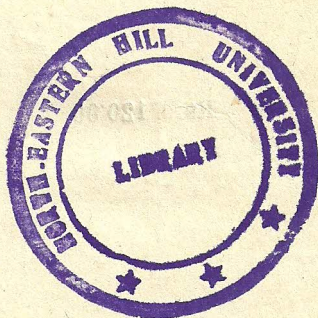


THE
ORIGIN AND EARLY HISTORY
OF THE KHASI-SYNTENG PEOPLE

NAMITA CATHERINE SHADAP-SEN

(Mrs. A. B. Shyam)



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In memory of my maternal grandfather,
U JISMOT CHYNE,
who helped me greatly with the writing of
this book, and died shortly before
its publication.

PREFACE

THIS monograph is based on a Ph. D. thesis which was the result of two years' work under formal supervision at the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, followed by part-time study and research in India, Australia and America. Thus the work can at least claim the distinction of having been produced in four of the five continents. It is intended not as an anthropological study but as an attempt to record in logical form whatever reliable information can be gathered about the past of the Khasi-Synteng people, now an important element in the life of north-eastern India. In gathering my material I have utilized the evidence of archaeology, linguistics, written records and anthropology, as well as traditions and legends which have come to my notice from oral sources.

The only reliable written records of the earlier past of the people we are studying, if we except a few passing references, are chronicles, mostly in Assamese. In transcribing words from these I have used in general the modern spelling of well known place names, such as Gauhati, Shillong, etc., wherever this is standardized. Proper names and other Assamese words are transliterated mechanically from the Assamese, according to the standard system used for Indian scripts, irrespective of the Assamese phonology, which has very individual features, notably the pronunciation of the letter generally transliterated *c* as *s* and of *j* as *z*; thus the Muslim title *sultān* is transliterated in Assamese as *cultān* and the name *Zāhir* as *Jāhir*. Exceptions have been made in the case of certain romanizations generally accepted in modern Assam. Thus *Jayantiyā* regularly appears as 'Jaintia', *Dimaruvā* as 'Dimarua' and *Kharām* as 'Khyrim', while the titles *Baruvā* and *Gohāñi* normally appear in their modern Assamese romanized forms 'Baruā' and 'Gohāin'.

During most of the time when this work was being written I did not have access to the calendrical tables which are necessary to reduce Hindu dates to their exact western equivalents. If it had been possible to do this it might have added precision, but in no case would it have made any essential difference to our

knowledge. I have therefore been content to give approximate dates only.

I am deeply indebted to my former supervisor, my husband Professor A. L. Basham, for his unflinching help and encouragement, and also for the strong pressure which he has brought upon me to finish this work. Without the latter it would probably never have been completed. In this he was ably supported by my son Ashok. I have also received much help from numerous other people, chief of whom are Mr. A. Christie (S.O.A.S., London), Mr. J. Chyne (my maternal grandfather, of Shillong, India, who gave me much information from personal knowledge), Mr. C. Court (formerly of the Department of Linguistics, Australian National University, Canberra), Dr. R. Davis (A.N.U.), Professor Eugène Henderson (S.O.A.S.), Dr. H.H.E. Loofs (A.N.U.), Dr. A. Rehman (for drawing the maps), and Professor H.R. Shorto (S.O.A.S.). In the course of my work I have made use of numerous libraries, whose staffs have been invariably very helpful, and to whom I express my thanks. These include: in London, the libraries of the School of Oriental and African Studies, the India Office, the Baptist Mission, the Royal Anthropological Institute and the Royal Asiatic Society; in Shillong, India, the Library of the Historical Research Department, N.E.F.A., the Assam State Library, the Assam Government Records, Shillong, and the All India Radio Library; in Canberra, the Library of the Australian National University and the National Library; and in the U.S.A., the Library of the University of Pennsylvania, Columbia University Library, Harvard University Library, New York Public Library and the Library of Congress. I am very grateful to Dr S.K. Maity for preparing the index. Last, but not least, I owe my gratitude to my mother and my late father, who enabled me to go to England to work for a higher degree. I would ask the readers' indulgence for any typographical or other errors which may have crept into this work.

N. C. Shadap-Sen

CONTENTS

<i>Chapter</i>	<i>Page</i>
Preface	v
Contents	vii
Abbreviations	xiii
MAPS The Khasi and Jaintia Hills	
i. Showing altitude and location	xv
ii. Showing syiemships	xvi
I INTRODUCTION	1
Preliminary	1
Geography	2
Sources	4
Earlier work on the subject	7
<i>PART I : THE KHASI PAST</i>	
II ETHNOLOGY AND PREHISTORY	10
Indian racial types	10
Early migrations in Assam	12
The Khasi-Syntengs	14
Prehistoric remains in the Khasi Hills	18
III MEGALITHS	24
Khasi-Synteng megalithic memorials...	24
Other Khasi megalithic structures	33
Khasi megaliths and other megalithic cultures	38
Origin and spread of megalithic culture	46
IV THE EVIDENCE OF LANGUAGE	51
The language of the Khasi-Syntengs	51
Glottochronology	55
Loan-words	57
The written language	72
Conclusions from the linguistic evidence	74
V HISTORY OF THE JAINTIA KINGS—I	77
Origins	77
The Jaintia Kingdom	78

	The legend of Jayantidevī and Bargohāin	...	80
	The successors of Bargohāin	...	88
	The Koch conquest of Jaintia	...	90
	Dhanmānik	...	91
	Further strife with the Kacharis	...	96
VI	HISTORY OF THE JAINTIA KINGS—II		102
	Yaśmānik	...	102
	Yaśmatrāi	...	110
	Mānsimha and Pratāpsimha	...	116
	Lakṣmīsimha	...	119
VII	HISTORY OF THE JAINTIA KINGS—III		130
	Rāmsimha	...	130
	Jaynārāyaṇ	...	145
	Bargohāin II	...	149
	The end of the Jaintia kingdom	...	153
VIII	THE FRAGMENTARY HISTORY OF THE HILL KHASIS		155
	Chieftains of Khyrim	...	155
	Other hill states	...	166
	Khasi relations with Sylhet	...	168
<i>PART II : TRADITIONAL KHASI CULTURE</i>			
IX	POLITICAL LIFE		174
	Early western contacts with the Khasis	...	174
	Tribal government	...	175
	Justice	...	181
	The Khasi chiefs	...	184
X	SOCIAL INSTITUTIONS		190
	Characteristics of the Khasis	...	190
	Matriliney and matriarchy	...	191
	Tribal structure	...	192
	The Khasi clans	...	193
	The Khasi-Synteng family	...	197
	Inheritance	...	199
	Class distinctions	...	200

	Conclusion	...	202
XI	KHASI RELIGION		203
	Preliminary	...	203
	The High God	...	204
	Other gods	...	209
	The <i>Thlen</i> —demonolatry	...	214
	Human sacrifice	...	216
	Animal sacrifice	...	217
	The afterlife	...	218
	Ancestor worship	...	219
	Totemism	...	220
	Marriage	...	221
	Birth ceremonies	...	226
	Funerary rituals	...	227
	The feeding of the dead	...	238
	Ceremonies performed for a husband or father	...	239
	The significance of the megalithic rituals	...	239
XII	INDUSTRY AND TRADE		242
	General material condition	...	242
	Trade	...	244
	The iron industry	...	246
	Weaving	...	251
	Pottery	...	252
	Agriculture	...	252
	Bee-keeping	...	254
XIII	EVERYDAY LIFE		256
	Houses and furniture	...	256
	Sites of villages	...	260
	Food	...	260
	Drinks	...	262
	Dress	...	263
	Oral literature and music	...	265
	Art	...	267
	Sports and pastimes	...	269
	Astronomy and calendar	...	270

Medicine	...	271
XIV CONCLUSION		274
Survey	...	274
The Khasis in recent times	...	276
The future of Khasi-Synteng historical studies	...	277
APPENDICES		
I Dates of Jaintia and Ahom kings	...	279
II Assamese months and their Sanskrit equivalents	...	280
III Notes on the constitutions of the Khasi Hill states	...	280
Bhawal	...	281
Khyrim (Nongkrem)	...	282
Langrin	...	283
Maharam	...	283
Malai-Sohmat	...	284
Mawiong	...	285
Mawsynram	...	286
Mylliem	...	287
Nongklaw (Khadsawphra)	...	288
Nongsohphoh (Nobosohphoh)	...	290
Nongspung	...	291
Rambrai	...	294
Sohra (Cherra)	...	296
Bibliography		298
Index		321
PLATES		329ff

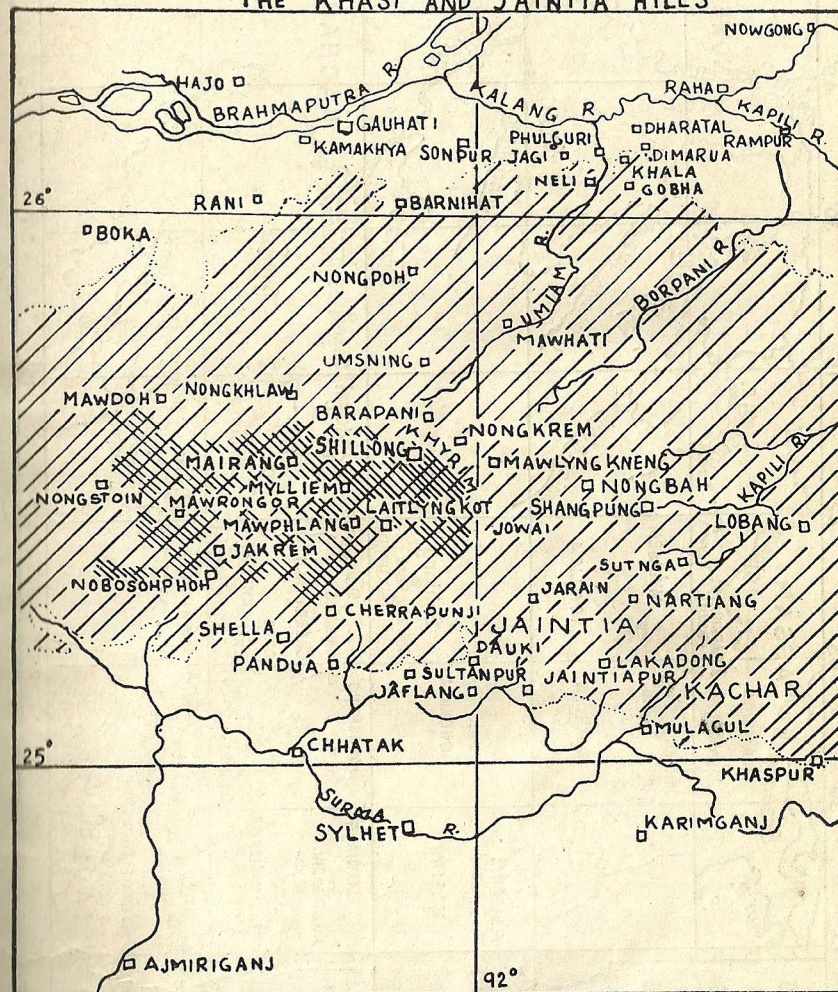
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|-----|--|
| I | a & b. Megaliths at Shangpung market place,
Jaintia Hills |
| II | Mound, Shangpung market, showing part of a
stone enclosure |
| III | a. Large megalithic complex, Nartiang
b. The tallest megalith, Nartiang |
| IV | a. Megaliths at Lyngkyrdem
b. Megaliths near Cherrapunji |

- | | |
|------|--|
| | c. Megaliths at Sohrarim, near Cherrapunji |
| V | a. Megaliths at Mawsmal, near Cherrapunji
b. Circular capstone from a megalith at Sohrarim |
| VI | a. Remains of half-buried cists, Mawkyndur
b. Stone cists, Lyngkyrdem |
| VII | a. & b. Ancient cairn, Shangpung |
| VIII | a. Cist and cairn near Cherrapunji
b. Recent cairn in the non-Christian cemetery,
Jowai |
| IX | a. Cremation platform near Cherrapunji
b. Ancient stone path, Nartiang |
| X | a. Stone bridge, near Cherrapunji
b. Stone bridge, Amwi |
| XI | a. Hill denuded by old iron workings, Smit
b. Khasi furnace (from Hooker) |
| XII | a. Lime-burner's house, with remains of kiln,
Sohrarim
b. Lime-burner's house, Sohrarim |
| XIII | a. Ceremonial house of the Nongkrem <i>syiem</i> , Smit
b. Gateway, the summer palace of the Jaintia kings,
Nartiang |
| XIV | <i>Maw-sning</i> . Rock carving of a pig, Jowai |

A B B R E V I A T I O N S

- AB* ed. Bhuyan, S. K., *Asam burañji* (1945).
- ACP* *Assam commissioner's papers*, Civil secretariat record office, Shillong.
- ADG* Assam, Government of, *Assam district gazetteers* (1906).
- ASP, GD* *Assam secretariat proceedings*, General department. Civil secretariat record office, Shillong.
- As. Res.* *Asiatic Researches*, Calcutta.
- BEFEO* *Bulletin de l'École française de l'extrême orient*, Hanoi, Saigon.
- BRP* *Board of revenue papers*, Assam, Civil secretariat record office, Shillong.
- BSPC* *Bengal secret political consultations*, India office library, London.
- DB* ed. Bhuyan, S. K., *Deodhāi Asam burañji* (1932).
- DRV* ed. Goswami, H. C., *Darrang rāj vaṁśāvalī* (1917).
- ERE* ed. Hastings, J., *Encyclopaedia of religion and ethics*.
- HCA* Choudhury, P. C., *History of the civilization of the people of Assam* (1959).
- JAI* *Journal of the Anthropological institute*, London. (later *JRAI*).
- JARS* *Journal of the Assam research society*, Gauhati.
- JASB* *Journal of the Asiatic society of Bengal*, Calcutta. (also *JRASB*).
- JB* ed. Bhuyan, S. K., *Jayantīyā burañji* (1964).
- JDL* *Journal of the department of letters*, Calcutta university.
- JRAI* *Journal of the Royal anthropological institute*, London. (earlier, *JAI*).

- JRAS *Journal of the Royal Asiatic society, London.*
 JRASB *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta. (also JASB).*
 KB ed. Bhuyan, S. K., *Kachārī burāñjī* (1936).
 MCLRMI *Monthly circular letters relative to the missionary in India, Serampore.*
 MI *Man in India, Ranchi.*
 PCCA *Proceedings of the Chief commissioner of Assam, Foreign department, Government of India, Assam.*
 SAB ed. Bhuyan, S. K., *Sātsārī Asam burāñjī* (1964).
 SDR ed. Firminger, W., *Sylhet district records.*
 TB ed. Bhuyan, S. K., *Tuñkungiyā burāñjī* (1933).

 PARTS OF ASSAM AND EAST BENGAL, SHOWING
 THE KHASI AND JAINTIA HILLS

 SCALE : 15 30 45 60 75
 KILOMETRES

INDEX

- ▨ : AREA OVER 450 FT ABOVE SEA LEVEL (APPROX.)
- ▩ : AREA OVER 4,500 FT ABOVE SEA LEVEL (APPROX.)

indicates that they were imported in comparatively recent centuries.

Geography

The plateau inhabited by these people, until recently known as the United Khasia and Jaintia Hills, rises in the south abruptly from the plains of Sylhet, now in Bangladesh, and more gradually in the north from the plains of Kamrup, in Assam. The latitude of the Hills is approximately 25° to 26° N, and the longitude between 91° and 93° E. The plateau is bounded on the north by the districts of Assam known as Kamrup and Nowgong, on the east by the Kapili river, on the south by Sylhet, and on the west by the Garo Hills, the western half of the state of Meghalaya. The average altitude of the tableland is about 1,200 m. above sea level, but it contains 23 prominent peaks, the highest of which is the Shillong Peak, which rises to some 1,960 m., not very far from the city centre of Shillong. Soh-pet-bneng, 'The Navel of the Sky', east of the road from Shillong to Gauhati, was supposed by the Khasis to be the centre of the earth and the connecting link between the abode of the gods and the world of men, when there was free communication between the two regions. Most of the peaks are conical in shape, and are capped by sacred groves, the only exception being the Soh-pet-bneng, which is bare of trees.

Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya and until recently also the capital of Assam, is about 1,500 m. above sea level. The higher ranges have been denuded of trees and are now covered with grass. For centuries the trees were cut down for household fuel and for feeding the iron-smelters' furnaces. But there are still numerous sacred groves throughout the land. One such grove is in the area surrounding the Shillong Peak, which is believed to have been the home of the god Shillong, after whom the town was renamed by the British.¹ These groves still have very fine

1. Its older name seems to have been Yewduh, pronounced by the British as *Yedu*. The old name of Shillong is still sometimes heard among the Khasis.

timber trees, rhododendrons, rare orchids, wild cinnamon, and various flowering shrubs. Lavender and ferns grow in profusion, together with medicinal and edible herbs. There are many wild fruits, such as strawberries, blackberries and raspberries, and a profusion of edible mushrooms, which are much relished by the people. Pine trees and stunted oaks, as well as certain other trees, grow on the higher levels. On the warmer lower slopes black pepper grows wild in abundance and is of great commercial value to the people, as is the *texpat* or bayleaf. These two products are exported in large quantities to the plains, and are favourite spices of the Khasis, Syntengs, Wars and other kindred tribes.

The hills are composed chiefly of granite, with strata of sandstone and limestone. Shale and coal beds exist here and there, chiefly in the Cherra region.¹ There are places like Lyngkyrdem, not far from Dawki, where coal is found on the surface, and people still use in their fireplaces coal which has been collected or dug in their own gardens. There is good reason to believe that the use of coal was known to the early Khasis, since they have their own word for it, *marwiong* ('black stone'), unlike most other Indian languages, which use adapted forms of the English word.

There are no navigable rivers, though small boats can ply on a few streams in the lower slopes. Some of the main streams flow south to join the Surma, while others flow north into the Brahmaputra. As they approach the plains they form very beautiful rapids and deep gorges, obstructed by large boulders. Most of these rivers swarm with fish of various kinds, of exquisite flavour and taste, particularly those in the colder streams.

Rainfall is heavy throughout the area; it is heaviest during the monsoons, from May until the middle of August, although a certain amount falls in winter also. Cherrapunji and its neighbourhood receive the heaviest rainfall in the world, with an average of 1,250 cm. per annum. Winters are severe in the

1. Hunter, *Statistical Account of Assam*, vol. ii, pp. 208, 210.

uplands with heavy frosts and occasional snow and sleet. But the cold season is generally bright and sunny. Summers are mild in the higher regions, with an average temperature of about 18° C., and sometimes there are fairly cold days even in summer. Very heavy mists and fogs are frequent in the mountains, particularly in the Cherra area. These obstruct the view even of fairly close objects, but the Khasis believe that they are good for health. In general the lower slopes enjoy a much milder climate, suitable for the growth of various sub-tropical trees and plants.

Sources

The race inhabiting these hills is supposed to be the last remnant of the earliest Mongoloid migration into the bounds of India. For a detailed study of its origin and early history not much authentic material is available. The Khasis were an illiterate people, and hence they have left no written records of their migrations and earlier history. For our knowledge of their past we must rely on oral tradition, on the Assamese chronicles or *burāñjīs*, on the accounts left by eighteenth and nineteenth century civil servants, missionaries and visitors, on linguistic evidence, and on the stone monuments which lie scattered throughout the region.

The *burāñjīs* were written in Ahom and Assamese by court historians and others connected with the royal families of the region. Of these the most important for our purpose is the *Jayantīyā burāñjī*, describing the relations of the Ahom kings with the Hindu kingdom of Jaintiapur, which was ruled by kings of Synteng origin. The text in its published form is in fact a conflation made by the late Professor S. K. Bhuyan from two main manuscripts, both apparently fragmentary, to which he added certain further material from published and unpublished manuscripts. The most important of the latter is a fragmentary document to which, following Bhuyan's list, we refer as 'Source 9',¹ and which seems to be based on the two main documents,

1. Introduction to *JB*, ed. Bhuyan, 2nd ed., p. vi.

summarizing parts of them and adding important variations and new passages here and there.

Other Assamese chronicles important for our purpose are the *Kachārī burāñjī*, describing the relations of the Ahom kings with the kingdom of Kachar,¹ the eastern neighbour of Jaintia, the *Darrang-rāj-vamśāvalī*, giving the history of the Koch kings, and the *Deodhārī burāñjī* chronicling the history of the Ahom kings down to A. D. 1648; the last named work includes some material of value to us, in particular a brief account of the relations of the Ahom kingdom with the frontier tribes in the reigns of Rudrasimha and Jayadhvaj.² The *Tuñkhungīyā burāñjī* is important for the light which it throws on the end of our period; it gives a detailed account of the history of the Ahoms from 1751 to 1806, with a synopsis of their earlier history, and its author, Śrināth Barbaruvā was a minister of the Ahom kingdom and an eye-witness of many of the events which he chronicled.³ Other *burāñjīs* also contain references of significance, and one work of classical Assamese literature, Śaṅkaradeva's paraphrase of the *Bhāgavata purāna*, contains the earliest known occurrence of the word *Khāsi*.

Few references to the Khasis will be found in Persian sources, though the chronicles dealing with the history of Bengal tell us a little about the Jaintia kingdom. We can gather much, however, about the customs and way of life of the Khasis at the end of our period from the accounts of early travellers and reports submitted to the East India Company. The first European to write on the Khasis, Robert Lindsay, was collector of Sylhet, and his reports and correspondence throw much light on the relations of the Khasi hillmen with the plains of Bengal.⁴ Hamilton's lengthy *Description of Hindoostan*, published in 1820, is also

1. Officially spelt Cachar. We regularly employ the initial K- in this work for the sake of consistency with the recognized system of transliteration and to avoid misunderstanding as to its pronunciation.

2. *DB*, paras. 221-57.

3. Bhuyan (tr.), *TB or a History of Assam*, p. xxxii; *TB*, pp. xiii-xvi.

4. Ed., Firminger, *Sylhet district records*, 4 vols. Shillong, 1913-19.

valuable, as is the account by Walters of his journey across the hills, published in *Asiatic researches* in 1832. Early issues of the *Journal of the Asiatic Society* of Calcutta and the *Calcutta review* yield several important articles.

Sources for the study of the language of the Khasis from the historical point of view are few. They have no written records much more than a hundred years old, and until recently linguists have not paid them the attention they deserve. The standard grammars and dictionaries are practical compilations for utilitarian purposes, and though the Khasis have their fair share of space in Grierson's monumental *Linguistic survey of India* they are a small people, and thus only a brief summary of their language is given. More recently specialist studies of Khasi have been made by Dr. Lili Rabel and Professor Eugénie Henderson. But in general the language has only interested those scholars who need it for comparison with other South-east Asian languages, and it has received little attention in its own right. Further study of the several dialects and of the vocabularies of the remoter villages might yield important data for the historian. Meanwhile we have used for historical purposes whatever data we have been able to obtain, supplemented by personal knowledge of the language.

The archaeology of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills is to all intents and purposes at present (1974) non-existent, and consists mainly of descriptions of megaliths and other stone monuments, some of the most detailed and valuable being more than a hundred years old. Similar descriptions of the more developed architecture of the Jaintias are also to be found. We have not heard of any archaeological excavations in the hills or of any experiments in carbon-14 dating.

Folklore and tradition, critically analysed and studied, throw valuable light on the past, but in the case of the Khasis little has been done by way of the systematic collection of traditional lore. The very valuable work of Colonel Gurdon tells us something about this, and a small collection of Khasi folk-tales was

produced by Mrs. U. K. Rafy in 1920. A further brief collection of folktales, deliberately excluding those contained in Mrs. Rafy's book, was made by Mr. I. M. Simon, and published by Gauhati University in 1965. This forms a useful addition to our source material, but since Mr. Simon does not mention his sources the scholarly value of his book is impaired, since the reader cannot tell from what part of the hills these stories were collected or the age, sex and nature of his informants. A number of brief accounts exist in Khasi publications, chiefly in the form of articles by such pioneers as Dr. H. Lyngdoh. Here again much work remains to be done in collecting and scientifically recording material of this kind.

Earlier work on the subject

The most comprehensive anthropological study of these people is that of J. H. Gurdon, whose book, *The Khasis*, gives an account of Khasi social structure based chiefly on first-hand information and personal contact. But Gurdon's work is not intended as a history, and this aspect of the subject is hardly touched on. He does not tell much about the Syntengs, for the simple reason that he was not a trained anthropologist (a profession scarcely in existence in the days when he wrote), and he came more in contact with the upland Khasis than with the more Hinduized Syntengs. The same is true of the study of Khasi matriliney made more recently by Baron U.R. von Ehrenfels, and of the descriptions of Khasi customs by David Roy. A more recent study of the Khasis from this point of view appeared in 1967 from the pen of a Japanese lady anthropologist, Dr. Chie Nakane; though her methods may be modern, her book contains numerous factual errors.¹

The earliest history of Assam, excluding the *buranjis*, is the

1. For example her statements that the motor road from Gauhati to Shillong was opened only after independence, and that it was only at this time that Shillong became the seat of the Assam government (*Garo and Khasi*, p. 99); that the pine tree was introduced by the British (*ibid.*, p. 99); and that *ka para-kur* means mother's sister's daughter when in fact it means any female fellow-clanswoman.

Account of Assam by J. P. Wade, a surgeon of the East India Company who visited the country with Welsh's expedition and studied its history with the aid of pandits. Wade gives a clear account of Assamese history, taken from the *buranjis*, but the Khasis are almost ignored, though the outlines of the history of Jaintia are included in this work, which was largely superseded by that of Gait.¹ As the name of the book indicates, Sir Edward Gait's *History of Assam* covers the whole of the state according to its earlier boundaries, and gives a brief chapter on the diplomatic history of the Jaintias, with a slight reference to the Khasis.

The late Dr. H. Lyngdoh published a number of books on the Khasis, mostly written in the Khasi language; these are still used as textbooks in Khasi colleges. His works are based mainly on personal knowledge and first-hand information. Like Gurdon and Gait, Lyngdoh was neither a professional historian nor an anthropologist, and thus, like them again, he deserves special credit for his pioneering work. He served with the Indian Army Medical Corps during the first World War and then became civil surgeon at the Civil Hospital in Shillong, where he is still remembered with great affection and respect.

Dr. Hamlet Bareth, another Khasi, has also written on his people. His brief books, *Khasi democracy* and *History of Khasi literature*, contain much useful information, but unfortunately their value is impaired, from the point of view of the serious student, because their author, writing for a wide public, fails to mention his sources, though he is a trained historian, having received a doctorate from the University of Gauhati. His thesis, published under the title *The history and culture of the Khasi people*, is most valuable for its treatment of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. He has not much new to say about the earlier period, and he repeats many traditional accounts which have little or no historical value. He relies too

1. For a detailed study of Wade and his work, see Bhuyan, *Anglo-Assamese relations*, pp. 398-423.

much on the evidence of fanciful etymologies which are quite untrustworthy from the linguistic point of view.¹

Syed Murtaza Ali, now of Bangladesh, has written a brief history of the Jaintias, which, though it contains much useful information, suffers from similar shortcomings. His work is the outcome of personal interest in the history of the Jaintia kings, which was apparently stimulated by acquaintance with their later descendants. He records interesting, if not wholly reliable, traditions preserved by the Muslim community of Jaintiapur, such as are not to be found in print elsewhere.

Several studies of Assamese history contain short chapters or briefer sections of chapters on the Khasis and Jaintias. Among these we should mention Professor P. C. Chaudhuri's *The history of the civilization of the people of Assam to the twelfth century* and Dr. N. N. Acharyya's *History of medieval Assam*. Their references are scholarly and valuable, as far as they go in illuminating our theme, but this is only peripheral to the studies of the two scholars, whose works end at periods before the sources throw much light on the Khasis. Certain other works, published in Assam and claiming to reveal the ancient history of almost every tribe and people within the former boundaries of that state, it is kindest to ignore.

1. For example: '*Madur Maskut*, does not seem to be a term of Khasi origin. In its Sanskritised form, *Madhur-Masvut*, it means strong and beautiful' (op. cit., p. 42). It appears that the author is thinking of the Sanskrit *madhura* (sweet, pleasant) and the Perso-Arabic *mazbut* (firm, strong). The reference is to a fortress of a legendary ruler of Malngiang who, Dr. Bareth believes, repelled a Muslim invasion in about A. D. 1200.