

# **THEMATIC APPROACH IN KHASI DRAMA**

**(From the beginning to 1950)**

**By**

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

Khasi drama and theatre is an unexplored area in the realm of research studies. During the course of my investigation, I have encountered one obstacle—that is the absence of records which would assist me to get a glimpse of the genesis of Khasi stage-plays and their subsequent development. No contemporary writer or critic has found it worthwhile to dwell on this aspect.

Hence the premises of some chapters of my thesis have been based on questionnaires answered by living personalities who are knowledgeable about the earliest 'stage-play' in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, and also on whatever scanty references that could be collected on the subject.

As has been discovered Khasi drama has a long history and tradition. Unfortunately most part of that history and tradition are still buried in obscurity. It is only in this present century that they have been exposed through published plays. It is unfortunate again that the plays enacted in various places in Khasi and Jaintia Hills have not been preserved for the benefit of

posterity in general and Khasi literature in particular.

The period under investigation sees very few published plays whose bulk belongs to the Seng Khasi, a socio-cultural organisation founded on 23rd November, 1899.

The first published play of Seng Khasi- Savitri (1910) written by Hari Charan Roy Dkhar is an adaptation from one of the episodes found in the Mahabharata. In the strict sense of the term, Savitri is not one of the representative plays of the decade since it is not an 'original work' of the writer. Although it does not reflect the Khasi way of life yet there are certain attitudes found therein which coincide with traditional Khasi morality. It is unfortunate that no other plays written by this playwright have been unearthed although I have been told that he had written few others which had been staged in the Seng Khasi Hall, Mawkhar from time to time.

The next published plays written by Dinonath Roy Dkhar are three in number - Ka Shrommotimai lane ka Hok (1912), U Arbnai (1912) and U Tipsngi (1924). As has been

gathered, Dinonath Roy had also written few more plays which were staged by Seng Khasi. Unfortunately, again all the manuscripts have been lost or burnt by the fire that completely destroyed the old building of the Ri Khasi Press located at Umsohsun, Shillong.

These four plays represent the period from 1910 to 1924, and in examining them we have found that they are sufficient to cater to our needs in discovering the thematic approach stressed by the playwrights. We also have reasons to contend that the approach does not deviate from those plays written, produced and enacted by other theatrical circles like the Khasi Native Club, the Jowai Theatrical Clubs, Nongkrem Theatrical Clubs and others.

## II

I realised that starting my project from the year 1910 would be self-defeating if I would not dwell at length on certain elements prevalent on some aspects of Khasi customs and traditions such as marriage ceremony, religious rites and rituals, the phawars and others. This has resulted in the emergence of Chapter I under the

title "Elements of Khasi Drama" which seeks to prove that 'play-acting' is inherent in the Khasi way of life. This element in a crude form found in the varied aspects of Khasi life may be taken as a precursor of improved and artistic stage-plays of later days performed by different theatrical clubs in the land. This chapter also attempts to underscore the idea that theatrical performances seen at Jaintiapur could be easily adapted, improvised and enacted later on by the Khasis.

The chapter further stresses that 'drama' among the Khasis initially begins at home reflecting through the Khasi concept of Sawdong ka Lyngwiar Dpei which may be roughly rendered into English "Around the Hearth". In fine, this saying signifies that the hearth is a nucleus of any family life in all Khasi homes. It is round the fire-place that the elders have a 'dialogue' with the children and wards, tell stories, recount past events, impart moral lessons and so on. As a matter of fact, the 'hearth' can be considered as a 'school' where informal education is imparted.

## III

The second chapter, "Beginning of Khasi Drama" proposes to trace the historical aspect of Khasi Theatre. Arguments have it that the pioneers in the field of stage-play are the so-called "Bengalee babus" of Calcutta coming to Shillong when it was made capital of the Chief Commissioner's Province of Assam in 1874. The Bengalee 'babus' no doubt had contributed considerably to the development of Khasi theatre in Shillong but they are by no means the pioneers in this realm. This chapter proposes in clear terms that 'play-acting' in Khasiland is a direct influence of Jaintiapur stage-play enacted particularly for the entertainment of the Jaintia royalty by the Bengalee subjects inhabiting Jaintia Parganas in the olden days. Further it proposes to trace that play-acting ascended the Jaintia Hills and found its root at Nartiang and eventually at Jowai, the subsequent administrative headquarter of Jaintia Hills District. Through trade relationship, marriage ties and other factors, Jowai theatre touched its feet at Nongkrem, Shillong, Sohra, Marbisu and Mawngap. Stress also has been made on the

Hinduised Khasi theatre characterised by subject matter, setting, atmosphere, music, attire, etc., which are found to be a common factor in all theatrical productions of the time.

In our investigation we have not discovered that Sylhet had a direct influence on Shillong theatre, Nevertheless whatever impact it might have had the only place would be Shella and perhaps a certain amount at Sohra.

#### IV

Chapter III entitled "The Published Plays" attempts to trace the Khasi published plays from the times of John Roberts. Most Khasi writers have echoed in one voice that John Roberts is the pioneer of Khasi written plays through his Khasi translation of certain portions of Shakespeare's Julius Caesar. However, it has been discovered that prior to this, Roberts had written a dialogue entitled "Phi la leh aiu ha kane ka Sngi" (What have you done today) published in his Khasi Third Reader. This aspect has been dealt with <sup>in</sup> this chapter.

It is agreed that John Roberts has made considerable literary contributions and he ~~is~~ rightly deserves to be called the "Father of modern Khasi literature."

Chapter three also devotes at length to the invaluable contributions of the Seng Khasi towards Khasi theatre. Basically the theatrical productions of the association do not defer much from those of Jowai's. There is so much in common that it is contended that the Shillong stage plays have a direct link with Jaintiapur through Jowai theatre.

Further no writer has done any research work on the role of the Khasi Native Club and its involvement with the Khasi theatrical development. One section of this chapter is devoted to its contributions as could be gathered from questionnaires, interviews and whatever scanty records available.

The coming of the Welsh Calvinistic Presbyterian Mission is a landmark in the history of Khasi society. Its impact on Khasi culture is immense. It was at this juncture that a school of thought founded by the Seng Khasi emerged which eventually culminated into a socio-

cultural revival pioneered by a few traditionalists with a view to combating the Christian invasion. Seng Khasi became a bastion of Khasi traditional life. To disseminate their idea, the Seng Khasi undertook production of plays and had them staged. Earlier we have mentioned the plays enacted by this association.

In fine, the main focus of this chapter is the conflict between the Khasi traditionalists or fundamentalists and the Khasi converts or modernists. Seng Khasi as an epitome of Khasi thought, culture and tradition viewed the coming of Christianity as a destructive factor of the Khasi way of life. Its theatrical performances have in them concepts such as righteousness, truth, clan consciousness, brotherly love, good conduct, etc.

## v

Chapter IV entitled "The Age of Conflict" deals with the late twenties and the thirties. The period is rather conspicuous by the absence of any publication of literary value and significance except perhaps in the field of journalism which is outside the scope of this thesis. In

the field of drama the lone representative play is U Mihsngi written by Mondon Bareh in the late twenties or early thirties and subsequently "revised and edited" by Prof. H.B. Ngapkynta in 1964. The impact of the play on the changing Khasi society especially among the urban folk is immense and far-reaching. The playwright as an ardent presbyter might have considered this play too sensitive, scandalous and hurtful that he left it unpublished during his life-time. In this chapter we have discussed certain conditions prevalent at the time, such as declining Christian spiritual life, blind imitation of western behaviour and ideas, church organisation and its intrigues and the negligence of customary rights and duties.

## VI

The last chapter covers the period of the forties, and hence it has been entitled simply as "The Forties". It singularly devotes itself to the impact of the Second World War on the Khasi milieu.

During this period Peace Roy Pariat emerged as a new powerful playwright. Out of his eight plays only

Ka Shangkhawiah Ki Rang (Share for men) has been published although all of them were staged in various places from time to time through the theatrical club known as Panora Club. Ka Shangkhawiah Ki Rang may be considered as the only representative play of the decade.

With whatever available references that could be discovered and facts gathered from interviews with living persons, this chapter exposes the changing attitude among the Khasis especially the females of the period. The society for the first time experienced a new imported vice-prostitution - till then unknown and unpractised. Its varied implications are reflected in the play of the era.

Lastly, here we have also traced the history of Panora Club one of the most popular theatrical clubs of the period, and its role on Khasi theatre.

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## CONCLUSION

'Drama' is a product of human action and interaction stemming from the instinct of imitation. This is what we have seen in the genesis of Khasi drama.

Drama among the Khasis can be traced to their customs and traditions manifested in the rites and rituals, marriage ceremony and other social observances. The first chapter has attempted to pinpoint this aspect of Khasi drama in oral form. Besides the few illustrations that have been shown relating to what we may call Khasi folk drama, we think it is also important at this point to refer to one aspect of Khasi social life where the element of drama is found, and that is the traditional Khasi archery.

Khasi archery is a sport and pastime among male participants where prowess and keen competitive spirit are exhibited. As far as we can gather no rowdiness or semblance of fisticuffs has ever occurred in this game either among the participants or

supporters. In fact this traditional sports has always reflected the true spirit of 'gamesmanship'. I particularly chose this word because this game requires no referee or umpire to decide the fate of the two teams competing with each other. One interesting point that should be mentioned is that skill and ability alone at the game is not enough because the Khasis believe that winning or losing is predetermined by the art of reasoning or polemics at the hand of the representative or captain of the team before the contest. To illustrate this point we turn to Donbok T. Laloo who has done much research on the subject. He has this to say:

"The art of reasoning in archery among the Hynniewtrep<sup>1</sup> primarily rests on the diction or wording the right argument ... The wording that U Hynniewtrep employs in archery evidently indicates that he regards his language and solemn promise as sacrosanct, and what he does or enjoins<sup>2</sup> he bases his action on truth".<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> May be roughly translated into English as "Seven Huts" or "Seven Homes" or "Seven Clans". These are the mythological ancestors and ancestresses of the Khasi race inhabiting Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The term has gained currency among Khasi writers today.

<sup>2</sup> The word used in Khasi ( ) is "kam", i.e. whether the team chooses the black spotted arrows or red-spotted one to be used in the competition.

<sup>3</sup> Ka Ronobirria u Hynniewtrep, (Shillong, pub. by S.S. Kharsmai, 1978) p. 97.

Hence it follows that winning or losing in Khasi archery is the result of the upholding of one's word and commitment, not only the ability in the game itself. This particular aspect of the game can be illustrated by one example recounted by D.T. Laloo besides the many he has collected in his research work. Mr. Laloo points out that in Khasi archery the words of commitment between two teams become a pledge, and once this pledge is violated by any contending team, the fate of that team is already decided.<sup>4</sup> The following event narrated by D.T. Laloo will perhaps show what dialogue employed with choice words and logic would lend credence to what we have indicated.

Once there was an archery competition between Dulong and Shillong-Raid.<sup>5</sup> According to the pledge or words of commitment (kular) the stakes was "eight rupees above". Ramkhian Masong, the representative or

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 108

<sup>5</sup> Loc.cit.

captain of the Dulong Team was sure of victory and hence he had carried a sizeable sum of money. In the archery arena, amidst joviality, tension and expectations the dramatic scene is laid for the dialogue that runs as follows:

"Let us compete for one hundred rupees", started Ramkhian.

"Let us compete for a pice", replied Iang Nihla, the captain of Shillong-Raid Team.

"Two hundred rupees", said Ramkhian.

"Two pice", replied Iang Nihla.

"Three hundred rupees", increased Ramkhian.

"Three pice", ensnared Iang Nihla.

"How can we compete with one pice, two pice, three pice? You don't have any stakes?", asked Ramkhian.

"We will give you the money for sealing wax and bee wax if you do not have any. But why have you forgotten the pledge. All right, we will stake five hundred rupees besides what we have pledged", explained Iang Nihla.

Ramkhian Marong right then and there realised his great blunder and refused to compete with the

stake of not more than eight rupees. In the contest the Shilliang-Raid were victorious on the main ground that "he has forgotten his solemn promise".<sup>6</sup>

Khasi archery besides entailing the element of 'gamesmanship' underlining with truth and righteousness has a focal point which can be summed up in the words of Primrose Garfield Gatphoh:

"Besides fun and pleasure, it [archery] creates self-confidence. It reminds all males to be courageous and not fearful to stand on what they choose to be the right side. As it is for us to peruse and judge first before we release the arrow at the target, so also it teaches us to weigh things carefully before we open our mouth and arrive at the word of honour".<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp. 108-109

<sup>7</sup> Ki Khanatang bad u Sier Lapalang, (Shillong, pub. by Mrs. P. Gatphoh, 3rd ed., 1967) p. 40.

[Primrose Garfield Gatphoh was a prolific writer. He is considered as one of the prominent Khasi poets. He was born on 10th January, 1900 at Jowai, Jaintia Hills. He joined the British Labour Corps in 1918 in the First World War before completing his Matriculation. He saw action in the Middle East till 1922. In 1923 he was appointed a Clerk in the Shillong Government High School. He passed his Matriculation in 1928 in the First Division with distinction in Khasi. He was inducted as a full time teacher in Khasi in the same schools. P.G. Gatphoh has published books of wide-ranging variety. His prominent publications are Ki Phawar Sara, Sawdong ka Lynowiar Dpei, Ki Khanatang bad u Sier Lapalang and Ki Umjer Ksiar. He died on the 6th July, 1977/

The beginning of Khasi stage-plays is that of Jaintiapur, the summer capital of the old Hima Sutnga (Sutnga Kingdom) or Jaintiapur Kingdom as has been referred to by the English historians and writers. As has been discovered the early stage-plays of Jowai town were Hinduised in character. The themes of most plays enacted by various theatrical clubs of Jowai and Shillong during the early part of this century were drawn out from Hindu myths and legends. Simple the themes may be these stories especially those that centre round the raja, maharani and the nobles captured the imagination of the Pnars inhabiting the hills of the Jaintia Kingdom. They readily identified these rajas with their own "syiem",<sup>7</sup> the maharanis with their "mahadei"<sup>8</sup> and the nobles with their "myntri".<sup>9</sup> Thus the "kingly theme" as the trend was set for the later playwrights to follow, and it has

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<sup>7</sup>Cf. Chapter III, Section IV, pp. 107-108.

<sup>8</sup>Wife of the Syiem.

<sup>9</sup>. Or Councillors. Representatives of various clans who are usually the founder members of any hima or state or kingdom in Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

been a focal point of all plays written by Khasi writers till the forties of this century. Their kings were mostly benevolent who care about the well-being of their subjects. "The king can do no wrong" seems to have been a precept for all playwrights of the time. But beneath the popular theme these lies the time-honoured Khasi saying "having been born into this world to earn righteously" (wan long brieve sha ka pyrthei ban kamai ia ka hok) on which most playwrights have framed their stories. 'Good winning over the bad' theme has a prominent role in all the plays enacted in the earliest decades of Khasi drama.

The evidence is obvious when we turn to the published plays enacted by the Seng Khasi whose themes have been largely drawn out from Hindu myths and legends with 'kingly setting' as a backdrop. Nevertheless the underlining message of all their plays is "to earn righteously", "knowing-man, knowing-God" and the knowledge of "truth" in keeping with the traditional Khasi thought and belief. Obedience and respect to parents and elders as well the strict observance of

of one's duties and responsibilities in relation to others in the society has been vividly projected in all published plays. Although the Khasi Native Club had staged plays with local themes and settings woven round popular Khasi folktales it could never deviate itself from disseminating Khasi thought and idea to the audience. It is interesting to observe that although these two non-Christian associations were open in their opinion against Christianity and 'aping' of the westernised way of behaviour which they regarded as a destructive factor to the traditional Khasi way of life, yet it has been discovered, they have never written and enacted plays which were derogatory to Khasi converts and to those educated few who pretended to have disregarded the old customs and traditions and adopted a new life-style. The conflict and mud-slinging might have been manifested in newspapers but not through dramatic performances.

It has been pointed out that John Roberts who has been regarded as the "father of modern Khasi literature" is the pioneer of Khasi written plays not by his translation of certain portions of

William Shakespeare's Julius Ceasar but by his short dialogue "Phi la leh aiu ha kane ka sngi" ( What have you done today) published in his Khasi Third Reader. But unfortunately no Khasi writers had picked up the cue to write plays and enrich this literary genre. It may be inferred that the missionaries coming to these hills after John Roberts had no literary disposition or interest and were adverse to existing stage plays which they considered as heathenish and Hindu practices. Their main aim was to spread the Gospel among the non-believers who were steeped in ignorance and in need of the light. It is for these reasons that Khasi drama became a stagnant pool for many decades of the present century. During the course of interviews I have learned that there were kinds of 'play-acting' enacted by Khasi converts on occasions such as Christmas and Easter and on some other festive occasions in the thirties and forties. But all themes of such dramatic representations had religious overtone leaning towards Christian teaching. These may be likened to the **N**ativity and **M**iracle Plays of the Middle Ages.

In the realm of Khasi published plays the first three decades of the century belong to the Seng Khasi. Although we have not been able to trace any manuscript of the plays enacted by the Khasi Native Club its role in the theatrical performances in Shillong and other places will always be a part of the history and development of Khasi drama.

Turning to the historical aspect of Khasi drama, I have discovered through my interview<sup>10</sup> that there existed a theatrical club known as "Tyngshain Club" at Laban, Shillong. This club was founded by Mr. David Swer's father Don Singh Khongwir sometime in the early or middly twenties and presented annual theatrical performances till the early and middle thirties in a make-shift stage located near his residence. I have been told that the open ground where the stage was erected, which is still vacant today,

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In the course of my investigation I have met and interviewed Mr. David Swer who originally hailed from Sohra (Cherrapunjee) but now resides at Streamlet Road, Laban, Shillong. In his early eighties he is still hale and hearty and possesses a good and clear memory.

belongs to S.M. Amjad Ali.<sup>11</sup> Laban is a locality where one finds a sizeable Bengali population whose settlement has been traced since the early decades of the present century. Mr. David Swer has recounted that the essence of the Club's plays was not uncommon to those of Jowai, Seng Khasi and the Native Club theatrical performances. The themes of some plays were transcreations from the stories found in the Arabian Nights series. Again we have encountered that the common factor is the 'kindly setting' as a backdrop with the focal point of good always winning over the bad! I have also been told that the 'king's attire' had been specially ordered from Calcutta at an exhorbitant price. It is of interest to note that in all the theatrical performances there pervaded the Hindu music played by Bengali artists. But the songs sung were all in Khasi language and all male participants were all Khasis. As has been recounted most of the subjects of the plays which were written and produced were framed on popular stories found in

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Cf. Chapter III, Section IV, pp. 104.

varied literatures. But the thematic focus of all stage plays was illustrative of the traditional Khasi way of life.

Mondon Barih and Peace Roy Pariat may be regarded as the first modern Khasi playwrights who have projected social problems and issues prevalent in their times. When we take Mondon Barih first his Mihsnqi has clearly exposed what the Christianised and educated Khasis living in Shillong were going through the changing times. He was a Presbyterian and a committed Christian but did not spare to criticise and condemn those who misused the pulpit for self-aggrandizement. He is singularly vehement against those whom he considers as hypocrites who have stained the good name of the Church. His ardent wish is that the Khasis should not be too receptive and imitative in nature. He fears that these two factors if <sup>they</sup> cannot be controlled could have an adverse effect on the Khasi social life. Mondon Barih has nothing against education but those who think that **once** they are 'educated' they can flaunt themselves with impudence and impunity and in the process lose all self-dignity and originality and

become 'apes' of western civilization. In fine, Mondon Bareh's clarion call is that the Khasis whom he loves should not lose their own identity and genius in the new wave that was sweeping the land. Beneath the satirical element in the play his underlining message can be summed up by the Khasi saying "kylla dien trai" or to put that roughly into English "back to one's roots". To Mondon Bareh being a Christian is <sup>not</sup> acceptable but it does not mean that one is not a Khasi anymore.

On the otherhand Peace Roy Pariat the most modern of Khasi playwrights prior to the fifties is rather direct in his attack at certain social vices and issues that were prevalent in the Khasi land. As has been mentioned P.R. Pariat has written eight plays which were enacted in Shillong and other places in Khasi Hills. Out of these plays only Ka Shangkhawiah ki Rang (Snare for Men) has been published. Two of his plays are still missing but the other five manuscripts are still available today. It has been told that he had also written few short plays but unfortunately not one of the manuscripts has been

traced.

Peace Roy Pariat knows thoroughly well about drama and this is evident from the structure of his plays and his knowledge of the art of characterization. That is why his theatrical performances through the Panora Club were in great demand throughout the length and breath of Khasi Hills. Moreover, P.R. Pariat breaks away from the style of writing of the traditional Khasi playwrights and sets the trend of modern play-writing. He carefully chooses his themes and cast which are relevant to the times for the main purpose of entertainment and audience participation. His plays were well received and appreciated not only by the town people but the rural folk as well. Through his plays P.R. Pariat could be able to project the varied facets of Khasi social life. If he talks about love be it erotic, marital and parental, he touches the core of human sentiment and passion. If he is vitriolic in his attack against social evil such as greed, he does it with vehemence and deep conviction, shoots poisonous darts at the target and brings it down with no mercy and compunction. In

Ka Shangkhawiah ki Rang he has clearly depicted one social vice that has crept upon the society unawares and that is — prostitution. If he has pointed his fingers at the females who are the root cause of this imported vice he has also indirectly accused the menfolk of being accessory after the fact. As a matter of fact Peace Roy Pariat has simply exposed the burning issue to the audience and left the answer to them. Although the element of 'poetic justice', where the villains received their just deserts, is present nevertheless, the import of the play is not lost to the spectators who in turn should think and do something about it.

In conclusion, Peace Roy Pariat and the earlier playwrights in one respect have been cast in the same mould. In a subtle manner he subscribes to the idea of earlier writers and hence we find him being didactic and instructive. He is quite aware that the Khasis are being exposed to new attitudes and life-style and he fears that they may be succumbed to them at the cost of losing their own identity and self-respect. At times we feel that the traditional

theme of 'good triumphs over the bad' seems to be the main focal point in his Shangkhawiah ki Rang and others of his unpublished plays. We also feel that Peace Roy Pariat has echoed the idea of "earning righteously" the concept which has always haunted the earlier Khasi playwrights.

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