CHAPTER II
THE CONCEPT OF THE FOLKTALE AND ASSAMESE FOLKTALES

THE FOLKTALE

Folktale is a kind of traditional prose narrative which is generally handed down from generation to generation. But it 'need not always have been oral [Thompson 1977(1946).5]. It is found in written form also.

The tradition of telling a tale for pure entertainment and to the delight of the listeners is not new. Folklorist Linda Dégh says, "Narration is ageless. The impulse to tell a story and the need to listen to it have made narrative the natural companion of man throughout the history of civilization" (Dégh 1972 : 53).

Every tale tells about the human, their culture and their society. Folktale is a kind of prose narrative. Dégh says that any part of life history, from cradle to grave, including great turning points or insignificant details in family life, occupation, entertainment, celebration, religion, crisis, illness and travel may provide material for collaboration into a narrative (Dégh 1995. 73).
The tales have survived orally from generation to generation. "In all countries some persons in the community—usually old men or old women have been noted as competent narrators. Sometimes there have been young reconteurs too. They heard these tales in their childhood and they themselves told them to their grandchildren or other children" (Goswami 1980. XV).

Generally men's tales differ from the tales of women. It has been observed that in the traditional patriarchal society, men's stories focussed on experiences of men, whereas women's concerns were home bound-love, marriage family life (Dégh 1995.73).

An oral tale depends on the ability of the reconteur. The reconteur can maintain a vital form in a tale (Goswami 1980. XXII). Linda Dégh says, "The 'genuine' tale is the one told and listened to irrespective of its literary antecedents" (Dégh 1995. 269).

The character of a tale at a particular point of time depends no less upon the quality of the narrator and the social changes brought about by extraneous factors than upon its traditional form. It was observed by Franz Boas long back, "We find the cultural, formal background of the art of narrative of primitive people almost entirely determined by their present cultural state" (Boas 1948 : 497, cited by Goswami 1970 : 5-6).
A good self-contained tale has some characteristic features. Stith Thompson identified following features:

"(1) A tale does not begin with the most important part of the action and it does not end abruptly. There is a leisurely introduction; and the story proceeds beyond the climax to a point of rest or stability.

(2) Repetition is everywhere present, not only to give a story suspense but also to fill it out and afford it body.

(3) The characterization is simple. Only such qualities as directly affect the story one mentioned: no hint is given that the persons in the tale have any life outside.

(4) The plot is simple, never complex. One story is told at a time. The carrying along of two or more complex subplots is a sure sign of sophisticated literature.

(5) Everything is handled as simply as possible. Things of the same kind are described as nearly alike as possible, and no attempt is made to secure variety (Goswami 1970. 162-163).

CLASSIFICATION OF FOLKTALE AND ITS RELATED FORMS

Folktales can be classified into some divisions. Finnish folklorist Anti Aarne classified them into three broad divisions- (i) Animal tale (ii) General folktale and (iii) Trickster tale and Anecdotes in her famous book "Verzeichnis der Marchentypen (1910).
According to Aarne Thompson Type Index (1961) the folktales are classified as - Animal Tale (1-299); General folktale (300-1199); Magic and Fairy tale (300-749); Jokes and Humorous Tale (1200-1999); Formula tale (2000-2199) and Unclassified tale (2400-2499). This classification is based on subjectmatter and form.

Another early writer, Von der Leyen, distinguished two broad types of the oral tale sage and märchen. He says, "Generally we can say the sage is the simple picture, the märchen the complex one; that the sage aims at condensation and simplicity, the märchen at lengthening and expansion; that in the sage is developed instruction at the cost of narration and play, in the märchen narration and play at the cost of instruction" (Legen 1899. 87, cited by Kiefer 1947:16).

In Germany folktale is called 'märchen'. Märchen is the diminutive form of the old German 'mär'. Meaning of that is short story. In the English speaking world it was called and is still called, the magic tale, the fairy tale or sometimes the hero tale. The word 'märchen' was adapted from the kinder-and-Hausmärchen of the Grimm brothers (1812). It is the first story book published for scholarly purposes. "The Grimms and Later German folktale scholars used the word as an umbrella for all kinds of folktales" (Dégh 1972 : 62).
According to Dean Thompson 'Märchen' is a tale of some length involving a succession of motifs or episodes. It moves in an unreal world without definite locality or definite characters and is filled with the marvellous (Thompson 1946:8). Märchen and sage, these two are only broad divisions of oral tale, but myth is a one of the other varieties of tale. Thompson says that Myth is a tale laid in a world supposed to have preceded the present order. It tells a sacred being and of semi divine heroes and of the origin of all things, usually through the agency of these sacred beings. Myths are intimately connected with religious beliefs and practices of the people (Thompson 1946:9). Thompson takes the term folktale to cover all true oral tales as distinguished from such literary types as the fable, exempla, saints, legends and myth (Goswami 1970:83). He says, “As we use the term folktale we usually mean märchen and eliminate myths, sagen, fables, we mean prose fiction presenting its life primarily orally. We mean oral fiction” (Thompson 1946, cited by Goswami 1970:84).

FOLKTALE RESEARCH

The systematic study of these folktales has began in early nineteenth century. Before the beginning of systematic study and collection of the tales, some interested persons collected some tales from different parts
of the world. As for example, we can say about Gianbattista Basile's collection of fifty Neapolitan tales, *the Pentamerone* (1634 - 36), Charles Perrault's *Contes de ma Mère l'Oye* (1695-98), and the counters d'Aulnoy's *Contes des Fees* (1697-98). Through these and similar publications and the translated editions of the great oriental story books, *the Panchatantra, the Arabian Nights*, and the adaptation of the Aesopian fables folktales were popularized (Dégh 1972:54).

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). This work had a tremendous impact on the international folktale. They soon became the subject of folktale research. After them many other scholars from different countries of the world followed their example and presented the first national collections of their respective countries (Dégh 1972:54-55).

After Grimm brothers scholars like Max Müller (1823-1900), Edward B. Tylor (1832-1912), Theodor Benfey (1809-1881), Finnish folklorist Kaarle Krohn and Antti Aarne (1867-1925) studied folktales. American scholar Stith Thompson and many others from different parts of the world contributed to study of the tales. But these studies were mainly concerned with texts of the tales.
After World War II, the trend of folktale study has changed. Now it is not limited only to texts. The totality of cultural context, performance of the storytellers and the response of the audience are also considered important (Dégh 1972:58). A survey of the accomplishments of this trend is done by Linda Dégh. She states, about her own work "I prefer to view my work as ethnography: a narrator centered approach to narrative performance" (Dégh 1995:7).

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. The scholars as Friedrich Ranke, Julius Sechewietering and Gotfried Hensesen in Germany and Gyula Ortutay in Hungary established methods for the study of the role of personality and society in folktale performance during the thirties and forties of the last century (Dégh 1972:57).

Personality of the tellers plays a major role in choosing the tales. Telling a tale by an individual storyteller is a kind of reflection of his/her personality, tradition and society. By stating his aims Ortutay told, "It is the special tensions prevailing between the personality and the tradition preserved by the community that gives us the clue to an understanding of the essence of popular (folk) culture, and a one sided emphasis on any of the factors
may well lead us astray" (Ortutay 1972.226-227, cited by Dégh). German folklorist Julius Schewietering says that to understand folklore, as its forms, the way they function within the totality of life also must be studied (Dégh 1995.53). In *A Siberian Tale Teller*, the Russian folklorist Mark Azadovskii argued not just a narrator's personality, but also a narrator'sistry should be examined in folktale research (Narayan 1997.210). By that classic monograph Azadovskii makes clear about the "Concept of what folklorists call repertoire, and discussions of the relationships 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). The Finnish folklorist Juha Pentikäine's *Oral Repertoire and world view* ingeniously combined the study of one Karelian women's life history, her folklore repertoire and her worldview (Narayan 1997.210).

stresses that folklore texts emerge through creative performance in a specific, situated socio-cultural contexts (Narayan 1997:210).

'The Old Deccan Day' is the first collection of Indian folktales. The tales were collected by Merry Frere and published in 1868. It was followed in 1879 by M. Stokes. In that year he published another Indian Fairy tale collection. An another collection of folktale from Punjab published in 1884 by Flora Steel and R.C. Temple. With this humble beginning a tradition of folktale studies has continued in India. Besides the collection of the tales some analytical studies also have been attempted in this field in the last fifty years (Vidyarthi. 1978:201-202).

THE STUDY OF ASSAMESE FOLKTALES

The Meaning of the Assamese Term for Folktale

'Sadhukatha' is the Assamese term for a folktale. According to Lakshminath Bezbarua who is the pioneer of the study of folktale in Assam, 'Sadhukatha' is the word of saints. It is advice of virtuous people. In the past by these oral tales people taught moral lessons to their own children and to other people in Assam (Bezborua 1999; preface).
Folklorist Praphulladatta Goswami says, "Assamese for an oral tale is sâdhukathâ, usually derived from the sanskrit ‘sâdhu’, a merchant, and kathâ, a tale, meaning there by that the sâdhukathâ is a tale told by a wondering merchant. It is a generic term signifying anythig from a myth to a fable, though, of course, the term upâkhyâna, episode or sub-story, is some times use to refer to episodes in an epic like the Mahâbhârata or in some old purâna, for instance, the upâkhyâna of sâbitri" (Goswami 1970:80).

According to a literator of Assam Joge s Das, “Sâdhukathâ” is the Assamese equivalent of folktale. All kinds of folk stories like pure folktales, legends, myths, fables and parables are covered by the term Sâdukathâ, The word ‘sâdhu’ means ‘the righteous’; it is also same as saud or saudâgar, a merchant. So Sâdhukathâ means a moral story like as Aesop's fable or a biblical parable or a narrative of wonderful events by merchants who return home from abroad after a long stay in distant lands" (Das 1972: 123). Thus the term has an exalted status according to the cultural notion.

Collection of Assamese Folktales

Collection of Assamese folktales started in the beginning of the 20th century. G.A. Grierson's collection of Assamese tales in The Linguistic
Survey of India Vol-III (1903) and Benudhar Rajkhuwa's Assamese Demonology (1905) are two of the earliest collections of Assamese folktales in English (Goswami 1980: xix). In Assamese Lakshminath Bezbarua is the first collector of Assamese folktales. His first compilation of tale is Burhi Aai Sadhu, published in 1911. However two folktales are found in his short story book Sadhukathar Kuki, (1910). Most of the tales are short story in this collection. But some of them are folktales. Those are Mulâ Khowâ Burhâ and Gharpatâ Kakâ.

There are thirty folktales in Lakshminath Bezbarua's folktale collection Burhi Aâi Sâdhu (which is literally translated would mean tales of a grand mother). Bezbarua collected the folktales form different people of Assam and compiled it in 1911. He included the names of the persons from whom he collected tales and also wrote a few lines about folktale scholarship.

A prominent folklorist of Assam Birendranath Datta says, "Bezbaruah's Buri Aâir Sadhu (1911) deserves special attention not only because it represents the earliest attempt to collect and publish Assamese folktales but also because of the driving spirit behind it, viz. the emerging Assamese nationalistic fervour. The short preface of the book is strikingly knowledgeable in that it refers to the role of folklore in the nationalistic
upsurge in Europe and also to the contributions made in the field of folklore by such personalities as Herder, the brother Grimm, and Bopp" (Datta 2005:25).

Bezbarua's another folktale collection *Kakâdeutâ ãru Nâtilorâ* (The grandfather and the grandson) published in 1912. There are twenty nine folktales in this collection. These tales are written for the pleasure of the children and to arouse their curiosity. Another collection of folktales *Junukâ* of Bezbarua has published in 1913. This is the collection of eleven folktales. Four of them are narrated in verse form.

Some tales of *'Bhuri Āir Sâdhu'* were translated to English by J. Borrooah in 1915. He says, "I had intended these translations for the children and ‘grown up's of the English speaking world. My idea was to place our Assamese folktales before the world so that they might gain some knowledge about Assam" (Borrooah 1955 : 133). He says that folktales more than anything else reflects the mind of the people.

Bezborua’s daughter Aruna Devi Mukherjee has translated his *Kakadeuta aru Natilora* (Tale of a grandfather from Assam, 1955).

After Lakshminath Bezbarua Sarat ch. Goswami edited a collection of Assamese folktales *Asamiyâ Sâdhukathâ* in 1929. The stories of this collection was collected by Taranath Chakrabarty. There are eight
Assamese folktales in Asamiyâ Sâdhukathâ. At the same time another collection of folktale Sâdhur Bhorâl of Kumudeswar Borthakur was published in Assamese.

Trailokeswari Devi Baruani collected some other Assamese folktales in the books Sâdhukathâ and Sandhiyâr Sâduh, Sadhukatha is the collection of seventeen Assamese folktales and it has published in 1934. In Sandhiyâr Sâduh there are twenty two Assamese folktales. This collection was published in 1937.

By this way many other scholars collected some tales from different parts of Assam throughout the twentieth century and its study started in Assam. These tales are carried by both men and women folks as a teller and listener.

The women play an important role in telling the tales. But the collection of women's repertoire has not been attempted in Assam. Even in Burhi Âîr Sâduh (a very popular folktale collection in Assamese) most of the tales are collected from men storyteller. But from the title of the book we can surmise the popularity of women's stories in Assam.

Research on Assamese Folktales

Lakshminath Bezbarua is the pioneer of the scientific study of folktales in Assam. In the preface of Burhi Âîr Sâduh Bezbarua has said
about folktale and its importance in the society. He says that to know the
unwritten history of people folklore is as important as philology and mythology
(Bezbaruah 1999: Preface). Bezbaruah says about two types of folktales
in the book. One type is fictitious and another is moral tale. The moral tale
plays a major role to teach morality to the people.

Birinchi Kumar Baruah “Who played the pioneering role in
ushering in what may be called the truly ‘academic era’ of folklore studies
in this region” (Datta 2005. 27) says that folktale is a big branch of folk
literature. It comes orally from person-to-person, generation to generation
and one society to another (Baruah 1997. 52). He says, ‘Assamese folktale
is mainly animal, nature and trickster centered (Baruah 1997.53).

After Bezbarua the systematic study of Assamese folktale was
started by Praphulladatta Goswami. Goswami collected the tale texts and
classified and analysed them. *Asam Deshar Sādhu* is the first collection
of folktales of Praphulladatta Goswami; published in 1955. ‘Tales of Assam’
is one another collection of folktales collected by him, published in 1980.
Praphulladatta Goswami classified the Assamese tales into five broad types
as animal tales, supernatural tales, jokes or humorous tales, trickster tales
and cumulative tales (Goswami 1970.85 - 106).
Maheswar Neog says (in his 'Asamiya Sahityar Ruprekha') that every good story has a good instruction on morality (Neog 1986:30). After P. Goswami's study some attempts have been made to interpret tales by different scholars of Assam. N.C. Sarma has collected new tales from Assam and explained them (Sarma, 2003). K. Bhattacharjee has studied the role of gender and psychological interpretation of tales (Bhattacharjee, 1999). M. Medhi has interpreted Assamese wonder tales applying Propp's method (Medhi, 2004).