

## Chapter VII

# WRITINGS IN KHASI VERNACULAR PERTAINING TO SOCIO-POLITICAL ISSUES: A REVIEW

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With the ever increasing literature written in the Khasi vernacular for the last one hundred and fifty seven years, the task becomes more difficult for a layman like me to be able to comprehend over this wide ocean of knowledge. The Khasi literature in the form of a vernacular has progressed and developed in leaps and bounds covering almost all fields of literary works, especially in Social Sciences and Humanities like—Poetry, History Political History and Thought, Drama, Geography, Folktales and Folklore and a host of other academic disciplines.

On account of the vast canvas of Khasi literature written in vernacular language, this paper has a number of limitations. Also, this paper limits its coverage only to those areas dealing with socio-political issues. Even after limiting the scope of the paper to such issues, it is still incomplete. In one sense, this work is not only tentative but it can be said to be of an introductory nature.

Talking about socio-political issues as reflected through the published works in Khasi literature, we are still compelled to set aside for the time being, those writings that appeared

in the form of poems, dramas, dialogues, folktales, etc. As far as possible we are trying to review in this first exercise only those writings that appeared in a prose form—that too, by taking into account only those serious works that have been published in book form.

The intellectuals (Scientists and Social Scientists) when they search knowledge about man and his environment, they examine the signs/symbols, any written words/drawings etc., to extract some information about the past to understand the present better. Broadly speaking, the period is divided into Pre-historic and Historic. Among the Khasi-Jaintia people, the pre-historic period is the most difficult one.

With the coming of the British, the Christian Missionaries followed. Thanks to the untiring efforts of the earlier Christian Missionaries like Thomas Jones and a host of others, the Khasi vernacular started taking shape in a written form. Though a long period of the initial years was spent on the translation of the *Bible* and other religious books, this period proved to be the most important humble beginning. Among the local pioneers, the name of Jeebon Roy (or Babu Jeebon Roy) and a few others appeared prominently in the list of those who contributed immensely in the growth and development of the Khasi vernacular.

Once the Khasi literature takes off from the ground, there is no going back. Rather we experienced its steady growth, development and improvement. The first attempt made by William Carey for translation of the Bible into Khasi by using the Bengali alphabet did not succeed. It was not, however, till the arrival of Thomas Jones of the Welsh Calvinistic Mission at Sohra on the 22<sup>nd</sup> June 1841, that a serious attempt was made to put the Khasi language in a written form by using the Roman alphabet. I.M. Simon is of the opinion that "he (Thomas Jones) his choice of the Roman alphabet for the writing of Khasi was not a haphazard decision. True, the London Missionary Society had made a beginning with the Bengali script, but the literature produced was imperfect in the sense that it was not acceptable as Khasi writing. It was only when Alexander Lish, the 18 year old missionary, was sent to these hills and resided within one dialect area, which by a happy coincidence happened to be the home of the Cherra dialect or

*Ka Ktien* Sohra that the writings produced by him for the first time made sense".<sup>1</sup>

Thomas Jones would appear to have been a man of strong convictions. As he was familiar with the Roman Alphabet only, and having started to learn Khasi, he realised that this Alphabet was suitable for the writing of this language. Among the first tasks Thomas Jones took up were the preparation of school books for beginners and the writing of religious literature, as well as the translation of the New Testament into Khasi.

Regarding the Political History of the Khasi-Jaintia people, there have been a number of books written and published. One of the earliest books on this subject is that of Dr.H. Lyngdoh—*Ki Syiem Khasi Bad Synteng* (1952) (Khasi and Jaintia *Syiems*). The book consists of 19 (nineteen) chapters dealing with the history and administration of all the Khasi-Jaintia *Syiemships*. The book is of great importance as it gives detailed information about the origin, development, geneology of the *Syiems* and the over-all administration of these *Syiemships*. Mention may be also made here of L.G. Shullai's book *Ki Hima Khasi* (the Khasi States, 1975). It deals with the formation of the Khasi States, their position and status before and after India's Independence, their signing of the Standstill Agreement and Instrument of Accession and the administration of these States. The book contains important and helpful information about the Khasi States. The Appendices provide additional information relating to the relationship between the Khasi States and the British as well as the Indian Union after Independence. Very recently, L.G. Shullai published two books—*Ka bri Hynniewtrep Bad Ka Sixth Schedule* (1998) (Khasi-Jaintia Hills and the Sixth Schedule) and *Ka Shillong Naduh 1863* (Part I & II) (1998) (Shillong since 1863). The former analyses the relationship between the erstwhile British Area (i.e. Jaintia Hills), the Khasi States and the Autonomous District Councils (ADCs) in Khasi-Jaintia Hills under the Sixth Schedule to the Indian Constitution. The Acts passed by the ADCs from time to time and their effects on the traditional institutions are also discussed. The latter deals in Part I with the Shillong Municipality and Shillong (Administered Area) Municipality. Part II discusses about the Cantonment Area of

Shillong and its historical and administrative development. As in his other books, the Appendices included in these books provide important sources of information. Students of Political Science and History will find the books to be of great help as sources of information.

On the socio-cultural issues, much literature in Khasi has been published dealing with the questions of traditions, customs and cultural practices relating to marriage, family and kinship as well as the changes that have appeared in the transitional period of the history of the people of Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

It is interesting to note that the Khasi books, especially those which are of recent publication, bring out a number of pertinent issues regarding the changing situation that appears in the Khasi-Jaintia society and how these changes have or might have their effects in the concept of family and kinship among the people and the society. The writers of these books also do not forget to bring to the notice of the readers how inter-marriage, especially with the non-Khasis, may lead to such knotty problems on the family, kinship and the entire gamut of clan relationship as well as the economic impacts due to such marital relationship outside the Khasi society.

The position, status and role of *Ka Khadduh* (youngest daughter) appear prominently in those books dealing with the socio-cultural issues. There are books not only on the status and role of women but men also especially that of *Knyi* (maternal uncle). What are the changes in the role of the maternal uncle due to the changing pattern of professions, job opportunities, when he has to be away to a distant place—far from his brothers, sisters, nephews, nieces, etc.? This and a host of other problems have now raised their heads in the changing situation. Few books have also discussed the different aspects of culture—including that of family, faith, social problems and the impact of western and other cultures on the Khasi-Jaintia society. Some authors in the form of poems, dramas, novels, etc. have raised the question of the future of the Khasi-Jaintia society. Where is the future of the Khasi-Jaintia society? Where do we go from here? Some such authors did try to suggest ways and means of how to get rid of the various problems faced by the society at large. The ever

increasing number of books written in Khasi vernacular, does not only increase the quantity but also the quality and improvement of the language itself. This is a welcome trend in the writings in Khasi in the recent years.

On the issue of *Ka Niam Khasi* (Khasi traditional religion) a number of excellent books have been written and published. A good number of articles on this important issue have been written and published in different Journals, Souvenirs, Pamphlets and occasional papers. A few of such published works may be mentioned here—*Ka Niam Khasi* (1937; 1990) By Dr. H. Lyngdoh; *Ka Niam Ki Khasi* (1919; 1978) by Sib Charan Roy; *Ka Pomblang Nongkrem Bad Ka Thangsyiem Sohra* (1928) by Dr.H. Lyngdoh; *Ka Niam Khasi* by Jeebon Roy; *Ka Kitap Niam Khasi* by Rabon Sing and *Ka Kitap Jingphawar* by the same author; *U Khasi Ha La Ka Niam, Seng Khasi Souvenir* (published by Seng Khasi from time to time), *Ka Riti Jong Ka Ri Laiphew Syiem* (Part I & II) by G. Costa, etc.

These books or articles on *Ka Niam Khasi* provide such information on the basic tenets, practices, form and practice of rites and rituals, ceremonies, customs and usages in connection with the Khasi traditional religion and religious beliefs. Mention may be made also here of the discussions and analyses on the impact of Christianity on the people and the society at large.

It is also interesting to note here that books on folklore and folktales have a lot to contribute on the understanding of the Khasi-Jaintia history in general and the important aspects of religious rites and ceremonies that are still performed and celebrated by different *Raids*. The untiring efforts made by Donbok T. Laloo are worth mentioning. His contribution to Khasi literature has been enormous and to Khasi folklore is unsurpassed. His highly acclaimed work *Ka Sajer* is about the agrarian ceremony of *Raid Khatar-Nonglyngdoh* of Ri Bhoi district. The book is a veritable goldmine of information about the material culture, ethnography, religious beliefs and practices and a useful lexicographical information to the *Karew*, the indigenous people of the Bhoi area.<sup>2</sup>

On the socio-economic issues and problems faced by the Khasi-Jaintia society, there is no dearth of books. These issues could also be found in those books written on the history and

culture of the Khasi-Jaintia people. Among the authors and their books on the socio-economic problems and drawbacks of the people, mention may be made here of a celebrated book by P.R. Mawthoh, entitled *Balei U Khasi Um Roi-Spah* (1967) (Glimpses of the Socio-Economic Drawbacks of the Khasis). The author has analysed in great detail the causes that led to the socio-economic drawbacks of the Khasis. In brief, he listed these causes as—false sense of pride and dignity, unemployment and unbalanced growth in trade and commerce, overconcentrated and suicidal competition, complacency or inertia and shortsightedness, vainful extravagance, lack of capital and unequal competition, lack of initiative and business enterprise. Besides these, there are problems like agriculture and agricultural practises, tools and implements, influx of village population to the towns, etc.. Having discussed these problems, the author suggested some ways and means how to overcome them, of which spread of education, co-operatives, cultivation of the habit of economical management of income, expenditure and savings, development of enterprise and initiative, development of the new means of communications, marketing facilities, etc., play an important role.

In the same spirit of discussion on the issues and problems of socio-economic backwardness, a number of books have been published. In general, these books take serious note of the situation that prevailed before and after India's Independence and how these two periods of history had effected the socio-economic conditions of the Khasi-Jaintia people. The authors discussed in their books about the flourishing trade and commerce in the pre-partition days, the extent of participation and involvement of the Khasi-Jaintia traders with their counterparts in the plains, in terms of trade and commerce especially that of Sylhet district, during those hectic days. Having made a comparative analysis between the pre and post partition days, many of these authors lamented of the lost opportunities as a result of the Partition of 1947. Thus, writings in Khasi vernacular pertaining to the economic problems of the Khasi-Jaintia people did find an appreciative attempt by many Khasi authors.

Of late, due to the formation of such an association known as 'Ka Synjuk Rympei Thymmai', a number of books on the socio-economic problems of the Khasi-Jaintia people have been written with a view to project the opinions of a certain school of thought. Some prominent members of this 'Synjuk' have even gone to the extent of questioning the age-old traditional practices of matrilineal system and inheritance of property. Some of these books were based on these two systems by trying to prove or disprove of the need for continuity and how the practices give rise to a number of social and economic problems. To sum up, they are of the strong opinion that one of the main causes of economic backwardness of the Khasi-Jaintia people is due to the practice of matrilineal system and the present system of inheritance or management of properties, especially that of ancestral property. The opinion of this school of thought is of course still debatable. But the very fact that some books have been written and published on this particular issue, speaks of the kind of socio-cultural and academic consciousness of the thinkers among the Khasi-Jaintia people. Such published works have enriched the literary culture of the people and their sensitivity to such topical tricklish issues, which in the past were discussed only in their hearths and homes. But now, they have realised that these kind of traditional practices do not help to inform the people at large, so these ideas have now been put in black and white for wider circulation of opinion and knowledge itself. As such literary works have been written in Khasi, even the rural population have the chance to read and build up their own opinion and judgement on their society which is undergoing a tremendous transformation in the transitional period. Such discussion seems to go on as long as the society continues to face such problems and we expect more such opinions in the years to come through the writings of different local scholars.

On the close heels of socio-economic problems, the question of land, land tenure system and land-use pattern among the Khasi-Jaintia people follows. Many thought – provoking published works by the Khasi authors have already come out. These books discuss such pertinent issues like land tenure system, land-use patterns, kinds/types of lands as prevailed in the society, the question of inheritance, rights

over the land and its management, etc. While discussing about land, the question of forests, their use management, ownership, etc. also comes into the picture. The authors of these books do not of course forget to inform the readers about the role and constitutional status of the traditional institutions like the *Syiem, Lyngdoh, Doloi, Pator*, etc. as well as the new constitutional set up in the form of the Autonomous District Council and State Government in relation to the issue and problems of land and forests in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

In short, the quality and quantity of literature in the form of Khasi vernacular in all its genre has marched on ahead of many of the languages of the tribals of North-East India. The credit for such a steady growth and progress is due to the spirit of consciousness and concern about one's own people and society and the untiring efforts put in by many local writers and scholars. Their literary efforts have increased the quantity and raised the standard and quality of Khasi literature to a greater height in comparison with the progress made by the neighbouring tribal communities and their languages in the North-Eastern region. Language is a vehicle of social change and transformation. Khasi has survived for centuries in spite of its not having any script till comparatively recently. Khasi has preserved its basic identity while enriching itself by borrowing from other languages. It is a member of the Mon-Khmer family of languages spoken in South-East Asia and it therefore provides us with a useful link with these neighbours.

### References

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