

## The mystical Nongkrem Dance Festival of Meghalaya - A photo story by Anutosh Deb

It was a bright autumn afternoon with the cold winter just around the corner with the occasional short spells of chilling winter breeze flowing an overcast sky of 4th November 2015, I along with two colleagues of my school Ms Lamare and Mr Gautam, set to visit the two day Nongkrem Dance Festival at SMIT, about six kilometres from Kendriya Vidyalaya Air Force Station, Laitkor Peak, Shillong.



It was my first experience of witnessing live the amazing traditional dance form. Our guide for this tour was my senior colleague Ms. Lamare, who narrated the

history of the Nongkrem dance and its significance. Her invaluable inputs have been very helpful for my write up.

The Nongkrem Dance Festival of Meghalaya is celebrated during autumn at Smit, the cultural centre of the Khasi Hills. The two day celebration is the most popular festival for the inhabitants of Khasi hills. It can be termed as a grand carnival that involves flow of wealth, sacrifice of animals and an environment of religious fervour. The venue of the festival celebration is SMIT, an agricultural hamlet about 11km from the main town Shillong partially on the Jowai-Laitumbai Highway.



The Nongkrem dance form is associated with the religious beliefs of the Khasi people, and is an annual event in the Khasi hills. This festival locally named *Ka Pomblang Nongrem*, which over the years has been popularly termed as Nongkrem dance Festival. Nongkrem Dance Festival is performed to appease the all-powerful Goddess *Ka Blei Synshar* for a rich bumper harvest and prosperity of the people.

The dance is performed by young unmarried Khasi girls and has the typical essence of rich cultural heritage and traditional belief passed on through generations. The costume is in bright yellow 'Jainsem' with intricate embroidered panels and tassels and a silver crown headgear with autumn bloom of orchids and other flowers. Coral Beads of varied sizes form the intricate part of the necklace made out of 24 Carat gold, which is also part of the enchanting costume in yellow heavily decked attire. The girls dance in small groups of four and move in a slow rhythmic toe movement of feet in a circular path surrounded by energetic youth men who also wear the traditional costume.

**The Costumes for girls:** Traditional pure Silk forms the basis of the dress, called the 'Jainsem' in the Khasi language (It is in the form of a Toga) pinned on the shoulder. It is unstitched in one piece. A black/ red/blue/Magenta wrap around for covering the lower part of the body at the waist. They wear a blouse which is of Maroon or Red velvet colour.



**The Costume for the gents:** The men wear Dhoti of Cotton or Yellow silk with a black waist coat heavily embroidered with gold and silver thread showing panels of nature (Flora and Fauna). A symbolic set of bow and arrows also form a part of their costume to suggest hunting

activity and also for protection of the women folk. This is significant in the modern scenario where rich traditional values need to be revived and passed on to the present. They also wore a turban studded with feathers of fowl of either domesticated or wild and carry on their right hand an ornamental hand plumage during the dance. The purpose of carrying the plumage is symbolic to ward off the evils.

The Khasi, Garo and the Jaintia community is known for adopting the matrilineal family society. A matriarchy is a "family, group or state governed by a matriarch (a woman who is head of a family or tribe)." The daughters play an important role in the entire societal norms, decision making and lineage, unique to Meghalaya. This is very significant in maintaining the hierarchy of generations which has been very unique and interesting.

As we entered the venue which was already jam-packed with audience local, national and international. There were groups of International tourists who were all set to record the activities all through the day in digital formats, and photographers were busy taking their best shots of the mega event. Ms Lamare, arranged an introduction with the *Syiem* (King) of Khyrim and we were thrilled to meet him. He was dressed in traditional outfit and wore a turban. He was seated in the wonderful architecture *Ing-sad*: a house for the deity and is used as a ceremony centre and houses the gallery. The unique construction with Pine wood and a thatched roof, I was told that no nails were used to build this unique heritage gallery for the Royal family and his guests to watch the Nongkrem dance from a height.



The two day festival begins with the rituals and the Royal priest sacrifice a fowl as part of the traditional religious rituals, marking the genesis of the festivals. Mass prayers and fervour follows the Nongkrem dance by the small dance groups in a continuous progression till sunset. A visitor is never bored to see the identical dance continuously as the dancers kept on changing after short intervals making the presentation more lively and fresh, with new faces coming in and taking the centre stage.

It was very interesting to see that tiny tots were also a vibrant part of the dance participation and were doing their bits as professionally as their elders. I could richly feel as I watched the small girls barely six or seven years of age, being imbued into the rich cultural milieu where the elders pass over the traditional values and vibrant culture, creating a lineage for posterity, to uphold the age old tradition and beliefs from generations to generations, to keep alive the wonderful Nongkrem dance form. It is significant to mention that girls from the Imperial family also actively participates in the dance.

As the sunset was approaching, we also set on the retreat from the breath-taking spot at SMIT, while the sound of the drum beat, the flute and the Tan muri (the local instrument resembling

the sehnai) keep resounding in the air, as we enjoy some wonderful local cuisines, in the village fair around promoting the local food and fruits with brisk shopping going around. Most striking was the cooked local rice from this year's harvest baked in soft bamboo retaining the aroma of the bamboo with steamed pork and chicken cuisines strewn around in small makeshift restaurants doing brisk business.

What a breath-taking setting with Orchids in full festive bloom in varied colours on the Pine trees, and the wild cherry blossoms spots on the vast landscape, announcing the advent of autumn making the setup even more mystical than just pleasant.

Back home, as I relive the images from the day's experience the music and

the imagery kept flashing and I live through the moments of the mystical State dance of Meghalaya, the Nongkrem dance would keep me enthralled for days together and will emphatically tempt me to visit SMIT again next year and beyond, with more excitement and experience.



**Photo and Text – Anutosh Deb**

(Anutosh Deb is a Graduate in Applied Arts from Faculty of Fine Arts, Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, Gujarat. An avid photographer working as an Art Educator with Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan (KVS), Deb is a recipient of the prestigious Kendriya Vidyalaya Sangathan, National Incentive Award in 2011, the Pearson National Teachers' Award 2013.

