

## Ethnographic Profile of The Khasi Tribe

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### **Abstract**

**T**he Khasi, an Austroasiatic ethnic group, inhabit mainly the state of Meghalaya. They are famous for their distinctive matrilineal social organization in which inheritance in the line is traced through females. The system pervades several facets of their society, such as family, property ownership. The Khasi people possess a rich culture with traditional ways, festivals and language. The Khasis are the ecological part of their forests. but by globalization, industrialization, and urbanization the impact of new culture, interaction, and harmonization of culture, all tribal cultures have lost their identity. To safeguard their heritage, culture, and tradition the government also initiated schemes for safeguarding their heritage and also meets their need and requirement. The government also motivates and takes steps in increasing their economic development by ensuring with the primary amenities.

**Keywords:** Matrilineal, protecting culture, globalization, khasi tribe, sustainable government.

### **Introduction**

Ethnography is focused on the study of 'ethnos', meaning nations, people, or cultures. It is a qualitative research approach commonly utilized in social sciences,

particularly in fields like anthropology and sociology. This method gathers empirical data about human societies and cultures through techniques such as participant observation, interviews, and questionnaires. In biological sciences, this type of research is referred to as a “field study” or “case report,” terms that are often used interchangeably with ‘ethnography.’ Ethnography systematically examines human social behaviours and communities, representing a key branch of socio-cultural anthropology. The main goal of ethnographic research lies in applying various methods, concepts, and procedural guidelines to analyse social life. This type of study typically employs specific data collection techniques, including naturalistic observation, document analysis, and in-depth interviews. Another crucial element of ethnographic work is the development of theories or models, which serve as a guide for practice and are essential for conducting the research.

In a world marked by globalization, climate change and environmental decline pose significant threats to all Earth’s species and their sustainability. Indigenous ecological knowledge and the attitudes of tribal populations toward nature are often rooted in principles of sustainability, efficient productivity, and balanced use of land and natural resources. In India, tribal communities account for 8.6% of the population, with 89.97% of them residing in rural regions. A large number of these tribal communities are located in Northeast India, and the Khasi are among them. They inhabit several Indian states, such as Meghalaya, Assam, and Manipur, with the majority residing in the forested northeast region of Meghalaya. The Khasi community lives primarily in the united Khasi and Jaintia hills of Meghalaya and speaks Mon-Khmer, a unique language found only in north-eastern India. The Khasi tribe exemplifies an unusual matriarchal society, which is rare in today’s world. Their societal structure is matrilineal and matrilocal, with lineage traced from a legendary female ancestor. The most striking aspect of Khasi society is its near matriarchal system, which is not seen among other hill tribes in Northeast India, except for the neighbouring Garo tribe that also follows a less strict version of matriarchy compared to that of the Khasi.

### **Historical Context**

The Khasi tribe, believed to have settled in India around 4,000 years ago, primarily in Meghalaya as well as parts of Bangladesh and Assam, has ancient origins and a migration narrative. Their ancestry traces back to the Austro Asiatic people, with genetic studies suggesting a link to both South and Southeast Asia. The Khasi have a rich history potentially extending back nearly 60,000 years, highlighting their deep

connection to land and nature as reflected in their myths and legends. Over the centuries, they have demonstrated resilience in preserving their unique cultural heritage, which reinforces their lasting identity and traditions. The early history of Meghalaya is closely associated with the Khasi, Pnar (Jaintia), and Garo communities through various legends and historical discoveries.

## **Aims and Objectives**

- To explore the cultural, social and economic aspects of the Khasi Tribe.
- To document the traditional practices, beliefs and modern adaptations.
- To explore and analyse their social organisations, kinship structure and political system.
- To understand the challenges faced by the tribe in contemporary society.

## **Area and People**

### **Geographical Distribution**

The khasi tribe are an indigenous people who mainly inhabit the north-eastern India, particularly in Meghalaya, with smaller groups in Assam, Punjab, Manipur, and Jammu and Kashmir. They make up approximately 48% of the population of Meghalaya. Their native land, the United Khasi and Jaintia Hills, stretches for about 5,541km.sq. and is bordered by areas such as the Brahmaputra valley and Garo Hills. This region is famous for its natural splendor, such as the Mawsmai Fall, India's fourth largest waterfall, and Mawsynram and Cherrapunji which hold the highest rainfall in the world. Other attractions include the holy grooves, monoliths, and the Nohsngithiang Waterfall, also referred to as the Seven Sister Waterfall. The khasi area is highly biodiverse, with forests accommodating a variety of tree species and wildlife. The fauna largely consist of bees, fowls, pigs, tigers ,etc. They are divided into four sub groups

- Khynrian khasi or upland khasi of the Shillong plateau
- Pnar of the Jaintia Hills
- Bhoi of the lowlands
- War of the Western and the Southern Slopes

## **Demographics**

In 2011, East Khasi Hills had a population of 825,922, an increase from 660,923 in 2001. The sex ratio rose from 981 to 1011 females per 1000 males, although the child sex ratio fell from 972 to 964 girls per 1000 boys. The literacy rate remained stable at 84.15% with 578,030 literate individuals. West Khasi Hills had a population of 383,461 in 2011, up from 296,049 in 2001, with a sex ratio of 980 and a literacy rate of 77.87% which did not change since 2001. Male literacy was 78.53 % and female literacy was 77.19%

## **Language**

Khasi is a branch of the Mon-Khmer family within the Austroasiatic stock, spoken by approximately 1,128,575 people primarily in Meghalaya according to the 2001 census. The language has borrowed many words from Indo-Aryan languages like Assamese, Bengali, and Nepali, and originally lacked its own script. It is one of the few surviving Mon-Khmer languages in India today, primarily found in the Khasi Hills and Jaintia Hills regions, with speakers also found in some parts of Assam and a small population is also in Bangladesh. Khasi has been an official language in Meghalaya since 2005, using both the Latin and Bengali scripts for writing. The main dialects are Sohra and Shillong, with Sohra recognized as the standard due to colonial influences. Other related languages and local dialects include Pnar, War Jaintia, Maram Lynngam, and Biate, among others. English serves as a common language across various ethnic groups, with proficiency varying between urban and rural areas.

## **Community Structure**

Among the Khasi people, society is divided into matrilineal units called kur, akin to clans, where all members are related through a common female ancestor. Clans often trace their lineage to ancestresses known as ki Iawbei-Tynrai, or grandmothers of the root. Certain clans, like Mylliem-ngap and Mylliem-pdah, retain names derived from these ancestresses. Descendants of one ancestress form a singular kur, while those descending from one great grandmother constitute a kphoh or sub-clan. Families, or iing, usually live together under the grandmother, who leads the household as ka Iawbei Khynraw. Clans are established through mothers, who are key to family rites, and marrying within one's clan is considered a serious offense. In marriage, a man joins his wife's clan and resides with her. The Khasi clans are exogamous, and social structure hinges on matrilineal inheritance, with property passed down through females, illustrating a complex kinship system.

## Cultural and Social Analysis

### Social Organisation

Family is the smallest social unit in Kashi society. The family includes grandmothers, daughters, husbands and children. The khasi have three types of weddings are Khasi-Synjat, Lamdoh, Iaadih-Kiads-Synjat. Kid-hiar) is ready with Klongs or Pumpkin Ships. The bride's family also has Ksiang, who manages the wedding. Bridal and groom alarm pockets made with layout, wrestling or other tokens. The permanent member is a daughter who married and settled with her husband. In the Khasi Society, the most frequent office is the Family Home (Ling-Khadduh). The youngest daughter ( ka-Khadduh) is the one who looks after the religious rituals and ritual performances of the family. It also carries the reputation of the largest portion of family ownership. The siblings of the mother also play vital roles in the Khasi Society. Due to the fact that he is in charge of taking care of his mother in the tribe and favours the upholding of vital social rituals. Access to property, power, religion and residence are all held by women. Men are also held in honor and have power. The second department is Iing (Lit. House) or Family. In the majority of instances, it is true that grandmothers, daughters and children of daughters reside in one house. Grandmother is the head of her life household. The most interesting aspect of the marriage among the Khasis is that, like among other societies, the husband never cohabits in his wife's house and doesn't enter the house along with the bride. This arrangement under the Khasis is most certainly attributed to the existence of the mother. As long as the woman resides in her mother's home, all her earnings go to the mother who uses her family upkeep Sainthoods seems to maintain the Matrihaki traditions more than Cassi, and Sinthom asserts that their Niam and religious ceremonies are untainted. They align with what existed in ancient days more than that of Cassi. The clans are very much exogamy. Among the clans is the greatest crime that Khasi can commit, is marrying outside their clan and can lead to death by refusing relatives and mourning rituals, and his bones are not allowed to rest in the clan's grave.

### Economic Life

India's Khasi tribe mainly exists on a hill farming subsistence economy, the main activity involving the cultivation of a variety of crops such as rice, vegetables, betel nut, and fruits by jhum cultivation (shifting cultivation) in forests, and secondarily supported by traditional weaving operations, mainly cane products and "Ryndia" cloth, earning an additional income in the form of trade; they have a economic system frequently identified with strong communalism and with individual family-owned

farms as the main production unit. The Khasi tribe is more or less dependent on Jhum Cultivation. Under jhum cultivation the forest land are cleared with the process called jhuming, the trees being cut down during the early part of winter and left to remain till January or February when fire is used, logs of wood being dropped at intervals of a few feet so that the ashes are not blown away by the wind. There is no manure applied to this kind of land. Wet paddy cultivation is a kind where the paddy needs a lot of water. The soil is formed into a thick paste afterward after which the seeds are planted. Once the crops ripen they are harvested and thrashed against a stone by the women. Out (iuh kba) There is a rich variety of crops here. The rice cultivated is of poor quality. The potatoes are raised in the Khasi and the out turn is five times the seed sowed. The winter crops are cultivated for seed collection to be planted during the spring season. The type comprises the Garo potato (white skinned) and the u Phan sawlia (rex skinned ). Millers, the staple crop is cultivated on rotation with the potatoes and is cultivated mostly on Jhum land. Orange and lime are planted together. Pan and betel nut are widely cultivated but take 8-10 years to yield fruit after planting. Tourism has greatly contributed to the economy of the Khasi people of Meghalaya, acting as a significant source of livelihood, particularly in rural regions where jobs are scarce.

Tourist arrival has resulted in the development of small enterprises such as homestays, restaurants, tour operations, and craft shops, generating employment and entrepreneurship. Major economic improvement has been observed in areas such as Sohra and East Khasi Hills because of tourism activities. Tourism has reinvigorated local handloom and handicraft industries as tourists have a demand for such traditional Khasi and Garo products like shawls, bamboo work, pottery, and jewellery. Tourist demand has helped keep artisan culture intact and benefiting the local crafts people. Infrastructural developments for the benefit of tourists have taken place in terms of improved road connectivity, enhancement of airport infrastructure in Shillong, improved hotels, and visitor facilities. These changes have not only positively impacted tourism but also economic development as a whole, enhancing the quality of life for residents. In addition, tourism has reformed the social structure of Meghalaya. Community-based tourism activities have enhanced the status of women, enhancing their economic autonomy and more prominent position in domestic and community decision-making. This empowerment has improved family welfare and community development. Besides, the tourism has facilitated cultural exchange and conservation, and festivals such as the Nongkrem Dance Festival drawing visitors from all over the world. This has brought in economic incentives to the people so that they retain their customs and develop a sense of pride about their native heritage. Tourism has

developed a rapport between Cultural heritage and Economic growth, leading young people in Meghalaya to Engage in their heritage culture and perpetuating the existence of the Region's distinctive heritage

### **Religious Beliefs and Rituals**

The Khasis hold a general belief in a creator God named U Blei Nong-thaw, often perceived as feminine due to matriarchal influences. While they occasionally invoke this Supreme God during sacrifices or in times of trouble, they do not formally worship Him. Their religion is mostly defined by spirit-worship and animism, which includes appeasing good and evil spirits, especially during times of hardship. This is usually done by priests or wise elders. The Khasis also believe that the spirits of the dead, especially those whose funerals were not well performed, can reside in animal forms. They do not have a belief in an afterlife death or hell, but the souls of the dead under certain circumstances are said to roam the earth in various forms. The Khasis also worship their ancestors through offering, as among the Hindus. The offerings could be food, which the spirits are believed to consume, and in some ceremonies, pigs are sacrificed by the families to commemorate their dead members. The Khasis perform rituals in the puja house of a clan, where pigs are sacrificed to the memory of family members newly buried in the cromlech of the clan. Animal sacrifice is the duty of the priest, who may be called a lyngdoh or langdoh belonging to the lyngdoh clan. Family rituals are performed by the head of the clan, usually assisted by the maternal uncle, the kni. The most prominent is the Shad Nongkrem, which is celebrated at Smit, the residence of the Khyrim king. This five-day festival includes goat sacrifices and traditional dancing by adorned unmarried women and men in rich ceremonial attire. A significant other celebration is the Shad Suk Mynsiem, an anticlerical spring dance to give thanks for prosperity and to denote the harvest and sowing seasons, which involves more restrained female dancing. The festival is celebrated in April by the "Seng Khasi," inviting Khasis from every hills. It is a three-day celebration, beginning with the first dance "Shad Nohkjat." The other dances are "Ka Shad-Shyngwiang-Thangiap" for sorrow, "Ka Shad-Kynjoh Khaskain" for housewarming, "Umsan Nongkharai" for spring bonding, and "Shad Beh Sier," a deer hunting dance for celebratory delight.

### **Political System**

The Khasi State constitution is formed by the voluntary confederation of villages with a limited monarchy led by the Siem or chief. The Siem's authority is circumscribed by having to consult and obtain approval from his durbar, an executive council with power of jurisdiction. The state is usually administered by his mantris, but sometimes

family members might participate, which amounts to being unconstitutional. Village headmen, Sirdars, deal with local government duties, while the ownership of land is in the majority in the hands of clans and villages and also a bit of private estate holding. The chief is paid primarily by state land, voluntary payments, or pynsuk, and market sale tolls since there are no land taxes and tithes on farm products. The Siem does not collect excise duties on liquor manufacture, with registration fees started in some states. Fines by the courts in the Khasi States are negligible and split between the durbar members and the chief. The Siems' revenues, usually in the few hundreds annually, reflect their poverty, with most being indebted. Siems are chosen from their family line in each of the fifteen Khasi States, the most important ones being Khyrim, Mylliem, Cherra, Nongstoin, and Nongkhlaw, and smaller states headed by other officials. Hereditary succession to the Siemship is in a maternal line, and Siems are appointed by a durbar thought to be of divine origin. They are considered to represent God and are usually both religious and secular leaders, with definite ceremonial responsibilities delineated in Khyrim and Cherra States.

### **Art, Literature and Music**

Music is essential to Khasi ways of life, and something it falls short of in official adversity of hooked up seminaries and song styles, it compensates for in chastity, beauty and a good complexity in skilled picture. Song is everything in Khasi ways of life - all jubilee and form from birth to death is improved with music and cotillion. You maybe can listen natural sounds caught in the songs- the hum of ideas, catcalls name, call of the wild beast, guggling of a sluice. One of the opening types of Khasi song is the 'phawar', which is more of a chant than music, and are sometimes written on the spot, improvisational, to accommodate occasions. Other types of music consist of ditties and verses on the records, the adventures of stunning icons, laments for assassins. Khasi musical entities( Ksing Shynrang, Ksing Kynthei) also serve as a tool because they support the song and the Dance. Flutes and cans of multi-coloured types are employed. The omnipresent barrel assuming the highest profiling element. Cans can't best provide the jubilee beat, they are utilized in requesting humans for the event. Tang-muri, a type of flageolet; 'Shaw Shaw' (Cymbals), Percussion gadgets of colorful kind including the 'Nakra'(big Drum) and the ' Ksing padhia'( small barrel); the Besli( flute for solo recitals), and so are used. The traditional oral shape is getting a misplaced artwork a few of the ultramodern modern generation. The records of written literature started with Ka Gospel of u Matti( 1844), a restatement of the philosophy of Mathew into Khasi with the aid of Thomas Jones. some of the forms of oral literature encompass lyrics(poetry and song), hymns used in colorful congregations, Christian and Non-Christian,

ritual songs, mainly mourning songs. The kingdom of Meghalaya Is well known for colourful crafts crafts made with membership and bamboo merchandise, cloth weaving carpet weaving, garnishment timber and woodcarving additionally preserve vital location in Meghalaya's art and crafts. In reality, weaving paperwork an essential component within the culture of the nation and its strains. requests like Police bazar, Bara bazar and Laitumkhrah inside the capital megacity are a many locations in which you could buy the innumerable handcraft particulars that Meghalaya produces. Meghalaya is home to numerous lousy crafts. Weaving be it on cloth or membership, has been an art for long within the state. There are some extraordinary crafts weaved through the colourful traces of Meghalaya. another distinguished work then includes woodcarving and bamboo work due to the fact the raw cloth for those products is set up in cornucopia within the country. The kingdom produces some extremely good membership mats, winnowing suckers, caps, screens, droppings and baskets. The 'Khasi' lineage is a infamous lineage of Meghalaya. The people of this weave mats, baskets and chairpersons out of membership. The' Jaintia' is any other lineage of Meghalaya it's concerned n making lovely fishing traps out of bamboo. The Khasi traces additionally make home shanks , implements and many others. The Garo' lineage weaves accoutrements which can be used for making clothes. in addition, the weave bed covers desk covers and so on. A unique kind of membership mat known as' Tlieng' is popular in Meghalaya for its continuity. Baskets referred to as Meghum Khoks' are also created and used for storing exclusive. The ' Khasi' lineage is notorious for weaving club mat, droppings & baskets. The ' Jaintia' lineage makes fishing traps out of bamboo sticks, which are also infamous for its beauty. The Khasi lines additionally make domestic shanks , implements and certainly ordnance with uprooted iron ore. The Garo' lineage weaves ' Dakmorda', a cloth used for his or her clothes at the side of shirts, bed covers, bedsheetsand tablecloths. A unique kind of club mat called Tlieng' is popular for its continuity Baskets referred to as ' Meghum Khoks' also are created and used for storing unique particulars.

## **Education and Health**

According to the 2011 census for the East Khasi hill, literacy rate in Meghalaya has seen upward trend and is 74.43 percent as per latest population census. Of that, male literacy stands at 75.95 percent while female literacy is at 72.89%. Formal education is the basis of all round human development. Alienation of the society, lack of adequate schools, education, hostels, and teachers subject to poverty, apathy towards irrelevant curriculum have always stood in the way of trial's getting their rights. To achieve this, the National Policy ensures that:

1. The trials are included in the national program of Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan by the Ministry of Human Resource Development.
2. Schools and hostels are provided in areas with no such facility.
3. Education is linked with the supply of supplementary nutrition.
4. Free allowances like financial assistance, pocket allowances, free distribution of textbooks, and school uniform are also provided.

Tribal people are self-sufficient and self-reliant as they have their own medicine system which is based on herbs and other items collected from their environment. They have their own ways of diagnosing and cure of diseases. Although tribal people live very close to nature, there are majority of them who need health care on account of malnutrition, lack of safe drinking water, poor hygiene, and environmental sanitation, etc. Lack of their knowledge about health services, government schemes under health also affect their health status.

The National Policy seeks to: The government provides for allopathy system in these tribal areas with the extension of the three-tier system which provides for a village health worker, auxiliary nurse mid-wife and primary health centers. Formulate area specific strategies to improve the access to and utilization of health services, etc.

### **Challenges and Modern Adaptations**

Over the time, tribes have become more complex due to their different characteristics making a more complex definition. In India tribal communities can be found in almost every state. There is no doubt that tribes are being exploited more with the growing period. The problems like proper communication, literacy rate, clean drinking water, inadequate medical services, etc. are all the major problems that damage the tribes from its core. It can be said that development is always double-edged. As development brings changes in the tribal areas which help them live a better life but it also destroys their culture and life. The tribal people have to deal with a lot many problems which can affect the upcoming generations.

Many advancements like industrialization, globalization, urbanization have brought significant changes in the tribal world. Northeast India comprises the eight states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. It houses over 200 tribal communities showing different characteristics. Nowhere can the impact of globalisation be as stark as in Northeast India, more so since

this region is geographically and culturally isolated and away from the rest of the country.

Aerated drinks like Pepsi, Coca Cola, Fanta are today found in every nook and corner. In many homes, these have replaced the traditional rice beer due to their easy procurement. On the downside, a large number of licensed liquor shops have also sprung up in which foreign liquors are easily available. Also packaged food such as frozen meat, and fish; frozen sausages, salami; tinned fruits etc. are all found in the state capitals and towns. All these food items have replaced their healthier traditional food. Today, obesity, and lifestyle diseases like diabetes are seen among trial's which were practically unknown two decades back.

Language is one area where change has taken place. No doubt due to culture contact and policies of assimilation, their language was already undergoing change, but today due to the presence of private schools, foreign colleges and universities, as well as mass media (through cable TV and DTH), the younger generation speak English with various accents, while many have forgotten their mother tongue. Bollywood songs are commonly sung and performed by children in school programmes in remote villages in Arunachal Pradesh. Cities like Shillong in Meghalaya and K Kohima in Nagaland are beginning to be referred as the rock capitals due to the choice in music by the younger generation here. Unfortunately, traditional music and dance passed down orally through generations have almost disappeared. No doubt today the trial's of the Northeast are connected to the rest of the world through the increasing market economy, through mobile phones and internet connectivity. but the change towards a consumerist and market economy have impacted their value systems and their socio-cultural lives.

The prevention of cultural identity for tribal people has always been a complex issue with no concrete answer. It is important to remember that tribes are monogamous groups, and their needs and experiences vary greatly. There are some common issues that emerge with respect to every tribe. Some of their important concerns include loss of land, loss of their cultural identity, loss of their language, etc. Loss of language is the key component of culture and when a tribe loses its language, they also lose their identity. Language has always been the most important part of identity. One can protect their language for the next generation by promoting it in their tribe and educating their new generation with their own culture and highlighting it in their day to day life.

The government of Meghalaya has taken several measures to preserve the unique culture of their tribes namely the Khasi, Garo and Jaintia tribes by the following measures:

- Constitutional and Legal frameworks : As per the constitution the sixth schedule provides for autonomous district council(ADCs) to protect the tribal customs and traditions .
- Cultural Preservation and Promotion : The state government promotes the use and development of their language . They promote to teach their language in schools, talk in their native language in general, etc. which also helps in to foster a feeling of oneness among them. The government also promotes major festivals which show the expression of cultural identity.
- The government also encourages its people to promote their art and craft such as weaving, pottery, bamboo works, through various initiatives and training program

## **Conclusion**

The Khasi tribe presents a fascinating case study in the cultural adaptation and social organisation. Their unique matrilineal system, where lineage and inheritance are traced through the mother line which sets its apart from many other tribe. Their geography, language, social structure, traditions , religion, etc. set's them apart from the many other tribes inhabiting the same area. The khasis are traditionally an agrarian community, with rice being their staple crop. They practice both wet rice cultivation and jhum cultivation ( slash-and- burn agriculture). The khasis have a rich tradition of music, dance, and storytelling. Their festivals, such as Nongkrem and Shad Suk Mynsiem, are vibrant celebrations of their culture. They have a strong sense of community and social cohesion. They have deep respect for their nature and have also preserved many sacred grooves. Its important to know that though khasi is a matrilineal society, it not necessary matriarchal. Men still play important roles in the political and social life of the community.

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