CHAPTER - I

1.00 : KHASI RELIGION AS REVIEWED IN RELATED LITERATURE

It is believed that Khasi Religion (Niam Khasi) is a religion given by God, as God is omnipotent and omniscient. He is the supreme being, the creator of all things.

As the word 'Niam' means religion so,

The term Niam, therefore, has a very deep and significant meaning. Niam means living reason or living covenant. A term which denotes that the concept is non static or sterile but always living and dynamic.1

The Khasis still preserve their indigenous religion which is the core of their culture. As long as the Khasis still practice and propagate their own religion, the Khasi religion will still remain and show to the world that they have their own religion. We can see that, even with the coming up of other religious groups like the Baptist, Welsh Mission, the Roman Catholics, the Unitarians and the Brahmo Samaj, the Khasi religion still remains and there

are Khasis who did not want to convert to any other religion, they still preserve their own religion. The converted Khasis turned away from Khasi religion and religious rites, beliefs and rituals were abandoned for the new faith. Thus they follow the Christian way of life.

In the beginning, Christian missionaries spoke against everything native and pagan and often, one sect spoke against another even during sermons.²

The impact of Christian missionaries was more prominent. This had a shaking effect on many aspects of Khasi traditional culture. With the changes of time there is an intensified revivalism of culture among the Christian Khasi. There is a realization that they need to strengthen their own culture, customs and tradition. From this point of view many writers contribute to the development of Khasi religion and culture in their writings.

The earliest Christian missionary to arrive Khasi Hills was Rev. Krishna Chandra Pal. He was sent to these Hills by the Head of the Serampore Mission i.e. William Carey, as an evangelist in 1813. Krishna Chandra Pal began his Preaching at Pandua a place where the Khasis and the plainsmen met together to exchange their goods. U Duwan and u Anna were the first converts among

the Khasis. After preaching for about eight months, he returned to Serampore. William Carey still wanted to continue the work of preaching among the Khasis. In Serampore he translated the Bible into the Khasi language using Bengali script, as he himself did not come to work in the Khasi Hills as an evangelist. The Serampore Mission made another attempt to evangelize among the Khasis. The Mission sent Alexander B. Lish in 1832. Under his missionary work he established three schools at Cherra, Mawmluh and Mawsmai. To preach about Christianity,

Lish followed Pal’s method of preaching on market days, but he never succeeded to implant the notion of God’s love for mankind, because for the Khasis, having a God who loves sinners, was beyond their comprehension. They reasoned that love is earned only by righteous living and is received on the basis of merit. 3

As the Khasi religion is believed to be God gifted it did not have any propagation or prophet. Most of the Khasis did not understand what the new religion meant for, as many of them turned a deaf ear to conversion to the new religion. Because of this the Mission had to discontinue its evangelization in the Khasi Hills in 1838.

The Welsh Calvinistic Mission sent its first missionary,

Thomas Jones, to Khasi Hills after the Baptist mission. He arrived in Cherrapunjee on the 22nd June, 1841. Thomas Jones founded a script, because he wanted to educate them along with evangelization. His first step was to introduce Khasi Alphabet in Roman script, which the Khasi never had before. This is one of the greatest contributions of Thomas Jones even though his main aim was to convert the Khasis to Christianity, to practice and propagate the Christian faith. In his work Thomas Jones found that;

Kam long kaba myntoi eh ban īalap īa ka Gospel lymdā ki briew ki la nang hi īa ka ban pule īa ka ktien U Blei.4 (It is no use to preach the gospel unless people could read the word of God).

He took a firm step to boost up conversion by educating the people. After this the Khasis are taught not only to educate but to gear up the process of conversion by these students themselves. The impact of Christianity on Khasi religion was never total. It was only when Christianity had establish a foothold in the Khasi society that elements of conflict began to show the new trend in the life and ethos of the Khasis who remained in the indigenous faith. Prominent Khasi leaders found that it is very important to preserve their own traditional belief as handed down from one generation to another. Among them was Babu Jeebon Roy who saw that the

Christian and the western influences, subsequently, weaned them away from their indigenous beliefs and practices which, from Christian stand point, were vague, animistic and primitive. Without written record, the Khasi religion could disappear into oblivion. He was the one among Khasi writers who tried to put in writing the facts about the Khasi religion.

In his book *Ka Niam jong ki Khasi* (1897), it gives a lucid account of the religious beliefs in the Khasi society. In the preface to the book he wrote;

The people will completely forget their religion, with the coming of the Christian Mission; the Brahmo Mission; the poor religion of the Khasis without any written record will pass into oblivion and we will one day forget it completely.5

Khasi indigenous religion did not have any written and conventional documents; it passed on from one generation to another through oral traditions. With the coming of these writers and thinkers who have tried to lead the way to the present generation the Khasi religion survived. They enable the people to know about the Khasi religion, its tradition and practices. Their devotion has undergone tremendous efforts to put into writing the most important parts of Khasi religion, when they saw that


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traditional customs like marriage ceremony, naming ceremony, disposal of dead and religious rites and festivals are no longer observed by Christians or the Khasis who adopted Christianity.

1.01 : Jeebon Roy Mairom

Jeebon Roy Mairom was born in 1838 at Saitsohpen in Sohra; he was the son of Ram Singh Korkata and Bijan Mairom of Shella, he had a brother and a sister named Bon Roy and Tiewbon Roy respectively. According to the memoirs of the Late Babu Jeebon Roy published in the Khasi monthly 'U Khasi Mynta' (The Khasi Today), Jylliew (June), 1903, No. 80 described that; "Babu Jeebon Roy was born at Cherra in the month of April in the year 1838. His father Ram Singh a descendant of the 12 clans of Cherra was a big trader of his time but his mother was a lady of the war caste. It was Ram Singh who first visited the metropolis of India. In consequence of this adventure he got the nickname "Korkata". In the early thirties when the Khasi Hills were steeped in utter darkness and ignorance, it was undoubtedly a marvelous feat for a Khasi to go over to Calcutta for purposes of business."

Jeebon Roy married to Lakhreh jait Dkhar Sawian. On the 1st May 1885 he was employed as a second clerk in the office of the

6. II. Diengdoh (Ed.), U Khasi Mynta, 1903, No.80, p.3.
Principal Assistant commission in Sohra and he was the first Khasi to rise to the rank of senior Extra Commissioner as early as 1878, at the end of his service.

He retired as a Senior Assistant Commissioner on the 20th November 1894 with a pension of Rs. 200 per month from the Government.\(^7\)

One of the most important issues brought by Jeebon Roy was to bring higher education to the state. In order to introduce higher education he had to seek help from the authority concerned

Haba kiba bat ia ka bor ia ka jinghikai skul ha kito kip or kim treh ban sdang high school ne Entrance school namar ki ong ba ki wan’ for religion and not for education’ bad hana ba ki Khasi kim don jabieng ban pass tang ia ka entrance ruh”.\(^8\)

(The authority who looks after education i.e. the missionaries did not want to introduce high school or entrance school as they said that they came for religion and not for education and that the Khasis are not capable even of passing the entrance examination).

Through his hard work Jeebon Roy got a sanction from the Government and from his side he contributed about Rs. 700 to start the Entrance School or “Ka Jylla Skul”. It is stated that,

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When the mission refused to open a High School, he started one of his own situated in the premises of the present Telegraph office. Soon after his school had started functioning the mission raised its M.E. School at Mawkhar to Entrance standard. The existence of Entrance schools at Shillong then was held by the Government as unhealthy for education, harmful to peace and the growth of learning.

The first Headmaster of this Entrance School was Mr. Rain Mitra. Sib Charan Roy, the eldest son of Jeebon Roy was the first to pass the Entrance Examination in 1880. Jeebon Roy was also the founder of the Mawkhar Bengali Middle English School in 1899. He was the founder of the Khasi National Durbar, the Ri-Khasi Press and a patron of the Seng Khasi: a socio-cultural religious organization of the Khasis in 1899. In a letter to Sir Erskine Ward, Chief Commissioner of Assam, Jeebon Roy wrote;

The want of a press in those hills was a great drawback in the way of developing our vernacular language. Indeed there are few religious books and pamphlets that have been published by our kind and philanthropic missionaries for primary schools, etc, but there are no publications which may serve as general reading for the majority of our people.

His major literary works on Khasi religion were *Ka Niam Jong Ki Khasi* (The religion of the Khasis) published in 1897 and

Ka Kitab Ba Batai Pynshynna Shaphang Uwei U Blei (A book that interprets clearly about one God) in 1900. Jeebon Roy was a man with a vision.

He was eminently a self made man. He began life as a poor government servant, and died a millionaire: this simply through his unflinching devotion to duty, unflagging energy and fixity of determination.11

He worked hard not only for himself but also for the wellbeing of the people and the state as a whole. He died on the 16th May 1903 and he was cremated at Mawprem.

As reviewed from his literary works, it is found that Jeebon Roy Mairom would like to take note that there was a transition in the thinking of the Khasis in those days. This was noticeable especially among those who have been converted to other faiths and left behind their indigenous faith. Jeebon Roy tried to put into writings what he heard from his forefathers and whatever he inherited orally. His writings, have now become sources of information to the Khasis holding the traditional faith and for the future generation about the Khasi religion and other matters related to Khasi.

Rabon Singh Kharsuka was born at Mawmluh a village about five kilometers from Sohra in about the year 1840. At his time most of the parents who still follow the Khasi indigenous religion, did not allow their children to go to school; as most of the students after attaining education, converted themselves to Christianity. But in Rabon Singh the case is different, as his parents allowed him to go and be educated in a missionary school at Sohra; he was converted to Christianity when he attained adulthood. In 1864, the British East India Company shifted the capital from Sohra to Shillong due to heavy rainfall. It was during this year that Rabon Singh came to Shillong, where he was employed to work in a Government Press after passing the Minor examination (Middle English). At thirty years of age he converted to Christianity and left the government job to work as a primary teacher, in a mission school at Mawmluh at a very low salary. He wrote a detailed description about ‘Ka Niam Khasi’ (Khasi religion) in a Khasi monthly paper *U Nongkit Khubor*, which was the first Khasi newspaper edited by William Williams in 1889 of the Presbyterian Church. He contributed a number of articles in the Khasi papers of his time such as; *U Khasi Mynta* edited by Hormurai Diengdoh and *U Nongphira* edited by Sib Charan Roy. It is said that,
Owing to want of written order of social traditions, customs and practices in the Khasi society whatever enlightened men like Rabon Singh knew of the past appear to have been slowly neglected or ignored out of ignorance; and Rabon Singh appeared to have experienced the urge to reduce whatever he knew, saw and heard about old values into writings.  

Rabon Singh Kharsuka was one of he Khasi thinkers and leaders whose main object was to re-awaken the Khasi people towards their own beliefs and traditions. The missionaries did not allow the Khasis who converted to Christianity to take part in the religious functions and ceremonies of the Khasi indigenous religion. Rabon Singh could not tolerate or withstand these restrictions imposed by the Christian Mission and their unflattering remarks about Khasi religion.

Christianity could not bring peace and satisfaction in his life as he was hurt when he found that the activities of the Christian Missionaries were not in favour of the Khasi culture, due to their baseless restrictions imposed by them on the traditional festivals and customs and practices. Due to this, he published a book about the Khasi religion, *Ka Kitab Niam Khein Ki Khasi* in 1911, and decided to devote himself in the study of his own heritage.

According to R.S. Lyngdoh in his article “Ki Nongtei ia ka Thoh ka Tar Khasi u Pahep Rabon Singh Jaid Kharsuka”, in *Soso Tham Birth Centenary Celebration 1873-1973* pointed out that;

Ka kitab Niam Kheiñ ki Khasi la dep pynkhreh naduh ka snem 1895, hynrei sngewsih ban ong ba u nongthoh um shym la buh kano kano ka dak ka shin ne ka shap ba thikna ia ka snem ba ka mih pyrthei. Ha ka snem 1897-1903 ...Ngi ioh jingtip ba thikna ba kane ka dei ka kot kaba ar shaphang ka Niam Khasi ba la pynmih na Ri Khasi Press.¹³

Summarizing the above statement (“This book has been prepared by the author since 1895, unfortunately the author did not show the exact year in which the book was published. The actual publication of the book might be in between 1897-1903. Sources of correct information said that this is the second book about Khasi religion published by the Ri Khasi Press”).

The religious ideas and practices inherited from generation to generation tend to lose many things in the passage of time and finally it may certainly face extinction. The other factor which stand as an obstruction on Khasi religion is the impact of Christian missionaries which was more prominent and had a shaking effect on many aspects of Khasi traditional culture and religion. So because of these conflicts arising from the coming of the

missionaries, Rabon Singh Kharsuka cannot tolerate their teachings, and his written work on Khasi religion has helped the Khasis to know about Khasi religious rites and rituals.

Sib Charan Roy Jaid Dkhar was the eldest son of Jeebon Roy Mairom and Lakhreh Dkhar. He was born at Sohra on 4th March 1862, he was the first Khasi who passed the entrance examination in 1880 from Shillong High School. In his book *Ka Niam_Ki Khasi, Ka Niam Tip Blei Tip Briew* (1919), he explained about the Khasi religious aspects and the instructions on sincerity and honesty. That nothing should be passed through dishonesty; they should be obtained through one's personal work and effort. Theft and dishonesty are derogatory and should have no place in the mind of the people. He also explained the moral values of the Khasis, because at present it is not very easy to remember only by word of mouth. Obedience to elders and parents is a prerequisite for a successful life.

1.03 : H.O. Mawrie

H. O. Mawrie was born on the 12th May 1920, He became an active member of the Seng Khasi (A Socio Cultural religious Organization) since 6th March 1978. He joined the Indian Tribal Cultural Forum in 1980 to protect the religion and culture of the
Indigenous Tribes in the North East India. He joined the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF) in 1980 and represented seng Khasi in the 24th Congress of IARF held in Netherlands. He also participated in the Theological conference held in Belgium and Holland, the IARF centre. He was the President of the Seng Khih Lang normally known as the Youth festivals of the Hynñiew Trep (Ka Lympung ki Khun Samla), to promote the Indigenous culture of the Khasis', he held this post as the President from 1988 till he died in 1991.


Conversion to other religions has brought above a radical change in Khasi religion, H.O. Mawrie through his contributions has made tremendous efforts to focus the religious belief and
practices of the Khasi people and there are also changes with the changing of time.

1.04: Radhon Singh Berry Kharwanlang

Radhon Singh Berry was one of the main architects of the written Khasi language. He wrote a series of articles suggesting the best use of Roman letters in spelling Khasi words and persistently pointed out in article after article the mis-spellings and phonetically misleading spellings of Khasi words in books brought out by the Christian Missionaries. A man gentle and kind he was also a poet, philosopher and religious thinker, his classical work on Khasi moral code and Khasi etiquette is his book *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen* Part I (1902) and Part II (1903). The book is now being used as a text book both in School and colleges. According to Radhon Singh Berry now, at present it is not easy to remember only by word of mouth all the ethical moral lessons as it was in the past. It is high time to put into writing in order to follow up the moral values as shown by the forefathers, so that one should know to honour oneself, their kith and kin and the society at large.

Other authors who have contributed in this field are Dr. H. Lyngdoh *Ka Niam Khasi* (1937), R.T. Rymbai, *Ban Pynieng La ka Rasong* (1979), T.M. Pongroop *Ki Mawlynti ka Jingnget U Khun*

The Khasi Authors who are converted to Christianity like Rev. T. Rodborne, Pascal Malngiang and T.M. Pongroop even though they wrote about the Khasi religion, they are very much influenced by their new faith of Christian thoughts and ideas.

Besides these authors mentioned above, there are also non-Khasi writers who have contributed to the same topic like P.R.T. Gurdon’s The Khasis, J. N. Choudhury’s The Khasi Canvas (1978), P.R. G. Mathur’s Study in Tribalism and Religion (1979), Sir Keith Cantlie’s Notes on Khasi Law reprinted and edited by A.S. Khongphai (1974).

After a thorough analysis of the writings on Khasi religion, it is found that there was a transition in the thought and mindset of the Khasis living in those days where some of them had converted to other faiths and left behind their indigenous faith. It is because of the conflicts arising of the coming of the missionaries, some eminent Khasi writers mentioned above would like to revive the
Khasi religion and traditions. These authors wrote about the Khasi religion and its traditions and their writings will testify to the existence of Khasi religion. What was heard before from our forefathers and that was inherited orally through generations due to non availability of written records will now become sources of information to the present and future generations about the Khasi religion and other related matters of the Khasi faith. The religious ideas and practices inherited from generation to generation tend to lose many things with the passage of time and finally it may certainly face extinction. The other factor which stands as an obstruction to Khasi religion is the impact of Christian missionaries and the colonialism which was more prominent and had a shaking effect on many aspects of Khasi traditional culture and religion with the changes of time, there is an intensified revivalism of culture among the Khasi-Christians.