Barring Assamese is more of a voluntary sense of belonging to a notion of nationhood. The Assamese nation evolved through history with numerous sub-nationalities subscribing to the notion of being Assamese: each group brought with them vibrant folklore forms that went on to evolve as what can be termed as Assamese Folklore. Thus, Assamese Folklore is polyvocal, heterologistic, and is indicative of the triumph of the ‘vernacular’ that has resisted homogenizing and standardizing tendencies from above, and is basically a celebration of myriad forms and moods. This dialogic engagement is brought to the fore in the article ‘The Assamese as Reflected in Dimasa Folklore: Excerpts from a Song Jiniba Raj’ by Uttam Bathari, where folklore is seen to be interrogating the intra-ethnic relationship between the Dimasas and the Assamese. Uttam Bathari’s article clearly delineates the liminality of the notion of ‘Assamese’, as he discusses the multiple possibilities associated with the term. Scholarship in Assam has directed attention to the role of folklore in the forging of a greater Assamese nation. Anil Boro’s ‘The Trickster in Assamese Folktales’ shows how trickster motifs are common to various ethnic inhabitants of the region. Kishore Bhattacharjee, in his article ‘Folklore Studies in Assam: an indicative outline’, highlights how early scholars approached folklore from within the ambit of nation building. He concludes his article with an understated hint that ‘difference and conflict’ are gradually emerging as areas of interest, perhaps as exemplified by Uttam Bathari’s article.

Kishore Bhattacharjee also points out that folklore studies in Assam had forged international linkages from a very early period and this is validated by the article ‘Notes on Assamese Place-Lore’ where Úlo Valk grounds his field visits in Assam against contemporary international scholarship in place-lore and shows how it can be perceived as ‘narratives of belonging’. Sunil Kumar Dutta’s ‘A Birth-Centenary Tribute to Birinchi Kumar Barua: a pioneering folkloric voice’ highlights the early influence of European and American scholarship on Birinchi Kumar Baruah and in the establishment and consolidation of the discipline of Folklore in Assam.

The feminine voice is emerging as an important part of contemporary folklore scholarship in Assam. Manasi Borah and Mandakini Baruah articulate the gender studies perspective in their articles on Assamese folktales and proverbs respectively. Folklore has also greatly influenced popular cultural forms in Assam. Neelakshi Goswami in her article ‘The Folk imagination of Bhupen Hazarika’ shows how folklore has been a major formative and creative influence on the most celebrated of Assam’s popular voices. The river Brahmaputra is an integral part of the Assamese imagination and Prabin Das explores how the Brahmaputra has enriched the songs of Bhupen Hazarika. Jyotirmoi Pradhani’s ‘Life as Lore: the Art and Time of Pratima Barua Pandey’ is a multidimensional write-up in the sense that it not only shows the role of folklore as the determining influence in one of Assam’s major artistic voices, but also how tenuous the link is between Assamese nationalism and its contributing constituencies. The article also shows how the life and time of artistes like Pratima Barua or Bhupen Hazarika are itself part of contemporary folklore in Assam.

Bihu is perhaps the most visible of Assam’s folk forms. A multimedia event comprising songs, dances, dress and food, one can have a glimpse of various facets of this important folk form in Paramesh Dutta’s article ‘Festivity, Food, and Bihu: a short introduction to the national festival of Assam’. Parasmoni Dutta provides a short introduction to the physical folklife of Assam and Madhurima Goswami goes into the dynamics of the folk dances of Assam. One would like to hope that the short articles discussed above would be indicative of the rich tapestry of Assamese folklore and the scholarship that goes into its understanding and would whet the appetite of the readers for more.

One would like to conclude with a folktale from an alternative constituency of Assamese identity: alternative because they are the lesser known Assamese of Southern Assam or what is more popularly called the Barak Valley. Barak Valley is home to a Bengali speaking majority and a multitude of smaller ethnic groups, amongst whom the Assamese are a minuscule minority. A section of the Assamese in Barak valley trace their displacement to the valley to the Burmese incursion into Assam in the eighteenth century, while another sees themselves as the descendants of the forces of general Chilarai’s campaign in the Valley.¹ The folklore of the Assamese of Barak valley reflects an anxiety to remain united and safeguard their land and life. The following tale was narrated by Minaram Hazarika, a man in his late seventies, in a village named
Alekhagul in the Karimganj district of Barak valley, and many variations were narrated by other informers during the course of a year-long field work. During the Burmese incursion into Assam and the resultant atrocities, people belonging to the Ahom Chutiyas, were forced to flee their ancestral place at Kathiyatoli in the Nagaon district of Brahmaputra valley. They fled westward and reached Srihotto in the Syhlet district of what is now Bangladesh via the Khaki Jaintia Hills. During their escape, they came across other groups fleeing the Burmese. However, as the groups were charting their own individual courses, they were easy prey to attacks from not only the pursuing Burmese, but also other inimical groups. It was in Srihotto that the various groups encountered each other, and instead of being loosely dispersed, decided to form a composite group in their struggle for survival. This agreement was sealed with the leaders of the various groups embracing a large stone and taking an oath over it to remain united and to identify themselves as Assamese. It is apparently the result of this oath that led to the formation of the Assamese identity in Barak Valley as they reached its safe haven and settled in different locations. This oath on the stone is still a part of their living folklore and holds them together which is in direct contrast to the ethnic assertions of the Brahmaputra Valley. Thus, while the Koch Rajbanshis fight for a separate identity in Brahmaputra Valley, the Koch Rajbanshis of Barak Valley fiercely hold on to their Assamese identity. Being or not being Assamese is perhaps just a point of view and the final resolution or a semblance of it lies in the people’s voice and in the folklore of a place.

End Note
1 Chilarai is the celebrated general of the Koch King Naranaryan, and is treated as a national hero in Assam for his role in the consolidation and expansion of the Assamese nation. Ironically, he is also a hero for the contemporary champions of the Koch-Rajbanshi nationalistic assertion that perceive it as distinct and different from Assamese.

Folklore studies in Assam: An indicative outline

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Folklore Studies in Assam includes the study of both tribal and non-tribal folklore. It began in the end of the nineteenth century. A study of Kachari folktales was published by J.D. Anderson in 1895 (Kachari Folktales and Rhymes). P.R.T. Gordon studied Assamese proverbs (Some Assamese Proverbs, 1896) and there were similar studies by colonial scholars. Those studies were mere collections and had certain biases. The colonial collectors used their value for evaluation of oral literature and customs of the communities. They were interested in locating themselves vis a vis the anthropological other.

Local scholarship also began simultaneously. Bhadrasen Bora collected riddles and ballads. There were some collections of proverbs. But a more systematic collection of Assamese superstitions, demonology and supernatural legends was made by Benudhar Rajkhowa (Assamese Demonology, 1905, and Assamese Popular Superstitions, 1920).

Lakshminath Bezbarua can be termed as the Brother Grimm of Assam. He worked from a specific nationalistic agenda. He used folklore for consolidating Assamese identity and was involved in the project of framing a distinct hinterland for Assamese culture early in the twentieth century. He published 65 folktales in three collections and included two in a short story collection. He thought that there are two purposes of narrating: moral education and entertainment. The recurrent themes of the tales of his collections are an ideal society, unity, solidarity, just rule and the role of people in the process of social reform and formation. Thus his tales discuss the principles of an ideal nation and stress that folktales contain metaphors of an ideal society.

Folklore studies in India were basically part of the project for the establishment of a literary history of the regional languages of the country. But, in Assam, it also forged linkages and became a systematic study in an academic framework that acknowledged concerns articulated in international folklore studies since the middle of the last century. The influence of anthropological folklore reached Assam in the mid-1950s when Walter Fernandes wrote a letter to Praphulladatta Goswami saying that the tale Three Oranges migrated to Europe via Assam through China.

Modern study of folklore in Assam began with the contributions of Birinchi Kumar Barua (1908-1964) who was influenced by folklore research in Europe and the USA. Following his research experience in London and subsequent exposure to the Folklore Archive in...