

Linguistic Awareness Among the Khasis

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1.0. Introduction

The history of the Khasis is still shrouded in obscurity. As a people they differ greatly from the people of their surrounding states both culturally and linguistically. Linguistically, they are surrounded by the Tibeto-Burman and Indo-Iranian languages, hence they are an island of their own. The Khasi language as it stands today is more than a hundred and fifty years old. It is a developing language and prior to the advent of the Christian missionaries it was only a spoken language. The Khasi language is made up of several dialects spoken in different parts of Khasi and Jaintia Hills, but the people communicate among themselves both in spoken and written forms using the Cherrapunji dialect; the historical account for that will be discussed later. Khasi language is one of the major languages in Meghalaya which is divided into seven districts; the East Khasi Hills district, the Jaintia Hills district, the West Khasi Hills district, the Ri Bhoi district, the East Garo Hills district, the West Garo Hills district and the South Garo Hills district. In the first four of the above mentioned districts, the Khasi language is used as a medium of instruction at schools upto Class VI. As

a subject it is studied at the High school level, Pre-University or Class XII level, Degree and Honours levels, Master degree level, Master of Philosophy and at the Doctor of Philosophy levels. As a language it is used in the Church services of the various Christian denominations and in various government offices. / It is also a spoken language in some parts of North Cachar Hills district of Assam, other parts of Assam and in some areas of Bangladesh bordering India, particularly to the state of Meghalaya. According to the statistics of 1981, the total number of persons who used the language in Meghalaya alone is more than 6,29,640.¹ With the increase of population of Meghalaya, the number is certainly higher at present and the projection for 1994 is more than 10,00,000 persons who used the language.

1.01. The Khasis And Their Script

As said earlier, prior to the advent of the Christian missionaries, the Khasi language was only in a spoken form. The reason for it being the lost of the Khasi script which is supported by a legend, "the script was lost when the Khasi scholar who came to these hills swallowed the book while swimming across the ocean or river."² If the Khasis

1. Statistical Hand Book Meghalaya, (Shillong: Directorate of Printing & Stationery, 1989), p. 15.

2. H.W. Sten, Ka Histori Ka Ktien Khasi, (Shillong: Ropeca, 1979), p. vii.

lost the script it means that they possessed it earlier. The script must have been written in animal's skin and it could be presumed that the Khasi swimmer ate it out of hunger and tiredness. We are led to such conclusions because even the Mizos had similar story that a dog ate the skin on which their script was written.

Though the Khasis had lost their script, yet they possessed their own way of communicating messages. Such means of communication were used especially between the chief (syiem) of one area and another. For such messages they used rings made out of bamboos which were called kyrwoh and a messenger is deputed to deliver it. Unfortunately, the method died out and today we are left in total ignorance about it. Among the modern Khasi writers, H.W. Sten firmly believes that the Khasis had their own script, writes he, "I am inclined to believe that the ancient graphic substance of Khasi language is not lost completely."³ The existence of such graphic substance is demonstrated by the presence of some continuous chain of rings kept in the Kamarupa Anusandhan Samity.⁴ The difficulty we face at present is that no one could decipher the content of the writings. It appeared that such system of writing was used during the

3. Ibid., p. viii.

4. Ibid., p. 57.

reign of Gadadhara Singh who ruled till 1696 in the Ahom kingdom.⁵ Perhaps with the development in computational linguistics we could at later stages try to systematise them but even if that is possible still then Sten expresses his fear in these words, "but it would be futile now to revive it as such discovery will throw us all into an ocean of confusion."⁶ We believe that if they could be decipher, it will be a matter of pride for the Khasis and perhaps more will be known about the race from those writings.

1.02. The Contact With the British

Before we proceed into a detail discussion of how the Khasis received their script from the Christian missionaries, let us look into the early contact of the Khasis with the British prior to the advent of the missionaries. The East India Company under the leadership of Lord Robert Clive, completed its dominion of Bengal after the battle of Buxar in 1764. After that the East India Company began to establish trade contacts with the nearby territories. When trade began, conflict followed, and the earliest conflict between the Khasis and the British occurred in March 1772. Some people from Jaintiapur attacked and

5. Edward Gait, A History of Assam, (Guwahati: Lawyer's Book Stall, 1905, rpt., 1992), p. 160.

6. Ka Histori Ka Ktien Khasi, p. viii.

plundered the boats laden with merchandise plying on the river Surma which belonged to the East India Company. For the plunder which was committed by the people, the Jaintia Raja had to pay a heavy indemnity to the British.⁷

Another record of the contact by trade with the Khasis is by Robert Lindsay in 1787, writes he, they

... bring down from the mountains various articles of trade consisting chiefly of Assam clothes and iron, cotton and different fruits. In return they carry back salt, rice, dry fish and copper in considerable quantities.⁸

From the above account it is clear that the Khasis in those days produced clothes, iron, cotton and various types of fruits. They in return required salt, rice, dry fish and copper; it appeared that the Khasis do not cultivate rice. It also appeared that for trade barter system was in used. Let us get a further view of the Khasis from Lindsay. Writes he,

During the eleven years I have resided at Sylhet they never entered the district but twice in arms, and both times it was occasioned by a supposed indulgence to one of their tribe, men, women and children

7. Hamlet Bareh, U Tirot Singh, (New Delhi: Publications Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, 1984), p. 10.

8. H.W. Sten (Ed.), Khasi Studies, (Shillong: Don Bosco Press, 1991, Vol. V, No. 3), p. 88.

being indiscriminately put to death. They shewed themselves a barbarous enemy and for a short time were formidable, most of the Rajahs having united in one general confederacy.⁹

From the above account it became clear that the Khasis of those times were great warriors and wherever they went they spread fear and terror.

1.03. The Khasis And The Baptist Serampore Mission

In spite of the conflict and misunderstanding between the Khasis and the people of Sylhet, trade and commerce continued to flourish. The contact with the people in Sylhet and other areas paved a way for the contact with the Christian Baptist missionaries of Serampore also. William Carey, the missionary of the Baptist mission in Serampore was interested in the Khasis and he wanted to open new branches of work in the Khasi Hills. As a missionary his sole aim was to spread Christianity among the Khasis and to educate the people with Christian education. William Carey's frequent contact with the Khasis made him to comment as early as 1813 that the Khasis were truthful and sincere, they were however revengeful and would not forget the wrong committed against them.¹⁰

9. Ibid.

10. Khasi Cultural Society, Shispah Sanphew Snem Mynshwa, (Shillong: Khasi Cultural Society, 1984), p. 22.

Although William Carey desired to open new branches in the Khasi Hills, he could not perform the task by himself. He sent a Bengali by the name of Krishna Chandra Pal who had accepted Christianity; he reached Pandua in 1813 to start the work of spreading Christianity. Krishna Chandra Pal found immediate success because after a few months, seven people accepted Christianity, two of whom were Khasis by the name of Duwan and Anna. As many as eight Chiefs (Syiem) and about six hundred Khasis went to witness the baptism of those seven new Christians.¹¹ After that initial success, Krishna Chandra Pal left for Calcutta and for unknown reasons he never returned to Khasi Hills.

William Carey wanted to continue the work among the Khasis in spite of the fact that Krishna Chandra Pal deserted him. He began his work by concentrating in another direction, that is, to spread education among the Khasis. In this venture, he was faced with another major problem, since the Khasis did not possess a script of their own; after much thought, he conveniently adopted the Bengali characters. Thus, with the help of "a Bengali ayah from Sohra and another helper sent by a sahib from Shilot, the work of translating the New Testament into Khasi using the Bengali

11. D. Ropmay, Ka Centenary History Ka Balang Presbyterian Ha Ri Khasi-Jaintia Naduh 1841 Haduh 1940, (Shillong: Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian Synod, 2nd Edition, 1975), p. 2.

characters was started in 1813 and completed in 1824; the work was published in 1831."¹² This was substantiated by the record kept by William Pryse who listed the following books published by the Serampore Baptist mission in the Bengali characters, they were,

The whole of the New Testament, translated by the Serampore Missionaries, and printed at Serampore in 1831.... A small pamphlet, translated by the late Rev. A.B. Lish, and printed at Serampore in 1836. Title-page: "Dr. Watts's First Catechism for Children, translated into Khashee for the use of the Churra Mission Schools." It was printed in the Bengali characters.¹³

In 1832, William Carey sent Alexander B. Lish to the Khasi Hills to continue the work of spreading Christianity and Christian education. He opened three schools at Sohra, Mawsmal and Mawmluh and in 1833 there were 36 pupils in these schools.¹⁴ In spite of all the hard work William Carey and Alexander B. Lish had put in, the work of the Serampore mission did not find any root. In 1838, the Serampore Baptist mission closed the mission works in the Khasi Hills

12. T. Redborne, U Khasi, (Shillong: The Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian Press, 1977), p. 142.

13. William Pryse, An Introduction To The Khasia Language, (Calcutta: Calcutta School Book Society's Press, 1855, rpt., 1988), p. 121.

14. Ka Centenary History Ka Balang Presbyterian Ha Ri Khasi-Jaintia Naduh 1841 Haduh 1940, p. 2.

for good.¹⁵ The factors which contributed to the failure of the Serampore Baptist mission could be the following:

- (i) Right from the beginning the mission did not have a person who has fully dedicated himself to the task of spreading Christianity and Christian education in the Khasi Hills exclusively.
- (ii) William Carey was interested in the work but he was never in a position to fulfil it since he was directly involved in the mission work at Serampore. It was difficult for him to concentrate in both the places and to give equal attention.

While the major difficulties for the spread of Christian education among the Khasis were the following:

- (i) The Khasis of those days did not realise the need for education since they were still among themselves only.
- (ii) The symbols (letters) and sounds of the Bengali characters were difficult for the Khasis to learn and they were many in number.
- (iii) The Bengali characters could not represent the equivalent sounds of 'h', 'ng' and 'y', especially in the spelling of Sohra, sohphoh, lyoh, nga, etc.¹⁶

15. G. Angell Jones, Ka History Jong Ka Balang, (Shillong: Khasi Jaintia Presbyterian Synod, 1966), p. 3.

16. U Khasi, p. 148.

- (iv) The Khasis generally "had a superstitious terror of Bengali letters, firmly believing that if they tried to form a letter that they would be struck by blindness ... or suffer a fatal illness."¹⁷

By analysing the present situation in the Khasi Hills, we could draw some sort of conclusion as to why the Khasis failed to adopt the Bengali characters for their language. The Khasis considered the plain people "dkhar" as "mraw", that is, slaves; it will be quite difficult for them to accept the characters of such a people to represent their language. Accepting the Bengali characters will prove for generation to come that the Khasis is an inferior race, to avoid that they ignored them. Or it might have been due to the hatred the Khasis had for the Bengali people right from that period of time. As to the idea that they will be blind had they tried to write in Bengali, it was mere superstition and to accept the fact as they are today, we are really blind since we are not able to perceive what the Bengali write in their script. The idea that the Bengali characters were difficult is just a lame excuse, even the Roman characters would be difficult for a people that did possess a script of their own.

17. Hughlet Warjri (Ed.), Souvenir 1842-1992, (Shillong: Khasi Authors' Society, 1992), p. 12.

1.04. The Khasis And The British. As The Rulers

While William Carey was trying to contact the people from the religion point of view, another important event took place. According to the Letter No. 1, dated 14th November, 1823, from the Secretary to the Government of India, to Mr. Scott; David Scott had been officially appointed Agent to the Governor General for the whole Eastern Frontier from Cachar and Sylhet in the South to the Sikkim country in the North.¹⁸ Since Sylhet came directly under the control of the British, David Scott thought it convenient to construct a mule tract through Khasi Hills to connect Kamrup and Sylhet via Chatak. The proposed mule tract was to pass through Nongkhlaw and Tirot Singh was its chief (syiem) then. It was a historic and a fateful day when David Scott visited Nongkhlaw on the 1st November, 1826,¹⁹ to request permission for the construction of the new tract. The visit of David Scott was historic because the historians and the people of Khasi Hills will keep on remembering the day for generations to come especially, after signing of the agreement "at Gowhatty on 30th November 1826"²⁰ between

18. Edward Gait, op.cit., p. 276.

19. I.M. Simon (Ed.), Meghalaya District Gazetteers, (Shillong: Government of Meghalaya, Arts & Culture Department, 1991), p. 33.

20. C.U. Aitchison (Compiler), A Collection of Treaties, Engagements, and Sanads Relating to India and Neighbouring Countries, (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1892), p. 242.

Tirot Singh and David Scott. It was fateful because the signing of the agreement then would decide the fate of Nongkhlaw and the whole of Khasi Hills in the years following 1826. While the dorbar of Nongkhlaw agreed to grant permission for the construction of the mule tract connecting Kamrup and Chatak, because the British in return for that would assist the chief of Nongkhlaw in the time of need.

The work began and at the initial stages a peaceful co-existence prevailed between the workers of the East India Company and the people of Nongkhlaw. But unfortunately, it was not to last very long, for on the 15 April, 1829, a war broke out between the chief of Nongkhlaw and the British.²¹ The cause of the war was stated differently by different authors in Khasi Hills. According to Dr. H. Lyngdoh, the people of Nongkhlaw learnt from a worker of the Company who was from the plain (dkhar) that the ultimate motive of the Company was to establish supremacy over the chief of Nongkhlaw once the mule tract was completed. Hearing of it the people of Nongkhlaw took to arms, and a record says, "In 1829 an attack was made on a survey party at the village of

21. R.S. Lyngdoh, Ka Histori Ka Thoh Ka Tar, (Shillong: Scorpio Printers, 1979, rpt., 1988), p. 20.

Nongkhlaio [sic] and Lieutenants Burlton and Bedingfield, with about 50 or 60 natives, were massacred."²² The term 'natives' is not for the Khasis but for the people from the plain who had come as daily labourers with the Company. The rest of the British and labourers were driven out of Nongkhlaw. Dr. B.K. Sarma Roy, stated that after a few months the workers of the Company began to threaten the free movement of the Khasis particularly that of the womenfolk. The officers incharged could not control their men and even after repeated complaints the Company failed to take action. When the people could no longer tolerate and their daily existence was in danger especially in the market days, they took up to arms. Another account stated that when Tirot Singh the Syiem of Nongkhlaw required the assistance of the British against his principal rival Balaram Singh, the Raja of Rane, the British instead of assisting him gave their support to Tirot's opponent. Tirot Singh was enraged and so he and his men attacked the British and all their workers in Nongkhlaw but David Scott escaped to Cherrapunji. The most probable reason why the Anglo-Khasi war broke out could be, the news that the intention of the British was to impose their supremacy in Nongkhlaw, the disrespect shown by the British towards the agreement that they would assist Tirot

22. C.U. Aitchison, op.cit., p. 220.

Singh in time of need and also the behaviour of the Company's labourers towards the women at Nongkhlaw.

The Anglo-Khasi war continued and Tirot Singh called on all the Khasi syiem to stand united to fight against the British, but unfortunately, some Khasi syiem did not respond to that call of Tirot Singh; some even gave shelter and assisted the British like Duwan Singh of Cherrapunji. In the meantime the British began to look for a fitting place to have their military headquarters since they were driven out of Nongkhlaw. David Scott who had befriended the syiem of Cherrapunji got Saitsohpen for the military headquarters, and it was accepted because of its accessibility from Sylhet. At the time when the war was at its height, David Scott died on the 20th August, 1831, and was buried at Cherrapunji. The war continued under the leadership of Captain Lister until the capture of Tirot Singh on 13th January, 1833.²³ As soon as he was taken prisoner, Tirot Singh was sent to Dacca where he died on 17th July, 1835, according to the findings of David R. Syiemlieh.²⁴ With the dead of Tirot Singh the British became the rulers of Khasi Hills and proved their superiority in military powers to the

23. Meghalaya District Gazetteers, p. 40.

24. D.R. Syiemlieh, "The Enigma of Tirot Singh", in The Meghalaya Guardian, (Guwahati: G.L. Publications, 15.7.1990), p. 4.

Khasis. After the war the British abandoned Nongkhlaw because it was found to be unhealthy and liable to constant mists. The change of place as headquarters from Nongkhlaw to Saitsohpen in Cherrapunji assumed significant from the language point of view, because the missionaries who will arrive later will develop the Cherrapunji dialect and reduce it into writing for the whole of Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

1.05. The Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission And The Khasis

After the Serampore Mission left Khasi Hills, the Welsh Calvinistic Mission, following the advice of Jacob Tomlin took over Khasi Hills. In February 1837, Tomlin was on his way to England; he paid a visit to Khasi Hills and spent about nine months with his family in Cherrapunji. During those months he found out that the people of Cherrapunji were quite responsive to the message of Christianity. In 1839, Tomlin wrote these lines in the Trysorfa.

It would be good to see two ... of the Welsh brothers being sent to the Khasi Mountains, a place where your [sic] might soon enough gather into Christ's orchard many of the wandering sheep on the distant and until lately unfamiliar mountains, who have at present no shepherd to watch over them, and feed them. They would have considerable assistance with the language, which can be learned in a year or two.²⁵

25. Hughlet Warjri, op.cit., p. 4.



The above paragraph is a recommendation to send missionaries to the Khasi Hills but the line, "They could have considerable assistance with the language..." is revealing. It could perhaps mean the availability of good Khasi teachers to teach Khasi to the learners or it could mean that the language is easy to learn. The London Missionary Society agreed with the suggestion offered by Tomlin and sent missionaries to the Khasi Hills. The Society chose Thomas Jones for the new mission, he was to be accompanied by his young bride Anne. The two left Liverpool by the S.S. Jamaica on November 25, 1840, to set sail for Calcutta.²⁶ In those days it took many months to reach Calcutta, to be precised around five months, because the mode of travelling was only by sea. Thomas Jones and his wife reached Bombay and then travelled to Calcutta perhaps in the month of May in 1841. Two days after their arrival at Calcutta, Mrs. Jones gave birth to their first child, but unfortunately, the baby died as soon as it was born. Once Mrs. Jones was fit to travel, the Joneses proceeded to Cherrapunji and reached there on the 22 June, 1841.²⁷

Since the opening of the military headquarters at Saitsohpen, many Khasis longed for the day when they could

26. Ibid.

27. G. Angell Jones, op.cit., p. 6.

learn to speak English. The mission of Thomas Jones was not only for the spread of Christianity but also to spread education. The then Khasis immediately flocked to Thomas Jones and requested him to teach them English. The reason being the firm belief that once they learn to speak English they could earn a living and their daily bread anywhere,²⁸ since the British Empire was big in those days. Critically, we could conclude that the then Khasis, especially those of Cherrapunji, had a great respect for the English language. It appeared also that they were after white collar jobs with the British.

✓ Thomas Jones came to Khasi Hills with a mission and his interest also was only in those things which will help him to achieve his goals. He picked up the Khasi language soon enough and records said, "after a few months,"²⁹ contrary to what Jacob Tomlin had stated that the language can be learned in a year or two. According to G.A. Jones, Thomas Jones was assisted by Duwan Rai and Jungkha, the students of Alexander B. Lish to learn the Khasi language.³⁰ Hamlet Bareh has his own view. Writes he, "It is said that Thomas Jones was considerably assisted in the translation

28. Ibid., p. 7.

29. Ibid., p. 8.

30. Ibid.

work by u Laithat, a literate."³¹ It could have been that all the three assisted Thomas Jones since they were the literate of the time and from them he picked up the language quickly and fluently.

The immediate attention of Thomas Jones was to supply the Khasis with a written language. He studied the earlier attempts to introduce the Bengali script for the language. He realised that the Bengali script contains numerous number of characters and the Khasis themselves were superstitious about them. He was aware that the Khasis in that time were eager to learn and speak the English language. He found the letters which were closed to the English language was those of the Latin language. He knew Latin well since during those days it was a compulsory subject to be studied at different levels. He discovered that the sounds of the letters in Latin would fit exactly for the Khasi language. Therefore, he adopted the Latin letters for the Khasi language and they were, A B C D E G NG H I J K L M N O P R S T U W Y.³² His experiment met with an opposition from the other English men especially, those who had been in the Khasi Hills earlier with the exception of Dr. Duff and Jacob Tomlin who encouraged the attempt. It was

31. Hamlet Bareh, A Short History of Khasi Literature, (Shillong: Ri Khasi Press, 1962, rpt., 1979), p. 20.

32. Hughlet Warjri (Ed.), Souvenir 1842-1992, op.cit., p. 12.

said in 1842, Thomas Jones prepared a primer entitled Ca Citab Nyngcong Ban Hicai Poole Ci Citin Cassi.³³ While R.S. Lyngdoh wrote that the Khasi alphabet introduced by Thomas Jones were 21 in number and they are A B K D E G NG H I J L M N O P R S T U W Y,³⁴ and Jones published those in the book entitled the First Khasi Primer. After much research in the area, we find it is more logical to agree with the first opinion, that there were 22 letters and that the name of the first primer was Ca Citab Nyngcong Ban Hicai Poole Ci Citin Cassi, which was published most probably in the year 1842. Therefore in agreement we raise our hands in support of the first opinion and from further research we come across these lines:

A Primer in Khasia, also by Mr. Jones, printed "Calcutta 1846", entitled "Ca Citab Nyngcong Ban Hicai Ci Citin Cassi."³⁵

Perhaps the copy of 1846, mentioned by Pryse could have been the reprinted edition of the earlier copy of 1842. However, a fact remains that till date a copy of the book is yet to be discovered and the search is going on in England and Wales. Interestingly, Mr. Nigel Jenkins, is still trying in

33. Ibid., p. 13.

34. R.S. Lyngdoh, op.cit., p. 29.

35. William Pryse, op.cit., p. 121. (Note: In most of the references the word Poole is missing from the title. Perhaps the correct title is as given by William Pryse).

Wales at the initiative of H.W. Sten; here is an extract from a newspaper in Wales:

One of my contacts there, Professor Sten, head of Khasi literature at the North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, has appealed to me to try to track down here in Wales two historic texts that would be of great value.... They are Thomas Jones's first Khasi primer. C [sic] Citab Ban Hicai Ci Citien Cassiah...³⁶

✓ Thomas Jones adopted the Cherrapunji dialect since the written language started from there. But William Pryse had his opinion, writes he, "The dialect of Cherrapunji is generally considered the purest by the natives."³⁷ We are more inclined to hold that it was merely due to historical coincidence that the Cherrapunji dialect came to be accepted as a written language for the Khasis. Had the British chosen to remain at Nongkhlaw, perhaps, things could have been totally different. On the same issue other scholars had their opinions. T. Rodborne, had his view as to why the written language in Khasi Hills started from Cherrapunji; the views are, Cherrapunji was regarded as the forehead (shyllangmat) of Khasi Hills. It was there that David Scott was first received by a friendly chief when he was drove out of Nongkhlaw. Education started from there right from the

36. Nigel Jenkins, "Appeal for 150-Year-Old Publication", The Western Mail, (dated 27.6.1992).

37. William Pryse, op.cit., p. v.

time of the Baptist Serampore missions and it was the first place to accept Christianity. Close to Cherrapunji there was a military headquarters of the British. Cherrapunji was a well known market place all over Khasi Hills, it was there that trade flourished between the Khasis and the non-Khasis.³⁸ While according to Wilson Reade, the Roman Script were introduced "for accuracy and simplicity".³⁹ H.W. Sten offered four reasons as to why Cherrapunji dialect was accepted. Writes he:

1) Cherrapunji was the capital of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills district and the people *employed there spoke the dialect.* 2) *Cherrapunji was the centre for trade where the traders from all over Khasi and Jaintia Hills met.* 3) In it there is softness which is closer to the English language especially in rendering polite words. 4) It was a dwelling place of the missionaries from Wales.⁴⁰

While I.M. Simon, is of the view that, perhaps the Cherrapunji dialect is sweeter than other dialects. It is a centre for trade where all the traders both from Khasi Hills and the plains of Bangladesh and Assam met. Due to that reason a number of Indo-Aryan words entered Khasi Hills through Cherrapunji dialect.⁴¹

38. T. Rodborne, U Khasi, pp. 152 & 153.

39. H.W. Sten, Khasi Poetry: Origin and Development, (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1990), p. 45.

40. H.W. Sten, Ka Histori Ka Ktien Khasi, p. 12.

41. Ibid.

Regarding the introduction of the Roman characters, William Pryse had this to say in the "PREFATORY NOTE TO THE VOCABULARY". Writes he,

The Roman characters have been adopted in preference to the Bengali characters; not from a conviction of the superior utility of the former, but simply because they were found already in use amongst the natives. It is obvious that such a small and uninfluential tribe will not be able to retain characters different from those of the larger nations of the plains which surround their hills. Should the Khasis tribe be ever brought under the influence of education, civilization, and commercial intercourse the Bengali character must supplant the Roman at a not very distant day. For the sake of the Khasis that would be very desirable. Nor would it be less desirable for the Bengali language to supplant all the hill dialects on the northeast frontier.⁴²

Thus, from the above we come to learn that the Khasis have been using the Roman script or that they are familiar with them probably due the English language. The hopes of Pryse that the Bengali language would take over the languages of northeast frontier did not materialised in the case of Khasi. The Roman characters continued to be in used among the Khasis. Hugh Roberts, stated that the dialect of Cherrapunji was taken as the standard language for Khasi, because it is the purest as universally acknowledged by the natives.⁴³ In the

42. William Pryse, op.cit., p. v.

43. Hugh Roberts, A Grammar Of The Khasi Language, (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1891, rpt., 1995), p. xiv.

same paragraph he condemned the use of words from other Khasi dialect with the Cherrapunji dialect as "ugly barbarisms."⁴⁴ He advocated the use of the pure Cherrapunji dialect as the standard language for Khasi language.

1.06. The Khasi Alphabet

In 1849, William Robinson in the article "The Kassia", wrote about the Khasi language; the article was reproduced faithfully in the journal Khasi Studies. From his writings when we re-organised the letters he used could have been A B D E H I J K L M N O P R S T U W. The author used frequently the cute vowel in his writings especially in the letter á as in Ū tángá, Ū párá, and ú lúm.⁴⁵ We also noticed that Robinson was the first to use the letter ĩ in the spelling ĩing.

In 1854, Thomas Oldhams wrote an article entitled "The Language and Ethnology of the Khasi", which is faithfully reproduced in Khasi Studies, and he has this to say on the orthography. Writes he,

For many obvious reasons, I have selected the Roman letters, consisting of the following 13 consonants: b d g h j k l m n p r s t, and of the vowels, a e i o u w and y.⁴⁶

44. Ibid.

45. H.W. Sten (Ed.), Khasi Studies, Vol.III, No.2, pp.59-65.

46. H.W. Sten (Ed.), Khasi Studies, Vol. II, No. 4, p. 70.

If we try to re-arrange the letters, we will discover that there were twenty letters used in writing the Khasi language at the time of Thomas Oldhams.

In 1855, William Pryse presented the following characters in the book An Introduction To The Khasia Language, they were A B D E G H I J K L M N O P R S T U W Y, the letters were divided into vowels and consonants. The consonants were b d g h i j k l m n p r s t; while the vowels were a e i o u w y.⁴⁷ The reason why w and y were considered as the vowels is because, in the initial stage of the Khasi language w was pronounced as woo, while y was pronounced as /ɔ/, that is, as an O.⁴⁸ We have, for example, words which were today have ending in w but at that time ended in u like, brieu, kieu.

Hugh Roberts discovered that "the Khasi language possesses features altogether its own, as compared with the other members of the Sub-Himalayan group."⁴⁹ Speaking about the orthography of the Khasi language, he found that it has twenty one letters only and they are, A B K D E G NG H I J L M N O P R S T U W Y.⁵⁰ According to him, the "letters are

47. William Pryse, op.cit., p. 1.

48. H.W. Sten, Ka Histori Ka Ktien Khasi, p. 67.

49. Hugh Roberts, op.cit., p. xiii.

50. Ibid., p. 1.

divided into three classes (Lai jaid), (1) Vowels, (2) Semi-vowels, and (3) Consonants."⁵¹ The vowels he called them Ki Dak Jur and they "are six in number, viz., A, a; E, e; I, i; O, o; Y, y; U, u."⁵² He used the acute for the long vowel and accordingly, we find that there were five long vowels and seven short vowels and the point is illustrated with concrete examples.⁵³ The letter ï was treated like a semi-vowel and it appeared in the spelling like ïaid and ïar.⁵⁴ The consonants were fourteen in number and they were b k d g ng h j l m n p r s t. Regarding the consonant g he said that it was used mainly for the words which were borrowed either from Bengali or Hindustani, like gadda, gora, godam, lagam etc., but all these words today are spelt with k and not with g. Thus, we noticed a lot of efforts were made by the missionaries to give the Khasis the alphabet which will help them to write their language properly. It is clear till 1891, only the missionaries participated in the study of the Khasi alphabet, in our later section we shall discuss the role of the Khasis in updating the letters.

1.07. The Meaning of Linguistics

A proper and systematic study of linguistics began

51. Ibid.

52. Ibid., p. 2.

53. Ibid.

54. Ibid.

with the publication of Ferdinand de Saussure's Cours de Linguistique Generale (1916). Regarding the beginning of the study of linguistics, John Lyons is of the opinion that the term 'linguistics' was first used in the middle of the nineteenth century.⁵⁵ It is a generally accepted fact that the study of linguistics is attributed to Ferdinand de Saussure and different people at later stages took it up. At present the study of linguistics as a subject has shoot into prominence and it is a subject that is talked and discussed in many intellectual circle. Currently, many scholars are engaged in research in this field.

Linguistics, studies human language and the aspect which any human being is proud of is certainly his language that is, his mother-tongue. Although of late the study of linguistics has shoot into prominence, still there is a misunderstanding among a section of people that a student of linguistics or a linguist is basically the one who knows many languages. The word 'linguist' has come to be associated with a person who knows many languages and the study of linguistics as the study of many languages. Thus, the word linguist has turned out for certain people to mean 'a polyglot', that is, a person who can speak many languages.

55. John Lyons (Ed.), New Horizons in Linguistics, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1970, rpt., 1973), p. 7.

Such a misunderstanding has come even among most of the Khasis even the educated ones. Thus, such a misunderstanding of term is misleading and has to be carefully corrected.

In the process of the study of linguistics many scholars on the subject tried to define it. David Crystal, defined it as, "linguistics is a scientific study of language."⁵⁶ Another definition says that linguistics is "a scientific study of the systems and principles underlying human languages."⁵⁷ When a language is scientifically studied, it follows the methodology of science which involved several steps. The steps involved are, observation, hypothesis-formation, analysis, generalisation, prediction, testing by further observation, confirmation, modification or rejection of the hypothesis. When a language is scientifically studied, it aims at establishing a theory of language which could be applied for further study of another language. In other words, the scientific study of any particular language is based on a certain framework. At the present juncture, when any particular language is studied, not only the scientific methodology is used, but if required even scientific instruments. For instance, in the analysis

56. David Crystal, Linguistics, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books Ltd., 1971, rpt., 1985), p. 9.

57. S.K. Verma & N. Krishnaswamy, Modern Linguistics: An Introduction, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 26.

of phonetics, a phonetic laboratory is an essential part of the study, particularly, for the study of acoustic phonetics. When a language is scientifically analysed, it is analysed from these levels, phonetics, phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, graphology and lexicology.

Linguistics as it is today is divided into different branches and each branch has its own area of study. Diachronic linguistics studies the history and development of a language. Synchronic linguistics studies the description of a language at a given point of time. Comparative linguistics studies more than two languages from the historical stand point. In Contrastive linguistics more than two languages are being studied from the synchronic stand point. Psycholinguistics studies how the human beings acquire and use the language. In Sociolinguistics, a study is made about the language in relation to the society. Applied linguistics deals with the concepts and methods used in the teaching, translating or testing language. Theoretical linguistics deals with the study of language for its own sake. Computational linguistics deals with the use of computer science in the study of language. Thus, we notice that the term linguistics today is no more an area that is closed up, it is a subject that involves both literature and science depending on the area.

1.08. The Meaning of Awareness

The word aware according to the dictionaries, is a predicate and also an adjective; its noun form is awareness. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, presents, aware, means having knowledge or consciousness; having knowledge or consciousness of the stated type.⁵⁸ While in the Longman Concise English Dictionary, aware, means having or showing realization, perception or knowledge.⁵⁹ The meaning given by Longman LEXICON of Contemporary English, is, knowing (what is happening); having or showing understanding of oneself, one's surroundings and other people.⁶⁰ The Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, aware, implies having knowledge of something through alertness in observing.⁶¹ The Reader's Digest Use The Right Word, aware, in the broadest sense may mean having knowledge of something inside oneself or of some external fact or condition. Such knowledge may be based on the evidence of one's senses or on the intellect; for example, to be aware of hunger pangs;

58. Paul Procter (Ed.), Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, (London: Longman Ltd., 1978), p. 60.

59. Linda O'Donnell (Ed.), Longman Concise English Dictionary, (London: Longman Ltd., 1985), p. 95.

60. Tom McArthur, Longman LEXICON of Contemporary English, (London: Longman, B. 80, Ltd., 1981), p. 52.

61. David B. Guralnik (Ed.), Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), p. 97.

aware of a sharp drop in temperature; aware of a new trend in public opinion.⁶²

The common meaning for the word aware, found in the dictionaries are, *having knowledge, realization, consciousness and understanding*. The noun form awareness goes hand in hand with the word experience, for awareness comes from experience and vice versa. Awareness does mean only a physical experience but also a mental experience. Awareness may or may not lead into action; if it stays only with the person who has it, then it is not shared. In our context, we want to take the meaning of awareness from the positive side, that is, the people who are aware initiate and move others by their personal example or by presenting their view through the media available to them.

- 1.09. Linguistic Awareness

When we glance through the pages of the history of Khasi literature and language, we find that right from the start some educated Khasis came forward to say something on their literature, culture and language. The missionaries gave them the written script and through it the Khasi language was preserved in a visible form to be transferred to the future generation. Once they received education, the

62. Reader's Digest Use The Right Word, (London: The Reader's Digest, 1969), p. 30.

Khasis became aware that the language the missionaries were trying to impart was sometime defective. They never knew about linguistics but certainly knew their language and its various forms of expressions. It must be understood that the Khasi writers of the late 19th Century and till date were mostly native speakers of the Khasi language. As native speakers they possess a deep knowledge of their language and the use of Khasi as a subject in schools and colleges gave them the opportunity to start thinking about their language. The establishment of the North-Eastern Hill University in 1973 and the birth of the Khasi department in 1981, paved a way to the study of Khasi linguistics. With that beginning, the study develops and books were written about the language by different authors, prominent among them is H.W. Sten, who published Ka Histori Ka Ktien Khasi, in 1980.

Among the Khasis such knowledge of their language is brought about from their experience in the language, knowing the traditions and the form of expressions. The Khasis feel that as the native speakers are in a better position to describe and analyse their own language, and to offer their views through the media available to them. In the study of linguistic awareness the data we are analysing is the standard language. After going through the pages of the different books in Khasi literature, we find that some of

the Khasis who had written books, had presented their views on the language; *their comments were offered in form of preface or in the foreword.* Such comments on the language are also taken as awareness because it shows that those people knew something about the language and its uses. In their own capacity they have contributed for the development of the study of Khasi linguistics.

Now is the time to put forward our definition of linguistic awareness; by linguistic awareness we mean the knowledge, understanding and comments of the language by the literate native Khasi speaker through writing. Such knowledge and understanding is brought about by their constant touch, indepth study of their language and through their own intelligence.

1.10. Awareness of the Alphabet

The first awareness created by the Khasis was about the letters which were accepted and used for instruction in schools. It was stated earlier that in the initial stage W was pronounced as /woo/ or /u/, while Y as /ɔ/. Hormu Rai Diengdoh and Radhon Singh Berry, created the awareness through the journal U Khasi Mynta, that W should be pronounced as /dʌbjlu:/ and Y as /wai/. Such awareness created by the Khasis themselves was accepted only at a later stage. For a period of time it was generally accepted

that the letters ï and ñ were introduced in the Khasi alphabet by Jeebon Roy Mairom, the view was propagated by R.S. Lyngdoh.⁶³ The publication of the articles in Ka Jingsdang Ka Jingspel Bad Jingthoh ia ka Ktien Khasi da ki Dak Roman, by Kynpham Singh, and a further research by H.W. Sten, throws a new light about the introduction of the letters ï and ñ. It goes back to March 7, 1896, the journal U Khasi Mynta, in the article entitled, "Ka Jingspel ia ka Ktien Khasi". In that article, it was stated that the letters ï and ñ should be used in the spelling of the Khasi words requiring them. Since that article did not have the author's name, it was concluded by Sten that it could have been the author himself. The conclusion of Sten was later proved to be correct by the following words summarised below,

... if you read the journal "U Khasi Mynta" which comes out once a month, which is the first Political paper in Khasi & Jaintia Hills and in the issue of March 1896, on page 5, I had written much on the Khasi words and how to spell them correctly not as the spellings the missionaries used in their books. And there I had introduced the letters ñ (enj) and ï (yi) in order to systematise the spelling of the Khasi words.⁶⁴

63. R.S. Lyngdoh, Ka Histori Ka Thoh Ka Tar, Bynta I, p. 29.

64. _____, Ka Syngkhong Jingtip, last quarter of 1938, (no date has been mentioned officially in the issue except the piece by A. Alley who signed 12/11/1938).

The editor of the journal was none other than Hormu Rai Diengdoh, hence the claim that Jeebon Roy introduced i and ñ is incorrect.

From further research we find that the letter i was used as early as 1849 by William Robinson in the spelling ling⁶⁵ and in 1870 by Hugh Roberts in the spelling of khaïi, ïaid.⁶⁶ But we find that Roberts sometimes used the letter i wrongly and was very inconsistent also.

In the early stages of the Khasi alphabet, the same sound was given to /u/ and /w/ and also to /o/ and /y/. An offer was made to pronounce /w/ as /wu:/ but it was rejected. It was Radhon Singh Berry who offered the sound of w /dʌblij/ which was accepted. Thus, the letters were rearranged with their sounds as A B K D E G NG H I Ï J L M N Ñ O P R S T U W Y, that is, twenty three in number. the disappearance of c from our present alphabet still remains a mystery. Perhaps the sound of the letter c does not figure in the Khasi words, that is why, it was removed. It could be agreed with Sten that Thomas Jones started the Khasi alphabet, Hormu Rai Diengdoh made it better and it was Radhon Singh Berry who strengthen it and gave it a solid foundation.

65. H.W. Sten, Khasi Studies, Vol. III, No. 2, (Shillong: Don Bosco Press, 1989), p. 64.

66. Hugh Roberts, A Grammar of the Khasi Language, pp.7,109.

For a number of years the Khasi alphabet was used and no one felt the need of up-dating it. Around the year 1977, three Khasis who took interest in the Khasi language became aware of the need of updating the alphabet. The three persons were, L.G. Shullai, W.R. Laitflang, and I. Kharkongor; these wanted the inclusion of C F V X Z in the present alphabet.⁶⁷ The reasons given for the inclusion of the letters are:

- (i) There are some Khasis whose names require the above letters.
- (ii) The inclusion of the above letters will help to spell the borrowed words properly.
- (iii) It will help in the spelling of geographical names, scientific and literary terms.
- (iv) The inclusion of the letters is necessary because it will help in the study of phonetics and phonology of the Khasi language.

For the inclusion of the letters, L.G. Shullai suggests that those be placed at the end of the present alphabet. Public opinion is still divided on this. In the mean time H.W. Sten, suggests the inclusion of Q⁶⁸ as well in

67. H.W. Sten, Ka Hystori Ka Ktien Khasi, p. 69.

68. Ibid.

the alphabet. It will take sometime for the inclusion of the letters as it requires proper study and analysis of the language before any change could take place.

In the chapter we discussed about the Khasi language its usage as a literary language; the areas where the language is used and the number of speakers. We come to know how the Khasis lost their script and the use of kyrwoh by the syiem (chief) to send messages among themselves. The knowledge of the existence of some graphic substance used by the Khasi kings in the ancient times creates an interest in the scholars and the people. We discussed at length regarding the contact of the Khasis with the British. We analysed the efforts made by the Serampore Baptist mission to write the Khasi language using the Bengali scripts. We stated some possible reasons as to why that attempt failed. The construction of a mule tract through Nongkhlaw to connect Chatak and Kamrup from 1826 is important, that leads to a closer contact of the Khasis with the British. The Anglo-Khasi War from 1829 to 1833 is also important because one of the results of the war was the shift of the British Headquarters from Nongkhlaw to Cherrapunji. The arrival of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist missionaries and the work of Thomas Jones to give the Khasis the written script is discussed at length. We also discussed the meaning of

linguistic and awareness by taking recourse to some definition by eminent scholars and linguists. We presented the definition of linguistic awareness as the understanding of and comments on the language by the literate native Khasi speakers through writing. We discussed the first awareness of the Khasis, that is, the alphabet and we noticed the active role they played in building and strengthening the Khasi alphabet. We also find that the present Khasi writers are in their own way contributing to modernise the alphabet.

CHAPTER II

CONCLUSION

As far as possible I managed to avoid leaving my chapters open-ended; hence, I tried to make them self-conclusive. A summary would be of help.

The first chapter is devoted to historical perspective, and to the outlines of the main work. I found that all available records point to the fact that the Christian missionaries reduced the spoken language of the Sohra area into writing, first for the purpose of education and second for communication by means of sermons in congregations and correspondences from one village to another. The missionaries succeeded appreciably that the natives started expressing themselves on several points about the Khasi language, including spelling.

The second chapter deals with language and literature, and the efforts of the Khasi scholars to distinguish the two names. In my effort to educate myself in the topic, I have taken refuge in the shadows of Western scholars whose names occupy the rightful position in the footnotes. I found with pleasure that the Khasis, especially of modern days, are also aware of the nature and development of the Khasi language.

The third chapter concentrated on the efforts of the

Khasis to describe their own language in the form of grammar books. I found that Nissor Singh and Mondon Bareh were prominent traditional grammarians of the language. Both wrote in English, and the one by Nissor Singh is still a text in schools. I found also that a few other Khasi authors described their language in Khasi; one of them stroke a new ground. I have devoted one full chapter in his works.

In the fourth chapter I examined mostly the contribution of H.W. Sten to structural grammar of Khasi language. The chapter traced the beginning of the new approach; and proceeded with examining that new direction. Sten wrote both in Khasi and English; but not on the same topics. That made it difficult for a researcher like me to locate the journals, newspapers and other publications to which he might have contributed. I found, however, that he happened to be the first native who dared to tread the untrodden path, and the chapter showed that diagrams in quick description of the Khasi language were introduced by him. It is difficult to antiticipate what he will do next because he is still very much with us; and is sensitive to the description of the Khasi language by non-Khasis (that was till this pre-submission seminar was passed by Late Prof. H.W. Sten).

Chapter five was devoted to the awareness of the Khasis of spelling the words written in their language. I have recorded in the chapter itself whatever I found; but I must state that the Khasi scholars were aware of the inadequacy of 19th century spelling, and have gone further to the study of word juncture under the leadership of H.W. Sten.

The annexures are intended to provide additional information to readers about the awareness of the Khasis. Those are not meant for evaluation.

If we compare the development of Khasi literature and Khasi language, we will find that the development in language study is still far behind. However, we are positive that competent scholars will come forward to take this issue seriously.

I have thus proved that linguistic awareness among the Khasis is real. It began in the 19th century and it continues till date.
