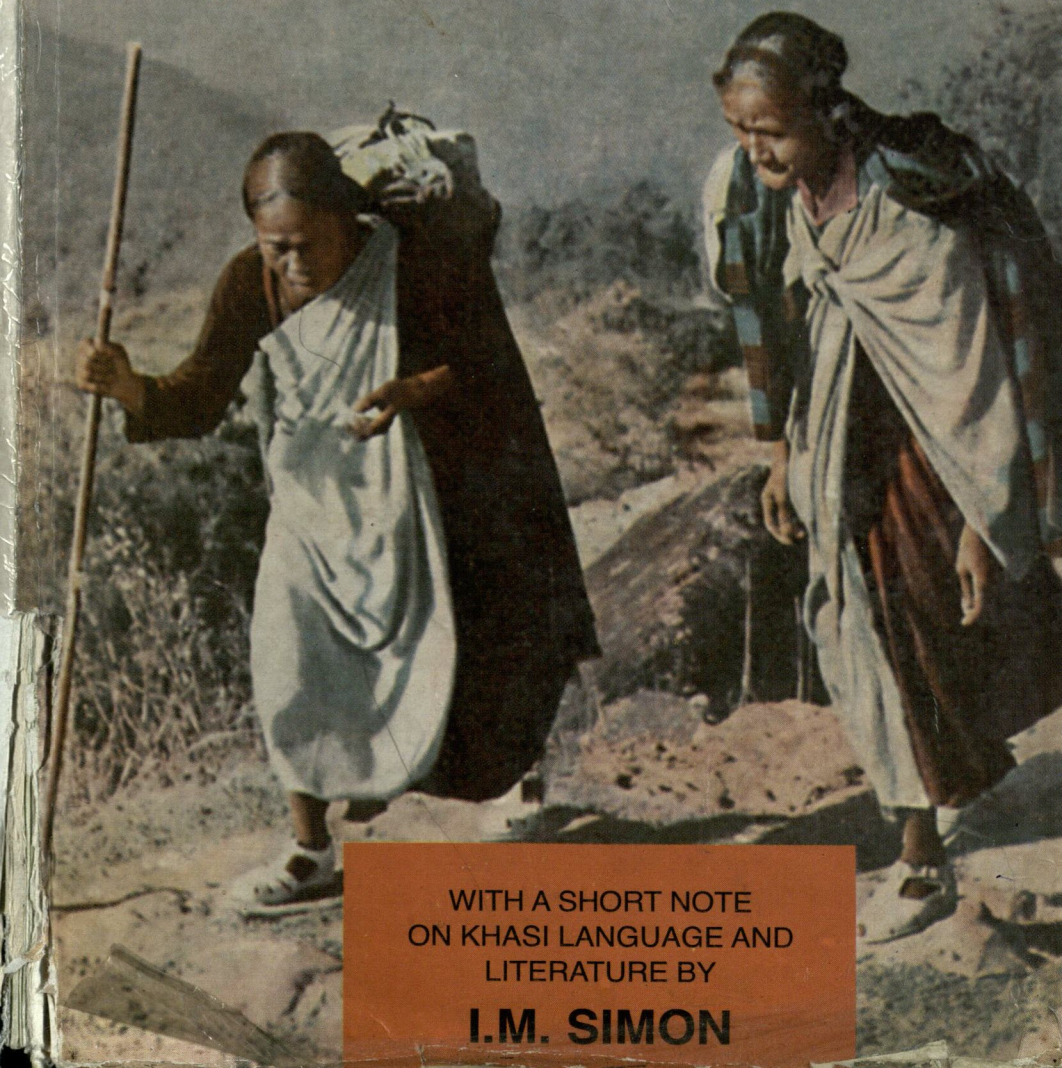
The KHASI CANVAS

J. N. CHOWDHURY



WITH A SHORT NOTE
ON KHASI LANGUAGE AND
LITERATURE BY

I.M. SIMON

THE range of literature on the history and cultured of the Khasis, ethnologically and linguistically the most unique racial group in India's north-east, is still limited.Therefore, there is possibly room for another book of the kind as the present one. The author does not claim to have done very original researches on the Khasis and he makes no more claims for his book than as a quick inventory of the cultural and political history of the people.

Other Books by the Author :

The Hill Miris of Subansiri (1970)
A Comparative Study of Adi Religion (1971)
Arunachal Panorama (1973)
Arunachal Through the Ages (1982)
Tribal Culture and History of Arunachal Pradesh (1990)
Ki Khun Khasi-Khara (The Khasi People) (1996)

About the Author :

Born in 1916, the author had his schooling and higher studies in Shillong, having graduated from the St. Anthony's Collage in 1940. He never left the hills except for very short intervals. The author was initiated to the study of tribal life and cultured under the patronage of late Dr Verrier Elwin, an anthropologist of international stature, who took him into NEFA service in 1956. In course of his many official tours in the interior of present Arunachal Pradesh (erstwhile NEFA) during its difficult and pioneering days when road communication was still largely unknown, he had ample opportunities of observing the colourful tribal people from close quarters in their natural settings. During his tenure of service until he retired in 1976, and even after, he produced several books and seminar papers on the life and culture of Arunachal tribes which found good response.

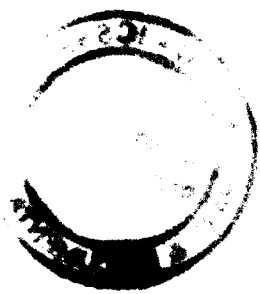
The centre of interest for the author, however, has always been the Khasis of present Meghalaya amongst whom he spent a life-time spanning little over four score years. The author, therefore, can legitimately claim to have known the Khasis intimately, and possibly succeeded in achieving a measure of empathy with the spirit of the place and the way of life and culture of its people . His sincerity, sympathy, and labour of love in presenting the fruits of his observation and study in this book - it is humbly hoped - are beyond question.

THE KHASI CANVAS

(A CULTURAL AND POLITICAL HISTORY)

By

J. N. CHOWDHURY



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INTRODUCTION: LAND AND THE PEOPLE

GLEANINGS FROM EARLY ACCOUNTS AND SOME MODERN SPECULATIONS

NOMENCLATURE

Philosophers might very well say 'what is there in a name!' but we worldly people know that names are important in the mundane world. Language, for instance, would not have arisen, if mankind had not learnt to give names to things around them. To begin at the beginning, therefore, we have to start with a discussion of the nomenclature of the people, now universally called Khasi, an ethnically and culturally distinctive race in India's north-east. We shall see that early British writers at the commencement of their contact with the people were not sure about the correct name or correct form of the spelling of the term for the people who aroused infinite curiosity in them by their uniqueness in a variety of ways. The names they used individually in their accounts of the land and the people not only point to the confusion which prevailed over the nomenclature of the race in the past, but at this distance of time possibly also intrigue us in no small measure. Let us take note of how early British writers speculated on the nomenclature of the Khasis.

The confusion, it appears, started with Rennell who about 1780 A.D. in his pioneer map gave the form *'cussey'* for the land of the Khasis. Dr Buchanan-Hamilton in his account of the tribe written about 1810, came nearest to the present form of the spelling with his *'Kasia'* and Dalton followed Dr Buchanan-Hamilton in the use of the same term. Strangely enough, L.A. Waddell while insisting on 'a definite system in translating into Roman character the spoken words of an unwritten language, gave the popular form of the spelling as *'Cosseya'* (Waddell 1901, Reprint 1975). At the same time he noted that, in modern official documents, 'the word is aspirated into *Khasia'*, which again according to him did not represent the native form of the word. The native form in

his estimation, 'outside the influence of the European missionary schools', was pronounced *'Ka-si-a'* or *'Ka-se-a'* (Ibid).

The next part of his speculation on the correct term is very interesting. We may quote him:

> 'The interest of this point is that this tract of the country, the *'Cussay'* of Rennell, or properly *'Ka-Se'*, is, in common with the adjoining hills of south Manipur, known to the Burmese as *'Ka-se'*, or as they lispingly call it 'Ka-the'....' (Ibid).

He then proceeded on to add that the Sintengs (Syntengs) who adjoined the *'Kasias'* on the Jaintia hills called the tribe *'Kai-rium'*, or *'Kai-rhyum'*. This remark of his, though obviously far wide of the mark, was, as we shall see later on, not without a basis or a source of mistake.

Pemberton to whom we owe the first full-scale account of the Khasi resistance to British penetration of the hills under their redoubtable leader. Tirot Singh used the form *'Cossyahs'* in his Report On the Eastern Frontier (1835). Dalton, writing in 1872, referred to the people of Jaintia hills as being called *'Kasia'* by the people of the plains and added another interesting variation of the form when he observed that the people called themselves *'Khyi'* . He was obviously wrong, and was possibly led into the mispresentation by the report of David Scott as quoted by Pemberton.[1] But the source of the mistake was later traced to the plains people of the Surma valley who, it was alleged, could not pronounce 's' and always substituted 'h' for it. Khasi, therefore, in their form of pronunciation was transformed into 'Khahi' and Scott, in his turn, must have heard it pronounced as *'Khyi'* in his first contact with the race. The present author, without presuming to comment upon this phonetic confusion, only wishes to note

[1] 'It appears from p. 219 (of Pemberton's Report) that Mr Scott's report was responsible for the erroneous statement (often repeated) that the mountaineers 'called by us Cossyahs, denominate themselves Khyee'. This second name is in fact the pronunciation current in Sylhet of the word *Khasi*, *h* being substituted for *s*, and should be written *Khahi'* —Introduction by C.J. Lyall to *The Khasis* by Maj. P.R.T. Gurdon (1914).

that he has not come across any Bengali, whether from Surma valley or elsewhere, calling the people of the Khasi hills by any other name than *'Khasiya'*.

We owe to Dalton another curious piece of information which is worth quoting here:

> 'Major Fisher, in his Memoir of Silhet, Kachar and Adjoining Countries, tells us that Khasias or Khyee are called Miki by the Kacharis, and he supposses they may be connected with the Mech, though he does not connect them with Kacharis' (Dalton 1872).

William Robinson, writing in 1841, used the form *Khassia* in his *Descriptive Account of Assam* while John M'cosh in his *Topography of Assam* (1837) referred to the Khasi Hills as *Kassya* hills. Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker preferred the form *Khasia* in his *Himalayan Journals* (1854).

The above confusion of names was further confounded and deepened by the existence of discrete groups of people along the Himalayan belt bearing a similar nomenclature. Some early writers, for instance, were tempted to identify the Khasis of the Khasi hills with the *Khasas* of Mahābhārata fame, whose remote descendants are now said to be found in Gilgit, Chitral, Kumaon, Garhwal and the Doti district of Nepal. Manu who also referred to the Khasas classed them as *Vrishalas* or outcasts along with other Kshatriya tribes like Paundrakas, Odras, Draviras, Kambojas, Sakas etc., 'from the extinction of sacred rites'. Atkinson (1882) observed that 'even in the most orthodox writings the Khasas are looked upon more as heretical members of the great Aryan family than as outcast aborigines'. Dr Chatterji's comment on the present day *Khasas* may be cited in this context:

> 'The Khasas were an Aryan-speaking tribe who appear, like the Gorkhas of a later age, to have absorbed a good deal of Indo-Mongoloid blood. The Kunindas, an ancient Eastern Punjab Hill people, are believed to have been of mixed Indo-Aryan and Indo-Mongoloid origin . . . . Their descendants now form the considerable Kunet community of the Simla Hills . . . .' (Chatterji 1951).

A great mass of population in Kumaon and Garhwal, according to Atkinson again, 'belong to the Khasa or Khasiya race and speak a dialect of the Hindi akin to the language of the Hindus of Rajputana' (Atkinson 1882, Reprint 1973). Atkinson continued as follows:

> 'To the north in the inter-alpine valleys of Bhot, we have tribes of decided Tibetan origin and whose affinities are found in the Trans-Himalayan Tribes of Hundes. They are known as Bhotiyas to the people of the lower hills, who in turn are designated Khasiyas by the Bhotiyas....' (Ibid).

The mass of people of the Doti district of Nepal and the 'British district of Kumaon' were said to belong to the race generically known as *Khasas* or *Khasiyas.* In Garhwal, they were a mixed group and, we have been told, that most of the better classes of the mixed group looked down with contempt on the purer members of the *Khasiya* class who represented the oldest inhabitants of the hills (Ibid).

'To our great consternation, the existence of a group of people, known as *Khasiyas,* has also been traced along with Lhopas. Lepchas, Limbus, Kirantis, Murmis, Newars, Sunwars, Chepangs etc. in Sikkim and Bhotan (Ibid).

It is, however, clear that Atkinson was aware of the existence of a distinct group of people bearing a similar nomenclature, but separated by language and geography from the other groups dotted along almost the entire Himalayan belt as noticed above. He wrote:

> 'The Kopili river separates the Khasiyas of the Jaintiya and Khasi hills around Shillong. The Khasiyas appear to be an isolated group, speaking a monosyllabic language which cannot be classed with any other of the same family' (Ibid).

There is strong reason to believe that the present form of the nomenclature of the native population of the Khasi hills had actually originated with them and they called themselves *Khasi* since time immemorial. With the rapid stride of literacy and introduction of a script among them, the name became fixed and received universal currency with the publication of the first Khasi newspaper under the style *'U Khasi Mynta'* (The Khasi Today) long before Gurdon wrote his famous book. U Hormu Rai Diengdoh,

in course of a letter addressed to the Editor of the 'Bengalee', Calcutta, bearing the date 24.9.1902, stated that there were four Khasi newspapers in existence including *'U Khasi Mynta'* which he described as a political paper, the rest being 'very much sectarian' published by Welsh Calvinistic Methodist and German Mission. We may round up this discussion on the nomenclature of the Khasis by quoting in its extenso a note on the subject given to this author by I. M. Simon, himself a Khasi and a trained linguist:

> 'The origin of the name *Khasi* is shrouded in mystery. It was suggested by Scott (quoted by Pemberton) that the name had been given by the British, the local name being 'Khyee'. Gurdon disputes this and suggests in his turn that the word 'Khyee' was a distorted representation of 'Khahi', the name given by non-Khasis who could not pronounce 'Khasi' properly. Gurdon is probably correct. It is not likely that the word 'Khasi' is one concocted by the British as there is an imitative of the word 'Khasi' as in 'Khasi-Khara' (i.e. the Khasi tribe as a whole) which gives it the stamp of being a native word. To the knowledge of this writer the coinage of imitative was a phenomenon of the distant past and no recent such coinages are known.

It is true, of course, that the word 'Khyee' appears to be the first element of the name 'Khyrim' but whether these are in fact connected cannot definitely be stated.

A few pointers are given below that may be examined by those who would like to get into the question of the origin of the name more minutely:

(a) The name given by the eastern Khasis (i.e. Pnars) to their fellow-Khasis living to their west is 'Khynriam'! Perhaps the words 'Khyrim' and 'Khynriam' are local variations of one name. It may be noted that the word 'Khyrim' seems to have a political connotation rather than general currency. In practice, a Khasi tends to denominate himself rather as a resident of a particular locality as U Nongkrem (a resident of Nongkrem village, the original seat of Khyrim Syiems); U Nong-Mylliem (a resident of Mylliem), U Nong-Sohra (a resident of Cherrapunji) etc. than as a Khasi first, just as in the Jaintia district, people call themselves nong-Jowai

(resident of Jowai) etc. With the stabilization of the name *Khasi* in the administrative set up of the British epoch (i.e. in the name of the Khasi & Jaintia Hills District), the word may have acquired a restricted applicability to include only the people living in the western part of the district.

It may also be added that the Khasis living in the western region, particularly those of Nongkhlaw Syiemship, are called by those to their east of 'Khyriem' (pron. Khyr-yem). This may be another variant of the word 'Khynriam/Khyrim'. The association of the terms with communities *living to the west* provides food for thought'.

PHYSIOGRAPHY OF THE LAND

The early British writers from the time of their contact with the land and its people recorded their impressions very accurately and their descriptions make interesting reading at this distance of time and, in many respects, have not been excelled by writers who followed them. From the historical point of view too, the importance of these descriptions is unique and invaluable to all future scholars. We propose, in this chapter, to include gleanings from early accounts dating from early nineteenth century and compare them with more recent speculations both with regard to the land and the people.

What has been very aptly said of the whole state of Meghalaya recently is particularly applicable to the Khasi and Jaintia hills, as a picturesque landscape of plateaux, ravines, brooks, rivulets, lakes and waterfalls, besides the magnificent gorges exceeding 600 m in depth in the southern part of the landmass.[2]

W. W. Hunter, writing in 1879, described the geographical situation of the Khasi and Jaintia hills as follows:

> 'The district of Khasi and Jaintia hills called by the inhabitants Ka Ri Khasi and Ka Ri Synteng, is situated between 20° 9′30″ and 25° 8′28″ north latitude, and between 91° 9′0″ and 92° 51′30″ east longitude. It contains an approximate area of 6157 square miles, and a population, according to the Census of 1872, of 1,41,838 souls'.

[2] Geological Survey of India, Miscellaneous Publication No. 30 (1974).

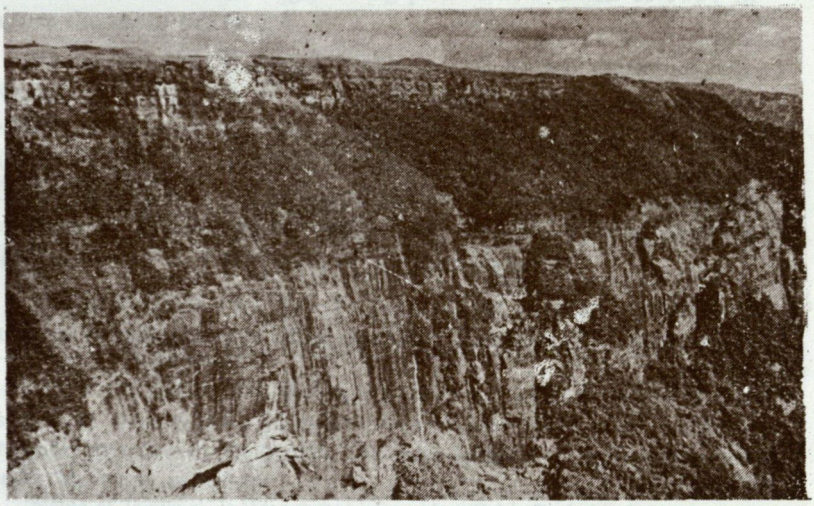
A typical grove of Khasi Pines (*Pinus Kesiya*).

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

Nature in the Khasi uplands. The meandering foot-track ahead seemingly leading to the top of a precipice connects Mawmluh with Mawshamok and other Khasi villages. Beyond and below the range of hills in the background the plains of Sylhet (Bangladesh) spread out before the eyes (in the south of the Khasi Hills) like a green tapestry intersected by twisting rivers and jhills.

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

The Khasi Hills abound in magnificent gorges exceeding 600 m. in depth in the southern part of the landmass. The deep gorges serve as funnelling channels for rain-laden clouds into the great depth of the hills.



The steep rock-face of the southern range of the Khasi Hills once lashed by boisterous tidal waves of Pre-tertiary Tethys Sea. At the base of this almost perpendicular rock-wall is a triple-headed rock, called *Maw-Lai-Khlieh* in Khasi. According to popular Khasi belief, if this natural rock bastion should ever give way, it will portend the end of the world.

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

The most recent calculations of the landmass and of the population have been given separately in respect of the Khasi Hills district between Garo hills to the west and Jaintia hills to its east as 10,463 sq. km with a population of 5·5 lakhs and in respect of Jaintia hills forming the easternmost part of the state of Meghalaya as comprising an area of 4,000 sq. km with a population of about one lakh only. The Jaintia hills have been described as a prolongation of the 'Shillong Plateau' with a mean elevation of about 1,000 m overlooking the gentle plains of Bangladesh to the south and the Assam plains to the northeast. The whole terrain is rugged where hills are generally flat-topped rising up to a height of 1,200 m above the mean sea level. 'Deep gorges and narrow valleys carved out by the Myngot, Myntheden, Mynghreg and a number of other turbulent streams characterise the topography'.[3]

Physiographically, the whole state of Meghalaya is said to represent a remnant of an ancient plateau of Pre-Cambrian Indian Peninsular Shield, block uplifted to its present height of about 600–1,800 m above the mean sea level. The Shillong peak, which is the highest point, towers over the neighbouring plateau at a height of 1951 m above the mean sea level.[4]

Pemberton (1835) described the tract of country comprising the Khasi and Jaintia hills as 'an irregular parallelogram, the length of which, from north to south, may be assumed at about 70 miles, and its average breadth at 50, giving an area of 3,500 square miles'. On the north, it is bound by the plains of Assam; on the south by those of Sylhet; on the west by the Garrows (Garos); and on the east by the central portion of Kachar (Cachar).

Pemberton indicated that the area consist of 'three portions of unequal breadth and diversified character'. The first and northernmost

[3] G. S. I. bulletin 1976. With regard to the names of rivers, this author is given to understand by his informed source that 'Myntheden' is actually 'Myntdu' as called by the people. The same source also comments on the name 'Mynghreg' as follows:

'Name of Jaintia river 'Mynghreg' is not identifiable Probably 'Myngkrem'. The last 'g' is difficult to explain. Another probability is 'Myntang' with final 'g' but the other letters are again difficult to account for.

[4] G. S. I., Misce. Pub. No. 30 (1974).

part of the country, according to his description, is closely wooded, rising from the Assam Valley and 'stretching by a succession of gentle undulations for 20 miles', gaining a height of 2,746 feet above the sea. The northern crest of the more elevated plateau was seen 'resting at an elevation of between four and five thousand feet above the sea level'.

The second division, varying in topological character from the first, had been described as stretching from 'Nungklow' (Nongkhlaw) on the edge of the northern crest to 'Moosmye' (Mawsmai), similarly situated on the southern verge of this elevated region, the direct distance of which had been calculated as about 35 miles. To quote Pemberton:

> 'It is within these limits, that the region is included, whose salubrity has been so much extolled by its friends, and so much questioned by its opponents' (Pemberton 1835).

Pemberton was referring to the early search for a sanatorium for European invalids of the government and a site for a military cantonment. This search, as we know, ultimately led to the establishment of the headquarters of the Chief Commissioner's province of Assam over a wide area of the Shillong plateau.

Pemberton observed that this central tract could only be imperfectly described as a 'table-land'. Even though unmarked by very lofty elevations, the whole terrain was so much undulated and distinguished by hillocks, knolls, valleys and chasm that it resembled much more strongly 'the troubled surface of the ocean'. But for want of a better term, Pemberton preferred to designate it as 'table-land'. Later Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, the famous Botanist, also commented upon the highly undulated nature of the terrain, but agreed with Pamberton in calling it 'table-land'.

The third division of Pemberton's description comprised the tract of land lying between 'Moosmye' (Mawsmai) and 'Tara (Therria) Ghaut' at the foot of the hills which covered a distance of about seven miles. This third division of steep mountain face, like that on the Assam side in the north, is densely wooded. The description continued: 'viewed from the country below, it appears to spring almost perpendicularly from the plains to an elevation of five thousand feet . . . .' (Ibid).

The fertility of this narrow strip of land running along the base of this almost vertical climb had been extolled by Pemberton in exuberant terms. In view of the interest of his description, we may quote him even though at some length:

> 'The groves and plantation, from which the whole of Bengal is supplied with oranges, occupy a belt of from one to two miles in breadth, at the sloping base of the mountains, and in a soil formed of the detritus of the limestone, which constitutes the principal rock on this side of the range; limes and pineapples, the jack-fruit and mangoes, betelnut and plantations also grow luxuriantly, to an elevation of nearly 2,000 feet above the plains, when the character of the products indicates a change, from tropical to a more temperate region .... (Ibid).

Hooker, who approached the Khasi hills from the south in June 1848, left an identical description as that of Pemberton:

> 'From this place (Chhatak, now in Bangladesh) the Khasia mountains are seen as a long table-topped range running east and west, about 4,000 to 5,000 feet high, with steep faces towards the Jheels, out of which they appear to rise abruptly' (Hooker 1854).

The next part of the description evokes a poetic image:

> 'Though twelve miles distant, large waterfalls are very clearly seen precipitating themselves over the cliffs into a bright green mass of foliage that seems to creep half the way up their flanks' (Ibid).

The above description holds a nostalgic fascination for this author who as a young boy followed the same trail during his many journeys, back and forth, in the twenties and early thirties of this century.

William Robinson, writing in 1841, followed Pemberton almost verbatim, in outlining the topography of the Khasi hills. The only additional information he added, referred to the prolongation of the chain of hills in the north of the region down to the plains of Assam, having the same geological character:

> 'The hills projecting into the valley of Gowhatti (Gauhati),

> and extending from Naigong (Nowgong) to the Kamakhya Parbut .... are rather prolongations of spurs from the Khassia chain, than isolated groups belonging to the valley' (Robinson 1841).

John M'cosh, it is interesting to note, considered 'Moplong' (Mawphlang) as the highest point in the 'Kassya hills'. His description has its peculiar interest:

> 'The highest point in the Kassya hills is believed to be Moplong, its elevation is about 6,000 feet, hoar frost is common in winter, and the thermometer does not rise above 70 or 75 in the hottest weather ..... A stormy wind blows for a greater part of the year, at a high elevation this west wind passes over Assam and restores the equilibrium of the atmosphere that would otherwise be disturbed by the prevalence of the easterly winds along the course of the Brahmaputra' (M'cosh 1837).

We have now again to revert to Sir Hooker for a description of the distinctive formation of the northern and southern face of the Khasi hills. His postulate about the physical causes responsible for their curious formations is really breathtaking. Who could have imagined that the present Khasi hills, both in the north and the south, faced vast oceans and the valleys of Assam and the plains of the Surma valley gradually emerged from the bottom of the sea during countless millenniums! We offer no apology for quoting from Sir Hooker at great length:

> 'All these peculiarities of outline are the result of denudation, of the specific action of which we are very ignorant. The remarkable difference between the steep cliffs on the south face of the range, and the rounded outlines of the hills on the northern slopes may be explained on the supposition that when the Khasia was partially submerged, the Assam valley was a broad bay or gulf and the whole of Churra (Cherra) cliffs were exposed to the full sweep of the ocean, the Nunklow (Nongkhlaw) shore was washed by a more tranquil sea' (Hooker 1854).

Sir Hooker continued his postulate as follows:

> 'The broad flat marshy heads of all the streams in the central

> and northern part of the chain, and the rounded hills that separate them, indicate the levelling action of a tidal sea, acting on a low flat shore; whilst the steep flat-floored valleys of the southern watershed may be attributed to the scouring action of higher tides on a boisterous rocky coast' (Ibid).

Dr A. K. Ghosh and S. Biswas of the Zoological Survey of India in a recent paper on the impact of shifting cultivation on wild life in Meghalaya (1976) incidentally made the following observation which is relevant to the above postulate of Sir Hooker:

> 'It is from this north-east of India, of which Meghalaya is a part, that the obliteration of Pre-tertiary Tethys sea began, producing in its wake a land connection between the Indian peninsula and the main Asiatic mass to the north'.

CLIMATE

Though remarkable changes might have taken place in course of long years in the climatic conditions of the hills due to various causes such as expansion of settlement areas, the destructive effect of the shifting method of cultivation resulting in large scale deforestation etc., it remains true as it did in the past, that the whole area is among the rainiest parts of the globe. This was one outstanding feature that forcefully struck all early British explorers who came in the wake of the opening up of the hills. Almost all early writers commented upon this ubiquitous trait of the climatic condition of these hills which were so exposed to the full blast of monsoon clouds coming from the direction of the Bay of Bengal.

The deep gorges and chasms, occurring particularly in the north and the south of the region, serve as funnelling channels which by natural process of suction convey the rain-laden clouds into the great depth of the hills. One can notice the rain clouds always forming over the hills particularly during the rainy season of the year. Sir Hooker who entered the hills from the south in the month of June was struck by the stillness of the atmosphere under the impact of the constantly rising clouds which seemed to benumb the voices of nature. He wrote:

> 'Hot gusts of wind blow up the valleys alternating with clouds and mists, and it is curious to watch the effects of the latter in stilling the voices of insects and birds . . . . kites become numerous after the rains, and are regarded as a sign of their cessation' (Hooker 1854).

Sir Hooker elaborated on this climatic condition in a remarkable passage:

> 'The climate of the Khasia is remarkable for the excessive rainfall. Attention was drawn to this by Mr Yule, who stated, that in the month of August, 1841, 264 inches fell or twenty two feet; and that during successive days, thirty inches fell in every twenty four hour. Dr Thomson and I also recorded thirty inches in one day and night, and during the seven months of stay, upwards of 500 inches fell, so that the total annual fall perhaps greatly exceeded 600 inches, or fifty feet, which has been registered in succeeding year. From April, 1849 to April, 1850, 502 inches (forty two feet) fell. This unparalleled amount is attributable to the abruptness of the mountains which face the Bay of Bengal, from which they are separated by 200 miles of Jheels and Sunderbunds' (Hooker 1854).

Pemberton also remarked on this aspect of the climatic condition in the Khasi and Jaintia hills and, interestingly enough, referring to Cherrapunji, he observed that the excess of rain did not seem to render the place unhealthy. Earlier, he quoted David Scott who thought of Cherrapunji as a possible site for a sanatorium to the same effect. What he noted subsequently is interesting:

> 'Such a result as far as I have been able to ascertain is scarcely paralleled in the registers of any spot on the globe, and nearest approach is probably found in some observations made in Arracan, during the months of July, August, September and October 1825' (Pemberton 1835).

We may round up this discussion by quoting from most recent observations made by the Geological Survey of India on the climatic condition in general of this region:

> 'The region experiences tropical monsoonic climate; the summer temperature recording as high as 25°C and the mean winter temperature falling down to 9°C with periodic deviations to below the freezing point, marked by appearance of ground frost at night and morning over the higher elevations. The average annual rainfall of the State is around 205 cm, the annual average of 1143 cm being recorded around Cherrapunji and Mawsynram the world's rainiest spots' (Miscellaneous Publication No. 30).

THE RIVER SYSTEM

The region of the Khasi and Jaintia hills is remarkable for the absence of navigable rivers due apparently to the nature of the terrain except for short stretches at the base of the hills, Pemberton and Hooker did not find much to comment upon the river system of the area. Pemberton had only this much to say:

> 'The whole tract lying between Nungklow (Nongkhlaw) and Moosmye (Mawsmai), when viewed geologically, consists of two portions, separated by Boga Panee, which flows between them, from north-east to south-west' (Pemberton 1835).

Sir Hooker, while commenting upon the torrential rain which the southern edge of the Khasi uplands experienced, only incidentally noted on its effect on the mountain streams. It is worth quoting here:

> 'The direct effect of this deluge is to raise the little streams about Churra (Cherra) fourteen feet in as many hours and to inundate the whole flat, from which, however, the natural drainage is so complete, as to render a tract which in such a climate and latitude should be clothed with exuberant forest, so sterile, that no tree finds support, and there is no soil for cultivation of any kind whatsoever' (Hooker 1854).

Amongst the early writers, W. W. Hunter in his *Statistical Account of Assam* (1879) noted somewhat elaborately on the river system of the region, and described their invariable courses down to the plains of Surma valley in the south and Assam in the north. We may, therefore, quote him at some length:

> 'No navigable rivers flow through the hills, the streams being all mountain torrents. On some of the large streams, however, near the point where they debouch upon the plains, small canoes are used for short distances below the rapids. The principal streams flowing south to the Surma river in Sylhet are the following: (1) The Kyn-chi-ong, named Jadukata by the Bengalis in the plains; (2) The Tangla, called Mukai in the plains; (3) The Bogra, called Bogapani in the plains; (4) The Soh-ryng-kew, called Dhulai in the plains; (5) The Mungat, called Pein (Piyain) in the plains; (6) The Mantyh-du, called Hari in the plains; (7) The Luka or Luba. The principal tributaries to the Brahmaputra are: (1) The Kopoli; (2) The Um-khen, called Barpani in the plains; (3) The Um-iam; (4) The Um-tru, called Digru in the plains; and the Ka-Khari, called Kulsi in the plains. All the foregoing streams have numerous feeders of their own, but none of them are of any importance'.[5]

This account will be incomplete unless we also take notice here of William Robinson's description of some of the mountain streams which arising in the Khasi and Jaintia hills course down to meet various rivers in Kamrup and Nowgong in the Assam valley. Robinson was of course writing his *Descriptive Account of Assam* (1841) and, therefore, only incidentally referred to those rivers which flowed beyond the confines of the hills. To quote:

> 'The rivers in the southern Kamrup are the Diboroo or Sonapur, which takes its rise in the Khasia hills, in the district of Kyrung (Khyrim?), and passing through Desh Dumuria, empties itself into the Kullung (Kalong?) about four miles above the junction of that river with the Brahmaputra. The Bata Nandi or Barnadi, which also takes its rise in the Khassia hills, and after a long and winding

[5] Modern spellings of some river names, according to the informed source of the author, are given below:

(1) Kyn-chi-ong is Kynshi-iong (literally black Kynshi).
(2) Man-tyh-du is Myntdu.
(3) Kapili is Kupli.
(4) 'Umkhen' is the Khasi name for the Jaintia 'Myngkhen'.
(5) 'Umtrew' rather than 'Umtru' is the Khasi spelling.
(6) 'Ka-khari' – 'Ka' is actually the 'article'.

course falls into the Koosi in Purguna Choianni. The Kools or Kulohi which after washing the base of Nungklow (Nangkhlaw) range, takes a northerly direction and passes through Pantam, then winding its course westward, and receiving the waters of numerous minor streams, passes through Purguna Chumuria and empties itself into the Brahmaputra about eight miles above the Nagabera hills .....'

Robinson then turned to take notice of some rivers which rise in the Jaintia hills, and flow down through Nowgong in Assam to the farther east. We may as well quote him again:

'Proceeding eastward, the first we meet with is the Killing, which takes its rise in the Jaintia hills, and falls into the Kullung (Kalong?) near the town of Jagi. The Barpani rising in the same hills, after taking a short northerly course, falls into Dimal below Chopper Mukh (Chaparmukh) . . . . The Kopili issuing also from the Jaintia hills, falls into Kullung in Raha (Roha); another branch taking a westerly direction from Chopper Mukh, falls into the Barpani . . . . Lime and coal of very excellent quality are found in some parts of this stream (Jamuna)'.

Finally, the Geological Survey of India, in a recent publication, comment upon the peculiarity of the river courses from geological angle though it does not elaborate on the river system itself of the region. We quote below the relevant passage:

'The drainage pattern in the region represents a most spectacular feature revealing extraordinary straight courses of the rivers, evidently along joints and faults. The magnificent gorges scooped out by the rivers in the southern Khasi and Jaintia hills, are the result of massive headward erosion by antecedent streams, along joints of the sedimentary rocks over the block, experiencing relatively greater uplift. Westward in the Garo hills, the consequent streams are mostly controlled by structures— faults and monoclines in the sedimentary rocks. The northern part of the plateau, devoid of any sedimentary cover, is marked by long, incisive valleys formed due to headward erosion along joints in the gneissic rocks and granites' (Miscellaneous Pub. No. 30).

In order to give our readers an idea of the singular beauty and flight of poetic imagination found in some of the folk-tales of the Khasis, the story of the river 'Rupatylli' may be recounted here.

There were two river goddesses who lived very close to the Shillong Peak as far back in time as could be imagined by mortals. They were believed to be daughters of the god U Blei Shillong. They once sportingly challenged each other to a competition to decide who would be the first to reach the plains of Sylhet. Umngot chose a soft and easy course though much longer and circuitous. Umiam or Umiew was very proud and felt that she was strong enough to cut a channel for herself straight through the hard rocky hills which blocked her way. Umngot easily outdistanced her sister and reached the plains first where she came to be known as 'Shengurkhat' (Chengerkhal?). She flowed past Chhatak and Dwara. When looking over she could not descry Umiam, her sister, she abandoned herself to playfulness. She went round in joy and formed a channel like a silver necklace *(rupatylli)* at Dwara.

Umiam or Umiew who wasted her time in digging her course through the hills progressed very slowly. When she ultimately reached Shella, she still thought out of her pride that she must have been the first to arrive since she chose a straight course. But then she looked over and saw her sister, Umngot, dancing away in joy and glistening like a veritable *rupatylli* or silver necklace at Dwara.

In order to hide her shame, Umiam split herself up into five branches now known as Ka Umtong, Ka Torasa, Ka Pasbiria, Ka Kumarjani, and Ka Dwara.

Rupatylli can still be seen far below in the plains of Surma valley, proclaiming the victory of Umngot over her sister and glistening in the sun like a silver garland, from the heights of Laitkynsew or Mahadeo.

[There are two rivers by the name of Umiam with sources very close together in the Shillong Peak area. They are usually differentiated as Umiam-Khwan (i.e. Barapani Umiam) and Umiam-Mawphlang (i.e. the Mawphlang Umiam). The former flows north-eastwards to the Brahmaputra and the latter southwards to the Surma valley.]

GEOLOGICAL STRATIFICATION AND MINERAL RESOURCES

Even before systematic geological exploration of the Khasi and Jaintia hills under governmental agency began in 1851, early British writers like Pemberton and Sir Hooker remarked on the geological stratification of the region and existence of limestone, coal and iron-sand in the hills. We are given to understand that a certain Mr. Stark first reported about the finding of coal beds in 'the lower hills of Sylhet', in 1815.[6] But long before that, trade in limestone was known to the European officials of the East India Company, stationed at Sylhet. Robert Lindsay who had been the Resident and Collector of Sylhet since 1778, it is said, directed his attention to limestone trade in 1780 and amassed great wealth by pursuing the trade.[7] Col. Shakespear (1929) noted that the superintendents of the European traders in lime often irritated the hill people by their injudicious conduct and extortion. There are extant records that trade in Khasi lime and coal was already in full swing in the early part of the 19th century. Sir Hooker who proceeded up the hills from the direction of the Surma valley in the month of June, 1848, noticed the brisk trade in lime that was being carried on, and recorded his impression in the following passage:

> 'Many small villages were scattered along the banks (of Surma river), each with a swarm of boats, and rude kilns for burning the lime brought from the Khasia mountains, which is done with grass and bushes' (Hooker 1854).

It is curious to conclude from the above passage that coal was not still being imported. We are, however, given to understand that, between 1840 and 1844, a large quantity of coal was sent from Cherrapunji under the guidance of Colonel (then Major) Lister, the Political Agent for the Khasi hills, partly to 'Dinapur' and the upper

[6] Statesman, January 20, 1977.

[7] 'As stated in the Appendix to the Statistical Account of Sylhet, the control of the profits of lime trade formed in early times one of the most valuable advantages attaching to the official in charge of that district (Sylhet). It does not appear that any European had been attracted to reside in the Hills before 1826'.— Hunter's *Statistical Account of Assam* (1879).

stations on the Ganges, but the larger proportion to Calcutta.[8]

There is clear evidence, however, that, by 1848, trade both in coal and lime was rampant. On the night of 9th June 1848, Sir Hooker started from Chhatak (now in Bangladesh) and travelled up the river Piyain, a tributory of the Surma, to a place, called Pandua, near the foot of the Khasi hills. He noted in his journal:

> 'We started at night, and early the next morning arrived at Puñdua (Pandua), where there is a dilapidated bungalow: the inhabitants are employed in the debarkation of lime, coal, and potatoes. Large fleet of boats crowded the narrow creeks, some of the vessels being of several tons burden'.

The next part of the account of his travel up the steep face of the hills is both interesting and instructive from the point of view of the geological character of the region:

> 'The rock at Terrya (Therria) is a nummulitic limestone, worn into extensive caverns. This formation is said to extend along the southern flank of the Khasia, Garrow (Garo) and Jyntea (Jaintia) mountains, and to be associated with sandstone and coal . . . . It is succeeded by a horizontally stratified sandstone, which continued up to 4,000 feet, where it is overlain by coal beds, and then by limestone again' (Hooker 1854).

Sir Hooker was a very keen observer even beyond his own immediate field of interest, namely botany, and left almost the first extensive account and estimate of the geological stratification of the whole region of the Khasi hills before any systematic exploration began in right earnest. We, therefore, offer no apology for quoting him again:

> 'The general geological characters of the chain may be summed up in a few words. The nucleus or axis is of highly inclined stratified metamorphic rocks, through which the granite has been protruded, and the basalt and syenite afterwards injected. After extensive denudation of these, the sandstone, coal and limestone were successively deposited' (Ibid).

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[8] Statesman, January 20, 1977.

Sir Hooker then went on to compare the Khasi hills with other known chains of mountain system such as Vindhya, Kymore, Bihar and Rajmahal from the point of view of resemblance of geological character and concluded that the Khasi hills were actually an extension of the same system now separated by the delta of the Ganges and the Brahmaputra. One noticed the same general contour of the mountain, their stone cliffs and the same association of the rocks with coal and lime. But Sir Hooker noted one fundamental difference:

> 'There is, however, this difference between them, that the coal-shales of Khasia and limestone of Behar are non-fossiliferous, while the lime of Khasia and the coal-shales of Behar contain fossils' (Ibid).

Sir Hooker considered the nummulites of limestone found in the Khasi hills as the only means of estimating the approximate age of the Khasi coal, and concluded on examination of species by experts that they were the same as the nummulite rocks of north-west India, Sind and Arabia.

Before Sir Hooker, Pemberton (1835) to whom we owe the first elaborate description of the physiography of the Khasi hills, also noticed the geological features of the land and the condition of soil in different parts of the country. He recorded that the northern portion of the Khasi hills consisted almost exclusively of granite masses which were seen protruding through the soil at every step, and large boulders were scattered over the surface in every direction. He then observed:

> 'The soil as far as Myrung (Mairang) is essentially poor, and the vegetation scanty, greatly relieved by the presence of some noble firs, which crown the summits of the knolls, and are scattered over all the hollows, which lie between different heights' (Pemberton 1835).

The condition of soil from the point of view of its fertility was described as more favourable as one advanced from 'Myrung' (Mairang) and, between 'Lumbree' and 'Syung' (Sohiong), consisted of 'black mould' which was thought to be favourable for gardening purposes. Pemberton next noticed marked change

in the geological character of the country in the neighbourhood of 'Moflung' (Mawphlang) which was considered by him as the loftiest point on this line of the route at an estimated elevation of 5,942 feet. He also remarked on the corresponding change in the nature of the vegetation in consonance with the geological character of the country around. To quote:

> 'The firs, which in the more northern portions of the tract, grow with considerable luxuriancy, and attain an elevation of from 30 to 90 feet, become dwarfish and stunted, in appearance, as they approach the point of transition from granite to slate and the secondary rocks, and altogether disappear, on reaching Boga Panee, whose rocky bed is composed of a heterogenous accumulation of rolled masses of granite, gneiss porphyry and sandstone; while the perpendicular walls, which bound it on either side, consist of soft and fragile slate, which is rapidly decomposed by the effect of the atmosphere upon it' (Ibid).

Pemberton continued his description that, as one ascended from this chasm, he met with another barren region, extending for a short distance round 'Surareem' (Sohrarim) 'where coal is found, and the principal operations of the iron smelters are carried on'.

Hunter, in his *Statistical Account of Assam* (1879), dismissed the subject of the geology of the Khasi hills in a short passage and we may as well reproduce it below:

> 'The geological formation is mainly granitic, with stratified rocks of sandstone, limestone, and shale. The coalbeds rest upon trap and metamorphic rocks. The prevailing surface soil is a red ferruginous loam'.

Systematic geological explorations of the Khasi and Jaintia hills, it has been claimed, began in 1851 when Thomas Oldham was first appointed as 'Geological Surveyor'. He later changed his designation to 'Superintendent, Geological Survey of India'. Oldham started his career in the Khasi hills with his first field season in June 1851.[9] The earliest geological reference on the region is said

[9] The Statesman, January 20, 1977,

to have been made by Oldham (1859). The systematic geological mapping of the region was subsequently carried out by H. B. Medicott (1869), Godwin Austen (1869), La Touche (1883, 1887), and F. R. Mallet (1887).[10]

We have, however seen above that observations on the geological character of the tract were made even earlier than Oldham by Pemberton (1835) and Sir Hooker who carried out his explorations during seven months of his stay in the hills from June 1848. His journals, however, appeared in 1854.

The geological history of the State of Meghalaya, which includes the Khasi and Jaintia hills, has been recently described as follows:

> 'The Archaean basement of Meghalaya, a remnant of the northeasterly extension of the Indian Peninsula, remained a landmass experiencing earth movements leading to complete folding and fracturing of the ancient rocks till Precambrian times . . . . '[11]

The major upliftment of the plateau as a whole, it has been stated, started at the end of the Miocene period. The rock formations in the district of the Khasi hills have been enumerated as: (1) Archaean, (2) Precambrian (Proterozoic), (3) Cretaceous-Tertiary Sedimentary rocks and (4) Recent Sediments. In order of antiquity, Cretaceous-Tertiary rocks have been classified into three groups, viz Khasi, Jaintia and Garo (G.S.I. bulletin, 1976).

We have been further told that the Khasi group consists of sandstone and conglomerate of Jadukata formation overlying the feldspathic sandstone of Mahadek formation. The Jaintia group consists of Langpar, Shella and Kopili formations and are comprised of limestones, sandstones and shales (having phosphetic nodules) and clays (Ibid).

With regard to the existence of mineral deposits in the Khasi and Jaintia hills, the G.S.I. publication[12] notes as follows:

> 'Though no promising deposits of any metallic minerals have so far been located in the state, it is endowed with some

[10] G.S.I., Miscellaneous Publication No. 30 (1974).
[11] G.S.I., Miscellaneous Publication No. 30 (1974).
[12] G.S.I., Miscellaneous Publication No. 30 (1974).

of the important non-metallic minerals like limestone, coal, clay, glass sand and sillimanite. The limestone occurring along a belt over the southern scarp of the plateau, from western end of the Garo hills to northeast Jaintia hills accounts for an unsurpassable deposit of high grade limestone'.

The publication in question continues as follows:

'The potentiality of initiation or expansion of mineral-based industries in this new State of Meghalaya mainly depends on the four principal mineral deposits, viz. limestone, coal, sillimanite and clay'.[13]

Traces of other minerals found, though not economically promising yet, are corundum, dumortierite, gold, phosphate and iron ore.[14] Iron smelting was known in the hills since time immemorial and the Khasi blacksmiths turned out iron implements much coveted once in the plains of Assam and Surma valley. The craft is still practised though not on a considerable scale.

This account of the geology of the region will be incomplete without a reference to the Kyllang Rock, a breathtaking geological phenomenon. The Kyllang Rock is situated at a distance of seven miles from the Mairang village. Sir Hooker described the Kyllang Rock in his journals as follows:

'Kollong (Kyllang) rock is a steep dome of red granite, (this granite is highly crystalline, and does not scale or flake, nor is its surface polished) accessible from the north and east, but almost perpendicular to the southward where the slope is 80° for 600 feet. The elevation is 400 feet above the mean level of the surrounding ridges, and 700 feet above the bottom of the valleys. The south or steepest side is encumbered with enormous detached blocks, while the north is clothed with dense forest, containing red tree-rhododendrons and oaks; on its skirts grew a white bushy rhododendron, which we found nowhere else. The hard granite of the top was covered with matted mosses, lichens, lycopodiums, and ferns, amongst where were many curious and beautiful airplants' (Hooker 1854).

[13] Ibid.

[14] G.S.I. bulletin, 1976.

The most recent account of the Kyllang Rock does not improve upon Sir Hooker's description recorded over a century ago, except telling us that the 'stiff dome of red granite' rises to a height of 5,400 feet above the sea level. 'The view from the top of the rock is very extensive, especially towards the north, where a magnificent panorama of the Himalaya(s) is obtained in the autumn'.[15]

FLORA

Writing in 1879, W. W. Hunter, in his *Statistical Accounts,* observed that, on the whole, the Khasi hills were remarkable for absence of forest. He, however, did not forget to note that, owing to the habit of firing the jungle in spring prior to sowing, a great waste of valuable timber had taken place. But Hunter's observation is only partially true because, from the point of view of richness of flora, the mixed evergreen forests in the northern and southern parts of the region are second to none in Asia. Generally it may be said that the vegetation type of the Khasi and Jaintia hills belongs both to the temperature and the sub-tropical. Sir Hooker, the celebrated Botanist, who pioneered the exploration of the Khasi flora, noted in his journals that both in number and extent of fine plants the Khasi flora was the richest in India, and probably in all Asia. This was due mainly, according to Sir Hooker, to varied nature of the terrain and the variety of exposures in different parts of the region. He specially noted that the temperate flora descended fully to 4,000 feet lower in latitude in the Khasi hills (25°N) compared to Sikkim (27°N), ie. even though the former was two degrees nearer to the equator.

Hooker observed that many species and genera appeared at 5,000 to 6,000 feet on the moor-like uplands, naked and exposed, but the same species and genera were not found under 10,000 feet in the Sikkim Himalaya. He mentioned amongst these *Thalictrum, Anemone,* Primrose, Cowslip, *Tofieldia,* Yew, Pine, Saxifrage, *Delphinium* and *Pedicularis.*

Sir Hooker, after noticing the beauty and luxuriance of really tropical vegetation on the southern side of the Khasi hills, induced by the hot, damp and insular climate of the perennially humid mountains compared the Khasi flora here as of Malayan

[15] North-Eastern Spectrum (Shillong Centenary Number), November, 1976.

character. He found the comparison true particularly in the prevalence of 'brilliant glossy-leaved evergreen tribes of trees' (as *Euphorbiaceae* and *Urticeae*), especially figs which abound in the hot gulleys. 'The emerald green vegetation' of the southern slope, 2,000 feet below Mawsmai, contrasting with the slivery cascade of many waterfalls, vividly recalled to Sir Hooker's mind the scenery around Rio de Jenerio (Rio de Janeiro). He made the following entry in his journals:

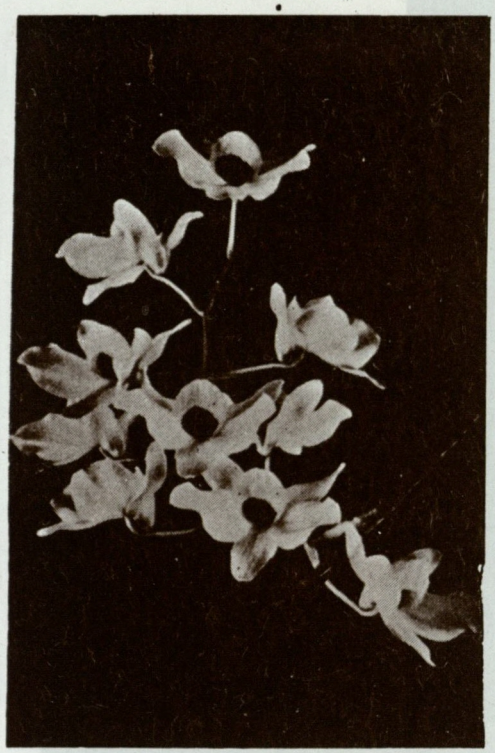
> '. . . . nor do I know any spot in the world more calculated to fascinate the naturalist who, while appreciating the elements of which a landscape is composed, is also keenly alive to the beauty and grandeur of tropical scenery' (Hooker 1854).

Among the many species and genera of vegetation which occurred on the southern slope, Sir Hooker named *Combretaceae,* Oaks, Oranges, *Garcinia* (gamboge), *Diosphyros, Pandanus,* pinnated leaved *Leguminosae,* all kinds of palms with pinnated shining leaves (as *Calamus* and *Plectocomia*). He noticed the beautiful *Caryota* or wine palm, whose immense decompound leaves were twelve feet long, laurels and wild nutmegs with *Henslowia, Itea* etc. There were abundance of parasites such as mistletoe, epiphytical *Orchideae, Aeschynanthus,* ferns mosses, and *Lycopodia.* On the ground were *Rubiaceae, Acanthaceae,* beautiful balsams, and herbaceous and shrubby nettles.

Sir Hooker also contrasted the abundance of many kinds of bamboo and numerous species of grasses with that of Sikkim. That was not all. After informing his readers that the Khasis enumerated fourteen kinds of bamboo, Sir Hooker even gave the native names of some of these as *uspar, upspet, uspit, usken, uskong, uktang, usto, silee, numlang, tirra,* and *batooba.*[16] We are also told

[16] This author tried to verify the correct Khasi names of the different kinds of bamboo as far as possible from his informed source. Now, 'U' in every case above is an article in Khasi language indicating the male gender of a person or a thing as 'Ka' denotes the female gender (viz. *ka jainsem,* an item of Khasi female dress). The names of different varieties of bamboo are as follows:

(a) U spar, (b) U Pspét is unknown but not a likely term, (c) U Spit, (d) U Shken, (e) U Skong, (f) U Ktang (Ktang actually stands for bamboo tube. Could it imply that good tubes are obtainable from this variety?),



The Khasi flora is very rich in orchid species.

'*Orchideae* are, perhaps, the largest natural order in the Khasia. . . . .' (Hooker 1854).

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

Orchids in plenty in Khasi Hills.

'. . . . . the largest natural order in the Khasia where fully 250 kinds grow, chiefly on trees and rocks but many are terrestrial. . . . .' (Hooker 1854).

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

'The Khasi Hills have many interesting plant species, such as tree ferns, pitcher plants . . . .' The pitcher plants (*Nepenthes Khasiana*) are said to be carnivorous. Flies and insects entering unwarily into the pitcher-like growths are trapped.

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

Hunter noted as early as 1879 that the India-rubber or Caotchouc tree was found in many forests throughout the Khasi Hills. There has recently been an attempt to grow rubber trees (*Ficus elastica*) on an experimental basis.

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

that wild plantains were called *Kairem* and that the cultivated variety, called *Kakesh,* was considered nourishing by the Khasis who gave it to new-born infants.[17]

On reaching still higher elevation at a point where the view of 'a bleak stony region' opened up, Hooker noticed numberless plants of a temperate flora and 'of European Genera'. This change of scenery and character of the flora continued up to the top of the flat on which Cherra stood. Sir Hooker wrote:

> 'No rhododendron grows at Churra (Cherra), but several species occur a little further north: there is but one pine (P. *Khasiana*) besides the yew, (and two *Podocarpi*), and it is only found in the drier interior regions. Singular to say, it is a species not seen in the Himalaya or elsewhere,[18] but very nearly allied to *Pinus longifolia* (cone-bearing pines with long leaves . . . .) though more closely resembling scotch fir than the tree does' (Ibid).

Sir Hooker's observation on the presence of numerous orchid species in the Khasi hills is also worth quoting in this context:

> '*Orchideae* are, perhaps, the largest natural order in the Khasia, where fully 250 kinds grow, chiefly on trees and rocks, but many are terrestrial, inhabiting damp woods and grassy slopes. I doubt whether in other parts of the globe the species of orchids outnumber those of any other natural order, or form so large a proportion of flora' (Ibid).

On the northern side of the hills, Hunter noted in his *Statistical Account* (1879), there were some tracts of timber forest on the lower hills towards the Brahmaputra valley, but through want of water carriage they were not of great value. Hunter added that the India-rubber or Caotchouc tree was found in many forests throughout the hills, but not in great numbers.

(g) U Stew, (h) U Sylli, (i) U Namlang, (j) U Tyr-a, (k) Batooba is unknown.

[17] (a) *Kairem* is unknown, probably dialect, Usually called *'Kait Khlaw'*.
(b) *Kakesh* should be *'Ka Kait'*.

[18] Sir Hooker was apparently wrong. *Pinus Kesiya* (Royle ex Gordon) has a far wider distribution than the Khasi hills. It is found in North Burma, Naga hills, Lushai (Mizo) hills, Manipur, and foot-hills of Lohit district of Arunachal Pradesh (Vide paper entitled 'Endemic Plants of Meghalaya' by P. K. Hazra of Botanical Survey of India in the Bulletin of the Meghalaya Science Society, Vol. 1, 1975).

With regard to the character of the flora in the upper regions, Hunter continued that, at an elevation of 3,000 feet, the *'Pinus Kasia' (Pinus Kesiya)* predominated over all other vegetation and formed almost pure pine forests. On the general nature of the flora, Hunter noted as follows:

> 'The characteristic trees are those of a temperate vegetation, chiefly consisting of oaks, chestnuts, magnolia, Schima, Cinnamomum, Prunus, Engelhardtia, etc. There are also numerous other timber trees, including valuable Sal (Shorea robusta) and rubber tree (Ficus elastica)' (Hunter 1879).

The rich pasture grounds, scattered over the whole of Khasi hills, where particularly there was no forest and where land was not under cultivation, also did not escape Hunter's notice.

The most interesting part of Hunter's accounts, however, concerned his reference to 'Sacred Groves' and we quote:

> 'A remarkable feature in the aspect of the country throughout the hills, is the numerous sacred groves which superstition has preserved from time immemorial from the destructive hand of the woodcutter. These sacred groves contain beautiful timber-trees of various kinds, rare orchids, rhododendrons, and wild cinnamon' (Ibid).

In a most recent publication of the Government of Meghalaya entitled *'Law-Lyngdoh (Sacred Grove), Mawphlang'*,[19] intended as a visitor's guide, it has been noted as follows:

> 'The sacred grove is kept in a comparatively undisturbed condition, due to the faith and regard of the local people and the belief that the sylvan deities would be offended, if trees are cut, flowers and fruits plucked. The vegetation composing this sacred grove is very different from that of the surrounding areas, which are marked by the dominating Khasi pine or *Pinus Kesiya.* More than a century ago the celebrated English Botanist Sir J. D. Hooker who visited the woods had commented on the unusual wealth of species present here. Much later another English Botanist (and a forest officer) Dr. N. L. Bor studied this and two other sacred groves including that of Shillong peak, and has pleaded

[19] Text prepared by P. K. Hazra of Botanical Survey of India, Shillong, 1975.

for the preservation of these forests in an undisturbed condition, for all to enjoy the beauty and grandeur of the primeval forest.'

The description of the sacred wood itself is not only surprising, but is bound to impress one as the nature's own museum of the ancient and primeval flora of the Khasi hills. We cannot resist the temptation of quoting again from the publication in question, even though at some length:

> 'The sacred grove is a sharp contrast to the surrounding low grassland. It is rimmed by a dense growth of *Castanopsis Kurzii* trees as if forming a protective hedge, halting the intrusion of the pine which is present here and there at the edge of the slope. Amongst these trees, with their somewhat glaucous foliage, are scattered trees of *Quercus Griffithii*. Only after getting into the forest and walking about on the soft cushion of accumulated humus and looking around, one can see that what appeared at first sight to be a somewhat uniform greenery only, is really composed of many species with much varied foliage and floral display . . . . The trees are heavily loaded with epiphytic growth of aroids, piper, ferns, fern-allies and orchids. Some of the branches are bent under the pressure of this accumulated epiphytic growth, and often parts of these fallen on the forest floor, and there itself forming a small colony of their own' (Ibid).

Amongst other devoted naturalists who by their systematic study contributed immensely to the knowledge of Khasi flora, besides Sir J. D. Hooker, the following names are conspicuous: W. Griffith (1848), U. N. Kanjilal (1934-40), N. L. Bor (1942), D. C. S. Raju (1964), A. S. Rao (1969) and S. K. Kataki (1963).

Finally, this author is obliged to Dr. S. K. Jain, Head of the Botanical Survey of India, North-Eastern Region, Shillong, for the brief note below, summing up the floral landscape of the Khasi and Jaintia hills:

> 'The natural vegetation of Khasi and Jaintia hills comprises of mixed evergreen forests in northern and southern parts, pine forests in most of the hilly areas and the grasslands. The mixed evergreen forests are particularly found in protected areas like the Sacred Groves, where *Oaks*,

Rhododendron and species of *Schima* and *Cinnamomum* are common. The Sacred Groves also have a number of orchids and other epiphytes and also rich fern flora. Mixed evergreen forests at lower altitudes have chiefly *Mesua ferrea, Vatica Lancaefobia* and *Tetrameles nudiflora.* The common Khasi pine namely, *Pinus Kesiya,* dominates most of the hill slopes where habitations, roads and shifting cultivation have not reduced the forest to grasslands. Even grasslands have scattered pine trees. These hills have many interesting plant species, such as the tree ferns, pitcher plant and a number of endemic or rare plants such as *Brainea, Mitrastemon* and Wild Camellias'.

FAUNA

We have seen that Sir Hooker, as a Botanist, was enthusiatic about the Khasi flora, and was evidently impressed by the rich variety of the vegetation of the region. But Hooker apparently formed a poor impression of faunal wealth of these hills. Insects and birds, according to him, could not thrive in a damp climate alternating continuously with clouds and mists blowing through the valleys. He noted that common crows and vultures could be occasionally seen around villages but these and all other large birds were very rare in the Khasi hills. A few hawks were to be seen, also sparrows and kingfishers, and only once during his seven months' stay he heard a cuckoo. He never saw a pheasant but heard reports about the presence of these birds in the hills. Let us quote him next:

> 'More remarkable than the rarity of birds is the absence of all animal except domestic rats, as a more suitable country for hares and rabbits could not be found' (Hooker 1854).

Sir Hooker collected sixteen species of snakes and, to his great astonishment, none of these were found poisonous after examination whereas five out of the eleven species from his collection in Sikkim proved to be poisonous. As we shall see later, Sir Hooker's conclusion in this regard was wrong. About the presence of insects, he wrote:

> 'One of the Khasia blind worms (a new species) belongs to a truly American genus *(Ophisaurus),* a fact as important as is that of Sikkim skink and *Agama* being also of American forms' (Ibid).

'The fauna of Meghalaya present an unique assemblage of Indo-Chinese elements of Oriental fauna and Palaearctic elements'
—(Dr A. K. Ghosh)

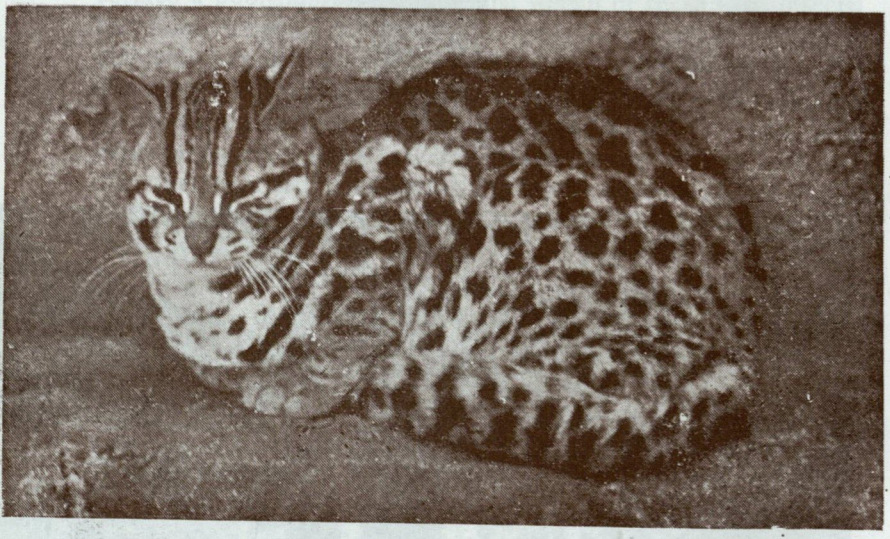
Clouded Leopard
(*Neofelis nebulosa*)

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

Binturong or Bear Cat (*Arctictis Bingturong*).

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

The Golden Cat (*Felis temmincki*).



Leopard Cat (*Felis bengalensis*).

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain

That was all about the fauna of the Khasi and Jaintia hills that Sir Hooker had to say. We are indebted to Hunter specially for a more elaborate early account of the faunal wealth of the region. Of the mammals, Hunter mentioned tigers, elephants, rhinoceros, buffaloes, mithun or wild cows, bears, leopards, wolves, jackals, foxes, wild hog, and several kinds of deer abounding in the Khasi and Jaintia hills. The next part of his account is very interesting and we quote:

> 'The expense of keeping down tigers in the shape of Government rewards amounted to £ 44.10s.0d in 1869-70. The reward now paid is Rs. 25 or £ 2.10s.0d per head. No rewards have ever been given for the destruction of venomous serpents' *(Statistical Account* 1879).

The bird species found in the Khasi and Jaintia hills included, according to Hunter, black partridges, hill partridges, quails, ducks, teal, snipe and woodcocks. After telling us that *Mahsir* fish was caught in the rivers, Hunter noted that no regular trade was carried on in the skins of wild animals, and, except in case of wild elephants, the 'Ferae naturae' were not made to contribute towards the wealth of the people (Ibid).

With regard to the practice of catching wild elephants and the trade that was in vogue on this account, Hunter's observation deserves to be quoted in its entirety:

> 'Wild elephants are found in the lower ranges of the hills, and in the gorges opening on the valleys of the Surma and Brahmaputra. Each state in the Khasi hills and each dolloiship in the Jaintia hills constitutes a separate hunting circle or *mahal.* In the Khasi states the conditions of elephant hunting are governed by rules framed in 1874-75 by the Chief Commissioner and approved by the Government of India. One of these rules required 'that one half of the proceeds of the sale of each elephant caught shall be paid over to the chief whose state forms the *mahal,* and the other half retained by the Government' (Ibid).

The Jaintia hills being British territory, the ordinary Assam rules were applicable. In accordance with these rules, the leases of the *mahals* were sold at intervals of two years to the highest bidder at public auction. The Assam rules, as revised in 1875-76, reserved to the Government the right of pre-emption at the price

of Rs. 600 (£ 60) in the case of every elephant captured between 6 feet and 7½ feet in height.

Since the above observations were recorded about a century ago, new facts relating to the fauna of the region have come to light and we now know that the fauna of the Khasi and Jaintia hills is as rich in rare species as the flora, though perhaps not in great abundance. We are indebted for this knowledge to the Zoological Survey of India which carried out systematic and scientific explorations in the remote corners of the hills. We have been told that the fauna of the State of Meghalaya of which the Khasi and Jaintia hills are constituent parts, particularly the mammalian fauna, is exceptionally interesting from a biogeographical point of view. It is this northeastern region which was said to have been the gateway through which many species of Indo-Chinese origin migrated to peninsular India after the Pre-tertiary Tethys sea receded and a land connection was established between the great Asiatic landmass and the rest of the Indian subcontinent. We can do no better than quote from a paper contributed by S. Biswas and Dr. A. K. Ghosh of the Zoological Survey of India to a seminar held under the auspices of the North-East Council for Social Science Research in June 1976 on Socio-Economic Problems of Shifting Cultivation:

> 'The present day composition of the fauna (of Meghalaya) can be said to be in a dynamic phase of biogeographical evolution associated with geomorphological evolution of the area and it required a long span of time for nature to reach this phase . . . . In recent times a geological and climatic discontinuity can be observed between north-east India and the rest of India and this is readily visible in the Garo-Rajmahal Gap which acts as a filter barrier in the effective dispersal of mammals in either way. Though primarily the fauna of Meghalaya are of Indo-Chinese origin, nevertheless it has a veritable admixture of Peninsular elements, Ethiopian elements and Palaearctic montane elements and as a result a highly diversified and complex assemblage could be seen; many of the relict species of the southern Peninsular India, mostly confined to western ghats, have closely related species only in Meghalaya and adjacent areas, separated by a gap of over one thousand and five hundred kilometres'.

Further on, we learn that more than 48% of the total number of mammalian genera, known from the entire Indian subcontinent,

could be seen in Meghalaya. Out of these, at least 9 genera ie. *Tupaia, Anourosex, Nycticebus, Hylobates, Atherurus, Rhizhomys, Cannomys, Chiropodomys* and *Micronys* do not occur anywhere in India except in Meghalaya and its adjacent areas.

This author is particularly grateful to Dr. A. K. Ghosh, the present Head of the Zoological Survey of India, North-Eastern Circle, Shillong, for preparing a brief note on the fauna of Khasi Hills District for this book. The entire note is appended below for the benefit of our readers:

> 'Fauna of Meghalaya present a unique assemblage of Indo-Chinese elements of Oriental fauna and Palaearctic elements. Tropical and subtropical moist evergreen forests ensured the survival of rich mammalian fauna of Meghalaya as also other groups of animals like birds, reptiles etc. Of the mammals, the Khasi hills areas possess interesting animals, like Hoolock or the only tailless ape in India [*Hylobates hoolock* (Harlan)], Golden Cat [*Felis temmincki (Vigors and Horsfiled)], Leopard Cat [Felis bengalensis* (Kerr)], Jungle Cat [*Felis chaus* (Gulden Staedt)], Large Indian Civet [*Vivera zibetha* (Linn)], Binturong or Bear Cat [*Arctictis bingturong* [Rafles)], Himalayan black bear [*Selenarctas thibetanus* (G. Cuvier)], Barking Deer [*Muntiacus muntjak* (Zimmermann)], and Pangolin [*Manis pentadactyla* (Linn)], to name a few.
>
> Birds could still be seen in abundance in the forested jungles specially at lower altitudes like forests at Nongpoh-Lailad areas in Khasi hills besides other forested areas. Some of the more common birds include Burmese Hoopoe [*Upupa epops longirostris* Jerdon], Long tailed broad bill [*Psarisomus dalhousie dalhousie* Jameson)], Scarlet minivet [*Pericrocotus flammcus speciosus* (Latham)], Burmese roller [*Coracias bengalensis affinis* (Horsfield)], Blue- throated Barbet [*Megalima asiatica asiatica* (Latham)], Red-vented Bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer bengalensis* (Blyth)], Himalayan black Bulbul [*Hypsipetes madagascariensis pscoroides* Vigors], Himalayan Whistling thrush [*Myiphorneus caeruseus temminckii* (Vigors)], Large racket-tailed Drongo [*Dicrurus hotentotus hotentotus* (Linn)], Spotted forktail [*Enicurus maculatus* (Vigors)], Thick-billed green pigeon [*Treron curcirost nepalensis* (Hodgson)], Black breasted Kaleez

Pheasant [*Lophura leucomelana lathami* (Gray)], Red Jungle Fowl [*Gallus gallus* (Linn)], and number of Mynas like jungle mynas, Hill Myna etc., and Turtledove [*Streptopelia orientalis* (Latham)].

Among Reptiles, many snakes and lizards could be seen in the region. Snakes include the poisonous species like Indian cobra [*Naja naja* (Linn)], King cobra [*Naja hannah* (Cantor)], Coral snake [*Callophis macclellandi* Reinhardt] and Vipers [*Trimeresurus monticola* Gunther, *T. Jerdoni* Gunther]. Of the non-poisonous snakes, occurrence of Python [*Python molurus* Linn], Blind snakes [*Typhlops* spp], Copper head [*Elaphe radiata Schlegel*], Green tree racer [*Elaphe prasiana* (Blyth)], Red necked Kulback [*Rhabdophis himalayana* (Gunther)] could be noted besides a number of other not so common species.

Besides mammals, birds, and reptiles, Khasi hills also could rival other parts of India in a number of interesting amphibian and fish species. Of the latter group many exhibit hill stream adaptation. Insects of the region present an equally interesting assemblage many of which have been described as new to science from Shillong-Barpani areas as also from Mawphlang areas. Special mention should be made about the beautiful butterfly fauna of the region, which exhibit a dazzling array of colour and texture and include hundreds of species eg, the Blue Peacock [*Papilio polyctor* Boisd], the Karserhed [*Teinopalpus imperialis* Stoppe], the Orange oak leaf [*Kallima inachus* (Boisd)], the Dipper [*Parthenos sylvia* Cram], the Bhutan Glory [*Armandia lidderola* (Atkinson)] etc.'

ACCOUNT OF A JOURNEY IN THE KHASI HILLS IN GOOD OLD DAYS

In this section we propose to reproduce excerpts from the account of an early journey down the south face of the Khasi hills left by Ethel St. Clair Grimwood in her book entitled 'My Three Years In Manipur' (1891). This account besides being amusing and interesting, will provide an historical perspective of the Khasi hills in bygone days when communications had not developed and vehicular transport was almost unknown. Journey in those days had to be undertaken either on foot or one had to surrender to being carried on the back of a porter in a special contraption called *thaba.*

Starting on a journey in *thaba*.

(Mrs Grimwood (1891) described *thaba* as 'a very curious mode of locomotion. It is a long cane basket with a seat in the middle, from which hangs a small board to rest your feet upon. Over your head is a covered top made of cane, covered with a cloth. You sit in this basket and a man carries you on his back. . . . .')

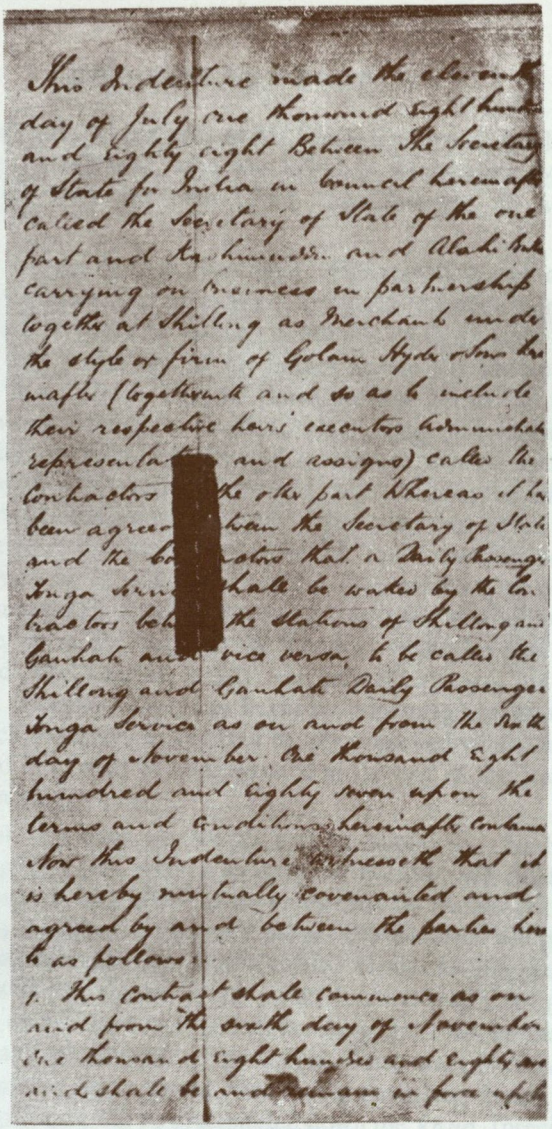
° *Thaba* is possibly not a Khasi word though the author has always known it as *thaba* or *thapa* since he was a boy. The Khasi term is *Khoh-Kit-Briew* literally meaning Basket (for) Carrying Person.

— *Photo by* Ghosal Brothers

The First Motor Service was introduced on the Gauhati-Shillong Road in 1906. The photo shows the English Manager, Mr Noels, seated in the middle, with two Anglo-Indian drivers, Mr Pokos and Mr Douglas, on the extreme right and left respectively.

(The credit of introducing the first motor service between Shillong and Gauhati belonged to Khan Bahadur Kasimuddin Molla, son of Golam Hyder who was a pioneer in many fields. Golam Hyder reached Cherrapunji, the first British Civil Station, in 1862, travelling to Chhatak by boat from the Hooghly district of present West Bengal and thence to Cherra on foot. He came in quest of business and earned the nickname of *Bakshawala* as he carried his merchandise in large boxes. With the shifting of the Civil Station from Cherrapunji, he migrated to Shillong in 1864. In 1888, his son Kasimuddin Molla secured a contract from the then British Government to run a horse-drawn Tonga Service between the Shillong Station and Gauhati. Even before that Bullock carts plied on the gravel road, taking three days to complete the journey. The Tonga Service used to cover the journey of 64 miles, up and down, in a single day. There were twelve stables along the road so that after every 5 or 6 miles horses were changed for the sake of speed. The passenger freight was rupees thirty either way though concessional rate was allowed to Government officials.

In 1906, Kasimuddin Molla obtained the Government permit to introduce the first motor service and placed a fleet of seven Albion cars (as shown in the photo) which ran on solid tyres, on the road.



This Indenture made the eleventh day of July one thousand eight hundred and eighty eight Between The Secretary of State for India in Council hereinafter called the Secretary of State of the one part and Kashimuddin and Alahi Baksh carrying on business in partnership together at Shillong as Merchants under the style or firm of Golam Hyder whose names (together with and so as to include their respective heirs executors administrators representatives and assigns) called the Contractors of the other part Whereas it has been agreed between the Secretary of State and the Contractors that a Daily Passenger Tonga Service shall be worked by the Contractors between the Stations of Shillong and Gauhati and vice versa, to be called the Shillong and Gauhati Daily Passenger Tonga Service as on and from the 16th day of November One thousand Eight hundred and eighty upon the terms and conditions hereinafter contained Now this Indenture witnesseth that it is hereby mutually covenanted and agreed by and between the parties hereto as follows:-

1. The Contract shall commence as on and from the 16th day of November One thousand eight hundred and eighty and shall be [illegible]

A photo copy of the preamble to the contract between the Secretary of State for India and Kashimuddin Molla and Alahi Baksh, granting permit to the latter, to run a Daily Passenger Tonga Service between Shillong and Gauhati. The Tonga service continued side by side with the Motor Service till 1910.

In 1906, as already noted, Kashimuddin obtained the Govt. permit to introduce the first motor service. In terms of a new contract, the Planters Stores took over the service in 1911 and, still later, in 1921, the Commercial Carrying Company came into the picture and maintained the service till Independence.

(Through courtesy of Mr Aulad Hussain.)

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

Mrs. Grimwood was the wife of Mr Frank Grimwood, the British Political Agent in Manipur, who was killed in the Manipur Mutiny of 1890 along with the then Chief Commissioner of Assam, Mr Quinton:

> 'I left Shillong early in November 1889 travelling part of the way towards Manipur quite alone, and had a terrible experience too. I had arranged to journey a distance of thirty eight miles in one day. I sent one of my horses on the day before, and started in a 'Khasia Thoppa' down the last hill of the range upon which Shillong is situated, which bring you down into the plain of Sylhet. A Thoppa is a very curious mode of locomotion. It is a long cane basket, with a seat in the middle, from which hangs a small board to rest your feet upon. Over your head is a covered top made of cane, covered with a cloth. You sit in this basket and a man carries you on his back, supporting some of the weight by tying a strap woven of cane on to the back of the Thoppa, which he puts over his head. The Khasias, luckily, are very strong men, but they think it necessary always to begin by informing you that you are much too heavy to be lifted by any single individual, unless that said individual be compensated at the end of the journey with double pay'.
>
> 'You ask him what you weigh, and he scratches.... his head, shuts up one eye, spits a quantity of horrible red fluid out of his mouth, and then informs you that he should put you down as eighteen or nineteen stone, and he even will go as far as twenty sometimes. This to a slim, elegant-looking person, partakes of the nature of an insult, but eventually he picks you up on his back and proceeds along the road as fast as he can, as if you were a feather weight. Going along backwards, and knowing that, should the man's headstrap break, the chances are you will be precipitated down the *khud* (precipice or cliff), are certainly not pleasurable sensations; but it is astonishing how exceedingly callous you become after a lengthy course of Thoppa ride up in the hills. Sometimes your Thoppa-wallah may be slightly inebriated when he will lurch about in a horrible manner, emit a number of curious gurgling noises from the depth of his throat, and eventually tumble down in the centre of the road, causing you grievous hurt'.

Describing how a Thoppa-wallah originally turned up 'enveloped in every covering' that he could get together, the narrative goes on:

> 'After he has carried you a short way he begins getting hot, and rapidly divests himself of his many wrappers, placing them on the top of your machine, where they flutter about, hitting you now and then playfully in the mouth and eye, as the case may be, and making themselves as generally unpleasant as they possibly can. Having done so, they end by falling off into the ground. Your Khasia perceives them, and immediately descends with you on to his hands and knees, and grovels about until he recovers the fallen raiment. During this process your head assumes a downward tendency, and your heels fly heavenwards; and should you move in any way ever so slightly, you immediately find yourself sitting on the ground in a more hasty than dignified attitude....
>
> 'At the foot of the hills I got into a small train, the only railway to be found at present in that side of Assam. I think it extends over about twelve miles of country, and there were about four trains, two up and two down daily. They do not trouble themselves by putting on too much speed. We, my servants and I, travelled as far as we could in it, and then I found myself within twenty miles of Sylhet....'

[The present author as a young boy used to notice during his many journeys to Sylhet, traces of the discarded railway lines at the foot of the hills, the carcass of railway engine and stone piers of railway bridge near Therria. The primitive railway service connected Therria with Chhatak (now in Bangladesh) in the good old days. It was completely destroyed during the great earthquake of 1897, and was never resumed again.]

THE GREAT EARTHQUAKE OF 1897

Never before and after that fateful day, the 12th of June 1897, an earthquake as terrific and as devastating was experienced in the history of this region. The epicentre was said to be located in the neighbourhood of Shillong itself. The shock was also intensely felt in far away Calcutta where people rushed out into the open for safety but the swaying of buildings all around inspired little confidence

in them. The orbit of the seismic shock, it was estimated, extended over an area of 1,275,000 square miles. According to an expert, the cause of the earthquake was laid to a fault in the earth's crust about twenty miles below the surface; but it was not considered to be connected with any volcanic origin.

It was about five in the afternoon of 12th June 1897 that the first severe shock rocked the whole region and the earth's convulsion was accompanied by a terrific rumbling roar from the depth of the earth. Before the impact of the first shock could fully subside, it was followed by a succession of tremors, and for days together after that tragic afternoon, an intermittent shaking of earth's surface became a regular experience of the inhabitants of Shillong and other places in the hills. The situation was made worse by heavy downpour of rain which followed the shock and continued for forty eight hours without respite. People did not dare enter their houses where they were still left standing, drenched though they were, and sleep was out of question on that night and many more nights.

The damage caused by the earthquake was immeasurable. It destroyed bridges, sent long stretches of road down the gorges; deep chasms appeared everywhere and people in great numbers were crushed under their uprooted houses. Notable amongst them was Mr. Robert Blair McCabe, the Inspector General of Police, who was found dead beneath the ruins of his house. McCabe's grave by the side of the stream, and at the junction of the road known by his name near the old Pologround can still be seen as a standing remainder of the tragedy which overwhelmed Shillong and its neighbourhood. The grave is at present in a very sorry condition and it is to be regretted that nothing has yet been done to preserve this historical monument in a proper manner. The likelihood is that what still remains of it may disappear altogether in not too distant future.

According to official estimates, the number of dead was set down at 1542 but it was apprehended that the figure must have been much higher. Flood and continuous downpour of rain greately impeded the work of collection of complete returns. The building of the Government Press where many persons were engaged in the printing of the Gazette collapsed over their heads, crushing many to death. In Assam, a terrible sickness broke out in the wake of the earthquake and people in large numbers died of the epidemic.

The then Chief Commissioner of Assam, Sir Henry Cotton and his wife, providentially escaped death as seconds before the earthquake, they had come out to board their cart for the usual evening ride. Sir Cotton recorded his impressions of the tragic event in his autobiography in the following words:

> 'The road yawned open with cracks beneath our feet, the pine trees overhead shook and trembled as though under the influence of a mighty storm, and the pinecones showered an avalanche upon our heads.... As I leaped from the trap, I looked back to where the Government House had been, and saw nothing but a great pillar of red dust, from the earth to heaven.... The noises of the earthquake, blended with cries of terror, rose all around us, and the shaking of the surface of the earth continued like the movement of some titanic piece of machinery'.[20]

THE PEOPLE

The Imperial Gazetteer of India dispensed with the question of the origin of the Khasis in a short passage:

> 'On ethnological grounds there are reasons for supposing that the Khasis and the Syntengs have been established in these hills for many centuries; but, living as they did in comparative isolation in their mountain strongholds, little is known of their early history. At the end of the eighteenth century they harried the plains on the north and south of the District'.

The Gazetteer did not make any attempt to define exactly the nature of the ethnological grounds which accounted for the origin and existence of the Khasis in the hills known by their name. And even before the eighteenth century, references to the Khasis are available in the chronicles of the neighbouring peoples of the valleys to their north and south, with whom they had both cultural and commercial contacts. There is also no reason to suppose that they were in a particularly primitive stage, for they were already organized in ancient and powerful kingdoms and principalities, and pursued their own distinctive method of statecraft.

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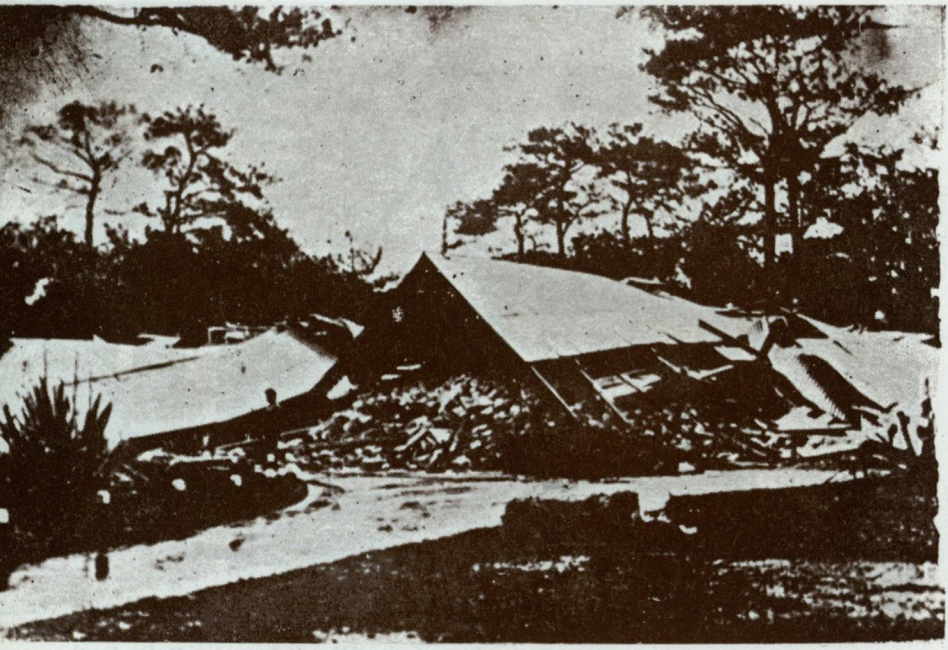
[20] Quoted by Dr P. Goswami in Shillong Centenary number of North-Eastern Spectrum, November 1976.

The Chief Commissioner's (Assam) residence before the Great Earthquake of 1897.

(It was about five in the afternoon of 12th June, 1897, that the first severe shock rocked the whole region and the earth's convulsion was accompanied by a terrific rumbling roar from the depth of the earth.)

— *Photo by* Ghosal Brothers.



The ruins of the Chief Commissioner's residence after the earthquake of 1897.

—Photo by Ghosal Brothers.

With regard to the racial origin of the Khasis, the most recent postulate (Bongard-Levin 1971) favours an autochthonous theory according to which they might have belonged to a common racial stock which occupied a wide area of northern India, Burma, Indo-China and parts of south China in the neolithic period. Due to natural causes or other reasons, they might have become detatched from the main stock in the dim past and thereafter pursued an independent course of racial and cultural development.[21] The convergence of cultural and material traits which occurs between the Khasis and scattered groups of people in Burma and Indo-China beyond the confines of India, can be explained on the supposition that they all originally belonged to the same racial stock. We have discussed the various theories about the ethnic origin of the Khasis elaborately in a separate chapter in this book. Here we shall make only passing references to the views of early writers who either from personal knowledge or otherwise wrote about the Khasis.

Amongst the early writers who visited the Khasi hills, Sir Hooker very generally remarked on the Indo-Chinese affinity of the Khasis, but did not elaborate on this so-called resemblance.

To quote:

> 'The Khasia people are of the Indo-Chinese race; they are short, very stout, and muscular, with enormous calves and knees, rather narrow eyes and little beard, broad high cheekbones, flat noses and open nostrils.... The hair is gathered into a top-knot, and sometimes (they) shaved off the forehead and temples' (Hooker 1954).

Sir Hooker's observation on the language of the Khasis, made very early, makes interesting reading:

> 'Their language is, I believe, Indo-Chinese and mono-syllabic: it is disagreeably nasal and guttural, and there are several

[21] 'Those who believe in the theory of independent origination of cultures would argue that the various cultures in different parts of India which archaeology has revealed during the last ten years show that when the great Indus Civilization was flourishing in Sind, Saurashtra and the Punjab, the rest of India was developing the regional cultures'. — H.D. Sankalia (1962).

> dialects and accents in contiguous villages. All inflections are made by pre-fixing syllables and when using the Hindoo language, the future is invariably substituted for the past tense' (Ibid).

Hooker's reference to 'Hindoo language' in the above passage is somewhat intriguing. Was he referring to the Bengali language of the Surma valley stretching away from the foothills on the southern slope of the Khasi hills? If not, we have to suppose that the Khasis were acquainted with Hindi even in that distant past! The last possibility would seem rather out of question at that early date.

On personal habits of the Khasis, Hooker's observations are no less interesting particularly his reference to their habit of 'chewing pawn (betel-nut, pepper leaves and lime)' all day long. He noted that their saliva looked like blood on the paths they treaded. After observing that the Khasis counted up to a hundred, Hooker made the funny remark that they estimated distances by the number of 'mouthfuls of pawn' they consumed on the way. The observation made on the inherent aversion to milk amongst the Khasis is worth quoting:

> 'They (Khasis) have an aversion to milk, which is very remarkable as a great proportion of the country is admirably adapted for pasturage. In this respect, however, they assimilate to the Chinese, and many Indo-Chinese nations, who are indifferent to milk, as are the Sikkim people' (Ibid).

It is, however, very remarkable that Hooker had practically nothing to say on the matrilineal system of the Khasi society and that this important trait of the Khasis should at all have escaped his notice or failed to engage his attention.

L. A. Waddell, who was only writing from reports in 1901, straightaway classified the Khasis as a Mongoloid tribe but, with regard to their language, he observed:

> 'Linguistically the Khasias are said in the Assam Census reports to occupy a group by themselves exhibiting no relationship with any other known language in their neighbourhood'.

Waddell's remarks on the physical character of the Khasis are worthy of notice in this context:

> 'Physically they are sturdy and muscular with great calf development, with distinctly Mongoloid eye and longish face.... Their complexion is recorded in the table, and is generally exceptionally dark for a tribe living at a relatively high elevation.... The section called *War* who live in the lower valley are positively darker; the *Bhoi* appear to be closely related to *Sintengs* (Syntengs)'.

Waddell's conclusion had, however, been directly contradicted by E. T. Dalton (1872) who noted the complexion of the Khasis as 'fair, often ruddy'. But he was not prepared to see beauty in 'such flat round faces and oblique eyes'. Dalton also noted the remarkable muscular development, especially of leg, in both Khasi men and women.

John M'cosh (1837) did not remark on the ethnic affinity of the 'Kassyas' and simply noted them as 'a powerful athletic race of men, rather above the middle size than below it, with a manliness of gait and nobleness of demeanour peculiarly their own'.

The next part of his account is, however, remarkable for his prejudice:

> 'I wish I could say that treachery formed no constituent in their moral character, but the indiscriminate and unprovoked massacre of Lieutenants Beddingfield and Burlton, and nearly their whole party, stands recorded against them'.

M'cosh was obviously referring to the prolonged war which the Khasis waged under their redoubtable leader, Tirot Singh, against the British penetration of their hills. It is strange that most of the early British writers, including Sir Hooker, had been equally prejudiced against the Khasis for the banner of revolt they raised against the occupation of their country. They never paused to think that, circumstanced as they were, the Khasis had every reason to feel suspicious of the British intentions towards the hills and that it was no crime, if they were jealous of their freedom. The excesses which might have been perpetrated in an atmosphere vitiated by suspicion and fear, should not have been blown out of proportions.

William Robinson (1841) confined his remarks mostly to observations on the political organizations of the Khasis, which represented 'the appearance of little oligarchical republics' to him. These small republics were not subject to a common superior and yet each of them was 'amenable in some degree to the control of his confederates'.

The next part of his description of the Khasi political organization is remarkable for its accuracy as it shows how the Khasis, even from remote times, subscribed to what in modern parlance will perhaps be called 'decentralization of powers'. We quote:

> 'A number of villages, as we have seen, profess allegiance to one sovereign, who, however, has but little authority; every village has its own chief, who obtains more than nominal respect. The office of these chiefs requires them to administer counsel; for which reason, men of matured judgement and good sense are always selected. The king usually takes up his residence in the principal village in his territory; he knows no more of the concerns of his dominions than his subjects, since every village is entitled to transact its own business, with the assistance of its chief'.

Hunter dismissed the question of the ethnology of the Khasis in a very short passage, for he had no doubt that they belonged to the Mongoloid family:

> 'In order to determine the ethnological position of the Khasias, we need to dwell upon a few only of their physical characters, viz., those which are held to indicate that type of the human family, the Mongolian, to which they undoubtedly belong' (Hunter 1879).

It is interesting to recall is this context that Robert Lindsay who was Resident and Collector of Sylhet since 1778 and made a large fortune by quarrying Khasi lime, considered the inhabitants of the Khasi hills as 'a tribe of independent Tartars'. The name Tartar was originally given, as we know, to turbulent nomadic tribes of Mongoloid origin of the Central Asian Steppes, and was later confusedly applied by transference to all people of Mongoloid origin generally. Lindsay obviously meant nothing more than that the Khasis were ethnically Mongoloid.

Major Fisher was the first to recognize that the Khasis as a race were totally distinct from the neighbouring hill tribes and he also first remarked on 'matriarchy or mother-kinship' prevalent among the Khasis.[22] But we have already noted that Fisher wrongly supposed that the Khasis were connected with the Mech only on the evidence that the Kacharis called them *Miki.*

'The isolation of the Khasi race' from the contiguous Tibeto-Burman stock, linguistically and also otherwise, was, however, soon to attract the attention of comparative philologists and ethnologists. J. R. Logan (1850 & 1857) was probably the first in the field, who demonstrated the relationship existing between the Khasis and certain isolated groups of peoples of 'Further India' like Mons or Talaings of Pegu and Tenasserim, the Khmers of Cambodia and inhabitants of Annam. His researches were later carried forward by Prof. Ernst Kuhn of Munich and Pater W. Schmidt of Vienna. The nearest kinsmen of the Khasis were also found in the Palaungs and Was of Burma. It was noticed at the same time that the linguistic and remote cultural affinity of the Khasis extended to Kolarian tribes like the Mundas, Hos, Santals, Korkus etc. in Chota Nagpur in Bihar and Satpura range in Central Provinces.[23]

Gurdon was, however, the first author to write a definitive book on the Khasis and naturally he treated all aspects of their origin elaborately. We shall refer here only to his significant observations. Incidentally, we may mention again that the origin of the Khasis is still shrouded in mystery and the question is far from resolved yet. Bongard-Levin's postulate about their possible autochthonous origin, already noticed above, only adds a new dimension to the problem. After noting that the Khasis have extant traditions that they originally came from elsewhere, Gurdon made the following hypothetical statement:

> 'With reference to the Khasi branch of the Mon-Anam family, it would seem reasonable to suppose that if they are not the autochthons of a portion of the hills on the southern bank of the Brahmaputra, and if they migrated to Assam from some other country, it is not unlikely that they followed the direction

[22] Introduction by C. J. Lyall to Gurdon's 'The Khasis' (1914).
[23] Ibid.

> of the different irruptions of foreign peoples into Assam of which we have authentic data, ie. from south-east to north-west'.

Gurdon was clearly committed to the theory that the Khasis were 'an offshoot' of the Mon people of 'Further India' and he assigned the same direction of migration in the case of the Khasis as had been followed generally by other race movements, ie. from the east. Mentioning about the comparatively late arrivals of the Khamptis and the Singphos from the country east of Hukong valley, Gurdon particularly noted that 'the tendency for outside people to move into Assam from the east still continues'.

Evidence of social and material culture, it was held, also seemed to confirm the relationship of the Khasis with peoples of 'Further India'. Gurdon particularly mentioned the typical Khasi *hoe* which he considered an enlarged version and modern representative in iron of 'the singular shoulder-headed celts' found first by S.E. Peal in the Malay Peninsula. Later in 1875, these celts or stone implements were also discovered in Chota Nagpur and still subsequently Peal came across iron implements and miniature *hoes,* similarly shaped as the 'shoulder-headed celts', among the eastern Nagas. The most interesting point was that the Burmese name of these stone celts was *mogyo.* The Khasis called their hoes *mo-khiw (moh khiew).* Now, this phonological resemblance, Gurdon asserted, could not be explained away as mere coincidence.

The discovery of 'shouldered celts' as noted by Gurdon raises some important question marks and difficult problems defying easy inference from this as to the migration of a people. Sankalia (1962), for instance, appears to support an east to west movement of culture and migration in prehistoric times affecting North-East India.

> '(But) judging from tool types, which have got widespread distribution in the Far East as well as Eastern India, viz. (1) shouldered tool or hoe, (2) round butted axe, and chisel with a triangular section, it would undoubtedly appear that they have been derived from the Far East'.

A. H. Dani (1960), on the other hand, takes a divergent view of the question and quotes F. J. Richards with approval:

A Khasi young man with the typical Khasi hoe called *moh khiew*. On his head is the peaked cap worn by the Syntengs.

(Gurdon particularly mentioned the typical Khasi *hoe* which he considered an enlarged and modern representative in iron of 'the singular shoulder-headed celts' found first by S. E. Peal in the Malay Peninsula.)

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

A Khasi woman wearing the footless cloth gaiter round her legs, called *sopjat* in Khasi.

(The Khasi women shared this item of dress with the Palaungs of Burma with whom the Khasis were supposed to have ethnic and cultural links.)

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

On way to market.

(Going to market forms the chief excitement of the life of a Khasi. Hutton remarked: 'The countryside is strewn with markets, the smallest village apparently having some sort of *hat* and everyone going to or coming from market somewhere.')

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

A view of the Cherra bazar.

—Photo by Abhijit Choudhury.

> 'The eastern frontier is.... difficult; true, the Burmese and Shans have ravaged Assam and Arakanese East Bengal, but the flow of Indian influence is eastward, penetrating Indo-China and the isles as far as Borneo. The meeting points of China and Indian culture are in Turkistan and North Annam'.

The above remarks recall to our mind the views of S. C. Roy, the great pioneer Anthropologist of India, discussed elsewhere in this book.

Worman (1949), as quoted by Dani again, apparently subscribed to the theory that Eastern India in prehistoric times belonged to one culture area comprising much of India, Burma, South-East Asia and Southern China:

> 'The eastern half of India belonged to a fairly large south and east Asiatic area throughout which the evolution of post-pleistocene prehistoric cultures was apparently more or less similar'.

The above views will appear to support an autochthonous theory of origin which obviously rules out migration to the west.

Dani next points out the other well-known theory that 'the shouldered tools' were brought to India by the migration of the Austro-Asiatics. He, however, concludes that the appearance of the tools does not prove any cultural affiliation of Eastern India with South-East Asia, but at best establishes contact and borrowings natural to countries so close to one another.

We cannot close this discussion on 'shouldered celts' and *hoes* without a reference to Sir Mortimer Wheeler's views on the subject. We, therefore, offer no apology for quoting him at length:

> 'Before the origin of the Indian axes is considered, something must be said of a more individual type of implement which partially coincides with them in distribution. The tanged and shouldered hoe or adze, with angular or sloping shoulders, often polished and with a single-chamfered edge in one of the broad planes, is a wellknown though not a common type in certain parts of eastern India, as far south as lower Godavari. The material is commonly chert or schist. In Assam

> the form occurs freely except in the Sadiya frontier area; but examples from the Garo and Khasi hills are rough and irregular and suggest provincial imitation' (Wheeler 1968).

Wheeler then added that, though rare in Bengal, only an example has recently been found in Midnapur district, they re-appear near the Bengal-South Bihar border in the Santal Parganas, Manbhum and Dhalbhum, and further south in Mayurbhanj and elsewhere in Orissa. Stray specimens have been found as far west as the Banda district of southern U.P. and as far afield as Chitor in Rajasthan but Wheeler noted that the eastern bias of this type was clear enough.

He continued as follows:

> 'Beyond India, Burma has produced good examples, and the type, highly finished or in the rough, is widely characteristic of south-east Asia. It is recorded in Malaya; in Indo-China it is included both in the socalled Bac-Sonian culture north of Hanoi and in the more southerly Somrong Sen culture of Cambodia and Annam... Further north usually crude shouldered hoes occur sporadically over a wide stretch of China from Hong Kong to Hunnan and Yangtse valley of Szechwan... The evidence on the whole points to a Chinese parentage for the shouldered hoe, with an origin perhaps in the earlier half of the 1st millennium B. C., and a southerly trend through the Chinese low lands to Laos and Burma. When it arrived in India is unknown; no example had there been found in any significant association... To link its arrival with that of Austroasiatic languages from south-eastern Asia, as has been attempted, is mere guesswork' (Ibid).

We have only incidentally touched above on certain views on the discovery of 'shouldered celt' and the existence of shouldered *hoe* only to show that opinions differ and any facile conclusion, one way or the other, from the above discovery, with regard to the question of migration of a people would be unwarranted.

Let us revert to Gurdon again.

The importance of the egg in divination, a cultural trait found amongst the Khasis, seemed to connect them with the Palaungs of Burma. Some tribes of Malay Archipelago, it was stated, also

used eggs for divination. Then, it was held that the Khasis shared their 'matriarchal customs' with some tribes in Malaya, Sumatra and adjacent countries. Gurdon wrote:

> 'The apparently strong survival of the matriarchate in parts of the island of Sumatra, as compared with this corresponding most characteristic feature of the Khasis, is a point for consideration'.

The prevalence of 'matriarchate' was also noted among some primitive tribes of Cambodia. The Cambodian taboo, *tam* or *trenam,* was assimilated to the Khasi *sang.*

We have attempted an analytical appraisal of the Khasi matriliny, wrongly called *'matriarchate',* in a separate chapter in this book. In the above context, we may only incidentally take note here of a remarkable passage on the subject in Hasting's *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Vol. 8, pp. 854–55):

> 'In India there are two centres of mother-right. One of these represented by the Khasis and Syntengs of Assam, affords a most definite example of the condition. Descent is matrilineal in the clan, which is traced back to an ancestress and embraces kindred groups consisting of the female descendants of a great-grandmother....The War people show an intermediate form in that both men and women inherit, but the youngest daughter obtains an additional share...The Megam or Lynngam, who are a fusion of Khasi and Garo, practice a form of mother-right closely resembling that of the Khasis. Though a man cannot inherit property and can possess only that acquired by his own exertions, he nonetheless exercises some control over the property of his wife, and can even appoint a member of his clan, usually his sister's son, to exercise the control in the event of his death'.

On the side of physical characters, the anthropometric measurement, according to Gurdon, established the Khasis as 'almost brachy-cephalic'. Their muscular development was also noted but Gurdon found that the trunk was longer in proportion to the rest of the body. They were broad at the waist with highly developed calf muscles. A definite tendency towards prognathism

was evident. The complexion of the people inhabiting the uplands was lighter and women of Nongkrem, Laitlyngkot, Mawphlang and surrounding high plateaux possessed 'pretty gipsy complexion'. The people of Cherrapunji were specially fair. The Pnars or Syntengs of the Jaintia hills were of darker shade. The Wars inhabiting the southern slopes were frequently more swarthy. The Bhois had the 'flabby-looking' yellowish skin of the Mikirs while the Lyngams were decidedly the darkest amongst the Khasis.

Finally, we have to take note of the views of Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterjee (1951), a great scholar and a versatile linguist, on the origin of the Khasis. He gives it as his opinion that they are Indo-Mongoloid in race, but Austric (Mon-Khmer) in language. To quote:

> 'They appear to be descended from some of the earliest Mongoloid immigrants into India who changed their language through contact with Austric speakers, either in Burma or on the soil of India, in prehistoric times'.

The Khasis, according to Dr Chatterjee, had a far wider distribution covering parts of the plain-lands of Sylhet and Kamarup before they became confined to the Khasi and Jaintia hills. He particularly takes note of three main branches of the Khasi people whilst those in the north he regards as Lalungs and Mikirs (of Naga origin). He designates the Synteng section of the Khasi people as Eastern Khasis with reference to their geographical relationship to the Khasis proper of Shillong and the Khasi hills just as the War form southern Khasis. The Lynggams are the south-western tribe. The next part of his observations may be quoted for its phonological interest:

> 'As in the case of all languages which have no early written records, it is difficult to trace their history, particularly in their sounds. The form *Synteng* (= Santen) gives the modern pronunciation: but it is quite in the nature of things that an earlier pronunciation of the word some 500 years ago was *Zainteñ*. The War tribe, now quite a small one, which lives in the part of the Khasi and Jaintia hills adjoining Sylhet, was in all likelihood a branch of the Syntengs; and possibly the War have not differentiated themselves much.

> In the War dialect, we find frequently initial Z in place of the S — in the other dialects. The phonetic law or the line of phonological change is not known: but Z-may be the earlier sound, just as Khasi S appears to have developed out of an earlier C. Thus, War has *Zia, Zan,* 'four, five' = *sāw, sān* in the standard dialect'.

Dr Chatterjee then speculates that thus it was easy for Aryan speakers to sanskritize *Zainteń* (Synteng) to *Jayanta, Jayanti* (J has the value of *dz* or *Z* in East Bengali and Assamese). Thus it was again that the capital of Jaintia came to be known as *Jayanta-pura* or *Jayanti-pura.*

DRESS

Dress, among all the social traits, is perhaps most amenable to change through culture contact or what might possibly be called, in anthropological terms, 'cultural expansion'. It may perhaps be correct to say that the Khasi male dress has changed almost completely during the last fifty years. The sight of a venerable Khasi old man in *dhoti* and *turban,* particularly in urban areas, has become extremely rare. There are only a few persons amongst the fading generation - they may almost be counted by names in Shillong - who still sport a *turban* over their otherwise European dress. In their case, the *turban* has become symbolic of their pride in their racial heritage. Nowadays in order to see the full Khasi regalia, one has to visit a few ceremonial gatherings in a year like the Khasi national dances. Even there only the participants will wear old costumes while performing. It of course goes without saying that the common people dressed less gorgeously. But the ceremonial dress does recall the old tradition in costume.

The Khasi women have always been very conservative in the matter of dress and they are still so. But recently a greater propensity to change in the manner of dressing is noticeable particularly amongst school and college going girls. The coming of the University in the hills might have given a boost to greater amenability to change of dress. It could also just be a coincidence. The great vogue of the film and fashion magazines among young people might conceivably also have exerted their influence in dress change among girls. It is becoming a common sight to notice girls specially

of middle class status increasingly taking to maxis and male trousers of new fashion like bell-bottom etc. The girls also increasingly like to bob their hair and shed all ornaments. On the other hand, a section of young boys readily responded to the new fashion of keeping long hair, usually bobbed, with side-burns. Even then it is true that the new fashion in dress is confined only to the level of a certain age group. It is most probable that Khasi women will continue the tradition in dress for a very long time to come.[24]

Our purpose in this chapter is to provide an historical perspective of the Khasi hills and the people from selected writings of early authors and not so much to stress on changes that have inevitably come over. So let us take note of how old writers viewed Khasi traditional dress in the last century and early part of the present. Sir Hooker noted in his journals as follows:

> 'A loose cotton shirt, often striped blue and red, without sleeves and bordered with long thread fringes, is the principal garment; it is gathered into a girdle of silver chains by people of rank. A cotton rope is sometimes added, with a large cotton turban or small skull-cap' (Hooker 1854).

Khasi women have all along been the most heavily and elaborately dressed amongst all the neighbouring peoples of both hills and plains. Strangely enough, Hooker had very little to write about the Khasi female dress. He simply noted that Khasi women wore a long cloth 'tied in a knot across the breast'. It is not clear what part of the dress he was referring to. One may be inclined to think that he was referring to the outer garment which is called *'ka jain kup'*. On ceremonial dress of the Khasis, Sir Hooker wrote:

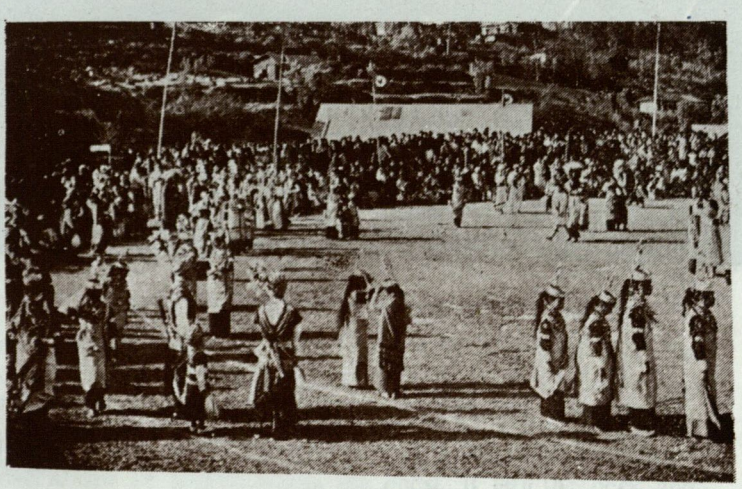
> 'During festivals both men and women load themselves with silk robes, fans, peacock's feathers, and gold and silver ornaments of great value, procured from Assam, many of which are said to be extremely curious'.

Incidentally, Hooker was not much impressed by Khasi dance but, it appears, he was writing only from reports:

[24] It should be mentioned that, on formal occasions, the traditional dress, with some modification in some cases, is still worn even by those who wear jeans, etc. on other occasions.

A Khasi maiden dressed for the dance.
(On her head is the silver crown called *Ka Pansngiat*. Note the necklace of large coral beads alternated with solid gold beads round her neck. The outer garment she is wearing with loose ends knotted crosswise over the shoulders is *Ka jainsem* and the stuff is muga silk. Different shades of a velvetty stuff are preferred for the jacket with long sleeves.)

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

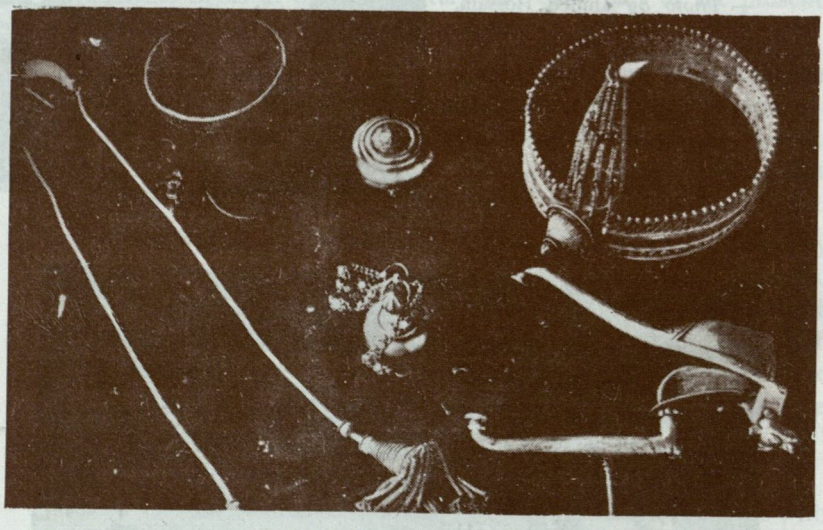


The Khasi male dress has almost completely changed. Nowadays in order to see the full Khasi regalia, one has to visit a few ceremonial gatherings like the Khasi national dances. In the photo, the Khasi male dancers in the foreground in *dhoti* and turban are wearing the sleeveless coats called *jymphong* with fringes at the bottom.

—Photo by Ahmed Hossain.

Samples of Khasi ornaments from Nongkrem.

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.



(1) On the right (top) is a silver crown called *Ka Pansngiat.*

(2) In the middle (top) is *Dong Kwai* for keeping betel nuts.

(3) On the left (top) is *Dong Tympew* for keeping betel leaves

(4) On the right (bottom) is *Ka Khylliat Kwai* used for crushing betel nut and betel leaf mixed with lime for old people without teeth.

(5) In the middle is *Ka Shanam* for carrying lime. It is made in two separate parts held together by a chain.

(6) On the extreme left is *Sai Khyllong,* a tiara used during dance.

(Through courtesy of U Kynpham Singh.)

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

> Dance is described as a slow ungraceful motion, the women being tightly swathed in clothes'.

Next, we may take note of Robinson's account of a ceremonial occasion:

> 'On these occasions the people are dressed in their best richly embroidered outer shirts of broad cloth, silk turbans and *dhotis*, large bangles, heavy silver chains, gold necklaces, plumes of down or peacock feathers and ornamented quivers'.

It is strange again that neither Hooker nor Robinson noted about the heavy necklaces of large round coral beads which both men and women wore on ceremonial occasions such as dancing. Robinson did not describe the ordinary working dress of Khasi men and women. His description concerned the ceremonial costume only. Consider, for instance, the following description:

> 'In the dances the maidens in the centre of the group, in lines of two or three, (are) set to each other with eyes demurely cast on the earth. They too are in their best array, having on their heads circlets of silver, with a tall spearhead-like ornament rising behind. They are swaddled in long petticoats, with an upper garment passing lightly under the right arm and tied in a knot on the right shoulder' (Robinson 1841).

Incidentally, Robinson described the Khasi dance in a few lines which hold some interest at this distance of time:

> 'The dancers are both men and women; of the latter only such as are unmarried or widows. These dance, or rather hop, in an inner, while men form an outer circle and display all sorts of gesticulation, but keeping good time with music. Sword exercise is also common on such occasions . . . .' (Ibid).

Gurdon was possibly the first writer who described both the traditional and modern dress of the Khasis elaborately. The traditional item of the Khasi male dress, according to Gurdon, consisted of the sleeveless coat, called *jymphong,* with a fringe at the bottom and with a row of tassels across the chest. It left the neck and arms bare, and was fastened 'by frogs in front'. This author has to admit that he has not seen this item of traditional dress and it

must have gone out of fashion very long ago, at least in urban areas like Shillong.[25]

Gurdon, however, noted that, at the time his book was written, this sleeveless coat was still being worn 'by many Syntengs and by the Bhois and Lynngams'. For nether garment, the Khasis wore a waist cloth or *dhoti* tucked in between the legs with one end hanging in front 'like a small apron'. The other item of the dress was a cap with ear-flaps for the head. The Syntengs, we are told, wore a different kind of high-peaked cap without ear-flaps.[26] The elderly people, possibly in keeping with their age, favoured a large white turban fastened tightly round the head. The old traditional fashion in dress, as we have already observed, as changed almost completely, and has given way to the new style which is becoming popular with the younger generation everywhere both in the hills and plains. The new dress of course consists of trousers, shirt and coat of European style. The Khasi young men, particularly in urban areas, like to dress well and they are seen in their best form, complete with necktie, on Sundays, when they go out for stroll in large numbers or visiting friends and relatives. The social bond amongst the Khasis is still very strong and this trait happily has not suffered due to modernization. Visiting restaurants and eating houses is, however, becoming a new craze with young boys and girls.

The ethnology of the Khasi traditional dress might have been an interesting subject to write on with knowledge. The present author, however, lacks this knowledge. No author as far is known to have seriously attempted an explanation of the original source of the Khasi traditional dress. The sleeveless frock coat which they used to wear is an item of dress which is found among many tribes along the eastern Himalayan belt. The Adis and Mishmis of Arunachal Pradesh, for instance, still wear a kind of frock coat. This sleeveless garment remains open in front, and is sometimes fastened by extraneous aid like tassels or frogs. According to Gurdon, the Khasis used this coat

[25] This garment mentioned by Gurdon is still worn during the dances.

[26] The informed source of the author notes as follows: 'The peaked cap worn by the 'Syntengs' is still popular in the rural areas and may reasonably be expected to displace the costly turban. Some encouragement is given by cultural groups to popularize the item'.

in common with the Mikirs and certain eastern Naga tribes. But, as we have noted, variations of this frock coat are found among many other people. The famous Russian ethnologist, Shirokogorov, believed that this curious garment 'reminiscent of a frock coat' had at one time a very wide distribution. The Tungus of the Siberian *taiga* wear or used to wear it in earlier times. The presence of this light garment in the extreme climate of the far north might seem out of place unless it is assumed that this dress originated in a warmer climate of the south.[27] Shirokogorov came to the conclusion that this dress was retained because it facilitated quick movements for fast moving nomadic tribes. While, therefore, a common origin of the frock coat can not be ruled out, no definite conclusions, however, can be derived from this for its migration or distribution over wide areas of the globe.

The Khasi female dress is very peculiarly their own and cannot be related to any neighbouring people except for the one-time footless cloth gaiter which the Khasi women shared with the Palaungs of Burma.[28] The cloth gaiter can still be seen among some tribes of Arunachal Pradesh, particularly the Akas. Gurdon was right in saying that the Khasi women might almost be described as 'excessively dressed'. The inner garment, called *ka jympien* was a piece of cloth swathed round the body, kept in place by a kind of cloth belt, and the end of it came down to the knees. This had long back completely given place to the chemise which has been universally adopted. Over this is worn a short coat usually with long sleeves. Different shades of a velvety stuff was once preferred for this coat. Other items of the dress still hold their ground. The first is *ka jainsem.* This drops loosely down from the shoulders to a little above the ankles. The ends are knotted crosswise over both the shoulders. The fashionable young girls at present wear it much higher, a little below the knees. Instead of the old loose style, the young girls keep it tight to their body so that from a distance it gives the impression of a skirt. In olden days, *muga* silk was much in favour for *ka jainsem* among well-to-do people. Over the *jainsem* another wear, called *ka jain kup,* is worn. This is thrown over the shoulders like

[27] Ivar, Lissner: *Man, God and Magic* (1961).

[28] The local name of the gaiter is 'sopjat'.

a cloak, two ends being knotted in front. It covers the entire back and sides, suspending a little over the ankles. Very becoming colours, usually light grey, or some pleasing chequer patterns, are chosen for this cloak-like garment. Young girls of fashion appear to have discarded this item of the dress. Depending on the time of the year, they would rather wear a cardigan over the *jainsem*. Elderly women still wear another piece of cloth called *ka tap-mohkhlieh*. This is a short wear for the head and the shoulders kept in place by tying two ends loosely below the jaws. This might be described as a head wrapper. Elderly women still prefer to cover their heads. In olden days, both Khasi men and women were seldom without their haversacks for carrying odds and ends and their constant provision of pan leaves, betel-nut and lime. In case of women, it was kept completely concealed within the folds of the *jainsem*.

Gurdon noted slight variations of the dress or the manner of wearing it among various branches of the Khasis like the Pnars, Wars and Lynngams. The stress is now on uniformity and we, therefore, need not go into the details of the variations here. The Khasi women always had an eye for matching colours. With the coming of new fashion, young girls now often prefer rather loud colours and intricate floral designs.[29]

MEGALITHIC CULTURE

Most of the early writers who wrote about the Khasis and their land remarked on the curious monolithic stone structures which abound everywhere. These monumental structures dotted the landscape and marked the sky-line wherever they went in the hills. All of them came to the conclusion that these were memorial stones raised by the Khasis in honour of their dead. Gurdon observed much later that the Khasis shared this custom of putting up 'memorial stones' with the Mikirs, certain Eastern Naga Tribes and Ho-Mundas of Chota Nagpur. In fact, however, these so-called memorial stone structures have an inter-continental character and their distribution can be traced right from Europe through Asia and Africa to Pacific Islands as far east as the Easter Island and Eastern Carolinas. We

[29] Why modern girls prefer material with loud designs may be due to the fact that they are also less costly ?

shall have to deal with the nature and purpose of the Khasi memorial stones or monolithic structures in a separate chapter on their religion and eschatology. Here we shall, therefore, content ourselves with drawing the attention of our readers to the description of stone structures or monoliths left by early writers who were forcibly struck by their sometimes stupendous size recalling Stonehenge in the south of England and similar structures in Brittany. It may be profitable to preface this account with a brief discussion of the views of ethnologists and archaeologists on the existence of this curious human phenomenon. Set against this background, it will be possible to see that the Khasi megalithic culture is not an isolated anthropological curiosity, but has its link with a world-wide cultural and human movement.

We have been told that the term 'megalithic' to denote these stone structures was formally adopted at a meeting of the Congress of Anthropology and Prehistoric Archaeology in 1867.[30] It is not strange, therefore, that Hooker, who was writing in 1854, did not use the term in describing the Khasi stone structures. Some ethnologists and archaeologists subscribed to the theory that the megalithic culture had a common origin in the stone ages. It was carried to Asia by two branches of the Western Caucasians, one of which reached the uppermost confines of the continent, passing from Europe through Mongolia to Korea and Japan, the other from North Africa through Irania to India and Indo-China. Some of the northern branch, all dolmen and megalith builders, passed from Japan to Micronesia where they joined hands with those of the southern branch who ranged from Indo-China southwards to Malaysia and thence eastwards to Polynesia.[31] The existence of these astonishing 'marais' and other monolithic structures in vastly separated parts of the globe was thus sought to be explained.

When these stone structures, made of large undressed stone blocks, appearing in different remote corners of the world, first attracted the attention of the ethnologists and archaeologists in the 17th and

[30] Hasting's *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. I, pp. 688 (Edition 1971).

[31] Hasting's *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, Vol. II, pp. 236.

18th centuries, it was assumed that they were of 'Celtic' or 'Druidic' origin. This idea persisted for a long time as would be evident from the fact that the terms for different types of these monolithic structures such as 'menhir' and 'dolmen' were derived from 'Celtic' or 'Druidic' names. As we shall see later, Sir Hooker when he first noticed the Khasi megalithic structures, he was at once reminded of Stonehenge in the south of England, attributed to the Druids. One gets the impression that Hooker even noticed some similarity between the Druidical name 'maen' for stone and the Khasi term 'maw'. This Celtic attribution of the origin of megaliths was later given up. 'The Semites were among the most assiduous raisers of 'pillars' in the ancient world . . . . The erection of large stones as memorials is frequently referred to in OT (Old Testament)— more frequently as memorials of events than of 'individuals".[32]

Megaliths have been classified into two main divisions, namely non-constructional and constructional respectively. The first kind refer to stones set on end, either singly or in groups, showing no particular architectural skill than required for erecting them. The second comprises all monuments 'in which heavy stones are built one over the other'. This type naturally requires no small amount of ingenuity on the part of their builders. We shall see that both these types are present in the Khasi hills.

Altogether six kinds of megalithic structures have been noted in different parts of the world. They are as follows:

(1) *Standing stones or 'menhirs':* These are undressed blocks of stones set up on end. The height may range from 2 or 3 feet up to nearly 70. These are non-constructional and the simplest form of monuments. This type is very common in the Khasi hills. The tallest monolith at Nartiang in Jaintia hills is 27 feet high and 2½ feet in thickness.

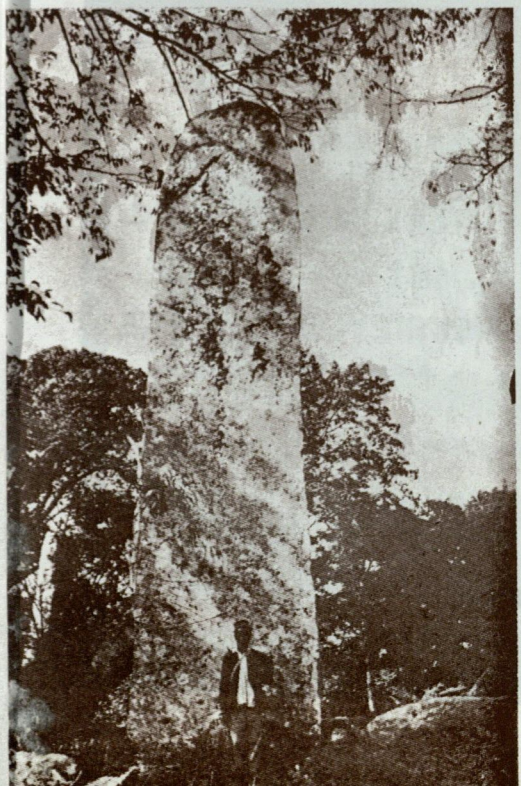
(2) *Alignment:* These consist of standing stones in straight lines. They may be of any number, from a single line of two to 1120 stones found at Carnac in Brittany, arranged in three groups. In Khasi hills, alignments consist of single lines of 3, 5, 7, 9 or even, in an exceptional case, 11 upright stones with flat table-stones in front

[32]Hasting's *Encyclopaedia of Religions & Ethics*, Vol. XI, pp. 877.

The common simple alignment of monoliths in the Khasi Hills. The standing stones or menhirs are called *maw-shynrang* in Khasi meaning male stones and the flat stones or *dolmen* are called *maw-kynthei* meaning female stones. These are 'memorial stones' raised in honour of dead ancestors and ancestresses.

At one time it was wrongly assumed that such stone megaliths were of 'Celtic' or Druidic' origin. In fact, these memorial stones have an inter-continental character and can be traced right from Europe to Easter Island and Eastern Carolinas.

—Photo by Abhijit Choudhury.



The tallest monolith at Nartiang in Jaintia Hills, measuring 27 feet high and $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet in thickness.

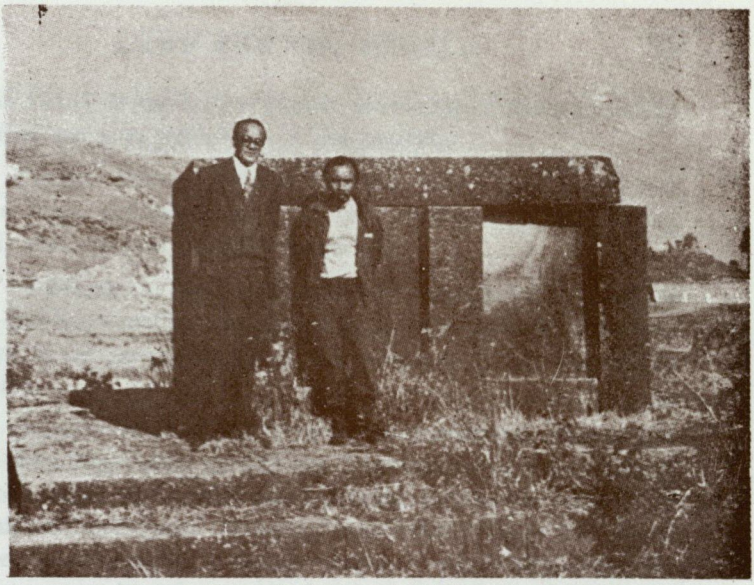
— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

More megaliths typical of the Khasi Hills.
—Photo by Ahmed Hossain.

Memorial plaque on monoliths raised in honour of Jaintia Kings and the legendary hero Mar Phalanki. Obviously this is a modern innovation.

The readers may refer to the legend about Mar Phalanki at pages 56-57. The legend of Mar Phalanki seems to confirm the belief that megalithic structures might originally have had religious associations in the Khasi Hills as well; at least it might have been so in case of megalithic structures associated with old market-places.

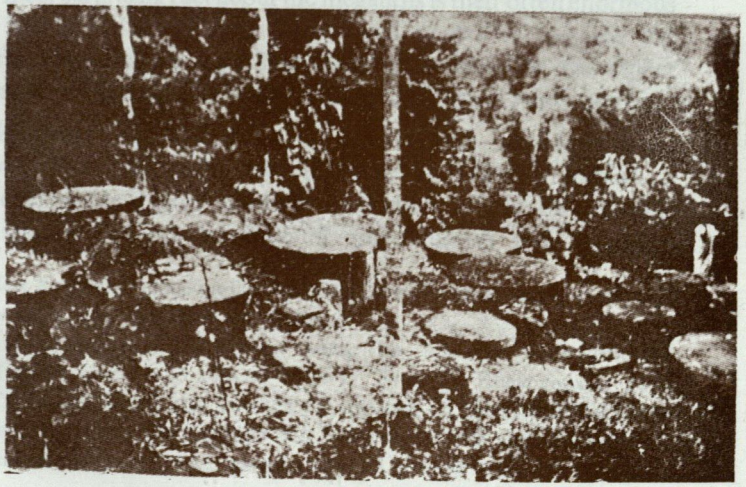
—Photo by Ahmed Hossain.



A *cristvaen* (Welsh: 'stone-coffer') called *mawshyieng* in Khasi (Lit. bone stone) at Pomsohmen in lower Cherrapunji.

On getting a clue from his informed source, the author made a trip to Pomsohmen, accompanied by his nephew Abhijit. In the photo the author (left) is seen in front of the cristvaen with Benedict Nongkynrih himself very sincerely interested in Khasi culture.

—Photo by Abhijit Choudhury.



The author obtained the above photograph of rather curious cylindrical *mawshyiengs* at Nongjri from U Kynpham Singh.

— *Rephotographed by* Ahmed Hossain.

(Gurdon 1914). It may appear that the peculiarity of Khasi monoliths is that they are arranged always in odd numbers.

(3) *Circles:* These consist of standing stones arranged in one or more rings, circular or oval. Circular arrangement of standing stones is also reported from the Khasi hills.

(4) *Trilithons:* In these monuments two stones on end support a third, laid horizontally across their tops like the lintel of a doorway. We have so far no knowledge of the existence of this type in the Khasi hills.

(5) *Dolmen:* In a dolmen three or more stones on end support one or more large slabs (called the 'cap-stones' or table-stones) lying horizontally upon their tops. Dolmen derives its name from the Druidical 'taol-mean' meaning 'stone table'. These flat stones are called *maw-kynthei* or female stones in Khasi hills while the upright stones are known as *maw-shynrang*, ie. male stones (Gurdon 1914).[33]

(6) *Cristvaens* (Welsh 'Stone-Coffer') are actually dolmens built of roughly squared slabs rather than blocks of stones, fitted closely together, leaving the chamber within less open than in the case of ordinary dolmen. They are of smaller size than average dolmens. It is not known again whether this type occurs in Khasi hills.[34]

The most surprising fact about the megaliths is their often enormous weight. The erection of these huge stone structures required the co-operation of many people. The observation made on this aspect of the matter in Hasting's *Encyclopaedia of Religion* is worth quoting:

> 'However the difficulties of construction may have been overcome, the existence of these monuments implies a considerable degree of social organization on the part of their builders. The co-operation of great number was necessary

[33] 'Maw Kyntheis' represent the mothers of the particular family concerned and 'maw shynrangs' represent the uncles.

[34] This impression of the present author has, however, been corrected by his informed source who adds as follows: 'There are Khasi counter-parts of the 'Cristvaens' which may be seen for instance on the footpath between Pomsohmen (in lower Cherrapunji) and Sohra Bazar and also at Mawmluh. These are used as ossuaries or 'mawshyieng'' (Lit. bone stones).

> to transport and to deal with the blocks, and some compelling power must have existed to secure such co-operation—whether the external pressure of a despotic chief or medicine-man, or more subtle influence of loyalty to common tribal interests'.

The Khasis, we have already observed, never owed allegiance to a common despotic chief. They had many chiefs, called *Syiems*, whose nominations had to be confirmed by some sort of electoral colleges. It may be asked, therefore, what was the compelling force which secured the co-operation of people in the preparation and erection of megalithic structures in case of the Khasis. The hypothetical pressure of 'a despotic chief' was not present in their society as far as it could be ascertained. The last of the alternatives mentioned in the above quotation could possibly be postulated for the Khasis who were guided by strong loyalty to a common belief. It was very likely the compelling and subtle influence of the reverence they felt towards their ancestors in whose memory the stone structures were erected.[35] This was obvious from the names they often gave to these megalithic stones. We shall have more to say on this point later under the chapter on religion.

The originally religious associations of the megalithic structures cannot be ruled out in the case of the Khasis though they are now supposed to represent their ancestors. At least it appears to be true of the megaliths commonly seen in old market places throughout the Khasi hills. Any visitor to the Bara Bazar at Shillong could not have failed to notice them. A note given to this author by I. M. Simon on this point is quoted below:

> 'Old market-places in the Khasi-Jaintia hills apparently had religious associations as evidenced by the megaliths set up therein. Their removal would apparently mean the close of the market-place if the legend of the Jaintia man of strength, U Mar Phalyngki, is any guide. This man had been entrusted by the Jaintia King, Ram Singh II (ca 1790) with the task of constructing a road and bridges to connect Jaintiapur with the King's summer residence at Nartiang. Nartiang had no market-place at that time but Raliang, the native village of

[35] Many of the dolmens are really family memorials.

U Mar Phalyngki's wife, had. Once, after a visit to his wife, this man wanted to return to Nartiang but as there was a very heavy downpour, he asked for a rain-shield. In fun, his mother-in-law asked him to take the large slab at the Raliang market-place and use it as his rain-shield. U Mar Phalyngki took her at her word and lifted up the stone, taking it all the way to Nartiang where he deposited it. As a result, the market-place ceased to be at Raliang and has since been held at Nartiang instead.'[36]

The purpose of the erection of rude stone monuments was originally religious wherever they existed, for the memorial stones were after all some kind of shrines to the ghosts of deceased chiefs or ancestors. It has also been supposed that many of the menhirs were actually figures of deities. This was however, not so with the Khasis.

With the background of above knowledge, we may now note how early writers viewed the Khasi megalithic structures. Let us quote from Hooker first at some length:

'Nurtiung (Nartiang) contains a most remarkable collection of those sepulchral and other monuments, which forms so curious a feature in the scenery of the mountains and in the habits of their . . . population. They are all placed in a fine grove of trees, occupying a hollow, where several acres are covered with gigantic, generally circular slabs of stone, from ten to twentyfive feet broad, supported five feet above the ground upon other blocks. For the most part they are buried in brushwood of nettles and shrubs, but in one place there is an open area of fifty yards encircled by them, each with a gigantic headstone behind it' (Hooker 1854).

In the first part of Hooker's description, the circular slabs of stone corresponded to dolmen type of structures listed above. It is interesting to note also that, at least in one place, the arrangement of menhirs and dolmens recalled the circular alignment found in other parts of the world.

[36] Incidentally, a point of interest here is the confirmation which the legend seems to lend to the existing view that in ancient time the Khasi husbands were only periodical visitors to their wives. They continued to live in their natal houses.

Hooker gave the measurement of the tallest standing stone or menhir at Nartiang as nearly thirty feet high, six feet broad and two feet eight inches in thickness, and must have been sunk at least five feet or more in the ground to keep it in position.[37] Hooker's conjecture about the construction or splitting of large stone slabs to desired size and shape is worth quoting:

> 'The flat stones were generally of slate or hornstone; but many of them, and all the larger ones, were of synitic granite, split by heat and cold water with great art' (Ibid).

Hooker thought that the purpose of these curious stone structures was partly religious as they were located in groves of trees regarded as sacred by the Khasis. He also conjectured that the upright stones were erected generally to mark great events and sometimes as memorials. He also correctly supposed that ashes of dead men were not necessarily buried or deposited in the hollow stone sarcophagi near them.

As an instance of the constructional type of megalithic structures already referred to by us above, Mr. (Later Sir) Yule reported to Hooker of one thirty two feet by fifteen, and two in thickness, and stated that the sarcophagi, though a rare type, consisted of four slabs. Yule was reminded of a drawing in Bell's *Circassia,* and descriptions in Irby or Mangle's *Travels in Syria.* We have already noted that the Semites were great builders of monoliths since the time of the Old Testament. In the same category of constructional type, we may also, perhaps, refer to many monolithic stone bridges, sometimes of great length and made up of different parts, which can still be seen in many places in the Khasi and Jaintia hills. It was J. H. Hutton who first drew attention to these monolithic structures.[38]

It was Yule again who drew the attention of Hooker to the fact that many place names in the Khasi hills were derived from the existence of megalithic stones. 'Mau' (Maw) in Khasi signifies stone, The name 'Mausmai' (Mawsmai) is after 'the stone of oath'. According

[37] Some of the megaliths at Nartiang collapsed in the earthquake of 1897.

[38] One can be seen in south Jaintia hills over the Amwi. One of the two slabs spanning the stream collapsed probably in 1897. Another at Mawpun-Ka-Rtiang (on the way to Mawsmai) has also collapsed.

to Yule's native informant, 'there was a war between Churra (Cherra) and Mausmai (Mawsmai), and when they made up peace, they swore to it, and placed a stone as a witness'. Here we clearly get an example of a megalith raised to mark an event in the life of the people of two different states. Hooker observed that this forcibly recalled the stone pillar set up by Jacob as stated in the Old Testament. 'Mamloo' (Mawmluh) derived its name from 'the stone of salt', eating salt from a sword's point being the Khasi form of oath. This stone also seems to recall an historic event. 'Mauflong' (Mawphlang), it was reported by Yule, was so called after 'the grassy stone'.[39] The purpose of this stone megalith is not very obvious. Hooker also incidentally reported having crossed a stream, while returning from the Nartiang grove, 'by single squared block, twenty-eight feet long, five broad, and two thick, of gray Syenitic granite with large crystals of felspar'. It was obviously a simple type of one stone megalithic bridge. But J. H. Hutton reported about more complicated and constructional type of megalithic bridges made up of several stone blocks.

The Khasi megalithic monuments and flat stones naturally reminded Hooker of traces of similar but more gigantic megalithic structures in England and their Druidical association. He was, therefore, tempted to draw an analogy and his remarks are highly illuminating:

> 'Analogous combinations occur in the south of England and in Brittany, etc., where similar structures are found. Thus *maen, man,* or *men* is the so-called Druidical name for a stone, whence *Pen-maen-mawr,* for the 'the hill of the big stone', Maenhayr, for the standing stones of Brittany, and Dol-men, 'the table-stone' for a cromlech' (Ibid).

We may now pass on to the description of Khasi stone monuments left by Dalton in his *'Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal'* (1872) (though he was only writing from reports):

> 'To the peculiar aspect of the Khasi hills from physical conformation and natural features must be added the

[39] The author's informed source remarks as follows: 'I do not know if all the place names with 'Maw' prefix are all after ceremonial erections. 'Mawlong' for instance means 'boulder': 'Mawshamok' nearby means 'flint'. In such cases 'Maw' may simply indicate a distinctive stone landmark.

> various monumental stones that give a marked character to the scenery. These are of several kinds but most of them, says Colonel Yule, recall strongly those mysterious solitary or clustered monuments of unknown origin, so long the puzzle and delight of antiquaries, which abound in our native country, and are seen here and there in all parts of Europe and western Asia.'

Dalton then proceeded to compare the stonehenge-like structures found in the Nilgiris with the Khasi monuments and he also conceived some connection between the 'Kasias' (Khasis) and the Hos of Singbhum, and the Munda race, generally of the Chota Nagpur province, from the similitude of custom in raising stone memorials to their dead ancestors. He also noted that very similar forms of upright stones and flat circular slabs, supported on very short pillars, as if meant for stools to sit on, were found in and about every Ho village. Basing on the reports of Yule, Dalton noted that the round flat stones, resting the heads of so many pillars, were actually sarcophagi or cineraries, sometimes placed so close together that one could step from one to the other. He then remarked that he noticed the precisely similar arrangement of flat stones in an old Ho village and on deserted sites of Mundari villages. The upright pillars were regarded by him, as by Yule, as merely cenotaphs. Dalton's concluding remarks are interesting:

> 'If you ask a Kasia why their ancestor went to the trouble of erecting them, the answer is 'to preserve their names'. The Ho gives precisely the same answer when asked the object of the pillars set up by the village wayside.

Waddell (1901) did not elaborate on the Khasi stone monuments, but treated the subject in a short passage. We may as well quote him:

> 'One of their striking customs is the erection of monumental slabs of stone to commemorate great events, including the death of their chiefs. Thus on their hill sides may be seen *rows and circles of tall slabs* (Italics ours) like a miniature stonehenge; and from this funereal custom Colonel Dalton believed that they were allied to the Dravidians'.

The interesting points of Waddell's description are the confirmation that, among other reasons, the Khasis put up stone

monuments to mark some passing historical events and that the arrangement of stone monuments corresponded both to single line alignments and the circular form.

Before we close this section, we may also incidentally refer to Sankalia (1962) who noted that the district of Quetta in Baluchistan was extensively inhabited by an ancient tribe some 5,500 years ago and that the curious structures which abounded in the region and the present Indo-Pakistan border were megaliths resembling 'avenues' and the like.

ARTS & CRAFTS

An idea had gained ground and influenced many writers to the effect that the Khasis were deficient in all kinds of arts and crafts. Even in a very recent article in a journal, a sweeping statement has been made that the Khasis never wove, nor did they sculpt nor paint. They might not have practised the plastic arts, but there can be no doubt that they did weave, though perhaps not very extensively. The source of the wrong impression can be traced to Dalton's statement in his *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872) as follows:

> 'They (Khasis) are, however, rather lazy, and have made small progress in the arts. They are unacquainted with weaving, and although affecting a peculiar style of dress, it is all made for them by other tribes'.

Dalton's statement was repeated by Waddell (1901) without caring to verify the fact. He was, besides, expressing his ignorant prejudice when he wrote as below:

> 'They (Khasis) were in a very primitive state until lately and unacquainted with the art of weaving; and they still practise the maternal form of inheritance . . . . .'

We have stated in the beginning of this chapter that the Khasis already had their organized chieftainship, powerful principalities which maintained diplomatic contact with the Ahoms of the Brahmaputra valley, and followed their own distinctive statecraft of a republican nature. They succeeded in extending their hegemony over wide areas of the plains both in the Surma and Brahmaputra valleys. It was only a height of prejudice and racial arrogance to have depicted them as being in a particularly primitive state. The nature of their

terrain, the largely barren uplands, was possibly not particularly suitable for the practice of many arts. But they did know weaving. It was for Gurdon, who had better knowledge of the people and the country, to contradict both Dalton and Waddell. He wrote:

> 'The Khasis are said by Col. Waddell to be unacquainted with the art of weaving; but the fact that a considerable weaving industry exists amongst the Khyrwang villages of the Syntengs, and at Mynso and Suhtnga (Sutnga) has been overlooked by him. The Khyrwangs weave a special pattern of cotton and silk cloth striped red and white. In Mynso and Suhtnga (Sutnga) similar cloths are woven, also the sleeveless coat. In the former days this industry is said to have been considerable, but it has been displaced to a large extent of late years by Manchester piece goods. The number of weavers returned at the last Census in the district was 533. The Khasis and Mikirs of the low country, or Bhois as they are called, weave cotton cloths which they dye with the leaves of a plant called *U noli*. This is perhaps the wild indigo, or *ram* of the Shan settlers in the Assam valley. The weavers are almost always females' (Gurdon 1914).

In a letter to the Editor of the 'Bengalee', published in 'U Khasi Mynta', Risaw 1902,[40] corresponding to 24th September 1902, a year after Waddell's book was published, Hormu Rai Diengdoh gave an inventory of things produced by the Khasis:[41]

> 'The Khasis had a very big trade or business in quarrying ore and they had many smelteries all over the hills. They manufactured guns or cannons big and small and other instruments for warfare. All implements as hoes, daos, axes, wedges, hammers etc, were manufactured and exported to the plain Districts surrounding the Khasi Hills. In old days the trade in metals exported from our Hills was very great and now-a-days it has almost been in extinction when the cheap metal or iron from England has been imported. The cotton cloths and earea or silk Clothes also were woven by

[40] *Ka Jingsdang Ki Skul Ha Ri Khasi* by U Kynpham Singh (1969).

[41] The author's informed source notes as follows: 'Risaw' is actually October. Probably 24.9.1902 is the publication date of the October issue.

themselves for their local and common use. But valuable cloths were received from Kashmire, Burma, China'.

In the above quotation, we notice a clear reference to indigenous weaving industry, though perhaps practised in a limited scale for common use. We shall turn to iron implements manufactured by the Khasis further on. Before that, let us consider the following extract from the 'Proceedings of the Chief Commissioner of Assam in the Revenue Department, No. 928, dated Shillong, the 17th July 1884':

> 'An excellent collection of agricultural implements, domestic utensils, *clothing* (Italics ours), machines used in domestic manufactures, and other objects illustrative of the mode of life of the Khasis and Santengs (Syntengs), was made by Babu Jiban Rai for the ethnological department of the Calcutta Exhibition, and a *number of cloths of silk and cotton* (Italics ours), together with samples of the gold and silver jewellery of the Khasis, were purchased by Provincial fund for the embellishment of the Assam Court.'[42].

Thus there are evidence on all hands that various arts and crafts, including weaving, were practised by the Khasis since time immemorial.

Basketry, based on bamboo and cane, is another industry which has considerable vogue throughout the Khasi and Jaintia hills. We have noticed that Khasis distinguish at least fourteen varieties of bamboo in their hills. There are different kinds of basket *(ki khoh),* as well as of different sizes and shapes. But generally they all conform to the conical shape, broad and round at the top, narrowing gradually to a point at the bottom.[43] These are carried on the back, suspended

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[42] *Ka Jingim U Babu Jeebon Roy* by U Kynpham Singh (1972).

[43] This author is obliged to his informed source for the following information:

'Khoh' is actually a carrying basket of conical shape. Other baskets for storage etc. are called *'shang'*. Others include:

(1) *Khoh lyndung*— a basket with a rounded base used for measuring coal etc.

(2) *Kriah*— a storage basket with wide interstices.

(3) *Prah*— a threshing or winnowing tray like basket.

(4) *Pdung*— a flat circular basket used for sifting or drying grain etc.

(5) *Trop*— a basket with a lid (4 legs) used for portage.

(6) *Thiar*— a grain storing basket of large size.

by a cane headstrap[44] across the forehead. A special kind of basket *(trop)*, woven out of cane or bamboo, and with a cover, is also known. This has its special utility in long journeys. There are different sizes to it. Wooden mortars and pestles[45] for husking paddy are also locally manufactured up in the hills. Winnowing fans *(prah)* and sieve *(pdung)* for sifting husked rice are fashioned out of bamboo and cane. Sleeping mats *(shylliah* or *tlieng)* were once universal. They have their use still in rural areas, and are widely used as coverings for floors in urban areas. Rain shield, fashioned out of plaited bamboo and cane, is a speciality of the Khasi hills. This is called *Ka knup*[46] and no Khasi house is without it. A small sized shield of the same general pattern is used for protection against the sun and similar shield of very fine workmanship is sometimes used merely for show. The present author, as a boy, used to notice even well-to-do and fashionable ladies sporting such shields over the heads, just as venerable elderly men carried their silk turbans. This has almost gone out of fashion, having been replaced by the umbrella. But *Ka knup* must have its use still in rural areas in the interior. Circular receptacles of various sizes, from very large to small, are still manufactured out of plaited bamboo and cane for strong paddy, and are useful to farmers.

Sir Hooker, otherwise an acute observer, had very little to say on the indigenous crafts of the Khasis:

> 'All their materials are brought from Assam; the only articles, in constant use, of their manufacture, being a rude sword or knife with a wooden handle and a long, narrow, straight blade of iron, and baskets with headstraps, like those used by the Lepchas, but much neater, also a netted bag of pine-apple fibre (said to come from Silhet) which hold a clasp-knife, comb, flints, steel, and betel-nut box . . . . Besides the swords I have described, they carry bows and arrows, rare a lance, and bamboo wicker-work shield' (Hooker 1854).

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[44] The head strap is called *'U star'*.

[45] Mortar is *thlong & pestle synrei.*

[46] The informed source of the author adds:

'A circular rain shield is called *'trap'*. The large rain shield (tortoise-shell like) is called *'nup-bah' (nup* = short for *knup)* or *'knup-bah'*.

The craft of basketry, based on bamboo and cane, is widespread in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Articles of daily use are woven by expert fingers.

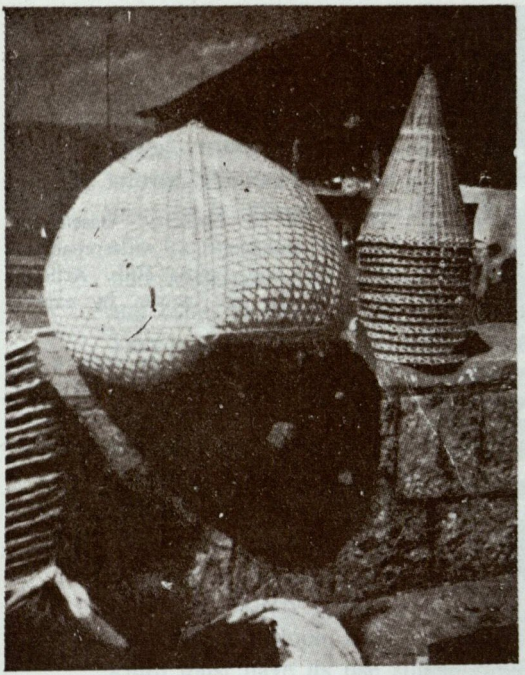
The photo shows a *trop* with a lid (standing on four legs) used for portage. This is fast becoming obsolete.

— *Photo by* Abhijit Choudhury.

The common type of carrying basket of conical shape is called *Ka Khoh*. Other baskets for storage etc. are called *shang*.

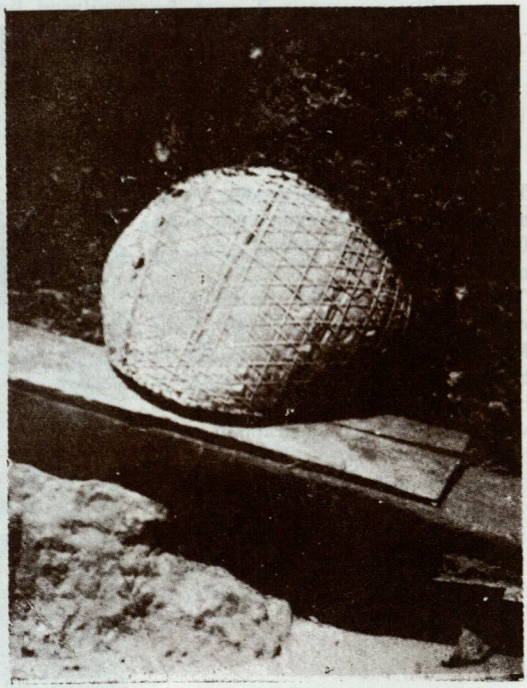
The head strap around the *Ka Khoh* on the left is known as *U Star*. The *Ka Khoh* on the right with wide interstices is usually used for carrying betel leaves. This type of basket is very common at Cherrapunji and outlying areas.

— *Photo by* Abhijit Choudhury.



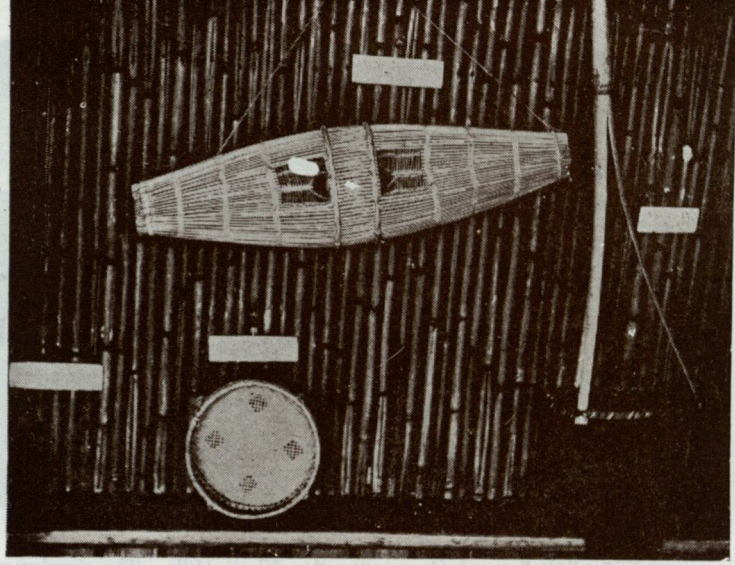
The tortoise-shell like rain shield on the left is called *nup-bah ('nup*—short for *knup*) or *knup-bah*. On the right are the common *Ki* (plural of female article *Ka*) *khoh* (*Ki khoh*).
The tortoise-shell like rain shield or *'nup-bah*, which conveniently covers the whole backside of the body, still has great vogue among working people.

— *Photo by* Abhijit Choudhury.



A different and rather uncommon type of rain shield, called *Ka 'Rap* dong (*'Rap*—short for *Trap*) which comes from the Suktia village on the southern slope of the Khasi Hills.

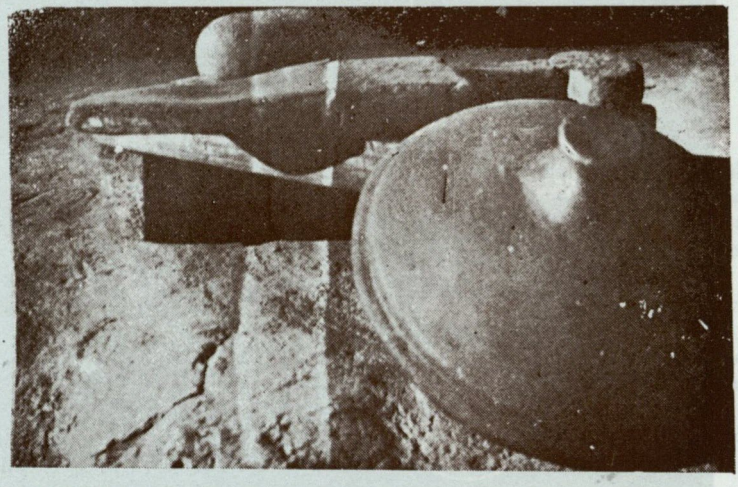
— *Photo by* Abhijit Choudhury.



In the middle (top) is a Jaintia fishing trap.
On the right a Jaintia hand fishing net.
At the bottom (left) is a Khasi basket for betel nuts and betel leaves.
(Through courtesy of Meghalaya State Museum.)
—Photo by Ahmed Hossain.

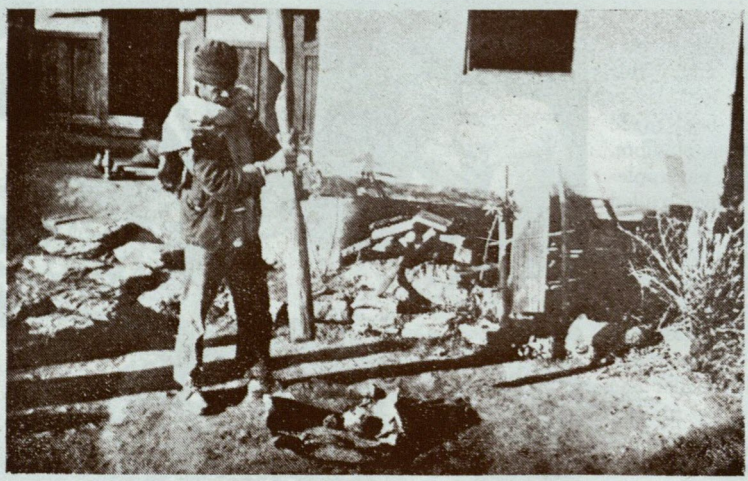
In the foreground of this photograph is a 'netted bag' made of pineapple-fibre. The pineapple-fibre bags, called *iarong* in Khasi, are of two sizes. The larger one is used for carrying betel nuts as seen in this photograph. The smaller bag has its use for carrying the constant personal provision of betel nuts, pan leaves, and metal lime box called *ka shanam* which a Khasi cannot go without. But these are likely to be replaced by cheaper nylon bags in not too distant future. This photograph was taken at Cherra bazar.

—Photo by Abhijit Choudhury



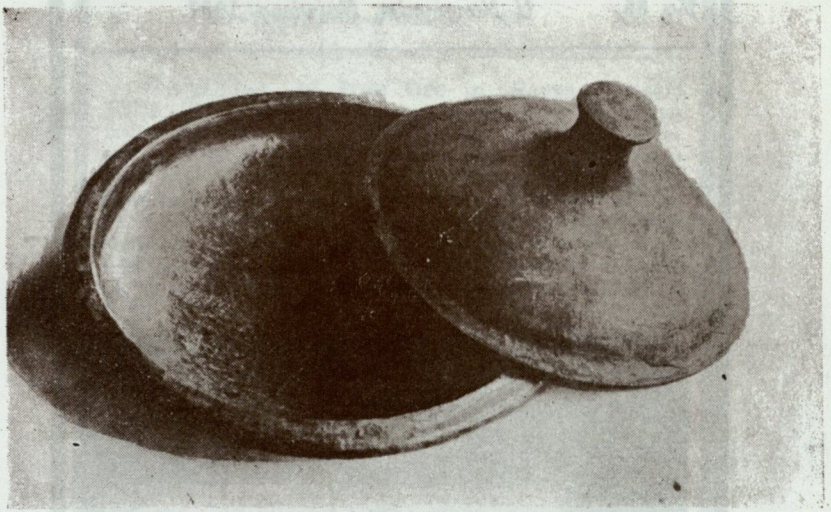
Larnai Pottery.
(The potter's wheel was unknown in the Khasi Hills. The implements used are:
(1) A semi-round stone known as *Maw-Soh-Sdiep*.
(2) A wooden beater or triangle.
A finished lid is shown in the photograph. The craft is on the way out. There are only six families now left at Larnai in Jaintia Hills still carrying on the traditional craft.)

— *Photo by* Abhijit Choudhury.
(Through courtesy of Dr S. N. Rao, Head, Dept. of History, NEHU.)



A potter demonstrates how earth is pounded on a leather mat prior to its being kneaded into clay duff. Two kinds of clay are used: (1) *'dew-iong* (of a dark blue colour) and (2) *'dew khluid* (of greyish colour).
(Through courtesy of Dr S. N. Rao.)

— *Photo by* Abhijit Choudhury.



Larnai pottery for cooking rice pancakes called *Kpu Tharo.*
(Through courtesy of Meghalaya State Museum.)
— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

Distilling Equipments (Khasi and Jaintia Hills).
On two sides are dried gourd bottles which serve as containers.
(Through courtesy of Meghalaya State Museum.)
— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

IRON

Sources whence Derived.

The Smelting of iron ore is a process which has been brought to the highest degree of perfection in this country : it is, therefore, interesting to notice the more primitive and ancient method of reducing iron ore to the metallic state, such as that illustrated in Fig. 515, and carried on by the natives in India.

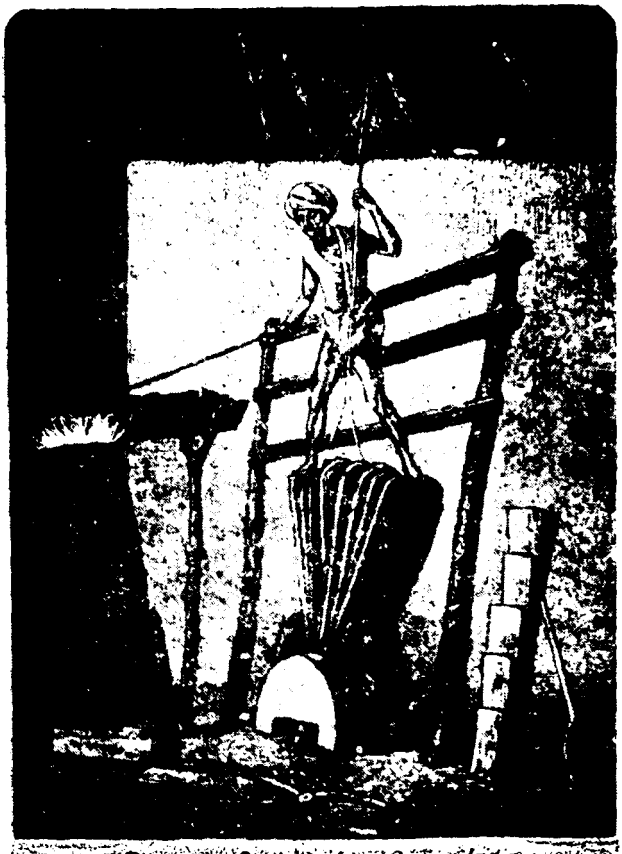


FIG. 515.—*Smelting Iron Ore in India.*

'The smelting of iron was once the chief industry in the Khasi Hills. (Hunter, 1879.)

A photostat copy of a sketch of the Khasi double-action bellows reproduced from the Journal of the Asiatic Society in a Khasi journal, *U Nongpynim*, edited by U Sib Charan Roy.

(Through courtesy of U Kynpham Singh.)

— *Photostat by* Ahmed Hossain

"**Smelting of Iron Ore in Kasya (Khasi) Hills.**—The following is the method pursued from time immemorial by the natives of this part of the country in working down the ore of iron so plentifully met with hereby. There are large grass huts at least 25 ft. high, the thatch of which reaches down to the ground on all sides ; the interior, of an oval form, 15 by 30 ft. in the two diameters, is divided into three apartments, the central one being the smelting room. Two large double bellows, with the nozzles pointed downwards, are set up on one side of the apartment, on the upper side of which a man stands with one foot on each, his back supported by two planks. He holds a stick in his left hand, which is suspended from the roof, and has two straps attached to it below, conncected with the two bellows : these are worked quickly by a wrig-gling motion of the loins and the strength of the leg. The nozzles of the bellows unite in a tube which leads underground, form a sort of wind-chest, to the hearth, about four feet in front of them. Over the hearth is a chimney of pipeclay, braced with iron hoops, 2 ft. in diameter at the bottom and about 6 ft. high ; the mouth at the bottom is on the side away from the bellows, and the chimney inclined from them, to direct the heated air from the smelter towards an opening in the roof. At the right side of the bellows, and even with the top of the chimney, is a trough containing damp charcoal and ironsand. At every motion of his body the operator with a long spoon tumbles a piece of this charcoal, with the ironsand adhereing to it, down the funnel of the furnace, and when a mass of melted—or rather softened—iron is formed on the hearth, it is taken out with the tongs, and beaten with a heavy wooden mallet on a large stone by way of anvil. The iron in this state is sent down to the plains for sale or barter." ("Journal of the Asiatic Society," Vol. I. 1832.)

* * * * * *

* * * * * *

= (Ha ka tien Khasi ia katei shaphang) =
U NAR (Iron)

* * * *

* * * *

"Ka rukom sain nar mawpyrsut ka long kawei ka kam kaba la lah pynjana: tam eh ha kane ka Ri; ka long, namarkata, kaba myntoi ban da iapeit shuwa-eh ia kata kaba la kham mynshuwa bad kham byndai ka rukom sain nar mawpyrsut ban pynlong nar, kum kato kaba la shon dur ha ka dur ne Fig 515, bad kaba la leh da ki trai-shnong ha Ri India."

Photostat copy of an article on the process of iron smelting in the Khasi Hills reproduced in a now defunct Khasi journal from the Journal of the Asiatic Society (*Naiwieng* corresponds to November).

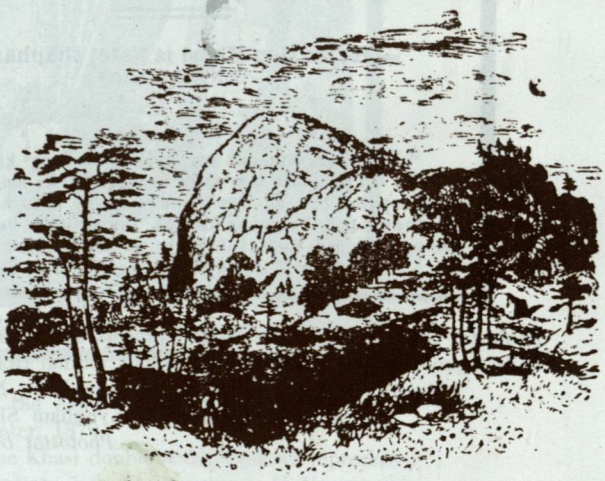
(Through courtesy of U Kynpham Singh.)

— *Photostat by* Ahmed Hossain.

A photostat copy of a sketch in Hooker's Journals of obviously a different type of double action bellows once known in the Khasi Hills. No trace of such bellows is left now in the Khasi Hills. No one even could confirm to the author of having seen one in his lifetime.

(Readers may refer to page 67 for a description reproduced from Hooker's Journals.)

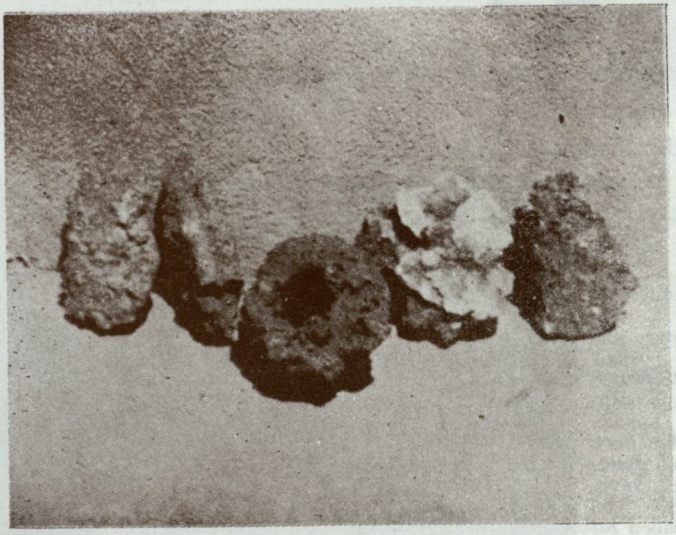
— *Photostat by* Ahmed Hossain.



The Kyllang Rock from the top of which Sir Hooker heard 'the tinkling sound of the hammers from the distant forges'.
(From Hooker's Journals.)
— *Photostat by* Ahmed Hossain.

The iron industry is still being pursued on a much reduced scale in the Khasi Hills for producing the typical Khasi hoe called *U moh-khiew* and Khasi *dao*, but strictly for local markets. The Khasi blacksmiths, however, now use the ordinary hand-driven bellows (as shown in the photograph) at Mylliem and other places.

—Photo by
Abhijit Choudhury.



The author and his nephew Abhijit collected specimens of iron slags (Khasi—*Eit-nar*, literally meaning iron dung) from old iron-smelting sites at Mawsmai. They were guided to the sites by Benedict Nongkynrih, a young enthusiast who proved an invaluable guide.
Such sites are scattered all over the Khasi Hills, particularly at Nongspun which was the chief centre of the iron industry.

— *Photo by* Abhijit Choudhury.

Some Khasi iron implements. From the left:

(1) Hooked Dao called *Wait Bnoh.*

(2) Curved Dao called *Wait Lyngkut,* also *Wait Lyng-ngun* or *Wait Lgngngam.*

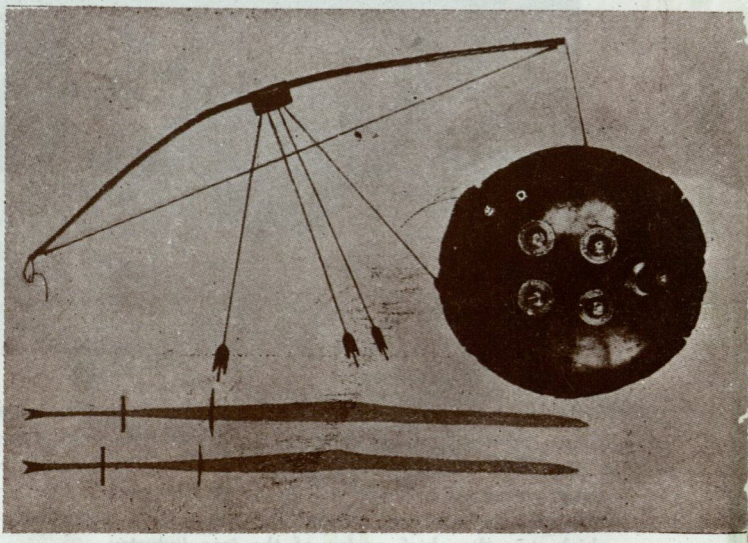
(3) Warrior's knife called *Wait Kynda.*

(4) Butcher's knife called *Wait Sum.*

(5) Kitchen knife called *Tari Dab.*

(Through courtesy of Meghalaya State Museum.)

—*Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.



Khasis manufactured swords usually of wrought iron, and occasionally of steel. Note the typical swords in the photograph without any extra handle. The shields were once fashioned out of rhinocerous hide but lately of buffalo skin. The Khasi bow is called *Ka ryntieh* (*Ka* is the article indicating female gender). Is it because the bow was originally a gift from their mythical ancestress *Ka Mei-kha*? The bow-string in the olden days was made from three kinds of bamboo, namely *U spit, U shken,* and *U sieĵ-lieh.* The arrows are of two kinds: (a) *ki pliang* (*ki* plural of article *ka*), *i.e.,* barbed-headed; (b) *sop* the plain headed.

(Through courtesy of U Hipshon Roy.)

—Photo by Ahmed Hossain.

The 'netted bag' of pine-apple fibre had also been mentioned by Gurdon who wrote as follows:

> 'In every Khasi house is to be found the net bag which is made of pineapple fibre,[47] or of *U stien (U stein),* the Assamese *riha* (Boehmeria nivea). These bags are of two sizes . . . the smaller for the ever necessary betelnut. *Pan* leaves are kept in a bamboo tube, and tobacco leaves in a smaller one. Lime, for eating with betel-nut, is kept in a metal box, sometimes of silver, which is made in two separate parts held together by a chain. The box is called *ka shanam,* and is used all over the hills' (Gurdon 1914).

It is interesting to note in passing that this lime box had a special importance for the Khasis, for it was used in divination. It may also be mentioned incidentally that divination or magic connected with lime pot is a cultural feature of the Trobriands and other Oceanic tribes.[48] The lime boxes which once had a great vogue must have become mere curios now, though possibly quite a few could still be seen in rural areas.

About smelting of iron which once constituted the major industry of the Khasis, Hunter wrote in 1879:

> 'The smelting of iron was once the chief industry in the Khasi Hills, and a considerable quantity of the metal used to be exported to Sylhet, both in the crude and manufactured state. Recently, however, this industry has almost died out, in the face of the competition of the superior article imported from England and sold in the plains at a cheaper rate'.

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[47] Bronislaw Malinowski: Argonauts of the Western Pacific (4th impression 1953).

It may also be mentioned that addiction to chewing betel-nut, pan leaf, and lime is an Austric habit which the Khasis share with many Oceania tribes. Malinowski stated in his book that betel-nut and lime were considered as magical substances and, in their *Kula magic,* the two crushed in a mortar was used to redden the tip of the canoe, Betel-nut was also given to a partner, after it had been charmed over with a seducing spell (Ibid, pp. 453). The importance of the above ingredients in many Khasi rituals is well known.

[48] The pineapple-fibre bag is called *'iarong' in Khasi.*

Almost all early writers also commented upon this industry which was indigenous to the Khasis since time beyond reckoning. Some ethnologists even went to the extent of associating knowledge of iron smelting with megalithic culture. Writing in 1841, Robinson noted as follows:

> 'The iron is principally obtained from ferruginous clay, which after being cleared of portion of its earthly constituents by washing, is afterwards melted in small clay furnaces'.

Robinson who was writing mainly about the Assam valley, and describing the great demand of Khasi iron implements in Assam, commented as follows:

> 'The Khassia iron, a large quantity of which is annually imported into the country, contributes likewise in no small degree to drive the iron of Assam from its own markets .... being more energetic labourers, and possessing furnaces of a far better construction, and more suited to the purpose, they (Khasis) are better able, by a more economical process, to reduce their ore'.

Other writers who commented upon the Khasi iron industry included Colonel Lister, Yule, Cracroft and Thomas Oldham who wrote on the geology of the Khasi hills. Colonel Lister reported in 1853 that an estimated quantity of '20,000 maunds' of iron in the shape of hoes were exported from the hills to the Assam valley and in lumps of pig iron to the Surma valley where it was used by boat builders for clamps. Oldham, writing in 1863, praised the quality of Khasi iron as 'excellent for all such purposes as Swedish iron is now used for'. Much later, in 1914, Gurdon described Nongkrem and Laitlyngkot as being centres of iron industry in the Khasi hills. He attributed the large granite boulders which rolled down the sides of hills at the aforesaid places and gathered at the bottom of the slopes to the shovels of the iron smelters. The iron workers resorted to the method of digging the softer ferruginous rock and thereafter extracting the iron ore from it by means of washing. The softer rock thus having been removed from the interstices between boulders, these by their own weight rolled down the sides of the hills. Sohrarim, Laitdom and quite a few other places had their iron-smelting foundries.

It was again Sir Hooker who left the most elaborate description in his journals of the Khasi indigenous method of iron working and the process of manipulation of their peculiar and distinctive double-action bellows. We shall, therefore, now turn to his description for more detailed information on the subject:

> 'To procure the iron-sand, which is disseminated through it, the natives conduct water over the beds of granite sand, and as the lighter particles are washed away, the remainder is removed to troughs, where the separation of the ore is completed. The smelting is very rudely carried on in charcoal fires, blown by enormous double-action bellows, worked by two persons, who stand on the machine, raising the flaps with their hands and expanding them with their feet. There is neither furnace nor flux used in the reduction. The fire is kindled on one side of an upright stone (like the headstone of a grave), with a small arched hole close to the ground: near the hole the bellows are suspended; and a bamboo tube from each of its compartments, meets in a larger one, by which the draught is directed under the hole in the stone to the fire. The ore is run into lumps as large as two fists, with a rugged surface; these lumps are afterwards cleft nearly in two, to show their purity' (Hooker 1854).
>
> 'The country is everywhere interested with trenches for iron-washing, and some large marshes were dammed up for the same purpose' (Ibid).

Oldham (1863) also noted how the Khasis conducted water by artificial channels for the purpose of iron-washing and remarked that the natives could work only for a few days in a year during periods when rains were heavy and they could obtain sufficient force of water for the washing of the ore from its matrix.

At the end of this section, we are tempted to quote again from Hooker a remarkable passage describing the view from the top of the Kyllang Rock already referred to. The description conjures up a charismatic vision of the Khasi hills in good old days, not unconnected with iron-working:

> 'The view from the top is very extensive to the northward, but not elsewhere: it commands the Assam valley and the

> Himalaya, and the billowy range of undulating grassy Khasia mountains. Few houses are visible, but the curling smoke from the valleys betrayed their lurking places, whilst the tinkling sound of the hammers from the distant forges on all sides was singularly musical and pleasing; they fell on the ear like 'bells upon the wind', each ring being exquisitely melodious, and chiming harmoniously with the others. The solitude and beauty of the scenery, and the emotion excited by the music of chimes, tended to tranquillise our minds, wearied by the fatigues of travel, and the excitement of pursuits that required unremitting attention'.

TRADE

We have noted Hutton's observation elsewhere in this book that there is hardly a Khasi village which does not have a market or *hat* in its neighbourhood or located within easy distance from it. Among all the hill peoples in India's north-east, the Khasis are perhaps the most trade-minded. In fact, going to market either in quest of business or merely for the pleasure of it, has almost acquired the character of a social compulsion which any visitor to the Khasi hills cannot fail to notice. Consider, for instance, the following remark of Hooker in his journals:

> 'They (Khasis) have names for the twelve months; they do not divide their time by weeks, but hold a market every four days'.[49]

As in many other spheres, so in the matter of conducting business, the women folk predominate. They are most conspicuous by their presence and in the seriousness of business pursuit but this is not to say that the Khasi men are less inclined to going to market. The market has an irresistible attraction for them all, irrespective of age.

Robinson, writing in 1841, noted that the Khasis always had intimate trade relations with the Garos from whom they obtained cotton, their own cotton grown in Jaintia hills to a very limited extent being inferior in quality. The Khasis exported great quantity of

[49] The informed source of the author notes as follows:

'Market days in the Mylliem, Khyrim, Nongkhlaw states, to mention only three, occur every 8th day. This is true of Jaintia Hills also'.

iron, potato and honey which they exchanged for cloths and silks of Assam. Robinson particularly commented upon the extensive trade which the Khasis carried on with the plains people of Surma valley which extended along the southern foot of their hills. One of the main centres of trade was of course Jaintiapur, the erstwhile capital of the Jaintia Raja, before the British forcibly annexed it. To quote:

> 'A considerable trade in cotton, iron ore, wax, ivory, betle leaf and cloths, is carried on between the plains and hills; and Jaintiapore, the capital, is the great *entrepot* in which all commercial dealings are transacted between the inhabitants of the plains and those of the hills. The articles specified, are bartered for salt, tobacco, rice and goats' (Robinson 1841).

Elsewhere Robinson wrote that the Khasis were of a volatile disposition which took them away much from home and that, while they were either engaged in trading with the lowlanders or merely sauntering about the hills and dales in pursuit of sports and amusements, the domestic occupation devolved upon the women. It is no wonder, therefore, that woman was the real mistress of the house, and had to bear a great deal of the burden of managing the household affairs. And, perhaps, the system of inheritance through the female line rendered them rather irresponsible to no small extent, at least such brothers as were not directly involved in guiding or managing the affairs of the ancestral property in the custody of their youngest sister. Then describing the system of trade in those days, Robinson went on:

> 'Their trade consists chiefly in the barter of oranges, honey, iron, bee's wax, and ivory — for rice, fish, cotton and silk, cloth and salt. Potatoes are grown to a considerable extent in their valleys, and on the declivities of their hills; and may be considered with iron, as the staple article of their trade'.

The other important centre of trade was Pandua in the plains of the Surma valley, close to the foothills of the southern slope of the Khasi uplands. The Khasis used to carry down their merchandise to the grand mart at Pandua from whence the products

of the Khasi hills such as lime, oranges, potatoes, tezpat etc. were conveyed by boats to many river ports of deltaic Bengal.[50] We have mentioned earlier that Hooker on his way to the Khasi hills in June 1848 halted at Pandua, and was a witness to disembarkation of lime, coal and potatoes from large fleets of country boats crowding the narrow creeks. Gurdon noted that the Khasis possessed quarries which could supply lime for the whole of deltaic Bengal and they were not averse to trade. Barooah (1970) quoted from the letter of a missionary, stationed at Sylhet, to William Carey of Sreerampur Mission in Bengal to the following effect:

> 'In the grand mart at Pandua, on the Sylhet border, they (Khasis) traded in silk, iron, wax, honey and ivory and employed many Bengalis to keep their accounts'.

But before 1824, the British took little interest to know about the Khasis though many of the European employees of the East India Company were already involved in business in Khasi lime.

We may now turn to Hunter who in his *Statistical Account of Assam* (1879) left an account of the trade in which the Khasis were engaged in the later part of the nineteenth century:

> Cinnamon grows wild in some parts of the country. There is a considerable trade carried on in Tezpat or bay leaves, the trees being extensively cultivated by the inhabitants of the lower slopes of the hills on the Sylhet border. The finest oranges in India are also grown in the same tract, the value of the trade in which is now (1876) estimated to amount to £ 3760 per annum. Lac is gathered by the Mikirs in the Jaintia hills, but not to any great extent. Bees are both domesticated and found wild, and an extensive trade in

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[50] Hooker stated in his journals that Mr. Inglis was responsible for introducing potato to the Khasi hills where it thrived luxuriantly. We have been given to know that, before 1824, no European entered the Khasi hills and it was only in the wake of the Burmese war that they saw the advantage of entering into relations with the Khasis. In view of this, it is hard to reconcile Hooker's statement with the fact that he had already noticed extensive trade in potato being carried on in 1848.

The informed source of the author, however, writes:

'In our geography books (school grade) David Scott was said to have introduced the potato'.

> bee-wax is carried on, the amount exported being estimated at from three hundred to four hundred maunds annually'.

It must be stated here that trade in the products mentioned by Hunter above, is still being carried on and the volume of trade in these items is very considerable. The Marwari business community has almost monopolized the trade in cinnamon and tezpat or bay leaves. They purchase these forest products from the Khasi cultivators and export them to various places in India in great quantities. The Marwari traders are also the major exporters of potatoes.

In the above context, we may recall a remarkable passage in Hooker's journals, in which he castigated his own countrymen who perpetrated a fraud in the trade of cinnamon in those days:

> 'The trade in cinnamon is of recent introduction, and is much encouraged by the Inglis family, to whose exertions these people are greatly indebted; the cinnamon is the peeled bark of small species of *cinnamomum* allied to that of Ceylon, and though inferior in flavour and mucilaginous (like cassia), finds ready market in Calcutta. It has been used to adulterate the Ceylon cinnamon; and an extensive fraud was attempted by some Europeans at Calcutta, who sent boxes with this, with a top layer of genuine to England' (Hooker 1854).

We cannot leave out from this account a reference to the extensive trade in iron implements which once constituted the chief industry of the Khasis. Unfortunately, it could not withstand for long the competition from cheaper articles imported from England in those old days. The industry is, however, still being pursued, particularly in the production of the typical Khasi hoe called *u moh-khiew* and Khasi *daos,* but strictly for local markets. The Khasi artisans possessed considerable proficiency in the manufacture of bell-metal household utensils of typical forms or shapes. This industry is also dying out fast in face of competition from much lighter products manufactured from aluminium, stainless steel and plastic.

The trade in honey is one of the specialities of the Khasi hills like the justly famous oranges, and deserves to be mentioned separately. There are two kinds of indigenous honey bees in the

Khasi hills. The domesticated one is called *u ngap (apis Indica)* and the other a wild variety *u lywai* which is never domesticated, and is very pugnacious (Gurdon 1914). We are given to know that a third kind of Italian extraction had also been introduced by the English, and had been successfully naturalized in these hills. The villages which reared honeybees and pursued trade in honey on a commercial scale, as mentioned by Gurdon, were Thied-dieng, Mawphu, Nongwar, Mawlong, Pynter, Tyrna and Kongthong and most of the War villages on the southern side of the Khasi hills. The flora of the Khasi hills being rich and numerous there is no need for arranging artificial food for the bees. The varieties of vegetation like clover, anemones, bush honey-suckle and numerous shrubs, growing naturally in the hills, provide sustenance for the bees. The quality of the honey produced in the Khasi hills enjoys a great reputation, and is much coveted in the plains as far away as Calcutta. The orange honey like the famous oranges of the Khasi hills is reputed for its flavour and taste. The wild honey-combs built by *u lywai* are located in very high cliffs and collection of honey from these hives is a very hazardous task. But the Khasis are quite up to it. Perched precariously in a sling lowered down the face of a cliff by his companions an individual uses the smoke from a smouldering torch to drive out the bees from the hive after it has been located. We also learn on the authority of Gurdon that wild honey is gathered twice or thrice in a year during autumn and spring. The wild honey is distinguished from the domestic variety by being reddish in colour.

We have already noticed above that most of the early writers including Hooker commented upon the extensive trade in potato which along with Khasi lime was exported in great quantities. The Khasi potato enjoyed excellent reputation for its superior quality compared to the produce of other parts of India. Admittedly, it was a late introduction to the Khasi hills where it found a natural habitation, and was *jhumed* widely in Khasi uplands, there being very little, if at all, of its cultivation in Jaintia hills. Hooker, we have seen, attributed, possibly wrongly, its introduction to Mr. Inglis who served in the Khasi hills under the East India Company, and later made a fortune by doing trade in Khasi lime. Hooker stayed with him at Chhatak in the Surma valley on his

way to the hills. We are inclined to think that introduction of potato into the Khasi hills could have been much earlier since it was being exported in large quantities even before 1848. Interestingly, the noted Indian anthropologist, late K.P. Chattopadhyaya, believed on linguistic evidence that the original home of the potato was South America where it was called *Kumara* by the native population. In the course of its migration, it was variously termed *Kumala, umala, wala, ala* and ultimately *alu* through the widely dispersed Pacific islands. The name was retained in Sanskrit. The medical treatise of Sushrata distinguished three kinds of *aluka,* such as *pindaluka, moddhaluka* (sweet variety) and *shakaluka.* The Khasis know three varieties of potato, the two being of the sweet kind, namely *u phan karo*[51] and *u phan sawlia,* distinguished from the first by having a red skin. The yam proper, which is largely grown, is known as *u phan shynreh.* It is obvious that *u phan karo* was an introduction from the Garo hills.

The other popular items of trade in which the War section of the Khasi monopolize are of course the areca-nut and *pan.* The *pan* gardens are mostly found on the southern side of the hills. *Pan* gardens do not thrive on the northern slope except in the neighbourhood of Jirang. The *pan* creepers are raised from cuttings which are later planted close to trees. The creepers are then trained up these trees. Groves of areca-nut, entwined with *pan* creepers, are a common sight in War villages.[52] Groves are actually to be seen up to the very door steps of the houses. It has to be mentioned here that cultivation of *pan* creepers in which the War section of the Khasis specialize sometimes takes them away from their hills. There are Khasis settlements pursuing *pan* cultivation in many places of Cachar hills, particularly in the neighbourhood of tea gardens. We believe there are small Khasi settlements, engaged in *pan* cultivation, even now in Sylhet.

[51] The informed source of the author has this to say: 'Phan karo' is actually the sweet potato' which belongs to a different family and is related to the 'Morning Glory' creeper'.

[52] The informed source of the author adds: *'Pan* has been introduced by War 'colonists' in the areas near Nongpoh since their settlement there after the collapse of the Border trade— so also orange— but the taste of both is inferior probably because of the soil'.

We have already mentioned extensive trade in bay leaf *('la tyrpad* or *tezpat).* We learn from Gurdon that the tree, producing *tezpat,* is classified as *Cinnamomum tamala.* This tree along with one or two others of the same genus yields both *tezpat* and cinnamon bark. Besides the south slope of the Khasi hills, Maharam, Malaisohmat, Mawsynram and a few other places produce sufficient bay leaf for export. Apart from arum *(ka shriew)* which constitutes an item of food for the common people, turmeric *(shynrai)* and ginger *(sying* or *s'ing)* are grown in the Khasi and Jaintia hills and small scale trade is carried on in these minor produces. The Khasi turmeric is much coveted by housewives in the plains for its colour and fine dust. A speciality of the Khasi hills is a small plant with edible root called by the Khasis *u sophlang (flemingia vestita. Benth).* The roots of the plant are eaten raw[53] but its consumption is confined to the Khasi hills. It does not seem to find favour with other people.

We cannot leave out from this account a reference to indigenous drinks of the Khasis. There are at least three varieties. The first kind of spirit, distilled from rice or millet, is called *Ka 'iad pudka.* The rice-beer is of two kinds, namely (1) *Ka 'iad hiar* and (2) *Ka 'iad um.* Gurdon in his book has described the indigenous processes of distillation of these spirits elaborately and we do not wish to go over the same ground again here. There are breweries everywhere in the Khasi and Jaintia hills. Early writers commented upon the prevalence of much drunkenness among the Khasis. It is to be regretted that the drinking habit has sometimes assumed the proportion of a social evil, for it has drained away the energy of a considerable section of the people.

The Khasis also indulged in pottery to a very limited extent. In fact, manufacture of pottery was confined to one place called Larnai in the Jaintia hills. The earthen pots fashioned by Larnai women by hand were known as *Khiew ranei* or sometimes *Khiew larnai* and these could be seen at one time in Khasi houses. The potter's wheel was however unknown. The Larnai women also turned out flower-pots which were in demand in Shillong (Gurdon 1914).

[53] The author has, however, been informed that, though eaten raw, *sohphlang* (lit. grass fruit) is subjected to a thorough process of cleansing. The acrid outer skin has to be removed by soaking and repeated shaking with sand.

The Census Report of 1901 returned the number of persons engaged in pottery as 54 only. According to Gait, the potters used two kinds of mixed clay, one of a dark blue colour *'dewiong* and the other of greyish colour *'dew khluid.* The pots were first sun dried and subsequently fired. They were painted black with the infusion of a bark called *sohliya.*

AGRICULTURE

A wrong impression had gained ground with some early writers who gave their opinion about the Khasis being predominantly a pastoral community. Consider, for instance, the following remarks of M'cosh (1837):

> 'The Kassyas are more pastoral, the Garrows more agricultural; the Kassya lives by the produce of his cattle, the Garrow, by the tillage of his hill; the Kassya is content to eat the bread of idleness, the Garrow loves to live by the sweat of his brow'.

With regard to the animal husbandry of the Khasis, Robinson only incidentally mentioned the common goat. We may as well quote him:

> 'Capra hircus; the common goat. Great numbers are kept in all parts of the country. The hills goat is generally a large, fine looking animal. That of the Khassia hills is usually clothed with long, white, rather coarse hair, whilst the Naga goat differs from it in the beautiful streaks with which its body is marked' (Robinson 1841).

The only animal which the Khasis rear in any number is of course the pig. At one time, piggery, big and small, was attached to every domestic household. It is possibly even so now in rural areas. In urban areas, the problem of space, if not of sanitation, does not permit a household to own its piggery.[54] Gurdon (1914) mentioned in his book as follows:

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[54] The author's informed source adds: 'I believe the rearing of pigs has been stopped within the Municipal areas'.

> 'All the villages, Khasi, War, Lynngam and Bhoi, swarm with pigs, which run about the villages unchecked. The pigs feed on all kinds of filth, and in addition are fed upon the wort and spent wash of the brewings of country spirit, or rice beer, the latter being carefully collected and poured into wooden troughs. The pigs are of the usual black description seen in India. They thrive greatly in the Khasi villages, and frequently attain extreme obesity'.

It may, perhaps, be speculated whether the attachment of the Khasis to rearing pigs does not show their Austric link. In *Saptashati Chandi* of *Markandeya Purana,* the aboriginals of India had been termed *'Kolabiddhangshinah'*, meaning destroyers of pigs, i.e., pig eaters. Many scholars agreed that the so-called aboriginals here denoted the Mundari speaking branches of the Austric race. The Aryans called their language *'mridhra vach'*, i.e. they spoke an imperfect language. Now, *Kol,* the term for pig, was also once the generic name for the different branches of Mundari speaking people. It implied possibly the meaning, 'men of the pig', just as the ancient Chinese used to call a branch of the Mongol hordes of Central Asia *'Tung-hu'*, meaning literally 'men of the pig'.

Stock-breeding, except that of pig, was not widely practised in the Khasi hills although most early writers commented upon the country being ideally suited to rearing cattle for its vast expanses of alpine meadows. The reason could possibly be that the Khasis were indifferent to drinking milk. Gurdon noted that, according to the Census of 1901, stock-breeding and dealing in cattle provided occupation to 1,295 people in the Jaintia hills. They reared cattle and drove them down to the plains of Surma valley where they found ready market. The other notable place for rearing cattle was the Sviemship of Nongkhlaw where there was good pasturage around Mairang. These cattle were either sold at Shillong or found their way down to the Kamrup district by the old Nongkhlaw road. Gurdon thereupon remarked:

> 'Cattle-breeding is an industry capable of expansion in these hills'.

The Khasis have all along been an agricultural community and cultivation of rice formed the main prop of their subsistence. They pursued both shifting and sedentary method of cultivation, depending on the lie of the lands. Among early writers, Hunter in his *Statistical Account of Assam* (1879) took elaborate notice of Khasi method of agriculture which, in many respects, was far in advance of that of many other hill people in the north-east region of India. Though handicapped by their failure to adopt the use of the plough, they thoroughly understood the importance of manure and their system of preparation of the field by turning the sods, allowing time for them to dry, then burning them and broadcasting ashes over the soil, showed their expertise despite the generally poor condition of their land and unfavourable terrain. Irrigation was known and resorted to wherever the sources of water could be turned to use. Hunter wrote:

> 'Irrigation for agriculture purpose is regularly practised. Water is brought to the land by means of channels cut from the numerous hill streams in the neighbourhood of the fields. Wells and tanks are unknown'.

Gurdon corroborated Hunter and gave a more detailed description of the Khasi system of irrigation with reference to *hali* land. It is necessary, however, first to take note of different types of land classified by Gurdon. These are: (1) Forest land, (2) Wet paddy land called *hali* or *pynthor,* (3) High grass land or *ka ri lum* or *ka ri phlang,* and (4) Homestead land. Forest lands on hill slopes and higher grounds are cultivated by the method of shifting cultivation popularly known as *jhuming* in the north-east regions of India.[55] This is the common slush and burn method followed universally in the hills of this region. The trees of the area selected for *jhum* cultivation by a cyclic process of rotation are felled in winter and allowed to lie on the ground until fire is applied to them in January or February. In order to prevent ashes being blown away, logs of wood are positioned at intervals of a few feet. No further care is taken for preparing the field; paddy and millet are sown broadcast. The seeds of root crops such as maize and

[55] *Jhuming* is called *'rep shyrti'* in Khasi. Another type known as *'rep bun'* forms the cultivation of heaped-up sods in which bushes and dried vegetation have been burnt for raising potato and ginger.

job's tears *(soh riew)* are dibbled into holes dug by small hoes. There is no question of irrigation nor any means of introducing water into such dry lands of high grounds, the only manure used being ashes of burnt down trees and undergrowths. The sowing of seeds generally coincides with the onset of the first rains. This is a wasteful method in the long run as it results in large scale deforestation and consequent loss of fertility of the soil. The Bhois and Lalungs inhabiting the eastern and southern portions of Jaintia hills and the Lynngams adjoining the Garos on the western tract resort to this method.

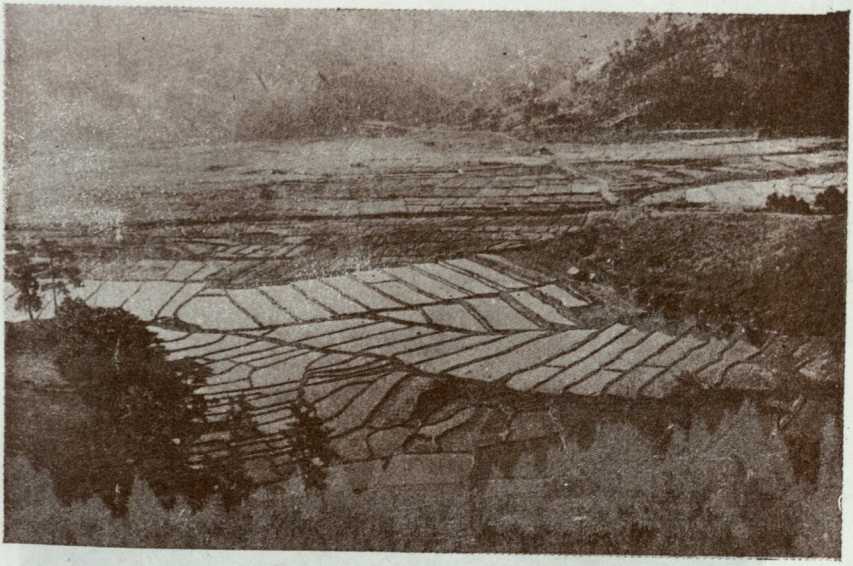
Wet-rice cultivation is practised on low lands, called *hali* or *pynthor,* which are capable of receiving plenty of water. Such lands are usually situated in valley bottoms and are divided up into small compartments corresponding to *alis* of the plains by means of earthen banks called *stir* in Khasi. Water is let in by artificially constructed channels to submerge the compartments and there is arrangement to drain out the water as required. The water channels, skilfully contrived, could be more than a mile in length.

The plough is used in the Jaintia hills for churning the soil into a thick paste; cattle are also driven into the fields for the same purpose of levelling the mud into required consistency. The seed is sown broadcast in the wet mud only once, there being no question of transplantation of seedlings from nursery bed. Only when the plants are four inches high, water is led into the field by irrigation ducts. Weeding, however, has to be done several times. The Khasis of the uplands prepare the field laboriously only by means of the hoe. The upland Khasis, as far as possible, select clayey soil for growing potato and hill paddy. Sods are turned over with the hoe and exposed for a time to the action of the atmosphere. The sods are generally arranged in piles and in rows through the field and when sufficiently dry, are reduced to ashes by means of ignited bunches of dried grass introduced into the piles.[56] No other manure is generally used apart from ashes obtained by the process indicated above. Manure, we are told, is used

[56] The following corrigendum has been added by the author's informed source: 'Wet paddy fields in the Khasi uplands are also cultivated with the hoe and after flooding the sods are broken by human feet'.

A Khasi baby playing amidst Job's tears (Khasi—*soh riew*).

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.



Wet-rice cultivation on low lands called *hali* or *pynthor*. Such lands are usually situated at valley bottoms (as seen in the photograph) divided into small compartments corresponding to *alis* of the plains, called *stir* in Khasi.

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

Preparation of tarraced lands with Khasi hoes, called *moh khiew,* for cultivation of rice in Khasi uplands,

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

Potatoes are grown extensively in the Khasi Hills, and constitute one of the chief cash crops. The lands, usually on hill sides, have to be properly levelled and drains are dug about small compartments called *khet.*

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

Oranges from the southern slopes of the Khasi Hills are unrivalled for their sweet taste.

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

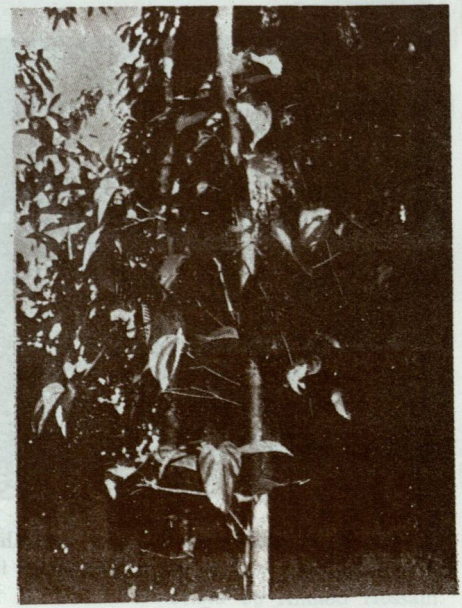
Potato is the chief cash crop of the Khasi uplands and extensive trade is carried on in it.

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

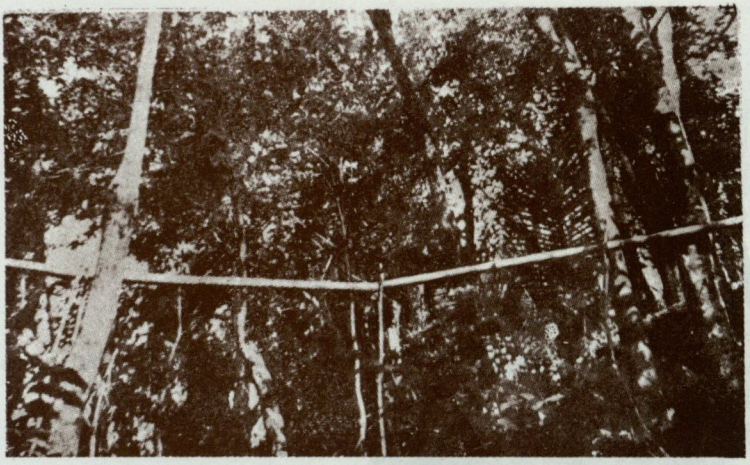
The author accompanied by his son Dhruba, went in search of *pan* orchards to Shnongpdeng village in the interior of the Dawki Sub-division. Note how the *pan* creepers are trained up the trees. There are said to be points of resemblance in the manner of cultivation of *pan* vines by the Khasis with the Konyak Nagas.

(Readers may refer to page 122 for an account.)

— *Photo by* Dhrubajyoti Choudhury.



A closer view of *pan* vines on trees.
— *Photo by* Dhrubajyoti Choudhury.



'Syndai (Khasi) *panbaris* are irrigated by bamboo acquaducts bringing water from the nearest stream' (Hutton, 1928)

— *Photo by* Dhrubajyoti Choudhury.

The author is seen in the above photograph on the bamboo platform in front of a Pnar-War house with the village headman. This photo was taken at the village of Shnongpdeng which follows *pan* cultivation

— *Photo by* Dhrubajyoti Choudhury

A Khasi woman winnowing husked rice with a *prah*.
— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

Wooden mortars (*thlong*) and pestles (*synrei*) for husking paddy are also locally manufactured.
— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

plentifully only for the homestead lands which, with little care, yield better and more crops. The preparation of fields for millet, job's tears and other crops, is the same as described for high-land paddy.

Let us now turn to Hunter (1879):

> Rice is cultivated in marshy fields situated near running water as well as in high lands. The first seven of the thirteen species of rice are sown in marshy lands during the months of April and May, and reaped generally in November and December, although in some parts of the hills the harvesting season commences as early as October'.

Before we describe the thirteen different varieties of rice known to the Khasis and as enumerated by Hunter, we may profitably follow his account of the cultivation of wet rice in low lands at some length:

> 'His (Khasi farmer's) land is thus inundated (by bringing in water to his fields from neighbouring streams by means of regularly cut channels) from fifteen to thirty days, in order to soften the soil, when part of the water is allowed to escape the opening made in the banks surrounding the fields. The land is then ploughed, the ploughing being called *lur-snih,* and three or four days afterwards it is made to undergo a second ploughing, called *lur-kyn-roi.* The fields are then refilled with water by the same means as before, and allowed to remain covered from ten to fifteen days, when the water is again drained off. After this the land is ploughed a third or fourth time, the ploughing being termed *lur-shat* and *lur-bet* respectively, and the soil is made as smooth as possible with the hands or a hoe *(kodali).* The seed is then scattered broadcast over the field. Transplanting is not practised in the district'.

It can be seen that Hunter treated the method of cultivation more elaborately, but both Gurdon and Hunter agreed broadly, particularly on the important point that transplantation is unknown.

According to Hunter, the agricultural implements in use in the Khasi and Jaintia hills consisted of a plough, called *kajing-lur* in

Khasi,[57] and a hoe or *kodali,* called *u-mo-khiw (U mohkhiew).*

The list of agricultural implements used by the Khasis, as given by Gurdon, is as follows: a large hoe *(mohkhiew),* an axe for felling trees *(U sdie),* a large *da* for felling trees *(ka wait lynngam),*[58] two kinds of bill-hooks *(ka wait prat* and *ka wait khmut),* a sickle *(ka rashi),* a plough in parts of the Jaintia hills *(ka lynkor),* also a harrow *(ka iuh moi).*

In the above context, it should also be noted that the Lynngams and the Khasis and Mikirs of the low hills or Bhois, as they are sometimes called, consider it a *sang* or *taboo* to use sickles. They reap by pulling the ear through the hand. The sheaves, as they are collected, are thrashed out on the spot by beating them against a stone *(shoh kba),* or by men and women treading them out *(iuh kba).* Cattle are not used for the purpose.

We shall now take note of thirteen varieties of rice, known to the Khasis, and describe them after Hunter: (1) *u kybakhynrium*[59] (u, the masculine article, and *kyba,* noun masculine, meaning 'paddy'); this is brown rice with long gain; (2) *u kyba-khynriam bai-lih,* a white variety with long grain; (3) *u kyba latoh,* round-shaped grain; (4) *u kyba ksai,* bearded, husked; (5) *u kyba-dew-ba-iong,* black husked rice (literally u = 'the', kyba = 'paddy', dew = 'earth' ba = 'that', iong = 'black'), (6) *u kyba ba-lih,* white rice; (7) *u kyba-siem,* scented rice (literally u = 'the' kyba = 'paddy', siem (syiem) = 'royal'); (8) *u kyba la-kroh,* large grained rice; (9) *u kyba-ba-tlaing,* small grained rice; (10) *u kyba sa-bia, early rice;* (11) *u kyba- ra-bon,* late rice; (12) *u kyba tangla,* rice grown along with beans; (13) *u kyba-ba-tuh,* small rice.

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[57] The informed source of the author adds: 'The plough actually called *'ka lyngkor'. 'Jinglur'* means 'the act of ploughing'.

[58] 'Synonym' for *'wait lyngngam'* is *'wait lyngngun'.*

[59] U Kyba-Khynrium' should be spelt *'U Kba-Khynriam,* obviously a 'Synteng' word.

'U Kyba-Khynriam bai-lih, is probably *'U Kba-Khynriam balien* (i.e. white Khasi rice).

The informed source adds: 'Some of the names are unknown to me; they are probably misspelt. For instance, *'U Kyba ba tuh'* means 'stolen rice'! Could it be *'bthuh'* (grey)?'

It can be easily seen from the above that Khasi expertise in agriculture is considerable. They know not only different varieties but also grow early and late ripening rice to maintain a steady level of the stock through the year round. It was wrong therefore, to term them as merely pastoral.

A point of interest in the method of Khasi agriculture is that, while transplantation of rice seedlings is unknown, nurseries are carefully prepared for the other important cash crop, the famous Khasi orange. In fact, when the plants and 3 to 4 inches high, they are transplanted to another and larger nursery before being finally planted in their appointed ground. The seeds are carefully selected and exposed to the sun for drying. Nurseries are prepared in spring, the ground being thoroughly hoed and soil pulverised. The seeds are then sown with thin top layer of earth being applied. The nurseries are regularly watered and covered up with leaves to ensure retention of moisture.

The young plants, carried from the nurseries, are planted 6 feet to 9 feet apart. No manure is used. Big trees in the field are left standing to provide shade for the young plants though the shrubs, weeds and other undergrowths are carefully removed. Jungles are not allowed to grow, care being taken to weed them out periodically in spring and autumn. Branches of the sheltering trees are cut down as required, to permit necessary sunlight to touch the young trees. They oranges which used to be popularly known as Sylhet oranges really came from the southern slopes of the Khasi hills. The source of the confusion could be traced to the fact that oranges were transported in those days to Calcutta mainly from Sylhet and Chhatak, both in Bangladesh now, *via* the river ports of East Bengal.

While the orange was native to the soil of the Khasi hills by all accounts, the potato was a foreign importation. But how late it was introduced and who the person or persons were responsible for initiating it into these hills might be a matter of research. It is probable that its introducation might have been due to the British as claimed, but we would not hazard a difinite opinion on this question.[60]

[60] The author is obliged to his informed source for drawing his attention to the following observations in Hunter's Statistical Account of Assam, which he missed:

'The tuber was first introduced into the Hills in 1830 by Mr. Scott, who was then the Governor-General's Agent' (Hunter 1879, pp.225.)

Potato grows on all classes of land except *hali* or wet paddy land.[61] After the field has been prepared following the method pursued in the Khasi hills in respect of dry crops, seed potatoes, usually two of them, are dropped into one hole dug up by a hoe. The planting is generally done by women. The land has to be properly levelled and drains are dug about small compartments of land called *'Khet'* so that water might not have a chance of standing and making the soil sodden. The average specifications of holes, dug for receiving seed-potatoes, as given by Gurdon, are 6 inches in diameter, 6 in deep, and from 6 to 9 inches apart from one another. As a cultivator (usually a woman) goes on dropping seed-potatoes into the holes, another throws a little manure from a basket over the seeds and lightly covers up the holes with earth. After the young shoots attain the height of about 6 inches, they are properly earthed up.

That the Khasis have a number of sayings and proverbs associated with agriculture unmistakably point to the fact that agriculture is native to them and they have pursued it since time immemorial.

THE ORIGINAL HOUSE TYPE AND VILLAGE

It is rather strange that there is hardly any reference to the original house type of the Khasis, which is indeed very distinctive, in the accounts of early writers. The only reference occurs in M'cosh (1837) and that too is pretty little. It comes in the course of his very wrong conclusion about the Khasis being a pastoral people:

> 'The habits of the Kassyas (Khasis) are idle and independent and their mode of living pastoral rather than agricultural; their houses are large and commodious; their cattle numerous, fat and productive'.

We have, therefore, mainly to follow Gurdon's description and, at the same time, it should be noted that the original house pattern is disappearing very fast and a few that are still left standing in the interior villages have actually been reduced to the status of museum specimens.

[61] 'Nowadays, Khasi farmers have started using the *hali* land after rice harvest for raising other cash crops including potato. This is done in the cold season' (informed source).

Gurdon started with a curious note that the houses were cleaner than the appearance of the people themselves. It should also be mentioned at the outset that the type differed in details of plan and location amongst various sections of the Khasis. In Khasi uplands, the houses were substantial thatched cottages with plank or stone walls, raised on a plinth 2 to 8 ft from the ground. The luxuries of windows were unknown, the only opening to let in ray of dim light into the room being a small opening (the opening for light is called *pong-shai)* on one side of the house. The reason for this could possibly be attributed to the fact that the houses were exposed to blasts of wind which blew strongly over the hills. For the same reason the height of the structure was kept down rather low. The houses were oval-shaped and divided into a porch, a centre room, and a retiring room.[62] An earthen or stone hearth in the middle of the spacious central room was kept constantly alive and burning. A swinging frame with firewoods stacked upon it suspended from the ceiling over the hearth. This typical feature the Khasis shared with many hill tribes of India's north-eastern region. But in contradistinction to them, the pigs and calves were housed in separate sheds away from the main house. Among the hill tribes of Arunachal Pradesh and number of other hill tribes of this region pigs are billeted immediately below the living house constructed usually upon stilts.

It was considered a *sang* or taboo in olden days to use iron nails in the construction of the house. In Cherra, and also in Shillong, the walls of houses were generally of stone before the great earthquake of 1897. Houses with stone walls can still be seen at Cherra. Stone walls were possibly conceived as a protection against excessive rains in Cherrapunji. Amongst the Syntengs, mud plaster for the walls was said to have been contrived for protection against fire. Arson was a common form of revenge in these hills.

In Cherrapunji and some places of Jaintia hills, houses sometimes assumed huge proportions. The largest that was observed by Gurdon belonged to the Doloi of Sutnga. It measured 74 feet in length. The house of the *Syiem Sad* or the Syiem

[62]The house is not fully oval-shaped. It is oval in front but broad and square at the back.

Priestess (also called *Soh-blei)* at Smit, although less sprawling, easily measured up to 61 feet long by 30 feet broad. This is understandable because the *Syiem Sad's* house forms the centre of many rituals both inside and in the courtyard of her house during the great Nongkrem dance. On the eve of the dance, after the *Syiem Sad* returns with her party from the stone alter at a distance from her house, where sacrifices are offered in honour of *U'lei Shillong,* she along with a selected group executes a dance in front of the *rishot blei* or holy post of Khasi oak inside the house.

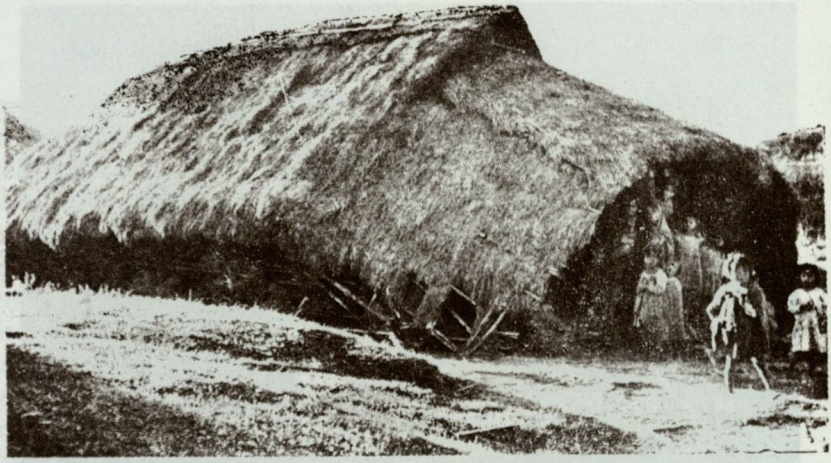
It was the practice among the Khasis to enclose two sides of the house with fencing, the space in front leading to the village street being left open. The house pattern of the Syntengs generally conformed to that of the upland Khasis with the difference that the courtyard was plastered with earth and cow-dung. The custom was believed to have been imbibed from the Hindus of the plains. The Syntengs of Nartiang also worshipped *U Biskurom,* the prototype of the Hindu *Biswakarma* and *Ka Syiem Synshar* after the completion of a house. The ritual consisted of sacrifice of two fowls, one to the former and the other to the latter. The Khasis had similar custom of performing ceremony in honour of *Kynjoh-kha-skain.*[63]

It goes without saying that the present day residential houses in urban areas like Cherrapunji, Mawphlang, Shillong and Jowai are built after modern style with iron roofs, glass windows and doors. It has been said that the practice of resting the main structure of the house upon stone pillars after supposedly Japanese pattern was introduced following the great earthquake of 1897. However, the new style has travelled far into the interior of the hills wherever it can be afforded. Reinforced construction for residential houses, whether wholly or partly, is also lately becoming popular with a section of well-to-do people.

The house of the Pnar-Wars differ in shape from that of the uplanders though the division of compartments is the same. The roof is hog-backed and thatched with the leaves of a palm called

[63] The informed source of the author speculates as follows:

'Kynjoh-Kha-Skain= (To) reach up (for) fish-fly (perhaps because there would be flies on the dried fish)'.



The original house type of the Khasis is fast disappearing and the few houses that are still left standing in the interior of the hills have already been reduced to the status of museum specimens. The house pattern of the Syntengs (as shown in the above photo) generally conforms to that of upland Khasis. The Wars proper have similar houses with the difference that part of the house is built on stilts.

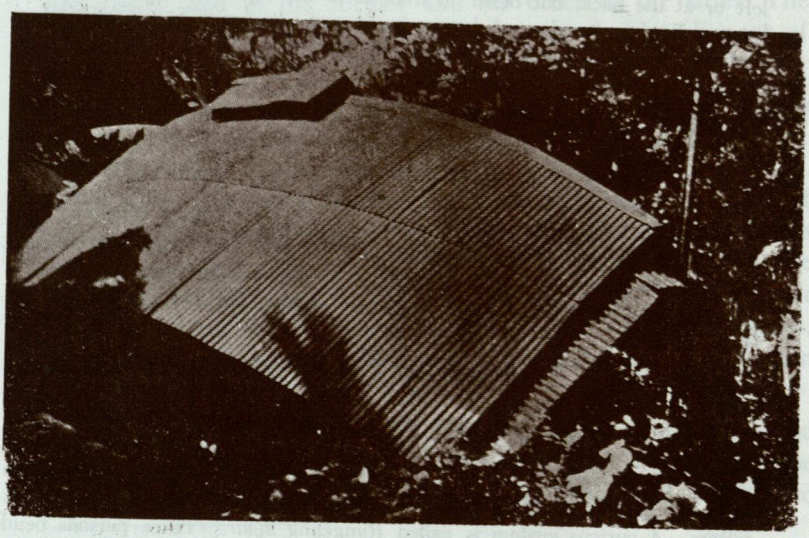
(According to U Kynpham Singh, should an elder daughter build a house in the same compound as her mother's, the house must be on the left or at the back, but never in front or at the right side of her mother's house. Roofs of adjacent houses must not overlap. As on other important occasions, eggs are broken to read augury before the site for building a house is finally selected.

The Khasis were very particular about the kinds of timber they used for building houses. Hard woods were preferred and, among these were Jackfruit, Champa, *Albizzia odoratisima, Euginia Tetragona, Morus logiabata,* Jati Poma, Iron wood, wild Jackfruit, and different species of Oak. *Biscopia Japonica*, duabanga, cinnamon species, Boki Poma, wild mango, *Eleocarpus robusta, Sauranja buduala* and pine were used for rafters, purlins, planks etc. while the former were used for columns and pillars. The Khasis considered it a taboo to use Makria Sal in any part of the house.

There cannot be occupation of a new house without house-warming ceremony. There are several ways of celebrating the occasion. The most well-known ceremony is called *'Ka Kynjohkhaskain* (for the meaning of the term readers may refer to the footnote at page 84). A common feature of the ceremonies is the fish-jump. The people assembled jump up and try to pull down pieces of dried fish tucked into or tied to the rafters. A curious custom is called *Ryngkang Syiar.* Three persons bend over on one side and three others try to leap over them. Then there is mock dancing against the pleading of the house owner that he is poor and

the house is weak. In urban areas the ceremony has been simplified and consists in pouring libation of rice-beer mixed with powdered rice from a hollow gourd bottle at the foot of every corner post. Chanting and invocation of blessings, of course, form an important part.)

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain



A transitional house made of corrugated iron sheets at Shnongpdeng village, conforming to general pattern or the original house type. The smoke outlet is an addition.

— *Photo by* Dhrubajyoti Choudhury

u tynriew. The eaves come down almost to the ground. In some War villages, notably Nongjri and Umñiuh, separate spirit houses, called *iing ksuid,* are erected in the compound of the residential houses. Offerings are made at intervals to the spirits of the departed ancestors here. Gurdon saw a similarity in this custom with an ancient form of Shintoism. We are also given to know that bachelor's dormitories existed in some War villages. This is an institution which does not seem to be native to the Khasis, and is absent elsewhere. It is a matter of investigation, therefore, whether it might not have been borrowed under some special circumstances. The Wars proper have similar houses as that of the Pnars with the difference that part of the house is built on stilts. The main structure rests on the hill-side, the portion built on platform projecting from it. This was a convenient device adapted to the condition of narrow space available on hill slopes.

The Bhoi and Lynngam houses, which are said to be similar, are built on high platforms of bamboo. They are frequently 30 to 40 feet in length. Naturally the ascent to the houses is by notched ladders of wood or poles as among many other tribes; for instance in Arunachal Pradesh where houses are generally built on stilts. There is one other similarity in the existence of open platform in front of the house in case of the Bhois, and at the back in case of the Lynngams. The platforms are used for drying paddy, spreading chillies and as lounges for family members when the day's work is done. A house is divided into compartments according to need with the hearth in the centre room. In case of the Bhois, the house-warming ceremony consists of sacrifice of a he-goat and a fowl to *Rekanglong*[64] (Khasi, *Ramiew iing).*

It is not the practice of the Khasis to select the top of a hill for siting their villages. They build their villages in a convenient niche or depression a little below the top as a measure of protection against strong winds, a common feature in the hills during certain time of the year. They scrupulously avoided locating their village on the last eminence of a range of hills, a custom said to have arisen out of the need for defence against surprise enemy attack. The conditions in the hills apparently were not always as peaceful

[64] *Rek-anglong* would appear to be a Mikir word.

as they are now. The attachment of the Khasis to the site of their village, once the village has existed on a particular location for a long time, is said to be great due mainly to the presence of family tombs and memorial stones or *mawbynna.* There had been cases after the Jaintia Rebellion of 1860-62, and the great earthquake of 1897 when people returned and rebuilt their villages on old sites. The same attachment does not apply to Bhois and Lynngams who are in the habit of shifting their villages after every two or three years. Another notable characteristic of a Khasi village, among the uplanders and also the Pnars, is the presence of a sacred grove in its vicinity, where the villagers worship *U ryngkew U basa,* the tutelary deity of the village. Thus along with memorial stones, the sacred grove accounts for the attachment of the Khasis to their village site. Such groves are situated hardly a few hundred yards from a village.

The Khasis build their houses fairly close together as far as the terrain permits but otherwise no definite plan is apparent in the arrangement of the houses. The Synteng villages conform closely to Khasi villages in appearance. The Khasis being of a democratic temperament do not permit reservation of special areas for their *Syiems* or leaders of the society.

In the War villages, the houses are even closer to one another from the nature of their situation on the hill-slope. The houses stand one above the other on shelf-like elevations, generally facing the village street which actually consists of rough and steep stone steps climbing up and linking the houses. The difference in height between the house at the bottom of the slope and that on the top could be as much as 200 to 300 feet. A fairly spacious space is carved out at a convenient spot and kept neatly swept and free from weeds, often enclosed by stone walls, for the session of village tribunals in the War villages. Dances are also held here during festive occasions. The War villages are remarkable for their gardens of areca-nut, entwined with *pan* creepers, and their orange groves reach out to far distances. The villages actually nestle in the midst of their gardens.

The Bhois and Lynngam villages are located in small clearings often in the midst of forests and the houses huddle close to one another on both sides of the village street. As already mentioned,

they are in the habit of shifting their villages from time to time. They do not, therefore, attempt to grow gardens which one notices in War villages. A curious feature of the Lynngam village is the presence of a high bamboo platform, sometimes 20 to 30 feet above the ground, usually in the centre of the village. The village elders meet and gossip on the platform in the evening. They might have borrowed the idea of building very tall platforms from the Garo tree-houses. These platforms as a meeting place of village elders have some resemblance to Apa Tani *lapangs* in the Subansiri district of Arunachal Pradesh. The *lapangs,* however, consist of wooden boards thrown loosely over bamboo frames, and are never so high. All Khasi villages irrespective of the different sections of the people, swarm with pigs, running about freely. The present author is grateful again to I. M. Simon for the short note below on the original Khasi house type:

> 'The shape of the Khasi house occasionally still to be seen in the uplands may be described as a truncated oval, the front being rounded and the back of the house straight. The main side walls are also straight and more or less parallel. The main roof is high at the back and slopes down to the front. There is another and smaller roof over what may be compared to a front porch. This may be described as half-umbrella-shaped.
>
> The perimeter of the walls is usually a stone plinth of dressed or undressed blocks that may be 3 feet high. On this the wood-work is buit up. The front of the house usually faces the village thoroughfare.
>
> The front of the house may either be at ground level or it may be slightly raised. Odds and ends, implements and baskets are kept here. This is the *tyngkong.*
>
> From here steps lead up to the *shyngkup* — an interior porch. The only main door in the house is through the front wall.
>
> The inner room with the hearth *(dpei)* as the focal point, may be divided into two sections — *nengpei* ("above the hearth") where guests and other outsiders may be entertained. The *rympei* (a form of *rumpei* = "below the hearth") is actually the area where the family and intimate friends may gather. This may be called the heart of the

Khasi family circle, and is often used as a synonym for the family.

Khasi houses are without windows, and for this reason the interior is always dark. Light is admitted by means of a hole or a wider opening called *pong-shai* (lit. light-opening) let out in the wall generally by the side of the hearth. The wider opening also serves as a doorway through which the inmates can enter or go out when necessary.

Fire is kept burning all the time and the smoke tries to find an outlet as best it can, though exit is somewhat helped by the slope of the roof up to the back. Above the hearth is suspended a tray-like rack on which things are kept to dry (e.g. wood). This is called the *tyng-ier*. Higher above is the *tym-pan* where articles and baskets are stored when not needed for immediate use.

The walls and floor of the house are generally of wood'.

SPORTS & RECREATION

It appears that Yule among early writers first took notice of Khasi indigenous sports and recreation. For instance, he observed that peg-top spinning was indigenous to the Khasis. They could not have borrowed it from the Assam or the Surma valley plains where the prevalence of this form of sport was not known, Yule was also surprised to find the presence of another sport among the Khasis, known as 'greasy pole' in England. Instead, however, of a leg of mutton or a piece of pork fixed at the top of the pole, the Khasis placed a silver ornament or some amount of money on the top of a bamboo pole well-oiled and made slippery. The successful climber appropriated the reward. The present author as a young boy saw this form of sport as a popular item during the annual school sport meets. Apparently, it was adapted from the Khasis amongst whom it was native and popular.

Robinson (1841) treated the subject of Khasi pastime in a short passage:

'Amongst the amusement of the Khassis (Khasis), archery may be mentioned as the chief, as well as the most interesting. Bird-catching, fishing, hunting, and gambling also occupy no small portion of their leisure time'.

Of course, archery occupies the pride of place and assumed the character of a national sport amongst the Khasis. Mythology takes it back to the beginning of time when their progenitor or the first ancestress of the Khasi race *ka mei-kha,* taught this art to her two sons. The Khasis claim and believe that the *Kamakhya* hill at Gauhati, where now the famous Hindu *tantric* shrine stands, is sacred to them being the seat of their ancestress *Ka mei-kha.* The renowned scholar, Dr Bani Kanta Kakati, also agreed that *Kamakhya* could be a Sanskritized form of an original austric formation. We have also mentioned elsewhere that there is support in *Jogini Tantra* that the form of worship at *Kamakhya* was of non-Aryan origin. The mother of the Khasi race, while giving them the bow and arrows, cautioned them that they should never lose their temper over the game. Even now the *nongkhankhnam,* an arbitrator or umpire, directing and regulating the sport, invariably invokes the primeval mother and repeats her warning to the contestants before the commencement of every game of archery.

We shall follow Gurdon here in describing the Khasi bow and arrow, which also at one time constituted their principal weapon of offence as well as defence, and the rules of the game. In the words of Gurdon, although no 'Robin Hoods', the Khasis are fairly good archers. The Khasi name for bow is *Ka ryntieh* and the arrows are called *Ki khnam.*[65] The usual height of the bow is about 5 feet, and can be as tall as a man's height in exceptional cases. We must, however, remember that the average height of a Khasi hardly exceeds 5 feet 4 inches. The bowstring in olden days was made from three kinds of bamboo namely *U spit, U shken,* and *U siej-lieh.* Readers may refer to the section under *flora* above for an account of the various species of bamboo known to the Khasis.

The arrows are said to be of two kinds: (a) *Ki pliang,* barbed-headed and (b) *Sop,* the plain headed. The first is meant for hunting games and the second is used for archery competitions only. Arrow heads are made of iron or steel, and are fashioned in local smithies. Iron-working is a very old craft among the Khasis. The plumes of vultures, geese, cranes, cormorants and hornbills

[65] *Ki Khnam* = Arrows (plural). Arrow (singular) is *'U khnam'.*

are known to be used for decorating the arrows. The range of a Khasi arrow shot from an ordinary bow by a man of medium strength covers from 150 to 180 yards according to Gurdon's calculations.

The style of Khasi archery competitions was for one village to challenge another in a friendly game. We use the past tense advisedly because archery competition at present has lost much of its innocent character as a lively sport. It is being increasingly used as a means for gambling. We believe many authorized as well as unauthorized gambling dens flourish in Shillong and possibly other places also, making capital out of this erstwhile national sport. Admittedly, wager was also made in olden days but it was never looked upon as a source of individual profit, nor was it made a matter of unwarranted speculation. The wager made by each side in former days was usually raised by subscriptions amongst the competitors. The winning side appropriated the wager staked by the losing side and distributed it amongst themselves or possibly utilized it more often for a grand feast. We do not think archery competition is held any longer just for the sake of a pleasant pastime or sport. However, the old style competition, as described by Gurdon, took the following form.

On a challenge being thrown and accepted, each side appointed a *nongkhangkhanam*[66] (a term which literally means, he who stops the arrow), who only partially corresponded to modern umpire. As we shall see, he was also a magician *par excellence*. These men finalized in advance the terms and conditions of the competition as to (a) the day on which the contest was to take place; (b) the place of the meeting; (c) the number of arrows to be shot by each archer on either side; (d) the distinguishing marks to be allotted to the arrows of either side; (e) the amount of the stake on each side; (f) the number of times the competitors could shoot on the day of the archery meeting. There could have been other conditions also but we might ignore them for our purpose here. The targets, called *U skum*, were generally small bundles of grass, skilfully fashioned and having the measurements usually about 1 foot long and 4 inches in diameter. These were fastened on small

[66] *Nongkhangkhanam*, the term means 'one who divines upon arrows'.

poles and stuck in the ground at a distance of 40 to 50 yards from the shooting line. Each side had its own target, the different targets having been arranged in a line, and the competitors took up positions in a straight line a right angles to the line of fire, facing the targets. Each side then, in turn, took shots at its own target. Every time an arrow found the mark, it was acclaimed with loud cheers. The hits were counted by representatives of both sides at the end of each turn. The side with the greatest number of hits at the end of the day was declared winner. The winning side carried off the wager staked by the opposite side and returned home in a procession, raising loud cheers of joy all the way. The description would be incomplete without mentioning that young women admirers of both sides used to assemble on the ground, and took keen interest in the proceedings. They also dispensed refreshments to the competitors and their supporters.

The most interesting part of the game was the use of magic and incantations. In the early hours of the appointed day, *nong khangkhnam,* already mentioned or, to use a more convenient term, the umpire, on either side, performed magic in front of the target of his own side. The bows and arrows were laid down alongside the target. The umpire held a hollow bamboo receptacle full of water in his hand and repeated the prescribed formula of incantations freely referring to the supposed shortcomings of the opposite side and pouring water in front of the target from time to time. The intention of the proceedings was to cast a spell over the arrows of the opposing side and prevent them from finding the mark. Hence, the significance of the name given to the umpire.

Among other forms of sport, mention may be made of wrestling in which two persons grasping each other's hand with the fingers interlocked try to push one another down to the ground ; tug-of-war with a piece of pole, two contestants holding it between them face to face and placing their feet one against the other ; blind-man's buff, flying kites, pitching cowries into a hole are other forms of sport mentioned by Gurdon. It is, however, strange that he never mentioned another, rather cruel sport, of shooting at birds with small catapults. Indeed, it is a popular game among young boys. The present author has recollection that he noticed even

grown-up people using their bows as catapults to shoot at birds on branches of trees during his numerious journeys down the southern slope of the Khasi hills to Therria. The bows used for the purpose had special adaptation with two strings fixed with a catch for the stone missile just in the middle.

We may as well mention here that, besides bows and arrows, the Khasis also manufactured swords usually of wrought iron, and occasionally of steel. The swords were considerably long without extra handle of wood or bone. Gurdon cast doubt on their efficacy as weapons of offence. The Khasis also used spears which had a more effective appearance. These were not decorated with wool or hair, dyed red, as the Naga spears. The Khasis had shields of rhinoceros hide but lately of buffalo skin. They had also been credited with the knowledge of making gunpowder even before the advent of the British in the hills. The materials used were saltpetre, sulphur and charcoal pounded together in a mortar. The Jaintia Rajah was known to have used cannons in his fight against the Ahoms and the Kacharis.

MUSIC

Amongst all the hill peoples of India's north-east region and, perhaps elsewhere, the Khasis are undoubtedly the most musical race. Their sensitivity to musical sounds is so great that they can readily pick up any tune and melody whether indigenous or foreign. They can handle any musical instrument however complicated, with little training and practice. There is a remarkable passage in Dalton (1872) eulogizing their musical sense and it will serve well as an introduction to what we are going to write on Khasi music:

> 'The English might be characterized by Asiatics as a people that whistle, so little is that expression of a satisfied mind an Eastern accomplishment, but the Khasis are great whistlers . . . . .'

Any one who has lived in the Khasi hills for however short a length of time will testify to the truth of the above ovservation. A porter treading a lonely path or a carpenter absorbed in his work will go on whistling tunes which are often very pretty. With

the Hindi film songs becoming popular among certain sections of the people, they will render any hit-song perfectly and with ease. The following passage in Gurdon revives nostalgic recollections in the mind of this author:

> 'It is pleasant to hear on the road down to Theriaghat from Cherrapunji, in the early morning the whole hillside resounding with the scraps of song and peals of laughter of the coolies, as they run nimbly down the short cuts on their way to market.'

Music whether sung or played on their indigenous instruments like *'Tangmuri'* or *'Ka sharati'* at one time formed invariable part of any social occasion however solemn or gay.[67] It is not possibly universally so nowadays with the growing sophistication and even change in the pattern of music. But music all the same is in the core of the people.

Robinson noted as early as 1841 that it was the custom to play 'a funeral dirge' on bamboo flutes which added much to the solemnity of the scene as a funeral procession slowly progressed towards the cremation ground.

In the above context, we may remind our readers that there exists a highly romantic and tragic legend about the origin of the practice of playing the flute, known as *'Ka sharati'*, at funerals. The legend is about U Manik Raitong (lit. wretched Manik), a lonely man, who inadvertently bewitched a queen with his music played on a bamboo flute. The queen whose husband had gone on his travels fell desperately in love with Manik and at her insistence both committed the sin of adultery, one of the most serious offences a Khasi could commit. A son was duly born. After some months, the king returned home and he was dismayed to see the child. He demanded to know who the father was. She would not say. At last a test was suggested by his councillors. The child was brought to the *durbar* and every male was required to entice him with a banana. None succeeded. Somebody then remembered that U Manik Raitong had not been called to face the test. Many thought

[67] Both *'tangmuri'* and *'sharati'* are pipes. The latter is particularly used on solemn occasions, the former at festivals.

there could be no grounds to suspect him, the poor wretched man that he was. But the council decided that he also should be put to the test. He arrived and the inevitable happened. The child happily went to him. He confessed his guilt. The episode ended in both U Manik Raitong and the queen burning themselves in a funeral pyre. Since that time, the bamboo flute, called *'Ka sharati'*, is played on all solemn occasions like funeral or invocation to the spirit of the dead. Gurdon who related the whole legend in his book on the Khasis concluded as follows:

> 'From U Raitong's time it has become the practice to play the flute at funerals as a sign of mourning for the departed'.

Gurdon added that 'this instrument (*Ka sharati,* also called *Ka shingwiang*) is played at cremation ceremonies and when the bones and ashes of a clan are collected and placed in the family tomb, or *mawbah'*.

The Khasis' musical instruments are limited in number but they are of varied kinds including different types of drums, string instruments, flutes and pipes, and cymbals. The drum is very important for the Khasis and drumming forms the background music for all occasions not excluding a political meeting. It is used as some kind of herald whether it be a festive occasion or a social meet, calling upon people to assemble. Kyndiah writes: 'The use of indigenous musical instruments like 'Tangmuri', a clarionet like bamboo flute and 'Nakra' or 'Bom', a big drum, is invariably woven with the fabrics of the cultural and social life of the people, be it festive or mourning occasions'.[68].

There are several kinds of drum, notably (1) *Ka nakra,* a large kettle-drum made of wood having the head covered with deer skin; (2) *Ka Ksing kynthei,* a cylindrically-shaped drum, having the appearance of a *dhol,* though smaller in size (it is so called because this drum is beaten when women, *kynthei,* dance;) (3) *Ka padiah,* a small drum with a handle made of wood; (4) *Ka tasa,* a small circular drum. Gurdon noted that Khasi drums were nearly always fashioned out of wood, not of metal or earthenware as in Assam.

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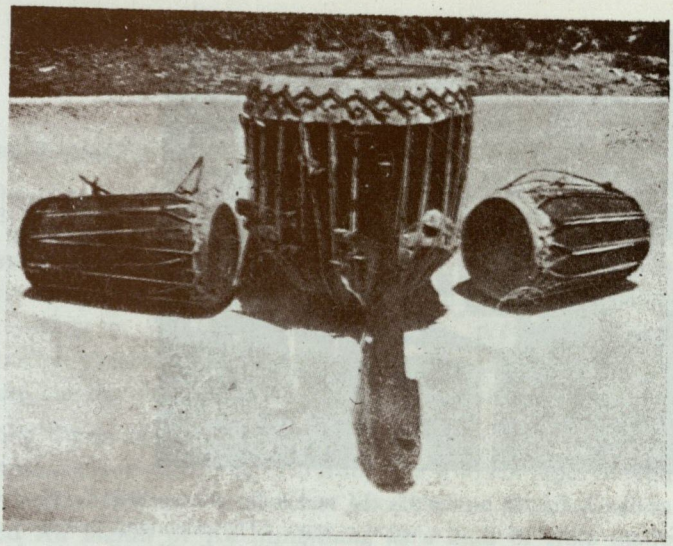
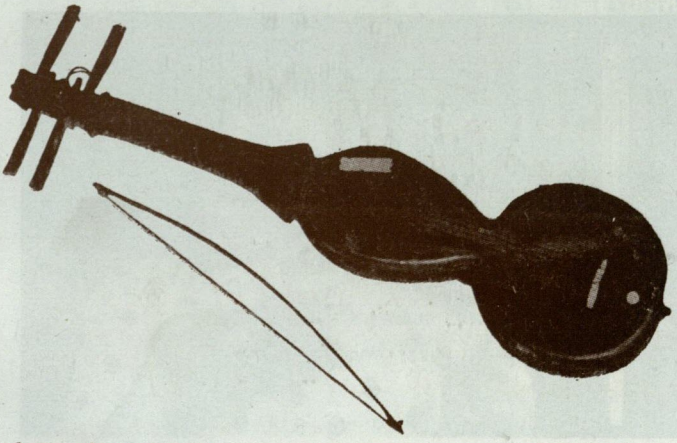
[68] 'A Peep Into Khasi & Jaintia Music' by P. Ripple Kyndiah in Khasi Heritage (1969).



Music is in the lifeblood of the Khasis and they play on various musical instruments some adopted and others native to them. 'Drumming forms the background music for all occasions not excluding political meetings. It is used as some kind of herald . . . . calling upon people to assemble.' The photo shows a *nakra* or *bom* in the middle and two cylindrically-shaped drums, resembling *dhol,* called *Ka Ksing Kynthei,* on two sides of the *nakra.* They are so called because they are played on when women (*kynthei*) dance. Reclining on the *nakra* is a *duitara* played with a little wooden key held in hand.

(This photo was taken at Cherrapunji.)

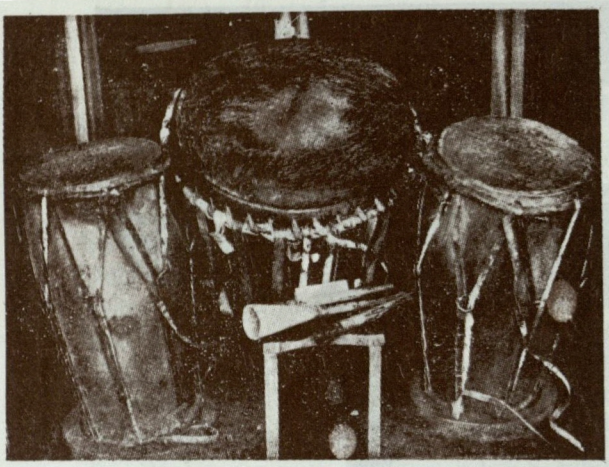
— *Photo by* Abhijit Choudhury.



The above photograph shows a *maryng-od* played with a bow. While nakra and *duitara* might have been borrowed, *Ka Maryng-od* is native to the Khasis. The other string instrument is *Ka Marynthing* played with a plectrum. The latter instrument seems almost to have become obsolete.

(Through courtesy of Meghalaya State Museum.)

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.



(Through courtesy of Meghalaya State Museum.)

In front of the *nakra,* on a stool, is the senhai-like flute called *Ka Tangmuri.* Gurdon described it as a wooden pipe. The celebrated flute associated with the legend of U Manik Raitong, called *Ka Sharati,* seems to have gone out of fashion. *Ka Sharati* is also called *Ka Shingwiang.* The author could not find a specimen even in the Meghalaya State Museum. The author's enquiries at Cherrapunji also did not produce any result. But many Shillong people would easily remember a blind man with a *sharati,* begging at Barabazar. The flute has a plaintive note evocative of introverted loneliness.

(Through courtesy of Meghalaya State Museum.)

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain

Fluentist Marbaniang, himself a well-known composer of Khasi songs, shows how *Ka Mieng* is played. Gurdon called it a Jew's harp (made of bamboo.)

— *Photo by* Ahmed Hossain.

About drumming Kyndiah writes:

> 'Perhaps none appeals more to the aesthetic ear than the "music of drums" which is considered not only entertaining but a class by itself. It is performed by a group of players on drums of varying sizes with the music of *Tangmuri* receding in the background. Its style, presentation and perfect combination among the drummers is simply superb and has the classic touch of the best in drumming'.

Among flutes and pipes, mention has already been made of *Ka tangmuri,* which according to Gurdon is a wooden pipe, though Kyndiah refers to it as ' a clarionet like bamboo flute'. Gurdon described *Ka sharati* or *Ka shingwiang* as a kind of flute made of bamboo. Kyndiah mentions *Ka Sharati* as a reed flute and also refers to another 'home-made bamboo flute' called *Ka Besli.* There is no mention of *Ka Besli* in Gurdon's book. But he mentioned another kind, not taken notice of by Kyndiah, namely *Ka'sing ding phong.* It is a sort of make-shift harp made out of reed by the War section of the Khasis. Gurdon then noted that the Khasis also played a Jew's harp *(Ka mieng),* made of bamboo. Kyndiah waxes eloquent on the music played on the flute like *Ka Besli* or *Ka sharati:*

> 'A happy-working cowboy while tending his herd or while resting gaily on the top of a hill would play his favourite flute pouring out beautiful tunes which, if I may say so, speaks of the green of the Pine trees, meadows and of the surrounding natural beauties in all its glory'.[70].

Among the string instruments, Gurdon mentioned *Ka duitara* which he described as a guitar with muga silk strings played with a little wooden key held in hand. Kyndiah gives a more detailed account of the *duitara*:[71]

> 'Purely home-made the Duitara is made of strong hard wood. The hollow in the belly of the main body is covered with dried skin of animals. Its neck which is longer than the main

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[69] Ibid.

[70] Khasi Heritage (1969).

[71] Ibid.

> body has at its end four holes in which wooden pegs are fixed to hold the strings in tune'.[72]

We also learn from Kyndiah that 'Duitara' provides the invariable accompaniment to one of the most popular forms of vocal music which he terms 'story song'. The function of *duitara* is solely as an accompaniment, very rarely played as a solo. Kyndiah also tells us that *duitara* is not used in ceremonial music. We get the following description of story song again from Kyndiah:

> 'In a story-song the story-teller sings of legends and stories of bygone days in a spontaneous way carrying the listeners with him. Through the fine art of unfolding the story while the music of Duitara is lavishly used to give him the resting tune and also to create the proper and desired atmosphere. This type of story-song is usually performed at night more often times on a moonlit night and continues up to 2 O'clock in the morning when the story comes to an end'.[73]

Gurdon referred to *Ka maryngod* which he described as an instrument much the same as *Ka duitara,* but was played with a bow like a violin. This instrument has not been mentioned by Kyndiah. The other string instrument, mentioned both by Gurdon and Kyndiah, is *Ka marynthing.* Gurdon described it as a kind of guitar with only one string, plucked by the finger. Kyndiah simply writes that 'Marynthing' and 'Sitar' are still popular with certain people while 'Sarong' and other such instruments are rarely used now. Gurdon also mentioned *Ka kynshaw* and *shakuriaw.* These are cymbals made of bell metal.

It should be mentioned here that the Jaintias have adopted the harmonium and *tabla* which they play with considerable skill. They are no longer foreign to them. This author, during his visit to Shangpung near Jowai some years ago found evidence of the popularity of these instruments there. We are also given to know

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[72] The author's informed source has this to say:

'Duitara' and 'nakra' are obviously borrowed. The Khasi names for string instruments they used to have are: *'Ka Marynthing'* (played with a plectrum) and *'Ka Maryng-od'* (played with a bow).

[73] Khasi Heritage (1969).

that the influence of Hindusthani music, assimilated to their own indigenous musical notes, has helped creating a distinct school of Jaintia music. The proximity of Jaintia hills to the plains of sylhet, over parts of which they once dominated and the cultural contact which thus existed, contributed to the evolution of another distinct type of music peculiar to the Jaintias.[74]

Kyndiah mentions a popular type of vocal music known as *Phawar* in Khasi and *Kieh-ki* in Jaintia. This is properly groupsong without instrumental accompainments. 'The popular composition consists of two stages of two lines each. The first line which is a combination of a cluster of words having no meaning at all is employed to rhyme with the second line which carries the real meaning.'[75] In this category is also included *Phawar lasiat.* This form of vocal music is associated with archery, the national game of the Khasis. A victorious party, proceeding homeward after the day's competition, indulge in this form of music. A male voice gives the lead and others join him in chorus. The Jaintias, we are given to learn, resort to a slight variation of this form. This, if we have understood it properly, takes the form of competition in spontaneous musical compositions. This kind of musical contest is popular with the Eskimos who use peculiar hand drums, associated with their Shaman priests, as accompaniments. The Jaintias use no accompaniment. Two spokesmen on either side, facing each other, tease and praise alternately members of the opposite group who happen to become the subject of their attention. Jokes are hurled at each other through songs, composed on the spots, and joined in chorus by members of each party *(Kyndei nea ka ladei).* This form of music, we are told, with the additional use of the music of the flutes and drums, is also a feature of the Jaintia *Laho* Dance.[76]

The folk songs of the Khasi and Jaintia hills are, however, the real repository of their cultural traditions. The are varied according

[74] Ibid.

[75] Khasi Heritage (1969).

[76] The author is given to know by his informed source that this form of 'testing' is also practised by the Sohbar people of south Khasi hills.

to seasons and festivals. The folk songs are generally in praise of the scenic beauty of the hills, the murmuring streams, green valleys, waterfalls, paddy fields as they turn golden with ripened crops. There are also examples of occupational songs, like harvest songs, rich in local variations.

Before we conclude this chapter, we must take note of the predominant influence of the western form of music on modern Khasis. Indeed, any visitor coming from outside or any one occasionally listening to All India Radio, Shillong, may feel inclined to conclude that the orientation of present day Khasis to western music is almost complete. With the spread of English education and possibly under the influence of church music, a great section of the Khasis have come under the impact of western form of music. English cinemas also have made no little contribution towards this orientation. The skill attained by Khasi artistes in handling and playing western musical instruments is indeed of very high order. The violin and the guitar are particularly popular and proficiency achieved by some renowned Khasi artistes in these instruments has been acknowledged widely as far away as Bombay. There are also outstanding soloists on other instruments like the piano, the saxophone, the clarionet etc. Group singing has become very popular. A prominent manifestation of this western influence is seen in the universal popularity of part songs adapted to Khasi compositions. Kyndiah observes as follows:

> 'The artistes could give perfect rendering of an operatic chorus or a solemn hymn. For lighter moods and instant appeal a youth would even sing a western song in Guitar with all the flavour of the exciting rhythm of Latin-American Tango or American Rock'n Roll. In short, Western music has not only made its influence felt but appears to have come to stay as one of the important schools of music'.[77]

We may generally say that the western form of music has found favour mostly in urban areas, and is confined to a certain level of the sophisticated class among the Khasis. The popular and indigenous Khasi tunes still continue to be hummed, or more particularly whistled,

[77] Khasi Heritage (1969).

by working people in the daily round of their life. And these tunes have a nostalgic effect of the lonely hills and dales on the attentive listeners.

We must also add that we see no harm or anything bad in the influence of western music. A thing of beauty is certainly a joy for ever and everywhere. The great Indian poet and composer Tagore himself adapted many western tunes and melodies to Bengali songs. The only thing to remember is that no great artist can thrive for all time to come on mere imitation, but has to turn again and again to the revitalizing and perennial source of his own genius and traditions.

The present author's informed source adds: 'An encouraging feature of recent years is the revival of traditional music, and a number of Khasi-Pnar composers, both men and women, have thus done no little service to the cause of Khasi music.'

A note received by this author from I. M. Simon on the present state of the Khasi music is appended below:

> 'Music would appear to be in the lifeblood of the Khasi people: whether the 'formal' type played on instruments and associated with communal festivities, or the individual expression of a contented mind. The flute and the harp (duitara) may then be used.
>
> Khasi music until very recently, has been mainly of the type 'without words'. This may explain why when it is not played on instruments, it is invariably whistled. A Khasi at work cannot help whistling and early British officers who worked in these hills or knew the people have commented on what they thought was a peculiarly 'English' trait: (cp. Dalton & Yule).
>
> Popular western or Indian film music may alike constitute part of a Khasi's repertoire, and his rendering will usually be very creditable and facile. Whether the singer knows the meaning of what he sings is a different thing altogether.
>
> Early attempts to enter the field of recorded music were not successful. The first recorded Khasi songs were adapted to the western style. They thus lacked spontaneity and appeal and died a natural death.

The Radio in post-Independence years provided the incentive to a number of musicians who rightly believed that Khasi music had individuality and abundant scope for exploitation.

Although as a rule, the field of Khasi music has been a masculine preserve, a number of Khasi-Pnar women have established a place for themselves in this field. One of the first really popular composers of Khasi music and lyrics was a lady, Kong Listrimai Syiemlieh. Without disparaging the work of other composers and lyricists, we may mention a few of them here:

U Siken Swer — with a flair for the humorous type of songs:

U Siken Syiemlieh, who has adapted many Khasi folktales to Music:

The Wahlang family of Laban — Edith Ermina and U Adolf Benitonel — who must have inherited their gifts from their father, U Hedronel Nonglait. The latter was a gifted composer but he unfortunately lived and worked before the Radio opened the field for original compositions. Edith's daughter and her son-in-law are following in her steps.

U Beriwel Kyndiah, an accomplished composer of Jaintia music and a very capable performer on the piano and violin; Viviana Modi War and Marvellous Massar, two young women with remarkable gifts as singers;

U Chosterfield Khongwir whose compositions are almost without exception sung by his gifted wife, Helen Giri.

The couple have been on a tour to Germany in their professional capacity'.

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