

Relevance of Oral Literature

Caroline R. Marak

Crisis of orality has been brought into sharp focus by Sven Birkerts in his *The Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. He observes that 'the print medium exalts the word, fixing it into permanence, the electronic counterpart reduces it to a signal, as a means to an end.'¹ Like other arts, oral literature is 'suffering a deep crisis of relevance'. Electronic order makes it possible for information and contents to travel from one place to another instantly, but they travel along a network. The broadcasting is targeted at the heterogeneous public, with ever widening circuit of connections.

Sri A.R. Marak, the present Deputy Station Director of All India Radio (Prashar Bharati) at Tura, keenly aware of the tenuous existence of the oral tradition of Garo Hills, has made an effort to collect rare materials from remote areas, identifying knowledgeable persons and getting them to perform, because oral literature is on the brink of extinction as narrators in A'chik, Koch and Hajong languages are dying out. Narrations of tales, myths and archetypes pertaining to A'chik religious ceremonies connected with agricultural cycles accompanied by chants, rituals for drought and for excessive rain, singing of ballads and epic poetry, and sacred texts, *kabe*, i.e. lamentation in the funeral and post-funeral ceremonies, folksongs, are fast disappearing even in rural areas, although some have been retrieved and recorded.

These moves made by broadcasters, documentary film-makers and those engaged in documentation through interview, video film, audio recording with some authority over electronic communication appear to be a return to orality, an unprecedented effort to retain oral traditions. There is a qualitative change, however. The collection is broadcast/telecast through the electronic media which are public and impersonal in nature, not to speak of the loss of warmth, gestures, facial expressions in the inter-personal communication,

elements which add depth to the narration and the impression it makes. Communication through television and radio is passive as there can be no interaction with the speaker. The narratives and poetry are, as in the print medium, removed from the context. The historical perception is lost, because, the electronic communication leaves out a big chunk of the background, which always, constitutes a significant corpus of information. Telecasting too, is fragmentary, where materials are compressed into the available time slot. This results in what Birkerts calls “flattening of history”. Information and modulation of voice that go into the telling are reduced to a minimum.

In the print medium, reading is essentially a translation of symbols into words. The narrator and her voice with all that it implies are missing. Careful arrangement of syntax, sentence sequence and paragraph further separate the reader from the spontaneity of oral narration. The printed pages literally ‘fix’ one version of a tale, a genre, giving the impression to the general reading public that it is the genuine, original model, whose variations might be questioned. This ‘fixing’ is opposed to the very nature of folk literature whose charm and beauty lies partly in its adaptability, flexibility and the existence of multiple versions. Paradoxically, while the print medium helps to preserve and give a concrete shape to folk literature, it also poses a threat.

Language Erosion: Just as Birkerts feared, with the print and the electronic media there is an increasing erosion of language. Oral narratives, discourses and poetry reduced to writing and preparation for publication for mass consumption requires simplification of language because the target is a wider area and addressed to nameless readers in the present and the future. In the oral culture the speaker and the bard could assume familiarity of his audience with his material, style and above all, language and imagery. The audience know what to expect. In fact, in longer poems, like *Doro*, *Ajea* and *An chaa*, a number of poets get together, sing and recite by turns. Fellow poets and aspiring ones constitute the audience. In the electronic media, the language has to be further simplified towards ‘plain-speak’ for all

listeners to understand the contents, in order to convey the message in very clear terms. This situation does not favour any use of metaphorical language, unfamiliar vocabulary; complexity of any sort is better avoided. Plainness in delivery will go down better with the listeners. This rings a bell, because vocabulary is lost through disuse.

The erosion of the A'chik language is an example. Oral literature in its original form, specially poetry, used to be of high order, in language and style, in thought and content; some of its beauty can still be seen, though imperfectly, on pages of folklore books. This type of sublimity, conciseness of style, metaphorical expression has never been equaled even by the best poets of the present generation who enjoy the benefit of education. With the introduction of education the literate people's vocabulary has become limited to what is found in text-books, and rarely beyond their given parametres. Listening to oral literature, and learning its vocabulary and style are no longer regarded as desirable. In fact, oral literature is looked down upon and ignored as a product of unlettered heathens. The focus of the converts now shift to Christian literature, mostly translated, school text-books.

In Garo Hills one of the major reasons why literary creativity is lacking to a great extent at present can be traced to the unfamiliarity of the people with the oral craft and vocabulary of oral art. People with education no longer have command over their own language, at least not to the desired extent, nor are they acquainted with traditional symbolism.

The electronic and print media leave out the bulk of folklore material. Selection for publication is subjective; it depends on the perception of the collectors, and the choice depends on sales and acceptability factors by the reading public.

The extinction of languages and dialects is a case in point. With the advance of education and due to outside influences, Koches, Hajongs and a section of the Rabhas have lost their language. Now they speak a language pejoratively known as *jharua*, a corrupt form of Assamese, Bengali and Goalpara dialect. There are only a handful of individuals, belonging to these communities, who know their

language and are able to narrate tales in their own tongue surviving today.

Relevance of the oral art: We live in a period in which orality, print and electronic media overlap. If orality is dependent on the spoken word in oral, non-literate cultures, that orality will continue, though a part of the society has become literate. Despite this definition, orality does not stop with literacy and education. Oral transmission continues, and it carries with it the bulk of a community's traditions. In the context of North-East India, oral literature and traditions matter, and must be taken seriously.

In the context of the tribes of the North-East, it will be found that the major systems which direct their social organization exist in the oral traditions, e.g. customary laws, which regulate the interrelation of individuals and groups. The laws of marriage, inheritance, land holdings, succession, laws regarding offences and crimes, separation, adoptions, settling of disputes are decided on the basis of customary practices. These laws of different tribes are yet to be completely documented and codified.

We are here concerned with folklore. A larger part of oral traditions is still ignored- they tell us about the relations of people, something that is basic to human life and to every society, as it is the literature of the common people. The oral tradition tells us how different communities and tribes are linked to each other, just as there is dialect continuance, linking one area with another, irrespective of State and international boundaries. According to their respective legends, the Bara-Kacharis and A'chiks descended from two sisters, who were separated due to some compelling circumstances in the distant past. The A'chiks called a group who came with them as *ra baa* (brought) which was corrupted into 'Rabha'. The Rabhas call A'chiks 'name-giver'. The Me.gams had come with the A'chiks in their migration from Tibet; their group is mentioned frequently in the A'chik legend narrating their journey. Similarly the A'chik epic poetry *Katta Agana* mentions a close relationship between a section of Khasis and A'chiks living side by side presumably in the area near

present day Guwahati. References to Khasi ritual of breaking eggs are frequent. In the post-funeral ceremony *chugan* of the Atongs, (a dialectical group living mostly in South Garo Hills), the lamenters singing *kabe*, at one point, tell the spirit of the deceased that the betel-nut offered ceremoniously comes from the land of the Khasis, meaning that in their area, the areca-nut was obtained from their eastern neighbours.

It was reported in *The Telegraph*, of June 25, 2005 that 'a virtually forgotten chapter from the life and times of a mighty Ahom ruler and a vital missing link between Assam and its neighbouring State Arunachal Pradesh was discovered through the legend of the grave of a lost princess. The grave of Princess Nape Wangcha wife of Gadadhar Singh was discovered at a distance of about 70 km. from Jorhat on a hillock at Bantera in Tirap District.' The grave was traced 'on the basis of tales narrated by villagers.'

Some oral traditions which last till today, the stuff legends are made of, tell us of the inter-tribal relationship through clan system. A number of common clans exist among the A'chiks, Koches and Rabhas of Garo Hills and along the border, pointing to their common origin. There is relationship between a few clans of Rabhas and those of Atong sub-group, similarly there is a relationship between some clans of A'chik and Khasi.

Colonized and subjugated people do not write their own history, and so it is with the tribes of North-East India. Analytical descriptions of the pre-literate peoples of the region- family, village and social organization, culture, food habits, means of livelihood, industries, dresses and appearance, religion, etc. have been made by British officers and missionaries from the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th century. On the A'chiks, *Garo Jungle Book* (1919) by William Carey, *The Garos* (1910) by A. Playfair, records by Elliott and Dalton are some of the oldest. Those were written from the point of view of the Western, dominating colonists and the missionaries who enjoyed their patronage, and who had come, at least partly, to support the cause of the British expansionist policy. A study of those books show how much misrepresentation, distortion of facts and lacunae exist in

their records. Some examples of this may be found in Chapter 6 (six) of *Garó Jungle Book* 'Glimpses of Home Life'.² Among the many aspects of tribal life, one that is singled out for attack is their religion, which, unlike other major religions like Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and Hinduism has no written texts. Unlike the customary laws, social and political organization, culture and food habits, their religious beliefs exist in the oral tradition. Ceremonies and rituals cannot be understood unless the sacred oral texts are known.

G.P.Singh says, 'The oral literature or the traditional literature, transmitted to us from generation to generation, represents the most valid and appropriate expression of religions, mythological, historical and culture milieu of the rural folk. It was the only form of literature that existed among the tribal society as a vehicle of expression.'³ Further, he observes, 'It will not be incorrect to state that the folklore of the tribals of North-East India constitute the bedrock of the higher philosophy, higher literature, higher history and higher art. This is one of the distinguishing features of tribal culture and civilization of North-East India.'⁴ These tribes have their own oral history, even the history of their lost script, which the historians are tardy to acknowledge. They have quasi-scientific stories on natural geographical formations, on natural calamities like the great flood, earthquakes, drought, migration of some plants, para-normal experiences, on fossils, and so on. There are numerous A'chik tales on transmigration of souls from human to other living objects, and stories of were-tigers in line with the European phenomenon of the were-wolf.

There are striking resemblances in types and motifs in the tales of the North-East. B.B. Kumar in his *Folklore and Folklore Motifs*, K. Jadav in his *Folklore and its Motifs in Modern Literature*, Soumen Sen in *Folklore in North-East India*, P. Goswami in his *Essays on the Folklore and Culture of North-Eastern India* and others have confirmed it. This goes to show that syntagmatic and paradigmatic studies of the tales may be made to the advantage of all concerned.

In the present world of globalization where economic competition and technological determinism are proposed as conditions for

survival, the non-Western cultures have to do a serious reflection, whether our society can thrive on ideas, such as individualism, exported from the West. Folklore and folk literature are intrinsically opposed to individualism; they contribute to family and community-centred culture. It is most potent in its original oral form to promote social cohesion and happiness. It forms a part of the traditional in-built support system for children and all individuals, a field which deserves exploration.

References :

1. Birkerts, Sven. *Gutenberg Elegies: The Fate of Reading in an Electronic Age*. Googles - Orality, 20.6.2005
2. Carey, W. *Garó Jungle Book* pp14-20.
3. Sen, Soumen. *Folklore in North-East India*. New Delhi. 1985. p226
4. Ibid., p227

Bibliography :

1. Kumar, B.B. *Folk-lore and Folklore Motifs*, New Delhi. 1993.
2. Mibang & Abraham, *Indian Folk Tales of North-East*. Delhi.2002
3. Jadav, Kishore. *Folklore and its motifs in mordern Literature*. New Delhi. 1998.
4. Sangma, D K *A'chik Golporang*. Part I,II,III.IV, Tura.
5. Choudhury K N *Folklore in North-Eastern India*. Calcutta.2001.
6. Gurdon P R *The Khasis*. Delhi. 1906 Rep.2002.
7. Marak J L R *Atchu Ambini Kubising*. Delhi.2004.
8. Goswami, Prafulladatta. *Essays on the Folklore and Culture of North-Eastern India*. Guwahati. 1983
9. Sen, Soumen *Folklore in North-East India*. New Delhi. 1985
10. Rongmuthu, D S *Apasong Agana*. Delhi. 1967