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NEHU

EDITORIAL

As you might perhaps have noticed, *The NEHU Journal* has started coming out regularly and with the current issue it celebrates its third birthday. I would also like to inform you that the journal is now refereed internationally the joy and pain of which I have put in my editorial of volume 2, number 2. I am positive that the journal will receive quality submissions in future not only from humanities and social sciences but also from the life and physical sciences that have so far remained outside the purview of the journal, not the least due to any policy but perhaps due to the hangover of its earlier *avatar* as the *North-Eastern Hill University Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, which the present journal continues to be called.

We at the editorial office of the journal are grateful that many of our colleagues have enrolled themselves as subscribers, but the number of subscribers it has today is still not enough to make it self-sustaining. This situation is certainly not desirable.

I therefore take this opportunity to request you all to send in your subscription amount at least for three years and those of you who are subscribers continue to support the journal till it becomes self-sustaining. On our part, I shall continue to try and improve the quality and reach of the journal with each issue.

T. B. Subba

Editor

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in Meghalaya

L. CAJEE, H. J. STIERLICH &

UBAHUNLANG LYNGDOH THAR*

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The Signifying Dimensions of the Folk — A Study of *Ka 'Tiew Larun*

ESTHER SYIEM

The folk represents a complex strategy of cultural survival that goes back to a pre-literate era when the concept of a distinct cultural identity depended upon the dynamics of the oral communication in terms of song, dance, storytelling, sculpture or painting. This performance aspect of the folk replicates the lived life. It has been the link that has transcended time and history, making its own inroads in different situations at different times. It forms a continuing dialogue with a present that by all means is, an edited dimension of the past. In Khasi society, the folk tale is a repository of cultural values that informs the present and invests it with a living sense of tradition. Many of the folktales, or, all of them for that matter, have come down by word of mouth and, allowing for the fluidity of the the oral tradition, vary from region to region. They are a dramatic retelling, of situations and relationships that, like all folk-tales, are embedded in an ethos peculiar to themselves. They have been the Khasi's life-line to a past, which has carried no written documentation of itself. In the absence of a written form, they have, therefore, become, what Bevan Swer has said in his book *Ka Mationg ki Khanatang* (Swer 1995) , truly internalised¹; a statement, that justifies and explicates the significance of another tale, that tells of the lost script and how it was swallowed by the Khasi, empowering him with a crucial sense of history. Khasi folktales, therefore, have become vibrant with the telling, since they are nourished upon the dynamics of the spoken word. It would not be wrong to observe that, rather than any written manuscript, the living ancestor or the village elder, would be looked upon as the available authority about a particular tale. Debates over the variations of certain tales continue unendingly. One takes this as a healthy manifestation of the orality that persists within society, despite the incursion of the written word. Thus the version of *Ka 'Tiew Larun* that will be taken up here is one that has come down from close ancestors belonging to the upland regions of the Khasi Hills.

In Khasi folklore, the performance aspect may be traced directly to

the oral form of the folktale as it follows the path of a cultural discourse, a give and take process between story teller and audience, that moulds itself according to existing social patterns. The story of *Ka 'Tiew Larun*, as with innumerable others, reaches us replete with its own set of meanings interwoven into the structure of the tale. It presents a fairly coherent picture of the Khasi social system and, in the mention that it makes of the amount of money paid to the physician, a princely sum of a few rupees, probably a tale of recent origin. It displays a unique ability to portray the vulnerability of the family unit, as it is pushed into a situation of great extremity where choices must be made, and decisions handled, with the primary aim of preserving it as an important part of society. If one were to pay heed to the structure of the family, as it is being presented in the tale, one would see that the concept of the extended family is not an anomaly in the society that the tale represents. This is an important factor in a tale, which is expository of the values that continue to nurture the present generation. It touches upon responsibilities that siblings have towards one another and towards the clan in general. The uncanny truth about the tale is that, whilst it is representative of a matrilineal society as it takes one to the brink of the possibly tragic consequences of, the death of, a female member of the family which would have repercussions on the clan in general, it also allows for an introspective and hence interrogative view of the matrilineal set up. Briefly thus, the tale will be retold as it has come down by word of mouth:

Once, in a village near the *Pnar* region, there occurred a ravaging natural calamity in which entire clans were wiped off and in which there were two siblings, a brother and his younger sister, who were left by fate to face the future together. He raised her himself, treasuring her as an anticipation of better times to come. Everyday he would go to the fields which were a certain distance away from the house, in order to till the land, always gently admonishing her never to follow him lest disaster should strike again. She grew up a diligent housekeeper always keeping his evening meal ready for him whenever he came back. One day, however, she was adamant in wanting to follow him. He could not refuse her. But, when she had been out in the sun with him for sometime she felt thirsty. There was no source of water nearby. There was only a cluster of wild bamboos growing there. He cut them down and split some pieces into two, in order to see if there was any water in them. There was plenty and as she drank from them, she unknowingly swallowed a baby snake. As time passed the brother noticed that his sister was looking heavier everyday and that her stomach seemed distended. He became suspicious of her, thinking that she had become pregnant. Her repeated assurances about her innocence did not satisfy him. Besides, he always found

her asleep when he came back in the evenings, and his rice uncooked. One day in order to find out the truth for himself, he pretended to go to the fields as usual only to hide himself nearby. His sister completed her morning chores without mishap but around noon he noticed that she looked weary and in a few moments found that there was no one about. Curious and anxious he discovered that she had fallen fast asleep. As he kept watch a curious thing happened. A snake emerged from her mouth and slid its way to the kitchen to eat up everything that she had cooked for him. Enraged the brother killed it instantly and chopped it up into two. He threw the severed body at the root of *U 'Tiew Larun* (the *Larun* flower). He did not disturb her then, but when she woke up she exclaimed that she felt light and easy. He waited until they had eaten their evening meal together before telling her all, warning her this time not to go to the foot of the garden where he had thrown the body, lest splinters from the snake's bones prick her. Needless to say, when the flower was in bloom, even though she remembered her brother's injunctions she felt compelled to pluck it. The inevitable happened and whilst plucking the flower, shards of snake bone entered her foot. When the brother came home he found her delirious and inert, lying helplessly inside the house. With great sorrow he prepared her for death and dressed her in all her finery, decorating the entire room with all the wealth that they possessed. Should anyone pass by, he thought to himself in his sorrow, they would know that she had not died alone and that, she had been prepared for death by a member of her own clan. Then he took off his clothes, replaced them with sackcloth and ashes as token of his grief and renunciation of everything that he possessed. He was distraught with pain and a feeling of loss, and saw no reason why he should live all alone. With the death of his sister there was no one left to continue the clan's lineage. He became a wandering *pukir*² and left home for good. As good luck would have it, however, the *Syiem*³ happened to be hunting in the vicinity and being overcome with thirst sent his servant in search of water. The servant, having climbed a tree if he could see any human settlement, spotted a village nearby and went there in search of water. Fortunately for *Ka 'Tiew Larun*, hers was the first house that he saw. He entered the abandoned house and, noticing a young woman almost paralysed with pain, went back to tell the *Syiem* of the pathetic sight that had met his eyes. The *Syiem* went to see her and immediately sent for a physician⁴ who successfully cured her by drawing out the shards of snake bone from her foot. After a period of time they got married and the house was full again because the *Syiem* did all he could to make her happy. When a girl child was born to them a year later the *Syiem* noticed that she still looked unhappy. But after repeatedly coaxing her into telling him the cause of her sorrow, she confessed everything to him. Immediately the *Syiem*

called for his men and instructing them to make an effigy of the brother, he also asked her for her brother's clothes with which to drape the figure. Then he ordered them to place it in the market area whilst enjoining them to observe, and to arrest any person who displayed an interest in it. Sure enough where others failed to pay much attention to it, there was one man who, not satisfied with a glance had come back for a closer look. He recognised his own clothes but before he could so much as open his mouth he was taken prisoner and was led back to his own house. Great was his joy when he found his sister safe and sound again.

She had innumerable children and came to be known as *Ka 'Tiew Larun* named after the flower that attracted her to it.

The story follows the graph of the folktale and provides the listener with a set of values, social and cultural, that are recognisable enough in their universality. A closer view of it would, however, place it within a specific cultural group in which marriage remains unfulfilled or even unacceptable, if there is no common meeting ground for the two clans, or if the two clans are in ignorance of the relationship that marriage has given them. One recalls the tragedy that overtakes the lives of *Ka Sohlyngem* and *U Ryññiaw* because of the inability of their respective clans to accept each other. In the tale, the disappearance of her brother creates a void in the consciousness of *Ka 'Tiew Larun* as, he is the only clan-relative whom she has ever known. She is desirous of finding him and setting things right with him; and of obtaining his approval for the marriage that has already been consummated.⁴ The *Syiem's* role as facilitator of disentanglements may be appreciated only when one understands the important part that the husband as father and as *U Thaw Lang* — the male progenitor of the clan— plays within it. One may refer to R.S. Lyngdoh's chapter on Khasi polity in his book *Government and Politics in Meghalaya*,⁵ in which he explains the role of the sexes within the matrilineal set-up. The values that the tale portrays are specific to the entire Khasi-Jaintia Hills, which may also explain its continued existence as a source of entertainment, information and interest.

Death is a spectre that one finds in all folktales. In this particular tale death takes on an added dimension when one has to contend with the total erasure of entire clans which, for *Ka 'Tiew Larun's* brother, entails the irreparable loss of one's clan identity. This becomes a serious and painful matter for a brother who believes in the immense importance of the clan. *Ka 'Tiew Larun* and her brother exist in a fragile oasis that is being continually

threatened by the desolating power of death which could at any time deprive them of a clan identity. Incidentally, death is a potent force of change and destruction in a number of folktales. It hovers just below the surface of many tales, as a general reminder to all, of the temporality of life itself.

The brother understands the implications of being a part of the nuclear family. And it is firstly to this unit that he remains loyal, attempting to nurture his sister on the principles of loyalty to it and trust in its immense capacity to protect and to nurture, he being its living embodiment. Ideally speaking the story presents a society that functions on the decisive capabilities of the man – represented by the brother in the early part of the tale and by the *Syiem* in the latter part. The principle of order guiding the lives of the young siblings rests on the responsibility that the brother has towards the future, in caring for a sister who will one day continue the clan lineage. Set within the framework of the story is the understanding that society has, of the apportioned role of the sexes. This has not been explicated within the tale, for it addresses itself to an audience schooled in the ways of its matrilineal culture. The brother's responsibility towards his sister outlines his future role as uncle to her children. The *Syiem* also bears great responsibility as the future father who has come to enrich his wife's clan. He shows concern over the missing brother-in-law and does all he can in his power to bring him back. As future father of the children who will be borne by her, he is also responsible for his wife's clan, to see to its welfare and well being. It is still a commonly held belief that if the husband as father stands by his wife's clan in times of adversity, this in itself will garner rich blessings for his maternal clan. The tale merely dramatises what is deeply ingrained in the psyche of the people. This belief, never spelt out in the tale, shows itself in the easy way with which the *Syiem* accepts his brother-in-law back into the family.

At this juncture, one has to understand the commonly accepted norm of married life in Khasi society, where the bridegroom relocates himself at his wife's house; a sociological representation of it, would be, matrilocal residence. This becomes a permanent feature, if the wife is the youngest or the only daughter, and hence entrusted with the care of house and parents, and any unmarried sibling or close relative. In the tale it is, however, understood that the *Syiem* does not relocate himself at his wife's house, because of his social position, which entails responsibility to several other clans. The point to be made, however, is that the *Syiem*, upon hearing of the probable existence of a brother-in-law does all he can in his power to trace him down in order to re-unite him with a family that would now consist of nieces and nephews.

His marriage to *Ka 'Tiew Larun* makes him an inevitable part of her clan, although he does not reside in her house. The twin roles of public man, the *Syiem*, and of private man, the husband, who must become the father, exist within him without contravention to one another. As the *Syiem* he has helped her regain her social self. As husband and father, he must play a definite and positive role in the clan that he has married into. Hence his attempt to trace his brother-in-law is a self appointed task that not merely fulfills a social obligation but is a moral part of his responsibility towards his wife's clan. He is the role model of paternal care and authority in a matrilineal society that expects much of, and gives as much respect to, the father.

As a folktale it makes a characteristically traditional stand in presenting the culture that it embodies. It allows one an overview of the relationships that are given importance to in a society that professes itself to be an egalitarian one. In matters of the heart, Khasi folklore draws upon an uncountable number of tales that understand the intricacies of romance. But in this tale, what is being prioritised is the enduring strength of family ties, a fact that one has to come to terms with even in the present set up of the nuclear family. (One notes, however, that within Khasi society the concept of the nuclear family may be stretched to include an unmarried aunt or uncle, a sister or a brother.) Thus, what makes folktales like *Ka 'Tiew Larun* vital is that they also challenge existing roles and interrogate them within the parametres of contemporary life. At the risk of digressing, one may point to the well-intentioned attempts of several Khasis who belong to an organization called *Ka Syngkhong Rympei Thymmai*, which aims at overhauling the matrilineal structure of Khasi society, in order to make it patrilineal. The reasons for doing so are innumerable and it maybe said that some are even justified. But the question that arises is whether this would in any way be functional, for it would mean re-structuring the Khasi psyche at its most primary level.

Meanwhile, for the rest who have been nurtured on tales of the matrilineal culture there is precious little to be changed. *Ka 'Tiew Larun* continues to convey, in a transparent way, society's faith in the woman as its custodian of spiritual and material wealth, and of man's multi-faceted role as provider and protector, the one who has bestowed upon woman the right to carry on the family name. This goes back to another unique tale that tells one the reason why man conferred this responsibility upon woman.⁶

The almost perfect relationship that exists between brother and sister is marred by the entry of the snake. In Khasi folklore the snake has always

been synonymous with evil. It comes as no shock then that when *Ka 'Tiew Larun* exerts her will over and above the brother who loves her and who wishes to protect her, she would be taken over by the evil that she has unwittingly invoked. Her disobedience has allowed it easy access into her. Its consequent control of her portends her doom and, as it begins to enslave her, she loses her initiative for positive action. The evil that thrives within her casts its shadow over their idyllic life for the brother now begins to suspect her of having had an illicit affair.

The snake is a manifestation of the evil that lurks in nature, waiting to prey upon the ignorant who are even more susceptible to it. It has natural associations with *U Thlen*, the serpent that stalks Khasi society at large. Later in the tale, when the snake is severed into two by her brother, one is reminded of a similar incident that predates Khasi history, when the *Thlen* was also severed into several pieces to be consumed by all. It revived itself in the household of a woman who forgot that she had kept aside a piece for her son to eat.⁷ Having gained its tenacious foothold in the human heart, within the story, evil flowers in a symbolic way in the bloom of the *larun* flower to continue to entice one apparently marked with the frailty of her kind.

The snake is symbolic of the destabilizing power of evil as it threatens the destruction of *Ka 'Tiew Larun* at the personal level; and at the extra personal level, the extinction of the clan, through her imminent death. This is the reason why her brother has been overly concerned with her welfare. Not only is she the one living relative close to him but she also represents the clan's hope for survival through her progeny. As her guardian and surrogate parent, therefore, he has an overweening sense of responsibility that prompts him into decisive action. He consequently hides in order to find out the truth for himself. When he discovers the snake that emerges from her and kills it, he is protecting *Ka 'Tiew Larun* from herself. But her wilfulness manifests itself once again when she plucks the forbidden flower and is pricked by it. Symbolically enough, the *Larun* flower seems to have cast its power over her to make her forget her brother's warnings. Similarly the woman who had kept back a piece of the *thlen's* flesh for her son, forgot all about it until it was too late for redressal. Once again *Ka 'Tiew Larun* falls prey to the evil, that had seduced her away from family and stability. It is interesting to note that within the tale, evil seems to be more dynamic and potent than good. It insinuates itself upon one who is the least experienced of all. But

she has had the good fortune of being protected by a brother who has never been side-tracked by evil and who puts her welfare above everything else. As surrogate parent he presents a phenomenal challenge to the evil that waits to prey upon his sister. Both he and the *Syiem* are ideals of courage and integrity; men who safeguard Khasi society. Even though evil is afoot there is a sense of hope in the fact that death has not really been able to strike anyone down. As a point of interest, the two men in the story may be seen as the architects of, and participants in, a world-view that is steeped in the logistics of clan loyalties.

The story reaches a psychologically convincing point where the brother is so driven to despair that he gives up all hope and prepares his sister for death. Assistance, however, must come from an outside source for the brother has fulfilled his duties towards his sister. When the *Syiem* helps her, the natural culmination of this is marriage to him. Within the framework of the folktale layers upon layers of meaning have been built up so that what would seem to be a romantic tale at first hearing is actually more than just that. It enacts a situation in which a brother has raised a sister alone and at a stage when she would have been ready for marriage a near tragic incident occurs which temporarily takes her away from him. In keeping with social roles, the *Syiem* steps in, seemingly by a stroke of good fortune. Even though the story has been taken from a matrilineal set-up, one finds that *Ka 'Tiew Larun* passes from brother to husband. This would have been the ideal situation in a patrilineal society. Interestingly enough this is also the ideal situation in the Khasi matrilineal society where the brother and the *Syiem* take up roles of responsibility that clearly define their places in society. If one looks around one finds symbolic expression of this aspect of Khasi thought, in the presence of the monoliths that dot the region. They bear testimony to a society's belief in demarcating roles for both men and women (this, however, is an insufficient and partial explanation for their presence). The vertical stones represent the male principle, *ki maw shynrang* and the horizontal stones are the females or *ki maw kynthei*. Ideally speaking, the tale conveys the best that is in Khasi matrilineal culture. The brother and the *Syiem* are role models of great integrity for they keep the interests of the clan and of the weaker sex uppermost, an important pre-requisite in the ideal structure of Khasi society. On the other hand, the tale also makes an evocative statement concerning the equality of the sexes in a matrilineal society. It also raises an important and oft-debated issue over the very idea of the freedom of women in such a society. It could be said that *Ka 'Tiew Larun*

is truly fortunate in that her freedom to a great extent is guaranteed by brother and husband; equally articulate, however, are the voices of the less fortunate women of Khasi folktales, like *Ka Likai*, who speak of their forced domination by men and society.

According to social custom, when the brother leaves his sister for death, he prepares her for a secure passage into another world. One can therefore place it in a not-too-distant past, because the social ambience is permeated with certain cultural patterns that tell of a society that is in many ways not too different from the existing one in, above all, the arrival of the *Syiem* and his hunters from another village, a common enough picture of royalty; the servant who finds *Ka 'Tiew Larun*, which reflects upon the existence of a social hierarchy; and in the ritual preparation for death, which speaks of a society that has already developed its own belief system. In the mention of the finery that she has been arrayed in, the message is clear to all. *Ka 'Tiew Larun* has a definite clan identity. Even in death she has a social presence and her body, had she really been dead, would have been treated with respect because of visible evidences of her social identity. The most unwanted tragedy ever to occur in a person's life is to die without a clan and be branded as a social non-being.

Mention has also been made of the brother embracing the life of a *pukir*, which is a corrupted form of the Hindi word 'fakir'. Furthermore, when the *Syiem* calls for a physician, some variant traditions say that he asks for a 'kaviraj', who one knows is a healer who uses herbs to cure, but who is also of non - Khasi stock. The money paid to him for his services is according to these variants, a sum of a few rupees. In the backdrop of a society that has already taken shape the picture that one gets of it is of a community of people who have already established firm links with the plains people living nearby. And the point to be made here is that, despite outside influences, the principles of Khasi matrilineal culture have sunk their roots deep into the Khasi world-view. The tale bestows upon the present generation innumerable values garnered from its matrilineal heritage. One may understand the foundation upon which Khasi society stands, from the folktales that abound in all its regions. Several variations are in circulation, depending on the places of origin. This version of the tale is one often told in the highlands of the Khasi hills.⁸

The grief-stricken brother mourns for the supposed death of a sibling. He also mourns for the extinction of his clan. He is driven to the brink of

disaster but is saved by the timely intervention of fate. As a matter of interest one might at this juncture tell of a real-life occurrence in the present, where a family lost a sister and the brothers took it upon themselves to put on women's clothes as token of their grief or even as token of their resistance to fate. Whichever way one might view it, this is an extreme example of the expression of one's loss at a level that goes beyond the mere personal. *Ka 'Tiew Larun* is said to be innocent of life. She displays certain waywardness in her behaviour as a young girl, which is, however, remedied by a ready acceptance of her brother's authority. At first the desire to follow him despite his repeated attempts to dissuade her, is the simple disobedience of a young child. When she expresses her thirst, her disobedience takes on a more complex turn because she is forcing her brother to tamper with nature.

Nature is of primary importance to the Khasi. One cannot easily dismiss a relationship that has always been an intimate one in which there has been great sensitivity displayed to the balance that must be strictly maintained. It may be noted that, even now, when one goes out into the wilderness of the fields and the woods, one is cautioned against indiscriminate picking or reckless bathing, for fear of disturbing the presences that guard nature. In the course of the story, however, she has disobeyed not only her brother but she has also committed the grievous mistake of disturbing the peace that must remain undisturbed by any means in nature. The retributive powers in the Khasi world-view are always swift and often lethal. Perhaps because of her youth and her innocence *Ka 'Tiew Larun* is spared the fatality of a death that has stricken the erring ones in Khasi folklore.

On a superficial level, the rest of the story follows the path of recognition and reconciliation. On a deeper level, discernible only to those initiated into the Khasi world-view, there are forces at work contesting for the life of *Ka 'Tiew Larun*. Her motives, however, must have remained untainted because one learns that help comes quickly to her. She is saved, but at a cost, in which her future happiness is marred for a while, for she loses the brother who has loved her and cared for her.

The element of coincidence⁹ in the *Syiem's* thirst during his hunting expedition is a common motif of the folktale. In comparison to *Ka 'Tiew Larun's* thirst his is a legitimate one. According to the rules of accepted social behaviour he sends his servant to scout for water from a human habitation, knowing fully well that as the *Syiem* his needs would be met. His

response to *Ka'Tiew Larun's* predicament is one of immediate concern as the *Syiem* who is committed to the welfare of his people. As he assists in getting a physician for her, he falls in love with her. One must understand, however, as one schooled in the art of listening, that there is a hint of the extra-personal in the relationship. Generally speaking the *Syiem* is representative of one who belongs to the ruling clan, which has been vested with powers to overcome evil. His arrival at that precise moment is a fortunate one for *Ka'Tiew Larun* and her clan. It becomes even more fortunate when he falls in love with her, for then he is able to reverse by his conjugal commitment the evil that has struck *Ka'Tiew Larun* down. He is an agent of life and renewal, for her as well as for society in general, for it is through him that the siblings are reunited and the clan, by implication, society, made whole again. He restores the balance in life by symbolically displacing the evil that threatens to take over, which is the reason why it is told that the marriage is a fruitful one. Children in Khasi families are representative of great spiritual wealth and husbands as fathers, as pointed out earlier, have multiple roles to play. The *Syiem* fulfils his multifaceted responsibilities as father, thereby, maintaining stability in the larger sphere of society. His ready acceptance of his brother-in-law focusses upon the ideal of family and clan relationships upon which Khasi society has been founded.

The ideal pattern of social behaviour that the tale endorses is embedded in present-day life. Although there have been deviations in the present lifestyle, one cannot, however, call it a fossilised remnant of the Khasi folk imagination. It holds up for public scrutiny, the figure of *Ka'Tiew Larun*, captive to her own frailty; but who seems to have, however, been chosen by the gods,¹⁰ to be saved by a brother and to find fulfillment through a husband who is sensitive to her commitment to the clan. The tale of *Ka'Tiew Larun*, with some modifications, is a common enough story of the modern-day woman who is still caught in the web of personal preferences and clan commitments. One might even go so far as to say that identification with her at the emotional level would not be difficult for many Khasi women. However, as to the presence of a personal saviour in the form of a *Syiem*, many would aver to the fact that this would be the exception rather than the rule. Be that as it may, even as the tale continues to be retold to a succession of younger generations, it restates vital themes and issues and, acceptance or understanding of it, would entail mature consideration of the multi-dimensional forces at work within it.

He also mourns for the extinction of his clan. He is driven to the brink of

Voices are being raised, however, against the claim for woman's freedom, in a matrilineal society. The role of man as provider and protector has also provoked a number of queries from the same society that has empowered him. Much of what the story tells us is true of a society that in many ways is being informed by a past, still preserved in the annals of unrecorded history. The final call hence, of all folktales, as of *Ka 'Tiew Larun*, is to continue with a tradition of telling that sounds out meaningful associations dynamic enough to remap future changes. In the context of Khasi life, as the imperative for social evolution is being necessarily felt, the present must continue to face up to a past that opens up insights into, and awareness of, issues that are threatening to be buried in the affectations of the global. *Ka 'Tiew Larun*, her brother and the *Syiem*, therefore, are precipitative embodiments of a culture's ongoing search for icons of its very own. Therein lies the signifying depths of the Khasi folktale.

ENDNOTES

1. Bevan L. Swer *Ka Mationg ki Khanatang* (Shillong:1995) p.50.
2. A corrupted form of 'fakir'.
3. Traditional Khasi ruler.
4. Briefly, the usual procedure, even in the Christian set-up, is that the male members of the two clans meet before the marriage, usually in the girl's house, to identify one another. This is to help the respective clans recognise each other as future relations.
5. R.S. Lyngdoh, *Government and Politics in Meghalaya* (New Delhi : Sanchar Publishing House, 1996) p.119.
6. U Donbok T. Laloo, *Ki Paju Lyngkot* (Shillong:Don Bosco Press, 1970) p.42.
7. S.K.Chattopadaya, *Tribal Institutions of Meghalaya* (Guwahati:Spectrum Publications 1985) p.159.
8. Evil as an inescapable aspect of life is given significance to from early childhood. This is a tale familiar to all.
9. In some areas of the War region, oral sources tell of a different story altogether, that is about an abortion attempt by *Ka 'Tiew Larun*. This, however, is not a version told in the highlands of the Khasi Hills.
9. Lalit Kumar Barua *Oral Tradition and Folk Heritage of North-East India* (Delhi: Spectrum Publications,1999) p.89.

10. This is a common observation made of people who seem to have escaped tragedy, who seem to be marked for fame, or generally, of those who seem to have everything made for them- *thoh shun ki blei* –lime-marked by the gods.

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Book Reviews

Agrarian Structures and Land Reforms in Assam by M. N. Karna, North-Eastern Hill University Publications, Shillong and Regency Publications, New Delhi, 2004, 103p, Rs. 250/-.

A brief review of peasant movements in India from 1860 to 1950 clearly reflects the changing trend of agrarian structures and land tenure/land reforms in the country. It identifies the changing features of Indian agrarian societies, which show more of discontinuity than continuity.

Initially, the East India Company's trade with India was insignificant. The decisive moment came in 1765, when the financial sovereignty over Bengal, Orissa, and Bihar went to the hands of the Company with the concession for levying taxes in exchange for a sum of Rs. 2.6 million per annum. In 1793, Cornwallis' Permanent Settlement brought a final regulation on the procedure for levying taxes, which led to decisive changes in land tenure. The British did all this as if the land belonged to the state and was thus at their disposal.

The objective of the British was to establish their commercial interests firmly in India. Since the textile industry played an important role in the beginning of industrialization in England, very large amounts of cheap products manufactured by mechanical looms were exported to India and this soon led to a collapse of her home textile industry. A large number of weavers became unemployed. In order to secure a basis for existence, they migrated to rural areas and tried to lease land for cultivation. The monopoly over the means of livelihood soon shifted to the hands of *zamindars* who were able to extort more and more taxes as the demand for land increased. This led to peasant indebtedness and even loss of their occupancy and usufructory rights. This was compounded by rise in prices of agricultural produce between 1860 and 1950. The landlords asserted their proprietary rights by evicting tenants while the latter claimed, and were occasionally granted occupancy rights. Over the century, the peasants' ability to resist landlords increased and landlordism stood considerably weakened by the end of British rule.

Consequences of the changes in the land tenure brought about by the Permanent Settlement undermined the rural stability. More and more cultivators became indebted, lost their occupancy rights, and dropped in status

to tenants-at-will or agricultural labourers. On the other hand, the wealth of *zamindars* increased on account of the income they earned from the difference between the amount of taxes and the rentals, increase in cultivated areas, money lending, and expropriation of debtors. In the course of time, the *zamindari* areas were characterized by marked difference in wealth, power, and prospects in life between the two distinct rural classes.

More liberal *ryotwari* system was introduced in Madras, Bombay, and Assam. Under this system, the government claimed property rights to all of the land and allotted the same to cultivators with the proviso that they paid taxes. They could use, sell, mortgage, bequeath, and lease the land as long as they paid taxes. Otherwise, they were evicted. This direct tax relation between the government and the cultivators was meant to prevent sub tax collectors. It sought to increase purchasing power, and, widen the market for British products in rural India. Taxes were pre-determined and fixed in a temporary settlement for a period of thirty years. It was revised and the tenure was extended.

Communal rights to land were common in North and North-West India. This system ideally fitted with the *Mahalwari* system. Tax was imposed on the village community, which distributed the same among the cultivators. Everyone was liable for the others' arrears. A village inhabitant - the *lambardar* - collected the tax and remitted it to the state. Tax assessment was also revised at intervals.

Over a period of time the *ryotwari* region was no longer a self-cultivator area. More than one third of the land was leased and in many districts more than two thirds. Indeed, it was not possible to transfer land to the people who were not from the locality, but the result was that landed property became concentrated in the hands of a few wealthy people, whereas the others lost their rights. A constantly increasing number of people became landless. While in the middle of the nineteenth century there were no landless persons, in 1931 and 1945, respectively 33 and 70 million landless labourers were registered. Others succeeded in renting some land, but on less favourable terms. Share tenancy increased greatly.

After Independence, economic situation in rural India changed very differently. A large part of the population remained poor and landless. A complicated relationship between landlords, cultivators, and landless emerged based on mutual rights and obligations.

Assam is a miniature replica of the Indian subcontinent. It has noticeable

diversities and variations in demographic and economic characteristics. It has a wide range of human responses to natural-ecological settings and historical compulsions. Within the confines of this region, a variety of people with diverse ethnic origins, representing different racial strands, speaking different languages and professing diverse religions have migrated and settled. The modes of living of the people, their lifestyles, and material basis of culture and consumption behaviours are diverse.

There are communities in the valleys whose agricultural calendar keeps them busy most of the year while those in the hills and mountains raise a single *jhum* crop. Then there are communities who are partly agrarian and partly dependent on forest produce. In the river valleys of the region, particularly the Brahmaputra and Barak valleys, the peasant communities live in a state of dynamic equilibrium with nature and are surrounded on all sides by tribal groups. The varied ecological-environmental settings in the region encourage a variety of agricultural practices and cropping patterns to emerge. The natural factors also influence the human choices in two crucial areas—land and its quality and water and its availability. These greatly influenced their responses and settlements.

A littoral and East Indian model of the Asiatic monsoon regime with dominant wet conditions prevail over a longer duration in the year, and demand prolonged spell of work in the fields in North-East India. In this wet region paddy has emerged as the most dominant crop. The diversities in the crop ecology and the resultant cropping pattern engendered differences in the social division of labour, the absorption of women in the agricultural labour force, in the quantum of agricultural work and leisure available to the agrarian communities. Female labour force participation rates varied strikingly between the hill-mountain and plains-valley communities.

In an area like Assam, with a variegated politico-administrative set-up, there are significant inter-regional differences in the landownership patterns and tenurial relations. In fact, the British policy, like in the rest of the country, was so designed as to accommodate multiple forms of landownership in the hills, mountains and plains regions, depending on agro-climatology, social custom and local tradition. These types of landownership evolved in the course of social history of the various peoples within the niches provided by their respective ecology.

It is in this background that the book under review assumes significance. This book is an outcome of a series of three lectures by Professor Karna

delivered as Professor H.K. Barpujari Endowment Lectures at Dibrugarh University, Assam. It is an attempt to study agrarian structure and land reforms on all India level. Karna raises the issues of peasant mobilisation, policy decisions and their implementation in a broad temporal framework. He has also traced the peasant uprisings such as Phulaguri uprising and No-Rent agitation. He has been successful in providing wider canvas on which land reforms in India can be better understood.

He provides a broad assessment of the land reforms adopted since Independence. With the abolition of intermediary interests the ownership of land is broader based and the erstwhile superior tenants acquired a higher social status.

Karna argues that while abolition of intermediaries brought about a measure of uniformity in the agrarian system of Assam, tenancy reforms provided a new confidence to the disgruntled tenants. He states that a preponderance of tenants with virtually no ownership rights on land characterises the Assamese agrarian structure. He adds that this has been further complicated by the religio-feudal establishments like *Satras* and *Maths*.

Under the prevailing socio-economic condition in the country no tangible progress can be expected in the field of land reforms. Wherever effective mobilisation of beneficiaries has taken place the result has been positive. The beneficiaries of land reforms, especially sharecroppers and landless labourers, are crippled by social and economic disadvantages. By tradition they are inarticulate, passive and unorganised. They do not constitute a homogenous social and economic category. Hence, a deliberate attempt at mobilisation is needed to generate an appropriate political and administrative climate for implementation of land reform measures. Such a change leads to better implementation of agrarian laws.

Those who believe in a liberal market-oriented path of development may come to accept the necessity of enforcing any package of land reform measures to foster sustainable agricultural growth, a pre-condition for rapid industrialisation and steady economic development. Undoubtedly an outmoded agrarian structure characterised by absentee ownership, widespread tenancies, persisting religio-feudal land control, and scattered holdings is a grave impediment to the optimum utilisation of land and water and to the adoption of improved technology and modern farming practices in the otherwise agriculturally well-endowed plains districts of Assam. Thus, the

need of the hour is to complete the unfinished task of reforms, which should include abolition of absentee landownership, identification and protection of *adhiars* (sharecroppers) effective and efficient enforcement of ceiling laws, speedy distribution of acquired surplus land, and consolidation of holdings and provision of supporting facilities to enforce minimum standards of cultivation. If these steps are integrated with development programmes related to surface irrigation and ground water, soil conservation, social forestry and such other activities, Assam should be able to come out of the vicious cycle of poverty and backwardness.

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The Great Earthquake of 1897 in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills translated by Basil Moris, North-Eastern Hill University Publications, Shillong, 2003, pp.40 + xiii, Price : Rs. 95.00 (SB), US\$3.

Like any other eyewitness account of an event of importance, this one by the Reverend Robert Evans, who was a missionary to the Mission Field in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills between 1878 and 1901, makes interesting and fascinating reading, as indeed anything about the Great Earthquake of 1897 is. With the epicentre in the Shillong Plateau, and with a magnitude of 8.5, a report of the Meteorological Department says: "It is one of the major earthquakes in the seismic history of the world. Lasted about 2.5 minutes and completely ruined an area of 150,000 square miles and was felt over an area of one and three quarter of a million square miles. Caused landslides, fissures, vents and disrupted normal communication line. It was followed by a large number of after-shocks. The epicentre tract was within a cot-shaped area covering the entire Shillong Plateau". The severest shock might not have lasted for less than one minute but the devastation was complete.

To the Welsh Presbyterian Mission, originally named the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission, the event was of particular significance as the areas most severely affected were those within the Sohra (Cherrapunji) area, where the Mission had established the first church and schools. One may understand the concern that the 'Mother Church' must have felt when news of the devastation reached England. The Reverend Dr. John Roberts,

whose name will always be linked with the development of Khasi literature, was in his country at that time. He had, in fact, just been nominated Moderator of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Mission of Wales. The scene of devastation that they saw on their return, with most familiar landmarks beyond recognition, and roads and paths on which they had often travelled drastically altered, was almost beyond belief. The Deputy Commissioner of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills at that time, Mr. J. C. Arbuthnot, whose report to the Government of India was perhaps the most detailed and graphic of the reports submitted, bears out the fact that no comparable natural disaster has ever taken place, perhaps for centuries! This is what he had to say: "In my tour of the district, I have been much struck by the way in which the ancient Khasi monoliths, often of immense size, the antiquity of which unknown, have been levelled with the ground and in many cases snapped off two, three and four feet from the base."

Eyewitness accounts agree that during the two minutes or so when the full force of the earthquake was felt it was impossible for anyone to remain standing. It was said that two women cyclists who were riding past the old All Saint's Cathedral fell down and from where they lay, they saw the church building collapse. The Chief Commissioner of Assam and his wife, who were preparing to go for a ride, had a narrow escape when their residence, the Government House, met a similar fate within minutes of their leaving the porch!

Although Shillong was well within the area most affected, it got off comparatively lightly, with only 23 deaths including Mr. McCabe, the Inspector General of Police, who was buried under the debris of his bungalow on the near side of the Umkhrah River opposite the Polo Ground. It is worth mentioning that the memorial that was erected on the spot has unfortunately been built over by unauthorised constructions during the past few years, which is a stark reminder to the state government to take more interest in what happens in the city than what it has been doing, in order that historical sites are not obliterated as has been done in this and other cases.

By contrast, it was the area closer to Sohra that was more grievously affected, the reason being in the nature of the topography, with steep slopes and cliffs everywhere. The village of Laitiam in the deep valley below the Mawsmat falls accounted for 86 deaths, all lost when the overhanging cliff broke off to overwhelm the habitations below. With these casualties, the Sohra Syiemship lost a total of 237 lives. The Khyrim Syiemship lost 146 lives mainly in the villages on its southern slopes.

Literally, earth shaking events such as this one do arouse strong reaction, and impressions upon those who experienced them. All of them suggest that the earthquake was a form of devil. Retribution for the wickedness of men, which at this point of time may conflict with the belief held by many, in a merciful, forgiving God. Who would extend His compassion not only to His noblest creation, Man, but even to animals, as may be seen in the Book of the Prophet Jonah (Ch.4:13).

Over the next few decades, however, there would be many eyewitness accounts left to various people in the form of newspaper articles, or even in poems published by individual authors, as by the Reverend Morkha Joseph, many of which bring to mind the destruction that overwhelmed places like Shella, the wealthiest village in the Khasi Hills at the time, but today reduced to a shadow of its original self. The once prosperous village of Shella Circle lost a total of 217 lives of which 117 were from the Shella village itself. This village, which was perhaps the most prosperous in the district at that time, with a population in 3658 in the Census of 1891 never recovered from this disaster having been reduced within minutes to a shadow of its former condition.

As one goes through Reverend Evans' account, one will appreciate that primarily, Robert Evans prepared this account for the Mission Board which would want to know how the earthquake affected the new church in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and more especially upon the believers. This account would appear to have been a vindication of the faith that God would not abandon His own in times of crises, but give them strength and ever greater faith, as one can see from the short personal experiences of local pastors and their flocks. What will impress the reader even more is the effect upon the young, who never lost their faith but carried on in the belief that was the time when they would declare how their faith had sustained them even at the worst moments of their young lives.

The account left by the Reverend Robert Evans will therefore be better appreciated if also read against the background as provided by official records.

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