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**CHANGING FAMILY SYSTEM AMONG A MATRILINEAL  
GROUP IN INDIA**

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Madhumita Das

## Introduction

According to evolutionary theory, the early human society lived in promiscuity. Due to the biological factors of pregnancy and childbirth, it was easier to trace biological relationship of children to their mothers, than to their fathers. Hence, human organization at a later stage revolved around mothers than around fathers. From matriliney there evolved patriliney when men were able to assert their superiority. This evolutionary theory from promiscuity to patriliney via matriliney is now discarded (Chacko, 1998). Both patrilineal and matrilineal systems have developed and flourished independently.

One of the few parts in the world where people rejoice when a girl is born, is a unique societal structure, which is found among the Khasis, a tribe of Meghalaya, a small northeastern state of India. It is one of the few areas in the world where a woman proposes marriage and where houses bear the name of a woman instead of a man. Anthropologists describe it as a matrilineal society (Rasid, 1982).

## Characteristics of Matrilineal System

Early evolutionists have attempted to demonstrate that most societies in this universe have eventually evolved from matriarchy to their present form. Today assumptions of universal male dominance, rather than universal female dominance hold the stage (Fox, 1967; Divale and Harris, 1976). Analyses of the matrilineal system operating in a variety of cultural and ecological settings and their comparison with kinship systems based on different principals of descent, inheritance and succession, have contributed to a clearer understanding of certain distinctive type of social structure.

Most of the anthropologists do not believe in the existence of any true matriarchy. They, however, suggest that there exist three characteristics of matriarchy, viz., descent through the mother (family name through mother), matrilocal residential system (husband lives at the residence of wife after marriage) and inheritance of property by females. Thus, any society, which follows these three norms, is presently called matrilineal society.

In a matrilineal society, the descent or the family name is through the mother's side, and is known as 'matrilineal descent'. This affiliates an individual with kin of both sexes, related to him or her through women only. Kapadia (1966) has mentioned that all children of a woman take the family name of their mother. As descent is through female side, only the children of the female of the family can become members of the family. The children of the male child cannot be the member of his mother's family as they cannot take the family name of their fathers.

Matrilineal societies also exhibit interesting variety of residence patterns, like, 'a man residing with his wife's matrilineal kin', 'a wife residing with her husband's matrilineal kin' or 'with his paternal kin', 'couples settling down together in a new residence', or the 'two living with their respective natal groups following the duolocal pattern' (Richards, 1950; Dube, 1969). Traditionally, it has been assumed that in those societies where married children live near or with kin, residence will tend to be patrilocal if males contribute more to the economy and matrilocal if women contribute more (Ember and Ember, 1971; Divale, 1974). Ember and Ember (1971) have also mentioned that those cross-cultural evidences also suggest that in societies where war exists amongst the neighboring communities, residence is almost always matrilocal.

Usually in a matrilineal system, it is the husband who lives with his wife in his in-laws house and doesn't take his bride home, as is the case with other communities. After the birth of one or two children, the man frequently takes his wife to his own house. Generally at

this point of time, they form a neo-local family. However, an interesting feature of neo-local family set-up is that the mother of the bride mostly gifts the house in which the couple usually settles down (Sinha, 1970).

Property is transmitted through the female and is held by the females alone. Whatever a male member of the family earns belongs to the family, to which he belongs, and either goes to his mother or is inherited by his sister and her female descendants.

### **Matrilineal Society in India**

When most of the people in the world follow the patrilineal system, there exist a few groups here and there who believed to be the descendants of Japheth (son of Noah), and are followers of the matrilineal system (Syiemlieh, 1994).

At the global level, the existence of matrilineal society is found among the tribes of African countries, in some part of Southeast Asia and among three groups of India. It is the Minangkabaus of West Sumatra, Indonesia, comprising the largest ethnic group in the world who follow a matrilineal system (Tanius, 1983).

In Indian context, the matrilineal social system is found only among small pockets of south the and northeast India. The Nairs and Mappilles in Kerala, the tribal groups of Minicoy Island and the Khasis and the Garos of Meghalaya are the followers of matrilineal system. However, the matrilineal system of the African countries differs considerably from that of the Southeast Asian groups. Even within India, the system differs from one group to another (Kapadia, 1966).

Among these groups, difference is mostly observed in the type of residence after marriage. The pattern of duo-local residence exists among the Ashanti of the Gold Coast in Africa, Minangkchau of Sumatra and the Nayars of Central Kerala. However, the Khasis of Meghalaya, generally follow the residential pattern known as “matrilocal residence”, where the husband resides with his wife's matrilineal kin or in other case couples settle down together in a new residence in and around his wife's maternal place (neo-local residence).

### **Methodology**

This work discusses the changes that are occurring among the only few existent matrilineal setup in the world in terms of their attitudes and behaviour. In order to discuss the changes, the existing literature has been reviewed and they are supplemented by in-depth interviews of a few key informants. The key informants include eminent academicians, elderly persons of different localities, local heads, social workers and persons representing the younger generation. In addition, two focus group discussions (FGD) were done with women from different age groups. The idea behind this exercise is to clearly identify those features that have been characterising the matrilineal system of the Khasi tribe these days.

Along with the qualitative analysis, the profile of women living in original matrilineal arrangement as against those who have completely transited in the form of percentage distribution is also presented. A few socio-economic, demographic, and developmental characteristics of both women and her husband has been taken into consideration. Lastly, a multivariate analysis has been undertaken to substantiate the findings from bivariate analysis and to find out the factors, which brought changes among the society.

### **Study Area**

The basic aim of the study is to understand the structure of matrilineal system and the changes that has taken place in it over the period of time among the Khasis of Meghalaya. In Meghalaya there exists three tribal groups, namely Khasi, Jaintia and Garo. The state is predominantly inhabited by the Khasi tribe, who are known for their matrilineal social system.

The sample design adopted was a multistage design, fitted to the study requirements. Given the resources available, it was decided to cover 600 eligible women (currently married

Khasi women age 15–49 years), all from (erstwhile) East Khasi Hills district. The choice of East Khasi Hills over West Khasi Hills was purely purposive. According to 1991 census, little over 33 per cent population of the East Khasi Hills district live in the urban areas. Thus, it was decided to cover 200 eligible women (33 per cent of 600) from the urban areas and the remaining 400 women from the rural areas.

### **The Khasi Matriliney: An Overview**

The term matriarchy or matriliney has become inseparably associated with the Khasi social organisation since it was first used in 1914 by Gurdon to describe Khasi social customs (Das. Gupta, 1964). Although the term is used to explain the pattern of residence after marriage among the Khasis, it is, however, known that matrilocal residence is not an invariable concomitant of matriarchal or matrilineal society. As among the Nayars of India, though they are also the followers of matrilineal system, the residential system among them is duolocal, where husband is usually the night visitor to their wife.

Before we begin to understand the nature of Khasi social organisation, it becomes necessary, to clear that the general rule of matrilineal system is that females inherit property. However, it must be noted that at the outset the system of inheritance is governed by some code of rules, which, if taken in its totality and richness, can hardly be described as simple. In fact, the Khasi society is more complex and vivid than what is it apparent.

The Khasis have matrilocal residence and matrilineal descent. Participation in the family religion and the common sepulchre, where bones of the members of the family are interred after death, are the two elements that bind the members together. Besides the matrilocal residential pattern and matrilineal descent, family property is mainly transmitted through the female line.

The children of the male do not belong to the family. The youngest daughter, *Ka Khadduh*, in a Khasi family is in charge of the family religion. She cremates her mother and inters her bones in the common sepulchre (a place where the bones are kept with a huge stone over it which is different in shape for males and females). Marriage is a great social institution among the Khasis, as it determines the system of matrilocal residential pattern among them (Sinha, 1970).

Being the followers of a unique social system of matriliney, the Khasi women enjoy a special place of status and dignity (Kyndiah, 1990). A Khasi woman is the guardian and preserver of the family goods. She plays a crucial role in the affairs of the family. However, she is not the head of the family, as this is left to a male member. The father of the family has a definite role to play in the household affairs. However, his role is limited to the final word of the maternal uncle.

When Christianity came, the Khasi family was faced with the question whether a “*Ka Khaduh*” could hold the family property if she would convert to the Christianity. In 1918, the Government ruled that Christian converts should be allowed to inherit the ancestral property. Property is thus divorced from religion. Though religion was divorced from the traditional rules, because of the modernisation process, such as, educational development along with the spread of Christianity, that had somehow changed the traditional system in many respect (Roy, 1964).

The original system and moral efficacy has now a days been largely distorted (Bareh, 1994). The literature shows that a shift is taking place in the matrilineal society towards parental or patrilineal one (Tanius, 1983; Syiemlieh, 1994). Syiemlieh (1994), in his write-up on the Khasis and their matrilineal system has explained that due to some basic reasons there exists a transition in the matrilineal set-up in Meghalaya. This transition in the matrilineal society is due to the changes in the overall set-up. Such changes can be the result of factors like the intermingling with other neighbouring patriarchal communities, the advent of missionaries and spread of Christianity among these tribal groups. The spread of urbanisation

and urban development along with the spread of Christianity have changed the perception and attitude of people among the Khasis ( Kapadia, 1966; Syiemlieh, 1994).

Thus from the above review we get the idea that over time these matrilineal societies are undergoing changes in its characteristics. On the basis of the above literature, each characteristic feature has been given weightage to categorize the sample women in two groups, viz.,

**Traditional:** Women fulfilling all three criteria or those who possess at least ownership right along with matrilineal residential pattern or matrilineal residential pattern and descent through female.

**Transitional:** Women who follow none of the criteria or only descent.

It is found from the above categorisation that 55 per cent of sample women are from the traditional group while the remaining 45 per cent are from the transitional group. The Traditional women will be referred to as 'traditional women', whereas women in Transitional group will be referred to as 'transitional women'. It may be relevant to mention here that these nomenclatures are used for the purpose of conceptual categorisation of these two groups of women according to their characteristics assessed at the time of survey. Yet another issue that needs to be kept in mind is that the term 'traditional' is not used as opposed to 'modern'. It may be emphasised that women in traditional group are the followers of all the three or the first two important characteristics of the matrilineal system, i.e., property ownership right, matrilineal residence and/or family name through mother's side.

## **Socio-economic and Demographic Characteristics of Women in Matrilineal Set-up**

### Type of Residence

Type of residence is one of the important determinants that has its effect on the changes that take place in any society, as well as, on the changing perception of people towards traditions. From table 1, distribution of the two groups of women in rural and urban areas can be seen. Women from traditional group are mostly concentrated in rural areas (79 per cent). What is, however, more interesting is that 21 per cent women following the matrilineal system live in urban areas and also almost half of the women who have deviated from matrilineal system continue to live in rural areas. This indicates that the transition that we witness in Khasi society is a complex phenomenon operating at family level than merely the outcome of urbanisation and modernisation process.

### Educational Level of Couples

Education is considered as one of the important sources for social change. Education, either formal or informal, is part of the individual's socialisation. It has been widely recognised that education plays a crucial role in individual's well being and society's economic and social progress.

Table 1 shows that the level of illiteracy is higher among the second group of women (35 per cent) as compared to the first group (28 per cent). A large number of women who follow matrilineal system are not only literate as compared to the transitional group, they have also acquired higher level of education. Proportion of women who are literate up to middle or have gone up to high school and above is higher in 'traditional' group than in 'transitional' group.

In case of educational level of husband, it has been found that the husbands of "transitional" women have higher education than the husbands of 'traditional' women. Viewed against the previous finding, the couple's education confirms that 'traditional women have higher education than their husbands, whereas in case of 'transitional' women, husband has

higher level of education than their wives. The qualitative data suggests that if a girl marries a man who is more educated than she is, the tendency would be to move away and set up one's own neolocal residence. It is quite likely that a girl who prefers to stay within 'traditional' set-up is matched with a boy whose educational level is not an important consideration for marriage. Alternatively, if a girl happens to marry a boy who is less educated prefers to continue to stay within 'traditional' set-up. It is also likely that after marriage, boys drop out of education or discontinue after some time because they engage themselves in work, while the girl continue education as they find it an easier proposition, by virtue of their stay with their mothers. This is just the opposite of what happens in a patrilineal setting, where girls tend to drop out of education after marriage.

### Occupational Status of Couples

The occupation of a person refers to the type of jobs that he holds (Bogue, 1969). It is also an important indicator of the family's social status in the community. The occupational structure of a family also changes the outlook and thus leads to a change in societal set-up. The social changes broaden when the women also tend to participate in the economic development along with men.

Bosrup (1970) has stated that women lose their traditional roles during economic development, as they are found mostly absorbed in agricultural sector. The level of women's participation also depends on the restrictions imposed on women in a society. Free and more favourable societies give more autonomy to them and thus their participation rate in economic sector increases.

The assessment of the occupational status of the currently married women (Table 1) reveals that there is not much significant difference between working and non-working status among the two groups of women. However, a large proportion of 'transitional' women are found to be engaged in professional sectors, whereas, a large proportion in 'traditional' group are working in nonprofessional sectors. The husband's occupational profile also follows the similar expected pattern. It is perhaps primarily because most 'traditional' women stay in rural areas, whereas 'transitional' women are more concentrated in urban areas.

### Standard of Living of the Household

Among the surveyed population a higher concentration of women in the medium standard of living category in both the groups has been found. The results for both the categories of women follow almost an identical pattern.

### Age Distribution of Women

Age is one of the important variables that determine the authority among men and women. Age also determines the decision making process in almost every society and it has been found that in most of the Indian societies female autonomy increases with age (Das Gupta, 1995).

Table 1 presents some demographic characteristics of sample women. Age distribution of the two groups of women shows an interesting picture. Percentage of women in the first age category (<25 years) is higher in the 'transitional' group compared to 'traditional' group and it indicates that it is mostly the younger generation that is undergoing the changes. Also, this is the group, which is moving out from the traditional matrilineal culture to a different social set-up closer to patrilineal one.

### Women's Birth Order

Birth order of a women, though have a greater role to play in terms of age at marriage, is also having a good role to play in the social system which is matrilineal in nature. Among the Khasis it is found that there exists a system that the youngest daughter has to live with mother

**Table 1 Characteristics of women of matrilineal set-up**

Percent distribution of women by selected social characteristics; according to groups of matrilineal set-up

Social characteristics	Groups of matrilineal set-up			
	Traditional group		Transitional group	
	Percent	Number of women	Percent	Number of women
<b>Residence</b>				
Urban	21.2	70	48.5	130
Rural	78.8	260	51.5	138
<b>Education</b>				
Illiterate	27.6	91	35.4	95
Literate up to middle school	38.8	128	35.8	96
High school complete and above	33.6	111	28.7	77
<b>Husband's education</b>				
Illiterate	7.6	25	7.5	20
Literate up to middle school	35.5	117	28.0	75
High school complete and above	57.0	188	64.6	173
<b>Couple's education</b>				
Both illiterate	27.6	91	25.0	67
Wife illiterate, husband literate	27.6	91	35.4	95
Wife literate, husband illiterate	2.7	9	1.9	5
Both literate	42.1	139	37.7	101
<b>Occupational status</b>				
Not working presently	50.3	166	51.5	138
Professional worker	35.5	117	43.3	116
Nonprofessional worker	14.2	47	5.2	14
<b>Husband's occupational status</b>				
Not working presently	32.1	106	22.4	60
Professional worker	43.0	142	58.2	156
Nonprofessional worker	24.8	82	19.4	52
<b>Standard of living index</b>				
Low	36.1	119	32.1	86
Medium	40.3	133	39.6	106
High	23.6	78	28.4	76
<b>Age</b>				
< 25	31.8	105	36.2	97
25-34	37.9	125	34.7	93
35-49	30.3	100	29.1	78
<b>Women's birth order</b>				
Eldest daughter	12.4	41	4.9	13
Others	34.2	113	13.8	37
Youngest/only daughter	53.3	176	81.3	218
<b>Age at first marriage</b>				
< 18	17.3	57	17.9	48
18-24	71.8	237	67.5	181
25+	10.9	36	14.6	39
<b>Years in current marriage</b>				
< 5	31.8	105	36.9	99
5-9	25.5	84	27.2	73
10+	42.7	141	35.8	96

Contd...

<b>Table 1 Characteristics of women of matrilineal set-up (contd.)</b>				
Percent distribution of women by selected demographic and developmental characteristics, according to groups of matrilineal set-up				
	Groups of matrilineal set-up			
	Traditional group		Transitional group	
Social characteristics	Percent	Number of women	Percent	Number of women
<b>Type of marriage</b>				
Love marriage	47.9	158	54.9	147
Arranged marriage	52.1	172	45.1	121
<b>Number of living children</b>				
0	9.1	30	6.0	16
1-2	33.6	111	50.0	134
3+	57.3	189	44.0	118
<b>Exposure to mass media</b>				
Exposed	53.3	176	64.2	172
Not exposed	46.7	154	35.8	96
<b>Total percent</b>	100.0	NA	100.0	NA
<b>Number of women</b>	NA	330	NA	268

Note: Groups of matrilineal set-up are defined in text. In all subsequent tables that use this classification, definition is the same, if not stated otherwise.  
NA: Not applicable

and have to carry out the traditional rituals. For daughters of other order births, it depends on their choice as they have an option to move out from their mother's residence. For the purpose of analysis, keeping in mind the culture of matrilineal society, women's birth order has been categorised especially into three groups, viz. eldest daughter, youngest/only daughter, and others.

Percent distribution of women by birth order (Table 1) shows that in both the groups it is the youngest daughter category where the distributions concentrate the most. Around 53 per cent of the 'traditional' women are the youngest or the only daughter of the family. While little more than four-fifth of the second group of women falls in this category. This is a rather surprising distribution and quite contrary to our expectation. It is possible that the younger daughters or the only daughters who are actually carrier of the traditional culture of Khasis are moving out in large numbers from the traditional set-up.

#### Age at first Marriage

It is expected that if a girl marries early, she is more likely to continue education and therefore she may continue to live with her mother. On the other hand, if a girl marries late she would acquire education and are likely to settle outside her mother's family. Age at marriage therefore may be an important determinant of whether the girl continues to live in a matrilineal set-up or moves out. The percent distribution of age at first marriage (Table 1) does not, however, show any notable difference between the two groups of women. For both the groups, maximum concentration is found in the middle age at marriage category (18-24 years). Median age at marriage for the first group is 20 years while for the second group it is 21 years.

#### Type of Marriage

In India, generally it has been found that the accepted norms of marriage is the one which is arranged by parents only, and brides are rarely consulted in selecting their life partners in most of the societies. This subordination or lack of autonomy of women has given rise to early age at marriage (Audinarayana, 1990; 1993) and thus leads to lower status of women (Dubey and Bardhan, 1972). Among the study population there exists two types of marriage patterns (a)



arranged marriage (arranged only by parents or parents with relatives with or without girl's consent) (b) self choice or love marriage.

Table 1 indicates that a little more than half of the total women in first group have got married, arranged by their parents or relatives, where as, around 45 per cent of the women of the second group have gone for arranged marriage. This shows that among the women, whose marriages have been fixed and performed according to the wish of their parents, a large number are staying with their mother and are following the norms of the traditional matrilineal set-up. However, there is not much difference with the 'transitional' group. In case of marriages among 'transitional' women, there are about 45 per cent of women whose marriages have been decided by their parents.

### Mass Media Exposure

Any change in the society is a mixture of interaction or intermingling with outside groups as well as the developmental process. From the developmental point of view, exposure to mass media plays an important role to shape people's attitude and lifestyle.

Table 1 shows that among the 'traditional' group of women around 47 per cent have not been exposed to mass media who also confronts with the finding that this group is mostly found among the rural population. On the other hand, among the second group of women, the unexposed group consists of only 36 per cent. Nevertheless, it shows that there is a higher share of exposure among the women of 'transitional' group compared to the first group.

### Number of Living Children

In a matrilineal culture, one of the basic requirements of the women is to stay with their mother after marriage, which has undergone tremendous changes in the process of time. Traditionally, it was the rituals for all the daughters to stay with their mother after marriage. However, with the increasing influences of modernisation, it has been found that mostly the youngest daughter follow the rules and for the other daughters they have freedom to move away and stay separately, preferably after the birth of one or two children, when the couple feel confident that they can move out and form a healthy family.

<b>Table 2 <u>Total children ever born to women</u></b>			
Mean number of children ever born among women of two groups of matrilineal set-up, by current age			
Current age	Mean number of children ever born to women		
	Groups of matrilineal set-up		
	Traditional	Transitional	Total
< 25	1.69	1.52	1.60
25-34	3.20	2.55	2.92
35-49	4.97	4.26	4.66
Total	3.25	2.67	2.99

Table 2 shows the mean number of children born to women of different age category. The results show that among all the age groups the mean number of living children is higher among the 'traditional' group.

The mean value of 4.97 in case of women age 35-49 years among the 'traditional group, is quite high, whereas, in case of 'transitional' group it is slightly lower. Thus, one can say that the fertility level is no doubt higher among the 'traditional' women rather than the 'transitional' group.

## **Results of Logistic Regression Analysis**

From the above analysis, a comparative idea about the socio-economic and demographic characteristics of the two groups of women has been emerged. There exists a limitation in the two-way classification, because, the results obtained from this may be misleading for the effects of one characteristic may be confounded with the effect of other characteristics under study. The logistic regression analysis thus has been undertaken to get a better picture by controlling the effect of such potentially confounded variables.

From the above discussion, we have also observed that the concentration of women belonging to 'transitional' group are more in the urban areas, which in a simplistic sense means that urbanisation may have its own influence over the changes in the society. This may not be completely true in this case. Thus, for understanding the factors, underlying for the shifts from 'traditional' to transitional set-up among the women within urban as well as in rural areas, separate regression analyses have been done for both the residential types and for the total women.

From the analysis there emerges a significant effect of mainly educational status of couples along with the economic variables, which mainly alters the chances of being in the 'traditional' or in 'transitional' group. Women's educational level reflects an interesting situation, where, as her level of education increases, the chances of being in the 'transitional' group also increase among both the urban as well as rural women. It is more in case of rural women, where the odds ratio are 1.2 and 1.9, in case of literate up to middle school and high school complete and above women, respectively, to be in the transitional category than among the illiterate women.

However, in case of husband's education, the situation in urban and rural areas differs. In urban areas, it is only the higher level of education of husband, which brings changes among women to shift from 'traditional' set-up to 'transitional' set-up. In case of husband's education, irrespective of the level of education, has generally a very high impact among the rural women to go for the changes, among them.

The most interesting variable that has emerged in the analysis is the occupational status of both husband as well as wife. Urban women, who are engaged in the professional sector, are 1.8 times more likely to move to the 'transitional' category than the women who are mainly the housewife or not working. In case of rural area, the occupation of women is not showing any significant effect on these changes or shifts. Husband's occupation has also shown an interesting trend, where, husband's involvement in both professional as well as in nonprofessional sectors brings women to be more in the 'transitional' sector. However, in case of rural areas, women whose husbands are engaged in professional sector are 1.4 times more likely to be in the second group.

The standard of living of the household in case of rural women has come out to be significant, where women belonging to high standard of living are more likely to be in the 'transitional' group than women belonging to households with low standard of living.

Among the demographic factors, current age of women, her age at marriage, birth order and number of living children, have come out to be significant. In case of age of the women, urban women belonging to higher age category (35-49 years), show a negative way as the odds ratio of 0.4 means that women belonging to this category are 0.4 times less likely to be in the 'transitional' group than women of younger age category. Even in case of age at first marriage, women getting married at a later age are more likely to shift from 'traditional' to the 'transitional' group.

The birth order of women has also emerged as a significant variable as women belonging to the category of 'eldest' or 'other' order birth are less likely to be found in the 'transitional' sector than the younger or the only daughters, in both urban and rural areas. In case of number of living children, women with at least one or more children are more likely to shift from 'traditional' group to 'transitional' group, among both rural as well as urban women.

**Table 4.6 Determinants of groups of matrilineal set-up**

Odds ratios of logistic regression analysis of groups of matrilineal set-up on background characteristics of women, according to place of residence of women

Predictors	Place of residence		
	Urban	Rural	Total
<b>Residence</b>			
Urban	NA	NA	1.0000
Rural	NA	NA	0.1390***
<b>Education</b>			
Illiterate	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
Literate up to middle school	1.0755**	1.5849**	1.7892**
High school complete and above	1.6053***	1.3332**	1.4618***
<b>Husband's education</b>			
Illiterate	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
Literate up to middle school	1.2771	1.2017**	1.0400
High school complete and above	1.2452**	1.9395**	1.6968
<b>Occupational status</b>			
Not working	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
Professional worker	1.8225***	1.2940	1.5824***
Nonprofessional worker	1.4177	1.2771	1.3008**
<b>Husband's occupational status</b>			
Agricultural worker	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
Professional worker	5.9808***	1.4464***	1.9434***
Non-professional worker	4.1815***	1.2383	1.6513**
<b>Standard of living index</b>			
Low	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
Medium	1.0747	0.6006	0.6942**
High	0.6109	1.4412**	0.5121***
<b>Age</b>			
< 25	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
25-34	0.6142	0.0124	0.7984
35-49	0.3892**	0.7335	0.7349
<b>Age at first marriage</b>			
< 18	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
18-24	0.7733	1.3912**	1.0299
25+	1.5771**	1.0221	1.4101
<b>Type of marriage</b>			
Love marriage	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
Arrange marriage	0.9467	0.8559	0.6254
<b>Women's birth order</b>			
Youngest/only daughter	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
Eldest daughter	0.2398***	0.0775***	0.2644***
Other	0.2517***	0.2533***	0.2560***
<b>Number of living children</b>			
0	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
1-2 children	4.0577***	1.7624**	3.5034***
3+ children	3.1386**	1.1863**	1.6374**
<b>Exposure to mass media</b>			
Not exposed	1.0000	1.0000	1.0000
Exposed	1.1595**	1.5370***	1.5677***
<b>CONSTANT</b>	-0.9826	-2.4672	-1.2558

Note: Reference category for dependent variables 'Groups of matrilineal set-up' is 'Traditional women'  
Significance level \*\* p<.01 \*\*\* p<.001  
NA: Not applicable

The effect of mass media, which is considered as a developmental variable shows higher significance level among the rural women to accept the change, though it has also emerged as a significant variable in case of urban women.

Results of Table 3 for all women show that predictor variables like type of residence, educational level of women, occupational status of both woman and her husband, standard of living, women's birth order, number of living children and mass media exposure have significant bearing on the dependent variable.

After controlling for all the other predictor variables, type of residence shows that the women who reside in urban areas have higher chances to be in the second group (who are not strictly following the traditional matrilineal culture) than their counterparts. In other words, the

chances of being the followers of matrilineal norms are more among the rural women. Women's educational level have also emerged as a significant predictor variable, as women with education up to middle school as well as high school complete and above, there is a higher chance of women to move away from the traditional cultural bonds.

In case of the occupational status of women it is found that those who belong to the non-professional sectors as well as in the professional sector there is a higher probability to be in the second group in comparison to women who are not working at all. Whereas, when husband's occupational status is considered, women, whose husbands are engaged in one of the traditional tribal economic sector (agricultural sector) are having higher chances to maintain the matrilineal culture and as they move to the professional sector their shift from the traditional matrilineal set-up becomes more prominent.

The Exp. ( $\beta$ ) values for the demographic variables show that those who are the only daughter or the youngest daughter in the family have higher probability to retain themselves within the circle of matrilineal set-up. In case of number of children to the women, it indicates that women with more than one surviving child are mostly from 'transitional' group.

The developmental factor, 'exposure to mass media' shows that the women who are not exposed to media have higher possibility of following the traditional matrilineal culture whereas, as the women get exposed to media the chances of shifting out of traditional culture increases.

Among all the factors, women's birth order and the number of children show higher effects in determining the probability of shifts from the traditional set-up to the one who have mostly transited from the system.

The above analysis shows a definite change that had taken place over time among the Khasis. Considering the underlying factors that brought changes, and in order to support the above findings, the existing literature has been reviewed and they are supplemented by in-depth interviews of few key informants and two focus group discussions (FGD). The idea behind this exercise is to clearly identify those features that have been characterising the matrilineal system of the Khasi tribe these days.

### **Cultural Change Among The Matrilineal Groups Over Time**

When we try to understand the cultural shifts among a particular community, two questions arise in our mind: What is the source of the new trait? Why are people motivated to adopt it? From the literature on matrilineal society it has been found that some of the matrilineal societies have changed through the ages to patriarchy and this process is making a progress in roads into the remaining matriarchal societies which are coming into contact with the outer world (Vidyarthi and Rai, 1985).

This process of transformation of matrilineal society into different phases has been the outcome of various interacting forces. Though this change is not visible from outside, to understand the mechanism one should study the cultural pattern and practices by observing them thoroughly in their own environment.

It is well known fact that the sources of any change in the culture may be inside or outside the society, i.e., new ideas or behaviour may originate within the society or it may have been due to intervention of outside culture or have been borrowed or imposed by another society.

In the following section, an attempt is made to understand the process of cultural change among the Khasis, who belong to the matriarchal or matrilineal set-up.

#### **(a) Role of Christianity in bringing cultural change**

Christianity came on the scene with its patrilineal values and cultural concepts. It has been spread among the Khasis mainly during the British rule and has covered more than 80 per cent of the total population at the present time. This has mainly spread with the help of Christian missionaries, which is found in most of the rural areas in the state besides being in the urban areas. Christianity is mostly adopted by the Khasis than the other two tribal groups

(Garos and Jaintias) of Meghalaya (Office of the Registrar General and Census Commissioner, 1992). The first generation converts completely cut themselves off from practising the traditional religion. Many of them were ostracised and rejected by their 'kur' or 'clan' (Syiem, 1998).

Due to the activity of Christian missionaries during the past century and the development of a dynamic native Christian Church, the culture of the Khasis has been radically altered, and thus the Khasis have accepted 'new lives for old' (Roy, 1964).

The main differences that had existed in the society due to the Christian invention are the spread of education. This has helped them to achieve the goal for providing education to those people who are considered to be isolated or backward group. And as education altered human perception, even among Khasis, there exists some changes in the traditional set-up. As mentioned by an eminent academician, "at the present time when education has become an asset, and is available in most of the parts of our state, the parents consider it essential to educate his/her children so that they can also achieve their goals in this modern world. But, though education has helped the overall developmental process, it has also altered the perception of men and thus among most of the male members in particular, desire to form a separate household after marriage has emerged out. They wanted to have an independent life".

(b) Level of exposure and interaction with patriarchal society

The second challenge has come from growing exposure and interaction with patriarchal cultures. Khasi society has had interaction with other neighbouring cultures in the past. A key informant has recounted that "since independence, the Khasi locality has been increasingly open to the larger society. Besides, many Khasis have gone out of their homes for other parts of the country for the purpose of education and employment. Thus, when they return they bring different norms and values of other cultures, mainly of patriarchal values, along with them which after mixing with traditional norms and values gives shape to a different cultural set-up".

The changes have also been occurring due to cross-marriages, because, the children of such couples generally use their father's clan name. In present days it is also found that children of Khasi families, especially in the urban areas, are using their father's clan name or both their father and mother's clan name. A young person has pointed out that it is simple and convenient to say that "I am the son of Mr. So and so, rather than referring to the mother's name when we interact with other community people".

(c) Role of Urbanisation in bringing change among the Khasis

Urbanisation is another important source, which has brought changes into the Khasi matrilineal set-up. The spread of urbanisation has given rise to more chances of intermingling of people of different communities and thus has led to the adaptation of different cultural traits among them. This process has also altered their perception of matrilineal culture among them.

From the above discussion on the changes of matrilineal culture, it has been found that some of the matrilineal societies have changed through the ages. Though, the above mentioned sources are the main causes of cultural change, common people consider many other factors responsible for the changes that has occurred in the society. To collect more information regarding the causes and consequences of changes in the societal set-up, the key informant's interviews have been conducted, of which some descriptions have been given below.

According to an elderly woman from a sample village, "the changes that occur in the society is different in town and in the village as the causes for the change differ a lot according to their location". She has emphasised that in a rural area the most drastic changes that have occurred are the changes in the residential pattern, which we consider the most important asset of the matrilineal system. While discussing the causes of changes she has told

that except for the rich families, other families in the village couldn't afford to have so many members in a single household. Thus, due to financial problem males prefer to stay away with their wife after marriage. Secondly, among many families in rural area, the chances of having large ancestral property, is very less compared to the urban areas and thus the parents cannot afford to divide the property among the daughters while it is their right. Because of this, however smallholdings they have in terms of land or other goods, all of them generally go to the younger daughter or the one who stays back with her mother. The other daughters stay away from their parents. Besides, the changes have also been occurred due to the influence of urban areas. Like the urbanites, even the rural people prefer to form a small family now days.

While asked whether she likes the changes that have occurred and will occur in the social set-up in the due course, she has replied, "it is very difficult to accept the fact as we have seen the traditional matrilineal culture with very high traditional values". An eminent social worker has stated that, "it was our moral duty to give respect to our mothers and other females, be they our relative or not, which has vanished mostly at present. I don't blame the male members of the society, but as a whole, the rigidity of the social set-up and feelings of inferiority among the males had caused the present situation. Men felt that he had no contribution to this society".

In another interview, a middle-aged lady from rural area has denied to accept that there is a change in the society. She has argued that every thing is almost identical and whatever changes have occurred are good for the people of this land. She says "actually, like other societies which have experienced a lot of changes in due course of time, ours has also experienced it. It's quite natural. Because of developmental processes, and expansion of urban areas, the interaction between the Khasis and other surrounding non-tribal groups has increased which is acting as an important catalyst for the changes in the society. Even there is any change in the society, we, the women folks of the Khasi community always feel secure due to our system".

According to her, matrilineal society is divided into two different types, for have's and for have not's. If a family doesn't have any property for them, the question of inheritance of property through females doesn't arise at all.

According to another respondent, 'the nature of matrilineal culture is not healthy for any one. There should be modifications in this system. One should divide the property not only among the daughters but even the sons should get the share from the ancestral property from their mother. She has said that however, it is very difficult to change the system. Thus, to bring the modification, one has to change oneself and then only we can improve the Khasi society.

Now a days, due to modernisation and a high rate of urbanisation, there is a lot of change among the Khasis. At the present time, when education has become an asset, even the parents consider sons and daughters education equally important. This has given rise for desire among the males to form a neolocal family rather than staying with their in-laws.

The changes have also occurred as now even girls prefer and are more willing to set-up a neo-local family. This is because it is the husband with whom she has to spend her whole life and if he feels insecure staying with his in-laws, the change become inevitable. Thus, it is the mutual understanding between husband and wife and also between daughter and mother which has given rise to more of neo-local families.

Even with regard to inheritance of property ownership, there is a marked change as people now a days prefer to divide the property equally among all children, be it daughter or son. It has also been found common at the present juncture that parents wish to have at least one son, as daughters prefer to stay separately after marriage.

According to another key informant, the matrilineal society is "female oriented but not female dominated". According to her, the women have acquired a prime position in

society, as they have been seen as natural caregiver. However, this does not imply that they dominate in every aspect of family lives.

The real matrilineality among Khasis is in a process of transition due to many factors. Though it is very difficult to give any direct opinion about its quality but it is true that the changes have emerged mainly due to urbanisation, level of modern value input in the society and intermingling of different communities in the process of time.

The most important change that has taken place in the matrilineal society as observed in the above discussion, is the changes in the residential system and property inheritance system. The above two factors have emerged as main causes of transition in the social set-up. Hence, to get more in-depth knowledge, *focus group discussions* (FGDs) were conducted.

### **Matrilocal Residence and Mother-Daughter Relationship Among the Khasis**

To understand the mechanism of this issue, two groups were considered, depending on the age cohorts, both from rural and urban areas, viz., (i) women age below 30 years and (ii) women age above 30 years.

#### *(i) Observations from women age below 30 years*

Throughout the discussion focus was kept on the matrilocal residential system among Khasis and its advantages, disadvantages and changing patterns. Most of them were of the opinion that matrilocal residence after marriage is not conducive for both mothers and daughters. They pointed out that if a daughter after getting married stays with her mother, her relationship doesn't properly develop with her husband. Always it has been found that the husband feels that he is being treated as a stranger in the family and thus he takes very less interest in the family affairs. It was also pointed out that in such a system in most of the matters, both husband and wife have to depend on the wife's mother to say the final word. While discussing the same issue among the rural women it has been found that even in rural area, women feel more secure to stay with their husband separately for a better and happy married life.

On the other hand some of them have different opinions as they have pointed out that the care is more when they stay with their mother, where the mother takes care of her as well as her children. The burden of workload becomes less if they follow the matrilocal residential pattern. And thus it has been found to be a common practice that women generally move out of their mother's residence after having at least one child.

#### *(ii) Observations from women age 30 years or above*

In general, all the women of this group (both rural and urban) were of the opinion that it is always easier and better to stay with mother. The reason pointed out was that if they stay with their mothers, they enjoy more freedom and help during their pregnancy, as well as lesser workload all the time. They have also mentioned that it is their duty to keep alive the traditionalism of matrilineal system. While discussing the real situation at present, they said that most of the women desire to stay with their mothers after marriage, but because of their husbands they are sometimes forced or some times even willingly stay away from their mother's residence. Now a days, it has also been found that some women are compelled to stay with their in-laws, because of higher incidences of cross-cultural marriages, which is totally against their culture.

### **Changing Inheritance Pattern and Its Impact on the Position of Women**

Both the groups (less than 30 years and above 30 years women) have given the same opinion in this matter. They have pointed out that along with the changes in other aspects, the inheritance of property by females has also faced with lots of changes. As of now daughters are mostly found to move out to form neo-local families, the family property is either divided or given to all the daughters or else it is given to the son if he is going to stay with his parents at home. They feel that it is not wise to restrict the son to get anything as even son can also

take care of their parents equally well. About its impact on the position of women, they felt that it is true that if a daughter doesn't get anything from her mother, her position becomes inferior as she is always under pressure. However, at present, it has been found in most of the cases that the property is kept in contact by the parents and it is only the youngest daughter in most cases who enjoys all rights which has also caused a great set back in the position of women.

As most of the societies pass through transitional phases due to several external and internal forces some of which is mentioned in the above discussion, have passed through this transition. From the FGDs and in-depth interviews the importance of each of the component characteristics of matrilineal society has been judged. On the basis of the views placed by women, each characteristic feature has been given weightage to categorise the sample women in two groups, viz.,

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The present paper gives an outline of the changing matrilineal set-up where two groups have been identified based on the important characteristics of matrilineal society emphasised by many anthropologists. It also shows us the relationship between the women's socio-economic and demographic characteristics in both the groups of matrilineal set-up.

The changes that have occurred over time are examined as the pre-requisite to show the transformation of the matrilineal society. From the analysis it is clear that out of three important aspects of matrilineality, i.e. type of family setup after marriage, descent, and the inheritance, there is a definite change in at least two of them. They are the residential system and the inheritance pattern. The paper concludes that over the time due to continuous mixing with members of patriarchal societies around them, having finding their mates from that society, the norms and attitudes of the minority matrilineal society is on fast transition.

Tracing the tendencies of social changes through the ages, it is observed that among Khasi matrilineal society, there is a definite change over time due to many elements that exist in the society. The important factors that have brought the changes in the system are mainly the increasing rate of urbanisation, modernisation, and also the intermingling of different communities with the Khasi society.

The changes that have occurred over time are examined as the pre-requisite to show the transformation of the matrilineal society. By applying different qualitative techniques, i.e., focus group discussion (FGD) and key informant's interviews, the issue of changing matrilineal system has been examined. From the analysis it is clear that out of three important aspects of matrilineality, there is a definite change in at least two of them. They are the residential system and the inheritance pattern.

Most of the researchers have described the factors like urbanisation as an important determinant for any change in the society. Even in the study population, it has been found that those who have transited or have gone far from the traditionalism are higher among urban population and those who follow the traditional form of matrilineality are more among the rural counterparts. What is, however, more interesting is that around 40 per cent of women in urban areas are still following the traditional matrilineal culture. This indicates that the transition that had taken place among the Khasis are not only due to urbanisation process but it is a complex phenomenon.

It has been observed that among the social characteristics, i.e., educational level of spouses, women who are closer to matrilineal set-up have higher opportunities to go for higher education and as they transit, the rate of illiteracy among them has increased. In case of husband's educational status, the level of illiteracy is almost identical among both the groups. The crucial relationship that had existed in case of husband's education predicts that if the husbands are more educated, the chances of transformation from matrilineal system among women become more.



When occupational status is concerned, women's absorption in professional field leads to more shifts towards transitioned groups. Whereas, in case of non-professional women worker and their husbands who are engaged in agricultural sector have higher probability to follow the age-old traditional system of matrilineal structure.

Among the demographic issues, age at marriage of women reveals that the study population irrespective of groups has a higher age at marriage. The overall fertility level is found to be higher among the 'traditional' group.

From the percentage analysis, it has not been possible to conclude that urban influence is a factor for the shifts in the society. Thus, for better understanding, separate logistic regressions have been done for urban as well as rural women to find the effect of other predictor variables on the dependent variable.

The results of the logistic regression analysis show that among urban women, it is basically the interplay of her educational level and her engagement in professional job along with her husband's higher education and higher occupational status, which bring them to a 'transitional' category, besides the effect of birth order of women, number of children and role of media. Whereas, in case of rural women, it is mainly the interplay of her educational achievement and her husband's role which matter more.

Thus, we can conclude that the forces like modernisation in terms of educational attainments, economic characteristics and developmental factors have acted in a positive way to bring change in the matrilineal system among the Khasi women.

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