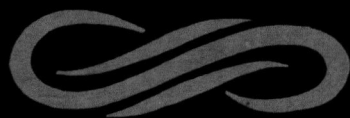


*The
History and
Culture
of the
Khasi People*

Revised & Enlarged Edition



Hamlet Bareh

The first edition of **THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF THE KHASI PEOPLE** came out in 1967. Considered the first of its kind on the subject the book contains a detailed treatment on many basic subjects of ethnography, culture, politics and history. As such it is truly a pioneering work which provides exhaustive information on the associated topics. Emphasis in this work has been laid on the evolution of Khasi society i.e. the matrilineal form of organisation, its megalithic and religious aspects reviewed in the light of their chronological history and the nature of their civil institutions. The main purpose of the work is, therefore, to present the Khasi history based on all available sources of information. A connected history of the Khasi people has not yet been properly studied nor has been systematically dealt with by any other writer on the subject.

The author has sought to enrich the second edition by providing material for the reconstruction of the chapters and adding new ones. The book, therefore, covers the period upto the formation of **MEGHALAYA**. In respect of literature and education it has been considerably updated.

Hamlet Bareh has had a very distinguished career. He is the youngest son of late U Mondon Bareh, a reputed scholar, writer and educationist. On being awarded the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy on his thesis : "The origin and history of the Khasi people" in 1963 by the University of Gauhati Hamlet Bareh was appointed as Editor NEFA and Nagaland District Gazetteers from 1965 to 1976. He joined the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies at Simla as its Visiting Fellow. Shortly after he was invited to serve the newly founded North-Eastern Hill University where he is now in-charge of the Centre for Creative Arts.

Besides many books to his credit he has participated in various State, National and International seminars. Many of his papers have been published in important books and learned journals. He has also directed Khasi plays on U Tirot Singh and U Sngap who were eminent Freedom Fighters. He provided the screen play and directed the first Khasi film *Ka Synjuk Ri Ki Laiphew Syiem* (The alliance of thirty Khasi kings). He has also contributed in the field of Art and Music.

THE HISTORY AND CULTURE OF THE KHASI PEOPLE

Second Revised and Enlarged Edition

Dr. Hamlet Bareh

1985

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GUWAHATI



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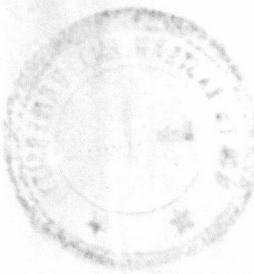
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PREFACE

THE SECOND EDITION

The History and Culture of the Khasi People was first published in 1967. Since then I had deemed it necessary to revise and enlarge the next edition. The present publication besides endeavouring to affect a series of modifications in all the chapters, seeks also to highlight the important trends in the contemporary situation. The formation of Meghalaya as a new State, carved out from Assam State, was indeed epoch making.

I did the revision of this work during my stay at Simla as Visiting Fellow of the Indian Institute of Advanced Study where I was engrossed in other academic pursuits. In fact in my capacity as a Fellow I was undertaking a special project on THE LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE OF MEGHALAYA which on its completion, was published by the Indian Institute of Advanced Study in 1979. I continued the revision work of the present volume after I left the Institute and joined the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong in 1974.

From 1976 we tried to process the publication of this volume. However the publication could not be expedited in right earnest on account of some unavoidable reasons.

I have incorporated what ver new materials were obtained in almost all the chapters. Some results of field work I undertook have been collated here. Most of the materials recently collected from the Record Rooms and Archives are not only relevant but are quite corroborative to our previous finding. It was this which has enabled me perhaps to throw more light on those vital trends related to the task of historical reconstruction.

To keep in pace with the present development, a few changes have become inevitable. Thus some of the chapters have been retitled. The title of the chapter on *Administration* has been changed into *State Polity*; the chapter on *Cultural History* has been inverted into *Society and Culture*; the chapter on *Economic Conditions* similarly has been altered into *Economic Geography*. I hope the readers will appreciate the changes which have been incorpo-

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CHAPTER I

SOURCE OF HISTORY

The Khasi people belong to one of the earliest groups of races migrating to North-East India. They were not an isolated people, but have had close connection with other peoples inhabiting Assam and made substantial contribution to the evolution of culture in this land. Even in their present home, in the period before the British annexation, they had links with other neighbouring kingdoms (through their migrations) and had political and commercial contacts and still continue to contribute to the cultural life of their neighbours. Emphasis in this work has been laid on the evolution of Khasi society i.e., the matrilineal form of organisation, its megalithic and religious aspects reviewed in the light of their chronological history and the nature of their civil institutions: the main purpose of the work is, therefore, to present the Khasi history based on all available sources of information. A connected history of the Khasi people has not yet been properly studied nor has it been systematically dealt with by any writer on the subject. Not to speak of the early period, no detailed work has yet been done on the Khasi-Jaintia Freedom movement and the measures adopted by the East India Company and the British Government to complete the process of annexation; many other details of British administration have not as yet been put on to record. The political history of the Khasi people is known only from about 1500 A.D. It is our object, however, to write about them from some prior dates with the materials as far as we could glean and present a detailed account of both the political and cultural life of the people from its earliest beginning to the present day.

The sources may be grouped as follows:

- I. Literary
 - (a) Local
 - (b) Contemporary
 - (c) Modern records

- II. Foreign accounts

- III. Archaeological
 - (a) Inscriptions
 - (b) Coins
 - (c) Pre-historic remains
 - (d) Monuments of historical period.

I. LITERARY

(a) *Local* — The Khasis, in the past, had no literature of their own. The modern Khasi script with Roman characters was introduced as late as 1841 A.D. A particular tradition says that one original Khasi script was lost in the ancient period at Madur Maskut and Nongkeh whereas, in other accounts, it is stated it was lost in the flood. Till the middle of the last century, the Khasi Syiems (Rulers) had used a script of their neighbours like Devanagiri, Assamese and Bengali — and even Persian, the records of which are preserved in the office of the Deputy Commissioner (Khasi and Jaintia Hills) and also Secretariat Record Room, Shillong. Border conditions and the relations of the Khasi rulers with their subjects in the plains necessitated the use of such scripts for official purposes as well as the medium of expression. The adoption of the script was made without any concomitant acceptance of cultural influence from the plains as the Khasis adopted neither the religion nor the culture of their neighbours. The use of these scripts was abandoned after 1841 when they were replaced by the Roman alphabet.

These records of the Syiems came from the Pre-British period. The absence of the literary evidence for the early period is a conspicuous problem with which we are confronted in the task of historical reconstruction and we will have, therefore, to depend mainly on both the oral traditions and foreign evidence which is preserved in diplomatic documents maintained between Khasi rulers and their neighbours.

The importance of oral traditions called *Ki Parom* handed from generation to generation and the legends throwing light on the history of the people cannot be neglected. In examining them, we find no doubt, differences with regard to details from place to place, but happily they agree in conclusive and relevant points. It may be stated that Khasi traditions agree in the main with the information left by the Koches, Kacharis, Ahoms, as well as with the earliest archives of the East India Company and for this corroborative evidence, we are on firmer grounds. Legends further help us to form an idea about cultural conditions in the pre-historic period. We expect that traditions collected from various places will supplement the information gathered from other historical sources, and at places they throw interesting light on the past history of the people.

(b) *Contemporary* (including) Assam Buranjis — Among foreign evidence, the Assam Buranjis throw important glimpses on historical contacts of the Khasis with foreigners since 1500 A.D. Koch-Jaintia and Koch-Khyrim contacts have been preserved in Koch accounts as well as in the *Darrang Raj Bansabali*. The Buranjis which throw light on Khasi relations with the Ahom rulers are the Jayantia and Tungkhungkia Buranjis and a series

of Assamese historical letters. It is worth mentioning that the importance of these Buranjis lies not only in their political aspect but also in the fact that they give us clue to the understanding of cultural problem, diplomacy, the Khasi matrilineal laws of inheritance and giving us an idea of the resource and position of prominent entities. As early as the middle of the 8th Century A.D., reference is found to a kingdom of *Stri-Rajya*, literally Kingdom of Women which successfully resisted the Kashmirian invasion into Assam. The information is very important from the stand-point of matrilineal law, the Kingdom is identified with the Jaintia Kingdom.¹ By way of identification and the evaluation of other sources, both Indian and foreign, some other results may be obtained in respect of historical reconstruction. In exchanges of letters with the Ahom court, the rulers of Sutnga Syiemship (Jaintia kingdom) used an old form of Assamese as the medium. Local Bengali manuscripts at Jaintiapur have preserved other important incidents in the country's history. But many of them have not been deciphered properly as they are antiquated.

(c) *Modern records* — In the earliest archives of the East India Company, we find some information relating to Khasi contacts with the East India Company which had firmly been established in Sylhet since 1765. The accounts of the invasion of Jaintiapur by the Company's troops under Captain Helliker in 1774 is obtained from the Sylhet District Gazetteers, records and the documents of the Board of revenue. The book 'Lives of the Lindsays' which has preserved the reminiscence of Lindsay, the collector of Sylhet, has left us a record of the southern Khasi states with socio-economic conditions. Accounts of the various Khasi raids into the contiguous Sylhet plains are also preserved in the above documents. An account of the British annexation and the Khasi Wars of Independence is obtained from a series of Government records and archives of the East India Company and the Government of Assam, as also other files and district gazetteers available at the Secretariat Record Room and Library, Shillong, and some have remained in Calcutta, New Delhi and Dacca.

II. FOREIGN ACCOUNTS

Classical sources like the account of the Greeks, Romans and Chinese starting from the 5th Century B.C. referring to Assam in general, indirectly allude to important socio-economic and cultural conditions of the Khasis during the early period. Qazim's² mention of fruits like citrons, limes, lemons, pine-apples, oranges etc., produced from Assam in the mediaeval period refer to the cultivation of these fruits by the Khasi people who have grown them through generations till the present day. Mention of iron-smelting, working in gold, silver and copper in Assam in the early

¹ *Calcutta Review*, May 1867, Vol. XLV and *U Lurshai*, July 1926.

² Quazim was one of the earliest Muslim travellers to Assam.

and mediaeval period refers to similar Khasi enterprises (of which we have evidence). On the proper basis of identification, we¹ can make use of the foreign accounts and classical sources.

III. ARCHAEOLOGICAL

(a) *Inscriptions* — An inscription bearing the date of 1602 (Saka Era) or 1680 A.D. still remains at Jaintiapur corresponding to Lakshmi Narayan's rule whereas another copper plate inscription indicating a land grant by Bar Cossain prevails at Jaintiapur which was dated 1770 A.D.² A rock inscription on the bank of river Jadukata has been noticed in the south-eastern direction of the country but the inscription, as it is worn out, has not been deciphered. Rock inscriptions, on both sides of the river Lukha in Devanagri script, between Sonapur and Kuliang in the south-eastern direction of the country have been noticed, bearing images like weapons; according to local traditions they were inscribed in commemoration of one Jaintia King taking shelter in course of a war against the Kacharis. Proper deciphering has not been possible as they also are worn out.

(b) *Coins* — Jaintia coins with Hindu symbols have been collected by Botham and E.A. Gait and they are called *Katra Taka* or *Takra Rupia* literally sword Rupees owing to the fact that they bear the device of a sword on them.³ They seem to have been modelled on the pattern of coins of the Hussainy dynasty. Sixteen specimens of Jaintia coins inscribed in the old Devanagri are noticed in the journal, *Asiatic Society of Bengal Vol. LXIV* but only two of them bear the name of kings. They were made of copper, silver, zinc and other elements, but the largest proportion being of copper. The earliest date on the coins was 1592 (Saka Era) and the latest was 1701 (Saka Era). Yet we are to say that these coins do not throw much light on the internal history of Jaintia and the contemporary events. Recently Prof. G. G. Swell, M. P.,⁴ unearthed 15 silver plated coins inscribed in Arabic and Persian characters from a pool of water at Jowai which in the past belonged to the Jaintia Syiems. All these fifteen coins bear the same inscription. The obverse of the coins reads — "Hamiudine — Muhamad Shah Fazl Alam" and the reverse reads — "Nineteen Jalus Murshioabad". The obverse has got this meaning: "Exalted Emperor Shah Alam, Protector of the religion of Muhamud" and the reverse means this: "The 19th Council Murshioabad".⁵ The finding is important. It points

¹ P. C. Choudhury, *The History of civilisation of the people of Assam to the 12th Century A.D.*, p. 360 & *Ka Ryngi*, Vol. II, No. 1 and Vol. II, No. 2.—Hamlet Barch's Article on economic enterprise of the Khasi people, also Hamlet Barch, *Khasi Democracy*, pp. 17 - 18.

² E. A. Gait, *History of Assam*, pp. 264 & 266.

³ Botham *Catalogue of the Provincial Coin Cabinet*, Section XXVII.

⁴ *Nongsain Hima*, p. 101, No. 5-27.

out that the Khasis had maintained important commercial or emissary contacts with the Mogul emperors or their Viceroy at Murshidabad which was their important headquarters at the time of Robert Clive or if this surmise is not correct, it seems to point out to the fact that these coins were obtained by the Khasis from some Muslim invaders. Some traditions tell us that the Khasis, in those days, captured a large number of cannons, guns and artillery from the Muslims who were trying to invade the Assam plains through the Khasi-Jaintia Hills. At places, traditions imply that the plain subjects in Sylhet paid the Khasi rulers taxes in cash.

Further it is interesting to note that since the middle of the 16th Century A.D., the Jaintia and Khyrim kings stamped their own coins. According to the *Raj Bansabali*, a Koch conqueror, Silarai, authorised both Jaintia and Khyrim Syiems to mint coins in their dominions but those have not come to our notice. During that time, Jaintia had maintained emissary relations with the Koch Kings but these relations ceased with the beginning of the 17th Century. Khyrim coins never came to notice, although we hear them made by fully sovereign Syiems.

Whether it is true or not, information has been collected from many traditions that the Khasi Syiems on the eve of the British advent had stamped their own coins and had their own mint and machine for this purpose. The use of gold mohurs among the Khasis with seals was extant in those days; yet the specimens of the indigenous coins have not been obtained. We are told that a number of them have been made into ornaments with the introduction of modern currency. Silver and copper excavated by the Khasis themselves were used for coinage.

As already mentioned, the Khasis themselves used the scripts of their neighbours like Assamese, Bengali, Devanagri, and even Persian for maintaining relations with their subjects in the plains. In a few specimens available in the Record Room in the Deputy Commissioner's office, Shillong, we find that stamps (like seals) with symbols were being used by the old Khasis.

(c) *Pre-historic remains* — Megaliths are very important sources of information in regard to the pre-historic and proto-historic period, and with the progress of anthropological study, they yield very valuable information on the origin of the people and some important aspects of their culture. Remains of such megaliths which lie scattered in some places in Assam and North Cachar Hills have been associated with the settlement of Khasi clans before they migrated into their present home.

(d) *Monuments of historical period* — The diverse types of monuments like megaliths and other stone works in various areas of their settlement within their present territory give very important information as regards the antiquity of the settlement. Moreover, most of the stone monuments have been associated with the foundation of markets and were erected in commemoration of political associations and allegiances of clans forming a civil authority. They were also important from the stand-point of socio-cultural conditions and religious usages of the people like the disposal of the dead and other allied matters. The monuments are important in determining the date of settlement; for instance information has been gathered that the great monolith at Nartiang has existed there for 24 generations.

Sources of information are limited and scanty. For historical reconstruction, much will depend on the proper evaluation of the existing sources.

As already mentioned, the Khasi territory, the southern part of their territory, like Assam, Bengal, Bihar, etc. was under British rule for a long time. The British records and maps, etc. are of great value and have been used for the purpose of the present study. The records of the British records are of great value and have been used for the purpose of the present study. The records of the British records are of great value and have been used for the purpose of the present study.

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WHAT THEY SAID ABOUT THE FIRST EDITION

"... I found your accounts of Tirots struggle against the British exceedingly interesting. You have done a great service to the cause of the Khasis and of India by giving such a detailed version of the whole struggle. . ."

JAIRAMDAS DAULALTRAM
Former Governor of Assam

"... The History and Culture of the Khasi People—I must congratulate you for this valuable work. . ."

B. P. CHALIHA
Former Chief Minister of Assam

"... I have read with great interest, and it is indeed a most valuable contribution to both historical and anthropological studies. . ."

CHRISTOPH VON FURER HAIMENDORF

"... It is obviously a very thorough and painstaking piece of work. If I had any criticism to make it would be that it covered almost too wide a field. . ."

J. H. HUTTON

"... It must be said in Barih's favour that he has done his best, considering the present state of knowledge on the subject, in introducing his people in valid historical perspective. Although the narrative is in the accepted mode, it faithfully brings out the best qualities and achievements of the unique Khasi people, its matrilineal institutions, its ancient democracy, rich folk heritage and its struggle throughout the ages to preserve and develop a colourful personality of its own. . ."

The Assam Tribune; Gauhati.