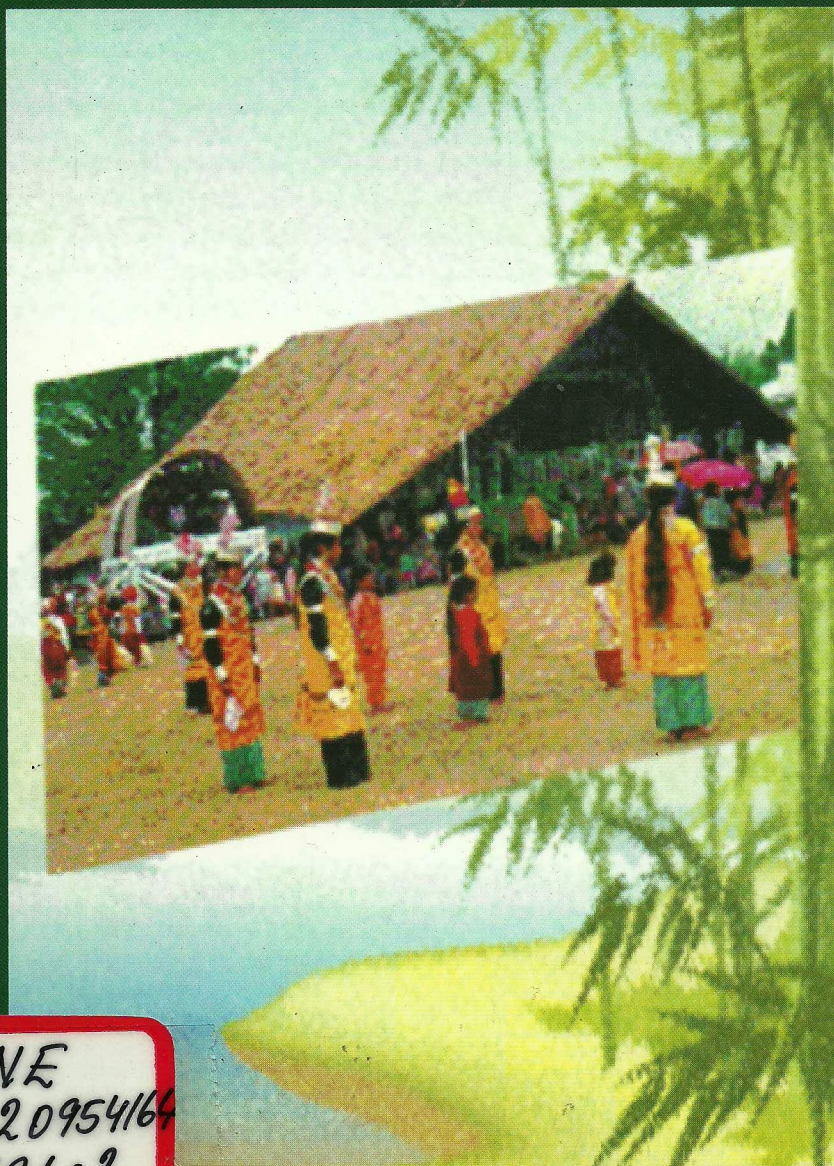


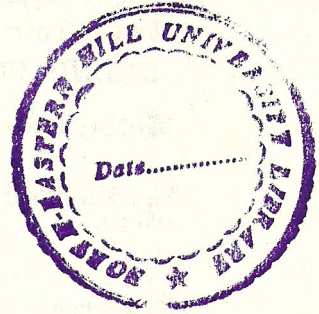
Khasi Cultural Resistance to Colonialism



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Sharmila Das Talukdar

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BY
SHARMILA DAS TALUKDAR

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(Sharmila Das Talukdar)

Introduction

The Khasis are a group living in the Khasi Hills of Meghalaya who came into contact with the British administration directly in 1835, when the entire Khasi and Jaintia Hills was placed under a Political Agent with headquarters in Cherrapunjee. Contemporary to the British administration came the missionaries, the 'specialists' and 'sacred intelligentsia'¹ who served as carriers of the Christian faith. The missionaries served the British administration in furthering the administrators' interest who 'felt that the best way to tame the primitive Khasis was through love which the missionaries alone could give.'² The missionaries came as the messengers of Christianity and in the process inflicted a super-imposition of foreign religio-cultural ethos which served as an external force, shaking the existing cultural ethos of the Khasis. The spiritual and temporal arms of the Christian missionary contributed to the imposition of the attitudes, norms, values and world view of the British, who being the political heads could emphasize this domination.

To explain the domination of an alien power which had arrived in their midst, namely the British, I have used the much used term colonialism which is 'domination of an alien minority asserting racial and cultural superiority over a materially inferior native majority; contact between machine oriented civilization with Christian origin...'³ The fact that the political and economic hegemony, the establishment of which was the most pertinent point for the British was reiterated through social means 'the reactionary character of British imperialism was more manifest in the social sphere'⁴ and the British hegemony penetrated the masses through various socio-cultural channels. The concept, therefore,

denotes not only extra territorial expansion of a political and economic nature which is generally taken to be connoted by this term, but also constitutes a system of controls and subjugation meant to facilitate the exploitation of the colonized people. This purpose of subjugation and control was facilitated by two dissimilar groups of people, they being the merchants and the missionaries. Between the two, the latter upheld the self-imposed obligation of the more advanced British power to spread civilization and uplift the 'pagans' or 'barbarians' as they perceived the conquered people to be. However, this process of spreading civilization and uplifting the 'barbarians' was not viewed in the same light as the British by the colonized group. It was not long before the community was compelled for different reasons (which I have discussed in Chapters II and III) to offer resistance to this kind of domination. The term resistance is taken as an 'intention to preserve community life as it existed before the colonizers intervened'.⁵ and also as the 'inter play between ideologies of domination and subordination'.⁶

The perceived threat to the ways of life of the Khasis led Khasi elders to formulate certain methods, adopt certain measures and in some cases to launch resistance movements.

Culture as we know includes avenues of religion, politics, morality, value system, in fact a total way of life. It is, therefore, an invisible medium of perceiving, retaining and enacting meaning and values, which are the essentials of a particular society. The essential core of culture consists of traditions (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values. Thus culture can be considered as a product of action on one hand and conditioning elements of further action, on the other. Accordingly, I have first discussed Khasi culture as an 'ordered system of meanings and symbols'.⁷ The Khasis asserted their individuality like other groups through their culture. The cultural ethos of every group is a universal phenomenon even though it

may only be brought into focus when an external influence touches a group to undermine it. The second chapter discusses the historical process of the entry of the British along with the missionaries into the Khasi hills. The missionaries of various origins commenced their proselytization activities with clear rules laying 'the standard of church membership on the mission field high and clear from the beginning. It was enjoined that every candidate for conversion should not only have renounced all heathen practices and lead a moral life.....'⁸ The religious rituals and festivals were seen as 'excesses' which were 'pagan', attendance to which were the causes of disciplinary action by the Church. In addition, the Khasi religion and their value system was classed as 'vague belief in God'⁹ by the early writers.

Social change implies a 'significant alteration of social structure, i.e. patterns of social action and interaction including consequences and manifestations of such structure embodied in norms (rules of conduct) values, and cultural product and symbols'.¹⁰ Such a type of change was brought about very perceptibly in the Khasi context through the process of British colonialism in the Khasi hills. The colonialist ideological foundation was that 'they were part of the civilized world as they were Christians and others beyond the pale of Christendom were a amorphous mass whose common characteristics was their heathendom'.¹¹ and thus noticeably inferior to the colonizers' unquestionable superiority. On the basis of their supposed ideological superiority, the Missionaries as the ideological arm for colonization were means of domination and depreciation of the ideology of the Khasis. Thus the Christian ideology became a exploitative value system.

The Khasi society which had a definite ideology as 'closely related beliefs or ideas or even attitudes that characterize a group or community'¹² perceived the threat system and perpetrated different forms of manifest and latent opposition to the Missionary

and British suppression.

The Seng Khasi started as an organisation in 1899 with aims to 'revive the true faith of their forefathers' and 'foster a sense of brotherhood' among the Khasis who still retain their socio-cultural and religious heritage, among other aims. The temporal activity of the missionaries like education, medical facilities etc. was seen as a means to undermine tradition and proselytize the Khasis. The spiritual activities of the Church on the other hand, was seen as the means of projecting the Christian values and to prove the inefficacy of the traditional system in terms of health and well-being. The traditional healing system was put down as simply superstitious and primitive.

The present working of the Seng Khasi is based entirely on the need to strengthen the Khasi cultural identity through knowledge of their own culture. In Chapter-III I have shown how this organisation has been the means of retaining awareness regarding the Khasi distinctiveness. By entering the fields of education and social welfare they have attempted to break the power-wielding grip of the missionaries. Again by reassuring the people of the relevance and greatness of their own culture, the Seng Khasi has made an organised effort at establishing a distinct identity among the Khasis. Many of the cultural elements of the Khasis have been imbibed into the Christian Khasis who have included certain cultural activities in order to counter the threat of the Seng Khasi organisation, which they felt was taking away many Christians. The *Seng Khyllang* (United Endeavour Society) along with the Indian Tribal Cultural Forum have established a platform for enhancing the understanding of the traditional cultural activities of the Khasis. The various clan organisations too have come up to highlight the traditional basis of the society. Another branch namely the *Seng Kyrsew* organises talks about Khasi religion and culture in the interior areas of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills in order to expose the people to their traditional culture.

The *Seng Pyni yet* another unit of the Seng Khasi holds talks and group discussions about Khasi religion and culture on every Sunday to motivate the people to retain their culture and resist outside influence. The Seng Khasi has also been attempting to associate itself with other organisations like the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), and maintain its distinctive identity by highlighting their differences with Christian Khasis.

The Christian Khasis on the other hand have in their own way offered cultural resistance by attempting to throw away the yoke of the west by promoting certain elements in the culture which would help them to retain their Khasi identity. Slight tremors of dissent against the missionary ways are being manifest in covert ways (refer Chapter V). Though this assertion in an organised way are few, for it is seen more on an individual level yet this is fairly well manifest. There is also a noticeable attempt at modifying certain elements which were blatantly colonial.

In comparison with the Seng Khasi who believed that without religion the strings that bind the Khasi society will be broken and would gradually disappear, the Christian Khasi equally worried about Khasi identity, yet prefer it to be limited to 'culture'. The young Khasis who are born Christians would like to preserve their new religion while at the same time keeping their pride in Khasi heritage intact.

I have tried to show that the response to the challenges of subjugation is not found limited to the organised effort of the *Seng Khasi*. There is mushrooming of resistance groups within the society.

The present day resistance is mainly in form of associations, promoting different aspects of tradition like names, dress, music, literature, theatre and dance. These are, however, projection of culture in a piecemeal fashion, more like cultural showpieces. This piecemeal manifestation of culture cannot really wipe out

the effects of colonialism. This is also the reason why the two major groups among the Khasis could not launch a powerful social movement against cultural subjugation. There is, of course, the pragmatic attempt to keep the religious group, i.e. Seng Khasi alive in order to ensure the continuity of the tradition. In the present day, we can also see in the symbolism of the colonised group (the Christian Khasis) a conscious attempt at integrating their traditional attitudes with their new religion. This is symbolized vividly in the work of Christian leaders like Rev. Fr. Sngi, Rev. Kharkongor and others.

Here I sense a dilemma, on the one hand you have members of a group negating a large chunk of their tradition (*viz.* religion) as superstition, in favour of a new religious ideology which they feel is more modern and in tune with the times and on the other hand, the same members of the group wish for a balance between their tradition and the newly acquired modernity. Except for group dances and group songs and artifacts like 'baskets', *daos* etc. displayed in market places there does not appear any clear cultural thrust which could be uniquely Khasi. The ethnic identity seems to be the only hallmark for being a Khasi. The cultural identity is being slowly pushed to the background. Today you can be Khasi if you have a Scheduled Tribe certificate, no matter where you live, no matter what is your religion and even if you think like or are an Anglo-Indian.

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