



**TRIBAL
LITERATURE
OF
NORTH-EAST
INDIA**

EDITED BY
BADAPLIN WAR
DEPARTMENT OF KHASI
NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY
SHILLONG
2009

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The Poetics of the Khasi *Phawar*

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According to the legend of "The Lost Manuscript"¹, the ancient Khasis had been deprived of their God-given script when the man charged with its safe-keeping had swallowed the delicate material, where the script had been set down, while crossing a huge river. It was only in 1842 that "the Khasis, by which I mean all the seven sub-tribes – Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lyngngam and the now-little heard of Diko – of the Khasi tribe of north-east India,"² had received a new script when Thomas Jones, the Welsh Presbyterian missionary, introduced the Roman characters to form the essentials of the Khasi written word. "But the alphabet is nothing to judge them by. Enlightenment did not come with schools and colleges"³, and long before their establishment the Khasis had been spinning their own tales in the forms of sacred myths, legends, fairytales, fables, parables and amusing anecdotes; fashioning their own occasion-inspired songs; and composing their own poetry in the form of the unique and inimitable *phawar*.

The *phawar* is a six-line traditional Khasi verse form. It is referred to in the singular as *ka phawar* and in the plural as *ki phawar*. It can be described in three ways: as a limerick because, although it is not a five-liner, it is often a humorous poem; as a verse epigram expressing an ingenious thought with point, usually satirical; and as a gnomic verse because it compromises pithy and sententious sayings, embodying some moral principle or precept, some of which can be quite witty. Sometimes *ka phawar* has also been referred to as a

combination of couplets because of the short lines rhyming in a certain manner (see Metrical Structure below).

Ka phawar is of course not a set of couplets. Despite the short and terse lines, it is neither composed in the English iambic pentameter nor in the rhyme scheme of aabb, which is normally associated with rhyming couplets.

Ka phawar, in essence, combines the characteristics of all the first three species of poetry mentioned, with the gnomic verse bearing the closest resemblance to it. However, *ka phawar* is also different from all of them in the fact that it is primarily a kind of performance poetry (see Enactment Features below). The following is an example of *Ka Phawar* in Khasi:

Ooooo!
U jhur mo shi pirit,
I Pylleng mo shi anna,
I dur te la ibit,
I rynnieng i dang duna,
Hooi kiw!... Hooi kiw!⁴

In English the sample would read as:

Ooooo!
Saucerful of turnip,⁵
One *anna* of scrambled egg,
The appearance is neat,
But the height not quite correct.
Hooi kiw!... Hooi kiw!

When represented as written poetry, *ka phawar* can also be characterised without the first and the last lines in the following patterns:

U jhur mo shi pirit,
I Pylleng mo shi anna,
I dur te la ibit,
I rynnieng i dang duna.

Or,

U jhur mo shi pirit, I Pylleng mo shi anna,

*I dur te la ibit, I rynnieng i dang duna.*⁶

Two Modes of Composition: *Ka phawar* is generally composed in two modes and thus divided into two broad varieties: firstly, it is composed by professional and practiced poets to meet the requirement of a specific purpose and secondly, spontaneously by anyone during any public occasion. These are sometimes referred to as *Ka Phawar Kyrpang* and *Ka Phawar Shlei*.

The Professional Variety or Ka Phawar Kyrpang: This variety is more elaborate and literary since the poets have the advantage of fashioning their compositions at leisure. In their case a great deal of attention is given to the poetic art. The theme is carefully chosen to be suitable for the occasion and the diction is carefully selected so that words and images should not only express that theme appropriately but also fit the poetic form and the chanting tune of *ka phawar*, which is always the same, without any variation, for most types.

The theme of *ka phawar*, as suggested earlier, is dictated by the circumstances of the occasion. But whatever that occasion might be, the poet always speaks of the theme indirectly and suggestively through parabolic metaphors and symbolic images loaded with sarcasm and humour as in this example:⁷

Ooooo!
U soh ramruiñ ramraiñ,
Ba tawah ha jingthang briew,
U leh rymmuiñ rymmaiñ
Ba u tuh ka tnga ki briew,
Hooi kiw! ... Hooi kiw!

The English translation in free verse:

Ooooo!
Shaggy creeper sprawling,
About the cremation ground,
He is full of smiles,
Having stolen a man's wife,
Hooi kiw! ... Hooi kiw!

The most striking features in this sample are the humour and

sarcasm expressed in very concise lines, in a manner, which at first reading, may seem rather crude. Further, the first two lines, seem to stand idle and apart from the entire poem without contributing to the development of thought in any way. But it is here that the profundity and the great metaphorical significance of *Ka Phawar* can be found. Such a gnome would have been composed for a community denunciation of adultery. The basic reference is to a man who seems happy and even gloating that he has stolen another man's wife irrespective of the consideration that such an act would also constitute a violation of socially accepted norms. So what kind of man is this? How should he be viewed by one and all? How should he be publicly denounced? The answer is given in the first two lines of the gnome where the man has been compared to a shaggy and wild creeper sprawling, of all places, about the cremation ground, with all the abhorrent and horrible associations of the place. The metaphor used is, therefore, not only apt and suggestive, but also profound and powerful. And this quality is what characterises most of the best Khasi *Phawars*.

Metrical Structure or Ka Thew Phawar: *Ka phawar* is fashioned according to a definite metrical structure called *Ka Thew Phawar*. Among the first essentials in this structure is the invariable chanting tune called *Ka Kynhui*. This includes all the tonal variations from the beginning to the end of *ka phawar*, as explained below.

From the samples above, it could be seen that *ka phawar* always begins with a choral invocation, that is, the high-pitched, long-drawn-out 'Ooooo!' chanting sound, which is articulated by many in a given group. This opening chorus closely follows the sound of the baying of a wolf or the howling of a dog. It is called *Kyn-o* or *Sur kyn-o* and must contain one capital 'O' trailed by four lower-case 'oooo's'. This pattern is common to all but a few *Phawars*, as will be shown later.

The choral invocation is followed by the main body of *ka phawar* called *Metbah Phawar*, chanted by the poet alone, or by the poet together with a crowd of supporting voices, if the *phawar* is already a well-known one. The chanting tune of the four lines by the

poet is called *Sur Phawar*. Thus *Metbah Phawar* consists of *Sur Phawar* and four chanting lines, the first two of which are called *Sai Khmat* and the last two, *Sai Bud*. These lines enclose the theme and the entire range of meanings that *ka phawar* may imply, and are not constituted haphazardly but abide by a strict Syllabic Metre⁸, the way that Japanese haikus are structured, that is, with each line comprising a definite number of syllables. In the composition of *ka phawar*, the first and third chanting lines consist of six syllables, while the second and fourth chanting lines consist of seven syllables. Their rhyme scheme consistently follows the pattern of 'abab' as may be shown below:

U / jhur/ mo / shi / pi rit, (Six syllables, rhyming 'a')
I / Pyl / leng /mo /shi /an /na, (Seven syllables, rhyming 'b')
I / dur/ te / la / I / bit, (Six syllables, rhyming 'a')
I / ryn / ñieng/ I / dang /du / na (Seven syllables, rhyming 'b')

In English:

Sau/cer/ful/of/tur/nip, (Six syllables, rhyming 'a')
One/an/na/of/scram/bled/egg, (Seven syllables, rhyming 'b')
The/appea/rance/is/neat, (Six syllables, rhyming 'a')
But/the/height/not/quite/correct. (Seven syllables, rhyming 'b')

This syllabic measurement is called *Ring Ksai Phawar* or *Thew Kynnoh Phawar* and the rhyme scheme is called *Thew Tara Phawar*.

Finally, the four chanting lines or *Metbah Phawar* are rounded off by *Ka Sur Hoooi Kiw* or concluding chorus of *hoooi kiw*, which is repeated twice as shown in the samples. This concluding chorus is adapted from the sound of a rooster heralding the emergence of the sun.

This *phawar* versification, which includes the choral invocation, the syllabic metre of the four chanting lines, the rhyme scheme 'abab' and the choral rounding off, is strictly adhered to by the first variety of professional composers.

The Spontaneous Variety or Ka Phawar Shlei: In the *phawar* of the second variety, that is, the *phawar* which is composed on the spot during a public occasion, the metrics is basically the same,

though not so stringently observed. This is because the composition is done spontaneously by both professional and amateur poets, either as a launching of the celebrations etcetera, or as a quick repartee against a rival group in case of a competition. In such a situation, the poets mostly focus their attention on the parabolic quality and pointedness of the words to render the *phawar* more cuttingly effective, and also on the rhyme scheme for the sake of an enhanced musical quality. In fact, in this variety, the first two chanting lines of *ka phawar* may not mean anything at all, since they may be used simply for the sake of rhyming with the last two lines where the thought is expressed, as in this example.

Ooooo!
 Thylla ia ka kha sdieh,
 I phireit i tur shajan,
 Khynnah ba dang shi sieh,
 U jawdud ia ka iadthnam,
 Hoooi kiw!...Hoooi kiw!

In English:

A flea to a fish-fry,
 A little wren flying near,
 Boy only a foot high,
 Slobbers over boiling beer.

Types or Jait Phawar: As stated earlier, it is the theme that determines what type *ka phawar* is. The theme in turn is dependent on the occasion for which *ka phawar* is composed. It follows, therefore, that whatever type *ka phawar* may be, its poetics is always the same with some slight variations in one or two types. So far about eight types of *phawar* or *Jait Phawar*⁹ have been identified. These are *Ka Phawar Shad* (Dance *Phawar*), which comprises three further sub-types including *Ka Phawar Singshad* (Dancing-drum *Phawar*), *Ka Phawar Sing-dum-dum* (Big-drum *Phawar*) and *Ka Phawar Singmareh* or *Ka Phawar Shadwait* (Running-drum *Phawar* or Sword-dancing *Phawar*). Others include *Ka Phawar Leit Thep Mawbah* (Bone-burial *Phawar*), *Ka Phawar ĩam Meikha* (*Ka Phawar* Mourning the Paternal Grandmother), *Ka Phawar Ksan Thma* (Victorious-war *Phawar*), *Ka Phawar Dngiem* (Bear

phawar), *Ka Phawar Siat Thong* (Competitive Archery *Phawar*), *Ka Phawar Ringmaw* (Stone-fetching *Phawar*) and *Ka Phawar Khleh* (Mixed *Phawar*).

Enactment Features: As a kind of performance poetry *ka phawar* is meant to be chanted or recited in a singing manner, especially, but not necessarily, during all sorts of community events. In the case of Mixed *Phawar* performed on festive occasions, a compact cluster of people would form around a poet and launch into a celebratory caper around him. Simultaneously they would commence the Sur Kyn-o, the long-drawn-out choral invocation of the *phawar*, which would be followed by the chanting of the four lines of the poem by the poet alone or by the poet together with a crowd of supporting voices, if the *phawar* is already a well-known one. The chanting would then be rounded off with the triumphant concluding chorus of *hoooi kiw*, which is repeated twice as shown in the samples earlier. And so they would continue jiggling and chanting throughout the festivities with the help of a relay team of chanters and dancers.

It is only during competitions that two rival groups, instead of one, are formed around the respective poets. In this case, while one group launches a satirical attack, the other listens intently and then immediately let fly with its own repartee. And this, of course, amidst the same boisterous gambolling.

It may also be noted that the performance of a *phawar* is different according to its type and the nature of the occasion that inspires it. In a Dance *Phawar*, for instance, the *phawar* is performed by male dancers dancing on a sand-covered circular field, in a protective ring around female dancers, and to the accompaniment of drum and pipe music (also see *Jait Phawar* in Short Entries below)

Endnotes and References

¹ Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, *Around the Hearth: Khasi Legends* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2007) 16-20.

² -----, "Prelude". Details as above. vii-xi.

³ *ibid*

⁴ Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, *Ban Sngewthuh ia ka Poitri*

(Shillong:Gautam brothers, 1998) 59-60. This is the only book in Khasi which has attempted a study on the poetics of the Khasi *phawar*.

⁵ All English translations of the *phawars* are done by this author.

⁶ This Stanzaic arrangement of the *phawar* can be found in U Rabon Singh, *Ka Kitab Jingphawar*. 16thed. (Shillong: Mrs. Fair Beaulah Lyngdoh, 1987).

⁷ See 1 above. Same page numbers.

⁸ See(a) W. R. Goodman, *Practical Criticism*. 4thed. (New Delhi: Doaba House, 1984) 36-116. (b) O. P. Malaviya, *Practical Criticism* (New Delhi: Doaba House, 1984). (c) Robert Scholes, et al, ed. *Elements of Literature*, 4th ed. (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007)

⁹ See 6 above.

SHORT ENTRIES

Ka Phawar:

Ka phawar is a six-line traditional Khasi verse form. It is referred to in the singular as *ka phawar* and in the plural as *ki phawar*. *Ka Phawar* combines the characteristics of a limerick because it is often a humorous poem; of a verse epigram because it expressed an ingenious thought with point, usually satirical; and of a gnomic verse because it comprises pithy and sententious sayings, embodying some moral principle or precept, some of which can be quite witty. Of all the three, the gnomic verse bears the closest resemblance to it. However, *ka phawar* is also different from all of them in the fact that it is primarily a kind of performance poetry meant to be chanted or recited in a singing manner, especially, but not necessarily, during all sorts of community events.

Based on the modes of composition, *ka phawar* can be divided into two broad categories, which are *Ka Phawar Kyrpang* or the professional variety and *Ka Phawar Shlei* or the spontaneous variety. It is the theme, however, which determines what type *ka phawar* is. So far about eight types of *phawar* have been identified. (See article details).

Ka Thew Phawar:

Ka Thew Phawar is the metrical structural of *ka phawar*. It is made up of the chanting tune called *Ka Kynhui*; the four chanting lines called *Metbah Phawar*; the syllabic measurement called *Ring Ksai Phawar* or *Thew Kynnoh Phawar*; the rhyme scheme called *Thew Tara Phawar*; and the concluding chorus called *Ka Sur Hoooi Kiw* (see Matrical Structure).

Ka Kynhui:

Ka Kynhui is the chanting tune of *ka Phawar* and it includes all the tonal variations from the beginning to the end. *Ka Kynhui* starts with a choral invocation called *Kyn-o* or *Sur Kyn-o*, followed by the chanting of the four *phawar* lines of *Metbah Phawar* called *Sur Phawar* and finally rounded off by *Ka Sur Hoooi kiw*, the concluding chorus.

Sur Kyn-o:

Kyn-o or *Sur Kyn-o* is the choral invocation that begins the *phawar*. It consists of the high-pitched, long-drawn-out 'Ooooo!' chanting sound, which is articulated by many in a given group. This chorus closely follows the sound of the baying of a wolf or the howling of a dog. It must contain one capital 'O' trailed by four lower-case 'oooo'. This pattern is common to all but a few *phawars*.

Metbah phawar:

Metbah Phawar is the main body of *ka phawar*. It consists of four chanting lines chanted by the poet alone, or by the poet together with a crowd of supporting voices, if the *phawar* is already a well-known one. The first two lines are called *Sai Khmat* and the last two, *Sai Bud*. These lines enclose the theme and the entire range of meanings that *ka phawar* may imply, and are constituted according to a strict Syllabic Metre called *Ring Ksai Phawar* or *Thew Kynnoh Phawar*. The chanting tune of the four lines by the poet is called *Sur Phawar*.

Sai Khmat:

Sai Khmat constitutes the first two lines of the four chanting lines of *Metbah Phawar*.

Sai Bud:

Sai Bud constitutes the last two lines of the four chanting lines of *Metbah Phawar*.

Ring Ksai Phawar or Thew Kynnoh Phawar:

Ring Ksai Phawar or *Thew Kynnoh Phawar* is the name given to the Syllabic Metre of *ka phawar*. According to this metre, the first and third chanting lines of *ka phawar* consist of six syllables, while the second and fourth chanting lines consist of seven syllables.

Sur Phawar:

Sur Phawar is the chanting tune of the four chanting lines of *Metbah Phawar*. It is chanted by the poet alone or by the poet together with a crowd of supporting voices, if the *phawar* is already a well-known one.

Thew Tara Phawar:

Thew Tara Phawar is the rhyme scheme of *ka phawar*, which consistently follows the pattern of 'abab'.

Sur Hoooi Kiw:

Sur Hoooi Kiw is the concluding chorus of *hoooi kiw*, repeated twice, which follows the four chanting lines of *Metbah Phawar*. This chorus is adapted from the sound of a rooster heralding the emergence of the sun.

Ka Phawar Kyrpang:

Ka Phawar Kyrpang is one of the two broad varieties of *phawar*. It is composed by professional and practiced poets to meet the requirement of a specific purpose. It is therefore more elaborate and literary than the other variety since the poets have the advantage of fashioning their compositions at leisure. The theme is carefully chosen to suit the occasion and the diction is carefully selected so that

words and images should not only express that theme appropriately but also fit the poetic form and the chanting tune of *ka phawar* (see article for details).

Ka Phawar Shlei:

Ka Phawar Shlei is the second variety of *phawar*. It is composed on the spot during a public occasion. The metrics is basically the same, though not so stringently observed since the composition is done spontaneously by both professional and amateur poets. In this variety, the poets mostly focus their attention on the parabolic quality and pointedness of the words to render the *phawar* more cuttingly effectively, and also on the rhyme scheme for the sake of an enhanced musical quality (see article for details).

Jait Phawar:

This refers to the various types of *phawar*, which are determined by the themes, which in turn, are dependent on the occasions for which *ki phawar* are composed. So far about eight types of *phawar* have been identified. These are as given below.

Ka Phawar Shad:

Ka Phawar Shad - or *Dance Phawar* comprises three further sub-types including *Ka Phawar Singshad* or *Dancing-drum Phawar*, *Ka Phawar Sing-dum-dum* or *Big-drum Phawar*, and *ka Phawar Singmareh* or *Ka Phawar Shadwait*, that is, the *Running-drum* or *Sword-dancing Phawar*.

Ka Phawar Singshad or *Dancing-drum Phawar* uses pipe music and three kinds of drums comprising *Ka Nakra*, a big drum played with smooth sturdy sticks, *Ka Ksing Shynrang* (Male Drum), and *Ka Ksing Kynthei* (Female Drum), which are small rectangular drums draped over the shoulders and played with a small stick in the case of the Male Drum or with the palms of both hands in the case of the Female Drum. In this dance young women are seen dancing round a circular sand covered field in all their finery, while young men dance around them in a protective gesture, chanting *phawars* appropriate to the occasion, which could include praises of the women's beauty and

virtue and the young men's determination to honour these qualities and save them from any harm.

Ka Phawar Sing-dum-dum or Big-drum *Phawar* is one of the sub-types of *Ka Phawar Singshad*. Here the chanting is quite slow in keeping with the leisurely beat of the big, round *Nakra* drum, and the relaxed movements of both female and male dancers.

Ka Phawar Singmareh or *Ka Phawar Shadwait*, that is, the Running-drum or Sword-dancing *Phawar*, is yet another sub-type of *Ka Phawar Singshad*. This sub-type has a fast dance and music rhythm, which is also reflected in the chanting.

Ka Phawar Leit Thep Mawbah:

Ka Phawar Leit Thep Mawbah or Bone-burial *Phawar* is performed during a bone-burial ceremony to preserve the bones of a dead relative or those of several dead clan members. The ceremony involves a procession to the ancestral bone-repository cairn, leading by priest, followed by sword-dancers in traditional dance attire, by relatives and other. Here the *Phawar* is chanted during the procession by poets and dancers and the rhythm is as fast as that of the Sword-dancing *Phawar*, with only the words marking the difference, as they have to relate to the occasion of mourning and commemoration.

Ka Phawar ĩam Meikha:

Ka Phawar ĩam Meikha - performed while mourning the death of the paternal grandmother, is a rather unique one. Here the chanting is done by two people, one representing the son, standing inside the house, while the other representing the grandson, standing outside, with each holding a whisk of Yak's hair used for dancing. The *phawar* is then carried out in the form of a verbal exchange, recounting the life story and extolling the virtues of the paternal grandmother. In this case, the choral invocation or *Sur Kyn-o* and the choral rounding-off or *Sur Hooi Kiw* may or may not be used.

Ka Phawar Ksan Thma:

Ka Phawar Ksan Thma or Victorious-war *Phawar* is performed by both professional and amateur poets while returning victorious from war. The themes, therefore, mostly relate to the act of thanks-giving to God; justifications of the war on the foundation of virtue; and eulogies to warriors and king.

Ka Phawar Dngiem:

Ka Phawar Dngiem or Bear *Phawar* may not actually have anything to do directly with bear hunting. This *phawar* is marked by the words of wisdom, the profundity of thought and the imagery from the animal world that are related to human nature and the human world.

Ka Phawar Siat Thong:

Ka Phawar Siat Thong or Competitive Archery *Phawar* is in the form of quick repartees between rival groups, with one group trying to defeat the other through highly-charged invocations to God and through sharply satirical and cleverly coined words, mocking the prowess of the archers of the rival group and ridiculing their impudence in presuming to challenge their champions. As may be gathered, the actual *phawar* is not by archers but by their supporters, who may include shamans, priests, professional poets and anyone with talent. It is a general belief that the outcome of any archery competition involving equally skilled archers from rival groups, villages, provinces and so on, largely depends upon the skill of the poets to kill the counter arguments of their rivals.

Ka Phawar Ringmaw:

Ka Phawar Ringmaw or Stone-fetching *Phawar* is performed by those involved in the fetching of bridge stones, bone-burial stones and monoliths, to their designated locations. This is the most unique of all *phawars* and the choral invocations here are quite different from the rest of the *phawars* discussed. In this *phawar*, the chosen poet would sit astride the stone being fetched, holding a branch of a tree in his right hand. Then he would incant words of inspiration and beat the

stone with the branch to indicate direction, stoppage and movement. At the end of his incantation, the pullers and the rest of the crown would use a very different chanting tune or *Sur Kynhui*, which would serve as both invocation and conclusion to the *phawar*. This choral intonation would invariably be as follows:

Ka / wei / ka / bor / ba / lang, hui-hah,
Ka / wei / ka / buit / ba / lang, hui hah,
Pyn / beit / ia / u thi / ri, hui-hah,
Pyn / beit / ia / u jyr / mi, hui-hah.

In English :

In one collected strength, *hui-hah*,
In one collected talent, *hui-hah*,
Straigthen the bamboo twine, *hui-hah*,
Straigthen the liana line, *hui-hah*.

In this *phawar*, the poet may use the syllabic metre of six and seven chanting lines in the main body of the *Phawar* as usual, but the choral incantation called “*hui-hah*” must always contain the same number of six syllables, followed by the refrain *hui-hah* as shown in the samples.

Ka Phawar Khleh:

Ka Phawar Khleh or Mixed *Phawar*, is perhaps the most popular because it can be composed by anyone with the talent—including women, who are otherwise not allowed to participate in the other types of *phawar* except as part of the choral group. This *phawar* can be on any theme whatsoever, regardless of the inspiring nature of the occasion. From this point of view, this *phawar* can truly be called a theme free *phawar*, which could be chanted during courtship, engagement, wedding and divorce ceremonies, hunting expeditions, community picnics, cultural festivals, and any other social or political functions. It is, of course, also subjected to other restraining factors of the metrics of *ka phawar*, with the added proviso that it should be free from all that is unnecessarily lewd and immoral, if it involves performance in public. This proviso is usually enforced by the organisers of the events, but here also the nature of the occasion is a very important determining factor.