

International Seminar on Orality: The Quest for Meaning

CONCEPT NOTE

It is pertinent to have a wider platform which offers avenues into the study and discourses on oral traditions when the world, in its so-called progress for development, is veering away from the age-old traditions and the wisdom contained therein. Oral traditions offer an understanding of a world in which humankind has lived for generations together with the other animate and inanimate objects. Writing, being a relatively recent invention, most cultures, especially the non-literate indigenous cultures, recorded their experiences, history, traditions, proverbs and beliefs through oral traditions which are remembered and passed on through generations. Therefore it goes without saying the importance and significance of oral narratives to the understanding of these cultures. The new surge of interest in non-western cultures and multiculturalism, spurred by post-colonial studies, has certainly contributed to the renewed study of the unwritten verbal art of the people across the world. The re-discovery of oral traditions, as Miles Foley has claimed, is “an achievement of the twentieth century” (*Teaching Oral Traditions*: 1998) and this ‘re-discovery’ has, no doubt, unearthed a wealth of knowledge. Besides the realization and the consequent preservation of knowledge, it has led to a better understanding of those cultures who have not otherwise found adequate representation in the written literature of the modern world.

Understanding Northeast

In this regard, the case of Northeast India may be taken into account. The scanty writings that one finds on the region through anthropological works or colonial reports offer more or less distorted views on the region and its people. Serious study had never been made on their cultures, their verbal art nor their history. At best, they are given as passing references and their verbal art presented as nothing but samples of ‘savage music’ or ‘concoctions of illiterate folk’. The subtle nuances, the rhythmic arrangement of lines, the deliberate pauses, onomatopoeic devices, the formulaic system, etc of their poetry, the various dance forms with various allusions to nature, the intricate patterns of their attire and many other elements involved in the verbal art of these non-literate societies were never the subject of scholarly inquiry. It is only by the turn of this new millennium that the region has seen its own native writers experimenting with writing. But since this phenomenon is comparatively new, hardly enough written literature has been produced to fill an entire shelf of a library. It is therefore dangerous if not misleading to focus exclusively on the written literary text as unrivaled paragon of literary art. The

seminar proposes to interrogate, revisit and re-examine the oral traditions of the people to arrive at a better understanding of the region.

Environment in the traditional worldview: ecocentric or anthropocentric?

The study of oral traditions is important also because they contain age-old wisdom about the environment, and knowledge gathered from experience is crucial to a better understanding of the earth in this age when the world is heading towards environmental devastation with its thoughtless actions which harm the environment beyond repair in the name of development. It is therefore significant to have intellectual discussions and debates complemented by oral performances on the traditional worldview of the environment and the wisdom contained therein at such a time when the United Nations, in its General Assembly in 2015, calls for a global action to protect the environment, address climate change and adopt sustainable development, which clearly means that development should not have just one dimension, i.e. economic, but also integrate the social and environmental dimensions.

It is important to study the environmental philosophy of the peoples who have lived in close intimacy with nature - their deep knowledge of the ecology developed not through books but rather, by learning the book of nature through observing and through recognizing the intimate connection with the environment in which they live. It is important to realize that their world view may not be similar with that of the most literate societies because for them, the earth is not solely for humankind; they are just a part of the cosmic whole in which all things, animate or inanimate, are interrelated and inter-dependant. In fact, even the terminology we use for the inanimate objects— non-living things— may not be so appropriate for these cultures who live in such close proximity with nature, because even the 'non-living things' like the rocks, caves, mountains, gorges etc are believed to have spirits in them. Their rituals and ceremonies create a sense of community not just among the humans but also with the spiritual realms and offer a way of life in which humans can live in harmony with nature. The ecocentric beliefs of these cultures deserve to be studied in juxtaposition with the anthropocentric Euro-American beliefs.

Thus one of the objectives of the seminar will be to address the issue of the environment and how development can be brought about in harmony with nature.

Oral Tradition and History:

Oral narratives are especially significant to the northeast India, whose epistemic understanding of the region is usually derived through negative connotations. Different aspects like state interventions initiated through history writing,

anthropological reading of the communities, empowerment development can be explored and re-examined. Oral narratives play an undeniable role in establishing the identity of a tribe by giving an insight into the tribe's history. In the native sense, the oral myths and narratives are history though incidents may not be factually accurate and they may qualify as history because they are what a culture considers as truth. They are, in the words of Arnold Krupat, "public knowledge of the past— public in the sense of being culturally shared" (*Red Matters*: 2002) In the same vein, Jan Vansina has also said that among the peoples without writing, oral tradition forms the main available source for the reconstruction of the past (*Oral Tradition*: 1972). It is in this sense that the seminar can be fruitful in reconstructing the past and present of a region rife with misconceptions.

Approaches:

The twentieth century has witnessed the development of several theories by which literary works can be approached and these theories have been applied to the study of oral traditions as well. A wide range of approaches have been employed to the study of orality— the more "mechanical" Finnish historic-geographic method and the age-area hypothesis which focused on documenting the spread of a tale, resulting in the Aarne and Thompson's *Types of Folktale* and Thompson's *Motif - Index of Folk Literature*, followed by cultural approaches which lay emphasis on oral tradition as an information system that encoded cultural meaning and served the needs of the members of the society; some prefer to use the structural approach which examines oral literature as revealing the underlying, universal structure of the human mind. According to Claude Levi-Strauss, human beings perceive the world in binary opposites such as night-day, man-woman, dark-light and so forth and aspects of culture provide symbolic means to bridge or mediate these opposites which are structurally embedded at a deep, cognitive level of the human mind. But this approach is rejected as arbitrary intellectual approach by other approaches which stress on the importance of the "native's point of view" within a specific culture and stress upon this 'local' context which is ignored by the universality of Strauss's approach. And there is also the psychoanalytic approach, according to which, oral tradition serves as a symbolic projection of unconscious desires. These approaches are again followed by the postmodern approaches like the ethnopoetics, which lays stress to not only the text but the context with all the elements of performance like gestures, laughter, sighs etc thus encapsulating the living performances into the text. For ethnopoetic theorists like Dennis Tedlock, the prosaic narratives become poetry. According to him, documenting or translating a text must necessarily encapsulate the living performance. With the ethnopoetic approach, the sole focus on the text is shifted to the context and all the elements of performance.

Folktales and folk songs which form part of the oral traditions have often been felt to have the potential for fostering nationalism. Romantic nationalists like Johann Gottfried Herder gave a national character to folk poetry and referred to folk poetry as “ the archives of a nationality”.

Oral traditions have been approached from different perspectives to deal with issues like identity politics, gender, race, class, ethnicity, ecology etc. Northeast Indian writers such as Desmond Kharmawphlang see the folk as preservers of traditional wisdom and culture and turn to the village elders to gather the remnants of the quaint past. Many feminist writers, including Esther Syiem, Temsula Ao, and Margaret Ch. Zama re-read oral narratives of their cultures to deconstruct “male paradigms” and thereby reconstruct models which are more expressive of women’s emotions and experiences. Though writing for a long time had been a male domain, in orality we find a number of women’s expressive voices. For example, in the oral poetry of the Mizos, a number of early folk songs are named after women composers, one among whom was said to have been buried alive by the village authorities because they feared that she would not leave any song for posterity to compose. We also find the female presence in lullabies and love songs. The antiphonal Assamese and Bodo songs of Assam sung during festivals like Bihu and Bwisagu offer a wide spectrum of subtle female vocabulary, expressing their concerns and anxieties in a jocular fashion. In many cultures, songs become the forms of expressions of women, who are often been dominated, silenced and marginalized by men. We find a continuum of this trend in the writings of women poets.

Again, when we talk of orality and writing, it is pertinent to note that as far as conducting cultural affairs goes, even in the last few years of the millennium, the greater part of the world’ s population still conducts most of its cultural affairs without writing. And in the case of most societies of the Northeast India, the customary laws still exist in an oral form though a few have been codified. And customary laws can, in many instances , be very androcentric and patriarchal in nature resulting in gender discrimination and inequality.

The seminar proposes to offer a platform to present different women narratives, which will hopefully lend significant contribution in policy framing, and in reviewing customary laws in the march towards gender equality. The inclusion of live oral narratives and women narratives side by side with the academic discourse as part of the seminar will be the first of its kind in the Northeast.

Following are the themes that may be taken up by paper presenters for deliberation:

Orality and writing

Folklore: Approaches and prospects

Women narratives

Women and Nature: Emerging Perspectives

History writing and orality
Emerging literatures
Dynamics of indigenous identity
Revisiting Northeast
Folklore and nationalism
Traditional Belief Systems , myths, legends, oral poetry
Magic, Witchcraft and Paganism
Environment and traditional worldview
Inter-cultural and multi-cultural dialogues