CHAPTER - II

THE KHASIS: THE LAND AND ITS PEOPLE
The Khasi Land: Its Physical Structure

The homeland of the Khasis is a hilly state situated in the north-east of India and known as the district of United Khasis and Jaintia Hills, under the State of Meghalaya. Meghalaya came into being as a full-fledged state on January 21, 1972. The state is mainly inhabited by the matrilineal tribal communities of the Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos.

According to the 1991 Census, the state is spread over an area of 2,2429 sq. kms. and has a total population of 17,60,626 (Census of India, 1991). The total literacy rate of the State is 49.10 per cent, viz. males 53.12 per cent and females 44.85 per cent. Further urban literacy rate is 81.74 per cent and rural 41.05 per cent. It has a working population of 42.67 per cent and non-workers comprise of 57.33%. The percentage of birth rate is 32.4 and death rate is 8.8 per cent (Directorate of Economics and Statistics, Government of Meghalaya, 1993).

Meghalaya lies between 85°49' and 92°52' East longitude and between 20°1' and 20°5 North Latitude. It is bounded on the west and on the south by Bangladesh and on the East and on the North by Assam.

Meghalaya today is a populous and proliferating state. There has been a steady growth of population during the past few decades. A glance at the population figures of

In 1991, the total urban population of the state was males 1,73,817 and females 1,56,262. The density of population per square kilometre in 1991 was 79 persons.

Locale and People

The history of the Khasi Hills had been shrouded in darkness till the beginning of the 19th century except for fragmentary stories such as Khasis raids on the Sylhet people (Nakane, 1961:97). The first reference to the inhabitants of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills occurs about the middle of the sixteenth century. The Khasis are better known since the annexation of the district to the British in 1833 (Gait, 1905:311).

The Khasis and the Jaintia Hills are divided politically into two sub-divisions, with headquarters at Shillong for the Khasi Hills and at Jowai for the Jaintia Hills respectively. The people of both subdivisions are called 'Khasis' in a broad sense and are distinctly marked off from other neighbouring tribes and people by language and social structure. Their language belongs to one of the Mon-Khmer group of the Austro-Asiatic family to which the
Munda of central India also belong. The main feature of the Khasi society is its matriarchal social structure.

Though all Khasis share fundamentally the same language and social structure, their culture, dialects, economy, social usage, and political organization vary owing to the ecological and politico-historical differences among them. Following the geographical and ecological differences, the Khasis are divided into five main subgroups. These groups are segregated into fairly well-defined cultural areas, each developing a different economy and dialect, namely the Jaintias of the Jaintia Hills also known as the Synteng or Pnar, the Khynriam Khasis or Upland Khasis of Shillong plateau of the Khasi Hills, the War who inhabit the southern slope of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills (they are called geographically the Khasi-War and the Jaintia-War), the Bhoi occupy the northern slopes of the Khasi Hills and the Lyngam inhabit the western border of the Khasi Hills near the Garo Hills. These sub-tribes are again divided into a number of clans, lineages and families in their respective territories.

"The development of the upland Khasi Hills of the Shillong plateau started with the establishment of its headquarters at Shillong in 1874. Since then, the features of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills have changed a great deal. What was once a small Khasi hamlet, untouched by the light
of history has become a busy modern town where many Khasi intellectuals live, mixing with various outsiders who are engaged in official work or in business. The British administration opened the way to missionary activities, especially that of the Welsh Calvinist Methodists who set up a mission in the Hills in 1841, almost at the same time the British political influence began to make itself felt in the Khasis Hills. Along with the political penetration from Cherrapunjee (1833) to Shillong, missionaries established many institutions, including churches, schools and hospitals, etc. Christian education, bringing with it the promise of clerical positions, attracted young Khasis a great deal; and the majority of the upland Khasis have been converted to Christianity. They have become the modern intellectuals of their people. Besides these political and religious changes there have been very important changes in Khasis economy, along with the development of Shillong and the opening of the motorable road to Gauhati from Shillong after Independence, when Shillong became the seat of the Assam Government as well as the capital of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, Shillong has become an important trading centre. These changes have introduced the Khasis into an active commercial economy which again has brought about various changes in their social life. The history of the
Khasi Hills during the last hundred years has changed a great deal the picture of the Hills (Nakane, 1961:97-99).

Shillong: Its Environment

Shillong the field of the present study is the picturesque state capital of Meghalaya, also known as the 'Scotland of the East', is situated at a height of 5,000 feet above sea level.

"Shillong is the name of the tutelary deity of a state formerly known as "Ka Hima Saw Kher Lai Lyngdoh". This god has his abode on the top of a mountain peak named after him "U Lum Shillong". It is the highest peak in Meghalaya and is held sacred being the source of the nine revered rivers of Khasi Hills known as "Ki Khyndai Umdih, Khyndai Umtong" (the nine living waters). The Khasis call this god "U Lei Shillong", and he was the maternal uncle of a divine maiden "Ka Pah Syntiew" (flower charmed), who founded the dynasty of "Ki Syiem Shillong", who ruled over the heartland of Khasi Hills extending north-wards to the Kolong and Brahmaputra and southwards to the Barak and the Surma. Out of the wedlock of the divine maiden to a man from Nongjri were born children who were chosen by the elders of Ka Hima Sawkher Lai Lyngdoh to be their kings. The Khasis being matrilineal Ka Pah Syntiew thus became the
founder of the rulers known as "Ki Syiem Shillong" whom we see today in the persons of "Ki Syiem Nongkrem" also called "Ki Syiem Khyrim" (Rymbai, 1973:28-30).

Culture Contacts

The contact of the Khasis with the various socio-cultural or socio-religious influences coming from outside their land-locked region has had a shaking effect on many aspects of their traditional ethos and culture. "It has to be admitted that though the impingement has been considerable in some respects, in may other respects their traditional mores have continued unaffected" (Mathur, 1979:15).

There was no settled habitation by the name of Shillong till the British selected this valley as their district headquarters in 1864. The villages existing in this valley then were a few scattered huts in Laban, Mawkhar, Laitumkhrah, Nongkseh and Lawsohtun. It was the British who gave the name Shillong to these villages taken together.

Marginal effects on the society caused by the British rule and opening up of communications cannot be altogether ignored. "Changes consequent on locations of the capital of Assam at Shillong in Khasis Hills in 1874, such
as influx of outsiders in large numbers leading to more and varied inter-ethnic marriages, the upsurge in economy and improvement in the prospects of trade, greater horizontal and vertical mobility of population better communication, etc. owe their origins to the British rule. But, the prime factor which induced and fostered silent and mammoth changes in the Khasi society was the work of the missionaries for nearly a century or more. This work also nourished and unfastened forces of adoption, resistance, adaptation and opposition. The changes that occurred by invisible degrees and stages, in the hitherto undisturbed Khasi society grew more tangible over a period of time. Missionary influence was a major catalyst for the metamorphosis in the Khasi society (Natarajan, 1977:91).

Growth and Composition of Population

Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya has overgrown its rural past. It is interesting to study the spiral of population-growth in Shillong town, particularly during the last eighty years. For the preceding eighty years there has been a fairly steady growth of population. The population figures of different periods are: 1881 - 4,288; 1891 - 6,720; 1901 - 9,621; 1911 - 13,639; 1921 - 17,203; 1931 - 26,536; 1941 - 38,192; 1951 - 58,512; 1961 - 1,02,398; 1971

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- 1,22,752; 1981 - 1,74,703; 1991 - 2,22,273. It is worth noting in this connection that the steady and rapid growth of Shillong in recent years has resulted in a shift in the mode of life of the growing population.

There were only a handful of Christians in Shillong in those early years. Till 1871, their number did not exceed 400, in the whole district. The first "Ing-Mane Trai Ri" (Chapel of the National Church) was established in the Umsohsun area to hold a small number of worshippers (where at present the Sweeper Lane meets the G.S. Road near the Police Point). It was called the Chapel of Babu Don Rai, because it was constructed by him. He was ordained in Calcutta in 1877. He was in-charge of the Umsohsun Church from 1873 to 1889 (Laitflang, 1972:65:68). Today after nearly 150 years of the beginning of proselytisation in a concerted manner the population of Christians (mostly Khasis) comprise of 69,926 Catholics in Shillong City and a total of 2,54,622 Catholics and 3,54,257 Presbyterians in the whole of Khasi and Jaintia Hills (Presbyterian Statistics, Synod house and Archdiocese of Shillong Directory 1993). In 1901, 9 per cent of the Khasis were Christians, 3 per cent were Hindus and nearly all the remainder were orthodox Khasis (Imperial Gazetteer of India). According to the Census of 1911, out of a population of 15,000 in Shillong 1,300 or 10 per cent were Christians.
However, over the years there has been a considerable increase in the number of Khasis who convert to Christianity. The Christian population increased rapidly during the first six decades of this century. The population of Christians (mostly Khasis) was, 1961 - 1,44,879 and 1971 - 2,48,000 (approx.). According to Census data 1971, the number of Christians among the Khasis alone was estimated at about 2,12,000 in a total population of 3,52,000. After the conversion of Krishna Chandra Pal in 1800, seven Khasis embraced Christianity. By 1920, 30 per cent of the Khasi population became Christian. But in 1962, only 39.7 per cent of the population had become Christian. In 1965 the figure was 47 per cent of the population, and today about 53 per cent of the total population in the district and 60-65 per cent of the Khasis are Christians. There is a slight discrepancy in the figures as gathered from the Church institutions and the census records.

Seng Khasis (Non-Christian Khasis)

The presence and activities of the missionaries brought out in the open the strong revivalist forces within the Khasi society. These forces got consolidated and began articulating against the spread and conversion to Christianity. It was thus that the Seng Khasi movement was born in 1899. The Seng Khasis was founded with the object
to preserve the ancient Khasi culture and religion. The Seng Khasi adopted four important principles with a view to implement the objective of the organization. These were (i) adherence to the tenets of kinship as specified by the Khasi ancestors, (ii) righteousness through service, love and truth, (iii) respect for one's own fellowmen with humility and faith, and (iv) belief in God, the Sovereign Lord, the Creator and Giver of all. Some prominent Khasis associated with the movement are Jeebon Roy, Sib Charan Roy, Chandranath Roy, Hormu Rai Diengdoh, Dolip Singh and Rashmohon Roy Nongrum. The non-Christian Khasi leaders made great efforts to revitalize the Khasi culture particularly in the fields of religion, moral code and ethics through their publications. Jeebon Roy's pioneer studies (1897, 1900) on Khasi religion "Ka Niam Jong ki Khasis" (the religion of the Khasis and "Ka Kitab Shaphang (Wei U Blei") have thrown much light not only on several aspects of the Khasi religion, but also the need for preservation and protection of the Khasi religion and the historical tradition and culture against the onslaught of Christianity which was bringing about rapid changes in the society. In May 1921. The Seng Khasi Free Morning Schools was founded with the objective to give free education to the poor and helpless and illiterate Khasi boys and girls.
Education

Second only to conversion education ranks as the most important contribution of the Christian missionaries in the Khasi Hills. The percentage of literacy in the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts of the different periods are: 1901 - 6.72 per cent (Males 9.64 per cent and females 4.01 per cent), 1911 - 6.51 per cent (Males 9.57 per cent and females 3.62 per cent), 1921 - 9.05 per cent (Males 12.44 per cent and females 5.78 per cent), 1931 - 10.94 per cent (Males 14.73 per cent and females 7.07 per cent), 1941 - 16.51 per cent (Males 21.58 per cent and females 10.81 per cent), 1951 - 22.96 per cent (Males 29.13 per cent and females 16.41 per cent), 1961 - 37.15 per cent (Males 42.70 per cent and females 31.04 per cent), 1971 - 39.69 per cent (Males 43.79 per cent and females 35.26 per cent), 1981 - 44.08 per cent (Males 47.89 per cent and females 39.08 per cent), 1991 - 49.10 per cent (Males 53.12 per cent and females 44.85 per cent).

The important feature of the missionary work was the strong spirit of competition among the various evangelical missions. This led to the intensification of the activities of each denomination in its own sphere. The Roman Catholics who followed the Welsh Mission in 1890, established well-reputed educational institutions namely Loreto (1909), St.
Mary’s (1913), St. Edmund’s (1905), Don Bosco Technical School (1923) and other reputed schools besides colleges to be followed by St. Anthony’s (1935), St. Mary’s (1935) and St. Edmund’s (1937). By the late thirties Shillong had become the biggest and most prominent centre for higher education and missionary activities not only in the Khasis Hills but in the whole of North-East India.

With the passing of time and shifting of the activities of the Government to Shillong, which grew in importance as the then capital of Assam, the missionaries also carried their activities to Shillong and established a network of institutions. By 1961, the Presbyterians had the maximum number of schools.

The initial impact of missionary work, conversion, availability of employment opportunities, medical facilities, education, etc. led in a way, to an acute awareness on the part of the orthodox Khasi.

Jeebon Roy, a self-educated intellectual from Shella jointed the service of the East India Company in 1858 as an interpreter and retired in 1894 as a senior Extra Assistant Commissioner, being the first Khasi E.A.C. His concerted effort resulted in the founding of the Shillong Government High School in 1878, which marked the beginning of formal English education in Shillong. Jerman Jones brought into existence the Mission High School (today’s K.J.P.) in 1884–
85. In 1880 Sib Charan Roy passed the Entrance Examination from Shillong Government High School founded by his father before the Mission High School was started. He was the first Khasi to pass the entrance examination.

The number of educated Khasis began to increase over the years. Among them, were more Christian Khasis than orthodox ones. Solomon Blah and Dohory Ropmay graduated in 1898. In 1905, six Khasis had obtained the degree. Khasi women also began to occupy important positions in the society, by virtue of education. Miss Anamon Tham was the first lady to pass the Entrance Examination in 1902 and F.A. Examination 1904. Enola Khain (Chyne) was the first graduate (1918). Miss Mavis Dunne was the first lady minister in Assam, in the Cabinet of Sir Saadullah around 1937, ten years before Independence of the country. Female literacy began to grow and the report of 1931-32 stated that the Khasi women occupied the first place in India in the pre-Independence days in matter of literacy.

The People : Their Social Institution

The earlier near-static Khasis society underwent transformation that began around the year 1813. However, the matri-centred Khasi society remained as before. According to Nag, “Although Christianity was found to have
made considerable impact on the Khasi education and economic condition, it seems to have a minimal effect on the traditional rules of inheritance and residence and on clan exogamy. The youngest daughter still inherits the largest share than the rest, both among Christians and non-Christians. Matrilocal residence is still the dominant pattern among both” (1965:151). Similarly, Bareh states “Christianity accounts for considerable changes ...., but it has not yet materially changed the laws of inheritance. Adaptation to the western life was quickly made although the matrilineal laws of inheritance and succession and other cultural traits were retained” (1972:321:323). The rules of abstinence in matters of marriage were strictly observed. The exogamous unit, Kur or Jait (clan) an over-grown family that descended through female has survived through the centuries. The missionaries could not directly or otherwise influence the matri-centred social institution of the Khasis.

Descent and Residence (Their Family Life)

True to its matrilineal principle the Khasis reckons descent through the female line, the children take the name of their mother, are members of their mothers lineage and clan and live in their mothers social group. Social
recognition of the child being centred on the mother in other words children owe to the mother their social placement.

In conformity with the principle the Khasi household is matri-local in nature. The basic residential unit comprise of the mother, her husband and their children.

The social, cultural, political and economic set up of the race is based on a matrilineal system. According to this system, the children belong to the mother and her family, through mothers to the mother to the common ancestors. Children of informal unions do not have a problem of group placement. Hence no Khasi child can be illegitimate child whether the mother borne the child from the husband with whom she has been formally married or not. The child by right of birth has claim to the family to which his mother belongs (Lyngdoh, 1972:78).

The most remarkable feature of the Khasi marriage is that it is usual for the husband to live with his wife in his mother-in-law's house and not for him to take his bride to his house. Divorce is very common in Khasi society. Women not only has a right to property but also has a right to choose their life partners and to re-marry after widowhood (Gur'don, 1975:106).
Khasi - Family Organization

Reverence to the ancient female progenitors constitute an important feature in the family organization where the mother's clan is adopted by her children. Among the Khasis, owing to the matrilineal custom the mother is a person entrusted with the important duties of performing family rites and ceremonies occupying the position of a family priestess though in actual practice, males who are brothers perform the actual task if sacrifice and other religious celebrations of the house.

Family organization centres around the mother in which capacity she acts as a keeper of the hearth and kitchen. She is in-charge of jewels, ornaments, vessels, implements and lands. In all acts of family celebration and the issue of inheritance, the mother exercises her duties, obligations and authority in consultation with her brother's who acts as Kni (Uncles) in the capacity of counsellors to her children.

It should be noted the maternal uncle, i.e. the mother's brothers have a great role in promoting the welfare of her children. In fact the former act as counsellors and guardians to their nephews. Khasi children, therefore, receive guidance both from father's and maternal uncles. The father has his part to play in bringing up his children.
It is wrong to think that he is a nobody (stranger) but has an exalted position by maintaining the children (Bareh, 1967:112:114).

Family Organization of the Matrilineal System

According to Gurdon, many of the Khasi clans trace their descent from the ancestress or Kiaw (grand-mother) who are styled Ka Iaw-bei tymmenlit, grandmother of the root, i.e. (the root of the tree of the clan). The descendants of one ancestress of the clan Ka Iawbei Tynrai are called shikur or one clan. Then comes the division of the Kpoh or sub-clan, all the descendants of one great grandmother being styled shi kpo. The next division is the family (1975:118).

The house where the mother lives is known as Ka Ingseng (a foundation house) or the house which belongs to the whole family or clan, which on her death passes on to her youngest daughter and this is one of the foundations of the matrilineal system amongst the Khasis. Apart from being a place for family celebrations and religious sacrifices, important affairs relating to the family and clan are discussed in this house (Lyngdoh, 1972:43:44).
Inheritance

The youngest daughter according to strict usage is merely the custodian of property, the sole management of family affairs lies with the maternal uncle. Pakyntein stated that "The clan or Jait and not the individual is the unit of the Khasi society in which the eldest maternal uncle is the head (Census, 1961).

To understand the Khasi rules of inheritance we have to distinguish between two types of property, namely 1) The ancestral property (Ka Nong Tyammen) that which has passed down in the family for generations. This may include land, houses, paddy-fields, groves, cash, ornaments, domestic animals, etc. 2) Self-acquired property (Ka Nong-Khynraw) that which is earned during a person's life time.

Inheritance of ancestral property follows strictly in the female order. It falls from mother to youngest daughter failing which by death or social taboo it goes to her next youngest daughter. If the youngest daughter who inherits the ancestral property happens to be childless or has only sons, then on her death, the next youngest sister inherits the property and then passed on to her youngest daughter after her. Thus the Khasi contributes to the ultimogeniture pattern of inheritance where ancestral property passes on from mother to youngest daughter for generations.
Inheritance of the ancestral property is, however, coupled with certain social obligations, while the elder daughters set up separate households a few years after their marriage, the youngest daughter continues to stay in the mother's house. She not only has to look after the aged parents but if any member of the family is widowed, divorced or fall into any misfortune, it is the duty of the youngest daughter to look after them and to give them shelter if the need arises. The house of the youngest daughter is looked up by the members of the matrikin as a refuge in the midst of any contingency.

The youngest daughter although inherits the ancestral property, she is not free to deal with it as she pleases. Each and every move that she makes should be with the acknowledgement and consent of her brothers or the mother. She is merely the custodian of the property while real control over them is vested in the hands of her male matrikin.

Further, in lieu of the inheritance, the youngest daughter has to see to the execution of the family rites and bear all the expenses incurred. Above all, to maintain the dignity and honour of the youngest daughter's house, she should be free from all social contaminations. It is for this reason that committance of incest, adultery, crime or
change of religion deprive the youngest daughter of her right to the ancestral property.

The above rule of inheritance applies to ancestral property only. As far as the self-acquired property is concerned it can be disposed off according to the will of the beholder. Self-acquired property is considered to be the private monopoly of the owner and he can give it to whoever he likes. Inheritance of a person's self-acquired property need not necessarily follow from mother to youngest daughter. Sons too can inherit self-acquired property if the owner of such property wills it. Determination of the right of inheritance to the acquired property of a man depends upon the period during which the property is earned before marriage that is, before a man goes to live with his wife and children, the property known as Kamai Ing Kur (that is, which is earned in one's mother's house) will go to his mother on failing which his sister or sister's daughter. But property which is earned after his marriage known as Kamai Ing Khun (that is, which is earned in one's wife's house) will go to his wife and children.

The Khasi in general and those of them inhabiting Shillong in particular, have for a not inconsiderable period been exposed to intensive missionary activities. These contacts, apart from what has come in the wake of the changed situation since independence seem to have made much
of an impact on the traditional society of the Khasis particularly on their socio-cultural life. This study is, therefore, an endeavour to comprehend in what manner families have departed from their traditional norms and practices and to what extent have they found it expedient to retain their traditional system and practices with regard to socialization of children in various family situation, though they have been living in contact with the outside world for the last 150 years or so.

A society in the process of transformation cannot be measured except in terms of both past and future. Hence to acquire a proper perspective for the study of the present, this study is a humble attempt to study change and continuity associated with the attitudes and behaviour patterns between generation with regard to the parent-child relationship in the socialization of their children among the Khasis over a period of time.