



# Tripuri Folktales: Tracing Out The Essence Of Beast Fable

Kishan Reang

MA 3rd Semester, Department of English

Netaji Subhash Mahavidyalaya, Udaipur, Tripura

## Abstract

This paper explores how animals in Tripuri folktales adopt human-like characteristics which capture the essence of beast fables. The study focuses on stories such as *Naauwui or Nuai*, *Yongkhaupha*, *Khumpui or the Legends of Raima-Saima*, *Tiger and Tortoise*, and *A Wild Pig and a Mouse* and exhibits how animals behave like humans to show moral lessons. These stories are also compared to popular English beast fables like Aesop's Fables and Orwell's Animal Farm. The study emphasizes on how animals represent human behaviour, virtues, and values, as well as Tripura's stunning spiritual and oral traditions. This makes not only folktales more interesting, but it also contributes to the preservation of tradition and lessons passed down through generations.

**Keywords:** Tripuri Folktales, Beast Fable, Cultural Traditions, Oral Literature, Anthropomorphism, Naauwui or Nuai, Yongkhaupha, Khumpui or the Legends of Raima-Saima, Tiger and Tortoise, and A Wild Pig and a Mouse

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The North East is the most Eastern part of India, known for its natural beauty, surreal landscape and ethnic groups of tribal. This part of India is consists of eight states, and these states are known as together, seven sisters and one brother, which are including, Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim. The part is connected to the main body of India by a narrow Siliguri Corridor, also known as Chicken's Neck, which runs between Nepal and Bangladesh. These states are administered by

the Ministry of Development of North East Region (MDONER) and have distinct historical and cultural trajectories, with the majority of the region becoming part of British India in the mid-nineteenth century.

Tripura is a hilly state which is famous for its tropical weather. Tripura is indeed one of the smallest states of India by both area and population. It is the third smallest state of India after Goa and Delhi, having flat and hilly land of 10,491 km (4,052 sq. mi). Tripura is the second least populous state of India, after Sikkim with approximately 3,500,000 people (As of 2020). Tripura was a princely state like Manipur for decades, which makes Tripura to have place in the history of India. Tripura has a rich and diverse history spanning over 2,500 years, with various dynasties and empires ruling region but mostly the Manikya Dynasty. The first king of Tripura is a matter of debate among historians and scholars, as the early history of Tripura is not well-documented. However, according to tradition and legend, the first king of Tripura was Druhyu (also known as Druhya or Durga), who is said to have ruled in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, alternatively some sources suggest that the first king of Tripura was Samudra Tapasvi, a legendary king who is said to have ruled in the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Moreover, Ratna Fa, who is mentioned in the *Rajmala*, a chronicle of the kings of Tripura, as the first king of the Manikya dynasty, who have ruled from the 15<sup>th</sup> to nearly 19<sup>th</sup> century. Afterward there were 184 kings who have ruled Tripura; some of them successfully, on the other hand some not and then ended the reign of these kings with Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya (1923-1947 CE). However, the purpose of this study is to find out the essence of Beast fable in the folktales of Tripura.

The indigenous people of North East India preserve their folktales through oral traditions. This method of storytelling was popular back then among the people. This tradition passed down through generations. Fortunately, some of the folktales have its written form now. However, prior decades, the elders used to tell these stories to their Youngers or grandsons, in those stories there was a common factor and that is the existence of animals, acting like human being, which can also be considered as beast fable.

An animal tale or beast fable is typically a story in which animals act as humans. They may display other anthropomorphic characteristics as well, such as living in a human-like community. Animal stories can be understood universally in terms of how animal species interact with one another, rather than human groups in a given civilization. As a result, readers can comprehend the motivations of the characters even if they do not have the author's or storytellers' cultural background. Animal tales can be enjoyed in eras and places far removed from their beginnings.

There are lot of films and stories which are based on animals, which might be seen as beast fable and animal tales. For example, Aesop's *The Tortoise and the Hare*, *The Fox and the Crow*, George Orwell's *The Animal Farm*, *The Peter Rabbit* Novel by Beatrix Potter it is a classic children's tales in which anthropomorphic (using animals to explore human emotions, experiences and societal issues) animals teach moral lessons, behaving like human, *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame, a tale of four animal friends- Mole, Ratty, Toad, and Badger, which explores the themes of friendship, nature and responsibility, *The Fox and the Grapes*, *The Nun's Priest Tale* from Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, it is a fable by the Nun's Priest about a cock named Chanticleer and his favourite hen, Pertelote. The story revolves around the Chanticleer's dream, which foretells his own death, and his subsequent debate with Pertelote about the

significance of dream, there are many more stories that owned their place in the English literature. In Addition, the award winning films *Zootopia*, *Stuart Little*, *Jungle Book*, *Kung Fu Panda*, *Madagascar*, *Rio*, these are the some of the famous movies in which animals are the main lead and act like human. In order to add depth to the main theme of the paper, tracing out the element of animal tales or beast fable in the folktales of indigenous people of Tripura is significant. The examples of these works have been stated to explore the same quality and expression of the tales of indigenous people.

## 2. TRIPURI FOLKTALES AND THE ESSENCE OF BEAST FABLE

The history of folktales in Tripura has a broader place among the people. The elders of the state, the authors, and the poets have their own take to display those tales, but what makes it interesting is the feature of beast fable that is seen in most of the tales, recited by the elders, written and collected by the authors and poets to give lives to those stories. This study is infused with some of the well-known stories, including-‘Naauwui or Nuai,’ ‘Yongkhaupha,’ ‘Khumpui or the Legends of Raima-Saima,’ ‘Tiger and Tortoise,’ ‘A Wild Pig and a Mouse.’ These select folktales collectively display the essence of beast fable or animal tales.

### 2.1 NAAUWUI OR NUI

In this tale, we see a traditional story that involves both human and animal elements, typical of a beast fable. It begins with two sisters going to harvest melons, where they find a lovely vine hanging from a tree. The elder sister suggests swinging on it, and after both enjoy a turn, the younger sister leaves briefly. During this time, the elder sister maliciously cuts part of the vine. When the younger sister returns to swing, the vine breaks, and she falls into a sacred river, where a gigantic fish swallows her.

When the elder sister returns home, she lies to their mother about her younger sister’s whereabouts, sending their mother on several futile errands to the king’s court. Eventually, the truth remains concealed for a long time, until one day, the mother spots the gigantic fish in the river, captures it, and stores half of its flesh in the rice vault. Strange noises emanate from the vault, and when they investigate, they find a new-born baby from the remaining of the younger sister.

As time passes, the younger sister reveals how the elder sister betrayed her by cutting the vine, and in response, the parents punish the elder daughter by locking her in a cage. Over the years, she tries to escape and eventually constructs wings using feathers given by a group of birds called Naauwui. She ultimately flies away with the birds, leaving her family behind.

The tale concludes when the Naauwui birds tell the grieving mother that her daughter will return if they cut a hole in the roof. However, instead of a reunion, the daughter sends deadly creatures-snakes, bees, and poisonous insects through the hole, leading to her family’s demise.

The story employs classic beast fable elements, where animals (like the giant fish and birds behave like human beings in the end of the story) take on significant roles and symbolize deeper moral themes. The punishment of the elder sister for her betrayal and the eventual destruction of the family by animals highlights

the consequences of human vice, much like a traditional beast fable, which typically involves animals and teaches moral lessons.

## 2.2 YONKHAUPHA

This story revolves around seven sisters who go to a Jhum (a hilly farm) to pick brinjals. They encounter a mischievous monkey named Yongkhaupha, who is devouring the brinjals. Angered by his actions, the sisters instruct their dogs to chase and bite him. Yongkhaupha, however, swiftly climbs a tree, escaping the dogs. After collecting seven baskets of brinjals, the sisters head to a nearby river to bathe, leaving their clothes on the riverbank. Yongkhaupha, still watching from the tree, seizes the opportunity to steal their garments while they are bathing.

When the sisters finish bathing, they realize their clothes are missing and spot Yongkhaupha sitting on a treetop with their clothes. One by one, the sisters ask him to return their clothes, and he obliges, except for the youngest sister. Yongkhaupha refuses to return her Rwnai (traditional garment wore by indigenous women of Tripura) and instead commands her to climb a seven-step ladder in order to get her clothes back. Despite following his instructions, Yongkhaupha traps her on the last step and refuses to let her go. Her sisters, realizing they cannot save her, leave her behind. The youngest sister, now trapped, eventually marries Yongkhaupha and gives birth to two sons, Yongkhau and Yongtee.

As time passes, the youngest sister craves a sour wild fruit called Ksamai. Yongkhaupha promises to fetch it but eats the flesh of the fruit himself, bringing only the skins back for his wife. Furious, the youngest sister curses him to die as dried fish. Eventually, she gives birth to their second son, Yongtee. Soon after, she leaves Yongkhaupha, taking their sons with her, but tricks him by placing a cat and an insect in their home to delay him.

Yongkhaupha, enraged by this, kills the cat and insect, then makes a drum from the cat's skin. He searches for his family, asking people along the way if they've seen them. Those he encounters curse him for his actions, predicting his death like dried fish. He continues his search, eventually spotting his sons, Yongkhau and Yongtee, from a tree. His sons invite him down, but Yongkhaupha expresses fear of various animals such as hens, dogs, and hogs, so the boys lock them up, assuring him it's safe. Finally, he reunites with them.

Yongkhaupha's mother-in-law offers him sticky rice to eat, but he puts the leftover rice on his back. When he asks where to throw the leaves, she tells him to put them in the rice bucket. As he does this, a dog attacks him, killing him instantly. Though Yongkhaupha was a monkey, his sons grieve deeply, insisting he was their father. Their grandmother chops up Yongkhaupha's body, dries it, and tries to sell the meat as dried fish in the village. However, the children cry out to the villagers, warning them, "*Do not buy, it is our father's flesh!*"

Unable to sell the meat, the grandmother curses the children, predicting their death just like their father. She throws Yongkhaupha's remains into a nearby stream, ending the tragic tale.

The story mixes elements of folklore, morality, and relationships between humans and animals, leaving a cautionary note about consequences and familial bonds, even across species.

### **2.3 KHUMPUI OR THE LEGENDS OF RAIMA SAIMA**

In this story, a Tripuri priest and his wife are occupied with priestly duties, leaving their two daughters, Raima and Saima, to manage agricultural work. One day, while working in the fields, a storm hits, and Raima, seeing her sister shivering in the cold, makes a pledge to marry anyone who builds them a shelter. The next day, they find a newly built hut (gairing), and Raima fulfils her promise, marrying the one responsible, a python whom she perceives as a human. The python consumes most of their food, causing the sisters to grow thin.

When the priest learns about the situation, he plans to kill the python. While Raima is away, the priest tricks the python into touching his feet and kills it. Raima senses something has gone wrong and rushes back, only to discover her husband is dead. In her grief, she mourns over the python's body, which others see as a serpent but she sees as a man, her husband.

Raima's tears form a stream, which gradually grows into a river, ultimately submerging her. The river, named Khumtwi (later known as Gomati), symbolizes her devotion and becomes a source of life for the Tripuri people. The story concludes with the belief that the python was Lord Shiva and Raima was Parvati, both appearing in disguise to offer salvation to humanity. In this story the beast fable element is the python's humanly appearance and speaking.

### **2.4 TIGER AND TORTOISE**

One day, a tiger was moving around the forest in search of food, but he could not find anything. Tired and exhausted, the tiger sat down under a tree. After several failed attempts at hunting, he became very disappointed and sad. While returning to his cave, the tiger met a tortoise. The tiger had never seen an animal like the tortoise before and was curious to learn about this new species. The tiger stood there for a while, staring at the tortoise and thinking about eating it.

The tortoise was initially sitting with its neck and limbs out. Upon seeing this, the tiger attempted to eat the tortoise. However, as soon as the tiger made the attempt, the tortoise retracted its limbs and neck. The shell of the tortoise was too hard to pierce or bite. The tiger thought, "Today, I shall eat this little tiny animal for the first time, since I couldn't find anything else to eat." Thinking this, the tiger began to pierce the tortoise, but he failed. The tiger tried again and again, but each time he failed miserably. After several failed attempts, the tortoise cleverly advised the tiger to soak him in water:

*“You cannot eat me like this,*

*If you soak me in water,*

*I may become soft and suitable to eat.*

*Wait for a while, and you will get the result.”*

The tiger, realizing that soaking the tortoise in water might indeed soften it, decided to follow the advice. As soon as the tiger threw the tortoise into the water, the tortoise removed all its limbs and head and started swimming beyond the tiger’s sight. Then, the tortoise laughed at the tiger, who was standing on the riverbank. Seeing the tortoise laughing and swimming away, the tiger realized he had been tricked. There was nothing he could do, and ashamed, he returned to his den in the evening.

In this laughable tale, the feature of the beast fable is presented through the conversation of two animals, acting as human beings.

## **2.5 A PIG AND A MOUSE**

In a dense forest, a boar struggled to find water during the dry summer days. One day, while searching for food, the boar began digging the soil with his sharp teeth, hoping to find water. After some time, he managed to uncover a small water source. Though he was disappointed by the amount, he decided to preserve it for future use. However, the boar was worried that other animals might drink the water while he was away, so he needed someone to guard it.

After some thought, the boar decided to ask a small bird living on a nearby tree to guard the water. The bird, being small, wouldn’t drink much of the water herself. The boar approached the bird and asked her to watch over the water and not let any animal near it. The bird agreed and started keeping an eye on the spot.

Soon, a hare arrived, wanting to drink the water. The bird stopped him, warning, “If you drink the water, the boar will kill me.” Curious, the hare asked, “How strong is the boar?” The bird described the boar as having eyes as big as an egg, teeth sharp like an axe, and a tail three meters long. Terrified, the hare fled.

Next, a deer came by, also thirsty. The bird once again warned him not to drink the water, explaining that it belonged to the boar and that her life would be in danger if the deer drank it. The deer asked, “How big is the boar?” The bird repeated her description, frightening the deer, who ran away as well.

Finally, a tiger approached, thirsty and determined to drink. The bird gave him the same warning and description of the boar, but the tiger was unimpressed. He asked, “Does the boar have claws like mine or a moustache like me?” When the bird replied no, the tiger said, “Then I’m stronger than the boar and will drink the water.” Without hesitation, the tiger began drinking.

The bird quickly flew off to find the boar and inform him of the tiger's actions. Furious, the boar rushed to confront the tiger. A fierce fight ensued between them, with both animals badly injuring each other. In the end, both the boar and the tiger died at the water spot.

The bird, saddened and angry over the boar's death, blamed the tiger. In her rage, she ate the tiger's flesh, but not being used to such food, she suffered from indigestion and became weak. As she rested on a bamboo bush, a strong wind blew, and a bamboo branch struck her, causing her to fall and die.

A mouse living under the bamboo bush had heard the fight but was too scared to come out. When all was quiet, the mouse emerged and found the bodies of the boar, tiger, and bird. The mouse thought the bird's legs would make a good flute, so it cut off the legs and crafted one. The mouse began playing the flute, and its sweet music attracted the attention of a nearby monkey.

The monkey, eager to take the flute, approached the mouse. Praising the sound, the monkey suddenly smeared gum on the mouse's eyes, blinding it, and stole the flute. The mouse, now unable to see and without his flute, cried out, "My flute, my flute!"

A kite flying above heard the mouse's cries and came down to help. After learning what had happened, the kite used its beak to remove the gum from the mouse's eyes and promised to retrieve the flute. The kite flew to the monkey's house and asked to see the flute. The monkey was suspicious and refused, fearing the kite would fly away with it. The kite cleverly suggested that the monkey hold onto its tail while it played the flute. The monkey agreed and handed over the flute, but as the kite played, it suddenly jerked its tail free and flew away with the flute.

The kite returned the flute to the mouse, and from that day forward, the kite and the mouse lived together happily, playing the flute from time to time.

Tripuri folktales, which come from the oral traditions of the people of Tripura, often feature animals and mythical creatures, creating stories that resemble beast fables. These stories, passed down through generations, not only entertain but also teach important moral lessons. In a beast fable, animals talk, think, and behave like humans, often to deliver a moral or ethical lesson. This is a common feature in both Tripuri folktales and classic English literature.

In the tale *Naauwui or Nuai*, animals play a central role. This is the tale of two sisters, where the younger sister is swallowed by a giant fish and later reborn. Here, animals aren't just background characters; they act as forces of justice. This use of animals to teach life lessons is similar to classic beast fables like Aesop's *The Tortoise and the Hare*, where animals symbolize human strengths and weaknesses. Another example is *Yongkhaupha*, a tale about a mischievous monkey who tricks a young girl by stealing her clothes. The monkey's ability to deceive and manipulate reflects a common theme in beast fables, where animals are portrayed as clever and sometimes cunning. His eventual downfall, after causing harm, teaches a moral lesson similar to the way Aesop's fables explore pride, like in *The Fox and the Crow*. In *Khumpui or the Legend of Raima-Saima*, a python takes on both literal and symbolic roles. The python is not just an animal but also a

divine figure, eventually being worshipped as Lord Shiva. This mix of the spiritual and the animal world shows how beast fables often link animals with larger human and divine themes. In English literature, a comparable approach is seen in *Animal Farm* by George Orwell, where animals stand for human political behaviour. However, while Orwell's animals are symbols of political ideas, the python in *Khumpui* focuses more on spirituality and cultural beliefs. The story *Tiger and Tortoise* is a perfect example of a beast fable. The clever tortoise tricks the tiger into throwing him into the water, much like Aesop's *The Tortoise and the Hare*, where a slow but smart animal outwits a faster, stronger one. The moral here is that intelligence and patience can be more valuable than brute strength. Lastly, in the tale *A Wild Pig and a Mouse*, animals take on human qualities as they talk, make plans, and solve problems. The wild pig asks the bird to guard the water, and the mouse uses cleverness to build a flute. This story highlights kindness, trickery, and fairness, much like the themes found in English tales like *The Fox and the Grapes*, where animals use trickery to get what they want or to solve a problem.

When comparing Tripuri folktales to beast fables from English literature, like Aesop's fables, both use animals to symbolize human traits and values. Aesop's stories, Orwell's *Animal Farm*, and Beatrix Potter's *The Tale of Peter Rabbit* all rely on animals to offer lessons about human nature while keeping a distance from real-life human characters. In *Animal Farm*, for instance, Orwell uses animals to represent political figures and societal problems, much like how the python in *Khumpui* represents a deity in disguise. Both traditions focus on the relationship between animals and humans to teach moral lessons, though Tripuri tales often weave in more cultural and spiritual themes.

### 3. RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. Further research could explore the cultural significance of these beast fables and their role in preserving Tripuri heritage.
- ii. Comparing Tripuri folktales with other stories from English literature could offer understandings into how animals are viewed in different cultures.
- iii. Translating these folktales into more languages could help preserve and share their moral and cultural lessons with a wider audience.

### 4. CONCLUSION

This paper concludes that Tripuri folktales offer an amusing tradition of beast fables, where animals play vital roles in teaching moral and cultural lessons. Like English beast fables, these stories reflect human behaviour through animals. However, Tripuri tales often blend cultural and spiritual themes unique to the region's traditions. These folktales explore themes like betrayal, cleverness, family loyalty, and justice which make them important contributions to the wider tradition of animal fables around the world.

**REFERENCES**

1. *Rajmala*, A Chronicle of the Kings of Tripura (written in Bengali).
2. Tripura District Gazetteer (1975), A Government Publication.
3. Tyagi, D.K., Tribal Folk Tales of Tripura, Tribal Research & Cultural Institution, Government of Tripura, First Edition: January 1997; Reprint: February 2020. ISBN: 978-93-86707-51-2.
4. Wikipedia, "Animal Tale." [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal\\_tale](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Animal_tale).
5. RSF-EEE Newsletter, "The Legends of Raima-Saima," Issue 4, June 18, Kaushik Debbarma.
6. Gupta, Surojit Sen, Relation between Nature and Tribal Culture in Tripura, Tribal Research and Cultural Institute, Government of Tripura, First Edition: February 28, 2020.
7. Boro, Anil Kumar, Folklore in the Multilingual Perspective of North East India, Prajña Vol. XXVIII, 2018-19, ISSN 0976-9072.
8. Bhattacharjee, Biprajit, *Kereng Kothoma: A Modern Re-telling of the Folk Tales of Tripura*, Zubaan Publishers Pvt Ltd, New Delhi, 2020.
9. Raha, Debopam, Folk Tales of North-East India: A Tryst with Nature, International Journal of Novel Research in Interdisciplinary Studies, Vol. 6, Issue 6, November - December 2019, pp. (1-3). Available at: [www.noveltyjournals.com](http://www.noveltyjournals.com).
10. Reang, Champabati, *Naauwui* and *Yongkhaupha* Orally provided and translated by Kishan Reang, Tripura, November 2023.