

Exploring Ethnic Identity: A Pragmatic Study of the Selected Borok Folktales of Tripura

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Abstract:

North East part of India is phenomenal for its variety prevailed in its culture, language, religion, myth, literature and many more. Most of the communities of this region can take pride of themselves for possessing their own literature, especially the folk tales. The present study is a reread of some selected folktales of the indigenous Borok story tellers of Tripura and tries to focus how these folk tales have become an important medium to create mass awareness about the cultural heritage, tradition and social values of the aboriginal communities of the tiny and beautiful state Tripura.

Keywords: Ethnic Identity, Folk tales, North East India, Social Values.

Introduction:

Folk tales are the eternal part of every community since ages. It is used to provide knowledge and stimulate interest to the readers to understand a particular community, their past, culture and ethnic identities and reaffirm and restore the moral values and common loyalties. Tripura, a fine example of unity in diversity is one of the most ancient states of North East India with its rich culture, history and ethnicity. The ethnographic landscape, geographical and ecological diversity make this state quite different from the other parts of the country. A huge number of ethnic groups are residing here to contribute to the state's dynamic culture. A variety of languages and literature have developed here. Among them, Bengali, Manipuri and Kokborok languages have acquired the foremost positions. Many renowned writers of Tripura are bilinguals or multilingual and through their contributions, the state has acquired an estimable position in the literary scenario of India. Though different studies are done and published on Tripura and its literature and culture by the Britishers, namely J.M Lewin, W.W. Hunter, Alexander Mackenzie, and many others, however, they remained endure mainly to scholars and academicians. There was no procurable literature that can be acceptable to the common people and popularized the cultural heritage of this region. Subsequently few Indian scholars who wrote about the state, most confined to historical, sociological and anthropological aspects of the tribes but not about the literary aspects of the region.

In recent time, some native writers like Chandrakanta Murasingh, Niranjana Chakma, and Nanda Kumar Deb Barma are going back to their roots to forge a different kind of literary identity. They endeavour their own original language Kokborok and try to focus the continuous sufferings of the people and make aware about their cultural loss evolved by their contact with some other cultures of the region. They attempt to make conscious efforts to retrieve their rich oral tradition especially the folk tales which

witness the rich sources of knowing the culture of the community and their economic and social indigenous life.

To enrich the treasure of literature, folktale plays a very important role. They are well-liked stories, handed down by oral tradition from distant past. It helps us to discover the roots of distinctive communities and their past, the commonality of varied cultures and ethnic identity. It is an important medium of creating mass awareness about the cultural heritage, tradition and social values. According to Kishore Jadav, folklore acts as an operative force for “holding up to scorn those who depart from socially accepted norms and eulogizing those who follow them, exemplifying the standard bearers of values and goals of the community apart from suggesting rules for conduct”. (Jadav28) American folklorist Alan Dundes has pointed out that “folklore is [an] autobiographical ethnography – that is, it is a people’s own description of themselves” (Dundes55). He further says that, this description made by the people is “in contrast to other descriptions of that people, descriptions made by social workers, sociologists, political scientists or anthropologists” (Dundes55)

The Borok is a major and aboriginal tribe of Tripura. They have been living in this region since many years back. Kokborok is the native language of the Borok community which has started to get proper recognition in the later part of the 20th century. Certain vigorous efforts have been taken by some linguists who translated the native folk tales of this native community to Bengali and also in English. Indian Linguists like, Kumudkundu Chowdhuri, Mrs Minakshi Sen Bondopadhaya, under the patronage of Sahitya Akademi North East Centre for Oral Literature, went out of their way meticulously bustling manuscripts of the tales, trotting from village to village in the flung hilly heartland of the state. The folktales, when transcript through Bengali to English, traverse a long journey through cultures, from antiquity to modernity They have contained the evocative picture of the social, political, economic and cultural life of the Borok community. Most of the folktales reveal symbiotic relationship between tribal with all the creations especially the forest which show the wild animals and plants, family life, foolishness, magic, unusual heroism, chance and fate, rituals, belief in deity, chain of events, egalitarian society etc. They not only render entertainment but also furnish reader, ‘the education’ which is required in daily life. More than one hundred folk tales are treasured in the realm of Tripura’s folk tale which reveals the richness of the Tripuri culture. Still these are being told by the old and grandparents to their grand children, but its popularity is decreasing now because of the rise of modern technology, which is easily available for the new generations. Sahitya Akademi awardee writer Chandrakanta Murasingh, talking about the foremost themes of kokborok tales, remarks: “Tripuri folk tales are rich in variety and in artistic presentation. Among the stories, one finds the theme of moral, of social guidance and restrictions, of ancient legends, fertility, taboos, creation of fate and destiny. There are stories in the form of beast-fable or of abstract character as well. Almost similar stories are found among the different tribes in Tripura. Sometimes through different tales motif of a particular tale is inlaid in a sub-plot. Some of the folk tales of the Tripuris have their close parallels in folk tales of other countries as well.” (Murasingh 282-283). The characters like accumulators, huntsman, shifting peasants, priests, kings, the local vegetation and the adventurers have played very important role in most of the tales. Most of them reveal Jhum as their surroundings, therefore, their whole existence are revolved on their agricultural activity – be that of kindness, sorrow, demise, marriage, festivity and so on. The Borok indigenous belief system is highly cognate to the animistic belief that can be noticed in their tales. As such, most of their tales have animal characters that utter the language of human being and also acquit themselves in a human manner. The word ‘animism’ which is derived from a Latin word ‘anima’ means full of life or

soul, is fully applicable in these tales which reflect that there is no differentiation can exhibit in the existence of man and animals, flora and fauna and other natural entities. For example, in the tale called “Jhum Cultivation of Four Friends”, four characters – a tiger, a pig, a fox and a hen are conducting a Jhum cultivation, which focuses a business of human being. The four friends have done all the process of Jhum cultivation for example, selection of perfect location for doing cultivation, setting fire on the field and so on. In another folktale named as “A Justice in the Jungle” reveals different animal characters like wild pig, tiger, monkey, hen and a bat who use human language to communicate with each other and even converse with humans also. Dwinjendra Lal Bhowmik in his book, Tribal Religion of Tripura: A Socio Religious Analysis termed the indigenous religion of Tripura as Tribalism and gives opinion that the native religion of Tripura is characterised by Animism or Spiritism. These folktales also portray the life of the royal palace from the viewpoint and narrative of the common folk. The folk tale “The Royal Swan” reveals that royal palace is something which is very superior to the common folk. Innocent poor people never raise their voice against the royal authority and sometimes they are deprived to get the proper justice also. In this tale it is focused, how the royal swan has been stolen from the royal’s pond by a poor widow’s son unwillingly and he has been arrested and tortured by the soldiers for his crime. No one has the courage to raise voice from the side of the innocent. This news made the poor mother very miserable and at last, with the help of the local goddess, the young man is released by the king. The folktale titled as “Kanchanmala” focuses a very pathetic love relationship between Kanchanmala and her husband. The husband has been compelled to join the royal army at the battle field between the king of Tripura and the Mughal forces. In the tale, it is revealed that Kanchanmala’s brother-in-law, who served in the royal force, was attracted to her beauty, sent the royal army to arrest his brother and force him into the battle field. Another chief tool that form the Borok folktales is social control which renders support to the people who follow the path of truth and give punishment to the wrongdoers. The people who have envy, cruelty, hoggishness and selfishness are invariably punished by some mysterious power are shown through these folk-tales and love and affection, service and sacrifice, courage and wit are also rewarded.

How jealousy, cruelty, greediness and selfishness are invariably punished by some mysterious ways is shown through folk-tales; how love and affection, service and sacrifice, courage and wit are rewarded is also exemplified. (Gan- Chaudhuri480)

In the folktale “The Two Girls”, the main character Jhumia has two wives and three children. Daughter Chhipingtwi, and son Aguroy are from the first wife and daughter named Mairungtwi is born to the younger wife. With the death of mother, Chhipingtwi and her brother are looked after by her step-mother. She is a meek, good hearted girl and perfect in household work but she is always ill treated by her stepmother and sister. The mother never desires her to be ahead of her own daughter. The king of that land has come to know about the good nature and beauty of Chhipingtwi. He meets her and takes her to the palace and has married her. The happy life of Chhipingtwi makes Mairungtwi and her mother jealous of her. They deceive her and ask her to visit their house and while staying in the house they torture her by pouring boiling water on her. Mairungtwi then wears the dress of her sister and pretends as if she is the queen. When the king knows the entire story, he kills Mairungtwi and her mother. The story, thus, manifests a moral lesson that a person with good nature and a kind heart will always be rewarded in his or her life and the punishment for the wicked person is death. It also conveys the message that although obstacles may come to everyone’s life, the justifiable and good person will always triumph in the end. Another folktale “The Lazy Priest” shows reckless and lazy person who disobeys his

mother's advice is punished by nature. A young fellow Abhiram is instructed by his widow mother to pray the hymns of gods and goddesses before setting fire to the Jhum field, but he does not obey the advice of his mother. He sets fire to the dried ghilla without praying and reciting the hymns. As a result snakes and other species are burnt away. So, the king of snakes, Nagraj, when comes to know that his children have been burnt and killed, he immediately goes to Abhiram's house to take revenge, however, realizing his own mistake and taking the advice of his mother, Abhiram very quickly runs to the forest and seeks the help of "Bura Devata", the old spirit. The old spirit then asks Abhiram to perform some rituals. After executing this, the body of the snake's body has been cut into seven pieces. Like "The Two Girls" tale, this tale, too, conveys a moral lesson to the readers. Firstly, one should always have to obey the advice given by his or her parents and secondly, religious rituals must be taken seriously. The tale, "The Nuwai Birds and Two Sisters" focuses the story of two sisters named as Kosomti and Kormati who have very affectionate relationship, work at the huk to support the whole family, but very soon, because of some misinterpretation, Kosomti, the elder sister has to stay in a bamboo cage. After that, she gets the freedom with the help of Nuwai birds (Pelicans). Here this folktale reveals the helping attitude, sisterhood and value of sharing which are very powerful force to bind a family. Punishment sometimes becomes a symbol of positive value, when it is given to someone for betterment of his or her life. This value is reflected in this tale. Kosomti's father has punished her because of her conspiracy to kill Kormati. The father becomes angry and builds up a big cage made by bamboo and has sent Kosomti into the cage. Although Kosomti gives punishment to her into the mouth of death yet Kormati has enough sympathy and kindness for her elder sister. She pleads her father to free the Kosomti from the cage. Moreover by responding to the request she provides water and food to Kosomti secretly. Kormati tries her best to free her elder sister from this cave. When all the family members do not respond her request, she starts to request Nuwai birds to give some feathers, beaks and nails to her sister through which she can fly in the sky and get freedom. Finally the prisoner sister gets everything and like a bird, she flies with Nuwai birds in the sky. Here it is metaphorically describe that if one desires something from the inner core of heart, surely she or he will get that desired object. Even the birds, animals or nature will surely help everyone to achieve a goal. The tale also reflects the discrimination related with the skin colour of a person. Kormati is good looking with turmeric complexion, so she receives more attention from the family members than Kosomti whose skin colour is black. It is not a wise behaviour. We should behave equally to all the people irrespective of caste, creed and colour; otherwise, we will lose our near ones. Another tale, "The Old Lady and Iguana" reveals a story of a beggar old lady who lives in a small hut on the hillock in the corner of a village. Nearby her hut, one big iguana lives in a hole whom she loves very much and always offers food to it. One day the iguana is killed by some village people at night when everyone is sleeping. In her sleeping, the old lady hears that iguana requests her to leave the village as early as possible just to save her own life. Hearing this, the old lady has started to run and saved her life. Next day the people of the nearby villages have seen that all the houses are drown into water except one house which belongs to the old lady. The story reveals that one should love a person or any other creature of this universe without looking for own benefit. If we are not able to assist someone, at least we should not insult them and we have no right to harm anyone.

The cultural and religious life of the Borok people are not highlighted in the earlier records of Tripura, the Rajmala being continuously cited as authentic history by the historians. In this regard, Borok literature, especially the Borok folktales appear as a counter-culture voice of its people and becomes an important medium for understanding their philosophy of life, social life and religious life.

In today's world, the realm of realization and value education are the most important ways to attain the quality education. In all the selected folktales, it is seen that freedom, affinity and cares are the key point of everyone's life. Some words of morality have expressed in the form of metaphor and sometimes as a form of dialogue are voiced in these tales. Moreover, directly or indirectly, these tales educate and instruct people about the morality, peace and love which are applicable not only for the human beings but also for the other living creatures. These are really the good sources of values and enlighten everyone on the dominant themes and characteristics of the rich Borok oral tradition and acknowledge the cultural spirit and emotional life of the Borok people.

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