

# **KHASI CULTURAL RESISTANCE TO COLONIALISM**

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## INTRODUCTION

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The Khasis are a group living in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya who came into contact with the British administration directly in 1853, when the entire Khasi and Jaintia hills was placed under a political agent with headquarters in Cherra. Contemporary to the British administration came the missionaries, the 'specialists' and 'sacred intelligentsia'<sup>1</sup> who served as carrier of the Christian faith. The missionaries served the British administration in furthering the administrators interest who 'felt that the best way to tame the primitive Khasis was through love which the missionaries alone could give.'<sup>2</sup> The missionaries came as the messengers of Christianity and in the process inflicted a super-imposition of foreign religious-cultural ethos which served as an external force, shaking the existing cultural ethos of the Khasis. The spiritual and temporal arms of the Christian missionary contributed to the imposition of the attitudes, norms, values and world view of the British, who being the political heads could emphasize this domination.

To explain the domination of an alien power which had arrived in their midst, namely the British, I have used the

much used term colonialism which is 'domination of an alien minority asserting racial and cultural superiority over a materially inferior native majority, contact between machine oriented civilization with Christian origin.'<sup>3</sup> The fact that the political and economic hegemony, the establishment of which was the most pertinent point for the British was reiterated through social means. "The reactionary character of British imperialism was more manifest in the social sphere"<sup>4</sup> and the British hegemony penetrated the masses through various socio-cultural channels. The concept, therefore, denotes not only extra territorial expansion of a political and economic nature which is generally taken to be connoted by this term, but also constitutes a system of controls and subjugation meant to facilitate the exploitation of the colonized people. This purpose of subjugation and control was facilitated by two dissimilar groups of people, they being the merchants and the missionaries. Between the two the latter upheld the self-imposed obligation of the more advanced British power to spread civilization and uplift the 'pagans' or 'barbarians' as they perceived the conquered people to be. However, this process of spreading civilization and uplifting the 'barbarians' was not viewed in the same light as the British by the colonized group. It was not long before the community was compelled for different reasons which I have discussed in chapters II and III to offer

resistance to this kind of domination. The term resistance is taken as an 'intention to preserve community life as it existed before the colonizers intervened'<sup>5</sup>, and also as the 'inter play between ideologies of domination and subordination.'<sup>6</sup>

The perceived threat to the ways of life of the Khasis led Khasi elders to formulate certain methods, adopt certain measures and in some cases to launch resistance movements.

Culture as we know includes avenues of religion, politics, morality, value system, in fact a total way of life. It is, therefore, an invisible medium of perceiving, retaining and enacting meaning and values, which are the essentials of a particular society. The essential core of culture consists of traditions (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values. Thus culture can be considered as products of action on one hand and conditioning elements of further action, on the other. Accordingly, I have first discussed Khasi culture as an 'ordered system of meanings and symbols'<sup>7</sup> They, i.e. the Khasis asserted their individuality like other groups through their culture. The cultural ethos of every group is a universal phenomena even though it may only be brought into focus when an external influence touches a group to undermine it. The second chapter discusses the historical process of the entry of the British along with the missionaries into the

Khasi hills. The missionaries of various origins commenced their prosyletization activities with clear rules laying "the standard of church membership on the mission field .... high and clear from the beginning. It was enjoined that every candidate for conversion should not only have renounced all heathen practices and lead a moral life ....".<sup>8</sup> The religious rituals and festivals were seen as 'excesses' which were 'pagan' attendance to which were causes of disciplinary action by the Church. In addition, the Khasi religion and their value system was classed as 'vague belief in God'<sup>9</sup> by the early writers.

Social change implies a "significant alteration of social structure, i.e. patterns of social action and interaction including consequences and manifestations of such structure embodied in norms (rules of conduct) values, and cultural product and symbols."<sup>10</sup> Such a type of change was brought about very perceptibly in the Khasi context through the process of British colonialism in the Khasi hills. The colonialist ideological foundation was that 'they were part of the civilized world as they were Christians and others beyond the pale of Christiandom were a amorphous mass whose common characteristics was their heathendom'<sup>11</sup> and thus noticeably inferior to the colonizers' unquestionable superiority. On the basis of their supposed ideological superiority, the Missionaries as the ideological arm for

colonization were means of domination and depreciation of the ideology of the Khasis. Thus the Christian ideology became a exploitative value system.

The Khasi society which had a definite ideology as 'closely related beliefs or ideas or even attitudes that characterize a group or community'<sup>12</sup> perceived the threat system and perpetrated different forms of manifest and latent opposition to the Missionary and British suppression.

The Seng Khasi started as an organisation in 1899 with aims to 'revive the true faith of their forefathers' and 'foster a sense of brotherhood' among the Khasis who still retain their socio-cultural and religious heritage, among other aims. The temporal activity of the missionaries like education, medical facilities etc, was seen as a means to undermine tradition and proselytize the Khasis. The spiritual activities of the church on the other hand, was seen as the means of projecting the Christian values and to prove the inefficacy of the traditional system in terms of health and well-being. The traditional healing system was put down as simply superstitious and primitive.

The present working of the Seng Khasi is based entirely on the need to strengthen the Khasi cultural identity through knowledge of their own culture. In Chapter-III I have shown how this organisation has been the means of retaining awareness regarding the Khasi distinctiveness. By entering

the fields of education and social welfare they have attempted to break the power-wielding grip of the missionaries. Again by reassuring the people of the relevance and greatness of their own culture the Seng Khasi has made an organised effort at establishing a distinct identity among the Khasis. Many of the cultural elements of the Khasis has been imbibed into the Christian Khasis who have included certain cultural activities in order to counter the threat of the Seng Khasi organisation, which they felt was taking away many Christians. The *Seng Khyllang* (United Endeavour Society) along with the Indian Tribal Cultural Forum have established a platform for enhancing the understanding of the traditional cultural activities of the Khasis. The various clan organisations too have come up to highlight the traditional basis of the society. Another branch namely the *Seng Kyrsew* organises talks about Khasi religion and culture in the interior areas of Khasi and Jaintia Hills in order to expose the people to their traditional culture. The *Seng Pyni* yet another unit of the *Seng Khasi* holds talks and group discussions about Khasi religion and culture on every Sunday to motivate the people to retain their culture and resist outside influence. The *Seng Khasi* has also been attempting to associate itself with other organisations like the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), and

maintain its distinctive identity by highlighting their differences with Christian Khasis.

The Christian Khasis on the other hand have in their own way offered cultural resistance by attempting to throw away the yoke of the west by promoting certain elements in the culture which would help them to retain their Khasi identity. Slight tremors of dissent against the missionary ways are being manifest in covert ways (refer Chapter V). Though this assertion in an organised way are few, for it is seen more on an individual level yet this is fairly well manifest. There is also a noticeable attempt at modifying certain elements which were blatantly colonial.

In comparison with the *Seng Khasi* who believed that without religion the strings that bind the Khasi society will be broken and would gradually disappear, the Christian Khasi equally worried about Khasi identity yet prefer it to be limited to culture. The young Khasis who are born Christians would like to preserve their new religion while at the same time keeping their pride in Khasi heritage intact.

I have tried to show that the response to the challenges of subjugation is not found limited to the organised effort of the *Seng Khasi*. There is mushrooming of resistance groups within the society.

The present day resistance is mainly in form of associations promoting different aspects of tradition like

names, dress, music, literature, theatre and dance. These are, however, projection of culture in a piecemeal fashion, more like cultural showpieces. This piecemeal manifestation of culture cannot really wipe out the effects of colonialism. This is also the reason why the two major groups among the Khasis could not launch a powerful social movement against cultural subjugation. There is, of course, the pragmatic attempt to keep the religious group, i.e. Seng Khasi alive in order to ensure the continuity of the tradition. In the present day, we can also see in the symbolism of the colonised group (the Christian Khasis) a conscious attempt at integrating their traditional attitudes with their new religion. This is symbolized vividly in the work of Christian leaders like Rev. Fr. Sngi, Rev. Kharkongor and others.

Here I sense a dilemma, on the one hand you have members of a group negating a large chunk of their tradition (viz. religion) as superstition, in favour of a new religious ideology, which they feel is more modern and in tune with the times. On the other hand, the same members of the group wish for a balance between their tradition and the newly acquired modernity. Except for group dances and group songs and artifacts like 'baskets', 'daos' etc. displayed in market places there does not appear any clear cultural thrust which could be uniquely Khasi. The ethnic identity seems to be the only hallmark for being a Khasi. The cultural identity is

being slowly pushed to the background. Today you can be Khasi if you have a Scheduled Tribe certificate, no matter where you live, no matter what is your religion and even if you think like an Anglo-Indian.

### **Methodology**

The present study entitled *Khasi Resistance to Colonialism* is an attempt to find out the forces of resistance to domination and deprecation of their culture operative among the indigenous Khasi population. The attempt is to study how different cultural elements of the past, consciously or unconsciously are still followed by the converts to Christianity and the followers of the traditional religion among this population.

In order to find out pertinent data in respect to the various cultural practices it was felt necessary that an appropriate research design be developed to give a proper scientific base. The present study, therefore, had been planned as a descriptive study which incorporated the various parameters of scientific applications, taking into account the sampling procedure, suitable research, methods, technique, tools, etc.

## Sampling

Since the present study does not incorporate any survey data and as it was felt that there is need for me to give an equal choice to all the respondent for their inclusion in the sample, I planned a non-probability sampling design which is suitable for basically exploratory studies like the present one. The non-probability sampling design is a valid sampling construction of a data base which is used widely in various social science researches and presents a fairly good result in case of analytical studies based on a characteristic design of the sample. Further, since I have generated a logical sampling frame by means of employment of key-informants, it follows that the non-probability sampling procedure will only be fitting into the research design. For my present requirement, it was, therefore, decided that purposive or judgemental sampling technique would be applied to develop a suitable and manageable group of informants for collection of data. With the belief that with the exercise of good judgement and appropriate strategy the right informants in the sample could be handpicked, an attempt had been made to develop a strategy whereby it would be possible to identify typical cases who were evaluated on the basis of their capacity to provide the required data as planned by me. After a careful evaluation of the suitability of various socio-anthropological methods, it was decided that three

methods, viz., historical method, interview method and observation method would be most suitable for the present study for the purpose of collection of primary as well as secondary data. The decision on these methods was taken to satisfy the requirements of qualitative data, time factor, available resources as well as the historicity of the subject under consideration.

Since one of my main purpose was to intermittently compare the various aspects of the past of the Khasi society with that of the present, I found the application of historical methodology as most valuable. Data was collected extensively through the oral tradition. This has helped to a satisfactory level in reconstructing the sociological past as was existing in its most manifest form. The group with strong traditions may have naturally readjusted themselves to the newly emerging socio-economic milieu and may not be able to maintain a strict socio-cultural boundary. In order to find out the social changes occurring in the two groups existing before me in the field viz, the group following traditional system and the group which do not follow tradition or follow them just as a matter of habit, the Durkhemian Methodology<sup>13</sup> of studying social facts was kept in view. The social facts, normal as well as pathological, were studied to find out their levels of existence, values and roles recommended by Emile Durkhiem has also been kept in mind while investigating

social facts pertaining to the three different sociological formations.

Historical data from secondary sources like records, journals, newspapers, private papers, and artifacts etc. have also been taken into account.

As it was also felt that the various socio-cultural manifestations in the life of the people required to be studied as closely as possible, use was made of unstructured and participatory method while conducting the research. This has particularly helped in discovering the underlying dynamics and contradictions as well as subtleties of the people involved. This was in conformity with the decision of furthering qualitative data. For the traditional group social activities like *Seng Pyni*, *Seng Kyrsew* and *Seng Khyllang*, *Shad Suk Mynsiem*, *Seng Kut Snem* besides actual everyday affairs were observed. For the non-traditional group actual everyday affairs, family situations, marriage ceremonies, naming ceremonies and the activities of the cultural organisations were observed. Through these observations, valid conclusions were drawn.

Focussed interview method was a natural choice for collecting additional information from the field. This method focussed on the subjective experiences/attitudes and emotional responses regarding particular concrete situation was thought most relevant as it is also helpful in research

situation which has already been analysed prior to the interview. This method could also be utilised in a situation where persons are known to be involved in a particular concrete situation or have participated in an observed social situation. Since the above criteria exist in relation to the present study, hence the focussed interview was extensively used.

Keeping in view the ethnographic method of anthropology and as it was particularly felt that 'key informant' technique be employed to generate information this technique has been used to gather information pertaining to the study.

Keeping the sampling logic in mind the maximum amount of time was spent in the field on developing the 'good judgement' and 'rapport' and gathering oral tradition. It was after this that a tentative interview guide with unstructured entries was prepared and pre-tested in the field. The next phase was the collection of secondary historical information. The next phase of six months was spent interviewing the people belonging to the Christian section of the population and the next eight months the Khasis belonging to the traditional faith and those who were members of the Seng Khasi. The next one year was spent on studying the various cultural organisations, their working as well as interviewing the members. Lastly, after working with the written texts and

going back to the field for recent information, the work of classification and analysis and finally writing commenced.

Through the pursuance of the written material and interviewing the authors and the important personalities of the society of both the traditional and Christian group a judgemental sampling frame was developed. This included 150 Christian Khasi informants and 150 informants affiliated to the traditional religion. This sampling frame included the office bearers and members of the Christian Khasi cultural organisations and the *Seng Khasi* organisations and branches therein. The interview of these informants was carried out by using an interview guide with unstructured entries, which helped in varying the questions in accordance to the demands of the situation. Further, the various cultural activities of the Khasis were investigated with the use of the focussed interview method.

cultural

### **Objective of the Study**

The following formed the objective of the study:

1) To discover the signs of cultural resistance to the colonisation of cultural traits amongst both Christian and non-Christian Khasis.

2) To find out the traditional religious structure and to explore the reasons for the birth of the *Seng Khasi*

among Khasis

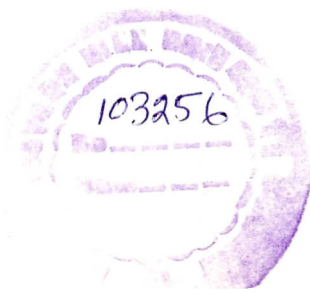
and other Christian Khasi organisations and their continuing existence.

3) To identify the elements of interaction and communication between the two resisting groups.

4) To evaluate the contribution of the Christian Khasis and the traditional Khasis in matters of retention of culture.

#### **Limitation and Scope**

For the purpose of convenience, practicality and operational purposes, the Khasi residents of Shillong have been included. Shillong here includes the Shillong urban agglomerate, comprising of the Shillong Municipality, Shillong Cantonment, Nongthymmai, Mawlai, and Pynthorukhrah. As it was felt that most of the requirement in terms of data could be had from the capital of Meghalaya where most of the cultural activities, awareness programmes, organisational activities are concentrated, Shillong was the natural choice. Both males and females have been included as it was felt necessary that these two gender groups would yield different categories of data. In terms of religious affinity both the non-traditional Khasi group and the Christians have been included as they are at present the mainstream of the Khasi society and substantial social force. Other religious groups among Khasis, such as Muslims, Buddhists, Hindus, Bohais, etc.



do exist but as they do not constitute a substantial grouping, they have not been included in the study. In terms of age structure and grouping the present study has included respondents belonging to the age groups 15 to 60 but the concentration has been within the age of 25 to 60. Children and adolescents have been excluded from the study as it was felt that they would not be able to sufficiently reflect upon the study and as their behaviour pattern would be influenced by modernity.

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## CONCLUSION

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It is mostly argued that culture embodies values which may be formulated overtly or may be felt implicitly by the society carrying the culture. In the preceding chapters, I have made a small attempt to characterise and define the changing scenario vis-a-vis the culture of the Khasi community in the North-East. In chapters I and III, I have explained how the main cultural traits among the ancient Khasis were transmitted and accumulated by the society. Culture was one with society in the sense we could use the words Khasi culture and Khasi society in the same breadth. The situation changed drastically with the coming of the colonial presence in their midst and there appears a division of culture between the social and the religious (refer chapter-III). The change in the religion factor in the ancient culture has undoubtedly greatly modified the social factor. Like the traditional Khasi religion the new religion too has succeeded in pervading all phases of the Khasi life. However, cultural resistance against subjugation has come from both groups of the Khasi community as they both feel the need for preserving Khasi identity. Also we must not forget they share a common history with common ethical and cultural mores which originated in the indigenous religion.

Cultural interaction is highly complex, indigenous and foreign cultures often intermingle and effect each other. The assimilation of elements of foreign culture with the indigenous involves a process of analysis, differentiation and absorption. But it is doubtful whether this threefold process was undertaken initially by the indigenous elite who opted for embracing the religion of the foreign elite. Colonialism all over the world has led to cultural liquidation of the conquered communities. With a view to facilitating their rule and the exploitation of the indigenous people, they successfully managed giving an inferiority complex to the conquered people with respect to their own culture. It is a historical fact that the colonial powers' interest in missionary work was not always from purely religious motives. They were perhaps convinced that the 'civilising', influence of missions advanced colonial plans directly or indirectly. Unlike the officers of the colonial administrations, the missionaries with their deep commitment and dedication had gained the trust and an intimacy with the people hence they were used as the most effective force of colonisation, simply because they penetrated more deeply into the life the people. Consequently, the missions helped the colonizers to consolidate their authority over the people as they hypocritically talked of the completion of the task of having

a 'colony of a Christian power'. Westernization through Christianity got equated with civilization while the indigenous faith was boldly labelled as barbarism. It cannot be doubted that for a long period of time a strong section of the Khasi elite advocated wholesale westernisation. After the acceptance of the western religion they came to regard the west as better in every respect. They tried to impose a culture which was derivative and imitative of the west.

"The introduction of a new administration has ushered a new era among the people. The entire area which was formerly independent and subjected to no outside empires, was now tagged on to the larger British map. The system of government that was imposed among the matrilineal culture has opened up a new work culture. The procedure of appointment was now done on the basis of qualification and not on muscle power. In the context of the matrilineal male dominated leadership, the introduction of the British administration has come as a good news to women. The freedom given to woman in the early period of British settlement was significant and served as a foundation for women leadership in the subsequent century and well into the present."<sup>1</sup>

The dominance of this was, of course, militated against even in the colonial times as I tried to show, by Khasi writers like U Soso Tham, U Jeebon Roy, U Radhon Singh Berry, etc. Though colonial ethos in some forms has persisted yet a

small change which is taking place which is evidence to the fact that there is a realisation that modernization (a process started by the British) in the specific context of the Khasis has to be different from not only its neighbouring groups, but also the West. My purpose in this thesis has not been to assess the impact of Christianity vis-a-vis social change in family, marriage, agriculture and other realms of life, I have accepted the fact that religious factor is the major factor in social change. In chapter-II, I have outlined a brief history of conversion to Christian faith. My purpose there has been simply to record the first exposure of the indigenous to the overpowering alien presence. With it a strong section of the community gave up their earlier stand of unquestioning acceptance of the moral order of their culture. Not only that, they started to criticise the ancient wisdom and became sceptical of their moral order. In such a situation cultural conflict was inevitable. One positive result of this conflict was the greater systematization of the ancient knowledge by the *Seng Khasi* (Chapter-IV).

A negative fall-out of Christianization has been that there could not be a strong, more organised and cohesive resistance to the onslaught of colonialism. Aware of the need to preserve custom such as matriliney and other customary laws relating to family and property, practicing Christians in spirit at least did not completely let go their traditional

beliefs and practice. Sometimes, the Christian Church appeared to be either unaware or turned a blind eye to these practices. The church was aware of its success in providing a focus in the shape of its religious experiences. It is an undeniable fact that the cultural focus of the dominant Christian group has been the religion factor and they accept the superiority of the faith introduced by the colonial power. It appears to me to explain the absence of a significant movement offering cultural resistance to colonialism. A strong movement could only result if the society was more homogeneous. Keeping the so-called 'superstitious elements' out of culture undermined a notable portion of the cultural activities of the Khasis. There could not be an over-arching and unifying ideology against the forces of colonialism and beneath whatever unity appeared on the surface lay substantial differences based on differing perceptions of the role and character of cultural traits. In effect the kind of resistance they offer stands free of its own history and as separate from the one offered by the *Seng Khasi*. Against the powerful forces of modernism and westernization, both the offshoot of colonialism, these small attempts at resistance may loose their legitimation.

What we are confronted with today is a culture which is unable to say either yes we should give up indigenisation or no we shall hold on to everything that is ours. This calls

to mind the ending of 'A Passage to India' in which the author confirms the history behind Britain's subjugation of India and "yet can neither recommend decolonisation nor continued colonisation."<sup>2</sup>

One can see the future Khasi society Christianized and modernised in many respects yet continuing to live with many traditional elements. This is not a strange phenomena, modern western (secular) societies too have the fanfare of traditional marriage rituals. So also the Khasi will continue to observe the ancient festivals such as the *Pomblang Nongkrem*, *Shad Suk Mynsiem*, etc. even when in theory he has rejected the sacred implications of them.

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