

Reaching Child Audience through Folktale-based Assamese VCD Films: A Textual Analysis

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Abstract

The adaptation of Assamese folktales into film format and their availability on social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook has raised inquiries about the impact of such adaptation and dissemination on the ethos of Assamese society which had been primarily restricted to transmission through oral culture for long. Concerns are also there regarding the effects of audio-visual format on the textual interpretation by children vis-a-vis the interpretation through reading a book or listening to a folktale presented by a storyteller orally. When a child reads a book or listens to storytelling, there is a simultaneous visualization of the story in the mind which is different from the experience of moving images created by an audio-video film. Eminent litterateur Lakshminath Bezbaroa was a pioneer in documenting Assamese folktales into printed text. He attempted to compile the folktales of Assam as *Burhi Aair Xadhu* (Grand Mother's Tales), *Kakadeuta aru Nati Lora* (Grandfather and Grandson) and *Junuka* (Rattle). Since ages, the stories included in such compilations have been popular among the people of Assam especially among children. Considering their immense popularity, stories from *Burhi Aair Xadhu* such as *Tezeemola*, *Tula aru Teja*, *Chiloni Jiyeekor Xadhu*, *Champawati*, *Abegetiyar Xadhu*, and *Lotkon* were made into Video Compact Disc (VCD) films. These VCD films are now seen to be uploaded and shared on social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook. The current paper is an attempt to analyse the various facets of this adaptation of Assamese folktales into VCD films through textual analysis. It is an exploratory discussion which underlines a contextual and cultural interpretation of the evolution of folktales from an oral culture to film culture in the recent media platform.

Keywords: Assam, Folktales, VCD films, *Burhi Aair Xadhu*, Lakshminath Bezbaroa

Introduction

The genesis of the Assamese film industry goes back to almost two decades after the release of the first Indian film *Raja Harishchandra* in 1913. The first film made in Assamese, *Joymoti* (1935) was a true 17th century historical incident depicting the tragic story of a brave woman who was tortured and killed by the then Ahom king Sulikphaa for not revealing her husband's whereabouts. The movie was produced and directed by renowned Assamese poet, author and filmmaker Jyoti Prasad Agarwala and was based on a play written by noted Assamese litterateur Lakshminath Bezbaroa.

Since then, numerous movies belonging to different genres and topics including not only family drama, romance, action thriller and comedy have been made but also issues like children and women, social discrimination and Assam history have been intensely dealt with in Assamese movies. Over the years, Assamese film industry has made a mark in the national and international platform with its unique sensitive style of filmmaking. There are films which have won prestigious awards and garnered immense accolades worldwide. The journey of National Award for Assamese cinema began with Nip Barua's *Ronga Police* (1958) in the 6th National Film Awards. The cinema industry of Assam had celebrated its golden period around the 1960s, precisely between the period of 1959 and 1969, when about 25 cinemas were produced and out of which nine won the National Award. The year 2018 created history with the nomination of the movie *Village Rockstars* by Rima Das in the Oscars. The contemporary Assamese cinema and its filmmakers are trying to leave an imprint on both national and international screens and platforms. To mention, Bhaskar Hazarika's *Aamis* (2019) won two awards at the 3rd Singapore South Asian International Film Festival (SAIFF) 2019, and also the 'Best Director' Award with the lead Lima Das winning the 'Best Actor: Female' award (Deka, 2021).

However, despite its remarkable history and artistic successes, the Assamese film industry has been a witness to many ups and downs. Particularly, during the first quarter of the current century, the industry was witnessing a tough phase where on one hand, the quality and aura that

Assamese films once carried was lost and on the other hand, due to lack of film distributors, insufficient government support and insecure conditions, cinema halls were getting closed one after another. Lack of proper infrastructure, funding or promotion activities, fewer screens, a more or less passive Film Development Corporation as well as the linguistic diversity in the region along with the political conflicts has had an adverse effect on the growth of local cinema in the region. The 2002-2003 ULFA ban on Hindi cinema, further brought a drop in audience for Assamese films (Barpujari, 2007).

It is during this period of crisis in Assamese film industry when films made in the Video Compact Disc (VCD) format became a part of Assamese cinema. There were several factors which ultimately brought the Video Cassette Recorder (VCR) cult, which gave businesses to local vendors who provided the new releases mostly on rent, and also sold video cassettes/tapes on demand (Deka, 2021). On one hand, VCD films filled the gap in the film industry when there were not many films made in the main industry; on the other hand, these stood as a platform for the artists to perform and earn their livelihood during the crisis situation. By the first quarter of the current century, VCDs entered the Assamese film scenario and immediately after its advent, VCDs became a craze in Assam. The initial VCDs were musicals which sold only for its songs. Afterwards, films in the VCD format on the backdrop of Bihu were predominantly made.

With the coming of VCD film format, Assamese films were no longer restricted to the space of theatre halls and were now able to reach out also to the non-theatre going audience within the home space. This meant that children became an important section of the audience of VCD films and hence content to suit their presence within the home space had to be generated. The films based on folktales came as welcome filler to this new-found scope and need created with the child audience. This created a new opportunity and market for Assamese VCD movies. It is during this period when cinema based on folktales was introduced in Assam. Though earlier there were movies such as *Haladhar* (1980) which were based on folktales, with the coming of VCD films, this practice saw a remarkable progression. The first VCD film based on a folktale was *Chiloni Jiyeekor Xadhu* (2005) by Gautam Baruah.

Adaptation of Folktales into VCD Films

Folktales develop the curiosity in children's minds. It is developed in such a way that the children readers' mind is imprinted with these tales and no other thoughts come to their minds (Kotoky, 2013). Folk tales increase the concentration capacity of a child and help in the mental development of the child in various ways. These tales are crucial to the development of child's imagination (Klim-Klimaszewska, 2015). They help in developing the language of school children and children weak in their mother tongue. Listening to the tales on a regular basis increases the child's concentration, expressions of thoughts which can be expressed in words, the child's ability to participate in conversations and the child even learns to use his thoughts, words and sentences correctly. Even a second language can be easily learned by a child to upgrade one's language skills. Especially children whose mother tongue is not the same as the medium of instruction can be made to speak and understand the two languages through the medium of tales (Tamuly, 2015).

However, looking at the present scenario where folktales have been adapted into VCD films and disseminated for consumption; there are inquiries about the impact of this adaptation on the ethos of Assamese society, transmitted through oral culture, which saw generations sitting together and sharing a folktale. Concerns are also there regarding the effects of audio-visual format on the textual interpretation by children vis-a-vis the interpretation of oral tradition. It is because, when a child reads a book or listens to storytelling there is a simultaneous visualization



Fig. 1: Covers of VCD films *Champawati* and *Chiloni Jiyeekor Xadhu*

of the story in the mind which is different from the experience of moving images created by a VCD film in an audio-visual format. Stories like *Chiloni Jiyeekor Xadhu*, *Champawati*, *Tezeemola*, *Abegetiyar Xadhu*, *Tula aru Teja* and *Lotkon* from folktales compiled in Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Xadhu* have been made into VCD films and now are easily available on social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook.

Language Transformation

With the adaptation of folktales into cinema there has been a change in language from printed text to audio-visual text- an inevitable process, given the specific nuances and demands of each format. When a printed text is adapted into audio-visual format, it lends itself to the interpretation of the person who is writing the screenplay. This basic script is again adapted to the taste and current language of the audience. Therefore, the emphasis in this process of adaptation is not so much on continuity of the linguistic tradition but on its acceptance from the current day audience.

While writing the screenplay for the movies and VCD films, the filmmaker put in words which are in common usage. For instance, in the story *Chiloni Jiyeekor Xadhu*, Bezbaroa used a sentence *bhaat dhukal loi aah* to mean that the served rice is already consumed and you bring more rice. But in the adapted version of the same story in VCD film, the dialogue *bhaat dhukal loi aah* has been replaced as *bhaat khai xekh korilu xunkale aru loi aan jaa*. While the later sentence is common in today's manner of speaking, the previous one is not much in vogue. Similarly, in the original text of the story *Champawati*, Bezbaroa uses the word *suwa-patoni* which refers to a particular place at the backyard of household where left-out food and other dirty stuff of the household are dispensed. But this word got replaced in the VCD script as *Barir chook* meaning 'corner of the house compound'.

Costumes and Visualization

Each cinematic adaptation of the folk tales is placed within a socio-cultural frame and this is most evident from the visualization of characters and sets and backgrounds selected. It is interesting to note that at some instances there are conflicts between this socio-cultural frame and the visualization adopted by the film-maker. It is apparent that this conflict might be because of the film-makers' attempt to make the characters more cinematically attractive and beautiful. For instance, in one of the scenes from the film *Tula aru Teja*, one of the main protagonists is shown wearing a coral coloured synthetic *ghagra-choli* which is a type of ethnic clothing for women in the Indian states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Haryana, Punjab, Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Jammu and Kashmir as well as in the Pakistani provinces of Punjab and Sindh. But in traditional Assamese practice, coral coloured synthetic *ghagra-choli* was neither worn by Assamese women nor were such colours part of traditional Assamese fabric.

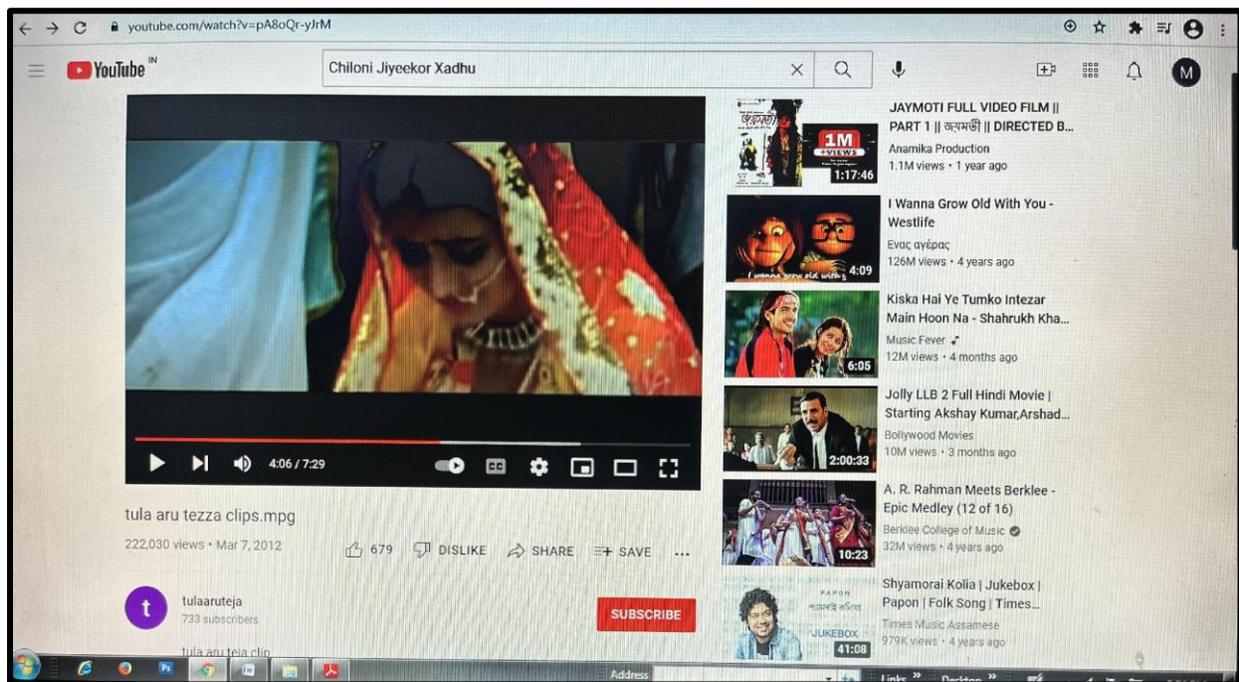


Fig. 2: The female protagonist wearing *ghagra-choli* in the film *Tula aru Teja* available on YouTube

This is where we get the logic of commercialization. In today's adapted versions, more than authenticity, importance is given on commercialization. The movies and VCD films definitely

have become more attractive due to the addition of contemporary colours in attire but questions could certainly be raised on the colour choice and the strong influence of present-day images juxtaposed on a storyline which is very periodic. Here it is important to understand that when we refer to periodicity of folktales we are not talking about historical periodicity, rather we are talking about a societal periodicity whereby the filmmaker has situated the folktales in a particular socio-cultural timeframe. Before compiling the folktales in *Burhi Aair Xadhu*, Lakshminath Bezbaroa re-wrote those stories in his words situating the plot of the stories in a certain society which might be the society of his own time or preceding time. So, when the filmmaker is calling it an adaptation and is borrowing the text from a folktale re-written by Bezbaroa, the period which Bezbaroa mentioned deserves to be shown correctly. Hence, questions arise- Should children not get an opportunity to know the society depicted by Bezbaroa? Folktales certainly talk about a society. Should that society not become a part of the visual imagination of today's children? This is where movies play an important role as a strong medium for creating imagination for a child. As a matter of fact, original folk imagination does not change and hence, it becomes important for a filmmaker to be clear about the particular society where the story has been situated. However, if the filmmaker says that the story is not based on Bezbaroa's re-written text, then the filmmaker has the liberty to adapt a folktale in his own creative style and present the story with reference to current context and present-day situations. But when the folktale-based movie is adapted from the text written by Bezbaroa and if today's children want to look at that particular society as situated by Bezbaroa, it can be observed that not enough care has been taken to do a correct representation of the said society through costumes and visualization depicted in the movie. In other words, there is a dilemma created in the minds of the children, where on one hand, the filmmakers brand their films as pure adaptations of Assamese folktales compiled by Bezbaroa; on the other hand, it is seen that there has been incorrect representation of the folkloric society situated by Bezbaroa.

Personification of Children's Imagination

If we look particularly at the three folk stories *Chiloni Jiyeeekor Xadhu*, *Champawati* and *Tezemola* which have been made into VCD films, in the adaptations of the movies where the

lead protagonist is a female, the character has been played by popular Assamese actress Barsha Rani Bishaya. Such casting, whereby multiple characters with diverse storylines and backgrounds are portrayed by the same person, may lead to the personification of the children's imagination associating all the characters with one single actor. Moreover, when one person is portraying all the characters, an imaginative homogenization happens. The imagination gets flattened and unexciting. As for example, if we see the first representation of Ramayana on Indian television and every other representation of Ramayana afterwards, we would realize that nothing has succeeded the first adaptation of Ramayana on screen. The first adaptation was iconic and people still remember the images of the mythological characters from the first adaptation of Ramayana on Indian television. The issue becomes more complex in the context of *Burhi Aair Xadhu* because the characters in the stories are based on common village folks who are quintessential images of diversity and simplicity much unlike the religio-mythological characters of Ramayana.

New Imagery Introduced into the Storyline

As a result of the adaptation from print format to cinema format, certain changes in storyline and presentation have also taken place- some of these arising from the technical limitations of the Assamese audio-visual industry. For instance, in the original story *Chiloni Jiyeekor Xadhu*, the character *Chiloni* is presented as a bird - Kite. Nowhere in the original text is it written that *Chiloni* transforms into a human like character while conversing with others.

However, in the VCD film, the character *Chiloni* is shown to be transforming into a woman character beautifully dressed in white attire and feathered crown when she converses with other human characters. While it represents an entirely new imagery introduced into the original storyline, the reason behind this variation in presentation might be because graphic designing techniques of Assamese film industry are not yet fully advanced to create the animation of the bird character. Therefore, it becomes affordable and convenient for the film maker to show a



Fig. 3: *Chiloni* transforms into a human character in the VCD film *Chiloni Jiyekor Xadhu* woman character speaking rather than an actual bird conversing on screen which would require advanced animation techniques.

Ethical Consideration for Child Audience

In recent days, there are a wide range of studies undertaken concerning the over exposure of violence in multiple media and its impact on children. One aspect of criticism of the folktales of Assam has been that there is some heightened degree of violence depicted in some of the stories which in current times may be considered harmful for children given the various other exposures that a child gets in his or her process of growing up. Children are now exposed to multiple media and the amount of violence a child is exposed to through such media also has increased. Hence, there are discussions that folktales also need to be sensitive to the fact that over exposure of violence might make children prone to violent activities or might lead to children accepting a degree of violence as correct. In this regard, litterateur and former Asam Sahitya Sabha president Nagen Saikia while quoting on a re-written version of *Burhi Aair Xadhu* by Samudra Gupta Kashyap (2010) asserts that though the folktales in *Burhi Aair Xadhu* have withstood the test of time and have successfully triggered the popular imagination of children for many generations, it has probably become necessary to revise the stories in recent times. He believes that 'a day would probably come when we might have to entirely rewrite the stories like *Tezemola* or *Tula aru Teja*, given the cruelty that they contain.'

In this regard, it is true that the audio-visual media presents various opportunities for a filmmaker not to show the actual violence but still make it understandable to children. In the audio-visual format the filmmaker holds the freedom and scope to depict violence creatively without over-exposing and over-representing it. So, whether those opportunities are explored by the filmmaker is something which requires to be looked into. For instance, in the VCD adaptation of the folktale *Tezeemola*, the murder of an innocent girl by her step mother has been depicted almost exactly as it is there in the literary text of the original story by Bezbaroa. In the movie adaptation, while portraying the brutality, *Tezeemola* the daughter is shown crying and screaming with pain as well as profusely bleeding due to the injuries caused to her by the stepmother which ultimately leads to the death of the girl. It is important here to realize that since audio-visual medium is considered to be a strong medium with huge impact on the audience, such depiction of bloodshed and violence might lead to adverse effects on the child's mind thereby highlighting the unsuitability of such depiction in front of young audience.

On the other hand, most recently, in the movie adaptation of the story *Tula aru Teja* (2012) as written and compiled in *Burhi Aair Xadhu* by Bezbaroa, *Tula's* mother unknowingly cooks and eats her own daughter's cut body pieces. However, this part of the story has not been included in the movie version. If the decision is consciously taken by the filmmaker in line with the thinking that depiction of such a disturbing event on screen where a human being is shown eating another human being would be inappropriate for children to watch or for any other reason this change has been done, the exclusion of this part from the movie is an initiative which is worth appreciation. Assamese cinema in this case is seen to be responsible as far as its child audience is concerned. It's only a matter of time to see whether such changes become consistent in the representation of various other movies and VCD films.

Conclusion

Folktales are the essence of any community whereby local fables are used to inculcate moral values, cultural ethos and strictures of socialization. In an oral culture these are free to evolve with each generational interpretation and narration. This process would essentially be

influenced by the socio-cultural structures of the corresponding time. The adaptations of folktales into various media formats including cinema while on one hand underlines the pure resilience of folk literature; on the other hand, it also underpins its inherent capacity to adapt to new-age modern technologies. Every media format has a certain responsibility in the way it structures its content keeping in mind the special requirement of the special audience section for which the content is being produced. Similarly, it is expected that the folktale based VCD films would also cater to that segment of the audience in producing its content.

The present analysis of the VCD film adaptation of stories from *Burhi Aair Xadhu* - an iconic compilation of folk stories by Lakshminath Bezbaroa, points at some cultural disconnects in the imagery of Assamese society. Though this may be a matter of concern for some, one has to admit here that the availability of this audio-visual content in a digitized format has accentuated its availability and access to both native as well global cultural audiences. The appropriations of language and other elements of material culture represented in the original stories of Bezboruah in the video format may have occurred due to oversight, technical limitation or to cater to the needs of commercial viability. We may either consider it as a cultural aberration or a natural process of cultural evolution manifested in material culture.

The other aspect that gains significance in this discussion is with regard to audio-visual content creation for children in India that is rooted in local cultural context and serves to promote ethos and moralities. The dearth of Indian content in this segment is a well-known fact. The children's folktale-based VCD films produced and their current availability in various digital media platforms which partially fill that vacuum in Assam probably need to be celebrated for this reason itself. VCD films had brought in children as audiences and gave a fillip to the Assamese movie industry in its dwindling days. But films based on folktales which primarily appeal to young and adolescent people at home as audiences also have a great responsibility in terms of creating child-appropriate content. On one hand, it is true that in recent times, these films and their availability on social media platforms like YouTube and Facebook have become a vehicle for propagation of folktales among children in today's busy world; but on the other hand, the text of such movies might also create disturbances in the minds of the children if they are not

appropriated according to standard protocols for depiction of objectionable content like violence. Parental control and monitoring will play an important role in this regard for influencing choice and consumption of content. Future research on reception analysis and textual analysis of video content based on *Burhi Aair Xadhu* will provide further insights into this evolving interplay of culture, folklore and media technology in Assam.

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5. *Tezeemola* (2007)
6. *Tula aru Teja* (2012)

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