

Role of Assamese Folk Tales in Validating Family Relationship and Conduct

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Abstract

Folktales help people see, feel and understand life--both personal and cultural, from many different perspectives. Many of these stories have been passed down through generations and can offer a sort of collective wisdom. Folktales convey indicators of the prevailing ideology in a society. Thus, they are suitable sources for an inquiry into culture complex in a given social formation. The people of the agriculture-based rural society of Assam have their own life and culture that get projected through the oral tales. Though the people were illiterate, they were life oriented. Therefore, the society of such people was so vibrant that their folk literature became a medium of their life like expression and, hence, an integral part of society validating the basic cultural pattern.

The present paper is an attempt to study the concept of culture, its influence on society and the function that folktales perform in validating Family Relationship and Conduct in agro rural Assamese people.

Key words: Culture, Society, Folktale, Assam, Tradition, Folklore

Research Paper

Assam is the homeland of a large number of populations that came here from different directions at different period of time. In terms of folklore, Assam is undoubtedly the richest Indian State. Assamese people follow their traditions, rituals, mythology and customs very religiously. Assamese folktales play a very important role in leading the Assamese tradition, ethics and customs and are instrumental in giving path towards the further generation. The fundamental learning of Assamese folktale helps people in handling the issues of life. Folktales serve the purpose of primary learning for the Assamese society. The morality of folktales has always remembered by Assamese people in every critical situation.

Folktales were more dominant in ancient times because there was no electronic device, mass media, radio, TV or film to get information, news or entertainment. Even books were not common for the commoners. So, most people had to tell tales in order to teach their children moral ideas, their culture, rituals, religion and to entertain them so that they would not get too bored. Folktales have always been used to pass on not only moral direction/suggestion/notions to children, but also in transferring the mother tongue and culture to the next generation.

The culture of people is usually reflected in its folklore. Folktales convey indicators of the prevailing ideology in a society. Thus, they are suitable sources for an inquiry into culture of any tribe/region. Culture is very important for the understanding of the nature of society.

A culture is an intricate system of values and norms, thought and action which the members of a society duly accepts and generally follow. According to classic definition of culture given by Sir Edward Tylor, Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (Tylor 1871, 1) Culture is very important for the smooth running of the societal process. It is culture that makes a man a human being, regulates his conduct and provides him a complete design for living. Apart from that while on the one hand culture keeps intact the age old customs and institutions, on the other hand it creates new needs and new drives. Without inclusion of positive attitude to newness and adaptation, a culture stops to remain

dynamic and becomes a liability rather than an asset. So culture comes from the past, adjusts itself to the present and moves forward to shape the future. (Horton & Hunt 52)

Assamese culture, which is a segment of broad Indian culture, is complex in character. It displays an amalgam of religious tolerance, societal harmony, love, compassion and brotherhood. Professor Northrop in his well known work *The Meeting Ground of the East and the West* aptly remarks, It should eventually be possible to achieve a society for mankind generally in which the higher standard of living of the most scientifically advanced and theoretically guided Western nations is combined with the compassion, the universal sensitivity to the beautiful, and the abiding equanimity and the calm joy of the spirit which characterize the sages and many of the humblest people in the Orient. (Chatterji et al 1) The cultural cross fertilization is the important marker of Indian as well as Assamese culture.

The culture cannot be handed down from father to son like a legacy. Every generation must revive them afresh by trying to live up to them after proper evaluation. Carole Boyce Davies writes, the oral tradition not only provides an important bridge to the study of narrative strategies in written form, but it is elemental in the definition of a group's aesthetic and psycho-social dynamics (166). The culture of people is usually displayed in its folklore. A folktale is a story developed by people of many different cultures and is used to explain natural phenomena or events of historic significance. There are many collections of folktales in all cultures. These stories were passed down orally until the advent of literacy. Each culture can possess similarities and difference in their folktales. Folktales help people see, feel and understand life--both personal and cultural, from many different perspectives. Many of these stories have been passed down through generations and can offer a sort of collective wisdom.

The bond of relationship in Assamese family household is exemplary only because the practice of storytelling like activities still exist in the family . That reminds the members of the family about the importance of maintaining a traditional behaviour even in the proliferation of other culture items. Family is the social base for folklore. However, These are two different things, families as the social base for folklore and folklore as the social base for families. The Zeitlin collection of U. S. family folklore and other works suggest that traditional expressions serve key functions in establishing and maintaining family relationships and values. Zeitlin and his colleagues (1992) indicate that families select images and traits that match their beliefs to perpetuate as traditions. Families use these traditions to present themselves, to characterize each other, and to note important transitional events as they honour the family. Toelken also asserts that traditional expressions develop a family sense of 'us' that is distinguishable from other groups. Because family often is the first group a person knows, the habits and assumptions acquired through family traditions shape perception and experience in a natural and more profound ways.

In order to examine the role of traditional Assamese folktales in validating family relationship and Conduct, I have focused on the tales with typical culture validation motifs as well as situations that can enhance a family feeling. The common story telling situation of Assamese is when parents or adults are out in the fields or busy in works and old people stay at home with children during the day. The old people often narrate folktales to children which prepare children for adult life, as the folktale is the narration of what elders are experiencing in the field even as tales are being told. Folktales not only warns them about the danger of evil things and advices them cultivate universal values such as compassion, generosity, and fellow feeling for the interest of all but also it helps family members to relate to each other. Children learn through these tales how to adapt relationships when changes occur. The following folktales are examples of such a function-

Khuba Khubir Kahini :

Once Mahadev tired of his roaming life decides to bring his life in order . He took a piece of land from Indra and seeds from Kubera and started raising a crop .He got so fond of his field that he forgot to return to Parvati. Parvati created gadflies and a tiger in order to force him to come back. Failing in this, she herself went to the field and seeing the crop, she got surprised. Two flames came out of her mouth and began to consume the crops. Mahadev in anger rushed upon the flames which turned into two demons and fell prostrate at his feet. He named them Khuba and Khubi and ordered them to lie quiet till they met Ramchandra. Ramchandra ordered them to dwell at the junction of three roads and whenever a marriage took place they were to take possession of the married couple. On the third day of the marriage if Khuba and Khubi were not given an offering of rice flour and gur, they were to make the marriage unhappy. (Source- Ballads and Tales of Assam)

Ghar Jeuti:

Once there was a family. The head of the family used to sleep at the doorway. Laxmi, the household goddess of wealth and prosperity came near him as two years old baby. The baby goddess tried to enter the house to dwell there and tried to pass over him, several times but stopped every time. Then the man awoke and removed his bedstead from the doorway allowing the baby to come and live with him.(Source- Ballads and Tales of Assam)

Analysis :

How to bring family life in order is suggested in the Khuba Khubir Kahini. It validates the family conduct of a couple for a happy married life. The husband should do outside works, but he should not forget his household duty and the same is true for his wife also. Only then they will be able to enjoy the bliss of married life. Otherwise they both will suffer. The second tale Ghar Jeuti is shared among the women folk during the celebration of Lakshmi Puja. This folktale validates certain action of the family man in order to bring prosperity in their life. Lakhmi in Indian tradition is revered as goddess of fortune and affluence. Her presence enlightens one's hold. So she is called the Ghar Jeuti and the family should provide a space to allow her to dwell. The belief has been validated by the narration of this tale.

Similarly there is a story Murukhmati Kanya that exposes the possibility of an illicit relationship between the brother in law and sister in law that is not socially approved and at the same time it validates importance of a faithful conduct on the part of husband for ensuring a happy married life. Without mutual faith no relationship can last for long –this basic idea has been proposed by this tale. Another folktale Panesai on the other hand testified the relationship between brother and sister. In Assamese tradition marriage between brother and sister is not approved socially. It is considered a sanctified relation. A few ideal stories for enhancing family bond between husband and wife, brother and sister, brother and brother, parents and children are listed below: Family relationship Tales 1. Father and Daughter 'Tejimala', 'Teja and Teji', 'The Messenger of Titkuji' 2. Brother and Sister 'Panesai', 'Ramai and Ratani' 3. Brother and Brother 'The Two Brothers', 'The Oldman and his Sons' 4. Husband and wife 'The Murukhmati Kanya', 'Beula and Lakhinder', 'A Dead Husband' 5. Mother and daughter 'The Kites Daughter', 'Teja and Teji', 'Tula and Teja' .

In conclusion we can say that these folktales often release tension to prepare family members to accept or adapt to their life situations. If they question how things actually are, often there is a tradition to validate what the family stands for and to instruct or suggest how members should behave. To maintain the family as a unit over space and time, often traditions will validate previous behaviors and attitudes even if other options are appealing or even more viable. Traditions thus have a function to instruct and direct on how to act and live.

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