

## Political Implication of a Khasi Taboo

Soumen Sen

The concept of *taboo* exists in all societies although the word comes from the Polynesian language where it means a religious interdiction. In the context of Polynesia, however, *taboo* is also a social prohibition or restriction since social and religious insitutions are almost inseparable there. Social rules are enforced by giving them a sacred value. But this may be said to be equally true on all traditional societies.

The extended meaning of *taboo*, as it is used in English, however, often crosses the space of religion. But even if some taboos have no direct bearing on religion, they atleast are charged with the supernatural and therefore, fraught with mysterious power and danger. Moreover, they are observed because they are considered to be right even if their meaning cannot be explained by the people who observe them.

Generally, therefore, a *taboo* sets apart a person, thing, place, name or an action as untouchable, unmentionable, unsayable or not to be done for a number of reasons. To see that these restrictions are observed, the society attaches mystery to them. Apparently they cannot be explained but are always considered to be right. A person who violates a *taboo* need not be punished by man or society ; Disease, death and some other dangers overtake the breaker.

But a close look on all the categories of *taboos* observed in different societies reveal that all of them are not always meaningless although some may appear to be so. It may not be easily explained when it is said (as in Khasi society) that a family possessing a plot of land which is triangular in shape would soon die out and so this should never be done. Such types of *taboos* are plenty in all the societies but there are others, such as incest *taboos*, which can be explained. It is wrong to suggest that the people observed *taboos* as part of their general ignorance or these were the result of false science. *Taboos* are not always the product of inferior mentality. Rather, these were, in most cases, the rules framed with the scientific knowledge available to the ancients and on

him. This ritual installation consecrated the *syiem* and imbued him and his clan with protective shield against *Ka Byrsieh*.

This *taboo* has, therefore, a political implication. In Khasi political system the representatives of the clans that settled first in the area retain the power. Even if the *syiem* and his clan gradually assumes a position of honour, he is traditionally bound to act on the advice of the *myntries* who constitute the state council (*Ka durbar hima*).

The *myntries*, as already mentioned, come from the first group of settlers known as *ki khun nyangkong* (the first group of children) and enjoy special privileges of citizenship<sup>3</sup>. These privileges include both political and economic control and one is obviously complimentary to the others.

In Khasi Hills there are two patterns of land holding. One is known as *Ri Kynti* and the other *Ri Raid*. *Ri Kynti* are private lands owned by families. *Ri Raid* is communal land. *Ri Kynti* is that category of land holdings that belong to the families and clans that came first in the area and occupied the better parts available for cultivation. These lands were distributed among themselves as absolute possession with heritable and transferable rights. To distinguish these families from others who might have been given only usufructuary rights over communal land or *ri-raid*, they are called *Bakhrav* meaning aristocrats by virtue of their being the owners of *ri kynti* and the members of the state council (*Ka Durhar Hima*). They are designated as *Trai Hima* meaning the owner of the state.

Therefore, the *taboo* that prohibits a group of people to perform the duties of a *Syiem* for fear of *ka byrsieh* has the political implication of retaining both economic and political control in the hands of the representatives of a few clans designated as *bakhrav* and *trai hima*. Since the *bakhrav* were not ready to surrender their privileges, they might have decided to retain and share political hegemony. All the traditional accounts of state formation in Khasi Hills suggests such an attempt<sup>4</sup>. In fact, at various times the *syiems'* attempt to usurp power was resisted and the rights of the *bakhrav* as ruling clans were upheld by citing customary principles.

But since these ruling clans preferred not to elevate any one clan from among themselves as ruling clan but at the same time felt the necessity of evolving an administrative machinery, they had to find out someone to administer on their behalf. It is, therefore, no wonder that even persons were kidnapped to be made

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syiems<sup>b</sup>. In the process they had also to forbid someone from among themselves to usurp power. Hence the formulation of the taboo and the fear of *Ka Byrsieh*.

### Notes & References

1. See, Kynpham Singh, 'Syiems and Durbars in Khasi Polity', *The Proceedings of the Seminar on the Indegenous Institutions of the Garos, the Khasis and the Jaintias of Meghalaya*, Government of Meghalaya, December 1980.
2. Hamlet Bareh, *Khasi Democracy*, Author, Shillong 1964. p. 43.
3. Hamlet Bareh, 'Ancient Khasi Polity', *The Proceedings of the Seminar on Social and Political Institution of the Hill Peoples of N. E. India*, North-East India Council for Social Science Research, Shillong 1977.
4. For details see, Soumen Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi - Jaintia Hills : A Study of Folklore*, B. R. Publishing Corporation, New Delh<sub>1</sub>, 1985.
5. Kynpham Singh, op. cit.