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## ASSERTING ETHNIC IDENTITY: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF HISTORIOGRAPHY, ORALITY, AND TRANSLATION OF CULTURAL 'TEXTS' OF TRIPURA.

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### Abstract

Tripura, with its heterogeneous co-existence of tribal and non-tribal offers a ground of analysis into the process of constructedness of its space and knowledge system through cultural and linguistic hegemonisation and hierarchy formation. This pertains to the question of interconnectedness of literature and literacy of any particular language and social, cultural and political power relation. The production of 'knowledge' or 'knowledge system' is socially stratified, and therefore an endeavour to examine the politics of knowledge for obvious reason carries with it the necessity/importance to investigate who produces, controls, disseminates knowledge and about whom. This paper is an attempt at analysing the historiography, and the process of telling, writing and translating /re-writing of Tribal oral practices of Tripura such as folk tales, proverbs, folksongs, et al of Tripura, and how the oral tradition forms of tribal cultures resist the process of annihilation of the root culture and corresponding languages as well as assert an ethnic consciousness and authentic parole countering linguistic domination. This paper also tries to emphasize the process of translation of tribal oral folk texts as an attempt at intercultural mixing explicating the source culture.

Index Terms: Ethnic consciousness, knowledge system, historiography, orality, translation.

The formation of canon is always based on a hierarchy of dominant and subordinate. As far as history of Tripura as well as its language and literature are concerned, they need to be analysed in the light of folk culture and literature as reading non-canonical would highlight the beliefs, codes, and custom of the region as well as the conflicts and the process of exclusion that mark the knowledge system and canon. When the aim is to develop a marginalised(?) literary, literacy and cultural position, local folklores, proverbs, riddles and myths et al are relied upon and used extensively. In case of Tripura when an urgent necessity arose to develop a local language the forms and contents of local folk texts were used. In 1954 Sudhanya Debbarma published a monthly newspaper Katakathma (New Story). 'Fumuk Mung' (riddles) were regularly published by Jyotilal, Ratimanik and Ruchirung Devi. In the same year Sudhir Krishna Debbarman wrote Kaktang, a book to teach Tripuri language<sup>1</sup>. The book was written in the form of rhyme for quick comprehension of the language:

Aang ami nung tumi narag tumra

Chung amra ba se barag tahara

(Aang means ami, nung means you narag means you (in the plural sense). Chung means we, Ba means he and barag means they). It is pertinent here to mention that because of the lack of knowledge in Kokborok language the translations of such texts have been examined in this paper. The reliance on local elements is an effort at decontamination, a process of freeing the root culture from the pervasive influence of dominant alien cultures and language. The onus on oral literature is due to the fact of its link to physical, cultural and material contexts that are different for different cultures and as such it defies a general, universal situation.

Oral literature as popular literature form provides a grounded and spontaneous mode of expression of a particular space moving towards creating a locale as opposed to global. Orality can be treated as a component of a specific social space, with its own particularities of gender, class, sexuality and politics. The very fact that the oral narrators are not telling about their own time and life but about their particular culture, region and race hints at a collective consciousness of a special group or region. The revival, promotion and analysis into the process of telling, writing and translating /re-writing of Tribal oral practices of Tripura such as folk tales, proverbs, folksongs, et al of Tripura, therefore is an attempt to comprehend the source culture and language. It has a social and cultural significance because of the state's status as a culturally amorphous region, the influx of non-tribal culture and subsequent domination, its translation/transformation from oral to linguistic text giving rise to question of domination and subordination of language, and being a part of a locale that itself experienced a hierarchy of royal (privileged-centre)-folk (underprivileged-margin).

Folktales of Tripura contain in themselves an insight into the evolution of their society and life pattern. The tale that traces the reason of 'kherenbar bubar' not having any fragrance has reference to 'chamaki kimani', a custom where young men do their service in their would-be father-in-laws house. If he can convince them as a suitable groom by his work parents agree to marry their daughter to him. 'Kok-da sati' (Do not talk) folk tale has the implication of the oppression and exploitation of royal dominance on mass especially womenfolk. In this tale a jhumias two daughters compared with Mailuma (the goddess of paddy) and Khuluma (the goddess of cotton) by the villagers are forcibly taken away by royal attendants when they hear their whisper from the room where they were kept for protecting themselves from royal attendants. In the next birth they become birds and says to each other kok-da sati (meaning do not talk) recalling their error of previous birth. It can be interpreted as the reminder of the fear as well as the silence of common folk who were relentlessly oppressed but could not protest. The tales also trace the hierarchy existing in the natural and animal world. The trickster figure is popular in folk tales. A small animal triumphs over the so-called lords of the jungle by superior intelligence and survivors spirit. The tale on the tiger and the tortoise is one such tale. The trickster figure is significant implying and hinting at the possibility of reversal of social hierarchy. Thus oral cultural texts assert/affirm a regional, cultural and linguistic space through its depiction of an uncontaminated 'locale' with its myth, legends, customs, belief system, taboo, et al and in the process also overtly questions historiography.

History requires the presence of writing to be heard, but the half visibility or the invisibility of history renders itself obscure and this obscurity provides scope for exclusion and inclusion. Jamichalang is a folk/ fairy tale hero and a tale on his chivalry is cited in Kereng Kothma<sup>2</sup> where he fights and kills a ferocious demon. His character finds reference in comic strip on chivalrous Reang general Senapati Ray Kachag written and illustrated by Alak Dasgupta. His reference has the connotation of the hierarchy and binary of canonical and non-canonical (here oral/ popular/folk) historiography. The comic strip on Ray Kachag, 'the chivalrous hero of fifteenth century Tripura' 'unheard in the history of Tripura (Dasgupta, back cover of the book; trans. mine) is non-conventional both in its adaptation of theme and medium and its personages. The comic strip on Ray Kachag is a reconstruction of history concerning oral historical traces in the form of folktales, representation of ethnic life and culture. It is an indirect indictment to the construction of a multilingual, multicultural state hinting the inclusion vis-à-vis exclusion. The linking of documented history in the narrative is a device to create a fictional credibility in the narration. Senapati Ray Kachag is the translation of a folk narrative into mainstream Bengali language, the target language. The comic strip Senapati Ray Kachag consists of five stories nucleating around the chivalry of Ray Kachag as general and his utmost effort to save the kingdom of Tripura- the first is about Kachags emergence as the leader of the protectors of his own village and his rise to the post of General in the army of King

Dhanyamanikya. . The inclusion of Jamichalang is not a figment of the writer-illustrator's imagination presented as fictional reality. The character of Jamichalang is clouded by obscurity as he is a character from folktale. He does not conform to any form of tradition, but is a blend of mythology and folktale and is also ahistorical as he denies age and time by resisting the prime determiner of canonical and conventional historical documentation viz. chronology. He had saved Kachag and introduced himself smilingly as yes I am as apt in telling lie as strong. My name is Jamichalang. hee hee (22, trans. mine). Jamichalang helped Kachag twice-in capturing Thanasigarh in Swet Hasti Parba and in the battle with Husen Shah. Jamichalang is indeed a strange character. He suddenly appears in the scene. He is a folk-tale element in the story and is a well-known character in fairy-tales. He does not wear shoes and in fact, is very much reluctant to do so, does not speak about his age or his origin. He remains obscure till the end and his character is a part of non-canonical history writing and new historiography. He refuses to go to Rangamati (now Udaipur and the then capital of Tripura). A quarrel is hinted between him and the writers of Rajmala: tomader rajmalar - lekhakra amake dekhe felle sarbanash. oder sange amar iye ache, he he he ( 26). When Kachag insists on his going, he tells e khetre kono aaposh noy. Ae: meaning no compromise here ( 26. trans. mine, ). Rajmala is the record of royal history and therefore his maladjustment with the writers of the text is hinted at since he defies time, ageing and also established literary and historical tradition of documentation. Jamichalang attempts to elude and delude all such definitive historical traces. He is a part of popular mythology and resists the form of writing that is monolithic, in the process revealing a power equation at play. As cultural tools the folk elements with multilayered connotation/multidimensionality thus create a canon of its own.

It is pertinent here to cite the following :

The books collected so far reveals only the story of kings. The discussion on real life patterns of mass (the subjects who are generally of the ethnic tribal stock at that time) is absent. The lifestyle of different tribes, their economic and cultural problems were not included. It is not possible for us to decipher clearly the aspects of mass consciousness until the opinion of the then masses is known. Rajmala or books of this type are based on the history and perspective of the royalty. There is mention of devotion to royalty and severe punishment for disobedience. But there is no mention as to why such devotion is not permanent in the mind of the devotee and periodically erupts in the form of revolution. (Dey 80-81; trans mine).

The hierarchy is here of court/administration and mass /folk. It is said that language has always been the consort of empire. Together they come into being, together they grow and flower. Ironically the empire -language parameter or more precisely the empire and its relation to the language of its mass has undergone a thorough shift in this region resulting a linguistic imperialism in the form of dominance of Bengali language in court and administration that subsequently ends up in a cultural and social hierarchy of tribal and non-tribal. The kings of Tripura patronized the Bengali community and Bengali language more than their own tribes. Radhakishor Manikya Bahadur wrote to his minister Ranimohan Chattopadhyay,

It is a matter of pride for a *Bengali Hindu state* that various attempts have been made for the use of Bengali language in royal official activities and for the development of the language. Specially I love *Bengali language more than my life* and consider it my prime duty to *look into the development of the language*" (qtd in Dey 168. trans and italics mine)

Translation as intercultural communication involves the risk of losing the self culture and therefore exploring the process of translation with multidimensional perspective is significant in the present paper/discussion. The oral literatures as folk tales, songs, proverbs, riddles need to be re-written in order to be heard. There lies the problematic of constructedness of a text as the oral text needs to be structured. If re-writing is not in the source language the process of structuring or re-writing undergo a dual shift of form (oral to written) and language (tribal language to Bengali or English), and what stance should a target language adapt become crucial at this point. The folk text carries the inscriptions of cultural coding in the form of myths, legends, symbols, fantasy and dreams of the source culture. The load of textual assemblages and identities of the source text as deep inscriptions may not be translated in its totality into the target language. This is where translating the oral or folk has its own problems, being hugely different from translating a written text. But when the contextuality (locale) and textuality (oral form) of the folk text need to be disseminated, the target language becomes a medium of intercultural understanding. When a language becomes a tool for cross-cultural understanding, the concept of 'target culture' renders itself as an ambiguity, Here the target language does not correspond to the target culture. If translation

of Kokborok oral folk literature into Bengali and English aims to acquaint the Tripuri new generation speaking or writing Bengali and English, the target languages become a tool to come close to the root/source culture. Translation is not an attempt at annihilating or erasing any of the traits of source culture. Translation here attempts to explicate the source culture. Here lies the necessity of understanding the process as an intercultural negotiation. It has put the onus of responsibility on the native translator or someone who bears knowledge on both source/root and target language. Being constituted within his/her language and culture a native translator can avoid the risk of erasure of cultural traits. It can be observed that Kokborok had been facing the threat of extinction mainly owing to the absence of educational institutions employing the language. The new generation has to attend schools in which the medium of instruction is either Bengali or English. Nowadays, westernised tribal boys and girls who study in English and Bengali-medium schools do speak Kokborok at home but most of them cannot read or write their mother tongue properly. Unless this trend is reversed, Kokborok will have a tough time surviving,<sup>3</sup> said Murasingh, the author of *Tales and Tunes from Tripura Hills* in which Quaint Kokborok proverbs and myths have been handpicked and compiled in a book that linguists hope will help save the language from fading into extinction. Apart from the 102 proverbs collected during painstaking travels across the hills, Murasingh has also incorporated in his book a hundred simple riddles popular in tribal discourse to rekindle an interest in the language spoken by thirty one per cent of the states population.

The focal point in folk/oral text is the absence of 'authority' of author and even of narrator/teller (who tells these texts orally) himself/herself -an aspect that highlights the impossibility of tracing the origin of folk texts as well as the importance of the term folk. The very fact that the oral narrators /tellers of the folk texts/oral texts are not telling about their own time and life but about their particular culture and region and race generates/hints at a collectiveness/collective consciousness of a special group or region. Therefore even the person who is documenting the texts in original tongue of these tales or the person who is translating them in the language of other culture is endowed with an commitment and responsibility towards this group and region. The non-intrusive narrator /translator is a recording consciousness, a telling medium that strives for neutrality and transparency. The collector and translator of Tripuri fairytales Kumud Kundu Chowdhury in the Introduction to the first edition of *Kereng Kathma* emphasizes the importance of regional collectiveness:

*Tripuri fairytales are not Bengali fairytales.* These fairytales are familiar with the Kokborok speaking tribal population of Tripura. Daily, at bedtime the tribal grandmothers tells these pleasing/enchanting tales to their grandchildren in *their mother-tongue* Kokborok. (KunduChowdhury, Introduction . 7-8, trans and italics mine).

The reference to Bengali fairytales points to the probability of annihilation and contamination of the identity of a regional cultural group by a dominant alien majority group and language. This aspect is even more overtly stated when the translator is talking about his preference for oral texts by female/women narrator over the male/men (eleven tales are collected from women folk out of total Fifteen):

I think the fairytales told orally by womenfolk specially those articulated by elderly women have protected themselves from the influence of outside worlds fairytales. The other four tales have been collected very cautiously from male/men. This caution was necessary firstly because the Bengali fairytale *Thakurmar Jhuli* has been entered into the tribal males through the Bengali teller/narrator due to the influx of Bengali refugee, and secondly, recently the newly educated tribal youths have began to read worlds fairytales in Bengali and English. Therefore, there is an acute/immediate possibility of violation of the sanctity of these Tripuri folktales. But I have noticed one thing some of the fairytales told by the tribal grandmothers or elderly women have been Aryanisised. Terms/words like *munir ashram*, *Brahman*, and *Kalitala*<sup>4</sup>, et al have entered. (Ibid, 9, trans mine).

The tribal discourse embedded in the oral folk texts of Tripura brings out a sensibility which is not tainted by linguistic and cultural imperialism. Resisting the pervasive influence of global culture their writing and re-writing should attempt to affirm an uncontaminated regional /local space. Unequal power relations inform-and have always informed-the locals. Similarly the literary forms in local languages (folk texts) and their relationship with the language of the court/administration are all power relation. Therefore the revival, promotion and translation of the folk texts can reinforce their culture and corresponding languages. Any cultural 'text' from Tripura in its discourse should generate a consciousness of the land and its people in their totality.

It is relevant here to mention a Report published in the local daily 'Dainik Sambad' on 18 June, 2021. The depiction and representation in an intersemiotic translation of old customs of tribal of Tripura 'Chamari Ompa' to audio-visual media i.e. TV telecast aiming at pan-Indian viewership was objected. The telecast of 'Chamurai Ompa- ek Prem Katha' (the title given by the makers of the tv serial in Hindi with 13 episodes) was supposed to be telecast from 19 June, 2021 on National Doordarshan Channel. Tripura Civil Society in a letter to channel on 16 June, 2021 made an appeal to stop the telecast of this TV serial. They found both the title and the content of the serial distorting and misleading. According to Kokborok spoken Tribal society Chamurai Ompa (the title given by the makers of the serial) did never exist in their society, the custom was 'Chamari Ompa', a custom prevalent in joom-based tribal society where the groom stayed and passed time in would-be in law's house to convince them, but according to them in such case also the opinion of the girl (bride) was given utmost priority. As such this distortion would hurt the sentiments of tribal society. The telecast would send a wrong message to the future generations and according to them would defame the old customs and rituals of tribal society of Tripura in the whole country. The Kokborok Sahitya Sabha and Tiwary Drama and Cultural Centre wrote to Indian Broadcasting Foundation to show it to concerned people before telecast. Therefore, translation should be an intervention to create new texts emphasizing cultural mixing and negotiation. Comprehending the cultural-ritual context in which the folk-text is produced, folk-text translator should aim to minimize the loss of cultural meaning.

#### NOTES

1. The information on history of tribal writing is collected from Ramaprasad Dattas Upajatiya Sahitya Rachana o Sankalan. (pp 51-57) in Saha Dinesh Chandra eds Ramaprasad Dattter Prabhandhamala: Pratham Khanda. Agartala: Writers Publication, 2008.

2. The tribal oral folktales of Tripura are translated in different texts in Kokborok, Bengali and English languages. Some of the tales are common with slight variation. This paper has incorporated the tales published in the journal . Indian Folklife: Tripura Folklore. 35(2010) (in English language) and those in D. K Tyagis Tribal Folktales of Tripura (in English language) and Kumud Kundu Chowdhury's Kereng Kothma (in Bengali). The tale associated with Nuyai bird has some differences in content in Kereng Kothma and Tribal Folktales of Tripura. Here it is necessary to mention that the meaning of the term kereng kothma is different in Kumud Kundu Chowdhury and Chandrakanta Murasingh. For Kundu Chowdhury the probable meaning of Kok is Katha (meaning story or utterance) and of Erengis Alik (meaning fanciful or imaginative). (See Kundu Chowdhury, Kumud. Introduction to First Edition. Kereng Kothma . Agartala : Akshar Publications, 2013. Pp 2). For Chandrakanta Murasingh in Kokborok there is a single term for folktales, that is 'kereng kothma'. A kereng is a land tortoise and kothma means a tale. Folktales are therefore, tales of the wild land tortoise, whether there be a tortoise in it or not (See Murasingh, Chandrakanta The World of Folk Literature: Kokborok. Indian Folklife: Tripura Folklore. 35(2010): pp 7.)

3. See Datta, Sekhar. Kokborok treasure dug out from Tripura hills-Sahitya Akademi brings out a book of proverbs and myth compiled by poet Chandrakanta Murasingh. The Telegraph 4 August 2009. 7. Print.

4. Munir ashram connotes Hindu sage and his abode while performing Bhramhacharya. Such cultural and religious custom is totally absent in Tripuri culture. Bhrahman is the Bengali for Brahmin, considered to be the upper caste. This term is not rooted /familiar in traditional Tripuri culture as primitive Tribal society was devoid of such class distinction. Kalitala, a Bengali word that can be taken as another reference to a Goddess associated with Bengali Hindu.

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