

Oral History of II World War in North East India, (1943-45)

Dr. R.K. Tamphasana

Associate Professor, Gp Womens College, Imphal

*Corresponding Author: * Dr. R.K. Tamphasana*

ABSTRACT: Since source materials for the study of many of the Indian ‘adivasis’ (tribes) and other ‘lower castes’ communities, particularly the ethnic communities inhabiting the various states of North East India are very limited, oral history has become specifically relevant. Many of them till the recent past, were non-literate and at the most semi-literate societies. Modern education began only with the British colonization of this region by the second half of the 19th century and trends of modernization has been going at an extremely low pace. Available oral evidences of II World War in North East India particularly of Naga Hills and Manipur not only fill some of the gaps in the existing studies but also provides interesting data to supplement the present narratives on the theme.

KEYWORDS: Legends, Traditions, folklore, oral biography, rituals, genealogical tables.

Date of Submission: 19-08-2017

Date of acceptance: 30-08-2017

I. INTRODUCTION

Oral History has increasingly become an accepted tool of studying the history of folk and tribal people, particularly in the non-literate as well as the semi-literate communities. Allan Nevins and Van Sinan’s pioneering works on oral history and oral traditions, respectively, set the beginning of historians endeavor to grapple with the problem of writing the history of folk and tribal people during the 2nd half of 20th century. Very broadly, oral history is that past that takes into account oral sources of history. In fact, in ancient times, during the early period of the emergence of history as a discipline, it was largely oral history. Thucydides who studied *Peloponnesian war* (fought between Athens and Sparta) travelled extensively, interviewed people, noted different viewpoints, provided an insightful look at the event (T. Mibang, Presidential address, 34th session of North East India History Association, Nov, 2013, Imphal). Herodotus too travelled extensively and recorded lifestyle of some 50 different people of societies.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY AND METHODOLOGY

The objective of the study is to highlight the indispensability of the use of oral history methodology in reconstructing the ethno-history of the more than 200 tribes which inhabit the seven states of North East India. Archival and other written sources are available only with the British colonization of this region during the 19th century. The existing rites, rituals, ceremonies, folklores and other oral traditions etc. are to be properly documented and studied for reconstructing the ancient and medieval past history of these ethnic communities. Similarly, oral sources are crucial in the reconstruction of the history of II World War, 1943-45 in North East India. The twin battles of ‘Kohima’ and ‘Imphal’ are considered to be turning points in the military history of the war.

Descriptive historical method has been used in the present study. Available published works corroborated by field investigation i.e. interviews of living senior citizens who had experienced the trauma of II World War have been extensively used. The collective data both primary and secondary have been analyzed quantitatively as well as qualitatively.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Oral historians predated modern historian. James Binnet wrote, “Like history, self-report, personal narration, life story, oral biography, memoirs, testaments are part of history” (quoted in T. Mibang, Presidential address, 34th session of North East India History Association, Nov, 2013, Imphal). But all these are collected by oral historians through interviews. Earlier, extensive hand written notes were prepared which were subsequently followed by taped interviews starting from around 2nd half of 20th century, which ran into a number of reels. With the development of information and communication technologies, digital technologies have come up in the 21st century. As stated earlier, Prof. Allan Nevins of University of Columbia, recorded spoken memories of

white male elites in 1948. And in 1965, there were as many as 89 oral history projects in America (Valeric Raleigh, Recording oral History, 1994).

Oral history, however, has to be used with an acute sense of the logic of historical developments. Scholars should handle the methodology involving interview schedules, questionnaires, both structured and unstructured, to construct a good picture of the theme of investigation from folk memory in the appropriate time scale of related events as public memory itself gets increasingly confused and blurred overtime. Amalendu Guha cautioned that more care and vigorous training would be necessary to make oral history fruitful (Amalendu Guha, Presidential address, North East India History Association, 1981, Dibrugarh).

Many of the Indian tribal and lower caste communities particularly the more than 200 ethnic groups which inhabit the seven North Eastern states of India, till the recent past, were non-literate and at the most semi-literate societies. Most of the historical studies of North East Indian hills for the 19th and 20th centuries are generally based on the archival sources and other anthropological writings prepared by colonial administrators. The almost unavailability of indigenous literary and other sources, thus make most of the studies in these societies unbalanced and colonial centric. Regarding the pre-colonial period, documentary source are at the worst unavailable and at the best insufficient and therefore, one faces an extremely serious problem in attempting to investigate the pre-colonial history of the societies. Fortunately, however, the histories of these societies are found hidden in the numerous legends, traditions, folk tales, folklores etc. The tasks of the historians, folklorists, and other social scientists, therefore are to reconstruct the past history of these societies from such nebulous and fragmentary sources. The methodology of oral history thus, has become increasingly indispensable in writing the history of the region in general and ethno-history of the different tribes in particular.

Oral history could be used to prepare the genealogical tables of the chiefs and priests. Folk tales, songs, proverbs, etc. still surviving amongst the tribe, could also be used to reconstruct a picture about their migration pattern, their way of life in pre-colonial times and their interaction with other neighbouring communities. Data could also be obtained regarding the replacement of their old monolithic tools by iron tools, the introduction of fire arms and its impact on tribal social organizations and also the circumstances of how they had moved from shifting cultivation to permanent terraced cultivation.

In addition to this one could use the surviving rituals and customs as sources for reconstructing the past history of tribal people as rituals and customs are crystallized relics of the past comparable to fossils. Social anthropologists, historians and linguistics could certainly make use of such mass data to reconstruct the past history of the tribal and rural people. Indeed, the ever expanding field of Archaeology, particularly the excavations at Kankhui, Napachik, Sekta, Tharon etc. have also extended the historical time zone of the tribal societies in these areas, backwards to the Neolithic age and Paleolithic age.

Oral History of the battle of Imphal and Kohima

In 1944, Naga Hills and Manipur had become a center of confrontation between the Anglo-American and the INA (Indian National Army)-Japanese forces attracting unusual international attention. Military historians characterized the twin battles of Kohima and Imphal as 'turning points' in the history of II World War for the possible repercussions that it might have in the future course of the war and also the possible impacts on mainland India. Many of the available literature on the twin battles of 'Imphal' and 'Kohima' (A.B. James and G. Evan, Imphal, London, 1963, A. Swinson's, Kohima, London, 1966 and W.J. Slim, Defeat into Victory, London, 1961) seem to underplay if not ignore, the contribution of the different communities in the North East in the said event. The above three books were written from the military logistic angle of the war, that too with Anglo-American point of view, whereas Samar Guha (The Mahatma and the Netaji, New Delhi, 1986) and Hugh Toy (The Springing Tiger, London, 1959) dealt heavily on the ideology and politics of Subhas Chandra Bose. The contributions of the local people have not been adequately dealt with. Further, the history of the event, has also not been incorporated in the studies of Modern Indian History.

The Anglo-American forces with the help of the British run local administration not only organized intense anti INA-Japanese propaganda to refrain the local people from providing any sort of supplies, information and shelter to the Indo Japanese but also very often resorted to forcible collections and burning of food grains so that the INA-Japanese force do not get sufficient supplies. Despite such policies, the INA-Japanese group achieved initial success with the help of local supporters. Between April-June 1944, Kohima in Naga Hills and a large portion of Manipur valley was controlled by the INA-Japanese force. By the middle of 1944, however, the events turned in favour of the Anglo-Americans.

Among many of the favourable factors, the recruitment of a large number of local people in the 'V-force' who countered the Japanese intelligence and also the Pro-Anglo American stances taken by many Naga tribes and many members of Nikhil Manipuri Mahasabha, worked in favour of the Anglo Americans. The result was the ultimate Japanese debacle by mid-1944 and the disastrous retreat to Burma. A recent article by Y. Shyam Singh on the basis of extensive interviews of the local people revealed how the Anglo-American force based near Tuliha-Malom sector used the labour of the local people in construction of roads, drains, etc. which

were the war time requirements (Y. Shyam Singh, 'Japan Lal Amasung Tulihalgi Prajasing', Poknapham, Imphal, 2014). Conversely, it has also been revealed that living senior local leaders like (1) Y. Bijoy (2) K. Mani Singh (3) S. Angangyaima Singh etc. for the first time in their life began to use modern food items like condensed milk, canned food items etc. It has also been pointed out that Anglo-American engineers and architects attempt to build drains, roads etc. provided the necessary skill and knowledge for the local people in their subsequent attempt to construct brick houses, metal roads etc. Tamo Mibang wrote that oral history reveal 'daily life of an individual or a family at home and at work that otherwise rarely gets into any kind of public record', thus opening the door of researchers for social history. Though the narrators do not know the date, year of the events, history does not exist outside human consciousness and 'history is what the people who lived it, make of it and what the others who observe the participants or listen to them or study their records make of it'. Oral history thus is very crucial for reconstructing people's history.

Historians of North East India debated on the nature of local response to the war. Whereas J. Roy, maintained that the Indo-Japanese force was getting full support from the local people (History of Manipur, Calcutta, 1973), Lal Dena argued that INA-Japanese force was not getting much local support ('INA Movement: Myth or reality', Proceedings of Indian History Congress, pp.365-369). Ursula Graham Bower in a penetrating study, pointed out that she could garner popular support from the Zemis and other Naga tribes of North East India to work in support of the Anglo-American forces (Ursula Graham Bower, Naga Path, London, 1952). In fact, an examination of some of the available oral evidences prove that a number of local people particularly the Kukis, the Nagas and the Meiteis provided a lot of supplies and information to both the Anglo-American as well as the INA-Japanese forces and perhaps the changing local responses were crucial in the later success of the Anglo-American forces.

Local people's participation in the said confrontation has been reconstructed from personal memoirs and biographies of many of the participants. M. Koireng Singh, on the basis of his experience with the INA highlighted the contributions of the members of Nikhil Manipuri Maha Sabha (an all Manipur organization established in 1934) in providing supplies and information to the Japanese Hikari-kan or intelligence group. When the Japanese-INA forces retreated to Burma in July-August, 1944, Koireng Singh, H. Nilamani Singh and a few others went along with the Japanese forces and took shelter for some time in Sagaing Province of Burma (M. Koireng Singh, 'Manipur's Contribution to INA', Legis News Vol II, No. 3, 1987, Imphal). Th. Angou Singh also wrote that a few active members of the Maha Sabha from in and around Imphal went to Moirang to meet the supporters of the Japanese-INA group (Th. Angou Singh, 'Azad Hind Fauz Amasung Manipur group', 75 Netaji Birth day Celebration, Publication, Imphal). M. Sanjeev (Shri M. Koirengge Punshi Amasung Thabak, Imphal, 2010) and Y. Yaima (Punshigi Khongchatta, Imphal, 1986) have comprehensively built up the narratives of how the local leaders who were former members of the Maha Sabha worked as volunteers for the INA-Japanese offensives in Manipur and Nagaland sector during March-August 1944. Some of the government publications, has also given credence to the massive role played by the different communities of Manipur (Freedom Fighters of Manipur, published by the Govt. of Manipur).

IV. CONCLUSION

Indeed, for many of the communities in North East India, "where languages are still unwritten and at the verge of extinction, oral traditions continue to hold the lock and key in preserving their history and rich cultural heritage" (T. Mibang, Presidential address, 34th session of North East India History Association, Nov, 2013, Imphal). Thus, available oral evidences provides interesting insights on the contributions of the North East Indian people in providing material and intelligence support to both the Anglo-American and INA-Japanese forces in 1943-1945.

REFERENCES

- [1]. T. Mibang, Presidential address, 34th session of North East India History Association, 11-13th Nov, Manipur University, 2013.
- [2]. Amalendu Guha, Presidential address, North East India History Association, 1981, 2nd session, Dibrugarh University.
- [3]. Valeric Raleigh Yow, Recording oral History (Sage, London, 1994).
- [4]. J. Roy, History of Manipur, (Calcutta, 1973).
- [5]. A.B. James and G. Evan, Imphal (London, 1963).
- [6]. A. Swinson, Kohima, (London, 1966).
- [7]. W.J. Slim, Defeat into Victory, (London, 1961).
- [8]. Samar Guha, The Mahatma and the Netaji, (New Delhi, 1986).
- [9]. Hugh Toy, The Springing Tiger, (London, 1959).
- [10]. Y. Shyam Singh, 'Japan Lal Amasung Tulihalgi Prajasing', Poknapham, Imphal, 15th October, 2014.
- [11]. Lal Dena, 'INA Movement: Myth or reality', Proceedings of Indian History Congress, pp.365-369.

- [12]. Th. Angou Singh, 'Azad Hind Fauz Amasung Manipur group', 75 Netaji Birth day Celebration, Imphal pp.46- 50.
- [13]. M. Koireng Singh, 'Manipur's Contribution to INA', Legis News Vol II, No. 3, (Imphal, 1987), pp.587-591.

IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) is UGC approved Journal with Sl. No. 5070, Journal no. 49323.

Dr. R.K. Tamphasana. "Oral History of Ii World War in North East India, (1943-45)." IOSR Journal Of Humanities And Social Science (IOSR-JHSS) , vol. 22, no. 08, 2017, pp. 34–37.