

Indigenous Oral Narratives: Alternative Spaces of Expression and their Importance

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My interest in the oral narratives was fueled early on in life, mainly owing to an exposure to tales and folklores which would catch the imagination of any child. What began as a simple exercise of oral retelling of tales and personal exchanges, over a period of time developed into a fascination with the dynamics existing between a creative outlet for the narrator and the narrative content. Narratives, although an important mode of transmission of knowledge—especially among indigenous communities—have been undermined owing to precedence given to rigid forms like written records.

Extending Cognitive Horizon

I came to a realization that the functional importance of oral narratives, especially in the case of indigenous people is tremendous. It is a carrier of culture, tradition and thought processes of a community. These are what can be defined as ‘alternative spaces’ where one can embed deepest thoughts and opinions without any hesitation. The value of it particularly lies in the projection of the subjectivities by the narrator into the narrative content, making it nebulous yet directly in sync with the environment in which it is born. Thus what is readily dismissed as babblings of primitive thoughts, forms important communicative tool for sharing transcendental knowledge and instructive preservation measures. The access and understanding to such coterie system of knowledge are usually meant for circulation within a particular community and requires considerable patience to unlock the information which envisages universal relevance. One popular example is the indigenous environmental protection discourses, exhibited in such narratives and is currently being explored for contemporary environmental problems.

It was possible for me to gain such an insight after numerous discussions with experts and scholars during my SRA period. I had divided my SRA visit between two universities and their primary aims were:

- To garner theoretical, methodological and leading trends in the discipline of folklore at the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu. My mentor at the department, Professor Ülo Valk (to whom I remain indebted) ensured my active engagement in discussions, lectures and seminars with the faculty, visiting professors and scholars at the department.

- Secondly, I wanted to seize the opportunity to access one of the largest Lepcha manuscripts collections at the Special Collections section of Leiden University. The outcome of which (I hoped) would enable me to juxtapose the written narrative content with the oral narratives that I had been collecting in the duration of my fieldwork. Access to both these institutions was vital for facilitation of my research.

The discipline of folklore and narrative studies is fairly new in India. It sadly occupies a geographical and vernacular niche, which it still needs to overcome; this condition limits a holistic understanding of the discipline. Taking up a research which demands a multidisciplinary engagement from within the folds of literature studies, has its own statistical challenges. Hence discussions and deliberation with subject experts were the need of the hour, especially when it came to refuting and clarifying the technical aspects concerning collection and compilation of my primary data. At Tartu, I was exposed to valuable essentialities of classifying the data into correct genres and encouraged to apply relevant terminology; the orientation of which (I was informed) is necessary to prepare any researcher or reader regarding the approach measures to be adopted while analyzing the contents of the narratives. This exposure has helped me to introduce necessary improvements through revision of my writings and also rectification of what (on hindsight) can be considered as glaring mistakes that would otherwise have remained, had I not chanced upon the opportunity of gaining quintessential knowledge about the discipline.

Perusal of Manuscripts

Although my research engages with oral narratives, it would in my comprehension be deemed incomplete, unless efforts were made to access existing manuscripts whose contents promised to divulge the age-old writings of the tribe. It was imperative that I personally examined the contents of these manuscripts in order to substantiate the claims made by my resource persons and more importantly to present well-grounded research findings. Hence the research stay at Leiden, with the aid of SRA has contributed immensely to detect the lacunae in my research endeavours so far.

As is the character of any research to be unpredictable, my SRA aims and outcomes have similarly been subject to these conditions. The Johan van Manen collection of Lepcha manuscripts led to a different set of revelation than I anticipated. Lepcha manuscripts which are known as *Namtho-Namthar* is translated as 'yearly-chronicles'. As the name suggests, *Namthars* are ideally supposed to chronicle important annual occurrences of a particular locality, usually a village. On investigating the contents of the *Namthars*, I found them to be mostly translations of Buddhist scriptures dealing with prominent Buddhist personages and their preaching's, some even recounted life-after-death experiences, which are fairly common accounts in Buddhist belief folds. Although all the manuscripts were not dated by the scribes, those which

had dates were situated in the early 1900's; however, one cannot satisfactorily assign a timeline owing to the lack of sufficient information. This makes it inconvenient to locate the period of changing trends and their incorporation into these manuscripts. Nevertheless, it can be safely presumed that the introduction of Buddhism in the region left strong repercussions on the vernacular belief system, so much so that people who were primarily nature worshippers began to diligently make hand-written copies of such Buddhist scriptures because they were led to believe that such actions would help in atonement of their sins. There are claims that *Namthars* like *Nyolik Nyooosong Mun* comprises of solely Lepcha vernacular beliefs, unfortunately, no *Namthar* by this name was among the manuscripts collections at Leiden and hence it remains to be ascertained.

Through SRA I have been able to engage with best minds on the subject and access rare manuscripts. The valuable knowledge and understanding will shape my thesis with the state of art of theoretical construct and the rare manuscript contents have opened up a new reality about the indigenous community which was going otherwise going unnoticed.