# INDO-ARYAN LOAN WORDS IN KHASI: AN INTRODUCTORY NOTE

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**Abstract:** *The present paper makes an attempt to discuss the Indo-Aryan loanwords found in Khasi. Khasi has borrowed a lot of words from languages like Assamese, Bengali and Hindi apart from English and the loanwords belong to almost all the semantic fields. Khasi borrowed these words to fulfill the need of the speakers but it borrowed only those words for which Khasi did not have indigenous stock.  In order to fit the loanwords into the Khasi phonological system, all the loanwords have undergone various phonological changes so that the words can be nativised. A few phonological rules for some of the processes have been formulated and exemplified in the body of the paper.  The paper also compares old loanwords used in the Khasi society around 1904 as mentioned in a very old Khasi-English dictionary with the present generation and found out that a number of old loanwords have been replaced by new Khasi native words.*

KEY WORDS: Borrowing, Loan words, Bilingualism, Phonological Processes, Khasi, Assamese. Sylheti dialect of Bengali, Hindi, Killer Language, word coinage.

**Introduction**

Borrowing is a process by which one language or dialect takes or incorporates some linguistic elements from another (Arlotto, 1972). Borrowing is a procedure which is inextricably bound up with the social, cultural and political history of a speech community. Without knowing the history of the concerned speech community, it is impossible to know about the contact of one group with speech communities outside itself. Borrowing usually takes place whenever a speech community comes into close contact with another community. The contact in question may be direct or indirect. When two speech communities are living in nearby, adjacent areas, they come into contact with each other on a daily basis which can be termed as direct contact. On the other hand, when the contact is through some other means such as book, media etc. and not on a regular basis can be called indirect contact. As a result of this, one community starts taking and using linguistic items from the other community. The linguistic items may belong to all the semantic fields and usually all the members of the concerned community extensively use these words and as a result of it these lexical items last longer. In some cases, the borrowed words displace the indigenous words and the native words completely disappear from the language. Borrowing not only depends on language contact but also on bilingualism. Presence of bilinguals in a speech community makes borrowing very common and omnipresent but it also takes place in a monolingual speech community where borrowed words are used to fill up the lexical gap. Though in Linguistics we unreservedly use "borrowing" and "loan words" the appropriateness of both the terms are debated. Haugen (1969) pointed out that since the borrowing language incurs no obligation to return the 'borrowed words' or 'loan words' to the source language (in fact, these are never returned), 'stealing' might be a better term, except for the fact that the lending language does not feel offended by having something taken from it and, in fact, has not lost anything. In spite of this, we freely use both the terms borrowing and loan words as no other suitable terms are available to refer to the modus operandi by which words are imported from another language.

Languages in regular contact circumstances borrow words from each other and most of the time it budges from the dominant (socio-politically) to the subordinate. In other words, the loan words come from the dominant language. Why does a language borrow? The answer to

this question can be given from two angles: (a) When a speech community experiences some new ideas, they need new words to express those ideas for which the concerned speech community has no native words. Therefore, in order to fulfill the need, it borrows from the nearest available language; (b) Minority languages usually take loan words from dominant languages because of the prestige issue as they have a fallacy that only majority, dominant languages are having prestige. It is seen in most of the borrowing situation that the language of the conquered has a propensity to borrow more than that of the conquered and if extensive borrowing goes on unabated for a long time, the borrowed language tends to lose its own tang. It is a very common phenomenon in India. Most of the time, the killer language is English and in some cases Hindi as the regional languages of India are extensively borrowing huge number of lexical items from these two languages. A case in point is Nefamese, an Assamese based lingua franca spoken in Arunachal Pradesh which is now almost replaced by Hindi.

**Khasi Language and People**

The word Khasi stands for the language as well as the people who speak it. The Khasi language belongs to the Mon-Khmer branch of Austro-Asiatic family of languages. It is the only language spoken in India that belongs to this particular branch. It is interesting to note that all the languages belonging to this family which are spoken in India are spoken by the people who inhabit only the hilly tracks and mountainous regions. It is spoken in Meghalaya, a small hilly state situated in the North-East India that occupies 22,429km of area and according to Census of India 2001, it had a total population of 1, 128, 575 and now in 2011, approximately 29, 64, 007 persons speak this language. At present, Khasi is taught up to the Post Graduation level at NEHU and Roman script is used for writing purpose. Khasi is also used as a medium of instruction in the schools and it is an associate official language in the state of Meghalaya. According to Grierson (1903), Khasi has four major dialects. They are: (i) Khasi Proper spoken in and around Cherrapunji which is considered to be the standard variety and hence this dialect of Khasi is used in all forms of literary works, (ii) Lyngngam, spoken in South-Western corner of the hills, bordering on the Garo Hills, (iii) Synteng or Pnar, spoken in the Upper portions of the Jowai sub-division, east of Shillong, and (iv) War, spoken in the low Southern Valleys bordering Bangla Desh and Barak Valley. He further said that Synteng approaches the standard dialect much more nearly than the others.

The Khasis are mongoloid in their appearance and the Khasi society is matriarchal. The lineage is traced through the mother and the children take the mother's surname. The Khasis are surrounded by speakers from different language families such as Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman and so the Khasis have formed a kind of linguistic island. It is generally believed that the Khasis migrated from Yunnan through there is no clear evidence.

**Bilingualism Amongst the Khasis**

Going back a bit to the histories of the North-East, starting from the 1960s, whole of North-East India was divided into seven states and it was an ethno-linguistically based division. Before independence, Assamese served almost as a lingua franca among different speech communities in the whole area (Goswami 1982:2). Goswami's claim can be verified by observed data. One can find many native speakers (especially belonging to the older generation) of Khasi in Meghalaya even today who can speak Assamese language just like the way an Assamese native speaker does.  The state of Meghalaya was formed by carving out two districts from Assam, the Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills on 21st January 1972. Prior to that Meghalaya was given a semi autonomous status in 1970. In other words, it was part of Assam till 1972 and Assamese was used extensively. Therefore, we can easily guess that those Khasis who were adults during the seventies could easily speak Assamese. So, they were bilinguals in Assamese and Khasi. As Shillong was the capital of the greater Assam and a tourist place, it attracted a lot of people that includes job seekers, businessmen etc. belonging to different linguistic groups. Among them, Assamese, Bengali and Hindi speakers were more in numbers and the Khasis came into contact with these people on a regular basis which prompted the Khasis to borrow a lot of words from these languages. According to S. Bhattacharya and J. B. Bhattacharjee (1982), the Bengali words, especially Sylheti variety entered the Khasi lexicon as Bengali was used as a link language between the Khasi rulers or the Syiems and their subjects in the plains during the pre-colonial era in the erstwhile Khasi states of Shohra, Shella, Mawlong and Nongkhlaw.

**Indo-Aryan Loan Words in Khasi**

From the analysis of Khasi lexical items, it is clear that there has been an extensive Aryanization of Khasi vocabulary. A statistical analysis of Indo-Aryan loanwords in Khasi

reveal that a majority of the loanwords are nouns and it indicates that when two or more cultures come into contact with each other, some cultural items inevitably cross the linguistic boundary. Of course one can also find a few adverbs, adjectives and even verbs among the loanwords in Khasi. Whatever category the loanwords belong to, all of them have undergone certain phonological modifications in order to fit into the phonological system of the Khasi language and sometimes a particular word undergoes such a tremendous change that it becomes almost impossible to identify the original shape of the lexical item. Though a number of English loanwords are found in Khasi as well, we are not going to discuss them as borrowing from English is very common among all the Indian languages and it does not tell us anything new about the loan words or its phonology. It must be noted here that the degree of lexical interference from Indo-Aryan languages to Khasi varies from two major axes: the rural-urban settlement pattern and age. The percentage of borrowing, including loan words from English is highest among the speakers living in places like Shillong which is having a metropolitan nature. The age also plays a very dominant role in the sense that the older generation retains a high number of Indo-Aryan loan words or native Khasi words whereas the young Khasi generation uses a lot of words directly borrowed from English.

In his Khasi-English Dictionary, U. Nissor Singh (1906) identified 445 Indo-Aryan loanwords including a few English words out of over seven thousand entries. This figure was low even at that time because few loanwords have completely been khasified that defy easy detection. Now when we look at the words included in this dictionary, some of the words have almost become obsolete in the last hundred years or so as told to us by our Khasi informants. For example, they do not know the names of some herbs having medicinal value, old fashioned tools etc that were mentioned in this dictionary. In other words, these types of words have completely vanished from the Khasi lexicon. But at the same time, new words have entered the Khasi language in order to fulfill the need of the modern Khasi speakers as they are freely borrowing words even today. As a result of this ongoing process, the modern Khasi language is having more than two thousand borrowed words from Indo-Aryan languages like Assamese, Bengali and Hindi with an altogether different pronunciation. The data for the present paper were collected from standard Khasi speakers living in and around Shillong town. It must be noted here that the Bengali words that were found in Khasi is not taken from the standard variety of Bengali but from a dialect called Sylheti which is

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extensively spoken in Barak Valley of Assam. We have said so on the basis of their phonetic shape.

The common Indo-Aryan loanwords in Khasi are mainly found in the following areas:

(a) Kinship Terms: /mama/ 'maternal uncle', /mai/ 'mother', /pa/ 'father', etc.

(b) Fruits and Flowers: /so□ apel/ 'apple', /so□ pomkranet/ 'pomegranate', /so□ nyamtra/ 'orange', /so□ krie□p/ 'grape', /so□ plom/ 'plum', /so□ piš/ 'peach', (so□ in Khasi means fruit), /tie□wlili/ 'lily', /tie□wkulab/ 'rose' (tiew in Khasi means flower), etc.

(c) Animal and Bird Names: /myaw/ 'cat', /ha:ti/ 'elephant', /kula:y/ 'horse', /ut/ 'camel', /kada/ 'donkey, ass' /bulbul/ 'bulbul', /moyna/ 'mynah', /pukni/ 'vulture', /saro/ 'pigeon', /paro/'dove', /ha:n/ 'duck', etc.

(d) Vegetables: /muli/ 'radish', /mator/ 'peas', /presbin/ 'beans', /kerela/ 'bitter gourd', /dhonia/ 'coriander leaf', /kubi/ 'cabbage', /shana budam/ 'peanut/groundnut', / rynsun/ 'garlic', /bindi/ 'lady's finger', /pudina/ 'mint leave', /shana/ 'gram', /dai/ 'pulse', /palo□/ 'spinach' /pyat/ 'onion', /ka□or/ 'carrot', /□ira/ 'cumin', etc.

(e) Food, Drinks, Household Items: /dud/ 'milk', /ša/ 'tea', /šini/ 'sugar', /doi/ 'yoghurt', /šamoyt/ 'spoon', /pela/ 'cup', /karma/ 'room', /khatli/ 'kettle', /peris/ 'saucer', /šun/ 'lime', /ata/ 'flour', /suji/ 'semolina' /ašar/ 'pickle', /borti/ 'bucket', /tari~šaku/ 'knife', /kurat/ 'saw', /palo□/ 'bed', /tirsok/ 'matress' /musari/ 'mosquito net' /tala/ 'lock', /šabi/ 'key', /šuki/ 'chair', /pukri/ 'well/pond' /p□rda/ 'curtain', /ba□e/ 'clock', /be:l/ 'bell', /kh□rki/~/kh□lki/~/kʰlaki/ 'window' /duli/ 'cupboard', /almari/ 'almirah', /nep/ ~/ra□ay/'quilt', /s□ndu:k/ 'box', /karai/ 'frying pan', etc.

(f) Instruments and Weapons: /raši/ 'sickle', /kʰya□ši/ 'scissors', /bom/ 'bomb', /kuli/ 'bullet', /šipay/ 'army/soldier' etc.

(g) Verbs, Adverbs and Adjectives: /batay/ 'to tell', /hikay/ 'to teach', /patʰai/ 'to send', /kubur/ 'to confess', /biday/ 'to bid farewell', /ha□ir/ 'to summon, be present', /□ubab/ 'to answer, reply', /tʰik/ 'exactly', /bar/ 'outside', /stad/ 'wise', /pura/ 'complete', /suk/ 'happy', etc.

(h) Miscellaneous Words: /□aka/ 'area', /□uti/ 'shoes', /kali/ 'car', /napit/ 'barber', /ši:tʰi/ 'letter', /khulom/ 'pen', /nakra/ 'big drum', /roŋ/ 'colour', /puri/ 'mermaid', /tupya/ 'cap, hat', /tamaša/ 'put on a show act in a funny way, /sur□k/ 'road', /šuti/ 'holiday', /šu:n/ 'lime', /rupa/ 'silver', /pop/ 'sin', /nyam/ 'rule, norm', /mie̯d/ 'table',

/kʰɨ/ 'ghee', /k□nta/ 'hour', /□aːr/ 'net', /bʰaŋ/ 'intoxicant drink made from herbs', /aiŋ/ 'law', /dwar/ 'gate', /dustur/ 'custom, culture', /kašari/ 'judicial court' etc.

It must be noted here that the above-mentioned list is not exhaustive. Though Indo-Aryan loanwords are found in all the semantic fields, we can see a pattern. A large number of loanwords are found in the areas of government, administration, legal procedure, crime and punishment, professions, business, names of household furniture, vegetables etc. but very few or no loanwords for agriculture, kinship terms, body parts etc. It is because of the fact that as Shillong was the capital of undivided Assam, almost all the government servants were non-Khasis and business was controlled by non-Khasis (now also) and it leads to borrowing. Similarly, the Khasi native speakers were and are at the helm of affairs as far as agriculture is concerned. Therefore, borrowing did not take place in a large scale. The same is true for body parts. As we said earlier, though these words are borrowed from Indo-Aryan languages like Assamese, Bengali and Hindi, it is difficult to pinpoint a particular donor language. All these loanwords have been khasified and in order to do that all the loanwords have undergone various phonological processes as per phonological system of Khasi language. A number of phonological processes are found at work in Khasi in relation to the loanwords and a few of them are mentioned below to drive our point home.

1. Devoicing: Khasi does not have voiced unaspirated velar stop /g/ and aspirated /gh/ in its system. Therefore, the /g/ and /gh/ of the loanwords are pronounced as voiceless velar /k/ and /kh/. Consider the following examples:
   /gadha/→ /kada/ 'donkey' (word final /dh/ in /gadha/ changes to /d/ by another rule)
   /gajor/ →/ka□or/ 'carrot'
   /guli/ →/kuli/ 'bullet, tablet'
   /gari/ →/kali/ 'car' (medial /r/ becomes /l/ by application of another rule)
   /gulab/→/kulab/ 'rose'
2. Deaspiration: All the aspirated consonants become deaspirated when they occur in the final position of the borrowed word as in the following words:
   /sukh/→/suk/ 'happy'
   /dukh/→/duk/ 'poor'
   /dudh/→/dud/ 'milk'

3. Defricativization: Native Khasi words do not end with a fricative or affricate. Therefore, if the borrowed Indo-Aryan words have fricative or affricate at the end, it is changed to, generally, dental stop /t/. Consider the following loanwords:

/piaj/ →/pyat/ 'onion'

/samus/ →/šamoyt/ 'spoon'

/horgij/→/horkit/ 'in no case'

4. Fricativization: Khasi does not have affricate sound in its phonological system. Hence, whenever a borrowed Indo-Aryan word has an affricate, it is changed to palatal fricative /š/ as in the following examples:

/čini/→/šini/ 'sugar'

/čhatri/→/ šatri/ 'umbrella'

/ča/→/ša/ 'tea'

**Donar Languages**

On the basis of the analysis done in the preceding section, we simply stated that they are Indo-Aryan in origin. However, in this section, we are making an attempt to identify the individual donor languages such as Assamese, Bengali and Hindi on the basis of similarity of words. When a word is found across the two or three languages in identical form, we have included them under the common heading such as Assamese/Bengali, Bengali/Hindi or Assamese, Bengali, Hindi. Of course, the list is not exhaustive.

Assamese: /šuti/ 'holiday', /šithi/ 'letter', /šabi/ 'key', /tari/ 'knife', /kuay/ 'betel nut', /šamoyt/ 'spoon',/yakaja/ 'quarrel', /muka/ 'muga silk', /mahajon/ 'a trader', /mem/ 'an European lady', /nuti/ 'prostitute', /saro/ 'pigeon', /tup/ 'cannon', /ha:n/ 'duck'.

Bengali: /musla/ 'spices, /pakha/ 'fan', /phu□/ 'to blossom', /soi/ 'to sign', /karai/ 'cooking vessel'.

Hindi: /batay/ 'tell', /horkit/ 'in no case', /šatri/ 'umbrella', /kulab/ 'rose', /abir/ 'coloured powder used in Holi', /atiar/ 'instrument',/antad/ 'to guess', /barobor/ 'always', /hisa/ 'share', /maphot/ 'for nothing', /tuta/ 'parrot'.

Assamese/Bengali: /doi/ 'yoghurt', /kubi/ 'cabbage', /ruti/ 'bread', /rubi bar/ 'Sunday',/dai/ 'gram', /ašar/ 'pickle', /mukur/ 'a type of fish', /kupar/ 'fate', /kušia/ 'an eel', /maya/ 'mystery', /niam/ 'custom', /šawkad/ 'door or window frames', /šira/ 'parched rice', /šitor/ 'a

type of fish', /si□/ 'lion', /sotti/ 'virgin', /tan/ 'to pull', /tyrpad/ 'bay leaf', /bania/ 'goldsmith', /bha/ 'good'.

Bengali/Hindi: /nusip/ 'luck', /šini/ 'sugar', /jubab/ 'reply', /lalot/ 'greedy', /thikna/ 'certain', /dud/ 'milk',/ buskit/ 'reward', /it/ 'brick', /kindad/ 'rhinoceros', /dorbar/ 'council', /halla/ 'noise', /malai/ 'cream'.

Assamese, Bengali, Hindi: /pura/ 'full, complete', /thok/ 'fake', /thik/ 'correct', /suk/ 'happy', /duk/ 'poor', /hikai/ 'teach', /kajor/ 'carrot', /khi/ 'ghee', /kuli/ 'bullet', /sut/ 'interest', /myat/ 'period of time', /puri/ 'mermaid', /piat/ 'onion', /bindi/ 'lady's finger',/stad/ 'clever', /thanat/ 'police station', /rumar/ 'handkerchief', /kali/ 'car', /ut/ 'camel', /phasi/ 'to hang', /kinta/ 'hour', /pirda/ 'curtain', /mintri/ 'minister', /kada/ 'donkey', /bha□/ 'opium'.

Another interesting aspect that came to our notice during our field work is that a lot of Indo-Aryan loan words which were found in U. Nissor Singh's (1906) Khasi-English Dictionary have become obsolete. The present day native speakers do not use them at all. Instead of those loan words, the modern Khasi speakers use indigenous words. It is very difficult to say whether these words have been coined recently or were there all the time but somehow missed by Singh. Of course, in some cases, Assamese-Bengali-Hindi loan words are replaced by English words which are almost a pan-Indian feature as several English words are still being borrowed freely. Consider the following examples:

| Loan words found in Singh | present day words | gloss |
|---|---|---|
| /asbad/ | /kit um ki tam/ | luggage |
| /be□/ | /jakoyd/ | frog |
| /bhai/ | /paral□k/ | friend |
| /bhut/ | /ksuyd/ | ghost |
| /bia/ | /š□ŋkurim/ | marriage |
| /bir/ | /nan/ | lake |
| /bijar/ | /sŋewsi□/ | sad/sorrow |

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| | | |
|---|---|---|
| /dai/ | /noŋp□nkhakhun/ | wet nurse |
| /jhula/ | /pla/ | bag |
| /jinis/ | /ki tyar/ | things |
| /juk/ | /thliem/ | leech |
| **/naia/** | /thimmay/ | 'new' |
| /tuphan/ | /eryoŋ/ | cyclone |
| /tusbir/ | /dur/ | picture |
| /tula/ | /k□nphad/ | cleaned cotton |

**Conclusion**

The Khasi language has borrowed innumerable lexical items from Indo-Aryan languages like Assamese, Bengali and Hindi covering almost all the semantic fields. This has happened as Khasi and Indo-Aryan language speakers came into contact with each other over a long period of interaction. The lexical changes that we noticed in Khasi can be called 'language-contact induced changes'. It is the bilingualism (both active and passive) of the Khasi speakers which has motivated and enabled them to incorporate these lexical items from Assamese, Bengali and Hindi to their own language Khasi. By borrowing these lexical items, the Khasi language has expanded itself. Khasi language has also coined new words as a number of loan words mentioned in U. Nissor Singh's (1906) Khasi-English Dictionary have become obsolete. This is a sign of expansion and development. In other words, Khasi language is expanding and adapting itself to new socio-cultural environments and new challenges.

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