

SENG KHASI SERIES No. 2

**WHERE LIES
THE SOUL OF OUR RACE**



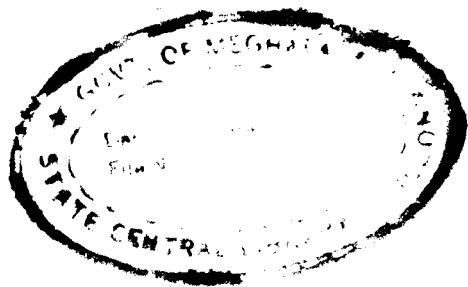
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English Supplements on Khasi Culture
and Religion

Where Lies The soul of our race

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THE KHASIS

Hipshon Roy

“They are one of the colourful tribes of the North Eastern Hills of India bordering China and Burma”! It is a prevailing notion by our own countrymen in the other states and by the Western countries, with mundance or ecclesiastical interest in the land and the people. The English dictionary meaning of TRIBE is a: “Group of primitive or barbarous clans under barbarous chiefs.” It is difficult to know the man, the land, where written literature is of recent origin, though rich in oral literature. The conqueror for more than a century had been hunting in this fair land with their local hounds and by divine right had imposed on themselves the white man burden to administer the people, the land and their soul and acting as self imposed spokesmen for the race.

The groups cut off from the rest of the country by administrative barriers and exposed to the Western ways of life and belief during British rule have developed, to a superficial observer, an un-Indian image. It is difficult to recognise a Khasi, particularly those of urban areas, as belonging to a race distinct from the neighbouring hill brothers. If one only goes back a few decades to the early British Indian period it may lead to a better appreciation in the land and the man by having a look at a few of the institutions as they were.

KHASI DEMOCRACY

Their democratic systems and ways of life have carried them through the ages for thousands of years in their small republics. Hon'ble Freeman Thomas, Earl of Willingdon,

P.C., G.M.S.I., G.M.I.E., G.C.M.G., G.B.E., during his visit to these hills as Viceroy and Governor General of India had this to say :

“It is a proof of the stamina and virility and competence of your people that when greater Empires in the East and in the West have throughout the ages come and gone, you still maintain in your pleasant Hills the freedom of your small republics, based on your ancient ways and tenets of your race.”

The Khasis retained their semi Independent status in subsidiary alliance with the British Crown and very few villages became British after the British conquest in 1833. The people govern themselves through their Durbars (Assemblies) and their administration carried out by their elected Syiem (Chief) in Council with his Myntries (Ministers). The Syiem or his myntries have no right over the land. Based on customary laws of the race a British Court of Justice as late as 1847 decreed that :

“Land in the Khasi Hills belonging to the children of the soil are the property of the owner for right of which he is answerable to no Chief and for which he pays no tax of whatever nature.”

The owner of the land may be an individual, a clan or a community constituting the commune of a village or group of villages. How old then is Democracy in these Hills, in the absence of a written history it is indeed hard to say, but with a safe margin it can be said to be as old, if not older, as that of the Greek City States. R.M. Lahiri in his book, ‘The Annexation of Assam’—1954, wrote thus.

“Each of these petty states was a little republic. When any question or dispute arose regarding succession or some other points, the matter was discussed by their Assembly, where every member was entitled to speak and vote. Captain White, Assistant to Mr. Scott, was amazed at the order, decorum and propriety with which

the debate was conducted for two days and admitted he had not seen these surpassed in any European society. This testimony coming from a contemporary officer of note shows how advanced were the Khasis in the art of self Government."

KHASI ECONOMY

In modern times the Khasis are economically backward and as a matter of fact the whole of the North East depends on the Central Government for financial support. In the old days the Khasis with a population, then, of less than one hundred thousand, had made a remarkable advance in trade and industry. One of their major exports was steel and iron. Dr. Hunter's Vital Statistical Account, an official documents of 1879, reported in a short passage :

"The smelting of iron was once the chief industry in the Khasi Hills and a considerable quantity of the metal used to be exported into Sylhet (now in Bangladesh), both in crude and manufactured state. Recently, however, this industry has almost died out in the face of the competition of the superior iron imported from England and sold into the plains at cheaper rate. . . . The manufacture of the district, besides iron, consist of coarse cotton and area cloth, plain silver work, rude implements of husbandry, netted bags of fibre of pine apple, common pottery and baskets. . . ."

SOCIAL SYSTEM

In their social system the Khasis are matrilineal and they recognise the matrilineal descent but it should not be confused with a matriarchate society. The woman is the mistress of the household and the custodian of wealth and property but not the proprietress. The man is the master in war and peace. The maternal uncle is the undisputed director of the ancestral wealth and property where the father is the provider, the master and guide of his family. There were a clear division of function between the household and the world out side.

The woman is the receiver and the custodian and, therefore, must not stray into the field of politics. She is not to take part in the affairs of the State, her domain is the Home. Mr. Jairamdas Doulatram as Governor of undivided Assam had said :

“I have been an admirer of some of your fine customs. I think there is a great deal to be said for the matrilineal system. I sometimes feel that indirectly it has considerable effect in encouraging the free progress of women and it tends to make them real equal of men. Their innate qualities get scope for evolution and development and they are more mature members of their own society than are their sisters elsewhere. You sometime give them a position in public affairs which any can envy.”

This is a vast field but it may be left at this rather than cram into this introductory article.

KHASI RELIGION

Under the caption, “THE KHASI RELIGION IN THE ECONOMY OF SALVATION, Fr. Jacob Aiukal, D. D. wrote in the souvenir of the St. Joseph’s Parish Silver Jubilee—1951-1976 :

“For those who are accustomed to hear and make use of the dictum, ‘Outside the Church no Salvation’, the above title may sound shocking. But a careful study of the salvific plan of God, in the light of the Second Vatican Council, will help us to appreciate the enormous salvific values in Non-Christian religions, especially in the Khasi Religion.”

There is a clear conception of God in the ‘Khasi Religion’, God Universal and in this context he is the God of the Hindus, the God of the Christians, the God of the Persians, the God of the Jews and of all the other races with their own religions. In the Seng Khasi Devotional Song Book there

is a beautiful song in the Khasi language which rendered into English reads:

“Of the Humans God created many races,
To each his Religion and Culture,
To glorify Him the Creator ;
They have their Religion and Culture
To glorify Him the Creator.”

This conception in the context of God Universal leads and established tolerance and understanding amongst themselves and with others. In the second context they visualised God National within their racial or national context. Sinai is a place of contemplation as it is here God spoke first to Moses out of the burning bush. In this mountain Moses received the Tables of the Law for the Jews, a distinct Law for the race. Here He entered into the covenant with the Israelites. So similarly did God with the Khasis, another branch of the human race in the same planet, at the beginning of their time entered into a covenant, whereunder was embedded the Law of the race, one distinct from the other. God created man who is born pure and innocent with a command that he acquired through his different stages of his life all that is good and truthful and not to defile himself or others. As a race he is to follow rightously the tradition and the law given to his forefathers. The Law enjoins that he must be healthy in his mental and physical being if he is to realise the glory of his Maker. The Khasi Reigion has no missionary intentions and received no converts to its fold though it welcome and chrished co-existence within its fold and with others. S. Radhakrishnan has beautifully put it when he wrote:

“To think that any human institution has a monopoly of God’s truth is to commit a sin of pride.”

As there is no missionary intentions there is no organised church or temple. To a Khasi, religion is personal contract between God and man. Here is God Localised within this context, wherein God’s place with man is nearest and holiest in man’s Hearth and Home. Here he communicates through

his prayers with his Creator adjusted to the wave-lengths of his tradition according to the Law and guided by his, God gifted, conscience free from prejudice, pride, greed and man-made dictum and dogma.

In this little and brief introductory essay it is not the intention to hide the primitive man nor to present the Khasi as a bundle of contradictions but only an attempt to present the truth as it is. There were forces for the last one century or so that has caused tremendous ripples in the surface of Khasi society though in depth it is secured. The forces are still there for though the hunters are gone, the hounds are here. It is a beautiful culture and religion that commends to his understanding and the test of reason. In his prayers he would even argue with his God. He cannot fail unless God has turned away from him because of his failings, but why, he must find the cause that effect. One of his precepts is that he must love himself and respect others. He respect others in many of his ways and including the death. Robinson (1841) had this to say on Khasi disposal of their death:

“They do not bury but burn them like the Hindus, *though in a more decent manner.*”

This English Supplement to the Khasi language Quarterly Journal — “SENG KHASI” — on this 81 year of the Seng Khasi founded on 23rd. November; 1899 is published with the hope that the Supplement is received in the spirit of Francis of Assisi-to borrow-from S. Radhakrishnan :—

“When Francis of Assisi picked up a paper and was told that what was written on it came from a pagan writer, he replied: ‘That means nothing for all that is said by pagan or anyone else, comes from the wisdom of God, from Whom comes every good thing.’”