CHAPTER I

1.0 Introduction

The aim of this work is to provide a comparative phonological and lexical study of some of the regional dialects of Khasi, an Austro-Asiatic language spoken in the hill state of Meghalaya, located in North East India.

1.1 The Khasis

North-East India is popularly known as the ‘Land of Seven Sisters’ comprising the seven states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. Of late, Sikkim has been added as the eight states of the North-East. All these states have their own indigenous tribes speaking different languages and having their own unique cultures. Meghalaya is a state known for its scenic beauty, and its capital, Shillong, is commonly known as ‘Scotland of the East’. This state was inaugurated as an autonomous state within Assam on the 2nd April, 1970. It was declared a state of Indian Union on Jan. 21st, 1972. Administratively, Meghalaya consists of eleven districts namely, East Garo Hills, West Garo Hills, South Garo Hills, North Garo Hills\(^1\), South West Garo Hills\(^2\), East Jaintia Hills\(^3\), West Jaintia Hills (formerly known as Jaintia Hills District before the creation of East Jaintia Hills District), East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi, South West Khasi Hills\(^4\).

Meghalaya has two dominant tribal groups, the Garos in the western part and the Khasis in the central and eastern regions. According to Mawrie (2009), the term ‘Khasi’ is inclusive of both, the so called Khasis and Pnars. The term Khasi-Pnar is used for convenience’s sake but actually the two communities belong to the same ethnic tribe and are of the same origin (Lyngdoh,1985). It was due to geographical location and political reasons that the Jaintias(Pnars) came to be gradually differentiated from those living in Khasi Hills(Khasis). The influence from the plains people and their Hindu religion has had its share in injecting some peculiar customs, beliefs and rituals among some sections.

\(^1\) Newly created in 2012
\(^2\) Newly created in 2012
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\(^4\) Newly created in 2012
of the people of Jaintia Hills (Pnars). According to Mawrie (2009), there always existed a rapport political, social, cultural and economic-between the Khasi and the Jaintias. The very fact that they easily accept one another, intermarry, having the same laws of inheritance and clan names, is indicative enough of their common origin and affinity.

Bareh (1974) mentions that under the Khasi tribe, there are four sub-groups who derive their names from the geographical location and the dialects they speak. They are i) Khynriam—those who occupy the central plateau of the Khasi Hills, also known as Khasis, ii) Pnars—those living in the Jaintia Hills, also known as Jaintias or Syntengs, iii) Bhois—those inhabiting the northern part, and iv) Wars—those inhabiting the southern portion (Khasi-Jaintia Hills). Although the people who inhabit the southern part of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills are known as ‘Ki War’, yet there are two distinct groups among them. Those who are found in the southern part of the Khasi Hills are usually termed ‘Ki War Khasi’ (Khasi Wars) and those who inhabit the southern part of the Jaintia Hills are referred to as ‘Ki War Jaintia’ (Jaintia Wars). Mawrie (2009:8) mentions that there is another group of people who have adopted the Khasi customs and also partly the Garo customs, who are called Lyngngams. They live in the extreme western part bordering the Garo Hills. Many scholars like Playfair (1909), Bareh (1977), Pakyntein (2000) opined that the Lyngngam are a hybrid race arising from an intermarriage between the Khasis and Garos. In analyzing the origin of Lyngngam, Langstieh and Reddy (2004:16) mentions that ‘no clear answers emerge as to their origin and ethnic position. Their origin is shrouded in mystery….., it is not possible to resolve the issue easily’. Further, they add that ‘it is safe to assume that there has been a gene flow from both the Khasi and Garo tribes and, at least linguistically, the Lyngngams appear closer to Khasi than Garos’.

The origin of the Khasis, commonly known as ‘Hynniew Trep’ (Seven Huts) is shrouded in mystery, as there is lack of recorded history. Many attempts have been made to rediscover the lost history of the Khasis. At present, there seem to be divided opinions regarding the origin of the Khasis. Many trends of thoughts and theories are prevalent today, namely from legendary accounts to scientific researchers. One of the most accepted theories today is that the Khasis came from Burma (Myanmar) and they belong to the Mon-Khmer group. There are sufficient and reliable proofs and indications to
support this view. However, nothing can be ascertained scientifically, for reason of absence of recorded history and documents (Mawrie, 2009).

Like any other tribal group of North-East India, the Khasis have their own rich collection of folktales and folksongs. These have not been recorded in black and white but have been passed on orally from one generation to another generation. In the absence of a written script, oral tradition was very vital to the ancient Khasis. This was the manner in which they were able to preserve much of their history and cultural heritage. Dance and music form an integral part of Khasi life - every festival and ceremony from birth to death is enriched with music and dance. The ‘phawar’ is one of the basic forms of Khasi music. It is more of a "chant" than a song, and is often composed on the spot to suit the occasion. Other forms of song include ballads and verses on the past, the exploits of legendary heroes, laments for martyrs etc. Khasi musical instruments like the ‘Ksing Shynrang’ (male drum) and the ‘Ksing Kynthei’ (female drum) are also interesting because they support the song and the dance. Flutes and drums of various types are used. The drum not only provides the beat for the festival but is also used to ‘invite’ people to the event. Other musical instruments used by the Khasi are the ‘Tangmuri’ (a kind of flageolet), ‘Shaw Shaw’ (cymbals), percussion instruments of various types, including the ‘Nakra’ (Big Drum) and ‘Ksing Padiah’ (small drum), the ‘Besli’ (flute for "solo" recitals) and a variety of other wind instruments like ‘Sharati’, ‘Shyngwiang’ (used for different occasions, sad or joyous), and the ‘Duitara’ (a stringed instrument played by striking the strings with a wooden pick). The Khasis have their own dances, both religious and festive. They are performed year after year at the proper season with pomp and show. Among the well known festival dances are ‘Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem’, which is performed annually during the spring season to celebrate harvesting and sowing, ‘Ka Pom-Blang Nongkrem’, a religious dance of the Khyrim Kingdom, celebrated during October or November every year, and ‘Behdeinkhlam’, a religious dance of the Jaintia Hills. These dances depict the unique aspects of the Khasi culture, and serve to maintain their identity. One of the unique characteristics of the social system of the Khasis is that they trace the lineage from the mother’s side (matrilineal). Clans trace descent from ancestress or ‘kiaw’ (grandmothers) who are called ‘ki Iawbei-Tynrai’ (grandmothers of the root, i.e., of the clan tree). She is
revered greatly and her descendants are called ‘shi kur’ (one clan). Below this division are the sub clan or ‘kpoh’ and the ‘iing’ (house or family). Though the descent of a Khasi family is traced through the mother, yet, the father plays an important role in the material and mental life of the family.

‘Khasi’ is also a term which refers to the language spoken by the Khasi tribe. It is mainly spoken in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. A sizeable number of Khasi speakers are also found in neighboring state of Assam and other states of India mainly in Mizoram, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura, West Bengal, and across the international border in Bangladesh. According to the Census of India, 2001, there are 11,28,575 Khasi speakers in Meghalaya.

The Khasis do not have a script of their own. In the absence of their own script in the past, the Khasi were compelled to adopt the script of their neighbours- Bengali, Assamese and Devnagiri scripts for keeping records. A few observation by Roberts (1891:XVI) throw some light on the Khasi then "the Khasis have no written language of their own, and therefore no literature of any kind. There are no materials as far as we know, from which to connect their present with the past, or trace out a history for them. This entire absence of native literature however, suggests a long period of isolation from the more civilized race". With the advent of the Welsh Mission in 1841, adaptation of a script for the Khasi language was completed by the introduction of the Roman alphabet, which fitted well with its simple, uniform and legible order. Thus, the steady progress in the use of written Khasi through newsletter, newspaper, textbooks, poetry, prose and drama, more importantly the use of Ka Kot Bah (Khasi Bible), in the length and breadth of the Khasi Jaintia hills, helped to spread literacy and education among the Khasis. At present, there are numerous works done in Khasi in the field of language and literature. There now exists a developed literature in the language and for this, it owes its origin and initial growth to missionary efforts.

Another important aspect is the evolution of a standard dialect, based on the Sohra (Cherrapunjee) dialect in the southern slopes of the Khasi hills. The reason being, the importance of Cherrapunjee as an administrative, educational and religious headquarters of the British. It is the Sohra dialect which linked the various sub-groups i.e., the Jaintia
(Pnar), the War, the Bhoi the Lyngngam, and the Khynriam (Khasi) in the central region. Much later, when the headquarters was shifted to Shillong area, the Sohra dialect was transported to Shillong which became the capital of undivided Assam. With the adoption of the script to the language, the foundation for education of the Khasis was laid. Thus, the introduction of the Roman script has brought about manifold blessings to the language.

1.2 **Dialects of Khasi:**

There is a good deal of dialectal variation in Khasi. Grierson (1904) identified four major dialects of Khasi: i) Khasi proper, which is considered to be the standard language is spoken in and around Sohra (Cherrapunji), ii) Synteng is spoken in the Jaintia region, iii) Lyngngam is spoken in south-west region bordering Garo Hills and iv) War is spoken in the southern region bordering the Syllhet plains of Bangladesh.

In addition to the four dialects mentioned by Grierson, Acharya (1971) stated that Khasi has several other sub-dialects, such as Bhoi which is spoken in the northern Openlands of Meghalaya.

Bareh (1977) provides a different view on the issue of dialects of Khasi. According to him, there are many more dialects than just the dialects identified by Grierson and Acharya. Bareh (op.cit, p 40) lists the following, as dialects of Khasi:

i) Amwi in the southern Jaintia hills
ii) Shala in the southern Khasi hills
iii) Warding in the south of Khasi hills
iv) Myriaw, Nongkhlaw, Nongspung, Maram, Mawiang spoken in the mid-western area of Khasi hills
v) Cherra in mid-southern hills
vi) Nongkrem, Mylliem, Laitlyngkot, Lyniong-Khasi spoken in central parts
vii) Jowai spoken in central Jaintia hills
viii) Bhoi in north-east Khasi hills
ix) Manar, Nongwah, Jirang-north Khasi hills
x) Khatarblang (Mawpran) spoken in mid-southern and
xi) Nongstoiin and Langrin in west Khasi
Of all the dialects of Khasi, Bareh (op cit, p 41) states that ‘Amwi has been ascribed to be the most typical dialect. Compared with the other dialects, Amwi appears to be the most rudimentary and is not, as a rule, intelligible to the neighboring people using dialects, such as Jowai or Khadar Blang. Compared with the other dialects, Amwi may be said to be more an agglutinative form which could preserve intact its Monkhmer background. The grammar, with some variance, is like that of Jowai, but in morphology and phonology, there are salient differences. The Amwis, however, are acquainted with their neighboring dialects and could pick them up for communication’.

Bareh (op cit, p 43) further classifies the above mentioned dialects into three main branches:

**Eastern dialects**
1. Jowai (Central Highlands)
2. Amwi and allied War dialects (in the south)
3. Bhoi Synteng in the north

**Central dialects**
1. Nongphlang or Nonglum, Cherra and related dialects such as nongkrem, Mylliem, Nongkhlaw, Nongspung, Rambrai, Mawsynram, Maram, Laitlyngkot, Mawphlang, etc
2. Bhoi east (in the north) comprising Mawrong, Bhoi Lymbong etc,
3. Bhoi west (in the north) comprising Manar, etc.,
4. War Shala (in the south),
5. Warding (in the south)

**Western dialects**
1. Nongstoin
2. Lyngngam
3. Langrin

Besides the above dialects, Bareh(1977) states that within each group there are again a number of sub-dialects which shows variants particularly in phonology.

From the study of the literature given above by different scholars on the dialects of Khasi, it appears that the Khasi language has many dialects and sub-dialects. These dialects of Khasi can mainly be attributed to regional differences.
This research work focuses on a few selected dialects of Khasi. The dialects selected for the research work is based on geographical/regional division of areas where they are spoken. These are:

i) **Pnar** is spoken in the Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. In this study, Pnar is represented by Jowai. Jowai is located in central Jaintia Hills. It is the headquarters of West Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya. The Pnar spoken in Jowai is understood in varying degrees by all the Pnars in the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya.

   Linguistically, some works have been done in Pnar. The most extensive work to date is the *Descriptive Analysis of Pnar* by Bareh (2007). In an attempt to bring out the structure of Pnar, Bareh (2007) has taken two varieties of Pnar into consideration- Jowai and Rymbai. His work includes a detailed description of the phonological, morphological, and syntactic aspects of Pnar.

ii) **War-Jaintia** area is located in the southern parts of Jaintia Hills, in the border area stretching along the international border with Bangladesh. In this present study, **War-Jaintia dialect** is represented by Pdengshakap. Under traditional administration, Pdengshakap falls under Amwi Elaka. Linguistically, the variety spoken in Pdengshakap is very close to Amwi variety, which is another **War-Jaintia dialect** of Khasi. There are 300 households in the village with a total number of 800-850 speakers.

   There has been no work done in this variety till date. But as far as Amwi is concerned, some works are available. This includes the works of Weidert (1975) and Daladier (2002).

iii) **Bhoi** dialect is mainly spoken in northern Khasi hills of Meghalaya. The study of Bhoi dialect is represented by Nongpoh. **Nongpoh** is located in the northern part of Khasi hills. It is the headquarters of Ri Bhoi District of Meghalaya. Under traditional administration, Nongpoh falls under Raid Khatar Lyngdoh, hence, the variety spoken here is commonly referred to as ‘Khatar Lyngdoh’, a **Bhoi dialect** of Khasi.

iv) Another Bhoi dialect is represented by **Tyrso**. **Tyrso** is located in the north-east Khasi hills bordering Karbi Anglong District of Assam. Administratively, Tyrso falls
under Ri-Bhoi District of Meghalaya. Under traditional administration, Tyrso falls under Raid Nongtung, hence, the variety spoken here is referred to as Nongtung, a *Bhoi dialect* of Khasi. There are more than 300 households in Tyrso, with more than 900 speakers.

Aside from Nagaraja (1990), not much linguistic works have been done on the Bhoi dialects of Khasi. Nagaraja(op cit) provides a comparative study of the sounds of Khasi dialects, in which Bhoi dialect, is one of the three dialects, which is taken for the purpose of comparison. In this work, Nagaraja(op cit) did not provide any detailed description of the sounds of the dialects undertaken for comparative study.

v) **Nongtrai** dialect is represented by Nongstoin, the district headquarters of West Khasi Hills district. It is located in mid-West Khasi Hills. There are different localities within Nongstoin resided by different people, who migrated from different parts of West Khasi Hills. This research is based on Old Nongstoin locality, which is resided by the native inhabitants of the place. According to the information given by the Syiem of Nongstoin (Nongstoin’s chief), the variety spoken here varies widely from the Lyngngam dialect, and it is much closer to the variety spoken by the people who resided in the north west of Khasi hills, who are commonly known as Nongtrais. In this study, the term Nongtrai will be used to refer to the variety spoken in Old Nongstoin.

   In this particular variety, no linguistic work has been done.

vi) **Lyngngam** is represented by Nongdaju and Nongriangmaw. These two villages are located in the western most part of west Khasi Hills bordering Garo Hills.

   As far as the linguistic structure of Lyngngam is concerned, some works are available. This include the works of Nagaraja (1995, 2004), Senkutuvan (2011). In both of these works, the variety(s) of Lyngngam which have been studied has not been mentioned.

vii) **War-Khasi** is represented by Shala. *Shala* is located in southern Khasi Hills adjacent to Bangladesh. The people preferred to call themselves as ‘War Khasi’. Under traditional administration, Shala falls under the 23 Shella Confederacy, a union of 23 villages. It is to be mentioned here that the ‘confederacy’ which includes the 23 villages
is no longer in existence. At present, out of the 23 villages, only 9 villages are under the confederacy. These villages are Shala(Shella), Mustoh, Nongwar, Nongbah, Nongtrai, Dewaw, Nongshluid, Tynrong and Tyngnger. These nine villages are commonly known as ‘Khyndai Sandi’ (nine villages).

Linguistically, no work has been done in this variety of Khasi.

viii) **Standard Khasi spoken in Shillong:** Shillong is the capital of Meghalaya and the headquarters of East Khasi Hills District. In 1864, Shillong was made as the Summer Capital of Eastern Bengal. After the formation of Assam, in 1874, it was made the headquarters of the new administration because of its convenient location between the Brahmaputra and Surma Valley and more so because of the climate which was much cooler than tropical India. The natural beauty of the place with pine trees, lakes, waterfalls, the legendary peaks and rivers, the highly standard schools, colleges, and above all, the most comfortable climate throughout the year have made the place all attractive. Majority of the people residing in Shillong belongs to Khasi community, though a significant number of Assamese, Bengali, Nepali, Marwaris, Mizo etc., are also found.

1.3 **Genetic Classification:**

Genetic classification is a historical classification based on the assumption that languages have diverged from a common ancestor. It uses early written remains as evidence and when this is lacking, deductions are made by using the comparative method to enable the form of the parent language to be reconstructed. The approach has been widely used since its introduction at the end of the 18th Century, and provides the framework within which all worldwide linguistic surveys till date has been carried out.

The Austro-Asiatic languages according to Sebeok (1942) are divided into three main branches. The broad division and sub-divisions which are given by him can be represented in the following diagram:

![Austro-Asiatic Language Family Diagram](image)

**Fig 1. Sebeok’s classification of Austro-Asiatic language family**

Diffloth (1974) grouped Khasi language and its dialects directly under Mon-Khmer along with Palaungic, Monic, Khmuic, Vietmuong, Katuic, Bahnaric, Pearic, Khmer, Semang, Sakai and Semelaic. This classification of Monkhmer languages was abandoned by Diffloth himself. Diffloth and Zide (1992) regrouped Khasi language along with Palaungic-Khmuic and Vietmuong under the North branch of the Mon-Khmer. In his latest classification, rather than establishing cognates, Diffloth (2005) compares reconstructions of various classes, and attempts to classify them based on shared innovations. He classifies Khasi-Khmuic languages as a separated branch of the family as shown below:
Fig 2. Diffloth’s classification of Austro-Asiatic language family (2005)
Sidwell (2009), in a lexicostatistical comparison of 36 languages which are well-known enough to exclude loan words, finds little evidence for internal branching, though he did find an area of increased contact between the Bahnaric and Katuic languages, such that languages of all branches apart from the geographically distant Munda and Nicobarese show greater similarity to Bahnaric and Katuic. He therefore, takes the conservative view that the thirteen branches of Austro-Asiatic should be treated as equidistant on current evidence. Sidwell and Blench (2011) discuss this proposal in more detail, and note that there is good evidence for a Khasi–Palaungic node, which could also possibly be closely related to Khmuic. They opined that if this is the case, then Khassic may have been an early offshoot of Palaungic that had spread westward. Sidwell and Blench (2011) suggest Shompen as an additional branch, and believe that a Vieto-Katuic connection is worth investigating. In general, however, the family is thought to have diversified too quickly for a deeply nested structure to have developed, since Proto-Austro-Asiatic speakers were believed to have radiated out from the central Mekong River valley relatively quickly.

Fig. No. 3 Sidwell and Blench’s classification of Austro-Asiatic language family (2011)
Structurally, Khasi differs widely from other South Asian languages including Munda which is spoken in Central India. Although Khasi and Munda belong to the same language family, yet they are different in many respects. The best example is regarding the word order. Whereas Khasi exhibits Subject Verb Object word order pattern, Munda follows the word order pattern of Subject Object Verb. Phonologically, the main difference between Khasi, and other Munda languages is that Khasi does not have retroflex sounds whereas almost all Munda languages have retroflex sounds. Another difference is the presence of fixed ultimate-syllable stress in Monkhmer languages like Khasi but never in Munda languages. It has been found out that Khasi shared many similarities with the dialects of Paluanga-wa (Mon) in the vocabulary and sentence construction rather than with any language belonging to Munda family (spoken in Central India).

Grierson (1904:33) claims that "Khasi forms an island of Monkhmer speech left untouched in the midst of ocean of Tibeto-Burman languages". Foreign contact with Tibeto- Burman and Indo-Aryan languages had not prevented the language from retaining its own basic structure without avoiding borrowed words.

1.4 **Methodology:** The linguistic fieldwork methodology is employed for this research study. This includes

**Informants:** The data are collected from informants who are the native speakers of the varieties or dialects. Informants include speakers of various age groups, male and female, literate and illiterate. Around 40 willing informants are interviewed for eliciting data.

**Tools:** The tools used for eliciting data include interview, word list, Audio recorder/Zoom recorder

**Procedure:** Data are collected from primary sources and secondary sources. For phonological study, primary information from native speakers of the dialects are gathered with the help of the tools mentioned above. For the lexical study, data are collected from primary and secondary sources such as books, journals, articles etc. Discussion with writers and knowledgeable people are also considered for the analysis and interpretation of the data.
**Analysis of data:** Data pertaining to phonology and lexicon are analyzed in this study. Analysis are done not only to compare these dialects but also to provide a measure of lexical and phonological variations in all the dialects.

**Presentation of data:** Description and standard procedure of presenting field data are followed. The data collected are presented in the form of charts, tables etc.

1.5 **Framework for description:**

This research work adopts a descriptive approach to the phonological description of the dialects of Khasi. The comparative analysis of the lexical items of the dialects is based on comparative method.

1.6 **Organization of the thesis**

The present thesis has seven chapters and each of them is divided according to the nature of the content.

**Chapter one** is the introduction of Khasi and its dialects. In this chapter, an attempt has also been made to provide the genetic affiliation of Khasi within the Austro-Asiatic family.

**Chapter two** includes the discussion of the notion of dialect and dialectology, the distinction between language and dialect, and dialect variations within languages. This chapter attempts to provide a review relating to the earlier works done in Khasi Phonology.

**Chapter three** provides a detailed analysis of Khasi Phonology. An attempt has been made to describe not only segmental phonology which includes consonants and vowels, but also some of the suprasegmental/prosodic features such as syllable and stress.

**Chapter four** presents a description of the sound system of the dialects undertaken for the study. The discussion here includes the descriptions of the segmental sounds and their allophonic variants, their distribution and evidences for establishing the phonemic status of the consonants and vowels.
Chapter five attempts to provide a comparative phonological study of the dialects of Khasi based on different parameters—basic vowel inventory, diphthongs, basic consonant inventory, consonant cluster and syllable structure.

Chapter six provides a discussion on the comparative lexical study of the dialects of Khasi. The study focuses on some important lexical items within the basic vocabulary list such as body parts, flora and fauna, natural elements etc. of the selected dialects.

Chapter seven presents the discussion of findings, and conclusion.