

**STORIES BY THE FIRE  
ON A WINTER EVENING:  
ASSAMESE FOLK TALES  
READ AND RE-TOLD**

—

**CHANDRICA BARUA**





ZUBAAN

128 B Shahpur Jat, 1st floor

NEW DELHI 110 049

EMAIL: [contact@zubaanbooks.com](mailto:contact@zubaanbooks.com)

WEBSITE: [www.zubaanbooks.com](http://www.zubaanbooks.com)

Published by Zubaan Publishers Pvt. Ltd 2020

In collaboration with the Sasakawa Peace Foundation



*All rights reserved*

Zubaan is an independent feminist publishing house based in New Delhi with a strong academic and general list. It was set up as an imprint of India's first feminist publishing house, Kali for Women, and carries forward Kali's tradition of publishing world quality books to high editorial and production standards. *Zubaan* means tongue, voice, language, speech in Hindustani. Zubaan publishes in the areas of the humanities, social sciences, as well as in fiction, general non-fiction, and books for children and young adults under its Young Zubaan imprint.

Typeset in Arno Pro 11/13

# STORIES BY THE FIRE ON A WINTER EVENING: ASSAMESE FOLK TALES READ AND RE-TOLD



*Thank you for giving me roots  
Thank you for giving me wings*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I had started out wanting to write an academic paper focusing on the historicity of the genre of folklore and children's literature, but as I re-read the stories of my childhood, my project took on a very different thematic purpose. I remember the August workshop in Guwahati with my colleagues on this journey when Urvashi Butalia told me that the Research Grant encourages intimate ways of thinking and studies that are personal rather than academic. Hence, I decided to re-tell some of the Assamese folk tales as I would like to read them to children today.

I would like to thank the whole team at Zubaan Books, New Delhi, India and the Sasakawa Peace Foundation, Japan for granting me this incredible opportunity which is not only a professional achievement but also a deeply personal one. In particular, I am grateful to Bidisha Mahanta and Karuna Menon for closely working with us through this journey. I would also like to thank the resource panel Rashmi Narzary, Anjulika Samom, A. S. Pannersevan and Dolly Kikon for their guidance and wisdom and my reviewer Roshmi Goswami for her insights of my writing.

Lastly, I would like to thank my beloved grandparents, my *Koka* and *Aita*, for giving me all the stories.

# 1

## LAKSHMINATH BEZBARUA'S COLLECTION OF FOLKLORE: WHY RE-TELL ASSAMESE FOLK TALES?



Lakshminath Bezbarua's collection of stories for children—*Burhi Aai'r Xadhu* (*Old Mother's Tales*) and *Koka-deuta aru Naati-lora* (*Grandfather and Grandson*)—have been the most popular children's writings in Assam since they were published in Colonial Assam (1826–1947) in 1911 and 1912 respectively. Bezbarua collected these folk tales written for children with the intention of instructing and delighting them. In the introduction to *Burhi Aai'r Xadhu*, Bezbarua talks about the moral dimensions of Assamese folk tales, analysing the word *Xadhu-katha* (Assamese word for folk tale), which may be interpreted as a 'moral story', as *xadhu/sadhu* also refers to a wise and moral human being. Bezbarua's introduction is clearly infused with a spirit of Assamese nationalism where he expresses his belief that folk tales, like languages, are the repository of a nation's traditional values

and that a study of folklore is as important as a study of philology. He asserts that the *xadhu-kathas* or the folk tales are central to Assamese culture, and they enjoy an elevated status in Assamese culture as compared to other cultures. A folk tale preserves rites, rituals, values, customs and a composite biography of the concerned community. As such, folklore mirrors society, and folklore aimed at children also pushes the agenda of maintaining society as it is. Of course, Bezbarua's stories also challenge society and expose social evils. The Assamese folk tale genre is rich with trickster tales which are often political and social satires. *Gangatoup* and *Latkon* are some examples of such tales which criticise issues like monarchical oppression, the tyranny of priests and superstition among people. The stories are set in a rural countryside and Bezbarua uses numerous socio-cultural references which make the stories uniquely Assamese. Some of these referents are plot points involving fish, food preparations that are unique to Assam such as *tenga* and *aanza* (sour curries usually served with fish), Bihu-related plot lines and clothes and paraphernalia unique to Assam such as *gamusa*, *sula*, *suriya*, *mekhela* and *riha*.

As the title states, in *Burhi Aai'r Xadhu* the narrator is a woman, and it references a tradition sustained and fostered by women. As middle-class male reformers strove to maintain both material and spiritual grounds of patriarchy and hierarchies the emphasis was on women as carriers of tradition and cultural memory, as preservers of the spiritual essence of 'Indianness'. Reinforced by history, myths and the media, the 'imagined' and the 'invented' images of womanhood as visual cultural symbols gradually become perceived reality in a continuous process of making and re-making in keeping with the compulsions of the colonial period. Bezbarua emphasises the pedagogic importance of imparting human values and righteousness in the narration of a *xadhu-katha*, 'The meaning of *xadhu katha* is the righteous narration or the sayings of the wise and the saintly, a fact recognized by the Assamese since the long past. This makes it clear that these tales were used by the wise and the aged to spread the knowledge of righteousness and the values of a moral and honest life' (Bezbarua 1999: 3). A.K. Ramanujan

(1994) puts forward the notion of ‘gender bing genre’ and locates its significance in folkloristica. Narratives with women at the centre of the action are expected to be subversive spaces that provide women with alternative creative and articulative spaces. However, women’s stories run parallel to established myths held sacrosanct by society. Thus, very often such alternative spaces are mythical and women-centred tales which are supposed to elevate them, but instead end up reinforcing patriarchy-generated restrictive structures by putting in place ‘golden chains’ that confine them to domesticity. Bezbarua co-opted women to valorise a distinct Assamese cultural and national identity. In a nationalistic agenda, the feminine was the embodiment of virtues like religiosity, submission and self-sacrifice and any deviation is an aberration. Women were in charge of the home and the hearth, and further social education of the progeny depended on the merits of their upbringing.

Though early documentation of culture is largely a ‘male’ affair, the transmission and sustenance of the tales was the prerogative of the ‘female’. Although, in *Burhi Aa’ir Xadhu*, while 11 of the tales are directly related to the world of women, it is surprising to note that in his preface, Bezbarua only acknowledges male informants thereby giving substance to one of the most repeated reservations held by feminist scholars against early collections that ‘when a collector had a choice between a story told by a man or as told by a woman, the man’s version was chosen’ (Jordan and Caro 1986: 501). *Koka-deuta* explicitly establishes the moralising grandfather figure with short snippets of interactions between the grandfather and his grandson at the beginning of each story. The grandfather uses the grandson’s interest in listening to stories to instil ‘good’ behaviour by withholding stories if the grandson does not act in a particular manner. In *Burhi Aai’r Xadhu*, the focus is more on affairs of the home and family, while *Koka-deuta aru Naati-lora* has stories dealing with affairs of the state and politics. In a similar vein, most of the trickster and animal tales, which primarily have an adventure or a heist theme have male protagonists.

As I re-read *Burhi Aai'r Xadhu* and *Koka-deuta aru naati-lora*, I started thinking about how these stories would be received by a child today. Many of the plot points which were taken for granted back then are anachronistic and politically incorrect. For example, the frequent storyline of a man being in a polygamous marriage with two or more wives. Often in the stories, a new young wife is brought into the household which leads to internal conflict and jealousy, as the wives fight it out for the position of the *laagi* (favoured) wife. There are depictions of intense rivalries between co-wives and jealousy and hatred of the stepmother towards the children by a previous wife. A happy ending for a female character is often depicted as her marriage with a rich man and her consequent ascendancy to the status of a *laagi* wife. *Champawati* is one such tale where there are two wives, a *laagi* and an *elaagi*. The *laagi* receives more financial and emotional support, her children are well looked after; she resides in the main house and manages the household. The *elaagi* is an outcaste, living in a peripheral house in relative poverty and with a lack of affection. Such portrayals are also drawn from a long history of pitting women against one another for the validation of men. In stories such as *Mekuri'r Jiyek'or Xadhu* (*The Cat's Daughter*), *Siloni'r Jiyekor Xadhu* (*The Kite's Daughter*) and *Tula aru Teja* (*Tula and Teja*) such misbegotten jealousy leads to violent consequences with the husband killing the miscreant wife/wives in a graphic manner.

*Tejimola* is a story about a woman's envy of another woman. The stepmother is insecure about her position in the household and wants to get rid of her step-daughter, which she does by beating her with the rice-grinder, *dheki*. It is interesting to note that the kitchen is the space of female-initiated violence; a woman's agency of decision making, her competency, her social and interpersonal relations, and also, the denouement of a narrative is located in the kitchen. In *The Kite's Daughter*, the protagonist is a meek, innocent and helpless creature, and her character is the socially accepted ideal feminine character as opposed to the jealous, cunning and insecure co-wives of the merchant. In this story too the co-wives conspire against the kite's daughter in the



kitchen and act out their vengeance in that space putting her through numerous tests of household chores. Women are praised and adored for being carers and sharers, nurturers and nurses, cooks and weavers and child-rearers. Thus, a woman's fertility and beauty are of much concern. The male counterparts often pursue polygamy in the quest for a more beautiful wife or male offspring. Defiance of the husband/father's wishes leads to violent consequences for a woman. For example, in *Koka Deuta Naati Lora*, a king kills his wife because of her inability to feed him the meat of a particular bird that he wants. Often, the jealous wives/stepmothers are also gruesomely killed, some with their noses cut off and some being pierced by thorns to death. While many of Lakshminath Bezbarua's stories revolve around women, demonstrations of female agency are rarely seen. There are only a few instances of harmonious female relationships, such as the intimate sisterhood depicted in the story *Kota Jua Naak Kharoni Di Dhaak*, a translated version of which is included in this essay. The stepmother and the co-wives are always demonised. These gendered specificities of society which were norms then cannot be perpetuated to posterity.

The world of Assamese folklore is also unique in using male characters for comic and tragic purposes as fools and 'hen-pecked' husbands. There are idiotic sons-in-law (*Junwai'r Xadhu* or *Son-In-Law's Story*) and foolishly egoistical sons-in-law (*Kukurikona* or *Night-Blindness*). *Eta Boli Manuh* or *A Strong Man* redefines traditionalist views of macho masculinity by proposing an alternative 'strong man' who achieves herculean feats of strength through his cleverness. The theme of the absentee father is also present in many stories, such as *Tejimola* and *Tula aru Teja*, where this absence/negligence indirectly leads to the daughters' sad fates or abuse at the hands of others. These open up pertinent points of enquiry as to why and how a certain story should be told to children. What purpose does mindless violence serve in stories for children? Why tell stories of unhappy childhood and bad parent-children relationships? Aside from the gender angle, Bezbarua's folk tales also have casteist and classist strains. Most of the heroic male protagonists are either from a wealthy station, and/

or are kings or Brahmins. There are poor Brahmins or commoners who acquire social mobility through tricks and schemes. Himself being from an upper caste, Bezbarua also uses terms with cautionary aspects for lower castes or lower class people, for example, the use of the word *dom* (a group of indigenous people of Assam who are descendants of the fishermen class) as a threat in *The Kite's Daughter*.

While a discerning adult reader might read these stories in the context of the historical period that they were written in, a child will not have these interpretive abilities. Thus, it becomes necessary to re-tell these stories in a way that aids in children's egalitarian personal development free from gendered stereotypes. In re-telling the stories, I paid close attention to cultural references to maintain an atmosphere of the Assamese countryside. I have also kept the untranslatable terms in the original, with explanatory notes at the end of each story.

2  
**SILONI'R JIYEK'OR XADHU**  
**OR**  
**THE STORY OF THE KITE'S DAUGHTER**

---

**SUMMARY**

The story starts with a rich potter and his wife who do not have a son. The potter threatens the wife that if she gives birth to a daughter again, he will sell her to the Nagas. Hence, she sets her baby daughter adrift on the river. A kite rescues her and raises her lovingly. As the daughter grows up, the kite gives her away in marriage to a rich merchant who already has seven wives. The other wives are jealous and make her do house work. The kite regularly helps her out with magic, until the wives kill the kite. One day, when the husband is away, they sell the wife to a trader. The merchant finds her and brings her back. When he finds out what his wives had done, he kills all his wives except the seventh, as she was not part of the plan. Thus, the merchant lives happily ever after with the kite's daughter and his seventh wife.

## RE-TELLING

### *The Kite's Daughter*

Once upon a time, in a kingdom there lived a rich potter. He had great wealth, but he did not have a son. His wife had borne daughters every time. Even though the daughters were smart and capable, he still wanted a son. You see, he believed that only a son could be as good a potter as he was and continue the family business. Thus, the potter was very sad. After a few days, when his wife was pregnant again, the potter warned her: 'If you give birth to a daughter again, I will sell you to the Nagas.' Hearing this, the wife was very scared because at that time they believed that people who lived on the hills were monsters. Now we know that this is not true, and she had nothing to be scared of, but we can hardly go back and tell her, can we?

She went to her mother's home to deliver the baby. The misfortune! She had a daughter this time as well. Seeing her baby girl, the potter's wife's mouth dried. Before the husband could realise this, she quickly put her baby in a *soru*, covered her with rags and put another *soru* on top as a cork before setting her adrift on the river. She was very sad to part with her precious little daughter, but she was terrified of her selfish and stubborn husband. She was also not very brave.

A washer man saw the *soru* floating on the river and swam across to see what was inside. Discovering the abandoned newly born girl, he decided to adopt her. As he was pulling the open *soru* to the bank, a kite swooped in, clutched the baby and flew away. The kite kept the baby in her nest which was on an *aanhot* tree. Smitten by the little rosy-cheeked baby girl, the kite decided to raise her as her daughter.

The kite collected food for her daughter as she flew to different places. If someone dried their *riha-mekhela* outside she brought them for her daughter. One day, the king's daughter took off her ornaments on the river bank before getting into the water to bathe. The kite stole the jewellery as well. In this manner, she collected a comb, a mirror,

a box of vermilion powder and a bowl of hair oil for her beloved daughter.

The girl grew up on a branch of the tree, and she was as beautiful as a fairy. The kite was becoming fearful of leaving her alone in the nest. People were not to be trusted. One day, she told her daughter, 'Whenever I am away, if you get scared or if you need me immediately, repeat as I say, and I will appear in front of you.'

*Aanhotor paat lore ki  
sore Siloni Aai mur  
aagote pore*

(Leaves of the mulberry flutter and flurry  
Mother kite of mine flies free to me)

One day, the daughter was sitting on the branch while combing her hair. A merchant passing by decided to rest under the same tree to recover from the heat. There were no people around. Out of nowhere, a long strand of hair fell on his lap. It was almost as long as the measure of seven hands! The merchant was astonished and looked all around to find the source of the strand of hair. Finding no one, he looked up at the tree and saw an enchanting girl combing her hair.

The awe-struck merchant called out to the girl, 'Who are you? A god or a human? A fairy or a witch? Why are you sitting on a tree in the afternoon?'

The kite's daughter had never seen another human before the merchant. Fearful and unable to answer the questions, she called her mother:

*Leaves of the mulberry flutter and flurry  
Mother kite of mine flies free to me*

As soon as she said these lines, the kite appeared in front of her. 'Aai, why did you call me?' The daughter pointed to the strange man under the tree. The kite saw the young and handsome merchant and

thought to herself that if he was a good man, she could get her daughter married off to him. 'Who better to keep my daughter safe from other people than a good and loving husband?'

The kite flew down and narrated her daughter's story to the merchant. The merchant said, 'I have plenty of wealth. I am a rich man. However, I already have seven wives. If you do not have any complaints regarding that, I promise you that I will keep her happy and content. I will never hurt her.' The kite thought it through and decided that despite the fact that he had seven wives, her daughter's safety mattered more.

She went and told her daughter about the arrangement. 'Mother, why must I go with him? I want to live with you on this branch forever. I do not know him; I do not know of life down there.'

'*Aai*, I cannot protect you always. Your husband can look after you, feed you, keep you safe and happy.'

'Mother, I can protect myself. The animals of the forest have taught me well. I do not have to go with that man to be safe.'

'You must! You cannot live in a forest forever, *Aai*.'

The kite persuaded her daughter to go with the merchant. Both mother and daughter cried a lot as they parted, and the kite said, 'Remember, whenever you need me, call out to me as I have taught you, and I will appear.'

The merchant took the daughter to his house and treated her with great love. He was often away on business, and the daughter lived with his other wives. However, the seven wives were very upset at having to share their space and wealth. They were already sharing the house among the seven of them. Moreover, the new wife rarely participated in household chores, while the seven of them worked all day. Shouldn't everyone work together and help one another? They thought that if they made her life difficult, she would be forced to leave the household.

One day, the seven of them came to the kite's daughter and said, 'Do you think you are some fairy princess? We maintain the fields, farm the land and cook all the meals. Will you just laze around and eat? You should make rice today.'

The kite's daughter had never made rice before in her life. Saddened and scared, she called out to her mother:

*Leaves of the banana tree flutter and flurry  
Mother kite of mine flies free to me*

The kite appeared in front of her and asked, 'Aai, why did you call me?' The daughter said, 'Aai, my sisters want me to cook rice. I don't know how. They are angry that I don't help around the house.'

The kite told her, 'Aai, don't be scared, I will teach you how to cook rice. Put one grain of rice in a *soru* filled with water. In another *soru* filled with water, put one leaf of either *dhekia* or *laai*. Put firewood beneath the two *soru* and come out of the *aakhol ghor*. After a while, you'll see that rice and *aanza* are ready!' The kite flew away, and the daughter followed her instructions.

As they all sat down to eat, the wives made a small pit under their banana leaves. As the kite's daughter served them rice, they called out, 'The rice is over. Give us more.' As many times as they asked for rice, the kite's daughter served them from the *soru*. Finally, the wives were satisfied with her work and left her alone.

After a few days, they became annoyed again at her inability to do house work and asked her to clean the *gohaali*. The kite's daughter went inside the *gohaali* and called her mother. 'Aai, my sisters want me to clean the cow shed. I don't know how. They are angry that I can't do household chores.'

The kite mother said, 'Place the bamboo sticks from the broom one after the other across the shed. You'll find it spic and span.' The daughter did as she was told, and the cow shed was as good as new. The seven wives and the merchant were very pleased with her work.

As Bohaag Bihu neared, the merchant gave each of his eight wives five kilograms of cotton, and said, 'Each of you must weave *sula*, *suriya*, *kapur*, *gamusa* for me to wear during Bohaag Bihu. I will see who weaves the best set of clothes.' Seven of his wives separated out threads from their share of cotton using a spindle and started weaving the clothes asked for by the merchant. The kite's daughter did not know



how to weave and sadly went to the yard to call her mother. 'Aai, the merchant wants his wives to make new clothes for him. I don't know how.' The kite told her not to worry.

'Put some cotton inside four hollow bamboo stalks and close the mouths. During Bihu, when your husband asks for clothes, give him the bamboo stalks instead.' The kite flew away, and the daughter did as she was told.

The other wives were very surprised to see the kite daughter's cotton just lying around, while they were busy weaving day in and day out. On the day of Bihu, the wives presented their woven garments, while the kite's daughter brought out the bamboo stalks. The wives were shocked at her audacity and some of them even laughed.

The merchant was red-eyed with anger, and asked the kite's daughter, 'What is all this? Where are your clothes?' The kite's daughter was taken aback. While she did want to make new clothes for her husband, she could not understand why he was so angry despite having been already gifted seven fine sets of clothes. Nevertheless, she told him to look inside the stalks.

Beautifully woven sets of smooth clothes made of *paat* were discovered inside. The other clothes gifted by his wives seemed like rags compared to these. The merchant tore up all the other clothes and threw them in the garbage, choosing to wear the kite daughter's garments. However, the kite daughter was not happy with the constant fear of displeasing her husband or one of her sisters. She wished she could live as she had done before, free and independent.

One day, the wives found out that a kite was secretly helping the new wife. They were angry and felt betrayed that while they worked hard every day, the new wife could get things done without any effort. One of them, heart-broken over her clothes being torn decided to take revenge.

She learnt the words to call the kite while observing the new wife in secret. She went to the cow shed and called the kite like her daughter did. When the kite appeared, she beat her with a bamboo till she died



and buried her under a heap of cow dung. The kite's daughter called her many times, but she did not come. Slowly, she realised that the kite had been killed by one of her sisters, and she cried with a broken heart.

Once, the merchant went away on business for a long time. Before leaving, he told his wives to take care of the kite's daughter. This preferential treatment made the wives very angry. Did he not care about them and their happiness?

One day, a peddler selling combs, mirrors, vermilion powder, perfumes and other cosmetics came to the port where the merchant lived. The wives, who hated the new wife by then, hatched a plan to get rid of her. They told the peddler that in exchange for his wares, they would sell a beautiful maiden to him. They told him about her beauty and grace in such a way that the peddler was very tempted. He agreed to the deal.

The wives went to the kite's daughter. 'There is peddler with a boat-full of pretty things. Go and see if you want something for yourself.'

The kite's daughter really wanted to go, but her husband had told her not to go outside the house. She was scared that he would get angry again. The wives called her again and again, and finally succeeded in getting her to the boat.

As soon as she was on the boat, as planned earlier the peddler set sail from the port. The peddler took her to his house and gave her the duty of looking after his stock of dried fish.

Every day, she sat and guarded the fish singing:

*I was set afloat on the river by my potter mother*

*I was raised in love and kindness by my kite mother*

*I was married off to the wealthy trader*

*I was sold to a peddler by my seven sisters*

*The peddler gave me his dried fish and made me their keeper*

Weeks passed by, and the kite's daughter sat every day singing her song and guarding the fish. One day, the merchant was passing by the area and heard the song. He recognised his wife's voice.

He called out to her and kept looking around till his voice reached the kite's daughter. In joy, she was about to call back when she remembered her days at his house. Having to prove herself again and again, his ill-treatment of the other wives and his anger at her when he thought she had failed. What if he gets another wife? Will she be treated the way the other wives had been?

She could not go back. She wanted to be free again and loved purely as her mother did.

She hid before the merchant could find her and decided not to go back to be his wife. The merchant returned home in puzzlement and found that his new wife wasn't there.

'Where is my new wife?' he asked his other wives, who told him that she had left for her mother's home and hadn't returned.

When she didn't return even months later, the merchant gave up and settled into his old life with his seven wives.

Meanwhile, the kite's daughter learnt many things from the peddler and many others in the market area, and in time she became a potter. Maybe someday her potter father will stumble upon the heir he had abandoned.

*With soot, our clothes are darkened, let us bring our evening to an end.*

## GLOSSARY

*Soru*—Tumbler in which rice is cooked

*Aanhot*—A kind of mulberry, peepal or fig tree

*Riha-mekhela*—Traditional garment worn by Assamese women; *riha* is a cloth that is wrapped around the chest and tied at the waist; *mekhela* is the skirt that is worn with the *riha*

*Aai*—A term of endearment for a mother and also for a daughter

*Sula*—A cloth, usually refers to the tunic worn by Assamese men

*Suriya*—*Dhoti*, a long cloth wrapped around the lower portion of the body by men

*Gamusa*—Traditional hand-woven cotton towel

*Paat*—Assamese silk

*Gohali*—Cow shed

*Aanza*—Sour curry

*Dhekia*—A kind of fern widely consumed in Assam

*Laai*—Green leafy vegetable used extensively in Assamese curries

*Kapur*—Clothes

## THE PROCESS OF RE-TELLING

In presenting anachronistic and gender-biased details, I took stylistic liberties and introduced small explanations downplaying the didactic intent of the original narrative. When the potter expresses sadness at the lack of a son and his distaste for his daughters, I added a statement that points out that this sentiment is an anomaly and not a norm. Later, when I re-write the end with the kite's daughter becoming a potter, this earlier discouraging statement is subverted.

Similarly, the potter threatens his wife by telling her that he will sell her to the Nagas. This demonising of the non-Assamese indigenous population of the region also needed to be offset with a statement that informs the readers about this prejudice, while also acknowledging that the prejudice did exist. Later, when the co-wives sell the kite's daughter to the peddler, she sings a song referring to the peddler as a *dom*. *Dom* refers to people who worked as fishermen in the olden times and to the descendants of those people. It also signifies their lower status. As such being sold off to a *dom* was used by Lakshminath Bezbarua, an upper caste, as a specifically atrocious act by the co-wives. Thus, I opted not to use that term and instead translated the song replacing *dom* with peddler.

In terms of the kite's daughter's relationship with the other wives, the original version was very indicting of their motivations to drive the new wife out of the house. Her beauty, her competence at work

and her being favoured by the husband angered them. Here, I try and change that by instead justifying their anger at having to work while the new wife lazed around. They are also pleased when she does start working and seems to be competent. It is when they discover that she cheated her way through work with the kite's help that their anger turns into violent rage.

I have also removed some of the gender-biased thoughts of the kite's daughter. When she calls out to her mother for help, it is not out of a desire to contribute towards the work done by the other wives, but rather out of fear that the husband will hate her. I also change the original word *xatini* (meaning the other wives of the husband, often used in a negative light) to 'sisters'. Pitting women against one another for the affection and validation of a male has long been a trope in literary, cultural and social traditions and exists till today. Thus, while reading stories to children it is imperative to ensure that they understand that the motivations for women to act against women are not rooted in competition for a male. The kite's daughter and the wives want to co-exist peacefully despite the presence or absence of the merchant, but legitimate circumstances (such as them feeling betrayed that she had been cheating at work) lead to their estrangement.

A major change that I have made is to the climax of the story. In the original story, the husband finds the kite's daughter and brings her back. After interrogating his wives and finding them guilty, he kills them off in a gruesome manner. In my re-telling, the kite's daughter chooses not to return as she realises that her marriage was not right for her, and she could not live with the constant fear of angering her husband or his wives. The husband returns home and continues life as it was with his other wives. While in a more liberal version, I would want to explore the other wives' motivations and their own happy endings further, for the purpose of this project I offer a somewhat truncated version that employs the feminist lens in re-telling these popular stories to children.

### 3

## TULA ARU (AND) TEJA



### SUMMARY

The story starts with a rich farmer who has two wives—Laagi and Elaagi. Laagi is the favoured wife with a daughter named Tula; Elaagi, the alienated wife, has a son and a daughter Kanai and Teja. Out of jealousy, Laagi first turns Elaagi into a turtle and later has her killed. Two trees bearing fruits and flowers grow on her burial spot. One day, a king comes to that spot attracted by the fruits and flowers where he sees Teja and agrees to marry her when she becomes an adult. Years later, Teja is married off to the king as his second wife, and she takes Kanai along with her to the palace. Laagi is very angry at Teja's good fortune. She calls her back home and turns her into a sparrow. She then disguises Tula as Teja and sends her to the palace as the new queen. The sparrow follows them to the palace and after many attempts is able to tell the king all that has happened. The king then kills Tula and sends her meat to her parents as a gift. Unknowingly, the parents eat the meat at night and discover the horrifying truth the next morning.

## RE-TELLING

### *A Tale of Two Sisters Undone by Fate*

Once upon a time there lived a rich farmer who had two wives; the first wife, Elaagi, was alienated, the second one, Laagi, was favoured. Elaagi had a son and a daughter named Kanai and Teja. Laagi had just one daughter whose name was Tula. Laagi treated the first wife and her children very harshly. The hen-pecked husband was also scared of being affectionate towards them as he feared his favoured wife. They didn't have good clothes and didn't eat good food. Every morning, Teja and Kanai ate left-over stale rice and took the cows for grazing, but Tula got a feast for breakfast and was decked out in pretty clothes. Despite the differences in the way they were raised, the children were great friends, especially the sisters, Tula and Teja. In a house where their parents were always at war, the two sisters grew closer and dependent on each other. This made Laagi even more furious with Elaagi. A few days later, something happened that made Laagi decide to remove Elaagi from the family forever.

In the afternoon, when the husband returned from work, Laagi fed him hot rice, curry and fried vegetables. Some days, Elaagi would plead with her husband to eat with her, and she would feed him cold rice with dried fish in secret. In truth, after the day's exhausting work under the sun, the husband preferred eating cold rice rather than the hot rice and curry. Laagi realised that her husband visited Elaagi more often after his work and was very jealous. She wanted to separate them.

One day, Laagi invited Elaagi to go fishing with her. Laagi caught crabs, prawns and eel, while Elaagi caught a variety of river fish such as *puhi*, *seni* and *bhangun*. Laagi was enraged to see this, as she wanted to be the best in everything. After fishing, they went to the big pond to bathe. Laagi said, '*Bai*, please scrub my back properly, there's a lot of dirt. Once I am done, I will scrub yours.' But, when Elaagi stepped in to have her back scrubbed, Laagi pushed her into the pond and chanted

her magic mantra, 'May you turn into a turtle!' She broke Elaagi's fishing tools and threw them in the woods on her way back home.

In their mother's absence, Kanai and Teja asked Laagi, 'Aunt, where is our mother? Have you seen her?' Laagi pushed them away saying, 'How would I know? Does she ask me before going somewhere?' Their father did not search for his lost wife as he was scared of Laagi. The children went around trying to find their mother, crying. Tula, moved by sadness for her step-siblings, went with them to search for Elaagi, but to no avail. The next morning, Kanai and Teja still had to graze the cows, otherwise they would be scolded and beaten by their stepmother.

In the afternoon, they went to the big pond to drink water. Their mother, the turtle, swam up to the bank and called out to them, 'My dear Kanai and Teja, your stepmother pushed me into the pond and turned me into a turtle. You look hungry. I will get rice pudding for you from the water princess. Get some yam leaves to put the pudding on. Do not ever tell anyone about this, or else your stepmother will kill me. I will give you rice pudding every afternoon, alright?'

The happy children collected yam leaves and had a good lunch with their mother. In the evening, they went back home. Soon, they became very healthy and rosy with their mother feeding them the magical pudding every day. Seeing this, Laagi thought to herself, 'I do not let them eat at all, and yet they look so healthy. I feed my Tula so well, but she doesn't look so rosy. What is the reason for this? When they go to graze the cows, they surely eat somewhere else.' The next day, she sent Tula along with Kanai and Teja to graze the cows. She instructed her to find out the secret. Tula was just happy to be able to spend the day with her siblings instead of having to stay at home with her cruel mother.

That day the children and the turtle mother were in a fix. Even though Tula was a dear friend, they knew that Laagi would somehow push her to talk. When Tula went in search of a cow that had run away, the turtle mother gave them their pudding and swam away.



The children had just eaten their food and thrown away their yam leaves when Tula returned. Realising that her siblings had eaten something, she said, 'What did you eat? Please let me eat as well. I won't tell anyone.' Tula felt sad at being left out of her siblings' secret lunch. Unable to stop her begging and crying, they told her, 'We have nothing left for you. You can lick the leaves if you want, but do not tell anyone about this, or else we will never let you eat again.' Tula collected the leaves and ate the left-overs.

When she returned home, Laagi saw that her daughter's face was bright and supple like a ripe orange. She understood that she had also eaten the same food as Kanai and Teja. Laagi drew Tula inside the house and asked her, 'What did you eat with them? Tell me!' Tula did not tell her anything as she had promised her siblings. When she repeatedly refused to tell her mother, Laagi threatened to put chillies in her eyes. Scared, Tula finally told her mother all that had happened that day. Laagi understood that the turtle in the pond was feeding her children secretly. She decided to kill the turtle to be completely rid of Elaagi.

The next day, Laagi put some branches under her mattress and slept off saying she was sick. When her husband came back, she made a big fuss over her sickness. When she moved around in the bed, the branches cracked making her husband even more worried. Laagi said, 'Dear husband, I feel so ill. I think my bones are breaking.' The husband brought a wise old woman to his house and asked her to consult the stars regarding his wife's illness. What he didn't know was that Laagi had already bribed the old woman with silver and gold to follow her plan. Laagi had told her, 'When my husband calls you home to offer advice, tell him that I will recover only if I am fed the meat of the turtle in the pond.'

The wise old woman said as she was asked to. The husband gathered the people from the village to help him catch the turtle so that his wife could get better. So the villagers took their hunting tools and went to catch the turtle. Hearing the terrible news, the children ran to their mother and told her everything. Turtle mother told them, 'I will



not be caught by anyone's traps or nets. When everyone has given up, you come to the pond with a broken trap and I will get on it. When they offer you some of the cooked meat, do not eat. That night, you must eat rice and *kharoni*. Ask for my forearms from the butcher and plant them by the side of this pond. I will live again as a bougainvillea plant, and I will help you in your troubles.'

As the turtle mother had said, the villagers couldn't catch her even though they searched the whole pond. When they were about to leave, Kanai and Teja went to them with a broken trap and told them, 'We can catch her with this trap.' The villagers laughed, 'Well, well, these urchins say that they can catch the turtle! Okay then, let's see you catch it.' Kanai caught the turtle in two or three tries and everyone was astonished.

As soon as Laagi heard the news, she was elated. That night, everyone had a feast of turtle curry. The children buried the forearms by the pond. As their mother had advised, they had rice and *kharoni* for dinner. Two trees grew where they had buried the forearms. One was a bougainvillea plant and the other was citron. Beautiful bougainvillea flowers bloomed and ripe citron fruits grew on the citron tree. Every day, when Kanai and Teja went for cow grazing, they sat under the trees and talked to their mother.

One day, the king travelled along the path of the big pond with his royal retinue. When he saw the ripe citron fruits of the *jora-tenga* tree and the beautiful flowers of the bougainvillea, he was very tempted. He asked his minister to bring some fruits and flowers from the trees. The children told the minister, 'The bougainvillea and the citron are ours. We will only give them to you if the king himself asks us.' When the king heard this, he came down from his palanquin to talk to the beautiful children. Kanai went down on his knees in front of the king and said, 'If the lord of heavens consents to marry my older sister, Teja, then we will let the lord take our fruits and flowers.' The king was bewitched by Teja's beauty, and he answered, 'Alright, I will marry your sister Teja, but she is a girl now. When she grows up, I will definitely marry her.'

Kanai gave the king a pomegranate sapling and Teja's pet myna bird, and said, 'Lord of the heavens, we are poor people, so I am worried that you might forget us and your promise. Therefore, I give you this sapling and Teja's pet myna. When the pomegranate tree bears fruits and the myna starts singing, the king has to marry my sister.' The king agreed to these terms and with the citron fruits, the flowers, the sapling and the bird, he returned to his city. The children's mother had taught them what to say when the king arrived. Once again their mother led them to good fortune and happiness.

The king planted the sapling outside the window of his bedroom and kept the myna in a golden cage in his room. Some years passed and the sapling grew into a bountiful tree. The myna started singing as Teja grew up into a pretty maiden. The king, however, did not remember his promise. One day, when the king was resting in his chambers, the myna called out to him,

*Days and nights pass by silently,  
Fruits you see on the pomegranate tree,  
The myna bird sings sweet and free,  
But truth is far from the king's memory,  
Teja bai has become a maiden waiting for thee*

The king was surprised to hear the song, and he looked around to see who it was. The myna called out again,

*Pomegranate fruits are ripe and ready,  
Teja bai waits for the king,  
But he does not remember anything*

This time, hearing the myna's song, the king suddenly remembered his promise. Gathering all the things required for the ceremony the king went to Teja's house with his attendants and maids. However, he forgot to tell his mother, the queen, about this. She asked his maid, 'Bai, where did the king go? Do you know?' The maid replied, 'Of course I do. It is you who doesn't know about your son's activities; I know

everything. My naive queen, the king is getting a wife. There is a girl named Teja, a daughter of a wealthy farmer—the king is marrying her.’ The queen started crying when she heard this news as she didn’t want to be replaced as the queen of the kingdom.

The old maid, who was very wicked and cunning, consoled the queen and said, ‘*Aai*, don’t cry. I will give you an idea to drive Teja out of the palace. Tomorrow, when the king brings Teja to the river-bank in his boat, do not let her pass through. Wherever she tries to go, create obstacles for her. At the entrance to the palace, plant two banana trees and cut them from the roots such that they fall on Teja the moment her clothes touch the trees. Loosen the hinges of the main door so that it falls apart the moment Teja touches it. Break off the legs of the stool so Teja falls down the moment she sits on it. Break off the legs of the bed so that it falls down the moment the king and Teja sleep on it. The king will then think that Teja is a bad omen and drive her out of the palace.’

The naïve queen did as she was advised by the old maid. Meanwhile, after her marriage, Teja pleaded with her father to give her some wedding gifts.

*Of Mother’s hundred and twenty cane baskets,  
Do I not deserve half of those?  
Of Mother’s hundred and twenty wooden baskets,  
Do I not deserve half of those?  
Of Mother’s hundred and twenty bowls,  
Do I not deserve half of those?  
Of Mother’s hundred and twenty cows,  
Do I not deserve half of them?  
Of Mother’s hundred and twenty buffaloes,  
Do I not deserve half of them?*

As Teja pleaded for her mother’s things, her stepmother pushed her away and cried out in anger, ‘I will not give you anything!’ The king led her away to his city. In grave sadness, Teja asked her brother,

*Mother's one and only son, my brother, Will you not come along with your sister?*

Her brother happily agreed to go with his sister. Teja then turned to her dear sister Tula and asked,

*My one and only friend of my heart, Tula my dear, Will you not come along with your sister?*

Tula replied, 'Dear Teja, I want to go with you, but I have to stay here to look after our parents when they are old and sick.'

Bidding her sister a teary goodbye, Teja left the house without looking back. Suddenly, all the things in her father's house started following her as he walked out—the furniture, the clothes, the jewellery, the farming tools and everything else. Her father was very scared. He called out to Teja,

*O my beloved daughter,  
Please look behind you.  
O my darling daughter,  
Please look behind you*

Teja looked back at her father's house and of the four parts of things, one part remained behind. All the rest followed Teja to the king's palace. Even now there is a rule that whenever a bride leaves her father's home, she looks back. It is believed that if she does not look back, all her father's property will follow her to her new home.

\*\*\*

In the palace, just as the old maid had advised, the queen went to the river bank and waited for Teja and the king to arrive. When the boat neared the bank, the queen cried out,

*Witch, do not step on this path,  
This bank is for the king's bath*

Hearing this, Teja went to another corner to climb up to the shore.  
The queen cried out again,

*Witch, do not step on this path,  
This is where the king's rice is washed*

This pattern continued and Teja was barred from stepping on to the bank from all sides by the queen. When the king arrived, Teja told him sadly,

*Listen, my newly-wed king,  
The queen says I am a witch*

The king answered,

*Let them call you witch, darling,  
you will be my queen, and I will be king*

The king carried her to the bank, and the queen quickly ran back inside the palace. At the entrance, just as planned, the banana trees fell on Teja as her clothes lightly touch the tree-trunk. The queen called out,

*Where have you come from, witch?  
Just as you enter, you break the trees*

Then, the doors fell apart when Teja entered, and the queen called out again,

*Where have you come from, demoness?  
Just as you enter, the doors are a mess*

Then, the stool broke when Teja sat on it, and the queen called out again,

*Where have you come from, evil spirit?  
Just as you enter, you are unable to sit*

Hearing all this, Teja was very sad and told the king,

*Listen, my newly-wed king,  
The queen calls me an evil spirit*

The king understood that the comments were out of jealousy and spite, and so he said to Teja,

*Let them call you a witch, darling,  
You will be my queen, and I will be king*

Teja spent many happy days with the king in his palace. Meanwhile, Laagi, her stepmother, couldn't sleep at night due to jealousy. She cooked up a plan to destroy Teja's happiness, and set out for the palace. Showing herself to be very affectionate towards Teja, she said to the king, 'It has been a long time since my daughter has been home; her father is missing her a lot. He spends his time in the farms and mopes around the house. Without her, I am also lonely. I have come to take her home for a few days.' Hearing her ardent pleas, the king sent Teja home along with her stepmother.

Laagi treated Teja very well for a few days while she kept looking for an opportunity to work out her plan. Tula was also very happy to have Teja back, and they spent many days together reminiscing about the old days. One day, Laagi told Teja, 'Dear daughter, the bangles, earrings and necklaces that the king has given you are so beautiful.' Then, she turned to Tula, 'Why don't you try them?' Teja readily gave her jewellery to Tula so that she could also wear it. Then, Laagi said to Teja, 'Come Aai, I will comb your hair and see if you have any lice.' As she was combing Teja's hair, Laagi suddenly stuck a hairpin on her head and chanted 'May you turn into a sparrow!' Teja transformed into a sparrow and flew to the roof of the house.

Tula was very shocked to see this and accused her mother. Laagi threatened to turn her into a frog if she didn't do as she was asked. Tula was very scared of her mother and often gave in to her demands. Next day, when the king sent his palanquin to bring Teja back to the palace, Laagi sent Tula instead of Teja. She dressed Tula up in Teja's

clothes and jewellery and made her look just like Teja. Tula indeed looked very similar to Teja, so the king did not notice much difference. Sparrow-Teja followed the palanquin to the king's palace and started living in the courtyard.

Before leaving for home, Teja had started weaving a *paat* cloth which she had left half-done on the handloom. Tula didn't know how to weave cloth. As she was trying to understand the process, the cloth became undone and all the threads were torn. Sparrow-Teja flew near Tula and said, 'Don't let my loom tear; don't let it break. Please keep it safely until I use it again.'

One day, when the king was playing chess with Tula after lunch, Sparrow-Teja came near them and said,

*What kind of a king are you to forget me so?*

*You are playing chess with your sister-in-law.*

At first, the king didn't pay any heed to the sparrow's chirping, but Sparrow-Teja called out again,

*What kind of a king are you to forget me so?*

*You are playing chess with your sister-in-law.*

The king heard the sparrow clearly this time and mulled this over. He went inside his room and took two sweets in his hands. In one hand, he held a *bhuk laddoo* and in the other he held a *piyaah laddoo*. He called out to the sparrow, 'If you are someone close to me then take the *bhuk laddoo*; if you are someone else, take the *piyaah laddoo*.' The sparrow flew in and took the *bhuk laddoo*. She sat on the king's hand and started eating the sweet. As the king ran his hand over the sparrow in affection, he felt something coarse on her body. On closer inspection, he saw that it was a hair pin. He pulled the hair pin from the sparrow's body, and suddenly the sparrow turned into his wife, Teja. The king was befuddled.

Teja told the king everything that had happened with her stepmother and her sister. The king was red with anger at the unfairness and treachery. Before Teja could stop him, the king ordered



the royal executioner to kill Tula and cut her up. He ordered that her meat be put in one container, her blood in a bottle, and her hands, legs and head be put in a separate container. The order was followed, and the king sent both the containers and the bottle to Laagi's house. He told the delivery people to give the meat container and the bottle to them as a gift of rabbit meat from their son-in-law and to keep the other container on their doorway the next day.

The delivery men did as they were asked. Laagi was very happy to receive the gift and she said, 'My Tula has already sent me gifts, and Teja never sent me anything!' That night Laagi and everyone in the family had meat curry for dinner. From the bottle they took out oil and lit diyas all night. The delivery men did not eat anything despite a lot of cajoling by Laagi. They said they had a fever, and they slept off. After the dinner was over, the two delivery men started singing mockingly,

*Kin was cooked, kin was served, kin was eaten by kin.*

*Kin's blood lit up the lamps, the whole place cursed be*

Laagi called out to them, 'What are you singing?' They answered, 'Aai, we have no sense due to our fever. We don't know what we are singing.'

The next day, after the delivery men had left Laagi saw the other container in the doorway. When she opened the container, she saw Tula's head, legs and hands and realised what they had eaten the previous night. Heartbroken, she cried until she didn't have any strength left. In the palace, hearing about what had happened to her sister Teja fell into a grave sickness from which she never recovered.

Thus, ends the story of two loving sisters who were destroyed by jealousy and treachery.

## GLOSSARY

*Laagi*—Favoured, beloved

*Elaagi*—Alienated



*Puthi*—A variety of barb fish found in the rivers of Assam

*Seni*—A variety of barb fish found in the rivers of Assam

*Bhangun*—A variety of mullet found in the rivers of Assam

*Bai*—Older sister

*Kharoni*—An alkaline dish made of burnt bamboo peel/dried bamboo bark

*Jora-tenga*—Citron

*Aai*—Mother; also used as a term of endearment for a close female friend/relative

*Paat*—A variety of domestic silk (mulberry silk) in Assam

*Bhuk laddoo*—a round-shaped sweet that is believed to take away one's hunger when eaten

*Piyah laddoo*—a round-shaped sweet that is believed to quench one's thirst when eaten

## THE PROCESS OF RE-TELLING

The most problematic element of the story is the brutal murder of Tula by her brother-in-law, the king, followed by her family being tricked into consuming her meat. Teja goes on to live a happily married life with her sister's murderer. Moreover, Tula was bullied into the scheme of taking Teja's place by her cruel mother and as such the gruesome punishment is extremely immoral and a heavily exaggerated response. Teja herself comes to the palace to take the place of the king's first wife in the original story, and does not face any consequences. This hypocrisy and streak of cruelty in Teja, the central protagonist who is written to be a role model for younger children, needed to be edited out or re-written in more humane terms. However, Tula's murder is also one of the enduring images of the story, and I did not want to completely remove that defining plot point. What I did was try and emphasise the injustice of the act.

During the re-telling, I re-imagined the relationship between Tula and Teja as one of intimacy, sisterhood and love. I emphasised that Tula's eventual betrayal was a result of the bullying she faced from her abusive mother and absent father. When Teja gave her a chance to escape the life and live in the palace, she was unable to leave, displaying signs of a victim of abuse who feels tied to her abusers. Laagi's treacherous hunt for power led to Tula's death. In my re-telling, the king reacts in a moment of extreme anger, as someone who is egoistical and has anger management issues would and condemns Tula to death. This again highlights that anger and rage need to be controlled or the sense of justice gets blurred. Unlike the original story my re-telling has Teja lapse into a comatose sickness when she gets the news of her sister's murder, thereby doing away with the traditional happily ever after. Instead the problems in the resolution are highlighted and so is sisterhood.

I made one major change in the story to deflect Teja's hypocritical nature in the original story. I replaced the character of the king's first wife with his jealous mother. Polygamy itself is now anachronistic in Assam, however, being the daughter of an unfairly alienated wife, readers would expect Teja to be more sensitised towards the king's other wives. In a more expanded version, one could further unpack the complexities of Teja's dynamics with the king's previous wives, but the format of a short story for children does not offer that liberty. One option was to completely erase that section. However, the first wife's attempts at driving Teja out of the palace are depicted with charming humour accompanied by witty poetry, and I did not want to remove those. Hence, I instead introduced the character of the king's mother who is reluctant to give up the status of queen.

In the re-told version, the themes that are highlighted are motherhood, sisterhood, bullying, the hunger for power, parental/ domestic abuse and the negative impact of rage.

4  
KOTA JUA NAAK KHARONI DI DHAAK  
OR  
PUT KHARONI ON YOUR CHOPPED-OFF NOSE

---

**SUMMARY**

The story starts with seven daughters-in-law of the king planning trips back home during Bihu. The youngest is an orphan, and thus has no family to visit. One day, a strange man arrives proclaiming to be the youngest daughter-in-law's brother. The queen is convinced by his story and sends her with him. The daughter-in-law finds out that the man is a thief and plans to marry her. She ties up his mother when he is away from home and escapes on one of his horses. Back at the palace, the thief tries to listen in on the conversation between her and her mother-in-law, and she cuts off his nose and puts the acidic *kharoni* on it. The thief is caught and put to the stake.

## RE-TELLING

### *The princess who rescued herself*

Once upon a time there was a king who had seven sons and seven daughters-in-law. The youngest daughter-in-law, Rani, was an orphan. Everyone in the family loved her a lot and treated her with kindness and gentleness. Having been brought into the palace when she was very young, she did not know of the cruel world outside where people can lie, cheat and deceive as they please. Instead of teaching her, the family kept her away from all bad things so that she could live in her happy bubble. Everyone called her Sweet and Simple Rani.

Every evening, till dinner the seven daughters-in-law sat together, wove clothes on their handlooms and talked at length about all the matters of home and the kingdom. As the spinning wheels rattled whisking the cotton, all the stories and secrets of the seven sisters unravelled. It was the time of the much-awaited festival of colours, music and fresh crops, *Bohaag Bihu*. Newly hand-woven clothes were gifted to the children, family and household helpers. The seven sisters were very excited about the festival and also overwhelmed by the cartloads of clothes they had to weave—flower-patterned *gamosas*, finely threaded *dhotis*, scarves, shawls and *chadors*. Impatient to get on with the work, they gathered in the courtyard every day and worked till late night making thread from cotton, and then clothes using the thread.

Amidst the conversation, the eldest sister asked the middle one, ‘Rukuni’s mother, are you going home for Bihu this time? I am planning to go on the day of *uruka*, but I have a lot of duties; I hope that I will be done in time. Moreover, I shouldn’t stay at my mother’s house for too long with my children. All of you should go for more days. I used to go for 10 to 12 days before I became a mother. Alas, I don’t have that luxury now.’

Rukuni’s mother replied, ‘My state is not any better as I am the second daughter-in-law. However, I will go for two days before *uruka*. What about you, Gongai’s mother?’

Gongai's mother said that she would leave three days before *uruka*. The next sister said, 'I am going four days before *uruka*; I will return only when my heart is content. Although, I wish I too had a golden child to celebrate the festival with.'

Dhananjay's mother joined in, 'I will go five days before *uruka*!' The sixth sister said, 'Same here. I will take my son Chandra to visit my mama.'

The youngest one, Rani, did not join in the conversation. She kept weaving the thread silently. The sisters realised that they shouldn't have spoken about going home in front of her. In an affectionate tone, Rukuni's mother said to Rani, 'I will take our youngest sister with me to my home. Won't you come with me?'

Rani smiled. Her sisters were very kind, but she knew that she would feel sadder if she saw them with their families. She would be reminded that she had no one to call her own. 'There is no need, *Bai*. I will stay here with our mother-in-law and whatever vegetables, and curry I get here will be enough to make me happy.'

The eldest sister unthinkingly said, 'Why would you not come with one of us? You have no mother, no father, no brother, no sister. We are all going home to our families. Why do you want to stay here all alone? The lord has given you much misfortune, but that is how it is, *Aai*. We will be very sad to leave you all alone here.'

Rani said, 'Please don't be sad. This palace is my home now, and you are all my family. I do not need anyone else. I do not want to go anywhere.'

Morning came on the day of *uruka*. The streets were bustling with activity as big crowds started their journeys home. There was no bound to people's excitement. The six princesses left for their homes with their children, and the palace became almost empty.

In the evening, a strange man came to the palace and asked to meet the queen, Rani's mother-in-law.

He said to her, 'Queen-mother, I have come to take my sister home.' The queen was surprised. She raised her eyebrows, and asked, 'Who do you mean?' The man said, 'Your youngest daughter-in-law.'

The queen was not convinced, 'She doesn't have anyone. Who are you?'

The man sighed and said, 'When we were very young, I left home to stay with my uncle. I got married, bought a house and settled in my uncle's village. Meanwhile, my parents passed away, and my sister was brought here. As such, I have had no contact with her; she probably doesn't know that she has a brother. It is only recently that I myself was told about her by my uncle. As tomorrow is Bihu, I have come to take my little sister home with me. She must have been so lonely all these years. Where is she?'

The queen responded, 'She is inside, and will be here soon. If what you say is true, then I am very delighted. All my other daughters-in-law have gone home. I was feeling very sad that my youngest had nowhere to go.'

Just then, Rani came out from the inner quarters. The queen told her everything that had happened, and Rani was astonished. She did not believe the man's story and refused to go with him. The man tried to cajole her with sweet words and affectionate appeals.

Seeing this, the queen persuaded Rani to go with him. 'Rani, he truly seems to care for you, and his story is believable. Go with him today.' Unable to say no to the queen, Rani agreed to go. She thought that the queen must know better than her, as she had never seen the world and must be mistaken in fearing the man.

The man took her to a house deep in the woods. Leading her inside, the man told Rani, 'This is my house. Tomorrow, we will get married. Till then, stay here and take care.' He called an old woman, and said, 'Aai, keep an eye on her. I am leaving to arrange the wedding ceremony.' Rani was shocked and scared. Even though she had felt that the man was dangerous, she had hoped that his story might be true and that she would finally have her own family.

Rani realised that she has been kidnapped by a thief. She started panicking, as no one knew where they were. By the time the king and queen realised something was wrong, she would be married to the

thief. Her body was sweating profusely, her head started spinning, and she almost fainted.

Just then, the old woman called out, 'Don't be scared; don't be sad. You will be happier here. My son will treat you better than the prince. Come and eat some rice I cooked for you.' Hearing these words, Rani willed herself to be strong, 'Old mother, who are you?'

The old woman answered, 'I am his mother. We are quite wealthy. He has filled my house with gold and silver stolen from villages and towns, but he hasn't married yet. One day, he went to the king's palace to steal. Through the hole in the courtyard wall, he heard you and your sisters talking. He said that you were crying about not having anyone in your life. So he decided to marry you. He has gone to the village to arrange the ceremonial things. He will be back tomorrow. Don't be sad; you will be very content here.' The old woman gave her rice to eat, which Rani did not touch it.

That night, she slept with the old woman wondering who would come to rescue her. In all the stories that her sisters had told her, the prince always saved the princess. Surely, her prince would come the next day to collect her. The next day, she waited the entire morning for her prince, but no one turned up. The thief was supposed to come back in the evening. 'No one is going to come; no one knows. I have to do something on my own. I have to save myself,' Rani thought to herself. After all, she was her own family.

In the afternoon, when the old woman was sleeping, Rani tied her to her bed using ropes and stole a horse from the stables. She rode the horse as fast as she could. On the way, she saw the thief sitting under a tree. She was scared that he would chase her when he recognised who she was. But, the thief thought that she was a soldier from the palace, so he ran into the woods to hide. Rani saw some gold ornaments lying on the ground under the tree. She collected the ornaments and hurried to the king's palace. Everyone at the palace was astounded to see her return on a horse, and even more so when she told the whole story. They all applauded her bravery and cleverness!



Meanwhile, the man realised that his would-be bride had run away when he reached home. After untying his mother, he made his way to the king's palace. In the evening, when Rani was telling her mother-in-law all her adventures, he once again pushed his nose through the hole in the wall and listened to their conversation.

This time, clever and brave Rani was ready. Silently, she got a knife and a bowl of *kharoni* from the kitchen. In a whiff, she cut off his nose and pressed some of the sour *kharoni* on the open wound. She said, 'Here, put some *kharoni* on your cut off nose.' The thief screamed in agony, 'Oh the pain! Help me! Help me!' Hearing the ruckus, the soldiers came to the scene and arrested him. When the king was told that he was the one who had kidnapped his daughter-in-law, the thief was put to the stake.

Since then, the youngest daughter-in-law is known in all the kingdom as Brave and Bold Rani.

## GLOSSARY

*Bohaag Bihu*—Assamese festival celebrated in April; it marks the beginning of new year in the Assamese calendar

*Dhoti*—A type of sarong worn by men in India that outwardly resembles trousers

*Gamosa*—A white rectangular piece of cloth with a red border; an item of cultural significance for Assamese people

*Chador*—A large piece of cloth that is wrapped around the head and upper body worn mostly by women, but also by men

*Uruka*—The day before Bihu



## THE PROCESS OF RE-TELLING

The original folk tale is a simple story about a young woman outwitting a thief who kidnaps her. While the story itself is not problematic to be told to children, I chose this story to display how simple trickster tales could be drawn out to highlight a feminist message. The story's original title is *Kota jua naak kharoni di dhaak* which roughly translates to *Put Kharoni on your chopped-off nose*. It is an Assamese idiom which refers to the increasing problems that may ensue in trying to hide your original problem. In this case, if you put *kharoni*, which is a sour alkaline product on your cut off nose, then the pain and the sting will be even more unbearable than just the pain of a cut nose. In the story, the princess cuts off the nose of the kidnapper and puts *kharoni* on it to teach him a lesson.

In the story of a young naïve princess kidnapped under the queen's watch, I found the potential to tell a simple coming-of-age story about a princess who saves herself. In the original story, the unnamed princess (named Rani in my re-telling) is the youngest daughter-in-law of the king who is an orphan. When the kidnapper claims to be her long-lost brother, the queen agrees to let her go with him even though the princess is suspicious of the man. This detail made me wonder as to why the queen would override the princess' doubts and send her with the strange man. Thus, I have painted the picture of a naïve young daughter-in-law who was raised at the palace and has seen very little of the world. The people around her coddle her by keeping her away from the harshness of reality. They also underestimate her, giving her the name Sweet and Simple Rani. Over the course of her kidnapping, the attempted forced marriage and the queen's dismissal of her worries, Rani learns to depend on herself. She realises that her prince will not come to rescue her like in the stories she has been told because no one thinks she is in any danger. Thus, she takes on the responsibility of her own escape, and finally in teaching the kidnapper a just lesson. Acknowledging Rani's personal growth, the kingdom gives her a new name—Brave and Bold Rani.

Thus, this re-telling challenges the Assamese folk tale ideal of a good woman who is obedient, resilient and modest. Instead, I present circumstances where the ideal womanhood failed to protect the woman, and she had to take on a stronger role, that of a brave and bold adventurer.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baruah, M. 2009. 'The Co-Wife and Step-Mother Motifs in Folklore: A case study of some Assamese proverbs.' *Indian Folklife* (2009). Accessed November 29, 2019. <http://indianfolklore.org/journals/index.php/IFL/article/view/>
- Bezbarua, L. 1999. *Burhi Aai'r Xadhu*. Guwahati: Pahi Prakash.
- Bezbarua, L. 2000. *Koka-deuta aru Naati-lora*. Guwahati: Pahi Prakash.
- Bhattacharjee, K. 2007. 'Bezbaroa's Folktale Collections and Nationality Discourse in Assam', in Mibang, Tamo and M.C Behera (eds.), *Tribal Studies: Emerging Frontiers of Knowledge*, pp. 75–82. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.
- Dutta, N. ed. 2012. *Mothers, Daughters and Others*. Assam: ABILAC.
- Jafa, M. 2004. 'The Indian Subcontinent', in Hunt, Peter (ed.), *The International Companion Encyclopaedia of Children's Literature*, pp. 1076–104. Oxon: Routledge.
- Jordan, R. A. and F.A. Caro. 1986. 'Women and the Study of Folklore', *Signs*, II (3): 500–518. Accessed December 7, 2019. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3174007>
- Kakar, S. 2012. *Inner World: A Psychoanalytic Study of Childhood and Society in India*. Delhi: OUP India.
- Nath, S.K. 2011. *The World of Assamese Folktales*. Guwahati: Bhabani Print and Publication.
- Ramanujan, A.K. 1994. 'Toward a Counter- System: Women's Tales', in Appadurai, Arjun, Frank J. Korom and Margaret A. Mills (eds.), *Genre, Gender, and Power in South Asian Expressive Traditions*. Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass.