UNIT 9: Khasi-Jaintia Societies

UNIT STRUCTURE

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9.1 Learning Objectives

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- Understand the societies of Khasi and Jaintia societies.
- Understand how the oral traditions help in forming the history of the communities.

9.2 Introduction

Ethnohistory provides an important and complex way to studying the history of Meghalaya's Khasi and Jaintia civilizations, which have been molded by oral traditions, ceremonial activities, customary institutions, and intimate interaction with a unique biological context. Unlike regions with long-established written chronicles, Khasi and Jaintia societies have historically preserved their historical consciousness through myths of origin, clan genealogies (kur), sacred groves, megalithic monuments, and customary laws administered through institutions such as the Dorbar shnong and Dorbar raid. Ethnohistory, which combines anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, oral history, and critical readings of colonial records, enables scholars to reconstruct these pasts in culturally grounded and sensitive ways to indigenous knowledge systems.

Ethnohistory is very useful for understanding Khasi and Jaintia societies' matrilineal social organization, which is one of their most distinguishing characteristics. Clan structures, inheritance procedures, and residence patterns are profoundly rooted in oral traditions and ritual life, not formal historical writings. Ethnohistorical methodologies allow us to investigate how matriliny evolved over time, how it affected political authority and land rights, and how it responded to external influences like colonial administration, Christianity, and contemporary state institutions. By integrating oral narratives with missionary writings, gazetteers, and legal documents, ethnohistory clarifies both continuity and change in Khasi-Jaintia society.

Ethnohistory is also useful in understanding political systems and customary governance. The operation of the Dorbar system, the role of the Syiem and Doloi, and inter-village interactions cannot be fully comprehended just through colonial texts, which frequently misunderstand or simplify indigenous political systems. Ethnohistorical research examines these records alongside oral testimony and ceremonial behaviors to uncover indigenous conceptions of authority, consensus, and justice.

Furthermore, ethnohistory provides a fuller understanding of the Khasi-Jaintia cultures' rich material and ritual landscape, which includes megaliths, holy forests (Law Kyntang), and ritual places. Archaeological evidence, paired with oral traditions, aids in the reconstruction of ancestral memory, burial rituals, and long-established ecological ethics. Thus, ethnohistory sheds light on the region's deep link with its society, ecology, and belief systems. In essence, ethnohistory allows for a more comprehensive and respectful reconstruction of Khasi and Jaintia pasts. It goes beyond colonial narratives and textual archives to highlight indigenous voices, cultural practices, and historical action, making it an essential tool for understanding these societies' historical experiences and identities.

9.3 Khasi-Jaintia Societies

The Khasi-Jaintia societies of present-day Meghalaya are among the most diverse socio-cultural forms in Northeast India. These societies, located in the uplands between the Brahmaputra and Surma valleys, have evolved in close proximity to a severe plateau ecosystem, dense forests, and monsoon-rich terrain. Their history, which is mostly maintained in oral traditions, customary laws, ritual practices, and material culture, provides valuable insights on indigenous governance, kinship, and environmental ethics. Ethnohistorical approaches help to reconstruct the past by combining oral traditions with archeological data and critical readings of colonial and missionary texts.

One of the most distinguishing characteristics of Khasi-Jaintia society is its matrilineal social structure. Descent and inheritance follow the mother's line, with the youngest daughter (khatduh) customarily inheriting ancestral property. Clans (kur) are the fundamental social entities that regulate marriage, inheritance, and social identity. While women have custodial rights to property, men have traditionally exercised political authority through clan councils and village institutions. This system represents a nuanced balance of gender roles, familial duties, and societal cohesion, which calls into question simplistic interpretations of matriliny as matriarchy. Politically, Khasi-Jaintia societies established decentralized and democratic systems of governance. Village-level institutions, such as the Dorbar shnong (village council) and Dorbar raid (regional council), served as consensus decision-making bodies. Leadership roles, such as Syiem among the Khasi and Doloi among the Jaintia, were frequently hereditary yet subject to customary laws and community accountability. These organizations governed land usage, conflict resolution, ritual observance, and inter-village connections, thereby maintaining social order in the absence of centralized governmental power. Religious belief and ritual life are another important aspect of Khasi-Jaintia society. Traditional religion focuses on the

worship of ancestors, nature spirits, and deities associated with the natural elements. Sacred trees (Law Kyntang), water bodies, and stones play important roles in ritual life, expressing deeply ingrained ecological ideals. These sacred landscapes functioned not only as spiritual spaces but also as mechanisms for environmental conservation. Seasonal festivals and rituals reinforced collective memory, agricultural cycles, and social solidarity.

Material culture, particularly the widespread presence of megalithic monuments, is a striking feature of Khasi–Jaintia societies. Standing stones, dolmens, and cairns served commemorative and ritual purposes, marking clan achievements, funerary rites, and social status. These megaliths, still visible across Meghalaya, serve as tangible links to ancestral histories and are often explained through oral narratives passed down through generations. Archaeological studies, when read alongside these narratives, help establish long-term cultural continuity in the region.

The colonial period brought significant transformations. British administrators and Christian missionaries introduced new legal systems, education, and religious practices that reshaped Khasi–Jaintia society. While Christianity led to changes in ritual life and belief systems, many customary institutions, such as matriliny and the *Dorbar* system demonstrated remarkable resilience. Colonial records often misunderstood indigenous practices, making ethnohistorical reinterpretation essential for correcting distorted representations. In the postcolonial era, Khasi–Jaintia societies continue to negotiate tradition and modernity. Customary laws remain influential in matters of land, inheritance, and identity, even as state institutions and urbanization introduce new challenges. Contemporary cultural movements and legal debates reflect ongoing efforts to preserve indigenous values while adapting to change.

In conclusion, Khasi–Jaintia societies exemplify the richness and complexity of indigenous social systems in Northeast India. Their matrilineal kinship, participatory governance, ecological ethics, and material heritage underscore a historically grounded way of life shaped by community and environment. Ethnohistory provides a crucial lens for understanding these societies on their own terms, highlighting continuity, adaptation, and cultural resilience across time.

9.4 Oral Traditions and Institutions

In the absence of a comprehensive precolonial written legacy, Khasi-Jaintia cultures' ethnohistory is based on oral traditions and indigenous institutions, which preserve historical memory, social values, and cultural identities. For millenia, Khasi and Jaintia groups have passed down their heritage through origin myths, clan genealogies, ceremonial tales, customary rules, and communal customs ingrained in daily life. These oral and institutional frameworks not only document history, but also actively influence social organization, governance, and relationships with the natural environment. Ethnohistory, by combining live traditions with archeological and archival evidence, allows for a better understanding of Khasi-Jaintia culture on its own cultural terms.

The Khasi and Jaintia have rich and diverse oral traditions, which include origin myths, migration histories, ancestral legends, and ritual chants. The tale of descending from heaven by the Jingkieng Ksiar (Golden Ladder) is one of the most important myths, explaining the origins of humanity and the moral order of society. Such myths are more than just symbolic stories; they contain messages about social harmony, human-nature ties, and ethical behavior. Migration traditions recorded in clan memory describe how several kur (clans) settled over the plateau, establishing territorial boundaries and kinship relationships. These myths offer ethnohistorians important insights into early settlement patterns and inter-clan relationships.

Clan genealogies are another important aspect of oral tradition. In matrilineal Khasi-Jaintia civilization, lineage is traced through the mother, and clan histories are passed down orally by elders. These genealogies govern marriage laws, inheritance rights, and social identity, assuring continuation across generations. Oral transmission thus serves as both a historical record and a legal framework, strengthening social norms and collective memory. Indigenous institutions that preserve and implement oral traditions are also critical. The Dorbar shnong (village council) is the primary institution of local governance, where customary laws are interpreted, disagreements are addressed, and community decisions are reached by consensus. Historical precedents, which are frequently recalled orally, shape discussions and enhance the validity of decisions. At a broader level, the *Dorbar raid* coordinates multiple villages, reflecting a federated political structure rooted in tradition rather than centralized authority.

Leadership institutions, such as the Khasi Syiem and the Jaintia Doloi, are also important in conserving ethnohistorical knowledge. Though frequently hereditary, these leaders gain their authority from customary law and ceremonial sanction rather than absolute control. Their responsibilities include directing rituals, protecting holy sites, and fostering inter-village interactions. Through ceremonial functions and oral pronouncements, they represent historical continuity and collective authority.

Ritual practices and festivals strengthen oral tradition and institutional memory. Agriculture, ancestor worship, and communal well-being ceremonies provide opportunities to recall past events and renew social links. Sacred groves (Law Kyntang) and megalithic monuments serve as living archives, with oral traditions explaining the importance of stones, trees, and water bodies. These locations connect memory, ritual, and geography, anchoring history in its physical surrounds. The colonial period brought written records and new administrative institutions, which frequently misread or suppressed oral and institutional traditions. However, oral traditions and customary institutions demonstrated resilience, adapting to new conditions while maintaining basic principles. Ethnohistorical study now critically engages colonial materials while emphasizing indigenous perspectives, allowing for a more balanced reconstruction of the past.

Finally, oral traditions and institutions are critical to understanding Khasi-Jaintia ethnohistory. They preserve historical information, control social behavior, and maintain

cultural identity throughout generations. By accepting these traditions as authentic historical sources, ethnohistory restores indigenous voices while also revealing the complexity, continuity, and vitality of Khasi-Jaintia history.

Oral traditions and indigenous institutions serve as the foundation for Khasi-Jaintia ethnohistory, preserving historical memory in the lack of comprehensive written sources. Myths of origin, migration histories, clan genealogies, and ritual chants serve as living archives, allowing communities to recall their history, define social identity, and pass down moral ideals over generations. These oral forms are not static remembrance, but dynamic systems that adapt to changing social and political settings while remaining true to ancestral traditions.

Indigenous institutions such as the Dorbar shnong, Dorbar raid, and Syiem and Doloi leadership roles all play an important role in translating oral memory into everyday government and customary law. These structures recall historical precedents, reinforce social norms, and justify communal authority. Ritual acts, holy landscapes, and megalithic sites help to anchor history in the physical world, connecting memory, belief, and location. Together, oral traditions and institutions allow Khasi-Jaintia civilizations to maintain a cohesive historical consciousness based on community participation and ecological principles. Ethnohistorical techniques that acknowledge and engage with these indigenous sources not only address colonial record restrictions, but also validate Khasi-Jaintia communities' historical agency. By emphasizing oral knowledge and customary structures, ethnohistory provides a more inclusive and culturally based perspective of their history, emphasizing resilience, continuity, and flexibility over time.

Check your Progress

Q1. What is the basic principle of Khasi–Jaintia kinship?

Q2. Name the main village-level governing institution.

Q3. What is the significance of megaliths in Khasi–Jaintia society?

Q4. How do oral traditions contribute to Khasi–Jaintia ethnohistory?

9.5 Let us sum up

¬ Myths of origin, migration narratives, and clan genealogies preserve Khasi–Jaintia historical memory in the absence of early written records.

¬ Clan (*kur*) histories passed through the maternal line regulate identity, marriage rules, and inheritance, ensuring continuity across generations.

¬ Bodies such as the *Dorbar shnong* and *Dorbar raid* use oral precedents and customary laws to guide community decision-making.

¬ Sacred groves (*Law Kyntang*), megaliths, and ceremonial practices link history to physical space and reinforce ecological and cultural values.

¬ Recognizing oral traditions and institutions as legitimate sources allows ethnohistory to recover indigenous perspectives and challenge colonial interpretations.

9.6 Further Readings

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9.7 Answers to check your progress

Answers to Q1. Khasi–Jaintia society follows a matrilineal system of descent and inheritance.

Answers to Q2. The main village-level governing institution is the *Dorbar shnong*.

Answer to Q3. Megaliths serve commemorative and ritual purposes and preserve ancestral memory.

Answers to Q4 Oral traditions preserve origin myths, clan histories, and social values essential for reconstructing history.

9.8 Model Questions

Very Short Answer Type Questions

1. What is the Golden Ladder (*Jingkieng Ksiar*) in Khasi oral tradition?
2. Name the basic social unit in Khasi–Jaintia matrilineal society.
3. What is the *Dorbar shnong*?
4. What role do sacred groves (*Law Kyntang*) play in Khasi–Jaintia culture?

Short Answer Type Questions

1. How do clan genealogies contribute to preserving Khasi–Jaintia history?

2. Explain the significance of the *Dorbar raid* in traditional governance.

3. Why are megaliths important sources for Khasi–Jaintia ethnohistory?

4. How did colonial rule affect oral traditions and institutions among the Khasi and Jaintia?

Long Answer Type Questions

1. Discuss the role of oral traditions in reconstructing the ethnohistory of Khasi–Jaintia societies.

2. Examine how indigenous institutions function as custodians of historical memory in Khasi–Jaintia society.

3. Analyze the relationship between matriliny, oral tradition, and social organization among the Khasi and Jaintia.

4. Evaluate the importance of integrating oral traditions with archaeological and colonial sources in writing Khasi–Jaintia ethnohistory.