

Significance of Indian Festival with Special Reference to the Khasis of Meghalaya

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Abstract

This paper examines the significance of Indian festivals, with a specific focus on the Khasi community in Meghalaya. The Khasis exhibit a rich tribal cultural heritage characterized by vibrant arts, crafts, and diverse festivals, all of which play a crucial role in shaping social structures and community identity. Key festivals, such as the Shad Suk Mynsiem and Ka Shad-Kynjoh Khaskain, are explored to showcase their importance in expressing gratitude and invoking blessings for peace and prosperity. The paper highlights the matrilineal structure characteristic of Khasi society, in which festivals reinforce familial roles and responsibilities, particularly in relation to women's status as caretakers and custodians of ancestral property. Ethnographic insights reveal how these cultural celebrations foster social cohesion, strengthen communal bonds, and facilitate the transmission of traditional values across generations. The Khasis' adherence to their cultural practices amidst modern influences underscores their commitment to the social fabric and identity of specific tribal communities in India, emphasizing the interplay between tradition, identity and cultural heritage within the Khasi society.

Keywords: Indian festivals, Khasis, Meghalaya, cultural significance.

A group or community's lifestyle and worldview are referred to as its culture, which is a common set of acquired behaviour. A group's ideals, customs, and tangible products are all part of its culture. It refers to the entire way of life of the people in the culture, including their marriage, their attire, their family life and customs, their work habits, their religious ritual, and their recreational activities. Thus we can rightly explain that the concepts of culture have been taken to refer to something like collective subjectivity, i.e., a way of life or outlook adopted by a community as a social class (Nongbri, 2017: pp 116-124). Edward Burnett Taylor (1871) in his book "Primitive Culture" referred to culture as that complex whole which included knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society.

It has been said that culture is a special attribute of humans. It is among the characteristics that set human society apart the most (Nongbri, 2017: pp 116-124). Members of each generation receive the cultural heritage from the preceding generations and adopt themselves to it. Thus culture is the cultural heritage which is acquired by man from preceding generation through learning (ibid.).

Culture of every society is distinctive in its own characteristics. Many research works and observations have made tremendous contribution to understand different tribes and cultures, anthropologically and sociologically. According to 2011 census, India is a land to tribal population of about 104.3 million and

they can be classified on the basis of language, religion, pattern of livelihood and degree of their isolation. In India, the cultural diversity of the people such as language, dress and food changes is so intense that we are sometimes unaware of the facts and figures of people of other states. In this regard it is required to understand the heritage, the cultural activities, places, and most important the ethos of the people with special reference to the original tribal population inhabiting the state of Meghalaya. Several academics, including Lyngdoh, Bhattacharjee and Chatterjee, have noted that the state's original inhabitants are members of the tribal communities of Khasis, Jaintias, and Garos; the former two are the Mongolian race, while the latter are of the Tibeto-Burman race, known as Achiks, and the land they live on is known as Achik-land. They are also members of the Bodo family. A descendant of the Mon-Khmer race of Southeast Asia, the Jaintias have climbed the hills through the Assam valley. These people are said to be the members of the Proto Austroloid Monkhmer race and are considered to be among the earliest ethnic groups to settle on the Indian sub-continent.

Ethically and culturally, Meghalaya's inhabitants are considered special mostly due to their remote location, and the Khasi language is the sole dialect of the Monkhmer family still spoken there. Matrilineal systems, in which inheritance and ancestry are traced via the female line, are one of Meghalaya's unique traditional practices.

It is important to note that the first British Colonial administrator to enter this enchanted region of verdant mountains and winding rivers had dubbed the heartland of Meghalaya state the "Scotland of the East". The name Meghalaya meaning abode of clouds for a conglomeration of three districts viz., Khasi and Jaintia Hills and Garo Hills before reorganization of Assam, was suggested as late as 1936 by S. P. Chatterjee in his treatise Meghalaya: Garo and Khasi: Jaintia. This state is situated between latitude 25 02' and 26 06' North and longitudes 89 50' and 92 50' East. The entire geographic area of the state is 22.5 thousand square kilometers. Assam's Goalpara and Kamrup districts border it to the north, while the southern portion of the state is bordered by Bangladesh's Rangpur district and the western portion of the Goalpara district. Bangladesh's Mymensingh and Sylhet districts are located in the south, while the Assamese tribal districts of Cachar and Karbi Anglong are located in the east. It holds the distinction of being the world's highest rainfall area and experiences intense summertime rainfall. The predominant forest types are sub-tropical pine, moist deciduous, and tropical wet evergreen (Rizvi and Roy, 2006:pp. 2).

In Meghalaya, the people have a rich tribal cultural heritage. The diverse number of art and craft forms are practiced by the tribal citizens with the manufacturing bamboo and cane products being one of the major occupations engaged by the people here. There is a rich diversity in the number of tribes which populate the state and consequently there are also a variety of festivals associated with each respective tribe. One can also observe a deep appreciation for dance and music among the people.

Jewellery and Costumes:

The dress of the people mainly depends on the geographical region. For the women folk, the most outstanding and prominent piece of dress is the "Jain Kyrshah" (cotton cloth with tiny square pattern) meaning cloth pin from one part of the shoulder, covering half the body and reaching down up to the ankles. It is a casual attire at home, or in the fields along with the familiar head-scarf, knotted at the back of the head. However, for formal and ceremonial wear the "Jainkyrshah" (Jain Sem Dhara), in pure silk of bright yellow having patterns embroidered above the ankle line. The maidens are heavily decked with gold and silver jewelry, silver crown, three-decker necklaces of gold interspersed with pink coral, silver

arm bands, golden bangles and chains studded with precious stones (Sawian, 2011: pp. 42-45). The pendent is called “Kynjri Ksiar” and “Paila”.

It must be noted here that another traditional attire of the Khasi includes “Tapmoh khlieh” (shawl) whereas the apparel of the Jaintias are the same as Khasis with the addition of “Kyrchah”, “Thoh Khyrwang”, “Thoh Saru” and others (Lamare, 2013: pp. 30-31). At the rear of the silver crown of the women, protrudes the legendary Lasubon flower, its fragrance signifying the beauty and purity of the maidens. The traditional casual men’s wear is the “Putoi” (a black sleeveless jacket) with a white turban and a dhoti. While the ceremonial attire is made of expensive materials. There is the famous turban of “Khor” cloth- a handloom piece of yellowish color dotted with red motif of animals, a “Jainphong” sleeveless jacket of dark colour with luxurious embroidery of symmetrical pattern and motif of the cock or rooster. The lower margin is decorated with elongated tassel trills of glittering threads. A silken sash is tied around the waist, falling over a bright deep-red dhoti. Similar to the Khasis, the Jaintias men wore dhoti and sleeveless coat with the addition of a triangular cap called “ka tupri pynyien”. A muga shawl and a turban make the dress of the men folk complete (Sawian, 2011: pp.42-53).

Dance and Music:

In the state of Meghalaya, there is a variety of traditional form of artistic expression such as folk songs and music performed with the use of traditional instruments which include several kinds of drums such as “Ka nakra” (large wooden kettle drum made with a head that is fashioned with animal skin), “Ka ksing” (a cylindrically-shaped drum), “Ka tasa” (a little round drum), “Ka padiah” (a small drum with a wooden grip), etc. Played with a small wooden key kept in the hand, “Ka Duitara” is a traditional guitar with munga silk strings. Similar to a violin, the “Ka Maryngod” is another instrument played with a bow. Another type of guitar was the “Ka Marynthing”, which had a single string and was played with the finger. A hardwood pipe called “Ka Tangmuri” is played similarly to a flageolet. “Shakuriaw” or “Ka Kynshaw” are bell-metal cymbals. In addition, there are many bamboo flutes that are played for particular events. For instance, when a clan’s bones and ashes are gathered and interred in the family “mawbah” (tomb), the king of flutes, “Ka Sharati” or “Ka Shingwiang”, plays during cremation ceremonies. The War Khasi plays a reed-based harp known as a “Ka sing ding phong”. Additionally, the Khasi play the bamboo-made “Ka Mieng”, a Jew’s harp. The Khasi and Jaintia traditional dance festivals feature the aforementioned traditional musical instruments. They are folk songs that tell stories of birth, marriage, love and other things (ibid.).

It can be pointed out that a wide variety of musical instruments are used in festivals, accompanying songs and dances and used to express inner feelings. In some parts of the hills the solemn and majestic drum beats are the sound rendering appeasement to the departed dear and near ones.

The people of the hills perform dances at the level of an individual village (called Shnong), a group of villages (called Raid), or a collection of Raids (called Hima). Regional and local colors and flavors are used to vary the basic Khasi dance form that is prevalent in their ancient culture (Sawian, 2011:pp. 57). The Khasi people celebrate a number of festivals, including:

Shad Suk Mynsiem:

Shad Suk Mynsiem is a significant festival of the Khasi people. In the month of April, Shillong hosts the event. Men and women dance to the sounds of drums and flutes while dressed traditionally and adorning themselves with ceremonial jewelry, the Tangmuri and cymbals, in an open arena. The Shad Suk

Mynsiem is an annual Thanks-giving festival usually take place in the spring season. It means the 'Dance in a spirited joyous soul'. The festival signifies the appeal for the blessing of God, the Creator, for peace, happiness and prosperity. In this festival, maidens dance in the center circle while the men dance and move into positions so as to form a protective ring around the former. The men are simultaneously doing these motions while holding a sword, shield, or weed brush which represent them as playing the role of the males as guardians and protectors of women and children and provider to the family. The maidens dance with their eye downcast in an act of modesty and restraints, thus accepting their status and position in society as family care-taker (ibid.).

Ryndem (2018:pp.4-5) pointed out that traditionally, the youngest daughter (Khadduh) is assigned with responsibility and duty of looking after aged parents. However, in matters relating to economy particularly ancestral property, the youngest daughter assumes the responsibility of being a custodian and trustee of family property. When it comes to the transference or sale of any property in hand, it is required that the mother's brother (Kni) is informed about the matter and his approval be sought. Two roles have been distinguished for Khasi men: 'U Kni' (mother's brother) and 'U Kpa' (father or husband). In his mother's clan, Kur, he is known as 'U Kni' and performs his role, but at his wife's house, he is known as 'U Kpa'. In his mother's clan, mother's brother plays and performs important roles at events like childbirth, naming ceremonies, his sister's children's engagement and marriage and death ceremony. He also plays a pivotal role in matters pertaining to economy, particularly those involving ancestral property (ka Nongtymmen) which has been amassed over two, three, or more generations which is transmitted through youngest daughters (Khadduh). In managing his maternal nieces' and nephews' affairs, he also plays a significant role.

The Khasis consider the father to be the source of form and stature (u kpa uba ai ia ka long rynnieng) (Nongbri, 1988: pp. 74). Mawrie (1981: pp. 57-67) explains that as U Kpa, "he is the main pillar supporting and sustaining the family. The sound of his hookah brings security to the household and his coughing symbolizes the strength and power that controls the whole household; he earns for his children and enhances his earnings for his children's wealth and progress; his children are taught to show respect and not to behave in a way which displeases him or cause any dissatisfaction to him". It is in this context, that the two oblong side drums, called "Ksing Thap" or "Ksing Shynrang", that is the male drums, accompany the big drum called "Nakra" or "Bom". The accompanying drum on the left side represent 'U Kni', the maternal uncle, while the right accompanying drum represents 'U Kpa', the father in the family. These drums and their beats signify the correlation between the matrilineal and patrilineal aspects (Sawian, 2011:pp.55-58). It was observed that the Shad Suk Mynsiem is of six types, namely, "Shad Nalai", "Ka Shad Dumdum", "Ka Shad Klang", "Ka Shad Padiah", "Ka Shad Mastieh" and "Ka Shad Wait".

Ka Shad Nongkrem:

The Shad Nongkrem festival is celebrated for five days in the month of October or November every year. The event was previously observed in the middle of summer. The festival is also seen as an expression of gratitude to God for the season's prosperous harvest. The festival attendees ask God to grant the community harmony and prosperity. According to Sawian (2011), the importance of the drum instruments is emphasized on the first day of the Nongkrem dance festival, in the auspicious "Iew Pamtiah" market day. The drums and instruments are sanctified in an ablution ceremony, in the river Um Iew, on the auspicious market day of Iew Shillong. An elder teacher from among the musicians and

drummers, called Dhulia, pays obeisance by offering libation from a gourd, three times, in front of the flames, to “U Biskorom”, the Deity of Arts and Crafts and musical instruments, guardian of the fire. There are in all twenty-seven drum rhythms, within ten forms of drum beats accompanying the rites and rituals and dances during the Nongkrem dance. They have clear religious and spiritual conception, which has attained the status of classical classification of Khasi music, which has now been documented. An important ritual in the Nongkrem dance festival is the special sanctification of the “Tangmuri”, in which the blessings of “U Biskorom” is invoked. The female drum called “Ksing Kynthei”, when played signifies the special status of woman as the custodian of the clan social system. The female drum, also denotes the “Kyntang Jaid”, consecration ceremony, upon the formation of a new clan, having a prefix of the word “Dkhar”, meaning anyone outside, especially from the neighbouring plains. One of the most important adages is “Tipkur-Tipkha”, meaning that a person should know respect and adhere to the matrilineal relationship, the cognate and the agnate.

Ka Shad-Kynjoh Khaskain:

It is a dance festival that is primarily planned to commemorate “house-warming” or the moving into a newly constructed home. Following the completion of the ceremonial ceremonies, three dance performance stages- “Ka Shad Kyuntui”, “Ka Shad Khalai Miaw”, and “Ka Shad Brap”- are held. The dance continues till day break.

Most of the festivals are closely associated with agriculture, like the “Sajer” festival in Ri-Bhoi District of the Khasi Hills, held after harvesting, personifying the paddy, called “Tyrjup”, as a deity of prosperity and wealth. The basic rules are the same associating with the duties and responsibilities of women and men. These festivals, dances and songs reflect the structure and fabric of the society. They indicate that both men and women have well defined duties and responsibilities. For instance, in the Nongkrem dance festival, it is the “Syiem Sad” (Queen mother), who is the mother or the eldest daughter of “Syiem” (King), who arranges and prepares the materials for rites and rituals, but it is the traditional right and privilege of the male folks to perform the rites, rituals and ceremonies.

Behdienkhlam:

In Jaintia Hills, the Behdienkhlam festival held in the monsoon month of June or July after the sowing season, is a festive ceremony of chasing away plague, diseases and all the negative forces. ‘The women called “Ri Blai” are designated to initiate prayers to the ancestors of the clan or ‘Kur’, invoking their blessings, for the peace, prosperity and health of the family and community’ (Sawian, 2011: pp. 54-58). In this festival, poles of considerable length are held across the “Wah-Ait-Nar” stream during this celebration. People dance in the muddy pool of water, jumping on the poles and breaking them. Two parties compete for ownership of a huge pole that has been positioned across the stream. People pray to God during the celebration, asking him to grant them a bountiful harvest, praying for the property and good health. It can be pointed out here that only the male participates in the dancing.

Lahuh Dance:

The Lahuh dance of the Jaintias is also an essential folk dance. Sawian (ibid.) pointed out that when the Hynniewtreps finally descended to earth from the Golden Ladder on top of “U Lum Sohpet bneng” Peak and that the corporeal Golden Bridge was broken away, the Hynniewtreps performed a thanksgiving dance called the “Shad Chipiah”, honouring God, the Creator. Later this dance was called the

“Nikhla” dance, because it was the “Nikhla” clan or ‘Kur’ who preserved this dance form. Eventually, it came to be called the “Lahuh” dance, because of the words “Huh a huh a huh” proceeding the lyrics of the folk song. Dressed in their finest, both men and women take part. A young woman is typically accompanied by two men who join arms and dance in step. In lieu of the customary drums and pipe, a cheerleader- typically a man with the talent of impromptu recitation- can be heard reciting amusing couplets, which heightens the audience’s joy.

Other important festivals and ceremonies are “Ka Chad Pastieh”- basically a war dance. “Ka Chad Khla” or Tiger festival is another important festival of the people of Nongtalang and Changpung. In these festivals and ceremonies, a lot of importance is given to the community group dance like “Ka Chad Rawa”, “Ka Chad Sukra” and “Ka Chad Pliang”, thereby conserving the people’s cultural heritage.

Conclusion:

Khasi festivals have a significant impact on people’s social lives, irrespective of their place and time of origin or celebration. Whatever may be the purpose of the festivals, the overall significance or impact that festivals play upon the people of the land in general create a social sense of oneness and solidarity of the Khasi as a distinct group having a matrilineal system. It is, therefore, noteworthy to mention that in spite of the people being influence by any style of modernity, any form of religion and any standard way of living, the people still adhere to the traditional percept which is used to be amply demonstrated in time or occasion of festivals. The Khasis are God fearing people and any festival that they observe are divinely attached festivals. The celebration of festivals among the Khasis signifies the invocation of God for the material prosperity of the people such as agriculture, trade and commerce, health, security, economic and social wellbeing. This sense of religious reverence and attachment add to the purer and more attractive side of significance of festivals in the Khasi tribe.

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