

HISTORICITY OF FOLKLORE AS EXPLANATIONS OF SOCIAL FACTS: A FEW NORTH-EASTERN EXAMPLES

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Opposition notwithstanding, a plea has been made in this paper for a fruitful use of folkloristic studies for writing history especially of the peoples of the region called North East India. In making this plea a point of view has also been presented.

Historians or at least a few of them admit the usefulness of oral traditions in connecting the missing links in history, an account of the past, which the historian reconstructs. After all, 'The blanks may be far more important than the areas covered by our information', especially of earlier times 'because there is so little of it'.² This is equally true of societies where, and of whom, history is yet to be adequately written. Even in societies with written history the historian may have to accept a task of rewriting and re-interpreting the available materials by filling up the blanks. This is specially important for social history. 'The choice of oral information becomes obvious in areas where the documentary evidences are inadequate, and in any situation, for social history'.³

The importance of folklore is far more in writing social history of the peoples of north-east India because 'it has been the experience (in an endeavour to write the social history of the Cachar Valley of Assam) that folklore provides more extensive data than conventional historical sources'.⁴ The present writer had a similar experience in studying social and state formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya.⁵

What is true of oral traditions is equally true of other items of folklore. Rituals, for instance, have much deeper historical significance than we are aware of. While folklorists take ritual as the standard reference for understanding the belief and ideals of peoples, the historians emphasize the study⁶ of ritualism to reveal the actual social setup.

II

After making the plea for the use of folkloric data in writing history by drawing support from the writings of the historians, we can now proceed to present a point of view about how it can be done. Folklorists firmly believe in the historicity of folklore. This belief, as we find, is shared by a number of historians. But the problem is how to determine how far this interdependence be stretched. Take the examples of the origin myths or tales. Should we take their historicity in full strength? Any such attempt may lead us to wilderness. But by dissecting the myth or the tale we can definitely observe some details that may reveal its historical significance. For instance, the myth of Jainteswari of Jaintia Kingdom contains significant archetypes which negate the suggested Hindu Origin of the Kingdom and points instead to its tribal base. By taking the unexamined historical value of myths many a historian of earlier decades made serious mistakes. In turn, folklore loses its historicity. It is to be remembered that folklore is engendered by reality but does not contain any direct traces of the concrete reality. For instance, many a Khasi tales mention kings and queens which, if taken as concrete reality, will lead to a misconception that Khasi states had kings and queens and that many a states were kingdoms. While emphasizing the historicity of folklore, Vladimir Propp therefore warns: 'For a correct understanding

of the historical basis of folklore one should bear in mind, that folklore does not exist as a unified whole'. After all, tales must contain fictitious plots to amuse and entertain. But then 'one hardly needs to offer special proof that every art, including folklore, is derived from reality and reflects it. Difficulties arise when we attempt to interpret the historical process and decide how history has been reflected'.

We are thus confronted with the problem of determining the real axis between the text and the context. Context of an item of folklore is the specific social situation. Collection of context is therefore equally important as that of all the genres of folklore. Collection of texts in the long run becomes meaningless in the absence of contexts. A text is truly understood and explained only by a reference to the context. On the other hand, a careful examination of the text can explain the context in a more meaningful way. Even a formalist study cannot escape the ultimate concern of the folklorist for studying the content and contextual aspects and the search for meaning in all the folklore items.

Here is an instance. In Khasi-Jaintia Hills matriliney is practised. It is generally assumed that the status of women in a matrilineal society will be little more elevated in comparison to the status of women in patrilineal societies. But if we get here some texts similar to some obtained from patrilineal societies, should we conclude that the position of women in Khasi society is not different from the position of women in any of the patrilineal societies; that Khasi society is equally affected by male chauvinism or that it is no more matrilineal? Let us take a few texts collected from patrilineal American and English societies and matrilineal Khasi society:

American

A whistling maid and a crowing⁹ hen
Is good to neither God nor man.

English

Ill thrives the hapless family that shows¹⁰
A cock that's silent and a hen that crows.

Khasi

Woe worth the day
The hen begins to crow. 11

This is a tricky situation. One may ask how the value system of two different social systems can be almost same. This is a specific situation where folklorists have an answer: Historicity is not to be deduced from the whole but from dissected details. These details may also oftentime suggest tentative conclusions which must be cross examined with other details available from other sources. Moreover, testing of the authenticity is done by a folklorist only by examining different versions.

The value propagated in the American and English texts quoted above can be examined by referring to many other similar texts found among the English speaking people and we get a specific frame of mind. Take one:

I wish you luck
I wish you joy
I wish you first a baby boy.
And when his hair
Begins to curl
I wish you then a baby girl. 12

This surely reflects a male bias. We can be almost sure that such a preference for male

children. When we examine another Khasi text we see a different attitude:

The woman is the Lukhimai
 She is like the queen bee
 She becomes fragrant by silent listening.¹³

This subtle difference does not, however, establish the myth of a highly elevated position of women in Khasi society. Although her position is not to be equated with that of her counterpart in a patrilineal society, her place is in the home as in the case of a woman in a patrilineal society and she is debarred from participating in public affairs. This is the social situation, the context, in the light of which the text is to be tested. Here one is to follow only the inductive method i.e. proceeding from data to conclusion, as recommended by Propp for folklore studies.¹⁴

An Adi folksong collected from Arunachal Pradesh is, in a way, unique in its content because it tells us about not love, valour or nature but trade:

On the hills of Kiibo Piileng
 A honeycomb was hanging in great length
 We cut it and brought it home in pot
 And made wax out of it a lot;
 We made earring and bangles
 In local goldsmith
 And sold them in Tibet
 In exchange for beads and other things we need
 We returned to our village with goods in full
 basket
 And redressed ourselves in zest.¹⁵

This reference to trade between peoples of Arunachal and Tibet is a data which may lead us to a conclusion that there was extensive trade between Arunachal and Tibet. Here is a social situation (context) referred to. But how do we arrive at a definite conclusion? Should we be sure

of the existence of trade between the peoples of Arunachal and Tibet? Can it be that the reference to Tibet is imaginary? A conclusion, either way, can only be valid after examining other available information from other sources. The historicity of the text will be proved only when it is corroborated by other evidences. Moreover, a folklorist will prefer a conclusion only after examining some other texts of similar nature and content. But this is surely a data which can motivate a folklorist and a historian to search for further evidence.

Folklore studies therefore assume the task of only drawing certain inferences about the context by deriving the meaning of an item of folklore. As mentioned earlier even a formalist cannot escape this responsibility.

Notes & References

1. Irfan Habib, **Interpreting Indian History**, NEHU Publications, Shillong, Undated, p.2.
2. **Ibid.**, p.2.
3. J.B. Bhattacharjee, "History and Folklore in the Context of Cachar Valley", **Folklore in North-East India**, Soumen Sen (Ed), Omsons, New Delhi, 1985, pp.156-57.
4. **Ibid.**, p.157.
5. See, Soumen Sen, **Social and State Formation in Khasi-Jaintia Hills: A Study of Folklore**, B.R. Publishing Corporation, New Delhi, 1985.
6. See, N.N. Bhattacharya, **Ancient Indian Rituals and their Social Contents**, Manohar Book Service, Delhi, 1975.
7. Vladimir Propp, **Theory and History of Folklore** (Tr. Ariadana and Richard P. Martin), Manchester University Press, 1984, p.49.
8. **Ibid.**, p.48.
9. See, Alan Dundes, **Essays in Folkloristics**, Folklore Institute, Meerut, 1978, p. 170.

10. **Ibid.**, p. 170.
11. See, R.T. Rymbai, "Some Aspects of the Religion of the Khasi-Pnars", **Khasi Heritage**, Seng Khasi, Shillong, 1979, p.113.
12. Alan Dundes, **Op.cit.**, p. 157.
13. See, U Radhon Sing Berry, **Ka Jingsneng Tymnen**, Shillong, 1903, (Translated).
14. Vladimir Propp, **Op.cit.**, p. 57.
15. Talom Rukbo, "Pasi Kongki (A Trading Song)", **Kali Monthly**, Pasighat, Vol. I, No.4, p. 11.