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## **Fantastically Scientific: Reclaiming the Cerebral Dimension from the Discourse of Tribal Oral Literature in Assam**

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### **Abstract:**

The aim of this paper is to engage in the discourse of oral literature of some of the tribal communities like Karbi, Dimasa, Chutia and Tangsa of Assam to revisit their representation in the history for a present consciousness. By the discourse I mean myths, legends, folktales and rituals etc. which domicile a brilliant dimension of the history of these communities.

The discourse is a vast source of knowledge in understanding these communities. Besides many other dimensions in it, which however are beyond the scope of this document, two basic compositions in it critically engage our attention. They are the elements of reality and dream; scientific ideas interwoven in apparently fantastic tales. In sensing the opposites, it can be seen that the tales showcase a potentiality competent enough that can be read in parallel with many of the dominating tales in the world from the larger spectrum of Greek and Roman mythology, and even from the *Bible*.

What is apparent in the ancestral past is that *the tribal mind has attained to a psychological equilibrium between the binary of reality and dream, checking and neutralizing the excesses of each other and accordingly has attained to a universal competence which somehow has been terribly missed by the modern understanding, deliberately or undeliberatively.*

**Keywords:** oral literature, discourse, Greek and Roman mythology, Bible.

Understanding a present begins with the understanding of its past. However, in the historical context like ours which has been already manipulated by an unscrupulous colonial past, one of the best ways to understand the past is to take a recourse and go beyond its recorded history. And the best way to go beyond the recorded history is to believe in the oral literature.

The recourse beyond the recorded history is inevitable as otherwise it always encounters two limitations. First, the substance of history, Indian history for instance, both modern and pre-

modern, bears the stamp of being manipulated by the historical circumstances like the Mughal and the British empires and their thought legacy. In addition, such a history is always seen and written from above, a power perspective, and as such we have Gandhian era converging all the histories in an individual thereby eclipsing thousands of sacrifices and histories of the time at the ground level.

Secondly, the retrogression only up to the recorded history stops working after a certain point of time as it encounters a grey area, a cannot-go or suicidal zone summarily seeking refuge in an uncertainty. The French Revolution of 1789, for instance, had formative influence from Rousseau like thinkers who further had preceding influences that will escape the historical radars. At the same time, the Revolution not only culminated in the Reign of Terror but also it had (inter)continental influences that cannot be totalized in the pages of the written history. Similarly, the American War for Independence, the history of Colonization, the history of Apartheid in Africa, the Slave Trade, the Freedom Struggle in India and the like have illusive openings and closings. In other words, both the opening and the closing of the recorded history always play a fictitious gymnastic. They look honest, yet they are deceptive.

Therefore, knowing a present through the written history is always a paradoxical state, that is to say we are either forced to choose an exiled truth or an inadequacy of an already surrogate past that can live only up to the cannot-go zone. Nevertheless, it does not mean that there was no any significant chronology beyond or in this suicidal zone that cannot be experienced. Only the question of agency, that is when the scientific history has already failed what alternative means to arrive at it, has to be chosen. It is exactly here the role of the oral literature can become instrumental in experiencing and going beyond the history.

Invoking the oral literature for a historical experience has layers of benefits. Firstly, it is far more reliable as it has, unlike the written history, no time frame and does not claim to be all in all. Secondly, it is the beginning of a history from origin. It is a going beyond the prevalent and damaging theories of the written history what has just been referred to. Thirdly, it is an investment of intellectual exercise for authentication into an area which hitherto has a foreign interest. And, fourthly, it is a re-construction of an identity whose beneficiary will not only be a generation but also an entire civilization.

It is with this conviction and reliance this document gets inception. The document aims to introspect into the common past of the antic hill-valley people in Assam through the oral literature to see what it has in its repository that could make the past more influencing in the present consciousness. The aim of this paper is to engage in the discourse of oral literature in some of the tribal communities like Karbi, Dimasa, Chutia and Tangsa of Assam to revisit their representation in the history for a present consciousness. What is apparent in the ancestral past is that *the tribal mind has attained to a psychological equilibrium between the binary of reality and dream, checking and neutralizing the excesses of each other and accordingly has attained to a universal competence which somehow has been terribly missed by the modern understanding, deliberately or undeliberatively.*

The literature seems to suggest a potential engagement of the mind of the antic people with reality and dream, science of human origin and a congenial and thoughtful men-women

relationship which are universally significant. The engagement also gives the impression of an intellectual beginning of the civilization of the present hill-valley people in the far antiquity. It further hints that they have an integrated and inclusive social concern which can become a perspective for defining human relationships. However, before the contemplation, it is worthwhile to engage in the theoretical background of the oral literature.

The oral literature comprises a plethora of forms like myth, folktale, folklores, fairytales, legends, rituals etc. in written form and this study shall venture in all the availables. According to Margaret Drabble, a critic, the folklore is “the traditional beliefs, legends, and customs current among the common people; and the study of them” (Drabble, 370). M.H. Abrams, another critic, thinks that the folklore is the “...name applied to sayings [that include] ...legends, superstitions, songs, tales, proverbs...that have been handed down solely...*by word of mouth* and example rather than in written form” (Abrams, 133-134, emphasis added).

A myth, according to Nemishran Mital, an Indian mythographer, is “... a legend, a tale, a story, a saga of superhuman will, courage and strength handed down to a people *by word of mouth* over a long period of time...” (Mital, 9). Regarding its function, Mital comments that, “Myths have a serious purpose behind them... Every major culture of the world has tried to explain the cosmic phenomenon, the powers behind the elements, beginning of the universe...through myths...” (Mital, 10). Simply put the myth is an oral story, “word of mouth”, that can explain a cosmic phenomenon.

Luke Roman, a classical mythographer, links the myth to the Greek word ‘mythos’ which means a story. Commenting on its function, he writes that, “... mythological interpretation ... encodes a deeper meaning—a distillation of that society’s *psychic impulses*, social beliefs, systems of meaning, or ritual practices. In short, modern interpretations of mythology tend to assume the existence of a stable set of stories that affirm social *concepts*” (Introduction, ix, emphasis added). According to J.A. Cuddon, a literary theorist, the oral tradition is “usually sung or chanted (often to musical accompaniment) and is the earliest of all poetry...” (Cuddon, 617).

What is evident is that the oral literature had a tradition of getting handed down to generation “by word of mouth” (of late by written word) and, as Roman assumes for myth, a potentiality to sense “psychic impulses” and “concepts”. In other words, the oral literature can be construed as the vehicle of human memories that sense human thought - psychic impulses and concepts, linking a contemporary generation to its origin somewhere in the grey area of its history of civilization.

If the oral literature is the vehicle for human memory, then it is quite possible through it to peep into the working of the antic mind that houses that memory. Henceforth, it will be the endeavor of the document to get oriented towards the antic mind converging the focus entirely on 1) the pattern of dream and reality, 2) the science of origin, 3) the congenial men-women relationship, and 4) how the mind can be integrated and become a perspective.

Interest in dream element in modern thinking has perhaps gained momentum only after the publication of the books like the *Interpretation of Dream* (Originally published in German as

*Die Traumdeutung*) by Sigmund Freud, a psychologist, in 1899. The entire project of the book is to link dream, unconscious mind, to the reality and established a dynamism between them. In other words, what Freud indirectly established is the scientific base for a fictional element. The possibility of this resolution, however, had already been incepted in many of the simple oriental tales years before. The following can be taken as example.

The tale of Queen Rupavati of Assam [the wife of the founder king of the Chutia Kingdom Bir Pal also known as Gaya Pal and Birbar] conceiving Gaurinarayan, the succeeding king, in the early thirteenth century perhaps has a good bearing here. While returning to her marital home from her maternal with an elderly man, both tired,

took rest under the shade of a tree. Rupavati fell asleep, and in her *dream* she saw Birbar approaching her...in flesh and blood... Rupavati surrendered herself to him. When she woke up from reverie, she was horrified to find that the person was not Birbar. He was none other than Lord Kuber...Lord Kuber then smiled at her and blessed her... “You’ll beget a *baby*. He’ll become a king” (Gogoi,31, emphases added).

Before analyzing the content, the following story can be considered as other example. The Puranic tale of the princess Usha, the daughter of Vana, demon king of the present day Tezpur, that fuses dream, art and reality is another instance of a powerful thought. The story thus goes as narrated by a freelance writer Swapna Dutta:

One night something strange happened, something that changed Ushas’s life forever. She *dreamed of a wonderfully handsome prince* who sat beside her and smiled at her, looking deep into her eyes. Usha fell in love with him instantly and woke up to find that it was only a dream. But something deep within her told her that this dream meant something significant and that such a prince must exist somewhere (Dutta, 1, emphases added ).

Usha revealed it to her friend Chitrlekha, who was an artist, and vowed only to wed and live with the dream prince. Realizing the gravity of the situation, Chitrlekha sketched several pictures and in several attempts, drew the picture of Aniruddha, the son of Pradhyumna and the grandson of Lord Krishna. Aniruddha being identified as the dream prince and Chitrlekha being instrumental in mediating between them, they eventually wed.

The tales have layers of interpretations. First, they stand apriori to the Freudian theory at least in incepting a dynamism between dream and its realization. Secondly, they underline the potentiality of art in uniting immortality and reality, which otherwise came to the modern consciousness only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as exemplified by the poets like W.B. Yeats in his Byzantium poems. Thirdly, they run counter to the Biblical theory of dream realization. In the book of Genesis, it was a man, Adam, who dreamt of a woman, Eve, and with the intervention of God, she was realized. Along with the realization, a woman in terms of Eve was made subject to Adam, as it is deliberated in the *Bible* that she was molded out of a rib of Adam. Simply put, a woman becomes subordinate to a man and this divine politics got integrated throughout the Christian discourse, often got justified in the ideological discourses like *The Paradise Lost* by John Milton, only to be countered of late in the 20<sup>th</sup> century in

terms of Feminism. The tales above apparently appear miniature, nevertheless they reverse the Biblical theory; here women are the dreamers who realized men in terms of Birpal and Aniruddha.

Attempt to resolve the reality-dream paradox being one aspect of the tales, the other can be seen in their approximation of a scientific theory of universe and human origin, unlike the Biblical, Greek and Roman mythological interpretation where faith is only answer to these ordinary questions. In the *Bible*, the God molded the earth out of chaos and the first human being out of dust. In the Greek and the Roman thought, the first goddess, Gaia, appeared parthenogenetically, who gradually populated the earth:

At first there was only Chaos, a vast emptiness. The it divided itself into the earth, the sky and the sea. After the division, a goddess with no parents came into being. Her name was Gaia, that means the earth, and gradually she took control of the earth as it kept on forming (Sharma, 6).

Minus the element of faith, both the hypotheses will commit suicide. However, the tales that we are unfolding next seem to anticipate the suicidal state and rather conceive a more convincing way to approximate an origin. They function as the variant to the above and in this variance they gain momentum. The following ritual practice from the Karbi community, a middle Assam indigenous community, comes near to this type. What the community refers to is the “mosera”, a long folk narrative ritual. Commenting on it, Dharamsing Teron, a Karbi scholar, thus writes:

According to the *Mosera* versions, the Karbis originated from the *eggs* of a mythical bird- *Voplakpi*. The narrative starts with the difficult circumstances under which the Karbis were born out of the eggs of the mythical bird, which is not identifiable with any surviving avian species. The subsequent passages of the lengthy narrative tell tales of the trial and tribulations of the tribe in its migration from *long-le a-chete*, the ‘naval of the earth’ (Teron, 150)

The Karbis have another hypothesis of origin in which their lineage appendices them to Aryan history, though it is not a universally accepted theory among themselves today as they love to link themselves to Tibeto-Berman lineage. This is how Teron once again writes:

According to the ‘Sabin Alun’ (Karbi Ramayana, an oral tradition) tradition, the Karbis consider themselves to be the descendants of Sugriva, the great hero of the Ramayana who helped Rama with his subjects to fight against the demon king Ravana for the purpose of rescuing Sita (Teron 2008,185).

The hypothesis challenges the Tibeto-Berman origin on the one hand, on the other it once again underlines a rational hypothesis of their origin. In the *Ramayana*, the birth of Sugriva can be seen linked to the same egg theory. He was the son of the God Surya and Aruni, a heterosexual individual, who was the descendant of the saint Kasyapa and Vinata, the mother of birds. It is said Vinata laid two eggs and Aruni was hatched out from one of them.

Hemphu is regarded as the supreme God in Karbis. However, his divinity was an unknown entity at first and therefore it is a human creation. Human beings existed before his

appearance and acceptance. The “Hemphu Keplang” or the myth of the origin of Hemphu, as explained by Teron states that,

Hemphu with his sister Ra-sin-ja appeared in the bank of a river Kuleng to two brothers [the brothers were not God] Long-Mukrang and Band-Mukrang. In due course Hemphu and his sister were accommodated in the village headed by the Ran-Mukrang, father of the two brothers...This unknown entity was later elevated to a Hemphu., the supreme one who introduced the Karbis to new ways of worship (Teron,2011, 22-23).

Another originary tale from Dimasa , an autochthonous community mainly in Dima Hasao, Karbi Anglong, Cachar, Nagaon , Hojai districts of Assam and Nagaland, is of significance here. Dimasa call in “Arikhidima” (the name of a bird). According to it, as recorded by Jonison Daulagajau, Assistant Professor of Political Science, Biphuria College, Lakhimpur, Assam,

...at the beginning, the world was completely uninhabited...In course of time two godly beings one male and one female appeared. ... The male was called Bangla Raja ...the female was called ‘Arikhidima’ in the shape of a very huge bird. The two fell in love and as a result Arikhidima had a divine conception... she laid seven divine eggs. When the hatching course was over, from the first egg Sibrai was born, Sibrai was followed by the birth of Du Raja. Naikhu Raja, Wa Raja, Ganyung Braiyung and Hamiyadau from the second, third, fourth, fifth and the sixth egg respectively. All the six were gods in the form of the human beings... (Daulagajau ,4)

Another tale from Kachari community, a generic term applied to ethnic communities like Bodo, Dimasa, Sonowal, Rabha, Lalung (Tiwa), Rabha and Garos scattered throughout Assam, who share a common origin, continues the same egg-theory of origin. Jogesh Das, a folklorist writes:

A Kachari tale tells in the beginning there was only deep silence and the earth was very sparsely populated. From the silence *evolved* a man and a woman. [They]united and the woman became pregnant. In course of time, she laid seven *eggs*. From the first six eggs were born kings, men and *gods* (Das, 25).

Yet another tale from Tangsa community, an ethnic community in upper Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, is of wider significance to interpret Man-God relationship. Recorded by the same folklorist, it runs thus,

According to a Tangsa folk-tale, in the beginning of creation there was no earth. There was only water all round. From the water *evolved* two brothers. They first floated and drifted. Then from what they dropped the earth began to form. They created the Moon and the Sun (Das, 26).

The egg origin hypothesis is not unique to the Karbis and other communities. Prajapati, the Vedic God who later on was identified with Brahma is said to have been born of a primordial egg ( “hiranya garva”). However, what is evidenced by the tales is that divine intervention in creation is virtually ruled out. The faith theory of creation becomes skeptical. While linking

birth to an egg, the tales attempt to establish an alternative and more rational hypothesis of creation of God, evil spirit and man. Egg, with extension, can also be brought very near to the embryonic human origin, another scientific fact.

Another unusual attempt in the tales can be seen in reversing the God-first theory in creation. Birth of six Gods from the eggs of Arikhidima in Dimasa tale; birth of kings, Gods and man in the Kachhari; the creation of moon and sun by the two “brothers” in Tangsa and the creation of Hemphu as the supreme being in Karbis summarily reject the essentialism of the primordial divine role in creation as endorsed by many of the dominating conventional theories. The tales suggest, though it might appear damaging to the conventional belief, that God is the creation of man and not the vice-versa!

Other rituals and tales apart from these which reflect upon man-woman relationship are equally considerable. In Khasi community, for instance, there is a ritual practice of husband sharing the labour pain of his wife. This practice is known as “couvade.” The Khasi community couvade is not unique though, its function in strengthening emotional attachment in conjugal relationship, particularly during the time of labour, is immeasurable. An anthropologist K.N. Das thus records:

...Khasi husband...cannot wash the clothes or take certain type of food and confined to one place until the spirit connected with child birth is propitiated. The father takes rest, apparently to recover from the effects of childbirth...the father is confined to bed as if he is giving birth to a child. He also pretends to suffer from severe labour pain (Das,2004: 99).

The myth behind the practice is not known, however the concern is the recovery and well-being of the mother and the child, a social concern in miniature. It also brings together the element of assumption and reality and make them one. The practice is apparently quaint, but its gravity integrates further when juxtaposed with the similar dominating mythical tales of the world.

In the Greek mythology, Gaia was the first mother and Uranus the first father and the king of the Heaven and the Sky. They had three types of offspring: Giants, Cyclops and Titans. It is said that the Giants and the Cyclops at the time of birth were “terrible huge in size and fearing that one day they would dethrone him, [Uranus] confined them to the Tartarus, a dungeon deep down the earth from where they could not return” (Sharma,115). Quite similarly, the second generation God, “Cronus, in order to avoid succumbing to the same fate as his father, swallowed his children; Gaia and Uranus had predicted that he was destined to be overpowered by his son” (Roman, 120-121). In other words, in these cases the fathers become the cause of the mother’s tragedy. The emotion is virtually contested by the emotion of the couvade.

Another instance of a significant man-woman relationship can be sourced from the following Missing community tale. This is the case of a transformation of a woman subject to a perennial waiting conditioned her husband. A man married a servant girl mistaking her to be from an affluent family. On discovery, he left her in a forest in the pretext of going for



urination. He did not return and thus the girl was put to eternal waiting. The waiting transferred into a miracle. This is how a research scholar, Doley Pritilata Pegu, records:

With the girl sitting in the same place for months together, something miraculous happens. Root started to grow from under her and gripped the earth firmly. Her whole body started to grow and branch out. Eventually, she turned into a full-grown tree. *The same tree is known to be "Sera" tree today (Pegu,100).*

This fictional metamorphosis of a mortal into a tree is not unusual in oral tradition. Ovid, an 8<sup>th</sup> century Roman poet has written series of books on the same title which is also a record of similar transformations. A tale from it can be cited as an example. This is the tale of how a nymph, Daphne, is transferred into a tree. Apollo, a God, fell in love with her but she despises him. Accordingly,

Apollo perused Daphne for love and she later ran away. At last she prayed to her father Peneus [the river God] to change her form to escape from Apollo...Peneus transformed her into a laurel tree and hence the name Daphne, which means laurel in Greek (Sharma, 34).

The tales adopt a similar pattern of transformation, yet the cause behind is distinct. The first is a tale of sacrifice and eternal waiting, whereas the second is a tale of rescue from a crime; the first unites but the second divides.

Thus the tales have their own distinct significance. However, they can also be integrated and read as a part of a larger social spectrum. They are stored in individual memory or unconscious and handed down to generations. The individual unconscious has already been critiqued in the modern psychology and attempts have been made to refer it to a larger social unconscious. Carl Gustav Jung, a modern Swiss psychologist, has been dominant in this understanding. Reacting to the Freudian theory of unconscious as Individual, Jung thinks that,

In addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature...there exists a second psychic system of a collective, universal and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious is ...inherited. This consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes... (Jung, 43).

If that be so and if the individual tales above are taken as the personal, then it is quite possible that they are also of the collective form. They are rather the 'archetypes', a part of a whole, a bigger or mass unconscious. In the same integrated understanding they can be read as a part of a collective memory, an inclusive thought, of the entire north-east India which was there and by which people lived by.

There is yet another dimension. Cuddon has opined that the "oral tradition" is the "earliest poetry." A 16<sup>th</sup> Century poet, Philip Sidney opines that the "poetry is of all human learnings the most ancient and of fatherly antiquity, as from whence other learnings have taken their

beginnings...” (Enright ,27). If that be so, we can safely conclude that the oral tradition was the beginning of every branch of knowledge.

It further implies that every branch of knowledge, including the written history, therefore should bear the stamp of this inevitable orality -probability of having both the elements of facts and fiction, science and dream and an inversion between them and construction of knowledge within. Therefore, every perspective for inquiry into any branch of knowledge should be first cautioned by the nature of this orality that the knowledge inevitably bears. It is here the orality can become a perspective of the perspectives.

Thus it can be seen that many of the dominating thoughts of the world had already been incepted and contested by the apparently fantastic tales which seriously await further exploration and promotion. The hill-valley people as evidenced by the tales shared a *common intellectual origin* and a *mutually inclusive thought* as the common past. The consciousness of this common past in the present and the consciousness that the present has been shaped by the common past will only make the hill-valley relationship more influencing in the present consciousness.

And, by extension, if the north-east India should seek a distinct significance, it should be here in the common past which can be attested by the unwritten pages of the oral literature which people fear, as below, is at the verge of extinction now:

What is more tragic now is the rapid disappearance of this oral treasure that the present generation is even aware of. They are not even aware that their ancestors did possess so much of wealth stored in their orality. In the transition from orality to literacy, we now have neither (Teron Hem, in the *Preface* to the Teron, 2011: V).

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