

UNIT VII: Ethnographic accounts

Module 5: The Khasi Social Organisation

OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this chapter is to discuss about the :

- geographical distribution of this particular tribe.
- clans of the Khasi tribe.
- religious system of this tribe.
- family system of this tribe.
- traditional law and chieftainship of their village.

SUMMARY

The Khasi tribe is found to inhabit in the united Khasi and Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. They speak Mon-khmer, a lone language spoken in the north-east India. The Khasi present an exceptional example of matriarchal society, rarely found in the present day world. They are matrilineal and matrilocal. They trace their descent from a mythical female ancestress. The most remarkable social system of the Khasi is that of near matriarchy, which is not found among any of hill tribes in north-east India except among the neighbouring tribe-the Garos who still practice this system though less rigid than matriarchy prevalent among the Khasi.

TEXT

Introduction

The Khasi are an indigenous community living in Khasi and Jaintia hill districts of Meghalaya and its northern slope up to Brahmaputra valley and the southern slope rolling to the Surma valley. The Khasi call themselves Rilum. According to some historians Khasi is a generic term used for various tribes and sub-tribes who inhabit the Khasi and Jaintia hills. The Khasi have old and rich oral tradition which reveals a hidden truth of their past. They are the descendants of Mon-Khmer speakers who migrated from Yunnan to Meghalaya, and thus they are of East Asian origin.

The Khasi is a matrilocal community. It is just not the matrilineal character but some other typical characteristic differentiate the Khasi from the other tribes of north-east India. The Khasis are short statured people. The skin colour is usually brown varying from dark to light yellowish brown.

The Khasi speak an Austric Mon-khmer, a lone tongue used in the north-east India. The Austric language is also spoken by other tribes such as the Santhal, the Munda, the Ho, who

live in the southern and western part of Bihar. The Austric language is prevalent among the people of Cambodia, Java and Nicobar Island too.

Geographical Distribution and Sub-groups

The traditional social, culture, ethical, political and economic ideals of the Khasi are interwoven with the origin of the Khasi race. Since 1952, this area has been administered under the sixth schedule of the Constitution of India.

This tribe is divided into four main sub-groups:

- (i) The Khyntiam Khasi distributed in the Shillong plateau of the Khasi hills.
- (ii) The Pnar Khasi of the Jaintia hills.
- (iii) The War Khasi inhabiting in the west and south slopes of Meghalaya and
- (iv) The Bhoi Khasi settled in the low lands.

Besides these four main sub-groups, two others groups-the Maden and the Lynngam have been recognized recently. The hadems are localized in Jaintia hills while the Lynngams are found in the Khasi hill. Each of these sub-groups maintains territorial endogamy very strictly and therefore are considered as sub-tribes.

Clans

Some of the important Khasi clans (*Kur*) are Lingodon, Kharkongor, Diengdol, Sohkhlet, Marbaning, Shimlieh etc. The clan or *Kur* is the nucleus of Khasi life. Members of a clan trace their descent from a root ancestress and all clans are bound together by strict ties of religion, ancestress worship and funeral rites. All social, cultural and political institutions revolved around it.

The clans of the Khasi are reckoned through mothers. Mother is regarded as a custodian of family rites and religious performances. Choosing of mate from one's own clan is regarded as a great sin. After marriage, a man becomes a member of his wife's clan. He goes to live with wife in her house. Gurdon has reported clan from the Khasi and these clans are exogamous thereby satisfying our definition of clan. The Khasi are a matrilineal people, residence being matrilocal though often only temporary. A breach of the rule of clan exogamy is regarded as highly dangerous in so far as it entails disastrous socio-religious consequences. Inheritance of property takes place only through the female line. Hence, the Khasi clans furnish a good example of social organization based on clans.

Marriage

A man marries between the age of 17 to 21 years and a woman at the age of 18 years in the Khasi society. Marriage is strictly monogamous. Both parallel-cousin and cross-cousin marriage are prohibited with the exception that a girl may marry her father's sister's son after the death of the father. Divorce is frequent; however the declaration has to be made in public. Children live with their mother after divorce. As elsewhere in tribal India, so among the Khasis also, one must go outside the clan, but in no case outside the tribe, to seek spouses.

Hypergamy is not practiced. Since the maternal uncle among the Khasi is regarded almost as a father, his daughter may not be sought in marriage during his lifetime.

The maternal uncle's children would belong to their mother's siblings, who is different from one's own and therefore are suitable spouses. Marriage among the Khasi has both a religious and a social aspect. Proposal is made by the parents of a young man either at his suggestion or on their own. The girl's parents first consult their daughter, and then omens are observed and if found favourable their consent is communicated to the boy's parents. This is followed by the bridegroom visiting the bride's house with a party of kin and friends, where some religious ceremonies involving sacrifices of fowls or pigs take place. After the solemnization the husband stays with his wife.

Polygyny as well as polyandry is unknown. A person can marry his deceased wife's younger sister, but never the two of them simultaneously. A man keeps a mistress and among some sections of the Khasi, children of such unions enjoy equal inheritance rights to their father's property along with the children of his wife.

Divorce is affected in cases of marital faithlessness, barrenness, marital incompatibility etc. Unless divorce is by mutual consent, the party that demands must pay compensation to the other person. A woman who is expecting a child cannot be divorced.

Family

Family is the smallest social unit in the Khasi society. A family is composed of the grand mother, her daughter, their husbands and children. The permanent members are the daughters who after their marriage, settled in their mother's family along with their husbands. In the Khasi society the most common office is the house of the youngest daughter (*Ling-Khadduh*) of the family. The holder of this office i.e. the youngest daughter (*Ka- Khadduh*) is responsible for the performance of the family religious rites and ceremonies. She is also entitled the largest share of family property.

In the Khasi society the mother's brother also has an important position. He is in charge of the management of mother's ancestral property and helps in performing important social ceremonies. On the father's side, it is the father's sister who is the repository of the bones of the father's family. Whereas the Khasi family grows around a nucleus of consanguineous females who are surrounded by a fringe of males-unmarried brothers and sons, fathers and husband and whereas property, authority, religion, residence are all in the hands of women, men-folk are also respected and even exercised some authority. The all- powerful Khasi women addressed her husband as her Lord.

Inheritance of Property

In the Khasi society, inheritance of property follows the female-line. All movable property of the family and the house are inherited by the youngest daughter. As regards immovable or land property, other than the house, there may be two alternatives - mother may keep intact the entire property of the family and leave it to her youngest daughter or she may divide the

property and give to all daughters during her life time. A male may inherit in the absence of a suitable heiress.

Chieftainship of the Village

The Khasi state is formed by the voluntary association of villages or group of villages or groups of villages. The head of the state is the *Siem* or chief. The authority of the *Siem* or chief is very limited as he cannot perform any important act without consulting his *darbar* which is the executive council having judicial powers. The chief receives the income from the raj or state lands. *Siem* is elected within the members of the *Siem* families. As regard succession, when a *Siem* dies, he is succeeded by the eldest son of his eldest sister. Only male members are found to be nominated for *Siem*ship.

Traditional Law

The Khasi rules are very severe with the lawbreakers as they do not want any repetition of the crime. A murderer is punished by beating till death whereas adultery is punished through life-imprisonment etc. All petty offences are dealt in local council whereas great crimes are finalised at the court of central jurisdiction.

Religion

A very unique feature of the Khasi is that they do not follow idol worship; their worship is offered towards the spirits. The people also propitiate the dead ancestors. They believe in transmigration of soul. All religious rites and ceremonies are usually performed by the clan through a priest (*Lyngdoh*). Individual households also possess their own small domestic shrines. Above all, the Khasi recognizes a supreme power (spirit) as the creator of the world. Some years back, people used to practice divination with breaking of eggs. The practice of human sacrifice was also found. With the spread of Christianity and modern education, all these customs have disappeared. The rites associated with birth, marriage and death were very strict in earlier times. Due to westernization a section of Khasis undervalues their traditional norms and practices while another section is continually striving to revive the age-old customs and traditions. Specially, an organization of the Khasis known as Ka Seng Khasis has spearheaded a revivalistic movement for the preservation of the Khasi religion and Khasi identity

The Khasi also cremates the death body. The dead body of *Siem* is generally mummified by immersing the corpse into liquor.

Conclusion

After going through a detailed discussion about the various aspects of social structure of Khasi society, we can conclude that the Khasi social organisation is almost matriarchal. However, the Khasi society yields the conclusion that privileges do develop as a consequence

of matrilineal descent, matrilineal residence and inheritance of property through the female line only, which add to the status of women.

Thus, we find that both matrilineal and matrilineal residence give a pre-eminent position to the Khasi women. It is residence in association with the inheritance of property which adds to social status. The Khasi supplies us with an example of a near-matriarchal society.

TRANSCRIPT

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Clans:

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Now we will see in brief about the Inheritance of Property about this particular tribe.

Inheritance of Property:

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which is the executive council having judicial powers. The chief receives the income from the raj or state lands. Siem is elected within the members of the Siem families.

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The Khasi also cremates the death body. The dead body of Siem is generally mummified by immersing the corpse into liquor.

Conclusion: :

After going through a detailed discussion about the various aspects of social structure which comprises a Khasi society we can conclude that the Khasi social organisation is almost matriarchal. However, the Khasi society yields the conclusion that privileges do develop as a consequence of matrilineal descent, matrilocal residence and inheritance of property through the female line only, which add to the status of women.

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GLOSSARY

- 1) **Sixth schedule:** It is a schedule assigned under the Constitution of India which gives provisions as to the administration of tribal areas in the state of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram.
- 2) **Kur :**The Khasi clan is known as kur or zaid which is composed of a group of families, the members of which are believed to have descended from a common ancestress.
- 3) **Kakhadduh:** The youngest daughter among the Khasi is called “Kakhadduh”. She inherits the property of the mother.
- 4) **Lyngdoh:** He is the Khasi priest who performed all religious rites and ceremonies. All social ceremonies are usually performed by the clans through Lyngdoh.

- 5) **Darbar:** It is the traditional village council of the Khasi. The elders of the village constituted this 'Darbar'. They are in charge of looking after the social affairs of the respective village.
- 6) **Siem:** The chief of the village is known as 'siem'. As regards his succession, the Siem is succeeded by his sister's son. When a Siem dies, he is succeeded by the eldest son of his eldest sister.

FAQs

1. Who are the Khasis?

Ans: The Khasis is a matrilineal community who lives mainly in the Khasi and Jaintia hills in the state of Meghalaya. Some Khasis are found in Garo hills, North Cachar hills and also along the northern and southern slopes down to the Brahmaputra and Surma valleys.

2. What is matriarchal society? Give the name of a matriarchal society of north-east India.

Ans: A matriarchal society is one where the family is dominated by the mother as head of the household. In matriarchal societies couple stays at the bride's residence.

The best example of a matriarchal society of north-east India is the Khasi - a palaeo- Mongoloid people found to be inhabiting in the Khasi and Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. They are regarded as scheduled tribe.

2. Give a brief description of the language spoken by the Khasis.

Ans: The great linguist Sir George Grierson had stated that the dialect of the Khasis is Mon-Khmer which belongs to the Austro-Asiatic language family. These people have migrated from south-east Asia and settled in the hill of north-east India. They are the only people in India who speak Mon-Khmer language.

3. Write a note on the clans of the Khasis.

Ans: The clan known as Kur is composed of a group of families, the members of which are believed to have descended from a common ancestress- a woman who is called "Ka-yaobel Yinrai" and regarded as a goddess. Colonel P.R.T. Gurdon mentioned 303 clans extent in Khasi society. The members of the clan, who could be traced to be descended from a common ancestress is called "Swikpo". As it is genealogically traced the group may be called a lineage. The clan is an exogamous group.

4. Describe the marriage rules of the Khasi.

Ans: Marriage among the Khasi has both a religious and social aspect. Marriage brings together not just two individuals but two families in a network of social obligations. A breach of exogamy, they believe, brings disaster to them. The Khasi

are monogamous people and prefer cross-cousin marriage. The girl can marry a cross-cousin marriage with a view to maintain property within the household. Divorce is very common and frequent among the Khasi.

5. How do the Khasi inherit property?

Ans: According to Khasi tradition, men have no right to ownership, whether they are husbands or sons. Property is inherited by a woman from a woman. The youngest daughter who is called “Ka khadduh” inherits the property of the mother. Generally, she plays the dominated role in performing the religious ceremonies and takes care of the poor members of the family.