News
Analysis



Senseful Dkhar, right, practices Khasi songs with others before the pre-Christmas Novena Mass at the Queen of the Holy Rosary Church in Mawlait village, on Dec. 18, 2024. (Priyadarshini Sen)

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Eight days before Christmas last year, Senseful Dkhar, a 55-year-old schoolteacher, led her fellow Catholics in prayer at a small village church in the northeastern corner of India, where the terrain changes from the lush Garo Hills to the highland meadows of the West Khasi Hills.

It's not unusual for women to lead prayers in this district, home to the Indigenous Khasi community, one of the world's few remaining matrilineal societies. Women are the primary custodians of their families, properties and wealth among the Khasi, though they have historically been shut out of public life.

But recently Khasi women, along with women of other local cultures, have taken on new responsibilities in Catholic churches in the region, acting as catechists, leading parish councils and shaping pastoral life as spiritual counselors.

"Women are no longer confined to their homes," said Dkhar. "They are leading church services, guiding the faithful and sensitizing people about our religion and culture."

The prominence of women is in keeping with Pope Francis' frequently stated desire to put women in more leadership roles in the church. After admitting women as voting members to the recently completed Synod on Synodality, Francis appointed a nun last month to head a department overseeing religious and consecrated life. Last October Francis told a gathering of Jesuits in Brussels that he was trying "more and more to bring women into the Vatican with roles of higher and higher responsibility."

These developments have found resonance in this remote district. "If the Catholic Church allowed it, I would have opened up governing roles to women as well," said Bishop Wilbert Marwein, who heads the Diocese of Nongstoin, in the center of the state, where there are more than 2.2 million Christians.

Under Marwein, who belongs to the Khasi tribe, women have been sent to evangelize in villages and advocate for social justice at the grassroots level. "Now

women are leading on many fronts beyond their clan," said Marwein. "They are heading youth and social groups and taking on new responsibilities within the church."



Meghalaya state, red, in northeast India. (Courtesy Wikimedia/Creative Commons)

The Khasi people consider their matrilineal clan lineage a sacred tradition that predates organized religion. Central to the clan identity are mothers, protected by maternal uncles who are responsible for upholding the family’s honor.

Khasis believe in the ideology expressed in the phrase "Long jaitna ka kynthei": "From the woman sprang the clan."

Despite embodying the clan, women were not put in charge of village affairs, which were handled by councils of headmen. Only with the arrival of Christian missionaries in the late 19th century did traditional gender roles begin to loosen, unshackling women from household chores as they were exposed to Western education and ideas.

Marwein’s encouragement is part of an evolution in which women are asserting themselves. In the Nongstoin Diocese, a women’s commission with some 22,000 members oversees the functioning of 22 parishes comprising 30 to 40 villages each.

Last year, a nun was appointed as head of a social work group from the area's 23 congregations of nuns.

Before they can be elected to the commission, women immerse themselves in religious programs including evangelization work, adoration songs, prayers and readings at church. They visit villages to form deeper ties with the community and take part in Catholic retreats.

Geographical challenges in this hilly region with limited infrastructure don't deter them. "We love going to the remotest villages to preach the gospel," says Esther Thyrniang, a 46-year-old nurse who's a member of the diocese's family commission. "Women should be involved in every field of work and not be confined to their homes."

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In their villages, women are learning to turn their traditional roles to public purposes, standing by Indigenous people during family crises and teaching them about the adverse effects of drug abuse, mass media and early marriage.

Their efforts bore fruit in 2022 when the Conference of Catholic Bishops of India gave Nongstoin's women's commission a national award for its work in the diocese.

Yet, one of the biggest challenges for women remains the matrilineal society itself — and male insecurity.

"Men subtly want to put women in their place," said Amena Passah, a Khasi historian who teaches at the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong. "Women are asserting themselves outside their homes, which has stirred the inferiority complex of men."

Passah said the discontent dates to 1961, when a Khasi cultural organization began advocating for patriarchal descent, succession and inheritance. That effort and subsequent attempts to dislodge matrilineity failed.

"Men can’t decide without our consent in all areas of work since we are leaders of the clan," says Icylda Nongrum, the president of the women’s commission. "Women are now even asserting themselves in village councils, which were traditionally male-dominated."

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But the Rev. George Jarain, a priest who has been associated with the Nongstoin Diocese for nearly a decade, believes women’s dominance in society has led to lack of responsibility among men. "There should be limits to all freedom," said Jarain. "While women’s gentleness and patience in religious and social matters are important, men’s lack of responsibility towards their work and families has affected the balance in Khasi society."

The other threat, according to Jarain, is marriage outside the clan. He fears Khasi society’s ancient religious rites and ceremonies are more vulnerable to being wiped out. "That’s why some of us religious leaders have started awareness programs in villages to empower men," he said. "They should step up as protectors and not allow outsiders in."

But Marwein, who’s traveled widely in Europe to understand women’s role in religion, said women’s qualities allow them to lead church services, programs and prayers. "Our Khasi culture anyway prefers women to men," he said. "It’s an advantage we can leverage in a world where even today female infanticide is practiced."

Dkhar, who plans to work with the bishop to solidify women’s position in society and church, believes it would further gender equality outside the Khasi clan.

"Even though women still don’t have a definitive voice in the village durbars led by headmen," she said, "we can use the religious platform to bring positive change in society."