Chapter III: Folklore and Folklife in Acharjee’s Novels

3.1 The Genre of Novel and Incorporation of Folklore and Folklife in Acharjee’s novels

The word novel is a derivation of the Italian word *novella*. The *novella* was a kind of engorged anecdote as exemplified by the 14th-century Italian classic *Decameron* by Boccaccio. Novel, the truncated form of “novella”, also stands for this historically parent form. Thus, novel deals with new stories and unlike epic, gives importance to the socio-cultural-economic conditions the common people replacing the heroic elements of epic. Clearly, novels do not rework the known fables and myth, but draws inspiration from them and very often incorporates the elements of folklore and folklife reinvigorating their culture and tradition.

As a genre of literature, novel evades easy definition. In his essay *What Is Novel* (2005) Terry Eagleton writes:

The truth is that the novel is a genre which resists exact definition. This in itself is not particularly striking, since many things – ‘game’, for example, or ‘hairy’ – resist exact definition. It is hard to say how ape-like you have to be in order to qualify as hairy. The point about the novel, however, is not just that it eludes definitions, but that it actively undermines them. It is less a genre than an anti-genre. It cannibalizes other literary modes and mixes the bits and pieces promiscuously together. You can find poetry and dramatic
dialogue in the novel, along with epic, pastoral, satire, history, elegy, tragedy and any number of other literary modes. Virginia Woolf described it as ‘this most pliable of all forms’. The novel quotes, parodies and transforms other genres, converting its literary ancestors into mere components of itself in a kind of oedipal vengeance on them. It is the queen of literary genres in a rather less elevated sense of the word than one might hear around Buckingham Palace. (8)

From the views of Terry Eagleton, we can draw a conclusion that the genre of novel investigates the consciousness of human beings in relation to the cultures imprinted on the mundane life of common people whose language is not elite, but expression of folklife charting history of significant phases that shapes the culture of a particular society. Eagleton, therefore, writes:

The novel is a mighty melting pot, a mongrel among literary thoroughbreds. There seems to be nothing it cannot do. It can investigate a single human consciousness for eight hundred pages. Or it can recount the adventures of an onion, chart the history of a family over six generations, or recreate the Napoleonic wars. If it is a form particularly associated with the middle class, it is partly because the ideology of that class centres on a dream of total freedom from restraint. (8)

The Russian philosopher, literary critic Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin in his Epic and Novel: The Dialogic Imagination (1981) also says: “In the process of becoming the dominant genre, the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres; it infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness.” (7) Thus, while, the ancient literature like epic, ballad, fairy tales etc are based on memory, the genre of
novel insists on experience, knowledge and practice. Bakhtin writes that novel “demands for an external and formal completedness and exhaustiveness, especially in regard to plotline”. (ibid. 31) This completeness and exhaustiveness of the genre has offered much room for the novelist to reinvigorate folklore motif and to give subtle resonance to the elements of folklore and folklife.

While novelists of the western part of the globe like Walter Raymond used locality, folklore, and dialect to depict rural culture in his novels Love and Quiet Life (1894) and Tryphena in Love (1895). Thomas Hardy revived many folklore and folklife in his Wessex novels to demonstrate his attention to the past, and to depict traditional, rural England in its most pleasant and primordial form. Similarly, Robert Louis Balfour Stevenson’s dealing with witchcraft in his novel Treasure Island (1882). Dickens’s utilization of folk belief and practice in all his novels, the Bronte sisters’ use of mystic elements in their novels aptly make it obvious how the incorporation of folklore and folklife in novels facilitates us to understand decisive passages of early works whose learned authors took for granted an acquaintance with oral tradition.

While the first Assamese social novel Rajanikanta Bordoloi’s Miri Jiori (1894) was set in a tribal village of Assam, Hareswar Sharma Barua’s Kusum Kumari (1898) and Mahiram Das’s Harideu Kaniar Katha (1898) were based on the historical period during the years of the Burmese invasion of the Ahom kingdom in the year 1820. These novels drew much of their materials from the folklife and traditions narrated in history. Dandinath Kalita’s Sadhana (1929) and Daibachandra Talukdar’s Apurna (1931) are two major novels written around the third decade of the 20th century dealing with the aspects of folklife at the backdrop of the Independence Movement of India. . Gobinda Prasad Sharma in his book Asomiya Upasyar Gati Prakriti (2002) observes:

From the late nineteenth century when the modern Assamese literature made its beginning, we notice two trends of nationalism in Assam – one is the Indian nationalism and the other is Assamese sub-nationalism or regionalism”. (21)
The aspects of regionalism also encouraged the novelist of Mrityunjay (1979) namely Birendranath Bhattacharyya to incorporate elements of Assamese tradition and folk customs in his novel. The trend of identity consciousness imbued in regionalism were expressed more vigorously as Assam witnessed the second World War together with the Quit India Movement, and this trend is easily discernible in Birinchi Kumar Barua’s (Bina Barua’s ) Jibonor Batot (1938). Also, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharyya and Mamani Raisom Goswami successfully brought forth in their novels – the different historical-social-regional contexts. In this regard, Debendranath Acharjee sparkles as a genius. Though the two posthumously published novels namely Bekar Niketon and Raktsaraag have seen not much incorporation of folklore , yet all his three well crafted novels published during his life time, namely Anya Yug Anya Purush, Kalpurush, and Jangam offer a plethora of research materials from folkloristic points of view as they unveil the changing expressions of historical and community consciousness, in the mundane processes of everyday life in the quest of tradition of earlier generation.

3.2 Folklore and Folklife in Acharjee’s Anya Yug Anya Purush

Debendranath Acharjee holds the most prominent place in interrogating folklore elements in the genre of novel. He has not only based the stories of many of his works on folklore, but he may be labeled as a folklorist. Aspects of socio-political folklore in his Anya Yug Anya Purush shows how the British administration affected the socio-political life of Assam, while the description of marriage, customs, rituals, traditions of the villagers, celebrations of festivals correspond to the socio-religious folklore. Again, the novel successfully brings to our notice how the agro- economy of farmers is always traditional. Noted writer and critic Homen Borgohain’s comment in his foreword to Anya Yug Anya Purush is worth mentioning:

In a contextually sumptuous language, Sri Acharjee in this novel, named Anya Yug Anya Purush, has portrayed a perfect picture of
traditional village life that lies on the verge of extinction. The way in which the rapid urbanization is taking place in the present era, or in other words, urban environment has found its rapid extension, the swift wave of the same, is ready to completely engulf the memories of thousand years, dreams, traditions and the characteristics of our folk life in the villages. Such a picture is embedded forever in the heart of this novel. Being a witness of the lost era and folk ways of life, this picture will usher in a sense of nostalgia in many a mind.

In fact, through his first novel of *Anya Yug Anya Purush*, Debendranath Acharjee weaves a story that stretches incidents from the time when the East India Company stepped in the province of Assam to thwart the Burmese invasion till the time of First World War. The village Garakhiyadol at the outreach of Jorhat town, which also happens to be a place of acquaintance of Debendranath Acharjee by birth, is the epicenter where the story finds its progression to account for the different traces of folklore and the tangible changes in the folk life of Assamese people. The novel also offers a comparison of the changes that took place in and around Garakhiyadol during this period.

Debendranath Acharjee thinks that every man and woman is nurtured by the folklore. Indeed, folklore is a part of surrounding beliefs, customs, and culture of every society, which shapes every character. Truly, it is very difficult and almost impossible to separate a man from his culture. It would be worthwhile here to define culture. According to Tylor –

Culture stands for the beliefs, ideas, customs, laws, morals and other capabilities and skills acquired by man as a member of society. What is emphasized in this definition is that culture is the gift of society to an individual. (Madan. *An Introduction to Social Anthropology*. 14)
Debendranath Acharjee had varied experiences of Indian social life. He minutely observed the Assamese culture and gave a living and breathing dimension to their folklore and folklife in his *Anyay Yuhy Anya Purush*. The central character of *Anyay Yuhy Anya Purush*, Beng-Belestar narrates the story of the novel as a neutral observer of the cultural changes between the past and the present. Before the actual beginning of the novel, Acharjee offers a lyrical note in the manner of a riddle—the answer to which riddle is the entire story of *Anyay Yuhy Anya Purush*. Acharjee writes:

*Bar Churiyar phere mijuvala*

*Chal phapariya gat*

*Luito suka manoko lukale*

*Jor puri palehi hat.*

*Jato hurawalo peto nabharalo*

*Pachalt bhangilo dat*

*Athai sagarat thaoni napalo*

*Beng-Belestarok mat.*

(The width of the skinny body is not covered by big waist cloth; the Brahmaputra is dried up, pearls have lost, the time is nearing its end. Neither caste remained intact, nor is stomach filled, yet we lost our teeth in chewing the banana shoot; being lost in the wide sea, call up Beng-Belestar)

Clearly, Acharjee narrates his story through the mouth of Beng-Belestar as a neutral observer of Assamese tradition. Here he simply narrates oral tradition as history. Beng-Belestar is the only speaker in *Anyay Yuhy Anya Purush*. He is the speaker of the bygone rural cultural tradition. Bibhash Choudhry in his article published in the book *Debendra Nath Acharya: Sristi Aru Chetana* observes:

This novel can be considered as the response to a particular cultural situation. Belestar, the central character of the novel is a symbol of
the representation of this particular culture or life style. The culture
or the society that this character represents is no more seen in the
present day context of the novel. ... Belestar belongs to an *Anya
Yug* (different time), a person whose discussion inevitably includes
the aspect of the process of mythification. (57)

In Acharjee’s *Anya Yug Anya Purush* we observe this process of
mythification, a process which in the words of English poet Samuel Taylor
Coleridge successfully creates “a willing suspension of disbelief”. Belestar has to
rebuild history owing to the difference of time (and its cultural ethos) between his
experiences and the time of narration. While the narration of his past experiences
adheres to the process of mystification which according to Roland Barthes “is a
peculiar system, in that it is constructed from a semiological chain which existed
before it (Barthes, *Mythologies* 137), the happenings at the time of narration
demystify the audience, and they are brought to the present time making them
aware of the changes that took place between the periods. Prafulla Kotoky in his
*Swarajottor Asomiya Upanyas Samiksha* (1995) makes his observation in the
following manner:

As if Beng-Belestar is a neutral spectator: he is speaking, and the
reader is listening; not only have they heard, as if they have seen the
entire picture of the past age.

The state of abundance in rural –villages of Assam in the past days,
the natural environment including its rivers, wastelands, the details
of *Satra* culture of Assam, the various games and amusements, the
belief of the folk in the matters of *bhut-pret* (devil-witch) the impact
of soothsayers and magic healer on the folk and different folk-
beliefs – all have entered the story. (205)
The reader finds no difficulty in locating the different folk traditions that have straddled drastic changes in the course of time. According to the noted author Phanindra Kumar Dev Choudhury, Acharjee’s portrayal of the character of Beng-Belestar derives its origin from the rural old Assamese society. In Debendra Nath Acharya: Sristi Aru Chetana, he writes:

I have no doubt that after traveling different parts of the country and abroad, Acharjee who breathed his last only at the age forty four, always carried with him the childhood memories of the village life in Garakhiya Dol, and he met characters like Beng-Belestar in his those childhood days. (74)

To bring this traditional character like Beng-Belstar, Acharjee also uses chaste idiomatic Assamese language used by the folks in Baligaon (Garakhiyadol). Prafulla Kotoky in his foreword to Debendranath Achariya Rachana Samagra writes:

Use of pure Assamese language is an important characteristic of the novel. Hundreds of pure Assamese folk dialects gradually finding its place in the depth of loss-memory have found its new lease of life in this novel. An interesting amalgamation of historical objectivity and appeal of creative literature, Anya Yug Anya Purush, is an outstanding work of contemporary Assamese literature. (Foreword)

In Anya Yug Anya Purush, Beng-Belestar is the spokesman who categorically laments the decay of traditional heritage of Assam. Nagen Saikia in his article entitled Debendranath Acharjee as A Creative Writer (published in Debendra Nath Acharya: Sristi Aru Chetana) rightly observes that “the reader can visualize through the narrator namely Beng-Belestar such invents of folklore which have lost existence after the independence.” (6)
Beng-Belestar in *Anya Yug Anya Purush* is an Angler- an old man who always keeps roaming catching fishes with two fish hooks, and travels from village to village taking shelter at the different houses of the villages where people believe that “an evening guest is the exact icon of “Damodar’- incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The proverb here is an unmistakable part of Assamese folklore and the habit of angling to earn one’s daily bread is a part of Assamese folklife. Beng-Belestar recalls how the canals and wetlands of the locality were once full of fishes and how things are changing in the present day situation. Belestar starts his day with a bowl of red tea and a dollop of molasses and takes Assamese scented tobacco with ground beetle nuts – all of which are items of Assamese folklife. He then narrates stories of the company to the children of the family- a tradition of listening to stories from the past from the elderly people in Assam.

Beng-Belestar is a pet name of Nandiram, the youngest son of ‘Petuwa Gaonburha’. The extreme care to the smallest one in the family made him worthless for agro economic domestic activities except for catching fishes with fish hooks. In his free time, he kept searching for small ones of frogs (*Beng*) and so the village boys used to call him *Bengar Jam*- the dreaded one for frog. The very naming of Nadiram’s father Petuwa Gaonburha (Fat Village Head) and Nandiram as Beng-Belestar reflect the traditions of folklife in naming people according to their shape and activities. In his article in *Debendra Nath Acharya: Sristi Aru Chetana* Ananda Bannudoi states:

> Catching fish with different equipments, especially with fishing rod is an indispensable part of rural Assamese culture. Angling is also a taste of one’s patience. The angler gets time to think many a things while fishing in distant quite places. He is also a daring adventurer. He even visits such places usually avoided by people in the fear of meeting with *Deo-Bhut* (evil spirits). Therefore, the novelist has very thoughtfully selected the angler Belestar to narrate the history of our social life. (16)
Belestar in *Anya Yug Anya Purush* warns the children against taking *Bidi*-Cigarette etc. made by the *Bidi* companies and asks them to have beetle-nut as a means to take care of their teeth. The historical accounts of the Swadeshi Movement and the then British Raj are purely accounts of the rural folk’s ways of gradual change to folk tradition to modern tradition. Belestar’s accounts of the same successfully brings into fore an important phenomenon of folklore and folklife i.e. nostalgia for the glorious past and the feeling of the necessity of documenting the existence of national consciousness or identity.

Further, Belestar gives vivid account of the *Bhaona* (a folk drama with religious messages) of the old days and laments the loss of heritage in the present day. He regrets *Sei Ramo nai, sei Ajyodhyayo nai*—good old days are no more. Belestar recalls how on the day after *Barsabah* (the grand public worship day) people used to throng the *Dol namghar* premises to witness *Bhaona*; how people cried and laughed at the happenings during the *Bhaona* thinking it to be real incidents and never frowned or mocked at them, how people organised *Bhaona* to seek blessings from the public to soothe their prolonged illness; how the old Habiyal’s *Dol Namghar* has now lost its glamour by dividing it into seven *Khels* (sub–groups of religious community).

Acharjee’s concept of home is purely Assamese—a Hindu joint family where the members of old generation and young generation may live together. Joint-family is a quintessence of traditional Hindu society and an element of social folklore. The respect for Adhikar Prabhu (head of *Khel*) and adherence to rulings and suggestions of the Village Panchayat’s in case of dispute are indispensible parts of folklife in *Anya Yug Anya Purush*.

*Anya Yug Anya Purush* documents the ways as to how the British company invaded Belestar’s province searching the jungles for wealth and interacting with the village folk to industrialize their folk foods. The history of tea industry in Assam is imbued in the folk history having *Finap* (a traditional drink made from Finap tree in the jungles. The folk history of the Chinese people narrated in this novel (living in the present Margherita town) truly bears historical significance. *Anya Yug Anya Purush* is replete with many folk traditions that are primal forces behind establishing Tea Industry and Oil Company in Assam.
Acharjee’s Assamese male characters are of two types - those who are traditional and those who are caught between tradition and modernity. Of the first kind are busy in earning their daily bread, they love their wives and have no illicit relations after marriage, they think of betterment of the family. They believe in religion and observe the folklore. Of the other kind, they have regard for the new changes and new technology In *Anya Yug Anya Purush* people like Maniram Dewan, Jagannath Baruwa etc. are depicted as belonging to the second type.

*Anya Yug Anya Purush* also records the traditional agro-economy of Assamese farmers. The economy related to milk and milk products, the rearing of buffalos and cows, the abundance of vegetable crops in highlands in river side, the folk ways of cultivation etc. have found adequate description in folk language in the entire novel. For instance, Belestar gives account as to how pumpkins are cultivated in river sandbars:

On the day of great sacrifice of Durgapuja, the people of the river sandbars plants the seeds of pumpkin. These sandbars have no fixed boundaries- in the very early morning two men with bags full of pumpkin seeds on both of their arms start from the same place- one to the east side and other to the west side. They plant the seeds of pumpkin in the entire road. When they meet another person from the neighbouring river highland they draw their boundaries. What a rush of beggars at the time of collecting the harvest of pumpkins! During those days there were not many community markets! Just asking the ‘Chaparia’ (people living in Chapari- river highland) -one can get one basket of pumpkins. In grass land *Chapari* people reared cows and buffaloes. Thus, this old Brahmaputra fed the Assamese people until few years before. (55)
The devastations caused by the river Brahmaputra is solely shown as works of modernization in the forms of embankments against the folk traditions of agriculture in the alluvial soil deposited by the rivers in the inundated places. This is also shown in the novel as the cause of diminishing the once rich economy into a poor one. Also many folk stories are narrated in the novel to ascertain the cause of the anger of the river Brahmaputra. Belsestar gives many versions of such folktales related to Manidhar (chain) that were handed down from earlier generations through the words of mouth. Belsestar narrates:

Regarding this Manidhar – Nana Munir Nana Mat (Many men many minds). Some says that at the time of establishing the Auniati Satra by palcing Murti Bhagavat, Damodardev offered this chain to the Adhikar and said “since surrounded by Brahmaputra river, there should be a treaty with the river by offering feast and taxes, otherwise the Murti Bhagavat won’t be safe.” Hence a great feast was organized in the sands and the chain was offered to the Brahmaputra.

Some others say that the chain was worn by the river Brahmaputra in her marriage- somehow it reached the hands of Satradhikar.

Another section of people say the chain was kept by the river Brahmaputra on the sand for a Miri girl, the Satradhikar found it while he went for prayer in the Brahmaputra. (31)

Acharjee narrates many such myths through the mouth of Belsestar which are clearly elements of folklore. Besides narrating many folk fishing techniques for better livelihood, Anya Yug Anya Purush also mentions the tradition of fire wood as primary means of fuel. The use of Naharguti (seeds of Indian iron wood tree) in umbrella stand as lamp for reading purposes instead of kerosene lamp is an excellent example of the folk traditions prevalent in Assam. Further, the story of collecting the gold, silver and bronze jeweleries from the religious places and
sending them back as coins (with Queen Victoria’s head engraved on it) and then replacing them all by paper notes is replete with folk elements in historical contexts.

Belestar also warns his listeners indirectly by narrating the folklife of a large section of people who lived a worthless life under the grip of opium. He holds this habit of the folklife responsible for pushing the Assamese people to a few steps backward. Belestar has much faith in the folk beliefs and rituals regarding his fishing habit. He does not go for fishing on the Chat- Sankranti (The last date of Chaitra month or the day of Sankranti) day. That day, even the Kingfisher is believed to have vegetarian food.

That day, we get up early in the morning and after cleaning the cow-shed all the cattles of the village are brought to a water source like a pond, river or deep open non-plugged cultivation field etc. The cattle are washed; with a three bamboo strings knitted with pieces of bitter gourd, bottle gourd, eggplant and turmeric, Belestar keeps running after the cows with great happiness and throwing the vegetables to the cows he sings "laug khaa bengena khaa, bosore bosore bardhi jaa, maare haru baapere horu toi hobi bor bor goru" (eat bottle gourd eat brinjal, and grow year by year; your mother is small, your father is small, you be a bigger one. (50)

This quotation suggests how Belestar is attached to folk traditions and wisdom of his culture. With his activities and his narration of the traditional festivity – Belestar wishes that everybody should practice this culture to keep it continued to generations as rites, rituals, heritage, culture are handed down from generation to generation. Therefore, Belestar tells about the traditions of Chat-Sankranti to his listeners in the evening hours:
Chat- Sankranti is an auspicious day. Today, Bezbaruah searches the fields and collects herbal medicines. Rudai’s mother Mukhuri Jakhini visits the ‘erabari’ (separated land from the house) to collect magic materials, she is not even possessed by ghosts. But, what is the use? She has nobody even to perform her last rites for three generations. She had a son –Rudai; but, he was also taken away by Jam (God of death) in his youth. Mukhuriburi is a faith healer. It is inauspicious to step into the boundary of her homestead. She rears evil spirits like Bhut- Pishach, Bira, Kandha and roams about with a bag blowing mustard seeds. She practices Tantra-Mantra and indulges in mysterious healings. If evil spirits strike, she uses her cane. If anything is lost she moves bowls to search them. (50)

Belestar also offers an account of the old traditional celebration of Chat-Sankranti. He states that on that day people are overtaken by a thrill and get up at dawn to wash the feet of the cows with fish scales, to hang ripe elephant apples at front doors. The smell of the ripe elephant apples keeps cholera epidemics at bay.

In fact, Belestar offers a vivid account of the different age old and hitherto forgotten customs and traditions of Bohag Bihu. Acharjee’s Anya Yug Anya Purush creates a nostalgic love for heritage and culture. This nostalgia is also an element of folklore.

Acharjee’s description of the practices of superstitions, and scientific approaches behind some such superstitions (for instance, snake biting remedies and myths related to it) are sources of folklore and folklife. He categorically shows that the British hate the Indians traditions –its folklore and the religion, for its involved superstition. Driven by a sense of superiority and materialism, these British rulers either in Asia or in Africa never respected the local elements of folklore. However, Acharjee shows that it does not mean all the British had the same mindset.
Indeed, Acharjee treated his literature from a folkloristic point of view using all folklore elements like riddles, proverbs, sayings and the language of the folk. *Anya Yug Anya Purush* stands as a great testimony to his credible handling of folklore and folklife. Again, Belestar’s narrative too is intermixed with stories he had heard from others, though he is eye witness to most of the events. This double or multiple narrative technique helps retain historical distance and objectivity all throughout the novel. Use of chaste spoken Assamese diction and idioms is a unique feature of *Anya Yug Anya Purush* and thus the novel becomes an interesting document of everyday speech in folklife. It is as if hundreds of such long forgotten expressions were recalled to life in the novel. This novel is a rare combination of historical objectivity and creative literature.

3.3 Folklore and Folklife in Acharjee’s Kalpurush

*Kalpurush* (1976) is the second novel of Acharjee. Like *Anya Yug Anya Purush* this novel too 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. Commenting on *Kalpurush*, renowned folklorist Prafulladatta Goswami writes “…Attempt is original and appreciable. An excellent novel came out in juxtaposition of history and imagination. It has expressed the fear of death and worries of an era bypassing the action of Sajati (of the faithful one).” (*Kalpurush*, Blurb)

In fact, the novel presents Nadai Sajati, the narrator of the novel as a directly involved person of the entire series of incidents narrated vividly in the novel. Without doubt, the basic inspiration of the novel is the history of Assam. Acharjee therefore gives a long list including seventeen historical books as a proof of his historical references of the incidents narrated in *Kalpurush*. The list includes Francis Hamilton’s *An Account of Assam* (1940); Surjya Kumar Bhuyan’s *Axom Buranji* (1930), *Mirjumlar Axom Akrampa* (1956), *Lachit Barphukan and His Times* (1937), *Aton Buragohain and His Times* (1937), *Kamrupar Buranji* (1930), *Deodhai Axom Buranji* (1932), *Kachari Buranji* (1936), *Jayanta Buranji* (1936), *Lachit Barphukan* (n.d.), *Studies in the History of Assam* (n.d.); Gunabhiram
Barua’s *Assam Buranjii* (1887), Harkanta Sadaramin’s *Axom Buranjii* (1930), Saratkumar Dutta’s *Axom Buranjii* (1938), Kashinath Tamuliphukan’s *Axom Buranjii* (1906), Gopalchandra Barua’s *Ahom Buranjii* (n.d.); and E.A. Gait’s *History of Assam* (1926).

It must be mentioned that though history of Assam during the period of 1639-1673 is an integral part of the novel, the novel focuses mainly on some small historical facts either not included in history or bypassed by history. However, what makes the novel unique is its depiction of folklore and folklife of the aforementioned period. Prafulla Kotoky in his *Swarajottor Asomiyava Upnyasa Samiksha* (1995) therefore writes:

> Since the thematic concern of the novel is historical, it also naturally presents the social environment... the Folk language/speech, ways of folklife, faith, rules of the court of the kings are discernible here. ... The author has revealed some folk customs of Ahom reign. The coronation processes of Ahom Kings, the system of ladder reversal, the ways of upbringing of Sajati are some of them. (209)

The very setting of the novel, when the chief character of the novel Nadai Sajati is set to narrate his life history is an occasion of *Magh Bihu/Bhogali Bihu*, a folk harvest festival of Assam during the month of January celebrated in the similar manner as *Makar Sankranti* and *Pongal* - two other significant harvest festivals of India. Paramesh Dutta in his article *Festivity, Food, and Bihu: A Short Introduction to the National Festival of Assam* writes:

> The Bhogali Bihu is the Bihu given entirely to feasting. It is a time for eating and merrymaking after a successful harvest. Community feasts are organized across the entire state. Fish and meat are inseparable items of such feasting. (*Indian folklife*, Web17)
In Kalpurush when Nadai Sajati enters the small village near Dichou river, the villagers are seen busy in the happy atmosphere of the festivity of foods and feast around the Mezighar made of hey. Sitting in this traditional set up of Mezighar, Nadai Sajati narrates the story of a significant time during the Ahom rule stretching for a span of thirty four years narrating all the folkways as to how the son of Holongrakhia Chetiapatar, Nadai became Sajati and how he executed his responsibilities ignoring all the difficulties posed by the passage of history during the period of 1639-1673 of Ahom Kingdom.

Though Acharjee draws the character of Nadai Sajati as an imaginary one, 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. The actions of the Sajati were unknown to the historians chiefly because this class of people was destined to keep their activities and identities secret. This tradition of faithful people is definitely an important aspect of folk culture of Ahom period.

Nadai reveals that his earlier memories also appear before him as daily incidents. He narrates:

The tightening up our waist, having Hilo-Hengdang- Jamdar in hands, wearing black clothes, thousands of Assamese fighter forwarding to beat the enemies, the earthquake like sound of footsteps, sounds like breaking of heaven,.... the troupe of elephant riders! The overflowing spits of beetle nuts in our Gohain-Rajkhowa captain of soldiers with golden Hengdang in waist, the upbeats of mixed sounds of ‘Jaydhol’, ‘Singa’; the mica like glittering sights of Hengdang( sword) in red and white sands -all fills his every -day dream. (78)

Here, Acharjee’s description of the Ahom soldiers with their folk attire, arms and spirited environment amidst musical instruments like Jaydhol and Singa
are elements of folklife of Assam during the Ahom reign. Even the naming of Ahom ruler as Swargadeo has its connotations only in folk tale. To clarify this aspect, we may refer to the comments of noted author Arup Kumar Dutta who in his book *The Ahoms* writes about the myth associated with Khunlung Khunlai through a Narrator of Deodhai lineage:

We, the Ahoms, have an ancient lineage-we are the descendants of Khunlung and Khunlai sent by Lengdon to rule over a kingdom on earth … legends attribute to our race divine ancestry…. that is why we address an Ahom monarch as Chaopha or Swargadeo, or God of heaven. Accordingly, Khunlung and Khunlai knelt before Lengdon prior to departure and were given the following counsel: Go forth and rule … I am giving you a pair of drums; beat upon them in times of difficulty, and I shall aid you. I am gifting you a pair of hengdang …. the broad –bladed swords to slay your enemies with. But above all I am gifting our idol Somdeo, kept safely within a casket of gold. Take greatest care and protect it with your life… the loss of Somdeo would also spell the end of your rule…. (17-18)

Acharjee in his novel *Kalpurush* amplifies the importance of this mythical story of Ahom rule. The Hengdang is depicted in the novel as the supreme weapon by Acharjee for the Ahoms and Somdeo was a thing to be protected at all cost. Same importance was given to the drum beats. Here, the use of myth by Acharjee follows the two semiological systems propagate by Roland Barthes. In his book *Mythologies* (2009) Barthes writes:

It can be seen that in myth there are two semiological systems, one of which is staggered in relation to the other: a linguistic system, the language which I called *metalanguage*, because it is a second language, in which one speaks of the first. (138)
Acharjee’s use of *metalanguage* in dealing with the mythical objects is discernible in *Kalpurush, Hengdang, Somdeo, Chaopha* and even the very character of Sajati alias Kalnemi are instances of the use of *metalanguage*.

Again, the very process of upbringing of Nadai as Sajati bears all the ingredients of folklore and folklife. Nadai was brought to the *Hauli* (King’s palace) in a new traditional dress woven by his grandmother. His first meeting with *Swargadeo* in *Muga Chola Curia* dress, his training of different skills and later his swearing as *Sajati* by taking oath touching the *Somdeo* after bearing a round seal at nape, his naming by the astrologer as Kalnemi and *Swargadeo’s* explanation of the heroic figure in divinity namely Kalpurush- his lucky God are all ingredients drawn by Acharjee from folklore and folklife of Ahoms- the rulers of Assam for six hundred years.  In his article in *Debendra Nath Acharya: Sristi Aru Chetana*, Kutubuddin Ahmed writes:

*Kalpurush* encompasses the complete period of reign of Pratap Singh and other five kings. … During the tenure of Swargadeo, the foundations of the villages of Assam enlivened by the folk custom and folk beliefs were definitely strong. Without distorting history, Acharjee novel *Kalpurush* like his *Anya Yug Anya Purush* wafted with the fragrance of the soil of Assam by its use of locale language and tradition. (45)

Acharjee in his adroit language gives life to many folk traditions of the golden period of the Ahoms. For instance, he vividly describes the skills of *Tarowal Juj* (Sword Fight) in which one has to fight putting all his strength electrifying the environment with mega sound effect. Acharjee in *Kalpurush* states:

Living amongst Ahom family, one has to look what is good or bad before stabbing. One only becomes weak after cutting one’s own skin.  ... In sword fight if one head is beheaded, another three appears. ... So is the name *Tinimuriya* (Having three head) (88)
In *Kalpurush*, we also come to know about the traditional ways of dethroning of an Ahom king by a process called ‘Ladder Reversal’ for his unjustified works like making *Barkuwari* (Head queen) from lower social class. Again, to avert any unwanted incidents resulting from such marriage, Acharjee depicts the rituals of the Ahom folklife in which they offer *Deopiya* by beheading fowls and planting cotton seeds in lime stained black pots in orchard. The importance of the traditional *Tamulipira* (a sitting tool marking prestige) *Saru Chora* (Private Chamber) *Bor Chora* (Official Chamber) of Ahom kingdom are also elaborated in the novel through the character of Nadai Sajati.

While the extra marital affairs of the queens have no place in history, these are incidents of great interest in oral narration. Acharjee narrates such incidents of Aikuwari (the queen) in the novel projecting Nadai as Aikuwari’s confidant to avert any scandal. The different folk skills in fighting one’s enemy- now forgotten by the people have also been narrated by Acharjee through Nadai Sajati. In this regard he mentions that all the tribal kings like kings of Kachuri-Jayanta-Dimarua- Rani bowed down to the fighters of the Ahom kingdom and gave much wealth for the officials of Ahoms. He also gives a clear picture of the folk skills involved in the warfare. He says:

In those days we had two types of warfare- first one was face to face type fighting, the powerful one took advantage. The other one was secret sort; the less powerful fought hiding in places and attracting from the back. This type of warfare was also called humourously as *dag di kata* or else *furuli marao*. But, actually this is a technique only. When alone and having risk for one’s own life, this type of warfare serves as a fitting one. (103)

In another place Acharjee mentions about another fighting skill known as *Dari di dhara* (made captive by rope), a technique used to capture cavalry enemy in a narrow passage by using raw cotton rope to dismantle the rider from the horse. This is also purely an element of folk tradition of fighting in the Ahom period.
On many occasions, in *Kalpurush*, Acharjee depicts the customs of wearing dress materials including headgear. Nadai Sajati also gives a description of the Mughal style of dress materials while describing them. Once Nadai Sajati proclaimed: “a fighter does not wear headgear having a tail, I have to wear it only for carrying papers from *Swargadeo*”. (104) In this regard, Maheswar Neog’s comment in *Cultural Heritage of Assam* (2004) offers much light:

As it is generally held in Assam, it is from the reign of Rudrasimha that the Northern Indian *pag* (Pagdi), *jama* (=angarkha) and *ijar* (pajama) were introduced into the state. … Fresh presents of *kunmin* (the indigenous costume of the Ahoms consisting of a turban and a coat, two other pieces for waistband and the upper part of the body being added to it) were then sent and were accepted by nobility. The Budhagohain, however, made a prayer in going home, and he was later sent his *pag, jama* and *ijar*. It is from this occasion that presents of *pag* and *jama* became a custom. (64)

Further, the novel abounds in matters of raising the folk beliefs related to Kamrupiya *Fuk Mantra*, appearance of golden boat, white horse in the sorcerer river Dhanshiri, beliefs regarding changing of human to animals through Mantras, folk sayings regarding *Somdeo* and *Hengdang, bhut-prêt-dak-dakini* (devils) astrological practices of *Deodhai Bailung, Naginigat* (Snake hole) near the premises and the like. Regarding the novel *Kalpurush*, the remark of Sailen Bharali’s in his *Asamiya Oitihasik Upanyas* is worth mentioning:

The scenes of appearing Jaydhwaj Singha as a glittering idol and guidance of that idol to the Naginigat (snake hole) to search *Somdeo, Hengdang* and rings kept underground by Jaydhwaj Singha kept Keeping Nadai as a witness while leaving Gargaon may appear unnatural. But the connection of these elements in historical
novel creates an aura of wonder and surprise making the past sound more mysterious. (104)

Also, the agricultural practices narrated in the novel forms another plethora of information regarding folk life of that period. Here the folk story associated with the name of Bokakhat included in the novel is an interesting one. Nadai Sajati in *Kalpurush* states:

The land is sandy, not fit for agricultural activity. The Mariya people brought *Boka* (muddy) soil from distant Lakshimi field and placed in the Khat (farm), and thereby made the farm fit for agriculture. Thus, the place came to be called Bokakhat (Muddy Farm). (109)

The description of *Na-pamuwa Gaon* (Newly settled village) with details like huts made of bamboo- reeds with a round yard in the midst, pillars for tying cows, the dress of the women folk, their agricultural works offer folkloristic dimension to the novel. Truly, Acharjee’s geographical descriptions of nostalgic past of the alluvial soil of Assam are living and breathing aspects of the folklore and folk life of Assam. On the novel *Kalpurush*, Prafulla Kotoky in his *Swarajottor Asomiya Upnyasa Samiksha* therefore writes:

The author has also given realistic description of the geographical description of Assam during the Ahom period; especially the descriptions of the locales are accurate and given in minute detail.

Those bear the memory of once green and bountiful Assam. (211)

Further, the love story narrated by Nadai Sajati in the novel is a Romantic tale of the folk tradition. Also, the customs which narrates that “in the tradition of this country, the first male who touches the hands of an unmarried girl must marry the girl” (Acharjee, *Kalpurush* 111) is a matter of folk custom. Again, the alternative relief of such custom that if that male is lame or physically deformed or
has some internal diseases or dies in thunderstorm will be freed from the rules of
the society is a peculiar marriage customs embraced by the folklife of Assam.

Moreover, we observe that the novel Kalpurush is a literary document
regarding the language of the Assamese folk. Sailen Bharali in his Asamiya
Oitihasik Upayas rightly observes:

The central attraction of the novel is its ways of narration befitting
its subject matter. One of the main reasons of interest of the reader
in the chain of events of the novel is its speciality of expression.
The author has so successfully used the language marked with the
characteristics of history enriched with proverbs, idioms and
sayings etc. that every page smells of history and the tune of history
follows incessantly in the entire span of the narration.( 104)

The proverbs and sayings like Sei Ramo Nai Ajodhya Nai (Neither Ram
nor Ajyodhya exists; referring to the glorious past) , Ji Mula Barhiba Tar Dupatate
Sin ( equivalent to English proverb morning shows the day), Kesu Khandote
Saap(unforeseen danger), Sandhir Bah Budhire Katiba (wisdom is more effective
than strength) Saporile megh Nerai ( one cannot overcome danger by evading it)
etc. are used in Kalpurush like a part of its narration. Also, Assamese idiomatic
expressions in Kalpurush like “Even while fishing in the pond of one’s compound,
his is hurt by piercing bones of fish. This is only a battle; won’t eight or ten people
die there? None should feel sorry for that. What matters is how much fish is
captured.” (165) are used by Acharjee in almost every page of the novel and this has
certainly facilitated the revival of a unique feature of Assamese language widely
used by the common folk.

Clearly, Debendranath Acharjee is very keen in his treatment of folklore in
his novel Kalpurush. The elements of folklore operating in this novel give an
overall impression of Assam to those who are unfamiliar with the traditions and
customs of Assam during the Ahom Period.
3.4 Folklore and Folklife in Acharjee's Jangam

*Jangam* is the third work of Debendranath Acharjee in the domain of novel and is his second in the style of historical fiction after *Kalpurush*. Published first in the magazine *Praksh* in continuous episodes from 1978 to 1979, the novel posits a historical incident during the Second World War in the province of Burma. The novel reveals the story of a handful of farmers of Indian origin, who had made Burma (now Myanmar) their home. The Second World War reached the frontiers of the Burma. The British were defeated and Japanese army has destroyed Yangoon. The local rebels asked the poor inhabitants of Manku to leave the village or face ill consequences. They were worried about where to go and which way to take. This village had been their home. Finally, they decided to go to Lidu, in Assam. The war has desolated the country, and this group of migrants must walk on foot through the perfidious jungle, braving diseases and death, and hunger and fear — as they go on, the motley group is joined by two white men and a half-white girl. *Jangam* is not about the destination, but the journey itself, and what happens during the journey. Sailen Bharali, therefore, in his *Asamiya Oitihasik Upanyas* remarks:

Notwithstanding the atrocities of the Burmese people during the capture of Burma by the Japanese army, a group of Indian people started their journey to India through a dangerous route. The description of this dangerous journey constitutes the thematic concern of the novel. The journey carried out amidst inexplicable physical and mental hardship is a symbol of endless journey of the dynamic human life.

The novel is full of historical facts. The description of natural surroundings of Burma, social and economic condition, the troop of people making a journey to India from Burma and the minute
details of the roads bears testimony of the well studied mind of the author. (105)

In fact, Acharjee’s *Jangam* is unique in Assamese literature in terms of thematic issues and uniqueness of presentation. Acharjee also posthumously received the Sahitya Akademi Award (conferred by India’s National Academy of Letters) for this work. A remarkable feature of this novel is that the creative genius of Debendranath Acharjee found free and full expression here. In the previous two novels it was captivated within the rigid frame of social and historical context of the narrative. With this the possibility of epic expansion becomes wider. In the first edition of *Jangam*, noted journalist and writer Chandra Prasad Saikia comments: “History is a mere skeleton here. The writer’s imagination has sparked life into it. Most possibly this is the only novel in Assamese written in the context of migration from Burma.” (Preface)

In fact, Acharjee’s *Jangam* most systematically narrates the saga of folk life during the Second World War in the Arakan area by using various elements of folklore. In his article in *Debendra Nath Acharya: Sristi Aru Chetana* Prabhat Chandra Sabhapandit, the author of *Sociological Study of the Post-War Assamese Novel* observes:

The selection of setting in Jangam by the novelist Acharjee is marked by his nostalgia for the glorious past and a mournful attitude. In the description of the small village Manku near Mandalaya by the side of Irawati speaks of his love for the past.

(48)

This is the story of a journey back home of a group of Indian people from erstwhile Burma ousted by the nationalist Burmese people and the atrocities of the victorious Japanese army. It was a journey through dense forests and treacherous mountain terrains. For generations Burma remained the adopted homeland of this group of people but sudden turns of events in the world history forced them to leave their adopted homeland. However, the narration does not start with the
journey itself. Prafulla Kotoky in his Swarajottor Asomiya Upnyasa Samiksha therefore writes:

The novel begins with a not very long description of the natural environment of Burma, the socio-economic condition of the ordinary peasants of the country and their day to day living condition. The glorious past and history of Burma has also been brought forth. Especially the author has brought to the notice of his readers about many of the Pagodas, Buddha Images and the related legends, mythical stories and stories imbued in mystery. At the same time a realistic picture has also been presented by the author of the nature of the Burmese mountain: many hills, valley, plains-

*Bhekuli* (Frog) *Valley and Pakhila* (Butterfly). Valley where only frogs and butterfly are the only residents- different types of shrubs and trees, their roughness or wonderful beauties in course of the season summer-winter-spring. (213)

The novel *Jangam* is set in Manku, a small village near the abandoned capitals Abha and Amarpur of Burma. In setting the background of the thematic concerns of the story of *Jangam*, Acharjee gives literary expression to the elements of folklore and folklife survived from generation to generation about these two capitals some of which are even followed till the actual incidents of the story beginning with Japan’s capturing of Burma during the Second World War. Here, Acharjee refers to a *Lakkhan Patigghahak* (soothsayer), who on an unremembered day in the past foretold:

According to the orders that came in dream, the bodyless souls have showered their favour in Abha; evil spirits have taken abode in the many stones and old trees and it will be right to establish the capital here for the sake of well being of the state and kings’ family. (176)
Acharjee narrates in the novel how this soothsaying was obeyed by the kings and how Sayadeo followed the folk belief and himself sacrificed many male and female human beings to set the foundation of his capital, and the king become engrossed in amusement activities leaving the responsibility of protecting of his state to the sacrificed souls and to the stones engraved with Mantra-Tantra (an esoteric practice or religious ritualism). Acharjee further narrates how with the passage of time new Lakkhan Patiggahak (Soothsayer) came to courts of the king and explained the meaning of less significant troubles of the state:

The term of souls of the dead body looking after the safety of the state is over. One Pagoda (a tiered tower with multiple eaves built in traditions originating as Stupa in historic South Asia) has emitted supernatural lightening. One illiterate boy has commented unfavourably, one Sayadew has dreamt of evil omen. Sayings have been heard in jungles from sky; evils have been witnessed in seas and moonlight night. (176)

Immediately the capital was shifted to Amarpur by the kings and again thousands of people including children-youths—old and the pregnant women were scarified, and again the responsibility of keeping the state safe was given to the souls of these sacrificed people. Again, after some time, like old prostitutes the capital of Amarpur was abandoned, and as per opinions of the astrologers the capital was shitted to Mandalaya.

Further, Acharjee refers and recreates one very significant legends of Maha Muni image in Arakan Pagoda. It is whispered in oral traditional belief that the Maha Muni Image was shed at about 563 B.C during the reign of King Snda Thuriya (Chandra Suriya) of the Dhanyawaddy Dynasty in the presence of Lord Buddha himself accompanied by 500 disciples who were Arahats. According to the legend, Lord Buddha and King Snda Thuriya (Chandra Suriya) were very close friends in one life, while they were cowherd boys. They were very affectionate of each other and therefore they left a statue or a picture of the person, when that
person had to tour to other place. Therefore, Sanda Thuriya (Chandra Suriya) appealed Lord Buddha to leave his statue when he had to go back to India and Lord Buddha agreed. It is also believed that five copies of the Image were also cast and Lord Buddha predicted that the Holy Image (the original) would remain in Arakan for 5000 years. However, Acharjee narrates a different legend which says that in the antique time Budhha visited the Arakan province that was deserted by Pandavas through an aerial route and then the Hindu Devaraj Sakru made this Maha Muni Image to welcome Gautam Buddha with his own hand, and the image was so life-like that even the Buddha thought it to be a living and breathing human and embraced it. It is on this occasion that this image emitted light like blue lotus and uttered the teachings of the Buddha.

Juliane Schober, a historian of repute has very briefly clarified this legend and the cult worship that has evolved around the "living" double image of Mahamuni Buddha:

The rich and complex mythology associated with this image includes episodes that parallel other stories about the Buddha...The rituals and myths of Mahamuni thus accomplish two aims simultaneously: they place local contexts and actors within a universal Buddhist cosmology, and they locate a continuing biography of the Buddha in the Buddhist politics of Arakan and Upper Burma. Theravada politics characteristically extended the biographical mode of recreating the Buddha's presence and associated with it the power of kings and other patrons of this image. The veneration of this Buddha image is thus informed by local conceptions of religious patronage in sociopolitical domains. (Schober, Web 260)
Acharjee narrates that the Mahamuni Image became the envy of almost all of the kings of Buma. Whenever they expanded their empire, they tried to rob this holy image. Finally the Burmese King Bodawphaya succeeded to annex Arakan into the Burmese Empire and took the holy image after removing the devils through *Tantra Mantra*. The rich and complex mythology connected with this image includes episodes that correspond to other stories about the Buddha. The rituals and myths of Mahamuni thus accomplish two aims simultaneously: they place local contexts and actors within a universal Buddhist cosmology, and they locate a continuing biography of the Buddha in the Buddhist politics of Arakan and Upper Burma.

In addition to the folklore associated with the narrative strategy of Acharjee in *Jangam*, his description of the folk life is equally interesting. Acharjee narrates:

The village is quiet, hushed down. People are yet to arise to the hustle and bustle of farming- the pace of life is slow, lethargic. Many women are busy thrashing. Some are spinning yarn, others are .... Everybody is in small works, but none is in a hurry. There is no urge to perform one’s duty, no enthusiasm and no celebration. That poverty has struck them hard is apparent in their automatised daily life set in monotone. They are compelled to work for living but they are like mechanised toys or ants habituated to thoughtless work. (177)

These are only some clear examples of incorporation of folklore and folklife used in the novel *Jangam*. Oral literature and folk customs serve as the backbone in the building the setting of the novel *Jangam*.

### 3.5 Dexterity of Acharjee as a Novelist

A span of just forty fours of Acharjee’s life saw publication of three outstanding novels. Another two were printed posthumously. Altogether five
novels enriched the genre of Assamese novels. Truly, the niche he gave to Assamese literature through his novels is an immaculate one.

At the outset of the novel *Kalpurush*, Acharjee writes: “I write history as I am given—not as I understand, not as I believe it”. Actually, Acharjee understood the limitation of his liberty in framing the story line of a historical novel. Since the characters in history are many, it is difficult for a novelist to draw imaginary lines to weave in his plot; because, it is essential for the novelist to keep track not only of the past but also of the present and the future. To write his historical novels, Acharjee made an in-depth study of the history of Assam for seven years and discovered a connection between the written and the unwritten history. He realized that the each event in history constitutes the different parts of a single chain. Acharjee studied all the missing links in history and gave adroit expression to this missing link in his novel *Kalpurush*.

Acharjee himself admitted that the history of Assam is filled with many pearls and a novel with these pearls will make the readers interested in history. Also, he admitted that in writing his historical novels, he drew inspiration from the novels of Arthur Conan Doyle and Leo Tolstoy. Acharjee in his speech (published in *Debendranath Acharjiya Rachana Samagra*) after receiving the “Best Literature of the Year 1978” award for his novel *Kalpurush* by the State Publication Board, Assam said:

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History leaves immense impact on human lives. Our present is constituted by a conjugal mixing of the past with its surroundings.

... History is a must in incorporating the discussion of life, mentality of society, its reaction and its traditions and customs in literature. ... What we need now is unity and feelings of association, and the only source of unity amongst the diversified Assamese people is history. ... A nation’s history is the source of the nation’s unity. The only aim that I had was to increase the
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awareness of this unity by giving appropriate clothes to this history.

(584)

Though this study mostly centers its focus only on the three novels namely *Anyā Yug Anyā Purush, Kalpurush* and *Jangam*, yet his other two novels namely *Raktaraag* and *Bekar Niketan* are also not without merit. *Raktaraag*, the fourth novel of Debendranath Acharjee offers a dexterous account of the conflict between Magadh and Koshal. The central subject of the novel is Ajatsatu’s love for Bajira. Pali and Prakrit words are used profusely in the novel and this has helped retain historical objectivity and saved it from being historically misplaced. Acharjee’s fifth novel *Bekar Niketan* is based on the comic family drama that takes place in protagonist Mrityunjay Barua’s household. Mrityunjay Barua is suffering from partial memory loss and many a times he becomes the butt of joke of his friends and relatives. Unlike *Anyā Yug Anyā Purush* and *Kalpurush* this novel is set against a modern, semi-urban backdrop and therefore, pure rural folklife of the earlier two novels are not present here. However, the language of the novel is marked by its lucidity, spontaneity and idiomatic features. Thus, Acharjee treats folklore in dynamic ways that open up more questions and tensions than many of his contemporaries chose to recognise.
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