



## **Hornbill Festival of Nagaland: A Mosaic of Naga Cultures and Traditions**

**Mercy Philip**

**Research Scholar, Department of Sociology, Mahatma Gandhi University, Meghalaya**

### **ABSTRACT :**

*Nagaland is a hill state in the North Eastern end of India and the homeland of several traditionally distinctive communities who have been collectively identified as the Nagas. In its tourism literature, Nagaland has branded itself as the “land of festivals”. No matter what the season is, there is a festival around the corner due to the coexistence of several Naga groups, each having their own distinctive cultural range. Hornbill festival is a cultural extravaganza, a celebration of all tribes in one venue and it has been coined as “festival of festivals”. The Hornbill festival is named after the bird Hornbill, the majestic bird admired by the Nagas which is symbolically displayed in headgears and ornaments used by the Nagas and worn especially during the festivals. This festival aims to identify and conserve the Naga heritage and also to promote tourism and highlight the socio-cultural panorama of Nagaland. It is held in the Naga Heritage Village at Kisama which is about 12 kilometers from Kohima town. Annually the festival takes place in the first 10 days of the month of December. There are 16 recognised Naga tribes and 1400 villages in Nagaland. All the 16 tribes are given opportunity to perform and to showcase their culture and traditions in various cultural and material forms. This paper aims at bringing a closer understanding of the cultural mosaic of Nagaland by exploring the Hornbill Festival - the festival of festivals - and its impact on state tourism.*

**Keywords:** *Cultural Heritage, Cultural unity, Hornbill, Naga identity, Tourism.*

### **I. Introduction:**

Nagaland is a mountainous state in northeast India, bordering Myanmar. It's home to diverse indigenous tribes, with festivals and markets celebrating the different tribes' culture. It borders the state of Assam to the west, Arunachal Pradesh and part of Assam to the north, Burma to the east and Manipur to the south. The state capital is Kohima, and the largest city is Dimapur. The state of Nagaland has an area of 16,579 km<sup>2</sup> with a population of 1,980,602 as per the 2011 census making it one of the smallest states of India. Agriculture is the most important economic activity in Nagaland. The multi ethnicity and multi cultural aspects of the



tribal living in the midst of mesmerizing panorama, project the state to a mosaic of cultures. According to the census 2011 there are 16 accepted Naga tribal groups in Nagaland. The celebration of Hornbill festival in Nagaland by these sixteen tribes is a clear depiction of the rich cultural heritage of every tribe and their peaceful coexistence.

According to the latest census report, there are 16 Naga tribes and four non-Naga tribes inhabiting Nagaland. The sixteen Naga tribes include Ao, Konyak, Sema, Chakhesang, Angami, Lotha, Sangtam, Phom, Chang, Kheimungan, Yimchunger, Zeilang, Rengma, Tikhir, Mokware, and Chirr. The four non-Naga tribes include Kuki, Kachari, Garo and Mikir. So it is evident that Nagas are not a combined or composite group of people. Each tribe has its own dialect, traditional dress, cultural traits and even physical features, although they all belong to Mongoloid stock

Nagaland is a place well known for its overwhelming mountainous terrain, astounding natural beauty, vibrant tribal culture and green and clean surroundings. The rich natural bounty of the state is filled with diverse flora and fauna, lush green vegetation, deep valleys, clean rivers, natural lakes and pleasant climate, and so it's often called the Switzerland of the East. Nagaland is also known as the 'Land of Festivals' for its joyous festive spirit and year – long celebrations that mostly revolve around agriculture, the main livelihood of the Naga community. All the tribes in the state celebrate their culture in their own unique style with distinct festivals, folk dances, music and handicrafts, throughout the year. (Wakankar, 2018)

They start with the Chakhesang Sukrunye festival in January, followed by Kuki Mimkut followed by Angami Sekrenyi in February. The month of April begins with the Konyak Aoling and Phom Monyu festivals in the first week. Ao Moatsu and Khamniungan Miu festivals are celebrated in May; Sumi Tuluni and Chang Nkanyulum festivals are celebrated in the month of July. In the months of August and September, the Yimchunger Metemneo and Sangtam Mongmong festivals are celebrated. The month of November witnesses the celebration of the Lotha Tokhu Emong and the Rengma Ngada festivals. In the last month the Zeling Nga-Ngai, festival is celebrated with all the pomp and shows and this marks the completion of a year and the beginning of the next year. (Wakankar, 2018)

## **II. Objectives of the Study:**



The main objectives of this paper are to -

- i. Know the origin of Hornbill festival.
- ii. Understand the significance of the name 'Hornbill'
- iii. Find out the impacts of Hornbill festival:

### **III) Methodology:**

In the present study the investigator has selected the descriptive survey method according to the nature of the study. The work is done by the use of both primary and secondary sources of data

### **IV) Result and Discussion:**

#### **a) The Origin of Hornbill Festival:**

The date of the Hornbill Festival is associated mainly with two significant factors. First, the festival is to celebrate Indian statehood. Nagaland was formed when the moderate elites of the Naga nationalist movement the Nagaland People's Convention, arrived at a compromise with the Government of India in 1963 regarding a home for the Nagas. Thus, Nagaland was inaugurated as the sixteenth state of the Indian Union on the 1 December 1963. The second culminating factor that made the festival possible was the ceasefire signed between the Government of India and the largest of the nationalist group, National Socialist Council of Nagalim in 1997, which carved a politically neutral space where peace and reconciliation between the various factors could ensue.

There is another story associated with the United Nations celebration of the first International Decade of the World's Indigenous People between 1995-2004. According to a prominent Naga human rights activist, Neingulo Krome, they organised an event called Naga week, where amidst the most difficult period in Nagaland when there was incessant violence due to clashes amongst the different Naga nationalists and between the Indian security forces, the Nagaland People's Movement for Human Rights (NPMHR) and the Naga Students Federation (NSF) called for a lull in violence. The event was celebratory and emotional and also a show of solidarity amongst the different Naga groups from all over North East India and



Western Burma, that visualised – through the performance of traditional cultural activities – the sovereignty of the Naga people. Hornbill is said to be copycat of what was originally done in 1995 along with the NSF from December 1-5. There in Kohima local ground every Naga tribe constructed their original Naga house ground as part of the preparation for the celebration. During those days there was a lot of killing amongst the different nationalist groups, but when they heard that the Nagas were partnering with the United Nations, the nationalists stopped the violence. It was a very significant moment for all the tribes because during that week they all pulled a stone (a traditional ceremony practised by some Nagas which symbolises forgiveness, peace and reconciliation). The eastern Nagas such as the Yimchungru and Khamniungan, who never pulled stones too participated in the event. For Krome, the festival, at least in its first form, was firmly associated with the indigenous peoples movement and what it means to be ‘indigenous.’ In the case of Nagas, indigeneity is often associated with ties to land, traditions and customs and importantly, with sovereignty and national self-determination. So in a way, the Naga week celebration consolidated these abiding concerns into a larger ‘Naga’ festival according to the UN standard of celebration of indigenous life in all its richness – cultural, political and social

The Hornbill festival in its present form was started two decades back in the year 2000 to encourage inter tribal interaction by celebrating the festivals of the various tribes under one umbrella. It is organized by the Directorate of Tourism which mainly intends to encourage tourism and to protect and to preserve the richness and uniqueness of the Naga heritage. It is annually celebrated in the first ten days of December. [1]

### **b) The Significance of the Name ‘Hornbill’:**

The festival is named after the Indian Hornbill, a large and colourful forest bird that is one of the most venerated bird species by the people of Nagaland. This large and colourful bird is considered a symbol of valour in the folk culture of most Naga tribes. Its cry which sounds like a roar suggests strength and courage. For this reason the Hornbill represents the Naga warrior tradition. Also the bird is symbolically represented on all traditional headgears worn during the festivals. It is also believed that the coming of the Hornbill bird in the winter is signified as a good fortune, tranquility and peaceful coexistence. The bird Hornbill is



synonymous with prosperity and bravery among the tribes. And since the festival was initiated to unite the sixteen brave warrior tribes this famous Nagaland festival was named after this large colourful bird.

As cited in the official guide book of Hornbill festival the aim of the festival is to experience firsthand both sides of the coin – the rich cultural and vibrant heritage of the Nagas and their disposition in cultural pride arrangement in the face of modernity at the other end of the spectrum. All in all, the Hornbill festival - the Festival of Festivals - is the coming together of synergistic elements that make up Nagaland (Hornbill Festival Guide Book, 2012).

### **Kisama, the Festival Ground:**

The hornbill festival was originally celebrated in Kohima local ground initially for just five days. It was difficult and financially not viable to hold the celebration annually in Kohima as they had to put up every year 16 tribal morungs, display and sale stalls, food stalls etc. which had to be dismantled after the event. Matters of security, water and light connectivity, toilet facilities and maintenance, crowd control by the local youth were all herculean tasks. Eventually in 2003 it was shifted to its permanent venue Kisama Heritage village by the then Government under the Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio. Kisama is around 10 Kilometres away from Kohima town and the name is derived from two nearby villages, Kigwema (*Ki*) and Phesama (*Sama*), as the site is between these two villages. This land was acquired by the State Government of Nagaland and was gradually developed over the years into Kisama Heritage Village to preserve and promote the culture and traditions of the Nagas.[2]. The layout of the area comprises of the sitting arena with the central space for the cultural performance and a podium for the dignitaries. Above this arena is the place allocated for various stalls for display and selling of handicrafts and food stalls. With the support of the Ministry of Tourism, Government of India infrastructures were set up. In addition to this, other departments pooled in for water connectivity, power connection, road construction and the like.

The site itself is designed as a mini-village with its substantial long wooden ceremonial gates, amphitheatres, large indoor shopping areas, and dormitories (or morungs) resplendent with Naga symbols such as wooden figures of human and animal characters, spears, and *dao*.



Each tribe of Nagaland is assigned a morung, placed strategically according to their geographic location within the map of Nagaland.[8]

### **‘Hornbill’ – The Festival of Festivals:**

The Hornbill festival which is dubbed as the ‘Festivals of Festivals’ is a 10 day annual cultural fest of Nagaland celebrated from 1-10 December. The festival is celebrated in Nagaland to protect and promote the rich cultural heritage of Nagaland, to revive the traditions of Nagaland, to promote intertribal interactions and to promote tourism in Nagaland by helping the tourists to experience the customs, food, songs and dances of Nagaland. It is organized by State Tourism, and Art and Culture department and supported by the Union government. The weeklong festival unites one and all in Nagaland and people enjoy the colourful performances, crafts, sports, food fairs, games and ceremonies. The festival highlights include the traditional Naga morungs, exhibition and the sale of arts and crafts, food stalls, flower shows and sales, cultural medley – songs and dances, fashion shows, the Miss Nagaland beauty contest, traditional archery, Naga wrestling, indigenous games and musical concert.

Apart from the cultural shows there are other programmes like presenting collection of Naga traditional motifs and designs on contemporary wear under the theme of “Celebrating Naga Textile Art & Design” or Local Film Fest with the theme of “Global Local Meet”, Photo contest under the theme “Colours of Nagaland” etc. Besides all these the tourists can also participate in indigenous games and sports like Greased Bamboo Pole Climbing, Naga Wrestling, and Naga King Chilli Eating Contest and so on.

### **Some Highlights of the Festival:**

**Sixteen tribes and their 16 mesmerizing dances:** All these 16 tribes have diverse rituals, assorted practices and yet share a surprisingly similar way of life. Each of these communities has dedicated their entire time in making life happy and comfortable for themselves and for their families. Every individual can be distinguished specifically according to their intricately designed clothes, and completed with striking jewellery and beads. The hornbill festival showcases each tribe’s individuality in its full fervor. Their tribal dances are filled with positive rhythm, high spirited energy and are often warrior rituals. The hornbill festival does a glorious job of bringing together all these traditionally diverse tribes together as one and presents themselves as a single entity [7].



**Multicultural art displays :** Nagaland is a pleasant place for art lovers from round the world, the hornbill festival will definitely satisfy their thirst for experiencing quality and the finest art Nagaland has to offer. Hornbill spreads its wings and brings together all the rituals, customs and activities of the Naga tribes in the spotlight. Traditional arts and indigenous crafts play an extremely important part in making this carnival a success. The paintings, wood carvings and sculpture displays are presented in complete pride and impressive vigor to the attendees. [7]

**Rock Concerts:** What makes this festival unique is the international rock concert competition held at the hornbill festival. This crown jewel of the gala is considered as a launch pad for several new coming bands. With the prize money ranging between 30,000 rupees to 1000,000 rupees the main objective of this competition is to encourage talent from all over India as well as its neighboring countries like, South East Asia and even Australia. Their passionate love for rock n roll music is wonderfully demonstrated in this euphoria filled rock concert performances. Everyone, from the participants to the audiences not only have a great time but they also take away some of the best and unforgettable memories with them. [7].

**The Night Bazars:** The city of Kohima comes to life during the hornbill festival's vibrant and lively night bazaar. This is done in an attempt to bring the visitors and the participating tribes closer through their common love for food, handicrafts and the crisp winter air. This all-out fair is the happy place for families looking for a fun time out with dazzling festivities and positivity. One can walk through the impressive shopping area; give the taste buds a treat in the food stalls and spend some peaceful time by the lantern-lighting areas. ([7].Some of the fun activities which make the hornbill festival distinctive, unique and fun are: pork fat eating contest and chilli eating contest among other crazy games.

**Lip smacking local cuisine:** The Naga food that is presented in this magical carnival is equally traditional and gives one a taste of their rich history. Usually the core ingredient for most of the dishes is red meat and fish. The traditional spices are used in their preparation making each bite burst with intense flavor. These red meats are prepared



in various styles like smoking it, drying it or even fermenting it. The traditional Naga food includes chicken with bamboo shoots, pork delicacies, brown rice, various rice cakes, beef pickles, and a variety of non vegetarian chutneys and pickles. Although each tribe has their conventional and particular food styles they happily exchange their recipes with each other and promote mutual harmony. Naga food is known widely for its food being too spicy since they are producers of hot chillies, which is locally used in their preparation of foods at home. The festival also endorses a collection of local rice beer that is available at a relatively cheap rate. The visitors will have memories of tasting some of the most unique tastes and creatively prepared local dishes. [7]

### **Hornbill Festival Tourism:**

The hornbill festival is also an annual tourism promotional event of the Nagaland government organized by the departments of Tourism and Art and Culture. One of the aims of the festival is to attract tourists both domestic and international by showcasing the indigenous culture and traditions of Nagaland to the rest of the world, putting Nagaland in the tourism world Map. Hornbill festival is loved by the tourists because of its unique culture, traditions and lifestyle of different tribes with lush green enchanting and beautiful landscape, also known as the Switzerland of the East (Nagaland Post, 17 December 2018). Kisama the Naga Heritage village was established and commissioned by the Government of Nagaland in keeping with its tourism policy adopted in the year 2000 to promote cultural heritage of the Nagas. State records show that in 2019 festival, a total of 3 lakhs visitors, including tourists from abroad and other parts of the country witnessed the festival giving an estimated income of Rs. 75 crores to the entrepreneurs [5].

The state has the potential to attract more tourists if the state services are enhanced, the exorbitant prices are controlled and the infra structure is improved. It is noticed that the taxi drivers charge triple the normal price during the Hornbill festival. The exorbitant hotel tariff rate and the low standard and the low quality service provided do not tally with the value of money they pay for it. The excessive prices at the food stalls which is double the amount of the normal price, the quality and the service which do not match with the price being offered are hindrances to the inflow of tourists to the



festival. Many domestic and international tourists expressed their dissatisfaction or bitter experiences regarding the bad cab services, hotel tariff, poor quality of infrastructure, malfunctioning of ATM, high food prices and many more[6]. Good roads, cheap transport service, round the clock electricity, safe drinking water, better hotel and accommodation facilities are some of the areas which require great attention of the government and the local communities to pave way for attracting more tourists to boost the flow of revenue to the state.

### **C) Impacts of Hornbill Festival:**

The Popularity and importance of Hornbill festival is not just a national phenomenon but it has gained popularity around the world. Following the example of this celebration in Nagaland the first ever Hornbill festival of Tripura was celebrated in Agartala in February 2020 to conserve the striking forest bird ‘Hornbill’ and to boost the livelihood of the people through tourism [4].

As seen from above the celebration of Hornbill Festival promotes the rich Naga culture and brings unity among the tribes of Nagaland. This celebration is a great medium through which culture is transmitted to the younger generation year after year. This celebration is a gateway for the world outside to Naga tradition and culture as it attracts tourists from other parts of the counter and the world and so it heightens the tourism industry of the State. In the words of Nagaland Chief Minister Neiphiu Rio while presenting the state budget 2021-2022, the Hornbill festival is one of Nagaland’s biggest intellectual properties and is an economic booster. A mere investments of a few crores, it generates close to a 100 crore [2].

Needless to say that this festival also put on display some unwanted elements. The extravagant prices of goods, hotels, and taxi fare which is double than the usual time with hardly better quality or facility influence the tourists negatively. Only the rich and middle class sections of the society are beneficiaries of this celebration as the poor can’t easily afford to participate in the celebration (Chichanbemo, 2021). A lot of money is wasted on celebration and prolonged entertainment. Sentiments of competition and superiority or inferiority complexes are also seen amidst the celebration among some



tribes. The celebration also brings health issues like hypertension, sleep disturbance, and hearing disorders due to high decibel sounds for several continued days and nights [4]

It leads to environmental degradation through micro plastic pollution in the form of waste products like bottles, straws, food trays and cable ties. There is also a threat to the existence of the great bird hornbill as traditionally the feather of the 'hornbill' is used on the head gears of all Naga tribes, and the use of artificial feather is not traditional and indigenous. [5]

## **V. Conclusion:**

What began as an exercise to bring together the different Naga tribes from all over Nagaland and to generate more tourists has become a global event that encompasses a variety of activities. Its popularity has attracted people from all over the world, and also has gained an international reputation as a travel destination. Hornbill festival is a way to bring awareness about preserving the heritage of the region while displaying the Naga identity to the outsiders. In the recent years the festival also has gone truly global with dance troops from Korea, Myanmar and Thailand showcasing their cultures and this provides a platform for the Nagas in promoting cultural exchange. It can be said that the Hornbill festival is a negotiated balance between the local and the National or global, between imagined past and enforced modernity. For the State, this carries the message that peace is essential for development; and for the Naga groups this provides the platform to stage their revived identities. If Hornbill festival is a sacred stage for enacting identities for the Nagas, it is also a market for cultural commodities for the others.

## **References:**

- [1] *Easternmirror*. (2019, November 30). *Nagaland's Hornbill Festival, A commentary on the evolution of a tourism event* . Retrieved from *Eastern Mirror Nagaland*: [http://easternmirrornagaland.com/nagalands\\_hornbill-festival-a-commentary-on-the-evolution-of-a-tourism-event/](http://easternmirrornagaland.com/nagalands_hornbill-festival-a-commentary-on-the-evolution-of-a-tourism-event/)
- [2] *Express, T. M.* (2021, February 19). *Hornbill Festival among Nagaland's biggest Intellectual Properties*. Retrieved from *Morung Express Web site*: <https://morungexpress.com/hornbill-festival-among-nagalands-biggest-intellectual-properties>
- [3] *Humtsoe, Z.* (2021, October 18). *Negative Impact of Hornbill Festival*. (M. Philip, Interviewer)



- [4] Longkumer, A. (2020, June 16). *Visualising National life - The Hornbill Festival as Culture and Politics*. Retrieved from Researchgate website:  
[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340611950-Visualising\\_National\\_Life\\_The\\_Hornbill\\_Festival\\_as\\_Culture\\_and\\_Politics](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/340611950-Visualising_National_Life_The_Hornbill_Festival_as_Culture_and_Politics)
- [5] Lotha, C. (2021, October 21). *Negative impact of Hornbill Festival*. (M. Philip, Interviewer)
- [6] News, S. (11 February 2020). *Tripura Organises its 1st ever "Hornbill Festival"*. Tripura: *Current Affairs*.
- [7] News18.com. (2021, October 1). *Nagaland to Celebrate Hornbill Festival*. Retrieved from [www.news18.com/news/india/nagaland-to-celebrate-hornbill-festival-4271510.html](http://www.news18.com/news/india/nagaland-to-celebrate-hornbill-festival-4271510.html)
- [8] Poji, J. (2021, October 21). *Negative Impacts of Hornbill festival*. (M. Philip, Interviewer)
- [9] Post, N. (2018, December 12). *Hornbill and its Side Effects*. Retrieved from [www.nagalandpost.com: https://www.nagalandpost.com/hornbill-and-its-side-effects/187287.html](http://www.nagalandpost.com: https://www.nagalandpost.com/hornbill-and-its-side-effects/187287.html)
- [10] Travelogyindia. (2020, SEPTMEBER 02). *The Hornbill Festival of Nagaland*. Retrieved from [travelogyindia.com: https://www.travelogyindia.com/blog/the-hornbill-festival-nagaland/](http://travelogyindia.com: https://www.travelogyindia.com/blog/the-hornbill-festival-nagaland/)
- [11] Unseennortheastindia. (2021, October). *Naga Heritage Village Kisama Nagaland*. Retrieved from [https://unseennortheastindia.com/destination/nagaland/naga\\_hertage\\_village-kisama](https://unseennortheastindia.com/destination/nagaland/naga_hertage_village-kisama)
- [12] Wakankar, R. (2018, October 27). *Reasons to Visit Hornbill festival Right Away*. Retrieved from [www.veenaworld.com: https://www.veenaworld.com/blog/reasons-to-visit-hornbill-festival](http://www.veenaworld.com: https://www.veenaworld.com/blog/reasons-to-visit-hornbill-festival)
- [13] Humtsoe, Z. (2021, October 18). *Negative Impacts of Hornbill Festival*. (M. Philip, Interviewer)
- [14] Lotha, C. (2021, October 21). *Negative impacts of Hornbill Festival*. (M. Philip, Interviewer)
- [15] Poji, J. (2021, October 21). *Negative Impacts of Hornbill festival*. (M. Philip, Interviewer)