

Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

16 YEARS OF OPEN ACCESS

VOL. 16 ISSUE-1, FEBRUARY 2025

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ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

www.galaxyimrj.com

The Rabha Community of North Bengal

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<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14974004>

Article History: Submitted-31/01/2025, Revised-06/02/2025, Accepted-22/02/2025, Published-28/02/2025.

Abstract:

According to Barmahalia, folktales spread ethnicity and identity worldwide. Scholars and folklorists disagree on the meaning of folklore, although they agree that it relates to oral literature passed down through generations. Folktales include narratives, songs, rites, festivals, folklore, and practices passed down through generations. Rabhas are one of several ethnic and racial groups, and their mythology shapes their identity. Rabha folklore is rooted in history and culture. They differ from other ethnic groups in customs, nutrition, religion, social behaviour, and psychology. This paper will help us comprehend their lives, folktales, mythology, and culture. The study investigates how folktales contribute to their culture. By exploring some of their folktales, we hope to get insight into their mythology and society. Folktales shape society and help the community find its identity and progress. Their cultural, mythical, and ceremonial beliefs sometimes contradict tribal resiliency (Chakraborty, "Martial to Musical," 80). People become resourceful and empowered (Chakraborty 80).

Keywords: Rabha ethnic tribe, folktales, myths, North Bengal tribes.

Folktales embraces almost all facets of our existence. It is ubiquitous in our daily existence. Its existence in conversation is undeniable, manifesting in riddles, jokes, games, dance, and song. Folktale is vital in any examination of human existence, encompassing anthropology, history, linguistics, and literature. Folklorists have consistently endeavoured to collect, conserve, and record the historical narratives of their region. Unlike the esteemed classical arts, sometimes considered elite, folklore has always been associated with the unrefined, ignorant, and uncivilised populace. Academics have historically believed that folklore is transmitted orally through informal means. They contend that because to its predominantly verbal nature, folklore can exhibit significant variability across different instances of communication. Folktales inherently praise variety. The folktales of tribal societies consistently link humanity and environment into a cohesive worldview. It amalgamates the live with the inanimate, the past with the present, and deceased entities with the living. This activity can elucidate profound insights regarding the values, beliefs, history, practices, and customs of another culture via the exploration of narratives from diverse civilisations. Consequently, folklore is ever evolving and inherently dynamic. Folklore often exhibits inconsistency. Folklore maintains established and conventional cultural values. Folklore is described as the examination, dissemination, and perpetuation of cultural practices within any culture or community, regardless of regional or national attributes. It encompasses all information transmitted orally, along with all arts and practices inherited from one generation to the next. Folklore studies have become a significant discipline. This research will enable an examination of scholarly articles and literature that will evaluate and address enquiries on the folktales and culture of North Bengal's indigenous tribes: the Rabhas. It will also examine the tribes through the perspective of unique indigenous queer narratives, among other aspects. This will be illustrated via various folktales and myths,

demonstrating how they facilitate the exploration of a culture's past and enrich its cultural context.

Folktales serve a crucial function in disseminating concepts of ethnicity and identity globally (Barmahalia 177). Folktales serve to glorify the past and present of communities worldwide in contemporary contexts (177). Tribal folklore must be analysed from the perspective of the tribal community as the creator, consumer, and transmitter of their narratives. The oral tradition in tribal societies serves to fulfil their socio-creative needs, thereby validating and perpetuating their wisdom and knowledge over time. The process evolves over time and space while preserving values and customs within oral tradition. Thus, it is inherently contextual and resides within the individual as a form of social memory (Mishra 51). The potential of folktales to enhance the cultural backdrop of the ethnic tribes of North Bengal remains a pertinent question. This study will explore and analyse the cultural beliefs of the Rabhas. Their origins are associated with various myths, which are conveyed through folktales that are widely known and shared. These narratives persist through the storytelling traditions of elders to their children. Folktales serve as a mechanism for instigating change and facilitating community advancement in the process of self-discovery.

The tribal folktales emphasise their culture, myth, and rituals. The central question of the article is how the oral tradition can be analysed from the mythical and cultural point of view. In tribal societies, the establishment of oral traditions is a component of their socio-creative impulse, which is intended to authenticate and preserve their wisdom and knowledge over time. While maintaining the values and rituals of oral tradition as a foundation, it is a process that develops over time and space. Whether folktales can contribute to the improvement of the cultural backgrounds of the ethnic communities of North Bengal is the subject of the discussion. It will endeavour to investigate and comprehend the diverse cultural beliefs of the Rabha people.

Folktales are employed as a means to achieve these objectives and facilitate the community's progress towards self-discovery.

This holds true for all of the numerous texts and journals that have been studied in this regard, as traditions or tales from another culture or group should be viewed through the lens of that culture or group.

The Rabha tribe, included in the Scheduled Tribes list of the Constitution of India, is of Tibetan-Burma heritage. These individuals are predominantly located in lower Assam and several districts of the East Garo Hills, as well as in the districts of Sivasagar, Lakhimpur, Darrang, West Bengal, Cochbehar, and Jalpaiguri, among others. The family system initially adhered to a matriarchal structure, but it has now transitioned to a patriarchal form. Their societal structure is entirely governed by a democratic government. Both Rabha men and women participate in agriculture, fishing, and other activities. The Rabha Tribe is primarily segmented into eight clans: Rongdani, Maaitori, Pati, Dahori, Bitoliya, Tutla, Shunga, and Hama.

It is undeniable that the Rabhas are a distinct population due to their unique culture and language. It is illogical to assert that a Kachri can become a Rabha by converting to Hinduism or spreading the faith, or that the Rabhas are somehow connected to the Garos. Diverse hypotheses and concepts regarding the origins of the Rabhas are held by various experts. Nevertheless, their cultural affiliations render them a component of the renowned Mongolian lineage. The Rabhas' traditional lifestyle is characterised by weaving, forest activities, and cultivation. In the past, the Rabhas engaged in change cultivation. It continued to expand with the addition of "Gogo" or "bill-hook." Subsequently, they assumed responsibility for stable farming and initiated the practice of cultivating crops with a plough. In addition to cultivation, the Rabha people engaged in hunting. Rabha women were frequently employed in the weaving industry. The Rajbansis' society has been significantly impacted by the Rabhas, as they reside in the vicinity of Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar. It was believed that the Rajbansis would be more

successful in the social circles of North Bengal. It was only natural that the Rabhas endeavoured to elevate their social status. Women had positions of authority in Rabha society. Traditionally, at birth, they would receive the “gotra” of their mother.

The culture of the Rabha people is the foundation of their myths and stories. Every narrative possesses a distinct ensemble of people, with some adhering to a serial framework. You can listen to certain stories continuously for up to three days and nights. The origins of Rabha literature: Rabha has a rich tradition of folk writing. Folk music, storytelling, folklore, chamars associated with religious festivals and performances, myths, idioms, and proverbs may still be found among the Rabhas today. It is vital to remember the year 1900 A.D. while considering the written movement of Rabha literature. At the turn of the century, a religious book named “Markani Nima Saikai” was released. It was translated into Rongadani dialect from the Gospel of Mark in the original Holy Bible. This book established the written tradition of Rabha literature. Among Rabha’s documented traditions, it was most likely the earliest.

Story constitutes a significant component of folk literature. While literature often overlooks the significance of stories, they hold considerable importance in sociological studies. The narratives lack a fixed structure; the storyteller favours his own representation during the narration. The narratives of the Rabha Tribe are primarily rooted in their cultural heritage. The characters possess distinct names, and the structure of certain narratives adheres to a serial pattern. Certain narratives can be recounted for a duration of up to three days and nights. (Rajen Rabha, Rabha Sadhu, p. 7). The Rabha folk literature is characterised by a wealth of narratives, including the tales of chaste Dyumkochi, Kumbai-Chung, Jaglang Memang, Nolua-Cholua, Thope Nesar, Moira-Moiry, Randana-Chandana, Toshrai Raju Nalong, Nirmali-Nirbani, Biskorom-Alikorom, and Too-Maikoona-Ne, among others. Some stories among them discuss the creation of natural resources such as mountains and rivers.

The Lazy Gallant: A Rabha folktale

The youngest brother in The Lazy Gallant is unfairly portrayed as weak and unmanly due to his preference for “feminine” activities such as napping, playing dotara, and capturing little birds over what the adults view as “manly” chores like woodcutting and cow husbandry. A Koch village was home to six brothers. The youngest brother was the most slothful of the six siblings, who were all very hard-working. During the day, he would stay asleep. Evenings were spent mindlessly hunting birds or practicing his two-stringed dotara instrument; he couldn’t eat rice without meat.

His inability to hunt anything larger than a handful of tiny animals led to his nickname, “the lazy-gallant,” which he earned in joke. Household chores like cooking and weaving were carried out by the wives, while the five brothers were entrusted with the physical labour of chopping logs and tending to animals. It was the lazy-gallant who greatly angered the five brothers and four wives. Only the oldest sister-in-law showed signs of extreme tenderness. She wove him clothes and gave him most of the rice and meat on a daily basis.

The elder brothers tried everything to perk him up, but to no avail. After much deliberation, they decided it was best to get rid of him rather than keep serving the most meat with no results. He was going to be stabbed by them after dinner that night. While plotting his next move, he warned the slacker not to use his bed. He had his own bedroom, where he would sleep with a blanket over his bed and a hug pillow. After sneaking into the room of their youngest brother, the five brothers began to rip the pillow to shreds.

They went to sleep believing the laziest gallant had died. When they found their little brother alive the next day, they were very shocked. It was the eldest sister-in-law who saved his life. But the slack-jawed young man’s oldest sister-in-law suggested he stay the night in the barn.

She covered his bed with a sheet after placing bricks and stones on it. The elder brothers hit the stones and blocks with their swords, assuming that it was their little sibling. The wife of the eldest brother suggested that the slothful gallant not come back to the house for a few days the next morning. He entered the jungle with his dotara, clothing, and a limited quantity of nourishment that had been supplied by his eldest sister-in-law. Throughout the day, he persisted in playing his dotara. When night fell, he felt a hand on his shoulder. A beautiful young woman was sitting behind him when he returned. The young woman presented herself as a princess who had to run away from her home because her stepmother had a murderous plot. The mesmerising melodies of his dotara enchanted her during the procedure. She even went so far as to propose marriage to the girl.

They were wed and managed to get by for a few days without working as they had the food that the wife of the eldest brother had brought. All the food was gone in no time. In order to get assistance, the slothful gallant requested that his wife see his oldest sister-in-law. The oldest brother's wife was quite thrilled to meet the wife of the lazy-gallant. She told the youngest brother's wife to fire the forest and scatter the corn and rice seeds that she had packed and handed to the princess. Her instruction in jhum cultivation brought eternal happiness to the lazy-gallant and his wife.

The youngest brother's dependence on women, particularly his sister-in-law and wife, for physical and emotional support illustrates his portrayal as a diminished male, perceived as lacking masculinity by the invaders. This sixth brother of Rabha demonstrates a tribal nonconformity that does not view manliness as inherently opposed to femininity. The skills related to playing a dotara, regarded as unproductive and insignificant by non-indigenous settlers, stand in stark contrast to the youngest brother's eventual success as a wealthy individual, married to a princess and enjoying abundant harvests. This folktale underscores the importance of Rabha genderfluid skills, emphasising their relevance in contrast to the newly

formed social hierarchies established by immigrants. The boy's proficiency in playing the dotara, initially perceived as a sign of laziness, ultimately enhances his interaction with the princess, providing him with a form of agency derived from his musical talent.

A Tale about Buying a Song: A Rabha Folktale

Two siblings Shilmon and Tulmon inhabited a village. Both individuals were married and lived in distinct residences. The oldest brother Shilmon made a meagre income by labouring on others' land throughout the day.

The youth subsisted by singing and soliciting alms. Tulmon and his wife, however, were comfortable with their impoverished circumstances and lived happily. The elder brother's spouse was dissatisfied to find the younger sibling living comfortably in the company of his wife. She often articulated her discontent: "Tulmon is maintained with remarkable ease through singing."

His wife is also satisfied. She says, "although my husband works three times a day, he does not buy me a saree. He is a man of significant despair."

The oldest brother displayed a candid and unsophisticated demeanour. Following his wife's comments, he underwent considerable grief. Upon reflection, he said, "Alright, I shall relocate to the town tomorrow to get a song. Consequently, I will also produce substantial revenue by singing. I shall guarantee your contentment through monetary resources."

On the subsequent day, Shilmon left for the town to get a song. Before leaving the apartment, he took all the money he had accumulated. He met a man throughout his travels. He demonstrated significant cleverness.

The guy asked Shilmon, "Where are you headed?"

Shilmon said, "I inhabit that village" and further added

“despite my arduous efforts throughout the day, my profits are inadequate to acquire a saree for my wife. Consequently, I shall proceed to the town to get a song.”

The man abruptly stated, “Acquire a song!” He promptly identified Shilmon’s inherent folly and naivety. He is prone to dishonesty. He then enquired, “Why will you undertake the journey to town solely to acquire a song?” I will instruct you in singing here. Shilmon endorsed the initiative, declaring, “It is commendable.” Will you provide me with singing instruction here? It is permissible, therefore. In that circumstance, I do not require a trip to the town.

The guy enquired, “What sum do you possess to acquire a song?” “Kindly furnish the complete sum.” Shilmon promptly collected the intact currency and conveyed it to the individual. After collecting the money, the man suggested that Shilmon visit a place for singing lessons. They situated themselves under a tree next to a river. The guy initiated: Capture them. This is the conclusion.

Apprehend him.

Cane field, cane field, cane field.

Apprehend him.

Cane woodland, cane forest, cane jungle.

Apprehend him.

Criminals were hiding there with embezzled assets. The folks listened to the music, left the money, and then departed the place. Shilmon unearthed the money and thereafter had a gratifying life with his wife.

Shilmon’s wife’s inclination for a spouse who generates income through singing rather than manual employment exemplifies a want to subvert traditional conventions. This indicates a

desire to surpass the constraints of everyday existence and to partake in actions that challenge conventional categorisations (Chakraborty, ix). Shilmon's involvement with music, comically illustrated by his seemingly erroneous attempt to further his talents through the acquisition of singing skills, finally leads to his accumulation of adequate cash to appease his dissatisfied wife. Shilmon's imposed good fortune by coincidence clearly reflects the tribal man's persistent connection to musical abilities, which are sometimes disparaged as unmasculine by non-indigenous outsiders. So there are many such tales that enhance our knowledge about the Rabha folktales.

A people's traditional literature reveals their authentic culture. The folk literature of the Rabha tribe is extensive and valuable. Folk literature has been there since the beginning of time, evolving and passing down information from generation to generation. However, due to a lack of investigation and study, many of these works are in danger of becoming extinct. Keep them safe since they are really valuable right now. This goal is the basis for my discussion. What we call "folk literature" are the timeless accounts and artistic representations of folk wisdom. Happiness, sadness, pleasure, grief, hope, ambitions, and all the other human emotions. Folk literature reflects both societal imagery and different nature pictures. The lore of a people is preserved in their collective memories.

The people living in the countryside have passed down many tales, proverbs, songs, poetry, charms, riddles, and other forms of oral tradition.

In folk literature, qualities such as melody, universality, simplicity and natural presentation of subject matter, exaggeration, era-impartiality, and density of passion and sentiments abound. The folk literature acts as a mirror, reflecting the true essence of folk culture. A clearer picture of the passage of time emerged in the folk literature. The sentiments evoked in the rational beings by the knowledge that they resided in an aesthetically pleasing and diverse natural

environment may give rise to distinctive melodies, enchantments, etc. Aside from religious and social practices and programs, purification, and the like, the prevalent songs, verses, proverbs, and stories of the people who remained untouched by outside civilisation or culture provide a clear picture of the folk art that existed among them. So, folk literature is the type of literature that has been passed down through generations in this manner.

The idea of folk literature has been referred to by a variety of names. William Richard Bascon frequently referred to folk literature by a variety of names, including popular, mass, ancient, oral, and unwritten literature. Page 67 of W.R. Bascon's Contributions to Folkloristic Folk society, or an ethnic community, provides the setting for the introduction of folk literature. Every class of people's joys and sorrows, hopes and despairs, proverbs and similes, stories and examples, and so on may be understood via a nation's literature. The folk literature is vivid not only because of the folk society but also because of the descriptions of many natural components, such as rivers, streams, fruits, flowers, trees, hills, plains, birds, and so on. The folk society serves as the foundation for the invention, growth, and development of folk literature. Folk literature is created by certain skilled individuals from rural backgrounds. It is disseminated and augmented by *Sruti* (that which is heard) and *Smriti* (that which is remembered). Culture constitutes the identity of a nation. The cultural legacy of a nation is manifested in its traditions. However, owing to the passage of time, the invaluable elements of folk culture are on the verge of extinction. Therefore, it is essential that these be protected. An attempt is made here about the preservation of these documents.

Change is inevitable in society. The Rabha tribe is not an exception to this rule. It is entirely reasonable that the tradition may undergo a transformation as time progresses, and there may be an element of pressure to ensure its transmission. Nevertheless, it is imperative that all individuals exercise caution to ensure that the primary foundation of the tradition is not compromised by any modifications or transmissions. Everyone can comprehend that the Rabha

tribe's ancient cultural identity can only be preserved by their own tradition. Yet, the impact on them is evident. The youthful generation is experiencing a significant amount of scepticism as a result of the impact of globalisation, modern education, and Western civilisation.

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