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Telling Identities:  
Individuals and Communities in Folk Narratives  
An Interim Conference of the International Society for Folk  
Narrative Research (ISFNR)

*Shillong, 22–25 February 2011*

February 2011 saw the biggest international gathering of folklorists in India after the XI<sup>th</sup> ISFNR congress which had been held in 1995 at the Central Institute of Indian Languages in Mysore, in South India, the realization of the dream of Jawaharlal Handoo. This year's conference took place at the North-Eastern Hill University (NEHU for short) outside Shillong, capital of the state of Meghalaya, literally 'abode of the clouds', an area until recently not generally open to outsiders. The state was created in 1970 and its population is extremely diverse. Most world religions, as well as many local ones, are present, however, unlike most other states in India, Meghalaya is foremostly Christian (about 70% of its population).

NEHU was founded shortly after the state, in 1973. The first department of folkloristics in India had been established in the North-East, in 1972, at the University of Guwahati in the neighbouring state of Assam. Now our hosts, the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies at NEHU's Shillong campus, has its own MA programme in folkloristics and also research facilities, as well as being engaged in documentation and conservation. Twice, in 2002 and again in 2006, it hosted meetings of the Indian Folklore Congress (IFC). The Department embraces folkloristics, music and painting. Its head, Desmond L. Kharmawphlang, was secretary of the local organizing committee. He, along with his students and staff, and other colleagues, acted as energetic and genial hosts who not only dealt with the myriad of administrative matters but also, in many cases, provided first class performances from folk dance in full traditional garb to rock!

The conference was supported and sponsored not only by NEHU and the Indian Council of Social Science Research in Shillong, but also by the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, and the Indian Council of Social Science Research, all in New Delhi, as well as the Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies, and the Sahitya Akademi, both in Kolkata. The governor of Meghalaya, Shri R. S. Mooshahary, also lent his support and attended the stunning opening ceremony.

In all there were well over hundred delegates, most of whom presented papers and participated in the whole conference, leading to great collegiality. While the

majority were from the various states in North-East India, the rest of India was well-represented. The remaining delegates travelled from other parts of Asia, from Europe and the Americas, creating an exciting and stimulating mix. Many academics took the opportunity to introduce their students to ISFNR.

The title of the conference – *Telling Identities: Individuals and Communities in Folk Narratives*, and its several sub-themes – allowed plenty of scope for interpretation and threw up a huge range of papers which the organizers managed to sort into well-matched sessions. All were conducted in English. The content and presentation were of a consistently high standard across a range of speakers from students to seasoned conference-goers. It was heartening to see a whole new generation of folklorists participating fully, from presenting papers to commenting and joining in debate.

The main sub-theme *Ethnicity and Cultural Identity* attracted more than twenty papers which ranged over four main aspects – ethnic identity, the political deployment of culture and folklore's role in socio-political configurations, creation myths and identity, and ethnic and cultural movements. Most of the presentations related to the first two aspects. While the papers concerning ethnic identity generally focussed on one particular group, Kailash Dutta (Tezpur; *How Ethnic Identities are Articulated through Folklore in the Context of Thengal Kachari of Assam, India and the Setu Community of Estonia*) bravely set out to compare the use of their culture in self-definition by a North Indian minority with that of a North European one. The challenging topic of how India's independence has not only affected the role of performers but also their relationship with their texts and performances was put under scrutiny by Sadhana Naithani (New Dehli; *Individual, Independence and Inter-Dependence: Folk Performers in South Asia*).

Two symposia were held within the conference. *Belief Narratives and Social Realities* was convened by Ülo Valk (Tartu), Mare Kõiva (Tartu) and Desmond L. Kharmawphlang (Shillong). Of all the conference themes it attracted the most papers: twenty-nine in all were due from a broad range of delegates. The contributions ranged over many different aspects but concentrated on three main ones – local folk history, socio-cultural beliefs, and myth and reality. Many papers were based on recent fieldwork, including virtual material. Margaret Lyngdoh's (Tartu) fascinating presentation *The Vanishing Hitchhiker among the Taxi Drivers in Shillong* not only extended the documented territory of a 'contemporary' legend to Shillong itself, but tied it in to a local tragedy and postulated its likely purpose. The belief symposium included the showing of the documentary *Three Generations of Yogi Umer Farukh* by Sudheer Gupta (Uttarakhand) on a family of Muslim Yogis in Rajasthan. The Belief Narrative Network (BNN), established in 2009 in Athens at ISFNR's XV<sup>th</sup> Congress, used the conference as an opportunity to hold a committee meeting.

By contrast, and perhaps unexpectedly, the second symposium, *Identity and Belonging in a Transnational Setting*, attracted fewer papers. The sessions were set to consider shifting identities as well as the nature of cyberspace communities.

Of the other sub-themes *Identity in the History of Folkloristics* (ten papers in all) was the one which appears to have had the most disparate and least cohesive response. The papers for *The Making and Mapping of Urban Folklore* and *Places and Borders* were each spread over two sessions. The persistence of classic narrative in contemporary life was the main thrust of the first, although there was also a look at new forms. The second focussed on the use of narrative in border areas, place-names in narrative, places that attract narrative, and metaphorical borders in speech, specifically racist speech. *Revisiting Colonial Constructs of Folklore* was also addressed, although through the fewest number of presented papers.

Friday, the final day of the conference, was under the auspices of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, and consisted of two stimulating plenary sessions. At the first, session 2 of *North-East India and South-East Asia: Intercultural Dialogue*, there was an address of welcome by A. N. Rai, NEHU's vice-chancellor, and a 'state of the nation' overview by Jawaharlal Handoo, while Archana Baruah (Guwahati; *From the Cult of Goddess Tara to the Mode of Worship in Umpha-Puja: Some Glimpses of Religious Inclusiveness in Buddhism, Hinduism and other Religious Practices in Ancient Assam and South-East Asia*) focussed on religions and a common link in them in both areas. At session 1 of this theme (held at the beginning of the conference) Dilip Kumar Kalita (Guwahati; *The Indian Epics. A Shared Heritage of North-East India and South-East Asia*) was billed to open up the discussion by highlighting the classic epics of *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* as cultural bonds between India and South East Asia. Various peoples in the North-East, because of their adoption of the epics and because of their geographical position, formed critical links in the process. Also in session I Zothani Khiangte and Ch. Sheela Ramani (Imphal; *North-East India and South-East Asia. Inter-Cultural Dialogue*) were scheduled to provide an introduction to the diversity within the North-East, its connections in the past with South-East Asia, and to the importance of renewed intercultural study which has the potential to go far beyond its study for its own sake and can inform economic dialogue between the two areas. The focus of the remainder of the final session was *Critiquing the Paradigm of 'Folklorists' Paradise': A North-East India Perspective*. These dedicated sessions led to extremely lively discussion between many participants, both novice and veteran, and terms such as 'tribal' and 'mainland India' were justifiably queried.

NEHU's Shillong campus is a few miles outside the town where it has extensive rolling grounds, including those of a former palace. Its buildings are pleasantly dispersed amongst pines and ponds. The vast majority of delegates stayed in the tranquil university guest houses on campus where they were extremely well looked after. The complimentary lunches there throughout the conference were stunning in variety and a real delight. The mild weather allowed eating *al fresco* and this informality fostered the continuation of dialogue beyond the lecture rooms.

This stimulating, friendly conference was impeccably organised. The lively finale of plenary sessions ended all too soon, however, the links and bonds engendered by the conference will have permanently enriched folkloristics.

Many delegates, particularly those from outside India, arranged to stay on and do a little fieldwork, experiencing at first hand people and places mentioned at the conference. The fascinating paper *Motif in Dress as an Identity Marker of the Thangkhul Nagas* by R. K. Pamri and P. Jhingan (Shillong) concerned the interrelationship between folk narrative and weaving, in this case, that of the Thangkhul Naga people. Every delegate, whether or not s/he managed to attend this particular paper, or to become more closely acquainted with the area, received their own tangible example of weaving – a conference bag specially commissioned from the women weavers of the local village of Umden in Ri-Bhoi District, Meghalaya. In the striking black and red bags, hand woven on bamboo looms, the event itself is incorporated. This thoughtful, thoroughly ecological memento is emblematic of the attention to detail throughout the conference and in its planning. Congratulations to all the sponsors, supporters and organizers of this most useful and memorable ISFNR interim conference.