

ASSAM'S FOLK-LITERATURE

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The folk-literature of Assam is fairly rich and varied. A considerable amount of it has been recorded, and though the primitive character of an agricultural society is being now modified by political and technological changes and though the primary significance of some of the pre-Aryan ceremonials has been lost, many of the old songs and tales have survived, while Hinduism itself has inspired new compositions. Further, Assam has been the meeting ground of Aryan and non-Aryan modes of life and thought. This also has added material of considerable interest to the folk heritage of this part of India.

It is not possible to include here a list of the types of songs, sayings and tales that are current among the Assamese-speaking population as well as among the tribes. It will be possible to touch upon only a few of the salient features of an interesting subject. Let us first take the tales of the land. A large group of Assamese tales are either about tricksters or about animals. These are characterized by good humour and a sturdy outlook on life. A tale like 'Tejimala', about a girl murdered by her cruel stepmother and continuing to live in plant transformations, or 'Kamala Kuwari', a queen who is sacrificed to the Water God, has an old-world charm and evocativeness. The tale of 'Teja and Teji', in which Teji's mother is turned into a tortoise by her stepmother, carries us to that international group of tales of which the most well-known European specimen is 'Cinderella'.

Some of these tales have pan-Indian affiliations. A few of the tales about the tiger and the fox have close parallels in Santali-speaking or other areas. Take for instance 'Teacher Fox', in which a fox sets up a school to which are sent the children of the crocodile. Teacher Fox eats up the young crocodiles one after another and ultimately outwits the vengeful mother. In the Santali parallel 'The Jackal and the Crocodiles', the jackal is killed before it can eat up the fifth child of the crocodile. This tale, in fact, has versions all over northern India up to Punjab. In the Assamese tale 'Sister Chatimati', a brother and a sister gather fuel from the forest with a promise to the tiger that they would give it cakes that they are going to make. They, however, eat up the cakes and remain hidden in a rice-bin. The tiger carries off the rice-bin and, when they

let out wind, the beast leaves the bin and runs off in fright. In the Santali parallel 'Tipi and Tapa', it is the bear which is scared off in the same manner. Some of the Assamese tales can be traced back to old classics like the Jatakas and the Panchatantra. They are usually of a didactic nature.

The tribes possess many interesting myths. One of these explains why groups like the Garos, Abors or Nagas did not possess any script. An Angami tale which I recorded near Kohima goes like this : In olden times their ancestral old man asked his three sons : "What will you do for a living ? The eldest replied : "I will till the soil." The middle one replied : "I will be a writer." The youngest replied : "I will be a hunter." From the tiller of the soil were born the Angamis, the hunter disappeared into the forest, and the one who knew how to write became the ancestor of the Assamese. The myth tries to explain why they did not have any book-learning.

Of the songs, the Baramahi type has relationship with a similar type all over northern India. In the Baramahi song the twelve months, beginning from Aghon or Agrahayana, are described as a setting to the feelings of separation experienced by some young wife. Sometimes a young man proffers love to a young wife who avows her loyalty to her absent husband. In the end the young man reveals himself as her true husband and there is reconciliation. The rains are not an inspiration to the Assamese folk mind as they are in northern India, but in the Baramahi type one seems to find indications of the influence that the rainy season has on the mind of a lonely person.

Songs are of many types : lullabies, marriage songs, songs associated with the deities presiding over small-pox and paddy, philosophical songs, songs derived from Vaisnavite and Tantric sources, and also songs sung at the Springtime Bihu festival. There are also the ballads, romantic, historical, and even satirical. Then again, the same song may have regional variations. With the songs go, of course, melodies and tunes. The study of Assam's folk music is highly repaying.

Songs which are sung by womenfolk in the various stages of a marriage are often characterized by imaginative power and tenderness of feeling. Some of these songs describe the beauty of the bride, her loving relationship with the family, and the sorrow caused by her leave-taking, while others are a sort of commentary on the rituals performed in the marriage ceremony. The language of the songs is so homely, the imagery so tied down to local cultural asso-

ciations, that it is nearly impossible to convey in English the beauty and suggestiveness of the original. The following song describes how tender and inexperienced the bride is and how cruel it would be to put her to hard chores at her husband's :

Our maid is so tender,
she is just the sprout of a banana leaf,
she knows not how to tighten the knot of her skirt,
she does not know how to do up her hair.

She sways over her loom, makes wreaths on a plate,
our girlie knows only such work,
she cannot bear to hear words from others,
she keeps herself to herself.

In another song, after she is ceremonially bathed, the bride is supposed to ask : "Mother, what clothes am I to put on ?" The mother replies, "Such that dry in the shade and hide in the clasp."

Assam is the land of the handloom and many of these songs make references to spinning and weaving. The glory of Assam's folk-literature is the Bihu songs and these also set store by spinning and weaving. Bihunam or Bihu songs are primarily songs of yearning and of separation. These are light quatrains suited to the rhythm of the Springtime Bihu dance and are often sung antiphonally. The Bihu festival which welcomes the new year must have constituted at one time a sort of fertility cult, meant for the welfare of men, animals and crops, and also providing an occasion for young men and women to get together. Sociologically, it was a ceremony meant to regulate sexual relationship, by adding to itself the colouring of a sort of religion. The old beliefs have almost died out and the dance with its sexual characteristics has tended to get modified, but the songs which constituted a language of the heart and a means of expressing the joys of Springtime have survived, attracting even hardened critics by their manner of expressing various shades of emotion, by their imagery, and by their economy in the use of language. Some of these songs also reflect popular philosophy—the loneliness of man, sadness of life, the might of Fate.

The following Bihu songs describe beauty : and also yearning :

With your broad bosom and slim waist
none is your equal in beauty,
so frail is your waist
it sways as you walk.

A jacket suited to your body,
parted hair suited to your head,
a jewelled *keru* in your ear,
without sight of you
hardly a day can I pass,
how to pass a whole year ?

The bird is too young to fly,
it flutters back into its nest,
my darling is too young,
my mind goes back to her again and again.

There are hundreds of such songs and till now more than a thousand have been recorded. They throw considerable light on the social and even economic life of the people, though being lyrical, their prime concern is not so much with outward events as with feelings of the heart. It is amusing to note how the needs of the heart are sometimes linked up with facts of considerable social import, as in :

The Western Sahib went down to the West,
after drinking he threw away the bottle,
in spite of bullocks, in spite of buffaloes,
all is useless without a girl.

The motorcar roars away,
the letter speeds to Jorhat,
O dancer, what are you doing at your house,
to be dried and soaked in sun and shower !

That the capacity to dance and sing was a sign of merit as well as a means of attraction is evidenced in the songs. In fact, for a girl to be able to dance and sing and to weave was considered socially desirable. As the festival was participated in by most of the rural people this situation tended to indicate the level of artistic achievement possessed by the land. With the spread of modern education and the social mobility that has set in after Independence some of the features of the festival have tended to get modified. The old beliefs and customs have lost their vigour, new modes of dress and amusement are absorbing the mind of the youth, the old community life with faith in tradition as in elderly people has broken up. The Bihu, therefore, is now a festival of a different character. The dance and music is now confined to a small number of people who exhibit them for the benefit of a large number of onlookers. We have large festivals in towns, these have also been imitated in rural

areas, but the old ceremonial character seems to be disappearing from all of them.

Some of the tribes too possess songs akin to the Bihunam in spirit. For instance Miris of Upper Assam express in couplets the feelings of yearning characterizing the Bihu songs, while Rabhas of the Goalpara district have quatrains which also echo similar sentiments. Let us have one or two Rabha songs :

I see only flowers covering branches of trees,
all the world around, I see only you,
O my darling, for whom are you weaving ?

O dear, I am not weaving for anyone else,
it is in expectation of you that I am teasing cotton and
spinning, and it is with desire in my body for you
that I have taken up the weaving of a flowered chaddar.

The songs are antiphonal and the references that they make to spinning and weaving are to be noted.

Let us now pass on to another important type of folksongs—the ballad. Two of the longest ballads have as their staple magical incidents, thus linking them with the imaginative world of the folk-tale. The ballad 'Phulkowar' is made up of a ride on a magic horse and the transformation into the shape of a bumble-bee in order to enter the chamber of a princess. The ballad 'Janagabharu' similarly describes such incidents as the hero's throwing his adversary into the sky, the latter's body turning into trees and swamps and the winning of an Amazonian princess. Such magical incidents indicate that these ballads must have been composed in a fairly early period, though their language has gone on changing along with the change of times. Most of the Assamese ballads are recitative not sung as music, though a ballad like the historical 'Barphukanar Git' is said to have been chanted to the accompaniment of a stringed instrument.

'Barphukanar Git' is the longest historical ballad that we have and it describes the rivalry of two powerful grandees of the early part of the last century and how one of them in order to spite the other, had the Burmese invited into Assam. The depredations caused by the invaders are described in graphic language. To judge from the details recorded, the ballad must have been composed within living memory of the invasions. It lets us know that at one time there were minstrels who used to eke out their living by reciting ballads.

Let my lord give me a quarter-rupee,
I sing of the Barphukan,
it is my fortune
my lord I've met here.

A shorter ballad describes the sense of frustration felt by the people when Maniram Dewan, who had in 1857 made an attempt to organize a revolt against the British, was captured and hanged at Jorhat. There are also ballads describing the sorrows of the newly married girl who feels restive at the restraint put on her by her in-laws or whose husband leaves her to follow a sannyasi.

The ballad spirit is not as fertile as it had been, but current events inspire the folk poet even now. Ojha-pali dancers of the countryside, who recite scriptural narratives, very often extemporize and sing verses describing contemporary incidents. At one time they described the laying of railway lines. During the days of the nationalist movement they sang of Gandhi's efforts. These songs have not been recorded, but one comes on interesting fragments sometimes, as for instance, this song on Mahatma Gandhi :

This fellow says, that fellow says--
Let's have a look at Gandhi,
Friend, let's have a look at Gandhi,
If I stand on the embankment
I can have a glimpse of Gandhi,
Let's have our eyeful of Gandhi.

There is also a ballad describing a plane crash which occurred a few years ago near Gauhati.

The tribes also have their ballads, either mythical or describing incidents of a historical character. Here is a fragment from the Kacharis of northern Kamrup describing the exploits of one Bachiram who had to fight with some northern enemy :

Cut them into pieces, thrust your spear into them,
Brother Bachiram, the sun-faced !
Charge with your horse, lash it with the whip,
Speed up to the battle that is going on in the hills,
Let us cut them into pieces, let us thrust our spears into them,
Brother Bachiram, the sun-faced !

We have not many ballads of this heroic temper. After a torpor of a hundred and fifty years Assam has again come to have battle experience, and it is possible that the folk imagination may be again active in the creation of warlike songs and ballads. It is ultimately experience which shapes the creative urge.