International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Oral Narratives as Historical Sources: Reconstructing the Pre-Literate History of Arunachal Pradesh

Pinjili Elapra

Guest Faculty, Department of History, Indira Gandhi Government College, Tezu, Arunachal Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh, India

Abstract

Writing the early history of Arunachal Pradesh presents particular challenges because most indigenous communities of the region did not maintain written records prior to the colonial period. Consequently, historical understanding has relied largely on colonial administrative documents, travel accounts, and ethnographic studies produced by outsiders. While these sources are valuable, they often reflect external viewpoints and provide only partial insights into local societies. This paper examines the significance of oral narratives as historical sources for reconstructing the pre-literate past of Arunachal Pradesh. Drawing upon myths, legends, migration narratives, clan genealogies, ritual chants, and folk songs preserved among indigenous communities, it argues that oral traditions function as organised systems of historical memory rather than as mere folklore. Using insights from oral history scholarship and an interdisciplinary approach, the study discusses both the possibilities and limitations of oral narratives. It suggests that incorporating oral traditions is essential for developing a more inclusive, community-centred, and decolonised understanding of the region's past.

Keywords: Oral Narratives, Arunachal Pradesh, Indigenous Memory, Historiography

Introduction

Reconstructing the pre-literate history of Arunachal Pradesh is particularly difficult due to the absence of indigenous written sources before the colonial period (Singh, 1995). Unlike regions with long-established traditions of writing, the societies of Arunachal Pradesh depended largely on oral means for preserving and transmitting knowledge (Elwin, 1957). As a result, historical narratives of the region have been shaped mainly by colonial administrative reports, travel writings, and ethnographic accounts (Baruah, 1999; Mills, 1937). Although these written sources provide important information, they are often fragmented and shaped by external perspectives. Colonial records, in particular, were produced for administrative and political purposes and rarely reflected indigenous understandings of history. Consequently, community memories, local interpretations of the past, and indigenous perspectives have remained marginal within mainstream historiography. For indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh, oral traditions served as the principal means of preserving historical knowledge. Origin myths, migration accounts, clan histories, ritual chants, songs, and folktales transmitted information about social organisation, political authority, ecological relationships, and inter-community interactions. However, such narratives have often been dismissed as myths or folklore rather than recognised as legitimate historical sources.

This paper argues that oral narratives are indispensable for reconstructing the pre-literate history of Arunachal Pradesh. When examined critically and situated within their cultural and social contexts, oral traditions offer valuable historical insights that complement written and archaeological sources. Recognising their significance enables a more balanced and inclusive understanding of the region's past (Thompson, 2000; Sarma,2012.).

This study aims to examine the importance of oral narratives in reconstructing the pre-literate history of Arunachal Pradesh. It seeks to understand how myths, legends, migration stories, clan genealogies, ritual chants, and folk songs preserved among indigenous communities reflect historical experiences and collective memory (Elwin, 1957). The paper also explores the value of oral traditions in understanding social organisation, cultural practices, ecological knowledge, and patterns of migration. Additionally, it addresses the methodological challenges involved in interpreting oral narratives and highlights their role in developing a more inclusive and decolonised understanding of the region's past.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative and interdisciplinary approach based primarily on secondary sources. It draws on ethnographic writings, oral history scholarship, historical studies, and anthropological research related to Arunachal Pradesh. Documented oral narratives-such as myths, migration accounts, clan genealogies, and ritual chants-are analysed to identify recurring themes and historical patterns. Where possible, oral traditions are examined alongside archaeological findings, linguistic evidence, and colonial records to assess their historical significance. Rather than treating oral narratives as literal historical records, they are interpreted within their cultural and social contexts, drawing on oral history theory to understand their role in preserving indigenous historical memory.

Understanding Oral Narratives as Historical Sources

Oral narratives consist of bodies of knowledge transmitted verbally across generations within a community. These include myths, legends, genealogies, ritual performances, and historical tales that reflect shared experiences and social values (Vansina, 1985; Thompson, 2000). In societies without writing systems, such narratives played a central role in preserving and communicating knowledge about the past. In the context, Arunachal Pradesh, oral traditions constitute important intangible sources through which knowledge of social life, economic practices, belief systems, and political institutions-such as village councils and customary laws has been transmitted. Their continued performance and circulation lend them authority and ensure the continuity of collective memory (Vansina, 1985).

Scholars of oral history, most notably Jan Vansina, have demonstrated that oral traditions are neither random nor purely imaginative. Instead, they follow socially regulated modes of transmission and contain internal mechanisms of validation. When interpreted within their cultural settings, oral narratives reveal historically meaningful information embedded in symbolic language, metaphors, and ritual practices. In regions like Arunachal Pradesh, where writing was absent or introduced relatively late, ignoring oral narratives results in an incomplete understanding of history. Oral traditions must therefore be treated not as supplementary material but as central historical sources (Singh, 1995).

Pre-Literate Societies of Arunachal Pradesh

Prior to colonial contact, most indigenous communities of Arunachal Pradesh did not employ formal writing systems. Knowledge was transmitted orally through elders, clan leaders, ritual specialists, priests,

and shamans. Social values, ethical codes, and customary norms were conveyed through myths, legends, proverbs, and ritual performances. This transmission occurred during festivals, ceremonies, storytelling sessions, and everyday social interactions, ensuring continuity of historical memory across generations. Communities such as the Adi, Nyishi, Apatani, Galo, Tagin, and Idu Mishmi developed rich oral traditions narrating their origins, migration routes, settlement histories, and social institutions (Elwin, 1957; Sarma, 2012.). The absence of writing does not indicate an absence of historical consciousness. Rather, history was remembered and communicated through oral forms deeply embedded in cultural practices and social structures.

Oral Narratives and the Reconstruction of History

Oral narratives provide crucial insights into the pre-literate history of Arunachal Pradesh. Migration stories trace ancestral movements across river valleys, hill tracts, and forested landscapes, helping to explain present settlement patterns. Clan genealogies reveal kinship structures, inheritance practices, and systems of political authority, while ritual chants and folk songs preserve memories of conflicts, alliances, and ecological relationships (Sarma,). Among the Adi and Galo communities, migration narratives describe ancestral journeys along river systems such as the Siang and Subansiri. These accounts provide insights into ecological adaptation, resource use, and settlement logic. Similarly, clan histories among the Nyishi and Apatani reflect long-standing social institutions and customary laws that continue to shape community life.

Arunachal Pradesh is marked by remarkable linguistic diversity, with over sixty dialects spoken across the state. Despite this diversity, historical knowledge is primarily preserved in verbal form. Only a few communities-such as the Khamptis, Monpas, Sherdukpens, Khambas, and Membas has developed scripts, largely due to contact with Buddhist literary traditions (Singh, 1995). The richness of oral expression is evident in myths of origin, ritual prayers, ceremonial chants, and performing arts. The Singphos (Jingphos) preserve narratives recalling historical connections with present-day Myanmar, while Hrusso (Aka) oral traditions suggest ancestral origins linked to the Assam plains. One of the most widespread mythological figures is Abo Tani, regarded as the ancestral progenitor of several Tani-speaking tribes, including the Adi, Nyishi, Galo, Apatani, and Tagin. Narratives associated with Abo Tani reflect shared cultural roots, migration memories, and moral codes (Sarma, n.d.).

Ritual chants and shamanic recitations are particularly valuable historical sources. Among the Idu Mishmi, the igu (shaman) recites detailed genealogies and migration histories during death rituals. These chants recount clan lineages and ancestral movements across landscapes and are transmitted in structured oral forms from one generation of ritual specialists to the next (Delley, 2018). Oral narratives also preserve ecological knowledge. Tagin lullabies and songs refer to animals, celestial bodies, and natural phenomena, reflecting close environmental observation. Sherdukpen folktales show strong Tibetan influence, while Khamiyang narratives draw inspiration from Buddhist Jataka tales as well as the Ramayana and Mahabharata, indicating long-standing cultural exchange (Singh, 1995).

Themes found in myths across Arunachal Pradesh include beliefs in a primeval ocean, earthquakes caused by animals supporting the earth, taboos associated with journeys, and explanations of natural phenomena such as rainbows and storms. Some narratives are performed during festivals and dances, such as the Adi Aabang, while others are recited during funerary, agricultural, or healing rituals. Certain narratives are considered sacred and are transmitted only among shamans. Recent findings have strengthened the credibility of oral traditions. The discovery of nimok pung (salt wells) at Subang village in Tirap district

corroborates oral accounts of salt production and trade, highlighting the economic and political significance of salt and confirming historical trade networks. Similarly, Mishmi oral traditions describing ties with Tibet and China are supported by colonial records, including British expeditions to the Zayul Valley (Needham, 1886/1935). Myths also function as repositories of indigenous knowledge systems. Among the Adi, Aabang narratives associated with the Solung festival emphasise harmony between humans, crops, and spirits, reinforcing sustainable agricultural practices (Sarma, n.d.). Apatani ritual chants preserve knowledge of wet-rice cultivation, water management, and collective labour, particularly during the Myoko festival.

Among the Nyishi, folktales highlight hunting ethics, forest-based livelihoods, and medicinal plant knowledge, alongside bamboo and cane craftsmanship. The Monpa community, influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, preserves its history through religious narratives, monastic teachings, and legends of saints, which also safeguard traditional crafts and herbal medicine suited to the Himalayan environment.

In Idu Mishmi mythology, humans and tigers are believed to have been born of the same mother, symbolising kinship between humans and animals. This belief underpins taboos against reckless hunting and reflects a worldview centred on ecological balance (Aiyadurai, 2016). Although symbolic in form, these narratives contain historically meaningful elements. When critically analysed alongside archaeological, linguistic, and written sources, oral traditions become indispensable tools for reconstructing the pre-literate history of Arunachal Pradesh.

Methodological Limitations and Interpretive Approaches

The use of oral narratives raises methodology concerns, including versions, symbolic elements, absence of precise chronology, and the influence of contemporary contexts on memory. These issues have led some historians to question their reliability. However, such challenges do not render oral narratives unusable. Instead, they require careful interpretation and methodological rigour. Comparing multiple versions helps identify consistent elements, while interdisciplinary engagement with archaeology, linguistics, geography, and ecology strengthens analysis. Oral traditions should not be judged solely by standards applied to written documents; when contextualised, they offer valuable historical insights.

Oral Narratives and the Decolonisation of History

Integrating oral narratives into historical research plays an important role in decolonising historiography. Colonial approaches privileged written texts and marginalised indigenous knowledge systems (Baruah, 1999). Recognising oral traditions challenges this hierarchy and affirms indigenous ways of remembering and interpreting the past (Elwin, 1957). In Arunachal Pradesh, scholars such as Verrier Elwin demonstrated the importance of oral traditions for understanding local societies. Contemporary scholarship continues this approach by foregrounding indigenous voices and community memories, contributing to a more inclusive understanding of the region's past.

Conclusion

This paper argues that oral narratives are vital sources for reconstructing the pre-literate history of Arunachal Pradesh. Rather than being unreliable, oral traditions preserve structured historical knowledge embedded within indigenous cultural systems. However, the declining use of local dialects among the younger generation has created a communication gap between elders, the primary custodians of oral knowledge and their communities. Consequently, many oral sources are no longer transmitted, leading to

the gradual erosion of oral narratives. This trend is especially alarming in Arunachal Pradesh, where 33 local dialects are classified as endangered and four as critically endangered, according to UNESCO (Times of India, 2017).

Despite methodological challenges, oral traditions can be effectively utilised through careful interpretation and interdisciplinary approaches. Integrating oral narratives enriches historical understanding and promotes a more inclusive and decolonised historiography by moving beyond text-centric frameworks and engaging with indigenous perspectives of the past (Baruah, 1999).

References

1. Aiyadurai, A. (2016). *Tigers are our brothers: Understanding human–nature relations in the Mishmi Hills, Northeast India*. Oxford University Press.
2. Baruah, S. (1999). *India against itself: Assam and the politics of nationality*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
3. Delley, R. (2018). *Ya: A research publication on shamanic oral chants and ritual related to mortuary behaviour among the Idu Mishmi of Arunachal Pradesh*. Bookwell Publications.
4. Elwin, V. (1957). *A philosophy for NEFA*. North-East Frontier Agency Administration.
5. Elwin, V. (n.d.). *The tribal world of Verrier Elwin: An autobiography*. Oxford University Press.
6. Mills, J. P. (1937). *The tribes of Assam*. Government of India Press.
7. Needham, J. F. (1886). *Tour diary of Mr. Needham's expedition to Rima in the Zayul Valley, Eastern Tibet* (File No. 1735). Assistant Political Officer, Sadiya Frontier Tract, Government Records, North-East Frontier.
8. Sarma, R. (2012). Intangible cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh. *Antrocom: Online Journal of Anthropology, 8*(2).
9. Singh, K. S. (1955). *The peoples of Arunachal Pradesh: Cultural and historical perspectives* (Vol. XIV). Seagull Books.
10. The Times of India. (2017, March 10). *33 languages of Arunachal endangered*.
11. Thompson, P. (2000). *The voice of the past: Oral history*. Oxford University Press.
12. Vansina, J. (1985). *Oral tradition as history*. University of Wisconsin Press.