CHAPTER II

THE KHASIS: A PROFILE

Introduction

The Khasis live in Meghalaya, a land of undulating hills, rolling grasslands, cascading waterfalls, snaking rivers, terraced slopes and thrilling wildlife. S.K. Chatterjee, a geographer, coined the word “Meghalaya” meaning “abode of the clouds”. The name truly depicts the climatic condition of the state where the wettest place in the world is located. The climate of Meghalaya is generally temperate. The Khasi, Garo, and Jaintia tribes had their own kingdoms until the British annexed their land in early 19th century. Until the formation of Meghalaya as a State within the Union of India in 1972 it was divided into two districts – Khasi-Jaintia Hills District and Garo Hills District - under the rule of Assam.

The state has a total area of 22,429 sq. kms. and is located between 20 degree 1’ and 26 degree 5’ North latitude and 85 degree 49’ and 92 degree 52’ East latitudes. The altitude varies from 300 to 2000 metres above mean sea level (msl). It has predominantly hilly terrain with foothills as plains and flood-prone areas. It is bounded by the Brahmaputra valley of Assam in the North and Northwest, Cachar area of Assam in East and Bangladesh in the South and partly in the Southwest. It has about 496 kms. of international border with Bangladesh. Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya, was also the summer capital of undivided Assam from 1874 till January 1974. Shillong is located at an altitude of 1496 metres above sea level. The state has a population of 2,318,822 persons (Census of India 2001). The principal languages in the State are Khasi and Garo with English as the official language. The
State has a unicameral legislature consisting of 60 members (29 Khasi hills, 7 Jaintia Hills, and 24 Garo hills). In addition there are three Autonomous District Councils in the state, namely, Khasi Hills Autonomous District Council, Jaintia Hills Autonomous District Council and Garo Hills Autonomous District Council. These councils function in accordance with the provisions laid down in the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. These councils have executive, legislative and judiciary wings and are under the control of the Governor of the State. Meghalaya sends three members to the Indian national parliament: one to the Rajya Sabha (upper house) and two to the Lok Sabha (lower house).

Physiographically, Meghalaya can be divided into three distinct geographical zones. They are the northern slopes, the central upland and the southern slopes. These three broad zones display different geographical characteristics, which are also manifested in the economic activities and socio-cultural life of the people. The highest part of Meghalaya is in the Khasi hills with Shillong peak at an elevation of 1961 metres while the lowest altitude is found in the southern and northern slopes bordering Bangladesh and Assam respectively (Syiemlich 2003).

The population of Meghalaya is predominantly tribal. The main tribes are Khasi and Garo besides other plains tribes such as Koch, Rabha, Bodo, Baite, etc. The Khasis are also called the Hynniewtrep and are mainly divided into five groups namely Khynriam, War, Bhoi, Lyngngam and Pnar. Marwein (1987) says that Khasis are known sometimes by different names at different places. Khongsdier (1991) points out that the people have so far treated the Khynriam, Pnar, Bhoi and War as constituents of the same tribe called Khasi. Khasis inhabit the central upland of the Khasi Hills, Jaintias or Pnars occupy the Jaintia Hills, Bhois are
found in the low hills to the north and north-east of the Khasi Hills, Wars inhabiting the southern slopes of the Khasi Hills and Lyngngams living in the western portion of the Khasi Hills. They all speak a Mon-Khmer language that belongs to the Austro-Asiatic family (Das 1987) and have been indigenous in these hills for a long time. The various sub-tribes speak different dialects of the Khasi language and their *lingua franca* is based on the dialect of the Khasis of Sohra (better known as Cherrapunjee). The Garos are also an indigenous population of Meghalaya. They are also called Achik. Khasi and Garo are both matrilineal tribes.

**Origin**

The story about the origin of the Khasis has it that God created 16 families of them called *Ki Khad-hynrliew Trep* (The Sixteen Huts). In the beginning they shuttled at will between heaven and earth. They talk of *Ka Jingkieng Ksiar* (A Golden Ladder) helping them in their downward and upward journey every morning and evening. Their landing ground on earth was Mt. Sohpet Bneng (Navel of Heaven), a mountain of magnificent grandeur on the eastern side of the Shillong-Guwahati Road (about 15 kilometres from Shillong).

According to a legend seven of the sixteen families wanted to remain on earth. God granted them their wish. They would not hear Him speak to them as before but would know His will, if they honestly sought it, in such forms as He might choose to reveal and manifest. The golden ladder symbolises the most precious possession the Seven Huts had gained but had lost *Mynsiem Ksiar* (Golden Soul). The seven families staying on earth are known as *Ki Hynniew Trep* (The Seven Huts). They were the first ancestors of the people now known as the Khasis (Khynriams), Pnars (Jaintias, Syntengs), Wars, Bhois and Lyngngams.
They proudly say that God Himself gave them this land. That is why their land tenure system does not permit their ruler, be he called a *Syiem* (King), a *Lyngdoh* (Priest), or a *Daloi* (Patriarch) etc. to levy any land revenue.

**Physical Characteristics**

From the anthropological point of view, the Khasis (or Khynriam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, and Lyngngam) belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group of the Mongoloid stock (Das 1981). Haddon (1929) describes the physical features of the Khasi as Asiatic Xenthoderm, having cephalic index of 78.6, nasal index of 86.00 and stature 1.569 m. They are usually short in stature, with bodies well nourished, and the males are extremely muscular (Gurdon 1990).

**Demography**

According to 2001 census, Meghalaya has a population of 2,318,822 of which 1,176,087 are males and 1,142,735 are females. The density per square kilometre is 103 with a sex ratio of 972 females per thousand males. The district-wise population breakup is as follows:
Table No. 2.1: Demographic Profile of the Districts of Meghalaya

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Headquarters</th>
<th>Area (Sq. Km)</th>
<th>Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Jaintia Hills District</td>
<td>Jowai</td>
<td>3819</td>
<td>2,99,108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. East Khasi Hills District</td>
<td>Shillong</td>
<td>2820</td>
<td>6,60,923.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Ri Bhoi District</td>
<td>Nongpoh</td>
<td>2376</td>
<td>1,92,790</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. West Khasi Hills District</td>
<td>Nongstoin</td>
<td>5247</td>
<td>2,96,049</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. East Garo Hills District</td>
<td>Williamnagar</td>
<td>2603</td>
<td>2,50,582</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. West Garo Hills District</td>
<td>Tura</td>
<td>3715</td>
<td>5,18,390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. South Garo Hills District</td>
<td>Baghmara</td>
<td>1849</td>
<td>1,00,980</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meghalaya</td>
<td></td>
<td>22,429</td>
<td>23,18,822</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Climate

The State is directly influenced by the south-west monsoon and north-eastern winter winds. The region experiences tropical monsoon climate that varies from western to eastern parts of the plateau. The Garo Hills districts have tropical climate characterized by high rainfall and humidity, generally warm summer and moderately cold winter. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills have high rainfall, moderately warm summer and severe winter with periodic depression below freezing point marked by appearance of ground frost at night and morning over higher elevated areas. The lower elevated areas experience fairly high temperature for most part of the year having a mean maximum of 23 to 26° and a mean minimum of 12 to 17° C. The mean summer temperature is 26°C and the mean winter temperature is 9° C and at times goes down as low as the freezing point (Marwein 1987). The mean annual rainfall varies from 2000 to 4000 mm with most rainfall concentrated from May to September. The climate of
Meghalaya plateau is influenced by elevation and distribution of physical relief. On the basis of weather condition, the Meghalaya plateau has 4 distinct seasons. They are: rainy season from May to early October, cool season from early October to November, cold season from December to February, and warm or hot season from March to April.

**Occupation**

The main occupation of the people is agriculture. The major agricultural products include paddy, areca nut, bay leaf, ginger, turmeric, broom-stick, etc. Those who do not possess land work as daily wage labourers. Some people are also engaged in business and services and some in trade and commerce.

**Religion**

Khasis are monotheistic. Many authors (Mawrie 1981, Marwein 1987, Gurdon 1990, Bareh 1997) call the Khasi religion animistic. To a Khasi, religion is a personal contract between man and God. The Khasis believe in one Supreme God whom they call *U Blei Nongthaw* or *U Blei Nongpynlong* (Creator-dispenser) (Marwein 1987). The deity is also occasionally addressed as *Ka Blei* (Goddess), which is not surprising in the matrilineal society of the Khasis. Minor deities include *U Lei Long Iing* who is the household deity and *U Ryngkew-U Basa* and *U-Phan-U Kyrpad* are venerated as village deities. They believe in a Supreme Being, the Creator *U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw* who is omnipotent, omnipresent and omniscient. Accordingly, they hold it a sacrilege to symbolise Him or picture Him in any shape or form. God's three commandments, according to this religion, are:
1) *Kamai ia ka Hok*, which literally means "earn righteousness".

2) *Tip Briew - Tip Blei*, which literally translates as "Know man, Know God".

3) *Tip-Kur Tip Kha*, which means "know one's maternal relations and paternal relations".

Khasis perform various rituals and ceremonies to propitiate their ancestors and also to venerate their spirits. It is they who protect their descendants as long as they lead good lives and after death it is the hope of everyone to be able to join them in the house of God. They have their institution of priesthood. In respect of the some special ceremonials or of state religious functions, the services of the priests called *U Lyngdoh* are sought, but in cases of illness, those of *U Nongkha* (Diviner) or *U Nongknia* (Sacrificer) are looked for. Sacrificing animals such as fowls, pigs, cows, goats and breaking eggs are the part of the rituals to offer thanks-giving to God (Marwein 1987).

With the establishment of British rule, Christian missions began their work in the hills about 1841. In the Jaintia Hills work of the Christian missionaries started about a decade later. In both the Khasi and Jaintia hills, the Presbyterian Mission from Wales carried out the mission work. The Roman Catholics started their work about half a century later. The Christians now form a major chunk of the population of the state with an overall percentage of 70 (Census of India 2001).

**Social Milieu**

The Khasi society is characterized by matriliney. Monogamy is the general practice of the people. Nakane (1967) states that the core of the family comprises two persons – the maternal uncle who holds the authority and the youngest daughter who owns the property. Women are
accorded respect not only as those through whom the race or more precisely the clan is propagated but also in recognition of the fact that their commitments as mother and wife are a full time occupation. Responsibilities relating to regulation of the family are entrusted to men. Descent is traced through the mother, but the father plays an important role in the life of the family. In Khasi society, the woman looks after home and hearth, the man finds the means to support the family, and the maternal uncle settles all social and religious matters. Therefore, *Ka lawbei* (progenitress), *U Suidnia* (representing maternal uncle) and *U Thawlang* (of the paternal ancestry) are revered.

Among Khasis, household responsibilities are shared between the maternal uncle and the father. The father earns for his own wife and children but 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 uncle who makes the decisions though generally in consultation with other members of the family. Thus, there is virtually a three-fold division of family responsibility: the mother looks after the hearth and home, the father provides all that is necessary for the maintenance of his wife and children and the uncle attends to the business affairs that come before the family. A man does not forego membership of his own clan after marriage. His position in his wife's house is that of 'being in it, but not of it'. The impact of modernisation and of other cultures has no doubt eroded the maternal uncle's authority but by and large the convention is still honoured.

In Khasi society, a man is isolated from his wife and children in such social matters as the arrangement of marriages, management of ancestral property and performance of religious duties. However, in recent times, as stated earlier, the father has a more definitive role to play.
with regard to these matters. In non-Christian families, even in death, his bones must not lie with those of his wife and children. It must be deposited in a separate ossuary with those of his maternal relations. In well-organized families, the duties of the father and those of the uncle are clearly defined. Troubles, if and when they arise, are caused by intrusion of one into the other’s sphere. This isolation of the husband from the wife’s family is carried to a great length among Pnars, especially in orthodox families. Gurdon (1990) reported of the presence of the practice of the ‘visiting husband’ among them. Mawrie (1981) says that traces of it can still be found among the Pnars. Often the husband may only be at his wife’s home during the night. By morning he is back to his maternal home for it is there alone he can act freely. In Khasi matriliney, the identity of the man being important at the same time as a father and as an uncle was all right when the matrilineal system was strictly adhered to. He is uncle to his nieces and nephews and works for them and their well being, and a father to his children. The changes that started more than a hundred years ago have seriously affected the system. At present “He is a man in two worlds” (Nakane 1967: 137, Mawrie 1981: 67) – the world of his family where he is the father and the world of the family where he is the uncle. His position and authority as the *kni* has climbed down rapidly and, as things stand, he is a man of divided loyalties (Holy 1986).

Khasis practise clan exogamy. Clans are strictly exogamous and this rule is observed by both Christian and non-Christian Khasis (Cantlie 1974, DasGupta 1984). If this rule is violated, which is rare the couple is ostracized from the clan and society and is considered as *Shong-Sang*, the greatest sin a Khasi can commit, which is believed to bring the wrath of the gods. Marriage with maternal uncle’s daughter or father’s sister’s daughter is also prohibited.
(Gurdon 1990). However, marriage with maternal uncle’s daughter is not theoretically forbidden, especially after the death of the maternal uncle (DasGupta 1984). But no Khasi woman can marry any brother of her father or any son of her brothers. Otherwise she is believed to have committed another unpardonable sin known as \textit{ka sang synkhen kha}. Thirdly, a Khasi woman cannot marry a son of her father's brothers, otherwise she commits another unpardonable sin known as \textit{ka sansohpet kha}. Finally, a Khasi woman cannot marry her maternal nephew of her father so long as her own father is alive. There is a saying that nobody can give back the heart and bread of her father to his own clan. She can, however, marry any person whom she considers as \textit{shibakha} (cross cousin) after the third generation.

Marriage involves the families of the bride as well as groom and is held along with celebrations and festivities, and is mainly initiated by the bride’s family. Rings or betel nut are exchanged between the bride and the groom to complete the union. The groom then comes and lives in the bride’s house. They remain there if he marries the youngest daughter but if he is married to the other daughters they set up a separate house of their own after a few months of marriage. The children belong to the mother and they take their surname from her and belong to the family of the mother. Nuclear type of family is prevalent, but the youngest daughter along with her family stays in the ancestral house with her parents and unmarried uncles, brothers and sisters.

In Khasi society the birth of a son and a daughter is equally welcomed even though they prefer girls for fulfilling the role of matriliny like transmission of property, expansion of lineage and looking after the parents in their old age. They believe that the birth of a child is a
gift from God. So, in olden days, women gave birth till the end of her fertility period. Now, some of them have accepted family planning.

In the past, scholars, missionaries and administrators alike have been confused between matriarchy and matriliny among Khasis. The confusion was more prevalent among the earlier writers for instance, Gurdon (1990: 76-78) wrote that Khasis were “a people who observe the matriarchate”. Kharshiing (1988: 88) then declared that “the one great confusion that has persisted about the Khasis is that they are a matriarchal society; they are not so, they are very much matrilineal... It is a beautiful and correct observation on one of the basic structures of a Khasi way of life... not matriarchal but a matrilineal society…”

Separation and Divorce

The raison d'etre of a Khasi marriage appears to be the begetting of offsprings for the purpose of continuity of the race because barrenness and sterility justify separation and divorce (Gurdon 1990: 79). It also plays an important part in the system of kinship and can be initiated by any one of the parties concerned. For infertility, adultery, and incompatibility, separation can be obtained. However separations are seldom dragged to the courts; all they do is they leave each other and the husband returns to his mother’s house. Re-marriage of widows, widowers and divorcees are recognized in Khasi customary laws, but in case of the death of a spouse, a minimum period of one year is generally allowed to pass before remarriage takes place. Marriage within a year of the husband’s death is not considered proper and is seen as an act of fornication (Klim) (Bareh 1997). Customary laws do not allow a man to divorce his wife during pregnancy; he must wait till she delivers (Kharakor 1988: 50).
Rules of Inheritance

Khasis follow matrilineal system of inheritance of the ultimo-geniture type, whereby only the youngest daughter or Ka Khadduh is eligible to inherit the ancestral property. If Ka Khadduh dies without any daughter surviving her, her next elder sister inherits the ancestral property, and after her, the youngest daughter of that sister. Failing all daughters and their female issues, the property goes back to the mother’s sister, mother’s sister’s daughter and so on. If there is no female successor to the property, a daughter may be adopted from the mother’s kin group (Natarajan 1977). Ka Khadduh’s property is actually the ancestral property and so if she wants to dispose it off, she must obtain consent and approval of uncles and brothers. Among the War-Khasis, however, property passes to the children, male or female, in equal shares but among the War-Jaintias, only the female children get the inheritance (Cantlie 1974, DasGupta 1984, Gurdon 1990, Bareh 1997).

Property in Khasi society is mainly of two types, viz., ancestral property or Nongtymmen, which Khongphai (1970: 13) defines as “the property one inherits from one’s parents or grandparents” and acquired or personal property or Nongkhynraw Nongkhynraw or “the one which one earns while living or earning alone,” i.e., before marriage (Khongphai 1970: 13). Some of the important Khasi concepts are Kamai iingkur or “property one acquires while living with his mother, brother and sister…or property belonging to his mother, that is to his clan” (Kharakor 1988: 103) and Kamai iing khun iing tnga consists of the “property one acquires after marriage” (Chattopadhyay 1985: 131). The latter consists of the property earned by the present members of the family. In case of inheritance, however, both are taken together. The khadduh acts as the custodian of the ancestral property and has to act according
to the wishes of all the members of the family. She is therefore a custodian rather than the owner of the family property and is instrumental in binding all her kins and she holds the property because she holds the religion of the family (Mawrie 1981). The sisters and brothers of the *khadduh* are known as *Nongmih-ing*, as they are supposed to move out of the house when they get married. They set up separate households and earn their livelihood independently. The ancestral house or *Ing-Kmie* being inherited by the youngest daughter enjoins upon her the obligation to act as keeper of the house. She is required to look after the family, her aged parents and to support her brothers and sisters in times of difficulties and distress. “The *khadduh* judges and arbitrates over whom to pull up and whom to give necessary help” (Mawrie 1981: 58).

The status of the youngest daughter is of special importance. She is the embodiment of everything that is enduring and sacred in the Khasi concept of family. Her house is called *Ing-Khadduh*, which has special sanctity. This is the ancestral house of generations of youngest daughters, which provides refuge or shelter for the indigent members of her family and also looks after their improvement. 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 custom, the earning of a man before his marriage goes to his family, which later becomes part of the ancestral property. In spite of the high position of Khasi women, men too have their roles. They are not only sons, but also maternal uncles of their sisters’ children, and act as counselors and guardians of their nephews and nieces. In their wives’ houses, Khasi men are both husbands and fathers who bring up and provide for their children, their mother and sisters who are duly
respected as *Meikha* and *Kha*. A unique system prevails in the War area where equal shares are made amongst brothers and sisters. But the youngest daughter has the position of *Ka Nongri ing* (keeper of the house) and in addition looks after *Ri Shyieng* (family lands). The eldest son is actually the manager and to him is given the lion’s share of the property called *Ri Nongsaid*, as he has the position of *U Nongsaid* (Solicitor).

The issue of inheritance is one area where people are still very susceptible. The “special status” of *ka khadduh* as inheritress of “the lion’s share” of the property has gradually helped her emerge as the heiress, and her image as the custodian is fading into the past. Today, however, many parents share the property with all daughters, and some even among sons.

**Megalithic Culture**

Khasis have a rich megalithic culture. The Khasi megaliths may broadly be classified into two categories - monumental stones and ossuaries (Bareh 1997). The common monumental stone consists of three menhirs in a group with a dolmen, but if the menhirs vary to five, seven, or nine, more than one dolmen are associated. While menhirs represent men, dolmens stand for women. The next type conforms to a square sarcophagus forming an ossuary where the bones of the dead are kept inside earthenware or a stone urn. Vertical and flat stones serve as wayside seats at important trading centres; stones were also raised as foundations of markets and ancient places of settlement. They have a multifarious significance being set up as covenants among contracting parties, being connected with feasts, whereas some serve as
boundary marks and serve as obelisks. Majority of Khasi megaliths are associated with funeral ceremonies, hence representing memorials of the dead.

Mineral Resources

Meghalaya has abundant natural resources, including coal, limestone, kaolin, feldspar, quartz, mica, gypsum, bauxite, etc. Its sillimanite deposits (a source of high-grade ceramic clay) are reputedly the best in the world and account for almost all of India's sillimanite output. Meghalaya has no heavy industries. Small-scale industries include cement, plywood, and beverage factories, in addition to a newly established electronics plant. Internal communications are poor and many areas remain isolated. There are no railways in Meghalaya. A national highway runs through the State from Guwahati (Assam) in the north to Karimganj (Assam) in the south. The only airport in the state is located at Umroi, 31 kms from Shillong.

Flora

81% of the population of the state live in the rural areas and are dependent on agriculture for livelihood. Besides the major food crops of rice and maize, the State is also renowned for its horticultural crops like orange, lemon, pineapple, guava, litchi, banana, jack fruits and temperate fruits such as plum, pear, and peach. Potato, ginger, turmeric, black pepper, areca nut, bay leaves, betelvine, short-staple cotton, jute, mesta, mustard and rapeseed etc. are some of the important cash crops in the State. Apart from the above the State has achieved success in the cultivation of non-traditional crops like tea, cashew nut, oilseeds, tomato, mushroom,
and wheat. New emphasis is laid on pulses, oilseeds and cash crops. Besides agriculture, the allied activities of fishery, livestock, piggery, poultry and sericulture have immense potential and strength. The State’s natural resources include diverse, dense, endemic and cultivated exotic flora, ranging from tropical and sub-tropical to temperate or near temperate kind, sustained by heavy and long rains. The total forest area in the State is 9,496 sq. kms of which only 722.96 sq. kms are under the control of the State Forest Department. The remaining areas are under the direct/indirect control of the district councils in the State. The reserved forests are managed under the prescription of the ‘Working Plans’ prepared by the State Forest Department and the Protected Forests are managed for the preservation of the catchment areas of water resources (Sengupta and Paul 2007). State owned forest lands account for 12 percent of the total forest area and contains some of the best forests (Dasgupta and Syiemlieh 2006: 47).

However, a very unique and fascinating feature of these hills is the presence of community forests and sacred groves, which are a part of the culture and legacy of Khasis. The scared groves of Meghalaya largely fall under the temperate type and due to ecological succession it represents the floral relic of the area evolved through millions of years. These are rich storehouses of vegetation wealth incomparable to any other type of forests in the State. These isolated pockets are untouched due to the religious beliefs and myths associated with them. Many of the endangered species of the State are presently confined to these pockets only. Fagaceae members dominate over others in these sacred forests. Epiphytic flora is quite abundant and is dominated by ferns and orchids. In Meghalaya, 40 endemic species out of 115 plant species from 67 families are threatened with extinction and 6 species are
endangered. 30 types of orchids are currently threatened (Shreeranjan 2001). The State is rich in species of flora and varies from open scrub (grassland) to pine forest in the central plateau region. The rest is covered by mostly deciduous to evergreen forests and transitional tropical moist deciduous pine forests.

Thus the forests of Meghalaya are a treasure house of valuable products such as timber, fuelwood, fodder, resin, tannin, gums, shellac, fiber, latex, essential oils, fats, edible fruits, honey and a large number of medicinal plants, bamboo, reed, broomstick, cane, ipecac, cinnamon and thatch grass. Azaleas and rhododendrons grow wild in the forests of Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills and many kinds of beautiful orchids are found in the woods. The principal timber species are sal, teak, titachap, gomari, bol, pine birch and makri-sal. Meghalaya is well known for bay leaves and cinnamon. *Morus alba, Quercus semiserrata* and a number of other tree species play a vital role in the economy of the State, being the host plants for rearing of silk worms for sericulture. Many rare and interesting plants are also found endemic to the State like wild citrus and pygmy lily.

**Fauna**

Meghalaya is a paradise for botanists for its rich concentration of interesting and valuable flora. It is also no less a happy hunting ground for zoologists for its interesting, rare and diverse faunal wealth. It is considered by many biologists to have been the gateway through which many species of Indo-Chinese origin, particularly mammals migrated to Peninsular India. It is said that about 50% of the total number of mammal genera found in the entire Indian sub-continent can be seen in Meghalaya and its adjoining states in Northeast. Out of
the above, nine genera of mammals, such as Tupaia, Rhizomys, Cannomys, Chiropodomys, Micromys etc occur only in Meghalaya and its adjacent areas. Some of the most interesting animals found in Meghalaya are: Hoolock - the only tailless ape in India, Golden Cat, Leopard Cat, Jungle Cat, Large Indian Civet, Binturong or Bear Cat, Himalayan Black Bear, Barking Deer, and Pangolin.

In the forests of Meghalaya, especially in lower altitudes, multifarious species of birds can be seen in abundance. Some of the common birds are: Hoopoe, Long tailed Broadbill, Scarlet Minivet, Burmese Roller, Blue-throated Barbet, Red-vented Bulbul, Himalayan Black Bulbul, Himalayan Whistling Thrush, Spotted Forktail, Black-breasted Kalij Pheasant, Red Jungle Fowl, Jungle Mynas, Hill Mynas etc. Besides, hornbills including the Great Indian hornbill, florican, owl, black drongo and many other birds are also found. Reptile population in Meghalaya includes lizards and snakes, poisonous and non-poisonous. Important ones are: Indian Cobra, King Cobra, Coral Snake, Vipers, Python, Blind Snake, Copperhead, Red-necked Kulback and Green Tree Racer. Besides mammals, birds and reptiles, Meghalaya has a number of amphibians and fishes and insects. Amphibians like frogs, toads and fishes like rohu, mrigal, kalibaus, puti and many more of hill stream variety are found abundantly in Meghalaya. Among the insect population ants, flies, bees, beetles are common. Meghalaya's butterflies are world famous, among which are Blue Peacock, Karserhed, Orange Oak Leaf, Dipper, and the Bhutan Glory. It is for this exquisitely diverse, rare and wonderful animal life that Meghalaya is called a veritable nature's wonderland. The State has two national parks, viz, Nokrek and Balpakram and two wildlife sanctuaries, viz, Nongkhyllem and Siju.
Food

The staple food of the people is rice. They also take fish and meat. They have now begun to consume milk and milk products. Vegetables, roots and tubers also form a part of their diet. Common vegetables include onion, potato, brinjal, pumpkin, gourd, plantain flowers, yam, arum, cucumber, tomato, pulses like lentil and different types of beans. Different types of leafy vegetables, mushroom and bamboo shoots are collected from the jungles and consumed during the rainy season (April to September). It may be noted that nowadays, tea is another important ingredient of the breakfast and tiffin (DasGupta 1984).

Political Organization

Democratic values are deeply embedded in Khasi social life (Mawrie 1981). The Bhois fall under the jurisdiction of the Syiem of Mylliem and the Khasis of Nongkrem under the Syiem of Hima Khyriem. The villages have their own Dorbar Shnong (Village Assemblies) headed by the Rangbah Shnong or the village headman who is assisted by an executive committee of elected elder members of the village. The Rangbah Shnong is elected by the village assembly. A number of villages together form a Raid headed by the Basan Raid who is an elected leader known by different names such as Lyngdoh in the Bhoi and War areas, and Doloi among the Pnas (Jaintias). The Raids constitute their own Dorbar Raid. “This system forms the basic foundation of Khasi democracy” (Mawrie 1981: 91). The Rangbah Shnong and his Dorbar decide upon all matters pertaining to the village. The people choose their own village headmen and elders and these look after judicial and administrative affairs of the village.
The institution of local government has been one of the pillars of Indian administrative system, particularly in the frontier areas. This practice of self-governance is centuries old in the Khasi Hills. Khasis managed their essential social, economic and political affairs through their Syiems (Chiefs) on the basis of popular will and consent, freely expressed, for ages (Bhattacharya 1980).

The Syiem is the head of the estate and runs his day-to-day administration with his cabinet whose functions extend to the administration of markets, collection of judicial fines, etc. He takes up judicial cases from various units and villages in which he acts as a judge and his council as a jury according to the powers, which the District Council has entrusted. In the past the Syiem and his council determined foreign relations. According to a tradition, a Syiem should be proficient enough to carry out the administration in the interest of the people for whom he and his Deputy Syiem were to receive adequate training in the art of administration. No provision was ever made in the estate budget for his maintenance. A Syiem is succeeded by his nephew or grand-nephew or by his own brother. This rule prevails in appointments to all offices in his estate. Women are the custodians of ancestral property, but are not entitled to succeed to the office of chieftains (except temporarily in the absence of a legitimate male to hold the office). However there is a Syiem-Sad, a mother, maternal aunt or sister of a Syiem who is regarded as the official custodian of the estate ceremonies (Bareh 1997).

Khasis have 25 existing estates, 16 of which are known as Syiemships, one is a Wahadadarship (Wahadadar seems to be derived from Arabic uh-dadar which means civil official), 3 are Lyngdohships (Lyngdoh means priest, Lyngdoh Nongsynshar means Priestly King) and 6 Sirdarship (Village Chief or Elder). Other non-estates (called ‘British areas’ in
the erstwhile administration) comprise 32 villages in Khasi Hills District. Doloiships (Doloi in Tibetan is associated with a religious shrine, a usage adopted by the Ahoms to re-designate the highest officers in the State and perhaps imitated by the Jaintias.). All these offices are highly elective (Syiemlieh 2003).

One of the important features of the Khasi-Jaintia polity and the core element of their democratic set up is dorbar through which the entire population participate in moulding policies, and taking legislative and judicial decisions. The hierarchy of dorbars is as follows: Dorbar Hima Pyllun which is at the highest or Syiem's level, Dorbar Hima which stands at the level below that, Dorbar ki Shnong, a dorbar of villages next and finally Dorbar Shnong, a village durbar. In Dorbar Hima Pyllun all the population of the estate participate. In Dorbar ki Shnong, in view of the difficulties in organising such a vast gathering, only male residents, especially village delegates, local officials, and heads of clans participate. At the district level there is a Dorbar Raij (commune) whose composition varies from place to place. In the dorbars the matters discussed and debated range from petty issues to political, social, economic and environmental affairs pertaining to the area under its control. Dorbars are usually held in the open and constitute typical open-door councils. The councillors sit in concentric rows. The counting of heads, which is always preferred to raising of hands, usually indicates voting. Women are excluded from such sessions but in some places they are allowed to listen to the debates as observers. It is considered as a divine agency and a strict rule of conduct and verbal engagement is observed. Anyone who violates the rules and strict code of conduct is excommunicated and may even lose his ‘citizenship’. A dorbar is generally known
as Ka Dorbar ki Blei meaning the Dorbar of Gods, which has been a strong foundation of the society in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills.

**Market**

The people have periodical markets for sale of articles available in their respective areas, inspite of having permanent markets. These weekly markets are localized and the people in the neighbouring areas come to participate either as vendors or buyers. It provides the villagers with the opportunity to sell their products and to purchase those they need. In the market two kinds of commodities enter, i.e., general-purpose commodities produced inside the region and special-purpose commodities brought from outside the region. Among the former mention may be made of rice, corn, oil, earthenware, baskets, leafmats, vegetables, ropes, etc. and the latter include mill cloth, tailored garments, mirrors, cosmetics, etc (Vidyarthi and Rai 1985). Traders from different villages and towns flock to sell their products and merchandise. The villages falling in a radius of 20-30 kms have each a fixed separate weekly market place. These weekly markets play an important role in the life of the people. The market brings together people from different adjoining villages not only for economic but also for social and religious activities. The market is the most powerful channel of communication in the tribal region. Any announcement of community interest may be broadcast there and it will get relayed all over the area immediately (Vidyarthi and Rai 1985). It has obtained a place in the social organization of the people and proves to be a meeting place of kinsmen and friends from neighbouring villages.
Thad Village

The area covered by the undulating hills sloping down north from the Shillong plateau in Meghalaya and tailing off into the Brahmaputra valley is known as the Bhoi area. These hills are interspersed with rich narrow alluvium valleys that are famous for rice cultivation. It is in this area that the village Thad is located. It is inhabited by the Bhoi Khasis.

Thad falls under the Umsning Community Development Block and under the Mawhati Assembly Constituency. To reach the village a person has to take the Mawhati (Jaggi) road from Umsning that leads to Mawhati and further down to Assam. The village has two schools that cater to the needs of education. A government deficit Lower Primary School functioning from nursery to class IV, and a village supported school from class V to class VII are there. For classes VIII onwards the students go to schools outside the village. They often opt for schools situated in Umsning, which is much nearer to them than traveling to Shillong.

Majority of the village population belongs to Christian faith. There are three denominations of Christianity in the village - Presbyterian, Church of God and Catholic. Of the three, according to the census conducted by me, majority of the people belong to the Presbyterian denomination. The most likely reason for this is that this was the first church established in the village. There seems to be a demarcation of settlements based on religion. Most Presbyterians live close-by and cluster together in the main village known as Shnong Heh which consists of localities called Jronglum, Current, Lum Myrsiang and Lum Rngi. The Catholics and the people belonging to the Church of God live in localities surrounding Shnong Heh or in localities known as Shiliang Um, Kseh, Makri, and Lum Sohsai. There are, however, exceptions to this broad pattern. People of the village are very religious and they
attend the church services regularly. A locality known as Lumsuna is the area where the people belonging to the Khasi indigenous religion are found. However they are assimilated with the Christian way of life. The people in the village belonging to the indigenous faith do not perform any life cycle rituals. When a person dies he or she is buried in the graveyard specially allotted to them by the village.

Nongkrem Village

Nongkrem is one of the important villages falling under the East Khasi Hills District. It is a very big village and includes 8 hamlets, namely, Mawmuthoh, Nongkyndong, Ur-Masi-U-Joh, Rngi Kseh, Warbah, Kharbuli, Mawlynnei, Mawpynthaw, Iew Pomtiah, Kynton U Mon and Lamlyer.

Fieldwork for the present study was conducted among the Khasis in the hamlets of Mawmuthoh and Nongkyndong of Nongkrem village under the Khyrim Syiemship. It is under the Mawryngkneng Community Development Block, and falls in the Nongkrem Assembly Constituency. It is situated in the outskirts of Shillong, the capital of Meghalaya. Information and data gathered by me by conducting interviews with key informants of the village suggest that there is a wide variation in the socio-economic conditions of the people belonging to the two hamlets. Mawmuthoh is a purely agricultural hamlet and Nongkyndong has a mixed economy with educated and literate people working mostly in both government and private sectors. The purpose behind the choice of these two hamlets was to observe the ways people belonging to different educational and economic backgrounds perceive their environment and their natural resources and how each group manages and conserves them.
The religious affiliation of the villagers varies considerably. They belong to different denominations of Christianity as well as to the indigenous Khasi religion. There is a very strong presence of the Khasi indigenous religion in the village, which holds three phases in life very dear and significant to their faith - birth, marriage and death. Khasis belonging to this religion in the village perform elaborate ceremonies, rituals and rites either to celebrate the joys of life or mourn the death of the people there.

Being a semi-urban area and in close proximity to Shillong, Nongkrem is comparatively more developed than Thad village. It has a number of schools at the primary level and one government deficit upper primary school. The teachers are generally from Shillong town with a few exceptions from the village itself. A well-established commercial market complex is established, where all basic amenities are available with shops providing modern attires too. A majority of the people are government employees, businessmen and local traders. Very few people practise agriculture, except in a few hamlets that are situated at a relative distance from the main hamlets.