

Ethnography of Wilderness: The Sacred Groves in the Perception of the Khasi-Jaintia People

Sajal Nag

Abstract : *In most of these earliest world religious rivers, mountains, streams, animals, ferns, trees everything was revered and diligently preserved as a part of the faith itself. But with the emergence of organized religion and institutionalization of faiths and more so with modernity and mechanization these interdependence and interrelationship were gradually eroded to the extent that ecological ethics and nature gradually was relegated into the background. Organized religion does talk of environment and its preservation but it is more as a matter of principles and rhetoric without ensuring its practice in contrast to nature worshipping faiths.¹ As a result the degradation of nature has increased manifold. Despite this a number of communities still retain their ancient eco-ethics and practice them. The concept of Sacred Groves is one of them. The Khasis, one of the major tribes of north east India, have been profound nature worshippers. Their faith was that right from their origin to their sustenance was dependent and directed by the nature around them. Despite adopting a new religion like Christianity during the colonial times, the Khasis still preserve these Sacred Groves both in concept and practice. In this paper first provide an anthropological detail of the Khasi Sacred Groves and how it was a part of their nature worship. In the second part it traces the way the colonial and missionary agents viewed and appropriated this pre-Christian belief and in third section it interrogates various beliefs and ideas associated with the concept of Sacred Groves.*

Key Words: *Sacred Groves, religion, nature, colonialism, state, kingship, ideology.*

The contextualization of religion and society in environment and vice versa is historically appropriate. In fact their evolution and sustenance has often been reciprocal but in modern times somehow these vital interrelationship and interdependence has been systematically undermined both in discourses and practice. But historically speaking all ancient faiths or religion in their earliest forms, for example, was nature worshipping. These were known as nature worshipping, or animism and in theocentric discourses as Paganism. But nature worshipping does not necessarily involve preservation of nature. In Hinduism for example rivers, streams, animals and mountains are worshipped but these have been consistently polluted and destroyed through excessive appropriation. However, in most of these earliest world religious rivers, mountains, streams, animals, ferns, trees everything was revered and diligently preserved as a part of the faith itself. But with the emergence of organized religion and institutionalization of faiths and more so with modernity and mechanization these interdependence and interrelationship were gradually eroded to the extent that ecological ethics and nature gradually was relegated into the background. Organized religion does talk of environment and its preservation but it is more as a matter or principles and rhetoric without ensuring its practice in contrast to nature worshipping faiths.² As a result the degradation of nature has increased manifold. Despite this a number of communities still retain their ancient eco-ethics and practice them. The concept of Sacred Groves is one of them. The Khasis, one of the major tribes of north east India, have been profound nature worshippers. Their faith was that right from their origin to their sustenance was dependent and directed by the nature around them. Despite adopting a new religion like Christianity during the colonial times, the Khasis still preserve these Sacred Groves both in concept and practice.

The Khasi institution of Sacred Groves is immensely important because although most of the tribes in India in general and north east India in particular had the concept of sacred groves in their tradition, most of them have actually lost it. Nagas and Mizos are two major tribes who have actually lost their sacred groves with their jungles. The hills of Nagaland and Mizoram are denuded of all forests and look pathetically barren, brown and ugly

signifying the erosion of ecological ethos in their everyday life. There are many other such tribes. In contrast to these large scale degradation and destruction the Khasis not only have been successful in preserving these Sacred Groves, they were actually able to institutionalizing them as sites of tourism and even a heritage site. The Khasi concept of Sacred Groves is not just about according divinity to a patch of wilderness but also how the concept was allowed to germinate and develop by the community by inextricably associating with the religion of the people and then weaving credible narratives around it through legends, myths and fables, all aspects of oral history. More so the state (*hima*) itself had proactively intervened in the process of institutionalizing the concept thereby ensuring its creation, sustenance and perpetuation. It was its eco-politics.

In this paper I propose to first provide an anthropological detail of the Khasi Sacred Groves and how it was a part of their nature worship. In the second part I trace the way the colonial and missionary agents viewed and appropriated this pre-Christian belief and in third section I interrogate various beliefs and ideas associated with the concept of Sacred Groves.

Khasi religion: Communion with Nature

There is a saying in Khasi language, ‘*U Khasi u im bad ka mariang, bad ka mariang ka im bad u*’ which means ‘a Khasi lives with nature and nature lives with him.’³ Indeed the pre-Christian religion, known as *Ka Niam*, where *U Blei Nongthaw* was the Supreme being, was all about nature. The Khasis believe only in one God (*U Blei balah baiai, U Nongbuh u Nongthaw*). The Khasis religion is truly a nature worshipping. The Khasi believed that there was a Golden Age/Silver Age or Age of Purity (*Aiom Kshiar/Aiom rupa or Sotti Juk*) when man and animals lived in perfect harmony with each other. There is a common belief that once upon a time both man and beast spoke the same language and communicated with each other. The Khasi poet U So So Tham talked about it in his poem *Ki Symboh Ksiar* (Golden grains):

U Briew, u Mrad, u Khla, Thlen,
(A Man, a beast, a tiger and a snake)
Kawei ka ktien ki dang ia kren;

(One language they used to speak)
 Shuwa ban paw u Ksuid u Khrei,
 (Before the appearance of the devil)
 Baroh ki mane ia u Blei.
 (All worshipped God).⁴

The Poet believed that this was the primeval social condition when God first created the world. But due to the sinfulness of man, this era came to an end.

For the Khasis, nature is a holy sanctuary where God resides and continues to interact with man. Nature is seen as God's creation and a mother who nourishes human beings. The existence of sacred mountains, hills, rivers and sacred groves or sacred plants vindicates this fact. Hence the Khasis treat nature with respect and they reveal a certain feeling of awe towards her. They believe that the vast nature surrounding them is the dwelling place of the spirits (good and evil), where the 'rngai' (shadow/soul) of the deceased roam about. Therefore, they seek constantly to appease such spirits so that they do not interfere with human life. For this reason, they offer sacrifices and resort to divination in order to discern God's will in their life. It is not just animals and birds but the entire ecological system including the mountains and rivers which are part of this eco-spirituality.

The Holy Mountains

In February 6th 2010, the Khasis of Meghalaya gathered at *U Lum Sohpetbneng*, a mountain peak nearly 20 kms from Shillong to take part in the annual pilgrimage to invoke the creator's blessings and offer prayers to the mountain by offerings of water and plants. They gathered there as part of their traditional religious belief and despite being Christians now. The belief was that the peak about 1434 meters sea level had linked heaven and earth through *Jingkieng Ksiar* or the Golden Bridge. The golden bridge was believed to link the creator and the Khasi race. The annual pilgrimage is always held on the first Sunday of February. 'Today this golden bridge signifies the communion between the heart and soul, that continues to flow in each prayer and worship to the divine creator and that the creator would

never fail to answer though signs of divination' said Sumar Saing Sawian, a Khasi writer.⁵ The Khasis consider certain mountains and hills as sacred because they believe that some deities reside there. Well known hills and rocks to which sacredness is attributed are the following:

(i) Lum Shillong (Shillong Peak)

This is one of the mountain ranges found in this region. On this range is situated the Shillong Peak which is the highest peak in Khasi and Jaintia Hills. At the foot of this peak the Shillong city is situated. The deity associated with this range, is known as U 'Lei' Shillong. On account of its height and prominence, this mountain range is considered as the king of the Khasi ranges. The spirit of this mountain is considered as the most powerful among all. Due reverence is paid to him especially by the Khyrim royal family and the Nongkrem priestly clans.

(ii) Lum Raiting (Raitong Hill)

This peak is situated about 16 km away from Umsning. Its name is derived from a legend which commemorates the burning alive of U Manik Raitong. Manik Raitong was a poor orphan who was condemned to death by the King whose queen fell in love with him after listening to the sounds of his flute. Manik Raitong was executed because the poor orphan had no one to defend him and it was his queen who was guilty of the crime. It is said that on this peak there grew a grove of bamboos with the branches upside down. This grove is said to have sprung up from the bamboo flute, planted by him before he jumped into the pyre.

(iii) Lum Sohpetbneng (Sohpet-bneng peak)

This is a peak that is most sacred to the Khasis because it is connected with their origin. The Khasis believe that once upon a time there was the so called Golden Ladder (*Jingkieng ksiar*) which linked the earth to heaven. The *Hynniew Trep-Hynniew Skum* (seven families) used to descend to earth by day and then returned back to heaven in the evening through this ladder. When finally the tree was cut down due to man's sin, the *Hynniew Trep* were stranded here on earth and they keep on living in these places. *U Lum Sohpet-bneng* is the holy sanctuary where God established his

covenant with man. Even today the place is kept as sacred and the **Seng Khasi** who maintains the traditional religion performs an annual sacrifice to the Almighty God. On this peak there is a stone altar erected many centuries ago, at the spot where the trunk of the tree is said to have been.

(iv) The Kyllang and Symper Rocks

U Kyllang and *U Symper* Rocks are two of the well known peaks among the Khasis. The former is about 5684 ft. in altitude while the latter is about 5700 ft above sea level. A Khasi legend tells us that these two peaks were twin brothers. They lived in peace until one day a great quarrel arose among them and as a consequence a ferocious battle took place. In this battle the Kyllang Rock overpowered his brother and the latter retreated to the south where it is located now. In this battle it is said that Symper extracted a huge quantity of stones and boulders from his own side and hurled them against his brother. This is the reason why there are a number of caves on the side of the Symper Rock while the Kyllang Peak remains up to now a home ground of stones and rocks pelted by the Symper. These two peaks are very significant in the Khasi legends because they remain them of the evil of family wrangles and disunity. The perennial wounds displayed on these peaks warn the Khasis of the danger of sibling competitions and jealousies. They teach the people to learn to live in harmony in their families and to promote mutual understanding and co-operation.

(v) Lum lawpaw (lawpaw peak)

This peak is located in the West Khasi Hills closed to Mawkyrwat. It is the most well known and sacred mountain of the people in this region. The Khasis believe that it is the dwelling place of the divine spirit. This spirit is known as ka '*Lei lawpaw*'. She acts as the guardian and the presiding spirit in the West Khasi Hills. People offer sacrifices to her in order to appease her and to obtain her blessings and protection. The people of the place therefore, treat this mountain as a holy ground.

Water of Life

Water sources are also revered in the Khasi faith. Every river and streams in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills like the hills and mountains, derives its name

from some folktales and myths which in turn has religious affiliations. Many of these rivers are sacred to the Khasis because they are closely connected with the life of the people. Some of the most important rivers are:

(i) **Ka Umiam and Ka Umngot**

According to Khasi folklore, these two rivers were once upon a time sisters. They came from a well to do family and were extremely beautiful. They seemed like identical twins in every respect of their physical features, and in fact, they likes to dress alike. The elder sister was however vain and spent most of her time in beautifying herself and in merry making with her friends. The younger sister, on the other hand, was diligent and spent her time in performing her domestic duties. One day, the elder sister heard from her friends that the plains abound in big fish of every sort and kind. She was so enchanted by the plains that she decided to go there. Being unwilling to go alone, she invited her friends from Sohiong to accompany her on this pleasure trip. But when she reached the plains, she discovered, to her disappointment, that her younger sister had already preceded her and had gathered all the fish from there. There upon, she cried aloud with great lamentation. From that day onward, the two sisters became the two rivers. The elder sister is call ka *Umiam* (crying water) and the younger sister is known as ka *Umkhen*.

Another version of this same story tells us about two rivers, *ka umiam Mawphlang* and *Ka Umngot*. *Ka Ngot* and *ka Iew* were two sisiters, daughters of *u blei Shyllong* (Shillong God). The former two sisters was quiet and unassuming while the latter was proud, eccentric and ambitious. One day, while watching the plains of Sylhet, *ka Iew*, the elder sister, forced her sister, *ka Ngot*, into a competition as to who would reach the plains first. *Ka ngot* took the winding road gradually until she reached the plains of Sylhet. *Ka iew*, on the other hand, being proud and showy, took the rough path through the mountains and the gorges. She destroyed everything on her way. But to her horror she found that her sister had reached earlier than her. In great disappointment and shame at being defeated by her sister, she threw herself on the ground and from her five rivers emerged. From that time onwards, this river is known as *Umiam-Mawphlang* to distinguish

her from *Umiam Khwan*.

(vi) **Ka Kupli:**

This river marks the eastern boundary of Jaintia Hills. According to Jaintia legends, this is the river that the ancestors of the Jaintia people had to cross on their way to these hills. Ka Kupli is worshipped as the mother Goddess and sacrifices of propitiation are offered to her. The belief in the Goddess *Kupli* is still very strong among the people of Jaintia and even today people would not dare to cross the river without performing some sacrifices to appease the goddess. They fear that violation of which rituals would incur a curse from the goddess.

(vii) **Myntang River**

This is another sacred river in Jaintia Hills. A legend tells us that it was from this river that U Ryndi caught a fairy in the form of a fish. The fairy became his wife and from her the dynasty of Jaintia Kings originated. This is how the divine origin of Jaintia kings has been established since time immemorial.

The “Law Blei, Law Kyntang” (Sacred Groves).

As part of this nature worshipping faith where nature is considered holy and sacred. Although the entire ecological system is seen as holy, certain forests are marked as inviolable. There is a practice among the people to declare certain groves as Sacred. It is believed that the deities live in these groves and, for this reason, no one is allowed to damage them by lumbering or by indulging in any other injurious activity. The sacred forests are located as public forests set aside for religious purposes under the traditional land use system. In these groves the trees and plants grow without threat of being destroyed and the animals too enjoy the freedom and guarantee of security to life. They all carry the same implications, namely, that they are sacred and not to be violated by people without incurring some curse from God upon themselves. The sacred forests are intrinsically related to the social, religious and cultural life of the Khasi people. Needless to say, these forests are home to a number of flora and fauna, which are endangered and as such are rich in bio-diversity.

These sacred forests are divided into **three categories**, depending on the places where they are located. In places controlled by the *Lyngdoh* or priest, the sacred forests are called **Law Lyngdoh**. In places that have a heavy concentration of people who adhere to the Khasi indigenous faith, these forests are called **Law Niam**, and in places where villages are under the control of the village headman, the forests are called **Law Kyntang** (which is the literal meaning of sacred forest). Another category is known as **Law Adong**.

Some of the well known sacred groves found in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills are:

Law Lyngdoh Nongsangriang in Nongstoin kingship, Law Kyntang Umwai in Mawlong kingship, Law Suidnoh in Laitryngew, Lum Ryngkew swer in sohra kingship, Law Lyngdoh Mawphlang, Law Lyngdoh Jowai, Law Blei Shyllong and many others. There are about 79 Sacred Groves documented so far in Meghalaya covering an estimated 10,251 ha. Out of which 32 are in East Khasi Hills, 13 in West Khasi hills, 15 in Jaintia hills and 8 each in East and West Garo hills and Ri Bhoi districts.⁶ The Sacred Groves are divine and home of certain spirits (leis). These groves are sites of rituals, taboos and religious ceremonies. The Khasis believe that the guardian spirit of **U Ryngkew U Basa** is present in these Groves. Destroying or cutting of trees or plants from the grove is prohibited by religion. **Ka Leh Niam Pyrda** is a religious ritual held every year in the month of April by the **Lyngdoh Syntiew** clan in the deep inside of groves. In the sacred groves of **Raliang**, in Jaintia hills a religious ceremony known as **Ka Nguh Blei** performed annually between April and November. While the Khasis traditionally deify nature as Gods, they believe in the existence of spirits (lei) that are believed to hover around natural surroundings.⁷ These spirits however function according to the commands of God (**U Blei**). There are good spirits and evil spirits. The forests are considered to be abode of the **lei** or good spirits where the soul (**rngai**) of the deceased roams around. Some of the sacred sanctions to be observed in these groves are:-

- (a) The visitor to these forests should not cause any damage

whatsoever. He or she can only admire its beauty. Even plucking a flower or cutting a branch is strictly forbidden.

- (b) Littering of these forests in different manners like throwing garbage or urinating is strictly forbidden. Such acts are considered as insults to the guardian spirits of these forests and so they can displease them.
- (c) Anyone who visits these sacred grounds should observe decency in comportment. Use of foul language is considered a taboo in these places. Even impure and evil thoughts are not proper while one is in these places.

The person who dares to violate these sacred groves is punished by the village durbar for it is considered a crime (**ka sang**) not easily forgiven. It is also believed that violators of these sanctions will incur incurable diseases like insanity, loss of sight, lameness or some other psychological derangement, or even suffer death. The Sacred Grove is a sort of divine sanctuary where the clan or a group of clans who take care of it, perform their periodic sacrifices to God the creator. It is from this sacred place that they converse with their Creator through rituals and prayers. The Sacred Groves are considered by the Khasis as a paradise of the pristine glory of creation. Here men live in harmony with each other, with the animals and the birds, with the fish and the fowl, with the trees and the mountains and even with the spirits themselves. They are the sanctuaries of the Creator where sacred history was being written. The legends and narratives were woven behind with each of the Sacred Groves to prove its divinity and sacredness and as a site of reverence. These stories provide legitimacy and sanction of their tradition to form a part of Khasi theology.

Narrative of the Sacredness

Like most things, sacred forests also have stories and stories. The rise and perpetuation of the Sacred Groves are through these oral narratives which rationalized and legitimized the utter necessity of existence of these groves. Religion has displayed a significant role in the encouragement of the narrative art and entire cosmologies and philosophical discourses have been derived from these narratives. The parameters of these tales which in turn create

discourses and belief systems are drawn by the limitations of human life and the similarity of its basic situations. Stories, while existing in time and space, are influenced by the nature of the land, by the linguistic and social constitution of its people, by the showing historical circumstances and changes.

According to the Khasi indigenous faith, these patches of wilderness known to us as Sacred Groves which are the *law kyhtang* are held sacred due to the presence of *U Ryngkew u Basa* – believed to be the earthly embodiment of the primeval *Ryngkew* and husband of *Lisan*, the primeval universal mother. Conceived as a male, he is also regarded as the first light and father to rock and soil. The *Ryngkew* and *Basa* are believed to manifest their being and presence, at times, through human and animal agencies. These spirits were sent by God to dwell on earth. They were sent for a purpose. When the earth was young, it was believed that there grew a gigantic tree with branches spreading in all directions and as the tree grew, swathes of shadows were cast. Gradually, more and more places became overcast and as the tree continued growing with rapidity, the branches also started reaching across larger and larger areas. Very soon, the sun was almost eclipsed and creatures, both humans and animals, were seized with fear. Finally, total darkness covered the earth and none dared venture out in search of food or to finish any chores. It was finally decided in a council that the tree had to be felled and collectively, humans in great numbers went to the mountain range of *Diengiei* (to the west of present day Shillong) and started to work at bringing the tree down with their axes and machetes. However, the tree trunk was too huge and the people found that they could not finish the work in one day. They left the place and returned home to rest and sleep.

When they returned the next day, the cut marks and notches made on the trunk of the gigantic tree had all disappeared and the *Diengiei* stood as new as ever. The people, determined to bring the tree down, began anew to hack at the trunk once again and as the day before, had to give up without success swearing to finish the work the following day. The next day when they came to the place they discovered to their dismay that the tree was

whole again. Nearby, a small migratory bird called the *phreit* was perched on a bush and it taunted the people there telling them that it would be impossible to fell the tree unless they heeded it because it knew the secret of how the tree regained its lost sinews. After obtaining permission for itself and its ilk to feast from ripened paddy fields for generations to come, the *phreit* disclosed that when the people go home after their laborers, a tiger used to come and lick the wounded portions of the tree trunk and thus, the *Diengiei* would heal itself.⁸

The bird then advised the people to tie their axes and machetes to the tree trunk all around so that when the tiger comes to lick the wounds and notches it would cut its tongue and abandon its mission. As predicted, the tiger, after hurting itself, ran away in the darkness of night and the following day, the tree fell. God was offended by the actions of the humans as the tree was supposed to symbolize a close relationship between God and man and this destructive action severed all connections between creator and creature. The felling of the *Diengiei* tree ushered in long period of calamity and deprivation. There was discord between animals and humans. There was turbulence in the earth. The earth including all its inhabitants beseeched God's forgiveness and as signs of atonement, forswore the use of axes and machetes on trees and plants unless necessary. God also looked on kindly at this gesture and resolved to send the *Ryngkew* and the *Basa*, his representatives to live in the *law kyntang* or sacred forests and accept the annual deification through ritualistic offerings and ceremonies.⁹

This narrative constitutes a fundamental tenet of the Khasi religious philosophy and is often told and retold in ceremonial situations lasting several hours. In conjunctions, offerings in memory of clan progenitors and founders are also performed in the sacred forests. Therefore, it is very common to see symbolic representations of the *Ryngkew* in the form of a rock or stone which may be naturally formed or constructed and to also see imposing megalithic structures which are actually cromlechs, cairns sarcophagi and other forms of commemorative stone structures. An event to give offerings to the *Ryngkew* could also double up as one in which the ancestors are propitiated. In fact, almost all clan and community ceremonies of

consequence are performed within the confines of the sacred forests. The *Mawphlang* sacred forest, one of the most well known, was established by *ka Khmah*, the founder of the *Lyngdoh mawphlang* clan.¹⁰

Colonial Discovery

There is a belief that it was the British who first discovered the Sacred Groves of the Khasis and seeing the profoundness of an environmental ethics had encouraged to perpetuate it. This seems somewhat unbelievable considering the fact colonials were plunderers of most of the world's ecosystem. Although Sacred Groves are an ancient institution of the Khasis, it was for the first time brought into the notice of the outside world by colonial botanists who were amazed by these phenomenon. The practice of forest sites are purely indigenous of the Khasis and were pre-colonial in its history. The British had nothing to do with its greatness. They had only given a European name to the practice.

In the early 1840's Botanist William Griffith, who accompanied a deputation searching indigenous tea plants in Assam, visited Khasi hills where he discovered the Khasi Sacred Groves. His report was published in 1847 where he had written about the groves in the following words— 'Myrung is far superior in every point to any place that we have yet seen; and as the climate is peculiarly fine and the bungalow good, the degree of enjoyment is as great as can be expected. The features of the country are similar to those of Mumbree. The groves or woods are composed chiefly of oaks, intermixed with magnolias which attain a very large size. These forests seem all to have a northern aspect. Orchideae abound in these woods, and as far as herbaceous forms go, European vegetation on the decrease.'¹¹ Although Griffith mentioned the groves he did not seem to have noticed the difference between normal forests and Sacred Groves because he did not make any special mention of its different nature. He had given an elaborated report of the flora and fauna of these groves but ignored the fact that these groves were carefully organized and managed patches of wilderness looked after by the community or the state. In 1850's two other Europeans made a survey of the flora and fauna of Khasi hills. One was Thomas Oldham and the other was Joseph Dalton Hooker. Oldham

was a Geologist due to which he perhaps noticed only the cash crops grown in the Khasi hills and their commercial prospects. But Hooker was a Professional Botanist. He was perhaps the first outsider to notice and conceptualize this organized forestry as Sacred Groves due to the divinity attached to them by the people. He wrote, 'Nurtiung contains a most remarkable collection of those sepulchral and other monuments which form so curious a feature in the scenery of these mountains, and in the habits of the native population. They are all placed in fine groves of trees, occupying a hollow; where several acres are covered with gigantic, generally circular slabs of stone, from ten to twenty-five feet broad, supported five feet above the ground upon other blocks. ...Except pines there are few large trees; but the quantity of species of perennial woody plants contributing to form the jungles is quite extraordinary; we enumerated 140, of which 60 were trees or large shrubs above twenty feet high... splendid trees of Bombax, fig and banyan, over shadowed them: the largest banyan, over shadowed them: the largest banyan had trunk five feet in diameter, clear of the buttresses and numerous small trees of Celtis grew out of it and an immense flowering tuft of Vanda Carualea (the rarest and most beautiful of Indian orchids) flourished on one of its limbs. A small plantain with austere woolly scarlet fruit, bearing ripe seeds, was planted in this Sacred Grove, where trees of most tropical genera grew mixed with the pine, birch, Myrica and Viburnum.'¹² Hooker then crossed the Mawphlang sacred forest and was impressed with the wide variety of orchids and plants that grew in the spot. While in Larnai village Hooker found very expensive orchids which he plucked to be exported to England. By the 19th century J. D. Hooker and Thompson made a survey in 1854 and collected about 3000 plants from Khasi hills and about 1000 from the plains. However organized effort to document and conserve the plants and botanical specimens began in the 20th century. Sir Archdale Earle, the Chief Commissioner of Assam established the Assam State Herbarium.

There is a belief that Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker, the European botanist visited the Mawphlang sacred forest. Impressed with the bio-diversity of its environs, he strongly urged its protection and conservation. In contrast

he himself had plundered the Sacred Groves of Mawphlang and transported exotic orchids from this group amounting to head loads of 200 men. In fact Hooker collected seven head loads of *Vanda Carulea* orchid to be sold to the Royal Gardens at Kew. From Mawphlang, Hooker 'procured many species in fruit and made a collection of upwards of 300 kinds of woods, many of very curious structure...collected upwards of 2500 species...which amounted to 200 men's loads.'¹³ A very lucrative illegal trade of wild orchids, exotic birds and medicinal plants from the Khasi hills began since then and continued up to late 20th century.

Similarly like true colonialists some other British officers like Francis Jenkins who was the agent to the Governor General in Assam personally as well as through collectors gathered a number of plants from the Brahmaputra valley and deposited them in Sibpur Herbarium which is a national herbarium now. Thus a number of botanical gardens were also given birth to. Buchanan Hamilton collected in 1808 from Gauhati a number of plant specimens. John Mack and his wife collected in 1826 a huge number of plants from Khasi hills and forwarded them to William Hooker. It was similar to Wilcox gathering plants from Mishmi Hills and Botanist Robert Bruce tracing tea from the Singpoh tribes in 1823. Similarly David Scott collected a new herb from Manipur which local people used as tea. N. Wallich, the then superintendent of the Botanical Garden identified it as wild tea. Thus was formed the Assam Tea Delegation in 1835 in which Botanist like Wallich, William Griffith and McClelland were there. Later William Robinson described the story of tea as well as flora of Assam in his writings. Later, another botanist and an Officer of the colonial Forest Service, Dr. N. I. Bor visited the place and recommended its conservation. But the Christian Missionaries did not take the concept of Sacred Groves very kindly. They scoffed the idea of divinity of a forest as it was a part of the indigenous religion which they describes as pagan and demon worship and against the tenets of Christianity. In fact there is the example of Rohn Robers, a missionary of the Welsh Presbyterian who in 1897 secured land next to a Sacred Grove and built a house there to disprove the Khasi tradition belief that Law *Kyntang* (Sacred Grove) was inhabited by spirits (*ki Kshid*

Ki Khrei) who harmed people if they entered without religious sanction. By building the house the missionaries discounted the belief in evil spirits and turned the peoples, mind from such superstitions and so called irrational fears associated with Sacred Groves.¹⁴

In the post colonial period once the Khasi-Jaintia Hills were brought under the Sixth Schedule Areas. There were renewed interest in preserving these ecological institutions. In a short time it developed into a movement of sorts within the *Hima* or the traditional state of Mawphlang which assumed a very important dimension. Pressurized by public opinion the elected heads of the 12 ruling clans a *riti synshar* or instruments of law was introduced by the *Hima Mawphlang* through the office of the Lyngdoh or priest on 30th April, 1970. Through this proclamation, the forests of Mawphlang were formally categorized according to the requirements of the time and their functions and uses stated in writing. These forests were *Ka khlaw raij ka Khlaw Adong, Khlaw Lyngdoh, Khlaw Lyngdoh Khun, Khlaw Lait-Tyrkhang, Khlaw Ri-Kynti or Ri Sumar and Khlaw Ri-Kur*. The grove stands undisturbed even today in its natural form not because of any legal sanction but because it is believed by the people that the sylvan deities would be offended were anything to be taken away, a belief reinforced by generations of oral tradition and by reference to the concept of the *Basa*, a village deity and guardian spirit of the grove. Moreover, inherent in this practice of institutionalizing the Sacred Groves is the concept of replenishing the forests. There are times when rain fail or some other natural or man-made causes trees and plants in these groves die leaving the site barren and shorn of vegetation. Such a situation is seen by the people as ‘the curse of the *Ryngkew*. Ever since the forests were destroyed, we have had nothing but trouble, sickness and poverty.’ In such situation the village communities summons the communities’ strength to plant new saplings and replenish the grove. This practice continues even today and was evident in case of Thaiang Sacred Grove in the 1990s.¹⁵

Conclusion

The concept and practice of Sacred Groves is quite common among tribes

of different parts of the globe. A number of them have lost the practice in recent time while others have retained it despite socio-cultural transformation. There is renewed interest in the study of Sacred Groves. D. D. Kosambi in 1962 discussed this concept of bio-diversity management among some of the tribes of eastern and central India. B. K. Roy Burman traced the origin of Sacred Groves of Meghalaya as a creation not for preserving bio-diversity but for the king-priest, to extend protection to traders who traveled international routes.¹⁶ Some scholars romanticized it as environmental consciousness of the tribes. Feminist scholars valorized it as a feminine domain where women practiced their exclusivity while other see it as a protected site where medicinal plants are grown and preserved for the treatment of the sick by the community priest. Among recent scholars Muhammed Abdul Kalam's work in south India and Nandita Krishna's work on the Sacred Groves of south India, Ashish Anthawal and Archana Sharma's work on Uttaranchal, Amalkko Atta's work on Ghana, G O Sigg and Omenda's work on Kenyan Sacred Forests, Sarah Laird's work on the concept of Sacred Forest and V Vaitkevicius's work on Balts are worth mentioning. On the Khasis hills there are a massive number of published materials. Sacred Groves are often seen as an identity of a community. Indeed the Sarna Movement in Jharkhand has actually developed as a identity movement of the people of Chotta Nagpur Plateau. However there is very little historical research on the Sacred Groves; these are mostly from botanical point of view.

In this concluding part which is the most important part of this presentation I want to first question the accordance of environmental consciousness on the practice of Sacred Grove. The environmental consciousness and conservationist ethos are a twentieth century development. It would be perhaps ahistorical romanticisation and valorization to impose a modern day political consciousness on a pre-modern practice. The tribal communities practiced it as part of their nature worshipping often out of fear of evil spirits living in these sites or out of reverence as they believed that it was the abode of celestial beings as did the Khasis. They grew into a site of bio-diversity on its own. It was not organized. It was a

part of the cosmology. But most importantly, Sacred Groves are sites of power and was inextricably linked with the concept of divine origin of the kingship. In colonial as well as nationalist ethnographic literature Sacred Groves have been unnecessarily demonstrated as a haloed tradition. It has been seen as environmental ethics, nature worshipping and religious practice. But it needs to be deconstructed to see the actual role, function and institution of Sacred Groves in the overall social, economic and political structure of the Khasis. Although it is seen as a clan maintained site, the development and maintenance of Sacred Groves directly related to the status, function and celestial image of the Chiefs. The Sacred Groves are a site of divinity, constructed by the Clan (Darbar) which is a divine institution and maintained by the royalty who is a celestial being. It is through this huge chain of institutions, ideas, and offices all of which needed to keep alive the belief in their divine origin theory to perpetuate their hegemony over the subjects that Sacred Grove has to be understood and contextualized. To understand this further one has to look at the State apparatus of the Khasis.

The Khasis had a rudimentary state formation called *Hima* when the British came into contact with them. Chiefs with the attributes of royalty (Kings) headed the state. The Khasi-Synteng (Jaintia) state was remarkable for its hierarchy of village officials to govern the tiny hill polity and for its series of assemblies of people from the village at the bottom to the state level at the apex. A Khasi state was a federation of villages under a Chief styled *Syiem* or Raja or *Lyngdoh*. Some time the Priest was the *Lyngdoh* and vice versa combining in him the function of political and temporal heads. Later a separate clan was recognized as ruling clan and it was from such clans the Syiems were chosen customarily. The *Syiemships* were recognized as the highest class of states. In fact some of them were regarded as of divine origin. In some of the states there were even two *Syiem* clans called *Dhola Raja (Syiemlieh)* or White Syiems and *Kala Raja or Syiemiiiong* from whom the Chiefs were nominated by a Council of heads of the Clans. The customary line of succession of *Syiem* or Raja was uniform in all cases except *Khyrim* state where a *Syiem* priestess nominated the heir. In other states a *Syiem* was succeeded by his brother, and cousins often ranked

with brothers or were preferred to grand nephews. A fact which was of universal application was that heirship lay through the female side in keeping with the matrilinealism among the tribe. Although the *Syiemship* was hereditary in some clans under certain restrictions, the office itself was elective. But the electors of the *Syiem* were not the entire people of the state (except in Langrin). They were elected by small committee of chiefs and elders who constituted for the purpose the traditional electoral Durbars of the state. The oligarchy of the chiefs who nominated the *Syiems* derived their authority from the fact that they were the earliest citizen settlers of the states and hence inherited a superior privilege over others. In some states the Durbars were also regarded as institutions of Divine origin.

The *Syiems* governed their states with the assistance of their Durbars which were distinct from electoral Durbars. They were composed of officials called *Myntries* and *Lyngskors* i.e. viceroys. Besides, there were the village headman and elders who had rights to be heard by the chiefs. The *Durbar syiem* or executive council of the states met in frequent sessions to conduct the business of the state. According to custom the *Syiems* could not perform any act of importance without first consulting and obtaining the approval of the *Durbars*. One of the chief functions of the *Syiems* was to act as judges with their **Durbars** serving as jury. Among the other important duties of the *syiems* were establishment of markets in the states, leading the militia in wars and officiating as priests in public festivals and ceremonies. The revenues of the *syiems* were mainly derived from the tolls in the markets and fines realized from the criminals convicted by the Durbars, a share of which however went to his *myntries*. The people did not pay any direct tax to them except a free offering called *pynshuk*. The *syiems* were allowed of course a portion of the public land (*ri raid*) for their maintenance. A Khasi *syiem* was generally impecunious ruler. It is difficult to classify a Khasi *Hima* or state as a pure democracy, oligarchy or even a republic. It contained the elements of all to a certain degree. It has been aptly described as a mixed government.¹⁷ Moreover the myriad states were involved in fierce war hostility in which the *Syiem* had to provide leadership. All these were necessary to perpetuate the belief in the Divine theory of Khasi

kingship.

The divinity of Kingship is a concept that actually expresses the status, power and functions of the king of a particular time and area. It also reflects the relations between the king (representing the State) and the subject community. Both these aspects are components of the ideology of kingship and are supplementary of each other. A problem with the either could weaken the other. It is this relationship which in some social formations, helps perpetuate the rule of individual kings and his lineage. The lineage or family's rule was legitimized by such ideology which in course of time became a combination of tradition and belief. The monarch in these ideologies was given a divine status. His functions were seen in an inverted form. The kings were viewed as celestial, of divine origin and his functions as sacred-approved and instructed by the Divinity. They were believed to be sent by God and possess superhuman power. In other words there developed a fetishism of the monarch. The king was not only seen as a guarantor of the welfare and protector of the subject community, he was also seen as the guarantor of the fertility and higher returns of land, higher surplus appropriation and so on. However, the Khasi kings performed great feats in the construction of public works. Most of the existing roads of Assam were constructed by the Khasi kings. Public works were undertaken on an extensive scale. Excavation of gigantic tanks, embankments, roads, bridges and canals were some principal works provided for the benefit of the people. The development of a Sacred Grove is part of this public work. For such public works a huge manpower was necessary. The village communities were pooled and mobilized to do the work. The concept of kingship was actually a reflection of the structural relationship of the vis-à-vis the village communities. The Divine attributes of king postulated were based on the actual function that, say the kings performed what appeared ideologically the heavenly attributed of the monarch were merely the effects of his function in the appropriation, distribution of utilization of surplus labour e.g. organization or public works. Provision of irrigation network, redistribution of land, maintenance of Sacred Grove and so on.¹⁸ But such concept of kingship as visualized in the ideology was an inextricable part of the system

prevalent without which the monarch could be threatened and the system collapsed. It also helped a lineage to continue because the existence of the ideology rendered legitimacy to the regime. The actual apparatus of the state whether administration was centralized or decentralized might be subdivided into departments controlled by a whole series of functionaries, carrying out ceremonial, administrative, religious, intellectual and other functions but at the apex of the apparatus was always the reigning monarch and his family or lineage. Since ideology played such an important role it had to be religionised. In other words it had to have the sanction of the religion of the community and the vanguards of the religion the priestly classes. Hence the monarch was constantly guided by the deities and priests and his tasks had to be always expressed through religious symbols and rituals. As a result of these practice, the 'Kingship' itself was totally fetishised. King's attributes, ancestry and status as a higher-being become a belief and proverbial in course of time. Thus the actual relationship between the monarch and the village communities appear in an inverted form and the king ideologically perceived as the guarantor of the welfare of the people could only be as much, given the exploitative relations existing between the state represented by the king and the village communities. Similarly, the priestly class which legitimized the king enthronement and his practices, thus fostering the growth the ideology of kingship.

Thus perpetuated by the monarchy and supported by the spiritual ideology came to have hegemonic effect on the village communities. The king's divine attributed etc. which were the dictates of the ideology coined, was accepted by the people as long as the king performed his duties and functions vis-à-vis the village communities effectively as was expected of him. But when he failed in his political and economic functions the foundation of the monarch also was rendered fragile because it shook and weakened the beliefs of the community regarding the Kingship. Like all its function, Sacred Groves were also a site which determined the power, hegemony and period of Khasi royalty (Chiefs).

Notes and References

1. Rajdeva Narayan and Janardon Kumar (ed), *Ecology and Religion:*

- Ecological Concept in Hinduism, Buddhism Jainism, Islam, Christianity and Sikhism*, Deep and Deep Publication, Delhi, 2003.
2. Rajdeva Narayan and Janardon Kumar (ed), *Ecology and Religion: Ecological Concept in Hinduism, Buddhism Jainism, Islam, Christianity and Sikhism*, Deep and Deep Publication, Delhi, 2003.
 3. H. O. Mawrie's articulation reproduced in Rekha M Shangpliang, *Forests in the Life of the Khasis*, Concept, New Delhi, 2010, p. 28.
 4. Khasi poet Soso Tham's poem translated by Barnes L Mawrie, *The Khasis and their Natural Environment*, Vendram Institute, Shillong, 2009, p. 153
 5. Reported in *The Telegraph*, Region Section, Guwahati, 7th February 2010.
 6. Rekha M Shangpliang, *Forests in the Life of the Khasis*, Concept, New Delhi, 2010, p. 28.
 7. *Ibid.*
 8. Desmond Kharmawphlang, A Walk through the Sacred Forests of Meghalaya, National Knowledge Commission, *Glimpses from the North East*, Delhi, 2009, pp. 9-15.
 9. *Ibid.*
 10. *Ibid.*
 11. William Griffith, *Travels in Assam, Burma, Bhutan, Afghanistan and the Neighbouring Countries*, John M'clelland, London, 1847, reprinted by Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1982, p. 8.
 12. J. D. Hooker, *Himalayan Journals: Notes of a Naturalist in Bengal, Sikkim, and Nepal Himalayas, the Khasia mountains etc.* John Murry 1854, Reprint, Today and Tomorrow's Printers and publishers, Delhi, 1980, pp. 312-13.
 13. J. D. Hooker, *Himalayan Journals: Notes of a Naturalist in Bengal, Sikkim, and Nepal Himalayas, the Khasia mountains etc.* John Murry 1854, Reprint, Today and Tomorrow's Printers and publishers, Delhi, 1980, pp. 315-16.
 14. Sharmila Das Talukdar, *Khasi Cultural Resistance to Colonialism*, Spectrum, Guwahati, Delhi, 2004, p. 63.
 15. Desmond Kharmawphlang, A Walk through the Sacred Forests of Meghalaya, National Knowledge Commission, *Glimpses from the North East*, Delhi, 2009, pp. 9-15.
 16. Cited in Rekha M Shanpliang, *opcit.*
 17. P N Dutta, *Impact of the West on the khasis and Jaintias, : A Survey of Political Economic and Social Change*, Cosmo, New Delhi, 1982, pp. 15-22.
 18. John G. Taylor, *From Modernisation to Modes of Production : A Critique of the Sociologies of Development and Underdevelopment*, London, 1979, pp. 175-181.