



**TRIBAL  
LITERATURE  
OF  
NORTH-EAST  
INDIA**

EDITED BY  
BADAPLIN WAR  
DEPARTMENT OF KHASI  
NORTH-EASTERN HILL UNIVERSITY  
SHILLONG  
2009

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## SETTING IT APART: THE NEPALI ORAL TRADITION

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From the beginning of history, human life and leadership have been centred on stories - the stories of our past, who we are today, with inferences on what or who we may yet become. Hence, any attempt at entering the subject of Nepali literature, and implicitly its culture, as part of the literary scene of North-East India must take into account the historico-political fact that it is after the Anglo-Gurkha Treaty of Saguali in 1816, that the Nepali people, specifically that of the North-East India, and their literature have become a part of the great Indian literary scene. Hence, the oral tradition of the Nepalis of North Bengal, Sikkim i.e., the North-East India, stems from a common root in the culture of Nepal. Hence, understandably, the corpus is vast, as it not only reflects the oral tradition that goes beyond recorded time, but includes also specific oral traditions evolving from the distinct religio-cultural practices of various ethnic groups that comprise the composite Nepali culture.

**The distinctive features of some branches of Nepali oral tradition: *Lokgatha*** - It is accepted practice amongst Nepali folklorists, however, to group the oral tradition in terms of either their subject or form. Thus, *Lokgatha* are legends and stories, *sung* as ballads, of historical personages, heroes and kings and also includes tales from religious epics like the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and sometimes of ordinary mortals facing extraordinary human conditions. Bravery,

the trait that, like a badge of honour, has been conferred on the community by the world at large, is unquestionably sown and nourished by innumerable ballads that sing of battles and victories, *Veergathas*, that include even comparatively recent subjects as the warrior Balabhadra's filial devotion, nourished by ballads, for example, of Sravankumar, the pain of separation of householders forced by economic hardship to seek livelihood outside their village, state or nation, are *lokgathas*, for example, that have shaped the perspective, moral and values of an entire race.

A feature that has helped keep alive the ballads through the centuries is not only, as with all verse sung, traceable to the rhythm and rhyme that are mnemonic aids, but also to the fact that the community has a **separate caste, gyaienay**, of wandering minstrels who pass the oral tradition of *lokgathas* from father to son and spread the stories far and wide as they roam with their *sarangis*, even today, through villages, giving life and longevity to their repertoire. They sing for their livelihood and often a village or a group may even today solicit their participation in celebrations and festivities.

#### *Lokgeets* -

*Lokgeets*, or folk songs, are often **tribe or caste-specific**. Hence, this group comprises such a wide variety of folk songs sung during various agricultural, domestic, religious and cultural occasions like **diwali, bhai tikka, teej, binayh** (marriage), **nauran** (naming ceremony) etc. that any discussion of it requires much more time and space to do justice. However, chief amongst the important types that cut across more ethnic groups than others is the sub-group of devotional songs, *bhajans*, sung to accompaniment of the *ektara*, or *duitara* the traditional (literally, 'one-stringed' or 'two-stringed') instruments almost exclusively used for religious singing at home or in public.

#### *Balgeet* -

*Balgeet* and *Nininanee geet* are children's songs: songs that children hear from infancy and songs adults sing to children. These songs generally are short ditties, often using nonsensical words in between for rhythm, rhyme and lightness of mood. Teaching,

entertaining, play and evoking smiles and laughter are the basic aims of these songs. *Lohris* are cradle songs, lullabies sung to the flow of the melody to rock children to sleep in their small baskets or *kokro*, or hanging cloth cradles.

A unique musical practice is the *Sareli*. Here a group of young men and women from one village is invited to stay from one festival to the next (usually the tenth day of *Dashai* to the *bhai tikka*) by another village to participate in competitions and performances there. *Sareli* then not only brings festivity to a fever pitch of competitiveness but also generates greater interaction between villages and must often prove a fertile ground for romantic attachments, or carrying of information about eligible men and women for marriages to be arranged.

But the most interesting of the music-based oral traditions is the *Dhohorie* or *Joharie*. This is a musical debate between male and female singers. It can be staged as a performance to be watched by the village, it can form a part of marriage festivities (traditional Nepali marriage lasts three days, but sometimes five), it can be incorporated into any social or cultural celebration. The participant, generally young men and women, seat themselves in two groups, gender-wise. Though a leader is chosen by each group, a few may legitimately intervene to help the leader. The subject is always love, and the tone and mood playful. Wit is the essential feature. The attitude adopted by the leader of the male group is of a man desperately in love with a beautiful woman who is hard to woo. He uses arguments, flattery, promises and wit to woo her while the leader of the female group adamantly refuses to thaw and uses counter arguments to show the flaws in his promises. The banter between them is lively, and most significantly, it is impromptu. Each argument is sung in stanzas of four lines, with the main argument or punch line coming in the last one. The group echoes its leader's statement in a vociferous chorus. Simply accompanied with a 'madal' or small drum, the Dohorie continues until a definitive winner emerges. Sometimes, it is said the Dohorie goes into days. Legends and stories about Dohorie are numerous: like of one that lasted twelve days, or several where the winner has won his competitor as his wife. Humour and wit make this love banter a much-loved folk

tradition that is vibrantly alive and practised in the community even today.

### *Lokkatha-*

Lokkatha are Folktales. They began as an oral tradition, passed from one generation to the next, and for centuries children have been hearing these stories told around campfires and cook stoves. Part of their appeal lies in the incorporation of almost ritualistic format reminiscent of the folk and fairytales in English. Comparable to the “once upon a time...” start and “they lived happily after” conclusion, Nepali *Lokkathas* must begin with the phrase “...ekadesh ma...” meaning “in a certain place...” and conclude with the mandatory entry of the narrator and the listeners into the narrative. The narrator completes the story, states it as concluded, thanks his listeners and then sends the tale back to the heavenly abode from where his narrative skill and their listening powers had brought down for the occasion. Together they send it back to remain until called for next time...

*Sunnay lai sun ko mala  
Bhannay lai Phool ko mala  
Yo katha baikuntha jala  
Pheri bhannay bela ma  
Thato Thatai ai jala*

*(For the listeners, garlands of gold;  
For the story-teller, a garland of flowers.  
Now may this tale be sent back to heaven,  
To return post-haste and refreshed.  
The next time it be retold)*

The language of these stories tends to be accessible; plots move quickly; events unfold in predictable patterns and characters fit into familiar roles. Often humour, pathos and magical awe create a strong impact on the listeners and work as mnemonic aids that help guarantee its survival through generations of retelling. Another important feature that help their survival is their ability to evoke a strong sense of immediacy by typically featuring “ordinary” people and everyday life, like farmers, woodsmen, villagers, orphans, childless

couples and maids, placed in circumstances that naturally create space for an element of wish fulfilment, often realised through magical elements as in folktales the world over.

Thus, they often typically coalesce the ordinariness of the characters and their circumstances with the unexpected and the magical by featuring alongside talking animals, fairies, repetition of language and events, magical events, wish fulfilment, fast moving plot, and symbolism. Thus, *Gomati* is a story that weaves an ordinary human pain of childlessness into the world of magic by creating a beautiful daughter for a childless couple through investing magic into a lump of cow dung.

*Nindra Maya*, a popular folk tale of an orphan’s journey from poverty to princedom, is based on the same basic enduring appeal of wish-fulfilment that one finds in Cinderella. Though the stories are simple, they offer rich and complex cultural meaning. Folktales and fairy tales offer the new, young generation a window into their culture’s history, geography, and the values of their society. These folktales are used often to teach life lessons or reinforce ethical behaviours. They offer an excellent genre for building literary and critical thinking.

But the distinctive genre amongst *Lokkatha* in Nepali oral tradition is the Ghost story or *Dantyakatha*. The stories of this type assume that man and ghost are just two very natural players of this world, the seen and the unseen aspects of human life, and hence our very natural and fairly numerous, though frightening, neighbours. Narrating ghost stories has been amongst the favourite after-dinner past times in homes and village groups. But there is, along with the thrill, awe and fear generated a sense of familiarity and ease too: the ghosts are identifiable types, the listeners know how and what to do to escape a dire end. The Nepali ghosts are subdivided into various categories and the lore is at hand to help deal with each type. The *Rakay bhoot* carries fire, his arms are always aflame. He haunts at the river’s edge. But no listener is scared of him, because the only harm he can do a living person is to give him high, shivering fever, but that can be cured through the intercession of the Dhami or Jhakri, the local witch-doctor. The headless ghost is *Murkutta*. He too just can

frighten you, if you are cowardly, to illness or death by his deadly looks, but is otherwise harmless. The *Churail* is far more dangerous and far more attractive. She is the ghost of a young, unmarried woman who has died suddenly, often unnaturally, may even be through suicide. She haunts, frightens, entices young men, kills and turns them into ghosts. She appears on lonely roads at the stroke of midnight. She calls you always from the back. Always one single call. To ward off her designs, you are advised never to look back immediately but to wait for the call to be repeated, preferable thrice. By the third call, one is certain it is a human call. Every night-traveler over lonely roads is advised, therefore, to beware when you are called at night, to carry matches and to show her its light because light frightens her away and her vicious powers are nullified by it, to jingle coins in your pockets, or the ornaments on your feet, or your bangles (traditionally, men too wear some ornaments). The tinkling sound exasperates her and sends her running. *Peechas* is a male ghost who hides behind trees, and follows you surreptitiously. His feet and hands are turned outward, or the other way round. He too can be chased with light.

*Liddhini Mau* is a female ghost with wrinkled, pendulous breasts that she carried crosswise over her shoulders. She is wicked and aims to kill, awaiting her victims in the mountainous regions that she haunts. The way to counter her is simple: run downwards, she cannot follow you as the weight of her breasts drags her to a dead stop.

*Loknatya- Loknatya* is folk drama. While the Nepali *Loknatya* uses both male and female artists, it incorporates the use of music and dance so varied and context-specific that it would be impossible to enumerate them here. The various ethnic groups within the community again have their particular, often celebration-related folk dramas. The *Soreti*, for example is a folk drama of the Gurungs that uses specific kinds of songs and dances. *Mauruni* is the dance form associated with it. Its distinction is that it must have a narrator or *sutradhar* as he is called, as an integral part of the drama. The *sutradhar* is always an old venerable sage.

Although Proverbs or *Ukhan* are a feature of practically all languages, a mention of it is included in this paper for an interesting reason. It is probably not known to those unfamiliar with the oral form of the Nepali language. That no conversation of some length is complete without at least one speaker using a proverb to bolster his point. Nepalis use proverbs copiously. They are innumerable, pithy, based on observations of common everyday life and striking in the wordly wisdom that is expressed so concisely and often with so much wit and humour.

#### *Gaon Khanay Katha-*

A much-loved, and still flourishing oral tradition is the *Gaon Khanay Katha*, literally, 'the village devouring stories'. These are riddles that can be played at the domestic, familial level (between siblings, mother and children: traditionally, the father is a patriarch who may look on indulgently, or help from the sidelines but often will not actively participate in games with his children) or in a larger group like the village. One asks the riddle, in verse. The audience ventures the answer. They may try to answer many times. If they can provide the answer, the winner now gets the chance to ask the next riddle. If the correct answer cannot be offered, the whole system of negotiations comes into play. The audience offers various villages in mock-trade for the correct answer. The quizzer thinks over but may not accept the trade. Then another village, its beauties and worth exaggeratedly extolled, is offered. Should he accept it, he says that he has accepted but will specify what all is accepting. Generally, he says... the dirty dogs of the village, the stinking areas there, the beggars and sick people there, he is gifting back to the audience, but in return for the answer to his riddle he will accept the better parts of the offered village. As the Nepali people are basically fun-loving, and wit is held in great esteem, the quizzer will use this trade to bring about laughter by specifying which areas, houses etc. he accepts or rejects and why. The one with the maximum number of villages in his kitty is declared the winner. A few examples of *Gaon khanay katha*: are

*Khai, khai dai/mo agay jao...kay ho?(Just a moment, brother, let me go first...what is it?)*

*The answer is: a walking stick.*

*Naam cha naari, stree haina/latta cha dhari, jogi haina... kay ho?* (The name is Naari, but isn't a woman, has dark coarse hair, but isn't jogi... what is it?)

The answer is: a coconut ("naariyal")

Many pleasant, fun-filled evenings in the home and in the village owe their debt to the oral tradition of *Gaon Khanay Katha*... a cheap, entertainment past-time that not only bonds the family or the group together, but by providing wit as the heart of the riddles, gives its people the love, appreciation and practice of wit, besides keeping the tradition alive.

Nepali oral tradition thus reflects, while at the same time it nurtures too, the defining values and qualities of the community: bravery is reflected in the subjects of numerous oral practices that have survived and flourished; love of battle has assumed the more socially compatible guise of competitions and test of skill and wit in *sareli, Dhodrie, Gaon Khanay Katha*. Even love is viewed as a frontier that requires the use of skill and wit to conquer. In these very forms of the oral tradition is also the evidence of the fun-loving, humour-driven people that they are. Wit is held in high regard and it is rare to find a Nepali who will not attempt to colour his observations, arguments and narratives with wit, whatever the degree of individual expertise. Generous use of proverbs and idioms help him to achieve a style that is vivid and vigorous: the Nepali ideal of verbal communication. Most importantly, as with all tribal, hill communities, the community, the village, is truly the extended family and the various traditional practices not only mirror this but also nourish and nurture this strong allegiance.

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