

Origins and Origin Myths: Reading Narratives of the Peoples of the Northeast

Swati

Research Scholar, School of Letters, Ambedkar University Delhi
E-mail: swati.17@stu.aud.ac.in

Abstract—*The “existing identity,” as Temsula Ao puts it in Identity and Globalisation: A Naga Perspective (2006), of many of the peoples from Northeast India springs from their mythic lore. They understand their origin, location, and why they have come to be what they are through their myths. She maintains, “There is no concrete ‘historical’ or material support for the myths of origin; however, these myths have been accepted by people as an inalienable principle of their tribal history”. The statement gives an impetus to delve deeper into the myths of the Northeast. Each tribe with its distinct language, dresses, social and/or religious customs has continued to live as a group, securing its pasts in narratives that construct their present. Mythic lore has great aesthetic value. It is not just a link connecting the past with present, but a document that preserves traditions born out of interactions between peoples within and among communities. Above all, it is a society’s own way of presenting itself. A study of such narratives from the Northeast may offer an insight into the lives of its various peoples. The paper aims to explore a few such origin myths that have been collected through extensive fieldwork.*

Reflecting on the state of tradition in the Northeast, Temsula Ao observes in *Identity and Globalization: A Naga Perspective* that

Cultures of North East India [emphasis added] are already facing tremendous challenges... In the evolution of such cultures and the identities that they embody, the loss of distinctive identity markers does not bode well for the tribes of the region. If the trend is allowed to continue communities will become mere brand names and commodity markers stripped of all human significance and which will definitely mutate the ethnic and symbolic identities of a proud people (Ao, 2006, p. 6-7).

“Identity” and its discussion is a highly contentious terrain, being overloaded with several cultural and social meanings. Assigning a singular identity of “Northeast” to

peoples who are highly diverse and distinct in all nameable aspects, culinary habits, attire, language, rituals, etc., to name a few is problematic. Homogenisation colligates identities, and what we have is an aggregate: an assemblage of constituent identities, where original features are erased. While the “new” identity is celebrated, the erasure of the particular one is a matter of loss. The paper, therefore, will attempt to de-homogenise, using the term “peoples,” acknowledging their unicity.

The “existing identity,” to use Ao’s term, of many of these peoples springs from their mythic lore (Ao, 2006, p. 6-7). They understand their origin, location, and why they have come to be what they are through their myths. As Ao notes, “There is no concrete ‘historical’ or material support for the myths of origin; however, these *myths have been accepted by people as an inalienable principle of their tribal history* [emphasis added]” (Ao, 2006, 6-7).

The loss of cultural distinctions, as has been reported by Ao, is intrinsically linked with depletion of lore and traditions that peoples of the Northeast have cherished. It is this alarming situation that gives one an impetus to delve into the literatures of the Northeast. Each tribe with its distinct language, dresses, social and/or religious customs has continued to live as a group, securing its pasts in narratives that construct their present. The paper aims to explore a few such narratives.

It is appropriate to be mindful at the outset that the myths have travelled across geographies and peoples through words of mouth, with unknown composers or narrators over a long period of time. They may have experienced several changes, and grasped characters of society that produced them. Mythic lore does not belong to any particular individual or moment in history, rather

it is an entire community that owns it. Like modern “texts” it is not fixed and continues to evolve. Therefore, there might be several variations of any myth, legend, or lore. The following myths and legends have been collected over an extensive fieldwork.

As has already been discussed, the Lepchas, like many peoples of the Northeast, trace their identity through their myths. They are one among the many indigenous peoples living in Sikkim, hills of West Bengal, along with western and southwestern part of Bhutan, eastern part of Nepal, Tibet. Barbara A. West writes in *Encyclopedia of the Peoples of Asia and Oceania* that “*Lepcha* is derived from a derogatory nickname given to them by the Nepalese, *Lap-che*, meaning ‘in articulate speech’; however, today the name is in general use and does not bear this negative connotation” (West, 2009, p. 462). There exist many stories about their migration, but they maintain that they did not migrate to their current locations from anywhere, and are indigenous to the many regions where they now live (West, 2009, p. 462). The legend of Do Roam Dyan tells the story of the incident that resulted in the number of different tribes that can be found today.

Thousands of years ago, people of Sakyong Pentong (north Sikkim) were tormented by a demon king, Laso Mung Pune. As a result, they deserted their homes to find sanctuary in a safer place. They began to move towards Kingchun Chypong (Mount Kanchenjunga), and after travelling across various hills and forests for many months, decided to halt. Slowly, the place began to develop, but certain apprehensions remained. In a meeting of the elderly, it was decided that a magnificent staircase be made that may lead them to the heaven, allowing them to ask the Gods for a divine intervention. Water of the nearby lake had to be released, so that the remaining soil could be used for building a staircase. The place where the lake was situated before came to be known as Do Roam Dyan or Daramdin (meaning “releasing the water of lake”).

After the lake dried up and the bed of the lake was all that was left, the people began to make earthen pots, and building the staircase. It took them about twelve years to build a staircase that could reach the heaven. Noting their progress, the Gods decided to intervene, and introduced some changes in the language spoken by the Lepchas. When those working at the top asked the people at the bottom to pass them a hook so that

they may check whether they have reached the heaven, the latter misheard them and started smashing the earthen pots, breaking the staircase. Those who were on the top fell down, and ones who managed to survive the mishap were divided into two major subtribes: Tukmomu and Kachyummu. These subtribes later disintegrated to reach the present number of about forty.

Pema Wangchuk and MitaZulca in *Khangchendzonga: Sacred Summit* hold that although “theories” about how the Lepchas emerged as a group they are today differ, the community has a significant relationship with “Khangchendzonga,” as narrated in the myth, and it is difficult to spot a Lepcha village from where the mountain range cannot be beheld (Wangchuk & Zulca, 2007, p. 31).

Tripura Ni HachukKuchuk O, a Kokborok¹ folk song, in a similar fashion documents the peoples’ belonging to their home and surrounding nature. It evokes the interspersed local bamboo and cane forests. Seasonal heavy rainfalls and alluvial deposits make Tripura’s soil ideal for cultivation. Consequently, most residents are engaged in agriculture and allied activities, as noted:

Tripura nihachukkuchuk O...
tongthaichiniaro, tongna tong baiya
chano, chabaiya, chiniachaimahao le
Ho...ho...ho...hi...hi...hoye...
Salthangwihorphaipike, changwogola,
yagodamoraabosichinitongthai
tongthainochungle tong nai,
Khlaithainochunglekhlainai
Tripura nihachukkuchuk O...
Twisitwigurungbasagoi,
hathaihaphonglaisogoi
Tripura nihachukkuchuk ho...
The high hills of Tripura...

¹The word Kokborok is a combination of two words, “Kok” meaning “language” and “Borok” meaning “human,” which is spoken specifically by peoples living in Tripura. Many have noted that it is closely related to Bodo and Dimasa, both languages of Assam. It is not one singular language, but a collective name for many dialects and languages that are spoken in Tripura.

*They are the best place for us to live.
 Ho...ho...ho...hi...hi...hoye...
 Girls collect water from nearby springs
 in earthen pots, and boys
 with the help of dao² cut,
 collect firewood from the jungles
 for our kitchens.
 This is what we do,
 this is how we live.
 The high hills of Tripura...
 Crossing small lakes,
 high hills, and valleys,
 we roam and live happily.
 The high hills of Tripura...*

The song celebrates scenic beauty of the state. Mountain ranges running north to south, and deep green valleys constitute the landscape of the state. Interspersed in the landscape are the Chethuang trees. It is believed that they lost their crown after an unfortunate incident. While discussing one of the tales from Chandra Kanta Murasingh's *Tales and Tunes of Tripura Hills*, writes Sekhar Datta, "Unable to bear her brother's advances, a girl flees home one night and prays to a Chethuang tree to grow tall so that she could climb it and reach heaven" (Datta, 2009, para. 11). As per the myth, after deciding to depart, she greeted her parents and the villagers, and prayed to Chethuang to grow. Seeing this, the brother climbed up the Chethuang tree to save his sister, who using her toe, kicked at the Chethuang tree and rose among the clouds. It is believed that Chethuang lost its crown thereafter.

The word "Mizo" is an overriding term for several ethnic peoples who speak various Mizo languages. The Mizo claim that there was Chhinglung at the cradle of all the Mizos. It is believed that they lived in caves at some point in the history, probably during the prehistoric times. Once, a thick mist engulfed everything that was there, and darkness covered the earth. Strange things began to happen, and humans transformed into various birds and animals. The God, Khuazingnu, on seeing His

wonderful creation, human being turn into "lesser" creatures, grew worried. He gathered a husband and wife from each tribe and shut them in a secret cave. He covered the opening with a huge stone, which later came to be known as Chhinglung. After some generations must have passed, Khuazingnu opened the gate. He was pleased to listen to several but confusing indistinct voices. He opened Chhinglung so that the various tribes may come out. It is for this very reason that tribes of the Mizo maintain that they have emerged from Chhinglung.

In the beginning, hold the Mizo, was Khuazingnu, who created this magnificent earth. Seeing that it remained dry, Khuazingnu opened the windows of heaven, pouring down the rains. (This may be the possible reason why many are told that rain is nothing but water fetched by a maiden from the heaven.) Both humans and animals lived happily with one another but could not eat anything, for earth was covered with hard rocks, and nothing could be grown.

There was some soil, but across the banks of an extremely cold ocean Tuihriam. Many animals began diving into the ocean so that they may collect the soil, but none could survive in the cold water. Oddly enough, the porcupine managed to swim across and smear some soil on his face. Everybody's face glowed with happiness. But the soil was very little. Everybody scratched their heads on how to spread the little soil they had on a huge earth. "I can eat the soil and poop, increasing the volume of the soil," said the earthworm. Everybody was disgusted. Not only this, they were worried that he might just eat the soil up. The earthworm suggested that if he doesn't poop, his stomach can be cut open to take the soil back. Everybody was convinced. The earthworm ate and ate and ate, and just as he had claimed, he pooped and pooped and pooped. Seeing more and more soil, everybody excitedly spread it all over the earth. The earth became a great plain covered with soil. Vegetation grew and everybody lived happily.

But, there also grew a supremely large tree, Thingvantawng, literally meaning a tree that reaches the sky. The animals decided to cut the tree, for it could spoil the plain earth, but they had to wait until it dried up. When they could not bear to wait any longer, a bird went up to see if earth was still wet anywhere. The small bird couldn't find any wet spot. Since the soil hadn't dried properly, the tall tree when fell, caused a rupture,

²A large knife used for cutting trees and plants.

making valleys and hills. This is how Mizoram, deriving from "Mi," meaning "people," "Zo," meaning "hill," and "Ram," meaning "land" got its present name and form (landscape).

The Idu Mishmis are an ethnic group living primarily in the northeastern end of central Arunachal Pradesh. Traditionally, the Idus believe in animism, a religious belief that all objects, places, creatures, etc., are animated by a spiritual essence. A legend tells that they too had to struggle for foodgrains. Once, both the Gods and humans were equal, but in might and power. The Gods, out of jealousy, showered the earth with half-cooked grains. Andizru, the local priest revealed that the Gods have cheated them. He sent two tiny birds, ipih and peka to seek revenge, and bring back some grains. The two birds entered Apesha, the land of Gods. Befooling Millih, the Goddess of the crops and Golloh, the Goddess who guarded the crops, they brought some maize and paddy back home. Joyful humans began cultivation and celebrated. Folk songs that commemorate the incident are sung during post-harvest festivals till date.

In addition, it is believed that in the hilly tracts of the region, lives a giant snowman known as the Himalayan Yeti, or Grepfut. The Yeti has a long nose, sparkling eyes, and a forehead that resembles a cone, and its hair stand erect. The Yeti runs from one hill to another, making terrifying cries. It lives in a huge cave, and seldom comes out to feast on humans. The earth rests on the horns of a giant ox. And when the Yeti jumps too hard, the ox moves, causing the earth to quake.

The modern game of polo, though formalised and popularised by the British, is believed to have been derived from Manipur, where it is known as *Sagol Kangjei* (Stephen, n.d., para. 1). Legend holds that King Khangba invented the game in erstwhile Kangleipak (now Manipur). The game has, since then, been maintained as part and parcel of Manipuri ethos. Ponies, an integral part of polo, figure prominently in Manipuri (Meitei as informed by the informant) mythology, and are claimed to have an undeniable presence in the state's social life. Ancient Manipuri literature gives an account of the role they play in the local myths.

A book named *Ougri* (as cited in Raj, n.d., para. 5) states After Lord Ashiba, the Almighty God had created the earth, His son Atiya asked His brother Apanba to create human beings. Apanba, after having consulted His

wife, Leinung Chakha Khongjombi, started planting sword beans on the earth. Lord Ashiba became jealous, and created Samaton Ayangba, a mythical horse that is believed to be the progenitor of Manipuri Pony, so that both human beings and their agriculture, created by Apanba may be destroyed. Apanba, then, fought with Samaton Ayangba, and His wife Leinung Chakha Khongjombi helped Him in His conquest. Later, they cut off Ayangba's wings, mane, and fur, taming the pony so that it may be used by the humans.

Elsewhere, in Assamese exists a legend which tells the story of a magical Singharafish. One fine afternoon, a poor man went to a nearby river to catch some fishes for the supper. Even after toiling for all day long, he couldn't catch even a single fish. The dejected man was about to leave, but decided to try his luck one last time. He threw the hook into the water and felt a sudden tugging at the other end. He had managed to catch a Singhara fish. With happy thoughts of a delicious dinner in mind, he unhooked the fish, and prepared to leave. To his surprise, the talking fish said, "I am the king of Singhara fishes. Have some mercy on me and spare my life!" Before the man could say anything, the fish said that it would graze his cows. The man's heart softened and he agreed.

The next morning, Singhara fish set out to graze his cows. Whenever the fish directed the cows to a particular field and it would go to the other, he would prick them with his fins, forcing the cows to jump to the right patch. But there appeared a monster who wanted to eat the cows. The Singhara fish pricked the monster with his fins, who then, pleaded for mercy. As a gesture of thankfulness, he Singhara fish a magical ring, which when wrapped in a banana leaf, would fill his house with heaps of gold and silver.

The fish narrated the incident to the poor man, who didn't believe his words. On following the instructions, he was blessed with heaps of jewels. Overwhelmed with joy, the man married his daughter to the Singhara fish. When after a few days, the fish's wife was washing clothes by the riverside, she saw an unbelievable sight. Singhara fish had removed his skin, and had transformed into a handsome young man. A smart woman, she burnt Singhara fish's skin to ashes. The Singhara fish remained in his human form, and the couple lived happily ever after.

A significant aspect of any culture is possession of the written words which serves as the "history". It is for this reason, many call peoples from the Northeast as "people without history". Various communities have been using orality as a tool to transmit their collective memories and shared experiences down the generations. Orality, here, documents the indigenous knowledge as well as the experiences of the present, which are equally worthy and significant. With its location on India's periphery, the region already experiences exclusion because of its remoteness and cultural distinctiveness. Under these circumstances, when one often relies on the colonial representations to understand various Northeastern peoples and regions, prejudiced conceptions are reinscribed. This, to a certain extent, has created an idea of an insular Northeast, relegating its peoples as different and exotic. The paper seeks to dismantle this "otherness," by beginning to explore some narratives which emerge out of the communities themselves.

Association of orality with primitiveness and written word with modernity is a colonial view that needs to be challenged. Mythic lore has great aesthetic value. It is not just a link connecting the past with present, but document that preserves traditions born out of interactions between peoples within and among communities. Above all, it a society's way of presenting itself. A study of emerging narratives from the Northeast may offer an insight into the lives of its various peoples. The narratives may be contentious and challenge each other, but efforts are appreciable.

I use the word "emerging" as Margaret Ch. Zama puts it, "emerging does not necessarily denote only the new but also refers to the fact that though more new writings in English and the vernacular are indeed being generated from the region, so also is the emergence of previous and existing works in the form of translations, thereby making such works accessible..." (Zama, 2013, p. xi).

The paper is an attempt to bring together some origin myths which in no way is an exhaustive study. The myths are attempts on the part of the professing communities to make sense of the (ir) world. The thrust, as Zama urges remains unchanged that "emerging literatures" of the peoples of the Northeast "having undergone historical and political trauma of untold suffering and marginalization, registers various voices

that needs to be heard and understood in the context of India's multicultural mosaic (Zama, 2013, p. xi). The literatures are historical and cultural documents that present various peoples, their communities, distinct worldviews, and linguistic registers, among other things.

Tradition is the cultural heritage that is and should be maintained from generation to generation. The wealth of tradition is present mainly in the form of lore, both mythic and folk, stories, poetry, etc. The Northeast is a huge reservoir of such wealth. It is a land of art of different peoples, whose heritage is recorded in handicrafts, folklore, mythology, literature.

The myths ought not be understood as mere reminiscence or nostalgia for a way of life that seems to have been lost in the distant past, but must be appreciated as voices emerging from societies "caught in the cross currents of their political and historical inheritances, personal tragedies and ambivalence, voices that are involved in developing and contributing to a much larger literary consciousness that needs to be recognized and interrogated" (Zama, 2013, p. xii).

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