PREFACE

The concept of studying narrative structures of oral narratives, particularly folktales, initiated by Shklovskij, Volkov, Nikiforov, Veselovskij and many others and blossomed at the hands of Vladimir Propp in Russia, is now nearly one hundred years old. Vladimir Propp with his epoch making work ‘Morphology of the Folktale’ in 1928 heralded a new era in the study of oral narratives and revolutionized the entire gamut of folktale study. He began his theory of investigation with an attack on Aarne’s taxonomy of folktales (1910) in particular and on the Historical Geographic method in general. Unfortunately, this big leap in folkloristics from historical to descriptive and from diachronic to synchronic era of analysis and study was not seriously felt even in Russia. Besides other reasons, one important reason of this was that folklore studies in all over the world was not prepared to receive the benefits of this big leap, and had to wait for thirty years till 1958, when Propp’s ‘Morphology’ was translated. Structural analysis has not only highly influenced folklore studies, but also literary theory and other related areas.

The narrative world of Assamese folktales is not fully explored except a few attempts, although collection of Assamese tales began in the beginning of the twentieth century by collectors like great nationalist Lakshminath Bezbaroa. After Prafulladatta Goswami’s typological study of Assamese tales (1960), no full length analytical or interpretative study of Assamese folktales has been done.

My first encounter with structural analysis was when I was introduced to it in my theory classes while pursuing M. Phil course in Folklore in Gauhati University. The wonderful and bewildering world of folktales...
and the approach of structural analysis to study these fascinated me so much that it resulted to my working on twenty Assamese wonder tales in the Proppian scheme of analysis and the examination of the cross-cultural validity of this scheme (1999). This was my first experiment with structural analysis and the work was for the M. Phil degree as well as fulfilment of my desire to study Assamese wonder tales in the Proppian method of structural analysis. The work was carried out under the scholarly supervision of my teacher, Dr. Kishore Kumar Bhattacharjee, Head of the Department, who is the supervisor of the present work also. The results of the work show to what extent applicability, feasibility and cross-cultural validity of Proppian method of analysis is valid in the context of Assamese wonder tales.

The success of this maiden venture encouraged me to undertake a full length structural study of Assamese folktales by following Proppian scheme and the modifications and developments of this by later scholars like Bremond and Apo. The main reason of this endeavour is to carry out a full length analytical study of Assamese folktales—their themes, plots and characters. The study has mainly remained confined to the printed / published materials.

The identification of structural patterning of a narrative genre is no easy task and call for careful and meticulous planning of the research model. After going through the major collections of Assamese tales, I found the number of printed / published wonder tales to be much more than the other sub genres. I zeroed down on wonder tales and also on a few tales of some other sub-genres like religious tales, novellas, and tales of the stupid ogre having close proximity with this sub-genre.

The Aarne-Thompson tale-type numbers of the Assamese tales analysed in this work have been identified as far as possible. However, it has been observed that in some cases, the AT type numbers of Assamese tales do not match exactly. Sometimes, a tale is a combination of more
than one types.

In identifying and enumerating the 'functions' while analysing the Assamese tales, it has been observed that in many cases the exact form of a function as enumerated by Propp in his 'Morphology' could not be discerned in the Assamese tales. In such cases, the nearest/closest form of a function has been identified.

An appendix has been included in the thesis to refer the tales in the conclusion. In the body of the thesis, tales have been separately serialised in different patterns. The comprehensive list included in the appendix will be useful for locating a tale and its analysis in the thesis.

In the course of my adventures through the bewildering world of Assamese folktales, many new ideas stimulating impulses for text and discourse analysis and interpretation of folktales appeared in the horizon. The credit of inducing them to me goes to my supervisor, who inspired this entire work. Without his scholarly cooperation this voyage would have not ended. This is the privilege of working under this silent scholar. I express my hearty gratitude to him.

I express my deepest gratitude to Prof. A. C. Bhagabati, former Vice-Chancellor, Arunachal University, for the constant encouragement and inspiration received from him in completing this work. I also express my gratitude to Prof. Birendranath Datta, an eminent folklorist himself and presently President, 'Asom Sahitya Sabha' for encouraging me to complete this work. I am equally grateful to Prof. N. C. Sarma, Dr. Anil Boro and Dr. Dipankar Maral for the constant encouragement received from them in this regard.

I express my gratitude to Prof. C. J. Thomas, Deputy Director, ICSSR, NE Centre, Shillong and Prof. Anjan Ghosh, Joint Director, ICSSR, Eastern Region, Kolkata, for sanctioning me a travel grant to do library works in the National Library, Kolkata. I also express my thanks to Dr. Ramani Barman, Joint Registrar, Gauhati University for making me aware
of the ICSSR grant. I express my thankfulness to the Librarian and staff of the National Library, Kolkata, for extending all possible helps to me while doing the library works there.

I must acknowledge the encouragements and inspirations that I received from my colleagues Dr. Rabin Sarma and Sri Gopal Barman in completing this work. I thank Sri Rabindra Nath Sarma, Research Scholar in the Department for his help. I thank Sri Dilip Deka and Sri Mahendra Baishya of the Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, for helping me in various ways, particularly in doing the library works in the Departmental Library.

I express my thankfulness to my brother in law, Sri Pratap Das for his encouragement and help, particularly in providing me with some rare books. I have no word to express my thanks to my wife, Meera and son Bitopan, without whose constant cooperation and help, this work would have never been completed.

Last of all, I offer my gratitude to the tale collectors from whose collections I have collected the data for my work. I am also equally beholden to all authors, from whom I have quoted and without the benefit of whose experience, my work would not have progressed at all.

I also express my thanks to Mr. Sajal Kumar Saha, Blaze Computer Systems, Panbazar, Guwahati, for composing this thesis in time.

Guwahati
12 January 2004

Mrinal Medhi