CHAPTER IV

SOCIETY AND TALES IN A KAIBARTA VILLAGE:
NARRATIVES FROM NIZSILABANDHA

NIZSILABANDHA THE VILLAGE:

Nizsilabandha is located about four kilometers from the sub divisional administrative centre of Kuwaritol in the Kaliabor subdivision of the Nagaon district of Assam and is about 47 kilometers from the district headquarter Nagaon to the west and 25 kilometers from Tezpur, the district headquarters of Sonitpur, to its north across the Brahmaputra river and connected by the Kaliabhomora bridge. Kaliabor is an important political location boasting of its own constituency in the Indian Parliament with four Legislative segments in the Assam state legislative assembly and is marked by a high level of political consciousness. Within Kuwaritol is located a post office, a police station, a primary health centre, a telephone exchange, a circle office, a government circuit house, a rural bank, a high school and the Kaliabor College, which is about a kilometer away from the village and with numerous state run primary schools in its proximity, it affords good opportunities to those who want to pursue their education. It is adjacent to the important National Highway number 37 linking central and upper
Figure 4: Map of Nizsilabandha Village

Assam with Northern Assam and Arunachal Pradesh and is thus highly accessible. It is also relatively free from the ravages of flood, the common problem of the villages of Assam inspite of its proximity to the mighty Brahmaputra and thus affords a good agricultural location. The many water bodies in an around it are good fishing zones.

Social Composition

The village is a pre-dominantly schedule caste village and consist of Kaibarta people and consist of 125 households with a total population of about 800 persons. Originally the Kaibartas were fishermen, but in Nizsilabandha, they have mostly adopted an agrarian way of life. A few though continue with their traditional profession. With the advent of education and exposure, jobs as school teachers or in the army are also not uncommon. People with regular jobs are economically better off and thus form a relatively affluent class in the village. The villagers mostly follow the Vaishnavite faith after the teaching of Shree Sankardeva, the famous religious and social reformer of fifteenth and sixteenth century Assam. However, followers of other Hindu practices, notably Vaishnavite denomination like the followers of the Krishnaguru cult are also found. A few upper caste Hindu families including a few Brahmin families following the Shaivite path are also residing within the village premises.
Impact of Religion in the Village

Religion is a very strong social and cultural factor in Nizsilabandha. All social, cultural and religious activities basically revolve around the village Namghar located centrally, and it mediates all contrary religious, cultural and social dynamics in the village, and maintains the social and cultural equilibrium. In the early nineties the village had different contesting religious denominations based on the reform agendas of the vaishnavite groups:

The main point of contradiction between the reform sects are based on the question of the place of brahmanical Hinduism in vaisnava devotional path. These reform sects are Bamunia and egharadinia (who follow the brahmanical system but have contradiction on the point of death pollution); Sankar sangha, Sankar samaj, and ek sharan bhagavati samaj (all of them denounce the brahmanical system and have their different interpretation of the vaisnava system) [Bhattacharjee 1990:91].

However, in the present context, informants in the village proudly proclaim that such dissensions are a matter of the past and the namghar is the mediating ground where all contradictions are resolved and all convictions given space. The important religious occasions are Janmasthami that celebrates the birth of Lord Krishna in August and the birth anniversary of Shree Sankardeva in 22nd August. Thus the Indian
month of *Bhadra* or *Bhada* in Assamese, which coincides with mid August and early September, is very important and auspicious and the women hold evening prayers throughout the month. *Doul*, the spring festival of colour is a very important religious occasion in the village in the month of March. Moreover, the *namghar* doubles up as an auditorium during the *Ras* festival in November/December where events from Indian mythology involving Lord Krishna and his consorts are enacted as *bhaona* or traditional theatre.

The *namghar* is also the premise from where the sanctioning and sanctifying of marital bonds emanate, and other events like settling of disputes or discussion on developmental activities for the village takes place.

**Status of Women**

The women of Nizsilabandha are by nature devout and traditional and regularly attend the village Namghar for evening prayers. They mostly wear the traditional Assamese dress *Mekhala Chaddar*, though a few adolescent and unmarried school going girls sports the *Salwar Kameez*, a dress that basically belong to Northern India but very popular all over the country. Most women are housewives, though a school teacher can be a rare exception. Most girls do not go beyond school and are married by the age of eighteen. It is to be noted that married women and widows are called the ‘daughter in laws’ of the village, thereby signifying that
they were born and brought up in other villages before their weddings. Education amongst the middle aged and elderly women is very poor and most of them are illiterate, though amongst the younger ‘daughter-in-laws’ a modicum of school education is not an exception. Apparently, women enjoy a respectable status in the society; however close interaction during the course of the research project reveals a very strong patriarchal order to be in place. Women are hardly free to interact with strangers without the presence of some male figures. It is the men of the village that determines the place and time of interaction, and they were hardly left on their own during the various visits and interactions.

**Marriage and divorce**

Marriages are to be socially sanctioned by the village *namghar*. Arranged marriages are the norm, though elopement is also very common. However, wedding through elopement by a man of the village will have to be socially sanctified by a ‘punitive’ (*danda*) feast imposed by the assembly of the villagers in the *namghar*. The quantum of the punitive action will depend on the familial and religious status of the bride’s family. If the religious denomination is different the fine will be more and finally the girl will be accepted into the Vaishnavite fold. When a girl from the village elopes, the onus is on the groom’s family to follow the procedure of acceptance. However, if the elopement is within the village, both the families are levied the punitive feast and a donation
to the namghar. There is also the custom of bura biya where a couple cohabit producing children but gets married much later in life at an old age. Bura means old and biya means to get married.

Divorce is not a traditionally formal or legal procedure, but basically a parting of ways. Though rare, such splits are not uncommon and are mostly caused by extramarital affair of the husband or the inability of the women to bear children. Such extramarital affairs mostly occur due to the financial insecurity of the women concerned, and they basically enter into such relationship looking for security in life. Quite often, a man enters into a relationship with another woman and maintains another family. Bitter marital feud is not uncommon, and public mediation often defuses the situation.

**Economy and women**

Kaibarta women folk had always been a part of the traditional fishing activity. However, after coming to the Vaishnavite fold and gradual receding of prominence of fishing, most women are no longer a part of this traditional activity; but most go to the agricultural field where they help out their men folks in sowing and transplanting of paddy. The sphere of economic activities with which the women are associated is the processing of the harvested paddy and its storage after the harvest is done. The women also maintain small kitchen gardens and look after livestock like goats, cows and ducks. But these activities do not afford
them the chance to generate income as it is mostly for self sustenance of the family. Similar is the case with weaving. A few women weave clothes on the loom, but these are for personal use and gifts during religious and social occasions like Bihu. Thus the women in the village are financially dependent on their men folk. This has added to their misery and degraded their status in the socio-economic set up.

Education and women

Education amongst the young women at the school level is very common in the present time; but few continue beyond the secondary level. College going girl students are a rarity and is confined to the few well to do families in the village. Amongst the elderly women, illiteracy is rampant. The middle aged housewives like some of the informants like Chitra Bharali Dipali Das and Dulu Das has had exposure to primary education and can read and write. The lack of sustained exposure to education amongst the women in the village is reflected in their gullibility to believe in evil spells and black magic. Thus, it is not uncommon to find women ascribing chronic illness or familial misfortune to the evil eye or spells of those inimical to them. This is popularly called as ‘ban mara’ or casting a spell. This is perhaps a residual factor of the pre-vaishnavite days, as the preaching of Sankardeva is very clearly against the belief in any black magic or evil spells. Very often, the extra marital forays of the men folk are ascribed to
the magical seductive spells of the other women or the mistress of the man and are popularly known as the 'mohini ban'. Thus the world of magic and lust for sex loom large in the minds of the poor women.

TALES FROM THE FIELD

Tales from Nizsilabandha were collected over a period of one year that consisted of six specific visits to the village to collect tales. Interspersed were other casual visits to build up a rapport as well as to socialize in an informal manner. The first visit was on the 4th of November 2005 and the last visit was on the 16th of January 2007. There were no storytellers with significant repertoires, but individual woman recounted isolated tales they had heard during their childhood. By common admission, the television and films in compact discs had largely replaced traditional mode of recreation like story telling, and it was difficult to find anyone, man or woman, who could be termed as a traditional story teller. According to an informant, Tuluma, a lady in her fifties, they had heard about a game called Dhupkhel, where story telling sessions amongst women were held. Subsequent effort to uncover data on Dhupkhel failed to yield results, as memories of both the game and tales had been effaced from public memory. However, it was interesting to note that almost all knew the tale of the origin of the village Niz Silabandha. On the first visit, Tuluma narrated the legend of the origin of the village.
Figure 5: With Tulumi who first narrated the legend of the origin of Nizsilabandha
The general of the powerful Koch King Naranaryan, Bir Chilarai had personally set camp on the bank of *Padma Sarovor*, the large water body in the village, by sailing in from what is now the Mori Kolong (or the dead Kolong) river. The water body is now known as *Silabandha Bil* (Silabandha lake), and the village assumed its name *Niz Silabandha* from the fact that Chilarai (*Sila*) had personally (*Niz*) tied (*bondha*) his boat by the side of river.

This tale was repeated many times by other informants during the course of the several visits to the village. It was clear in the narration of the other tales that details have been forgotten; but what was forgotten was replaced by references that gave us an insight to the social context of the village. The following tale was narrated by Dipali Das, a woman who was married into the village Silabandha and was around 30 years old. The tale was about a king who had seven daughters and was disappointed at not begetting a son. When asked about the name of the story, the narrator was at a loss and said that the name can be given after the narration is over. She started by saying that the youngest daughter of the king was the cleverest:

When the queen was pregnant with the seventh child, he had promised a big feast if the baby was a boy. If it was a girl, he said that he would banish her into the forest. When a daughter was born for the seventh time, the king had to keep his promise. So he asked the elephant rider to take the baby into the forest and slay her and bring back her blood
Figure 6: With Dipali Das taking notes

Figure 7: An informal moment with Dipali Das and her husband Babul Das
as proof. But the child was very pretty and the elephant rider found it very difficult to carry out the order. He sighted an old woman taking her bath by the riverside on his way to the forest, and quietly left the baby by the riverfront and on his way back, slayed a dog and took its blood to the king as a proof. As the baby started crying, it caught the notice of the old woman, who was very surprised to see such a lovely baby girl abandoned in the forest. The old woman, who herself was leading a life in exile inside the forest and surviving on the fruits and honey she harnessed from it, took the baby under her protection and raised her. The child grew up to be a very pretty girl. The old woman was scared to leave her alone and always instructed her to stay indoors and never come out when she was away on her daily chores. On one such day, when the old woman was away, a king from a nearby kingdom came to cut firewood and took rest under a tree in the forest. As he was resting, a streak of long hair came floating in the air and the king was surprised to see it inside such a deep forest, with apparently no human around. This aroused the curiosity of the king and he was determined to solve the mystery. It so happened that the old woman used to work in the palace of this very king to earn her daily bread in order to raise and support the girl. She used to request clothes from the king’s household in order to give it to the young girl, but never revealed the true fact as to why she needed the clothes. Finally the king saw the young woman and was attracted towards her, and realized why the old woman used to bring the clothes from his household. He,
however already had six wives and she would be his seventh. It was very difficult for the king to justify a seventh marriage and ask for her hand to the old lady, who he thought was sure to refuse, as she knew everything about him and his family. So he started a scheme to get rid of the old lady.

One day the king informed her that he would be scattering mustard seeds over seven acres of land and she would have to collect each seed failing which she would be hanged. The old lady lost all peace of mind at the prospect of this impossible task and was tossing around in her bed, without food or water, worried sick. At this, the young girl asked her about the cause of her worry. After she came to know about the truth, she asked the old lady to cook take her dinner and leave the problem to her to be solved. She asked the old lady to cook some extra rice as she needed it. She had, during the course of her growing up in the forest had mustered the languages of the birds and animals. Early next morning, she spread the extra rice that was leftover from the previous night. Seeing the white glistening rice, a flock of storks descended to feast on it. The young girl kept a condition that in order to feast on the rice, they will have to help her to pick the mustard seeds from the seven acres of land. The storks agreed and picked up all the mustard seeds and put it in the bushel provided by the king. The king was very surprised that the old woman was able to meet his unreasonable condition. The king then informed the old woman that this was only the first test in a series of three, and she has to go through another two
tests. The king then sowed some pulses on the seven acres of land and laid down the condition that they have to be harvested on a single day once they are ready for harvesting. The old lady was very scared at this condition as it was impossible to harvest such a huge field on a day single handedly. The girls asked her not to worry, and once they were ready for harvesting, got a pack of wild boars to harvest it for her by gnawing at the stems of the trees and piling them up on one place. Thus the old woman was able to meet the second condition laid down by the king. A surprised king was sure that the source of success must be the mysterious maiden living with the old woman, and instead asked her to tailor for him a shirt in the course of a night. The girl asked the king to come back within a week with a needle made of water in order to accomplish the task. At this, the king realized that he has himself set a condition that he could not fulfill and gave up his unreasonable demand and asked her about her true identity. At this, both the old woman and the girls told him whatever they knew of her past and the king was finally able to identify her as the seventh daughter of the neighbouring kingdom. The story ends with the return of the girl to her own kingdom.

Towards the end of the story, Dipali Das fumbled in her narration and admitted that there was changes in details as she had heard it a long time back from her grandmother, and that she was around six years old at the time. It was clear that the original story might have had a quite different
ending. This tale reflects the usual prejudice against a girl child and celebrates the overcoming of social prejudices by her ingenuity. This is not a tale where a prince comes and rescues a damsel in distress. Rather she goes through a series of tests and beat the king in his own game. She is one who has mastered the art of surviving against all odds by her tough childhood in a forest. Thus, the tale can be seen as some sort of a celebration of womanhood.

The next story was narrated by Biruhi Saikia, the wife of the village headman, and who was well into her eighties. The tale was about a king who had two wives named Rupali and Sonali. Both had two daughters each:

Once they went to the paddy field where a huge python was lurking. The python heard the girls regularly singing a song that promised roasted grains for those who spared the ripening crops after the harvest was done. Gradually the crops were harvested and taken away and the grains stored. The python was wandering about the roasted grain that was promised to those who caused no harm to the crops and decided to go and ask what was roasted grains and when he would have it as was promised. So the python went to the palace of the girls and placed himself in front of the doorway. This scared one of the girls and she ran hither and thither crying, trying to escape the python. As the python raised his hood and asked the girl that what the roasted grains that she had promised were. At this the girl
was shocked and informed him that the song was meant for the birds and not for him. At this the python told her that it knew what roasted grains were; it was a whole human being and informed her that it wanted to marry the girl. At this the girl told the python that it wanted to eat her and as such would not marry it and asked it to go away. However, the python kept on reappearing with his proposal for marriage. When the girl asked how a princess could marry a snake, the python revealed that it was not a snake but a handsome celestial being in the guise of a snake. Seeing the python mutating into a handsome person, the girl was impressed. She agreed to marry him but asked whether she would be betrayed. The python replied that it would never betray her. At this, she went and told her parents about the happenings. The parents were scared and tried to placate the python with offering of milk and sweets. But the python refused all such offerings and stuck to the demand to get married. Finally the parents acceded on the condition that the python would stay at the palace. The parents also wanted to see the celestial form of the python. When the python revealed its celestial shape, the parents were overwhelmed and asked it as to the reason for such a dual existence. The python replied that amongst human being it assumed the shape of a snake and otherwise it was a celestial being. After the wedding took place, the princess was given a quarter in the palace by the side of her parents where she started her married life with her husband. Six months went by with the husband remaining a snake during day and man by night. After six months were over,
the daughter told her mother one day that she was feeling very depressed and worried. When the mother asked her whether she was rebuked by the husband, she replied on the negative. However, she told that she was very scared and wanted to sleep with her mother. But the mother refused on the ground of propriety and told the daughter that she can call out for her if she felt unwell. That night the husband gave her a golden ring and when asked where he had got it from, revealed that he was the celestial being of wealth, and further decked her with rich ornaments. The parents were surprised to see her all bejeweled in the morning and was happy to know the identity of the son-in-law as the lord of wealth. That night, when the princess went to sleep, her husband assumed the unusual identity of a python. During night he was always seen in the shape of the handsome youth. The princess was scared to see this shape and prayed that no harm came to her. At dawn the girl called out for her mother saying that her legs were feeling strange. The mother called back asking her to massage her feet. Then the daughter called out that she was feeling strange on her waist. The mother called back asking her to massage the waist. However, when the mother went to see her in the morning, she saw a fattened python slithering away towards the woods and the daughter nowhere in sight.

This is a very interesting tale akin to the tale ‘Champavati’ narrated in the previous chapter. However, there are striking variations in Biruhi Saikia’s rendition of the tale ‘Champavati’. While the documented tales
in both Bezbaroa’s *Burhi Air Sadhu* (70-76) and Goswami’s *Tales of Assam* (212-215) had two daughters of the co-wives marrying two snakes, one in disguise and the other real, Biruhi Saikia’s tale had only one daughters marrying a python. In the documented forms, the daughter of the innocent co-wife end up marrying the handsome male in the guise of a python, and ends up living happily, while the daughter of the greedy co-wife is married of to a real python and ends up in its stomach. In Biruhi Saikia’s version the python assumes the shape of a handsome prince during the day and a handsome youth during the night. However, in the end it devours the girl assuming the shape of a python. The identity of the python/man is never delineated in clear terms. This is a very interesting variation where the male figure can be seen as untrustworthy and indefinable that finally devours the female after six months of keeping her happy and under the illusion of being a loving and caring husband.

The next tale is entitled ‘*Sarabjan Sadhu*’ and was jointly narrated by Chitra Bharali a middle aged housewife and Dipali Das. Dipali Das was basically filling in the missing details:

A wife had prepared some *pithas*, a kind of rice cake, and had put them on a tray. While baking them over the charcoal, she tasted one and ended up eating all the cakes. When she was into the last bite of what she had baked she realized that there was none left for the husband who had
procured the special rice for baking the *pithas*. Meanwhile, the husband came back from ploughing the field in the evening and saw the tray in the kitchen with the marks of the wet dough and counted the number of *pithas* that were prepared. When he was not given any *pithas* he spoke out aloud, “wonder who devoured the three scores of *pithas* baked today”. This surprised the wife as the husband could pinpoint the number of *pithas* she had baked. Wondering how he could do that, she confided the whole event to some other women. In a few days, a family lost their cow. The lady of the house, who was privy to the event around the *pithas*, approached the farmer’s wife if her husband could tell them where the cow could be found. The farmer who had just returned from the woods after defecating and had seen a lonely cow being tethered under a bamboo grove, informed his wife that he had indeed seen a cow under suspicious condition under a bamboo grove. When the lost cow was recovered, everybody was in awe of the farmer who could precisely tell where the cow was. Thus, unknown to him, he acquired the reputation of possessing magical powers and the nickname *Sarabjan*, the know all. Gradually the news of his magical power reached the king of the land. He king had two wives, Hadoi and Madoi. The younger queen had lost a precious necklace which was proving extremely difficult to recover. So the king summoned the farmer, whose real name incidentally was also Hadoi, and was popularly known as *Foring* or the grasshopper before he acquired the reputation of being *Sarabjan*. When the king told the farmer the reason for him
being summoned, the farmer was at a loss and scared, more so when he was promised half of his kingdom as reward. When he was served food, he spoke out aloud to himself, ‘Hadoi, enjoy this meal, for it may be your last’. The elder queen, the farmer’s namesake, heard this, and was scared as she was the one who had hidden the precious necklace, and assumed that the man with the magical power had caught her. She came and confided to the farmer the exact location of the necklace on the condition that she would not be betrayed. When the necklace was recovered, an overjoyed king offered half of his kingdom to the farmer. But some of the courtiers opposed the move and demanded that there should be more proof of the farmer’s power. So the king got hold of a piece of a hardened block of soil covered with moss and concealing it asked the farmer to identify the object. A scared and tired farmer spoke out in exasperation, ‘Every step is slippery like walking through a moss covered land’. A surprised king thought that the farmer had accurately found out the object that was being concealed. He then got hold of a foring (grasshopper) and concealing it within his palm asked the farmer to name the object that was being hidden. The farmer, by now at his wit’s end, spoke out aloud ‘I told one by counting, the other by seeing; I uttered the name Hadoi and recovered the necklace, but now foring you have come to a dead end’. At this the king revealed the grasshopper and gave the farmer his promised share of the kingdom.
The tale of *Sarabjan* is a popular Assamese folk narrative and a version can also be found in Bezbaroa’s *Burhi Air Sadhu* (38-41) and most probably is a case of written to oral transmission.

The following tales were recorded during the afternoon’s story telling session on the 10th of May 2006 in the village Namghar. This was organised as some sort of a community story telling session for the benefit of recording. Both men and women took part in the session and narrated stories. However, the stories narrated below are the ones narrated by women. It was a one time event and is not a part of the usual or traditional expressive behaviour in the village. The first story was narrated by Biruhi Saikia and is named the ‘Cat’s daughter’:

A Brahmin’s wife and his pet cat were pregnant at the same time. The cat was always looked expectantly when the Brahmin and his wife had their food. Fish was a regular item and the cat always stared at their faces hoping for a piece. However, she used to get only the bones. This saddened the cat a lot. So the cat prayed to the lord that if she was being fed only the fish bones, so be it; but let the nutrition of the food she had benefit the Brahmin’s wife and the nutrition of the Brahmin’s wife benefit her. As she was being deprived, the cat prayed to the lord to protect her, and that her babies go to the stomach of the Brahmin’s wife, and the wife’s babies come to her stomach. In due course of time, the Brahmin’s wife gave birth to two kittens and the cat gave birth to two beautiful girls. An
irritated Brahmin started ill treating his wife wondering how his wife could give birth to kittens. In due course the kittens started attacking the cat's human daughters as a result of which the cat had to hide them in the jungle. The cat foraged the forest and fed her daughters who grew up to be beautiful girls. As they grew up, the cat got more worried about their safety. The cat kept two pitchers, one containing milk and the other charcoal under a basil tree. She told her daughters that should any harm come her way, the milk in the pitcher would turn black; if everything is okay, the charcoal will remain so. Once, when the cat was away to find some food, the milk turned blue. The daughters started crying that their mother must have been killed. One of the daughters went to the side of a pond and was crying inconsolably. From across the pond she was seen by a vagabond, who enquired the cause of her misery. When she replied that she had lost her mother, the vagabond took her away. This left the other daughter all alone in the forest, and she wandered around in the forest looking for missing sister. As she moved around crying, she was sighted by a king who was traveling through the forest, who took her under his refuge.

The girl that was taken away by the vagabond stayed in his house and had the man's daughter for company. Once there was a Bihu celebration in the village and the girl taken away by the king had come to witness the celebration. As the two sisters saw each others, both stared at the other finding some familiarity. Both started speaking to the other and enquired about their place of stay and their
parents. As both their mothers were cat, they realized that they were the separated sisters.
Meanwhile, in the family of the Brahmin, his brother, who stayed with them, started withering away. The Brahmin was surprised at this turn of events and wondered what had gone wrong with his brother; for he always brought enough food and his and his wife’s health seemed to be fine. So he decided to hide in the ceiling of the house and take a look at what his brother ate. What he saw angered him no end. Instead of the good vegetables, fish and meat, his brother was served watery leftovers. Coming down from the ceiling, he affronted his wife and told her that he can very well do without her, for he can always get another woman but can never replace a lost brother. He gave her a thorough thrashing and handed her over to her family.
On the other hand, the daughter given refuge by the king married his son and the other daughter rescued by the vagabond married a prosperous merchant and led a life in great bonhomie with each other.

This story is a version of a popular Assamese folktale and also forms the opening story of Burhi Air Sadhu. However, in Biruhi Saikia’s rendition of the tale ‘Cats Daughter’, there is a subtle expression of her attitude towards upper caste Brahmins. In the versions of the tale presented in Lakshminath Bezbaroa’s Burhi Air Sadhu (1-3) and J Barooah’s Folk-Tales of Assam (1-7), the family to which the cat belonged was a farmer’s family and the cat was ill treated by the farmer’s wife; in Biruhi
Saikia's rendition the offending women was a Brahmin's wife. This is perhaps an articulation of the attitude towards the brahmanical social structure by the Kaibarta society. Moreover, while in the written forms, there are no mention of a brother-in-law being ill treated, in Biruhi Saikia's rendition, the Brahmin's wife is very cruel to her brother-in-law and almost starves him to death.

The next tale was narrated by Chitra Bharali and is named 'Bayu Rojar Sadhu' or the 'Tale of the King of the Wind':

An old lady had a son. One day the son asked his mother for a fishing trap as everyone was busy catching fishes by laying traps in the water laden fields. The old lady got a fishing trap for her son, who, instead of laying the trap in the water fixed in the top of a bamboo grove. The next morning, when reminded of the trap he had laid, the boy replied that he had forgotten all about it and went looking for it. He was elated to see a huge fish caught in the trap on the top of the bamboo grove. A proud son came and showed the fish to the mother boasting that raps laid in the water could not catch a fish as big as the one he caught in the air. The mother asked the son to kill and dress the fish. As he was about to kill the fish, the fish spoke out requesting to be spared, in return of which the boy could have whatever he wanted. The fish told him that he was the King of the wind and had assumed the shape of a fish since he got caught in a fishing trap. The Boy asked the fish what he could have in return for letting him go. The fish
Figure 8: Going over the tales narrated by Chitra Bharali
replied that he would know about it when the mustards flowered.
But by the time the mustards flowered, the boy had forgotten all about it. One day when walking on the bank of the river Kollong, the boy saw the fields yellow with flowering mustard plants and remembered the promise of the Lord of the Wind. He immediately came back home and informed his mother and set out to meet the King of the wind and reached his home.
The King of the wind had seven daughters and seven maids. The maids were disguised as the daughters and dressed as princess. The daughters were working as servants with one gathering the cow dung, another sweeping the courtyard, another washing clothes. After the boy was fed and rested the lord of the wind pointed to the maids dressed as princess and introduced them as his daughters and announced that he could choose any one of them as his wife. That was his reward. But the girl who was gathering cow-dung walked by his side whispering “choose me”. The boy followed the instruction and informed the king of the wind that he did not want to marry the princess but would like to have the maid cleaning the cow shed as his wife. A surprised king asked him whether it was true that he had chosen a maid over the princess to which the boy replied in the affirmative. The girl he had chosen again walked by him and instructed that he deny all wedding gift but choose a broken drum. The boy acted accordingly and the king again reassured himself that the boy had chosen the broken drum over all the riches
on offer. After the wedding was over, the boy left for his home with his new wife and the broken drum. On the way, the wife felt like going to the toilet and asked her husband to guard the drum but not play on it. But the curious boy tapped on one side of the broken drum and a horde of armed man emerged from the drum and attacked the boy and cut him to pieces. The wife came running and tapped on the other side of the drum, at which the armed man vanished into the drum. She managed to revive her dead husband and carry on with their journey. On the way, they came across a river and took a boat. The girl instructed the boatman to stop the boat at a place where a girl called Kopou Kuruli lived. At this the boatman sang a song:

A boat made of a kodom tree
And the oar of a sodom tree
Halt where the girl Kopou Kuruli
Can be found.

At this the boat came to a stop near a river bank. When the boat stopped, the girl called Kopou Kuruli was in the bank to fetch water. The boy asked her to get into the boat and carried on. On the way he picked up two more girls named Sorpo and Phul and finally reached home and narrated all the events.

Meanwhile, the king of the country came to know about the adventures of the boy and wanted to put him to test. His first test was to fight a battle against an enemy king. The boy was worried and depressed, but his wife reassured him that everything will be okay and reminded him about the broken drum. Meanwhile the king arranged some of his
own man to pose as enemy soldiers. The boy tapped on one side of the broken drum, and the horde of armed man emerged and routed the king’s man. Seeing this king asked the boy to halt the battle and accepted defeat. Hearing this, the wife of the boy tapped the other side of the drum and the armed man disappeared and she used her magic powers to bring alive the dead soldiers.

The king put him to other tests from which he was rescued by the other two girls he had picked up on his way. The story ends with boy winning half of the kingdom and becoming a rich and powerful person.

In the above tale, the beneficial role of women in the life of men is highlighted. The protagonist of the story, like Sarabjan, is a knave and it is the women in his life, his mother and his wife, who plots his success story. Thus, the ingenuity and intelligence of women is celebrated in this story.

The next tale was also narrated by Chitra Bharali and is titled ‘Dimbo Rojar Sadhu’ or ‘The Tale of the Egg King’:

A king had seven wives. When the seven wives became pregnant more or less at the same time, a happy king went out on a pilgrimage for a year. On his return he found that six of his queens had given birth to baby boys. But the seventh had given birth to an egg. The king was shocked at this turn of event. He banished the egg and the mother from the palace to a cottage on the river bank. In due course, the six princes grew up into strapping young lads,
and the king gave them the job of getting the magical seed and sticks. When the princes set out on their respective boats from the river bank, the egg called out that he would also like to accompany his brothers. At this, the mother was surprised and said how he could row a boat. The egg replied that he be set out on the water on the covering of a bamboo flower with another used to cover him from the top. The mother did accordingly. In due course, the six princes had stopped for food and the egg called out to them requesting that he too be picked up on to the boat. The surprised brothers looked here and there trying to locate the voice, and after a while one of them saw the floating banana flower covering and heard the voice emanating from it. When they realised that it was an egg that was speaking to them, the surprised brother started to play around with the magical egg. As they were passing the egg around, it fell from one of their hands and struck the brow of a boat and broke. From within it emerged a handsome young prince.

In the course of their journey, they saw a snake stalking a frog. The frog asked out for help and the egg prince chased away the king and saved the frog. The grateful frog told the prince that in the event of any danger, he should meditate on him and his problem would be solved. Next, the princes came across a rat being chased by a cat, and the egg prince rescued the rat, who in turn assured him of his help in times of trouble. In due course they stopped for the night beside a tree under which an ascetic was meditating. They took refuge for the night at his hermitage.
When the prince confided to the hermit about their mission next morning, the hermit told them that they can reach their objectives by snatching the clothes of any one of the fairies that come to bathe to a river bank close by. But after snatching the clothes, they should not look back and run straight to him. Saying this he gave them a magical stick with which they should poke a certain tree. It was the egg prince who enthusiastically took upon himself to accomplish the task. He went up to the tree and poked it with a stick, at which the tree parted and a group of fairies emerged and rushed to the river. The egg prince followed them and stole the clothes of a fairy he particularly fancied, and started to run straight to the hermit. But the fairies started calling him from behind, at which the curiosity got the better of the egg prince and took a glance behind but instead of the fairies, he saw cotton wool floating in the air. The hermit got hold of the cotton wool with a net and kept it with him. The next morning the egg prince followed the same routine, but again looked back at the last moment. But on the third morning he could successfully reach the hermit resisting the temptation to look back. The hermit then gave him the magical seed and informed him that he could get the magical sticks in the underworld. The name of the sticks was ‘the life giving sticks’. But the problem was how to reach the underworld. He remembered the rat that he had saved and meditated on him. The rat appeared before him and offered him his service and drilled a whole to the underworld. He tied a rope around his waist and asked his six brothers to hold on to it and descended to the
depths of the underworld. He had instructed his brothers to pull him out once he shakes the rope. He reached a house in the underworld that had no entry. A horse and a tiger were tethered in front of the house. In front of the tiger was a bundle of grass and in front of the horse was a tray of flesh. The egg prince interchanged the food and a door opened before him. He went inside the house and after crossing a two deserted rooms came across a room with a lifeless girl sleeping. He saw two sticks, one beside her head and the other near her legs. He interchanged their positions and the girl sprung to life. The egg prince told her the whole story and picking up the two sticks, asked her to accompany him to the earth above. On their way out, he again interchanged the food before the tiger and the horse, and the entry to the house was sealed. Reaching the opening of the hole, he tugged at the rope and both the egg prince and the girl ascended up to the earth. As they were about to reach the top, he remembered that he had forgotten the sticks of life that he had kept on the floor to tug at the ropes. He let go off the ropes and giving the girl the magical seed told her to keep still and not to shake the rope and went back to get the sticks. The curious girl wandering what will happen if she shook the rope, gave a tug at it and was hauled up to the earth above by the six brothers who were surprised to see a girl instead of the egg prince. Seeing the six brothers, the girl got scared and started crying and the brothers forgetting both their brother and the sticks, rushed off to their kingdom with the girl. Meanwhile, finding girl and rope missing, the egg prince
wondered how to get out of from the depths of the underworld. He remembered the frog that he had rescued and meditated on it. When the frog appeared, he told it of his dilemma, and the frog arched his back and asked the egg prince to hop on to his back. He enlarged himself manifold and the prince reached the top on the arched back of the frog. He went to the hermitage and found that all the boats were also missing as the brothers had left. He asked the fairy whose clothes he had snatched to accompany him and along with the sticks stated his long trek home. It would almost take him six months to reach his kingdom. Meanwhile, the six princes were competing to marry the girl that had emerged from the underworld. The king held a public meeting and asked the girl to choose amongst the six princes. The girl sought six months to come to a decision and the king deferred the matter for six months. After six months, the girl laid down a condition that the one who is able to behead her and move with her head seven times around the kingdom would be the chosen one. Meanwhile, the egg prince reached the kingdom in a tattered shape from all his wondering and looked like a beggar or a madman. When his mother told him about the happenings in the kingdom, he deposited the sticks and the fairy with his mother and left for the palace where, by this time, the other six brothers were surprised at the condition laid down by the girl and wondered how one could marry a dead girl. Everyone was surprised to see the egg prince approaching the palace and taking him to be a mad man, jeered at him. But the egg prince took up the challenge and
beheaded the girls and circling the kingdom seven times with the head reached his mothers cottage and using the magical sticks revived her. As per the conditions laid down, the girl garlanded and married him. The egg prince went up to the king and told the whole story to him. Where his six favoured sons had failed on their mission, he not only got the magical seed and sticks, but also two girls. At this a satisfied king handed over the reign of his kingdom to the egg prince who now became the egg king.

This tale also shows the triumph of the underprivileged in society. An unusual tale, the disenchantment occurs with the breaking out of seventh brother from an egg. This could be a metaphorical journey out of the shell of discriminatory behaviour to success of the child of a lesser women over his more favoured brothers. Tales like this and the earlier ‘Cat’s Daughter’ can also said to be an articulation of women’s anxiety associated with childbirth, and the success in overcoming it. Successful motherhood is central to the validation of the self for an Assamese woman, and anxiety and misgivings are natural corollary to such social expectations.

The final tale selected for this chapter is named ‘Dhruva’s tale’ and was narrated by Dulu Das, a school teacher in her thirties. In this tale:

A King had two wives, who had a son each. The son of the elder wife, Sumati was named Dhruva and the son of the younger wife, Suravi was Uttam. The King was particularly fond of the younger wife and her son. Once
Dhruva came and sat on his father’s lap, but an infuriated Suravi chased him away saying that to find place in his father’s lap he would have to take a second birth. The rebuke touched the heart of Dhruva who set out in quest of god Bharanta, another form of Lord Krishna, whose blessing would enable him to claim his legitimate place beside his father. After a long and arduous wandering, a tired Dhruva was paralysed because of his non-stop walking. The celestial ascetic Narad appeared before him in disguise and told him that Krishna is everywhere and he need not wander around looking for him. Instead, he should meditate on him by the river bank. Dhruva sat on a long and uninterrupted penance by a river bank, and witnessing such single-minded devotion, Goddess Lakshmi was moved and requested Lord Narayana, whose one form was Krishna, to go and appear before Dhruva who was in deep penance. Finally Lord Narayana appeared before him in the splendour of his *chaturbhuj* form, or the multidimensional all-embracing universal form, with four hands. Dhruva was thus blessed with the love and blessing of the supreme lord and became a blessed one. Meanwhile, the King’s favourite Uttam, had grown up and went to battle on behalf of his father, where he was fatally wounded and died.

This tale has antecedents in pan-Indian myths, where the myth of Dhruva’s devotion is celebrated in different religious renditions. However, the tale here has been adapted to local condition to reinforce the religious belief of the village. This tale is grounded in the devotional
framework that permeates the religious fabric of the village, namely the devotional path preached by Sankardeva, named the *ek swaran nam dharma* that literally means the religion that follows the chanting of one name.

**Gender Dynamics and the Field**

The first important observation that goes into this interpretative attempt is the choice and change of location. It was amply made clear to the women of the village during the course of my earlier visits that what they would be narrating would be especially a representation of society and women of the village. This was reiterated by Rajmohan Das during my introduction to the village women. The most readily rendered story during my previous visit was about the origin of the village. Narrated by both men and women, there were significant presences/absences in their narration. The lady narrators acknowledged the presence of what they termed as a popular misconception regarding the origin of the name being derived from the Assamese word ‘*nis*’ meaning low which was appended to the name *Silabandha* to signify a village inhabited by low caste people. They, like their male counterpart, however subscribed to the belief that the place derived its name from the legend of King Naranaryan’s brother Chilarai sailing into the village by a boat via the river Kolong. What is interesting to observe here is that in the narration by men, the notion of *nis* being derived from the Assamese word low is
totally absent. This is interesting in the sense that it could signify an attempt to come to terms with socially underprivileged status in society and in the evolution of etymologies that could act as palimpsest over past notions of origin. And maybe fearing controversies, this story of the origin of the name of the village was not rendered in the public space of a namghar by the women. There was a clear difference between domestic narration and public narration. In public narration censorship could be a voluntary or subconscious act by women narrators. As Claire Farrer had pointed out, women's folklore genre gets importance if they conform to models and notion generated by the other half, i.e. the male half (Farrer1975: v-xv). Contemporary approaches to women folklore genres have begun to explore how women see themselves and their world. This has often meant looking at a private world, a world of women with women rather the public world outside the intimacy of gender and family. Rather than the specific locations, it is the privacy afforded by the location that is important.

It was clear by the choice of the tales that stories unique to the place were missing from their repertoire. Instead, what we have are variations of folktales made popular by the writings of Lakshminath Bezbaroa. His presence was that of a master storyteller in absentia and perhaps we have a rare occasion of the folk finding its way back to the oral repertoire through the written mode. There were a few women who admitted to
have read the stories as children while the other said that they had heard them as very young children. Story telling as a recreational and creative activity almost died out after the introduction of electronic media like television and CD players. Stories from the Indian epics were being regularly beamed in the easily accessible terrestrial national network. Traditional activities like evening story telling sessions were being replaced by collective movie viewing in portable TV’s with the help of Batteries that helped to beat the trap of power failure. Thus, tales though not completely extinct, have receded from public memory. In the present context, personal experience narratives of women are very important. As pointed out by Margaret Yocom, “women’s private storytelling sphere includes all those areas that feel not merely a woman’s touch but also her dominant influence and control.” (Yocom1985: 48). As pointed out by Margaret Mills, “within the traditional setting, effects of gender on performance in different genres vary, partly according to the degree to which a performance genre is displayed in public” (Mills1994: 63). For tales rendered by women, dislocation and displacement to a public space can obscure much of the intrinsic values associated with it. Women narrative space must be free from the fear of censure and ridicule.

TALES TOLD AND LIVES LIVED: AN INTERFACE

Ramanujan in his analysis of the role of gender in folklore performance makes distinctions between elite and lower caste narrative traditions,
associating elite or upper caste tradition to narrative control and decorum as well as a socially subservient role for women. Lower caste genres articulate themes of defiance, social disorder and emotional intensity. None of the ideas associated with lower caste genres were explicitly present in the renditions of the women of Nizsilabandha. Their performance was pretty reticent and controlled. However, latent features indicated certain variations from printed versions. The king in some of the stories was much more accessible. In one of the stories the king goes to the forest to cut firewood. The king as a woodcutter was in variance with the stock image of the king as a big game hunter. In other instances, we find a liberal use of colloquial English usages like detective kore or cid kore signifying spying. Other words like direct was also often used. Such usage in renditions by man is unheard off in Nizsilabandha, where a very proper Assamese idiom is maintained in public space.

Variations pointed out in the tales narrated by Biruhi Saikia above can be understood if contextualized in the immediate social and familial environment of the renderer. The motif of the untrustworthy and deceitful snake/handsome youth that she introduces in her narration of Champavati has antecedents in social fabric of the village where it was very common to abandon a wife. Biruhi Saikia’s own son has a very violent and strained relationship with his wife and by public knowledge has a mistress and generally stays with her. He had an ailing daughter
who was suffering from a debilitating 'mysterious' disease, but it was common knowledge that he did not take much care of her. The popular belief was that she was suffering because of the spell cast on her by her father's mistress. Though, as a mother Biruhi Saikia did not take an overtly condemning attitude towards her son, the fact that the neglected daughter-in-law and her children still stayed with her family meant that she was giving refuge to them and was sympathetic towards their plight.

The violent retribution towards women in Assamese folk narrative, as evident in the tale 'The Cats Daughter' rendered by Biruhi Saikia, and many others from printed source has a clear parallel in the lived lives evident at Nizsilabandha. During the course of an interactive session with some of the women in the courtyard of the Biruhi Saikia's home, (in the presence of men, including her son who had abandoned his legitimate wife and children for a mistress, and her husband, the gaon burah), a young married women¹ with two young children came to the courtyard and was listening to the interaction. When she heard that tales were being narrated, she also volunteered to tell her own tale. The tale that was being discussed was 'Dimbo Rojar Sadhu', and she intervened that such incidents does not only occur in stories but also in real life. She held out the example of her husband, who has married for the second

¹ Some identities like that of the woman and her family, or he gaon burah's son are being concealed due to reasons of propriety.
time, and under the influence of his second wife was very cruel to 'her' children. She referred to one particular instance, where her elder son was mercilessly thrashed after being accused of stealing money from his father’s wallet, apparently under the behest of the stepmother. She then compared her children’s plight with her own life, where she had suffered the torture of her own stepmother till the time she was married. She even compared herself with Tejimola, the girl protagonist of a famous Assamese folktale often labeled as a variation of the Cinderella motif.

The discussion that followed was very interesting. The gaon burah commented that the father has the right to behave in whatever way he chooses with his children. The gaon burah’s son interceded by commenting that wives who publicly speak against their husbands deserves a thorough thrashing. Biruhi Saikia commented that all step mothers are not evil. A young girl, Anima, vehemently opposed the statements made by the gaon burah and his son, at which the son remarked that women must be quiet or tolerant, or should be disciplined by a deserved thrashing. Finding the situation embarrassing, Biruhi Saikia, decided to pay a visit to Chitra Bharali’s house, where her daughters and son-in-laws had come for a post- Bihu visit, and as tea was being served, confided in private that the Bihu that just went by was very sad for her. The family get together did not take place as her son was not in talking terms with his wife, and anything that was cooked or
prepared by her daughter-in-law was thrown out by her son. According to Biruhi Saikia, this has happened to her daughter-in-law due to her 'dush' or bad karma and needs 'suddhi' or purification. Her dush was her foul mouth as she uses words like *kukur* (dog), *moron nohua* (one without death) to describe her husband. This was intolerable for Biruhi Saikia as she was the mother; but still she tried to protect her daughter-in-law and showed her broken finger as the result of her attempt to prevent her son from thrashing his wife.

Thus polygyny or extramarital affair is deep rooted in the social fabric of the village, and wife bashing is almost an accepted way of life. Though such violence are absent in the tales narrated by the women of Nizsilabandha, persistent visits to the field uncover such latent tendencies and the tales with motifs such as multiple wives, co-wives' rivalries, violence against women, neglected children are not only fictional realities of folktales, but social realities amidst which the folk lives. As Kishore Bhattacharjee points out, “distress of a married woman and responsibility, power and authority of the male head of the family are main gender pre-occupations” in many Assamese tales, though “it highlights only certain aspects of gender relations” (Bhattacharjee 1999: 36). It is clear that women’s resistance does not assume any overt contours of protest in the socio-cultural set up of the Assamese women; rather it is a process of occasional and subtle validation of their self
through their participation and sparing subversion of patriarchy generated forms, like the narratives discussed here. The narrative space of the Assamese women is a space of their own, away from the public gaze, and an arena to negotiate their socio-cultural reality and validate their existence.