Chapter- 2

Functions of Oral Narrative Tradition:

Theoretical Background

It is only the story that can continue beyond the war and the warrior. It is the story that outlives the sound of war-drum and the exploits of brave fighters. It is the story that saves our progeny from blundering like blind beggars into the spikes of the cactus fence. The story is our escort; without it, we are blind. Does the blind man own his escort? No, neither do we the story; rather it is the story that owns us and directs us.


2.1. Introduction:

An expression of oral narrative is the result of an impersonal, continuous and slow process of creative activity exercised in a given community by consecutive imitation. From the foregoing discussion, it is evident that, folktales, the most potent genre of oral tradition are the stories, which the people formulate, pick up, and carry along as part of their cultural stowage. These stories are told habitually by the people and are transmitted to their progeny either orally or in print. The oral stories when recited gives it certain values that the written story can never achieve– just as certain features of the written story are necessarily absent in the oral tale. These nuances can only be recorded by a phonograph– pauses in speech, interjections, intonation, stress or by the motion picture– gesture, facial expression and the like. (Herksovit, 1974, 276)
2.2 Folktales in the Present day Society:

The present day society, dominated by computer and media cesspool, has encountered a great threat to the oral tradition of folktales. Although Assam has a rich and glorious tradition of folktales, people have become detached from much of what can be utilized by a greater integration of oral traditions in a given culture. As the oral tales carry in them a showcase of culture or a moral lesson, regardless of if they were fictional or true, it is evident that without the survival and proper preservation of the oral narratives, most significant facts or ideas concerning one’s culture may very well have been lost. So it seems pertinent to get back the essence of oral tradition through the understanding and integration of it into the cyber-literate present. Of late, it has been observed that oral tradition has received some amount of attention in policy foray and debates, ranging from food and agriculture, the environment, health, human rights, and cultural policy, to trade and economic development. The concept of ‘traditional knowledge’ has also emerged independently in several contexts such as environment conservation, agriculture and food security, traditional medicine as a source of primary health care, indigenous knowledge, preservation of cultural diversity and protection of minority cultures, especially those of indigenous peoples. Moreover, the oral tales go far beyond and venture deep into the truths about how it is that people really imagine, think and behave.

Oral tradition is a living speech. It is only in recent decades that these stories have been written down to be preserved. Today, science and technology have adopted this tradition and thereby increasing the speed of transmission. The tales, which form a large part of oral tradition, are getting transmitted and being popularized in cinema, episodic serial and animation films. Thus a new dimension is added to the tale telling tradition i.e. transmission through audio-visual media. Though some argue that when it is reduced to writing it loses its vitality; when one translates it, it is freeze, and when one documented it, it has lost its originality, it cannot be approved strictly. Much of the flexibility
may be lost in a passive reading of the written texts, but so far as today’s society is concerned the written or recorded traditions are also equally significant and may serve multiple social functions. The need of the hour is to utilize different forms of oral tradition for different purposes.

2.3. Functional Theory of Folklore:

Taking into consideration this very fact a new approach of functionalism was developed in American Anthropology to illustrate the cultural functioning of different folklore genres in the last century.

The question they ask is how folklore – a word they avoid for synonyms like verbal art and expressive literature – contributes to the maintenance of social institutions. Simply put, how does folklore function in the culture? (Dorson, 1972, 20)

The functional theories have received tremendous attention not only in America but also in Europe and other countries since its promotion. In contrast to Grimm’s method of collection of folklores in its purest forms, the functional folklorists study the community in its historical depth, assume participant-observer-collector position and try to gather information about the purpose of the narrator and response of the audience, meanings and satisfactions derived from the tale telling activities and furnish hopes and aspirations about different uses of folklore materials in nearby future.

In the Functional theory, the text itself is meaningless apart from its living presentation, or performance to a responding audience (Dorson, 1972, 20)

In the present study, it is going to be established and asserted that the uses of folktale text can equally function in an effective manner in different spheres of the society like family, community group, educational institution etc.

While exploring a detailed analyse of the social functions of oral tradition, it seems pertinent to discuss the term ‘function’ as used in different academic disciplines and to focus specially on how Assamese folktales can be utilized in a meaningful way to serve different functions in the present day context.
2.4. ‘Function’ in different Academic Disciplines:

The term ‘function’ is used in different but related senses in Linguistics, Sociology, Anthropology and Architecture etc.

In Linguistics Structuralism, the term stresses that the nature of linguistic phenomena can not be understood without regard to the functions they fulfill within the system to which they belong. Here the concept of function is employed in two senses– either as a kind of use to which language can be directed, or as an action contributing towards the development of a narrative. The First was employed by Roman Jacobson in his ‘Linguistics and Poetics’ (1960) where he defines six linguistics functions according to the element of the communicative act that each function makes predominant. These are:

i. Emotive Function.

ii. Connotative Function.

iii. Referential Function.

iv. Phatic Function.


vi. Poetic Function.

Emotive Function is focused upon the addresser, and an example of the emotive function in rare, pure form would be interjections such as Tut! Tut!, Alas!, Hurrah! Etc. The connotative function involves an orientation towards the addressee, typically in the vocative or imperative modes, and this function is distinguished by the fact that it is not liable to a truth test. An orientation towards the context involves the referential function, which he sees as the leading task of numerous messages. The phatic function includes messages designed purely to ‘keep the line open’ to maintain communicative contact without actually communicating any information other than that needed to remain in such contact. The meta-lingual function involves checking that the same code is being used, where for example, we ask a conversational partner to explain what he or she means by a particular word. Finally, a focusing on
the message itself for its own sake, leads us to the poetic function of language. (Hawthorn, 2003, 135)

Roman Jacobson’s classification of Linguistic function, Anders Patterson claims, is a well-known further elaboration of Buhler’s. In 1934, Karl Buhler suggested three different semantic functions performed by the linguistic ‘sign’—Symbolic function, Symptomatic function, and Signaling function. By Symbolic, it is meant that there is a relation between ‘Sign’ and things and states of affair it stands for. Symptomatic function suggests the inner states of the sender, which is expressed in the ‘sign’ to the listener. Signaling function is rested upon its appeal to its listener, whose external and internal attitudes it directed much like a traffic sign. These three functions have been elaborated by Ronald Jacobson into six. (Hawthorn, 2003, 135-136)

In Sociology, functionalism is associated mainly with the American Talcott Parsons (1902-79), who in a series of books, offers a very general theory designed to explain both behaviour and macro social process e.g. every society is a system built on some sub systems which strive to maintain themselves in a state of stability. All forms of behaviour and social action are said to be either functional or dysfunctional, depending on whether they serve or disrupt the needs of the system. The goal of the system itself is the functional integration of subsystems such as the family into rationally ordered completely. Although immensely influential, Parson’s theory has often been criticized on the grounds that its stress on integration and stability as a conservative reaction to social change. (Inkeles, 2011, 7)

In Architecture, functionalism is one of the basic characteristics of the modernism of the international style, which emphasizes the practical function of buildings rather than its aesthetic appeal. Form is thus subordinated to function. The classic expression of architectural functionalism is Le Corbusier’s dictum that a house is a machine for living in, which implies that the fitness for use is the sole criterion by which the value of a building can be judged.
Functionalism can equally be applied to Material Culture too. In his *The Function of Folk Costume in Moravian Slovakia*, Petr Bogatyrev mentions,

magical, religious, regional and national, age group, erotic, and everyday functions’ of the traditional costume. The form of the costume reflects its particular function. In his words, ‘the functional method expands the subject matter of ethnography’ so that village buildings, farm implements, and verbal folklore can all be examined from the functional point of view. (Dorson, 1972, 25)

In modern Narratology, Vladimir Propp defined function as a fundamental component of a tale. In the study of the long fairy tales, the obvious area in which the stories form is analyzed is in the area of motif analysis. But the mere identification of a motif in a tale does not necessarily tell much about its form – to understand how the story is put together, one must also comprehend the ‘function’ of the motifs within the tale.

Attempting to analyze how various elements were used in specific folktales, Propp declared that all tales have a common structure, that there are several recognizable functions, which may be fulfilled by various character types or motifs. He identified thirty one functions which, he argued, dictated the structure of the folktale, claiming that their order of appearance is invariable, although not every function will appear in one tale.

Propp started with Russian magic tales and so far as basic plot elements of a fairy tale are concerned fundamental component of a tale i.e. an action performed by a character that is significant in unfolding the story. Contending that fairy tales could be studied and compared by examining their most basic plot components, Propp developed an analysis that although folktales contain an extremely large number of different characters, they contain a relatively small number of functions, functions which constitute the ‘fundamental components’ of the folk tale. Thus he reduced the fairy tales or folk tales to a series of actions performed by the ‘dramatic personae’ in each story. Propp’s thirty one distinct functions which, he argued, dictated the structure of the folktale, claiming that their order of appearance is invariable, although not
every function will appear in one tale. According to Propp, a tale usually begins with some sort of initial situation. This situation is not a function, it is an important morphological element. After the initial situation, there follow the functions. The typical sequence of functions is:

1. The Absentations – Someone leaves or dies. Usually a parent.
2. The Interdiction – A big rule is set up. Don't touch the spinning wheel. You can't go to the ball. You know the drill.
3. Violation – Someone breaks the big rule. This could be good or bad as seen by the examples above.
4. Reconnaissance – The villain spies on the hero or the hero learns about the villain.
5. Delivery – The searching party discovers information.
6. Trickery – Villain tricks hero.
7. Complicity – The hero is forced, tricked or influenced by magic to do something bad. There are bad consequences.
8. Villainy – Baddy McBadson does something really evil, normally stealing the Macguffin or kidnapping the princess.
9. Meditation – The goodies figure out a plan and get ready to set out on their quest.
10. Beginning counteraction – The heroes choose to fight back.
11. Departure – They... depart. Voluntarily or not.
12. First function of donor – The hero run into a donor or a magic dude. This character can be The Obi-Wan, a mysterious beggar or a ‘None Shall Pass’ kind of character. They may have to pass a test. The hero may have to fight the donor. But on the bright side, the donor may have a magical object to help them on their quest.
13. Protagonist reaction – The hero outsmarts, outfights or finds a way around the donor's demands. He gets the Macguffin.
14. Acquisition of Magical Agent – The obi-wan type character. Can be the donor. This character helps the hero on his quest, sometimes willingly, sometimes not.

15. Transference – The hero is taken to a new place physically, emotionally, spiritually. Grammatically.


17. Branding – Our hero for his efforts is marked out as a hero either with a token or with a mark on his body.

18. Victory – The hero beats the villain with his wits, his special abilities or his brawn.

19. Liquidation – The goodies all help the hero, and get what they were after.

20. The Return – Guess.

21. Pursuit – The heroes are chased by the villain, who is going all One-Winged Angel on them.

22. Rescue – The goodies run for it and escape by placing obstacles in the villain's path.

23. Unrecognised – The hero comes home and no one knows who he is because...

24. Unfounded Claims – Some El Captiano-Zapp Brannigan-Gilderoy Lockhart character claims he saved the day.

25. Difficult Task – To prove he's the Hero the Hero must, well prove himself. It can be an ordeal of choice, a riddle or a test of strength.

26. Solution – The Hero chooses right/guesses right/wins the fight.

27. Recognition – Everyone realises that the hero is the hero through his special mark, the fact they got the right solution or through simple recognition.

28. Exposure – The false hero is shown up.
29. Transfiguration – The hero gets a makeover. Or at least new clothes or a palace.

30. Punishment – False Hero and Villain (and yes, they can be the same guy) get what's coming to them.

31. The Wedding – Usually the hero marries the princess or something like that, but the wedding can just be a general celebration from getting crowned to a party. (Propp, 2007, 25-65)

Propp's very popular work was important for two related structuralist ideas: that all fictional works have basically the same structure underneath, and that a story can be created by instantiating a sequence of abstract plot elements. Moreover, Propp’s fundamental discovery was that there exist innumerable wonder tales, which have different contents but similar structure. In his contention, the structure of a tale is similar to the structure of a sentence. Just as in language where there are innumerable sentences of different contents but same construction, in the structure of wonder tales the structure is constant but the elements or contents are variable. However, Propp's approach was not intended to unearth meaning in the fairy tales he examined (as may be the case with Structuralist or Psychoanalytic analysis), nor to find the elements that differentiate one tale from another, but to discover the elemental building blocks that form the basis of their narrative structure. Propp logically uses the term ‘functions’ to mean the basic elements of the plot of the wonder tale that he declares to be constant. But he has not explained the term ‘functions’ in his classic book. Alan Dundes has preferred the word ‘motifeme’ while others speak of ‘Function slots’. The thirty one functions are distributed among leading dramatis personae: the villain, the donor, the helper, the object of a quest, the dispatcher, the hero and the false hero. In reality, these are roles rather than characters, as on the one hand a single character can assume multiple roles, while on the other hand several characters can share a single role.
Propp’s discussion of the functions and roles reveal some characteristics of the character of wonder tales. His was mere structural approach. But in the present study the discussion of functions will be from a different direction and in a different manner. Propp’s discussion of functions was limited to the role of dramatic persona within the corpus of folktale narration, but this study will be directed to the analysis of the functions of folktale narration – the story, the character, the motif, the plot, the language etc. on both the individual and the social groups especially in the present day context. The proposed study will be a socio cultural research on traditional folktales prompted by William Bascom in contrast to Propp’s purely structural study of folktales.

2.5. Social Functions of Oral Tradition:

William Bascom was the clearest articulator of the functional thesis of verbal folklore. According to his functional orientation, a particular item of a folklore can be used at a particular situation to serve a particular function. The form is the same but the function may be different in different situation according to different need. The Anthropologist often held this view and tried to find out the context as well as text of a verbal folklore. According to this approach

A tale is not a dictated text with interlinear translation, but a living recitation delivered to a responsive audience for such cultural purposes as reinforcement of custom and taboo, release of aggressions through fantasy, pedagogical explanations of the natural world, and application of pressures for conventional behavior. (Dorson, 1972, 21)

In assigning the functional role of folklore, Bascom extended the viewpoint of Bronislaw Malinowski, who insisted that myths serve as charters for social action in his Myth in Primitive Psychology (1926). To quote Malinowski,

The text, of course, is extremely important, but without the context, it remains lifeless. As we have seen, the interest of the story is vastly enhanced and it is given its proper character by the manner in which it is told. The whole nature of the performance, the voice and the mimicry, the stimulus and the response of the audience mean as much to the natives as the text; and the sociologist should take his
cue from the natives. The performance, again, has to be placed in its proper time setting-the hour of the day, and the season, with the background of the sprouting gardens awaiting future work, and slightly influenced by the magic of the fairy tales. We must also bear in mind the sociological context of private ownership, the sociable function and the cultural role of amusing fiction. All these elements are equally relevant; all must be studied as well as the text. The stories live in native life and not on paper, and when a scholar jots them down without being able to evoke the atmosphere in which they flourish, he has given us but a mutilated bit of reality. (Malinowski, 1926, 24)

This remark points toward the functions of folklore and upon the relations of folklore to culture, which signifies the cultural context of folklore.

Considering these views Bascom pronounced,

... folklore cannot be dismissed simply as a form of amusement. Amusement is, obviously, one of the functions of folklore, and an important one; but even this statement cannot be accepted today as a complete answer, for it is apparent that beneath a great deal of humour lies a deeper meaning. The same is true for the concepts of fantasy and creative imagination. The fact that storyteller in some societies is expected to modify a familiar tale by introducing new elements or giving a novel twist to the plot is in itself of basic importance to the study of dynamics and the aesthetics of folklore, but one may ask why the teller chooses to introduce specific elements and twists. (Bascom, 1981, 55)

Pronouncing that proverbs are to settle legal decisions, riddles are to sharpen wits, myths are to validate conduct, satirical songs are to release pent-up hostilities, William Bascom suggested four functions of traditional lore which is the basis of the present study with slight modification. His suggestion was originating from the conviction that, though the lores are simple in form and content, they can serve a variety of functions by its symbolical nature.

First, ‘Folklore’ enables human beings to escape in fantasy from frustration, repressions, geographical environment and biological limitations. People tell and retell stories and celebrate holidays and events because they are entertained by their lore and by each other. When folktale is being performed, people imagine living in a better situation or escaping the limitations of life
and death. These fantasies often release tension to prepare group members to accept and adapt to their life situations. In this way Folk tale lets people escape from repressions imposed upon them by society. Adams labels this as ‘compensation’ for something lacking in reality, and he suggests that telling the tale may serve as an ego building device for the teller.

Second, Folklore validates certain aspects of culture and justifies its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them. There is the ‘explanatory tale’ or a moral animal tale, myth or legend to ‘validate doubted pattern or to warn of subsequent consequences if necessary when accepted practices are violated.’ Traditional narratives thus validate some belief, conduct, ritual even if other options are appealing or even more viable. Traditional lore serves as the ultimate reference on points of legal, political, social and economic rights and status. These have a function to instruct on how to act and live. Families can use traditions to teach appropriate behaviour and to gently or openly reprimand members for making unacceptable decisions.

Third, Folklore fulfills the important but often overlooked function of maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behaviour. These have a function to instruct on how to act and live. Families can use traditions to teach appropriate behaviour and to gently or openly reprimand members for making unacceptable decisions. Bascom asserts that taking the examples of previous behaviours and attitudes the family as a unit can be perpetuated over space and time. Folk tales can be used as an ‘internalized check on behaviour’ to encourage conformity to group values. Although Bascom sees folklore performances as maintaining the status quo, traditions also can be altered to allow families to recognize themselves in spite of new attitudes or circumstances. Hence, Folklore serves the function of applying social norms and social control. This is referred to by Adams as ‘integration’ implying group cohesion and group feeling. Dundes terms this ‘maintaining conformity’. Dundes’ notion emphasizes the way folklore acts as a controlling
factor considering how folklore can be used to express social approval of those who conform. On the other hand, Adams says that the telling of legends can act as an ‘icebreaker’ to let outsiders into the group or bring the group closer together.

Fourth, Folklore is a pedagogic device, which reinforces morals and values by sharpening the wits and disseminating the wisdom of past generations. With the help of time-tested tales the instillation of moral values in students is possible with little contrivance and more enjoyment. For many folktales represent an attempt to distil wisdom, a summation of ideas and insights that have not lost its value over time. Folklore can carry along and teach the history of a people as well as its cultural norms diligence, respect, perseverance, etc. Dangers and how to avoid them may be pointed out. The most fascinating tales are legends, which attempt to teach why things are found as they are, for example, why the elephant has a long nose or the bear a short tail. While no one labels entertainment as a function of folklore, it seems that one of the primary purposes served when a story is told is to interest, and provides fun or excitement.

Bascom indicated that the four functions can be further subdivided into various other functions. Thus the psychological escape can be divided into creative fantasy and amusement, the validation of culture can be divided into the themes of guiding principle to behaviour and ritual, social approval and disapproval may be divided into internalized check on behaviour and a means of suggesting that one should be content with his lot, educative function may operate at two levels— as a didactic device and as a means of embodying the content and purpose of education. (Bascom, 1981, 55-57)

Many other myth scholars also discussed this aspect of myths. Anthropologist and folklorist Paul Radin considered myth distinctive because of its function and implications as determined by certain individual society members. The myth-makers then explained symbolically how to live, as Radin notes:
A myth is always explanatory. The explanatory theme often is so completely dominant that everything else becomes subordinated to it . . . (Radin, 1950, 370)

Myths serve to explain and encourage worldview and good action within society. Thus the theorists of myth concurred that it has a functional dimension. Ruth Benedict, a student of Franz Boas and editor of *Journal of American Folklore*, also put forward the functional use of folklore in her *Zuni Mythology* (1935).

In his *The European Folktale: Form and Nature*, 1982, Max Luthi attempts to describe and explain the literary properties of folktales and provides with an insight to the function and significance of folktale genres, which has enabled the researcher to continue explorations into the social function of the traditional folktales in the present day context. In his contention, the function of folktales can be understood only by the joint effort of several disciplines – the research of the folklorist, the psychologist, the student of comparative religion and mythology, the sociologist and the literary scholars as well. The function can be considered only from what can be deduced from the form of folktales. The form of the folktale must correspond to its function and thus the function can be deduced from the form of the tales. Folktales, in contrast to other two prose– narrative genres– myths and legends, is a ‘pure’, purposeless literary mode (Luthi, 1982, 81)

According to him, the function depends on two major factors – what type of persons have created it and how it fulfills the need of the audience. What are the human needs that is going to be satisfied with the folktales performance–this is the basic question dealt in the functional study of folktales. To quote Luthi,

The weight less figures of the folktale has the property of not demanding a specific interpretation. They actually prohibit specific interpretations and allow for (and even call for) diverse ones. They cause various soft but clear tones to sound in harmony in the minds of the listening audience. Without the listener’s being aware of it, they present him or her with a visible image of an array of invisible phenomena. As soon as listeners take the figures in , unconsciously they cannot help
charging them with a personally appropriate content – usually several levels of content, in fact. (Luthi, 1982, 96)

The folk tale is a means of joy and entertainment for the children, but for the elder people, this is

a promise of possibilities whose fulfillment is yet to come (Luthi, 1982, 106)

In a paper presented on a conference on ‘South African and Russian Folklore, the Similarities and the Role of Folklore in society’, Dr. Elias Malete declares that folktales are not only tales, these are

part of our indigenous knowledge system which can help us achieve our aspiration, attitudes and values through development. (Malete, 2010, 1)

Folktales reveal the soul of any society; they express their hopes, wishes, desire and beliefs about the world. They are often the product of preliterate imagination, simple and plain without any pretension of being scientific. The tales as well as the characters have constant functions throughout the narration. In functional theory, the text itself is meaningless apart from its living performance to a responding audience. Teachers can draw the attention of the students to the information about a country’s environment – location, topography, and climate –, and cultural information – its housing, food, dress, religion, or education embedded in these tales. Students discover and identify aspects of culture, both unique to his own country and universal in nature.

It is true that folktale is not prescriptive or normative literature. It does not try to illuminate what things should be in the world, but it gives a verbal account of what really happens in the world. It does not present things that do not exist in real life, and never could exist in the world. It never creates the hero with all ethical virtues. He is the epitome of a human with both positive and negative traits of character. Folktales do not cling to individual events or experiences, for these are no more than its raw materials. The most distinguished characteristics of folktale is that it gives answer to the burning questions of human existence and this answer provides a deep solace.
According to Chinua Achebe, a story does many things. It entertains, it informs, it instructs, it directs our action.

If you look at these stories carefully, you will find they support and reinforce the basic tenets of the culture. The storytellers worked out what is right and what is wrong, what is courageous and what is cowardly, and they translate this into stories. We can learn much about a culture by learning its stories. (Baker and Draper, 1992, 19-27)

The functions of folktales are not fixed and may change as the context changes. According to Adams the context includes the following:

1. When and where the tale was told.
2. Events which took place before the narration began.
3. Was the legend told verbatim or not.
4. Gestures and facial expression.
5. The relationship of the narrator and the audience.
6. The amount and type of audience reaction and participation.
7. The age, occupation, ethnic background, etc. of both teller and audience.

All these factors could affect the functions of folktales – whether the tale is told to educate or to entertain or to affirm social solidarity. These factors provide a good source of investigation and class discussion. (Bascom, 1981, 42)

In his keynote lecture, delivered at the 14th congress of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR), held in Tartu in 2005, Terry Gunnell, a folklorist from Iceland drew attention to the radical changes that have occurred in understanding text in folkloristics. Linear, univocal and ontological understanding of folklore text has been replaced with its multi-dimensional interpretation that includes the space of its performance and social functions (2005). At the ISFNR interim conference ‘Folklore and Society’ held in September 2007 in St. Rosa, Argentina, a Chilean folklorist
Manuel Dannemann in his plenary lecture interpreted storytelling as an active and emotionally charged relationship between the narrator and the audience that supports the building of the community (2007). Hence, folklore spreads in society and reflects socially important topics but moreover, it shapes the social reality and prepares social changes.

The active role of oral tradition in social and political life has also been discussed by Anna-Leena Siikala and Jukka Siikala in their monograph Return to Culture, Oral Tradition and Society in the Southern Cook Islands (2005). They do not conceptualize culture as a homogeneous, closed and ontological entity but interpret it as a conceptual system that consists of schemes, themes and categories that enable novel applications, meanings and patterns of action. Folklore is a generative system that creates new texts and meanings that enables people to cope in the continuously changing everyday realities. Thus, the static and reproductive notion of folklore has been substituted with its dynamic and creative understanding. Performing folklore is not understood as its reproduction in new context but as tradition-oriented creative textualisation, semantically shaped by the social needs. However, as folklore expresses the voice of tradition and echoes the former performances, it cannot be identified with those works that have the author function. Genres get their meaning and functions in social uses, in the environment where they are performed. Hence, it is necessary to interpret the existing folktales in the relevant social context. (2005, 1-5)

2.6. Social Functions of Traditional Folktales of Assam:

On the backdrop of these theoretical frameworks, the present study is conducted to search for the potential functions of traditional Assamese folktales in today’s society that is yearning for a new harmony and civilized conduct in spite of immense advancement of science and technology. Naturally, the folktales have an obvious connection with the past, but it is equally relevant in the present context. The study of the social functions of the traditional tales can help us awaken our regard for the miraculous condition
of life & evoke profound feelings of awe and respect for life as a miraculous process, which can be altered and changed to compensate for the lack of power, wealth, and pleasure that most people experience and retain their popularity and encourage the present generation to preserve such a rich and valuable tradition.

For the Research purpose, the social functions of the traditional tales have been discussed under four heads –

1. In educational Institution: As a pedagogic device– imparting value education and as a teaching tool in skill orientation.

2. In culture: validation of certain belief, conduct, custom, ritual and values and thereby maintaining social peace and harmony.


4. In Academics: Providing data for Gender Studies

Each of these functions offer a highly interesting study area which, if conducted systematically, will open up new vista of knowledge and action.

Education is conceived of as a major social institution and so it is the first area of concern during the research. Education, both formal and informal, is an important quality marker of society. It not only assists the individual’s intellectual growth but also accelerates the new pathways for future. It promotes the acquisition of knowledge and skills and widening of personal horizons. As education plays a vital role in socialization of children enabling them to internalize the social rules that govern the society, the core of the chapter deals with how the traditional folktales can fulfill the function of dissemination of knowledge and skill on the one hand and upholding of moral guidelines to the present day children and thus eliminating increasing nonconformity that has threatened the social solidarity. In the educative function, Folktales can enhance literary skills, both oral and written, in the national language as well as in English language. Also folktales can hone
speaking skills and thus improve communication skills. Folktales awaken the students’ creativity and the telling of tales provides a forum that is truly interactive. In this chapter, four main educative functions of Assamese Folktale tradition have brought to light. These are –

1. As a tool in language learning classroom
2. Imparting practical wisdom and moral lesson
3. Stimulating creativity
4. Assisting cognitive development

The second area of the research deals with the function of folktales in validating culture, which was also mentioned by William Bascom in his epoch making, essay ‘The Four Functions of Folklore’ (1981). A culture is an elaborate system of values and norms, thought and action, which the members of a society duly acknowledge and generally follow. Culture in sociology is conceived of as acquired behaviours, which are shared by and transmitted among the members of the society. Culture persists in the society through tradition. The term culture also connotes the meaning of ‘ideal’, which is another way of saying that it defines the standards of the conduct. Man begins to learn it since his birth. A cultural norm is a set of behaviour that is expected to follow and a cultural image is an image of how people are supposed to act. With both concepts – society and culture – the boundaries are blurry. For the smooth running of the societal process, the importance of culture is immense. At present, social life everywhere is full of problems—social unrest, social movements, power politics, fall of communism, crime, deviance and terrorism and so on. So in the study the culture as a representative unit of society is included to provide an understanding of the potentiality of traditional folktales in the validation or conformation of different culture items so that some possible ways of dealing with such problems can be worked out. For the analysis the following culture traits are taken into account– patterns of communication – gesture and language, family patterns– marriage, kinship relation, guardianship, inheritance etc, rituals,
values, norms, mores and so on. It has been observed that traditional folktales have enough potential to justify these aspects of culture while motivating the people to follow them. There are the explanatory tales or tales relating to origins, myths, legends or moral animal tales replete with universal values such as peace, brotherhood, unity, integrity, fellow-feeling, honesty, purity, generosity etc to validate traditional culture on the one hand and make people realize the essence of being ‘good’ on the other.

The next concentration of the research is on the discussion of the function of folktales in communicating environmental message. There is an intrinsic link between society and environment. During the 1980s and 1990s the knowledge of global environmental problems emerged and it became clearer that the fate of the ‘natural’ and ‘social’ worlds were inevitably intertwined. The human activities triggered by rapidly changing socio-economic patterns are chiefly responsible for deterioration of the world’s ‘natural’ environment. Hence, it is considered necessary to successfully instill an environmental ethics in human mind so that they are prepared to deal with environmental problems in the real world. Folklore plays a role in the communication and promotion of new ideas of ecological balance apart from its traditional role of entertaining and teaching moral values. There are various important lessons to be learnt from the cognitive and empirical dimensions of folklore tradition for conserving the natural resources for the sustainable development of the communities in specific and mankind in general. This chapter supplements the above notions focusing on the utilization of the traditional tales for this purpose.

Lastly the notions of gender getting reflected in traditional folktales and how the traditional tales fulfill the function of providing sufficient data to gender role studies in present Academics is going to focus upon. In today’s context gender, relations refer to societally patterned interactions between man and woman in society. As gender is a social construct that attributes different social roles and identities to men and women, it has been included in the study as a special area. In this chapter, the realm of Assamese tales has been
explored to examine how the traditional human relations were defined by patriarchal power. The tales reveal that from the individual to the institutional level, various types of masculinity and femininity were all arranged around a central premise— the dominance of men over women. The actions and behaviour of average people in their personal lives were also directed by the collective social arrangements in society. These arrangements are however not static or fixed, they are open to change and challenge and hence a dynamic construct. The most early research on gender concerned itself with the position of women in a male dominated society and the role of men in maintaining patriarchy. However, the focus has been shifted to the nature of masculinity in recent years. Wide economic and social changes are provoking a crisis of masculinity in which men’s traditional roles are being challenged. In this chapter the interaction between traditional gender order and the new arenas of gender relations have been dealt with and the function of traditional tales in providing data for such gender role studies in the context of present day Assamese society has been emphasized.

The traditional Assamese tales are inheritance from the ancestors incorporating the knowledge and experience of them and they can function to reaffirm the priority and wisdom of the ancient Assamese people as a whole, reassure its members that balance and harmony can and should be restored, and that the community will survive and prevail. Assamese folktales serve multi-purpose functions for individual, family and for society and community. There are multi-layered meanings embedded in the tales. Most folktales recount trivial events but are of great moral and social importance, with experiences drawn from daily life such as farming, fishing, hunting, religion and rituals, cattle business, adventures with domestic and wild animals, interactions with human companions and spirits such as ghosts, life and death battles with man-eating demons, business journeys to other villages, conflict and reconciliation with rulers, love and hatred, domestic strife and harmony etc. They can be instrumental not only in employing control over the present generation but to provide an internalized check on behavior of the new
generation by exposing some undesirable traits of human character like –
greed, jealousy, deceit, cunningness and its consequences. Loyalty, honesty,
hospitality and selfless generosity are considered as moral virtues, which find
expression in most of the tales through certain conventional narrative
structures.

Because of high regard in which these are held and because of a means of
exercising social approval and disapproval the folktales are considered as
significantly appropriate for the youths and adults alike. The tales involve
behavioral details that are especially characteristics of Assamese cultural
attitudes. The local stereotypes and hierarchical structure have been
manifested in the tales. But interestingly the smaller and the weaker sections
triumph repeatedly in the tales. Men of social statures like the King, the
Brahmin, the Pandits and animals of big stature are like the elephant, the
tiger, the lion etc are brought low in these tales. This signifies that the value
hierarchies rather than class hierarchies are rooted deep in Assamese
sensibility and cultural attitudes.

To diagnose the number of functions for the most effective work one needs a
sizeable representative collection of tales with information on the audience
and audience’s attitude toward each tale. The prime objective of the study is
to offer the potential of these simple, easy traditional materials of Assam as a
medium for developing specific basic skills, stimulating moral values,
learning the necessities of maintaining family relationships and values and
developing a harmonious sense of ‘us’, enhancing identity, esteem and
bonding and knowing our ancestor’s scientific knowledge of importance of
maintaining ecological balance for the betterment of life processes and
understanding the acceptance of gender roles assigned by then society without
any negative feeling. The proposed research, in this sense, involves a dialogue
with the society and utilization and popularization of the outcome.
References and works cited:


Propp, Vladimir: Morphology of Folktales, University of Texas Press, 2007


Bascom, William: Contributions to Folkloristics, Archana Publication, 1981

Winterthur, Rhein –Verlag Zurich(trans) Radin, Paul: The Basic Myth of the North American Indians, 1950

Luthi, Max: The European Folktale: Form and Nature, Indiana University Press, 1982


Thompson, Stith: Motif Index of Folk literature vol. I, Helsinki, 1932

Ben-Amos, Dan: Folklore in context: Essays, New Delhi: South Asian Pub. 1982


Inkeles, Alex: What is Sociology? An Introduction to the Discipline and Profession, Harvard University, PHI Learning Private Limited, 2011

Dundes, Alan: Interpreting Folklore, Indiana University Press, Bloomington, 1980
Adams, Robert G.: *Introduction to Folklore* Columbus, Ohio: Collegiate Pub. 1973


Siikala Anna Leena and Julia: *Return to Culture, Oral Tradition and Society in the Southern Cook Island*, Academia Scientiarum, 2005

**Web Resources:**

Malet Dr. Elias. South African and Russian Folklore: The Similarities and Role of Folklore in society, retrieved on 12. 10. 2010

Baker and Draper. ‘If One Thing Stands, Another will Stand Beside It: An Interview With Chinua Achebe’, *Parabola* 17.3. (Fall 1992), 19-27 (Infotac 2000 Expanded Academic ASAP Article A 12603141)

*****