

*Oral Tradition  
and Folk  
Heritage of  
North-east India*

*Lalit Kumar Barua*



This book is a critical and comprehensive account of the folklore of North-eastern India, describing the important features of myth, folktale, legend and the long narrative poem. It also discusses other intervening aspects, like traditional religion and ecology. It brings into focus for the first time, the shared tradition of history, linguistics, demography and the social mores of the tribal folk of the hills and the plains of Assam, as well as those of the neighbouring states. The effort is to understand the folk elements empirically, in the larger context of a constantly evolving relationship between folklore and the life of the community. This approach also helps one to understand the streams of culture that flow down the great Brahmaputra valley. It also brings to note that despite ethnic distinctions or different orientations in language and the traditional or the adopted religion, there is a common element in the heritage of folklore, in which, the oral tradition exercises a decisive influence.

The book co-relates and derives valuable insights from earlier studies as well as some very recent ones. In studying the tribal narrative tradition, the concern goes beyond grasping the living tradition of the tales, in order to indicate the dynamic situation in which the tales keep on changing according to exigencies.

Another significant feature of the book is a chapter on the distinctive qualities of tribal poetry pertaining to some representative tribes of the north-east. One can see poetry evolving separately from the narrative or the storytelling tradition. Tribal poetry, it has been carefully argued is marked both by spontaneity and a sense of craft.

While discussing ecological and social change impinging on the life of folklore, the writer has contended that the systems of tribal folklore are likely to develop creatively once social change overtakes the static societies. Ecology will remain a major determinant of this change in North-east India.

**ISBN 81-87502-02-9**



Lalit Kumar Barua (b. 1938) completed his education at the Gauhati and Delhi universities. He has authored four books including two in Assamese, which deal with literary and social criticism. He has also contributed to the *Encyclopedia of Indian Literature* (1989) published by the Sahitya Akademi and *Comparative Indian Literature* (1986) published by Macmillan and edited by Dr. K.M. George.

The present work *Oral Tradition and Folk Heritage of North-East India* has been undertaken by him while working as a Senior Fellow of the Department of Culture, Government of India.

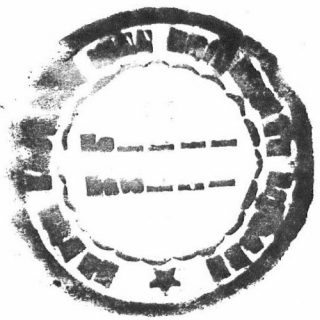
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**LALIT KUMAR BARUA**



**SPECTRUM PUBLICATIONS  
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# SPECTRUM PUBLICATIONS

- Hem Barua Road, Panbazar, GUWAHATI- 781001, Assam
- 298-B, Tagore Park Extn., Model Town I, DELHI- 110'009

## ORAL TRADITION AND FOLK HERITAGE OF NORTH EAST INDIA

**First Edition : 1999**

© Author

ISBN 81-87502-02-9

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*For My Mother*  
*Chandraprova Barua*  
*(1912–1995)*

## PREFACE

This is a book on folklore but with a difference. The theme here covers important aspects which have not received adequate attention so far despite their having a great deal of relevance to the problems of culture in general, and in the North-East specially.

There is no attempt here to reconstruct a socio anthropological paradigm for the entire region nor to arrive at theoretical formulations on the basis of the available information. The effort is to understand the folk element empirically in the larger context of a constantly evolving relationship between a living folklore system and the life of the community. One cannot account for change in that relationship without an awareness of the other related changes in the ecological and other modes of living in the community. Perhaps this process goes deeper in the tribal societies when they are called upon to adopt a higher religion. Such radical changes are reflected in the folklore, in the performing arts, in the song and the dance, and in the observance of the traditional rituals which form the basis of an entire belief system.

Some changes are indeed inevitable but one has to realize in the context of the cultural needs of the tribal communities that just conservation is not enough and one has to look beyond the archives to be able to understand the real creative potency of folklore in any tradition.

I am deeply obliged to all the writers and folklore scholars whose writings have been quoted here and in the notes this has been appropriately acknowledged.

I take this opportunity to thank Shri K. Kumar and the Spectrum Publications for undertaking to publish the book and for the whole hearted cooperation in this regard.

Guwahati

April 14, 1999.

Lalit Kumar Barua

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## INTRODUCTION

The North Eastern region of India comprising the seven states have for long shared certain common features in terms of their social and cultural history. The shared tradition in history, linguistics, demography and sociology cannot however ignore the fact that two or three broad streams of culture flow across the region evolving a kind of synthesis, which can still be seen and judged as a continuous process. There is a certain distinctiveness attached to each tradition, in relation to the tribes inhabiting the region, which inhere in their particular language, religion, custom or ethnicity.

While Assamese is an Indo-Aryan language Assam has a fair proportion of the tribes in the hills as well as in parts of the valley who speak dialects or languages that belong to the Tibeto-Burman family; the tribes differ from one another linguistically even though the ethnic distinction is not pronounced. The Khasi language, for instance, has an Austro-Asiatic lineage while the tribes of Arunachal Pradesh or Nagaland or of most of the other states of the North eastern region have a different linguistic orientation. The most important and common factor here is the heritage of folklore, in which naturally the oral tradition is quite over riding and decisive.

The importance of the oral tradition in folklore has a historical validity. Since the midnineteenth century folklore has been the collective name given to traditional verbal materials handed down primarily by word of mouth rather than in the written form. Folklore in the early stages always flourished in communities in which few could read or write. But it is a fact that as societies grow out of the pre-literate stages, their languages develop a written literature of their own and the folklore elements undergo a process of change due to various cultural factors. Folklore as a system in the broadest sense includes among other things, legends, superstitions, songs, tales, proverbs, riddles, spells, nursery rhymes, traditional lore about the weather, plant and animals, rituals at birth, marriage and death, dances and the performing arts associated with the ceremonies or community festivals. It may remain the same but may acquire new meanings and associations depending on the social circumstances in which communities live and on the variable conditions of ecology and environment they become subject to over a period of time.

Field studies of the folk and cultural resources of the north-eastern region are mainly of recent origin. Yet one does come across studies which provide valuable insights into the nature of this heritage in relation to Indian and world folklore. Tribal folklore of the region has been compiled and collated by scholars like Dr. Verrier Elwin and C. Haimendorf; even much earlier by Mills and Hutton who wrote a detailed account of the tribal myths; even the 19th century accounts of the tribes and their myths prove to be both relevant and useful even though these early writers did not have the advantage of a modern methodology.

Tribal folktale and the long narrative poem are the two genres which have received much attention now and are studied side by side with the tales and ballads of the valleys and here one does come across not only differences but also a striking correspondence between the two. One important feature of the tribal folk tradition is that it is almost entirely in verse, that is to say, verse which is also inseparable from the musical tunes through which the narrative, whether a ballad or a tale or a plain song is put across to the group or the community. A fuller understanding of the distinctive types of tribal folklore therefore demands not only a knowledge of the relevant language or the dialect but also of the particular tunes for unlike in the literate tradition of the valley there is no scope here to establish a direct contact with the creative word through the written medium. On the other hand, it is not surprising that in studying Assamese Folk literature, one does find the link between the oral narrative and the evolution of the story as a literary form. But here too the narrative often has strong associations with the tradition of singing in Assamese Folk literature. Most ballads did have this requirement and were initially meant to be sung to the accompaniment of music.

Myths and folk beliefs play a far greater part in the narrative tradition of tribal folk tales than in the non tribal Assamese tradition. Magic plays an important part in determining the life and beliefs of these communities. The rituals, fertility symbols and the folk tales are closely related to certain key words or chants or incantations and are woven round a number of myths describing the creation of the world, the origin of certain phenomena like sun or the moon, the eclipses and so on. Myths, therefore abound in the tribal folk tales while they are not generally to be found in the Assamese tales of the Brahmaputra valley. The female characters of ballads like the Tejimola perhaps have ancient origins in the older folklore but in the Assamese narrative, it is charged with a new meaning; the same can

be said of the development of the stepmother theme, a recurrent idea in Assamese folk tales as well as in Assamese folk literature as a whole.

When A.K. Ramanujan spoke of the 'changing lives of the Indian tales', the suggestive force of the statement implied not only a living tradition but something more; it indicated the dynamic situation of the tales in which they keep on changing according to the exigencies of the narrative tradition, the verbal requirements of language or creative speech in a particular context or simply by the very process of telling and retelling.<sup>1</sup> It is not surprising therefore that the origins of many of the folktales to be found in north-eastern India could be traced back to the *Jataka Panchatantra* or the *Mahabharata*.

A ballad technically is a song that tells a story. There are quite a few very significant ballads of Assam and Manipur which have attained a certain universality of appeal in their rendering of well known historical legends or romantic tales. In Manipuri folk literature, the tradition of minstrelsy has grown round the memorable saga of the love story involving Khamba, a young hero and Thoibi, the beautiful princess and this tragic but moving tale has become the most imaginative and compelling presentation of the beauty and majesty of the Meitei tradition. The Karbis and the Dimasas too have their ballads; the Dimasa ballad of *Dishru* and the Karbi ballad *Haimu* sound a deeply tragic note and whenever they are sung they continue to be very popular.

A tribal community has songs of another kind. It may not be a long narrative poem or a traditional ballad but could be a (a) love song (b) a dance song (c) a spiritual song in which too the text and the tune are equally important. In the love songs the lyrical element is often dominant, showing a kind of spontaneity which the other varieties seem to lack, and it is the result of a genuine exercise of the poetic imagination. This is evident in the love songs of some of the Naga tribes or of the Kuki tribe of Manipur and North Cachar Hills district of Assam.

The creative richness of tribal poetry cannot perhaps be fully understood through the grasp of a few images, motifs and ideas for it is a complex structure in which music has no mean role to play in bringing out the nuances inherent in the situation. A deeper knowledge of the language as well as ethnomusicological aspects can bring out their fuller import. The ethnic musical landscape forming the background of the

tribal cultural heritage of the country needs to be studied together with the varied patterns of language, rituals, customs and faiths for there is indeed a thread running through them.

The animal motif is very much evident in tribal folklore. It is significant that the love theme is also quite dominant in some of the stories. In Karbi and Mizo folktale traditions there are a large number of women centred stories. On the other hand one does not come across any elaborate creation myth in the Mizo folk tales. One kind of folk tale has been described as the wonder tale because of the predominance of romantic, imaginative or supernatural incidents; such type of tales in the tribal folklore closely resembles those in the Assamese; one can also refer to the element of the supernatural in the Mizo tale Raldawna and Tumchingi in this connection. We can recall here what an eminent folklorist has to say about these folktales in general:

"Few tales -- excepting perhaps mythological and etiological ones -- are the exclusive property of any particular community or language group. When people live together in the same geographical area and have close contact for centuries tales from one group tend to pass on to another group"<sup>2</sup>. Not surprisingly, the Assamese term for a tale or folktale is Sadhukatha which is derived from Sadhu (merchant) who was the most likely person to carry the tales across countries.

There is a link between the simple tribal folktale and the evolution of the tale as a literary form; there is a complex process in which the changes come about but the original elements do remain recognisable, giving force to the narrative.

It is also important that the folklore of Assam or for that matter, Manipur has evolved and profoundly influenced not only the performing arts but also the creative literature in the written form. It has in fact evolved with the evolution of society from the primitive mores to the present stage, coming through the process of transformation in which magic and superstition, and the rituals based on these two elements come to have less and less dominance. The particular situation of Assamese being an Indo-Aryan language has also given the folklore a different base even though change in the material circumstances of living including the existence of relatively free peasantry at the intermediate level is a crucial factor in determining the nature of this change. Assamese written literature is

richer for being continuously associated with folklore, which is no longer entirely oral. It is significant that the theme of the most popular Assamese ballads which inspired a creative flowering in the late nineteenth century has close affinity to the traditional songs of more ancient origin. Although there were suggestions of a magical belief in the earlier versions it is the creative core of meaning or their rich human content that has been developed in the later oral tradition.

The aim of the present study is not to look into the folklore resources of the North-East in totality. The adopted approach is not of a trained folklorist or that of a social anthropologist or a sociologist. In fact it also wants to promote an awareness of areas of concern, which the social historian or the environmentalist has drawn our attention to in recent times. For instance one of the areas being considered here is the way in which social change (including change in the means of production or mode of resource use) impinges upon the life of folklore. One comes to the conclusion that the systems of tribal folklore are likely to develop creatively and with it perhaps the notion of exclusive identities of the tribes themselves once social change overtakes the static societies. Ecology has been a major determinant in changing the agricultural more in the Brahmaputra Valley where the mighty river—a male river in the mythology—cuts through the middle of it, touching the very life and breath of the people. (Folklore is the most intrinsic part of that life connecting the past with the present and going into the future.)

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