KHASI SOCIETY

A. K. Nongkynrih
Department of Sociology,
North Eastern Hill University
KHASI SOCIETY

A. K. Nongkynrih
Department of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University,
Shillong, India
About the Author

A. K. Nongkynrih is a Professor in Department of Sociology, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, India
Khasi society is one the tribal societies of the North - East India and the term Khasi include Khasi people inhabiting regions such as Khynriam, Pnar, War, Maram, Lyngngam, Bhoi, jyrngam, etc. Khasi people considered themselves as descendants of Ki Ŭawbei (founding ancestress), Ki Suidňia (Mother’s brothers) and Ki Thawlang (Fathers) of Ki Hynňiewtrep Ki Hynňiewskum. It is a way of referring and identifying with reverence and respect to the ancestors whom the people believed to have descended from the house of God and came to live and settled on earth around the sacred peak called U Sohpet Bneng (the umbilical cord connecting the earth and the house of God).

The Khasi are linguistically different from others because they speak a variant of the Austro-Asiatic language, while other tribes are classified under the Tibeto-Burman language speaking group. Khasi people are found in majority in the state of Meghalaya; and are also distributed in the neighbouring state of Assam and the neighbouring country of Bangladesh.

1826 was the historical moment of contact between indigenous communities and Europeans in this region. The Khasi states meaning traditional political institutions were politically subjugated under the colonial state. The British took control of land for setting up military sanatorium, administrative headquarters, etc. These lands were not returned to the indigenous tribes after the transfer of power in 1947. The colonial rulers were the causal factors of the loss of ancestral land of the clans and the traditional political institutions. This matter of loss of ancestral domain continues to be an issue in the present times.

In the pre - independence and before the commencement of the Constitution of India, Sir Akbar Hydari, the Governor of Assam and the heads of 25 Khasi States, that is, few
days before the independence, they signed the Standstill Agreement and later followed by signing of the Instrument of Accession. Under this agreement, traditional political institutions were brought under the control of modern state in the post-colonial period. They continue to exist under the new politico-legal framework of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India.

In social relationship, Khasi society is matrilineal and based on Kur; and two persons are kin if they trace descent from a common ancestress or if either of them is descended from the other. The largest division in the society is in terms of Kur which is a near equivalent of clan. The Kur is an exogamous unit and every member is a kin of every other person of the same Kur. Hence, every member belonging to the same Kur refers to each other collectively as Shi Kur. The basis of this is that they have all descended from a common ancestress. The Kur affiliation becomes a unit of identification of members. Khasi society is made up of Kur and according to the listing conducted by Spiton Kharakor approximately there are more than 3363 kur.

In Khasi society, the position and authority of male and female in social relationships is determined by the matrilineal social structure. The woman is considered as Ka Nongri ìing. Ka Nongri ìing means the care taker and keeper of the domestic groups; and it also means that every woman is a potential mother. As a mother it is her role to care and support members of the domestic groups. It should be noted that women as keepers of the domestic groups is also the keeper of ancestral property and follows the principle of ultimo geniture. In the case of men, they play the role of father to children and mother’s brothers to his sister’s children. In Khasi society, men as Kňi meaning mother’s brothers play a role and authority at the level of the kur or at the level of the ìing of his sisters or in his mother’s house; and as the Kpa meaning father of his children and responsible for their upbringing including caring of his wife.

At the level of traditional political institutions, there is a tier – system, they can be either a three tier system or a two tier system. However, the Shnong (village) is the basic political unit formed and constituted by Ki ìing, and it has been a practice that male
representatives of households form Ka Dorbar Shnong (village council). The village council is the traditional authority represented by the headman. There are other two tiers with designated political boundaries and also larger political boundaries beyond the village and they are known as Ka Hima or Doloiship or Ka Raid. In the case of the last two tiers they have their own councils known as Ka Dorbar Raid or Ka Dorbar Elaka (council of cluster of villages) and Ka Dorbar Hima (council of villages and Raid). In these councils adults representing their households or their villages attend.

On the aspect of religious beliefs and practices, the indigenous religion of the Khasi is called Ka Niam Khasi. Ka Niam Khasi is divided into Ka Niam-Im and Ka Niam-ɪap (meaning beliefs and practices related with living and the dead). It also contains the description of various rituals to propitiate God on various occasions (rites-de-passage), rituals performed to propitiate various spirits, rituals regarding agricultural activities etc., rituals performed at the change of seasons, rituals relating to political activities. It also contains the prescriptive and proscriptive norms relating to social interaction and maintenance of social order in the society. It lays down the norms regulating the interaction of man with his natural environment. It is a cardinal principle for a Khasi in his/her life time to live a life, follow and uphold of Kamai īa Ka Hok meaning to earn his livelihood in a righteous manner and Ka Tip Briew Tip Blei. Ka Tip Briew Tip Blei (know man, know God), ‘means that man could know God if man could know his fellow beings since God manifests himself through his creations... It is believed that when man loves and respects his fellow beings, he loves and respects God’.

Lastly, Khasi society has adopted culture change such as westernisation or followed another faith; however, the matrilineal social structure and other aspects of Khasi culture are still intact.