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OF
MEGHALAYA AND
ARUNACHAL PRADESH**

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FOLK TALES OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH AND MEGHALAYA

B. K. BORGOHAIN



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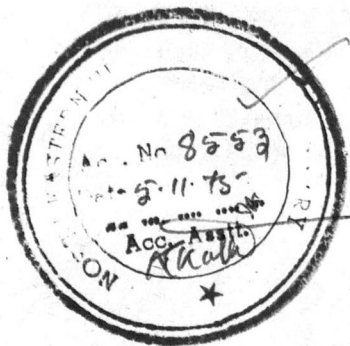
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GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

Folklore in the different parts of India is a rich legacy for us. While researches in ancient and modern history have been directed in recent decades more to the succession of kings and political shifts not much notice has been paid to the culture, complex traditions and social beliefs of the common people. The sociologists have also to pay a good deal of attention to the customs and beliefs of the people and changes therein through the ages. They have rather neglected the study of folklore which is a reliable index to the background of the people. There has always been an easy mobility of the folklore through pilgrimages, *melas* and fairs. The wandering minstrels, *sadhus* and *fakirs* have also disseminated them. People of the North visiting temples of the South and *vice versa* carry their folk-tales, songs, riddles and proverbs with them and there is an inconspicuous integration. The *dharamsalas*, inns and the *Chattis* (places of where the pilgrims rest and intermingle) worked as the clearing houses for the folk tales, traditional songs and riddles. That is why we find a somewhat common pattern in folk literature of different regions. The same type of folk tale will be found in Kashmir and in Kerala with different regional complex. These stories were passed on from generation to generation by word of mouth before they came to be reduced to writing.

Folklorists have different approaches to the appreciation of folklore. Max Mueller has interpreted the common pattern in folk literature as evidence of nature-myths. Sir L. Gomme thought that a historical approach is the best for the study of folklore. But Frazer would rather encourage a commonsense approach and to him old and popular folk literature is mutually interdependent and satisfies the basic curiosities and instincts of man. That folklore is a vital element in a living culture has been underlined in recent years by scholars like Malinowski and Radcliffe Brown.

It is unfortunate that the study of folklore in India is of very recent origin. This is all the more regrettable because the *Panchatantra* stories which had their origin in Bihar had spread

through various channels almost throughout the world. As late as in 1859, T. Benfey had held that there is an unmistakable stamp of Indian origin in most of the fairy tales of Europe. The same stories with different twists or complexes have come back to us through Grimm and Aesop and the retold stories are greedily swallowed by our children. That India has neglected a proper study of the beautiful motifs of our folk tales is seen in the fact that the two large volumes of dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend published by Funk and Wagnalls and Company of New York have given a very inadequate reference to India.

What is the secret of the fascination of the folk tales that the old, young and the children are kept enthralled by their recitals? The same story is often repeated but does not lose its interest. The secret is the satisfaction that our basic curiosity finds in the folk tales. The folk tales through phantasies, make beliefs and complacent understanding help the primitive man to satisfy his curiosity about the mysteries of the world and particularly the very many inexplicable phenomena of nature around him. We have an element of primitiveness in our mind in spite of the advancement of science around us. Even a scientist finds great delight in the fairy tales of the moon being attacked as the origin of the lunar eclipse. Through the folk tales man exercised his once-limited vision and somehow or the other we would like to retain that limited vision even when we have grown up. The advancement in science can never replace the folk tales. On the other hand, folk tales have helped the scientific curiosity in the man. In spite of the scientific explanation as to why earthquakes take place, the old, young and the child would still be delighted to be told that the world rests on the hood of the great snake and when the snake is tired with the weight, he shakes the hood and there is an earthquake. Among the Mundas, an aboriginal tribe in Bihar, there is a wonderful explanation of the Orion. The sword and belt of the Orion, the Mundas imagine, form their appropriate likeness to the plough and plough-share which the supreme *Sing Bonga* God first shaped in the heavens and then taught people on earth how to use the plough and plough-share. It is further in the Munda

folk tale that while the *Sing Bonga* was shaping the plough and the plough-share with a chisel and hammer he observed a dove hatching on its eggs at a little distance. the *Sing Bonga* threw his hammer at the dove to bag the game. He missed his mark and the hammer went over the dove's head and hung on a tree. The hammer corresponds to the Pleiads which resembles a hammer. The Aldebaran is the dove and the other stars of Hyades are eggs of the dove. Any illiterate Munda boy will unmistakably point out these star groups.

Weather and climate have their own stories and are often connected with particular stages of the crops. The wet season and the hottest month are intimately associated with the ripening of crops or the blossoming of trees or the frequency of dust storms and stories are woven round them. But nothing is more satisfying as a folk story than the explanation of the phases of the stars, moon and the sun. A Munda would point out the milky way as the *Gai Hora* i.e. the path of the cows. The *Sing Bonga* God leads his cows every day along this path—the dusky path on the sky is due to the dust raised by the herd. The dust raised by the cows sends down the rains. A story of this type can never fail to sustain its interest in spite of all the scientific explanation of the astral bodies.

The “why and wherefore” of the primitive mind tried to seek an answer in the surrounding animal and plant kingdom. Animals are grouped into different categories according to their intelligence and other habits. The fox is always sly while the cow is gentle. The lion and the tiger have a majestic air while the horse is swift, sleek and intelligent. The slow-going elephant does not forget its attendant nor does he forget a man that teases him. Monkeys are very near the mankind. The peacock is gay while the crow is shrewd. The tortoise is slow-going but sure-footed. The hare is swift but apt to laze on the road. The primitive mind is not unintelligent to decipher these inherent characteristics of the common animals he meets. Similarly, when he sees a large and shady peepal tree he naturally associates it as the abode of the sylvan god. The thick jungle with its trees and foliage is known to be frequented by thieves and dacoits. Any solitary hut in the thick of the

forest must be associated with someone unscrupulous or uncanny. These ideas are commonly woven into stories and through them the primitive mind seeks to satisfy the eternal why and how of the mind. Folk literature is often crude and even grotesque. The stories of the witches and the ogres come in this category. There is nothing to be surprised at that. They reflect the particular stage of the development of the human mind and also a projection of the beliefs and fads of the mind. Scientific accuracy should never be looked for in folk tales although folk tales are a very good reflex of the social development of a particular time.

It is enough if the basic ideas regarding the animal and plant kingdom still satisfy that the donkey is dense or stupid or the snake typifies slyness and the fox is deceitful repeated in ancient folk tales have stood the test of age and that would show that the primitive mind was not foolish or credulous. The very idea that the folk tales have woven man, nature, animal and plant creation together shows the great flight of imagination and a singular development of mind. Introduction of moral lessons or any dogma was not done as an after-thought but came in as a very natural development.

The last source of the folk tales is human society itself. The elemental moorings that are at the root of human society are sought to be illustrated in folk tales. The day to day life of the common man finds its full depiction in the folk tales. Parental love, family happiness, children's adventurous habits, love and fear for the unknown, greed etc. are some of the usual themes of folk tales. The common man yearns for riches and comforts, he cannot usually look for. He dreams of riches, princes, kingdoms etc. and finds a satisfaction in stories of fantasy. Men love gossip and scandal. Women cannot keep secrets, children will love their parents, a mother-in-law will always think the daughter-in-law needs to be told—these are some of the basic ideas that make up much of our daily life. The folk tales are woven round them and whether fantastic or with a moral undertone they only reflect the daily chores, tears and joys of the common man.

Unknowingly, the folklorists bring in the religious custom,

beliefs, food habits, modes of dress, superstitions etc. and thereby leave a picture of the culture-complex of the region and its people. A tribal story does not picture a king riding a white big foaming horse followed by hundreds of other horsemen going for a *shikar*. In a tribal story the Raja will be found cutting the grass and bringing back a stack of it for feeding his cows but a folk tale more current in urban areas will have large palaces, liveried-servants, ministers and courtiers in the king's court. All this only means that the time and the venue of the origin of the stories are widely different. It is here that the sociologists and the anthropologists come in useful. As life is different in rural and urban areas or is chequered with goodness or badness of the world so is folk literature diversified, as it must be —being a replica of life.

It is a pity that these beautiful folk tales in India were almost on the point of disappearance when a few pioneers mostly consisting of foreign missionaries and European scholars looked into them and made compilations in different parts of India. Our present run of grandmothers knows very little of them. The professional story tellers who were very dearly sought after by the old and the young, not to speak of the children, have almost completely disappeared from India. The film industry and the film songs pose a definite threat to folklore.

The Sterling Publishers are to be congratulated for launching the project of publishing a compilation of 20 volumes consisting of the folk tales of different regions. The work has been entrusted to specially selected writers who have an intimate knowledge of their region. The regional complex of the stories has been sought to be preserved as far as possible. The stories have an elemental involvement about them and they are such that are expected to appeal to the child and its parents. We expect the reader of the folk tales of the particular region to have a feeling after a study of the stories that he has enjoyed a whiff of air of that area. We want him to have an idea of how Kashmiri folks retire in wintry nights with the *Kangri* under the folds of their clothes to enjoy gossips and how they enjoy their highly spiced meaty food. We want him to

appreciate the splash of colour of the sari and the flowers that are a must in Tamilnadu. We want him to know the stories that are behind some of the famous temples in the South as Kanjeevaram temple. We want him to know the story regarding the construction of the famous Konark temple. We want him to enjoy the stories of the heroes of Gujarat, Punjab and Rajasthan in their particular roles. We want the reader to have an idea of the peace and quiet of a hut in the lap of the Kumaon hills. We want the reader to enjoy some of the folk tales of Bengal and Bihar that have found wings in other parts of India and to appreciate the village life with their *Alpana* and *Bratas*. At the same time we want the reader to appreciate the customs and manners of the Santals, Garos, and the other tribes inhabiting Nefa and Assam.

A set of twenty volumes of folk tales of the different regions of India by selected authors is an ambitious programme. Folk tales have great impact in bringing in national integration of the country. A Keralite will see a pattern of familiarity while reading the folk tales of Bengal, Assam and Kashmir. Maharashtra and Orissa will come nearer to each other through ties of folk tales. Thus reader will feel that he is at one with his brother or sister elsewhere. A spread of knowledge of the social patterns of the different regions is a pre-requisite for national integration. It can be modestly claimed that this folk tales series will be of great help in that direction. The Publishers want to have a miniature India in these 20 volumes.

The authors have to be thanked for their interest in the work. I am sure that they have enjoyed the assignment. It is hoped the books will be found useful and interesting to the public. I have no hesitation in saying that the stories of the different areas do make out a miniature India. It is hoped the reader will enjoy the stories and will come to know more of the region and its people.

P.C. Roy Chaudhury

PREFACE

Arunachal Pradesh is one of the most picturesque tribal areas of India. It covers an area of about 83 thousand square kilometres. It is an area that is at once remarkable for its greenness, its tall evergreen forests, high and rugged mountains and silvery meandering rivers. Arunachal is wild and elemental, so are its people. From morning till night it is music all around, the music of the stately forests rustling in its ferocity, the music of the gurgling, angry waters of its innumerable rivers and rivulets, the music of the icy howling wind piercing through the cruel mountain passes, the music of its people, unravished and untainted by the advent of modern civilisation.

She has a long border with China, including Tibet and Burma. Formerly Arunachal was called NEFA and formed a part of Assam. With the coming into force of the North Eastern Areas (Reorganisation) Act of 1971, on 27 January NEFA acquired a new constitutional and administrative status under a new name which is the Arunachal Pradesh. This marked the end of isolation for this remote part of the country.* The ethnic units vary in population and degree of literacy and advancement. For a balanced national integration Arunachal has been given a democracy recently. It was felt that the area should not be taken merely as a land of songs and dances but that the men and women have their ideas, dreams and aspirations. The previous isolation has thus been broken

The five districts of Arunachal Pradesh and the main ethnic groups are as follows :—

1. Kameng—Banguis/Daflas, Hrusso (Akas), Monpas, Mijis (Dammai), Sherdukpens, Sulungs, Bangros, Boguns (Khowas).
2. Subansiri—Daflas, Apatanis, Tagins, Hill Miris.
3. Siang—Gallongs, Minyongs, Tagins, Pangis, Padams, Shimong Membas, Bokars, Milangs, Boris, Karkas, Bagums, Pasis, Ashings.
4. Lohit—Miju-Mishmis, Idu, Digaru-Mishmis, Padams, Khamtis Shingpos.
5. Tirap—Wanchos, Noctes, Tangsas, Singphos, Yobins.

and the people are more involved with what is going on around them.

Arunachal is now throbbing with new ideas and activities. Every inhabitant bears on his face the stamp of involvement. There is in the air that indelible stamp of coming prosperity and advancement.

The government has provided for fuller participation of the people in various stages of economic planning and at different levels of administration through the introduction of the Panchayat Raj system. Basically and mentally democracy oriented, there has been no difference of opinion in marking off the vast Arunachal tract into three broad cultural divisions. One of these divisions is the habitats of tribals who are Buddhist by religion, and include the *Sherdukpens* and the *Monpas*. The second cultural area stretches from west to east, from Sepila in Kameng and through the greater part of the Subansiri, Siang and Lohit districts. The population here is of assorted traditions.

I have known this beautiful, wild and lush land for long and have always enjoyed their songs, dances and Folk Tales. You can very well imagine my excitement when I was asked to compile a book of Folk Tales from this area. It is hoped that this modest collection will carry the message of this exotic state to other parts of the country.

The tales collected in this book will not only make good reading, but will also help the readers peep into the unique fabric of co-existing cultures.

Bipin Borgohain

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