

Folk Songs as Oral Narratives: A Study of the Folk Songs of the Bongcher Community of Tripura

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Abstract:

The Bongchers are one of the smallest ethnic tribes of Tripura. The Bongchers of Tripura, like any other such ethnic communities in India and the world, have lived an undocumented history for centuries. Members of this community, having no written script and language at their disposal, have narrated themselves through the spoken word from the ancient times. This spoken word constitutes the Bongcher literature of oral traditions which include a wide variety of folk songs, folk tales, riddles, proverbs, idioms, comparisons and other forms of oral expressions. Due to the absence of any comprehensive and well documented history of the community, any socio-cultural and historical study that involves this community has to be inevitably informed by its oral traditions. This paper proposes to study the folk songs of the Bongcher community, whose total population numbers not more than one thousand. The present study aims at looking at these folk songs, which have luckily survived the doom of extinction, not as mere forms of entertainment rather as powerful oral narratives archived in the collective memory of the community. Any literary and cultural study of the oral traditions of such ethnic communities has to undoubtedly grapple with anxieties arising out relying too much on the spoken word of the collective memory. But one has to remember that it is the spoken word, among many other forms of creative expressions and cultural practices, which defines the identity of such communities which is why any attempt from outside forces at denying the power of the spoken word and the erasure of the social memory is met with violent resistances from these tribes. This implies the intricate and inseparable relation between the oral, memory and the ethnic identity of these tribes. This paper intends to build up its argument on the basic premise that the folk songs which are an inseparable part of the Bongcher literature of oral traditions must not be treated as mere forms and expressions of entertainment of a community, rather they are meaningful “communal” oral narratives within which the identity of the community is encoded.

Key Words: tribal folksong, orality, memory, narratives, ethnicity, ethnic identity]

This paper recognises the power and significance of the spoken word in the context of the study of ethnic cultures across the globe, which are perpetually threatened and menaced by the invasion of “narratives” in forms, seemingly stronger and more constant than the oral. The paper undertakes a study of the folk songs of the Bongcher tribe of Tripura and argues that any study of the tribe must rely on the diverse oral traditions that define and shape life and living of these people. Despite the extinction of an unimaginably vast treasure house of oral traditions of the Bongcher tribe with the death of the “tellers” or the “speakers”, the folk songs which have continued to live through the spoken word of mouth, may be looked at as

narratives archived in the collective memory of the tribe. These folk songs as oral narratives are living inscriptions of the history and the past of the tribe. They are a kaleidoscopic depiction of the life of the Bongchers.

The Bongchers are a very small sub-tribe of the Halam community of Tripura. Although the first settlement of this tribe was in the Ompi area in Amarpur sub-division of Tripura, they are now scattered in small numbers in different parts of Tripura such as Teliamura, Gandachara, Ambassa, Kamalpur and other places. The Nelsiebongcher para or Nelsiepara at the foot of the Barmura hills at Ompi, under Amarpur sub-division, still happens to be the largest settlement of the Bongcher tribe. Although there is no recently updated record, it is assumed that the population of the tribe will not be more than one thousand. Kamal Bongcher, one of the compiler-editors of the only book on the Bongcher literature so far, published by the Sahitya Akademi, fears that the smallest number of population of this tribe may suggest that they are a community on the verge of extinction. Due to the unavailability of any written documents, very little is known about the history, origin, and arrival of this tribe in Tripura. The meagre amount of socio-cultural and ethnic history of this tribe that has so far been retrieved and preserved in written form by different bodies of the state and central government, has had to rely on the oral narratives of this tribe. The Bongchers of Tripura, like any other such ethnic tribes in India and the world, have lived an undocumented history for centuries. Members of this tribe, having no written script and language at their disposal, have narrated themselves through the spoken word from the ancient times. This spoken word constitutes the Bongcher literature of oral traditions which include a wide variety of folk songs, folk tales, riddles, proverbs, idioms, comparisons and other forms of oral expressions. These oral traditions archived in the collective memory of the tribe need intensive study, preservation and dissemination in forms other than the spoken word. Because these oral traditions are prone to extinction with death of the generations of “tellers” or “speakers”. The oral traditions of the Bongcher tribe, like that of any other ethnic tribe in the state, are characterised by dynamism, anonymity, and shared memory. This implies a complex and intriguing discourse about the intricate relationship between memory, narratives and identity of such ethnic communities. Any scholar will definitely have to grapple with a set of questions and doubts which his/her engagement with the given tribe’s oral traditions may give birth to- how far it is feasible to aim at a truthful study of the tribe by looking into only “the oral”, whether the findings of the study be considered valid for they have had to depend so much on the spoken word of memory, or whether it is justified to draw on the collective memory of the tribe because memory falters in many ways.

None, no one I can call my own
Is there, in this desolate earth.
I search my heart for a destination
(And find nowhere a welcoming hearth.) (1-4)

So is narrated the entire painful history of the Bongcher tribe- their perpetual search for a destination, a place called home, in one of the melancholic folk songs called “S A R A L A” or “Song of the Destitute II”. The *Foreword* of Kamal Bongcher, one of the compiler-editors, to the book “*Echoes From Lungleng Tang: Bongcher Literature of Oral Tradition*” suggests that the Bongcher folk songs are marked by a constant presence of a sense of melancholy, sadness, nostalgia, defeat, fear, and insecurity. One important characteristic that

renders these folk songs different from that of the other ethnic communities in Tripura, is this all-pervasive sense of sadness which is easily manifested during the performance of these songs by the folk artists who almost instinctively break to tears as they sing along these age-old heart wrenching stories of the tribe from their memory. This sense of sadness has its genesis in the nomadic life of the Bongchers and the intolerable pains and hardships that are an inevitable part of such life.

Although there is a host of conflicting versions of stories about the origin of the tribe, the legends, myths, and popular beliefs seem to suggest that the original abode of the Bongchers was in sinlung or chhinlung in South China. They are a sub-tribe of the “Baro Halams” group of tribal community. Even though the twelve tribes of the “Baro Halams”, share a linguistic affinity among themselves, the Bongchers do speak a different dialect which is called the Bongcher language. These Bongchers inherit an ethnic affiliation to the Tibeto-Burman Mongoloid group. Linguistically they belong to the Kuki-Chin language group. The route of the migration of the Bongchers is a long and chequered one. Theirs is a long journey through ages from Sinlung, China to Burma, through Mizoram, and the Chittagong Hill tracts to Amarpur, Tripura. It is believed that around five centuries ago, the Bongchers, after leaving behind the Chittagong Hills, followed the course of the Gumati river in search of an ideal place for new settlement. Having heard of the entry of a new group of people in his land, Maharaja Amarmankya, arranged for a meeting at the palace, accepted them as his subjects and ordered them to settle at the Ompi area. After their periodic settlements at places such as Sonakang, Tuicheleng, and Taidu Bazar, they had permanently settled at the Nelsiepara in Ompi, Amarpur. Nelsiepara happens to be the most ancient and the largest settlement of the Bongcher tribe.

The Bongchers have songs for almost every occasion in their social life. Although sadness predominates, the songs are a panoramic depiction of all human emotions. The folk songs of the Bongchers present a kaleidoscopic picture of the tribe’s past, their nomadic life, cultural and social beliefs. Perpetual movement from one place to another, in search of new beginnings and the need to tame the wild lands for survival, along the course of the journey, have characterised the lives and living of these people. An intense sense of homelessness is deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the tribe. The wretched predicament of these people on the “desolate earth” is a constant presence in the folk songs of the tribe. In a song called S A R A L A – II, or “Song of the Destitute – II”, the narrator laments the utter futility and exhaustion born of the perpetual journey towards finding a home:

There’s no place on this earth for me
 How long can I trudge on and on?

The encounter with the wild nature, quite naturally, gives birth to a sense of helplessness and getting lost in the unknown which finds vivid and melancholic expression in the song S A R A L A- II or Song of the Destitute II:

I call out
 Seven times. None to my left I see.
 None to my right nor can I find out.
 Who is there my own? Who will be? (5-8)

The deep intoxicating silence, accompanied with intermittent hoots of birds at night lulls the inmates of a Bongcher home in the lap of nature to sleep. Morning, with the crows of the cocks, whispers in the ears of the sleepers, to wake up, embrace and face the challenges of the day together. Such is narrated the breaking of a dawn in one of the songs called “JING” or “Morning”:

The cricket chirps in the morning
 Hear the cock crow at dawn
 Up and awake all
 Let us get to work together. (1-4)

Like any other ethnic tribes in the state, the Bongchers, who still have to depend on agriculture and jhum cultivation for sustenance, do need to stick to the ancient tradition of living and working together as a community. The call of the dawn to wake up and move out together for the day’s work is beautifully expressed in the song called “JIMLA” or “Song at Day Break”:

Awake, awake you all
 Friends and fellows, awake together.
 Slept with the hoots of the owl,
 Now it’s morning, the cocks all crow—
 Awake, O, awake you all.
 Taking a quick and meagre breakfast,
 We shall move ahead surmounting all obstacles
 Together we shall go.
 Awake, O, awake you all. (1-9)

The songs of love and separation of the Bongchers are deceptively simple depictions of the feelings of love, sorrows and hardships of everyday life. Love songs are replete with metaphors, images, and objects of nature. The promise of the two lovers to each other, to stay together in the face of all odds in life, is vividly expressed, through metaphors of nature, in “Love Song I” called “RIDIL A I”. The lovers compare themselves to different objects of nature to express their resolve to hold each other’s hand forever.

Boy : If I become a *Kelreng*¹ tree, what would you do?
 Girl : I shall be your branch and remain attached to you.
 Boy : If I be a scaly *Ngalim*² in the running brook?
 Girl : I’d embrace you as a net from the farthest nook. (1-4)

The lover in another love song assures his ‘Seetanu’ or beloved, of the prospective consummation of their love despite having little differences between themselves. The recurrence of images from the natural world in the songs are suggestive of the ancient psychic relation of the tribe with the wild nature as evident in the following songs titled “RIDIL A –II” or “Love Song-II” and “RIDIL A –IV” or “Love Song-IV” respectively:

If we are different vegetative growths
 Throwing up separate shoots,

Boiled together we can make
 Richer and delicious food. (15-18)

If we grow as vegetables of sorts,
 We germinate at the same time, O *Ramoi* ³.
 We shall share our food, won't we?
 Tell me, O *Ramoi* . (19-22)

The flora and fauna in the songs seem to carry manifold symbolic implications. The sound of cricket which normally suggests breaking of dawn, a call for new beginning, appears to be unbearable to the beloved who is alone and lamenting the absence of her lover as found in the song called “RWTWINAL A- I” or “Separation-I”:

Ramnithey ⁴ insects drone and drone—
 They pay no heed to anyone's words.
 I remember *Ramai* all the time—
 O *Ramnithey* insect, please drone no more. (1-4)

The folk songs are vivid and faithful narrations of the painful past, tortures, exploitations that the tribe has suffered for ages, in the hands of the ruthless rulers of different lands which they have inhabited along the course of their journey for home. The pain and sadness of the tribe comes alive in the songs called songs of “separation”, in which the narrator laments the loss of his/her beloved ones. One such song depicts the tortures inflicted on the subjects by the king's soldiers (RWTWINAL A (II) or “Separation (II)”):

I had gone fishing for crabs in the streamlets,
Binandiyas ⁵ came and stole you away. (1-2)

When I had gone for fishing crabs in streams,
 My wife and child had been abducted,
 By the *Binandiyas* for my debt. (14-16)

These folk songs as oral narratives are the direct products of the continuous social interaction among the members within and outside the community, and its confrontation with a perpetually untameable physical world. Needless to say, these oral narratives of the tribe do shape and control their social and cultural practices. In the face of pressures from the forces of the technology driven modern society, much of the worldview of this tribe still continues to be inspired by the oral traditions, deeply rooted in the collective consciousness of the community. These are not just songs; it is through these songs or the word of the mouth that the Bongchers have narrated and preserved their past. The entire history, the past and the very identity of the Bongchers are orally scripted in their songs. To deny the power of the spoken word of these people, would mean denying their existence. To take away the spoken word, would mean taking away their past.

It would take a surprisingly meagre amount of intellect on the part any ordinary person to understand that the perpetually violent “insurgency problem” in the northeast of India owes its origin to the chosen blindness and sheer incapacity of the power centres to

recognise and acknowledge the power of the spoken word- the stories of these ethnically different groups. Unless and until this age old practice of violent appropriation of the micro-stories of these tribes with the bigger and nationalistically inspired stories of development, progress, national integration, and others, in the name of democracy, does not stop, the wars and tension will continue. It is time the nation understood, it is not the ethnic groups and the state that are at war, rather it is the war of the conflicting stories. And these wars of the stories cannot come to an end until it is acknowledged that such different stories do exist and they must be heard with care and sincerity.

To sum up, all previous research projects of different government bodies for retrieving and documenting the history of the Bongchers or any other such ethnic tribes in the state, have had to rely on the oral traditions of the tribes, which testifies to the fact that such oral traditions are inextricably linked to the identity of these threatened ethnic groups. The history of any ethnic group is inscribed in its oral traditions. Retrieving these oral traditions is rewriting their history. Hence, the folk songs of the Bongchers, which contain such fascinating world of stories- stories of love, separation, sufferings, defeats and wins, do need immediate preservation and dissemination for the spoken word is always vulnerable to extinction. The singing voices must be heard before they disappear. The launch of the new projects by the Tribal Research Institute of Tripura for archiving the folk songs of the tribal communities in the state is indeed a ray of hope.

End Notes:

1. Kelreng : A tree of hard wood
2. Ngalim: A scaly Fish
3. Ramoi : Address to the beloved boy by a girl
4. Ramnithey : Cricket
5. Binandiyas : King's bodyguards

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