Research Paper

Exploring the Oral Traditions in Indigenous Languages in Meghalaya for Folklore and Storytelling

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Abstract
This research focused on the linguistic and cultural dynamics of Meghalaya's indigenous communities and explored the oral traditions in their folklore and storytelling. Located at the periphery of North East India, Meghalaya is home to diverse indigenous communities with different sets of unique oral traditions. A secondary qualitative method was employed in this study to generate insights into the traditions, language and ethnic beliefs of Meghalaya's tribes,essentially the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia communities. Each of the major ethnic communities is designed on some unique and distinctive customs and traditions due to their diverse ancestry which also reflects on their lives and oral narratives.

Introduction Meghalaya, literally meaning the "abode of clouds", is a small state of India that shares borders with Assam in the north and Bangladesh in the West. Located at the periphery of North East India, Meghalaya has a rich cultural influence of natives of Jaintia, Garo and Khasi regions and is set between China and India (INDIAN CULTURE, 2017). As such, Meghalaya is one of the least studied areas and is often overlooked while discussing the Indian culture as a whole. Regardless, the cultural heritage of Meghalaya is undeniable due to the convergence of tribal traditions and multicultural linguistics that are reflected in its folklore and storytelling. In this regard, the current research seeks to explore the oral traditions of indigenous languages used in Maghalayan folklore and storytelling.

I. Literature Review
Culture and Multilingualism in Meghalaya Meghalaya's multicultural dynamics are essentially built on the indigenous influence of Jayantia, Garo and Khasi tribes (Government of Meghalaya, 2017). Each of the major ethnic communities has some unique and distinctive customs and traditions due to their diverse ancestry. For instance, the Khasis hail from the Mon-Khmer ancestry, Garos from the Tibeto- Burman origin whereas the origins of Jaintias trace back to the South East Asian region. These dominant tribes have some distinctive traits that add to Meghalaya's harmonious milieu and contribute to its ethnic richness. As a tribe-heavy population, traditional language andconventional storytelling methods are highly relevant even in the modern age. According to Badlani (2015), the culture and tradition of a region are essentially reflected in the languages used by its inhabitants. Given the influence of distinctive indigenous groups and unique cultural traits, the languages of Meghalaya majorly originate from the dominant cultural influences. As articulated by Badlani (2011), the Khasi tribe comprises the majority of Meghalaya and follows numerous religious practices. In the Khasi community, the rituals, traditions and norms are designed in a matrilineal manner; although the patriarch of the family is also a significant member in decision-making. As a subgroup of the Tibeto-Burman family, Garo tribes belong to the Bodo-Garo or Barish group and their dominant language is Bodo. Jaintia is another tribe that majorly influences the cultural dynamics of Meghalaya. The cultural heritage of the Jaintia tribe is rich with traditions, folklore, art forms, music, dances and crafts. Jaintia tribes are also known as Pars or Syntengs and are one of the oldest and most widely spread indigenous populations in the North Eastern region of India (Government of Meghalaya, Oral traditions of folklore and storytelling in Meghalaya Literature, society and folklore are intricately connected concepts that influence the interplay of culture within communities. As argued by Gugget al. (2019), folklore represents the collective wisdom of communities; together with traditional beliefs and oral narratives, folklore shapes and reflects the values and norms of societies. A multifaceted connection of

literature, culture, society and folklore shapes the traditional oral narratives of diverse cultures. In Meghalaya, the oral traditions are mainly based on the lores and myths of the Khasi, Garo and Jaintia tribes. Regarding the oral traditions of Meghalaya's indigenous communities, Badlani(2016) points out that apart from religious connotations, myths and traditional viewpoints significantly influence their narratives. For instance, the stories of the Khasi community are greatly influenced by their forest myths and age-old beliefs about their connection to nature. Khasis consider themselves descendants of nature and worship forests as their home and abode of worship. On the other hand, Brighenti (2017) points out that Garo oral lores reflect a belief in "weretigers" or humans who can shape-shift and turn themselves into tigers. Folklores in the Garo community reflect the belief in magical arts and extra-human capabilities that make them one with nature. The Jaintia tribe essentially originated from the Khasi community and is often called the Khasi-Pars (Government of Meghalaya. Thus, their oral narratives are similar to the Khasi lores and express love for the earth and praise natural elements using different instruments.

II. Methodology

Research philosophy formulates the outermost layer of Saunders' research onion and entails the approach that guides researchers in selecting suitable methods for data collection, interpretation and analysis. The philosophy is mainly categorised into positivism, pragmatism, interpretivism and realism. Positivism views the world from an objective spectacle whereas interpretivism priorities scientific evidence and subjective observations. Realism on the other hand is an amalgamation of positivist and interpretivist philosophies and explores phenomena using scientific information and objective observations (Sileyew, 2016). Pragmatism strictly deals with facts and focuses on multiple approaches to generate a conclusion. In this research, the pragmatist approach has helped collect relevant data concerning the research topic from multiple pieces of evidence to determine the way oral traditions influence folklore and storytelling in Meghalaya.

The research design can be categorised into exploratory and conclusive design based on the type of data and information to maximise research outcomes. The exploratory design applies to studies that aim to generate conclusions about a phenomenon from general observations and do not require quantifiable data. On the contrary, conclusive studies essentially focus on deriving insights based on subjective information and well-defined scientific evidence (Pandey & Pandey, 2016). The current research is designed in an exploratory manner to enable the collection of objective viewpoints of Meghalaya's indigenous population regarding their oral traditions, folklore and storytelling methods.

The research approach refers to the framework that the study and its reasoning are based on; the approach can be categorised into inductive, deductive and abductive reasoning. Inductive reasoning involves the usage of existing information for generating specific conclusions. On the other hand, deductive reasoning applies to studies focused on using existing theories and general premises to formulate insights and develop conclusions. The abductive approach is a combined approach that uses existing data and known premises to detect patterns and test hypotheses. In this research, the inductive approach has been employed to collect relevant data and develop a general notion about the region's population.

Data collection and data analysis comprise the core of Saunders' research onion and is the most crucial component of research. As divulged by Pandey and Pandey (2017), data collection entails the process of collecting relevant data from various sources to generate insights into the research topic. Based on the type and nature of information, data collection is categorised into primary and secondary methods. Secondary data collection deals with information from existing studies and market insights to develop insights into the research topic.

Secondary data are not the researcher's original work: the findings are essentially developed from the works of other researchers. Contrarily, primary data collection involves empirical evidence collected from first-hand accounts of a real-life population to substantiate secondary findings with original insights. In this research, the secondary data collection method has been employed to collect relevant data concerning the research topic and generate insights into the linguistic traditions of oral narratives in Meghalaya.

Data analysis methods entail the approaches followed by the researcher to analyse the collected data and interpret findings to generate specific conclusions. As articulated by Sileyew (2017), data analysis can be categorised into qualitative and quantitative methods based on the nature of data. The qualitative method deals with open-ended information and non-scientific evidence concerning the research topic and is collected from interview transcripts, videos, audio recordings and textual documents. The qualitative information helps the researcher to detect patterns and develop an objective overview of the research topic. Contrarily, quantitative analysis deals with quantifiable evidence and close-ended empirical information. In this study, a qualitative data analysis method has been employed to explore the various facets of language and culture in Meghalaya through thematic analysis.

Findings and Discussion Language and literature as a form of cultural expression Folklore refers to the age-old traditions and oral lore that are passed through a community across generations through narratives, inspiring local literature and producing universal experiences. Likewise, literature and stories originating from Meghalaya are rich with cultural traditions influenced by the ethnic beliefs of its indigenous groups. The Khasis comprise the majority of Meghalaya's population and are subdivided into 12 groups based on their ancestry: "Khasian", "Palaungic", "Khmuic", "Pakanic", "Vietic", "Katuic", "Bahnaric", "Khmeric", "Pearic", "Monic", "Aslian", and "Nicobarese" (Van Driem, 2007). The Khasi or Mon-Khmer language is a part of the "Austroasiatic stock" and majorly dominates the language of Meghalaya with about 900,000 individuals speaking various dialects of Khasi (Government of Meghalaya, 2016). Meghalaya's location shows its influence on the Khasi language: The language contains numerous words borrowed from Bengali and Hindi alongside other languages found in the Indo- Aryan region. In Khasi folklore, language is used to convey stories originating from their traditional beliefs and show greater importance on nature, forests and "mother earth". The Jaintia culture also originates from the Khasi tribe; however, they are located in the East Jaintia Hills district of Meghalaya and their language is known as Par (Government of Meghalaya, 2016b). Literature originating from the Khasi and Jaintia tribes reflects a similar attitude towards natural elements. The linguistics of Garo lores show influences of Tibetian and Burmese languages whereas their literary creations reflect the cultural beliefs of superhuman capabilities and magic.

In this regard, Oza (2016) points out that folklore and literature are used to bind communities through cultural beliefs, myths and mysticism. Folklore and oral traditions in Meghalaya Folklore is an essential source for constructing, articulating and perpetuating identities in communities through oral and semi-oral communication. Over the years, as communities gradually transition from traditional narratives to a modernised civilisation, folklore and traditional storytelling methods contribute to bringing people together. In folk literature, the influence of ethno cultural traditions is highly prominent. For instance, the ethnocultural beliefs of Khasis are evident in their storytelling where the forest is viewed as their home and abode of worship while also being their sanctuary and source of food. The Khasi custom regards the world as "Meiramew" which translates to "mother earth" as a bountiful combination of elements such as forests, rivers and land. The oral narratives of Khasis are built on the myth of "Ki Khanatong U Hynniewtrep" (Tales of the Seven Huts) which claims that the Khasis descended from heaven to preserve the land and cultivate crops (Badlani, 2020). Jaintia tribes are essentially Khasis and share similar tones with Khasi narratives and literary tales. On the other hand, the Garo tribes call themselves "Achik-mande" which in the Garo language translates to hill people. Brighenti (2017) points out that although a majority of Garos in Meghalaya have converted to Christianity,

a part of them stick to the traditional animist beliefs of "Songsarek*. Folklore and oral narratives in the Garo community are built on traditional beliefs in weretigers and magical abilities that bring humans closer to heaven and God. As Pike (2023) points out, the Garo tribe is one of the rare indigenous groups to follow a matrilineal societal system and prefers staying in groups. The culture puts the youngest daughters in a special position in terms of inheritance and achievements. In addition, the Garo tribe uses the nature metaphor to represent humans in their traditional lores, which represents influence on nature. The cultural beliefs of these tribes essentially build their identities in the communities and over the years, language has played a mediating role in representing their traditional heritage.

III.   Conclusion

The current research investigated the influence of oral traditions and indigenous languages on folklore and storytelling in Meghalaya. Through the help of secondary evidence, the study focused on the dynamics of language and culture in indigenous communities. It has been observed that the Meghalayan community is mainly influenced by the Garo, Khasi and Jaintia cultures. The study highlighted the influence of language in emanating the traditional beliefs of diverse indigenous communities through oral narratives.

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