

Bezbaruah's Commentary on Identity in the Prefatory Note of "*Burhi Air Sadhu*"

Abstract

Lakshminath Bezbaruah, the pioneer of Assamese literature contributed to the nation's identity assertion by serving to both Assamese language and literature. He collected and used folktales as tool to rejuvenate the national identity of Assam in the period of identity crisis. He endeavored to collect folktales as a project to preserve the culture to re establish the Assamese identity. In the prefatory note of his celebrated folktale collection *Burhi Air Sadhu* he described folktale as the 'biography' of the community because it preserves in it the world view of the concerned community in the form of its culture and tradition.

Keywords: Folklore, Folktale, Identity, Nationality, Tradition, Culture.

Introduction

William Bascom offers four functions of folklore, educating; escaping accepted limitations of our culture; maintaining cultural identity and validating existing claims. Folklore is used as a tool for revitalizing culture and identity from the period of Renaissance. India has the multi-faceted identity with some versatile culture and tradition. But the invasion of the British Empire created a havoc and chaos in this country. The colonial influence was observed in all the aspects of society including politics, economy, culture, tradition and the life style of colonized India.

Literature, created to prevent the colonial grasp over the minds of people is called the nationalistic piece of literature. Not only literature, the native language instantly plays a pivotal role to establish the national imperialist identity. In Germany, during the eighteenth century Romantic Nationalism, the famous German scholar Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803), Jacob Karl Grimm (1785-1863) and Wilhelm Karl Grimm (1786-1859) started to compile and publish the songs and folktales as their native property. According to Grimms' 'Heritage Theory' the heroic and magic tales are of the Indo-Germanic origins which are spread all over world through migration (Thompson, 1977).

Such attempts had been made also by pioneers of Indian literature and culture in the colonial stage. Assam was also affected by the colonial grasp of the British Empire. But, with the conscious endeavors in the spheres of literature, language, culture and tradition by a group of conscious people, somehow managed to sustain the threatened identity of the nation. Among these conscious people, Lakshminath Bezbaruah(1864-1938) of Assam was a prominent figure. His contribution to his nation and nation's identity was of immense significance. His contemplation in this perspective reflects in a very short prefatory note of one of his folktale collections *Burhi Air Sadhu*¹, (1912) which was in his vernacular language Assamese.

Objective of the Study

This paper tries to focus on heritage value of folktale and its role in motivating the nation for unity and harmony. Folktales mirror the way of life of a society or of a nation from generation to generation. The objective of this paper is to substantiate the role of folklore, especially folktales in the nationalistic movement to establish the identity of a nation through the analysis of the prefatory note of *Burhi Air Sadhu* by Lakshminath Bezbaruah. In this preface to *Burhi Air Sadhu* Bezbaruah put forward a commentary on folktale and its role in restoration of the identity of a nation or a community.

Methodology

Methodologically, the author selects the popular Assamese folktale collection *Burhi Air Sadhu*, especially its valuable prefatory note by Lakshminath Bezbaruah to achieve the objective and overall understanding of the folktales in respect to identity issue. The preface to *Burhi Air Sadhu* is a masterpiece regarding the theoretical approach to folktale and identity.

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Review of Literature

The literature review is done in two phases, the first phase is to understand the theoretical approach to identity crisis and identity assertion and the second one is to relate how the literary heritage in form of the oral folk literature works on the identity assertion of a nation or of a community and Bezbaruah's opinion regarding this aspect.

Edward Gait's (1863-1950) *History of Assam* is an excellent description regarding the history of Assam through the glasses of a colonial person. Gait gave a vivid description of the history of Assam from the prehistoric era till the British colonial period. This book by Edward Gait provides information regarding social, cultural, economic and political atmosphere of Assam from the perspective of a colonial ruler. This book is significant as it is the history of the colonized people by a colonial ruler: so it is important in the study of the topic of identity assertion of that colonized people.

The issue of identity is a burning topic in the social and political spheres of Assam and now it is a very common discussion of Assam discourse. The issue of identity in Assam is very vividly discussed in the *Questions of Identity in Assam- Location, Migration, Hybridity* by Nandana Dutta. Here Prof. Dutta has provided a detailed account of Assamese identity relating the history and the present scenario. Though this book covers the period of identity assertion from the Assam movement till now, it gives a thoughtful insight to understand the Assamese mentality and Assamese identity.

*Asamiya Manuhar Itihas*² by Dr. Nagen Saikia is a masterpiece regarding the history and identity of the Assamese people. Along with the other aspects generally discussed by a historian, he gives emphasis on the folklore and folk literature as the foundation of the history and identity of the Assamese people.

An effort is made to understand the folklore of both tribal and non tribal in the larger context of a relationship between folklore and the life of the community by Lalit Kumar Barua in his work *Oral Tradition and Folk Heritage of North-east India*. Here he discusses on the importance of oral tradition that is folktale and other oral genres in folklore, because, these have a historical value in the societies. Since, folklore is an inherent part of life of a community connecting the past, present and future, it has a great value regarding the culture and identity of that group or community.

A collection of articles on Lakshminath Bezbaruah's life and contribution namely *Lakshminath Bezbaroa, The Sahityarathi of Assam* (1972) edited by Maheswar Neog has immense importance to know the personality of this pioneering figure. There are thirty one essays on Bezbaruah and in almost all the essays his opinion on the Assamese identity and his policies for identity assertion is discussed.

Backdrop of Identity Assertion in the North-East India and Assam

According to Frantz Fanon, colonized people, in the first stage, likes to imitate the colonial

principles and lifestyle and this attitude gradually destroys the cultural identity of a nation and makes the people the slaves of the colonials; in the second stage, the intellectual class starts to rejuvenate their heritage, culture, tradition and the identity as a whole and tries to remake the cultural identity through their intellectual activities. (cited in Sarma, 2014)

Nineteenth century was the most significant period of Indian history for cultural development and identity assertion. This period witnessed how a colonial power became the ruler of not only the greater part of India but the ruler of the Indian minds too. (Chatterji, 1972: 1-13) They subjugated the Indian people not only politically but also culturally and spiritually. To make the escape from this colonial rule, the intellectual emancipation of the Indian people was a great thrive of that period. The intellectual Indians had a question in their mind about the source of the British power, "What bread doth Caesar eat that he became so great?" and the answer of this question was their knowledge of science, intellect and their organizing power. As a result of which, an exploration of knowledge was started all over India. This exploration of knowledge leads the intellectual class of Indian people to the root of their identity that is their own culture, tradition, language and distinctiveness in all these aspects.

The identity crisis of the Assamese has been continuing from the beginning of the nineteenth century. This adversity in Assam, the present North-Eastern region started with the invasion of the *Maans*³. After this invasion the glorious *Ahom*⁴ kingdom declined and a greater part of Assam was included to *Brahmadesh* or Myanmar. After the Yandaboo Treaty (1826) between the *Maans* and the British, the north-eastern part of India was moved to the hand of British rulers and they imposed the *Bengal*⁵ language all over Assam as the official language putting the cultural identity of the Assamese at stake. The colonial economy initiated the emergence of a new middle class in the society. This new class being a part of the colonial rule came in to close contact with the revolutionary transition taking place all over the world. The re-awakening brought about by the educated Indians signaled the closure of the colonial and their ambitious vision.

Bezbaruah's Contribution to Identity Assertion

Lakshminath Bezbaruah (1864-1938) dominates the Assamese cultural life by his multi-faceted interests. He is regarded as the pioneering figure of the journey of modern literature and therefore, he is honoured the title of *Sahityarathi* –the charioteer of literature. He was the rightful founder of the scientific projection of literature for social satire and identity assertion. He contributed to the store house of Assamese literature with his pioneering works in fields of fictions, poems, dramas, scholarly articles, folktale collections and other literary contributions. As a part of this mission, Bezbaruah and his friends Chandra Kr. Agarwala and Hem Chandra Goswami chose to serve for the vernacular language- Assamese, to renovate the lost identity. With a view to re-store cultural heritage of the land

they started the publication of a revolutionary journal *Jonaki* (meaning 'firefly') to avert the engulfing 'darkness' in literary as well as cultural milieu. Their mission was not limited to the literary resurgent but spread into the cultural and political interests. (Bhattacharjee, 1999: 31-37) guided by nationalistic sentiment and responsibilities to the motherland Bezbaruah collected and used folk material with a view to rescue the vanishing cultural heritage.

He recuperated the Aryan origin Assamese language by assimilating the native dialects and speech from the native communities. He collected folktales and compiled three volumes- *Burhi Air Sadhu* (1911), *Koka Deota Aru Natilora*⁶ (1913) and *Junuka* (1913). The folktale collection *Burhi Air Sadhu* (1911), by Bezbaruah is a popular literary and folklore specimen intensely used for multi-faceted analysis by scholastic personalities.

Preface to *Burhi Air Sadhu* – A Commentary on Assamese Identity

Burhi Air Sadhu is a popular Assamese folktale collection by Lakshminath Bezbaruah. The folktales of this collection were collected from the common people, from different places of Assam. It was published in 1912 and in the hundred years of its first publication, countless editions of this book have been published. English translation of this collection is also done by translators namely Jnanadabhiram Barua and Deepika Phukan. Jnanadabhiram Barua (1880-1955) translated a few tales into English from this collection and published them in 1915, after three years of publication of the original book under the title *Folktales of Assam*. After him Deepika Phukan published *Grandma's Tales* the complete translation in 2012, after a long century of the first original publication. Thirty folktales are included in this book; however, the prefatory note by Bezbaruah is itself a radiant work on the origin, evolution, and especially significance of folktale⁷ in different communities and societies to explore their identity.

"Just as every community or nation has its own separate language, similarly it has its own distinctive folklore." (Nath, 2011) With this sentence Bezbaruah started the prefatory note of *Burhi Air Sadhu*. This sentence announces Bezbaruah's estimation for his distinctive national identity. He tries to enlighten that as his nation has its own language, it has its own culture, tradition and folklore and these

are the base of his national identity. Bezbaruah's concern for identity depicts dual identity-Assamese and *Indian*. For his identity as an *Indian* he contributed to the political field being a member of the National Congress. And for the identity as an *Assamese* he contributed a lot in the field of Assamese language and literature. His urge for his own identity reflects in the words of the preface to *Burhi Air Sadhu*. Here, according to Bezbaruah, language is autobiography of people's national life and the tales are the autobiography of the community. The community's old norms of behavior, rules-regulations, thoughts and imaginations remains ineradicably attached with the tales of the community. Likewise, the unwritten old national history lies inseparably with the folktales.

With the reference of the famous German philologist Franz Bopp (1791-1867), he substantiated the same origin of the Tutons, Celts, Hindus and the other Aryans by the study of folktales. For identity the root or the origin is the most necessary concern. So he expressed the usage of folktale in tracing the root or the origin of a race or a community.

Bezbaruah wrote about the similarity of folktale that though the tales are unique in itself, similarity may be observed in the tales of different languages and different communities because of its origin and its migratory nature. For example the Assamese tales have resemblance with the tales of the other parts of India, especially with Bengal. But he also said that tales of Assam have some uniqueness in regards to its culture and identity because of which one can distinguish these as Assamese tales.

In the preface, Bezbaruah wrote about the contribution of the German scholars-Herder and the Grimm Brothers as the pioneers of the folklore study. He explained how the German scholars prove the truth that history of an antique tale or the history of a word is more important than the history of a big war. Because he realized that the history of an antique tale helps to establish the identity of a nation.

All the tales of *Burhi Air Sadhu* has some cultural significance. The Assamese tales are unique as it reflects the traditions and cultures that are prevailing and continuing in the Assamese society from times immemorial. All the tales from *Burhi Air Sadhu*, contain abundant cultural elements representing the Assamese cultural identity.

SI.No	Title	Symbol of Cultural Identity
1.	The Tale of the Cat's Daughter	* <i>Hachoti</i> -the traditional Handkerchief. *people in touch with the food wastage (<i>Chowa-patani</i>) is regarded the untouchable in Assamese society
2.	The Monkey and the Fox	Mention of milk, jaggery, banana, sugar cane. These are some foods used in all Assamese rituals.
3.	The <i>Ow</i> ⁸ Princess	Texture of this tale is Assamese.
4.	The Raven and the Warbler	Mention of the tradition of drying the boiled paddy.
5.	The Flower Girl	Texture of this tale is Assamese.
6.	The Cunning Fox	The tradition of offering <i>Pitha</i> to the goddess Lakshmi.
7.	Tiger and the Crab	*Description of some delicious Assamese food items- <i>Maniki Madhuri</i> , <i>Joha dhan</i> (the scented rice); <i>lai,lopha, chuka paleng, memedhu, babari</i> etc are some popular vegetables.

		* <i>Na-Khua</i> is a traditional after harvest ritual, offering of newly harvested foods.
8.	<i>Tejimola</i>	* <i>Sakhi</i> -this relation is very serious in Assamese culture. * <i>Riha- Mekhela</i> made from silk, <i>Khaniya Kapor</i> made from <i>Eri</i> thread etc are the dress of an Assamese woman. * <i>Dheki</i> – the rice pounding device generally used in the Assamese families. * <i>Jora</i> (a kind of fruit), gourd these are easily available fruits and vegetables in the backyard of an Assamese household.
9.	The Old Couple and the Foxes	Texture of this tale is Assamese.
10.	The Long-Legged One	*The title of the tale itself is a good example of a popular and humourous phrase used in Assamese language. <i>Dighal Thengiya</i> meaning 'long legged' is used to mean 'rain' in Assamese language. *reference of <i>Pepa-Korha</i> . It is a imaginary mysterious creature found in the gossips of the Assamese society.
11.	The Proud Glob Fish	*mention of the names of the fishes found in the eco system of the geological region of Assam, that are the <i>rau, borali, bahu, xol, kawoi, goroi, darikona</i> etc. *reference of various native fishing instruments- <i>jal, polo, juluki, pauri, cheap, thuha</i> *description of various delicious recipes which are especially of fish-roasted, smoked, steamed, grilled, boiled fish. These are very popular in Assamese society.
12.	The Youngest Son	Mention of the name giving (<i>namkaran</i>) tradition of a new born baby.
13.	The All-knowing One or The Know-all	*mention of <i>pitha</i> -one kind of cake popular in Assamese society. *mention of <i>Tamul-pan</i> , (areca nut and betel leaf) the most important objects in Assamese society. The use of this <i>tamul-pan</i> is very significant.
14.	A Fish Tale	The use of this <i>tamul-pan</i> in the marriage ceremony is mentioned here. This unique tradition is observed only in Assamese society.
15.	The Strong Man	Mention of <i>pitha-guri</i> (rice powder). <i>pitha-guri</i> is popularly used as snack in Assamese society.
16.	The Tale of the Kite's Daughter	*The tradition of giving new cloth- the <i>Bihuwan</i> on the occasion of <i>Bihu</i> , the great Assamese festival. *dry fish. It is one of the Assamese recipes traditionally used by the tribal and the non tribals of this region.
17.	<i>Tula and Teja</i>	There are many evidences of Assamese culture, but the mention of the weaving is significant here in this tale.
18.	A Tale of a Thief and a Princess	In the title there is a word <i>Kharani</i> . It is a popular food item made from the mixture of grind mustard seed and alkali, used as <i>chutney</i> with rice.
19.	<i>Tikhar and Chuti Bai</i>	Mention of the ingredients used to make the <i>pithas</i> –the very popular Assamese cake.
20.	<i>Champawati</i>	The use of this <i>tamul-pan</i> in the marriage ceremony is mentioned here. Both <i>Champawati</i> and her step sister were married off by cutting <i>tamul-pan</i> .
21.	Tale of King <i>Jaradgab</i>	Texture of this tale is Assamese.
22.	<i>Paneshoi</i>	<i>Paneshoi</i> was grinding <i>Maah-Halodhi</i> into a paste for the ritual bath of the bride and groom. This ritual bath is a tradition in Assamese society.
23.	The Tale of the Son-in-law	Should be filled with Texture of this tale is Assamese
24.	The Tale of the Night Blind	Should be filled with Texture of this tale is Assamese
25.	The Frog's Tale	*Mention of fishing tools used by Assamese people. * <i>mah-gotkara</i> - a mixture of roasted pulse and rice is popular in Assamese culture.
26.	The tale of his father's friend	Texture of this tale is Assamese.
27.	<i>Latkan</i>	Texture of this tale is Assamese.
28.	The Woman of Prosper	Description of some ornaments used by Assamese woman. That are <i>thuriya, bakharua moni, angathi, chipat, galpota</i>

29.	Two Clever People	Texture of this tale is Assamese.
30.	<i>Kanchani</i>	Mention of the weaving.

From this analysis of the folktales of *Burhi Air Sadhu* it is observed that these tales carry the aspects of cultural identity of the Assamese society on all the aspects such as social behaviour, dress pattern, rituals, food habits and the other aspects.

The core portion of greatest interest of the collection *Burhi Air Sadhu* is the profound preface of this collection. The preface to *Burhi Air Sadhu* is regarded as a masterpiece among the initial approaches to theoretical writings on folklore. This preface reflects the compiler's sole mission of rejuvenation the Assamese national identity. Here, he claimed that the uniqueness observed in the language and traditions of the folktales establish the fact that the Assamese language and culture have a separate identity from the other culture and language.

Conclusion

Folktales are a significant ingredient of traditional culture which carries distinctiveness of a nation's culture. These tales may help to foster unity and harmony among the people leading to the formation of identity of a nation. Bezbaruah was a true patriot serving his nation and nationality through his works. Though he spent a large part of his life outside his motherland and in close contact with culture of West Bengal, he never separated himself emotionally from his land and people. His *Burhi Air Sadhu* is an outcome of the Romantic Nationalism. He collected folktales as a project to preserve the culture to re-establish the Assamese identity recovering it from the grasp of British colonial rule and from the grasp of *Bangali* language. He realized that folktales not only can preserve but also can demonstrate the unique culture, history and identity that exist in the fertile soil of Assam. The folktale collection *Burhi Air Sadhu* with its priceless prefatory note was the outcome of his nationalistic enthusiasm and this enthusiasm was solely reflected in his preface to this folktale collection- *Burhi Air Sadhu*.

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Foot Notes

1. Grandma's Tale.
2. The History of the Assamese People.
3. The people of Myanmar, popularly known in Assam.
4. Ancient rulers of Assam who ruled the region for 600 years.
5. Language of the people of West-Bengal.
6. Grandpa and grandson.
7. In the preface Bezbaruah used the term 'folklore' for folktale.
8. Elephant Apple/*Dillenia indica*.