

'Urged by a deep concern for the future of their race whose social structure was being eroded, whose moral fibre weakened and whose bond of unity disintegrating by the inroad of foreigners, especially the Welsh Calvinistic Mission, who mercilessly attacked, denigrated and maligned their religion, condemned their culture, sixteen Khasi non-Christian youngmen met together on the 23rd November, 1899 in the Brahma Samaj Hall at Mawkhar to form an association to forge and mould again its people and to revive the moral teaching and tenets passed on from generation to generation'.

This is how the formation of Seng Khasi, a socio-cultural association of the Khasis of Meghalaya, has been described by late Mr. Kynpham Singh¹, who, till his death two years back, was actively associated with it.

Recently the Seng Khasi has been admitted to the International Association of Religious Freedom (IARF) as an associate member and two delegates of the association attended its 24th Congress at Holland in 1981². The other members of the IARF from India are *Sadharan Brahma Samaj*, *Islam and the Modern Age Society* and *The Unitarian Union of North-East India*. In the Profile of the member groups of IARF published by its Secretariat in July 1981 on the occasion of its 24th Congress, the Seng Khasi has been described as a socio-cultural association of the Khasis founded in 1899 as a defense of Khasi culture against intolerant influence of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission Movement and opposition from the Colonial Government in preserving their traditions³.

Thus it appears that the immediate cause for the formation of Seng Khasi was the challenge posed by the Welsh Mission, actively supported by the Colonial Government. The challenge was real. Besides proselitisation, campaign against the traditional institutions and practices was launched. The principal objective of the Seng Khasi was, therefore, to work for retaining their socio-cultural and religious heritage. Being in that stage of development when social institutions were bound to be intertwined with kinship and religion, the Seng Khasi leaders, placed much emphasis on religion to retain social cohesion and fellowship. In the Constitution of the Seng Khasi it is stated that it is an organization of all the Khasis who adhere to the traditional religion. These Khasi are described as Khasi Khasis to differentiate them from the Chris-

tian Khasis. It is declared that a Khasi is Khasi only because of his religion and to understand him one has got to go deep down into the very root of his religion. One of the declared objectives of the Seng Khasi is to foster a sense of brotherhood among the the Khasis who still retain their socio-cultural and religious heritage. Another important objective is to create consciousness of God, the Sovereign Lord, the Almighty, the Creator, the Omnipotent, the Omniscient.

In the IARF Congress held in Holland in 1981, one of the delegates representing Seng Khasi, Mr. H. O. Mawrie, declared that according to the Khasi religion there is but one God, the God Universal, the Creator of Mankind and religion is a way to God as well as man and is known as *Ka Niam Tipbriew Ka Niam Tipbri.*⁴

In this sense Khasi religion is claimed as monotheistic.

Ritualistic System Examined

An analysis of Khasi ritualistic system will show that it acts as a binding force for the group for the renewal and strengthening of a conviction and initiates the individual into a communal life with a sense of communal well-being combined with responsibilities to one's family, clan and community. The system has arisen out of the practical necessity of hazardous action and dangerous enterprise out of the conflict between human plans and realities faced by a people inhabiting a mountaneous country, labouring hard for subsistence with the practice of shifting cultivation.

It is unlikely that a religion based on such a ritualistic system will be personal and monotheistic. It is bound to be communal and determines the world-view of the community. The religious conduct of each member of the community is regulated by the ritualistic system. The psychic becomes secondary since it is a reflection of the practical aspect of life.

Gods and goddesses are conceived and the ritualistic system is organised accordingly.

The rituals both at family and group level indicate ancestor worship, nature worship, spirit worship and divination with a preponderance of sacrifice and wine libation. Even if a Creator God is conceived, he is propitiated along with ancestors and other gods, especially goddesses, the principal being Mother Earth.⁵ The worship of ancestors provides a supernatural framework for the principle of unilineal descent by constant renewal of faith on the descent system and the worship of earth for the principle of contiguity and fertility. The supernatural sanction of ancestor wor-

ship also supplements the authority as is seen in the *Pomblang* (popularly known as Nongkrem Festival) where the authority of the ancestral mother of the ruling clan (*Lei Long Syiem*), the ancestral maternal uncle (*U Suidnia*) and the ruler (*Syiem*) of the state through the God of the state is ritualistically established.

Ancestor worship permeates every sphere of the life of a Khasi, from birth to death. In their communal life, in every community rites and festivals, the most essential part is ancestor worship. It also fits in their practice of erecting monoliths. It is a common belief among the ancestor worshippers that dead ancestors freed from earthly bondage are elevated to a supernatural status capable of aiding mortals materially in times of crises. The Khasis do not accept death, do not mourn death with outward signs, preserve the bones of the dead in the clan ossuary (*mawbah*) and only bid goodbye to the departed souls with the words : *Khublei khie leit bam kwai sha iing U Blei ho* (Goodbye, go and chew betelnut in the house of God). The dead ancestor's wish is supposed to be the eternal continuation of life power.

An element of luck is always present in the hard struggle for existence. As good and ill luck are attributed to the superior powers, benevolent and malevolent spirits, the principle of worshipping occult power and dependence on divination is but natural. This is the principle that works in spirit and nature worship and divination. A number of spirits are worshipped, groves are considered sacred and every ritual is preceded by a divination, the two common divination being hepatascopy and egg-breaking. This is followed by libation and sacrifice. When the priest (*lyngdohsoh blei* in *Pomblang*) scatters wine on the soil from a gourd he and his folks expect more fertility from the soil. When they sacrifice a goat or a pig they expect a magic which would afford them sustenance.

If rituals are to be taken as the implementation of a belief, the Khasi rituals implement the belief that the ancestors elevated to a supernatural status would aid the mortals materially in times of crisis. Sacrifice and libations are thus the two integral parts of these rituals. Goats are sacrificed considering their virility — blood flows to earth and wine is compared to blood. Both are used with two ends in view : Overcoming death and ensure birth and continuity. Wine (and blood) is taken as a life giving principle.

Rituals inspire them in action, in their social institutions.

Deities

The principle of communal wellbeing also worked in the conception of deities. Although there is a supreme god as the creator

of the universe, he is never worshipped directly and has no place in the rituals. He is represented by a goddess *Ka Blei Synshar*. He is conceived as one without gender and is addressed as *Ka Blei U Blei* without using either the masculine prefix *U* or feminine prefix *Ka*. The feminine prefix has the precedence. This reflects the importance of feminine or mother principle in a matrilineal society practising agriculture. *Ka Blei Synshar* is the supreme goddess for prosperity and justice. Other deities associated with communal wellbeing are also female such as *Blei Rymmaw* (the mother earth), *Ka Thlang* (the goddess of harvesting), *Ka Sngi* (the Sun, the reigning goddess), *Ka Blei Lew* (the market deity), *Ka Rasong* (market deity), *Ka Bit Syrte* (the goddess who hold the bellows to keep up the fire in the furnace), *Ka Blei Mynso* (goddess of accident), and *Ka Taro* (goddess of wealth).

The conception of deities are, therefore, role-specific and influenced by social forces. A matrilineal society, by its own logic, conceives female deities as agents of human wellbeing. A goddess *Ka Sngi* (the Sun) reigns and a supreme goddess *Ka Blei Synshar* ensures prosperity and justice. By the same logic mother earth (*Blei Rymmaw*) is conceived as only next to god almighty. The supreme god can only be propitiated by libation to *Blei Rymmaw*.

Male deities, it is assumed, have been conceived only after state formation since they are all associated with administration and territorial defence such as *U Lei Muluk* (god of the state), *U Basa Shnong* (god of the village) and *U Lei Shillong* (god of the state of Shillong). It is to be remembered that in Khasi-Jaintia society women were forbidden to take part in state activities. All the *durbars* (councils) from the village *durbar* (*Durbar Shnong*) to *Durbar Hima* (state council) are all-male institutions. Thus the gods associated with administration and defence are male.⁶

Seng Khasi Movement

The Khasi religion as propagated by the Seng Khasi seems to be different from the ritualistic religion as discussed above. In the Seng Khasi interpretation of Khasi-Jaintia religion god is conceived as a personal god with whom an individual can have direct communion. There is no established priesthood. God can be worshipped alone in one's own house or in the open, anywhere.⁷ This is distinctly different from the ritualistic system which allows only a communal propitiation conducted by a priest (*Soh Blei* in *Pomblang*) and with libation and sacrifice. Moreover, *lyngdohship* in Khasi-Jaintia Hills is nothing but an established priesthood. The Seng Khasi leaders also claim that Khasi religion is mono-

theistic. It is said that *U Blei*, the name given to God, is He and only He. He is the creator and sustainer of the Universe. He is almighty, omniscient and omnipotent.⁸ At the sametime, this creator god is conceived as above gender⁹. But while in one interpretation this god is masculine (*He and only He*) and called *U Blei*,¹⁰ in another version it is said that in prayers God is addressed as either *A Blei* or *Ko Blei* without using the masculine prenx *U* or the feminine prefix *Ka*. God is also addressed as *Ka Blei* with the feminine prefix *Ka* having a precedence¹¹.

Whatever may be the manner of addressing God, He (or someone above gender) is one and the religion is monotheistic. In matter of worship, however, the Khasi religion realises God in three aspects—God Universal, the creator of mankind ; God localised, the guardian of the land and the people of Khasi-Jaintia Hills and God at home, a Being right inside the house and family¹². God has, therefore, many identities. To a state the God localised is *U Leihima U Leisima*, to the *elaka* and *raid U Leimuluk U Leijaka* and to a village *U Leikhyrdop U Leikharai*. The God at Home is *U Leilongkur U Leilongjait* when He is conceived as the god of the clan (*Kur*) whereas god of the family (*iing*) is *Ka Blei ha iing*¹³.

In the above description we note the masculinity of gods associated with state and territory whereas god gets a feminine character at the family level and is called *Ka Blei ha iing*. The supreme God known as *U Blei Nongthaw Nongbuh* is however male and He takes these different indentities at different level, universe, locality and home. The supreme God is also conceived as above gender and number and can be addressed as *Ka*, *U* or *Ki*, (feminine singular, masculine singular and plural) and sometime simply as *Ko Blei* (oh God).

Religion idealized

Keenly feeling the twin challenge of the modern age and christianity, the leaders of the Seng Khasi set out to revive, reform and codify their version of Khasi religion. With this end in view *U Jeebon Roy* brought out a book, *Ka Niam Jong Ki Khasi, in 1897* followed by another, *Ka Kitab ba Batai Pynshynna shaphang Uwei U Blei* in 1900. In these books, *U Jeebon Roy* dwelt upon the universality of god and conceptualized Khasi religion. Since then other writers have also contributed in the same direction. This they had done to face the challenge to their religion and culture through organised proselitisation by church missionaries with support from the colonial rulers. The Seng Khasi leaders maintain that Khasi religion is not animistic based on ancestor, spirit and

nature worship but is spiritual and monotheistic. It has now assumed the character of a distinct faith with an ethical system adjusted to both the age-old ritualistic system and social order.

Thus they proceeded in a highly selective fashion and the selections operated in the direction of both modernity and monotheism. This enterprise, which canonized some elements of the old religion and ensured others, was certainly creative and idealized¹⁴. It seems to have met with certain measure of success in propagating the idea that Khasi religion has a distinct ethical base and spiritual strength.

Notes & References

1. Kynpham Singh, 'Seng Khasi', *Where Lies the Soul of Our Race*, U Hipshon Roy, ed. (Seng Khasi, Shillong, 1982) p.7.
2. The delegates were U Hipshon Roy, Secretary, Seng Khasi and U. H. Onderson Mawrie.
3. See, the Excerpt from the Profile, *Where Lies the Soul of Our Race*, (Seng Khasi, Shillong, 1982), p. 76.
4. H. O. Mawrie, 'A Short View of the Khasi Religion', *Where Lies the Soul of Our Race*, p. 70.
5. There is a legend which tells that the Supreme God can be approached only through Mother Earth.

For details see, Soumen Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills : A Study of Folklore* (B. R. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 1985) pp. 168-69.

6. For a detailed discussion, see, Soumen Sen, 'State and Religion: The Khasi-Jaintia Experience', *Journal of North-East India Council for Social Science Research*, Vol. 10, No.2., October 1986.
7. See, R. T. Rymbai, 'Some Aspects of the Religion of the Khasi-Pnars', *Khasi Heritage* (Seng Khasi, Shillong, 1979) p. 115.
8. H. O. Mawrie, *The Essence of the Khasi Religion* (Seng Khasi, Shillong, 1981) p. 1. 9. *ibid.* 10. *ibid.* 11. R.T. Rymbai, *op. cit.*
12. H. O. Mawrie, 'A Short View of Khasi Religion', *Where Lies the Soul of Our Race*. p. 70. 13 *ibid.*
14. I have discussed these issues in detail in my paper entitled *The Changing Face of Khasi Religion* presented in Session 4 of Symposium V of XI World Congress of Sociology held at New Delhi on 18-22 August 1986. In preparing the present paper I have also used some observations made by Prof. Thomas Luckmann of University Konstanz, FRG, in his commentary on the papers presented in Session 4 of Symposium V of the Congress dealing with the Cultural Dimensions of Social Change, as the Co-Chairperson of the Session.