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Early Eco-Philosophers Among the Tribal People: Letter  
from India

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In the north east corner of India, squeezed between Bangla Desh, Burma and Bhutan, there rises a plateau of the Himalayan hills, which is a small state within the Indian nation and which is called Meghalaya. Some 40,000 square kilometers, on an elevation of between 4000 to 6000 feet. A lovely part of the world, as the hills of Meghalaya are covered with the singing pines. Why these pines have survived so well is a story in itself, to which we shall return.

Meghalaya is otherwise called the Khasi Hills, as those hills are inhabited by the Khasi people. The Khasi are tribal people who speak Khasi language and hold to the Khasi way of life and the Khasi system of beliefs. Once they were rather rough people who would go to the lowlands to raid and rob other people - and they were feared for that as blood was often shed. But that was in the past. The Khasi are of Mongolian stock and their speech has non-Khmer affinities and is connected with Cambodian. For centuries, they lived intact, preserving their system of beliefs.

The Khasi do not have temples as we know them. For them the whole of nature is a temple; and they worship trees, groves, forests and rivers as deities, or as the places in which God resides. Because of their strong beliefs in the sanctity of nature, the highest peaks of the Khasi land have been saved from the axe. Already in 1908, in the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* (xv, R55) it has been admitted that the Khasi hills are “clothed with clumps of oak, chestnut, magnolia, beech and other trees, which superstition has preserved from the axe of the wood cutter” (Emphasis added).

What The *Imperial Gazetteer* calls “superstition” we would now call Ecological Wisdom. For, indeed, the Khasi, as well as neighbouring Naga Land tribes, represent societies in which Eco-Philosophy was practised on a daily basis. We are very fortunate to find early Eco-Philosophers still surviving among the tribal people of North-east India. We need to honour them and learn from them and help them in whatever way we can, for they represent an important heritage of human kind.

In my article “Forests as Sanctuaries” (published in the *Trumpeter*, Spring 1989) I described how the original templum, the sacred open enclosure becomes the temple, a closed building. I also described the importance of sacred groves and forests for the people of ancient Greece and Rome, and how these sacred natural places were gradually eliminated with the advent of Christianity and

secularism. I also mentioned the sacred forests of India, only two of which have survived to our times. Much to my delight I found the two of them in Meghalaya among the Khasi hills. After having studied the world view of Khasi, I know why they survived. It is because the beliefs of the people have made their forests sacrosanct. Because they have been sanctified, anybody who cuts any tree from these forests is severely punished.

On a sparkling April morning in 1989, I went to the sacred forest of “Law - Lyngdoh” situated at the edge of the village of Naw Phlang, 25 km from Shillong - the capital of Meghalaya. The forest is at an altitude of about 5000 feet. It occupies a distinctive hill, clearly demarcated by a mountain brook on one side, and a ravine on the other. It is about 2200 feet by 1200 feet. Not a huge piece of land. But what is exciting is that it has survived in its shape for centuries and is still regarded as the sacred place in which god dwells. When entering the forest one is inclined to assume a reverential attitude and ask the permission of the forest to enter. While in the forest one is not struck by any supernatural vibration. No, this is not how it works. It is one’s reverential attitude toward it that makes this forest special. One can recapture the sense of exhilaration of ancient people, when they entered sacred groves, felt purified and were uplifted because their attitude was reverential. It was a great feeling to know that some of these places have survived and that there is still a possibility of enshrining and celebrating nature in its sacred groves.

After the visit, I went to see the head of the village, Mr. Milton Lyngdoh. The village takes the responsibility for the sacred forest. So far they have been able to preserve its integrity without outside help. But in the future some help may be welcome and required. I asked whether the forest is actively used as an open air temple. It is now much less used. When a person is seriously ill, they will sacrifice a cock (which has a special place in their mythology) in the village itself. Then they carry the sick person to the edge of the forest, by the side of the brook, as the water is supposed to have healing qualities. In olden times, every village had a sacred rock, or some sacred trees, or a sacred hill within which the Khasi God resided to protect the people. But now under the impact of Christian churches (most Khasis have been converted to Christianity) those places are very rare, and deemed by the Christians as remnants of the Pagan superstition.

In another village, I met Onderson Mawrie, the head of a local middle school and a writer, who published two books and a number of booklets explaining and defending the Khasi world view and religion. He said that there is an onslaught of Christian churches on the traditional Khasi people, and the Khasis do not like it. He questioned the statistics according to which a big majority of the Khasis are Christian. He said these statistics are compiled and published by Christian people, who have vested interests in spreading Christianity. He also mentioned “When I go through Khasi villages, I do not see this Christian majority.” Then he turned to me directly and said, “Why do you Western people tell us to forget

our past and start everything anew? We cannot do that.” I told him, “Listen to your heart. And obey your gods. Your destiny must be shaped by your conscience.” He was visibly delighted and asked me, “Are you sure, Sir, you come from the West?”

There is a problem here - the Khasi versus Christianity, or rather Christianity versus the traditional Khasi. One of the distinguished British foresters and Botanists Dr. N.W. Bor writes, “It has always been a matter of great regret to me that the spread of Christianity in the hills tends to involve the complete destruction of all that is most interesting in the lives and customs of primitive people.” Bor also maintains that there is no more devout Christian (for a time) than the fresh convert, and that among the converted Khasi, there are those who think that it is a splendid thing to go into a sacred grove to cut a tree, in order to defy the gods of their fathers and to show their pagan brothers that their beliefs are all wrong. It is in this way that the heritage is defiled and then lost.

We have not a small problem here. The Khasi are a unique people. Their world view is not only distinct but of importance to the coming ecological age in which our harmony, cooperation and symbiosis with nature is an imperative. We preserve rare species of animals for their distinctiveness, unique-ness and in order to maintain the diversity of life. The hill people deserve to be preserved no less than other threatened species. Not that we want to make the Khasi a rare kind of animal species. Far from that: they represent a part of the human family; they are a valuable part to the human tapestry of culture. To eliminate their distinctive culture would be to impoverish the human family.

Beyond this aspect of maintaining the cultural diversity, the Khasi are of great importance to us, while we are re-building our strained relationships with nature. We want to build a new model of reverence for nature and the Khasi culture provides one which has existed for centuries. Thus, the Khasi (and other tribes in North-East India) represent not only an aspect of the historical richness of human cultures, but they may become an important laboratory (perhaps model is a better term) to help us Westerners learn to live with nature symbiotically.

To remove the threats to the Khasi and other similar cultures, we need to restrain the zealous thrust of Christianity. The time has come to revise our attitudes toward paganism, as something beyond the pale. In converting the pagans, we are destroying nature in the wake of our conversions. We must not forget what we have done to the earth with our Christian attitudes. It is God’s earth that we have plundered and destroyed. Is this what God requires and demands of us as Christians? The time for a deeper reflection on these matters has arrived. Christianity must help us to save nature and to regard the Earth. Dr. Bor wistfully adds, “The Khasi attitude of mind being what it is, it is unreasonable to expect that the sacred groves will last forever. With their disappearance goes the last remnants of the climax forests of the Khasi hills.”

I myself think that injustice is done to Khasi people and to the richness of human culture by the continuous onslaught of Christianity, and by treating them as barbarians that ought to be converted. In a fundamental way their human rights are violated. They are not left alone to be what they are. They are often defenceless against the subtle ways of the present mass media. They are made to feel inferior, and then promised to be equal, if they embrace Christianity. By embracing Christianity they are not only promised eternal salvation but all kinds of economic advantages. Economic bribery is part of the process of conversion.

It is a violation of human rights to make other people inferior for religious, ideological and economic reasons. The gospel of gentle Jesus is that of love toward other people, and it is not compatible with making them feel inferior or sub-human. Every so often on Sundays Christian cars go to Khasi villages to beam Christian messages through megaphones. This is an intrusion, a violation of their privacy of their peace of mind, of their culture, their tradition. One wonders how Christian villages and communities would feel, if vans of other religions (Muslim, Hindu or Khasi) arrived in their midst and started to beam messages trying to convert them. Wouldn't they feel outraged? They would. And rightly so. Don't do onto the other...

I will speak personally again, strictly on my own behalf. I think that UNESCO (or some other international organization) should extend its protectorate to these traditional hill people. Their culture should be declared as a part of the international cultural heritage. We are not talking about meddling in the political or national affairs of India. We are talking about the preservation of a cultural heritage which belongs to the whole world. UNESCO should be in a specially favorable position to aid in such a presentation. Furthermore, I think that UNESCO should declare that religious proselytizing should be not allowed among tribal people. We must cherish their heritage and learn from them, rather than to convert them to our more destructive ways. Eco-philosophers, ecologists and other people concerned with the survival and integrity of the planet should be particularly interested in the preservation of the tradition of the Khasi and other tribes like them. I would welcome suggestions of eco-oriented people on how we could help - without interfering with this rather delicate situation.

It must be added that the Indian Government has tried to help in these matters by establishing (federally financed) the North Eastern Hill University, where predominantly local (hill) people attend, and where, during the last few years the number of teachers (who were students a few years ago) has dramatically risen, so that slowly the destiny of the local people is being transferred to them. The education of a nation determines its destiny. It should also be noted that in the philosophy department of the Shillong Campus (of the above mentioned university) there are some professors sympathetic to the world view of the hill people, notable especially is Prof. Sujata Miri, who published (in 1988) a book entitled *Khasi World View* and who has supervised theses on such subjects

as “The Naga Philosophy of Nature”, “The Khasi World View” etc. In the piece that follows Prof. Miri writes on the various aspects of the ecological Weltanschauung of the hill people (the Khasi) of North East India.

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