



# **Forest in the Life of the Khasis**

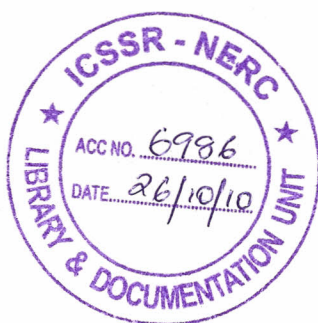
**Rekha M. Shangpliang**



# Forest in the Life of the Khasis

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*Dedicated*  
To  
My mother  
**Mrs. Sidona Shangliang**  
*who taught me to appreciate  
the beauty of nature*

*“Sa shisien pat kin win ki khlaw  
Sa shisien pat kin khib ki maw,  
Kum kiwei pat ki sngi kin mih,  
Da kumwei pat ka ri kan ih  
Lada ngi don ki shkor ban sngew  
Aiu ka kren ka Mei-Ramew”*

*“Once again the trees will sound  
Once again the rocks will move  
Like in the past the days will come  
In another way the land will mature  
If we have ears to listen  
To what Mother Earth has to say.....”*

Soso Tham “Ka Meirilung”

## PREFACE

This book is an outgrowth of my Ph.D. thesis under the title "Forest in the Life of the Khasis : A Study in the Role of Forest in Khasi Socio-economic Structure" which I have worked on for almost 6 years. The idea of bringing out this book sparked off from a casual tea-time conversation that I had with my friends and colleagues at the department who held out high opinion about the relevance of the work to the present ecological scenario of the state and about its usefulness for educating and generating eco-consciousness among the people. It also occurred to me that besides being useful to general readers, this book if made available, would be beneficial for academicians, planners and research scholars as well. Keeping this in mind, I set to pattern out my work into two separate volumes. The present volume is based on the ecological dimensions of forest in Khasi culture. It is intended to disseminate knowledge about Khasis, their land, ecology and economy and the parameters of forest usage among the Khasis. While the other volume is meant for a deeper understanding about the Khasi concept of forest and ecology; their implications in the socio-economic and spiritual life of the Khasis including a case study of two sample villages with empirical data-base.

This Book is divided into 4 chapters. First chapter lays emphasis on the background of Khasi society throwing light on the origin, history and ecological heritage of the Khasi people. This chapter also discusses at length the system of classification of land and forest in Khasi Hills, the land tenure system and forest cover information of the State.

The second chapter focuses on the Khasi concept of forest explaining the various connotations of forest as a sacred entity which finds expression in Khasi beliefs, legends, folklores, folktales and literature. With a view to analyse the eco-theandric view of nature, this chapter discovers the wholeness of nature and ecology in the socio-religious life of the Khasis, reminiscent to those found in the life of the Maler tribe studied by L.P. Vidyarathi.

Chapter 3 gives a detailed account of the parameters of forest usage in Khasi society covering various aspects of Khasi life and culture such as shelter, food, medicinal herbs, musical instruments, weaving and dying, rituals and ceremonies.

Chapter 4 is a conclusive evidence of the fact that nature still occupies a central place in Khasi life and culture in spite of large scale destruction of forest by some vested interests to satisfy his needs and greed. Truly, today it is quite a deplorable sight to see our forests disappearing at an alarming rate, but this state of things has come to the fore only in recent times. In the past, the Khasis adored nature and treated her with due respect and reverence. While it is true that we cannot get back the golden era or "Aiom Ksiar" when men and nature and beasts lived peacefully, there is still a ray of hope that the tradition of eco-spirituality embedded in Khasi culture can serve as a starting point to continue the pristine relationship with the forest that has existed in the past.

The weaknesses of this book are precisely my own—its strengths mine, too. There were several people who extended invaluable help, which I am eager to recognize here. I sincerely thank the faculty at the Department of Sociology, NEHU, who have supported me throughout my years as a student and even today as a colleague. A special word of thanks to Prof. A.C. Sinha an erudite mentor in the early stages of my work and still a valued supporter in every way. To others who read all portions of my manuscript and provided advice and criticism, I am indebted to all of them.

The most important acknowledgement, however, is reserved for my father. His support and good judgment is recorded at every page.

Last but not the least, I dedicate this book to my most beloved mother who passed away five months before the book was due to be out. I'm sure she would have been very proud of me as she always dreamed of her youngest daughter achieving new heights in her life and career.

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## GLOSSARY OF VERNACULAR TERMS

<i>Bylla Sngi</i>	- daily labourer
<i>Bylla Surok</i>	- Muster roll
<i>Ka Kper</i>	- Homestead Land
<i>Ka iuh moi</i>	- a harrow
<i>Ka Latar</i>	- A type of tree, the bark of which is used as ropes for constructing houses
<i>Ka Rashi</i>	- a sickle
<i>Kba</i>	- born of
<i>Khanatang bad Puriskam</i>	- Khasi folktales and legends
<i>Kblam</i>	- Serious plague
<i>Kblaw Shimet</i>	- Private Forest
<i>Kblaw Shnong</i>	- Village Forest
<i>Kbmam</i>	- Khasi arrow
<i>Kboh</i>	- Bamboo basket
<i>Ki kblaw ki btap</i>	- the forest
<i>Ki Lum Makachiang</i>	- the Himalayas
<i>Kmp</i>	- Bamboo Umbrella, Rain shields
<i>Kwai</i>	- Betelnut
<i>Kynbat Samthiah</i>	- a particular flower the petals of which open when the sun rises and close as the sun begins to set
<i>Dawai Kynbat</i>	- Khasi Folk Medicine
<i>Dieng Kseh Bilat</i>	- Pure Oak
<i>Durbar Shnong</i>	- Village council where all disputes are settled
<i>Haat</i>	- weekly market
<i>Hynniewtrep-Hynniewskum</i>	- Seven Huts – Seven Nests
<i>Ja</i>	- Cooked Rice
<i>Law Adong or Law Shnong</i>	- Protected or village forest

<i>Law Kyntang</i>	- Sacred Groves
<i>Law Sumar</i>	- Private Forest
<i>Lei Khlaw</i>	- Forest spirits
<i>Lei Lum</i>	- mountain or hill spirits
<i>Lei Muluk</i>	- God of the State
<i>Lei Umtong</i>	- Water Spirits
<i>Lei wah</i>	- river Spirits
<i>Lyngknot</i>	- Wooden stool for sitting upon
<i>Mawshamok</i>	- White Stones
<i>Meiramew</i>	- Mother Earth
<i>Mohkhiew</i>	- Khasi Hoe
<i>Myntris</i>	- ministers
<i>Niam</i>	- religion
<i>Nuli, Pantaro, Sohtung</i>	- Species of trees used as a dye
<i>Poikha poiman</i>	- marriage
<i>Putharo Pukhleim</i>	- Rice Pancakes
<i>Pynthor</i>	- Plains or wet paddy
<i>Ri-Kynti</i>	- Private Land
<i>Ri Lum</i>	- Hilly Land
<i>Ri-Raid</i>	- Community Land
<i>Rngai</i>	- Shadow or spirit of the dead
<i>Sapied Siej</i>	- Sharp Edged Bamboo Stick
<i>Sboh sem masi</i>	- lumps of decomposed cowdung
<i>Sboh Sem sniang</i>	- Pig Sty
<i>Shang Kwai</i>	- Bamboo Basket for storing betelnut
<i>Shoh Kba</i>	- thrashing of sheaves
<i>Shoh Maw</i>	- stone crusher
<i>Shylliah</i>	- Mats made of plaited cane
<i>Siej lieh</i>	- species of bamboo out of which mats are woven
<i>Sohpetbneng</i>	- the navel of Heaven
<i>Tang Jait</i>	- a ceremony by which a new clan bearing the name of the non-Khasi mother is created
<i>Tari</i>	- kitchen knife

<i>Thang Skyrti</i>	- Jhum Cultivation
<i>Thup or Thak</i>	- a Stake of firewood
<i>Tiew Diengsong</i>	- a particular flower associated with the onset of fever
<i>Tih Shyiap</i>	- sand tiller
<i>Tymmen Shnong</i>	- Village headman
<i>U Blei nongbuh nongthaw</i>	- God the Supreme Being
<i>U ryngkew U basa</i>	- the guardian spirit
<i>U Sdie</i>	- An axe for felling trees and shrubs
<i>Wait Bnob</i>	- hooked knife
<i>Wait Lyngkut</i>	- curved knife
<i>Wait Sum</i>	- butcher's knife

NB: The alphabetical order here follows the Khasi alphabets.

## INTRODUCTION

The Khasis are one of the tribal communities of the North East who have maintained a very close symbiotic relationship with the environment since time immemorial, and whose ethno-cultural traits have been greatly influenced by the natural surroundings. Like any other tribal group, the Khasis have a very close affinity to nature therefore forest which is an important component of nature is intricately linked to the life of the Khasis.

For a Khasi the forest is a well-loved home, a game sanctuary and also an abode of worship, all rolled in one, around which his social, cultural and religious activities revolve.

In the words of H.O Mawrie

*“U Khasi U im bad ka mariang, bad ka mariang ka im bad U”*, which literally means: “A Khasi lives with nature and nature lives with him”. This strong bond created between the Khasi and the environment also leads one to believe that the forest, which is a vital component of the environment, is the very source of life. It is in the Khasi custom to believe that the earth with all its bounty is referred to as *Meiramew* which means “*mother earth*”, *Meiramew* being a combination of land, forest, rivers and streams, the Khasis do not separate these elements of the mother and the earth as separate entities. Forests are a treasure trove of a large variety of food. It is estimated that 60-70 per cent of the food consumed by the tribals comes from the forest. It is a familiar sight to see Khasi women and children setting off into the woods to collect edible fruits and roots. They look upon the forest as the ultimate storehouse of wealth, a source of immediate help at difficult times, a readymade kitchen and a

Khasi would spare no pains from running to the forest and grabbing any edible fruit to offer to an unexpected guest who just pays a sudden visit.

Forest products such as tubers, rhizome, succulent shoots, fruits and mushrooms have provided the villagers with an alternative source of economic activity besides supplementing their basic requirements of food. An estimated study reveals that most of the village folk who still continue the collection of wild mushroom from the Upper Shillong Reserve Forest in Laitkor peak collects about 5 kgs. of mushroom per day and sell them in the markets of Shillong. An interesting study made by a well known Khasi author, S. Khongsit brings out a list of 113 food items comprising edible leaves, bark of trees, fruits and vegetables that are procured from the forest which begin with the prefix "Ja", which in Khasi means 'cooked rice'.

With the increase in the realization of global value of medicinal plants, today the medicinal plant trade (eco-piracy) is a hidden economy. According to a research conducted by the North Eastern Bio-diversity Research Cell, the North Eastern Region alone has more than 10,278 plant species documented so far and contributes to more than 17 per cent of the country's genetic resources. Besides, the herbal practitioners conducted a preliminary survey covering 200 herbal practitioners on the use of medicinal plants and related activities in East Khasi Hills, Jaintia Hills and West Khasi Hills and Ri Bhoi, which documented the use of more than 150 species of plants. There is a growing concern among the local practitioners and environmentally conscious citizens for the rapid rate of species depletion in certain areas due to the absence of any effective regulatory and monitoring agency. There is a lurking danger of biopiracy, which may be responsible for the unrestricted depletion of the State's bio-resources. However for any research along the field of forest as a source of medicinal plants it is necessary to reflect on its traditional assumption and then to analyze the Indigenous Knowledge System (IKS) pertaining to their usage in the Khasi society.

Forest has provided the Khasi with food, fodder, water, shelter and medicine. For their food, they collect from forest a great variety of minor forest produce. The forests of Khasi Hills possess a vast resource of medicinal plants and herbs on which the Khasis have traditionally depended for the treatment of various diseases. The rural folk have practiced this age-old herbal lore and developed the system of Khasi folk medicine (*dawai kynbat*) into a lasting tradition, which continues even today.

Thus the Khasi have a very close affinity with the forests, which encompasses a wide spectrum of life including food, medicine, shelter, housing, agricultural implements, musical instruments besides having a strong cultural link.

Like many other hill people of the North East, the economy of the Khasi is essentially land and forest oriented. Agriculture is the mainstay of the people, which is largely carried out, in primitive method of *jhum* or shifting cultivation. This practice is, however, considered destructive as vast areas of forest is cleared and burnt so that cultivation can be carried on for at least 3 to 4 consecutive years. After a gap of 4 to 5 years, those areas are again used for cultivation without allowing the land to rejuvenate. *Jhum* cultivation, which is locally known as "*thang shyrti*" is still practiced by a large section of the community in Khasi Hills.

Nature has endowed the Khasi homeland with the quality of soil and climate suitable for a wide variety of crops, fruits and vegetables. The Central plateau of the district is suitable for growing high altitude paddy, maize, millets, potato and temperate fruits and vegetables; while the southern slopes bordering Bangladesh grows plantation crops like oranges, bananas, pineapples, erecanuts, betel leaves, bay leaf etc. In the northern side of the district bordering Assam, paddy, maize, banana, and pineapple are widely grown. But the Khasi economy has essentially remained a tribal economy till today, characterized by simple technology and primitive method, geographical isolation and single-family unit of production and consumption. No appreciable change appears to have taken place in the style

and technique of rural economy despite Government efforts during the last 50 years and more of planning for development.

A majority of the village industries in the Khasi Hills are forest based. Industries like carpentry, cane and bamboo work, bee-keeping, broomstick making etc. derive their raw materials from the forest which provides employment opportunities to a large section of the rural people who work in the forests by felling trees and sawing timbers in lime kilns and burning and selling charcoal. The womenfolk and children of the poor families traditionally eke out their living by cutting and selling firewood, collecting broomstick, selling wild fruits and vegetables while the men folk penetrate deeper into the forest and gather valuable orchids and wild flora for earning handsome prices for the urban rich.

Thus forest occupies the central place in the socio-economic and religious life of the Khasi who constitute an integral component of the forest ecosystem. The forest has always been a plus item and it will continue to remain so with added interest and it will be on forestry that the future economy of our people can find sound footing (Mathew, 1980:26).

### **A Word on the Existing Literature**

Literature has little to offer on environmental issues in Meghalaya in general and the Khasi Hills in particular. Some scholarly works of research has already been done on subjects relating to the forest resources of Meghalaya, the existence of Sacred Groves, the natural environment of the Khasis and System of Forest Management in the Khasi Hills etc. However, the vagueness of such references and the obvious richness of the subject led to the initiation of this present study. A few books that contained references relevant to the present study are :

A.C Sinha's book *Beyond the Trees, Tigers and Tribes* (1993) which has thrown light on the system of Forest administration starting from the colonial to post-colonial stage with particular reference to early efforts of forest utilization in North East

frontier. His work reveals some alarming facts about the discovery of valuable plant species in and around the forests of Khasi and Jaintia Hills. David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha's co-edited book *Nature, Culture Imperialism* (1996), introduces the reader to the nature-man relationship embedded in the cultures of South East Asia. H.O Mawrie's book *The Khasi Milieu* (1981) is a compilation of some important themes in Khasi life and culture like marriage, family, religion, village, administration, folktales etc. and he devotes 2 chapters exclusively to the role of nature in Khasi life. His resounding declaration "A Khasi lives with nature and nature lives in him" summarises the close affinity between the Khasi and nature. Mawrie also relates the symbolic significance of trees by associating them with Khasi folk tales and legends. Mawrie's book also unfolds the rich storehouse of Khasi folk tales and legends that centre on things and objects seen in nature. Besides the moral values attached to these folk tales, they are also an important source of information about the long attachment between the Khasi and nature that have existed since time immemorial. The book "*The Last Frontier-People and Forests in Mizoram*" (1996) written by Daman Singh presents a 'realistic' account of Mizoram backed by some useful data on forest as a mode of resource use. The author interprets the term "forest" in Mizoram in two ways: forest cover which includes the total area under tree or bamboo vegetation and forest by use which excludes those areas used for non-forestry purposes, e.g. *jhumming*. With regard to *jhum* cultivation, it is the well-established Mizo custom of '*tlawmngaihna*' which goes along with the principle of collective use of land for shifting cultivation. Daman Singh notes the strong element of mutual cooperation shared by members of the Mizo community in agricultural operations. She also examines the changing interaction of man and his environment in Mizoram over the span of a century and attributes this change to a set of four parameters: Belief Systems, Domain, Social institutions and Technology.

A number of books in vernacular literature also proved

fruitful for the present study. Amongst them, K. Dhirendro Ramsiej (1992) in his book entitled "*Ka Mariang ha U Khasi bad Ki purinam-puriskam*", brings out the intricate relationship between nature and culture amongst the Khasis. A number of Khasi folktales and legends associated with nature-man relationship have been highlighted by the author which throws light on the part played by nature in shaping the Khasi culture. In the book, "*Ka Dieng bad ka Culture Jong Ngi*", S. Khongsit narrates the numerous species of trees, plant and herbs that grow in Khasi-Jaintia hills which have played an important role in the life of the Khasi both in the past and present. Talking about the role of theology and culture in the maturity of human civilization, H.O. Mawrie in his book "*Ka Theology Jong ka Niam Khasi*" stresses the importance of understanding the theology of a tribe. The author also speaks about the role played by the environment in shaping the theology and belief of humanity. Man is already a part of nature and nature is already a part of man.

Published literature in the form of official reports and documents has also been useful sources of information on historical and administrative matters. On the whole, what proved to be most fruitful was the real life situations revealed by my field trips which formed part of my research work for my Ph. D. These visits aimed at gaining insight through interview and observation on the role and importance of forest in the life of the Khasis.

This book examines the role of the forest in the life of the tribal communities in India, with particular focus on the Khasis. Tracing the origin and history of the Khasis, it describes in detail their land, ecological heritage, economy and parameters of forest usages among them.

It further discovers the wholeness of nature and ecology in the socio-religious life of the Khasis. Also, it presents a detailed account of the parameters of forest usages in Khasi society, covering various aspects of their life and culture such as shelter, food, medicinal herbs, musical instruments, weaving and dying, and rituals as well as ceremonies.

**Dr. Rekha M. Shangpliang** did her M.A. in Sociology from North-Eastern Hill University Shillong, and attained 1st Class 1st position (Gold Medalist). Thereafter she completed her M.Phil and Ph.D. from North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. She was a Lecturer in Sociology at St. Edmund's College, Shillong and presently a senior Lecturer at the Department of Sociology, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. She has contributed many articles in various academic journals and edited volumes.

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## People and Forests in Khasi Hills

- Forest : A Sacred Entity ● Sacred Groves or *Law Kyntang*: An Ecological Legacy ● Forest Wisdom of the Khasis ● Khasi Rural Women and Forest Livelihood ● Jhum Cultivation or *Thang Shyrti*

## Parameters of Forest Usage in Khasis Society

## Conclusion

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## also available

- \* British Forest Policy in Assam/ **Rajib Handique**
- \* Forest Government and Tribe/ **Chittaranjan Kumar Paty (Ed.)**
- \* Forest Planning at Landscape Level/ **K.C. Beberta**
- \* Forestry for the Next Decade (In 2 Vols.)/ **Ajoy Kumar Bhattacharya**
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