CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

THE STUDY OF FOLKTALES

Folktale is a major genre of folklore. It is a kind of traditional prose narrative, which come either orally or in writing from generation to generation. Folklorist Max Lütli singles out five stylistic features of a folktale. John D. Niles, who translated Lütli's 'The European Folktale : Form and Nature' rendered the features as — "one dimensionality, depthlessness, abstract style, isolation and universal connection, sublimation and all inclusiveness — unique to and characteristic of the folktale and often in contrast to the style of the legend" (Bendix 1983:311).

Considering the availability of written fairytales Bacchilega says, "As a hybrid or transitional genre, the fairy tale also magically grants writers/tellers and readers/listeners access to the collective, if fictionalized past of social communing , and access that allows for an apparently limitless highly idiosyncratic recreation of that 'Once there was''(Bacchilega 1997).
Before the beginning of systematic study and collection of the tales, some interested persons collected some tales from different parts of the world. German folklorist Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm first systematically collected folktales both from the tellings of oral poets and from early literary collections and compiled them as *Kinder-Und Hausmärchen* in two volumes (1812-14). After them, many other scholars from Russia, Norway, Denmark, Bohemia, Hungary, Greece, Albania, Romania, Sicily and France also collected their household tales throughout the nineteenth century. After Grimm brothers, scholars like Max Müller (1823-1900), Edward B. Tylor (1832-1912), Finnish folklorist Kaarle Krohn and Antti Aarne (1865-1925), American scholar Stith Thompson and many others from different parts of the world contributed to the study of folktales. But these studies were mainly concerned with texts of the tales.

In the following years the orientation changed. The life of the storyteller, her personality, tradition and surroundings of the storyteller’s society shape the telling and function of a tale. So the study of storyteller’s life, his tradition and society is very important in folktale study. The proponents of a new Russian school of folktale switched their interest from the tale texts to the creativity of the storytellers and a new trend started in European folktale studies. Some scholars in Germany and in Hungary established methods
for the study of the role of personality and society in folktale performance during the thirties and forties of this century (Degh 1972:57).

Personality of the tellers plays a major role in choosing the tales. So the personality of the tellers and narrators artistry is examined in folktale research in recent times. Moreover, the storytellers cultural context, performance and the response of the audience are also considered important in contemporary folktale studies.

The storyteller's tale repertoire, creativity and meaning of the tales are also studied now by different scholars of the world. Performance Schools study the total performance. In India, Kirin Narayan gives emphasis on the art of storytelling in her book *Mondays on the Dark Night of the Moon* (1997). Her early insight expanded into 'performance - oriented approach' elegantly encapsulated in Richard Bauman's verbal Art as performance. The performance approach stresses that folklore texts emerge through creative performance in specific, situated socio-cultural contexts (Narayan 1997: 210).

**THE REPERTIORE STUDY**

Repertoire includes what a person has performed in course of his life to one or more types of audience. A repertoire of a person may
change over time and space (Kvideland 1993:106). A repertoire is a selected and memorised knowledge of a bearer of tradition that she can recall at any time and is prepared to give to any other people. As a tradition bearer, an individual selects and absorbs the traditions from her culture and society. So the social knowledge which is continued from generation to generation is known from individual repertoire analysis. Besides that repertoire study can bring into light various specialists of a community. Linda Dégh says that a good tellers knows at least parts tales. Later it has been argued that there is no reason for depending on outstanding storytellers at the cost of popular tradition and number of items in a repertoire can not be a criteria for tellers (Ibid:108-9).

The tradition is transmitted and formed by individuals. So the individual talent plays a great role to carry the tradition. The repertoire study can make it easy to study the talent and personality of an individual. Besides that repertoire analysis clarifies the relationship between individual and the society.

Russian folklorist Mark Azadovskii, in his classic monograph, A Siberian Tale Teller makes clear about the "concepts of what folklorists call repertoire, and discussions of the relationship between narrators' and
singers' repertoires and their life histories, had become common in the research and writing of Russian folklorists by the mid 1920s" [Azadovskii (1926) 1-14, cited by Georges 1994. 315].

It was Richard Dorson who first recorded tale repertoires from American narrators (Dégh 1995:58). Afterwards, scholars gave emphasis to the study of repertoire and it is apparent almost everywhere. For instance, Finnish folklorist Juha Pentikäinen's Oral Repertoire and Worldview (1978) studied the memorised knowledge of folklore of Mrs. Marina Takalo. In this book Pentikäinen studied one Karelian woman's life history, her repertoire of folklore and her worldview. Similarly, folklorist Linda Degh’s Folktales and Society (1969) made East European Literature on tellers available to English readers while also providing portraits of Hungarian storytellers from her own field research (Narayan 1997.210).


Pentikainen says, "In repertoire research individuals are examined as members of their cultures, subcultures or microcultures, not as human
types, some sort of model or ideal personalities, but as idiosyncratic representatives of their cultures" [Pentikäinen 1987 (1978): 13]

THE ROLE OF WOMEN IN STORYTELLING

The women have a great role in carrying the tales as a teller. "In addition to pure entertainment, stimulating laughter, excitement, emotion or fright, women's stories discipline and socialize children and teach girls proper behaviour in preparation for future life roles as well as comfort adult women in their daily domestic drudgery" (Dégh 1995 : 62). In the midst of their different kinds of domestic work and in their leisure time they tell the tales to others. By telling the tale they can give pure entertainment to delight of the listeners. In the time of working, to destroy their aversion for work also they tell the tales. Especially, to lull the children, women tell tales as a mother or grandmother. Kirin Narayan writes about importance of studying forms popular among women. Narayan writes (1997:211), "In particular I inspired by work that emphasized the value of recording the often silenced voices of women in different societies, the power of cultural forms in shaping gendered subjectivities, the growing awareness that gender relations are themselves intersected by other relations of power, and the strategy of drawing on personal experience to think theoretically." To present the issue
in more simple terms, it can be mentioned that folklorists have been aware of women-centered tale since sometime (e.g. Ramanujan 1991).

In 1991, as a supplement to Another Hermony another path breaking book on South Asia recognised the role of gender and power. The name of the book is Gender, Genre, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions. The book argues that text and performance of folklore project alternative voices that is feminine against the masculine or lower caste against the upper caste. Ramanujan showed separation and suffering, and counter tales about chastity are found in women’s tale. He also told recounting of personal tales by the heroine leads to the resolution of a problem.

It is said, "...women’s personal narrative may be seen to share the general function of recapitulation in fictional narratives; the construct of a self." The book observes that tales and personal narratives overlap in the South Asian context combining fantasy and reality. The most interesting observation of Ramanujan has been interpreted as follows: “Thus normative biological categories such as gender and culturally constructed such as genre are not as taxonomically distinct as one might presume for as Ramanujan reminds us in his contribution ‘Genders are Genres’. (Appadurai et.al. 1991.7-9).
CREATIVITY OF STORYTELLERS AND MEANING

The issue of tradition and creativity is a new area in the folklore, which was raised since the early part of the 20th century. Gradually individual idiosyncratic behaviour and creative expressions became problems of enquiry in Hungarian and Finish research. Bell discusses Roger D. Abrahams concerns for giving educate importance to the cultural categories of creativity. He also analysed repertoires and personalities of two elderly singers. (Bell Patricia. P. 136-137). Roger D. Abrahams in his study of Crowley's study said that successful teller not only knows the pattern of narrative but also acceptation patterns of the audience (Abrahams 1967:309).

To please the audience, storytellers create some new elements in a tale. Folklorist Linda Dégh explores what roles tradition, milieu and teller's personality- the three creative factors — play in the life of the marchen (Dégh 1995:36). The creativity of the narrators help to choose the pieces of their repertoire. personal characteristics and personal style of the storytellers also influence the telling. So the creative role of a storyteller is very important.

Deniel J. Crowley (1962:44) writes that a creative teller change his tale and artistry is the skill of everyday life and not any mysterious power.

Every tale has outer and inner, the two meaning, "Educators and child psychologists recognised overt and covert meanings of tales and
their beneficial effects on personality development (Bühler and Bilz 1961; Von Franz 1972; Piaget 1929, Bettelhein 1976) and encouraged storytelling in public schools and at home (Degh 1995). Besides that every tale has a meaning and significance to the tellers for themselves. The storyteller and audience find meaning of tale in the context of their life and tales can play significant role in the life of the people. In folklore studies, the exploration of meaning involves diverse approaches running from completely analytical commentaries to the peoples' explanation. The interpretations given by the storyteller and the listener can help to illuminate a text.

**AIM OF THE STUDY**

Scholars recognise the importance of the teller, the context, performance and audience in folklore studies. In Assam, the study of folktale has so far broadly remained either confined to collection of texts or classification of the collected material notwithstanding certain analytical attempts. Therefore, attention could not be given to the stylistic features and meaning in Assamese folktales. This study is actually an endeavour for collection from individuals living in a society and their interpretation. In this study, repertoires of three women storytellers were observed and examined in sociological context.
Here an attempt is made to study 'the act and art of storytelling' in the context of Assamese society. The study has focused certain questions as: what is the size of individual tellers repertoire, what do the tales mean to the tellers and how life history of performers is related meaning? The issue of creativity is examined in personal background of the tellers. Special efforts are given to understand creative aspects of storytelling and to find the meaning of the tales.

The meaning of tales is connected with the life and culture of the storyteller and the audience. So the meanings of the tales, and its relation with the teller and the listener are investigated.

SCOPE OF THE STUDY

In this study, repertoires of three women storytellers were collected. The emphasis has been given to the style of narration, storyteller's creativity and meaning of the tales. The texts of the tales have been understood in its context and from the experience in the field. Therefore, an idea was developed about the socio-cultural setting.

How the personal life history of the storytellers are related with the tales and how the teller and the audience create meanings by relating the world of folktales and real life has been focused in this study and therefore
the study is involved not only with examination of storytelling situations but also with the study of the personal and family life of the tellers and their life stories.

METHODOLOGY

The study of creativity and meaning was carried out mainly with the help of participant observation method. First, efforts were made to select three tellers from different places and two different castes of Assam representing two poles of the caste system. These castes are Brahmin and Kaivarta. Two Brahmin tellers from two different parts of Assam that is lower and upper Assam were selected. This was done to understand regional variation. The Kaivarta teller was selected to study inter-caste variation. Two tellers houses are located in a convenient distance. The existence of a storyteller near the house eased my work. Intimate relationship was developed with the tellers and their milieu. Data were collected through prolonged contact with the tellers. Necessary details of social contexts were collected by participant observation method and supplemented by interview data. Regular contact with the tellers as a family member helped me to understand their personal life to a great extent.
Tales were collected in the field by using a medium sized tape recorder. Some of the tales were directly written down in paper. Those tales were later shown to the tellers to get their approval. Tellers also showed their curiosity to hear what has been transcribed. Even they showed such interest in hearing recorded tales. Moreover, Lahari Hazarika the teller from Kaivarta caste who read upto M.V. School, insisted in giving the tales in writings. Though she narrated some of the written tales she made it a point to give tales in writing. It was possible to collect only four tales orally from her. It has been observed that there is not much differences between her written and oral tales, only in the written version her manarism is carefully edited.

The texts of the tales in the repertoires of the tellers were collected from different contexts. Biographical information about the tellers was obtained by using interview method and through collection of their personal stories in intimate sessions of interactions.

Data on creative aspects of telling were obtained from the observation of performance and aesthetic evaluation by the tellers and by interview method. Observation in several sessions of storytelling by the same teller was utilised to seek answers of intricate questions regarding variation
and creativity. For the analysis of creativity different telling situations and
the features of performance and people's commentaries were analysed.

For analysis of meaning, the technique of 'Oral Literary Criticism'
was given priority and used in developing analysis. The meaning was also
probed in the experiences of the tellers.