



Revisiting Assamese Folktales: Unveiling the Environmental Wisdom Embedded in Oral Traditions

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Abstract

Folktales are captivating as they intricately weave myths, beliefs, and psychological connections within a community. The tales engage the mind and emotions, offering much more than mere entertainment or superstition. They have a vital role to play as they are exquisitely stitched for the smooth functioning of society to retain harmony. The research seeks to investigate the intricate ways in which elements of nature interconnect to create meaningful narratives that highlight the significance of natural elements. These narrations are a strong social force that upholds moral principles and raise awareness of environmental problems. Assam, geographically situated in the northeastern part of India mesmerizes one with its verdant, breathtaking landscapes like hills, plateaus, and plains; waterscape formed by the mighty rivers like Brahmaputra; and rich biodiversity has a rich tapestry of folktales that emphasize the interconnectedness of human life and nature. Assamese folktales reflect the deep connection between the region's culture and nature, with stories serving as vessels for ecological knowledge, spiritual beliefs, and respect for the environment. This research article intends to explore the relationship between the memory and oral narratives, how it keeps travelling from generation to generation while centering on the environment as a major concern. For instance, "The Tale of Banyan Tree Spirit" or "The Tale of Snake Goddess and Paddy Fields," focus upon how stories about nature shape cultural memory and influence ecological consciousness. By examining folktales of Assam through the lens of Ecocriticism and Bronislaw Malinowski's functionalist theory, this paper aims to highlight the role of storytelling in preserving ecological knowledge, fostering a sense of environmental stewardship, and understanding the consequences of human actions on the natural world. The article argues that narratives about the environment serve as collective memory, carrying important lessons and wisdom that can inform contemporary approaches to environmental challenges.

Keywords: Folktales, Environment, Collective Memory, and Ecological consciousness.

Introduction

Folktales are wonderful stories that bind folk communities together in a shared cultural thread and hold immense importance within social groups which is often known as collective consciousness. Tales and storytelling have been prevalent since time immemorial, serving as a means of communication, education, and cultural preservation. When considering Northeast India as a cultural space, it becomes evident that this small region of the country encompasses seven states, marked by a rich diversity of tribes, communities, and sub-communities, each with its own distinct social structure and historical background. These histories shape their

ways of living, belief systems, and social practices, which are transmitted from one generation to the next through oral narratives. From a theoretical perspective, particularly through the lens of Functionalist theory, folktales can be understood as social instruments that perform crucial functions within society. Often imaginative and deeply rooted in nature, these narratives convey moral lessons, social norms, and collective values that guide everyday behaviour and ensure social cohesion. They help individuals understand their roles within the community, reinforce shared beliefs, and provide explanations for social and natural phenomena. In this sense, folktales function as a mirror of society, reflecting its structure, concerns, and aspirations, while simultaneously working to maintain social order and continuity. By preserving collective memory and reinforcing cultural identity, folktales contribute significantly to the smooth functioning and stability of society.

The narrations are formed not only just for fun or just for the sake of saying it but instead it has layers of meaning within it, when dug further it is observed they talk of moral lessons which even if some are not aware and educated with higher degrees, they can easily understand what is correct and what is wrong. As the tales are in oral form it keeps passing from one person to another and people mould it with their own ideas that's how same stories have slight changes in them, - the name, the situation, the place can alter with the motive of the person speaking. Their circumstances in which they are living, surrounding all these things has a great role in the slight changes.

These narrations perform a crucial role in sustaining social cohesion and ensuring the smooth functioning of society. Folktales, often embedded with explanations of natural phenomena such as the moon, stars, and other elements of the cosmos serve as guiding frameworks through which communities interpret the world and regulate everyday life. Traditionally, the act of storytelling is undertaken by elders, who function as custodians of cultural knowledge and transmit this wisdom to younger generations. At an early age, when children may not yet be equipped to comprehend abstract logic or scientific reasoning, folktales become effective pedagogical tools for moral instruction and character formation. Through symbolic representation and imaginative narration, these stories help children discern right from wrong and navigate appropriate behaviour in social contexts. Moreover, folktales are typically imbued with an underlying sense of optimism and moral clarity, creating a positive and engaging cognitive environment for listeners. Their concise and accessible narrative structure sustains interest across age groups, preventing cognitive fatigue or disengagement that may arise from overly elaborate or prolonged accounts. Rather than relying on exhaustive detail, folktales encourage intuitive understanding and emotional identification, allowing listeners to relate effortlessly to the narrative. The frequent personification of animals, plants, and natural elements further enhances their appeal, enabling audiences to see reflections of themselves within the characters. In this way, folktales transcend mere storytelling and operate as powerful cultural texts that shape perception, foster empathy, and reinforce collective values within society.

Within the tales the most important thing that we will find is the natural objects, animals, birds, insects, trees, mountains, and scenic beauty. In the tales we rarely come to see scientific objects and usage of technology as they are age old and are moving from one generation to the other. Nature has a specific way of its own, for instance; the patterns made in a leaf has similarity to the veins in our body, which is again similar to the river system which connects to the seas and then to the oceans. All the entities present in our Mother Earth are connected and dependent on each. Thus comes the concept of deep ecology where every entity has an intrinsic value. Environment as a vocabulary has gained a greater importance since the last century. Our planet Earth has faced multiple environmental mishaps that too because of the anthropogenic activities- mining, industrial waste, deforestation, burning of fossil fuels, all

leading to harming of biodiversity leading to mass extinctions, soil erosion, poor waste management resulting in polluting the clean water.

The famous Assamese folktales – “The Origin of Brahmaputra”, “Behula and Lakhinder” and are taken into consideration for study from an Ecocritical angle, that's how their short narratives become very important to understand in depth. Within these little stories there are great morals and knowledge hidden. The paper aims to study folktales through the lens of Functionalism theory, examining how these narratives operate as vital cultural mechanisms that contribute to the smooth functioning and stability of society. By analysing folktales as social institutions rather than mere forms of entertainment, the study highlights their role in transmitting shared values, norms, beliefs, and moral codes across generations. Folktales serve important social functions such as reinforcing acceptable patterns of behaviour, promoting social cohesion, educating individuals about their roles and responsibilities within the community, and offering collective solutions to social tensions and conflicts. Through a functionalist perspective, the paper demonstrates how folktales help maintain social order, preserve cultural continuity, and support the collective conscience, thereby acting as an important force in sustaining the structure and harmony of society.

Analysis

The story “Origin of Brahmaputra” states that the wonderful river of Brahmaputra is a unique male river with its origin from Brahma, the creator. Hindu- Puranic stories say how Brahmaputra was outcome of great penance, and finally the son of Brahma, Brahmaputra was from his *kamandalu* (water pot). The river is worshipped in a different way from the other rivers like Ganga and Yamuna. The story takes a slightly different turn when it reaches Assam. According to the Assamese folklore it is not merely just a river flowing but a living force. The Brahmaputra is known with various names in Assam like “Luit” or “Bor Luit”. The river was known to have been hidden in the mountains for centuries and when it finally came out it came with a great fury that it tore the mountains with all the masculine strength.

The river paved width channels and floods, the annual floods of Brahmaputra are taken very positively as it brings along with it silt and helps the farmer in the agriculture. The folklore provides great environmental wisdom how people understood the river ecology rather than disturbing it. There is a great saying about the Brahmaputra that “Luit never flows on the same path” it makes one understand the continuous flow of the nature of river and the people over there are very flexible with moving their settlements while obeying the force of nature as the river changes its path every year.

The river is known for creating a havoc causing floods which in modern studies it is termed as some calamity but it teaches about the law of nature, floods are interpreted as cyclical renewal and known as life giving events as it is helpful for the farmers. And over time people learnt to live in contact with nature as seen in a river island present in Assam known as Majuli where people build stilt houses, they adopt seasonal migration and crop diversity that led them to live a life in harmony with nature. Thus, storytelling preserves practical ecological knowledge across generations.

The second one is a very interesting tale of “Behula and Lakhinder” goes this way that Manasa, the Snake Goddess wanted to be worshipped by Chand Saudagar a wealthy merchant of Chhaygaon mauza of Kamrup district but he refused to worship her as he was a devotee of Lord Shiva. This angered the Goddess and this was followed by a curse that all Saudagar's sons will die due to snakebite. Years later Behula, got married to Chand Saudagar's youngest son Lakhinder. Despite several efforts made by the father to keep the son safe Lakhinder was bitten by a powerful snake sent by Maa Manasa. Behula was adamant that she would bring back Lakhinder's life. So, she took the dead body on a raft which floated down the Brahmaputra

to Dhubri. Behula prayed to Lord Shiva to restore her husband to life, finally Maa Manasa was pleased and granted his life back.

From an ecocritical perspective, the narrative of Maa Manasa and Chand Saudagar can be interpreted as an allegorical discourse on the human-nature relationship. Maa Manasa, the snake goddess, functions as a symbolic representation of nature, asserting the imperative that humanity, embodied by Chand Saudagar, must respect and live in harmony with the natural world. Nature, as depicted in the tale, provides essential sustenance: food, oxygen, shade, and other life-sustaining resources yet human arrogance and disregard, symbolized by Saudagar's devotion to material auspiciousness over ecological reverence, disrupt this equilibrium. The death of Lakhinder can be read as a manifestation of nature's retributive justice, a metaphorical warning from Mother Earth regarding the consequences of human transgressions against ecological balance. This loss signals a cautionary trajectory toward environmental degradation, suggesting that continued neglect may preclude any return to a state of ecological harmony.

Behula's determined struggle to restore her husband serves as a metaphor for human agency and environmental stewardship. She represents the knowledgeable and conscientious individual who confronts destructive forces threatening the natural world. The narrative implies that safeguarding the environment requires active, persistent effort akin to Behula's courage and resilience. Furthermore, the story underscores the urgency of collective action: humanity must recognize the fragility of ecological systems and engage in sustainable practices to avert an impending ecological crisis. Through this lens, the folktale functions not merely as cultural lore but as a prescient ecological allegory, emphasizing the moral and practical responsibility of humans to preserve and protect the environment for a sustainable and balanced future.

The narrative illustrates that Behula undergoes a series of trials and hardships during her journey, which symbolically mirror the formidable and often harsh aspects of the natural ecosystem, including storms, floods, and turbulent currents. These obstacles can be interpreted as allegorical representations of the challenges humanity faces because of environmental degradation and ecological mismanagement. Chand Saudagar's refusal to honor the natural order, by neglecting to worship Maa Manasa, triggers these challenges, highlighting the theme of ecological justice embedded within the story. The folktale underscores the necessity of respecting and coexisting harmoniously with natural forces, personified by the snake goddess, who functions as a symbolic custodian of the entire ecosystem. By demanding reverence, the goddess draws attention to all species and elements within the ecological network, emphasizing that neglect or exploitation of any part of this system can destabilize the delicate balance of nature.

Furthermore, the depiction of the river Brahmaputra serves as a powerful metaphor for regeneration and transformation. It embodies the cyclic and restorative patterns of the natural world, suggesting that if humanity mitigates anthropogenic pressures and realigns its practices with ecological principles, life's continuity can be preserved. The river's flow symbolizes not only the resilience of nature but also the possibility of renewal and environmental rebirth, reinforcing the narrative's advocacy for sustainable coexistence and ecological stewardship.

The third is the tale of Teji Mola, which is one of the most famous Assamese folktales, first published by Lakshminath Bezbaroa in his 1911 collection of tales known as *Burhi Aair Xadhu* (Grandmother's Tales). The story is about a beautiful and kind girl named Tejimola with her merchant father in a remote village of Assam. She stays with her step mother and father after the death of her mother. Even though the stepmother pretends to be kind with Tejimola in front of her husband, she harboured deep hatred towards her, because of the father's affection towards her. As Tejimola's Father is a merchant, he must travel far for his trading journey which is the starting point of Tejimola's tragic twist. The stepmother started mistreating her, forcing her into arduous chores, denying food and subject to physical violence.

One day, after a wedding of Tejimola's friend, the stepmother murdered her by crushing her head with a traditional wooden pestle (Dheki) and burying her body in the garden. However, death was not the end. A gourd (lau) vine emerged from her grave site. As villagers became aware of the situation, a voice emanated from the plant, showing that Tejimola was singing from the dead. When the stepmother killed the plant, a plum tree emerged from its ruins, bearing Tejimola's name. Tejimola re-emerged through nature's alterations after the stepmother sought to destroy her new form. At the end the step mother threw the tree fragments into the river. A lotus flower bloomed on the riverside which catches the attention of her father while returning home. When her father touched the lotus, it revealed Tejimola's identity. When the father commanded it to morph, the lotus turned into a bird that flew inside his cage before returning to Tejimola's human form. Tejimola reconnected with her father after her harsh stepmother was exposed and thrown away for good.

In many ways, Tejimola's journey can be seen as an allegory for mother natures response to the harms human beings are doing. The stepmother's violence towards Tejimola parallels with human exploitation of nature. On the contrary, Tejimola's different forms as a part of nature shows the interconnected relationships between humans and nature. She emerges in different ecological niches (garden, soil, flower, and fruits) reminding us how nature persists even after manmade harm.

Conclusion

Assamese folktales, as shown by stories of Tejimola, Behula and Lakhinder, and the origin of Brahmaputra, conveys more than mere entertainment. They profound repositories of collective memory, moral wisdom, cultural memory, and ecological insight. Through symbolic storytelling, the tales preserve ecological knowledge, illustrate the consequences of human actions on nature, and underscore the ethical concerns of environmental management.

By providing ecological perspective, these folktales portray nature not as a passive backdrop but as a active participant who is capable enough to respond to human actions by asserting moral agency and renewal. Tejimola's heroine's changes through plants, trees, flowers, and birds symbolically express nature's tenacity, persistence, and connectivity to human life. Similarly, stories such as Behula and Lakhinder and the Origin of the Brahmaputra emphasise the cyclical processes of ecological balance, natural systems' regenerating capacities, and the significance of living in peace with the environment.

Oral storytelling possesses a communicative power that is distinct from and, in certain contexts, more effective than written or other mediated forms of transmission. The spoken narrative engages memory, emotion, and communal participation, thereby creating a lasting cognitive and affective impact. Through repetition and performance, oral traditions exert a profound influence on the formation of social norms and collective identities. Historically, such narratives have functioned as informal yet effective mechanisms of social regulation, guiding communities and sustaining cultural continuity without the need for external institutional structures. Ultimately, the study of Assamese folktales demonstrates that oral traditions serve as enduring instruments for both cultural and ecological education. They remind us that sustainable human–nature relationships are not merely modern scientific concerns but are deeply embedded in the cultural imagination, encoded in stories that have guided communities for centuries.

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