GURDON AND MAWRIE ON KHASI RELIGION: A PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE

ABSTRACT

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The present thesis as the title suggests, is a study of the views of P.R. Gurdon and H.O. Mawrie on the Khasi Religion. Gurdon was a British Officer of the British Government during the pre-independent period while Mawrie was a native Khasi writer during the post-independent period. This thesis is an attempt to develop a philosophical critique by bringing out certain important highlights regarding the actual nature of the Khasi Religion in the form of a comparative study of both the views of Gurdon and Mawrie for their accounts and expositions of the nature of the Khasi Religion which appear to be of opposite dimensions. It is therefore, desirable to undertake a careful study and thorough analysis on the views of both the writers after which an attempt could be made to evaluate their works.

One of the most debated topics in the study of Khasi culture and philosophy, is religion. Many post-independent writers on the Khasi Religion have pointed out that a few foreign writers have brought a lot of misinformation in their expositions and interpretations of the Khasi Religion. Therefore, there is a need to examine the claims of Gurdon as appeared in his writings on the Khasi Religion.
H.O. Mawrie, a native Khasi writer, presented his own views on the Khasi Religion which appear to be either directly or indirectly opposite to the views expressed by Gurdon. I consider that it is important to have a comparison of their writings, in their study of the Khasi Religion. The thesis consists of the following chapters

Chapter I : Introduction
Chapter II : Gurdon on the Khasis
Chapter III : An Exposition of Mawrie’s writings
Chapter IV : A Critical Analysis
Chapter V : Christian Missionaries Versus Seng Khasi On Religion
Chapter VI : Conclusion.

In chapter I, after introducing the topic, I have briefly introduced both the writers, viz. P.R. Gurdon and H.O. Mawrie who uphold different views on the Khasi Religion. Gurdon being the non-Khasi observer may be termed as an outsider observer of the Khasi Religion while Mawrie who was a Khasi native observer may be termed as an insider of the Khasi Religion. Though Gurdon was an outsider of the Khasi community, culture and religion, yet he had shown keen interest to know the nature and essence of the Khasi Religion. Mawrie based his views on the authority of the Khasi tradition by referring back to the Khasi myths and legends of the ancient days. As a believer of the Khasi Religion, Mawrie tried to bring out his experiential knowledge of the religion to which he belonged and he had played his role as a revivalist and defender of the Khasi Religion.

P.R. Gurdon has strongly branded the Khasi Religion as simple animistic Religion. It may be useful to state a few words of what ‘animism’ is all about. The term ‘animism’ is derived from the Latin word ‘anima’ which means ‘soul’. Today it has become a doctrine or belief system which states that objects and living things
are endowed with indwelling souls which are independent of men. It was Sir Edward Burnette Tylor, a British anthropologist who first propounded this theory of animism. Tylor called spirits ‘animae’ and his theory became popular and it is known today as an ‘animism’ theory.

In Chapter II, entitled “Gurdon on the Khasis”, I have discussed the concept of ‘religion’ in Khasi society as viewed by Gurdon and other scholars as well. I have also brought out the Khasi idea of religion which is popularly known in the local Khasi language as ‘Ka Niam’. Etymologically, the word ‘Niam’ is a composite concept because it is made up of two concepts, namely, ‘Nia’ which means ‘reason’ and ‘im’ which means ‘living’. In this fashion, the word ‘Niam’ denotes a living reason, a living thought or a living relationship between man and the supreme Being (U Blei). Apparently, Gurdon had made an attempt to describe the Khasi Religion by making some claims which need to be examined whether they are justifiable or unjustifiable. In his book entitled “The Khasis” Gurdon said, “The Khasis have a vague belief in a God the Creator, U Blei Nongthaw, although this deity, owing, no doubt, to the influence of the matriarchate, is frequently given the attribute to the feminine gender., cf., ka lei synshar”.

The word “vague” used by Gurdon in the above quotation may mean that a thing referring to is not clearly expressed because of being ambiguous in the expression. To the mind of Gurdon, the Khasi conception of God, ‘U Blei’ is doubtful, uncertain and has an inexact meaning. In this chapter, an attempt has been made to analyze and clarify the Khasi conception of ‘U Blei’ based on the authority of tradition. Though U Blei is not perceivable yet he is knowable. We can perceive his manifestations. For instance, the world with all its beauty and charm bears the marks of His majestic greatness. We can know Him by means of intuition, his revelation etc. It is probably, due to this reason, that the Khasis, right from the time
of ancient days, described God as the supreme and ultimate Being who is good, merciful, holy, all-powerful, all-knowing and self-existent. Gurdon might have not got fully acquainted with the Khasi conception of *U Blei* (God). The Khasis have given many names to *U Blei*. Another point, which perplexed the mind of Gurdon, is the gender of *U Blei*. To the Khasis, God is not gender-based but is rather gender-free. In other words, God is beyond gender. He can be addressed as both male and female. Gurdon is seen to reveal his perplexity in his attempt to grasp and to understand the Khasi Religion. He seems to have under-estimated the Khasi Religion on the ground that this religion has no founder, no scripture, no emphasis on place of worship and not so well organized.

Chapter III is an exposition of Mawrie’s writings. This chapter is devoted to bring out the exposition and interpretation of H.O.Mawrie on the Khasi Religion. Mawrie perceives God (*U Blei*) as the overall Creator and Lord. He holds the view that God alone has independent existence. Everything else that exists is created.

Mawrie holds a view that man is part of God’s creation and the only rational being. Man has been created by God with ‘*ka Rngiew*’ which is the divine spark in man. In other words, ‘*ka Rngiew*’ is the divine and rational power that God gives to man. It is this power that adds to man the power of dignity and personality. It is similar to the Christian notion of the ‘divine image’ that God the creator gives to man when he created him. The presence of *ka Rngiew* in man is important because it distinguishes man from animals.

Mawrie, in his discussion on the concept of man refers back to Khasi creation myths. These myths narrate that man in the beginning was with God in heaven. As a spiritual being, man worshipped God as his creator and giver of life. In the course of time, God sent the members of the seven families down to Earth while the members of the nine families still remained up in heaven. In this way *ka Niam*
(Religion) is God-given and not a product of human invention. He also points out that since the very beginning of God-Man relationship, the Devils are always the chief enemies of God and humanity. They may live in water, trees, rivers, hills, streams, woods, etc. But the Khasi Religion does not recognize them as deities. Though the Khasi Religion does not instruct people to regard the evil spirits as deities, yet some individuals do regard them as their secret deities and offer them sacrifices secretly and individually.

In Christianity, it is believed that Yahweh God gave Ten Commandments to Moses, the leader of the Israelites on Mount Sinai known as the Decalogue (Exodus 20:2-17) but in Khasi Religion there are only Three Commandments, viz. (i) Kamai ia ka Hok (To earn Righteousness), (ii) Tipbriew Tipblei (To know man and to know God), and (iii) Tipkur tipkha (To know maternal and paternal relatives). Most probably these commandments were given when the members of the seven families known today as ‘Ki Hynniewtrep Hynniewskum’ (Seven Huts) first landed on mount Sohpetbneng. These commandments are sorts of directive principles on ethical and moral life.

Perhaps H.O.Mawrie was the first writer who has written and discussed more elaborately on the Khasi Theology.

Chapter IV is devoted to bring out a brief comparative study on the views upheld by P.R.Gurdon and H.O.Mawrie on the Khasi Religion. Gurdon described the Khasi Religion as animism or an animistic religion. H.O.Mawrie rejected the animistic view of Gurdon. He describes the Khasi Religion as monotheism (One-God-ism). He explains that the Khasis believe that there is one supreme Being known as U Blei who is infinite and self-existent. He is both the sustainer and destroyer of the world. According to Mawrie, U Blei is the uncaused Cause of the world.
Gurdon also describes the Khasi religion as an ancestor-worship religion. The word ‘worship’ in common parlance means an act of reverence towards God or gods. The worshippers may express their reverential attitude in the form of prayer or offering sacrifices. According to Mawrie, Gurdon had misconceived the manner of worship in Khasi religious beliefs. The Khasis have three most respectful ancestors, namely, *ka Lawbei* who is the first maternal ancestress, *u Thawlang* the first paternal ancestor and *u Suidnia* who is the first maternal uncle-ancestor. Tradition states that the Khasis have a deep sense of respect and reverence to their ancestors, especially to *ka Lawbei*, *u Thawlang* and *u Suidnia*. But this act of respect does not amount to worshipping their ancestors.

In Chapter V, entitled ‘Christian Missionaries versus Seng Khasi on Religion’, I have made an attempt to analyze the Khasi matrilineal tribe before the coming of Christianity. Their religion may be termed as a pre-literate religion because they do not have a written language and script. But it does not mean that it is pre-logical and qualitatively inferior to that of the so-called religions of the civilized people, like Christianity, Islam or Hinduism. It may be more appropriate to call the Khasi Religion as an indigenous religion because the Khasis are the aboriginal inhabitants of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

Since ancient times, the Khasis conceived U Blei as the sublime and pure Spirit who does not stick to any particular form or image. They do not insist the need to have shrines or temples. The absence of a written language does not mean that they have no literature at all. They still continue their literature through the oral and traditional literature. This has been instrumental in retaining their traditional literature, thoughts, concepts and wisdom.

The works of the Christian Missionaries became an eye-opener to the Khasi people. The Christian Missionaries had done a great deal in the field of education
by establishing many schools in different parts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Along with the task of providing education to the people, the Christian Missionaries strived hard to propagate the Gospel of Jesus Christ. On the one hand, it was a new beginning towards the development of Khasi literature while on the other hand it brings about a large scale conversion of the Khasi people to Christianity.

The rapid growth and development of Christianity in Khasi and Jaintia Hills has been taken as a serious threat to the Khasi religion by its leaders. These leaders established a revival organization which came to be known as ‘Ka Seng Khasi’. It was set up on 23rd November, 1899 in Mawkhar, Shillong. This socio-cultural organization has its own aims and objectives. Its main aim is to strengthen the faith and traditional teachings of the Khasi Religion. Another objective is to combat the Christian education by promoting nationalist education.

Chapter VI is the concluding chapter. The objective of this chapter is to give a summary and to highlight some of the findings. The writings of Gurdon on the Khasi Religion should not be discarded at random but it calls for more scholarly works to put in, by scholars of the 21st century. Both Christianity and ka Seng Khasi have their own impact on the Khasi Society till today. Professor Hamlet Bareh who has written many books and articles on the Khasi culture, literature, etc., holds a view that the Khasi Religion at the beginning was monotheistic in its nature. But in the later stages this religion got polluted with the animistic beliefs. If one wants to get a holistic picture or nature of ka Niam Khasi (Khasi Religion) one needs to have a synthesis by synthesizing and philosophizing the views upheld by both P.R.Gurdon and H.O.Mawrie on the Khasi Religion. This will help us to get a clearer understanding of the nature and contention of the traditional Religion of the Khasi people of Meghalaya.
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