

## CHAPTER III

### Folk Media in Khasi Life and Culture

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It is the unique capacity of folk culture to address the universal from its vantage point in the local that makes it an indispensable part of contemporary Indian society. (Chatterji 2005, 11)

In this chapter the preliminary focus is on the examination of folk media and its relevance in the modern day, wherein the term media implies a source or means of communicating via the folk. Subsequently, the chapter progresses to an exploration of Khasi folk media in the milieu of the established discourse on folk media.

#### 3.1 Concept of Folk

Folk has been seen as recessive and something that is contrasting of science and consists ordinarily of fantasies, myth, etc. Folk, during the 19<sup>th</sup> century was defined in contrast to or in opposition with some other group. Usually the folk were considered to be people who constituted the lower stratum, in contrast to the upper layer or elite of a society. The capability to read and write since antiquity had been the sole parameter used to define folk. Despite such definition of folk in the ancient times, it was the folk that were relied upon to identify the origin and traditions of a society. Such methods for example, have been used to reconstruct the European history.

Another concern that arose in understanding the folk was that it was defined in association to the elite or civilised. It was assumed by ethnocentric European intelligentsias that in many parts of the world, folk did not exist, since those parts were uncivilised as per their presupposition. Ethnocentrism was the key in defining folk as the other lesser form thereby, the term folk was limited to the peasants.

As George M. Foster defined in his essay, *What is Folk Culture*, “a folk society was not a whole society, not an isolate in itself. It was rather ‘a half-society’, a part of a larger social unit” (1953, 163). It is to be noted that the folk part had a synergetic

longitudinal time-based connection to the more multi-faceted component of the society which was formed by the upper class in the urban centres. This description too resonated the concept that folk is primitive, backward and the like.

If such definition and explanation of the folk was adhered to the folk studies; then the folk in itself would perish in obscurity but such is not the case, folk is flourishing in all cultures. With the works of Alan Dundes, William Bascom, Richard Bauman and few others, folk came to be understood in a different light.

Dundes defines folk as...

Any group of people whatsoever, who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is - it could be a common occupation, language or religion - but what is important is that a group for whatever reasons will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consists of many individuals. A member of the group may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group to have a sense of group identity. Items of folk are shared by all and then there are specific tales that revolve around a family or group like how they came to settle in an area, it might include a family whistle (a tune or sequence of notes) used in public spaces to assemble members to depart for home. (Dundes, 1978, 7)

More evident as folk congregations are those with cultural, ethnic or religious character, when new clusters emerge, new folklore is formed. It is also stated that folk is an unconstrained variable and that associates of a modern society are members of numerous diverse folk groups. "As an individual moves from one of the folk groups to which he belongs to another, he must shift mental gears so to speak. A man normally wouldn't tell jokes exchanged in a military setting at a church sponsored meeting" (ibid., 9). The notion of folk does not encompass some type of plurality and to also determine the membership of a group in order to

declare item folk is not plausible. Not that folk is not circumscribed to the household, province, religious or ethnic group, also it is ubiquitous to literate and non-literate, urban and rural sections.

A very pronounced way of defining folk was the means by which it is transmitted. Most standard way of transmission is oral, but not all of it is communicated orally, as people learned by partaking, witnessing, etc. and thus, not all folk would fall in the category of the oral tradition. One cannot ignore the fact that the oral-written bilaterality always exists, and there are numerous models of written folk like traditional letters, flyleaf rhymes, etc.

It should be clear that the mode of folklore's transmission is in no way limited to folkloristics materials and that, consequently, it is of limited aid in defining folklore as distinct from other cultural materials. One could with reason say that definitions of folklore which depend completely upon such terms as 'oral', 'tradition' and 'transmission' are of questionable utility in explaining to someone who has no idea what folklore is. (Dundes, 1978, 23)

But, nevertheless an operational explanation is a requisite and it cannot be repudiated that the process of broadcast is the key for defining folk. Likewise folk is diffused just like any other facet of culture but this too does not stand out as a definition of folk. Stith Thompson, an American scholar of folklore had stated "this lack of basic definition is a great convenience, since it avoids the necessity of making decisions and often of entering into long debates as to the exact narrative genre to which a particular story may belong" (1955, 7). Herein, scholars have emphasised that a detailed analysis of the texture, text and context helps in the understanding of folk.

In simple words, texture is inclusive of the language in all its elements. Text is principally the versions of a tale, song, etc. and context is the specific social condition in which the specific folk are essentially transacted. The understanding of context can explicate dissimilarities in text and context. There is a strong interconnectedness between the three and its analysis is of significance; for a

modification in context most likely has an effect on the texture. For example, if a female narrator is narrating a tale, there are chances that words may be substituted or if a male narrator is narrating to a female audience, there too replacement of words may take place. Such parameters of analysing folk forms bring it out from the narrow sphere of only being defined as a means of transmission.

In its simplest form, the term folk means people, and folklorists like D. Yoder and Richard Dorson believe that this distinction between folk culture and folklore or folklife is the creation of an anthropologist's mind where the domain of folk studies has been delineated to solely folk literature.

With folk studies experiencing a revival, many strongly reiterate that folk culture in its totality is not simply literature communicated orally. But it is inclusive of arts and crafts, performances, beliefs and customs, all of which is embedded in the social structure. Therefore, a new concept 'folklife' has been presented by the folklorists to label folk culture in its totality.

On one side, many scholars preferred to restrict the use of the term folk to the peasants but scholars like Robert Redfield broadened the scope of folk studies by including both the peasants and tribes under the rubric of folk, where he "emphasized the continuities between tribal and peasant societies and have brought these societies within a more unified frame of reference" (Bauman, 1992, 35).

Following this trend of departing from the classic view, Dundes stated that the expression 'folk' can denote to any group of people of any kind who share noticeably one mutual element. The connecting element could be a shared occupation, language or religious conviction - what is essential is that a group formed for whatsoever reason will have some customs which it recognises as its own. "The modern definition of folk allows one to think of individuals belonging simultaneously to many different and distinct folk groups" (Dundes 1989, 11).

As discussed earlier, folk is an all-inclusive term and Richard M. Dorson, an American folklorist has classified four broad categories of folklife:

**Oral Literature** - “Oral literature called verbal art or expressive literature are ‘spoken, sung and voiced forms of traditional utterances’. Traditionally, this sector has been known as folk literature. Oral narrative is one big sub-division of this group, which in turn has its own manifold distinctions” (Handoo, 2000, 13). The varied sub-divisions comprises of folk poetry, riddles and proverbs and folk speech. It is vital to bring forth the idea that each of these sub-categorise can be classified in many sub-forms like myths, prayers, folk epics, legends, laments, ballads, work songs, chants, and even hollers.

**Material Culture** - According to Dorson, “material culture responds to techniques, skills, recipes and formulas transmitted across the generations” (1972, 2-3). This element of folklife is more discernible than oral. Some common questions that can be answered while observing the material culture is how the people of a community build a house, design clothes, prepare their food, design their tools, and the like. Art and craft are also an indispensable component of the material culture. In the context of India “these arts have followed a definite continuity in the history of folk arts” (Handoo, 2000, 15). It is known that folk arts also have a pleasure giving aspect, monetary sustainability and has a close association with social customs, religion and sacraments.

**Customs or Rituals** - Social folk custom lays stress on group communication instead of individual abilities and performances. Of defined significance are the rites de passage connected with birth, matrimony, origination, death and other analogous rituals. “Investigations in this area are more centered on the family and community observances of the people living in the villages, tribal belts and even the industrial areas” (ibid., 17).

**Performing Folk Art** - Performing folk art principally is linked to traditional dance, music and drama. Performance here means the conscious demonstration of the arts by persons or groups who handover these art forms from generation to the other. One school of thought adheres to the idea that all folk items when communicated are performed. Dorson opined, “while the renditions of a folktale or a folk song are now usually referred to as performances, they are more

casual in nature that the conscious presentation of these arts by individuals or groups with folk instruments, dance costumes and scenario props. The performing arts intersect each with the other and often appear in conjunction” (Dorson, 1972, 4).

The categories listed out by Dorson when analysed carefully indicates that the varied branches of folk are things associated to the everyday life of the people. Folk is what people think, how they live, and communicate. Herein, it is important to draw in the reference of the notion of folkways, a term related to the works of William Graham Sumner, where he states that folkways are created, “the young learn them by tradition, imitation, and authority. The folkways, at a time, provide for all the needs of life then and there. They are uniform, universal in the group, imperative, and invariable. As time goes on, the folkways become more and more arbitrary, positive, and imperative” (1906, 2).

Folkways are a by-product of societal force where there is recurrent reiteration of acts, commonly by a number of people functioning in harmony or acting in the same manner when challenged with the same necessity. In this way, folk is made involuntarily “from recurrent needs arise habits for the individual and customs for the group, but these results are consequences which were never conscious, and never foreseen or intended. They are not noticed until they have long existed, and it is still longer before they are appreciated” (ibid., 4).

The question then arises as to how folk is created, some would adhere to the notion that someone in some point in time composed it. However, the process of creating folk is not so simple and it goes back in time where its origin is difficult to establish. But one view that many support is that folk is created and recreated through a course of give and take between man and man. “This process is one of development. New suggestions come in at point after point. They are carried out. They combine with what existed already. Every new step increases the number of points upon which other minds may seize. It seems to be, by this process that great inventions are produced. Knowledge has been won and extended by it” (ibid., 20).

It becomes evident that folk practices are a part and parcel of people's lives and in contemporary times it is seen that people fall back on the folk to understand the life and culture of communities. Thereby, rejecting the earlier view that folk is primitive and only restricted to the rural spaces.

### **3.2 Overview on Folk Media**

Because the folk culture or folk practice is passed on from generation to generation, another element that needs to be looked in within the domain of folk is media. Here, media implies the medium or channel of communication. Communication as a method is centered on the cultural dialectics in a society. Since culture outlines the environment in which a message is deciphered, folk media forms thrive in that environ and continue to stand out as valuable channels for broadcasting messages. "In communication studies, the term 'folk media' is used to encompass the visual arts, drama, oral narratives and other oratorical forms, as well as music and dance" (Nicholls, 1997, 52-53).

Folk is embedded in information about rites, rituals, norms and ways of life. It emerges as a rich cultural reservoir that accumulates traditional knowledge. Folk media or indigenous media is one of the most persuasive modes of communication functioning in a society; for it comes straight from the people (folk) and progresses in the society itself. It can be said that it is a binding component of the society at large. Since it is through, folk media people learn and share believes, rituals and customs.

Traditional cultural forms are considered as folk media which is implanted in local culture, developing in different societies and budding over time, they have been persistently used for moral, religious and socio-political learning. From ancient times, human beings and animals alike have developed their mechanism of communicating. Even before the beginning of contemporary modes of communication like print and electronic media, techniques like beating of drums to signal danger, cave paintings, etc., were successfully used for communication. These olden methods of communication are known to many as folk media. Herein, it is being argued that "folk media or local and traditional communication systems

refers to all organised processes of production and exchange of information managed by rural communities. These also include traditional theatre or drama, masks and puppet performances, tales, proverbs, riddles and songs. They are cultural and endogenous responses to different community needs for information, education, social protest and entertainment” (Chiovoloni, 2004, 1).

Scholars also opine that it is a useful means of communication in today’s world as it not only assists people in connecting with their cultures but also recuperates the obscure culture of the society. It is born and articulated in the expression of people’s ethos and has always been a means to entertain, teach and disseminate the existing philosophies and approaches. Folk media is interconnected with the people’s past, present and future, equipping them with the means to understand their community and worldview.

Many have gone on to say that folk media is the media for the people. The message is intertwined within an assortment of traditional communication channels which comprises of storytelling, drama, folk songs, dance and folk puppetry and more. For instance, as Kombol (2002) states, “folk patterns of communication and social interaction in Africa are those ways of passing messages which are original to the African people as opposed to the modern communication methods” (cited in Daudu, 2009, 19). Folk media thus, is a shared and participatory traditional communication means, regardless of its rusticity.

Even in contemporary times, folk media is being used for communication of messages in rural spaces. For instance, in African context, sensitive message is communicated through songs, dances and plays, intermingle with proverbs and poems. Azeez and Jimo (2003) studied the use of folk media in forest conservation support communication (FCS) among inhabitant in protected areas in south western Nigeria. The data revealed that 88.75 percent of the informants considered trado communication as beneficial and that it was a supplementing other information sources.

Researchers over a period have suggested that new media forms cannot substitute folk media since it was initiated in the philosophies and cultural milieu of societies,



associated to definite segments of the structure and characteristics of social life. “Folk art is functional and spontaneous. Every village has its relevant music, dance or theatre. The folk performing art is changing its structure continuously over centuries modifying itself to the needs of the changing situation making it functionally relevant to the society” (Kumar, 2006, 94). As discussed earlier, folk was dismissed as primitive but the scholarship in folk studies aided in bringing forth the fact that folk exists because people and societies exist and it cannot be shunned away.

### **3.2.1 Revitalisation of Folk Media**

Studies have shown that even the third world countries witnessed a period when revival of folk media practices took place. For instance, Chinese puppet made a rejoinder in Hong Kong, owing to their addition in the Hong Kong Arts Festival. In Malaysia and the Philippines, importance was given on revitalisation of folk media. Also, in Indonesia, studies and records were made on indigenous communication practices namely - the Wayang Orang (traditional opera of masked characters in live performance), Wayang Kulit (leather shadow play), Wayang Golek (wooden-puppet show), among others. Colletta wrote that, “Indonesia historically has used these art-drama forms to promote social and political transformation” (cited in Lent, 1980, 82).

A further illustration of folk media revival was seen with the use of Boria music (a popular Penang composite of calypso rhythm and traditional Malay music) in communicating government information. In Botswana’s Central District (a landlocked country in southern Africa), extension workers and community participants employed the annual Laedza Batanani festivals to connect to the community members. Using folk media like drama, puppetry and folk music, the extension staffs presented before the community programmes that caters to basic community distresses. Laedza Batanani was the earliest experiment that underway in 1974 in the Bokalaka area of northern Botswana. Laedza Batanani was established out of the distress to overcome challenges of increasing community involvement in government development programmes in the area. “Their basic

goal was to find a way of motivating people to participate in development, of mobilizing the community around important local issues” (Kidd and Byram, 1982, 91).

In third world countries, folk media is being revived since community workers, scholars and people at large have taken cognisance of its effectiveness in communicating information. Lent in the article, *Grassroots Renaissance: Folk Media in Third World Nations* states that the Bernameh and puppets are employed to encourage family planning in Iran; folk tunes convey instructional information on change of currency and change over to the right hand drive in Nigeria, and the Kakaku (comic play) is a developmental instrument in Ghana. Chamsoun (ballad) and Karakhouz (shadow puppets) in Egypt, calypso in Trinidad and folk theatre in Jamaica have been found to be adaptable for social message transmission. (Lent, 1980, 84)

Along parallel lines numerous folk forms have been effectively employed in the literacy campaigns in Maharashtra in India. “During the environment building programmes in Ratnagiri district, for example, the Kalajathas drew from musical forms such as Lavani, Powada, Gondhal, Jagar, etc. Environment building gave expression to songs from tribal traditions such as the Dhangari Lok Geet and from religious sects like the Varkaries, followers of Vithoba of Pandharpur” (Saldanha, 1993, 981).

In the Chipko movement too, folk played a vital role. Arvind Singhal and Sarah Lubjuhn in their paper *The Chipko Environmental Conservation Movement in India*, discussed about the use of songs by the women folks of the Mandal village of Uttarkhand, India, for protecting trees from the lumberjacks in the Chipko Movement” (cited in Konwar, 2014, 72).

In Assam, folk forms like Bihu songs, Zikir and Dakor Boson have been used to further the cause of social development in the rural areas. In the context of the Zeme Nagas, Mishra and Newme in their article, *Social Communication and*

*Traditional Folk Media of the Zeme Society*, indicate that among the Zemes, the initiation to Christianity has had an influence on its folk media but the community has not given up such practices and followers of Paupaise still carry on the folk practices (2015, 12).

These are examples illustrating how folk media is being used across the world and in India for carrying out varied development work and social change. It reiterates the idea that folk is not outdated even in the modern times and is equally relevant as a carrier of traditional knowledge and also being a means of communication.

Owing to its functional character, researchers have stated that folk media serves certain purposes. It helps in the process of mobilising the people, acts as a window using which the community understand the world around them, facilitates the process of sustaining and consolidating the culture and social establishments, aids in information diffusion, through it, social and religious education is imparted to the common people, it is also a source of entertainment, it connects the whole community with a common thread. Folk media is a representation of the people in their natural environment, with all their inconsistencies and miscellaneous activities. It gives a foretaste of their bravura of speech, dress music, dance and knowledge.

It becomes evident that folk media has survived the onslaught of time, since they are part of the life and philosophies of people and have the capacity to touch the sentiments of the masses regardless of social, economic and political position within a community. In this direction, folk is also used to understand people's worldview and identity perceptions.

### **3.3 Folk Communication and Society**

Every society has its traditional and customary channels of communication which typifies its survival, association and progress. In the present times, folk media is undergoing a process of revival in which it is progressively being realised that folk practices go beyond being only a source of entertainment. Scholars across domains are examining the folk to understand the past, present and also foretell future leanings of a society. It is being reiterated that folk media is not an isolated entity

but is entwined in the socio-cultural practices of a community or group. Folk media being the transmitter of information from one generation to another act like the bloodstream of a community.

The traditional communication system of any community is a part of its over-all culture and it can be understood in the milieu of its social arrangement, organisation and traditions. The knowledge of folk tradition serves as an important tool in the process of understanding social set-up, progression of a society and its people through its common culture, customs and principles. “Indigenous communication is being eroded, endangering the survival of much valuable information” (Mundy and Compton, 1991, 2).

A community’s knowledge, philosophies or morals, language and worldview is impacted, when the folk media or traditional forms of communication are threatened. Hereby, folk media is also part of people’s culture which helps in giving a structure and meaning to the people of a community. Culture is defined by Oniou and Ogionwo (1981) as “the complex whole of man's acquisitions of knowledge, morals, beliefs, arts, customs, technology etc., which are shared and transmitted from generation to generation” (cited in Kumar, 2012, 1). It is pertinent to note that folk media forms vary from region to region and it is ethno specific, however there are commonalities in all folk media forms.

For example, all folk media:

- 1) Entails a process of interaction.
- 2) The interaction is carried out by means of signs and symbols that arouse shared meaning among community members.
- 3) The process of interaction can be recognised, evaluated and comprehended in the setting of the specific culture and its belief system
- 4) They are also a reflection of the social arrangement of each community.

Some of the common folk media forms that can be found across cultures include “relay-running, festivals, drama, music/songs, dance styles and steps, bush or wood fire, smoke ashes, (colour) of clothing,

tales and proverbs, gun shots, animals, birds and insects, grass knots, fresh leaves knots, have looks, tribal marks, body language, talking drums, weather, pottery and wood carvings, legends and myths, and so on” (Kumar, 2012, 1-2).

All such folk forms are a formation of human communications, consensus and engagements, whereby they are made into customs, given meaning and confounded, based on “age, kinship, gender inheritance and marital status and with authority patterns embedded in the social structure and organization of the society” (ibid., 2).

Folk media, be it face to-face, interpersonal or group communication networks operate both vertically and horizontally and are ordinary, real and inescapable in a community's premeditated and unintended progression.

Johnson (2005) states “folk art, of any country, has developed with the society and so they become a part of the culture of that region. They cannot develop in isolation because they are the manifestations of the culture and society itself to which they belong. (Cited in Kumar, 2012, 2)

In the process of understanding folk media's function as the connection between the past and the present of a community, the definition of folk given by Raymond Williams is of importance. He said folk “had a general meaning of ‘people’, in a range from particular social formations, including nations to people in general” (1983,136). It is indicative of the idea that folk practices are part of people's day to day activities, it is what people are. It emulates the culture of a society and has a relation to the day-to-day life of society and the community. Through folk media, people of a community transfer information and express their distress, happiness, festivity, accomplishments and the like.

Folk media is not institutionalised and structured, individuals maintain it and it is this feature of folk media that makes it easy to espouse by people across generations. They gratify individual requirement and at the same time belong to the community.

The folk media is known to refuge and propagate dynamically the tradition and culture of the ancestors, as they are profoundly engrained in the social mainstream.

There are varied forms of folk media and in India they are known by different names across regions. For example, in Andhra Pradesh, the folk forms of a village as a whole are known as 'Janapada Kalalu'. Correspondingly, common terms like 'Lok Natya' folk dance, or 'Lok Geet' folk song are used to refer to folk media in general. The term 'Jan Madhyamas' implying people's media is also suggestive of these systems exemplified by people's lifestyle, language, behaviour, music, dance, dress, food habits, worldview and customs. As veteran folk media scholar, Balwant Garhgi rightly said "folk media represents the people in their natural habitat, with all their contradictions and multifarious activities. It gives a glimpse of their style of speech, music, dance, dress and wisdom. It contains of reach store of mythological heroes, medieval romances, chivalric tales, social customs, beliefs, and legends" (cited in Kumar, 2006, 97-98).

It is an accepted fact that folk media has undergone several changes over the course of time adapting to the requirements of fluctuating circumstances and people's needs, but it is imperative to acknowledge that despite the changes, folk media has stood the test of time and continues to be functionally significant to the society even in the contemporary times.

Durgadas Mukhopadhyay in the article, *Let's Use Folk Arts and Traditional Media for Development*, states that the very idea of tradition advocates a process of the dissemination of ancient beliefs and the circumstantial expression and interpretation of the universal. Even though it is repetitive, this repetition enables the process of affirmation of an identity, a revitalisation and renewal of the vitalities of a community's social life. And "traditional media rely on this cultural support and context" (2007, 1) which is also the aesthetic element of the living system in the community.

Research over the period of time has marked out the presence and importance of folk media in very community as irrefutable and thus, it is imperative to understand

the usages utilisation of folk media for various activities more so in the context of India.

### **3.4 Application of Folk Media**

The common folksong Villupaattu of Tamil Nadu, Alha of Uttar Pradesh, Laavani of Maharashtra, Gee-gee of Karnataka and Kabigan of Bengal were instrumental in awakening the conscience of the people against the colonial rule. Also folk media was very effective in the several political and social movements initiated by Mahatma Gandhi. Post-independence, the union government sustained the use of the folk media to transmit messages and create awareness about development schemes.

In the 1940s, the traditional theatre of Bengal became a symbol for the anti-colonial struggle, and the Bengali elite who had previously ignored or denigrated traditional theatre, began to give importance to these performing arts. Rabindranath Tagore and others advocated the use of traditional theatre in programmes of cultural revival and anti-colonial protest in the context of rural fairs and festivals. In the 1920s, the playwright Mukunda Das transformed the rural folk form of Jatra, which had earlier dealt with historical or mythological themes, and created a new form of Swadeshi or Nationalist Jatra which dealt with contemporary themes of colonial injustice, caste oppression and feudal exploitation. (Mukhopadhyay, 2007, 2)

In the current times too, folk media has equal footing in consolidating national integrity, manifesting social harmony, invigorating communal coherence, strengthening value-system and upholding traditional knowledge system. In the article, *Problems and Prospect of Folk Media Usage for Agricultural Extension Service Delivery in Benue State, Nigeria*, Daudu states that “agencies interested in rural development especially agricultural information dissemination should note that there is certainly a good prospect for folk media usage for extension service delivery in Benue State” (2009, 24).

The Heart Care Foundation of India, New Delhi has been organising a nationwide publicity of science and health communication. The publicity is specifically on nutrition under a nationally coordinated project of the Parishad by means of numerous folk forms for communicating messages related to nutrition to large number of people. The 10 - month long project carried out under the aegis of Ministry of Culture and Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Govt. of Rajasthan, used street plays, puppetry and folk songs, etc., as methods of communication. “In Philippines, author Valbuena VT (1989) described the use of folk media for promoting the messages of family planning, good nutrition and environmental conservation” (Konwar, 2014, 71).

Folk media are traditional communication structures signifying a systematised method of construction and inter-change of information managed by a community. They are cultural and endogenous rejoinders to diverse community pre-requisites for information, teaching, social dissent and entertainment. And thus folk media is as relevant as it is contemporary.

According to Kidd & Byram, “in many developing countries of the world, various folk media like puppetry, dramas, folk songs and dance have been used to engage the interest of the large numbers of the masses with the motto of community education and development. These folk media in collaboration with mass media such as radio and television used to diffuse health messages widely and effectively” (cited in Konwar, 2014, 72).

In Assam for instance, Bihu song without losing its ingenuity are used to communicate information about the prevention of indoor air pollution caused by the use of coal and bio-mass for cooking; various schemes of the government of Assam are promoted through this folk practice.

The promotion of the use of fertilizer and tractor was done by using traditional songs and kwagh-hir puppet theatre in Tiv land, in Benue State, Nigeria. To encourage herbicide usage, the Ochahuhu dance was also made use of in Otukpo local government area (Benue State Government, 2002, cited in Daudu, 2009, 20).



These examples help in illustrating the idea that across the globe, folk media is being used for disseminating varied kinds of information. Its use in developing and under-developed countries is increasing since people want to understand and cater to the needs of the community using traditional methods of communication, where mass media becomes ineffective. “The use of traditional or folk media to aid recent national development programmes seems to be upstaging the paradigms of the 1960s that emphasized bigness in mass media development, non-participatory, unidirectional information imbalance (one-way flow of information from urban centers to rural areas or from foreign nations to Third World cultures), and that played up development in terms of economics at the expense of peoples’ values, beliefs, attitudes and the societal needs” (Lent, 1980, 78).

Likewise in India, the folk media has been incessantly used to communicate to the masses and has been reported to be effective and influential in communicating about the newest development in various fields along with ushering in the preferred changes, talk into protests and consciousness among the people. “Unlike in western theatre, folk performance is a composite art in India. It is a total art with fusion elements from music, dance, pantomime, versification, epic ballad recitation, religion and festival peasantry. It imbibes ceremonials, rituals, belief and social system. It has deep religious and ritualistic overtones and the again, it can surely project social life, secular themes and universal values” (Kumar, 2012, 6).

Traditional folk forms have a functional character, are inter-personal in nature and have a circumstantial foundation that enables it to stand the test of time and also disseminate message of transformation, development and evolution. It has been acknowledged that folk media practices and norms have long-term influence on society and its principles. Although, globalisation, economic liberalisations and modern elements of transformation have had an extensive bearing on the folk it still continues to contribute meaningfully in social integrity and solidarity.

“Folk arts have continued to play a meaningful role in rural areas, in educating the rural people about the consequences of social evils like alcoholism, illiteracy untouchability, superstition, communalism, population explosion, malnutrition and

insanitation, dowry and so on. Even today in the midst of hi-tech media scenario, the traditional performing arts continue to be popular” (Chapke and Bhagat, 2006, 124).

The above illustrations help in establishing the idea that folk media is an established, time-honored segment of every society, and it is being systematically used for diverse purposes like education, implementation of various projects even to this day.

It is pertinent to reiterate that folk media since antiquity has been a fragment of local cultures of a community. Primarily it was protected in the oral chronicles and collective memories of the members of the community. Folk forms of communicative methods undergo changes with the passage of time affected by the fluctuating environment and requirements of the social order. In this direction, the oral nature of folk forms has become a bane for it. Since the younger generation under the influence of mass media, westernisation and globalisation no longer interest in these traditional practices which is posing a threat to the folk media. This threat faced by folk media also poses a threat to the traditional knowledge system which may perish away if folk media is not sustained and preserved. With the demise of folk media the lifeline of a community is also at a risk since in modern times to a society's ethos, philosophies, worldview, rites and rituals which is communicated via folk media.

### **3.5 Folk Media in Northeast India**

A look into the Northeast of India reveals the bounty of folk media that runs through the life and culture of each community residing in the region. Regardless of the cultural multiplicity which is difficult to even perceive, there runs a rivulet of affinity and togetherness that binds people of the region together. And in this stance the folk media has a significant role to play. Scholars opine that folk can become a lens to understand the Northeast region specifically. The folk practices of the Northeast offer a sense of commonness, it also gives an idea of closeness.

Boundless folk materials exist that make up the folk history or ethno history and can be used as resources to join up the tribal history of the region and understand

the socio-cultural contours. A multi-dimensional approach is required to examine folk, though conventionally folk is associated to “oral tradition and the verbal art, other categories have also been taken into consideration like physical folklife, customs and performing folk arts, to get more holistic and meaningful results” (Dutta, 2012, 17).

Scholars from the region also are of the opinion that Northeast has never been given a space in the pan India scheme of things, and the region has been side-lined from all fronts. History is no different; the impact of Northeast towards the history and evolution of the country has not been properly acknowledged. In most historical text, Northeast has transitory mention and “the veil of historical awareness about the Northeast continues to prevail on the general historians of India” (ibid. 37). The onus lies on the scholar’s of the region to lift the veil. Herein comes in the role of oral history and oral tradition. These being the predominant source of collecting materials, which can open up new avenues of understanding about Northeast India, its people and culture.

Historical ballads are quite momentous, along with other items of folk media which “offer important clues for the interpretation of events of historical importance and most frequently, scholars have unhesitatingly take cognizance of them in modern history writing” (ibid., 48). In the context of the region, the relevance of oral / folk traditions is accentuated, primarily in the milieu of examining the socio-cultural, political history and structure of the communities.

Folk is an indicator of cultural subsistence, an association that goes past time and history, a discourse between past and present, storehouse of values and knowledge and are wholly internalised. Customs, performances, material art, crafts, architecture, all are facets of folk traditions and each community in the region is rich in distinctive folk media. Folk is a ‘strategic knowledge system’ (Sen, 2010, 18) functioning as a communication device protecting and promulgating community life, recommencing and enhancing shared convictions.

For instance, the Khasi folk narrative is nourished upon the dynamics of the spoken word. It is to be noted that “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 organisation and political system” (ibid., 18).

Example can also be drawn from the Tangsa community in Assam who have revived their folk festivals cutting across religious barriers “come together to jointly celebrate a ‘traditional’ festival in an attempt to create a common pan-Tangsa identity” (Barkataki-Ruscheweyh 2013, 242). This was a consequence of the recognition among the Tangsa’s that religious precincts before ethnic concord may perhaps lead to their ethnic elimination.

In terms of research on folk media in the Northeast region too, the approach that folk is an old-world thing of the past, has only begun to change recently. Over a period of time, research on folk also initiated to ascertain that “folklore represented the cultural expressions and ideology of a people living in nature, following the habit, manners etc., of the olden times and untouched by changing realities under the impact of technical discoveries and development processes” (Sen, 2010, 31).

Once it began to be globally recognised that folk is not old-world, perceptions began to alter. As a result research was carried out with a fresh perspective and it became accredited that “technology is not stamping out folklore, rather it is becoming a vital factor in the transmission of folklore and it is providing an exciting source of inspiration of now folklore” (ibid. 35).

Simply put, folk practice is a dynamic component of the human culture and philosophy having the innate capacity to acclimate with the social and cultural fluctuations. This has been the case with the folk practices of the region too; it is profoundly embedded in the history, temperaments and philosophies of a particular community, which helps in the establishment of cultural expressions and social groundings. It also manifests the idea that folk is not antithetic to modernism, it is not at time-honoured and faces the risk of being degenerated under numerous conditions. “Thus, “tradition in true perspective needs to be viewed as a ‘transitive series’ (Ramanujan, 1991, xviii) a ‘scale of forms’ engaged in continuous and dynamic dialogic relations between past and present” (cited in Sen 2010, 36). Thus,

it can be said that folk is a cultural construct mirroring perennial socio-cultural alterations.

In the process of discussing folk practices in Northeast India, it is important to understand that man as social being owes his survival commonly in the folk practices that his forefathers have passed down. Indigenous knowledge system is of prominence, for within it vestiges the fundamentals of socio-cultural, political growth of any society, herein lies the significance of folk media, for it acts the carrier of tradition.

Clifford Geertz (1983) has shown that “knowledge is incalculably local, indivisible from people’s instruments and encasements” (cited in Sen, 2010, 48). Due to this nature the culture or custom of any community is specific to it.

“Folklore is the sum total of the expressive behaviour patterns of the members of a particular group. Their everyday life revolves around this pattern - the habits, gestures, customs, vocabularies, worldview, etc. These find their outlet in a continuous discourse in different mediums of expression such as art, literature, performances, rites and existence determines the turns of these discourses. Folklore is thus, an amalgam of expressions, created, recreated, circulated and communicated within the circuit of a group that find acceptance among its members” (Sen, 2010, 49).

Folklife entails all elements of people’s life and culture, and here the definition of culture given by (Tylor 1847) is worthwhile, where he said “culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, beliefs art, morals, laws, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (cited in Sen, 2010, 49). The ethnic and folkloristic workspace in this region mainly of the Khasis is very opulent, comprising varieties at each level of the gamut.

Because an important angle of folk is the diffusion of tradition across generations, the elements affecting the communication like interaction, community, individual, language, has to be taken into consideration while studying folk music, dance and drama, which is a fecund method of understanding folk traditions. Against this

milieu, Khasi folk traditions have been examined and an attempt has been made to explore matriliney through the lens of folk media.

### **3.6 Khasi Folk Media**

In the preceding sections, discussion has been carried out about what folk is and what folk media implies. What is the role and characteristics of the folk media and what are its potential categories (even though genre or category is not so much of significance). In this backdrop an understanding about Khasi folk media is being positioned. It is pertinent to mention that Khasi media has not been identified so much as other folk media from different parts of India, like Jatra of Bengal, Puppetry of Rajasthan, Tamasha of Maharashtra, Bhavai of Gujarat, Bihu of Assam. Along the lines it is also seen that Khasi folk media has not been utilised as a communication tool for furthering development plans or social messages, as being done in other parts of the country.

Folkways are as common to the Khasi society as it is to any other community residing in India. “The folk and traditional arts of India have from ancient times been used for moral, religious, and socio-political purposes. Rarely have they been resorted to, for pure entertainment alone” (Prasad, 2013, 3).

A significant pattern that emerged from the data gathered is that people both in the rural and urban spaces had a fair idea of the term ‘folk media’. When questioned as to what they understand by folk media, octogenarian Lakmen Lyngdoh said, it is telling stories, my grandmother would tell me stories, I told to my eldest granddaughter too. Similarly, a 27 year old Abir Syiem said, “we call it *Jingsneng Tymmen*, you see where elders of the family have the duty of narrating stories with moral values to the younger generation, though I do not have much exposure to it but it used to be a common practice among us, Khasis”. The Khasis tell stories *Thuh Khana*, sitting around the hearth, that is how they know about their ancestors, but children these days have no time to sit with us but busy with phone and television, opined 62 year old Cathy Rumnong.

Another respondent stated that her mother told her that Khasis have many tales and not much is written down. But where is the time these days to sit with

grandparents to hear them. These and many more such chronicles set in the idea that Khasis in the present times are aware of the presence of a strong oral source of information. In which evidently the younger generation doesn't have much time to invest. By contrast the older generation lament that if this continues, what would be the fate of the bountiful information that resides in the many oral narratives of the Khasis. Thus, it becomes evident that the Khasis are not oblivious about folk media and also take cognisance of the fact that largely Khasi folk is not practiced by the masses. The Khasi folk is still very relevant since till day, Khasis rely largely on their oral narratives to understand their worldview. The Khasi community till date is aware of the idea that oral narratives were also a medium of educating the younger generation about life and culture in general. This becomes evident from the responses of the informants.

As Maurice Halbwachs states, “‘memory’ is a matter of how minds work together in society, how their operations are structured by social arrangements: It is in society that people normally acquire their memories. It is also in society that they recall, recognize, and localize their memories” (cited in Gahatraj, 2014, 416). It ratifies that the context and meaning of oral texts is rooted in the society itself and it helps in the understanding of how and what a community thinks of itself. A fact that cannot be repudiated is that definite alterations may occur in oral narratives, when it is communicated from one generation to the other, but what remains unaffected is the content, the connotation and the fundamental essence.

The study reasons that the elements of the oral tradition of folk media are methodically connected to definite segments of the social structure and to specific facets of social life. And if folk media is obliterated, then the store house of traditional knowledge will cease to exist. A community's lifeline of expression will disappear and people will find it difficult to understand their worldview; philosophies, norms that guide their social life and help in identity formation.

### 3.6.1 Classifications of Khasi Folk Media

- a. Taking into consideration existing categories of folk as proposed by Richard Dorson, the first category of folk media in case of the Khasis is also oral literature like proverbs, tales, myths and the like. More specifically they are *Jingsneng Tymmen* (a set of maxims that has been orally passed on through generations), *Khanatang* (sanctified stories), *Khana Pateng* (legends), *Purinam* (fairy tales), *Puriskam* (fables) and *Khana Pharshi* (parables).

For instance, many of the *Khanatang* are laden with the narratives of an evil spirit known as *Thlen*. For some, the *Thlen* is a demonic being while some also worship it as a deity, though people never acknowledge it. As Lyngdoh notes, “*Thlen* is the popular usurper, the creature who subverts the fundamental precepts laid down by Khasi traditional religion, in which earning righteousness is the foremost duty of human beings” (2015, 170). The Khasi sanctified stories also are a prime source of understanding how god created the world and man came to earth from heaven, the notion of noble and wicked. Nongkynrih (2007) writes that principles of matriliney, clan system and even governance were infused in *Khanatang*. A book titled, *Ki Khanatang U Barim* (Sacred Stories of the Past), authored by H. Elias (1972) is a significant collection of Khasi sacred stories. The purpose of such stories is to explicate the Khasi philosophical beliefs about every aspect of Khasi culture and ensure it influences and grasps even the humblest of men.

#### Case 5

Remarkably, it is a folktale that validates the reasoning behind why Khasis depend heavily on oral narratives.

The legend recounts how a Khasi forefather who was returning back after a divine union with God, lost a manuscript which contained the philosophical and spiritual wisdoms and along with it information about the script that was used for documenting these philosophies. He was also chaperoned by another person from the Surma valley; a big obstacle came their way in the form of an unbridled river,



which they had to crossover. The man from Surma valley swam across the violent water after fastening his manuscript to a bundle of hair on his pate. The Khasi ancestor held the manuscript tight in between his teeth and succeeded to swim on shore. But in the process of swimming through the water he unintentionally, swallowed the manuscript. He returned with a heavy heart and communicated to his people the whole episode, but comforted them that all the wisdom were still anew in his mind and could effortlessly narrate all of it to them. From here, originated the process of story-telling among the Khasis, which has become a central part of their life.

Khasi forefathers were aware of the importance of the oral traditions and so they have been ciphered with religious allegory, moral principles ordinarily known as *Khanatang* (sanctified stories). In the Khasi community, the oral chronicles are also a medium of teaching the younger generation about life and philosophy in general and consequently, oral narratives have been classified accordingly. The younger generation may not be well versed with all the oral traditions or the tales associated with each form but that does not mean its relevance is gone, reasoned a 66 year old Lamlynti Nongsiej.

A 75 year old male stated, that the oral stories are like air for our people, it gives life to us. "It tells us who we are and how we are expected to lead our lives in the earth". It can be indicated that the oral traditions are laden with deep-social philosophies and have a deep-rooted association with the life and tradition of the Khasi community. It groups the people as a definitely distinguishable tribal group, whose being even to this day is regulated to a great point by the legacies of the past known to the group through the oral practices.

Oral narrative is a corpse of wisdom that plays a strong role in everyday life of a Khasi. It is the oral discourse that shapes, determines and sustains Khasi culture. In the present times, there has been a diminishing importance of the oral tradition. Factors being western model of education, hegemony of script and paper, but it has to be recognised that among the youth, the importance of oral still persists, for example, the popularity of the *Phawar* is increasing among the youth.

The *Phawar* is a unique tradition among the Khasis. It is an ancient tradition, generated from the game of archery and at one point it was exclusive to archery. But the *Phawar* with the passage of time has been diffused and is associated with fishery, death, community hunting and there are different genres of *Phawar*. In the modern context, *Phawar* has been adopted to various fields like political rally etc., whereby *Phawar* singers are engaged to lure voters. *Phawar* is one form of Khasi folk that is being used in many government initiatives like family planning which is broadcast via radio. *Phawar*, though derived from an ancient tradition has a protean quality/plasticity and is available to various media for various cultural communication.

- b. The second category of folk is material culture, in this direction, diverse views came to the fore. As a general pattern people failed to identify with the term material culture, but when the meaning was explained some seem to grasp the idea though not very confident about it. The remaining few apparently had no idea that such a concept prevailed.

One of the most important components of material culture is art and crafts. A respondent indicated that Khasis are dexterously skilled in weaving, woodwork, bamboo work and cane work. “In cane work, we Khasis make a special type of cane mat known as *Tlieng* which is extremely sturdy” informed Pdiangarti Khongnang aged 38. Khasis are also dexterous in making musical instruments like the drums *Ka Bom* or *Ka Nakra* (big drum), *Ka Ksing Shynrang* (male drum) and *Ka Ksing Kynthei* (female drum) and *Ka Padiah* (small drum).

“Folk arts and crafts, as is well known, are objects of material culture that simultaneously give pleasure and serve some political, social and economic end” (Handoo, 2000, 15). In the same tone, 83 year old Ksanbor Myrboh argued, “Khasi food and the way we make our houses should come under what you called material culture. Some people in our village also know how to make living root bridges that are becoming so popular among tourists now. Even that should count I think as this material culture, nobody has written it down only by mouth we know and I can tell you” she states. Material culture for the Khasis too is transmitted socially

through interaction and is a symbolic representation of the nuances of the community. Material culture comprises of objects or possessions of human beings, just about everything that can be seen or touched, that is not mortal has the probability to be an article of material culture. Architecture, pictures, documents, painting, artwork are all illustrations of material culture. Material culture offers an insight into non-material culture, which consists of the ideas, beliefs, customs and principles of the populace. Most importantly the Khasi ancestors had conceived narratives about all aspects of life, philosophical, religious and practical. The covert purpose was to educate the younger generation and entertainment was only an overt intention.

- c. Social folk custom is the third category of folk life. For the Khasis too, social folk custom have an important place in their life and culture. “We have lots of ceremonies and rituals but I cannot remember all now, I am a Christian and so we don’t follow most of it, but I remember seeing some of the rituals. Like we have specific ceremonies related to birth, death, wedding, and so many. Those who still follow *Niam Khasi* will know better. But yes the customs are important for the Khasis” opined Embhah Shabong.

For instance, *Tang Jait* ceremony, which is performed when men marry outside Khasi community. The family is assimilated back to the society through the *Tang Jait*, in which a new (*Kur*) clan is created but whereby the first born daughter of the couple is considered to be the root ancestress. Aged 65, Donlakador Pariat reasoned, *Tang Jait* but is a ritual not restricted to the followers of *Niam Khasi*, even the Christians feel the need to follow this ceremony to fit in back to the society, so people do follow it ardently even today.

From the narratives it was evident that Khasis celebrate life in all forms. For example, in the villages post the construction of a new house, the elders perform some ceremonies to bless the house and family members. Post which a dance takes place called *Shad Kwei Iing*. The naming ceremony or *Jerkhun* is also celebrated with full fervour and involves elaborate rituals. But many respondents informed

that the converts do not follow it any longer and most such practices have been given up, which is a threat for the Khasi community.

The naming ceremony (*Jerkhun*) among the Khasis has some elaborate rituals that people have learned from their elder generation through word of mouth and observation. A 75 year Aiom Nongrum, listed out some nuances of the naming ceremony, according to her she remembers them as told to her by her grandmother and she hoped her grandchildren too would learn them similarly. In *Jerkhun* ceremony the gender of the infant is connoted using symbols, for a male child, a sword, a bow and arrow is placed by the altar. In case of a female child, the *Khoh* (conical cane basket) and *U Star* (cane head band) is placed. Great care is taken to ensure that a befitting name is giving to the child, such that the child is blessed with prosperity and happiness. It is believed that through divination the right name for the child can be selected. The divination is carried out uttering one name after the other while the priest (*Nongduwai*) goes on pouring wine, the name that corresponds with the last drop of wine will be approved. There are some who also perform the confirmation ceremony (*Ka Tap Lubri*) to guarantee that the name is auspicious and the ancestors are not dissatisfied by any means. She also informed that some rituals vary from clan to clan, but the basic tenets remain the same and is an integral part of the Khasi life.

In matters related to social folk custom, the group is of significance instead of the individual; focus is on family and community performances. Scholars have also stated that the social customs are also a reflection of the process of adaptation and survival of culture of a community. “Similarly the religious practices of many tribal groups of the country who did not maintain close contacts with the firmly established mainstream religious systems, also show the maintenance of indigenous modes of worship” (Handoo, 2000, 15).

- d. A 79 year old Hehbok Wallang orated that Kongthong village is known as the singing village for its unique folk tradition. The mothers and other family members call their children with a unique tune composed at the time of birth; the tune is locally known as *Jingrwai Iawbei*. “We have dances like

*Shad Nongkrem, Shad Sukh Mysiem* and few others. The Khasis also play the drums on all important occasions, be it rituals or festivities”.

Herein, it is indicative of the fourth category of folk is performing folk arts. Normatively, Khasi performing folk arts also is concomitant to music, dance and drama. Performance here implies the demonstration of the arts by persons or groups who also have an important task of handing over these art forms from one generation to another generation. While witnessing the Nongkrem dance, one occurrence that cannot be missed is how toddlers, both boys and girls dressed in the traditional costumes are initiated into the dance arena to partake in the dance. A process where the children are introduced to the folk practices; they have a chance to bond with the community and also partake in the festivities.

Performing folk art involves the rendition of music; dance accompanied by instruments, often one art is in conjunction with the other. Such performances are part of ceremonies and also of festivities. Here too the component of oral transmission comes in effect, “just like a tale or song or a folksong is passed on from one generation to another by word of mouth, so is the instrument (its construction as well) and the kind of music associated with it, passed on from one generation to another by ear and memory” (Handoo, 2000, 20).

Khasi performing art is in oral form and only recently attempts have been made to notify it or put in notation form. Performing art has been looked as a means of entertainment since times immemorial, but today it is a discipline of study. The core classification is very strong in Khasi performing arts, more so in Khasi music. But it needs a larger projection and it has to be researched into. And they are very much part of the *Khasi Riti*. One way of reaching god is through music, through drum beats, it is the integral part of Khasi culture, opined a lady ages 35.

Research on Khasi folk music has revealed that it is the base, upon which traditional or other genres of Khasi music developed. “Khasi folk music has evolved and developed as part of the day-to-day life of the people whether in the family, the clan or the community. As such no teaching process is involved here. A Khasi believes that music is an art gifted by the Creator and it is with this perception that Khasi

folk music evokes shared joy as there is much group participation (Syiem, 2012, 22).

### **3.7 Relevance of Khasi Folk Media in Recent Times**

Having discussed the different categories of folk life in general and that of the Khasi's in particular, a question that needs to be answered is - in the present times, what relevance do folk or folk media have for the Khasi populace?

Several scholars in the past and in contemporary times have researched about Khasi folk practices, primarily the oral narratives. And had established the fact that the Khasi society at large relies on the narratives for understanding the political and socio-cultural underpinnings. Material culture, social folk custom and performances have not gained so much ground and thus, opens a scope for investigation. It is worthy of mention that, so far concrete attempts have not been made to understand, if nuances of matriliney are embedded in the varied folk practices and that the folk practices are a vehicle of communication that is rooted in the life and culture of the Khasis.

The Khasi culture and society has experienced several modifications owing to the exposure to other cultures, religion and people. But regardless of these fluctuations, quite a lot of indigenous traits like language, clan system, traditional political structure, kinship and its folk media has continued to survive. The folk practices of the Khasi have principally been a manifestation of clan, ethnic and religious distinctiveness and of the sacrosanctity of the matrilineal order, social structure and political arrangement.

A defining feature of Khasi folk forms is that, it is dominated by oral transmission. Even though written Khasi Literature came into existence from 19th century onwards, the Khasis at all times have a very rich oral tradition. Khasi oral literature is awfully rich and diverse where certain genres are categorised with very accurate connotations. It is indicative of the idea that the anonymous creators of the folk traditions were aware that once the information was rooted in the folk forms and accepted by the folk (people), it would become a tangible source. It is evident that

the folk media survives on the oral tradition more so in the context of Khasi folk media, where only a minute part of this vast material has been transcribed.

An elderly Joplang Marwein reinstated that even today, the Khasis rely on the oral narratives. He stated that according to Khasi folktales, the tribe traces its foundation to *Hynniewtrep* (seven families). The story being, *U Blei* (the Creator God) had originally scattered the human beings to sixteen heavenly families (*Khad Hynriew Trep*) and their residence was in heaven. The occupants of seven of these households were allowed to come down on the earth with the assistance of a golden stepladder (*Jingkieng Ksiar*) that was positioned on the *Sohpetbneng* peak (located in the present-day Ri-Bhoi district), and in this way the ancestors settled in the hills of Meghalaya. Subsequent to an appeal from nature (*Ka Ramew*) to the Mother Decree (*Ka Hukum*), to send the Hynniew Trep (the Khasis) to this world and look after it, the seven families had come down to stay. With the passage of time, the Seven Huts on earth erred following which the bridge was removed; a division took place splitting the group into nine above and the seven below. Khasis also believe in a triad in which *Ka Iawbei Tynrai* (root ancestress), *U Thawlang* (her-husband) and *U Suidnia* (her-brother), are our special ancestress and ancestors.

However, there are many opinions that have been established about the origin of the Khasis, but even today notably, the Khasi community traces its origin from legend and so many such oral tales outlines the culture, philosophies and way of life of the Khasi tribe. Although the Khasis are no longer purely an oral society, yet till date they rely profoundly on their oral narratives, lores, maxims for re-joining with the past, comprehend the Khasi worldview and make way for the future generations to live by the Khasi way of life and tenets.

In the process of examining Khasi folk media, the oral nature of folk cannot be ignored: narratives, performances - dance and music, material culture, rites and rituals, all of it is transmitted orally. It is indeed remarkable that over the years via research and analysis, anthropologists and even historians, “have demonstrated the adaptability, durability and frequent vitality of orality as a medium of communication even after the advent of writing” (Innes, 1998, 4). This re-

establishes the point that oral practices have passed the challenge posed by the commencement of literacy, and that it has a fundamental role to play in the establishment of cultural and social structure within which literacy developed, no society is exclusively literate: “oral communication (not to mention gesture) continues to function as an alternative to, or a partner of, the written word” (ibid., 5). On the one hand, the presence of the written word does not imply that all oral elements within a society is eliminated and on the other, “orality itself does not preclude complex intellectual activity” (Thomas, 2002, 4).

### **Case 6**

Despite following different religious faith, Khasis believe in some basic tenets, which have been taught to them by the elders by word of mouth. In present times people do not have the time to sit around the hearth and listen to narratives from elders but until the recent past, this was a common drill in every household and an effective method of communicating traditional knowledge.

The Khasis believe in three essential doctrines, which they abide by fervidly for centuries now:

- *Tip Brew Tip Blei* - Know man (*Brew*) know god (*Blei*), which implies service to mankind is service to god.
- *Tip Kur Tip Kha* - Know your maternal (*Kur*) and paternal (*Kha*) kins, or in simple words respect both the matri-kin and patri-kin.
- *Kamai Ya Ka Hok* - Earn (*Kamai*) righteously (*Hok*), the preponderance of an upright life is the essential idea of this tenet.

These philosophies have been presented through generations, by word of mouth in the form of stories, legends, etc. These are the underpinnings around which social rules, beliefs and the Khasi world-view have been moulded. The Khasis are celebrated as great story tellers and they have been triumphed in learning the quintessence of the oral narratives. The art of story-telling has had profound social function; stories were intended “to elucidate the Khasi philosophical thought on



every aspect of Khasi culture and make sure that it reaches and holds captive even the simplest of men” (Nongkynrih, 2007, ix).

Several others narrated that like the elders, the youngsters do not know so much of the oral traditions, rituals, but they do understand its sanctity and importance in Khasi life. Though people follow different religions, yet no one disregards the folk practices. Christians directly do not participate in many such traditions but they come as audience, for example, during Nongkrem dance and enjoy the process thoroughly. Parents and grandparents do instill some of the philosophies and values but a generation which is growing up watching television and playing video games not everyone pays much heed to these things. The parents of today, people do realise what their children are missing out, since this generation is even more detached from their own people. Even though people have converted to Christianity they feel the need to revive folk practices like the *Phawar* and others and make popular among the youth.

Oral word is so important in the life of a Khasi, that it has been craftily used to hand down information through generations. The chief responsibility of teaching the young with ethical and social values was bestowed to the older members of the family, who would sit by the hearth and narrate various *Jingsneng Tymmen* (a set of maxims that has been orally passed on through generations). “They mark an important territory in Khasi thought for they capture the ambience of a culture with roots embedded deep in oral practices of their ancestors, where the social and the metaphysical interpenetrate each other” (Syiem, 2011, 44). Reaffirming the relevance of folk media in a society is the *Jingsneng Tymmen*, which can be seen as a significant extension of the social, a product of the oral that has been defining the Khasi way of life.

Through this study it is learnt that the concept of folk is not unknown to Khasis in general and youth in particular. Many respondents identified Khasi folk media as Nongkrem dance, Shad Sukh Mysiem, the instrument duitara, the drums and different tales. Some also included the attire, language and food to be a part of folk media for they felt that cumulatively it defined who a Khasi is. Few respondents

also named certain ceremonies to be a part of folk media like the *Tang Jait* ceremony, *Jerkhun* or the naming ceremony.

The study also reveals that among the youth the sentience towards folk practices is present. They are well-versed with the Khasi tenets but in terms of minute details like rituals related to marriage, naming ceremony, death and the like could not be narrated successfully. Most opined that nobody these days sit by the hearth to hear stories from elders, those residing in the villages move out of their homes at a young age for education. Also, most are practicing Christians, so their exposure to folk traditions is limited only to the dances and music but at the same time they also reverted that folk is part of Khasi life and many are learning some elements of it in the academic courses offered by few colleges in Shillong.

### **Case 7**

Aged 20, Junisha Marbaniang stated folk practices now have also become a means of earning a livelihood for some as a degree helps in seeking jobs. Also traditionally the Khasi girls are not allowed to play the drums but this typecast is being broken by girls who take these courses and learn to play the traditional instruments, which in earlier times was not possible. There are institutions today that offer courses on music where students are exploring Khasi performing arts too. For instance, St. Anthony's college offers degree in music, Martin Luther Christian University has a department of fine arts, North Eastern Hill University and Seng Khasi are few institutions that have opened avenues for the youth to learn folk music and also earn a livelihood out of it.

The above assertions are pointers to the idea that Khasi folk media is still relevant in contemporary times, though there are several factors like globalisation, modernisation and religion that have had an effect on it. Also, the oral nature of Khasi folk media should not be the cause to undermine its veracity.

### **3.8 Oral–Written Dichotomy and the Khasi Folk Media**

In the process of understanding folk and its facets, one recurrent opposition that emerges is that of oral versus written. Also, for the Khasis, orality lies at the core

of its folk media practices. Oral practices which is the core of the folk, assists in expressing 'self-identity' and maintain the social structure, principles and practices of a community. Along the lines, orality for the Khasis provides for the perpetuation of social order other than being a rich reservoir of historical knowledge. In the present times, oral traditions are being re-examined, it is the pathway of information wherein gridiron of ideas takes place and interrelations between the traditional and contemporary can be reasoned. It does not amount to over romanticising orality as many may critique.

Communication is the lifeline of a society which expedites the transmission of simple to complex portions of information. Just like the want to eat, love and sleep; the need to communicate is equally strong among human beings. Prior to the dawn of modern methods of communication like print and electronic media, distinctive systems like beating of drums to signal danger, cave paintings, etc. were efficiently used for communication. Each community has its medium of expression that is employed to pass on, preserve and acclimatise with customs and traditions from generation to another. This in turn has an influence on the beliefs and lifestyle of each member of a community. These rudimentary devices of communication are known to many as folk media. Herein, folk media is of importance because it is a demonstration of a clan's ethnic and religious identity, and it encompasses oral tradition, customs and rituals. Over the years through investigation and analysis, anthropologists and even historians have established the flexibility, resilience and recurrent vivacity of orality as a channel of communication post the arrival of the written word.

This retells the fact that oral practices have cleared the challenge posed by the beginning of literacy. And that it has a vital role to play in the establishment of cultural and social structure in which literacy developed; no society is solely literate: oral continues to be a substitute to, or a partner of, the written word. On one hand, the presence of the written word does not imply that all oral elements within a society is eliminated and on the other orality itself does not impede intricate intellectual activity (Thomas, 1992, 4).

One fact that cannot be overridden is that, there is no known human civilisation which does not seem to have oral folk traditions. All existing evidence leads us to accept that all human societies have proverbs, riddles, folktales, myths, ballads, songs, and the like. One may be tempted to contemplate that oral customs is often idealised but the point remains that folk is considered to be the natural expression of people's character and worldview. However, it does not imply that oral traditions are fixed, there are understated alterations that take place over a period of time but the essential nature of such customs remain unchanged.

“Some studies of orality emphasise that oral societies are ‘warm’ personal societies, since all communication ‘of any kind has to be done face-to-face, and the alienating individualism of the reader is absent” (ibid., 7). Oral folk traditions also aid in the process of examining ‘social memory’ which is the shared view about the past. It also prompts the process of identity creation of the group, which is communicated and changed through generations. Thus, oral traditions become a system of communication and also a historical basis of information.

Walter Ong in his book, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* has very emphatically spoken about primary orality and secondary orality. Primary orality is reliant on spoken words untouched by the written. Sometime the written can be overlooked but speech cannot be disregarded, since in oral communication, people depend on interpersonal communication and ‘mnemonic’ devices. It banks on memory and discussion for the storage of information, its characterised by the incessant echo of knowledge to others, in case it be lost. Contrariwise, secondary orality is dependent on communication through the written word which is centered continuously on writing, printing and the use of technology. It is out precisely an outgrowth of literacy. “The written document can never stand on its own, for it is not creditable and is easy to destroy as it simply involves the writing and easy tearing up of a piece of paper. This implication being that the oral has potency unmatched by the written” (Syiem, 2011, 1).

Matthew Innes also argues that “the heroic view of a triumphant literacy pushing previous practices aside is being replaced by an understanding of the ways in which oral practices survive the challenge of literacy, and can indeed shape the cultural and social contexts within which literacy is adopted” (1998, 4). On this set, the significance of oral narratives in the Khasi society can be understood very specifically. The alphabets which are an essential element of the written word were only presented in 1842 by the Welsh Presbyterian Missionaries. And scholars have stated that Khasis were wise and sophisticated much before the advent of the written word and encounter with the British.

A counter argument that arises is why even in the present era one would rely on orality and memory to understand a community when the written document is not scarce. It is important to understand that orality along with memory operates as a link of connecting the past with the present and embodies a shared history and creates an identity for the community. Also orality is continued with the help of memory where narratives are repeated for generations.

“Memory culture is the way a society ensures cultural continuity by preserving, with the help of cultural mnemonics, its collective knowledge from one generation to the next, rendering it possible for later generations to reconstruct their cultural identity. References to the past, on the other hand, reassure the members of a society of their collective identity and supply them with an awareness of their unity and singularity in time and space - i.e. a historical consciousness - by creating a shared past” (Gahatraj, 2014, 417).

Because communication and orality are associated, it is important to note that communication is the name given to the various approaches that people use in keeping touch with one another, other than words and music, images, emblems and signs, nods and becks, postures and feathers and every action that expresses some meaning. Denis McQuail (2005) considers law, behaviours, customs, attires, gesticulations, architecture and even flags as sources of human communication.

Herein a word of caution is indispensable, dependence on orality as a cradle of ethnic knowledge does not suggest that civilisations are wedged to orality only.

Ruth Finnegan in her work reminds us that “some degree of literacy has been a feature of culture nearly all over the world for thousands of years” (cited in Rosenberg, 1987, 74). This signifies that all societies at certain point in time have been exposed to literacy and if there was boundary between orality and literacy that seems to be clouding.

Any dialogue on orality or folk media in general, does not suggest that the orality is over romanticised or the written is unnoticed. The purpose of exploring orality even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century basically lies in the fact that, oral practices are expressions of the folks; the thinking and principles are linked through it, are held in social memory, and unites people in a common platform. Writing on the other hand is ideal for recording and preservation of data, but does not essentially contribute in the assertion of cultural tenets and philosophy. “Words acquire and retain their meanings from their existential setting” (Ong, 1982, 47).

### **3.9 Khasi Folk Media in the Era of Mass Media**

Folk traditions cannot be dismissed even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century for numerous societies count on oral knowledge to re-examine their past, understand the community’s beliefs and provide the linkage for the future generations to bond to with their ancestries. That the traditional knowledge of the Khasis is gradually disappearing from the common memory with the dawn of modernism, is a cause of alarm for the community. It is to be acknowledged that the traditional knowledge of the Khasis is passed on to a generation that is tech-savvy unlike the older generation. Exposure to world culture and technology tends to dissuade the minds of the younger generation and thus it is imperative to revive the Khasi folk practices. Some work has already begun with the introduction of traditional music courses at the college and university levels. At the university a department is fully functional that deals in Khasi folk traditions and more, opined a male respondent aged 38.

In case of the Khasis too, folk media is still as contemporary as it can be and many accept the need to revive and popularise it among the youth primarily. Goody and Watt note that even in the most literate cultures “the transmission of values and attitudes in face-to-face contact is oral” (cited in Rosenberg, 1987, 75). It has been

respected across cultures that the most central values of life is conveyed orally. Melville Jacobs (1971, 212) states that in those “societies he analysed everyone participated in the tribe’s ‘literary’ heritage, unlike the situation in ours. Myths retold within the community contained many apostrophic pontifications which established the truth and strength of the community’s convictions” (cited in Rosenberg, 1987, 75).

In the process of discussing folk, the advancement in technology and the advent of mass media comes to the fore. With the rise of literacy and technology like the printing press, doors were open for the development of mass media (newspaper, radio and television). Mass media rapidly became the lifeline of communication. Many predicted that the boom in mass media would sideline folk media, but the case is not so. It has been noticed that folk media is still being used and effectively so. In India for example, the government has been the major user of folk media. The Directorate of Field Publicity and their state offices use these media to its best potential. The Song and Drama Division have complemented modern communication approaches by offering live performances through departmental groups and private participants. The programmes are targeted for all kinds of audience at the urban, rural and interior regions. AIR (All India Radio) and Doordarshan also draw heavily from folk media. Many opine that such endeavours help in sustaining the folk media.

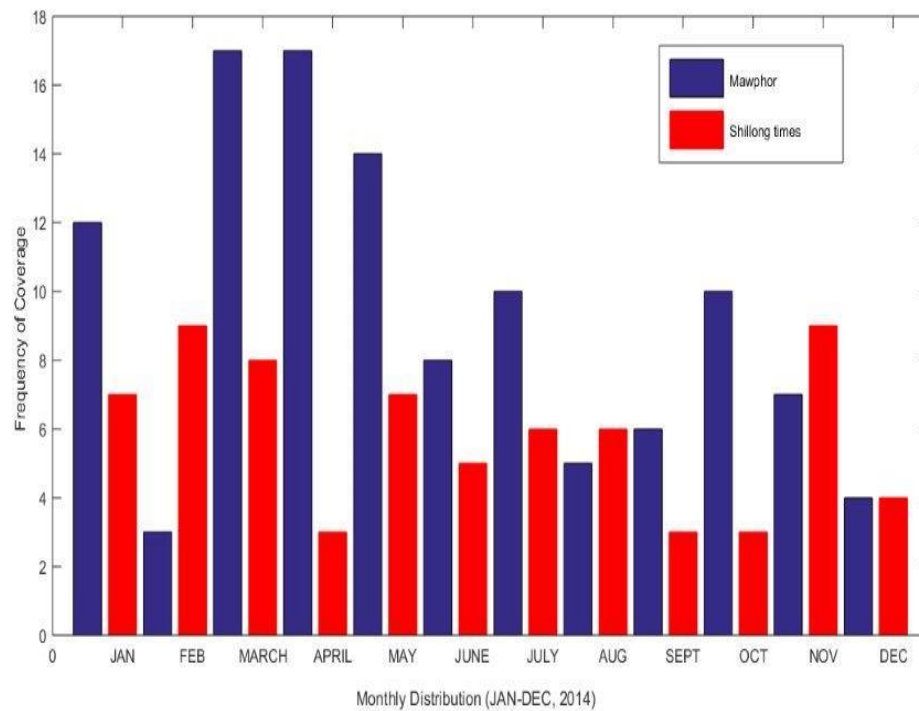
In case of Khasi folk All India Radio (AIR) and Doordarshan broadcast certain programmes based on the folk practices like music, *Phawar* or other legends and tales. A male respondent aged 29, stated, “not many people listen to AIR or see Doordarshan, people have cable channels and FM radio these days. We do not have our own satellite Television channel like Assam has. People do read the newspaper in English or in Khasi”. Another respondent aged 44, opined “we still like to read the paper in Khasi and some in English as well, papers carry more news about Meghalaya. People watch programs on Doordarshan specially during festivals. We also watch and rely largely on local cable news like PCN (peitngor cable news)”.

Similar responses has helped in establishing the idea that newspapers are the preferred form of mass media. Thus, this prompted the researcher to do a newspaper analysis, since it was seen that newspapers the may possibly be a platform to make Khasi folk media more popular in one hand. And, on the other, assess whether like AIR and Doordarshan, do newspaper draw on the folk media for its content.

The newspaper analysis was carried out for a period of one year i.e. 1<sup>st</sup> January - 31<sup>st</sup> December 2014, to examine the frequency of coverage of news related to Khasi folk traditions and culture. Two popular and oldest newspapers in the state, *Shillong Times* an English daily functional from 1945 and *Mawphor* a Khasi daily functional from 1989, were taken up for analysis.

Given below is a graph showing the frequency of coverage of news items related to Khasi folk traditions like customary laws, matriliney, material culture, dance, music and varied forms of oral narratives.

**Figure 1**





From the given figure the following points come to the fore:

- 1) In terms of coverage of folk media related content, Mawphor fairs better than Shillong times.
- 2) During certain events like traditional festivals, Pomblang, Nongkrem Dance, *Shad Sukh Mynseim*, autonomous district council elections, the frequency of coverage increases, a common trend that is seen in coverage patterns of both newspapers.
- 3) Content is news based primarily, and very few research-based or analytical article is published in relation to the aforementioned topics, in both papers. Though issues related to Khasi matriliney is a recurrent topic.
- 4) Remarkably, in the letters to the editor section of Shillong Times and Mawphor, frequently readers voice their concern with relation to these issues. This is a platform that voices public concern and also through follow-up letters, an element of debate or counter argument also prevails.
- 5) The coverage of festivals is done predominantly through images, by contrast in-depth articles on such events are not to be found.
- 6) The general content of both the newspapers too does not focus on these topics particularly at a time when folk festivities are not taking place.

It can be concluded that folk media has not penetrated the domain of newspaper publication and thus, newspapers in the study area are not a hauler of the folk traditions. Shillong Times and Mawphor, publish the regular happenings related to folk media, but does not draw on folk media for content generation like AIR or Doordarshan. The difference in the medium of broadcast could be a potential reason, but yet again, research based analytical piece do provide scope for such coverage.

The idea behind the newspaper analysis was to examine if folk media needs the assistance of modern mass media for gaining foothold. Because folk media does not get widespread coverage, it can be said that the folk tradition is not dependent on modern media. For folk media across the globe have defied challenges posed by turns and twist of civilisations. It is worthy of mention that folk presentations have

been an expressive source, bequeathed with the task of disseminating cultural items from one generation to the next and from one person to another. The content communicated orally are received, retained in the memory, and recalled at the time of subsequent transmission. So also is the case with Khasi folk practices, it has been surviving based on its character to pass traditional know-how across generations, it lives through Khasi life and culture.

### **3.10 Summation**

In this chapter, mention has been made of selected Khasi folk forms, while elaborate discussion is made in the subsequent chapter. In chapter four thence, attempt has been made to find linkages between matriliney and folk media. Given the fact that Khasis till day follow matriliney despite upheaval in favour of patriliney, it presents a need to relook into the folk practices and the social set-up.

The argument that is being made in the course of this study is that no society can survive without communicating; any change, any crisis or any movement in a society cannot be taking place without communication. Establishment of social-political norms, ethos and structure also needs some form of communication to occur. Thus, the relevance of folk media as a communication medium has been established. Following which, folk media of the Khasis is being examined to establish possible linkages to matrilineal tenets. This further helps in understanding the role of folk media, in perpetuating matriliney among the Khasis since times immemorial. It is a probable factor owing to which matriliney manacles still holds the Khasi community, even in the face of varied challenges.

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