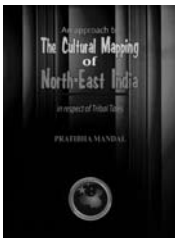


South Asia



Pratibha Mandal, *An Approach to Cultural Mapping in North-East India in Respect to Tribal Tales*

Kolkata: The Asiatic Society, 2009. 332 pages; maps; color photos.
Hardcover, US\$75.00; No ISBN.

IN A 2007 article entitled “Folktale, North East India and a tale-type index,” Mri-nal MEDHI states that:

Although North-East India has been referred to, with justification, as the “folklorist’s paradise” because of the presence of an almost bewildering cultural and folkloristic variety with a huge stock of folklore materials—both

verbal and nonverbal—however, till date, no full-length study has been undertaken to classify, list, index, and catalogue these. (2007, 23)

Although attempts at examining local folktale motifs in parts of North-East India have been made by a few scholars, notably P. GOSWAMI (1980), this volume by Pratibha Mandal attempts to further extend the motif research with tales from throughout the northeast. A research associate linked to the Indian National Academy, New Delhi, and resident of Kolkata, Mandal attempts a cultural mapping of major tale motifs in communities across the seven states of this highly diverse, multicultural region. Motifs are drawn from tales in all of the seven states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, and Tripura.

These states are home to hundreds of ethnic groups, a number of which are represented in the bordering countries of China, Bangladesh, Myanmar, and several other countries in Southeast Asia. The majority of these groups speak Tibeto-Burman languages, though the Khasi of Meghalaya, one of the oldest populations in the region, speak a Mon-Khmer language, and other languages from elsewhere in India and Southeast Asia are also represented.

The northeast has a complex history of migration, colonization, integration, border issues, and unrest. Since the mid-nineteenth century, Christianity has made strong headway among various tribal groups (many of whom practiced head-taking). Other agents of change include the violence-fraught birth and partition of the Indian state in the mid-twentieth century, and the forces of modernization and globalization (including the recent “Korean Wave” pop culture phenomena). These factors, in a multitude of ways, have contributed to the decline of traditional local lore, including origin myths, folk songs, and other aspects of oral culture throughout the upland communities. Due to decades of insurgency and inter-ethnic strife, much of the region has only recently been opened to foreign visitors.

As a sign of a new openness, two events of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research were held in northeast India in 2011 and 2012. These events, one at the North-Eastern Hill University in Shillong, Meghalaya, and the other at Manipur University in Imphal, served to showcase a lively folklore scholarship scene featuring accomplished elder generation folklorists and a substantial contingent of vibrant young folklorists whose work, both ethnographic and theoretical, signals the dawn of an exciting period of growth and interaction with folklorists around the world. Mandal’s book reflects one facet of the diverse approaches to folklore studies in the northeast today that range from more traditional studies such as this to cutting-edge works that involve performance theory, ethnic and gender studies, and eco-theory.

During several prolonged periods of doctoral fieldwork in a number of these areas during the late 1980s and 1990s, Mandal was able to collect much of the material presented here. The author candidly notes, however, the limitations of what ideally could have been a much larger study involving numerous participants by indicating that only a limited number of tellers from a limited number of groups could be the source of her data. Moreover, due to the unstable situation in Nagaland in the 1990s, the data on Naga tales is drawn only from Naga groups in northern Manipur.

That said, the wealth of her material is presented in a clear and organized manner, well-illustrated by a wealth of maps. The text will be useful in orienting schol-

ars to the existing record of collected motifs and tales from a regional perspective. More than a listing of common motifs and their distribution, the work provides brief contextual background on the geography, history, linguistic background, ethnology, and economy of each state and the major ethnic groups therein. The author also situates her efforts in relation to THOMPSON (1955–1958) and draws extensively on Western and Indian scholarship on folklore, myths, and tales.

The text lists examples of motifs and tale synopses in three categories: World-origin Myths, Other Origin Myths, and Other Tales. The myths section includes thirty-one narratives from all seven states, all but two collected by the author. The other two categories include twenty-nine narratives from Assam, Meghalaya, and Tripura. All the narratives were recorded in a variety of languages, including English, Bengali, Hindi, and local languages. The collection sites were in hill areas, where many communities “closer to tradition” were found (14).

Table-III-1 in Chapter III illustrates the “Categories of Tales, States, and Tribes and Tales” and lists the corresponding synopses of the tales that appear in the ensuing pages. Chapter IV lists the motifs in the narratives in accord with the Stith Thompson index. So, for example, tale 25, a Mizo tale from Mizoram, contains exact or similar motifs as found in the index: A137.1 God with a hammer; A1232.3.1 Mankind emerges from a pit; and A18.5 Creator with hammer and chisel in hands; A37, Joint creators; A800, Creation of the earth (146). Chapter V includes forty-seven handwritten maps illustrating the distribution of the various motif types, each item represented by a dot. Chapter VI, the epilogue, discusses various distribution patterns discerned in the data in accord with specific groups.

Despite its limited coverage, Mandal’s book is an important addition to the increasing number of studies made from a variety of perspectives concerning folklore in northeast India. The study allows an overview, with particular examples, of the sorts of tales and motifs that once constituted important aspects of the oral tradition of the region. The work will become increasingly useful in a comparative mode as more information on the many oral traditions in the complex border areas of China, northeast India, and Southeast Asia becomes available.

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