

BIBLICAL INFLUENCE ON PRE-INDEPENDENCE KHASI LITERATURE

ABSTRACT



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DECEMBER, 1995

The study investigates the biblical elements found in the pre-independence Khasi literature by examining all published literary works of the period (1813-1947). Therefore, its chapterisation are: Historical Perspective, Poetry, Fiction, Drama and Conclusion.

All translations of quotations have been done by the investigator and biblical quotations were taken only from the authorised King James Version of the Holy Bible.

Chapter 1 outlines the objectives of the study. It also presents the historical perspective of the genesis of Christianity, the genesis of various schools at all levels and the influence of the Bible in Christian educational institutions. It gives a bird's eye view of the biblical publication of the period and in particular, it examines the influence of the Bible on the literary publication of indigenous authors who were educated in missionary schools and colleges. The chapter also gives a brief account of the existence of pre-Christian and non-Christian educational agencies that run schools during the period. In this connection, the study also discusses the ecumenical approach of later missionaries who collaborated with prominent Khasi leaders like Jeebon Roy Mairom (1838-1903) in establishing the Shillong Government High School, the Alma Mater of many Khasi authors and in framing academic syllabi approved by the Government.

Chapter 2 analyses the biblical influence on Khasi poetry which forms the bulk of the thesis because not less than 5 major poets and a host of minor poets both Christians and non-Christians from *Na Ka Thiar Ki Longshuwa* (From the Ancients' Store) and a poem "Moments of Grief" from *U Lurshai* (The Bright Star)¹ enriched Khasi during the period. John Roberts, titled the 'Father of Khasi Literature' led the way by publishing and preparing his famous *Khasi Readers* Series between 1883 and 1908. Roberts was followed by Morkha Joseph, Mondon Bareh, Soso Tham and H. Elias. The study also includes Amjad Ali. A short sketch of the lives and work of major poets has been given before analysing their poems. Care has also been taken to differentiate their original compositions from their translations by preparing a separate list before analysing them in detail.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS IN CHAPTER 2

Translation was a strong motivation behind every major poet. Most of them achieved greatness in verse by acquainting themselves to it. Their main aim in translating English poetry was to enrich the repertoire of Khasi literature and expose the school going children to English literature via their vernacular.

¹ "Moments of Grief" in *U Lurshai*, Vol. V., February, No. 4, 1901, p. 30.

The efforts that the poets made in translating standard English literature, led them to the discovery of the richness and loftiness of their own language and the awakening of their own creative power and imagination.

JOHN ROBERTS (1842-1908)

John Roberts graded and interspersed his poems in the three *Khasi Readers*, 3 in the *Second Reader*, 8 in the *Third Reader* and 9 in the *Fourth Reader* respectively keeping in mind the mental capacity of the age of the school-going children. In almost all of them, including the two sonnets at the end of *Ka Jingiaid U Pilgrim* (The Journey of a Pilgrim), he applied the method of contrast. Through his poems children are taught to appreciate nature, and everything terrestrial and to see through them as glimpses of what is going to come in the celestial life. In a realistic manner he also presents life as a time of struggle, doubts, confusion, trials, pain and anxiety while at the same time playing the role of an eschatological prophet by showing how in the eternal city, God will wipe away all the tears from their eyes for the former things are passed away (Rev. 21:4). Suffering and pain are seen as stepping stones and means of meriting graces.

Again virtues were made attractive by appealing to the hero-worship instinct in children. Biblical heroes like Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Joshua, Samuel, who excelled in one or other of the biblical virtues in their struggles were introduced in the language of the child.

Similarly when personified vices such as anger, pride, sloth and disobedience and other evil inclinations are rejected, love, humility, charity, peace, joy and obedience will replace them, but when pride is pampered it calls upon the anger of God. Thus the wall of Jericho fell, Pharaoh and his army were drowned in the Red Sea because they were proud and haughty.

MORKHA JOSEPH [1838/45² (?) - 1921]

With the exception of "**U Sirlapalang**" (The Lapalang-Stag), Joseph never published any of his poems. Through the intuitive knowledge of the mother deer in the poem Joseph highlighted the difference between the two levels of justice: human justice which executes according to the letter of the law, and divine justice that transcends the law

² This year was surmised by Dr. R.S. Lyngdoh, "Ki Nongtei ia ka Thoh ka Tar Khasi: Morkha Joseph" in *Soso Tham Birth Centenary Souvenir 1873-1973*, Shillong: 1973, p. 44.

with forgiving love. The allegory depicts the mother deer struggling to overcome depression and despair. Joseph, however, did not leave the mother in the anguish of her despair, as a spiral of hope he slowly seeped in her mind some shadow of hope. She started looking at the Khasi warriors known as 'U Khyndai Bah Ryntieh' (U Khyndai Bow Carrier) as instruments of the law of the Old Testament justice : "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth". Gradually she was able to forgive them and invoked on the "erbatemon erbatesi" (the gentle soothing breeze) stanza 35, to dry the tears of sorrow from her eyes.

At this stage, Joseph deliberately merged the Hindu belief in transmigration or rebirth with the Christian doctrine on the resurrection because Christ has come to replace the old law of justice with his reconciliatory love for men.

With Paul who sees 'death as the last enemy' (1 Cor. 15:26), Joseph verbalised the victory of Christ over death through the mother deer.

"Away ! Aggressive Death ,
"Gluttonously gaping for prey,
"Unsightly! Weird black Witch,
"Roaming round victim to slay,
"The Son of God in fetters bound,
"Thy joints will twist and wound,
"Thy sting He'll rout they teeth He'll rake,
"From their sockets thy eyes He'll scoop,
"Mankind his God gratitude and thanks echo,
"To the ends of the earth his praises flow."

(stanza 38)

H.W. Sten has given more praiseworthy biblical interpretations of this poem alluding to the mother deer as the Christian Church that beckons the wayward sons and daughters of Khasiland to embrace the faith.³ The tragic end of the son "U Lapalang" awaits every youth who lives outside the fold of the Church, because without Christ's support, the devil's wiles are not only fatal but very intricate and vicious snares. The mother deer eventually realised that spiritual death is more fatal than mortal death.

³ H.W. Sten, *Khasi Poetry: Origin and Development*, New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1990, pp. 178-186.

Morkha Joseph's complete work saw the light of day only in 1967 when James Tham published *Ka Ryngkap* (The Quiver). The study finds a lot of biblical elements in "U Jumai Bah Ka ri Khasi" (The Great Earthquake of Khasiland), "Ka Jinghiar u Mynsiem Ha Ri Khasi" (The Descent of the Spirit On Khasiland) are among the most beautiful outpour of his poetic Spirit-filled heart. The last two poems reflect his interpretation of the historical event of the great earthquake of 1897 and the Pentecostal experience of the Church in Khasiland.

Joseph saw God's hands in all of these events and he even played the role of John the Baptist at the Jordan and of the apostle Peter on the first Pentecost morn by preaching repentance through his poems.

MONDON BAREH (1878-1932)

Mondon Bareh composed many standard poems in Khasi and in English some of which he published in two of his journals *Ka Jingshai Jong ka Ri Khasi-Pnar* (The Light of Ri Khasi-Pnar) and *Ka Seng Presbyterian* (The Presbyterian Association) and the rest were published in Denzille Bareh's *U Mawpun Jingtip*, (Knowledge Stepping Stone), 1956, and *Na Ka Thiar Ki Longshuwa* (From The Ancients' Store), 1980.

In the poems, "U Nongbet" (The Sower), "Ka Lyer Ka Beh Ka Nangiaid" (The Blowing Wind Ever Blows), "Jingkyrmen (Ka Sonnet)" (Hope- A Sonnet), and "Ka Jingshisha" (Truth), Bareh leads his readers from familiar concepts of the harvest to the metaphorical harvest at the end of time, i. e referring to Matthew 13:29-30. Adult readers and children alike are familiar with nature scenes as well as with common concepts like truth and hope. Merging his own philosophy and Christian faith, Bareh embodies his lyrics with rare scriptural, literary and theological fusion.

U SOSO THAM (1873-1940)

Translation was Tham's faithful handmaid that ushered him to the abode of the muses. Apart from *Ki Sngi Barim U Hynñiew trep* (The Primordial Days of U Hynñiew Trep), 1936, Tham published all his original and translated lyrics and ballads in *Ki Poitri Khasi (Khasi Poems)* in 1925 and 1931 which he renamed into *Ka Duitara Ksiar* (The Golden Harp) in 1936. Most of the lyrics were the fruits of his work between 1910 -1935. Many of the poems in this collection reflect Tham as a man familiar with suffering like the suffering Servant in Isaiah (Is. 53:1ff). Through them, the pages of Khasi poetry has access to some of the finest counsels on how to cope with life's strain and stress.

The poem "**U Sim Ba La Lait**" (The Bird That Escaped),⁴ an allusion to Psalm 124:7 reveals Tham's capacity to cope with suffering. In this poem, he shares his triumph over pain and suffering with the readers. Tham finds an answer to his search and longing for heaven and expresses it in stanza 18 which is reminiscent of Luke 17:20-21.

Literature enabled Tham to transcend the narrow confines of religion. Thus, he could say that from the 'sning' cedar (*castanopsis*)⁵ he could see his nation heading towards unfamiliar ground as expressed in stanza 20. This is further expressed in his ballad "**Ki Khun Ka Mariang**" (Children of Nature).⁶ What attracted Tham most to the children was their simplicity and familiarity with nature. They could recognise every genre of bird in the wood, every type of herb in the field and remember all the names of brooks and rivulets of their locality. Furthermore they were offspring of devoted Christians parents. They attended church services to hear God's Word in order to share it with their bed-ridden father.

Tham's *Ki Sngi Barim U Hynñiew Trep* is the glorification of Khasi pre-literate era. In his attempt to immortalise the Khasis' creation myths and the ancient past, Tham modelled his venture after the author of the Book of Genesis (cc.1-11) and Milton's *Paradise Lost*, which he must have read during his study at the theological school at Cherrapunjee (1892-93).

The intimacy between God and man portrayed in "**Pyrthei Mariang**" (World of nature) stanza vi, is allusioned to Genesis 3:8 where:

Amidst Flowers-filled garden God descends,
To walk with man His intimate friend.

Again Tham refers Genesis 3:17-18 and Jeremiah 17:9 to emphasise the degenerated nature of man after he had become corrupted.

Are whirlpools more abysmal and weird,
Than the Heart of Man?

[**"U Lyoh"** <The Cloud/Mist> (stanza xv: lines 5-6)].

Similarly, Tham's "**Rngiew**" <spirit> like Lucifer, was thrown headlong to Pamdaloi (Is. 14:12) and *Paradise Lost* V:542,3.

⁴ Soso Tham, *Ka Duitara Ksiar*, Shillong: Ri Khasi Press, 9th Edition, 1979, p. 49.

⁵ Mgr. E. Bars, *Khasi-English Dictionary*, Shillong: Don Bosco Press, Shillong 3, 1973, p. 372.

⁶ *Ka Duitara Ksiar*, op. cit., p. 42.

From the sky he bases at Pandaloi,
And ramifies its image into the universe.

["Rngiew" (spirit), (stanza xxii: lines 1-2)].

However, Tham's reference in "**U Simpyllieng**" (Rainbow) to the 'One who is to come' unearths a sort of doctrinal theology that man's offence would be propitiated by 'Someone still to come', to replace animal sacrifice including that of the cock. Accordingly repentance for sin and forgiveness would materialise with the coming of the Redeemer. Thus begun the period of repentance and waiting for the God-man Redeemer.

HOPEWELL ELIAS (1901⁷-1966)

Elias treasured his poems in *Ka Pansngiat Ksiar ki Saw Aiöm* (Golden Crown of Four Seasons), 1937. "**Ka Saron Ksiar**" (Golden Era or Stringed Instrument) which forms one of the sections of the book, tuned Elias to the triumphal past of many Khasi kingdoms: Sutnga, Shillong, Sohra and Madur Maskut. The concept of righteousness that the four kingdoms value stands on two founding pillars: Love of God and love of one's neighbour. Righteous living means to be at peace with one's neighbour and with God. As long as the leaders and the people seek the interest of "Righteousness", their other temporal vicissitude were taken care by God.

A poem like "**U Mikael Bad U Lusipher**", initiate readers into the realm of the abstract and of deeper realities - the warring spirits in their lives. The incessant spiritual combats between the Michaels and the Lucifers in their lives continue: symbolised by the triple temptations of Christ (Mt. 4:1-10; Lk. 4: 1-12; Mk. 1:13).

The musing of "**Ka Korbar Met-Mynsiem**" (body-soul debate) vacillates around a number of paradoxical behaviours of the body and the soul. Though they are one entity they still possess a number of metaphysical differences which make them appear independent and self-sufficient. The debate becomes all the more fascinating because of these conflicting elements. The conversation between the body and the soul is however,

⁷ Catholic Authors' Guild, *Fr. Hopewell Elias 25th Death Anniversary, 1991*, Shillong: Don Bosco Press, 1991, pp. 21, 35.

- cf. also the sheet prepared by the Catholic Authors' Guild in 1991.

- Bp. T. Resto however, gave more than one date of birth for Elias: 18.7.1901 and 4.1.1904.

- While K. W. Nongrum, in *Ki Nongthoh-kot Khasi Bynta II*, Shillong: Scorpio Printers, 1982, recorded 4.1.1908 as the date of birth of the poet.

coloured more by Christian eschatological concept rather than that of the cognatic reunion of the Khasis. But the guilt feeling projected by the body comes from the conscientious responsibility prevalent among Christians as well as Khasis.

S. M. AMJAD ALI (1868⁸-1926)

Critics, consider Ali's *Ka Myntoi* (Benefit), as the first published collection of Khasi poetry of the nineteenth century which inspired other poets and Khasi writers to come forward with their own publications.⁹ As the list appears, Ali's poems transcended all boundaries and touched on various topics: political, cultural, religious, philosophical and metaphysical offering scopes to scholars of various discipline especially students of literature to explore the trend of the period.

In "**U Blei**", (God) nature and creation are being invited to magnify their Creator who shares his grandeur and beauty with them. Man is again being reminded that his destiny goes beyond the horizon of the present life and "**Jingstad**" (Wisdom) is seen as the source of all technical perfection and scientific precision. Through "**Ieng Riw Khasi**", Ali once again echoes Paul's Epistle to the Ephesians 6:14-17.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS IN CHAPTER 3

Chapter 3 concentrates on John Roberts' 11 anecdotes, 1 story and 2 novelettes of *Ka Khasi Second, Third and Fourth Readers*, followed by Dicken's story, *The Life of Our Lord*, translated by Soso Tham as *Ka Jingim U Trai Jong Ngï* in 1936 and Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*, translated by John Roberts as *Ka Jingïaid U Pilgrim* in 1910.

"ABRAHAM"

Through the story of Abraham, the post-deluge world is seen as being again plunged into another vicious sinful life but, of all sins idolatry was shown as the most loathsome in God's eyes. Abraham emerged as a patriarch who belonged to the progressive

⁸ H.W. Sten, *Khasi Poetry: Origin and Development*, op. cit., p. 124.

- D.S. Khongdup, "U Synfiang U Amjad Ali Sha ka Poetry Khasi" in *Ka Thiar Ki Nongthoh*, Vol. III, Shillong: Khasi Authors' Society, 1981, p. 64.

- K.W. Nongrum, *Ki Nongthoh-kot Khasi Bynta I*, Shillong: Ri Khasi Press, Umsohsun, 1982, p. 105

- W.M. Majaw, *U Amjad Ali Kum U Nongkysiew*, Shillong: Sawlyer Printing Press, Lumdiengjri, 1990, p. 7.

⁹ R.S. Lyngdoh, *Ka Histori Ka Thoh Ka Tar, Bynta II*, Shillong, Scorpio Printers, Mawkhar, 1983, p. 83.

type of personality who was ready to break off from the beaten path of animistic worship. His sincere search for the true God was to bring out his unalloyed faith.

There are three sections to the story to which John Roberts gave his own didactic conclusions. The first section began with Abraham's call to leave his own country and security. Secondly the call to heroic faith and obedience and thirdly the just reward rendered to Abraham for his hospitality and kindness which merited for himself the title of 'father of the nations' and the promise of an heir from the celestial visitors.

"JOSEPH"

The novelette on Joseph based on Genesis 37: 1-47:20 has been divided into seven chapters (cc. 35-41). The story begins with the sibling jealousy of Joseph's older brothers which led to the cold persecution of Joseph reaching its climax in their sale of Joseph to the Midianites and then to the Egyptians. The first intrigue sold him for good as a slave and in the second intrigue he was imprisoned for life. The plot which marks out Joseph to be the victimised hero was partly caused by the preferential love of his doting father. The third part shows Joseph as the wisest man in Egypt, filled with the Spirit of God. Pharaoh delegated him to be in charge of administration in the country.

Roberts' intention in inserting the novelette of Joseph in the *Reader* is twofold. Firstly to familiarise children with the Old Testament patriarch and secondly to show the connection between the Old Testament and the New Testament, especially with the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. Joseph and the other Old Testament characters prefigure Christ. And God's kindness to the patriarch like Adam, Noah, Abraham and others down the ages is only a fore-shadow of the fulness of mercy and kindness to be embodied in the Person of Jesus Christ.

"MOSES"

This novelette has been divided into ten chapters (cc. 14-23 inclusive) with Moses as the charismatic leader called to liberate the chosen people from slavery in Egypt to an unknown promised land. Roberts modelled his story on the four Books of the Pentateuch which deal with the Torah or the Law: Exodus, Leviticus, Number and Deuteronomy. The Novelette "U Moses" has served as a pulpit for Roberts. Readers, particularly students are bound to realise that God is all-powerful and that it is very wrong to put oneself as a god. Readers would also be convinced that a nation's identity is forged by God in collaboration with humble leaders. The 'fiat' of Moses is one of the finest examples of great leadership.

The story also presents God as the Provider and the exacting but forgiving Father. Moreover, through the story, the setting apart of a priestly group testifies to the fact that sin will continue to pollute mankind, but repented sinners are assured of forgiveness of the *I Am Who I Am*, and what Yahweh requires from sinners is humility and contrition.

KA JINGIM U TRAI JONG NGI

Tr. from Charles Dickens' *The Life of Our Lord* by Soso Tham.

In 1934, Dickens' *The Life Of Our Lord* written as early as 1849 for his children was made available to the Christian world in 1934.

Ka Jingim U Trai Jong Ngi is based on the towering personality and virtues of Jesus Christ. Tham inserted the preamble of Dickens for his children in the preface:

"Remember" he said, " to be a Christian is to do good at all times - even to those who harm us. To be a Christian is to love others as we love ourselves, and to treat others as we would like others to treat us. To be a Christian means to be meek and merciful, to forgive and to treasure this ethos within your heart without boasting about it, or about our prayer life and our love of God, for we must love God in the secret recesses of our being. If we follow this principle at the same time remembering the Life and Teaching of Our Lord Jesus Christ, we can hope for our own forgiveness of sins from him who will assist us in our last moments with peace."¹⁰

The story begins with Dickens' introduction of Jesus Christ, the greatest person ever lived. To Dickens, the knowledge of Jesus is paramount and indispensable. On the proportion of their knowledge and perception of Jesus will depend their understanding of heaven. He told his children that they would never grasp the beauty or comprehend the bliss of heaven unless they first know who Jesus is and know what he had done on earth.

"And this is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God and Jesus Christ, whom thou has sent" (Jn. 17:3).

KA JINGIAID U PILGRIM

**Tr. from John Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, by John Roberts and published
by Mrs. John Roberts.**

Bunyan's life had been depicted in a nut shell in R. Jones' preface of the translation dated the 1st January 1910.

¹⁰ S.Tham, "Shikyntien" *Ka Jingim U Trai Jong Ngi*, Shillong: Ri Khasi Press, 3rd Edition, 1981, p. iv.

Though Roberts changed the original format of the novel by introducing chapters in his translated text and by decreasing or increasing the lines and stanzas of original poems he faithful adhered to the spirit of the allegory. He divided it into 19 chapters which highlight Christian experiences in his pilgrimage from the City of Destruction to the Celestial City. Roberts also transformed the concluding poems into two sonnets.

Ka Jingiaid U Pilgrim has only one main character, Christian, the Pilgrim. He appears in every scene and dominates them all. Other characters are those he chances to meet casually on his journey and with whom he talks for a longer or shorter time. Faithful and Hopeful, share his experiences just before, during and after he enters the Vanity Fair. Both Faithful and Hopeful were brought in to drink with him the chalice of suffering at the Vanity and the Doubting Castle respectively. Faithful receives the crown of martyrdom, the coveted death of Christians and Hopeful shares also Christian's joys and spiritual experiences at the Delectable Mountains, the country of Beulah and the Celestial City.

Some characters were placed at the different junctions of his sojourn either to dissuade Christian from or persuade him to go on with his pilgrimage. Mr. Good-will, the Evangelist, the Interpreter, the Three Shining Ones, Discretion, Prudence, Piety and Charity, Knowledge, Experience, Watchful and Sincere are among those who helped Christian, while Mr. Worldly Wiseman and Atheist try to discourage him. Apollyon represents the evil power that torments Bunyan, Formalist, Hypocrisy, Demas, Turnaway, Timorous, Talkative and Ignorance stand for the apostates who were either damned in hell or met with tragic ends. By-ends stands for those who embrace religion for personal convenience, Pliant for the person who has no backbone and so on.

To conclude, Bunyan allegorises many more characters and names to illustrate his message.

SUMMARY OF THE FINDINGS IN CHAPTER 4

Chapter 4 discusses the reasons for the conspicuous paucity of written drama and play during the period, namely, the cultural and religious prejudice, the global political and economical pressure, and low readership. It gives a historical background of the attitudes of the Christian denominations with particular reference to the Presbyterian and Catholic missions and the non-Christian association like the seng Khasi.

The chapter mentions the dramas of the two sons of Jeebon Roy, Hari Charan Roy and Dino Nath Roy who translated and staged plays for the Seng Khasi between 1910-

1924 and takes note of the effort made by the neutral theatrical clubs and the 'shnong' (localities) and the contribution of Peace Roy Pariat's between 1943 and 1952. Similarly, though the chapter records P.G. Gatphoh's "Kamat ĩa Ka Hok" (Earn Righteousness), 1950, it does not examine the play as it belongs to the post-independence period.

Mondon Bareh's *Ka Drama u Mihsngi*, is the only drama taken for analysis because though it was completed and published in 1966 by Hamlet Bareh, his youngest son, it was in actual fact, written between 1928 and 1932 before Mondon Bareh's premature death in 1932. *Ka Drama u Mihsngi*, deals with the hypocrisy and evil that enter in the lives of some church leaders and on the pretensions prevailing among some of the educated Khasis.

Money, fame and comfort were the obsessions of some corrupt church-leaders. Even Syntan, the sitting Presbyter, encouraged corruption and commended exploiters. In other words, Bareh painted Mihsngi's society as a Babylon and presents him as the object of ridicule for the obsession of the time to ape Western behaviour:

"Do you not think that befitting my position I should walk with my wife as Westerners do? ... Common people may wonder, but educated people always take the populace by surprise..."¹¹

Through the drama Bareh satirizes 'Mawkhar' the residence of the elite clans, ridicules pedantic preachers and exposes the dubious mercenary lives of church leaders and the degenerated morale of Christian values.

The conclusion at the end of the dissertation is a summing up of all the findings in the chapters.

¹¹ Mondon Bareh, *Ka Drama U Mihsngi*, Shillong: Hills Co-operative Printing Press Ltd., Keatinge Road, Shillong 1, 1966, p. 37.