

# Folklore, Identity and Change: The Khasis of Meghalaya.

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**Abstract:** This article is an attempt to re-examine folk material related to the Khasis (A tribe from Meghalaya, India), and discussing them in a manner that will throw light on the larger question of identity. The important connection between identity and folklore can never be denied. Folklore is the most important source for the construction, articulation and perpetuation of identities in oral and semi-oral communities. The Khasi society is one such tribal community, that is gradually making a transition from folk society to a modernized one. Societal transition across cultures in every part of the globe has never been an easy one. Very often folklore of a people is used as an instrument in identity politics, as has happened with the Khasi society and other tribes of North-East India; resulting in the assertion of ethnic identities that has led to large-scale violent conflicts in these regions. A fresh look at how we interpret folklore and the role it plays in building community identities is what this paper attempts to discuss.

**Key Words:** Folk, Khasi community, Tribes,

## 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, within the Indian Union. 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 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 headquarters, Jaintia Hills with Jowai as its headquarters, 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 Khasi and Jaintia Hills. Following the same customs and traditions, speaking the same language and following common religious beliefs; the Khasis of the Eastern Plateau are known as Pnars or Synteng, those of the Northern slopes are Wars and those in the West by North areas as Lyngngams. The Khasis of the Western Plateau are known as Khyrnriams to the Pnars and as Nongphlang to the Wars. These are other groups like the Labangs, the Khyrwangs, the Nongtungs, and others and all these are known by the generic name "Khasi".<sup>1</sup>

Firstly, a clear definition of folklore is required to better understand its intrinsic connection to Identity. Folklore and the oral tradition are dynamic; they form part of a knowledge system in which traditional knowledge is viewed as the carries of information and discoveries.<sup>2</sup> Mazharul Islam explains the dynamic nature of folklore, where he sees 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. Since folklore is after all knowledge of the people, not of a person, but of a community at large; folklore shapes the thinking of a community-its artistic expressions, observations and such. The role of myths ; the functions that proverbs, tales, riddles in the oral forms plays in shaping a society, are of no less importance than any written literature of the past.<sup>3</sup>

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 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 that serve to provide cohesion for the present. It may be emphasized that these myths and beliefs systems are not only important to ensure the continuity of the group, but also making the past a living and vital part of the present, where accuracy of the memories of the past are less important than the memories themselves.<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> Giri, Helen., *The Khasis Under British Rule 1824-1947*, Regency Publication, New Delhi, 1998:6.

<sup>2</sup> Sen, Soumen., *Folklore Identity Development: In the Context Of North-East India*, Anjali Publishers, Kolkata, 2010:15.

<sup>3</sup> Islam, Mazharul., *Folklore, The Pulse of the People*, Concept Publication Co. 1985:291

<sup>4</sup> Ringer, Benjamin B.& Elinor R.Lawless, "The "We-They" Character of Race and Ethnicity," *Race and Ethnicity*, Vol 1, Routledge London, 2001:54.

upon the myth's believability.<sup>5</sup> These myths or what the Khasis refer to as *Khanatang*, are important part of what constitutes 'oral literature' among the Khasis-having been the building blocks upon which rituals, traditions and the Khasi identity have been constructed upon. To take this up further, I will translate, in part, the Origin Myth of the Khasis-a version narrated by Kynpham Sing Nongkynrih, to better understand the role these myths play in establishing a culture, a religion and an identity that is uniquely Khasi:<sup>6</sup>

### *Ki Hynniew Trep (The Hynniew Trep)*

**(This is the English translation from the original Khasi Language).**

In the beginning, there existed nothing but empty space. Then God created the earth; as a female deity, and along with her husband, U Basa, were entrusted with the task of looking after God's creation, including mankind. It was after the creation of these God-like deities, the earth was filled with stones and sand. At first, both husband and wife were happy and content with each other's company, no sooner, however there began to crop a certain loneliness that began gradually to eat into their peaceful co-existence-this was due to the lack of an off-spring. They began to pray in earnest to God's divine mercy to bless them with off-springs, which would quell their loneliness, and have progenitors, to carry on their bloodline.

After fervent prayers, God responded and blessed them with five children, all gifted with various might and talent. The oldest among the siblings was The Sun, followed by The Moon, who was the only male child. The rest three were daughters too, namely Water, Wind and Fire. Fire, being the youngest, always remained at home, attending to household chores, and the needs of the parental home on a daily basis.

Mother Earth was happy to see her children grow into beautiful beings, tending to everything and contributing to making nature more attractive, by bringing alive trees, flowers, fruits etc. However, inspite of plentiful happiness and abundance, there was none to enjoy and appreciate the fruits of abundance, nor tend or care for its beauty. So, they turned once again to God in prayers:

Merciful God, who bore witness to the cries of Mother Earth, who had spent every bit of her effort and energy beautifying the earth; heard Mother Earth's plea, and agreed to fulfill her wish by commanding two mountain deities to protect and preserve the beauty of nature.

Unfortunately, the two appointed deities began to fight for control, each wanting to over-power the other, in their control over nature. Their bitter animosity towards each other, not only put their lives at risk, but the lives of others as well.

Upon, Mother's Earth's complaint to God against the dangerous presence of these two deities; God brought in the tiger, as presider and protector of everything on Earth. This however, did not work out for long, for the Tiger, instead of discharging his duties with honesty, advocated and propagated the rule that 'might was right' throughout the Earth. Lastly, when everything was in a state of chaos and mayhem, Mother Earth, once again appealed to God for his intervention –to population the Earth not with beings that are like a curse upon this Earth, but with blessed beings.

Almighty God, upon hearing Mother Earth's plea for help, came to a decision that the Earth cannot be well looked after by anyone, except *The Khathynriew Trep (sixteen huts)*, whose abode was in heaven. It followed, that God called upon a *Dorbar(meeting)*, that would select, those who would come upon Earth to preside over its affairs. After a heated debate that lasted for days, God announced that seven out of the sixteen of the *Khathynriew Trep*, who resided in heaven, were to descend upon the Earth, to toil the earth, to protect and preserve it. It was also announced, that from henceforth they shall be known as *Hynniew Trep (seven huts)*, *Ki Hynniew Iing*, *Ki Hynniew Jait (clan)*, who will later become the first ancestors of the Khasis, that constitute the Khyntiam, Pnar, Bhoi, War, Maram, Lynggam.

God, who brought about peace and prosperity; blessed the Earth with plentiful abundance with the help of Mother Earth's children. A solemn promise was made between God and the *Hynniew Trep*, by divine laws, and to bear witness to the solemn promise made, he planted a tree called *Sohpet Bneng (navel of heaven)*, that served like a Golden ladder between Earth and Heaven. According to God's decree, as long as the *Hynniew Trep* uphold the three commandments – '*Ka Tip Briew Tip Blei*' (know man, know God), '*KaTipKurTip Kha*' (know kith know kin), *Kamai ia ka Hok*' (earn with honesty)-they will find truth, peace and prosperity, health and wealth-one with God, they will not be left as orphans. Further, they can traverse between Earth and Heaven, as they please, making use of the Golden ladder situated by God himself as the Hill of *Sohpet Bneng*.

<sup>5</sup> Sen, Soumen., Sen., *Folklore Identity Development: In the Context Of North-East India*, Anjali Publishers, Kolkata, 2010:19.

<sup>6</sup> Nongkynrih, Sing Kynpham., *Ka Pyrkat Niam Ki Khanatang*, Pine Cone Publication, Shillong 2011:10-13. Tran, Sophia Pde. The Khasi version has been given, alongside the translation into English by myself.

Earth had finally found peace and fulfilment. As long as man, remembers and honours God and his commandments, he will find everlasting peace. This peace he will find by never crossing or flouting God's decree.

However, Man was not born to find satisfaction in peace alone. Like everything else on earth, he has a dual mind, and as capable as he is of good, he is also capable of evil. No sooner, he began to tire of obeying God's decrees. He longs to spread his wings and live unbounded by rules and regulations-a free spirit. Gradually, he began turning away from the three commandments laid down by God. Greed and avarice settled in his heart, and sooner, because of his greed, began to infringe upon the rights of others. He began to lie, to betray and even to kill in order to obtain what his greed desired. The loss of respect for one another drove him further and further away from God-greed and the clamour for wealth became their new God.

Unable to bear the sins that had come upon mankind, God's wrath was soon upon man for his utter betrayal and disrespect for God's commandments. God decided to finally sever the tree that connected Heaven and Earth at *Sohpet Bneng*. The Seven on Earth were separated from the Nine in heaven. They were left bereft of God's love and guidance like orphaned children. Darkness descended upon both Earth and man. The Golden period of man's existence on Earth had come to a standstill.

Darkness descended upon the Earth, resulting out of God's wrath upon the sins of mankind. There happened to be a tree upon another sacred hill, a large tree, which God caused to grow at such speed, spreading its roots and branches to such an extent that it covered the whole of heaven, plunging the Earth into utter darkness. This in turn, caused the destruction of all types of vegetation, posing a danger to mankind himself; being pursued by all kinds of creatures.

The Earth was plunged not only into darkness but into utter confusion and chaos. Man, because of his disobedience, instead of looking at his own heart, and ask forgiveness for his own mistakes, resorted to finding his own means to remove the danger that posed a threat to his very existence.

Man, called for a *Dorbar* or meeting, that asked for all the male leaders of all of the *Hynniew Trep* to attend without fail. It was urgently decided in the meeting that the ominous tree or *Diengiei*, that was increasing in size every minute, should be cut down. Every household was to send a male member, along with an axe, so that the *Diengiei* tree can be served with speed.

Then, began the earnest effort to cut down the *Diengiei* Tree. The men put on a great show of trying with all their might to sever the tree. They dented the trees at several places with their axes; throughout the day, and would return home at night, only to find the next day, that the large tree would have healed itself, and the dentures on it were restored back to normal.

Everyone was perplexed, and fear arose in their hearts, less some mystical power was at work. How were they to battle a gigantic tree that had the power to heal itself upon being bruised?

They all gathered together and pondered with fear and anxiety over the *Diengiei Tree*. It chanced that a small migratory bird happened to be passing that way, on its way to paddy fields. The bird had never seen man amidst such anxiety. When the bird learnt about the happenings with the *Diengiei Tree*, decided to tell them about the wonders of that tree. The bird told upon man that the *Diengiei Tree* had no such magical qualities to heal itself upon being severed. The bird, however had a condition that it would reveal to man the secret of the *Deingiei tree*, only if man promises to allow the bird to eat of man's paddy fields as much as it desires.

Man, admit his dark confusion, readily agreed to the bird's conditions. The bird then told man, that *the Diengiei Tree* had no magical qualities; instead it was due to a Tiger's licks. Every night, when man would return home, after having chopped as much of the trees as possible, the Tiger would come out at night to the *Diengiei Tree* and lick its wounds, restoring it to its former healthy self.

The Tiger, who stands for all that is evil, wants that the *Diengiei Tree*, would remain as it is; covering the earth in darkness, making it easier for him to hunt for his preys, which includes man himself. To thwart the Tiger's evil intent, the bird advised man that after having dented the tree, before retiring for the night, should leave their swords and axes stuck to these dents.

Following, the bird's advise –those engaged in chopping the tree-upon returning at night, struck their axes and swords upon the tree. The next day, to their surprise, instead of finding a tree that had healed itself, found instead blood stains all over the weapons. They discovered the Tiger had almost lost his tongue, when he had come to lick the tree at night. In his fear, the Tiger took off, and never made a re-appearance. Mankind rejoiced, and with renewed vigour produced to chop-down the tree, until it was completely severed; much to man's relief.

The agreement that man had with the tiny bird, showed the return of his humility. It was because of the show of humility on the part of man, that God allowed for the Giant *Diengiei Tree* to fall to the ground.

(Trans. Sophia Pde).

### 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 ia 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 jingkyajah 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 Bakhrav bor, ba la pynkup da ki sap ki 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 hapdeng 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 mynjour 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 hapdeng 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 Jingsisnei, 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 Khyriam, Ki Pnar, Ki Bhoi, Ki War, Ki Maram bad kito kiba shnong ha ri Lyngngam, kiba ngi shu tip kyllum kum ki Lyngngam, ki Nongtraai.

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

(Kynpham, Sing Nongkynrih, Shillong ,2011)

By connecting religion 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 Khasi-Pnars, to this day, in times of storm and stress, of stir and strife, whenever there is a call for unity of the tribe, invoke the name of *Ki Hynniewtrep*’ ( Rymbai 1998:166)<sup>7</sup>

The historical past matters greatly (be it oral or written) in the formation and perpetuation of ethnic identities, and its function 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.”( Benjamin B.Ringer and Elinor R.Lawless 2011:54)<sup>8</sup>

The statement above holds true for all tribal societies in India, who build their identities based on a mythical past, lending meaning to the perpetuation of their identities in the present, and projecting their varied identities into the future.

When we talk about changes in tribal societies in India, with unique ethnicities, identity markers and traditional patterns, we recall what Vidyarthi had observed about the tribes of Bihar which also holds true about all other tribes of North-East India.<sup>9</sup> 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 inducting transformation. Due to these factors of change, the cultures of tribes of North-East India are in constant flux and cultural heterogeneity is reflected in all aspects of their 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 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 *Bakhraws* or aristocrats who always held prime land (though they had no absolute authority over land and people)<sup>10</sup>. 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 interest through the provision of the Sixth Schedule and establishment

<sup>7</sup> As quoted in Sen Soumen., 1998 “Endoethnonym and Exoethnomyn of an Ethnicos: Identity and Folklore.”, *South Indian Folklorist*: Vol.2: 85-91.

<sup>8</sup> Ringer, Benjamin B.& Elinor R.Lawless, “The “We-They” Character of Race and Ethnicity,” *Race and Ethnicity*, Vol 1, Routledge London, 2001:54.

<sup>9</sup> Vidyarthi, L.P., *Cultural Contours of Tribal Bihar*, Punthi Pustak, Calcutta 1964. As quoted in Mazharul Islam, *Folklore The Pulse of the People*, Concept Publication, New Delhi, 1985:348.

<sup>10</sup> Sen Soumen., *Between Tradition and Change: A Perspective of Meghalaya*, B.R Publishing Corporation, New Delhi 1988: 64.

of District Councils. The eclipse of the traditional elite or the chiefs began with the economic and political controls exercised by the elected representatives of the District Councils. But the ultimate analysis will show that though the chiefs had to subordinate themselves to the new political elite, their economic rights were in no way disturbed.”<sup>11</sup>

Coming to the impact that the West had on Khasi-Jaintia society, we make note of the observations of P.N. Dutta, who gives a detailed account of Khasi society under British rule in his book, *Impact of The West on Khasis and Jaintias*, (1982). 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 Khasis was substantial. However, of immediate consequence was the expulsion of the Khasis from 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 significant of the tradition, it indicated at least the beginning of the end of the traditional age of their history.”<sup>12</sup> The new epoch came about bringing both positive and negative changes to the Khasi society. On the one hand, the Khasis embraced the changes and reforms brought about by the British establishment. During the initial years they did put up a struggle to preserve their freedom, independence and traditional culture. Prominent revolutionary leaders among the Khasis and Jaintias, was Tirof Sing Syiem from Mairang and Kiang Nongbah from Jowai. Gradually, began the conversion to Christianity and modernization of the tribe. 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, has been applauded by many scholars.<sup>13</sup>

Coming back to the function that folklore plays on issues of cultural identity-most importantly how folklore has been used as an instrument in identity politics. It is important to understand that folklore by preparing cultural symbols (the essential features of an identity system), determined the collective identity of a people and its retention.<sup>14</sup> Folklore has been successfully used by political parties to promote their agenda. They constantly refer to folklore, to reaffirm and reassert their ethnic identities. 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 in 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.<sup>15</sup> 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), discourages any programmes of land reform. According to Soumen Sen, the Indian National Congress (INC) remained distant and conspicuously silent on the issue of land reform and industrialization of these 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, as 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 result being a static economy. This short sightedness among the political leaders of the State of Meghalaya has resulted in the economical backwardness of the state, the lack of opportunities and unemployment, which has resulted in many social ills. Also, given the fact that the tribal population itself has increased in the last few decades. In resisting development efforts in the name of identity preservation, we can expect a restless growing ethnic community that will not be satisfied with a static economy.

## CONCLUSION:

With modernization making steady inroads into tribal regions of North-East India, the Khasis too have realized that they can hardly ignore the changes brought about by modernity in every aspect of life. Like other tribal societies of India, the Khasi society is undergoing a transition from folk society to a modernize one. With every kind of social transition there is bound to be social conflict and transformation. Technology and New Social Media in the form of Facebook, Twitter, Youtube and I Phone have transformed the way we think and interact. Folklore too, being the

<sup>11</sup> Sen, Soumen., *Between Tradition and Change: A Perspective of Meghalaya*, B.R Publishing Corporation, New Delhi 1988: 64.

<sup>12</sup> Dutta, P.N., *Impact of the West on Khasis and Jaintias*, Cosmo Publication 1982:208.

<sup>13</sup> *Impact of the West on Khasis and Jaintias*, Cosmo Publication 1982:210.

<sup>14</sup> Sen, Soumen., *Between Tradition and Change: A Perspective of Meghalaya*, B.R Publishing Corporation, New Delhi 1988: 77.

<sup>15</sup> Sen, Soumen., *Folklore Identity Development: In the Context Of North-East India*, Anjali Publishers, Kolkata, 2010:37.

‘dynamic force of culture’ will accommodate itself in changing spaces and will be the active agent of social change. It is in folklore that people from minority groups find and retain their identity. The prime function of folklore is to understand social formation of oral or semi-oral societies, cohesion, schism and change. Folklore then, shoulders the twin responsibility of accommodating social change, while retaining its unique flavours that has given numerous cultures their distinctive identities.

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