A PROFILE OF THE KHASI HILLS

Origin - The People - Physiography - Geology -
Economy - Literacy - Sex Ratio - Education -
Natural Resources etc. - Impact of Geography on History - The Problem of Defence.

Origin:

Khindi mythology says that the Khiasi race descended from the "Seven Huts" - "K1 Hynniew Trep ki Hynniew Skum". David Roy writes, "There is a belief among the Khasis that they were instructed in religion and that their ceremonies and rites were delivered by God Himself to the Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum (the seven nests, the seven roots). These seven nests or roots were seven pairs of virgin women and men created by God to marry and they formed seven houses (families) and from them the country was filled up and the rites and ceremonies were obtained. Thus, Khasis pride themselves that God Himself delivered their religion and the rites and ceremonies unto them. The Khasi matrilineal system has come down through ages and with a definite idea of the union of one man and one woman". 1 The Seven Huts on earth and

the Nine Huts in Heaven were connected by the golden
ladder called u Sohpet Bneng. When ka pap ka sang
(sin) crept and covered the earth, the golden bridge
was broken, the sun refused to shine and hid herself
(In Khasi, the sun is referred to in the feminine
gender) in a cave, called "Ka Krem Lamet ka Krem Latang".
Man and beast were on the horns of a dilemma. A large
durbar was convened calling forth who would be ready
to pay the price, who would go to call back the sun
from Ka Krem Lamet Ka Krem Latang. No one seemed fit
to shoulder the responsibility but at length, the cock -
U Khun Lymboit u Khun Lymbiang3 swore to have himself
sacrificed at the altar or ka Duwan Dupat and thus
brought forth the reconciliation between Man and God -
when the cock crows three times, the earth sees the
light of the morning sun. In short, the Khasis believe
to have a divine origin, they believe in one invisible
God, who is kind, loving and forgiving, who is omni-
potent, omnipresent and omniscient. They believe in
the fundamental doctrine that service to man is service
to God. R.T. Rymbai observes, "A Khasi is a deeply

2. (a) Tham, Soso : Ki Sngi Barim U Hyanniew Trep.
(b) Lyngdoh, Dr. H : Ka Niam Khasi.
(c) Roy, Jeebon : Ka Niam Khasi.
(d) Roy, Sibcharan : Ka Niam Tip Briew Tip Blei.
(e) Singh, Rabon : Ka Kitab Niam Khein Ki Khasi.
(f) Roy, David : Principles of Khasi Culture.

3. U Khuit Lyriboit U Khun Lymbiang - one who does not
have enough dress to befit himself to attend any
important function or occasion.
religious person, who nevertheless has an intense love of life. This may sound paradoxical as we have been wont to associate the religious with the ascetic. A Khasi believes that life is God's greatest gift to man here below; and man has to account for it again to the Giver hereafter. Therefore, man's supreme duty is to preserve this life on earth as good and beautiful as he can. But he finds that difficult: he sickens and dies, soon too soon. For bare existence he has to earn his livelihood by the unrelenting sweat of his brow. Nature which smiles on him through her verdant hills and fruitful valleys, also frowns on him with her darkling forests and shady pools. Evil spirits which haunt these dark places come out too often to plague his life. These same spirits twist and torture his mind with sordid ambition and soul killing jealousy. He believes that the evil around him is much too strong for him to resist alone. So, he turns to his nearest kith and kin (Ki Kur ki Kha ki man) to form a united front against his enemies, seen and unseen, and above all to his God for his omnipotent help. A Khasi believes in a God, who is good and kind and who would not fail him. He also believes that gratitude is the highest form of virtue and God desires him to live his life fully... when a khasi is happy, he shouts, laughs
and dances. When he is sad, he sings mournful songs."4
The fundamental belief and faith of a Khasi is that the comes to this world "ban kamaia ka hok" - to earn truth and righteousness.

Speaking from the anthropological or historical point of view, the Khasis belong to the Austro-asiatic Race and their language belongs to the Monkhmer family.5 Though the origin of the Khasis is lost in obscurity, due to the great flood, as tradition tells us, yet their language is remarkable as being the only surviving dialect in India, of the Monkhmer family of languages. Dialects of this linguistic family are believed to have been spoken by the earliest Mongolian invaders of India. The evidence of philology, therefore, suggests the hypothesis that the Khasis are a remnant or a residue of the first Mongolian overflow from the traditional cradle of the Indo-Chinese race in North Western China between the upper waters of the Yang tse-kiang and the Hwang Ho, who established themselves in their present habitat at a very remote period.7 Their congeners in the plains below were submerged in subsequent streams

6. (a) Bareh, H. : The history and culture of the Khasi people - Sec. II.
   (b) Lyngdoh, H. : Kama Khasi.
   (c) Roy, David : Principles of Khasi Culture.
of immigration, but the vanguard continued its onward march until the sea put a stop to all further progress.

A reference may be made to Peter Schmidt's famous Austro-Masaryk theory under which the Khasi language is included in perhaps the largest language field in the world i.e. one stretching from Eastern Island off the coast of South America in the east to Madagascar in the west and from New Zealand in the south to Punjab in the north. Reference may be made of U Bin Iangphar whose father was from Sylhet. He was a native of the village of Hawkong who married at the village of Sohiong. He went as a coolie under Colonel Wood Thorpe to China and returned after an absence of thirty years or so.

According to the report of U Bin Iangphar, there were Khasis in a certain place in China; they called themselves Khasis and spoke Sohiong dialect and they strictly observed Khasi customs and traditions. They had powerful Siems who had their own soldiers. U Bin Iangphar had four children - (1) Ka Donrimai, (2) Ka Dori, (3) U Bilot and (4) U Alot.

In short, Khasi is a generic name given to the people of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Having the same

customs and traditions, speaking the same language, having a common religious belief, the Khasis of the Eastern Plateau are known as Pnars or Syntengs, those of the southern slopes are known as Bhuis and those in the west by north areas as Lyngngams. The Khasis of the Western Plateau are known as Khynriams to the Pnars and as Nongphlangs to the Wars. There are other groups like the Labangs, the Khyrwangs, the Nongtungs and others but all these are known by the generic name Khasi.

Before discussing the varied details of Khasi and Jaintia Hills, it is of vital importance to understand that the Khasis form a matrilineal society where it pre-supposes of an all powerful woman or women who dominate the mental and material life of the people in the society. Among the Khasis, the line of descent is traced through the mother. From the woman sprang the kind (species) it is the father who gives the stature, (person). The father plays a vital role, in fact, he has a dual role - as father to his children and uncle to his nieces and nephews. The sword he holds in the right hand symbolises his defence for his self, his home (Ka Rympe) his kith and kin (K1 Kur Kha) and his motherland. The Symphiah (fly flap) on his

left hand symbolises the softness and warm advice and counsel to his nieces and nephews. It is he who shapes and moulds the destiny, the material and mental culture of the people. David Roy wrote "man is the defender of the woman, and the woman is the keeper of his trust."

A Khasi man is 'U Kni' (maternal uncle) in his mother's clan and 'U Kpa' in his wife's family. To quote David Roy again, "It is true that the 'Kni' or mother's eldest brother is the head of the house, but the father is the executive head of the new home, where after children have been born to him, his wife and children live with him. It is he who faces the dangers of the jungles and risks his life for his wife and children. In his wife's clan, he occupies a very high place, he is second to none but 'U Kni' while in his own family circle as father and husband, is nearer to his children and his wife than U Kni." The dancing arena of young maidens with downcast eyes testifies to the modesty and obedience of a Khasi woman, the crown on her head bears the glory and dignity of Khasi matrilineal society, the tiew lasubon (flower of fine light yellow texture) attached to the crown stands for purity and beauty, the slow movement of her feet to the accompaniment of drums.

11. Roy, David : The Khasis Gurdon : The Khasis

12. Ibid.
cymbals and flute, synchronises the fact that she must follow the man for love and shelter. Young and old men alike surrounding the maidens symbolises the role of a Khasi man and a Khasi father. "A Khasi Dance" observed A.S. Khongphai, "brings with it the memories of the years gone by when the fore-fathers of long, long age considered it a sacred duty to lay down their lives in guarding the honour, purity and chastity of their women-folk who even now are given an honourable place in Khasi society." It is, therefore, wrong to say that a Khasi man has no place or position in the Khasi society.

Area:

The Khasi Hills cover an area of about 10,500 square kilometres, between longitude 91°E and 92°5'E and latitude 25°9 and 26°N. The flat topped range appears to be running east west about 1,400 to 1,800m with a steep face towards the plains of Bangladesh, out of which it appears to rise abruptly. It rises to 1953mm in the Shillong Peak, the highest point.

Places of Interest:

Composing of undulating hills and dales, valleys and precipices, cascading water falls and rippling brooks, the Khasi Hills lure the minds and hearts of the

people far and near. It is a dream come true for the traveller. The charms of this land are many splendoured and unique. Here is a happy land of magnificent beauty - rolling grasslands, snaking rivers, terraced slopes and thrilling wild life. Looking around, one will find himself in the midst of a riot of colours - breath-taking flowers in a million hues, bright costumes and the ever-green trees soaring skywards.  

It is dotted with a number of lovely tourist spots, where nature unfolds herself in all her glory. Shillong, the Scotland of the East ripples with the Beadon's Falls, Sweet Falls, the Golf Links, the Ward's Lake and others. Umiam Lake, by the side of the main Guwahati - Shillong Road, provides a most fascinating view. Sparkling green waters receding into the creeks and crevices of the distant blue hills form a most striking asset of these hills.

Kyllang Rock is situated at a distance of about 55 kilometres west of Shillong. Rising out of the rolling grassy downs, it is an important dome of granite more than 700 ft in height. From the top of the rock, one can have a commanding view of the surrounding country side.  

Mynjneh Peak gives us a broad eye view of the Khasi Hills. Mawsmai Falls at Cherra Poonjee, over looking the hazy blue plains of Bangladesh has an appeal

---

unparalleled in the whole of India. Thadlaskein Lake offers a picturesque spot and boating facilities to the tourists. Syntu Ksir of Jaintia Hills unveils the wonder of nature as one walks slowly down to this place. Nartiang in Jaintia Hills about 90 kilo metres from Shillong has a number of monoliths, the tallest being 27 feet high and 2½ feet thick. According to recent archeological research, it is found to be one of the tallest in the world. Garampani, a hot spring of sulphur water is 120 kilometres from Shillong. It is said that it is not only an interesting place of visit but herein abounds nature’s healing powers for the sick.

Rainfall:
The climate is temperate, neither too hot nor too cold with a plentiful supply of rainfall in summer. Sohra (Cherra Poonjee) which is situated close to the southern slopes receives 12,033mm rain, Mawsynram lying to the west receives 13,923mm rain but Shillong which is located at a distance of 50 kilometres from both these places receives only 2296mm, Jowai in the east receives 3077mm and Mawphlang at the Central Plateau receives 3309mm.21

Vegetation:
As a result of heavy rainfall, Khasi Hills is

17. Ibid - p.17
18. Ibid - p.17
rich in natural vegetation. It is clad with beautiful evergreen trees of the lower hills and tall pine trees (Pinus Khasiana) of Shillong. The echoing green meadows, the flora of Khasi Hills have a piercing fascination and add more to the beauty of the hills. Cherrapoonjee has gorgeous, luxuriant, tropical vegetation and boasts of an innumerable variety of ferns, moss and orchids. According to Hooker, Khasi flora is the richest in India, in extent, number and variety of flowering plants, some 2000 species of flowering plants and 150 ferns could be found within 16 kilometres of Cherrapoonjee.

**Mineral Products**

It is rich in mineral products. Coal reserves are found in abundance, about 30 million tons. Silimanite is found at Sonapahar, Nongpen and Mongbali area. Clay is found at Cherrapoonjee, Kaolin conducive for the supply of china clay is found at Thadlaskain, Sung area in the Jaintia Hills and Mawphlang in the Khasi Hills. The local people of Larnai, Jaintia Hills deftly make the ‘Khiew Ranei’ or clay pots for cooking rice, curry, Khasi bread made of rice called putharo and others. Two million tons of glass stones are found at Laitkynsew area. Added to these abundant mineral reserves, Khasi Hills which abounds in waterfalls helps

22. Meghalaya Chronicle.

23. Ibid.
in generating electricity.  

Economy:

Speaking of the economy of the people, agriculture is the main occupation. The principal agricultural products are rice, maize, potatoes, oranges, pine apples, betelnut, pan leaves, tomatoes and others. But lack of preservation of perishable products, marketing facilities, modern equipments, complexities of the land tenure system and the like are a great hindrance to the growth of trade and commerce of these agricultural products. The Cement Factory at Cherrapoonjee known as the Mawmluh - Cherra Cement Ltd. which is in the process of expansion, adds more to the production capacity of 930 tons per day. It recently adds to the improvement of the economy of the people. An industrial area in Burnihat about 80 kilo metres from Shillong on the Gauhati-Shillong road is being developed for providing facilities for setting up industries. An integrated programme has also been taken up for the rehabilitation of the economy of the areas bordering Bangladesh which were badly affected by Partition in 1947. Besides, a number of small industrial establishments like Saw Mills, food processing units, Bone Mill, Cotton, Ginning, Bakeries and others are also found in the Khasi Hills.

27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
Wild Life:

Speaking of wild life of the Khasi Hills, reference can be made to the Tiger (*Panthera Tigris*) - the most majestic cat growing up to 12 feet in length, the Panthers (*Panthera Pardus*) - a sleek short haired animal growing up to 8 feet in length, the Golden Cat (*Felis Temmincki*) a sturdily built animal of the cat family growing up to 4 feet in length, the Clouded Leopard (*Neofelis Nebulosa*) larger than the Golden Cat, and other members of the cat family. Then there is the Himalayan Black Bear (*Selenarctos thibetanus*) and the Sloth Bear (*Melursus Ursinus*), Sambhars (*Cervus Unicolor*), the Barking Deer (*Muntiacus Muntjak*) Elephants (*Elephas Maximus*), apes like the Hoolock (*Hylobates Hoolock*), the Golden Langoor (*Presbytis Geei*), the Slow Loris (*Nycticebus Coucang*), the Stump Tailer Macaque (*Macaca Speciosa*) the Wild Boar (*Sus Scrofa*), the Flying Squirrel (*Petaurista*) and a host of others.29

Population:

According to the census report of 1971, the population of Khasi and Jaintia Hills30 is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>3,12,469</td>
<td>2,92,615</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

29. Ibid.

Again, according to the census report, the following is the list of towns and its classification:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Town</th>
<th>Status</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Classification</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Shillong Municipality</td>
<td>87,659</td>
<td>Class-II</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Nongthymmai Non-municipality</td>
<td>16,103</td>
<td>Class-IV</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Mawlai</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>14,260</td>
<td>Class-IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Jowai</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
<td>8,929</td>
<td>Class-V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Shillong Cantonment</td>
<td>4,730</td>
<td>Class-VI</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In 1975, the following table shows the population of Khasi and Jaintia Hills:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Districts</th>
<th>Persons</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2. Jaintia Hills</td>
<td>1,13,875</td>
<td>56,959</td>
<td>56,916</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It must be observed that Shillong Cantonment is geographically part of Shillong. Nongthymmai and Mawlai towns are the result of the expansion of Shillong. Therefore, greater Shillong has a population of 1,72,752. The increase in population is therefore, confined mostly in greater Shillong. If we take greater Shillong as one

   (b) Census of India, 1971, Meghalaya
   Roy Burman : Demographic and Socio-Economic profiles of North East India - p.72.
single entity, the only town which has come up after 1951 is Jowai and as such, the increase in the number of towns from 1901 to 1961 is only one. The urban density of population is heavy in Khasi and Jaintia Hills with 4,525 persons per square kilometre.

Sex Ratio:
Speaking of sex ratio in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, according to Census Report 1971, the number of females is 936 per 1000 males.

Literacy rate:
The literacy rate of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills according to the same report is as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Persons</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>33,46</td>
<td>37.11</td>
<td>29.57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Missions:
With the advent of British rule in India, we also saw the establishment of different missions in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills. The most notable among them are the Roman Catholic, the Presbyterian, the Pame Krishna.

33. (a) Census of India, Meghalaya 1971.
34. Census of India, Meghalaya - 1971.
35. Ibid.
36. Ibid.
Mission, the Baptist Mission, the Church of God Mission, the Church of Christ Mission and various others. The missions propagated not only missionary work but imparted education through the establishment of various educational institutions, establishing health centres or hospitals and such other humanitarian works.

**Impact of Geography on History**

Last but not the least, the topography of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills presents a fascinating and undoubted picture of the influence of Geography on the history of the people. In the first instance, ever since the immigration of the Khasis into these hills, they have been able to preserve their history and the democratic ideals uncontaminated and unadulterated because of the compactness of the physical environment. They have afforded to remain aloof and secluded, thus, capable of keeping their history intact.

In the second place, the steep hills, the valleys and ravines, the caves and dense forest, all these have contributed in creating the defence mechanism for their land; with their bows and arrows and their crude war instruments, the Khasis adopted guerilla tactics in times of external aggression. The embracing climate of the land makes the people strong, brave and sturdy to adopt such natural defence techniques which enable them
to maintain their rule and sovereignty amidst the multi-farious odds. The Earl of Wellington remarked: "It is a proof of the stamina and virility and competence of your people that, when greater empires in the East and the West have throughout the ages come and gone, you still maintain in your pleasant hills, the freedom of your small republics, based on your ancient ways and tenets of your race." Again, in another remark made by Sir Bamfylde Fuller, we can very well discern the influence of nature on the undaunted spirit of a Khasi. He said: "Not without courageous fighting and there is much to the credit of your nation in the record of the long struggle, which however, lamentably commenced, exhibited the bravery and endurance of Tirot Singh of Nongkhlaw. So also in the incidents of the protracted military operations which took place in Jaintia years ago..." The serenity of free nature amidst the hills of the Khasi land breathes an air of freedom and a love of their type of local self-government which still remains a symbol of local autonomy and democratic set up till date. R.M. Lahiri rightly observes, "Freedom was the very breath of their nostrils. Such was the country and the people with whom the British came into contact and conflict and it was no wonder that such brave people offer a determined resistance to an invading

force, however defective and primitive their means of warfare might be. And it is in the background of their national character and constitution that we should trace the true genesis and causes of their insurrection, which though a failure, was tinged with the halo of martyrdom. 39