

FOLKLORE AND THE KHASI IDENTITY

Thesis submitted for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in the

FACULTY OF ARTS JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

By

SOPHIA PDE

DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

KOLKATA 700032

2020

DECLARATION

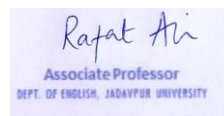
Certified that the Thesis entitled **FOLKLORE AND THE KHASI IDENTITY** submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my original work carried out under the supervision of Dr. Rafat Ali, Department of English, Jadavpur University and co-supervised by Prof. Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, Department of English, North- Eastern Hill University, and that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

Candidate:



Date: 17/09/2020

Countersigned by the Supervisor



Date:

Co-supervisor:

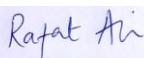


Date: 17/09/2020



Date: 17/09/2020

Countersigned by the Supervisor


Associate Professor
DEPT. OF ENGLISH, JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

Date: 17/09/2020

Co-Supervisor


Professor in English
North Eastern Hill University
Shillong-793022

Date: 17/09/2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

DECLARATIONI would like to express my deepest appreciation to the Department of English, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, for letting me fulfill my dream of being a PhD student there. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Soumen Sen (Retd) From North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, who initially guided me to undertake a study, he himself was so enthusiastic and passionate about, during his tenure as Head of the Centre of Literary and Cultural Studies, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong. Dr. Sen has been an excellent mentor, through his vast experience in the study of social, political development and folk-cultures of North-eastern States of India. Without his guidance and persistent help this thesis would not have been possible.

I would like to thank my guide Dr. Rafat Ali from the Department of English, Jadavpur University, who put his best effort to make sure my thesis was completed and to his satisfaction. My sincere thanks to my co-guide, Prof. Kympham Sing Nongkynrih, who is not only a faculty member of the Department of English, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, but is also an expert in Khasi folklore and Translation. I would also like to sincerely thank Dr. Anil Kumar Boro, Faculty member of the Department of Folklore Research, Guwahati University, who helped me understand the importance of folklore studies related to North-East India.

I extend my sincere thanks to the staff members of Anthropological Survey of India, Kolkata, National Library, Kolkata, for without their co-operation and help, it would have been next to impossible to unearth

archival material needed for my study. I also thank the staff members of Central Library, Shillong, who guided me to pick valuable source material, from their repertoire of folk material on the Khasis.

Last, but not the least, my gratitude to my parents, for their constant support and love in trying times.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Khasis and Jaintias form a part of the tribes that inhabit the hilly regions of what has come to be known as the State of Meghalaya. Meghalaya came into existence first as an autonomous state within the state of Assam on April 2, 1970, and then attained full statehood on January 21, 1972. It was initially formed with two hill districts, Khasi and Jaintia hills and the Garo hills. West Meghalaya comprises of East Garo hills, West Garo hills and South Garo hills. East Meghalaya comprises of East Khasi hills with Shillong as its headquarter, Jaintia hills with Jowai as its headquarter, West Khasi hills and Ri-Bhoi with Nongstoin and Nongpoh as their respective headquarters. “Khasi” is a generic name given to the people of the Khasis and Jaintia hills. The Khasis and Jaintias share the same customs and traditions; they speak the same language and follow common religious beliefs. The Khasis of the Eastern Plateau are known as *Pnars* or *Syntengs*, those of the Northern slopes as *Wars* those in the Western slopes are known as *Lyngngams*. The Khasis of the Western Plateau are known as *Khyntiams* to the *Pnars* and as *Nongphlang*s to the *Wars*. There are other groups like the Labangs, the Khyrwangs, the Nongtungs and others and all these are known by the generic name “Khasi”.¹

Since the Khasis had no written history, and we cannot retrace beyond the sixteenth century for any kind of dated history of the people, they do find mention in the annals and chronicles (Buranji) of the neighbouring Ahom, Kachari and Koch Bihar kings.² From early records of British writers like Pemberton, and Sir Hooker, we are able to gather the information that there are extant records that show that trade in Khasi lime and coal was already in full swing in the early part of the seventeenth century. The records also show that there has been constant trade with neighbouring countries, in particular Sylhet for a long period of time, before the systematic geological

¹ Helen Giri, *The Khasi Under British Rule 1824-1947* (New Delhi: Regency Publications, 1998), 6.

² Soumen Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills: A study of Folklore* (Delhi: B.R Publishing Corp., 1985), iii.

exploration of the Khasi and Jaintia hills under the British agency began in 1851.³ The first monograph on the Khasis appeared in the early part of the Twentieth century, when P.R.T Gurdon published his widely acclaimed book *The Khasis*. Since then, numerous scholars, writers have written extensively to try and reconstruct the history of the Khasis from oral sources.

All Scholars are in general agreement that the origin of the Khasis seems to be shrouded in mystery. Gurdon had once said that it was indeed a very “vexed” question. It is noteworthy and relevant, to mention how ethnographers, linguist and historians have tried to trace and identify the racial and linguistic origin of the Khasis. J.N. Chowdhury in his book *The Khasi Canvas* mentions Sir Hooker amongst the early writers who remarked on the Indo-Chinese affinity of the Khasis. The language too, being Indo-Chinese. L.A Waddel, writing from reports in 1901, straightaway classified the Khasi as a Mongoloid tribe, but in language, they occupied a group by themselves exhibiting no relationship with any other known language. The isolation of the Khasi race from the contiguous Tibeto-Burman stock, linguistically and also otherwise, was, however, soon to attract the attention of comparative philologist and ethnologist, J.R. Logan. He was probably the first in the field, who demonstrated the relationship existing between the Khasis and certain isolated groups of people of ‘Further India’ like Mons or Talaungs of Pegu, the Khmers of Cambodia and the inhabitants of Annam. His researches were later carried forward by Prof. Ernst Kuhn of Munich and Pater.W. Schmidt of Vienna. The nearest kinsmen of the Khasis were also found in the Palungs and Was of Burma. It was noticed at the same time that the linguistic and remote cultural affinity of the Khasis extended to Kolarain tribes like the Mundas, Hos, Santals, Korkus etc in Chota Nagpur in Bihar and Satpura range in Central Provinces.⁴

Subsequently, Chowdhury speaks of Gurdon’s significant contribution, having been the first author to write a definitive book on the Khasis, and treated all aspects of their origin elaborately. He was clearly committed to the theory that the Khasis were ‘an offshoot’ of the Mon people of ‘Further India’ and assigned the same direction of

3 J.N. Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas: A Cultural and Political History* (Shillong: Jaya Chowdhury, 1978), 17.

4 Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, 37-47.

migration in the case of the Khasis as had been followed generally by other race movements, i.e. from the east.

Hamlet Bareh, interestingly mentions that there is a tradition amongst the Khasis that they originally came into Assam via the Patkoi range which is described as a hill they met on their journey. J.H Hutton entertains a similar idea of the migration from the east. An interesting point is the finding of groups of stones ossuaries in North Cachar Hills which can clearly be associated with the Khasis having halted in North Cachar Hills before they passed into their present home.⁵

Coming to the language spoken by the Khasis, Soumen Sen, says that linguists like Logan and Schmidt however, discovered them as a people speaking an Austric language, Mon-Khmer, spoken on the one hand by the Mon, Palaung Wa of Burma and Khmer of Cambodia, and on the other by a linguistic family of the Indian Peninsula, once called Kolarin, but now known as Munda and Nicobarese. Gurdon saw through the difficulties of connecting the Ho-Mundas and the Khasis, who may share similarities in language and certain customs, but were at a 'great distance from the Khasis'. Having cited Gurdon's insightful statement, Sen goes on to ask a pertinent question—" If Khasi belong to the Austric family of languages having linguistic and cultural affinities with the Ho-Mundas, then how do we explain the isolated habitat of the speaker among a group of Indo-Mongoloid people speaking Tibeto-Burman languages, with whom they are supposed to be racially connected and from whom they differ very much linguistically?"⁶

Many physical anthropologist, past and present, according to Sen are certain that ethnically, the Khasi belong to the Indo-Mongoloid group inspite of linguistic isolation. Though, some contending theories by eminent scholars like J.N. Chowdhury and Bareh, point to the Khasi as being an Austric people. However, Sen makes a point when he cites the findings of S.K. Chatterji, who implicitly states:

"These are as has been observed more than once before Indo-Mongoloid in race, but Austric (Mon-Kumer) in language. Their cultural milieu is the same as that of the

⁵ Hamlet Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi people* (Shillong: Author, 1967), 12-13.

⁶ Sen, *Social and State formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, 23.

neighbours the Bodos. The history of the origin of the Khasis is shrouded in mystery. They are said to be descended from some of the earliest Mongoloid immigrants into India who changed their language through contact with Austric speakers, either in Burma or on the soil of India, in prehistoric times. It is likely they were spread over a much wider tract-probably over parts at least of the plain-lands of Sylhet and Kamrup, before they become finally confined to the Khasi and Jaintia Hills”.⁷

Soumen Sen, to bring forward the point, that there is yet another postulate that might enlighten the question of racial identity of the Khasis, cites B.S Guha, who suggests that the Mongoloids were the third group to enter India, the proto-Australoid being the second and the Negritos first, could be divided into two broad groups-the Palaeo-Mongoloids and the Tibeto-Mongoloids. Guha, also suggested that the Khasi belong to the Palaeo-Mongoloid branch. Citing other authors like (S. K Chatterji and others) for authenticity and a stronger argument, Soumen Sen states that if Palaeo-mongoloid are taken as the admixture of the Mongoloid and Australoid racial types, then the Khasi may be taken as Palaeo-Mongoloid following the findings of B.S. Guha.⁸

Until newer research comes to light with more substantial evidence, we are in general agreement with Soumen Sen, B.S Guha, S.K Chatterjee and others, that the Palaeo-Mongoloid assumption of the racial identity of the Khasis, seems the most plausible, coming as it does as a culmination point to the years of conjectural research by leading scholars from various fields of research.

What we know about the Khasis, is largely what has been reconstructed from their oral tradition called ‘*Ki Parom*’. It is from ‘*Ki Parom*’ that the Khasis derive their meaning and inspiration for their socio-cultural organization. The single most important aspect of Khasi society is the matrilineal system, as is reflected in the term *Khasi* itself, split into two syllabus *Kha* and *Si*, the term means ancient mother (*Kha* means ancestral mother) and *Si*, means one, suggest the basic philosophy of inheritance that governs the idea of matriliney.⁹ The Khasi are an endogamous tribe who are divided into exogamous clans which are again

⁷ S. K. Chatterjee, *Kirata-Jana-Kriti*, 2nd ed. (Kolkata: The Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1974), 133. Quoted in Sen, *Social and State formation*, 26.

⁸ Sen, *Social and State formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, 29.

⁹ K.R Dikshit and Jutta.K Dikshit, *North-East India: Land, People and Economy*. (Netherlands: Springer Publication, 2014), 356.

subdivided into exogamous matrilineal families. The exogamous clans are Lyngdoh, Kharkongor, Diengdoh, Sohkhlet, Marbaniang and Syiemlieh who trace their descent from respective female ancestress. Inter marriage between them is allowed. Inheritance of property takes place only through the female line. The Khasi clans provide a good example of social organization based on clans. A clan is known as 'Kur', and its evolution includes generations of people tracing their descent to a common maternal ancestry, bound together by religion, ancestral worship and funeral rites. Most clans came into being during the period of migration. In course of time; the original matriarch's name is replaced by one of the successor mothers, leading to a multiplication of clans. The Khyntiam are the most prominent group, who live in the high plateau in the vicinity of Shillong, and consist of several clans such as Kharkongor, Khongwir, Rani, Lyngdoh, Mawlong, Syiemlieh, Dkhar and Nongkhlaw. Even after having adopted Christianity, the Khasis maintain strong ties based on their irrespective clans, which pass down the female line.¹⁰

Among the Khasis, there are well-defined territorial groups, which reflect a relationship with their immediate environment. This is clearly reflected in the names given to Khasi groups. Khasis who inhabit the higher plateau call themselves '*Ri-lum*' (people from higher regions). Similarly *War* is the region on the southern edge of the plateau, and is inhabited by people who refer to themselves as *War Khasi* (area that falls on the Khasi part of the region), and *War Jaintia* (those who inhabit the Jaintia part of the region). K. R Dikshit and Jutta, K. Dikshit have listed the five region-specific recognized groups as shown in the table below: ¹¹

Khasi group	Present area of their habitat
1. Kynriams or Nonglums (Khasi proper)	East Khasi district, specially Shillong region
2. Syntengs or Pnars	Jaintia District
3. Wars	Area around Cherrapunji
4. Bhois	Ri-Bhoi District
5. Lyngngam (also written Lyngam)	West Khasi District

¹⁰ Dikshit and Dikshit, *North-East India*, 356. See also Bareh, *Khasi Democracy*, 115.

¹¹ Dikshit and Dikshit, *North-East India*, 358.

During Pre-colonial days, and even till Meghalaya became a full-fledged state, the Khasi state had been formed, in more than one instance by the voluntary association of villages, or groups of villages. The head of the Khasi state is the *Syiem* or chief. A Khasi State is a limited monarchy, the syiem's powers being circumscribed. The syiem can perform no act of any importance without first consulting and obtaining the approval of his *durbar*, upon which the state *myntris* (noblemen) sit. This *durbar* is an executive council which the Syiem presides, and also possesses judicial powers. The Syiem manages the State business through his *myntris*, although it is true that in some states the members of the Syiem family have been allowed considerable share of the State management. In some States there are village headmen, styled *Sirdars*, who settle cases, collect labour, and assess and receive for the chief the *punsuk*, which may be translated into "gratification" In Nongstoin there is an official styled *lyngskor*, who is the superior of a number of village *sirdars*, and who acts as the Syiem's deputy-governor. In the Khasi Hills there is no land revenue, nor are there any tithes or other imposts levied upon the cultivator's produce. The land, to as great extent, is the property of different clans and villages, although in some instances land is privately owned. The chief is entitled to receive the income that arises from what are known as the *raj* or State land only.¹² A *Syiemship*, a *Lyngdohship* or a *Sirdarship* was an important aspect in the territorial organization and democratic governance of the Khasi State during pre-colonial days. These Syiemships were confined to the Khasi hills only, whereas the Jaintia hills had their equivalent of *Syiemships* called the *Daloiship* (where the chief was referred to as *Daloi*). The power structure of the Jaintia *Dalois* was almost the same as that of the hill area of Jaintia kingdom. However, in Khasi Hills a kingdom parallel to the Jaintia Kingdom did not develop. The *Dalois* in Jaintia Hills exercised more or less the same authority as that of the Khasi Syiems, except that the *Syiems* had no overlord as the *dalois* had on the King of Jaintia.¹³

Hamlet Bareh, had given a list of sixteen native states, which fall under the Khasi hill division alone (excluding Jaintia hills and Garo hills), at the time before Meghalaya became a full-fledged state. The sixteen native states or *Syiemships* were (1) Khyrim,

¹² P.R.T.,Gurdon, *The Khasis*, (London: Macmillan, 1914), 66-67

¹³ Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, 144

(2) Myllem, (3) Nongkhlaw, (4) Cherra, (5) Rambrai, (6) Myriaw, (7) Nongstoin, (8) Nobosohpoh, (9) Mawring, (10) Nongspung, (11) Mawsynram, (12) Maharam, (13) Malai-Sohmat, (14) Langrin, (15) Bhowal, (16) Jirang. The three Lyngdohship were Mawphlang, Sohiong and Lyniong. The five *Sirdars* were (1) Dwara-Nongtyrnem, (2) Mawdon, (3) Mawlong, (4) Nonglwai and (5) Pamsamgul. The only *Wahdadarship* was Shella.¹⁴ After independence, these *Syiemships* have been replaced by the Autonomous District Councils, for regional autonomy and for the safeguard of traditional heritage, customs, practices, usages and economic security. In effect, the Khasi States are functional till today in their independent character, under Constitutional provision of the Sixth Schedule. The only thing that has changed is that the *Syiemships* now remain only titles, and they do preside over clans and *durbars* as in the days of old.

Khasis are divided into groups which are clan-based, following the matrilineal pattern, which is the defining element in Khasi society. Alongside this defining system of matriliney, is the democratic system in organizing the *Syiemships*, and in choosing the *Syiems*. The '*kur*' or clan plays a pivotal role in the division and rules of inheritance, based on the matrilineal order. A '*kur*' is an exogamous unit, where every member is a kit and kin of every other member of the same '*kur*'-resting on the belief that they all originated from the same '*kpoh*' (in literal translation would mean womb) or common female ancestry. The organization of *Syiemship* also takes into account only the clan, and even if a *Syiem* was to take over the neighbouring *Syiemship* by expansion, there is no change in the *Syiem*'s original family or clan.¹⁵

The Khasi group has been sub-divided into the following groups: -

Khynriams

This group occupies the highland around Shillong, and is considered the most progressive group. Majorities from this group have embraced Christianity, but there are quite a number of them who still adhere to the *Niam* (traditional Khasi Religion). Living in and around the administrative capital, Shillong; they have access to modern

¹⁴ Bareh, *History and Culture of the Khasi People*, 13. Quoted in Dikshit and Dikshit, *North-East India*, 358

¹⁵ Dikshit and Dikshit, *North-East India*, 359

amenities, raising their level of awareness, which also led to the growth of the Khasi elites, who became active members in the socio-political movements and finally to Statehood for Meghalaya. The Khyntiams (or Khasi proper of Shillong region) constitute about 70% of the total Khasi population and about 35% of the population of the State. Conversion to Christianity, growth of Khasi language and literature, after adoption of the Roman script, produced eminent poets and writers; prominent among them is the 19th Cent Khasi poet Laureate, U Soso Tham. The modern Khasi is forward-looking, proud of his ancestry and culture, and is ready to assimilate modern ideas. Unfortunately, socio-cultural advancement is confined to the urban Khasi elite and the middle class. Rural Meghalaya still remains backward both economically and culturally, strongly steeped in superstitious beliefs and tradition. They still practice shifting cultivation, with poor yield, and are vulnerably to natural disasters. It is in the rural area that Khasis produce a large number of children, putting pressure on cultivable land, and adding to their economic woes.¹⁶

Jaintia/Syntengs/Pnars

These are the Khasis of Jaintia Hills District, and being matrilineal trace their origin back to a mother. The Clans of Jowai, the present headquarters of Jaintia Hills, trace their origin to *Saw Kpoh*, or the four sisters-*Ka Bon, Ka Tein, ka Wet and Ka Doh*. According to legend, the clans that are settled in Jowai are the descendants of these four mothers (in Khasi *Saw Kpoh* means four wombs). The Khasi group claim their descent from *Ki Hynniew Trep* (seven families or seven huts). The Jaintias, who are usually taken as a sub-group of the Khasis with endoethnomyn Pnar and exoethnonyms Synteng and Jaintia, also claim that they are the descendants of *Ki Hynniew Trep*. These narratives and oral tradition make one inclined to accept the Khasis and the Jaintias along with the Wars, the Bhois and the Lyngams as different sub-groups of one ethnic group with the generic name Khasi.¹⁷

The Pnar-speaking Khasis form over 20% of the entire Khasi population of Meghalaya. The Pnars too have embraced Christianity, though a sizeable number still adheres to *Niam Tre* (the Jaintia indigenous Religion). Though the Pnars have engaged

¹⁶ Dikshit and Dikshit, *North-East India*, 359-360.

¹⁷ Soumen Sen, *Khasi-Jaintia Folklore: Context, Discourse and History* (Chennai: National Folklore Support Centre, 2004), 56.

themselves in mining of coal and other minerals, a majority are still engaged in jhuming cultivation, the slash and burn cultivation, but also benefit from wet irrigation, particularly in the eastern part of Jaintia hills. The Pnars are known for their betel leaf gardens, which were an important source of betel leaves in Sylhet market during the British days. Trading still continues in the border areas between the Pnars, War Jaintias and traders from Bangladesh. Owing to coal mining in Jaintia hills, the wealthy among them have invested in prime real estate in Shillong and its vicinity, and have migrated there for a better life.¹⁸

War Khasi/War Jaintia

The Wars are found in a group of thirty odd villages in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya, bordering Bangladesh, and they are popularly known as War Khasis and War Jaintias respectively. The War region of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills is bounded by the Upland Khasi and Jaintia Hills on the north, the Bangladesh plains on the south, Garo Hills on the west and the Jaintia hills on the east. Some of them are early migrants from Bangladesh who migrated to the region during the partition of India in 1947 and settled in the southern part of the state. In fact, the Wars, because they inhabit the borders with Bangladesh for a very long time, their language, culture and economic activities distinguish them from the rest of the Khasi tribes. The law of inheritance among the Wars is at variance with that of other Khasi groups and both sons and daughters inherit property. It appears that the system of matriliney is discarded in War region under the influence of the society in neighbouring Bangladesh, where males own and inherit property.¹⁹ Unfortunately, the partition of India in 1947 shattered the economy of the area due to the closure of the age-old trade with East Bengal and this had a deterrent effect on the economic life of the Wars, who were formerly thriving traders with East Bengal.

Bhois

Bhois are the Khasi group, occupying the fertile lowlands on the northern margin of Khasi hills. Some believe that the Bhois migrated to this region from Jaintia hills.

¹⁸ Dikshit and Dikshit, North-East India, 360.

¹⁹ Dikshit and Dikshit, North-East India, 361.

According to one tradition, Sajar Nangli, the Army General of the king of Sutnga Syiemship (later Jaintia Kingdom) along with his followers, had a serious fall-out with the Jaintia King, and fled towards the North-West of the present Khasi hills. In course of their odyssey between 1500 and 1600 A.D (presumably). They travelled to these lowlands and established the Kingdom known as Nongpoh Syiemship. There are various contending theories on how the Bhois originated and came to settle in those areas. Most popular among these theories is that the Khasi came and possessed their present land by crossing the great river 'Brahmaputra'. The question arises, whether some people were already living in these areas prior to the advent of Sajar Nangli and his followers. No researcher has come by with any convincing theory, and we can only in the meanwhile rely on conjectural theories.²⁰ It is also suggested that many of the Bhois are really Mikirs (Karbis) who have adopted the language and customs of the Khasis. Bhois, like the other Khasi groups, follow a matrilineal system and are monogamous. While speaking the Bhoi dialect of the Khasi language, they are also multi-lingual because of their contact with other communities in the area. Besides agriculture, especially shifting cultivation, the Bhoi-Khasis follow a number of supplementary occupations like fishing, hunting, basketry and collection of forest produce.²¹

Lyngnam (also spelt as Lyngngam)

The Lyngam are another sub-group of the Khasis, occupying the West Khasi Hills district, just to the east of the Garo hills. There is a tradition that lyngnams have a Garo origin and embraced Khasi customs. Their language is similar to Khasi and has at best a 'Garo-Khasi' hybrid ancestry.²² Their family organization and succession follows the Khasi matrilineal pattern.

The Garos

Garos are a tribe, occupying over a third of the western part of Meghalaya, with a population of over a million, the Garos form over 30% of the population of

²⁰ The Official Web Portal of Government of Meghalaya (Dec 07, 2016). Retrieved from <http://meghalaya.gov.in/megportal/district.details/14799>.

²¹ Dikshit and Dikshit, North-East India, 361.

²² Dikshit and Dikshit, North-East India, 361.

Meghalaya and second largest ethnic group in the state. Besides, the three districts of Western Meghalaya, the Garos are spread in the neighbouring district in the Brahmaputra Valley. The Garos have a substantial presence in Bangladesh notably in Mymensingh and Sylhet districts.²³

The Garos call themselves ‘Achick’-Mande, meaning hill people. The word ‘Achik’ meant hill and Mande signifies people. A’chick is the general title used for the various groups of people after the division of the race, and it also applies to the groups of Garos scattered at the neighbouring places in Assam, Tripura, Nagaland and Mymensingh in Bangladesh. An overwhelming majority of the Garos have converted to Christianity, though in matters of social organization almost all Garos follow their traditional system. Like the Khasis, they too are a matrilineal group, and though ethnically, the Garos are a Mongoloid people, allied to Boro-Kachari group and speak a language that is akin to Bodo language. The Garos maintain good relations with the neighboring tribes like the Hajongs, Rabhas and Koches, besides Bengali and other Hindu inhabitants of the Brahmaputra region.²⁴

Population of Meghalaya

This data collected by Meghalaya Census 2011, will display the decadal growth rate of population of the State of Meghalaya (1991-01 2001-11). The table below will clearly show the density of population that has risen at both state and district levels. The highest density of population is noticed in East Khasi Hills with 292 persons per square kilometer and the lowest in West Khasi Hills with only 73 persons per square kilometer. Only East Khasi Hills and West Garo Hills have a density of population above the state average. In the remaining districts, the density is below the state average and in South Garo Hills and West Khasi Hills; it is in two Digits only.

It is observed that the decadal growth rate of population of the state as well as that of the Districts have decreased considerably when compared to that of 2001, except in East Khasi Hills where it has risen by 1.27 percentage points. The highest decadal

²³ Dikshit and Dikshit, North-East India, 363.

²⁴ Dikshit and Dikshit, North-East India, 363. For further reading on the Other Tribal Communities of Meghalaya that merit attention like ‘The Hajongs’, ‘Koches’ and ‘Rabhas’, refer to the same book, under the heading, “The People of Meghalaya”.

growth is noticed in Ri Bhoi with 34.02 percent followed by Jaintia Hills with 31.34 percent and the lowest is noticed in East Khasi Hills with 24.68 percent. In fact, the decadal growth rate is above state average of 27.82 percent only in South Garo Hills, West Khasi Hills, Ri Bhoi and Jaintia Hills. In the remaining Districts, it is below the state average. According to the Census 2011 the total population of Meghalaya stands at 8, 24,059 respectively.²⁵

The Decadal growth rate of Population of the State of Meghalaya (1991-2001, 2001-2011) is shown below:

Distribution of Population, Decadal Growth Rate, Sex-Ratio and Population Density										
District Code	State/District	Population 2011			Percentage decadal growth rate of		Sex-Ratio (Number of Females per 1000 Males)		Population density per Sq. Km.	
		Persons	Males	Females	1991-01	2001-11	2001	2011	2001	2011
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
	Meghalaya	2,964,007	1492668	1,471,339	30.65	27.82	972	986	103	132
01	West Garo Hills	642,923	324,900	318,023	28.41	26.73	969	979	137	173
02	East Garo Hills	317,618	161,372	156,246	32.45	25.84	966	968	97	122
03	South Garo Hills	142,574	73,322	69,252	32.33	29.33	941	944	60	77
04	West Khasi Hills	385,601	194,628	190,973	33.05	30.25	968	981	56	73
05	Ri Bhoi	258,380	132,445	125,935	51.43	34.02	941	951	81	109
06	East Khasi Hills	824,059	410,360	413,699	23.41	24.68	981	1008	234	292
07	Jaintia Hills	392,852	195,641	197,211	35.67	31.34	996	1008	78	103

* For calculation of sex ratio total of males and others as males used.

Art and Festival of the Khasis

If we are to take the world view of a folk people, it must necessarily include art and craft, festivals, rituals and music. The customs and rituals practiced by the Khasis are reflected in their art and craft, festivals (which include music and dance). Many writers in the past have accused the Khasis of being deficient in all kinds of art and crafts.²⁶ Though the accusatory remarks may have been prejudicial and bias, there is some truth in it, to the extent that though art and craft was being practiced; it was only to a limited scale for daily use. However, as stated by J.N Chowdhury, that there is evidence on all hands that various art and crafts, including weaving, were practiced by

²⁵ Both the table and data are taken from Meghalaya census 2011. Retrieved from <http://www.censusindia.gov.in/2011-prov-results/data-files/Meghalaya/2.%20highlights.pdf>.

²⁶ Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, 61.

the Khasis since time immemorial. Basketry, based on Bamboo and cane, is another industry considered vogue throughout the Khasi and Jaintia hills.²⁷

Cottage industries and industrial arts include cane and bamboo work, tailoring, handloom weaving and spinning.²⁸ The others include cocoon rearing, lace production, stone cutting, brick making, jewellery making, pottery making, iron smelting, and beekeeping. Manufactured goods include: woven cloth, coarse cotton, *randia* (silk)cloth, quilts (made of beaten and woven tree bark), hoes, ploughshares, billhooks, axes, silver work, netted bags (of pineapple fiber), pottery (made without the use of the potter's wheel), mats baskets rope and strings, gunpowder, brass cooking utensils, bows, arrows, swords, spears, and shields. Decorative art of the Khasis include metal gongs (with animal engravings), implements of warfare (arrows, spears, bows, and shields), and memorial slabs (with engravings).²⁹

In Khasi life, every festival and ceremony from birth to death is enriched with music and dance. We must also keep in mind that among early agricultural communities the processes of birth and generation and those of fertility in general appeared to be so intimate that the two aspects of the same mystery found symbolic expressions in their customs and rituals.³⁰ The '*Phawar*' (traditional Khasi rhyme) is one of the basic forms of Khasi music. It is more of a "chant" than a song, and is often composed on the spot, to suit the occasion. I.M Simon describes the *Phawars* as couplets, each line of which is divided into two parts; each part of the first line sung by the cheer leader is what may be called a "Rhyme setter" for the corresponding part in the second line which would be taken up by the chorus. The first line would therefore appear to be meaningless strings of words, the whole purpose of the exchange being confined to the second line. An example of a *Phawar* is given below:³¹

U kyndeh ka jalyngkhan, u sohbrap ho! ia ka skei;

²⁷ Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, 63.

²⁸ Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, 63.

²⁹ These details have been retrieved from, "Art and Festivals of the Khasi Tribe" (12/12/2008) http://www.indianet.zone.com/19/art_festival_Khasi_tribe.htm.

³⁰ N.N Bhattacharya, *Ancient Indian Rituals and their Social Contents*, 1975, Preface X. Quoted in Soumen Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, B.R Publishing Corp, 1985:43.

³¹ I.M., Simon "A Note on Khasi and Its Development as a Literary Language" In Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, 401.

Wat leit leh kam bymman, ioh tim-pap ka bilei.

Literally:

He pants for curry leaf, the passion fruit ho! For the deer;

Never do what is evil, or the Goddess will curse (you).

(I.M Simon, 1978)

Other forms of songs include ballads and verses of the idyllic past, the exploits of legendary heroes, and lament for martyrs. Khasi musical instruments used to support a song are, *Ksing Shynrang* (Male drum) and the *Ksing Kynthai* (female drum). Flutes and drums of various types are also used. The traditional drums are not only used to provide the beat for the festival but it is also used to 'invite' people to the event. Other musical instruments used by the Khasi are the "Tangmuri" (a kind of flageolet); "Shaw Shaw" (Cymbals); Percussion instruments of various types, including the "Nakra" (Big Drum) and "Ksing Padiak" (small drum); the "Besli" (flute for "solo" recitals) and a variety of other wind instruments like "sharati", "shyngwaing" (used for different occasions, sad or joyous); the "Duitara" (a stringed instrument played by striking the strings with a wooden pick).³² Primarily, the Khasis are a musical people and this has been attested by J.N Chowdhury when he says the following:

"Amongst all the hill people of India's north-east region and, perhaps elsewhere, the Khasis are undoubtedly the most musical race. Their sensitivity to musical sounds is so great that they can readily pick up any tune and melody whether indigenous or foreign. They can handle any musical instrument however complicated with little training and practice."³³

There are different types of Khasi Festival, but prominent among them are 1) ka Shad Suk Mynsiem 2) Ka Pomblang Syiem 3) Ka Beh Deing Kham Festival.

Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem-It is the annual spring dance festival, performed to celebrate harvesting and sowing. Both male and female dancers participate in the dance, but it is a ritualistic requirement that the female dancers have to be unmarried. The female

³² These details have been retrieved from "Art and Festivals of the Khasi tribe" (12/12/2008)
http://www.indianet.zone.com/19/art_festival_Khasi_tribe.htm

³³ Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, 92.

dancers wear a cloth draped from waist to ankle (*ka jingpim shad*), full sleeve blouse with lacework at the neck (*Ka Sopti Mukmar*), two rectangular pieces of gold-thread embroidered cloth crosswise at the shoulders, overlapping each other (*Ka Dhara Rang Ksiar*), necklace made of red coral and foil-covered beads in parallel strings (*U Kpieng Paila*), golden ear-rings (*Ki Sohshkor Ksiar*). A gold or silver crown with a braid of very fine threads in the back that falls past the waist, often adorned with fresh flowers (*Kapangsngiet Ksiar Ne Rupa*). Large silver armlets on arms (*Ki Mahu*), golden wristlets or bracelets (*Ki Khadu Ne Ki Syngkha*). Semi-circular collar of gold/silver plate tied with a thread around the neck. A silver chain worn around the neck (*U Kynjiri Tabha*). Handkerchief tied to both hands, to wipe perspiration off face and forehead (*Ki Rumal Rit*).³⁴

The male dancers are regally dressed in a golden silk turban (*Ka Jain spong Khor*). Semi-circular collar of gold/ silver plate tied round the neck (*U Shanryndang*). An 18-inch long ‘plume’ stuck in the turban (*U Thuia*). A richly embroidered sleeveless jacket (*Ka Jympang*). A silver chain worn across the shoulders (*U Taban*). Silver ‘quiver’ with silver ‘arrows’ tied to the waist and an animal tail dangling from the end (*Ka Ryngkap*). A silver-mesh belt at the waist to cover the cord of the quiver (*U Painpoh Syngkai*). Maroon silk cloth woven like a ‘dhoti’ (*Ka jainboh*). A whisks (*U Symphiah*). A ceremonial sword (*Ka Waitlam*) and a Handkerchief (*Ka Rumal*).³⁵

Ka Pomblang Syiem- is a five day festival, which is a thanksgiving festival for a good harvest and the participants pray for peace and prosperity of the community. It is celebrated during October/November every year. “Smit”, the capital of the Khyrim Syiemship (a few kilometers away from Shillong) is officially the venue for this ancient festival. Once the religious rituals, performed by the administrative heads are over, the dancers begin their ritualistic dance composed of both female (unmarried) and male participants. The Syiem (King) is the administrative head of the Hima (Khasi State). The Syiem Sad (eldest sister of the ruling Syiem), is the custodian of

³⁴ These details have been retrieved from “Art and Festivals of the Khasi tribe “ (12/12/2008) http://www.indianet.zone.com/19/art_festival_Khasi_tribe.htm

³⁵ These details have been retrieved from “Art and Festivals of the Khasi tribe “ (12/12/2008) http://www.indianet.zone.com/19/art_festival_Khasi_tribe.htm

rites and rituals along with the Myntries (Council of Ministers), who are the caretakers of all ceremonies. The Priest and the High Priest join this dance festival as well. Not only to the Gods, ritualistic offerings are also made to the ancestors like “ka lawbei” and “U Thawlang” of the ruling clan,” Suidnai”, the First Maternal Uncle and to the diety of Shillong, propitiating their blessings for a bumper harvest.

Ka Behdeinkhlam Festival- is another religious festival which is celebrated by the Pnars or Jaintias inhabiting the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya. This festival is celebrated annually at Jowai, the headquarters of the Jaintia Hills District. This festival is also celebrated in some other places of the District such as Tuber, Shyrmang, Ialong, Mukhla and Mutlong. *Beh*, means drive, and *dein* means stick. *Khlam* means plague, so it means a festival to drive away plague with the help of sticks. The festival is held in the rainy months of June or July after the sowing season. The people observes this festival to free themselves from various diseases and other evils that plague human life, and to invoke God’s blessings for a bountiful harvest, and well being of the people on the whole, so that they could live happily throughout the year.³⁶

Festivals play a major role in the lives of the Khasis, and their importance cannot be overemphasized, as we note in the words of R.T Rymbai, who wrote thus:

“As one would not be able to keep a beautiful fabric intact by separating the weft from the wool. So would it be impossible to view the life of a Khasi fully lived, if torn away from his festivals.”³⁷

The last few years spent as a researcher in folklore, has enabled me to re-examine folk material related to the Khasis, and discussing them in the light of prevailing folklore theories, and their correlation with the question of identity. Any discussion on the question of identity, concerning any group or communities across the globe, has never been an easy one. Cultural identity has always been a sensitive and touchy topic, and

³⁶ Rina Lyngdon and Mary Pristilla., *The festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasis* (Har Anand Publications, 1991), 17. Rina Lyngdoh has written extensively on the festivals of Khasis, celebrated in different regions of the Khasi Hills, each festival carrying its own meaning and purpose.

³⁷ R.T. Rymbai, “The Festivals of a Khasi and their Influence on his life”. In *Khasi Heritage*: 23. Quoted in Rina Lyngdon, Mary Pristilla., *The festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasis*, 65.

with the world becoming more fragmented along ethnic and religious lines, the study and understanding of the nature of identity has become even more pressing. Soumen Sen describes this remarkably well, in the context of North-East India, when he says:

“When we talk of ethno-specificity of culture including folklore, we come to a related issue-the issue of cultural identity-which is in sharp focus in culture and politics of north-east India for the last few decades. The important connection between identity and folklore can never be denied. Since the relationship between members of a group, or of a community, determines the collective identity, folklore is the most important source of its construction, articulation and perpetuation. This is because it prepares the cultural symbols, the essential features of an identity system.”³⁸

The identity of Khasis, as with every other tribe of North-East India, (and tribes around the world, for that matter), is sought through their respective folklore, and other folk material. This study examines the social structure of the Khasi society; viewed in the historical process-its continuity, and makes note of different social changes that have taken place over a span of more than a hundred and fifty years. A concerted written history was given to the Khasis by the British, who upon landing in these hills and making the Khasi hills a center of their administrative activity, facilitated the introduction of the writing script in 1841.

I have attempted to discuss folklore of the Khasis and its relevance to the formation of a Khasi identity. Identity has been precisely defined by Craig Calhoun in these words:

“We know of no people without names, no language or culture in which some manner of distinction between self and other, we and they, are not made...Self-knowledge-always a construction no matter how much it feels like a discovery-is never altogether separate from claims to be known in specific ways by others.”³⁹

The above definition of identity can be applied not only to the Khasi situation, but to every tribe of the North-East states of India, which are experiencing a crisis of identity in some form or another. Discussions on the binary function of culture and

³⁸ Soumen Sen, *Folklore Identity Development: In the Context of North-East India* (Anjali Publication, 2010), 37.

identity, has become a popular tool and even a weapon in recent debates in cultural studies and anthropology. Jonathan Friedman lays emphasis on a global anthropology that can in his words, “occur by maintaining a perspective in which cultural processes are understood as embedded in life worlds, life spaces, social experiences that are susceptible to analysis.”⁴⁰ This is precisely where folklore fits in, as a study of how cultures perpetuates themselves, how identities are formed, how cultural and identity symbols are formulated and how ethnic divisions are created and destroyed. I have made an effort to trace and analyze a tribal culture, keeping in mind current folklore theories to help better understand its peculiarities, its uniqueness, and also its sameness with other cultures from North-East India- with a view to understanding the Khasi culture as it is prevalent today.

The chapters that form this dissertation examines and discusses the Khasi identity-its formation, development and its relation to other aspects of culture, beginning with the oral tradition, based upon folklore material that have presumably been passed down through the ages. We often forget that folklore, oral tradition and texts are knowledge systems; being both scientific and literary, and are in fact ‘knowledge of a people’.⁴¹ Whilst taking oral material to identify and place the Khasis as a tribal race, I have moved on to the written phase which clearly defines and positions the Khasis as a ‘distinctive’ race (perhaps a colonial construction, but an important phase in the history of the Khasi people). It was during this written phase, that the Khasis became a part of a wider nation, where identities were defined in words and narratives-sometimes negotiated and compromised, and sometimes asserted to meet desired ends. Since there cannot be a discussion about folklore without discussion on religion, the fourth chapter examines the Khasi religion (based on folk material) and the steady conversion of more than half of the Khasi population into Christianity. This phenomenon, being predominantly the influence of British rule, and the hand-maiden of Christian missionaries in the Khasi hills. The folklore of the Khasis, as stated by Soumen Sen has been the expression of clan, ethnic and religious identities, and the sanctity of the matrilineal order, social formation and organization, and political

⁴⁰ Jonathan Friedman, *Cultural Identity and Global Process* (London: Sage Publication, 1994), vii.

⁴¹ Sen, *Folklore Identity Development*, 16.

system.⁴² Indigenous religion permeates every aspect of Khasi life-its expression and organization - this is true for every other tribe that inhabits the North-East region. With large-scale conversion to Christianity, certain features of culture may have changed over the decades, but Khasi tradition of which Khasi religion or *Niam Khasi* forms the bases, remains unchanged. The fifth chapter discusses matriliney as a unique feature of the Khasi social set-up, and the role that it has played and continues to play in the formation of the Khasi identity. In recent years, we witness subtle changes to Khasi matrilineal with changes in residential patterns-owing to influences from larger communities. Attitude towards this age-old tradition system is changing, especially among the male members of the younger generation of Khasis. With changes in the matrilineal set-up, will there be a corresponding change to the Khasi identity? Only posterity will be able to answer that question. The sixth chapter deals with contemporary Khasi society-its transitional phase, its political nature, and the changes ensuing within this tribal, folk society in the decades since independence. It also deals with conflict that has arisen with the assertion of identity, and the repercussions of regionalism and identity politics on its inhabitants, and the long-term consequences of such conflicts. Does the folklore of a people change, under changed social circumstances brought about by modernization? Are the Khasis afraid of losing their ethnic identity, or is identity being used for political ends? And what part does folklore play in all of this? This chapter strives to answer some of these burning questions. The last chapter discusses ethnic identities in a larger context, which encompasses most of the tribes of the North-East region. In almost all the North-East states and with almost every tribe that inhabit these states -asserting of ethnic identities has led to ethnic tension and community conflict, which in turn is connected to the larger identity of the Nation-State. Since India's independence, conflict situations have increased multifold, turning North-East India into a region of unrest, where ethnic identities are being pushed and stretched against the national identity. I have argued for cultural pluralism to resolve some of the crises of community- the kind of crises that has shaken these communities to their very roots. If there is anything we can learn from cultural pluralism, is in the poetic words of Abid Hussian who says this:

⁴² Sen, *Folklore Identity Development*, 16.

“There are different paths of culture, even in India; it has got to be pluralistic. Cultures cannot be otherwise. Cultures will break down, cultures will be futile, unless and until it is allowed to go its own way. It is like a stream, which flows from heart to heart.”⁴³

No matter the skeptics, globalization is a reality nobody can deny anymore. The boundaries of nation-states are becoming porous, and cultures and nations are beginning to merge with technological advancement, and the world is indeed shrinking. However, the reverse can happen, as in the words of T.N Madan: “One is connected, one is not alone, one is lost in a sea of connectivity. And when the sameness and connectivity become oppressive for some, they seek to recover themselves and their distinctiveness—they assert their ethnicity. It is not merely a political problem, this ethnic assertiveness, but a cultural and psychology problem.”⁴⁴ This malaise (if you may call it that) is a burning issue in the world today, and everywhere among the world’s races, communities, groups, we see them asserting their distinctiveness and everywhere they confront the state. What the world really needs today is to devise educational and cultural policies that strive for an understanding and concern for national unity with multiculturalism as its forte—a respect for traditional culture, but also a need to blend cultures for greater unity and lasting peace. The Khasis may be considered a ‘tribal’ community, and would naturally like to preserve their uniqueness as a tribe, and be recognized by the world as such. However, they need to work inward and outward to confront the problems that underline the social-political make-up of the society; to ensure less disparity between ‘Us’ and ‘them’. This view is not only to tackle outward disparity, but to allay internal disparity among tribes that inhabit Meghalaya. The purpose of this study is to foster such an understanding that will push tribes towards the future with a better understanding of ‘self’ and the ‘other’. Moreover, these discourses create an opportunity for a rethinking of the very foundation of the post-colonial states of the North-East region of India. The percolation of globalization in these remotest areas of

⁴³ Abid Hussain, “Culture Begins with Folk” in K. Satchidanandan and Ajeet Cour, *Folklore Across the Boundaries of the SAARC Region: Towards a Comparative Perspective*. (Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature, 2010), 26.

⁴⁴ T.N Madan, “Towards Participating Pluralism” in *Identity, Cultural Pluralism and State, South Asia in Perspective* in N.K Das and V.R Rao eds., (Anthropological Survey of India publication, 2009), xxiii.

the world appears to have fundamentally altered the definition and role of ethnicity⁴⁵. The natural progression, is to advocate for cultural pluralism in a region torn by separatist tendencies, with the hope that as we move forward, we need to also look backward and learn from past mistakes.

Inconclusive Fieldwork

In April of 2015, we arrived at Kudeng Thymmai, a village in War-Jaintia, Amlarem Sub-division, West Jaintia Hills, for conducting our field research. We were met by our hostess, Kong Lakhmie Pohtam, in whose home we spent a couple of days. Our intension was to interact with the locals, and unearth any new folktales, or any other material that may have not been documented by other researchers. Kudeng Thymmai is a village consisting of thirty-five houses, two churches, and two schools (a primary school and an upper primary school). The War-Jaintia dialect from these areas is difficult to grasp, and Kong Lakhmie Pohtam acted as translator. The population of Kudeng Thymmai mainly consists of three clans, namely, Pohswet, Jalang and Khongstiar.

We were equipped with a recorder, hoping to record folktales and other folk material we would find. We met with about five respondents in total, but of the five respondents, two among them would clearly communicate their thoughts and ideas. From Pate Pohswet (1st Respondent) and Monte Pohtam (2nd Respondent) we learnt that most of the people from the older generation (seventy years and above) have either passed away, and those that were alive, would hardly recall any folktales of yore. The only remembrance that had, was of a time when these areas had flourishing trade with Sylhet. There is still a weekly market where traders from both Bangladesh and Meghalaya sell their goods in border markets. They have maintained friendly trade relations with the people of Bangladesh since the days of yore (so they related). They showed us a couple of Muslim graves, where men from across the border have inter-married with women from these areas, and have lived and died in Kudeng Thymmai. Some of these ancestors have survived, and continue to live in Kudeng Thymmai and the neighbouring village, Kudeng Rim. Some of these ancestors have

⁴⁵ J. Kousar Azam, *Conflicting Ethnicities, Locating the Local in the Global* (Manohar publication, 2013), 15.

survived, and continue to live in Kudeng Thymmai having fully adopted the matriliney and the War-Jaintia way of life.

After speaking with the village headman (*Rangbah Shnong*), Bah Ribeneih Pohswet, we learnt a few sad facts, that there was after all no age-old folklore left to be collected. There were clan and family lores of recent origin (which did not fall within the preview of our study). Our main purpose was to find folklore of a distant past, that may have been passed down by word of mouth and/or through performance to the younger generation of the people of Kudeng Thymmai. The village headman explained that the older generation (above seventy-five years or so) have mostly all passed away, and with them the remembered past has also died. Where do we find the lore among these folks of War-Jaintia? When the very act of storytelling had died with the older generation. There are vague recollections of the First and Second World War, but for various reasons they cannot recall the details. However, “*Ka iew Shilot*” (Sylhet Market) seems to have been an important place of trade (exchange in trade among the people of the hills and plains), for as long as they can recall.

Eventually, instead of recording or documenting, we began relying strictly on our observations to come up with these conclusions: -

1. The people of Kudeng Thymmai still practice community living, and there is harmony and sharing among clan members in both daily living and occasional ritualistic performances involving birth and death ceremonies, like in the days of old. But this harmony is peripheral (perhaps one of the last remnants of what it may have been like, in the days of yore. As stated earlier, this village consists of clan members, believing to have descended from one ancestress or *Shi-Kpoh* (one womb). People belonging to this clan hold surnames (Nongkrot, Kongstia, Talang, Pohswet and Pohtam).
2. Two villages, namely Kudeng Thymmai is connected to another village called Kudeng Rim via a natural roots bridge. People from both villages traverse up hill and downhill through deep gorges (approximately forty meter drop), and people inhabiting these areas are completely cut-off from modern amenities. The hardship of daily live is apparent, and they all look forward to the weekly

market with Bangladesh, where exchange of trade has helped people from both sides of the border sustain their livelihoods. This weekly market “*Ka iew Shilot*” has an almost symbolic significance in the lives of these people, since the days of yore (as related by them).

3. Urbanization has slowly but surely creep into these areas of War-Jaintia, and the younger generation in search of better lives for themselves, had opted to migrate to either Jowai (the district headquarter) or Shillong, leaving the few to cultivate the land. For want of cultivable land (for they still practice shifting cultivation and some form of horticultural activities), agricultural practice is dwindling, making the availability of food dearer. With the lure of urban centers, old traditions are slowly dying out, in particularly the art of storytelling, or ‘*Phrom*’ as they call it. Folktales are no longer recalled, except those tales already documented.

CHAPTER 2

ORAL TRADITION AND IDENTITY FORMATION

When we talk about oral tradition, we need to keep in mind what Albert B. Lord had stated; that the concept of oral tradition is the counterpart to literary tradition.¹ He points out that oral tradition-he refers specially to verse tradition-is learned and transmitted orally.² It further states that the ‘minimal’ definition of tradition includes “culture (elements) handed down from one generation to another”. It becomes imperative at this point to define the ‘culture’; and its associated meanings. It was E.B. Tylor, the celebrated Anthropologist, who first defined the word ‘culture’ and made extensive use of it. Majumdar and Madan take up Tylor’s definition and describe it as a term that stands for the “beliefs, ideas, customs, laws, morals, arts and other capabilities and skills acquired by man as member of society”. What is emphasized in this definition is that culture is a social heritage; it is the gift of society to an individual.”³ Malinowski’s definition of culture is an all encompassing one, when he defines culture as the “integral whole consisting of implements and consumers’ goods, of constitutional charters for the various social groupings, of human ideas and crafts, beliefs and customs”. Malinowski further informs us that, be it a simple or primitive culture or a complex and developed one- “we are confronted by a vast apparatus, partly human and partly spiritual, by which man is able to cope with the concrete, specific problems that face him”.⁴

Professor Leslie A. White’s description of what actually constitutes culture gives a rounded perspective, when he says ,” a culture includes social organization, magico-religious ceremonials , kinship and marriage, systems, behavior patterns , institutions, beliefs, art forms, mythology and feeling attitudes.”⁵ This would also include oral and

¹ Richard M. Dorson ed., *Folklore in the Modern World* (The Hague, Paris: Mouton Publishers, 1978), 239.

² Albert B. Lord, “The Singer of Tales” *Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature* 24, 1964:5-7.

³ T.N. Madan and D.N. Majumdar, *An Introduction to Social Anthropology* (New Delhi: National Publishing House, 1986), 14.

⁴ B. Malinowski, *A Scientific Theory of Culture* (University of North Carolina Press, 1994)

⁵ John Lewis, *Anthropology Made Simple* (London: Rupa and Co in arrangement with Heinemann, 1984), 234.

written traditions which make up a large part of the interpretation of culture and cultural elements.

What then is ‘oral tradition’? How is oral tradition connected to ‘folklore’? Birendranath Datta in his riveting book, *Folklore and Historiography* has defined tradition thus: “Tradition came to be associated with folklore material like songs, ballads, tales, proverbs, customs and so on, when romantic nationalism prompted societies to look back with nostalgia at their respective national heritage. Such folklore material, it was agreed, belonged to the oral tradition.”⁶

To further explain the phrase ‘oral tradition’, Birendranath Datta, quotes Jan Vansina extensively. From what we gather, it was Jan Vansina who popularized the usage of the phrase, after the English translation of Vansina’s *De la Tradition Orale: Essai de Methods Historique*, published in 1961. This book laid down in Dutta’s words, “the identification, collection and interpretation of oral tradition for the purpose of finding out aspects of the past.”

Jan Vansina’s definition of the expression “oral tradition”, leaves no doubt in the mind, to the nature and extent of what this term really implies.” Oral tradition”, he defines, “applies both to a process and its product. The products are oral messages based on previous oral messages, at least a generation old. The process is the transmission of such messages by word of mouth over time until the disappearance of the message. Hence any given oral tradition is but a rendering at the moment, an element in a process of oral development that began with the original communication.”⁷ In his explanation of dynamic processes of oral tradition, Vansina notes that among traditions exist different classes according to the further evolution of the messages, and within it, we distinguish messages in everyday languages (formula, prayer) from messages subject to special languages rules (poetry). Again, memorized traditions behave differently over time from others. Among memorized traditions, we tend to distinguish again between formal speech (epic) and everyday languages

⁶ Birendranath Datta, *Affinities Between Folkloristic and Historiography*. National Folklore Support Centre, 2002), 66-67.

⁷ Jan Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History* (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 3.

(narrative). Narratives themselves, Vansina goes on to explain, belong to two different classes according to the criterion of factuality. Some are believed to be true or false; others are fiction. Factual traditions are transmitted, with more regard to faithful reproduction of content, than fictional narratives, such as tales, proverbs, or sayings. The notion of truth, is the prime criterion, and varies from one culture to another. A given tradition can and may be considered to be true and later to be false. The degree of difference in the treatment of accounts and tales can greatly vary from one society to another.⁸ Since traditions are a part of culture, and constitute the base element of what culture really is- Vansina's explanation of the function of messages in a given culture is noteworthy indeed. "All messages", says Vansina, "are part of a culture. They are expressed in the language of a culture and conceived, as well as understood, in the substantive cognitive terms of a culture. Hence, culture shapes all messages and we must take this into account when we interpret them."⁹

Vansina's argument of what a culture should define; the interplay of language in a given community; its idiosyncrasies-all boil down to what a community holds to be true-its reality. Cultural contents, he adds are transmitted to children in the process of learning the language and in hearing how to behave, "Communication of oral tradition is part of the process of establishing collective representations."¹⁰

Vansina, in his discussion, counter-argues the claim that Jack Goody makes, that culture is totally homogeneous in oral society and heterogeneous in a literate one. Vansina points out that Goody exaggerates his thesis, and both in the sharpness of the opposition between "oral" and "literate", and in his claim for total homeostasis. In literate communities, Goody had stated -the acquiring of information is selective since one person can turn to ancient books and manuscripts which others may not read. This view is exaggerated, claims Vansina, because people on the whole, read the same things-those which they are told are worthwhile reading. Vansina makes an emphatic point when he argues that the content of the minds of people from literate

⁸ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 13-14.

⁹ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 124.

¹⁰ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 124.

societies are more standardized than Goody believes-more so than people in oral communities. "Idiosyncrasies remain important"-Vansina reiterates.¹¹

Coming back to any earlier definition by Albert B. Lord as quoted in Juha Pentikainen, that the concept of oral tradition is the counterpart to literary tradition refers especially to verse tradition-is learned and transmitted orally. This brings us to the claims made by Pentikainen, that in an oral society, the channels of information are less complicated than in a modern society, and the formation of new information occurs less rapidly. He further states that in cultural anthropology, information transmitted from one generation to another is described generally by the concept "culture". And since the formation of new information is tied up with the culture's spawning inventions- "The hegemony of people in the world is received not primarily by their ability constantly to invent new things, but by their capability to adopt, transfer, and apply tradition. In studying the transmission of tradition, one can distinguish between enculturation –the internalization of culture-and socialization-the integration into society and its norms. In an illiterate society, these processes are oral; in a literate society, they are both written and oral."¹²

The connection then, between oral tradition and folklore is an obvious one. Historically, claims Pentikainen, the problems of oral tradition belonged to folklorists, but not many folklorists actually study oral tradition-Instead they study folklore.¹³ However, the idea of differentiating the terms is good, says Pentikainen, because if folklore and oral tradition were classified as one entity-"all information in non literate cultures would be included under the term *folklore* .It is not necessary, he further adds to attach the criterion *oral* to folklore. The reason being that a folklorist deals with literary tradition (booklore), as well as either wholly or partly with non verbal material. "The meaning of oral tradition depends crucially on what is understood by the words *oral* and *tradition*, whereas the meaning of folklore consist of the meanings of the words *folk* and *lore*. The task of a student of folklore is both wider and narrower than that of one who deals with oral tradition. Students of oral

¹¹ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 125.

¹² Juha, Pentikainen, "Oral Transmission of Knowledge" in Dorson, *Folklore in the Modern World*, 238.

¹³ Vansina, *Oral Tradition as History*, 239.

tradition study all orally transmitted traditional information, the former study only a part of it, but the folklore student may, in addition to verbal tradition, also consider non verbal material and written material as well. The central problem of the study of oral tradition is the process by which tradition is transmitted in speech from speaker to hearers.”¹⁴

Taking Pentikainen’s clear description of the constant difference and similarity between “oral” and “written” traditions, we will now turn to Khasi Folklore –its oral tradition, its heritage and how its folklore speaks of a common identity. Before we do that, however, I would like to quote Mazharul Islam, whose description of folklore, gives a comprehensive idea of what really constitutes the term ‘folklore’:

“Folklore as the creation of human civilization, the creation of people who live in a particular geographical area, share the same language, culture, mechanism of livelihood, and living conditions; whose way of life and traditional heritage are bound by a common identity. Folklore is outcome of the creative ideas of people expressed through verbal art as well as material forms-it may originate from a community or an individual. It is transmitted orally or through one written process from one generation to another and from one country to the other-it exchanges its position between written and oral traditions. Without any touch of bookish knowledge, a person may create folklore, both material and non-material, which may, in course of time, be accepted by the people. Folklore may belong to a non-literate or the literate society, to a tribal or non-tribal community, to villages or town-dwellers. Folklore constitutes a major part of culture, especially of folk culture. Should we consider folk culture as something unsophisticated and uncouth? Culture cannot be divided on the basis of sophistication and unsophistication, as folklore cannot be treated as unpolished.”¹⁵

Kympham Sing Nongkynrih, in his book *Ka Pyrkhat Niam Ki Khanatang* (2011), in literal translation would mean, “Scared Myths and the Religious Contents of Folktales” (in the Khasi context), spoke at length about the history of writing among

¹⁴ Pentikainen, “Oral Transmission of Knowledge.” 240.

¹⁵ Mazharul Islam, *Folklore, the Pulse of the People: In context of Indic Flokllore*, (New Delhi, Concept Publication Co., 1985), 6-7.

the Khasis. He stresses the fact that though, writing was introduced recently into the Khasi hills by the Welsh missionary, Thomas Jones, in the year 1841, it does not mean that the Khasis did not have their own literature. In fact, the Khasis always had what we would term *oral literature*. Despite, not knowing the art of writing, they always had the gift for story-telling, which has been passed down from one generation to the next, through oral communication.¹⁶

Ruth Finnegan, had once argued for the value and importance of oral literature, by stating that ‘non-written artistic forms’, ‘couldn’t’ be ‘literature’ or have ‘literary qualities’, determined finally by etymological contradictions involving the term ‘oral literature’, and also by apparent self-evident conclusion that if it is not written it was not suitable for scholarly analysis- and therefore not ‘literature’. Finnegan goes on to argue by making an emphatic point-that even when oral forms like tales and song lyrics did become objects of ‘interest’-mostly studied as ‘folklore’ or ‘popular cultures’ rather than ‘literature proper’-whether they were taken down from dictation or transcribed from recording, they were presented as *texts*. Oral forms then came to be studied-but only in the sense of ‘capturing the texts’, presumably only in text form can their ‘essence’ be read and captured, and eventually treating them in a similar way to written literature. Oral literature, according to Finnegan, came to be varied as ‘fixed forms’ which would at times be corrupted by ‘imperfect memory’ but essentially existed in ‘correct’ and ‘permanent’ texts.

Coming back to what Kympham Sing Nongkynrih wrote, that the Khasis are a story-telling people, and this tradition dates back to a distant past, originating from the time of the origin-myth and other tales. Below is a synopsis of a folktale; a version being told by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih in his book *Ka Pyrkhath Niam Ki Khanatang*.¹⁷-a tale that metaphorically explains, at the same time laments the lost of the written word amongst the Khasis:

Once, among the first ancestors was a leader of men, a holy man-he somehow lost the written word, contained in a sort of leaf that spoke of rituals and traditions of the

¹⁶ Kynpham Sing, Nongkynrih, *Ka Pyrkhath Niam Ki Khanatang* (Shillong: Pine Cones Publications, 2011), 9.

¹⁷ Nongkynrih, *Ka Pyrkhath Niam Ki Khanatang*, 12.

people. The holy man obtained the writings from the wisdom of God himself, on top a mountain-God, told unto this holy man, the mysteries of mankind, and taught him rites and rituals that can lead mankind to a better existence, whether in silence, at work or in a community. The holy man from the hills was accompanied by another holy man who represented the people living along the Surma Valley. The Two holy men, gathered the written word, bestowed upon them by God himself, to spread God's words among their people. However, while they were returning home, they were beset by the trouble of having to swim across a mighty river, which was flooded at the time. The holy man from the Surma Valley, having been used to swimming across rivers, tied the leaf-like book upon the tuft of hair on top his head, and succeeded with great difficulty to swim across the river, without any eventuality.

The holy man from the Khasis hills, not wanting to be left behind, he clenched the leaf-like book between his teeth, and tried swimming across, though he was very hesitant. Being a man from the hills, and not adept with swimming abilities, he immediately found himself in danger in the midst of the river. No matter how hard he tried, he found his head sinking into the water. In order to save himself from sinking, and suck in air from his mouth; he swallowed the leaf-like book that had shiverelled for being in water. Though he managed to save him, swimming the engulfing water to safety-he returned to his people without the book of knowledge.

Upon reaching home, the holy man told the people the unfortunate happening; everyone was bitterly sad with having lost the written word of God. He tried to pacify the people by telling them that God's teachings were still freshly imprinted in his mind, and that he would impart God's teaching through tales and stories. A meeting or *Dorbar* was convened, represented by all leaders of the *Hynniew Trep*¹⁸, which the holy man imparted the knowledge and statues bestowed upon him by God himself.

Since way back then, the tradition of story-telling emerged among the Khasis. The tales began with the creation –myth, which told of how mankind descended upon this earth, to live and propagate upon it. From thence, came about the Khasi views about heaven and earth; God and religion; good and evil; about kith and kin; about the

¹⁸ The generic word for the Khasi people.

system of governance; so on so forth. It is to these that the Khasi refer to as *Khanatang*, namely myths, tales, legends and songs. [Trans. Sophia Pde]¹⁹

The word *Khanatang*, in literal translation into English, would mean *Sacred Myths*, merits further discussion, as it throws light on how these myths—any important part of what constitutes ‘oral literature’ among the Khasis—have been the building blocks upon which rituals, traditions, and the Khasi identity has been built upon. To take this up further, I will translate, in part, two important myths of the Khasis—a version narrated by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, to better understand the role played by myths in establishing a culture, a religion and an identity that is uniquely Khasi:²⁰ Below is the narrative in both Khasi (as related by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, and also in the English Translation).

Ki Hynniew Trep (in the original Khasi Language)

Ha kaba mynnyngkong eh ym shym la don ei ei ha ka pyrthei lait tang ka haw basuda. Nangta U Blei U la thaw is ka Ramew, ka nongri nongsumar jong ka pyrthei ka mariang bad ia u lok jong ka, U Basa, uba kylla long ruh hadien kum u nongri nongsumar jong ki shnong ki thaw u khun bynriew. Dei hadien ka jingthaw ia kine ki kynja blei ba la pyndap ia ka suda da ka kyndew ka sboh, u maw u shyiap. Shipor, kine ki kynja blei ki la i aim suk im sain tang baroh shi lok hi. Hynrei suki pa suki, ka jingkyngjah ka la wan ban ha ki haduh ba miet la bad sngi kim lah shuh ban pyrkhath ia kaei kaei ruh lait noh tang ia kawei, bad kata ka long ba kim don khun. Te kumta ki la ia dem khrup ha ka duwai ka phirat; ki la ia ieng ka kyrpad ka kyrpon ha khmat U Blei Trai Kynrad ba un kyrkhu noh ia kid a ki khun ki kti Khnang ba kin kham shngain bad ruh khnang ba ka pateng jong ki kan iai im.

Hadien bunsien kum kine ki kyrpad kyrpon, U Blei U la ai ha ki ia kaba ki kwah bad U la kyrkhu ha kid a san ngut ki khun ki Bakhraw bor, ba la pynkup da ki sap ki

¹⁹ This passage has been loosely translated by Sophia Pde, by way of introducing the fuller version of the tale, which has been included, and also the translation into English, done by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih himself.

²⁰ These tales have been narrated in Khasi by Nongkynrih, Sing Kynpham, *Ka Pyrkhath Niam Ki Khanatang*, Pine Cones Publications, Shillong, 2011:17-22. There are several versions to this tale. I have chosen Kynpham, Sing Nongkynrih's version for its clarity and poetic quality. He has also translated the same tales into English.

phnong ki bapher-san ngut ki khun kiba mynta ngi ju tip kum ki bor ka mariang. Ka Sngi ka dei ka khun nyngkong jong ki, bud sa u Bnai, uba long u Khun shynrang marwei, bad s alai ngut kiwei pat ki khun kynthei, kynthup ia ka Um, Ka Lyer, bad ka Ding. Ka Ding ka long kaba la kha Khatduh, ka khun khlieng kpoh, bad ka ju long ka kamram jong ka ban shong ha iing, ban shet ban tiew bad ban pynbiang ia baroh ki jingdonkam ki kmie ki kpa ha iing ha sem man la ka sngi.

Ka Ramew ka la kmen shikatdei ban iohi ba ki khun jong ka ki la heh la san ha ka rukom kaba I hun. Ka la nang kham kmen shuh shuh ban iohi kumno ki la trei shitom ban pynwandur ia ka pyrthei ka maraing sha kata ka ri kaba biang ban im ban sah da kaba ki la ai jingim ia ki dieng ki siej, ki syntiwe ki skud, ki soh ki pai ha kylleng kylleng.

Hynrei hapteng jong kata ka pahuh pahai, ka suk ka sian, I kumba dang don kaei kaei kaba dang duna. Ba kat kata ka jingithiang yn shu ieh shrah kumto khlem ka sumar ka sukher! Ba kat kata pahuh ka pahai kan nym lah ban pynmyntoi iano iano ruh! Kam long ka badei ha ka jingsngew ka Ramew. Kumta ka la phai biang sha U Blei.

U Blei Uba sngewthuh bha ia ka jingthrang ka Ramew bad Uba la peit thuh bha ia ka jingtrei shitom jong ka ban pynlong I aka pyrthei kum ka ajaka ka ba bit tam na ka bynta ki jait jingim ba laiphew skit, U la mynjur ban ai ia ki jingthaw jong ka baroh. U la pynmih kawei ka hokum baa r na ki kynja lei lum ki baradbah kin long noh ki nongsumar jong ka pyrthei.

Hynrei kine ki shipara ki lei lum, ha ka jaka ba kin sumar sukher ia ki jait jingthaw ba laiphew jait ha pyrthei, ki la ia sdang pynban ban ia knieh bor para ma ki. Kane ka la pynmih ia ka jingialeh bashyrkhei bad hapteng jong ki kaba la buh ia ka jingim jong ki baroh ar ngut, bad ruh ia ka jingim jong kiwei, ha ka jingma.

Hadien ba ka Ramew ka la mudui sha U Blei pyrshah ia kine ki lei lum, U Blei ruh u la buh noh ia u Khla kum u nongpeit u nongi, u nongsynshar u nongpyniaid ia kiei kiei baroh ha pyrthei. Hynrei kane ruh kam shym la long kam namar ba u Khla, ha ka jaka ba un synshar hok, u la leh pynban kum u nongthombor bad u la pynshlur ia ka ain, 'Ka bor ka long ka hok', ha kylleng kylleng ka pyrthei.

Ha ka bakhatduh, haba kiei kiei baroh ki la sdang ban kulmar wit ban yum don bal ah shuh ban the lakam ia u khla, ka Ramew ka la mudui biang sha U Blei bad ka la kyrpad ia U ba Un ai noh da ki nongpeit ki nongi ki ban long kum ka jingkyrkhu, ym kum ka jingtim, ia ka pyrthei.

U Blei, Uba long ka Hok bad Uba dap da ka Jingisnei, U la sngap ia ki jingud ka Ramew da ka jingsngewlem bad U la rai bay n nym don mano mano bal ah ban peit hok, ban bishar hok ia ka jingim ha pyrthei lait noh, ban bishar hok ia ka jingim ha pyrthei lait noh tang ki Khathynriwe Trep kiba long ki nongshong shnong jong ka bneng. Te kumta, U Blei U la khot ia ka dorbar bah jong ka bneng ban ia jied ia ki nongri nongsumar, ki nongpeit nongi jong ka pyrthei. Hadien ka jingiatai sani bha kaba da ki sngi, U Blei U la pynbna ba Hynniew na ki Khathynriwe Trep ba shnong ha bneng ki dei ban hiar sha pyrthei, ban rep ban riang, ban pynlong shnong ia ki jaka shrah, ban peit ban synshar bad ban sumar sukher ia baroh kiei kiei kiba don ha pyrthei. La pynbna ruh ba naduh kata hi ka por yn tip noh ia ki kum ki Hynniew Trep, Ki Hynniew Iing, ki Hynniew Jait, ki ban kylla long hadien ki kpa tymmen jong ka jaitbynriew Khasi, kaba kynthup ia ki Khynriam , Ki Pnar, Ki Bhoi, Ki War, Ki Maram bad kito kiba shnong ha ri Lyngngam, kiba ngi shu tip kyllum kum ki Lyngngam, ki Nongtraï.

U Blei Uba la wanrah ia ka jingsuk ha pyrthei, Uba la ai ha ka mariang da ka spah bah bad ki soh jong ka pahuh pahai lyngba ki khun ka Ramew, nangta U la iateh soksular ruh bad ki Hynniew Trep lyngba ka Jutang Blei. Kum ka sakhi ia kata ka Jutang, U la thung ia uwei u Dieng Blei halor uwei u lum kyntang ba la khot u Lum Sohpet Bneng, uba la kylla long kum ka Jingkieng Ksiar kaba pyniasnoh ia ka hima U Blei U la bad ka pyrthei u briew. Kat kum kane ka Jutang, U Blei U la pynbna ba ktaba ki Hynniew Trep ki dang iai bat ia ki Lai Hukum kiba long ‘Ka Tip Briew Tip Blei, Ka Tip Kur Tip Kha abd Ka Kamai ia ka Hok’-Kata, katba ki dang tip bad dang burom ia u briew ia U Blei; katba ki dang tip bad dang burom ia ki ain ka longkur longkha; bad ktaba ki dang im suba-kumta kin shem hok, kin suk kin sain, kin pahuh kin pahai, kin khiah krat khiah stang ha la ka jingim; kin long kawei bad la U Kynrad, kin nym shah ieh khunswet ha pyrthei, hynrei kin lah ruh ban hiar ban kiew ban leit ban wan katba mon

hapteng ka bneng bad ka khyndew lyngba ka Jingkieng Ksiar ha u Lum Sohpet Bneng.

(Kynpham, Sing Nongkynrih, Shillong, 2011)

The Seven Clans

In the beginning there was nothing but a vast emptiness on Earth. God had created only two of his many creatures, Ramew, the guardian spirit of Earth, and Basa, her husband, who later came to be identified with the patron god of villages. The two lived happily enough for a time, and there was only one thing that plagued their minds — the thought of children. They wanted children, wanted them intensely, for life without them had been terribly lonely and monotonous. They prayed to their God, U Blei, to bless them with at least a child or two so that their line could continue:

"O God, our Master, our Creator! O God, Giver and Keeper of life!" they implored, "we have been living in this place, absolutely alone for many years now. While we love each other and are happy to keep our own company, we wish our love to be fruitful. We wish to have children, the product of our love, children who would lighten our days and ease the monotony of our existence. It doesn't seem right, O God, Keeper and Giver of Life, that the Earth you created should remain barren and empty like this. O Master Creator! We have each other now, but what about the future?"

After many such entreaties, God granted them their wish and gave them five children of great powers and accomplishments, five children that the world has come to call elemental forces. The Sun was their first daughter, followed by their only son, the Moon, and three other daughters, Water, Wind and Fire. Fire was the last born, the womb-cleaning one, and it was always her duty to be at home, to cook their meals and tend to their daily needs as custom demanded.

Ramew was delighted to see her children grow up and prosper. She was particularly delighted to see how they kept themselves busy, reshaping the world into a pleasant land, giving life to tall trees and beautiful flowers everywhere. And yet amidst all that plenty and peace there seemed to be something wanting. That such loveliness should

go untended and uncared for! That such plenty should benefit no one! It was not right, she felt. Ramew turned to God again:

"O god, our Master, our Creator! O God, Giver and Keeper of Life!" she beseeched Him, "please forgive me if I seem unthankful and disgruntled. I am indeed contented and pleased to see my children so powerful and accomplished. They have done wonders here on Earth. They have turned it into a pleasant land of peace and plenty. There are trees and beautiful flowers everywhere. There are fruits and plants of every type and description. But it pains me at times to see that so much loveliness and abundance is going to waste like this, with no one to benefit from them. Besides, my God, my Creator, my children, though bestowed with outstanding gifts, powers and accomplishments are yet ill-equipped to look after all that they have created. The Sun and the Moon are too busy roaming the universe, tending to their myriad duties. Water has its limitations and cannot travel the earth freely. Wind is not suited for caretaking on her own, nor is Fire. Both of them can run wild if not properly tended. You see, my Lord, we need someone who would not only be the heir to all this bounty but someone who would also be a caretaker to watch over all these creations and see that some of my children are properly attended to, so that they do not become excessively wayward."

God, who understood the yearning of Ramew and who had watched her labour hard and long to make the world a fitting place for life, promised to indulge her wishes. He issued a decree declaring two powerful spirits of the mountains as the guardians of Earth. But instead of seeing to the welfare of the many living things, these sibling spirits began to tussle for power resulting in a terrible fratricidal battle, the scars of which could be seen till today.

Responding to the complaints of Ramew against the mountain spirits, God then put the responsibility of ruling Earth on animals, with the Tiger as the presiding administrator. But this also did not work as the Tiger began to rule as a despotic overlord and encouraged the law of 'might is right' everywhere. When eventually things broke out of control and degenerated into a state of pandemonium, Ramew

once more raised her complaints with God and pleaded with Him for wise and conscientious overseers who would be a blessing and not a curse to life on Earth.

God, who is just and benevolent, listened to the pleas of Ramew sympathetically and came to the conclusion that none but the sixteen clans living in Heaven could be the fitful caretakers of Earth. Accordingly he summoned the greatest council ever held in Heaven to elect the future caretakers of Earth. After days of careful deliberation, God eventually declared that seven out of the sixteen clans living in Heaven should descend to till the Earth, to populate the wilderness, to rule and govern and be the crown of all creation. And from then on they would be known as the *Hynñiew Trep*, or the Seven Huts, the Seven Families, the Seven Clans, who would later become the ancestors of the Seven Sub-tribes of the Khasi people, encompassing the Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lyngngam, and the now little-known Diko.

God who had provided for happiness on Earth, endowing its soil with riches and the fruits of plenty, through the children of Ramew, then made a covenant with the Seven Clans and as a token of that covenant, He planted a divine tree on a sacred mount called Lum Sohpet Bneng, which served as the Golden Ladder between the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Man. This covenant declared that so long as the Seven Clans adhered to the three principles of “Ka Tip Briew Tip Blei, Ka Tip Kur Tip Kha, Ka Kamai ia ka Hok”, that is, so long as they were secure in the Knowledge of Man and God, in the Knowledge of ones’ Maternal and Paternal Relations, and so long as they lived on Earth in such a way as to Earn Righteousness, they would never be left alone, but could come and go as they pleased between Heaven and Earth, from the Golden Ladder at Lum Sohpet Bneng, literally the Mount of Heaven’s Navel. The mountain is so called because it acted as an umbilical cord between God and Man, for even as a child is joined with the mother through this thread of flesh and thread of blood, so also is Man joined with God.

Everything was well in the world. And as long as Man remembered God and his divine decree, as long as he behaved in a manner befitting his celestial lineage, he prospered in life and never suffered real grief in any way. His life on Earth was one long tale of happiness.

But it was not in Man to be content with happiness alone. Like everything else in this world, he is essentially two-edged, capable at once of great good and great evil. Soon he began to tire of always following the dictates of God; he wanted to branch out on his own, to determine his life independently, according to his own instincts and inclinations. In this manner he strayed away from the principles of “*Ka Tip Briew, Tip Blei, Ka Kamai ia ka Hok*”. Greed, the mother of all evils, sat supreme in his heart, and in his craving for power and pelf, he trampled on the rights of others. He began to cheat, to swindle, to steal and even kill to gain what his avaricious heart desired. Respect for fellow men, through which alone Man could approach God, was completely forgotten, as men tried their best to outwit each other for the sake of wealth, their new god.

God, on his part, was greatly vexed by Man’s rebelliousness. He was sorely grieved that Man had chosen to ignore and slight the covenant, and since this was quite meaningless now, He decided to break off his ties with Man and closed forever the Golden Ladder to Heaven through *Sohpet Bneng*. Away from their Nine Clans in Heaven, and bereft of God’s guidance and blessing, the Seven Clans remained helpless orphans on Earth, amidst a new kind of darkness that bred all sorts of evil in the minds of men. Their Golden Age had ended. As evidence of His displeasure He made an oak tree, situated on another sacred mount, grow day by day to a monstrously enormous size and height, so that its shadow expanded to eclipse whole portions of the Earth in pitch darkness. The perpetual darkness caused by the branches of *Diengiei*, the name then given to this “Tree of Gloom”, made standing crops wilt and threatened to destroy all plant life, as well as making Man himself vulnerable, a prey to wild beasts and many other evils. Man panicked. But as is characteristic of him, instead of turning inwards to examine his soul, then conceding his own aberration and approaching God with a repentant heart, he proudly sought his own solution to the ever-worsening crisis that menaced his very existence.

He convened an extended council to which male representatives of all the Seven Clans were summoned. After hurried consultations, the council resolved to bring down *Diengiei*, which was even then enlarging itself alarmingly. In passing the resolution, the council declared:

"We do not know the cause of this terrible darkness, nor why *Diengiei* has suddenly grown so malevolently huge. But nor is it so important to us to seek the cause at this juncture. Our very survival is threatened; we must act quickly and decisively. We must bring down this Tree of Gloom before its foul shadow can destroy us. To this effect, each family must send at least one man, equipped with a large knife and an axe, to carry out the task."

Work on toppling *Diengiei* commenced immediately. The men cut and axed away at the trunk from dawn to dusk, chipping off a bit of it each day. But always, when they came back the next day, they found the trunk whole again. It was as if it was never touched at all.

The men were dumbfounded, and some of them grew apprehensive, for it seemed to them that the tree had mysterious powers. How could they fight something that could heal itself as soon as it was cut?

While they sat brooding, in fear and confusion, a little wren called *Phreit* came flying to the paddy fields nearby. The little bird had never seen men in such gloom before, but on learning the cause, it offered to reveal the secrets of *Diengiei*:

"It is not what you think, O men. *Diengiei* may have the power to grow with the swiftness of a bird's flight, but it does not have the power to heal itself. I know its secrets and I'm ready to help should you wish for any help. All that I ask is that you allow me to feed freely in your paddy fields so that I too may survive."

By then the men were so thoroughly demoralised and desperate that they were prepared to listen to just about anyone with new ideas. Once the deal was struck, *Phreit* told them that it was not the enchantment of the tree that was responsible for its extraordinary recovery, but the licking of its trunk by the Tiger as soon as they had retired to their homes for the night. That was how the gashes filled up as fast as they were made.

The Tiger (a symbol of all that was evil and cruel) wanted *Diengiei* to stand, as the expanding eclipse caused by its growth made his hunting easier. In fact, he was looking forward to the time when the whole world was totally blanketed in darkness,

so that he could then start preying on Man too. To foil the evil designs of the Tiger, *Phreit* advised them to fortify the portions of the trunk that they had hewn by putting knives and axes against it each night.

Encouraged by this revelation, the men hustled back to the task, and at the end of their day's work set their axes against the tree. The next morning, instead of a healed trunk, they discovered bloodstains on their axes and later they learnt that the Tiger had lapped his tongue to shreds, then, terrified, had fled the place for an unknown destination. They were elated. They fell upon the tree with fresh vigour and after some weeks found they had cut it down. Everyone heaved a sigh of relief.

The pact made with the little *Phreit* marks the first movement of Man towards repentance and humility. And that was why God had granted Man success in felling the *Diengiei*. (Translated by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih)

U Saw Shyrtong (In the original Khasi language)

Hadien ka jingkhyllem jong ka Diengiei bad ka jingwanphai ka jingshai sha pyrthei, ka la don ka jingkmien ka Bakhraw hapdeng ki nongshong shnong ka pyrthei: Ki briew, ki mrad, ki sim bad baroh ki jait jingthaw. Ban rakhie ia kane ka jingjia, u briew u la pynkhreh ia kawei ka lympung shad bad u la phah kiten sha baroh ki jingthaw ba don jingim shaphang ka Shad u Laiphew Jingthaw baradbah u la thmu ban pynlong. U briew um shym la klet ban khot sngewbha aino iano ruh, wat ia ki jingthaw jong ka sahit kum ka Sngi bad u Bnai.

Ynda la poi ka sngi shad, ki jait jingthaw bapher na ki saw lyer ka pyrthei ki la wan ia thid sha ka lympung shad; ki la ia leh kmien leh shongshit hadud bym ithuh ithaw shuh, namar ba ki la im hapdeng ka iongnit bad ka jynjar trah da ki snem. Hynrei ka Sngi bad u Bnai ki la ia poi sha ka lympung tad haduh ba la jan kut ka shad. Ka sngi, kaba bun la ki Kamram bad kaba peit ba I bad kaba sharai ia kiei kiei baroh ha bneng bad ha khyndew, kam lah ban shu ieh kumto ia la ki kam ki duk khlem da pynbiang lupa ia kiei kiei khnang ba baroh kin ia id beit ryntih. Ha kaju ka por, ba kan nym wan pat sha ka shad ka long pynban kumba pynpaw ia la ka jong ka jinghangamei, te kumta, ka la pyrkhat, ba kan bha hi la kumno kumno ban wan mih khmat khnang ban

pynpaw ia ka jingiasngewtynnat lem. Dei na kane ka daw ba ma ka bad u para jong ka, u Bnai, ki la ia leit dier por sha ka jingrakhie leh kmen bad ki la ia shad tang shipara hi ha lypung, wat la kiwei pat ki jingthaw ki la mih lut nangta ban ia phyrnop ha kiwei ki rukom leh sngewbha

Hynrei kane ka jingiashad jong ki tang ar ngut hi ha lypung ka la pyniabler iapang pynban ia u babun u baling. Kita ki paid byllien kiba ia don hangta, khamtam lei ka Dkhoh, U Dkhan, ka Jakoid bad ka Shrieh, ki la ia risa shaw, ki la ia sin ia rngop bad ia bein ia khoh ia kita ki ar ngut kiba la ia wan slem.

U bynriew ruh, uba la iohsngew ia kine kiei kiei baroh, u la ngan pynshlur ia ka jingkhlemrain jong ki a kaba ia rkhe pashait lang bad ki. Ha ka bakhatduh, kine ki shipara kim shah shuh bad ki la phet iamrem na kata ka lypung kid a ia smai ba kin nym wan pynpaw khmat shuh sha kane ka pyrthei. Ka Sngi, kaba long kum ka nongpyntyllun ia ka bneng bad ka khyndew, kaba ai jingim ia baroh, ka Syiem jong ka sahit, ka la kham bitar bha lain ia ki jingle ibein bad jingkren kput u bynriew bad ki laiphew jingthaw.

Hadien ba ka la dumok ia baroh kiba ia don hangta da kine ki kyntien bitar shla, ka la phet de soit sha ka Krem Lamet Krem Latang, kaba don sha jngai bah, sha lyndet ka Them Jong Ka Jingiap, ha ka lynti sha ka ling U Blei.

Naduh kata hi ka sngi ka pyrthei ka la ngam biang sha ka jingdum khlem kut trai. U briew u la shaiong ngain. Ban hab biang ha ka jingdum baar hadien ka jingdum basuhsat jong ka banyngkong, ka pyndap ia u da ka jingsngewtriem, bad ka la don ka jingtieng bad ka jingjaw ummat ka bashyrkhei hapdeng jong kiwei ki jingthaw ka pyrthei ruh. Baroh baroh ki la dap ka babe ka bynniaw, bad ki la ia pyrta ia ka Sngi ia u Bnai, bad ki la ia duwai ha ki meit la bad sngi, khnang ba kin wan wan phai sha pyrthei ban pynshai biang ia ka jingim jong ki. Hynrei baroh ki jinglynniar bad jingkyrpad jong ki ki shu long lennohei. Ka Sngi bad u para jong ka kim kwah ban sngap shuh ia ki bad ki la kyntait shisyndon ban wan phai sha pyrthei.

Haba ka jingkyndit bad ka kulmar wit ka la kham duna, u briew, uba kham shemphang ban ia kiwei pat ki jait jingthaw, u la khot da kawei ka dorbar bah ban jied

ia uwei napdeng jong ki, uwei uba kham shlur bad kham khlain, ban wanlam biang ia ka Sngi hapdeng jong ki. Haba la iakren iatai kumba katto kane, la jied nyngkong eh ia u Hati, namar u dei u baheh tam bad u bakhlian tam napdeng jong ki.

Hynrei u Hati hi dalade u la kyih. Wat tang ban pyrkhath shaphang kata ka jingiatynjuh bor bad ki kunja bor bneng ruh u la sngewtriem lupa.

Kumba u la khlei, u Kohkarang ruh u la liet sha ka jaka rieh ka Sngi, ha kaba u la pynithuh ialade kum u nongkit ktien u bynriew bad jong ka pyrthei baroh kawei, uba la wan khnang sha tata ka jaka ban iakren ia ka jingwanphai biang jong ka Sngi sha pyrthei. Ha kaba mynnyngkong ka Sngi ka la leh donburom bad lehsbun ia u; ka la ai ha u ka jaka shong bad ka bam kumba ka ju ai ia uno uno uba wan kai ha iing jong ka. Hynrei namar ka jingkhyllew bad jingkyreit jong u Kohkarang u la shim ia kata ka jonglehsbun jong ka kum ka jingibha jong ka ia u, bad u la sdang ban leh samla bad ban iarain ia ka-kane ka nongsynshar jong bneng bad ka kyndew ha kaba kiwei pat ki jingthaw kin nym nud wat tang ban peit ruh. Ka Sngi ka la khie dom buk, ka la bitar lep, ka la shim niat da ka lyngknot ksiar bad ka la kawang ia u na shyntur phlak. Bad ka tim ka tla artat ia u.

Dei da ka jingsngew khlemrain ka bym don jaka shuh ba u Kohkarang u la wan her biang sha khyndew. Ki nongiashong dorbar ki la iohsngew ia ka jyrhoh ka sahiaw jong u naduh jngai bah, bad baroh naki ki la ia kwah tip ka la la jia aiu ia u. Bad ka lehrain bad ka sngewrih ria kum I khnai, u Kohkarang u la iathuh lut ka khmat ka dorbar ia kaba la jia ia u baroh-bad naduh kata hi ka sngi um ju nud shuh mynta mynne ban peit pyrshah ia ka Sngi; ka lyngknot ksiar jong ka Sngi ruh ka la sakut sah ha ka shyntur jong u haduh kine ki sngi ryngkat bad sahiaw ka jyrhoh kaba u la ioh kum ka jingshah pynshitom.

Sa shisien pat la don biang ka iambriew ka lynnair ha baroh ka ri ki laiphew jingthaw. Hynriew, hadien kaba la jia ia u Kohkarang, ym shyndon ba shlan shuh ban tyrwa ia la ka jingshakri. Uwei ruh um don shuh uba nud ban ong ngan leit ma nga. Ynda haba u la ioih bym do shuh ba nud ban wan sha khmat, u briew u la kylli ia baroh ioh dang don mano re ba dang jah na ka dorbar. Shen shen la lap ba baroh ki la ia don lut lait tang u Syiar, uba ki ia ong, u sngewlehrain ban wan namar u die tang u jingthaw u

balyngkhuid, uba khlem ka sner ka thapniang, uba rieh ha ka nuit ka nier, ba u tieng ia kiwei pat ki jingthaw wat tang ban mih shabar.

U briew u la phah khot ia u Syiar ba un wan sha ka dorbar. U la batai ha u ia ka rai jong ka dorbar bad u ia kylli ia u, “Hato me long uba kloi? Lada me long uba kloi, hato me long pat u bakhuid? U Kohkarang u la pulom namar ka jinbymkhuid bad ka jingkyreit ka mynsiem jong u, hato me pat me long uba kumno? Lada kad wak ia ka met jong me? Lada ngi pied ia ki snier jong me, lada ngi sei ia u dohnud dohnem jong me hato ngin lap ne em ia kano kano ka dak thohbria ha ki? Hato me long ne em uba la kloi shah ia kita kita baroh?”

Ka dorbar ka la ai lut ha u Malyngkhoit ia kiei kiei baroh kiba u la pan, bad nalar kata ka la buh ruh ha ka shynrong khlieh jong u ia u saw shyrtong khnang ba un kham iphuh iphieng shisha kum uta u nongkit ktien u ban leit iakynduh ia ki blei.

Ynda, u la ia id lynti da ki bnai bad ynda u la hap ban shah ia kiba bun ki jingeh ha kata ka jingleit jong u, u Syiar u la poi Khatduh khatwai ha tyngkong ka Sngi, sha lyndet jong ka Them Ka JIngai. Mer syn ia piet ia u, ka Sngi ka la ithuh ba une te um dei kum uto u Kohkarang khlemrain. Ka la pdiang sngewbha ia u bad ka la lensbun shikatdei eh ia u. Hynrei ha ka jingsngewrit jong u, U Syiar u la pan tang da u khaw pyrsit bad khyndiat ka um ban un bam ha phyllaw, ha khmat ka jingkhaw iing jong ka, namr, u la ong, ba dei tang u jingthaw u bapoh tam, u bym don hok kat ia kata ka burrom ki Syiem ki patsha.

Ka Sngi kaba la ktah ka mynsiem haduh katta katta da ki ktien jail jaum jong u jingthaw u bashisur bad uba dap da ka jingsngewrit, kam lah khlem da kular, na ka jong u, ba kan sa wan phai biang sha pyrthei bad ka kan map lut ia baroh ki kam sniew u bynriew. Shuwa ba kan phah noh ia u sha pyrthei, ka la air uh ha u ia ka nam kum u Nongprat Lynti, U Nongkrad Lynti, u ban pynbeit pynbiang hapdeng baroh kiei kiei kiba dei jong ka pyrthei bad kiei kiei kiba dei jong ka bneng.

U Syiar u la wan phai sha pyrthei da ka jingjop, bad hapdeng ka jingpdang burom ka bakhrwa bah, u bynriew u la pynkup ruh ha u da ka nam U Saw Shyrtong. Hynrei hapdeng kat kata ka nam burom, U Syiar um shym la klet ba dei ka jingsngewrit jong

u bad ka jingpyndem lade ha khmat ka blei kaba la wanrah ia ka jingjop ha u. U la kynmaw biang biang ia la ka kular kaba u la khlei ha khmat ka Sngi, bad kumta ynda haba ka shai byrngut ka la wan, u kynruh la ka stieh bad u pynriew la ka bikur lai sien lai wat haduh ban da poi ka phyrngab. Bad nangta, kumba weng noh ia ka jingkah, ia ka jingdum ruh la weng noh da kikjat sngi kiba doh ia ka pyrthei ka mariang, Kaba mynta ka la dap biang miar da ka jingkmien jong ka jingim.

U briew ruh u la bat ia la ka kular kaba u la khlei ha khmat u Syiar. Haduh kine ki sgni, haba u sdang ia kano kano ka niam ka rukom ne ka jingainguh ia U Blei kaba kham kongsan, u da pjiar da ka snam jong u Syiar kaba la buh lang bad shilyngkhot Ka Dieng Jri, U Sning bad ka Lamet, ki lai tylli kiei kiei kiba u Syiar u la kular ban ai bynta lem ha ka niam ka rukom u bynriew. (Kynpham, Sing Nongkynrih, Shillong, 2011)

The Purple Crest

After the fall of *Diengiei* and the return of light to Earth, there was much rejoicing among Earth's inhabitants, men, animals, birds and all other living creatures. To celebrate the event Man prepared a huge dancing ground and sent word to all the kinds of life on Earth about the dance festival he intended to organise. Man did not omit heavenly beings like the Sun and the Moon from his invitation.

On the day of the festival all manner of beings from all four corners of the globe converged upon the dancing ground; they enjoyed the day's festivities as only those could who had lived with much suffering and without any kind of pleasure for so long. The Sun and the Moon arrived at the scene, however, only towards the end of the celebration. The Sun, the hinge of the universe, on whose good offices depended the smooth running of everything else, could not leave her work untended without first setting things in order, and so could not come any sooner. Not to attend the festival, however, would appear arrogant on her part, and she thought, therefore, that putting in an appearance would at least show her goodwill. That was why she and her brother, the Moon, went to the festival and danced on together even when all the others had abandoned the arena and were engaged in other forms of pleasure.

But the spectacle of the lone dancers created a tremendous uproar. The gathering, prominent in which were the Owl, the Mole, the Frog and the Monkey, began to ridicule and boo the late-comers:

"Look at those two clowns dancing alone on the empty ground!" hooted the Owl. Then the angry Mole shouted, "You insolent hypocrites! If you don't want to dance together with the rest of us, then why did you come at all?" Then the Frog croaked out, "You are too early for the next festival!" But what hurt the heavenly sister and brother the most was the Monkey's nasty indictment: "Hey, you two!" she shouted, "Are you brother and sister or husband and wife that you are dancing so intimately together?"

The two could stand it no longer and left the field, vowing never to show their faces to the world again. The Sun, the hinge of the universe, the queen of the heavens, felt especially stung by the unwarranted insults heaped upon her and her brother. "You filthy, vicious creatures!" she raged, "Is this how you treat your own guests! Is this the reason you have called us, so that you could humiliate us? In your beastly rudeness you have gone so far as to accuse us of abominable incest, you foul-tongued things! You will never see us in this dirty place again!"

Having hurled her tirade at the stunned gathering, the Sun went to hide herself in *Krem Lamet Krem Latang*, the Cave of the Sanctified Leaf, situated somewhere beyond the valley of death on the way to the House of God.

From that day the whole world was thrown into perpetual night. Man was stupefied. To experience a second darkness so soon after the harrowing first, filled him with dread, and there was much fear and shedding of tears among the other earthlings. Everyone was overtaken with remorse, and they called after the Sun and the Moon and prayed to them that they might return to lighten the days of Earth. But all their cries and pleadings were in vain. The Sun and her brother could not forgive them so easily, and refused to be drawn back into the world.

When the initial shock and confusion had subsided, Man, who was more sensible than the rest, immediately convened a council to choose someone from among them,

someone with more than ordinary gumption and strength to bring back the Sun to their midst. The first choice fell on the Elephant, the largest and strongest of them all. It was a choice that personified brute strength and reflected Man's pride in his own knowledge— and his short-sightedness in believing that the Sun, who signified heavenly light, could be intimidated by a show of force.

But the Elephant himself quaked at the mere thought of confronting the might of heavenly powers. He said, "Hear me, O Man, my fellow creatures all, before you send me to my doom. I'm big and strong, there's no denying that. But going to the Cave of the Sanctified Leaf, I will have to go across rivers and seas, bogs and fens, and crossing them, I fear my hand or my foot may get stuck. Demons may devour me; I may fall into pits and gorges and finally perish without achieving the task that you have seen fit to bestow on me. Forgive me," he urged, "let me off this impossible assignment, and I promise to give myself up to serving the interests of the council in every other possible way."

After the Elephant had spoken his mind, there was a sudden hush in the gathering. All of them seemed affected by the simple truth of what he had said; they bowed their heads and did not offer to volunteer themselves.

But the Hornbill, cocksure and proud of his good looks and accomplishments, came forward and said, "Listen to me, my friends, I will shoulder this responsibility. I will go to the Cave to fetch the Sun and the Moon. With me to plead for you, they won't be able to resist."

When they heard this imperious utterance, there was much relief and joy among the crowd to know that there was at least one who dared face the dangers implied in the journey to the other world. All those present could not wait to give the Hornbill their heartiest congratulations.

True to his words, the Hornbill went to the Sun's hiding place, where he presented himself as the ambassador of the whole world, there to discuss her return to Earth. At first the Sun treated him with respect and hospitality; she gave him shelter and good food, as she would give to any honoured guest in her house. But presumptuous and

vain as he was, the Hornbill took her kindness for her weakness for him, and he began to court her - this ruler of the universe at whom no other creature would even have dared to look. Enraged, the Sun snatched up a golden stool and threw it with all her might at his mouth. Shouting and cursing him all the while, she said, " You shameless creature! From now on you will bear my golden stool wherever you go! You will be plagued with coughing and asthma, and you will fly sideways, trying to avoid my golden rays, throughout your life!"

It was with great humiliation that the Hornbill directed his way back to Earth. The councillors could hear his coughing and wheezing from far away, and they were all curious. Embarrassed and feeling small, the Hornbill recounted all that had happened to him - and from that day on he could never look straight at the Sun again.

Once more there was crying and howling in the land. And once more the same question was raised, "Who will bring the Sun and the Moon back to Earth?" After what had happened to the Hornbill, however, no-one felt bold enough to offer their services, and seeing that they had reached a dead end, Man inquired if there was anyone else missing from the council. Soon they found that everyone was represented except for the Rooster, who, they said, did not feel qualified to attend since he was a naked creature hugging the weeds and bushes, too scared of the other animals to venture out. Then someone added that he did not even attend the dance festival, at which the whole gathering erupted into an uproar of angry shouts that the Rooster had defied what the whole council of creatures had organised. He must be punished, they said, he must be sent to the Cave and be responsible for all the evils and wrongs in the world— in other words, he must bring back the Sun and the Moon to Earth.

Man sent for the Rooster, ordering him to come to the council. In his turn the Rooster said, "My Lord and fellow beings underneath the heavens, I'm prepared to go to the Cave of the Sanctified Leaf and expose myself to all sorts of dangers for your sake. I am also prepared to lose my neck for your faults and failings. But who am I to stand before such royal beings as the Sun and the Moon? I am only a naked desperate wretch crawling among weeds and dark holes. Now, if you can give me the diverged tail of the Skylark, if you can cloak me from head to foot in finery and warm feathers

bright with all sorts of brilliant colours, then I promise to give up my very life, willingly, for the sake of the general good. And if you promise to acknowledge my deeds throughout my life and to let me occupy a place of honour in all your rituals, I am ready to go at once."

The council endowed him with all he had asked for, and on top of that it placed a purple crest on his head to make him look even more like an emissary fit to meet the gods.

On his way to the Cave, the Rooster met *Jri*, the Rubber Tree, whom he asked for shelter. But *Jri* said, "There are demons living on my branches. They will devour you if you stay the night here."

Undaunted, the Rooster replied, "If you let me spend the night here, when I return, if I have coaxed the Sun to return, I will let you share the role I have in the solemn rituals of Man." Seeing that he was determined, *Jri* decided to allow him to sleep in a hole in its trunk.

The next night the Rooster met *Sning*, the Oak Tree, whom he also asked for a place to sleep, promising to keep a role for it in the religious ceremonies before the altar when he was congratulated and thanked on his successful return from his mission. The Rooster also offered the same thing to *Lamet*, the Leaf, whom he met on the following night.

After he had travelled for many days and gone through much hardship on the way, he finally reached the retreat of the Sun, beyond the valley of death. It only needed one look at him for the Sun to see that here was no randy young fool like the Hornbill. She welcomed him gladly and treated him with great benevolence, giving him royal food and a royal bed for his rest. But in his humility the Rooster asked only for the leftovers of winnowed rice, which he said he would eat in the courtyard in front of her door, adding that he was only a poor desperado, not deserving of such good things and royal treatment.

Impressed, the Sun said, "Tell me, why did you come here?"

The Rooster answered, "My queen, O mother, the whole world was thrown into darkness when you left for this Cave. Man, animals and all other creatures live in great anxiety and dread. Unless you come back, there will be no peace on Earth. Come back, O mother, and I will stand accountable for all the injustices and transgressions of Man and his fellow creatures. It was their mistake not to think before they acted, not to limit their scorn to their own kind. But from now on, I will be answerable for all their wrongdoings, and I will see that the same outrage does not befall you again. Before you peep into the world I will shake my shield and thrice will I sound my bugle, as signs that the world is fit enough for your divine blessing. Come, O mother," he ended his plea, "for I have traded my life to be an intercessor with the gods, a redeemer of wrongs."

Touched by the eloquence of one so simple and modest, the Sun could do no more than give him her assurance that she would return to Earth and forgive the misdeeds of all earthlings for his sake; before she sent him away she bestowed upon him the right to be the Pioneer who will open the way, the Pleader before God, and the negotiator between all things earthly and heavenly.

Thus the Rooster returned to Earth in triumph, and amidst a thunderous reception the victorious fowl was awarded the title of *U Saw Shyrtong*, or the 'Purple Crest'. But glory did not make the Rooster forget that it was his humbleness, his self-abasement before the goddess that had carried the day for him. So he remembered his pledge to the Sun and when dawn came, he shook his shield and sounded his bugle, thrice, at regular intervals. And then, like the lifting of a veil, darkness was removed and light filtered into a world once more full of the joy of living.

Man kept his promise to the Rooster as well. To this day he never begins a ritual or a thanksgiving without the sacrificial blood of the Rooster placed before a piece of *Jri*, the Rubber Tree, *Sning* the Oak Tree, and *Lamet* the Leaf, the three to whom the Rooster had promised a share in the ceremonies. (Translated by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih).

These myths have been interwoven into one continuous long tale that tells the story about how the Khasis first originated upon this earth. The story of the *Ki Hynniew*

Trep is significant; as we are told that the Earth is a female deity, *Ka Mei Ramew* and presided upon the earth, alongside her husband, establishing at the very onset, the matrilineal nature, which the society has been structured upon. Since much of the identity of the Khasis is establishing upon the matrilineal social structure, I will quote at length what Soumen Sen has written in his book, *Folklore Identity Development*, which argues the very same point about Khasi matriliney:

“Social organization focuses on the institution of matriliney. Descent is matrilineal, and residence is matrilocal. Mother controls household property and religious rites. She is succeeded by her younger daughter. However the eldest son enjoys authority in making decisions in the family council (*durbar iing*) even after shifting his residence to his wife’s mother’s household, after marriage and plays a dominant role in the clan council (*durbar Kur*)”²¹

“The matrilineal principle is also evident in the clan-centered religions,” says Soumen Sen, and he goes on to explain the three religious tenets upon which the Khasi Religion (*Niam Khasi*) is based upon, the Niam Khasi, he says, “ revolves around a triad : the progenitress (*ka Iawbei*), the progenitor (*U Thawlang*) and the eldest son of the progenitress (*U Suidnai*).” These tenets, explains Soumen Sen, stresses the consciousness among the Khasis of kinship principles. Thus religion among the Khasis he says, is “essentially a shared experience with predominantly female principle being ritually propitiated. Female deities relate to general welfare, production of wealth, and protection from diseases and other calamities, while male deities’ duties include defense of state, villages territories and markets.”²²

This would then bring home the point made by Bascom about the true nature of Myths, when he says:

“Myths are prose narratives which in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the past.

²¹ Sen, *Folklore Identity Development*, 17.

²² Sen, *Folklore Identity Development*, 18.

They are accepted on faith; they are taught to be believed; and they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance.”²³

Going by Bascom’s definition of myth, we can safely state that the Khasi identity is based largely on these prose narratives, which are believed to be true on all counts.

These myths laid the foundation of what later becomes the Khasi identity. Soumen Sen makes an emphatic statement when he says thus:

“Folklore of the Khasi-Jaintia has largely been an expression of clan, ethnic and religious identities and of the sanctity of the matrilineal order, social organization, and political systems”²⁴

We now turn to another myth based on oral tradition entitled *Ki Syiem Shillong* (The Kings of Shillong), written by H. Elias in Khasi. This myth speaks of the mystical origin of the Kings of Shillong. This myth has various versions, and tells the tale of a lady whose name was Pahsyntiew, whom the Khasis or the people of the *Hynniew Trep* believe to be the progenitress of the Kings of Shillong. The myth goes thus:²⁵

There is a region along the *Lum Shillong* (Hill of Shillong), which is called *Pomlakrai*, located at the end of the River *Umiam*. There is a cave which they called *Krem Marai*. The cave was so small and narrow, that nobody even visited it, and it remained a very lonely place.

A very long times ago, when the population was still very small, and dwellings were scattered far and wide for the purpose of agriculture. Shepherds and cowherds reported the strange citing in the *Marai cave*, of a very beautiful young girl. Her beauty was so mesmerizing, but at the same times so strange, that they dared not venture anywhere near the cave. Others, who had seen such a sighting, merely dismissed the reports as untrue.

The reports of the sighting had spread to villages, near and far the Shillong Hill. There was a youth called *Sati Myllem Ngap*, who lived in a place called Nongkseih. This

²³ William R. Bascom, *Contributions to Folkloristic*, (Folklore Institution Arkhana Publications), 1981

²⁴ Sen, *Folklore Identity Development*, 18.

²⁵ S.D.B. Elias, *Ki Khanatang U Barim*. (Tura: Meghalaya Board of School Education, 2008), 177-181.

youth; curious by nature decided to check the authenticity of the wild story about the young girl.

When the young man reached the cave entrance, he actually did see a distinctly beautiful young girl. She was richly attired, and such was her grace and beauty that the man wanted to find out more about her. He wanted to find out, if she had lost her way and perhaps found herself trapped in the cave. He then tried various ways to attract her attention, but she merely sat and stared at him. He tried entering the cave, but it was too narrow. He noticed a great variety growing near the cave. He decided perhaps, if nothing she may be attracted to flowers.

He plucked some flowers and showed them to her. The girl, happy upon seeing the flowers suddenly stood up, moved in his direction. The man moved backwards slowly step-by-step, while she tried to reach for the flowers. When he reached a safe place, he granted her to safety and took her to his home.

When he returned home, all his neighbours gathered to look upon the beautiful girl. Everyone, from villages far and near, came to see the couple, with marvel and awe in their hearts. Sati took care of all her needs and gave her the name Pahsyntiew. After a time, he married her and, the couple had many children. One fine day, however, she disappeared to the Maria cave and never returned. She never again re-surfaced inspite of the heart-rending pleas of her husband and children. From then on she just vanished, never to make a re-appearance.

Sati raised the children on his own; and they all grew up into very fine young people, gifted with excellent qualities of the head and heart. Everyone loved and respected them, for they believed their mother was the daughter of the God of Shillong. When the children were older, they were older; they were appointed Kings and revered. These new kings, gifted with many talents and intelligence, increased the *Hima* or State, and soon they became rulers of half of Khasi hills. They had noblemen; ministers who help them preside over their state.

The common folks along with the kings, the noblemen and ministers all worked together to institute a religious residence called-*Ka ingsad-ingsunon*. In this

consecrated place lived the Queen-mother or *Syiem-sad*, the older sister of the official king or *syiem-synshar*. It is the Queen mother who presides over all religious matters. Once a year, a religious ceremony in the main market place called *Iewduh*, would take place, where a goat would be scarified, as part of religious rites.

The younger sister of the Queen-mother, when she came of age, married a youth from a place called Myllem, and she and her husband began living independently in a separate home. The Queen-mother, being the older sister, wanted her sister to live in peace and prosperity, relegating some villages under the *Hima* to the sister. The Queen-mother then shifted her resident to a place called *Nongkrem*, the sister too shifted to *Myllem*; since then religious worship was carried on smoothly from *Nongkrem*.

However, during the rule of one king by the name U Ronsing, his nephew, U Sing Manik, revolted against his uncle and wanted to overthrow him. U Ronsing, fought against his nephew and won, forcing U Sing Manik to flee and seek shelter at a place called Langkyrdem. After the death of U Ronsing Syiem, and his successor U Latu Manik, a grand nephew of U Sing Manik, who was also called, U Sing Manik, came to live in Nongkrem. This youth, because he was sharp-willed, gentle of manner, articulate, and a man who held the king in great respect, was well loved by the King, who wanted him to become successor after his death. However, when Bor Manik died, his nephew, who was called U Hayon Sing, demanded the throne, since he was the rightly heir, being the nephew of the King, U Bor Manik. Everyone, both noblemen and ordinary alike, demanded that U Sing Manik should be King. This resulted into the splitting of the Hima into two parts. The region of Nongkrem and Lang Kyrdem appointed U Sing Manik as King, and the rest appointed U Hajon Sing as King.

Since then the Hima of Shillong was split into two divisions. Sing Manik was called King of Nongkrem or Khyrim. Hajon Sing became the Syiem of Myllem. The right to perform traditional religious practices laid with the King of Nongkrem; lakyr-dem-he has sole rights. The King of Myllem, remained without religious practices, and without the traditional religious home called *Iingsad*.

To date, evidence points to the fact that the original home of the Kings of Shillong remains Nongkseh. The main market area in Shillong remains Nongskeh. The main market place in Shillong called Iewduh still retains its name, owing to the yearly sacrifice, in ancient days, of a goat in the Syiem's honour. Rites and ritualistic sacrifices are still being maintained at the place called Smit, which is the official residence of the Kings of Nongkrem. The Mylliem Ngap clan are the ministers throughout the land, till this very day.

The above myth speaks of the divine origin of the Khasis Kings; the seat of religious worship being Nongkrem. The significance of the *Iingsad* or royal residence, and the yearly religious rites and sacrifices connected with the Khasi religion (*Ka Niam Khasi*), that takes place at a place called Smit.²⁶ Soumen Sen., states this very clearly when he says that these oral narratives, (whether the Khasi or Jaintia version) have one elements in common i.e. that the Khasis (which includes the Jaintias) are the progeny of these seven families and are known as the children of *Ki Hynniew Trep*. He further states that these mythic narratives of *Ki Hynniew Trep* is repeatedly referred to enhance the identity consciousness.²⁷

The myth of *Ka Pah Syntiew*, explains in part, the origin of the Khasi State or *Hima*. An explanation of how the *Hima* has come about, is important, as it brings to the fore the social and state formation in the Khasi and Jaintia Hills, which will in turn, connect to an identity formation that is intrinsically connected to the concept of *Hima* and associated meanings. To discuss this at length, we will turn to Soumen Sen to establish the finer points of the arguments. Sen explain how the *Hima* came into existence. One *emic* explanation, he states, talks of divine origin in the myth of *Ka Pah Syntiew*. If we were to look for hidden 'Transcript'²⁸ in the myth, it also refers to the *Bakhraw* (nobles) and their role in the nomination of the *Syiem*. This being the basic elements of a typical 'early state', which according to Sen, recognizes a distinction in social statuses. Appointments to office counterbalance the principle of

²⁶ Elias, *Ki Khanatang U Barim*, 177-181.

²⁷ Sen, *Folklore Identity Development*, 67.

²⁸ As Soumen Sen himself explains in his that it is common to all forms and genres of folklore to carry a coded message for the members of a group (folk) and which is more pervasive in the case of an ethnic group. These 'hidden Transcripts' (for details see also, Korom, Frank J. 2004. 'Uncharted Waters of folklore Scholarship' *Lokoshruti* Vol.3.Issue1: 45-46.

heredity with non-kin officials, who then begin to play a leading role in governance.²⁹ By this process then, the selection of the *Syiem* is carried on in democratic principles, taking into account the will of the majority, who are looked upon as stakeholders in every decision that the Hima makes. Soumen Sen, then, prefer to call a *hima* a “type of early state”³⁰ Sen quotes J.B Bhattacharjee, who states that the ‘inchoate early state’ is usually found where kinship, family and community ties still dominate the relationship in the political field.³¹, taxations systems are primitive and ad hoc taxes frequent, and social differences are offset by reciprocity and close contacts between the rulers and the ruled.

Since , we more or less agree that the *hima*, is a type of early state-and to further this argument, Sen goes on to explain that the *Bakhrav* or noblemen, including the *Syiems* or king themselves declare that they are the *traï hima* or rightful owners and custodians of the *hima*.The *Syiems* of the Hima Khyrim, Sen further states, are the descendents of the *Syiems* of Hima Shillong, and are known as the *Syiem Blei* or divine chiefs.The yearly Nongkrem Festival and the rites and rituals associated with the festival at Nongkrem, are according to Sen, ‘ a discourse in a political space’- where meaning is produced through the rules of conduct, texts and institutional practices.An attempt at rationalizing authority and the reiteration of power equations between the units and the core. This in turn sends a message to the commoners through the systematic organization of religio-political economy.³²

The myth of *ka Pah Syntiew* establishes firstly a religious identity, and this percolates to every aspect of the Khasi way of life. The Jaintia myth of *Ka Lih Dokha*, that explains the establishment of the Hima Sutnga, is worth recounting. The Khasi version by H.Elias, gives a detailed account of divine origin of the Sutnga Kings. There are distinct similarities between the myths of *Ka Pah Syntiew* and *Ka Lih Dokha* .Both tell the stories of the divine origins of kings from mythical mothers, establishing a religious-political identity. This being any important factor, that

²⁹ Sen, *Folklore Identity Development*, 84.

³⁰ Sen, *Folklore Identity Development*, 83.

³¹ J.B. Bhattacharjee. *Social and Polity formation in Pre-Colonial North-East India* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1991).

³² Sen, *Folklore Identity Development*, 105-106.

brought about changes in simple social organization—from kinship to state, and establishing a common identity.³³ Sen further explains how religious belief is a powerful sanction in the enforcement of a standardized community discipline, thus making it clear why the origin of the secular rulers of Khasi-Jaintia would be considered divine. This happens, he says when the *Lyngdoh* (whom Sen defines as the first law maker, because he stands between the community and the unseen powers as a mediator, had to start sharing powers with the *Syiems* or kings—the new secular power centers had to be of divine origin.³⁴ This has been symbolically reinstated yearly, in rites and rituals, associated with the two prominent festivals of the Khasi-Jaintia, namely Pomblang Nongkrem and Behdeinkhlam.³⁵ P.R.G Mathur drives the point home, when he wrote in his book about the Khasis, thus:

“In many respects the small political units, such as the clan, villages and commune, are inseparable from the state and this element has strengthened the solidarity in no small measure. This has, as it may be seen, helped the Khasi as a tribe to put up a valiant resistance against the onslaught of powerful external forces like Christianity. These units have preserved and protected the traditional customs and laws, usages and rights of the Khasi. The leaders of these political units, still inspired by the old tribal loyalty, show their allegiance to the chieftain at the annual religious ceremony by offering goats and other tributes. There is no denying the fact that the Pomblang Nongkrem, the annual goat killing ceremony, has today enabled the Khasi to come together and express their solidarity, though there was a period when the schism between the Christian and *Pucca* Khasi brought about a suspension of the festival for a few years. The ancient pyramidal structures of authority among the Khasi still survives despite interferences from modern institutions like the District Council and the High Court of Assam”.³⁶

A special point has to be noted with reference to identities. Eminent Scholars like D.N Majumdar, N.K Das, Soumen Sen, B.Pakem, and R.T Rymbai speaks of distinctive

³³ Sen, *Social and State formation in Khasi-Jaintia*, 150.

³⁴ Sen, *Social and State formation in Khasi-Jaintia*, 149.

³⁵ Sen, *Social and State formation in Khasi-Jaintia*, 12.

³⁶ P.R.G. Mathur, *The Khasis of Meghalaya: Study in Tribalism and Religion* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publication, 1979), 137.

difference between the Khasis and Jaintias. N.K Das (1989), emphasized an important point, when he says that despite their distinct ‘self-names’, the Khasis and the Jaintias consider themselves as one and the same people. He quotes R.T Rymbai,³⁷ who clearly defines the word ‘Khasi’ to include the *Pnars* (people from Jaintia hills), who refer to the Khasis as *Khynriams* or Khasis, to distinguish themselves as a distinct entity. The *Khynriams* or Khasis, on the other hand call the *Pnars* as *Syntengs*, Jaintias or *Pnars*, and refer to themselves as Khasis. N.K Das further states that despite their “mythological basis for ethnic unity” of Khasi-Pnars or Khasi-Jaintias, enough historical evidence could be cited to show the varying patterns of structural development among these two groups of people.³⁸

Soumen Sen states yet another point when he says, that the essential difference between the Khasi-states and the Jaintia Kingdom was that the feudal order was more consolidated in the Jaintia Kingdom. The Myth of *Ka Lih Dokha* of the hilly regions was later transformed into myth of Jayanta Devi, connected with the plains and Hinduism³⁹. The myth of Jayanta Devi is found in the Jaintia Buranji, a chronicle of the Jaintia court written in Assamese. This myth is more structured and refined; speaking of the divine origin of the Jaintia Kinship, connecting it unmistakably to the Hindu pantheon-pointing to the influence of Hinduism among the Jaintia people. Sen says that this myth shows the Jaintia Kings as descendants to a mythical lady, Jainteswari or Jayanti Devi, who was an incarnation of Goddess Durga.⁴⁰ Yet another narrative collected from the Hills, established the reverse. This narrative states that the Kings of Jaintia went to Jaintiapur from Sutnga in the hills and that the Kingdom was an extension of the Hima Sutnga. For a reading of the Tale as told by Hamlet Bareh look at Appendix⁴¹. A pertinent question to be asked here, is who then were the Jaintia Kings? As tradition goes, it is believed that they belonged to a hill-tribe called Pnar or Synteng, originating from the Hima Sutnga, and their kings came to occupy the area called Jaintia Parganas. One tradition, Soumen Sen says, even mentions the name of a

³⁷ N.K. Das, *Ethnic identity, Ethnicity and Social Stratifications in North-East India* (New Delhi, Inter-India Publications, 1989), 208.

³⁸ Das, *Ethnic identity, Ethnicity and Social Stratifications in North-East India*, 208.

³⁹ For detailed reference, see Appendix C. Source: Soumen Sen (201-204).

⁴⁰ Sen, *Folklore Identity Development*, 90.

⁴¹ Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, 58-59.

powerful Syiem known as U Bor (or Mar) Kuhian. On the basis of this tradition, says Sen, the year 1250 A.D has been suggested by Pakem as the year of annexation of Jaintiapur to Hima Sutnga.⁴² This well-known tale from the Jaintia Hills, related here in both the original Khasi language by H.Elias and a translation into English,⁴³ relating how the *Syiems* (kings) of Sutnga originated, will perhaps throw some light:

Ki Syiem Sutnga

Mynkulong-kumah eh mynba ka ri Pnar ka dang long ka ri khlem Syiem, mynba hangne-hangtai, kyntoit-kyntoit ki shong ki briew kiba shu iasypain-lang ha ka rep-ka-raing, ka trei-ka-ktah bad ka leit-ka-wan, bad la shu don tang ki kynja rangbah shnong kiba long ki kni-ki-kpa jong kito ki thain-kyntoit, la don uwei u briew ha Umwi, uba kyrteng u Ryndi. Kum ka jingling ka ri bad ki jingmlen ha kito kipor, uta u Ryndi, u la long u basmat eh ha ka leit-lum leit-wah, ban beh-mrad, ne ban leit khwai-dohkha.

Ha kawei ka step synrai barang bha ka bneng, bad ka suin ka khuid bha kdiar, u mih na la iingtrep bad la u ryngwiang bad u la liet khwai na kawei ka thwei kaba ki khot ka Waikhyrwi. La u la pynap bad iai-khwai baroh shisngi haduh ban da meit ram, u la ngat tang kawei ka dohkha kaba khot ka 'khakhlur. Ia kane u la phiah arliang wak, bad u la thad tyrkhong ha ka sngi, katba u la nang-pynap ban khwai shuh.

Haba la hap ka meit, u la wan phai-noh sha la iing: u la thep ia kata ka dohkha hapoh kawei ka ruh kaba sdien napoh tyngier halor dpei. Kumta u shet-u-tiew, u bam-u-dih bad u leit thiah-noh. Ynda kum lashai, u la khie dang-step, u la khreh la khrum Ia ka bam-ka-sa, la ka leit-ka-wan bad um kynmaw eiei shuh shaphang kata ka dohkha; u la shim la u star, la ka wait bad u la leit sha lyngkha.

Janmiet, ynda u la wan ha iing, u la shem pynban ha ka iing-ka-sem, ka syaid namar ba ryhem ka ding, ka madan-madiah baroh ka khuid kdom-kdom kumba dang lah sar; la u peit bha, u shem ba la ih ka ja- ka-jyntah baroh. Kumta u la lyngngoh-ngain, bad u la korbar marwei-marwei.

⁴² Sen, *Folklore Identity Development*, 61.

⁴³ This translation into English has been made by me, closely following the original narrative written by S.D.B H.Elias.

Kumta ha kata ka meit, u la shu pyrkhat sammut marwei-marwei ba lashai un khmih-siar ba dei mano ba pynshet-pyntiew, pynsar-iing-sar-sem ia u. Ha kata ka step u la khreh ban leit lum kumba u ju leh. Ynda u la who-dieng ia ka jynkhang u la leit rieh sha-rud shnong. Haba la dei ka por shet-jashet-dohkha, u la wan siak-siak sha la iing, u la plies or ia uta u dieng ba who jynkhang bad u lap pynban da kawei ka samla ka babha-briew shibun, kaba dang shop-kba ha shyngkub. Ka la mut ban phet-noh, hynrei u la kem bad u la bat khak ia ka. Haba u la kylli-tohkit bniah ba ka dei kaei bad balei ka wan ha iing jong u, ka la iathuh ba ka long kato ka dohkha kaba u la khwai na 'Waikhyrwi bad kaba u la shu buh hapoh ruh khlem kynmaw ban bam.

U Ryndi u la jer-kyrteng ia ka, ka Lidohkha, namar u la ioh ia ka kum ka dohkha, u la ri la sumar ia ka bad hadien u la iapoikha-poiman bad ka. Ynda katto-kattne por, ka la kha arngut ki khun-kynthei, ia kiba la jer-kyrteng ka Rytong bad Ka Rnga. Haba kine ki khun ki la kham-san bad tip-briew, ka Lidohkha ka la phet biang shata shapoh thwei; la y Ryndi bad kita ki khun ki la kyrpad-kyrpon, ki la iam pangnud-pangnam, hynrei kam pynsngew.

Da ka jingsngew-sahnud ha kawei ka sngi, u Ryndi, u la mih leit khwai biang na kata ka thewi, hynrei haba u la ngat, um lah ring shuh ia la u ryngwiang. Kata ka dohkha ka la tan lang ia u shapoh thwei bad u la ngop jlang. Naduh kata ka por ym ju iohsngew eiei shuh shaphang jong u bad kata ka dohkha.

Ki khun jong u Who Ryndi bad ka Lidohkha, ki la nang-san nang-rangbah ha ka buit-ka-sap bad ha ka ryngieng ryniup ruh. Ki briew ruh baroh, ki burom bad ki mane ia ki, namarba ki long kiba la wan kha phylla da ka briew ka baphylla. Bub snem hadien, kine ki la ioh la ki khun-ki-ksiew parum pareh, kiba la phriang kylleng ka ri Khasi bad ri Pnar baroh. Na ka Rytong, la mih ki jait Sutong, Pala, Huwa, Iongrem, bad kiwei-kiwei de.

Ka Rnga pat, ka la ioh arngut ki khun-kynthei, kiba kyrteng ka Het bad ka Libon. Na ka Het, la mih ki jait Lihet Sutnga, kiba long ki jait Lyngdoh ban pyniaid ia ka knia-ka-khriam ha ka hima –sima. Bad na ka Libon la mih ki jait Libon Sutnga, ia kiba la sin ruh ki Iong-Muliar. Na kane ka jait, la mih u Syiem Sutnga banyngkong bad ki ba-bud ter-ter.

Uta u rangwiang khwai jong u Who Ryndi, uba la hap ha um kum ba sieh khongpong, u dang don haduh kine ki sngi, hangta harud ‘Waikhyrwi. U la suh-thied harud-um bad u la sei-sla bad u la roi ruh bun-bun tylli. U long thik kum ki kynja shken baroh, tang ba u mih Khongpong, bad u seisla ruh khongpong.

(S.D.B H.Elias, *Ki Khanatang U Barim*, 2008)

Ki Syiem Sutnga (The Sutnga King)

In ancient days, the land of the Jaintia (*Pnar*) had no King or rulers. People were scattered here and there, and they came together to cultivate the land to gather once a while, and affairs were presided over by headmen or elderly men. There was a man from Umwi, whose name was U Ryndi. This man was industrious, hard-working and liked hunting and fishing.

One bright spring morning, with clear blue skies, he decided to go fishing. He left his hut with his fishing rod and went fishing in a large pond called Waikhyrwi. He sat with his fishing rod throughout the day, till sunset, and managed to catch only one star fish. He sliced the fish in half, left it to dry in the sun, while he waited to catch more fishes.

When finally, he settled in, he returned home; placing the fish in a basket hung above the hearth. He began cooking his meals, ate and retired for the night. Next Morning, he woke early, and did his usual chores, completely forgetting about the fish placed in the basket. He began cooking his meals, ate and retired for the night. Next Morning, he woke early, and did his usual chores, completely forgetting about the fish, placed in the basket. He took his cane-strap, his knife and went to the fields.

At dusk, when he returned home, he discovered to his utter surprise, the house warm already, because the fireplace was lit. Everything around the house had been cleaned and dusted and even his meal was cooked. He was struck with amazement and wondering as to who might have done all of this. He ate the deliciously cooked meal, musing at who the generous person might be. The next day, upon returning home, he discovered the same strange happening. That night he made up his mind to secretly

spy upon the person who cooked his meals and kept his home so immaculately clean. The next morning, he readied himself like every other morning. When he finally latched his front door, instead of going straight to the fields, he hid himself near his hut. He waited a while, and then stealthily open again, and quietly entered the hut. He found a very beautiful girl beating husk on the floor. Upon seeing him, she tried to flee, but he cornered her and held her back. Upon enquiring about who she was, and how she came to be there, she revealed that she was the same fish he had caught in Wai Khyrwi, which he had placed in a basket, forgetting to eat.

U Ryndi, then gave her the name Li Dohkha, or the fish lady, as she was formally a fish. He took care of her, and later married her and she bore him two daughters; one was called Rytong and the other Rnga. When these children had grown to a certain age, the mother returned to the pond and was never seen again. The children and U Ryndi, pleaded for her return, but she never resurfaced, from the waters.

U Ryndi, missing his wife terribly; one day went back to the deep pond, to fish once again. His fishing rod did manage to hook a fish, so heavy that his rod would not hold –instead he was dragged by the fish into depths of the pond, and he too disappeared into its waters. Neither he nor Li Dohkha were ever heard from again.

The daughters of U Ryndi and Li Dohkha, grew up into very beautiful girls, with varied talents and gentle mannerism. Everyone respected and paid homage to them, being daughters of a mystical mother. Years went by, and the daughters begot their own children, who in turn begot theirs, and they began spreading and setting all over Jaintia hills. From the daughter Rytong, came the clan who bore the surnames of Sutong, Pala, Huwa, Iongrem and others.

The other daughters, Rnga, bore two daughters by the name Het and Libon. From Het, came the clan Lihet Sutnga, who were noblemen, presiding over religious rites of the Hima. From Libon, sprung the clan called Libon Sutnga, and it was from Libon Sutnga clan that the first King of Sutnga originated.

It is told, that the fishing rod of U Ryndi, that lay erected topsy-turvy by the side of the Waikhyrwi, can be seen even today. Leaves have sprung around the fishing rod,

and it seems to have multiplied like a cluster of bamboos only that, unlike bamboos grow up-right, these clusters that are off –shoots of the original fishing rod, grew upside down.⁴⁴ [Trans. Sophia Pde].

These myths, told in various versions, sought to establish not only the origin of the Khasis as a people, but also traces, through mythology, the divine origins of Kings and noblemen. These myths help form not only a strong religious identity, which found its way into every aspect of the social lives of the Khasis, but was also the bases for a political formation that could establish the Khasi *Himas* as early states or pre-states, gradually leading to the establishment of a full-fledged state as we know it today. To reiterate an important point that connects these mythical narratives to both Khasi religion and consciousness of a collective Khasi identity, we quote Rymbai who says:

“The Khasi –Pnars, to this day, in times of storm and stress, of stir and strife, whenever there is a call for the unity of the tribe, invoke the name of Ki Hynniew Trep.”⁴⁵

⁴⁴ Elias, *Ki Khanatang U Barim*, 170-172.

⁴⁵ As quoted in Soumen Sen, ‘Endoethnonym and Exoethnomyn of an Ethnicos: Identity’, *South Indian Folklorist*: Vol.2: 85-91.

CHAPTER 3

WRITTEN PHASE AND IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

When a society passes from a purely oral culture to a written one, these are accompanying changes that take place on all aspects—from the socio-cultural to the religious. New meanings and interpretations are sought, either confirming in writing, old meanings, or giving them a new meaning altogether. This has been remarkably described by B.A. Botkin in the Funk and Wagnalls standard dictionary, making it clear from the very outset, the role, writing plays in folklore, and its undeniable importance in modern society. This is what Botkin says:

“In a purely oral culture everything is folklore. In modern society what distinguishes folklore from the rest of culture is the preponderance that the popular imagination derives from and gives to customs and tradition. The transference of oral tradition to writing and print does not destroy its validity as folklore but rather, while freezing or fixing it in form, helps to keep it alive and to diffuse it among those to whom it is not native or fundamental. For the folk memory forgets as much as it retains and restricts and corrupts as much as it transmits and improves. In the reciprocity of oral and written tradition and the flux of cultural change and exchange, revival plays as important a part as survival, popularization is as essential as scholarship, and the final responsibility rests upon the accumulative and collective judgment of the many rather than a few. In this process of creative remembrance, which is tantamount to the genius of a people, the great collection of folk literature are the product of collaboration of countless folk singers, folksayers, collectors, scholars, religious teachers, and professional artist and interpreter of the arts, with the inarticulate folk.”¹

The movement from oral to written culture does not however imply that with the advent of writing, all aspects of culture would necessarily change. Nor are all aspects

¹ Funk and Wagnall, Standard Dictionary of Folklore: Mythology and Legend, Vol.1 (New York: Funk and Wagnall Co., 1949), 398.

of communication equally affected, as Jack Goody puts it. Orality remains a dominant form of human interaction, although orality itself modified in various ways by the addition of new modes of communication.² To stress this point further, this is what Walter.J. Ong, says:

“Thus writing from the beginning did not reduce orality but enhanced it, making it possible to organize the ‘principle’ or constituents of orality into a scientific ‘art’ , a sequentially ordered body of explanation that showed how and why oratory achieved and could be made to achieve its specific effects”.³

Ruth Finnegan, in her ground –breaking work, ‘Literacy and Orality’ (1988), spoke at length about the development of writing, where she quotes Roy Harris ⁴, as having said, in his book *The Origin Of Writing* , about the writing revolution, ‘ was the first of the great communication revolutions in the history of mankind. The next came thousands of years later, followed after a much shorter interval by the development of telegraphy and telephony.’

Finnegan explains the nature of oral communication, which looks she says, at first light ‘unproblematic’ and ‘natural’. But, like literacy or computer technology, its use too, rests on social and cultural conventions, and on man-made system of communication. She goes on to explain, the remarkable system of human speech-a ‘technology’, she says, we take for granted, like we take for granted *established* systems, which at once seems too ‘natural’ and ‘self-evidently’ human to need any explanation, in contrast to newer, and thus apparently ‘intrusive’ and ‘unnatural’ technologies. The threat nowadays, Finnegan states, seems to come from ‘unhuman’ electronics –based technologies. Whereas, in earlier times, the threat was seen as coming from the external technology of writing. A view, says Finnegan expressed in Plato’s *Phaedrus* (274-5)-and much later in the mechanization of print. The threat of the new and ‘unnatural’ continues, but writing and even more so vocal communication

² Jack Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition*, (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 2.

³ Walter J. Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologising of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 9.

⁴ Ruth Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality: Studies in the Technology of Communication*. (London: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1988), 3-4.

through the conventions of human speech, now at least, looks very ‘natural’ and ‘non-technological’-which ironically, are socially created products of human ingenuity.⁵

On an optimistic note, Finnegan answers the question of whether or not writing is now driving out oral literacy. She states, that, perhaps the extensive use of writing does mean some decline in the relative position of oral literature. Yet, in another sense, oral literature shows no sign of disappearing. She cites the example of the Pacific scene, where she says, orality is a constant feature in story-telling, where stories are told on recent events as well as old traditions. In some areas, she says, schools and churches, far from ‘driving out’ these forms, have stimulated and fostered them. The radio too-together with the gramophone and tape recorders –has an important part to play in the modern Pacific, Finnegan states. What is more heartening is when she says, to quote her:

“Over the radio, truly oral forms of art can come into their own, as stories, poems, songs and speeches are broadcast over areas much wider than the ‘traditional’ narrator or minstrel would reach with individual voice. All in all, it is hard to see a quick death for oral literature in the Pacific, or any inevitability about its ‘decline’.”⁶

Finnegan, makes a strong argument when she states that orality-and hence oral transmission –has been seen as ‘characteristically’ and ‘essentially’ found in cultures without writing, which also implies, going back in history without modern commerce, or transport systems. Correspondingly, she states, literary had been associated with cultures characterized by the development of urban and bureaucratic systems and the rise of secular and scientific enquiry, which were intensified by the advent of prints. Based on this view, two very different types of culture are contracted and the characteristic of both oral and written traditions, thus investigated in the framework of these ‘essentially opposed’ settings-she added.⁷

Finnegan further argues that the approach may be an ‘attractive’ one, ‘romantic’ even, to investigate orality and literacy from the concepts of two opposing types: the one, the characteristic settings for oral tradition as being rural, non-industrial, face to face,

⁵ Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, 4-5.

⁶ Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, 120:121.

⁷ Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, 140-141.

dominated by ascribed kinship, religion and revered traditions. The other-the setting for written transmission-typically industrial, urban, bureaucratic, characterized by a respect for rationality, individual achievement, heterogeneous and secular. Having stated all of that, Finnegan makes a further point by adding that with ‘orality’ and ‘literacy’, such a typology has serious drawbacks. How useful is binary typology when it turns out that most known cultures don’t fit? Asks Finnegan. She answers the question, by stating that in practice a *mixture* of media (oral and written) is far more typical than the reliance on just one. I quote her: “This kind of mixture is and had been a common and ordinary feature of cultures throughout the centuries rather than the ‘abnormal’ case implied by the ideal types model.”

Finnegan sums up the importance of mixed oral and written modes in human cultures that has been widely documented. To sum up her argument effectively, she quotes Jack Goody, who made following observation in his classic, *Literacy in Traditional Societies*:⁸

“At least during the past 2,000 years, the vast majority of the peoples of the world (most of Eurasia and much of Africa) have lived...in cultures which were influenced in some degree by the circulation of the written word, by the presence of groups of individual who could read and write...Even if one’s attention is centered only upon villages life, these are large areas of the world where the fact of writing and the existence of the book have to be taken into account, even in discussing ‘traditional’ societies .”

In the light of the above discussion, we are to understand cultures, not as divided into two water-tight compartments, viz oral and written, but rather as a mixture of both oral and written. Writing is then, not something in isolation, but part of the whole process of change-from the oral, small-scale, heterogeneous rural communities to the literate, urban, industrial and mechanical cultures⁹. Taking this very same argument from Ruth Finnegan, I would like to place it in the Khasi context, from the time the language was committed into writing in 1841 and since then, Khasi culture has seen a moving back and forth between oral and written. In his book, *Khasi Canvas* (1978),

⁸ Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, 387.

⁹ Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, 141.

J.N Chowdhury included in the Appendix, an enlightening essay written by I.M Simon entitled, “A note on Khasi and its development as a literary language.”¹⁰ I will refer to this essay at length to further my argument. I.M Simon begins by stating that the Khasi language is the *only* representative of the Mon Khmer language family on the Indian mainland and belongs to the Northern Branch of that family-and exists as an island within a large area where the language spoken are either of the Indo-Aryan or the Tibeto-Burman family.

I.M Simon further states that the Standard Dialect of Khasi has been in use in educational institutions and for official purposes for more than 150 years. This dialect, he says is locally called ‘Ka Ktien Sohra’ because it is spoken in Sohra (the Khasi name for Cherrapunji). The Cherra dialect was selected, because it happens to be more refined than the other dialects, and is rich in idioms and phrases. Before the coming of the British to these hills, Cherrapunji had always been the centre for trade in lime, coal and other products for which the demand in the plains was considerable. This was most probably the reason, that the Indo-Aryan words in Khasi, states Simon, found their way into Khasi Language through Cherrapunji.

I.M. Simon traces the development of the Khasi Language, with the coming of the British in the 1830’s, and it was in Cherrapunji that they established their headquarters. When the Baptists discontinued their work, they were succeeded by the Presbyterian Mission from Wales, which began their work, states I.M. Simon, in the year 1841. Rev.Thomas Jones was the first missionary to open schools at the same locations. Thomas Jones, within a few months had acquired a working knowledge of the language, and put it in writing, adopting the Roman script for his purpose. The reason why he adopted the Roman Script was because he came to Cherrapunji directly from Wales. It was easier and quicker for him to work with a script he knew, without much delay to the enormous task at hand. At first the adoption of the Roman script was received with misgivings in Britain as well as in India, but won the support and patronage of Dr Alexander Duff-the great British missionary scholar. This script continues to be used in favour of the Bengali script. Though, states I.M Simon, the adoption of a known script for a new language is always uncertain, and many

¹⁰ Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, 387.

dissenting voices began to be heard about the close of the nineteenth century. Prominent among them was U Jeebon Roy, who had his own printing press, and published the first Khasi journal called 'U Khasi Mynta' (The Khasi today). This criticism, says Simon, turned out in the end to be constructive, and although there is still room for improvement, the Khasi alphabet as it now represents Khasi sounds as faithfully for any alphabet to do.¹¹

I will turn to Hamlet Bareh to substantiate what has already been stated by I.M Simon.¹² Bareh states that the first books that saw the light were the Christians publications; and Christian missions contributed to the making of literature. As has already been stated by I.M Simon, Bareh reiterated that the first mission to set foot was the Serampore Baptist Mission. The first missionary was a Bengalee from Calcutta named Krishna Chandra Pal, who came in the year 1812, and worked for a few months. William Carey, foreseeing the advantage, proposed to translate the New Testament into Khasi, using the Bengalee script. Step by step the translation was accomplished which led to the publication of the full New Testament in 1831 entitled *Khashee New Testament*. Bareh further elaborated, that in the year 1838 for certain reasons, the Baptist Mission at Cherrapunji was closed down to be replaced by the Welsh Calvinistic Methodist Church, which came to be known later as Welsh Presbyterian Mission. It was Thomas Jones 1 of this mission who on setting foothold in 1841, reduced Khasi to writing in the Roman alphabet, being assisted by a literate named U Laithat in the production of the first primers and the gospels. The Roman alphabet, says Bareh, introduced since that year is being used till today. Thomas Jones published his first work in Khasi, called *Ka kot pule ba nyngkong* printed in 1842 at Calcutta Baptist Press. The next booklet to be printed was a translation from Welsh entitled, *Rhodddham. My Mother's Gift*. A Catechism entitled *Ka Kot Laiphew* in print came out followed by a *Gospel of Matthew*. These, according to Bareh, laid the beginnings of literature, or in a word, the writing tradition of the Khasis. Thomas Jones deservedly won the gratitude of the then community, for laying down the foundation of literature amongst the Khasis.

¹¹ Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, 387-390.

¹² Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, 364-365.

Hamlet Bareh gradually traces the evolution of literature and the written word, and with the first edition of the Bible in print, which came out in 1899, laid the foundation for the writing and printing of the numerous books that followed.¹³ Bareh speaks about the period of cultural awakening (1895 to 1915), which I find necessary to mention, as it notes the local authors coming into their own, influencing every aspect of Khasi life, not to mention with missionary activities, Christianity gained a strong foothold in a region previously dominated by indigenous religion. Bareh states that the years following 1895, saw the flowering of local writers, and gaining insightful clues into some cultural aspects, which also in many ways speaks about the various aspects that make up the Khasi identity.

U Jeebon Roy as mentioned earlier was as Bareh calls him, “The first Architect”, and with the publication of his book *Ka Niam Jong Ki Khasi* (1) The Religion of the Khasi in 1897, laid emphasis on the Khasi religion, its belief, rites and rituals, and treatment of other themes like clan, monolithic erections, birth and death ceremonies, marriage, divorce and funeral. Though a booklet only, it documented some important aspects of religion and culture, from an insider’s perspective.

Bareh lists prominent names of Khasi writers, who took the cue from the great pioneer, U Jeebon Roy. The names that stand out are those of U Rabon Sing, who wrote three books, the first being *Ka Niam Khien Ki Khasi*, which threw considerable light on Khasi religion, with special emphasis on Khasi religion, and also with emphasis on Khasi rites and rituals, which make up a major portion of Khasi *Niam* or religion. Other important laws and customs were incorporated in this book.¹⁴ Then followed, U Sib Charan Roy, another prolific writer, who wrote *Ka Niam Tip Briew Tip Blei*, which according to Bareh, gives interpretation on the conception about the Supreme Being. His writings laid stress on the monotheistic tendency of the old religion. It is also interesting to note, that Sib Charan Roy wrote a book entitled *Bhagabad Gita* in Khasi in (1903), an adaptation from Hindu philosophy on the supremacy of the soul.

¹³ Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, 365-367.

¹⁴ Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, 368-370.

Then came about Journalism, and as early as 1896, Hormu Rai Deingdoh edited a monthly named *U Khasi Mynta* (U Khasi Today)-not only was it the first journal in circulation, says Bareh, but the only journal in circulation, says Bareh, but the journal itself was concerned with the process of cultural awakening, providing critical insight on several subjects. Then followed poetry, and we have well-respected flowering of poetry in the works of Radhon Singh Berry. Bareh mentioned that these and several miscellaneous writers, kept their works in line with the cultural orientation of the times, which was then a moving force. They laid down in writing, old maxims and proverbs for the well-being of the family and society. Through their writings, they taught the younger generation to love and respect tradition, and save the race from distortion and extinction. The legacy they left behind continues to be followed in many aspects of Khasi social and personal life.

Bareh then lists writers from the modern period, beginning from 1915 onwards; writers who have contributed greatly to Khasi language and literature. Prominent among them are writers like U Soso Tham, Dr Homiwell Lyngdoh and U Mondon Bareh. I will not elaborate further, and for further reading, Hamlet Bareh's book is recommended.¹⁵ Going back, to what I.M Simon had written in his essay, an important point maybe be noted to the substantial growth in the number of literate among the Khasis. He wrote that with rise of Khasi writers and the number of books written during the years, the Khasi language became the first tribal language in North-Eastern India to be recognized for high schools. The first recognition, I.M Simon notes, was given in 1900 to Khasi language when it was prescribed as a Second Language for the Entrance (later Matriculation) Examination of the Calcutta University. In 1903, the permission was extended to High schools for girls. It was recognized next for college in 1919. In 1961 Khasi was recognized as a Major Language by the University of Gauhati, which has assumed in the authority of the Calcutta University in higher education in North-Eastern India.¹⁶ Since then Khasi has been included in the post graduate level, and the Department of Khasi- in more than two decades of its existence, has made tremendous efforts to develop and enrich Khasi language and literature. It would seem fitting to quote Helen Giri, to sum up

¹⁵ For further reading, look up Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, 370.

¹⁶ Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, 394-395.

how Khasis viewed their history; and even with the written tradition having been introduced for more than a hundred and fifty years ago, her words resounds a sentiment shared by all Khasis:¹⁷

“The Khasis have no written history but it is engraved in their veins. They can read their history from their customs and traditions, their folklore and festivals, their culture and religion, their manners and ways of life. They have undoubtedly been able to preserve and maintain their democratic way of life. Democracy, to the Khasis, is the ideal shaped, moulded and brought into stature by the ancestors in the dim mists of antiquity.”

Fast forward to the beginning of the 21st Century and we witness tremendous changes having taken place in social and cultural traditions, religion and language. Towards the end of the last century and the beginning of this one, Khasi society has undergone varied changes, upheavals, and we bore witness to a society in transition, very characteristic of any other society that undergoes changes from its so called ‘primitive’ stages to becoming a full fledged modern society. Promatha Nath Dutta made a note of this in his book.¹⁸ In the chapter entitled “Society in Transition”, he states that British paramountcy brought about far-reaching changes in every aspect of Khasi-Jaintia society. Whatever device the British may have employed to uplifting the Khasis from their ‘primitive’ state to a ‘civilized’ one; whether it was missionary activities, attributed to the Serampore Baptists and Welsh Presbyterian Missionaries- the impact was tremendous.

It is to be noted, as Promatha Nath Dutta and various other writers have mentioned that William Carey, the head of Serampore Baptists sent his first Indian convert, Krishna Chandra Pal to evangelize in the district of Sylhet, in the year 1813. Pal began preaching at Pandua, and was successful in gaining some converts, among the two Khasis who went by the name U Duwan and U Anna. Their baptismal ceremonies

¹⁷ Giri, *The Khasis under British Rule*, 11.

¹⁸ Promatha Nath Dutta, *Impact of the West on the Khasis and Jaintias: A Survey of Political, Economic and Social Changes*, New Delhi: Cosmo Publication, 1982), 182.

were held in radical Protestant tradition in a neighbouring stream, the Dhuleswari, which was attended by eight Khasi Rajas and six hundred other Khasis.¹⁹

As has already been mentioned earlier, that for various reasons, one being the lack of funds, the Serampore Mission had to put a stop to its activities in the hills, and the work was finally offered to the Welsh Presbyterian Mission, who accepted it, and thus began the momentous period of the history of the Khasis from 1841 to 1874 and beyond. This period and after that was marked by proselytization, and saw the greatest majority of the Khasis converting into Christianity. The paternalist and humanistic attitude of the British towards the hill tribe, won not only converts to Christianity, but adoption of Western values, dress and culture, especially among the more affluent lot, who reaped the benefit of Missionary education. These emerging elites were composed of both Christians and non-Christians alike, and from amongst this rising educated class, emerged the social reformer, the patriot –both being influenced by western values. With the adoption of a new religion, the introduction of the written script, there were bound to be changes in the cultural patterns of a society. It will be discussed at length in the later chapter.

Our attention will be to show how the written script came about- to whom do the Khasis owe their now well-developed script? The answer lies with the Welsh Presbyterian Mission, and to Thomas Jones, who not only according to Andrew, J. May, “brought Christianity to the hills, but who in transporting an oral culture to written form has also been revised as the founding father of Khasi Literature.”²⁰

Andrew J. May, meticulously and painstakingly traces the established of the Welsh Presbyterian Mission in the Khasi hills, from the time the Reverend Thomas Jones, came to India in 1841 to the end of the 19th Century. He himself claims in the introduction to his book, *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism –The Empire of Clouds in North-East India*, that the book seeks to “inflict the history of one particular mission station in the under-studied north-east region of India with alternative

¹⁹ Dutta, *Impact of the West on the Khasis and Jaintias*, 182.

²⁰ Andrew J. May, *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism: The Empire of clouds in North-East India* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010), 2.

readings of the interactions between missionary, indigenous people and the other British imperial agents.”²¹. The Welsh, as missionaries, were to have a profound impact on the language, culture and beliefs of the Khasi people.²²

A brief note on the most palpable theories, conjectures by eminent scholars, on the origin of the Khasi language in its un-writing form, is beneficial, before we come back to the Welsh Presbyterian Mission, and in particular Thomas Jones, who in October 1841 made the decision to use Roman characters, instead of the Bengali script (whom the people had little or no knowledge off) to render the Khasi language in print and also to utilize the Welsh alphabet’s character in doing so.²³

According to Soumen Sen (1985), many physical anthropologists, past and present, are certain that ethnically, the Khasi belong to the Indo-Mongoliod group inspite of linguistic isolation. Through some contending theories by eminent scholars like J.N Chowdhury and Hamlet Bareh, point to the Khasis as being an Austric people, speaking on Austric language. However, Sen makes a point when he cities the findings of S.K. Chatterji (1974), who implicitly states:

“They are as has been observed more than once before Indo Mongoliod in race, but Austric (Mon-Khmer) in language. Their cultural milieu is the same as that of the neighbours the Bodos. The history of the origin of the Khasis is shrouded in mystery .They are said to be descended from some of the earliest Mongoliod immigrants into India who changed their language through contact with Austric speakers, either in Burma or on the soil of India, in prehistoric times. It is likely they were spread over a much wider tract-probably over parts at least of the plain-lands of Sylhet and Kamrup, before they become confined to the Khasi and Jaintia Hills.”²⁴

To rest all matters then, the general agreement among most scholars is that Khasi is a Mon-Khmer language in morphology, lexicology and phonology. The colossal role of

²¹ May, *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism*, 3.

²² May, *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism*, 3.

²³ May, *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism*, 138.

²⁴ S.K Chatterjee, *Kirata-Jana-Kriti* (Kolkata: The Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1974), 133.

Thomas Jones in fostering Khasi Language and Literature is often cited in passing, but his role is undeniably a pivotal one, in transforming an oral language into a written one, even if its main purpose was proselytizing.²⁵ How he went about the task of committing, in Jones's words, 'a strange and uncultivated tongue' into writing is a fascinating story in itself.²⁶

Following, Andrew. J. May and the chapter in his book entitled, "The Banner of the Cross"- events from the life of Thomas Jones, who arrived in Cherrapunji in June of 1841, and within months of working tirelessly was able to compile an alphabetical list of Khasi words, as well as longer sentences with literal translations. Jones has two Khasi words, as well as longer sentences with literal translations. Jones had two Khasi interlocutors, students of the great missionary, Alexander Lish, and both men had a working knowledge of the English language.²⁷ Thomas Jones built upon the legacy of the Serampore missionaries and their cultural interactions with the Khasis, bringing the indigenous people to play an active role in shaping their cultural and spiritual outcomes, unlike in the past when many missionaries and their published accounts tend to overlook the role of indigenous informants in the process of translation, Jones himself was overt about role played by his interlocutors in shaping the language into letters, making Jones not only a committed missionary but also a cultural saviour of the people. As May says that Jones was not simply putting Khasi vocabulary into writing in a straightforward act of transliteration; he was, very importantly reconciling different sets of belief into a single phraseology. Jones settled on the Cherra dialect, as he himself claims to be the 'middle road that suits them all'. By fixing the Cherra dialect among other contending dialects, Jones established it, as May wonderfully puts it, "as a vehicle for the latter mobilisation of collective cultural and political identity among the Khasis as a group."²⁸

The central aim of the Welsh Mission is to educate people in religious and other matters. With the opening of Mission schools and most importantly The Welsh Sunday School tradition which was a model of Welsh pedagogy. The Sunday Schools

²⁵ May, *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism*, 4-5.

²⁶ May, *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism*, 4-5

²⁷ May, *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism*, 136.

²⁸ May, *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism*, 137-138.

played a significant role in Welsh language maintenance, in teaching, reading and writing, as well as inculcating tenets of social discipline, good order and personal hygiene. May, stresses the point when he says that through the institution of the Welsh Sunday schools, a largely illiterate people learned to read the Bible, but also importantly to read.²⁹ The Sunday school tradition is very much a practice till today, helping to educate and bringing a large part of the indigenous population to adopt the Christian faith, which now accounts for almost 70% of the population.

However, there is the argument that states that, with the transition from orality to literacy –with written forms replacing primary forms, certain aspects of culture, changes; while others remain constant. As John. J. Honigmann once stated that language interweaves with practically everything in culture,³⁰ the influence of language, be it in the oral or the written form, is paramount. How far has the writing word shaped the thinking of the Khasi, and subsequently cultural aspects, remains central to this discussion. Prior to the coming of the British to these hills, and the development of the Khasi alphabet, and the subsequent writing and documenting; little is known about either the history or origin of the Khasis. With the East India Company having extended its administrative rule in these regions, began the earnest recording and documenting of environment, habits, and customs of a lesser known people. Various accounts by both administrative, missionaries and consequently the local narrators themselves, began gradually the reconstruction of an obscure past, based upon present observations. The oral history of a people, became a written history, though the fact remains that much was based on conjectures, heresay and most importantly, the folklore of the people. In the oral past everything that was known about the people was through their lore, which accounts for various aspects of the Khasi culture that remained unchangeable and immutable.

Esther Syiem views the function of folklore in Khasi society as tremendous and intrinsic to its knowledge systems, as she puts into words in the following paragraph:

“The immense body of the folk exists close to the surface, punctuating it with its characteristic insight. It is forward looking in its adaptability to change and, in Khasi

²⁹ May, *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism*, 143.

³⁰ John, Honigmann, *Understanding Cultures* (New York and London: Harper& Row, 1963), 154.

society it has gone a long way in exercising order and control over many aspects of the lived life; it is never uncommon to seek guidance from a village or a clan elder who steeped in folk knowledge .It breathes life, poetry and philosophy .Its esthetics is based upon a simple enunciation of its principles, wherein the physical and the extra physical are equally legitimized. Hence, one would continue to view the folks, as a vast resource of knowledge patterns, which wields control far beyond itself.”³¹

Coming to the direct impact that writing itself has had on folklore, customs and tradition of the Khasis-we see a moving forward and a looking backward-an admixture of the oral and the written, as Ruth Finnegan had spoken about-a movement from the oral, heterogeneous, rural communities to the literate, urban and mechanical cultures.³² From the time Mrs. Rafy documented and published her scintillating, *Folktale of the Khasis* in 1920, dozens of writers, both local and others have documented oral stories of the Khasis, giving it new meaning and understanding, and becoming instrumentalists in the oral-written continuum.

Before the Khasi language was committed to writing, it was based purely on the oral tradition. The history of the people was reconstructed based on myths, legends and oral narratives. Jan Vansina stresses this point in his book, *Oral Tradition as History* (1985), when he says, “writing is a technological miracle. It makes utterances permanent while not losing any of their faithfulness, even though the situation of immediate intimate communication is lost.”³³ Consequently in societies where writing is widely used, Vansina adds; information is detailed and varied allowing for a more precise and detailed reconstruction of the past. Historians, who work solely with oral materials, can never expect the same results. It was only when the Khasi language itself took on the written form, that the Khasi past was gradually reconstructed through the various materials that folklore provided, and piece by piece, began the unraveling of the past and the understanding of a culture hereto unknown. With the reconstruction of history, began the reconstruction of identity-the Khasi identity and what it means to be a Khasi, took on a new meaning-an identity now composed of

³¹ Esther Syiem, *The Oral Discourse in Khasi Folk Narrative* (Guwahati: E R H Publishers, 2011), 19.

³² Finnegan, *Literacy and Orality*, 148.

³³ Vansina, *Oral tradition as History*, 199.

both Christians and Non-Christians elements. To state the obvious, the non-Christian elements belong to the oral past, to the stuff of folklore. The new identity would be re-interpreted by the emerging intelligential (the immediate product of a now written culture), composed of both Christian and non-Christian Khasis, with certain common ethos. All felt the need for reforms of the society and were often scornful of their traditional mores and customs.³⁴ The scale of influence that British Imperialism had on Khasi culture, identity and language cannot be overestimated, as in the words of Andrew .J. May, who sums it up precisely, showing in his estimation what Khasi identity means in the present context:

“The underlying imposition of British hegemony as exerted over the Khasi were in their very nature fundamentally inimical to native welfare, rights, identity, self-determination and sovereignty. British power was achieved through promulgation of its language and its bureaucracies, and the Khasis were co-opted into serving British interests rather than their own. As Jones once attested, the everyday equilibrium of this subordination were evident in an apparently tenuous yet deceptive strong web of obligate relationships that naturalized British control as the *status quo*. Khasi and British constructed each other as indigene and imperialist; they mutually relied on each other for their own particular and transforming identities , living on and in each other. Of course the unintended consequence of imperialism’s disruptive effect was ultimately its transformation influence on Khasi culture and identity, which shaped by resistance, agency and its own co-option of those mechanisms of British hegemony, including language, that suited its purposes. Khasi and colonialist co-evolved.”³⁵

Though the Khasis and the colonialists may have “co-evolved”, and as we become part of these transforming identities, the words of P.N Dutta cannot ring more true when he states that the Western Influence may have “opened the window to the west no doubt, but it closed the other window, the sanskritic influence from the plains.”³⁶ Prior to the coming of the British, there was plenty of interaction between the hills and plains people. This was evident when the Bengalee Alphabet was first used when Khasi became a writing language, but was later replaced by the Roman alphabet.

³⁴ Dutta, *Impact of the West on the Khasis and Jaintias*, 201.

³⁵ May, *Welsh Missionaries and British Imperialism*, 270.

³⁶ Dutta, *Impact of the West on the Khasis and Jaintias*, 201.

Gradually the administration began curbing and restricting these interactions, and people from both sides began alienating themselves from the other. This sense of alienation, in its turn did give rise to a xenophobic feeling, which has brought about decades of unrest in the Khasi Hills. All this may have had its origin in a now famous folktale that has been in circulation for close to a hundred years, among the people of the Hynniewtrep. The following is a version from the Khasi by H. Elias entitled “*Ka Jynthoh ba la jah*” or the lost book.³⁷

After having felt the Diengiei tree that connected earth to heaven; mankind and God severed all ties, and all communication between them came to a halt. Since then, began the moral degradation about everything. Fear began to set itself into the hearts of men, previously unknown, and fear overtook his whole being, so much as that he would grow restless, and that nothing he did would bring him peace. Even with eyes and ears open, he would neither see nor hear, nor comprehend.

Upon reaching such a desperate and Godless state, Man knew he had to reach out to God, and he began calling out and reaching for God, in whichever means he would muster. Finally, God took pity upon man, and instructed both the Khasi and ‘Dkhar’ (a term used to denote a Non-Khasi), to meet with him on top of a tall hill, God appeared before them. For these days and nights, God preached his message of peace and goodwill, and laid his commandments in writing to be taken back by both men and taught to fellow clansmen.

Both men were overjoyed to re-learn the commandments that God had once put on earth. Moreso, this time they each had a book with written laws to be taken back to their respective people.

While descending the hill; elated with what they had learnt, they changed upon a large river at the foot of the hill, which was flooded at the time. They needed to swim across the turbulent river to get across to the other side. Since the river was swelling with flood water, they needed to swim across the turbulent river to get across to the other side. Since the river was flooded at the time, they decided to stay put for the

³⁷ Elias, *Ki Khanatang U Barim*. Translated by me. I chose this version for its simplicity, conciseness and poetic expression.

night, and wait till the flood abated. However, the knowledge that each carried the overwhelming urge to reach their homeland and deliver the message of hope to the awaiting people was too powerful. They both decided to swim across, no matter the danger involved, and get by to the other side without too much delay. They each devised a strategy of how best to preserve the books from getting wet and consequently from being destroyed.

The Dkhar, because he had a long strand of hair on his head, decided to put it to use, by tying the book upon his head tightly with his hair. He made an attempt to swim and managed to reach the shore, with the book intact. He spread the word of God to his fellow denizens, and they grew wiser and brighter.

The Khasi, because he kept his hair short, and would not tie the sacred book upon his head, decided, instead to place the book between his teeth, and swim. Upon reaching half-way, owing to strong river currents, and the fact that he would scarcely breathe, with the book in his mouth, his head dipped into the water, and the book became wet, and trying to save himself from drowning, he swallowed the book. He was so disappointed and defeated that he decided to swim back and ask for another book of wisdom. But Atlas! He never met the almighty again and was forced to return empty-handed to his people.

When he finally reached his native place, he gathered everyone, far and wide, and his story in vivid details in vivid details from start to finish. Everyone gathered were terribly sad and disappointed at the lost of the book of wisdom. A *dorbar* (social gathering) was arranged, whereby all Khasis from near and far made their presence. In this *dorbar*, led by the holyman himself, a discussion of God's laws were discussed, and all the knowledge the holyman had gathered from God himself was re-told to the people by word of mouth. Each present on that day held the stories and teachings dearly to their hearts.

Let it be told, that since that fateful day of the *dorbar*, till today, the Khasis worshipped God. He lived on earth, in harmony with nature and in accordance with the will of God, as told in folk stories and tales, which have been handed down from

one generation to the next. The Khassi carries these folktales in their hearts and passes them on to their children, and they to their children, and so on and so forth.

Henceforth, based on tales about the lost book, the Khasi refers to any individual who may be clever, cunning and scheming, as someone who has a belly full of cleverness.

The tale, upon closer examination, speaks not only of lamentation at the lost of a written script. It drives a wedge and creates a sense of ‘otherness’ by the use of the term ‘Dkhar’. Though the term came into use to denote every person who was not a Khasi; it gained notoriety when it began to be used derogatively to mean ‘the other’. Political parties, as well as the common Khasi uses the word freely to create a feeling of ethnic identity. N.K Das in his article, ‘Identity Politics, Cultural Pluralism and the State in South Asia : An Anthropological Reappraisal ‘ (Anthropological Survey of India, 2009) discusses the meaning of Ethnic identity, having referred to various writers like Fredrik Barth, Eugene. E. Roosens, Thomas Hylland Eriksen, Katherine Verdery and Marcus Banks, all eminent scholars who have written extensively on Ethnicity and Nationalism in Modern societies.³⁸ He speaks of ethnic identity being constructed and modified as individuals become aware of their ethnicity.³⁹ The tale of the “lost Book” is one such tale, which progressively began to establish a Khasi identity as opposed to a non-Khasi identity. Since, ethnicity deals with social relations between groups; ethnic identifications, stresses N.K Das, are based on definition and self –definition.⁴⁰ Based on this explanation, we can see in the tale, how the lost of a written scripts begins to define the way a Khasi views himself - as deprived, and being lesser in skill and privileges to a Non-Khasi, as a people who have yet a lot to learn, or rather to re-learn and regain from the lost of a written script. On the opposite end of the spectrum is the term ‘Dkhar’ that defined a Hindu, a Sanskritic culture and identity, as distinct and different and often identified as ‘mainstream culture’- and most importantly a ‘learned culture’, a culture that managed to retain its writing script.

³⁸ N.K. Das and V.R. Rao, ed., *Identity, Cultural Pluralism and State: South Asia in Perspective*. (Anthropological Survey of India, 2009), 23.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

CHAPTER 4

RELIGION, FOLKLORE AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Homiwell Lyngdoh, in his book *Ka Niam Khasi* (The Khasi Religion) established the Khasi religion as being monotheistic, and so have numerous other scholars and writers. Homiwell Lyngdoh, to bring his point across to readers for a better understanding of the *Niam*, states that the Khasis have a firm belief that their religion is a covenant between themselves and God the Creator, since the beginning of time. This being the reason that people who perform religious rites and sacrifices hold firmly to their faith, and often begin their sacrificial incantation with: -

“Oh Merciful God, The Creator, The Giver,
Rites and rituals bestowed upon me,
Of the children of the Khasis;
I firmly uphold the covenant
From the beginning of time.”

(Homiwell Lyngdoh, 2013:1 Trans by Sophia Pde).

To establish the fact that the Khasi religion has its origin in folklore, and is essentially monotheistic in nature; Homiwell Lyngdoh elaborates, that Khasi folk narratives point to the fact that in the very beginning there was no concept of religion.⁴¹ Mankind constituted of only sixteen families, and they all lived with the Creator in heaven. Occasionally they would chance to visit earth, but would never stay for the night. It just so happened, that one occasion, seven families from among the sixteen descended to earth. These families upon coming to earth, began to reap and sow and made the land fertile. One among them, grew jealous of God's supreme rule over men and animals, decided to sever the tree that these consecrated members of the seven families used as a ladder to descend from and ascent to heaven. Henceforth, the seven

⁴¹ Homiwell Lyngdoh, is considered an authority in Khasi religion, and his book, *Ka Niam Khasi* is widely read and cited by Khasi scholars and writers.

families remained on earth, never to return to heaven, and the Khasis venerate and remember them as the 'Hynniew Trep' (seven families). God, the Creator in his sympathy at the follies of mankind, decided to return one last time, to teach them how to cultivate the land for their sustenance. Moreover, he taught them rites and rituals, religious duties that they need to fulfill on earth, before they finally return to their heavenly abode. Since that time forward, states Homiwell Lyngdoh, Khasi from generation upon generation, have carried with them the legacy of the Hynniewtrep. A Khasi holds fast to his religion as a promise between him and his God. Homiwell stresses that indigenous Khasi religion has sprung from this legend, (as the tale goes), that God himself had placed upon the people of the Hynniewtrep.¹

With regards to the contention of early British writers; describing the Khasi religion as 'animistic', J.N Chowdhury makes an empathic point, by stating that such contentions are only partially true. Chowdhury states, that since unilinear development of any religion is no longer supported. The theories about religion invariably evolving out of an earlier stage of 'magic' or 'animism' have been found to be intellectual myths. The Khasis did have conception of a high God or Creator-God along with their belief in different grades of spirit. Chowdhury sums up his observation about the Khasi religion thus: "We are obliged to point out here that there is another kind of pitfall which arises from the eagerness to attach an intellectual label to a religion.... We are inclined to think that such regimented conceptual notion hardly applies. The fact is that there were both kinds of beliefs, theistic and animistic, existing side by side."²

Soumen Sen shared J.N Chowdhury's opinion about the characteristic features that describes Khasi religion. He concurs that the Khasis (which includes the Jaintias) did have the conceptions of a supreme God, alongside a number of Gods and Goddesses representing different forces of nature. This, Sen states is not unusual as many primitive religions combine both theistic and animistic beliefs. The Khasi religion being a folk religion; numerous creation-legends points to the existence of many Gods

¹ Homiwell Lyngdoh, *Ka Niam Khasi* (Shillong: Ri Khasi Book Agency, 2013), 2-3.

² Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, 190.

and Goddesses, along with a supreme God.³ It also repletes with spirit worship, nature deities and ancestor worship-these rituals and propitiations binds the community together and also gives a sense of identity. Not only is a Khasi bound to his religion, it gives him a sense of kinship on one level, and a sense of self in another. This may be attributed to the three sacrosanct commandments which form the basis for Khasi religion, they are as follows:

1. Kamai ia Ka Hok-Earn righteousness
2. Tip briew-Tip blei-Know man, Know God
3. Tip Kur, Tip Kha-know your maternal and paternal relations.⁴

How these three commandments, that form the basis of Khasi religion came to be bestowed upon the people, owes its origin to a myth from Jaintia hills which is intrinsically connected to the origin-myth of the *Hynniewtrep Hynniewskum*. When the seven families were left behind on earth, never again to be in communication with either God or those residing in heaven-God, himself came down to earth and met the leader of the seven families, whose name was Lakriah Syiem or King Lakriah, as he was known, met with God in secrecy, and it was in this occasion that God conveyed his wishes and commandments through Syiem Lakriah, who in turn passed them on to his people. These commandments were known as Niam and are to be followed strictly by the adherence of the *Niam Khasi*, as a sanctified bond between God and man, and man with his kith and clan. In his analysis of the powerful role played by religion in every aspect of Khasi life, Soumen Sen has this to say:

“In terms of religion, a Khasi-Jaintia is an integral part of his clan and community. His individual existence circumscribed by his membership primarily of his *Kur* (maternal relations)-and then extended to his *Kha* (paternal relations), although his extension is rather emotional than functional. In this sense, his religious life is also regulated by his clan. He cannot be a member of a religious group beyond his *kur*. Khasi-Jaintia religion is therefore essentially ritualistic to serve the purpose of clan integrity. And as the clan is matrilineal there is a preponderance of

³ Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, 126.

⁴ Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, 123.

female principle in religion also. Even if a supreme creator was conceived, his will and powers were invariably manifest through female deities until there was a necessity of creating new Gods for territorial integrity. The supreme creator U Blei Nongthaw is thus represented by a Goddess *Ka Blei Synshar*, The agents of God in this world are therefore *Ki Hynniew Trep*. The God of Shillong or U Blei Shillong is represented by his daughter Ka Pah Syntiew who gave birth to *Ki Syiem Blei*, the (God Kings) of Shillong.”⁵

To try and established a deep connection between myth, religion and identity and the importance played by mythogenesis in theological constructs (A phrase used by Soumen Sen, who has meticulously explained his views on the constructs of Khasi religion).⁶ Closely connected to the myth of the Hynniewtrep; that traces the origin of the Khasis, is the myth of U Lakriah (already mentioned), the divine Syiem (King) unto whom God orally communicated his three commandments that form the basis of *Ka Niam* (Khasi religion). Here we recall what H.O Mawrie had once stated that the Khasi religion illustrates the relationship between man and God through parables and mysterious words.⁷ This relationship between man and God is illustrated through several myths, namely, a) The parable of *U Sohpetbneng*. b) The parable of *U Lum Diengie*. c) The parable of the *krem Lamet Ka Krem Latang*.⁸ These narratives are told in a sequential order, and each narrative serves the purpose of shaping religious concepts and beliefs. Soumen Sen, taking up the theological discourse from H.O Mawrie summed up the role of myth thus:

“Myths function as religious communication and the theological constructs are an extension of this communication, explaining and rationalising, respectful of ethnic context, thereby leading to the evolution of the foundation for cultural identity.”⁹

⁵ Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, 123-124.

⁶ Sen, *Khasi-Jaintia Folklore: Context, Discourse and History*, 61. He has extensively written on the issues of ethnic identity, and the role of myth and rituals in the assertions of identity with regards to the Khasi-Jaintia of Meghalaya.

⁷ Mawrie, H.O.....,

⁸ See Appendix for Parables.

⁹ Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, 62.

The Khasi political system is intrinsically bound up with kinship, religion, the social set-up, which functions in a very democratic way. It will be discussed here only so far as to trace the formation of identity. How a state emerged out of a civil society, will further explain how identity was formed among the Khasis. Mary Pristilla Rina Lyngdoh explains it well when she says Khasi democracy was founded in the *Dorbar Raid* or the Durbar of the communes, and the *Dorbar shnong* or a village Durbar which had an elected headmen each at the top. The will of the people is considered supreme in the Khasi political set up, and hence the chief is in no sense a territorial sovereign, but being merely elected heads of village confederacies. The Durbars of the Khasi present the appearance yet of which each member is amenable to some degree, to the control of his confederates.¹⁰

Soumen Sen, has elaborately discussed the administrative setup of both the Khasis and Jaintias and placed them in a three-tier arrangement. The *Syiems* (Kings) of the Khasi states were not mere chieftains, although full-fledged kinship did not develop. These *Syiems* were assisted by a number of *myntris*, who belonged to a few clans described as nobles (Bakhraw). Besides the *myntris* who constitute the state council (*durbar Hima*), there were the Lyngdohs, the Basans and the Lyngskors who acted as the *Syiem's* deputy governors.¹¹ The head of the Khasi state then, is the *Syiem* or chief, who maybe a limited monarch. According to custom, he cannot perform any important act without the consent of the Durbar.¹² As has already been mentioned, because of the democratic set up, the will of the people is supreme. But at the same time, each political unit, such as clan, village and commune, are inseparable from the state (*Hima*), and show their allegiance to the *Syiem* (Chief) at the annual Pomblang *Syiem* (Nongkrem Festival), by offering goats and other tributes. This sort of allegiance helps to form solidarity among the tribe, to face the onslaught of powerful external forces like Christianity.¹³ The annual festival called Nongkrem, is organized by the *Syiem*, along with the council of ministers (*durbar Hima*), at Nongkrem- the

¹⁰ Pristilla Lyngdoh and Rina Mary, *The Festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasi*. (Haranand publication, 1991), 35.

¹¹ Soumen Sen, *Between Tradition and Change: A Perspective of Meghalaya* (Delhi: B.R. Publishing Corp, 1988), 12.

¹² P.R.T. Gurdon, *The Khasis* (London, 1907)

¹³ P.R.G. Mathur, *The Khasi of Meghalaya: Study in Tribalism and Religion* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publication, 1979), 137.

headquarter of the Khyrim State or Hima. This festival is also known as Pomblang Syiem Nongkrem, because of its ritualistic practice of offering goats as sacrifice. The offering of goats is symbolic in the sense that it is mandatory for each headman of different administrative units (raids) to offer first to the Syiem as an indication of solidarity and homage. This four day annual festival brings the different raids together as a show of unity under the leadership of the Syiem (Chief). The Syiem along with the aristocrats (*Bakhrav*) declare themselves as *traï hima*, the owners and custodians of the Hima. Therefore, the Syiems of Hima Khyrim, the descendants of the Syiems of Hima Shillong are known as *Syiem Blei*, or divine chiefs. Soumen Sen, describes this political set up aptly by stating that it is an attempt at rationalising authority and reiteration of power equations between the various units and the core. It also sends a message to the commoners (*paidbad-paidkar*) through the systematic organization of religio-political ceremony.¹⁴

The mythical narratives of *Ka Pah Syntiew* established a divine origin. Some *Syiems* like those of Shillong and Sutnga were taken as God-Kings (*Syiem Blei*), some others were called simply *Syiem Briew* (king of the common man) because they had no divine origin.¹⁵ The narrators that establishes the Shillong Syiems as having divine origin is a follow:

In olden days a rumour got abroad that there was a woman in a cave called Marai. She was a young and very beautiful damsel. Many tried to catch her, but could not, because of the narrowness of the cave. There came, however, a certain very clever man who went to entice her by showing her a flower called U Tiew Jalyngkteng. The damsel came out to snatch the flower, but the man went on holding back his hand until she came out into a more open place, when he seized her. He brought her to his house; carefully tended her and afterwards he married her. That damsel was called *Ka Pah Syntiew*-the flower lured one. The man, who came from the village of Nongbri was called Nongjri Kongor. After she had given birth to children, *Ka Pah Syntiew* returned to the same place increased in stature and wisdom, and the people hearing of wonderful origin of their mother, came from all parts

¹⁴ Sen, *Folklore identity Development*, 105-106.

of the country to look at them. The children also were very clever at showing their humility and good manners in the presence of their elders. All the people (in return) loved them and considered them to be the children of the Gods, and paid homage to them. It occurred to the nobles and leaders of Shillong Raj to appoint them *Syiems* (rulers), because (they said) the children had been born of a wonderful woman, who, it seemed very clear, was the daughter of the God Shillong. Therefore, they gladly decided to appoint them *Syiems* in the country of Shillong. The children thus became *syiems*, and they were called Ki Syiem Blei, the God kings of Shillong.¹⁶

Such myths serve the prime function of ensuring the people's allegiance towards the chief and his council. Such stories and rituals performance, send clear message to the people; this works as a tool to overcome disharmony and to build solidarity among the different clans.

Similarly, there are numerous legends and myths associated with Jaintia Kings. It is interesting to note how such narratives "serve to mystify the royal domain when the chief assumes the role of a king". This is particularly true about the Jaintia kingdom, especially since the Jaintias expanded their territories to include the plains of Jaintiapur (now in Bangladesh). All this, while they were in control of their respective Hima (oligarchical states). Once they expanded their territories to the plains, they needed to legitimize and enhance their royal powers. There is a famous legend that surrounds the chief of Hima Sutnga, and how he came to acquire Jaintiapur. As the story goes, when the Syiem of Hima Sutnga found Sutnga unsuitable to continue as his headquarter, he began searching for a new site. The Syiem's party went exploring towards the east but rejected it due to its foul smell. They proceeded south, and reached the plains at the foothills. It was autumn and the ripening ears of paddy swaying in the breeze tempted them to take possession of the large terraced tracts of Jaintiapur. There the Syiem met a lady landowner. It did not take long for the clever Syiem to realize that he could buy the land from the simple woman for a bargain. He devised a plan. He offered her as many coins as would fit into the concave sides of two silver shields (*ar stish tyngka*), in exchange for a plot of land that could be

¹⁶ P.R.T. Gurdon, *The Khasis*, 165-67.

covered with the skin of a deer. The unsuspecting woman agreed, and was paid the amount. But the Syiem cut the deer's skin into tiny pieces and scattered them over a vast area. This is how he acquired a large expanse of territory in Jaintiapur and shifted his headquarters there. And thus, the story goes. The chief became a king. A number of myths came to be woven around him to legitimize his authority.¹⁷ After the Hinduisation and consolidation of the Jaintia kinship, a myth was woven, to trace the divine origin of the Jaintia kings and give it legitimacy, so that the King's leadership may be readily accepted by the plains' people. This myth traces the origin of the Jaintia Kings to Jayanti Devi-Matchyodari, believed to be the reincarnation of Devi Durga,¹⁸ to include matrilineal descent to the Hinduise myth. It is important to note here that the myth of Jayanti Devi was elaborate in structure and content and mostly associated with Hindu elements from the plains of Jaintiapur. The myth of Jayanti Devi was included in a chronicle of the Jaintia court-the *Jaintia Buranji*. The Jaintia kings trace their descent to the kingdom's deity, Devi Durga. According to the Jaintia chronicle, the myth goes as follows:

The Myth of Jayanti Devi Matchyodari

Raja Jayanta Rai was childless. He worshipped Devi Durga (Gouri) praying for a son. Satisfied by his worship, Gouri appeared and told him 'If God does not grant you a son, I cannot give you a son. But because you have worshipped me so earnestly, I shall take birth in your home. Your daughter will rule the state for a long time and the state will be known as Jayantipur, following her name, Jayanti.'

A daughter was born to the King. She was given the name Jayanti. She was growing like the moon. The King was unhappy because he could not find a suitable groom for his lovely daughter. Afterwards she was given in marriage to Landabar, the learned and wise son of the chief priest, Chandibar.

¹⁷ Sen, *Khasi-Jaintia Folklore*, 108-110.

¹⁸ As narrated by Soumen Sen., *Social and State formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, 201-204. Translated by Soumen Sen. Instead of in the Appendix, I am including this myth here, as it can be read and understood as a myth popular among the Jaintias, and also in establishing their connection to the Hindus of the Plains of Jaintiapur. This myth also marks the distinction between the *Pnars* (Jaintias) and *Kynriams* (Khasis proper) from the highland.

When the Raja felt that he was growing old, he made Jayanti the Queen Regent by a coronation. When he died Jayanti Devi became the queen taking the name Rani Singha.

Landabar began a one –year worship of Devi Bhadrakali. Before the worship was over, he tried to embrace the goddess. The angry goddess cursed him, 'you have lost your senses; you will forget the scriptures and will have to live with a heathen'. Saying this, the goddess disappeared, Landabar came back home forgetting everything about scriptures and religious rites.

Then when Jayanti Devi was in her menstrual period, Landabar forcefully mated with her. Jayanti Devi was very angry and asked Landabar to leave the house and not to see her again. Since then Landabar was so degraded that he started taking all sorts of food such a beef and dog-meat and became addicted to liquor. Nobody recognized him. He then fled away and took refuge in the house of Sutnga Garo. There was none else in the house except Sutnga's wife. Sutnga therefore told Landabar, 'we have nobody to look after us, so stay with us.' Landabar stayed with them. After sometime when both Sutnga and his wife died, Landabar became the owner of their house and property and the villages started calling him Sutnga Garo.

After throwing Landabar out, Jayanti Devi became pregnant and prayed to the Goddess Bhagabati, 'oh, mother save me, I have sinned, I am an infidel.' The goddess appeared in her dream and told her, 'I shall save you. During your menstrual period a girl will emerge from your body as a shadow-image and will enter the stream. She will be eaten up by a Barali fish. Afterwards, Landabar, fishing in the stream will catch it. The fish will give birth to a daughter. She will be known as Matchyodari. Landabar will keep her in his house and live with her. That will redeem your infidelity. When Matchyodari gives birth to a son, give your Kingdom to him to rule and come and stay with me. Till that time rule your country.'

When her period started Jayanti Devi went to the Sutnga stream and bathed there. A girl was born from the shadow of her body and was eaten up by the fish. Jayanti came back to her palace. Landabar caught the fish while fishing in the stream. Afterwards he started living with Matchyodari as ordained by Goddess Bhagabati. Since then his

household became prosperous. After sometime Landa Sutnga got a son by his Matchyodari. He was given the name Borgohain. Since then Sutnga's house was full of crops. Landa Sutnga was made the headman of the village by the villagers. He became very powerful and once invaded Sultanpur killed Muhammad Sultan and took the title Sultan.

Then one day Borgohian with his men and arms invaded Jayantiapur. Jayanti Devi's spies informed her of the invasion. Jayanti Devi came to know from them that Borgohain was the son of Landa Sutnga and Matchyodari. She told them that Borgohain is her sister's son and asked Bhim, her Commander, to take Borgohain as captive without going for a battle.

Borgohain was brought to her. He told Rani Singha that his father has been taken captive by Jahirbeg Sultan. Rani Singha asked Rana Singha to go with Borgohain and rescue his father. Borgohain went with Rana Singha, killed Jahirbeg Sultan, made Landa Sultan the ruler of Sutnga and came back to meet Rani Singha. Then Rani Singha gave Sutnga the name Sultanpur and made Landabar its ruler with Matchyodari as his consort. Borgohain stayed with Rani Singha as her son.

Afterwards Jayanti Devi called Matchyodari to her palace and told her 'you are my sister. To save me from infidelity, you were born by the wish of Mahamaya Bhagbati from the womb of a fish. Go and serve your husband. I bid good-bye to you proclaiming you and your husband the ruler of twelve villages.' Matchyodari then left for Sutnga keeping her son Borgohain with Rani Singha.

After sometime, making Borgohain the king, Jayanti Devi entered the earth and disappeared. Borgohain, very sad and angry, started digging the spot where Jayanti Devi disappeared. But he could not find her. Disappointed, he started sleeping there on the ground. Jayanti Devi appeared in his dreams and told him, 'don't dig the earth any more. You will not find me. Instead you will find a copper plate. Give it the name Jayanti and worship it as a deity.' Afterwards, Borgohain found a copper plate there, gave it the name Jayanti and called the place Muktipur where from Jayanti Devi disappeared. Jayanti Devi further told Borgohain that thenceforth King's sister's son

should be made the king and Jayanti Devi should be worshipped. Otherwise the Kingdom would be lost.

Source: Bhuyan, S.K.(Ed). *Jayantia Buranji* (in Assamese) 1-7. Translated by Soumen Sen.

The legend from the hills, to traces the divine origin of the Jaintia Chiefs is similar to that of *Pah Syntiew*, and those of the Shillong *Syiems* or *Ka Lih Dokha*. Less elaborate in structure and complexity of content than the Hinduise Myth of Jayanti Devi-Matchyodari. This tale speaks of U Wah Ryndi, an Amwi resident, who caught a strange fish from the Thlu Amwi stream in the South of Jaintia Hills, which he brought home but forgot to eat. The fish which later took the form of a lady was found by him in his in his abode while she was doing household work. He caught her and burnt the shell from which she emerged. Then he married her and the lady gave birth to one son and a daughter. The daughter was called Lawbon. When they grew up, Ryndi took them his mother. His mother blessed them and Ryndi prepared for his return along with his family. When they were learning his mother's house, his wife noticed a broom lying on the ground. At once she disappeared because it was an evil omen to see a broom on the path.¹⁹ With a heavy heart U Who reached for her in vain. One night in a dream she saw her in Wai Khyrwi stream near Sutnga. Early next morning he set off to fish in that stream and caught the mermaid. She came back and stayed with him.²⁰

A tradition says that they had four daughters, and around them has been woven a myth of the four wombs (*Saw Kpoh*), which describes how four sisters (the daughters of *Ka Lih-Dokha*)-Ka Doh, ka Bon, Ka Wet and Ka Tein-who are believed to have mothered the clans of Jowai settled in that locality. From these four Kpoh (wombs) came the religious and secular chiefs of the area-Lyngdohs, daloi, pator, and Basan, who are the principle functionaries, especially the Lyndoh and Daloi, in the ritual event of the *Ka Behdeinkhlam*, held annually at Jowai (Jaintia Hills). It is during the *Behdeinkhlam* festival, that the four sisters or *So Kpoh* are propitiated and two myths

¹⁹ Till today, a broom in one's path is still considered an evil omen amongst the Jaintias.

²⁰ Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, 55-57.

are recited by the *parom* (story teller).²¹ The other myth being chanted along with *So Kpoh* is that of U Lakriah, the Syiem whose divine character made him leader of the people. It was through Lakriah that the divine commandments or *Niam* (Khasi Religion) was communicated to the people. Soumen Sen states this point very clearly when he says that is during the Behdeinkhlam festival, that the legend of *So Kpoh* and that of U Lakriah are chanted together to establish social solidarity and religious cohesion. Both served the purpose of retaining order via the political power centre, *the Syiem*.²²

So far we have discussed how religion and folklore have contributed to the formation of a Khasi identity. We have also seen how *Ka Niam Khasi* (rules of conduct based on Khasi religion) have bound people together, tying them to one's clan and community irrespectively, what happened to such ancient ties with the coming of Christianity? How has proselytization affected the Khasi identity at large?

The coming of Christianity to these hills in the early part of the 19th Century had a two-fold effect. On the one hand it brought tremendous positive changes with the spread of western education, the introduction of the written script, the opening up of this hitherto unknown region to the world-overall modernization and improvement in the lives of people. On the other hand the spread of Christianity threatened the sanctity of traditional institutions-their usage and practice.

The Khasis owed much to the missionaries. That the missionaries have made major contribution in the spread of education, the introduction of a modern language and literature and health care goes undisputed. Their significant contribution to uplifting the people, has greatly helped in conversion and enlightenment, and also contributes to the richness of the social life of the Khasis. On the contribution of the missionaries, H.K Barpujari makes this observation.²³

“Among the unofficial enterprise, the contribution made by the missionaries to the vernacular schools in Assam and in the tribal areas

²¹ Sen, *Khasi-Jaintia Folklore*, 48

²² Ibid, 66

²³ Lyngdoh and Pristilla, *The Festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasi*, 173.

in particular, though inspired by the zeal of spreading the gospel, was indeed unparalleled.”

However, with colonial rule and missionary activities, Khasi society was bound to be affected. Tradition culture came under serious threat. Unfortunately, the missionaries did not solely concentrate on proselytization and establishment of schools. They went against traditional institutions and practices with efficient patronage, and this interference with religious rites created a great deal of tension between the authority and the people. In the initial days, western values and Christianity came as a challenge to traditional religion and culture of the Khasis. There was a great deal of tension between the new converts and the adherence of the *Niam*. A social change came about that was to disturb, if not totally displace traditional institutions. From a hundred years of British rule, the social changes that came about were observed by Hamlet Bareh, who criticized the converted Christians for no longer observing their old religious beliefs and rituals. Though Christianity has not materially changed the laws of inheritance and succession, and some of the old political institutions still survive. H. Bareh however clearly states that in Christian areas, old usages of megalithic erections, households and community religious celebrations and festivals have become obliterated. Christianity has also caused reversals in marriage, funerals, house building and village ceremonies. Certain social traits have also been lost, such as ancient sports and games. He further observed that Christianity was embraced with firm conviction because of its enlightening power, which somehow stood the test of persecution, ex-communication from the community; lose of property and family ties on the part of the early converts.²⁴

Another writer, J.N. Chowdhury makes a similar observation of the changes that have come about over hundred years, since the Khasi population embraced Christianity. Despite the fact that a large chunk of the Khasi populace had converted to Christianity; Chowdhury states that the people still retain many of the customs and practices originally sanctioned to their ancient faith. The Khasi Christians may no longer follow their age-old practice of cremating the dead, but they still retain some of the eschatological customs connected with their funeral rites. Most of all, they

²⁴ Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, 404-405.

managed to retain the distinctive features of their society, namely their law of inheritance, in keeping with their matrilineal character, whereby the *Khadduh* or youngest daughter inherits and becomes custodian of ancestral property. This institution has its sanction in religion, and though it has suffered attrition in the course of time, at least among the Christians, it has managed to hold on unto its distinctive identity, and all agree to retain it as ‘foundation of their social structure.’²⁵

After the initial vigorous campaign against traditional cultures, which met with resistance, the missionaries began to be soft and even allowed the converts to retain some of the traditional socio-cultural traits.²⁶ The main opposition came from the first organization in these hills called Seng Khasi. This organization was instituted by a new educated middle class; being apprehensive of a loss of culture, wanted to protect and preserve the traditional culture and religion of the Khasis. The patron of the movement for cultural and religious awakening was Babu Jeeban Roy, and it was founded in the Brahmo Samaj Hall in Mawkhar on the 23rd Nov 1899. This day has been commemorated as Seng Kut Snem (year-end festival), and has been declared a state holiday in Meghalaya.²⁷ The formation of this association has been described by one of its leaders in the following words:

“Urged by a deep concern for the future of their race whose social structure was being eroded, whose moral fiber weakened and whose bond of unity disintegrated by the inroad of foreigners, especially the Welsh Calvinistic Mission, who mercilessly attacked, denigrated and maligned their religion condemned their culture, sixteen Khasi non-Christian young men met together on the 23rd November, 1899 in the Brahmo Samaj Hall at Mawkhar in Shillong to form an association to forge and mold again to people and revive the moral teachings and tenets passed on from generation to generation.”²⁸

The challenge posed by Christians missions was real indeed. Mary Pristilla Rina Lyngdoh recorded an account of their initial years, when the Welsh Mission opposed

²⁵ Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, 188.

²⁶ Sen, *Between Tradition and Change. A Perspective of Meghalaya*, 28.

²⁷ Lyngdoh and Pristilla, *The Festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasis*, 177.

²⁸ Kynpham Singh, “Seng Khasi”, in *Where lies the soul of our Race?* ed. Hipshon Roy (Shillong: Seng Khasi, 1982), 7.

the celebration of the annual dance festival held by the Seng Khasi, called *Shad Suk Mynsiem* or *Shad Weiking*. This festival is celebrated in April each year to welcome the advent of spring after the harvesting work is over. 'To the Khasi, dances and songs are part of their religious and social life.'²⁹ The Welsh Mission launched a campaign against it by ex-communicating anyone from the church who might have attended the dance or any function organized by the Seng Khasi. Even as late as the 1970's, Khasi Christians stayed away from celebrations held by the Seng Khasi, only for fear itself, that such attendance may be viewed as blasphemous.³⁰ In spite of several opposition, the *Shad Suk Mynsiem* was held in the Weiking field at Jaiaw (Shillong) in the year 1911. In this way the Seng Khasi helped the Khasi to preserve their traditional dances, which could have otherwise died out due to the lack of patronage and depreciation by the missionaries. The principle objective of the Seng Khasi was to work for the retention of socio-cultural and religious heritage. The Seng Khasi leaders emphasized the importance of religion for maintaining social cohesion and fellowship. The Seng Khasi declared that a Khasi is a Khasi because of his religion, i. e adherence to the traditional Niam (Khasi religion). These Khasis are described as Khasi Khasis to differentiate them from the Christian Khasis.³¹

During initial conversion to Christianity, there arose a divide between Christians (Khasis) and traditional Khasi (Khasis). The repercussions arising out of this schism saw the suspension for a few years of two major traditional festivals, namely the Nongkrem dance and the Behdeinkhlam. Both festivals were later revived by the effort of the Seng Khasi, who strove to unite the people by making them conscious of their cultural usages. Gradually through the years and by the sincere revivalist effort of the Seng Khasi Movement-the divide between the Khasi Khasis and Christian Khasis began to repair itself. Christians began to once again participate in their traditional festivals alongside the Khasi Khasis. An interesting example has been cited by P.R.G Mathur, who states that in the Nongkrem festival of 1969, in which the Khasi, irrespective of religious practices and affiliations, united under the banner of

²⁹ Lyngdoh and Pristilla, *The Festival in the History and Culture of the Khasi*, 178.

³⁰ This is an observation from my own personal experience, where the Roman festival, and terming them as 'pagan practices, as late as the 1970's.

³¹ Sen, *Khasi-Jaintia Folklore : Context, Discourse and History*, 70.

State religion, to assert their socio-political identity. Mathur makes a note of how Christians Khasis, are as keenly wedded to the ancient usage as the others. This is what he noted: 'a significant fact noted was that the 'Lynskor' or the Prime Minister of the Khyrim Syiemship was a Christian but he willingly took upon himself the onerous duty of organizing the Pomblang Nongkrem. Not only did he dance with the tribal and Christians brethren but also supervised the performance of rites and sacrifices with the most meticulous care.'³²

The Seng Khasi maintain that there is only one God, making the Khasi religion Monotheistic, which was not the case in ancient practice, which was ritualistic and permitted only communal propitiation, conducted by a priest with libation and sacrifice as carried out by *soh blei* (the chief priest) in Pomblang.³³ The Seng Khasi had a reason for doing this. Faced with the challenges from a major monotheistic religion like Christianity, it needed to prove its equality.³⁴ Thus, certain modifications and superimpositions were made, one being, that God is one and that the religion is essentially monotheistic. Soumen Sen sums this up by stating that the Khasi religion, as propagated by the Seng Khasi, constituted God in these aspects. There is the Supreme God known as *U Blei Nongbuh Nongthaw* (Creator of mankind). There is the god localized, the guardian of the land and its people, and God at home, inside the house and family. The Supreme God takes different identities at the different levels of universe, locality and home. While at the levels of universe and locality he has all male identities, at the family level he takes on a feminine character. 'It has now assumed the character of a distinct faith with an ethical system appropriate to both the age-old ritualistic system and the matrilineal social order.'³⁵

A.S. Khongphai divides the impact of the Seng Khasi on the cultural profile into two periods-the pre-independence period, where the Seng Khasi stood as the symbol of Indian Nationalism, local patriotism and resistance against Empire. The second period, as the post-independence period, where the Khasi society has and is undergoing cultural changes, the question that hangs in the air is whether the Seng Khasi is as relevant as it

³² P.R.G.Mathur, *The Khasis of Meghalaya*, 138.

³³ Sen, *Khasi-Jaintia Folklore : Context, Discourse and History*, 71.

³⁴ Sen, *Between Tradition and Change*, 29.

³⁵ A.S. Khongphai, ed., *Cultural Profile of Shillong*. (Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta, 1979), 147.

was in the 1930's. Perhaps not, yet its importance in reviving the Khasi religion, institutions, culture and way of life can never be under estimated. It was the tireless effort of the Seng Khasi, that made it possible for any Khasi, be they Christian or those adhering to *The Niam* (Khasi Religion) are all proud of their heritage, and the traditional dances and festivals are attended by all, irrespective of their religious denominations. The Seng Khasi became a member of two important denominations, the Indian Tribal Cultural Forum and the International Association for Religious Freedom (IARF).³⁶

Though Khasi is a generic term applied to both Khasis and Jaintias, as they have the same ethnic origin and springs from the same racial stock, and most importantly that they have a common mythology. Yet, we often speak of a Jaintia identity, as different from but distinctively connected to the Khasi identity. It is imperative in the nature of a study that deals with the question of identity, to discuss the recent trends of claiming a separate ethnic identity for the Jaintias or *Pnars* (as they like to call themselves), and are objectionable about being referred to as *Syntengs* (a name given to them by the Khasis of the Central Plateau).

Soumen Sen, who has written extensively on the Jaintia identity, throws considerable light on the question of sub-ethnicity claims of the Jaintias, and why this is so. Strongly arguing his point, this is what he states:

“A particular ethnic group possesses certain attributes that include folklore, which is related to ethnic consciousness. Ethnic consciousness again includes ethnonym among other ethno-differentiating attributes. The name given to itself by an ethnic group for self-identification is its endoethnomyn. And the name given to it by others is its exoethnonym. An endoethnomyn has only one meaning. The exoethnomyn, on the other hand, originated under different circumstances. If the meaning of endoethnomyn can be traced back to the oral traditions of the people, the meaning of exoethnonym is not always obvious. Whenever the meaning of the exoethnonym can be traced, it usually seems to have a historical significance. Sometimes an exoethnonym gets converted into an endoethnomyn through a historical process. This happens most often in the case of a sub-group

³⁶ Lyngdoh and Pristilla, *The Festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasi*, 179.

of an ethnic group, again for historical reasons, may clamour for a separate identity as it has happened in the case of Jaintias, who are considered a sub-group of the Khasis.”³⁷

Some scholars have contested this claim based on oral tradition and a narrative as proofs in support of the argument that the Khasis and Pnars are descended from the same ‘ancestress’. The following narrative has been cited by I.M Simon to prove a common ancestry for both the Khasis and Jaintias:

In the beginning there was only one woman in the Talang clan named Iawtalang. She had nine daughters who were all very industrious. So devoted were they to their work that even when the youngest was on the point of child-bearing, the eight elder sisters left her at home with her husband, a man of the Dkhar clan. The youngest sister’s husband was so furious that she cooked the after-birth and gave it to the elder sisters on their return, saying that it was meat of a sacrificial cock. After they had finished eating he taunted them saying that they were devourers of their own kith and kin. In intense shame they fled the village and almost all of them founded other clans in other localities. One of them went to Chyrmang village, retaining however her original clan name. Another went to Thangbuli and founded the Buam clan. ‘Buam’ originated from two words, ‘bu-a’ (eat) and ‘am’ (water), which she uttered when she learned what she had eaten: “Lah kaba bua am” (Better to have eaten plain water). Another went towards Rymbai, but because she stayed a night at Myntdu, the clan she founded is known as Nongtdu. Another went to Sohmynting where she founded the Pyrtuh clan after the religious celebration called the Pyrtuh. Another went to Khasi Hills and there she founded the Syntung clan, another founded the Suting clan. Some people say that both these clans are one and the same. Some people say that both these clans are one and the same. Another went to Mawblang and founded the Talang clan and yet another went to Nongtalang and her progeny being the first to arrive in the locality became the Lyngdohs or priest clan. The last one, Ka Nialang by name, remained alone at Pamchadong and there she founded the clan known to this day by her name.³⁸

³⁷ Sen, *Khasi-Jaintia Folklore: Context, Discourse and History*, 54-55.

³⁸ Simon, *Khasi and Jaintia Tales and Beliefs* (Gauhati: Guwahati University, 1996), 49-50, as quoted in Sen, *Folklore, Identity Development, in the Context of North-East India*, 64-65.

Both the Khasis and Jaintias, being matrilineal, trace their origin from a female ancestress. As Soumen Sen elaborately explains that the endoethnomyn Khasi, it is believed, comes from *Ka Shi*, meaning the first woman ancestress, *Ka*, being the article signifying the feminine gender in Khasi, and *Shi* means one. The Jaintias similarly claim origin from four sisters or ancestral mother called *Saw Kpoh* (four wombs). The Khasi ethnic group claims their descent from *Ki Hynniew Trep*, seven mothers or seven families. The Jaintia who are usually taken as a sub-group of the Khasis with endoethnomyn *Pnar* and exoethnomyns, *Synteng* and Jaintia, also claim they are the descendants of *Ki Hynniewtrep*. Reference to these narratives and other oral tradition, and the ritualistic performance during the annual Behdeinkhlam festival of the *Pnars*, points to the fact that the Khasis, the Jaintias, the Wars, the Bhois and the Lyngams are different sub-groups of one ethnic group with the broad name Khasi.³⁹

It is significant that the Behdeinkhlam festival held annually at Jowai in Jaintia Hills, is associated with what Soumen Sen states, as an identity consciousness. During the colonial rule, the British administration put a stop to the performance of this festival; it was revived after India gained its independence, at the initiation of an association of the Jaintias called Seinraj. It has its headquarters in Jowai, and was formed to fight for the religious and cultural rights of the Jaintias, and is very similar to that of the Seng Khasi Movement formed by the Khasis.

The Behdeinkhlam festival has an interesting origin linked with the migration of the first families of Jowai. Tradition goes that when Jowai was still a forest, inhabited by only wild animals and birds; the hills and rivers and also the religious stones were already there. Among the religious stones, was the eldest brother known as U Mookhar, *moo* means stone in the Jaintia dialect. U Mookhai was also known as u Kongwasan, and his brothers were u Mooralong, U Mutong and U Musniang and their sister were Ka Wah Myntdu, or the Myntdu river. According to oral tradition, it was the four sisters named Ka Bon, Ka Tein, ka Wet and Ka Doh and their maternal uncle who formed the first colonizing family at a place known as Lakynrah which is situated near U Mookhai at Jowai. When they reached that place there was a heavy

³⁹ Sen, *Khasi-Jaintia Folklore : Context, Discourse and History*, 56.

thunder storm. In that situation U Mookhai danced with joy at first sighting of human beings. The five were frightened and terrified and trembled with fear. When U Mookhai saw that they were frightened, he promised to protect them from all enemies, and would bring prosperity to them to increase their family, clan, crops, trade and their village. The only thing he asked of them in return is that they should perform a religious ceremony every year to him and his brothers and also to U Pyrthat or Thunder, for good rain, bountiful harvest and protection of their crops. The four sisters and their uncle readily accepted this proposition. The families of four sisters increased and their generation are known as the *Soo Kpoh* (four wombs).⁴⁰

Although the Behdeinkhlam festival is a harvest festival organized after the sowing of seeds and rites are performed to drive away plague and pestilence to ensure good harvest. Some of the rites are directed towards the veneration of ancestors, where two myths are narrated which connects their ancestry with the *Hynniewtrep* (the ancestors of the Khasis). The myths are of the *Syiem* (King) U Lakriah (the venerated leader of the people of the *Hynniewtrep*) and that of *Saw (Soo) Kpoh* (four wombs).⁴¹ Though Behdeinkhlam primarily means driving away plague or pestilence with the use of sticks-this month long festival is pivotal to the social, religious and cultural lives of the Jaintias. As Soumen Sen had stated:

“Ritual events with the narratives play the most strategic roles in enhancing a realm of values, beliefs as well as actions, in the structures of the society. Identity is recurrently emphasized to achieve both structural and functional cohesion through these performances. In Behdeinkhlam, in its ritual events and narratives, the Jaintia identity is reinforced annually.”⁴²

Christianity and modernization may have permeated every aspect of Khasi life, by it also brought about a strong identity consciousness among people with religious and cultural movements like the Seng Khasi from Shillong and the *Seinraj* from Jaintia Hills. It is certainly true that in the colonial period most of the tribes of North-East India, were not conscious of their ethno-tribal identities and their world was confined to their family, clan, and villages. But in the post independence period, these terms

⁴⁰ Quoted in Lyngdoh and Pristilla, *The Festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasis*, 88-89.

⁴¹ I have narrated both myths, see also appendix.

⁴² Sen, *Folklore Identity Development, in the Context of North-East India*, 69.

became the focal point by the newly educated people belonging to these communities.⁴³ In recent decades we have seen a number of resurgent and revivalist movements that have painstakingly tried to revive the Khasi way of life, its customs, festivals, dances, music and such.⁴⁴ Some of these revivalist movements have taken on a political nature based on ethnic and religious affiliations. In extreme forms these political movements have turned into insurgent and militant movements. These numerous insurgency groups that sporadically arose at different times in the last twenty years or so, created unrest and political upheavals in almost all of the States of North-East India- Meghalaya being no exception. However, the fact remains that important factors which have helped retain some elements of Khasi customs are kinship ties and religio-ethnic practices. Mary Pristilla Rina Lyngdoh puts things in perspective when she says that inspite of factors like Christianity, modernization, western education and others ; the Khasi people irrespective of religious denominations still take pride in their identity as Khasi.⁴⁵

⁴³ Mary Pristilla Lyngdoh, *The Festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasi*, 90.

⁴⁴ Identity and Conflict will be discussed at length in the final chapter of this dissertation.

⁴⁵ Mary Pristilla lyngdoh, *The Festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasi*.

CHAPTER 5

MATRILINY AND IDENTITY

The matrilineal system of the Khasis defines not only its basic social structure; but that the Khasi identity itself is derived from this unique system. Kinship ties are strong and based on the matriliney *Kur* (Clan), which is the most effective unit in regulating the social action and religious life of the people¹. Matriliney finds its sanction in the Khasi religion, its law of inheritance, and is manifest in the folklore of the region. J.N. Chowdhury has implicitly stated this when he speaks about social organization of the Khasis thus: ‘The foundation of their society, namely their law of inheritance, deriving as it did from its matrilineal structure, had its sanction in religion.’²

It has already been stated that Khasis are composed of many clans or a group of clans. All clans traced their origin to the ancient mother called *Ka Iawbei Tynrai*-the ancestral mother of the whole clan. Then comes the *Iawbei Tymmen*, the Grandmother of a sub-clan or *Kpoh* (womb). There is also the *Iawbei Khynraw* who is considered the ancestress of a family or *iing* (home). Each clan has its triad, *ka Iawbei* (the ancestral mother), *U Thawlang*, (The ancestral father) and *U Suidnai* (the maternal uncle who is the eldest son of *Ka Iawbei*).³

We will examine the structural organization of the Khasi society in order to understand question of identity-an identity derived by a Khasi, through the mother’s clan, where descent is traced from ancient female progenitors. The Khasi word *Kpoh* is used for a domestic unit which traced descent from one great-grandmother. J.N Chowdhury argues that it is probably wrong to define *Kpoh* as a sub-clan as Gurdon had done, but rather as Chie Nakane had explained the nature of the *Kpoh*, as a group of matrilineal kin confined to one domestic family, or a group of households, linked by direct extension of the main household.⁴

¹ Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, 88.

² Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, 189.

³ Gurdon, *The Khasis*, 63.

⁴ Chowdhury, *Khasi Canvas*, 132.

J.N. Chowdhury makes a comparison between the Khasi *kpoh*, the Nayar *Taravad* and the Garo *Nok*, bringing out the uniqueness of the Khasi *Kpoh*, while distinguished it from other matrilineal societies. The Khasi *Kpoh* had been defined by Chie Nakane as a religious or ritual unit which unites its members in a common sentiment, tracing descent to a common ancestress. It is not a corporate productive group, holding property in common, presided over by a male head, as among the Nayers, and other matrilineal societies. Among the Nayers, the seniormost male members, called Karnavan manages the resources of the group, allocating provisions separately to each household, but continue in one property group called *Taravad*.⁵ “The most important functional unit, among the Khasis, is the *iing*. The *iing*, literally meaning house like the Garo *Nok*, is the lowest order of clan and lineage segmentation smaller than the *kpoh*.”⁶ Making a distinction between the Khasi *iing* and the Garo *Nok*; J.N Chowdhury following Nakane’s description states that the Garo *Nok*, comprises the group of individuals residing within one household. This household forms a corporate and productive unit, cultivating the common village land called *a’king*. The ownership of this village land vests in the headman’s wife. Unlike the Khasi household unit, which is exceptional, where spouses of the members of the *iing*, even when co-resident, are actually excluded from the *iing*. Typically, the Khasi household unit comprises the wife, husband, their children, wife’s unmarried sisters and brothers-including widowed or divorced.⁷

Hamlet Bareh has also explained the basic function and structure of the household unit, by referring to it as the ‘foundation house’ or *Ka iing seng*, which on the death of the mother goes to her youngest daughter, (*The Khadduh*). In this house, vital family affairs are discussed, and are also a place of family celebrations and sacrifice. The largest share of property is inherited by the youngest daughter, who in turn is responsible for the well being of the clan. Since the mother is the bond of unity, upon her death, the youngest daughter assumes the role in organizing the house and

⁵ Nakane Chie, *Garo and Khasi: A Comparative study in Matrilineal System* (1961).As quoted in J.N Chowdhury, *Khasi Canvas*, 133.

⁶ Chowdhury, *Khasi Canvas*, 133.

⁷ Ibid, 134

relations with the other members of the clan.⁸ The Institution of the *Khadduh* will be taken up again in the following pages.

D.H Schneider had pointed out that in matrilineal society; there is always conflict between bonds of marriage and bonds of descent.⁹ In the introduction to the book, *Matrilineal Kinship*, he states that if matrilineal descent group are to be maintained, woman's ties to their descent group should supersede that of their marital ties. Likewise, a man cannot accord priority to his marital relationship, if he is needed to play authoritative roles in his maternal descent group. Thus, the Khasi social structure consistently stresses matrilineal solidarity, and reinforces this solidarity by indirectly emphasizing the religious association of the *iing* (natal house of descent). The natal *iing* is like the central fugal force in a man's life, being the centre of all family rituals and activities, and to which his bones return upon his death. The religious sanctions given to the natal *iing* is to ensure that conjugal bonds are kept subservient to the links of matrilineal kinship.¹⁰

Another important point that needs to be stressed is that the Khasi system of kinship is exogamous and no marriage of members inside the clan is allowed, unlike the Garos, who according to Nakane, prefer cross-cousin marriage, especially when the marriage is between an heiress and heir-to-be, which, "on basis of household succession, the matrilineal cross-cousin marriage is the rule."¹¹ This however, did not exist among the Khasis, who have a general aversion to cross-cousin marriages, and never linked it with the control of property, which nevertheless descended in the female line.¹² Such cross-cousin marriages are considered sinful acts and referred too as *Shongsang* (living in sin). Couples marrying in this way are driven away from their homes; they secure no inheritance and are considered outcasts. This custom is still observed even today not only among Khasis who practice the traditional religion (*Niam*), but the Christian Khasis as well.

⁸ Bareh, *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*, 322.

⁹ D.M. Schneider, and Kathleen Gough, eds., *Matrilineal kinship* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), 17.

¹⁰ Chowdhury, *Khasi Canvas*, 138.

¹¹ Nakane, *Garos and Khasis*, 46.

¹² Chowdhury, *Khasi Canvas*, 132.

Coming back to the function of the *iing* in Khasi matrilineal social structure, which is not only pivotal to the lives of all Khasis, irrespective of gender; but that this domestic functional unit has been clearly defined to serve its multiple purposes. The central core being constituted by the mother (and upon her death, the youngest daughter). There is the sister's brother who exercises authority of management over the property. It is the rule that the other sisters as they marry, to move out and establish independent households as close to the natal house as possible. The inheritor of the ancestral property (in this the youngest daughter, according to rules of inheritance), continues to be responsible for the funeral expenses of all original members of the *iing*, and other ritual expenses centering on the *iing*. The new establishment put up by a separating sister and her husband marks the beginning of a new *iing*. Whatever property is acquired hereafter by the separating sister and her husband will descend to her youngest daughter, in keeping with the rules of inheritance. Though in recent years, property is being equally divided between sons and daughters; and if it so happens, that the couple begets only sons, then the independent property is inherited by the sons. J.N Chowdhury explains this remarkably well, when he says: "This process is repeated in case of every third generation a new independent *iing* comes into being. The lineage therefore has no structural or functional relevance beyond the strictly defined domestic group, i.e. the *iing*." ¹³

It is the concept of *iing*, which distinguishes the Khasi matrilineal set-up from the Nayers and Garos. Both are more homogeneous and individual ownership is either not recognized or strongly discouraged. The Khasi institution of the *iing* is more heterogeneous and operates strictly on the domestic level. ¹⁴

Closely connected to the concept of *iing*, is the institution of the *Khadduh* (youngest daughter as heiress to ancestral property), which is not only based on the customary laws of inheritance, residential patterns are based on this institution, and most importantly it finds its sanction in the tradition religion (*Niam*). Since the centre of all religious activities and rituals is the *iing*; the *Khadduh* plays a significant role as custodian and heiress of the *iing* (in this case the property on which the natal home stands). Traditionally, the natal residential house is not counted as the *Khadduh*'s

¹³ Chowdhury, *Khasi Canvas*, 140.

¹⁴ Ibid, 142.

private or personal property, but rather as the ancestral house, which is to provide shelter to all her kith and kin (when the need arises), under the strict supervision of her uncles (kni). What makes the place of the Khadduh even more unique, is that it is she, along with other clan members, who collect the bones of deceased members, which are to be deposited in the family cairn.¹⁵ Her rights to the ancestral property are strictly based on the performances of her religious rites. The residential pattern may be uxorilocal, if married to a Khadduh or heiress, and neolocal, if married to a non-heiress.¹⁶ Residence is also matrilocal in some parts of Jaintia Hills, where the son continues to live at his mother's house and is an occasional visitor to his wife's home. Over the years, this traditional law of inheritance (which confers all rights on the Khadduh, as custodian and upholder of religious and familial rites within each household unit), has suffered attrition. With the conversion of a large number of the Khasi population to Christianity- who view this law of inheritance as bias towards the other members of the family, both male and female-a redefinition of the meaning of the institution of the Khadduh is insisted upon. However, while advocating changes to the traditional law of inheritance to suit the changing times, all agree that the matrilineal structure should be maintained –arguing that, it is after all matriliney that lends its unique identity to the Khasi society. Matriliney has been instituted by ancient practices and folk beliefs, and is the basis upon which society stands. We have already stated that the Matriliney social structure of the Khasis is based on religious principles of the Khasi religion. We also know that religion and folklore find their connectivity through tales, beliefs and legends. Almost every clan, including the *Syiem* (King) clan traces their origin from an ancestress. Soumen Sen, clearly states this when he says that the legend associated with race itself tells of seven women who mothered the seven families (*Ki Hynniewtre*), who were the original ancestral mothers of the race.¹⁷ The myth of *Ka Saw Kpoh* from Jaintia Hills tells of the four mothers, referred to as *Saw Kpoh* or *four wombs*, from whom the Jaintia trace their descent. The *Syiems* (Kings) of Shillong sought their divine status from the legend of *Ka Pah Syntiew*, the mystical daughter of the Gods of Shillong (*U 'lei Shillong*). Similarly, the Jaintia

¹⁵ H.O. Mawrie, *The Khasi Milieu* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company, 1981), 57.

¹⁶ Chowdhury, *Khasi Canvas*, 142.

¹⁷ Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, 94.

Syiems trace their decent to the legend of *Ka Lih Dokha*, a mermaid who bestowed divinity upon the Jaintia Kings. Almost every clan traces their descent to some ancestral mother via tales and legends that circulate within the clan, family circles for generations. There is a tale however, that bears direct reference to the matrilineal system, which is referred to by Soumen Sen, and which will be critically analyzed further, to show its direct bearing on the matrilineal system practiced among the Khasis. This is the tale of *U Synriang*:

An unmarried girl, named Ka Liam, went bathing in a river, while bathing she saw a fruit floating, picked it up and ate it. After that incident she felt some sensation in her lower abdomen. (Another version holds that when Ka Lisan was bathing, the Shillong-God was also bathing upstream and Lisan conceived). However, her brother took her to a diviner who told him, after dire divination, that she was carrying. This announcement enraged the brother who thought that the man was deliberately defaming the family. So he caught hold of the diviner and dashed him down. But the inevitable happened –Ka Lisan gave birth to a male child. The boy could not speak even when he was six years old. The maternal uncle then went to another diviner who said that the boy would not speak unless the first diviner was satisfied. So the uncle went to that diviner and begged his pardon. He was then asked by the diviner and begged his pardon. He was then asked by the diviner to go back home and cry out *Synraing*. The uncle did so, and the boy started talking almost immediately. When the boy reached manhood he once told his mother that he was a reformer and sought her permission to have undisturbed sleep on some occasions. During sleep he used to make communion with God. He slept once for nine nights and after the death of his mother for another three nights when he received ordinances, commandments, rules and regulations for the society. There was no rule of marriage, any one could marry anybody; abduction, rape, kidnapping, incest, etc were the order of the day. *Synraing* ordained that henceforth one must not marry within one's mother's clan, and in certain cases, in the father's clan. One should not also marry the sister of one's brother's wife. He also introduced the system of cremation for the Khasi-Jaintias.¹⁸

¹⁸ Quoted in Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, 94-95.

This tale strengthens this fact that the matrilineal practice is founded on religious grounds. That *Synriang* is of divine origin and entrusted with the task of reforming society is reiterated in many versions of the tales, to give the tale the kind of religious legitimacy it requires to be readily accepted by the people. Since, the mother is revered as both a moral and spiritual head, descent will naturally be sought from her lineage. *Synriang* also puts moral sanctions on the whole race to ensure continuity, and strictly prohibits certain marriages between near relations on both the maternal as well as the paternal side.

When we speak of moral and consequently sexual prohibitions, like so many other tribes of North East India, the Khasis too have tales that strictly prohibits incest. The tale tells about the amorous behavior of the moon (*U Bynai*) towards his sister. The Sun (*Ka Sngi*) in Soumen Sen's words, "speaks of the morality around which the society was so structured as well as the logic behind the system."¹⁹ This tale tells about the moon, who falls in love with his elder sister, the Sun. In the beginning, the moon was as bright as the Sun. Becoming aware of her brother's incestuous feelings towards her; she expelled him from the house in utter rage. She throws a handful of ashes on his brows and in his shame he leaves. From that day forward; though the moon gave out light, yet his bright brilliance was lost forever, for the sun had covered his face with ashes.²⁰ In another tale, '*Ka krem lamet Ka Krem Latang*,' tells of a thanksgiving dance where all earth's creatures were invited to partake. The Sun and her brother the moon too arrived at the dance, and danced like a couple in pairs. Though there was nothing wrong with their steps, there was uproar of scornful laughter at the pain; that they being siblings should not dance together, and therefore viewed as sinful.²¹

The importance of the ancestress in Khasi and Jaintia rituals is manifest in the two important annual festivals, namely the *Pomblang Nongkrem* and the *Behdeinkhlam* Festivals. During the *Pomblang Nongkrem* festival, libations are offered to *Lei Long Syiem*, the first ancestress of the *Syiem* (King) clan and *U Suidnia*, (the first maternal

¹⁹ Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, 95.

²⁰ See appendix for the tale X *Ka Sngi bad U Bnai*.

²¹ See appendix for the tale X *Ka Krem Lament Ka krem Latang*.

uncle), including *U Blei Shillong* (The Godhead).²² Soumen Sen elaborates that the matrilineal system demands that the nephew of the present *Syiem* would be the next *Syiem* and therefore the religious rites are performed by both the sister of the *Syiem* (*Ka Syiem Sad or the Chief Priestess*) and the *Syiem* himself.²³ Similarly during the Behdeinkhlam festival in Jowai, ritual offerings are made to the four ancestress, ka Bon, Ka Tein, ka Wet and Ka Doh, who mothered the various clans of the Jaintias. A special mention needs to be made to the religious festivals of the Bhoi area in the northern parts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills called *Ka Lukhmi* festival. Since the people of the Bhoi area depend largely on agriculture for their subsistence, the festival of *Ka Lukhim* or *Ka 'Leikba* (the Goddess of rice or agriculture also considered the house deity of the Khasis), is celebrated yearly with a lot of fanfare.²⁴

When we speak of matriliney; an interesting fact arises about the role of fathers, and consequently the status of women in Khasi society. Mostly every tale, legend that has been passed down via the oral tradition glorifies the role of mothers and daughters, but very little or nothing is mentioned about the role of fathers in most of these tales. In the place of fathers, maternal uncles find an important place in the stories. In some stories, we find wandering women with children, but without fathers.²⁵ In keeping with matrilineal principles, women as mothers, as social and familial beings enjoy a privileged position. Soumen Sen takes up this argument to ask a pertinent question, of whether or not Khasi women enjoyed any higher or equal status with men. Women inspite of being glorified in almost every folklore material passed down from generations, do not actually have decision-making authority, neither in the household not in the socio-political power structure.²⁶ Sen further states:

“A status is functionally refined by the role attached to it. It has been observed that while women as mothers enjoy a revered position in terms of the domestic and religious roles assigned to them, they do not enjoy any privileged as *women* as such. Although men as husbands are relegated to an unimportant position in household affairs, they are the

²² Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, 96.

²³ Sen, *Between Tradition and Change, a Perspective of Meghalaya*, 46.

²⁴ Pristilla Mary Lyngdoh, *The Festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasi*, 72.

²⁵ Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, 96.

²⁶ Sen, *Khasi-Jaintia Foklore: Context, Discourse and History*, 77.

decision –making authorities in their mothers’ and sisters’ houses. Women are custodians of ancestral property but the decisions are taken up by the clan council (*Durbar Kur*), where the maternal uncles (*U Kni*) have a decisive authority. Moreover, women have been debarred from holding any position in socio-political decision making bodies, such as village and state councils. They are not even allowed to participate in the deliberations of these bodies. It is said that deliberations and decisions, planning, administration, and burden of management belong only to men. Women are forbidden even to speak before the councils (*durbars*). Thus, in terms of control of the household, decision-making powers, political participation, etc., women in Khasi-Jaintia society have been denied any role. Their status in these spheres is, therefore significantly low. Women are also denied the right of franchise in the elections of different grades of chiefs, beginning with the village headman, only adults male members (with moustache) can participate.”²⁷

Mary Pristilla Rina Lyngdoh, states similar views as that of Soumen Sen, but with a different interpretation on how to view the position of women among the Khasis. She has this to say:

“Although the Khasi society is matrilineal, yet in ancient days women have no rights in the political and administrative spheres, they never attended any Durbar and are excluded in the process of legislation, administration and judiciary. There is a Khasi saying, *Wow la kynih ka ‘iar kynthei, ka pyrthei ka la wai*, meaning that when the hen crows the world will come to an end or will be in destruction. This is a saying that as only the cock crows, so also the crowing job should be carried on by men only. The Khasi in the evolution of their democratic system have in their wisdom not burdened a woman with politics, and in the traditional political institutions, she has hardly any function or place, she has more vital functions to perform in her career as woman, besides her all important vocation as a mother.”²⁸

²⁷ Sen, *Khasi-Jaintia Foklore: Context, Discourse and History*, 78.

²⁸ Pristilla Mary Lyngdoh, *The Festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasi*, 33.

Various scholars hold different opinions as to the actual status of Khasi women today. But as Soumen Sen had conjectured, based on available folklore material, that the status and role of women changed after the formation of the state. That women were once the ‘stuff of legends’-being warriors and administrators in their own rights (*Ka Syiem Latympang, Ka Piang Sariang, ka Lar Syiem*, to name a few). With the formation of the State structure, the simple pre-state political institutions and structures were replaced by more complex ones. As Soumen Sen states: ‘The taboo that prohibits women from speaking in public and participate in public and state affairs might be a later creation.’²⁹

There is a very real picture offered by Tiplut Nongbri, on the actual status of the matrilineal Khasi women, which actually reflects the position of Khasi women in contemporary society. The actual condition may be denied, but it offers an insight into the plight of Khasi women today viz-a viz the men of the community. This is what she observes:

“The general assumption that matrilineal descent gives women a dominant position collapses under the weight of the reality of their actual condition-the multiple burdens they bear and their existence under male-centred authority. Although Khasi women have rights over their children, this does not always translate into authority, which in most cases is shared between the mother’s brother/brother on one –side and by the father/husband on the other side, an arrangement obviously made to reconcile male authority with uxorilocal residence. In ideal terms, this arrangement appears to be discriminatory against men who have to discharge their duty both to the conjugal family and to the sister’s family. In practice, it is the woman (both in the role of wife (mother and sister) who has to bear the major brunt of this arrangement. Notwithstanding the dual responsibility imposed by tradition on Khasi men in their role as brother and husband, in reality it is the mother who works and scrapes, stints and saves, and garners all

²⁹ Sen, *Khasi-Jaintia Foklore: Context, Discourse and History*, 78.

her resources to the administration of the family and the management of its resources, control lies in the hands of men”.³⁰

The matrilineal system may still prevail among the Khasis, but in recent years the system itself has undergone a series of changes to suit the changing times. Previously, men were given the role of protectors and custodians in the role of maternal uncles in their mother's home. With modernization and with families becoming nuclear, the exclusion from property rights has resulted in the men folk becoming more insecure. They are losing their traditional role as uncles with the loosening of kinship ties-with the formation of each nuclear and independent family; the role of the uncle diminishes. In such a scenario, men folk find themselves in a precarious position, where they belong neither to their mother's house (which is usually passed on to the daughters) nor to their wives' (which is usually owned by the wife's family). Among the men folk, whoever can secure a stable job, prefer to set up their own independent unit, where their role as fathers to their children takes center stage. Nowadays, when couples get married, the man and woman contribute their earnings to setting up a home of their own, and in some cases children take on both their father's and mother's surnames as proof of their new identity. This new identity, is at its core matrilineal, but has also elements of patriarchy in it-with the man assuming the role of father and ceremonial head of his household. It is to be noted, however that these changes are taking place only in the urban center of Shillong, where acculturation, education and technological advancement has influence people's thinking and the manner in which they view traditional institutions. In rural areas however, the matrilineal system is still being practiced like in the days of old, but even there we witness a strain in the matrilineal set-up. As Soumen Sen had stated that the system itself has suffered some disruptions, owing to certain changes that occurred in the economic and political framework of the society. Factors such as the introduction of market economy, relations based on private holdings, where land was no longer under the total control of the community. Fragmentation of family disrupted the functional matrilineal descent group. With the fragmentation of family, the fragmentation of clan

³⁰ Tiplut Nongbri, *Gender, Matriliney and Entrepreneurship, the Khasi of North-East India* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008), 27.

land (*Ri Kur*) became necessary, thus bringing about varied changes in the matriliney order of society.³¹

As far as the question of identity is concerned, it may be reinstated that the matrilineal system lends its peculiar characteristic to the Khasi society. We need to quote the late Mr. S.J Duncan, I.A.S, who in response to the questionnaire issued by the Land Reform Commission of the Government (1974), made this emphatic statement:

“The Khasis base their customary laws of inheritance on the tenets of their ancient religion. Now that many have become Christians and have given up those religious rites and forms of worship according to the old belief, the system of holding lands based strictly on the performance of those religious rites and functions can no longer hold good. This is particularly true of a general saying that the Khatduh gets the properties because she looks after the religion of the family. Therefore, it is for the parents themselves to divide their properties as they think best. Khasi customs should nevertheless prevail in so far as descent from the mother is concerned. Once this fundamental structure of Khasi society is demolished, the whole concept of Khasi society is demolished, the whole concept of Khasi society topples down, and becomes meaningless.”³²

Khasi society cannot lose its fundamental structure from which it derives its meaning. That the Khasis sought their identification from the mother's lines defines them for who they are today. Also, the Khasi matriliney, being among a handful of matrilineal societies still in existence, in a world dominated by patriarchy and patriliney, needs careful consideration. This is not however to state that matrilineal descent is the most idyllic of social structuring, and that every society should aspire to becoming matrilineal. What it clearly means is that it is an ancient practice among the Khasis, Jaintias and the Garos, and it continues to this very day to dominate all aspects of social life. It has empowered women from these tribal communities and has striven, through its continual practice, to bring about gender equality. Over time, however there has been an inevitable cultural change among these matrilineal groups, which is to be expected in a world, predominated by patriarchy. We also know that some matrilineal societies have evolved to patriarchy, through the ages, and that the same

³¹ Sen, *Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills*, 98.

³² I.A.S Duncan S.J., in “The Report of the Land Reforms Commission for Khasi Hills” quoted in Chowdhury, *Khasi Canvas*, 151.

process is making an inroad into remaining matrilineal societies when they come into contact with the outside world (Vidyarthi and Rai, 1985)³³. Among the Khasis and Jaintias, though cultural diffusion has happened in the ancient past with neighbouring cultures (especially in the Jaintia hills) - the matrilineal order has seen little or no changes to its pattern of descent and identification. Since the opening up of these hills by the British and the direct contact with mainstream patriarchal cultures, changes have begun to seep into the matrilineal structuring, and these changes are beginning to show in urban areas, where education and inter-mixing has produced a new cultural set-up. However in rural Meghalaya, where agriculture is still the main sustenance, the matrilineal order remains strong, with outside influence having made little or no significant changes to ancient practices.

In a recent research paper, written by Dr Madhumita Das, from the Institution of Population Science, Mumbai- she lists a number of reasons, based on qualitative analysis of women from both the urban and rural areas of East Khasi Hills. This is primarily to determine among other factors, the cultural shifts affecting Khasi matriliney and the transformation taking place therein, owing to various interacting forces. The reasons for slow but sure changes to the matriliney system are listed below: - ³⁴

1. Christianity had a large role to play in bringing about cultural changes. When Christianity came to the hills with the coming of the British; it brought along with it patrilineal values and cultural concepts. With the belief of Christian Missionaries that the only way to bring about changes was through education-it was only a matter of time before more than 75% of the tribes converted to Christianity. The patriarchal values that Christianity endorsed were in direct conflict with matrilineal beliefs. In the initial years of proselytization, there was a lot of conflict between the new converts and the adherence of traditional religion. In more than a century of initial conversions, it is inevitable that changes will take place in the matrilineal set-up. Educated men of the

³³ L.P.Vidyarthi and B.Rai, *The Tribal Culture of India* (New Delhi: Concept Publishing Company 1985), 385-94.

³⁴ Through questionnaires and qualitative analysis, Dr Madhumita Das was able to come up with a convincing database, which points to changing trends in Khasi matriliney. The samples design adopted was a multistage design, fitted to the study requirement. Six Hundred women were covered for the study Two hundred eligible women from the urban area and the remaining four hundred from the rural area. Dr Madhumita Das is Research Officer at the International Institute for Population Sciences, Mumbai.

community are gradually setting up independent units, and are therefore no longer living in their wives homes, paving the way for a more patrilineal strain. Though clan names are still being carried on from the mother's line, the tendencies in these new family patterns are for the children to carry both the father's and mother's family names.

2. Though Khasis had been interacting with neighbouring cultures even before the coming of the British, it was only after a permanent British settlement was set up in these hills, that these hill people began interacting steadily with the larger patriarchal culture. Since Independence, the Khasi state has been increasingly opening its doors to the larger society. Many Khasis have travelled and lived outside of the state for both education and employment. Thus, when they return, they bring different norms and values of other patriarchal cultures, and after diffusing some of these values into their own traditional practices, gives shape to a different cultural set-up. This new set-up is an intermixture of both the matrilineal and patriarchal/patriliny traits.

Another reason, being cross-marriages between Khasis and members of other patriarchal communities. The resultant factor has been that children from such marriages prefer to take their father's clan name, making explaining their family status much easier in a world where matriliney is but a small island in a sea of patriarchy.

3. Urbanization has been a key factor in bringing about changes into the Khasi matrilineal set-up. The intermingling of people from various communities has led to fusion and fission of various cultural elements. This process has led to altered perception of the matrilineal system.

To show the changing attitudes towards matriliney, and the subtle factors creeping slowly into this set-up, Dr Madhumita collected more information, by interviewing more respondents from the rural areas. Women from the rural areas are of the opinion that, causal factors for change in the matrilineal system in rural areas differ from those in urban settings. One of the drastic changes has been changes in the residential patterns, which form the backbone of matriliney. Men prefer to stay away with their

wives in single household units, and unless a family is wealthy and owns large ancestral property, division of property among daughters is becoming increasingly difficult.

Post modern debates concerning feminist and gender issues have been doing the rounds for decades, redefining various perspectives that have emerged, that draw attention to the construction of gender and gender equality. With modernization and globalization, folk societies are in a process of transition, where the role of women viz-a-viz men folk is being constantly questioned and re-defined. This chapter discussed matriliney as the bases on which Khasi identity has been constructed, and the importance of the female principle in all matters governing Khasi life. There may be a paradigm shift on how we view matriliney now and then, yet, basic tenets have remained unchanged. However, traditional attitudes towards this ancient practice may be changing, but whether or not this societal system itself will be uprooted and have patriliney replace it in the long run, is difficult to predict. As for now, it is safe to argue that there is much in the Khasi matriliney set-up that other communities in India and abroad can learn from. While, across all races, caste or creed, women are fighting for gender equality, the Khasi woman is guaranteed a position of respect and reverence endowed upon her by societal customs, beliefs and tradition, backed by traditional religion. Where ever there are atrocities committed against women in the garb of patriliney, and male domination; the Khasi woman, and the matrilineal tribes can be cited as examples of an age-old practice; as old as humankind itself, but perhaps more progressive and forward-looking than anything that you may witness around you. With the competitive nature of modern existence, where nuclear families are becoming the norm, and no longer the exception in Khasi society, law of inheritance are changing, and educated families are beginning to distribute properties equally among children (both boys and girls). Slowly a pattern is being set, and is changing one family at a time, and it is the educated among the Khasi youth who are taking precedence in determining what aspect of matriliney to accept and which to reject.

Sadly, inspite of the matrilineal system, which should naturally enhance the status of women- khasi women from both the rural and urban areas still find themselves in a position of vulnerability. Such vulnerability arises out of illiteracy, poor economic

status and lack of proper knowledge of contraception. For cultural and personal reasons, a Khasi woman prefers to have numerous children (preferable daughters) compounding her responsibilities and problems, whenever the husband or male partner deserts (which is often the case). Also studies by various agencies have shown a rise in domestic violence and crime against women in recent decades.

While women have comparative security under matriliney, they are not entirely free from sub-ordination. A recent survey conducted by researchers, Gitika Das and Abhijit Kr Bezbaruah show that violence against women is a disturbing factor, on the rise in matrilineal society of Meghalaya.³⁵ 2.5 female heads agree that physical violence exists in female headed households as compared to 60% in male headed households in the changing societal set-up. This has been compounded by the fact that desertion and other forms of violations and violence against women are very much present in the state. This survey has not only highlighted some of the issues regarding the status of women in Meghalaya, but suggestions have been made in this study towards improving a situation that may, if left unchecked, further deteriorate. Suggestions have been made for the improvement of education among the women-folk, raising the income of women, so as to fill the gap between male and female earnings. Reducing the level of poverty and preventing households from single parenting, or one- sided desertion (which is so often the case). Property rights in matrilineal Meghalaya needs to be re-examined, so there is equity among both sexes with regards to property matters, which will further ensure male responsibility towards his household. Physical violence against women needs strict intervention and punishment. All these measures would facilitate comprehensive development and progress among the matriliney tribes of Meghalaya.

³⁵ Gitika Das and Abhijit Kr Bezbaruah, "Social Transition and Status of Women Among the Khasi Tribe of Meghalaya by Survey Method." *Global Research Methodology* 2nd Issue, Aug-Sept/Oct 2011.

CHAPTER 6

FOLKLORE AND IDENTITY POLITICS: CHANGE AND CONFLICT

This chapter will closely examine how folklore has contributed to the establishment of an ethnic identity among the Khasis. An identity which has dramatically evolved over the last century, giving rise to political movements, solidarity movements and militant groups. The chapter also includes a close study of changes and political upheavals the society has witnessed in the last few decades. Firstly, it is to be recognized that folklore and the oral tradition are dynamic; they form part of a knowledge system in which traditional knowledge is viewed as the carriers of information and discoveries.¹ Folklore is after all knowledge of the people, not of a person, but of the community at large.² Folklore shapes the thinking of a community-its artistic expressions, observations and such. Mazharul Islam explains Folklore as one of the many forces created by society, but that sometimes, this force is so powerful that the whole society is directly moulded by it. The role of myths; the function that proverbs, tales, riddles in the oral form plays in shaping a society, are of no less importance than any written literature of the past.³ Folklore is so structured, that with every new changes in society, it too changes and adapts. You may ask why this is so? Mazharul Islam argues this point succinctly by stating that with changes in society, folklore does not vanish, but rather makes an adjustment for the following reasons:

- (1) Persistence of older elements of folklore for a variety of reasons.
- (2) The adaptation of old elements of folklore to the new condition is an important phase of cultural creativity.
- (3) The new emergent pattern through interaction and conflict.⁴

The Indian sub-continent is composed of many ethnic groups, of which the Khasis are one such ethnic (Tribal) group who sought their identity not only based on common

¹ Sen, *Folklore identity Development, in the Context of North-East India*, 15.

² Islam, *Folklore, The Pulse of the People*, 16.

³ Mazharul Islam, *Folklore and Social Change* (Calcutta: Rabindra Bharati Society, 1985), 75.

⁴ Ibid., 119.

ancestry and descent, but a common history. Most important is the function that the presumed ancestry plays in maintaining the present for the group-its core myths and beliefs systems are not only important to ensure this continuity of the group but also making the past a living and vital part, are less important than the memories themselves.⁵ For example the Khasi origin myth of *Ki Hynniew Trep* (The Seven Huts) is constantly being referred too, in order to build and enhance identity consciousness. The Khasis refer to themselves as the people of the *Hynniew Trep*, believing and building upon the myth's believability.⁶ According to one version of the narrative of *Ki Hynniew Trep* (there are several versions) after the felling of the auspicious tree that once connected God to man, a darkness descended upon the earth, but eventually man repented, and God gave them three commandments that formed the essence of *Ka Niam Khasi* (Khasi Religion), namely, *Kamai ia Ka hok* (Earn righteousness), *Tip Briew Tip Blei* (know Man Know God) and *Tip Kur-Tip Kha* (honour maternal and paternal kinship).By connecting religious and ethnic identity, the Khasis managed to form a strong identity that took the form of many a movement –the first being the socio-religious *Seng Khasi Movement* initiated in 1899, which contributed significantly towards building a Khasi identity. There was a call for unity among clans and sub-clans to unite under the banner of the *Hynniewtrep*. The historical past matters greatly (be it oral or written) in the formation and perpetuation of ethnic identities, and its formation can be viewed in the following statement:

“Thus the historical past of an ethnic group is not something that is relegated to its archives to be viewed as a curious but interesting relic. Instead it functions to organize the sentiments, needs, aspirations of the present. Consequently to understand fully the meaning of the past for an ethnic group, it must be seen as filtered through the prism of the present. As such the past and present are inextricably interwoven in the life of the ethnic group, and the interaction between the two does much to define the group's vision of its future.”⁷When we talk about changes in tribal societies in India, with unique ethnicities, identity markers and traditional patterns, we recall what Vidyarthi had

⁵ Benjamin B. Ringer and Elenor R. Lawless, “The “We-They” Character of Race and Ethnicity” in Harry Goulbourne ed., *Race and Ethnicity* (London: Routledge, 2001), 53.

⁶ Sen, *Folkore Identity Development, in the Context of North-East India*, 19.

⁷ Ringer and Lawless, “The “We-They” Character of Race and Ethnicity”, 54.

observed about the tribes of Bihar, which also holds true for all the other tribes of North-East India.⁸ Vidyarthi had noted that tribal Bihar has been going through a phase of transformation. In the past, the traditional process was responsible for initiating change in tribal societies, which was further accelerated with the modern processes. If the first process brought the 'Hindu model' before the tribes (as in the case of Jaintia Hills), the modern process, put before the tribes, the western-urban-industrial-democratic model for inducing transformation. Due to these factors of change, the culture of tribes of North-East India is in constant flux and cultural heterogeneity is reflected in all aspects of their lived lives. The inevitable changes in such societies which, is bringing about heterogeneity, individualization, competition, money, and so on, can also be attributed to the role of technology that has positive influences in terms of winning over poverty and isolation, and can be termed as revitalization process. Most importantly, the emergence of the tribal elites from among the newly formed middle class. Though class relations did exist even in traditional circumstances, they are not as pronounced as they are today. Formerly, tribal societies such as Khasi society had a ruling group consisting of the *Bakhras* or aristocrats who always held prime land (though they had no absolute authority over land and people).⁹ With colonial rule, and changes in the customary land tenure system, there arose a conflict between the traditional elite and the new middle class, where the traditional elite had to compromise. Describing the conflict that arose between these two classes, Soumen Sen has this to say:

“The real tussle, however, started after Independence, with the emergence of the democratic order, the middle class had an edge and could successfully protect their interests through the provisions of the Sixth Schedule and the establishment of the District Council. The eclipse of the traditional elite or the chiefs began with the economic

⁸ L.P. Vidyarthi, *Cultural Contours of Tribal Bihar Punthi Pustak*, Calcutta, 1964 and ss quoted in Mazharul Islam, *Folklore, the Pulse of the People*, 16.

⁹ Sen, *Between Tradition and Change, a Perspective of Meghalaya*, 64.

and political controls exercised, had to subordinate themselves to the new political elite, their economic rights were in no way disturbed.”¹⁰

Various scholars have viewed the rise of the middle class (tribal elite), intelligentsia from various perspectives. The factors attributed to the rise of the elites among the Khasis had been western education, conversion to Christianity and a progressive outlook towards life. The emerging elite composed of both Christians and non-Christians, developed certain common ethos and goals-the need to reform society, and were often scornful of traditional mores and customs, rejecting traditions and ancestors.¹¹ It is interesting to note P.N Dutta’s observation on the impact of the west on the Khasi-Jaintia society. He states that the transformation in the fortune of the Khasi tribe began from the time they came into contact with British authorities in the Sylhet frontier in 1765. During the six odd decades till the outbreak of the Anglo-Burmese War in 1824, the influence of the British on the economic, political and even the cultural life of the Khasi was substantial. However, of immediate consequence was the expulsion of the Khasis from the plains of Sylhet. He recalls a popular Khasi myth of “The Lost Book”, which the tribal memory had probably preserved as the ‘snapping of the ancient cord’, after the coming of the British, which spoke of their migration from the north (Assam) and ended in the plains of Sylhet. According to the myth, it was believed that the Khasis were repelled by a flood in Sylhet, whereby they lost the script of their language, whereas the Hindu, who accompanied the Khasi, managed to retain his language’s script. P.N. Dutta further adds that “whatever may be the significance of the tradition, it indicated at least the beginning of the end of the traditional age of their history.”¹² The new epoch came about bringing both positive and negative changes to the Khasi society. On the one hand, the Khasi embraced the changes and reforms brought about by the British establishment. However, during the initial years they did put up a struggle to preserve their freedom, independence and traditional culture. Prominent among revolutionary leaders among the Khasis and Jaintias, were Tirot Sing Syiem from Mairang and Kiang Nongbah from Jowai. Gradually, began the conversion to Christianity and modernization of the tribe.

¹⁰ Sen, *Between Tradition and Change, a Perspective of Meghalaya*, 68.

¹¹ P.N. Dutta, *Impact of the West on Khasis and Jaintias*, (Cosmo Publication, 1982), 208.

¹² Ibid.

However, the realization did dawn upon them for the need to resist some of the drastic changes that was slowly eroding into their way of life. Hence, began the revitalizing movements, with the *Seng Khasi Movement* (Khasi Hills) and the *Seinraj* (Jaintia Hills), doing their utmost to preserve and perpetuate both religion and culture. The last century witnessed not only positive changes brought about by the British administration to uplift the hill tribes, by the humanism displayed by them whilst dealing with the Khasis and Jaintias, which has been applauded by many scholars.¹³ However, while throwing open the doors of these hilly regions to the world, there began the influx of people from outside who came as businessmen, contractors, as employees of the Government (both Central and State) and menial workers.¹⁴ Gradually, with the growth of population of the tribe itself and the influx from other states, the Khasis began to fear that they will be swamped by outsiders, who they generally refer to as 'Dkhar'. I will quote Mary Pristilla Rina Lyngdoh, who made the following observation:

“The tribal fear that they would lose their jobs through competition. So, it is these contemporary political and economic problems that the society is facing with the influx of the outsiders, that the people have become conscious of their identity and in their attempts to strengthen their identity that they appreciate their past, when it was uncontaminated and unadulterated .It was this thought of this uncontaminated past, that strengthen their quest of identity.”¹⁵

The political struggle that led to the formation of the State of Meghalaya on the 21st January, 1972, by the then Prime Minister of India, the late Mrs. Indira Gandhi, was no less dramatic. J.N Chowdhury meticulously traces the genesis of various political movements in North East India starting with the EITU in October 1955(Eastern India Tribal Union), with the short career, until it was superseded with APHLC (All Party Hill Leaders Conference). To quote J.N Chowdhury on the political events and their failures in the initial years after independence: “We are constrained to remark again that factionalism and groupism marked the formative stages of tribal politics in north-

¹³ Dutta, *Impact of the West on Khasis and Jaintias*, 210.

¹⁴ Lyngdoh and Pristilla, *The Festivals in the History and Culture of the Khasi*, 191-190.

¹⁵ Ibid.

east India possibly because tribal allegiance, in the beginning, was primarily clan-oriented or village oriented.”¹⁶ The fall out happened when The All Assam Hills Leaders Conference in April of 1960, vehemently opposed the resolution of the Assam Pradesh Congress Committee directing the then Chief Minister B.P Chaliha to declare Assamese as the state language of Assam. It was certain that the hill people would resent the imposition. But, as J.N Chowdhury had stated, that the language issue was not the cause of demand for separation, but that it proved the occasion which spiraled the situation into an emotionally charged situation, where the emergent middle class in the hills clamoured for greater political share and control of the government.¹⁷ The Hill leaders, by the beginning of the nineteen sixties, formed the All Party Hill Leaders Conference,(APHLC) with a fresh move for Hill state, and it was becoming clear that there were more positive reasons than language behind the Hills State demand .As Soumen Sen explains in the following statement :

“The present regional parties in Meghalaya are the off-shoots of the APHLC movements. The Hill State movement was weakened by the dissociation of Naga and Mizo groups and when the demand for forming the State ultimately came to be realized, the Mikir and North Cachar Hills also backed out. The simple reason for this is that the national aspirations of each of these ethnic groups could never be satisfied in one such state with heterogeneous and conflicting attitudes. Ultimately the Khasi-Jaintia and the Garos mobilized themselves under the banner of APHLC and Meghalaya was born first as an Autonomous State in 1970 and two years later as full-fledged state in 1972.”¹⁸

Coming back to the function that folklore plays on issues of cultural identity, and most importantly, how folklore has been used as an instrument in identity politics. As has been mentioned in the introductory chapter that folklore by preparing cultural symbols (the essential features of an identity system), determines the collective entity of a people and its retention.¹⁹ Folklore has been successfully used by political parties to promote their agendas .They constantly refer to folklore, to reaffirm and reassert

¹⁶ Chowdhury, *The Khasi Canvas*, for a detailed description of events.

¹⁷ Chowdhury, *Khasi Canvas*, 872.

¹⁸ Sen, *Between Tradition and Change, a Perspective of Meghalaya*, 77.

¹⁹ Sen, Soumen., *Folklore identity Development, in the Context of North-East India*, 37.

their ethnic identity, every socio- political movement in North-east India has been founded on such ethnic lines-often taking on a xenophobic character that has resulted in several ethnic conflicts; causing large-scale bloodshed, displacement and insecurity in the region. Many movements have opposed developmental efforts on their respective states (even after the establishment of states), with the general argument, that they are doing so to preserve and perpetuate their traditions, their customary laws, kinship regulations and land-holding patterns etc.²⁰ Within the State of Meghalaya itself, regional parties like the All Party Hills Leaders Conference (APHLC) and the Hill State People's Democratic Party (HSPDP), discouraged any programs of land reform. According to Soumen Sen, the Indian National Congress (INC) remained distant and conspicuously silent on the issues of land reform and industrialization of backward areas. Only the Communist Party of India (CPI) suggested reform to vitalize the agrarian sector. The reason for such lack of initiative to bring about economic development to these regions; Sen notes, was the genuine or perceived fear that such modernization would affect the 'tribal' way of life, and would create an identity crisis of sorts-the end results being a static economy.²¹ This short sightedness among the political leaders of the State of Meghalaya has resulted in the economic backwardness of the state; also the lack of opportunities and unemployment, that has given rise to many social ills. Given the fact that the tribal population itself has increased in the last few decades; in resisting developmental efforts in the name of identity preservation, we can expect a growing and restless ethnic community that will not be satisfied with a static economy.

Are folklore and modernization two antagonistic terms? Does folklore really adapt to changing social situations? Or does it vanish altogether with technological advancement? Soumen Sen quotes Temsula Ao, who expresses anxiety and fear at the positive loss of ethnic identities in North East India, due to tremendous challenges from education and modernization: "If the trend is allowed to continue in an indiscriminate and mindless manner, globalization will create a market in which Naga, Khasi or Mizo communities will become mere brand names and commodity markers stripped of all human significance and which will definitely mutate the ethnic

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

and symbolic identities of a proud people. Globalization in this sense will eventually reduce identity to anonymity.”²²

The views expressed here by Temsula Ao may be rather extreme and can be counter-argued by an example cited by Mazharul Islam from an American situation. America being the ‘ideal’ place for urbanization, where according to Islam; “urbanization occurs in the true sense of the term and the area of conflict is more wide, folklore constitutes the residue in culture that are never completely eradicated as a result of urbanization.”²³ Since change is implicit in the nature of culture, its adaptive capabilities are substantially great. Similarly, folklore which is a product of culture, would naturally adapt itself to changing times. Take the case of Khasi Folklore, despite the many social, political and economic changes with modernization and technological enhancement, folklore still retains its distinctiveness and its influence in every aspect of our daily lives. If we are worried about folklore’s survival in an age where we have made tremendous progress in areas of development, technology and science, we need allay our fears, as in this prophetic observation by Mazharul Islam:

“Those who are afraid of folklore’s bleak future because of urbanization, industrialization and modernization; are perhaps not truly aware of its vital dynamism and love for life. Folklore is the creation of the human mind-society is also the creation of the human being-so there cannot be any ill-feeling between the two that one would change and the other would remain static.”²⁴

There is always the situation, where over-stressing on ethnic identity has led to many a conflict situation, involving various ethnic communities of North-East India. Many scholars are now of the agreement that overemphasis on ethnic identity has encouraged cultural myopia.²⁵ It has further cultivated xenophobic feelings where peaceful living among communities is constantly under threat. With political parties using folklore material to develop a sense of *we-ness* as opposed to *they* (*they*, for the ethnic group represents the larger society), which eventually drives a wedge between

²² Quoted in Sen, *Folklore Identity Development*, 39.

²³ Islam. *Folklore: The Pulse of the People*, 329.

²⁴ Ibid, 340.

²⁵ Quoted in Sen, *Folklore Identity Development*, 42.

people, leading to social tension and conflict. Soumen Sen, quotes Anil Kumar Boro, a folklorist from the Boro community, who puts the question of ethnicity among the various tribes of North-East India in perspective. Anil Boro speaks about identity as an evolving concept, expect that in a symbolic form it connects ethnic, linguistic, cultural markers and differences. It is therefore not possible that in globalised cultural space, unique identities can remain pure and free from contamination. Acculturation takes place all the time, where communities learn from one another and adapt to changing circumstances. Most importantly, Anil Boro lays stress on the point that identities are already and always hybridized.²⁶ Such is the resilience of folklore that will adapt itself to changing circumstances, and rather enriches itself in changing spaces.

Turning back to the question of social tension and conflict, arising out of identity assertion in the case of Meghalaya, needs careful reviewing. Economic factors has been cited as one of the reasons that leads a group to asserting separate identities. Common identity and common culture are emphasized and whatever cultural difference that may exist with other groups is constantly harped upon. In this way, in order to emphasize the identity of culture, old cultural elements are revived or recreated, leading to the process of revivalism.²⁷ This process of revivalism is usually carried out by the emergent middle-class from within a group itself that want a share in economic and political processes, giving rise to a number of politically active student's movements, and in Meghalaya's case we had the rise of the Khasi Students Union (KSU) from the late 70's which is still an active movement even today. The Khasi Student Union went by the slogan "Khasi by blood, Indian by accident" which created a wave of hatred for other minority communities in the state, in particular the Bengali community, resulting in clashes and the killing of several people. The fear psychosis unleashed by the Khasi Students Union led to the exodus of a large group of people from the state. Even till this day, whenever the Khasi Student Union raises any issues that concern the Khasis, be it real or imagined, banners are displayed that assert identity. The immediate outcome was the talk of a Khasi identity that

²⁶ Quoted in Sen, *Folklore Identity Development*, 42.

²⁷ Majumdar, 'North-East India: Problems of Identity and Migration, Social Tension in N.E India.' (Ed) J.B Bhattacharjee, Research India Publication, Calcutta, 1982), 202.

permeated every aspect of life. As in the words of Kanchan Mukhopadhyay, an Anthropologist who describes the situation thus: “These movements often cease to target the state and redirect their anger towards members of other communities. Through this process, ethnic identities are politicized and ethnic communities turn into political communities. Eventually, such a movement gains a dominating position in a narrow geographical space, and it marginalizes the ‘other’ smaller communities from the articulate space of the dominant identity.”²⁸ This is precisely the reason why a student Movement brought about the rise of a militant organization by the name, Hynniewtre National Liberation Council (HNLC) - *Hynniewtre* a term which denotes Khasis, thereby giving them an ethnic identity. This militant outfit unleashed terror with the demand of secession from India, which saw the near collapse of the state machinery in Meghalaya. Only in very recent years did the militant organization give up arms and its members brought back into the mainstream of life. Describing the turbulence years in the State of Meghalaya, which roughly began during 1979 and continue over a period of more than twenty-five years and more, Professor Tiplut Nongbri has this to say:

“The continuity social and political instability has not only undermined the legitimacy of the state but has also allowed political parties and sundry groups of diverse hues and ideologies to hold the people to ransom with these pressure tactics and militant ways. Some of the group or parties had even started functioning like a parallel government, using their covert and dubious network, both within and outside the establishment, to divert state resources whenever they chose and to secure the compliance of officials. It is a matter of serious concern that while part of the rot stems from the state’s failure to provide development to the people, like a vicious circle, it in turn feeds into the system to generate and reproduce underdevelopment.”²⁹

The reason for the rise of such movements be they political or militant, can be traced to what Tiplut Nongbri has pointed out to be the malaise of underdevelopment or in Soumen Sen.’s words, ‘the crisis of underdevelopment, nay, uneven development.’

²⁸ Mukhopadhyay, Kanchan., “Tribes, Nation and State in India,” Identity, Cultural Pluralism and State; South Asia

²⁹ Nongbri, *Gender, Matriliney and Entrepreneurship, the Khasi of North-East India* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2008),150.

Sen, in reviewing the situation, pertaining not only to Meghalayans, but the Assamese, the Andhras, the Maharashtrians, the Bengalese etc, sees this as a pattern of the frustration of the people all over the country, who are deprived of their legitimate rights in a serial order which is disconnected from the actual needs of the people. Soumen Sen adds this: “Exploited, not of course by their brethren of other communities but, because of the socio-economic order suited to the needs of feudal and bourgeoisie interests. The banner of chauvinism that is carried of course by the unsuspecting masses is actually spread out to safeguard these interests and the infighting in that camp spills the venom. Their fight is for a share of the spoils, and the people are used as fools.”³⁰

If there are social problems and conflicts, there are also solutions. We need to realize that India as a country has undergone various processes of cultural changes since independence, while, on the one hand, ethnic and regional self-consciousness or identity of castes, tribes and minorities is increasing, on the other hand, there prevails many integrative, cultural and syncretic processes. On the political front, the growth of regionalism had led to new aspirations on the part of the middle class who want a fair share of the national wealth. Keeping all this in mind, we are also aware that uneven development in tribal areas has created a feeling of mistrust towards communities they view as ‘more developed.’ Economy and developmental policies introduced by the Central Government towards upliftment in these regions has met many a hurdles in the name of preserving cultures and identities. In the post modern world where globalization, free market economy are the order of the day; politics in these regions can ill afford to work on parochial lines. Political parties need to rethink their strategies, instead of working for their own self interest. They need to work towards economic parity, keeping in mind the economic status of the masses in India. This can be achieved, as in the words of the Anthropologist, Dr N.K Das:

“There is greater need today to reinforce our pre-existing cultural interconnectness to achieve a meaningful balance between syncretistic traditions and cultural pluralism. It

³⁰ Sen, “Social tension in North-East India in Retrospect,” J.B Bhattacharjee ed., *Social tension in North-East India* (Research India Publication, 1982), 189.

must be recognized that Indian masses are strongly rooted in their composite culture and secular commitments, evolved over centuries of cultural synthesis.”³¹

The world is fast changing and social attitude too are changing, becoming more secularized. Religions are either being re-interpreted or newer religions are gradually cropping up to replace the old religions.³² With newer interpretations of older religions and replacement of older religions by newer ones, myths too are undergoing transformation and are being re-interpreted to suit modern times. This is true of the Khasi scenario which has in recent years published fiction in the Khasi language, reflective of social changes and conflict. These writings are reflective of conflict arising in a once folk society, which is moving towards modernity-which in turn has brought in new social and personal relationships. Soumen Sen makes a list of prominent writers, such as I. Kharkongor, K. W Nongrum, B.C Jyrwa, W. Tiewsoh and L.H Pde, who write about conflict between the old and new, rural and urban, traditional and modern and such matters. Sen sums the recent trend among the Khasi writers in the following words:

“This seems to be obvious once it is recognized that the age-old cultural patterns are being steadily threatened by new modes of living and apprehending reality –social, political and economic-and that it is necessary to preserve continuity and assertion of a distinct cultural identity.”³³

This phenomenon is not peculiar to tribals of North East India alone, but is true of various cultures around the globe that are either afraid to loss their unique identity , or feel the urgent need to regain their cultural past, that they fear is either being eroded or lost in the ‘post modernity of today’s capitalism.’³⁴ Jonathan Friedman talks about this phenomenon in his book *Cultural Identity and Global Process*, where he makes specific note on the global situation and the changes thereabout. This is what he says:

³¹ N.K. Das, “Identity Politics, Cultural Pluralism and the State in South Asia: An Anthropological Reappraisal.” in N.K Das and V.R Rao eds., *Identity Politics, Cultural Pluralism and State in South Asia* (Anthropological Survey of India, 2009), 64.

³² Islam, *Folklore: The Pulse of the People*, 352.

³³ Sen, *Khasi-Jaintia Folklore: Context, Discourse and History*, 117.

³⁴ Jonathan Friedman, *Cultural Identity and Global Process* (London, New Delhi: Sage Publications, 1994), 79.

“The past decade (1975-85) has witness a marked change in the cultural state of the word that could not have been predicted in the ‘progressive years’ of the 1960s. In the increasingly crisis-ridden centers of the world system there has been an implosive loss of faith in the progress of ‘civilization’, and a corresponding explosion of new cultural movements, from cults and religious revival to primitivism, a new rationalism, a striving from the re-established of a new cultural defined identity. All of this activity is accompanied by an increasing ‘national’ and ethnic fragmentation in the center.”³⁵

Such a process can be applied to the shift in cultural patterns in the Khasi society, which is undergoing a transition from folk society to a modernized one. With every kind of social transition there is bound to be social conflict and transformation and folklore being a ‘dynamic force of culture’,³⁶ will accommodate itself in changing spaces and will be the active agent of social change. Moreover, we need to keep in mind the dual nature of folklore, as it is performed and studied; discussed by Jill Terry Rudy in the introduction to the book by W.A. Wilson entitled, *The Marrow of Human Experiences: essays on folklore*. (2006). This is was she says:

“Folklore can be used to denigrate other groups and create boundaries to keep a group isolated, while folklore can also be used to celebrate a group and make connections between individuals and other groups. Folklore study can be used for nationalistic propaganda to promote a group beyond all other groups and to argue for political and territorial privileges, while it can also be used for nationalistic propaganda to promote a group beyond all other groups and to argue for political and territorial privileges, while it can also be used to critique misuse of authority and to make legitimate claims for cultural and political autonomy”.³⁷

The above explanation gives a better understanding of the level at which folklore operates in traditional societies, which are undergoing similar transition to modernity. This would then call for a better understanding of traditional expression that includes self awareness, appreciating diversity and honouring a common humanity.

³⁵ Friedman, *Cultural Identity and Global Process*, 78

³⁶ Islam, *Folklore and Social Change*, 353.

³⁷ W.A. Wilson et al., *The Marrow of Human Experience: Essay on Folklore* (Utah: Utah State University Press, 2006), 4.

Traditional bodies Versus State

An example can be cited of the traditional form of governance of the Khasis that will clearly indicate the changes from folk society, with its unique mode of governance, into an elaborate state form. With the complexity of state machinery in modern times, we witness a direct confrontation between traditional governing bodies and the larger agencies of the state. I will liberally cite Soumen Sen who has elaborately traced the process of state formation in the Khasi-Jaintia society-this will enlighten the process of evolution of a folk/peasant society into a modern state, with all its functional ramifications and newly emerging political tussle between traditional bodies and the state government. Major writers from Gurdon to J.N. Chowdhury, Hamlet Bareh and David Roy, to name a few, have analyzed and explained the structural function of the Khasi society since pre-British era. From their writings, we gather a lot of information about land division and ownership among the Khasi populace. Writers like Keith Cantlie, David Roy and J.N Chowdhury state that land is divided into two major categories; namely *Ri Raid* (land for community) and *Ri Kynti*, (land in absolute possession) and, are subject to general control of the *durbar*, but ultimate appeal lies with the *Dorbar of Ka Hima* (State Durbar or *Dorbar Hima*) which arbitrates over serious and unresolved disputes. The *Bakhras* (noblemen) with the *Syiem* or the chief are precluded from claiming tax on lands, the power of arbitration or controlling power of the state is exercised by the state *durbar*, presided by the *Syiem*.³⁸ Finally what Soumen Sen concurs, is that the administrative arrangements in both the Khasi and Jaintia Hills follow more or less a three-tier arrangement. The *Syiems* of the Khasi state were not mere chieftains, although they were not full-fledged kings either, with the power to levy taxes on land held under their jurisdiction. In their power of arbitration, they were assisted by a number of *myntis*, or noblemen to assist in the administration of the state. These *myntis* belonged to a few clan described as noble (*Bakhras*). Besides the *myntis* who constituted the state council (*durbar Hima*), there were the *Lyngdohs*, the *Basans* and the *Lyngskor* who acted as the *Syiem's* deputy governors. There were also village councils (*durbar shnongs*)

³⁸ Chowdhury, *Khasi Canvas*, 158.

headed by the village headmen (*rangbah shnong*).³⁹ It is with respect to the office of the *rangbah shnong*; and the duties and privileges associated with this important branch of the administrative functioning of the Khasi state, that we turn our focus too. We already know, that a village is the functionally unit in the political organization of the Khasis. Each village is sub-divided into localities and presided over by a *Rangbah Shnong*, or headman who oversees its administrative and political functioning, among other miscellaneous matters concerning the smooth functioning of his unit. This arrangement has been in existence since the pre-British era, and perhaps been in existence many, many centuries before the coming of the British to these hills. Though during the British period and even after independence, these *dorbars* have not been constitutionally recognized, yet they have relentlessly worked for upliftment of the society. Deeply knitted with the Khasi traditions, culture and roots, it is also regarded as an institution that safeguards and archives the fast depleting cultural values in today's world.

Sandeep Chatterjee, in the July edition of the North East Tribunal, (August 11, 2011), wrote an article that will highlight the importance of the function of the *Rangbah Shnong* in traditional society. Also, the problems that have arisen in recent years, whereby questions have been raised on the actual functioning of this traditional arrangement, which is being seen as antithetical to the democratic principles of governance. The high court has questioned the *Dorbar's* authority, which more or less attributes to monarchy, and therefore deems it unconstitutional. The District Council then proposed The Khasi Hills Autonomous District (Village Administration) Bill, 2012, that would once again invest upon the *Dorbar Shnong* or Village council its traditional rights to administer at the village level, in accordance with age-old customs and traditions, thereby upholding the uniqueness of Khasi culture.

Sandeep Chatterjee, in the afore-mentioned article states that the traditional system of governance is deeply rooted to the Khasi way of life. The recent questioning of its authority by the high court, has led many a people to rethink about the status of traditional governing bodies of the state. The traditional bodies –known as *Dorbars* draws its root since the age of the *Syiem* before democracy had any relevance in the

³⁹ Sen, *Between Tradition and Change, a Perspective of Meghalaya*, 12.

state. But with time even the *Dorbars* moulded itself with the changing times, from traditional institutions to democracy. Today, it exists parallel to the democratic design of the state but how relevant is its existence, is the vital question being asked.⁴⁰ Though these *Dorbars* are not constitutionally recognized, yet they have in their unique functioning contributed to the upliftment of society for years. Being deeply knitted with Khasi traditions, culture and roots, it is also regarded as institution that safeguards and archives the fast depleting cultural values, prevalent today. The *dorbar shnongs* have thus far worked hand in hand with the government in the implementation and checking of various schemes. For decades this system has been going on rather smoothly, until the recent high court order that questions the source of the *dorbar's* authority. The questioning of the *dorbar's* authority has people divided in their responses, and some view the Village Administration Bill, as un- constitutional and drawn by sentiments, rather than proper research and consultation. The state is now divided on this issue, as the Association of headmen (*Rangbah Shnong*), the district council and the government is at loggerheads regarding the contents of the bill.

The Village Administration Bill was first introduced in the state when the Ministry of Panchayati Raj, Government of India sent the draft of the Meghalaya Village Council Act of 2011 to the state government, with a request for its approval and implementation. Based on lines closes to the Panchayati Raj system, this bill aimed at strengthening the democratic process of the state. However, the district council unanimously chose to oppose the enactments, as they felt it contrary to the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution, and to the prevailing traditional practices, customs and the usages of the tribal of the state. Therefore, in response, the Executive Committee of Khasi Hills District Autonomous constituted its own Village Administration Bill, 2012, which was passed in the summer of 2014. The District Council has made it clear that all the clauses in the bill should be accepted without any alterations. The impasses that followed the non-functioning of *dorbars*-with major tussle between the government and the traditional bodies, witness the shutdown of the state machinery and countless agitations. The District Council and traditional

⁴⁰ Sandeep Chatterjee, in the July edition of the North East Tribunal, (August 11, 2011)

bodies are bent on the passing of the Bill, which now rests with the Governor, whom the people trust will take steps to reinstate the function of *Dorbar Shnongs*. So far, a decision has yet to be made and people of the state are once again calling for fresh agitation for the passing and implementation of the Village Administration Bill, and for the recognition by the Government of the state's traditional practices.

Many questions have been raised on the issue of whether or not *Dorbars Shnongs* have become redundant and are therefore no longer required in a modern, democratic set-up. The people in authority and those responsible for the implementation of rules, will in time answer those questions. Meanwhile, from the academic stand point, it is issues like these that folklore studies concerns itself with-folk practices being reinterpreted to suit modern times. With every transition, we witness a conflict between those who want to preserve and continue with old age traditions, and those who would like to move with modern practices. There will always be a conflict between the old and the new, and if folklore is indeed what Mazharul Islam has called it –‘the dynamic force of culture’⁴¹; we can only hope that it will accommodate itself in changing spaces (both social and political) and become the active agents of social change, by synchronizing both the old and the new and adapt to changing times. After all, Meghalaya has in more than a hundred and fifty years evolved from small oligarchies or *Raids* into a full-fledged modern state. Redefining old practices therefore becomes incumbent upon the Government that must take into account the complexities of modern democracy, keeping in mind not only age-old sentiments, but also the pressing needs of the times, so as to ensure the smooth functioning of the state.

⁴¹ Islam, *Folklore and Social Change*, 353.

CHAPTER 7

ETHNIC-IDENTITY AND CRISIS OF COMMUNITY IN NORTH-EAST INDIA

When we talk about ‘crisis of community’, what we really mean is the ethnic tension between ‘indigenous’ people and incomers from somewhere else.⁴² Over the years, North-East India has experienced considerable tension in this respect. The reasons behind these crises of community are varied, complex and multi-dimensional. In this chapter, I will take a broader perspective, and discuss identity and crises of various communities that constitute the ‘tribes’ of North-East India. Ethnic tension and community conflict that has arising in all states of North-East India since independence, has been attributed to various factors, and prominent among them has been the question of identity assertion among various ethnic groups, which in turn is connected to the larger identity of the Nation. How ethnic identities are defined, negotiated, manipulated and sometimes compromised, viz-a-viz national identity has become a matter of grave concern, being hotly debated in academic circles the world over.

Ethnic identity has been defined as a dynamic, multi-dimensional construct that refer to a sense of self as belonging to an ethnic group. Ethnic identity is not a fixed categorization, but a fluid and dynamic understanding of self and one’s ethnic background. Ethnic identity is constructed and modified as individuals become aware of their ethnicity.⁴³ Ethnicity deals with social relations between groups, and is therefore a dynamic phenomenon, and not the same as culture, which deals with social traits. To quote N.K. Das on ethnic identities: “They are created by human experience and, therefore, attention should be paid to the creation and maintenance of

⁴² Jim Mc Guigan, *Cultural Analysis* (London: Sage Publication Ltd., 2010), 80.

⁴³ Das, “Identity Politics, Cultural Pluralism and the State in South Asia: An Anthropological Reappraisal”, 23.

borders and not to the ‘cultural stuff’ inside the borders”. Ethnicity and ethnic consciousness are universal phenomenon. Since the 1990’s, however, Anthropological studies started to deal with the study of ethnicity in earnest, precisely because the post-modern world seems to be at the brink of ethnic divide and conflict, in a scale hard to grasp and even harder to define. Social ideologies and the ideologies of nationalism, revolving around notions of ‘culture’ and ‘origin’ seems to have gripped the world intensely, spinning it into an arena where violent ethnic conflicts are played out every other day on television screens worldwide, to the horror and dismay of onlookers. The individual’s understanding of identity, formation of ethnic groups, interests of governments and global processes, are often fused together forming a complicated field of political and cultural processes that more often than not leads to violent conflicts. To rephrase N.K Das, what is really happening, is that ethnicity can and is being used as an instrument for competition of scarce resources. Cultural difference and ‘possessing culture’ become the ‘politics of culture’. This phrase is highly relevant, when we study the numerous ethnic conflicts that have taken place in the last few decades in North-East India. Identity politics and ethno-nationalistic assertions, not only in North-East India, but the world over has taken violent turns, creating enormous ‘crisis of community’, where the ‘we’ and ‘them’ syndrome is being perpetuated to meet socio-political-economic ends. M.S. Prabhakara has put it accurately in the following words:

“There is hardly any country, from the economically most advanced to the most backward, where such ethno-nationalistic mobilizations have not taken place with a political agenda of separatism whose objective is to carve out an exclusive territorial and political space, excluding the ‘other’ who has historically been part of the same territorial and political space, and has shared the same or similar ethnic identity. Often, the ‘other’ is indistinguishable from the self, as in civil wars whose key components is ethnic cleansing, the other side of violent ethnic assertion”.¹

¹ S.M. Prabhakar, “Invention and Re-invention of Ethnicity”. In Kousar J.Azam ed., *Conflicting Ethnicities, Locating the Local in the Global*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 2013), 28.

The North-East states of India comprising the states of Assam, Nagaland, Meghalaya, Manipur, Tripura, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram and the latest inclusion of Sikkim in the 1990's, is a region that has witnessed major ethnic conflicts, following the years after the Second World War, leading up to India's Independence-has been labeled a region of 'turbulence' and 'crises'. This crisis syndrome, as we may call it, has been caused by, or is central to, a number of inter-related changes in demography, production technology, political institutions, religious practices, language barriers, ecological and environmental changes, among others.² My main focus, however will be on ethnic identities and their impact in a region as diversified as it is similar, where the question of 'homeland', 'territory', 'border' have become by-words, with each ethnic community wanting to secede from the Indian Union, forming a nation of their own.

There are various reasons for a 'separatist' tendency among the North-East states. Following B.P Singh, I will touch upon some of the core historical reasons why this has come about. How ethnicity, has given rise to acute identity assertion; with on-going quarrels over territories, borders, and eventually a call for a separate nation by almost all the North-East states at some point or the other. During the Second World War, the Japanese had occupied parts of Manipur, and the battle between the Allied and Axis powers at Kohima, stirred the people of north-east India to a new spatial consciousness, and an awareness of modern technology. Previous to this, only a very small section of the elites of the region had travelled outside of their native homes to the other parts of India and the world. There were discrepancies and dissimilarities among the various communities that lived in these states, in terms of educational, economic and political consciousness. It is safe to say, that among the various tribes of North-East India, the Khasis were by far the most progressive, owing to the fact that the British had set up their administrative seat in Shillong, opening up the Khasi hills to the rest of India, and consequently to the world. Though even in the Khasi hills, it took a long time for people to develop a sense of political consciousness, which was confined to the village, the clan and the *Syiemship* (administrative rule of the Khasi king). It took an even longer time for tribes of other states to come out from

² P.B. Singh, *The Problem of Change: A Study of North-East India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 1.

their so-called territorial confinement .The changes that were happening in the rest of India, had no impact on these secluded regions. B.P Singh explains it in these words:

“The advent of the Industrial revolution, the development of communication and the cultural renaissance that characterized the rest of India from the second half of the eighteenth century-all these did not make any significant impact on north-east India till the twentieth century”.³

We learn from B.P. Singh, that the Brahmaputra and Surma valley were the first to receive modernization ideals, yet the winds of change had not reached the masses as yet. It was only after the establishment of Cotton College at Guahati in 1901, and the arrival of Mahatma Gandhi on the scene from 1920's onwards, that the freedom movement led to a cultural resurgence. However, Manipur, Tripura and the Khasi states were princely states, and in these states the princely orders and the Christian missionaries played conflicting roles. The British administration left Manipur and Tripura to be administered by the princely orders, and large tracts of the hills areas were left under the care of Christian missionaries who dissuaded the people from becoming active participants in the new cultural, nationalist and scientific movements of greater India, even as late as the beginning of the twentieth century. It cannot be denied that Christian missionaries were responsible for the spread of modern education and health care, but they played a negative role when it came to fostering a sense of belonging to the Indian Nation. Similarly, the princely states of Manipur and Tripura, did not believe in the democratic rights of the peasantry, and believed in the age-old system of inequality and the divine right of kings.⁴ This is not the case in the Khasi states, having a more democratic approach to governance, and the *Syiems* (Kings) are nominal heads, who look after the overall smooth administration of their region, but have no power in their individual capacity to make laws.⁵

After independence, the political and administrative changes in the country were naturally extended to the North-east region as well-which was by and large backward in most respect. The democratic practice of voting, the setting up of district councils,

³ Ibid., 2.

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Bareh, *Khasi Democracy*, 48.

community development schemes, brought to these regions, as in the words of B.P Singh," an unprecedented change in the political and economic consciousness of the people."⁶ The state system became the vehicle, through which rights and equalities were sought, and this new phenomenon as B.P. Singh rightly puts it, appeared larger than the traditional family, the clan, and demanded greater loyalty and subordination of tribes and caste interests. However, several tribes treated the new state as an intruder, and as an instrument that would take away their traditional rights. The Nagas began to revolt, followed by the Mizos, consequently extended to other tribes, against the new state; and the general objection and dissatisfaction of the administrative rule from New Delhi. According to B.P Singh, what was not realized was that the state apparatus of Assam, Manipur, Tripura, and the district councils under these administrations were inadequate to tackle the aspirations of the people, which had hitherto remained dormant, and modernization brought with it new forces and new ways of interaction. People found themselves being torn between the new forces of modernity and the old loyalties to language, tribe, clan, tradition and cultural diversity.

When we look at the British administration of the north-east states of India, we find both a positive and negative influence on the process of integration of these states. B.P Singh explains both influences, by stating that on the positive side, the British had done much to consolidate these regions bringing about development and modernization in an unprecedented scale. They brought restoration of peace and order, the stopping of head-hunting and human sacrifice, and raids by the various tribes. Also the abolition of slavery; restored agricultural operations and resurrected some of the earlier religious life in the Brahmaputra valley, such as *Namghars*, *Kirtanghars*, *Satras*. The setting up of the British administrative quarters in Shillong in 1847, as well as the political integration of the hills with Assam, helped greatly in the integration and socialization process between the plains and hills people, particularly of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills.⁷ The modernization process of the hills began when the British constructed railways lines, roads, setting up schools, colleges, printing presses, hospitals, dispensaries, political institutions by the introduction of

⁶ Singh, *The Problem of Change: A Study of North-East India*, 4.

⁷ Ibid., 15.

legislative councils, political parties and associations, and generally to quote B.P Singh,' encouraged the people of north-east India to view themselves as part of India and to know more about the country's cultural heritage, traditions and values'. It is to the British then, which we need thank for being the first to bring in contact, the people of the hills with the people of the plains of India, and for fostering the growth of nationalism.

On the negative side, the British in their bid to re-organize the newly annexed regions of the north-east, to make integration and administration easier upon themselves, made certain political, social and economic moves that had lasting repercussion to this region. In their administrative rule of 'greater' Assam, they insisted on recording evidence, and had an elaborate system of maintenance of land records, which was previously not the case, as the locals relied largely on oral evidence, and land was mostly community owned. The process of recording written evidence would not be done by the locals themselves, and a new class of people who worked as administrators and clerks were inducted into Assam from Bengal. This class of people knew both English and Bengali, and before long used their influence, and in their bid to establish supremacy, they urged upon the British to declare Bengali and English as the language of administration. To quote B.P. Singh on this matter, this is what he says:

“The replacement of Bengali by Assamese in 1873 as the official language of administration and the medium of instruction in schools did not, unfortunately lead to a restoration of the earlier patterns of relationship between the Assamese and Bengalis. It left a near permanent distrust between them and gave birth to linguistic chauvinism in the Brahmaputra Valley, which worsened with the increasing migration of people to Assam from various parts of Bengal, a process which persist even today.”⁸ However, Assamese was later restored by the British officials as the language of that province.

This process in its wake gave rise to what Jim Mc Guigan had termed 'the crisis of community'-with constant clashes between the indigenous people and those coming to the state of Assam from elsewhere. To add insult to injury, the British

⁸ Ibid., 16.

administration, while employing a policy of segregation towards the hills, and keeping them away from mainstream India, left the boundaries between Assam and the then East Bengal wide-open and unprotected. Between 1921 and 1945 a large influx of Bengali Muslims immigrants started pouring into Brahmaputra valley as cultivators, mainly from Mymensingh. They began to occupy cultivable land in the vicinity of the Brahmaputra and its tributaries, and settled there. This has been looked upon as serious short-sightedness on the part of the British administrators, who demonstrated a lack of understanding of the social and cultural distinctiveness of this region. The situation of Assam, during this time, just prior to India's Independence, has been grimly described by Nirmal Nibedon thus:

“They came from the plains of East Bengal in great numbers, raising huts and hearths, snatching fallow lands, settling in the lagoons and sharing the resources. The few graziers in the vicinity, mainly tribals, quietly left for new pastures. Soon it would become an avalanche. The nations would soon be threatened by more and more immigrants. Indeed, if Assam's ethnic identity would eventually be challenged, the indigenous tribal inhabitants of Hill Tipperah, later to be known as Tripura, would actually be swamped by the Bengali tide in the days to come”.⁹

On the other side, there were the Christian missionaries, who did a world of good in uplifting people through modern education by introducing health care, and by committing most of the major tribal languages of the hill people into writing. But what the missionaries failed to do was bring the hill people closer to the plains people, and the British administrative policy of neither allowing any political party to enter the region, nor any political activities to take place in these areas, by declaring them ‘secluded’ areas, made matters worse. Hence, people from these regions could not become active participants in the new cultural and nationalist movements, until much later. The congress would make its presence felt here, and it was only after the British withdrawal was imminent, and the Independence of India became a reality did these states become politically restive and began to organize themselves urgently. Sajal Nag had states in his paper, “Resisting Nationalist Discourses, Ethnic Upsurge in Post-

⁹ Nirmal Nibedon, *North-East India: The Ethnic Explosion* (New Delhi: Lancers Publishers, 1981), 9.

Colonial North-East India” (2013)-that it was precisely this urgency to organize themselves, having realized that colonial rule was ending, and that they needed to take stock of their social-political-economic direction to secure their respective futures. According to Sajal Nag, the Nagas formed the Naga National Council in February 1946, the Mizos formed the Mizo Union in April 1946, the Manipuris formed the Nihil Manipuri Mahasabha (1934) and Tripura formed the Tripura Rajya Gana Parishad (1939). There were enormous concerns and debates about the uncertainties of their futures, and the question of whether or not to withdraw from the India (Union)-its advantages and disadvantages. Eventually, all these states opted to remain within the Indian Union, and from Sajal Nag, we gather this interesting bit of information: ‘It was interesting to note that at this juncture of history, the dominant opinion was in favour of remaining within the Indian Union’.¹⁰ History was made when the Naga National Council (NNC) signed an agreement with the government of India agreeing to remain in India, with provisions for the safeguard of their separate interests and needs. But disagreement over the interpretation of the Agreement led to the breakdown of the agreement, and the situation is best described by Nirmal Nibedon in the following words:

“In several memoranda, the Nagas constantly reminded both the British and the Indians that ethnically, they were from a distinct stock, with a distinct social life, manner of living, law and customs, and even their method of governance of the people. But, despite the brilliant provisions made by the founding fathers of the Indian Constitution to safeguard the identity of the minority groups, in the sub-continent, the Nagas were the first to be swept by the South-East Asian ethnic breeze of insurrection”.¹¹

This call over distinctiveness of ethnic identities would gradually spill over to the other states, namely Mizoram, Manipur, Tripura and Meghalaya. The Mizos being dissatisfied with the Assamese hegemony and coupled with poor economic factors, their earlier enthusiasm to remain within the Indian Union began to wane. Though both Nagaland and Mizoram were granted statehood, this did not end insurgency in

¹⁰ Sajal Nag, “Resisting Nationalist Discourses: Ethnic Upsurge in Post-Colonial North-East India” in Azam, *Conflicting Ethnicities: Locating the local in the Global*, 93.

¹¹ Nibedon, *North-East India: The Ethnic Explosion*, 21.

both states, it only escalated causing untold suffering, and reached its peak during the 1980's. Manipur has a distinct story of its own, being largely influence by communist powers in China and Myanmar. Though the princely state had merged with the Indian National Congress in 1946, they were later dissatisfied and called for secession from India. Being heavily influenced by communist ideology, a powerful insurgent group called the PLA (People's Liberation Army) was formed by a few Maoist youths, this group along with other groups successively attacked the Indian state, and the chaos and misery that ensued, prompted people to leave Manipur. The state was virtually turned into a killing field, with insurgency operations, counter-insurgency operations, ambushes, kidnappings, fratricidal murders and such. The problem in Manipur continues till the present, with little or no respite to the conflict situations, with newer insurgency groups arriving on the scene, making dialogue and negotiation increasing difficult.

When we turn to the state of Tripura, which secured statehood under the Indian Republic in January of 1972, around the same time Meghalaya was accorded statehood. We can draw similarities between the two states, as the conflict in both states springs from the tribal, non-tribal divide. However, the problem with Tripura is the large influx of Bengali immigrants from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh), as is also the case with Assam. The non-tribal population in Tripura largely out-numbers the tribal population (which is not the case in Meghalaya). The reason for such large-scale influx into Tripura by people from Bangladesh (both Hindus and Muslims) was because of the Noakhali (East Bengal) communal riots in 1946, the Partition of 1947, Communal riots in 1963, which lead to a rapid increase of Bengali-speaking Hindus who entered Tripura, as refugees following these catastrophic events. This resulted into an open conflict between tribals of the area and non-tribals over dwindling agricultural land. Political parties threw in their lot with people from both sides of the divide, causing an even wider chasm, leading to violent riots and by 1984 the number of underground groups has increased, as well as the number of clashes, which resulted in the death of several people.¹² In Meghalaya too, though the tribal population are in a majority, by the 1980's we witness several clashes that involved tribals and non-

¹² Nag, "Resisting Nationalist Discourses: Ethnic Upsurge in Post-Colonial North-East India", 96.

tribals. Sporadic violence led by political parties, students' movements and militant groups resulted in a few deaths and the exit of a large number of the Bengali-speaking people from Shillong. Though the scale of violence was much less in Meghalaya, in comparison to Tripura-the call to drive out 'outsiders' was the same. The constant reference to ethnic identity, its uniqueness and the need for the tribes to unite under its umbrella, caused an even greater hatred for the 'outsider'. As in the case of Assam, and the insurgency group –United Liberation Front of Assam (ULFA), which was at one time a dreaded insurgency outfit, and was involved in one of the bloodiest attacks on non-Assamese government officials, industrialists, businessmen, politicians and non-tribals whom it considered to be 'foreigners'. The ULFA, which essentially aimed for secession from India, is a by-product of the prolonged Assam agitation which began in the late 1970's by the Asom Gana Parishad and the All Assam Students Union against all Bangladeshi foreign Nationals residing in Assam, who were threatening, by the sheer number of immigrants that numbered around three to four million, to become a majority.¹³

The All Assam Students Union (AASU) and the All Assam Gana Sangram Parishad (AAGSP) had since 1979 emerged as the two focal organizations for the protection of Assamese Hindu interests. Somehow, and as Nirmal Nibedon had rightly stated the revolutionary undercurrents of ethnic politics in the hills, which had found their first expression in the guerilla movement of the Nagas, to be followed by the Mizos, Tripuris etc, was to find its way to those in the plains of the Brahmaputra valley. For the first time, the youth movements in the plains and the hills started co-ordinating in India's post-independence history. Historical factors like the unchecked and large scale illegal immigration from East Bengal, East Pakistan (Bangladesh) and the consequential repression in the economic life of the people, with pressure on land, unemployment, poverty and the loss of large chunks of fertile farm land to immigrants, have engendered among the Assamese considerable resentment against the ruling party, the central government, Bengali-dominated leftist political parties and the Bengalis in general. Nirmal Nibedon sums up the situation in Assam and the sentiments of the Assamese people at the time of these events, in the following words:

¹³ Ibid., 97.

“Fear of being eventually engulfed by another major community in the region-Bengalis-struck the chords of ethnicity and the region was set ablaze by the leaders of the AASU and the AAGSP. Why were the Assamese, the major sanskritised indigenous community in this volatile region going backward in time? The demographic invasion of perhaps, the most beautiful and picturesque state, stoked the flames of ethnicity irrevocably”¹⁴

After more than three decades since the Brahmaputra valley exploded in November of 1979, by what started as a peaceful mass movement of the largest number of people in post-independent history of India. This movement turned into a violent insurgent movement with the ULFA at the helm of affairs, which turned the Brahmaputra Valley into a notorious area of large-scale ethnic conflict. This bloody movement that saw the death and displacement of thousands of people, had its desired effects in virtually putting an end to immigration from Bangladesh, as observed by K.R Dikshit and Jutta.K. Dikshit thus:

“The decline in the number of immigrants from Bangladesh over a period of two decades is so significant that one would be justified in imagining that immigration from Bangladesh has virtually stopped. In 1971, the number of immigrants in Assam born in Pakistan/Bangladesh was 903,429, and within a period of two decades, their number appears to have declined by over seven hundred thousand people. Part of this decline may be attributed to natural causes like death, but it is also likely some of the immigrants migrated from Assam to other states of India. If immigration had continued unabated after 1980’s, as is often made out to be the case, such a drastic decline in the number of immigrants could not have occurred. According to the Census of India 2001, the total number of people who migrated from Bangladesh to India between 1992 and 2001 was 279,876. There is shift in the movement of people from Bangladesh, and Assam is no more the preferred state’.¹⁵

¹⁴ Nibedon, *North-East India: The Ethnic Explosion*, 92.

¹⁵ K.R. Dikshit, and Jutta K. Dikshit, *North-East India: land, People and Economy* (Springer Publication, 2014), 485.

If the Assam movement had managed to stem its immigrant problems through fair means or foul, a different problem arose to plague Assam in the next decades to come, all build along ethnic lines, and this time it was the unrest of the plains tribesmen living in Assam-the Boro-Kacharis, whose number were more than 1.5 million, demanding through their political organization-the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA), a separate 'Udayachal State', in which Bodo is the official language.¹⁶ If the ULFA is the by-product of a peaceful movement led by the Asom Gana Parishad; the Bodo Liberation Tigers (BLT) and National Democratic Front of Bodo (NDFB) were by-products of the once peaceful initiative of the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA). The same was the case with the Dimasas of North Cachar which resulted in Dima Halom Daoga (DHD) and Karbis of Karbi Anglong district and subsequently, the United People's Democratic Solidarity (UPDS) as well as Karbi National Volunteers (KNV). Before long the Khasis joined with the Garos under the same umbrella organization called Hynniewtrep Achik National Volunteer (HANV), which later disintegrated into two-Achik National Volunteer Force (ANVF) and Hynniewtrep National Liberation Council (HNLC), according to their ethnic, tribal bases. While the Garos (Achik) organization demanded a separate statehood for the Garos, the Khasis (Hynniewtrep) demanded secession from India. In addition to all these myriad militant/quasi-militant organizations operating in the various states of the North-East, based on their peculiar ethnic identities-we had a new addition from Arunachal Pradesh, calling itself the Arunachal Dragon Force, with the similar objective of secession from India.¹⁷

So far, what we learnt from the histories of people of North-East India, be it tribes or plainsmen is the ethnic divide between people as we move from one region to another. For thousands of years, life was fundamentally the same especially for those in the hills. The people in the Brahmaputra Valley were more integrated and had more exposure with the happenings in the mainland, be it invasion, travel, economy or trade. They assimilated with the socio-cultural traditions of the Gangetic plains and their sanskrit-based languages developed into the present Assamese language. It was to the credit of

¹⁶ Singh, *The Problem of Change, A study of North-East India*, 153.

¹⁷ Nag, "Resisting Nationalist Discourses, Ethnic Upsurge in Post-Colonial North-East India", 98-99.

the Assam rule, that during its six hundred years, the various ethnic groups of Assam were able to shape themselves into a single entity.¹⁸ It was the various tribes scattered in the various mountainous regions that remained isolated, owing to inhospitable terrain and dense forests. Each tribe differed from one another in spoken dialect, cultures, dress, religion etc. Each tribe forming its own distinct ethnic group..Despite their differences, they shared a lot in common, and a common thread united all the groups over a large stretch of land that extended from the Brahmaputra valley to mainland South-East Asia, and were identified as the great Mongolian race.¹⁹ It was the colonial rulers who annexed, consolidated this vast region, forcing tribes to come out of their isolation and interact with the rest of the world. We recall what Stephen Shennan had mentioned in the introduction to the book, *Archaeological Approaches to Cultural Identity* (1989) and this is what he wrote:

“Fried (1967,1968) suggested that ‘tribes’ as real entities arose as a result of external pressure from more-complex societies; they coalesced on the basis of a segmentary principle in the face of an outside threat, and when they were incorporated into expanding empires they were created and administered as a fixed unit. Without such pressure, Fried argues, there are merely temporary and fluctuating patterns of groupings and alliances. In a similar fashion Bentley (1987) sees ethnicity as much associated with the complex societies and the impact they have on people in terms of social and economic upheavals.”²⁰

The statement and suggestions by both H.M Fried and G. C Bentley, explains a lot of what has happened and is happening in the North-East states. The tribes, once forced out of their isolation and having to interact with colonial administration during pre-independence, were to later interact largely with the Nation, which they viewed as complex, scheming and un-trustworthy. Land is central to tribal identity, and both land and natural resources are inseparable from identity. P.K Ryngnga, discussing

¹⁸ Nibedon, *North-East India: The Ethnic Explosion*, 4.

¹⁹ Ibid.,5.

²⁰ Shennan, J.S.,(Ed), *Archaeological Approaches to Cultural Identity*. Unwin Hyman LTD.London 1989:15. See also 1. Fried, H.M (1967). *The Evolution of Political Society*. New York, Random House 2. Fried, H.M (1968) on the concept of ‘tribe’ and ‘tribal society’. In, *Essays on the Problems of Tribe*. J.Helm (Ed), 3-22. Seattle: University of Washington Press. 3. Bentley, G.C. (1987). *Ethnicity and Practice. Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29,24-25

ethnic tension and community conflict in North-East India, argues along the same lines. She states that identity assertion is central to the effort to protect natural resources. Each community uses its ethnic histories as a means to protect its land and livelihood and to declare itself as the first inhabitants of a given area. Based on this the community demands exclusive rights over the area, its resources and benefits. This is what she says:

“What causes conflict is not history as such but the search for an exclusive identity, shaped by economic shortages and attack on their culture. History only legitimizes the conflicts. This shows the need to take a fresh look at the history of north-east India and take steps towards a composite history that moves away from this exclusive approach and underlines inter-dependence.”²¹

It was once again the need to assert one's ethnic identity that drove Meghalaya, a relatively peaceful state into the web of conflict already spun by the other states. Nirmal Nibedon had stated that the Khasis by 1979 had demonstrated that they too had an 'ethnic bomb in their cellar', and at almost the same time a movement for the preservation of the ethnic identity of the Assamese people would break out in the Brahmaputra Valley.²² In five of the then seven states of the North-East, a clear call to preserve and perpetuate ethnic identities would be heard, all in a bid to drive out the 'outsider'-which was highly unfortunate, for 'outsider' would mean anyone who was not of the Mongoloid stock and generally belonging to the plains of India.

Nirmal Nibedon had in his book, *North East India: The Ethnic Explosion* (1981) related the events that began the assertion of the Khasi identity, in a state where almost eighty percent of the population consisted of the Khasi, Jaintia and Garo tribes. Paraphrasing the events as related by Nirmal Nibedon will clearly show how ethnic assertion is closely linked to evolving political forces in the region-the link between ethnicity and politics is undeniable, and very often political force is used by dominant communities to subjugate and drive out those they perceive as real or imagined threats, and in this case the 'outsider' is the 'incomer' from somewhere else. The

²¹ P.K.Ryngnga, "Ethnic Tension and Community Conflict in North-East India, a Challenge to India's Integrity and Unity.", 126.

²² Nibedon, *North-East India: The Ethnic Explosion*, 40.

Khasi political leaders had ignored the Naga leader, Zapu Phizo's call upon the people of the Mongliod stock to take the warpath and declare independence in the 1950's. But by 1979, the Khasis, like the Assamese were on a war-path, exhibiting the same symptoms like the Nagas, Mizos and the Meiteis of Manipur.

The events in Shillong as recorded by Nirmal Nibedon started in 22nd October 1979, where two Khasi boys allegedly hit the image of the Goddess Kali, during Kali Puja, which was being taken for immersion. The Kali devotees were enraged and violence broke out between the two parties. The situation escalated to a point where 15,000 non-tribals, mainly Bengalis, were driven out of the predominantly tribal pockets and had to seek refuge in relief camps in Shillong. 20 were killed, 200 others injured and over a hundred shops were looted and gutted. The whole state machinery came to a standstill and the entire non-tribal community in Shillong, estimated at half the population of the state capital was threatened with eviction. The Bengali numbering 35,000 or so were the main targets. No sooner the law and order problem in Shillong had deteriorated to a point, where curfews were the order of the day, and non-tribals lived in constant fear for their lives and property. By November of that year, posters were being circulated around Shillong, urging Khasi and Jaintia youth to join the Khasi and Jaintia United Liberation Army. Never before had the tribal youth of the state taken to arms. It was just a matter of time before the youth of the state would form their own militant group. The agitation in Shillong was started and conducted by the Khasi Students Union (KSU) and was the prelude to Guwahati. The KSU, in fact were in close touch with the All Assam Students Union (AASU).²³ What started as student's movement in both Shillong and Guwahati. The, were to turn into ethno-political upsurges, and in its extreme form, later gave rise to underground movements and separatist elements that have rocked these states for decades, and continues to undermine any long lasting peace in the region. Of late, situations in both Shillong and Guwahati. The have improved from back in the 80's and 90's, when ethnic tension had reached its peak. But it is in the complex nature of ethnic agenda, that if the common enemy was once the non-tribal 'outsider' or 'foreigner'; the new/old enemy is now the member of another more dominate ethnic group, competing for the same

²³ Nibedon, *North-East India: The Ethnic Explosion*, 104-105.

resources ; once again fuelling ethnic tension, only this time the conflict is inter-tribal and Intra-tribal. However, these intra-tribal conflicts are not new in nature, and were a part of pre-colonial history of North-East India. In the past, most of these conflicts arose because tribal groups competed for scarce resources with each other, also for land and hegemony. The most bloody and notorious of these conflicts have been the Naga-Kuki conflicts. In the state of Meghalaya, the subtle ethnic conflict between the Khasis and Garos, has led to the discontentment of Garos in general. They view the Khasis as the more dominant group, and despite Garo leader's immense contribution to the political make-up of Meghalaya today, the Garos resent the fact that the more dominant Khasis always have the final say in most matters, both political and economic. This has created an undercurrent of resentment between the two distinct ethnic groups sharing the same state. Lately, there has been growing discontentment on the part of the Garos, who are now demanding a separate Garo state. As in the nature of ethnic politics, Garo insurgency groups have arisen, and periodic violence has rocked the Garo hills in a demand for a separate Garo state.²⁴

If Meghalaya has a new set of problems to deal with, Assam found itself in the throes of an intensive Bodo agitation, who now demanded a separate state for all plains tribal people, against rising hegemony of so-called Assamese nationality. Their demand for statehood was crushed several times, and during this long agitation, a lot of conflicts, bloodshed and administrative mayhem surfaced in the political history of the state. The following account given by Sajal Nag is worth recounting, for we learn that the Bodos are the single largest community in the north-east, constituting six percent of Assam's population of more than 13 lakhs in number. Deprived and disempowered under the hegemony of the caste Hindu Assamese, they have been vigorously trying to revive their culture and identity. Earlier, the Plains Tribal Council of Assam (PTCA) and the Bodo Sahitya Sabha were the representative bodies of the Bodos. Since 1986, the All Bodo Students Union (ABSU) started a movement for a separate state for Bodos. Progressively, the once peaceful movement became violent as two

²⁴ For further reading on the Naga-Kuki, Kuki-Paite, Kuki-Vaiphei, Mizo-BRU (REANG), Bodo-Santal, Naga-Meitei, Konyak-Chang, Kuki-Karbi, Dimasa-Zemi Naga, Dimasa-Karbi conflicts, see Sajal Nag, "Resisting National Discourses, Ethnic Upsurge in Post-Colonial North-East India", 105-114.

underground organizations-the Bodo Liberation Tiger (later known as Bodo Security Force) and National Democratic Front of Bodoland (NDFB) launched an armed movement to achieve their goal. By 1993, the Central Government were left without a choice but to negotiate with the Bodos, and after long and hard negotiation, the Bodo leadership agreed to come down from the demand of statehood to autonomy under the provision of the Bodo Accord (1993). Thus, the Bodoland Autonomous Council was formed without a clear-cut boundary and with an almost 50% non-Bodo population. What seems like a vicious cycle of violence repeating itself time and time again, the ethnic card was up again on display, and this time it was ethnic cleansing by the Bodos against, firstly, the non-tribal Assamese, Bengali and Nepali settlers, both Hindus and Muslims. Then, their attention shifted to the Adivasi Santhal population settled in the area. These Santhals were settled in the area by the British in the mid-nineteen century after the Santhal rebellion. In the summer of 1996, more than a thousand Santhals were massacred; and lakhs displaced, according to unofficial sources. The violence against the Santhals was aimed at generating fear in order to displace their present living space and to recapture the space for the Bodos.²⁵ The ethnic fire would soon spread to the hills of Karbi Anglong and North Cachar. Though the movement to assert Karbi ethnic identity was relatively non-violent in nature, it resulted in the creation of Karbi Anglong autonomous district within the jurisdiction of Assam. In recent years, several other ethnic movements have made their presence felt in Assam. Of them, the Mishings, an Indo-Mongoloid group in the area have begun to revive several of their age-old and forgotten tradition to bring non-violent movements, under the banner of Takam Mishing Parin Kebang (TMPK) demanding political autonomy for the Mishings. Like the Mishings, there are various other tribal groups in Assam and elsewhere in other states of North-east India, that are working on similar lines.²⁶

Since the birth of the modern state, and in a post- colonial and post-modern world, no community remains in isolation anymore. Every community is now a part of a state

²⁵ Sajal, "Nag, Resisting Nationalist Discourses, Ethnic Upsurge in Post-Colonial North-East India", 110-111.

²⁶ Jyoti Chandra Sonowal, "Ethnicity and Ethnic conflicts in North East India-with special reference to Assam" in Sarthak, Sengupta ed., *Tribal Studies in North East India* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 2002), 57.

and a nation, and like elsewhere in the world, India too witnesses two levels or layers of nationhood. Harihar Bhattacharyya (2009)²⁷ has this to say about these two layers – that one is ethnic, which is thick and based deeply in culture, language, religion, tradition and social structure, and heterogeneous in intent. The other is political or civil, which is thin but hegemonic in intent. In India, the civil base of national unity is relatively weak and fragile, because for political mobilization, primordial and ethnic attachments are preferred. One cannot resist quoting the often quoted Benedict Anderson (1983), whose definition of a nation in a changing environment seems to make the maximum sense:

“In an anthropological spirit, then, I propose the following definition of the nation. It is an imagined political community-and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”²⁸

Since we are never likely to meet any of our co-nationals, we have to imagine something we have in common with all these strangers-in effect the relationship with these ‘imagined’ people is ‘thin’ and placid. Then there is ethnic identity which is strong, often emotional and binding-used ever so often for political reasons, where identities are negotiated, sometimes the national identity takes precedence, but most times its ethnic identity that gains cognizance, and as Jim Mc Guigan had remarked, that it is now commonplace to say that identities are multiple and in process, not singular and essential.²⁹ When we come to the question of the nation, especially in a plural society like India, with a vast population that consists of numerous groups and sub-groups, who define their identity variously in terms of religion/sect, language/or region, caste and tribe, we realize the complexity of issues of identity and religion. In India, both religion and identity have very often created a divide that threatens the internal cohesion and territorial integrity of the nation. P.N. Rastogi (1993) talks about the problem of national integration as not a political problem, but a psychological one, involving the perceptions and world views of the members of various ethnic groups. If members of ethnic collectivities perceive and identify

²⁷ Harihar Bhattacharyya, “Citizenship, Nationhead and Federalism in India” in Das and Rao *Identity, Cultural Pluralism and State, South Asia in Perspective*, 206.

²⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983), 15.

²⁹ Mc Guigan, *Cultural Analysis*, 74.

themselves as parts of a larger and harmonious whole, then the very basis of the problem would not exist. If on the other hand, one or more ethnic groups gives primacy to the perceived interests of their own group or community, regardless of the interests of other communities; taking up arms for the pursuit of their own sectional goals, then ethnic conflicts emerges. These conflicts only serve to weaken the national fabric, and are a constant threat to peace and security of the nation.³⁰

From pre-independence days, nationalists and visionaries from Rabindranath Tagore to Swami Vivekananda, Gandhi and others have propagated the idea of unity amidst diversity, which was later incorporated in India's constitution-this being an important clause, for the recognition and understanding of 'unity in diversity' in a country as diverse as India. As Harihar Bhattacharyya had stated, when discussing India's relative success as a nation-state, placed in relation to the global crisis of national identity: "India is yet to face any terminal crisis of identity as a nation, and her political system seems to demonstrate considerable resilience and flexibility." (2009)³¹. Turning to North-East India, the threat to national integration seems as ominous as ever, owing to the numerous ethnic conflicts in the region. In the post-Independent years, Nehru's policy of allowing tribes to develop 'along the lines of their own genius', has proved beneficial in warding off imposition of alien values-but it has also alienated the tribes in the process of nation building. As Sajal Nag had stated that nationalism had emerged as a legitimizing ideology of a modern nation state, north-east India was expected to fit into the framework of the cultural imagination of India. The larger India, being sanskritic in culture; the north-east states found it hard to assimilate, and any resistance to assimilation was seen as a threat to India's cultural ethos. Demands for autonomy were seen as threats to national integration, and questioning the nationhood of India and the demand for restructuring of the policy was viewed as secessionism.³²

A large section of the population of North-East India, do not like to refer to their Indian national identity, and prefer to use only their territorial or ethnic identity. They

³⁰ N.P. Rastogi, *Ethno-social Conflict and National Integration*, (Gyan Publishing, 1993), 51.

³¹ Bhattacharyya, "Citizenship, Nationhood and Federalism in India", 205.

³² Nag, "Resisting Nationalist Discourses, Ethnic Upsurge in Post-Colonial North-East India", 120-121.

fear that by identifying themselves with the 'Hindu State', they will eventually lose their characteristic identity. This feeling would prompt them in the end to demand outright for a sovereign independent nation of their own, than assimilate with the Indian state. Though Jawaharlal Nehru understood in essence the sensitivity of the region, he failed to understand the complexity of the social structure in these regions. P.K Rynnga has stated that various arrangements made in an ad hoc and short-sighted manner, to politically empower dominant ethnic groups, by creating tiny states on ethnic lines, has only added to the problems of diversity, creating newer conflicts and demands for more divisions and fragmentation on ethnic lines.³³ Various suggestions from various scholars, writers dealing with ethnic conflicts in North-East India have often suggested 'federalism', 'regional autonomy', 'cultural pluralism' as keywords for solving some of the major issues which confront these regions. In an age where identities are no longer singular and essential (as mentioned earlier) but multiple and fluid, how do regions of the north-east overcome their 'crisis of community' and participate in nation building? One of the answers would possibly be 'cultural pluralism' or 'multiculturalism'. Both terms are interchangeable and are often regarded as synonymous. N.K Das explains the term multiculturalism to mean the broadest range of human difference acceptable to the largest number of people. It seeks to overcome discrimination in communities, such as racism, sexism, etc. Cultural Pluralism as the term suggests, describes the co-existence of many cultures, in a locality, without any one culture dominating the locality. It also signifies a nation that favours the co-existence of a variety of cultural, ethnic or religious groups. Pluralism invites people of every faith and community to participate in nation building and engage in creating a civil society, without having to give up one's faith or tradition.

A civil society can be created, when communities come together, and work towards creating a civil society, through critical and self-critical encounters with one another. N.K Das explains it from a global perspective, pointing out that we now live in a world, that is seeing the tremendous migration of people across continents, regions etc, both as immigrants and as refugees. Everyone today confronts and is learning to

³³ Rynnga, "Ethnic Tension and Community Conflict in North-East India, a Challenge to India's Integrity and Unity", 135-136.

endure the plurality of religions and cultures. Archiac anthropological and sociological theories of ‘assimilation’ and ‘acculturation’ have given way to themes of identity and pluralism in wider perspective of the state. The new paradigm of pluralism does not require us to give up on our difference, be it religious or cultural, but to work towards a convergence of differences, through dialogue and encounter, criticism and self-criticism. To quote N.K Das, who explains these concepts and puts them in perspective thus:

“Pluralism and federalism now appear as the two essential principles for organizing heterogeneous societies into a viable pattern of political sharing of power, by reconciling the twin processes of political unification and social diversity of commonality for certain purposes and specificities for others. In its praxis, federalism builds and sustains the unity of polity and simultaneously preserves and promotes the plurality of society. It is from this perspective, and ideological premises of a federal nation, participatory democracy, secularism and social justice, that we should re-examine polity and plural society.”³⁴

We need a paradigm shift in policy making in North-East India, and whilst giving the states regional autonomy, the principle of federalism should be incorporated in state policies that would integrate these states into the wider process of nation building. Social diversity is fine, but extreme compartmentalization more often than not, leads to conflicting situations, when there is a call to participate in wider political and social processes. The North-East states should realize and accept that they no longer live in isolation. World processes have converged, whether we like it or not, and there is such a thing as a national identity too. Cultural pluralism is the only way by which communities can come to any dialogue with one another, and by doing so, some of the distinctions that each community has built around itself, may disappear in time. As we are all aware, that it is only through meaningful dialogue that anything can be achieved. In the North-east states, where conflicts centers on scarce resources, race, ethnicity, language, religion, culture and boundary-cultural pluralism should indeed become a concrete vision. The reason being that the theory of cultural pluralism

³⁴ Das, “Identity Politics, Cultural Pluralism and the State in South Asia: An Anthropological Reappraisal”, 25-26.

which includes multiculturalism, identity politics, and the politics of difference, involves questions about how the distribution of power and resources is or ought to be affected by cultural membership.³⁵

There are after all a variety of identities in the modern world and belonging to majority does not mean the loss of the individual's ethnic or self identification. The process of self-identification should mean not contradiction but cooperation of the concepts 'we' and 'they'³⁶ Especially in a region that seems to take 'pride' in their 'distinctiveness' from the rest of India. The feeling that they are 'different' from the rest of India is growing among the youth of these regions, who seem to share a sense of fraternity and are mainly referred to as 'North-Easterners'. This often creates a divide when youths from the north-east leave their homes to study or work outside of their region. Such divides have sometimes resulted in violent clashes and protest marches from north-east students' organizations. The Delhi government has done much in the recent past to help create awareness among the public of the salient 'characteristics' that define 'North-Easterners'. The time has come for the youth from the North-East region to break-down some of their differences and be more accepting of a 'wider-identity'. For as in the words of T.B Subba and G.C Ghosh: 'the identity of a region or community is important but it need not be pushed against the identity of a nation. The various identities-ethnic, regional and national-can very well coexist'.³⁷

Firstly, modernization from the twentieth century onwards, has brought significant changes in both tribal and non-tribal life, at a pace unprecedented in any period of history, and have been striking at the roots of traditional group/ethnic identity ever since.³⁸ Modernization, in its wake forced people out of their isolation to interact with the dominant world outside of their families, clan, territories etc .Driven by the complexities of the modern world, they have had to make the difficult choice to either move and adjust with the times or to strictly hang on to their roots, traditions,

³⁵ Avigail I. Eisenborg, *Reconstructing Political Pluralism* (Albany, New York: SUNY, 1995), 211.

³⁶ Olga Potapova, "National Identity as a Factor of Effective Global Organization" in Azam ed., *Conflicting Ethnicities*, 302.

³⁷ T.B. Subba and G.C. Ghosh, *The Anthropology of North-East India*. (New Delhi: Orient Longman Pvt Ltd, 2003), 5.

³⁸ B.B. Dutta, "Changing contours of Tribal Folklore in India: Through the North-East Indian Window" in Sarthak Sengupta ed., *Tribal Situation in North East India* (New Delhi: Inter-India Publications, 1994).

religions etc, resisting change. It was /is widely believed that modernization is a cauldron in which traditional identities will melt and a culturally homogeneous society will gradually emerge.³⁹ The transition from tradition to modernity has not been an easy one for any of the states of North-East India. Secondly, the modern process of globalization that has began in the last few decades, has brought about a shift on how we view things. Globalization is today regarded by social scientists and statesmen alike, as irreversible, which is largely beneficial to the economic and technological advancement of developing countries. Skeptics do not agree with this view however, and as T.N Madan had stated, that the boundaries of nation-states are becoming porous. Giving Europe as an example, he adds that the very concept of the unitary nation-state is under pressure from larger political and economic formations such as the European Union and free trade areas, on one hand. On the other hand, there is pressure from ethnic groups within countries that consider themselves marginalized, even suppressed. Globalization has attempted to create a homogenizing effect on the lifestyle of people. T.N Madan adds that no matter where one is, one is confronted by the sameness of architectural, artistic, working, entertainment etc, and even thinking styles-and when this sameness and connectivity become oppressive for some, they seek to recover themselves and their distinctiveness –they assert their identity.⁴⁰ T.K Oommen speaks of a similar effect in post-colonial states of South Asia, endeavored, as he states, to create modern nation-states modeled after their West European counterparts, an untenable proposition given South Asia's empirical realities. What T.K Oommen argues is to abandon the aspiration of creating nation-states which pursue cultural monism and should instead pursue the idea of national states which endorse cultural pluralism.⁴¹ When we come to the post-colonial states of North-East India, a region diverse and economically backward, but a region of vast natural resources, where modernization and globalization have altered certain aspects of life, but have failed to economically lift up this region. In their bid to assert their ethnic identities, they have failed to economically strengthen their respective

³⁹ T.K. Oommen, "Identity, Cultural Pluralism and the State: Situating South Asia", 4.

⁴⁰ T.N. Madan, "Foreword" in Das and Rao eds., *Identity, Cultural Pluralism and State: South Asia in Perspective*, xxiii.

⁴¹ Oommen, "Identity, Cultural Pluralism and the State: Situating South Asia". In, *Identity, Cultural Pluralism and State, South Asia in Perspective*, 2.

communities, by integrating with the rest of the country. The short-sightedness of their leadership in states like Nagaland and Mizoram is evident in their refusal to abolish “Inner line” permits—a restrictive device introduced under the colonial rule to restrict the entry of plains people into their regions. Though these states have mass education and literacy to their credit, they have failed to take advantage of economic development policies to strengthen their economy. K.R Dikshit and Jutta K. Dikshit put matters in perspective, by explaining the situation aptly in this strongly worded observation:

“A year after year they wait for Grant-in-Aid and financial packages from the Central Government, not to mention many of the centrally sponsored projects, hardly evokes admiration from these zealots of cultural identity.....These states need to strengthen their economy to be able to truly assert their independence and authority.”⁴²

A case in point is the ‘Look East Policy’, that was announced with a lot of fanfare and expectation, adopted by the government of India in 1991. This was designed to establish and promote deeper relations with the countries of Southeast Asia. With Myanmar, the Indian Government has instituted numerous infrastructure projects that aim at linking India’s North-Eastern states—through road and port connectivity to the robust Indian economy. This ambitious trade and economy policy has hardly picked up steam. Though, the Trans-Asian Route is steadily under construction in most places, its completion needs to be accelerated. The North-East can hugely benefit economically from this trade route, but only if they put aside their differences and speak in one voice, that would boost industry’s confidence to invest in the region.⁴³ But as P.K Ryngha had stated, in connection with ‘Look East Policy’, that so far there is little trade with the neighbouring countries through the land route, primarily because of conditions of insecurity that plague these regions. Besides, land routes are considered more expensive than sea routes; therefore, trade continues to be conducted through sea-routes. She also adds that neither strong military presence, nor short-sighted political initiatives have succeeded in controlling clashes between

⁴² Dikshit and Dikshit., *North-East India: Land, People and Economy*, 760.

⁴³ Ibid., 762.

various groups, and bringing lasting peace to the strife-torn region.⁴⁴ Isolation and seclusion cannot bring about economic development. Integration and cultural pluralism are the tools that foster economic progress and confidence, as is the case with America—a country that has successfully integrated cultural diversity and used their multi-cultural strengths towards building the world's strongest economy. India, too has demonstrated time and time again its adeptness of the policy of accommodation of cultural diversities. It's about time, the North-East states feel and realize that they are a part of the country, as the rest of India, and instead of living in isolated pockets defined by cultural identity alone, they can aim at interdependence and economic viability. It is the people of these regions themselves who have to make the choices—whether or not they can reconcile development and identity and have both, without having to give up one for the other.

How does folklore contribute to the creation of ethnic identities in North-East India? We have already argued this point in the context of the Khasi identity and the part played by Khasi folklore in building up that identity. When we take a much wider area like the North-East region, the function of folklore becomes all the more important. We already know that before the coming of the British, most tribal languages were in the oral form, before being committed to writing. Folklore material was the only material available that would help build a history around each of these numerous tribes. Each tribe has its creation myths, folktales, riddles, ballads, folksongs etc, around which a tribe creates its identity, and as quoted in the earlier chapter, and re-quoting to build my argument, the description by Soumen Sen holds true, when he says that folklore is the most important source in the construction of identities among tribes, also, for it prepares the cultural symbols and identity markers—the essential features of an identity system.⁴⁵ There are a total of 209 listed schedule tribes in the region belonging to six different categories, and each tribe has its own folklore material, distinctively different from the neighbouring tribe. Cultural items are handed down by ancestors or adopted in the process of migration. These cultural symbols are jealously guarded as identity symbols that are unique to a particular

⁴⁴ Ryngnga, "Ethnic Tension and Community Conflict in North-East India, a Challenge to India's Integrity and Unity", 137.

⁴⁵ Sen, *Folklore identity Development, in the Context of North-East India*, 37.

tribe's folk identity. Unfortunately, folklore which should have remained the pride and possession of a tribe is often fused with political demands, encapsulating identity within a capsule, resisting change and modernity. The question remains, if whether or not folklore and modernity are two oppositional concepts. Though Folklorists do not take part in active resistance, they do often subscribe to the theory that modernization and industrialization are antithetical to folklore and Folklife.⁴⁶ There is also the view that folklore is resilient, and will adapt to changing circumstances. Tradition, be it folklore or other customary practices are in a constant state of flux, often resulting in re-adjustments and re-inventions and newer forms of folklore.

In the previous chapter, we had mentioned the dual nature of folklore. It serves to reiterate this duality, as a reminder of the strong connection between folklore and identity. Folklore, as we know can be used to denigrate other groups and create boundaries, to keep a group isolated, while it can also be used to celebrate a group and make connections between individuals and other groups. Also, folklore can be used for regional, territorial or nationalistic propaganda, at the same time it can also be used to critique misuse of cultural and political autonomy (W.A.Wilson et al 2006).⁴⁷ This is true of North-East India, where folklore has been fruitfully used and at times abused by various tribes at different times in the recent history of the North-East states, for socio-cultural and political reasons. For these tribes, both during colonial and post-colonial times, it has been a sustained fight to preserve their identity and culture against a powerful alien system. Long isolation from a dominant mainstream, these tribes were able to maintain their world view (reflected in their respective folklore and other cultural symbols). They were also able to protect their social institutions from interference from outside. Once they were thrown open to a larger, more dominant world, they naturally became unsettled, and any effort to integrate with the Indian Nation became a hard and difficult one. From demands for secession from India, to demands for separatism and autonomy within the framework of the Indian Constitution-the road to integration and development has never been an easy one. Once development and modernizing processes were underway, each North-East state wanted a piece of the pie, but were fearful less it disturbs or even destroys the

⁴⁶ Sen, *Folklore Identity Development, in the Context of North-East India*, 36.

⁴⁷ Wilson et al., *The Marrow of Human Experience : Essay on Folklore*, 4.

identity of their group. Almost every socio-political movement in different parts of the North-East region, both peaceful and militant since the 1960's through the 1980's revolved round this syndrome, either for self-determination in a changing scenario, or for the reinstatement of lost rights and position.⁴⁸ What is more ironic, even among the more developed states of North-East India; that they still hold on to the idea that modernization will somehow erode their ethnicities and symbolic identities. One may ask if the rest of India, which is embracing modernization at an unprecedented scale have all lost their unique identities and cultures? Or would it be that identity far from being the goal that tribes sought to attain was in fact an instrument on which they relied to secure their political end?⁴⁹ The answer to these questions are numerous and varied in their opinion and justification. It is only fair to say, as Tiplut Nongbri herself had stated that to reduce social and political processes in the North-East region to a single unilinear cause-effect relationship, is to ignore the complexities of the empirical reality. Though tribal politics is to a large extent characterized by the pursuit of identity, it is not its sole purpose. These states have actively participated in the democratic process, and in their demand for political autonomy, have made it explicit that they not only want to be equal partners in political participation, but that their economic and cultural interests should be protected.⁵⁰

With modernization and globalization, traditions do not exactly disappear, but are constantly reinvented. The same can be said of folklore, which from all the areas of culture have been tremendously affected by technological advancement. Beliefs, attitudes, traditions which once were thought to be expressions of human nature have crumbled in a globally networked world-old classifications being discarded and new one formulated. Soumen Sen argues this point by stating that new formations in the altered social environment, do not threaten old ones, rather enriches them. We need to realize that folklore enriches itself through mutations and new formations in the spaces of change.⁵¹ Folklore is being extensively used in the North-East region to project ethnic identity; which is a natural phenomenon, given these tribes initial resistance to change. With the modernization process being inevitable, we need to abandon some of that

⁴⁸ Sen, *Folklore Identity Development in the Context of North-East India*, 38.

⁴⁹ Nongbri, "Ethnicity and Political Activism in North East: Tribal Identity and State Policy". In *North-East and the Indian State, Paradoxes of a Periphery*, 56.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Sen, *Folklore Identity Development in the Context of North-East India*, 42.

romantic idealism and glorification of 'age-old' tradition, and move towards building bridges between communities, instead of creating divisions by constantly flashing the ethnic card and fostering conflicts. Folklore has a crucial role to play in this process. Mazharul Islam had stated that change is within the body and spirit of folklore and it has to adjust with changed conditions of a society. Variants to elements of folklore, when it appears within the same group, community, or society, does not mean that it ceases to exist. Rather, these variants add to the strength and vitality of its regeneration, where old elements of folklore adapt to newer and changing patterns of society. Giving an example, to lay emphasis on his argument, Mazharul Islam speaks about the industrial belts of Europe and America, where scholars have thoroughly studied the condition of folklore prevalent in those areas. All these scholars have opined that with industrial and technological advancement, folklore finds a new way of expression and exists in a new order.⁵²

In this chapter, I have tried to analyze, by tracing the social-political history of the North-East region, how ethnic identities have emerged; the pivotal role they play in defining the tribes of these regions, and also how these identities are being defined, re-defined, and negotiated for social, political and economic purposes. Histories of the North-East region have shown how these distinct tribes are new comers into the national scene. It becomes all the more important that histories, which include tradition histories of this region be faithfully represented, so as to ensure a better understanding of those aspects of traditional cultures unique to each tribe. P.K. Ryngha, argues along similar lines when she expresses the need to take a fresh look at the history of the North-East. A composite history that would move away from any exclusive approach and one that underlines inter-dependence.⁵³

Recapitulating some of the main points that explains past conflicts, and focusing on present ones -the following paragraph will serve to explain why the North-East region has often been classified as a 'conflict zone'-this is to better understand the complexities that defines a people's sense of social identity and belongingness. The tribes of North-East India are largely of Tibeto-Burman/ Mongoloid stock and are closer to Southeast Asia than to South Asia. Their racial stock makes them ethnically,

⁵² Islam, *Folklore and Social Change*, 131.

⁵³ Ryngha, "Ethnic Tension and Community Conflict in North-East India, a Challenge to India's Integrity and Unity." 126.

linguistically and culturally very distinct from other states of India. Though cultural and ethnic diversity are not reasons for division and conflicts; one of the major problems is the territorial division of the North-East states. In the 1950's when territorial divisions were being made, ethnic and cultural specificities were ignored, giving rise to discontentment, delineation and assertion of ethnic identities, each to each. It took the British administration almost a hundred years to annex this secluded and difficult terrain, and administered them as a loose 'Frontier area', which goes by the name North East Frontier Agency (NEFA). This area had never before come in touch with the principle of a central administration. Hence, the angst against the administrative rule from New Delhi was to be expected. Their allegiance to the newly formed Indian Nation after Independence was lacking from the very beginning. This feeling was accentuated by the creation of East Pakistan (today's Bangladesh)-which resulted in the loss of a major chunk of the physical connection between mainland India and the North-East states. 99% of the boundaries of the North-East are international and only 1% is domestic boundary. Moreover, the Indian Government's past and on-going processes of national integration, state building and democratic consolidation have further aggravated the conflict scenario in the region. For instance, the eight states comprising the North-East has a population of nearly 40 million inhabitants who vary in languages, race, tribe, class, religion and folklore. Each tribe has a cultural heritage, folklore tradition, traditional practices and indigenous religion that is uniquely their own. Each tribe considers their traditional practices sacrosanct, and any denigration or compromise of identities is met with fierce opposition. Therefore, most often, the clubbing of all these states under the tag of 'northeast' has tended to have a homogenizing effect with its own set of implication for policy formulation and implementation; not to mention local aversion to such a construct.⁵⁴

There is an elaborate and informative survey done by Ajai Sahni, on conflict and resolution in India's North-East states. He surveyed each of the states, citing the specific problems of each individual state, naming every insurgency group that has been active in the past, and some that are still active in each state. He has also listed the main reasons for the rise of insurgency in each of these states-statistic of conflict related deaths, scale of violence, conflict management on the part of state machinery,

⁵⁴ *Conflict in Northeast India: Issues, Causes and Concerns*. (28thFeb, 2009). Retrieved from <https://in-boell.org/2009/02/28/conflict-northeast-india-issues-causes-and-concerns>.

the central government and non-government organizations. According to Sahni, India's North-East is the location of the earliest and longest lasting insurgency in the country. Separatist violence commenced in Nagaland in 1952, and since then the multiplicity of violence has increased since the late 1970's. Every state in the region has been afflicted by insurgency, terrorist violence and ethnic conflicts⁵⁵. Of the more volatile states have been Assam, Manipur, Nagaland and Tripura-they have witnessed scales of violence that can be categorized as 'low intensity wars'-defined as conflicts in which fatalities are over hundred, but less than one thousand per annum (as stated by Ajai Sahni)⁵⁶. These conflict situations have been a cause of grave concern to the central and state governments. While there have been several governmental peace initiatives; there have also been diplomacy and mediation from non-governmental organizations as well. Many peace talks have failed at an incipient stage, while some have managed to contain the escalation of violence in several states. Ajai Sahni lends perspective and better understanding of the internal strife in India's North-East by stating thus:

"Internal conflict in India's Northeast are overwhelming conceptualized within the framework of unique ethnic identities that are threatened by, and in confrontation with, the nationalist state, which is often seen as a representative of an inchoate cultural 'mainstream'. While some of the conflicts in the region certainly fit into this general framework of interpretation, few if any are completely explained by it, others, moreover, are entirely unrelated to this reductionist scheme of 'freedom struggle' by ethnic minorities against the 'homogenizing state'. Indeed, even where militant groups direct their rhetoric and their violence against the symbols of the state, the underlying motives and ideologies are more correctly interpreted in terms of conflicting tribal identities and histories of internecine warfare based entirely on tribal, sub-tribal, or tribal-

⁵⁵ For state-wise details on insurgency in North-East India see, Sahni, Ajay (2001.SATP). *Survey of Conflict and Resolution in India's Northeast*. Retrieved from [www.Satp.org/Satporgtp/publication/faultlines/Volume 12/Article 3.htm](http://www.Satp.org/Satporgtp/publication/faultlines/Volume%2012/Article%203.htm)

⁵⁶ Dr.Ajai Sahni is Executive Director, Institution for Conflict Management (ICM) and Executive Editor, *Faultlines: Writings on Conflict and Resolution*

outsider rivalries and corresponding competition over limited resources, especially land.”⁵⁷

It has become incumbent on these regions, like so many regions of the world to re-think in terms of cultural pluralism –not by giving up on one’s identity or culture, but by conveying differences through dialogue and encounters. India has been quite successful in accommodating cultural diversity and managing ethnic conflicts through democratic institutions. N. K Das explains this success as being the result of India’s federal system and its commitment to maintaining cultural and ethnic peace. He attributes state autonomy statehood for territorially based regional/linguistic identities as the most comprehensive methods of political recognition of identity in India, and the key to India’s plural-cultural federalization. India’s Centre-State/Province/Union Territory framework provides an institutional framework of autonomy and decentralization, which manages the need for development and identity.⁵⁸

The new era, then, is one where ‘Globalization’ and ‘Localization’ become mutually dependent and inter-related processes. Kham Khan Saun Hausing, in his paper “Multiculturalism and Intercultural dialogue in North-East Region (NER) of India”, speaks about the same “Glocalisation”, which he says is increasingly imperative to recognize the asymmetrical, yet equal ways in which cultural exchanges and intercultural dialogue take place. He emphasizes, that every cultural community around the world needs recognition as “equals”, with “equality of circumstances”, wherein they can promote, protect and sustain their unique histories, identities and cultures. He stresses the need to revisit the tradition of knowing the North-East region. Instead of subsuming everything that happens in this region under the “law and order” approach, and mistaken for insurgency and anti-nationalist movements. It is time we use a different approach, which ‘Glocalisation’ will accommodate. This will facilitate the recognition of the inter-connectedness of histories and culture of various communities of the region. Kham Khan Saun Hausing, brings in the concept

⁵⁷ Ajay Sahni, *Survey of Conflict and Resolution in India’s Northeast*. Retrieved from www.Satp.org/Satporgtp/publication/faultlines/Volume12/Article3.htm.

⁵⁸ Das, “Identity Politics, Cultural Pluralism and the State in South Asia: An Anthropological Reappraisal”, 36.

of multiculturalism in a bid to solving conflicts in this region, and puts matters in perspective when he says the following:

“In a situation of deep diversity like India’s Northeast or South-East Asia, there is a compelling need to give multiculturalism its due without losing sight of the possibility of a fusion of horizons where diverse ‘imagined worlds’ can harmoniously live together and share the fruits of progress and development”⁵⁹

As I close my argument for this chapter, I would like to once again reiterate the advantage of cultural pluralism in deeply diversified regions of the North-East India. Pluralism, as has already been stated, does not require us to leave our distinct identities behind-it means holding our deepest differences, not in isolation but in relationship to one another. In a globalised world and where communication technologies have taken center-stage-it would help the North-East region on their road to progress to develop an ethic of pluralism. As much as we need clans, sects and tribe, we need citizens to participate equally in the political process of a nation, with the hope, that equality among citizens will result in less prejudice and discrimination towards minorities from the dominant society. Successful cultural pluralism is one mode of diminishing ethnocentrism, and arresting conflict based on ethnic divide. In a world where demographics and politics are constantly changing, cultural pluralism is the means by which we can hope to strive for political and cultural harmony.

In a technology-driven world, we are coming closer together like never before. Social media has thrown open the world, allowing us to view and comment on conflict situations around the globe, irrespective of where we live. In fact, social media has fostered its own brand of cultural pluralism, allowing us to interact and learn from one another. As world events continuously unfolds on our television screens, mobile phones, laptops etc on a daily basis, we are already members of a more pluralistic world, and we can only hope cultures can learn from each other’s mistakes, and minimize the ill-effects of ‘crisis of community’.

⁵⁹ Saun Hausing and Kham Khan, “Multiculturalism and Intercultural dialogue in North-East Region (NER) of India”, *Indian Journal of Public Administration*. Vol.LXII, No.3, July-September (2016):415.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION

Through this small effort on my part to research on folklore - its connection with identity and related issues; I have in the understanding of these issues come to the conclusion, that folklore studies should be an essential component of an academic curriculum concerning the Humanities. Precisely, because it gives a comprehensive understanding of an oral past, followed by the writing tradition, and the crucial role played by writing on all cultures of the world. My studies which center on the Khasi-Jaintia tribe of Meghalaya, explore the role played by oral tradition-its transition into the written tradition and its impact on every sphere of Khasi life, consequently building up of a Khasi identity. I have also raised pertinent questions on the nature of 'identity' itself and its direct relation to social tension and conflict. Though the study of identity is important in a world divided over crisis of identity, we need to peel the veneer, and research why cultures, religions and identities are undergoing sea-changes in a conflicting world, aided by advanced technology. These are some of the issues I have touched upon and I hope younger scholars will find appropriate source material to further their research on identities, especially in North East India, where identities of various tribes are being hotly debated in academic circles. Such studies are necessary to find long lasting peace and stability in the region.

The shift from orality to writing has never been an easy one, and of the tens of thousands of languages the world over, only a few hundreds have been committed to writing, to a degree sufficient enough to produce literature. The Khasi language is one such language that had a written script from the mid nineteen century, and we have the Christian missionaries to thank for that effort. We have seen the growth of literature written in the Khasi language for more than a century now-touching on various aspects of the Khasi life. Speaking of the shift from orality to writing and the distinct impact it has on the culture of any society in the world that has undergone such transition; this is what Walter J. Ong has to say: "The shift from orality to writing intimately interrelates with more psychic and social developments than we have yet noted. Developments in food production, in trade, in political organization,

in religious institutions, in technological skills, in educational practices, in means of transportation, in family organization, and in other areas of human life all play their own distinctive roles. But most of these developments, and indeed very likely every one of them, have themselves been affected, often at great depth, by the shift from orality to literacy and beyond, as many of them have in turn affected this shift.”¹ Also the major shift in the transition from orality to literacy and beyond is the focus on identities of each society, each group that had undergone similar transition. Identities that had a whole different meaning while in the oral stage of development, take on different meanings when folk material is re-produced in print. With printing technologies and the growth of the electronic media, which has transformed the effect of writing on thought and expression; we also see a growth of consciousness of a people towards its individual culture and identity.

However, on the flip side, a people’s overt consciousness of its unique culture and identity has often led to assertions of identity, which has culminated in violent clashes and the lost of live and property, and the displacement of a large number of people. This point has been clearly argued in chapters five and six; whilst taking into account the relation between identity and politics firstly in the context of Meghalaya, and other states of North-East India as well. Identity politics and related issues has become a contentious topic, being debated in many academic and non-academic circles. The pressing need to find solutions to ethnic conflict, arising out of identity politics in complex and diverse regions of North-East India, has become incumbent on peacekeepers and academia alike. Instead of tribes forever wailing that they suffer from ‘a sense of marginality’, and wait upon Delhi, to bail them out of every conflicting situation they may find themselves in, there is an urgent need to engage in some sort of inter-cultural dialogue from both within and across communities. Part of the blame (if we must blame someone) lies with the early encounters of tribal communities with colonial modernity which transformed their land and territory into powerful cultural symbols. The fierce resistance of the Nagas to the construction of road communication between Assam and Manipur .Similarly, in the Khasi hills, the resistance of Tirot Sing Syiem to the British attempt to open up the Khasi-Jaintia Hills

¹ Walter.J Ong, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 171.

in the second half of the nineteenth century, among others, exemplified the sanctity and importance accorded to their land and territory.² Perhaps, this may be so, but with changing times, outlooks and strategies need to change, to suit the ever increasing challenging world of the 21st Century. What are the solutions for long-lasting peace in these regions? We have suggested cultural pluralism and multiculturalism through the democratic working of institutions that will facilitate inter cultural dialogue. Such dialogue, will also contain both inter-tribal and intra-tribal conflicts based on the politics of identity. Amin Maalouf , a French writer and author of the book, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* , believes that the root of much of the world's violence are tension about identity .To prevent the eruption of such violence, Maalouf writes, we need a new way of thinking about identity .This is what he suggests :

“In an age of globalization and of the ever-accelerating intermingling of elements in which we are all caught up, a new concept identity is needed, and needed urgently. We cannot be satisfied with forcing billions of bewildered human beings to choose between excessive assertion of their identity and the loss of their identity altogether.”³

It has become commonplace to emphasize that our world is undergoing an identity crisis. Academic debates in social and cultural studies concerning the question of identity has abundantly increased as we go through the global, postmodern and information era. The concept of identity turns out to be more complex and problematic than ever before. When it comes to globalization, and its impact in the cultural sphere, it has generally been viewed in a pessimistic light.⁴ For an understanding of recent debates on issues of identity, I will follow John Tomlinson's argument, that cultural identity, properly understood, is more the *product*⁵ of globalization than its victim.

² Hausing and Khan, “Multiculturalism and Intercultural dialogue in North-East Region”, 404.

³ Amin Maalouf, *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong* (New York: Arcade Publishing Inc., 2001), 35.

⁴ John Tomlinson, *Globalization and Cultural Identity*. TGT2ec23 19/03/2003:269. Retrieved from www.policy.co.UK/Global/pdf/gbreader2etominson.pdf.

⁵ John Tomlinson's *Italic*.

Firstly, Tomlinson meticulously deconstructs the assumption that globalization destroys identities. Before the era of globalization, there existed in Tomlinson's words 'local, autonomous, distinct and well-defined, robust and culturally sustaining connections between geographical place and cultural experience.'⁶ This identity was simply what people, 'had' like an inheritance, a continuity with the past. And like language, it was not just a description of cultural belonging; it was a sort of treasure of local communities-which need protection and preservation. Then around the middle of the 1980's came globalization, which swept like a flood through the world's diverse cultures, destroying stable communities, displacing peoples, bringing a market-driven, western, in particular American cultural experience, with homogenizing tendencies, destroying communities-defined cultures, which had constituted our identities. Globalization, then, has been blamed for the destruction of cultural identity the world over. Tomlinson, however, argues that globalization far from destroying cultural identity, has perhaps been the most significant force in creating and proliferating cultural identity.⁷ To add credence to his argument, Tomlinson quotes Manuel Castells, who in his celebrated analysis of the 'The Information Age' stated that: 'Our world and our lives are being shaped by the conflicting trends of globalization and identity.' For Castells, the primary opposition to the power of globalization lies in the 'widespread surge of powerful expression of collective identity that challenges globalization on behalf of cultural singularity and people's control over their lives and environment.'⁸ What we see then, is not so much that cultural identity, in Tomlinson's words, is something that is being trampled upon, but rather the reverse, where identity transforms into a powerful tool that offers resistance to the forces of capital globalization. The reason being that identity is not merely as Tomlinson puts it: 'some fragile communal –psychic attachment, but a considerable dimension of institutional social life in modernity.'⁹

Taking Tomlinson's argument and he did particularly mean national identity, which is a deliberate cultural construction, maintained by state machinery. There are more complex identity, within national identities, that are more powerful and more

⁶ Tomlinson, *Globalization and Cultural Identity*.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ M. Castells, *The Power of Identity*, Vol II of *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, Oxford, Blackwell. Quoted in Tomlinson, John., *Globalization and Cultural Identity*. TGT2ec23 19/03/2003:270. Retrieved from www.policy.co.UK/Global/pdf/gbreader2etominson.pdf.

⁹ Tomlinson, *Globalization and Cultural Identity*.

complex. These multi-ethnic compositions arising as Tomlinson describes: ‘from the crude territorial division of colonial occupation combine with comparatively weak state structure to produce a legacy of often bloody political instability and inter-ethnic violence.’¹⁰ This we have discussed at length in the chapters dealing with ethnic identity and conflict. Though it is true that identity-formation is a universal feature of human experience, but it does not follow the kind of identity construction as we currently understand it, which has turned ethnocentric based on western-modern interpretation of identity, is how we viewed identity at all. What globalization has really done, and I agree with Tomlinson, is that it did not after all destroy identity, it produced too much identity-to the detriment of peace and stability in many regions of the world, and closer home to various conflicts arising out of too much *ethnic identification* (my italics), coupled by a sense of marginality (on the part of minorities/tribal communities) that had escalated in regions of North-East India since the 1980’s (about the very time when globalization arose as a cultural-economic force that swept through the world’s diverse cultures). This phenomenon in modern societies is best highlighted in Tomlinson’s statement, which goes as follows:

“In modern societies we live our lives within structures that orchestrate existential experience according to well-policed boundaries. We ‘live’ our gender, our sexuality, our nationality and so forth as publicly institutionalized, discursively organized belongings. What could be a much looser, contingent, particular and tacit sense of belonging become structured into an array of identities, each with implications of our material and psychological well-being, each thus, with a ‘politics’. This is what I mean by saying that modernity is a harbinger of identity.”¹¹

When we come to the notion of national identity, which has been on the rise since the eightieth century, where everyone claims a sense of entitlement and belonging within the boundaries of nation-states, is according to Tomlinson, ‘the most powerful-cultural-political binding force of modernity’.¹² National identity in its turn is not being threatened by globalization, and we are unlikely to see the collapse of national

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

identity in the near future. However, the truth remains that national identity is being threatened by globalization, in so far as the proliferation of identity positions may be producing challenges to the dominance of national identity. There are numerous examples of violent and chaotic confrontations of ethnic and religious communities with the nation-state, in Europe, America, Canada and elsewhere. In the context of post-colonial societies of South Asia, the complexities are multifold and ethnic and religious groups are involved in violent clashes with nation-states. How far globalization is responsible for the proliferation of identity positions in countries of South Asia is fittingly described by Kousar.J.Azam in the following statement:

“In the post-colonial societies of South Asia, ethnicity remains pervasive in the political process due to the very nature of decolonization. Its resurgence in the western world –particularly in Europe-has been attributed to the forces ushered in by the disintegration of the former Soviet union, globalization and the new political arrangements which include the creation of new states, redrawing of the boundaries of the older states and the emergence of new political elites accompanied by the emergence of new ethnic minorities and refugees across the new international borders. The new states in Europe grapple with this comparatively recent phenomenon outside of the Marxist paradigms, that were suppose to have influenced the reaction of the state to ethnicity in these societies before the end of the cold war. On the other hand, the state in South Asia continues to be engaged with this as it threatens its very foundation. In the Indian context the problem of ethnicity in India’s north-east has been perceived as a part of a wider regional problem cutting across international borders.”¹³

Globalization as understood in this context is not the opening up of global market system, but the unleashing of violent cultural forces-ethnic/nationalist/regional factionalism-in post-colonial states of South Asia.

An example of this ensuing conflict in regions of North-East India can be illustrated by the very recent clashes between Manipuris (Mieties) and Nagas. Inter-community tension has returned to the state of Manipur (reports the article), with the creation of

¹³ Azam, “Introduction” in *Conflicting Ethnicities, Locating the Local in the Global*, 14.

seven more new districts in December 9th 2016, taking the total number of districts in Manipur to sixteen. Manipur currently had four valley and five hill districts. The United Naga Council (UNC) has opposed the move, accusing Manipur of taking portions which were “traditionally ancestral Naga land” and adding these to the newly formed districts. The law and order situation deteriorated in Manipur, with a mob, defying curfew attacking vehicles on their way to the predominantly Naga Ukhrul district.¹⁴ Conflicting situation such as these are a regular feature in North-East India, and it is to situations like the one cited above that recalls what Mary Kaldor (1999) has aptly called ‘new wars’ of the era of globalization. The ‘globalization wars’ are fought around a vicious, particular form of ‘Identity politics’ in which ‘movements...mobilize around ethnic, racial or religious identity for the purpose of claiming state power’.¹⁵

Around the discourse of globalization and identity and the grip of nation-states over our cultural imagination, Tomlinson suggests that we look for ‘more gentle-subtle, long –term shifts in identification. This sort of shift has meant the emergence of ‘hybrid ‘cultural identities as a consequence of the multicultural constitution of modern nations-states, mentioned by Tomlinson in the same paragraph. So much has been said and written, both within and outside of academia, about multiculturalism and pluralistic societies as answers to misconceptualisation of essential identities. What has emerged is a phenomenon that the Anthropologist, Clifford Geertz refers to as cultural ‘syncretism’. Syncretism has emerged as a tool for understanding the complex dynamics of identity, interconnectedness and pluralism.¹⁶ According to N.K Das, Syncretism is widespread where multiple religious/linguistic traditions exist, especially in a country like India. In an era of displacement, migration and general increase in transnational linkages, syncretism is very much an emergent phenomenon.

¹⁴ *Violence continues in Manipur, vehicles to Naga district targeted*, by Esha Roy, Kolkata. Dec 19, 2016. Retrieved from www.indianexpress.com/article/India/Imphal-curfew-manipur-violence-protest-bus-burnt-okram-ibobi-Singh-4434353.

¹⁵ M. Kaldor, *New and Old Wars*, Cambridge: Policy Press. Quoted in Tomlinson, John, *Globalisation and Cultural Identity*. TGT2eC23 19/03/2003:274. Retrieved from www.policy.co.Uk/global/pdf/gtreader2etomlinson.pdf.

¹⁶ Das, “Identity Politics, Cultural Pluralism, and the State in South Asia.: An Anthropological Reappraisal”, 43-44.

However, in all of the globalization and identity discourse, and its homogenizing effect on cultures of the world, and consequently the emergent trends of multiculturalism, hybridization, and syncretism and so on-the need was felt to focus on identities as cultural powers and cultural treasures. Hence, the term globalization came into use in English, and its usage can be attributed to Professor Roland Robertson, a British/American sociologist. Here the identity is seen as the rise of local cultures, that contests major claims of the capitalist globalization.¹⁷

The term glocalization has come into frequent use since the late 1980's. And in a discussion about glocalization, Habibul Haque Khonder says that some writers tend to conflate it with hybridization and in his words, 'glocalization involves blending, mixing, adapting of two or more processes, one of which must be local, but one can accept a hybrid version that does not involve local.'¹⁸ There is an urgent need to understand the complexities of ethnic identities in North-East India, through the spectrum of Glocalization. It has become pre-emptive, in the nature and understanding of ethnicity itself-which is both global and local in character. Also, because ethnicity in today's world, not only challenges the notion of state and nation, but is in turn challenged by globalization, multiculturalism and the over-riding notions of modernity. In both chapters five and six, a humble attempt has been made to highlight how the study of folklore has contributed to constructing identities in oral and semi-oral societies (in the context of Khasi folklore and the construction of the Khasi identity). How identity politics has evolved through the years since India's Independence in regions of North-East India, and how the proliferation, perpetuation and assertions of ethnic identities has been used in socio-political space, to negotiate political power, within and amongst the several hundred tribes living in and sharing boundaries in the North-East states of India. An attempt has also been made to explore the reasons for ethnic conflicts in these regions, which has constantly threatened peace and stability, and remains a challenge to the Indian state; with hundreds of lives lost each year, and hardships faced by both government and non-

¹⁷ Muzzafar Assadi, "Identity Politics and Globalisation: Social Movements and Politics of Appropriating Syncretic Culture", 308.

¹⁸ Habibul Khonder Haque, "Glocalization as Globalization: Evolution of a Sociological Concept." Bangladesh e-journal of Sociology, Vol, 1.No. 2. July, (2004) :6.

government agencies to bring leaders to the negotiating table. The North-East states will benefit if they indeed, fuse global with the local in their forward march towards the future.

Coming back to the first four chapters that deals with the dynamic force of folklore in Khasi society, from its oral stage to the written phase-we see a folk society gradually transform into a modern one .Still in its transitional phase, we witness the myriad changes in Khasi society starting from religion, literature, social customs, rituals and practices. Like every other small community in the world; whose social ties and identification are largely based on clan affiliation, the Khasi community too, has in the past few decades seen social conflict, whilst resisting change. The Khasi society has had its share of tension and conflict; its resistance to change brought about by modernity. The Khasis too, like the other tribes of the North-East have used their identity as a political tool to negotiate political spaces. However, by comparison, conflict in Meghalaya, arising out of ethnic division has been less insidious than other states in the North-East. But the fact remains that the Khasis continue to view non-tribal people from the plains as a threat, and are still prejudicial towards them. Lately, with social media and related technologies, a more tolerant spirit has developed among the youth, towards ‘differences’ they may see in ‘others’. In this sense, social media in the form of Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and the iphone has impacted the way we view the world, by providing inter-cultural exchanges that has changed not only the way we communicate, but also the way we think and interact. This is what Rebecca Sawyer has to say about the impact of the new social media across cultures throughout the globe:

“New social media have been rapidly spreading across the globe and gaining popularity in today’s society. While providing a common way of linking people together through knowledge, behaviours, and attitudes, a sense of belonging to a greater social network other than one’s own local community is effectively created.”¹⁹

With rapid social and cultural transformation-in regions of North-East India, societies can no longer deny the irreversible effects of globalization on their distinctive cultures. Mobilization around ethnic identities and homeland has aggravated through

¹⁹ Rebecca Sawyer, “The Impact of New Social Media on Intercultural Adaptation” (2011:6).Senior Honours Projects 242, [Http://www/Digitalcommons.uri.edu/srhonorsprog/242](http://www/Digitalcommons.uri.edu/srhonorsprog/242).

the years. These problems can be arrested, or least contained when prejudicial stereotyping of other communities changes. People have to be helped and educated to explore and value diversity; respect and tolerance and acceptance of others. In a pluralistic society like India, and as history has repeatedly showed, plurality of cultures and religions has been its strongest force. Also, India's democratic set-up has made special provision through the Indian Constitution, and has extended the Sixth Schedule in tribal dominated areas in four states viz .Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram. This special provision is to ensure that tribal people are given the freedom to exercise legislative and executive powers through an autonomous regional council and autonomous district council. Thereby giving tribes more control over their regions to protect, promote and sustain their distinctive societal cultures. The Sixth Schedule, by granting special rights to minorities, safeguard their interests , especially in post-colonial , democratic India, where minority communities are demanding greater recognition of their distinctive identities and greater freedom and opportunity to preserve their unique cultural practices. This is true not only for minorities in India, but in every other part of the world. In this direction then, and in the light of a changing world, it can be said that the theory of multiculturalism has come to the theoretical realm as defender of minorities rights and consequently as a solution to cultural conflicts all over the world on the basis of religion, language and ethnicity.²⁰ It serves to be reminded that India is after all one of the first countries to give constitution recognition to minority communities. These are almost similar to the cultural rights as envisaged by multiculturalism. If we are to address issues and challenges that face North-East India, we start with understanding the nature of identity and how it operates in these communities. Once the understanding of the complexities of ethnic identities is gained; then will truly begin the process of multiculturalism, for with the knowledge of 'self' we can also hope for an understanding and accommodation of the 'other'.

²⁰ Prakash Desai, "Point of View-Multiculturalism and Minority Rights in India: Interface between Theory and Practise,". Goa University, Goa.JMSD, Oct-Dec 2014/20.Retrieved from [www.irgu.unigoa.ac.in/dsl/bitstream/unigoa/3628/J-Media-Social-Develop-2\(4\)-2014-14-33.pdf?sequence=1](http://www.irgu.unigoa.ac.in/dsl/bitstream/unigoa/3628/J-Media-Social-Develop-2(4)-2014-14-33.pdf?sequence=1).

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APPENDIX

1.1 U Lakriah

God sent seven families to earth to restore order. It is said that originally there were sixteen families in heaven. Of whom seven were sent to earth. They could visit heaven by a golden ladder. The nine families living with God in heaven could also visit earth by the ladder. The earthly families were led by their leaders (*Syiem*), U Lakriah. U Lakriah and the members of these seven families had godly qualities for which other creatures on earth accepted their leadership. Order was thus restored.

But the seven families soon found that the world was full of stones. There was no soil and so they faced difficulties in cultivating the land. Syiem U Lakriah, therefore, went to heaven to ask for soil from the God. The God directed the supreme goddess Ka Blei Synshar to give U Lakriah three basketful of earth (soil) from heaven. U Lakriah came back with these baskets and covered the stones with soil. In another version it is said that Ka Blei Synshar sent Bei Rymmaw (the mother earth) to cover the stones with soil. It is also said that God could only be approached through her (Bei Rymmaw) by libation on the ground.

When evil spirits made the world full of miseries, people prayed to God and solicited his presence. God (U Blei Tre-Kirod) came down to earth, met U Lakriah in some unknown place and conveyed his wishes and advice through him. These were known as *Niam* or commandments, the most important of them were the following:

1. Earn righteousness (*kamai ia hok*)
2. Respect the parents (*Burom ia ki bei ki pa*)
3. Service to man is service to God (*Tip bru, tip Blei*).

God also declared that he could be approached by prayer and sacrifice (*Ka nguh Ka dem wa ka Knai ka Khriam*), and that his wish could be read and ascertained in auguries through divinations by egg-breaking or entrails of fowls etc.

By some such divination, using rice-beer in a gourd-pitcher, U Lakriah ascertained the wish of God regarding the manner of dance to celebrate the harvesting by the people.

In the Behdeinkhlam festival the Parom (the story-teller) narrates the legend of U Lakriah along with the legend of *Saw (Soo) Kpoh*. While chanting the story, wine libations are offered.

Source: Cristobin Rymbai, O.P Lytan and H.L. Deb Roy. Quoted in Soumen Sen's *Social and State formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills (A study of Folklore)*. B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1985: 168-69

1.2 So Kpoh

In ancient times, four wandering sisters arrived at a spot near Jowai in Jaintia Hills. There was a big stone nearby. The four sisters, Ka Bon, Ka Tein, Ka Wet and Ka Doh along with their menfolk decided to stay there near the stone for the night. At the dead of the night, Ka Bon heard a sound, woke up and saw the stone dancing. She was horrified, called everybody and was about to flee when the stone ceased dancing and said, 'Oh, children of God, do not run away. Stay with us here. I assure you that no harm will come to you. Myself and my brothers shall guard you from all evils. We shall watch the four corners (*so dwar----**so Luti*). Our maid-servant, the river Ka Myntdu, will serve you faithfully.' The name of the stone-spirit was U Mukhai and his brothers were U Musniang, U Muralong and U Mulong. They guard the four corners of Jowai where the progenies of four sisters (*so Kpoh*) live.

Since that time, the four families known as *so Kpoh* have been residing in this place. These were the original clans and therefore all the religious rites, community-functions as well as administration were vested in them. From these four *Kpohs* (wombs) come the religious and secular chiefs of the area-lyngdohs, daloi, pator and basans. The biggest festival of Jowai Behdeinkhlam is conducted by them. During the Lyngdoh-house rite of the Behdeinkhlam festival the parom (story teller) narrates the legend of *so Kpoh*. In the dance that follows the libations and chanting of the legend, people try to lift three logs with bamboo sticks which represent three sisters, the ancestresses of three *kpohs* of *so kpoh* –Ka Doh, Ka Bon and Ka Wet and the fourth Ka Tein is worshipped in the afternoon as a diety of *aitnar*, the sacred pool.

Source: Cristobin Rymbai, R.T. Rymbai, O.P. Lytan and H.L. Deb Roy. Qouted in Soumen Sen's, *Social and State formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills (A study of Folklore)*. B.R. Publishing Corporation, Delhi, 1985: 170-180.

Annexure-I

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E-Thesis Metadata Form

•	Title	FOLKLORE AND THE KHASI IDENTITY
•	Alternative Title, if any	
•	Name of Research Scholar	SOPHIA PDE
•	Index Number (if any)	N/A
•	Date of Registration	
•	Name of Guide/Supervisor(s)	1. DR RAFAT ALI 2. PROF. KYNPHAM SING NONGKYNRIH 3.
•	Name of Degree	DOCTORAL DEGREE
•	Name of Faculty	FACULTY OF ARTS
•	Department/Centre	DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
•	Name of affiliated Institution for which JU is granting the degree	DELHI UNIVERSITY, VIVEKANANDA COLLEGE
•	Date of Submission	2 nd OCT 2020
•	Subject Keywords	1. FOLKLORE 2. KHASI 3. IDENTITY 4. ORAL 5. WRITTEN
•	Coverage (for time periods or spatial regions only)	
•	Language of the thesis	ENGLISH
•	File Format of thesis and accompanying material, if any (PDF, MPEG, etc.)	COMPACT DISC (ALL PDF FILES) IN TWO FOLDERS WITH ANNEXURES I and II

Annexure-II

Jadavpur University

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Degree	DOCTORAL DEGREE
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Department Centre	DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
School	SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES
Name of affiliated Institution for which JU is granting the degree	DELHI UNIVERSITY, VIVEKANANDA COLLEGE
Guide/Supervisor(s)	1. DR RAFAT ALI 2. PROF KYNPHAM SING NONGRYNRH
Thesis/Dissertation Title	FOLKLORE AND THE KHASI IDENTITY
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