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KHASI POETRY

ORIGIN &
DEVELOPMENT

H W STEN

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This work, deals with the questions that are central to the origin and development of written Khasi poetry. It is the result of the first systematic study ever undertaken in Khasi literature. Here he:

(1) traces the origin and follows the development of written Khasi poetry in the first 100 years of its history beginning 1841;

(2) finds that Khasi poetry originated in folk tales, fables, folk songs, translation, religious and socio-political thoughts;

(3) shows with examples that some poets were influenced by the art and themes of English poets; and examines the causes of the influences;

(3) examines the nature, theme, style and meaning of the poems in the major section of the work; and

(5) interprets the poems he examines in a lucid and simple way. Now that advances have been made in the study and teaching of Khasi poetry, teachers and students will find in this book background information as well as reliable interpretation of the poems during the period covered by the work. The treatment is intended to provide an insights of the Khasi milieu, including the change of life style along with the progress of education in the pre-Independent days. Therefore, the chapters are arranged in a systematic order which will enable readers of varied disciplines, including, anthropology, sociology, education and religious philosophy with a view to find in the book exactly what they wish to know.

The book will contribute largely to the scholar's understanding of Khasi poetry and deepen their appreciation of its wealth.

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KHASI POETRY

(Origin and Development)



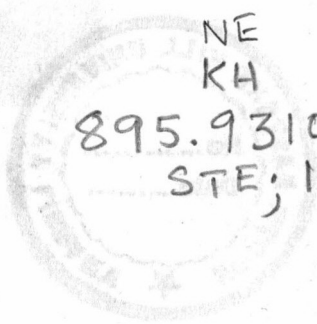
H. W. STEN



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PREFACE

This work is substantially based on the doctoral thesis of the author accepted in 1982 by the North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Ever since then, a few more authentic materials have been received from the United Kingdom and incorporated here. Besides this one chapter on the Monologue has also been added.

Written Khasi poetry is 144 years now; but this work happens to be the result of the first investigation in the area. I must state quite frankly that the work does not pretend to be a comprehensive history of Khasi poetry because my aims for it are, first, to examine how written Khasi poetry developed during the first 100 years of its history; second, to explore the major traditions in poetic creation; and third, to examine the extent of outside influences in the works of Khasi poets.

The history of Khasi poetry is to a great extent the history of the intellectual development of the Khasi society. Because I expect literature to reflect and interpret life, a few anthropological questions have been examined in the introductory chapter for possible whole-scale investigation by competent anthropologists. For the same reason again, efforts have also been made to approach the subject through socio-political, cultural and religious movements. A reader needs only to consult the contents to find the movement which is of special interest to him.

In this work, only poems written in the Khasi language have been examined; and poems in English written by the Khasis have been left out. To save space, I have in several chapters translated both the titles and lines directly into

English. So, when a reader comes across quotation in English, he needs not conjecture that the original is in that language.

Difficulties in tracing the origin and development of Khasi poetry are there, many of which are insurmountable. Questions like: who was the first poet in the Khasi language? What did the Khasis have before written poetry appeared in print?—came to mind. Then, how to lay my hands on old journals and publications? I have tried to meet questions as these and many others in the present work. I am grateful to senior friends like late Kynpham Singh for placing his personal library at my disposal in 1981, Mr. Thomas Barch for copies of *U Nongkit Khubor* (the first Khasi journal), Mr. Treshon Warjri for books from the Khasi-Jaintia Presbyterian Synod Library, Mr. L. Gilbert Shullai for his own work which I used as references in one chapter in this work, Dr. R. S. Lyngdoh for the copies of *U Lurshai*, and Mr. I. M. Simon for a list of Khasi books in the British Museum in London. Some other friends who supplied (voluntarily) copies of poems which I already had are there. Difficulties of peculiar nature are also there: Christian missionaries who introduced modern education in these hills left no trace of the dates of the first editions of their books. In some cases, the names of composers or translators who left the mission have been ignored. They did this out of religious zeal, I guess. In such cases, I have taken recourse to stylistic analysis to identify the authors. I do not claim that the method is fool-proof especially when I came across a translation done by one person in the 19th century appears now in the name of another; but I believe that the final result cannot be far away from my conclusion in such cases.

Finally, my special thanks are due to Mr. K. M. Mittal and his dedicated team of workers in the Mittal Publications for the interest shown in the work as well as for speed and efficiency which culminated in its publication.

H. W. STEN

INTRODUCTION

THE KHASIS: SOME ANTHROPOLOGICAL QUESTIONS

I

Before embarking on the main inquiry, it is fitting to devote a few lines to the primary question which comes up whenever we study Khasi language and literature, that is, where did the Khasis come from?

Ethnographically, all the original inhabitants of the present Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills districts of Meghalaya are Khasis. As years rolled by, these people came to be known by the names of the regions they live in. Thus, we have the Pnars inhabiting the mainland of the Jaintia Hills district, the Khyntriams the central part of Khasi Hills, the Bhois on the north, the Lyngngams in the west, and the Wars in the south of both the Khasi and the Jaintia Hills. All are Khasis. Strictly speaking only the children of Khasi parents are Khasis, but the Khasi social custom is flexible enough to include within it children of Khasi mothers and non-Khasi fathers as Khasis, because according to the Khasi customary laws, the children belong to mothers and not to the fathers.¹ There are instances of even children of non-Khasi mothers being regarded as Khasis. People who investigated the origins of clans in Khasi Hills have said that all those clans with *Khar* as the prefix to them trace their original homes to either the Brahmaputra or the Surma Valley. A. S. Khongphai gives an instance of the origin of three new Khasi clans. He took the three daughters of Mohon Diengdoh and Pushpalata, his wife, namely Bani,

Rani and Sati and writes "these daughters cannot be Khasis in their life time, not even for years to come, unless they married Khasis, lived as Khasis, followed Khasi custom. . .²

For a person to be considered a Khasi presupposes the following: (1) He must marry a Khasi girl; (2) he traces his descendance from his mother's side; (3) his dress be like that used by other Khasis; (4) he accepts the Khasi way of life and customs; (5) he speaks one the Khasi dialects; (6) he embraces Khasi religion or religions professed by many Khasis; and (7) he identifies himself totally as a Khasi. There are several clans among the Khasis which have assimilated themselves to the Khasi society in this way. It is not difficult for the members of such clans to trace their origins and to tell others how their ancestors came to this land, and where their original homes were. It is the original home of the original Khasi tribe which most Khasi poets including Soso Tham, Homiwell Lyngdoh and Primrose Gatphoh, have exercised their imaginations upon.

II

These hills are not the original homes of the Khasis. Every Khasi tells that his ancestors came from some other land where they lived for generations in a sort of a paradise. Khasi poets speak of the *Sottijuk*³ or golden age. This was and is used when a Khasi divine speaks or prays to God. Homiwell Lyngdoh wrote that the fore-parents of the Khasis reached these hills through Nowgong, Lumding and Haflong "which lie beyond the Kupli river".⁴

If Khasi language and culture have any similarity to those of the people in the eastern part of Assam, a conclusion can be drawn that those and the Khasis belonged to the same race, but the difference between them does not warrant such conclusion. The Khasis first settled in Jaintia Hills and in course of time many of them moved westward to the present Khasi Hills. In Jaintia Hills, elderly persons and divines speak of "Sohphoh Lynrum" as their homeland. "Sohphoh" means Khasi pears, while "Lynrum" ramshackle. Literally the phrase means that in that original home there grew plenty of

Khasi pears or *pynus granulata*. This name is more symbolic than literal. It stands for a group of families that lived together in the same land till they multiplied and spread to other parts of the world, and the Khasi tribe is but one of those symbolic pears from the same tree. The extensive use of symbols in Khasi folk songs and speeches lends credence to this postulation. Primrose Gatphoh refers to this place in "U Sier Lapalang" when he sings of the attempt of that allegorical stag to trace the original home of the Khasis: "And thence he followed to Sohphoh Lynrum/Mark trace which is clear and great in numbers".⁵

Poet Soso Tham devotes one whole poem "Ka Meirilung" to anthropological questions. He seems to have gone through the Darwinian theory of the descent of man from an ape when he asks whether the ancestors of the Khasi race came from the dens of tigers or bears or any other animal. Other questions he poses in the poem are: Were the ancestors savages? Were they man-eaters? Tham reflects on the ancient culture and political system, the erecting of memorial stones, the construction of meeting and resting places, the digging of lakes and ponds and concludes that they must have come over here from some civilized area.

That homeland is spoken of as lying far away from these hills. It took the Khasi ancestors twelve years to reach here. This calculation of the length of the journey is recorded by Soso Tham who enquires:

And ye, o babes of morning bright,
 Ye kites, ye crows, here throw some light.
 While fast you fly around the earth,
 Where can be our first home and hearth?
 If I can fly as fast as ye,
 From here upto twelve years' journey.⁶

Where could that home be? Could it be somewhere near Cambodia or Siam? Those states lie far east of the Khasiland. P. R. T. Gurdon maintained that the people came "from the east and not from the west."⁷ It is yet to be examined by experience whether or not it took people twelve years to travel

from Cambodia to Kupli in those days. The significance of the phrase "Sohphoh Lynrum" deserves further inquiry. Most western scholars agree that their ancestors were the Aryans. If the Aryans were to be regarded as the fore-parents of the Khasis too, the names of seven Aryan branches corresponded well to the "Hynniew Trep" or seven Huts of the Khasis. These branches were (1) the Indians, (2) the Persians, (3) the Slavs, (4) the Teutons, (5) the Greeks, (6) the Kelts and (7) the Romans. These branches lived in the southern steppes of Russia before they moved to different parts of the world. In their movement, the Indians, and Persians moved eastward.⁸ Could the Khasi tribe be a sub-branch of either the Indians or the Persians? The old Persian coins discovered some 15 years ago, in Jowai land credence to the social intercourse between the Persians and the Khasis, but the history of Money tells us that coins replaced barter system at a much later date than the history of the tribe. The Aryans themselves came to India around 2000 B.C.⁹ They could not therefore be the forefathers of the Khasis.

Homiwell Lyngdoh strongly refutes any attempt to regard the Khasis as one of the Aryan branches of people because the appearance, the language and the religious practices of the Khasis do not support such argument. Moreover he claims that the Khasis were older than the Aryans in age and that they were found in the Punjab, in South America and even in New Zealand.¹⁰ Lyngdoh draws his conclusion from such books as the *Hindu Exogamy* (1929) by Karandikar and the *Bhagavata* which referred to the Khasis as the people of ancient India.

There is, however, no conclusive proof of this. R. C. Majumdar referred to the Khasi warriors as one of the "famous Tribes" in ancient India; the other tribes were the Abhiras, Mallas, Andhras, Vaidehas, and Magadhas. Recording one event about the Khasis, he writes to say that in 1287 the Khasias invaded Nepal from the east and devastated the country.¹¹

To the east of Nepal lie the modern Sikkim, Bhutan, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Nagaland and Meghalaya. This view corroborates the myth that the Khasis were once warriors

who subdued many kingdoms, but it does not offer a clue to the original homes of the Khasis. Majumdar has nowhere mentioned whether the Khasis occupied all the Hills east of Nepal or that they made their way there through Kamarupa. The question is an open one.

III

P. R. T. Gurdon and Peter Schmidt who have attempted tracing the family to which the Khasi language belongs assert that it is a branch of the Mon-Khmer group of language. E. Kunt, who has made a comparative study of the Khasi and Mon-Khmer languages, finds many words in them which carry the same meaning. In his *Beitrag zur Sprachenkunde Hinterindiens* (1889) he selects many such words in support of his findings.¹² The following Table of similar words provides interesting information:

English	Khasi	Mon	Khmer	Palaung
Year	snem	snam	—	—
lightning	leilih	l'li	—	—
stone	maw	k'maw	—	maw
water	um	—	—	em
pond	pung	—	ping	—
rice	khaw	—	—	sekao
dog	ksew	—	—	hsao
tiger	khla	—	kla	—
bird	(ka) sim	katsim	—	hsim
crab	(ka) tham	—	ktam	—
woman	briew	brou	—	—
child	khun	—	kun	—
eye	khmat, mat	mat	—	—
hand	kti, ti	—	te	—

It is interesting to note that Palaung "sekao" and "hsao" are similar to the sounds in Jaintia "sakho" and "ksaw", respectively, also "em" to "am" as spoken by the War-Jaintias. In the above fourteen words, the tally of similarity between

Khasi and Mon is six, Khasi-Khmer five, Khasi-Palaung five. If more words than those similar in sound and meaning the findings of Kunt should satisfy a scholar at least about the origin of the Khasi language. But there is an interesting similarity between Khasi and Burmese too. The use of "U" for male is found in both the languages e.g., U Nu, U Thant (Burmese) and U No, U Tan (Khasi), Eeng (Burmese) and Iing (Khasi). This was the influence of Burmese when the Khasis sojourned in their land on the way back to their lost paradise on earth. In the use of morpheme "la" to indicate action in the past time the language bears some similarity with the morpheme "le" in Nepali.¹³

One may hazard saying that when the Khasis were defeated in wars, they were driven eastward till they mixed with the people of Cambodia and Siam. It was in their effort to return to their paradise that they trekked backward and finally reached the present hill fastnesses. A Khasi still laments the loss of that paradise on earth in his songs and prayers.

The paradise of which the Khasis speak has been spoken of as never again to be witnessed on this earth. The forefathers of the British also spoke of such a paradise which they believed to be somewhere in central Asia in which their ancestors dwelt five or six thousand years ago "in pastoral and poetic simplicity and plenty."¹⁴ Coincidentally, such was the nature of the original homeland of the Khasis as sung by the poets. There are differences too. The Khasis speak of that golden age as the age of righteousness, when God spoke directly to man as he spoke to the Jewish patriarchs like Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets. More than that, the members of both the animal and the plant kingdoms were able to speak to man in the same language. The bull, the raven, and the bird could converse with man even as the serpent spoke to Eve, and God in the garden of Eden; and as a donkey spoke to prophet Balaam,¹⁵ and that too in one language understood by the whole world. Such is the traditional account of the world of the Khasis when it was young. If we accept the *Bible* as both historical record and an infallible word of God, we have in it the time when the world was divided into nations and tongues. That was 4230

years ago.¹⁶

The above account corresponds well with the oral tradition of the Khasis as handed from one generation to another down to the present time. It also meets the contention of Homiwell Lyngdoh that the Khasis have been on this earth over 4000 years ago.

The quest will however be incomplete without examining two popular legends of the Khasis.

IV

Two legends are associated with the origin of the Khasis; one of which is repeated more to God in prayer and sacrifice than to man.

The legend says, in the beginning God created sixteen families in heaven. These, were allowed to come down to this earth to cultivate every day and to return to heaven at night when the day's work was over. They climbed up and down according to timing appointed by the Creator through a bridge on top of the Sohpetbneng peak joining heaven and earth. In course of time, seven of these families sinned against God and cut the bridge down to ensure that they did not see his face any more. Ever since that day, man was subjected to pain and death. The cause of the fall was *U Ksuid* or the Tempter who took the form of a Raven to tempt God's ambassador, the bull, to deliver a perverted message to man. The message God commanded for delivery was to tell mankind to boil for his meal only a handful of rice in the morning and a handful in the evening, and to live healthily and long. The bull forgot the text of the message and delivered that of *U Ksuid* and asked man to boil one seer of rice in the morning and one seer in the evening, to suffer and eventually die. Man did so. As time passed, God saw all that had happened to man and took his ambassador to task. He took his golden rod and knocked down all the teeth of the bull in the upper jaw, and also struck him on the right side. The bull lost his upper teeth, and bore the empty space on his side since then. God in his royal anger called for the Raven, and dyed her feathers with a soot from an earthen

pot. Since that time all ravens in Khasiland wear black feathers. Most Khasi children till this day utter a triplet condemning the Raven.*

Most Khasis believe that they are descendants of the Seven Huts. Homiwell Lyngdoh has examined the possibility of linking the "Seven" with the seven ancient Indian Rishis. He referred to those as Visvamitra, Jamadagni, Bharadvaja, Gautama, Atri, Vasisthala and Kasyapa. Though "Kasyapa" sounds like "the father of the Khasis" no proof of the assumption is available. Indian literatures do not lend any clue to it. Moreover, those were the Aryan Rishis (wisemen).¹⁷ Because of practical difficulties perhaps, Soso Tham regarded the seven huts as mere symbol or "pharshi syllok"¹⁸ which could not be taken as proof of the origin of the tribe.

Another legend speaks of a great flood in the world as the cause of the arrival of the Khasis to their present homeland. Gurdon writes:

It was on the occasion of this great flood, the legend runs, that the Khasi lost the art of writing, *vis-a-vis* his book whilst he was swimming at the time of this flood, whereas the Bengali managed to preserve his.¹⁹

The account points out north as the direction from which the Khasis migrated into these hills. The very reference to a Bengali in the passage indicates that the flood mentioned to Gurdon by a story-teller was of a recent origin. The legendary flood spoken of by the Khasis was far older in time than that one. An opinion may be formed that this great flood occurred some 6000 years ago, that is, before the Aryans spread to other parts of the world.

The two legends referred to above, call for a close examination. The first speaks of the ancestors of the Khasis as coming from above (*na sha jrong*), meaning heaven; the second one associates the arrival of the Khasis with the flood. Which "heaven" and which "flood" were these?

**Ka tyngab ka thok i'u Blei*
Ka shah tah du khiew ranei
Peit ka iong kumeti!

The Crow betrayed
god and it was made
black like that.

The popular idea of "heaven" was where the hills and the sky seem to meet in the horizon. So the peaks and mountains could as well be heaven for the purpose of this legend. A Khasi who is not so much influenced by education still speaks of the moon, stars, and the sun as having been fixed by the Creator in heaven. In this context the *Makashang* (Himalayas) could be regarded as the heaven; mount Ararat also a heaven. The original home of the Khasis which was heaven or *shajrong* to them is therefore the high mountains. It might be the Himalayas, the Armenian range, Kashmir, Russia or Central Asia. Wherever that place was, one thing should not be lost sight of. The Khasis speak of this world as *Ka Jingbasa* or an Inn to live in for a while. They believe that their eternal home lies somewhere beyond the blue. They call it *Ka Jing U Blei* which means exactly the *Kuriakon* of the Greek, the Lord's House. There are indeed certain similarities between the ancient Greek and the Khasis. Both believed in the divine origin of the soul, and that when the man accomplishes his duty on earth he dies, but his soul is immortal and returns to God. Thus they speak of a righteous and upright man; but the soul of the sinner goes to hell. Hell also has as many as nine floors; the worst sinner reaches the ninth floor or circle below.²⁰ Like the Greeks who believed in the existence of the Supreme Zeus,²¹ the Khasis too believe that above all deities they worship in their respective villages, *U Blei Nongthaw* or God, the creator reigns supreme.

The Greeks believed in sign from God, as Priam in Book XIV of *Iliad* believes the Eagle to be a sign from God; the Khasis read the signs in all objects—including lime container and the intestines of the fowl. Both the Greeks and the Khasis burnt their dead and did not leave it to decay openly for that is a crime. Priam seeks the dead body of Hector to be disposed of according to the Grecian customs, Antigone defies the order of Creon, the Theban King, and ceremoniously disposes of her brother's dead body.

Politically also, there were times in Greece when the people elected their kings as the Khasis elected their rulers from times immemorial. In the heroic ages the Greek king exercised his royalty 'over willing subjects', and himself was

both 'a general and a judge, and had control over religion'.²² For all this similarity of beliefs and practices, however, the Greeks and the Khasis are two unmistakably different races.

I therefore propose to return to the seven families which the Khasis regard as their ancestors who first came to the Khasi world. It was possible that they speak of that part of the world which has both day and night in one diurnal revolution of the earth. The main clue is the flood. The greatest flood ever recorded in any book occurred in the time of Noah, in 2349 B.C. It took waters nearly one year to recede to the seas. The belief in 'pastoral and poetic simplicity and plenty' in which the seven huts lived could be supported by the profession of Noah after the flood. Noah "began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard" recorded Moses.²³ Though there were three pairs of persons taken by Noah into the Ark, there were not seven families which escaped death. The *Bible* tells us that all the four families lived in peace because God blessed them and spoke to them directly as there was not any body else through whom he spoke. As years rolled by, the top of Ararat could be the heaven referred to by the Khasis. The seven families were the grand-children of Noah from Japhet. They were Gomer, Magog, Midai, Javan, Tubal, Meshech and Tiras. They were seven, and were born after the flood, about 1998 B.C. Incidentally, there is little account of the grand children of Japhet in the *Bible*, though it records the activities of those who lived in the west namely the children of Shem and of Ham. The Bible also speaks of Japhet's children as the fathers of the gentiles:

By these were the isles of the gentiles divided in their land; every one after his tongue, after their families, in their nations.²⁴

It is not impossible also to think that the Rajput kings descended from Japhet, and through a process of evolution and corruption Japhet became 'Rajput' simply; and Gomer Khmer. The 'Sohphoh Lynrum' which has been considered to be a symbolic phrase stands for the seven sons of Japhet

and their descendants. That original home is, therefore, in the Central Asia, from which the children of Japhet moved eastward, leaving no other record about their abode except that they are said to have lived in the 'isles' beyond the sea.²⁵

When the eastern plains were under water for long, the hills running from Garo Hills to Burma and as far away as Cambodia and Siam could appear as islands. In their search for fortune the first Khasis moved from place to place, and finally reached their final abode. In any case they have been here all this time.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. AIR 1958, Assam, 128 Wilson Reade vs C.S. Booth and others.
2. *Principles of Khasi Laws* (1974), p. 10.
3. I am not sure whether this was borrowed from Sanskrit, *Satyayuga*, or that the term is universal; but some authors refer to this age as *aiom ksiar*, meaning 'golden age'.
4. "Jinglamphrang", *Ka Naim Khasi* (1937, rpt. 1970), p. 11.
5. *U Sier Lapalang*, st. ix.
6. "Ka Meirilung", st. 1 "Ki Sngi Barim U Hynniew Trep" (1936).
7. *The Khasis*, (1904), p. 4.
8. L. P. Smith, *English Language* (London : Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. 66-67.
9. R. C. Majumdar, *Ancient India* (Calcutta, 1964), pp. 29, 119.
10. *Ka Niam Khasi*, pp. xvii-xix. Lyngdoh did not add the word *gita* to *Bhagabat* as he spelt it; so I come to the conclusion that he had *Bhagavata* in mind.
11. Majumdar, *op cit.*, p. 353.
12. Reported by Gurdon in his *The Khasis*, p. 201. I am a stranger to german still.
13. It is perhaps by co-incidence, but a comparative study of the sentence structure of the two languages by competent linguists may reveal an interesting result. This has not been done yet.
14. Smith, *op cit.*
15. "Numbers" ch. 22, *English Bible*.
16. "Genesis" ch. 11, *English Bible*.

17. *Ka Niam Khasi*, p. xx.
18. "Ki Symboh Ksiar", *Ki Sngi Barim U Hynniew Trep.*
19. P.R.T. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, p. 10.
20. Sib Charan Roy, *Ka Niam-Ki-Khasi* (1919, 3rd ed. 1966), p. 10.
21. Cf. Homer, *Iliad*.
22. Aristotle, *Politics*, trans. Benjamin Jowett (New York: Carlton House, n.d), p. 158.
23. "Genesis", 4: 1-20.
24. *Ibid.*, 10:5.
25. "Jeremiah" 25 : 22, cf. 'Psalms' 72: 10.

CONCLUSION

Khasi poetry has gone through an interesting process of change and development in the hundred years or so since its beginnings. The pioneers of written poetry, namely, the Christian missionaries wrote for a specific purpose and limited readership. Their readers were mostly school children and a few converts. As we have seen, Jones and Lewis made an effort to teach people reading and writing so that they could understand the principles of Christianity in their own tongue. Songs were part of the school curricula, but had to be good and inspiring so that the learners took interest in them. Because the early missionaries had evangelization as their ultimate aim, the nursery rimes too have a palpable Christian intention. That is why I have classified them as Christian poetry. The early Khasi poetry, is therefore, obviously didactic, but not entirely devoid of varied patterns of tone and emphasis within a broad religious stereotype. It shows in a variety of ways that this world is a temporary abode for man, and his permanent home is heaven. Most of the early poems are songs of praises, and prayers to God. Hopewell Elias observes that in such poetry we discover aspirations of the human heart, "there are supplications asking for forgiveness, there are bitter and deep lamentations coming out of a lonesome and convicted heart."¹

Later poets like Amjad Ali, Morkha Joseph, Soso Tham, Primrose Gatphoh, Bronath Thangkhiew, D. Nihon Singh Wahlang, and Hopewell Elias have often made poetry a plat-

form to propagate education and promote moral virtues. In their poetry we have the second variety of didacticism. The third variety of the mode is reflected in the poems of Mrs. Lewis, John Roberts and Primrose Gatphoh which stress the value of hard work and diligence in any good undertaking. The style of this poetry is like that of an elevated sermon.

As against the unworldliness of the poetry of Jones, Lewis and others, Larsingh Khongwir stresses the importance of this world, this life. It is to him a place where man shall live peacefully. Like St. John in the Book of Revelation Khongwir waits for a day when God himself shall come down from heaven and rule the world in peace. Mrs. Lewis on the other hand introduces a non-theological and non-evangelical ideal of good life. This marks a major shift of ideas and orientation in Khasi poetry.

We have in the period covered poets who interpret life from various points of view. Soso Tham is nostalgic about the past, criticises the present, and looks forward expectantly to the future. Optimistic elements in Khasi poetry are present right from the poems of Roberts and Amjad Ali, poems primed by their faith in an immense future awaiting Khasi culture and society. Tham in his last poetical works envisions the coming of a golden age in the Khasi society symbolized by a Rainbow, when the land will prosper with a new awareness of a common good. This is the spirit of his "U Simpyllieng" and "Ka Aiom Ksiar". In Gatphoh's poetry, on the other hand, there is no polarisation between past and present or future. His is a poetry of those 'natural sorrow, loss, or pain, / That has been, and may be again'.² Gatphoh sees life in all its recurrent complexities.

Bronath Thangkhiew is a poet of the ordinary form of life in his society. He evokes the rhythms of life in a rural community and contrasts those with the vanity and corruption of the towns. He is a revivalist and a social critic.

The patriotic note struck by Roberts has been echoed by other poets. The poetry of Roberts, Ali, Tham, Gatphoh, Thangkhiew and Elias is deeply imbued with a sense of Khasi patriotism. This has influenced later poets especially Victor

G. Bareh, Simon Jenkin Duncan and B. Chedrack Jyrwa. This concern with the special destiny of the Khasi people continues in Khasi poetry to this day. The theme of many of major or minor Khasi poem is "Whither we Khasis?"

The treatment of nature in Khasi poetry has varied from one decade to another. To Mrs. Lewis, nature and the natural objects serve as good illustrations of the manifest love of God for man; Roberts finds that nature has a message; Amjad Ali sees in it a strange divinity; to Gatphoh nature is a university, and to Tham it is a library which man can consult for meaning, Morkha Joseph and L. Lewis see nature, as Alfred Tennyson sees it "red in tooth and claws". This is what we find in Joseph's "U Jumai" and in the Summer and Winter poems of Lewis' and upto a point Tham too sees the cruelty and mutability of nature. But Khasi poetry, on the whole, takes a Romantic-Christian rather than a scientific-Darwinian view of nature.

The variety of form and style in Khasi poetry is quite interesting too. Allegory as a form of poetic expression has been used by Roberts, Ali, Joseph and Gatphoh. However, it is their fable-like quality that most uniquely characterizes most Khasi poems.

The themes too vary. Some poets have chosen topical and local themes while others have discovered the universal in the local and have thus made a contribution to the universal metaphors of the human situation. Roberts' "The Driving away of the Enemies"; Ali's "The Merchant and the Barbar" and "Tai and the Poorman"; Joseph's "Earthquake"; Tham's "U Ayoh" and "U Rngiew" and Gatphoh' major poems for example, are all metaphors of man in relation to his universe. Khasi poetry can lay any claim to greatness only in such enduring themes and metaphors as these.

The poetry covered by this work mirrors the development of an ancient tribal culture. It is the story of a civilization as well as a method of discourse about, and release of, the personal feelings of various poets.

Admittedly, Khasi poetry upto 1940 has achieved greatness only occasionally. Most of it is didactic and annalistic, not a

free play of the mind issuing in enduring images of life, but a forum for religious and social propaganda. Tham and Gathphoh, however, are great poets. They are the true founders of a poetic tradition in the Khasi language, that poets of today and tomorrow will do well to turn to them for a sense of direction.

NOTES & REFERENCES

1. *Ka Hamsaia Ki Por* (1963), p. 24. Translation is mine*
2. William Wordsworth, "Solitary Reaper".

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