



**The Other Dimensions of Oral History:
In the Light of Oral Traditions**

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Abstract

In historiographical tradition, Oral History is regarded as a method of using oral narratives of social, political and other phenomena. Such narratives emanate from the testimony of living witnesses. Often based on personal experiences of an event, oral history may aid its formal construction. It is true of both pre-literate and literate societies. Besides its folk or popular dimension, oral history has another important dimension, that is, orality. This paper deals with a few problematics of oral history especially in terms of 'primary orality', which characterize verbal expression in pre-literate societies. The task of the historian is to extract meaning from such narratives. It is, of course, difficult. Because there are possibilities that these narratives may have psychological, ethical and knowledge dimensions. This paper would emphasize a few cases related to the pre-literate societies of India's northeastern region where historical records from pre-modern times are scant. However, it would be shown as to how some of these oral traditions based on certain beliefs operated (and still operates) in the collective memory of the concerned communities. In the process it would also be endeavored to cite a few instances of formalization of the apparently 'informal' through 'secondary orality' as in the case of movies and through literature and historiography. However, instances from literate societies are also noted.

The Social Sciences regard *oral history* as a method of recording the account of living witnesses to events. It helps in writing biography, history of a movement, socio-political changes and so on. Thompson defines it as a *method* of historical research, especially *social history*, in which the recollections of living persons are collected. The data including those from ordinary persons, provide a valuable *source* for historical constructs with, of course, careful appraisal for reliability and representativeness¹. Bennett uses such terms as *life history*, *testament*, *personal narratives* to mean 'oral history' (1983: 1-15). However, the *scope* of these definitions is limited only to the *short-time* perspective in the sense of narrating the events of the recent or immediate past. If we take the average life-span of a person at seventy to eighty years then it shows what do I mean by the 'immediate' past! Yet, the apparent contemporaneity ultimately transcends into a source for historical construct in the *long-time* perspective. A classic instance is the *popular* view circulating in the fourteenth century Europe during the Black Death which found expression in

the Chronicle of Agnolo di Tura who wrote: “This is the end of the world”. This type of narratives are used by the historians of the posterity².

Those who are doing oral history often join issue on the correctness or distortion of facts given by the narrators as also of the different versions in matters of certain details like time or a particular fact. Such experiences led Portelli to point out that the importance of oral testimony need not always lie in its adherence to fact “but rather in its divergence from them, where imagination, symbolism, desire break in”. His observation came from recordings of a post-war industrial strike in a town where the workers gave their individual versions which forced one to recognize “the collective processes of symbolization and myth-making”. This had revealed their ways of constructing *history* according to their *worldview* (1981: 96-107). Oral history, I believe, may also serve as a mirror of *popular* mentality which surface from the recesses of ‘collective memory’³ of an event much after it happened. This point, at least, emerges from Portelli’s observations. Well, it may be a *limitation* of oral history. Because, the task of bringing out ‘meaning’ from the apparently ‘meaningless’ is rendered difficult due to the subjects’ peculiar subjectivity and relativism. Nothing can be better illustrative of this situation than the Japanese Master Akira Kurosawa’s film, “Rashomon”, where several persons presented their own versions of how a murder was committed. It is analogous to what happens in oral history. Yet another instance is the stories based on individual and collective experiences from the *Partition of India*. But may I point out that this very *limitation* is a boon? For, it gives us insights into the *psychological* dimension of oral history.

This dimension closely relates the narrator’s and the listeners’ individual perceptions of the things and happenings about the existing social milieu and their own expectations, frustrations and values which emanate from it. Submerged in the psychological *map* of the ‘collective’⁴, these individuals, respectively at the *giving* and *receiving* ends, curve out their own worlds and may, therefore, be treated as the two *active* aspects (that is, the narrator and the listener) of the processes of *formal* oral historiography. *Formal*, because such narratives as those relating to the *Partition of India* are then given shape into literary works like Rajinder Singh Bedi’s *Lajwanti*, Abdus Samad’s *Do Gaj Jamin* and Bhishm Sahni’s *Tamas* or even Ritwik Ghatak’s classic film, *Komal Gandhar*. As for the narrative on the Santhal Uprising in Colonial India, we have Mahashweta Devi’s novel, *Hajar Churashir Maa*. These dimensions are active,

because they give expression to their ‘subconscious’ operating in the background of their visions. Their class/caste/clan/tribal positions, their ideologies and their political sympathies are betrayed. One resorting to oral historical methods in writing biography, history of a movement, history of the past or even about contemporary electoral politics may encounter this situation. Neither the individuals nor the collectives can remain as *islands* in a given socio-political and economic environment. They constantly interact. These processes land us into another broad dimension – that of the *ethical*. Because, the question of the *efficacy* of the individual, institutionalized and societal attitudes and behavior/responses loom large. Again, both the psychological and ethical dimensions are qualified by *knowledge* at different levels which *inform* the narrators’ and the listeners’ worlds. None of them – especially the narrators – can be wholly ignorant of one or other detail. There lies the basic difference between *illiteracy* and *ignorance*. An illiterate individual may not be totally ignorant about the socio-political atmosphere particularly when it is hostile, or when a political mobilization is going on⁵. He or she comes to know, even if little bit, about it through his/her constant interaction with the others. This may be called the *network of information and knowledge* of the world which is supplemented by personal experiences. Within this *network* every Tom, Dick and Harry operates. Everyone creates a world for oneself. When an interviewer approaches his/her subjects, their worlds meet on this plane. *Knowledge* therefore, acts as a *dimension* enriching the other two and actually becomes their fountain. Knowledge of the world around, in different degrees, emanate from awareness too.

However, it appears, the two definitions of oral history, cited above, are primarily concerned with only one of its traditions, that is, the *formal*. The other tradition of the *informal* is left out. One may suspect that in line with the general mainstream historiographical practice these two definitions try to ignore the latter⁶. Since my focus is on this *informal* tradition of oral history, we need not dwell any longer on the *formal* oral history. Of course, the *dimensions* cited above – are applicable to the domain of the *informal*, too, albeit in different context and modes. The *informal* tradition is so, because it is purely *verbal* in mode of presentation in the traditional sense of ‘oral’ transmission⁷. Today one may be tempted to call any *lore* operating at the popular level as ‘informal’, which is transmitted only verbally and occasionally formalized through the print/screen media. It may signify the shift from ‘primary’ (informal) orality to ‘secondary’ (formal). An instance is Kalpana Lajmi’s movie, *Rudaali* where a folk practice of Rajasthan, i.e., mourning songs sung by the village women in the event of death is depicted. In Mrinal Sen’s

Bhuvan Shome one may observe the transformation of the worldview of an urban bred railway officer, influenced by an underlying tribal belief of deities protecting a forest. But they may be left out of formal historical construction. This paper emphasizes the former though the latter (i.e., print/screen media) may be cited in passing. *Informal* oral history is derived from what is termed by the anthropologists, folklorists and historians as the ‘oral tradition’. Now, *oral tradition* may be defined as a system of maintaining cultural *continuity* in a society by way of *verbal* transmission of norms and values, its practices, through succeeding generations. Myths and legends, fables and folktales, aphorisms and proverbs, folksongs and folkplays/dramas – called the ‘genres’ – are the *means* by which this task is fulfilled. It gives rise to whole set of unwritten literature which Bascom treats as a “verbal art” aiding humanities and social sciences (1953: 283-90; 1968: 496-97). Certain questions may arise at this point: why do I call oral history derived from oral tradition as *informal*; and, is it necessary at all to do so?

Let me make it clear that the inadequacy of the two definitions of oral history, with which I opened this paper, is sufficiently provocative to make one search for the possibility of its having another face coexisting with the *formal* practices. I have arbitrarily chosen the term ‘Informal’. But there is a reason. Knowledge in its *informal* form, unbound by the print, is the people’s repository of information, ideas and perceptions of their overall existential environment, which goes into the making of the worldview of, say a community. Usually, oral tradition represents it, but is marginalized by ‘official’ history. Though the anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists had long since examined the forms, contents and meanings of oral tradition, it is only lately taken note of by the historians and political scientists. Since oral tradition is the people’s repository of knowledge, one may notice in folktales, legends, myths, proverbs, folksongs and etcetera, the subtle meanings which could be useful for the constructs in the fields of literature and history. Litterateurs and historians may bring in their angles of looking at these. In this sense it may be called ‘oral literature’, and ‘oral history’ respectively. Oral tradition, therefore, remains a *universal* source for all to draw upon. However, echoing Carr’s statement that not all facts are historical (1976: 7-30), one may observe that *not* all folktales, aphorisms or even legends are useful in deciphering the past. Because, *firstly*, such utility depends upon their *content* and, *secondly*, historian’s choice (from among them) and subsequent interpretation may be conditioned by his/her priorities. Where the content carries useful meaning, the historian requires getting at their significance through the labyrinth of symbolisms. Certain issues,

however, may emerge here. Are those aspects of oral tradition, which are useful to the historian, *timeless*? Do they represent ‘intentional’ exercises on the part of a people? If they are then can we identify the dimensions of this ‘intentionality’? How do we manipulate oral tradition in our own space and time? Taking these questions together I propose to submit my brief.

For our purpose I shall refer to those mythic narratives, legends, tales or even to folksongs which are primarily concerned with the world of human drama. For, they represent the *verbal documentation* of the past, preserved in and articulated by the ‘collective’ *memory* of a people. This is normally a predominant mode of retaining history in the *pre-literate* societies. But nobody knows who created them or how they came about. They may either be discarded or continue in use depending on the *nature* of a given society and its priorities. For instance, even after the Greek society went *literate* the myths derived from a supposedly hoary past were recollected and recorded⁸. Finely points out, they were timeless yet they fulfilled the functions of social memory and of maintaining popular identity with their past (1990: 33). Today, however, the Christian Greeks no longer identify themselves with that pagan worldview, though they take pride in being the ‘mother’ of the European cultural tradition. Is not the lighting of the Olympic Torch today, which is carried from Greece, as good as our adherence to a ‘past’? The heroes of the formative period of the Chinese culture were deified. Their celebrated culture-heroes were connected with tackling the challenges of drought, flood control and other ecological crises. The legendary archer, Yi, who was the chief of the Yi tribe, shoot down nine out of ten suns which scorched the earth and restored her habitability. Nuwa, a tribal chieftainess, restored the Heaven to its original position with new pillars formed from the legs of a huge tortoise and brought the earth to order. All such chiefs, including Huang Di and his descendants, Yao and Shun, were accorded *divine status* (Shouyi 1982: 52-57) which ultimately transformed them into *mythical* characters. Incidentally, Huang Di is credited with the invention of carts, boats, writing, and silkworm breeding. Under the changed circumstances of China, these tales have become a thing of the remote past telling one symbolically about the operation of tribal democracy (Yao and Shun consulting with other chiefs on the matters relating to flood control, for example), handling of the environmental problems and man’s innovative spirit. But it appears that under the changed circumstances they are marginalized in the Chinese imagination.

In India, on the other hand, the situation is different. For instance, the ‘many’ *Ramayanas* that we have, indicate that there exist persistent oral traditions about Rama and Ravana with regional and local variations from which the written versions have been derived⁹. These variations reflect regional/local attitudes and imaginings relating to the characters involved¹⁰. It is argued that originally the *Ramayana* tradition might have been based on actual happenings. Only later on it was transformed into ‘fiction’ with ‘didactic’ purpose¹¹. One may conclude that the way *Ramayana* is presented clearly betrays its aim: to idealise certain code of behavior which might find social acceptance. The *Krishna Kathaye*, popular in the rural milieu, also exhibit the same tenor in the idealization of Krishna as the ‘Purushottam’. The folkloric elements, particularly the mythic narratives involving the non-human characters, abound in both the Epics – *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* – as well as in the other classical works such as the *Kathasaritsagar*, the *Panchatantra* and the *Jataka*¹². We need not take them up here. It would suffice to state that their common purpose is to impart the ‘*niti*’ or *practical* wisdom. Many of them, especially those from the Epics are recited in popular gatherings. From these facts it appears that oral tradition may serve as a timeless, yet continuous source of reference for popular culture. The oral traditions of the types indicated above cast lingering shadows on the *popular mentality* of a people. Even though the mythic nature of the *Ramayana* or the mythic origin of the *Mahabharata* is indicated¹³, their use for political manoeuvres in the contemporary body-politic of India show how a *desired* or *wished* social history is gradually formalized. Attempts at innovations could be a feature of this *formalization* of the social past¹⁴. Thus our own time and space intervene in reinterpreting not merely an extant tradition but also an imaginary past. The argument of Munslow would be relevant here:

Most historians accept that even if we could revisit and reproduce the past as it actually was, we would still be interpreting it in our own time and place, and most likely for our own ideological purposes. No one today, apart from ever diminishing band of naïve empiricists, seriously supports the view that historians objectively recover the past to discover the truth... we now have a situation whereby, in particular, most historians seek *their* truth in the past... (1997: 146 see 140-162).

What he says holds well for our application of oral tradition to oral history.

Those tribes who have adopted either Roman or other scripts – for example, the Khasis of Meghalaya accepting the Roman script or the Santhals of Jharkhand the Hindi – have not rejected their oral traditions. Though the rise of the world religions such as Buddhism, Christianity and Islam apparently eradicated or submerged say the *ethnogenic* myths, in reality they lie dormant in the *collective psyche* of a people including those sections who are converted. In Western Africa some societies associated the origin of their state formations to one or other companion of the Prophet after they accepted Islam (Hunwick 1994: 251-73). The Christian Khasis of Meghalaya often invoke the concept of *Ki Hynniewtrep Hynniewskum* (i.e., the Seven Huts or Seven Families) in order to emphasise their ‘otherness’ through distinctive lineage. This concept, derived from their ethnogenic myth of origin, assumes the role of *identity-marker* which is employed for politics of culture. The local pressure groups used to invoke *Jaitbynriew* (rooted in the above concept) to magnify this marker for ethno-political purposes. Thus, an ethnogenic myth is formalized by way of ‘secondary’ orality, via print medium/poster campaign. One may find examples of this in Janice Pariat’s literary work, *Boats on Land* (2012), where “..political struggles and social unrest interweave with fireside tales..” The processes of this type of reference to a mythic past imposes some degree of contemporaneity to the *timeless* character of oral tradition. The awareness of the plurality of the body-politic and social milieu, under changed circumstances and associated socio-economic problems, necessitates such references for manipulative purposes. In other words, from the *seemingly* timeless emerge the contemporary imaginations which bestow a *psychological* dimension to the process. The imaginary, the symbolic gives rise to situational usages which can be empirically observed.

The Khasi myth of ethnogenesis above-referred may be outlined briefly for its intrinsic value and interest in our context:

In the beginning God created sixteen families with whom He lived in Heaven. These families were known as *Khathynriewtrep Khathynriewskum*. Later, seven of them entered into an agreement with God and settled down on earth. But they could maintain their contact with the ‘Nine above’ who preferred to stay back in Heaven. For this purpose they used a ‘Golden Ladder’ on a peak, called *Sohpet Bneng*. However, man’s pride and insolence led him to tear that ladder. Since then, the seven families (*Ki Hynniewtrep*) remained stranded on earth. After that

ladder was destroyed a big tree grew to such extent on another peak, called the *Diengiei*, that the earth was overcast with darkness. Man prayed to God to redeem him. God forgave him. The big tree was felled and man's relations with God was restored¹⁵.

This story has *two* important components. The *first* is the reference to the habitat and its geographical setting where the 'Seven Huts' descended from Heaven. Three important mountain peaks constitute the *geo-scape* of the story. They are the *Sohpet Bneng*, situated to the north of the town of Shillong which is referred to as the 'Navel of Heaven'; the *Diengiei* located to the west of Shillong and known as the 'Sign of Sin'; and the *Shyllong* near the town. This last peak is connected with the story of the origin of the ruling family of the State (*Hima*) of Shillong/Khyrim¹⁶. This peak was the abode of *U Blei Shyllong* whose niece was the first ancestress of this family. All these peaks are sacred to the Khasis, where they perform their rituals. The Khasis consider themselves as the tenants in their temporary abode, the *Earth*. They also believe that they originated in the *Sohpet Bneng* area from where they spread to other regions. But if one closely follows the studies of the anthropologists and linguists the possible migration of the Khasi-Pnars to their present habitat from elsewhere may not be ruled out altogether¹⁷. Does the reference to the 'Golden Ladder' mean a *metaphor* which hints at movement of the people? In fact, there is a tradition that the Khasis had a script which they lost while crossing a river¹⁸. The state-formation processes in the Khasi-Jaintia Hills have been closely examined¹⁹ along with their origin myths and one may come across at least one suggestion that the overall processes could have taken place around fourteen-fifteenth centuries²⁰. The Tai-Ahom lores also talk about two heavenly princes, *Hkun-Long* and *Hkun-Lai*, as the founders of the Ahom ruling family who were despatched to the earth by the Supreme God, *Lengdon* (Gogoi 1976: 07-14). It is suggested that after the consolidation of the Ahom power in Assam, *Sukapha* – their first king – claimed, they came down to the earth by a 'Golden Ladder' carrying a sword and a royal charter to rule (Nath 1978: 126). The evidence of the Ahom migration to Assam from the Shan country in the thirteenth century is clearly established. Such tales have one common function. That of 'legitimation' of their *coming*.

The *second* component of this story deals with the 'agreement' with God. According to one version when 'Mother Earth' (*Ka Mei Ramew*) requested God for a ruler, He summoned a

‘Divine Dorbar’ (*Dorbar Blei*) where it was decided that seven families should go down to Earth and rule over it. Since they came with God’s dictat, He is also called ‘Supreme Command’ (*Ka Hukum*)²¹. *Hukum* stands for ‘Divine Decree’ prescribing a particular code to conduct life²². Briefly stated, God’s commandments are *three-fold*, namely, *Kamai ia ka Hok*, or one must follow a righteous mode of living so that one may ultimately join the ‘Nine above’; *Tipbriew – Tiplei*, or to know man and to know God, that is, by fulfilling one’s duty towards the fellow men one would be able to redeem oneself before God; and *Tipkur – Tipkha*, which means one must respect one’s ‘maternal’ (*Kur*) and ‘paternal’ (*Kha*) relations²³. A tradition tells us that God selected *U Syiem Lakriah* as the leader for the seven families and gave him His *Hukum*²⁴. What is *unique* about this component is that such a clearly spelt out *ethico-moral* code – strengthened by *rituals* at family and clan levels²⁵ – is seldom found associated with the ethnogenic myths. The Khasi songs or ‘rhymed catches’ (*Phawars*) uphold this code. Let me cite one example:

“Never let your hand snatch in taking,
 Such is the way of the repulsive ape;
 Whatever there is in the home,
 Never move aside with the foot; ...
 because that is the way
 with the brutish beast”²⁶.

Even the well-known familial institution of *Ka-Khatduh*, wherein the youngest daughter succeeds her mother to the family holding, mean that she is only a *custodian*. In that capacity, she performs the family rituals as the priestess, assisted by her maternal uncle who also helps her in managing the property. *Caution* is, however, necessary, when one speaks of ethico-moral objectives that are being delineated. We are analyzing only in term of the ‘ideal’ type in the Weberian sense. In the ‘real’, *objective* conditions crises do appear at familial and societal levels. The story of the *Nohkalikai Waterfalls*²⁷ in Cherrapunjee illustrates the fact. As is the case with the other peoples, many among the Khasis today do not pay any heed to their traditional code of conduct. In spite of being a matrilineal society, woman does not play, or does not want to play, a more active role in the body-politic. There is a Khasi proverb which says, “Woe worth the day the hen begins to crow”²⁸. Nevertheless, under the ‘ideal’ situation, hypothetically conjectured, the *ethical dimension* of the discourses centering the ‘Divine Decree’ is worth mentioning. It appears that social cohesion through a more or less pragmatic ethico-moral code has been the

desired goal. As is the general case with the ‘sacred’ type of myths, *rituals* are given due importance also in the political institution of Syiemship²⁹. It seems, these rituals implicitly articulate an urge for people’s acceptance of the Syiem’s function within both *sacred* and *secular* parameters. Practical knowledge drawn from experience and precedents went into the making of these practices.

I’ve tried to present an analysis of the *Khasi* ethnogenic myth in some details to *explicitly* delineate its dimensions. For, I think, this may serve as an illustration of how oral tradition can be of use not merely at the level of the *informal* oral history in the sense of the ‘collective memory’, but ultimately it can be brought to *formal* historical processes of understanding a society (or even a segment or class of it); its popular psyche at a given point of time. If myths represent an attempt to explain an unknown or remote past (or in terms of ‘long-time’), there are other aspects of *oral tradition* which demonstrate that it does not stop at that. Because oral tradition continues in time by being constantly created and recreated according to the objective situation pertaining to any given era. In other words, a particular historical situation may inspire popular imaginations. During the Non-Cooperation Movement the image of Gandhi was expressed in terms of the *metaphor* of the ‘Avateern’ (*God Incarnate*) by the peasantry in Gorakhpur district of the then United Provinces (Amin 1992: 01-61, see *p.* 18). The Messianic movement of Jadonang among the *Zeliangrong Nagas* in the 1930s and 1940s derived its strength from a Naga tradition of a Messiah King³⁰. It is an instance of how new legends are created out of an old tradition by the motivated under particular situation. Ketan Mehta’s film, *Mangal Pandey: The Rising*, a screen narrative of the Great Revolt of 1857, used the popular belief of how a loyal soldier of the East India Company, infuriated by the unintentional injury to his Brahminical pride by a sweeper was ultimately transformed into a rebel. A recent work relating to the folksongs on the Great Revolt of 1857 would provide an illustration of popular mentality operating in the course of an event (Joshi 1994). A few examples follow:

- (i) The last words of a Commander of Laxmi Bai, the Rani of Jhansi, Khudadad Khan who died defending the fort:

We have to die one day, brother
And I shall chose today

For our queen I shall lay down
my life,
I shall hack the Firangis** with my sword
And the world will forever
remember me! [Ibid: 49]

(** Firangis = the British/Europeans)

- (ii) Comparing the other feudal rulers, who were servile to the British, with another hero, Amar Singh:

The princes became mere princelings
and the gentry no better than Dhuniyas***
If there is a man,
He is Amar Singh.
The world trembles
(at his very name). [p. 91]

(*** Dhuniyas = mere nobodies)

- (iii) A lullaby alluding to Raja Kunwar Singh of Jagdishpur, (last stanza):

... ..
Oh Babua he was eighty years old,
Oh Babua, his head shook as he
moved,
Oh Babua, his hair was white
like the heron,
Oh Babua, all his thirty-two teeth
he had lost,
Oh Babua that day our grandpa

took up his sword! [pp. 74-75]

(the full lullaby is given in Appendix - 1 to this paper)

That 'collective memory' does not die is evident from a song composed and sung during Gandhi's first visit to Arrah District of Bihar in the 1920s. It reflects the popular belief of Gandhi as a reincarnation of Raja Kunwar Singh as also the change in emphasis on the mode of struggle.

... ..

old Kunwar Singh took up his sword
even on his eightieth year
It stirs our youthful blood
He himself has now come as Gandhi Baba
We will take your pledge of non-violence
and follow you to the end.

[p. 99]

(the full song is given in the Appendix - 2)

The ballads and folksongs on 1857 may remind one of the *Barphukonor Geet* depicting the sufferings of the people of Assam during the troubled days of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (though the context is different)³¹, and of the *Maniram Dewanor Geet* (who was executed during the Revolt of 1857). I shall cite from the latter:

You smoked on a gold hookah, O Maniram
You smoke on a silver hookah.
What treason did you commit to Royalty
That you got a rope around your neck!
How could they catch you, O Maniram,
How could they catch you?³²

... ..

(the full song is given in Appendix - 3)

If we move from folk songs and ballads to the other *genres* we can glimpse their usefulness to ‘informal’ oral history at any given time. The *street plays* of Safdar Hashmi are an instance, which document the pathos of our contemporary socio-political scenario. Political crises provide, at times, interesting sidelights. During a recent political change in our state, Meghalaya, I came across a *joke* which I heard from some staff of the Civil Secretariat. It was related to the then elderly Chief Minister: “our C.M. attends the Cabinet Meetings. But only to steal naps!” The C.M. sleeping is not important, but this very act *signified* an almost non-functional government, during a period of political instability! Tat *jokes* may not be placed on factual correctness but are used as ironical statements are seen in many cases. Popular legends abound surrounding Laloo Prasad Yadav in Bihar politics. These are topped by *Laloo Chalisa* – a collection of jokes. Together, these may mirror the state of affairs in the then Bihar. Once I was travelling to Guwahati from Shillong in a Tata Sumo. I overheard a comment made by a Bihari co-passenger, “Let Bihar be segregated by barbed wire and rest of India would be set right!” The correctness of this view is questionable. However, it is an ironical statement, reflecting upon our times! The symbolic use of *Lathis* in a recent rally, organized at the behest of Lalooji, is a case in point. A well-known Assamese maxim: “*When people shake their nails a river flows*”, is a classic example of relevance of such sayings for all ages – a warning to all, especially the politicians, not to ignore public opinion. The many lessons of the elections in India are an ample demonstration! Such sayings are, in fact, the products of experiences which expand the *Knowledge* horizon. Not for nothing that proverbs/aphorisms/maxims represent the scale of popular, commonsense understanding about the ways of the world. They have values for historical studies. Mencius used these in his treatises³³. It may be noted here that I have cited instances of hero-legends, origin myths and ballads etc. Obviously they are *not*, by themselves, oral history. However, I would not agree to the view that they cannot be used as oral historical sources for reconstruction of our past from a ‘long-time’ perspective.

Conclusion

This study has dealt with the three major dimensions – *psychological*, *ethical* and *knowledge* – of oral tradition and history. They represent the overall structure and functions of the *discourses* involved. We have to remember that a major part of oral tradition, as historical material, come from anonymous sources. But although they may be *mute* representations (in the sense of this anonymity) of the *popular mentality*, they do articulate a given social milieu. They, as *discourses*, provide *space* for both that people and the social milieu they represent, and the historian studying them. In both cases, objective conditions not only generate their respective discourses but give shape to them. In many cases of oral tradition we may discern certain amount of purposes and aims which are *implicit*, in the form of the metaphors and symbolisms, in the discourses. Therefore, I propose that such discourses are *intentional*.

If *discourse* means ways of articulation within a given social milieu, then to me it seems that Foucault's *concept* of discourse as a process of locating the relations of power which are connected with what is known and said, is basically 'anti-humanistic' in approach³⁴. Because, its *presumption* is that *consciousness* emerge from discourse, or in other words, it is the discourse which shapes our consciousness. No doubt, objective situations do give rise to our consciousness in the sense that our ideology formations are conditioned by the realities. No one can deny Marx and Engels' formulation that by complementary relations (or relative independence of), our ideologies create conditions for the next set of objective situations³⁵. Shorn of consciousness, human being is no more 'human'. Our worldviews, collective attitudes and opinions may arise from the 'collective unconscious', if Jung is to be followed. But conscious perceptions of the world come from practical experiences which go into the making of this "collective unconscious" by means of *archetypes*. Discourses emerge from a structured consciousness. Their purposes are *implicit* but never 'unintentioned' as Foucault would have it. For, it cannot be acceptable that the creators and articulators of say the *oral tradition*, with their subjectivity and societies they belong to, are mere *effects* of linguistic expressions. Even storytelling and listening to stories are not devoid of intention. It is another thing that in history we often reach an unintentional end. We are not concerned with that in this paper.

The above is precisely the reason why I stand by the views of Berger [1969: 30-31]. I may present them as follows: discourse is not the same as consciousness. Because, the form and content of discourse carry different meaning for different people. That is why, it is not merely conventional *verbal* expression. Hence it demands analysis.

The historian studying and using oral tradition as a process of discourses in time and space might add his/her own personal dimension of looking at and interpreting them, leaving plenty of rooms for debates. After all, no society is, or can be considered as, ‘people without history’. For, oral tradition serves that role albeit in an *informal* way. Broadly speaking, one has to appreciate Braudel’s observation:

By *history* I mean research conducted scientifically; at a pinch I might call it a *science*, but a complex one: there is no *one* history, *one* profession of historian, but many professions, many kinds of history, a whole list of inquiries, points of view, possibilities will be added tomorrow [1980: 64].

APPENDIX

(1)

Oh Babua, that day our grandpa took up
his sword

Oh Babua, to keep safe our pride and
our plenty

Our religion and our cows!

Oh Babua, to keep safe our widows
and their honour

And to protect our mothers and
sisters from disgrace

Oh Babua, to defend the fair name of
our fathers and grandfathers

Oh Babua, the edge of calamity was upon us,

Oh Babua, that day our grandpa
took up his sword!

Oh Babua, the Marathas laid down
their lives

And the Sikha had fought, till they died

Oh Babua, the sons of the Peshwas were
turned into slaves

Oh Babua the Emperor of Delhi – he too
a pauper became

And we begged and begged but received
no alms!

Oh Babua, that day our grandpa
took up his sword!

Oh Babua, useless when our cannons
became,
And scorpions had laid eggs in them,
Oh Babua, the barrels of our guns
had rusted
Oh Babua we had foolishly made
Sickles out of the steel of our swords.
Oh Babua, the Bhojpuris had even
thrown their lathis aside
Oh Babua, that day our grandpa
took up his sword!

Oh Babua, he was eighty years old,
Oh Babua, his head shook as he
moved,
Oh Babua, his hair was white
like the heron,
Oh Babua, all his thirty-two teeth
he had lost,
Oh Babua, that day our grandpa
took up his sword!

(Source: P.C. Joshi)

(2)

This is the brave land of Shershah
This is the district of Arrah
Bhojpuris of Bhoj we are called.

Today the savior of the world,
Gandhi Baba is here.
We will offer him the cushion of our
eyelashes to sit upon

Brothers, this is the land of Kunwar Singh
this is Arrah
Oh hero of heroes, we offer you a
hero's welcome!

Old Kunwar Singh took up his sword
even on his eightieth year
It stirs our youthful blood.

He himself has now come as Gandhi Baba
We will take your pledge of non-violence
and follow you to the end.

They took our Raj, they took our rights
They took away the honour of our women
To end the woes of our brothers
Our lives we shall stake.

(Source: P.C. Joshi)

(3)

Maniram Dewanor Geet: The Ballad of Maniram Dewan

[Opening portion describing the arrest of Maniram Dewan by the British Government and the common man's anguish at his execution]

You smoked on a gold hookah, O Maniram
You smoke on a silver hookah.
What treason did you commit to Royalty
That you got a rope around your neck!
How could they catch you, O Maniram,
How could they catch you?
Jorhat on this side, Golaghat on that,
Through a letter did they catch you,
Secretly did they arrest you, O Maniram,
Secretly did they arrest you;
Holroyd Sahib on the Tokolai bank
Had you secretly hanged.
The stubble of *bara* paddy, O Maniram,
This stubble of *bara* paddy,

Hardly four days passed his death
When meteors flashed in the sky!

.....
.....

(Source: P. Goswami, Ballads and Tales of Assam, Guwahati, 1969, 1970, cited in B.N.Dutta, et.al)

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End Notes

¹ T. Thompson 1981 (*Edwardian Childhoods*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul) cited in *Collins Dictionary of Sociology*. David & Julia Jary. Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers, 1991: 442-443.

² An instance is, *The World, An Illustrated History*. Ed. Geoffrey Parker. New York: Harper & Row, publishers, 1986: 176-180.

³ I have borrowed this term from Maurice Halbwachs in the sense of the *Social framework* of memory which work upon the individual and the 'collective' alike.

⁴ I am using 'collective' in the sense of *class*, *group* and *community*. It can even mean the *locality*, whereby the 'spatial' setting is bestowed with its own personality.

⁵ I have followed this process in which the members of any given 'collective' take part in the *popular* discourses during the elections, or in the event of an important political development, or during the communal disturbances.

⁶ However, among the historians Bernard S. Cohn, R.S. Sharma, P.C. Joshi and Romila Thapar have given the *informal* tradition its due.

⁷ 'Oral' tradition persists at the folk/tribal levels. The *non-verbal* pantomimic presentations may also form part of the 'informal'.

⁸ I've discussed this to some extent in "Ethnogenesis and Ethnic Consciousness: The Mythic Horizon", in *Ethnicity, Culture and Nationalism in North-East India*. Ed. M.M. Agarwal. New Delhi: Indus Publishing Co., 1996: 134-57.

⁹ See Richman, Paula. Ed., *Many Ramayanas, The Diversity of a Narrative Tradition in South Asia*. Delhi: O.U.P. 1997 impression (1992 edition).

¹⁰ The Gonds of Central India place Ravana on a higher pedestal than Rama. Ravana is presumed to have been their King. See Sankalia, H.D. *Ramayana, Myth or Reality?* New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1991 reprint: 46-48.

¹¹ For details, see *ibid*.

¹² Examples are cited in Karan, Sudhir Kumar. *Vishva Lokakathar Ruprekha* [Outline of the World Folklore, in Bengalee]. Calcutta: Punascha, 1996: 17-104.

¹³ Sen, Sukumar. *Bharatkathar Granthimochan* [Unfolding the Mahabharata, in Bengalee]. Calcutta: Ananda Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1982 reprint (1981 edition) deals with the *Mahabharata*.

¹⁴ I have adopted the idea of 'formalized social past' as what is "officially defined as the 'past'" from Hobsbaum, Eric. *On History*. London: Abacus, 1998: 14, see Ch. 2: 13-31. This 'past', Hobsbaum says, is based on "particular selection from the infinity of what is remembered or capable of being remembered". I find this view is applicable to the use of oral tradition.

¹⁵ For space constraints I have not gone into the details of this story. Moreover, the Khasi words and terms are avoided, as far as possible, to make its reading easier. The details of the story are to be found in the following works: (i) Malngiang, Pascal. *Aspects of Khasi Philosophy*. Shillong: Seven Huts Enterprise, 1991; (ii) Mawrie, H. Onderson. "God and Man", in U. Hipson Roy, ed., *Khasi Heritage*. Shillong: Seng Khasi, 1979: 83-90; (iii) Sen, Soumen. *Social and State Formation in Khasi and Jaintia Hills (A Study of Folklore)*. Delhi: B.R. Publishing Co., 1985; and (iv) Shadap-Sen, Namita Catherine. *The Origin and Early History of the Khasi-Synteng People*. Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1981.

There are several versions of this story. In some of them the 'golden tree' replaces the 'ladder'.

¹⁶ For this story, see (i) Bareh, Hamlet. *The History and Culture of the Khasi People*. Shillong: The Author, 1967; (ii) Gurdon, P.R.T. *The Khasis*. Delhi: Low Price Publications, 1993 reprint (1906 edition); (iii) Sen, Soumen, *ibid.*; and (iv) Shadap-Sen, N.C., *ibid*.

¹⁷ See Chowdhury, J.N. *The Khasi Canvas*. Shillong: The Author, 1978, especially the Chapter on "Migration", pp. 103-125.

¹⁸ See Laitflang, W.R. "Khasi Society – Indigenous Traits". In *Lest We Forget*. Shillong: Seven Huts Enterprise, 1994: 07-10. He also briefly touches the question of migration of the Khasis (p.07).

¹⁹ See Pakem, Barister. "State Formation in Pre-Colonial Jaintia". In *Tribal Polities and State Formation in Pre-Colonial Eastern and North-Eastern India*. Ed. Surajit Sinha, Calcutta: K.P. Bagchi & Co., 1987; Sen, Soumen, *op.cit.*; and Shadap-Sen, *op.cit.*

²⁰ Shadap-Sen, *ibid.*: 80-90, 155-57.

²¹ Malngiang, Pascal. *Op.cit.*: 24-26.

²² Mawrie, H.O. *op.cit.*: see 84-85.

²³ See for details, Rymbai, R.T. “Khasi Religion”. In *Lest We Forget*: 01-06; and “Some Aspects of the Religion of the Khasi-Pnars”, in *Khasi Heritage*: 110-18.

²⁴ Sen, Soumen, *op.cit.*: 168-69.

²⁵ I am not entering into the details here, because the present exercise is dealing with the illustration of the dimensions. The details are to be found in the authorities already referred to.

²⁶ Tr. By Dr. I.M. Simon in his contribution. “A Note on Khasi and its Development as a Literary Language”, in Appendix-I to Chowdhury, J.N. *op.cit.pp.* 387-414, see 402-03.

²⁷ See Simon, I.M. *Khasi and Jaintia Tales and Beliefs*. Gauhati: Department of Tribal Culture and Folklore Research, Gauhati University, 1966: 72-73. The story reflects the *pathos* associated with jealousy and possessiveness.

²⁸ Rymbai, R.T. 1979 *op.cit.* See pp. 113-14.

²⁹ ‘Syiem’ means *Chief*. See for details the authorities above referred.

³⁰ See for details, (i) Bower, Ursula Graham. *Naga Path*. London: John Murray, 1950; & (ii) *The Assam Secretariat Political – A*, September 1931, Nos. 20-94.

³¹ Dutta, Birendra Nath et al. Ed., *A Handbook of Folklore Material of North-East India*. Guwahati: ABILAC, Assam, 1994: 75-76, 376.

³² *Ibid.*: 324-25. Today, however, such songs are seldom sung.

³³ See for a few examples, “The Book of Mencius”, in Schurmann, Franz and Schell, Orville. Ed. *China Readings – 1: Imperial China*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1972 reprint (1967 edition): 9-20.

³⁴ See for details (i) Foucault, M. *The Archaeology of Knowledge*. New York: Harper & Row, 1972; and (ii) Rabinow, P. Ed., *The Foucault Reader*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1991.

³⁵ Marx & Engels. *Selected Works*. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1962, Vol. II: 397.

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