



# Khasi Indigenous Knowledge System

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## **Abstract:**

This essay entitled “Khasi Indigenous Knowledge System” is a brief reflection on the Khasi Indigenous Knowledge as a knowledge system. The Khasis are among the tribal groups inhabiting in the state of Meghalaya, Northeast region, India. From ancient times they have their own culture and lived within the framework of their cultural milieu, practices and worldview. The Khasi Indigenous Knowledge represent a unique knowledge system, practices and beliefs developed by the khasi communities over generations, encompassing diverse aspects of life, including the knowledge on agriculture, medicine, governance, cultural traditions and traditional practices, beliefs and values that have often passed down orally, providing a unique perspective on the natural world, human relationships and the cosmos.

**Key words:** Khasi Indigenous Knowledge, traditional practices, cultural sustainability, ecological resilience.

**Introduction:** The Khasi people possess a rich and diverse knowledge system that has been passed down through generations. Hence, this paper studies the Khasi Indigenous Knowledge system encompasses traditional practices, beliefs and values that are intricately linked to their natural environment, cultural heritage and community identity. For centuries, the khasi people have lived in harmony with the nature, developing a profound understanding of the local ecosystem, its rhythms and its limitations. The Indigenous knowledge is rooted in a deep respect for the land, forests and water sources which are considered sacred and integral to their existence. These various aspects of the indigenous Khasi knowledge system, its meaning, characteristics and various methods are employed, studied and investigated briefly.

## Meaning of the term ‘Indigenous Knowledge System’

Literally speaking, „Traditional knowledge“ refers to the knowledge developed within indigenous societies. Develop from experience gained over the centuries and adapted to the local culture and environment. It is transmitted orally from generation to generation. On the other, the term „Indigenous People“ indicates a pan-tribal identity. Representations of the Indigenous people regarding the essential elements of Traditional knowledge are quite consistent. “Long before the development of modern science, indigenous people have developed their ways of knowing how to survive and also of ideas about meanings, purposes and values. It has been customary to refer to this kind of knowledge as “Indigenous Knowledge” or “Traditional Knowledge” (Magga 2005, p.2.) For Marie Batiste (2005), according to him it is vital to define that knowledge of the indigenous people as contextual knowledge. By way of a definition, the word „indigenous“ refers to the root or something natural. Indigenous knowledge systems refer to the combination of knowledge systems encompassing technology, social, economic and philosophical learning, or educational, legal and governance systems. (Odora Hoppers and Makhale-Mahlangu 1998). Margaret Bruchac in *Indigenous knowledge and Traditional knowledge* states traditional indigenous knowledge can be defined as a network of knowledge, beliefs and traditions intended to preserve, communicate and contextualize indigenous relationships with culture and landscape overtime.

## The Basic motive developed for the growth of Khasi Indigenous Knowledge System.

1. **Knowledge to understand relation between one group with another** - that is, knowledge of knowing of one’s own paternal and maternal relationship *Tipkur – Tipkha* and the knowledge to know human beings and God *Tip-Briew and Tip-Blei*. (RT Rymbai, “Some aspects of the religion of the Khasi-Pnar.” P.16). Hence the reason developed in the Khasi traditional knowledge system is about to know and the tie between man and man and between God and man. This knowledge of knowing is derived from the cardinal principles of the Khasi religion.
2. **Knowledge of denoting things, description of truth or facts-** Knowledge of knowing makes an individual to identify not only an object or thing but to reason out what is wrong and what is not. H. O. Mawrie in his book *The Essence of the Khasi Religion* (p. 23) states that God gives the Khasis the reasoning power so that they could perceive what is right and what is wrong.
3. **Long tradition of environmental conservation** - This is expressed in the concept of sacred groves. These sacred grooves are till today seen in every nook and corner of the Khasi land exist till date which was preserved by the ancestors from time immemorial. (H Rymbai, *Major Challenges to Religion and Culture of the Khasis*, Unpublished P HD Dissertation, p. 47)
4. **Ability to recognize several medicinal plants:** The Khasis has a rich knowledge on the ability to recognize medicinal plants whose potential is yet to be recognized and unleashed. Rekha Shangpliang in her book *Forest in the Life of the Khasis* (p. 59) writes, „from olden days the medicinal plant knowledge system of the traditional medicine has evolved its practice and the development of the concept these days

serves the society through its massive resources in maintaining different health problems”.

However the existence of the knowledge system mentioned above is doubtful because of the knowledge coming from outside through different means particularly modern education. It is also noticed the change in attitudes of many social and natural scientists towards indigenous people and their knowledge. There is also a sign of danger of the disappearance of indigenous knowledge as a result of the death of its custodians, and the erosion of indigenous languages and cultures which caused through various factors.

### **Concept and Characteristics of the Khasi Indigenous knowledge**

The concept of Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS) refers to the collective knowledge, practices, beliefs that have been developed and preserved by Indigenous peoples over generations. These systems encompass a wide range of domains, including traditional ecological knowledge, spirituality, social organization, technology of subsistence e. tools and techniques for agriculture, medicinal practices, midwifery, ethno-botany, celestial navigation, craft skills, ethno-astronomy, climate and more. IKS is deeply rooted in the cultural, historical, and environmental contexts of Indigenous communities.

### **Important features of the Khasi knowledge system**

The characteristics of the Khasi IKS are:

- a. Adaptive:** It is based on historical experiences but adapts to social, economic, environmental, spiritual and political changes. It is also the key to survival.
- b. Cumulative:** It is a body of knowledge and skills developed from centuries of living in close proximity to nature. Experience that is obtained in specific location is the basis of local science; therefore it is situated knowledge, specific to a location.
- c. Dynamic:** It is not rooted in a particular point in history but has developed, adapted, and grown over millennia; it is not static. Indigenous cultures have been quick to adapt to new technologies, try to improve to their circumstances, modifying and adapting the colonial structures to their own purpose while maintaining their relationship to the land.
- d. Holistic:** All aspects of life are interconnected and are not considered in isolation but as a part of the whole. The world is believed to be an integral whole. Khasi Indigenous knowledge incorporates all aspects of life - spirituality, history, cultural practices, social interactions, language and healing similar to other indigenous knowledge systems. Indigenous Knowledge is constructed as stories, traditions, skills, myths, all together presenting a holistic picture of interdependence of humans and their environment. Traditional Knowledge is dynamic, holistic, intergenerational, linked to experience on traditional lands and the integrity of knowledge depends on maintaining the “integrity of land itself” (Battiste 2005, p.8.).
- e. Contextual:** Khasi knowledge system is contextual embedded. Indigenous knowledge is passed on through observation and „doing“. Knowledge is embedded in the natural environment and includes the

knowledge and skills needed for survival

**f. Competency:** Indigenous Knowledge considers learning as “competency” (Barnhardt, R., Kawagley, A.O.1999, p.2) as the immediate ability to apply knowledge. Khasi traditional knowledge also taught to immediately perceive any knowledge coming from inside and outside and to apply it if necessary.

**g. Living interdependence:** Indigenous people know that humans are inseparable from the land, the earth. For indigenous peoples Traditional Knowledge sees “all by my relations” including all species and the earth, which maintains sustainable, respectful and sacred connections to the land

The Khasi Native knowledge network further elaborates from their own unique perspective. H.O. Mawrie in his book *The Khasi Milieu Says: A good man bases his life in his world on reason (ka nia) and God's commandment (Ka hukum).*” Since a man has come into this world by *reason*, he must also live by *reason*. So man's activities, sayings, phrases, moral behavior, intellectual growth lies in his power to reason. There is no other strength in this world comparable to the strength of reason. (Mawrie, H., 2010, p, 50). To live by the commandment and by reason is also to understand the real meaning of dignity. A man must truly obey the commandment by living righteously, behaving righteously, working and earning for righteousness and also respecting his fellowmen and devoting himself entirely to God. (Mawrie, H., 2010, p, 50).when he can truly obey the commandment he will stand unblemished before the judgment of God and before reason. Reason and commandment to Khasi, are to obverse and to reverse of the same coin of life. To live by the commandment is to live according to the knowledge enshrined in the tradition. Hence, according to the Khasi knowledge system reason and tradition are integral to each other

When a man lives a life of reason his *Ka rngiew* is prominent and his personality shines forth. If one follows *Ka hok (righteousness)* then one would possess a strong *rngiew*. *Ka rngiew* can also inspire a person to behave morally. Therefore, if one wants to possess a strong *rngiew* one has to lead a virtuous life or moral life. Thus the three cardinal moral principles of the khasis are:

1. *Tip Kur Tip Kha* (know your maternal and know your paternal relation), in other words, to know one's own maternal (*kur*) and paternal relatives (*kha*)
2. *Tip Briew Tip Blei* (Know man and know God or to know God is to know man. No man is expected to know God without knowing how to relate himself/herself to man.)
3. *Kamaiia ka hok* (to earn a just living as well as to lead a righteous life)

Further, A Khasi says:“Reason is at its Zenith” (*Ka iengrasong ka daw*). (Mawrie, H., 2010, p, 50). Originally phrases such as *ka dawjop* (a cause to succeed)or *ka daw rem* (cause to loose or fail) were commonly used and understood in relation to the ideas of relationship between reason and commandment. When a man lives by the commandment, his reason is destined to be successful, but when he fails to live by the commandment, his reason is destined to be distorted. According to the Khasi, even religion is the relationship between man and God and this relationship is governed by two factors, namely, *ka nia* and *ka*



*jutang* (reason and covenant). The principal reason for man is that he is a creature of God. Man belongs to God during his lifetime as well as after he has left this world. His permanent habitation is with God. The covenant on the one hand indicates that as long as man is alive in this world he should abide by and execute the command (*hukum*) of God by earning righteousness and on God's part the covenant is that God shall take care of man. Here, we may say that the Khasis received their knowledge through *reason (ka nia)* and *commandment (ka hukum)* of which, have been indirectly acquire through parables, storytelling and legend (*ki puriskam* and *khanatang*), myths, poems, songs and dances.

**Various approaches to knowledge organization:** The close attachment of Indigenous Knowledge to nature has enabled local cultures to survive for generations amidst pressures of change .The initiatives of the native people to respond to the present conditions of the environment provide the dynamic characteristics of the local culture. IKS depends on the natural conditions of the environment. Indigenous knowledge observes a system that involves the theory and practice of learning. Indigenous knowledge begins with concept that develops into ideas, philosophies and principles that are evaluated and verified scientifically. The final form of Indigenous Knowledge is a reality based on the actual experiences of the people .The Indigenous Knowledge Learning System involves the brain and the senses(perception).Learning begins with a concept that develops into an idea and philosophy based on affirmative and negative arguments. When the philosophy of particular ideas has been achieved, the result becomes a principle or theory. The theory, however, remains a theory until it is verified by the human senses. The IKS particularly of the Khasis strictly follows reason. An Indigenous idea can never go ahead of a concept because without a concept, an idea will never exist. Moreover, the Indigenous philosophy is developed through the argumentation of contrasting idea (comparison).A philosophy can never exist as a single thought. There is a relationship between the *knower* and the *known, self* (not human self) and the *world*. The resolution of contrasting ideas finally become a principle or theory that serve as basis of field investigation or verification of a particular knowledge. Thus, the framework and structure of Indigenous knowledge includes concept, ideas, philosophies and principles.{HodaYacoub – IK Report(1) }.The verification of IKS are through the sense of hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, tasting, feeling and moving and when philosophically verified i.e. through classical modern (Nyaya) it includes, perception, inference, testimony and comparison . On the other, in Khasi Traditional Knowledge system, *reason (ka nia)* and *commandment (ka hukum or religion)* evidently serve as the main tools of Indigenous knowledge. Both sensual and religious knowledge are translated into practical realities.

**Sources of knowledge:-**As discussed above the main sources of Khasi knowledge system are reason and religion (*ka nia bad ka hukum*). Reason produced perceptual knowledge/ knowledge perceived through perception. Reasoning power is also used while observing that which is considered as the source of knowledge. Religion as authority is also considered as the primary source of knowledge by the Khasis.

Religion although considered as primary source of knowledge and the knowledge it provides is considered authoritative. Therefore, religious knowledge and the knowledge received from reasoning power can be considered as the sources of the Khasi IKS/ as the origin and foundation of Khasi Knowledge as found in any other communities of the world. Different questions at the different levels with regard to the problem and validity of perception in this study from the Khasi Traditional perspective shall be answered.

However, The Khasi IKS in a general sense embraces the content of knowledge itself as well as traditional expressions including distinctive signs and symbols associated with it. In a narrow sense refers to knowledge as such, in particular the knowledge resulting from intellectual activity in a traditional context, and includes know-how, practices, skill and innovations. Symbols and signs help to provide clues to understanding experiences by conveying recognizable meanings that are shared by the people. Khasi Indigenous Knowledge can be systematically categorized as

(i) Khasi Ecological Knowledge, (ii) Khasi Traditional Technical Knowledge and (iii) Khasi Traditional Knowledge on religion and philosophy

The Khasi Ecological Knowledge represents knowledge associated with natural resources and environmental management. This refers to the evolving knowledge acquired by Khasi Indigenous people over thousands of years through direct contact with the environment (perception/observation). This knowledge is specific to a location and includes the relationships between plants, animals, natural phenomena, and the landscape that are used for livelihood, such as resource gathering through hunting, fishing, agriculture, livestock farming, forestry, etc. Such practices are linked to prioritization of uses along the line of sustainable harnessing, wise use, equitable sharing of benefits, management of future stocks through conservation, defining threshold limits, etc. There are practices for weather forecasting too (Kharkongor. I., 2005). Such Khasi Knowledge System considers natural landscape characteristics, weather and climate as well as all types of flora and fauna. The community takes necessary decision based on abundance/scarcity and seasonality of biotic and abiotic resources, natural disasters, and associated problems. It is a process of Indigenous Communities for observation, classification, analysis, interpretation and decision making for daily walk of life along with development of world views. Secondly, Khasi Indigenous Technical knowledge refers to knowledge associated with tools and appliances used which in fact refers to value, norm, institution and policy framework evolved with Traditional Knowledge based practices. Such practices are related to agriculture, fisheries, animal husbandry, forestry, handloom and handicraft, etc. Moreover, this knowledge also represents the knowledge and skill about design and construction like housing, water harvesting structure, roads and bridges, etc. Thirdly, Khasi Traditional Knowledge on religion and philosophy is linked to traditional cultural practices which prioritize dos and don'ts in several aspects in relation to kinship system, marriage, divorce, rituals, sacrifices and others.

Khasi Indigenous Knowledge is characteristically oral and is also plural in nature because different kinds of knowledge are being indirectly drawn from different sources, namely, through storytelling and legends,

epics, Proverbs, folktales, recitation, demonstration, sport, poetry, reasoning, songs, myths, dance, music, and others.

IKS of the Khasi was traditionally applied in harmony with the nature. A Khasi lives in nature and learns in its bosom. It teaches and guides him in his daily existence, be it in his movement from place to place or in his occupation and it is nature which determines and co-ordinates the system of his work. Thus, it is from natural surroundings that the Khasis came to know about his conception of time, seasons, danger, etc.

Khasi people since time immemorial are practicing the Indigenous means of conservation of cultural and biological diversity. So, their Traditional Knowledge Systems related to use of bio- resources is very rich. These Traditional Knowledge System can also lead to innovative mechanisms of conservation. Thus, the existence of this age old tradition of preserving forests has become a factor in the survival of degraded areas. Khasi Indigenous communities also summarize their knowledge “in the form of Folklores and Folk Institutions like „Sacred Groves“,

„Sacred Ponds“ and „Sacred Species“, this prohibit the destruction of certain resources species and their habitat. So Khasi Traditional communities protected its environment by following cultural and ecological rules. Taboos forbade the killing of some animal at certain time and human impact was restricted in designated sacred places.

Khasi proverbs representing their accumulated wisdom are basically formed with the image drawn from the nature and folk life such as birds and animals, trees and seeds, fish and crab, sky and river, etc. These provide practical wisdom, wise instruction, socio cultural rules and regulations, etc. to the younger generation of the community. In spite of the fact, that interest in Khasi Indigenous Knowledge is growing because of its potentiality to promote or sustain development activities and moreover for understanding the Knowledge System, yet, its knowledge system remains isolated and haphazard in nature and are unable to make any significant contribution to the knowledge base.

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