

Relation of Co-wives in Assamese folktales

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Abstract

Folktales are the repository of the culture of a nation. One can find the different rituals, customs, traditions and pictures of the day to day life of the past period of a community. Folktales are the expressions of national life, autobiographies of nation. Like folktales of other regions, Assamese folktales also portray the culture and tradition of the Assamese people. Folktales portray the social system as well as family life of the Assamese people. Polygamy was common in ancient society. It created many problems in the society. One can look this issue through the light of folktales. Two Assamese tales: The Tale of Kite's Daughter and The Tale of Cat's Daughter will be taken into consideration. Both of the tales were taken from Buri Air Xadhu (Grandma's Tale) by Lakshminath Bezbaroa. The study of the story 'The Tale of Kite's Daughter' indicates that the story originated in Brahmanical society where a girl child's status is inferior to a boy child's status. The status of women in this society is inferior to men. Birth of a girl child is not easily accepted in this society. Giving the birth of a girl child is a crime for a woman. As the numbers of girl children increase, the crime becomes more serious. The rich potter does not have a son. Whenever his wife becomes pregnant, she delivers baby-girl. The potter's wife conceives again. This time the potter threatens his wife that if she gives birth to a daughter again, he will sell her to the Nagas. As the date of delivery approaches, she goes to her mother's place. She gives birth to a baby-girl again. She puts the baby in an earthen cooking pot, covers it with old clothes, puts a lid on it and floats it on the river. Suddenly a kite catches hold of baby from the pot and flies away. The kite keeps the baby in her nest on a tall tree and starts to bring her up. As the kite's daughter grows up, the kite gives her away in marriage with a rich merchant who already has seven wives. In The Tale of Cat's Daughter, the merchant meets a young girl crying on the bank of the river. She has lost her mother and elder sister. The girl needs console. But in such mental state, the merchant makes her his third wife. Both the stories represent a strongly patriarchal society. Polygamy was common in that society. The women folk didn't have any voice. Their position in the family was very transitory. If a wife would be loved by her husband today, she would have been neglected by him in future. Polygamy was followed by many evils and crimes in the society.

Key words: Co-wife, polygamy, folktale, society.

Introduction:

Folktales are the repository of the culture of a nation. One can find the different rituals, customs, traditions and pictures of the day to day life of the past period of a community. Folktale is a native story which originates from native culture and then passed on by word of mouth. Folktales are expressions of national life, autobiographies of nation. Folktales have been an eternal part of every community since ages. But oral tradition always gets reconstructed when the stories thread down from generation to generation. While retelling the stories the narrator would almost alter it according to his or her interpretation and target audience. Folktales were in oral form like other forms of folk literature. In India, folktales were collected during the colonial rule. Some British and Indian scholars started to collect the tales in colonial period. Growing of nationalism during the early twentieth century accelerated the collection of folktales. This is applicable in case of Assamese folktales also. Lakshminath Bezbaroa published his *Burhi Air Xadhu* in 1911. It was published in Assamese language. Since then Assamese folktales were started to be collected. But these collections are not yet in large number. Like folktales of other regions, Assamese folktales also portray the picture of the culture and tradition of the Assamese people. Polygamy was common in ancient society. It created many problems in the society. One can look this problem through the light of folktales. We take two folktales *The Tale of Kite's Daughter*ⁱ and *The Tale of Cat's Daughter*ⁱⁱ from *Buri Air Xadhu*.

In the narrative of the stories:

The Tale of Kite's Daughter: (Abridged)

There lives a rich potterⁱⁱⁱ with his wife. He does not have a son. Whenever his wife becomes pregnant, she delivers a baby-girl. The potter's wife conceives again. This time the potter threatens his wife that if she gives birth to a daughter again, he will sell her to the Nagas.^{iv} The wife becomes terrified. As the date of delivery approaches, she goes to her mother's place. Unfortunately she gives birth to a baby-girl again. She trembles in fear. She puts the baby in an earthen cooking pot, covers it with old clothes, puts a lid on it and floats it on the river. The pot drifts along the river. A washer man^v washing clothes notices the pot. He swims up to the pot and on opening the lid, sees the baby. He decides to adopt the baby. Suddenly a kite catches hold of the baby from the pot and flies away. She keeps the baby in her nest on a tall tree and starts to bring her up. Gradually, the girl grows up on the branch of the tree and in beauty she looks like a fairy. As the kite's daughter grows up, the kite gives her away in marriage with a rich merchant who already has seven wives. When she goes with her husband, the mother kite advises her to call her whenever she needs with the following words:

“The banana leaves dance in the breeze.

Mother Kite appear before me.”

The merchant brings the kite's daughter to his house and keeps her with love and care. On seeing her beauty, the other wives think that on finding such a beautiful wife, the merchant will be weary of them. Thinking so, the seven of them grow jealous of her and begin to inflict pain on her. They impose the domestic works on her to harass her. Her kite mother helps her out with magic to complete the works. The other wives come to know the secret of the completion of domestic works. So they kill the kite secretly. Kite's daughter wails out her several times but the kite doesn't appear. She understands the mystery. She cries bitterly. A few days later, the merchant gets ready to go for trade. At the time of departure, he cautions his seven wives not to cause sorrow to the kite's daughter and to take care of her. One day a trader brings various cosmetics and ties his boat at the merchant's landing place. The other wives of the merchant except the sixth one conspire to sell the kite's daughter to the trader. They insist her to buy goods from the trader. Under pretext of seeing the goods, they make her get into the boat. According to the plan, the trader suddenly unties the boat and goes away taking with him the kite's daughter. The trader takes her home and makes her the keeper of dried fish. Guarding the dried fish under the sun, kite's daughter wails out in this way:

“The potter's wife drifted me away,

Mother kite lifted me.

The prince of merchants married me.

His seven other wives sold me to a fish monger,

And he made me a keeper of dried fish.”

One day merchant goes upstream in his boat towards home by that way. Hearing the wail of the kite's daughter from distance, he stops his boat and goes to her. He hears every detail from her. He brings her home back. He takes a test of the seven wives about their involvement in selling the kite's daughter. He digs a deep pit and plants leafless thorny branches on it. He ties a fresh thread from one end of the pit to the other and says his seven wives to crawl from one end to another. The six wives fall into pit and die but the sixth wife can go across the thread. She does not know anything about the conspiracy. Finally the merchant settles in peace and happiness with the kite's daughter and his sixth wife.

The Tale of Cat's Daughter: (Abridged)

A family has a pet cat. She is about to deliver kittens. The lady of the house is also pregnant. As the cat expresses its desire to eat fish, the mistress asks her to bring fish. Hearing this, the cat brings fish every day from other people's house by stealing or by force. The mistress cooks fish and gives the cat the bones of fish. The cat is deprived of fish. She curses the mistress, "Whatever my womb is bearing, let it go to her and whatever her womb is bearing let it come to me." After few days, the mistress gives birth to two kittens while the cat gives birth to two baby-girls. She goes out in search of fish, milk and other eatables and thus brings up the two girls with great affection. As the two girls grow up, they become concerned about their mother. One day ask the cat, "Mother, if someone kills you while going to the village, how will we come to know and what should we do?"

The cat plants a basil sapling and places round earthen vessel containing milk and says, "If someone kills me, then this plant will wither and the milk in the vessel will turn black. Then you go out in search of me."

A few days later, the plant withers and the milk in the vessel turns black. They go out in search of their mother. On their way, the younger sister feels thirsty. They reach a river. Leaving her sister on the bank, the elder sister descends to bring water. After quenching her thirst, she goes to collect water, the water dries up and the prince of the river says, "If you hand over your ring to me, then you can only take some water." She gives the ring and collects water. After drinking water, the younger sister sends her to bring back the ring. As soon as she descends to river, the prince of the river takes her away. The younger one cries aloud. A merchant coming along the river takes her away in his boat and marries her. He accords her the status of his third wife. The merchant showers more affection on his newly-wed tender aged wife. Out of jealousy, the two elder wives begin to think of ways to make their husband hate his third wife. On the ceremonial function on the occasion of the child birth of the third wife's first child, the other two blindfold her. They say that she begets a pestle and float the new-born boy-baby on the river. Next time too, they lie that she begets a pumpkin and make the boy baby to drift along the river. The elder sister comes to know that the babies belong to her younger sister. She brings them to her. The merchant thinks these incidents of birth to be true and considers the youngest wife a cursed woman. He drives her out of his house and builds a hut for her in the backyard. She lives at that hut in sorrow. One day the merchant ventures out in business. The river prince seizes of his boat in the mid-stream. The merchant is unable to free the boat by any means. He thinks what to do. Someone says from water, "If you want boat to be released, fix a date to hold a religious function and leave your handkerchief and walking stick."

Finding no alternative, the merchant fixes a date to hold community worship of Lord Vishnu, and drops his handkerchief and walking-stick. As soon he does it, the boat gets free. On the other hand, the aunt narrates to the boys the incidents right from the birth of their mother from a cat's womb to their desertion in the river. She asks them to relate the story of their life to the people who will assemble in the religious function that will be held by their father. On the day of the function, the boys start for the merchant's house along with the walking stick and the handkerchief. At first they go to their mother and introduce themselves to her. When they enter the religious function, the gathering asks them to introduce themselves. They say that the woman who resides in the backyard is their mother. The elder brother relates everything in detail and shows both the walking-stick and handkerchief as the proof of his statement. All the people understood the conspiracy of the other two wives of the merchant. The merchant chops off the noses and ears of his evil wives and drives them out. He brings his two sons and youngest wife home and lives in happily.

Discussion:

In the *Kite's Daughter*, the potter threatens his wife that if she gives birth of another daughter, he will sell her to the Nagas. The story indicates that it is the story originated in Brahmanical society where a girl child is not of equal status to a boy. Assam is a land of different ethnic group. Most of these ethnic groups are Tibeto Burmese/ Sino Tibeto origin. Still today, women have better social status than rest of India. But Assamese people of non tribal origin have come under the Brahmanical^{vi} social system far earlier. The status of women in this society is not equal to that of tribal society. Birth of a girl child is not easily accepted in this society. When the number of girl child increases, it becomes almost a crime for a woman. So the potter behaves such. In Brahmanical society a daughter is not authorized to perform the rites of dead parents. So the people want at least one son. Sons are also wanted because a son can retain the occupation of father in the caste divided society.

In *The Tale of Cat's Daughter*, the merchant meets a young girl crying on the bank of the river. She has lost her mother and elder sister. The girl needs to be consoling. But in such mental state, the merchant makes her his third wife. In patriarchal system, a girl's mental condition gets no importance. On the other hand, a woman cannot be sure about her position as a wife. At any moment, the husband may bring another wife who will be dear to the husband. In such case the husband will neglect his earlier wife or wives. In this story the merchant showers more affection on his newly-wed tender aged wife than his other two wives. Naturally the other wives will be jealous of the fortune of the cat's daughter. They are deprived of their rights. In a society where a wife cannot protest her husband when he wishes to bring another wife, will search the way to express her annoyance. In this case co-wife will be her target. In this story the elder two wives try to make their husband hate his third wife and they become successful. He considers the youngest

wife a cursed woman. It is the same person who showers more affection on his youngest wife than his other wives drives her out of his house. He builds a hut in the backyard for her. When the merchant understands the conspiracy of the elder two wives, he chops off their noses and ears and drives them out. He brings his sons and youngest wife home and lives in peace. The husband has the right to drive out of his house or bring her home whenever he wishes. He can love or chop off his wife's nose and ears whenever wishes. When the husband brings back the youngest wife home but there is no mention in the story of the wife's mental state at that moment. Husband does not dare her dignity or emotion. He lives in peace after bringing the sons and wife. But no mention of wife's mental peace and happiness are there in the story because these aren't important issues in patriarchal social system.

Conclusion: Both the stories represent a strongly patriarchal society. Polygamy was common in that society. The women folk didn't have any voice. Their position in the family was very transitory. If a wife would be loved by her husband at present, she would have been neglected the next day. Polygamy was followed by many evils and crimes in family life. A woman cannot part her own space with another woman. It is obvious that a woman cannot tolerate her co-wife. Naturally the neglected wife will try her best for her right. She cannot fight against her husband. Naturally she will find another way to get her right position. So she targets her co-wife who is loved by her husband.

Notes and References:

ⁱ Barua, Pallavi: *Grandma's Tales*, Translation of *Buri Aair Sadhu* by Lakshminath Bezbaroa, p. 1-4, 2nd edition, Guwahati, 2011.

ⁱⁱ Ibid, p. 66-73.

ⁱⁱⁱ Indian Hindu society is divided into four castes. From higher to lower, the four castes are: Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra. Potter (Kumbhakar) community is of the lowest caste i.e. Shudra.

^{iv} The Naga is an umbrella term for a number of indigenous tribes that reside in Northeast Indian states Nagaland, Manipur, Assam, Arunachal Pradesh and Manipur.

^v Washer man (Dhoba, Dhobi,Rajaka) community is of the lowest caste i.e. Shudra.

^{vi} Brahmanical Society is a society that originated from the tradition of the ancient Vedic religion. This is based on the caste hierarchies of the Brahmin class. Though it originated from the Vedic religion, but it adopted variety of practices, rituals and cultures.