

Nature in Transition: Transformations in Nature Use, Beliefs and Control in Khasi Hills in Pre-Colonial and Colonial Eras

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Introduction

In recent years, traditional forest management practices have acquired importance and consequently received academic attention as a counter move to uncontrolled depletion of forest cover taking place around the world. The degradation of natural resources has been the outcome of rapid and large scale modernization, industrialization and commercialization boosted by concepts like Scientific Forestry. The latter is an eighteenth century German notion that emphasized utilization and manipulation of forests and its associated resources to meet human benefits and produce sustained economic yield from forests through scientific applications. The British colonial state in India found this to its advantage and used it to expand control over natural resources in various parts of the country. Thus, there emerged a system of colonial forest administration in India that emphasized on economic returns from forests through application of practices like fire protection, creation of plantations and demarcation of forest reserves, etc. The implementation of the new administrative structure over natural resources fundamentally altered indigenous forest use and management systems by restricting local access to forests. Such exercises continued over a prolonged period and directed towards commercial profits contributed to deforestation, destruction of biodiversity, death of aquatic species, shattering of habitats and the eco system in general. The rise in population proved to be an accompanying factor that hastened this process.

The increasing natural hazards that have come up due to large-scale exploitation of nature have raised issues like judicious use of nature, balance between development and nature preservation and sustainable use of nature, etc. The growing consciousness on the aspect has probed

social scientists in India along with environmentalists and others to ponder over traditional methods of forest management and preservation among the indigenous tribal communities with emphasis on the north eastern part of the country. North East India houses numerous tribal groups whereby the states of Arunachal Pradesh, Meghalaya, Mizoram and Nagaland have predominantly 90 per cent of tribal population. In the remaining north eastern states of Assam, Manipur, Sikkim and Tripura, tribal communities range from 20 per cent to 30 per cent of the population.¹ The region is also rich in forests and biodiversity resources and is the meeting ground of temperate East Himalayan flora, palaeo-arctic flora of Tibetan highland, wet evergreen flora of South East Asia and Yunnan forming a bowl of biodiversity.² The tribes indigenous to the territory have had traditions of forest management and conservation mechanisms associated with their social, cultural, religious or economic life. For instance, traditionally, the Mizo community of Mizoram never killed Indian hornbills, tigers and pythons as they believed in taboos connected with them³. They also reserved certain parts within forests as homes for supernatural beings⁴. Similarly the *Adi* tribes of Arunachal Pradesh had religious beliefs associated with natural elements. The *Hollock* (*Terminalia myriocarpia*) tree is considered as the abode of natural spirits and its felling was considered immoral⁵.

Objectives and Methodology

This paper attempts to historically trace forest use, nature-based beliefs and conservation practices among the Khasi community of *Meghalaya* prior to the arrival of the British in the region. It also attempts to understand the role played by the natural environment behind colonial access in the area previously known as Khasi Hills. The paper endeavours to comprehend the impact and changes brought about by colonial intervention on Khasi indigenous nature utilisation, management and faiths.

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The study is based on government reports, primary and secondary literature, journal and newspaper reviews.

Traditional Nature Based Knowledge among the Khasis of Meghalaya

The Khasi tribe constitutes the largest tribal community of Meghalaya, one of the eight states of North East India. The origin of the community can be traced from the Mongolian overflow to India that include subgroups like the *Pnars* or *Syntengs*, the *Bhois*, the *Wars*, the *Khynriams*, and the *Lyngams*. According to P.R.T Gurdon, the *Khasis* descended from the *Mon-Khmer* race who originated somewhere in *Cambodia*⁶. Joseph Delton Hooker also suggested that the language of the *Khasis* is similar to Indo-Chinese especially the *Mon Khmer*⁷. The community follow a matrilineal structure where the clan is traced through the mother. The youngest daughter (*Ka Khadduh*) performs the religious rites and is the guardian of the ancestral property⁸. In the pre-British era, the *Khasi* inhabited area was a collection of small states locally known as *Hima* ruled by *Syiem*, the Khasi elected chief who was nominated by an electoral body that consisted of *Lyngdohs* (officials having secular and religious powers), *Myntris* (advisors to the Khasi chief at the state level), *Basans* and *Sirdars* (elected headmen of villages) and the headmen of the leading clans (*Kur*) based on matrilineal line. The *Syiem* supervised the overall administration of his state and was considered as the authority of moral law. He was assisted in his duties by the *Durbar* (the Khasi Assembly) consisting of officials and advisors to the *Khasi* chief⁹. The *Khasi Durbar* exercised supreme authority at the state level and dealt with issues like theft, adultery, damage to property, trespass, etc.¹⁰

Natural elements were associated with every aspect of Khasi livelihood and ceremonies. Bamboo splinters, leaves, gourd cells, betel nuts and leaves were essential for Khasi marriages and death ceremonies.¹¹ Shifting cultivation indigenously known as '*Thang Shyrti*' was the common form of farming practiced by the people in forests.¹² Hunting was another occupation of the people that was associated with forests. Ceremonies connected with hunting formed an important part of the Khasi social framework. For instance, before proceeding for a hunting competition, the hunter broke eggs in order to ascertain if he would be successful or not and to which jungle he should proceed. An auspicious day was selected for the purpose and after the propitiation of forest deities, the hunters started with a number of dogs trained for the purpose. When the dogs picked up the smell, the hunters began the chase with loud shouts which ended after the animal was caught. Fishing was also a favourite pursuit of the people. An extract prepared from bark of a tree

named *ka mynta* and a creeper known as *U khariew* was mixed with water which helped in catching fishes.¹³ The people had knowledge about the different components of nature. They were familiar with 113 different varieties of edible plants found in forests.¹⁴ In this context Gurdon observed:

A Khasi loves a day out in the woods, where he thoroughly enjoys himself. If he does not go out shooting or fishing, he is content to sit still and contemplate nature. He has a name for each of the common birds and flowers. He also has names for many butterflies and moths. These are traits not usually found in India.¹⁵

The social and political organization of the Khasi society was deep associated with nature and its components. Traditionally forests and lands belonged to the people where the *Syiem* or the *Khasi* chief could act only as the guardian or custodian. The soil was considered as the mother of the community over which every child had cultivating rights.¹⁶ In the pre-British era, regular land tax was unknown to the people. The *Syiem* had no right to impose taxes on the original settlers of a land. Long-standing occupation of land was one of the criteria for conferring citizenship in pre colonial Khasi state.¹⁷ Thus, the people were not only attached to their lands for sustenance, it formed an essential condition for their social, political and economic existence. The people reserved patches of forests within villages for personal use where felling of trees for commercial and residential purpose was prohibited. Such forest reserves were also maintained to meet exigencies like famines and other natural calamities.¹⁸ The Khasi and the Jaintia tribe preserved giant monoliths in memory of their ancestors as symbol of reverence and respect. H.H. Godwin Austin, while observing such structures at the village Nougshai near Shillong, observed: 'They stand on the open spur just above the village and have been worked out the beds of the Shillong sandstone series, and some of the smaller blocks have been taken from the conglomerate beds.....'.¹⁹

Animism was vital to Khasi religious beliefs. Mother earth, water, moon and solar energy, the necessary requisites for human existence were worshipped. Some rivers and mountain peaks were considered auspicious. The river *Kenchiang* (known as *Jadukata* and *Punatit* in Sylhet presently in Bangladesh) was worshipped in Khasi Hills through an annual sacrifice of goats. The river *Kopili* was revered with annual sacrifice of human beings in Jaintia hills located in eastern part of Meghalaya.²⁰ Pigs and dogs were also sacrificed to goddess *Kopili*. Another water goddess named *Lenju* was also propitiated with similar offerings.²¹ The Khasi people believed in *Thlen* or a serpent spirit who attacked and swallowed passers-by on market days and therefore had to be appeased

with human blood. Such beliefs suggest the existence of human sacrifice in pre-colonial Khasi society. Mountain peaks such as the *Shillong* peak was revered as the abode of *U Shillong*, the God of Shillong. The Shillong deity regarded as the highest in *Khasi* religious pantheon was revered and offered sacrifices by the members of ruling families. Mountains considered as natural barriers were worshipped as saviour from external attacks and hence mountain deities were revered.²² The people believed in the existence of spirits in mountains, water, forests and rivers also.

Forests were sacred entities for the Khasi people. Certain portions of forests were kept out of human interference and preserved on religious grounds. The people believed that the guardian spirit *U Ryngekew* and *U Basa*, responsible for human well-being, resided in these forests and hence felling of trees or hunting of animals were prohibited there. Such forests were sacred groves locally known as *Lawkyntang*. As per Khasi religious faith, sacred groves were categorized into three types. The first type was known as the *Law Lyngdoh* under the administration of *Lyndoh*, the indigenous religious head. The second category was *Law Niam* where traditional religion was followed and the third category consisted of forests under the supervision of the village headman. It was believed that peace and tranquillity in villages depended on the appeasement of forest spirits. The village headman and the priest performed rituals and sacrifices in these forests to appease the guardian deities for the protection of the villages and the communities. Such forests preserved on religious grounds also contained timbers and natural products of considerable importance. W.W. Hunter observed that the sacred groves of Khasi Hills contained important tree types like oaks, chestnuts, *Magnolia Schima*, *Cinnamum*, *Prunus*, *Engelhardtia*, timber species like *Sal* (*Shorea robusta*) and rubber tree (*Ficus Elastica*).²³

Natural elements were indispensable in economic transactions. The people traded in natural products like *lac*, honey, *paan* or betel leaves, turmeric and nuts, etc. within the region and with the adjoining Indian state of Bengal. Indigenous honey from Khasi Hills enjoyed a great reputation and was traded even up to Calcutta.²⁴ *Lac* was also traded in Jaintia Hills and in the Khyrim territory that fetched enormous profits to Khasi traders. Trade was mostly through barter where the tribes in exchange of forest and mineral products procured regular requisites from cultivators and traders either from other hill states or from the plains. However, by the twentieth century, middle men appeared in the existing *lac* business who consumed profits. The Marwari merchants from the plains attended the markets frequented by the Khasis to purchase *lac* and exported them to Calcutta.²⁵ Natural

elements were essential source of Khasi folk medicine used for curing ailments like sprains, fractures, burns and dental problems. The people had wide knowledge about variety of medicinal plants and animal products available in the region. In a recent study conducted by the North Eastern Hill University Shillong, the total volume of medicinal plants and their products consumed per year is around 80 to 120 tonnes that involved a sum of Rs 2.5 crores per annum within the three districts of Khasi and Jaintia Hills.²⁶

Khasi folklore and legends revolved around natural structures like hills, rocks, caves, flora and fauna. The elements of nature are described in the legends as mother and son, husband and wife, or friend and foe, according to their natural characteristics to teach moral and spiritual lessons. They also contribute in an important way to Khasi rhetoric and idiomatic expressions. For example, a person with good reputation and respect is often compared to a flower called '*tiew pathai khubor*' which spreads a good fragrance around it. A boy who grows very fast and tall is compared to a tender bamboo plant. The 12 months of year in Khasi calendar are named according to their natural changes varying from season to season.²⁷ The justifications behind natural phenomenon like creation of earth, occurrence of eclipses and earthquakes etc, characteristics and colours of animals are described in Khasi folklore.²⁸

The Establishment of Colonial Administration: Impact and Role of the Natural Environment

The initial interaction between the Khasis and the British took place around 1765 when the English East India Company established control over Sylhet in East Bengal under the provisions of the *Diwani* of Bengal. The Khasis had trade relations with Sylhet plains that brought them into contact with the British. The Khasi region shared boundaries with Mymensingh and Sylhet in East Bengal on its southern sides. Some Khasi *Himas* also controlled *lands* in the Sylhet region of neighbouring East Bengal.²⁹ By 1824 the imminent Burmese threat at the frontier made the British realise the strategic importance of Khasi hills which according to them had to be incorporated within British Indian Empire to protect the *Sylhet* plains from possible Burmese incursions. The British suggested for the establishment of postal service between Sylhet plains and Khasi Hills and hence with this purpose David Scott, the Agent to the Governor General for the North Eastern Frontier of Bengal (1802-1832), proposed the construction of a road between *Pandua* in the foothills of Surma valley via the *Khyrim* territory to Assam.³⁰ The construction of the road established regular contacts between the British

and the Khasis in the subsequent years. The colonial access in the Khasi region was followed by treaties and agreements between the British government and the Khasi chiefs that culminated in the incorporation of Khasi and *Jaintia* states within British administrative ambit. This not only led to political subjugation of the region under the British but also resulted in colonial subordination of Khasi traditional institutions. The Khasi states were accorded semi independent status to the Khasi chiefs as mere feudatories or vassals under the British administration. The importance of Khasi *Durbar* was considerably reduced.³¹ The region because of its fertile soil, geography, rich natural and mineral resources and salubrious climate soon acquired the appreciation of the British. On 20 March 1874, Shillong located in Khasi Hills was declared as the capital of the Chief Commissioner's Province of *Assam*.³²

Climatic conditions did play a significant role in assigning political importance to Shillong by the British. In 1831, Cherrapunji that was previously known as *Sohra* was made the political headquarters of colonial administration in Khasi Hills. Initially the British authorities held perceptibly high opinion about the climate of Cherrapunji which they compared with other hill stations like Darjeeling and Mussoorie. The place was considered to be free from jungles and consequently from diseases like malaria, the disease which the British likened to associate with *Assam* forests.³³ Moreover the coal deposits available in the area could keep the British officials warmer during rains.³⁴ But soon the incessant rains and consistent mist that the place regularly experienced made British reconsider their decision about continuing with the area as the seat of administration in the region. David Scott expressed his unhappiness over the climatic conditions of Cherrapunji.³⁵ The journal *Science* in 1903 described it as the place having heaviest annual precipitation with 457.80 inches of annual rainfall in 1900.³⁶ In 1864, the headquarters was shifted to Shillong and the district of Khasi-Jaintia Hills was carved out. The region was placed under a Deputy Commissioner assigned with political authorities. In 1874, when *Assam* was made the Chief Commissioner's province, Shillong was made the headquarters of the entire territory.³⁷ The region soon developed as a favourite haven for the British which they fondly referred as *Shillong* plateau. It could secure the admiration of the British due to its geographical, topographical and climatic resemblances with Europe. The natural features of the region appeared so akin to Europe that the British equated it with 'European Scotland'. In this context C.B. Clarke observed:

In this marvellous plateau the subalpine and sub tropical forms overlap; at the very foot of the elegant palms may be gathered

the identical stag's horn mosses, which, in Britain is found only in mountain. On a fir tree much resembling a scrappy Scotch fir is seen growing the *Vanda Coercula*, the king of epiphytic orchids; a gnarled oak will carry a gigantic tropical laine....³⁸

By the 1800s, Christian missionaries arrived in Khasi Hills. David Scott with the assistance of Serampore Baptist Mission established a school at Singamari in 1831. He was convinced that Christianity would find an easy access in the region as the inhabitants did not believe in organized religions like Hinduism and Islam.³⁹ The Welsh Calvinistic missionaries established schools at Jaintia Hills and in the Khasi region in 1852. The missionaries propagated the message of Christianity among the indigenous people through the use of roman scripts.⁴⁰ There was spread of English education that drew the people towards Western culture and thoughts. Such initiatives on the part of the colonial government brought changes in Khasi nature based beliefs.⁴¹ This aspect was perceived as one of the factors behind the *Jaintia* rebellion of 1860. Jaintia hills that was located on the strategic position between Assam and Sylhet plains was the first to be brought under colonial administration in 1835. The annexation was apparently made as a punishment to the Jaintia king Rajendra Singh who was alleged to have barbarously sacrificed three British officers at the shrine of Goddess Kali. On this plea, the plains portion of the *Jaintia* kingdom was annexed by the British. The hilly part of the kingdom was surrendered by the king himself. The annexation was followed by imposition of house tax and income tax by the British government on the Jaintia people that enraged the inhabitants against the colonial administration that culminated into anti-British rising known as the *Jaintia* rebellion.⁴² Apart from the causes mentioned, the killing of a monkey in a sacred forest by a Christian converted *Daroga* named *Solomon Dehling* was also held as one of the factor that provided boost to the *Jaintia* rebellion.⁴³ The impact of Christianity over indigenous nature associated beliefs was more pronounced after Indian Independence. Alison Ormsby who has conducted a survey on this aspect at the *Mawphlang* sacred grove in East Khasi hills district of Meghalaya observed that rituals associated with reverence to nature and forest spirits in sacred forests have considerably lowered down. Faith on the forest deity '*Labasa*' in *Mawphlang* sacred forest has also significantly reduced. Converts to Christianity are found to fell trees for economic profits rejecting the reverence and beliefs associated with forest spirits and deities. Instances of sacred forests being sold in auctions are also found in some areas.⁴⁴

In order to strengthen colonial grasp over the region, the British government concluded agreements with Khasi chiefs on aspects related to defence, road connection

and construction of sanatoria, etc. though establishing imperial control over Khasi lands, forests, lime and coal reserves was also certain coveted agenda aimed to be materialized through the agreements.⁴⁵ The provisions of the treaties were framed in a fashion that made them appear advantageous to both the Khasi chiefs and the British.⁴⁶ For instance, the agreements between the British Political Agent and the Khasi chief Raja Shoova Singh of Cherrapunji on the use and excavation of coal mines in the region in early nineteenth century contained provisions that gave the government supreme authority over the coal mines under the chief with rights over coal excavation while the responsibility of revenue collection was handled by the Khasi chief himself. The agreement apparently permitted the people to excavate coal and cut stones without restrictions.⁴⁷ Such clauses made the Khasi chiefs believe that the colonial government considered their interests along with its own. David R Syiemlieh observed that the *Khasi Syiems* perhaps could not comprehend the implications of the treaties.⁴⁸ However such agreements between the chiefs and the British government injured the sentiments of the Khasi subjects who expressed resentment against the chiefs for entering into agreements with the British ignoring their emotions.⁴⁹ Inner Line Regulation of 1873 that was implemented to segregate the hills and plains of Assam on political grounds was not implemented in *Khasi Hills* considering its political importance. The availability of natural and mineral resources in the region, perhaps, proscribed the British from undertaking policies that would minimise its access over natural and mineral deposits found in the territory. The intensions of the colonial government however, were understood by some Khasi chiefs who protested against British intrusion over the Khasi areas. Way back in 1829-30 U Tirot Singh the Khasi Syiem of Nongkhlaw Hima revolted against British intrusion in the Khasi territory.⁵⁰ The revolt was suppressed by the colonial authorities who brought other *Khasi Himas* like *Mawmluh*, *Mawsmmai* and *Sohbar* under their control and appointed local headmen to administer the areas as representatives of the imperial government. Colonial usurpation of these regions enabled the British to establish control over the limestone deposits found in the areas which the government utilised for its profits.⁵¹ The internal administration of usurped regions was left under the control of the appointed Khasi chiefs who functioned on behalf of the colonial government.

The district of Khasi-Jaintia Hills created by the British for administrative convenience did not include all the *Khasi Himas*. It incorporated 31 *Khasi Himas* over which they exercised direct political control. The district comprised of entire Jaintia region, Shillong plateau and its adjoining catchment areas.⁵² The district, thus, created

apart from its Europe like geographical terrain, tree types and rich natural resources also attracted the British with its fertile soil that grew European crops like cabbage, cauliflower, radish and potato, etc. in plenty when introduced by the British in the region. Potato cultivation that was started in the area under the initiatives of David Scott soon became the largest exported product from the area to the adjoining territories of *Bengal* and *Assam*. It became the economic specialization of the Khasis who financially profited by trading the product with the neighbouring plains.⁵³ However, a large scale cultivation of potato soon resulted in extensive deforestation in Shillong plateau that became more pronounced after Indian independence.⁵⁴ Another natural component that attracted colonial attention was the *Khasi* pine trees (*Pinus Kesia*) that was indigenous to the region. The cones of the tree reminded the British of *Pinus insignis* found in England.⁵⁵ Hence with the installation of Shillong as the head quarter of Assam, the tree was planted as a green belt around the newly formed seat of administration.⁵⁶ Thus, *Pinus Kesia* exemplify the colonial epoch in the region.

Initiation of British administration over Khasi-Jaintia Hills was followed by application of colonial forest management over the region that categorized forests into reserved and unclassed under the Indian Forest Act of 1878. This led to minimisation of indigenous access in forests under governmental control with imposition of regulations on tree felling, hunting and fishing. The establishment of Shillong as the political head quarter of Assam in 1874 was followed by creation of forest categories like plantations, military cantonments and green blocks in the area.⁵⁷ Initially the criterion for forest reservation in the region was on climatic grounds that emphasized on protection of forests in the catchment areas as a measure to ensure regular water supply to the city of Shillong.⁵⁸ Such conservation agendas probably prompted the British to undertake sympathetic attitude towards preservation of sacred forests in the region. Perhaps the presence of *Pinus Kesia* in the sacred groves reminded them of English pine trees. Moreover, the government preferred not to mingle indigenous religious sentiments with colonial forest administration measures. Hence, emphasizing on the preservation of sacred groves, Lt Col. J.C. Haughton the Officiating Agent in North East India observed:

I agree that the government or the possessor of the land within named, as well as the Shillong lands, shall have the joint right of turning off all water adjoining the said land for use subject to such rules as the government may prescribe. I promise also as far as in me lies, to preserve the sacred groves whereon the water supply is dependent, and to punish any of my subject s found cutting the trees of the said

groves and to deliver up for punishment any British subject found so offending.⁵⁹

However, despite attempts to control nature in Khasi hills through various ways, the British administrators abstained themselves from interfering with the internal administration of the *Syiems*. Neither had they intruded with popular customary rights over lands and forests.⁶⁰ The indigenous chiefs with assistance of the *Durbars* exercised jurisdiction within their limits while the Political Agent handled magisterial functions.⁶¹ The government emphasized that since land was indigenous property held by individuals or families, customary rights related to it should not be interfered with. Thus, in matters like sale of lands within the community, indigenous decision was regarded supreme. Considering this, the government did not impose land tax on the people. The British however collected revenue through other sources like judicial fines, share on the duties from goods sold at *haats* (market place) and taxes imposed on iron, lime and coal mines etc under clauses of agreements signed with the chiefs. Such agreements placed the British in advantageous position where they could profit from indigenous resources without local resistances.⁶² The post independent government of India accorded importance to indigenous rights over lands and forests in Meghalaya created as a separate state in 1972 and Autonomous District Councils established in the region under the Sixth Schedule of Indian constitution. Till 1972 the region functioned as a district of Assam.⁶³

Conclusion

Thus nature-based beliefs and knowledge did exist among the Khasi community of Meghalaya in pre-colonial times. Such faiths mostly of social, cultural and religious character contributed to nature conservation in the region through rites, taboos and rituals. The people enjoyed indigenous rights over soil, lands and forests which were neither hindered nor abrogated by traditional chiefs or institutions who only acted as guardian of lands that customarily belonged to the people. The colonial access and assignment of political importance to the region that was decided largely by climatic and geographical factors did not directly intrude into the customary land and forest rights of the people. Rather it established control over indigenous natural and mineral resources in a tactful manner that outwardly appeared advantageous to both the Khasi chiefs and the colonial government though assigned the latter with supervisory powers over the former. Elementary structure of forest administration that was implemented in the region divided government forests in reserved and unclassified and laid regulations on forest use that outwardly did not impinge on

indigenous forest rights except in government controlled areas. The British administration seemingly professed for the protection of sacred groves and punishments for persons who would damage them. But propagation of Christianity that accompanied the colonial administration in Khasi Hills did bring changes in Khasi faiths associated with nature. The deviations were reflected in the beliefs of Christian converted Khasis who did not nurture faith in sacred groves and forest spirits. The change was more evident after Indian independence. Hence colonial intrusion in Khasi lands and forests was materialized in a discreet manner.

Notes

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