

# Social History and Folktales: A Study of the Socio-Cultural Pictures in the Folklife Represented in the Assamese Folktales in *Burhi Āir Sādhū*

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## Abstract

*Burhi Āir Sādhū*, published in the year 1911 is a priceless collection of Assamese folktales. The tales in this book present socio-cultural pictures involuntarily portrayed by Lakshmināth Bezbaroã, the cultural luminary of Assam who has retold the tales in his characteristic style of narration. Folktales, orally transmitted from one generation to the other, are valuable not only for the tapestry of folklife but also for the historical information of a primitive period they carry within them. For this reason Bezbaroã's effort in preserving the tales is truly honourable. The Assamese Sādhukathā, as traditional oral narratives are called in the language, offer a clue, like most folktales, to the background of certain people of a community, amounting to a cultural history. The present paper attempts at a partly analytical and a partly descriptive study of select tales in the said book, to arrive at information about the folklife in the tales that speaks of a past age. Within the culture complex of the region represented in the tales, the study also examines the prominent characters which are particularly noteworthy in the present socio-cultural study that seeks to capture the sentiments, the attitudes, the practices and the beliefs within different segments of the society.

**Keywords:** Assamese, Assamese folk literature, culture, folklife, folklore, folktales, Lakshmināth Bezbaroã, oral narratives, Sādhukathā, tradition

## Introduction

Lakshmināth Bezbaroã compiled thirty Assamese folktales and retold them in his distinctive blend of lucid humorous and satirical style of narration in *Burhi Āir Sādhū*, translated into English as *Grandma's Tales* and *Old Mother's Wise Tales*. A good number of unrecorded tales have now perished with time and Bezbaroã writes in the Introduction to the book, he had to seek the tales he has retold, from several people. It was a remarkable contribution by this cultural luminary to Assamese literature and culture particularly as folktales are orally born and transmitted; and very few scholars in India were involved in the priceless but arduous task of gathering, retelling and publishing folktales during his time. Bezbaroã was one of the commendable forces behind the Assamese literary and linguistic revival in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His said book and its tales are admired and celebrated even after a hundred years and a decade of its publication in 1911. He followed it with the publication of another collection of folktales entitled *Kokā Deutā Āru Nāti Lorā* (1912).

The customary folklife of a society, anywhere in the world, finds itself represented in folktales originating there. That is the reason why folktales possess socio-cultural value. In this sense *Burhi Āir Sādhū* is a precious socio-cultural document. In the Assamese language folktales are called Sādhukathā, a term which embraces within its definition the essence and implication of a fable, a legend, a fairy tale, a mythological tale and the folktale in general. At several points in history numerous tales have initiated from the mouths of those residing in the villages of Assam. They have thence travelled to the coming generations, using the human mouth as a vehicle. The tapestry of folklife involuntarily permeated within the tales by the teller calls for a serious study to arrive at historical information of a primitive period. This is more significant because Assam is an ethnically and religiously vibrant state in the Indian subcontinent.

### Review of Literature

Martha C. Sims and Martine Stephens in the book *Living Folklore* remind that folktales, as any folklore, carry informal communication about behaviors and rituals of people. The authors further observe that the knowledge gathered from folklore can help preserve a cultural history (1-24).

Jack Zipes in *Breaking the Magic Spell: Radical Theories of Folk and Fairy Tales* writes that in the folktale, which is an oral narrative form, the non-literate or literate people express the manner in which they “perceived or perceive nature”. The author refers to August Nistchke who, according to him, helped to reveal how the tales could be the vehicle for carrying knowledge of the social order in some time in history (22-24).

Mira Pakrasi lays emphasis in *Folk Tales of Assam* on the value of folktales in offering a clue to the background of certain people. Pakrasi highlights that folktales have a valid connection with aspects of social life. Reiterating the presence of social pictures in folktales she says that folktales are not simply fantastic tales from human imagination, for the sake of a moral lesson; rather, they are about the life of common people in a primitive point in history:

“The folktales are woven round them and whether fantastic or with a moral undertone they only reflect the daily chores, tears and joys of the common man” (7)

In *Asamer Loksanskriti* Jogesh Das observes that the Assamese folktales called Sādhukathā are purely Assamese in thought and setting. Besides, he says, the tales present rural characters and their superstitions, imaginations, sentiments and simple wisdom in the diction of the local folk.

Prapulladatta Goswami says in *Asamiyā Jana Sāhitya* that folktales may have religious pictures and magical-supernatural events and are filled with the luxury of the imagination, meant particularly for the entertainment of children, yet they are priceless because the tales generally speak of a past age.

In *Asamar Loka Sanskritir Ruprekḥā* Umesh Chetia identifies that only a few scholars have involved themselves in the task of preserving folktales. He highlights the fact that in folktales or Sādhukathā the mark of the manners, the customs and rituals, the thoughts and imaginations of the people of all classes of a community remain indelibly present.

Maheswar Neog speaks of socio-cultural pictures in folktales in *Asamiyā Sāhityar Ruprekḥā*. The tales, he tells us, express the simple faith and perceptions of man; and the tendencies of an unsophisticated society can also be understood from them. Neog mentions of the old couple, the Brahmin and the servant, the king and the minister, the night-blind son-in-law, the old man who settled marriages and the clever character of quick-wit as some of the character ‘types’ found generally in Sādhukathā .

### Materials and Methodology

The research is partly analytical and partly descriptive. The primary data is based on the folktales in the book *Burhi Āir Sādhu*, which are closely analyzed. The English translation of *Burhi Āir Sādhu, Grandma’s Tales* by Pallavi Das; and *Folk-Tales of Assam* by J. Barooah have been considered. Apart from this, encyclopedia and books on folklore and on the value and classification of folktales and specific books, scholarly articles and research works on Lakshmināth Bezbaroā, on Assamese Sādhukathā and on the history, literature, folklife and folk culture of Assam serve as secondary sources for the research.

### Discussion

Within oral folk narratives folktale is a sub-set. There is no doubt that folktales are entertaining—at least for the reason that the tales primarily originated for amusement. An old man or an old lady would gather a few children or young folk in some village on a winter day or a summer evening and recount a narrative heard somewhere or specifically composed to suit the expectations of the audience. Yet, entertainment is not the only motive in the telling of the tales. Folktales have the purpose of imparting cultural values, social norms and traditional practices and moral lessons. This is what studies have unearthed. Hence folktales are valuable as folklore, which means the knowledge about a folk. Like folk songs, folktales are situated within verbal folklore. The tales inform us because they portray the folklife of a community. Very simply, folklife is about a group of people and what they traditionally do within their culture.

We agree with Sims and Stephens who say that folklore “is informally learned, unofficial knowledge about the world, ourselves, our communities, our beliefs, our cultures and our traditions” (8). The folktales are precious for the unofficial knowledge they carry about beliefs, rituals, practices, manners of a community. This is true about the Assamese Sādhukathā compiled in *Burhi Āir Sādhu* by Lakshmināth Bezbaroā . We find in them pictures of folklife which have socio-cultural significance. A primitive cultural history, which was otherwise unrecorded, is indicated in the oral tales. A scientific study of folktales has followed globally from the initial inspiration by Johann Gottfried Von Herder in the eighteenth century in “Collection of Popular Songs”— since researchers understood their value. At least in India, however, studies in this sphere have started late and have been slow and sparse. As Bezbaroā recognizes in his Introduction to *Burhi Āir Sādhu* , scholars in Germany such as Herder established the true value of folktales that been might have been simply sidelined as trivial and immature stories (*Grandma’s tales*).

Scholars like Arthur L. Campa consider that folktales are not removed from history as they are often thought to be. As they inform us, history has a definite and valid connection with folklore. Tellers, in the mouths of whom folktales are born, have a social function as historians have— because they too help record the past by

recounting past events. Research in the area of folktales can, hence, lead to significant outcomes. Campa even says:

“Along with the accounts of Herodotus, the stories, ballads and epics of the past continue to provide us with the record of man before the art of history developed into the present form.” (1)

*Burhi Āir Sādhū* contains thirty Sādhukathā with significant social implications. Some outstanding tales in the book are “Ou-Princess”, “Tejeemola”, “Tula and Teja”, “Champawati”, “Paanesoi”, “Lotkon” and “Kanchanee” among others. We learn of some ancient time, about characters in different social segments from the merchant, to the king, to the Brahmins, the women, the farmer, the wise old man, the thief and several others in the folklife they populated; and we know about the manners, behaviours, attitudes, practices, beliefs and their ways of life informed informally. A study of the Sādhukathā is, thus, crucial to comprehend and acknowledge the people, their traditions and their culture in a community.

The first tale, “The Tale of the Cat’s Daughters” has a merchant who is disregarding of women. This attitude is reflected in the way he takes off a girl from the river-side without seeking consent from her. A patriarchal mindset seems evident in the merchant’s action of keeping the girl as his third wife. The practice of polygamy among merchants is also notable here. The merchant was a respectable individual in the social set-up particularly by the dint of his affluence; and so it appears that he could exercise a sort of dominion over women without having to face objection. In another tale “Ou Princess” the king, however, sends a proposal to the girl’s family when seeking her for the prince. The king could have used the royal power in such a situation and could demand any girl to be his daughter-in-law; but he did not do so. This attitude and practice is remarkable and conforms to a common pan-Indian cultural custom.

“Tejeemola” features an evil and greedy stepmother, most often found in fairy tales. This heartless woman sets up and traps her eponymous stepdaughter in a false circumstance and as punishment pounds her hands and feet and finally her head in the traditional rice pounder called ‘dhekee’ in Assamese, thus killing her. This cruel act perhaps can never be justified or generalized; but an analysis in the patriarchal domain will show the stepmother’s loveless existence and ignored position in the family compared to the love showered upon the stepdaughter by the father, which could have ignited an inhuman jealousy within her. The tale further shows the use of magic by the father in turning his daughter into a bird and then transforming her back to human form. During an ancient time magical enchantment or transformation was practised and performed in Assam.

In “Fortune Teller” a young man suddenly becomes known as a fortune teller following his clever conjecture in affirming a fact. This tale recognizes the popularity of individuals in the past who could predict future events or ascertain the location of lost objects. This accidental fortune teller in the tale is however lucky in establishing the truth of several subsequent guesses and is rewarded by the king. In the tale titled “A Strong Man” we identify another facet of the king when he announces a reward for anyone succeeding in an astounding challenge. The task is to kill a giant, fierce wild elephant. When this is accomplished however, the hero is made to perform two more feats of killing a tiger and overcoming a strong man. The champion is rewarded with a lot of riches by the king.

“The Tale of the Kite’s Daughter” has one more overbearing merchant carrying out polygamy by marrying and keeping a beautiful young girl even after having seven wives already. Through such tales the author probably wished to emphasize on the objectification of women by affluent and honourable men who used women simply for sexual gratification. The particular tales also inform about the damaging consequences of loving the new young wife more and paying no attention to the previous wives. That is why the seven wives sell the young wife to a trader. Further we find the merchants deciding on the punishments themselves, for being disloyal and brutal, without consulting or approaching an established legal authority for trial. Detrimental result of polygamy continues in “Tula and Teja” with the similar factor of affluence being the cause. A rich farmer marries twice and keeps one wife with him as his favourite and the other is ignored and separately kept alone. When the husband spends some time with the neglected wife, the favourite one becomes jealous. Marital disharmony because of polygamy is reiterated here. The latter gets the former woman killed. Use of magic is also brought in again in the tale.

Traditional Assamese food item known as pitha is included in “Teekhor and Suti Bai” and readers know about the ingredients namely rice flour and molasses required to prepare the item and that oil is needed to fry the same. This delicacy is particularly made by the Assamese on the occasion of the community cultural festival Bihu. The case of two wives of a man and unhappiness in the family is a theme of “Champawati”. The neglected wife’s eponymous daughter is married to a serpent after which she becomes rich and the snake turns to a handsome young man. When the jealous favourite wife tries the same, her daughter is swallowed by the other snake.

### Conclusion

Folktales incorporate the consciousness of the masses. The Assamese Sādhukathā represent social reality, preserving the attitudes and practices in the folklife of ancient Assam, which are collectively established by them. *Burhi Āir Sādhu* by Lakshmināth Bezbaroã contains not only an assortment of folktales which were generated way back in time but as a social document the book is significant because folktales provide materials for appropriate historical understanding:

“mature minds derive ideas on different social manners from the folk tales. Sādhukathā are created based on social metaphors and through them social life gets reflected” (Sarma, 54).

The thirty folktales in *Burhi Āir Sādhu* are enriched with pictures of socio-cultural value and the characters in them call for a study within the culture complex of the region. We may accentuate what Sims and Stephens said that “the expressions, customs and objects folklorists study do not exist in a vacuum, apart from the people who create and share them” (11).

When we look closely at the merchants we find the prosperous men were made vain and powerful by their wealth and they freely practised polygamy. They travelled long distances for trade and could go the extent of punishing their wives without trial, even putting them to death, when they were found guilty of deception or a crime. The monarchical rule was prevalent at that time and the king was an interesting figure remarkable for

his wilfulness and, as in many tales, generosity as well. The king enjoyed rewarding an individual for an exceptional skill or an outstanding feat.

Among the women Bezbaroã portrays the malicious stepmother and the feeble stepdaughter; the favourite wife and the neglected wife and the helpless young wife chosen by a disregarding man in the practice of multiple marriages. If one woman became the neglected figure in the patriarchal domain, another could be a chosen object of rich men, valued for her beauty and expected to satisfy their sexual desire.

We further understand the esteem of a fortune-teller in the society who was even rewarded by the king if he could prove his capacity. This apart, a sweet delicacy, which is a cultural symbol in the ritualistic preparation during Assam's cultural festival Bihu, is also introduced. Interestingly, then, an in-depth analysis of the socio-cultural pictures in the folklife portrayed in the Sãdhu-Kathã offers details about the background of a community of people. As Pakrasi says, "The elemental moorings that are the root of human society are sought to be illustrated in folktales." (10) If the folktales are not researched for such a wealth of information, the particular truths would be left unidentified.

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