CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

The Khasis, whose origin is still shrouded in mystery, but have been supposed by many authors\(^1\) to be racially and linguistically the offshoot of the Mon-Khmer branch of the Austro-Asiatic stock, are held to be the remnants of the first Mongolian overflow into India. They are supposed by some to have been the earliest inhabitants of Northern India, but being driven by the Tibeto-Burman on the east and by the Dravidians on the west, they came to the present hills and made them their home.\(^2\) Today, the Khasis, Jaintias, Garos and other smaller sub-tribes constitute the present state of Meghalaya, whose southern and western fringes, border on Bangladesh. The East Khasi Hills, West Khasi Hills, the Jaintia Hills, the East Garo Hills and West Garo Hills are the districts of Meghalaya. The Khasi Hills are located approximately between \(20^\circ\,48'\) and \(26^\circ\,7'\) North Latitude and \(90^\circ\,45'\) and \(90^\circ\,51'\).

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\(^2\)Banikanta Kakati, Assamese, Its formation and development, p.32.
East Longitude. It covers an area of approximately 3,690 sq. miles with a total population of 6,68,579 according to the latest Census Report of 1981. It is bounded by Kamrup and Nowgong districts of Assam in the North, Bangladesh on the South, Jaintia Hills District on the East and Garo Hills on the West.

The term Khasi is a generic term which includes the 'Khynriams' and the 'Pnars'. Within the Khynriam group, there are such tribes like the 'Bhois', the 'Wars' and the 'Lyngngams'. The Pnar group consists of the 'Labangs', the 'Nongtungs', the 'Khyrwangs', the 'Nongphylluts' and the 'Wars'. Thus, since the 'Wars' are found in both groups, they are known as 'War Pnars' and 'War Khynriams'.

The 'Pnars' are also known as 'Syntengs' or 'Jaintias', as they are inhabitants of Jaintia Hills, which is so called because it once formed part of the Jaintia Kingdom. The geographical situation and the variations found in their cultural and social way of life, are the main constraints in covering them in our present study which is on the Khasi society of Khasi Hills, and more particularly on the culture of the 'Khynriams'.

The Khasis have established themselves in these hills for many centuries, and the process of their migration had been from East to West. When they first came to settle in their present home, the Khasis developed their social system according to their genius and convenience. The most outstanding feature was its neolithic culture, which at a later phase, diversified itself to incorporate megalithic elements too. The ecology of the Khasi hills and its neighbourhood, determined the process of early social formation as it does in case of any society. Like other hills people of North East India, agriculture was the mainstay of Khasi economy. The people were also artisans at leisure, and though they have been living an isolated life, cut off from any direct intercourse with the plains, there have been commercial contacts with the neighbouring plains, whenever they resort to the markets to exchange their surplus products for essential commodities. The hills also yield valuable mineral resources—like iron, coal, limestone, sandstone, salmonite, granite and mica. The climate is generally cool— and pleasant though humid, and nearer to the plains, in the north and south, it is hot and damp.

4B.C. Allen, Imperial Gazetteer (Eastern Bengal & Assam), p. 481.
The British contacts with the Khasis, started with the accession to the Diwani of Bengal in 1765. Living as they did in comparative isolation in their mountain strongholds, little is known of them by the outside world. However, the end of the 18th century, saw raids and aggressions as these hillmen harried the plains on the north and south of the District. Necessities of commerce arising from the Khasi monopoly of the lime quarries, from which Bengal has drawn its supply from time immemorial, also attracted European enterprise to the Khasi Hills. These ultimately led to contacts of the Khasis with the English East India Company which resulted in a more active British interest in these hills. Good will and friendship were soon cultivated between the British and the Khasis, as the commercial intercourse was found to be mutually convenient. This was further necessitated by the involvement of the British in the Burmese War of 1824, in which the British needed the cooperation of the Khasi states. By the end of the first quarter of the 19th century, Assam had become an integral part of the East India Company's territories. Through trade transactions and


8 S.K. Bhuyan, *Early British Relations with Assam*, p.28.
conquests, the Khasi settlements had extended to the plains of Assam and Sylhet. The Khasi sylens exercised control over the Duars, and some of the Khasi states covered extensive lands in the plains. By this time, David Scott, the British Political Agent of the North East Province was impressed by the cool and healthy climate of the hills, and thought of obtaining a salubrious spot for a sanatorium, to which the European inhabitants of the plains might occasionally resort for the renovation of health. He also soon found out that the hills are suitable for the cultivation of many European crops like potatoes, turnips, beet roots, wheat etc. But most important of all, was when David Scott felt the need of a proper road through the hills which will connect the two important British headquarters - Gauhati and Sylhet - for the smooth running of the British administration. Thus, he eventually concluded a treaty with Tirot Singh, the Sylem of Nongkhlaw in 1826, the first treaty with a Khasi chief, by which he obtained permission for the construction of this road through Tirot Singh's territory. At the beginning, things were amicably maintained, but the high-handedness of the military...

11 Hamlet Barih, op. cit., p. 142.
at Nongkhlaw, their harsh treatment of the poor inhabitants, false manoeuvres on their part and other misdeeds, led to a Khasi rebellion under Tirot Singh in 1829, which lasted till 1833 with the defeat and surrender of Tirot Singh. After this, British annexation was inevitable and thus the Khasi Hills became annexed to the British Dominion in that year itself.

(The Khasi Hills, as has already been referred, prior to 1833, had maintained a splendid political isolation, which had enabled the society to condition itself according to its needs and local situation. The rugged physical features and geopolitical isolation, greatly helped in enabling the people to maintain this political and cultural isolation for many centuries.) Nature and climate of the place also played a tremendous part in contributing to the independent character of the people. Thus Kamaleshwar Sinha wrote, "Garnished and cumbered by alien domination, encircling them from across easily accessible plains, convinced of their power to defend their genius, they struggled through their social and political systems to keep themselves relatively free."
They have indeed succeeded in maintaining their nationality in tact, though surrounded on every side by people of a different stock, and the main characteristic features of their culture, the organisation of their customs and the usages relating to marriage, divorce, inheritance etc. remained untouched.

However, this success proved to be short-lived, as with the arrival of the British, the Khasis started feeling the gentle breezes of change, which gradually gathered momentum and became violent winds of change, leading to the almost total transformation of the Khasi society. This transformation was more evolutionary no doubt, but British annexation of the Khasi Hills and the consequent changes that followed, proved to be a dynamic force towards this drastic social change. The Khasi Hills under the British administration saw a number of administrative changes, coupled with many other changes introduced by the British for their smooth administration and which culminated in the urbanisation and civilisation of the Khasi Hills. Roads and bridges were constructed for smooth military and administrative operations, resulting in rapid circulation of ideas; new improved means of agriculture were introduced leading

\[14\] B.C. Allen, \textit{op.cit.}, p.485.
to the increase and growth of markets and towns, trade and commerce; influx of outsiders leading to more and varied inter-ethnic marriages and mobility of population; all these have their origins in the British rule. Yet the British rule, by itself, did not produce any major influence on the Khasi way of life, as the British rulers were only interested in changes only to a degree that will suit their administrative needs and their policy was not to interfere with the internal affairs of the independent hill tribes. Political agents were advised to act with discretion, as worsening of British relationship with hill tribes was to be avoided. It was the arrival and work of the western Christian missionaries, on the invitation of the British government, and their zeal to educate and help the people, that resulted as a major catalyst for the matamorphosis in the Khasi society. However, even missionary influence came with the British rule, so the British, by its wide, deep and varied impact, is responsible for ushering in the Khasi society, a new era.

15 B.C. Chakravarty, British Relations with the tribes of Assam since 1858, p.26.
17 Nalini Natarajan, Missionary Among the Khasis, p.91.