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 Khasi 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 nationalist 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-à-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, demonogy 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
Uppsala University, he took the initiative to establish a Folklore Archive at Guwahati University in 1955. It was later renamed the Department of Tribal Culture and Folklore Research. He was influenced by western rationalism and his scholarship betrays an embeddedness in the colonial paradigm.

Praphulladatta Goswami (1919-1994) was another Assamese folklorist of international stature. He became the first Indian folklorist to visit the USA as a visiting professor when he was invited by Indiana University in 1963. He was a student and successor of Birinchi Kumar Barua and his doctoral thesis was examined by Stith Thompson and Verrier Elwin. In 1964, he took over charge of the Department of Tribal Culture and Folklore Research, and it was under his guidance that it was granted the status of an independent University Department named the Department of Folklore Research in 1972. He applied motif-index to Assamese folktales and ballads. He was shy of offering interpretation and confined his works to typology, description and compilation. However, there are penetrating sparks of insights in his writings which should be picked up by future researchers. His approach was comparative and he applied the historical-geographical approach in a novel way. His compilation of narratives in his Ballad and Tales of Assam is astonishing. The depth of the accompanying notes is very precious for future folklorists. Nevertheless, his strong allegiance to international classification without accommodating local classification is an example of submission to critical tropes of western academia.

Birendranath Datta, who took charge of the Department of Folklore Research after Praphulladatta Goswami, directed attention to local categories, and introduced the M.Phil course in the department under his tutelage. He facilitated not only the training of future folklorists, but also the generation of a larger database of local folklore materials. Birendranath Datta charted areas like commonality of folklore materials in North-East India, ethnicity, and folklore, functional studies of folklore, folk Ramayanas and folklore in the context of society and politics in North-east India. He wrote a monograph on folklore studies in an Assamese region. This was the first step towards the study of regional folklore in Assam. He has broadened folklore studies in Assam and expanded the engagement with theory. His metaphors are nationalistic, anthropological, and integrative; but his work does not direct attention to issues of difference and conflict.

After Birendranath Datta the department of Folklore Research of the Guwahati University has expanded its activities and is responding to contemporary and emerging trends whereby expanding the theoretical coverage, range of data collection, fieldwork and methodological awareness.

A Birth-Centenary Tribute to Birinchi Kumar Barua: A pioneering folkloric voice

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Birinchi Kumar Barua (1908-1964) was a pioneer in folklore research. Born on October 16, 1908, at Nagaon in central Assam, he had his early education at Nagaon Government High School and passed his Matriculation Examination in 1928 in the first division. He went on to complete his graduation from the Presidency College, Kolkata, with Honours in Pali in 1932 that secured him the prestigious Ishan Scholarship. In 1934, he received his M.A. degree, securing First class First position in Pali, from Kolkata University and went on to qualify for the Bachelor of Law degree from the same university.

In 1945, he proceeded to London for his research at the School of Oriental and African Studies on the Cultural History of Assam and received the Doctorate degree in 1947 from the University of London. While returning from London, Dr Barua visited some European countries, particularly Switzerland and Finland. He was immensely influenced by the research activities in folklore that were being conducted in these countries, particularly in the spheres of documentation and archiving. His experiences in Finland converted him to a folklorist, and this found full expression when he joined Guwahati University as a Reader in the department of Assamese in 1948 after teaching stints at Calcutta University and Cotton College, Guwahati. The Guwahati University started the Folklore Archive on the initiative of Birinchi Kumar Barua in 1955. It was later upgraded to the Department of Tribal Culture and Folklore Research. Path breaking documentation of the folklore and material cultures of the different ethnic groups of undivided Assam, like the Boros, the Misings, the Khasi-Jaintias, the Deuri-Chutias, the Garos and the Assamese Muslims were taken up. This department