

## Assamese Oral Literature: A study

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**ABSTRACT :** *The tradition which is transmitted orally is known as Folk Literature or Oral Literature. This tradition is transmitted orally basing on the collective memory of their elders. In the ancient Assam Oral Literature has been playing an important role in traditional Assamese society. The folk literature reflects the day to day life, the joys and sorrows of the common people. Assamese oral literature is very resourceful both in quantity and variety. The wealth of the oral literature of Assam is most impressive. Oral literature is mainly produce by the folk society. In fact, oral literature flourished and transmitted from one generation to other by word of mouth. It contains songs, tales, ballads, proverbs, sayings, riddles, folk speech etc. In this research paper an analysis is attempted about the oral literature of Assam and its various sub categories. In the present research paper we try to observe the characteristics of oral literature.*

**Keywords:** *Oral literature, folk songs, ballads, tales, proverbs, riddles etc.*

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### I. INTRODUCTION:

Assam is very rich in Oral literature. Oral literature is the primary sector for study to folklore materials. Oral literature is also called ‘folk literature’ or ‘Verbal art’. W.R Bascom introduced the term ‘Verbal art’ first time and the term clearly point out the distinction of relations existing among myth, legend, folksongs, tales and folk speech etc. Sometimes a term “Expressive Literature is also used. Besides these terms there are other various designation which precisely help in understanding this particular type of folklore material. The term oral literature became popular only after R.M. Dorson used. The oral literature is transmitted orally basing on the collective memory from one generation to another generation. Assamese folk literature is very resourceful. Assam is in true sense, a meeting point of many communities, faiths and cultures. This state has always been the hub of cultural diversity owing to multiple ethnic and non-ethnic communities living herein. Therefore, the oral literature of Assam is very rich.

#### Objections of Study :

The research paper aims to analyze the state of Assamese oral literature and its sub genres. In this present paper we tried to draw the characteristics of the sub genres of Assamese oral literature with the examples.

#### Methodology :

This research paper is based on analytical method. The analysis basically concentrates on the definition of Assamese oral literature and its classifications. To prepare this research paper we take help from the topic related books, research paper thesis and internet.

#### Theoretical Discussion

- a) **Oral literature of Assam :** Oral literature is mainly produced by the folk society. In fact, oral literature flourished and transmitted from one generation to other by orally. Oral literature is a part of folk culture. Oral literature is the expressions or composition of an unknown composer. It’s expressed in the language or dialect which was commonly spoken by the large number of people of a same community. Oral literature does not accept any boundary of academic doctrine and expresses instinct but inner happiness or sorrows of common people. The oral literature of a community belongs to its common people whose thoughts and feelings are embedded in a spontaneous way. Though folk literature is creation of any one specific unknown person but it is so deeply influenced and touch the heart of the common people that its originality transform generation to generation. It gets popularity, passing through various situations and cannot be recognized as a creation of any special person. Therefore, it is known as a property of common people.
- b) **Classification of Oral literature:** In the light of folk literature the life of the common people is reflected. It is the way to pass on their feelings. The oral literature draw a pictures of common people whatever they think or experience. Folk people used folk songs on the occasion of their different rites and rituals. Story telling is the medium of their amusement. Folk society used to express their ideology, knowledge by using

proverbs. Folk literature is classified in many divisions. The Folklorist R.M. Dorson divided the oral literature in his book "Folklore and Folk life: An Introduction" in such way –

- i) Myth,
- ii) Legend,
- iii) Tales,
- iv) Folksongs,
- v) Proverbs, Riddle etc. And
- vi) Folk speech.

Famous Assamese Folklorist Prafulladutta Goswami classified the Folk literature as below:

- i) Tales, Myth and Legend,
- ii) Folksongs-
  - a. Ballads,
  - b. Religious songs,
  - c. Love songs,
  - d. Working songs and
  - e. Lullabies.
- iii) Riddles,
- iv) Proverbs and
- v) Mantra.

Assamese folk literature are concerned, the categorization offered by Dr. Nabin Ch. Sarma is given below:

- i. Folk poem/ song or oral/ verbal song :-
  - a. Ballads,
  - b. Religious song,
  - c. Love song,
  - d. Working song,
  - e. Festival song,
  - f. Ritual song,
  - g. Philosophical song and
  - h. Hunting song.
- ii. Prose Narrative :-
  - a) Myth,
  - b) Legend and
  - c) Folktale.
- iii. Proverb, saying, maxim.
- iv. Riddle.
- v. Folk speech or folk language.

Although, the scholars divided the oral literature in many part. But, mainly there are only two types of Folk literature, firstly verse and secondly prose. According to Birinchi Kumar Barua since primitive age folk literature is being orally in both prose and verse forms.

Folklorists have classified a number of genres of oral literature according to form and functions. But, the genres are not available in every community. So, in this paper we try to include the every genres of Assamese oral literature. But, research paper has a limitation and Assamese folk literatures are very wide in numbers. So, we just mention and give a brief description about the genres of Assamese oral literature.

c) **Folk song/ poem** : Folk songs or oral poetry is a major sub-division of oral literature. It has its own varieties. Like the other form of folk literature a folk song is also transmitted verbally from one generation to another generation. Sometimes folk songs are used for educational purpose. Folk songs are varieties in number. They are folk epics, ballads, lullabies, love songs, working songs, ritual songs etc. Folk songs are associated with facts and festivals are mostly agricultural, its relationship with the social set up tends to demonstrate single commonness. Some Assamese folk songs are sung only in the occasion any kind of festivals. Among the festival songs some are religious and some are non-religious songs. The Ainaam (performed by the women), Sitala naam (worship of pox goddess), Jikir, Jari, Dehbisharar geet are religious songs. Biya naam (marriage song), Bihu song, Huchari, Mahoho song, Bambol pita songs are non-religious song.

➤ **Bihu Songs**: As the spring time Bohag or Rangali bihu is the most favourite festival of Assam and so the bihu songs are. The charm and popularity of bihu is reflected in the songs and dances. The songs and dances are the expression of youth, love and union of young generation. In the occasion of bihu marriageable young men women take an opportunity to choose their life partners.

- Bihu naam and bihu geet has two aspects. Some of them are meant for the Bihu festival. As it is a community festival so everybody take part in it. When the Huchari party (group of young men) come to the courtyard and they sing Huchari song which is sung usually in praise of the great festival, God and earth with the music of drum, pepa and various bamboo instruments. As example -

Chote gai gai bahage palehi Fulile bhebeli lata Kaino thako mane orake napare Bahagor bihutihir katha.

(With the ending of chaitra the baishakh comes and the bhebeli creepers are in bloom; there will be no end if go on talking the beauty of bihu.)

In the bihu song the young people sing of their youth feelings and love. The bihu festival itself is considered to be the relic of a bygone fertility festival. Through the bihu song men wanted encourage the fertility of mother Earth. The young men and women gathered in the groves to dance and sing their feelings of heart. As example -

Epar dopar kori rati par haba Amar bihut amani nai Rati pare pare phechai kuruliyai Amar bihu bhangota nai.

(Hours by hours the night will gone but we never tired of our bihu. All through the owls hoots but can stop our Bihu.)

- **Marriage song or biya naam:** In Assam, a marriage ceremony is considered to be one of the important social functions. Marriage is celebrated in this region with musical affairs. There are several stages in a marriage ceremony between the bride and groom party from the starting to the final leave taking of the bride to her in-laws house. During the every stage of celebration women sing appropriate marriage song or biya naam. In the marriage songs usually there is a women leader who sets the melody while the others follow her. Different stages of a marriage are celebrated in Assam. In the every stage of celebration the female singers sing appropriate songs related to that stage. The marriage songs are simple in language and very homely. By the marriage a girl leave her parental home and goes to the in-laws home after marriage. As a daughter-in-law she has to perform lots of responsibilities in her new home. Therefore, in a marriage song some verbal instructions are given for preparing a girl for the new role of her life and performance of all her duties to the satisfactions of all. As example -

Sahurak maniba deutarak dare

Sahu aaik dekhiba maarar dare

(The female singers advise the bride to respond her father-in-law and mother-in-law like her own father and mother)

Again,

Jatane kariba bowarir ban

Seyahe janiba narir dharma.

(In this song bride are advised to do her all work carefully and complete her responsibilities to her in-laws).

- d) **Ballads:** Ballads are noteworthy branch of Assamese folk songs. In other words the narrative folk songs or Kahini geet. A ballad is a narrative folk song which is originated and communicated orally. In a ballad only one story is found. Ballads are like a short story. Ballads are the creation of the folk society. The story which narrated in Ballad reflects the folk society. The sub genres of ballads are divided as following classes-
  - Historical Ballads: The historical ballads centre on some important historical event or persons. This type of ballads has great historical importance. The name of some historical ballads mentioned here- Barphukanar geet, Maniram Dewanar geet, Chikan Sariharar geet, Haradutta Biraduttar geet, Jayamati konwarir geet etc.
  - Legendry Ballads: Legendary ballads narrate the legends associated with various national and social heroes, places, rivers, mountains etc. Like Sati Radhikar geet, Manikurwarar geet, Beula-lakhindarar geet, Barnadir geet are legendary ballads.
  - Realistic Ballads : The Ballads in which reflect a more or less realistic attitude of life and describe, mostly ordinary day to day affairs in the lives of the people. The Dubala Santir geet, Kanya baramahi, Sita Baramahir geet, Ram Baramahir geet, Madhumatir geet are the realistic Ballads.
- e) **Working Songs:** Working songs are related to the various work of Assamese Folk society. The composer composes these types of songs to balance the labour in work. The working songs relief the pain of hard work to the worker. Nisukani geet (Lullaby), Naokhelor geet (Songs of Boating), Garakhiya geet (Songs of Cowboy) etc. are the Assamese working songs.
- f) **Folk tales:** Folk tales are the one of the important sub genres of oral literature. Although most of the folk tales are told for entertainment, the main reasons behind them among others are for instructing and moulding characters specially the children. In Assam Folk tales or Sadhukatha likes pure folk tales, legends, myths, fables are covered by the term. The work Sadhu meant “the righteous” and Sadhukatha means a moral tales. It is also same as Saud or saudagar, a merchant. So sadhukatha means a moral story of wonderful events narrated by a merchant who return home from abroad after a long time.

The folk tales also have played an important role in exercising the imaginative power of children. Some folk tales reflect the mind of the people. These tales draw the pictures of old cultural patterns, religious belief, behaviour, habits and customs of the society in which they are found. We should be able to know a lot of things about the society from the folk tales.

Folk tales reflect the day-to-day life the joys and sorrows, love and hatred of the people, parental love, unnatural cruelty, family happiness, wise and unwise conduct, cleverness, unlucky incident, greed, true friendship are some of the common motifs of folk tale tradition. Some typical characteristics of man, woman, children get reflected in the tales. Man's greed for money and riches, hostility accrue between the co-wives, step mother's behaviour, children's adventures, and such pictures are drawn in the Folk tales.

Depending on the subject of folk tales, we make the sub genres of Folk tales like below-

- i. Animal tales: Fox and Monkey, Monkey and Crocodile, Mouse and Lion, etc.
- ii. Magical or Wonderous or Romantic or Supernatural tales: Tejimolar tales, Kamala Konwaris tales, Teja and Tula's tales, The Kites Daughter, etc.
- iii. Joke or Humorous tales: The Son in law, Astrologer, The Brahmin and his servant, Seven foolish, etc.
- iv. Trickster tales: Tentan's Adventure, Teekhar and Suti Bai, The Old Man and Fox, etc.

g) **Riddles:** The Riddle is a very significant form of oral literature. The major functions of a riddle are providing entertainment and young people are often seen to like riddles for amusement they provide. But the riddle is not merely entertaining in character. It also helps in cultivating wit and intellectual capability in a person. Asking one to answer a riddle is an easy and interesting way to testing ones intelligence. The riddle has influenced popular imagination more than any other oral tradition. Its construction is neat and attractive.

The characteristics feature of the riddles show that they are composed to tell and teach about a wide range of things and processes from animals, plants, household items, agricultural tools and production etc. The employment of the riddle in marriage is a worldwide custom. In Assam, when the groom parties in the way the place of marriage at the brides' house his path is barricaded by a group of young boys and he is asked a number of riddles. Thus, it is seen that from the earlier times riddles have played an important role in testing intelligence, wit and wisdom. Many types are riddles are found in Assamese oral literature some of them are:-

- i) Mathematical Riddles,
- ii) Word Riddles,
- iii) Natural Riddles,
- iv) Relationship Riddles,
- v) Animals Riddles,
- vi) Parts of Body Riddles,
- vii) Wisdom Riddles and
- viii) Religious Riddles (Bhakatiya phakara) etc.

h) **Proverbs:** Proverbs is an important sub genres of oral literature. Proverbs are the representation of the society at large. Proverbs are made from the experiences which got from the society. Proverbs are kinds of moral or educational lesson for the folk society. Almost in all societies elder and parents used proverbs to spread the knowledge and to guide the new generations. Proverbs are the store house of the wisdom of different races play an important role in imparting informal education among both literate and illiterate people. Although proverbs are created by unknown composer, they throw glimpses on different places like environmental problems, agricultural management, social conduct, patriotism, superstitions, status of women, medical remedies, hospitality, customs, beliefs and family relations etc.

Assamese proverbs contain ideas or information suitable for imparting instruction. The Folk people composed the proverbs of inculcating in the succeeding generations those virtue and principles that have traditionally been deemed as desirable. Common people use these proverbs in their day-to-day life and thereby acquire and transmit the knowledge informally. Proverbs in one of the most important bearers of the moralities those are prevalent in a society. Proverbs have high structural and contextual value. Proverbs can be divided in some sub genres given below:-

- i) Proverbs relating to agricultural activities,
- ii) Proverbs relating to women,
- iii) Proverbs relating to preparation of food,
- iv) Proverbs relating to medicinal herbs, remedies and dietary habits,
- v) Proverbs relating to house building,
- vi) Proverbs relating to journey,

- vii) Proverbs relating to philosophical thoughts and ideas,  
viii) Proverbs relating to political wisdom,  
ix) Proverbs relating to character of men,  
x) Proverbs relating to history and  
xi) Proverbs relating to superstition, etc.
- i) **Folk speech:** Accordingly to R.M. Dorson, Folk speech is also one of the important sub genres of oral literature. Folk speech refers to the dialect or style of speaking, unique to people living within a geographic area. Folk speech embraces the local and regional turns of phrases that deviate from the standard language. One of the main characteristics of folk speech is that it is more restricted to oral circulation. With the total vocabulary of every speaker there is a large number of words but that are not used in writing and in formal situation. These words or expressions may be taboo words or they may be a kind of passive vocabulary. Moreover, these characteristics of folk speech are not only limited to vocabulary, but there exist at the level of grammar, idiom and phonetics.
- j) **Conclusion:** Assamese society is known for its rich history of oral literature. The popularity of folklore in such region is worth mentioning. Oral literature is one of the most important fields to be studied to acquire knowledge and question the representation of cultural beliefs and values for it can reflect the society in various forms. While we talk about cultural studies, it refers to a multi-disciplinary subject which observes the representations of culture in the various field of study. Oral literature helps us to understanding the culture. Assamese oral literature field are very wide. This being a research paper so some limitation is the research paper. So, we just try to give a glimpse in the area of Assamese oral literature. There is no possibility to study the each and every category of Assamese oral literature in such limited research paper.

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