

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The State of Meghalaya came into being on the 21st January 1972. It lies between 25°47' and 26°10' North Latitude and 89°45' and 92°47' East Longitude. Its approximate area is 22,429 square kilometres. It is bounded by Assam on the north, east and the north west; while Bangladesh is on the south and south west. This state is divided into seven administrative districts. The Ri Bhoi District, under which the Marngar village falls, was created in July 1992.

In this state we find three dominant tribal groups - the Khasi, the Pnar, and the Garo or Achik. The Khasi and the Pnars believe that they belong to the Hynniew Trep Hynniew Skum, meaning 'Seven Huts' and were separated from their heavenly abode of Khyndai Trep Khyndai Skum, meaning 'Nine Huts' at a certain point of time in the past. The Khasis are believed to be the remnants of the Monkhmer tribes of South East Asia. The Garos, on the other hand, are believed to have come from Tibet. But all these three hill

tribes are matrilineal in character.

These tribes are also known sometimes by different names at different places. Such names are either confined to a particular Syiemship or a particular geographical region. Based on the geographical divisions the Khasis are classified roughly under the following groups:

- 1) War - The Wars are those residing along the Southern slopes of Khasi and Jaintia Hills bordering Bangladesh.
- 2) Khynriam - Originally, the word referred to the people living within the Khyrim Syiemship, but this name has not been universally recognised as such. The Wars call the Khynriams as Nongphlang.
- 3) Bhoi - The inhabitants of the northern slope of the Khasi Hills are known as the Bhoi.
- 4) Lyngngam and Dyko - They live in areas bordering the Garo Hills and in the western part of West Khasi Hills. The Garos call them Megam.
- 5) Pnar - They are the people who live in the Central Upland region of the Jaintia Hills and are sometimes called Syntengs.

6) Hadem or Biete - They are found mostly in the eastern part of the Jaintia Hills.

Amongst the Garos also we find a number of sub-tribes. The most prominent of them are Abeng, Awe or Akawas, Kothu, Atiagra, Matabeng, Chisak, Matchi or Dual, Megam, Atong and Gara Gamching.

Besides the Khasis and Garos, there are people from other regions of the country residing in this state. The flow of the outsiders to this state is mainly due to economic reasons. According to 1981 Census, they consisted of the Bengalis (1.2 lakhs), Nepalis (0.61 lakhs), Assamese (0.25 lakhs) and other peoples (0.29 lakhs).

1. The Problem

Marngar is the name of a village located in the Ri Bhoi District of Meghalaya. It is about 55 kilometres away from Shillong and lies in the northern part of Meghalaya. The people living there are also called Marngar after the name of the village. They are recognised as one of the Khasi sub-tribes called the Bhoi. There are 15 clans in this village consisting of about 1800 households. They had originally migrated

from different parts of the north eastern region as well as the present state of Meghalaya. For instance, the Syiem clan came from Gobha, which is situated in Nowgong District (erstwhile Jaintiapur), the Lyngdoh clan is from Thamsing Pargan, which is situated in Jirang (Ri Bhoi District); and so on.

There are 7 villages which are included in one Raid or Administrative Unit of the Ri Bhoi District. These are as follows:

1. Mawtnum
2. Marngar
3. Umjarasi
4. Mawphru
5. Umbuda
6. Portion of Nongkhrah, and
7. Iew Mawlong.

Earlier they used to speak in their own languages. But now the younger generations, Marngars, specially the male members, mostly speak in the Khasi language. They have not only adapted to the Khasi language but also the Khasi culture and society to a considerable extent.

Their ways of dressing were also different in the beginning. Some of them wore a clothe known as Mikhli which they wrapped around the body from the armpit to the ankle. They also wore a clothe known as Nara which they tied on the waist and another cloth which they tied below the shoulder. Besides this, they wore a white cloth covering their shoulders. Traditionally, blue coloured Mikhli was popular.

Earrings were mostly worn only by the old women and these were known as Dhomoitsali Luti which was made of dry wood. Bangles or Kharu and a ring were also worn by old women. These can perhaps be considered as markers of their traditional identity.

Traditionally, males used to wear a loin cloth locally known as Langtih Gamsha and Palong Gamsha. They even wore a turban or Kharsola and a shirt. Sometimes, they even wore a Dhoti or Jainboh. Occasionally, males used to wear earrings too which were locally known as Khuria. All this shows the dominance of Assamese culture in earlier times.

Traditionally, for dying cloth they used laha or lac for red and blue colours they used a dye

extracted from Ka Mustih tree.

This study is intended to be descriptive as no one has hitherto done any ethnographic study on the Marngars. The study of the Marngars is important not only from the historical point of view but also because of its present dynamics. Here is one historically alien community that has not only accepted the Khasi land and social system to a large extent but has also retained its traditions. The ambivalence in the cultural and linguistic identity of this community is also necessary to be explored.

2. Suvey of Literature

P.R.T. Gurdon (1907) describes about the tatoo which the Bhois practise. He writes that the only people in the hills who tatoo are certain tribes of the Bhoi area which are originally Mikirs. The female tatoo on their forehead when they attain the age of puberty. A straight vertical line is drawn from the parting of the hair down the forehead and nose. He further states that they have a flabby looking yellow skin of the Mikirs.

H. Bareh (1967) writes on various subjects

like culture, politics and history of the Khasis. It is truly a pioneering work which provides exhaustive information on the tribe. Emphasis in this work is on the evolution of the Khasi society, i.e., the matrilineal form of social organisation, its megalithic and religious aspects reviewed in the light of their history and the nature of their civil institutions, but this book makes no special mention of the Marngars in particular.

N. Natarajan (1977) has written on the influence of the missionaries on the Khasis of Meghalaya. Her discussion begins around the early nineteenth century when Missiology first come to the hills and extends into the recent times. Relevant topics like pre-missionary Khasi society and the Khasi religion (niam) has also been described. The study also presents an analytical and descriptive picture of contemporary Khasi society. But, like the work of Bareh, she has not dealt with the Marngars of the Bhois in general.

J.N. Choudhury (1978) has attempted a critical appraisal of the Khasi matriliney, the still unresolved question of their migration, religion, and eschatology, the institution of inheritance and land ownership,

and their political history in the light of new facts on archaeology, anthropology, comparative religion and history but he too has ignored the Marngars.

K. Vincent's Socio-economic Study of Bhoilymbong (1978) is a holistic study on this area, which falls in the Ri Bhoi District only. However, this book also presents no clue to the Marngar society.

P.R. Mathur's (1979) concern is with the political and religious activities of the Khasis. His material was obtained from his research among the Khasis of Meghalaya carried out between 1967 and 1969. But he too has not written anything on the people in question.

D.T. Laloo (1982) has provided an explanation to their various ceremonies of the Sajer Raid Lyngdoh including the Lukhmi festival of this raid. But the Marngars are left untouched.

S.K. Chattopadhyay (1985) has edited a book on the tribal institutions of Meghalaya. The discussion is divided into three parts. Part I deals with the indigenous institutions of the Khasis and the Jaintias. Part II deals with the indigenous institutions of

the Garos and Part III deals with the indigenous institutions of the State as a whole. But in none of the parts are the Marngars discussed even in passing.

The Law Research Institute did a field study in the Bhoi area in 1990. Four villages in Bhoi area near Naya Bungalow (Umsning) namely, Umran Niang Byrnet, Nongkya, Umsaitsning, and Nongjri were studied. The study shows the absence of jhum cultivation and the presence of the Nepalis there. But nowhere has there been any mention of the Marngar village and people.

M.P. Rani Lyngdoh (1991) has worked on the Khasi festivals in historical perspectives and focussed on the social relevance and historical contents of these festivals, which had been lying dormant for so long. It is during the observation of the various festivals that the people propitiate God, their creator, for his blessings and kindness throughout the year, so that they have a prosperous harvest, good health, general prosperity and that they could live happily throughout the year. The festivals play a very important part in the life of the Khasis, as each festival has certain meaning to them. Besides, providing entertainment, the festivals act as an

integrative force, hold the community together and strengthen their identity. The festivals have also preserved the distinctive traits of the culture and tradition of the people.

According to her, the word Lukhmi which is also the festival of the Marngars, might have originated from the word Lu khi which means rice in the dialect of the Marngar in the Bhoi area. However, this word could have been a corrupt word of Laxmi, the goddess of wealth, worshipped by the Hindus in the neighbouring areas.

It is clear from above that the published literature on the state of Meghalaya or on the Khasis has not mentioned anything on this community which has been in existence there for over a hundred years or so. It, however, remains to be ascertained if they have been mentioned under a different name. It was reported to me that a journalist had once worked on the handloom of these people (Marngar) but no evidence could be found of this. Even the two works done on the Bhoi area itself, one by K. Vincent (1977) and another by D.T. Laloo (1977), who have written in English and Khasi languages respectively, have not

mentioned anything about the Marngars.

3. Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is to prepare an inventory of the Marngars. In particular, this study seeks to delve into their migrational history and the continuity and changes in their economy, beliefs and values, and social institutions ~~over~~ a period of hundred years or so of their living in this area.

4. Methods

The list of households in the village was collected first from the Syiem of Marngar. Census of 300 households was taken with the help of the list given by the Syiem. Then 100 elderly people of the village under study were interviewed by picking every third household head, with the help of an interview guide. Non-participant observation was also used as a technique of data collection.

As for secondary data, materials were collected from the North-Eastern Hill University, Anthropological Survey of India, State Central Library and from various governmental and non-governmental organisations as well as some knowledgeable people and officers of

the Bhoi area and Shillong.

The 300 households were collected from 7 hamlets or kyntoit with about 16.6% from each hamlet. This has been done on the basis of random sampling.

5. Plan of the Study

Chapter I deals with survey of literature, objectives, methods, and plan of the study.

Chapter II describes the location, history, and the people of the village.

Chapter III focusses on their traditional economy, beliefs and values and social institutions (family, kinship and marriage).

Chapter IV brings out the changes that have taken place in their economy, beliefs and values, and social institutions.

Chapter V is the concluding chapter where the processes of continuity and change are discussed and the reason for the same are provided.
