Conversation 2: 
Folklore and Identity

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Saikia: In response to the conference in which we have just participated, I think it is essential that we should sit and take up issues that have been raised during the last two days, and engage in a dialogue especially in relation to the region that all of us come from — Northeast India. Let us start with Chandan. He has contributed a lot to Folklore studies. So, what areas do you take up for study in Tezpur?

Sharma: Folklore constitutes a very important component of our department. Our department in Tezpur University is the Department for Cultural Studies. As you know, Cultural Studies is coming up as a kind of inter-disciplinary field, and Folklore itself is emerging as a kind of inter-disciplinary field. Apart from folklore, we also study art, aesthetics, language, performing arts, and literary and other cultural theories — so it really is quite inter-disciplinary.

Kharmawphlang: When did your department start?

Sharma: 1996.

Khiangte: What school are you in?

Sharma: We are in the School of Social Sciences.

Kharmawphlang: It has been a trait of Northeastern Folklore studies that Folklore studies have come to be synonymous with the study of literature in many respects. In Khasi Literature departments, fifty per cent of what they are studying is actually folklore. The same is the case in Assam.

Khiangte: In my department also — the Department of Mizo — we have the category of folk literature. We call it folklore literature. Of course we deal with all folklore matters. This is a compulsory course. We trace right from the beginning of oral cultures to when writing appears.

Sharma: From what I have seen in this conference, this is not something that is unique to the Northeast. It seems that many Folklore scholars are based in Literature departments.

Saikia: Also Sociology. And I am from History. People from many disciplines are coming and working in the field of Folklore.

Kharmawphlang: One feature of Folklore studies is that until very recently our job has mainly been the collection and compilation of data. There has not been very much analytical, scientific, or theoretical analysis of the materials. I think now some changes are taking place. People are getting trained, they are getting exposed. Scholars are travelling, they are reading, they have access to the Internet. So, some very promising people are coming up to take up this job of taking Folklore as a very serious discipline.

Khiangte: In that sense I feel that the present conference is very important. At least we can meet all these popular folklorists, experts in their fields.

Saikia: Personally, I am open to all kinds of disciplines. The question is, “How can folklore help us to understand ways to improve society?” Folklore provides a large landscape. It provides a landscape of material located in different forms, and awareness of folklore can help scholars to understand any subject in the Humanities in a much more dynamic way. For example, I’m writing about the social journey of a legend over the last five hundred years. The different components of folklore are helping me to understand the social history of Assam.

A problem in the Northeast is that most of the folklorists are primarily antiquarianists. They are trying to collect. There are other groups also, who are on theoretical platforms. I think there should be a better mixture of these groups. As has been mentioned, most of the theoretical formulations that have been created over the
Sharma: the Northeast in a much more vibrant way than it does understand this process? I think this issue appears in becoming an important weapon for the middle class, role in the recent politics of Northeastern India. Folklore ignore: Folklore practices have been given an important outside of the pan-Indian folkloric world. For example, Saikia: All of the tribal societies have their own epistemologies about these theoretical questions, and I think we should be more inward looking. Also, we need more rigorous academic training to understand the subject. In the Northeast region some time back there was a seminar in Gauhati University’s Folklore Department: “Folklore and Oral History.” As a practicing historian, I had a serious problem. Some scholars were considering oral tales as history.

Khiangete: Oral traditions do have some history in them.

Saikia: Yes, but sometimes there is a gap between the tales and the history. We have to develop techniques in order to use oral traditions to understand our society better.

Sharma: And for the socialization of our people. I think Mr. Desmond also should share some information. He is from Meghalaya. Your experience please.

Kharmawphlang: In Shillong state, there are splendid examples of how myth and legend are combined to create history. In our undated myths, the gods, goddesses, and other supernatural beings from that particular discourse have percolated down to a legend which has no supernatural beings, but rather only human beings. And then you have written history.

Saikia: We need to collectively develop some kind of theoretical frameworks to understand the Northeastern genres, including those that occur in everyday life. There is a lot of folklore in people’s everyday lives.

Kharmawphlang: I’ve never come across any scholars talking about rice myths. In Khasi folklore, rice myths constitute a very important part of the discourse. [Please see the book review on page 26 of this newsletter.]

Saikia: In fact, the folk-world of the Northeast is largely outside of the pan-Indian folkloric world. For example, a Bharata Katha has not touched Assamese society. I don’t think we have Bharata Katha to a large extent.

There is another important point that we should not ignore: Folklore practices have been given an important role in the recent politics of Northeastern India. Folklore is becoming an important weapon for the middle class, as well for other segments of society. How do we understand this process? I think this issue appears in the Northeast in a much more vibrant way than it does in most other parts of the country.

Sharma: Many people in adversity are using folklore in terms of their origins, the past.

Kharmawphlang: Nagas are using Christianity. Khasis are calling themselves Hymnico Trep, which means, seven huts, which is referring to the past. This is an attempt to unify all of the tribes and sub-tribes that fall under the umbrella of Khasis.

Kharmawphlang: Nagas have different ways of imagining themselves, because of their heterogeneous character. Nagas are dispersed over a large area. But Khasis are more homogenous, more cohesive, and it is easy for them to imagine a kind of unity. And now the Government is also using folklore. And those protesting against Government policies are also using it, in a different way. Folklore was important for the 1857 rebels, and again during the freedom struggle. And the British missionaries, that is, the administrators, they had their own uses of folklore. Hitler also used folklore. But as folklorists, we have the responsibility just to observe it.

Sharma: I’ve not seen much political use of folklore in Assam, apart from the Boro case perhaps. I think that the insurgents may also be using folklore for propagating their goals.

Saikia: In this way the gamocha [a traditional cloth] has become a symbol of the Assamese society.

Sharma: No, I am referring to the militants.

Kharmawphlang: A friend of mine was taken from his home by an insurgency group, taken to a camp of insurgents. They asked him to stay there for two weeks to talk about folklore of the Khasis in order to inspire some sort of unity among the cadres.

Sharma: In Meghalaya also folklore is being used. And in Assam. The symbols are being used. Bodos are doing it, but not the militant groups. Bodo middle-class leaders are very consciously involved in the construction of their own community identity. Elements are there in their folk tradition, and they trying to build up a new identity for themselves. People have different ways of imagining themselves as communities.

Saikia: The Karbis are also doing that. They are organising folk festivals that become a space for the assertion of their rights and authority.

Kharmawphlang: I’ve been to one of the Karbis Association conferences, at Taralanshu. They also are consciously making use of folklore. They are giving their own interpretations, and they are developing new modes of expression, which is important.

Sharma: All kinds of methods are being used to emphasize particular points and ideologies. For example, we see the legend about Krishna from Dwarka marrying Rukmini from Sadiya. And Krishna’s grandson, Anirudha, marrying Usha from Tezpur. You see, Assam is primordial. These legends attempt to emphasize the link with mainland India.
Saikia: I think the pan-India idea began in the mid-19th century, with the advent of modern scholarship. They were trying to manipulate the entire local knowledge and connect it to their vision of a pan-Indian landscape. It is quite interesting.

Sharma: These materials are being used to try to authenticate institutions and prove versions of history. “This has happened, so this is a fact!”

Saikia: I think that we need a platform encompassing the entire Northeastern region in regard to all of this. Perhaps a journal. Maybe we can have an annual meeting where scholars of the Northeast can interact.

Khiangte: Folklore is very deep-rooted in our states, and people are very interested in folk literature and in the other arts also. Whenever we have literature conferences, they are busy with their dances and all kinds of expressive forms. I support the idea of having a forum in the Northeast region. We don’t have any seminars particularly for discussion of folklore, and we should. Refresher courses and awareness campaigns are also needed in my state.

Khiangte: Well, to begin with, I suggest that whenever one of us has a programme that relates to folklore — whenever some paper is going to be presented — we can invite each other and other scholars who are interested in Folklore studies. In this way, we can build up a region-wide discussion.

Sharma: Yes, whenever we organize an event, we should send invitations to all. That is the way we should function.

Conversation 3:
Folklore and Ideology

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Bhattacharjee: We have assembled to discuss the Folklore as Discourse conference. Since the middle of the 20th Century, numerous ways to understand discourse, and the role of discourse in society, have been developed. I believe Folklore as a field of study might approach discourse in a fundamentally different way than other disciplines, and I am interested to know your opinion about this.

Bhadhuri: I agree! The fundamental difference arises from the fact that folklore activity initiates primarily from within the masses, and this affects all of the work done in Folklore scholarship. At the same time, it is true that, to my knowledge, all academic theories of discourse, including those used in the field of Folklore, are parts of an ideological apparatus that has been developed mostly by the members of elite classes. But now we are in the post-Gramcian, post-Althusserian, post-Saussurean Age. We must seek to understand what all of these great scholars — not to mention Foucault and Derrida — had to say about discourse, but for us — as Indians and as Folklore scholars — this should be just the starting point.