An Analytical Study of the Folklore and Folklife in the Representative Works of Debendranath Acharjee

Abstract

Sahitya Academy Award-winning author Debendranath Acharjee was a versatile genius. Though his works are embedded in traditions of folklore and folklife, yet his works have not found any attention of the folklorists for systematic study, which otherwise have all the possibilities of unveiling an era of rich traditional heritage. This thesis is an attempt in this avowed direction.

While this analysis of the representative works of Debendranath Acharjee explores the elements of folklore and folklife including a wide range of creative and symbolic forms such as custom, belief, technical skill, language, literature, art, architecture, music, play, dance, drama, ritual, pageantry, handicraft etc., its focus remains on the investigation of the changing expressions of historical and communal consciousness, in the mundane processes of the politics of everyday life as well as formal, stylized events that define and renew social identity. Further, this dissertation also attempts to discover the role of vernacular cultural forms and practices in the making of social life in which writer’s self consciousness is evolved in protecting and preserving the aspects of folklore and folklife with the zeal of a missionary. The thesis also argues that Acharjee treats folklore in dynamic ways portraying folkloric custom and belief from the perspective of one who has lived and moved within folk culture. However, he distances himself by commenting on folkloric material from a neutral stand leaving the job mostly to narrators belonging to the past.

The analytical method employed in this work leads to the investigation of the varying expressions of historical and communal consciousness in the day to day
happenings of everyday life as well as the traditional cultural heritage reflected in
the works of Debendranath Acharjee. The descriptive method is employed for
presenting the arguments and findings in logical and coherent manner.

The first chapter is introductory in nature, and focuses on the various aspects
of folklore and folklife both as academic and literary discipline in Assam as well as
India. This chapter also analyses as to how Debendranath Acharjee’s writer’s self is
thoroughly soaked in the folk and cultural heritage of his people. Indeed, folklore
and folklife are the two terms that cover a wide area that is deeply imbued in the
cultural context of a particular group of people. And, in disseminating their cultural
identity they adhere to various means which is ready at hand. It is true that very
often many ingredients are lost in the process of their transmission to the successive
generations through the word of mouth until they are made literary expressions of
different genres, yet the essence remains the same.

The second chapter is devoted to an account of Debendranath Acharjee’s life
and works. In this chapter, attempts have been made to draw a brief biographical
detail of the author to ascertain the sources and roots of the folklore and folklife in
all the genres used by him. Gifted with a photographic memory, he discovers many
oral traditions hitherto not having any space in history. Though he started penning
satirical articles for newspapers under the pseudonym- ‘Dronacharya’, Acharjee’s
well known works have been dated from the year 1957. Acharjee had many widely
acclaimed published works and won several honours including Sahitya Academy
Award. His works include various essays, short stories, poems, children’s literature
and a few significant novels, and many of his works including those which saw its
first posthumous publications only in the complete works of Debendranath Acharjee
entitled Debendranath Achariya Rachana Samagra (2011) are replete with the
ingredients of folklore and folklife of greater Assamese society.

The third chapter is an analytical study of the use of folklore materials in the
novels of Debendranath Acharjee. Debendranath Acharjee’s first novel is Anya Jug
Anya Purush, and through the narrative of the principal narrator Beng Belestar,
almost all the aspects of Assamese folklife come alive in all their vividness. Beng-
Belestar narrates his stories to the children of the family offering a vivid account of
the different age old and hitherto forgotten customs and traditions of rural lives and thereby creates a nostalgic love for heritage and culture. Acharjee’s use of folklore elements like riddles, proverbs, sayings and the language of the folk and his description of the practices of superstitions, and scientific approaches behind some such superstitions are sources of folklore and folklife. Acharjee’s second novel *Kalpurush* (1976) captures a period of Assam history during the Ahom rule (1639-1673) beginning at the repeated invasion of Assam by the Mughals and ending at the battle of Saraighat. Here, Nadai Sajati, the narrator of the story is an imaginary character, yet ‘Sajati’, the faithful person kept by the Ahom rulers is a real persona hitherto not having importance in history, but having immense prestige amongst the folks as well as the Ahom rulers. Also, *Kalpurush* amplified the importance of many mythical realms of Ahoms. This thesis analyses many such elements of folk tradition prevalent during the Ahom period. In his third novel *Jangam*, the journey of a doomed group of people has been foregrounded and folklore and folklife do provide a backdrop here. So far as portrayal of folklife is concerned, we have observed that *Jangam* does give a detailed picture of everyday life of the people before the tornado of war struck. This thesis also examines the local contexts and actors within a universal Buddhist cosmology prevalent in the Buddhist politics of Arakan and Upper Burma. Further, it analyses as to how Acharjee recapitulates many of the hidden treasures of the folklore and folklife in most authentic manner balancing both facts of history and mythical myriads.

The fourth chapter is about Debendranath Achaerjee’s treatment of the aspects of folklore in his short stories and only one act play. Debendranath Acharjee was a versatile literary genius and his awareness and appropriation of folklore materials are apparent not only in his novels but in his short stories too. Though his short stories have been shadowed by his legendary novels, yet these are never of less importance in terms of their merit. The adroit language of Acharjee is unmistakable in all the short stories. What is most interesting about these stories is its incorporation of folklife in its most refined manner. He premeditated on the scenes of the then contemporary rural life of Assam where folk elements are inseparable from the everyday activities of rural people. Also, the versatile genius of Debendranath Acharjee led him to write a one act play *Ek Tarikh*. Here, Acharjee
portrays eight characters from the lower and middle class people belonging to
different social strata. The protagonist Bidhan Borah typifies the traditional
businessman who faces inevitable doom for non-payment of credits by his
customers. Same is the situation with the character of the doctor. Therefore, unlike
the present day doctors, the doctor in the play cannot even afford to pay his bills to
Bidhan Borah on *Ek Tarikh*, i.e. the first day of the month. The dialogues in the play
also derive its inspiration from folk language.

The fifth chapter of this research work offers an analysis of folklore elements
in the children’s works of Debendranath Acharjee. The overwhelming presence of
folklore elements makes his children’s works stand out from the rest. In his
*Ramdhenu Kar Dhenu*, Acharjee uses rhythmic verses to unearth many the of the
mysteries of nature, the hills and mountains and borders of Assam, the monsoon air,
different floras, the twelve months, the important places of Assam and Meghalaya,
the rivers of Assam and myths related to them. Here, we have observed that though
Acharjee’s poems are not directly documentation of folklores and folklife, yet the
delineation of the elements of folklore and folklife are easily visible in these verses.
His short story collection *Haipati Chikimiki* (the Glittering Milky Way) is based on
pseudo scientific lore about the weather, plants and animals. It has been observed
that Acharjee’s world of children is firmly rooted in tradition and history which
facilitates the children to undergo a primeval cultural. He is successful in reviving
laughter in the children’s literature exploiting important features from folklore and
folklife of Assam. Through our analysis of Acharjee’s children-works, we can say
that Acharjee in writing of his children literature, not only brought about a freshness
of fusion between oral folklore, traditional knowledge and literature.

Thus, after our analysis of his representative works we may come to a
conclusion that Debendranath Acharjee’s works not only record the folklore
elements of Indian culture but truly speaking they are of much wider importance.
Folklore and folklife in his works makes his works the "artifice of eternity".
Acharjee derived his interest in culture and incorporation of folklore and folklife
from various motivations: at the one extreme lies the personal interest of the
collector, writer or scholar; at the other extreme is a desire to use folklore as an
instrument of education and indoctrination. Between these extremes, Acharjee
stands for the second extreme. Folkloristic approach made in this thesis bears implication for the direction of social change. From our analysis it becomes apparent that Acharjee knew that we cannot go back to the glorious past and live there. Therefore, in his work he made his best attempt only to educate the reader to live gracefully by reviving the noble ideals of ancient times and by making themselves free from the folk customs and beliefs which he considered social evils. Finally, we may say that since the agents of folklore are the indigenous people concerned, it has served the purpose of offering first hand narrative, which is in a way resistant to euro-centric representation of the orient. Thus, from the postcolonial perspective too, Debendranath Acharjee’s literary works are of great value so far as the critical discourse of Assamese literature is concerned.

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