

"Meghalaya's Culture & Society"

In Collaboration with St. Claret College, Ziro – Arunachal Pradesh

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INTRODUCTION

India is a beautiful country as well it's diversity. Heart thumping cliffs, extravagant rivers, flavorsome cuisines and breathtaking nature, a gem of North east India popularly known as 'The Abode of clouds ' or ' The Scotland of East' "MEGHALAYA", the land of Clouds. Here, we will discuss the various facts of the society and culture of Meghalaya.

THE KHASI TRIBE

Khasi villages are built a little below the tops of hills in small depressions, with houses built close to each other. Before the arrival of Christian missionaries, the majority of the Khasi people practiced an indigenous tribal religion known as Niam Khasi. Even though, today the population of Christians in Meghalaya is about 80%, many still perform and follow the rituals of the Niam Khasi.

Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem and Nongkrem Dance are very famous religious thanksgiving festivals that are celebrated annually.

Nongkrem Dance is a religious festival in thanksgiving to God Almighty for good harvest, peace and prosperity of the community. It is held annually during October/ November, at Smit, the capital of the Khyrim Syiemship near Shillong. The dance is performed in the open by young virgins and men, both bachelors and married. The women dressed in expensive silk costumes with heavy gold, silver and coral ornaments dance in the inner circle of the arena. The men form an outer circle and dance to the accompaniment of music of flutes and drums. An important feature of the festival is the 'Pomblang' or goat sacrifice offered by the subjects to the Syiem of Khyrim, the administrative head of the Hima (Khasi State). Ka Syiem Sad, the eldest sister of the king is the chief priest and caretaker of all ceremonies. The festival is conducted alongwith the Myntries (Ministers), priests and high priest where offerings are made to ancestors of the ruling clan and the deity of Shillong.

Shad Suk Mynsiem is one of the most important festivals of the Khasis. Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem means Dance of the joyful heart. It is an annual thanksgiving dance held in Shillong in April. Men and women, dressed in traditional fineries dance to the accompaniment of drums and the flute. The festival lasts for three days.

Weaving is an ancient craft of the tribals of Meghalaya – be it weaving of cane or cloth. The Khasis are famous for weaving cane mat, stools and baskets. They make a special kind of cane mat called 'Tlieng', which guarantees a good utility of around 20-30 years. The Khasis have also been involved in extracting iron ore and then manufacture domestic knives, utensils and even guns and other warfare weapons using it.

The staple food of Khasis is rice. They also take fish and meat. Like the other tribes in the North-East, the Khasis also ferment rice-beer, and make spirit out of rice or millets by distillation. Use of rice-beer is a must for every ceremonial and religious occasion.

Marriage within a clan is a taboo. Rings or betel-nut bags are exchanged between the bride and the bridegroom to complete the union. In the Christian families, however, marriage is purely a civil contract. The Khasi strictly follow an exogamy marriage system. The husband must leave his house to live with his wife and the children receive their mother's last name.

George Gilbert Swell (5 August 1923 – 25 January 1999) was a college professor, an Indian politician, an ambassador to several countries, a former Deputy Speaker of the Lok Sabha and its member from Shillong in Meghalaya. Over a span of more than 35 years, he represented India at high levels nationally and internationally. Though arising from a modest and rural background in far Northeast India, Swell quickly rose to prominence in every field he entered.

THE JAINTIA TRIBE

Jaintia Hills District is the home of one of the major tribes of Meghalaya popularly known as the 'Jaintias' or the 'Pnars'. They are believed to be remnants of the first Mongolian overflow into India. They established themselves in their present homeland in the remote past and owing primarily to their geographical isolation they succeeded in maintaining their independence. The Jaintia Hills district was established in 1972, in independent India.

Apart from the Pnars, there are Lalung, Vaiphe, Viate and Hmass in the Jaintia hills. They belong to Hynniewtrep sect of the Austric race whose kingdom was the oldest and most widely spread around Jaintia Hills. The rulers of the medieval Jaintia Kingdom belonged to the Synteng community. The Kingdom was occupied by the British East India Company in 1835, and later merged it into the Assam Province.

This tribe also is matrilineal where the youngest daughter of the family inherits the family property and has the obligation to take care and look after the family members in case of any financial or health problems. The children of the family take the title of the mother. The girl child of the family is adored, in terms of education, health and liberty, by every member of the family. There is only one restriction i.e., one cannot marry in the same clan and the marriage should get the approval of the family members.

The cultural heritage of the jaintias is very rich and reflects the traditions, music, dances, art and crafts of Jaintias tribe. The tribe is famous for artistic weaving, wood carving and cane and bamboo work. They are also famous for weaving carpet and silk and the making of musical instruments and pineapple fibre artices. During functions they wear crowns of silver and gold with peak attached at the back of it.

Traditional festivals which are observed by the Jaintia Tribe include Behdienkhlam, Shad Shukra, Chad Pastieh, Shad Ramynthei, etc. Behdienkhlam is the most celebrated religious festival among the Jaintia tribe. Behdiengkhal festival is held generally in the rainy season of July or August in Jowai annually. This festival is also regarded as the most colourful festival of Jaintias. The Laho dance is one of the oldest traditional dances of the Pnar or Jaintia. It has emerged as an important symbol of the Pnars cultural identity. This is a very important dance festival as it is associated with the creation and the origin of the people of hills. It is associated with the earliest settlement and habitation of the Pnar.

The people of this district are fond of music. Through music, the Pnar people expressed their praise for the rivers, hills, valley, land, etc. Traditional musical instruments include ramynthei, duitara, ksing/nakra, ramynken, shawiang, tangmuri, etc.

For the women, the traditional costume is known as Jainsem. This unstitched garment is made of mulberry silk and is worn around the body. The mulberry silk is cultivated in Meghalaya locally. Endi Shawl is another important costume of the region is also made up of silk.

Women belonging to this tribe have a traditional style of clothes in comparison to other tribes. They use a Kyrshah which is a small piece of cloth having checks on it to cover their heads post-harvest season. They cover their bodies with a velvet blouse and an ankle length sarong known as Thoh Khyrwan.

The females of the tribe wear a cape like cloth made up of Assam muga silk. The men wear iuslein pyniein, iuspong, ryndia tlem. Both men and women belonging to the Jaintia tribe dress up in ostentatious and splendid costumes during festivals. The women accessorise their costumes with silver and gold ornaments. Ornaments include paila, khoila (earring), khadu (bracelets), etc. Kynjri Ksiar is a unique gold pendant which is adorned by the women belonging to the Khasi and Jaintia tribes.

The people of the district live a simple life. Rice is the main food of the people. They also eat meat and different kind of vegetables collected from forests like mushroom, tyrki, bamboo shoot, wild ferns, noop, etc besides regular vegetables available in the markets.

The original tribal religion of the Pnars is known as Niamtre. The Pnar tribals believe that their religion is God-given (not founded by man) and comes to this world by God's decree. The three cardinal principles dictated by God are kamai yei hok, tipbru tipblai and tipkur tipkha. They signify right living and practice based on right livelihood; fulfillment of duties towards fellow men to reach God; and showing respect to the members of one's father's and mother's clans. Therefore, Niamtre stresses equal weight to be given to fellow humans to attain God realization. The Jaintias and Khasis have the same religion, although the Jaintias are more influenced by Hinduism. They have a superstition that the Jam, like the Khasi Thlen, is an evil spirit bringing riches to its owner and disease or death to its enemies or victims.

U Kiang Nangbah was a Jaintia freedom fighter from Meghalaya who led an uprising against the British. He was hanged by the British publicly at lawmusiang in Jowai town in West Jaintia Hills district on 30 December 1862. A postage stamp was issued by Government of India to commemorate him in 2001. A government college was also opened at Jowai in 1967 in his honour.

THE GARO TRIBE

The Garos are the second largest tribe after the Khasis in Meghalaya. The Garos refer to themselves as A'chik or Mande and their language belongs to the Bodo branch of the Bodo-Naga-Kachin family of Sino Tibetan phylum. The Garos are distributed over the five Garo Hills districts of Meghalaya, the Mymensingh district of Bangladesh and the Kamrup, Goalpara and Karbi-Anglong districts of Assam. They are also scattered in a few numbers in Tripura and Nagaland.

Since the Garos are scattered far and wide, and since these scattered units were in isolation from each other over time, they have developed their own separate identities and dialects. The various dialect groups that comprise the Garos are the Ambeng, Atong, Akawe (or Awe), Duals, Matchi, Matabengs, Chibok, Chisak Megam or Lyngngam, Ruga Gara-Ganching.

The life of the Garo tribes revolves around agriculture and farming. Garo hills are suitable for cultivation where paddy, cotton, maize, millet, pulses are grown. Many are educated and work in Government offices and Private jobs but majority of the population still follows agriculture and farming.

The Garos traditionally follow their own religion known as Songsarek, which has roots in agriculture. The Songsarek belief is presided over by the Godhead known as "Dakgipa Rugipa Stugipa Pantugipa or Tatara Rabuga Stura Pantura", or the Creator.

While Garos have retained their identities, many of the age-old customs and traditions are fading away with most of the population converting to Christianity.

All traditional annual festivals were connected with the different stages of shifting cultivation: Agalmaka, Maimua, Rongchugala, Ahaia, Wangala, etc.

Most of the women are into weaving, with many houses having a backstrap loom. The cloth is embroidered by hand and their signature design includes a geometric pattern done at the borders. Shawls, bags and cushion covers thus produced by them are a great way to showcase, preserve and propagate their native crafts.

The staple food of the Garos is rice. Their jhum fields and the forests provide them with a number of vegetables and roots for their curry but bamboo shoots are esteemed as a delicacy. They use a kind of potash in curries, which they obtained by burning dry pieces of plaintain stems or young bamboos locally known as Kalchi or Katchi.

The Garos are also matrilocal. The extended family is called a machong. A man leaves his machong after marriage to live in the machong of his wife. He becomes a member of her machong and adopts the name of her clan.

Pa Togan Nengminja was a brave A-chik warrior. Born in the village of Samanda near Williamnagar, East Garo Hills, Meghalaya. He has often been compared to the Philistine warrior 'Goliath'. Pa Togan Nengminja fought and died for his own motherland and community. This brave warrior is remembered by the people of Garo Hills and the state on December 12 every year.

Sonaram R. Sangma is the first Garos political leader. He was born in 1867 and died on 1916 before the Independent of the India. He fought against the British Government during India dominated by the British Govt. He was demanded for the Greater Garo Land and fought for the many times against the British and Zamindars. For these reasons he has imprisoned for the several times. And the British soldiers were threatened to kill him but he did not afraid and he reply to them that 'You can shoot me by a gun and kill me and throw my dead Body in the Manda River'. But where to a place my dead body reach you must be signed in an agreement that till to this place should be the Garo Land.

CONCLUSION

Coming to the end of our journey, it can truly be said that, the generations of all the three tribes of Meghalaya have worked and is working it's way up to be rooted to its origin keeping their culture as authentic and real even today by implying their culture in today's daily life.

Some places are such that they make you want to go there, Meghalaya is one such place where every experience over here is enriching & rewarding, making you feel included and loved.