ABSTRACT

The dissertation, "The History of the Khasis as reflected in the festivals and dances," is the study of the important festivals of the Khasis. The Khasis like other tribals love dances, music and songs, they have many important festivals, most of them of which are very ancient. On the other hand, some festivals are of very recent origin, example can be given of Ka Shad Suk Myansier, which started during the British period, when a need was felt for the preservation of the traditional culture of the Khasis, due to the threat posed by the process of westernization. Another one is Ka Shad Tirot of the Nongkhlaw Syiemship which started only a few years back to commemorate the heroic deeds of U Tirot Singh, in the Khasi war of resistance against the British Imperialism. In this dissertation only five major festivals of the Khasis are focussed. The object of the study, is to understand the historical situation in which these festivals originated and how the festivals play a very important role in the political, religious, social and economic life of the people.

The way of life of the Khasis is reflected in their various festivals, and the social relevance of the festivals is very great, as each festival has certain meaning to them. In the pre-colonial period, the Khasis lived in isolation,
they had their own traditional religion, unique political and social system. Their economic mainstay was agriculture, their social, economic and political activities were all governed by the situation and environment that they lived, their very existence depended on their good harvest. To get a bountiful harvest and to free themselves from plague, pestilence and various diseases, they propitiated God through sacrifices, and rites and rituals are performed during their festivals. Some of the festivals are celebrated before the sowing season, and some others after the harvesting season and when the sowing job for the new year is over. It is during these festive occasions, that they thank God for all His kindness and blessings that He showers on them, in the year that had passed and also to ask for His blessings for a bountiful harvest, good health and general prosperity for the coming year.

The major festivals that are studied here are (1) Ka Pomblang Syiem, or Ka Pomblang Nongkrem or Shad Nongkrem, which means the goat killing ceremony of the royal family of the Khyrim Syiemship, which is popularly known as the Nongkrem Dance. It is the well known religious festival of the Khasis, which is held annually, at the Ingsad, the royal residence at Smit about 20 Km from Shillong. This festival is held to honour and respect the ancestors, the founders of the State
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and religion and to invoke God's blessings for a bountiful harvest, well being and general prosperity of the royal family and the people on the whole. (2) The second festival is Ka Behdeinkhlam, which is another important religious festival, which is celebrated by the Pnar, a subtribe of the Khasis, inhabiting the Jaintia Hills District of Meghalaya. It is celebrated annually at Jowai, the headquarter of the Jaintia Hills district. Behdeinkhlam means a festival to drive away plague and it is held in the months of June or July. The people observe this festival to free themselves from various diseases and other evils, and to invoke God's blessings for a bountiful harvest, and well being of the people on the whole, so that they could live happily throughout the year. (3) The third festival is Ka Rong Khli, which is the most important festival of the War Jaintias. It is celebrated at Nongtalang village which lies in the southern part of the Jaintia Hills District bordering Sylhet District of Bangladesh. Rong Khli means the Tiger festival, and it is held whenever a tiger is killed accidentally or by the villagers on their organised hunting. In whatever manner that the tiger is killed, God is to be worshipped, if God is not worshipped, certain calamities like epidemic diseases, starvation, blindness, ill luck will befall on the people. (4) The fourth festival is Ka Lukhmi, which is an important religious festival in certain
places in the Bhoi areas in the northern parts of the Khasi and Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. The people in this area, depend very much on agriculture which is the mainstay of the economy. So, this festival is performed before the sowing season and after the harvesting work is over to Ka Lukhmi, the goddess of wealth and agriculture who is also the house deity of the Khasis. The festival is performed for prosperity of crops and for general welfare of the people on the whole.

(5) The last festival is Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem or Shad Weiking, which means a dance when the heart is happy or peaceful. This dance festival is quite different from the others because it is of comparatively recent origin. It is an annual Thanksgiving dance, which is held under the auspices of the Seng Khasi, a socio-religious and cultural organisation of the Khasis. During this festival, the people thank God for all His blessings in the year that had passed and to invoke His blessings for the coming year for a bountiful harvest and general prosperity. This dance is held annually in the month of April after the harvesting season and also when the sowing work for the new year is over.

The festivals play a very important role in the life and culture of the Khasis. Although many authors have attempted to deal with the festivals, and some articles have been written in journals, newspapers and magazines, no one has made a
specific study on the various festivals of the Khasis, their history, contents, their social relevances and the influence of the festivals on the social, religious, economic and political aspects of the people.

The object of my dissertation has been to study the festivals of the Khasis in historical perspective. An attempt is made to study some of the important major festivals of the Khasis, and the influence that they have on the life and culture of the people. The study includes the origin, evolution, and contents of the festivals, the glories that they offer of the past and brings to light the relevances which have been lying dormant for so long, and at the same time to focus on the rich cultural heritage of the people.

The theme has been organised into four chapters for the purpose of treatment. The first chapter is introductory on the land and people, dealing with the origin and migration of the Khasis, location, population, climate, mountain and river system, their religion, the matrilineal system which is a unique institution among the Khasis, the position of women in the Khasi society, inheritance and their political institutions. It also includes an introduction to the five major festivals of the Khasis, and the social change among them. The second chapter is on the Khasi Calendar. The Khasis like other people
of the world, have their own system of calculating time that is Calendar, which is based on agricultural activities and nature. They have their own names for the twelve months of the year and also the days of the week, which is an eight days week based on market schedule. They also have names for the four seasons of the year, and these four seasons are connected with their festivals and dances. There are festivals which are observed after the sowing season and some which are observed after the harvesting season. The third chapter is on the festivals, showing how the Khasis like other tribals love dances, music and songs. In this chapter an attempt is made to trace the origin, evolution and contents of these festivals. The concluding chapter deals with the final analysis of the festivals, their social relevances and the role that the festivals play in the social, economic, political and religious life of the Khasis.

The data for this research work have been based mainly on primary sources collected during my field work, through interview and oral sources with selected knowledgeable persons and those who participate in the festivals. Besides these, I have also consulted whatever books or articles that are available on the subject both in English and Khasi.

The study of the festivals reveals that they play a very important role in the political, social, religious and
economic life of the Khasis. The observation of these festivals, ceremonies, rites and rituals shows that the Khasis are deeply religious people. They pray to God the Creator, for His blessings for peace, well being, bountiful harvest and general prosperity, and at the same time, they do not forget to thank Him for all the blessings that He showers upon them. The study of the festivals also shows that they are not only religious ceremonies but also social festivities. They provide occasions, when people could meet their relatives, friends, the near and dear ones, and share the joy of a community as a whole. It is a time of merriment and enjoyment, to imbibe the spirit of love and brotherhood. It is a time for the young girls and virgins to show their beauty and to display their rich costumes, costly gold, silver ornaments and jewelleries. It is on such occasions that the young men could see and choose the beautiful girls and later on propose and arrange for their marriage. The youths and the people on the whole could display their best and colourful dresses, gold and silver ornaments. The festivals provide a social gathering and a collective activity to the people. The people who have worked very hard the whole year and those who are otherwise occupied with agriculture and other works and those who have to work outside come together in free mood during these festive days. This help the growth of solidarity among the people, their concern for the welfare of all the people and the state and
also the maintenance of unity and integrity against external threats.

The study of the festivals also shows that the Khasis have a deep love for their culture. It is this love which sustains them. They are proud that in spite of christianity, modern changes and other outside influences, they are still able to preserve their culture. When the Shad Nongkrem, Behdeinkham, Shad Suk Mynsiem, and other festivals are approaching, everybody is in a festive mood. Thousands of people in their best dresses go to witness these festivals and the above festivals are getting bigger and attract more people than ever.

The study of the festivals also brings to light that in the Khasi society, the festivals have direct connection with economic activities, apart from political and religious aspect. The study also brings to light that the Khasis love freedom and independence, so they could not reconcile their fate under the British rule, because the rulers interfered with the traditional way of life of the people. The Jaintias rose against the British, when the latter banned the cremation of dead bodies near the Jowai town and interfered with the processionists of the Behdeinkham festival at Jalong village. These discontentments took the shape of revolt under the
leadership of U Kiang Nangbah, but the revolt was suppressed in 1863 and U Kiang Nangbah was captured and hanged to death. Again, it is this love of freedom and independence, which made U Tirot Singh to revolt against the British. From the study of the festivals, we can see that a festival can be instituted at the wish and decision of the people for example, Ka Shad Suk Mynsiem which came into being when the Seng Khasi introduced it to preserve the rich cultural heritage of the Khasis. Another dance is Ka Shad Tirot of the Nongkhlaw Syiemship which is now held annually to honour the hero of the Khasi land, U Tirot Singh.