

JunglaBalahu, the Legendary Hero of the Tiwas: A Historical Study through Oral Tradition

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Abstract: Oral history or oral tradition has a great role to play as source in the rewriting of history. To study regional or local history one cannot always find specific written record or some archeological data. Over the years, a lot of attention has been given to the study of folklore as an academic discipline and oral traditions have served as the index for critical inquiry of historical records as well as source materials where such records are missing. The Tiwas or Lalungs are a scheduled plain tribe of Assam. The Tiwas mostly inhabit the areas of central Assam namely, Nagaon and Morigaon and also some areas of Dhemaji, Jorhat, Sonapur, and the hilly areas of Karbi-Anglong district. The Tiwas have a varied and colourful history. The Tiwas did not get due attention from the historians due to the lack of documentations and source materials that could be used as written records. The past of the Tiwas mostly survives in the form of oral traditions and legends. JunglaBalahu, a powerful king of the Tiwas, is the symbol of cultural pride and glory. He had his capital first at Khala and thereafter at Sahari. Due to the lack of research, critical enquiry and attention of the writers of Assam history, JunglaBalahu remains only a legendary king but fails to make a place as a historical figure. There are lots of popular folk songs and oral tradition in Nagaon and Morigaon districts which strongly depict Jungla as a historical figure. This paper is a study of the oral traditions of the Tiwas related to JunglaBalahu and an attempt as well to find a space for the legendary king as a historical figure in history.

Key Words: JunglaBalahu, Tiwa, oral history, legends.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The Lalungs or the Tiwas are a scheduled plain tribe of Assam. The Tiwas mostly inhabit the districts of Morigaon and Nagaon. The name Lalung is given to this tribe by the non-Tiwas but they prefer to be called Tiwas. The Tiwas or the Lalungs are also found in the hills of present Karbi-Anglong district.

Like all ruling tribes of medieval Assam, The Tiwas also have their history of migration, conflict and settlement. In the medieval period, the Tiwas ruled over the five principalities known as *Panchorajya* and seven principalities known as *Satorajya* under the Ahom administration in the western part of Nagaon district i.e., present Morigaon district. In history writings and written documents on Medieval Assam and Modern Assam, the Tiwas are not given due representation as a ruling tribe of Central Assam. This could be the limitation of historians or lack of available documented sources and archival records of the Tiwa past. Like most tribal societies, the Tiwas did not have the art of writing and documenting the past events. As written records about the Tiwas are limited, therefore, conventional historiography presents a fabricated and fragmentary version of Tiwa past.

On perusing the history of medieval Assam and that of the Tiwa tribe, it is found that JunglaBalahu the valiant and powerful king of the Tiwas, who had his capital first at Khala and then at Sahari (near Raha)¹, fails to get due representation in the hands of the historians. Due to the lack of proper enquiry and attention of the writers of Assam history, JunglaBalahu exists only as a legendary king but fails to attain a foothold as a historical figure.

¹JunglaBalahu was the ruler of Sahari from 1385 – 1400 A.D. (Rahar Rengani: Dharma Singha Deka; p. 21).

II. OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this paper is to highlight the historical background of JungalBalahu, his accounts, feats and accomplishments that could consolidate his place in Tiwa history. It is also an attempt to study the folk songs and oral traditions associated with JungalBalahu and thereby posit him as a historical figure through the folklore.

The methodology adopted for this paper is qualitative and analytical. For a study of the accounts of JungalBalahu both primary and secondary sources are used. Articles from newspapers and magazines on JungalBalahu are studied and personal interviews are also conducted to reach out to the folk songs on JungalBalahu.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In any society, the informative, educative and historical value of folklore is immense. In legends, folktales, songs one gets a kind of historical view or background of a particular group of people. One learns about the deeds of the renowned forbears and the history of a race. As Ekwutosi Onwukwe observes, the term 'folklore' has acquired a variety of meanings down the ages. However, in common parlance, the term could be understood to denote the "traditional expression of a people as seen in their proverbs, songs, tales, legends, myths and riddles... The folklore... has a highly educative value. It imparts knowledge on the groups' history, values of warfare, morals, wise sayings etc" (Narasimhaiah and Emenyonu 1-3)².

Richard M. Dorson outlines four broad sections of folklore which include oral literature, material culture, folk custom and performing folk arts (Dorson 1972: 2)³. Folklore and its various derivatives viz. folk art, folktales, folksongs, folk narratives, are substantially studied under the label of oral literature. While the term folklore is understood in the broad sense of all forms of orally transmitted tradition, including material culture, its central emphasis has commonly been on verbal genres. As such, folklore has long inspired the study of forms that might otherwise have remained hidden to scholarship, resulting in "colossal efforts in collecting and analysing narratives, poetry, song, riddles, and proverbs under the head of oral literature" (Finnegan 311)⁴.

Drawing on Dorson's classification, this paper makes a study of the Tiwa folk songs and legends related to JungalBalahu to inquire and facilitate a critical understanding of his role and position in Tiwa history. This paper attempts to situate Jungal as a historical figure of the Tiwas through a nuanced study of available records (though scarce) and oral literature.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

A study of history writings on Medieval Assam shows that, the historians did not give due representation to JungalBalahu, though the same was given to his contemporary Kachari and Chutia rulers. Only a few histories on medieval Assam tried to sketch the character of Jungal. Gunabhiram Barua in his *Assam Buranji* wrote a few lines on JungalBalahu. Barua mentions that Jungal had an enmity with the Kachari king Gajaraj who treacherously killed him.

Padmanath Gohain Barua, another noted historian of Assam depicts the character of Jungal in his work *Assam Buranji* where he says that "Jungal is the grandson of Arimatta" (Gohain Barua 11)⁵. He had a different opinion that Jungal was not the son of Arimatta. Pratap Chandra Choudhury, in his work *History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the 12th Century AD* tried to establish Jungal as a historical figure. Choudhury mentions, "In Sahari Mouza in Nowgong, there are the remains of a fort known as Jungalgarh, attributed to JungalBalahu, another son of Arimatta. He is said to have been defeated by the Kacharis and drowned himself in the river Kalong" (Choudhury 23)⁶. The writings of Pratap Chandra Choudhury bear similarity with the folk songs found on Jungal.

E.A. Gait in his *History of Assam* also writes that the remains of the fort at Sahari in Nagaon district stands as testimony of Jungal's capital. Kanak Lal Barua in his work *Early History of Kamrupa* furnishes some information regarding the origins of Jungal. He writes that Arimatta in 1365 AD captured the throne of Kamata by defeating Indranarayan. Both Kanak Lal Barua and Pratap Chandra Choudhury opine that Arimatta was the ruler of Kamata kingdom. Arimatta had two sons one is Mriganka and another is JungalBalahu. After Arimatta the throne of Kamata went into the hands of Mriganka and JungalBalahu established a new kingdom at Sahari in

²Narasimhaiah and Emenyonu in *African Literature Comes of Age*, 1988, p. 1-3.

³ Richard M. Dorson in *Folklore and Folklife*, 1972, p. 2.

⁴Ruth Finnegan in "Oral Literature: Issues of Definition and Terminology", *African Folklore: An Encyclopaedia*, 2004.

⁵Padmanath Gohain Barua, *Assam Buranji*.

⁶Pratap Chandra Choudhury in *History of Civilization of the People of Assam to the 12th Century AD*, p. 26.

the West of present Nagaon district of Assam⁷. Apart from these, history writings on Medieval Assam are silent regarding the life and accounts of JunglaBalahu.

As documented historical records and writings on JunglaBalahu are scarce and limited, therefore, to accomplish an in-depth study of the life and accounts of JunglaBalahu, one has to depend on oral traditions, mostly on folk songs. The folk songs on JunglaBalahu are very popular in Nagaon and Morigaon district. These songs are composed by unknown bards and these are made popular by their use in folk life.

As found in the folk songs on JunglaBalahu, he had a clash with the Kachari king and finally lost his life at the hands of the Kacharis. Apart from that, some other important and interesting information are also found on JunglaBalahu in the folk songs. Some of these are :

*RohatrahileRaijkhangarhilechorakoibandhilegarh;
SatukhalapiagarhorebhitoratJongalVirBalahurghar.
DangoreDighaleJungalVirBalahuDumuhaJuadi Jai;
GahineGambhirethanuakonworerajpatchalaeikhai.*⁸

This song says that Jungal constructed a seven storied rampart and lived there. He moved like cyclone and was a solemn and somber person. Again,

*JunglaBalahuroja;
DeumanuhbuliheJunglaBalahukbhabilesakaluprajai.
Kotarikkatiledabe;
JunglaBalahurpratapdekhiaetaeiacharithbhabe.*⁹

This song describes the strength and valour of JunglaBalahu. His subjects considered him to be a super human a kind of demi-God. Another song says,

*Kacharirojarebhoi;
Vhabe dine ratibalianJungalakkenekoikoriba joy.*¹⁰

His contemporary Kachariking namedGajaraj(as mentioned in some sources) had apprehension ofJungal for his power and strength. Jungalhaddefeated the Kachari kings of Maibong and Dimapur. So, Gajaraj wanted to take revenge on Jungal and also wanted to get rid of him. To accomplish that, Kachari king hatched a plot. Jungal had a special sword gifted by Lord Shiva (or according to some by GoddessesKalikha) and it is believed that as long as this sword is with Jungal no one can defeat him. The Kachari king, according to his plan, married off his daughter to Jungal and asked her to collect the powerful sword and hand it over by any means to him. This is found in the following folk song:

*Kacharirghoneghonegathi;
DurjoiJongalokcholerechalibopangilekutokoibudhi.
Aachilejioridhan;
MitirorbhabereSataruSaliborrojaekorile man.*¹¹

Again,

*KomaregarhileKaar;
Jungalortiri hoi rani konwrieswamirchintile mar.
TirikhandileSindhi ;
Bapekorgharoloitarualpathaborjiekelogalefondi.
Jungalokjokale kale, konworiebudhitsu pale;
Raghuaboralirpetotelukuaibapekorgharoloidile.
Singhoksallile tire;
Patiretirotaiborbihdhalilenajaniledehibire.*¹²

This song says that the daughter of the Kachari king and wife of Jungalplanned a conspiracy to kill her husband. She planned to send the special powerful sword of Jungal to her father inside the stomach of a big *borali* fish. She requested Jungal to send a big *borali* fish to her father as he had a wish to eat such a big fish. Her plan became successful and she sent that sword inside the stomach of the fish. When the Kacharis attacked Jungal, he asked his wife to prepare rice for him before going to the battle field. As Jungal searched for the sword it was not there. He asked his wife about the missing sword but she did not reply. When he asked her for rice,Jungal noticed that she was boiling some stones. Without rice Jungal could not do anything and he realized

⁷ This information is furnished in *MonikonwarAkhyan* by LakhiSinghaDeka, 1970, pp. 4-5

⁸ Taken from RudraDeka's collection of folk songs.

⁹ Taken from RudraDeka's collection of folk songs

¹⁰ RudraDeka

¹¹ RudraDeka

¹² RudraDeka

the treachery of his wife. In the war with the Kacharis, Jungal was defeated and started to flee from the battle field. He jumped in the river Kolong but failed to save his life. This episode is also found in another folk song:

BhoraKolongoteJunglaBalahuevotiamarile bur.
Jagitejagan di dingimelieliefalesifalesai
DunaidubemariJunglaBalahuepanirtoletole jai.
BidhirbipakotJunglaBalahusumalgoidingorarpetot.
Maronokbandhenukune?

In another folk song it is found that JunglaBalahudied at his mother's curse. Jungal's mother warned him not to lead his invasion towards the west of his kingdom. But Jungal failed to keep his promise and in the midst of the dense jungle he killed a deer which was actually his father Arimatta who was in meditation. Jungal's mother cursed him that in times of crisis, Jungal's own people would betray him which was proved to be true as his wife, daughter of the Kachari king conspired against him.

Apart from the folk songs some other folk beliefs, that form an intrinsic part of traditional wisdom, are also found regarding JunglaBalahu in Nagaon and Morigaon district. In an oral literature it is found,

Jungal pluckedTulsi from Tulsimukh
Worshipped Mahadeo at Deosal.

In such a reading of the life and accounts of JunglaBalahu, oral literature offers a sophisticated paradigm in understanding the history of the Tiwa tribe and in situating one of their heroes as a historical figure. Although, due to dearth of space, only a few songs and tales have been studied here, this paper could open up the path of future research in the area through detailed and elaborate study of folklore to facilitate a more comprehensive understanding of Tiwa history. Moreover, steps should be taken to preserve and record these folktales and songs for the benefit of posterity and future research.

V. CONCLUSION

A study of Tiwa oral literature provides an alternative paradigm of looking at the history of this tribe. Where archival records are absent, oral literature serves as useful tool for understanding, analyzing and appreciating the past. Because of dearth of archival records, the Tiwa past is misrepresented and fragmentary in dominant historiography. Folklore and tradition are the living fossils of a society. These are not simply the artistic presentation of the social life of a group. The Tiwa folk songs and folktales studied in this paper offer vivid intrinsic accounts of the community and its leader--JunglaBalahu. The accounts of JunglaBalahu as recorded in the Tiwa folk repository Jungal as a historical figure whose feats of bravery and courage have been preserved by the Tiwa community through oral literature and traditional wisdom, if not in black and white.

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