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Morality in Orality: A Study of Oral Folk Tradition in Barak Valley of Assam

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to explore the oral folk tradition of Barak Valley of Assam which includes the oral and folk cultures and literatures that survived in the memories of people since time immemorial and passed on from generation to generation as a sustained form of verbal exchange dealing with their day to day lives. These verbal exchanges, popularly known as oral tradition, consist of oral literature and culture including folklores, folk songs, folk literature and culture. The genesis of oral tradition or culture is unknown. Oral cultures, literatures and its tradition are extemporary or spontaneous and they cannot be located to any specific time or authorship and hence, pass as their own. Oral culture or tradition cannot be isolated from folk culture or tradition and they comprise of epic narratives, ballads, myths, legends, fairytales, fables, folk songs, proverbs, jokes, riddles, etc.

Keywords: Orality, morality, oral tradition, folklore, English literature, Assam, Surma-Barak Valley.

Like the tradition of English literature, the literary tradition of Barak Valley of Assam began its journey with orality or oral tradition. It is believed that English literature originated with 'verses of an extemporary kind' (Albert 9) which were composed and verbally expressed long before the written records. It is also interesting to note that *poetry* emerged much before the composition of *prose* as a form of literature in written form. Most of the old English compositions derived their subject or theme from religion and intended to deliver moral lessons. Likewise, orality and folk oral (literary and cultural) tradition of Barak Valley are indeed extemporary in nature and are mostly in verse form. Their rhymes are surprisingly well-balanced and they convey some sorts of moral lessons experienced in day to day lives.

The rural societies, abounded with rich tradition and folk culture, have always been the source of inspiration for the writers of world's greatest literatures including Bengali literature which has produced Nobel Laureates like Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). Orality or oral culture and tradition stand upon their strong appeal to human verbal expression and completely 'untouched by any knowledge of writing or print' (Walter Ong 10). These verbal expressions are not merely speech sounds; they are loaded with day to day human experiences and lessons of life passed from person to person and generation to generation. Sound of speech is said to be more powerful and appealing than a speech/text in writing because it attracts real-time attention. However, written form of literature and culture has its own merits and advantages as it allows people to generate ideas and store or retrieve them at any time and in more accurate, reliable and efficient way.

The oral culture (which undoubtedly includes folk culture) stand on poles apart against the so-called civilized costume culture of modern times. They deal with men's inner selves. Hence, their presence/influence is more visible besides being active in men's inner streams of lives rather than the outer wings of society (Sujit Choudhury 49). However, the attributes of written literature and culture, combined with conducive technologies are absent in oral cultures and hence, their scope and development of thoughts and ideas are, to some extent, limited. Yet, that does not detract the importance and role of oral tradition in our day to day lives. Folk oral tradition and culture which include folklores, myths and legends have, lately proved to be significant sources of writing history not only in this part of the globe but also in other parts of the world as well.

In his seminal work *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), Walter J. Ong observes that human society 'first formed itself with the aid of oral speech, [to become] literate very late in its history, and at first only in certain groups' (2). Therefore, it is evident from Ong's observation, on primarily orality though, that one form of society evolves from the other. In other words, literacy evolves from orality. The current discussion does not intend to scrutinize the evolution of literacy or any other forms of literature from orality or oral tradition. It, however, intends to highlight the oral tradition of Barak Valley of Assam which includes the oral folk cultures and literatures that survived in the memories of people since time immemorial and passed on from generation to generation as a sustained form of verbal exchange dealing with their day to day lives. These verbal exchanges, popularly known as oral tradition, consist of oral literature and culture including folklores, folk songs, folk literature and culture.

The genesis of oral tradition or culture is unknown. Oral cultures, literatures and their tradition are extemporary or spontaneous and they cannot be located to any specific time or authorship and hence, pass as their own. Oral culture or tradition cannot be isolated from folk culture or tradition and they comprise of epic narratives, myths, legends, fables, fairytales, folk songs, proverbs, jokes, riddles etc. Scholars opine that the narratives and anecdotes in the oral tradition are, in fact, picked up and formulated by the people who carry them along as part of their cultural burden (responsibility) and identity. People usually tell these stories or sing ballads, rhymes, proverbs, riddles etc. with great fervour and even relish them. Folk culture and tradition, therefore, are also in the line of the oral tradition and they live in the memories of people. Memory is said to be a dynamic force for cultural continuity and oral cultures give an opportunity for mnemocultural praxis in many ways. Such type of praxis not only provided with information, knowledge and entertainment for the people of Barak Valley but also engaged a few authors who painstakingly retrieved/recovered some of the assets of our oral culture and tradition that had sustenance from people's memories.

The oral tradition of Barak Valley of Assam comprising of a part of culturally advanced Sylhet district of eastern Bengal (presently Karimganj district), Cachar and Hailakandi districts goes back to an undated time. In the pre-independence era, the Valley happened to be an extension of eastern Bengal and had a close cultural affinity with that of Surma Valley (now in Bangladesh, though a small part of which namely Karimganj district is still a part of greater Barak valley). The present Barak Valley is an area where people of different religious, linguistic and ethnic background have been living together in great harmony. Though the Bengali-speaking population, both Hindus and Muslims, constitute eighty percent of the total population, yet,

people belonging to other ethnic and indigenous communities too live here. This culturally rich and diverse land is surrounded by hills from three sides: in the north lie NC Hills (currently Dima Hasao) and Jaintia Hills, Manipur in the east and Mizoram and Hill Tripura in the south. The only plains that lie to the west and has so much cultural similarity, now belong to a foreign country namely Bangladesh. This region, as stated before, has a long history of orality together with folk culture that not only survived in people's memories but also travelled down from generation to generation. Even with the emergence of written literature and print, these precious oral creations are now retrieved from people's memories and preserved in books. Such mnemonic oral practices are still prevalent in rural areas of the Valley. The oral folk culture and literature, therefore, are not mere articulation of people's day to day life experiences, they are mostly, as stated before, convey messages or lessons of morality too.

In olden times, people normally lived communal and shared lives unlike today's secluded nuclear family lives where people are shaped and controlled by Information Technology (IT), computers, mobile phones and tablets, remote controls, robots, flats, lifts, escalators etc. The people of Surma-Barak Valley in those days happened to be mostly agricultural (majority of rural population are so even today), they lived simple lives and shared each other's pains and pleasures, thoughts, emotions and passions which gave birth to various types of artistic and creative compositions and in this way blessed this land as a fertile ground, as already mentioned, with ballads or epic narratives, myths, legends, fables, fairytales, folksongs, proverbs, jokes, riddles etc.

As stated at the beginning of this paper, that, extemporary verse compositions dealing with sundry subject-matters had been one of the most important oral traditions of Surma-Barak Valley and most of those articulations convey some moral lessons. It cannot be denied that religion plays an important role in shaping peoples' mind and behaviour and this perception is equally applicable to the people of Barak Valley where Hindus and Muslims, besides people of other religious faiths, have been living together for centuries. However, it is difficult to separate the oral folk culture and literature of Barak Valley on the basis of people's religious backgrounds; the influence of Aryanised Hinduism and Arabic Islam is equally significant in our oral folk cultures. Moreover, the Bhakti or Vaishnava influences together with Sufism that have swept the whole Surma-Barak region during the medieval period have brought the two communities together for the making of a synthetic culture and out of which emerged different epic narratives or ballads, songs, rhymes, lullabies etc. *Dhamail* songs combined with dances are performed even today during various cultural functions and marriage ceremonies by both Hindus and Muslims. They are performed on the yards of households, marriage pavilions and sometimes in the open places. Normally a group of five, ten, fifteen or more number of people, mostly women, participate in the *Dhamail* who sing and dance in a circular way and clap their hands. In most *Dhamails*, where the performers are Hindu women, the subject of the songs is Radha and Krishna. Notable that the translations given below are all mine:

Banshi thuia hashi hashi radhar kachhe ashi
 Kheter mathot boshi kanai sukhe jai bhashi
 Radhar mukher dige kanai ek dristo chay
 Dangor-dungor chokku duti nahi tay. (cited in Basu 52)

(Leaving the flute Kanai comes to Radha with smiles

Sitting on the paddy field he floats in happiness
And casts a glance on Radha's face
That holds not the two big eyes)

Marifati songs are another such type of oral creations inspired by Sufi Islam. *Marifat* is based upon *Yakin* or faith and whatever falls on human life is taken as God-sent and this is possible only when one has great faith in God. In his book *Barak Upatyakar Lok Samskriti* (2001), Shibtapan Basu defines *Marifat* as a 'medium' through which something is done. Taking that sense, human love is one such medium without which it is difficult to know the most beloved i.e. God, the creator (Basu 55-56). Thus, for the *Marifati* sects, the bodily love of the material world transcends into the love of creation by mingling with the Creator:

Ei dunia banaia ape sai kibria
Premer khela khelchhe shoday gopone thakia
O she nije premik hoia
Kar sathe mon prem korile premik na chinia. (cited in Basu 57)

(By making this world thou my Lord
Playing the game of love in secret
And being a lover himself
Not knowing the lover whom you loved my soul)

The song cited above hints towards the divine love which is the core of *Marifati* songs so common in Surma-Barak Valley. *Marifat* is somewhat synonymous to mysticism. This region has seen a number of mystic poets whose compositions are not mere songs; they are the outcome of the mystic poets' selfless love for the Creator. Noteworthy among the *Marifati* or mystic poets are: Lalon Fakir, Sitalong Shah, Hason Raja, Usman Ali, Irfan Ali, Abdus Samad etc. The people of Surma-Barak Valley still remember and sing their songs with great reverence for their human and emotional appeal.

The advent of Islam, particularly the Sufi Islam, as mentioned before, had a tremendous influence on the lives of the people of Barak Valley and for the emergence of a composite and rich folk culture. Yet, this discussion will remain incomplete unless we explore the Aryanised Hindu influence and cult reverence among the people of the eastern extension of Bengal, popularly known as Surma-Barak Valley. There were strong waves of Vaishnava, Shaiva and Shakta movement throughout the medieval period that swept the region under discussion and they were reflected in the literary compositions, oral tradition and folk culture of this Valley. Moreover, the folk-cults of Surma-Barak Valley (as Basu observes) have had a close connection with the predominantly agricultural society, that, besides the cult of Jongla Kali, Manasha or Bishahari, Kanchakanti, Babahar, Tinanath etc. their day to day struggles, wins and defeats have also given birth to several evil spirits and ghosts. In order to get relief from these evil spirits and their evil eyes, the simple-minded people often surrender themselves to *tantra*, *mantra*, talismans, amulets, exorcisms etc. In addition, rural and mainly agricultural people of this Valley still practise various rites and rituals, passing orally, related to certain cults. For example, Makar Sankranti and Garva Sankranti are related to fertility cult, believed to be responsible for good harvest; similarly, Nouka Puja, as people believe, is connected with the cult of Manasha, the snake goddess. Sujit Choudhury, a prominent historian of Barak Valley has given a detailed

account of Nouka Puja or Boat Worship in his pioneering work *Folklore and History: A Study of the Hindu Folkcults of the Barak Valley of Northeast India* (1996).

Since the core of the current discussion is morality in orality, let us highlight those oral compositions and utterances in the form of hearsay, proverbs, riddles, rhymes etc. Proverbs are, in fact, epigrammatic expressions which convey lessons of morality since they are born out of people's day to day life experiences aimed at hinting towards universal facts often by employing irony and satire. Proverbs are said to be the essence of the people of this region and most importantly, they are oral expressions passed from generation to generation and their rhymes are significant:

Kera kalo baudre chuile	(If bat bites when tender)
Nosto oi gua	(Betel nuts get spoiled)
Horu kalo lai paile	(Excessive affection in age tender)
Nosto oi pua. (cited in Das 3)	(Makes sons spoiled)

The proverb cited above, hints at a moral lesson that excessive love, affection and indulgence at tender ages spoil our sons. It is noticeable that this has been expressed with the help of a beautiful comparison with tender betel nuts and its rhymes are equally significant. Proverbs and riddles of Barak valley are full of aesthetic value besides conveying some moral lessons. Similarly, the oral expressions listed below:

Fol pakile mitha	(Fruits when ripe are sweet)
Manu pakile tita	(Men when ripe are sour)
or	
Chure chure ali	(Thieves are friends)
Ek chure bia kore arek churer hali	(One marries another's sister-in-law)

deal with human nature and character. Likewise, the following proverbs also focus on the nature and character of human beings with the help of beautiful comparisons:

Bap bhala tar beta bhala	(A good father makes a good son)
Ma bhala tar jhi	(A good mother makes a good daughter)
Gai bhala tar basur bhala	(A good cow has a good calf)
Dudh bhala tar ghee. (cited in Das 47)	(Good milk makes good butter)
or	
Bape beta	(A son is known by the father)
Gase guta.	(A fruit is known by the plant)

The readers might have already noted that almost all the oral folk compositions are poetic and not in prose. Their rhymes are equally important. The oral tradition of Surma-Barak Valley, like its counterpart English oral tradition, as mentioned at the beginning of this paper, graced the people of the Valley with those genres of creative compositions listed before, in no other medium but pure verse. Verse compositions are spontaneous due to the interplay of thoughts and emotions and hence, one's ideas get an opportunity for a free flow of expression which is not possible in the case of prose. This is, perhaps, the reason behind the oral compositions, now recorded in books that are available to us. Even today they have remained fundamental source of

aesthetic pleasure and moral teaching to the people of Barak Valley. Form subjects of female beauty to daily course of actions, the proverbs and sayings have their own importance and influence on our lives and guide us against right and wrong. Let us take a few such sayings, for example, (though their bibliographic source is unknown), they pass orally from generation to generation:

Ma jar lajjaboti, ghono lengur nare (The one whose mother is modest)
Sorbang chuia jeno pani pore (Where water seeps from the rest)

The saying quoted above, has come down orally from the father of the writer of this paper and conveys a great moral. Besides its literal meaning, (the translation of which is given in brackets), the above saying signals towards many things that have great value in the society which is basically agricultural. It implies that if one looks for a good bride for marriage, he/she has to look at her mother because a modest mother makes a good daughter for bride. Similarly, if one is looking for a bullock for plough, he should notice its tail because a fit and active bullock moves its tail very frequently. Lastly, if one is looking to purchase a plot of paddy field, he/she should go for a low land because such a land that has regular flow of water from surrounding upphish land proves to be more fertile and hence, gives more yield. Let us see a similar saying below:

Aile sundor kiari (A plot of land is beautiful with its border lines)
Chule sundor jhiari. (A girl is beautiful with her hairs)

The following proverb conveys a great moral teaching that if man does not have any control on his words, he is bound to get entangled into some trouble:

Machh more lenje (Fish perishes due to its tail)
Manush more mukhe (cited in Das 6) (Man perishes due to its tongue)

Likewise:

Hajom puay bap dake na (A newborn cannot call its father)
Deka goru e bagh chine na (A young cattle doesn't know the tiger)

The above saying has a great moral. It implies that, a new born baby cannot call its father since it is tender and immature, similarly, a young cattle is unaware of the dangers from a tiger because of its tenderness and immaturity. This proverb also signals towards the errors and mistakes committed by young people since they are immature and have less experience of life.

Another significant genre, like proverbs, is riddle. The riddles of Barak Valley are also in verse form and they, like proverbs, evoke aesthetic pleasure and even hints of moral lessons are not uncommon. In the oral folk tradition of the region under discussion, the riddles or 'poi' occupy a significant place and they are mostly extemporaneous in nature. They are a great medium of mental exercise and in this way, enrich our knowledge and provide for a great opportunity for mnemocultural praxis, as mentioned before. For example:

Tumi thako khalo (You live in streams)
Ami thaki dalo (I live on branches)
Duijoner dekha oibo (Both will meet)

Moronor kalo. (cited in Das 20-21) (At the time of death)

The answer to this riddle is: fish and chilly. Both fish and chilly, besides originating from different locations, meet and die together in people's curry pots at the time of cooking. This riddle is really funny. Below is another interesting one:

Ghoror bhitre ghor (House inside house)
Ath baraia dhor (cited in Das 23) (Catch it extending your hand)

And, it has a funny answer too. The answer is: mosquito net. People build houses in order to protect themselves from animals, insects and rough weather; similarly mosquito nets are drawn inside a house as a protection from marauding mosquitoes. There are thousands of other such riddles still travelling in the memories of people of Barak Valley to adorn special occasions such as family gatherings, marriages and cultural meets.

Ballads and folk songs too occupy an important place in the field of oral folk culture of the people of Barak Valley. The composers of ballads and folk songs craftily narrate stories of important social events, quarrels, fights, intrigues, friendships etc. of their time in a fascinating manner and that also in the form metrical or verse composition. They were originally meant to be sung and in the process of passing from person to person and generation to generation orally, they underwent some changes including the loss of the names of their original composers. Some of these compositions are also called in the local dialect as 'punthi' and these 'punthis' including other folklores, have proven to be significant sources for the writing of history of this region. They are generally expressed with cadence often by a single person and the spellbound audience enjoy their pleasure. *Sonabibi, Tilai Raja, Sonamoti Konya, Rongomala, Suratjan bibi* etc. are a few among many other such ballads and folklores that have blessed this region for their simplistic style, theme, subject-matter and mass appeal.

It is known to us that literary or any other creative compositions reflect the condition of a particular society: its people, manners, customs and rituals including social, political and economic status. The people of Surma-Barak Valley are blessed with a dialect called 'Sylheti' which is considered to be the best and sweetest dialect of Bengali language. Most of the oral compositions in this Valley till today are composed in this dialect. The writer of this paper has had the opportunity to meet a person whose speciality is that, his compositions are oral, spontaneous and at the same time extemporaneous. The subject-matter of his oral compositions range from poverty to politics, customs to corruptions, malignity to morality and so on. Hailing from a remote agricultural family located at Durlabhcherra of Assam's Karimganj district, the seventy-year old Promesh Nath considers his oral compositions as his moral duty to educate people and liberate them from the evils of communal hatred, ignorance and corruption of all forms. The following is a brief extract from his oral expressions with balanced rhyme:

Age pichhe chinta korle matha oijay gula
Hokol kothar asol kotha ekhon bachtam kila,
Gaur pothor kijat hal
Eoto maroin manshe jal,
Bashor hakom jeta ase

Itat uthile hakome nache,
 Ko'bar ko'gu porla khalo
 Ekbar egu atkilo jalo,
 Kige niche itar khobor
 Emne gechhe pachta bosor.

(Looking before and after, head gets disturbed
 The word of all words now is how to survive,
 The condition of village road so bad
 That people use net (to catch fish) even in winter,
 The bamboo poles that are stretched (on the stream)
 Shake timidly even when climbed,
 Many a time so many fell into the stream
 Once a fellow found in a net entangled,
 To see this (bad) condition came none
 This is how five long years gone).

The foregoing discussion gives us an idea of the height of importance and popularity of oral culture in a synthetic and predominantly agricultural society like Surma-Barak Valley. Orality, let us say, ritualistic, literary and artistic, as we have seen in the preceding paragraphs, thus, has remained the essence of the people of this Valley in providing them with emotional, moral and overall cultural sustenance. It is, however, worthwhile to mention here that the oral compositions, though briefly discussed in this paper, are on the verge of obliteration. In today's 'technologizing' global society, people hardly find any time and opportunity to sit together (as our previous generations did) and share those gems of our oral tradition which, for the people of this valley, have not only remained great sources of entertainment but also enlightened the people for their underlying morals too.

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