

# WOMEN OF MEGHALAYA AND KYRIARCHY

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## ABSTRACT:

*The most common word that comes to our mind when we hear the word oppression is 'patriarchy'. But one more term that is also associated with oppression is 'Kyriarchy'. Coined in 1992, it tries to include the people who are privileged in one aspect and oppressed in another aspect. This pattern of being privileged and oppressed at the same time has attracted the critics to analyse such situation. Similar situation can be found in the state of Meghalaya. Meghalaya comprises of various tribes and is matrilineal and matrilocal in nature. So in a way, the women of Meghalaya are privileged than women across the country. But they are also oppressed by the men of their tribes. This combination of being both suppressed and privileged makes them an ideal example of 'Kyriarchy'. This paper analyses the condition and situation of women of Meghalaya under the scanning lens of Kyriarchy. The privileges that they have had been analysed and the suppression that they suffer simultaneously has also been highlighted.*

**KEYWORDS-** Kyriarchy, Meghalaya, Women, Oppressed, Privileged

## INTRODUCTION:

The word 'Kyriarchy' was coined by Elisabeth Schussler Fiorenza in 1992 "to describe her theory of interconnected, interacting and self-extending systems of domination and submission, in which a single individual might be oppressed in some relationship and privileged in others"<sup>1</sup>. These intersecting structures of oppression and domination exist in different levels of our society. It appears in varied forms and depicts a person or a section of society being oppressed and privileged simultaneously. India, being a patriarchal country, assigns its women a secondary position. In most parts of India, the birth of a girl is not welcomed in a family while the birth of a boy is celebrated with pomp and show. The status of women deteriorates as she

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grows up. Her family considers her a burden, after marriage she becomes her husband's property. But there are a few states where the birth of a girl child brings more happiness and celebration than that of a boy. One of these few states is Meghalaya, which means 'the abode of the clouds'. Meghalaya is a matrilineal and matrilocal state. Therefore, the women of Meghalaya enjoy a lot more privileges than the women in the rest of India. But the question that arises is: are they really so privileged and not suffering from any oppression? If we look at the complete structure of this setup, we come to know that these women, though are privileged from women of other parts of India, are simultaneously being oppressed by the men of their society. To analyse their situation, we need to look at both sides of the coin- the privileges as well as the factors that oppress them. This paper focuses on two of the major tribes- the Garos and the Khasis.

### **THE POWER OF WOMEN:**

The Khasis, the Garos and the Jaintia reside in the state of Meghalaya. "The Garo in the East and West Garo hills, the Khasi in the East and West Khasi hills and the Jaintias in the Jaintia hills" (Gopalakrishanan). These tribes are different from others in the aspect that it follows a matrilineal culture.

The people of Khasi tribe follow matrilineal culture and the inheritance passes from mother to daughter. The mother's surname is given to the children. In Khasi tribe, after the marriage is over the groom goes to live with his wife's family in her house. Moreover, the largest share of property goes to the youngest daughter and she gets the responsibility of her parents and any unmarried brothers and sisters. The Khasi tradition gives its women the freedom to select and live with a man even without marriage. They have the choice of marrying whenever they choose to.

The Garos have a similar matrilineal culture where the children get their surname from the mother. The only difference from Khasi culture is that in Garo tribe, they don't give the largest part to the youngest daughter; rather they select one of the daughters as an heiress to the family property. Generally the girl who is most obedient, loved and well behaved gets this opportunity. She gets the title of 'Nokma' and her husband is referred to as 'Nokrom'. These women also get the freedom to choose their partners and their say to whether they want to marry him or not get an upper hand. No child, whether born in wedlock or outside of it, is considered illegitimate as they belong to their mothers and get their surname from their mothers.

Thus, these women have the power of inheritance, the freedom to choose for themselves, the power of taking decisions for themselves that women in other parts even cannot dream of. The women in other parts of the country rarely get a say in choosing their life partners and choosing whether and when to have children. They generally get no right to take decisions for themselves or their family. In such a scenario the women of these tribes of Meghalaya can be said to be more privileged as they enjoy lots of freedom that is difficult to even dream for women in rest parts of the country.

## THE LOOPHOLES IN THE POWER STRUCTURE OF WOMEN:

Though these women get the power of inheritance and freedom of choice and decision making abilities for themselves, still there exists factors that leads to the oppression of these women. According to Nongbri, “the Khasi matrilineal system doesn’t actually favour women although certain aspects of their ideology and inheritance rules may give a contrary impression”. In Khasi culture, the role of women is appreciated only in the domestic front. She is seen as the overseer of the family property. But the tradition does not let women’s interference in the workings of the other affairs. Men still treat these women as if they are not capable of handling affairs outside of their home. They are not allowed to indulge in politics, war and administration that is considered by them as the man’s forte.

Similarly in a Garo family, the husband has the paternal authority and it is his responsibility to earn bread for his family. The wife is expected to handle the home and take care of the children. Though the wife lives in her own house, the wife still remains subordinate to her husband. Even in their daily life, the wife cannot have food before her husband. First she needs to serve him. “According to Garo custom, the husband can beat his wife if she acts unreasonably, but the wife cannot beat her husband under any circumstances” (Sangma, 134).

## CONCLUSION:

Thus if we analyse the situation of the women of Meghalaya under the scanning lens of Kyriarchy, we can see how they are leading both a life of privileges and oppression at the same time, giving their culture a multi-dimensional nature. They have some power as the tribes are matrilineal and matrilineal in nature but as it is not matriarchal society, their power is limited and they suffer oppression. They would have got absolute power if it had been a matriarchal society as well. But as per the present situation, we can conclude that the women of Meghalaya are examples of ‘kyriarchy’.

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