

F237
994

Growth and Development of Khasi and Garo Languages

Edited by

C. R. Marak and J. S. Shangpliang



Sahitya Akademi

Growth and Development of Khasi and Garo Languages : A collection of papers presented in the seminar held on 28-29 March 2001, edited by C. R. Marak and J. S. Shangpliang. Sahitya Akademi, 2008. Price : Rs.70

© Sahitya Akademi
ISBN 978-260-2514-5

First Published : 2008

NE
495.93
GRO;2

Sahitya Akademi

Rabindra Bhavan, 35 Ferozeshah Road, New Delhi 110 001

Sales : Swati, Mandir Marg, New Delhi 110 001

Jeevan Tara, 23A/44X, Diamond Harbour Road, Kolkata 700 053

172 Mumbai Marathi Grantha Sangrahalaya Marg, Dadar,

Mumbai 400 014

Central College Campus, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar Veedhi,

Bangalore 560 001

Main Guna Building Complex, 443 (304) Anna Salai, Teynampet,

Chennai 600 018

Cover : B. S. Hynniewta

NEWU LIBRARY

Acc No. 215207

Acc By. m

Date. 27-3-09

Class I.

Sub.H.

Enter

Typeset by

North-East Centre For Oral Literature, Shillong

Printed by

D. G. Offset, 96N, Maharani Indira Devi Road, Kolkata 700 060

COMPUTERISED

Amu
30/09/09

CONTENTS

Introduction	i
The Growth and Contribution of Khasi Journalism towards Khasi Literature <i>Sumar Sing Sawian</i>	1
Traditional Garo Poetry : A Survey <i>Caroline R. Marak</i>	6
A Glimpse at Khasi Literature Today <i>Bevan L. Swer</i>	14
The Growth and Development of Khasi Language : A Linguistic Perspective <i>B. War</i>	18
Contribution of Garo Women to Garo Poetry <i>Brucellish K. Sangma</i>	23
Garo Vocabulary <i>Llewellyn R. Marak</i>	37
Language as System and Institution—Khasi Perspective <i>L. B. Kharlukhi</i>	43
Gleaning and Preservation of the Khasi Traditional Literature and Cultural Heritage <i>W. R. Laitflang</i>	47
Development of Garo Folktales <i>A. G. Momin</i>	52
The Garo Language : Its Origin and Dialects <i>M. S. Sangma</i>	55
Loan-Words in Khasi : Orthography and Pronunciation <i>Ivan M. Simon</i>	61

The Birth of Literary Theory and Criticism in Khasi	78
<i>M. B. Jyrwa</i>	
Khasi Language and the Sahitya Akademi	82
<i>M. P. R. Lyngdoh</i>	
Origin and Development of Drama among the Garos	90
<i>Julius L. R. Mark</i>	
Khasi Language as a Written Language	98
<i>Sylvanus Lamare</i>	
List of Contributors	102

Introduction

The papers included in this volume are contributions to the Regional Seminar on the Growth and Development of Khasi and Garo Languages held on 28 and 29 March, 2001 at Shillong organized by the Directorate of Arts and Culture, Government of Meghalaya and sponsored by the Sahitya Akademi. Different aspects of these languages and the development of their literature have been covered by the contributors.

Khasi and Garo belong to different linguistic groups. Garo is one of the branches of the Bodo group; some of its cognate languages are Boro-Kachari, Rabha, Mech, Hajong, Koch, Tiwa, Kokborok (Tripuri) and Dimasa. The speakers of these languages are scattered all over the North-East India. Bodo, in turn, is one of the branches of the Tibeto-Burman group of languages descended from the Tibeto-Chinese linguistic family.

It is believed that the Khasi language, as was the case of most North-Eastern Indian tribal languages, had its root in the ancient period. "The languages of the North-East are ancient, but they survived as oral languages until the arrival of Christian missionaries in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Indeed the Lepcha language of Sikkim, as presumed by Ramnika Gupta in her introduction to the book *Indigenous Writers of India*, published in 2006, "is believed to be even older than Sanskrit but a written script was not created until Rev. William Start started a school for Lepcha language and culture in 1841".

Khasi, like the speech forms found in the hill country of the middle and lower Mekong and the middle of the Chindwin rivers, is of Mon-Khmer origin. According to Grierson, it is one of the five groups of the Mon-Khmer family. The first group is the language spoken by the inhabitants of the hill country of the middle and lower Mekong, the Mon spoken in Pegu and the Anamese of Annam are a part of the second. The dialects of the Khmer language used in Cambodia form the third group. Palaung or Wa, spoken in the regions north-east of Mandalay, and the dialects of the hilly country around

the upper middle courses of Mekong and Chindwin form the fourth group. The dialects of the Khasi language constitute the fifth group.¹

The development of written literature among the Garos and Khasis is of recent origin, as among a majority of the tribes of North-East India. Hence it is of utmost importance to take a quick look at the history of the past two centuries to see how these languages came to be written and how their written literature developed.

Reducing tribal languages south of the Brahmaputra took place along similar lines and about the same time. The processes, approaches and motivation involved were similar. Among the Garos, Khasis, Nagas and Mizos the Christian missionaries with the active support of the British administration took the initiative to educate and convert them. Giving the foundation of education and imparting the gospel in their own language was crucial for the success of their mission. The British officials took the first step to identify the tribes and survey the languages spoken in the North-East India, as they had done in the rest of India. Reducing those languages into writing, and producing school text-books and translation of the Scriptures and other material was a long process and involved painstaking effort by many dedicated missionaries and enlightened local people, over a long period of time.

The effort of educating and converting the Nagas, for example, began with the support and contributions of the British officials towards the project at Namsang village in the Ao area undertaken by Miles Bronson. In 1840 a school was opened in the village under the direction of Mrs Bronson with twenty boys. Bronson started translation of the Scriptures. Though the work at Namsang in Tirap District of the present Arunachal Pradesh, then called North-East Frontier Agency, had to be given up due to various reasons, the mission efforts continued with Sibsagar as the base. Rev. E. W. Clark mastered the Ao language and from 1868 to 1885 he wrote a dictionary, a primer and a catechism. He also wrote history books, the life of Joseph, and translated the gospels of Mathew and John in that language with Dekahaiming as the headquarters. Education was received with enthusiasm; from Lyrman village people came asking for teachers to educate them and their children.

The number of day-schools rose to five in 1887, seven in 1888 and nine in 1889, with an ever increasing number of pupils. Efforts to teach them English, their own language and some arithmetic went on. In 1895 Teachers' Normal school was established at Molung. The trend among the Nagas was towards self-sufficiency in financing their schools, as they were keen on receiving education.²

In 1800 at the Serampore Baptist Mission, Krishna Chandra Pal was baptized, who later became the first missionary to Khasi Hills on the eastern frontiers of Bengal. He worked at Pandua in the plains below Cherrapunjee. His favourable reports about the Khasis filled William Carey with enthusiasm to open a station for the tribe. At the initiative of Dr William Carey stationed at Serampore, a translation of the New Testament into Khasi was started in 1813 and printed in Bengali characters in 1824, which was however found to be unintelligible to native speakers. A fresh translation was started by the young missionary Alexander B. Lish in 1833 using Bengali characters. Prior to 1841, the Shella dialect was adopted as the written Khasi language. Education in Khasi and Jaintia Hills found its way through the border village of Shella-Mustoh. Being a commercial border village, Shella was the main point of contact between the Khasis and the Bengalis. An English Boarding School was established at Cherrapunjee in 1834, which was followed by two more schools at Mawsmal and Mawmluh. Watt's scripture catechism in Bengali characters appeared in 1833. Due to various reasons the mission for the Khasis appears to have been abandoned. Thomas Jones and his wife, sponsored by the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists' Foreign Missionary Society, arrived in Kolkata in April 1841. In June of the same year, the couple arrived at Sohra, then known as Cherrapunjee. Thomas Jones learnt the Khasi language sufficiently well to start some translations; he introduced the Roman script for writing the language. In 1842 he decided to open schools in the neighboring villages of Sohra, Mawmluh and Mawsmal. They brought out Khasi Readers, a translation of the book *Mother's Gift*, which marked the beginning of Khasi literature.³ The adoption of Sohra dialect or *ka ktien* Sohra as a written language was of recent origin, a little over 160 (a hundred and sixty) years ago.

Khasi written literature, in whatever sense we accept it, has grown to a great measure in spite of it being born only a little over a century and a half ago. Literature of all languages and culture, we believe, was born of societies and communities for the purpose of expounding their philosophy of life, for enshrining and keeping up the memory of the great deeds and vision of the fore-fathers and ancestors and to cherish all that was good or evil, to treasure folk literature containing aesthetic values and artistic merits. This type of literature has descended to us in the form of oral literature. With the advent of letters and scripts, many, and certainly not all, have been transcribed in today's written form.

A span of a century and a half is but a moment compared to a period of two or three thousand years of our literary history. However, in spite of our late on-set, Khasi written literature in all its genres has marched on ahead of many tribal languages of the North-Eastern region. The credit for such a steady and positive progress is due to the awakening of the consciousness and also the untiring effort put in by many of our writers during the latter half of the last century.

The British officer David Scott first conceived of educating the Garos as a solution to the frequent violent conflicts between the community and the zamindars of the neighboring plains. His idea was carried on and implemented by Captain F. Jenkins who opened a Bengali medium school for the Garos at Goalpara in 1847. The first Garos converted into Christianity, destined to be torchbearers to their own community, were students of this school. They were Ramke W. Momin and his uncle Omed W. Momin, baptized by Rev. Miles Bronson at Sukheswar Ghat in Guwahati in 1863. Education spread among the Garos with the opening of more schools, in 1856 a school was started at Rongjuli in Goalpara District; in 1864 Ramke W. Momin opened a school at Damra. Later Ramke W. Momin's school was upgraded to Normal School and shifted to Tura, the headquarters of Garo Hills. Some of the schools established in villages were supported by the Government; a co-educational school was started at Rajasimla in 1868 supported by the Christian Mission, and in 1872 a separate Girls' School of the Mission was opened. By

1874-75 there were fourteen village schools, and an equal number of Government and Baptist Mission supported schools. The Normal School functioned as the nucleus of teacher training for the diffusion of education. A succession of American Baptist missionaries designated for the Garos, I. J. Stoddard, T.J. Keith, E.G. Philips, M.C. Mason, to name only a few, with the assistance of the local educated people, produced text books in many subjects. Primers were written, essays and poems were composed for the purpose, the Scriptures and books connected with religion were translated, side by side went the translation and writing of secular books, stories and fables, and publication of journals. These activities laid the foundation of Garo literature, making it possible to adopt the language to various needs, and enabling authors to venture into different genres and proceed to modernity.

While written poetry advanced earlier, other genres like drama, novel, short story, biography and other prose compositions progressed substantially in the post-independence period. Howard Denison W. Momin, writing in the early 1940s before his premature expiry, is called the Father of Modern Garo Literature, because not only did he write poetry, but also started a literary magazine called *A'chik Ku'rang*. He inspired others to write and publish their work. He gave a renewed emphasis on the trend towards secular literature, and aroused a fresh interest in the native literary traditions. With him came the realization of new possibilities in using the Garo language, and raising the prose and poetic compositions to new heights. Among other prominent writers and poets may be mentioned Ramke W. Momin, Modhunath G. Momin, Jobang D. Marak, Tuniram R. Marak, Baren Bangshall, Jonmoni D. Shira, Evelyn R. Marak, Mackenson Rongmuthu, Gilbert K. Marak and Brucellish K. Sangma. Simison R. Sangma, Icylian R. Marak and Prabodh M. Sangma contributed to the growth of the novel. Keneth M. Momin, Arjison G. Momin, Lindrid D. Shira, Liewellyn R. Marak, Julius L. R. Marak are among those who built drama. A host of writers followed the footsteps of their illustrious predecessors and continued to produce prose compositions, fiction, poems and plays.

At the same time, oral literature was not neglected; in fact, with authors like D. K. Sangma and D. S. Rongmuthu, the worth and beauty of the oral literature came to be rediscovered. Garo oral literature consists of various genres like epic, lyric, narrative and dramatic poetry, folktales, folksongs, lullabies, proverbs, riddles, and so on. Some authors like Dhoronsingh K. Sangma, Dewansingh S. Rongmuthu, Aldrich C. Momin, Mihir N. Sangma, Llewellyn R. Marak, Julius L. R. Marak and Chenggan A. Sangma published their collections of oral literature. Aldrich C. Momin and Mihir N. Sangma contributed substantially to the systematic study of the traditional customs and ceremonies to which the oral literature is inseparably connected.

Papers on Garo Language and Literature:

Out of the six papers on Garo, four are on literature, and two on language. Milton S. Sangma and Llewellyn R. Marak wrote on some aspects of the language, while Julius L. R. Marak, Brucellish K. Sangma and Caroline R. Marak wrote on literature and Arjison G. Momin on folktales.

In order to understand who the Garos are it is important to know the origin of the tribe and their language. M. S. Sangma's paper will serve as an introduction to the subject. M. S. Sangma in his paper 'Garo Language: Its Origin and Dialect' wrote on the Garo language, which besides being the medium of communication, is central to their identity and culture. Taking his information from sources like G. A. Grierson, he traces the origin of Garo language, the linguistic family and affinities, and the distribution of the cognate languages and dialects of Garo. Springing from the parent Bodo of the Tibeto-Burman group, the branches Bodo-Kachari, Garo, Dimasa, Rabha, Mech, Hajong, Tiwa, Koch, Riang and Kokborok languages spread all over North-East India. Except the areas inhabited by the Khasis and Jaintias the Bodos occupied the whole of North-East India, pushed into Bangladesh in the south and Bihar in the west. The author goes on to write about the probable dates of their migration from Tibet. The early Tibeto-Burmans are believed to have entered India before 1000 B.C. along the southern slopes of the Himalayas

eastwards to Assam. Another path of migration could have been across the Himalayas into Nepal and the sub-Himalayan regions of Garhwal-Kumaon. The Garo tradition says that they migrated from Tibet to their present habitats. The paper describes the distribution of the dialects of Garo language in Garo Hills, in Assam and across the borders in Bangladesh, and their present status. A'we dialect spoken in the plains along the Assam-Garo Hills border, has become the written form; it attained the status of the written language because the first converts spoke the dialect, and the missionaries working with them learnt and wrote in that dialect. It has attained dominance all over Garo Hills through the use in churches, writing and education, and consequently other dialects are dying off, and the current trend is towards uniformity.

Traditional oral poetry of the Garos is an unfamiliar subject, though it is the oldest form, and has depth in terms of space, variety and time. It forms the basis of modern literature, yet it is little known and much misunderstood by the educated community. Little analytical study has been made on it. The paper on traditional oral poetry covers but a part of a vast oral literature in different genres existing in Garo language. The paper by C. R. Marak titled 'Traditional Garo Poetry: A Survey' is an attempt at understanding the literature transmitted orally from the hoary past till the present.

C. R. Marak in her paper describes the nature of each of these genres, their place and function in the society. The paper is also an attempt to bring out the literary value of these forms. Oral genres are difficult to collect on account of the timing and place of narration. Bards willing to spare time and energy to sing for the purpose of recording are hard to come by. Their number has dwindled so much that at present finding them poses a problem. The oral history of the Garos is one of the most important genres; in the subject of Folklore studies such legends of origin and migration are being increasingly given their due. The Garos have a very distinct, unambiguous legend of their migration from Tibet to India; it recounts various conflicts, deprivations, desperate situations, settlements and prosperity, as they moved from one place to another, moving to the areas they are occupying today. *Kabe* singing is an indispensable item in the funeral

and post funeral ceremonies. Termed 'funeral wail' by A. Playfair, *kabe* literally means a song of heartbreak at the departure of a loved one. *Ajea* is a genre consisting of a couple of rhyming lines; it has a definite function in the society. It is a vehicle through which people express anecdotes, have fun, joke with one another, communicate, entertain and express romantic feelings, especially in the Wangala season. *Doro* is a sacred, solemn poetry, used in the Wangala season to sing to gods and about the sacred objects in their belief system. *Dani*, sung during the most important Incense Burning ceremony of the festival, narrates the myth of the rituals of Wangala. It tells the origin of the festival of thanksgiving, dance, music, feasting, the practice of marking the house of the Nokma, the village chief and the celebrants with a paste of white rice powder and the significance of burning the incense. The grandest of the oral literature characterized by loftiness of subject, grandeur of style, and dignity of treatment is the epic poetry, *Katta Agana*. Its heroes and heroines and their exploits reflect the cultural ideals of the tribe.

Katta Sailing is an inimitable genre describing Nature and its activities, and its changes according to the seasons as its theme. The sensitivity to and appreciation of nature in all its manifestations by the poet is unique. It is dignified and elevated in style with a generous dose of literary figures.

The author adds the characteristic features of the traditional oral poetry in general, some of which are compactness of structure, use of stock words and phrases, figures and images, which are nevertheless flexible, giving wide freedom to a particular poet. The author concludes by emphasizing the cultural value of the traditional poetry which gives an insight into their belief system and world view, which, in the absence of any written documents and exposition of their faith, we would have no way of knowing.

Julius L. R. Marak, a scholar who has covered a wide area in his research on folklore, social institutions and judicial system, laws and customs of the Garos, in his paper 'Origin and Development of Drama among the Garos' traces the origin of drama from the pre-literate period in Garo Hills and notes that the plays composed orally,

had a clear understanding of the basic purpose of dramatic performance as entertainment. The seeds of drama lie in the traditional epic poetry which celebrates the valour and adventures of the cultural heroes and heroines. The narration and singing of *Katta Agana* epic poem involves a number of bards at a time, who speak in different voices, representing different characters. Episodes of *Katta Agana* are sung during festivals and occasions of social gatherings, in boys' dormitories called *nokpante*, and attract a large number of listeners. With the dawn of education and advent of Christianity, plays came to be composed orally, composers dictated the plays, thus creating manuscripts, which, however, were never published. Care was not taken to preserve them, thus causing immense loss to literature. With the realization of the importance of plays, more came to write and were published since the 1960s. The author cites two sources of drama - Garo folklore and the English drama. Modern drama is represented by original creations which mirror social realities of the present and the past.

J. L.R. Marak has drawn from his rich experience of data collection in order to give a first-hand information in the earliest development of Garo folk-drama in the plains of Assam. The manuscripts unfortunately never appeared in print. To these pioneers we owe the present published versions of *Serejing and Waljan* and *Sonatchi and Khalsin*. The folk drama known as *gabon* were staged in Assamese and Garo languages. Later compositions increasingly came to be written in Garo.

The author classifies the plays into three categories - translated, traditional and modern. Some of Shakespeare's plays have been translated. Traditional plays are based on oral literary traditions, like epic poems, mythical stories and romances. Many of the modern plays are social dramas, reflecting the society of the past and present, and the family life of the Garos.

The author gives a valuable data about the places where performance of plays originated, and the playwrights who took a leading part in organizing them. He traces the growth of the plays which may be called folk drama, and accounts for their decline.

Arijson G. Momin in his paper on 'Garo Folktales: their Development' points out the folklore, customs, beliefs and oral literature as the base for the folktales which consist of myths, legends, folksongs and traditional oral poetry with their themes portraying beauty and mystery of nature.

Another stage in the development of folktale is the composition of the narratives of Biporin, Sonajing, Serejing and Waljan, Khalsin and Sonatchi as central characters in prose and in poetic form.

The author acknowledges the influence of Aesop's fables, other Western folktales and the Indian classical sources on Garo stories. Next, he pays tributes to folklorists like Jobang D. Marak, Dhoronsing K. Sangma and Dewangsing S. Rongmuthu who, realizing the value of the indigenous folklore, took the initiative to collect, document and publish them.

Llwellyn R. Marak in his paper titled 'Garo Vocabulary' traces the early attempts to reduce the Garo language into writing. He describes the representation of Garo phonology in Roman characters, the system of counting and terminology, the use of classifiers which identify the objects being counted.

Some loan words have been borrowed due to necessity, and at times on account of exposure to Bengali, Assamese and Hindustani languages. As a writer keenly interested in the folklore of the Garo people, he is concerned about the fate of the old Garo words which are going out of use, causing much loss to the vocabulary.

He has emphasized the need to do field work in order to retrieve those archaic words, phrases and idioms, which dictionaries alone cannot provide. He is aware that the rich Garo vocabulary, various hidden dialects and oral literature have not been sufficiently tapped and utilized in writing.

B. K. Sangma in her paper entitled 'Contribution of the Garo Women to Garo Poetry' makes a laudable survey of the poems written by twenty-eight women which were published in different anthologies and magazines. The author analyses the poems with an emphasis on the themes chosen by the women and their treatment; and she locates the place of folklore materials in their composition.

Traditionally a greater number of the bards and singers used to be men, though women played a vital role in singing dirges called *kebe* in funeral and post-funeral ceremonies and rituals. Singing the funeral wail is almost exclusively their domain. This being the situation largely in the past, B. K. Sangma has found it important to identify the women writing in verse and enriching the Garo literature with their unique and individual treatment of subjects. The author finds that in many cases women writers assume a persona in their work. The brief introduction of those writers to the reader is an invaluable addition of the author. She describes the themes of J. D. Shira's poems which range from feminist themes of Garo women's life and their status, to patriotic feelings, innocence and experience. Phoebe W. Momin's poems are found to be didactic and solemn in tone, and to contain exhortations to women to live a life of virtue and wisdom, as they shoulder the responsibility of shaping the destiny of their society. Relish B. Sangma takes as her themes; devotion to her mother, patriotism, reflections on the transience of life, God's love and forgiveness. A strain of piety runs through her poems. The next poet taken up is Verna K. Sangma, who, in her concern for the survival of the literary magazines *Da. kua* by an organization in Shillong and *Nokdangni Ripeng* by Mothers' Union, Tura, wrote poems to encourage their continued publication. The themes of her poems show her concern for the fate of women among the Garos as well as for those among other tribes and communities. She writes on the themes of their suffering due to circumstances, male dominance and oppression in their respective cultures.

Papers on Khasi Language and Literature:

Sumar Sing Sawian, a noted journalist and author of several books gives information at a glance about how Khasi literature and periodicals grew, starting from the early contributions made by the Christian missionaries and those of the native writers over a span of a hundred years. Although the approach to literature by the two schools of thought, that is, the Christian and the native, might differ, yet it is here that one sees how valuable are the information and findings we derive from them. As literature is a mirror of the society, Khasi and

Garo literature serve as mirror of the social realities as Prof. B. L. Swer emphasizes in his essay 'A Glimpse at Khasi Literature Today'.

Prior to 1960, especially at its budding stage, writers revealed how Khasi literature had greatly been influenced by the impact of other adjoining cultures. The year 1896 marked an important milestone in the realm of development of Khasi literature. It was on this particular year that translation works were carried out by a prominent Khasi writer, U Jeebon Roy Mairom, known to the Khasi literary world as 'the Father of Modern Khasi Literature'. He translated some Indian classical literature into Khasi. The task of translation is still being carried out to this day by modern writers.

The Welsh Mission brought Christianity to these regions and Christian education with it. The influence of Christian thought had spread alarmingly far and wide. In order to counteract this trend, Seng Khasi was established in 1899 by some like-minded young Khasi writers and thinkers. Thus turning the wheel of thought and ideology back to the indigenous Khasi concept, they kindled the spirit of the past with which even modern authors and poets are in touch.

On aspects of Khasi poetry, drama and novel, writers have exhibited considerable maturity and knowledge and brought these literary genres to proper shape and form in the late sixties and seventies. However, during the nineteen eighties a new front had been opened. It marked the beginning of the age of question and of critical analysis on the subject of treatment in literature. M. B. Jyrwa in her essay 'Birth of Literary Theory and Criticism' traced the origin of the Khasi literary criticism to the year 1891 when it had its beginning.

Another area of Khasi literature which has recently developed, though yet to flourish, is linguistics. B. War in her brief essay on 'The Growth and Development of Khasi Language: a Linguistic Perspective', has, to a large extent, dwelt on a variety of linguistic aspects of Khasi language belonging to the Mon Kmer group of the Austro-Asiatic language family.

Khasi Language, though in its written form had only emerged just a little over 160 years ago, is a dynamic language. It is undergoing changes with the passing of time. It is felt that it needs to accommodate itself with this changing trend. One important

contributing factor to its growth, besides amalgamation of different dialects of Khasi in its vocabulary, is the borrowing factor. Borrowing of words is a common phenomena in respect of different languages of the globe, and a bulk of Khasi vocabulary has come from borrowing. I. M. Simon and B. War have elaborately dealt with this area of Khasi language. B. War's essay has been supplemented by I. M. Simon's essay 'Loan Words in Khasi : their Pronunciation and Orthography'.

M. P. R. Lyngdoh's narrative account on 'Khasi Language and the Sahitya Akademi' makes a very interesting reading, tracing the history of the pursuit by the Khasis for attainment of the recognition of the Khasi language by the Sahitya Akademi, National Academy of Letters, even as Calcutta University, Dibrugarh University and Cambridge University had accorded recognition to the language. The efforts put in by the members of the General Council of Sahitya Akademi representing Khasi Language, R. S. Lyngdoh, M. P. R. Lyngdoh and H. W. Sten together with the constant support of the Khasi Authors' Society and the State Government had failed in convincing the Akademi to accord recognition of the language. M. P. R. Lyngdoh, ex-member of the General Council of the Sahitya Akademi, expressed her concern that a language as rich as Khasi had not been given due recognition.

It is felt that there is no need to elaborate or add anything new to what our esteemed writers had done. Their work is truly commendable and will give any reader of the book a fair picture of how Khasi and Garo languages grew from their beginnings to the present period. The research put in by the contributors will, the editors believe, be of immense value to all concerned.

References :

1. Grierson, G. A. *Languages of North-Eastern India* : Vol I pp 1-2
2. Sangam, M. S. *Hill Societies : Their Modernisation*, pp 190-91
3. Morris, John H. *The History of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists' Foreign Mission to the end of the year 1904*, pp 80-81

Select Bibliography :

1. Morris, John H. *The History of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists' Foreign Mission to end of the year 1904*, Indus Publishing, New Delhi, 1996.
2. Downs, Frederick S. *Essays on Christianity in North-East India*, Indus Publishing, New Delhi, 1994.
3. Sangma, M. S. *History of the American Baptist Mission in North-East India* Vol. II, Mittal Publishing, 1992.
4. Sangma, M. S. *Hills Societies : Their Modernization*, Omsons Publishing, New Delhi, 1995.
5. Grierson, George A. *Languages of North-Eastern India : A Survey*, Vol. I Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, (RP) 1995.

A Glimpse at Khasi Literature Today

Bevan L. Swer

Written Khasi Literature is only 150 years old, and in this rather short span of time it has outgrown its immaturity and gradually spread its wings to new dimensions which have never been thought of in the previous decades. In this short write-up let us take a peep into the tendencies in Khasi literature covering the period from the middle of the last century till today and attempt to pinpoint only the salient features of different literary genres which have embodied themselves in the literature.

Literature as broadly understood is the embodiment of the whole gamut of actions, reactions, inter-actions, experiences, hopes, dreams, faiths and beliefs of the human race. It is through literature that we get a glimpse of the story of man himself. This story is not merely a record of man's struggling to better himself in a given situation and environment, but of his ideals about the best in life. Again, literature in a sense, is a social mirror, besides the aesthetic sense attached to it, because it deals with the stark reality of life. Through literature we see how man struggles with and adjusts himself to his surroundings. We see how he either reacts to or against life whether for his own personal achievements or for social necessities instinctive to him. This whole experience is conspicuously reflected in literature.

Turning our mind to Khasi Literature we distinctively see that the same natural progress of growth and development common to all literatures, has moulded it and transformed it into a maturing literature today. It is a fact that Khasi language and literature is indebted to the Christian Missionaries who had blazed the trail in the 19th century but no doubt its subsequent growth and development ought to be attributed to the ingenuity and genius of the Khasi race itself.

Khasi Literature is a young literature and like other developing and maturing literature, it has not escaped the influence of other literatures. The Welsh missionaries had not only introduced Christianity



to the Khasis (the generic term I ascribe to all descendents of *U Hynniewtrep*) but have also brought along with them education. The birth of Khasi alphabets based on the Roman script in 1841 was the beginning of written Khasi literature. Consequently, Christianised literary influence was the main dominant feature in the works of the earlier Khasi writers whose tendency was towards didacticism coloured with Christian teachings. This trend dominated the literary field for a considerable period of time. Counter-acting to this tendency we see in the beginning of this century a section of Khasi writers belonging to the Seng Khasi (founded in 1899) who withstood the onslaught of the changing times and attempted to steer the literary wheel towards the Khasi concept of 'go back to one's roots' (*Kylla dien trai*).

Later Khasi writers, particularly the present coterie, have been able to shrug off the traditional line of approach and attempt to be secular in their works. Life as it was more so, as it is and as it should be, is vividly portrayed. But it is clearly noticeable that they are discreet enough not to jeopardize and neglect their innate love for and devotion to their own land and race.

What is the trend of Khasi literature today? To seek answers for such a searching question, one has to probe and analyse the various fields of the primary literary genres which one feels is beyond the scope of this brief resume. However, let us just take a peep and try to capture its essence and significance.

Firstly, Khasi poetry has the distinction of being the main bulk of contribution towards Khasi literature. Khasi modern poets to a certain extent have been able to free themselves from the shackles bound by certain major poets of the thirties and forties whose works had been a guiding light to many a poet after them. The general trend, as can be observed, is an attempt not to lose touch with reality of life, and in the process, there is a search for identity of one's individuality in the society. In capturing the spirit of the day, the Khasi poets however do not stray from the common tendency, that is cherishing one's homeland and its tradition and customs. This instinctive reaction to all sights and scenes is a conspicuous characteristic of Khasi poetry

today. I do not know if literary critics may either find this peculiar aspect baffling and interesting or condemn the poetic creations to a guillotin! But the intrinsic value of Khasi poetry can never be under question because all poets have exhibited a rare creativeness combined with a wide range of imagination and ideas, and hence it has transcended the local barriers and the inborn attachment to one's own land. Besides focussing the intense love of freedom of the mind, idolization of nature and its beauties, patriotic fervour and a search for an answer to life, Khasi modern poets are attempting to enrich poetry with various literary art-forms. In this new direction much has been achieved in poetic creations in the form of ballad, sonnet, ode, elegy and free verse.

Secondly, we come to drama and novel which, for the sake of brevity, may be considered together. Earlier Khasi novelists and playwrights seemed to have trodden on unknown ground because the major portion of their works indicated uncertainty and scanty knowledge of what they were doing. Later writers however, have shown maturity of mind and ideas, skill in transcreation, fertile imagination and artistic trait. Khasi drama and novel began to take a proper shape in the sixties and seventies. In these two decades the general trend was toward revival of old Khasi folktales. Another significant aspect of most novelists was their fascination for local themes, settings and rustic life that they employed in the backdrop. Present playwrights however bypass the usual traditional line of approach which they perhaps think irrelevant to the modern situations and conditions of life and attempt to bring their plays close to the audience. The general tendency is to dwell more on social issues which they consider more relevant to the modern Khasi milieu. The eighties see the opening up of a floodgate yard-stick of a 'standard work'.

1. I should add that we are richer in the ballad and the sonnet, still poor in the ode and elegy and the less said about the free-verse the better. But I still wonder why our Khasi poets show this poetic form or why this style of expression has not tickled or captured their imagination so far. I am still seeking for an answer.

2. The nineties do not see much publications either in the novel or drama although the former takes the front seat by way of published form. Khasi creative writers are rather slow to react to drama writing. Perhaps I can only presume that writing a play entails technicality, that is, the requirement of plot construction, characterisation, the cohesiveness of the theme coinciding with the duration in the 'unity of time', the flow of the dialogue and others. Perhaps the authors find novel-writing easier than drama writing.

3. Another field which is yet to develop in Khasi literature is linguistics. Although this branch of studies was introduced in the M. A. curriculum of Khasi literature at North-Eastern Hill University from the early eighties but it has not generated interest as yet. Very few books (in Khasi) have been published so far although language studies is part of the syllabus of the Khasi Elective in B. A. level. It is hoped that few more books will come out with the expected publication of few M. Phil dissertations.

In conclusion, a word or two ought to be said on Khasi literary theory and criticism. This branch of study can be traced back to the thirties but sprang up to a proper shape only in the seventies onwards. The emergence of literary critics in the eighties with sufficient knowledge and skill was a strange phenomenon in Khasi literature. From the prominent literary works that have been published it was noticed that Khasi literary critics have not strictly followed familiar critical techniques or been tied down by any known and traditional method. An approach towards investigation or analysis in most cases is identical. Their free use of known methods and their attempt to fuse them together is an interesting characteristic.

Khasi literature is a growing literature. The process of growing and developing is sometimes looked at with awe, wonder and scepticism. But above all who can hold back the reins of the mind and heart which are free and unfettered, and when artists can enjoy the freedom of imagination and will, and can soar up to the sky with lofty thoughts and ideals and share them with the rest of the world.

Khasi and Garo belong to different linguistic groups. Garo is one of the branches of the Bodo group, with the origin of Tibeto-Burman speech family, while Khasi according to Grierson is one of the five groups of Mon-Khmer language that belongs to the Austro-Asiatic language family.

Khasi written literature has grown to a great measure inspite of it being born only a little over a century and a half ago. While written poetry advanced earlier, other genres like short-story, novel, biography, drama and other prose compositions progressed substantially in the post-independence period. Howard Denison W. Momin, called the Father of modern Garo literature, gave a renewed emphasis on the trend towards secular literature and aroused a fresh interest in the native literary tradition. With him came the realisation of new possibilities in using the Garo language and raising the prose and poetic composition to new heights.

The papers presented in this book deal with different aspects of Garo and Khasi languages and the development of their literatures from the beginning to the present period.

C. R. Marak, retired Professor and former head of the department of Garo, North-Eastern Hill University, Tura, a well-known scholar, who has written numerous books and J. S. Shangpliang, a scholar in Khasi literature have jointly edited this book.

Cover : B. S. Hynniewta

Price : Rs.70

ISBN : 978-260-2514-5



9788126025145