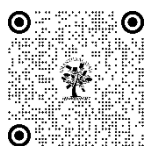


ORAL TRADITION: FOLK TALES AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN UNDERSTANDING THE KOKBOROK SPEAKING SOCIETY OF TRIPURA

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ABSTRACT

Early societies since time immemorial relied on oral tradition to preserve record of their past in the absence of written histories. Oral tradition has played a crucial role in preserving the cultural heritage and history of societies, especially those with non-literate backgrounds. In the context of the Kokborok speaking community of Tripura, folktales serve as significant oral sources that transmit cultural values, social norms, and historical narratives from one generation to the next. This paper highlights the significance of folktales in understanding the Kokborok speaking society, focusing on three notable folktales: Chethuang, Nwai, and Kuchuk Kherengbar.

The Chethuang folktale, centered around a brother and sister's taboo love, imparts a moral lesson about the social prohibition of incest and the natural consequences of such actions. The tale of Nwai highlights the mistreatment of a step-daughter by her stepmother, reflecting on the dynamics of family relationships and the social challenges faced by women in traditional societies. The Kuchuk Kherengbar folktale, which revolves around a forbidden love between a boy and a girl from historically separated families, emphasizes themes of societal taboo and natural repercussions, symbolized through the transformation of the lovers into animals.

These folktales not only offer understanding into the beliefs, customs, and societal norms of the Kokborok speaking community but also demonstrate the broader role of oral traditions in shaping and preserving collective cultural identity. By analyzing these narratives, the paper emphasizes the significance of folklore in stimulating a sense of community, identity, and continuity in the face of changing societal structures and challenges. Through these folktales, the Kokborok speaking community has maintained a strong connection to its cultural roots, strengthening moral values and societal principles across generations.

Keywords: Oral Tradition, Kokborok, Folktales, Social Norms, Traditional Societies

1. INTRODUCTION

Early societies since time immemorial relied on oral tradition to preserve record of their past in the absence of written histories. When Herodotus visited Egypt (c. 454 BCE), he collected oral traditions from the priests, who were also the custodians of the archives. The Greek father of the western historiographical tradition was himself a practitioner of oral tradition and oral history. In Western society, the use of oral material goes back to the early Greek historians Herodotus and Thucydides, both of whom made extensive use of oral reports from witnesses. The modern concept of oral history was developed in the 1940s by Allan Nevins and his associates at Columbia University. It will not be out of track to conclude that North East India's historical sources are predominantly stored in oral tradition.

Oral tradition and other oral sources of history like oral evidence and others constitute the bulk of the sources where the past history of any society could be reconstructed. Oral tradition is therefore a reliable source because non-literate

societies have always from time immemorial used the oral mode, of which oral tradition is an integral part for the transmission of their history, values, customs, traditions, folklores, folktales etc from one generation to another uninterruptedly. Thus, oral traditions are very valuable in stimulating and promoting cultural heritage of any society. The genres of oral literature serve many functions in any society- in the form of education, rituals and belief, promote and encourage conformity to cultural norms etc. Thus, oral tradition, in essence, almost always tends to capture cultural reality of any society. Oral tradition covers a wider range of subject matter and can be found in a variety of forms as indicated earlier.

Oral tradition is different from personal knowledge that is an aggregate of the community's cultures handed down from one generation to another uninterruptedly. Before any information is passed for a tradition, it must have been preserved and passed down by a much older generation to another. The information must of course, be orally transmitted. The bulk of oral traditions comprise folktales, folklores and folksongs. The fundamental difference between folklore and folktale is that the folklore refers to the traditional beliefs and stories of a community. Folktales, on the other hand, refer to the stories that have been passed down from the ancestors of a particular group of people to the younger generations. This highlights that folktales are a part of folklore. Specifically, folktales most were often employed to share a common history, to reinforce cultural values or highlight important traditions.

Folktales have lived for centuries and been found valuable and are still relevant today- in the light of the statement let us discuss the three folktales of the kokborok speaking community- Chethuang, Nwai and Kuchuk Kherengbar.

The Chethuang folktale relates about a brother and a sister and is usually told as Chethuang ('*alostonia scholoris*'— popularly called the devil's tree) folktale. The brother is older than the sister. One day both of them were on their way to huk (shifting cultivation). They had to cross a river and on that particular day the river was at spate. The sister was ahead of her brother and while trying to cross the river, she lifted her rignai ('lower garments worn by Borok women') and the brother saw her thigh. The brother immediately fell in love with his own sister. When they got back from the huk (shifting cultivation), the boy was moody. The behavioral change in the boy was noticed by everyone in the family and ultimately the grandmother intervenes and asked the boy the reason of his moodiness. The boy told the grandmother that he wished to get married. The grandmother spelt out all the names of the young girls of the village whom the boy could marry. The boy rejected all the young girls and ultimately the only unmarried young girl left was his own sister. The boy confessed to his grandmother that he has fallen in love with his own sister. In spite of counselling that it is wrong and unsocial on the part of a brother to fall in love with his own sister, the brother was unyielding and insisted on getting married only to his sister. Thereafter, without much hype, preparation began for the marriage. While the paddy was being dried out in the sun in the courtyard for husking it into rice for the marriage, fowls began to feed on that paddy. The grandmother chased the fowls saying that the paddy is for the marriage of her grandson and granddaughter. The sister overheard what the grandmother said while chasing the fowls and asked for clarification. She was shocked to hear that her marriage is being fixed with her own brother. She was very much annoyed. She could not concentrate in her works and one day saw in her dream that to get rid of her agony she was asked to plant a seedling of chethuang. She did as was instructed in her dream. She planted a chethuang seedling and poured water on it and worshiped. The tree began to grow as she sang a song 'lok chethuang lok, anole dada bai se kainani hwno' ('grow chethuang grow, as preparation is going on to marry me off with my own brother'). She climbed on the tree and began to sing and the tree grew taller and taller and ultimately, she disappeared in the sky. Before she disappeared her feet broke the shoot of the tree and to bear this testimony our people believe that the chethuang is without a bud. The moral of this folktale is that brother and sister of the same siblings cannot have wedlock and not permissible by the society. Even genetic science forbids the wedlock of a brother and a sister of the same siblings because there are the chances of genetic disorder in the children born out of the wedlock.

It is not only among the Kokborok speaking society that this kind of folktale exists but we also among the santal. The santal folktale- Kora and his sister. Here Kora falls in love with his own sister. The unfortunate girl saw that flight was her only means of escape from such a fate, so one day she ran away; all she took with her was a pet parrot. For many days she travelled on and one day she stopped by a pool to bathe and as she rubbed her limbs she collected the scurf that she rubbed off her skin and put in on the ground in one place; then she went on with her bathing; but at the place where she had put the scurf of her skin, a palm tree sprang up and grew so rapidly, that, by the time she came out of the water, it had become a large tree.

The girl was struck by this strange sight and at once thought that the tree would afford her a safe refuge; so she climbed up it with her parrot in her hand and when safely seated among the leaves she begged the palm tree to grow so

tall that no one would be able to find her, and the tree grew till it reached an unusual height. So the girl stayed in the tree top and the parrot used to go every day and bring her food.

In all haste the father and mother went to the tree and found that it was much too high for them to climb; so they begged their daughter to come down and promised not to marry her to her brother; but she would not come down.

Her relations had made all the villagers promise on no account to let her into their houses; so when she went into the village and called out at house after house no one answered her or opened to her. Then she went to her own home and there also they refused to open to her.

But Kora had lit a big fire in the cow house and sat by it warming himself, knowing that the girl would have to come to him; and as she could find no shelter elsewhere she had to go to his fire, and then she sat and warmed herself and thought "I fled for fear of this man and now I have come back to him; this is the end, I can no longer stay in this world; the people will not even let me into their houses. I have no wish to see them again."

So she sat and thought, and when she was warmed, she lay down by the side of Kora; and he wore tied to his waist a nail-cutter; she unfastened this and cut her throat with it as she lay. Her death struggles aroused Kora, and he got up and saw the ground covered with her blood and he saw that she had killed herself with his nail-cutter; then he took counsel with himself and also cut his throat in the same way. In the morning the two corpses were found lying side by side, and it was seen that their blood refused to mingle but had flowed in opposite directions.

So they took the bodies away to burn them and laid them on one pyre; and when the fire was lit, it was seen that the smoke from the two bodies rose separately into the air. Then all who saw it, said "We wished to marry brother and sister but Chando would not approve of it; see how their blood would not mingle though spilt on the same floor, and how the smoke from the pyre rises in two separate columns; it is plain that the marriage of brother and sister is wrong." From that time such marriages have been discontinued.

The Nuwai folk tale indicates that in the traditional kokborok speaking society the role of the step mother towards the step children has not always been compassionate. It is also to be noted that in the earlier days when a wife dies, the relatives of the wife as well as from the husband's side will invariably suggest that the man marries the deceased younger sister. This arrangement is done in order to avoid the ill treatment of the children by the step- mother. But such arrangement always does not happened and the step children are ill treated by the step-mother. Here, in this Nuwai folk tale the step-mother ill treats the step-daughter in so many ways and always showing preferential treatment to own daughter. The step- daughter has been witnessing and suffering in silence with deep agony and at times revolted against such ill-treatment. However, as she grew up to her adulthood she was given in marriage and got freedom from the bondage and cruelty of her step- mother.

In the Folk tales of Kashmir, 'The Wicked Stepmother' we do find similar where the step- mother commit domestic abuse, physical and emotional torture etc on the step- daughter. In spite of all untold sufferings the step- daughter marries a king and lived happily in abundance.

Similar folk tale/ folk lore exists in the Polish community in the form of 'Three Gifts' where the step- daughter was abused, ill treated, tormented etc by the wicked step- mother. The step- daughter was wonderfully pretty. One Sunday morning when she went to pluck flower from the garden for altar of the church, she came across three young men and beside them was an old man. The old man asked for alms and the girl gave the piece of money she had. The old man thanked her and laid his hand on the girl and asked those three men to bless the girl and wish. The first one wished that, whenever she cries, her tears may turn to pearls. The second one wished that when she laughs delicately perfume roses may fall from her lips. The third man wished that when she touches water golden fish spring up in it. Enduring all kinds of cruelty of her step-mother.....ultimately she married the king and lived happily.

Kuchuk Kherengbar (Fox Tail Orchid or *Rhynchostylis Retusa*): In a traditional kokborok speaking villages around 60 or more household constitute a village. These villages are administered by Chokdri or village chief. In such one of the villages a couple even after many years of marriage could not beget a child. In the traditional customs it was quite unnatural for a couple not to beget a child and was considered taboo. Thus, the Chokdri or village chief along with the council of elders decided that the barren couple will be expelled from the village and take shelter elsewhere. It is pertinent to mentioned here that such barren couple once expelled from a village does not get shelter in another village. Having no option the barren couple took shelter in the deep forest far away from the village.

The entire village is dependent on 'huk' or shifting cultivation. So the barren couple also depended on 'huk' or shifting cultivation. Nature has its own course, within few years the barren couple was blessed with a male child. During the same period in the family of the Chokdri or village chief a girl child was born.

The boy began to grow in the lap of nature and as time passed grew up into a young handsome man. The girl child of the Chokdri or village chief also began to grow in the village. As the families are dependent on shifting cultivation, both the young man and girl met together and fell in love. Both of them were ignorant of their families and the past. The news went to the Chokdri or village chief, who on hearing became very furious and could not reconcile in any way. He immediately called his daughter and warned her not to fall in love with the boy and also briefed her about the past how the family was expelled from the village. Understanding the situation one day the girl secretly escaped from the house and went and met the boy and disclosed the attitude of her father i.e. Chokdri or village chief. Both of them decided to elope in the further remote and deep forest where no souls would be found. As they went along crossing rivers, valleys and mountains, the girl got a smell of sweet fragrance of flowers. The girl insisted the boy-her beloved that she must by any means get the flower and put it in her hair bun. Ultimately the flowers with sweet fragrance (Kuchuk Kherengbar) flowers was spotted on top a tree and on seeing the flowers the girl was so excited and would have it by all means. The boy was reluctant to pluck the sweet fragrance (Kuchuk Kherengbar) flowers as he knew that the flower is considered sacred traditionally and at all plucked will have certain unknown consequences. The boy knowing all consequences agreed to pluck the flowers for his beloved but on one condition and the girl agreed i.e. as he plucked the flowers and drop on the ground, she should not pick the flowers until he gets down from the tree. As the boy climbed the tree and plucked the flowers and dropped on the ground, the girl could not resist and picked the flowers and began feeling the sweet fragrance. Upon doing that the boy shouted at her beloved for breaking the vow, and as the girl looked up the tree found her beloved slowly transforming into a hoolock (Hoolock gibbons) and the girl also slowly transformed into muphuk or Monitor lizard (*Varanus indicus*). The bond of love remains in spite of the fact that both the lovers transformed into hoolock and muphuk, as the kokborok community still believe that whenever the hoolock makes emotive call that echoes across the forest the muphuk responds by beating the chest.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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None.

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