

The Essence of Folktales and Their Functions in Assamese Society

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Abstract

Social life is a result of assimilation of individual and public life. Folktales are being created with the experience of social life. From that perspective it may be said that social life is reciprocate to folktales. Folktales put its influence naturally upon the social life of a community. Folk society never pays their attention towards the logical analysis of the folktales. Genetically, they have been taking away rigid ideas. Assamese folktales are leading the Assamese tradition, ethics and customs and have been giving path towards the further generation. The fundamental learning of Assamese folktale makes people eligible to handle the problems of life. Though at first, it was somebody's individual; later it becomes as the corn-house of primary learning for the Assamese society. And we see that the ethnic identity, cultural identity and natural integration are built up among different sections of the people of a state with the contribution of folkloric components. The morality of folktales has always remembered by Assamese people in every critical situation. Even Assamese folk-beliefs and ideas are formed specially based on folk tales. This paper aims to focus on how the prevalent elements of folktales are spreading out to each part of Assamese society and the day to day life of Assamese folk life.

Keywords: Assamese society, Folktale, Folk society, Customs, Folk belief, Moral, Tradition

I. Introduction

North East India has beautiful landscape and the confluence of various ethnic groups perhaps have given rise to a body of writing this is completely different from Indian English literature. The literature from North east India refers mostly to English writing but it also include in its rubric Assamese Literature, Bodo literature, writing in the 'Meitei language'; that have long been traditions of writing and stand on their own with a glorious legacy. The north east is a fertile ground for various traditions that have made their way to this zone along with tribes that bought such way of life along with them when they came here from various part of Asia.

The meaning of the word 'folk' is common people, public. The term common people include people of all caste, creed and religion. According to folk-culturists the term 'Folk' refer to a class of people who follow the same customs and traditions. It may also refer to the common living, sharing

language, religion etc. (Sarmah, 1997). On the contrary in literature the term ‘folk’ encompasses especially somewhat narrow ideas as compared to the folk society. It normally refers to the working class of villages and towns living under the canopy of traditions and customs (Sarmah, 1997). They are basically not endowed with formal education. From this angle folktale deals with the working class.

There is nothing fixed regarding the form of folktales. Folktales are primarily created by the folklore of the society and customarily orally circulated narrative literature. A folktale passes through different shapes as according to the passing of time. It expresses the experience of common people and is nourished by the common attitude of the ordinary firming class. The daily life of common people means different activities performed for their survival. They earn various types of experiences after performing these works. Creative mind always try to share their thoughts and experiences with other members of the society. They always want to narrate their work experience, their story of bravery and the beliefs (fantasy or illustration) towards the further generation.

II. Method

Analytical method is specially applied here. In analytical research, the researcher has to use facts or information already available and analyze these to make critical evaluation of the material. Here the researcher tried to elaborate the folktales introduced in Assamese society and their impacts on the people of Assam. The paper is mainly written on the basis of orally transformed folktales but related printed materials like relevant books, journals etc. are also used. Besides these tales are in printed form but they are still transformed orally in the society. In this paper the printed primary material of Bezbaruah and other unprinted oral tales have been used for analysis.

III. Discussion

Northeast India is a land with a rich and exquisite oral tradition. Histories, beliefs, saying, anecdotes and most importantly stories that embody all of these others have continued to be orally passed down to the younger generations. Orality and the collective memory are core components of every tribal society of Northeast. These stories capture the very essence of the people’s identity. Ben Okri’s words “We are part human, part stories” is very true in the case of the different ethnic groups of the Northeast. Here, every community is in possession of a vibrant storytelling tradition. There are bristling galaxies of stories archived in the collective memory of the people which to a large extent determine their ways of life and beliefs. These stories are a dominant influence on the literary creation of the region. Temsula Ao’s *The Songs From Other Life* also draws heavily from these indigenous lores, myths and legends. Almost every poem in this collection is preceded by a brief stating of the story that the poem deals with. These help the readers to understand the poems better. From the myth of origin of the Nagas from the six stones at ‘Lungerteok’, to the tales about the stealth of the Naga script, Ao delves into a number of folk tales. Early writings on ethnicity and identity-based conflicts by such scholars as Apurba Baruah, Manorama Sharma, Udayon Mishra, Tilottama Mishra and others reflected broadly on how communities of the Northeast remain far less internally differentiated than their counterparts from the rest of India.

Assam has a fair proportion of tribes in the hills as well as in parts of the Valley who speak dialects of languages belonging to the Tibeto Burman family. The general Assamese people use Indo-Aryan language. There is a certain distinctiveness attach to each tradition, in relation to the tribes inhabiting the region, which in here is their particular language, religion, custom or ethnicity. (Barua, Lalit Kumar, 1999). Assam is one of the eastern- most states of India. The people of Assam inhabit in a multiethnic, multi-linguistic and multi-religious society. The process of social formation in Assam has been marked simultaneously by ‘Sanskritization’ and ‘Tribalization’ at different times. So, the folk-beliefs and ideas are different that grows up at different times.

To begin with, Folk traditions are interrelated with the folk and folklore of a society. Folk implies a group of people who constituted the lower stratum - in contrast to the upper stratum or elite society. In present times, Folk refer to any group of people who share at least one common factor. It belongs to the collective traditions which help the group to have a sense of solidarity and group identity. Folklore means folk learning. It comprehends all knowledge that is transmitted by word of mouth and all crafts and techniques that are learned by imitation, or example, as well as the products of these crafts. Folklore is the lore of the people. Folklore reveals people’s ideas and ideals, hopes, fears, aspirations and superstitions. It is the evolution of people’s social, emotional and cultural life, an index to their ethnic, aesthetic norms and moral values.

Folktale is a kind of traditional prose narrative which is generally handed down from generation to generation. But its need has not always have been oral. It is found in written form also. The tradition of telling a tale is for pure entertainment and to the delight of the listeners is not new. Narration is ageless. The impulse to tell a story and the need to listen to it have made narrative the natural companion of man throughout the history of civilization. Every tale tells about humans, their culture and their society. Folktale is a kind of prose narrative which is related to any part of life history, from cradle to grave, including great turning points or insignificant details in family life, occupation, entertainment, celebration, religion, crisis, illness, travel etc. and may provide material for collaboration into a narrative.

Assamese people used the word “SADHU” in a wider sense. This word represents the meaning of the English words—tales, legend, myth and fable. Assamese folktales are like an evident document of Assamese culture, society and civilization. Folktales work as reflector of socio-cultural scenery of Assamese society. Assamese people always learn and try to handle the problems of life from folktales. It is like the corn-house of primary learning for Assamese society. When they are fishing, cultivating, firming, looming, rice mixing etc. in every day work the morality of tales or the situation describes in folktales are memorized or referenced by them.

This research paper aims to focus how the prevalent elements of folktales are spreading out and functioning in day to day life of Assamese society.

The Study of Assamese Folktales

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'*Sadhukatha*' is the Assamese term for a folktale. According to Lakshminath Bezbarua who is the pioneer of the study of folktale in Assam, '*Sadhukatha*' is the word of saints. It is the advice of virtuous people. In the past, people used these oral tales to taught moral lessons to their own children and to other people in Assam. *Burhi Aai'r Xaadhu* (literally translated to Grandma's Tales) is a collection of stories or folklore, that have been compiled by famous Assamese author and poet Laxminath Bezbarua. As most folktales go, before this compilation, there had been no written record of these stories. While some of the stories are more like the Assamese version of Panchatantra, with speaking animals and birds as main characters of the story, most of these are based on the life of a simple villager. The words of Laxminath Bezbarua wrap these stories up in subtle and sometimes blatant humour, which can somehow never be reflected in translation, no matter how accurate it is. Some of the popular folktales prevalent in Assamese society are-

- **Tejimola**

Perhaps the most famous among all *Burhi Aai'r Xadhu*, this story is a touching story of a girl named Tejimola whose evil stepmother kills her in a fit of jealousy while Tejimola's father is away for business as a traveling merchant. However, Tejimola takes different forms and stays alive in spirit despite her stepmother's efforts to make her disappear forever. The story has a happy ending, where Tejimola ends up as a lotus flower in the hands of her father on his way home. With magic and emotions all packed in, this story is a fascinating narration from beginning till the end.

- **Jorodgob Roja'r Upakhyan**

This funny tale is about a foolish emperor whose skewed idea of justice leads him to decide to kill his own son. In an attempt to find a way out of this, the emperor's shrewd minister catches hold of a fat man in the pretext of having him carry the baby prince while he was being killed. The man's teacher in turn, being even more cunning, makes the foolish emperor kill himself by tempting him with kingship of Heaven itself.

- **Bandor aru Xiyal**

This is a famous tale of a monkey and a fox who claim to be friends and yet keep trying to outwit each other. While the monkey cheats the fox out of his fair share of food taking advantage of the fact that the monkey can climb trees while the fox can't, the fox makes the monkey attack a bee hive by telling him it is a royal drum. The greedy foolish monkey however ends up paying with his life in this story with a strong moral: Don't cheat your friends!

- **Juwai'r Xadhu**

"Juwai" meaning son-in-law, this story is about a foolish man who goes visiting his in-laws. While confusing his own shadow to be a person, he ends up giving up all of his clothes to

his own shadow to get rid of it. To add to his woes, he suffers from night-blindness which he tries to hide from his in-laws, leading to a whole lot of confusion.

- **Lotkon**

An intelligent but poor man tired of being nagged by his wife sets off on a journey to prove his worth, and with his cunning manages to fool a lot of people on his way. Starting from eating sweets in a sweet shop by fooling the shop owner's son into believing his name to be "Makhi" (meaning housefly) to making a man run around a tree holding on to the tail of a pig, the intelligent man goes back home with riches much to the satisfaction of his wife.

- **Kukurikona**

Kukurikona in Assamese means a person suffering from night blindness. Although not much different from the "Juwai'r Xadhu" this story has its own twists and turns.

- **Dhura Kauri aru Tiposi**

Dhura Kauri meaning a crow and Tiposi being a pigeon, this story is a narration of how the intelligent bird escapes from the clutches of the crow using his cunning, by making the crow fly around to fetch something that ultimately leads to the crow's death.

The central idea of the Assamese folk society, on the relation between men and animal, is that 'Nature is much better than cruelty or ugliness of men'. They have received this idea from the folktales. Human society injured itself. Men are the cause of their own devastation. But nature never ignores men. It is always there for the human society. In the tale of *Tejimola*, Tejimola takes different forms and stays alive in spirit despite her stepmother's efforts to make her disappear forever. The story has a happy ending where Tejimola ends up a lotus flower in the hands of her father on his way home (Deka Hazarika, 2001). In her journey from Tejimola to lotus, nature helps her in every step; her different forms are always related with nature.

There are some folktales which are introduced with the sorrow and unfortunate conditions of heroes and heroines. The heroes and heroines, living with the power, have to face the evil power. But however, joy ultimately comes to the hero by the grace of god power. The god power makes their lives prosperous and powerful (Bezborua, 2005). The examples of *Tejimola*, *Tula and Teja* and *The Kite's Daughter* may be given, where Tejimola, Teja and the kite's daughter faces many problems from their enemies. Tejimola was killed by her stepmother, Teja was cheated by her step sister and turned into a little bird, Maina by her step mother (Bezborua, 2005), the kite's daughter was sold to a tradesman by her husband's seven co-wives (Bezborua, 2005). All situations were created out of jealousy. Taking inspiration from those tales, folk people sometimes

face their challenging moment of life. Injustice is transient before justice. ‘Truth must come clearly before us; nobody can hide’, folk society regard it as key idea while spending their life. They take inspiration from the heroes or heroines of folktales to spend their life gracefully

Tribal Folktales

Tribal folk tales are deeply concentrated with the myths and beliefs. Folk tale bears the example of ancient origin and has deep psychic roots in the life of the community. There are various popular Folk tales among all the communities of Assam. These Folk tales bears few general features. They are oral narrative. Myth and Folk belief have a great role in narrative tradition of folk tales, popular among the tribal communities. The rituals, fertility symbols, chants or incantations, description about the certain phenomenon, like sun or moon, the eclipse etc. are abound in the tribal folk tales. The Assamese folk tales are known as *Sadhu Katha*. These above mentioned features generally not found among the *Sadhu katha* or Assamese tales. The influence of neo-vaishnavism, Jataka tales, Panchatantra, tales of central India found in *Sadhu Katha*. Supernatural , motif, e.g. Ban devata, the Snake husband motif (Champa Yati), Romantic motif (Paneso), Step mother motif (Tejimola), Jealousness of rivalry woman motif(The kite’s daughter), humorous or trickster motif(Tatum Tamuli, Tikhar) etc. often intervenes the Assamese folk tales.

Creation tales are very popular among all the tribal communities of Assam. Dimasa tribe believe that they are the son and daughters of Bangla (a male) and Arikhidima (a female). Arikhidima laid seven eggs at Dilou Sangibra (Bank of Dibu and Sangi River). The forefathers of Dimasa community appeared from six eggs and from the seventh egg few devils spirits, appeared. Bodo people believe that God Anam created one pair of birds. The female bird of the pair laid three eggs, devil, spirits appeared from one egg and from the other two eggs the forefathers of the Bodo community appeared. Assamese folk tale is distinguished from tribal folk tales. Assamese Folk tales have influenced both in dialects and standard spoken language. But tribal tales has a deep connection with myth which in turn is originally connected with beliefs and practices of the tribal communities.

Rabha folktales are very long. Bodo verbal arts are enriched by folk tale, myth, proverb, ballad etc. Creation tale of earth are very popular among Bodo tribes. The folk tale Jaulia Dabdan, Bigroshree chekla are very popular folk tales. The characters of Bodo tales are very peculiar, i.e. animal character, e.g. Frog king, Seng Fish, Clever Fox and old man and woman, crane bird king, Phanfawali bird, the fisohowa bird, Tortoise and Hare etc.

Present Status and History

Assam is indisputably the richest Indian State in terms of folklore. The traditions, rituals, mythology, customs are more living here than anywhere else. Assam is the homeland of a large number of divine populations that came here from different directions at different period of time besides her aboriginal inhabitants. They belong to different racial stocks, speak different languages

and have different socio- cultural traditions. Besides the Assamese people, a large number of tribal people, both in hills and plains, such as Bodos, Garo, Rabha, Koch, Missing, Dimasa, Tiwa, Karbis etc live in this region as members of broad cultural group.

Folktales were more important and influential in ancient times and pre-modern times because there was no mass media, radio, TV, electronic device, film and even books were not common for the commoners. So, most people had to tell tales by word of mouth in order to- a) teach their children moral ideas, encourage imagination and b) amuse their children so that they would not get too bored.

Folktales have always been useful and are still useful today in not just passing on moral direction/suggestion/notions to children, but also in transferring the mother tongue (language) on the next generation. By language, I mean, a feel for grammar structure, pronunciation and vocabulary. This, I believe, was also the precursor of literature. Literature is simply a sophisticated version of folktale telling. It is a continuation of story-telling right into adulthood. And people everywhere love a good story. In fact we are still being surrounded by stories everyday right into the 21st Century. The methods have evolved and diversified, but stories are still told with the exact same intentions as our ancestors had when they told them to their children

IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, the results of this study provide that folktales and its characters, situations, background and ethics spread all over the day to day life of Assamese folk society. Assamese folk-beliefs and ideas are formed specially based on folktales. Folktales have been bearing the Assamese folk culture. Taking elements from folktales, Assamese folk mind tries to shape their life. Assamese folktales are also universal. It shares universal human feelings. All human beings are connected to each other. On the other hand, the whole human society is connected to whole nature. Man itself is a part of nature. Assamese folktales have been bearing this notion. There are some tales which are regarded as fundamental lessons of life, through which the different situations of life can be handled. Folktales can be applied as a medium of expanding human values removing fears, hardships and obstacles from the chaotic situations of life and society in general. The impact of folktales upon the Assamese folk life can be noticed clearly. There is nothing else in the folk life where there is no element of folktales.

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