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**DOCUMENTING THE QUEST OF FOLKLORISTICS IN THE SPACE OF INDIAN
ANTIQUARY: EARLIEST ENGLISH DOCUMENTATION OF FOLKLORISTICS IN BENGAL
BY G.H.DAMANT**

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Abstract



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This paper is based on an excavation of archival works from the pages of the journal, *Indian Antiquary*. The paper is a study of the folklores contributed to the journal by Guyborn Henry Damant during the mid-nineteenth century in Bengal. The paper delineates the different trajectories of the quest for such contributions in the space of the *Indian Antiquary* and tries to locate the reasons of folklore excavations, translations and their subsequent publication in the journal. The paper also takes a look at the role of the native associates in the process of publishing the folklores to the journal.

Keywords: Indian Antiquary journal, Orientalism, archival literature, translation, folk literature, literature of the empire, native associates of the empire, reception

I. The journal of *Indian Antiquary*: a formative space?

"Local Legends and Folklore, Proverbs and Songs, are subjects at every one's door who can speak a vernacular tongue, and besides their intrinsic interest they often shed a most instructive light on the habits of thought of the people" -*Indian Antiquary*, Prefatory, Part 1, Jan 1872

Nineteenth Century is a period in magnitude. Nineteenth Century gave the world its sense of Rationality, Enlightenment, and more importantly Modernity. Nineteenth century India was still under the rule of the British; it was flourishing as an Empire under British Rule. The Empire was sketched out as an identity, distinct from the British. The identity was that of difference. The identity was that of the

Orient, as opposed to the Occident. The identity was that of the 'Other' as opposed to the 'Self'. Edward Said in his seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) wrote

"Taking the late nineteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point [of Orientalism,] Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient-dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient...My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European

culture was able to manage-and even produce-the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period." (Pg 3, 4)

This discourse was facilitated by a large body of texts which Said calls as Orientalist. The Orientalist discourse which paved way for the Post-colonial Theory in academia views the Orient as the inferior to the superior and modern West. This Orientalist discourse in India comes in the form of the formidable colonial archive which consciously channelized knowledge production on the orient to construct and understand and know the orient. Though Postcolonial studies have sought to look at understanding Orientalism in the Indian Empire by means of a large body of texts, mostly in Sanskrit and its translations, there has been in general a dearth of study or research into the oral/folk literature.

The nineteenth century also saw the expanse of the print technology in the Empire. The earlier scribes were now more and more replaced by the printed page. This technology facilitated the production of knowledge, in fact fuelled it, and brought into forth disciplinary rigors. Calcutta was the centre of Printing, and Print flourished as an industry. It was only second to the jute industry.¹ The initial attempts at printing, prior to nineteenth century were heavily missionary translations and print of books on grammar, philology, and later the Orientalist translations by the noted William Jones and many other colonisers. Now, print led to 'emerging' '*disciplines of knowledge*'²which produced classified knowledge. This categorisation of knowledge into History, Literature, Archaeology, Folklore, Philosophy etc. was the gift of modernity to

the Orient. Print led to the printing or publishing of oral/folk literature into the written form, folklore was one of the important printed texts since folklore served as the way to understand the manners and customs of people for the British Civil Servants as well as to serve for their philological need. Nineteenth century archives show numerous instances when the folk literature has been represented as the authentic indigenous manners and customs which however have not yet been much explored. And Stuart Blackburn studies the inevitable influence of print in "its power to cast oral traditions in new forms, to new audiences, across linguistic and geographical boundaries".³

There have been a number of translations – from the regional language to English- in folk literature at the time as well. What I am concerned here in this paper is the documentation⁴, in English, of folktales from Bengal⁵ by a certain Guyborn Henry Damant, a colonial administrator in the journal *Indian Antiquary*. Guyborn Henry Damant (1846-1879) was a London educated⁶ British Civil Servant posted in the Bengal Presidency in the 1860s and 1870s. The Dictionary of Indian Biography, mentions Damant's "keen interest in literature and philology: wrote on folklore and the Manipuri language in the J.A.S.B⁷, J.R.A.S⁸, and the Indian Antiquary". My paper aims to study his quest in the field of folk literature which came in the form of *Bengali Folklore: Legends from Dinajpur* in the *Indian Antiquary* Journal. Dinajpur is a place in Bengal. The journal *Indian Antiquary: A Journal of Oriental Research in Archaeology, History, Literature, Languages, Folklore, &c. &c.* started in the year 1872 to research and report on the Orient. The Indian Antiquary assumed a great significance in the

¹ Roy, Tapati "Disciplining the Printed Text: Colonial and Nationalist Surveillance", *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal*, Ed Partha Chatterjee

² : " The Disciplines in Colonial Bengal", *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal*, Partha Chatterjee

³ *Print, Folklore and Nationalism in Colonial South India*, Stuart Blackburn

⁴ It needs to be noted here that by documentation I also refer to translation. The folktales were

documented from the Oral Bengali into the written English. (Intra-lingual as well as Inter-lingual translation)

⁵ Bengal here refers to undivided Bengal since the time frame is that of nineteenth century

⁶ The Dictionary of Indian Biography, 1906

⁷ Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal

⁸ Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland

Orientalist knowledge production. This journal which was devoted to the produce the classified knowledge fields of History/Literature/Religion/Folklore/Philosophy etc., disseminated knowledge of and about the Orient. What needs to be observed here is how the print enterprise was gradually systematising forms of knowledge of the Empire in India. These products of print enterprise were catering to the study of ways and customs of the Indian Empire, and a journal like this as it self-proclaims in its prospectus was a “*medium of communication* (as in original) between Orientalists and Archaeologists in different provinces of India and in Europe and America – in which all that relates the Archaeology, History, Geography, Ethnography, Mythology, Literature, Religion, Philosophy, Manners, Customs, Folklore, Arts and Science, Natural History &c. &c. of India and

the neighbouring country find a record, -indexed and easy of reference”. The journal invited contributors to ‘supply their quotas of information’.

II. Guyborn Henry Damant’s quest for folklores in the *Indian Antiquary*

Damant contributed quite a number of tales and anthropological notes and accounts of the people in Bengal and also of Manipur in the Indian Antiquary from 1872 to until his death in 1879. And after his death three more stories were published posthumously in 1880. Damant’s collection of tales “Bengali Folklore – Legends from Dinajpur” was in fact the first collection of the Bengali oral folktales to have been published in print.

The Table below shows the folktales that Damant had published.⁹

Serial Number	Title	Issue	Volume
1.	No Title	April 5, 1872	I
2.	The Second Story	June 7, 1872	I
3.	The Third Story	June 7, 1872	I
4.	The Fourth Story: <i>The Prince and the Sages</i>	July 5, 1872	I
5.	The Fifth Story: <i>King Dalim and the Apsaras</i>	July 5, 1872	I
6.	The Sixth Story: <i>The Four Friends</i>	September 6, 1872	I
7.	The Seventh Story: <i>The History of a Rogue</i>	November 1, 1872	I
8.	The Eighth Story: <i>The Merchant and the Demon</i>	November 1, 1872	I
9.	<i>The Two Bhuts</i>	January, 1874	III
10.	<i>The Jackal and the Crocodile</i>	January, 1874	III
11.	<i>The King who married a Pali Woman</i>	January, 1874	III
12.	<i>The Farmer who Outwitted the six Men</i>	January, 1874	III
13.	<i>The Minister and the Fool</i>	November, 1874	III
14.	<i>The Tolls of Goail Hat</i>	December, 1874	III
15.	<i>The Finding of the Dream</i>	February, 1875	IV

⁹ According to Indian Antiquary, as published by Swati Publications, Delhi, 1982

16.	<i>The Brahman and the Merchant</i>	January, 1880	IX
17.	<i>Adi's Wife</i>	January, 1880	IX
18.	<i>The Prince and his two Wives</i>	January, 1880	IX

The tales that Damant have collected are all simple at its outset. The stories show a fascinating world of old-world charm. The stories contain unrealistic superstitions. They portray more of world of fantasy – of kings, queens, demons, fairies, talking-animals and miracles. They portray a world which is not a lived-world. It is a surreal world with reality infused along with fancies which the conscious rational mind would never imagine. The folklores not only project a world of superstitions, but also an inconceivable temporality. The stories also portray a world of morality, justice/injustice and the punishment meted out to those who do not abide by the moral orders.

The folktales portray a world of fantasy, of imagination where humans are in contact with non-humans like Apsaras or Gods and Goddesses or Rakshasas -

"Siva Das... "Sword given by Siva, take me to the place in heaven where Tillottama [Apsara from heaven; my own] is sleeping," so the sword took him to heaven, and he found Tillottama asleep, and the house was lighted up by her beauty as if by lightning, while the flower of fire kept coming out from her nose and retreating again.

Siva Das was excessively delighted at the sight and seized the flower, and she woke up instantly, overcome with joy, and said, "Your death has come, for if you come face to face with any of the gods you will be reduced to ashes and will make me a widow: you must leave this place at once." So Siva Das descended to earth and went back to the sage, and after he had taken leave of him went back to the country of the Rakshasas". (*The Finding of the Dream*)

The stories portray a world of superstitions

"The prince replied, "I shall tell you nothing to-night, for I am now going away, but I will give you this lamp, and when it goes out, you will know that I am dead, and as long as it remains alight so long I shall be alive" (*The Prince and the Sages*)

The stories abound in customary rituals

"When the child had eaten his first rice, his ears had been bored, and he was grown up, his father gave him in marriage..." (*King Dalim and Apsaras*)

The folklores also greatly deal with justice and injustice – morals –

"...only those who leave the straight road and come off the path will fall into my pit" (*The Minister and the Fool*)

The stories reflected a society where division of occupation was there but in harmony –

"There was once a king's son, a wazir's son, a kotwal's son, and a barber's son, they were all great friends..." (*The Four Friends*)

They also project a world where due to premonitions, a child is forbidden by his father – "...After that Durani bore her son, and at his *sasti* ceremony he was called Siva Das. Now before Siva Das was born, a soothsayer had come, and, after making magical calculations, had declared that the king would become blind if he saw the child who was in the womb of Durani; so directly the child was born the king put Durani and her son forth from the women's apartments and made them live in a house which he provided in another place, neither could he bear to hear her or her son's name mentioned." (*The Finding of the Dream*)

The stories not only portrayed a familiar customary world infused with fancy, the folktales also projected a world of deceit, treachery, of brutality. Most of the stories project a world in which justice is targeted to be achieved but where it is achieved by ways of violence or revenge.

The folktales vividly show a world of cunning and of brutality and of revenge –

"...In the meantime the barber's son, pretending that he was going to shave some one in the neighbouring village, passed near the king's son, and he being a very effeminate person admired the barber's beautiful hair, and asked him how he obtained it. The barber replied, "Sir, if you agree to suffer a little pain, I will make just as beautiful hair grow on your head, I do not wish you pay me anything, but if you get a good crop of hair, you can make me a little present." The king's son believed all that he said, and asked what was to be done; so the barber made him sit down, and cut off all his hair with a razor, and then began to scrape off all the skin from the front part of his head, so that the blood flowed all over his body, but still he made no objection. The barber then rubbed some salt on his head, and told him to go to a pond, and dip his head in it, saying that the virtue of the charm was such that the deeper he dipped the longer his hair would grow. So the prince went into the water, and began to dip his head, but in the meantime the barber took his clothes, and went away. The prince continued to dip his head and each time looked to see if his hair was growing or not. After some time he saw that no good came of his dipping, and began to think that he had been deceived, and found that both his clothes and the barber had disappeared".
(The Four Friends)

The folktales project a society with amorous affairs and also where polygamy is in practice. Kings had more than one wife, and kings would marry anyone as they wished-

"There was once a king who has two queens named Durani and Surani" (*The Finding of the Dream*)

In the same story the king's second son marries four times, a human, two Rakshasas, and one Apsara or nymph.

The folklores are full of deceit. Like that of the story of *The Two Bhuts*, where the friend of the king's son, a kotwal's son deceives the king's son by throwing him into a well without any apparent reason. However, it is mostly seen that initially though there are treacherous plots contrived by the one who contrives it suffers a tragic end. Throughout the folklores, there is a sense of Fate or Destiny which looms large.

III. Conclusions: The space and the quest - the folklores and their reception

The folklores in the *Indian Antiquary* by Damant were the first Bengali folklores to be published in the printed page. The folklores were the gift of modern print technology to classified forms of discipline, in particular, to the discipline of Folklore. Folklore became an important way to understand the natives' culture – the customs, manners and habits of the people. There is a need to consider the major objective of this Orientalist journal; a little scrutiny would reveal a lot of other things. These folklores are taken as the manners and customs or beliefs of the common man. So there was a need to understand and know these stories to know the common ethos to gain effective control over them. It was thus necessary to understand the structure of the indigenous society. And the folklores give a glance of that. In the first story we see that the king had two Queens. It immediately paints a picture of polygamy. This story also shows the political set-up of the society when the king tells the prime minister "to do as he thought best", that the minister could use his authority discreetly; also the cunning, shows plotting, the clever working of the mind. Stuart Blackburn already had observed on the ways the folktales in the Colonial South-Indian context were held by the administrators as being

filled with deceit, indecency and immorality¹⁰. The folklores were part of a larger picture, that of representation – the Orientalist representation of the indigenous society; its societal values and culture. This unearthing of the folklores can also be considered with respect to 1857 Sepoy Mutiny who had rebelled against the rulers – the colonisers. It became an ardent need of the hour to know the native Orient as much as possible, and the interests in debunking local legends and folklores testify that. The journal Indian Antiquary has published several legends and folklores and anthropological accounts from different parts of the Empire. The journal was giving a consolidated representation to the manners and customs of the people. As it saw itself in the capacity as the 'medium of communication', and as we know The Folklore Society came up in 1878 at London for deliberations and discussions on things written about the Empire, the Indian Antiquary with its contents lend itself much to the production of knowledge about the Orient. The folklores represented the customs of the people, and by knowing the folklores, the colonisers sought to know the people better, to rule/govern them better.

When this knowledge production is considered, the colonisers' intent is unearthed. In trying to understand that solely, what is often neglected the role of the native associates in constructing the Orient. These stories here as given by G.H. Damant, were translated into English for its publication. The stories were collected by 'hearing' and later transferred to the code of the written language in English. "When we had heard and seen all this we came away..." (First Story). Hearing is important in the act of recording Orality. As Regina Bendix had pointed out that in folklore studies, not much attention has been paid to "hearing"¹¹. Sadhana Naithani also observes "The importance of hearing gains in complexity when the collector does not really understand the tongue of the narrator, or understands it to a limited extent, or does not understand the cultural discourse around the

narrator, narratives, and performance..." ¹²The stories also become a part of travel writing. The location of the folklore-collector determined the stories collected. As usual with most of the other collectors, even G.H. Damant was not a professional folklorist or a collector or ethnographer, but by mere virtue of his administrative position and location, he started collecting the stories wherever he went. And as Sadhana Naithani writes in her article "The Colonizer Folklorist" (Journal of Folklore Research, 1997) on James Clifford's observation, "a colonial official's years of experience were regarded as sufficient in themselves to guarantee or validate his ethnographic authority. He knew because he had been there; his statements did not need to be grounded in theory" (which Naithani takes from Charles Morrison's 'Three Systems of Imperial Ethnography: British Officials as Anthropologists in India.' in *Knowledge and Society: Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present*. Vol.5, ed. Henrika Kuklick and Elizabeth Long, 141-69. Greenwich, Conn.: JAI Press, Inc.1984:152).

So it was by the 'privilege of power'¹³ that the colonial administrator could collect the stories, and then document them in the English written word. The written form in itself indicated a modern break. Orality which has been understood as a performance tradition was given the standard form in the written language. Here, there was a transferring from one code to another. Not only this, the transference took place also in linguistic terms wherein Bengali was translated into English. This process of translation was not an easy task since the colonial-administrators were not language-experts; they were required to learn the language in the standard form only so-much-so that their interaction with the natives would be facilitated. And oral traditions are usually in the local dialects, and translating them was actually challenging. As Richard Carnac Temple, administrator and later Editor of Indian Antiquary, would write about the cumbersome process of translating in his *Legends of Punjab*¹⁴-

¹⁰ Stuart Blackburn, Print, Folklore and Nationalism in Colonial South India

¹¹ Sadhana Naithani, The Story-time of the British Empire

¹² Ibid

¹³ Ibid

¹⁴ Richard Carnac Temple, Legends of Punjab, Preface: xi

"At first, of course, I had to see everything done under my own eye, but as I became satisfied that the munshi could be trusted to record accurately, the procedure finally adopted, and that now in use is to have the recitation taken down roughly as related, then carefully copied out in a clear Persian hand, and corrected and explained by the bard, his explanations being marginally noted. I then transcribe the whole into Roman characters myself, and translate it. The Roman transliteration and the translation is then gone over by the munshi who heard the song sung, and both are revised by myself finally in consultation with him."

It is thus comprehensible how arduous a process the task of translating was. And in G. H. Damant's case as well it could be drawn that it was definitely not him, alone, engaged in the translation process. When we examine the last sentence from the first folklore that Damant presents "When we had heard..." the sentence conveys an understanding that there is more than one person; the plural 'we' would testify for the plural existence for more than one person. Sadhana Naithani has already studied on the rather un-acknowledgement of the native associates.¹⁵

When it is found that the natives associates were already involved in these transactions, could the native associates or the so-called colonised people then be said to be also involved in furthering the Orientalist motive/Project of the colonisers. Were the native associates only the representation of the colonised, or did they also have a role in creating/constructing the Orient along with the so-called colonised? Thus may we not as well conjecture on the definitive role played by the so-called colonised in the knowledge construction of the Orient? And these native associates were majorly the educated native elites who had been influenced by the Victorian rational ideas of rights and wrongs and thereby had accumulated a notional symbolic capital of being the educated elite. As Tapati Roy in her essay (1995) writes there was not

only colonial 'surveillance' in 'disciplining the printed text', but also there was an 'internal' surveillance of the same by the native elites which had later taken a nationalist colour.

To probe on the quest for the folklores, was it only G. H. Damant's quest? It was definitely not so. It was the quest of the native elites also to excavate the 'archaeology of knowledge' for representing the Orient. The colonial archive that resulted in knowledge production of and about the Orient thus was also facilitated by the natives. The native associated played prominent roles in constructing what was termed as the Orient, as the "other" of the Occident sole by their recognition of symbolic capital of being educated native. The native in their role of associates erased Said's bipolar distinction of the Self and the Other – the superior Self and the inferior Other – that the Self (Occident) was appropriating knowledge and creating the Other (Orient) could therefore be seen in other term. It was not the Self (Occident/West/Modern) to create the knowledge alone but with the aid of the significant Other (Orient/East/Traditional). A number of publications in folk literature in the nineteenth century by native associates throughout the Empire and also in Bengal (undivided) have been unearthed from the nineteenth century archival works of knowledge production. The scope of the paper lies in a humble and careful research that needs to be carried out in this aspect.

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¹⁵Sadhana Naithani, In Quest of Indian Folktales

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