

A
HANDBOOK OF
FOLKLORE MATERIAL
OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

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PUBLISHER'S NOTE

Folklore and oral traditions form one of the several areas of work for the **Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art & Culture, Assam (ABILAC)**. The Institute has a subcommittee consisting of folklorists including Dr. Praphulladatta Goswami and Dr. Birendranath Datta to recommend research and publication programmes relating to folklore and oral traditions. Still in the take-off stage, the Institute has not been able to contribute much to the discipline, although there have been quite a few recommendations from the subcommittee. In fact, the present work is the first publication of the Institute in the area of folklore and oral traditions. However, the Institute has been offering a few fellowships to M. Phil students of the Folklore Research Department of Gauhati University for the last two years for the promotion of folkloristic studies. The scheme is continuing. Schemes such as collection of folk-songs and ballads of the Barak valley and the Karbi Anglong district, publication of a treatise on the festivals of Assam, etc. have also been undertaken in the meanwhile. It is expected that folklorists will hear a little more of ABILAC in the years to come.

The great ethnic diversity of North-East India should deter anyone from undertaking a work of the present kind, particularly if one has to look for primary sources. But, as has been mentioned by the authors in their preface, the need for such a work has been there all through, which prompted them to embark upon the project. Although the book contains material from quite a few secondary sources, its usefulness as the only work so far that provides a window on the folkloristic world of the North-East as a whole should be quite evident. ABILAC is glad to associate itself with such a pioneering venture.

Our grateful thanks are due to the authors for coming up with such a work, particularly to Dr. Birendranath Datta, professor and head of the Folklore Research Department of Gauhati University, for his active co-operation with the Institute at all stages of the production and publication of the present work.

Ambikagiri Nagar
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15 Feb, 1994

T.R. Taid
Director

PREFACE

The importance of folklore studies is being increasingly recognised in academic circles of India and the number of universities in the country introducing folklore studies as an academic discipline is growing from year to year. It is a matter of pride and satisfaction for North-East India that Gauhati University happens to be a pioneer in this regard and its Department of Folklore Research has the distinction of being one of the oldest independent university departments exclusively devoted to folklore studies. Folklore courses have also been instituted in the Manipur University and the North-Eastern Hill University.

As is well known, North-East India is extremely rich in the matter of its folklore heritage. Although a fairly large crop of books and articles having a bearing on various aspects of the folklore of the region — ranging from the highly academic works to the patently laymenlike efforts — have been published both in English and Assamese and also in some other languages, the need for a handy compendium that could give a comprehensive picture of the folklore scene of the whole region was being felt by all concerned, particularly by those involved with its study as an academic pursuit.

It was against the above background that the present work was taken up as a departmental project of the Folklore Research Department of Gauhati University under the University-level Book-writing Scheme of the University Grants Commission. We are beholden to the UGC for the support it gave to the project.

After the draft was ready, we had been on the look-out for a publisher when, fortunately, the Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art & Culture, Assam came out with the generous offer to undertake the publication of the book as one of its schemes in the field of Folklore and Oral Traditions. We are really grateful to the Institute, and in particular to its Vice-Chairman, Dr. P. Goswami and Director, Shri. T.R. Taid, for this laudable gesture.

The book itself has been divided into two parts. The first part contains discussions on the various aspects of the folklore material of the North-East while the second part is chiefly made up of the specimens of different types of folklore items, mostly culled from different published works. Some additional matter has been incorporated in the Appendix. While some photographs have been given in a section called Illustrations, we have also appended a comprehensive bibliography for the preparation of which our special thanks are due to Dr. K.K. Bhattacharjee, our junior colleague in the Department.

We take this opportunity of acknowledging our indebtedness to all those from whose works we have culled various material, and also to those who have otherwise supplied information needed for various contents of this book. As far as practicable, the sources have been duly acknowledged. However, special mention must be made of the Director of Research of Arunachal Pradesh for their kind permission to reproduce material from their publication.

We are extremely grateful to Professor P. Goswami, the doyen of folklorists of North-East India for the inspiration and guidance at various stages of the work. Apart from the fact that we have freely and copiously drawn from his works, he has also kindly allowed us to reproduce an essay written by him in the Appendix section. Our sincere thanks also go to Dr A.N.M. Irshad Ali, Professor of Anthropology, Gauhati University, for kindly giving his consent for the incorporation of one of his articles in the Appendix section.

Our expectation is that this volume would serve the purpose of not only academic folklorists but also the interested general readers both inside and outside the region.

Department of Folklore Research
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B.D.
N.C.S.
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PART ONE

CHAPTER 1

NORTH-EAST INDIA AND ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL MILIEU

I. NORTH-EAST INDIA AS A HOMOGENEOUS ZONE

Introduction

The term North-East India— or simply the North-East— obviously refers to the geographical location of the region. But there are many other ways in which the term holds great significance.

Topographically, the north-eastern region of India lies in an extension of the sub-Himalayan zone— consisting of lofty mountainous terrains and moderately high hilly tracts interspersed with plateaus and river-fed valleys. While this geographical and topographical situation has made north-eastern India into a naturally homogeneous zone, the partition of the sub-continent literally cut it off from the rest of the country— barring a narrow corridor— accentuating, as it were, the specificity of the region.

The specific character of the North-East, however, extends beyond its physical features; it has its own distinctiveness also in respect of its population component and cultural pattern. Since very early times the North-East has been the home of the Kirātas or Indo-Mongoloids. Although Austric and Dravidian sub-strata have been discerned by scholars in the racial and cultural make-up of the region and although waves of Aryan culture have swept over parts of the region— particularly the valleys in Assam, Manipur and Tripura— the predominance of the Indo-Mongoloid

racial and cultural features is much too obvious. Although the Indo-Mongoloids had not occupied a centre-stage position in the history of India's civilization, they have never been off the stage either.

Apart from the fact that the Aryan-Hindu religious and cultural norms have been a dominant influence, there is also the living presence in the region of Buddhism of both Hinayana and Mahayana sects, of Islam, and also of Christianity in more recent times.

Because of the presence of an almost bewildering racial and cultural variety, the North-East has often been referred to as the anthropologist's paradise. With equal, if not greater, justification the region could be called the folklorist's paradise: the stock of folklore material, both verbal and non-verbal, of the great number of groups and sub-groups inhabiting this region is virtually inexhaustible.

This is a region where tradition had held its sway till very recent times. But unusually heavy influx of people from outside the region has of late disturbed the demographic and cultural balance of the region. Spread of education coupled with the waves of development and modernization has also played its part in changing the region's cultural contours. There have been problems of identity crisis tending to give rise to various kinds of movements aimed at self-assertion. Not only has there been a new concern with folklore but there have even revivalist tendencies also.

With international borders on almost all sides— China on the north, Burma on the east, Bangladesh on the south and west, and Bhutan on the north—the North-East is also most strategically placed and is, thus, geo-politically a very sensitive area.

While there is no denying that there are considerable diversities within the region, yet the fact remains that there is a basic unity characterising the seven units making up North-East India— Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Nagaland, Arunachal Pradesh, Tripura and Mizoram. Presently there is also a realisation of this unity among the people of the constituent units and the term "Seven Sisters" to designate the seven units reflects that sense of unity and togetherness running through them.

II. UNITS MAKING UP NORTH-EAST INDIA

(i) Assam

In many ways the foremost of the seven units comprising the North-East, Assam is also more or less centrally located in the region. It is bounded by Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh on the north, Nagaland and Manipur on the east, Mizoram and Tripura on the south and south-west, and Bangladesh and West Bengal on the west. The total area of the state is 78,523 square kilometres. The long and narrow Brahmaputra valley, also called the Assam Valley, stretches across the state from east to west while the small Barak Valley forms its southern adjunct, the two hills districts— North Cachar and Karbi Anglong— lying in between. The population figure in the 1991 Census is 22,294,562.

Assam has had links with Aryan civilization and culture since ancient times. Known by the names Pragjyotisha and Kamarupa, the land finds frequent mention in ancient literature, particularly in the epics and the Puranas. Narakasura, Bhagadatta and Bhaskarvarman were kings of ancient Assam who are known to have played significant roles in the political and socio-cultural history of India. While there had been migration of hordes of Aryan settlers at different times, the indigenous population had also come under influence of Aryan religio-cultural mores and modes, giving rise in the process to a very interesting synthesis of Aryan and indigenous strains.

In the medieval period, different parts of Assam were under the Chutiyas, the Barahis, the Bhuyans and other chieftains. But later there arose two very strong ruling powers, the Ahoms in the east and the Koches in the west. The Ahoms of Tai-Shan affiliation originally came here as invaders but soon became completely indigenized, and their uninterrupted 600-year rule not only gave the land its present name but also played a signal role in forging its social and cultural unification. The Koches played a similar role in the western parts of the land helping not only in political consolidation but also in socio-religious and artistic afflorescence.

At present the bulk of the indigenous population is made up of Assamese Hindus among whom the Indo-Mongoloid or Kirāta

element is visibly strong in terms of both racial strains and cultural traits, although scholars have also discerned certain Austric and Dravidian ingredients. Various tribal communities— now at different levels of acculturation, integration and assimilation vis-a-vis the Assamese Hindu society— live in the hills and plains, the chief among them being the Karbis, the Dimasa-Kacharis, the Zemi Nagas and the Kukis in the hills, and the Bodo-Kacharis, the Misings, the Rabhas, the Tiwas (Lalungs) and the Deuris in the plains. Although Saivasim and Saktism (and also Tantrism) have had strong roots here, neo-Vaishnavism with a wonderful spirit of liberalisation and synthesis was ushered in under the unique leadership of Sankardeva (1449-1568), and its influence on the population has since been both pervasive and abiding. The local Muslim population is also sizeable in proportion and their place in, and contribution to, the composite socio-cultural milieu is quite significant and considerable. While there is a small but significant Assamese Sikh community, Christianity has been adopted by a section of the local population, particularly among the tribal groups.

(ii) Manipur

A former princely state, Manipur first became a Part C state in 1950. Made a Union Territory in 1963, it became a full-fledged state in 1972. Bounded by Nagaland on the north, Mizoram on the south, Assam on the west and Burma on the east, the state has a land surface of 22,327 square kilometres. Ninety per cent of this land is made up of hills which surround the small but fertile Manipur valley placed almost at the centre. While there are a number of rivers criss-crossing the valley, the famous Loktak lake (along with some other smaller lakes) has its own importance in various ways— topographic, economic, social, and cultural.

Manipur has a population of 1,826,714 (1991 Census) of which two-thirds live in the valley and the rest in the hills. The valley is inhabited almost entirely by the Manipuris (who also call themselves Meiteis), while the hills are the abode of as many as 29 tribes, mostly of Naga and Kuki stocks.

The Meiteis have been the politically and socially dominant group in the land throughout known history. Originally different

Meitei ruling families held sway over different parts of Manipur but at one time one single ruling dynasty established its paramourty.

The Meiteis themselves belong to the Indo-Mongoloid stock although they have adopted Hinduism and their culture has been considerably influenced by Vaishnavism of the Chaitanya sect. While the Hindu-Aryan influence has led to the flowering of a highly refined cultural and artistic tradition, best exemplified by the Manipuri dance acknowledged as one of the major classical dance forms of India, the Manipuris still carefully retain much of their pre-Hindu beliefs and customs in both individual and community life. The bulk of the tribal groups follow their own traditional ways of life, including religious beliefs and practices. Certain sections have, however, adopted Christianity. There is also a small Manipuri Muslim population known as *Pangan*.

Manipur has always had close links with Upper Burma, its closest neighbour on the east, and also some connection with China, one of the routes between India and China having been through Manipur. There have also been close historical and cultural ties between Manipur and Assam.

The language of the valley is Manipuri or Meitei-lol, which belongs to the Kuki-Chin group of the Tibeto-Burman family. It has a fairly old and rich tradition of written literature mostly consisting of royal chronicles and legendary accounts. The language also serves as a kind of lingua franca among the various tribal groups of the state who speak different tribal languages.

(iii) Tripura

Formerly a princely state, Tripura became a Part C state of the Indian Union in 1949. It was made into a Union Territory in 1957 and conferred full statehood in 1975. The geographical situation of the state is as follows: Bangladesh on the north, west and south-west, Assam and Mizoram on the east. A narrow strip through Assam (Barak Valley) and Mizoram links it with the rest of India. Covering an area of 10,486 square kilometres, Tripura can be geographically divided into three broad zones—the hill region, the flat plains, and the river basin. The population figure in the 1991 Census is 2,744,827.

The original inhabitants of Tripura have been tribal groups like the Tipras, the Rheangs and the Hrangkhols, most of whom belong to the Bodo group of the Indo-Mongoloid family. However, the royal dynasties had come under Hindu-Aryan influence quite early and had patronised Aryan culture. It has been suggested on the basis of various evidences that Buddhism and the Nath cult had also made their entry into Tripura. Subsequently Bengali language and culture found favour with the ruling and elite groups. In the process, there arose a gulf between the "Sanskritized" ruling elite and the rank and file of the local population. In recent times the unusually heavy influx of East-Bengali settlers has brought in such a drastic change in the demographic pattern of the state that the indigenous population has been reduced to a weak minority.

Of the indigenous population, the Tipras or Tripuris constitute the most prominent group. They are supposed to be the oldest inhabitants having links with some of the Bodo groups of Assam.

(iv) Arunachal Pradesh

Bounded by Tibet in the north, Assam and Nagaland in the south and south-west, Burma in the east and Bhutan in the west, Arunachal Pradesh, formerly known as North-East Frontier Agency or NEFA, covers an area of 83,743 square kilometres and thus has the largest territory among the seven units of the North-East. This hilly land of the sub-Himalayan tracts, made into a Union Territory through administrative reorganisation after independence, was given full statehood in 1987.

The population of Arunachal Pradesh, 858,392 according to the 1991 Census, is made up of over 82 tribes and sub-tribes of Indo-Mongoloid origin. All these groups have their distinctive social and cultural identities, speaking different languages and dialects of the Tibeto-Burman family and following different beliefs and customs. The territory can be conveniently divided into three main cultural zones:

To the first zone belong the Buddhist or near-Buddhist groups of the westernmost parts, other small tribes along the northern frontier, and the Khamptis and the Singphos in the foothills of the eastern parts. These Buddhist and near-Buddhist groups

have elements of civilization considerably influenced by Tibet and Burma. The Monpas and the Sherdukpens are followers of Tibetan Buddhism while the Khamptis and Singphos, who are Buddhists of Burmese affiliation, have migrated from the Irrawady valley in comparatively recent times and lived in close proximity to the plains of Assam. The Buguns (Khowas), the Hrussos (Akas) and the Dhammais (Mijis), though not Buddhists themselves, have imbibed many cultural elements from their Buddhistic neighbours.

In the great central area live a large number of tribal groups who have been divided by the difficulty of communications and by the state of war in which they lived before they were brought under a common administration. The chief groups among these are the Adis (divided into several sub-groups), the Nishis (Daflas, Bangnis), the Apatanis, the Hill Miris, the Tagins and the three groups of the Mishmis.

The third area, comprising the south-eastern parts of the territory bordering on Burma, is inhabited chiefly by the Wanchos, the Noctes (who have adopted elements of Assam Vaishnavism), the various small groups collectively known as Tangsa, and a small population of Singphos and Khamptis.

Although all the three cultural areas have many traits in common, there are also certain others that distinguish them from one another.

Again, there have been contacts with the plains of Assam at various levels and a kind of patois of the Assamese language—sometimes designated as Nefamese—has served as lingua franca for communication among different groups.

(v) Meghalaya

Carved out of Assam in 1973, Meghalaya comprises the erstwhile districts of Garo hills and United Khasi and Jaintia Hills. It covers an area of 22,429 square kilometres and has Assam on its east and north, and Bangladesh on its west and south. The population of the state according to the 1991 Census is 1,760,626.

The bulk of the inhabitants belong to three major tribal groups—the Garos, the Khasis, and the Syntengs (Pnars) who are more

popularly known as Jaintias. While another section of the population is made up of such other tribal groups as the Rabhas, the Hajongs, the Tiwas and the Koches, there is also a sizeable number of non-tribals scattered in different parts of the state.

The societies of the Khasis and the Jaintias, and to a great extent of the Garos, are matrilineal in character, which distinguishes them from other societies of the region. While the language of the Garos, who call themselves Achik, belongs to the Bodo group of the Tibeto-Burman family, the Khasis and the Jaintias speak languages that belong to the Monkhmer family of Austric affiliation.

Christianity has made considerable impact on the major tribes of Meghalaya, particularly among the Garos and Khasis. There are, however, some sections among them who still follow the traditional religions. The non-Christian Garos call themselves Songsarik. The Jaintias had once come very close to Hinduism, particularly of the Sakti cult.

(vi) Nagaland

Till 1963 Naga Hills formed a district of Assam. It was made into the state of Nagaland in that year. It is a land of rugged hills with small plains tracts, the total area being 16,579 square kilometres. The state is bounded by Assam in the north and north-west, Manipur in the south, Arunachal Pradesh in the north-east, and Burma in the east. The population according to the 1991 Census is 1,215,573.

The bulk of the inhabitants of Nagaland are known as Nagas who are believed to be among the earliest migrants from south-east Asia to North-East India across the Assam plains.

There are more than twenty Naga tribes and sub-tribes, the more well-known among them being the Angamis, the Aos, the Semas, the Lhotas, the Konyaks, the Chakesangs, the Sangtams, the Changs, the Yimchangers, the Zeliangs and the Rengmas. All of them speak different dialects unintelligible to one another. For mutual communication they use a kind of pidgin Assamese which has been named as Nagamese—i.e., Assamese as adopted by the Nagas. Incidentally, contacts with the people of the plains have been regular and abiding.

Sturdy and virile, the Nagas have been inveterate lovers of freedom. Inter-clan and inter-village feuds had been very common in the past and head-hunting was once very much a part of the Naga way of life. Much of the Naga character of independence and alertness had been built up through the institution of the *morungs* or bachelors' dormitories.

Today, the majority of the Nagas have adopted Christianity. Along with it, rapid spread of western education and the impact of modern western standards have made deep inroads into traditional Naga beliefs and customs. However, the Nagas are a tradition-loving people, and a more or less distinctive Naga way of life is still being maintained.

(vii) Mizoram

With an area of 21,081 square kilometres Mizoram, once a district of Assam, was made into a Union Territory in 1972 and attained full statehood in February, 1987. Although its size is bigger than those of Manipur and Tripura, its population is smaller— 686,217— according to the 1991 Census.

The term Mizo, which means highlander, refers to a composite group of allied tribes. These tribes started moving into their present abode in India from the Chin hill tracts of Burma towards the beginning of the 18th century. The Lushais, the most dominant group among them, were the first to arrive. Other groups that followed the Lushai migration comprised the Hmars, the Pawis, the Raltes, the Paites, and the Thadous, etc. The Lakhers came somewhat later, and the Chakmas were the last to enter from the Chittagong tract. Initially each tribe or clan was eager to maintain its distinctive identity in respect of dialect, religious beliefs and social customs. But subsequently a process of integration and assimilation came into play, and there has now developed among them a common identity as Mizos. Although some of the major sub-tribes have retained their separate dialects within themselves, the minor ones have given up theirs in favour of the Lushai dialect called Dulien. The Lushai hegemony has been accepted in other socio-cultural fronts as well.

The Mizos are a sturdy people. Their traditional society and culture have been characterised by certain distinctive features:

- a. There was little distinction between high and low. Although the chief had full political authority over his subjects, in social life he was as much a commoner as others. The land belonged to the community, not to individuals; and the crop was shared.
- b. There was an elaborate code of chivalry called *plawanghmaina*, according to which one's conduct was to be led by consideration for others and the spirit of mutual help.
- c. *Zawlbuks* or bachelors' dormitories constituted a most vital institution in the society. In the *zawlbuks* adolescent boys not only slept but also got trained in discipline and service to the community.
- d. An inherent spirit of self-help was nurtured.

Widespread acceptance of Christianity and a high percentage of literacy have caused the Mizo society to move pretty fast along the path of modernity. But there are many indications to show that they are also not in favour of fully giving up traditional ways.

III. THE DISTINCTIVE CHARACTER OF THE SOCIO-CULTURAL MILIEU OF NORTH-EAST INDIA

An apprisement of the role of the Mongoloid peoples in the development of the composite Hindu or Indian culture, the peculiar line of development of this culture in its expansion in North-Eastern and Eastern India through Mongoloid contact or participation— should be looked upon as an important line of enquiry tracing the history of Indian civilization.¹

North-East India has been, and still remains, the traditional homeland of the Indo-Mongoloid population of India. But neither the region nor the contribution of its people to the culture and civilisation of India has received adequate notice, much less appreciation. Rather it is not unusual to hear it suggested, both overtly and covertly, at different times and in different contexts, that the north-eastern region is removed from the Indian mainstream. If we leave aside the political implications of such

suggestions (which, when applied indiscriminately to the people of this region at large, is open to serious challenge), and confine ourselves to the socio-cultural ones, we might as well agree that they somehow reflect shades of historical and contemporary reality. The north-eastern region does have a special character of its own: the socio-cultural milieu of this region holds up in the present day, as it has done in the past, a picture that somehow distinguishes it from the rest of India. As such, this special character cannot be understood, much less assessed, in terms of the commonly accepted standards of what is believed to constitute the Indian mainstream.

What we want to suggest is that the socio-cultural pattern of the north-eastern region should be studied in a frame of reference which is specific for this region and which, although not being in full conformity with the all-India frame of reference, need not be considered un-Indian or even less Indian than the other one. This is true as much of the general character of the population of the region as of the social and cultural traditions which include the folklore material. There is so much here that is obviously of all-India affiliation and perhaps so much more that is peculiarly North-East Indian.

One of the outstanding peculiarities is the fact that the process of assimilation and absorption of tribal communities into the Hindu fold, which had stopped working in other parts of India quite some time ago, has been operative in this region till comparatively recent times and cannot be said to have completely ceased to work even today.²

Another significant fact is that almost the entire tribal population of the region and a very sizeable proportion of the population absorbed into the non-tribal society through Sanskritization (or otherwise detribalized) are drawn from the Indo-Mongoloid or Kirāta stock, making for a kind of homogeneity in the midst of the apparent heterogeneity. True, the Kirātas have been relatively late arrivals in the Indian scene— some hordes coming in the recent centuries (although the earliest arrivals date back to the Vedic times); but that cannot mean that they have been cut off from the main currents of Indian history and culture. Concentrated in the eastern and particularly the north-eastern peripheries of the sub-continent, they have participated in the

course of Indian history and contributed to the evolution of Indian culture in no small measure.³

While the Hindu-Aryan element is fairly strong in certain sectors and traces of the Austric and Dravidian element linger on from a remoter past, the dominant presence of the Indo-Mongoloid element in the culture of the north-eastern region is a reality that cannot be brushed aside easily.

From the cultural point of view, the population of this region could be divided into three categories:

- 1) Those tribal communities living in the rather distant hills, more or less isolated and free from the impact of 'Sanskritic' or other 'organised' cultures (except in the case of tribes with Buddhistic connections).
- 2) Those tribal groups, both in the hills and the plains, who have retained their tribal group identity but who have been acculturated in various degrees as a result of living in close proximity or contact with the 'non-tribal' Sanskritized majority, or through the impact of Buddhism or Christianity or Islam.
- 3) Those societies which are more or less fully Sanskritized, where the population is almost wholly (as in case of the Meiteis) or substantially (as in the case of the Assamese) made up of erstwhile Indo-Mongoloid stocks. Local Muslims of this region, although not Sanskritized from the religious point of view, are culturally a part of this milieu.

In the process of Sanskritization of the latest category of the population two agencies have been at work: the Hindu religion and an Indo-Aryan language (chiefly Assamese, and to a lesser degree, Bengali). While in the case of Assamese society both the Hindu religion and the Assamese language have worked simultaneously, in the case of the Meiteis it is almost entirely the religion that has been responsible for this transformation, their language continuing to be of the Kuki-Chin group of the Tibeto-Burman family. The Bishnupriyas stand midway between the two: religion-wise they are Sanskritized and at the same time their language contains elements both of the Indo-Aryan Kamrupi and Kuki-Chin Meitei.

Even the Sanskritized Hindu communities of this region retain elements which according to orthodox standards are patently tribal. For example, the caste system in the Assamese society is flexible and fairly liberal. While Brahmins (and one or two other castes) do occupy a higher position in the society, they do not dominate the scene. All non-Brahmins are lumped together as *sudirs* (Shudras) among whom there is considerable inter-caste mobility; and there are practically no untouchables. Castes are not profession-oriented and caste-based disabilities are few. In the Meitei society also there are just two broad caste divisions—the Brahmins and the Ksahtriyas; and Brahmins can take non-Brahmin brides and vice versa. Although there are trades and professions traditionally practised by particular family groups, such functional specialisation is not integral to the caste system. In both the societies, far from being a degrading occupation, weaving is a most honoured and desired skill for women of all categories, unlike in any other part of India. Similarly in the matter of food: not to speak of non-Brahmins and non-Vaishnavas, even the purest Assamese Brahmin has no scruples about eating both fish and meat, while the Meitei Brahmin would restrict himself to fish.

In the field of religion, side by side with the Brahminical gods and goddesses of pan-Indian affiliation, hosts of pre-Brahminic deities continue to receive veneration and propitiation. While in the Assamese society belief in, and worship of, such deities are more or less confined to the semi-Sanskritized peripheral communities, in the Meitei society Sanamahi, Pakhangba and a very big number of other *lāis* (gods) are still intimately associated with the Sanskritized core—the best evidence being provided by the famous Lāi-Hārāoba festival. Non-Brahmin priests and spiritual mediums (*deodhā* and *deodhani* in Assamese and *māiba*, and *māibi* in Manipuri) and their shamanistic dances and other activities are met with in both the Assamese and Manipuri societies.

Again, although Vaishnavism has deeply touched both the societies, Saktism and more particularly Saivism continue to prevail in different forms. Apart from Bathou-Brai and Mouthansri of the Bodos, Gira-Girasi of the Deuris, Pha-Mahadeo and his consort of the Tiwas, and so on, which are original tribal versions of Siva-Parvati, the influence of Siva-Parvati on the Assamese society

is evidenced by the big number of Siva temples and the innumerable Burā-Buri shrines scattered all over rural Assam, whereas in the Manipuri society it is discernible through such myths and legends as the story of Nongpokningthou-Panthoibi and that of the origin of the Rāsa dance.⁴

Thus Hinduism has assumed in this region some peculiar features through the processes of syncretism.

The process of "universalisation" and to a certain extent that of "parochialisation" have also been at work. What is important is that such processes are still operating, however imperceptibly, in certain fields. It may be pointed out that in this region even Islam and Christianity have taken characters which have local flavours.

In the field of material culture— which in folkloristic parlance is "physical folklife"⁵— there are certain distinctive peculiarities. Much of the traditional pattern of life in the hills centre round jhuming or shifting cultivation which at best makes for a bare subsistence economy, gradually giving over to settled cultivation in the plains, even where the indigenous economy is hardly above subsistence level, professionalism and trademindedness not being the strong points of the local population. Weaving of exquisitely coloured and designed textiles by the womenfolk in their indigenous looms is a distinctive feature common to the lives of all the communities of the region, including the "Sanskritized". What is more, even the dress worn by the women has a basic similarity— the Assamese *mekhelā*, the Manipuri *phānek*, the Karbi *pini*, the Bodo *dakhnā*, the Rabha *ruphān*, the Mising *gāseng*, the Adi *gāle*, the Mizo *puān*, and so on, are practically variations of the same basic format.

All this— and many other traits— make the distinction between the tribal and the non-tribal lose much of its relevance in the context of the socio-cultural milieu of the north-eastern region.⁶ And from the midst of the seemingly incompatible diversities there emerges a pattern that is characterised by a certain "commonness" and "togetherness"

It is against this background of commonness and togetherness in the midst of variations and distances that we have to study the folklore material of the north-eastern region— without, of

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course, losing sight of the broader of all-India backdrop. Although many of the items cited above themselves constitute folklore material highlighting the common perspective for the north-eastern region, we shall take some random examples from verbal folklore items to illustrate the points we have made above.

A big number of tales and other narratives available among the different communities in this region are found to have identical types and motifs. The tiger being scared by an imaginary dreadful thing (*Dighal-thengiyā* in Assamese and *Tāptā* in Manipuri), the old man and the old woman being cheated by the cunning animal (the jackal in Assamese and a number of tribal versions and the monkey in the Manipuri version), the simpleton who is plotted against by jealous relatives and who successfully turns the table against them (Assamese, Karbi, Naga and other versions), the step-mother's ill-treatment of the step-children and the ultimate prevalence of justice (Assamese, Manipuri and various tribal versions) are just a few cases in point.⁷

It is true that the existence of tales and other narratives with identical types and motifs even among widely separated communities is the rule rather than the exception. However, certain cases of the appearance of some particular types in a few communities of this very region to the exclusion of others calls for some special attention. For example, the story of *Harata Kuwar*⁸ of the Karbis has an almost exact parallel among the Bodos (*Ālsiyā Kowar*)⁹, but the type has not been noticed elsewhere. Again, the story of the brother's incestuous infatuation with his sister has been found in three communities—the Bodos (*Rāonā Rāoni*)¹⁰, the Misings (*Bijuli Āru Dherekani*)¹¹, and the Bishnupriya (the story of Pani and her brother). The Bishnupriya tale starts with the same motif as the Mising tale but ends in a different note. Incidentally, a Mising mythical story about how the sky, once very low, happened to go high up being hit by a rice-pounding flail¹² has an exact parallel amongst the Bishnupriyas while the Assamese version has it that a broom, and not a flail, was used.

Speaking of myths, it may be pointed out that there is a remarkable similarity in the patterns of stories about the creation of the world as obtaining among the various groups of the region, both tribal and "unofficial" Hindu: the world arising from a

primeval ocean, the world coming from a great personage or a tree, the world directly created by a heavenly being, creation coming out of a cosmic egg and earth and sky being born of a universal mother, etc. As has been brilliantly brought out by Verrier Elwin, "such traditions can be paralleled in both the classical and the tribal literature in India".¹³

But apart from such examples of "commonness", what is interesting is that many myths and legends exemplify the idea of "togetherness" that we spoke of earlier. Quite a number of tribal myths about the creation of man are concerned not only with the coming of the first progenitors of the respective communities but of those of neighbouring communities as well, not excluding the "non-tribals" in the plains. For example, a Karbi myth speaks of the eggs laid by the mythical bird *wo plakpi*, out of which come the first men— a Naga (Naka), a Kachari (Ramsa), a Khasi (Chomang), an Assamese (Aham) and of course a Karbi. There is a Bugun (Khowa) creation myth in which a Bugun marries a girl from the Assam plains.¹⁴ In a Dhammai (Miji) tale one of their earliest progenitors becomes the Raja of Assam.¹⁵ A Taraon (Digaru) Mishmi tale speaks of how the first human children were carried by water to the plains and how all others except the oldest son remained in the plains to become the Assamese.¹⁶ There is a Singpho tale about how the different races including the Assamese came down by ladders made of different materials.¹⁷ The Hrussos have a similar but more elaborate story.¹⁸ According to one Wancho tale: "At first there were no different clans or tribes. Then at that time a great flood poured over the hills of Assam and levelled some of them and the land became flat. Since there was not enough water in the hills, some of the children of the Wanchos went down to the plains and became the Assamese."¹⁹ The Taraon Mishmis have a tale about the first human boy who got from the tusk of his elephant father his wife and also many soldiers from whom came the Assamese, the Akas, the Daflas, the Miris and the Mikirs.²⁰

A story very widely distributed among the tribes of this region "attempts to explain how it is that the tribes are illiterate, while the plains people, though not such talkers, can read and write." According to this story, all knowledge was at first written on

animal skins which were distributed among all communities. While the plainsmen preserved their skins and so the knowledge of reading and writing, the hungry tribesmen boiled and ate their skins resulting in their illiteracy.²¹ There are also various traditions current among the different tribes of Manipur about the common origin of, or close connections between, the tribals of the hills and the non-tribals of the valley.²²

Some myths, legends and tales certainly point to the awareness of the tribal people of the region about the "togetherness" we have been talking about.

There are also many tales which reflect on the 'peculiar' socio-cultural standards of the Sanskritized people.

For example, in many Assamese tales (and folk-songs) the Brahmin is the butt of ridicule, showing that his position is not all that sacrosanct. In one such tale the Brahmin and his low-caste (often a tribal) attendant sit for their meals in the same room, only a little apart. Piqued at being given only one fish while the Brahmin has the rest of the score of the fishes, the attendant throws the one fish of his lot to the Brahmin's dish. His food thus defiled, the Brahmin leaves everything and the attendant has a hearty meal.²³ There are many other specimens in which the attendant scores over his Brahmin master. In one such story the attendant even marries the daughter of the Brahmin's brother.²⁴ Apart from providing humour, such tales also highlight the fact of the absence of caste-ridden rigidity and the looseness of food taboos here. It can be said that even the famous Sorarel story of the Manipuris, in which the human wife of god Sorarel comes down to her father's house and partakes of forbidden food and drink²⁵, represents a sense of loss of a community with a tradition of meat-eating and liquor-drinking passing into a stage where the consumption of such food and drink is prohibited. A Bishnupriya tale which speaks of the daughter of a non-tribal family being married to a Kuki man and proving to be a better devotee of God than the father himself despite the 'impure' ways seems to contain a tacit admission of the fallacy of non-tribal superiority.

There are other tales in which the physical folk-life of the people is faithfully represented. Jhuming is central to many of them. Many others are connected with weaving. There are many

etiological tales in which the bright plumage of birds is explained in terms of brightly coloured textiles. For example, a beautiful tale current among the Garos,²⁶ the Rabhas,²⁷ and the Bodos²⁸ tells how the peacock and the peahen got their colourful plumage. The Tangkhuls have a tradition involving the cicada²⁸.

A very interesting example of narratives reflecting the physical folk-life of the region is provided by the *Sābin Ālun*, the Karbi version of the *Ramayana*. In this folk epic king Janaka works in his jhum farm; Sita carries rice and rice-beer to him in a basket slung across her head; guests are served betel-nut and rice-beer; being a good weaver, Sita wants the golden deer killed as its skin would make a good seat while weaving; and Rama dries the deer meat for future consumption, and so on.³⁰

Further, the Misings have tales recounting their descent into the valley from their original home in the Adi country.³¹ Karbis have vivid legends about their heroine Rangpharpi and hero Thong Nokbe highlighting their traumatic experiences under the Kacharis and the Khasis respectively. One song contains a fervent appeal to Karbis to rise against the Ahoms— representing their frantic reaction about the earliest encounter with that mighty power.³² There are also Naga legends centering round hills-plains relations.³³

True, such material makes up only folk history or ethno-history and cannot be accepted as history proper; but they can certainly supply useful raw ingredients and provide clues to missing links.

There is another class of legends— drawing heavily from the epics and the Puranas— with the instrumentality of which Sanskritized and semi-Sanskritized groups have sought to establish their linkage either with pure Aryan lineage or with one or more Hindu gods or goddesses. One of the best examples of such a legend is linked with the Meitei tradition that they are related to Babhrubahana born through the union of the *Mahabharata* hero Arjuna with Chitrangada, a princess of their land. The Kacharis claim their descent from Bhima through Ghatotkacha who is believed to have been the former's son through his Kirata wife Hidimba. Then there is the tradition prevailing in Assam that the Mishmis are the same people whose princess Rukmini was in the remote past married by Krishna himself. The Rajbanshi-Koch people consider themselves to be progenies of

“pure Kshatriyas” who had “lost their caste” to Mech (Bodo) women while hiding themselves from the wrath of Parashurama. Examples could be multiplied. The stories linking non-Hindu kings or royal lines directly with particular gods of the Hindu pantheon and those identifying local deities with Hindu gods and goddesses are of a piece. They are as much the result of the eagerness of newly Sanskritized groups to be ranked high in the Hindu-Aryan hierarchy as the product of the ingenuity of the Brahmin priests³⁴. All these clearly have a common pattern.

This is the overall socio-cultural background against which we have to view the folklore material of the north-eastern region. It is in this broader cultural context that the various folklore material of the region— even individual items belonging to particular groups— can be seen in their proper perspective. As such, the approach in the study of such material should be an integrated one in keeping with the “special character” of the region.