Folk-Songs of Arunachal Pradesh: The Thrust on Beauty and Love

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[Abstract: With folksongs of different Scheduled Tribes communities of Arunachal Pradesh covered in this brief study, an understanding of the folk ways of living, thinking and planning social organisation has been offered to underline the fact that the tribal folk life has ever put premium on beauty and love with its conviction that the beauty of survival in the face of humbling and disabling odds really lies in the loving co-operation of all the people together to enable the communities as collective entities to ensure happy life everywhere.]

1.0 The importance of folk culture and resources in matters of tribal people’s identity and community pride is simply not to be exaggerated. Elite bodies of various communities in Arunachal Pradesh have in proper recognition of such a fact paid due attention in recent years to preservation and promotion of their culture with emphasis on collective ceremonial participation in festivals that single out the uniqueness of their individual communities. Mobility and intermingling of people of different communities as regular features of modern life and social organisation have come increasingly to stress that interaction of community-specific cultures are a new need that requires to be appreciated particularly against its promised contribution to allow the people of different place and community identities to share the state’s resources and opportunities offered under the modern political arrangements and the attendant administrative and development considerations. Awareness that tourism is a flourishing new area of economic gains that people could readily welcome and find easy to be involved in has made the people in the rural areas keen about discovering a new value of
their dances and songs which traditionally they used to cultivate only as means to give expression
to their sense of group identity and of group entertainment.

1.1 The Draft National Policy on Tribals (as in Dr. Swaminathan Research Foundation website) under
Cl.12 and Cl. 14 has the following important point to make with regard to
Tribal Art, Culture and Tradition, and again Tribal Languages.

Cl.12. Tribal Art, Culture and Tradition

Issues relating to tribal art, culture and tradition such as proper documentation of culture of various
tribal communities, including arts and crafts; appreciation and encouragement of traditional tribal
dance and music; commercialisation of arts and crafts; insufficient information and data base on tribal
artisans and artists and lack of awareness of culture and heritage of tribal communities by the
administrators and field functionaries needs to be addressed. The National Policy for Tribals will
ensure the following measures:

(i) Formulate a National Policy on Tribal Culture, including arts and crafts in order to preserve
and facilitate the continuation of the rich cultural heritage of tribals.

(ii) Organize cultural melas and festivals at the National and State levels and tribal artists, and folk
art performers to be encouraged by organising training classes in their respective areas of specialisation
by experts from their communities.

(iii) Traditional costumes, musical instruments and the like to be supplied to the tribals who are
well-versed in their performing arts.

(iv) The National and State level Sangeet Nataka Academies to document different folk dances
performed by the tribals of different States and identify distinguished artists.

(v) Important folk dances to be included in the curriculum of the Schools.

(vi) The tribal textiles and ornaments to be further encouraged and displayed in art exhibitions and
facilitate to market their own fabrics and ornaments.
Cl.14. Tribal Languages

Tribal languages are treated as unscheduled languages. In the wake of changing educational scenario, many of the tribal languages are facing the threat of extinction. The loss of language may adversely affect tribal culture, especially their folklore.

The National Policy aims at preserving and documenting tribal languages. Education in the mother tongue at the primary level needs to be encouraged. Books and other publications in tribal languages will be promoted. Dictionaries and glossaries of tribal languages will be prepared and brought out.

1.2 The educated youth today in many ways have woken up to popularise their tradition and culture by ways of innovatively introducing changes that show a marked shift in the taste of the new generation that likes to experiment with the indigenous stuff to add to them elements of newness in look and make. Technology in a good measure is in use today by the government publicity machinery and by the NGOs and youth bodies of various communities for whom culture continues to be an important area of their concern. Also the modern educated youth have a better practical orientation towards their resources of the material culture wherein they see lying ingrained their self worth as a distinct community which they could further project positively to genuinely claim for them support that the union government of India or the state government of Arunachal Pradesh extends under various promotion policies. The rural, tribal and backward area development considered to be better ensured and qualitatively more satisfactorily addressed through the Panchayati Raj could also be helped with a predominant concentration on the culture of the people as they present it on a marketable basis and scale and gain through dance, songs, music, cuisine and beverages and drinks.

1.3 In the light of the above, the present emphasis in the paper here is on the folk-songs of Arunachal Pradesh. Particular attention has been paid to selection of the songs as they have been collected and published by the Directorate of Research of the Government of Arunachal Pradesh or by scholars from among the indigenous communities of the state. The objective here in this presentation is to read the songs as they are so available to dwell on the characteristic thrust they bear towards presenting the attitudes and approaches of the different communities to life in general and its changing occasions in particular wherever clearly emphasised. The care as desirable has been exercised to read the songs to
arrive at a general estimate of the people as basically treading the path of Beauty and Love as they meet the complex order of challenges of life in simple, yet unique and majestic ways.

The present approach is in line of Gandhi’s dream of India as ‘continually progressing along lines best suited to her genius’ without turning out to be ‘a third class or first class copy of the dying civilization of the west’. (Elwin 1960, in Roy 1960) Also, this paper seeks to conform to the directive of Pundit Jawaharlal Nehru on planning development of the tribes people ‘on the lines of their own tradition and genius.’ (Ibid.) Elwin (1960) explains the approach: ‘... we should not make them a second rate copy of ourselves. If we are to do this, we must know what that genius, what that tradition is. Otherwise we may confine ourselves to a mere preservation of the more colourful and exotic aspects of tribal culture and be tempted to isolate them as a picturesque enclave in the rather drab and conventional modern world.’ (In Roy 1960:xii).

Mishra (2001) has also underlined the importance of Dr. Elwin’s emphasis on the development of the tribal genius in lines of the Nehruvian vision to contend that discourse of development of Arunachal Pradesh in transition would have very usefully to visualise tribal development against the available historical evidence of what suits better to ensure development planning to make the schemes introduced on various fronts yield results without potentially causing disjunction from tradition and natural endowments of the variously gifted people of the state. The concern to ‘raise their standard of living’ and help them ‘come out of their shell, and develop a full integration with the people of the plains without losing those fine qualities which can make so unique a contribution to ‘the rich and varied tapestry of India.’ (Elwin in Roy 1960:xiii) has been justified in granting the priorities for development of the tribes. In this connection the importance of the resources of the material culture of the tribal communities as an ‘Intangible Heritage of oral traditions and expressions’ (Revel 2006) requires to be sympathetically understood to forward the tribal people the best light of representation they deserve. This line of reading folk oral literature has been adopted by Mishra (2005) with folktales of the Sherdukpen community and by Mishra and Dey (2006) with the Monpa and Nocte folktales wherein the development-oriented reading of the tales and the didactic basis that justify the use of the folk wisdom to circumvent future crises for collective safety and general prosperity of all in a society have been attempted. In Mishra and Dey (2006) it has been established that ‘didactic element is basic to the folk-tales of Arunachal Pradesh, which, “on the whole … are remarkably original and seem to be genuine products of tribal creativity and imagination” (Elwin, 1968: xxi), though alongside this dominant motive there are other significant social and cultural projections as Datta. B et al (1994: 45) have suggested in discussing Elwin’s views on NEFA folk-
tales: “There are many stories [Arunachal tribal stories] which contain information about the social order like the position of women, the prevalence of slavery, etc.” Pelto and Pelto commenting on the uses of folk-tales for various purposes hold: “The folk-tales and myths of non-literate and literate societies constitute an archive of thematic materials that have been a rich mine of information for various kinds of analysis. Sometimes these archives are used to infer psychological characteristics of people; they are often invoked for the analysis of religious beliefs; and they also serve as evidence concerning the transmission of information (diffusion) from culture to culture” (as in Dey, 1996). Further, Herskovits in this connection remarks, “Folk-tales are more than the literary expression of a people. They constitute in a very real sense their ethnography; if systematized by the student they give a penetrating picture of a given way of life” (1974: 269). It is thus relevant here to re-emphasise that the tribal folk-tales of Arunachal Pradesh may be analysed cautiously and systematically so that the didactic motive basic to majority of those tales could be neatly discerned and an abiding vision of a moral society that would be capable of catering to the needs of every member of the society – in fact, of all the societies of Arunachal Pradesh to be specific – to live a life with all decency and dignity could be brought to fruition....’ (Mishra and Dey 2006)

What has been claimed above with regard to the folktales also does hold good with the study of the folksongs. The purpose is to show in all these folk narratives – oral or reproduced in writing – that reflection in all cases of folk thinking and dissemination of experience and education is to create conducive atmosphere so that the quality of social life would be enriched to an extent where happy, safe and free accessing of life’s goals would be most naturally facilitated. In sum, folk narratives are expositions of folk insight into nagging problems that afflict life and fill it in misery and anguish. These narratives are a human storage and retrieval system or archive wherefrom need-based extraction of meaning could be done and scope for occasioning happiness at individual and universal level rendered achievable.

1.3.1 Arunachal Pradesh

Arunachal Pradesh – the land of rising sun was formerly known as North East Frontier Agency, popularly NEFA, since 1954. On 20th January 1972, the name Arunachal Pradesh was given with the inauguration of the Union Territory by the then Prime Minister of India, Smti. Indira Gandhi at Ziro, the Headquarters of erstwhile Subansiri district. The Union Territory was later on given the status of a fullfledged State on 20th February 1987. Shri Rajiv Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India had inaugurated this 24th state of the Union of India at Itanagar, the state capital.
The original five districts of Tirap, Lohit, Siang, Subansiri and Kameng, named after the five principal rivers that flow in the respective districts of Arunachal Pradesh, have later been divided into sixteen districts – Tirap, Changlang, Lohit, Anjaw, Dibang Valley, Lower Dibang Valley, East Siang, Upper Siang, West Siang, Upper Subansiri, Papum Pare, Lower Subansiri, Kurungkureme, East Kameng, East Kameng and Tawang.

Arunachal Pradesh is home to 26 major Scheduled Tribes communities with their language, dress code, language/dialect, dance, musical instruments, folk resources as tales and songs, arts and crafts, and the like. With special attention provided under National Manuscript Mission, Oral Literature promotion initiatives, Heritage sites development, Primary education in local dialect/language etc., it has come to be necessary to duly stress how community wisdom and experience have been expressed in the folk literature/orature of the people.

1.3.2 Folk-Songs of Arunachal Pradesh

“A Few Folksongs Of Arunachal Pradesh” (Duarah 1989) dealing with the selected folksongs of eight different tribal communities – Monpa, Sherdukpen, Aka, Khowa, Apatani, Adi, Idu-Mishmi and Khampi – provides us with the source for our present study. Covering heterogeneous themes and categories, these samples convey that from the eastern to the western end of Arunachal Pradesh the people enjoy a rich heritage of oral literature that still awaits sympathetic reading for a sincere evaluation especially in terms of the guidance value that the songs may offer for the present day society which faces the need to usher in harmony, understanding and peace that in turn would lead to progress, prosperity and prestige for the people of the whole of Arunachal Pradesh for whom the task lies ahead to rebuild the state into a magnificent and mighty reservoir of unity and strength through constant engagement among the people across the broad spectrum of diversity that they so gloriously inherit.

1.3.2.1 The Monpa folksongs – *Cadi cungsi barakha* (Duarah 1989:38), Phuli Kemjang meta (Duarah 1989:38-39) - together talk of the Nature beautiful that needs to be left to be beautiful forever. The destructive role of snow, rain and sun with regard to the tender beauty of the flowers in fresh bloom is condemned thus sounding an alarm to prevent those forces of destruction from spoiling and tarnishing beauty. This charming reference to Nature and the concomitant concern in the apprehension and implied appeal forbidding outrageous aggression against beauty that soothes the eyes, mind and soul has a parallel and more caustic remark restraining man from contributing to the build-up of social stigma involving women. Like in Nature beauty has certain definite justification to be guarded from
corrupting and corrosive contact of the powerful and cruel forces of destruction, in society morality requires to be persuasively spread so that evil ways do not leave the beauty of the human form and also of the social relationship between men and women tampered and ravaged in any way. The poems in a Buddhist didactic thrust combine to impart the ideal of sheel or duty in a decent society where organisation of human behaviour and conduct enjoy a premium and where irresponsible and rash immorality is decried upon as condemnably paving clear the path towards social degeneracy and moral turpitude. The songs exhibit a deep and abiding interest in the protection and propagation of beauty. Beauty commands attention of the beholders. This great and unique strength inherent in beauty itself is reason enough why accumulation of beauty and virtue needs to be one avowed consideration of man. Dwelling on the idea of beauty in a marvellous way the cause is forwarded most convincingly in the songs above for the ideal practice of social equality. The beauty of the body and of the soul together and simultaneously needs to be celebrated with mind not unduly getting mired in the formal and superficial differences of beauty outwardly manifest as in a woman’s body and that not immediately visible as eternally radiant as in terms of a decently self-conducting soul. Beauty, the songs emphasise, is in being capable to see and successfully establish thereby equality above and despite differences that demand diversion, cause distraction and dilute the purity of the deliberation (on the eternal and universal equality/beauty). Equality is Beauty, and in glorifying differences there certainly lies no beauty. The Monpa folksongs therefore in a way seem to encapsulate a vision of a beautiful life in a world where equality as a social goal even across the gender categories is keenly pursued with due exercise of restraint and caution constantly prescribed to arrest the possibility of the soul’s beautiful flower being crushed under powerful spells of lust.

Thus, the three folksongs together serve to sum up the Monpa world view – serious, sincere, welfare-oriented, equality-minded and careful about purity, permanence and equality. The idea is about a conscious moral society in certain emergence of which gender equality goals and fruits could be enjoyed by all the people. Social progress in a co-operative atmosphere is ensured in such cases where without inhibition and fear and psychological distrust about others is nearly absent and as a result, free and wholehearted voluntary services to the best of capacity and thinking of the people are most effectively discharged. The Monpa Buddhism-based folk songs therefore have a distinct element of ethical education which has a sure eye on the ultimate practical gain for the society in entirety.

1.3.2.2 The Sherdukpen folksong - Sarca sarge minta dumprag (Duarah 1989:39) is about the wish in general that people express about owning things they see around them with almost ever being in the
immediate next moment left conscious of the individual lack of resources and competence to fulfil the wish. The idea is that beautiful things even as they belong to others arouse in the people an interest in those things. Other than when passive withdrawal takes place in most cases where people accept a position to satisfy with what they are materially capable of acquiring, there could also be

1.3.2.3 The Aka folksong Gana nikhili ai tadatra cijida kuruli (Duarah 1989:40) suggests that there is the ready willingness on part of the persons, who know they still should enjoy the good and beautiful days despite their lack of resources, to get things of need in return of the services/physical labour to bring the rich their pleasure. The idea is that a social structure and social organisation in which there exists no exploitation, honourable terms of loving interdependence evolve wonderfully to be at work to grant the community life the beauty and grandeur it is resplendent with. Give-and-take and not begging, borrowing or stealing is a conscientious voluntary undertaking by people who are conscious of their social status and their inadequate fortunes for which they offer to work for the rich for the support and security of relationship they extend in prompt return. The idea is that cooperation with love, understanding and honesty and justice as the guiding principles in a society would serve, satisfy and sumptuously boost the status of people of unequal economic fortunes thereby creating conditions for harmony and progress of the people of the community as a whole.

1.3.2.4 The Khawa (Bugun) folksongs Ri ri adiri ra ra ara ra (Duarah 1989:40) is an example of ‘meaningless syllables put to sweet tuning (ibid.)’. From the folk interest in songs like this created simply to pander to pure entertainment needs undiluted by incursions of meaning content into singing performances, it needs to be seen that sweetness and beauty in composition of songs with apparently no meaning burden to interfere in the free enjoyment of just tone and note associations and variations involving sounds and phones. The folksong in the example shows there is sweetness in the composition. It needs to be observed here that not necessarily always that which is meaningful is also sweet. It is in the conscious attempt at freeing entertainment from the burden of thought and its attendant meaning that there seems to be the suggestion of the folksong here that beauty and soul’s satisfaction and peace lies in transcendence of meaning. Attempts at securing meaning in the strenuousness of the efforts themselves take away the value of entertainment itself. The folksong seems to advise the community to rise above the craze for meaning to keep usefully bogged down to pure,
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perfect and entertaining overflowing sweetness and beauty of sounds as they come, combine and vanish.

The implication is here that feeling needs to be accorded the supremacy in every true search for heart’s content. The need is to value the tribal love of the natural and spontaneous in giving rise to patterns and designs to freely and passionately understand the marvels and mysterious coincidences of life. Beauty of the tribal way of life is thus actually in not predicting and planning the very course of it, but in boldly, bravely and squarely encountering the challenges and even the risks that life at its many crucial junctures has in store.

1.3.2.5 The Apatani folksong *Cira de araca* is a love declaration where the determined lover wants to marry the girl of his liking. The folksong *Ani Ani adu nunu cada si* similarly is a love call by a young man to one young girl whom he wants to have as his life’s companion and promises her happiness and prosperity. The folksong *Tapang Putapa calu* is about the manifestation of beauty everywhere around – in the melodious notes of the birds like moina, Putap and Tapang; and the beauty of the stars twinkling in the sky.

The folksongs together thus are about youth, love, companionship for life in marriage, and pride in the beauty with which the community’s surroundings are vibrant and resonant.

1.3.2.6 The Adi folksongs presented here are – *Ga raja pabane* (Duarah 1989:42-43) and *Gikay gikay gikay* (Duarah 1989:43). The *Ga raja pabane* is a praise for Gandhi. It is about the people’s expectation and appreciation about people friendly and good governance-based rule. It is also about the people’s love of free spirit and boldness of Gandhi. The *Gikay gikay gikay* is about how day after day life goes on with sunset, darkness, night, dinner, sleep, dreams and the new dawn.

The two songs together present the Adi people as liking through Gandhi the spirit of boldness and freedom. The Adi expectation of a good rule is also something that stands out from their folk celebrations where Gandhi is remembered and their search for good governance is further more reiterated. The community’s continued emphasis on a search for happiness and beauty in all walks of life and across the length and breadth of the day is idealised with reference to the mother’s love and care and people’s longing for rest, sleep and dreams.

1.3.2.7 The Idu Mishmi community’s *Inni lappaci-praciwe* (Duarah 1989:43) *song* is a wish-list shared in all earnestness to gain as blessed gifts from different gods things that would grant the people
prosperity and well-being. The gods are requested to give wealth, seedlings and crops, mithuns, costly stones for necklaces etc. brought from all the places.

Invocation to bless the Idu people with plenty and prosperity as expressed in this song establishes the recognition by the community of the role and importance of wealth in the qualitative enrichment of life. The people’s awareness of the life and joy in the larger world outside and their openness about importing all that is good and enriching elsewhere are important aspects of this song. The song in most ways emphasises the aspirations of the community to live quality life at par with the known neighbours. What is unique about this Idu song is that the people are particular about their important needs and unequivocal in their emphasis on wherefrom with the gods’ blessings and help they could get those things to satisfy their conscious striving for a better life.

1.3.2.8 The Khampti song Nam hing la kyat to(Duarah 1989:44) is about the clear bright and beautiful shining silvery bed of Noa-Dihang river once again emerging sparkling clear following the muddy and dirty water of the flood time. The Men en ,lingkhai tak net oi (Duarah 1989:44) song is about the value and role of labour without which getting food as one likes is difficult. Its thrust is on work – work helps; work feeds. The suggestion therefore to young children is to mind this unique need in life for avoiding laziness and acquiring the capability to fend with confidence and dignity. Their Myong long toong how ye ritan cha nitangoi (Duarah 1989:44) song praises village life and scholars there in the villages and the country.

The Khampti emphasis seems to be on the truth about beauty that it cannot be permanently kept covered under any mud or dirt. Temporary influences of unfavourable circumstances in life need to be understood as actually not thoroughly capable of dispossessing life of all hopes and possibilities of progress, success and happiness. Life’s charm needs to be patiently awaited to appear clearing the clouds of contingencies and adverse situations in due course. The song inspires a longing for living even in the times that for sometime look to be irredeemably oppressive. Further a routine esteem for labour in practical recognition of its role in sustaining life and a just pride boosting the self-worth as in appreciation of one’s own village, one’s country and the educated or wise people living there go together to show the community’s thrust on the truly important ideals with which progress and happiness may be sought.

1.4 A reading of the tribal folk heritage as lies sealed in the songs of wisdom and valuable experiences of the people of different communities who live in different geo-physical surroundings with limitations
and challenges of many kinds and differing intensities as attempted here may well lead us to appreciate the fact that tribal folk in their natural settings have reflected hard on the need to overcome the odds imposed by largely unfavourable conditions and to move ahead with hope, confidence, courage and carefulness to strike the right terms in life so that the inspiring vision of beauty and love would lead to grand accomplishments of survival. The distillation from the sample of the folksongs of Arunachal Pradesh convinces that survival in itself in its strongest bid is an outcome of the undying inspiration and conviction that life needs always in all conditions to be viewed as an eternal source of beauty and love. The reading offered here suggests that in stark contrast to the handicaps inherent in most difficult rural settings where the folk way of living still holds good, there is a highly enabling vision offered in the folksongs by almost all the communities studied here to let the people know their difficulties and use their strengths properly so that they could draw out the best that lies in the world around to make the best of their life.

Notes and References:

[**Acknowledgement:** All entries on Folksongs of Arunachal Pradesh have been taken from the Journal RESARUN (Vol.XV.No.1&2(Spring-Winter Issue,1989),published by the Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh,Itanagar.Whereas the material selection for treatment in this paper has been entirely as per the reading preferences of the present author, the guiding comments offered in English in the source by Dr.D.K.Duarah have been the basis on which the present author has built up further analysis and interpretation of the folksongs of the various Scheduled Tribes communities of Arunachal Pradesh. Grateful acknowledgement to the said Directorate is herewith made as a matter of propriety.]


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