CHAPTER – I

INTRODUCTION

The present research work, as the title suggests, has two main components viz. (1) A study of the view as expressed by P.R. Gurdon, a British writer, on the Khasi Religion and (2) A study on the view and interpretation of H.O. Mawrie, a native Khasi writer, on the Khasi Religion.

By way of introduction, Gurdon was a British officer of the British Government for India during the pre-independent period. It is noteworthy to mention here, that Gurdon was working in the capacity as a Deputy Commissioner of Eastern Bengal. He was also appointed as Superintendent of Ethnography in Assam.¹ We should bear in mind that Shillong, in those days, was the Capital of Assam. This happened, prior to the creation of the State of Meghalaya. It is worth mentioning that the State of Meghalaya became a full-fledged State only on January 21, 1972. While Gurdon was working in Shillong and other parts of the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, he made some observation of the Khasi People, especially their thought, their belief system, and their religious practices of their traditional Religion which is popularly known as Ka Niam Khasi. He also observed their life-style, their faith, their religious rites and the way they performed their religious sacrifices. Having acquainted with the Khasi people, in 1903 Gurdon wrote a book entitled The Khasis. He devoted the whole of the Section IV of his book in discussing and

commenting on the Khasi Religion. His account clearly indicates that before the advent of Christianity and other religions to these hills, the Khasis had their own primal religion. Since the Khasi Religion has no scriptures, the observers of this religion described it according to their observations and interpreted in their own ways. This is clear from the observation and interpretation of P.R. Gurdon on the Khasi Religion.

As far as H.O. Mawrie is concerned, he was a native Khasi writer and interpreter of the Khasi Religion. He was born and brought up in the East Khasi Hills District of Meghalaya. Undoubtedly, he was an Indian by birth belonging to the Khasi tribe. Interestingly, for a good number of years, Mawrie had worked as a School Teacher and he was popularly known as ‘Babu Onderson’. It may be noted here, that Mawrie was formerly, a Christian himself. He even had an opportunity to undergo some Christian theological training by which he could gather a good amount of knowledge of the Christian Faith. But due to certain personal reasons, he gave up his Christian faith and conviction. He turned back to be an active member of the Khasi Traditional Religion. In this connection it may be rightly pointed out that Mawrie, may be regarded as an insider of the Khasi Tribal Community. In this thesis, an attempt has been made to examine Mawrie’s understanding of the Khasi Religion as reflected in his writings.
It may be relevant in this introductory Chapter, to state a brief account on the need and importance of the study on religion. Generally speaking, religion is a subject of great importance for all, including the so-called advanced society of today. This is so, due to the fact that science has its own limitation in addressing basic issues of human existence which has often compelled man to earnestly search for God or a supernatural power, so that his faith in the order of things around him is not absolutely lost. Religion is normally based on simple faith imbued with a sense of supernaturalism.

It may be appropriate to point out here, that religion in pre-literate societies, usually, exercises a more profound influence over the thoughts and behaviour of man who is ultimately surrendering all his actions to God as the ultimate reality. It is a truism to say that religion is an all-pervading supernatural phenomenon in the life of man. It is a fact that about the things in the world, religion has exercised the most far reaching influence over the thinking processes and behaviour of man right from the times beyond our human recollection. In this connection, it may be mentioned here, that among the tribal peoples of North East India, religion becomes all the more important, for it is inter-woven in their entire social life and to a great extent, it helps to shape most of their social behaviour.

It will not be out of place to devote a few lines to the primary questions when we make an attempt to study on the Khasi Religion or Khasi Culture.
These common questions are: who are the Khasis? And where did the Khasis come from? With regard to these questions, I would like to state that several attempts had been made by various researchers and scholars to provide answers to these pertinent questions. First of all, let us begin with H.W. Sten, who said, “Ethnographically, all the original inhabitants of the present Khasi and Jaintia Districts of Meghalaya are Khasis. As years rolled by, these people came to be known by the name of the regions they live in. Thus we have the Pnars inhabiting the mainland of the Jaintia Hills District, the Khynriams, who are living in the central parts of Khasi Hills, the Bhois on the North, the Lyngngams in the West and the Wars in the South of both the Khasi and Jaintia Hills... All are Khasis. Strictly speaking, only the children of Khasi parents are Khasis, the Khasi social custom is flexible enough to include within it, children of Khasi mothers and non-Khasi fathers are Khasis, because according to Khasi customary laws, the children belong to mothers and not to fathers. There are a few instances of even a child of non-Khasi mothers being regarded as Khasis”.

Referring to the Khasis as one of the ethnic groups of North East India, Helen Giri said, “Generally speaking, ‘Khasis’ is a generic name given to the people of Khasi and Jaintia Hills having the same customs and traditions speaking the same language and following a common religious belief. The Khasis of the Eastern Plateau are known as Pnars or Syntengs.”

Basing on the linguistic affinities between the Mon-khmer language and
the Khasi language, Hamlet Bareh writes, “Khasi is an offshoot of the Mon-
khmer language, a group of Austro-Asiatic family of the Austric super family.
The other branch of the Austro-Asiatic family is Malaio-polynesian. Khasi
forms an isolated Austric island in the midst of the neighbouring speeches
such as Bengalee, Assamese, Kuki, Garo, Dimasa and Lalung ... The Khasis
had no literature of their own in the past, the present Khasi alphabets derived
from the Roman script was introduced as late 1841 A.D. According to a
tradition, an indigenous script was lost during an incendiary at Nongkseh, but
another story states it was lost in the flood”.

For the sake of reflecting and philosophizing on the available sacred
stories which are popularly known as mythical stories, the Khasis have their
own account of such stories. In the local Khasi language they are called ‘Ki
Khanatang’ (legends) for instance, (i) The Story of U Lum Sohpetbneng which
means the mount Navel of Heaven. This, at times is also translated as the story
of umbilical cord of heaven (ii) The Story of U Lum Diengiei which means a
story of Diengiei Peak. Literally, ‘dieng’ means a tree and ‘iei’ means a
warning. (iii) The Story of Ka Krem Lamet Latang which means a story of
Lamet Latang Cave. Making use of these well-known stories among the
Khasis, Mawrie tried to trace the origin of the Khasi race. He concluded that
the Khasis came from heaven and they will have to go back to heaven which is
their original home. These things have been discussed quite at length in his

book entitled "The Essence of the Khasi Religion" especially in chapter II, III and IV.\(^5\)

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 known as an 'animism' theory.\(^6\)

At this initial stage of this research work I could say that both P.R. Gurdon and H.O. Mawrie are the keen observers of 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. Both the writers have observed the Khasi Religion from their own standpoints which are opposite to each other.

Chapter II examines the view of Gurdon on the Khasis and their traditional religion which is popularly known as 'Khasi Religion' and in the local Khasi language it is known as 'Ka Niam Khasi'. In this Chapter, I try to

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point out some of the problems facing by Gurdon in his attempt to understand meaningfully the nature and significance of Khasi Religion.

Chapter III deals with the understanding and interpretation of the Khasi Religion. In this Chapter, discussion has been brought out to show that Mawrie has his own reasons for rejecting the views held by Gurdon on the Khasi Religion. It also examines the concept of God (U Blei) which is interpreted differently by Gurdon and Mawrie.

Chapter IV deals with a critical analysis of the opposite views held by Gurdon and Mawrie on the Khasi Religion. Interestingly, it points out how Gurdon pointed out that the Khasi conception of God is vague and inadequate while Mawrie reacted against Gurdon saying that Gurdon has knowingly or unknowingly overlooked the real essence of the Khasi Religion.

Chapter V discusses how the Christian Missionaries and the members of the Seng Khasi are holding different views on the Khasi Religion. In this Chapter, I try to point out the Seng Khasi which came into existence in 1899 as a precautionary measure against the Christian influence on the Khasi Religion.

Chapter VI is the concluding chapter of the present work. An attempt has been made in this chapter to summarize all the preceding chapters. In this chapter, I try to re-emphasize the point that Gurdon is a superficial observer of the Khasi Religion. His dominating attitude made him unable to undergo an
indepth study as to know the truth and reality of the Khasi Religion. Mawrie on the other hand, has entered into the very form of life as far as the Khasi Religion is concerned. It is so, because Mawrie is neither a stranger nor an outsider of the Khasi Religion. A critical analysis of the views of Gurdon and Mawrie is important because both of them had played a very significant role in their keen observation and interpretation of the Khasi Religion. In many areas, both Gurdon and Mawrie agree and disagree as far as their views on the Khasi Religion are concerned. The works of the Christian Missionaries in Khasi and Jaintia Hills seem to hamper towards the growth and development of the Khasi Religion. But we must not overlook their contributive role as torch bearers of education among the Khasi-Jaintia people in Meghalaya.

By way of statement of the problem, I would like to point out as follows:

(a) The scholars in the recent past had not made any attempt to have an indepth study of the role played by Gurdon and Mawrie in the development of the Khasi Religion.

(b) The scholars who have touched or referred to the works of Gurdon and Mawrie on the Khasi Religion have disagreed to each other regarding the nature of the contributive role played by the two writers towards the growth and development of the Khasi Religion.

(c) The writings of Gurdon and Mawrie on the Khasi Religion deserve to have a scholarly study by analyzing and evaluating their works on the Khasi Religion.
(d) This present dissertation is an attempt to make an academic contribution towards the study of Khasi Religion in the context of Khasi society.

(e) This study will contribute towards giving a clearer understanding of what the Khasi Religion is all about and to enable us to know more of the role played by Gurdon and Mawrie in strengthening the Khasi Religion.

(f) It seems that Gurdon and Mawrie, to a certain extent, are responsible in developing a spirit of revivalism in the present Khasi society.

In this thesis, I also intend to discuss the present scenario. Though most of the present Khasis are largely Christian converts, yet there is, to a certain extent, a religious revival of the Khasi Religion in the context of Khasi society.