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Guest Editor:
Parag M Sarma





NATIONAL FOLKLORE SUPPORT CENTRE

National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC) is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation, registered in Chennai, dedicated to the promotion of Indian folklore research, education, training, networking, and publications. The aim of the Centre is to integrate scholarship with activism, aesthetic appreciation with community development, comparative folklore studies with cultural diversities and identities, dissemination of information with multi-disciplinary dialogues, folklore fieldwork with developmental issues folklore advocacy with public programming events and digital technology with applications to voice the cultures of the marginalised and historically disadvantaged communities. Folklore is a tradition based on any expressive behaviour that brings a group together, creates a convention and commits it to cultural memory. NFSC aims to achieve its goals through cooperative and experimental activities at various levels. NFSC is supported by grants from the Ford Foundation and Tata Education Trust.

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The Oath on the Stone and other Musings: An editorial and a little more

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Being 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, heteroglotic, 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 Raji' 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 Ülo 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 Prodhani'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 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 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-à-vis the anthropological other.

Local scholarship also began simultaneously. Bhadrassen 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



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



was nourished by Dr. Barua till his death. After him the responsibilities were shouldered by his disciple Prof.



Birinchi Kumar Barua

Praphulladatta Goswami who could offer efficient leadership to the study of folklore applying modern scientific methodology and theory. In 1972, this department became a full-fledged academic department of Guwahati University and was renamed the Department of Folklore Research. An important part of Birinchi Kumar Barua's vision was realized.

A creative writer of repute, two of his novels *Jivanar Batat* (On the Road Called Life, 1944) and *Seuji Patar Kahini* (The Story of Green Leaves, 1959) achieved both critical and popular acclaim. His creative writings are infused with the folklore of Assam, and his engagement with it produced the pioneering *Asamar Lokasamskriti* (Folklore of Assam) in 1961. It was the first ever comprehensive survey of folklore material of the state written in Assamese and it fetched him the Sahitya Akademi Award posthumously in 1964. He has to his credit books on the history and development of Assamese language and literature as well as biographical accounts of Sankardeva. Some of his famous works are *Assamese Literature* (1941), *Asamiya Bhasa* (1949), *Studies in Early Assamese Literature* (1953), *Asamiya Bhasa aru Samskriti* (1957), *Sankardeva, The Vaisnava Saint of Assam* (1960), and *History of Assamese Literature* (1964). In 1951, Birinchi Kumar Barua published his magnum opus *A Cultural History of Assam*, Volume I.

Prof. Barua died at the age of 56 on March 30, 1964, after a brief illness. Within the short span of his life, he left behind a legacy of scholarship of the highest order in varied fields like Folklore, History, Literature, Language, Art and Culture, and Sankardeva Study. One would like to conclude with the obituary for Prof. Birinchi Kumar Barua by the famous American Folklorist Dr Richard M. Dorson:

"In the spring semester of 1963 Professor Barua lectured on 'The Folklore of India' as visiting professor of Folklore at Indiana University...We negotiated a contract for two volumes he would edit on *Folktales of India* to appear in the *Folktales of the World* series. He had other ambitious projects: for an *Encyclopedia of Indian Folklore*, for a book surveying the *Folk Traditions of India*. To us Prof. Barua appeared imposing, handsome, sturdy, and in continual good spirits. He organized his lectures, the first on their subject in the United States, with logic and clarity, and delivered with feeling. All his listeners received the impression that Indian civilization was permeated with a folk culture, and that her classics dipped deeply into the wells of folk tradition. 'In India a child sings before he talks, and dances before he walks' he said memorably...Professor Barua became our cherished friend. His sudden death is a heavy blow to his American as well as his Indian colleagues, and to the cause of international folklore scholarship (Dorson 1994:20-21)."

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The Assamese as Reflected in Dimasa Folklore: Excerpts from a Song *Jiniba Raji*

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Assam is a land of great diversity inhabited by different ethnic communities belonging to different races and linguistic groups. Having migrated at different times, each of these groups is endowed with rich and distinct cultural practices. Over the centuries, a new culture developed in the valley along the Brahmaputra as a result of social interactions amongst these disparate groups. It is this culture that evolved to be 'Assamese'. Some of the groups blended traits completely with the new culture, whereas others maintained their distinctiveness despite having made sizable contribution to the formation of the Assamese culture, like the Dimasas.

While its antiquity is obscure, its medieval history is relatively known through the various *Buranjis* (chronicles) maintained by the Ahoms, as the medieval Dimasa kingdom remained a formidable adversary of the Ahom monarchy till its dissolution in 1832. In the later part of rule, the Dimasa monarchy came under the influence of Brahmanism and Vaishnavite cult. It was during this period that substantial literatures were produced by the Dimasas, mostly in Assamese, Bengali and Sanskrit. However, large sections of the community remained pre-literate and possessed a large corpus of oral literature that includes a vast genre of ballads, folksongs, folktales, hymns and riddles amongst others that responded to the political and cultural reality around them. There is a distinct class of songs that speaks of encounter with other neighboring and distant communities. There are different songs narrating the Dimasas' encounter, both friendly and hostile, with different groups such as Kukis, Nagas, Burmese etc. These songs recount tragic defeat or heroic triumph over such neighbours.

The song under discussion is titled *Jiniba Raji*, the nearest translation of which would be *Our Country/Land*. It narrates the misfortune of being dispossessed of land. The song begins by offering obeisance to the Gods and Goddesses worshipped by 'grandfather and grandmother' and recollects the affluence of their land in the days gone by, where 'rice and cotton used to grow all by themselves'. It says, however, that days are changed and they are 'forced to' live with the Ahoms

as neighbours. The song portrays the Assamese as cunning and expert in scheming. At one point, the song narrates that the Ahoms are asking for land measuring a blade of a straw/thatch. It is commonly believed that the Ahoms at the time of their advent requested the Dimasa King to allot land for their settlement. The blade of straw is used to denote the gradual occupation of their ancestral lands by the Ahoms. It exhorts the members of the community not to adopt the 'Ahom culinary and dress culture' and uphold their own. The song ends with strong hope that the days of gold and silver would indeed return one day.

There is extensive use of metaphor in the song. The growing of rice and cotton all by themselves, are actually used to narrate the fertility of land. The use of words such as 'gold-decked swaying hands' and 'silver-clad waving hands' represent the affluence of the people. The use of the phrase 'forced to be neighbour with the Ahoms', though implicit, points to the military reverses suffered against the Ahoms and consequent loss of territory. Similarly the use of 'continue to push boundaries' is reference to the Ahom expansionism leading to constant military conflict. From the start to the end several references are found to 'god and goddess of forefathers' and 'paternal skill and maternal skill'. Towards the end the song, it is narrated with conviction that the days of gold and silver would return. But the song sets some conditions for the return of the good old days. It calls upon the members of the community not to idle away time. It would return only if their cultural distinctiveness as a community is maintained. If folklore "encompasses various aspects of expressive behavior as dialogue between human groups and their physical and social environment" (Reddy & Durga, 2008, p.3), the song helps in explaining cultural formation and change. It is a reflection of the historical experience that the Dimasa society went through.

But how does the song reflect the community's perception toward the Assamese as claimed in the title of this essay while it narrates only its political contest with the Ahoms. A small detour shall reveal the answer to this. Dimasa typically uses different ethnonyms for different communities it has come in close contact with, for instance *Magam-sa* for all the various groups of Nagas, *Phana-sa* for the Karbis etc. In the song, the term used to refer the Ahoms is '*Asimsa*'.



However, the same name is used by the Dimasas to refer to the Assamese. This terminological dissonance needs a little explanation as both the Ahoms and the Assamese are actually two different categories. The Ahom is an ethnic group that migrated to Assam in the early thirteenth century, whose six hundred years of rule was instrumental in the formation of geographical category called Assam, while the Assamese, usually meant to denote people living in Assam, is rather a complex and politically loaded term. The non-recognition of differences between these two categories of people derives from its folk perception which may be explained in terms various changes the region underwent in the medieval times.

The term *Asimsa* was originally used for the Ahoms. It is to be noted here that most Dimasa words are derivatives. They called the Ahoms so because they were known to have migrated from Siam or Shyam by the Dimasas. The term *Asimsa* is changed version of *Ha-shyam-sa* meaning son of land of shyam. (the suffix *sa* is used by Dimasa to denote any community, i.e. *ha-di-sa*, Bengalis as son of wet paddy field, *gufu-sa*, the white man (son) or European). The Dimasa term of *Asimsa* referring to the Ahoms extended to the other groups living in the land of Ahoms. Interestingly, they share close emotional bond to their agnates living in the land of Ahoms and refrain from designating them as *Asimsa*. Many scholars believe that the term Assam finds origin in this word *ha-shyam-sa* or *Asimsa*.

It would be convenient to draw the conclusion that the type of songs discussed in this essay forms a part of peoples' memory. Their performances are actually recounting of events in the past which shaped the community's destiny. Every act of performing this act of retelling is similar to rereading past history, though the act of reading itself cannot be put beyond context. The context of reading is crucial in shaping contemporary public perception over issues and events, especially amongst people 'without history.'

The Song (translated by the author):

O' Lord Almighty of my artless grandfather/ I bow to you in the east
 O' Goddess Almighty of my innocent/guileless grandmother/ I bow to you in the west
 Lend your ears o' my elderly folks/ Lend your ears o' my brothers and sisters
 Cotton weaved cloth by itself / In our land rice grew by itself
 Gold decked the swaying hands/ Silver clad the waving hands.
 These days, we are forced to be Assamese neighbours
 These nights, we are forced to be fishermen's friends

The Assamese continues to push our boundaries/
 The fishermen continue to fish our waters
 The Assamese is asking for Land/ Measuring the blade of a straw/thatch
 The fisherman is asking for water/ Measuring a throttle
 The Assamese are foresighted in thoughts/ The fishermen are deft diplomats
 Lend your ears o' my brothers and sisters/ Do not sleep away the hours
 Do not idle away the times/ Wake up o' fellow brothers and sisters
 Arise o' fellow elderly folks

Lest you wake up/ Paternal skill will be lost
 Lest you arise/ Maternal skill will be lost
 In grand old book thou shall find the paternal skill
 Crafted in designs of hand fans belong the maternal skill

Do not learn the way Assamese eat/ Do not learn the way Fisherman dress
 Will eat the fathers' way/ Will dress the mothers' way
 If paternal working skill not abandoned/ Golden days would return
 If maternal weaving skill not abandoned/ Silvery nights would return
 Again gold shall deck the swaying hands
 Once more shall sway silver clad hands
Judi shall flow in torrents/ *Khaji* shall form hillocks
 Fawn shall fickle around six hills/ When gold shall deck the swaying hands
 Shall consume fruits of six banyans
 Dance till headgear falls/ Sway hands till *rikhaosa* slips.

Judi—shortened from of *Judima*, meaning Dimasa traditional rice beer.

Khaji—meat or vegetables served with rice beer or any other form of drink.

Rikhaosa—a piece of cloth worn like stole or *chador* by women.

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The trickster in Assamese Folktales

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The trickster figure in folk narratives all over the world is a tricky, skillful and resourceful character, often full of contradictions and ambivalence. A rogue and a clever deceiver, he can outwit and outplay his adversaries by virtue of his wit and presence of mind. The tricksters of Assamese folktales, unlike the trickster of, say, Native American tales and myths, isn't a culture hero. The Assamese trickster is not responsible for creating conditions that allow for the civilization of human society.

The Assamese word for trickster is Tenton or Teton, literally meaning "the clever one." In his pioneering work on the tales of Assam, Praphulladatta Goswami has included four trickster tales along with other versions and parallels amongst other ethnic communities of the region and other central Indian tribes.

The trickster is very often out of his home for his apparent foolhardiness. This feature is seen in many of the trickster figures of this region. In one such tale, he meets some thieves who ask him to enter a house and throw out the valuables to them. He beats on a drum instead and the householder gets up and apprehends him as the others flee. As he is being taken to court, he finds a man cry out at an unruly bullock, "Would someone kill it with but one stroke?" Tenton deals the animal a fatal blow and sends it to its death. So the man follows him to court. As they go on, a woman is seen selling bananas to the following strain,

Give me a paise
Take a bunch,
Then go away, a kick on my breast.

Tenton drops a paise, takes a bunch of bananas and gives her a kick. She also follows him to court. At the court he explains his action thus: "Does a thief beat on a drum in the home he has entered? I but looked for something to eat." The King's minister observes here: "His words are worth a hundred rupees". He goes on, "I did what that man had asked me to do: I slew the bullock with but one stroke". The minister again observed that "His words are worth a thousand rupees". He concludes by declaring: "I paid exactly what the woman had asked for her bananas". The minister reiterated that "His words are worth a lakh of rupees".

The King acquits Tenton. After a few days Tenton comes to the court and claims a hundred and a thousand and a lakh rupees from the minister, for as he declared, "A

word is a word". The king forces the minister to make good the claims. With the money, the lad persuades the minister's daughter Champa to bathe and feed him. He leaves his money with Champa and asks the King: "Who bathes whom? Who places a seat for whom? Who feeds whom with her own hands?" The King answers: "Why a wife does these things for her husband". Then the lad Tenton tells the King that Champa has done these things for him. Despite the opposition of the irate minister, the King allows the lad to marry Champa and makes him an officer [Goswami: 1970]. Thus the trickster gains in two ways. He marries the minister's daughter and becomes the minister of the King. In the initial stage of the narrative he appears not to be very clever, but the way he responds subsequently establish him as a trickster.

In another Trickster tale entitled "Tenton", the trickster hero follows the same initial move. He is taken to task by his father and is turned out of home for no fault of his own. His father wanted the son to extort some more money from the moneylender who came in his absence. Out of home, the lad finds a man ploughing the paddy field under the midday sun. He shows sympathy for the ploughman for his hard work with old bullocks. The man tells that he has laid by a score of rupees for a new bullock. The lad feints thirst and tries to scoop some water from the muddy field. The man sends him to his house nearby. Tenton goes and asks the man's wife to hand over the score of rupees as her husband has secured a new bullock. The woman is suspicious and he calls out to the ploughman, "She won't give". The ploughman shouts back: "Hei! Why don't you give?", thinking that she is denying the thirsty lad water. The woman hands over the money and Tenton makes good his escape. He buys a goat and stays the night at a stranger's. The host offers him clothes for it is winter. He says that the goat will eat up the cold and he does not require any cloth. He sleeps on some hay and from time to time calls out: "Goat, eat up the cold." Next morning the host exchanges the goat for a horse. Tenton rides away. He sees a boy at a sweetshop, tells him that his name is Fly and starts eating the sweets. The boy shouts to his father who is inside: "Father, Fly is eating the sweets." "Oh, let it." says the father. So Tenton eats as much as he can. From there he reaches a rich man's house at evening. He halts there. Next morning he stirs up the dung of his horse. His kind host says, "You need not throw it away, my son will do that". Tenton says that he only looking for coins for the horse excretes rupees and he picked up a few coins. The host buys the horse at a high price. Tenton returns home with all the money and his father takes him back. The clever younger



brother deceiving his foolish elder brother is the theme of the trickster tale entitled "Ajala and Tenton".

There are parallels of these narratives among the ethnic communities of the region and the State. The motif of robbing the ploughman is found in the Mising Trickster tale. Besides the ethnic communities of Assam like the Bodos, Karbis, Misings, the ethnic communities of Nagaland, Mizoram and Meghalaya have their trickster figures akin to the Assamese trickster figure. In tales like this, the foolish elder brother comes to his senses under the influence of his neighbours and shows maturity and outwits his clever younger brother. The tale has an exact parallel, as Goswami explained, among the Meches [Bodos] of western Assam and the Meiteis of Manipur. Even the Chinese have a trickster tale with the same motif. But in the Chinese version the elder brother is cleverer than the younger brother.

The trickster tale is very popular amongst both the literate and non-literate society. The clever tricks of the hero provide entertainment to the listeners.

Trickster heroes like the Brahmin's servant are well known for their witty tricks and tirades against high caste people. In Assamese society, casteism was never as prominent and cruel as in the rest of India. But this did not mean that casteism did not exist at all in this part of India. A review of available literature in the early twentieth and late nineteenth century reveals this. It is probably for this reason that the so-called tribal and low caste people cut jokes at the expense of the high caste people, if not in real life, in popular

folktales which have the function of "role reversal" as well as "escape mechanism".

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Notes on Assamese Place-Lore¹

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During the last decades a new concept, "place-lore" (Est. kohapärimus), has been added to Estonian folkloristics to denote local legends (muistend), beliefs and descriptions of customs that are connected with places, and oral histories, memories and other genres concerning places and toponymes (Remmel 2001, 21). Place-lore is not a distinctive folklore genre; it is not an analytical concept but a synthetic device to study various genres in their connection with environment. According to Mall Hiiemäe, place-lore focuses on natural and cultural surroundings, such as hills, valleys, forests, wetlands, lakes, rivers, fields, stones, old trees, graveyards, chapels, churches and

other objects. The very existence of these places in the neighbourhood supports the tradition memory of the local people (Hiiemäe 2007, 364, 370), who share their narratives, beliefs and customs with the younger generations, newcomers and visitors.

Research in place-lore is among the emerging trends in contemporary international folkloristics. Cristina Bacchilega's inspiring monograph is dedicated to the production of legendary Hawai'i in the tourist industry and connections between local narratives and the environment (2007). She makes a clear distinction between geographical locations in the landscape and places. The beauty of the landscape can be admired by outsiders, who know nothing about the places as "emotionally, narratively, and historically layered experience" (Bacchilega 2007, 35). Place is a location that evokes feelings and memories and is bound to



local knowledge systems. Place-lore is a shared folkloric tradition that needs a long time to emerge and develop. It is always connected with the heritage of previous generations. Generally a rich and lively place-lore characterizes the narrative traditions of those regions where people have settled for centuries.

Proceeding from these preliminary notes on place-lore as the micro-cosmos of storytellers, let us study a few examples from Assam. I visited this state for the first time in 2000 and have been back twice since this first memorable trip. There was something enchanting about North Eastern India with its diversity of languages, ethnic cultures and religious traditions, as well as the richness of nature, nurtured by the majestic Brahmaputra River. The region was once known as Kamarupa, referring to the Hindu god of love and to the Tantric traditions, deeply rooted in the region. As I have visited some places in Assam several times and been guided by different people, the place-lore of the region has been opening up for me in its richness and variety. During my last trip to Guwahati in January 2008, I collected the following story among my field notes, kindly written down for me by Raktima Hujuri, a doctoral student of folkloristics at Guwahati University:

Kamdeva, god of love, who was burnt by Lord Shiva, got back his previous form in this place – kam means love, rup, beauty.

Kamdeva was a beautiful god like Cupid. Once Lord Shiva was practising Samadhi and was too engrossed. So, everybody was worried. Who and how would the universe run if Lord Shiva does not arise from his meditation? So Rati and her husband were sent (both were good dancers) to break this meditation. Shiva got so enraged that his third eye (on his forehead) opened and fire was coming out from his eye. It is believed that his third eye opens only when he is enraged, then annihilation will follow. Rati, Kamdev's wife, went mad out of sorrow and requested that Lord Shiva bring her husband back. Then his heart melted seeing the wailing and he said, "There is only one way. There is a place in the east of India where he can get back his form and beauty." So, she came here along with the ashes, which in turn transformed into Kamdev.

It is a good example of place-lore that links Assam with a mythical past and expounds its ancient name.

There is a strong connection between place names and oral tradition about these locations. In contrast to unknown toponyms on geographical maps, place names can evoke narratives, memories and histories. In January 2000 in Kolkata, I made a telephone call to folklore Professor Soumen Sen and told him about my plan to visit Guwahati in Assam. When I mentioned this place-name, Soumen responded by telling a story. As a folklorist I knew that jokes, rumours, beliefs, personal narratives and urban legends often form parts of telephone conversations, but witnessing a performance of a myth by phone was surprising. I was stunned by the magic of these moments, as the ancient myth of Shiva and his wife Sati was transmitted to me via the telephone lines. Of course, I could not record this version, but based on my notes and memory, this is what I heard:

When Brahma and Vishnu were creating the world, Shiva was deep in meditation and stayed away from creation. In order to awake Shiva, Brahma asked his son Daksha to give his beautiful daughter Sati to Shiva as his wife. Shiva and Sati lived happily together on Kailasa Mountain; years passed and Daksha decided to arrange a huge sacrificial ritual. Everybody was invited, except Shiva who was an ascetic and ignored the company



Kamakhya temple on Nilachal hill near Guwahati that appears in many myths and legends of Assam.

of others. Sati went there. During this gathering Daksha started to talk badly about Shiva. This insulted Sati who burned herself in front of the deities. Then Shiva woke up from his meditation, rushed there and took the body of his dead wife. Enraged, he started a cosmic dance, putting the whole world in danger. The gods asked Vishnu to do something in order to stop Shiva's dance. Vishnu took his weapon sudarshana cakra and



cut Sati's body into pieces that fell all over India. All the spots became sacred places, where the goddess is worshipped. Sati's private parts (yoni) fell to Nilachal hill near Guwahati, where the famous Kamakhya temple is located.

It took only a few days for me to reach Guwahati. Guided by eminent folklorist Kishore Bhattacharjee, I went to Nilachal hill to witness the place, which has been the travel destination for thousands of pilgrims. Myths are narratives with great power to set up rituals, make people act according to ancient models (like the self-immolation of widows in order to follow Sati's divine precedent) or take travellers to roads to visit places touched by the divine aura of the sacred genre of myth. The vaults and walls of the Kamakhya temple shelter one of the most important peetha – cult places of the feminine divine power shakti. The Myth about Shiva's devoted wife Sati, who was cut into pieces that fell all over India, gives sacredness to the whole subcontinent as the story identifies earth with the body of the goddess, who is worshipped as a living deity (Kinsley 1987, 187). Place-lore can thus be deeply religious and mystical, like the experience of worshipping the goddess to the accompaniment of sacred mantras, chanted by Brahmins in a dark chamber, close to the bosom of earth, where oil lamps cast shadows on the ancient sculptures and on the faces of devout pilgrims, who have come from far away to meet the goddess.

Birendranath Datta has shown that the goddess Kamakhya was associated with the Hindu deities Shiva and Sati during the historical period when the Assamese religion and customs were blended with Brahmanic tradition, dominated by pan-Indian gods and texts in Sanskrit (1998). But Nilachal hill and its close vicinity has many other stories to offer, all connected with local history, going back to mythical times. Narakasura was a great king of Kamarupa, whose life has been discussed in several classical texts, such as Vishnu Purana, Mahabharata and Kalika Purana (Bhattacharjee 2006, 24-25). In January 2003 we visited some villages in the region of Nameri national park and conducted interviews with local people. Farmer Benudhar Das from Potasali village told us several stories about Narakasura's close connection with the region. A king dreamed of marrying the goddess

Kamakhya, who said that she would agree only if Narakasura would build a stone staircase to the top of Nilachal hill in one night. Kamakhya thought that this task would be impossible to accomplish but she was mistaken. Narakasura was very close to finishing the work and Kamakhya, who wanted to avoid the marriage, got frightened. She transformed herself into a chicken and made the sound of a cockcrow. This meant that the night was over and that Narakasura had failed to finish the work. But the stone staircase is still there on the Nilachal hill as a proof of Narakasura's power and reminder of the ancient myth. Benudhar Das also told us other narratives about local rulers, such as Banaraja or Banasura, the king of Sonitpur. Krishna's grandson Aniruddha wanted to marry Banaraja's daughter, but the king had refused. As the wedding was arranged secretly, Banaraja arrested Aniruddha and kept him in the prison at Potasali – the home village of our storyteller. Krishna wanted to set



Visiting Nameri National Park in January 2003: Gojen Naroh, Anil K. Boro, Ülo Valk, the late Dipankar Moral, Kishore Bhattacharjee, Parag Sarma and Laur Vallikivi (from right to left).

his grandson free and started a war against Banaraja, defeating him. Events of this mythical war explain many place names in the region. For example, Sonitpur is nowadays called Tejpur, meaning the city of blood (Valk 2006, 142-143). Places thus become charged with narratives and mythical meanings that are passed on from one generation to the next. Kishore Bhattacharjee has shown that the link that has been made between the local kings and the kin of asuras – great demonic adversaries of the gods in Hindu mythology – also has a social and political implication. Through such identifications the local political, cultural and religious institutions were incorporated into the pan-Indian Brahmanic tradition (Bhattacharjee 2006).



Fieldwork in the Nameri region also opened up Assamese place-lore on a smaller scale – narratives about places and events that are known only to a few people and will probably fall into oblivion without becoming a part of the mythical history. We met Gojen Naroh – a man from Mising tribe who had been working in the nature preserve for eighteen years. He told us about Bogijuli camp in the jungle where strange things happen. Sometimes the crying of a woman is heard but nobody is seen. Gojen Naroh had never heard the wailing sound but he had heard strange noises in the buildings, like a dragging chair, somebody pulling the carpet or banging a door. Sometimes bamboo had been cut in the bamboo grove next to the forest. When men in the camp had gone to witness what was happening, nobody was seen. Thus, it was believed that the camp was haunted. Gojen Naroh suspected that probably somebody had committed suicide there or wild animals had killed somebody. Such narratives about supernatural encounters have been identified as legends in international folkloristics (see Valk 2007). In contrast to myths – grand narratives that function on the public scale – legends often remain hidden as local narratives, spread among small groups only. Also, many beliefs circulate in tradition as pre-narrative motifs, never used to build up finished and polished narrative plots like those in migratory legends. But also the beliefs, fears and expectations of people whose lives are linked with certain localities, form an important part of place-lore. Sharing it with others means opening up the hidden knowledge that has been accumulated by generations. As a traveller in Assam, I have often felt that certain places have become meaningful to me thanks to the people who share with me their personal memories and tell stories that they have heard from others.

Place-lore is a synthetic concept, connecting several genres, such as myths, legends and beliefs, and enabling folklorists to analyse the connection between oral tradition and environment. Place-lore appears on different scales of narration, from the sharing of intimate knowledge among small groups, to the public representation of myths in books, mass media, film and theatre. The micro-level of Assamese place-lore can be studied firstly in local stories, such as the narratives of the haunted Bogijuli camp; secondly, other stories, such as the myths about Narakasura, are widely known and narrated on the regional level; and thirdly, there are examples of Assamese place-lore that belong to the pan-Indian heritage, such as the myth about Shiva and Sati. Connecting narratives with real locations is much more than a storytelling strategy to confirm the truth of the story and provide material evidence of the narrated events. Folklore animates the environment of traditional communities and creates a sense of belonging to certain places. Generally, one's

home and its close surroundings become charged with memories – either personal or collective memories of shared folklore traditions. Just as the ability to create and share folklore is a distinctive quality of folk communities, the existence of place-lore is a special quality of environment, inhabited by people. Without place-lore man would be surrounded by an empty physical space of alien natural surroundings; place-lore links generations and provides them with a shared identity – the narratives of belonging.

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Endnote

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Life as lore: the art and time of Pratima Barua Pandey

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Pratima Barua Pandey (1934-2002), one of the greatest folk artists that Assam has ever produced, is an interesting phenomenon. She not only helped the revival and consolidation of a folk form facing impending oblivion, but also became the subject of a vibrant contemporary folklore of the times. Her life reflects the various phases of the evolving Assamese identity, and how the folk acted as a syncretic energy in the understanding of the Assamese. Her songs, popularly called the Goalparia Loka geets, are a part of a cultural community, largely the Rajbanshis, who have been historically dispersed around a vast territory including Assam, Bengal, Bihar, Southern Nepal and even Bangladesh. When Pratima Barua picked up the songs, they were seemingly in their last phase of life in public memory, for the history of the land took a sharp turn forcing the communities living in the periphery to abandon their cultural moorings and acquire new identities to conform to the altered geo-political legacy of the colonial times.

Expeditions with her father, Prakritish Barua, in the jungles to catch elephants brought her into close contact with the intimate rhythms of the folk. She had the freedom to move about the jungle, go for game herself at times and listen to the carefree songs and stories of the campers comprising the mahouts, the phandis, and the b orkondaj. They would sing for the whole night the songs of the elephants, the mahouts, their women back home, the women they would come across in the solitude of the jungles and songs of their pain and pathos.

It was also the time when the speakers of Rajbanshis, the major language group speaking the language of these songs, had taken the political strategy of accepting mainstream Assamese language as their mother tongue in Assam. Similarly the Rajbanshis of Coochbehar in West Bengal acquired the dominant Bengali identity thereby relegating their own language to a sub-dialect. As a result, their traditional folk songs also receded from the public sphere into little-known private domains.

Pratima Barua's rendition of folk songs not only revived a folk form but also the language of the erstwhile Goalpara district of Assam, presently comprising the four districts of west Assam, namely Goalpara, Bongaigaon, Kokrajhar and Dhubri. Dr. Bhupen Hazarika made the most significant contribution in bringing Pratima Barua to the fore as an artist of repute in Assam. During his visit to Gauripur in 1955, for the first time, he heard folk songs sung by a young Pratima. He found the songs unique and her voice exceptionally mellifluous. Dr. Bhupen Hazarika returned to Gauripur the very next year, in 1956, with a bigger mission: to include Pratima's songs in his forthcoming Assamese film, *Era Bator Sur* (Songs of the Abandoned Road). The two songs included in the film, *dung nori dung* (a song that was sung by phandis while catching elephants)



The Jacket of a Pratima Barua Album.

and *O birikha simila rè* (a pensive song of a woman's unfulfilled desires), not only foregrounded a young talent, but also a forgotten genre and language. In other parts of Assam, people had the misgiving that the culture of Goalpara was a part of Bengali culture. After having fought a prolonged battle to wrest state language status for Assamese they were apprehensive that their battle for the Assamese language and culture would take a beating.

Nevertheless, Dr. Hazarika shot the Assamese film *Rong Sabujer Gaan* based on the script by Alokesh Barua, son of renowned film maker Pramathesh Barua of Devdas fame and scion of the royal family of Goalpara. In the LP disk of *Mahut Bandhu* Pratima Barua had five solo numbers and one duet with Dr. Bhupen Hazarika. The





Bhupen Hazarika and Pratima Barua

songs that had so far been referred to as *desi* became famous as *Goalparia loka geets* and became cult songs of the oeuvre.

The next big thing to happen was the radio broadcast of Pratima Barua's folksongs. Dr. Bhupen Hazarika took the initiative to broadcast the songs of Pratima Barua in 1961 when they were members in the Programme Advisory Committee of All India Radio, Guwahati. Purushottam Das, who later became an



A young Pratima Barua

eminent cultural figure of Assam, decided to record her songs in the studios of All India Radio, Guwahati. For the people of Goalpara, it was strange to hear the voice of Pratima Barua on air singing the songs traditionally sung by ordinary farmers, maishals and mahouts. The songs were not received easily by sections of Assamese people that had nurtured frenetic Assamese nationalism. They raised strong objections against the broadcasting of Pratima Barua's songs, which they alleged were 'non Assamese' and 'Bengali'. In 1958, she made her debut on the dais of *Gana Mancha*, the left-leaning cultural wing, in Shillong upon the initiative of her father and Bhuban Chandra Prodhani of Golakganj who were the members of the Assam state assembly in Shillong at the time. Later, she was closely associated with the IPTA. She became almost a regular feature at the annual conventions of Assam Sahitya Sabha and the All Assam Students' Union who honoured her with the highest public respect of the organization by declaring her a legendary folk singer.

When she was removed from the life support system in the ICU of GNRC hospital at Guwahati on 26 December, 2002, the whole of Assam deeply felt the void she'd left behind. Normally it takes about five hours by road from Guwahati to Gauripur; that day it took more than twenty hours because all along the road, throughout the night, people were waiting, braving the incessant drizzle, to have one last glimpse of their favourite princess. At Gauripur, a sea of people accompanied her hearse to the cremation ground. Apart from the members of the cultural and cinema fraternity in Assam, ordinary folk from as far as Sikkim, Jalpaiguri and Coochbehar in West Bengal, and Bihar joined the last procession of the princess of Gauripur. Pratima Barua Pandey had passed into the realm of the contemporary folklore of Assam.



The Gauripur Rajabari (Palace) where Pratima Barua was born and lived.

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Festivity, Food, and Bihu: a short introduction to the national festival of Assam

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Amongst the many festivals celebrated in Assam, the festival of Bihu is perhaps the best known and synonymous with its culture and people. Assam celebrates three Bihus, amongst which the Bohag Bihu or Rongali Bihu (celebrated in mid-April) can be termed the marker of the community's nationality. All three Bihus are associated with the agricultural cycle of the region. The Rongali (Assamese for gaiety and celebration) Bihu marks the Assamese New Year and the advent of the agricultural cycle. The Kati (the period from mid-October to early November) Bihu celebrated



A man blowing *pepa* in a performance of *bihu* dance

in the Assamese month of Kati marks the completion of sowing and the transplantation of paddy. Marked by austere celebration, it is characterized by the lighting of earthen lamps in the paddy fields and courtyards of homes as obeisance to the almighty for good harvest and the protection of crops. The Magh Bihu or the Bhogali (the Assamese equivalent of feasting) Bihu marks the end of the successful harvesting of crops and the ensuing celebration. The Bihu festivals are secular and, by and large, non-religious in nature. People belonging to different castes and creeds participate in the celebrations.

On analysis of Bihu festivals, we can perhaps come to a conclusion that Bihu is an ancient folk festival of Assam and its inhabitants. The Rongali Bihu is essentially a spring festival that sets the tune for the advent of a new agricultural cycle. It starts with the washing and worshipping of agricultural implements, the bullocks and the cows and proceeds to the dances and songs of the festivities. The Bihu dance is supposed to be related to the fecundity principle of nature, and was originally performed in the fields to symbolize the fertile and productive nature of the earth. With the passage of time, the Bihu assumed the role of romantic interplay between young men and women and the accompanying songs reflected different facets of life in Assam. Thus the Bihu songs could include facts like the building of new bridges, visits of politicians, changing fashion and the rural-urban divide.

Till the fourth and fifth decades of the twentieth century, Bihu songs and dances survived in the rural hinterland of Assam. It may be mentioned that during turbulent historical times in the last part of the 18th and the first part of the 19th century, both revolutionaries and rulers used Bihu songs as socio-cultural tools to rally the people. During this period, some elite of the state, under the influence of colonial and western paradigms, disparaged the Bihu festivities as lurid, immoral and having sexual overtones. However, the Bihu had already moved away from the fields

to the royal amphitheater, thanks to the patronage of the Ahom kings. Later, in the mid-twentieth century, because of the efforts of some scholars like Lakshminath Bezborua, Gyanadharam Barua, Radha Gobinda Baruah amongst others, the Rongali Bihu came to the stages of urban and semi-urban locales in the state.

The Rongali and Bhogali Bihus are marked by their distinctive food items, where food becomes a metaphor for success, happiness and prosperity. It is customary to eat rare varieties of pot herbs (*xak* in Assamese) during the celebration of Rongali Bihu. In the upper reaches of the Brahmaputra, many people eat 101

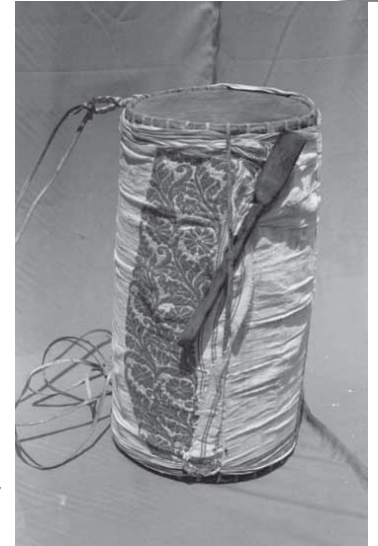


varieties of pot herbs on the first or seventh day of the celebration of Rongali Bihu, whereas in the lower reaches of the Brahmaputra, people eat seven varieties of pot herbs on the 7th day of Rongali Bihu. Different varieties of pancakes and confectionaries made out of coconut, sesame seeds, jaggery, rice powder, sticky rice, and milk products are prepared in a traditional way. Amongst some ethnic communities, brewing of rice beer and preparation of pork and chicken is a must.

The Bhogali Bihu is the Bihu given entirely to feasting. It is a time for eating and merrymaking after a successful harvest. Community feasts are organized across the entire state. Fish and meat are inseparable items of such feasting. It is obligatory for people to visit each other's households as invitations are not sent out.

Bihu has spawned a distinctive material culture in Assam. The mekhala chadar (two-piece apparel worn by women in Assam) woven out of the muga silk is a distinctive identity marker; so are the colourful japis (originally protective headgear woven out of bamboo and palm leaves worn by farmers as protection against

sun and rain) and the intricately woven gamochas (traditional cotton towels for wiping the body; ga means body and mocha means to wipe). Musical instruments include the dhol (traditional drums), the tal (traditional cymbals), the pepa (traditional wind pipe made out of buffalo horn) and the gagana (a delicate but simple instrument made out of bamboo and played by simultaneously blowing wind from the mouth and vibrating the instrument by hand). In spite of local variations, Bihu remains a cohesive cultural force amongst the different communities of Assam even in the present divisive times. ❁



Assamese dhol, a traditional drum

Women in Assamese Folktales

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The Assamese equivalent for folktale is Sadhu or Sadhukatha. The word Sadhu means "the righteous"; hence Sadhukatha means a moral tale. Another meaning is derived from Saud or Saudagar, a merchant. According to P. Goswami

The Assamese for an oral tale is sadhukatha, usually derived from the Sanskrit sadhu, a merchant, and katha, a tale, meaning thereby that the sadhukatha is a tale told by a wandering merchant (Goswami 1970: 80).

The present discussion focuses on some of the Assamese folktale collections by Lakshminath Bezborua which fall under Magical or Wonder or Romantic or Supernatural tales. The Burhi Air Sadhu and the Kakadeuta aru Natilorua are two famous collections by Lakshminath Bezborua.

By analyzing the gender roles played out in these tales, an idea of the status of women in Assamese society can be made. Outlines of the selected tales follow:

The Kite's Daughter:

A baby girl was abandoned by her mother because she was warned by her husband that he will sell her if she gives birth to a girl child again. A Kite brought up the girl, and married her off to a merchant with seven other wives. The co-wives created difficulties for her and the Kite mother would help her in difficulties. Once, the girl was set to weave a cloth and cook rice. When she called her Kite mother, the latter appeared and performed everything magically. The co-wives of the girl later killed the Kite mother and sold the daughter to a tradesman. She was found wailing on the riverbank by her husband. The merchant commanded his senior wives to walk on a thread stretched across a pit full of spikes. Six of them fell in, while one escaped because she was not in the plot to sell the Kite's daughter (Bezborua 2005: 41-47).

Tula and Teja:

A man had two wives; the younger one was his favourite. The elder wife had a daughter named Teja and a son named Kanai. The younger wife had a daughter named Tula. Once, the co-wives went fishing. The younger one pushed the elder into the water, muttering: "As a big tortoise may you stay."

Later, the tortoise revealed herself to her children and gave them food every day. They became healthy and strong. Their step mother observed this and came to



know the truth from her daughter who accompanied Teja and Kanai. The stepmother then feigned illness and told her husband through an old lady physician that she will be cured if she was fed on tortoise flesh. The tortoise mother came to know this. She told her children that they should not eat the flesh and must bury her legs and bone on the banks of the tank.

Two trees, bearing flowers and fruits of exquisite beauty and taste, grew at the spot. The produce of the trees was in great demand. Kanai refused to give the fruits and flowers to the king unless he promised to marry his sister. The king, seeing the beauty of Teja married her. After the marriage Teja is faced with the jealousy of the king's elder wife. The co-wife used to create problems for her from the very beginning. She was guided by her old lady servant. But the king was always kind to Teja. At Teja's happiness her stepmother grew more jealous. One day she invited Teja to come to her place and after a few days she pushed a thorn into her head and turned her into a myna. Her step sister put on her dress and went to king's home as per her mother's advice. The myna followed her. Tula was almost a look-alike of Teja; so the king was unable to recognize her. The myna tried to tell him the truth one day he overheard her and asked the bird to alight on his shoulder. The bird flies to him and the king, finding a thorn in its head, pulled it out and Teja appeared in her real shape. Then the king killed the imposter and cut her into pieces and sent it to her scheming mother (Bezborua 2005: 48-57).

Three female stereotypes are found in the above stories: (a) Young women: daughter and bride, (b) Middle-aged women: mother, stepmother, and co-wives and (c) Old women: lady physician, lady servant etc. Young women and old women have a comfortable position in the society as compared to the middle-aged women. Young women are generally daughter and bride. A daughter generally receives love and care from parents. Similarly the bride also enjoys a comfortable position as compared to the middle-aged women. It is revealed in both the tales that the new bride always receives the love and care from her husband. But it is conditional and, later on, depends on her fertility and successful management of household work.

It is depicted in the tales that relationship between the spouses affects the relationship with their children. Generally the mother figure is portrayed as a more caring one for the children whether it is a human being or animal. In the first tale the Kite mother provided utmost care to her daughter. On the other hand the father's role towards his children often depends on his relationship with their mother. In the second tale Tula and Teja, the father was indifferent towards the wellbeing of Teja and Kanai because their mother is not his favourite wife. He provides all care to his younger wife and her daughter Tula.

The preliminary requisite of women for marriage as depicted in the folktales is mainly beauty. In both of the tales the merchant and the king agreed to marry the Kite's daughter and Teja by seeing their beauty.

But to sustain the marriage, giving birth to a child and being expert in household work is necessary. The women unable to perform household work and bear children are often driven out from home. In the first tale, the merchant began to love the kite's daughter more because of her expertise in household work and weaving.

Among the middle-aged women, the mother figure is always portrayed as a symbol of tolerance and loyalty, who wishes well for the children, whereas the stepmother and co-wives are depicted as cruel, immoral, disobedient, disloyal and cunning persons. They create difficulties in the life of their step-children and co-wives. They don't hesitate to commit heinous crimes like killing their stepchildren and co-wives to fulfill their desires. In the first tale, the co-wife of the kite's daughter killed her mother and sold her to a tradesman. In the second tale, the younger wife killed the elder wife and, later, even tried to kill her step-daughter Teja.

The old women are also depicted as bearers of both negative and positive qualities but enjoy a comfortable position compared to young and middle-aged women. In the above tales, negative qualities find prominence. In the tale of Tula and Teja, the old lady helps Teja's step-mother catch the tortoise mother. In the same tale, the advice of another old female servant creates difficulties for Teja. Other old women like grandmothers and mothers-in-law are often depicted in Assamese tales. The grandmother is always depicted as good for the grand children. But both good and bad qualities are found in the case of mother-in-law.

It is also evident from the cited tales that polygamy and remarriage for the man are the socially accepted norm. The woman can take care of the children alone when her husband dies or if she is abandoned by her husband. Men often remarry for the sake of his children, whether the children are happy with the marriage or not.

Thus, it is seen that gender roles in Assamese folktales are basically generated by values of patriarchy, and the morals these tales convey consolidate the patriarchal world order. The ideal qualities of women, as depicted in folktales, are chastity, purity, obedience, loyalty and tolerance. The ideal woman is not supposed to complain against male authority, and about the problems she is facing and the injustice meted out to her. Cruelty, immorality, cunning and being disloyal are some of the negative attributes of women depicted in Assamese folktales. Most of the positive qualities belong to the mother and most negative qualities are possessed by step-mothers and co-wives.

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The Co-Wife and Step-Mother Motifs in Folklore: A Case Study of Some Assamese Proverbs

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In woman-oriented Assamese proverbs, two of the most common motifs are those of the co-wife and the step-mother. It is interesting to note that women are more often than not at the receiving end of such verbal behaviour, as they are held up as either ideals to be emulated or targeted as objects of abuse. However, in Assamese proverbs the latter is more common than the former. Moreover, such proverbs depict female jealousy and hatred.

'Satinir pok diu bolotei bastu bahi hai jowa.'
(If you think of giving it to the co wife's son, the food cannot but go stale)

'Nijar nak kati satinir jatra bhanga'
(Cut one's own nose to prevent the co-wife from traveling).

'Saman satinir kolat po,
Ghumati nahe caket lo'.
(If the son is in the co-wife's lap,
He cannot sleep but has to cry.)

However, depiction of such intense rivalry between co-wives can be seen as a subversion of the patriarchal order and is perhaps a pointer to the promiscuous nature of man. As these proverbs are mostly present in the repertoire of women, it can be seen as an internalization of the patriarchal structure in order to subvert it as it is also a kind of warning for the man who is tempted to stray from wedlock.

'Ejoni thakile (thakunte) ejoni anile khariyal sunibo lage'.
(If one gets another woman in the presence of the other, get ready for a life of misery)

Another common motif is that of the step-mother. Usually, in most items of folk literature, the step-mother motif is used in such events as when the children have lost their own mother. The stock image of a step-mother is of one who favours her biological offspring and is very cruel towards step-children.

'Dhankherar juye mahi air marama saman'.
(There is equality between the simmering husk and the step-mother's affection)

'Mahi air marama (adare) kherar juye saman'.
(There are similarities between the step-mother's love and the burning straw)

'Ataitkai tita nemu tengar pat
Tatokoi tita mahi air mat'.
(The most bitter taste is the lemon leaves
But the step-mother's words surpass it)

Though polygamy is the enabling factor of the above Assamese proverbs, widows do not find a place in the scheme of multiple marriages. This points out to the fact that the idea of a woman marrying more than once was taboo.

'Su bat dur gaman tak nidiba eri,
Burhi haleu jiyari aniba,
Teu naniba bari'.
(Do not miss out on the chance to travel the good long way
For it is better to get married to an aged daughter
Than to a widow.)

The proverbs at one level can be an internalization of overt patriarchal structures; at another they are subversive in the sense that they hold out a warning for the woman who is ready to accept a married man or a man who strays from monogamy. Polygamy may be out, but adultery still continues.

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Assam and the other states of North-East India are geographically located between the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. The physical folklife of the region provide ample evidences of cultural fusion: if one finds the sorai and the japi to be of Southeast Asian origin, the terracotta toys of Assam are unmistakably Harappan in make and style.

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Folk dances of Assam: a short appraisal

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The folk traditions of Assam encompass a great variety of occasions and events to celebrate. Farmers and agricultural workers have a dance to welcome practically every seasonal change. They dance with joyous abandon to create for themselves their *raison d'etre* - a reinstatement of beliefs rooted in the mythology of their land and culture. Originating in the harvest festivals of our ancient ancestors, when the gods were invoked or appeased through magical verses and dancing feet, the folk dances retain much of the spontaneity and vitality of their primary impulse. In earlier times, man supposedly bridged his world and the one beyond through dance, assuming the role of gods and demons; even today, the dancing steps take their cue from nature, which at times is conquered, and at others, befriended. There is an essential rhythm that binds the dancer and the environment into an organic whole; and this is reflected in the varied beats and movements of the folk dancers.

The folk traditions of Assam too, encompass a great variety of occasions and events to celebrate. People consider it as art, work, ritual, ceremony, entertainment, or any combination of these, depending on the culture or society that produces it.

There are dances that celebrate the bounty of Mother Nature and celebrate the generous gifts showered by her. Bihu is performed by young men and women reflecting youthful passion and joy of life. The dance movements are patterned in a way that can be intelligible to the audience. The slinging of the hands, and vigorous body (hip) movements symbolize mirth and yearning for union. The moving body here is a mechanism by which meaning is produced. A prelude to the Bihu, the *husori*, is a slow dance, the text sung and danced by clapping of hands to keep the rhythm of the performers, as they make circular patterns that are repeated till the end of the singing. The dancers move freely in simple movements and make allowances

in the choreography for others to join in and express their joy through individual dance movements that are created spontaneously. Finally the household in whose courtyard the event takes place is blessed.

The *Deodhani* dance is considered more of a ritual than a dance; but essentially the same movement sequences may be considered a secular performance if de-contextualized from religious moorings. The dancer, who apparently goes into a trance, uses mimetic movements of snakes and goddess *Manasa* and enacts the popular legend of *Behula*. The meaning of what is being communicated can be understood if we are aware of the rules or grammar of a cultural form. The Goalpara region in Assam has colourful dances which combine the dramatic with the realistic; the performers use props such as bamboo poles, swords and masks, both at the apparent level and the symbolic. The bamboo pole doubles up as a phallic symbol, while the sword is the annihilator. The mask signifies the hypocritical nature of people or the difference between appearance and reality.

The Bodos, a major ethnic group of the state, are known for dances like *Bagarumba* and *Bordoisikla* that represent the different hues and moods of nature. The dancers mould their bodies into various postures and images that symbolize a movement in nature or a spirit. The shamanistic dances of the *Daudini* (shaman dancer) are visual treats of frenzied and vigorous movements. The movement involved here is for the pantheon in the traditional dance arena (*sali*) of the *kherai* festival, which is a social and religious occasion of great significance for the Bodos. The body movements communicate primarily to gods, priests, and believers that the proper ritual is being celebrated or carried out. The visual spectacle produced is one of regular and rhythmic linear movements intersecting at right angles; it generates the effect of an essential maze. Around the ritual structure of the *Kherai*, in a semi-circular pattern, the musicians play the *Kham* (drum), *Siphung* (flute) and the *Jotha* (cymbals).

The *Gumrag* dance of the Misings is associated with the *Ali-ai-ligang* festival which depicts the various activities of the Misings in their daily life. The movements in this



dance enhance the text they accompany. Repeatedly enacting the same movement can produce different results. The shaping of hands which in some way makes reference to flowers can be moved in such a manner that every change is a new metaphor. Another dancing event, *Porag*, takes place after the harvest. The neighbouring villages are invited to take part in the celebrations which lead to dancing and beating of drums. Though initially the event looks competitive, it finally ends in harmony.

The *Haidang* songs of the *Sonwal Kacharis*, another important ethnic group in Assam, are performed by males and have very interesting body movements. Most of the body movements correspond to the *Oja-pali* dance movements, which are performed by men in lower Assam and are an important component of many religious rituals. The bodies are swayed in gentle movements and in the *Haidang*, unlike the *Oja-pali* which is confined to a particular place, the dancers moves slowly through the narrow lanes of the villages. They walk to the pace of humming bees clustered together. The girls welcome them with a dance that is performed inside a house.

A very colourful festival of the Tiwa community, *Sagramisawa*, has some beautiful dances reflecting youth, spirit and joy. The dance performed during the rice pounding activity is an exceptional creation by the people. During their leisure, womenfolk imaginatively created movements to match the rhythm of the pounding pestle. Certain ceremonies like the *Barat Puja* have distinctive instruments to accompany the dances. In one such dance, an instrument made of wood and bamboo with animal and bird motifs is used as a clapping device. The Tiwas also have springtime celebration (*pisu*) where an interesting dance is

performed. It is more fun than a structured dance. The young people assemble near a muddy spot and start making jocular movements. Finally, people are seen holding each other and pushing them into the mud.

The Deoris have significant dances of Shiva and Parvati locally known as *Gira* and *Girasi*. These are performed initially in the family courtyard and later are taken to the temple courtyard where it takes a spiritual turn. The performance process is dynamic as it leads from individual joy to spiritualism.

The Karbis have a very strong dance tradition. Most important dances are performed during the *Chomangkan* death ceremony. These dances have become very rare as they are performed only when there is a death in the village. A high spirited dance, Banjar- Kekan is danced by boys carrying decorated bamboo poles (*banjar*) in a playful manner. There are other dances like *Nimso-Kerung* and *Hachacha-Kekan* which are popular amongst the Karbis.

The folk dances of Assam belong to the whole community and are an expression of the creative interface between reality and the imaginative life. They reveal not only the individual talents of the people, but the collective traditions from which they and their art form spring.

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The Folk Imagination of Bhupen Hazarika

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Contemporary art in Assam is a seamless interface between the modern and the folk. Nowhere is it most pronounced than in the compositions and renditions of the iconic Bhupen Hazarika, Assam's face to the world. He celebrates her people, her seasons and her sights as his songs draw their lifeblood from the villages of Assam. Thus, in his composition for the movie *Aparopa*, the yearning for a time gone by is presented in terms of the different hues of nature and a desire for a long-lost village:

The folk landscape is perhaps the most enduring of images in Bhupen Hazarika's songs; be it his serenading the evening of Shillong or celebrating life in the hilly frontiers:

(i)

The Shillong evening
 The dreamy city's endearing autumn
 And memories golden
 Crossing the colourful markets

The delicate grass caressing the bare feet
 By the side of the innumerable rivulets
 The laughter and the slip
 That made you and me almost fall.



The evening gradually envelops
The distant Khasi village
You and me together
Lost to the world

Two minds streaming together
Flooding the tall grasses beneath the pines
As if the flying fireflies
Mocks us
To be like drifting flowers
Of the sweet autumn.

Bhupen Hazarika's creative imagination reaches the furthest corners of north-eastern India and combines landscape with folklore and culture:

(ii)

The Tirap frontier
Beauty without compare
Noctes and the Wanchoo
Tangsas and the Yougli
In them I saw the furthest green horizon.

Out there is the Wanchoo youth
In his hand the spear *Pakmoo*
On his neck the colourful beads
On his head the *Kachan*
In their loincloths dance the *Showan* youths.
With the sweet wrappers around their delicate waist
The rhythmic movements of the girls.
The awe-inspiring mountains embraced by the kissing clouds
Behind is an indistinct sun.

In the distance
I catch a glimpse of the Khoonsa hamlet
The sturdy Nocte youth
On his body the traditional shirt *Jengsem*
On his head the cane headgear seats proudly
On his waist the colourful scabbard
Busy extracting salt from rocks.

The Changlang village in Tirap
Where dwells the simple people Loongchang
The Tangsa farmers in the hanging bamboo bridge
Crosses the Tirap River in groups.
Bamboo baskets on their back.

...

On their way to the Margherita bazaar

...

Bhupen Hazarika's composition embraced all the ethnic communities of Assam. It could be the folk reality of Kamrup in lower Assam or the elephant catchers' song from Goalpara in west Assam; the description of youth from different communities in their young splendour

or the throbbing of the Bihu drums. Yet his songs form a picture of the composite culture of Assam.

In the following song composed to the tune of Bihu, apparently by youth looking for work, Bhupen Hazarika annexes the whole of Assam in his celebratory muse and presents the human face of a contemporary problem, unemployment, on a larger canvas. The folk provides an outlet for the frustration of the youth:

(iii)

O Dear! O Dear! We have crossed the
Brahmaputra
O Dear! O Dear! We have crossed the Dikrong
O Dear! O Dear! We are rested at Naoboicha
O Dear! O Dear! In quest for a job
O Dear! O Dear! We have left home and hearth
O Dear! O Dear! We can't stay at Lakhimpur
O Dear! O Dear! The Borali fish of Tezpur
O Dear! O Dear! The Kandhuli fish of Laluk
O Dear! O Dear! Wonder how they got mixed
O Dear! O Dear! You from Neghereting
O Dear! O Dear! And we from Jorhat
O Dear! O Dear! Wonder how we got to
know each other
O Dear! O Dear! We roamed through Guwahati
O Dear! O Dear! We roamed through Duliajan
O Dear! O Dear! No job at Digboi too
O Dear! O Dear! Oil Gas Company
O Dear! O Dear! Railway Company
O Dear! O Dear! No sweet words there too...
O Dear! O Dear! Keep well
O Dear! O Dear! Keep the pining alive
O Dear! O Dear! Till I return with a job
O Dear! O Dear! The streets of the town
O Dear! O Dear! Are tread by the colourful
ones
O Dear! O Dear! Yet none to beat you.

Bhupen Hazarika also catches the rhythm of both the life and music of the common folk, best exemplified by his songs on the palanquin, the *dolah*, bearers.

The above translations are only indicative of how Dr. Bhupen Hazarika's creative genius draws its lifeblood from the folk. They hardly do justice to the full range of his versatility or oeuvre. However, I do hope they convey some of the beauty of the people and the countryside that inspires and infuses his creativity.

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The Brahmaputra and Bhupen Hazarika: an enduring romance

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The Brahmaputra and Bhupen Hazarika are two iconic identity markers of the notion of being Assamese. And the relationship between the two is the stuff of which contemporary folklore is made. Bhupen Hazarika's composition on the Brahmaputra has elevated it to be a part of the rhetoric of Assamese nationalism that accommodates its diverse people and culture.

*Mahābāhu Brahmaputra mahāmilanar
tirtha*

*Kata jug dhari āhise prakāshi
samannayar artha*

(The mighty Brahmaputra, the pilgrimage
of great confluence

Through the ages it has borne the lesson
of co-existence)

Yet, at times, the singer's ire is directed at the river for not being able to inspire the people living on its banks to greater deeds and heights of achievement:

Tumiye jadi Brahmāre putra

Sei prititva tene nām mātra

Nahale preranā nidiyā kiya

(If you are the son of Brahma,

Then it's namesake only

For where is your inspiring zeal?)

Again he remembers the great river as a symbol of the courage and anger of the Assamese people:

Āji Brahmaputra hal bahnimān

Manar digantat dhowā ure

Ākāsat papiyā tarā ghure

Pade pade kare kāk apamān?

(Today the Brahmaputra is turbulent

The minds' horizon is clouded with smoke

The meteor roams the sky

Each step holds potent indignity)

If the Brahmaputra is a creator on one hand, it is also the destroyer in the other. It holds out a perennial threat for the disrespectful. It is the mysterious entity that never returns some of whom that venture into its heart. Many *Rangman*, the poor working and downtrodden class of the society, sacrifice their lives in the stream of the river when they sail to earn their livelihood.

*O parahi puwāte tulungā nāwate
Rangman māsalai gal*

.....
*gadhulire parate Barhamputrar mājate
Rangman nāikiyā hal.*

... ..
*Hiyākhami bhukuwāi ākasale cāi cāi
Rahdai bāuli hal*

(It was the day before yesterday morning
that Rongmon went fishing in his country boat
In the Brahmaputra midstream by twilight
Rongmon disappeared
Thumping on the chest eyes heavenward bound
Disconsolate Rahdai goes mad)

Dr. Hazarika was born on the bank of the Brahmaputra at Sadiya. He spent a long span of his life on the bank of the river at Guwahati, Tezpur, Dhubri and many other parts of the state. He becomes nostalgic when he sees the river from an aircraft while flying to Tezpur from Kolkata and wants to jump from the craft on to the bank of the river:

Akowā pakowā gāmochā ekhan

Jen bālit meli thowā ache

Seikhān gāmochā Barhamputra

Sitate rod he puwāiche

Jen japiai bāli bhoj khām

Ājir bihu git gām

Mor mon chaku porile jur

(The twisting gamocha
Spread out on the sand below.

This gamocha is the Brahmaputra
Basking in the winter sun

The desire is to jump down for a picnic
And sing the Bihu songs.

The mind and the eyes are at peace)

Bhupen Hazarika perhaps also realizes that the Brahmaputra straddles numerous people and cultures and can be harnessed in strengthening the cultural mosaic of the state. Mixing the sands and water of heritage carried by the mighty river would accommodate the diverse reality of the state from Sadiya to Dhubri.

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