

CONTEMPORARY WORLD VERSUS CULTURAL PRACTICES: EXPLORING THE INEXTRICABLE INTERTWINING OF SONGS AND NARRATION IN ASSAMESE FOLKTALES

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ABSTRACT

Community emotive connections have changed drastically in the technology dependent contemporary world. The substantial significance of folklores and folklore research faces experiential queries in the perception of the present day generation. However, it is pertinent to re-assert that community life provides strength, solace and foresight to individuals; and community treasure troves such as folktales and folksongs help an individual at crucial junctures of decision making. Songs serve an impressive variety of functions in Assamese folktales. This paper examines some of those functions through exegeses of the contexts of the folktales.

Keywords: folktales, songs, emotive connections

Technology dependent contemporary world has empirical experiential queries regarding the substantial significance of folklore research and its propagation. Newer forms of interaction, communication, connectivity have brought in newer realisations concerning community emotive connections as against global craze-corners in the form of social media sites, video games, songs with an extremely rich tapestry of audio-visual elements with subtle connotations, and other mechanism of technology bound engagements, which are ever emerging or expanding. This was the wild dream come true of humanity, i.e., to get everything – all forms of knowledge and information – available instantly and in an overwhelming abundance. Information exploration has made several traditional concepts redundant, some others on the verge of extinction, while some others are constantly getting upgraded and geared up to meet the needs of the unknown unfamiliar reader consumer.

This connectivity has brought in an impulse – to young and old alike – to wait for something appealing and new every minute of every single day. Anything goes viral and becomes a viewed, enjoyed, exulted, or abhorred experience, propelled by lack of any stringent control exerted earlier by the traditional dominating factors such as time, money, power, or mediating agencies. This has two very obvious and opposite repercussions – first is a necessity to explore and enjoy the common or the universal; and the second is to explore the unique, the uncommon, the interesting, the exciting or even the repulsive. Though these processes are opposite, they are closely connected. The first is enhanced by universal emotions, felt experiences, mass products, mass consumer items – a list that can be considerably elongated. The second aspect provides a much-needed fresh air to brush aside the universal boredom, which is an after-effect of the homogenization of almost everything pertaining to our internet wired world.

Cultural practices offer a significant versatility here. Due to the hugely dynamic nature of discursive cultural practices prevalent in communities created by linguistic, demographic, social and other differentiating parametres, cultural practices demand much more attention in the contemporary world. Community life provides strength, solace and foresight to individual selves. Culture is an ever-flowing stream, springing from the roots of community living, fed with experiences and realisations. Therefore, it is both old and new, both general and unique. Folktales, folksongs, folk celebrations in the form of festivals, rituals, rites and so on and so forth carry culture forward.

Thus, there is a necessity to develop folklore studies more extensively than ever before. In a comprehensive article¹, Stephen O Gencarella advocates the establishment of “critical folklore studies”. He highlights several aspects as well as perspectives of examining the folk, the folklores and the rationale of folklore study centres. Closely related to these are the connections of society, polity and oppression or marginalization reflected through folklores.

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Assamese has a commendable variety of folktales that carry community realizations. It is significant that these realizations are made memorable through songs that intertwine with almost every folktale theme, serving multiple purposes. The rich tapestry is difficult to be included in any single research exposition. Nevertheless, the attempt here is to highlight the close connection of Assamese as a community with songs and stories used as community reservoirs of wisdom and age-old experiences.

Various communities use various aesthetic means to celebrate life in all its diversity and felt experiences. For instance, Gond art has been of academic focus in the contemporary times because of the felt community or individual realisations expressed in a unique art form that is remarkably close to the people of that region and group. The medium of expression most widely used in turn unfold the cultural, psychological as well as emotive proximity of a particular group, region or community towards the specific medium chosen collectively. In various reiteration of a particular medium of medium of expression, a community conveys/articulates itself aesthetically, socially and thus creates history.

It is significant to note in this regard that Assamese does not have an art form emerging to a similar stature that the community widely embraces for recreation and expression. On the other hand, it has an outstanding variety of songs that are used in different occasions and they establish extremely significant emotive connections. They provide a much refreshing life stream to the people on various community and cultural occasions.

Assamese folktales are no exceptions. They abound in songs and the purposes that these songs serve are manifolded. We can cursorily glance at some instances of the use of songs in Assamese folktales:

1. **Song as empowerment:** Several Assamese folktales can be included under this subcategory. Tejimola is the most prominent of them all. In another articleⁱⁱ, I have focused on the subaltern status of Tejimola and elaborated on the theme of the subaltern in Tejimola, Cinderella and Katniss Aberdeen, three female protagonists from extremely different socio-cultural setting. In spite of a remarkable temporal and narratological difference between the first two and the last one, my research established several interesting features pertaining to the three female characters, widely popular among reader-audience circles which are again broadly different.

What I would like to reiterate here is the fact that the turning point to the tale of Tejimola comes only when her metamorphosed soul starts singing. Tejimola, the girl as we find her in the beginning of the tale is downtrodden and doubly marginalized. Although through the title the reader-listener's focus is directed towards her, she hardly gets or utilizes any linguistic space for herself and thus, in spite of the focus, she remains a third person non-entity, a name or a character necessitated by the narrative. In sharp contrast to this, the metamorphosed selves all use the discursive space, or it will be rather more appropriate to say that they create a linguistic discursive space for themselves through the songs. In this story as in so many other Assamese folktales, nature – both animate and inanimate – use human linguistic communicative media. The manifolded significance of the songs in terms of the tale can be explored from diverse contemporary perspectives, since this folktale can lend itself to ecocritical, critical discourse analytical, feminist, neo historicist and other theoretical orientations as well.

2. **Songs of emancipation:** Though these songs are similar to songs as empowerment, these are also slightly different in terms of the way they are used in particular tales. For instance, one can examine Chilanir Jiyekar Sadhu, another Assamese folktale about the plight of a human child brought up by a Kite. With admirable love and care, the Kite mother not only brings her up, but also shares the humanly concerns for her marriage and therefore, marries her to a merchant who happens to pass by the forest and gets impressed by the Beauty. The Kite mother's concern to provide a home for her grown up daughter is placed in sharp contrast to the human world she faces in the close confinement of the home provided by the merchant. This daughter sings a particular song to call her Kite mother whenever she is in distress. This song is afterwards sung by the daughter's enemies i.e., the rival wives and the Kite mother could not differentiate the voice. This moment is strewn in huge ironical overtones as a bird comes down following a

human voice considering it to be the voice of her human daughter. The lack of a discerning ability heightens the crisis, more so as it is placed in the context of a bird, which is known for its sharp observations and sharper reactions when it comes to be its natural habitat, the forest and the sky. The bird comes down only to be brutally killed by the rivals of her daughter. Significantly, the daughter does not have a human name throughout the tale – Chilanir Jiyek literally means the daughter of the Kite, the only name given to her in this folktale. Obviously, a huge crisis appears at this point of her life, which can't be understood much less be tackled by the innocent daughter completely inexperienced in human ways of living and the complexities of instinctive impulses driven by jealousy of evil selves. In the absence of the merchant, she is sold to a fisherman and is asked to be by the riverbank to guard the fish caught and dried to be sold. Here she sings her own song, a song narrating her plight. This ultimately led to the emancipation and a consequent happy ending to the tragic circumstances of her life. Chilanir Jiyek posits interesting similarities in terms of her innate innocence with the innocence of several Shakespearean female protagonists, a theme I have explored in another article.

3. **Songs for the establishment of Truth:** A lighthearted strain is noticed in certain Assamese folktales where songs work as riddles and help in establishing the truth. A notable instance of this is the folktale titled “Sarabjaan”, the story of a man who became famous as a fortune teller due to several incidences where his wit makes him come out victorious of a tricky situation. Similar to the trend we have noticed so far, here also, his songs full of riddles pave way for the truth to unfold, so much so that initially he uses songs to unearth his wife’s mischievous behaviour, but ultimately, he could solve mysteries in the royal household as well. The most significant aspect of this story is that Sarabjaan does not claim to know everything. He is sharp, observant, quick witted and thus becomes successful on every occasion.

It is notable at this point, that songs and the impact they have on the listeners have been explored in several contemporary research works. For instance, David Cospertⁱⁱⁱ draws upon post-Structuralist narratology that offers “a rich theoretical vocabulary” for interpretative associations. Though Cospert’s article focuses mainly on musical performances, what is pertinent for us is the fact that folktales with songs sung by individuals of different age groups belonging to different generations and situated in different temporal and immediate contexts generate newer hermeneutic experiential dimensions which were considered necessary by Assamese society and culture and that is why the songs in folktales still remain integral.

4. **Songs as carriers of the theme/s:** This is one of the most elementary purposes of the use of songs in a folktale in Assamese. There is a simple tale titled Dhora Kauri aru Tipasi Charai: the story of a greedy and crooked Crow that wants to eat a small bird, Tipasi Charai. To thwart the attempt of the Crow, the Tipasi sends it to wash its dirty beak before eating. A chain of events happens when the Crow tries to request others to help it wash its beak. A song in a sequence is used while the Crow first goes to the sea and requests for water, the sea asks for a pot to give water and hence the Crow goes to a potter, then to Earth, to a bull, to a dog, to a cow, to Grass, to the blacksmith, and finally to a woman who provides it with fire. While carrying the fire the Crow catches fire and drowns itself in the sea to death. Right from the Crow’s visit to sea, all through the tale the same song is used with additions of stanzas sequentially narrating the story’s progress. It is noticeable that this folktale exhibits the close interconnection of various workplaces and activities that a child needs to understand and practice, for a smoother future life. This connectivity is central to any social and cultural existence. Significantly, amiable nature, good behaviour and helpfulness is shown in this story to be inherently good, something that does not lead to any regrettable consequences, or rather leading to the culmination/destruction of the evil in a natural but inevitable manner. Folktales have a very significant position in Assamese culture, so much so that they are termed “Sadhu-kotha”, i.e., good or ideal discourses of the sages. In addition to this, Bezbaroa^{iv} highlights another aspect of community living while he names his compilation of Assamese folktales “Burhi Aair Sadhu” – tales of the grandmother. The unique bonding that the grandparents have with their grandchildren in a joint household provides the much-needed space for sharing of wisdom, experiences and tradition and here tales with

songs play a wonderfully successful role as the transmitter. As far as this particular story is concerned, the basic simplicity of the story line embedded in the song is made easier to remember and recite as a cultural practice. Thus, the moral – that avarice in itself is the greatest enemy – gets imprinted in the young minds.

It is important also to note that the stereotypical notions regarding a crow that is asserted in the above-mentioned folktale is countered in another folktale named “Kanchoni”. The Crow here becomes the messenger who comes and draws the protagonist Kanchoni’s attention to its blood strewn beaks. The Crow speaks to her in songs and she also responds in songs. In fact, what follows is depicted in an unforgettably pictorial way – on learning about the impending doom of her beloved husband in the cruel order of a jealous king, while Kanchoni runs through a paddy field to reach the court where the husband is about to die, the husband sings to urge her not to venture out through the paddy fields as the sharp edges of the rice leaves would cut her soft and beautiful skin. This is an intensely passionate moment made possible only through the timely information of the benevolent Crow.

In an interesting article, Sudeshna Roy explores the possibility of a “Euroamerican ideology at play in texts and illustrations appearing in U.S. children’s literature about India.”^v Roy highlights, there are some significant consequences of this. According to her, even author publishers are facing obstacles while trying for the creation of a space to incorporate themes, notions, ideas, symbols that do not fit into the conventional and the West accepted ones. Edward Said still remains pertinent in this kind of a context. Nonetheless, the problem does not persist only in the United States. Academia as well as global societies need to open up to diversities that abound in various parts of the world, including nooks and corners of India. Stereotypical notions abound in India as well, with regional stereotypes such as the ones regarding its north eastern regions. Homogenization – cultural and otherwise – are still underway, in spite of attempts for alterations. Subtle power equations play significant roles in academic spaces that need to be opened up further for new explorations of tales, community good practices, habits, community consciousness and so on. Assam is unique in the north east because of its close connection to the so-called mainland as much as to the local, aboriginal pockets of culture. Folktales therefore, serve as a huge repertoire of this uniqueness.

5. **Song as the saviour:** Here we get a considerable number of folktales using songs in widely different contexts, but serving the purpose of leading to the denouement from the climax. A good instance of that is the widely popular folktale titled “Burha Burhi aru Siyal”. Here an aged couple uses songs as secret messages first to kill the foxes that won their faith initially and later on create havoc in their farm. There are two climax points in the tale – the first one is when the aged couple communicates successfully to each other and kills almost the whole skulk of foxes. However, as a retaliative measure when the foxes attempt at killing the aged woman finding her alone on the way home, she starts singing. This time the song is repeated so long as it sends an SOS signal to her pet dogs and they come for her rescue. While the difference of the songs in content, style and delivery makes them interesting, they also foreground the necessity of smart behaviour and quick wittedness as life skills to be learnt. To eager young enthusiasts, folktales of this kind serve as an initiative exemplar for a successful, practical social existence.

Tadesse Jaleta Jirata^{vi} focuses on the universal characteristics of folktales before establishing the performative aspect of folktales that children carry forward in the Ethiopian context. I would like to draw a similarity line by highlighting the “navigating” aspect of folktales that I focused so far. Assamese folktales consider children as the primary listener receptors as well interpreters. The story line is narrated and reiterated through the songs in a performative manner, in which the children in their early childhood years along with grandparents in their late adulthood years participate equally enthusiastically. Orality and transmission through enactment make it possible for a child to hear, imagine, sing, experience or may be realise the possibility of a world which demand amiability, sincerity, smartness, practicality and even after that tragedy might befall on anyone. Thus, they carry a strong yet necessary message for future struggles waiting for anyone in adulthood. It is not just the

human world that these tales encompass, it is rather a realization of a much larger interdependent world with animals and nature standing side by side with the human beings. Communication is exhibited in these folktales to be effortlessly possible with the animate and inanimate world surrounding us, hermeneutic connections can be established, human values that vanish from the human world get replicated in the animal world and vice versa.

Songs, as has been elaborated are inextricably interwoven in this process of understanding and growing up. They establish a connection immediately with the heart. This connection gets strengthened throughout life as a person passes through various problems and crisis situations at the personal or social level. This is what has made academia come back to folktales with different theoretical tools, as exemplified by Gencarella. Whether it is a Marxist or ecocritical, narratological or neo historical, feminist or postcolonial – all perspectives finally accept that folktales and folksongs transcend space and time to establish an emotive connection with people. More research from diverse cultural contexts will ultimately help the technology-tired humanity start a step afresh.

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