

Journal of North-East India Council for Social Science Research

NEW SERIES

VOLUME 1

NUMBER 1

2011



ISSN 0970-7913

'Matrilateral Asymmetry'-A Rural Urban Comparison in Guwahati Metro and Dobok Village of Kamrup Rural District Assam

Luna Goswami*

Introduction

Many studies in Western societies have shown the growing tendency of matrilateral asymmetry in western families. This trend is observed in the newly industrialized societies which are predominantly patrilineal or patrilocal in nature. The term 'matrilateral asymmetry' is used to mean the increase interaction between the married daughters with her parental house which broadens the role of wife's kin's which is traditionally confined to be the role of husband's kin's. Thus there is a change in behavioral roles (Sweetser 1963, 1964, 1966, 1968, 1970). Researches in American and European societies revealed the fact. Studies conducted by Townsend (1957), Young and Wilmot (1957), Habenstein and Coult (1965), Susman (1965), Poggie and Pelto (1969) are worth mentioning. Matrilateral asymmetry can be observed in the patterns of aid provided, frequency of interaction, and feelings of closeness. According to Sweetser, this tendency is associated with man's decreasing role with his parents or brothers in joint enterprise (Vatuk, 1971; 287-307). Vatuk (1971) in his study of Kinship system in North India also found the same trend. There is an increasing bond between wife's kin's which is recognized and gradually accepted in society. Brown (1931) has found that both the paternal and maternal kin's are universally recognized as a child is attached to both his father's and mother's family. But Fortes stated that the "bilateral filiations" does not carry the equal weightage for the two sets of kin groups in society (Fortes 1953, p.33).

With this idea at the backdrop of mind, number of visits to the wife's parental house and help or aid received by a couple is considered in the study.

* Assistant Professor, Department of Anthropology, M. C. College Barpeta, Assam.

Objectives

- (i) To find out the interactions with the matrilineal kins in terms of number of visits and help received.
- (ii) To analyze the factors leading to the growth of matrilineal asymmetry.

Methodology

The methods that were used for collection of data mainly include the survey schedule method, unstructured interview and the case study methods. 200 Assamese Hindu families were selected for the purpose of the study from both the study areas. The respondents selected were mainly the heads of the households and the married women. The responses of some elderly women were also considered for the study.

Findings

The following table shows the number of married women visiting either to her husband's relatives or to her parental relatives or to the relatives of both the sides within six months.

Table 1: Number of women visiting within six months

Dobok (%)			Total	Guwahati (%)			Total
Number of women visited				Number of women visited			
Husband's relatives	Her parental relatives	Both		Husband's relatives	Her parental relatives	Both	
92(46)	36(18)	72(36)	200	20(10)	123(62)	57(28)	200

From the above table it is clear percentage of married women visiting her parental relatives is much more in Guwahati (62%) than in Dobok (18%) which shows a trend of matrilineal asymmetry in the urban area.

The table 2 focuses the help received by the families either from the husband's relatives or from the wife relatives in times of need.

Table 2: Help received by number of families

Dobok (%)		Total	Guwahati (%)		Total
From husband's relatives	From wife's relatives		From husband's relatives	From wife's relatives	
104(52)	96(48)	200	53(26.5)	147(73.4)	200

It is found that percentage of families receiving help from wife's kins' is more in Guwahati 37(73.4%) than in Dobok (48%). In Dobok those who receive help from the wife's kins' are found to reside in the nuclear families while maximum (52%) families receive help from the agnatic kins as they are easily at reach.

Maintenance of Kinship Relations by Men versus Women

Variation is observed on direction of maintaining relationship by a married men and married women.

Regarding the maintenance of kinship relations by married men it is observed in the study that almost all men Dobok/Guwahati put emphasis on maintaining relationship with his own primary and secondary kin's. They feel contend if the wives also do the same. Most married men feel it only as an obligation to maintain relationship with his wife's family. They use to visit only on occasions or at times of need. But here a difference is found according to the habitation context. In Guwahati, the son-in-laws use to visit his parent-in-law's house irrespective on any occasions though he gives more emphasis upon his own relationships. In certain cases, in Guwahati, if a couple lives in the wife's ancestral land or dwelling house, in that particular case it seems a reverse pattern where the direction of maintaining relationship is more with his wife's family. Therefore it can be assumed that the pattern of inheritance also shapes the kinship network. However this phenomenon is not observed in Dobok. In Dobok a son-in-law rarely makes frequent visits to his parent-in-law's family. As the marriage distance is not much longer there is no question of residing in one's parent-in-law's family only in some exceptions. It is regarded as a matter of shame if he pays frequent visits and perhaps for this reason that a married person in Dobok has less contact with his wife's family. Vatuk in his study in the rural North Indian kinship pattern noticed that there is a patrilineal emphasis, both structurally and normatively. Men are expected to have most intimate and lasting ties with agnates (Vatuk 1971 p 235).

Regarding the maintenance of kinship relations by married women in both the study areas, it is noticed both that the wives use to give more importance upon maintaining relationship with her own parental family. Both in Dobok and Guwahati the younger women after marriage try to remain in touch with her natal home. It is found that they visit their father's house at least twice a year if at distant and often frequently if at nearest. But in this regard I have found that in Dobok, they have to take prior permission of their husband or the mother-in-law. In Guwahati too, those living in joint families use to take permission of their mother in law, but those living in the nuclear families have more or less little freedom than those living in joint families. The educated working women both in Dobok and Guwahati are also found to be the helping hands of their parents in times of need. In case of working women they have replied that they can take their own decision regarding visit or offering help to their parents but they think it as their duty to inform their husbands.

A noteworthy feature is that the visits to wife's parental house decreases with the death of the parents. This is a characteristic feature of both Dobok and Guwahati.

Case 1

Mrs. Rumi Sarma aged 49 years is a school teacher in Dobok living in a nuclear family. Her parental house is 15 km away from the village. At the death of her mother she immediately visited her parental house and remained there upto thirteen days when all the ritualistic performances were over. She also paid an amount of the total expenditure in the shrradha (Vedic rituals to show obeisance to the departed soul) ceremony at her own wish, but she had informed her husband in this regard.

Case 2

Mrs. Bora aged 39 years of Guwahati is a doctor by profession. Her parental house is also located in Guwahati. Accidentally her parental house was damaged by flood. Her widow mother stayed alone in the house. She therefore decided to construct a new house in the same compound along with her sister who is also employed and thus shifted her mother to the newly constructed house.

The older women of Dobok replied that thirty or forty years back they could rarely visit their parental house. Thus there was less interaction with the parental family in those days.

Case 3

Mrs. Rita Saloi, 62 years is a housewife living in joint family in Dobok. She was married at her early childhood days. She recalled that in those days

she too longed to visit her parental house, but could not speak up her mind before her mother-in-law as she was a very dominant lady. As such she used to visit her parental house only whenever her mother-in-law permitted her to go.

In a traditional patriarchal society though descent, inheritance and succession is traced through the paternal side yet it is found that there is a growing tendency to maintain relationships with the maternal kins' both in Dobok and Guwahati, though matrilateral asymmetry is more focused in Guwahati. In Dobok the normative principle still exists to some extent in its structural basis.

Causes

Causes that are responsible for the growth of matrilateral asymmetry among the sample in Guwahati can be related to the factors as increasing number of nuclear families and the absence of patrilateral kins in and around which are the consequences of the process of urbanisation. The women in the nuclear families have more or less freedom of making her own decision regarding visit or offering help to her parental house. The other important factor that is noticed in Guwahati is that most of the marriages are conducted within the city and as such there is more scope to have interaction with wife's parental family. In Dobok though the percentage of the nuclear family is higher and the marriage distances are also short, yet the frequent interaction with the matrilateral kins are not noticed. It is because the agnatic kins reside in the same locality and they often make derogatory remarks if there is much interaction with the matrilateral kins as the trend goes against the very nature of a patriarchal society.

The following table shows the family types in both the study areas.

Table 3: Family types

Family Type	Number of families	
	Dobok (%)	Guwahati (%)
Nuclear	131(65.5)	165 (82.5)
Joint	61(30.5)	33(18.50)
Extended	8(4.00)	2(1.00)
Total	200	200

It is evident from the table 3, that the percentage of nuclear families is higher both in Guwahati (82.5%) and Dobok (65.5 %).

The following table brings to light the range of marriages in both the study areas.

Table 4: Marriage distance

Range	Numbers of marriages Dobok (%)	Range	Numbers of marriages Guwahati (%)
Inside the Rangia subdivision	173(86.5)	Inside Guwahati	130(65)
Outside the Rangia subdivision	27(13.5)	Outside Guwahati	70(35)
Total	200		200

Regarding the distance of marriage, it is observed that maximum of the marriages have taken place within Guwahati. Same is the case with Dobok where the marriage within the subdivision is higher than the inter districts marriages.

Conclusion

The increasing interaction with the matrilineal kins' in a patrilineal society reflects the mindsets of the people which changes through the rolling of time and contexts. Such interaction gets expressed through visits made and help received by the married daughters with their parental family or vice versa. This trend is observed in both the study areas though it is more focused in Guwahati. Therefore it can be summed up that the urban way of life leads to the growth of matrilineal asymmetry. The urbanization has also touched the life of the villagers for which the trend is also observed among the village people though not very openly.

References

- Brown, A.R. (1931). *The Social Organization of Australian Tribes*. Macmillan and Co. Limited, London.
- Fortes, M. (1953). The Social Structure of Unilineal Descent Groups, *American Anthropologists* 55, 17-41
- Habenstein, R. & A. Coult (1965). The Function of Extended Kinship in Urban Society, Kansas City: *Community Studies*.
- Poggie, J. and P. Pelto, (1969). Matrilineal Asymmetry in the American Kinship System. *Anthropological Quarterly* 42, pp.1-15.
- Sussman, M.B. (1965). *Relationship of Adult Children with their Parents in the United State*.

- Social Structure and the Family: Generational Relations* (Ethal Shanas and Gordon F. Streib, eds), Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, Prentice Hall.
- Sweetster, D. (1963). Asymmetry in Intergenerational Family Relationship. *Social Forces* 41, pp.346-52.
- (1964). Mother- Daughter Ties between Generations in Industrial Societies. *Family Process* 3, pp.332-43.
- (1966). The Effects of the Industrialization on Inter Generational Solidarity. *Rural Sociology* 31, pp.156-70.
- (1968). Intergenerational Ties in Finnish Urban Families. *American Sociological Review* 33, pp. 236-46.
- (1970). The Structure of Sibling Relationships. *American Journal of Sociology* 76, pp. 47-58.
- Townsend, P. (1957). *The Family Life of Old People*. London Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Vanuk, S.J. (1971). Trends in Northern Indian Urban Kinship: The Matrilateral Asymmetry Hypothesis, *South Western Journal of Anthropology*, Vol 27, pp. 287-307.
- Young, M. & P. Willmot, (1957). *Family and Kinship in East London*. Baltimore: Penguin Books.