



“DEPICTION OF THE KHASI ‘TEACHINGS OF ELDERS’: A STUDY OF RADHON SINGH BERRY KHARWANLANG’S KA JINGSNENG TYMMEN”

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ABSTRACT

Ka Jingsneng Tymmen is a documentation of oral traditions of the Khasi tribe in Meghalaya. Berry’s book showcases the rich culture of the North-East India contrary to the popular belief that literature from this zone is only about the troubled political climate, violence, backwardness, under-development, poverty, and the ever-present image of the gun. This book is a compilation of the Khasi teachings of elders passed on from generation to generation and thus, serves as an important document in contemporary times when western influence has seeped in to such an extent that our culture and traditions are under threat of being lost.

This paper is an attempt to study the important issues related to the Khasi society, primarily among those are gender roles, marriages, family and community, and connection to God and thus, brings out the rich oral legacy documenting their myths, beliefs, and culture, as represented in Berry’s book, in order to understand the ways of life of these people.

Keywords: moral code, etiquette, oral tradition, clan, matrilineal, gender, family, elders, beliefs, food

An indigenous tribe living primarily in the state of Meghalaya of North-East India, the Khasis are called *Ki Khun U Hynniewtrep* in the local language, meaning ‘the children of the seven huts’. Several sub-divisions of the *Ki Khun U Hynniewtrep* – the Khasis, Jaintias, War, Bhois, and Lyngngams – inhabit different regions of the state. The Khasis inhabit the Khasi Hills, and those known as the Jaintias live in the area called as the Jaintia Hills; the Wars inhabit the Southern belt of the slopes to the valleys of the Surma; the Bhois and Lyngngams inhabit the northern lower hills extending towards the Brahmaputra valley. Primarily following a rich oral tradition, the Khasi script was perfected at a much later time. Radhon Singh Berry occupies a prominent position in North East Indian literary scenario. Along with Rabon Singh Suka and Jeebon Roy Mairom, Berry had perfected the Khasi written language. The shift from the oral to the written medium in Khasi is mainly due to Berry’s joint



collaboration with Mairom for introducing the complete alphabet and correct spellings. Berry's masterpiece, *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen*, a compilation of Khasi moral codes and rules of etiquette, was translated into English by Bijoya Swain in 1997, thus making the Khasi world reachable to all. Based on the Khasi philosophy of life, Berry in his book talks about day to day living in the right manner so as to achieve inner and outer harmony. The two parts of *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen* comprising of hundred and nine stanzas are not mere delineation of the Khasi codes of conduct, but bring out the various beliefs, legends, and cultural practices of their society as well. The book also inculcates the ways of honourable and decent living of the Khasis which have been passed on from generation to generation, and is thus a vivid proof of the strong oral tradition of the tribe. A thorough study of Berry's book in contemporary times would enable researchers to understand important issues related to the Khasi society, primarily among those are gender roles, marriages, family and community, and connection to God.

Berry has done a commendable job in collecting and compiling the 'teachings of the elders' and thereby, taking the step forward to make the oral tradition of the Khasis permanent. The moral codes and etiquette which form the basis of this book provide lessons to the younger generation on how to live, work, and conduct oneself at home and in the society in a respectable manner. The narrative of *Ki Hynniew Trep*, the original settlers, and their legend presented in the introductory section of the book offers a direct connect with the teachings of the elders. The narrative takes the readers through the "origin of the race, prescribes the kinship norms, explains man's relation with 'God', dictates the religious codes and patterns of social behaviour and above all a distinctive identity consciousness in a single module." (Sen, 77) Drawing inspiration from the narrative about the tribe, Berry's book too deals with day to day affairs, and lays emphasis on the correct ways of talking, walking, and sitting according to the tribe's customs. The teachings of the elders emphasize on avoiding useless chatter, abusive talks, and scandalous banter as these are mere waste of time and will never yield in positive character building. Similarly, dignified walking is opposed to walking "with eyes shifting here and there/Like the goat who, for grass, searches and scour" (*KJT*, Part I, 2). Sitting and walking postures are given lots of importance in the teachings and simple edicts like avoiding sitting with one's legs pointing towards others and moving aside whenever people are passing by give basic lessons of etiquette to the younger generation. Among other teachings on day to day living, the book concentrates much on avoiding bad habits, such as smoking hashish, consumption of alcohol, opium and other stronger drugs, and gambling. Occurring repeatedly all throughout the book are lessons on being truthful, earning self-respect, avoiding being in debt, and other teachings leading the tribe to a virtuous and honourable life. The Khasis are generally monotheistic and do not have any particular and formal place of worship. Close relationship to nature make them believe in every portion of the earth as sacred, and therefore, fit for prayer. Berry's book too highlights the essentiality of the cleanliness of the heart of the worshipper rather than the religious paraphernalia. The teachings highlight that religion is the very foundation on which the members of the clan



survive, and hence, performing one's duties towards the Creator is of primary importance: "The act of worshipping and revering God/Is a discipline we must all accord/If you don't believe in and follow true religion/How will you instruct and guide your clansmen?" (*KJT*, Part II, 35). The representative of God, the priest is also given much importance by the Khasis, and the teachings reveal that the priest occupies the highest position of respect in a clan, higher than even one's parents. The teachings form the very act of preserving the lost culture of the Khasi tribe in today's modern world when western influences have seeped in to the society, thus endangering the tradition and beliefs of the past.

The Khasis follow a matrilineal culture. The Khasi children take their mother's surname and clan name. The maternal uncle in the family is highly revered and given utmost importance. The Khasis consider marriage between members of the same clan as an unforgivable sin and those who go against the norm are out-casted. Berry's book goes into detail about how to choose partners carefully and on how marriages should be conducted. Repeatedly mentioned in both the parts of *Ka Jingsneng Tymmen*, the teachings of elders focuses a lot on marriages. Marriages are not to be conducted without informing family members as there may be chances of getting associated to families which are not equal in status. Marriages within the same clan are considered taboo and is dealt with in various stanzas of both the parts of the book – "Marrying those forbidden by custom don't dare/It's a sacrilege beyond compare/Intimately don't mix with close relations/For you just might to temptation succumb" (*KJT*, Part I, 16). In the Khasi society, "all the members belonging to the same 'kur' (clan) refer to each other as 'shi-kur' ('shi' meaning single)...All the members belonging to the same generation within the 'kur' accept each other as brothers and sisters..." (Nongkynrih, 34) Hence, much considerations and calculations go into match making before a relationship is finally approved. In order to avoid committing a heinous crime, the elders recommend avoiding hastiness in finalizing a match – "Before you decide to woo anyone/First find out what clan she comes from/Inquire with care in case the match is taboo" (*KJT*, Part II, 15). The teachings also lay emphasis on the conduct of marital life. Berry's book focuses on adultery as a sin and in a couple of stanzas highlight that both men and women are to avoid extra-marital relationships. In one of the most expressive stanzas in the book, Berry reflects, "A flower that someone else has worn/Never wish that it should you adorn/And once you've worn a particular flower/Others shouldn't get its fragrance, don't let them get near" (*KJT*, Part II, 38), signifying that it is a vile act to seduce other's spouses and is forbidden in the Khasi community for both men and women.

In connection to Khasi traditions in marriages and marital life, it is important to understand the status of men and women in the Khasi family and society as highlighted by Berry. The introductory section of the book portrays the misconception of outsiders who think that the Khasi society is women dominated. The writer states, "There is no curse which we dread more than that which makes his clan extinct. We consider it God's greatest blessing when the tribe and clan increases. So in our matrilineal society, contrary to the mistaken, idea of



outsiders that women rule, a man is doubly honoured.” (*KJT*, ix) The Khasi men occupy a very important position in the society. The most important role that the men play is as the maternal uncle. He is considered as ‘U Kni ha ka iap ha ka im’ (an uncle in life and death) in his sister’s house and plays the role of an advisor and protector. Being a matrilineal society, the youngest daughter in the Khasi household is the custodian of the family property. But however, she cannot take any decision related to the property and other major issues without the consent of her maternal uncles. The second part of Berry’s book concentrates on the roles and status of Khasi men and women. The eighth and ninth stanzas of part two of the book highlights abnormality in the gender roles – “A man who no moustache does sport/Like a man should, like a man is endowed/A woman who doesn’t have a feminine mien/Like a hornless cow who has been maimed” (*KJT*, Part II, 6). The traditional beliefs are not limited only to the looks of men and women. Even though women are respected in the Khasi society, they do not participate in administration, legislation, judiciary, and religious matters in the traditional set up. Women are also supposed to maintain dignity in every action; they are advised not to show their teeth while smiling and to suppress their laughter and familiarity with people whom they do not know well. Such advices in Berry’s book are however, limited only to the women, showcasing the differences in status of the two genders in the Khasi society. The prominence of men in the household is further understood in other smaller details, such as, the serving of food – “The first scoop out of the rice pot/Goes to the men of the house, without any doubt/If the women avail of this privilege instead/The world won’t give the men respect” (*KJT*, Part II, 16). This advice more or less summarizes the important status enjoyed by Khasi men in the family. However, the repeated teachings on men caring for their pregnant wives, advices on avoiding adultery, and managing homes focus on the importance given to family life and conjugal bliss.

The Khasi teachings of elders focus much on the importance of family and the larger community. Love towards kith and kin, reverence for parents, and unquestioned loyalty towards blood relatives are repeatedly mentioned in Berry’s book. Parents in Khasi community are next to God, and the teachings advise people to never blame parents for anything. They are to be adored and respected for having brought us to this world. Similar sentiments find place in dealing with elders of the community. The elders are the most revered ones in the society and the younger generation are advised to “speak and behave with humility and grace” (*KJT*, Part II, 1) in front of them. The wisdom of the elders are expected to lead the entire tribe, and hence, all due respect are to be given to them. The Khasis give lots of importance to companionship, and hence many stanzas in Berry’s book talks about the pivotal role played by friends in one’s life, journeys to be undertaken with companions, and so on. The teachings also focus on Khasi beliefs in avoiding certain kinds of people. Men who do not showcase their masculinity by sporting moustache and women their femininity by keeping long hair are to be avoided. Apart from such societal dictates on gender roles, the book also highlights other categories of people who are to be avoided – widows without children, barren women, shallow people, and physically deformed people. Berry’s book thus,



highlights the strong belief system of the Khasis, albeit quite a traditional one, on the exclusion of people who are considered not normal in participation of community activities.

Berry's book is considered an important document portraying the Khasi belief system. Similar to almost all tribal culture, the Khasis too have firm foothold on their myths and legends which seem to govern each and every aspect of their lives. Steeped in traditional tribal beliefs, these villagers are greatly influenced by spirits and the teachings project the right ways of living in order to avoid the clutches of the other world. An analysis of the Khasi myths and legends as portrayed in Berry's book highlights that much of the tribe's beliefs in honourable living is related to their beliefs in etiquette related to food. Both the sections in Berry's book deal elaborately on the customs and traditions to be followed in serving food, eating, offering food to visitors, and so on. Part one of the book talks about the importance of sharing food with others and to eat happily whatever is given by parents. The elders advise to control over-indulgence in food as it may lead to ill health. Part two deals in greater length on customs to be followed while eating. It is considered wrong to indulge in talking while eating as it may not be pleasing to others and the food eaten won't be digested properly that way. Certain codes of conduct are to be followed while serving food as well. At home, food is always supposed to be served first to men and women are advised to stay back and supervise till the meal is over. The teachings also deal elaborately on the formalities of serving food in the right manner as well as correct posture of sitting while consuming food. The cultural life of the North-East is interwoven with the tradition of offering and consuming betel leaves and betel nuts. The 'paan' or betel leaf occupies a prominent position in North-East Indian cultural scenario and the Khasi belief system too centres around the same. Bijoya Swain in her book, *Khasi Myths, Legends and Folk Tales* notes that "all over the Khasi and Jaintia hills, a guest is always welcomed with an offering of 'paan'....unless the host wishes to or it is a special occasion nothing else is required to be served." (Swain, 42) Berry's book too emphasizes on the importance of welcoming guests at home with 'paan' and the respect to be shown to this item of food. The teachings of elders focus on many other beliefs central to the Khasi life. An interesting aspect of their custom lay stress on the way names of people are to be called out. It is believed that if anyone's name is called out just once, it would definitely be the work of a spirit, and thus, until a person hears out his name being called at least twice should not answer to the call. Similar kinds of beliefs are followed while one goes on a journey or a business trip. It is advised that such trips should immediately be cancelled if while leaving the house one comes across people with defects and certain unfortunate inadequacies. Berry's book brings out such traditional beliefs and customs of the Khasi tribe kept alive through the oral tradition.

Ka Jingsneng Tymmen documents an indigenous community's cultural beliefs and lifestyle and authentically portrays the rich oral tradition of the Khasis, their myths and legends. Berry's book most importantly traces the importance of keeping alive the tradition of the past in a modern world which is under the influence of the western scenario. The tradition of the



rich oral tradition makes the community's culture vibrant and Berry's effort in recording these teachings for future generations is worthwhile. Berry's book proves that North-East literature is definitely not limited to the projection of violence and terrorism, and instead is successful in portraying many under-represented themes central to the lives of the Khasi community in Meghalaya.

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