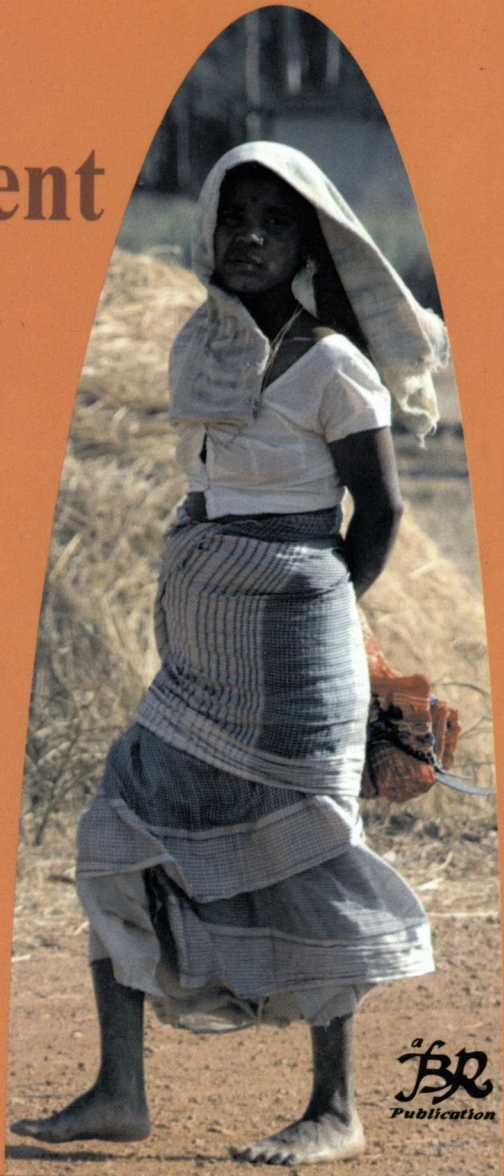


Scheduled Tribes of North-East India and Development

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Th. R. Tiba



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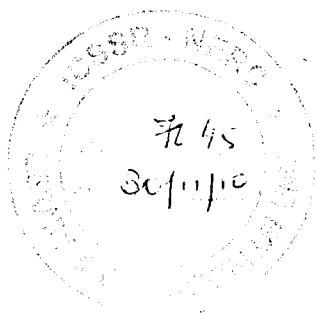
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1

ETHNOHISTORY IN NORTHEAST INDIA: IN SEARCH OF A FRAMEWORK

—*Dr.(Ms.) Sarah Hilaly**

I

The discourse on ethnohistory emerges out of certain questions posited by an eminent academician of the region when encountering a research proposal. The researcher had proposed to the unravel aspects of culture and social phenomenon in pre-literate societies in Northeast India. It is quite distressing for the researcher to be told that to understand cultural history by evaluating social institutions is not possible within the framework of history. Cultural history understood only through an amalgam of the disciplines of sociology and anthropology sans history. This is an age and era when disciplines are transcending boundaries and an

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interdisciplinary approach is the order of the day. It may be imperative to mention that the reconstruction of history in Northeast India has been primarily based on epigraphs, coins, religious texts, genealogies, chronicles, ethnographic accounts and the sacrosanct archives depending on the period one is representing. Archeological too finds also plays a significant role in this reconstruction, but has its limitations due to paucity of excavated sites. Accounts of Christian missionaries, productions in Vernacular languages and English during the colonial period provide us with source material. This has limited our source of historical material to the 'written word'. A substantial section of the ethnic communities which are in a state of 'orality' or do not trace history only to the advent of Christianity in the region are left out of the 'matter of history'. This gap is pertinent today when all are seeking roots of their ethnic identities in to distant pasts for which no well documented evidences are available. This has helped me in shaping the major ideas in this paper.

Romila Thapar in her *Early India: From the Origins to 1300*, has pointed out as to how present day historiographical changes incorporated new evidences and ways at looking at existing evidence.¹ Reformulations in explaining the past has been largely due to inclusion of perspectives from the other human sciences such as studies of societies, economics and religions. While earlier historical writing was preoccupied largely with politics, today it included virtually all aspects of human activities and their interconnections. She also draws attention towards use of new sources of evidence not just to corroborate the exiting evidences, but provide an alternative point of view.

The focus of the world history till the Second World War was in the understanding of the nation state. Biographical, political, diplomatic, institutional, economic

and social (defined as history sans politics) history provided the main cross-cutting categories.² The coming of what Bernard Cohn terms as 'proctological history' from 'the bottom up' provided a ground of a complex and rounded history. This was because history came down from the ivory towers of elitist history and was involved in the study of the masses, the inarticulate, the deprived and the dispossessed. Conventional organized source material left out any account of these marginal groups. Historians who studied from bottom up contributed to the development of few sources in form of the oral traditions, the utilization of different kinds of records to explore the characteristics and life patterns of the inarticulate. Cohn finds a celebration of the new variety of history in the works of E.P. Thompson and Natalie. Z. Davis who extensively used songs, folklore, public celebrations and rituals. The conclusions of these proctological historians he argues has directed historians to study of structures and the meanings involved in the creation of systems of solidarity and authority.³ E.P. Thompson repeatedly called for dialogues with anthropology. He finds:

the anthropological impulse chiefly felt, not in the model building, but in locating new problems, in seeking old problems in new ways, in an emphasis upon norms and or value systems and upon rituals, in attention to expressive functions of forms of riots and disturbance, upon symbolic expressions of authority, control and hegemony.⁴

But the cautioned its practitioners to overcome the shortcomings of the anthropology, as the discipline often tended "to ignore historical specificities and elide questions of power"⁵. This new kind of social history involved issues of exploring the underlying cultural formations, the systems of concepts, meanings and beliefs manifest in symbols rather than just its surface features. It is in this new space that a conjuncture of

the epistemological aspects of anthropology and history took place. The dynamic problem of culture and culture change has made the cultural/social historians to increasingly turn to cultural anthropology and particularly to ethnography. It was here that ethnohistory founds its roots.

II

Ethnohistory as a discipline emerged in America in the post World War II almost parallel to the growth of the American school of anthropology. America as an actor in the Second World War encountered 'the others' on an unprecedented scale. For the first time anthropology appeared to the Americans as a relevant social science because they had to evolve appropriate strategies to study the 'exotic others'. There were various reasons for the growth ethnohistory. This was imperative in a situation when culture change was increasingly in the direction of Westernization. With increasing communication and increased political and cultural control over isolated communities, ethnohistorical methods were required;

to provide a wide range of ethnographic accounts of such interesting phenomenon as cannibalism, human sacrifice, non-Western warfare, kingship and law and other aspects of small-scale independent political systems, economic specializations and trade.... or the value systems of people almost entirely ignorant of the rest of the world. |

Another root of ethnohistory was in the "direct historical approach" of the North American archeologists who used historical evidence to identify archeological sites of known tribal groups. This was done by working backwards from an identifiable historical present to proto

and pre-historic manifestations of that culture. This diachronic approach united archeology, ethnology, history and linguistics.

The process of decolonization led to reclaiming of history within the colonized countries by contesting the imperial ideology. Cultures 'lacking writing' were said to 'lack history'. To context such categorizations and correct the colonial biases ethnohistory developed, with the thrust on retrieving oral tradition and converting them to the status of written records. The study of oral tradition as a source of history developed in Africa which was in the throes of decolonization. Through its use "agency has been ascribed to marginal actors, and histories have been produced of regions and subjects that written records would not have permitted".⁷ The rendering of oral traditions in the style of western historiography has thus often been a politically radical and empowering gesture as it allowed the postcolonial identities 'the denial of difference'.

In the 1950's, comprehensive ethnohistorical research was taken up in the United States to create a corpus of material which could be used to study culture growth and change amongst the tribes in the region of the Great Lakes. Ethnohistory emerged as a disciplinary hybrid of ethnography and historian with anthropology dominating its definition and practice. It was considered an exclusive "sub-branch of ethnology" or "sub-discipline of cultural anthropology", till the 1960's. If a historian wished to practice ethnohistory he virtually had to undergo the rites of passage and transfer his loyalty to anthropology.

Since the Symposium on the nature of ethnohistory at Indiana University in 1960 its practitioners have broadened and refined its definition. Historians and anthropologists broadly agree that ethnohistory is essentially "the use of historical and ethnological methods and materials to gain the knowledge of the

nature and causes of the change in culture defined by the ethnological concepts and categories".⁸ Historians, archeologists and some ethnologists share an interest in diachronic, historical explanations, while other ethnologists and linguists favour the synchronic, structural explanations. The two are at variance, yet complementary ways of understanding culture or any social phenomenon. Ethnohistory thus is a product of the diachronic dimensions of history and the synchronic sensitivity of ethnology. This new definition subsumes the fear of subinfeudation by each discipline. The aspects which characterize ethnohistory are: the present or the past, the use of written or non-written documents, a diachronic or synchronic emphasis and to comprehend folk views of history.

The anthropologist and historian both focus on the culture of an ethnic group or society over space and time. Even while stressing on one part of the culture, their analysis is oriented by the assumption that it is to be understood in terms of the organic whole. In spite of some disagreements, most anthropologists agree that culture is "an idealized pattern of meanings, values, and norms differentially shared by the members of the society, which can be inferred from the non instinctive behaviour of the group and from the symbolic products of their action, including material artifacts, language and social institutions".⁹

An aspect of ethnohistorical approach is in its use of "historical methods and materials". In its nascent phase "historical material" meant written records, which limited the focus of the historian to exploring the culture of those societies which produced them. Today the documentary evidence at the disposal of the cultural historians goes beyond just books and manuscripts. Both the practitioners of history and anthropology "have discovered the utility of maps, music, paintings, photographs, folklore, oral tradition, ecology, site

exploration, archeological artifacts (especially trade goods), museum collections, enduring customs, languages and place names, as well as rich variety of written resources".¹⁰

The historians have found the use of ethnohistory of great utility in unravelling the reciprocal relationships between cultures at the point of contact or at their 'frontiers'. By emphasizing that each culture must be understood in its own terms as it progresses, ethnohistory ensures that the history of the frontier will cease to be the short "pathetic" story of the "inevitable" triumph of a "booming" White "civilization" over a "fragile" "primitive" culture.¹¹ Ethnohistorians working in frontier studies, the social sciences, particularly anthropology offers access to theories on acculturation and the related processes of culture change, revitalization, diffusion, innovation, conversion and socialization. This body of theory provides working hypothesis, avenues of approach and problems to be refined and tested by ethnohistorical analysis of specific cultures. This in thurn helps generate more accurate generalizations and hypothesis about social stability and change.

In the study of cultures, ethnohistorians experimented with what Fenton called "upstreaming" a method that utilizes the existing living culture for linking it to an earlier pattern in a direct sequence, proceeding from the known to the unknown.¹² As this went against the tide of history, ethnohistorians began looking into the abundant ethnographic literature for clues into significant aspects and patterns of culture, as checks on weak historical documentations. The ethnohistorian also sought to create his own corpus of ethnographic data by using memory of the communities.

Ethnohistory helps us extract the "folk history". According to Sturtevant it is "the common view of the past, an important aspect of world view and of intergroup

relations. It frequently serves as a charter and justification for aspects of history".¹³ Charles Hudson explains it in terms of "the historical beliefs of other societies and culture" and "judging it by their sense of credibility and relevance".¹⁴ Its methodology helps us to reconstruct history from the "emic" viewpoint against the "etic" viewpoint of ethnohistory.

Since World War II oral history become an increasingly critical adjunct to the more traditional sources of historical documentation. This again had its roots in the post-colonial situation, when the denial of history to colonized societies was by simply describing oral traditions as "mytho-history" based on imagination. Memory here became the site where the historical 'other' turned to. The colonizers distinguished between memory and writing to that between speech and writing, categorizing societies dependent on memory as devoid of history. It is in response to this perception that efforts were made to reclaim history through memory.

Historians have finally recognized that the everyday memories of everyday people. Oral history is the systematic collection of living people's testimony about their own experiences. Oral history is not folklore, gossip, hearsay, or rumor. Oral historians attempt to verify their findings, analyze them, and place them in an accurate historical context. The techniques are interviewing participants or experts in a particular subject or issue and preserving their judgements and recollections. Oral history materials-sound and video recordings, transcribed interviews, interview notes and memoranda-supplement, but do not replace, official written records. Oral history materials contain information not normally preserved in official documents." Oral history preserves through interviews an individual's interpretation not normally preserved in official documents." Oral history preserves through interviews an individual's interpretation or recollection

of events. The final product, whether it is an interview tape or transcript, reflects the combined efforts of the interviewer and interviewee in the creation of a unique historical account. An interview is subject to the same scholarly analysis and standards that a historian applies to other evidentiary sources. It is the responsibility of the historian to shift and weigh all evidence and to use sources wisely in the preparation of historical accounts.

III

India still sustains an extensive range of societies at various levels of socio-political evolution. This living 'pre-history', as it has been called, underlines the continuity of cultural survivals.¹⁵ The cross-discipline of ethno-archeology is attempting to correlate to exiting ethnographic data. This correlation helps to unravel the forms of social organization or on the functions of artifacts. According to Romila Thapar in the areas where there are cultural survivals, these procedures 'can endorse the assistance occasionally provided by fieldwork as an adjunct to textual studies'. Fieldwork can provide insights that can enhance the meaning of the text.

It is here that I seek to address the status of ethnohistory in the northeastern region. A range of societies in this region are cultural survivals. The existing corpus of 'historical materials' in the form of written records constitute the basis of historical research. It limits the focus on exploring superficial layers of the society and to those communities having a written tradition. This weighs down heavily on reconstructing the history of pre-literate societies in the region. In colonial ethnographic productions are embedded biases which need to be corrected. A researcher apprehends a similar problem in reconstructing early history of the region beyond the

Sanskritic sources. The history of the medieval period does not look beyond traditional chronicles and hagiographies.

A significant attempt is being made in the political arena to subvert nationalism and create a space for self-identity of ethnic communities. Reclaiming of a unique historical heritage of the region is a part of the agenda. Attempts are made to dismantle colonial cultural constructions by contesting the colonial sources. Creation of a corpus of cultural material from the rich oral traditions is a significant tool in reclaiming 'history'. It is in this space that we need to use approaches and tools of ethnohistory.

Academia in the region is exposed to adopting interdisciplinary approaches in certain areas of study. Yet one comes across uncritical and radical disavowals of attempts to use the integrated approach of history and anthropology and culture of a community in time and space. These however is not to say that ethnohistorical researches are not taking place within the region. Most of these attempts remain individual exercises between the supervisors and their scholars.

What we need is to develop a framework for taking up ethnohistorical studies in this region. The researches require to be trained in the approaches and the tools of ethnohistory. It would help us to reap the benefits of the exercises taken up by the American historians in the 1950's for evolving the discipline of ethnohistory, as an offspring of a common law marriage between anthropology and history. It would help allay fears within the academia of domination from either of the disciplines. A scientific approach would also help eliminate biases which might creep in native reconstruction or 'emic' history. Here I would like to appeal to the community of historians in the region to pool in our efforts to evolved techniques for retrieving history from oral traditions, which this region is rich in.

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Scheduled Tribes are categories of communities who are the indigenous people of India. There are about such 645 tribal communities in India comprising of 12% of the total population. In north east India there are about 145 tribal groups of which 78 are large and the rest small comprising 22.81% of north east's population. But these huge components of population constitute the marginal section of India's population. They are the weakest sections of India's population from social, economic as well as educational angles and constitute the matrix of India's poverty. Despite tremendous growth of India's economy in recent times this section remains underdeveloped. This collection of seventeen papers thus analyses the problems that the scheduled tribes of this part of the country face as one of the least developed areas.

The contributors also deliberate to generate debates to the questions of development vis-a-vis scheduled tribes of north east India as they analyze the government programmes policies, tribal movements, ecology and development, gender, tribal culture language and ethnicity, education and employment.

Prof. Th.R.Tiba (1969-2010) taught History at Assam University, Diphu Campus, Assam, till his untimely death on 8th feb.2010 from an accident. He has already published on the oral history of the Maram Nagas and the impact of Christianity on them. His research interest was mainly tribal studies, culture and development of north east India in general and Nagas in particular. Several research being conducted under him remain unfinished.

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