

STATUS OF HISTORICAL WRITING IN KHASI

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I

In the select bibliography in English and Khasi of Hamlet Bareh's *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, the author notes that uptill 1967-68, "nothing on the history and culture of the Khasis came out. Thereupon my effort to produce it"¹. It may be true that nothing substantial and comprehensive had been written in English, though his interpretation of events and processes had to depend on existing published histories. A close look at his Khasi sources and a search for what had preceded and came after this first comprehensive history of the Khasis reveals a fair interest among the community in their history, the nation and even world events. That the Khasis had a sense of history is reflected in their oral tradition and folklore. That today these traditions are being lost out with the many influences on the Khasi society and the lack of appreciation of how the Khasis came to be till the present, is sadly reflected in their lack of interest in the past. In this context the seminar on "Status of Social Sciences in Vernacular Languages in North East India" assumes significance as this would be among the first to attempt to examine the literature that has been generated in the various vernacular languages in the region. This paper will examine the histories that have

been written in Khasi and situate the status of the subject both as an academic discipline and matter of historical interest.

II

Much after Rev. Thomas Jones started the use in 1842 of Roman Script for the Khasi language was history written. In the first flush of literary works a combination of primers, Christian literature and translations were published. Beginning with a translation of *Rhodd Mam* (1842), a popular Welsh story, Jones worked on *Ca Citap Nyngkong Ban Hicai Poole Ci Citin Cassi* (First Khasi Reader, (1842), *Oo Nonghicaï (The Instructor, 1843)*, and *Ca Gospel Jong OO Mathiaos, 1847*). By the time Rev. William Lewis tried his hand in the new expression some standardisation had taken place. He added a small catechism, a hymn book (1850) and a translation of the Four Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles (1856).² In 1855, Rev William Pryse's *Khasi Grammar* was published. In the Prefatory Note to the vocabulary, Pryse takes a stand that the Khasis, "a small and uninfluential tribe will not be able to retain characters different from those of the larger natives of the plains which surround their hills." He continued:³

Should the Khasia tribe be ever brought under the influence of education, civilisation, and commercial intercourse, the Bengali character must supplant the Roman at a not very distant day.

Pryse may have been influenced in this opinion as he had started work among the Bengalis of Sylhet. Perhaps a not too encouraging start of the three schools at Mawmluh, Mawsmāi and Cherrapunji where Khasi was taught and the British Official policy of encouraging the use of the Bengali script,⁴ had Pryse write these lines. The debate of which script to use was not a long one. By the 1860's-1870's the decision of the Welsh Mission to use the Roman Script prevailed.⁵ It was followed by an outpouring of literature that stimulated literary creativity in prose, poetry and drama; the establishment of Ri Khasi Press (1896) and monthly journals *U Khasi Mynta* (1896), *U Nongphira* (1903), *Nongkit Khubor* (1889), replaced in 1902 by *U Nongialam Kristan*. It was not long before Calcutta

University, where many Khasis first went for higher education, gave recognition of the development of the language in its many expressions when it decided in 1902 that Khasi could be included in the use of subjects for the Entrance Examination.⁶

III

Before and by the turn of the century fragments of Khasi history were appearing in Alexander Mackenzie, *History of the Relations of the Government with the Tribes of the North East Frontier of Bengal* (1884); W.W. Hunter, *A Statistical Account of Assam* (1879); C.U. Aitchison, *A Collection of Treatise, Engagements and Sanads* (1892), (1909); J.H. Morris, *The History of the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists' Foreign Mission* (1910), and D. Herbert, *Report on Succession to Siemships in the Khasi Hills* (1902). These and other material in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, reprints of A.J.M. Mills, *Report on the Khasi and Jaintia Hills 1853* (1901), and W.J. Allen, *Report on the Administration on Cossyah and Jynteah Hill Territory, 1858* (1903), would have enabled B.K. Sarma-Roy to write *Ka Histori Jong Ka Ri Khasi*, Shillong, 1914. The book of 104 pages has chapters on the Khasi states, a chapter on neighbouring Manipur and one on the Syiemlieh clan.⁷ From the title of this first history in Khasi, its subject was the Khasi people. As an observer of the society B.K. Sarma-Roy's work becomes important as a reference point. When Homiwell Lyngdoh published his *magnum opus*, *Ki Syiem Khasi Bad Synteng*, Shillong, 1938, he does not refer to the history mentioned above. He has as a reference Joel Gatphoh's *Ka Histori Ki Syiem Synteng Ha Ka Jingshisha* (1923-1926) which unfortunately is not located. Lyngdoh's book was a trend setter for historical studies in Khasi. He goes into a long introduction of the origin of Syiemship, its variations, powers and functions of Syiems, the role of the founding clans *Bakhrav*, the Khasi religion linked with the Khasi *Himas*. Then follow nineteen chapters in which accounts are given of 18 Syiemships. The start given with this has made the study of the Khasi *Himas* in general a recurring theme in Khasi histories, of which more will be said shortly.

It must have been rather difficult for Khasis to write histories in the vernacular during the closing years of British control over them. Homiwell did not closely examine the effects British paramountcy was having over the institution of Syiemship. Rather he is impressed that some of the Syiems had titles of "Rai Bahadur", "Raja", the M.B.E. and O.B.E. conferred on them. Though Rev. J.J.M. Nichols-Roy did not write a history, many of his writings with their political bend made use of history. We may here cite just one of his pamphlets: *Ka Ri Khasi Bad Jaintia: Shabar Bad Hapoh Ka Reform*. The lecture was distributed in October 1936 to educate the Khasis of their position in the reformed constitution of 1935. He would continue to write till the 1950s both in Khasi and English on a variety of subjects.⁸

With independence came the freedom to interpret the history of Khasi-Jaintia. In this new approach L.L.D. Basan very early published a bilingual pamphlet *The Khasi States under the Indian Union*, (1948), which questioned the position of the Khasis under the Indian Union and the process by which the Khasi states and British villages had come into an Assam administration. Many years were to pass before L.G. Shullai took up where L.L.D. Basan left. Over the years Shullai has almost single-handedly campaigned for another look into the status of the Khasi Syiem, the integration of the Khasi Jaintia Hills into the Indian Union and kindred other topics. His *Ki Hima Khasi* (1975) draws much from the references noted above and from the author's perserverance in collecting every scrap of information on the subject of the Khasi Syiems. The importance of this small book is that it updates the issue to the present times and has become a ready reference on the Khasi Syiems. A variation of this appeared not long after in *Ka Ri Shnong Pdeng Pyrthei* (1978), the introduction of which is addressed to the youth as an inspiration for them to see their society as distinct despite their small numbers. Other writings of L.G. Shullai that have a historical approach are *Ki Symbol History Bad Ka Ri Hynniewtrep* (1989), a collection of essays on aspects of British rule in India; the Assam Legislature 1912-1950, the Constituent Assembly of India, and the administration of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills after 1950 and till 1974. Rather disappointing was the contents of I. Nongbri's

Ka History Ka Ri Hynniewtrep (1992), but a close look at the cover clears that the history he writes, starts in 1952. His is a repetition of what Shullai and Basan had earlier published; more particularly in the appendices that form a large part of the paperback. To his credit are the appendices of interesting letters of Wickliffe Syiem of Nongstoin.

IV

Before we again bring the history down to our times it would be convenient to go back to the early part of the century and again build up the literature on other aspects of history. In the face of the spread of Christianity in the hills and the establishment of the Seng Khasi (1899) Jeebon Roy wrote *Ka Niam Jong Ki Khasi* (1897); Radhon Singh Berry published *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen Shaphang Ka Akor Khasi* (1902) and Rabon Singh Kharsuka authored a book *Ka Kitab Jingphawar* (1905). These stalwarts of Khasi religion and culture are especially noted for they gave the Khasi society a strong influence to remain in the traditional faith. A church elder in Homiwell Lyngdoh, with his strong sense of history wrote a study of the cremation rites of the Sohra Syiems and the rituals of the Shad Nongkrem at Smit.⁹ To this he added in 1937, *Ka Niam Khasi*. In it he centres on the basic ideas of the Khasi faith, depicting its religious performances, the chanting of prayers, incantations and ceremonies relating to different social occasions. Just how concerned he and others were about the past is illustrated in the studies by two Salesian priests. J. Bachhiarello could identify himself with the people sufficiently to author *Ki Dienjat Ki Longshuwa* (1930). Another of his confreres G. Costa endeared himself to the Khasis with his *Ka Riti Jong Ki Laiphew Syiem* (1936). These writings in Khasi have become invaluable texts for scholars wishing to pursue a search into the Khasi past. While at this stage of Khasi religion, it would not be inappropriate to note the histories of Christianity. A *Centenary History Ka Balang Presbyterian* was published in 1941. Though many small tracts had been brought out by that time it was only in 1966 that Rev. G. Angell Jones translated and updated J.H. Morris' history. The Catholic mission history is best done by Fr. O. Paviotti, *Ka Matti Jong U* (1989). Fr

H.Elias', *Ka Histori Jong Ka Balang Catholic* (1965) and Francis Diengdoh's *Ka History Jong Ka Balang* (1980) give a general picture of the Catholic Church's history.

It is not intended to exclude a history of Khasi poetry, prose and drama for these were as important in the transformation of the Khasis as other factors such as education, British administration and urbanization. As much has already been done on this by the members of the Khasi Author's Society it may suffice to note that the Khasi literature has grown sufficiently to be reflective of a society's wish that their language and literature receive the recognition of the Sahitya Academy.

Today a trend is clearly emerging in Khasi history of biography sketches and monographs. Tirot Singh and Kiang Nangbah two resistance leaders have received a fair amount of adulation and if the present position is any indication, the lives of these patriots will continue to inspire writers.¹⁰ Thomas Jones is beginning to find a more befitting place in Khasi history.¹¹ J.J.M. Nichols Roy has found his biographer in O.L. Snaitang.¹² Dr John Roberts a medical missionary is given a sketch by L.G. Shullai.¹³ Other Khasis such as Jeebon Roy, Mavis Dunn Lyngdoh already have accounts of them in English and it may be not before long that Khasi readers are made familiar with their lives. The most recent biography is on Wickliffe Syiem.¹⁴

V

In the absence of comprehensive histories one has to be on the watch for small pamphlets, booklets and paperbacks such as V.B. Rynngga's, *Na Them Riwar* (1992), a collection of 20 short notices in the War area. Short histories of the Khasi *Himas* are not many. One such is E.W. Chyne's, *Ka History Jong Ka Hima Mawlong* (1977) which is a useful little booklet. Another small publication is Jor Manick Syiem's *Ka Jingiathuh Khana Shaphang Ki Syiem Jong Ka Hima Myllem 1830-1960* (1984). Spiton Kharakor's, *Ki Khun Ki Ksiew U Hynniew Trep* (1981) makes very interesting reading, particularly the chapters *Ki Kur U Hynniew Trep* and *Ki Jait U Hynniew Trep* which enumerates 3363 Khasi clans. Other essays are on a variety of

subjects relating to culture, Kiang Nangbah, Tirot Sing and the Khasi Natural Durbar.

One reason why history in Khasi has not acquired interest as much as literature has, is due to the absence of history in the vernacular in the school syllabus. An earlier generation of Khasi school goers had to go through texts¹⁵ in Khasi, that made them familiar with the history of India and the world. For young students not familiar with English, this medium would have enabled them to better understand their histories. Today in the change of school syllabus history has taken a back seat. Whatever incentive was there to write history school texts is gone and so has the base for an appreciation of the past.

Another point to note is that the histories in the Khasi vernacular may have been written with the intention of portraying the past but many of the authors are not trained in the art of collecting, interpreting and presenting their findings. This has made the better written history rare. The Khasi historians, if we may make a categorisation have preferred the English medium for a number of reasons of which the principal would be that English would have a larger number of readers. Before long it is hoped the Khasis who are becoming increasingly conscious of their roots and culture will find histories relevant to this time and age.

References

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3. Cited by I.M. Simon, "A Tribute to the Rev. Thomas Jones", in *Ibid.*, pp. 25-26.
4. D.R. Syiemlieh, "Education, Elite and Politicisation in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills", in Ashish Bose *et al.* (ed.), *Tribal Demography and Development in North East India*, New Delhi, 1990, p.178.
5. D.R. Syiemlieh, *British Administration in Meghalaya: Policy and Pattern*, New Delhi, 1989, p.?
6. *Assam Administration Report 1902-1903*, p.44.
7. Cited in L.S. Gassah, "Don Katno Tylli Ki Elaka ha Ri Jaintia", in *Hynniewtrepreneur Endeavour Society*, September 1989; and Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, *Kirata-Jana-Krti*, Calcutta, 1974, p. 172.

8. For a collection of J.J.M. Nichols-Roy's Writings see O.L. Snaitang, *Memoirs of Life and Political Writings of the Hon'ble Rev J.J.M. Nichols-Roy*, Shillong, 1998.
9. *Ka Pomblang bad Thang Syiem Sohra*, Shillong, 1928.
10. See H. Bareh, "Ka Thma Synteng Bad U Kiang Nongbah" (1961); *U Syiem Tirot Singh bad Kiwei Ki Para Syiem Ki Hima Khasi* (1977); *Shispah Sanphew Snew Mynshwa: U Tirot Singh bad Ka Mynnor ba Iphuh Iphieng* (1984); Quotient Sumer, *U Kiang Nangbah* (1978), and many Souvenirs released on the occasions of commemorating these leaders.
11. See the articles in *Khasi Authors' Society Souvenir 1842-1992* as an indication of this interest. Also S.S. Majaw, *U Kpa Ka Thoh Ka Tar Khasi*, Shillong, 1992.
12. O.L. Snaitang, *Ka Biography U Rev. J.J.M. Nichols-Roy*, Shillong, 1993.
13. L.G. Shullai, *U Dr John Roberts D.D.*, Shillong, 1975.
14. E.P. Syiem, *U Wickliffe Syiem Bad Ka Hima Nongstoin*, Nongstoin, 1998.
15. Prescribed for schools were Frank Pugh, *Ka Histori Jong Ka Khasi Jaintia Bad Assam*, Shillong (n.d.) and Tngensi Rynjah, *Ka History Ka Ri Khasi Jaintia*, Pts.I-III, Shillong, 1991, which is a political history of the Khasi-Jaintias. The first History of India in Khasi language was written by Jeebon Roy, an Extra. Assistant Commissioner who published, *History of India in Khasi*, Ri Khasi Press, Shillong 1900. The book has three sections on "Hindu", "Muhammadan" and British history of India bringing up the narrative to Lord Curzon's Viceroyalty.