CHAPTER - I
INTRODUCTION

The Khasis predominantly inhabit the Khasi and Jaintia Hills districts of Meghalaya in the Indian Union. The name 'Khasi' includes all the Khasis, the Khynriam, Pnar, Bhoi, War and Lyngngam which are the various sub-tribes living within or outside the Khasi and Jaintia Hills.

*The common nomenclature Khasi for inhabitants of the Khasi Hills, the Synteng, the War, the Khasi and the Bhoi indicate that they are of the same stock.*

The above passage is quoted to show that the Khynriam, Jaintia, Bhoi, War and Lyngngam are one people. To avoid confusion throughout, when writing about the festivals and dances of the Khasis, it refers to all, Khynriam, Pnar, Bhoi, War and the Lyngngam.

The Khasis can be broadly divided into:

1. The Pnar or Jaintia inhabiting on the East.
2. The Bhoi inhabiting on the North.
3. The War inhabiting on the South.
4. The Lyngngam inhabiting on the West.
5. The Khynriam inhabiting the highland middle portion.

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All these people, although the customs, manners, dialects are slightly different, are one and the same people.

The term Khasi

Khasi is a general term of the various subtribes inhabiting the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. They speak according to many authors a dialect of the Monkhmer Linguistic Group. According to the world renowned Linguists such as Pater Schmidt, G. A. Grierson and others, Khasi is an offshoot of Monkhmer languages of the east, forming a group with Mon in Lower Burma, Khmer in Cambodia, Vietnamese in Vietnam, Palaung-Riang-Wa in Upper Burma, Khmer-Lemet-Khmu in Thailand, Bahnar-Nanang and allied languages in Cambodia, Indo-China and Sakai-Semang of Malaysia.  

Many authors tried to interpret the word Khasi, Khasi is a term which has a particular significance. Kha means born of, and Si refers to an ancient mother, therefore Khasi means born of the mother. Many Khasi clans derive their names from that ancient mother, for example, Sawiah clan owes its name to Ka Sa, the ancestress of that particular clan, Kurkalang to Ka Lang, their ancient mother and so on. The plainsmen inhabiting Cachar, Sylhet and Mymensingh and also the British, when they first came in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, called the Khasis, "Khosa," "Cossiyah," "Khasiya" or "Khasia." Another opinion is that Kha means water

and Chai means persons or children, Chaikha or Khachai means bloody water. The people living by the side of the spring from which reddish water oozed out were the Khachais, and they were later known as Khasias or the Khasi. According to Pandit Lakshmi Narayan Sastri, in his first message to the All India Hindu Maha Sabha, said that the Khasis, according to the Shastra and Purana of the Aryans were known as "Khos Parbat." Khos is derived from the Sanskrit word "Kho," meaning power to understand, and thus "Khos" means people with the power to understand. Another three views point out that the people of the neighbouring plains often called the hills people "Khai manus" which means cannibals, so it is quite probable that the word Khasi has its origin there. The word Khasi might have originated from Cassia, the name of a particular bay leaves found in abundance in the Khasi Hills. The word might have also originated from the word ghas, meaning grass in the neighbouring plains. Probably, the plains people might have referred to the hills people as Ghasia, which later became Khasi. Father G. Costa, stated that the Khasis were once very badly distressed, and they did not know what to do, to free themselves from the oppression of Thlen, a serpent who sucks human blood. When the people were about to give up hope, God sent a redeemer, to free themselves from that oppression. The name of this redeemer

was u Khasi, his father was u Thawlang, and his mother was ka Lawbei.8 Another legend says that the Khasis were descendants of one Khasi who came from the East, but while swimming across the sea, he dropped his literature into the sea, or swallowed it, hence the Khasis have no script of their own.9

Considering all these interpretations by various authors, it is very difficult to trace the origin of the word Khasi. However, one thing is rather certain, that the term Khasi is the name given to all the subtribes of the Khasis, living in or outside the Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts of Meghalaya.

Origin and Migration

The origin of the Khasis has been discussed by many authors and different views have been given by them. The Khasis have their own tradition about their origin, they believe in their own Divine origin, that they have been living here since the beginning of times and that their land has been given by God Himself. The story tells us that in the beginning, God the Creator created sixteen families. These families were allowed to move freely between heaven and earth with the help of a golden ladder which touched the top of a mountain peak name Sohpethneng, literally meaning, navel of heaven. This was the golden age when the people

8. G. Costa, Ka Riti Jong Ka Ri Laiphew Syiem, Ka bynta kaba nyngkong, pp.13-14.
led a happy life. Later on, nine out of the sixteen families chose to live in heaven, and the seven families, known as u Hynniew Trep u Hynniew Skum, drifted away from God and decided to live here on earth, and the golden bridge was severed. So, the Khasis traced their origin to these seven families, who expanded and increased in these beautiful hills, and it was from these hills that they spread to the other parts of the world.

The first race of people with a more or less organised form of society to inhabit the province of Assam were the Austro-Asiatics or the Austrics. The Austric people who originally migrated from a state in China were called the T'sin-taing or Tsin-tien, and they were ultimately known as the Zyntien or the Jaintias. They were closely associated with the other group of their race known as the Kachais or the Khasis.¹⁰ Many authors supposed the Khasis to be racially and linguistically the offshoot of the Mon-khmer branch of the Austro-Asiatic stock and are held to be the remnants of the first Mongolian overflow into India.¹¹ It is not possible to decide whether the Khasis are the result of the intrusion of a wave of Mongoloids into the Khasi hills, where they intermarried with settled group of Monkhmer speaking Proto-Australoids, or whether this process took place elsewhere in South-east Asia, or even in India after which the ancestors of the modern

¹⁰. R.M. Nath, op.cit., p.95.
Khasis already endowed with approximately the same language and racial characteristics as at present migrated to their present home.\textsuperscript{12}

The Khasis have established themselves in their beautiful hills for a very long time, for many centuries.\textsuperscript{13} The process of migration is from east to west, there is a tradition of a migration over the Eastern Hills possibly the patkoi ranges on the Indo-Burma border, sometimes in the past.\textsuperscript{14} Many authors supported the view that the Khasis migrated from the East. Traditions which are prevalent among many Khasis, show that the Khasis came to these hills from the north-eastern direction, through Nowgong, Lumding and Haflong areas across the Kupli river and the original place was somewhere in Western China from where various tribes spread to Indo-China, Cambodia, Burma and other regions in the east.\textsuperscript{15} There is also a tradition that the Amwi Khasis reached their present land from the east and that their ancestors are connected with the Mekong river. This may give a clue that the ancient Khasis were immigrants somewhere from the Cambodian region and from the bank of the Mekong river.\textsuperscript{16} According to another tradition in Nongtalang village, one orphan girl who belonged to the Pohrmen clan, in her journey across the river, a flood occurred,

\textsuperscript{12} N.C.S. Sen, \textit{The Origin and Early History of the Khasi Synteng people}, pp. 17-18.
\textsuperscript{13} B.C. Allen, \textit{Imperial Gazetteer, Eastern Bengal and Assam}, p.481.
\textsuperscript{14} I.M. Simon, \textit{Mehalaya}, p.12.
\textsuperscript{15} H. Lyngdoh, \textit{op.cit.}, Introduction, pp. II-VI.
\textsuperscript{16} H. Bareh, \textit{op.cit.}, p.15.
and in this hour of distress, she saw a tiger, and that tiger carried her on its shoulders, and rescued her. From that time onward, it is believed that the tiger will not devour the Pohrmen clan or the pohrmen clan will not eat the meat of the tiger. 17

The traditions of the Khasis about the flood, the loss of the script in the flood, shows that the ancestors might have crossed a river on their way to the hills. The Khasis may be concluded were the descendants of the old Austric race of the Far East, in view of anthropological and linguistic findings. They were descended directly from the old remote Austric-Monkhmer tribe in Burma, of which a group moved westward and came to Assam. 18

Location

The United Khasi and Jaintia Hills was one of the Districts in the earstwhile State of Assam. After the creation of the autonomous state of Meghalaya on 2nd April 1970, and after the attainment of the full statehood on 21st January 1972, the former United Khasi and Jaintia Hills and the Garo Hills Districts formed the two constituent Districts of Meghalaya with the headquarters at Shillong and Tura respectively. The two Districts were further divided into five Districts for administrative convenience as follows: 19

17. Information given by Shri S.M. Pohrmen, Assistant Teacher, who belongs to the Nongtalang Village.
18. H. Bareh, op. cit., p. 35.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Headquarters</th>
<th>Date commissioned</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>East Khasi Hills</td>
<td>Shillong</td>
<td>28.10.1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Khasi Hills</td>
<td>Nongstoin</td>
<td>28.10.1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jaintia Hills</td>
<td>Jowai</td>
<td>22.02.1972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West Garo Hills</td>
<td>Tura</td>
<td>22.10.1976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East Garo Hills</td>
<td>Williamnagar</td>
<td>22.10.1976</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The plateau of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills lies approximately between 90° 40' to 90° 45' E Longitudes and 25° to 20° N Latitudes, covering an area of 14,463.6 Km². The Khasi and Jaintia Hills are bounded on the north by Kamrup and Nowgong Districts of Assam, on the south by the Sylhet District of Bangladesh, in the east by the North Cachar Hills and on the west by the Garo Hills District of Meghalaya.

Population

The population of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts from 1901 is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Growth rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>202,250</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>235,069</td>
<td>16.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>243,263</td>
<td>3.49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>289,926</td>
<td>19.18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The population of Meghalaya on the whole according to the 1981 Census is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Growth rate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>332,251</td>
<td>14.60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>363,599</td>
<td>9.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>462,152</td>
<td>27.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>605,084</td>
<td>30.93</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The density of population per Sq. Km is 59, decennial population growth is 31.30%, and the percentage of literacy is 29.55%.

The population of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts alone, according to the 1981 Census is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Persons</th>
<th>Males</th>
<th>Females</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>13,28,343</td>
<td>6,79,519</td>
<td>6,48,824</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>10,88,842</td>
<td>6,53,634</td>
<td>5,35,208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Urban</td>
<td>2,39,501</td>
<td>1,25,885</td>
<td>1,13,616</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mountain and River System

The Khasi and Jaintia Hills Districts of Meghalaya is a plateau generally enrolling grasslands interspersed with river valleys, which in the southern portion, take the form of ravines. Altitude varies from 1220 metres to 1830 metres above sea level. The mountain ranges run from west to east, in the southern Khasi Hills, land rises abruptly from the Surma valley, at places up to 1700 metres in height. The highest peak in the Khasi Hills is the Shillong peak with an altitude of 1,967 metres (about 6,540 ft). The Diengiei peak west of Shillong is 6077 ft above sea level. The Symper peak near Kmbawan is 5700 ft, Kyllang rock near Mawnai in the Nongkhlaw Syiemship is 5684 ft. Raitong, Rableng and Maw-thada-raisian peaks are also high. In the Jaintia Hills, the Bahbo-Bahkong range rises parallel to the hills of North Cachar. The highest peak is Moryngksih which is 5837 ft above sea level. This is followed by Iakorsingh, rising up to 5751 ft. The other peaks in the district are Tiniang near Raliang, Nongjngi peak east of Nartiang.

The rivers of the state flow either to the Brahmaputra or the Surma valleys. In the Khasi Hills, the rivers that flow in the north are the Umkhen, the Khri, the Umtrew and the Umiam. Those flowing in the South include the Kynshi iong, the Umiew-Umiam and their tributaries. In the Jaintia Hills, the biggest river is the

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23. Meghalaya, basic facts, Pamphlet, p.2.
24. J.M. Simon, op.cit., p.1
Kupli on the border between Jaintia Hills and the North Cachar Hills. Its important tributaries in the district are the Mynriang, Myntang and Umiurem, which flow eastward. The south flowing rivers are the Myntdu, Lubha and Umngot, the latter serves as the natural boundary between Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills in the south. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills are said to be much older geologically than the Himalayas. In comparison with other hills, they show mountain features that are more rounded, and the extent of the central plateau is considerable.

Due to the rugged mountainous nature of the land, most of the rivers have to flow through difficult areas. This give rise to numerous waterfalls in rivers and tributaries, particularly in the southern slope. Most of these waterfalls are seasonal, in and around Shillong, we have the Bishops falls, Beadons falls, the Crinoline falls, the Sweet falls, the Spread Eagle falls and the Elephants falls. Other important waterfalls in the Khasi Hills are the Shad Thum falls, the Kynshiari falls and the Winnia falls on the Kynshi river. The Kyrshoh Nianglong falls and the Thup Weikhudoi falls on the Umkhen river, the Thylliej Lyngwa falls and Shrem falls on the Umiam Khwan river. Other important falls are the Mawsmai falls, the Nohkalikai and Dainthlen falls. In the Jaintia Hills, the most important falls is the Iale falls beyond the Kupli river, which has a historical and religious importance. It was here, in the olden days, that the Jaintia Kings performed.

26. Ibid., p. 5.
human sacrifice. Other important falls are the Myntdu and Leshka falls. Most of the falls besides being beautiful, have their historical legends behind them.

Climate

The climate of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills is according to the physical features of the land. The northern and Southern slopes because of their low altitude have a climate similar to the plains, whereas the plateaus have temperate climate. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills along with the whole state of Meghalaya is directly influenced by the south-west monsoon, originating from the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea. The Monsoon begins sometimes in the month of May and continues till October. From November to April, the climate is almost dry. In winter, that is December to February, frost falls in the higher altitudes of the land, the climate is pleasant in autumn and spring.29 The hills are characterised by heavy rainfall especially in the southern region. The Cherrapunji-Mawsynram belt in the southern slopes overlooking the plains of Bangladesh has the distinction of having the world's heaviest rainfall, with an average of 500 inches (1270 centimetres) per annum.30 It was due to heavy rainfall that the capital of Assam was shifted from Cherrapunjee to Shillong in 1874. The climate of the central plateau is temperate and that is why the people are healthy. But at

29. Ibid, p.4.
the foothills in the southern slopes, the climate is humid and warm and the region is thinly populated.

The climate is suitable for various crops and fruits. With varying climate and sufficient rainfall, evergreen tropical forests are to be found on the northern slopes. Temperate forests of a variety of pines, oaks are to be found in the central region. While in southern region not much natural vegetation is to be seen. The principal crops of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills are rice, maize, millet, potato, arecanut, pan leaves, bay leaves and rice is the principal food of the people. Temperate fruits like oranges, lemons, pears, peaches, plums, bananas and many others are also grown, temperate vegetables are also grown. The climate is also suitable for cattle rearing, sheep rearing, piggery and poultry farming and others.

The Khasi Religion

The Khasis have their own traditional religion since the dawn of times. They believe that their religion or hiam is the covenant that they had with God from the beginning of the world, and that their religion is given by God Himself. With the coming of christianity into the hills, most of the Khasis gave up their traditional religion and became christians. At present, more than half of the Khasis profess the christian faith belonging to different denominations, few of them belong to other religions, other

than Christianity. There are still many who follow their own traditional religion.

The Khasis believe in one Supreme God, the Creator, U Blei is the name given to God. He is almighty and all powerful, omniscient and omnipresent. Being all in all, He is above gender, so they call Him, U Blei or Ka Blei. He is also above number and they call Him, U Blei, Ka Blei or Ki Blei. Different names are given in the different spheres of our life and in different aspects of His creation. 32

It was a general accepted opinion of many authors that the Khasi Religion is theistic and animistic. But this view has been contradicted by many Khasi authors like H. Lyngdoh, Rabon Singh, Sib Charan Roy Dkhar, H. O. Mawrie and others. In reality, the Khasi religion is monotheistic and God is known by different names and He can be addressed in many different ways, in order to signify the different relations in which He manifested Himself. In all spheres of our life and in all aspects of His Creation, He is there with a name. 33 In the Holy Book, mention is made, God of Abraham, or God of Jacob or God of Isaac, this does not mean that there are three Gods. Abraham also worshipped El Shaddai meaning the God of mountains and nature. Melkhisdekh of Salem called Him, El-Elyon, meaning God above. El Elyon of Melkhisedekh does not differ from

33. Ibid, p. 2.
El Shaddai of Abraham, the Israelites worshipped only one God. So also the Khasis believe in one Supreme God the Creator, but, He is addressed in different names. He also manifested Himself in different places in a number of groves, forests, hillocks, peaks and rivers, and these became places of worship. This may be the cause that non-Khasi authors called the Khasi religion, theistic and animistic. As God the Creator, the Khasis call Him U'BLEI NONGBUH NONGTHAW. God's creation is a process of continuity and in this reproduction, He is U NONZSIEI U NONQPNLONW. As Maker of man, He is U'NONGTHAW BYNRWEW, U'NONGBUH BYNRWEW. As the protector and guardian of the Kur that is the clan, He is U LEI LONGKUR U LEI LONGJAID. As protector and guardian of our Inq that is the family or home, He is known as U LEI LONGING, U LEI LONGSEM. As the mainstay of economic welfare, He is U LEI LONGSPAH U LEI LONGPHEW. As the defender of the village, He is U LEI KYRDOP U LEI KHARAI, and of the territory and the state, He is U LEI MULUK U LEI JAKA.

The legend of the origin of the Khasis, tells about a golden age after the creation, when there was no such thing as sin in the world, and when heaven and earth was connected by a golden ladder. God created sixteen families, nine of them stayed in heaven and they were known as Ki khyndai Ha Jrong or the nine above. Seven of these stayed here on earth and were known as the Hynniew Trep, Hynniew Skum, or the seven huts. They had the freedom to go between

heaven and earth by means of that ladder. Later the seven families on earth drifted away from God and the connection with heaven was separated. Since then, the seven families could no longer come and go between heaven and earth, and these became the ancestors of the Khasi race. When God allows the seven families to stay on earth, he gave them three commandments to observe and follow to enable them to join the nine families above who stayed with Him in heaven to whom they wanted to return when their earthly term was over. The three commandments are: 1. Kamai ia ka hok, literally means to earn righteousness; 2. Tipbriew tipblei, meaning to know man and to know God, or man conscious and God conscious. 3. Tip Kur Tip Kha to know maternal and paternal relations. These three commandments are the fundamental tenets of the Khasi religion. The Khasis believe that all their actions are accountable to God, a man is responsible for his own actions, and no other persons could share his burden of sins for him. So, man should lead a righteous life, speak the truth and should be honest. The Khasis speak of Ka hok or justice in all their works and speeches. It is also desirable for man to know and love God and his fellowmen. Being a social being, man does not come alone to this world, he has his Kur or clan which trace their descent from the common ancestress. He also has his Kha, that is paternal relations through marriage ties between the members of his clan and those of other clans. The Kur and Kha concept, has an important significance, because Khasi kinship is exogamous, marrying within the same clan is forbidden and term as Ka Sang or

taboo. To the Khasis, there cannot be a greater sin than a coition between members of the Kur, other sins are forgiveable but not this before God or man, persons guilty of this sacrilege are outcasted. The Khasis fear ka shong sang, as they believe that such a union is unlucky and will face misfortunes, such as by the striking of thunder, devouring by wild animals like the tiger, fatal accidents and others. The Khasis when meeting anybody for the first time, the first question that they use to ask is to which Kur he or she belongs, so that they could know which are the Kur and which are the Kha, and to prevent the occurrence of Ka sang in marriage. Even the converted Khasis did not give up this traditional custom; they still consider Ka shong sang that is marriage within the same clan as a taboo and a great sin, which is unpardonable.

The Khasis believe in a reason and a cause behind everything. Thus when there is any distress, calamity, diseases and others, it is believed to be one's own errors not fate or luck. To find out the reason and cause of all these, divination by the breaking of an egg, or the use of a shanam or lime case, or even by examining the entrails of a cock or hen, play an important part. When the reason and cause is found, prayers and sacrifices have to be given to God.

38. G. Costa, Ka Riti jong ka Ri Laiphew Syiem, Ka bynta kaba ar, p.28.
The Khasis according to their belief came to this world by the cause, *nqi wan sha kane ka pyrthei da ka daw*, meaning we came to this world through that cause. In the great plan and design of God, man has a place and an allotted part to play, he has a destiny and a mission. Also, the man comes into this world by and with *Ka Hukum, nqi wan sha kane ka pyrthei da ka hukum*, that is we came to this world by Divine Decree, a fore ordaining eternal purpose of God, which also embodies that prescribed conduct, which man should lead himself in life.⁴⁰

The Khasis have a strong belief in the life after death, as to them, death is the end of life in this world and a beginning of a new life. The Khasis use to say that they cannot take anything from this world except *Ka hob* or righteousness. They consider earth as a temporary place, and they are more concerned with their life after death in *Ka Inq U Blei* or house of God.⁴¹ They use to say *Ka pyrthei shong basa*, meaning the earth a temporary abode. Thus while talking about or referring the dead people, they often say *bam kwai ha Inq U Blei*, which means eating betelnut in the house of God. Again while addressing the dead before the cremation ceremony, they say, *Khie leit suk ban bam kwai ha Inq u Blei*, meaning go in peace and eat betelnut in the house of God. This means that as we love and respect them on earth, in the same way they will have the same love and respect in the house of God. The bone collection or

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⁴⁰ H.O. Mawrie, The Essence of the Khasi Religion, p.3.
⁴¹ Sib Charan Roy jait Dkhar, Ka Niam Ki Khasi, Ka Niam Tipblei Tipbriew, p. 9.
bone burial ceremony has its origin in life after death. In this ceremony the bones of the dead are collected and kept first in a family cairn or Mawshyienq, which is a temporary resting place, and later on, these bones are transferred to a Mawbah, which is a clan ossuary and a permanent place to rest. This action is to signify that as the dead belongs to the Ing or family and to the Kur or clan here on earth, in the same way, they should remain as the members of that same family and clan in their life in the next world, in the house of God. The bones of a married man after his cremation is returned to his Kur to be placed in the clan ossuary. However, the bones of persons who have led a life of sin for example Ka shong sang, whose sacrificial and religious rites have not been performed are not kept in the religious stone or mawniam. The spirits of these are believed will not go to the house of God, but will stay on earth and become evil spirits. This may be the reason that the Khasis believe that there are evil spirits known as Ki suidlum suidwah and others. The people also speak of a place known as ka khyndai patenq niamra, or ka mynqboi u Jom or ka nurok ka ksew, in which people who have led a life of sin will go to after their death, as they cannot go to the house of God.

The Khasis have no fixed days of congregational worship, like the Sunday of the Christians, the Friday of the Muhammedans, or the Sabbath of the Jews. But, he is in fact a very religious
person as he must kamai ja ka hok in this world, which he can fulfil only by means of honest work, truthfulness in thoughts, words and justice in all his transactions.  

The Khasis believe that God the Creator fills heaven and earth, and that they can save themselves through their own actions. The Khasi religion has no missionary intention like other religions, they have no organised church, and they do not claim that their religion is superior to any other religions. They believe that man's soul when it comes to this world is very pure. It comes with a purpose and when that purpose is done, it goes back to where it comes from. All religions are good and true to them, and are from God, but the covenant that each race entered upon from the beginning of time is different from one race to another.  

Matriliney

The unique institution among the Khasis is the matrilineal system. There is a tradition that a "woman's kingdom" existed among the Khasis. In the writing in the Calcutta Review Vol. XIV, May, 1867, about ancient Assam, the author said that after the visit of Hieun Tsang to Assam, Lalitaditya, a King of Kashmir who ruled from 714 to 750 A.D., invaded the Jaintia Kingdom which they called "Stri-Rajya", a woman's kingdom in which Lalitaditya was repulsed. The social structure of the Khasis originated

44. H. Lyngdoh, op. cit., Introduction, pp. X-XI.
from the clans. All clans traced their origin to the ancient mother called \textit{Ka Iawbei Tynrai}, who was the mother of the whole clan. Next in order was \textit{ka Iawbei Tymmen}, the old grandmother of a sub-clan or \textit{Kpoh}, \textit{Ka Iawbei Khynraw} was the ancestress of a family or \textit{Inq}.\textsuperscript{45} Each clan has its triad - \textit{Ka Iawbei}, the ancestral mother, the progenitrix, \textit{u Thawlanq}, the ancestral father, the progenitor, and \textit{u Saidnia}, the eldest son of \textit{Ka Iawbei}.\textsuperscript{46} There are many myths and legends about the origin of the clans, which throw some light on their structure. Some clans adopted the mother's and father's names, for example, the Sawian, Ngapkynta, Phanbuh and Wanlang clans; \textit{Ka Sa, Ngap, Phan, Wan} were names of their female ancestress, the mothers. While \textit{Wan, Kynta, Buh, Lang} were that of the fathers respectively.\textsuperscript{47} Some of the clans traced their descent from a goddess, and these clans would become ruling family, for example, the origin of Shyllong or Khyrim Syiemship Centres round \textit{Ka Pah Syntiew},\textsuperscript{48} \textit{Ka Pah Syntiew} was believed to be the daughter of the Shillong God. The Diengdoh clan traced its origin to a tree by that name. There are clans which bear the names of animals such as \textit{Shrieh} and \textit{Tham} clans, which traced their origin to a monkey and crab respectively.\textsuperscript{49} However, there is no evidence that these clans ever regarded the above animals as their tribal totems. There are also clans which got their names from

\textsuperscript{45} P.K.T. Gurdon, \textit{op.cit.}, p.63.
\textsuperscript{46} Kynpham Singh, "Khasi and Jaintia Religion" in \textit{Khasi Heritage}, p. 95.
\textsuperscript{47} H. Bareh, \textit{op.cit.}, p. 316.
\textsuperscript{48} Ibid., p.37.
\textsuperscript{49} Gurdon, \textit{op.cit.}, pp. 64-65.
the places they dwelt, like Khonglah, a place name on the southern slopes of the Baintia Hills. Lamin and Nongkhlaw are also names of places, so these clans might have originated from these places' names. A large number of clans like the Dkhar clans traced their origin to the plains and had plainswomen as their ancestresses. Members of the Lyngdoh or priestly clans had the right to perform sacrifices, but not all members of these clans followed the same occupation as priests, they might take up any profession, sometimes acting as priests in their spare time. All the Lyngdoh and Dkhar clans are not at all descended from a common ancestress and are not debarred from intermarriage.

Due to the matrilineal character of the Khasi society, the children always adopt the names of the mothers clan. However, in some of the war area, the children could also adopt that of their fathers. Khasi system of kinship is exogamous, and clans which claimed their descent from a common ancestry could not intermarry. Intra-clan sexual relationship is a mortal sin, and a couple who commit such a crime are excommunicated from the society. This marriage is termed as Ka'shong sang, a Khasi can commit no greater crime than marrying within the clan. Some of the clans are prohibited from marriage with other clans, for example, the Kharkongor clan cannot marry the Kharshiing clan and the Diengdoh clan cannot

52. Kynpham Singh, op.cit., p.100.
marry the Lalu clan. This may be because they share a common ances-
tress or due to an allegiance of kinship as a result of each others
help and protection. A non-Khasi woman who marry a Khasi man, is not
only accepted and assimilated but she becomes a progenitrix of a
new clan. The children adopt the mother's clan, therefore the chil-
dren belong to the mother, and there is no illegitimate child in
the Khasi society, whether the mother bore that child from a husband
with who she had gone through a formal ceremony or not.53

Position of women in the Khasi Society

Women amongst the Khasis are highly respected, they enjoy an
unusual dignified and important position. For generations, Khasi
women have been custodians of property in whose strength of life
and character, the men of their clans, confide their life earnings
and the hope of the peaceful resting of their souls.54 The women
enjoyed comparative freedom, and the bride price does not exist in
the Khasi society. Woman is accorded respect as one through whom
the race, and the clan is propagated. In recognition of the fact
that her commitments as a mother and housewife are a full time occu-
pation, responsibilities relating to regulation of the family are
entrusted to menfolk. Household responsibilities are shared between
the maternal uncle and the father. In matters affecting the clan or
the family, such as the arrangement of marriages, management of
ancestral property and performance of religious duties, it is the

53. David Roy, "principles of Khasi Customs" in Keith Cantlies' 
Notes on Khasi Law, p. 88.
54. Ibid., p. 87.
uncles who make decision, though generally in consultation with other members of the family.\textsuperscript{55} Khasi women are respected as the propagators of Ka'kur'ka iaid or the clan. Therefore, they are held in high esteem and accorded a high status. But with all the privileges in the society, Khasi women are not aggressive and do not have any superior feeling towards men. There is a saying in Khasi, u Kpa u ba lah u ba iai, u Kni u ba tip ha ka iap ka im, meaning the father who provides for the family and the uncle who has to know in matters of life and death. Although the Khasi society is matrilineal, yet women have no rights in the political and administrative spheres, they never attended any Darbar, and are excluded in the process of legislation, administration and judiciary. There is a Khasi saying, Wow'la kynih ka'iar kynthei, ka byrthei'ka la wai, meaning that when the hen crows, the world will be in destruction, this is just a saying that, as only the cocks crow, so also the crowing job should be carried on by men only.

Inheritance

According to the matrilineal system prevailing amongst the Khasis, the inheritance to property is from mother to the daughter, except in the War area, where the system is both matrilineal and patrilineal. In the War area, the children inherit both ancestral and acquired property in equal shares, both males and females with the exception that the Khatduh or youngest daughter is given something in addition to her share.\textsuperscript{56} The khatduh enjoys the privileges

\textsuperscript{55} I. M. Simon, \textit{op.cit.}, pp.16-17.
\textsuperscript{56} Gurdon, \textit{op.cit.}, p.84.
of getting the lion’s share of the property including the residential house of her parents. Her sisters are entitled to smaller shares of the family property. The status of the youngest daughter, is one of special importance, she is the embodiment of everything, that is enduring and sacred in the Khasi concept of family. Her house is called the Ing khatduh, or the youngest daughter's house which has special sanctity, this is the ancestral house of generations of youngest daughters which provides refuge or shelter for the indigent and the improvement of the members of the family. This undoubtedly accounts for the rarity of beggars in the Khasi society. As long as a man remains unmarried, he stays in his parents' house and contributes whatever he earns to the common fund. According to the custom, the earnings of a man before his marriage goes to his family, which later may becomes part of the ancestral property.

Property is of two kinds, inalienable and alienable; the first type is a legacy, an ancestral property, which is known as Nonqtymmen, this property cannot be disposed of without the general consent of the whole family or clan. The second type consists only of the earnings of the present members, this property is known as Nonkhyynraw. The youngest daughter inherits the major share of the property, but other sisters also receive a share of inheritance. The khatduh is one who is responsible for all the family religious rites, her house is called Ka Ing seng, Ingiam or Ingkur. She has to bear the expenses of these

57. I. M. Simon, op.cit., p.14
rites', and the funeral rites of her parents including the impor­tant ceremony of placing the bones of the dead under a family, cairn or Mawshyienq and finally to transfer them to the clan cremlech or the Mawbah. Although the khatduh has to bear all these expenses, but some contribution is given by the children of the deceased. In all cases, the maternal uncle, has great influence and prestige in the family. Even so, the father of the family is no way subservient to him, he enjoys a high status in both his own and his wife's family.59

In spite of the high position of the Khasi women, the men too have their role, they are not only the sons, but the maternal uncles of the sister's children, and act as counsellors and guardians of his nephews and nieces. In his wife's house, a Khasi man is a husband and a father who brings up and provides the children. The Khasi use to say u Kpa u ba' ai ia ka long rynienq, meaning the father who gives the stature and his mother and sisters are duly respected as Meikha and Kha. The Khatduh is called ka nongri inq or the keeper of the house and has to make all arrangements for the performances of religious rites and ceremonies of the family or clan and the maternal uncles perform the ceremonies. Will and gifts did not exist in the Khasi society, but there was a custom in respecting the wishes of the parents or grand-parents who sometimes said their wishes as to what should be done after their death and even named property which should be given to a certain child.60

60. David Roy, op. cit., p. 95.
Political Institutions

The Khasis have their own unique society, religion, culture and also their own political institutions, which function in a very democratic way. In the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, there is no land revenue, as the chief is only a democratic ruler who has no right to levy a land tax from the people, as land is the absolute property of different clans, villages, and private owners. As land belongs to the people, so also Khasi democracy is by the people and for the people. The Khasis belong to a race quite distinctly individual from any other race in India. They have been characterised in the Memorandum of the Assam Government prepared for the Indian Statutory Commission as a remarkable people, socially and politically, the people show a sturdy independence and democratic equality. With their separate history, culture and institutions, the people are however distinct from the plainsmen who form the bulk of the province.61

Khasi democracy was founded on the Dorbar Raid or a Durbar of the Communes, and the Dorbar Shnong, or a village Durbar, which had an elected headman each at the top.62 A Khasi state has been formed by the voluntary association of villages or groups of villages. The head of the Khasi state is the chief, locally known as Sviem, who is assisted by a council locally known as Dorbar of ministers.63 Ka Dorbar Hima or State Durbar is also known as

63. K. L. Bhowmick, Tribal India, A Profile in Indian Ethnology, p.142.
Ka Dorbar Blei, or assembly of God, because it is very much respected and held sacred. The will of the people is considered supreme in the Khasi political set up, and thus the Khasi state is truly democratic. The constitution of the state is democratic, the chief is in no sense, a territorial sovereign, but being merely elected heads of village confederacies. The Durbars of the Khasis present the appearance of little oligarchical republics, subject to no common superior yet of which each member is amenable to some degree, to the control of his confederates.

The Khasis were divided politically and socially into three groups, 1. The ruling class which included Syiem, Wahadadar, Sirdar and Lyngdoh. 2. The aristocracy of the Bakhraw, which was made up of Myntris, Basan, Doloi and Lyngskot. and 3. the subjects or riots. The head of the Khasi state is the Syiem or chief, who is a limited monarch, his power is being very much circumscribed, according to custom, he cannot perform any important act without first consulting and obtaining the approval of his Dorbar.

After the British had established and consolidated their position, they had set up and recognised twenty five petty states in the Khasi Hills. Fifteen of the first class presided over by Syiem, one confederacy under an elected officer, styled as Wahadadar.

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64. H.O. Mawrie, op.cit., p.71.
65. A Mackenzie, History of the Relations of the Government with the Hills Tribes of the North East Frontiers of Bengal, p.221.
66. William Robinson, Descriptive Account of Assam, p.408.
68. Gurdon, op.cit., p.66
five under Sirdar, and four under Lynqdoh, both of which classes of offices are entirely elective. The names of the states are Bhowal or Warbah, Sohra or Cherra, Khyrim or Nongkrem, Langrin, Malaisohmat, Maharam, Mariaw, Mawiang, Mawsynram, Mylliem, Nobosohphoh, Nongkhlaw, Nongspung, Nongstoin and Rambrai. Sheila was ruled by a confederacy of Wahadadar. Dwara Nongtyrnem, Jirang, Mawlong, Mawden and Nongrang were under Sirdar. Lyniong, Mawphlang, Nonglwai and Sohiong were under Lynqdoh. In all the Syiemship, Lyngdohship and Wahadadarship were worked out in strict accordance with the Riti or an unwritten constitution which grew out of past usages and practices.

Syiemship or chiefdom is a unique institution of Sireship and is peculiar to the Khasi states. According to traditions, the first Khasi syims were Ki Syiem Madur Maskut, ki Syiem Synteng bad ki Syiem Khasi. These three royal families traced their ancestry from a divine and totemic origin. The Syiem Madur Maskut traced its origin from a pig. The Jaintia syiem to a fish and the Shillong syiem to a goddess. There is a close bond of relationship between the Syiem and his subjects. This closeness of relationship could be clearly seen from the way the people sometimes addressed their Syiem as Päiem or father king and Meiem or mother queen, and in return, the Syiem referred to their subjects as ki khun ki’ hajar or children. The Syiem's are

regarded next to God, hence they are known as Ki Syiem Ki Blei. Some kings are said to be Syiemblei or God kings as they had divine origin. Some others were called Syiem briew or men kings, because they had no divine origin.

The succession was from uncle to nephew, the customary law of succession was and still is matrilineal, although the ruler is always a male. The son of the eldest sister normally becomes the heir, but in the absence of male heirs from the eldest sister, the succession passes to the next eldest sister. In this manner, the matrilineal principle of the Khasi society is followed. However, in case of total absence of male heirs from the particular royal clan, a female could also succeed to the position and such a case was seen in the Nobosohphoh Syiemship, where a female by the name of Ka Lar had been able to obtain the seat of a Syiem. The Syiem is usually appointed by the council of ministers, from the royal family or clan, and the members of the council in the same way are elected from certain selected clans.

Broadly speaking, the Syiem has four duties, those of a chief priest, judge, executioner, and general. The Khasi state is a limited monarchy, the king cannot do as he pleased without consulting and obtaining the approval of his Dorbar. White in his Memoirs of the death of David Scott was deeply impressed by the conduct in the Khasi Durbar held to discuss David Scott's

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73. Gurdon, op.cit., p.68.
proposal to build a road across the Khasi Hills, he observed:-

"I was struck with astonishment at the order and decorum which characterised these debates. No shouts of exultations, or indecent attempts to put down the orator of the opposite party, on the contrary, every speaker was fairly heard out. I have often witnessed the debates in St. Stephen's Chapel, but those of the Cosayah parliament appeared to be conducted with more dignity and manners."75

As a religious head, the Sviem consults the auspices of soothsayers for the welfare of the state, he also appoints a Lyngdoh to help him in the performance of religious rites. State religious ceremonies are also performed by the Sviem, and he is also responsible for those who die without any relatives, to take care of their bodies and properties. In judicial matters, he acts as a judge, the whole Dorbar being the jury. In olden days, the Sviem marched to war at the head of the army.76 Regarding their military organization, the Khasi Sviem had no armed forces, but in time of war and trouble, it was the people themselves who rose as one man to defend their hearths and homes.77 The Sviem has to organise state ceremonies, and also acts as the keeper of the religion of the state. The income or possession of the Sviem or Sviemsad high priestess, the mother, or the eldest sister or the eldest niece of the Sviem who distributed to the wife and children including the family members.78

75. White, Memoirs of David Scott, quoted in Kynpham Singh, op.cit., p.16.
76. Gurdon, op.cit., p.69.
78. H. Lyngdoh, Ka Niam Khasi, p.167.
As we have seen, land tax is unknown amongst the Khasis, as land is the property of the people, so the income of the chief is very less. Revenues of the Syiem is derived from tolls levied on all goods sold in the market in his territory, and this is perhaps the most important source of income. Income is also derived from state lands and also judicial fines. Besides these, the Syiem also derives a collection known as Pynshok, or state subscription, a kind of tribute which was also paid to other categories of rulers such as Lyngdoh, Sirdar and Wahadadar.

The festivals and dances

The Khasis have a rich cultural heritage, although they have no script of their own, their history is preserved in form of festivals, folk songs, folk tales and folk dances. They are a happy and lively people, they love dances, songs and music which are connected with their various colourful festivals and religious ceremonies. The people observe some important festivals and these celebration usually take the form of dances, when people can be joyous and happy and can forget their everyday monotonous life. Understandably, many of these festivals have religious association, although a few of the celebration are plainly secular.79

A festival means a time or day of feasting or celebration or a series of performances of a certain kind. Festival according to the accepted usage of the term, may be defined as an aggregate of

79. I.M. Simon, op.cit., p.32.
rituals observed mostly in an astronomically or ordinarily fixed date and time and celebrated with rejoice, pomp and grandeur by an ethnic group or a social group or a community as a whole.80

Festivals and dances play an important role in the social life of the people, because it is through these occasions, that the people express their joy and happiness and also gratitude to their creator. It is not known when the art of dancing was first introduced to mankind, but people in the different parts of the world dance and move their feet to the rhythm of their music.

R. T. Rymbai commenting on the festivals wrote:—

"As one would not be able to keep a beautiful fabric in tact by separating the weft from the woof, so would it be impossible to view the life of a Khasi fully lived, if torn away from his festivals."81

Amongst the Khasis, dance-festival started since the beginning of times. There is a story about a cave known as Ka krem lamet ka krem latang, which shows that dancing festival started since the dawn of times. Once a day was fixed for the dance festival and all the living creatures turned up in their grand costumes. They danced throughout the day, until they were tired and towards evening, when they were about to depart, there arrived the sun and the moon, a sister and a brother, and they also danced. Everyone said that it was evil that a brother and

sister should dance together. In anger the sun went off to hide herself in a cave called *ka krem lamet ka krem latang*. This is just a tradition prevalent among the Khasis, showing that dancing festival must have started long time back. In the olden days, the Khasi used to teach their children how to dance, so that they will know how to dance in the religious dance and other dancing festivals. In the evening time, when their day's work is done, the young girls gather together in a spacious place to learn the art of dancing, they also use to call anyone who could play the pipe. In this way the parents encourage their children to dance. It is a great pleasure and pride for the parents to see their children in their dancing attire dance in the dancing field. There are two kinds of dance (1) *Ka Shadniam* or religious dance (2) *Ka Shad Sngewbha* or festive dance without any religious ceremonies. The male and female dancers dance during the bone collection ceremony or state religious festival or during the cremation of the Syiem. Those who participate in these kinds of dance, are performing *ka shadniam* or religious dance. Sometimes there are festive occasions, and the dancers who take part in these dances are performing *ka shad sngewbha* or festive dance.

The Khasis are mostly agriculturists, so they are more attached to land and agriculture, they also observe fertility rites associated with dances and songs and sacrifice to the deity

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84. Ibid., p.137.
to protect the crops from being injured by evil spirits. The Khasis have a variety of festivals and dances which they performed in the past. Some of these survive till today, while some others have disappeared, due to social, religious and economic changes which are undergoing among the Khasis. The Khasis also have their own musical instruments which are made locally, which consists of harps, drums, pipes and others. There are many festivals and dances which are still performed and some of which are no longer performed in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, but in this dissertation only five major festivals are focussed with, these are as follows:

1. **Ka Pomblang Sviem or Ka Pomblang Nongkrem or Shad Nongkrem** - This is the well known religious festival of the Khyrim Syiemship, which is held annually at Smit, the royal residence of the Khyrim Syiemship. It is a religious festival to honour and respect the ancestors and to invoke God's blessings for a bountiful harvest, the well being and general prosperity of the people on the whole.

2. **Ka Behdeinkhlem** - is a religious festival which is celebrated annually at Jowai in the Jaintia Hills District. It is celebrated in the months of June or July, the people observe this festival to free themselves from various diseases and other evils and to invoke God's blessings for a bountiful harvest and well being of the people on the whole throughout the year.

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3. **Ka Rong Khli** - is the war dance which is celebrated by the people of Nongtalang village in the southern part of the Jaintia Hills District. *Rong Khli* means the Tiger Festival, so this festival is held whenever a tiger is killed by the people accidentally, or on an organised hunting. In whatever manner that the tiger is killed, God is to be worshipped and the festival is to be held. If God is not worshipped, it is believed that certain misfortunes will befall on the people like diseases, starvation, blindness and others.

4. **Ka Lukhmi** - is a religious festival of certain places in the Bhoi areas in the northern part of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The people in these areas depends much on agriculture which is their economic mainstay. So this festival is held before the sowing season and after harvesting work is done to *Ka Lukhmi*, the goddess of wealth and agriculture and the house deity of the Khasis. This festival is performed for prosperity of crops and for well being on the whole.

5. **Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem or Shad Weiking** - is an annual Thanksgiving Dance which is held under the auspices of *The Seng Khasi*, a socio-religious and cultural organisation of the Khasis. In this festival, the people thank God for all His blessings in the year that had passed and to invoke His blessings for the coming year, for a bountiful harvest and general prosperity. The dance is held in the month of April after the harvesting work is over and also after the sowing job for the new year is done.
The above is only a brief introduction to the festivals and dances, a detailed account of the same will be dealt with in a separate Chapter.

Social Change among the Khasis

With the coming of the British rule and its consolidation in the whole of India, the integration of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills in the British dominion also took place. The British rule brought along with it Christianity and western education which led to a transformation in the Khasi society. Formal education was introduced to the Khasis, and their language was put into writing, as the Khasis have no script of their own. The history of Education and Literature in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills began with the Serampore Baptist Mission, who carried on propagation work among the Khasi mercantile class who lived in the Sylhet District. The first missionary was a Bengalee, whose name was Krishna Chandra Pal, the first Bengalee convert of William Carey. Under this mission, a translation of the New Testament, and some Primers in Khasi in Bengalee script were prepared. The Welsh Presbyterian Mission came here in 1841, and it was Rev. Thomas Jones of this mission who replaced the Bengalee and introduced the Roman script. This mission built churches and started schools, and this was the real beginning in the field of Education. The history of proselytisation began with the Welsh Presbyterian Mission, and a large number of the Khasis were converted to Christianity. The Catholic Mission came later in 1890, this mission too started
schools and building churches. The advent of these missionaries is important for it was due to the endeavours of these missionaries that literacy rapidly increased in these hills.

In the pre-colonial period, the Khasis lived in isolation, they had their own traditional religion, unique culture, social and political system. The people depended much on agriculture for their living and existence, as they were not in touch with the outside world. Of course there were other occupations of the people like craftsmen, traders and iron-smelters etc. Their social, economic and political activities were all governed by their geographical and ecological environment that they lived. The people relied very much on supernatural powers for whatever happened to them either good or bad. A good harvest and well being was supposed to be a blessing from God, while diseases, bad harvest, starvation and pestilence were believed to be evil influences. So, they propitiated God for a bountiful harvest and to free them from all evils. Their festivals and dances are also linked with agriculture and cultivation rites throughout the year. All these gave way to new changes and civilization with the coming of the British and Christianity. The coming of the christian missionaries introduced a new era, as they brought about social, economic and political changes in these hills. These changes brought about by western values and culture came as challenges to the Khasi traditional religion and culture. The traditional political system was replaced by a new and more organised administration, and the social
system was disturbed. Besides christian and western influence, contact with the other cultures of the neighbouring plains also took place and these had an influence in the bordering areas. The coming of christianity and education had a great impact on the Khasis, as they accepted christianity readily and they become somewhat westernised. The festivals and dances which form part of the Khasi social and religious life are performed mostly by non-christian only.

In recent years, we witness a transitory period which is undergoing in the Khasi society. Old values are given way to the new ones, education spread rapidly, new forces of modernity are bringing in considerable changes in the society. The opening up of better means of communication ended the isolation of the people. The establishment of government offices and establishments, and also other private sectors, the growth of towns and villages brought in many people from outside and thus affected the population structure particularly in the towns, and this is another factor which influences the social change among the Khasis.