Bodo-Kachari Folktale

The Brahmin and his Servant

Introduction:

There was once a Brahmin who had a servant. And one day, when they were going to the house of the Brahmin’s mother-in-law, the Brahmin gave his servant a bunch of plantains and other things to carry and said to him, “Now, mind you don’t eat those plantains, for I can see just as well behind as I can in the front.” And, so saying, he marched ahead. And presently, the servant, getting hungry, plucked one of the plantains from the bunch, and, holding it out to his master’s back, ate it. And this he did again and again till all the plantains were gone. And when the Brahmin presently asked what had become of the load, the servant said, “You told me you could see behind as well as in front. So, I showed each plantain before I ate it. And you never said anything.”

So, the Brahmin went his way speechless. Presently, they stopped to cook their midday meal, and they had got with them some Khawai fish. But the Brahmin gave only one to his servant, and kept the rest himself. And when he was about to eat, the servant asked innocently: “Oh, Brahmin, do Khawai fish swim about singly or in shoals?” To which the Brahmin said, “Why, in shoals of course.” So, the servant said, “Then, my fish had better go with yours.” And, so saying, he threw the fish on the Brahman’s mess, which was defiled. So the Brahmin got no dinner, and the servant ate the whole.

A little later, they came across a number of Simul trees. Seeing them, the servant asked his master, “And what do they call these trees, master?” And the Brahmin, (being an educated man) said, “These are Sirmolu.” But the servant said, “Not so, not so! These are himulu.” And offered to bet five blows that it was so. And, meeting some cowherd boys, he asked them what the trees were. And when they said himulu, he gave the Brahmin five blows without further question.

Next, they met a drove of goats. “And what may these be, Brahmin, these animals that are grazing? And the Brahmin said, “These be called chag.” But the servant cried, “Not so, not so! These are chagali.” And the result as before, was that the Brahmin was worsted and got five blows.

And next, they came across a flock of paddy birds, which the Brahmin called Bog, but the servant Boguli. And again, he was worsted and got his five blows. On which he consoled himself by reciting an Assamese saying, to the effect that it is ill arguing with a fool:

“Sag sirmolu bog ba-karan
Tini panch panra kil suda
Akaran.”

And when they were near the Brahmin’s mother-in-law’s house, and the Brahmin became very hungry, he sent his servant on ahead to beg them to get supper ready. So, the servant went on ahead and bade the Brahmin’s mother-in-law to cook a duck and put lots of plantain ashes, which the Kacharis use for salt, well knowing that his master disliked its acrid taste. So the duck was cooked with plenty of alkali.

And when the Brahmin arrived, his meal was set before him and he was so hungry that he had to eat it whether he liked its taste or not.

And so, in various ways, his servant put the Brahmin to shame. So, he wrote a long letter to his brother and putting it in his servant’s hand, bade him deliver it. But he went a little way, until he met a man who could read and write and he bade him tell him what was written in the letter. And the man read the letter, which was to the effect that the brother was to kill the servant. On this, the servant tore up the letter and bade his friend write another one, saying “Dear brother, on receipt of this letter, marry my servant to my niece without delay. I shall not be able to come to the wedding.”
Taking this letter, the servant went to his master’s brother, who was very much vexed, but dared not disobey. Accordingly, though reluctantly, he married the servant to his daughter.

And, when the master came to see if his servant had been disposed of, and heard what had happened, he sat about to kill him. But his niece got to know of the matter and told her husband, who got a calf, and binding it hand and foot put it by her in her bed. And in the night, the Brahmin came, and thinking the calf was his niece’s husband sleeping by her side, killed it and when he found out his mistake in the morning, and learnt that he was guilty of cow-killing, he bade his niece’s husband go and bury the calf in all haste. And the servant dragged the calf into the garden and buried it with its tail sticking out of the ground. Meanwhile, the Brahmin set to work to get himself purged of cow killing, and summoned the villagers to a feast without telling them why. And when they were all seated, the servant ran out into the garden and hauling at the calf’s tail called out, “The Brahmin did not kill a cow. Oh, no! And that is not why he gives a feast, oh no!” So, the feast broke up and the Brahmin was not absolved. And that’s all!