

Revisiting and Reviving Traditional Practices: The Mech Kacharis of Nagaland

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Abstract

Culture and traditional practices are paramount in shaping communities' identity and continuity. These elements serve as repositories of collective wisdom, values, and historical experiences that are transmitted across generations. They play a crucial role in fostering a sense of belonging and identity among individuals, thereby connecting them to their ancestral roots and providing a framework for understanding their position within the broader social and historical context. Such practices and cultural expressions are integral to maintaining the social fabric and coherence of communities, enabling the perpetuation of shared heritage and continuity amidst evolving socio-cultural landscapes. Mech Kacharis, recognized as an Indigenous group in Nagaland, has faced cultural erosion due to Assamese influence, intermarriage, and modernization. In response, initiatives like the Burkhong Cultural Society (established in 2016) and the Gyanswarang Forai Sali school (founded in 2022) aim to revive traditional practices. The Hornbill Festival further supports these efforts by providing a platform for showcasing cultural heritage. This paper emphasizes the importance of cultural revival in maintaining ethnic identity amid changing socio-cultural landscapes.

Keywords: Tradition, Mech Kachari, culture, folk

Introduction

The Kacharis are one of the recognized indigenous groups of Nagaland, along with the Nagas and other non-Naga tribes like the Kukis, Garos, and the Mikirs, who are listed as scheduled tribes of Nagaland vide Notification (Nagaland) Scheduled Tribe Order 1970 (Luhadia, 2016). The Dimasa and the Mech are two sub-tribes under the Kachari tribe, which comes under the Scheduled tribe

list in Nagaland. The term Kachari denotes many tribal communities originally belonging to the same stock of people, such as the Bodo Kachari, Dimasa Kachari, Mech Kachari, and other Kachari sub-groups. Unfortunately, people have yet to ascertain the etymological meaning of the term Kachari scientifically. The term's origin is complicated to trace, and the people themselves need to learn precisely why they are called as such. It can

be mentioned here that the people belonging to the aforesaid tribal communities do not generally call themselves Kachari. They introduce themselves as Bodo, Dimasa, Sonowal, etc. In their traditional folktales, the term Kachari also does not appear (Bordoloi, n.d.).

The genesis of the Mech Kachari tribe traces back to the Mechi River region of the Terai, where ancestral ties to the land fostered a sense of communal cohesion and identity (Dutta, 2022). From this primordial landscape, the Mech embarked on a migratory odyssey, traversing the rugged terrain of the Patkai hills that demarcated the boundary between India and Burma. The migration of the Mech Kachari tribe was characterized by a westward movement along the Himalayan foothills, leading to the establishment of settlements in regions such as Darjeeling, Terai, and Baikunthapur in Jalpaiguri district. The Mech diaspora, driven by environmental, socio-economic, and geopolitical factors, ventured eastward, crossing formidable rivers like the Tista and Sankosh. This eastward expansion established thriving Mech communities in locales such as Goalpara in Assam, epitomizing the indomitable spirit of resilience and adaptability that defined their collective ethos.

The Mech Kachari tribe, classified as one of the scheduled tribes of the Republic of India, occupies a notable position within the mosaic of indigenous communities in the northeastern region. Central to the narrative of the Mech Kachari tribe is their purported ethnic affiliation with the Mongolian race within the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family. Historically, the Mech people are believed to have spoken the Bodo language, although the gradual assimilation into mainstream Assamese culture has left an indelible mark on their linguistic identity.

Methodology

This study's data collection methods encompass primary and secondary sources alongside participant observation techniques. Primary data were gathered through interviews and oral testimonies from individuals actively engaged in the traditional practices. Secondary data sources were utilized to elucidate the socio-cultural significance of these traditions across various regions of Northeast India, facilitating a comparative analysis. Data was also collected through observation on different occasions when traditional practices were performed.

Objective

The primary objective of this paper

is to elucidate the traditional and indigenous practices of the Mech Kacharis in Nagaland. Additionally, this study explores the historical trajectory of these practices, detailing how they were once marginalized and are currently undergoing a process of revival.

Discussion

An ethnic minority is a group that makes up a smaller portion of a larger population. For instance, the Kachari are a major ethnic group in Assam, whereas the Mech Kachari are a less well-known subgroup of the Kachari. Although the Mech Kachari were once the rulers of the ancient Kamrupa Kingdom, they now represent a small fraction of the Kachari population. Their ethnic identity has been largely absorbed into the broader Assamese society. Within the larger Kachari kingdom context, the Mech-Kachari are considered a minority ethnic group in Assam. Minority ethnic groups often experience an identity crisis and typically seek recognition, autonomy, or a separate nation. In Northeast India, ethnic assertion is a prominent issue, primarily driven by political, economic, and social disadvantages and other benefits (Dutta, 2022).

After the establishment of Nagaland in 1963, the Mech Kacharis continued to engage in traditional

dances and songs on various occasions. However, over the ensuing years, they progressively began to lose their distinct cultural identity and ceased many traditional practices. The primary catalyst for this cultural erosion was the pervasive influence of Assamese culture and language, as most educational institutions operated in the Assamese medium during that period. Additionally, intermarriage and social integration with other tribes in Nagaland further diluted the Mech Kacharis' cultural distinctiveness.

The inability to preserve their language played a crucial role in this cultural decline, as language is a vital conduit for transmitting traditional customs and practices from one generation to the next. The erosion of linguistic heritage led to the gradual forgetting of these customs. Furthermore, the forces of modernization and Westernization exerted significant influence, prompting the Mech Kacharis to adopt new lifestyles that diverged from their traditional ways. This confluence of factors ultimately contributed to the significant loss of cultural identity among the Mech Kacharis in Nagaland. Recognizing the gradual erosion of their traditional practices due to various factors, the Mech Kacharis undertook initiatives to

revive these customs. This revival effort aimed to preserve their cultural heritage and ensure that younger generations could learn and perpetuate their traditional practices.

In an effort to revive traditional practices, the Burkhang Cultural Society was established in 2016. The term “Burkhang,” meaning “to dig up” in the Bodo dialect, reflects the society’s mission to rediscover and rejuvenate cultural practices that were in danger of being forgotten. Furthermore, Gyanswarang Forai Sali, a school dedicated to preserving and teaching traditional dances, songs, and language, was established in Kushiabill village, Dimapur, in 2022. This institution aims to impart cultural knowledge to younger generations, ensuring the transmission of heritage. In addition to these educational endeavours, various self-help groups have been formed to engage in traditional crafts, such as weaving traditional dresses and creating ornaments. These groups play a crucial role in maintaining and passing on traditional knowledge across generations. The cultural practices of the Mech Kacharis in Nagaland are derived from the traditions of the Bodo Kacharis, forming the foundation of their cultural heritage.

The art of dance and music has been an integral component of the socio-cultural life of the people of Nagaland. The Hornbill Festival has acted as an impetus for the growth of music in Nagaland (Roy, 2020). In addition to music, the Hornbill Festival offers a comprehensive platform for the exhibition of traditional practices from all tribes in Nagaland. The following traditional practices of the Mech Kacharis were performed during the Hornbill Festival 2023 and the Aai Sagi Festival 2024. These performances highlighted their rich cultural legacy and demonstrated their commitment to cultural preservation amidst modern influences.

Traditional game

1.Khomlainai

Khomlainai, an indigenous game integral to the cultural heritage of the Bodo tribes and also practiced by the Mech Kachari in Nagaland, exemplifies their physical prowess and traditional values. This unarmed combat sport, akin to wrestling, is conducted in a circular arena called the *Dokhor*, which features three concentric circles and a central point known as the *Nokhor*. Participants, attired in traditional garments and using a jute rope belt, engage in ten distinct sub-bouts, each emphasizing various techniques such as pulling,

pushing, lifting, and strategic positioning within the arena. For identification purposes, one competitor is referred to as *Agor* and the other as *Matha*, hence the designation *Agor* vs. *Matha*. The game is officiated by referees and judges, who oversee the adherence to rules and scoring. Points are awarded based on the extent of control exerted over the opponent and the ability to manoeuvre them within the defined circles. The competitor with the highest cumulative score across all sub-bouts is declared the *Derhasat* (winner). Khomlainai not only showcases physical agility and strength but also embodies the cultural richness and communal spirit of the Bodo tribes, reinforcing their enduring legacy and traditional practices. In each bout of Khomlainai, two wrestlers compete through a series of sub-bouts.

Traditional Dances

1. Baguroumba

The Baguroumba dance is the most beautiful dance of the Bodo-Kacharis, associated with merry-making and gossip (Roy, 2014). It is performed only by women, who wear the regorng spread around their necks and hold the ends with both hands. The Baguroumba dance is performed on every occasion and festival. This word is also written and pronounced as Bagurungba and

Bagurumba. The word Baguroumba consists of four sub-words: Ba+Ega+Rou+mba, which means to carry, to come out, heaven, and five, respectively. Hence, Baguroumba means to carry out the Bathou puja of the supreme god, who is the ruler of the five spiritual elements of heaven. The women dance by taking alternating steps with their feet, folding the lower back, and pushing the knees backward, all while keeping the song's rhythm. The dance begins with horizontal lines, then the dancers move into a circular pattern with a rising tempo, and ends in a beautiful, wave-like sea pattern. The Mech Kacharis draws inspiration from the Bodos and also practices it in Nagaland in a similar fashion.

2. Mwsaglangnai

Mwsaglangnai is an important traditional dance of the Mech Kacharis of Nagaland, performed during the Bathou Puja or Kherai Puja, celebrated in the last part of May. This dance is performed by young girls and boys. According to their beliefs, the Kachari youth, dressed in their finest traditional attire, perform this dance to pray to Bwrai Bathou, the Almighty. They seek purification of their souls and steadiness of mind, enabling them to engage in suitable activities for the welfare of society as a whole. (R. Saija & M. Mech, personal communication, Feb 3, 2024)

3.Chotrolee

Chotrolee is a dance performed by the women of the Mech Kacharis of Nagaland during the Kherai Puja, which takes place in the latter part of May. A distinctive feature of this dance is that the dancers wave a pair of swords in their hands, suggesting fervour and intensity. This symbolic act represents the courage and valour of the Kachari women, demonstrating that they stand firmly alongside their male counterparts in defending their homeland from enemies. This dance celebrates the strength and fighting spirit of the women within the Kachari community.

4.Daosri Delai

Daosri Delai is a dance performed by the women of the Mech Kacharis of Nagaland, inspired by the movements of the Moina bird. The dancers wear vibrant and colourful traditional costumes, gracefully emulating the bird's movements. The melodious sounds of traditional Kachari musical instruments, such as the Kham, Sifung, and Jotha Jabkhring, accompany this performance. Daosri Delai is showcased at all significant occasions within the Kachari community, celebrating their cultural heritage and the beauty of nature as represented by the Moina bird.

5.Bar-Dwi-Sikhla

Bar-Dwi-Sikhla is a dance from the

Mech Kachari dialect, which translates to “wind-water girl,” symbolizing Mother Nature. This title reflects the agrarian Mech Kachari community's deep connection with the environment, as the different seasons play a crucial role in their agricultural practices. This particular dance is performed to depict the windy season preceding spring's arrival. It celebrates the vibrant spring season, when plants sprout new leaves and flowers, signalling the start of agricultural activities. During the dance, performers mimic natural phenomena associated with the windy season, such as the blowing wind, swaying trees, and rustling leaves, bringing the spirit of nature to life through their movements.

6.Na Gwrnai Mwsanai

Na Gwrnai Mwsanai is a dance that reflects the significance of fishing in the rural life of the Mech Kachari community, where it is an everyday activity enjoyed by men, women, the young, and the old alike. The fishing equipment is mainly made from indigenous materials such as bamboo or cane. This dance explicitly portrays the women of the community fishing together in groups. They use a “jekhai,” a triangular-shaped bamboo crate open at the front, and a “khobai,” a small bamboo container to store the fish they catch. The dance captures

the joy and camaraderie among the women as they engage in fishing, temporarily setting aside their daily struggles. It highlights the spirit of togetherness and the brief escape from everyday life that fishing provides. Ultimately, the dance celebrates the satisfaction and happiness the women feel at the end of the day, pleased with their catch that promises a nourishing meal for their families. This dance is a vibrant expression of community life and the simple joys of shared tasks.

7. Khopri Sibnai Mwsanai

Khopri Sibnai Mwsanai is a dance integral to the agrarian lifestyle of the Mech Kachari tribe, closely connected to their agricultural activities. The title of the dance, “khopri,” translates to a bamboo hat, and “sibnai” means to put on or use. This dance highlights the importance of wearing a bamboo hat to shield oneself from the harsh sunlight during the labour-intensive tasks of sowing and planting paddy.

The lyrics of the accompanying song narrate the strenuous efforts involved in ploughing and preparing the fields day and night. They emphasize how the community members work together in groups, a practice that eases their workload and helps them alleviate their fatigue through mutual support.

The song vividly brings to life the elements of nature that mark the sowing season, such as the onset of the monsoon, seasonal floods, and the croaking of frogs, painting a vivid picture of the rural landscape during this critical time of year.

The performance concludes with a collective prayer to Mainao Buri, a revered figure seeking blessings for a fruitful and bountiful harvest. Therefore, this dance serves as a cultural expression of the Mech Kachari's agricultural practices and a communal invocation for prosperity and success in their farming endeavours.

Traditional Dances

1. Nagaland Raijw Ni Sikhla Jwng

Nagaland Raijw Ni Sikhla Jwng is a beautiful song and dance that celebrates the cultural identity of the Mech Kachari damsels of Nagaland. The title and theme of the performance express a heartfelt message of unity and respect. Through this dance, the performers express their greetings and respect to all the different communities within Nagaland and worldwide. It serves as a bridge, connecting the Mech Kachari community with others through the universal language of music and dance, and underscores their openness and welcoming spirit. This performance showcases their cultural heritage

and promotes a message of peace and harmony among diverse groups.

2. Dhansiri Dimapuri

Dhansiri Dimapuri is a poignant song that reflects on the historical splendour of the Kachari kingdom, with its capital once established in Dimapur. The song is an homage to the past Kachari kings and serves as a testament to the lasting legacy of their rule, evidence of which can still be seen in the ruins at Rajbari Dimapur. The lyrics emphasize the integral role of the Dhansiri River in fostering the growth and prosperity of the Kachari community and the kingdom at large. The river, often a lifeline for ancient civilizations, is celebrated for its contribution to the thriving culture and economy of the Kachari during their reign. Through its verses, the song encourages everyone to awaken from passivity and actively celebrate the rich heritage of the Kachari kings and their kingdom. It is a call to honour and remember the great deeds of the past, urging the community to take pride in their history and keep their ancestors' memory alive through song and celebration. This song is a reminder of past glories and a rallying cry for cultural pride and communal spirit.

Musical instruments

Musical instruments comprise the three basic elements - Rhythm,

Melody, and Harmony. Combining different musical instruments provides a lively, joyous, delightful aspect to the music (Roy, 2014). Most of the traditional music of the Mech Kacharis is instrumental in nature and accompanied by dance. Therefore, mentioning the traditional musical instruments used to create this music is essential. The traditional music of the Mech Kacharis is based on either the Carnatic or Hindustani scale (G. Mech, personal communication, February 3, 2024).

1. Sifung (flute)

Most of the traditional dances and songs are accompanied by the traditional Mech Kacharis flute called Sifung, a bamboo flute with six holes, out of which five are for playing and one for blowing. The musician can adjust the octaves in the sifung by changing the intensity of the blow.



Fig. 1: Sifung

2. Kham (drum)

The Kham is a drum crafted from trunks of trees like Sama and Odla. Its two sides are covered with goat or deer skin, while the braces are made from buffalo skin.



Fig. 2: Participants with the *Kham* during the Aai-Sagi Festival 2024

3. Jotha (cymbal)

Jotha is a cymbal made of bell metal that is used to keep time with the music played on different occasions.



Fig. 3: Jotha

4. Serja (violin)

It is a harp-like instrument, the body of which is made of Chitauna or Kanthal wood. The lower part of the body is hollow and a part of it is covered with the skin of Maphou. It has four strings made of Muga silk.



Fig. 4: Serja

5. Jab Shring / Jab Khring (snare)

It is a castanet (percussive instrument) with wooden frames with small round pieces of sheet metal attached.



Fig. 5: Jab Shring / Jab Khring

6. Khautha (bamboo clapper)

The Khautha is a bamboo clapper made from a piece of bamboo split lengthwise in the middle. It is played by holding it with both hands.

Conclusion

The annals of Mech history are replete with tales of adversity and triumph, none more poignant than the cataclysmic floods that beset the Baikunthapur forest area in 1952 and 1968. Despite the ravages of natural disasters, the Mech Kachari tribe exhibited remarkable resilience, enduring the vicissitudes of fortune with stoic fortitude. These tribulations, far from eroding their cultural heritage, served to fortify the bonds of communal solidarity and identity, fostering a sense of collective resilience that transcended temporal and spatial boundaries (Dutta, 2022).

The saga of the Mech Kachari tribe stands as a testament to the enduring resilience of indigenous communities in the face of adversity. Through their nomadic wanderings and sedentary settlements, the Mech Kachari people have woven a tapestry of cultural diversity and historical continuity that enriches the broader fabric of Indian society. As custodians of a rich cultural legacy, the Mech Kachari tribe beckons

scholars and enthusiasts alike to embark on a journey of discovery and enlightenment, unravelling the mysteries of their storied past and charting a course toward a more inclusive and empathetic future.

The preservation and revival of traditional practices among the Mech Kacharis of Nagaland highlight a concerted effort to maintain cultural heritage amidst the pressures of modernization and cultural assimilation. The establishment of the Burkhong Cultural Society and educational institutions such as Gyanswarang Forai Sali, alongside the efforts of self-help groups, demonstrate a proactive approach to safeguarding and transmitting cultural knowledge. The Hornbill Festival has played a pivotal role in this cultural renaissance by providing a platform for the Mech Kacharis and other tribes to showcase their traditions. Through these initiatives, the Mech Kacharis are preserving their heritage and ensuring its transmission to future generations, fostering a sense of identity and continuity in an ever-evolving socio-cultural landscape.

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