

ASPECTS OF KHASI PHILOSOPHY

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PHILOSOPHY

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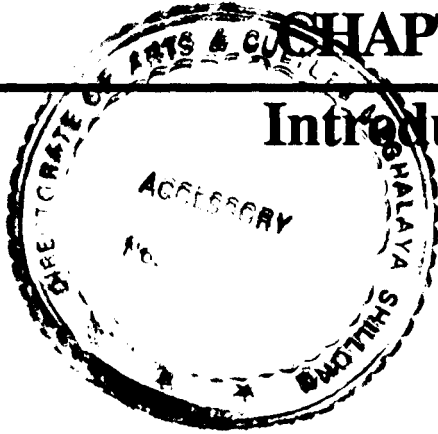
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CHAPTER 1

Introduction



In the past few years, the attention of many Researchers has been drawn to the Khasi living in this remote corner of North Eastern India. A number of scholarly works have been brought out. Some of these works have been of a very high order while others have preferred to examine the periphery only and in the process have managed to grasp at the shadow and missed the substance. Their interpretations have not only been superficial but have also misled people all over as regards the various institutions which are unique only to the Khasi.

One of the fears among the Khasi intellectuals and scholars is the attempt by some to make this beautiful land and its people a kind of social laboratory in order to enable people from elsewhere to secure their academic degrees by submitting some sort of shabby presentation of the people who have a long, unique and deep philosophical tradition.

Review of Literature

It will not be an easy task to mention the works brought out so far on the Khasi in general and his philosophy in particular. Below we will mention just a few of such writings by local Khasi authors and non-Khasi authors separately.

Although the Roman script was introduced into the Khasi language only in 1841 by Thomas Jones, yet the Khasi language has developed rapidly as reflected in the various literary writings that have appeared from time to time. This development is not confined to the field of Literature but also to Science, Theology and Philosophy. Some of the works on philosophy are being brought out as mere apologetics, but many have a genuine desire to preserve the true significance of Khasi traditional belief as handed down by words of mouth from one generation to another without being tainted by religious parochialism or egoistic motivations.

U Jeebon Roy was probably the first Khasi to have made an attempt at writing about Khasi religion. In his book, *Ka Niam Jong ki Khasi* (1897), Jeebon Roy had stated in the Preface that it was not his intention to give a comprehensive view but to present a mere note on Khasi religion in order to encourage other authors. The motive for the work was,

"The People will completely forget (their religion) with the coming of the Christian Religion, the Roman Catholic Religion, the Unitarian Religion, the Brahma Religion; The poor Khasi Religion without any written record will pass into oblivion and after many years people will forget it completely"(1).

A few years later Jeebon Roy also wrote "Uwei U Blei" in 1990.

Rabon Singh, another prominent author brought out three important books of which **Ka Kitab Niam Kheĩn ki Khasi** published in 1911 is the most popular. In this book he described about the various religious rites and rituals of the Khasi and their traditional beliefs, besides drawing a note on Khasi laws and customs.

U Sib Charan Roy Jaitdkhar in his book **Ka Niam Ki Khasi, Ka Niam Tip-Blei Tip-Briew** (1919) explained about some important aspects of Khasi religion and also gave a comprehensive view on Khasi etiquette and the teachings of the elders.

Radhon Singh Berry wrote extensively on Khasi etiquette in his Book **Ka Jingsneng Tymmen** (Parts I and II) in 1903. This work is considered even today as the best in the field of Khasi etiquette and politeness.

In 1930, Fr. Joseph Bachiarello brought out an edited work **Ki Dienjat U Longshuwa** with excellent articles on Khasi religion and philosophy besides a number of other articles. Even H.O.Mawrie had quoted from his book in some of his latest works (2). Fr. G.Costa, a renowned anthropologist did his part when he published **Ka Riti Jong Ka Ri Laiphew Syiem (Part-1)** in 1936. This book gave a lurid account of the Khasi conception of the origin of the world, the origin of the Khasi, his dress, food habits, gait, religion, inheritance, Syiemship and a number of such important chapters.

In the following year, Dr. Homiwell Lyngdoh brought out a master piece on Khasi religion in his book **Ka Niam Khasi** (1936). In this book he dealt elaborately on the Nongkrem festival, the method of inheritance, rituals and

rites at the naming ceremony, the way in which the Syiem of Sohra is cremated, the erection of the monoliths and on the system of Clans.

One year after that he brought out yet another rare work on the Khasi Syiems in the book entitled, **Ki Syiem Khasi bad Synteng**.

Others who have contributed to the development of the Khasi Culture, Religion and Philosophy are, Fr.H.Elias in his books 'Ka Pansngiat Ksiar Ki Saw Aiom' and 'Ki Khanatang U Barim' (1965), and Soso Tham, 'Ki Sngi Barim U Hynniew Trep', A.S.Khongphai, **Principles of Khasi Law** (1970), Fr. Sngi Lyngdoh, **Ka Pomblang shisien shisnem jong Ka Hima Shillong**, Rev.T.Radborne, **U Khasi** (1979) and **Ka Niam jong u Khasi Pnar** (1984). R.T.Rymbai too besides his brilliant contributions in various articles has also written elaborately on the foundation of Khasi Culture, the beliefs of the Khasi and other such aspects in his book **Ban Pynieng la ka Rasong** (1979). U Tralsing Mawthoh Pyngrup too has tried to explain about the Khasi in his book **Ki Mawlynti Ka Jingngeit u Khun Khasi** (1979). R.Kostan Roy in his work **Assortment** (1978) tries to elucidate some points pertaining to the Khasi faith and beliefs. Another work that has come up recently is Philomena Kharakor's detailed work on the Khasi Culture as reflected in Khasi literature in her book **Ka Kolshor Khasi kat kum ba ka paw ha ka literature Khasi** (1930-1941). Another such work is W.R.Mawphlang's **Ka Jingiathukhana Pateng la Pateng** (1988), a book which relies more on common sense rather than Research. Norbert Nodren Nongrum, another young author

in his books **U Sohblei** (1987) and **Ka Main u Shynrang Khasi** (1989) has tried to tickle the Khasi mind into a consideration of the whole concept of Priesthood and the role of the Khasi males in the Matrilineal setup of the Society.

The Seng Khasi has also contributed much to the preservation and development of the various traditional values. The Seng Khasi though apologetic in approach vis a vis Christianity has brought out thought provoking articles in their various publications which include, **Ka Sneng Khasi**, the official organ of the Seng Khasi brought out since (1975), **Khasi Heritage** in 1979, and **Where lies the Soul of Our Race** in 1982. Besides the above mentioned publications, the Seng Khasi has also brought out the annual souvenirs of **Seng Kutsnem** from 1988. These Souvenirs include excellent articles on the various facets of Khasi life.

However, the most comprehensive and dynamic contributions in the field of literature to the Khasi values, tradition and faith are made by H. Onderson Mawrie and Donbok T.Laloo.

H. Onderson Mawrie has written **U Khasi bad la ka Niam** (1973), **Hei Ho nga bat la ka Nia**, **Ka Pyrkhath U Khasi** which has been translated into English under the title **Khasi Milieu** in 1979, **Essence of Khasi religion** (1981), **Ka Longing-longsem u khun Khasi Khara** (1983), **Ka Risaw jong ka Niam Khasi** (1984) and **Ka Theology jong ka Niam Khasi** (1991). Donbok T.Laloo another prominent author has done extensive research on the various aspects of Khasi cultural life. These books include, **Ka Thymmei Pyrkhath u Khasi bad ki Parom** (1976), **Ka Rong-**

biria u Hynniew Trep (1978), Ka Sajer in two volumes in 1982 and **Ka Ksaw ka Kpong (1984)** to name a few.

Besides these above mentioned authors and books there are other Luminaries on the subject who have contributed much to it in various journals and Newspapers. The most prominent among them being, U Hormu Roy Diengdoh, U David Roy, U Rash Mohon Roy, Prof. Radhon Singh Lyngdoh, U Hipshon Roy Kharshiing and others. The names of the earlier authors featured in **Ka Syngkhong Jingtip**, A well known and popular Khasi Magazine brought out since 1936.

A number of Non-Khasi authors have also contributed much to the growth and development of Literature on the cultural life of the Khasi. Below we cite just a few which are widely read by people all over.

One of the first authoritative writers on the Khasi who was very often quoted even today in ordinary circle was P.R.T Gurdon's **The Khasis**. In this book, Gurdon gave a vivid description of the Khasi from all angles. He had the help of a number of Khasi intellectuals while preparing this book and in the preface he wrote, "Many others have helped, but the following names may be specially mentioned, viz.: Mr.J.B.Shadwell, Mr.S.E.Rita, The Revd. C:H.Jenkins, Mr.C.Shadwell, Mr.Dohory Ropmay, U Hormu Roy Diengdoh, u Ray Mohan Diengdoh, u Job Solomon, u Suttra Singh Bordoloi, u San Mawthoh, u Hajam Kishore Singh, u Nissor Singh and u Sabor Roy"(3).

However, though this book has been upheld to the present day as one of the best monographs on the Khasi, yet a number of observations dealing with the chapter on

religion, in particular, have been seen to portray some mistaken and misinterpreted truth.

Among other works on the Khasi are **The Missionary among the Khasis** by Nalini Natarajan in 1977, **The Khasi Canvas** written by J.N.Choudhury in 1978, **Khasi of Meghalaya, Study in Tribalism and Religion** by P.R.G.Mathur in 1979, **The Origin and Early History of the Khasi-Synteng** people by Namita Catherine Shadap-Sen in 1981, **Impact of the west on Khasis and Jaintias** by P.N.Dutta in 1982, etc. Besides these books there have been innumerable references to the Khasi in various books brought out from time to time. These works whatever be their quality have provoked the Khasi Scholars, Researchers and Intellectuals to be critical of the writing and research theses brought out especially by people who have just come to these hills to acquire an additional degree. It is in line with this that an attempt is made to form a kind of intellectual vigilant Society called **Ka Kynhun Pyrkhat Khia u Khasi** in April 1989. This group unanimously agreed that it is high time to give orientation to Khasi Ideology, preservation of the sanctity of thought and expression as well as counteracting the various distortions in the writings by Authors and Research Scholars who are not conversant with the local sentiments, traditions and way of life (4).

The Term Khasi

A number of authors have referred to the people living in these Hills as the Khasis. The plural number is used, precisely to include all the sub-tribes, the main ones as summed up by Brektis Wanswet include "U Khyrniam, U Pnar, U

Bhoi, U War"(5). The term Khasi is a generic one and it is for this reason that in this book, the singular rather than the plural is preferred. Today there is an unhealthy tendency where in the Khasi is made out to be different from the Jaintia (also known as Pnar or Synteng). Even eminent intellectuals of the present age including R.T.Rymbai are not free from this error, Rymbai for instance has frequently used the term Khasi-Pnar to refer to the Khasi. The suffix Pnar is redundant as the same is included in the term Khasi. Quoting R.T.Rymbai on the subject:

"The word Khasi (here) includes the Pnars who generally calls the Khasis as Khyrnriams or Khasis to distinguish them from themselves. The Khyrnriams, on the other hand call the Pnars as Syntengs, Jaintias or Pnars and refer to themselves as Khasis. Within the Khyrnriam group are the Bhois, the Wars and the Lyngngams. Within the Pnar group are the Wars, the Labangs, the Nangtung, the Khyrwangs, Nangphylluts. The Wars are thus found in both the groups and are known as War Jaintias or War Pnars and as War Khyrnriams or War Khasis according to their habitat, Jaintia Hills or Khasi Hills. This sort of differentiation between the Pnars and the Khyrnriams is the outcome of a political division between them over the centuries, so much so that, though they are one and the same people, it has become a practice to call them Khasi-Pnars or Khasi-Jaintias since the Pnars are also known as the Jaintias, wrongly though. The people always speak of themselves nowadays as Khasi-Pnars, and own that they are the progeny of Ki Hynniewtrep"(6).

Another author, the late Kynpham Singh, however contended that Khasi is a generic term with a number of sub-groups in it. He had even quoted *U Khasi Mynta*, one of the earliest Khasi papers (1896), to substantiate his contention. He wrote:

"The common nomenclature 'Khasi' for the inhabitants of the Khasi Hills, the Synteng, the War, the Khasi and the Bhoi indicate that they are of the same Stock" (*quoted from U Khasi Mynta*).

Kynpham Singh added,

"I have quoted the above passage to stress the fact that Khasis and Jaintias are one and that their religion also is one" (7)

Dr.Homiwell Lyngdoh like all other authors held the same view on this vital subject (8).

Origin of the Khasi

Today with the growth of science and research, a number of investigations have been made to trace the origin of the Khasi. However, despite such attempts the Khasi holds on to his own views about the origin of his race. He believes that the Khasi was directly created by God and placed in these hills, of which the most sacred ones are the **Sohpet Bneng** (The Navel of Heaven) peak in the north, the **Dieng iei** (the sign of sin) peak in the west, and the **Shyllong** (Lum Shyllong) peak in the southern part of Shillong.

Philosophically the Khasi believes that in the beginning of time, God created Sixteen Families (**Khathynriew trep khathynriew skum**). These stayed with God, in heaven. Later on, however, by an agreement with God Seven of these families came to stay on earth, these could also have free access to heaven through the Golden Ladder (**Ka Jingkieng Ksiar**) situated on the **Sohpet Bneng**. Owing to man's pride and sin, the ladder was torn down by man and the Seven families were left stranded on earth. These were known as Seven Huts or Seven Families (**Ki Hynniew trep Hynniew skum**). Hence, the Seven families have a direct connection with the Nine above.

This is the belief of the Khasi everywhere. The Khasi never doubts that this land, where he is presently staying

was his original home, a home given to him by God, a home with relics to be seen all around it.

With this in mind, then, one will be able to understand better the Khasi ethos and philosophy as given in the subsequent chapters. It may also be noted here that the Khasi, though surrounded by a galaxy of Idol worshipers has never deviated from his traditional belief and faith.

Sometimes the influence had been too great to resist, but the Khasi has nevertheless, managed to differentiate between what is original and what is being added from other religious traditions in his philosophy and belief. This will be seen in our discussion of the various aspects of their philosophy.

Notes and References

1. Roy, Jeebon, **Ka Niam jong ki Khasi**, Shillong, 1987, p.i.
"Ki briw kin klet noh shisyndon mynta ha kane ka por ba la wan kiew ka Niam Khristan, Ka Niam Raman Katholik, Ka Niam Unitarian; Ka Niam Brahma, Ka Niam Khasi ba pli khlem thoh khlem tar kan shu jah lyngngaid bad ynda bun snem kin klet noh ki briw shisyndon."
2. Cfr. Mawrie, H.O., **Khasi Milieu**, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1981, p.53.
3. Gurdon, P.R.T., **The Khasis**, Low Price Publication, Delhi, 1990, p.vi.
4. The Implanter, Vol XXI, No.20 dated April 5, 1989, "New Body of Thinkers".
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8. Lyngdoh, Homiwell, **Ka Niam Khasi**, Shillong, 1970, p.i.