Chapter I

Introduction:

The history of the world can be read in textiles; the rise of civilizations and the fall of empires are woven into the warp and weft along with the great adventures of conquest, religion and trade. The greatest highway, the Silk Road was for the most luxurious and desirability commodity of all, silk textiles. Study of the traditional textiles of the world reveals at times an amazing diversity of techniques and style, while at others we can only wonder at the way in which cultures separated by vast distances have developed such similar solutions to problem of design and construction.\(^1\) The techniques employed in designing were confined on the choice of fabric and structures. India is one of the countries where the Greeks, Romans, Arabs, Persians and Chinese traded for fine silk and colourful cottons. Thus in order to understand the richness of this trade one must explore the availability of textiles and designs in different communities of this great subcontinent, and to preserve it one must study and understand the weaving done in their different regions. However the north-eastern parts of India which is so diverse in language and culture no documents have been explored.

Therefore in my research work I am concentrating on two tribes the Khasis and the Jaintias of Meghalaya based on the interpretation of what is appropriate and what will bring a greater understanding of the subject on a whole.

These tribes inhabit in the Kashi and Jaintia Hills which lies approximately between 90° 40’ to 90° 45’ East longitudes and 25° to 20° North Latitudes, covering an area
of 14, 463, 6 Kms. The United Khasi and Jaintia Hills was one of the districts in the erstwhile composite state of Assam. After the creation of the autonomous state of Meghalaya on 2nd April, 1970 and after the attainment of the full statehood on 21st January, 1972, the United Khasi, Jaintia and Garo Hills district of Meghalaya with the capital at Shillong came into existence. The Khasi and Jaintia Hills are bounded on the North-East and South-East by Assam, on the South by Bangladesh and on the West by Garo Hills district of Meghalaya. The area is divided into three parts (i) the Bhoi region on the North which forms itself a compact plateau with associated flat lands and open Valleys, its northern extremely gradually sloping towards the Brahmaputra Valley (ii) the Ri Lum, an irregular plateau on higher elevation (iii) the Ri War forming a narrow belt full of oblong and sturdy, abruptly terminating of Surma Valley.

**Khasi and Jaintia Society and Culture:**

‘Khasi’ and ‘Jaintia’ is a general name given to the various tribes and sub-tribes that inhabit the Khasi and the Jaintia hills of Meghalaya. The term Khasi has a particular significance, Kha means ‘born of’ and Si refers to ‘an ancient mother’. Khasi, therefore, means ‘born of an ancient mother’. Khasi indicates, therefore, an original derivation and a legacy bequeathed upon the descendants. The Jaintias preferred to be called ‘Pnars’ but also known as the ‘Synteng’ holds a similar significance. According to a tradition ‘Teng’ was the ancient mother and therefore ‘Synteng’ means ‘children of an ancestral mother’. The association of Khasi-Synteng with the mother seems therefore very significant.
Khasi forms a group of the Mon-Khmer language which belongs to an Austro-Asiatic type. Logan (1857) discovered an intimate relation between Khasi and the Mon-Khmer-Palaung dialects which prevail in Burma and Indo-China. Through comparison of vocabularies he discovered the nearest kinsmen of the Khasis in the Palaung (a tribe inhabiting one of the Shan states of South-east Asia). Logan further described the physical differentiation of the Khasi and other Mon-Khmer tribes from the Munda.4

Kuhn discovered the connection between Mon-Khmer of Indo-China (including Jgasu of Assam) and Munda of Central India, the Non-Cowry of the Nicobars and the Sakai-Semang Orang of Malacca and concluded that “from its vocabulary and structure of sentences, Khasi is strictly connected with the Palaung-Wa dialects spoken by the tribes that line along the Central and upper reacher of the Mekong river”5 (Grierson has divided the Mon-Khmer language into five groups of which one of the group constitutes the Khasi and its dialects – Pnar (Synteng) of Jaintia Hills, War dialect of the South, Lyngngam of the far North-Western from tiers of the country and Khasi proper6.

On the average, the Khasis have a Burmese complexion and appearance which distinguish them from Indo-Chinese as well as other Indians from the plains. In real physique, however, there are differences between the different communities of various localities as there is with languages in regard to dialectic varieties. The unique features of these two tribes are the matrilineal descent. They have strictly exogamous matrilineal clans, which they call ‘Kur’ or ‘Jaid’.
As we know that these tribes did not have any scripts before the coming of the British, the Roman character for introduced to write the Khasi and Jaintia script which was introduced in 1841 A.D. According to the records preserved in the office of the Deputy Commissioner (Khasi and Jaintia Hills) and also Secretariat Record Room Shillong it is believed that these tribes earlier used scripts of their neighbours like Devanagiri, Assamese and Bengali, as well as Persian.

The region possesses temperate climate sharing the climate of the nearby plains. The area is rich in flora and fauna. Nature and climate have exercised a tremendous effect on the life and activities of the people and the vegetation required for weaving e.g. fibre, plant types for dyeing and the type of moth for silk threads.

Trade plays a big role in the culture of a society because they tend to depend on others for their necessity items not available locally. According to Lindsay, a lime merchant from Sylhet in his records has written that the Khasis bought a staple of coarse silk from the confinements of China near to Bengal. The tradition also says that they went as far as Burma and the east for trade.

It cannot be exactly ascertained when the silk rose in India, but there is sufficient documentary and inscriptive evidences available to show that, in the past, it was so often imported from China via Assam to Bengal route in the earlier period of the Christian era. So it is interesting to note that the Chinese silk-materials, after crossing Central Asia reached India through the Parthian traders. The account given in the Periplus leaves no doubt that silk was definitely exported from China to the West, but it might not have been always indigenous silk. It is very likely that it might have
been Chinese silk, which was first imported into India and re-exported to feed the markets of the west.\textsuperscript{9}

**Traditional costumes of the Khasi and the Jaintia**

These tribes have their own culture, customs and beliefs. They take great care of what they wear and do not part with their clothes till it is not torn and cannot be worn again. So after the death all his belongings are also burnt with his body. When they go to a particular program they wear the specific costumes with the specific designs as in the earlier days but on casual occasions they wear traditional costumes with new designs. Jaintias are more liberal and accepted new designs attributed to their attire.

Dress is perhaps most amenable to change through cultural contact or what might possibly be called, in anthropological terms, “Cultural expansion.”\textsuperscript{10} Textile plays a vital role in the life of these tribes but in the last fifty years a lot of change has been taking place in respect to the dress of the Khasis and the Jaintias.

The dress wore in the olden days can rarely be seen now specially amongst the male. The old man in a dhoti and turban has become extremely rare. There are very few people who can be seen sporting a turban over their European dress. In this case the turban is a symbol of their pride in their racial heritage. The Khasi and the Jaintia women has always been conservative in the matter of dress and they are still so. They are seen in traditional attire which covers them from the shoulder to the ankle. Blouse and skirt was introduced only after the coming of the British. But these tribes still wore the traditional costumes in such a way that the whole body is covered.
Daily costumes of men

Dresses of the Khasis may be divided into two divisions, ancient and modern. Male folks from the rural wear the sleeveless coat or Jymphong, which is a garment leaving the neck and arms bare, with a fringe at the bottom, and a row of tassels across the chest; it is fastened by tassels in front. It is usually black with flower decorations and an embroidered lining. A waist band made of cotton was worn beneath by a ‘kilt’ of different kinds was also used. Over the Jymphong (coat), Banat or a wrapper (red or white) or Ryndia (endi), Boh khaila (a dhoti) made of cotton thread was substituted for the waist band in some case. Jain Khyllong a turban (pagri) is a Sala (cotton white sheet) or Ryndia (endi) or Muga. The Jymphong, however, may be said to be going out of fashion in the Khasi Hills, its place being taken by coats of European pattern and nondescript garments while many Jaintias still wore it. The best material used for the Jainsem, and ceremonial head-dress for men is called Khor made of multifarious silk threads.

Boh Khaila (Loin cloth)-This is a small piece of cotton cloth which covers the waist area and is tied by a cotton belt at the waist therefore called boh Khaila in Khasi and Jaintia which literally means wrapping the waist. In interior villages this way of wearing a cloth by men made it easier for them to move in the rough hilly terrain.

Ka Jain Shympan (Dhoti)-A cotton cloth of one and half meters was used to be wrapped and tied on the waist and hangs down till the ankle. In cloth from the front is passed between the thighs and tugged on the waist behind. Giving a pant look and is easy for the wearer to walk (Fig.1.1).
**Jain Khyllong** (Turban)-The elderly men of both these tribes wear a white turban of cotton cloth of different sizes depending on the age of the person, the smallest is 2 meters long and 14 inches wide and the longest is 4 meters long and 14 inches wide, and is well tied on the head and worn in any important get together in their society which is seen till today. The way it is warp in a clockwise when the person is alive and anticlockwise when the person expired (Fig.1.2).

**Ka Jymphong** (Sleeveless Jacket)-The jacket worn for daily purpose is black and woven by cotton threads dyed in black. It is a simple plain sleeveless jacket and waist length (Fig.1.1) with no designs it. It’s worth noticing that the sleeveless coats worn by the men during the festivals are also similar with other tribes of North east India. These coat worn on daily basis earlier specially in villages till a few years ago are not as decorative as the one worn in festivals rather it is plain mostly black and sometime it was without tassels. It is also shorter in comparisons to the one worn during the festivals. The sleeveless coat worn during the festivals was frock like as they were not tight fitting in the body rather loose and long and covers the waist. The tassels hang from the bottom of the coat downwards and the threads are golden or silver in color. The length is not less than five inches. The design within the coat is of various types, some have floral motifs and some have animal motifs. The Khasis preferred having a cock motif in the jacket with floral designs to compliment it. Later the designs are embroidered as required or desired. Even the tassels are added after the jacket is being stitched.

The neckline and all side borders are also embroidered with geometrical or floral motifs (Fig.1.3). These original jackets were not available at present, though a replica
of it is made by some local tailors but is of no match to the earlier one. Now ‘felt’ is use for making the jacket instead of cloth as it is cheaper and even the designs embroidered are not as the earlier jackets. The compromise in the price is the main reason of this poor quality.  

It should be mentioned that even in ancient times people of importance amongst the Khasi, like Syiem (Kings), wore waist-cloths, as well as people of less consequences on great occasions, such as dances and festivals. The use of waist-cloths among the Khasis is on the increase, especially among those who live in Shillong and the neighbouring villages and in Jowai and Cherrapunjee.

**Daily costumes of women**

Women wear Jain Pien worn around the waist and fastened with a kind of cloth belt, and hangs down from the waist to the knee or a little above it. Over this is worn a long piece of cloth, sometimes of muga silk called Jainsem. There is a fold in the ‘Jainsem’ which serves as a pocket for keeping odds and ends. Over the Jainsem another garment called Jain Kup or Jain Tap-Moh-Khlieh is worn. This is thrown over the shoulders like a cloak, the two ends being knotted in front; it hangs loosely down the back and sides to the ankles. It is kept in position by knotting it over both the shoulders. They wear the ‘Jain Kup’ in such a way that hides entirely the graceful contours of the figure giving the ladies a decent beauty. Over the head and shoulders is worn a wrapper called ‘Tap-Moh-Khlieh’ (a cloth that covers the head). For daily use they wear ‘Ka Kyrshah’ (apron) a kind of sheet with colour ‘Khyrwang’ or plain (Ryndia) type both made of endi treads. Khasi women in cold weather wear gaiters which are often long stocking without feet or in the case of the poor, pieces of cloth.
wound round the legs like putties, or cloth gaiters. It is observed that the woman at Nongstoin wears gaiters of leaves. It was explained that these were worn to keep off the leeches.

Jaintia woman wears a little different ‘Jain Khrywang’ (Fig.1.4) a wrapper takes the place of the Khasi ‘Jainsem’, which is a cotton cloth woven in black and white threads with check or stripe designs. The black colour is obtained from an iron-ore extract. The cotton cloth is then worn round the body and fastened at the waist, which hangs down till the ankle. The ‘Jain Kyrshah’ like an apron is a piece of cotton cloth where one end of the cloth passes under right hand shoulder and its two corners are knotted on the opposite left hand shoulder or vice versa. They wrap the head just the same as that of the Khasi. On festive occasions they do not cover the head but rather decked with jewellery or flowers. However women form the ‘Ri War’ always keeps their heads uncovered. Nowadays blouses, skirts, and frocks mostly mill-made fabrics and synthetic are worn underneath the jainsem or the Kyrshah in place of the Khyrwang after the coming of the British in the 18th century.

Salu iong or Iu Sem is black and white wrapper or sarong girded at the waist and reaching the ankles, is commonly used by the Pnar woman in the rural with a Kyrshah Sem, dropped over it front the shoulder (Fig.1.5). The indigenous type of jainsem is made of a variety of Nara or muga or silk cloth (Fig.1.6). Nara varieties have extra weft design colours with flower like decorations – black, red, white and yellow colours.

Dhara: It is a traditional costumes of the Khasi women (Fig.1.7) and Mukhli (the silk cloth) a traditional costume of the Jaintia women (Fig.1.8) are woven by the
weavers of Assam now residing in Sualkuchi. It had designs all over with motifs of elephant, lion, peacock and flowers. It could be used both sides, it is expensive and cannot be availed by the ordinary people in earlier times. However no written documents about when it started to be woven in Assam nor who gave the specific design patterns. The Dhara which has design patterns only on the borders are cheaper. It was woven in a special loom and takes months to complete one cloth which is of 4 ½ meters. Now Sualkuchi weavers do employ weavers from other regions of northeast India like upper Assam, Kacharis, Kokrajhar etc to come and weave during their free time when sowing is already done as well as after harvesting. They are paid according to the length of cloth woven. The Dhara is extensively worn in festivals, weddings and special ceremonies.

Daily costumes of children

Children are seen wearing small shirts ‘Korkhapoh’ a piece of white cotton cloth it form the dress of the infants which is tied round the waist and is known as Jain Shympan. Sometimes the piece is passed between the thighs and then it is known as Jain Bah. Nowadays the children are seen wearing very few clothes in summer and wrapped up in winter. The girls are seen wearing home stitched dress known as ‘Ka Phrok’ or frock in English. While the boys wear a shirt and short pants known as ‘Ka Patlun Lungkot’. Though before the coming of the British these children also worn loin cloth around their waist and during winter a piece of cotton cloth was used to cover the head and tied around the neck. This way the cloth covered not only the upper part of the body but also the whole body literally. These tribes are believed to have learned weaving practically from their neighbours in the surrounding states. As
nowadays only village bordering other states is practicing weaving and has excellent weavers. (Fig-1.9A, Fig-1.9B).

A bag of cloth for odds and ends is carried by men and women slung across the shoulder. These bags are also woven in different region of Meghalaya. In the Bhoi region the school in the adjoining areas student’s uses locally woven bags for carrying books to school21. These tribes have good sense of weaving mats, baskets etc. The walls in their hut were also made of woven mats. So they knew the art of weaving from time immemorial. The coming of the British in 18th century brought a big change to these tribes, for example coming of Christianity, the traditional costumes worn for the marriage ceremony was abandoned and white long gowns were adopted by the bride22.

The purpose of the research is to provide a detailed description and analysis of this aspect of the Khasi and the Jaintia textile being a part of their rich culture, and also looking at textile of these tribes in their artistic values. Descriptions of these tribes textile prior to the 19th century are limited because such textile no longer exists and because early observers of the Khasi and the Jaintia provided very little information about how the textile looked or how they were made. But they are now portrayed in artefacts/mannequin in Tribal Research centre, Guwahati; Shankardev Kalashetra, Guwahati, State central Museum Shillong, Don Bosco Museum, Shillong. It is from this acquisition that the analysis begins. Accordingly, this research describes the Khasi and the Jaintia textile culture particularly as it existed in the late 19th century through the 20th century, at the end of the era when these tribes had a cultural tradition that is fairly distinct from that of the surrounding areas.
References:

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8) J.N Chowdhury, Khasi Canvas, Shillong: Published by the author, 1998, p.47
10) J.N Chowdhury, Khasi Canvas, Shillong: Published by the author, 1998, Pg.47.
12) As told by the Elders of these tribes during the field trip.
13) As explained by the Khasi Elders.
14) Informed by the duplicate traditional makers during the field work from 2006 to 2011.
15) J.N Chowdhury, Khasi Canvas, Shillong: Published by the author, 1998. Pg.52
17) Ibid.Pg.313
18) As seen in Sualkuchi weavers villages during the field study.
19) As explained by the Assam Sualkuchi weavers as no written documents are available.
20) As informed by the Elders of the Khasi and Jaintia tribes during the field work.
21) As seen in the Villages of Ri-Bhoi Region of Khasi Hills till date.
22) As observed in the wedding nowadays.
Fig. 1.1. Jaintia Man wearing Dhoti and Sleeveless Jacket (Don Bosco Museum)

Fig. 1.2. A Jaintia man wearing a white turban and dhoti, Western style coat and a Khasi traditional shawl on his shoulder sitting in front of the monoliths at Nartiang, Jowai.

Fig. 1.3. Jymphong a sleeveless Jacket worn by Khasi man during festival.

Fig. 1.4. Toh Saru Jainnian worn by Jaintia women. (literally Black and white stripe patterned wrapper worn by Jaintia women on occasions).
Fig.-1/5 Kainkryshah (cloth that cover the upper part of the body) check pattern worn by Khasi and Jaintia women.

Fig.-1/6 Jaintia Women wearing Thoh Saru wrapper (literally meaning a black & white stripes cloth worn on the waist covering the lower part of the body). Upper cloth known as Jainsen Muga (Eari Silk) with red stripe on the border. (Don Bosco Museum)
Fig.-1.7. Detail of a modern design on Dhara.

Fig.-1.8. Improvised design on Jainsem worn by Jaintia women.
Fig. 1.9A (Left to right) Kong Thran Tmung, Priti C. Nartiang, Kong Kwick Tmung, Kong Shisha Syiem, Kong Sial Muntaj Suphai, Kong Ritisuk Tado, Kong New Tmung.

Fig. 1.9B. Priti C. Nartiang with weaver Kong Tomkomari Chatri.