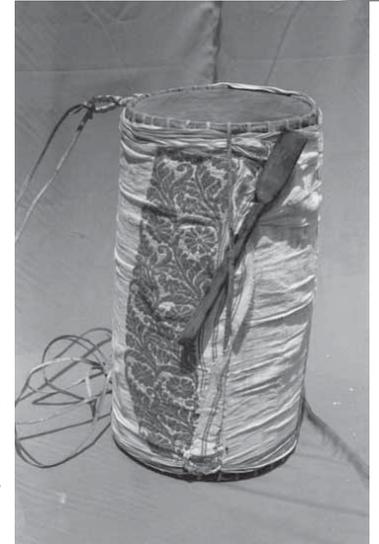


varieties of pot herbs on the first or seventh day of the celebration of Rongali Bihu, whereas in the lower reaches of the Brahmaputra, people eat seven varieties of pot herbs on the 7th day of Rongali Bihu. Different varieties of pancakes and confectionaries made out of coconut, sesame seeds, jaggery, rice powder, sticky rice, and milk products are prepared in a traditional way. Amongst some ethnic communities, brewing of rice beer and preparation of pork and chicken is a must.

The Bhogali Bihu is the Bihu given entirely to feasting. It is a time for eating and merrymaking after a successful harvest. Community feasts are organized across the entire state. Fish and meat are inseparable items of such feasting. It is obligatory for people to visit each other's households as invitations are not sent out.

Bihu has spawned a distinctive material culture in Assam. The mekhala chadar (two-piece apparel worn by women in Assam) woven out of the muga silk is a distinctive identity marker; so are the colourful japis (originally protective headgear woven out of bamboo and palm leaves worn by farmers as protection against

sun and rain) and the intricately woven gamochas (traditional cotton towels for wiping the body; ga means body and mocha means to wipe). Musical instruments include the dhol (traditional drums), the tal (traditional cymbals), the pepa (traditional wind pipe made out of buffalo horn) and the gagana (a delicate but simple instrument made out of bamboo and played by simultaneously blowing wind from the mouth and vibrating the instrument by hand). In spite of local variations, Bihu remains a cohesive cultural force amongst the different communities of Assam even in the present divisive times. ❁



Assamese dhol, a traditional drum

Women in Assamese Folktales

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The Assamese equivalent for folktale is Sadhu or Sadhukatha. The word Sadhu means "the righteous"; hence Sadhukatha means a moral tale. Another meaning is derived from Saud or Saudagar, a merchant. According to P. Goswami

The Assamese for an oral tale is sadhukatha, usually derived from the Sanskrit sadhu, a merchant, and katha, a tale, meaning thereby that the sadhukatha is a tale told by a wandering merchant (Goswami 1970: 80).

The present discussion focuses on some of the Assamese folktale collections by Lakshminath Bezborua which fall under Magical or Wonder or Romantic or Supernatural tales. The Burhi Air Sadhu and the Kakadeuta aru Natilorua are two famous collections by Lakshminath Bezborua.

By analyzing the gender roles played out in these tales, an idea of the status of women in Assamese society can be made. Outlines of the selected tales follow:

The Kite's Daughter:

A baby girl was abandoned by her mother because she was warned by her husband that he will sell her if she gives birth to a girl child again. A Kite brought up the girl, and married her off to a merchant with seven other wives. The co-wives created difficulties for her and the Kite mother would help her in difficulties. Once, the girl was set to weave a cloth and cook rice. When she called her Kite mother, the latter appeared and performed everything magically. The co-wives of the girl later killed the Kite mother and sold the daughter to a tradesman. She was found wailing on the riverbank by her husband. The merchant commanded his senior wives to walk on a thread stretched across a pit full of spikes. Six of them fell in, while one escaped because she was not in the plot to sell the Kite's daughter (Bezborua 2005: 41-47).

Tula and Teja:

A man had two wives; the younger one was his favourite. The elder wife had a daughter named Teja and a son named Kanai. The younger wife had a daughter named Tula. Once, the co-wives went fishing. The younger one pushed the elder into the water, muttering: "As a big tortoise may you stay."

Later, the tortoise revealed herself to her children and gave them food every day. They became healthy and strong. Their step mother observed this and came to



know the truth from her daughter who accompanied Teja and Kanai. The stepmother then feigned illness and told her husband through an old lady physician that she will be cured if she was fed on tortoise flesh. The tortoise mother came to know this. She told her children that they should not eat the flesh and must bury her legs and bone on the banks of the tank.

Two trees, bearing flowers and fruits of exquisite beauty and taste, grew at the spot. The produce of the trees was in great demand. Kanai refused to give the fruits and flowers to the king unless he promised to marry his sister. The king, seeing the beauty of Teja married her. After the marriage Teja is faced with the jealousy of the king's elder wife. The co-wife used to create problems for her from the very beginning. She was guided by her old lady servant. But the king was always kind to Teja. At Teja's happiness her stepmother grew more jealous. One day she invited Teja to come to her place and after a few days she pushed a thorn into her head and turned her into a myna. Her step sister put on her dress and went to king's home as per her mother's advice. The myna followed her. Tula was almost a look-alike of Teja; so the king was unable to recognize her. The myna tried to tell him the truth one day he overheard her and asked the bird to alight on his shoulder. The bird flies to him and the king, finding a thorn in its head, pulled it out and Teja appeared in her real shape. Then the king killed the imposter and cut her into pieces and sent it to her scheming mother (Bezborua 2005: 48-57).

Three female stereotypes are found in the above stories: (a) Young women: daughter and bride, (b) Middle-aged women: mother, stepmother, and co-wives and (c) Old women: lady physician, lady servant etc. Young women and old women have a comfortable position in the society as compared to the middle-aged women. Young women are generally daughter and bride. A daughter generally receives love and care from parents. Similarly the bride also enjoys a comfortable position as compared to the middle-aged women. It is revealed in both the tales that the new bride always receives the love and care from her husband. But it is conditional and, later on, depends on her fertility and successful management of household work.

It is depicted in the tales that relationship between the spouses affects the relationship with their children. Generally the mother figure is portrayed as a more caring one for the children whether it is a human being or animal. In the first tale the Kite mother provided utmost care to her daughter. On the other hand the father's role towards his children often depends on his relationship with their mother. In the second tale Tula and Teja, the father was indifferent towards the wellbeing of Teja and Kanai because their mother is not his favourite wife. He provides all care to his younger wife and her daughter Tula.

The preliminary requisite of women for marriage as depicted in the folktales is mainly beauty. In both of the tales the merchant and the king agreed to marry the Kite's daughter and Teja by seeing their beauty.

But to sustain the marriage, giving birth to a child and being expert in household work is necessary. The women unable to perform household work and bear children are often driven out from home. In the first tale, the merchant began to love the kite's daughter more because of her expertise in household work and weaving.

Among the middle-aged women, the mother figure is always portrayed as a symbol of tolerance and loyalty, who wishes well for the children, whereas the stepmother and co-wives are depicted as cruel, immoral, disobedient, disloyal and cunning persons. They create difficulties in the life of their step-children and co-wives. They don't hesitate to commit heinous crimes like killing their stepchildren and co-wives to fulfill their desires. In the first tale, the co-wife of the kite's daughter killed her mother and sold her to a tradesman. In the second tale, the younger wife killed the elder wife and, later, even tried to kill her step-daughter Teja.

The old women are also depicted as bearers of both negative and positive qualities but enjoy a comfortable position compared to young and middle-aged women. In the above tales, negative qualities find prominence. In the tale of Tula and Teja, the old lady helps Teja's step-mother catch the tortoise mother. In the same tale, the advice of another old female servant creates difficulties for Teja. Other old women like grandmothers and mothers-in-law are often depicted in Assamese tales. The grandmother is always depicted as good for the grand children. But both good and bad qualities are found in the case of mother-in-law.

It is also evident from the cited tales that polygamy and remarriage for the man are the socially accepted norm. The woman can take care of the children alone when her husband dies or if she is abandoned by her husband. Men often remarry for the sake of his children, whether the children are happy with the marriage or not.

Thus, it is seen that gender roles in Assamese folktales are basically generated by values of patriarchy, and the morals these tales convey consolidate the patriarchal world order. The ideal qualities of women, as depicted in folktales, are chastity, purity, obedience, loyalty and tolerance. The ideal woman is not supposed to complain against male authority, and about the problems she is facing and the injustice meted out to her. Cruelty, immorality, cunning and being disloyal are some of the negative attributes of women depicted in Assamese folktales. Most of the positive qualities belong to the mother and most negative qualities are possessed by step-mothers and co-wives.

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