Report: national seminar on folklore and oral history

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A three day National Seminar on Folklore and Oral History was organised by the Folklore Research Department, Gauhati University, in collaboration with Programme of Folklore Research and Archive (PROFRA), North Eastern Hill University, the North Eastern Archival Centre for Traditional Art and Folklore (NEACTAF), Tezpur University and the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysore from the 21-23 May, 2001. The primary aim of the seminar was to address various theoretical and empirical issues relevant for writing and rewriting history of the communities of the region. In the historical accounts of the most of the societies of North-East, it is noticed that recorded evidence is limited and the history of the people has been approached from the perspectives of colonial and shastric paradigms. However, the people of the region have retained largely the oral discourse as the basic source of recounting their histories and the oral discourse is a veritable treasure trove of data. For interpreting and decoding these data, folkloristic approaches may prove useful. The message of oral tradition cannot be literally decoded. It is here that folklore and history can actively collaborate.

Inaugurated by the Vice-Chancellor of the Gauhati University, H.L. Duorah, Birendranath Datta outlined the key areas and approaches for oral history for the region in his presidential address. The opening presentation of the first session was by J.L. Dawar of Arunachal University, who in his paper, ‘Folklore, Oral History and Construction of tribal Identity in Arunachal’, attempted to reconstruct the identity formation among the Tani group of tribes of central Arunachal Pradesh by using the oral data of personal reminiscences, which is oral evidence specific to the life experiences of the informant. According to him, most professional historians have been generally sceptical about the value of oral sources in reconstructing the past, labouring under the hegemony of the Rankean model of academic precision and strictly archive based history. However, he believes that oral history is capable of tackling major historical and political questions in a distinctive way, which will help in retrieving the voices of the voiceless and to construct the history of a people whose views and values are disenfranchised by ‘history from above’. In the second paper of the session Native American Autobiography: Historicising the First Person Oral Narrative, I proposed that Native American Autobiography can serve as an interesting heuristic model for students of history in the North-East. I examined the Native Autobiography genre as distinct and different from the general understanding of the term autobiography, focussing on how it is generated by the interaction of a post-colonial western episteme and a pre-lettered native oral discourse. Examining the different types of native autobiographies, the paper pointed out how the genre can be helpful in the construction of an oral history of a disinterested and marginalized populace that holds a counterpoise to the dated and factual account of the historical discourse of the disinheritors.

The second session of the day had four papers. The focal area of the session was on the relevance of ballads as an oral source for constructing alternative history. Helen Giri of NEHU in her paper ‘Folklore and Historical Research: Case Study of Shyllong Native State’, examined the oral tradition in the historical perspective with Shyllong native state as a case study. Shyllong native state is surrounded with myths and legends, the study of which can go a long way in creating a unique reality of the divine origin of the state. The mythical and legendary inputs are varied and integral to the socio-cultural norms of the people who still practice them. It is thus challenging for a historian to analyse such data from the historical perspective and to bring it within the oral paradigm of history. According to her, regional history/policy formation can go into hitherto unexplored sources and data pertaining to the community at the grass root, and it is here that oral tradition speaks. This will make the writing of both regional and national history complete. In the second paper of the session, Oral Tradition and History: Some Problems, Nabin Chandra Sarma, former Head of the Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, pointed out to possible inaccuracies in reconstructing history from oral sources. The genre of ballads, particularly the mythical ballads and historical ballads may function as oral history among both the non-elite rural societies and the educated-elite societies. As such, many historians and researchers depend on this kind of oral tradition as their source materials. But this practice may not be dependable, as according to Sarma, historical ballads may not always furnish real picture of the society nor the actual happenings. P.C. Das of Gauhati University, in his paper Oral History as Reflected through Few Assamese Ballads, attempted to construct the oral history of Assam as reflected through some Assamese ballads. He pointed out that both known and lesser-known Assamese ballads possess considerable potential for...
historical construct, which might help to cast newer light on accepted mainstream history. In the final paper of the session, *Historical Perspective in Assamese Oral Tradition*, Mrinal Borah and Tua Kataki of Chaygaon College, Gauhati University, took the model of Kwoma Y. Daaku’s work in Africa, and assessed the importance of Assamese ballads in the reconstruction of the socio-political history of Assam.

Jawaharlal Handoo of CIIL, Mysore, initiated the third session with his paper, *People are still Hungry for Kings: Folklore and Oral History* where he focussed on what he calls the palace paradigm of history writing and the inherent weakness of such traditional paradigms. Such paradigms perpetuate hegemony of power politics, falsehood, and exaggeration. Handoo questioned the relevance of anthropological theories in the arena of tribal studies. According to him, the tribal and non-tribal question need to be viewed in terms of its relations with basic resources, economic and other, and their management. It has to be treated as an economic problem and a problem of sharing resources and technology rather than as a problem of ethnicity and racism perpetuated by the colonial paradigm. Desmond Kharmawphlang of PROFRA, NEHU, in his paper on *Memory and Stones* pointed out that for the Khasis, whose written tradition is only a little over one hundred and fifty years, the oral narrative has come to mean history, effectively doing the work of what history ought to be doing, that of recording and accumulating events of human affairs. In the third paper of the session, *Peasant Resistance: Oral Tradition and the Problems of History Writing*, Arupjyoti Sakia, a research scholar in the Department of History, Delhi University, studied a popular oral-derived text, the *Dali Puran*, that described the events leading to the confrontation between the colonial state and the peasantry in the year 1894 in Assam. He outlined the different issues that emerged out of reading the various versions of the *Dali Puran* as a counterpoise to conventional historical sources. He also outlined how in recent times the middle class has worked with *Dali Puran* to crystallise its own identity. In the final presentation of the session, Margaret Zama of NEHU, Mizoram Campus, in her paper, *Finding the Meaning in the Meaningless: Oral History of the Mizos*, highlighted the fact that Mizo historians have been following the method of structuring their history on oral data. The Mizos trace their history through data found in their earliest songs, which were first in couplets, then triplets before developing into longer and complex forms. Some of these earliest songs are those that tell of rivalries between villages, which she calls ‘war of songs’ before the actual event.

The fourth session consisted of three papers. Abhijit Choudhury of St. Edmunds College, NEHU, in his paper *Other Dimension of Oral History*, pointed out that oral history has two faces. One is the formal tradition, which goes along the line of mainstream historiography. The other is the informal tradition, which is the people’s repository of knowledge. Several dimensions including those of the narrator/actor handing out the facts and listener(s)/audience receiving them mark the interface between them. The paper reader, however, was interested in what he calls other broader dimensions namely the psychological and the ethical. Encapsulated in time and space our knowledge of the world is generally empirical which is influenced by objective conditions and situations. To comprehend and interpret it one may exercise imagination and take recourse to symbolism to locate meanings. It is this that renders difficult the task of bringing out ‘meaning’ from the ‘meaningless’. In the next paper, *Interpreting Hindu Myths connected with the History of Tribal Kingdom in North-East India*, Kishore Bhattacharjee of Gauhati University presented folkloristic interpretation of selected myths connected with Hinduised Kings of Assam by examining them against the background of the process of state formation in North-East. Most of the Indo-Mongoloid tribal kings of the region became Hinduised and traced their ancestry with the help of these myths which were also used to appropriate and accommodate tribal traditions within the Hindu framework. In the final paper of the session, *Importance of Clan Maes*, Yushihay Yobin, a research scholar in the Department of Philosophy, NEHU, highlighted the importance of clan names amongst the Yobins of Arunachal Pradesh as an important source of oral historical data. He emphasised the need to document folk information available among other tribal people of the North-East, even though they do not seem to be of relevance in the present context.

The fifth session had four papers. In the first paper, *Don Narratives of Punjab: Oral History*, R.S. Bajwa of GNDU, Amritsar, studied how the narratives around the ‘dons’ of contemporary Punjab manifest a concrete model of oral history through modes of violence. These narratives are the creation of the ‘dons’ who represent community and society through a process of ‘gang formation’ in the oral web of Punjab, and create a jagged line to divide traditional caste *biradori* in accordance to different forms of shifting alliances. The ‘don’ narratives also explore how the state reproduces use of violence by intervening as a repressive force, to protect the interest of the ruling class. Bajwa tried to show that these narratives through the modes of traditional violence are incorporated into textual/a-textual orature of contemporary Punjab. In the next paper, *Notes on Some Motifs on Gamocha from Assam*, S.K. Roy, Curator in the Department of Anthropology Museum, Gauhati University, opined that in Assam, which is considered to be a
The confluence of Indian and South East Asian traditions, cultures while cruising through time to reach contemporary levels, have lost parts of its oral folk repository. Traces of these however still exist in items of material culture. ‘Gamocha’, the traditional towel, retains some of the stories in motifs in stylised forms. For a ‘siplini’ (woman weaver), the past and the present becomes an unified mass in the act of weaving.

In the next paper, Oral History and Emerging Identity Discourses in Arunachal: A Preliminary Note, S.K. Choudhury of Arunachal University, examined the relationship between oral tradition and emerging identity discourses taking instances from a few specific tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. These tribal communities have a rich and variegated oral tradition recorded in the collective memory. In spite of cultural diversities, these people who are sometime perceived to a historical, share a vibrant oral culture embedded within myths, legends, and other oral genres. In the final paper of the session, Folk Song and History, Sashinungla Ao, a research scholar at NEHU, showed how an Ao traditional song of a few lines could be a whole piece of History. She examines a few Ao folk songs to illustrate how it reflects and preserves their history till today.

The sixth and the final session of the Seminar begun with Anil Boro’s (Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University) paper Oral Tradition as a Source of History where he examined historical data present in Boro oral tradition. The historical aim of oral sources may be secondary and incidental, but they are important because they are unintentional, and hence precious as an alternative to intentional constructs. In the next paper, Folklore and Oral History of the Rabhas, Malini Devi Rabha and M. Gopal Singha, of Bikali College, Gauhati University, attempted to depict the rich folk-cultural milieu of the Rabhas and to give an insight into their variegated legends and ballads. The Rabhas are a tribe in Assam having their own distinct language, literature, and culture, which are, expressed through the oral media since they do not have a script of their own. In the next presentation, Archeology vs. Oral Tradition, A.A. Ashraf of the Department of Anthropology, Gauhati University, argued that in most cases oral traditions give some ideas in ascertaining the problem of ethnicity, and archaeological evidence often extend their concrete support to the oral tradition. He validated his standpoint by taking recourse to some recent examples from different ethnic groups of North-East India. The final paper of the seminar was by Mrinal Medhi, a research scholar in the Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University. In his Historical Roots of the Wonder tale, he elicited the propositions and viewpoints offered by Vladimir Propp in studying the historical roots of the wonder tale. Propp had made it clear that his aim was to discover the sources of Russian wonder tales in historical reality. The paper attempted to examine the applicability of Propp’s propositions and hypotheses in the context of Assamese wonder tales.

The seminar had both established and budding folklorists airing their views on the relationship between folklore and oral history. The seminar was significant as a number of ‘tribal’ scholars presented papers and the tribal perspective came through strongly. The seminar felt the need that historicity of the historical data embodied in oral tradition needs to be carefully examined and scrutinised. Nevertheless, it can’t be denied that oral tradition of the ethnic people of the North-East is a potent vehicle for the transmission of history, for it is a region where folklore and history visibly meet.