

Role of Folk Songs for Peaceful Living Among the Zeme Tribes of Assam*

Kingaule Newme

Abstract

The importance of traditional folk media cannot be overlooked in this era. It can contribute to social change, societal reconciliation and reduce conflict. The oral tradition is kept alive through folk tales and folk songs which can help build peace efforts through its thought provoking tales and songs that help in maintaining peace within the community and with the neighbours. In India, traditional folk media is recognized as a potential alternative media to connect with the rural masses and to convey messages at the grassroot level. Despite rapid technological advancement, traditional folk media has not lost its stand till today. It represents the traditional way of life of a community based on customs, beliefs and arts that make up a distinctive culture allowing the whole community to be a part of it, irrespective of caste or creed which builds peace and harmony in the society. Since time immemorial, different cultures have used folk songs as an important means of communication. Among the Zeme Naga community, folk songs have been playing a crucial role in social communication. It is considered to be the most important means of communication which helps in bringing change in an individual and in a community. The folk songs speak about the history, narrate the stories of past incidents, heroic deeds, tragedy, peaceful living, oneness etc. which serves as a lesson to the present generation. This paper will attempt to study the role and importance of folk songs of the Zeme Nagas in peacemaking and reducing further conflict through selected folk songs.

Keywords: *Folk songs, Peacemaking, Traditional folk media, Zeme Nagas*

Introduction

The importance of traditional folk media cannot be overlooked in this era. It can contribute to social change, societal reconciliation and reduce conflict. The oral tradition is kept alive through folk tales and folk songs which can help build peace efforts through its thought provoking tales and songs that help in maintaining peace within the community. In India, traditional folk media is recognized as a potential alternative media to connect with the rural masses and to convey messages at the grass root level. Despite rapid technological advancement, traditional media has not lost its validity till today. Its importance and success is increasingly felt by a greater number of people who are trying to use it along with modern technology for development purposes.

Traditional media represents the traditional way of life of a community based on customs, beliefs and arts that make up a distinctive culture. It covers a wide range of traditional communication channels like songs, dances, storytelling etc. which have mass appeal and caters to the lowest level, allowing the whole community to be a part of it, irrespective of caste or creed which builds peace and harmony in society. Although traditional society was organized and structured in ways that encouraged cohesiveness and peaceful coexistence, like any other society it also experienced conflict. It may be between individuals, within family or different families, different tribes etc. It is close to the lived experiences of people and the signs and symbols, folk tales, songs etc. are from their own life. Traditional media generally covers folk songs, folk tales etc. that depict the stories of the rural dwellers. It cultivates the rural lifestyle and culture specifically so as to match their needs. They are not alienated or distanced from them and their society. Madhu Bala (2012) wrote that despite great advancement of communication and information technologies, traditional media has not lost its glory as many Indians live in rural area and no media can reach every area without the help of traditional folk media. Traditional media is more efficacious than modern media in rural areas because of its localised nature, personal touch and familiarity of the audience and the economy involved. It deeply touches the hearts and minds of the people and so is able to carry the messages of social change, development and growth in a more effective way. According to W.W Manoj Pushpa Kumara Jinadasa (2011) folk media has evolved from its rural surroundings, hence they denote the rural socio-economic dimensions of the same society. Traditional folk media has been produced by the rural community with their prevalent social

needs and issues which have been passed down from generation to generation. Traditional media constitutes a potential source of conveying messages for socio and economic development and have been utilized for social purposes like health and family campaigns, education campaigns, peaceful living, unity etc. Shyam Parmar (1994) wrote that traditional folk media provides channels for expressing socio-ritual, moral and emotional needs of a society or societies to which they especially belong. According to S.C. Dube (1990) tradition has had a negative role and has been a barrier to change. Acceleration of change and progress could not be ensured unless the hold of tradition was weakened. But as tradition began asserting itself and in some cases adopted aggressive postures, the social scientists and development planners re-thought goals and strategies of development, and assigning a place to tradition became a necessity. He further said that although modern mass media has diminished its power, traditional media still occupies an important place. There is considerable variability and flexibility in the form and content of traditional media and its use of idiom that is familiar to common people and their grasp over the masses makes it possible to transmit new ideas more effectively.

Folk songs, folk tales, folk dance, rituals performance etc. are respected and performed by the community. Traditional media can mould or motivate illiterate folks effectively in an easy and understandable manner. The presentations come in the form of entertainment, enjoyment and education as well. Traditional media can educate the rural folk by disseminating information regarding health care, child and women education, employment etc. Instant interaction between the audience and the communicator is possible in an easy environment and leads in developing rural society. Rural development is a developmental process that benefits the rural people and accords recognition to them. It is needless to say that traditional media has been recognised as the most important medium for rural society which represents their essence. But continuous study and innovation is required for the better establishment of such media which is revered by the rural community. If traditional media thrives, a significant change in society can be expected.

Folk Songs

Folk music is also considered to be an effective medium of communication. Music has played a crucial part in everyday life from time immemorial. Shyam

Parmar (1994) notes, that the more prominent folk musical forms include Baul and Bhatiali of Bengal, Duha and Garba of Gujarat, Powada and Lavani of Maharashtra, Chaiti and Kajari of Uttar Pradesh, Kolkali Pattus of Kerela, Bihu of Assam, Mand and Panihari of Rajasthan, Rauf and Chakri of Kashmir, Sua and Dandari of Madhya Pradesh and Mando and Dhalo of Goa amongst several others. Every community has fondness for music and it is a significant part of their culture. It has been an integral part of marriages, festivals and celebrations. No religious ceremony is complete without music or song. Traditional music of India is the most natural representation of the emotions of the masses. Songs are associated with every event of life like festivals, new seasons, marriages, births, admiring nature or loved ones etc. During the British rule, many folk music and songs were composed by poets and singers to motivate people against foreign domination. Till today, we get to hear about the heroic deeds of the past heroes in the folk songs. Folk music or songs are used to spread the messages of development as well as for exposing the social evils that exist in society. Through folk song and music, messages are communicated with a blend of entertainment and education. Folk songs are transmitted through oral tradition and are familiar to audiences and creates a positive environment when they hear them. The music and songs are often related to national culture and are distinct from a particular region or culture. Indigenous Australians like Australian Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders incorporate a variety of distinctive traditional music styles of the indigenous Australian peoples.

Folk songs of the Zeme Naga tribe

The Zeme Nagas are an indigenous group of people belonging to the Mongoloid race and they are sub-lineages of Zeliangrong Naga tribe (Zeme, Liangmai and Rongmei), one of the sub-groups of the greater Naga community. They are found in Nagaland, Manipur and Assam in the district of Dima Hasao. The Zeme Nagas are culturally rich and they maintain their ethnic identity through their distinctive cultural life. They have a great respect for their cultural traditions handed down through the ages. The cultural life of the Zemes speaks a lot about their ethnicity, vibrancy and variety.

The Zeme Nagas communicate through songs more than any other means. They have religious songs, songs associated with festivals and celebrations, songs for children, work songs, romantic songs, peacemaking songs and so on.

Clan settlement was common among them, so they also have songs which praise the clan and the land that they worship and also teaches them the concept of peaceful living. Three folk songs have been selected for this study which elucidate the virtues of peaceful living.

Song 1

The first song is called *Samralung leu*, named after its composer. He composed many songs praising the land and teaching the residents the attributes of peaceful living. The song given below is about a request to the warriors who were all set to fight against each other. Four hundred years back, when the two villages *Tungje* and *Nianglo* were not in good terms which led to enmity and the two sides came to fight, well prepared with the *daos* and spear for a war. At that time an old man *Samralung* who was blind and old requested them to take him to the place where the fight was going to take place and put him in between two sides. He sat down on a cloth spread for him to sit and asked all the people gathered to listen to his song before they started their war and he sang this song. The song written below is an excerpt and not the complete song.

Samralung Leu 1

*Tingkangkedeireigehenam tew ze,
Mikinamze mi hungkam lei
Mikiriangkejang meng, mina lui ai lungkeukam de lei.
Ngineizai a ningnui bin ne rai lau, Ningchai sui lui lei
Hera ze Ihing lei...
Amungtungjengnewmone, Nriamnamntukekumnejeu,
Hekin pet se nggihepum tew neu tew du
Laulak le ria langkai
Nriamnamkumnkuira gadi mei
Anuinamjairing sungbing dun je kebamlungkai
Minamkereuchungneidesang ne ngamluhunjeu.
Heratingrangjeu meraikeuketkedeigetingpetseu
Nriamnamkumnkuira gadi mei
Anairamjairing sung sungbing dun je kebam lung kai
Minamje hiangmbeuidikedikum*

Mina chunkehingcum bam dere mi

*Ntau ha mijengianggereteitaura run lei.***

The literal meaning of the song goes like this- Under the high sky, in the earth we make our settlement, our village. Everyone loves their own place. We take care of our clan's lineage and see who are in our past generation but we are all same. If you want to fight a war, let your hand be the first one to start, I will follow you. But I fear God that I couldn't be the first one to start the fight. My people, stay happy and joyful with no ill feelings for each other. But when the disturbances rise up, everyone is ready to fight. Is there no one left to settle things peacefully?

Our place is like the river filled with fresh water, good in everything, better than ten villages together. The stranger cannot take over which was constructed by our creator. Is there no one left in this place to settle things peacefully. Our place is big like the Barak river, others did not have the guts to encounter and so they give respect. So in the same way, we should come together and settle things peacefully.

Song 2

This song was also composed by the same composer. This song also teaches the land dwellers to cohabit peacefully with their neighbours and not to spoil the beauty of the land with evil thoughts and motives.

Samralung leu 2

Ndaapau ne henamtewchu

Kedeikamdesuak sun ram tinggimgeu

Heka nup chu mezin

Keheunam, gekunam, mi kanchenam, tewdiaklui lei

Achukengenmbeubekelungleine

Aram kin bamdindialui lei

Gepangra chi tui le lau

Paukansiamemiengaulau

Tungjenamkedeibambagerakum

Anuitewdiguamiemegusukisim rim bou

Kehochujeuahun liang mepeuasuanlenghing je

Kebamakilluangheranamtewreigengam be namge lung lei

Keta yi tui lei, kedeihelung bin chu

*Michikeng sang penambesang
Aram rachinrimra bun getewkum lei
Tingnaimikpuigesangyikegut, dinsau me lei akilo
Naikilozairingkeyigazairamting sung luzeu
I neu adittewsangahunzeng ne zeu lung geka je
Nramengduidi kin kemuanghiamchamlulak
Ndaapau ram suangdihunneizanggui pin tew kamlak
Ketewnneilak lei duilim
Luangtaketakum lei abam lung gai
Meuchidangwangge chai peilau.
Ketuaikégiakgepei ai hejaikajeuge lung pet
Nkiangpui jeu kum kilo lung betainnei chu lung ra
Chudi di sum razeutaguangpaulungchang chu
Kiruiringbungkuangkebamgaje
Naikijeng gai chudireigaihetunpunjeu
Kiluangjen run tuiwang
Nairammenameneu rim apausam lei je tingnasam din diak la lei
Aram menagauheguangsam jeu kehingbekumpeilau
Apau led a hega lei, mina chi kelangmenung
Hebaizadesam din kemenggutesangkengunsia se lau
Geching me ai pesingsai di zetingnasamdinpuilak lei
Kedeireikelung ai minamyinei je tew bam bene
Patingnatewlu chi kemak me
Henamnra chu tesamkeng pet lipuina liang
Pebam cham rip chekebam be ju ai njomeleiaramsengyi
Asamseng ai tesamket led din teluiriangnkum
Teningpikachuikelukum lei
Aram sengyi lei hepum tew kelung me lung wang lau
Anui ne pepumtewmakpuina liang meje
Kelaknsangjaula pun pet je
Gesakbenam la cheu lau. ***

The literal meaning of the song is- Our grandfather starts a village, lacking nothing, like the clouds in heaven. A land of the rich, a land of the brave, a land which is envied by all. It was started by our grandfather with wisdom. Those who are trying to push me away, all those who are living on the bank of Barak

River, the deaf, who did not understand everything, remember this. Those who do not know things clearly and only know gossip, learn from your foolishness. Our land is like a river of fresh water, overflowing with fullness of everything, every fruit is the best. We go hunting; we enjoy and return very proudly. We live in a land blessed by our heavenly father and we won every battle. Everything is perfect in the land we live. Every sunrise and every sunset, we cannot stop praising our land. We have a land full of life giving water and blue skies which fill the heaven. I proudly take care of my fellowmen and no bad things will be allowed to flow in. A long time back in our grandparent's place, we got everything we wished for and cannot finish up the food and fruits that provides sustenance. It is like water flowing endlessly. We have paddy which we cannot finish. Early in the morning, youth came out like the early birds, all the people are lively and joyful. Our grandparent's words are kept and pronounce it to publicise among all.

My people respect and fear the word of the heavenly king. Our grandparent's words are like diamonds. People who didn't know, do not spoil the words spoken by your elders, they are growing old and cannot say all that they want to teach you. Those who did not respect and take the word of elders, pronounce for all, they are the ones who bring illness and deform the land. They speak like children and womenfolk and not like a man. They separate people from standing united and peacefully. Our land is good like the necklace where all beads are placed one after another, standing united. The way we live is good, we did not complain to each other but shared the rice beer that we prepared and drank together.

Song 3

This song is called *Nkiwangding Leu*. This song also speaks about the peaceful living respecting the words of the elders and forgiveness.

Nkiwangding leu

Naikilo ai ngeuki di pecheuteuweje
Geurakpecheugechen de laianamruang gai ramtingkumcheng lei
Timbunbechua je michichemeiramtingkehu
Kedeijumengaigechunaineu
Ketsam lei anamkedaijubalui lei
Sangjengmepeupekunketew lei neu
samaleuruang rim nking le lau

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*I gesiasam din meng je kang se lau
Mipeu kai ntewsam din kemeng be peu je
Kang se launaukesiasamra din du ze
Tingnaimikpuinezelulau
Tasangpeu sang lei petinsaupebangpui
Peteuriangngguize
Ningsamzengbeneumikduinaikingeu lei
Heguachineizaiheladrehiamlau
Haumepeupatebai li lupeteuriangtinggeu
Agim gai hepun geta peu kai
Tasang hang zeubingkulmai
Redau be lurayirechen lei. ***

The translation of the above song goes thus -Our land is like a big river with no rough sound, just flowing peacefully. Like the peaceful river, I want my land to be better and bigger than the strangers' land with no sound of disturbances. All strangers who have ears listen to my words. Did I say bad words? Don't try to resist my saying? Do not resist those whoever came on behalf of all and speak on behalf of all. If he had spoken bitter words by any chance, keep it only for a day, do not allow yourself to pass another day with those words in your heart. Think that it is the ways of strangers, who leave their own wives and hold the necklaces of the maids. His words will make the eyes shed tears. But if you want to learn to live, choose the good and right path. Like the business man who changes his place in search for his living. We should search and live and convince the strangers/ neighbours for peaceful living and living together is much better than separation.

Role of the folk songs of the Zeme Nagas

Singing folk songs have always been the means of communication among the Zeme Nagas. From the above three folk songs, it can be seen that the folk songs of the Zeme Nagas have been the healing force for the hatred that existed between the two groups. As Dorit Amir (1997) writes,

singing can be regarded as a holistic experience: it consists of body, breath, voice, rhythm, melody and words. As the main instrument of soul, the body determines the quantity and quality of sounds and communicates about the state of the self. Through history, songs from all over the world represent universal themes, for example the

relationship between human kind and nature, the connections of human beings to their land, the relationship between humankind and God, the expressions of love sadness, longing, mourning, pain, excitement, happiness, joy, beauty and wonder. (p. 111)

Similarly the folk songs of the Zeme Nagas relates to many activities such as agricultural activities, festivals, about the clan and the land, peaceful living, history, separation, romance etc. But the songs selected were about a request for peaceful living. Through the songs we can understand that the Zeme love their land and are attached to it

In the first part of all the three songs it can be seen that they speak about the beauty of the land and praise it. The first song reinforces that we may be dwelling in different geographical areas but we all live under one sky. Though we may trace our lineage and clan, we are the same. The second and the third songs also praise the land and its beauty saying that it is a blessing by the creator which was selected for settlement by the great grandparents with wisdom. It also says that the land is a peaceful land filled with rich fruits, brave people and young and energetic youths.

The second part of the first song speaks of the goodness of the place and that no one dares to encounter its dwellers. At the same time he puts forth a question - In such a beautiful and blessed land is there no one left to settle things in a peaceful way without a fight? Since others have no guts to encounter the dweller, it is the dwellers that have to come together and settle things in a peaceful way by not spoiling the land with evil things.

Similarly, the second song followed the praising of the land with a request to the people not to pay importance to gossip and to the word of the deaf who did not understand everything but learn from the mistakes they have committed. The song also brings in words of praise again saying that it is a land blessed by the heavenly father. And since everything is perfect, we can take care of the fellowmen by not allowing bad things to flow in our land. Then a request to fellowmen is made to fear and respect God and to give importance to the words of grandparents who are like diamonds. It also speaks about the dangers of the people who did not respect the words of the elders because they are the ones who bring illness and deform the land. Then the song concludes with the praising of the land and its people who live peacefully and united.

The third song makes a request to the strangers/neighbours to give ear to his

words and not resist him. And a request is also brought in to listen to the one who speaks on behalf of all. And in any case, if he might have spoken wrong words, that they will move on to another day with the words in their hearts. Furthermore, he insists that if they want to live, they should learn to choose the right path. Just as the business man changes his place to earn his living, trying to make good terms with the land dwellers, we should also convince the strangers and the neighbours to live together peacefully.

From the three songs discussed above, we can understand that the folk songs have so much to say about the land the Zeme Nagas live in, loving their own land, with the words of praises on their lips. It is also found that they have so much respect for the words of the village elders who always have words full of wisdom. Being the elders of the village they do not shout or scold but praise the land. The words spoken to the people may not be effective like the songs, as the words spoken are gone once spoken but the songs are more effective as they are sung repeatedly again and again till today.

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