

Religion and Culture : The Khasi-Jaintia Experience

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E. B. Tylor once offered as a 'minimum definition of religion, the belief in Spiritual Beings'.¹ This 'deep-lying doctrine', explains all kinds of folk-religion, which is need-based and finds expression in rituals. Despite all the criticisms offered against Tylor's definition of primitive religion, to which he applied the term 'animism', experiences with folk religion do not allow a negation of the belief in nature-deities and ancestor and spirit worship. The two-fold aspect of religion - the objective and subjective that involves recurring performance of certain human activities (objective aspect) and the hidden experience of the psychic life (subjective aspect), is intertwined in a folk-religion. In a folk society psychic is only a mirror of the material world around. Hence the preference for nature deities and spirits, who are believed to serve the human needs, both in distress and prosperity. This belief gives strength to man to carry on the struggle for existence. Ritual, which is the mode of worshipping nature-deities and spirits, 'at once becomes a standard of reference'² and it relates both social organization and culture, including its elements or evidences like art, literature, music and dance, with religion.

Khasi-Jaintia religion (despite the claim that it is monotheistic³) is essentially a folk-religion with a preponderance of ancestor worship, nature deities and worshipping of occult powers. It is a communal religion and is expressed in rituals, both at the family and communal levels.⁴

The Folk-Paradigm

It is, therefore, obvious that the traditional Khasi-Jaintia Culture must be related to their religion. Whether it is total or a part of it as its evidences such as literature, music and dance, this culture evolved out of and found expression in religion. A folk-culture cannot escape its religious identity. Among the communities like Khasi-Jaintias, several activities of traditional culture are inextricably interwoven and they are

exercised mostly in relation to religion and there is always a hereditary transmission of cultural values and skill which is obvious in a folk-culture and that is its communal aspect. Music and dances, legends and tales, reflect mostly this communal aspect of culture, although individual excellence is not altogether absent. But individuality in art forms is always secondary in the case of folk culture. Artistry evolves out of the basic needs of life. Man hunts; Man cultivates; He fears the unknown - He makes music, dances and tells tales. He brings the collective will to action. He makes magic; he creates a phantastic reality. His art is the result of a ritual with a functional purpose. Religion, art and artistry go together. The artist is not an individual; his individual skill is assimilated in the collective.

The Khasi-Jaintia folk culture is no exception. Their music and dance, legends and tales have evolved out of their religious activities, their rituals. The Nongkrem dance festival of Khasi Hills, the Behdienkhlam and Laho of Jaintia Hills are all associated with agricultural rites and the music and dances of these festivals are the typical dance and music of Khasi-Jaintia Hills. A number of legends are also associated with these dances. The tale of U Myndi and his wife narrates how U Myndi's wife who became the queen of a state introduced the virgin dance (*Shad kynthei*) to propitiate the spirits. This virgin dance, an integral part of the Khasi agricultural rite, *Pomblang*, which later came to be known as *Shad Nongkrem* or Nongkrem dance festival, gets its origin from the daughter of the God of Shillong - Ka Pah Syntiew and the monther of the God Kings of the state of Khyrim at whose residence at Nongkrem, the state capital, the festival and the rites are performed. The dances of Laho and Behdienkhlam festivals of Jaintia Hills, are also said to have been originated by God's grace. When U Lakriah, the leader of *ki Hynniew Trep* (the seven huts or the Khasi-Jaintia people) assumed *Syiemship* (the Chieftainship) with God's message, the Laho dance was conceived. The Behdienkhlam is associated with the legend of *So kpoh* and the ancestresses of *So kpoh* (four clans), Ka Bon, Ka Wet, Ka Doh and Ka Tein were all conceived as deities.

In the Behdienkhlam festival an important functionary is the *Parom* or the story teller. In every phase of the ritual, he chants the legend of U Lakriah and *So kpoh*.

The Khasi-Jaintia tunes, as in the case of dances, originate mostly from these rites. A music, fast and quick in tempo, accompanied by such instruments as *Tangmuri* (pipe) originated in Behdienkhlam and is also played during Shad suk Mynsiem, an annual dance festival organised by a Khasi national association, Seng Khasi. A music, known as *Keih Ke*, in moderate tempo, originates from the Laho dance festival.⁵

It is, however, not to be assumed that all the music are associated with religious rites, though dances are mainly so. There are some tunes such as *Sur Duitara*, a form of ballad singing, basically romantic in character and the tune played in *Ka Sharati*, a flute with ten holes, a mourning music, associated with the tale of U Manik Raitong.⁶ There are also tales (as are usually to be) not associated with any religious rites, as seen in the legends of U Lakriah, So kpoh, Ka Pah Syntiew etc.

The Colonial Period

The threat to the traditional culture began with the coming of the Christian Missionaries in the early part of 19th Century as a sequel to the establishment of Colonial Rule in the hills. The missionaries did not concentrate only on proselytisation and establishment of schools but also campaigned vigorously, with official patronage, against the traditional institutions and practices and this interference with the peoples' religious rites (among other causes), provoked the famous Jaintia Rebellion.⁷ The spread of Christianity during the next few decades also generated a movement to prevent further onslaught on traditional system and culture. Seng Khasi, a national social organisation, was established in 1899.

Spread of Christianity, however, could not be prevented altogether. Its impact on culture is also significantly manifest in two ways. Firstly, through a direct influence as it happened in the case of music and, secondly, indirectly through the counter religious movement of the Seng Khasi in the sense that culture in Khasi-Jaintia Hills could never get rid of religious overtones—the Seng Khasi for obvious reasons concentrated more on preserving traditional religion and culture (with major emphasis on religion) than on modernizing the society and culture. Christian influence and Colonial rule, therefore vulgarised the traditional culture on the one hand and prevented the growth of a Secular culture on the other. Education, though initiated, was not allowed to modernize

the society meaningfully. Initially there was also a deliberate attempt to Christianize the education system by compiling text books with strong Christian bias. The Government also pressurized parents to send their children in schools established by Christian missions.

The direct influence of Christianity on music is best understood in the following assessment by Filkin Laloo, a veteran exponent of music in Khasi-Jaintia Hills. Laloo says :⁹

As in the plains, our music was previously associated with the different animistic rituals, as well as with the various traditional social festivals. So long as our society remained cut off from the rest of the world our music also retained its old characteristics.....The first foreign impact on our society came through the Western church and its missionary activities. As a result of this, certain changes inevitably took place in our cultural values and attitude, due to which our traditional music got moulded. Most of our traditional musical tunes or forms have almost become extinct. It can be safely stated that our present day hill music have been deeply influenced by Western, specially, by church music. This western influence can be broadly classified under the following categories : (a) Music coming through the Welsh Mission Church in the forms of hymns. These are mostly composed in the Major Chords.. (b) Music coming through the Roman Catholic Church which are composed in Minor Chords. Western musical instruments which came to us along with these types of music are Violin, Piano, Piano Accordians, Spanish Guitar, Mandolin etc.

The missionaries also changed their approach to the local traditional system. After the initial vigorous campaign against the system in the early phase which met with resistance, they began to be soft and even allowed the converts to retain some of the traditional socio-cultural traits. Because of this softening of tactics, and a sustained missionary activities there was a threefold progress of Christianity in the decade between 1870 and 1880. (In 1981 almost half of the population in these hills are Christians). Did it result in a loss of culture ? In a sense, yes.

The apprehension of a loss of culture motivated the establishment of Seng Khasi in 1899. But in an attempt to preserve the traditional culture, major emphasis was put on a religious revival. There was also an attempt to propagate Hindu

religious value. The patron of the movement Babu Jeebon Roy believed that Khasi religion was a sister religion of Hinduism. Thus besides writing books on Khasi religion and concept of God, *Ki Niam jong Ka Khasi, Ka Kitab ba batai Pynskynma Shaphang Uwei U Blei etc.*, he had also translated in Khasi stories from *Ramayana, Hitopodesha* and *Chaitanya Charita* etc. His eldest son, Babu Sibcharan Roy also translated *Bhagwat Gita* and *Chanakya Niti Darpana*. This trend continued and there was also an attempt to put Khasi religion in a pedestal of monotheism to prove its equality, if not superiority vis-a-vis such monotheistic religion as Christianity and Islam.⁹ In fact, major literary publications patronized by Seng Khasi till date are on religion. Seng Khasi declares: "A Khasi is a Khasi because of his religion, more than anything else. This is a great fact, to understand him one has got to go deep down into the very root of his religion".¹⁰

So the cultural identity and religious identity go together. The written literature in Khasi, that began sometime after the adoption of Roman script around 1841 and the establishment of a printing press by Babu Jeebon Roy in 1894, were initially religious literature as stated above. Even a book of verse, *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen* written by Radhon Singh Berry in 1903, in the form of *Phawar*, the traditional Khasi verse, had a religio-moral overtone. The *Phawars* were sung in all the social feats of the Khasis such as festivals, community work, social gatherings, hunting and fishing expeditions, games and sports and archery competitions. It has always been a part of celebrations, whether after a successful hunt or victory in archery competitions. Radhon Singh Berry's verses in *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen* written in the form of *Phawars*, however, propagates principally religious morality. Not surprisingly the collection opens with an invocation:

*God, the Lord and Master and the Wise One
May he enable us to be righteous and knowing
In imparting sound instruction to kith, kin and family
May he not give us unto abject shame.*

This can be compared to a common form of traditional *Phawar*:

He pants for curry leaf, the passion fruit ho!

for the deer;

Never do what is evil, or the goddess will curse (You).¹¹

The difference in tone is easily noted.

Modern Trend

The modern Khasi literature, mainly poetry, began with U Soso Tham, described as a nature poet in the tradition of William Wordsworth. His love of nature and humanity finds a poetic expression in almost all of his poems. A special mention may be made of his poem *U Sib* in which he has immortalized a blind Khasi street singer. U Sib sings :

*Of sweetest water-springs I drink,
In deepest slumber nightly sleep,
On me harsh winds of sorrow never beat,
Why then should I ever grieve !*

* * *

*Although I see nor moon nor sun,
Because my eyes are closed,
To me they shine, both night and day,
With brightness I alone can know.¹²*

The poets after U Soso Tham, however, could not abandon the flux initiated by Tham, who till date remains singularly genuine. A poem from one of the younger generation poets, Dewi Singh Khongdup, is typically Thamian in diction :

*At times when I'm alone
With all friends somewhere else,
Why should I my lot bewail
In quietness by the fireside
To numb by fretful heart.
Oh, where are the soothing strains of Khasi Land
To calm my desolate mind ;
Cool breezes of Shillong Peak,
Blow upon me here, whispering
'I for one do still remember thee'.¹³*

Remembering the grand old days of joy, prosperity and hope, glorifying everything past in a revivalist mood, may however, retard the growth of modernity in literature. This might be a reason why significant prose literature - novels and stories are yet to be written. The modern Khasi poets like Victor Bareh and Hamlet Bareh draw themes and inspiration from folklore.

*I know, my friend, you wish to ascend above
To live in a realm where no dark clouds encumber,
The Bridge of Sohpetbneng is not a dream,
It reaches up skyward behind those hills.
A life of purity, a heart that earns (righteousness)
One step higher each day it ascends*

Till at last where the bright stars shine
 It arrives, leaving a sinful world behind.
 Truth dwells within each human heart,
 The happiness we feel is no illusion,
 With charity it strives after higher things.
 To a Wondrous Realm, children of light.

—*Ki Khun Ka Jingshai (Children of Light)*

by Hamlet Barch¹⁴

This religiousity, this spiritualism, this craving for a 'wondrous realm', ascending the golden bridge of *Sohpetbneng* connecting heaven and earth, leaving the sinful world behind and reaching the heaven where the bright stars shine, is comparable to Radhon Singh Berry's *Phawars* with religious overtones :

'Give thanks to God with folded hands when you awake'.

Significantly, the parable of *Sohpetbneng*, is referred to in establishing the monotheistic dignity of Khasi-Jaintia religion.¹⁵ The parable tells : 'On the top of U Sohpetbneng peak there grew a tree which served as a ladder of communication between god and man. That was then the golden age after creation. But this happy state of things had its end for, in course of time, man i.e., *U Hynniew Trep U Hynniew Skum*, the the ancestors of the Khasi race, drifted away from god, and the golden bridge had to collapse'. The God-man relation was, however, restored when man turned to God with repentance and thereby averted his race's spiritual crisis.

What gave strength to the early man, his affinity to spirits and nature deities, his gods and goddesses, his ancestors, in his grim struggle for existence and which got reflected in his folklore, the evidences of his culture, cannot provide strength to a modern man in his struggle for survival and a better day. His culture - the evidences of it - must find a new hope by analysing social reality exposing the social maladies and evolving a form of culture - art, music and literature - that leads him to action for a change of his world for a better one, and not in religiousity and fond hope in spiritualism. The modern art and literature must depict the world as something which can be changed. To do it, there should be analytical dissection of the facts of backwardness and identification of forces and factors of backwardness. Revivalism is no answer.

References

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12. *Ibid.*
13. *Ibid.*
14. *Ibid.*
15. H. Onderson Mawrie, *op. cit.*