

FOLKLORE AND THE KHASI IDENTITY

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A SYNOPSIS

Khasis and Jaintias form a part of the tribes that inhabit the hilly regions of what has come to be known as the State of Meghalaya. The Khasis had no written history, and we cannot trace beyond the sixteenth century, any kind of recorded history of the people. The first monograph on the Khasis appeared in 1907, when P.R.T. Gurdon published his widely acclaimed book *The Khasis*. Since then, numerous scholars have written extensively to try and reconstruct the history of the Khasis from oral sources, namely folklore.

This Thesis proposes to re-examine folklore related to the Khasis-discussing them in the light of prevailing folklore theories, and their correlation to identity formation. Cultural identity, and its bearing on political formations and structures, has always been a sensitive topic, and the study of the nature of identity has become even more pressing. In tribal communities, such as that of the Khasis, the connection between folklore and identity is of paramount importance in the understanding of their collective identity. Folklore generates cultural symbols which subsequently form the structural parts of a system of identification. The Khasis sought their identity through their respective folklore and other folk archives. This study intends to examine the social structure of the Khasi society, viewed as a historical continuum –and documents different social changes that have taken place over a span of more than a hundred and fifty years.

The chapters that comprise this thesis, from the introduction onwards till chapter two, interrogate the Khasi identity from its origin, development and establishment in relation to other aspects of culture. I begin in the introductory chapter, with a discussion of the oral tradition of the Khasis, based on folklore material that has presumably been passed down through the ages. I have taken available oral material to identify and historically locate the Khasis as a tribal race, with a rich oral tradition. Many of the folktales have been reproduced

here in their original Khasi version, transcribed in the Romanized script and translated into the English language. Each tale has a moral message, or a series of messages that has facilitated, in a manner of speaking, the Khasi way of life. These tales have been disseminated by word of mouth for generations, until they were transcribed and documented as an archival source, after the introduction of the written script in 1841.

I have moved on to the written phase in the third chapter, which clearly defines and positions the Khasis as a distinctive matrilineal race. It was during this written phase, prior to India's independence, that the Khasis became a part of a wider nation, where identities were defined in words and narratives-sometimes negotiated and compromised, and sometimes asserted to meet desired ends. Since there cannot be a discussion about folklore without a discussion of religion-the fourth chapter examines the Khasi religion (based on folk archives), and the progressive conversion of more than half of the Khasi population into Christianity. The indigenous Khasi religion or *Niam Khasi* forms the bases of every aspect of Khasi life-its expression and organization. With the large-scale conversion to Christianity, certain features of culture might have undergone revision, but the Khasi tradition of which Khasi religion or *Niam Khasi* forms the bases, remains unchanged.

The fifth chapter, discusses matriliney as a unique feature of the Khasi set-up, and the role that it has played and continues to play in the formation of Khasi identity. The sixth chapter deals with contemporary Khasi society - its transitional phase, its political nature and the changes ensuing within this tribal society in the decades since independence. It also deals with conflict that has arisen with assertion of identity, and the repercussions of regionalism and identity politics on its inhabitants.

The last chapter discusses ethnic identities in a larger context, with references to most of the tribes of the North-East region of India. Assertion of ethnic

identity has been, and remains, a perennial problem for almost all the North Eastern states. This ethno-identity assertion has led to ethnic tension and community conflicts, which in turn is connected to the larger question of national identity. There has been a lot of bloodshed in the name of ethnic identity, and India's North-East has been witness to decades of political unrest and violent turmoil. Ethnic identities are being pushed and stretched against the national identity. I have argued for cultural pluralism to resolve the crises within the community stemming from ethnocentrism and regionalism.

Irrespective of the skeptics, globalization is a reality nobody can deny anymore. The boundaries of nation-states are becoming porous, and cultures and nations are beginning to merge with technological advancement, and the world is indeed shrinking. However, the reverse can also happen, and even though people are more connected today, than at any time in the past-it is in this connectedness, that they often seek to rediscover themselves and their ethnic distinctiveness. This is not merely a political problem, but a cultural and a psychological one as well. This malaise (if one can call it that) is a burning issue in the world today, and everywhere among the world's races, communities, groups we find a violent assertion of cultural distinctiveness, and a conflict with majoritarian state. What the world really needs today is to devise educational and cultural policies that strive for an understanding and concern for national unity with multiculturalism as its forte-a respect for traditional culture, but also a need to blend cultures for greater unity and lasting peace. The Khasis may be considered a 'tribal' community, and would naturally like to preserve their uniqueness as a tribe, and be recognized by the world as such. However, they need to work inward and outward to confront the problems that underline the sociopolitical make-up of the society; to ensure less disparity between 'us' and 'them'. This view is not only to tackle outward disparity, but also to allay internal tension among tribes that inhabit Meghalaya.

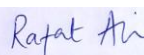
In the concluding chapter, I have tried to argue that the purpose of this study is to foster an understanding that will push tribes towards the future, with a better understanding of 'self' and the 'other'. Moreover, these discourses create an opportunity for rethinking of the very foundation of the post-colonial states of the North-East region of India. The natural progression, is to advocate for cultural pluralism in a region torn by separatist tendencies, with the hope that as we move forward, we need to look backward and learn from past mistakes.

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