There are diversified opinions regarding the basic conception of the term 'folklore'. Before going to these controversies regarding the definitions of the term one should notice the evolutionary history of it. The first use of the word 'folklore' was made in 1846 A.D. In the month of August (22nd Day) of that year, Ambrose Merton used this term in a letter written by him and published in The Athenæum, a London-based magazine catering to the needs of the intellectuals. Ambrose Merton was the nickname of William John Thoms (1803-1885). Before it, terms like 'popular antiquities' and 'popular literature' etc. were in use to designate such material and the replacement came only in the middle of the nineteenth century. The emergence of the epithet folklore suddenly caught on the eyes of the intellectuals, as it opened a new way of defining and inquiring the age-old materials. But the process of looking "closely at the ways of the lower classes" was started far more before 1846. In 1812 A.D. — a year of land-mark

itself — the German Brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm — popularly known as Grimm Brothers published a series of "household tales". These tales were the combination of oral folk narratives and interpretations of German mythology. They used the German word "Volkskunde" to denote the subject. But whatsoever, it was W.J. Thoms, alias Ambrose Merton, who first coined the term folklore. T. Chattopachyay presumes that the German word Volkskunde became an archetype in coining the English word folklore by W.J. Thoms first. With the establishment of the Folk-Lore Society of London in 1877 "the word 'folklore' established itself as the generic term under which are included the traditional institutions, beliefs, arts, customs, stories, songs and sayings current among backward peoples or retained by the less cultured classes of more advanced peoples. Thus the word folklore established itself in the international arena in the early part of the nineteenth century. Its acceptance as a general generic term took place in almost all countries including India.


Earlier, folklore and folkliterature, these two terms were misconstrued as the general people used to find no difference between the two. Even an anthropologist like W. R. Bascom was of the opinion to use the term folklore to mean folkliterature only and in this context he liked to meet it by 'verbal art' to avoid the difficulties. He remarks - "The concept of verbal art avoids all these difficulties, and has the further advantage of emphasizing the essential features which distinguished the folktale, myth, proverbs, and related forms".

Folklore: The new conception:

Though the term folklore, thus became prevalent and created a new discipline of inquiry, it could not avoid confusion and controversy. As a result of such dis opinions a new term 'folklife' has emerged in recent years which has "vied with and threatened to dominate folklore". The supporters of this term believe that folklore is a confusing phenomenon and as such it is narrowly pre-occupied with the limited oral materials only. They maintain that their term folklife includes the whole panorama of traditional culture which were being neglected by folklore. Conversely the supporters of the term 'folklore' counter claim that term is

inclusive enough of all elements of wider range. Richard M. Dorson, has elaborately discussed the nuances and relationship of the terms by outlining four major groups of folklore and folklife. These are —

1. Oral literature,
2. Physical folklife,
3. Social folk custom and
4. Performing folk arts. 6

'Folklore'—the very word is distinctively divided into two parts—'folk' meaning the people and 'lore' indicating the knowledge. Hence the word summarily means the knowledge or wisdom of people. But above the dictionary background a deep insight into the basic conception of the term makes the whole thing more clear. Let us start with folk. According to Alan Dundes, "The term 'folk' can refer to any group of people whatsoever, who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is—it could be a common occupation, language, or religion—but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory, a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups may not know all other members,

but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to that group, traditions which help the group to have a sense of group identity". 7

The folk and the lore:

This definition of 'folk' (if it can rightly be called) by Dundes definitely gives us a clear conception as in the discussion of the term 'folklore' we are faced with two vital questions — who are the folk and what exactly the lore is. In fact, the folk were earlier understood to be consisted of peasantry. It denoted the typical cross-section of the people of the society who have the commonest way of habit, custom and culture. Hence the term 'country-folk' etc. were being used to denote this class of people. But with the advancement of age the process of modification of the term began to start and later on it was used to denote something relating to a group which has a common traditional culture. Finally these conceptions of the term were wiped out and some new trends of interpretations developed. In this stage the term was used to denote the opposition of a thing to the other. Lexically meaning it opposes the elite group of people of a certain society. Sometimes it opposes the urban group. Sometimes it is said to be pre-industrial

as opposed to the industrialisation. Again, in some cases the folk is supposed to be the non-civilized group of the civilization. In more modified societies they are the non-modified class. In socialistic outlook the folk are the non-progressive cluster of a progressive society. According to the champions of this reasoning the folk remains within the civilization — but is not necessarily an integral part of it.

Though in the above deliberation a good number of viewpoints of folk is mentioned, these are not sufficient enough to give us a clear-cut definition of folklore. The basic thing is interpreting the 'folk' is the sorting out the linking factor of the people concerned, which according to Dundes is the common lore of traditions. These common traditions ensure the identity of the group and there lies the truth of 'folkness' of them.

This common lore of traditions, coined by Dundes is the 'lore' of the people — which we commonly term as the knowledge or wisdom of them. Unless one knows the basic idea of this common lore of traditions, one remains in dark about the very meaning of the term. Generally speaking if folk is a group of people, then the lore is the collective knowledge or wisdom of people belonging to that group, — the collective knowledge being of traditional
nature. With this formal conception of two different words, a general idea of folklore can be made. With this idea, perhaps, in later years, several definitions were put forth by different scholars, a few of which will give us a better idea of the term.

There are as many as twenty one definitions in The Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend. The most accepted definition is that of Archer Taylor. The definition reads thus — "Folklore is the material that is handed down by tradition, either by word of mouth or by customs and practices". What Taylor has termed as "The material handed down by tradition", is the common acceptance of all scholars. Only the coining and usage of the term vary from man to man. Unless there is the transmission, there is no question of its being the folklore.

A.H. Krappe puts forward the almost identical view. To him folklore is "a study of the unrecorded traditions of the people as they appear in popular fiction, custom and belief, magic and ritual". A.R. Wright defines folklore as "The science which studies the expression, in popular beliefs, institutions,

practices, oral literature, and arts and past times, of the mental and spiritual life of the folk, the people in general, in every stage of barbarism and culture".  

William Bascom rather gives an inclusive definition which enlists the components of folklore. The definition states — "Folklore means 'folklearning'; it comprehends all knowledge that is transmitted by word of mouth and all crafts and other techniques that are learned by imitation or example, as well as the products of these crafts — folklore includes folk-art, folk crafts, folk costume, folk belief, folk medicine, folk recipes, folk music, folk-dance, folk games, folk gestures and folk speeches as well as these verbal forms of expression which have been called folk literature but which are latter described as verbal art".  

Being an anthropologist, Bascom gives this definition with the conception of the culture in his mind. To him the material culture, the graphic art, the plastic art, the economy, the socio-political institution, the religious functions etc. fall within the purview of culture and its extended territory. But besides these elements there remain some useful things which can not be delimited in the definition of culture. These elements

10. Quoted in Ballads and Tales of Assam, p. 2 by Goswami, p.
remaining outside the periphery of culture is the folklore.

Alan Dundes gives a definition which provides us with an internalized list of folklore. This list, an elongated one includes—myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, chants, charms, blessings, curses, oaths, insults, retorts, taunts, teases, toasts, tongue-twisters, greetings and leave-taking formulas. It also includes folk-costume, folk-dances, folk-drama and mime, folk-art and folk-belief (or superstitions), folk-medicine, folk-instrumental music (e.g. fiddle-tune), folk-song (e.g. lullabies, ballads etc.), folk-speech (Slang), folk-similies, folk-metaphor and names (e.g. nicknames and place names). 12

Whatever the definitions of the term may be, it is almost an established fact now that folklore is the recalling of the past and its main feature is orality. This is the process of survival and what is handed down from the past is the folklore. There are two processes involved in it — one is transmission and the other is orality. But a deep study of folklore has proved that all that is orally transmitted is not the folklore and secondly not all folklore be necessarily transmitted. 13 If it so, then we are

12. Dundes, A.: The Study of Folklore, p. 3 & 25
faced with countless controversies relating to the definition and characteristics of folklore. But with the advancement of more scientific studies, many a theory is put forth by different scholars in different times. Such as the historical geographical theory, historical reconstructional theory, functional theory, psycho-analytical theory, oral formulaic theory, cross-cultural theory, folk-cultural theory, mass-cultural theory, hemispherical theory, contextual method and the theory of structuralism.

Folklore and tradition:

It will not be irrelevant to raise one vital point here. In common parlance the two terms 'tradition' and 'folklore' go hand in hand. Even in understanding the lexical meaning they bear the same conception. But critical analysis of the etymology of the two words may bring forth a minute demarcation between the two. The etymological meaning of the word tradition envelopes all the elements of social life but for a few novelties which every new age creates for itself and all the immediate borrowing from others in the process of diffusion. Tradition of a given society or a nation is nothing but the sum total of their various ways of life which come under some inherited traits of transmission process viz., social customs, institutions, clothes and draperies, habits and manners, songs
and tales and rites and rituals etc. Therefore it is seen that these two are generalized terms and hence there lies the basic problem of differentiation between the two. Like folklore 'tradition' too, means 'handing down, 'surrender' etc. It is derived from the Latin word 'tradito' which carries the above meaning. "The word tradition connotes the act of handing down and what is handed down from one generation to another". In this perspective it concerns with the inherited traits of a society, though in later years controversies arose regarding the real understanding of the ward. Generally folklore and tradition bear identical meaning with identical elements as their components and the study of folklore and tradition is complementary to each other. Tradition depends more on the cumulative heritages of a society which permeates through all levels of social organisations whereas folklore, in addition to it survives in the aural phenomenon of a certain society. Secondly, tradition may be transmitted from generation to generation with an elite make-up — folklore on the contrary, remains in its original vintage foothold. In this context, tradition undergoes a stage of transformation, but folklore is a static, original in form and style, always reminding its

age-old entity. Materials constituting the tradition and folklore of a certain society are common by class, but these are the product of two different processes when the finer point of demarcation is discussed. Precisely enough, folklore always includes the materials of tradition. Rightly observes S. C. Brown—"the basic requirement of living folklore is that it be traditional widely current and transmitted primarily through memory and practice rather than by printed page". 15

Again remarks Jonas Balys:

"Folklore compromise traditional creations of people's primitive and civilized. These are achieved by using sounds and words in metric form and prose, and include also folk beliefs or superstitions, customs and performances, dances and plays". 16 Therefore it is rightly said that "the essential quality of folklore is that it is traditional". 17

These remarks clearly show that folklore is the bearer of the traditional heritages of manfolk—both from primitive and civilized stages.

It can be summed up now from the above deliberation that tradition is a process of spontaneous continuity and this continuity is the living force of folklore. But nevertheless, folklore is not a by-product of tradition; if the allegiance can not be undermined at all, we can vie for another intrinsic term, folk tradition. Tradition always includes the process and production in its preservation.

Folklore and history:

Folklore interconnects with many disciplines and as such the relationship of folklore and history is a matter of sincerist discussion. As both the discipline concerns with the study of the past and deals with the whole human situation, some historians may regard folklore as a branch either of itself or of social science. But the fact is not to be so. Society, composed of human being is produced in a very natural way, but its heritages are not the production of nature. The level of society is different from the stratum of the biology. The structure of a certain society is indifferent to many things but it can not be a mere on-looker in its cultural ethos. It is a web of social and traditional relations supplied by history. The forces of nature have no hand in keeping the societies united but the forces of traditional materials are wholly responsible for keeping them
in united form and survival. In this way folklore is a social and traditional discipline and a part of Humanities. History and folklore are both related to processes of mankind. Folklore discusses the age-old pictures of the societies which also has concerns with pre-history and anthropology. While analyzing different factors that may come under their common fields the anthropologist the pre-historian and the folklorist must walk hand in hand. But in spite of it a possible solution is imminent in determining folklore as an independent field of study. The dual character of folklore in respect of its variety of subjects and the values of it in manifold perspectives viz. social, historical anthropological, and archaeological is recognized by all. Rightly observes W.R. Bascom - "The dual affiliation of folklore with the humanities on the one hand and with social science on the other are well recognized".\(^{18}\) History presents a description of these societies - in the form and nomenclature of pre-historic documents. "Historians and folklorists can find common ground in the area of traditional history. Such history may include personal, family, neighbourhood, and township historical traditions".\(^{19}\) These pre-historic descriptions comprise the very folk-life of the

\(^{19}\) Dorson, R.M.(ed): *Folklore and Traditional History*, p. 110.
people. Moreover folklorists lay stress on the source of the cultural and traditional set up — whereas history repeats these in its sequence of events. Folklore studies the inanimate past — but history describes human actions. Observes R.M. Dorson — "History as written by historians usually has little relation to the historical traditions orally preserved by a people. Such traditions have a value for revealing what episodes of the past endure and what forms they take in popular memory unaided by the crutch of print and catechism of the school master". Again folklore always deals with the ancient traditional ethos of human culture, but history has no interest in it. Folklore makes history — history reciprocates it in its existence. The viewpoint of folklore is folkloristic — but the viewpoint of history is always historical. Development of folklore study remains with the research of the past — its processing is rather investigative and explorative — but in turn history remains within the history for the history and by the history. It is apolitical by nature but folklore is a process of cultural transmission devoid of any sort of political and modern-day bias. Inspire of such relative complexities in respect of interconnections, folklore must be regarded as a separate discipline having own methodology, philosophy and content.

20. Dorson R.M. (ed); Folklore and Traditional History, p. 75.
Folk and written literature;

The term 'expressive literature' is also used to
designate oral literature and it engulfs "spoken, sung and
voiced form of traditional utterances that show repetitive
patterns". The type of this literature is an ideal source
for the completeness of written variety as "oral literature
can and frequently does enter into written literature".

Most of the civilized nations lift upward from
savagery. Savages can neither write nor read. Yet they
manage to store their age-old heritages considerably well
by transmission method. Later on, upon this tradition grows
the elite variety up which utilises its fullest possible
means to store it independently and differently. The elite
variety does maintain different tendencies. In written
literature, these tendencies react vehemently. There, in
this context, comes up the manifold differences. Firstly,
as the transmission itself is the primary thing, anonymity
in oral literature is always evident. Written literature
belongs to individuals by name. It is a conscious piece of
work and as such remains fixed and tangible, but oral lite-
rate is always dynamic and intangible. Every oral per-
formance is a new creation itself. Their method of

23. Ibid. p.2.
transmission is different. Unlike the oral transmission of folk-literature the written variety is naturally improvised and of superlative class because of its being written with pen. Written literature remains in as is where in position but oral literature changes its place. Due to the changes of place of occurrence and originality as well, its basic structure and format etc. are too changeable.

Types of folklore:

Stitch Thompson, has analysed the types of folklore in two broad divisions:

i) Folklore of the spoken word — which includes tales, songs, riddles, proverbs, sayings and charms — and

ii) practices — which includes seasonal and agricultural practices and cures and superstitions.¹⁴

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24. As quoted in Ballads and Tales of Assam, by P. Goswami, p. 3.
II

History of Assamese folklore;

It has been told in the introductory chapter of this study that the basic foundation of Assamese literature originated out of the oral narratives which were multifareous and heterogenous in form and content. These were composed by unknown village poets and authors and some of these oral materials contain gems of poetry and narratives. Scholars have tried to trace out the history of Assamese literature from the mystic songs known as caryapadas composed between the 8th and 12th centuries A.D. But the real foundation of Assamese literature, however, was built with the tradition of early specimens of this kind popularly coined as loka sahitya or jana sahitya. As these were being orally transmitted, the term moukhik sahitya is also attributed to it which encompasses various items viz. songs, tales, proverbs, riddles and aphorisms etc.

Assam has been described as the repository of folksongs of innumerable varieties. Nobody can ascertain its time of occurrence and system of composition of such traditional songs of the bygone days, which are least preserved and the most are forgotten now. It is apprehended
that the folksongs which still are remaining on the lips of the unlettered bards will die soon unless some proper measures are adopted to preserve them. If literature of a given society implies something more than the written literature and if it requires an attempt to trace the origin of the latter, then the popular folk literature deserve more careful observation. Rightly does think M. Neog in this connection — when an observation is made on the literature of modern world it is found that its poetic composition has always prestepped its prose variety. A prosaic composition unless it is written cannot pass over to its latter age. But the power of memory corresponds to poetry. For this quality of recollection of poetry it is being thrived in a nation generation after generation even after passage of many ages. These perpetual compositions of oral transmission are termed as folksongs.²⁵

Assam being a meeting ground of various ethnic groups of people, can boast of being a rich repository of traditional materials of different ethnic groups. Numerous tribal folksongs are the specimens of rich oral heritage of composite cultural milieu of the state. There are innumerable examples of Assamese folksongs proper.

Ainam, dhainam, bihu nam, biya nam, bangit, barmahi git etc. are only the names of such kind — the list is exhaustive. Besides these, many oral narratives are also current in Assam from ancient times which reacted as a contributing factor in the beginning of Assamese literature.

The history of Assamese folklore does not go to antiquity. Regarding the contribution of oral literature in building up the foundation of proper form of literary history as a remarkable point, a researcher of Assamese language can find ample references of folklore materials in abundance in the works of Madhav Kandali etc. of presankarite period and even in latter. But the history of Assamese folklore proper began with a nation-wide phenomenon.

In India many tales and songs were collected at the instance of government officials and the missionaries, who came to the country to propagate Christianity. It was for their enterprising efforts that people used to collect and preserve the folklore materials current in every nook and corner of their country. Folklore was best cultured at the behest of one journal named 'Indian Antiquary' which catered for the preservation of age-old heritages. The western scholars as they did in the case of studying the Vedas, showed the path of culturing the folklore to the
people. It was for their inspiration that some Indians namely Natesh Shastri of the south, Ganga Datta Upreti of North India and Lal Bihari De of Bengal could collect and publish tales and proverbs etc. in latter years.  

Assam had two valuable publications in 1895. The first one was some Assamese proverbs by Gardon and the other was a collection of Folktales and Rhymes of the Bodos by Anderson. With the publication of these several others namely Hutton, Mills also did work on the collection of tribal songs and tales. After this, two names of Assamese come to the reckoning — one is Bhadrasen Bora and the other is Gopalchandra Das. Bhadra Sen Bora’s R mcarit (1899) is a collection of some Assamese riddles popularly called sathar. Gopal chandra Das collected and published the first ever collection of some Assamese proverbs and maxims in 1900 A.D.

Bhadrasen Bora had the credit of bring two incredible ballads into the light of people. The two ballads are famous Manikonwarar git and Phulkanwarar malita (1903). Besides these two ballads, Suryya Kumar Bhuyan published a historical ballad Barphukanar Git, with historical commentries in it. One year after, in 1925 A.D. another ballad of historical kind Janagabharur Git, by name was published

by Rupeswar Datta. *Phakara* is the word that stands for aphorism in Assamese — a collection of such kind named *phakara* was collected and published by Kanti Ram Bura Bhakat in 1927 A.D.\(^28\)

It is mentioned time and again that the Assamese cultural and folklore history is a composite one with contributions from different ethnic groups. Some of the tribal folktales came into light in early days. Grierson, in the third volume of his incomparable masterpiece *Linguistic Survey of India* published some of these tales in 1903 A.D. Meanwhile Benudhar Rajkhowa published an anthology called *Assamese Demonology* (1905 A.D.) where he placed various beliefs and superstitions current in Assam in respect of demons and ghosts. His another collection popular *Assamese superstitions* was published in 1920. Besides these Rajkhowa collected a few folktales also.

In 1918 A.D. a small booklet was published by Ganesh Chandra Hazarika. The booklet named *nihu aru Tar prakritik citra* is a publication of simple description of the bihu festival of Assam.\(^29\) In the field of bihu songs, Nakul Chandra Bhuyan and Dimbeswar Neog collected a good

\[\text{28. P. Goswami in Asamat Jana Kristir Carca/ Madhya Dingsa Sātikar Asamiya Sahitya, p. 174.}\]

\[\text{29. Goswami, P.: Asamiya Jana Sahitya (Preface. 0.5).}\]
number of it. In the field of folktales Lakshminath Bezbaroa contributed a lot in collecting, editing and publishing Assamese folktales. His *Burhi Air Sadhu*, Kakadeuta aru Natilara and Junuka are three anthologies of folktale which paved the way of collection and publication of oral narrative in latter years. The popularity of *Burhi Air Sadhu* is an all time record so far the tradition of Assamese folktale is taken into account. Though Bezbaroa was not a collector of real potentiality, in so much the scientific method of folktale collection is considered, yet, his pioneering efforts in this respect were invaluable ones for ushering in a new environment in Assam. In spite of being a true traditionalist, Bezbaroa, for his unskilled ability, collected and published the folktales in a random and undocumented way. Moreover, he published the folktales after these were subjected to refinement and modification. But nevertheless, his *Burhi Air Sadhu* is a great contribution to Assamese folktale repository. The preface of the collection, though a very short and brief one, is of invaluable service to a researcher of folklore material. In this, we can find the zeal and inspiration of this great literary figure of Assam for the heritage of his mother land when we consider his advocating the term
Gadhukathā tatta (philology) for signifying the scientific study of folktale. Many people in latter years followed the path shown by Bezbaroa and thus enriched the granary of Assamese folktale.

This is in brief the short history of Assamese folklore collection to the time of Rajanikanta Bordoloi. But besides these collections a few stray articles and essays on folklore materials were published in different journals of the time. P. Goswami provides us with a list of such materials.

Bardaicila (folktale): published in Jonaki (ninth issue), 1902, A.D.

Asamiya Bhakat Sewa
aru Debbitarar Git : Published in Asom Bandhay, 1909 A.D.
by Taranath Chakravorty.

pani Tulibaloi Joa
Nām : Published in Uahi, 1917 A.D.
by Padmawati Debi Phookanani.

Asamiya Jatiya Git, : Published in Chetana, 1923, A.D.
Nām aru Gadhukathā
by Tulashi Narayan Sarma.

Asamiya Jogana Adir : Sahitya Sabha Patrika, 1940, A.D.
Katha
by Chandradhar Barua.

These are some specimens only. There may be more articles on this subject but due to the dearth of proper documentation of the journals we might have lost these. A proper collection of the journals of yester years may bring forth many scholarly observations into light.

The advancement of folklore study all over the world is now a universal phenomenon. But the study of folklore achieved its social significance in Europe as an indirect effect of national upheaval which took place due to the French Revolution and war-mongering of Napoleon. It is not denying the truth that a sort of revivalism in the wake of any nationalistic movement and political upsurge is bound to set in and thereby try to check the decay and disappearance of folklore of the land. Rightly opines P. Goswami - "Nobody advocates the preservation of traditions as such, but that certain of them have a relation to the spirit of the people cannot be denied. A revival of this sort was also observed in Europe and America after the national struggles which culminated in the French and American revolutions. Modern folklore studies got an impetus from these revolutions". A deep sense of

nationalistic outlook is the vital factor for urging upon the people of a given nation to rethink about the age-old heritages of the land. The spirit of nationalism responds tremendously in the form of social upsurge especially at a time when the nation plunges into crisis for cultural survival. People inculcate in themselves a propensity to turn back to their past — their ancient culture and rich heritages upon which the ancestors of them rested on glory and grandeur. With a view to adding new dimension to the spirit of nationalism, people, stirred with such upsurges, prepare themselves, in recollecting their folklore. An idea begins in their selves to rouse the spirit amidst the 'heap of fossils' of their land and revitalisation of the traditional assets of bygone age. At least, the people think that the national entity can best be protected and identified in and amid the rich heritages. We have already mentioned the role of Grimm brothers who helped in reinsuring the faith of German people by collecting the household tales. Many followed the path ever since and now it has turned to be a universal phenomenon.

Now-a-days folklore is being studied in many countries all over the world. Assam is also stepping in the footsteps, shown by other parts of the globe which has heralded in a new era.