

**FOREST IN THE LIFE OF THE KHASIS :
A STUDY IN THE ROLE OF FOREST IN KHASI
SOCIO-ECONOMIC STRUCTURE**

**ABSTRACT
BY**

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ABSTRACT

The Khasis are a people who live in profound communion with nature. Conservation of natural resources is embedded in the ethos of Khasi life and culture. Since time immemorial, they have maintained a deep symbiotic relationship with their natural environment, which have played a dominant role in determining their way of life.

The forest or '*ki khlaw ki btap*' as the Khasis name it, has since time immemorial endured as a revered entity. The supernatural connotations of forest have occupied an important place in Khasi literature, Khasi legends and folktales and the life and culture of the people as a whole. For a Khasi, the forest is a well-loved home, a game sanctuary and also an abode of worship all rolled into one, around which his social, cultural and religious activities revolve.

With the change of time and tide over the last couple of centuries, a tremendous change in the pattern of social life of the Khasi has taken place. The symbiotic relationship between man and nature that existed in the past has gradually given way to ecological

stress and strain. Pressure of increased population, spread of modern education, advent of Christianity, flow of new culture and a borrowed world view, all have combined together to shatter the age old economy, culture and tribal ethos of the Khasi.

After the attainment of Statehood by Meghalaya, road construction taken up by the Government has opened up link roads to some inaccessible remote and interior villages which has further paved the way for exploitation of forest resources for commercial purposes due to the demand of industrial wood and other forest products mainly from outside the State.

A cursory glance at the available statistics of Meghalaya shows a steep rise in the process of forest exploitation resulting in sharp fall in the area under forest cover. Out of Meghalaya's total geographical area of 23, 06,069 hectares (22,429 sq. km) she now has only 9, 41,823 hectares of forest area, which comes to barely 42.03 per cent (2001 Census).

The hectic activities in forest operation have given rise to a new order of life affecting the socio-economic structure of the Khasi. Bereft of their traditional and natural logistics of livelihood the weaker sections of the society have become alienated from their age-

old occupation and practices related to forest.

These being the issues arising out of the present scenario, the study has tried to go beyond the often talked about problems of environment into the countryside and examines and analyses the role and importance of forest in Khasi society.

SELECT REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The present study reviewed the available literature on man-nature relationship and a wide range of Khasi books that spelt out the problem under study.

E.P. Stebbing's *The Forests of India* (1927) in 3 volumes provided comprehensive data on the general progress of forest conservancy in India since Colonial period. Stebbing's brief description of the methods of exploitation in force in the forests of Khasi and Jaintia Hills are notable.

A.C. Sinha's *Beyond the Trees, Tigers and Tribes* (1993) which is a historical account of forest administration starting from the Colonial to Post Colonial period provided some interesting facts about the discovery of valuable plant species in and around the forests of Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and the conflict between the State and tribal perception about the usages of forests as natural resources.

Daman Singh's *The Last Frontier: People and Forests in Mizoram* (1996) has provided a realistic account of environmental change in Mizoram, attributing this change to a set of four parameters, viz., Belief systems, Domain, Social Institutions and Technology.

H.O Mawrie's *The Khasi Milieu* (1981) provided useful facts about the place of nature in Khasi culture. His resounding declaration, "A Khasi lives with nature and nature lives with him" summarizes the close affinity between the Khasi and nature. Mawrie relates the symbolic significance of trees by associating them with Khasi folk tales and legends.

Tiplut Nongbri's *Development, Ethnicity and Gender* (2003) provided some startling facts about the infringement of people's rights over land and forest and depletion of the country's natural resources, such as water, trees, minerals and soil.

Barnes L Mawrie's *The Khasis and their Natural Environment* (2001) has thrown ample light on the 'ecological wisdom' and the 'eco-theandric' view of the Khasis.

VERNACULAR BOOKS

S. Khongsit's book *Ka Dieng bad ka Culture Jong Ngi* narrates the numerous species of trees, plants and herbs that grow in Khasi-Jaintia Hills which have played an important role in the life of the Khasi. It has also provided useful facts about the various types of forest products and their uses in Khasi Hills.

K. Dhirendro Ramsiej's *Ka Mariang ha u Khasi bad ki Purinam-Puriskam* (1992) has brought out the intricate relationship between nature and Khasi culture. A number of Khasi folktales and legends associated with nature-man relationship have been recounted by the author which throws light on the crucial part played by nature in shaping the Khasi culture.

OBJECTIVES OF STUDY

The objectives of the present study are as follows:

1. To chart out the traditional usages of forest and forest products in Khasi society
2. To work out the role of forest and forest products in the Khasi economy.
3. To explore the emergent socio-economic structure and the changing harmony between the Khasis and the forest.

METHODOLOGY

I have selected two villages which are characterized as follows:-

Village-I: Lawbyrwa Village

Lawbyrwa village is located in the Ri-Bhoi district of Meghalaya under Umsning Development Block and falls within Myllem Syiemship. It lies at a distance of 22 kms., north of Shillong. The total population of Lawbyrwa village is 655 members including both adult and minors.

Forest Profile

Lawbyrwa is one of the well forested villages of Meghalaya. It has 728.74 hectares of land covered by forest out of a total geographical area of 1200 hectares.

On the basis of rights of ownership and management, the forests of Lawbyrwa are divided into: -

1. Village Forest or *Khlaw Shnong* with the Village Durbar as the controlling authority.
2. Private Forest or *Khlaw shi-met*, *Khlaw shi-kur* owned by private individuals or clans.

Dependency on Forest

The economic profile of Lawbyrwa village reveals that agriculture is the mainstay of the people of the village but a large majority of the population is dependent on forest for their livelihood. The main areas of forest activity are cutting firewood, making charcoal and collecting NTFP. The study revealed that out of the total of 180 respondents, 108 were directly dependent on forest related activities.

Village-II: Madan ĩing Syiem Village

Madan ĩing Syiem is located 16 kms south of Shillong and is the nucleus of Mylliem village. Because of its close proximity to Shillong it can be rightly described as a village in an urban setting. The occupational pattern, infrastructural growth of the village and a diversified economy serve as the indicators of the village as a fast growing town. It has 185 households and a total population of 1029 members.

Forest Profile

The total area under forest cover in the village is 10 hectares as against a total area of 210 hectares which is very low. Even the percentage of forest produce is nil as a result of which local felling of

trees for firewood in the village is not allowed nor do the villagers depend on forest related activities.

Occupational Distribution

Besides agriculture, trade and business occupies an important place in the economy of this village followed by employment in government offices and schools. In sharp contrast to Lawbyrwa village, what is striking is the fact that forest activity in Madan ling Syiem is nil.

SOURCES OF DATA

The sources of data include both primary and secondary, while more emphasis was laid on the primary sources.

Primary Sources

In order to get sufficient primary information, two types of interview schedules were used: (a) Structured and (b) Unstructured.

The structured interview schedules included 4 types of schedules:

1. **Block Schedule:** which was used to procure official records and useful data and statistical information about the villages from the Block Authorities.
2. **Village Schedule:** which was used in gathering facts and figures about the village administration and other matters from the village

Headman and Gram Sevak of both villages.

3. **Household Schedule**, and

4. **Forest Produce Schedule**. These were the two most important devices used to procure primary data from the respondents' .In all there are 120 sample households, 60 households in each village. The Forest Produce Schedule specially designed to collect data on forest activities of the respondents, helped me to assess the relative dependency on forest.

As a part of the unstructured interview, personal visits were arranged with officials from the forest department and Block officials, Government of Meghalaya, Village Headmen of the two villages and a number of selected knowledgeable persons of the society who included some Khasi elders and scholars who provided me with valuable information about Khasi culture linked with forest.

Secondary Sources

The secondary sources of information included Government reports, records and documents, published books, newspaper reports and journals, State of Forest Reports, Research papers published by ICSSR, North East Bio-diversity Research Cell, NEHU, etc.

SAMPLE SIZE

A total of 120 sample households have been selected randomly, i.e. 60 households from each of the two villages. Thus taking an average of 3 adult working members in each household, there were in all 360 respondents.

CHAPTER SCHEME

The present work is divided into seven chapters and the chapter scheme is as follows:

Chapter-I: INTRODUCTION

This chapter deals with the statement of problem and discusses some key conceptual issues. It also incorporates a theoretical discussion on the review of literature. Finally the chapter concludes with an outline of the objectives of study and a description of the methodology used.

Chapter-II: BRIEF HISTORY OF FORESTRY IN INDIA

The second chapter gives a historical account of Colonial forestry in India. It also includes the considerable administrative and legislative changes under the Planned Economy of post-colonial period and finally the chapter provides an understanding of the forest cover information of the country.

Chapter-III: THE KHASIS: PEOPLE, LAND AND GEOGRAPHY

This chapter deals primarily with a general background of the Khasis, the climatic conditions, mineral deposits, mountain and river system and flora and fauna. It also includes a historical review of colonial forestry in Khasi Hills and a detailed discussion on various categories of land and land tenure system. The chapter concludes with information on *jhum* and bun cultivation in Meghalaya.

Chapter-IV: GENERAL PROFILE OF LAWBYRWA VILLAGE

This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted in Lawbyrwa. It includes 3 separate units: (a) The General Profile, (b) Forest Profile, and (c) Economic Profile.

Chapter-V: GENERAL PROFILE OF MADAN ĪING SYIEM VILLAGE

This chapter is based on fieldwork and includes 2 separate units: (a) General Profile of the village, and (b) Economic Profile.

Chapter-VI: PEOPLE AND FOREST IN KHASI HILLS

This chapter focuses on the role and importance of forests in Khasi ethno-cultural traits. An effort was made to develop insight into the traditional usages of forest and forest products and to identify the

different parameters of forest usage of which 12 areas were identified: Legends and folklore, shelter, musical instruments, weaving and dying, weaponry, rituals, agriculture, food, agriculture, woodcraft and bamboo craft, folk medicine.

Chapter-VII: CONCLUSION

This chapter concludes the study by highlighting the major findings and key issues that have arisen as a result of the study.

I have also included as many as 35 tables at appropriate places in the thesis, 3-4 pie charts, and a few maps. A number of photographs of the two sample villages have also been displayed.

FINDINGS

The present study has brought into sharp focus three important issues based on field data. They are as follows:

1. The forest continues to hold an important place in the life and culture of the Khasis.
2. There has been an infringement on the people's traditional rights over forest.
3. There is a gradual but inevitable shift in the Khasi economy from forest based livelihood to a diversified economy.

1. Forest still holds an important place in the life and culture of the Khasis

The forest occupies a central place in the socio-cultural and economic life of the Khasis. The indelible mark that the forest had left on the Khasi thought, behavior and attitude, can clearly be seen today in their culture, customs and religion. In many of these legends, folklores, songs and dances, this rapport with nature and environment comes out forcefully. For a Khasi, the forest has entered the *sanctum-sanctorum* of the Khasi religious rites and rituals including many social ceremonies. All these facts have been amply brought out in this work at Chapter-VI under the heading "Parameters of forest usage among the Khasis".

The present work also brings into focus the unique system of traditional forest management among the Khasis. The study revealed three different types of traditional forests, viz. (i) *Law Kyntang* (Sacred Grove); (ii) *Law Adong* or *Law Shnong* (Protected or Village Forest) and (iii) *Law Sumar* (Private Forest) which are preserved, controlled and managed by the village authority, individual or clan, as the case may be. It exhibits a deep sense of eco-consciousness and the ecological wisdom of the Khasi forefathers about the value of forests

for the general well being of the community as a whole.

Forest has ever played a vital role in Khasi economy. It was found that the economy of Lawbyrwa village is largely based on forest with majority of men, women and children engaged in cutting firewood, making charcoal, collecting and selling Non Timber Forest Products like wild vegetables, bamboo shoot, mushroom etc. It thus presents to us a picture of very high dependency of the life, culture and economy on the natural resources and environment.

2. Infringement of people's traditional rights over forest

It is a well established fact that State control over forests has systematically eroded people's traditional rights over natural resources thus posing a threat not only to their livelihood but also to the delicate balance between tribals and the forest. In the present study, this situation is largely the outcome of the following two factors:-

1. Forest for revenue
2. Forest for development.

1. Forest for revenue: The British created State forests and scientifically organized them as a profit making enterprise. Forests were since then seen as a revenue- yielding property which could be



commercially exploited.

During this long period of British rule a considerable area of forested land of Khasi and Jaintia Hills which were clad with rich forest and natural vegetation were brought under legal ownership of the British Government, depriving the tribal forest dwellers of their natural rights. According to an estimate the land converted into Reserved and Protected forests in Khasi and Jaintia Hills amounted to 427.79 sq. km.

For an average Khasi farmer, who depended heavily on *Jhum* cultivation for their livelihood and collected his daily necessities of life from the forests, the conversion of these vast natural resources into state property not only told upon the age old tribal economy but also on tradition and cultural heritage.

2. Forest for development: The process of economic development during the post-independence period brought about another wave of pressure on the land and natural resources of the country.

Large-scale economic growth, mushroom growth of industries, increase in population, urbanization, infrastructural development through expansion of roads and rails, buildings and parks, etc.

resulted in the increased demand for raw materials like timber, bamboo, coal, limestone and other forest products. Numerous saw mills, plywood factories, cement factories, coal mines, carpentry and cane and bamboo workshops and paper mills grew up in an around Meghalaya.

In the present study, the villagers of Lawbyrwa lost most of their *jhum* lands during the construction of Umiam Hydro-Electric Project, one of the biggest power projects of the North-East. No substitute lands were provided to the landowners who lost their lands and compensation was paid after several years of dispossession of the land. This situation of landlessness in Lawbyrwa village has been aggravated in recent years by the usurpation of fertile lands by well to do residents of Shillong city who have converted these low-lying lands into orchards, pine apple farms and private lands. The two perspectives of forest utilization viz. Forest for revenue and forest for development have lead to infringement of people's traditional rights over forest and they are in constant conflict on people's livelihood.

Forest for Livelihood

The present study revealed that a sizeable majority of the population of Lawbyrwa village is engaged in collecting and selling

of minor forest products like wild vegetables, tubers, bamboo shoots and edible fruits etc. The use of firewood and charcoal are indispensable sources of energy in both the sample villages.

It is apparent that "Land" and "Forest" being the natural productive resources at the base, there is a long standing conflict between the State and the people over the rights to land and its natural products ever since the advent of Colonial rule in India to the present time. The study has ample evidences to show that the Forest Acts and rules over the years have not only infringed into the people rights over the minor forest produce but also contributed to depletion of natural forest resources.

3. **The Inevitable Shift**: What has also come to light out of the present study is that there is a gradual and inevitable shift in the pattern of Khasi livelihood from a traditional forest-based economy to a modern, open and more diversified means of living. The conversion of natural forests and wastelands into Reserved forest, Protected and Unclassed forests by the State and Autonomous District Councils led to increased restrictions on tribal access to forests, rivers and fisheries etc.

The process has led to a number of untraditional economic phenomena like decline in shifting cultivation, transition from forest based economy to open and diversified economy, concentration of land in the hands of certain group of people, landlessness, share-cropping etc. which cannot be termed as positive indicators of development.

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