Chapter- 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. Introduction:

Folktales form an integral part of oral prose narrative tradition, an important genre of folk literature. Folk literature is a broad segment of folklore created during the most ecstatic moment of creative sensibility and is disseminated, preserved and adapted in an oral tradition. The folk literature of a country belongs to its common people whose thoughts and feelings are embedded in it in the most native, down-to-earth and spontaneous way. People since time immemorial have used it to voice or sound their experiences, to throw light on the secret of the physical world and to describe human nature and society. The folktales are deeply rooted in their social environment and are highly sensitive to individual and group sentiments. They are lucid, entertaining, engaging, easily intelligible and memorable. These tales have no fixed form in their oral stage. As long as they are told, they vary, merge and blend. But once they are put into paper, they get stiffened. (Dorson, 1972, 59)

1.2. Folklore and Folklife :

The folklore of which folk literature is only a part consists of two kinds of activities– what the folk traditionally do and what they traditionally say. Thus the concept of tradition has been embedded in the definition of folklore. Folklore, in general sense, is the traditional beliefs, myths, tales, and practices of a people which have been disseminated in an informal manner– usually via word of mouth, although in modern times the Internet has become a pivotal source for folklore. Folklore as a discipline of study started in the 19th century A.D. Until the 19th century it was considered a part of ideology. It was given a new focus of interest when Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm in Germany began collecting, examining and publishing oral narratives and interpretation of Germanic mythology in 1812.
It is generally agreed that the history of modern Folklore studies began with the publication of the volume of German Folktales under the title *Kinder und Hausmarchen (Children’s and Household Tales)* in 1812 by the Grimm brothers. (Datta, 2002, 15-16)

They used the word *Volkskunde*. Previously it was known in England as Popular Antiquities. Later, in 1846 William John Thoms, a British antiquarian sent a letter to the Magazine *The Athenaeum* in which he suggested the new word ‘Folklore’ in place of either Popular Antiquity or Popular Literature. He wrote,

> Your pages have so often given evidence of the interest which you take in what we in England designate as Popular Antiquities or Popular Literature (though by-the-by it is more a lore than a Literature, would be more aptly be described by a good Saxon compound ‘Folklore’—lore of the people) – that, I am not without hopes of enlisting your aid in garnering the few ears which are remaining, scattered over that field from which our forefathers might have gathered a goodly crop. (Dundes,1965,4)

Thus the simple term folklore replaced various awkward phrases floating around at that time. The term gained immediate popularity and currency not only in the English speaking countries but also in other nations. The original terms such as *Volksunde* and Popular Antiquity were also being used simultaneously.

In the famous *Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend* (1984) more than twenty definitions of folklore have been enlisted. Though all of them are diverse from each other, taking those views and observations into consideration some general points on its nature and scope can be derived. A few definitions are cited below:

1. Folklore comprises traditional creations of peoples, primitive and civilized. These are achieved by using sounds and words in metric form and prose, and include also folk beliefs and superstitions, customs and performances, dances and plays. (Balys, Jonas. *SDFML*, 1984, 397)
2. It is usual to define folklore either literally as the lore of the folk or, more descriptively, in terms of an oral literally tradition. (Smith, Marian W. *SDFML*, 1984, 402)

3. Folklore is the generic term to designate the customs, beliefs, traditions, tales, magical practices, proverbs, songs, etc; in short the accumulated knowledge of a homogeneous unsophisticated people tied together not only by common physical bonds, but also by emotional ones which color their every expression, giving it unity and individual distinction. (Leach, Mac Edward. *SDFML*, 1984, 401-402)

Thus, most definitions have their focus of interest on the ‘lore’, not on the ‘folk’. The ‘folklore’ of a people consists of two kinds of activity— What the ‘folk’ traditionally ‘do’ and what they traditionally ‘say’. The issue of the word of mouth or orality is thus embedded in the concept of folklore. ‘Folk’ are identified with the backward, illiterate, uncivilized peasant community who dwell on rural inhabitants. But this is a narrow conception of folk and quite unsatisfactory as well as misleading too.

If one were to accept this view, the life of the folk would be conceived of as static and untouched by urban sophistication and as bearers of archaic items in their most unchanged form. This notion of ‘folk’ has been challenged by the modern day folklorists and the most pronounced name in this connection is Alan Dundes who defined ‘folk’ in a new light. To quote Dundes,

> The term ‘folk’ can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is – it could be a common occupation, language or religion – but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions, which it calls its own. In theory, a group consists of at least two persons but generally most groups consist of many individuals. A member of the group may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the group, traditions which help the group have a sense of group identity. (Dundes, 1965, 2)

This all inclusive definition of ‘folk’ provides with an important insight that ‘folk’ has a group identity and the group may be of any size ‘as large as a nation or as small as a family’. In addition to ‘nation’ and ‘family’, there
could be many forms of ‘folk’ based on region, state, city, village or ethnicity, race, religion, occupation, etc. Even a military group or college community or music band or computer programmers, a street corner gang, a batch of factory workers, army, apartment dwelling urban elite, a village or tribal group, a troupe of pilgrims may constitute a folk group and their customs, stories, songs, in-group jokes may be their ‘lore’. This modern conception of ‘folk’ provides us with an important insight: folklore is not merely the ‘lore’ of the antiquarian belonging to a single, homogeneous group, it may include the items of the modern people too. In 1978, M. R. Dorson presents them as contemporary,

keyed to the here and now, to the urban centers, to the issues and philosophies of the day (Dorson, 1978, 23)

Folklore now evokes two levels of meaning— one, the materials collected from a group of associated people and second, the systematic scientific analytical study of such materials. To quote Alan Dundes–

these materials and the study of them are both referred to as folklore. To avoid confusion it might be better to use the term ‘folklore’ for the materials and the term ‘folkloristics’ for the study of the materials. (Dundes, 1965, 3)

1.3. Folkloristics : The Study of Folklore :

Folkloristics has come a long way since the earlier days. So the 19th century definitions of ‘folk’ have been modified and this new concept of ‘folk’ and ‘folklore’ studies is included in the *Oxford Dictionary of English Folklore*, folklore is

something voluntarily and informally communicated, created or done by members of a group (which can be of any size, age or social and educational level); it can circulate through whatever media (oral, written or visual) are available to this group; it has roots in the past, but also present relevance; it usually recurs in many places, in similar but not quite identical form; it has both stable and variable features, and evolves through dynamic adaptation to new circumstances. The essential criterion is the presence of a group whose joint sense of what is right and
appropriate shapes the story, performance or custom not the rules and teachings of any official body. (2003, 130)

In the 19th century the concerned interest in the roots of a nation’s (volk) culture and spiritual life was considered a part of ‘romantic nationalism’.

Enthusiastic groups of people who felt a kind of romantic nostalgia for the past and who were also driven by the spirit of nationalism, got themselves involved with the collection and documentation of folklore material. (Datta, 2002, 16)

The idea behind this enthusiasm was to renew a link with the past which had been considered a glorious and rich one and utilize the traditional recollections to reconstruct the recent past. From the colonial perspective, however, the people were more profoundly impressed by unyielding rupture with that past and the process of defining folklore with a pre industrial and pre literate origin to substantiate the feeling of isolating the ‘elite’ from the ‘folk’. It is to be noted here that while there may be some link between folklore and popular culture of modern cities, the difference between them is even more perceptible. The very consciousness of a break wedded to the folklore studies has been considered Euro-centric and self-centered point of view, identifying and isolating ‘others’ and placing the ‘self’ at the upper end of a ladder of progression and locating the ‘others’ at its lower end and then subsequently starting the process of marginalization with a view to dominating them. From this perspective, folklore studies had incorporated an inherent intention of dominating the knowledge system of the ‘others’, collecting it and appropriating it if useful, and if not, defining it as of an inferior status and bringing it to a state of deprecation.

The next focus of interest on ‘folklore’ which laid emphasis on the relation between written traditions and oral traditions has gone a long way in redefining the concept of folkloristic. This new approach, however, was not based on any formal methods or theories as to combine literary theories and folklore with an aim to devise indigenous methods of folklore studies. The main objective was to relate literature and folklore either by identifying
whether the verbal art such as myths, legends, folktales, ballads, epics, songs etc. are literatures or, on how much ‘folk lore’ is there in written literature from the classical to the modern.

In the days of new theoretical paradigms like post-modernism and post-colonialism, the attention has been turned to the study of native naïve tradition by providing non biased importance to it. Thus a growing realization that folklore can not be studied in isolation, intermingling of folk and elite culture and fusion of different disciplines like Anthropology, Sociology, Psychology, Literary Studies, Gender Studies, Education and Linguistics has changed the dimensions of Folklore Studies. In the present day situation any item of folklore is considered as a living aspect which has changed the entire panorama of theoretical bias and folklore specialists begin thinking of their areas of inquiry as a living phenomenon with hopes, both for the present and the future. (Handoo in Sen, 1985, 7)

Now, the folklore studies have incorporated multidimensional approaches responding to contemporary socio-cultural and economic theories and methodological concerns. Present day international folkloristic has broadened its scope from the analysis of folklore texts to the study of their performances, functions and social sphere of impact.

1.4. Folkloristic in India: A Historical Survey:

The details of the historical survey is not intended but scanning the available literature on folklore in India, an attempt has been made to review the historical background of Folkloristic in India from the beginning– both the material and its academic study.

As regards the history of folklore materials in India, it can be said that ‘folk’ (loka) was recognized as a category from very ancient time. ‘lokacara’, ‘loka reeti’, and ‘lokadharmi’ were used to refer to folk customs, folk ritual and folk performances as distinguished from the ‘sastracara’, ‘sastrareeti’, ‘natya
dharmi’ etc. Deshi and Margi are other current terms used to refer to the folk, local or regional or low-cultured style and refined, codified and national, high-cultured style respectively.

From time to time, those oral narrative versions were collected and put to writing by literary and scholarly persons. The more well-known collections are— the Buddhist Jatakas, the Panchatantras, the Kathasaritsagara, the Hitopadeshas, the Vetalpancavimsati. Among these, the Jatakas are about two thousand years old, and the Panchatantras, the Kathasaritsagara, are almost fifteen hundred years old. The Panchatantra had been translated into various middle-eastern and western languages like Persian, Arabic, Hebrew, Latin, German and Italian. It was from Indian collection that Grimm brothers were inspired to bring about a revolution in the study of folktales. (Goswami, 1980, xv)

Folkloristic was started in India with the collection and compilation of some folksongs and folktales sporadically in the Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, established in 1774. In the first 100 years, only two-dozen articles on folklore are to be enumerated. Interest in the study of folklore increased when Indian Antiquary was founded in Bombay in 1872 under the editorship of James Burgess, who encouraged the publication of myths, folktales, folksongs and popular traditions with a view to studying it. In addition to the publication of folklore materials in these journals, some efforts were made to compile collections of folktales and songs. The Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay, 1886 gave a maximum impetus to the collection and publication of folklore materials.

The history of the publication of folklore collection goes back to 1868, when Merry Frere compiled and published The Old Deccan in 1868, the first collection of Indian Folktales. It was followed by another publication of Indian Fairy Tales, 1879 by M. Strokes. In 1884, a collection of tales from Punjab by Flora Steel and Sir R. C. was published under the title Wide Awake Stories. (Dundes, 1978, 2000-2001)
With the rise of nationalism in urban centers, and particularly Bengal, the potential of folklore for reclaiming an un-westernized Indian identity was recognized. Rabindranath Tagore is the most widely celebrated among nationalist folklorists. In 1893, he established the ‘Bangiya Sahitya Parishad’ (Literary Society of Bengal), and started publishing its quarterly where folklore from various regions in Bengal were appeared. His objective was to seek the ‘soul’ or ‘spirit’ of the people in folklore. His contemporaries Kaka Saheb Kalelkar, Zhaverchand Meghani, Ram Naresh Tripathi, Lakshminath Bezbaroa inspired the whole generation to respect the hitherto neglected folklore genres for generating a new kind of national consciousness.

After independence, concerns and methods from Anthropology began to be used in the creation of more in-depth analysis of Indian folklore. Since last thirty years, folklore in India has attracted many a scholars to define folklore as they see and observe. Indian folklorists Devendra Satyarthi, Krishnadev Upadhyayaya, Jhaberchand Meghani, Praphulladutta Goswami, Ashutosh Bhattacharya, Kunja Bihari Dash, Chitrasen Pasayat, Somnath Dhar, Ramgarib Choube, Jagadish Chandra Trigunayan and many more senior folklorists have contributed immensely to the study of folklore. Of course, the trend was more literary than analytical. But it is during the 1970s that some folklorists studied in US Universities trained up themselves with the modern theories and methods of folklore research and set a new trend of folklore study in India. Especially, south Indian universities advocated for folklore as a discipline in the universities and hundreds of scholars trained up on folklore.

It was during 1980s that the ‘Central Institute of Indian Languages and the American Institute of Indian Studies’ started their systematic study on folklore in public domain bridging the gap of academic domain and community domain. These have created a space for the new scholars who are pursuing the study of folklore with their commitment. After that many western as well as eastern scholars pursued their studies on folklore as a discipline. Starting from around the time folklore programmes were set up in
some Indian Universities. The scholars such as Chitrasen Pasayat, M. D. Muthukumaraswamy, Vivek Rai, Jawaharlal Handoo, Birendranath Dutta, N. C. Sarma, P. C. Pattanaik, B. Reddy, Sadhana Naithani, P. Subachary, Molly Kaushal, Shyam Sundar Mahapatra, Bhabagrahi Mishra and many new folklorists have contributed in their respective field for shaping folklore study as a strong discipline in representing the people's memory and people's voice.

A. K. Ramanjuan was the noted folklorist to analyse folklore from Indian context. His theoretical and aesthetic contributions span several disciplinary areas. He advocated context-sensitivity of Indian folklore and classic poetry. In ‘Where Mirrors are Windows’ (1989) and ‘Three Hundred Ramayanas’ (1991), for example, he discusses the ‘inter textual’ nature of Indian literature, written and oral. His essay ‘Where Mirrors Are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections’ (1989), and his commentaries in ‘The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology’ (1967) and ‘Folktales from India’, ‘Oral Tales from Twenty Indian Languages’ (1991) are good examples of his work in Indian folklore studies.

The pioneer of the folklorists in contemporary India are Jawaharlal Handoo, Lalita Handoo, Soumen Sen, Chitrasen Pasayat, Sadhana Naithani, B. N. Datta, N. C. Sarma, Kishore Bhattacharjee, Anjali Padhi, Kailash Patnaik, V. A. Vivek Rai, late Komal Kothari, Raghavan Payanad, M. Ramakrishnan, and many more. An emerging trend of new folklorists has come up who are committed to understand folklore from Indian point of view than to see the whole subjects from the western model. Some of them better prefer to understand folklore from the folklore provider and consultants who are the creator and consumers of folklore. Users of folklore know what folklore is since they use folklore with purpose and meaning. But, theoreticians see folklore from their theoretical angle. However, folklorist should learn from the folk as directly as possible and folk should give the hidden meaning of folklore to the folklorist, so that both of their interpretation can help giving a
new meaning to the item of folklore and explore the possibility of using the folklore in new socio-cultural domain.

1.5. Five Phases of Indian Folklore:

Folklorists of India can be chronologically divided into five phases. The first phase was dominated by philologists, and linguists working with Sanskrit, Arabic and Persian, who have no direct knowledge of India. In the second phase, were the British Officials who collected the local knowledge and folklore to understand the subjects they want to rule and the missionaries who wanted recreate their religious literature for evangelical. In the third phase a new kind of consciousness was grown among the Western Scholars as well as National scholars who started a combined method of fieldwork and philology the purpose being the search for soul and the spirit of the local people. It was in this phase that the collection and compilation of folklore genre were given top priority. The fourth phase is the post independent period in the country where many universities, institutes and individuals started studying the folklore, the purpose was to search the national identity through legends, myths, and epics. In course of time Academic institutions and universities in the country started opening departments on folklore in their respective regions, more in south India to maintain their cultural identity and also maintain language and culture. In the last phase, the folklorists have endeavoured to shift their focus of interest, as a result of which many interdisciplinary theories have evolved which have opened up a new vista of research in terms of Linguistics, Anthropology, Sociology, Culture studies, Globalized Economy and so on. The folk voice is merged in modern oral as well as literary discourse and its role in present day ideologies is so potent that day-by-day many new meanings have been emerged. One important breakthrough in the field of folklore in the recent period is that it is no more confined to the study in the four wall of academic domain; rather, it has again found its space within and among the folk to get true meaning.
1.6. Folklore Studies in Assam:

In Assam folklore studies started in the later part of the Nineteenth Century. A study of Kachari folktales was published by J. D. Anderson (Kachari Folktales and Rhymes, 1895). P. R. T. Gordon studied Assamese proverbs (Some Assamese Proverbs, 1896) and there were similar studies by colonial scholars. Their studies were prompted by their interest in locating themselves vis-a-vis the anthropological other.

Local scholarship also began simultaneously. Bhadrasen Bora collected riddles and ballads. There were some collections of proverbs. But a more systematic collection of Assamese superstitions, demagogy and supernatural legends was made by Benudhar Rajkhowa (Assamese Demonology, 1905, and Assamese Popular Superstitions, 1920). It was Lakhminath Bezbaroa who used folklore for consolidating Assamese identity and was involved in the project of framing a distinct hinterland for Assamese culture early in the twentieth century. He published 65 folktales in three collections and included two in a short story collection. Bezbaroa’s Burhi Air Sadhu (1911) contains an excellent preface in which he states how folklore played a role in raising nationalistic spirit in Europe. He mentioned two main purposes of folklore – moral education and entertainment. The tales contain metaphors of an ideal society and they can form and reform the society in a positive way. In this way, a systematic study of folklore in an academic framework was developed in Assam stimulated by Western Scholarship. Birinchi Kumar Barua (1908-1964) was the pioneer in the modern folklore research. In 1945, he proceeded to London for his research at ‘the School of Oriental and African Studies’ on the ‘Cultural History of Assam’ and received the Doctorate degree in 1947 from the University of London. He was immensely influenced by the research activities in folklore that were being conducted in these countries, particularly in the spheres of documentation and archiving. While he joined Gauhati University as a Reader in the department of Assamese in 1948 he started ‘Folklore Archive’ in 1955. It was later upgraded to the Department of Tribal
Culture and Folklore Research. Different projects on the documentation of the folklore and material cultures of the different ethnic groups of undivided Assam, like the Boros, the Missings, the Khasi-Jaintias, the Deuri-Chutias, the Garos and the Assamese Muslims were conducted. This department was later renamed the Department of Tribal Culture and Folklore Research. After Birinchi Kr. Barua the folklorist who has contributed largely to the study of folklore was Dr. Praphulladatta Goswami (1919-1994) who became the first Indian folklorist to visit the USA as a visiting professor when he was invited by Indiana University in 1963. He was the pioneer in the systematic folktale research in Assam. In his *Ballads and Tales of Assam* (1960), he offered a systematic analysis of brief motif index old Assamese Ballads and *Marchen* suggested by Stith Thompson. His approach was comparative and he applied the historical-geographical approach in a novel way. In 1964, he took over charge of the Department of Tribal Culture and Folklore Research, and it was under his guidance that the department was granted the status of an independent university department named the Department of Folklore Research in 1972. The penetrating sparks of insights in his writings influenced the further researcher to pick up new concepts and concerns. Birendranath Datta, who took charge of the Department of Folklore Research after Praphulladatta Goswami, directed attention to regional folklore and introduced the M. Phil course in the department under his auspices.

His was the first step towards the study of regional folklore in Assam. He has broadened folklore studies in Assam by substantiating the theoretical evidence. The basic area of his study covers the commonality of folklore materials in North-East India, ethnicity and folklore, functional studies of folklore, folk Ramayanas and folklore in the context of society and politics in North-east India. (Bhattacharjee in Sarma, 2008, 4-6)

After Birendranath Datta, Dr. Nabin Chandra Sarma made tiresome effort to expand its activities during the 80s and 90s. He penned down a large number of articles analyzing various aspects of traditional lore from his own fieldwork and local information. The editing of *A Handbook of Folklore Material of North East India* in
collaboration with Dr. B. N. Datta and Dr. P. Das was a massive project in which they covered various aspects of Folklore material of N. E. India and specimens of different genres of folklore collected from published works.

1.7. Classification of Folklore:

The various fields of folklore and folk life may be shown in the following manner:

1. Oral folklore or verbal art or folk literature or oral literature

2. Social folk life– a. Material culture

b. Social Folk custom

c. Performing art form (Dorson, 1972, 1-50)

These areas do not stand alone, however, as often a particular item or element may fit into more than one of these areas. So far as Assamese folklore are concerned, the categorization offered by Dr. Nabin Ch. Sarma seems quite authentic:

1. Oral folklore or folk literature:

   a) Folk poem/song or oral/verbal song:  
      i. Ballad
      ii. Religious song
      iii. Love song
      iv. Working song
      v. Festival song
      vi. Ritual song
      vii. Philosophical song
      viii. Hunting song

   b) Prose narrative: 
      i. Myth
      ii. Legend
      iii. Folktale

   c) Proverb, Saying, Maxim

   d) Riddle
e) Folk speech or folk language

2. Material culture or physical folklife
   a) Folk crafts
   b) Folk art
   c) Folk architecture
   d) Folk costume
   e) Folk cookery

3. Performing folk art
   a) Folk drama
   b) Folk music
   c) Folk dance

4. Social folk custom
   a) Festival and celebration
   b) Recreations and game
   c) Folk medicine
   d) Folk belief and religion (Sarma, 1999, 72-73)

1.8. Oral Folklore and its Classification:

Scholars have identified a number of broad genres of oral tradition according to both form and function. Not every society has each of the genres. While all transmit knowledge, the genres do have different but sometimes overlapping functions.

Oral tradition of Assam has a number of types and characters. They are specified below according to the form and methods of narration.

Two broad genres of oral tradition are: A. Verse narrative tradition which is either sung or recited
   B. Prose narrative tradition which is narrated

A. Verse narrative tradition includes: i. Epic
   ii. Ballad
iii. Song that contains story

B. Prose narrative tradition includes:
   i. Myth
   ii. Legend
   iii. Folktale

1.9. Myths, Legends and Folktales:

Myths, Ballads and Folktales have been accepted as three basic forms of prose narrative tradition. But three of them are distinct from one another.

Myths as defined in *SDFML*, is

> a story presented as having occurred in a previous age explaining the cosmological and supernatural traditions of a people, their gods, heroes, cultural traits, religious belief etc. (Leach ed, 1975, 612)

It is a kind of sacred narrative dealing with past events of cosmic and permanent significance, like ‘creation of the Earth’, ‘the coming of Death to the Earth’, ‘Divinity’, and ‘Existence’ etc. Myths can explain the source and meaning of some ritual giving it spiritual dimension and supernatural sanction. These are prose narratives, which, in the society in which they are told, are considered to be truthful accounts of what happened in the remote past. They are accepted as fact, not fiction. Myths are the embodiment of dogma; they are essentially sacred; and they are often associated with theology and ritual. Their main characters are not usually human beings, but they often have human attributes; they are animals, deities, or culture heroes, whose actions are set in an earlier world, when the earth was different from what it is today, or in another world such as the sky or underworld. Myths frequently deal with the tributes one should pay a god, the chief of which is piety. Though myths belong to a primitive or pre-scientific people, they are not presented as engaging fictions but as facts. Even in the sophisticated, intelligent culture where reason predominates, myths are frequently viewed as actualities. Every mythology has its inconsistencies and absurdities, but the crucial point is that myths attempt to give form to the cosmos and the
meaning to the human life. Moreover, they can be cited as authority in answer to ignorance, doubt, or disbelief.

In Assam, the most popular myths are a part of socio cultural heritage of the Hindus of Assam.

But at the same time, as the Hinduism prevalent here has its own peculiarities, so also has the local stock of Hindu Mythology its own character. Vaishnavism having a pervasive influence among the Hindus, Vaishnava myths, particularly those associated with the neo-Vaishnava order, are extremely popular. While much of this popularity is accountable to the existence of a massive and colourful body of written literature of neo-Vaishnava affiliation, the oral tradition is also very much alive and thriving. Mythological tales are in currency through story telling, singing and dramatic performances. (Datta et.al ,1994,37)

Legends are also traditional narratives grown out of mythology but have its focus on stories of humans as heroes. These are of an explanatory nature consisting of an exaggerated or unreliable account of some actual or possibly historical figures – often a monarch, saint and popular hero. These stories are related as facts and concern a specific time and place. Most of the legends are associated with the divine and miraculous activities that are believed to be true and focuses on religious belief, natural and cultural surroundings, such as hills, valleys, forests, wetlands, lakes, rivers, fields, stones, old trees, graveyards, chapels, churches and other objects. The people who inherit this tradition share their narratives, beliefs and customs with the younger generations, newcomers and visitors. In this way the legend lives from one generation to the next.

The line between the myth and legend is often vague; the myth has its principal actors the gods. The legend is told as true; the myth’s veracity is based on the belief of its hearer in the gods who are its characters (Leach , ed, 1975, 612-13)

The Legend in connection with Netai Dhubunir Ghat and Chandar Dinga Hill and the temple of Har Gauri in Hajo is very popular among the Assamese people.
Folktales or Popular Tales, forming a major part of oral tradition, are entirely fictional and distinctly different from legends and myths. A sampling of definitions reveals the generic characteristics of folktales most of which offer the recurrent criterion of its contrast to experience, reality, and established belief. Stith Thompson describes these tales as prose fiction or oral fiction. He maintains,

As we use the term folktale we usually mean marchen and eliminate myths, sagen, fables. We mean prose fiction preserving its life primarily orally. We mean oral fiction. (Thompson, 1946, 3 - 4)

According to Bascom,

Folktales are prose narratives which are regarded as fiction. They are not considered as dogma or history, they may or may not have happened, and they are not to be taken seriously. (Bascom, 1965, 1)

Linda Degh, one of the leading folklorists of contemporary India says,

Like novels and short stories, their sophisticated counterparts, folktales are told primarily for entertainment although they may have secondary purposes. They are believed to be fictitious and are cited as lies by the story tellers and commentators who mean that tales are the creation of human fantasy. (Dorson, 1972, 75)

Folktales are regarded as an object of serious literary attention by the European folk scholarship. The children as well as adult of new generation of each country are equally attracted by this genre. Elegant, moralistic French writers of the 18th century seized upon it at once and began to compose folktales in their own style. Authors of the German Rococo were quick to respond to the stimulus: Mausus published his Volksmarchen, while Wieland wrote fairy tales epics. In the classical period, Goethe delighted in composing dreamlike folktale pieces. For the Romantics, the folktale became the poetical canon. The Romantic’s deep love and appreciation of folktales stem largely from the Kinder– und Hausmarchen of Wilhem and Jacob Grimm, first published in 1812. Since then the collecting of folktales has continued ever more widely and has brought to light an enormous number of tales in Europe
and the rest of the world. The penetrating research of many scholars has sought to account for the structure and history of folktales and the ways in which tales are transmitted and diffused. The question of the origins of folktales has been perennially raised. But till now no authentic generalization can be deciphered; hypothesis opposes hypothesis. (Luthi, 1982, 1)

The distinctions between myth, legend, and folktale have been summarized by Bascom in the following table. The headings Place, Attitude, and Principal Characters are added in an attempt to indicate subsidiary characteristics.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Form</th>
<th>Belief</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Attitude</th>
<th>Character</th>
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<tr>
<td>Myth</td>
<td>Fact</td>
<td>Remote past</td>
<td>Different world</td>
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<td>Non-human, other or earlier</td>
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<td>Legend</td>
<td>Fact</td>
<td>Recent past</td>
<td>World of today</td>
<td>Secular or sacred</td>
<td>Human</td>
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<tr>
<td>Folktale</td>
<td>Fiction</td>
<td>Any time</td>
<td>Any place</td>
<td>Secular</td>
<td>Human or non-human</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Though these three forms—Myths, Ballads and Folktales have been accepted as three basic forms of prose narrative tradition, it is to be mentioned here that only the folktales normally maintain the prose characters, the other two—Myths and Legends are more often than not are recited, sung or chanted. Particularly this is true for ritualistic or religious stories. (Bascom, 1965, 5)

Compared with the legend and the myth, the folktale has the appearance of a work of art.

Folk tales strike us as enigmatic because they mix the miraculous with the natural, the near with the far, and the ordinary with the incomprehensible in a completely effortless way. (Bascom, 1965, 6)

The saint’s legend is an attempt to make converts or to confirm a faith. Migratory legends draw attention to events that are extraordinary or remarkable; they are intended to shock or to teach a lesson. But the aim of the folktale is to entertain and the secret power of its entertaining value lies not simply in the motif it employs but in the manner in which it uses them – i.e. in the form. The form of a folktale has a distinction and it invites a searching
study that leads to the marking out of the principal formal traits of the folktales.

The present study is not an attempt to investigate the form and structure of the folktales but a comprehensive understanding of the multiplicity of function that can be inferred from its form and content. In a sense, the chief attention would be on the role of the folktale and the act of narration in the life of the individual and the community.

1.10 Folktales: Its Salient Features:

First, Folktales are generally part of the oral tradition of a group and are more frequently told than read. They are anonymous. They are passed down from one generation to another and there is no virtue in originality. The tale is formed, performed, transformed and persist in tradition. In every telling and retelling, slight changes occur in the form and content of the tales, but the theme remains stable. The most common variation of tales occur because of the forgetting of secondary details, adding details, combining tales, substituting characters and changing the narrative point of view from third person to first person.

Second, Folktales take on the characteristics of the time and place in which they are told. They usually set in a fictional past and speak of universal and timeless things. Sometimes they take on the characteristics of the story-teller.

Third, Folktales are the most potent means of transmitting customs, beliefs, values, and attitudes of a particular culture, community or society. People of a given community use them contextually to convey critically and persuasively particular aspects of society like behavioural pattern, values, norms, mores etc.

Fourth, Folktales through phantasies, make beliefs and credulous acceptance helped primitive men to find an answer to the doubt regarding the mysteries of the world and particularly the inexplicable phenomenon of nature around
him. Scientific accuracy is never expected from a folktale, but they are a good showcase of the social developments of a particular time.

Fifth, Folktales reflect the day-to-day life, the joys and sorrows, love and hatred of the common people. Parental love, unnatural cruelty, family happiness, wise and unwise conduct, cleverness, deceptive bargain, unlucky accidents, love and fear of the unknown, greed, true friendship are some of the common motifs of Folktale tradition. Besides, some typical characteristics of man, woman or children get reflected in the tales, like man has greed for money and riches, hostility occurs between the co-wives, children are adventurous, mother-in-law always wants her daughter-in-law to obey them, etc.

Sixth, the folk narratives are always rooted in the western notion of binary. The distinct binary that the folktale exhibit is good/evil, male/female, life/death, day/night, king/queen, king/subject, rich/poor, clever/fool, creator/destroyer, monster/fairy, cruel mother/ good mother, good wife/bad wife and so on and through these binaries the folktales present the understated intricacies of life and culture.

Seventh, Folktales are intimately tied up with the dominant ideologies and thus the dominant ideology is unconsciously transmitted or oriented from one generation to generation. Thus folktales validate certain aspect and ideology of the society.

Eighth, though the folktales are originally in oral tradition, sometimes the tradition may be literary as when the story is recorded by an author or adopted in technological media. As long as they are in oral tradition, they vary with certain omission and commission. But once they are put in to writing or recorded other way, they lose the flexibility.

Ninth, Folktales are somehow connected to reality. Though supernatural and miraculous elements abound in folktales, they don’t degenerate folktales to mere fantasy. Rather the magical things develop according to a specific logic.
The co-existence of miracle and reality is one of the important markers of folktales. In the words of Lutz Rohrich,

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..the folktale’s magical events are not isolated; kings, craftsmen, and farmers, the mother, the step mother, and siblings— all people exist in reality. (Rohrich, translated by Peter Tokofsky, 1991, 3)
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Folktales are simple, clear, transparent and soothing, but along with its simplicity, one can grasp the sublimated essences of life. Here in lies the enduring popularity of folktales. The persons who were originally responsible for folktales are no more, but their thinking, their feeling, their behaviour and their belief got cemented to the folktales so intricately that one can construct the whole culture complex and utilize them.

1.11. Purposes of Folktales:

The chief purposes of folktales are:

- Entertainment
- Instruction
- Recounting of history
- Explanation of origin
- Conveyance of moral values

1.12. The Literary Elements of Folktales:

- Characters— 1. Animals
  2. Common folk- Those with wisdom
     Those with cunningness
     Fools

- Setting – 1. Forest
  2. Palace
  3. Mountain
  4. Bridge
  5. Hut
  6. Bank of a river
  7. Cave etc.
1.13. The Cultural Elements of Folktales:

1. Dress
2. Food
3. Custom
4. Values
5. Beliefs
6. Behaviour
7. Ideology
8. Problem and Solution

1.14. The Pattern of Folktales:

The most interesting aspect of the tales are that though the contents of the tales vary from culture to culture, they follow a common narrative pattern.

1.14.a. The Pattern of Form is as follows:

- Introduction: introduces the leading characters, the time and place, and the problem to be solved or the conflict which is the essence of the story
- Development: the heart of the story—quests begin, tasks are initiated and performed, flight gets underway, obstacles appear, hero or heroine reduce despair or helplessness or plunge into more and more perilous action. The unity of the tale is held together by an economy of incidents—generally limited to three tasks or three riddles or three trials.
- Conclusion: usually swift and brief, and accounts for everything that was started in the introduction—heroes/heroines achieve a happy solution, villains are satisfactorily punished.

1.14.b. The Pattern of Style is:

- Meant to be told or read aloud,
- Often story has a cadence and gesture with words suited to the tempo,
• A rapid and natural give-and-take in dialogue,
• Often uses rhyme for a particular character’s speech,
• Simple, everyday vocabulary,
• Deep undertone.

1.14.c. The Pattern of Character Portrayal is:

The characters are often types, for example, the good are altogether good and the wicked are completely wicked—leading to no sympathy and easy liquidation in the conclusion.

1.15. Classification of Folktales:

These tales may take on four distinct forms:

1. Animal Tales—generally the principal characters are animals that talk and act like humans and interact with humans.

2. Supernatural Tales— is about magical wonders (a person or object or enchantment) long ago in faraway lands usually depict the conflict between good and evil, usually with royal birth; end with a happy marriage.


4. Trickster tales

This division offered by Stith Thompson(1932) is only on the basis of subject matters. So far as Assamese folktales are concerned the classification offered by Dr. P. Goswami seems quite convincing. Modifying his list here is an attempt to classify the Assamese tale genre in to following:


5. Humorous Tales: Example, The Son-in-law, Kukurikanar Sadhu, The Seven Numskulls, Pharing, the All Knowing,


The tales are part of a specific people, but then they are also part of the stories of all people on the Earth. People help to keep the story alive when they hear it. They have their place in the story. And in turn they all have their story to tell. The folklore and folktales have been an eternal part of every culture since ages. This oral heritage helps us build collective knowledge and obtain one’s personal identity, sense of community and ancestral anchorage. Oral tradition supports the idea of ‘we-ness’ and a very good source of analysis from multidimensional perspectives.
1.16. **Statement of the Proposed Research:**

With this conceptual background an analytical research work has been proposed to examine and discover what can be done practically with the traditional folklore materials in the context of present day society of Assam. As folklore is a vast area, the proposed work will be confined to the study of traditional folktales accommodating them with newer innovations so as to give them a space in the changing socio-cultural set-up. The assumption in undertaking the present work is that folktales, a very good reflex of the mind of the primitive people, have the potential in opening up new vista of knowledge if they are viewed not simply as tales but utilized as essential components and road markers of society. Telling of tales is universal and it can be almost infinitely described, interpreted, and appreciated just as a text in literature can be read and understood from various perspectives. Theoretical and methodological foundations of the project are in contemporary international Folkloristic whose scope has broadened from the analysis of folklore texts to the study of their functions, performances and social sphere of impact. According to the current views, there is no need to separate folklore from its performances. Folklore can be understood as a generative process from remembering to creative textualization and application.

1.17. **Objective of the Study:**

The chief objectives of the proposed work is to examine social functions of traditional folk tales such as bringing in past and present folktales to its social applications, bearing in mind the needs and expectations of contemporary society. The chief objectives are:

1. To explore the realm of traditional Assamese tales as available both in oral and written forms.

2. To offer an illustrative analysis of potential source of wealth in performing multidimensional social functions in the context of present day society of Assam.
3. To examine situations in which the existing popular tales can be self consciously manipulated so as to fit in with social institutions and practices.

4. To throw light on the point that if a slight change in the form of narration would make it more or less useful to the society.

5. To offer some practical recommendations for motivating present day generation to record and popularize these traditional resources in the form of text, audio and video using the currently available digital technology.

1.18. Importance of the Study:

In this changing paradigm, it is important to examine the roots, the contents, the settings, the lives and the context of the folklore as well as the function of this discipline in the larger context of present day society. The question we should address today is whether the study of folklore contributes to the ever changing facet of social milieu, what sort of message is being conveyed and in which manner it is conveyed and what specific functions are being performed by different variants of folklore items. Defining the areas, material collection, classification, codification and compilation of databases are a part of the taxonomic paradigm that have already been done by a number of researchers. Today’s need is to analyse these available databases from the perspective of distributional, psychological and functional speculation and to see interdependence and interpenetration of folk and elite culture while maintaining their folk identities. Folklore is virtually connected to every aspect of life, part of the country, age group and occupation. From the bizarre to the seemingly mundane, folklore is as much a feature of the modern technological age as the ancient world. In their introduction to the landmark volume, Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India (1986), Stuart Blackbur and A. K. Ramanujan surveyed the history of folklore studies in India and suggested avenues for future research. According to them–
If . . . folklore must be studied in all its forms, we should not neglect the most contemporary. How does it respond to the urbanization, mechanization, and cash economy that are reshaping Indian society or at least large segments of it? (Ramanujan et al., 1986, 27)

Very few scholars have confronted the issue at any length. The result is a lamentable gap in our understanding of how folklore is revamped to function in the changing realities of society. The vivacity of folklore shines in different colours, if it is re-examined and re-analyzed in the light of present day social realities. Thus, the study of such semi conscious, spontaneous and non-voluntary human creativity from functional perspective is supposed to be as refreshing, enlivening, illuminating, interesting, and beneficial as its content.

Though a few research works have been completed on the thematic, structural and socio cultural aspects nothing had been attempted on the functional sides so far. In his monumental creation, *Ballads and Tales of Assam* 1960, Dr. Goswami has analysed the range and types of Assamese tales and ballads on the model set by Stith Thomson in *Motif Index of Folk Literature* 1932. Following him a few other works have been completed on the structural and psychological aspects of Assamese folktales. There is much scope for detailed work in the realm of folk tales from functional perspective in the present day social reality.

1.19. **Scope and Area of the Study:**

There is unlimited scope for a researcher in folklore. But to make a systematic study, my work is confined to existing popular folktales of Assam in which the richness of Assamese culture has been epitomized e.g. the environment, religious rites, beliefs, values, customs, behavioural pattern and other modes of community life.

Assam or more particularly the Brahmaputra Valley can be divided into two broad cultural zones-(i) Upper Assam, comprising the eastern part of the valley and (ii) Lower Assam, extending from the present Darrang district and
the erstwhile districts of Goalpara and Kamrup. Due to geographical, historical and political factors, the cultural and linguistics differences are quite distinct in both the zones. The study is confined to lower Assam only. It has been perceived that the division of a state into parts is only geographical, socially it is not relevant. As such, the tales for study analysis are not collected in accordance with the division. But for proper accumulation of the knowledge of accessible folktales and gather sufficient information about the Assamese society in general and the impact of tale telling activities in the present day environment in particular certain field study was required for convenience and achieving success in collecting relevant materials and information the study area was limited to lower Assam only.

1.20. Research Questions:

The research is intended to address the following issues:

1) Do the traditional folktales sustain the original interest in spite of the incorporation of modern genres of literature and other technological advancement?

2) On what grounds do the meanings and significance of folktales depend?

3) What specific functions of Assamese folktales have been ignored or unnoticed in folkloristic and therefore need thorough research?

4) Do the dynamics of folklore process depend on the social prestige and social functionality of genres?

Thus, the research questions of the project are connected with folktale performance, social impacts of folktales and their applications in the context of present day social situation.
1.21. Sources:

The present study, being a social science research is based on primary as well as secondary data collected from different sources. All the available collections of Assamese folktales and folklores have been gone through.


The secondary sources are direct conversation with a few prominent persons, experiences from living perspectives, knowledge gained from local environment, educational institutions, etc.

Newspaper articles, journals, periodicals and electronic data have been methodically consulted.

1.22. Methodology:

The Study of folklore Research in Social Science entails at least two distinct methodological steps: collection and interpretation. The first step is to identify and collect possible folkloristic element or form from either oral or written source and then to interpret it with a critical observation. While data collection is purely objective, the interpretation is fully subjective and is not necessarily empirically demonstrable. The interpretation is carried out with looking in to the tex . (Dundes, 1980, 211)

The methodology followed in undertaking the project is –

- Data collection
- Classification and Analysis of Data
- Observation
- Formulation of general ideas on the basis of the study
• Highlighting future directions

The choice of data collection is connected with concrete sub topics and research questions. Materials are collected from publications, popular media, Internet and from the village tradition bearers.

The collected data have been sorted out, classified into different categories, analyzed systematically, formed certain general observations and finally incorporated in different chapters.

The research is based on the ideas of textual ethnography, and applies the principles of textual, discourse and genre analysis, intertextuality and the classical descriptive method, supplemented by research on the social dimension of folklore narration.

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