Chapter-V

Verbal Art of the Charua Community of Nalbari

The char-chapori people of Nalbari district constitute an integral part of the Charua community in the state of Assam. As such, their life and lore as well as social practices match those of the greater migrant/immigrant Muslim community (Abhibasi Musalman) of Assam. They have all the forms of folk or oral literature like songs, rhymes, proverbs, riddles, myths and tales as discussed in the preceding chapter in the context of the whole community. This chapter takes into account different forms collected from the study area for a diachronic study.

Folksongs:

Lokgaan or Lokgeet (folksongs) in circulation among the people of Nalbari chars display the variety and richness of such songs in other char-chaporis of the state. On different occasions they sing songs such as Dhua gaan, Murshidi gaan, Magan gaan, Biya gaan, Hudumtoal gaan, Bhatiali gaan, Dehatatva gaan, Kabi gaan, Naokhelar gaan, Gairal gaan, Machhmara gaan, Nadir gaan, Dharmiya gaan, Kandon gaan, Bichhed gaan etc.

Dhua gaan:

Dhua gaans are sung by the people of the area when they are at work, tilling, sowing, de-weeding, or reaping in the fields together. Such songs reflect the socio-economic condition of the people while easing the burden of labour in the field.
In one song of this category the voice is that of a woman who is feeling suffocated in the grip of insistent deprivation, has lost her child and fallen in disaffection and indifference among the in-laws. She is mourning her fate, and thinking of the only recourse available to such women, going away to father's house-

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{are kinchi kata chul badani} \\
\text{galai niba chandra har} \\
\text{baper bari chaila jabalo} \\
\text{sader gaina nadile} \\
\text{ekta chhaon asilo tako nilo chile} \\
\text{dukha ki mor din thakte} \\
\text{agun dei sei chiler kapale}
\end{align*}
\]

(Ap-V)

These lines show the attachment of Charua women to different gaina (ornaments) like chandra har (necklace), kinchi kata (hair pin), chul badani (hair band), belief in the effectiveness of cursing or swearing, the disturbing reality of infant mortality, and the domestic and social neglect heaped on them. The chhaon (child) has been snatched away by the chil (kite), and hence it should suffer destruction by fire. The use of the expression baper bari is further indicative of the disparity in the position of men and women in the society.

In the following song the fickle mind is warned of straying from the right path. One should control one's mind and apply it to good deeds, treading on the path prescribed by hadis koraner katha (sayings of Hadis and the Koran). Otherwise, thakbena hader jora (the bones of the body will be
unhinged). Knowing this one should live a righteous life, a life of devotion and moderation:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{amar man lailaha je balo} \\
thik pathe je chalo \\
kupathe haiya raji \\
ajab pariba bado \\
tai buija man thik pathe \\
chalre amar pagla mana \ (Ap-IV)
\end{align*}
\]

The lines have similarities of import with *dehabichar gaan* in Assamese that teach indifference to body and material world. Though terms like *koran*, *hadis*, *behest* occur, the essence is spiritual and moral rather than religious. It reminds one of conflicts between good and evil in such works as *The Pilgrim’s Progress*, *Dr. Fastus*, and *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*. It is significant that the song is addressed to *pagla mana* (fickle, uncontrolled or mad mind). The religious or Islamic flavor, whatever, is only cosmetic and superficial.

The following song, on the other hand, celebrates madness.

\[
\begin{align*}
pagal pagal sabe pagal \\
tui kene pagaler khuta \\
pagal bine ei jagate bhalo hoi kera \quad (Ap-III)
\end{align*}
\]

There is no escape from madness, everybody is possessed by one sort of madness or other, be it a *ukil*, *muktar*, *jaj*, *balister*, *pitamata* or *sisu*. But more importantly the lines –

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ek pagal hai shib sanyasi teraj kaira kailat kali} \\
bhang dutura bhang jatha \\
bhang dutura bhang jatha
\end{align*}
\]
arak pagal narad muni

bilate bajay letha  (Ap-III)

mention shib, kali, narad from the Hindu pantheon or hariluk with such eclecticism that militates against any kind of rigid, frozen concept of identity.

Murshidi gaan:

Such songs are sung by wandering mendicants called fakirs who invoke the blessing of gurus or murshids in a spirit of self-surrender-

\[ gurur charan bhujib bale re e \]
\[ e more asa chhil \]
\[ chatak railo megher ashe e \]
\[ kono megh baye jaye anya deshe \]
\[ chatak bache kemane ? \]  (Ap-VI)

But all his supplications are in vain. So the singer-devotee feels like a thirsty chatak bird without any solace of rain though it sees clouds flying away to other land. The tree of hope that he had planted, bears no flowers or fruits; rather the sterile branches fall crashing on his head. He is sitting on the ashar nadi (bank of the river of hope) and only chari danda bela (short time) is left in his hand to sail across. The boat appears, but sinks near the bank-

\[ par nachapil loukare \]
\[ louka kinarai dubilore \]
\[ louka kinarai dubilore \]  (Ap-VI)

The use of secular metaphors like the chatak (bird), gachh, briksha (tree), nadi (river) is striking, and shows a fair degree of intellectual fiber at the folk domain. Such elements help sustain and transmit cognitive, linguistic efficiency and sophistication.
In another song of this strain, a man's life is compared to a boat/ship tossed up in the high seas of attachment and illusion. The only escape from certain drowning is the caring hand of the murshid, the dayal – the incarnation of daya or mercy-

\[
\text{o ami bhebe dekhi niropay} \\
\text{murshid bine gati nai} \\
\text{dhariya tolo dayal amare} \\
\text{eso ei adhiner hriday mandire}
\]  
(Ap-VII)

These songs and lines clearly reflect guru-shishya (teacher-disciple) parampara (tradition), so integral to the Indian ethos and to the cultivation of Sufism and Vaishnavism in particular. At the same time they retain the most important element of Islam – chanting His name is everything.

**Magan gaan:**

These songs are called magan gaan or geet because young boys move around singing them in the months of Pus-Magh (December-January), the harvest season while begging for donations. They sing and dance in the courtyards of people, seeking donations in cash or kind. In the song below we get references to bagun (brinjal) and its plant, a very common agricultural produce and eatable in the fertile land of chars, rakhals (cowherds) and their eating of karkara bhat (stale, cooked rice left overnight), taking out the master's cattle to the field and indulging in playful fights among themselves-

\[
\text{haliyare bhai haliya} \\
\text{hatir kade chariya}
\]
The use of *hathi* (elephant) creates the hyperbolic effect, and is intended to give symbolic strength to the group, and subdue the recalcitrant household to donate liberally. The sacred associations of elephant in the Indian context could be the other explanation for such uses. Similarly, the *rakhal* (cowherd) may eat only *karkara bhat* in the morning, but he gets a plenty of milk to drink, which gives him enough strength to defeat seven other *rakhals*—

*baro abal tero gai*
*tari amra dugdha khai*
*dugdha khaite nare sare*
*sat rakhaler nari satkhane pare*  

This could be ironical, and another hyperbolic expression to have the desired impact on householder. But like the scorpion's sting in its tail, the concluding lines dangle stick and carrot in the form of disincentives and incentives, curses and blessings to extract the maximum donation—

*ek ser chaul ek teka diyore*
*je dibo muth muth*
*tar habo bis phot*
*je dibo kula kula*
*tar hobo sat pola*  

One who gives in fistfuls may suffer from painful boils, while seven sons will result to one who gives in *kulafuls* (*kula*- a flat bamboo implement for winnowing husk from paddy and rice).
Biya gaan :

The Charua people of Nalbari district also celebrate their marriages singing songs at different stages of marriage. The songs show shades of different customs and beliefs associated with this important social institution. One song, sung by women, celebrates the custom of bathing the bride and the groom after applying haldhi (turmeric) paste and tel (oil) on their bodies. Known as teleni, the custom is believed to produce sanctity and freshness—

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{haldi tomar konkhane janam} \\
\text{amar janam chhayer karir made} \\
\text{haldi tumi konkhane nagibe go} \\
\text{ami nagmu bala balir gaye go} \\
\end{align*}
\] (Ap-XI)

In another song the women of the bride’s party target the groom’s father while referring to the bride as anarer kali (pomegranate bud)—

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{beli uthe dalaner upar} \\
\text{hay meri anarer kali} \\
\text{gaburer baper chhagula dadhi} \\
\text{hay meri anarer kali} \\
\end{align*}
\] (Ap-XVIII)

The song has references to the goatee of the groom’s father, his torn loincloth, snapping of the boat’s rope, rupture of the sail in mid-river, and the suggestion that the sail should be lifted by using the torn cloth as rope and sail—

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{gaburer baper chirana ningti} \\
\text{hay meri anarer kali} \\
\text{madhye nadit chirlo nayer badam} \\
\text{hay meri anarer kali} \\
\text{khulo ningti tulo nayer badam} \\
\text{hay meri anarer kali} \\
\end{align*}
\] (Ap- XVIII)
In these harmlessly playful, teasing lines the experiences of the present and collective memory of the past coexist without showing any trace of mismatch. The present of the community is tied to the boats that sail across the river Brahmaputra, often encountering problems in the form of sudden breaking of the ropes and rupture of sails in mid-stream. This difficult but accepted part of their present stands alongside a collective folk memory that still retains and displays traces of Arabic-Persian past in language and metaphor of the refrain line -

\textit{hay meri anarer kali}

The terms like \textit{meri} and \textit{anarer kali} take us backward in time and westward in space.

In the following song the women of the bride’s party address the groom, at the time of his bath, as a \textit{daroga} (police man) with implication that he has come to take away the bride after ‘arresting’ her -

\textit{hatu panit naima nayan daroga}

\textit{hatur sajan kare nayan daroga}

\textit{kumar panit naima nayan daroga}

\textit{kumar sajan kare nayan daroga} \quad (Ap-XVII)

The metaphor of \textit{nayan daroga} could be a projection of the desire to have a police man as the groom because of the folk experience in which a \textit{daroga} appears to be the frequently encountered, most powerful representative of government or power. This reminds one of a saying in Odia -

\textit{chakiri kariba pulisi}

\textit{machha khaiba ilisi}
A similar *daroga* motif we come across in the song -

*kuar pare pare helenchar gachh*
*kJal bhomorare*
*kJal bhomorare*
*tare madhye bada kusumer phul*
*kJal bhomorare*
*kJal bhomorare*
*daroga babu amak dake ki karane*  (Ap-XVI)

Here the groom is referred to in two metaphors– *kJal bhomora*, the black bee that has come to suck the nectar out of the *bada kusumer phul*, i.e. the bride. The metaphor of *kJal bhomora* is pan-Indian, and taken from nature. It has also the connotation of *Krishna* who is both black and a quintessential lover. The other metaphor is *daroga babu*. One additional element of the song appears in the line -

*sosur bhasur ami take karesi khun*

This line metaphorically means the taming of the bride’s father and the elder brother; their turn is over and it is now the turn of the *kJal bhomora* or *daroga babu* to have the field for himself with the *bada kusumer phul*, the bride.

In another song the women of the groom’s party sing lines that show how the bride is required to act according to the whims and desires of the in-laws –

*sosur babjani gesego mukalmuar hate go*
*sonar nalman tiya go*
The bride is welcomed to her new home with an endearing, affectionate address— sonar nalman tiyago (our delicate golden parrot). But soon it becomes obvious that she is surrounded by demanding in-laws who want her to act in different ways. It is only the fate of the bride to suffer in trying to satisfy the whims of all – sosur (father-in-law), sosuri (mother-in-law), nan (sister-in-law). This is a social reality not unique to the Charua community; it is endemic to all patriarchal, male dominated communities in South Asia. But the irony of the situation is that the women members of the groom’s household get co-opted to the power structure of male supremacy and act as its agents, creating a self-defeating drag on ideas of gender parity, women’s liberation. The bride’s sufferings find expression in the lines –

akas diya jayo oje dhupani eta chila go
sonar nalman tiya go
akas diya phatigo chhu diya macho nilo go
sonar nalman tiya go
machh nila bhalai karla hatkhan amar chirla go
sonar nalman tiya go} (Ap- XV)
The women of the groom’s party and those of the bride’s indulge in mock deception when they sing –

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{thakilore thakilore} \\
\text{kainar baintara thakilore} \\
\text{jitilore jitilore} \\
\text{nausar baintara jitilore} \quad \text{(Ap-XIII)}
\end{align*}
\]

This is contested by the bride’s party–

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{thakilore thakilore} \\
\text{nausar baintara thakilore} \\
\text{jitilore jitilore} \\
\text{kainar baintara jitilore} \quad \text{(Ap-XIII)}
\end{align*}
\]

The bride appeals to all to pray for her when she is on the verge of leaving to her in-law’s house –

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{biday deo biday deogo} \\
\text{jaba sasur bari} \\
\text{alla jeno bhalo rakhe} \\
\text{dua kairo amare} \quad \text{(Ap-XIV)}
\end{align*}
\]

The mother responds immediately–

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{jauga ma go sasur bari} \\
\text{dua kari tomake} \\
\text{sasur sasurir khejmat kairo} \\
\text{bhajan kairo samir} \quad \text{(Ap-XIV)}
\end{align*}
\]

Again the bride is tied to serve the in-laws and her husband. Mother’s or father’s \textit{dua} (prayer) to \textit{allah} will not do; it is only \textit{khejmat} (care) of \textit{sasur} and \textit{sasuri}, and \textit{bhajan} (worship) of \textit{sami} that will ensure her wellbeing. But, what
about her own khejmat and bhajan? The lore is silent, as also the society, on this point.

In the following song the women of the bride’s party enquire of the groom why he looks so pale, why he lacks a proper harirdo, and if he has no bhaibou (sister-in-law), bain (sister) and baintara (brother-in-law) to take care of him –

\[
o \text{are gabur tor ki deser bhaibou nai} \\
mukher siri kene uthe nai \\
o \text{are bali ase bhaibou daki nai} \\
mukher siri amar uthe nai \\
o \text{are gabur tor ki deser bainta nai} \\
matar alphabet kene uthe nai.
\]

(Ap-IX)

The song proceeds in the form of a dialogue between two parties one of which acts as the voice of the bride. A social reality that comes to light here is the vital role of the brother and sister-in-law, and sister and brother-in-law in making the groom bright and cheerful. Their absence or indifference mars mukher siri, matar alphabet and gayer siri of the groom.

The brother-in-law of the groom is the target of the women of the bride’s party in some songs. He is teased and mocked by the women who would like to earn a few bucks in the form of bribe from him –

\[
tetuler bichire hekare beka \\
gaburer baintar thuta beka \\
thutat marore char charda bari \\
aday korore ayor kari
\]

(Ap-X)
One marriage song refers to the festive mood of singing and dancing indulged in by the women at the house of the bride. They are tired of singing, dancing and moving around the village, and feel as if their hands and legs will go off, and the body would disintegrate. So they call upon the jamai (groom or son-in-law) to provide props (supports) of nali bash, kalagachh and bar bash. Moreover, to soothe their sore throat they should be given pan or betel leaf –

\[
gala bhainga gelo
\]
\[
gala bhainga gelo
\]
\[
amar gide gahane gala bhainga gelo. \quad (Ap-XII)
\]

Hudumtola:

\[edore bedore megh chaira deo\] is sung by farmers of the chars when drought sets in. In desperation they look up and pray to megh (clouds) to pour rain so that the fields will be wet and fit for plowing. The intensity of the dry spell becomes vivid in the lines –

\[
dail dhuibar pani nai
\]
\[
chaul dhuibar pani nai \quad (Ap-XIX)
\]

How can there be farming in such paucity of water? So the prayer is–

\[
hal khete baisiya
\]
\[
haler mati vijaiya
\]
\[
aisogo dayar megh
\]
\[
kaitan mure diya \quad (Ap-XIX)
\]

In the song we come across a community whose sustainability is linked to agriculture dependent on rain water. It also comes to light that their principal crop is \textit{dhan} (paddy) and staple food is \textit{bhat-dail}. The supplication shows the belief of the people in the effectiveness of prayers, a universal phenomenon.
Bhatiali gaan:

Some of these songs express the pent-up emotions of young women and girls who suffer from heart-breaks and boredoms in conjugal, family relationships. The boatmen sailing up or down the nearby streams appear to them as potential knights who could lift them out of the claustrophobic, frustrating situation–

\[
\begin{align*}
    \text{ujan deser sujani naiya} \\
    \text{hare bhatir dese jaon baiyare} \\
    \text{ki ki ainachho banij kariya} \\
    o amar naiyare & \quad \text{(Ap-XX)}
\end{align*}
\]

Her sufferings in the hands of the mother-in-law and the sister-in-law have been witnessed by the plantain plant and the patch of *kher* (reeds) at the backyard of her house–

\[
\begin{align*}
    \text{barir pase kherer na pala} \\
    \text{ar kata saiba ami} \\
    \text{sasurir jala} \\
    \text{seina jalai puira hoilam chhai} \\
    o amar naiyare \\
    \text{gharer pase sarpikala} \\
    \text{ar kata saiba ami nanadir jala} & \quad \text{(Ap-XX)}
\end{align*}
\]

Her joys and hopes have been burnt into *chhai* (ashes). And ironically the culprits are two female members of the family, *sasuri* (mother-in-law) and *nanad* (sister-in-law or husband's sister). Except in the matriarchal communities, oppressions of women by women is a bane of the Indian society, not just the *Charua* community.
Dehatatva gaan :

In these songs the *deha* or body is considered temporary, brittle and mortal whereas the soul is believed to be permanent. This leads to a kind of ascetic detachment in the material world and earthly pursuits. The following song depicts the body as a boat, the mind as the boat-man who has not taken proper care of the body or boat in saline water, and turned it back before its time –

\[
\text{maji asamay ken ghurailire re maji} \\
\text{maji asamay ken ghurailire re maji} \\
\text{loukar jatan karilina man maji} \\
\text{nayer age pachhai mamer bati} \\
\text{maj khane hay dakati} \\
\text{are loukar jatan karilina man maji} \\
\text{o tor bhara louka ghate baida} \\
\text{parar louka ken dabraili} \quad \text{(Ap-XXI)}
\]

So the *man* (mind) or soul enters another *louka* (body), leaving the earlier body at the *ghat* (ferry point). The body is the cause or site of all problems. Before the body, and after the body, i.e. before birth and after death, it is a moment and area of light where there is nothing to lose. The space in between is a point of conflict, suffering where life suffers robbery or dacoity. This song is like *charyya geet*, and Goalparia and Kamrupi *dehabichar geet* in which the body is compared to earthen pot or house, the world is compared to a trap or cage, life is compared to a crane.1 “The principal motif of these songs is spiritual absorption that speaks in general terms of the futility of man’s life and

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the presence of higher impulse that guides man’s destiny” says Hem Baruah.²

In dehabichhar songs also the body is supposed to be “a boat of which the mind is the oarsman guiding the five senses”.³

Kabi gaan :

These songs are performed by charan kabi (wandering minstrels) in the midst of people who gather in the open from afternoon till late in the night. The poets divide into two groups and turn it into a kind of poetic, musical contest. Often they compose lines on the spot while carrying forward the story line. In these songs we come across elements of both Islam and Hinduism, and a mode of presentation that has affinities with folk narrative or folk drama. Though initially a Hindu folk performance, the commonalities with Sufism have endeared it to the followers of Islam. The songs, thus, go beyond the orthodoxy of religion, and attain the height of secular, spiritual devotion and ecstasy. Such a kabi is called bayati or sarkar. As a kabi or singer is a veritable treasure trove of sur or swar (tunes), he or she is called sarkar (swar/sur+gar = swargar/sarkar). Some also explain the name as swarkar (creator of tunes).

Initially these singers used to wander from place to place singing in praise of kings and rulers, their dynasties and achievements. Hence they came to be known as charan (mobile/wandering/declaring) kabi. But later on such thematic restrictions have disappeared, and subject matter of such songs now includes contemporary socio-economic-political happenings. The stories narrated happen to be from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata, alongside the

² Das, Jogesh. Folklore of Assam, National Book Trust, India, New Delhi, 1972, 2005, p-110
³ Ibid, p-111
narratives Musa Nabi, Ibrahim Nabi, Ayub Nabi, Karbala, Naren Babu and others.

For the performance of a *kabi gaan* there must be two *sarkar* or *bayati*, one drummer, one harmonium player and one cymbal player. The last two players act as *doharis/hididhara* (followers or repeaters). While the former is called *pratham dohari*, the latter is called *dwittiya dohari*. This makes the affinity with *ojapali* of Assam, and *palla* of Odisha apparent. As the *sarkars* take the stage one after another, contest and challenge each other before they come to an amicable resolution at the end, the concluding resolution is called *juri palla* much like *badi palla* of Odisha.

*Charan kabi* Shantiram Sarkar has tried to capture the nature and objective of *kabi gaan* in the following lines of verse –

```plaintext
moder deshiya bhasaya gadha kabiganay
ei ganer sure shital kare byathiter paran
kabi ganer pradhan lakshya jen gadhe uthe desher aikya
bicharate jaha sukshma samajke tai kare dan
chaidhya shastra athar puran gita bible hadis koran
tule dhare shastra praman katha kare samadhan
gane barnana hay shastra tattwa ved puran bigyan sahitya
shunle sabay hayje matta hindu kimba musalman
ei gane ache ekti shakti hrude jagay shuddha bhakti
ante kise pabe mukti ei gane sandhan
gane barnana hay kabyasandhi dui jan thake pratidwandi
kar keman kathar phandi asarrei ta hay praman
```

-Akram Hussain Sikdar, Larkuchi
The secular credentials of *kabi gaan* are clear from the lines which form part of such a performance. In keeping with this secular spirit, such performances begin with invocations of both Islamic and Hindu godheads –

\begin{align*}
\text{allar name karlam shuru} \\
\text{nabijir charane nata kari meru} \\
\text{ram krishna bhagaban ohe dayamaya} \\
\text{anusthan shuru kari tomar kripay}
\end{align*}

-Akram Hussain Sikdar
Larkuchi

**Naokhelar gaan:**

The people of Nalbari *chars* sing songs at the time of boating or boating races. In such a song the chief oarsman seeks the blessings of the onlookers, and urges them to pray for their success –

\begin{align*}
\text{selam aleikum he o mamin bhai} \\
\text{amar selam dasore charane} \\
\text{are dasjane kariben dua} \\
\text{ami bale jai} \\
\text{bale lanka bale lanka} \quad \text{(Ap-XXII)}
\end{align*}

So singing the chief oarsman leads others in the boat, and they oar away. Prevalence of such songs shows the crucial role played by boats and river in the life of the community.

**Gairal gaan:**

In the *char* areas, the boats in the streams are matched by carts on land. These carts are drawn by buffalos called *maish* in the *Charua* language. These *gairal* (cartmen) sing songs while driving their carts on lonely tracks and
entertain themselves. In such songs we get an image of the *char* areas where family members are forced to move their separate ways to eke out a living –

\[
\begin{align*}
  & \text{bapo nai mor baritere garial bhai} \\
  & \text{maon nai mor kaditere garial bhai} \\
  & \text{tuila dibó hater chhata khani} \\
  & \text{eko bhai mor haluare garial bhai} \\
  & \text{arok bhai mor jaluare garial bhai} \\
  & \text{ami hoilam maisal bandhur dara} \\
  & \text{ja ja maish tara tari ja} \quad (\text{Ap-XXIII})
\end{align*}
\]

The song has references to four common occupations in the *chars* – *garial*, *halua*, *jalua*, and *maisal* (cartman, ploughman, fisherman, and one who looks after buffalos). Along with farmers, men of these occupations complete the scene of dominant activities in these areas.

**Machhmara gaan:**

*Machhmara* (fishing) is a prominent and rewarding activity of the people of Nalbari *char* areas. They catch fish in different streams of the Brahmaputra using boats, nets and rod and line. Fishing becomes easier in the months of May and June when fresh waves of flood come with rain. Not only the fishermen, but also the birds of prey like kites become expectant of getting enough fish–

\[
\begin{align*}
  & \text{jasti asargo mase gange ure chil} \\
  & \text{kato salar kamchorara gange falai sip} \\
  & \text{chalo jai machh marite} \quad (\text{Ap-XXIV})
\end{align*}
\]
In another fishing song there are references to a number of fishes and their natures in the form of a meeting where they have their say—

*bheda machhe aro khay keda*

*golsa machhe pan chapay*

*tepa machhe gal phulaiya ray*

*are katal machher madhye mota*

*pangkhas machher tin kata*

*taki machhe bajaise leta*  (Ap-XXV)

Other species mentioned in the song are—*pona, guina, mirka, kayaina, darkina, gajar, kani faila, bual, bhekti, puthi, rayek, maula, khalsa*. Another song mentions the commotion among fishes when rain comes—

*elo panir jal  barchhe machher digun bal*

*machhe machhe gandogal, ke rakhchhe khabar*

*taki machhe saki-suki  je khaichhe palar jata*

*se jane khabar*  (Ap-XXVI)

In the true tradition of folk literature, fishes like *darki, puthi, boal, kakila, taki* assume human characteristics (are personified) and conduct debate among themselves.

**Nadir gaan** :

*Nadi* (river) touches all aspects of these people. Though they get fish from it, and use it as a passage to move up or down the stream, they are mostly adversely affected by floods and erosion regularly. Such experience finds expression in the lines—
The song also refers to separation of near and dear ones because of the havoc caused by the Brahmaputra–

\[ \text{o mor brahmaputra nadire} \]
\[ \text{kichhu khaniio daya nai} \]
\[ \text{manusbor pratire} \]
\[ \text{desh bhangili, gaon bhangili} \]
\[ \text{bhangili balir charo} \]
\[ \text{are dainer kapal bame gelore} \quad \text{(Ap-XXVII)} \]

The havoc of flood and erosion results in destruction, separation and further migration–

\[ \text{kata apan manus niya dure pathaili} \]
\[ \text{paki ghar bhenge kherer ghar karili} \]
\[ \text{kata dhani manuske garib karili} \]
\[ \text{sona tulya khet matike marubhumi karili} \]
\[ \text{tor ki daya maya kichhui naire} \quad \text{(Ap-XXVII)} \]

In the process often new love is nipped in the bud–

\[ \text{kehoi gel mor kochbihare} \]
\[ \text{kehoi gel mor lalmanir hate} \]
\[ \text{bandhu gel mor aliparduare} \quad \text{(Ap-XXVII)} \]

This happens because the \text{nadi} or river is \text{pagla} (mad).

\text{Dharmiya gaan:}

The \text{char-chapori} people have different \text{dharmiya} (religious) songs called \text{kawalis} or \text{gazals} that they sing on different occasions. In one \text{gazal} the
story of Abdul Kader Jilani’s escape from the jaws of a crocodile is narrated. Jilani was the son of an old woman living in Bagdad. One day he went to have bath in the river and a crocodile snatched him away. But the crocodile let him free the moment it knew who he was—

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{chinoni, chinoni kumbhir tumi, amake chinoni} \\
\text{amar namti abdul kader jilani} \\
\text{jilaniro namti jakhan kumbhir sunilo} \\
\text{jilanike thuiya kumbhir palailo} \quad \text{(Ap-XXIX)}
\end{align*}
\]

Here we find the miraculous that is usually associated with all religions, lives of prophets and saints. Jilani was a miracle child, the blessing of Allah to an old woman. How could the crocodile harm him?

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ekti budhi bas karito bagdade} \\
\text{ekti putra dilen alla tahake} \quad \text{(Ap-XXIX)}
\end{align*}
\]

This reminds one of the miracles associated with Krishna, one of the ten Hindu incarnations of God, and even Mahapurus Sankardeva.

Another song is devoted to the story of Hazrat Ali’s death in the hands of the kafers and Fatima's mourning—

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{phul bagane baisa raise} \\
\text{batas deya fatimar gaye} \\
\text{putra soke praner agun} \\
\text{batase ki thanda haya} \quad \text{(Ap-XXXIV)}
\end{align*}
\]

One striking feature of these lines is the comparison between \textit{putra sok} and \textit{praner agun} that cannot be extinguished by wind.

In the song \textit{phul bagane phutlo nabin phul} there is the celebration of \textit{khoda} as the creator and source of everything – Mohammad Rasul, aras (sky),
kursi (Hadis). The wish of khoda made Mohammad bloom as a flower in the garden of swariyat. Without this flower nothing else would have seen the light-

\[
\text{pathailen khoda tare} \\
n\text{swariyater mul bagane} \\
n\text{sei phul jadi naphutito} \\
n\text{kichhu paida na haito} \\
n\text{nahaito aras kursi} \\
n\text{jalil rabbul bagane} \quad (Ap-XXXIII)
\]

The song ashraful ambiya islamer alisam recounts the life story of Nabi Ashraful from his birth in Arab land. The Nabi lost his father when he was still in the womb of his mother. At the age of six he lost his mother, at the age of twenty five he married Khadija, and at sixty three breathed his last–

\[
\text{ashraful ambiya islamer alisam} \\
n\text{janma nilen arabete nabidojahan} \\
n\text{tesathi basar bayas holo dayar nabiji mara gelo} \\
n\text{mrityur age adam santan ashraful} \\
n\text{ashraful ambiya islamer alisan} \\
n\text{janma nilen arabete nabidojahan} \quad (Ap-XXXV)
\]

Two other religious songs emphasize prem (selfless devotion) to get the affection and blessing of khoda, the supreme, or the Nabi–

\[
\text{premer mara jale dubena} \\
\text{haygo, premer mara jale dubena} \quad (Ap-XXXI)
\]

This prem or love of Yusuf Nabi or Ayub Nabi saves Jeleka Bibi and Rahima Bibi from adverse situations. Khoda listens if the prayer is appropriately submissive–
khoda tomai dakte janina
dakar mato dakle khoda ken sunbena  (Ap-XXXII)

The ideal devotees who have succeeded in moving khoda with their invocations are- Nabi Ali, Nabi Musa, Nabi Ibrahim, Nabi Ayub, Nabi Jakaria, and Nabi Yusuf –

ek daikesen yusuf nabi
machher pete railen tini
khodar name railen pari
hajam hailen na  (Ap-XXXII)

In some religious songs man is urged to tread the path of truth, righteousness, and follow in the foot steps of the Nabi –

satya bal, supathe chal
are pagla amar man
je pathe paba alla nabik
sei pathe kara agaman  (Ap-XXXVI)

aire manus ai, nabir pathsalate ai
pathsalate nam lagaya, nabir ummad haore bhai

(Ap-XXXVII)

One song puts utmost importance on the care and respect one gives one's parents–

ma baba ati apon ma babake karo jatan
mar kalijai aghat dile khoda sahena
alla nabijir daya tara pabina
ma baba ke kasta dile namaj roja jay biphale

(Ap-XXXVIII)
A peculiarity of these songs is their downplaying of orthodox, rigid religiosity, and foregrounding of spirituality, *prem* (true love), truth and right conduct in a very humanitarian, universal manner. There is no attempt to put such eternal values in the straightjacket of Islamic religion.

**Kandon gaan:**

Though the community is patriarchal, the value of the mother is fully appreciated by the children after her departure. The song mourning the death of a mother paints the agony of losing one's mother in vivid, eloquent terms–

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{ammar kandon jabat jiban} \\
\text{bainer kandon dui char din} \\
\text{gharer paribarer kandon} \\
\text{kahak dinto thakena} \quad \text{(Ap-XXXIX)}
\end{align*}
\]

The mother does not forget her children even once in her life. The sister may weep for *dui-char* (two-four) days, the wife's weeping does not last even a few days, but the mother sheds tears all her life. Any imminent harm to the son who lives away, comes to the knowledge of the mother–

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{dukher daradi amar janam dukhi ma} \\
\text{bidese bipake jadi chhele mara jay} \\
\text{parar loke janar age} \\
\text{age jane may} \quad \text{(Ap-XXXIX)}
\end{align*}
\]

In another song the mother mourns the untimely death of her son who has drowned in the river–

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{sonar chan chanre chan harailam nadite} \\
\text{machhe chine gahin pani pankhi chine dal}
\end{align*}
\]
Bichhed gaan:

Bichhed means separation. Sung by the elderly, these songs have elegiac notes born of separation from the lover or beloved. There is a strong desire to be reunited with the other, the thou. Devotion, complete submission or surrender to the supreme self is expressed in the framework of secular love. Separated from Him, life becomes a suffering in this world. Hence he cries out for a glimpse of the Almighty, but in a very humane way:

\begin{align*}
dekha deore e hare o dayal chan \\
tui kun khane lukaili i ekbar dekha dere \\
anek din hay dekhina tore e \\
tore na deikha ba kemane rai gharere e
\end{align*}

(Ap-XLI)

In another song the lover-beloved motif is quite obvious, and God is presented as a friend or lover who has ditched or betrayed the devotee:

\begin{align*}
baro dag lagaye chhere gelire \\
ore kon achin deshe
\end{align*}

(Ap-XLIII)

Thus, these songs have *prem* as the core value, much as it is in Sufism and Bhaktism.

Rhymes:

Rhymes constitute an important fraction of the oral literature of the people of Nalbari *chars*. They also refer to such rhymes as *gaan* or *geet*. 
Linked to plays and games, inducement of children's sleep, animals and birds, these rhymes throw light on the nature of this society.

**Ghumdeowa gaan:**

Lullabies are called *Ghumdeowa gaan* or *geet* in char areas. Usually sung by mothers, such songs are meant to make children sleep. With rhythmic swaying of the child, and softly patting its back, the mother sings these lines promising rewards and warning of dangers at the same time –

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{gom bala betara} \\
\text{gom diya jao} \\
\text{khutir madhye paisa achhe} \\
\text{guina niya jao} \\
\text{baisya aile nao dimu} \\
\text{kharali mase ghora dimu} \\
\text{khuti bhaira paisa dimu} \\
\text{ango mainak gom diya jao} \quad \text{(Ap-XLVII)}
\end{align*}
\]

The mother here promises *nao* (boat), *ghora* (horse) and *paisa* (cash) to make the child sleep. In the following lines she tries the stick of fear to achieve the same –

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{nindo nindo kalbadurer saon} \\
\text{kala khemna kala khemna} \\
\text{kalsi kina deon} \\
\text{kalsir madhye goma sap} \\
\text{gom gom kare} \\
\text{tari madhye mainar sasur} \\
\text{dadhi muchur pare} \quad \text{(Ap-XLVIII)}
\end{align*}
\]
Here we have a cluster of things or ideas that frighten children—*kalbadur* (black bat), *goma sap* (cobra snake) and a bearded fellow. Such songs have hypnotic, soporific effects on the children while relieving the mothers of the monotony of the chore. Though this points to some kind of psychological universality, mention of *nao, khuti, ghora, kalbadur, goma sap* reproduces the particular situation of the *chars*.

In such rhymes logic, grammar and probability— all are thrown to the winds because they are meant to match the children’s mental world ‘devoid of wounds of experience and burdens of life’. These lines also reflect the wonder, curiosity and imagination associated with the ‘big, blooming, buzzing’ mindscape of children.\(^4\)

**Khelar gaan:**

Rhymes associated with plays are also abundant among the people of this area. Sung by young boys and girls while playing, these lines increase their entertainment value and give an opportunity to the spectators to participate in the event by joining the singing. A good example is the following rhyme associated with swimming—

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{uan tu thri} \\
Pailam ekte bidi \\
Bidir nai agun \\
Pailam ekta bagun
\end{align*}
\]

\(^{Ap-L}\)

The rhyme lists a number of items which are integral not to swimming proper, but to the community’s being. They are— *biri* (country cigar), *bagun* (brinjal), *kesi* (scissors), *sand* (bull), *beng* (frog), *dhaka* (Dacca), *badi* (house or

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home), and *bhat* (steamed rice). Smoking of *biri* is a common habit and intoxication among the *Charua* people. The significant use of *dhaka* is a fossil from the past of the community, and a marker of its migrant nature. It is a good example of collective, racial memory being preserved in folklore material.

In the following rhymes children play counting games –

*eke ek ekasi*

duiye dasamik
tine tulasir pata
chaire gadir chaka

egharar ekki
barar chhepti
terar kechi kata
choudhyar rupa pata
ponarar pan thali
sollar deba gadi
sottarar sottar enchi
atharar amer gait
uniser gachh
biser lakh
ek lakh

(Ap-XLIX)

In one such rhyme there is a reference to 'Rampur', a place on the northern (right) bank of the Brahmaputra facing the *chars* in the river. This is an instance of the dynamic nature of the collective memory that continually keeps integrating appropriate and adequate markers from the spatio-temporal
presence into its body. So the lore harbours both 'Dhaka' and 'Rampur' - thus creating and sustaining a resonance around the community –

\[
\begin{align*}
aser bacha chai chai \\
ei maina tor badi kai \\
amar badi rampur \\
ami bechi chanachur (Ap-LI)
\end{align*}
\]

**Pashu-pakhir gaan:**

The rhymes involving animals, birds and insects are full of fun. In the following specimen they are presented as anthropomorphic beings in some sort of one-upmanship through dialogue –

\[
\begin{align*}
bilai kay machh khabona \\
khabo kata makkai jabo \\
o bilai kay \\
makkai jaya haj kariya \\
sada tupi mathay laba (Ap-LII)
\end{align*}
\]

This **bilai** (cat) giving up **machh** (fish), going on a pilgrimage to **makka** (Mecca) and sporting **sada** (white) **tupi** (cap) thereafter, is a beautiful example of pretension/affectation incarnate. Such pretenders abound in all societies, all places whether Dhakka, Rampur or Bhangnamari **char**. Listening to the **bilai** (cat), the **beng** (frog) croaks even a greater pretension –

\[
\begin{align*}
tai suina kay baya beng \\
amar achhe lamba theng \\
lampu diya lankai jaya \\
raban mayra raja haba (Ap-LII)
\end{align*}
\]
No society is free from such boasters. The *beng* makes a proud declaration that he will jump to Lanka, kill Raban and become king there. While the hollowness of the claim makes it quite comic, it turns the focus on such characters in our society. The use of 'Lanka' and 'Raban' in the lines immediately fits the rhyme to the grand Indian cultural matrix. In this competition or contest of pretensions, *juni poka* (glow worm) promises to cut the price of kerosene oil, and *endur* (mouse) warns of derailing the train. The reference to the kerosene oil is significant because, of the two most essential commodities the *Charua* people need from outside it is one, the other being salt. This is true of all difficult terrains in India or South Asia.

**Folk Sayings:**

**Distan:**

The people inhabiting the *char* areas of Nalbari district use proverbs and maxims called *distant* or *distan* in the *Charua* language. Of the maxims or wise sayings many are termed as *khanar bachan* or *dakar bachan*, quite familiar terms in Eastern and North-Eastern India and Bangladesh. These *bachan/distan* (sayings, proverbs or maxims) have intellectual vigour, moral and pedagogical utility. Some of such *distan* are –

\[ \text{karo pus mas, karo sarbanas} \quad \text{(Ap-LIII)} \]

One's time of prosperity could be another's time of adversity. Here *pus mas* (December-January) has been linked to the onset of prosperity through the harvesting of new crops.

\[ \text{jeman guru \; teman chela} \quad \text{(Ap-LIII)} \]

Like teacher, like student or disciple. This saying refers to the fact that one is moulded or influenced by the conduct of one's *guru* or teacher.
Slap one's own gal (cheeks) seeing milk-rice in the dish of the other. Here we find the nature of jealousy that only inflicts pain and suffering on the jealous. Moreover, it contains a truth or reality that has stood the test of time in the pan Indian context—dudh-bhat (milk-rice) as the ultimate delicacy and supreme nutrition that everybody aspires for.

Howsoever big the bottle gourd is, it remains under the leaf. Literally it is true. But giving a metaphorical twist, it is applied to the relative social positions of men and women with the latter always suppressed by the former; women are women, whatever the weight of their achievements. Blatant male chauvinism is obvious here.

The mulla or priest can run only to the masjid (mosque). This refers to the limited vision of mullas. Often applied to tick off persons not open to others' knowledge and opinion, and who doggedly stick to their dismally poor understanding. Its use is immensely secular and universal, though it has two core Islamic motifs in mulla and masjid.

One has an ox that refuses to pull the plough. For him this is suffering for ever. It is literally true. The experience is agonizing for the farmer in the field. From such experience and image there is a metaphorical transference to other situation where one has a son but he is not doing much, not applying himself.
*age dhare hayel*

*sei dui salai khay gayal*  
(Ap-LIV)

The two at the rudder get cursed. It is obvious because they have to lead the boat across turbulent waters to its destination safely. Others are ready to blame them. This is true of all situations; those who lead always come under attack.

*magna dai achal paita nei*  
(Ap-LIV)

When curd is free people want to take it in cloth. The implication is clear; freely available things are wanted by everybody only to be misused and wasted.

*jachle manikya nesta*  
(Ap-LIV)

*Manikya* (jems) lose value when proffered. It is true of everything. We tend to undervalue the things when we get them unasked.

*fakir anjade bhikshya beshi*  
(Ap-LIV)

More alms than the beggar deserves. So it depends upon one's stature, conduct and approach how much response she/he will receive from others.

*ek perai dhan khaya*

*ek perai han khaya*  
(Ap-LV)

One bull eats rice, another gets the stick for it. This is a universal phenomenon. Often the culprit goes scot-free; the innocent becomes the scapegoat, is victimized.

*nijer paot nijei kuiral mailo*  
(Ap-LV)
Wield the axe on one's own foot. This is an accident that the woodcutter sometimes encounters. But on the metaphorical plane the saying refers to all self-destructive, suicidal deeds committed knowingly or unknowingly.

“Conversation rather than oration is the most common milieu for both proverbs and conventional intensifiers…they have a moral weight of their own and an argument that is virtually self-sufficient…They are really the most formulaic elements of folk speech”, opines Dorson. The distan or proverbs discussed above also conform to such a description.

**Man:**

The people of the *chars* of Nalbari appear to be quite adept at using riddles, much like members of the community in other parts of Assam. Called *man* in *Charua* language, these riddles are used to kill time, to lighten the burden of some monotonous work or long walk, to subject the bridegroom to some playful interrogation or trial. These riddles show the intellectual agility of the community as a whole and preserve little but significant bits of information about the socio-cultural orientation of the people. Some of these *man* are discussed below –

\[
\text{rajar bari ghora} \\
\text{ek biyani kam sara} \quad \text{(Ap-LIX)}
\]

The *uttar* or answer to this riddle is *kala gachh* (banana plant). The plantain plant bears fruit only once, and then its utility is over much like the king’s horse that loses utility after giving birth only once.

---

etukuna dari

gusaite gusaite mari  
(Ap-LVIII)

Only a little piece of rope, but it takes the whole life before one can round it into a ball. The paradox of the situation is resolved when we know that the answer is road or way.

tumi asila khale
ami asilam dale
tomar sathe dekha haba mauter kale  
(Ap-LX)

You were in the pond, I was on the branch. We will meet at the time of death. The answer is machh and marich or jala (fish and chili). Fish lives in the pond, and chili grows in the plant. But both end up in the dish and thus meet each other in death.

kala kachu jale bhase

har nai tar mansa achhe  
(Ap-LX)

The kala kachu (black orum) floats in water. It has no bone but flesh. The answer to this riddle is jok (leech), a common nuisance in the swampy, marshy terrain of chars.

dile khaina

nadile khay  
(Ap-LVII)

It eats not when given, eats when not given; again a paradox. The answer is tupa or a kind of bamboo or cane mask that prevents a cow or ox from opening its mouth, and thus from eating crops. When the tupa is given, the cow cannot eat; when the tupa is not given or applied, it can eat. Thus the paradox is resolved in the answer to the man.
dui bhaiyer ek dam

ek bhai haraiya gile

arak bhaiyer dam nai  (Ap-LIX)

Two brothers have the same price. But when one is lost, the other becomes useless. The confusion disappears in the answer—chati or sandal. The chati or sandals are bought and used in pairs.

ek thali subari

gunte lage bepari  (Ap-LIX)

Only a dishful of betel nuts, but one needs a bepari (trader) to count them. How come counting a few nuts is such a big task? The mystery lies in the answer—tara (stars).

mamage kala gai

ghate ghate pani khai  (Ap-LVII)

The black cow of maternal uncle's house drinks water at different ghats (approaches or bathing points on rivers). The answer is barsi or angling rod and line. Here we have the evidence of a very common pursuit of the Charua people that is angling. The dynamic and ever evolving nature of lore is evident in the following riddle—

amar ekta mugar ase

baser pata khay

ku ku kaiya dak dile

bahudur jay  (Ap-LVI)
What is this *mugar* (cock) whose crowing reaches far off places? The answer is mobile phone. This is an example of the new being co-opted/integrated into the socio-cultural field of creativity at the folk level.

In some riddles there is a play on the letters of words, a kind of permutation and combination, as the following example shows–

\[ tini\text{ }akshyare\text{ }jar\text{ }nam \]
\[ jangale\text{ }bas\text{ }kare \]
\[ pratham\text{ }akshyar\text{ }katile \]
\[ jubatir\text{ }nam\text{ }bale \]

(Ap-LVII)

A three-letter name refers to an animal living in jungle. But the moment the first letter is taken away, it becomes the name of a *jubati* (girl). With some intellectual exercise the answer comes to mind: it is *harina* (deer). It lives in forest; if *ha* is omitted we get *rina*, a commonly used name for girls.

According to Dorson “Each riddle announces itself as being a certain type by its conventional phrasing. This conventional frame creates a pattern of expectation on the part of the hearers, allowing them to hazard a guess at the answer.”6 This assessment equally applies to *man* in circulation among the Charua community of Nalbari.

**Myths and Tales:**

In addition to these songs, rhymes, proverbs and riddles, the Charua people of the district have a good number of myths and tales in the repertoire of their folklore. As myths are embedded quite deep in the collective memory of a community, they have a simultaneous presence across a vast area with little

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variation. But these people use common terms like *galpa, kahini, kista or kissa* to refer to all folk narratives in prose, whether myths or tales. We find such myths as *Bhumikamp ar Sandgaru* (Earthquake and Bull), *Surjya ar Karbalar Tez* (The Sun and the Blood of Karbala), already discussed in the preceding chapter, quite popular in the *chars* of the district. They also tell the story of *Budhi ar Akash* (Old Woman and Sky) that explains why the sky is so high, beyond the reach of human beings:

“Once upon a time there lived a hunchbacked old woman. It was her daily chore to sweep clean the yard with a broom. At that time the sky was very close to the earth. One day, while the old woman was sweeping as usual, the sky touched the hunch on her back. This irked the old woman who struck the sky with her broom. This sent the sky so high above us.”

As Roland Barthes has pointed out, in all such archetypal stories the uniting relation between the narrative and its meaning is ‘essentially a relation of deformation’.\(^7\) There is also a transformation of ‘history into nature’.\(^8\) In the *Charua* myths such transformation or deformation also leads to the revelation of the truth.

Similarly, along with the much known pieces of *Rahim ar Rupwan, Beula-Lakhinder, Chilani*, the people of this area narrate many less known tales which they call *kista or kissa*, like *Bagh ar Shial Pandit, Raja ar Hathi, Naren Babu, Sabseye Misti Awaz* and others.

**Bagh ar Shial Pandit (Tiger and the Learned Fox):**

“A fox, trying to prey on the poultry of a village, gets caught and severely beaten. With a rope round its neck the villagers tie the fox to a roadside tree. The passers by enjoy themselves by raining blows on it. In a day or

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\(^8\) Ibid. p-154.
two the fox gets swollen and becomes as big as two tigers. At this moment a
tiger meets the fox and wants to know the cause of its good health. The fox
ascribes it to good care in his in-law's house with regular supply of chicken.
The tiger begs of the fox to allow him two days stay there. The fox takes the
chance, puts the rope around his (tiger's) neck and leaves the spot. Later the
villagers discover the tiger and beat him almost to death.”

As in all similar stories of tiger and fox, the later escapes with the help
of his cunning. Though relatively small in size, it succeeds in entrapping the
big cat with its cleverness.

*Raja ar Hati (King and Elephant):*

“A king had an elephant. It roamed around and ate the plants – branches,
leaves and fruits at will. One day a big jackfruit got stuck in its throat. It
returned home and fell ill. All the royal wisemen and *vaidyas* (country
physicians) could not diagnose the illness and failed in their attempts. But a
commoner, who had been watching the goings on from a distance, came to the
rescue by removing the thorny fruit from the elephant's throat and got rich
rewards from the king.”

As cleverness gets the better of physical size and strength in the earlier
tale, practical wisdom proves to be more useful here. The common man's
robust practical sense outshines the bookish knowledge of the titled wisemen
and physicians.

*Naren Babu:*

“Naren was born of poor parents who lost everything to educate him.
They sold their land, ornaments, and worked as farm and domestic hands for
others. In the meantime Naren got educated, went to the town, got a job and
married the daughter of a rich man. From Naren he became Naren Babu and forgot his parents. Though ultimately his pride was destroyed and he was brought to his senses, it was too late. He had lost his father and son.”

The story is significant because of its social reality. It is ironical that often educated children occupying good positions tend to become too self-centred to care for others, including their parents. The Charua society of Nalbari is not an exception in this regard. The tale could have entered the collective memory of the community when they were spatio-temporally close to the Hindu-Bengali ethos, as the name 'Naren Babu' suggests. But it is still dear to them, and fondly narrated because of its universal, contemporary relevance.

_Sabseye Misti Awaz (The Sweetest Sound) :_

“Long ago there lived a king. One day he wanted to know, which sound was the sweetest? The Minister told that it was the sound of _veena_. For another it was _sitar_. Still another named the _khol_, a kind of drum. While all were busy doing a little research on the matter, the palace priest took out a silver coin from his pocket and dropped it to the floor without the notice of others. The moment the coin fell to the ground it produced a jingling sound and everybody present looked its way. Then the priest/pandit said – O king, the sound of coin is the sweetest.”

In this short tale we get an idea of the materialistic and pecuniary interests and orientations of human beings in all ages and places. The message is put across simply and quite effectively.
**Bandar ar Shial (Monkey and Fox):**

“One day a *bandar* (monkey) and a *shial* (fox) were on their way as two friends. After some time they met a man who was carrying a bunch of bananas. The monkey took him unawares, and snatched away the bananas from the helpless man. Leaping to a branch of a tall tree he started eating the fruits. The *shial* (fox) sat under the tree and begged for a share of the bananas. But the monkey was not interested. When the fox pestered him with requests, the monkey threw only the peelings at him. The fox felt betrayed and humiliated, and left the spot. On the way he sat near the forsaken corner of a house with a nest of wasps hanging from the ceiling. After some time the monkey came that way and enquired what the fox was doing there. The fox said that he was listening to music. The monkey wanted to listen also. The fox prevented it from listening because he had made no payment. After some time, when the fox was gone, the monkey came back and tried to enjoy the music of the wasp nest by coming too close to it. This infuriated the bees and they stung the monkey to almost death.”

This story is a tit for tat one. The fox, as usual, comes out as a more intelligent creature that is never ready to take an insult or betrayal lying down.

**Bagh Raja ar Chatur Shial (The Tiger King and the Cunning Fox):**

“In a jungle there lived a tiger who was the king. Over years he grew old and weak. One day while after a prey, he fell into a hole and could not come out. He spent seven days without food and became still weaker. On the seventh day the cunning fox came that way and saw the tiger in the hole. The tiger pleaded with the fox to bring him some food. The fox went away promising to do something. On the way he saw a deer and persuaded him to come to the
tiger who would crown him the new king of the jungle. The deer believed the fox and accompanied him to the hole of the tiger. Seeing the deer approaching, the tiger, out of old habit and expecting an end to his misery, gave out a roar. This frightened the deer and he ran away for life. The fox rebuked the tiger for this lapse and tried again. This time the deer agreed to come after much persuasion. As advised by the fox, the tiger kept quiet when the deer came the second time. But he jumped at the deer the moment he came closer. The deer ran away, though its ear was bitten off by the tiger. On the request of the tiger king the fox made another attempt. The deer was convinced that the tiger meant no harm to him. He only wanted to whisper some dear words into the deer’s ears. This time the deer became the prey of the tiger. Eating the whole of the deer, the tiger got back some strength and jumped out of the hole leaving only the head of the deer there. In the absence of the tiger, the fox gnawed out the brain of the deer and enjoyed it. On coming back, the tiger charged the fox of theft to which the latter’s answer was: the deer had no brain, otherwise he would not have been a victim after repeated escapes.”

The story is an example of the frequent pairing of tiger and fox in the folklore of the region, of India as a whole. The fox, as usual, comes out as a cunning fellow for whom the nitwitted deer is no match. The deer is presented as a beautiful but fickle minded gullible fellow who falls to temptation. It is greed that leads to his downfall.

**Raja ar Fakir (The King and the Fakir):**

“Once upon a time there lived a *fakir* in a village with his daughter. He managed his family with the alms received from the people. His common refrain while begging was:

\[dengo, ma sakal\]
One day this refrain was heard by the king, and he wanted to know its meaning. When the fakir could not give any answer, the king threatened him with death if he failed to explain the lines within seven days. The fakir returned home without much alms, a crestfallen man. On the insistence of the daughter, the fakir told everything. Then the daughter took it upon herself to explain the lines. She told the king that in three days time the queen of the neighbouring kingdom would give birth to a boy and that baby would explain the lines. So knowing the king and his men started their journey to the other kingdom. On the way they spent night in the house of a fakir who lived with his wife and daughter. The mother and the daughter did not care much for the guests, and went to sleep after having their dinner, and leaving only a third of the food for the fakir. How to feed the king and his men? The fakir prayed to Allah and gave away his portion to the guests who had enough with the divine grace. In the morning, the king found all the three members of the fakir’s family lying dead. He arranged for their burial, and went his way to the neighbouring king’s palace. On reaching there he found that the queen had just delivered a son. Obtaining permission the king enquired of the infant about the meaning of words –

*dengo ma sakal*

*dile fal*

*na dile bifal*

The infant directed him to the backyard where an ewe was in labour, about to deliver. The king did accordingly, and asked the newly born lambs about these lines. The lambs said— they were the recently dead mother and
daughter who were rude to the guests and the hospitable fakir was the just born infant prince of that kingdom. Then the implication of the fakir’s words dawned upon the king.”

The story highlights the value of selfless deeds that earn heavenly bliss and reward. It also shows the domestic and material odds the world of a fakir is beset with. For the harsh life of peasants and workers in the Brahmaputra-Gangetic delta fakirali or fakiranti attitude has been a much needed psychosocial necessity to help the people cope with the elements of nature through the cultivation of some degree of otherworldliness that encourages fellow feeling as opposed to conflict.

**Bichhanmuta (The Bed-wetter)**

“In a village there lived a man who had the habit of bedwetting since childhood. The villagers got him married though he was reluctant to do so, knowing his own problem. The very first night with his wife did not pass well as the man wetted the bed as usual. The embarrassed wife wanted an explanation. The man said: in the dream an old man came with a pot and stick, and threatened to beat him if he did not urinate in the pot. Frightened, he did it and the dream came to an end, and the bed was wet. His wife gave him a solution: demand money of the old man if he comes again. The second night was even worse. It was both the calls of nature in the bed. To the disgusted query of the wife the man responded: when the old man came as usual, he demanded money. The old man expressed his inability and suggested that they went for stealing in the house of somebody, and then he would make payment. When they broke into the house of a man, they were surrounded by members of the family. In the melee the old man escaped, he was caught, and mercilessly thrashed. This made him soil and wet the bed. He did not stop there, and
blamed it on the wrong advice of the wife. The poor woman acceded to this charge, and readily volunteered to do the amends by washing and clearing the bed.”

The fun apart, bedwetting is a personal and domestic/conjugal problem. What is noteworthy in the story is the promptly produced excuses by the bed-wetter. The old man, and his wife, everybody else is to blame for his bedwetting, not himself. At the receiving end is always the wife or woman. With a bit of metaphorical twist, wives, women may be seen as being surrounded by bed-wetters. The wife submits to the illogical blame, rather meekly. This is a social reality. The bed-wetter, thus, cuts both ways, as a metaphorical idea.

‘nai jatui haokna bado, pater tal’ – the distan says as much.

Sat Bhaiye (Seven Brothers) :

“Days ago an old man had seven sons. One day they thought of going out for work together. On the way, in search of work, the eldest counted and said that they were six, not seven. Others also counted and found six. This confounded them no end. One bhadralok (gentleman) passing by noticed that each one was counting excluding himself, and hence the result was always six. He offered to restore the lost one, and counted excluding himself and the seventh came back. The brothers were so happy that they offered to work for the man for one whole month without wages. The bhadralok took them home and asked them to de-weed the brinjal garden. The brothers went to the field, and cleaned the field of everything, including the brinjal plants. The next task given to them was washing the man’s son who had soiled his clothes and person with stool. They followed the wish of the bhadralok to wash clean the boy wholly, thoroughly. In the river, after washing his outside body, they
knifed open his bowel and completed the task entrusted to them, and deposited the cleaned but lifeless body of the boy to the father. Seeing this, the bhadralok went mad.

The moral: if you intend to deceive others, you get deceived instead.”

A man having seven sons, but of what use if this is the quality. It is far better to have fewer sons if they have the minimum of understanding. It could be a critique of the society’s urge to have only sons, more and more sons. On the other hand, the story wants others to be wary of bhadralok who is always on the look out for opportunities to deceive, exploit others. He is not just a man, but a ‘gentleman’, a bhadralok. The irony is glaring. Who says folks are dull, and rustic ? They may not affect and theorise, but they live sophisticated concepts like paradox, metaphor, and irony.

**Bandar ar Shial (Monkey and Fox):**

“One day a fox, driven by hunger, came to a village, and saw that a monkey was in a black-berry tree and eating the berries. He sat under the tree and asked the monkey for a berry. The monkey gave him one. When the fox asked for another the monkey became angry. He jumped at the fox and entered its pet (belly). The fox, carrying the monkey in its belly, became mad and started running here and there. On the way an old woman, who was with a goat, pointed to the big belly of the fox that became angry and said –

*budhi, pet pet karaisna  peter bar jala*

*badi khaite bandar khaisi  tore khaite ki lagbo*

So saying he devoured the old woman. On the way he came across a group of cowherds and devoured them also, the pet becoming still bigger. Then he met the marriage party of a groom who teased him again – *de kho shiyaler kato baro pet* – see, see what a big belly the fox has ! The fox devoured all the
members of the party and went its way. By the side of a river a group of fishermen saw him and teased his pet. The fox said –

*pet pet karisna  peter baro jala*

*badi khaite bandar khaisi*

*barki banda budhi khaisi*

*biyar bardal khaisi*

*torge khaite ki lagbo !*

So saying when he advanced to eat the *jutiala* (man with spike), the latter struck at his belly with the *juti* (spike) and the belly was cut open. Then everybody inside it came out and started running to their respective places, and the fox fell dead.

*dara kheti pani*

*ei kista eikhani jani."

This story is an exception where the fox loses out in the end. While the height of fantasy endears it much to Charua children, we get a picture of Charua life in the images presented – fox, monkey, black berry tree, the old woman with a goat, the groom’s party, and a bunch of fishermen going for fishing. At the same time, all-devouring nature of hunger symbolized as *pet* (belly), is highlighted in the narrative. Hunger controlled, is satisfied with a *badi*, a berry. But hunger coupled with greed is harmful for everybody in the society, including the hungry and greedy.

**Ghora Anda (Egg of Horse)**:

“One day the son of a poor man wanted money from his father to buy a horse. The father gave him a little money and asked him to buy a small horse. The son went to the market and bargained with the horse sellers one of whom said that he was not with enough money, and directed him to buy an egg of
horse instead. The son entered the nearby vegetable market and bought a bangi (a variety of cucumber) for horse-egg. On the way back home he put the egg on the ground and went to the riverside to ease himself. In the meanwhile foxes in the bushes got the smell of bangi, came in a pack, tore it open and started eating. The boy came back, and thought that the foxes were the young ones of horse just coming out of the egg. Seeing him the foxes withdrew. But the boy started chasing them shouting – my horses, my horses, and requested the people to help him get his horses. The people laughed at him, called him boka (fool) as he was running after foxes thinking them to be horses. Put to shame thus the boy returned home heart broken.”

The story shows that there is no bottom to foolishness. And fools are mercilessly exploited by others in the society, selling them ghora anda (horse eggs), laughing at them. At the same time the message is: who goes for a ghora without knowing his ability, ends up with a ghora anda.

Shial, Bagh ar Bandar (Fox, Tiger and Monkey):

“One day a cowherd noticed a hole where lived a fox and his family. He prepared a ring of dry leaves, straw and weeds around the mouth of the hole and declared his intention: the following day he would set it on fire. At night the worried she-fox suggested that they should leave the hole when there was time. The fox retorted: tora halo magi jat – bhay beshi (you women have more fear). But the she-fox, who was pregnant, could not overcome her anxiety. The next day the cowherd came and set the ring on fire that quickly spread towards the hole. The fox and his wife ran away for life and entered a hole of a tiger who was not there. The she-fox gave birth to pups in that hole and suggested that they should move out before the coming of the tiger. The fox asked her not
to worry. In the meantime the monkey informed the bagh mama (tiger uncle) that his hole had been encroached upon by the fox and his family.

The tiger fumed and rushed back towards the hole accompanied by the monkey. The fox told his wife to pinch the bottoms of the pups when the tiger came sufficiently closer. She did accordingly and the pups cried out. The fox said: ‘Let the tiger come closer. The poor monkey has done my bidding and brought the tiger to us. You will have a good meal of him and quench your hunger.’ When these words fell in the ears of the tiger, he was frightened and ran away. After covering a long distance he took some rest and started blaming the monkey. The monkey kept persuading the tiger that it was a fox and his family, and he should not be in fear. At last he tied himself to the neck of the tiger, sat on his shoulder, and they came towards the hole again. This time the fox played another trick, and said aloud: ‘As agreed upon the monkey has done his job. He has brought the tiger tying a rope around his neck.’ When the tiger heard these words, he became suspicious of the monkey and started running away, dragging the monkey behind. The poor monkey died, beaten to this tree and that tree.”

The tale has usual animal characters like fox, tiger and monkey. These animals are quite familiar to the historical-geographical present and past of the community. The fox displays his cunning nature already noticed in other tales; the monkey shows his clumsy meddlesomeness for which he pays with his life; the tiger, bigger and stronger though, proves to be duller. It is again a celebration of the triumph of cerebral power over the body or physical power, through the character of the fox. But there is an additional element in the shape of male chauvinism displayed by the fox when he browbeats the she-fox with the words: ‘you women have more fear.’ As in all such narratives, these
characters have evolved with the superimposition of different human values that the concerned societies and cultures are theoretically aware of and practically exercised with.

**Gazi, Kalu ar Champabati (Gazi, Kalu and Champabati):**

“Long ago there lived a king called Saha Sikandar. His eldest son Julhas went to Patal Nagar and did not return. The queen Ajufa Sundari one day went out to see the river, and the experience made her mysteriously pregnant. In due course a son was born, and he was given the name Gazi. When he grew into ten years old princely boy, Saha Sikandar offered him the crown. Gazi refused to rule, and wanted to be a *fakir* instead. The king got angry and put his son through different ordeals. Gazi was thrown into a fire pit from which he came out unharmed after three days holding ashes in his hands. Then ten elephants were made to stamp on him. But Gazi was not killed. This time the king threw him into water tying a pitcher of stone around his neck. By Allah’s grace the stone kept floating, and Gazi survived. When nothing succeeded in harming him, and daunting his determination, Gazi took leave of his mother and went away. The younger brother Kalu also joined him. After a long journey the brothers came to Sundarban and lived there. All the tigers became Gazi’s disciples, the *gins* (spirits) and *paris* (fairies) became subservient to him. From there they went to Safai Nagar in Sriram Desh, the kingdom of king Sriram. In the guise of beggars they entered the palace. But the *katowal* (sentry) threw them out. They lived in nearby forest and found enough food by the grace of Allah. Kalu cursed that the king’s palace should catch fire, and this happened. In the melee that followed the queen was given shelter by the *fakir* brothers in their mosque. Later the king wanted to know the cause of this mishap from a Brahmin. Advised by him, the king sent messengers to the mosque and got
back the queen. The king and the queen repented profusely, read *Kalima* at the mosque and became disciples of the *fakirs*.

Gazi-Kalu’s next destination was Sonapur. They cleared forest there and built a resplendent mosque furnished with canopies of gold and silver. A fairy flew Gazi at night to the bed of Champabati, the daughter of the Matak king. In two hours time he was flown back to Sonapur where he stayed under a banyan tree by the side of the river. The next morning Champabati came to the bathing *ghat* of the river and did not appear to remember Gazi. Kalu felt for his brother, and went as a *ghatak* (messenger) to the Matak king begging the hand of Champabati for Gazi. Incensed by such audacity and trespass on the part of a *jaiban* (Musalman), the king imprisoned Kalu. Gazi went to Sunadarban and brought all his tiger disciples in the shapes of sheep, came back and encamped on the southern border of Matak kingdom. Dakshin Ray was the Matak general. He used to take nine buffalos and seven maunds of rice for one meal. He prayed to river Ganga who offered him crocodiles to fight Gazi’s tigers. In the battle that ensued Dakshin Ray was held captive by Gazi, and tied to the leg of a cot. The Matak king entered into a truce with Gazi. This resulted in the freedom of Kalu, and marriage of Champabati with Gazi. The three – Kalu, Gazi and Champabati – went to another country. Turning Champabati into a tree, Gazi and Kalu entered Patal Nagar and rescued Julhas from there. Then the four went back to the kingdom of Saha Sikandar after taking leave of the Matak king. From there Gazi went to Bangladesh where he died, and where his *majar* (tomb) stands today.”

The tale has all the elements of a fairy tale, a wonder tale – journey, adventure, ordeal, miracle, separation, and finally reunion. In spite of the layers of exaggeration and flights of fancy, the narrative is grounded in history and
geography of the vast region stretching from the Bay of Bengal up to the Brahmaputra valley in Assam. This history and geography enfold the processes of forest clearing for agriculture, spread of Islam, building of mosques, inevitable conflicts and eventual compromises. The terrain has been a compromise, or rather a chain of compromises between land masses and water bodies, between tigers and crocodiles. Thus, the tale is an example of the embodiment and preservation of the past through memory. The mention of the name Bangladesh proves a point: the dynamic nature of tradition and culture of which folklore is an important living ingredient.

*Rajkanya ar Rakhal (The Princess and the Cowherd):*

“Many days ago there was a king. He had a daughter. In course of time she became young and was of marriageable age. The king became anxious to find a suitable match for her. But the princess had a condition. She would marry someone – even if he were a barber, a washerman, a cobbler, a plowman – who could answer the following riddles:

\[
\text{sagarer madhye baghar paon} \\
\text{ek chhagale khay satsa naon} \\
\text{sunahe kanya bibaran} \\
\text{endur hoiya bilai marlo kikaran}
\]

Many suitors came to try their luck, but they failed in cracking the riddles, and were put in the prison. One cowherd learnt about this and volunteered to try his luck much against the wishes of his parents. On the way he came to a river, and while sitting on the bank he saw a cake of dry cow dung floating in water and noticed the mark of a tiger’s paw on it. While waiting for the boat he made toy boats using leaves of the jackfruit tree nearby and threw
them into water. A goat grazing there picked up these boats and ate them one after another in hundreds. The boy crossed the river and took shelter in the house of a man as night fell. At night he saw something strange: a mouse nibbled away at a sika (suspenders made of jute) that supported a heavy pot. After minutes the suspender snapped and the pot fell on the head of the cat below, and it died on the spot. The next day the cowherd proceeded to the king’s palace and faced the riddles of the princess. Using his experience on the way he explained each riddle to her satisfaction. The king offered his daughter to the cowherd in marriage and gave him all his wealth.”

The narrative has fairy tale elements like the king, the princess, her strange wish regarding the marriage, the knight in the form of the cowherd, and his successful quest. The cowherd, a very common character on the agrarian, riparian scene, becomes the knight who ultimately succeeds in getting at his goal. The common sense born of is rich earthly experience enables the cowherd to solve the riddles posed to him and he wins the prize in the form of the princess as his wife.

Char Jantu ar Rishi (Four Creatures and the Saint):

“Long ago there lived four creatures in a well – a snake, a monkey, a bear and a man – in a forest. A saint lived under a tree nearby. One day a person met the saint and requested him to rescue all the creatures from the well except the man.

Thereafter the saint came to the well and the creatures called out to him, ‘uncle saint, uncle saint save us’. The saint was moved and he threw a rope into the well. The first to come out was the monkey. He thanked the saint and told him to go to the tree where he lived whenever the saint felt hungry. He would give him fruits. The next to come up was the bear who thanked the saint and
invited him to the den in the forest whenever he wanted any help. The snake was the third to follow. He offered profuse thanks to the saint and told him to remember him when he was in trouble. Then the saint rescued the man despite the warning of others. The man came out and told that he was a smith in gold and silver, and lived near the palace of the king, and told the saint to meet him if he wanted to make ornaments. After days the saint felt hungry and went to the tree where the monkey lived. The monkey gave him delicious fruits. When in want the saint also went to the den of the bear and got a precious gold chain that could be bought by only kings with princely sums. The saint took it to the smith but the latter betrayed him to the king as a thief who had stolen the chain of the prince. The saint was put behind the bars to be hanged the following day. This time the saint remembered the snake. The snake appeared with a plan: tomorrow when the saint would be led to the gallows, he would bite the queen; this would create a commotion and the execution would be stopped; when all attempts would fail to cure the queen, the saint could touch the forehead of the queen and she would be revived. Things proceeded as per the plan. When the queen was cured, the king freed the saint and gave him rich rewards. The saint went back to his tree and sat there brooding: he was put in danger by the man he rescued. So he swore never to come to the help of a man in future."

So, the story highlights the mischief, the ingratitude of man. This defect in man becomes glaring when compared with the sense of gratitude on the part of monkey, bear and snake – the ‘sub-human’ creatures.

**Hatim Tai:**

“Hatim Tai was born in the Tai family. He was a miracle child, and his birth came after his mother wished for ‘Hatim’ in a dream. Hatim showed his unusual character since the days he could eat by himself. He started sharing all
his food with others. When he found nobody with whom he could share his food, he did not eat. This was resented by his father who sent him away with a herd of camels, and a slave woman to attend upon him. While grazing the camels, Hatim came across no friends. So he came to the road to see if he could find some others. After some waiting, a group of riders came that way. Hatim got acquainted with them and treated them with sumptuous meals killing a camel. He enjoyed himself playing the role of a generous host. Later on Hatim distributed the remaining ninety nine camels among these travelers who were on their way to another country. Hatim’s joy knew no bounds. This came to the ears of Hatim’s father. He came running to the field and enquired about the camels. Hatim’s reply was that he had given away all the camels to his friends, his guests from the other land. His father disowned him then and there. Hatim Tai went his own way with the slave girl, the female camel and its young one.”

The tale is a residue of the collective Islamic memory that stretches back to its Arab past, history and geography. Hatim Tai’s inclination to share all earthly or worldly possession, including his own food, makes him an epitome of sacrifices and friendship. The popularity and survival of the tale attest the need for such an ideal that was badly needed in the era of Islamic inception and spread. The utility of the ideal has not been found superfluous even in the Indian context, in the context of clearing of forests, possession of land for cultivation in the recent centuries, to the present days of the Charua people who live a life of constant struggle and conflict for new pieces of land for farming and habitation.

_Gopal Bharer Kissa (Tale of Gopal Bhar) :_

“One day Gopal Bhar, Gopal the jester, was returning from bazaar with a big boal fish for his ailing mother. On the way he met the kaita daktar
(country doctor) who mischievously informed that Gopal Bhar’s mother had breathed her last. Learning this Gopal Bhar hurried back home, leaving the fish for the doctor. Reaching home he discovered that his mother was alive and doing well. He realized that the doctor had taken him for a ride. Full of anger within, he maintained his calm and waited for a suitable moment when he could take revenge on the doctor. Days passed. One day Gopal Bhar met the doctor and told that he had a nasty boil on his posterior and giving him trouble. Invited by the patient, the doctor went to his home to give some relief to Gopal Bhar. Gopal climbed up to the ceiling so that the doctor could have a better view of boil from beneath. While the doctor was trying to locate the boil and examine it, Gopal Bhar released everything from his disordered bowl into the face of the doctor and had a hearty laugh –

\[\text{kar gata ke khure}\]

\[\text{jar jar gata sei sei khure}\]

(Whose hole who digs, we dig our respective holes)"

So the story reveals the character of Gopal Bhar who is always ready to play the game of ‘tit for tat’ even if the means are crude. He is never prepared to take any dig, insult or deception lying down. He is an unflappable character who maintains his cool to execute his revenge through presence of mind and cunning. Such tales involving Gopal Bhar belong to the lore of a vast area cutting across political and linguistic barriers in Odisha, Bengal, Bangladesh and Assam. Like \textit{dakar bachan}, \textit{khanar bachan}, gopal bhar narratives serve as a common thread that helps weave this cultural, linguistic continuum.

\textit{Dui Chor (Two Thieves)} :

“One night two burglars broke into the house of a businessman when the latter was not at home. His wife had kept his meal—steamed rice and fish
curry– covered on the table, and gone to sleep. The thieves got tempted by the sight of food, especially fish curry, and ate everything. One thief climbed up to the ceiling and the other sat under the cot in hiding. After sometime the businessman came, entered the house and enquired of his wife if his meal was there. The sleepy wife directed him to the table where he found nothing and shouted at her in anger. She got up and discovered the truth. When the businessman pressed further the bewildered wife wondered, *opar ballai jane* (the one above knows) meaning ‘god knows what has happened to the meal on the table’. But to the thief on the ceiling it appeared as if the woman was referring to him. In panic he shouted that the other hiding under the cot also knew it, i.e. he was also equally responsible. The two thieves came out of hiding and fell at the feet of the couple begging pardon. The businessman and his wife forgave them, and the thieves left.”

The tale involves burglars who fail in their attempts because of their temptation– first they are tempted to commit theft, then they are tempted to eat the food on the table. In addition they are hampered by their dullness that leads to their misunderstanding and panic reaction. On the other hand, the goodness of the couple as evidenced in their act of pardoning the thieves gets the support from some chance uttering of the name of God – *opar balla*.

*Dui Budhar Kissa* (Tale of Two Old Men):

“In a village lived two old men – one rich, the other, poor. One day they decided to go on *haj* together. Though the poor man was ready to undertake the journey at the earliest, the rich man went on postponing it on different pretexts– he would go after his son’s return from the army, he would go after his grandson’s marriage etc. After much persuasion and prodding by the poor man,
the rich man agreed to start the journey. He handed the responsibility of the house to his eldest son, took a big amount of money and left home. The poor man left with whatever meager amount he could manage by selling a beehive he had. While the rich man had no bad habits like taking tobacco, betel leaf, or smoking, the poor man enjoyed smoking his hookah that he left at home. So on his way he became friendly with others to share their hookah. With the same purpose he entered the house of a man, and asked the rich man to move on. Inside the house, he saw half-starved members on the floor. He enquired and came to know about their misery – their loss of land and cattle to the landlords and money lenders. He offered them whatever money he had, and they bought back their land and cattle. The family got a new lease of life. The poor man was happy and returned home from there. The rich man continued his journey, and reached Mecca after three days. But his mind was full of anxieties; he was worried about his sons, whether they were taking proper care of the fields or not. In the crowd he saw his friend, the poor man, and wondered how he could reach there earlier. He tried his best but could not get to the poor man; he appeared and disappeared in the thick milling crowd. After a few days, the rich old man came back and was wonder-struck to see the much improved condition of the poor old man’s household. But the condition of his household had become far worse.”

The tale, saving the narrative framework of a pilgrimage to Mecca, the haj journey, highlights the value of goodness, purity of mind, and sincerity of purpose. The poor old man is really pious; he knows no affectation. For him piety, religiousity consists in simple, sincere living not given to worldly attachment, and anxieties. He breaks his journey after spending his money on the needy and returns home. But he gets the blessing; he succeeds in
completing his real journey, the journey in the mind. With the rich old man, the journey is outward, and it is completed. But the real journey in mind does not take off, burdened as it is with affectations, materialism and insincerity. So the pilgrim’s progress is always mental and inner journey, not physical, outward movement. This is a universal belief across religions and faiths.

*Dui Dusta Loker Kissa (Tale of Two Wicked Men)*:

“Long ago two wicked men lived in a village. They did everything jointly; practised all their villainies together. So they decided upon a joint marriage, and took one woman as the common wife. Being wicked to the core, they were suspicious by nature and kept vigil on all the movements of the wife by turn. The woman felt suffocated and in disgust enquired of the husbands the reason for keeping constant watch on her. The husbands replied that all the villagers had been victims of their wickedness, and they might do mischief with her to take revenge. This was too much for the wife; she felt humiliated and declared that all their precautions would be futile if she decided to betray them. Throwing such a challenge to her husbands, the wife got busy with her machinations. She made contact with a wicked, lascivious man of the village and invited him home one night. He entered as planned while the husbands were asleep on both sides of the wife, slept on her and left before daybreak. All along one husband thought that it was the routine act of the other. In the morning both of them sulked and did not speak to each other. Noticing this, the wife chuckled and said that she could commit all mischief while sleeping between them; they would not get to know. Hence people say – even if the crow is washed with milk it will never be white.”

The tale is a comment upon man-woman relationship and the psychology of guilt. As the husbands are villainous and wicked, they see their
ghosts everywhere, including their wife. On the other hand, trust between man and woman, husband(s) and wife is a mutual product or phenomenon. Complete distrust leads to complete betrayal of trust and revolt. Ironically, she regains and retains her self from the stifling distrust of the husbands by willingly committing the act with the third. Thus, her ‘act’ becomes an act of liberation at the personal level, and also at the level of women as a community. The value of trust in inter-personal relationship is a universal phenomenon, and the live presence of the narrative in the lore of the Charua community is evidence that the people of these chars are linked to this grid of universality.

Kanya Ghadiman (Daughter Ghadiman) :

“Many years ago there was a king who had big and beautiful palaces, and loads of wealth. He was brave, and did whatever he intended to do. His daughter’s name was Ghadiman who was also like her father – proud and arrogant.

The king had a cowherd namely Sujan. Every morning he went to the field with cows, sheep and goats, and returned in the evening. One day he saw a strange sight in the woods near the grazing field – a man was weighing sand in a balance quite aimlessly. The cowherd approached him and enquired what he was doing. The man said that he was weighing the fates of different persons. But he forbade Sujan to share it with others. Sujan returned home in the evening, and he could not help sharing his experience with Ghadiman. She was surprised and asked Sujan to give a report of his daily experiences.

The following day the cowherd went to the field as usual. This time he saw the man tying a bunch of bina weeds to another. When Sujan became curious, the man said that he was fixing matrimonial matches of people. Ghadiman heard of it in the evening and asked Sujan to enquire about her
match of the mysterious man the following day. The cowherd did so and got a disturbing response: Ghadiman’s marriage had been fixed with Sujan. That evening Sujan could not muster courage to divulge it to Ghadiman. But her insistence proved too much and he reported the words of the man. Ghadiman, the princess of Virat Nagar, could not stand it. She threw the oil pot in her hand at the forehead of Sujan in anger and injured him. The cowherd left Virat Nagar and went to Haicha Chor-Paicha Chor in the neighbouring kingdom.

After days Sujan narrated everything before Haicha Chor-Paicha Chor. He was so trained in the art of thievery that he could steal eggs from under doves. Blessed by the expert thief he wrote a letter to the king of Virat Nagar that on twelfth of the month at midnight Ghadiman would be stolen away by him. After receiving the letter the king took all care to prevent it, and confined Ghadiman to a room under watch. But Sujan came, entered the room in disguise and spirited away Ghadiman when she was still asleep. He also dropped a letter for the king informing him of his operation, and intention of marrying Ghadiman. In the house of Haicha Chor-Paicha Chor they got married and started their conjugal life. Ghadiman did not know that she had married Sujan. After a few days she marked the scar on the forehead of her husband and recognized Sujan who reminded her of the words of the strange soothsayer he met while serving as a cowherd in the palace of the king of Virat Nagar.”

The tale with fairy tale elements – the rustic cowherd becoming an expert thief with the help of other thieves, the soothsayer, princess spirited away and married. Sujan acquires superhuman, mythical powers with the help of which he could steal Ghadiman and marry her. The words of the soothsayer are proved right. The narrative revolves round the belief that fate or destiny is
inescapable. In a harsh, hostile terrain full of dangers in the form of floods, erosions, wild animals, destiny gets an upper hand, and people become fatalists. Given the harsh present, and harsher past of the Charua people, it is no wonder that the tale is treasured and relished by them.

**Tuna Tuni:**

“At a place lived one couple. The husband’s name was Tuna, the wife’s name was Tuni. One day Tuni went to the field to glean ears of paddy. Suddenly there appeared a tiger in front of her. Tuni started running in fear and somehow entered her home. She told Tuna to flee if he wanted to live. The tiger, chasing Tuni, entered their home. Tuna and Tuni entered a big earthen pot to hide. The tiger started searching for Tuni in the house. In the mean time Tuni felt as if she would burst if she could not fart. She whispered this into the ears of Tuna. He charged her to do it slowly; otherwise their presence would be betrayed to the tiger. But Tuni could not control herself, and gave out a loud fart that exploded the pot, and produced the sound of a gunshot. The tiger was frightened, and ran away for life into the forest. Thus, Tuna and Tuni were saved.”

The tale is humorous, and the humour or fun is derived from a common affliction of people, the problem of gas or fart. Ignoring the improbability of fart’s effectiveness, we the listeners, especially children, enjoy the narrative with hearty laughter. On the other hand, the tale presents a reality from the past when deforestation, spread of agriculture and consequent menace of tigers were common. The way Tuna-Tuni escape, points to a reality that exists beyond the rational where unwanted actions lead to unintended good. Such paradoxes abound in our society, in the world of flora and fauna, and add complexity, variety and colour to life. Moreover, this story is endemic to the Brahmaputra-
Ganga cultural continuum. In Odisha a tale with little difference is called *tuan tuin*, and in Assam, it is *chhati-mati bair sadhu*.

*Ejan Darji ar Ejan Kamar (A Tailor and a Blacksmith)*:

“Once upon a time there ruled a king in a country. He had three sons – the eldest was a *matbar*; the second, a farmer; and the third, a hunter. When the king grew old he called his sons to his side and asked what they could give him to eat. The eldest son said that he would bring a big fish from the bazaar. The second son promised to give him whatever he wished. The third son said that he would kill birds and give him their meat. The king got angry at this and slapped the third son who went away crying and reached another country. There he took shelter in the house of a tailor and worked as his ostler. But he used to observe the work of the tailor, and picked up the tricks. In the absence of his master the boy could tailor nice pieces of dress. After days the tailor discovered his expertise and brought him a machine. He stopped looking after his horses, and become a good tailor. One day he broke the needle of his machine and took it to a blacksmith to repair it. The smith refused to do it, and suggested that he should buy a new needle instead. The boy said what kind of smith he was that he could not repair the posterior of a needle. The blacksmith got angry and declared that he could make fishes of gold and make them swim in water. The boy tailor was not to be left behind. He declared that he could make kite out of paper, and make it eat all the golden fish. Not only that, he could also make a paper girl, give her a seven day old son, and make the mother-son duo move round the world. The king’s men overheard these challenges and counter challenges, and reported the matter to the king.
The tailor and the smith were summoned to the palace one day, and asked to explain their claims. Sticking to their claims, they prepared for performance. The smith needed 5 kg of gold and the tailor, 18 squires of paper. The performance took place next Sunday at 10 in the morning in front of the palace before thousands of people. The smith made golden fishes and let loose them in water. The tailor immediately made a paper kite that started eating the fishes, pouncing from above. When only one big fish was left, the smith fell at the feet of the tailor and urged him to take off his kite. Though the tailor was reluctant, the king intervened and stopped the show there to the relief of the smith.

But the king was so impressed by the tailor’s performances that he wanted to enjoy another show by him. The tailor agreed, and wanted a seven day old son whom he could fly round the world on the back of a peacock. The king ordered his minions to search out such a child. But all their searches failed. Then it came to the notice that the prince was seven day old that very day. The king agreed to use his son in the show much against the wishes of the queen. The tailor got ready for the performance, and made the boy sit on the back of the peacock. But there was a condition: the king should not say ‘no’ when the tailor would call the peacock back, to which the king agreed. The show began, and the peacock flew eastward beyond Guwahati and Arunachal Pradesh. Then it was returned by the tailor with the consent of the king. The peacock brought a stick from the east. The tailor offered it to the king and said that a lame person would be cured of lameness if beaten with the stick. The king proved the veracity by beating a lame person who was cured then and there. This made the king very happy. The next flight was to the north, beyond the Bhutan hills. This time the peacock brought a miracle stone with which the
king could give sight to the blind. Then the peacock moved to fly to the west from where it brought a dhal (piece of clod) with which the king could cure of goiters of people. This time the peacock flew to the south, and the tailor reminded the king of the condition. But the king prevented the tailor from returning the peacock in time, and it went beyond the limit of his spell.

The peacock descended on the dead garden of flower belonging to a gardener. The garden became lighted, and came to life. The gardener and his wife, though frightened at first, approached the boy prince and came to know that his name was Manik. Manik Kumar was given shelter in their house and he grew into a young boy. In course of time he started making garlands sent to the palace by the gardener and his wife. One particular garland made by Manik was liked by the princess who wanted it as a regular supply knowing nothing about Manik. Taking advantage of the princess’s fondness for his garland Manik started sending letters to and receiving a few from her. He also came to her room in disguise and she came in the family way. This development infuriated the king, and he was not ready to give his daughter to the gardener’s son in marriage. But he was subdued when the peacock intervened on behalf of Manik Kumar and attacked the palace with its wings. He solemnized the marriage of his daughter with Manik Kumar. After the marriage the peacock flew across seven seas and thirteen rivers carrying the two and a half person on its back to Manik Kumar’s kingdom and palace.”

The tale’s title characters are men of quite familiar occupations – a tailor and a blacksmith. In the first phase of the structure we have an old king who wants to weigh the affection his sons bear for him, on the basis of what they could give him to eat. This irrational act on his part leads to the departure of his third son, the hunter who becomes the tailor with the magic touch. The level of
fairy tale nature increases, so also the irrationality of the second king’s wishes. While the conduct of the first king reminds one of Lear, that of the second, reminds one of Faustus. The second king is so possessed by the performance of the tailor magician that he uses his seven day old son as a pawn in his show and loses him, though temporarily. It is only through marriage of love, unselfish, innocent and spontaneous, that Manik Kumar comes back for a final reunion with parents and the native place. While irrationality gets the better of filial love, we get separation in the first two instances. Ironically, Manik Kumar gets a conducive atmosphere of love, affection with the gardeners who pick him up from their garden. At the same time, the mothers stand out as repositories of real love against the unreasonableness displayed by the fathers. References to Guwahati, Arunachal Pradesh and Bhutan Hills give geographical focus to the community that narrates this tale, and reaffirm the living quality of lore. Except Manik Kumar, the tale has no other human name. While this fact stretches the narrative towards a past without Islamic trace, the geographical markers provide contemporary positioning.

All these tales are of wide variety and cover areas of the natural, the supernatural and the magical. The predominance of animal tales may be explained in terms of conflict and co-existence of the people with animals because of the nature of the terrain and the increasing pressure on forest land through deforestation and agriculturisation. This is true of the folk tales of the entire continuum that includes Assam, Bengal, Odisha and Bangladesh.