



**TRIBAL  
LITERATURE  
OF  
NORTH-EAST  
INDIA**

EDITED BY  
BADAPLIN WAR  
DEPARTMENT OF KHASI  
NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY  
SHILLONG  
2009

Rs 150/-

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## FOLKLORE IN REFLECTION

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### WHY FOLKLORE? IMAGE CREATION AND PERCEPTION

Ever since I started teaching Post-Graduate courses in Folkloristics, I have been asked myriad questions, the more resonating of these being:

“How can folklore be relevant in today’s age?”

“What can we possibly do with folklore?”

“What are the job opportunities after studying folklore?”

Once, I had even been asked a bizarre one such as:

“We’re going to learn about black magic and stuff like that, right?”

These disconcerting questions led me to do introspection about my own usefulness as a teacher of Folkloristics and also to revisit the place that folklore occupies in segments of the Humanities and Social Sciences that interface with the educational and intellectual development of my community i.e. the Khasi community of Meghalaya.

Having taught ten successive batches of students, and having guided them during field trips, I often encounter young people who claim they have never seen a single performance of a folkloric text, and other than what they have heard or read, they have no idea whether these “things” still exist! When I probe the students’ definition of these “things”, they turn out to be folk ceremonies, agrarian rituals and even story telling sessions about which many books provide generous detail.

The existence of accounts of these performances in books and other print material is evident and also encouraging but we cannot wholly blame the students as users of this material when they harbour ideas that may be quite different from our academic notions. This introspection reflects a certain divide in the perception of folklore, which engenders questions such as the kind mentioned before.

Let me go back to a little bit of history – it is obvious that Khasi folklore studies, like other disciplines, have grown to its present stature through formal Western education. Historically, it was the Bengali Brahmins who first opened a school at Shala with the twin purpose of providing education to the Khasis and to spread Hinduism. Although this effort bore little fruit, it cannot be denied that this miniscule missionary activity had some impact, the chief of which was that the prosecutions of treaties between the East India Company and the Khasi chieftains in 1829 were made in the old Bengali script.

The first burst of serious missionary activity was initiated by the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Mission in the person of Thomas Jones who arrived with his wife at Cherrapunji on 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1841. A year later, Jones started the first school and he also brought out the first printed Khasi book, making use of the Roman script for the Khasi language. The first printing press was established by these missionaries in 1869 and publication works of various kinds were undertaken.

In 1871, Dr. John Roberts of the same mission came to the Khasi Hills, and like the others, busied himself with religious texts. But he also introduced Khasi readers to a wide range of literature borrowed and translated from the occidental, general knowledge and texts that had no Christian intent. Dr. Roberts also translated a good deal of the fables of Aesop and by carefully selecting animals, birds and other creatures which were known by the Khasi listeners and readers, appended to each of these fables a moral value that was intrinsically Khasi<sup>1</sup>. A highly significant work of this indefatigable scholar-missionary is his collection of Khasi folktales, a tribute to his eloquence and objective temper, This book was published in Wales in 1914.

Khasi folklore studies, as a planned, target-oriented discourse is firmly anchored in the second phase of literary outburst in the Khasi

and Jaintia Hills following the Welsh missionary activities. While the missionaries launched proselytizing translation and publication projects, the period also saw a proliferation of writings by a host of Khasi writers prominent among whom were Jeebon Roy Mairom, Rabon Sing Kharsuka and Radhon Singh Berry Kharwanlang. These writers were firstly prompted by a genuine apprehension created by what they saw as Christian (and hence alien) incursions into Khasi indigenous life and its disturbing influences especially on the culture. Secondly, they reacted to the missionary as well as colonial portraiture of Khasi culture, which did not hesitate to regard the religious practice as largely associated with demonology.

The first generation of Khasi literary scholars challenged and sought to correct this false presentation. With this agenda, they concerned themselves with putting down in writing customary practices, discourses on the religion, folk narratives and poetry called *Phawar* and copious collections of maxims. In support of the indigenous Khasi faith, one of the stalwarts, Rabon Sing Kharsuka wrote a splendid work representing a detailed exegesis, which is relevant to this day.

It is obvious that these writers tried to create, first, what I would call, an energizing atmosphere, through a determined collection and publication project and second, an enabling project through the creation of a systematic poetics, for the appreciation and study of the folklore material that was available. This was done to vindicate the position that Khasi oral literature had in the community and to prove that folklore, while being a worthy discourse, also reflected the maturity and cultural advancement of the community. Indeed, these stalwarts' prescribed correct spellings and syntax for the nascent print media then on the basis of their suggestion, even Christian hymnbooks had to be rewritten.<sup>2</sup> They, in short laid out the agenda and legitimized Khasi aesthetics. The founding of the Seng Khasi in 1899 was a tremendous effort made by these same stalwarts whose purpose was the preservation of Khasi religion and culture. Making an assessment of the Seng Khasi Movement a hundred years later, J. B. Bhattacharjee said:

The achievements of the **Seng Khasi** in promoting its ideals and creating cultural consciousness can never be over-

estimated. Established as early as in 1899, it has survived the stress and strain of odd time and circumstances and exists as the only organization of its kind in the Khasi Hills. It came into existence at a time when the Khasis were fast drawn to Christianity and the missionaries were actively patronized by the British Government. The progress of westernization appeared to be a positive challenge to the traditional religion and culture of the Khasis and the earlier converts had generally disowned their ancient ethics. The Seng Khasi aimed at making Khasis conscious about their own cultural heritage and attempted to publicise and preserve the religious and cultural usages. It started a literary movement by Babu Jeebon Roy, Sibcharan Roy, Radhon Sing Berry and others whose contribution led to the Khasi Renaissance since the closing years of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century<sup>3</sup>.

The Khasi Renaissance, which could well be considered to have found its impetus in the Seng Khasi Movement, was one of the most creative periods of Khasi literature. While it would take up too much time to dwell on the movement, it is important though to say that it (the movement) produced numerous writers and scholars, many of whom were fluent in English and Bengali and even Sanskrit, and through whose efforts, completely secular free morning schools were opened. A number of ground-breaking books were written and three highly competitive newspapers were brought out during the period. The Ri Khasi Press was started in 1896 by Jeebon Roy Mairom, one of the architects of the Seng Khasi and this establishment facilitated the exploding literary movement.

Earlier on I had stated that one of the objectives that these pioneering Khasi writers accomplished was setting the perspective for the creation of folk aesthetics. A careful reading of the texts would reveal yet another agenda – that of creating a cultivated image for the culture through subtle explications of the fundamentals of the Khasi indigenous religion, the tenets of which were strengthened by mythic attributes. We thus have a harping back to the past, to a presumably golden era.

Folklore has, in the past been adroitly used to conjure up visions of

a past that might be recaptured, if not in details, at least in spirit. This vision suggests that at some point of time, a fall from grace occurred, after which life was changed forever. This earlier world was portrayed as simpler and more humane.

Fortunately for us, the early architects of Khasi folklore studies consciously did not exploit this, but only generated and perpetuated a sense of nostalgia that is becoming a trademark of small ethnic communities in this part of the country. The creation of this sense of nostalgia is not the monopoly of Khasi writers alone; even western writers, colonial and missionary, of that period talk about the primordial beauty and glory of Khasi culture as reflected in their tales<sup>4</sup>. This is interesting since largely, the very same writers are horrified at the purported demon worship and ignorant superstitions of what passed as Khasi religion for them. Perhaps, this is the result of a misplaced evolutionist discourse dictated by nineteenth century white colonial hegemony to exoticize the vanquished.

Another example of the exotization using alien paradigms is reflected in the appendage “Scotland of the East” to describe the Khasi Hills. This appendage was coined by David Scott, Agent to the Governor General, the one single individual who managed to subjugate peoples of North East India and widen British hegemony in this part of the country. While remembered as the nemesis of Khasi sovereignty, he is also regarded as a benefactor of sorts in that he introduced and organized the plantation of some cash crops. The “Scotland of the East” appendage has been perpetuated by different modes of cultural production such as books, calendars, tabloids, stickers and the tourism engine and though still extremely popular, it is a somewhat inaccurate description of Khasi Hills. Khasi Hills was a geographical entity that spanned present day east and West Khasi Hills and Ri-Bhoi Districts. This last, the Ri-Bhoi District is to the North and obviously, David Scott was not at all familiar with this area of the Khasi Hills as the place was a non entity during the political configurations of the time. Climatically, the area is sub-tropical, humid and intensely malarial. The topography is undulating with no dramatic gorges, ravines or thunderous waterfalls as hyperbolic colonial descriptions about Khasi Hills went. The vegetation is of the jungle kind infested with leeches, snakes and other dangerous animals. My point in saying all this is to show that it would be very difficult for David Scott to conceive of the Khasi Hills as “Scotland of the East” if he had operated largely from the Bhoi

areas. What he has succeeded in doing was to generate and perpetuate a partial reality of a place on the basis of experiences he had with it. While it calls to mind, at least by implication, the yearning for another colonized country, Scotland, it also sets western geographical metaphors as models.

Is it, then, this quaint and exotic image of the spatial metaphor of the land which our folklore draws its sustenance from? Are we encouraging our young people to search for identities in nebulous narratives?

Disturbingly, even modern political discourse is replete with nostalgic excursions. Student bodies, political parties and even banned Underground groups indiscriminately make use of mythic metaphors to win support for their cause. While it has been maintained that it is imperative that as part of our tribal upbringing, we are expected, at least, to know something about the past, but it would be unfair to expect our many naïve youngsters to respond to a mythic past they have no direct experience with.

Literature departments have not really cut their teeth on folk narrative texts and are not doing much to equip their students to deal with the academic demands of the 21st Century, although folklore material constitutes a good bit of their course content.

Our boys and girls are today more concerned with joblessness, AIDS, environmental problems, Cable TV, the invasion of MNCs, and assorted issues that are relevant to them. These are realities that must be addressed by folklore if the subject is to process the things that matter to us and to the young minds that we teach.

Present day research statistics on Khasi folklore studies reveal that there are endless possibilities thrown up for exploration of the emergent trends which emerge at the intersections of popular and urban culture and tradition, mass media and folklore, the IT revolution and various other issues driven by politico-social realities. They make more sense and to a large extent, they would provide answer the next time the question “do I have to study folklore?” is posed.

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**(Endnotes)**

1. Roberts, John, Khasi Third Reader 1884
  2. U Khasi Mynta, 1896, March-June
  3. Roy, Hipshon, 1979 Khasi heritage pp 25
  4. Roberts, John, Khasi Folklore, 1871.
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