CHAPTER-III

THE KHASI MATRILINEAL SYSTEM
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A. Its Nature and Structure
B. Role Configurations and Permutation in Structure of Authority
C. Contemporary Status and Contemporary Debate for Change

“Kadiang kamon u kni u kpa,
Ka Theisotti, shongkun burom,
Rympei kan syaid, kumne shirta,
Jingsuk, jingkmen, synshar junom.
Sa aiu shuh, ngan ong ngan jer,
Longshwa la buh, kan neh kan sah,
Ha tynrai sbak, wat shah kan per,
Shajrong kan kiew, horkit kam jah”.

To left to right the Uncle, Father
The Virgin in her unspoilt glory,
Thus will the hearth radiate warmth forever
Peace, Happiness will rule eternally.
What else is there for me to name,
Our ancestors have found it all, thus will it stay,
At the root of all lies, don’t fritter it away,
Momentum will it gain,
Never ill it go.

The worldwide distribution of matrilineal civilizations and their location in the extreme South –West and North-East of India have been discussed in various series from time to time. For example, the matrilineal communities of the South Indian West Coast show the highest percentage of female literacy among all indigenous peoples of
this country. The standards of personal hygiene, cleanliness or beauty of clothing
designs, of housing and interior decoration—all were the highest among these
communities as long as the matrilineal system was still in full force there. Much of the
credit for such possibilities is the role and the impact that women have had on their
own society. In contemporary times, the balanced situation of women within the
family and social set-up and for all such possibilities point to their cultural affinity.

G.P. Murdock’s World Ethnographic Survey contains 565 matrilineal systems,
and in India, we have three known matrilineal societies i.e., the *Khasis* and *Garos* of
Meghalaya in the North-East who are contiguous to each other; and the *Nayars* or the
*Nairs* as they maybe called also of Kerela in the extreme South West who are far
removed in another part of the country. In our discussion we will study only the Khasi
matrilineal system, and to see the nature of this system that makes this people so
unique.

The matrilineal Khasi were the first, among all the other Mongoloid peoples of
northeast India to achieve a high culture level, even prior to intensive contact with
outsiders. The smelting of iron-ore, black-smithery and an efficiently democratic state
organization are typical features of old Khasi culture—quite apart from the gigantic
efforts, which the megalithic-building ancestors of the present Khasi achieved. Energy
and prominent personality and education to democracy in the basic family structure of
matriliney; these are the important contributions which the matrilineal order of society
has to offer. Khasi women for instance carry their own goods to the weekly markets,
do their own selling and shopping, often for a big family, including many male
members, and are entirely trusted by their men folk, a characteristic not peculiar in
patrilineal societies.
A. Its Nature and Structure

The unique institution among the Khasi is the matrilineal system. Amongst them, there is a tradition that a ‘woman’s kingdom’ existed. So like the Nairs and the Garos, the Khasis came to have the matrilineal family system. When the Khasis adopted it, is difficult to say. Basing themselves on the not-yet-convincingly-proven opinion that the Khasis came from South East Asia or Cambodia, where there is no sign at all of the existence of this matrilineal family system, some scholars believe that the Khasis adopted their matrilineal family on their way in the hoary past to these present hills. They believe that the Khasis did this in order to tide over some unexpected vicissitudes of history that threatened their very existence and survival. Whatever this might be, one thing is sure, this matrilineal system have established itself very firmly that the Khasis in general have come to be convinced that this matrilineal system is their unique characteristic that distinguishes them from the rest of the human race.

But before we go any further let us first see what does ‘matrilineal’ mean and what does it constitute. According to The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Sociology, matrilineages are unilineal descent groups that claim real or fictive kinship through maternal ties to a common ancestress through known genealogical links. In matrilineal systems, inheritance is traced from the maternal uncle (mother’s brother) to the nephew (mother’s son). The tendency is to preserve the economic and political identity of the sibling group. The means by which this is ensured entail control of women’s labour, sexuality, and reproductive powers, by distributing them between husbands and brothers. Matriliny should thus never be considered as a system, which somehow empowers women- and should not be confused with matriarchy, and this is definitely the case with the Khasis.
David M. Schneider in his edited book, *Matrilineal Kinship*, has identified certain fundamental characteristics and features of matriline and they are as follows:

1. Matrilineal descent groups depend for their continuity and operation on retaining control over both, male and female members.

2. In matrilineal descent groups, there is an element of potential strain in the fact that the sister is a tabooed sexual object for her brother; while at the same time her sexual and reproductive activities are a matter of interest to him i.e., the brother.

3. Matrilineal descent groups do not require the statuses of father and husband.
   a. Therefore the status of father/ husband can vary within fairly wide limits in matrilineal descent groups.
   b. In Matrilineal descent groups, the position of in marrying male is such that even his biological contribution can be socially ignored to some advantage to the matrilineal descent groups and ideology of descent developed which ignores the male role in conception.

4. The institutionalization of very strong, lasting, or intense solidarities between husband and wife is not compatible with the maintenance of matrilineal descent groups.
   a. Matrilineal descent groups require the institutionalization of special limits of the authority of husbands over wife.

5. Matrilineal descent groups have special problem in the organization of in-marrying affines with respect to each other.

6. Where bride wealth or bride service occurs with matrilineal descent, this transfer of goods or services cannot establish such rights in children as allocate them to any group other than that of their mother.
7. The bonds, which may develop between a child and his father, tend to be in direct competition with the authority of the child’s matrilineal descent groups.
   a. In matrilineal descent groups the emotional interest of the father in his own children constitutes a source of strain, which is not precisely replicated in patrilineal descent groups by the emotional tie between the mother and her children.

8. The processes of fission and the segmentation in matrilineal descent groups do not precisely replicate those of patrilineal descent groups.
   a. Differences of paternal origin are less likely to be used as criteria for creating structural divisions within a matrilineal descent groups than differences of maternal origin are in the process of segmentation in patrilineal descent groups.
   b. Brothers can more easily be the foci for the process of segmentation in patrilineal descent groups than can either brothers or sisters in matrilineal descent groups.
   c. Besides pairing of a male and a female member of a Matrilineal descent groups is relatively more difficult to achieve and, other things being equal, lateral succession (elder brother to younger brother etc) would be more likely than unigeniture in Matrilineal descent groups.
   d. In dividing property, lateral processes would be more likely.
   e. Two or three generations of matrilineal kinsmen are more likely to stay together than to split up.
   f. Matrilineal descent groups would be more likely to merge lineal and collateral relatives terminologically than would patrilineal descent groups.
9. Isolated communities (or smaller groups) consisting of matrilineal core and in-
marrying spouses are extremely difficult to maintain.

These distinctive characteristics of matrilineal societies highlighted by
Schneider throw light on the dynamics of matrilineal relationships and the patterns of
matrilineal organization. But, however this does not imply that every matrilineal
society have strictly the same characteristics as given above. One does find variations
amongst the various matrilineal societies empirically.

The word 'matrilineal' is derived from the Latin _mater matris_, 'mother', and
denotes kinship or lineage based of the mother or the female line. It must be clarified
that this does not imply matriarchy, or the rule of women (from the Greek _arkhes_, or
'ruler'). (Khasi society “is not...as is wrongly interpreted, a matriarchal society”).
The characteristics of the Khasi Matrilineal system are: (1) descent is traced through
the female line. (2) Clan identity is inherited through the mother, and (3) Ancestral
property is generally passed down from the mother to daughters, then sons usually
inheriting nothing.

Khasis, who have always had to explain their distinctive matrilineal system to
others, have a story of how it originated long back in pre-history. Oral tradition states
that men gave up naming their offspring after themselves because they were busy in
war and hunting, with little time for child rearing. The uncertainties of war also
gradually led to men’s voluntary abandonment of inheritance rights. Therefore all
these responsibilities were handed over to the womenfolk, which consequently
increased their social status to equals of men.

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3 Giri, Helen, “Social Institutions among the Khasis with special reference to Kinship, Marriage, Family
The Khasi conception ‘Matrilineal’ relates to the lineage in a direct line from a common progenitress. Khasi women by virtue of ka Nongkhaiar ‘ka Nongkha-paid’ has been endowed a status and position by tradition quite unique and different from other women in other societies. The largest matrilineal unit of the Khasis is the Kur (clan). Dr. Homiwell Lyngdoh his book, Ka Niam Khasi, gives a very elaborate description about the organisation of the Kurs and the Jaids (title). According to him, the word ‘Kur’ includes all members of the different clans or ‘Jaids’ who are the descendants of the same common ancestress called “Ka Jawbei Tynrai”. Each ‘Kur’ is further sub-divided into a number of Jaids claiming descent from the same common but younger family ancestress called “Ka Jawbei Tymmen”. Each Jaid or clan is further sub-divided into different branches called ‘Kpoh’ having the common descent from the same younger ancestress called “Ka Jawbei Khynraw”. So those members of a clan who live in one domestic unit or in different domestic units in the same neighbourhood constitute a lineage or what they call Kpoh. Each kpho is further subdivided into a number of families. Whatever maybe the divisions or sub-divisions, so long as they belong to the same kur, they cannot think of inter-marriage. Each clan has its own cromlech (Mawbah) where the bones of their members are interned. Attendance of all members of a kpho is the norm for common functions like marriage and death.

Descendants of a grandmother along with the youngest daughter (Khadduh) and the ancestral house usually constitute Jelling (family). Children address their mother’s sisters and female maternal cousins as mothers. Terms such as ‘Meisan’ (eldest sister) and ‘Meiduh’ (youngest sister) are attached to them while addressing them. Their spouses are classificatory fathers. The eldest living brother (Khi) exercise authority in all matters. The household unit of a mother, her husband and children is
called ิง. While the Khadduh’s husband is expected to reside with her, all other sisters settle nearby in their own independent households with their husbands and children. Thus fission of ิง is a frequent feature, unlike the Tharavad of the Nairs.

According to the Khasi Matrilineal system, the children belong to the mother and the mother belongs to her mother and this family through mothers to the common ancestress and from the ancestress to the present day children of mothers, is the clan of or through mothers. Hence no Khasi child can be the illegitimate child whether the mother bore that child from the husband with whom she had gone through a formal ceremony or not. The child by right of birth from his mother has a claim on that family to which the child of the mother belonged. A man or a woman is of the clan in life and in death. This being the Khasi idea of relationship, so the children of the man have to return to the relatives the bones and ashes of the man with something tangible to preserve his ‘person’ or ‘Ringlew’ in that family- his full dress and ornaments (if he had), and something of his earnings. If the wife wishes to keep these, she should take a vow of remaining a widow for life; failure on her part to keep the vow is a great taboo ‘sang’ which entails punishment of stripping her of all the property by the relatives of the man. Therefore, in general practice, the Khasis take the middle course of returning with the bones and ashes of the man as much as they could and should, and the relatives of the man never demand more than the means of what the children can afford.

When the son marries and lives with his wife, the mother claims the ‘person’ of the son as hers, but the son with his wife become the children of the new family or ‘U Khun or Ka Khun Ki brie’ and also the son becomes the father of the family through his wife. In one word, a Khasi man is the head of his wife’s family in so far as his own children are concerned. His position in the family is an honored one and as
the bread-earner and as the protector of the person of his mother, his sisters and young daughters, and later in life, of the person of his wife and daughters and young sons, and his position as the exalted defender of his mother’s family. He is ‘U Khi’ or Maternal Uncle and he is ‘U Kpa’ or Father, without whom family worship and religion would be an act of sacrilege. His position may appear in the eyes of foreigners as somewhat ridiculous, but to a Khasi man, the foundation of his self and person in the family which centers round his own thought, and that is his life and his soul, and the life and soul of those dear to him.

Many social scientists both foreign and Indian and even some Khasi authors who have made studies on the Khasi social system have made a mistake by coming to the conclusion that the Khasi society is Matriarchal in nature. According to the “Chamber’s Twentieth Century Dictionary” and other English Dictionaries, the word “matriarchy” presupposes a society where a mother or mothers are all in all. It presupposes of an all-powerful woman or women who dominate the mental and material life of the people in the society. But this is not the case with the Khasi society. Infact the Khasis have matrilocal residence and matrilineal descent only. Although descent is traced through the mother, yet the father is the head of the family. While the father is the main earner for the family’s income, the mother is the mere keeper of all earnings. While the mother is expected to nurse and to bring up the children in the correct manner, it is from the father that the children will expect to get the most correct advice and decision regarding the future. While both mother and father and along with children are the joint owners and partners of all the properties that they may jointly or collectively earned since the day of their marriage ceremony, it is the father who is expected to be the defender of the family and the family’s property. A mother or father has no power to sell or mortgage any part of the property.
without their joint consent. This is true in the case of the couples that have enjoyed a
happy family life. The question arises: What will happen to the fate of a father in a
broken home? There are stray cases of couples that experience bitterness and anger
for some reasons or the other, and in some cases a couple will be separated by a
divorce. The children will stay with the mother because they belong to the mother’s
clan. The mother will remain the keeper of all earnings and properties, which as
husband and wife they must have earned. Will the father of a family turn out to be a
tramp, a homeless wanderer, or a refugee, without anymore hopes and aspirations?
No. The father will return to his own mother’s home, a place where he had pooled his
earnings while he was still a bachelor, a real place where he actually belongs—body
and soul, bones and ashes. If his mother is not alive, then he will return to his
youngest sister’s home, because his youngest sister succeeds the office of his mother.
Once again, he will stay and pool his earnings in this home so long he has not
reconciled with his wife, or so long he has not married a second wife. Even after
having separated from his wife, he still possesses the power to control the affairs of
his children. He can still visit and meet them frequently. Without his consent, his wife
will be incapable to do at her own will regarding the earning and properties, which
they have jointly earned. Even after separation, a sensible father still has the moral
and social obligations to look after the children by helping them according to his
ability. He will continue to do so; so long the wife remains single. In case he fails to
perform his duties, then it becomes an extra burden to his mother, brothers and sisters
who, out of moral obligation, will have to subscribe in order to help his children.
There have been instances where they have to support right from school fees,
uniforms and other clothes, and even food now and then throughout the year. This is
because the mother of the children has a part-time job only and that they also look
upon his children as their own. They called his children "Ki Khun Kha" who have also a part in their family's religious ceremony.

Family and clan organizations (which we will discuss more in the next chapter) center round the mother in which capacity she acts as a keeper of the hearth and home and as the custodian over the ancestral property. In all acts, the mother has to exercise her duties and obligations in consultation with and advice of her maternal uncle or uncles and her brothers who are to guide the destiny of their own family or clan. The house where the mother lives is known as "Ka ling Seng" or the house which belongs to the whole family or clan, which on her death, passes on to her youngest daughter, and this is one of the foundations of the matrilineal system among the Khasis. In this house important affairs relating to the family or clan are discussed apart from being a place of family celebrations and religious sacrifices.

Today there is a novel theory of an all-powerful youngest daughter in the Khasi Society on the basis that she inherits the family property. This is due partly to the understanding of the word ‘inheritance’ borrowed from the British law and partly to the wrong decisions and interpretations of Khasi customary laws made by the Courts and lawyers during the British regime. In order to have a correct understanding about the Khasi customary law of inheritance, it is better to analyze it properly.

In each family or clan, property is divided into two parts: ‘ancestral property’ and ‘self-acquired property’. “Ancestral Property” (Nongtymmen) is that part of the property of a clan or a family which has been handed down from generations to generations from the first mother of a clan or family. This property originates from the first mother, then it passes on to her youngest daughter- then to the youngest grand-daughter and so on, down to the present youngest daughter of a clan or family. The youngest daughter is not the sole heiress, but she is a mere custodian of ancestral
property. She succeeds to the office of custodianship and not the office of proprietary rights from her mother. She alone is not in a position to do at her own sweet will regarding ancestral property. Ancestral property cannot be divided, cannot be mortgaged or sold without the unanimous decision and consent of all the members of the clan or family. It is the male members of the clan or her family- her maternal uncles, her brothers, her sons and sister’s sons if they have come to age- who have the right to give a final verdict regarding the fate of ancestral property. It is true that the youngest daughter enjoys the maximum benefits out of the income of such property. There are two strong reasons why the youngest daughter inherits the larger share of the parents’ self-acquired property and also the office of custodianship of the ancestral property. The first reason is that she has a very important obligation to bear all the expenses incurred during the religious ceremonies and celebrations of the whole clan or family. Secondly, the house is considered as “Ka Ŋing Seng”, which means the religious and common house of all the members- male and female- of the clan or the family. The youngest daughter has the sacred responsibility of meeting the heavy expenditure, of looking after the unfortunate orphans, helpless widows, the aged and even the unfortunate male members of her clan who have been forsaken by their wives and children. It is a place of shelter and refuge for all members of the clan or family. This is true in the case of a rich clan or family. But in the case of poor clan or family, the youngest daughter has to bear the entire burden whether she likes it or not. For instance during the fieldwork the researcher encountered Torimai Lyngdoh from Smit who is the youngest daughter of Thew Lyngdoh. Due to poverty and early death of her father and two sisters, she had to carry the extra burden of her family by taking care of her nieces and nephews till they grew up and settled down. The only means of support for them is by doing part-time jobs. This was not her choice but had to accept
this responsibility gracefully. Another case of Mrs. Nongrum who after her brother got separated from his wife, he went back to stay with his sister. Here again and not by choice, Mrs. Nongrum had to accept back her brother with open arms even when their mother is no more. Many such instances do take place in the Khasi society at large. That is the reason why no Khasi man can take away his earning out of his mother’s or sister’s house nor can he take his earnings away from his wife’s house. This is because in each family, the property is vested in the mother.

On the other hand, “Self- Acquired Property” (Nongkhynraw) of the family is that part of property which the father and mother of the family have jointly acquired. It is further expanded by the earnings of their grown up children who pooled their earnings so long they have not got married. There can be no self- acquired property for the clan. Self-acquired property can be managed or disposed of by the common consent of the father and the mother. A man and wife can bequeath their property to any other children or distribute it equally among their own children or do in whatever manner they like. Usually, if they have acquired big property, they divide the property among their daughters, and they even give capital investments to their sons. This important exception leads to a fundamental difference of Khasi structural principle from that of other matrilineal societies. This becomes apparent with this kind of property only on a neo-local residence after marriage with a non- heiress. When a Khasi man builds a new house for his wife and children, the house and his acquired property automatically belong to his wife and children to the exclusion of his other matrilineal kin. This is in contrast to the Ashantis, where such house and acquired property shall belong to the husband in principle, and shall be claimed by his matrilineal group, to the exclusion of his wife and children. An important point to be noted here is that the Khasi rule of residence, which, inspite of its neolocal nature, is
actually oriented towards uxorilocal arrangement. This is again based on the functional atomization already referred to above, or organization strictly on the household level. Of course, the youngest daughter gets the bigger share. After the next generation, this property becomes ancestral property of each family. But, on the other hand, it should be noted that in the ‘War’ region both the ancestral and acquired properties can be divided equally among the children, male and female members, without any distinction.

Finally in a review of the Khasi matriliny, it is also important to take note of the Khasi’s strong feeling against polyandry and polygyny. It was quite probable that it was permitted to a man, though not to a woman, to have extra- marital liaison with a kind of secondary wife called Ka tinga tuh (literally meaning a ‘stolen wife’). His first wife as Ka tinga trai (trai meaning ‘root’) always had social precedence, and was considered legal. On the question on the existence of polyandry among the Khasis at any time in the past, P.R.T. Gurdon (1914) commented very categorically

‘There is no evidence to show that polyandry ever existed among the Khasis. Unlike the Tibetans, the Khasi women seem to have contented themselves always with one husband, at any rate with one at a time. Certainly at the present day, they are monandrists’.

Similarly, on the question of ‘sororal’ marriage, no particular social sanction exists to uphold it as a general rule among the Khasis. Gurdon (1914) recorded his remark as follows:

“A Khasi cannot marry two sisters, but he can marry his deceased wife’s sister after the expiry of one year from the wife’s death, on payment of jingsang (price of sang or taboo) to the wife’s clan”.

Chie Nakane tells us that ‘Levirate’ is another form of marriage for which no social sanction or approval seems to exist among the Khasis even if it should take place at all as a case of extreme rarity. This is true perhaps because levirate marriage
has sociological functions and implication only when marriage is virilocal where the Khasis do not practice as such.

Incidence of divorce in Khasi society is considered by some authors as not infrequent. Gurdon for instance, noted that there are instances of divorce brought about by a variety of reasons. According to Chie Nakane, a marriage breaks up either through the action of the wife or of the husband, but generally through the wife. For instance, an element of psychological tension is always inherent in the relations between the wife's maternal uncle or brother who holds the position of authority and the husband who is rather an outsider or, at best, an additional member of the household. Nakane believes that marriage with non-heiress tends to be more stable and successful, since in the elementary household a husband enjoys a more comfortable position. She notes that the divorces are quite common among the Khasis; particularly divorce rate among the Khadduh's is greater than among the other daughters. But all such statements are subject to further research, which is entirely not part of the present research considering the adjustment made by a Khasi man in these two roles. In fact, it is this adjustment that has made the Khasi matrilineal system stand distinct and unique compared to other matrilineal societies in the world.

The matrilineal system of the Khasis is based on a strong belief that at the beginning God created in heaven a number of families called "Ki Khadhynriew Trep Ki Khadhynriew Skum" or the "Sixteen Huts- the Sixteen Roots". Out of these sixteen families seven families known as "Ki Hynriew Trep Ki Hynriew Skum". "The Seven Huts the Seven Roots" came down to earth to become the progenitors of the whole Khasi race. It is opposite to the theory that at the beginning there was only one man

and wife. That is the reason why in spite of the fact that more than half of the Khasis have become Christians, yet Christianity has nothing to do with the matrilineal system of the race.

B. Role Configurations and Permutations in Structure of Authority

The Role of a Khasi man: The Khasi man plays a pivotal role in the Khasi matrilineal society. Primarily and fundamentally, the Khasi man, or for that matter, all children belong to the mother and the mother belongs to her mother and this family through mothers to the common ancestress. Hence as said earlier, no Khasi child can be the illegitimate child whether the mother bore that child from the husband with whom she has gone through formal ceremony or not.

In Khasi tradition, a man is ‘U Nongda’ (protector) and a woman ‘Ka Nongri ling’ (keeper of the house), the custodian of family property. In his Kur’s (mother’s clan) family he has the position of U Khi (uncle i.e., counsellor), at his wife’s house; he is U Kpa (i.e., the father). The mother claims to return all the articles he took, from her to his wife, at the time of or after his marriage. But practically this is not so binding although it is still observed by many orthodox villagers.

(The Khasi man belongs to his clan not only by its name by which he is distinguished, but also in flesh and blood.) He is of the clan in life and death. After his death, his children have to return to his mother or to his relatives the bones and ashes of the man, with something tangible to preserve, his person or “Rngiew” in that family - his full dress and ornaments if he had these and something of his earnings. If the wife wishes to keep these, she should vow never to re-marry. Failure on her part to do so is considered a great act of sacrilege called “Sang” which entails punishment by stripping her of all the property by the relatives of the man. It should be borne in mind
that his clan reclaims the very person or "Rngiew" of the man after his death, even from distant places from where his bones and ashes cannot be reclaimed. This is done by the throwing up of cowries and ceremonies on those cowries. This is due to the fact that that the man belongs to the clan of his mother where he has pooled his earnings in that family before marriage, and as "U Khi" (maternal uncle), he has always played a key role as defender of the clan and "Ka Niam" (Religion), and as a guide, philosopher, caretaker, and maker of decisions in the affairs of the clan. When incest marriages take place in his clan, he has every right to punish the offender. Since from the procreative point of view, no male member element of the clan should in any way return to the clan, he sees to it that it is so. Except in extreme cases where a wife leaves for another man that a man can come back. But it has to be a genuine case. The purity of the clan is preserved when women marry men from outside the clan. He sees to it that the significance of the clan is defended and protected.

An interesting feature about the Khasi man is that after marriage, he also takes a portion of his Kamai Nongkhynraw (bachelor’s earnings) to his wife. It is also found that there have been cases where the husband stays with his mother until the birth of a first child, after which he assumes parental responsibility at his wife’s place. But this depends on other factors like his wife’s staying with her mother, the mother often helping her daughter to bring up the baby. A married man can also transfer a part of his income to his mother. His wife, if she works, may also give a part of her income to her mother. There are really no strict rules attached to this. And if a man undertakes business with his wife’s capital, he does not give this income to his mother, though he might help her in certain circumstances like sickness or any other emergency. In the ‘War’ area as mentioned before, children are entitled to inherit property that is
descended from their father's mother. The War laws of inheritance therefore exhibit both matrilineal and patrilineal characteristics.

In relation to the rules regarding the disposal of 'self-acquired property', this seems to be very complex. In the case of property acquired by a 'man' by his efforts before marriage, it belongs to his mother because of his clan alignment with his mother's house. After marriage, property strictly acquired by the husband descends through wife to the youngest daughter, at least the largest share of such property, after the wife is dead. In the absence of a daughter, the self-acquired property should be equally distributed and divided among the sons. When a Khasi man builds a new home after his marriage, the home of his acquired property automatically devolves to his wife and children to the exclusion of his other matrilineal kin. If a man brings his self-acquired property from his mother's house and sets up business while living in uxorilocal household, the earnings after his death will go to his mother and sister. In the normal setup as soon as the wife dies, he usually returns to his ling, that is, to his sister's house, where he is received warmly and where he often acts as the de facto authority. But in case of self-acquired property of a 'woman', her youngest son becomes eligible for inheritance in the absence of a daughter. The crux of the Khasi rule of inheritance, as explained by Chie Nakane, a Japanese anthropologist who studied the Khasi-Garo system in the 1950's, is that the ancestral property, without deviation must follow the matrilineal descent line, but a son may inherit his father's or mother's self acquired property under specified circumstances. However, the Succession Act on Khasi and Jaintia Men, 1984(b) gives men the right to dispose off their self-acquired property as per their will.

As a 'father' and progenitor he is honored and held in high esteem. The grateful expression of the Khasi child to his father is "u kpa uba lah uba ia, ba ai ia
"ka longrynñieng" (an able father who gives us life and stature). The Khasi wife addresses her husband as 'kynrad' (my lord). When he dies he is reclaimed by his Kur. His body is taken and cremated by his wife and children, but the bones and ashes are sent to his kur to which he belongs. The father solicits obedience from his children. A resourceful father who has made provisions (out of his income alone) in the form of lands, gardens, house and any other articles of wealth, he disposes of them to his children. Wealthy maternal uncles also use to leave provisions for their nephew and nieces (i.e., their sister’s offsprings) and the father therefore is the executive, the mother being a spiritual head of the house. Thereby, that a male member is without position and powers is verified or corroborated by the following extract from K. Cantlie, 'Notes on Khasi Law' (p. 23) "a man can hold self-acquired property (Nongkhynraw) but even in some circumstances ancestral property (Nongtymmen)...a man can carry on business and contracts in his own name which are legally enforceable against him and his own property though his wife’s property cannot be effected. This is now a days an everyday feature of Khasi life". Again in the case of childless husband, "he can make gifts in his lifetime. He can make his Kurs custodians of a portion of his property, placing his earnings with them from time to time. To his wife’s house, he can bring only sufficiently for maintenance of himself and his wife”. The Kurs can claim at least half of what he earned. There have been cases also where after his death the Kur can claim not only half of his wealth. They can even claim the entire property. This is when the Kur is very powerful, while the wife is meek. There was a case, where the husband left his wife for another woman on the grounds that they had no children. But after four years when he fell seriously ill this other woman left him for good. So what he did was he returned back to his first wife and stayed with her till he died. But after his death, his Kur claimed all his
property and even his insurance. They did not even give a fraction of this property to his childless widow. His Kur took it all. Not even her Kur, her Church organization or even the legal system could do anything about it as he (husband) had no written ‘will’ that might insure his wife his property and assets. While in another case where there are children in the marriage, even after the death of the husband/father, the Kur have no say in interfering with his property, as all his property went to his children. This is what usually takes place.

One of the constitutive elements of the Khasi matrilineal system is the role of the Khi or the maternal uncle as the center of authority and economy. He is center of authority over the whole clan or over one particular branch of the family. His authority is supreme and undisputed. His sister and her children are completely under his authority. They cannot possibly do anything without his knowledge and consent. Nay, in certain cases, the Khi seems to have power over the life and death of his sisters, nephews and nieces. It is said that in ancient times, the Khi could beat even unto death his nephews or nieces who committed the grave sin of incest by marrying within the clan. This authority was given to him in order to safeguard the purity of the clan. The Khi’s authority is life-long, even in extreme old age. He is known to be a real disciplinarian. In the past, his word was considered ‘law’ for his nieces and nephews. Hence the Khasi used to say, “The Uncle has said so, or has decided so”. Or to correct a disobedient child, the mother used to say, “I will inform the uncle! Wait! When he comes”. This phrase is enough in the past to correct an erring member of the family. Literally, the whip was ever ready in the hands of the Khasi uncles in the past. Sweety Rynjah in her response to the question on the role of the Khi says that the word Khi can be connoted by such Khasi words “hiba tip ia ka iap ka im jong ka longpoh longkur”, “u nongsain-nongtiah ia ka iap ka im ka kur ka jait”, “u nongsuit ia ka
nia ka jutang ha ki jingpynleit niam bad pyndep rukom namar la ki para, ki pyrsa jong ka jinglongdoh longsnam" as signified by the word "Suidnia jong ka longkur". (An Uncle who knows all matters relating to the clan). Along with his birth right as maternal uncle, it is \( u \ km \) who takes the leading role in a marriage negotiations of his sisters, nephews and nieces, to find out if there is any prohibitory relationships from the patrilineal trait of 'u sohpet kha' of the paternal grandmother or ‘ka lawkha’ as understood in Khasi marriage and custom. From the "Jingsneng Tymmen" (Teaching of Elders) translated by Bijoya Sawian the following excerpt reads:

"Nieces, nephews, children, grandchildren,
Come, I'll instruct you and your aura* strengthen;
Sit quiet awhile, listen and contemplate,
With my instructions make no mistake...."

(The \( km \) is also considered the administrator of all the goods movable and immovable, of the family or even of the whole clan. Of all the members of the family, the \( km \) is the chief earner and worker. The \( km \) administers principally the products of his toil and moil, of his sweat and perspiration.) There is care and seriousness in this type of administration. With the \( km \) as the center of economy, all the members of the family had to work and sweat. Nephews and nieces, maybe approximately above 15 years of age, had to be up on their feet and doing something because of the ever-pricking goad; the \( km \). Thus as Sohblei Sngi Lyngdoh rightly puts that in the Khasi matrilineal system the \( km \) is the pivot around which the whole family revolves. But it should be kept in mind that this \( km \) that we are referring to, is the chief uncle (\( km \) Rangbah). In case if he has other younger brothers, they are called the subaltern uncles.

* The Khasis believe every person has an aura (\textit{mgiew}) around him and his or her inner and outer well-being is indicated by its luster.
From the religious point of view, the Khi is the priest, the teacher and the intercessor between God and his “sister with her children”. This means the eldest married daughter, her children, and all her sisters and their children. The phrase “the Khi and his sister with her children” is just a mode of speech. The sister as a mother is a symbol of the Khasi family. She re-enacts the life and role of the first ancestress of the clan lovingly called the “Divine Mother - Ka Blei IEWbei”. Hence, she is clothed and invested with an aura that is truly divine from the Khi. Religion is in his hands too. So he has to perform the yearly sacrifice for the whole family and also for the whole clan. When his nephews and nieces get sick, he has to divine the cause by cutting the cock or breaking the egg. If the cause is some grave sin committed by the members of the family i.e., Daw ling, then the culprit has to confess either privately or even publicly to the Khi, who then would intercede with God for him in order to be pardoned. Here we see that the Khi is the confessor for his sister, his nieces and nephews. Also, both the daily morning and evening prayers have to be conducted by the Khi. It is during these prayers that the Khi teaches, advises and exhorts his nephews and nieces to earn righteousness in their life, to cultivate virtues and lead a life worthy of their clan.

So a Khasi man after marriage he becomes the child of the new family or “U Khun Ki Briew”. He is “U Kpa” (father) in his wife’s family without whom family worship and religion would be an act of sacrilege. He is the bread-earner and the executive head in his wife’s family. His position in the family is an honored one. And in his own clan or kur he is “U Khi” (maternal uncle) the protector of the person of his mother, his sisters and their young daughters and young ones. Mr. David Roy in his paper entitled “Principles of Khasi Custom” writes:
It is true that the "Kfi" or mother’s eldest brother is the head of the house, but the father is the executive head of the new home, where, after children have been born to him, his wife and children live with him. It is he who faces the dangers of the jungles and risks his life for wife and children. In his wife’s clan he occupies a very high place, he is second to none but U Kfi, the maternal uncle; while in his own family circle, a father and husband who is nearer to his children and his wife than U Kfi.

The Khasi man stands as a perpetual link between his mother’s clan and his wife’s clan. All the children, grand-children, great grand-children and so on will continue to look upon his and his mother’s clan as “Ki Meikha Pakha”, and his and his mother’s clan will look upon them as “Ki Khun Kha”.

Throughout the ages, the Khasis have lived in a casteless and classless society where every kind of labour is respected. Men and women work and talk together freely. Everyone knows that he or she is equal with others in the society. In the past, Khasi men knew that the art of government and politics were their monopoly whereas the hearth and homes was in the hands of women. As pointed out by Mr. David Roy again, “Man is the defender of the woman, and the woman is the keeper of his trust”. Apart from this, the relationship between the man and the woman is so independent of one another. Yet the fact remains that Khasis have such a sacred reverence for marriage because their idea of marriage is the spiritual bond. The Khasi woman is no mere chattel of the family of men. No feminist movement is required to free her from bondage. She is the glorified person, free to act; yet she is the partner of the man. This is the reason why in nearly all Khasi homes we find one man is the husband of one wife, and they have lived to see children, grand-children and great grand-children.

The kind of authority exercised by the Khasi man whether as the Kfi (maternal uncle) or as U Kpa (father), reflects the two types of Weberian concept of authority: (1) Rational–Legal authority, where authority is rested upon a belief in the
legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue command; and (2) Traditional authority, where it is rested on the established belief in the sanctity of immoral traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them.

With different religious propagations and conversion in Khasi faith, the role has been usurped thereby diminishing the power and status of u kñi. In respect of this status of u kñi, the effects of conversion has also contributed much to the lowering of his status and position not only in the urban areas but in the rural areas as well.

**Role of a Khasi Woman**

Perhaps it is only in few societies are women so fortunate as in matrilineal societies such as the Khasi society. Khasi women have a distinctively higher position and status with greater responsibilities than women of other societies. Their responsibilities and privileges are limited to their families and their kinship group and this accounts to their enviable position in the society. The Khasis trace descent through the woman. The mother of the clan, Ka ñawbei ( ancestress) through whom the lineage is traced, is highly revered. The woman is considered as the Nongri ñing. This term Nongri ñing literally means keeper of the domestic household. She is considered the procreator and perpetuator of Khasi kinship and traditions, and plays the role of continuity and maintenance of solidarity of the domestic household at the lowest level of Khasi social organization on the one hand, and solidarity of the clan at the larger social level on the other. It is through her that membership of both sexes in society is affiliated and recognized.  

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As said earlier, the Khasi society traces the rule of descent through a female. Kinship relations are thus determined by this rule of descent. Besides being a daughter to her parents and a granddaughter to her grandparents, a woman as Ka Nongri Ling, she is considered a potential mother. As a mother, it is her role to care for the members of both sexes in the family. Members of the domestic household, i.e., within the Ling, look up to her as a supporter, a comforter, a caretaker, and of course a homemaker. But it is the duty of the husband to provide shelter, food, and protection to his wife and children. The process of socialization of children is her main domain. It is also her responsibility to look after the needs and requirements of her husband. She nurtures not only her children but also her husband. Her husband’s family sees to it that she does not fail in her role towards her husband. In case she fails to do so, or in cases where it is noticed by them that she is having extra-marital affairs with another man, they can always call him back to his mother’s home. That’s why, a woman as a wife, has to be very cautious, wise, and far-sighted. As a mother to her children, she has to see that her children are all well brought up without any distinction between male and female (being a matrilineal society). That previous concept of thronging only for a female child who will continue the family generation is no more that preponderant.

The Khasis even before the coming of the Christian Missionaries realized that it is the woman who has to build a home. Why? Saying this is because the Christians also believe that it is the woman who builds a home and not the man. The woman as wife and mother is the custodian of the family wealth and property. Her children carry her name. But in decision making within the domestic household, she has no authority. This is the responsibility of the Khi or the maternal uncle.

Besides being a mother to her children and wife to her husband, she is also a grandmother. She is 'Meikha' to her son’s children, and 'Meirad'/Meiteit' to her
daughter's children. All her grandchildren look up to her as their mentor. As a 'Meieta'; she occupies an enviable position, as she is the ultimate owner of all family and ancestral property/wealth. She may gift part of her property or sell in exchange for money in consultation with her male clan members any time she likes and to whomever she chooses. As a 'Meikha', she occupies the ultimate place of respect. It is almost a sacrilege for her daughter-in-law and grandchildren to displease her or go against her wishes. In the traditional codes of conduct, the 'Kha' (father's sister) and 'Meikha' (father’s mother) must be revered even when they are wrong. The 'Meikha' is considered the ultimate mother i.e., the ‘giver of life’ without whom her grandchildren would never been born.

Further it is to be noted that in Khasi matriliney, 'Meikha' is a kinship terminology. To her married sons she is always their mother, but to her offsprings, she is always their 'Meikha'. She represents the domestic group of in-marrying males. Due to affinity the rules of marriage-avoidance is practiced for three generations between the offspring of the in-marrying males and his domestic group. The kinship bond between the Meikha and her married male’s offspring (she refers to them as 'Khun Kha') is different to that bond between mother and child. Here she can be both formal and informal, depending on the situations. She takes extra pain and effort to please them, and to provide them in some way in whatever ways and means she can. Since they stay in a separate household, she makes it a point to visit them frequently, without forgetting to buy or give them something. Something very peculiar to the Khasi people is that before her daughter-in-law (son’s wife) gives birth to her child, the meikha will present her with two clay pots, one to keep the placenta that symbolizes her blessings on the child who will continue the tradition; and the other to bathe the child. Further when the child is born, the meikha is the first one to give the
first banana to the baby and the strapper to tie the baby to carry on her mother’s back. This is an act to wish long health and prosperity on the child. So the *khun kha*‘s also in time, have to give special respect to their *Meikha*. Following the western trend, they always express their respect on meeting her by kissing and hugging her. By tradition the *Meikha* caresses their forehead as an act of wishing them well and to bless them.

It is a fundamental belief in Khasi kinship relations that any *Khun-kha* who dares to cause sorrow or pain to his/her *Meikha* will never enjoy a prosperous life. The blessings of *Meikha* are worth more than any wealth and treasures on earth. *Meikha* to the Khasis is the image of God on earth. In the rites-de-passage of the *Khun-kha*, her views and presence is considered God’s blessings. She is believed to have a godly image although the society has accepted her only at the level of affinity.

No wonder Chesterfield Khongwir one of the renowned Khasi traditional folk singers, in his popular song entitled 'Meikha' talks about the significance of a *Meikha*. His song runs.

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"Meikha Meikha, oh! Meikha balah baiai
Kyrkhу kyrdoh ma phi Meikha,
Kynthien kiba shongsbai.
Kait ih ka kait im dei nyngkong na phi Meikha,
Khiew sum khiew ranei ban khiah krat khiah stang shisha,
Kyrteng ka tap lubri ban khraw ka longrynieng,
Kyrkhу kyrdoh ma phi Meikha ka rngiew jong nga ka ieng".
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This song can be simply translated like this:

*Meikha Meikha*, oh! *Meikha* who’s capable of giving all,
Your blessings shower upon all,
Your words full of wealth.
Fleshy bananas, bursting with juice,
You are the first to give.
Water pots to bathe from,
Earthen pots to keep us healthy.
The *tap lubri* ritual for my future destiny,
Your blessings *Meikha* on me,`
For my *rngiew* to stand forever.
(She is also a 'Kiaw' (mother-in-law) to her daughter's husband and to her son's wives. She tries to love them as her own children.) There are cases where son-in-laws and daughter-in-laws are treated even more by the Kiaw than to their own biological children. In one particular case, the mother-in-law gave away the larger share of her property to her daughter-in-law simply because of her goodwill gesture. The role of the Kiaw is predominant especially after the marriage of her daughter or son when she excels her role to impress her son or daughter's in-laws. If it's her daughter's marriage, after three days of marriage she sends her daughter to stay with her in-laws for few days (a minimum of three days) together with food and fruits like bananas, apples, beetle-nut and others. But if it's her son's wedding, after three days of marriage, she invites his in-laws home for a family meal simply as a gesture of thanksgiving and gratitude for them in welcoming her son to their family. Such acts put an impression that the mother cares for her children and for their future well-being.

A Khasi woman is also an 'aunt' or a 'Meisan' / 'Nah Nah' to her sister's children. She plays an equally important role next to their mother. Especially when she's a 'Meisan' (i.e., elder sister to their mother), she acts as an adviser. As a 'Nah Nah' (i.e., younger sister to their mother), she simply has the role of acting like their younger mother. One important benefit in the existence of such roles is not only that it binds the family together, but that in case of death or fatal diseases, it is the 'Meisan' or the 'Nah Nah' who takes care of the children. Very rarely are children put in children's homes. The children's homes that are present like the 'A.W. Thomas Children's Home' at Jaiaw, Shillong (for girls), and the 'William Lewis Boys Home' at Mawphlang consists mostly of children who by being there doesn't mean that they have no relatives, but because their relatives are unable to take care of them due to
poverty and economic instability. Otherwise as much as possible, children are taken care within the domestic household or by someone within the clan or kur.

A woman is also a ‘Sister-in-law’ i.e., ‘Kong’/ ‘Hep’ to her sister’s husband and to her brother’s wife. She looks up to her sister’s husband with respect and to her brother’s wife with much love and affection. In both relations, she looks up to them also as her companions.

Finally, she is also a ‘niece’ to her uncles and aunts. To her uncle she is a ‘pyrsa’ and to her aunt, she is a ‘khunruit’. To her maternal uncles she has to give a lot of respect not only they being her mother’s brother(s) but by tradition maternal uncles play a very important role in the Khasi society. Whether its marriage, career, buying of land/houses etc, she looks up to her maternal uncles particularly the eldest maternal uncle for advises. To her aunts, she plays the role of a lovely and obedient niece who is at their beg and call, although they are the ones who are vulnerable in spoiling her besides her grandparents (especially during her younger days). But slowly as she grows older, the relationship changes where they now look up to each other for advises, counseling and for their better well-being. Especially when there is no one to take care of her aunts or uncles, she is supposed to take care of them till they die.

Indigenous faith practiced by Khasi society does not legitimize women in the performance of rituals and rites for different purposes be it at the ling (domestic family), the shnong (village) or the Hima (traditional Khasi State). Traditions legitimately sanctioned men with the authority on religious matters. Women have been legitimately accepted with exception as a Nongdowai (someone who chant prayers) without performance of rites and rituals. At the level of the domestic family it is the Khadduh (youngest daughter), which acts as the keeper of family religion.
(This we will discuss in detail in the next discussion). But a certain privilege on religious authority is observed in the case of a particular group of women belonging to the Syiem clan in particular, the Syiem Sad or the Queen Mother. It is only she and none other who can cure the sickness of a person especially those who had been under the spell of an evil-spirit called 'thlen'. (This we'll see more in our discussion on 'Religion').

(Then in relation to property, women do inherit it. Khasi matriliny follows the principle of female ultimogeniture. The Khadduh i.e., the youngest daughter inherits and is the keeper of property. She inherits both ancestral property and the acquired property.) (More on this, in our next discussion). Whereas the elder daughters after marriage leaves their domestic group of their mother to start an independent domestic group or family of their own. The reason is because in the Khasi society, it is only the youngest daughter who remains with the mother. The other sisters may receive any form of property depending on the wishes of the parents. This property becomes their acquired property and can be accumulated more depending on their savings with their husbands. In their lifetime, they may divide to both sons and daughters. This self-acquired property after two generations automatically gets converted to ancestral property. Sons cease to enjoy the right of acquiring this property, but daughters can acquire this property as a matter of customary practices, and as said earlier the khadduh as the keeper. But again, in the case of the War people or those living in the Southern slopes, both sons and daughters inherit property, with the khadduh inheriting a larger share in consonance with the conception of being keeper of the domestic family.

Lately, there has been a move under the banner "The Mait Shaphrang Movement" among certain section of people, for equal distribution of property i.e.,
'ancestral' and 'acquired' property among children, that is, between both sons and daughters. During a radio broadcast, the President of this movement, Mr. Michael Syiem highlighted that the main agenda of this movement is to give equal share of both kinds of property to both sons and daughters without any biasness. The insecurity that a Khasi man faces specially after marriage when he becomes a child of a new family or "U khun ki briew" is mainly because of this unequal distribution. Of course in a family where there is only a single daughter or where there are only daughters, this issue does not arise. But in cases where there are both sons and daughters and where there is only a son, this matter should be taken into consideration. Talking to some men folk who are supporting this movement, their argument is that after they get married they have no share in their parents property and it is in fact some other man who through marriage with their youngest sister enjoy the fruits and share of their family's property. Whereas some women feel that it is okay to part the 'acquired property' between sons and daughters but not the 'ancestral property'. Talking to Mrs. Sweety Rynjah one of the prominent members of the Seng Khasi at Mawkhar and an eminent literary writer says this that the Mait Shaphrang Movement is in the right direction, which means reforms in respect of inheritance and solving of any eventualities coming in the family in respect of an ancestral property. The intricacies of the system of inheritance need further research and findings for practical application by one and all. Majority of the women feel that it is not right to interfere with the khadduh's right with 'ancestral property' as this carries with it a lot of responsibilities. Interestingly, a majority of men also feel that such a movement will take decades for its members within the society to support it, as it will definitely shake the entire cultural setup that has been set up by their forefathers.
In the sphere of the economy, the woman is ‘ka nongkynshew ka nongkyndiap’, that is she saves the earnings and judiciously use them for the benefit of the family. In this regard, she occupies an enviable position as an administrator in the home front, though theoretically, her contribution here is however underestimated. This is because no one is ready to consider the multitude of unmeasured hours and efforts a woman spends at the household levels and how much she has to save and mint money for the security of the family particularly during emergencies (particularly in low income families or in rural households). How much she budgets her daily expenditures, no one sees. Her untiring efforts should be appreciated. The current policy discussions in the present decade assert that women’s roles are ‘special’ and ‘valuable’. Women as hewers of fuel wood, haulers of water or participants in production are yet to find solace in the policies and programmes designed by the planning agencies.

But in the political arena, it is the duty and responsibility of men as ‘protector’ to manage the political affairs of the village. It is customarily believed and practiced that women keep themselves to the keeping of domestic life. This distinct placement between male- female is very clear and practiced in spirit and form. Traditionally, in the Khasi society, politics, war and administration are considered as men’s domain. Women are not allowed to attend Durbar Shnongs in the locality or Village Councils in the village and men head the village administration till today. Women can never become headman, and women will not also like to become headmen even if it is offered to them. However since time immemorial, women have acted as a moral force behind men and used to give their views and suggestions on the different issues. The forefathers did not want to burden women with politics and administration as women have more important duties to perform as women and mothers, to look after their
homes, families and children. The political role of women in the traditional political arrangement is that of a consultant through the adult male members of the domestic family. They have no right to decide or to participate in the political administration. Their significant position is to provide adult male members for the political system. An adult female member enjoys the right to participate in the political administration by being identified as member belonging to a domestic group by consanguineality or affinity. Without this identification even an adult male member has no social recognition or acceptance by the village.

But there is a specific case of political importance of a woman at the level of Hima. She is referred to as mentioned earlier ‘Ka Syiem Sad’ (an eldest female member of the Syiem clan). The Chief of the Hima is referred to as ‘Syiem’ (an eldest male member of the Syiem clan). The Syiem has necessarily to be viewed as accompanied with the office of Syiem-Sad. In other words, there is no Hima without Syiem and there is no Syiem without Syiem-Sad. She legitimizes the continuity of political administration at the highest level of traditional political institution. Her office is at Smit. But this legitimacy that makes her important has no political authority. Infact the authority at the Hima is vested with the Durbar Hima (the largest collectivity of adult male members representing the ministers of the Hima, headman of different villages and adult male members of every constituent unit of the Hima). The significance of the Syiem Sad is that she too is the keeper of political institution at Hima level as the women are keeper at the shnong (village) level. This should be understood from the sustainability of the matrilineal principle and the consistency of structural position of male-female.

The introduction of new types of administration in the hills by the British rule and the Constitution of India, and with the growth of education, have further
expanded this change particularly in the field of politics which was once upon a time considered a taboo. Now, women do attend ‘Durbars’ (meeting of all members of the locality) or what is called as ‘Durbar Shnongs’ in their localities and they also give certain suggestions whenever required. For example during the annual durbars in both Laitumkhrah and Mawkhar locality women representatives are always there from the Seng Kynthei or the Women’s wing. Representation of women in Parliament, State legislatures and District Councils is negligible as few women came forward to contest in the election. It may be recalled that women played a very important and significant role in the movement for a separate State during the Hill State Movement till its achievement in 1972, and had participated actively in all the programmes of the movement like attending public meetings, processions, hartals, and also in the non-violent direct action movement and so on. The 73rd Amendment Act that provides 30% reservation for women in the Panchayati Raj institutions is one of the present constitutional innovation in taking a step towards the empowerment of women by giving them a voice in the decision making process. Of course women in Meghalaya enjoy social and economic freedom but as said earlier, they never shared politics and administration.

With the rapid transformation in the society, many changes have taken place. The position of women have undergone through a drastic change in recent times. They have become more extroverts and outgoing. Women are out in the streets, going to work, running errands, shopping, fulfilling their obligations, doing social work and holding high positions both in administrative and other services and even contesting for elections. For instance there’s Mrs. Roshan Warjri from Mawkhar who served two terms from 1993-2003 from her own Mawkhar Constituency. From Laitumkhrah there’s Mrs Margaret Mawlong (nominated I.A.S.) who contested during the 1998
elections from the Laitumkhrah Constituency. She was also the first Khasi woman Deputy Commissioner. Interestingly, amidst all these heavy responsibilities, they have been able to manage, adjust and play their roles well in and outside the house. A working Khasi mother will see that she faces no role conflicts and a Khasi woman sees that she meets the needs of her husband, her children daily and also fulfilling her duties to her in-laws and other relatives.

Women have definitely become smarter. They have competed the men in various fields. Today, in many professions or occupational activities, Khasi women are invariably found to be in part. In any occupational activities, from politics to policing, from teaching to technical profession, from business to banking, from athletics to armchair white-colored occupations, from doctors to domestic help, from entertainment to entrepreneurship, from religion to social service, from legal profession to lethal profession (such as prostitution, drug addiction, alcoholism, robbery, extremism etc), women have become part of the force to be reckoned with.

Many women have joined NGO’s/Voluntary activities, social services, environmental advocacy, human rights movements, women and girl-child issues, rural development and so on. Here we have NGO’s like the North East Network (NEN), Impulse NGO Network, World Vision and so on. In Laitumkhrah there is the Bosco Reach Out (social work), The Don Bosco Training Center, the Bethany Society (School for the Blind), WISE (Women In Service Entrepreneurship) and others where Khasi women take active part in various social activities including those relating to women in particular. In Mawkhar there is the SSSS (Synjuk Ki Seng Samla Shnong) and the “Synjuk Ki Seng Kynthei”, the former that includes youth members, including females, and the latter that includes women specifically. Both are involved in looking into the welfare of the locality and to see that there is peace and tranquility within its
boundaries. At Smit there is the R.S. Lyngdoh Training Centre where in the women’s wing training is given to unemployed women through the Ri Lum Foundation. At Mylliem also, there are self-help groups like the “Nangkiew Shaphrang” where special assistance is given to women in various occupational fields like in agriculture and other cottage industries.

Interestingly, in the course of my study, I came across one Miss Rytathiang who was previously involved with NEN (North-East Network). Now she’s working with VHAM (Voluntary Health Association of Meghalaya), an NGO that deals with drug addicts, alcoholics and conducts awareness programmes to fight against the spread of AIDS particularly among truck drivers in and around the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. It is learnt that she is the youngest daughter of the family and surprisingly has no intention of getting married. But she’ll try not to fail in her role as ka khadduh. Women have become more liberal, but they should not fail to play their role as expected by tradition. Staying closed doors, she says is an old practice. Now women should come out and show their talents and abilities that they are not unequal to any other (particularly, she means non-tribal women). Women are also capable like men. Therefore she continues there should be adjustment and understanding between husband and wife. There should be equal distribution of labour and both should be equally responsible to each other.

In the villages, women are also engaged in agriculture, horticulture, farming, jhum cultivation and even as daily wage earners in road building and other developmental construction projects. Perhaps, one of the most familiar occupational activities performed by women in villages like Smit and Mylliem are as petty traders or shopkeepers in the market places and road side spaces selling vegetables, fruits, fishes, betel nuts, betel leaves, and other miscellaneous items. Not only that, there are
also those coming to the towns who move around from one locality to another selling vegetables, fruits and others. One Mrs. Warlarpih from Smit says she moves around Shillong selling vegetables and dry meat daily, to support her three children and her ailing mother. Besides, she also works in the fields, if time permits. Her husband was an agricultural labourer but died due to unknown reason. This only shows the ability of rural women to take up any occupational activities, even those that were traditionally considered to be male occupation. With education, women in the rural areas are also following the footsteps of the urban women folk to attain higher education in the towns, and are also trying for all kinds of jobs and placements whether government or non-governmental.

When the “National Commission for Women” was set up by the Government of India through the “National Commission for Women’s Act”, 1993, the State of Meghalaya also set up the “State Commission for Women” by the State Government in 2005 with its Chairperson Mrs. Biloris Lyndem and Vice Chairperson Miss Hasina Kharbhiih. The aim of this Commission is to look and monitor the violation of rights against women. It even acts as a ‘court’ where it can summon anyone who has been alleged. To create awareness among the local women about their rights and how to protect them, special seminars and workshops are organized from time to time. This Commission also looks and decides various cases including marriage, divorce and separation. Through this Commission women have now come out in the forefront to voice their different woes and cries. 

Encountered one young and promising lad from Mawkhar who is voluntarily taking active part in various women’s issues through various groups. Her name is Miss Fenella Nonglait. It is learnt that she has just finished her master’s degree in law from Amity University, Institute of Advance Legal Study, New Delhi, 2006, and currently doing research study on “violation of
rights” financed by the “National Women’s Commission” New Delhi. Recently she represented India through the “National Commission for Minorities” held at Vienna 2006, to take part in the “International Interfaith Dialogue Conference”. Its focus is to bridge the gap through dialogue for a peaceful relation between various minorities. At the end of the Conference she was chosen the best of three among participants from various countries in the world. Why we’re mentioning this here is just to highlight how far Khasi girls and women have been able to compare themselves with other people of other communities and have been able to give a fair fight successfully without any jeopardy as has been mentioned earlier.

A number of women organizations were formed before the creation of Meghalaya. “Ka Synjuk Kynthei", an association of women is the oldest voluntary welfare organization in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills formed in1947. This organization is still continuing to work effectively for the upliftment of the society in general and the women in particular. Another premier women organization is “Ka Synjuk Ki Kynthei Riewlum” or the Tribal Women Welfare and Development Association of Meghalaya, popularly known as TWWADAM, which was formed in 1979. The main concerns of the organizations are the protection of tribal lands, and trade, foreigner’s issues, unemployment social evils and other problems. The TWWADAM has taken up many issues, and now it is still continuing to work for the social cultural upliftment. “Ka Lympung Ki Seng Kynthei” is a central body or apex body and functions as a co-ordination body of 22 women organizations of the various localities of Shillong and its suburbs. Since it is the Central co-ordinating body, it takes up common issues and problems of the various issues and problems of the various women organizations. Besides these, other women organizations do exists also in different localities, like the ‘Seng Kynthei’ or ‘Seng Longkmie’ of Mawkhar, Laitumkhrah, etc. Their nature and
activities are very much localized in their areas. Then there are the bigger organizations like the Meghalaya Women Forum, Meghalaya Women Alliance, Talents Club, Eastern India Women Association and others. At the Church level, there are also other women organizations like *Ka Synjuk Ki Seng Kynthei Katholik*, *Jingiaseng Kynthei Synod*, and Young Women Christian Association (YWCA). These various women organizations, whether religious or secular, contribute in their different ways to the social upliftment and general welfare of the society as a whole.

At present women have played a very important role even in various conflicting situations in the State. In the year 2005 when the issue regarding the M.B.O.S.E (Meghalaya Board of School Education) over the wrong tabulation of marks in the mark sheets and where question papers were leaked and were set outside the syllabus, it was the Women’s Organisation “*Ka Synjuk Ki Seng Kynthei*” (an organisation that includes all the women’s organisation of the various localities) together with other NGO’s like the K.S.U (Khasi Students Union), J.A.C (Joint Action Committee) that came to the forefront and blamed the State government for inefficiency and spearheaded the movement for the demand of shifting of the M.B.O.S.E. Headquarter located at Tura to Shillong and also to appoint a Secretary at Shillong. They were able to hold various public meetings and even organized processions. The women took to the streets and even faced water canoeing from the police force as a reaction to their agitation. Further even during the tribal-non-tribal tension in the years 1952 (against the Bangladeshis), 1965 (Chinese aggression), 1979 (against the Bengalees), 1987 (against the Nepalese), 1992 (over the trading license issue), 1994 (photo identity issue) and again the 2005 (M.B.O.S.E. issue), it was the women who came out from the homes not necessarily to provoke the issues but to sustain and maintain peace and tranquility in the State. They were the ones who
moved around the various localities late at night to see that there is safety. They sacrificed their obligations towards their families for the sake of a peaceful living. This also reminds us of the issue that took place in Manipur, where women took to the streets against the army jawans after when one local woman fell into the hands of these jawans. She was not only raped but was also killed. The women went to fasting and took to procession in the streets requesting the government to remove the army forces from the State. This was flashed all over the national news projecting the valour of these tribal women.

Further through the “Synjuk Ki Seng Kynthei”, women have been able to check the illegal passage of alcohol into the various localities and to see that no one causes nuisance in the locality. They have also been able to check crime like rape, briberies and extortion to a great extent. Particularly during winter times when Christmas mood is on the air and where a lot of young people go for enjoyment or are vulnerable to any of the above acts, you find women particularly the older members like in Mawkhar and in Laitumkhrah where they come out to the streets at night to check and monitor against any such atrocities. In the rural areas the situation is still save, but women do make an effort to see that things are run smoothly in and around the village.

The right to vote has also given women the right to choose their own leaders and preferably women if there are so. After the creation of Meghalaya in 1972, and since then a number of women came forward to contest in the elections to the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly. Some of the prominent ones are Miss Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh, Mrs. Bonily Khongmen, Miss Silverine Swer, Miss Maysalin War, Mrs. Margaret Mawlong and Mrs. Roshan Warjri, These are just to name a few. Even to the autonomous District Councils, there were a number of women representatives who
were either elected or nominated like Mrs. Lariam Shullai, Mrs. Louisiana Brosila Lamin and Mrs. Etris Syiem, Miss Maysalin War and others. Besides these politics, there are also other women who are known for other achievements like Mrs. Rose Millian Batheu Kharbuli, (Chairman of the UPSC), Mrs Alvareen Dkhar, (Chairman of MPSC), Mrs. Margaret Mawlong, (first lady Deputy Commissioner), Miss Silverine Swer, Mrs. E.N. Shullai, and Mrs. Patricia Mukhim and Mrs. Sitimon Sawian (Padmashree awardees) Mrs. Queenie Rynjah, (a noted social worker) and many other upcoming ones.

There have also been Khasi women who represented the NGO’s from the North-East to the 5th World’s Women Conference held at Huariou Beijing, September 1995. Under the theme, “Look at the World through women’s eyes” several issues regarding rights of the women and how to protect them from various physical, mental and psychological atrocities were discussed. The Khasi representatives were Mrs. Quennie Rynjah and Miss Adella Pariat besides a host of others from India.

Prior to the coming of the missionaries, as we all know the Khasis in general did not know how to read and write. Miss A.W. Thomas in her article “Ka Jingtrei Hapdeng Ki Kynthei Ri Khasi bad Jaintia” wrote that the work among women started only in 1843, that too with great difficulty. So by opening up schools, girls in particular were able to read and write. Mrs William Lewis taught them indirectly how to read the alphabets. In this way, before the end of the year 1843, 14 (fourteen) girls knew to read ‘Ka Kot Nyngkong’ (The First Reader). Girls were also allowed to learn knitting and weaving.

‘Education’ became an important factor influencing the traditional thinking and way of life of the Khasi woman. Most of them visualize education as a means to a career and economic independence rather than as a stepping-stone to marriage. In
other words, a Khasi woman has a new perception of herself as a career woman, as one having a role in society, as having the ability to complete with men in all professions.

Today, a host number of schools have existed specifically for girls. In Mawkhar area there’s the ‘Khasi-Jaintia Presbyterian Girls Higher Secondary School’ (KJP) and the ‘Synod School’ run by the Presbyterians. Then there’s the ‘St. Dominic School’ run by the Catholics (boys are included). In Laitumkhrah area there’s the ‘Loreto Convent School’, the ‘St. Mary’s School’, and ‘St. Margaret’s School’, to name a few, that are run by the Catholic sisters. These are considered to be one of the best schools in Meghalaya. Besides the Presbyterians have also opened schools like the ‘Laitumkhrah Presbyterian School’.

With special reference to the Presbyterian Church in N.E. India, in constitution, a section on women’s work reads:

“In every Church, Sub-District or District, Presbytery and Synod, there shall be
Women’s meetings for worship and fellowship
And for the development of the work amongst women”.

This shows that women were given special attention and freedom was also enhanced to them to worship freely in their own Church services. Christianity also introduced health-care institutions and training centers. At Mawkhar the Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian Synod has opened the “Khasi-Jaintia Presbyterian Technical Institute” where special training is given to women in the field of weaving, knitting, typing and others. Then a special hostel for women under its Social And Economic Life Development Board, The Working Women’s Hostel was opened to provide accommodation to working women outside the state and even to young college students. In Laitumkhrah, The WISE, i.e., “Women In Service Entrepreneurship” an
NGO run by Sister Judith, a Catholic nun, and offers professional courses to females in the field of tailoring, embroidery, knitting, food preservation and others. At the end, special exhibitions are held to exhibit all that has been worked upon. The Don Bosco Youth Center is also offering special courses for the youth including the young girls like tailoring, shorthand, typewriting, computers, cooking classes and others. It also organizes special programmes like Out-reach programmes and special programmes like on sex-education and leadership. Talking to its Director, Fr. Celia, he shares his experiences that in the past 10-15 years, the response of young girls in the various courses in this Center has been tremendous. He said that the attitude that girls should stay indoors, or that they are the weaker sexes, or that girls (particularly the Khasi girls) are not competent to do men’s work like typing for example is long gone. Today Khasi girls are (to him) one of the most broad-minded and civilized group of young people in the north-east.

But enjoying the fruits of the influence of Christianity on education does not necessarily mean that you have to be converted. Some Khasi women have been able to build themselves up on their own traditional religious grounds. Mrs. Sweety Rynjah from Mawkhar, a staunch member of the “Seng Khasi” (a movement to revive the Khasi traditional culture against the inroads of Christianity and other influences) who was the first Khasi lady to qualify for the Assam Civil Service (ACS) in November 1961. She has also worked as OSD NEHU with dual charge of Registrar. She has been recognized for her meritorious services towards upliftment of the Khasi literary world. She has published many books, some of which are of vital academic importance. Her paper on “The legal status of Khasi Women” is an eye opener on some of the inconsistencies of the matrilineal system. A social activist and a lady of varied interest, Mrs. Rynjah has become a valuable asset to the Khasi society.
Today, it has proved that women as a united force can have louder and stronger voices. Together with their inner strength women’s place has gone far beyond the hearth of every home. Their collective voices of righteousness, fairness, sanity, justice, equality and courage must be heard in the society more than ever. A Khasi woman feels that she should be treated not only as a female, but also as a human being, desiring to be respected with dignity and who is capable of greater achievement.

**Role of ‘Ka Khadduh’ or the Youngest Daughter**

“*Ka Khadduh*” or the youngest daughter plays a vital role in the Khasi society. This term has attracted so many sociologists in India and abroad. It has a special meaning and connotes its own distinctivity. But before we go any further, let us see, who is “*Ka Khadduh*?” Suppose in a family of 5 girls and 2 boys, the youngest from the girls is considered “*Ka Khadduh*”. But suppose she is the only daughter, automatically she is considered the caretaker, which literally means “*Ka Khadduh*” of the family. As we are all aware that the matrilineal system of the Khasi family is a system in which descent is based on the female line and females play some important roles. So “*Ka Khadduh*” illustrates such a role. But an interesting feature in the Khasi matrilineal is that though descent is reckoned through the female line, yet the Khasis refuse to accept that their society is truly matriarchal which means that authority is vested in the men. Schneider clearly expounded this postulate when he said:

“In Patrilineal system, succession to authority may occur through unigeniture (e.g. succession by a son). The precise analogue for matrilineal system would be from mother to selected daughter. This analogue does not apply, however, since authority is vested in male-held status”.
It is to be reminded here how the principle of unigeniture through the youngest daughter operates in the Khasi social organization and the referring to the passing of authority from maternal uncle to wife's brother in the course of descent of property.

Sir Keith Cantlie states that "Ka Khadduh" is the custodian of the family property, though not the full heir in the sense known to other system of law. She is responsible for the performance of religious ceremonies; she holds the religion (Ka bat ia ka Niam); she cremates her mother and if she were the "Ka Khadduh" of the whole family, she puts the bones of all members in their final resting place under the stone (Mawbah) of the clan. The expenses of this ceremony are considerable and, for this reason, she gets a larger share of property or in some cases a piece of family property in addition to and apart from her separate share. This expression that "Ka Khadduh cremates her mother" has invited a lot of criticism. Actually, it is not the khadduh who does the cremation; the uncles, brothers, sons and nephews perform it.

So her duties as family treasurer were (1) to meet family expenditures for ceremonies (such as wedding, naming ceremony etc), and rites (such as bone internment of dead relatives, religious rites etc), (2) to look after family member(s) who have fallen into misfortune such as disability, the death of a husband or wife, divorce and so on, (3) to gather family members at the ling seng (foundation house) for the various family affairs and rituals, and (4) to look after the religion of the family, to prepare for the religious rites and assist her maternal uncles in the performance of the rites.

It is said that in the Khasi matrilineal system, the ka khadduh of each family, in each generation succeeded to the office of custodianship over family property and religion. Dr. (Mrs) Helen Giri supports this when she says that the matrilineal system society involves a very close relationship between religion, social life, economy and

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political life of the people. Over family property, she is merely the custodian of ancestral property for common use only. By principle, the Khasi matrilineal system follows the female ultimo geniture in matters of inheritance. By this it is meant that the *khadduh* or the last surviving daughter has rights to inherit from the mother. Customarily, all daughters, except the *khadduh* leaves their natal home after marriage to set up independent households. The *khadduh* continues to stay in her natal home with her husband with the expectation that she meets all the responsibilities. She protects the family as well as property. She is not the heiress as wrongly reported in literature. She is simply the caretaker of the property. She cannot sell or mortgage the property, which has been handed down to her from her ancestors. She should remember that with whatever she has she has to protect not only for accumulation or preservation, but to save it for all unforeseen calamities that might take place in her *kur* (clan) or family.

Regarding ‘religion’, Khasi religion being basically a household religion, the *Jing* (family) functions as a religious unit. Members gather together in the *Jing-Niam* or *Jing Seng* (literally, ‘House-religion’) on occasions like births, naming ceremonies, engagements, weddings, deaths, bone internment and other rituals like “*ka kñia ai bam*” and “*ka phan ka kyrpad*” as propitiation to household deities. The senior most uncle (*Kñi rangbah*) usually acts as the family priest, while the duty of the *khadduh* is to prepare the necessary items for the rites and rituals. She epitomizes the family religion, and is referred to as the one who “keeps the religion” (*kaba bat ia ka niam*). However, the *khadduh* is not the “priestess” as wrongly stated by most authors or to have believed by most people. Practically, she does not perform the ceremony. It is

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the maternal uncle who performs it. The fact is that the oldest maternal uncle functions as the ‘spiritual mediator’ or priest (*U Lyngdoh*) of the family. H.O. Mawrie quotes “*U long khei ha ka ting u long u Lyngdoh u ban pyndep ia ki niam ki rukom baroh bad u leh ia kita baroh ha ting seng ting khadduh*” (It is the maternal uncle who is the spiritual representative or the priest in the home who must fulfill all the religious requirements, rituals and customs and he does this in the *khadduh’s home*, which is also the ancestral home). So the *khadduh* and the ancestral home “*ka ting seng ting khadduh*” is the focus of this spiritual heritage and unity. Since religious activities related to the unity, preservation and well-being of *kur* (clan) center around the *khadduh* and her home, which is also the ancestral home, she can be seen as symbolically keeping alive the family ritual and worship, that is religion or ‘*Ka Niam*’. She is in this sense, ‘the keeper of religion’. But she is liable to be dispossessed at one time of her right to inheritance for transgressions against the sacred norms of the society as sanctioned by religion.

The name *Ka Jawbei Khynraw* given to *ka khadduh* indicates the very privileged status, and the great responsibilities on her shoulders. More than the other sisters, *ka khadduh*, had the sacred duty to continue the family the family line through procreation, not only to pass on the family name, but also the office of *ka khadduh*. However, should a *khadduh* remain unmarried or has no female child, the youngest daughter of the next elder sister succeeded to the office. Often it becomes disappointing but such situations cannot be avoided.

It is found that Khasi Matriliny with respect to land and power is a unique system especially in relation to the role of the *khadduh*. The *khadduh’s* role as custodian of the family property indicates some access to the family wealth, especially for expenditures related to family matters and affairs. As mentioned in our
earlier discussion, she cannot sell, dispose or mortgage the ‘ancestral property’ or *ka nongtymmen* unless she has the consent of her maternal uncles, her brothers or parents (if they are still living). She has no absolute authority over land if this is part of *ka nongtymmen*, which must be handed on to the next generation. However, she and her sisters have access to, and control of, such land and wealth (in the form of gold, silver, corals, cash etc) only which are given as personal shares or gift from the family’s ‘self-acquired property’ or *ka nongkhynraw*. She is also the one who prepares all the necessary items (*ka dang ka duh*) for rituals and hand over to the *Khî* (maternal uncle) or to *Hymmen Rangbah* (Eldest brother) to conduct or to perform the actual rituals and to communicate with *U Blei* (Creator) for the prosperity of the clan and family.\(^8\)

A very significant feature of the Khasi matriliney is that the members of the family who are unable to earn for themselves and have no adult children to earn for them have the right of being fed at the *ting-khadduh* (house of the youngest daughter). The actual management is in the hands of the *khadduh*’s brothers and uncles because traditionally the entire fortune of a Khasi family depended upon the cultivation which required the muscles of men and hence the position and authority for men in the family. "*Ka Khadduh*” is the keeper of the house for her old parents. Khasis say that the males are unsuitable for keeping the religion (*bat niam*), as they are fighters and shedders of blood. The *Khadduh* has also a duty towards her brothers and sisters who maybe stranded in life or in extraordinary hardship. She has to help them out, even give them shelter and food if they are sick or disabled and have no one else to look after them. Her home is an open refuge. She cannot turn anyone away. She has a social obligation to fulfill towards them not only because she gets a major economic

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share but also because she has to keep the honour of her *kur* (clan). Sometimes these kinship obligations place a heavy burden on the *khadduh*, which she often finds difficult to fulfill if her resources are meager.

The *khadduh* however, by virtue of her custodianship of ancestral property and her corresponding social obligations, has a unique status in the Khasi society. She is more privileged among her sisters. She is the pivot, the cementing bond for family and clan relationships. She even has greater obligations towards her *kur* or clan. When someone from the clan or someone distant related dies, she has to attend to it. When there’s a function like marriage or naming ceremony, it is expected that she becomes part of it. The other sisters can make excuses if they do not want to attend, but for the youngest daughter, there are no excuses except when she is very sick. How far the *khadduh* has a say in the affairs of family and over property will greatly depend on her personality. Her husband usually does not interfere in the affairs of her *kur* or clan, but he helps in the management of the property. She cannot sell family property without the knowledge and consent of the uncles and the brothers. All sisters have the right to occupy a position of the family land, as co-partners and "*Ka Khadduh*" cannot deprive them of this right. This is close to the Garo society where all female members in the family are given a due share of family property. But the one who is the guardian and protector of all the goods of the house and family need not be necessarily the youngest daughter like the Khasis. Among the Garos, the mother passes on this authority to any of her selected daughter known as *Nokrom* (heiress).

The influence of Christianity, Westernization, Modernization, Development and Education; and the impact of Information Technology (IT), have all had their share in the role of the *Khadduh*. For instance an educated *Khadduh* no longer think of her role as "*Ka Khadduh*". She infact thinks of what she'll make of herself.
Coming again to the case of Miss Ryntathiang who is the Khadduh, she strongly points out that her priority is her career and not of her family position. Right now she says, she has no intention of getting married and would love to focus on her career. To her marriage is secondary. When asked what if she works outside the state or hat if she marries a non-tribal, this is what she had to say, “I will give my responsibility to my other sisters, but I will always enquire about my mother”. “The khadduh is only a custodian”, she says. Therefore, not much of a loss. Infact things should change with time. Adjustments should be made.

What about the influence of Christianity? To many, Christianity did not interfere with the family and clan arrangements of the Khasi household, but to a khadduh she seems to welcome her friends from church more for her family gatherings than her fellow kinsmen. During a marriage party at Laitumkhrah where attended, in the house of one khadduh, the first thing we notice was the active participation of the members of the church in carrying out the various works. The Uncle! (U Khī-Maternal uncle), was nowhere to be seen. He was just like any other guest. Infact it was the father who took the bride (the khadduh) to the church to walk down the aisle. Later when enquired why is it so? The first reason they gave was because, first, the Uncle is not a Christian. Second, because the bride takes more pride in allowing the father to take her down the aisle rather than the Uncle. Further, in most of the Khasi Christian homes, particularly the khadduh’s, it is not the Uncle or uncles who counsels or look into critical issues. It is the priests or the pastors or the Church elders who are informed first. Next, are the uncles. The reason is because the sense of attachment is very strong among church members where members meet more often than that compared to relatives. When a khadduh dies without leaving any
children behind, in most cases she disposes off her property to the church. Why? Because they feel more inclined to church social services.

The impact of Westernization and Modernization has had a large influence on the role as a khadduh. Especially among the younger generation, the trend has changed drastically. Speaking to some young khadduhs, we learnt that they don’t know much about their role in their homes or what is called Ka ling Seng. Some say no one has made them aware about their role; some feel tradition should be left aside and that they should go on with time; others say they want to marry non-tribals as they see that these men are much smarter than the local Khasi boys; a certain fraction would wish to work outside as there are better avenues and lastly some feel the responsibilities should be shared. Many of them are also very attracted to western lifestyle and ways of living, where parents live distant away from their children. This, they feel will give them more space for individual freedom. Children should have their own freedom.

Westernization and Modernization has weakened the kinship ties particularly with the Uncle who by tradition has a lot to say in her younger sister’s house. Since families and many individuals prefer to be more individualistic, the role of the Uncle or the Khi is just symbolic. It is the husband who has the upper hand. The husband visits the ling Seng only as a visitor. Only the family itself handles all discussions. Especially among the rich educated families, their way of life have greatly shifted from the traditional type and in many cases the Khi feels awkward to even ask food or any requirement from his niece and her children.

The hearth, which is the center for all family discussions, is long gone. The attachment to modern gadgets and the importance given to them has replaced the traditional significance to requiring each other. Modern lifestyle, modern thinking has eroded the traditional setup of a Khasi household including the Khadduh’s. When
most of the Khasi families have been converted to Christianity, religious activities in a khadduh's house have tremendously weakened. Whether it’s a naming ceremony, birth ceremony, marriage ceremony or even death ceremony, the traditional way has declined.

Development and Information Technology have made the khadduh more conscious about a better lifestyle. Instead of thinking how to improve her family and kinship ties, she pays more importance to uplift the standard of her family. Khasi society has reached an age where most of their young girls spent more time in cyber cafes trying to gather more and more information about is happening the world around. No doubt this is important too, but the question is what about the knowledge about their own land and people. Are they interested? No wonder the emerging middle class that is making its headway in the once upon a time classless society is partly due to the influence of what goes around in the globe particularly the West. Already most of the Kahdduh’s particularly in the urban settings are middle or high income families adding to their already existing ancestral property. This makes them more vulnerable to acquire more wealth and lead a different lifestyle. But this is subject to further research. We leave it to the other research scholars to do the needful as research scientists.

C. Contemporary Status and Contemporary Debate for Change

Though ‘Kur’ and ‘Kpoh’ still exists in the Khasi society today, their hold over the people has been on the wane. The authority and sanctity of the Khli (maternal uncle) have come under pressure. He doesn’t wield much power in conducting his sister’s household affairs. Many khadduhs i.e., the youngest sister exercises proprietary rights over landed property. A large number of Khasi men and women
have taken up modern professions and have fixed income. They seem to have set up nuclear households with their husbands. So the changes and disintegration of matriliney have inevitable repercussions, which results in the following:

1. There is a trend for strengthening the conjugal family’s solidarity.

2. There is decline in avuncular authority though the emergence of paternal authority is still an unusual concept among the Khasis, since women take on important authoritative roles and are usually involved in all decision-making processes.

The position, status and focus of authority of Khasi men are shifting from the natal to the conjugal home, and they are becoming more *Kpa* (father) than *Khi* (maternal uncle). Except in the case of a *khadduh* of a family owning a house, residence in most cases tends to be neolocal. This is especially true in urban areas. The changes in patterns of residence from matrilocal to neolocal have created a new phenomenon of independent households or elementary family units, where the father and mother bear the sole responsibilities for their offsprings. There is a decisive weakening of ties among members of a descent group. The term ‘*ki kur ja kur doh*’ (clansmen only during special occasions) distances relatives from the same *kur*. The growth in members as well as other factors has made clansmen almost like strangers. Socialization is no longer restricted to cognates (*kur*) but includes agnates (*kha*) also.

The extended family or *линг*, which is an integral part of the Khasi matrilineal system and as a corporate descent group, is increasingly non-functional. The *линг* as a family has to a large extent disintegrated or at that point of disintegration. The functions of the *линг* as a family unit are no longer feasible or practicable. The controlling authority vested on the maternal uncle (*khi*) has become ineffective. In may cases the nieces and nephews do not even see their uncles except at some
important family gatherings. The *ling seng* or *ling Khadduh* as a family sanctuary (*ling Niam*) binding the *ling*, *kpoh* and *kur* together, is either nominal or non-existent. It follows that the functions of the *ling* are no longer operable. It also logically follows that the next higher structure, i.e., the *kpoh*, has also disintegrated to a large extent. The Khasi society in this sense is similar to the fourteen disintegrating matrilineal societies examined by Kathleen Gough such as the Tongs, Ndembu, Bemba, Ashanti, Hopi, Minangkabau and so on. She pointed that variations may exist in the steps, in the process and in the degree of change; however the end results are the same.

The influence of modern day materialism and consumerism has considerably weakened the give-and-take relationship of members within the *ling*. Accumulation of wealth, rather than distribution to needy kith and kin, is now the order of the day. Conflicts between the controlling *Khi*, the *khadduh* as custodian (but increasingly like an 'inheritor'), other siblings and members of the matrikin are vouched by numerous court cases and litigations. Conflicts may also arise between a *ling Khadduh* and a *ling Khun* (i.e., the natal and conjugal families) in appropriating a man's earning or possessions. As Schneider has rightly observed, “An increase in conjugal family solidarity and loyalty is likely to be at the expense of the economic solidarity of matrilineal ties”.

For most of the urbanized Khasis, their ancestral home is far away in remote areas and this makes it even more difficult. Not only that, very few Khasis, which includes even those who practice “*Ka Niam Khasti*” observe all rituals, especially those related to sacrifices. The practice of bone internments in the *Mawshyieng*, or *Mawbah* is observed by fewer still, partly because of the huge expenses incurred and
partly due to various other reasons. The expression "Ngi la sah Khynnah" (we are left as children) sums up the inability to continue the old practices.

As education came and spread among the tribes, the efficacy of the matrilineal system of descent and inheritance began to be questioned. In 1961, an organization by the name of 'Ka Seng Iktiar Longbriew Manbriew' was formed in Khasi Hills to spearhead a movement for a change in then system. Its constitution provided for a radical change both in descent and rights of succession and inheritance. But it could not make much headway. At some stage, a section of the members of the organization wanted a mere change in the right of inheritance. The movement continued since then. It may be mentioned that a practice has already started in some parts of the Khasi hills whereby the sons also inherit properties. Among the War Khasis in the Shella confederacy and the adjoining villages, both boys and girls inherit property.

The erstwhile United Khasi-Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council, appreciating the persistent movement for a change that had continued for quite some time, though in a subdued note, decided to introduce the will system among the Khasis- Jaintias empowering the parents to bequeath their self- acquired properties to whomsoever they wish. The parents would then be enabled to gift their self- acquired property either to a daughter or a son or to distribute it among both daughters and sons.

A Bill was accordingly drafted and widely circulated but the District Council did not pass it. Subsequently, in 1980, that is long after Jaintia Hills got its own separate autonomous District Council. The Bill was reactivated and passed. But the Act did not receive the assent of the Governor. The State Government suddenly took interest in the matter and requested its Law Commission to study the case and to draft a fresh and suitable Bill. Obviously, the then Meghalaya State Government was
interested in introducing a system of inheritance for the first time in the Khasi matrilineal family. The Law Commission subsequently submitted its report with a draft Bill providing necessary powers to enable the Khasi parents to bequeath their self-acquired properties through a will to any of their daughters or sons. The Bill was duly passed by the Meghalaya Legislative Assembly as “The Meghalaya Succession to Self-Acquired Property (Khasi and Jaintia Special Provision) Act 1984” which received the assent of the President of India in 1986.

But the Meghalaya Act 1984 does not apply to the ancestral properties. Its provisions to enable the parents to dispose of their self-acquired properties by a will would suffice and should have satisfied all those who pleaded for a change-over to the patrilineal system. But they have not. The movement has not subsided but persisted. On the 14th of April 1990, a new organization called the ‘Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai’ (SRT) was launched to further intensify the movement under the motto: “Lajaitbynriew ban kyntiew” (to uplift the Khasi Community). The new organization thus replaces the erstwhile “Ka Seng Iktiar Longbriew Manbriew” and has presently spread and expanded its membership. The sole objective of the organization according to its Constitution is to bring about a change into a full-fledged patrilineal system. The members of the organization have reasons to feel aggrieved as the State Government of Meghalaya has failed to bring the Meghalaya Act 1984 into force by a notification. The Act has by now become a dead letter in the absence of a government formal notification to give effect to its application. Unlike the Malabar Marriage Act of 1896, which led to the reform of the Nair’s ancient matrilineal joint family system, the Meghalaya Act 1984 had failed to become a progressive legislation.

The main objective of the ‘Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai’ (SRT) is to motivate the Khasi society to change from matriliney to patriliney. The organization was born out
of a genuine social response and reaction to the stress and strain that matriliney is facing in the modern context. Its main objective is “pyniadei ka dustur jong ngi bad jingkylia ka por” (Tradition should adjust and go along with the change of times), and its goal is “Kyntiew, iarap ia ka jaibynriew kham shalor” (Uplift the community to higher levels). The group includes at present about 2000 members, both males and females. About 80-100 of the females have formed their own youth wing. It constitutes its own Executive Body, which includes the Chief Adviser, the President, the Secretary and so on. Prominent members like Sohblei Sngi Lyngdoh, Mr. Paul Lyngdoh (current Minister to the Government of Meghalaya), Fr. Eapen, Mr. Snenglem Kurbah, Miss I. M. Syiem and others. The Executive Committee meets once a month and the General Body twice a year where various issues are discussed openly regarding how to strengthen the pace of this movement. Previously this organization had opened two schools at Sohjarang and at Mawlyndep (villages in Meghalaya) but now is closed due to some reason. It believes that the answer to the ills of Khasi society is to go along this change. Presently this organization has opened units in villages like Kyling, Marngar, Nongpoh, Bymihat, Umling, Umsning all in Ri Bhoi District. In West Khasi Hills, this organization has supporters but has not been able to open any units. Whereas in the East Khasi Hills District, i.e., Shillong unit, it has been able to open units at Mawlai, Laban, Nongthymmai and Laitumkhrah. Recently, this organization has been able to get support particularly from the youth from Mawlai even from amongst those who are not yet its members. The need for such a change is in imitation to the Nairs of Kerela. This SRT does not think and does not speak of the original matrilineal system. What this group wants to change is the present “unhistorical” form of the Khasis’ matrilineal system. I.M. Syiem in her
article 'A Question for Change' published in the SRT magazine, 2004, on the issue of change from a matrilineal system to a patrilineal system, says

"Personally I feel it is a healthy sign of life and growth. It needn't bring fear that one would lose its identity though one should be concerned and closely follow the trends and development. Without the voice of caution culture would run shipwreck on the strong winds of change. At the same time to stay safely anchored on the shore would keep us behind our times".

Another prominent member of the SRT Mr. Snenglem Kurbah in his thrive to shake this movement says "Khlem u Symbai nging jahmgai" i.e., without the seed we would surely disappear into oblivion.

At present, there is no center of real authority and economy in the Khasi home. The father stays now in his wife's house with his children, but still is an outsider, though he is loved, esteemed and appreciated. He has no share in his wife's religion, if she happens to follow the Khasi Religion. In short, the father is not yet part and parcel of the family. The Khasis believe that the Uncle 'Khi', his sister and her children form one unit of flesh and blood as derived from the first ancestress. The father has no relation of flesh and blood with his wife and children. The children get from their father only his 'personality' (Rngiew) and his 'human dignity' (ka rynieng ryniot), but not his flesh and blood. The wife receives nothing from her husband, least of all his flesh and blood; hence they can marry. Were the wife to get anything of the flesh and the blood of the husband, their marriage would be incest and a sacrilege. Therefore their slogan, which has been abstracted from the writings of Late So So Tham, another renowned Khasi laureate speaks that this movement believes only in one thing and that is it is in the man that lies strength, honour, will and power:
"Dei ha U Rangbah kein ka shong ka mon ba jwat, 
Ia U phi lah ban bein, hynrei kumno phin rat".

(It is in a ‘Man’ that strong determination lies. 
You can criticize him, but how can you ever uproot him).

The SRT is trying its level best to initiate changes within its fold and to introduce changes in society. A number of sensitive issues are linked to the move. What is to become of traditional system of the ‘Khasi Khein Kur’? How is exogamous marriage to be assured? Will this solve the problem of male irresponsibility? Will it cure the socio-economic ills that numerous seminars and discussions like the one held by the SRT each year that have affected the Khasi society? Talking to some elderly members, their opinion on the SRT as a critical response to it is that it touches only the defects of the matrilineal system on inheritance. What about the pious duty, which relates to the care of the parents and other agnates in the family? The danger they feel that this movement might bring about is taboo in course of time, hardships to orphans and complete alienation of relationship of women from the nearness of blood relationship as contemplated and practiced in the old system.

There are many surmises and opinions expressed by various authors about the Khasi matriliney and changes that have taken place therein. Chie Nakane and Kathleen Gough are some of the writers who have pointed out the structural weakness in matriliney. The term “matrilineal puzzle” refers to the inherent conflicts in matriliney. Nakane states “the complexity of the matrilineal system is a decided handicap when it comes to resisting radical economic changes. This may be one of the reasons for the rapid disintegration or instability of social organization of matrilineal peoples in the world”. Gough’s observation is in the same strain “matrilineal groups seems to be badly hit as soon as their members enter the market system. Although they may not disintegrate altogether formant decades, they are likely to break down to their
minimal segments.... Patrilineal descent groups seem better able to weather the early changes.\(^9\) Khasi society too is in the process of transition from the agrarian subsistence economy to a market economy. As such it is bound to be susceptible to social changes. Besides economic reasons, many scholars have noted that in matrilineal societies there are basic structural contradictions such as:

1. The tension between the individual (nuclear) family and the matrilineal descent groups. (eg., ñing, Kpoh in the Khasi content).

2. The conflict between a man's loyalties to his wife and children and his loyalties to his wife and children and his loyalties to his own matrikin. This conflict of natal and conjugal loyalties also applies to the woman (especially the Khadduh).

3. The conflict between marriage and sibling cohesion.

4. The conflict between ownership and authority eg., land and property are in the names of the female members, but authority is with the males. Again the khadduh symbolically "keeps" the religion (ka bat ña ka Niam) but the Khi Rangbah (eldest maternal Uncle) performs the rites.

5. The conflict between matrilocal residence and a man's lack of complete authority over his own conjugal family.

6. The conflict between productive individualism and communal distribution.

7. The conflict between two sets of heirs (a man's children, and his nephews/nieces).

This idea supplies the present day Khasi with the novel theory of a powerful daughter who has freedom even to the extent of mis-management without

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responsibility to her kurs. The idea of ‘Niam’ or ‘Religion’ goes unregarded and the old position of the male relatives is set at naught. The loss of religious atmosphere in which family life is surrounded is detrimental to the Khasi community. Infact the youngest daughter has never been regarded to have any customary right over the property as it is understood today.

But while there is this trend towards patriliny by some sections of the Khasi society, yet Khasi beliefs and practices still exercise control over the larger population and even among the Christians. For our purpose here we can consider religion as a system of beliefs and practices by which a group of people interpret and respond to what they feel sacred and usually supernatural as well. \(^{10}\)(Here we are neither denying nor affirming the existence of the supernatural. We are only noting the fact that people in groups do in fact believe in the supernatural and consider certain things as sacred). Within the scope of this definition we include not only the traditional beliefs and practices of the Khasis, but also other activities that deal with the supernatural. No village community is without its religious specialists, its ‘diviners’, also known in religious terminology as ‘spiritist practitioners’. These mediators who deals with the supernatural are also found in the urban setting. In times of sickness, misfortune, when articles are lost or when there is a need to pray for good crop or success in jobs and business or even in elections, these diviners are consulted. (most often with payment).

So we have already mentioned the presence and function of ‘diviners’ or ‘spiritist practitioners’. How such beliefs and practices are immediately relevant to matriliny can be deduced from a few case studies. Some individuals who had adopted their father’s name since childhood had gone the diviners for various needs. The

diviners informed them that they could not help them because they had taken their father’s clan name. The reason can be traced to the matrilineal lineage and “Ka daw Ling”. Before diviners can help find a curse that it is a transgression committed by clan members or an external cause. Diagnosing the ‘cause’ and ensuring the cure involves invoking the help and forgiveness of the clan deity (‘Ka leilongkur ka leilongjait’) and “Ka lawbei”. For this reason it is thought that one should always use one’s mother’s clan title.

Further, kinship ties for the most part are still stronger than congregational ties. Even today, a few Christian converts from non-Christian families face opposition, even to the extent of the threat of death, from their maternal kinsmen. This is especially so in families where the ‘kur’ and the power of the maternal uncles are strong, and, in those clans where the converts in question are the youngest daughters, the ‘khadduhs’.

So in such a situation, Khasi matriliny today raises such questions as ‘what is the future of the Khasi matriliny?’ Can the system withstand the onslaught of change and exposure to modernizing influences such as education, the communication media, Christianity, or the process of urbanization and technological change? In particular, how far has Christian value system been internalized by the Christian Khasis? In the course of study, Christianity has been the main focus as an agent of change that has affected the very foundation of the matrilineal system and to most of its adherents.

We are all aware that Christianity came on the scene with its patriarchal values and cultural concepts. First generation converts completely cut themselves off from practicing the traditional religion. Many were ostracized and rejected by their ‘kur’. But there does not seem to be any conflict with retaining matriliny. It is only in recent times that matrilineal tradition has faced some problems.
The first challenge has come from Christianity and its patriarchal values. The majority of Christians do not see a conflict here. However, there is a growing number of younger Christian members who are beginning to re-evaluate the roles of men and women in the context of Christian teachings — man is fully responsible for family in all areas. He is the ‘spiritual head’ who leads his family in worship. In traditional non-Christian families, the maternal uncle is the spiritual mediator. This is to mention only one area where Christianity has brought about a change in the perception and attitude among the Khasis.

The second challenge has come from growing exposure and interaction with patriarchal cultures. Khasi society has had interaction with other neighboring cultures in the past. Ever since independence, the Khasi locality has been increasingly open to the larger society. Besides, many Khasis have traveled to other parts of the country and abroad for education and employment. Because of cross-cultural marriages and for various other reasons, some Khasi children, especially in the urban areas are using their father’s name or both their father’s and mother’s clan names. Interacting with patriarchal cultures, it is simpler to say ‘I am the son of Mr. So and So’ than to refer to the mother’s name. This is particularly relevant if the father has a higher status in the society than the mother, and is better known in the society.

The third and most vital challenge has come from the system itself. In a modern materialistic society, property ownership especially in terms of land has become an important consideration. Oral tradition and even customary laws are no longer strong enough to prevent property disputes within families. The younger generations are increasingly questioning the right of the khadduh to be the main trustee of family property. The control of the maternal uncle is decreasing. The khadduh with all that she stands for has become a ‘vulnerable institution’. There is a
general agreement that while the matrilineal name is retained, property should be equally divided among sons and daughters, or at least the ‘will’ system should be enforced to prevent disputes within the family.

However Christianity as such, while originating in a patriarchal culture, never sought to destroy the matrilineal culture of the Khasi people. At the same time, the call of Christianity to respect the equal dignity of every person, challenges any society where injustice or underprivileged situations may prevail. Christianity cannot provide an answer as to whether matriliny or patriliny is to be preferred but it questions any system where the rights and the dignity of a person are not respected. The trauma engulfing broken families speaks enough for the problems in society where stability is not assured. In a world where the media and current trends tend to trivialize the strong bond of the family hearth, there is the need of a strong voice challenging the ways in which many may still prefer to go.