PREFACE

The present research owes its origin to a rather casual discussion with a very dear friend, Junuka Acharya, who thought that the idea of a comparative framework to study tribal verse forms in Assam and the U.S.A. was worth much more than a short seminar paper that I was preparing to present at ASRC (now IACIS), Hyderabad. The trip to Hyderabad was planned with her husband Pradip Acharya, who taught me at Cotton College, and is now a valued friend. Since he had to go to Hyderabad for some Library work, he proposed that I should join him for a bit of freewheeling at the library to identify potential areas of research. My paper was a preparation for the mandatory paper one has to present when on a teacher’s grant to the IACIS. It was Junuka who got me and Dr. Kishore Bhattacharjee together a week before my departure to Hyderabad to discuss the feasibility of a longer project on oral poetry of the Assam tribes in a comparative framework. His enthusiastic approval and readiness to supervise the work, Pradip Acharya’s encouragement to take up the challenge and Junuka’s belief that it was an idea with potential together with my own interest (amateurish though) since childhood in the Native Americans clinched the issue in favour of a rather casual musing graduating into a research topic. So, what had started of as a proposal for academic freewheeling at Hyderabad, assumed the dimension of a more pointed trip to study
and collect materials on a chosen subject of research. Pradip Acharya, at the cost of his own library work, helped me in identifying materials of relevance for my project. I would take this opportunity to thank the Librarian and Assistant Librarians of IACIS, who went out of their way in helping me to locate valuable books borrowed by other scholars and even got back books that had gone out to the binders.

What Dr. Kishore Bhattacharjee had not bargained for in his initial enthusiastic approval to my proposal was that I would be importing a whole lot of unsullied English literary categories into the study. As Folklore and English literature tried to come to terms with each other, the project dragged on and at times seemed without direction. Dr. Bhattacharjee was patient and accommodative. It was around that time that he met Professor John Miles Foley in Finland, and they were kind enough to discuss my research proposal. It was Professor Foley who suggested to Dr. Kishore Bhattacharjee that I go through Brian Swann’s *Smoothing the Ground*, an anthology of critical writing that mediates the problem of orality and the literary in Native American oral literature wonderfully well.

Shortly afterwards I met Professor Kireen Narain of the University of Wisconsin, Madison, at Tezpur, where she was a resource person for an international workshop on Folklore. She agreed to discuss my research project and resolved for me certain important methodological issues. It is with gratitude that I remember Professor Narain. I also thank Dr. Kishore Bhattacharjee for being an understanding and patient supervisor and enabling me to interact with leading
scholars of the field. My gratitude are also due to Professor Soumen Sen, formerly of North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, who brought alive vividly for me the varied nuances of Folklore during the course of our informal discussions in various seminars and workshops.

It was during the workshop at Tezpur that I also met Nahendra Padun, Head of the Department of Assamese, Sibsagar College, who introduced me to Mising oral literature and later helped me out in the project. I am indebted to him for his insightful and invaluable interaction. The help of my colleague Tulan Mochahary in understanding and translating Bodo language material was also invaluable and he introduced me to present tribal approaches to their traditional literature and the contemporary role of orality in the Bodo socio-cultural milieu.

My grandfather, Umakanta Sarma, was an inspiring presence throughout my research and he appreciated my interest in tribal literature and culture as his artistic vision embraced tribal and ethnic ethos evident in his novels like *Bhoronda Pakhir Jak*. He encouraged me and often enquired of the status of my research. His example and constant encouragement gave me the courage not to abandon my project in moments of self-doubt. For the project indeed become a difficult proposition at times. The main problem was how to understand and present Assamese and tribal language materials. Not used to academic writing in Assamese, and unacquainted with the Bodo and Mising, my research at times seemed to be an unending exercise of translations from these languages into
English. However, I gradually warmed up to the exercise, and translation became both enjoyable and challenging.

Dr. Anil Boro of Gauhati University deserves special mention for the photographs he took and his valuable suggestions. Thanks are also due to Jiten Shah, lecturer in Geography, LOKD College, for his cartographic help. Kumud Basumatary, lecturer in History, Gossaigaon College, rendered great assistance through books and his wonderful company during my trips to Kokrajhar and Gossaigaon. Dr. Nabin Chandra Sarma, who headed the Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, during the initial phase of my research constantly encouraged me in my endeavour and took an active interest in its progress till the very end. Bhaskar Chaudhury and Dipali Khatun of ‘Digitech Appliances’, Tezpur, were of wonderful assistance right through my research. They not only introduced me to Computers but also were on the standby for any ‘desktop’ eventualities.

My wife Neelakshi’s constant remainder of the work at hand during languid phases and encouragement during the final hectic stages, her single handed management of familial affairs towards the later stages of research, and her revision of the initial draft of the thesis finally made this project possible. The mischief and the naughtiness of my child refreshingly kept alive the world beyond academics during the final busy months. The perennial readiness of my parents to help me and my brothers’ constant encouragement and active interest was a source of great inspiration. My mother-in-law’s help in keeping my child and wife with her when I was away for library research or fieldwork was invaluable. Last,
but not the least, I am grateful to my college authorities for permitting me to undertake the research and for granting me a couple of months leave in the end to complete the project.

The potential of much remains unfulfilled in this research. Exhaustive fieldwork to verify data from secondary sources was a difficult proposition under the sensitive political and security situation in the state. As a result, important para-linguistic features in a performative milieu could not be studied. Full access to tribal language materials was not possible and the work was accomplished based on selective specimens. My own inexperienced translations might not convey the full sense of the verse forms that came across to me during the collaborative stages with Nahendra Padun, Tulan Mochahary and others. If the gray areas of my research become leads to future direction of inquiry in the study of oral literatures in Assam, the choice of my subject will stand justified.

Junuka Acharya, whose enthusiasm for research to foray into fresher areas rubbed on to those around her, passed away recently. The completion of this project is a vindication of that spirit and the celebration of my friendship with a wonderful family.

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