Chapter 4

Function of Folktales in Validating Cultural Practices

Culture is the total content of the physico-social, bio-social, and psycho-social products man has produced and the socially created mechanisms through which these social products operate.

Anderson and parker, 1964

4.1. Introduction:

The meaning of culture is so vital to the understanding of the nature of society that it must be considered in a separate chapter. So in this chapter the attention of the research will be devoted to the concept of culture and its influence on society and the social transformation and the function the folktales perform in validating the culture and thereby maintaining social conformation and social control leading to retaining social peace and harmony for which the present society is yearning in midst of modern digital revolution.

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 behaviors 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. The classic definition of culture prompted by Sir Edward Tylor reads,

Culture — is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. (Tylor, 1871, 1)

Culture has two components— material and non material. Non material culture consists of the words people use, ideas, values beliefs and customs they hold and the habits they follow. Material culture, on the other hand consists of manufactured objects such as tools, furniture,
arts, architectures, buildings, automobiles, irrigation ditches, cultivated farms etc. Such objects are called artifacts. In the study the non material culture is taken into account. How the traditional tales validate certain aspects of the culture will be focused for further study and analysis.

4.2. Culture and Society:

Culture is not to be confused with society as the two concepts – society and culture – the have different undertones. Whereas a culture is a set of norms and values, a society is a relatively independent, self perpetuating human group which occupies a space, shares a culture and has been intrinsically associated with the group members. (Horton and Hunt, 2011, 52) For the smooth running of the societal process the importance of culture is immense. It is culture that makes a man a human being, regulates his conduct and provides him a complete design for living. It also directs the behavioural pattern of individual life to keep himself in conformity with social requirements. Culture may also provide necessary solutions for complicated situations. For society culture regulates social relationship by providing a number of checks upon irrational conduct and untoward happenings. Culture helps the group to maintain cohesion and unity by fostering the subordination of the individual member to the collective welfare. While on the one hand culture keeps in tact the age old customs and institutions, on the other culture also creates new needs and new drives. Without inclusion of positive attitude to newness and adaptation, a culture stops to remain dynamic and becomes a liability rather than an asset. So culture comes from the past, adjusts itself to the present and moves forward to shape the future. (Horton & Hunt, 201, 52-58)

4.3. Aspects of Assamese Culture:

Assamese culture, a segment of broad Indian culture is a composite in character which exhibits a synthesis of religious tolerance, societal harmony, fellow feeling, love and compassion and brotherhood. Professor Northorp in his well known work The Meeting Ground of the East and the West aptly remarks,

> It should eventually be possible to achieve a society for mankind generally in which the higher standard of living of the most scientifically advanced and theoretically guided Western nations is combined with the compassion, the universal sensitivity to the beautiful, and the abiding equanimity and the calm joy of the spirit which characterize the sages and many of the humblest people in the Orient. (Chatterji et al, 1966, 1)

The cultural cross fertilization is the important marker of Indian as well as Assamese culture. The traditional practices point towards the transcendentalism of narrow religious
and sectarian attitudes as is evident in many a literature, art and music. Typical characteristics of Indian culture which is *Manava Dharma* or *Manava Sanskriti* is so comprehensive a term that no alternative to it can well suit the general characteristics of Indian culture. Despite the persistence of idealized culture patterns, a cultural crisis in contemporary society has been emerging to shaken the basic foundation of the society.

At present, social life everywhere is full of problems – social unrest, 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 and mores. It has been observed that traditional folktales have enough potentiality to justify these aspects of culture while motivating the people to follow them. The culture cannot be handed down from father to son like a legacy. Every generation must recapture them afresh by trying to live up to them after due discrimination and evaluation. 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 'cultured' on the other.

**4.4. Folklore and Culture:**

Carole Boyce Davies writes,

> The oral tradition not only provides an important bridge to the study of narrative strategies in written form, but it is elemental in the definition of a group’s aesthetic and psycho-social dynamics. (Boyce, 1938, 166)

The culture of a people is usually reflected in its folklore. As important constituents of folklore, folktales are consequently expressive of the worldview of a society at some point in time; they convey indicators of the prevailing ideology in a society. Thus, they are suitable sources for an inquiry into culture complex in a given social formation. Folklore makes the fabric of a culture more attractive, more intense and more humane. As folklore is socially symbolical acts and narrative strategies formed to narrate the civilized discourses about morality and behavior in particular societies and cultures a society should be careful
in preserving and popularizing its folklore. Otherwise it becomes a rootless plant or a rudderless boat.

A folktale is a story developed by people of many different cultures and is used to explain natural phenomena or events of historic significance. There are many collections of folktales in all cultures. These stories were passed down orally until the advent of literacy. Each culture can possess similarities and difference in their folktales. Folktales help people see, feel and understand life--both personal and cultural, from many different perspectives. Many of these stories have been passed down through generations and can offer a sort of collective wisdom. As a cultural text, it is evident that the deep spiritual philosophy found in ancient tales bears viable approaches to today's political, artistic, and sociological concerns. Today’s social scientists opine that laws have no weight in turning the people away from destructive forces like alcohol and violence, while ancient stories and traditional philosophy do. Research on oral storytelling shows that it develops the creativity, independent thinking and problem-solving abilities necessary in forming a society capable of unifying tradition and development. Active processes of telling and listening are just as important as repining social development. But the potential source of wealth is not properly understood at present day situation. The story telling is proved to be so vital a force that it should be given rightful place in today’s society not just as a mere belief systems but as structures of feeling in order to attain social maturity.

4.5. Assamese Folktales in Validating Cultural Practices:

The people of the agro based rural society of this state have their own life and culture that get projection through the oral tales. A beautiful homeland of a good number of tribes, Assam’s oral heritage is also very rich and varied which can be considered as a dependable instrument to have a thorough understanding of the way of life of its people, their beliefs, customs, habits, values, norms, sense of morality, aesthetic sense, amusement, recreation and the like. Though the people were non literate they were life oriented and so the society of such people were so very vibrant that their folk literature becomes a medium of their life like expression and hence an integral part of society validating the basic cultural pattern. Though at present the concept of professional story tellers is not in vogue, there was a time when the teller or performer of tales was taken in high esteem. In so called modern society most indigenous languages are considered to be threatened if not almost extinct. This threat to traditional inheritance and the wisdom and beauty contained in down to earth resources is a tragedy on a global scale. Since languages are soul to stories and the culture is its life supporting system, perhaps revival of storytelling can go hand-in-hand with initiatives to preserve them.
It is observed in today’s family and social situation that under the spell of modernism, the conditions for storytelling have been deteriorating. In most parts, the home life of indigenous people have changed radically, with children busy in school activities and home works, sending to boarding schools, less spacious housing inappropriate for evening gatherings, educational values focusing on reading rather than oral tradition, and a new ideology pervading public and private life. Television and internet have revolutionized the focus of information and entertainment — now it all comes from outside the community. The concept of whatever is others are good and imitable has negatively effected its original place and the means of passing literature, history, and spiritual information through folktales have been relegated to a deplorable stage. Today people are afflicted with a trauma associated with the language shift, the shame in the old, native language and discomfort and incompetence in the new. So a positive attitude should be set to symbolize the needs, goals and concerns of the people by revealing the cultural values, social mores, and group norms of the people validated by the tales and telling activities and reassigning multidimensional functions in a number of social situations.

In order to examine the traditional folktales as validation of cultural aspects of the society, the researcher has focused on the tales with typical culture validation motifs as well as situations that can enhance a group feeling. Tales serves the function of mirroring the social order in an earlier period. It is a way of approaching culture complexes, examining norms and behavior, and transferring information. Here the following aspects are taken into account:

4.5. a. Enhancing Family Relationship and Conduct:

Family is the social base for folklore. There is a difference, however, between families as the social base for folklore and folklore as the social and expressive base for families. The Zeitlin collection of U. S. family folklore and other works suggest that traditional expressions serve key functions in establishing and maintaining family relationships and values. Zeitlin and his colleagues (1992) indicate that families select images and traits that match their beliefs to perpetuate as traditions. Families use these traditions to present themselves, to characterize each other, and to note important transitional events as they honour the family. Toelken also asserts that traditional expressions develop a family sense of ‘us’ that is distinguishable from other groups. Because family often is the first group a person knows, the habits and assumptions acquired through family traditions shape perception and experience in a natural and more profound ways.

Bascom notes that there usually is more than amusement going on when folktale is being performed in a family setting. He acknowledges that some traditions invite fantasy and
creativity, allowing people to imagine living in a better situation or escaping the limitations of life and death. However, these fantasies often release tension to prepare family members to accept or adapt to their life situations. If they question how things actually are, often there is a tradition to validate what the family stands for and to indicate how members should behave. To perpetuate the family as a unit over space and time, often traditions will validate previous behaviors and attitudes even if other options are appealing or even more viable. Traditions thus have a function to instruct and direct on how to act and live. Bascom observes in his research in Africa that children in non-literate societies primarily are taught by stories, sayings, and ceremonies. Families can use traditions to teach appropriate behaviour and to gently reprimand members for making unacceptable decisions and undesirable actions.

The common story telling situation of Assamese is when old people stay at home with children during the day, the former nursing the latter, and often narrating folktales, parents and adults are out in the fields or busy in works. The folktale narration is the replication of what elders are experiencing in the field even as tales are being told. Children will soon face the adult life portrayed in the tales. This prepares children for adult life. It warns them about the danger of evil things and advises them cultivate universal values such as compassion, generosity, and fellow feeling for the interest of all. Moreover, tale telling activities in family help members relate to each other, know each other's moods and talents, and learn how to adapt relationships when changes occur. The bond of relationship in Assamese family household is exemplary only because of such activities still persist in the family to remind the members of the importance of maintaining a traditional behaviour even in the proliferation of other culture items. The following folktales are examples of such a function.

**Sample Tales:**

**Khuba Khubir Kahini:**

Once Mahadev being tired of the beggar’s life took a piece of land from Indra and seeds from Kuvera and started raising a crop with a mind to ordering his roaming life. He got so fond of his field that he forgot to return to Parvati. Parvati created gadflies and a tiger in order to force him to come back. Filing in this, she herself went to the field and seeing the crop cried out in surprise *Ah* and *Ih*. Two flames came out of her mouth and began to consume the crops. Mahadev in anger rushed upon the flames which turned into two demons and fell prostrate at his feet. He named them *Khuba* and *Khubi* and ordered them to lie quiet till they met Ramchandra. Ramchandra ordered them to dwell at the junction of three roads and whenever a marriage took place they were to take possession of the persons
of the married couple. On the third day of the marriage if they were not given an offering of rice flour and gur, they were to make the marriage unhappy. (*Source- Ballads and Tales of Assam *)

**Ghar Jeuti:**

Once there was a family. The head of the family used to sleep at the doorway. Lakhmi, the household goddess of wealth and prosperity came near him in the shape of a baby of about two years old. She in the baby’s shape tried to enter the house to dwell there and tried to pass over him, but suddenly paused at his sight. It tried to pass several times but stopped every time. Then the man awoke and removed his bedstead from the doorway allowing the baby to come and live with him. (*Source- Ballads and Tales of Assam *)

**Murukhmati Kanya:**

Once upon a time there was a King. He had seven sons. Six of them were married. The youngest prince loved his eldest brother’s wife very much and had an illicit relation with her. The king wanted to settle the marriage of the youngest prince, but could not find any suitable match. The prince also didn’t select any girl for marriage; actually the eldest Bou (elder brother’s wife) didn’t want that he should marry. One day, the king went to a distant country in search of a suitable match for the prince. There he found one beautiful princess. Her name was Murukhmati Kanya. She was a suitable match in all respects. Having completed the marriage negotiation with her father, the king returned home.

Arriving home, the king told to his all bowaries (daughters in law) regarding the settlement of the prince’s marriage with Murukhmati and also described her extraordinary beauty and quality. The eldest bou was not happy with this news. So, due to jealousy, she made a conspiracy. She motivated other bowaries by telling that if Murukhmati would come to his house, they would be ignored and their importance would no longer exist. All of them agreed with her. When the prince returned home, she reported him, ‘father has settled your marriage, but it is a matter of regret that the bride is not at all suitable for you. She is an ordinary girl and very ugly to look at’. The prince became embarrassed. Then the eldest bou mischievously suggested him that since the marriage has already been settled, it is impossible to cancel it. Moreover if he would see the bride, his mind would be full of grief. Finally the bou advised the prince to attend the marriage rites covering his eyes with clothes of seven folds, and never try to see his wife. The prince followed the eldest bou’s advice accordingly.

The marriage was solemnized in time. The prince didn’t see his wife. He had a wrong impression about her. The wife Murukhmati was aggrieved for the unexpected and peculiar
behaviour of her husband who neither talked to her nor entered into the bedroom. She was surprised about her husband’s behaviour. She asked herself, ‘why I have been ignored so much by my husband’? After a few months, Murukhmati lost her patience and decided to leave her husband’s house. She informed her parents about her ill treatment and grief, and requested them to come immediately and take her from her husband’s house.

After getting this news, the sisters of Murukhmati came hurriedly in a rath to bring her back. In the time of departure, Murukhmati told her husband in agony, ‘you have neglected me, but a time will come to you to regret it all.’ By this time, the prince removed the cloths of seven folds from his eyes and could see his beauty. He could realise his own mistake. After a few days he went in search of Murukhmati and luckily got united with her after expressing his sorrow at his misconduct. Returning home, the newly united couple let their father know about the conspiracy of the elder daughters in law. The king punished them and Murukhmati and her husband lived happily thereafter. (*Source: Folklore of Assam*)

**Panesai:**

In the cottage of an old woman a girl is born of an egg. The girl hides in the loft but comes down, eats the cold left-over rice and leaves freshly cooked rice. The old woman discovers her and keeps her as her own daughter, naming her Panesai. The woman’s son desires to marry her and shuts himself up in the house of ‘dissatisfaction’. His mother promises to give him Panesai but the girl does not know anything of this development. She comes to know from a beggar woman that the bride for her ‘brother’ is none else than himself. As she is afraid, the beggar woman asks her to make a boat and an oar of reed and stay in the pond till nightfall when she is to take her shelter in the stump of a tree. She does accordingly. Her adopted brother calls out to her (in song) that she is not coming. One day as the lad is angling in the pond Panesai calls out him from inside the stump. He brings an axe and starts hacking at the stump. A chip flies off and this is taken away by beggar woman. In the cottage of the beggar woman Panesai comes out to the chip, eats the left-over rice and leaves freshly cooked rice. She is discovered by the beggar and kept as her daughter. Panesai roams during day as a lame duck. One day as her brother is playing with a ghila seed the duck makes off with the seed. The lad enters the house of “dissatisfaction” and tells his mother that he wants the lame duck. The duck is purchased and the lad keeps it as his pet. A beggar woman (a second one?) happens to come and tell him that she is no duck but Panesai. She tells him that he is to feign sleep at night and as Panesai goes out leaving her duck covering, he is to burn it in the fire. When the girl loses consciousness he is to revive her by fanning. The lad does accordingly and marries his beloved. (*Source: Burhi Air Sadhu*)
Analysis:

In the four tales sampled here the ordering of a family life is suggested in the *Khuba Khubir Kahini*. It validates the family conduct of a couple for a happy married life. The husband should make himself busy in outside works, but at no cost he should forget his household duty and the same is true for wife also. Only then they will enjoy the bliss of married life.

The second tale *Ghar Jeuti* shared among the women folk during the celebration of *Lakshmi Puja* validates certain action of the family man in order to enjoy the prosperity of life. Lakhmi in Indian tradition is revered as goddess of fortune and affluence. Her presence enlightens one’s hold. So she is called the *Ghar Jeuti* and the family should provide a space to allow her to dwell. The belief has been validated by the narration of this tale.

The third tale exposes the possibility of an illicit relationship between the brother in law and sister in law that is not socially approved and at the same time it validates importance of a faithful conduct on the part of husband for ensuring a happy married life. Without mutual faith no relationship can last for long –this basic idea has been provoked by the present tale. The tale has the function as a means of suggesting the illegal relationship.

Panesai on the other hand testified the relationship between brother and sister. In Assamese tradition marriage between brother and sister is not approved socially. It is considered a sanctified relation. Therefore, the arrangement of marriage between the brother and the sister had to be made secretly without the knowledge of the sister. Panesai had to undergo a trauma coming to know about the arranged marriage.

A few ideal stories for enhancing family bond between husband and wife, brother and sister, brother and brother, parents and children are listed below:

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<tr>
<th>Family relationship</th>
<th>Tales</th>
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<tr>
<td>2. Brother and Sister</td>
<td>‘Panesai’, ‘Ramai and Ratani’</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. Brother and Brother</td>
<td>‘The Two Brothers’, ‘The Oldman and his Sons’</td>
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4.5. b. Validating Religious Rituals:

Assam has a tradition of narrating *Satha Bratakatha* interspersed with hymns and attended with religious observations and these may serve the function of validating certain religious rituals characteristics of Assamese culture and controlling the conduct of the members of a family. The deities addressed are unknown and non-*Sanskritic* and the mode of their worship is also local belonging to particular community only. Examples are: *Khuba Khubir Sadhu*, *Bipadtarini Devir Mahima*, *Saktipalar Kahini*, *Beula-Lakhinderar Katha*, *Chandradhar Rajar Kahini*, *Chamaphular Mala*, *Subadsini Air Sadhu*, *Ghar Jeuti* etc. Of these, *Khuba Khubir Kahini* is told on the third day of marriage celebration for the happy married life of newly wed couple with an offering of rice flour and *gur*.

**Sample Tales:**

**Beula-Lakhinderar Katha:**

According to the legend *Manasa*, the daughter of *Har* and *Gauri* was sent to the lower region to rule and obtain the worship from the serpents. But she was willing to rule the whole Earth claiming the honour and devotion from the people all over the world. But *Chando Sadagar*, the most influential merchant of *Champak Nagar* (near Chaigaon, on the South Bank of *Brahmaputra*) was her great challenger. He, being an ardent devotee of *Siva*, at no cost was ready to offer worship to *Ma Manasa*. Goddess *Manasa* was angry with him. One Day when his wife was about to offer worship to *Manasa Devi* without her husband’s consent, he got furious and kicked away all the offerings. Enraged *Manasa* caused death to all the six sons of *Chanda Sadagar* by drowning the merchandise boats and put him in a distressed state of poverty and desolation *Lakhinder*, the seventh son was born to them and when grown up was married to a girl named *Beula*. Warning by astrologers that on the marriage night of *Lakhindar* would be bitten to death by snake *Chanda Sadagar* built an iron house called *Merghar*, without a whole in it and arranged the wedding night for the newly married couple. But unfortunately *Manasa* made *Lakhindar* bitten to death by a snake on the very night. *Beula*, however, resolved to bring back her husband’s life. Taking the body of her husband she started drifting along the river on a shaft of Banana tree and after many days the shaft stopped on the bank where the *Netai*, the washerwoman of *Siva* was washing her clothes. Coming to know *Beula’s* misfortune, *Netai* promised to take *Beula* into the *Kailash* hill where *Beula* could impress Siva by an enchanting dance and music. Siva was moved and revived the life of *Lakhindar* and six brothers. Returning home she requested her father-in-law to offer worship to *Manasa* which was done accordingly, though with his left hand. (*Source: Manasa Kavya*)
The Promise:

A certain person was suffering from smallpox. In order to get cured, he prayed thus, ‘O mother Sitala, if you save me, I promise to offer you a buffalo’. The man got rid of the disease, but he forgot about his promise to the goddess. One day goddess Sitala appeared in a dream and reminded him of his promise. The man said, ‘O mother, you are so powerful, you possess so many things, what can I offer that can please you? I am but a poor man. Be pleased to accept a goat. I will offer you a goat.’ The goddess disappeared, but the man didn’t sacrifice even a goat. The goddess again appeared in a dream and reminded him of his promise. The man said humbly, ‘O mother, I am so poor, what can I do? There are so many pigeons flying about all the time. Mother be so good as to catch a pair and be satisfied.’ The goddess grew angry at his words and appeared on him once again. This time he has to lose his life. (Source: Giribala Bhagabati, Gamarimuri, Nalbari)

Analysis:

The tale of Beula and Lakhinder acknowledges the concept of Sati Nari in a traditional society. Besides validating the custom of Manasha Puja the tale values the love and devotion of a woman for her better half and appreciates the role performed by Beula for her dead husband.

‘The Promise’ on the other hand validates the ritual of offering to mother Sitala, goddess of smallpox. Till today in Assamese community the smallpox is believed to be caused by angry Sitala and in order to appease her there is a custom of offering rice, flowers, animals etc. to the goddess. The tale validates this ritual. The scientific base for such belief is not certified, but the group cohesiveness inspired by a common belief system is the important function that such tales can function.

4.5. c. Validation of the Custom of a Society:

Assam is a homeland of different tribes. The tribal people follow different customs and practices than the people of plains. For example, in the tribal community a custom of making drinks and offering it to their deities and taking it during the religious celebrations persists. The custom of polygamy was also common among them. One interesting custom of the family life was that the husband does not demand back his wife when she has been enticed away nor is there any system of sending the enticer to jail. The culprit is simply required to recompense the husband in cash or kind, in default, to work as a slave. This practice is not confined to the tribal areas of Assam only, but is, more or less common in other tribal areas of India.
The following tribal tale validates this custom:

**Sample Tale:**

**How they Used to Make Drinks at the Beginning:**

The God known as Peddong Kebo looked like a cow. One day while grazing in the wood, he trod upon an ant. Thus pressed, the neck of the ant shrank in, the head became swollen and the back stretched out. Thereupon the god named Kazoom Kozey hacked the cow god to death. Some portion of the blood splashed into the plains of Assam and turned into soil. A little bit of the blood fell in the Mishimi Hills and became a particular kind of a plant. The Mishimi people wove fine cloth from its fiber. The Mishimis are well known for their wonderful weaving.

The bones of the cow god dropped in Assam and became steel. Men cut out the udder of the cow and made wine from it to use it as medicine. Thus came the use of *lao pani*. (i.e. Wine made in gourd *pani*-water, *lao*-gourd).

Doni bottey had married a girl named Takarkardu Doodeng. But Engong Dupi forcibly took her away. One day as these two persons were making wine from the cow’s udder, Doni Bottey saw them and said—‘This man has taken away my wife. I shall not ask for any money or ornament in return. I shall keep my wife if he will give me the sweet drink which he is making.’

At last, Engong Dupi packed the wine making secret in a leaf and handing it over to Doni Bottey, and asked Doni to open it in the house of God Rai Ooyoo, on his way home. But when the packet was opened on the way, a bee flew in and pinched off a bit of the wine. Honey became sweet to taste from that moment.

A woman named Pedo Dodey Demong died in the village where Engpong Dupi lived. The marrow of her bones became millet. Villagers sowed the millet, because the woman did not have a husband, the millet grew but it didn’t have a husband, the millet grew but it didn’t bear any grain. So when the millet was wedded to a wasp the millet grew fine. People cut the millet and took it home. They made wine from the millet and mixed it with medicine. In the ancient times, the wine tasted sweet and those who drank it didn’t drunk. But it made people drunk when the wasp put its poison in the millet.

(Source: Folktales of Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya)

The tale of Saluk Kunwar bears the authentication of typical Assamese custom.
Saluk Kunwar:

In ancient times in Assam there was a king who had a beautiful daughter. The king was so fond of her that she was weighed with flowers everyday. The gardener’s wife used to supply the flowers.

There was a pond near the palace where people usually came for fishing. One day the gardener and his wife came to the same pond not for fishing but for plucking the Saluk flowers. Saluk are the species of lotus without smell. It is of white, pink and yellow varieties. They brought many flowers one of which was very big. These flowers are cooked and eaten as vegetables. The gardener took the katari and was about to cut the big Saluk in pieces when the flower burst out and said that the old man should cut in such a manner that the Saluk Kunwar could come out.

The old man hearing the voice called his wife out of fear and gave her the flower. She fearlessly cut out the flower at the side and out came a beautiful boy of tender age. This couple was childless and so that they adopted him as their own child and called him Saluk Kunwar.

In course of time Saluk Kunwar grew into a young man while his mother continued to take flowers to the princes who also had grown into a young girl of exquisite beauty. One day while the old woman was ready to go the palace with flowers, Saluk Kunwar made a garland of Kharikajai without string and placed it with the flowers. His mother, however, refused to carry the garland to the princess but Saluk Kunwar persuaded her to take it to the princess.

The princess was as usual weighed with flowers and while she was looking through them she found a lot of rajanigandha, keteki, juti, jai, kapapuhool, champa, saluk and lotuses with soft smell. When suddenly she found out the garland of Kharikajai, she asks the gardener’s wife about it. She informed that the princes it came from Saluk Kunwar. The princess was pleased and she felt a strong desire to meet him. They met and fell in love. The young couple decided to marry. Saluk Kunwar put some vermilion on the forehead of the princes and they celebrated the secret marriage.

Saluk Kunwar used to ride a peacock to meet the princess at night when everyone in the palaces would be asleep. But one night he was caught and stuck with a spear while he was coming to the palaces. The princess tried to revive him but could not. Saluk Kunwar died. The princess, out of grief kept herself confined in her room and did not opened the door. When the king requested her to open the door, she wept and open it. The people saw the dead body of Saluk Kunwar. Amidst the heart breaking cries of the princess, his body was
being taken for cremation when a parrot flew to the spot with amrita jal (nectar water) and sprinkled it on Saluk Kunwar. He came to live and set up. Soon as he gained consciousness he asked angrily, ‘Who has brought me here, why am I brought here?’ The king decided to give his daughter in proper marriage to Saluk Kunwar. The gardener and his wife were informed. They came to the palace with fish, sweet-meets, curd and betel-nuts. After the came all the Brahmins of the village were called and an auspicious day was selected. Now pankhili was celebrated; betel-nuts and betel-leaves with two pieces of gold and two pieces of silver were offered to the idol of Goddess Lakshmi in the palace.

On the day of marriage both the bride and groom were solemnly bathed and the palace was throbbing with merry making. The drummers were beating the drums, children were dressed in their best and friends and relatives were all assembled. Next morning the priest sprinkled water with a mango leaf on Saluk Kunwar and the princess and placed adibash (the black ointment) on the forehead. Saluk Kunwar was anointed with sandal paste, and a crown of flowers was placed on his head and he was presented with a ring, a pair of clothes and some curd, by young girls of the palace.

He was seated on a stool and the princess walks round him seven times and threw flowers and vermilion on Saluk Kunwar each time. Sampradan was done by the king and the daughter was given away. Then the fire with mango-wood was lighted and rice, ghee and flowers were offered to the fire by Saluk Kunwar, mantras were uttered by the priest and he was married to the princess.

But many of the people in the palaces were jealous Saluk Kunwar and wanted to harm him. One day all the relatives of the king went for hunting with Saluk Kunwar. In course of the day the companion felt hungry and thirsty. They brought bhok laru (that satisfies hunger), but forgot to bring piyas laru (the quenches thirst). They sent Saluk Kunwar for water. He brought water from a pond, which belong to a demoness. The king, as he did not like Saluk Kunwar, sold him to the demoness for the water and proceeded towards the palace.

The princess, as she did not found her husband return, asked her father about his whereabouts. The king replied that he was gambling with dice. She could not believe it. She had two dogs called Chaonra and Bhaonra who reported the truth to her. Then she went in search of her husband and reached the place where Saluk Kunwar was sold. The demoness sniffed at the air and got human smell and asked a washer man about it. He laid her. He was all the while thinking of saving Saluk Kunwar and the princes. He thought out a plan. He advised Saluk Kunwar to play a jubilant tune on the flute and go away into the depth of the forest. As he did so the demoness with her kin followed him and went into the depth of the
forest. But when he stopped playing she could not find the way back and was lost in the thick of the forest with all her kin.

Saluk Kunwar returned home with the princess and appeared before the king and narrated what had happened. The king could realize his mistake and yielded at once. The king gave his kingdom to Saluk Kunwar who lived along with his wife happily thereafter. (Source: *Folktales of Assam*)

**Analysis:**

The marriage rites observed in Assamese culture are all found a photographic representation in this particular tale. The graphic description of the observation marriage ceremony provides a full-view picture of traditional Assamese marriage. The tale may serve the function of appropriating the basic custom of Assamese community, besides providing a message of how to work out a problem successfully in real life situations. The tale is also enriched with a moral boost to the people who appear to have failed in life. There are times when people seem to lose his moral courage and cry helplessly blaming his fate. The most important thing to do at this moment is not to lose heart but to adjust with his lot and be at peace with the new situation and if can, try to reverse the situation with courage. The tale is a good lesson on it. What makes Saluk Konwar get back his wife is his strong determination and will power.

4.5. d. Conforming Accepted Pattern of Social Behaviour:

Folktales fulfill 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 behaviour and decisions. Bascom asserts that taking the examples of previous behaviours and attitudes the community group as a unit can be perpetuated over space and time. Folktales 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 the society members to recognize themselves and assert separate identities in spite of new attitudes or circumstances. Hence Folklore has a function of applying social norms and social control.

This group identity may be defined by age, gender, ethnicity, avocation, region, occupation, religion, socioeconomic niche, or any other basis of association. As New York folklorist Ben Botkin wrote in 1992,
Every group bound together or by common interests and purposes, whether educated or uneducated, rural or urban, possesses a body of traditions which may be called its folklore. Into these traditions enter many elements, individual, popular, and even ‘literary’, but all are absorbed and assimilated through repetition and variation into a pattern which has value and continuity for the group as a whole. (Botkin, 1992, 2.1)

These traditional forms of knowledge are learned informally within a one-to-one or small group exchange, through performance, or by example. In all cases, folklore and folklife are learned and perpetuated within the context of the ‘group’, for it is the shared experience which shapes and gives meaning to the exchange. Robert Baron mentions in this connection:

While folklore is private and intimately shared by groups in informal settings, it is also the most public of activities when used by groups to symbolize their identity to themselves and others. (Baron et al.1992, 1-2).

Thus folklore helps to form and express identity in the midst of an always complex, sometimes confusing social context, in which one’s sense of ‘who he is’ frequently questioned and challenged. Folklore is not just the creative expression of a common past. As raw experiences are transformed into verbal folklore they are codified in forms which can be easily recalled, retold, and enjoyed. Their drama and beauty are heightened, and a community’s tradition becomes accessible as it is reshaped according to its needs and desires. The assumption here is that there must be some element all folktale has in common that is all folklore participates in a distinctive, dynamic process. Folktale comes early and stays late in the lives of human beings. In spite of the combined forces of technology, science, television, religion, urbanization, and creeping literacy, we prefer our close personal associations as the basis for learning about life and transmitting important observations and expressions (Botkin, 1992, 10). As the ingredients of folklore seem to come directly from dynamic interactions among human beings in communal-traditional performance contexts rather than through the rigid lines and fixed structures of technical instruction or bureaucratized education, or through the relatively stable channels of the classical traditions it has enough potentiality to function in rendering the priority and wisdom of the community, reassuring its members that balance and harmony can and should be restored, and that the community will survive and prevail maintaining group identity and group culture.

The following sample tales can serve this function in the context of Assamese community norms and behavior:
Sample Tale:

Belling the Cat:

A big ugly cat was making the lives of some mice miserable. As soon as a mouse crept out of its hole, the cat would at once jump upon it and kill it. So, all of them met to find a remedy. Some said this, and some that. One fine young fellow jumped up and made a speech, ‘Friends’, said he, ‘The cat kills us because we let her take us by surprise. So let us tie a bell round the cat’s neck. Then whenever he gets near, the bell will ring. Thus we shall have noticed in time to run away from him into our holes.’ He was cheered by all the mice.

One old fellow said, ‘It is a very clever plan. But who will bell the cat?’ Nobody was ready with a reply. So the old mouse said, ‘It is easy to say but hard to do.’ *(Source: Aesop’s Fable)*

*Moral: It is easy to say but hard to act.*

The Greedy Dog:

Once a dog stole a piece of meat from a butcher’s shop. He ran off with it in his mouth. On his way there was a narrow stream. The stream was bridged over by a plank placed across it. As the dog was on the plank he happened to look down. He saw his own image on the clear water below. He took it for another of meat. ‘I must fight that out and get his piece’, said he, ‘I am so hungry’. In fact it was his own shadow and not another dog. As he opened his mouth to bark at his shadow, down fell the piece of meat from his mouth. It dropped into the stream.

He jumped into the water at once to get back his piece of meat. Much as he searched for it by diving and swimming, it was lost forever, for, it was carried away by the current of the stream. *(Source: Aesop’s Fable)*

*Moral: Greed is a vice and causes grief.*

The Blue Jackal:

One day, a hungry jackal roamed about in the jungle in search of food. But though he searched long and hard, he could not find even a morsel. He was hungry and disappointed, yet he walked on and on, until he strayed into a city, although he knew it was an unsafe place for him. But because he was so famished, he was ready to take a risk.

‘I must find food’, he said to himself, ‘but I pray that I am not attacked by men or dogs.’

Suddenly the jackal heard the barking of dogs. He immediately broke into a run because he was afraid that the dogs would pick up his scent, and chase him. But the dogs saw him
anyway, and came in hot pursuit. The jackal ran as fast as he could to get away from them, but the dogs soon closed in on him. In despair, the jackal dashed into the home of a dyer.

In the yard, there was a large tub filled blue dye. The desperate jackal leapt straight into it without a second’s thought. The dogs looked around for the jackal, but when they couldn’t find him anywhere, they went away. The frightened jackal stayed in the tub until he was quite sure the dogs and gone away. Then, very slowly, he climbed out of the tub of dye. To his astonished and dismay, he found that that he had become blue all over. His body was blue, his tail was blue- why even his nose and ears were blue! The bewildered jackal did not know what do you next. Quickly and quietly, he slunk back into the jungle.

On the way, all the animals who spied him stepped back quickly and ran away in fear. They had never seen an animal that was blue all over. When the jackal realised they were afraid of him, his sharp mind began to think of a plan to take advantage of their fear, and turn the situation to his advantage.

‘Why do you run away?’ he called out to the jackal. There were tigers, elephants, monkey, rabbits and deer, amongst others. They stood around the jackal in wonderment. ‘You are safe with me. I am a very special creature indeed, quite unlike all the other beasts in the jungle! God has sent me here to be your king. I shall protect you.’

The animals, observing the jackal’s unusual appearance and his bold, confident manner, believed him blindly.

‘Your Majesty’, they said, bowing low, ‘We are happy that you want to be our king, and he accepts you with gratitude. We thank God for sending you to us. Please tell us what we have to do please you.’

‘You must look after your king well’, said the jackal. ‘You must provide him with all the comforts and the food that he needs.’

‘Certainly, your Majesty’, the animals promised. ‘We will do everything for our king’s comfort. What else can we do for you?’ they asked respectfully.

‘You must always be loyal to your king’, the jackal replied. ‘Then the king will protect you from your enemies.’

The animals were content and satisfied to here these words. From that moment onwards, all the animals in the jungle vied with one another to please their jackal king. They sent the jackal all kinds of delicious food, and fawned over him, and looked after him well.
The jackal truly lived like a king. Everyday the animals went to him with their problems. One day, as the king sat in his court, a noise was heard in the distance. It was the howling of a pack of jackal. The jackal king had not heard the voice of jackals for a very long time. He was overjoyed to hear the sound and his eyes filled with tears of joy, as memories of his joy, he quite forgot that he was a king, and the blue jackal lifted his head up and howled.

All the animals immediately realized who he really was- just a common jackal, who had tricked them for a long time! They were so angry that they rushed towards him to tear him to pieces. But the quick-witted jackal had already leapt off his throne and run away. He learnt too late that a lie does not live long—it is always found out.

(Source: The Panchantra)

Analysis:

Assamese society has certain fixed pattern of behaviour set for the community life, like, one should not steal, one should never betray a friend, one should not deceive others, one should be exemplary in behaviour before advising others, pride is not a deserving characteristic trait, one should love his own motherland, one should not be a flatterer in social communication, one should not be too show off in social interaction and so on and so forth. The sample tales are chosen for such function. The tale of belling the cat prefers action as rewarding activity than any precept. Though a simple animal tale, it criticizes the nature of ‘speak more act less’ type and admires the necessity of action though indirectly.

The second tale suggests that the greed cannot be a sought after attribute of one’s character. To live peacefully in the society one should shake off greed. The tale of the blue Jackal implies that the artificiality on the part of one group member is not tolerated by the others. Today most of the community conflict has been caused by artificial show off on the one hand and the greed on the other. The above tales may serve the function of suggesting the disastrous end of these unnatural traits. Though simple, the tales give one opportunity to check his own sense of morality and social behaviour internally and realize the necessity of maintaining social order.

4.5. e. Validation of Spiritual Belief:

For a culture the spiritual belief is of utmost significance. It not only helps people mature spiritually but also derive the mental solace during the most unbearable situation in life. The following Jataka Tale can be functional in this context.
Sample Tale:

The Parable of the Mustard Seed:

Kisagotami is the name of a young girl, whose marriage with the only son of a wealthy man was brought about in true fairy-tale fashion. She had one child, but when the beautiful boy could run alone, it died. The young girl, in her love for it, carried the dead child clasped to her bosom, and went from house to house of her pitying friends asking them to give her medicine for it.

But a Buddhist mendicant, thinking ‘She does not understand,’ said to her, ‘My good girl, I myself have no such medicine as you ask for, but I think I know of one who has.’

‘O tell me who that is,’ said Kisagotami.

‘The Buddha can give you medicine. Go to him,’ was the answer.

She went to Gautama, and doing homage to him said, ‘Lord and master, do you know any medicine that will be good for my child?’

‘Yes, I know of some,’ said the teacher.

Now it was the custom for patients or their friends to provide the herbs which the doctors required, so she asked what herbs he would want.

‘I want some mustard seed,’ he said; and when the poor girl eagerly promised to bring some of so common a drug, he added, ‘You must get it from some house where no son, or husband, or parent, or slave has died.’

‘Very good,’ she said, and went to ask for it, still carrying her dead child with her.

The people said, ‘Here is mustard seed, take it.’

But when she asked, ‘In my friend’s house has any son died, or husband, or a parent or slave?’ they answered, ‘Lady, what is this that you say? The livings are few, but the dead are many.’

Then she went to other houses, but one said, ‘I have lost a son,’ another, ‘We have lost our parents,’ another, ‘I have lost my slave.’

At last, not being able to find a single house where no one had died, her mind began to clear, and summoning up resolution, she left the dead body of her child in a forest, and returning to the Buddha paid him homage.

He said to her, ‘Have you got the mustard seed?’

‘My lord,’ she replied, ‘I have not. The people tell me that the livings are few, but the dead are many.’
Then he talked to her on that essential part of his system – the impermanence of all things, till her doubts were cleared away, and, accepting her lot, she became a disciple and entered the first path.

(Source: Jataka Tale)

Analysis:

The tale sampled here provides spiritual nourishment to the listener. As the physical life is not eternal one shouldn’t go for thing that is not allowed to him/her. This tale type may induce an indifferent attitude toward material gain and encourage a contended mind. One should accept the natural process of birth, ageing and death without losing his/her composure.

4.5. f. Validation of Labour Division:

The study of the traditional folktales validates the traditional labor division in the society. Here division of labor is gender based. Duties and works for men are set up as hunting, clearing the forest, offering sacrifices, in charge of security, taking cows to the field for grazing. But the gendered division of labour caused no problem for the family as well as society as it was an accepted pattern and no direct conflict with it was made to sustain in the traditional tales.

Sample Tale:

Lazy Bones:

The husband was a hard working youth. He worked all day in the fields. Unfortunately, his wife was a lazy bones, neither eager to work nor good at anything. She was however, touchy, and if someone put in a good word for her husband, she would retort:

Ploughing is just walking forward and backward,

Hoeing is a bit difficult,

But neither can equal my chores.

Now this verse was overheard by her husband. He did not make any comment, for as they say, ‘The deer that I will slay is in the forest, and what I will say is in my mind’.

One morning he was ploughing in a field close by their house. He was going to sow lentils there. He felt like having a pull at his tobacco pipe and get it for him.

When she took the pipe to the field, he said, ‘Just a moment, let me finish this furrow. Please bring the pipe up to there.’
When she reached there, he turned and said, ‘Let me complete this furrow as well. Please bring the pipe to that end’. She followed him. He again turned and said, ‘A little more, please. Let me get this furrow also finished.’

In this way he made the woman walk from one end of the field to the other several times. She was tired walking over the rough ground and had to admit, ‘I can no longer run after you, I feel tired.’

Her husband then smiled and put to her, ‘Now tell me which is harder ploughing or doing your morning chores?’

For once she held her tongue. What could she say? Since the day she made an attempt to do her work with greater interest.  

(Source: Tales of Assam)

Analysis:

In the tale it is going to be established that though the division was gender biased it was not unreasonable and unscientific. It was actually in accordance with the physiological structure of men and women and hence culturally accepted. A thorough survey of the tales will show the following labour divisions in the Assamese society.

Table 4.1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Duties for Men</th>
<th>Duties for women</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hunting</td>
<td>Cooking</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clearing the forest for agriculture</td>
<td>Second digging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In search of security</td>
<td>Domestic chores</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking cows for grazing</td>
<td>Cleaning the cowshed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Offering sacrifices</td>
<td>Singing songs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking part in the combat</td>
<td>Socialising children</td>
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<tr>
<td>Planting trees</td>
<td>Nurturing the plants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking part in the decision making</td>
<td>No share in decision making</td>
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</table>
4.5. g. Validation of Traditional Trades and Commerce of Assam:

The tales are also replete with the information of the beginning of certain cultural trades and profession. The traditional cultivation has been reflected in *The Frog, Champavati etc*, the sugarcane plantation is mentioned in the *Officer Fox*, the astrology is referred to in *The Astrologer*, the fortune teller is mentioned in *Pharing, the all Knowing*. The following tale validates the origin of the establishment of Assamese market system

Sample Tale:

**How the Assamese and the Aos set up a Hat (Market):**

In olden times some Ao Naga villages situated near the plains of Assam. Assamese villagers cooperated and established a *hat* or market for exchange of goods. Whosoever was not cooperative with this system he or she was not allowed to enter the *hat*. One day an Assamese and an Ao were driven out because of this reason.

The two persons stuck up a friend ship and one enquired of the other where he lived. The Assamese said that his home was beyond the mouth of Janji river. The Ao Naga said that he lived near the source of the river. Both of them now decided to collect people and set up a new *hat*. In order to test the strength of their agreement they proposed a task. The Assamese asked his friend to drop a log in the river at its source and said that if the dog reached him, their agreement would endure. The Naga dropped a log and it floated down to near his friend’s home.

Being satisfied at one another’s sincerity, they now began to contact people. The hat was set up and nine Ao villages and some Assamese villages joined the *hat*. There was a village named Sam near Sibsagar. The *hat* was set up in this village. At the beginning many persons came to by and sell. At first only needles were being sold by an old woman from the plains of Assam. The *hat*, therefore, came to be known as *Ajemla Wati*, a gathering of needles. But slowly the market grew and later came to be known as Sam *Hat*. The nine Ao Villages were called the children of *Wati* since they formed this wait or market. Later on these nine villages decided to approach the Assamese King at Sibasagar with presents and asked for exemption of tax (*hat khoa*) as well as to gain his good will. The Nagas had chosen *Mondinsungkum* as the leader of their delegation as he happened to be an old acquaintance of the king.

The king gladly accepted the presents and in return he presented a plot of land to them and also caused a good building to be constructed in each of the nine Naga villages. The land
that the king gave away is still preserved and remains as a memory of that kindly king. (Source: Tribal Folktales of Assam)

Analysis:

The tale validates the establishment of one of the important facets of Assamese culture – the market. To give present as return of something or as a token of gratitude is still a marker of Assamese community custom that has got reflected in this legendary tale. The place name suffixes like Wati and Hat (eg. Amollapwatti, Keya patti, Maranhat) are validated by such tale.

4.5. h. Validation of Patriotic Feeling:

There are tales that glorifies the national sentiment and arouses patriotism in the minds of the listeners. The following historical tale illustrates this motif:

Sample Tale:

Momai is Not Greater than My Land:

This inspiring story is associated with the Moghul general Raja Ramsingh’s invasion of Assam in 1669. As the powerful Moghul army marched up to Hajo, some way to the west of Gauhati and across the Brahmaputra. The Assam general Lachit Barphukan felt the necessity of an earthwork to protect his fortifications at Saraighat. Considering the work to be of vital importance and considerable urgency, he directed his maternal uncle to complete it in one day. The work began, all day thousands of men laboured hard, night came on and the work continued. Late at night the general himself went out to have a personal inspection. He noticed that the work was yet to be completed and the labourers were either relaxing or sleeping. He grew indignant at the state of affairs, and declaring ‘Momai is not greater than my land’, he pulled out his sword and cut down his uncle. The action of the general jolted the labourers into renewed activity and the earthwork came to be finished before the night was over. (Source: Tales of Assam)

Analysis:

This historical tale has immense significance in encapsulating the Assamese people’s patriotism. The remains of the earthwork are still to be seen and well known as Momai Kata Garh. (The rampart where the maternal uncle was cut down). The chronicles of Assam have kept a record of the war and the defeat of Raja Ramsingh (1671), but the incident of Lachit Barphukan taking nowhere recorded. The tale may have historical background but no historical evidence. It is possible that this type of tale was narrated during the most urgent period of time in order to inspire the spirit of nationalism in the hearts of common people.
4.5. i. Validation of Social Mores:

Mores, in sociology refers to those strong ideas of right and wrong which are associated with certain folkways. The strong sense of right and wrong always regulate one’s action in a society. In a society the members should follow certain folkways because these are considered essential to group welfare and also because to forbid others from doing so. Assam has a good number of trickster tales. These are secular beings often project the kinds of evil forces and bad behaviors against which the human community must contend to survive and which must be kept in check. This goal is rehearsed and achieved in group performance of traditional proverbs and folktales, wherein the trickster’s bad anti-social behaviors are usually punished, and the evil forces unleashed are controlled or defeated. Thus, for example, recounting Tenton stories or other trickster tales reaffirm the social mores and awaken one’s regard for universal and humanistic values in overcoming the serious incongruities between what is ideal, socially and politically valuable and what is socially disgraceful and malign. The usual cunning characters like Teekhar, Tenton and animals like the fox or monkey suggest that society is full of typical hypocrites and cheats. So one should always be prepared to handle them carefully so that they cannot do any harm. Moreover, the short tales of mere joke type though at first seems not to carry any morals or instructions, implicitly provide the social investigators some material for thought on the issues of social divisions. The following tales exemplify these functions:

Sample Tales:

The Old Farmer and his Sons:

Once there was an old farmer. He was quite well to do but he felt unhappy with his sons. They often fell out with one another and disturbed his peace of mind. They paid no attention to his advice. One day the farmer who had fallen seriously ill called his sons to bed side. They saw a bundle of sticks on the floor. He asked the youngest son to break it but he failed. Each of the other sons were asked to try. With all his strength none could break it. The father then got the bundle untied. The youngest son was asked to break the sticks one by one. This he did quit easily. Now the father said, ‘If you live united and attached to one another, nobody can harm you. If you live apart and divided, people can easily injure you’. Thus, the sons were taught the value of unity.

*Moral: United we stand, divided we fall.*

The Tuni or Tailor-bird:

There was a *tuni* (tailor-bird) who lived in a garden close by the king’s palace. One day the king noticed the bird’s nest and said derisively, ‘Look, the *tuni* too has built her palace.’
This observation of the king she took to heart, and while the king sat in his throne, she sang:

What wealth the king does not possess

That I have in my house.

The king was annoyed to here this. A tiny bird, that she should challenge a king like this was impertinence and not to be tolerated. He right away ordered his watchman, ‘Go and bring whatever she has in her nest.’ The watchman went, found two shells (used at one time as coins) and brought them. The king laughed out at the sight of the shells. The tuni now sang:

Why so poor you are, O king,

That my two shells you have to wrest.

The king heard the song several times and did not like to be teased thus. He asked his watchman to return the shells. The bird was overjoyed to find them and out of happiness sang out:

Why so frightened you are, O king,

That my two shells you have to return?

The king lost his patience now. A tiny bird to declare that he was frightened? How could he stand this? He roared, ‘Catch that bird and bring her to me!’ The watchman somehow managed to capture the tuni. The king took the bird and asked his seven wives to get her fried for him.

Now, while the queens were about to kill and dress her, she escaped and flew away. They were now in a tight corner, for they knew what a temper the king had and that they were likely to loss their lives. They had to think of a way out. They noticed a frog hiding on a corner of the floor. They killed it, dressed it, fried it and then gave it to the king to eat. The king had hardly finished his meal when the tuni sang out:

While I, the tuni, go on wardling on the limb, the king, on a gold platter, but a fried frog eats.

The king had thought he had done with the bird, but now discovering his mistake, he called his seven queens. At his anger the latter shock in fear. He asked, ‘Is it true that you have made me eat a frog?’ The queens bent their knees and humbly said, ‘O King, you can slay us if you so desire, but it was in fear of you that we had to substitute the bird with a frog.’

The enraged king immediately cut off their noses.
The king had hardly requested after his disgusting meal when the bird sang out again:

While I, the *tuni*, go on wardling

The noses of seven queens have been cut off.

He tried to ignore the bird but she could not leave off. He got furious and ordered his watchman to catch her again. The watchman caught the bird and gave her to the king. The latter this time simply ate her up. He concluded that the bird would not escape him again. The *tuni* began to pick at the walls of the king’s tummy. The pain was considerable and the king had to cry out and wanted to relieve himself. Feeling that the bird might escape while he relieve himself, he asked one of his queens to kill the bird as soon as she came out. The queen kept watching with a sword in her hand. Unfortunately, as she tried to hit the tiny bird, she cut off a portion of the king’s behind, while the *tuni* escaped the latter now began to sing:

While I, the *tuni*, go on warbling,

The king’s behind has been cut off.

The king failed to subdue this puny bird. He had to simply shut his ears to whatever she sang out. The bird however did not let him off so easily. She often sang:

Who goes along the road?

The king goes with his cut-off behind.

What could the hapless king do? A tiny tailor bird beating him in this way! At long last the king’s minister took a hand in the matter. He called on the bird, talked her round and thatched up the quarrel. She stopped teasing the king and the latter also gave up laughing at her. *(Source: Tales of Assam)*

**The Rupee Note:**

There was once lived a Brahmin in a small village. He was fast becoming old, and his sons were already grown and were looking after him. Nonetheless, this greedy Berahmin continued to keep up his work of conducting religious ceremonies for others. He would never refuse the chance to conduct some local ritual and thus earn a few *annas* as his rightful fees.

Once during the rainy season, the Brahmin was returning home in the evening from the performance of a small *puja* ceremony in a distant village. His return rout took him through a swamp. Indeed, it was even necessary for him to wade through water for part of the way. As the tired Brahmin picked his way through a hyacinth plants that grew in this swamp, he
suddenly slipped into a patch of deep mud. He was completely sunk up and it was impossible to get himself out. Then he remembered a brother in law who lived close by. So, in fear of his life, the Brahmin cried out loudly, ‘Oh brother in law! I am deep in the mud. Please help me.’ It had already grown dark, but fortunately the brother in law heard his cry. He arrived with a lamp and found his relative suck in the swamp. The brother in law pulled him out, took him home and gave him a change of clothing. The rescuer also kindled a fire to warm the old man. But the Brahmin, forgetting himself cried out, ‘Don’t worry about me. There is a rupee note in my bag. Please warm the rupee.’ (Source: Hemoprabha Devi, Vill: Japarkuchi)

The Fly Eats the Sweet:

One day, the Tenton was riding on a horse. He found a sweet shop and saw that a boy was selling the sweets in the absence of his father. Tenton telling him that his name was Fly started eating the sweets. The boy shouted to his father who was inside that the fly was eating sweets. The father said, ‘Let it be’ thinking that it was a fly. So Tenton ate as much as he could and left the place with a full stomach cheating the boy and his father, the sweet seller. (Source: Ballads and Tales of Assam)

Analysis:

The tale The Old Farmer and his Sons is a typical example of the requirement of a sense of united feeling for sustaining social harmony. The old farmer not only renders a lesson of unity to his sons, but it proves to be a universal lesson of brotherhood for the members of a community. On the other hand the tale, which pokes fun at the miserliness in a Brahmin’s character, functions as criticism of the social hierarchies in the traditional society. The Tailor Bird depicts the defeat of a king at the words of a mere bird. The Brahmin as a high caste and the King as a high born often enjoy a prestigious place in the society. But the priest has a fixation of money in offering religious rites which are particularly ridiculous and not an appropriate conduct. Similarly the king’s way of dealing with tailor bird is not appropriate for his status. He may be a king, but his action is particularly humorous. These types of tales, no doubt, have a function of validating social mores on the one hand, and social criticism on the other. In this connection the remark by Dr. P. Goswami seems worth mentioning,

These tales are usually short, often joke types, and amusing. They prick the bubble of orthodoxy and caste superiority, and suggest that story tellers, without perhaps
being conscious of their role, serve the function of social criticism. It is not decorous or safe to criticize a person of eminence face to face; on the other hand, one can release one’s vexation or repression safely and helpfully in the form of a joke or tale enjoyed together with other persons that is collectively. It is a kind of social protest, made safely because the author of the joke remains unidentified, unknown. But tales which are a ribald or risqué are not recounted in mixed groups, they are told to one’s close friends’. (Goswami in Sen, 1985, 63)

4.6. Thus Folktales in Assamese oral literature provides a rich source understanding of cultural history and socializing process, transmitting and reinforcing messages associated with central values. The tales analysed here are rich with typically Indian symbolism of social norms, values, beliefs and practices. Folktales as a ‘text’ is a social cultural production of society constituting the out come of social and cultural imaginings As carrier of this cultural message, the tales offer the sociologists some structures for viewing culture, society and events at a particular time and channelize them to the present generation. If folktales are studied, recited, and reinvented, it will offer a plethora of information, which supplies moral, cultural, global, and historical perspectives about life in a given culture. Through a very simple framework with just two types of characters – the protagonist and antagonist, they present a broad commentary on the world view of a given culture. Nina Jaffe describes that folktales give a way ‘for people to see, feel and understand life from many different perspectives-both personal and cultural’ (2004). The idea of learning from and about one’s own cultures, a sharing of intellectual understanding, through the spoken word is very unique. People need this exposure to folktales to help them value his own culture throughout the world. In this context the traditional folktales can provide each generation an opportunity to recapture the values of culture through subtle process of reinterpretation, reintegration and adaptation.

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