

INTRODUCTION
TO
KHASI ETHICS

DR. BARNES L. MAWRIE SDB

**Introduction to
KHASI ETHICS**

Dr. Barnes L. Mawrie, SDB

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By Barnes L. Mawrie, SDB

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DEDICATION

*This book is dedicated to the
loving memory of Fr. Constantine
Vendrame SDB, a Missionary who
loved the Khasi people and gave
his life for them*

PREFACE

Ethics plays an important role in the life and history of every people. It shapes their minds and hearts and ensures the continuity of a civilization. Man is a moral being and therefore he is governed by moral laws in his personal and social life. Because he is also a relational being, he is also guided in his relationship with others by these rules of ethics. Ethics makes social life possible and gives integrity to a person in his/her personal life.

The Khasis as a group of people possess a very sound ethics. They are governed by a great sense of justice and righteousness. The Khasis believe that it was in the Second Divine Assembly (*Durbar-blei baar*) that God assigned to them the moral code of conduct. Khasi Ethics has been preserved through oral tradition in the form of narratives which have passed on from one generation to the next. Until today no complete study has been made on the theme of Khasi Ethics. We find sporadic references to it in many writings of Khasi scholars like H. O. Mawrie, R. T. Rymbai and others. In most of these writings Khasi Ethics is never treated in a systematic or organic manner. Comparatively, Ethics is still an unexplored subject in Khasi literature. It is this realization that has prompted me to undertake a more thorough study of this subject.

Right at the start of this book I would like to place on record my gratitude to my family members for encouraging me throughout this project. I am also indebted to Fr. Shaji Joseph Puykunnel SDB for taking the trouble to go through the manuscripts and polishing the language. My special words of gratitude to the Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures

(DBCIC) and to the Director for helping me bring this work to a realization. My heartfelt thanks to Rev. Fr. Peter Schiavon SDB for his encouragement and help in this undertaking. Finally, I express my thanks to all the staff and students of Sacred Heart Theological College, Mawlai, who have always been a source of encouragement and inspiration for me all throughout this undertaking. May God bless each one of them.

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Barnes L. Mawrie SDB

GLOSSARY

- Aiñ-briew* This refers to laws formulated by men as distinguished from natural laws or God given laws.
- Ahimsa* This is a popular Hindu and Buddhist teaching on non violence to any living creature.
- Akor* The Khasi term for good manners and right conduct in human relationship.
- Daiñ kuna* A fine (in cash or in kind) levied on the offenders of the law.
- Diengiei* A legendary tree which is said to have grown up on Diengiei peak north of Shillong city.
- Diengsning* A sacred tree among the Khasis. It stands for righteousness and is used in every Khasi altar at the time of sacrifice.
- Dkhar* A Khasi term for non Khasis. It is usually used to refer to people from the plains.
- Duitara* A Khasi string musical instrument which is made of hollowed wood and leather strings. It is one of the most popular Khasi instruments.
- Durbar* A Khasi political assembly where legal cases are brought forward and important issues are discussed. It has full juridical powers.
- Durbar-blei* This is a divine assembly which the Khasis believe to have taken place in the past. There were four such assemblies. Each assembly marked an important era in Khasi history.

- Iawbei* She is the ancestress of the clan and is very much revered by the members of the clan.
- Iingsad* This is the house of the queen mother and is considered a sacred place. It is constructed without using any metal. It is here that annual sacrifices take place.
- Jait* This refers to a Khasi clan usually signified by a particular surname.
- Hynñiew-trep* A name of the ancestors of the Khasis who are said to have been put by God on Sohpet Bneng and the areas around it.
- Ka Hok* This stands for the ideal religious and moral value that every Khasi strives to achieve in life.
- Ka Sang* It is an unforgivable crime and calls for extreme punishments. Incest is one such crime.
- Khatduh* The youngest daughter of the family. She is the guardian of ancestral property and wields tremendous power in the clan.
- Khanatang* Folk tales and legends which contain some important messages in them.
- Kñi* The eldest brother of the family. He is considered as the enforcer of moral education and has the final word in any decision affecting the clan.
- Kur* It refers to a clan. Among the Khasis there are hundreds of such *kurs*. Each *kur* traces its origin from a common ancestress.

- Law kyntang* Sacred groves which are considered sacred among the Khasis. People are forbidden from doing anything untoward in such places.
- Lyngdoh* It means priest. There are two types of *lyngdoh*. One is a ritual priest while the second is an administrative priest who is like a small chief in a political unit.
- Moksa* State of bliss or heaven for the Hindus.
- Nirvana* Heaven or state of liberation from all desires for the Buddhists.
- Nongai-ksuid* An evil person who has the power to cause someone to be possessed by an evil spirit.
- Nongpyrta* A village official whose duty is to announce to the people about some important events concerning the whole village.
- Phawar* This is a Khasi form of couplets which are commonly used in some religious and non religious celebrations.
- Rangbah kur* The eldest or most prominent male member of the whole clan who has exceptional authority over the members of the clan.
- Rangbah shnong* A village headman. He has legislative, judicial and moral authority over the people in his village.
- Saiphla* A witness in a legal case brought before the *durbar* who is supposed to tell the truth.
- Seng Rympei Thymmai* A new movement among the Khasis trying to bring a change from matriliney to patriliney.

- Syiem* A king or a Chief who has authority over a big region. He has legislative, judicial and moral powers over his people.
- Tipbriew tiplei* This is one of the great Khasi commandments. It is equivalent to the Christian commandment of "love God and love your neighbour"
- U Thawlang* Ancestor or the progenitor of the clan. He is also revered and at times pacified by the members of the clan through offerings and prayers.
- U Suitnia* One of the three ancestors. He is the eldest son of the two and is revered as the first *kñi* (maternal uncle) of the whole clan.
- Tait kur* It means to be excommunicated from the clan. This is the worst punishment a person could incur in Khasi society.
- Thlen* A snake demon who is pacified with human blood and in turn makes people rich. This snake worship is the influence of *Saivism* from the plains.
- Tyurut* This can be translated as an evil power operating in a person or thing after a particular mishap by which they become victims of continuous mishaps.
- Yung-blai* This is a Pnar word meaning house of God. It refers to the house of the last daughter of the clan. It is considered so because this is the ancestral home where rites are to be performed regularly.

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INTRODUCTION

Human beings are social and moral beings. They live in communities and are governed by a set of ethical norms of conduct. In every society both personal and social ethics influence a person in his or her decisions and behaviour. Ethics is concerned with "good" and "bad", "right" and "wrong" actions and behaviours which in turn determine the quality of human relationship in society. Ethics is an immediate concern of human beings and permeates the whole life of an individual person.

This book is intended to give an over-all view of the Khasi ethical life. Therefore, an attempt is made to touch upon every aspect of life where morality is concerned, viz., personal and social. Since the Khasis have a strong sense of the *kur*, there is an elaborate discussion on social ethics. The whole discussion on the moral conduct of the Khasis is based entirely on their traditional belief and customs; and tradition is a strong point among tribal people. It is the scope of this work to provide the fundamental aspects regarding Khasi Ethics. As the title of the book indicates, it is intended to introduce the readers to the vast meaning and nature of Khasi Ethics.

The methodology followed in this study is an analytical-folkloristic method combined with a hermeneutical approach. By analyzing the moral stories and folktales of the Khasis we have come to certain conclusions concerning their moral life and ethical system. This method is in keeping with the Narrative Ethics which bases itself on stories and folktales. The hermeneutical method is employed to bring out the mean-

ing and significance of these narratives. Hermeneutics also helps us to come to certain important conclusions regarding the ethical system of the Khasis.

The whole book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter one is on *What is Ethics*. To speak so much about Ethics without the prior knowledge of what Ethics is or what is its scope, would be too unsystematic an approach. Therefore, in the first chapter a brief discussion on the scope and nature of Ethics is provided. Ethics is closely linked with society, therefore a discussion on the *Hynñiew-trep* society (the Khasis) is included here.

Chapter two is on the theme *Ethics and Khasi Religion*. This chapter elaborates the great commandment among the Khasis concerning righteous living and also the four associate commandments based on this. These commandments are religious as well as ethical norms of life. For the Khasis Ethics and religion are bound together. One cannot separate the two without harming the whole structure. These commandments form the basis of Khasi Ethics and Religion.

Chapter three speaks of the *Personal Ethics among the Khasis*. This chapter discusses the personal aspects of the Khasis especially with respect to their conjugal life and administration of their family property. The chapter also deals with moral norms concerning marriage and divorce and also elaborates the concept of *ka sang* (taboos) found among the Khasis.

Chapter four dwells on the *Social Ethics of the Khasis: The Political and Judicial System*. This chapter first of all describes the Khasi political organization responsible for the maintenance of moral discipline among the people. This is followed by an elaborate description of the Khasi judgement

and all the moral implications in it. The chapter also deals with the traditional punishments meted out to the offenders of the laws.

Chapter five dwells on the *Narrative in Khasi Ethics*. It brings out the power and relevance of narratives in Khasi Ethics. The chapter studies Narrative Ethics as the form of ethics that is prevalent among the Khasis who have a long history of oral tradition.

In Chapter six focus is made on the *Ethical Dimension of the Khasi Idioms*. These are studied in the light of the narrative tradition among the Khasis. A close analysis of these idioms and *ki ktien tymmen* (wise sayings) clearly indicates that they are primarily intended to carry moral lessons for whoever listens to them.

Chapter seven on the other hand describes *Nature as the Source of Khasi Ethical Norms*. It is from nature that the Khasis derive their tales and stories. Nature on her part dispenses justice to one and all.

Chapter eight is a critical evaluation of the contemporary situation in the light of the changes and *Evolution of Morality in Khasi Society*. This chapter examines the influence of western culture and of Christianity on Khasi moral life in general leading to some changes both positive and negative.

Ethics is such a vast subject that it is impossible to treat Khasi Ethics in its entirety. This topic is scantily explored in Khasi literature, and therefore there is scanty material for reference. There is still a lot of possibilities to research on this particular area. This book deals only with the main tenets of Khasi Ethics and hopefully anyone who reads through it, will get a satisfactory idea of the moral life of the Khasis.

This short essay is meant to serve as an eye opener to many other people who may be still ignorant about the Khasi style of life. Above all, it is evident that there are many valuable things in Khasi Ethics that ought to be shared by all. It is the objective of this book to create an awareness among the Khasi people about the richness and value of their moral tradition which if we are not careful, we may lose them in the course of time.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

Introduction to Khasi Ethics is a description of the moral life of the Khasi people, their ethical code of conduct and the fundamental moral norms that regulate their day to day existence. The Khasis have a very profound ethics which is based on their religious convictions. The ethical tradition of the Khasis is chiefly oral and for this reason they possess a large number of *khanatangs*, *paroms*, *puriskams* (legends and folktales) which have come down to us through this oral tradition. The Book is divided into eight chapters which highlight the following aspects :

- It explains the fundamental nature of Ethics in a brief and concise manner and also explains how Khasi Ethics and Religion are closely connected and they influence each other.
- Throws light on the important aspects of Khasi Ethics. It describes elaborately the nature of Khasi Personal Ethics and the concept of *Kur* and *Kur* morality.
- It speaks in detail of the Khasi Social Ethics emphasizing the communitarian character of Khasi society. It shows how the sense of common well being and altruism permeate the day to day life of a Khasi.
- It describes how Khasi Ethics is Narrative in its character and concrete examples of Narrative Ethics are given to support this statement.
- The Book also speaks of the evolving aspects of Khasi Ethical life. The onset of western civilization, the advent of Christianity and the encounter with other cultures have brought about a lot of transformation in Khasi ethical norms. Both the positive and negative aspects are discussed here. The Book is the first one to deal on the topic of Khasi Ethics in greater details. Therefore it is envisaged as a useful source of information for further study and research.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Barnes L. Mawrie SDB, is a Khasi hailing from Shillong. He holds a doctorate in Catechetics from the Salesian Pontifical University (Rome), a B.Ed. degree from NEHU and an M.Ed. from Kamraj University. He is currently pursuing a doctoral research in Anthropology at NEHU. At present he functions as a Reader and the Vice President of Sacred Heart Theological College and the Asst. Director of the Don Bosco Centre for Indigenous Cultures (DBCIC), Mawlai. He has to his credit many articles in some scholarly reviews and journals and is the author of *The Khasis and Their Natural Environment* published in 2001 now running into the second edition.

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