



Original Article

Matrilineal and Matriarchal Societies in India: A Comparative Study with Special Reference to Sikkim and Meghalaya

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Abstract

India's social structures are predominantly patriarchal; however, pockets of matrilineal social organization stand as noteworthy exceptions. This paper examines the concepts of matrilineal and matriarchy in the Indian context, critically analysing the nature of matrilineal traditions among the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes of Meghalaya and the debated presence of matrilineal elements in Sikkim, focusing on Lepcha and Bhutia communities. Using secondary sources including peer-reviewed research, books, and ethnographic accounts, the paper discusses lineage, inheritance, gender roles, socio-political power, and contemporary transformations. It highlights that while matrilineality exists strongly in Meghalaya, it does not equate to full matriarchy, and that Sikkim's social organization displays gendered nuances without strong matrilineal systems.

Keywords: Matrilineal, Matriarchal Societies and their features.

Introduction

The social stratification in India is largely patriarchal, where descent and inheritance are traced through the male line in the majority of socio-cultural groups. Nonetheless, certain indigenous groups in the Northeast, particularly in Meghalaya, followed matrilineal customs where descent, property, and family lineage pass through women's line [1-5]. This system has drawn academic interest for challenging dominant patriarchal models and offering insight into gender relations beyond binary frameworks.

Matrilineality—a system where lineage is traced through the mother—is distinct from matriarchy, which implies women's dominance in political and economic spheres. Even matrilineal societies may retain patriarchal features in governance, authority, and ritual practices [6-10]. This paper examines these concepts with a comparative lens on Meghalaya's matrilineal tribes and Sikkim's indigenous social practices.

Conceptual Framework

1. Matrilineality vs Matriarchy

Matrilineality refers to a kinship system where descent, inheritance, and clan affiliation trace through the mother's line. It influences residence patterns (often uxorilocal) and property inheritance. Matriarchy, on the other hand, signifies women's political, economic, and social control over major institutions. Most Indian societies labelled "matriarchal" in popular discourse are actually matrilineal but not fully matriarchal.

Matrilineal Traditions in Meghalaya

1. Ethnographic Context

The tribes of Meghalaya—especially the Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia—are among the few surviving matrilineal societies globally and the largest in South Asia.

In Khasi society:

Descent and clan identity pass through the mother.

The youngest daughter (*Khadduh*) inherits ancestral property.

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Children follow the mother's surname and residence is often with the wife's family. The Garo system has parallel principles, with the nokpante (youngest daughter) often playing a central familial role, and a localized cultural framework of inheritance and responsibility [11-16].

2. Gender Roles and Status

Though the matrilineal system elevates women's roles in domestic and economic life, research finds that: Men often retain control of political and public authority. Women may inherit property but have limited decision-making power in traditional councils (e.g., *dorbar shmong*). Activists and researchers note that despite matrilineal influence, patriarchal influence persists, and gender equity does not automatically result from women's inheritance rights [17-20].

3. Contemporary Challenges

Modern influences such as urbanisation, migration, and legal reforms have pressured traditional matrilineal structures, sometimes generating movements to alter them (e.g., Synkhong Rympei Thymmai campaigns in Khasi society) [21-24].

Sikkim: Debates on Matrilineality and Gender

1. Indigenous Communities of Sikkim

Sikkim comprises multiple ethnic groups, primarily Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali populations. Some anecdotal and popular sources suggest that Lepcha and Bhutia communities historically have had aspects of matrilineal inheritance (particularly related to familial lineage and property) [25-30].

However, academic literature indicates that Sikkim's social organisation tends to be more gender-balanced than strictly patrilineal than distinctively matrilineal. Women participate significantly in household and economic activities, but descent systems are not as uniformly matrilineal as in Meghalaya.

2. Gender and Cultural Roles

Lepcha women traditionally enjoy respect in familial decisions and household roles. Bhutia women are integral to cultural life and economic sustenance but their status aligns more with broader Himalayan cultural practices than strict matrilineal norms. Thus, Sikkim presents a hybrid social structure, where women's roles are strong but not necessarily tied to institutional matrilineality comparable with Meghalaya.

Discussion

1. Matrilineality and Gender Equity

The matrilineal system in Meghalaya illustrates that matrilineality can coexist with patriarchal traits. Women's inheritance does not guarantee political power; men remain influential in councils and governance structures. This reveals how matrilineality may reorder family structures but not necessarily power hierarchies.

2. Sikkim's Gender Dynamics

Sikkim, by contrast, shows culturally embedded gender roles without a clear matrilineal framework. Women's involvement in economic activities and community roles are emerging through historical, cultural, and contemporary influences rather than strictly matrilineal descent practices.

3. Theoretical Implications

Anthropologists argue that matrilineal societies challenge simplistic patriarchal models, but cannot be equated with matriarchies without empirical evidence supporting women's authority in all major societal institutions. This research also aligns with feminist scholarship that differentiates kinship systems from broader power relations.

Conclusion

India's matrilineal societies, especially in Meghalaya, present unique models of lineage and gender organisation. Although often perceived as "matriarchal," they are better understood as matrilineal systems deeply rooted in kinship and inheritance. Sikkim's case reflects gender roles shaped by cultural and historical diversity without distinctive matrilineal patterns comparable to Meghalaya's. Understanding these systems enriches discussions on gender, power, and cultural diversity in India, illustrating the complexity of social organisation beyond patriarchal norms.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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