

Tracing the Origins of the Khasi Tribe: A Critical Review of Current Perspectives

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Abstract: *The origin of the Khasi tribe of Meghalaya is not yet known. There is considerable controversy over the origin of the Khasi tribe, even among the Khasis themselves. Although the indigenous (non-converts) still believe that they have come from heaven and their original inhabitant was at Sohpetbneng, some of them doubt it and believe that they have come all the way from some South Asian countries; others say from the Middle East, etc. This paper is a critical analysis, where the writer focuses on different perspectives about the origin of the Khasis and tries to bring out their views on this matter. The writer tries to conclude that the Khasis have been living in their present land for quite a long time. So, it is difficult to trace their origin.*

Keywords: Introduction, Literature Review, The traditional folktale about the earth, The existence of devil, perspectives, new perspectives, conclusion.

1. Introduction

Meghalaya is the home of two major tribes, the Khasi-Pnars and the Garos. The Khasi-Pnars inhabit the Khasi and Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. They occupy the East and the central part of the state. The Khasi-Pnars are a hilly tribe; they inhabit in the Meghalaya plateau. The state is surrounded by Assam in the East and North, and in the south and southwest by Bangladesh. The Khasis believe that they are the children of Seven Huts who came down from heaven and settled down to the earth through the golden bridge at *U Sohpetbneng* hill; from there, they spread outward. Initially their kingdom was as vast as from the hill of Meghalaya up to the *Sylhet-Jaintiapur* plain in Bangladesh. They say, that 'Kamakhya' hill in Guwahati was a sacred hill of the Khasis where they used to perform ritual for the infertile couple. One old lady from Umsning once told, many couples who could not have children used to perform the ritual at 'Kamakhya' hill. The word 'Kamakhya' is the Khasi word derived *Ka Mei Kha*, meaning 'father's mother'. They say that the Khasi kingdom was up to Kamakhya hill, however, during the war, the Ahoms defeated the Khasi kings and took away the plains of Brahmaputra.

The traditional folktale about the earth.

At the beginning of the earth, all creatures, man, animal, and all the living things spoke the same language. The Khasis believe in the covenant with God right from ancient times. According to the folktale of the old people, it seems that the Khasis have been in this present settlement from ancient times. It seems that the Khasis are the oldest race on this earth, right from those days when all creatures spoke the same language. The story of *Kremlamet Krem latang* is the cave where the rooster lived, where the sun was hiding, the whole earth was in total darkness. *Ka iew luri lura*, or the chaos market of the beasts.

The air, thunder, punbon¹, earthquake sun, existed before human existence. Khasis believe Man and animals spoke the same language. Animals and man spoke the same language all the creatures, including trees. If the trees could not speak, how the human know that their fruits or leaves are edible. For example, the chilli is very hot, human being would not have tasted it, had they not told themselves that they are edible. The most surprising thing is the wild fruit called *u sohliang* in local language. This wild fruit is a very poisonous fruit, if we eat its fruit raw or cook. We should follow some procedure to be able to consume it. They say that *sohliang* told the people How to eat it. First is the seeds should be taken out and dried in the sun, after it is dried, the outer part of the seeds should be broken and the inner part to be cooked, after cooking, the water that comes out to be thrown out away from animals since it is poisonous. The seeds are to be sliced in a thin slice and after that it has to be soaked in a running water for the whole night; after that it is ready for eating. *Sohliang* is a very delicious snack.

The existence of devil

The coming of Christian missionaries has altered the minds of the Khasis. Some of them believe that they are the offspring of Adam and Eve. However, some still believe that they originate from their present land. When it comes to origin, the beliefs of the Khasi Converts and the non-Converted Khasis are not the same. The converts do not believe the old traditional folk tales at all. They take it as a myth or a joke. However, the non-converts Khasis who have a staunch belief about their origin. The living proof of their belief still exists now.

Those days when all creatures spoke the same language, the folktale says every creature could talk and see each other; even man could see the devil. There was a time when man teased the devil in the cave where he resided. The devil could not do anything but complained to God at the *dorbar blei*², where god gave his verdict. God removed the power to see a ghost or devil and told the devil to stay away from human

¹ A supernatural being that resides in cave, forest, hill or in water.

² *Dorbarblei*, a divine congregation is the congregation attended by all creatures on earth, during those days all creatures spoke the

same language. now adays, when a khasi prays, he takes a cute from this dorbar.

beings, as he could no longer see him; and instructed the devil to avoid colliding with humans as he no longer saw him and move away from him. That is why the old people, before entering a cave, would utter the words, "the devil should move away from human beings," as the latter could no longer see him, as decided by the divine congregation.

2. Literature Review

Stephen Fuchs (1992), in his book, 'The Aboriginal Tribes of India' has spoken about and the *Khasis (khyndriam) and Synteng (pnars)*, the *Wars, Bhois or Lyngngams* are the second migrants to have migrated to India after the Negrito Race". These tribes speak languages which belong to the Austro-Asiatic or Mon-Khmer group. Their origin can thus be traced back to southern China" (Fuchs, 1992, pp.192-193).

Again, Hamlet Bareh Ngapkynta writes, "There is a tradition that the Amwi-Khasi reached their present land from the East and their ancestors were originally connected with the Mekong River. The Mekong in Amwi or Meisan in Khasi has an equivalent of the senior Aunt, viz, Mother's elder sister in English" (Ngapkynta, 2016, p. 30).

According to Umeshwari Dkhar writes, "The Khasi and Jaintia believed that they were directly created by God and placed in these Hills, of which the most sacred ones are the *Sohpetbneng* (navel of heaven) in the north, the *Diengiei*³ (the sign of sin) peak to the west, and the *Shyllong (lum Shillong)* peak to the south part of Shillong". (Dkhar, 2015, p. 5). Barnes L. Mawrie, writes, "The origin of the Khasis is popularly traced back to the coming of Seven huts (*Hynniewtre*) from their heavenly abode through the golden ladder on *Sohpetbneng* (Navel hill)" (Mawrie, 2009, p. 9).

Joshi writes, "The ancestral progenitors of the Khasi were the Seven Families of seven clans (*Hynniew Trep*) who came down from heaven to inhabit this earth. They resided at first on the top of the *Sohpetbneng* peak, which had a golden ladder joined to heaven. These *treps* (families) never left their settlement. They were kith and kin of the celestial *Khyndai trep* (nine clans or families) who were associated with God as his messengers"(Joshi, 2021, pp. 193-194)

H. Onderson Mawrie, in his book '*Ka theology Jongka Niam Khasi*' writes, *Ka Niam Khasi lyngba u Sohpetbneng ka krenshai ba u briew u long u ba la wan na u Blei kata ba u long u jingthaw u bakyrpangjong u Blei lane ba u long utaia u ba u Blei u la phah* (Mawrie, 1991, p. 31) meaning, the Khasi religion through *Sohpetbneng* speaks that man came from God, that the former is the special creation of God sent to this earth The Khasis-Jaintias believe that they have come from heaven through the *Jingkieng Ksiar* (golden bridge) to this hill. This hill, the Khasi-Pnars believe, is the navel of heaven. There was a golden bridge that connected heaven to this hill. That is why this hill is known as the *sohpet bneng*, meaning the 'Navel of Heaven'. According to the story, the first Khasis who came down from heaven through the golden bridge are called the *Hynniewtre*-*hynniewskum* (seven huts). Sawian (2010) has written that the Khasis believe that their

land is the centre of the earth. He proves that with the traditional Khasi song, *Ka Ri Ba iei ki blei, Ka Ri shongpdeng pyrthei*. (Sawian, 2010, p. 17). It means the land of the loving gods is the centre of the earth. He even tries to prove his point geographically by saying that the land of seven huts lies between 25 degrees 42 minutes north latitude and 91 degrees 55 minutes longitude if North and South America are excluded.

3. Perspectives

Having examined the above literature, none of it has given concrete proof about the origin of the Khasis. Besides these, there are other views regarding the origin on the basis of the language. For example, Khasimon Phanbuh, in an interview, said that the Khasis came from Sumer (Sumerian) in Mesopotamia in the Middle East. They came to settle down in Khasi Hills at Sumer, a village near *Sohpetbneng* peak in the *Ribhoi* district. If we focus on Khasimon Phanbuh's view, it sounds correct because some of the similarities in words, such as '*Duriaw*' (Duria), '*Hukum*', and '*Kubur*' (Kubul), etc., have the same meaning as in the Mesopotamian language. Another similarity is the belief in one God from above; if we see the Genesis of the Bible, Abraham sacrificed an animal on the top of a hill, which is similar to the Khasi religion.

The view of Khasimon Phanbuh does not provide the evidence how the Khasi migrated to the present hill. By proving on the basis of language does not guarantee their origin as the Khasis have long trade relationship with the Muslims from the neighbouring Bangladesh, they must have borrowed the language from them. On the basis of similarity of ritual and sacrifice, that also does not prove their origin, as the first religion of the world was animism, worshipping the hill or sacrificing animal is not particular only to Khasis or Mesopotamian region, it happened around the world. →

Similar to Phanbuh, Rev. G.R Mawblei said that the origin of the Khasis is from Israel. This view is based on the basis of the monolith and megalith, where the Israel erected ritual monoliths at Gilgal, which is very similar to Khasis. However, the erection of monoliths is not particular to the Khasi community. There are many communities who erects monolith. Mitri writes, "There are many theories postulating the origin of the megalithic tradition in India. James Fergusson claimed that from an architectural perspective, the styles of the monuments which are like Gothic, Grecian, Egyptian, Buddhist or any other were generally erected by the partially civilised races" (Mitri, 2016, p. 4)

Bareh Ngapkynta (2016) writes that the word '*Khasi*' is the word used by outsiders, and words such as *Cussey*, *Ghasi*, etc. Ngapkynta also mentioned that the Khasi got his name from a woman named Si'. '*Kha ka si*', born by a woman named '*Si*', which is impossible. How could one woman have given birth to the entire race?

Most writers, such as Ngapkynta and others, believe that the Khasis came from Southeast Asia, and others say they came from the Himalayas. Some authors mentioned that they

³ A peak locating to the northwest of Shillong peak, at the top of this peak there grew the giant tree called *Diengiei*.

(Khasi) must have come from the Himalayas, or their ancient kingdom must have extended up to the Himalayas. According to some evidence, the Khasis have been living here in their present land for quite a long time; some believe this is the place where the whole human race originated. There are tribes of Himachal Pradesh whose names are similar to the word Khasi, but they are not Khasi; it's just a coincidence. For example, Balokhra (2016) mentioned that the Kinner tribe of Himachal Pradesh is also known as '*Khas or Khasia*'. Another example is the *Khasa* tribe of Himachal Pradesh, which is known by various names, such as Kasya in Kumaon and Garhwal, Khashiya in Kinnaur, and 'Khasira' in Nepal. However, many authors and the Khasi themselves are misled by the word '*khasi*'. However, '*Khasi*' is not the original name of the Khasi, but rather the '*Hynniewtrepp Hynniewskum*', not Khasi. This word, Khasi, is called us by the foreigners. So, the word Khasi is a foreign term coined by the foreign ruler, which refers to the grassy people.

Kharbithai, is of the view that the Khasi evolved from an egg. He writes, the Khasis "are the people born of the cosmic egg. When I say 'born', what I mean is, to come out of the egg a fully developed man or woman without the need of evolution. This memory has been preserved in the Karbi traditional narrative the Mosera where it is clearly mentioned that the Karbi, Khasi, and Naga tribes came from eggs along with many other tribes" (Kharbithai, 2022, p. 15). Kharbithai, further tries to prove his point by giving the example that Khasa, the tribe of the north India he said that they are Khasi he even writes there is a town in Kashmir called Khasipora, and the Khasi are known by the various names such as Kasirs, Casirris, Katti, Kogi, Koshey, Casseys, They are everywhere. This theory is totally wrong to a Khasi as it is based on the word 'Khasi'. The word Khasi is used by people from outside. The Khasis called themselves the *hynniewtrepp hynniewskum*. This theory is not valid.

New perspectives

The recent excavation at *Sohpetbneng's* peak confirmed the belief of the Khasis about their origin. However, the question arises if the Khasis inhabited in those years between 1500 and 1200 BC, their population must have exploded; the entire Meghalaya or Northeast India must have been dominated by them. The truth is, some of them have migrated to other parts of the east and west of *Sohpetbneng*. According to the story told by some old people. Initially, there were seven huts; three or four huts migrated; however, they don't know which side.

The excavation of the site at Myrkhan in upper Shillong was conducted by Marco Mitri, a faculty member of the Department of History at Union Christian College. According to the report by themeghalayan.com, "Myrkhan archaeological site likely to be turned into a cultural heritage site solely to be named Maiti-lang Park near Elephant Falls in East Khasi Hills. Mitri emphasised how Neolithic people first chose their rock type and then established a factory on the site, and remnants of different tools- finished and discarded- were excavated from this site. There were two layers in this site and according to carbon-14 dating, the lower layer dates back to 1900 B.C., while the upper layer is yet to be dated.

Jonathan Amos, the BBC Science correspondent, has written about the history of our planet, which reads: "The

Meghalayan, the youngest stage, runs from 4,200 years ago to the present. It began with a destructive drought, whose effects lasted two centuries, and severely disrupted civilisations in Egypt, Greece, Syria, Palestine, Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, and the Yangtze River Valley. It was likely triggered by shifts in ocean and atmospheric circulation. The Meghalayan Age is unique among the many intervals of the geologic timescale in that its beginning coincides with a global cultural event produced by a global climatic event, says Stanley Finney, professor of geological sciences at Long Beach State University and Secretary-General of the International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS), which ratified the ICS proposal. The middle phase of the Holocene will be referred to as the Northgrippian and runs from 8,300 years ago up to the start of the Meghalayan. The onset of this age was an abrupt cooling, attributed to vast volumes of freshwater from melting glaciers in Canada running into the North Atlantic and disrupting ocean currents. The oldest phase of the Holocene - the exit from the ice age - will be known as the 147 Greenlandian. For the Meghalayan, the spike is epitomised in a perturbation in the types, or isotopes, of oxygen atoms present in the layers of a stalagmite growing from the floor of Mawmluh Cave in the Northern state of Meghalaya in India. This two-step change is a consequence of weakening monsoon conditions. The isotopic shift reflects a 20-30% decrease in monsoon rainfall," explained Prof Mike Walker of the University of Wales, UK, who led the international team of Holocene scientists that developed the division proposal. The two most prominent shifts occur at about 4,300 and about 4,100 years before the present, so the mid-point between the two would be 4,200 years before the present, and this is the age that we attribute to the [Meghalayan golden spike], he told BBC News" (Amos, 2018).

Similar to Amos' view, the RTI activist of Meghalaya, Disparising Rani told at "*U Nongsainhima press conference*" (<https://youtu.be/9JXmRmMf6Gw>) that the Khasi have been living in their present settlement for more than 57 thousand years. They are the oldest people inhabiting in India. Rani claimed that the findings were provided by the researchers from abroad through the director of the Geographic Society in 2007. The study took samples taken from 92 Khasis, their language and DNA, and they found that the Khasis are the oldest inhabitants in India and migrated to the south.

The Khasi-Pnar believe that they are the children of U Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum or the Seven Huts and Seven Roofs, who came from heaven and settled down on the slope of U *Sohpetbneng* hill. The site was recently excavated by archaeologists. From there, they spread to other parts of the earth. Wahlang and Sawian (2017) have mentioned some details regarding the excavation at *Sohphetbneng*, such as monoliths, megaliths, ruined inurnments, ruined earthen pots, and some sharp objects, such as rusted iron. These findings in the excavations were displayed at Mawphlang during the week-long Monolith Festival 2016.

Another excavation of Neolithic cultural materials was unearthed at *Sohpetbneng* Hill on the slope of the hill at *Lawnongtroh*. This archaeological site dates back between 1300 and 1200 B.C. The materials discovered from this Site

were displayed at Mawphlang during the week of the Monolith Festival in March 2016.

Traditional perspectives.

Joshi (2021), mentioned that the Khasis came from heaven and settle down at *Sohpetbneng* peak and their association with the celestial nine huts, is more valid, because the Khasis till now they have the strong connection with the celestial bodies such as moon, sun, or any supreme power of the earth. According to the folktale, the first thing to exist on this earth are those powerful Supreme Being. Such as air, thunder, earthquake. These powers they existed prior to the existence of human on earth. The folk tales about *U thlen*⁴, *Deingiei* and the beginning of the earth are the proofs that exist that the living proof about their origin is from this hill. According to the folktales a giant tree called *Diengiei* stood at one of the peak to the west of *Sohpetbneng* peak; this giant tree covered the entire region. It took many days to fell it down. Now, at the top of the peak on which *Diengiei* stood, there is a big hole, or a crater, which is formed by the rotten roots of the giant *Diengiei*. The roots of *Diengiei* spread up to *Sohiong* and nearby villages, which are a few kilometres from *Diengiei*. However, some say that the crater at the *Diengiei* peak is a volcanic crater. The question is whether it is a volcanic crater, there would have been volcanic stone or ash nearby, or the soil must have been black. The giant tree existed at the top of *Diengiei* peak.

Another folktale is about *U Thlen*, in which the Khasi killed the beast (*u thlen*) and cut into pieces at *Dainthlen* Falls near Sohra. Till now, we can see some stones that look like a snake, or being cut into pieces. The living proof is at *Dainthlen* Falls, where, in those days, according to the folk tale, a giant python (*u thlen*) was killed by the people, and some of the remnants are still there as living proof.

The Archaeological Excavation Neolithic Site at Law Nongthroh (*Sohpetbneng* hill) Khasi hills, Meghalaya

The following information is the excavation from *Sohpetbneng* Hill displayed during a week-long display at the Monolith Festival at Mawphlang in the month of March 2016.

The archaeological site of *Law Nongthroh*, located on the northern slopes of *Sohpetbneng* hill in the Ribhoi district of Khasi Hills, Meghalaya, is the only Neolithic site in Meghalaya that has been systematically excavated. The actual site is located in one of the village's localities known as *Lum Mawbuh*, lying between 25° 72.253' N and 91° 94.2635' E at a Mean elevation of 1185-1200 M AMSL.

The presence of Neolithic cultural materials at the site of Law Nongthroh was discovered in the year 2004 while investigating the rich archaeological remains of the area. The site was systematically excavated in two seasons between 2103 and 2014, and the step-trench technique



Method of excavation was adopted on an area measuring about 96 meters. Culturally materials began to appear at 25-35 cm below the surface and continued till 65- 7 cm.

⁴ *U Thlen*, a giant python, which was killed by the Khasis and now its spirit is worshipped by some as Khasis as the god of wealth.

Cultural Findings

53 Nos. of finished stone tools were recovered along with detached and broken stone tools from the excavation. Different variety of artefacts were also recovered.



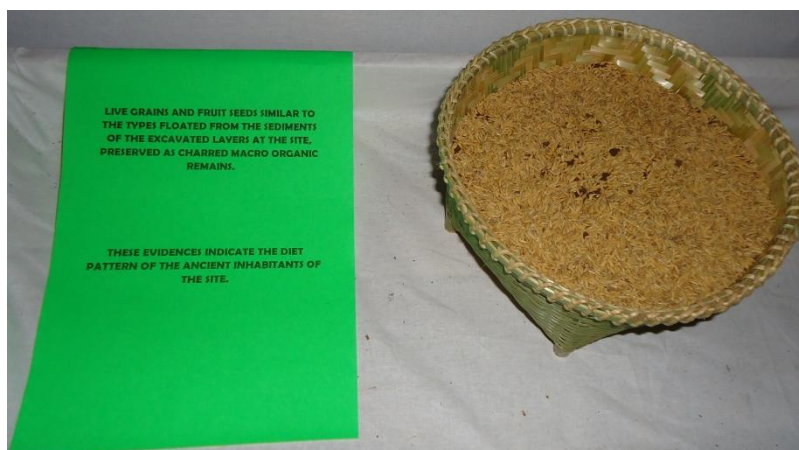
Few iron objects are recovered from different layers of the site.

More than 2058 handmade broken potsherds with paddle groove and cord-marked impressions on the surface were recovered from the excavation (typical Southeast Asian Neolithic potteries)



The grains in charred form were also floated from the sediments.

Oryza sp. (cf. *officinalis*): A wild variety of rice that is today on the Red List, among endangered plants and endemic to the region, usually grows in wild and swampy environments.



Ziziphus sp.: A common fruit also known as JuJube and locally called *sohbroi*

Embica officinalis: commonly known as Indian gooseberry.

Coix sp.: Also commonly known as Job's tears and locally called *Sohriew*.

Echinochloa sp.: Also known as barnyard millet locally called *kraishan/ kraitroh*.

Gossypium sp.: Common name cotton.

Date of the earliest layer of the site;

The carbon sample from Trench 7B1 (Depth: 50-60 Cms) has been dated to Bc. 1220 to 1020 (Cal BP 3170 to 2970) through AMS C14 dating at Beta Analytic.

4. Conclusion

Having examined all the different views by the different authors, we come to the conclusion that the most reliable theory is the theory provided by the facts and evidence of the excavation at *Sohpetbneng*. Who knows that *Sohpetbneng* was the original home of Southeast Asian people? The Southeast Asian people, such as the Burmese, Vietnamese, and Cambodians, are similar in their physical features, and

their language belongs to the Mon-Khmer, which is the same as the Khasis'. However, it is very difficult to trace the origin of the Khasis, as they are the most ancient tribe in India; to know more, we have to keep on digging facts through research.

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