Re-telling of Assamese Folktales in Animation: A Textual Analysis

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Abstract

Assam is a state in Northeast India with a rich cultural heritage that includes traditional art, theatre, music, dance, folktales, and others. In recent years, Social Media has become a platform for re-telling the rich cultural heritage of Assam through the latest means of production which caters to a wide range of audiences including children. The adaptation of Assamese folktales in such platforms for heterogeneous audience has necessitated serious enquiries as it is reflecting the social ethos the Assamese society subscribes to. The present study attempts to analyse the adapted versions of animation film on the folktales of prominent Assamese litterateur of *Jonaki* era Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *"Burhi Aair Xadhu"* (Grand Mother's Tales). Bezbaroa is one of the pioneers in the field of Assamese children literature who initiated to document Assamese folktales into printed text. Similarly, animation being the latest development in the field of entertainment, helps in preserving and disseminating the age-old traditional and social values among the new generation. This study will use a qualitative research approach through a textual analysis of animated films based on Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *"Burhi Aair Xadhu"* which is available on YouTube. Besides, the present study will draw on existing literature on animation and folktales and will interview Assamese animators and artists as primary data to get an insight on how Assamese folktales are retold through animation.

Keywords: Animation, *Burhi Aair Xadhu*, Folktales, Lakshminath Bezbaroa, YouTube.

Introduction:

Assam, a frontier state situated in the north-eastern part of India made its footprints into the landscape of cinema with the release of the first Assamese talkie *Joymoti* in the year 1935. The film which was directed and produced by Jyotiprasad Agarwala under the banner of Chitralekha Movietone depicted the historical account of a brave woman who was put behind bars by the Ahom King for not revealing the details of her escaped husband. Although the contemporary Indian film-makers during the period when *Joymoti* was released, emphasized on making films for disseminating religious and mythological beliefs to the common masses, but Jyotiprasad made a serious attempt to project the rich cultural heritage of Assam through his films. Unlike his contemporary Indian filmmakers who wanted to make films to entertain people, he acknowledged cinema as a powerful cultural and aesthetic medium, and used it as a tool for projecting the Assamese cultural identity (Baruah, 2021).

The seeds sown by Jyotiprasad Agarwala yielded in later Assamese filmmakers who contributed immensely towards the upliftment of Assamese cinema over the last several decades. Among them *Piyali Phukan* (1955) by Phani Sarma is a noteworthy Assamese film that primarily deals with a martyr who fought against the Colonial ruler. Further, the great Assamese son Dr. Bhupen Hazarika's entrance into the Assamese film as a director brought about the much-needed impetus in the overall growth of Assamese cinema from the commercial perspective. He made films during the period 1950-1990 which witnessed the growth of an alternative form of film as New Wave in the hands of Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Mrinal Sen. Dr. Hazarika directed seven Assamese films- *Era Bator Sur* (1956), *Shakuntala* (1961), *Pratidhwani* (1964), *Loti-Ghati* (1964), *Chik Mik Bijuli* (1969), *Mon-Prajapati* (1979), *Siraj* (1988).

Afterwards, the noteworthy contribution in the field of Assamese film came with *Gonga Chilanir Pakhi* (1976), directed by Padum Barua, one of the few Assamese films characterized by neo-realism from non-professional actor to realistic setting. In the latter half of the 1970s, the audiences in Assam were introduced to a fresh and new wave of cinema by the famous academician, litterateur, filmmaker Dr. Bhabendra Nath Saikia. His first venture *Sandhyarag* (1976) created a sensation in Assamese cinema history. This highly-acclaimed first creation was followed on by other equally-acclaimed and appreciated popular ones like - *Anirbaan, Agnisnaan, Kolahal, Sarathi, Abartan, Itihaas* and the only film he made in Hindi-*Kaalsandhya.* The last one was a realistic film looking at the issue of insurgency from a different angle (Deori & Bora, 2020). Further, the legacy of these filmmakers was capitalized by Jahnu Barua by creating films with high stature from direction to cinematography. His prominent creations include- *Papori, Banani, Pokhi, Kuhkhal* and *Konikar Ramdhenu.* Of late, an Assamese film *Village Rockstars* (2017) by Rima Das was nominated for the Oscar Awards (2019) following its being adjudged the Best Film in the Indian National Film Festival, which is another remarkable achievement in the glorious history of Assamese cinema in the last 85 years.

Animation through the Ages:

The history of Animation is considered very rich and diverse as it is spread across many cultures and regions around the world (Sarmah, 2016). The earliest known effort to represent movement in art can be traced back to the Paleolithic era, where pre-historic cave paintings portrayed animals with several legs, appearing to overlap each other. Other early forms of animation include- Chinese shadow puppets, Greek and Roman mechanical devices, and Medieval European illuminated manuscripts. Joseph Plateau and Simon von Stampfer are credited with inventing the first modern animation maker in 1832, known as the 'Phénakisticope'. This device used a spinning disc with still images which were reflected in a mirror to create the illusion of movement (wikiwand, 2022). The Phénakisticope quickly became a popular form of entertainment in the 1830s and led to the development of similar devices like the zoetrope, flip book (or kineograph), and praxinoscope in the following decades. All these devices have the same basic principle of rapidly presenting a sequence of images to create the illusion of movement.

In 1888, Charles-Emilie Reynaud used the 'Praxinoscope' to create projections for short films within the duration of 10-15 minutes, such as Pauvre Pierrot, which was shown to over 500,000 people in Paris. Charles-Emilie Reynaud is widely regarded as the one who invented

animation film. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the invention of the motion picture camera led to the development of early animated films (wikiwand, 2022). However, at the beginning of the 20th century, animation was not being considered as part of the new film industry. In 1908, Emile Cohl produced 'The Fantasmagorie', through this it was the first time when traditional animation techniques were shown in the big screen (MasterClass, 2021). This film was produced by following the traditional animation method i.e., by hand-drawn frames. In this film there were 700 hand-drawn frames which were later recorded on negative films, which is approximately 2 minutes in duration as a video. 'The Fantasmagorie' was widely considered to be the very first animated cartoon globally.

In 1914, the first animation film namely 'The Dinosaur' produced by Winsor McCay broke records as this was the very first film that was made using advanced techniques like key-framing, animation loops etc, which helped in starting future animation productions (MasterClass, 2021). After this a short film namely 'Steamboat Willie' (1928) produced by Walt Disney became the first animated film to use synchronized sound and was fully scored.

Further, during the 1930s through the 1950s, the Golden Age of Animation saw the rise of American animation studios such as Disney, Warner Bros, and MGM (Sammond, 2020). Many classic animated films were created during this period, including 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs' (1937), 'Pinocchio' (1940), and 'Bambi' (1942)'. These films became cultural touchstones and have influenced generations of animators and filmmakers. Likewise, there has been tremendous growth in animation film with the advent of much more effective computer technologies through which animation can be produced in a better way. This marked a new era of animation film, films like 'Toy Story' by Pixar in 1995 was the first feature-length film which was entirely produced by using computer-generated animation. From that onwards animation films have created a vast field and has become a powerful storytelling tool, various topics like environmentalism, awareness of different social issues etc have been shown with the help of animation.

Assam in the map of Animation:

Animation is an emerging genre of creativity in comparison to the Assamese film industry as there is relatively less production and research on animation in Assam (Sarmah, 2016). Though Assamese cinema boasts of a glorious history since the appearance of the first Assamese film in the year 1935, animation as a way of storytelling has developed in the State very recently. Some of the notable animation films of Assam which have played a very important role in the growth of storytelling through animation are-*Sarbagunakar Srimanta Sankardeva* directed by Manju Borah in the year 2016, a short animation film *YaYo* by Amalendu Kaushik in 2018. These animations which mostly deal with the contents of the state of Assam are influenced by the unique art and culture of the region. The animation film *YaYo* bears testimony to it where we can find representation of Assamese *Namghar* (prayer house), *Bhaona* (a religious play), *Japi* (a traditional Assamese hat), *Chang Ghar* (a type of house mostly seen in Assam) and *Bhela* (a type of boat). Besides, this short animated film is based on Majuli, the biggest river island of the world which is a hub of Neo-Vaisnavite culture propagated by Mahapurush Srimanta Sankardeva. These films which have been influenced by the rich cultural heritage of Assam are successful in portraying it through the medium of animation. With the advent of platforms like YouTube, it has become easier to portray the

independent works of many animators who are producing various animations related to the cultural history and folklore of Assam.

Assamese Folktale as a unique medium of Communication:

Folktales hold a special and significant place in Assam's cultural landscape and their role is distinct in comparison to other medium of communication. It is considered to be the repositories of cultural knowledge, traditions, and values. Unlike the other medium which evolved over time, folktales often remain unchanged which makes it a crucial source for understanding and preserving Assam's cultural heritage. Many folktales in Assam have been passed down orally from generation to generation which often conveys moral lessons and infuse cultural awareness among different individuals including children. These stories provide guidance and life lessons, helping to shape the ethical and moral values of individuals. In contrast to this, other medium such as literature, film and digital media have their own merits; they often cater to modern forms of consumption and entertainment. While these medium can offer contemporary interpretations of Assamese culture, they might not be able to capture in depth the understanding of historical authenticity and moral values as compared to the folktales. Folktales were more important and influential in ancient times and pre-modern times because there was no mass media, radio, TV, electronic device, film and even books were not common for the commoners. So, most people had to tell tales by word of mouth in order to- a) teach their children moral ideas, encourage imagination and b) amuse their children so that they would not get too bored (Hazarika K. , 2019).

Assamese Folktales & Lakshminath Bezbaroa:

Lakshminath Bezbaroa is one of stalwarts of Assamese literature of *Jonaki* Age whose contribution ranges from short story to children literature. His collection of stories for children- *Burhi Aair Xadhu* (Grand 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. Bezbaroa collected these folk tales written for children with the intention of instructing and delighting them. In the introduction to *Burhi Aair Xadhu*, Bezbaroa 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 (Barua, 2020).

Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Xadhu* has every element of folktale as it is circulated by word of mouth among the common folk who belong to a particular group known as community. Initially these folk tales were also disseminated from one generation to another generation by word of mouth. Bezbaroa compiled these folk stories from every nook and corner of Assamese society which were unlikely to be available in a printed text. The themes of such folk tales encompass nature, superstition, folklore, religion, animals, devils and many more. Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Xadhu* is one such compilation of folk tales where the greater Assamese culture and society have been documented with minute observation. In stories such as *Mekurir Jiyek'or Xadhu* (The Cat's Daughter), *Chilonir Jiyeekor Xadhu* (The Kite's Daughter), *Tula aru Teja* (Tula and Teja), *Bandor aru Xial* (The Monkey and the Fox) contain the moral story apart from the cultural representation of Assamese society whose primary target group is the children which in turn help in formulating values among them. Further, traditionally when women were

put on receiving ends in most of the literary pieces of his age, Bezbaroa was seen keeping women at the forefront of the story from the narrator to the protagonists.

Methodology:

The study is based on a textual analysis of the adapted Assamese animation films based on the folktales of Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Xadhu*. Four animation films from YouTube viz. *Bandor Aru Xial* (The Monkey and the Fox), *Dhura Kauri Aru Tiposi Sorai* (Crow and the Tailorbird), *Chilonir Jiyeekor Xadhu* (The Kite's Daughter) and *Tejimola* have been studied by using purposive sampling. Although a few folktales have more than one adapted animation uploaded on YouTube, the animation with more number of "views" has been considered through the "search filters" of YouTube for the present study. A practitioner in the field of Assamese animation has also been interviewed as primary data to get an insight on Assamese animation.

Animating *Burhi Aair Xadhu*:

Folktales leave a lifelong imprint on children by arousing curiosity. It also helps in widening the horizon of imagination in the process of listening to it. Each story of *Burhi Aair Xadhu* has been able to attract the children easily and teach a moral lesson to them regarding various aspects of human life. The possibility of developing negative outlook towards life among children during childhood in the form of injustice, inequality, atrocity etc remains very powerful. The folktales of Bezbaroa have been successful in the process of infusing moral values among the children (Goswami & Saikia, 2012).

With the rapid growth and reach of internet as a medium of communication over the last few decades, the mode of story-telling in the form of folktale has also witnessed a series of changes from oral narration to audio-visual content. Further, when it comes to Social Media like- Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, and others, the easy accessibility in the form of short films, animation has helped the age-old folktales to be retold in different versions by keeping the essence of it intact. Within a quarter of a century, the possibilities to digitally store and exchange folk narratives have expanded dramatically. The democratic medium of the internet made it possible for many to share their stories with others (James, 2010).

Though Assamese cinema has a rich legacy of glorious nine decades, the animation in Assamese language is at an infant stage. However, there are a lot of serious attempts being made by a bunch of promising animators who are representing the Assamese culture and society through animation despite having limited technological resources. Again, the target audience of any animation is primarily the children and hence the animators need to be both creative and cautious while dealing with a particular animated content in any language. When it comes to the folktales of *Burhi Aair Xadhu*, a few animations have been created over the last decade and made available on YouTube for a larger heterogeneous audience. It needs to be mentioned that no specific YouTube channel in Assamese language exists exclusively for *Burhi Aair Xadhu* or Lakshminath Bezbaroa. But among different contents of animation, such YouTube channels vary in being in either a "playlist" or as separate video uploads on different folktales of Lakshminath Bezbaroa and especially on *Burhi Aair Xadhu.* The popularity of such animations can be understood in terms of "views" and "likes" it receives on YouTube on popular folktales like-*Bandor Aru Xial* (The Monkey and the Fox), *Dhura Kauri Aru Tiposi Sorai* (Crow and the Tailorbird), *Chilonir Jiyeekor Xadhu* (The Kite's Daughter) and *Tejimola*.

Sl No.	Name of the Folktale	Name of the YouTube Channel	Total Views
1	*Bandor Aru Xial* (The Monkey and the Fox)	RongMon TV- অসমীয়া	1,400,000
2	*Dhura Kauri Aru Tiposi Sorai* (Crow and the Tailorbird)	RongMon TV- অসমীয়া	223,000
3	*Chilonir Jiyeekor Xadhu* (The Kite's Daughter)	JOJO TV Assamese	434,000
4	*Tejimola*	Assamese Cartoon Channel	509,000

Fig. 1: The adapted folktale based animations on YouTube and the number of views

Result and Discussion:

1. ***Bandor Aru Xial*** **(The Monkey and the Fox)**

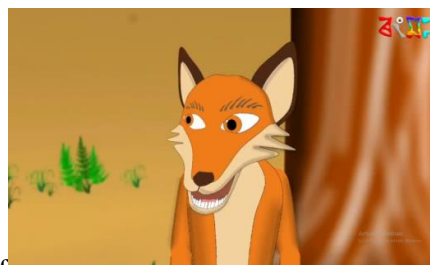Fig. 2: Scene-1 of *Banaor Aru Xial*

Fig. 3: Scene-2 of *Bandor Aru Xial*

Fig. 4: Scene-3 of *Bandor Aru Xial*

This animated folktale is portrayed in a well-structured manner and has been able to create a storytelling experience with respect to the original folktale of Bezbaroa (Scene 1). However, it can be seen in the animation that there is a lack of professional technique, as some of the scenes shown have limited variations (Scene 3, repetition of the same shot). Again, with respect to the unfolding of the plots, somewhere the connections are clear enough and distinctive, while some lack proper transitions from one scene to another. The storyline, dialogues are portrayed well and distinctive whereas there are some limitations that can be seen in designing of the characters (Scene 3). Another drawback of the adapted animation is that some shots are not well composed; after a transition the shot composition has been put in an uneven manner which changes the portrayal of the characters and consequently it also affects the visual narration.

2. ***Dhura Kauri Aru Tiposi Sorai*** **(Crow and the Tailorbird)**

Fig. 5: Scene-1 of *Dhura Kauri Aru Tiposi Sorai*

Fig. 6: Scene-2 of *Dhura Kauri Aru Tiposi Sorai*

Fig. 7: Scene-3 of *Dhura Kauri Aru Tiposi Sorai*

Fig. 8: Scene-4 of *Dhura Kauri Aru Tiposi Sorai*

This animated folktale namely *Dhura Kauri Aru Tiposi Sorai* (Crow and the Tailorbird) is narrated in a very well-structured manner and the depiction of the folktale through animation is done well but the overall quality is poor as the design of the characters is not upto the mark. In Scene-1 it can be seen that the use of transition is quite poor and it reflects the lack of technical expertise which is required to create a good storyline. In Scene-2 here in the shown frame, it can be observed that the overall composition of the shot is decent but the two characters fail to draw the attention of the viewer as it lacks clarity as it is important to put focus on the characters in this kind of shot as it is a conversation between the two characters. In Scene-3, in the close-up shot, it can be seen that there is a lack of composition where the character is shown out of the frame. There are many other similar shots in this animation where the same mistakes can be seen which create distraction to the viewers while watching the animation. In Scene-4, here the animator tries to portray a conversation between two characters i.e., one is shown as the 'Earth' and the other is the crow, here 'Earth' being a character fails to grab the attention of the audience as it can be clearly seen that there is lacking in the character and the way it has been presented. This particular scene fails to create the essence of the storyline as compared to the original folktale by Bezbaroa.

3. *Chilonir Jiyeekor Xadhu* (The Kite's Daughter)

Fig. 9: Scene-1 of *Chilonir Jiyeekor Xadhu*   Fig. 10: Scene-2 of *Chilonir Jiyeekor Xadhu*

Fig. 11: Scene-3 of *Chilonir Jiyeekor Xadhu*
Fig. 12: Scene-4 of *Chilonir Jiyeekor Xadhu*

This animation is very well composed as compared to the rest of the animated folktales. From the technical aspect also it is quite well structured in comparison to the rest of the adapted animations under study. Here it can be seen in all the scenes that the use of color, and shot composition is of a high standard. In Scene-1, the shot is composed well and it successfully reflects the narrative of the story. Whereas in Scene-2, it can be seen that the animator has designed the entire scene with lots of details, starting with the composition of the shot, special effort has been given in detailing the foreground and the background. This reflects the professional touch and knowledge of the animator in creating this folktale-based animation. In Scene-3, *Chiloni* (The Kite) as a character can be seen singing a song for her daughter using background music. Symbolizing the song through visuals immediately helps the audience to connect to the scene.

4. *Tejimola*

Fig. 13: Scene-1 of *Tejimola*   Fig. 14: Scene-2 of *Tejimola*

Fig. 15: Scene-3 of *Tejimola*

Fig. 16: Scene-4 of *Tejimola*

Fig. 17: Scene-5 of *Tejimola*

This animation is based on one of the most popular folktale of Assam popularly known as *'Tejimola'*. The animation here is discussed with reference to the above given scenes and it can be clearly seen that there is a lacking in technical professionalism as the entire animation is done in a mere casual manner and lacks the basic visual grammar of filmmaking. In Scene-1, it can be seen that the composition is very ordinary and the animator has not put any effort in detailing the background as well as the in the presentation of the character. Besides, the use of colour is not accurate as well which has made the visuals quite distracting for the audience. In Scene- 2, the two characters shown are blurred and even the movement of the characters is not smooth apart from being the narration of the story monotonous. The audio is unclear which further affects the overall scene and it creates hindrances for the audience to understand the storyline. In Scene 3, it can be seen that the editing is done with a casual approach, the background music used for the particular scene is not related with the ambience of the story and also the position of the character is not accurate; whereas storytelling through animation requires a lot of detailed work so that it creates a synthetic visual appeal among the audience. In Scene-4, which is considered to be one of the most important parts of the entire folktale, the animated folktale has failed to create the essence of the story and besides the approach is quite casual too. The use of tone is not proper and it is hard to concentrate on the narration. In Scene-5, the main focus in on the characters and the background is blurred out, but there is a lacking in the clarity of the characters which makes the scene visually unclear. Altogether it seems lacking in professional skills and techniques which also affected the storyline of the entire animation.

Folktale-based Assamese Animation and the way forward:

While dealing with any literary work of a stalwart like Lakshminath Bezbaroa, one needs to be more precise and careful as the litterateur was very particular in representing the Assamese society and culture with a minute insight. Again, when it comes to animation as a creative work the primary target group remains the children who start imitating the characters immediately apart from getting to know various aspects of a particular community and region. In the present adapted folktales of Lakshminath Bezbaroa, it is observed that in most of the

animations, the exact representation of the Assamese way of life is somewhat missing which may disseminate wrong perception regarding the Assamese society to the new generation as well as the global audience who watch animation to understand diverse aspects of the State of Assam.

The costume used in the adapted folktales *Chilonir Jiyeekor Xadhu* and *Tejimola*, it is observed that women are wearing various North Indian dresses and jewellery which are not generally seen wearing in this part of the country. Besides, at a time when Bezbaroa compiled these scattered folktales, he exactly represented the Assamese lifestyle from food habits to clothing in his original text of *Burhi Aair Xadhu*. Besides, the two men wearing traditional attire in the folktale *Bandor Aru Xial* are not the traditional Assamese *Gamosa* which the original text of the folktale represented by Bezbaroa. Such distortion of the original text due to the limitation of technology may create hegemony of other communities or regions as the global audience of YouTube might assume these folktales from other parts of the country rather than from the State of Assam it originally belongs to.

Despite having all the technological limitations, the animation of Assam and especially in the adapted folktales has enormous opportunities to represent Assam globally. Again, the role of disseminating the culture of Assam for the future generation through animation   is   the call of the hour which the present animators should take up with utmost dedication. An Assam-based Animation practitioner in this regard mentions-

> "There are high possibilities for Animations in Assam. I personally believe it is an opportunity, since there are countless untold stories that needs to be conveyed, others yet to be discovered through digging and research of our culture. Assam is a state of rich culture and history which deserves its stories to be told to the world. Proper, sincere and in-depth research and development into stories being developed into animations can lead the State's stories to be told to the world audience with genuine executions and interpretations, and that is very possible with the upcoming new artists. Though I feel the animations in Assam are at an Independent stage, it is the Independent animators and artists who often act as pioneers and they can convince Assam's entertainment industry to bring the storytelling medium into its mainstream products and outputs. There are handful animators in Assam who get inspired by the traditional art of the state and incorporate it in their animation. I always believe there is a good future in Assam's animations as long as the artists continue to proceed with their dreams and endeavour to tell their stories in the most unique ways."

Conclusion:

Folktales in any community play a formative role as it consists of moral values which help in the socialization process of any human being. It is obvious that with the passage of time and changing medium of interpretation, it will go through various transformations from narration to presentation. But it is the responsibility of every creator who is involved in such adaptation of folktales be it in full-length film or animation to keep the aura of folktales intact irrespective of the period it is produced.

The present study on the adapted folktales of *Burhi Aair Xadhu* in animation points out the responsibility of the creators on children as they are the primary target audience of it. The

creators need to be cautious enough to show children-friendly content in light of the original text compiled by Bezbaroa. Again, the technical limitations in the process of producing such animations should not be a cause of distortion of the original text of such folktales.

The commercial perspective of animation based on folktales should also be considered by the animators with utmost care. Assamese animators must come up with the content to serve the niche audience in the digital format which is globally scattered in different parts of the world. The role of government in regard to the promotion of animation as a medium of disseminating social values among the new generation is also enormous considering the crossroads of Assamese animation at present.

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Personal Interview:

Arunil Konwar (Animation practitioner)

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