D: PART - III
CHAPTER VIII

SOCIAL FUNCTIONS OF THE ḌĀK-VACANAS

It is seen in the preceding chapters that the Ḍāk-vacanas had earned intense importance in its hey-day in the social life of every concerned folk community in general and the Assamese folk community in particular. It therefore, becomes imperative to make a probe into the social functions of the Ḍāk-vacanas to make the study on it a complete one. In the following paragraphs it has been tried to analyse the social functions the Ḍāk-vacanas had served or are still serving in the Assamese folk society in different respects.

I. Education:

The context of the Ḍāk-vacanas and the mode of their application indicate that the principal function of them is imparting education for a practical life. We intend to strictly adhere to the phrase 'education for a practical life', because this education is in no way of formal nature nor leading to any higher intellectual pursuit. Rather the Ḍāk-vacanas as the revelations of the experiences and aspirations of a traditional folk society, quite naturally speak nothing of formal education nor of so-called higher education as the concerned traditional folk society of the days of yore was not interested in that sort of education.
It has been stated earlier that the vacanas are included in different chapters. Each chapter intends to impart necessary and the available knowledge on the concerned subject to the readers or the listeners. This is the case in regard to the written down vacanas. Since the vacanas are not a folk song, nor a ballad nor a folk tale, these are not always pronounced in toto. In suitable situations the necessary vacanas are only picked up and pronounced by the learned ones (of course, learned in the vacanas) either to advise one plainly or to do away with the confusions or to confirm the ideas already being conceived. Few examples will clarify the point:

1. About accepting a concubine ——

\[
\begin{align*}
\textit{dākar vacan vedar bāni /} \\
\textit{po lāgā tirotā gharalaj nāni //} \\
\textit{toko baṅce moko baṅce /} \\
\textit{pāle bastu putekalaj sāṅce //}
\end{align*}
\]

— It is a saying of \textit{Dāk} like vedic utterance that a concubine with a child is not to be brought home. She will deprive both you and me and will keep everything for her son.—

1. Sarma, N. C. (ed.): \textit{Dāk-Pravacan}, P. 17 (maxim No. 41-42)
2. About monogamy——

*bihā karibā eke sundari /
smaran karibā kebale hari // *

--- Marry only one lovely damsel and devote yourself only to one God, Hari. ---

3. About choice of bullocks -----

garu kinibā cikan jāli /
dui cāri cay dantīyā bhāli // etc.

--- Buy the bullocks of healthy growth and of tender age. The bullocks having two, four, or six tooth are the good ones. ---

Apart from fortune-telling, a good number of the astrological sayings such as *Barṣā laksanam* worked like meteorological forecasts relying on which the farmers could prepare their agricultural programmes. Innumerable examples can be cited of the *vacanas* intending to impart education about politics, religion, astrology, folk-cookery, folk-medicine, cultivation, vices and virtues of men and women etc. An Assamese folklorist of repute has pointed out with the help of few exemplary *vacanas* that even though in a rudimentary form, the *Dāk-vacanas* sufficiently exhibit the care of the concerned folk society for eugenics, a bio-scientific concept now in vogue for genetic improvement of the human race. The *vacanas* like -----

2. Ibid : P. 23 (maxim no. 96)  
3. Ibid : P. 46 (maxim no. 1)  
4. Goswami, P.: *Jāpīnār Janakrṣṭi ēru Anyānya Racanā*, (Guwahati, 1984), P. 32
1. \( \text{śuddha banīśa cāi bicār kari} / \)  
\( āpunie cāibu caṅṣu bhuri} / \)  
\( bhāl manda lakṣan cāi / \)  
\( tebese sudhiba kanyā jāi} //^5\)

— Considering the genetic purity and all the good and bad omens of a girl, only after satisfaction of own sight one should approach for a girl for marriage.—

2. \( bhui kinibā mājat khāl} / \)  
\( coyāli ānibā māiki bhāl} //^6\)

— Purchase land which is gradually slopped down to the centre and marry a girl whose mother is reputedly good;—

3. \( kāpāpi jār māthār kes} / \)  
\( purusar lakṣan āti bises} //^7\) etc.

— Curley hairs on head is a specifically auspicious symptom of a man: —

are only of eugenic concern. In fact several chapters like \( \text{Gṛhīṇī lakṣana}, \) \( \text{Nārīr lakṣana}, \text{Supuruṣa lakṣana}, \text{Kupuruṣa lakṣana} \) etc. and some

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5. Dutta, D. (ed.): \( \text{Dākar Vacaṇ}, \text{P. 27} \)
6. Sarma, N.C: op-cit, P. 28 (addional maxim)
7. Ibid: P. 87 (maxim no. 3)
scattered sayings here and there describing the vices and virtues of both men and women propagate the teachings on eugenics to the aspirant grooms and brides as well as their responsible guardians with a view to obtain or help obtaining conjugal success by reproducing quality progeny.

Although the vacanas mostly are of educative nature, still they can not be called 'wise sayings,' (or 'sententia' as called in Latin). Because the 'wise sayings' are composed by the authors of extra-ordinary knowledge who are better to be called 'oracles' like Solomon or Hesiod and accepted by the people in general as the code of their lifestyle. With the intent of educating people despite having some characteristics of 'wise sayings' the Dāk-vacanas are still folk sayings because of being composed by unknown author(s) and their context, usage and functions remaining limited to the folk society alone.

Apart from imparting education in the matters dealt, another function of some of the Dāk-vacanas can be noticed in consoling people in distress. Any individual or family seeing to be in distress, a person well conversant in Dāk vacanas may pronounce suitably one or two of them to console him or them, e.g.,

1. yame nājāne ekati po /
   kamāre nājāne dukhiyār lo. 10

---

10. Ibid: P. 20 (maxim no. 66)
--- Yama (the god of death) does not consider the only son as a blacksmith does not consider the poor for his iron.----

The context of the saying can easily be imagined to be of consoling one either on expiry of the only son or on a poor man being cheated of his iron by a blacksmith. Each part of the saying may be used as the example of the other. Like wise-----

2. nisphal gocar dāṅgariyā nakare kān / krṣir nisphal pathārat naphale dhān // 11 etc.

--- Litigation is useless if the judge is partisan or indifferent as cultivation is useless if the field does not bear (paddy) fruits. ----

The context of the saying can be imagined as consoling an aggrieved (for unheard) litigant or an unfortunate farmer deprived of his product owing to adverse weather or infertility of the soil, each part of the saying being the example of the other.

N. C. Sarma has maintained that beyond the Ḡāk-vacanas those have been penned down, there are still some vacanas running in oral tradition12 and he has recorded as good as thirty nine such vacanas 13. We have come across such another vacan used in a befitting context. An aspirant groom after arranging his marriage under certain compulsions disclosed his dissatisfaction that the bride was not

11. Ibid : P. 21 (maxim no. 76)
12. Ibid : P. 202
beautiful as he longed for. Hearing him, an older relative lady promptly replied ----

"eh, hobo jā bāpā:"
yār kapālat yi --
phēcār phecī /
Indrā Śucī //,
Harār Pārvatī /
svīmānār svīmātī // 14

---- Be happy with that my boy: One is to get what the fortune destines. As Indra got Sachi, Hara got Parvati so also a flat-nosed gets a flat-nosed and a handsome gets a handsome.-----

The lady believes it to be a Pāk vacan. Of course in a changed context, the same vacan may be used to laugh at one. Thus, as per the change of context, some vacana s may serve different functions also at different times. An explanation may be necessary here that to put an extra emphasis on this function of rendering consolation, a separate caption likewise could have been mentioned. But for having regarded 'education' rather as 'practical education' and considering that consolation may also form a part of it, a separate caption has not been considered necessary.

Coming back to the educative function, it needs to be mentioned

14. Informant: Mahindri Devi (78), Vill. - Bamunkuchi, P.O. - Bamunkuchi, Dist.- Barpeta, Assam, Data collected on 15.5.95.
that some of the vacanas might have had their source in old Sanskrit literature. N.C. Sarma citing example of five ślokas from Parāśara saṁhitā and showing their thematic and structural similarities to some Dāk-vacanas has established that particularly the agricultural sayings are the manifestations of knowledge cultivated several thousand years ago and flowing through the generations till now15. Another scholar of high esteem also believes:

The astrological part of the sayings and even certain maxims having a bearing on agriculture are likely to have had their inspiration in Sanskrit works. 16

II. Entertainment:

Entertainment is held to be one of the prime functions of folk literature. But the Dāk-vacanas being a stock of knowledge (of whatever standard may it be), apparently lack the entertaining feature unlike folktales, ballads etc. By way of presenting examples to some vacanas although allusion to folk-tales like kesari naṣṭa gel ṭipacik pusi17 (a lion meats its peril relying on a ṭipaci i.e., a small bird) may be found, in want of narration of the tale, the entertaining element is obviously very feeble. Like the above saying, the sayings-mare napāi ṭungā,mare paduli sungā18-and-bhakati ātāitāi sico , kapaṭiyā guru āśādhārī19 also seem to allude to some folktales. Those who know the

15. Dāk-Pravacan : Pp. 196-198
16. Goswami, P.: "Foreword", in Dāk-Pravacan (ed. N.C. Sarma), P. ii
18 & 19. Ibid : P. 26
concerned folktales, for them these vacanas may provide some amount of entertainment by mere pronouncement of them, but hardly for the others.

In some places, some sarcastic comments may provide some sparks of entertainment. The following two vacanas should suffice as example.

1. About the hypocrisy of a votary (bhakat) -----
   
   kāpare copare jeiṭi /
   param bhakat seiṭi //
   cāgat cāri pon kukurat mahā /
   sālagram katikaj thaj nāṭinik bole bahā //

   ----- A votary of the highest order is he who is well-dressed. He demands four ānnās each for a goat and a dog (as value for sacrificial donations) He entertains a whore hurriedly keeping aside the sālagrām (the idol of Viṣṇu).

2. About complaining of the vices of a fleeing daughter- in-law to her mother (by the mother- in-law) -----

   juhālat soe porāmāṭi khāi /
   kon dukhe biyani jiera palāi //

20. Ibid : P. 27 (additional maxim.)
---Your daughter is so idle that she sleeps near the furnace, so gluttonous that she eats burnt soil (and she is allowed to) what for does she fly away? ------

Apart from the literal meaning the saying reflects the sarcasm in attempt to cover up the bashful miserliness of a family under the guise of liberalism when a newly wedded daughter-in-law is compelled to sleep beside the furnace and to chew burnt soil for having provided no bed and no food and under such compelling situation when she leaves the home away, her mother-in-law pleads with their liberalism to tolerate her off-the-track manners. Even the saying may be pronounced by a third party in a sarcastic tone to report the parents of the fleeing daughter about the family's miserliness oppression. After all a cruel hypocrisy is mocked at by the saying and the mode of presentation provides some entertainment to the non-sufferers.

However, these entertaining elements in the পাক-ুচানাস are very sporadic and feeble in nature.

III. Self-corrective:

Another important function of folklore has of late been pointed out. Observes P.P. Giridhar:

"An essential function of folk-creativity is to be self-reflective, to be critically realistic. Oral literature has to do with collective creativity, a collective psyche. It is not the case of one man, a cantankerous crank, the odd-man-out holding the mirror to his
own people, but rather of a whole people holding
the mirror to themselves.\textsuperscript{22}

Thus stressing on the SELF-REFLECTIVE function of folklore as critique of culture, the author by threadbare illustration of an Angami folktale (The story of Mehoviu) which castigates the popular but dreaded custom of head-hunting has convincingly established that folklore also have a SELF-CORRECTIVE function which he claims, was either going unnoticed or ignored by the doyens of folkloristics like W.R. Bascom and Alan Dundes.\textsuperscript{23}

It is perhaps needless to mention that the Ąāk-vacanas in toto is self reflective in nature in as much as it reveals the collective feelings or experiences and aspirations concerning life and society to the collective whole (i.e., the society). At the same time it is also critical about the undesired realities. Numerous examples are available in this context. The following vacan will justify the contention ------

\begin{verbatim}
baidya huyā mare āpuni bise /
nrpati haiyā prajāk hinśe //
sire nabande kṛṣṇar pāw /
sabe biḍamban jānibā māw //\textsuperscript{24}
\end{verbatim}

---You understand mother, that if one being a physician suffers himself, a king hurts his subjects and one does not devote himself to Lord Krishna - all are the troubles only.-----

While such vacans with some sort of criticism against the

\textsuperscript{22} Giridhar, P.P.: 'Folk Literature As Critique of Culture' in Folklore In North East India. (ed. Soumen Sen, New Delhi, 1988), P. 46.

\textsuperscript{23} Ibid: P. 47

\textsuperscript{24} Sarma, N.C.: op-cit, P. 12 (maxims no. 10 - 11)
undesireds are available in a scattered manner here and there in the whole stock, particularly the chapters on the vices of men and women, the avoidables (i.e., *Parityāga kathana*) are mind boggling. Criticism so impersonal in nature as stated above carries a purpose and that is self-corrective. If the criticism negates the undesireds directly, as a natural corollary, it also at least indicates indirectly what are the desireds. There begins the corrective (rather self-corrective) function. The *Dāk-vacanas* are more functional than being mere indirectly indicative in respect of self-correction. Let us take the aforesaid example of a king who has been criticised for being malicious to his own subjects. A king in stead has been praised who fights to expand his kingdom for prosperity - *tebese nṛpati jebe kāti māri lawe rājā* and who is generous - *rājācīnibā dānat*.

The chapters on the virtuous men and women are more purposeful in this respect. Thus the *Ma-vacanas* obviously being self-reflective also function as self-corrective implement (i.e., as critique of culture) of the society they were composed and upheld in. By this self-corrective function folklore re-affirms the cultural norms of the society, so do the *Dāk-vacanas*.

**IV. The Concern of the Legends:**

Apart from the *vacanas*, there are also legends about birth and death of *Dāk* in the Assamese tradition resembling the all-India tradition. Scholars of course believe that the legends are later interpolations to the tradition with a view to earn credibility to the *vacanas*. However, the legends regarding *Dāk’s* birth, in our opinion, particularly needs to...
be analysed in respect of its functions keeping the fact in mind that it forms a part of the whole tradition. For the legend being narrated earlier, further narration has been restrained to avoid repetition.

In functional analysis of the concerned legend it is found that it provides entertainment of considerable amount, of course not simply emanating from a mere fiction. Apart from the fictional entertainment the legend marks an achievement. This is, fulfilment of a major rather perhaps the greatest expectation of a woman's life—begetting a child, even off-the-track, but without a blemish for approval of the social guardianship in the form of the mother-in-law's order which otherwise would have been a serious charge of conjugal infidelity. Here the legend also intends to suggest that the life is not a mere bundle of norms, rather the norms are or should be life-oriented, which a folk-society desires for its practical view of life. The rounds of verbal dual between Ḍāk and Mihirmuni are also quite entertaining for their context, metaphoric nature and the consequence.

The legend on the other hand functions as a REPRESS MECHANISM. Repress Mechanism, psychological in nature is a way of giving imaginative fulfilment to the desires which can not be fulfilled practically because of the existing social norms. By imaginative fulfilment of the unappreciable expectations the hindering realities are by-passed. This feature is very often seen in folklore items, particularly in the fictive genres. For a woman begetting a son even from a person other than her husband may be an earnest necessity in a compelling situation, but it is not socially appreciable nor does one advocate it at least expressly in practical life. But because of the earnestness of the suffering (rather depriving) womanhood the collective folk psyche

29. Supra: Part I / Chapter II / Column-1: The Assamese Tradition.
wants it to overcome (in imagination) and so done in folklore. Here in this case the legend has done too.

Another aspect of Repress Mechanism can be noticed in the caste factor of the legend. The so-called upper caste–lower caste dichotomy projects this repress mechanism. The supremacy of the (so-called) upper castes in the area of learning and knowledge against the so-called lower castes might have given rise to an inner conflict heading from the latter for affecting them, which failing to overcome in the practical situation, resulted in Dāk's birth to a potter family (representing a so-called lower caste) and Mihirmuni's (representing an upper caste) defeat to him in argumentative dual even while Dāk was a child. The legend telling about the death of Dāk in a conspiracy hatched out of professional rivalry by the upper-caste (Brahmin and Ganaka) scholars seems to be an extension to the conception. On the other hand Dāk's birth to a Brahmin family (uttam brahman ghare janam dharilā)\(^{30}\) and after survival for only one day and a night, his unexpected killing caused by a misconception that he was ominously unnatural\(^{31}\) seem to be counters from the other quarter to the obsessed projection. This projection however, on the other hand might signal an encouragement to the so-called lower castes for the culture of learning and knowledge, which if materialised would be a very very constructive function of the legend.

Folklore may also function as an instrument of social change. In the said legend that can also be slightly perceived. In the vacanas,

\(^{30}\) Sarna, N.C.: op-cit P.96

\(^{31}\) (a) Sarma: Loc-cit. (b) Bhattacharyya, S.: op-cit, P. 29
generally a stringent attitude has been cast upon the womenfolk as a whole. P. Goswami observes that there is no easier way to point out the vices of women than to recite one or two of the relevant दाक-वकनास. But in the said legend the situation is different. The older lady is the authority of the family. In the argumentative dual between दाक and Mihirmuni, paternity has been looked down in relation to maternity in respect of the right over children. As another manifestation of repress mechanism, male chauvinism has been turned down in this point thus mooting the idea of a social change, which however, is not seen furthering anymore.

The legend(s) of दाक with these functions have definitely enriched the tradition of दाक in the whole as an oral tradition making the same more interesting to both the folk society and the academicians as well.

Besides rendering these specified functions, the दाक-वकनास generally serve as verbal acumen of the folk. Any speech or contention may be enriched or powerful enough so as to convince a reluctant audience of the folk society by suitable application of the दाक-वकनास, reflecting the efficacy of the saying-दाकर वकन वेदार बानी (i.e., the दाक-वकनास are as good as the vedic utterances). Thus the दाक-वकनास generally appear to be an element of speech accomplishment and the clever and smart people of the folk society generally make good use of it.

V. Impact of the दाक-वकनास:

After the functions discussed, it necessarily demands to look into the impact (the present-day impact rather) of the दाक-वकनास.

32. Asamiya Jana Sahitya: (Hesiod áru दाकपुरुस), P.96
These are, in brief, discussed below.

The education they impart is traditional and that was suitable exclusively to an agro-economic society of long past denying the present-day scientific advancement and technological modernity any scope to make great strides. Higher intellectual attainment of any sort is hardly professed showing the social attitude as positive only to material prosperity. The astrological sayings (jyotisha vacanas) encourage people to remain fatalist. A liberal attitude to men compared to the strictures on women leads to discrimination upon sex, which present-day democratic concept denies thoroughly. In describing the vices or omens of men and women, people are bitterly criticised for the odd-looking growth of limbs or for the omens developed in the physique over which nobody can have a hand and thus personal dignities were played with, which a sound humanitarian taste can hardly allow today. For these kinds of incongruities in contrast to all round advancement of civilisation and culture, most of the Daak-vacanas are seen gradually losing their relevance in the present-day urban Assamese society.

However, all are still not lost, nor can be thought to be lost at all since old ideas die hard. Particularly the vacanas telling the universal truth or habitual fact sort of things, and those culturally congruous and therefore relevant, can be hoped to die out never.