



Exploring The Rich Folk Tradition Of Assam

HEMANTA BORAH

Guest Faculty

Sankardeva Mahavidyalaya, Lakhimpur

Abstract: This research focuses into the multifaceted and culturally rich folk tradition of Assam, renowned for its diverse ethnic groups and vibrant heritage. Through an interdisciplinary approach, the study explores various aspects of Assamese folk tradition, including verbal traditions, social customs, and performing arts. By examining oral literature, social rituals, and traditional performances, this research aims to uncover the deep-rooted beliefs, values, and practices that shape the cultural identity of Assam. Through a nuanced exploration of Assam's folk heritage, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of the region's cultural richness and diversity.

Key words: Folk, Tradition, Verbal, Heritage, Diversity.

1. Introduction:

Folk traditions are closely linked with the folk and folklore of a community. The term "folk" in contemporary times, encompasses any group sharing at least one common characteristic. These traditions serve to foster a sense of group identity. Folklore, on the other hand, encompasses the collective knowledge passed down through oral tradition, as well as the skills and techniques acquired through imitation or example, along with the tangible products resulting from these practices. Folklore, an ancient aspect of human culture, serves as a dependable indicator of a people's heritage. Despite the diversity in languages, religions, regions, and eras, it has been instrumental in fostering cultural cohesion and national unity (Borah, 2015).

In Assam, a significant portion of the population comprises tribes residing in both the hills and certain parts of the valley. These tribes speak dialects of languages that belong to the Tibeto-Burman family. Each tradition within these tribes carries a distinctiveness that is closely tied to factors such as their specific language, religion, customs, or ethnicity, thereby reflex Verbal arts, also known as oral literature or expressive literature, encompass spoken, sung, and voiced forms of traditional expression.

This study aims to delve into the rich tapestry of folk tradition in Assam, with a particular focus on three main aspects: verbal tradition, social folk tradition, and performing arts.

2. Verbal art traditions:

Tribal folk tales are deeply intertwined with myths and beliefs, reflecting ancient origins and profound psychological connections within the community's life. Assam boasts various popular folk tales among its diverse communities, sharing some common characteristics. These tales are primarily passed down orally and are rich in mythological elements and folk beliefs, prevalent among tribal groups. Rituals, fertility symbols, chants, and descriptions of natural phenomena such as the sun or moon, including eclipses, are prevalent in these tales. In Assam, these folk tales are known as Sadhu Katha, distinct from Assamese tales in several ways. Sadhu Katha often incorporates influences from neo-Vaishnavism, Jataka tales, Panchatantra, and stories from central India. Additionally, supernatural motifs like Ban Devata, the Snake Husband motif (Champa Yati), Romantic motifs (Panesoi), Step-Mother motifs (Tejimola), motifs of jealousy or rivalry among women (The Kite's Daughter), and humorous or trickster motifs (Tatun Tamuli, Tikhar) frequently feature in Assamese folk tales. (Brahma, 2005,)

Creation tales hold significant popularity among all tribal communities in Assam. For instance, the Dimasa tribe believes in the mythological narrative that they are descendants of Bangla (a male deity) and Arikhidima (a female deity). According to their folklore, Arikhidima laid seven eggs at Dilou Sangibra (the bank of the Dibu and Sangi rivers). From six of these eggs emerged the ancestors of the Dimasa community, while the seventh egg gave rise to a few devil spirits. Similarly, the Bodo people have their creation tale where God Anam created a pair of birds, from which the forefathers of the Bodo community emerged from

two of the eggs, while devil spirits emerged from the third egg. Pramod Ch. Bhattacharjee notes that creation tales are prevalent among all tribes of Assam. However, Assamese folk tales are distinct from tribal folklore. Assamese folk tales have influenced both dialects and the standard spoken language. In contrast, tribal tales maintain a profound connection with myth, which is intrinsically linked to the beliefs and practices of the tribal communities (Bhattacharya, 1969,).

Ballads or folk poetry constitute a significant aspect of verbal art in Assam. Examples of folk poetry include Bihu geet, Husari, Biyageet, Vandana or Stuti, Deh Bisar geet, Jikir, and Jari Banamali geet. Numerous famous ballads exist, such as Badan Borphukan geet, Jaimotir Geet, Moni kuwar, Phulkowar geet, Jana gabhanur geet, Haradutta Biradutta geet, Kniala Kowari geet, Patharu Ghatar Ranar geet, Sikan Saniohor Geet, Radhika Santir Geet, Moluwar geet, Tamul Chorar Geet, Bhuikar Geet, Bamun Purnar geet, and many more. Other notable folk poetries include Nisukanir geet, Nangeli geet, as well as missing folk poetries like Ai-nitam, Kaban nitam, doing nitam, and Midang nitam. Among the Dimasa tribe, Dishru, Sentraduri, and Amulah-dimalah are popular folk poetry forms. The Bodo tribes have their own Boisagu geet, which are love songs and a celebrated form of folk poetry. (Bhattacharya, 1997,)

The verbal arts of the Karbi community encompass a rich array of myths, ballads, riddles, poems, and tales. Among these, the Sabin Alun stands out as a particularly popular oral rendition of the Ramayana epic within the Karbi tradition. Oral songs in the Karbi language are referred to as "lunse," while cacophonous songs hold significant popularity among the Karbi people. One prevalent myth among the Karbi community involves the belief that the waplacopy bird laid eggs beneath a plum tree. According to Karbi folklore, it is believed that the Assamese, Naga, and Karbi people originated from the eggs laid by this mythical bird, emphasizing the shared mythical origins of these communities. This myth serves as a cornerstone of Karbi cultural identity and underscores the interconnectedness of various ethnic groups within the region. (Brahma, 2005,)

The oral narratives of the Bodo people are characterized by their extensive length and rich content. Bodo verbal arts are deeply enriched with a variety of forms including folk tales, myths, proverbs, ballads, and more. Particularly prominent among Bodo oral traditions are creation tales that explain the origins of the earth, which hold significant popularity among Bodo tribes. (Brahma, 2005,)

Notable folk tales among the Bodo community include "Jaulia Dabdan" and "Bigroshree Chekla," both of which are widely celebrated within Bodo folklore. These tales feature a diverse cast of characters, often animals such as the Frog King, Seng Fish, Clever Fox, Crane Bird King, Phanfawali Bird, Fishowa Bird, Tortoise, and Hare. Additionally, elderly figures like Alari Dumbro, Gambina, and Dimashrean, among others, play significant roles in Bodo narratives.

Various explanatory tales also form part of Bodo oral tradition, shedding light on topics such as the creation of the sky and earth, the birth of the Ha Fisa Howa Bird, the stories of Kathiya Patula and Chadramali, as well as the legend of Lakhishree, among others. These narratives not only entertain but also serve to transmit cultural values and beliefs across generations within the Bodo community. (Brahma, 2005)

3. Social folk customs:

This category of folklore primarily focuses on group interactions rather than individual skills or performances. In addition to verbal and tangible elements, these customs encompass group behavioral traits related to significant life events such as birth, initiation, marriage, and death. Rituals and customs associated with festivals often revolve around agricultural activities and follow a calendrical cycle. The general Assamese population adheres to pan-Indian social folk customs, which include the worship of Hindu gods and goddesses. Many Assamese people also follow Vaishnavism, a sect within Hinduism. Similarly, the Dimasa community has been influenced by Hinduism, adopting various deities into their religious practices. Pathri serves as the priest within Dimasa traditions. (Lekharu, 2008,)

Promod Chandra Bhattacharji has documented various social folk customs observed by the Dimasa community. These customs reflect a blend of indigenous practices and influences from Hinduism, illustrating the dynamic nature of cultural interactions within the region.

The Bodo community traditionally practices endogamy, preferring to marry within their own community. They observe both death and birth ceremonies, with many adhering to Hinduism, although a small number have converted to Christianity in recent times. Bathou Puja, worshiping Bathou and Borai, is a common religious practice among the Bodo people, who also maintain beliefs in animism.

Rabha society typically practices monogamy, with a preference for cross-cousin marriage and a high status accorded to women. They perform animal sacrifices during religious ceremonies and also offer wine. Bathou and Kheri Puja are observed by the Rabhas, who also maintain faith in tantrism. Birth and death ceremonies are integral to Rabha customs.

The Karbi people also adhere to certain folk customs and customary laws. While they generally Hindu, some have adopted Christianity. They worship deities such as Brahma, Siva, and various tribal deities like Amam, Hemphu, and Porigyā. The Karbis observe death ceremonies known as chomankan. (Brahma, 2005)

The Tiwa community does not worship idols but instead pays respect to natural features like hills, mountains, and rivers. They sacrifice various animals during rituals and revere deities such as Moramusi, Bala Khangar, and Hulauma. Tiwas believe in the spiritual welfare of the living being interconnected with the souls of their deceased family members.

For the Tiwas, the wedding day is considered the purest day, symbolizing the auspicious union of two individuals. (Bhattacharya, 1997,)

The Hajoi community also observes birth ceremonies, during which they worship the Sun. Additionally; they have a custom of tying a thread to the small finger of the deceased, believing that this act protects them from harm by devil spirits. Marriage within the same social class is generally not preferred among the Hajoi people. (Brahma, 2005,)

The Folk Traditions of the Missing Community are distinct in that they are not rooted in a creation theory but rather in the evolution theory exclusively. Unlike many other communities, they do not adhere to any particular religious faith. As such, they do not worship specific gods, goddesses, or deities as part of their traditional practices. Instead, their cultural and social customs are shaped by their understanding of evolution and their unique cultural heritage. (Borah, 2015,)

4. Performing art tradition:

This tradition within folklore studies focus on traditional music, drama, and dance that are transmitted orally from one generation to the next, rather than being written down or scored. These art forms often transcend generic boundaries and are characterized by their functional nature—they serve as accompaniments to various activities rather than being purely for entertainment or aesthetic enjoyment.

The Assamese Bihu dance and Bihu songs hold a significant cultural presence, with influences extending to many tribal communities. These performances are often accompanied by a variety of traditional instruments such as drums, cymbals, gagana (a type of flute), bamboo clappers, and horn pipes. Dr. Upendra Nath Goswami identifies several popular folk songs of Assam, including Bihu songs, Loka Geet, Deh Bissarar Geet, Jikir aru Jari, Kahini Geet, Nisukani Geet, Sisu Umala Geet, Sisur Khel-Dhemalir Geet, Gorokhiyar Geet, Nao-Khelar Geet, Hou Khelar Geet, Biya Nam, Si Nam, Tamul Chorar Geet, Moh Khedar Geet, and Sa ajar Geet, among others. (Bhattacharya, 1969,) These songs reflect the diverse cultural heritage and traditions of Assam, showcasing a rich tapestry of musical expressions deeply ingrained in the region's social fabric. Pramod Ch. Bhattacharjee sheds light on Bugurumba, the primary folk dance of the Bodo community, which is performed during the Kherai Puja. Alongside this dance tradition, the Bodos boast several popular folk songs, including religious songs associated with Bathou Puja, Kherai Puja, and Garja Puja, as well as romantic songs linked with Bisagu, humorous songs, and tunes related to activities like cultivation, fishing, hunting, and the Nisukani Geet. The Bodo community utilizes a range of folk instruments during their performances, including Kham, Siphung, Setja, Khoubang, and Thorkha. (Bhattacharya, 1969,)

Moreover, the Sonowal Kacharies have their own renowned folk song called Haidang, often sung during the worship of Bathou or Kherai. Meanwhile, the Karbi community boasts a variety of popular folk songs such as Masire Kohir, Karbi Keplang, Lakhmi Keplang, Has Kekan, Sabin Alun, Rang Kakim, Aso Kebei Alun, Thelu' Alun, and Himu Alun. The Missing community also contributes to the folk music scene, performing folk songs and folk dances such as Ainitam. These diverse traditions showcase the rich cultural heritage and musical diversity present among different ethnic groups in the region (Lekharu, 2008).

5. Conclusion:

Assam stands out as one of the richest Indian states in terms of folklore, boasting a vibrant tapestry of traditions, rituals, mythology, and customs that thrive more prominently here than anywhere else. It serves as the homeland for a diverse array of populations that have migrated to the region from various directions and at different points in history, alongside its indigenous inhabitants. These diverse populations encompass different racial backgrounds, languages, and socio-cultural traditions.

In addition to the Assamese people, who have been influenced by Aryan culture, Assam is home to a multitude of tribal communities residing in both the hills and plains. These include groups such as the Bodos, Garo, Rabha, Koch, Missing, Dimasa, Tiwa, and Karbis, among others, each contributing to the rich cultural mosaic of the region. Therefore, any discussion of Assam's folklore must inevitably encompass these diverse ethnic groups.

Dr. Nabin Ch. Sharma emphasizes that Assam's cultural heritage is a product of assimilation and harmony among its various ethnic communities, contributing to its unique identity as a symbol of unity in

diversity. This cultural amalgamation has played a crucial role in shaping Assam's identity and fostering a sense of cohesion and inclusivity among its people. (Borah, 2015)

In this evolving environment, folklore became intricately intertwined with culture. It is widely acknowledged that culture transcends individual traits and holds universal implications, encompassing human thoughts, activities, arts and crafts, morality, religion, and more. As Assam underwent socio-cultural transformations under colonial influence, folklore played a crucial role in preserving, adapting, and reflecting these changes, serving as a repository of collective experiences and traditions. (Bhattacharya, 1969)

Despite their distinct cultural identities, there are noticeable similarities and influences between these ethnic groups and their tribal and other neighbours. These resemblances extend to intellectual beliefs, traditional practices, and tacit knowledge, which, apart from universal patterns, often reflect borrowed elements from neighbouring tribal and other communities. This interplay of diverse cultural influences shapes the dynamic socio-cultural landscape of Assam, highlighting the intricate interconnections and shared heritage among its various ethnic groups.

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