

Ecossais

The Khasi Saga



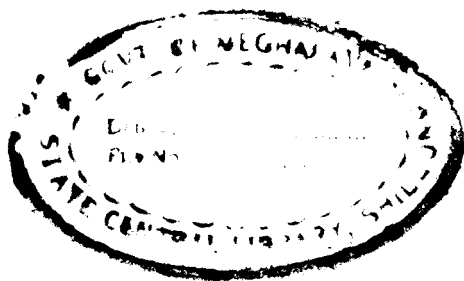
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Dr. Satyakam Phukan

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2001.05.23

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First Edition - 2006
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Text Printing and Binding :
Kaushik Printers
Industrial Estate, Bamunimaidam
Guwahati (ASSAM)

Cover and Photograph Printing :
Fairgraphic Media Services (P) Ltd.
Industrial Estate, Bamunimaidam
Guwahati (ASSAM)

23/11/3, FG

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PROLOGUE

The hill tract lying between Bangladesh plains to the south and the Assam plains to the north forms the so called Garo, Khasi and the Jaintia hills, going from west to east. This range of mountain becomes continuous in the east with the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills of Assam which itself is connected to the Naga hills in the east. The Garo, Khasi and the Jaintia hills comprises the Indian state having a Sanskritised name of Meghalaya meaning the abode of the clouds, much alike the Himalayas the home of ice or snow.

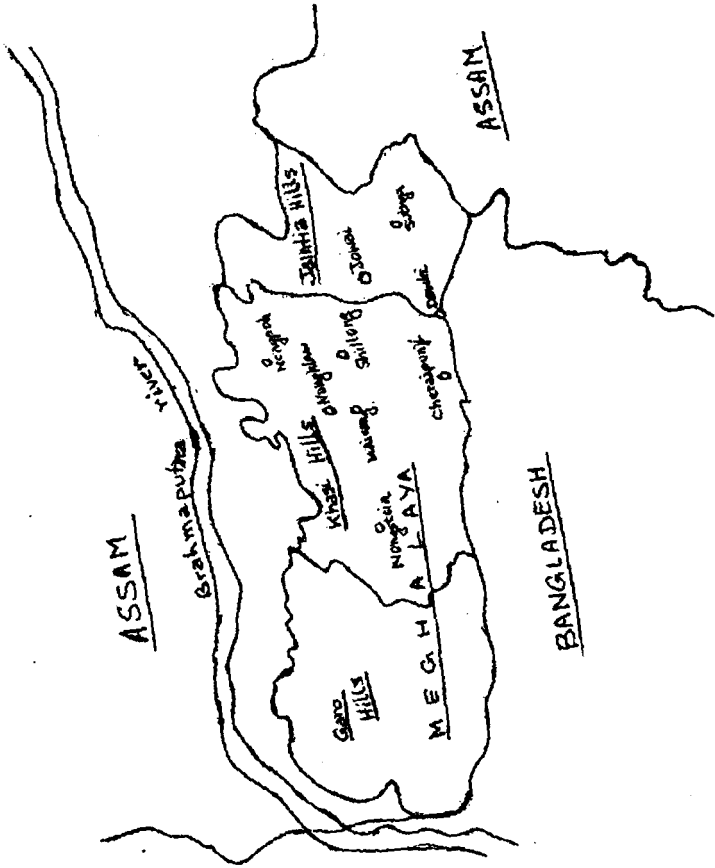
The Khasi people i.e. the Khasi proper and Jaintia and others inhabit the Khasi and Jaintia hills. There are few scattered communities of Khasis in the Karbi Anglong and North Cachar hills districts, Cachar district of Assam and also in Bangladesh. The Khasi country has three parts, the northern Bhoi region with extensive flat lands and valleys, having a gradual sloping towards the north.

The central region is called the Ri-Lum. It has a higher elevation and is in the shape of an irregular plateau. The Shillong peak (6449 feet) is the highest point here. It also includes the central plateau of the Jaintia hills with small ranges of hills with wide and beautiful valleys within them.

The southern War region is somewhat irregularly composed, having steep slopes, deep gorges, with a sudden descent down to the southern plains.

The upper segment of the land presents a temperate climate but the border areas to the north and south have a warmer climate, corresponding to that of the adjacent plainsland. Cherrapunji or Sohra in the Khasi tongue is a rainy spot competitively exchanging place with a neighbouring village of Mawsynram for the title of the 'wettest place on earth'.

Khasi is a general term for the various tribes and subtribes of the



Sketch map of Meghalaya

Khasi and Jaintia hills. The Khyntriams or Nonglums are the Khasi proper. They inhabit the middle range of hills and are composed of the Khyntriam proper and their allied subtribes in the central plateau. The Pnar or Jaintia or Synteng occupy the central plateau of the Jaintia hills. The War sub-tribe live on the south. They include the Shella people and other allied groups, the Amwi people with their allied War-Synteng of the Southern Jaintia hills. The Bhois, both Khasi and Pnar dwell on the northern part of the Khasi and Jaintia hills. Lyngngams comprises a Garo admixed Khasi group dwelling on the westernmost and northwest edge of the Khasi hills. Several minor non-Khasi groups of people are interspersed in between.

Majority of the Khasi people are fair and medium complexioned with an Austro-Mongoloid physiognomy and with very common sprinklings of Negroid and Caucasoid features. Khasi proper of the uplands are mostly brown or fair complexion, the Pnars and Bhois are however a bit darker and the Lyngngams a bit more. The overall appearance bear similarities with the Burmese (Myanmarese), Cambodian (Kampuchean), Malay and Palaung-Wa group of people of south-east Asia. However slanting eyes with prominent epicanthic folds and high cheek bones are less common and less pronounced in the Khasi's physical features, unlike the Mongoloids.

The Khasis practice a system of matriliney. The inheritance of the clanshood coming down the mother's side. This is a peculiarity which is not common with others. Most tribes and communities in the India's north-east are patrilineal. Those few among others to follow the system of matrilineage probably did so after coming in contact with the Khasis like the Hill Lalung or Hill Tiwa tribe of Assam and Meghalaya and the Garos of Meghalaya.

The Khasis were in the habit of raising monoliths as commemorative or religious structures. These can be seen strewn all over the Khasi country in the form of menhirs, dolmens and other megaliths. The Konyak Naga tribe also used to indulge in

similar activities of erecting monoliths. A linguistic connection was noted by some scholars between the Khasi and Konyak languages and also with the Wanchoo (Vanchoo) tribe of Arunachal Pradesh state of India.

The Khasi language alongwith it's various local variations is classed as an Austric language of the Mon-Khmer/Mon-Annam group. The Mon or Tailang are one of the earliest inhabitants of Burma (Myanmar) and represent an Austro-Asiatic segment of people admixed with early Telegu or Telinga immigrants from India. Khmer is another name for the Cambodians or Kampucheans. Annamese are the Vietnamese proper. They also show similarities with the Malay language and a similarity is highly probable with the Malagasy people of the Madagascar island, off the coast of Africa in the Indian ocean.

Several linguistic and nomeclatural similarities have been noted between many Mon-Khmer speaking tribes of south-east Asia and the Khasis. Tribe names like Stieng and Bahner are congnate with the names Synteng and Pnar. Name of the tribe Wa is similar to the name War. The Wa tribe represents a comparatively primitive people inhabiting a widely scattered area in upper Burma (Myanmar), the Yunnan province of China and Thailand. They are divided into Lawa or "tame Wa", who are mostly Buddhist, adopting Shan (Tai) or Chinese customs and Kawa or the "Wild Wa" who are animist and were politically autonomous until quite recently. A vivid account of the "Wild Wa" of the recent times can be obtained from the book "The Land of Jade" by a Swedish writer Mr. Bertil Lintner. The book was written on a journey through Assam, Nagaland and across the border through Burma (Myanmar) into Thailand. The linguistic similarities are extensive, a few samples are given herewith.

The Khasi language also have words dissimilar with the Austric languages and with striking similarity with languages placed far away in Asia, Europe and Africa, which seems more than mere co-incidence. The origin of the word "Khasi" as applicable to the Khasis is also something of a mystery.