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INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE OF GALO : A PRELIMINARY OBSERVATION OF THE ORAL NARRATIONS AND FOLK SONGS

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Abstract : Arunachal Pradesh is a hilly terrain in the foothills of the Himalayas. It is home to diverse ethnic communities. These ethnic communities have a rich repository of cultural heritage that are mostly intangible in nature. Oral narratives and folksongs are an important part of the Galo intangible cultural heritage. Through oral narratives, the indigenous knowledge and values of the community are acquired over the years and are passed on to the next generation. Therefore, these oral narratives and folksongs, if interpreted applying suitable analytical approach, can be immensely useful as a source for writing the history of the communities.

Key Words : North-East, Ethnic, Indigenous, Heritage, Folk

Introduction

Awareness of the significance of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is a recent phenomenon. Traditionally, heritage in general was restricted to tangible aspects of culture. Preserving cultural heritage meant conserving buildings, historic places and monuments. However, by 1960's with the growing appreciation of diverse cultures and modes of expressions, performing arts including music, song, dance, theatre and storytelling, language, traditional crafts, social practices, rituals, festive events, etc. also became an important part of human heritage.

The essence of cultural heritage is composed not only of tangible properties, but also and especially of the essential elements representing the living culture of human communities, their evolution, and their continuing development. Therefore, it includes all immaterial elements of a given community as essential components of its intrinsic identity as well as of its uniqueness and distinctiveness in comparison with all other human groups. In other term, the culture of a people is composed by the totality of elements representing the very heart of its distinctive idiosyncrasy (Lenzerini 2011:101).

It was only from then intangible cultural heritage attracted worldwide attention because modern societies were fast losing their valuable traditions and practices due to rapid globalization and cultural homogenization. That was the beginning of intense international awareness for preserving the Intangible Cultural Heritage for the next generation.

International Status

The attempts to safeguard intangible cultural heritage began in 1960's with the help of UNESCO's acceptance of the Convention for the Protection of World Cultural and Natural

Heritage. In 1989, UNESCO issued a Recommendation on the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore in Countries of Asia. The main objective of this recommendation was to encourage its Member countries to take legislative measures to initiate projects that sought to preserve traditional culture and folklore around the world. This led to a series of more effective UNESCO sponsored programmes for the safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage.

From the mid -1990s , intangible cultural heritage has attracted particular attention, as evident from UNESCO's work on Living Human Treasures Systems (1993) and the Proclamation of Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity (1998, 2003 and 2005). The Living Human Treasures Systems (1993) is to recognize brilliant folk artists who save and transfer the intangible cultural treasure to the later generations. It particularly aimed at the youth in order to encourage them to pursue and continue the works of the old artists. The Proclamation of Masterpieces of Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity was established with the aim to evaluate and listing the world's oral and intangible heritage and to encourage its member countries to take legal and administrative measures for the protection of their oral and intangible heritage. The Proclamation had a great impact in drawing government and public attention to the need to safeguard this heritage.

Another milestone was the UNESCO "Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage"(2003).With this Convention, the promotion of safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage increasingly gained momentum. The Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage is one of the legal instruments used by UNESCO to protect the universal heritage. In this Convention, "intangible cultural heritage" is defined as

> *the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith –that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognize as part of their cultural heritage. This intangible cultural heritage, transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature and their history, and provides them with a sense of identity and continuity, thus promoting respect for cultural diversity and human creativity.* (UNESCO 2003).

It aims to protect and promote respect for the heritage of communities, groups and individuals; raise awareness at the local, national and international levels about the importance of intangible cultural heritage; promote mutual appreciation and seek international cooperation and assistance in these efforts. The UNESCO 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage calls for its Member states to take measures to ensure the preservation of international cultural heritage and to strengthen cooperation and solidarity between the international and regional levels. The notion of intangible cultural heritage covers a vast field:

1. Oral Traditions and expressions, language
2. Performing Arts
3. Social Practices, rituals and festive events

4. Knowledge and practices concerning nature and the universe
5. Traditional Craftsmanship

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The Convention does some very good things. It reinforces the idea that the practice of one's culture is a human right. It seeks government recognition and respect for the varied cultural traditions practiced by people within its jurisdiction. It seeks to bolster the idea that all cultures give purpose and meaning to lives and thus deserve safeguarding. (Kurin 2004:75).

National Status

In India, continuity of indigenous crafts, beliefs and traditions have survived over centuries. For many communities in different regions of India, the intangible cultural heritage is the essential source of an identity, deeply rooted in the past. India's vast cultural diversity is itself an essential component of its intangible cultural heritage.

India supports the aims and safeguarding measures that are promoted through UNESCO'S Convention of 2003. This is reflected in India's ratification of the 2003 Convention in the autumn of 2005, several months before it came into force worldwide as well as its involvement in the promotion of the Convention through several international meetings. A year after the ratification, the UNESCO office in New Delhi hosted a meeting to promote the Convention and encourage its ratification amongst Asian Member states (Bedekar 2014: 90).

Because of the effective implementation of the 2003 Convention, eight Indian performing-art forms are enlisted for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage of India and in the year 2013, *Sankirtana*, ritual singing, drumming and dancing of Manipur was nominated in the list.

Significance of the study of the intangible cultural heritage of the Galos

The significance of Intangible cultural heritage in the promotion of cultural diversity is felt worldwide. There are also attempts to bring into the "new voices", those of indigenous and local communities, along with the "established voices", of scholars and practitioners. Following this measure, this paper presents the preliminary investigation of the Galo intangible cultural heritage with specific focus on their folk songs and oral narration. The UNESCO Convention of 2003 recognized the importance of the oral narrations as symbol of intangible cultural heritage of humanity.

North East India is home to many different ethnic communities with rich oral tradition. The Galos of Arunachal Pradesh are one such tribe. They are one of the most prominent tribes in Arunachal Pradesh, mostly found in the West Siang and some parts of East and

Upper Siang districts. According to 2011 Census, the Galo population is estimated as 1,12, 272. The Galos have rich collection of oral traditions mostly in the form of folk songs and tales.

The Galos do not have a script of their own and their material culture is mainly perishable in nature as it is entirely based on wood and bamboo; therefore, in the absence of a written script and lack of archaeological findings, the intangible heritage becomes an important cultural heritage of the native of the region.

The intangible cultural traditions of the Galos are not well documented. Modernization is taking its toll due to rapid process of globalization that has given rise to the phenomena of deterioration, disappearance and destruction of the intangible cultural heritage. As the younger generations are more oriented towards the modern and western education, the traditional rituals and festivals are losing their original place of importance and priority in their minds.



Fig.1.1: Map of Districts and Headquarters in Arunachal Pradesh

Source: www.eindiatourism.com

As these younger generations are mostly studying in schools and colleges outside their respective villages, gradually their contact with the community and its cultural practices is getting lost and this poses a great danger for the disappearance of their intangible cultural heritage. The rural urban migration is also posing a great threat to the culture and tradition of the communities.

The Intangible Cultural Heritage of the Galos

The primary aim of the work is to study the importance of oral traditions especially folk songs in preserving the culture of the Galos. Dances and folk songs are inseparable part of the life of the Galos. None of their social, cultural or religious function is complete without dance.

The Galos have a rich collection of traditional folk songs that represent their vibrant and dynamic cultural life. Dance and folk songs are not only means of recreation but also have great importance in reinforcing social life and strengthening group -feeling. They also play an important role in upholding the tribal identity. All Galo ceremonies, marriages, festivals, rituals are associated with traditional folk dance and songs. The Galo folk songs form an important part of their culture and play an important role in preserving their cultural identity. Any traditional musical instruments except *roksi* do not usually accompany the folk songs of the Galos during *Ponu*. Male or female singers perform these folksongs voluntarily, individually or in a group.

Ponu

Ponu dance is the traditional dance of the Galos. It is quite popular in the state of Arunachal Pradesh among other tribes too. *Ponu* dance is accompanied by *Ponu* songs or folk ballad. These ballads are orally transmitted folk tales told through song. These *Ponu* ballads are quite popular which are performed in different occasions.

Mopin Ponu is performed during *Mopin* which is an agrarian festival of the Galos. *Mopin Ponu* consists of a team of dancers and a *Ponu Nyibo* (Ponu priest) who is usually a person well-versed in the folklores. Some of the examples of *Mopin Ponu* are "*AnyiPinku Ngo Piriko, Anya Le Pinku a, HaePopire*etc. Through these ballads, the greatness of the *Mopin* is glorified and celebrated.

The *Ponu* priest narrates the legend in singing while the participant dancers repeat the refrain after each line of the song sung by the priest. A machete *(roksi*) is held upside down in the hand and along with the singing, s/he shakes the machete and rattles the iron discs loosely fitted to its hilt for the music. Apart from this traditional performance, *Ponu* is also performed by the young girls and the boys as a means of merriment during festivities or social events. *Ponu*is, in fact, was performed during all celebrations and in welcome functions for honored guests also. The dance remains the same; however, the genre of the song changes according to the social context. The *Ponu* sung during *Mopin* festival is more meaningful and substantial in its content than *Ponu* performed for merriment. The lyrics are often impromptu. The *Mopin Ponu* is based on important and well-known legends. These are orally transmitted from generations to generations. These ballads are based on oral transmission. Therefore, with the reducing number of the shamans and well-versed elders of the Galo tribe, many such important ballads are on the verge of disappearance.



Fig.1.2. Mopin Ponu

Kaben

Kaben is performed by the female members of the community. It is performed during important ceremonies like *Mopin, Togu* and *Mari*. Kaben is followed without any musical instrument.

Nyaan

Nyaan is performed only by the male members of the community. It is usually performed in a group after the successful completion of any activities, like the completion of sowing seeds in the field, harvest, completion of a new house or marriage.

DelloNyitom /DelloMennam

In a marriage, which involves *mithun* sacrifice, *DelloNyitom* is performed. It is predominantly a male group performance though some women can also participate. It is mostly in the form of chanting in which the migration story of the tribe and the concerned clan is narrated. Through such narration, the clan lineage of the groom and the bride is established.



Fig.1.3.The shaman chanting incantations during the performance of Jed-Mod, an agricultural ritual.

DelloMennam can continue for hours as the narration starts from the beginning of the world, until their coming to the present settlement. It includes a lot of information regarding their migration from the original homeland followed by extensive details of their sojourn, the names of the mountains and rivers where they settled for some time before embarking on their next journey in search of a better place to settle down. It is the narration of the unabridged history of a clan. These narrations, if studied meticulously can give clues regarding the original homeland of many different tribes that is still a matter of mystery.

Involvement of the young Galo boys in such performances is a highly positive approach because through their involvement in such socio-cultural activities of the community, a feeling of appreciation and belongingness to one's culture develops.

Apart from these, there are rich collections of the songs of the shaman that are mostly ritualistic in nature, which can be collectively categorized as *NyiboAgom.*

The shaman recites Songs that are ritualistic (in content) only during the performance of rituals assisted by a co-shaman. Shamanic songs or ritual chants form a huge corpus of the Galo oral tradition. A large portion of the ritualistic chants consists of shamanic healing

songs. Through these chanting the shaman connects the world of spirit, engages in dialogue with the spirit as what is to be offered in exchange for the well-being of the possessed or sick person and finally seals the deal with the offerings that has been concluded between them. Every ritual or any important social or cultural event in the life of a Galo person is not complete without a song or a chanting.

The songs of the shaman are important as it reflect the belief system of the Galos, their philosophy, their relation with nature and their understanding of the cosmology.

Therefore, the documentation of the Galo Intangible Cultural heritage is necessary in order to record the important aspects (as defined in the UNESCO Convention) before its disappearance and to create awareness about the preservation, protection and promotion among the younger generations. The International Convention for safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage attempts to help local cultural traditions to survive and even flourish in the face of globalization. Intangible Cultural heritage provides a sense of identity and continuity and promotes respect for cultural diversity which is the need of the hour.

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