

REFLECTION OF MATRILINEAL PRINCIPLES THROUGH KHASI FOLK NARRATTIVES

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The Khasi are one of the matrilineal tribe of Meghalaya. They are known for their unique culture and heritage. The social structure of the Khasi is based on matrilineal principles where residence after marriage is matrilocal, inheritance of property and succession is through female. The Khasi are endowed with rich oral tradition which is transmitted from one generation to the next. There are many myths, legends, folktales which are prevalent among the Khasi people. The matrilineal principles of Khasi society and culture are very nicely depicted in oral literature. Through this paper a modest attempt has been made to see the matrilineal principles of the society through narratives which are in oral form and its real existence.

Key words: Khasi, matrilineal, narratives, society, culture.

(i)

Every society in the world possesses a varied oral tradition which flourishes generation after generation. Folklore is the mirror of the society. The term folklore is divided into two parts—folk meaning people” and lore meaning the knowledge”. Therefore the word folklore means the knowledge or wisdom of people. The study of folklore has attained a worldwide dimension in the present day. Various definitions have been provided by the eminent scholars in the field of folklore.

According to Leach (1984), “Folklore is the generic term to designate the customs, beliefs, traditions, tales, magical practices, proverbs, songs etc; In short , the accumulated knowledge of a homogenous unsophisticated people, tied together not only by common physical bonds, but also by emotional ones which colour their every expression, giving it unity and individual distinction.” (cited in Datta, 2002:13). Botkin (1938) defined folklore, as every group bound together or by common interests and purposes, whether educated or uneducated, rural or urban, possesses a body of traditions which may be called its folklore. Into these traditions enter many elements individual, popular, and even “literary”, but all are absorbed and assimilated through repetition and variation into a pattern which has value and continuity for the group as a whole.” Wheatley (1884) defined folklore as the unwritten learnings of the people. Ben Amos (1971) defined folklore as artistic communication in small groups. Folklore comprises the unrecorded traditions of a people; it includes both the form and content of these traditions and their style or technique of communication from person to person. Norton (1978) defined folklore is the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture. It encompasses all knowledge, understandings, values, attitudes, assumptions, feelings, and beliefs transmitted in traditional forms by word of mouth or by customary examples.

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According to Bascom, "Folklore comprehends all knowledge that is transmitted by word of mouth and all crafts and techniques that are learnt by imitation and example as well as the product of such crafts." As such it comprehends a whole range of material which includes "folk art, folk craft, folk tools, folk costume, folk belief, folk medicine, folk recipes, folk music, folk dance, folk games, folk gestures, and folk speech as well as those verbal forms of expression which have been called folk literature." (cited in Dorson 1972:496 - 500).

Dorson (1972) defined the fields of folklore and folklife into four categories i.e., oral literature, material culture, social folk custom and performing folk arts.

(ii)

Folk narrative encompasses all genres of oral literature in prose. Myths, legends and folktales have been accepted as the three basic forms of narratives of universal distribution. These three have generally been taken as prose narrative forms in western folklore scholarship. These three fold classification of narratives does not apply to folklore material in all societies and secondly such narrative genres are not necessarily in prose form in all societies, both tribal and non tribal, the lines between the three categories – myth, legend and tale are not very clearly drawn and even if the notion of distinction between them is present, separate terms to designate them are not available. While folktales normally do have the prose character other narrative items which have the contents normally associated with myths and legends are more often than not in the verse form and they are chanted or sung. This is particularly true of items connected with ritualistic beliefs and practices (Datta, 1994:36).

The folklore of the tribal's is the storehouse of oral literature. The folk literature is largely an artistic expression of tribal thought, emotions, feelings, happy moments of dancing, hunting, merry making, and also sorrowful memories connected with frustrations, crop failure, distress and disappointments. North east region is a mosaic of tribal and caste people where majority of them are tribal and their cultural life are designed by folkloric element in every sphere.

The development of Khasi literature is of very recent with the introduction of Roman script in 1842 by Welsh Presbyterian missionary. Though the alphabet is of recent origin the Khasi do not lack regarding oral tradition. The Khasi culture is rich in oral tradition which is transmitted or handed down generation after generation. The Khasis have many wise sayings, incantations, fables, folksongs, sacrificial chants (*Ktien Knia*), parables (*pharshi*), proverbs (*ka tien tymmen*) and figuratives are many. There are other interesting legends and folkstories. Synonyms and imitatives are uncountable (Bareh, 1997: 363).

Khasi folklore is divided into a number of categories such as stories about natural phenomenon, stories about the origin, stories related with cultural values and moral principles, etc. Storytelling, as a practice has been a means for handing

cultural values, practices and beliefs down to the younger generation in many tribal societies of Northeast India. Narratives can be in the form of prose, poetic prose or in the form of verse that are generally chanted or performed by singing. Each narrative in whatever form it is rendered, always has a sense of novelty. Oral tradition is a complex phenomenon which configures its own ways and means of expression and transmission. Oral tradition expresses self-identity and upholds social organisations, religious practices, ethical values and customary laws. The Khasi social system is based on matrilineal principles and as such kinship system, succession is reckoned through the mother's line. The matrilineal principles are the basic of the Khasi society and their culture and they are following their age old tradition. This feature of the Khasi makes the tribe unique as compared to other tribes of India. Various scholars studied the tribe from different aspect regarding their society, culture and tradition. The study of folk narratives attempts to understand the social experiences and social reality of a society. The narrative tries to keep alive the Khasi matrilineal principles as it is handed down to generation after generation. Through the Khasi narrative one can make an attempt to understand the social principles of the Khasi society and culture.

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North east India is a homeland of a larger number of tribes and castes speaking different languages, having different social and cultural set up and diverse racial origin. Khasi are one of the scheduled tribe of Meghalaya. The term Khasi has a particular significance; *Kha* means born and *si* refers to 'an ancient' mother. Khasi, therefore, means 'born of a mother' (Bareh, 1997:10). The term Khasi is applied to the group of matrilineal and Mon-Khmer speaking people. Broadly, the term Khasi includes Amwis and the Lyngams. It also includes Bhois, Wars, Khyriams names which are primarily territorial though such groups have variations in their customs. The Khasis call themselves *Ri Lum* or 'hill-men' who traded with the people of Sylhet who gave them the name they have accepted (Singh,1994:17). According to the 2011 census of India, the total population of Meghalaya is 2964007 with 1492668 number of males and 1471339 number of females. Agriculture is the mainstay of the Khasi of Meghalaya. The staple food of the Khasi is rice. Dried fish is one of their favourite items. They relished boiled and smoked meat and fish. The Khasi society is known for its matrilineal system which revolves around the religion, social life, economy and political life of the people. The Khasi social structure is unique. The Khasi follow 'a unilineal principle of matrilineal descent' and descent is reckoned through female line. The Khasi society is known for its matrilineality where descent, inheritance, succession and residence after marriage are traced through female line. The inheritance of the property is matrilineal in nature i.e., property is owned by women. In the Khasi society marriage takes place only between two different *kur* (clan) as it is a sin if marriage takes place within

the same clan. The religion among the Khasi is based on three basic principles, *Kamai ia ka hok* (earn righteousness), *Tip briew- Tip blei* (know man, know God) and *Tip kur-tip kha* (know your maternal and paternal kin). Besides this the Khasi believe *U Blei* to be omnipotent and omniscient and omnipresent. Basically the Khasi religion is monotheistic religion (Rizvi and Roy 2006:58). But now majority of Khasi are followers of Christianity.

(iv)

The Khasi narratives where we get the explanation and description of Khasi matrilineal principles which is the foundation of the Khasi society and culture. Khasi oral literature is a large treasure house. Only few narratives has been selected to see the social reality of matrilineal Khasi society.

The Legend of Mount Sophet Bneng

“SOPHET BNENG is a bare dome like hill, about thirteen miles to the north of Shillong, and not far from the Shillong-Gauhati highroad to the East, from which it is plainly visible. Its name signifies the centre of heaven. From the time of the creation of the world a tall tree, reaching to the sky, grew on the top of this hill, and was used by the heavenly beings as a ladder to ascend and descend between heaven and earth. At that time the earth was uninhabited, but all manner of trees and flowers grew in abundance, so that it was a very beautiful and desirable place, and they of heaven frequently came down to roam and to take their pleasure upon it. When they found that the land in the neighbourhood of Sophet Bneng was fertile and goodly, they began to cultivate it for profit, but they never stayed overnight on the earth; they ascended to heaven, according to the decree. Altogether sixteen families followed the pastime of cultivating the land upon the earth. Among the heavenly beings there was one who greatly coveted power, and was unwilling to remain the subject of his Creator, and aspired to rule over his brethren. He was constantly seeking for opportunities whereby to realize his ambitions. One day it happened that seven families only of the cultivators chose to descend to the earth, the other nine remaining heaven that day. When they were busy at work in their fields, the ambitious one covertly left his brethren, and, taking his axe secretly, he cut down the tree of communications, so that the seven families could not return to their heavenly home. Thus it was that mankind came to live on the earth, and it is from these seven families- called by the Khasis “*Ki Hynniew Skum*” (the seven nests, or the seven roots) who descended from heaven on that fatal day that all the nations of the earth have sprung” (Rafy, 1985: 8-9).

Matrilineal principles are highlighted through narratives in Khasi culture. The Khasi believed themselves as children of “*Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum*” or the seven huts, the seven families who became the ancestors of the Khasi tribe. The origin of the tribe is believed to be female ancestress. Through this piece we get

how mankind is in relation with God through the golden ladder at mount “*Sophet Bneng*” literally means Mount of Heaven’s Navel. Here in the relationship between man and God the mountain is called navel as it acted as umbilical cord between mother and the child in reality.

Concerning the Origins of the Siems of Shillong

“The Siem of Shillong is a very great and powerful chief in the Khasi Hills. He is generally known throughout the Khasi Hills as the “god king.” By the term “god king” is meant that God has been placed to give over to him the largest portion of the Khasi country, i.e., the kingdom of Shillong, to rule. If you seek for the origin of these “god kings,” you will find there is great uncertainty about it. At any rate there is a tradition amongst the Khasis to the following effect. In olden days a rumour got abroad that there was a woman in a cave called Marai, which is situated near the present village of Pomlakrai, at the source of the river Umiew or Umiam. She was a young and very beautiful damsel. Of the reality of the damsel’s existence there is no question. Many tried to catch her, but they couldnot, owing to the narrowness of the cave. There came, however, a certain very clever man who went to entice her by showing her a flower called “u tiew – jalyngkteng.” The damsel then came (out) near to snatch the flower, but the man went on holding back his hand until she came out into a more open place, when he seized her. He then brought her to his house and carefully tended her, and after wards he married her. That damsel was called “*Ka Pah Syntiew*, the flower – lured one,” because that man caught her by coaxing enticing her with a flower. That man, who came from the village of Nongjri in the Bhoi country, was called the Nongjri Kongor. After she had given birth to daughters and sons, she return to the same place whence she had been captured, and from that time forth she never came out again, however much her husband and children called and implored her. Her children increased in stature and in wisdom, and the people hearing of the wonderful origin of their mother, came from all parts of the country to look at them. The children also were very clever at showing their humility and good manners in the presence of the elders. All the people (in return) loved them and considered them to be the children of the gods, and deed homage to them. It occurred to the nobles and leaders of the Shillong Raj to appoint them Siems, because (they said) the children had been born of a wonderful woman, who, it seemed very clear, was the daughter of the “god Shillong.” Therefore they gladly decided to appoint them Siems in the country of Shillong (i.e., the present Khyriam and Myllem States). The children thus became Siems, and they were called “Ki Siem Blei” (the god kings) of Shillong” (Gourdon, 1914:166-168).

In Khasi social structure clan plays major role. The function of clan is immense in economic, social, religious and political life of the Khasi people. Most of the clans have their own legends regarding their origin tracing female ancestor which

focused the matrilineal descent of the Khasi culture. Regarding the origin Syiem of Shillong is also traced around a woman and the people of Shillong believed that the woman was the daughter of God Shillong (*U Blei*). Every year in the state of Meghalaya a festival called Nongkrem is celebrated where the God of Shillong, first maternal uncle and the ancestor is propitiated through ritual and it is carried out by the syiem (chief) and the syiem sister. Syiem's sister is the priestess who plays pivotal role in carrying out the ritual. Here we can see the matrilineal nature of Khasi culture.

Why there are spots on the Moon

“In the olden days there was a woman who had four children, three girls and one boy. Their names were these, Ka Sngi (Sun), Ka Um (Water), Ka Ding (Fire), and U Bynai (Moon). These four children belonged to rich gentle folk. The Moon was a wicked young man, for he began to make love to his elder sister, Ka Sngi. In the beginning the Moon was as bright as the Sun. When the Sun became aware of his bad intentions, she was very angry. She took some ashes in her hand and said to him, do you harbor such an incestuous and wicked intention against me, your elder “sister, who has taken care of you and held you in her arms, and carried you on her back like a mother does; now I will cover your brow with ashes, you wicked and shameless one; began from the house.” Then the Moon felt very much ashamed, and from that time he gave out a white light because the Sun had covered him with ashes. What we see like a cloud (on the Moon) when it is full, are the ashes which adhered from the time the Sun covered him with them. The three daughters however remain at home to take care of their mother, until she grew old and died” (Gourdon, 1914: 172-173).

This Khasi tale is about how the moon had spots and gave white light which is a natural phenomenon. Here we get the rule of incest taboo which is to be followed and violation of the incest rule is committing crime and carries an order that it is the duty to manage and run the family by the daughters. And from this tale we get the idea that it is the duty of the daughters to look after the age old mother. As we know that in Khasi family it is the duty of the daughters to take care of their parents and manage household affairs.

(v)

From the above narratives we can draw the idea of matrilineal principle of the Khasi society and culture which is the base of Khasi culture. It helps to know about the social reality of the society through myths, legends and tales. We get a picture of reality regarding the origin of the tribe, the origin of ruler clan, duty of the daughters in a family of the Khasi society where female plays pivotal role.

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