Chapter VI

Conclusion

It is obvious from the preceding chapters that verbal art of the Khasis continues to exist in the oral tradition and in the context of Khasi folklore; only a small portion of folklore materials has been documented or written down. A large chunk of the materials are still to be unearthed and documented in a scholarly way. In the course of investigation, it is found out that the collection and documentation of Khasi folklore materials were first carried out by missionaries, colonial civil servants and the early educated Khasi elites. The works of the early collectors have paved the way and contributed tremendously to the growth of Khasi folklore studies.

The previous chapters have also been concerned with showing how Khasi riddles have undergone a gradual but significant change. The investigation has brought to light the position of the riddle among the Khasis. It has provided evidence that the Khasis do have a good repertoire of traditional riddles a corpus of which have been slowly replaced by modern ones. The conventional art and practice of riddling also has declined considerably. There are many factors that have been responsible for the decline in the practice and creating of Khasi traditional riddles and the emergence of newer and modern ones.

The study of Khasi riddles reveals that the Khasi community, despite having a good repertoire of riddles generally believes that they do not have a good collection of the same. This belief has been responsible for not attracting any
scholarly attention to this genre and therefore the documentation and study of
this genre is negligible. This in turn has largely convinced the collectors and
researchers that riddles are not worthy of serious collection and study.
Moreover as riddles are very short in form and are often perceived to be used
for entertainment only among the Khasis, so the people tend to believe that
they do not serve any purpose save that of being a juvenile form of recreation.
The people do not acknowledge that riddles though they are very brief in
structure, yet they can act as a catalyst to sharpen the mind and test the wit and
creativity of an individual.

The other genres of Khasi oral literature have been documented since the
nineteenth century by many scholars but the same cannot be said to be true of
the riddle. So the popularity of riddles cannot be compared with the other
genres of folk literature such as the tale and proverb. For instance proverbs are
commonly shared in the sense that their applicability is more or less
appreciated and understood. Riddles in many cases are idiosyncratic and
arbitrary often being coined, used, applied and improved through the
individual agency. Therefore a limited applicability does not open up the
scope for a shared experience and in this manner an idiosyncratic and arbitrary
riddle dies out quickly and is abandoned.

In this study, the scholar has also observed that riddles constitute a universal
art. But unlike the other communities where riddles have religious
connotation, among the Khasis, riddles are used purely as a form of
entertainment and contest among the youth and children to amuse themselves
and to test their wit and previous knowledge to the answers of riddles that are put to them. No evidence has been unearthed to show otherwise that riddles are used for any serious purposes except as a kind of amusement and a pastime among the youngsters and children.

Traditionally Khasi riddles derived from close observation of nature and things around them. This we may assume is due to the fact that the Khasis in the past lived in the midst of nature. They adored and treated nature with respect and reverence and were so intimate with nature and it was always a source of inspiration for them. But with the advent of modern science and technology, there has been rapid growth of industrialization and urbanization all over Khasi and Jaintia hills which greatly affect the use of riddling as a verbal art. Due to urbanization many people have lost touch with nature and this in turn led to the dwindling of the practice of riddling and creation of riddles that are related to nature.

Most Khasi traditional riddles are also found to refer to bodily function. This shows that those creators of Khasi traditional riddles always compared things found in nature and those around them and with bodily functions. Riddles are also found to derive from close observation of the habits, customs and tradition of the Khasis. The study also shows that there are riddles whose origin could be traced back to many Khasi folktales. Another finding is that Khasi riddles are mostly oppositional and metaphorical in nature.

In the course of investigation it has been found out that apart from traditional riddles, there are many riddles which do not fit into what is called the
traditional category. The contact of the Khasis with the outsiders especially the British in the nineteenth century had ushered in tremendous changes in their lives. For the first time the Khasis came into direct contact with outside forces which brought drastic changes with regards to their lifestyle, religious and cultural practices. The bearing of the western influences on the Khasis could be seen in all spheres of life. Even riddles that the Khasis have created since their first contact with the colonial powers bear testimony to this. It has been observed that there are scores of riddles that have evolved after the colonization of these hills by the British. This can be called modern riddles as they have been created only after the British came to the Khasi hills and the descriptive elements of such riddles reflect the colonial influences in the day to day life of the Khasis.

The present study on riddles also reveals that Khasi riddles are closely related to other genres of folk literature such as folk poetry, dialogic games, jokes and verbal dueling. Khasi folk poetry especially phawar are full of metaphors. Phawar which are a good example of Khasi poetry, play a very significant role in the religious, socio and cultural life of the Khasis. Phawar sung during archery competitions are not only sung to entertain the audience but to forward cogent argument to the Mother Decree in order to triumph over their rivals. It has been observed that many of these phawars on closer examination do contain riddle elements in the versification system which on deeper analysis reveals the metaphorical structure of the typical riddle. The study of dialogic folk games that have been found to be played by children in the past as well as at present brings out an interesting link between riddles and dialogic games. In
most of the dialogic games that has been studied, it is seen that traces of riddle element could be found in them. This study also brings into focus the existence of the inter-genre such as riddle jokes and verbal dueling. These verbal dueling and riddle jokes are found to take place mostly among people belonging to different regions or villages and among youth of opposite sexes who were trying to ridicule and out do each other.

The practice of riddling usually happens to take place among children and youngsters. Riddling among children particularly used to take place in social gatherings, playground and sometimes even in schools among friends and classmates. The researcher has witnessed such practices among students in the War-Jaintia areas as well as among children in Shillong, where she conducted investigations. It has been observed that in many cases the children in the rural areas can still connect with nature as many of the riddles they have asked and in some cases, created are related to nature. It has also been observed that many of the riddles the youth and children use these days are what we called modern or contemporary riddles as they reflect the Western influence in their day to day life and related to contemporary issues and modern technology.

The advent of the electronic technology has brought radical and drastic changes to the life of the Khasis. Modern communication system like the internet and the mobile phones has led to the emergence of a new medium for the spread of folklore. Some folklorists were of the opinion that technology tends to eliminate certain types of folklore, but their fears and doubts turned out to be baseless as the internet and mobile phones (SMS) in general have
proved to be a fertile ground for the spread and development of folklore. During the research it has been observed, that many traditional genres of folklore like urban legends, jokes, chain letters, rhymes and riddles especially riddles jokes and sexual riddles continue to thrive through modern communication system. Today the traditional practice of riddling as a conventional verbal art is dwindling but riddling through the internet and short message service is growing vigorously as this has piqued the curiosity and interest of the people. This in turn plays a very important role in the transformation of this genre.

Today most of what we called riddles are not true riddles in the strict sense of the term. But they do contain elements of riddles in them. What we know as riddles today are usually conundrums, riddle jokes and riddle parodies. Short message service and internet riddles can also be called contemporary riddles. These riddles are very popular among the youth and student community who are more tech savvy compared to older generations. The riddle texts that are circulated through the internet and SMS are considered to be genuine items of folklore because they are anonymous and collective products, and even if we can check the sender of these texts, it does not necessarily mean that the sender is the author or creator of the riddle text in question. And in the course of transmission of these riddle texts, some alteration always take place in most of the texts before the same is transmitted to others. This in turn led to existence of different variants which is one of the characteristics of folklore.

It has been observed that the study of the internet and SMS riddles that are in circulation among the Khasis do not confine only to those typical riddles that
are related to the community, but also those concerning other cultures and events that occur throughout the globe. Most of the riddles circulated through modern communication system are collected from Khasis belonging to different professions and different age groups. They are mostly what we called riddle jokes which were mainly created to ridicule and tease people from opposite sexes or individuals. Pretended and real sexual riddles are also found to be very popular and mind boggling.

Khasi riddles have undergone a significant change not only in their forms but also in their contents. Khasi traditional riddles are different from modern ones in many ways. One of the differences is the mode of transmission. Traditionally up to the last decade of the twentieth century, Khasi riddles are transmitted orally. There was no evidence that Khasi riddles have seen the light of the day in print. But by the beginning of the twenty-first century, riddles are mostly transmitted through the modern communication system, namely the internet and mobile phone technology. Messaging through e-mail and mobile phone started characteristically as a youth custom. The emergence and widespread practice of sending message en masse made the internet and mobile phone technology a new medium for the spread and popularity of riddles.

Today the practice of riddling as a conventional verbal art is dwindling considerably. The popularity of traditional riddles also cannot be compared to those of modern ones especially those created and circulated through modern communication devices. Modern riddles especially those which are funny and
tricky in forms and content appeal to the youth greatly as they are more identified with them and can understand the metaphors and messages in them better than those traditional ones. But still we can see that riddling as a verbal art still subsists as an oral tradition among the Khasis. The invasion of modern technology has greatly affected the conventional practice of this verbal art, but it cannot stamp it out altogether.