



# Intangible Heritage in All Forms: A Study of Khasi and Pnar Tribe

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## ABSTRACT

The masses having failed to recognize their North-Eastern counterparts to be as much a part of the Indian heritage as themselves, indeed exhibits a sad state of events. The recent cases of atrocities against the people from East being highlighted by the media each day, has brought this lack of acknowledgement by the mainlanders towards the North-Eastern society to limelight. The largest cause lying behind this huge public blunder being none other than simple lack of knowledge about this integral region of the country. We are faced with an intricate problem with a simple solution- to educate people about the unique North-Eastern culture, its bases, the mores and folkways it follows, so as to shed the curtains of ignorance to truly realize the 'unity in diversity' adage often used for our nation. This research focuses itself onto the heritage of the Khasi and Pnar tribes of Meghalaya in an attempt to unearth the inside story of the tribes. For efficient data collection, the project was sub-divided into five heads- Family, Marriage, Religion & Magic, Law & Order and Socio-Political Organization. The research largely relied on interviewing the locals on all aspects concerning these social institutions, which was simultaneously documented and recorded. The research presents an interesting set of information for any lay man to gain an insight into this unique social set-up. The research also attempts to provide useful inputs to researchers, especially in the field of Sociology and Anthropology, providing information otherwise unavailable on the public domain.

Keywords: Culture, Heritage, Khasi Tribe, Meghalaya, Pnar Tribe.

## INTRODUCTION

India is one, unity in diversity and what not do we claim. But the stark reality shows an absolutely different picture. Regional disparities on culture and economic grounds

have always kept the nation from realizing its true potential. Lack of knowledge has ever kept us from recognizing and reflecting onto each other's backdrops where appreciating the other's culture prima facie seems a far cry.

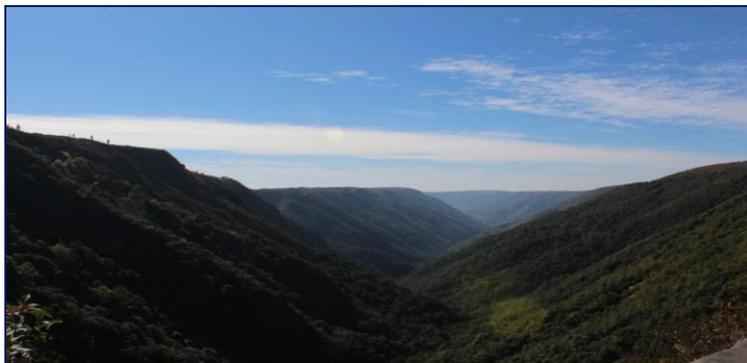


Figure1. Meghalaya, Abode of Clouds

The recent headlines about numerous North-Easterners being abused by their ignorant counterparts indeed present a very sad situation. Unfortunately even today no substantial steps have been taken to placate this critical state of affairs except for a few rules here and there that merely help in keeping things going.

The hour calls for urgent steps to bring about awareness among the folks to recognize and respect the culture of the North East and identify them as one among us. Educating the people about the basic culture of the North East can go a long way in curtailing the concerned issue.

Unexplored in the school texts the rich heritage of the North East is indeed a topic arising enormous curiosity. Gyanodaya V gave the students of Delhi University a great chance to engage in a substantial learning process, an opportunity to understand the oneness that lies beyond the shadows of ignorance. This bliss was explored by numerous teams all hailing from different colleges, focusing on different issues, but somewhere or the other with the same foundation of a desire to enhance their knowledge of the North East. The team chose Meghalaya and more specifically the Khasi and Pnar tribe as its focus community owing to the unique matrilineal structure, a mesmeric social set-up to explore.

The paper attempts to study the following objectives:

- To undertake a vivid study of the different forms of intangible heritage under well-specified heads .
- To understand the Khasi and Pnar perspective of a living.
- To unearth the local myths and folklores which are not readily available otherwise.
- To observe as to what extent do traditions influence the modern day Khasi and Pnar Society.
- To recognise the peculiar similarities in culture of the Khasis and Pnars and other mainstream communities.
- To appreciate the unique social structure of matriliney, how it has been helpful in empowering the women of the society and take it home.

## METHODOLOGY

With a prior research on the topic 'Intangible Heritage' the team prepared a questionnaire on further sub topics- Marriage, Family, Religion & Magic, Law & Order and Socio-Political Organization.

- Instead of following the traditional method of administering a questionnaire, the team relied on interactive sessions with the locals. Nonetheless a questionnaire was constructed to present guidelines to the team members for framing their questions while in dialogue with the subjects. The team believed that without engaging itself in in-depth conversation with the tribal's it could not achieve its aim of apprehending their culture, traditions and lifestyle and other aspects of social living.
- The students were divided into two groups, each group having their own photographer, writer and interviewer. Everyday based on what the team had already found the team replaced and updated questions in the sample questionnaire (For instance, the team learnt that a non-virgin Khasi girl should not wear a white dress at the time of her marriage and if she does, it is believed that she is committing a sin that shall be punished by the divine powers. To get further insight into related issues the questionnaire would be updated accordingly).
- The team focused on collecting data through video recordings, audio clips, and notes that was later compiled in the form of a study under specified heads and a relevant documentary.
- The study is solely based on the data gathered from through use of fieldwork, interviews and observations made during the visit to Meghalaya. No secondary sources have been used, though bibliography has been given for further research.

### A STUDY ON THE HERITAGE OF KHASIS AND PNARS

Despite being a society of very simple living, the Khasi and Pnar tribes inculcates in themselves complex social phenomenon and a highly colourful social lifestyle. The intensive interactions with the natives brought forth astonishing facts and fictions simultaneously. The intricate social system and the peculiar cultural-heritage associated with it have many stories to tell and many teachings to give. It's truly said that a journey can give you a lot more than a book.

#### A. FAMILY

Today large chunks of population in Meghalaya follow Christianity where man is the head of the family. However, in Pnar and Khasi tribes both men and women hold equal power and authority. The lineage is traced by the mother side only.

Youngest daughter is very important in the family as she is the one who is supposed to take care of the family especially her parents and divorced brothers in the house. After mother of the house, the youngest daughter is responsible for everything that the mother is supposed to do. It is the youngest daughter who will get the ancestral house and not the son of the family or the eldest sister or brother. All other property will be

shared among all the daughters of the family. The sons do not enjoy any share in the property. If there is no daughter in the family, then the house is given to the daughter of the mother's sister; as it is believed that the property should remain within the clan and not go to the father's clan.



Figure 2: In Conversation with Young Earning Woman of a Family

Maternal uncle is the head of the family. He is the most important person who controls the family and takes all important decisions related to the house. Though he lives in another clan with his wife, he has the responsibility of his sister's house. He is not the head in his own house as in his own house all powers are with his wife's brother. Maternal uncle is responsible to fix the wedding of his sister's children. Also, he performs all the rituals in the marriage. If there is no real maternal uncle in the family, then a cousin of the mother is supposed to perform all the rituals. The major power and authority in traditional Khasi family seems to lie within the hand of the maternal uncle and not with the parents.

MEIKHA, father's mother names every child of the family; whereas the children adopt the surname of their mother's clan. If grandmother or Meikha is not there, father's sister should name the child.

#### *Moral Code of Conduct:*

In Khasis, family is the most important social unit. Parents are regarded as God who we can see by our naked eyes and those who disobey them will not live long. The curse of the women in the family is considered as the worst; so they must be treated with respect and their emotions should not be hurt. Elders should be respected and it is believed that their words are known by god. If there is a festival or feast (Bamkhana) in the village the elderly members must be fed first and should be offered the best part of the meal (the best part of the meat served) . When there is something to be distributed or shared, the elders must be given their share first. So, people are respected according to their age. If any big animal is hunted down it is brought to the head man's house and he is offered the most important part like the head of the animal, after that the meat is shared among the other villagers.

## B. MARRIAGE

Marriage is an auspicious and joyful occasion for everyone in the world. The emotions behind all the ceremonies might be the same but the way they are conducted is unique to every community. The two tribes, Khasi and Pnar practice the matriarchal system according to which the maternal uncle of the boy accompanied by the boy asks for the girl's hand in marriage. In Niamkhasi (the traditional religion of the Khasis), the moment the boy and the maternal uncle enter the girl's house it is taken as the marriage has been fixed after which the marriage rituals are in order which customarily take place in the church. There is also a ceremony which includes exchange of rings known as "Sanjan"- symbolising that the bride and the groom are not allowed to roam around henceforth.

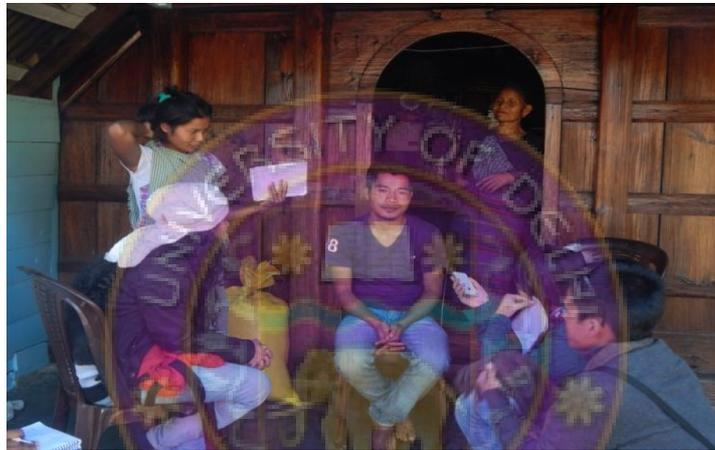


Figure 3: Having a Conversation with Locals about Marriage

In case of a love marriage, the girl and the boy announce their relationship to their families after which the maternal uncle and the boy are invited to the girl's house. The first meeting is followed by the whole gimmicks of engagement in the girl's house itself after which the ceremony is taken forward to the church for the some namesake rituals.

According to the terms of Khasi tribe, the mother of the boy is not supposed to enter the church or girl's house while fixing the marriage as it creates an impression that the mother is selling her son, while in Jowai (where Pnar tribe resides) there is no such rule.

A virgin bride wears a white dress to her wedding and a non-virgin bride is supposed to wear any colour except white. If the bride is non-virgin the couple is outlawed from the church for three months. In case the bride lies about her virginity it is believed that something bad will dawn upon her.

Marriage within the clan is prohibited and if it happens the couple is castigated by crossing the big river and is prohibited from entering the village again. As part of the

punishment three lines known as Khilainuid are drawn on their forehead. It is believed that bad omens will follow them, for instance, they will be eaten by a tiger or struck by lightning. Hence the fear of the wrath of god ensures that people marry outside their clan.

If one marries outside the tribe nobody is supposed to go to give him solace at the time of his death as a punishment.

### *Divorce*

In earlier days, Pyllait San Shyieng was a known ceremony for divorce. The girl should throw 25 paise and 5 paise, 5 times to her husband and the people attending the ceremony will shout that this girl and this boy are no more husband wife, that is they are divorced from now.

### *Pregnancy*

If a girl is pregnant before marriage then the boy and girl are not given any punishment from the tribe and also that boy is not forced to marry the girl. For khasi's snakes are metaphorically their babies. They restrain themselves from killing of snakes during pregnancy as they too put out their tongues like babies do, also their skin texture is as soft as a new born baby.

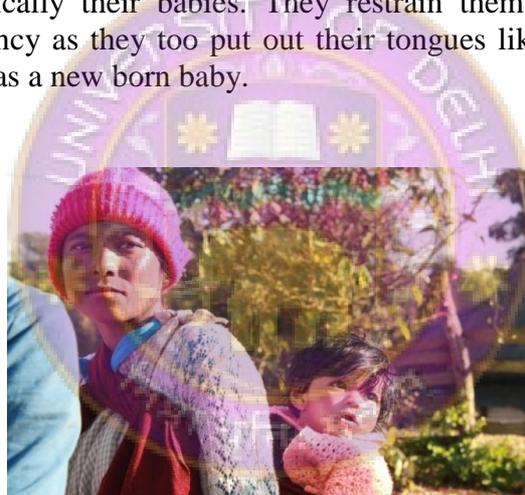


Figure 4: A Local Woman with Her Kid

The husbands are not allowed to cut pumpkins as it is believed that the child will have a mark on the forehead. He isn't allowed to roam around with other girls as it is considered as a sin. They do not burn bamboo or make holes in wood or any other thing believing that if they do so their baby will get scars on his body. Khasis also believe that husband of a pregnant lady should not colour the house, if he does the baby will get black marks on the body.

## C. RELIGION AND MAGIC

The khasi tribe largely inhabits in the eastern part of Meghalaya. But presently a substantial minority of the Khasi people follow their tribal religion, called variously "KaNiamKhasi" or "KaNiamTre".

Christian missionary started working among the Khasi tribe in the late nineteenth century and today over half of all Khasis have adopted Christianity. The Khasis believe in a creator God (U BleiNong-thaw) who is considered feminine in gender (Ka lei Synshar). She is invoked when sacrifices are offered and during time of troubles.

*Story behind the origin of the Khasis:*

Khasis or khasishynniew also officially known as Hynniew-trep or Hynniew-skum were said to be Mongolian coming from northern part of Asia in search of food. When they reached Meghalaya they found the weather conditions to be favourable for cropping so they settled in here. But folklore explains this story in a completely different form. It goes like this 'there were 16 families who lived up in heaven with god. There was a mountain Lumdiengi on which there was a big tree 'diengiiei' which is situated around twenty-five kilometres away from the Shillong, which acts as a path between earth and heaven. One day mankind requested to God to grant them to live on Earth promising that they will take good care of the habitation of the Earth, answering to their plea god granted them their wish and allowed seven clans to come and live on the Earth. These came to be known as ashynniew-trep or hynniew-skum which means seven huts or seven families. These seven huts are Kajerka thou Kapyn-eh rngiem, KapynksanrngniewKaduwanduput, ka-kaniakakhriam, Kaiabamiasip, Ka pan map, Kapoikhapoiman, and Lyngdoh-sohblei.

Before the rising of evil, mankind thrived on Earth. One day evil tempted the Mankind saying that they should cut down the tree otherwise it will grow too big and block the sun, fearing the consequences they summoned to the Dorbar- solemn assembly and decided to cut down the Diengiiei tree. They cut the tree whole day and when they came to continue their work the next day to their surprise the tree remained the same and all their labour were in vain. But a chirpy bird named Phreit helped the man and disclosed the mystery that at night a tiger came and licked the tree which healed it completely. From that bird mankind learnt the trick to destroy the tree. After cutting down the tree, to their surprise the sky turned dark and the relationship of God and man was broken and mankind did not receive any blessing from God from then on, the sky was spread with constant darkness. To seek for forgiveness from God they sacrificed the blood of cock and by doing that mankind reconciled with God.

From that day the practice of cock sacrifice started according to the khasi's folklore and the worship of God Hynniew-trep emerged.

## BELIEFS

### *Funeral*

According to Khasi beliefs the soul of their closed ones visits their house within three days of their last riots, so they keep their doors and windows open for the soul to enter. In their tradition people offer alcohol, eggs and rice when a member of their family dies, they burn the bodies at JOKHATHAMPRIOM, the burial land and the left over bones are collected and which are kept in their 'clan house'.

- They believe if they plant rose and lily in their house and decorate their house and doors with flowers then all the people in the family will not get married. And even if all get married, they won't have babies.
- When somebody dreams of snake or leeches, it is interpreted as being envious of a person.
- They keep black bottles in which prayers are crushed and when some of their neighbours are jealous of them and try to harm the family members with black magic the bottles tend to break, also bullet like holes appear in the mirror. People often visit the church to request the priest to conduct prayers in order to protect themselves against the black magic, while few think that it is the best of interest to pray by themselves for protection and sometimes they carry out practices such as sacrificing hen, goat and also use eggs to pray. During the sacrifice, they collect the blood of the animal in a vessel and offer it to the god whom they call "BLEI" and pray to the god to protect them from the black magic and to keep them healthy.
- They believe that god reside in the sacred groves and the one who indulge themselves in bad activities like drinking, plucking the leaves, anywhere around the sacred groove is said to be followed by bad omens. Sacrifices are done in sacred groves. They believe in forces of nature and worship rain, thunder when nature is destroying their livelihood.
- When a person get sick or are possessed, they are taken to a person who cures them by specific spells and rituals. Some people believe they talk to god and god will come in the diseased person and cure them.
- They also believe in SABUIT (kalinazar) if someone is eating and is stared at with bad eyes or hungry eyes then they will get stomach-ache. Before taking new born babies out, they put a piece of garlic and matchstick in the cap of baby in order to protect the baby from sabuit.
- Also they tie elephant's tusk on baby's hand to protect from black eyes.
- Some people are suspected to undertake dark paths when they are jealous of a person, they apparently pray for the person to get possessed with help of eggs and rice, they are known as MENAIKSUID. If the villagers come to know about the menaiksuid, then as punishments they make khilainuid on their heads or burn those people who are find guilty of performing these rituals. In some places king give punishment in consultation with the village headman and other people.
- There are other people who are called MENSHOHNOH, they keep THLEN in their house in hopes of getting rich. Thlen can be in any form, a snake, cat, etc. mostly they are in forms of snakes. Menshohnoh have to feed them with human beings for their wishes to come true. They sacrifice human beings or they give human hair, nails, piece of cloth to thlen. That person will die or get sick and menshohnoh become rich. It is believed that when they give nails, clothes, hairs to thlen, they are giving shadow of that person to the thlen.
- According to a lady in Smith village, menshohnoh cut hairs, nails, clothes then keep these in a bamboo and it changes into blood which thlen drinks and that person dies, which makes the Menshohnoh rich. When they drink the blood they play the drums. And people listening to that drum come to know that such a practice is going on but they don't know who is performing it. Thlen is passed on to generations. If a menshohnoh dies then his daughter will take care of the thlen. If the villagers get to know about the menshohnoh they will punish him. Either they will burn him, or make khilainuid( 3 lines on head) and will be asked to cross the river. . In 2013 smith

villagers killed two people who were suspected of being menshohnoh. Also thlen will eat only khasi blood people.

## FOLKLORE



Figure 5: Old Khasi Man Talking About Folklores and Myths

A rich and a poor man were childhood friends who belonged to the same village, but as time passed on the latter moved to a distant village after marriage. The duo managed to spend time together whenever the poor man made a visit to the village to meet his family. Every time they met, the rich man made it a point that he offered him sumptuous meal. But the villagers of the poor man gossiped and questioned the reality of their friendship. To prove his friendship the poor man thought of inviting him home. Unfortunately they ran out of food and none of the villagers offered any sort of help. The disheartened couple committed suicide. On the very same night a notorious thief entered their house. Seeing the dead bodies, he feared that the villagers would blame him for the murder and he killed himself. In sorrow of loss of his friend, rich man prays to God. And as an equalizer between the rich and the poor, God creates three trees from each soul. Since then offering Kwai (areca nut, lime paste and betel nut) to guests is a part of the Khasi etiquette.

### D. TRADITIONAL LAW AND ORDER

#### *Customary Laws and Social Practices:*

Khasi tribe practices a unique way of dealing with people who indulge in criminal disagreements, disputes or conflicts. The punishment is ordained by the Head of the clan or Siem according to the crime done by the accused.

Some of the common penalties exercised in the traditional societies are as follows:

- Exile i.e. they are expelled from the village and the person who is exiled can never return to that village at any cost.
- Imprisonment or confinement.
- Fine in terms of giving feast to the villager, to the dorbar or giving animal to the deprived family or person.
- Ex-communication and curse ; Apparently, the person or family is given permission to stay in the village but they have to live in complete banishment i.e. nobody will be allowed to extend any help to them in any case which also includes not talking or walking with that person/family. Any people who act against the terms are to offer animal to the dorbar or anything that the dorbar decides.
- Holdback - if a person gets killed in an accident while hunting or any such activity, then any such use of weaponry is off limits for that person and his weapons are confiscated by the dorbar.
- Disinheritance.
- Capital punishment etc are awarded.

Some of the judgements are associated with solemn vow on god. Witnesses are asked to make a vow to god that he will speak the truth only. Some of the grave cases like inter-clan conflict, Land disputes ,Family disputes, where the judgements are not easy to give, are solved by incantation and suspected people have to make solemn vows on god and are threatened with death like:

- Dipping into river in front of everyone and a person who didn't immerge in the water are consider as guilty and punished.
- Taking solemn vow on the god of thunder and cursing the guilty that he will be killed by thunder within the particular period of the year .
- Taking solemn vow by biting the teeth of lion or tiger and cursing the guilty that he will be killed by that animal within the particular period of the year.
- When a person is suspected of being a sorcerer and is guilty of killing someone for sacrifice, he is forced to eat the meat of that animal, which was killed during the sacrifice and is cursed to death within one year.

## E. SOCIO-POLITICAL ORGANIZATION

In a candid conversation with the village headman of mawtneng, their pattern of social organization was revealed. The headman in khasi religion is a big deal as he is the person who presides over the dorbar- a solemn assembly. The village as per the headman runs an autonomous unit in term of social and political functioning .They practice social activities independently, without interference of the king or the clan head.

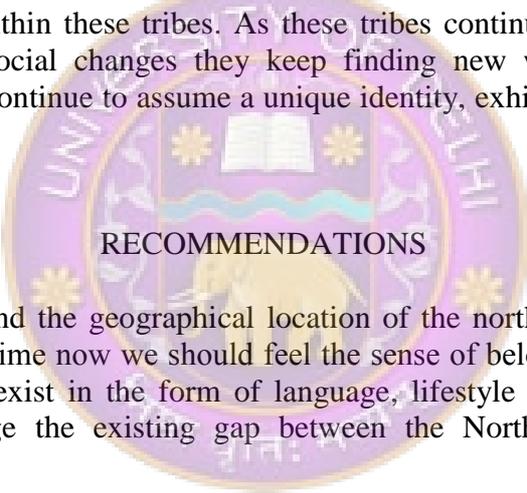
Each village has its own headman who is responsible for the social and political functioning of the village. The headman ship passes on from generation to generation within a family.

*Few Characteristics of the Village Headman:*

Every village has independent constituted village council 'Dorbar' which is headed by Siem. Siem or chief holds limited judicial and political power. He should be an elder person of the village and his decision is respected and followed by all. He is considered as 'The Father of the Village'. He has to lead the village in the right direction and safe guard the children of the village.

As far as the political point of view is considered the clan head is considered as 'the owner of the land' but every villager has equal right to utilize the resources in a limit within the boundary of the village. The villager doesn't need to take permission to exploit the village resources for livelihood. Hence, there is no single owner of the land but the chief acts as the guardian of the village land.

The Khasis and Pnars just like the other numerous tribes of the North-East have successfully preserved their heritage through centuries. However, no community has been able to evade modernity's coil, the Khasi and Pnar tribes are no different. With the changing times the coming of other religions especially Christianity, urbanization, assimilation with the mainstream communities all have taken their toll on the practice of traditional ways within these tribes. As these tribes continue to acclimatize with these never ending social changes they keep finding new ways to express their cultural heritage and continue to assume a unique identity, exhibiting a highly vibrant social living.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Cultural differences and the geographical location of the north east India has left it unexplored. It's high time now we should feel the sense of belongingness despite the differences that may exist in the form of language, lifestyle etc. Implementing the following will abridge the existing gap between the North East India and the Mainland.

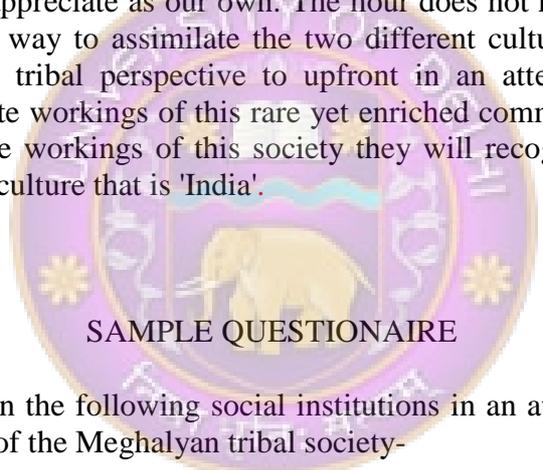
- Enhancing the cultural and commercial trade in North East will pay way to an exchange of information. Exclusive trade fairs which can showcase the heritage, literature and culture can bring about changes. Exchange of traditional medicinal knowledge will be beneficiary to both.
- One of the key factors which influence the Indian society is the Media; Bollywood as it tops the list. We get to know more about the South Indian and North Indian culture through movies. But rarely do we find a movie with a North East background or with a North East actor/actress. Movies with a north east background can a bridge the gap to a great extent.
- A joint effort from both the government as well as the private sector in improvising the tourism in North East would be mutually beneficiary. With government providing the adequate transportation services (easy means to reach) and tourism promotion & the private sector backing with the infrastructure facilities.
- Educating the public servants/officials regarding the North East since with reference to the situations of the recent past. Starting from the clerk to the top authority of every

institute should have a basic knowledge about dealing with any situation regarding North East.

- Teaching more about the North Eastern heritage, literature and culture will relegate our negligence. Apart from being just technical, educational institutions has social responsibility as well. Hence conducting seminars, paper presentations, workshops, study tours,(all regarding the culture & heritage) etc...should be conducted which can enrich ones knowledge. Optional credit courses (again regarding culture and heritage) should be introduced in school levels; wherein whoever opts for it should get an advantage in future. Adding contents about the North East in the textbooks (primary education) should be done.
- Exchange programmes of both the students and the faculty will help in cultural exchange. It will be an opportunity to both the students and the faculty to get to know each other.

## CONCLUSION

The study provides great insight into the living culture of the Khasis and Pnars, painting a typical picture of the unique social structure of the North-East which we need to identify and appreciate as our own. The hour does not require suppression of the tribal values as a way to assimilate the two different cultural set-ups , rather it requires to bring the tribal perspective to upfront in an attempt to make people understand the intricate workings of this rare yet enriched community. As the masses will come to learn the workings of this society they will recognize it as one of the highly varied yet one culture that is 'India'.



### SAMPLE QUESTIONNAIRE

The project focuses on the following social institutions in an attempt to discover the vast cultural heritage of the Meghalyan tribal society-

- 1) Family
- 2) Marriage
- 3) Religion and Magic
- 4) Traditional Law and Order
- 5) Socio-Political Organisation

Here is a sample set of questions that were explored during their interaction with the local people.

#### *Family*

- How is the lineage traced?
- What roles do men and women play in the family?
- Who assumes the position of authority in the family?

#### *Marriage*

- Describe the role played by omens during marriage.
- Is there a concept of bride price ?
- What are the customs & traditions in a wedding?

- What are the rituals in a traditional divorce?

#### *Religion and Magic*

- Are sacrifices practiced? What for and how? Describe the beliefs associated with them.
- Recount common folklores in the tribe.
- What beliefs exist that explain theories of life and death?
- What entities are considered sacred? Are forces of nature prayed? If yes in what form?

#### *Traditional Law and Order*

- How far do intention and collective responsibility play a role in the justice system?
- What are the accepted forms of evidence? Are ordeals used as effective evidences?
- Do laws uniformly apply to all or can they be manipulated while judging cases against different people? (for instance adultery by chief's wife is unacceptable but that by chief is acceptable.)

#### *Socio-Political Organisation*

- Please describe the clan organization and other such sub-groups that exist within the tribe? How have these groups come into being and what roles do they play?
- Describe the Matrilineal aspect of the society? How widely is it followed? Give the folklores and beliefs associated with this structure of the society?
- Explain the concept of Sacred Grooves and the beliefs associated with it.
- Do you have dormitory system? If not, has it ever existed in the society? Or what other ways are followed to teach the children the social norms of the tribe? How has this system come into being?

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