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Khasi: a minority language of North –East India,  
From an unwritten to a written language.

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The purpose of this paper is to take out one of these marginal fields, i. e. Khasi, and to give a short account of the historical development of the Khasi language and its literature as well as the efforts made by its speakers to preserve and promote their language.

Khasi and Garo are the dominant languages of the Indian State of Meghalaya, a hill state comprising the former Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills District of Assam. The State of Meghalaya was officially inaugurated by the late Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on the 21<sup>st</sup> January 1972. While Garo is a member of the Sino-Tibetan language family of which there are quite a lot of languages spoken in South Asia, Khasi spoken by ca. 950000 persons according to the Ethnologue (<http://www.ethnologue.com/web.asp>), together with the languages of the Nicobar Islands, belongs to the Mon-Khmer language family which is a subgroup of Austro-Asiatic. Another subgroup of Austro-Asiatic are the Munda languages which are solely spoken within India.

The Khasi phonological system is characterized by its opposition of plain versus aspirated versus voiced obstruents, a limited possibility of consonant-clustering of maximal two phonemes syllable-initially, the limitation of phonemes at the end of a syllable consisting of unreleased obstruents /k/, /\_/ (id/it) /t/ and some other phonemes as can be seen below in the chart, a contrast of short and long vowels and no tones. Free morphemes are mostly one-syllabic or bisyllabic with the first syllable consisting of vocalic nasals or sonants (/\_m/ (ym), /\_n/ (yn), /\_ñ/ (yn), /\_ / (yng), /\_r/ (yr), /\_l/ (yl) .

**The phonemic chart of “ka tien Sohra” (language of Cherrapunji)  
(simplified):**

**consonants:**

<b>voiceless unaspirated:</b>	p	t	k	– (y/h)
<b>voiceless aspirated :</b>	ph	th	kh	
<b>voiced:</b>	b	d	d_ (j)	
<b>spirant voiceless:</b>	{f} (ph /f)	s	– (sh) [engl.:ship]	h
<b>sonants trill &amp; lateral:</b>	r	l		
<b>nasals:</b>	m	n	ñ (ñ /in)	– (ng)
<b>semivowels:</b>	w	j (i / i /)	[as y in engl. year]	

**vowels:**

	a <>	a: (a)	
– (e) <>	e: (ie)		– (o) <> o: (u)
u (u)			i (i)

**Consonants syllable final:**

p	t	– (id/it)	k	– (h)
m	n	ñ (-in/ ñ	– (ng)	
w		j (i)		

If the written form of a phoneme is different it is added in brackets ( ).

Morphology is characterized by the exclusive use of prefixes and free morphs for grammatical processes. Infixes as in other Mon-Khmer languages are not used anymore and remain only as lexemes, as e.g “shong” “to live, to sit” and “shnong” “village”. A peculiar feature that is shared with other non-related languages of the area, as Mikir or Garo, is the loss of an obviously former prefix in the formation of compounds, as “u sew beh mrad” “a hound” from “u” (article) + “ksew” “dog” + “beh” “to chase” + “mrad” “animal” or “rangbah” “an adult male” from “shynrang” “man, male” + “bah” “be grown, be big”.

Khasi itself is divided into numerous so-called dialects, as there are Pnar or Synteng, Lynggam, Amwi, Bhoi etc. Whether these are really only dialects is doubtful, probably some of them are proper languages of Mon-Khmer, as current researches suggest.

Khasi is a recognised language of the 6<sup>th</sup> schedule.

Knowledge about the Khasi in pre-British times is scattered among different Indo-Aryan sources, especially in the Buranjis of the Ahom kings. One of the most impressive features of the Khasi for their neighbours was that they were a “female kingdom” , a hint for the matrilineal descent system of the Khasis that still exists.

When the British came in closer contact with the hill tribes who came down to the markets in the plains of what is now Bangladesh their missionary interest awoke. The first one who got interested to do missionary works among those tribes was William Carey of the Serampore Mission. In 1813 W. Carey sent one of his first converts, Krishna Chandra Pal, to the north of Bengal, to a market and trading place called Pandua (Bhologanj) under the jurisdiction of the Hima Sohra (Kingdom of Cherrapunji). Krishna Chandra Pal was able to convert some people among them some Khasis. In 1824 William Carey with the

help of a native of Shilot began a translation of the New Testament into the “Khashee” language. But the translation did not come out well due to the fact that the translators had no good knowledge of the language, that they used the Shella dialect of the plains and that they used the Bengali alphabet which was not suitable to represent certain sounds, as e. g. the glottal stop. Another reason could also have been that the hill tribes distrusted the ways of their neighbours in the plains and everything that was connected with them. And lastly there weren't suitable places either where schools and churches could be established. Nevertheless, the New Testament was printed in Bengali letters in 1831. This book and a few others, among them a catechism translated by Alexander Lish, and obviously a few primers were the only ones printed in Bengali letters. But these few works had the effect that even today there is a Khasi saying about the beginning of Khasi literature which is: “U ko bad u kho u kiew nyngkong ha Shella” (the ko and the kho – Bengali pronunciation of the letter ka \_ and kha \_ - came first to Shella.)

After the surrender of Tirot Singh, their last opponent in the hills, on 09<sup>th</sup> of January 1833 the British had practically subjugated all the Khasi states. At around the same time the Baptist missionaries discontinued their work and the the Welsh Calvinistic Mission took over. The first one to come to the hills was the Rev. Thomas Jones who established a school at Cherrapunji (Sohra), the place the British had chosen as their headquarters. To put the Khasi language into a written form Rev. Jones choose the Latin alphabet, a decision that was not accepted unanimously, as can be seen from the foreword of Rev. William Pryse's “An introduction to the Khassia Language” published 1855. There he pleaded for the introduction of the alphabet of the dominant language which was Bengali. But one has to remark that Pryse worked among Khasis living in Shella, i.e. among Bengalis and that quite a lot of those Khasis could read and write Bengali.

Rev. Jones' situation was different. He worked among Khasi who mostly hadn't seen a Dkhar (Indian) and heard only of those dkhar from their fellowmen who went trading down in the plains.

Rev. Jones started experimenting with the Welsh alphabet using the Welsh letter “c” (always pronounced as [k]) for the Khasi phonemes /k/ and /kh/, so that the Khasi words “ka kitap” (the book) appeared as “ca citap” Pretty soon he found out that the letter “c” was not suitable and he used “k” instead but left this “k” at the place of “c” so that the Khasi alphabetical order is “a, b, k, d...”. The introduction of the letter “k” allowed him to differentiate the relevant phonemes /k/ and /kh/. Another unique feature of the Khasi alphabet, obviously also of Welsh origin, was the introduction of the digraph /ng/ [ŋ] as a separate letter in the alphabet following the letter “g” which was not used at all separately. To introduce a writing system for an unwritten language is always an uncertain matter regarding its acceptance by the people aimed at but regarding Khasi it worked out well. Another problem was the selection of the right “dialect”. Rev. Jones choose the language of Sohra (Cherrapunji) which proved to be a good

choice later on. For the Sohra variety – nowadays called Standard Khasi - was not only the most prestigious dialect due to the fact that Sohra was a trading center and that from there the trade was done with the plains and because of this it also was the language widely understood in the Khasi Hills, but it also was phonetically the easiest form compared to dialects like Pnar, Nongstoin, etc. Of course, the spelling system was not perfect and soon dissenting voices appeared among the Khasis who became literate very quickly. One of them was U Jeebon Roy who established a printing Press, the “Ri Khasi Press” at Mawkhar, Shillong, in 1895. Thanks to this criticism two more letters were introduced, “ñ” and “ĩ”, the first one for the palatal nasal [ɲ] and the second one for the phoneme /j/ [j] (as in year). The letter “y” could not be used because it had two different functions:

- a) to represent the schwa [ə] in the syllabic letters written “yn” [ɲ], “ym” [ɲm], “yng” [ɲŋ], “yr” [ɲr], “yl” [ɲl] where the y is pronounced like the “a” [a] as in English “above”, and
- b) to represent the glottal stop following a consonant and preceding a vowel as in “syang” [s\_a\_] “to roast, to toast”.

Another problem not yet solved satisfactorily till today is the representation of short and long vowels. There is a tendency to write the sign of the voiced consonants after a long vowel, e.g. “ka ngab” [ka \_\_a:p] “the cheek” and “ka ngap” [ka \_\_ap] “the bee” but in words ending in no obstruent a differentiation is not possible. In course of time, however, a certain tradition in writing particular words has been established.

After the introduction of the Latin alphabet and its acceptance by the people the knowledge of written Khasi in Roman characters grew steadily. Because of the growing numbers of books Khasi became the first tribal language in the North-East to be recognized for High School in 1900 and was prescribed as a Second Language for the Entrance Examination of Calcutta University. In 1961 it was recognized as a Major Language by the University of Guwahati, the successor of Calcutta University in Assam.

In the last decade of the nineteenth century the first Khasi authors came out, as e.g. U Jeebon Roy who was a leading sponsor of the “Seng Khasi”, a social organisation still in existence, and who in 1903 published a monthly “U Nongphira” (The Watchman) that contained important news and anti-Christian ideologies and laid special stress on genuine Khasi religion, as U Rabon Singh who published a book on traditional Khasi singing “Ka kitap jingphawar” or “Ka niam khein Khasi”, a book on traditional Khasi religion, as U Nissor Singh who is the author of a Khasi dictionary and works on the Khasi language, as U Radhon Singh Berry and many others. Indian classics, like the Ramayana, Buddha Deb Charitra, Hitopadesha etc. were translated into Khasi mostly in prose. The bulk of literary output, of course, was at that time mostly of Christian religious content. But pretty soon the Khasis turned their attention to other fields. The Khasi journal “U Khasi Mynta” (The Khasi of Today) started by

U Hormu Rai Diengdoh in 1895 published articles on all kinds of subjects that could be of interest to the native reader.

Books on the indigenous culture and religion of the Khasis appeared and folk-tales and traditional songs and stories were collected and published. Translation of mostly English classics as Shakespeare appeared. In the years 1930-1940 another generation of Khasi writers appeared, as U Soso Tham who published his long poem “Ki sngi barim u Hynñiew Trep” (The old days of the Khasis), as U Dr. Homiwell Lyngdoh, a physician, who put down in his book “Ka niam khasi” (Khasi religion) what he had heard of the old non-Christian religious beliefs and traditions handed down by his forefathers, and Father Elias Sohlia, a catholic Khasi priest who wrote down numerous folk-stories.

After independence Khasi literature continued to grow and besides lyrics modern fiction came out of which the first novel was “Ka kam kalbut” by W. Tiewsoh. But also books in other fields as e. g. language learning, grammars, anthropology, technical instructions, cooking books etc. were printed in Khasi.

When Meghalaya became a state the languages of the dominant tribes (Khasi and Garo) received even a greater importance. Although Meghalaya choose English as its common administrative language, the Khasi language in the Khasi speaking areas and the Garo language in the Garo speaking areas were used extensively. In education Khasi is a medium of instruction up till class IV and afterwards a compulsory subject in Khasi schools. Khasi is permitted as language at the lower courts and, of course, in the Khasi District Council. When the Northeastern Hill University was founded a department of Khasi was established and researchers are allowed to write their M. Phil. in Khasi.

Nowadays there are quite a lot of newspapers, daylies as “U Mawphor” (The Landmark) ([www.mawphor.com](http://www.mawphor.com)) or weeklies as “Dongmusa” (The Torch) published in Khasi. It is used in radio programmes of All India Radio and in television there are meanwhile two channels, Ri Khasi Channel and PCN (Peitngor Cable News) sending in Khasi. For the cultural promotion of the language a few very active societies exist, as the “Seng Khasi” (The Khasi Foundation) or the “Hynñiew Trep Cultural Welfare Organisation” which every year organizes its Khasi Competition Festival. (Hynñiew Trep means the mythical “Seven Huts” or seven families who left heaven to stay on earth and is a synonym for Khasi.)

All these activities are done in Standard Khasi. Other Khasi dialects or languages are not used, except the Pnar or Jaintia “dialect” which has its own radio programme (one hour a day) and in which occasionally books are published (as e. g. Ka Diahmai by Phidalia Toi.)

Although Khasi has always been the language of the home and of daily intercourse there seemed to be a tendency to neglect it in education and nearly every community willing to establish a primary school was in favour of an English Medium School, but meanwhile there is obviously a feeling that the native language is as important as the common state language and greater emphasis is laid on education in it. English is, of course, necessary, but in its

right place. Few perhaps not much noticed changes have also taken place in public, so one has started to change non Khasi names into Khasi names (as Garikhana to Lumdiengjri) and at school more stress is put on a correct spelling. Regarding the introduction of new and modern concepts into the language newspaper have adopted the general Indian system by using the imported word in its original spelling together with a spelling in the borrowing language, as e. g. “election” and “ilekshon”.

But two important goals have not yet been achieved. In spite of intensive efforts by the “Khasi Authors Society” Khasi has not been incorporated in the language list of the Sahitya Akademi to be recognised as a literary language. But that is obviously not the fault of the Khasi Authors and their supporters but the uninterested attitude of the State Government towards its two main languages.

And secondly book publishing and book distribution are not organized at all so that it is very difficult to acquire and catalogue material printed in Khasi, a fact which the University Library of Tuebingen tries to remedy a little.

*That's only a short survey of the Khasi language. For those who are interested there is the collection of Khasi books and books on the Khasis, their culture and language and of India related material at the University Library of Tuebingen, Germany (<http://www.ub.uni-tuebingen.de/>), a collection that has been built up during the years with the generous assistance of the Germa Research foundation or DFG.*

Khublei shibun.

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<http://www.khasilit.org/>

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[On Khasi & Garo festivals]