

Khasi Unitarians of India

by John Rex, minister, the Buckman Bridge Unitarian Universalist Society, Jacksonville, Florida

Picture in your mind a map of the great sub-continent called India, and fly with me to Calcutta, that sprawling city in the East. From Calcutta, we will fly northeast, over Bangladesh, which is very low country, then over some hills, and finally to Guwahati in the Indian State of Assam, just south of Bhutan. From Guwahati we take a four-hour bus ride up into those hills we just flew over, into the State of Meghalaya, hill country, to the capital, Shillong.

Meghalaya is about the size of Massachusetts. The eastern two thirds of this highland state is the homeland of the Khasi people, who have their own language and culture, unlike any in the rest of India.

And, within a radius of about 50 miles, live roughly 9,000 Khasi tribal people who identify themselves as Unitarians. They constitute about 98 percent of the Unitarians in India. When we speak of Unitarians in India, with one small but important exception, we are speaking of this unique tribal group with their very distinct Unitarianism. There are also about 100 Tamil people in Chennai who are members of the Madras Christian Unitarian Church that was founded in 1795. Although separated by many hundreds of miles and very different cultures, these two groups joined in 1987 to form the Indian Council of Unitarian Churches.

In 1998, when I was finishing a ministry in Virginia, I was able to arrange with the UUA and the Indian Unitarians to spend six months in India, formally and officially, as a Unitarian Universalist minister. As the only outsider who had done that in many years, I found myself needing to learn, to understand, and to share information between cultures, between worlds.

And most recently, I spent the month of February last year in India, revisiting many of the people and villages where I had spent time previously, preaching and teaching, and then attending the 100th Annual Conference of the Unitarian Union of North East India This is the Khasi Unitarian association of churches, which has the equivalent value of the UUA for UUs in North America.

Little is known of the early history of the Khasi people. Prior to the arrival of the British invaders in the last century, their language was not written. When the British found that the Khasi people had their own traditional religion, neither Hindu nor Muslim, they sent in Christian missionaries. The Welsh Calvinists constituted the largest group of missionaries and, by the 1840s, they had written the Khasi language using Western (Roman) letters, and then translated the Bible into Khasi. With a written language tied to the imposition of colonial government, the only way for tribal people to progress was to learn to read and write by attending missionary school and enduring proselytizing. The Founder of Khasi Unitarianism, Hajom Kissor Singh, was born in 1865 into a family that followed the traditional Khasi religion. He and his brother were sent to a missionary school, and, at the age of 15, Singh converted to Christianity.

One Khasi Unitarian scholar emphasizes: ". . . even from his childhood, Hajom Kissor showed interest in spiritual and religious matters. . . Slowly his conviction grew that there was a Christianity more akin to the religion of Jesus than the one in which he had received formal instruction. Soon his

disenchantment with the Calvinist faith led him to break away from that order." Singh, working on his own, drawing from traditional and missionary concepts, envisioned and founded a "new" religion, a Religion of One God. Eventually, he met with a person who advised him to write to the Rev. Charles Dall, a Unitarian missionary then working in Calcutta. Singh wrote to Dall, who sent him a large quantity of Unitarian literature, which persuaded him that his Religion of One God was so much like the Unitarianism that Dall was preaching that he adopted the name, "Unitarian," for his religion. Thus this unique Religion of One God, called Unitarianism, flourishes today in the context of a very distinct culture.

The traditional religion of the Khasis teaches that there is one God, "UBlei," who is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient, and who should not be symbolized or pictured in any shape or form. Traditional Khasis have no churches or temples or holy books or ministers. They expect their religion to be passed on in the home, through a complex traditional system of family, clan, tribal organization, and governance. Religion is inseparable from all that happens in their lives.

Hajom Kissor Singh's new religion maintained the core of the traditional belief system and he created it at a time when Christian missionaries were making enormous inroads, criticizing, undermining, and threatening traditional Khasi culture and religion. Singh's Religion of One God provided many new elements: churches, a liturgy, Sunday services, group worship, even ministers. Though Singh's Religion of One God did maintain a core of Khasi traditional beliefs, it omitted some beliefs and practices, such as the reading of omens and animal sacrifice. He provided strong leadership without ever being ordained, setting a precedent for a lay-led, rather than minister-led, church. After founding his new religion, Singh devoted the rest of his life, until his death in 1923, to seeking converts, preaching, starting churches, and nurturing what he had begun.

A key document in that process of nurturing was a short book he wrote over a hundred years ago with his colleague, Robin Roy, titled, *The Book of Brief Questions About Unitarianism*.

When I arrived in Meghalaya in September, 1998, I was shown this book in the Khasi language and told it had not been translated into English. Working over a period of many weeks with my bilingual co-worker, I had the privilege of participating in its translation, which, last year, was perfected and approved by the Board of the Unitarian Union.

This key document, what we have come to call the "catechism," is divided into six chapters that are intended to give instruction in the Khasi Unitarian faith. The first two chapters deal with the subject of God, and these are considered essential training for children. Three of the middle chapters deal with duty: "Our Duty to God," "Our Duty to Fellow Humans," and "Our Duty to Ourselves," making it very clear that Khasi Unitarianism is a dutiful religion. The final chapter deals with sin, which is defined as not doing one's duty, or going against the commands of God.

There, too briefly stated, is what I understand to be the essence of Khasi Unitarianism. In saying that, I fear I have not presented the real flesh and blood humanity of the people I have been so fortunate to know and to love.

Their lives tend to be different from ours, just as our cultures and opportunities are different.

However, though the percentages vary greatly, the range of life-styles is not dissimilar to those in

the United States.

Some Khasis are highly educated Ph.D.s who teach in colleges, use computers, and live in modern houses with electricity, lovely gardens, TV, and so on.

Others, with less education, live in simple houses-many without electricity-in country villages, and do subsistence farming. For all Khasis, the Unitarian identity is absolutely central to their lives. All they say and do relates to their key cultural and religious themes of knowing God and doing duty within a covenanting community.

Today there are more than 30 Unitarian churches in Meghalaya-with three just over the border in Assam. Almost all these churches maintain pre-primary schools for the children in the village, that being their principle outreach in the community.

Since the days of the founder, Khasi Unitarians have maintained relationships with Unitarians around the world, first through the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF), and then through ongoing connections with the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) and the British Unitarians, and now through the International Council of Unitarians and Universalists (ICUU), founded in 1995.

In my travels within Meghalaya, I met members of the Church of the Larger Fellowship, both Khasi and non-Khasi, who value Quest as an important, ongoing source of information and inspiration from the other side of the world. Among those individuals, I see a great desire to learn more and to be connected beyond very limiting circumstances. Meeting them has given me a sense of being closer to the possibility of real understanding and of right relationships among us all.

I expect we all will be hearing much more in the future about the Khasi Unitarians, especially now that both the UUA and the Partner Church Council are actively exploring ways to establish closer connections in the near future. As the world continues shrinking, I hope that all of us will be open to new understandings, while we attempt to live the answer to the very basic question of our faith: How shall we treat one another? Whatever we do, may it be beyond indifference. May we connect with understanding and love. The motto of the Khasi Unitarians is: "To Nangroi." or, "Keep on progressing." May we find the wisdom to do just that.

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