CHAPTER 11
CHAPTER II

THE WAR KHASIS

The Wars are one of the major sub-tribe of the Khasis. About their origin, P.R.T. Gurdon points out towards. "the north as the direction from which they migrated, and Sylhet as the terminus of their wanderings from which they were ultimately driven back into their present hills fastnessess (sic) by a great flood, after a more or less peaceful occupation of that district. It was on the occasion of this great flood, the legend runs, that the Khasi lost the art of writing, the Khasi loosing his book whilst he was swimming at the time of this flood." (1967:10).

The War Khasis are concentrated on the southern slopes of the East Khasi Hills District. Their area is bounded on the north by the Khynriam Khasi, Pnar or Synteng on the West and by the plains people of Bangladesh on the South. They speak the same language and share the same social heritage with the Khynriam Khasi, yet their culture, dialect, economy, kinship usage and political organisation are slightly different from the same among the latter. This will be clear from the subsequent discussion.

Economy

The War area runs along the southern slopes of the East Khasi Hills which stretches upwards along the steep slope, looking down towards the Bangladesh plains. The temperature there is rather high especially between March and September and
this border land is the zone of malaria, typhoid, dysentry and other diseases, which still take the lives of many. However, it is the most fertile for production of horticultural crops. The chief horticultural crops grown in this area are orange, banana and pineapple. This area is also fertile for crops such as betelnuts, pan-leaves, pepper and bay leaf.

Before the partition of India and Pakistan, the products of the Wars were taken down to Sylhet, one of the biggest centres in East Bengal, this brought unimaginable wealth to the War people but the partition in August 1947, which drew a borderline a few miles away on the south, considerably upset their economy which was based on trade with the erstwhile east Bengal, only a limited amount of trade was allowed and with local people at the border after partition.

Coal is deposited in some War areas such as in Shella-Mawlong. The southern slopes inhabited by the wars are also rich in limestones. The lime quarries are situated all along the southern slopes of the hill.

Animal Husbandry occupies an important place in the economy of the War people. They mainly rear cows, goats and pigs. Since pork forms an important part of the menu for most of them, the pigs are reared in large numbers. They are normally stall-fed though sometimes they are left in the open to graze for themselves. Such animals are not only used for meat and cultivation but also for socio-religious sacrifices by some of them who are not yet Christians. However, the non-Christians being few, their animals are mostly for economic purposes.
Education

The literacy rate in the War area of the East Khasi Hills District is 39.26% as taken from the rural areas of Mawsynram and Pynursla blocks and from both rural and urban areas of Shella block (according to the 1991 census). Table 1 below shows the literacy rate of the War Khasis of the East Khasi Hills District.

Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AREAS</th>
<th>PERCENTAGE OF</th>
<th></th>
<th>PERCENTAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural and Urban areas of Shella Bholaganj Community Dev. Block</td>
<td>38.45</td>
<td>37.61</td>
<td>19,596</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural area of Pynursla community Dev. Block</td>
<td>34.28</td>
<td>36.85</td>
<td>18,281</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural area of Mawsynram Community Dev. Block</td>
<td>27.27</td>
<td>25.54</td>
<td>13,622</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>27.131</td>
<td>24.368</td>
<td>51,499</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Provisional Census of Meghalaya 1991.

Table 1 above shows that 38.05% of the War people of Shella Bholaganj are literate, whereas 35.49% comprise of literates under the rural area of Pynursla community Development Block and only 26.46% comprise of literates in the rural areas of Mawsynram community Development Block. The lower percentage of literates from the rural areas of Mawsynram is due to the fact that not many educational institutions are established there as yet.
In the two War villages studied it is found that no high school has been established as yet. In Laityra there is only one Lower Primary school which is run by the District Council and one middle English school which is called the Laityra M.E. school and which is run by the village community. And in Umsyiem village, there is only one lower primary school run by the Presbyterian church.

Religion

The War Khasis profess the same form of religion as the Khynriam Khasis do. Their religion may be described as 'animism' or 'spirit worship'. The propitiation of the various gods and goddesses is carried out either by priests or by old men who are well versed in the art of necromancy.

A very prominent feature of the War Khasi belief system is the propitiation of ancestor spirits. The War Khasi never symbolized their gods by means of images, their religion being non-idol tory. Of all ancestors, they most highly revere Ka Iawbei (Primeval ancestress) followed by U Thawlang, i.e., the first father and husband of Ka Iawbei, followed by U Suidnia or the first maternal uncle, i.e. the elder brother of Ka Iawbei (Gurdon, 1967). Ancestor worship consists of the appeasement of the spirits of the deceased ancestors with offerings of food. The underlying belief is that the chief ancestors and progenitors of the house or groups of families forming a clan should be appeased for they have become supernatural beings, partners with god, and have enough power to aid, assist and bless their descendants to grow, thrive and prosper. A system of divination
by means of cowries, breaking of eggs or examining the entrails of animals and birds also exists among some War Khasis. The cock is considered as a mediator between god and men and the convenient of the cock is the foundation of the Khynriam as well as the War Khasi identity.

All the religious rites are performed in the Ka Lìng Seng (foundation house). The Ka Khadduh (the youngest daughter) inherits the foundation house for performing the traditional religious rites. She is the custodian of the clan and religion and has to perform the role as the family priestess according to their traditional religion.

Besides ancestor-whoship, they worship other deities such as earth deities and household deities. These deities are believed to have the power of defence against invasion and prevention of epidemics. Such deities are called Ryngkew Basa, literally meaning earth deities, then ka lei Khyrdop meaning gods of highways associated with acts of defence of the state. With regard to the other deities mention should be made of Ka Lukhimai, and Ka lei Khuri or hearth deities. In acknowledgement of the hearth deities a senior member of the house broadcasts rice grains over the hearth as mark of gratitude to her.

Besides, they have a supreme god who is worshipped with prayers, gifts and sacrifices. In this regard, Nalini Natarajan says: U Blei (god) and his feminine counterpart, ka Blei were held supreme. God is said to be omnipotent, Omnisceint and Omnipresent. The following epithets testify to the predominance of the monotheistic trait in the Khasi religion:

2. U Blei U Nongbuh Nongthaw: God the Creator.
3. U Blei U Shihajar Nguh: God, the Over Lord.
4. U Blei u Nongsam Bynta: God the Decider of Human Fate

Among them most of the rites and sacrifices are made in the name of the goddess Ka Blei for attaining godliness, divine providence and forgiveness. She is regarded as an embodiment of the divine law and is believed to confer material prosperity and spiritual happiness. She is also believed to have the power to punish the devils and wicked spirits which torment the human beings on earth.

The War Khasi principle of recognition of heir in some War areas is quite different from that of the Khasis in general. There are broadly two principles of recognition of heir which operate in the social organisation of some of the War Khasi villages. The first draws its descent through only female and another through male as well as female lines in the matter of inheritance. This is the most important aspect of the social organisation of some of the War Khasi villages. An exploration into this exception from the usual Khasi rule of inheritance is the main problem of the present study.

Types of Property

There are two types of property: inalienable and alienable. Inalienable property consists of the ancestral property or landed property handed down by the predecessors which cannot normally be disposed of. But if it is at all to be sold, the agreement of the whole family concerned is necessary. According
to the custom, movable as well as immovable properties must remain in the possession of the family. The individual or personal earning known as Nongkhynraw can however be utilised as the owner wishes. The kinds of property in the War Khasi society are land, jewellery, residential quarters, cattle, agricultural implements, weapons, furniture and so on.

Among the Wars, there is a concept called Ri Seng in which Ri is land and Seng is a cognatic group consisting of male and female descended from a common ancestor or ancestress. But in the two villages studied, Ri Seng does not exist any more. Now they hold the land individually but it seems that they had such land before.

The property called Ri Seng is recognized in the matter of land ownership where the common ancestry entitles joint ownership to an undivided ancestral land. Originally the Ri Seng or cognatic group holdings were not divided between the members of the group but held in common for generation after generation (Das Gupta: 1984).

The affairs of the Ri Seng were dealt by the Seng Council or Durbar Seng which is composed of Tymmen Seng or old men of the Seng representing different branches of the seng. Division of such land was a prerogative of this council. Durbar Seng or seng council also had some religious functions in which the members recollected the memories of their ancestresses and ancestors and propitiated them by making offerings during the bam seng or feasting which the council arranged. Generally the feast was arranged by raising subscription from the Seng members or exacting some amount from the persons who had a share in the Ri Seng.
Rules of Inheritance

Among some of the War Khasis, property is divided equally among the children of both sexes with the exception that the youngest daughter inherits the parental house. This rule of division is dependent upon the marriage alliance he or she has entered into. Among them if any of the heir or heiress dies before the division of property, his or her children inherit the share. Property of a person who has no issue is equally shared by his or her brothers and sisters. If one dies without having any child, his or her property inherited from the father goes to the father's brothers and sisters and that from mother's side to mother's siblings. If a man dies leaving behind his young children his property will be in the custodianship of the widow and when all the children get married, they can divide the property among themselves or hold the same jointly. If the children from the second husband enjoy the property, there is a strong belief that they may become blind or be prey to various kinds of diseases.

The custom of adoption also exists among the War Khasis. If a couple has no issue it may adopt a daughter and nominate her as the heiress but the girl so adopted should be of closest blood relation.

The property of a man acquired by him before his marriage goes to his brothers and sisters in case he dies without issue, but if he has helped in planting oranges or other things the income from such land goes to his widow. It is also to be noted that a man cannot take away acquired property on the death of his wife. It remains with the children. But he has the
right to enjoy such property as long as he stays with his child-ren.

Further, no War Khasi who commits the Sang or taboo shall be allowed to remain with the Kur or the keeper of the house. Such a person must move out of the Kur or clan and shall have no more claim to the property. If the parents are still living then the family can deprive such person of all properties. Such a person can take away only his or her personal share. If he/she had children then his/her property will be at the custody of the children born from him/her and the children will be the legal heir of such properties. If he/she is issueless and moves out of the village, his/her immovable property can be inherited by the spouse.

Regarding the apportionment of property, it is the same as among the Khynriam Khasi. in this regard, Kynpham Singh points out: "Apportionment of the family property, whether it be Ka Nongtymmen or Ka Nongkhynraw during the lifetime of the mother. Such apportionment take effect after her death". (cited in S.K.Chattopadhyay, 1985 :133).

With regard to the self-acquired property, apportionment is done by the father, mother and the children in consultation with the maternal uncle. Apportionment of the ancestral property is done in the presence of all those who have the right to the property and who are entitled to a share. If the property is movable, they are identified and symbolically handed over to a person to whom it should belong after the death of the mother. If the property is immovable, then the person to whom it should belong is taken to the site by her maternal
uncle or brother or elders of the clan to make her familiar with the position and boundaries of the site. The apportionment so made may be verbal or written (Chattopadhyaya, 1985).

Among some of the War Khasis, the mother and fathers are the founders and builder of self-acquired property for themselves and on behalf of their children. Among them clan and Seng are two different social groups in which clan is strictly exogamous and unilineal, whereas Seng is a cognatic group consisting of both male and female descendants from a common ancestress or ancestor.
Reference


