

FOR KING'S SAKE: NARRATIVES AS DESIGNER TEXTS

There's always something or the other happening around us- natural or constructed event-which needs to be explained; explained within the limits of knowledge available at a point of time. Imagination steps in while explaining natural events that seem not to be backed by logic. In the imagination the world emerges from a cosmic egg—a new cosmogony is born. Myths are thus 'mythical', providing opportunities for multiple interpretations depending on the theoretical framework and tools of analysis such as psychologism, structuralism or functionalism. According to Heda Jason—an opinion that perhaps many will agree with in case of oral texts that contain camouflaged message—'A text can carry at one and the same time more than one message, a message can carry more than one meaning and a meaning can have more than one significance for a variety of addresses, even in the selfsame community and at the same time' (Jason 1984:2).

This may be true of some texts, but perhaps not all. Narratives are usually designed; designed to explain, to entertain, to inspire, even to hold in awe, and also to justify a system or a political order. In texts so designed, message, is likely to be straight forward, not allowing much room for multiple interpretations. The strategies used in the construction of these texts are determined by components involving manipulation of codes, social and even political, for the purpose of socio-political gains. There can be no doubt about the directness of these strategies and perhaps there is no scope for chosen interpretations. The communication that intended in such narratives are deliberate and prescriptive even if coated in linguistic codes such as metaphors. Such codes are used for artistic effect but never neglect culturally relevant requirements. Even the marvellous that is a myth, is often designed keeping in view these requirements. But folk narratives cannot always be regarded as manifestations of the marvellous.

Narratives of the Jaintias, a tribe in the state of Meghalaya in the north-eastern region of India, are the main source of the data used in this paper, are strikingly unambiguous in communicating messages that conform to social norms. Reflections on social experience are prescriptive rather than descriptive. This is so, because the texts were designed to make them relevant to multilevel organizations, institutions and systems¹. A text contains within itself socially defined communicative situations—as Ben Amos has seen in African society².

Before elaborating further, I would like to introduce the Jaintias. They are the inhabitants of Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya who were considered, till recently, to be a sub-group of the Khasis, a better known tribe in constitutional terms. The generic name Khasi for five sub-groups, Jaintia being one of them, continued to be accepted until not so long ago before there began a clamour for a separate Jaintia identity³. Jaintia itself is an *exoethnonym* replacing the *endoethnonym*, but eventually accepted as *endoethnonym* for some historical factors⁴. They were also known as Syntengs and Pnars, though Jaintia is the name more regularly used. Going by physical appearance, socio-cultural and linguistic factors they are close to the Khasis. Even if they prefer not to be known as one of the Khasi sub-groups, controversy persists regarding their separate identity.

Both the Jaintias and the Khasis, who follow the matrilineal system (I am going with the separate identities theory without entering into an anthropological debate since it is beyond the scope of my paper), trace a common ancestry through a myth known as the myth of *Ki Hynniew Trep*⁵. There are other narratives as well, which establish an affinity between them⁶.

The myth of *Ki Hynniew Trep* (the seven huts) with its seven ancestral mothers is central to the Khasi–Jaintia identity. Their religion, *Ka Niam*, which also doubles as a code of social conduct draws from the myth of *Ki Hynniew Trep*⁷. Seng Khasi, an association of the Khasis, which was established in 1899 and still preaches and practices *Ka Niam*, declares that a true Khasi is one who practices *Ka Niam*, since for them too it is as important as it is for the Jaintias⁸. A leader of the association says that the essence of *Ka Niam* is drawn from the myth of *Ki Hynniew Trep*⁹, thus inextricably linking the two tribes to common antecedents.

Because of the compulsions of relating religious commandments to social codes, the myth makers deliberately avoided abstractions. The extended version of the myth of *Ki Hynniew Trep*, widely known in Jaintia Hills and chanted ritually in the most important annual festival there, conveys a few messages right away: (i) the Khasi–Jaintias are descendants of the families of seven mothers, (ii) righteousness is linked with adherence to kinship norms and fellow feeling, (iii) messages from God, or rather his wishes, can be received only through the chief, since he is God's emissary, the bearer of his commandments. Following these commandments can enable one to reach God and join the nine families (*Ki Khyndai Ha Jrong*, who stayed in heaven when commutation between heaven and earth was snapped after his earthly term got over. This myth called *Syiem U Lakriah* is about God's cure for all human ailments.

There were sixteen families in heaven (*Ki Khathynriew Trep Ki Khathynriew Skum*). God sent seven (*Hynniew*) to earth to restore order but they were permitted to visit heaven by a golden ladder. Similarly, the nine families living with God could also visit earth by using the same golden ladder. The earthly families were led by their chief (*syiem*), U Lakriah and all of them possessed divine qualities and earthly mortals easily accepted their leadership. Order was thus restored. When the seven families discovered that the world was covered with stones and had no soil to enable cultivation Syiem U Lakriah, made a plea to God for soil. God in turn directed the supreme Goddess *Ka Blei Synshar* to give U Lakriah three basketsful of soil from heaven. Thus soil appeared on earth. When evil spirits spread misery in the world, people prayed to God to appear before them and solve their problems. God heeded their prayers and descended on earth where secretly met U Lakriah to make known his wishes. These are the *Niam* or commandments. They are: (i) Earn righteousness (*Kamai ia ka hok*), (ii) Know man, know God (*Tip briew, Tip blei*). In other words service to man is service to God and (iii) know your maternal and paternal relations (*Tip kur, Tip-kha*) or respect the parents and elders. God also declared that he could be approached by prayer, libation and sacrifice and that his wishes could be ascertained by breaking eggs or examining the entrails of fowls. And this is how, with the chief as medium, people keep in touch with God.

One needs only relate these commandments to the social set up of the Khasi-Jaintias to read the fine point. Religiosity is merged with secular concerns like solidarity through clan affiliations, respecting terms of kinship accepting the chief's sacerdotal authority, and the example set by the original settlers. Religion therefore ensures that the principles of matrilineal kinship and clan solidarity are respected through the commandments, *tip briew, tip blei* and *tip kur, tip kha*.

The myth is designed to ensure that the chief's authority remains undiminished by placing him and the representatives of the original seven families on a quasi-divine pedestal. Incidentally, the council of the chief, which forms the ruling oligarchy, is composed of representatives from the clans of the first settlers. Considered outside its context this account might well be taken for a work of fancy. But the design becomes obvious when you examine the Khasi – Jaintia political system. Such myths only attempt to sanctify an order that already existed. People's allegiance had to be ensured and a clear message sent to them through such stories and ritual performances organized by the chief and his council¹⁰. They work as devices to overcome the risk of disharmony, strategies to negotiate any possible threat of disintegration.

Strategies such as these also serve to mystify the royal domain when the chief assumes the role of a king by establishing a kingdom through expansion. Whatever the nature of the expansionist operation (application of force was a distinct possibility but it is difficult to say so with any degree of certainty given in the absence of any documented information) narratives provide explanations. Mythic narratives, in particular, contrived to legitimise and enhance royal power. Before the kingdom of the Jaintias was formally established¹¹ around twelfth century AD., sometime, there were oligarchical setups called *Ka Hima*, scattered over the Hills. The chief of one such *hima* called Ka Hima Sutnga, expanded his domain up to the foothills which were inhabited by non-Jaintias, assumed the title of *Rāja*, and established the capital of his kingdom in the plains in a place called Jaintiapur (now in Bangladesh). This event needed explanation and these were available in good numbers starting from simple narratives to almost lab manufactured Hinduised myths. First was an explanation for how Jaintiapur became the capital of the Sutnga *syiemship* or Ka Hima Sutnga (*Syiem*, chief of the Hima): When the *syiem* of Ka Hima Sutnga found Sutnga unsuitable to continue as headquarters the search for a new site began. The *syiem's* party went exploring the east but it was rejected for its foul smell. Proceeding south, they reached the plains at the foothills. It was autumn and the ripening ears of paddy swaying in the breeze tempted them to take possession of the large terraced tracts of Jaintiapur. There the *syiem* met a lady land owner. It would not take long time for the clever *syiem* to devise a plan to bargain the land off the simple woman. He offered her as many coins as would fit into the concave side pieces of two silver shields (*Ar Stieh Tyngka*) for a plot of land that could be covered with one deerskin. The woman agreed and was paid the agreed amount. But the *syiem* cut the deer skin into tiny pieces and scattered them over a vast area. This was how he acquired a vast expanse of territory in Jaintiapur and shifted his headquarters there.

So as the story goes the chief became a king. Numbers of myths came to be manufactured around him, to legitimise his authority, enhance his power, and lend an air of enigma to the royal personage. The most favoured method to ensure communication combined with feudal consolidation was myth-making. That was done, but with interesting contours. The texts collected from the Hills (the Jaintia kingdom had separate administrative machinery for the hills and the plains in the foothills) show that they were meant to establish the theory about the kings of Jaintia going to Jaintiapur from Sutnga in the Hills and that the kingdom was an extension of *Ka Hima Sutnga*. On the other hand, the Hindu chroniclers were keen to prove that the Jaintia kingdom was originally a Hindu *rājya*. Without entering into that debate

now and leaving the myth apart, certainly history is inclined to accept the Hill theory that the Jaintia kingdom was an extension of a Hill *syiemship*¹². In any case, divinity had to be assigned to the ruler for the masses to accept the myth as true; the rest of the elements of the story were arranged accordingly: As child lay sleeping on a stone slab under a tree and a black snake stood grand, protecting him from scorching sun. A Jaintia elder saw this scene and was convinced that the boy was of divine origin. He consecrated the boy with a *tilak* with blood drawn from his (the elder's) chest and declared that the boy would be their ruler. The most common story which establishes Sutnga connection with Jaintia kingdom is more elaborate and goes somewhat like this: There was a man of the Tariang clan called Loh Ryndi. One day while fishing in the Amwi river he caught a fish. He hung it up to dry but forgot to eat it. One evening when he returned home from work he found his home cleaned and carefully set in order. The same thing happened on the following day, so he decided to keep watch outside his house on the third day to find out who had been doing him this service. He hid outside and when he heard sounds coming from inside burst in and found there a very beautiful woman had come out of the fish that he had forgotten to eat. He burned the skin of the fish and told her people to come and see. Loh Ryndi requested his mother to clean up the house in anticipation of the event but his mother angrily told him that Li Dakha (the fish-woman) was not a queen to be served by her. Li Dakha thereupon fled to Sutnga. Loh Ryndi went in search of her, looking for her in every pool he came across. Finally he caught a fish and brought it home. His house began to set mysteriously cleaned once again. Li Dakha had been found. He married her and two daughters were born to them. Shortly afterward both the parents died.

The two daughters continued to live in the same place. The younger one was rather sick. One day a man from Nongbah found them and with the permission elder sister took the younger one away. He looked after her for three years. Since she continued to remain sick he thought of selling her. Having thus made up his mind he decided to take her to the market. On the first occasion he was stopped near Wahiajer village by a tiger and returned home. On the second occasion he saw a deer near Puriang village and chased it. Having captured the deer he returned home. Reflecting upon how animals had crossed his path twice in succession, the man decided that there was a reason behind it all. He bathed the girl and found in her hair a flower marked with symbols pertaining to the Jaintia country and thus he came to know that she belonged to a royal race. He decided that he would give her in marriage to a man of her choice.

The girl finally gave the betel-leaf in acceptance of marriage to a certain man called U Shitang. They wed and she followed U Shitang to Sutnga, the place he came from. They had a son, Markusain, a wild, wilful boy who killed a boy from the village for which his father had to pay a price. In order to change his unruly ways, U Shitang sends him to be trained by King Ksinor Saitsnier at Borkhat, and indeed soon the boy changed his ways and brought much happiness to the king and queen. The royal couple gave him many princely duties to perform. King Ksinor used to wash his intestine at a certain pond and it was said that if, any one caught him doing it, he would die. When Markusain heard about this from the queen he secretly waited near the pond. When the king came there to perform the secret rituals Markusain revealed himself and the king died. Markusain became king, returned to Sutnga and brought all the territories in the hills and plains under his rule.

Markusain reigned for many years, and established a dynasty. One of his successors transferred the capital to Nongtriang and built a palace there. He befriended many plainsmen from Sylhet who willingly offered their land to the king. He asked from them much land as could be covered by the skin of a cow and they agreed. The king, however, cleverly cut up the skin into thin strips scattered it all over the land. Thus he was able to get a very large area of land. Jaintiapur was added to the Jaintia Kingdom. Shortly afterwards, the king moved to Jaintiapur with his court and made it the capital of the kingdom.

This narrative is an attempt to answer two historical questions. Who were the Jaintia kings and from where did they come to the Jaintia Parganas in the district of Sylhet (now in Bangladesh) to make Jaintiapur the capital of the kingdom. The answer: they belonged to a hill-tribe inhabiting Jaintia hills and they came from Sutnga, a pre-state chieftdom in the hills. It is in answer to the second question, that elements of fancy creep in and facts seem to take a backseat, especially with reference to the trick the king plays on the unsuspecting landowners. But the storymaker's¹³ purpose of establishing the Sutnga connection has been served. There is no historical evidence available to prove or disprove this story. It is true however those kings were Jaintias from the hills now called Jaintia hills. But were they known as Jaintia then? Did the kingdom get its name from them or from Jaintiapur which was projected as the seat of Jayanti Devī or Devī Jainteśvarī an incarnation of Goddess Durgā, and the tutelary deity of the kingdom? Historians seem to think this was more plausible. An alternative explanation, suggests that the name Jaintia was derived from Synteng, a name by which the Jaintias were known¹⁴. A current view asserts that the name Jaintia came from Sutnga.

It is not within my purview, at this time, to examine these diverse views. That a narrative is designed for the specific purpose of establishing truth as perceived by the myth-makers and sanctifying it, is the view I intend to project. The text of the narrative, *Li Dakha*, among others is proof of this. I relate here one more myth which in my opinion was deliberately structured to sanctify the royal order. It is important to note that the Jaintia kings at one point in history, adopted Hinduism, patronised mostly the *śākta* variety, with at least one patron of Vaiṣṇavism (though designated as orthodox *śūdras*, in the caste hierarchy). Their subjects in the plains were composed of Hindus and Muslims but the people in the hills practiced their own indigenous religion and were not treated as their subjects. This was because the kings needed to legitimise their authority among their subjects, mostly Hindus. This was a pan-Indian pattern. Most of the tribal chiefs who assumed the role and titles of kings and established kingdoms, adopted Hinduism, were anxious to be identified as Hindu identification, and used Hindu symbols and imagery to legitimise their authority¹⁵. Significantly, the myth of Jayanti Devī, which I have used to support my argument that narratives are at times designed to sanctify royalty was included in a chronicle of the Jaintia court named *Jaintia Buranji*. According to this myth, the kings of Jaintia were descendants of the kingdom's presiding deity: Rāja Jayanta Roy was childless. He prayed to Devī Durgā (Gourī) for a son. Pleased with his devotion Gourī appeared before him and said: 'If God does not grant you a son, I cannot give you one. But because you have worshipped me so earnestly, I shall take birth in your house. Your daughter will rule the state for a long time and the state will be known as Jayantipūr, after her name, Jayantī'. As promised, daughter was born to the king. She was named Jayantī and grew to be as lovely as the moon. The king was unhappy because he could not find a suitable groom for his beautiful daughter. After much seeking she was given in marriage to Landabar, the learned and wise son of the chief priest, Chandibar. When the Rāja grew old he crowned Jayantī the Queen Regent. After he died Jayantī Devī became the queen, taking the name Raṇi Singha.

Landabar began a year long worship of Devī Bhadrakālī. Before the worship was over he tried to embrace the goddess when she appeared. The angry goddess cursed him, 'You have lost your senses. You will forget the scriptures, and will have to live with a heathen'. Landabar thus came back home forgetting everything about scriptures and religious rites.

Once when Jayantī Devī was in her menstrual period, Landabar forcefully mated with her. Angered, she ordered Landabar to leave and never come back. A humiliated Landabar took to all sorts of food and became addicted to drink.

Nobody recognised him any longer. He wandered around and took refuge in the house of Sutnga Garo who lived with his wife. Gradually Landabar took over the house and property of the couple and the villagers started calling him Sutnga Garo.

A repentant Jayantī Devī prayed to Goddess Bhagabatī to forgive her for having thrown her husband out and becoming an infidel. The goddess appeared in her dream and told her, when you menstruate a girl will emerge from your body in the form of a shadow and enter the stream. She will be eaten up by a Barali fish. Landabar, while fishing in the stream will catch it. The fish will give birth to a daughter, who will be called Matchyodarī. Landabar will take her to his house and live with her. Your infidelity will thus be forgiven. When Matchyodarī gives birth to a son, hand over your kingdom to him come away to me. Till that time, rule your country. Things happened as ordained by the Goddess, and Matchyodarī gave birth to a boy they named Borgohain. The couple grew even more prosperous and in the course of time Borgohain became a powerful young warrior in his own right. Then one day he invaded Jaintiapur. Jayantī Devī's spies informed her of his identity that he was the son of Landa Sutnga and Matchyodarī. She told them that Borgohain was her sister's son and asked Bhīm, her commander, to take Borgohain captive and bring him to her. He told Rāṇi Singha that his father has been taken captive by Jahirbeg Sultan. Rāṇi Singha arranged to rescue him and Borgohain managed to kill Jahirbeg Sultan, reinstate as Landa as the ruler of Sutnga and came back to Rāṇi Singha. Rāṇi Singha renamed Sutnga Sultanpur and made Landabar its ruler with Matchyodarī as his consort. Borgohain stayed on with Rāṇi Singha as her son. Jayantī Devī met Matchyodarī and narrated to her the entire story. She then gave her husband the charge of twelve villages before bidding her goodbye. She handed over her crown to Borgohain and gave herself up to the Goddess and was swallowed up by the earth. A grief-stricken Borgohain started digging the spot where Jayantī Devī disappeared but was unable to find her. He refused to leave the place but Jayantī Devī appeared in his dream and told him to stop looking for her. She told him he find a copper plate at the spot and that he should call it Jayantī and worship it as a deity. Borgohain found the copper plate at Jayantī or Jaintesvarī and named the place where it was found Muktipūr. Jayantī Devī also instructed Borgohain that thenceforth only the king's sister's son should be made king and that Jayantī Devī should be worshipped as the tutelary deity of the kingdom. Otherwise the kingdom would be lost.

In this story, all-important issues relating to royal authority and administrative arrangements are meticulously taken care of.

The Sutnga connection is validated the caste angle (Landabar was sent to Sutnga as an outcaste because of his *heather* like behaviour but was accepted back in the caste fold after being blessed by Mahāmāyā Bhagabatī), matrilineal kinship is established (Borghain is declared Jayantī's sister's son and it is ordained that the king's sister's son be his heir), administrative arrangement for the hills, with twelve *elākas* under independent charge of chiefs instituted (Landa being made the chief of Sutnga with the consent of the villagers) and above all, the Hindu angle emphasized. (Jayantī was an incarnation of Goddess Durgā, given marriage to Landabar, son of the chief priest. He falls from grace because he fails when he disgraces from the right path and is accepted back into the system when he mends his ways. Matchyodarī is the shadow-image of Jayantī, thus conferring on Borgohain, her son, a divine status and finally, Jayantī Devī is declared tutelary deity of the kingdom).

Chroniclers of *Jaintia Buranji* while emphasizing the Hindu connection of the Jaintia kingdom, with the kings' adoption of Hinduism continued to endorse the sanctity of the caste system by accepting the so-called *heathens* into the caste fold as *śūdras* in the hierarchy. But the major idea was to establish the divine status of the Jaintia kings by linking them to the Hindu pantheon, using Hindu symbols to legitimise their authority and make it easier for the Hindu subjects of the annexed territory to accept their rulers. Nothing was left to chance and the architects in the Royal court, who were perhaps commissioned to manufacture the built up a power structure, made acceptable by the use of Hindu symbols. The ruling elite has often resorted to such means. To justify their actions one cannot put it past them to have used, even invented, narratives, ceremonies, insignia and other symbols to further their cause. After all, power and authority can never be left to chance.

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Notes

1. For detailed discussion, see my paper, 1998a.
2. See, Ben-Amos, Dan, 1975.
3. Many a Jaintia leaders and scholars have been arguing for a separate identity of the Jaintias. Some of them argue that the Jaintia, as a separate ethnic group, has seven sub-groups, the Panr, the Bhoi, the War, the Biata, the Hadem and the Lalung. see Prakem, 1990.
4. For detailed discussion, see my paper 1998a.

5. A summarised version of the myth of *Ki Hynniew Trep* (the seven huts or families): God, in the beginning, created sixteen families and made them stay with Him in heaven. There was a tree which served as a ladder to the sixteen families for their communication between heaven and earth. This tree grew on top of a hill, *U Lum Sohpetbneng* which was in the centre of the earth and was the golden ladder ensuring contact between God and Man. One day, when only seven women were on earth, the evil one cut this tree and so they were forced to remain behind. These seven (*hynniew*) woman mothered the whole of mankind.

6. See, Simon, 1966: 49-50

7. For details see my paper, 2000, see also, Rymbai, 1993.

8. For a discussion on the manifesto of the Seng Khasi, see my papers, 1989 & 1994.

9. See Mawrie, 1981.

10. For a detailed discussion about the Khasi-Jaintia socio-political system and how folklore sustains it, see, my book, 1985.

11. No documentary history of the kingdom is available before the seventeenth century for the simple reason that the Khasi-Jaintias had no script till the Roman script was introduced in the colonial era. The documentary history commences from the early part of seventeenth century when diplomatic relation was established between the Ahom king (of Assam) and the Jaintia king in the latter part of the sixteenth century. This was available in Ahom Buranji (the chronicles of Ahom Kings), Jaintia Buranji (chronicle of Jaintia kingdom) and Buranjis of other neighbouring states. Some scholars, however, put the date of the emergence of Jaintia kingdom in twelfth century AD on legendary, mythical and other oral traditional evidences. See, Bareh 1967, Prakem 1990 and Chowdhury 1996.

12. See my book, 1985.

13. I have consciously used story-maker and not story-teller. A teller may be of today but the first teller had made the text. The inspiration could be collective wisdom or private imagination. But the intention is clear: to make a point.

14. See, Suniti Kumar Chatterji, 1951: 167. For other views and for a more detailed discussion on the issue, see my book, 1985 and my paper 1998a.

15. This was a set pattern in India when a kingdom was established on a *tribal* base. See, Sinha 1962 and Kulke 1993.

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