

REVIVALISM IN KHASI SOCIETY



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H. K. SYNREM

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H. KELIAN SYNREM



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Revivalism in Khasi Society
©1992, H. Kelian Synrem
ISBN 81 207 1448 2

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PRINTED IN INDIA

Published by S.K. Ghai, Managing Director, Sterling Publishers Pvt. Ltd.,
L-10, Green Park Extension, New Delhi-110016.
Printed at Ram Printograph (India), C-114, Okhla Phase-I, New Delhi-110020.



*Dedicated to my beloved parents
Shree Hoken Warjri and Shrimati Esa Synrem*

FOREWORD

Miss Kelian Synrem's *Revivalism in Khasi Society* is a testament of a youthful soul proclaiming her faith in the sublime truth, beauty and purity of the religion of her people who believe that it was given by God to their ancestors when He sent them down from their abode with Him Above to dwell on earth Below. Their tradition tells them that God, the Maker of heaven and earth, the Creator of everything therein and thereon—the trees, the plants, the different species of birds, beasts and fishes—also made different races and communities of human beings whom He placed in different parts of the earth to be their respective homelands. Their story about themselves is that God first made sixteen families of them called *Ki Khat-hynriew Trep* and let them stay with Him Above. Later He sent seven families of them to dwell on earth Below. They are called *Ki Hynniew Trep* (the Seven Huts). These are the first ancestors of the race or community known now as the Khasi-Pnars of Meghalaya. God put them on Mt. Sohpetbneng (Mt. Navel of Heaven) and told them to procreate, and as they multiplied in number to spread farther away all round from the centre of this magnificent mountain till they covered the entire land set apart for them to be their homeland—the hills and valleys stretching northwards and southwards towards the basins of the rivers in the plains; eastwards and westwards till they meet with the mountain streams dividing them from the mountainous homes of other races and tribes—the land which has been in their occupation from time immemorial till today. This divine origin of their habitation and settlement is the fountainhead of their regard for their land as sacred and holy, belonging to them as a people, not owned by a ruler to be disposed of according to his will.

Miss Synrem writes out of conviction and inside knowledge of her subject. Her book is, therefore, refreshingly different from other books published earlier dealing with a similar study of the people of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills—their religion, culture, customs and usages. It is not that those books are less informative or readable, or that their authors are less knowledgeable or scholarly. The difference lies in the fact that those other books were written by authors who studied the life and behaviour of the people from outside and recorded their perceptions and interpretations of what they saw and heard. Such a picture, however truly portrayed, lacks that certain essence of the true spirit and nature of the people into which the author cannot penetrate. Their non-conversance with the language deprives them of the niceties and nuances of what the people who give them the information feel deep down in their hearts, nor could they see the very common things in the daily humdrum lives of these people in their homes when they let their hair down, the totality of which constitutes their character and culture. This is true of the non-Khasi authors, our fellow Indian or non-Indian social scientists or sociologists, who write without prejudice or bias. It is more true of those who wrote with prejudice or preconceived ideas of the people. Such authors were the British administrators and missionaries of the West especially those who wrote in the high noon of the British Empire.

The earliest books on the Khasis were written by the British administrators and missionaries. They might have been very good and able people, devoted and dedicated to their work and mission but as members of the ruling race they had a higher responsibility—the cause of the Empire to which they owed and pledged loyalty. The administrator felt it to be his bounden duty to make the subject people accept his rule willingly as a better thing for them; and the missionary, his religion as a superior one. Their presentation of the institutions, mores, manners, beliefs, practices, etc., of the people was coloured by their imperialistic view and sense of superiority. And even where they spoke or wrote highly of them they did never miss a chance, wherever they could to give them a lowlier value or virtue by comparison with those of the West. And there were instances of their writings exposing their ignorance of their subject which they spurned to study, or their failure to appreciate its intrinsic meaning. In this

way they have subtly or blatantly, as suited them, twisted, distorted or wounded some of the noblest traditions, institutions and concepts of the Khasis in the field of their democratic system of government or the realm of religion. And yet these books and writings have been the guides for the later Indian authors.

The missionaries had the monopoly of education in the hills till the dawn of Independence. The Khasis, despite their ancient light and wisdom, were illiterate till the British missionaries taught them the three R's with the opening of primary schools for the first time in 1841. The thrust of the teaching in the schools was on the virtues of Christianity, the superiority of those who could read and write, who had seen the light over the illiterate, who were held to be benighted, who could not lead but must only follow. Superadded unto this was the greatness of the West and the good to accept it. Education in the true sense was not imparted. The missionaries established only primary and middle English schools. It was only towards the end of the last century that the Government established one English high school in Shillong for all the Hills districts of the then Province of Assam—the then Naga Hills (now Nagaland), the then Lushai Hills (now Mizoram), the then Garo Hills (now part of Meghalaya comprising the Khasi and Jaintia Hills), a part of Mikir Hills (now Karbi Anglong) and North Cachar Hills (then a part of Cachar district).

The Khasi authors of the earlier years were those influenced by that knowledge they gathered through the books and teachings of the missionaries, and those who were born and brought up as Christians had no more first-hand knowledge of the deeper meaning and implications of the institutions, customs, usages, rites and ceremonies of the Khasis founded on the precepts and principles of their religion. Their writings on the ethos of the Khasis are, therefore, blended with the Christian ethos which has taken roots in them. It needs one born and brought up in a Khasi home professing and practising the ancient faith of the people in the ancient religion and the traditions, institutions, customs, culture, usages, etc., emanating from the roots of that religion to present Khasi society in its pristine nature. A Khasi Christian who can be completely detached may do it as well. Indeed, there has been an awakening among the educated Khasi youths, including Christians, who are now inspired with a

sense of what they owe to their ancestors to present Khasi society in the purity of its ancient form and we have seen hopeful signs of an endeavour towards that desired end.

Miss Kelian Synrem comes from an old Khasi family, firmly following the religion they believe God gave to their first ancestors and the way of life and culture sprouting from it. Her book is a brave and noble attempt towards that goal which beckons the youths of today. I have no doubt that readers will derive both pleasure and profit from it.

R.T. Rymbai

President, Seng Khasi (Central Body)

PREFACE

This book is an almost wholly unchanged version of my doctoral thesis submitted to North-Eastern Hill University in the year 1986. Since childhood I have been witness to the erosion of Khasi culture and beliefs. Belonging to an original *Niam Khasi* family of this region, I was taught to respect and appreciate the wisdom of my forefathers. As a member of the Seng Khasi organisation, I lived the Khasi way of life without any confusion and uncertainty. However, when my own brethren claimed to uphold Khasi culture and Khasi identity after giving up the Khasi religion which, according to me, stored the wisdom of the ancient Khasi, I started to think very seriously about certain issues, namely, what is Khasi culture? What is Khasi identity? These questions are most relevant today when we hear so much about reviving and preserving tribal culture and tribal identity.

This book provides comprehensive details about the fundamental characteristics of Khasi society, the changes it has gone through in trying to preserve Khasi structure and kinship ties and to maintain its identity through revivalism. I have discussed extensively theories about revivalism in its various phases. I have attempted to analyse the sociological phenomena of revivalism as perceived in Khasi society. What I feel is that in spite of large-scale Christianisation, the Khasi identity, as also Khasi customs, have withstood the test of time mainly due to the kinship ties preserved by the people. I have discussed the impact of Christianisation, showing how certain basic features of Khasi customs and kinship ties were retained in reference to the village community of Laitkynsew. The aims and objectives of the *Seng Khasi* and its role in making the Khasi conscious of his own cultural heritage and instilling in him a love for it are brought out,

and they illuminate the discussion. From the concrete example of the village Laitkynsew, I have drawn upon material to make theoretical points in my discussion.

The structure of Khasi society and the elements of Khasi identity are discussed in penetrating detail. These include kinship, marriage, rituals, ceremonies, inheritance, and the relationship between social and religious functions of traditional Khasi society. On the basis of a thorough study of Khasi society I have pointed out many misunderstandings about Khasi customary law. Even by courts of law the implications of the terms *War*, *Jaid*, *Kur Dkhar*, etc., are explained clearly. A good account of Khasi language and its relationship to other languages and people is also given.

Large-scale confusion prevailed among the Khasis during the British era and even in the post-British period about the ideal Khasi. In spite of this confusion there had emerged a number of Khasi elites who provided leadership in reviving Khasi culture. The lives and works of the chief leaders whose mission it was to reawaken consciousness of Khasi identity after the advent of the British are described. The works and role of *Seng Kysiew* are presented with a wealth of empirical data. *Sengkhilang*, *Seng Ki Nongshat Nongkhein* and other minor organisations are also dealt with. I have discussed in detail the rise of regional forces in Meghalaya and their relationship to Khasi revivalism. There is a very perceptive analysis of certain sections of Khasi youth who wish to participate in revivalism without undertaking a serious discussion of Khasi religion, thus landing themselves in regional chauvinism instead of genuine revivalism.

I am of the view that the greatest threat to the Khasi identity comes from proselytisation. Although there were attempts made by the Khasis converted to Christianity to keep the Khasi identity alive, they have failed to do so, since religion is the very essence of the Khasi society. I believe that without a full realisation of this fact and without a serious study of Khasi religion by one and all, Khasi's revivalism among them will remain confused and misdirected.

I conclude with the opinion that Khasi revivalism is not opposed to nationalism and development.

H. Kelian Synrem

INTRODUCTION

The Khasi Community is said to be of Austro-Asiatic origin. Tradition points out that the Khasi came into Assam either from Burma via the Patkoi range or from the North with Sylhet as the terminus of their advance, wherefrom they were driven back into their present hill-sites by a great flood. It is very difficult to say definitely for lack of historical data as to how and when this tribe migrated from Burma or its neighbouring country to the part of Assam now known as Meghalaya as they have been living there since time immemorial. Their main language is known as the Khasi language and their family system is based on matrilineal and matrilocal practice right from the old days. The Khasis are agriculturists by occupation. Their religion is known as *Ka Niam Khasi*, although many of them got converted into Christianity after the advent of the British.

Confronted with the challenges of modernisation, Christianisation and industrialisation, Khasi society is today making a conscious effort to preserve its identity through revivalism. Revivalism generally aims at the restoration of a former golden age. Among the Khasis, revivalism has, to a limited extent, made people revert back to their own religion. But, by and large, revivalism has made people conscious of their past heritage though in practice most revivalists have aimed at merely cultural revivalism, excluding Khasi religion. Khasi society, like any other society, possesses a certain unity and has what we may call a certain life of its own. In the last few years the very existence of Khasi society as an organised structure has been threatened. Its various parts—religious, ethical, legal, and economic—are no longer knit together in harmony; they are being pulled in different directions for various reasons.

Chapter 1 of the book analyses the concept of society and the need for society to organise itself to pursue revivalism of its traditional culture. One hears the cry *Ngì U Khun Khasi Khara U Khun U Hynniew Trep U Hynniew Skum** in almost every part of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. This has given an impetus to the work already started by the Seng Khasi Organisation. For the Khasi, Christianity was a tough contender, anxious to replace the tribal customs and institutions. Its advent made the Khasi stand spellbound, for it brought modernisation and its attractive adjuncts.

The love of Christianity and its impact on the Khasi, I have discussed in Chapter 2. Here I have shown that in spite of massive Christianisation one factor which has helped to retain some elements of Khasi customs is the prevalence of kinship ties. In this connection, I have discussed the village community of Laitkynsew in the East Khasi Hills district, 90 kilometres from Shillong, the capital city of Meghalaya.

In Chapter 3, I have asked the question: Who is a Khasi? The answer is not easy, as in the present situation, it is a difficult task to identify in the true and pure Khasi traits of culture. Material culture seems to be rapidly changing and the institutions, the homes and so on can rarely be identified as pure Khasi. I have discussed the problems of Khasi identity in terms of space as well as of social and cultural customs. However, all this has been done while keeping the dimension of time in mind: life of the Khasi in the past and life of the Khasi today. I have gone on to assert that today the Khasi definitely looks upon the traditional concept of a good Khasi with yearning and respect and that is the main reason which makes me assert the presence of revivalism among the Khasis. (Revivalism in Khasi is unique and is not based on hatred of the present.) The conclusion to Chapter 3 attempts to identify the ideal Khasi. It is a difficult task for while tradition as contained in the *Niam Khasi*, defined somewhat clearly what is expected of a good Khasi the post-British period shows a climate of confusion.

The impact of the awakening of consciousness about the past was not limited to the non-Christian only; the Christian Khasis too contributed to the new-spirit.¹ Interestingly, many of the Christian elders reverted to the *Niam Khasi*, such as H.O. Mawrie,

* We the Khasi-Khara, the descendants of the seven huts-seven clans.

B.D. Pugh, D. Shangpliang, Atiar Syiem, P. Dkhar, P.S. Lyngdoh, etc. Chapter 4 discusses the various leaders who made a collective effort to save Khasi-culture; including Rabon Singh, Hormurai Diengdoh, Babu Jeebon Roy, Sibcharan Roy, and others. It also contains a recent major mechanism of the Seng Khasi Organisation to warn the Khasi against the dangers of losing their own culture, traditions and religion. The mechanism is the *Seng Kyrsew* meetings taking place in different parts of Khasi and Jaintia Hills. A survey of the geographical areas where *Seng Kyrsew* meetings have started to be held has made it possible for me to make a map showing the extent of *Seng Kyrsew* revivalism in eight Community Development Blocks covering 24 villages, five towns, three of them in Shillong City of Khasi Hills. Revivalism can be exploited by certain sections of the Khasis who are resisting change by trying to convert nationalism into communalism. The Seng Khasi is sometimes criticised as an organisation which does not want the Khasis to change over to an open society. This, however, does not appear to be the case. The fourth chapter discusses the role of the traditional elders as great nationalists.

In Chapter 5 I have taken pains to differentiate revivalism from regionalism. I am aware of the emergence of strong regionalism in Meghalaya; as a matter of fact I have given a short history of the various regional political parties. The leaders of various parties, while wishing to preserve the identity of the Khasi people, are to my mind, more interested, in getting economic benefits for the State from the Centre. At present, a strong section of Khasi youth want to confine their creativity as Khasi to their role in political parties. Their vote-catching compulsion seems to inhibit them from entering into a debate on religious and social issues. It also turns them towards regional chauvinism instead of genuine revivalism. I have hinted earlier that revivalism is a phenomenon limited not merely to the non-Christians. To prove my point I have listed the revivalist activities of the non-Christian Khasi youth as well as Christian Khasi youth. My interviews with them led me to classify them into three groups. Group A sees the necessity of a common religion for the unity of the Khasi. Group B takes the idea of revivalism as only limited to culture, traditions and festivals but without Khasi religion. To them the Khasi identity is more important. Group C

realised the importance of religion in constituting the identity of the race but they feel helpless in changing, once again, their faith from Christianity to the *Niam Khasi*. The same dilemma is experienced by the educated elite in Khasi society. The youths today work hard to join hands in order to revive their own culture and traditions. The Khasi Students Union organised a *Khasi Cultural Blow-Up* in the form of debates, seminars, discussions on different topics regarding culture, heritage, customs, traditions, festivals, old values, etc. The main points of difference between Christian revivalists and *Niam Khasi* revivalists appear to be this. While the Seng Khasi (*Niam Khasi*) revivalists feel that religious revivalism is a must for the Khasi if he has to retain his traditions, the Christian revivalists only wish to revive culture.

In the context of regionalism and communalism that appear to grip India today, some of the culture heroes of the Khasi like U Tirot Sing² and others are becoming regional and communal symbols. Social scientists fear that instead of integrating and strengthening the nation, revivalism may promote racial and linguistic rivalries. "The revivalist technique of boosting up group consciousness of the ancient days is unpatriotic in the sense that it would go against the contemporary national interest of unity and harmony among the various people of India."³ I am in disagreement with this understanding of revivalism. The past tradition of the Khasis is one that exhibits a long process of give and take with other cultural traditions of their neighbours. There is, for instance, a long history of inter-group marriages between the Khasis and the Bengalees and Assamese. Then there are also Khasi intellectuals of the calibre of Babu Jeebon Roy who wrote a commentary on the *Hitopadesa*, Lord Buddha, Chaitanya, and the *Ramayana*. I must also mention here the literary merit of another Khasi writer, U Hari Charan Roy, who wrote the story of *Ka Savitri* (Pativrata Mahatma) taken from a story of the *Mahabharata*. To say that recalling of one's past gives rise to unpatriotic feelings may have some justification if the Khasi past was completely cut off from that of its other Indian neighbours. But as I have just shown, it is not so.

I reiterate this point in the conclusion of my book where I try to show that revivalism should not be considered as anti-nationalism and as opposed to development. Development

should be viewed not merely as the production of material goods but as the improvement of the total human condition. I refer to Gandhi's model of development, which was based on his knowledge of local conditions while at the same time preserving the national identity. The conflict between tradition and modernity that has been talked about in recent times has a limited validity in the context of revivalism. Khasi revivalists are not opposed to changing over to modern techniques of development.

Notes and References

1. See *Tribal Movements in India*, Vol. I., Manohar 1982, p. 184; refer also to Nalini Natarajan, *The Missionary among the Khasis*, New Delhi, 1977, Sterling Publishers, pp. 181-82; P.R.G. Mathur, *Khasi of Meghalaya*; New Delhi, 1979.
2. A freedom fighter imprisoned by the British in Dacca in 1832.
3. Gangadharan, K.K., *Sociology of Revivalism: A Study of Indianisation, Sanskritisation and Galwalkarism*. New Delhi: Kalam Prakashan, 1971, p. 143.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I owe a special obligation to my guide, Prof. Sujata Miri, for the immeasurable help and encouragement she gave me in carrying out this work.

I am grateful to Mr. Hipshon Roy Kharshiing, who was General Secretary of the Seng Khasi Organisation. He supplied me with important documents and other information related to my work.

I thank Mr. K. Mawlong, Deputy Director, and Mr. F. Kharkongor of the Office of the Director, Census Operation, for their cooperation and help. I am also thankful to Mr. K.S. Ryntathiang of the same office, who has assisted me in mapping.

The Block Development Office of Shella Bholaganch NES (Block), Cherrapunjee, supplied me with the required village data. I am equally thankful to Mr. Dipshon Nongbri, Mr. Denis Khongwir, Dr. Xaxa of the Sociology Department, NEHU, and the people of Laitkynsew for the help rendered to me in this work.

I am most grateful to Swami Gokulananda, who has helped me in the publication of the book.

I express my gratitude to Mr. R.T. Rymbai, who agreed to write the Foreword to the book.

H. Kelian Synrem

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