

Prabodh Jhingan



THE KHASI THEATRE

**A Semiotic Study of the
Nongkrem Dance Festival**



The Nongkrem Dance festival is one of the most important symbols of the Khasi identity. The Khasis from the north-east part of India have been celebrating this five day annual event for centuries. Dr.P.Jhingan has made a detailed semiotic study of this festival after his research for 15 years and has theorized it to be a theatrical performance.

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Introduction

Twenty-first century is the century of information. Man has moved from the most primitive stone age to the wheel, the plough, to the steam engine and then to the computer. It is a long sweep and the journey continues. The current stop is genetics.

However there is a parallel journey of numbers, concept of zero and one, geometrical shapes, algebra for the symbolic calculations and manipulation. Another parallel journey is the flow of history a journey of different races, cultures- the European, Mongoloid, Muslims, Hindu and the tribal.

People over ages have communicated through different languages. There has been a mingling of races and cultures. However, races, cultures and languages have died over time. Migration has occurred from one race to another. Be it by volition or by act of war or for that matter by an act of nature like plague, earthquakes, and volcanic burst or by sheer desire of an individual or a race to move from one place to another. This has lead to a contact between cultures. Assimilation has therefore occurred. Despite different languages of different races, people have managed to communicate with each other. The desire for business, exchange of goods or sheer plunder has breached the divide. Over time Lingua

franca, pidgins, or use of multiple languages has made it possible.

Man has managed to communicate by verbal and non-verbal means. There has been a continuous transfer of information from one culture to another. What is interesting is that information is viewed by different culture in different manner.

One area in which information has transferred from one culture to another is in the area of dance. To the European the Chinese form of dance seems exotic. To the Indian a western ballet is equally beautiful thing to marvel. A Bharatnatyam to the American and a Wayang Kulit to the Dutch would look different but aesthetically pleasing. Each culture develops its own rules for enjoying a particular dance. In complex societies the role of a dance critic, dance masters, gurus tell a good production from a bad one. However looking across cultures the job becomes difficult.

One area that contributes to the repertoire of dances is the folk dance or the tribal dance . Different set of people have done lot of studies. There have been Anthropologists, Folklorists, Culture experts, and Semiotitians. Infact there have been various schools of studies. Prague school is one of them. The game becomes interesting when the folk dance is a part of a ritual. This becomes of interest to theatre people and to the Anthropologists. The dividing line between theatrical performance and a folk dance plus ritual becomes a thin one.

On another track let us look at cross-cultural communication. As mentioned earlier applied linguistics deals with it. This is especially so in the area of foreign language teaching .The earlier Anthropologist coming across a new language had developed a field method by which they could prepare a grammar of the target language. Theoretical spin off from this sub discipline is many.

We also find playwrights 'borrowing' literary works from another language. This is to enable them to create a script in their own language.

Then we have folklorists talking about Universals and limited number of structures of fairy tails. However, each culture has its own unique contribution. How one folk tale gets transformed / translated/ trancreated into another culture is another area of

research. However, common grounds can be clearly seen in all these cross cultural communication patterns.

For the purpose of this work cross-cultural and bi-cultural is being treated as same. And similarly tribal & folk in treated as same.

Cross-cultural communication also tackles the transfer of information when multi national corporations try to transfer a brand from the parent company to different part of the world. Advertisement industry thrives on this kind of market . It is quite clear that an advertisement that clicks in one culture even in the adapted form does not click in another culture. How much of information of an ad campaign taken from one culture to another gets across is one question, which is not easy to answer.¹ In fact, the answer to these entire questions lies in these various areas as mentioned above. All of them try to deal with the problem of information transfer.

It is therefore proposed to look at the works of various scholars, anthropologists, culture experts, theatre persons, semiotitians, historians, and philosophers looking for worldview. The next chapter of overview will be full of excerpts taken from these people. In addition it will also have excerpts on the system theory. Third chapter covers the work done by various Khasi scholars and other scholars who have written on the Khasi society. This will give a background of the Khasi culture.

REFERENCE:

1. Classic case at the moment is the slogan: 'Thanda matlab cococola'.