

ORAL TRADITION- A PROMISING AREA OF COMPARATIVE LITERATURE REFERENCE TO ASSAMESE 'DĀKAR BACHAN'

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MONTU SAIKIA

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Pub Kamrup College, Baihata Chariali, Kamrup-Assam, India

Abstract

Literature in its comprehensive sense includes both oral and written versions of the creative exuberance of human mind in language. That is why the history of literature across the globe is much more ancient than that of written form in any country. Hence oral tradition is rightly considered the mother of written literature. It embodies a vast world of age-old traditional knowledge of the life in its totality lived by the people of a region. Assamese oral tradition is too a very resourceful encyclopedic body of literature. Especially the Dakar bachan, bihu nam, biya nam, aai nam, phool konwarar geet, moni konwarar geet, tribal folk music- all are immeasurable sources of embodiment of the peoples living in the north-east region of the Indian republic. The present paper is an attempt to focus how 'Dakar Bachan'- the sayings of Dak embodies the all encompassing traditional knowledge of the peoples of Assam.

Keywords: Maxim, Dakar Bachan, oral tradition, traditional knowledge, folk society, orality, traditionality

Dākar Bachan bedar bāni, Tāk sakalowe labā māni.

(Maxims of Dāk are as indisputable as the teachings of the Vedas; everyone should agree with, and follow them.)

Maxims can be defined as a principle or rule. A maxim is a wise saying, especially one intended to advise or recommend a course of conduct. In comparison to its approximate synonyms: saying, adage, motto, epigram, proverb, aphorism, the term *maxim* stresses the succinct formulation of an ultimate truth, a fundamental principle, or a rule of conduct.

India, the hub of peoples with multi-cultural identities belonging to various ethnic, linguistic and cultural origins, is a rich centre of literary activities— both oral and written from the pre-historic times. As its orthographic counterpart, oral form of literature too proves to be a kind of 'best manifestation of language' housing age-old knowledge

and experience of people speaking that language. Succeeding generations very often can look towards the elements of Oral literature in hours of hope & despair, pain & pleasure and, even in hours of need or leisure. Because, being a type of literature, oral forms of literature do have the perpetual gift of elevating human mind and nature.

Oral Tradition – an Indian Reference

“Oral tradition”, is a mass of knowledge, memories, values, and symbols generally configured in linguistic objects of non-literary or aesthetic-literary nature built by the laws of traditionality (anonymity, persistence, variation) (Carlos Nogueira, Finnegan, 1992). At times controversy regarding the supremacy and originality arise. But the distinction between these two has of late been blurred. In the context of the controversy whether oral literature has been a creation of the illiterate class (since ‘illiterate’ stands for ‘lacking’ in something), Bruce A. Rosenberg has coined a new word as a compromising formulation between oral and written creation -“Oralature”. Whatever name one designates, oral tradition originally meant a transmission knowledge, memories, values etc. by word of mouth or by custom. It is a transmitted by a long chain of interlocking, and face-to-face conversations between members of the group. As such, Oral tradition is the transmission of cultural items from one member to another, or others. Those items are heard, stored in memory, and, when appropriate, recalled at the moment of subsequent transmission.

Regularly employed under the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” (1930:80).

Maxims (Bachan) of Dāk, Dankā, Ghāg, Bhaddari, Agasthi and of Khanā are a very resourceful elements of Oral literature in various parts of India. Most of these maxims have been found to be the production of the folk societies. But the same have been attributed to the non-historic and imaginary persons as stated above. Since these maxims are concerned with the folk societies and were mostly the productions of the illiterate or semi-literate people, thematic and structural similarities can be seen in them. But it is of indubitable certainty that maxims attributed to the above names in the various parts of this vast country are compositions of various persons at various points of time.

Dākar Bachan (Maxims of Dāk) in Assam

Maxims of Dāk (*Dākar Bachan*) are an asymmetrical source of traditional knowledge in the Assamese society. It is one of the richest sources of Oral literature in Assamese. Dāk is supposed to be a contemporary of Barāh-mihir, the fourth to sixth century astronomer [Neog 2010]. But whether Dāk is a historical person or a creation of the popular mind of the Assamese masses and of folk tradition is a question with no convincing answer. Anyway, Dāk proved to be a very knowledgeable person (tradition). Such a scholar, if historical, might have been mentioned by his successors

such as Mādhav Kandali (14th CE), Harihar or Haribar Bipra (15th CE), Śrīmanta Śankardeva (1449-1568 CE), Mādhavdeva (1489-1596 CE), Rām Saraswati (16th CE) and Ananta Kandali (16th CE)- the path finders of the Assamese society, culture and literature. Besides, linguistic analysis of the Maxims of Dāk (*Dākār Bachan*) proves that the same are definitely not the compositions of a very highly educated person(s); rather these maxims are compositions of some nominally literate commoner (s). So, critics have come to the consensus that Dāk is not a historical person, instead, knowledge and experience of centuries gathered and faced by the agro-based Assamese society from time immemorial has been attributed to a non-historic and imaginary figure— Dāk. “He has shown the extra-territorial connections of the maxims and done a scholarly job by pointing out that Dāk's sayings are not unique to Assam. They are part of an all-India tradition” Prof. Praphulladatta Goswami, Rtd. Professor of Folklore, Gauhati University comments in his ‘Foreword’ to *Dāk-Prabachan Āru Dak-Parampara* by N. C. Sarma [2005]. It needs further mention that similar sayings are to be found in various parts of India like Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Rajasthan. *Khanār Bachan* in Bengali is worth mentioning in this respect [Satyendranath Sarma 2003]. The Maxims of Dāk have been classified accordingly by N. C. Sarma [2005] with the subject matters they are associated with as follow (All quoted *Dākār Bachans* are taken from N. C. Sarma 2005) :

- *Dākār Bachan* on Farming
- " " " Food Habit
- " " " Civic Behaviour and law
- " " " Property
- " " " Disease
- " " " Treatment
- " " " Weather etc.

Since the maxims attributed to the names of Dāk, Khanā, Bhaddar, Bhaddari, Bhād, Bhaddali, Dangka— all are the creations of the folk society, in general they are associated with the folk society and way of living. Such maxims have come to us after generations of transgressions. They are the common assets of the masses. Proverbs- ‘words of the wise and their dark sayings’, maxims are mainly functional in the non-literate folk society.

A: NYAY-NĪTI (Justice)

- *Ji nyāyat nāhike sākhi, Dāke bole tāk thoibāhā rākhi.* (Dāk advises to avoid judgments without witness)
- *Sākhik dekhāi rinaka dibā, Patrat nām lekhi rākhibā.* (Grant a loan before witness keeping written documents)

B: Cultivation

i. Puhāt āhu jethat śālī,

Tebe jānibā grihasthālī.

(That is a proper household which sows **ahu* in December & January and **Shali* in May & June). * Different varieties of paddy grown in Assam.

ii. Bām bhumit ghanāi dibā āli,

Jadi nahai Shāli Dākak pāribā gāli.

(Erect water blockades at a shorter distance in uplands for *Shali* cultivation, reprimand Dāk if you do not get abundant production).

iii. Bhumi kinibā mājhat khāl,

Chuwāli ānibā māiki bhāl.

(Purchase land with a low midpoint for farming, marry a girl with ideal parentage).

iv. Ji nare sadā krishika kare,

Sewār phal paibā ghare.

Eteke krishi karibā sār, Durbhikshat krishi kare nistār.

(Those who keep themselves ever engaged in cultivation are rewarded with the fruits of worship at home. So be engaged in cultivation, it is helpful for sustenance in hours of famine even.)

v. Ehāt emuthan dibā kalar put,

Tetiya dekhiba kalar gut.

(Plant banana saplings at a depth of one hand long and a punch ie. 20 inches, and you will be blessed with products of quite satisfactory size.)

vi. Sāte pātāl pāsāt ghan,

Chhayat tāmūl nadanbadan.

(Betel nut saplings planted at a distance of seven hand long distance ie. 112 inches are too much wide apart, at a distance of five hands long, ie. 80 inches are very thick, both unbecoming. If planted at a distance of six hands long, ie. 96 inches from each other, betel nut trees produce in abundance).

vii. Āhār sāunak nakari ban,

Tāhār kene thāit man?

(What is one busy with if one never goes to the field in June & July, ie. the rainy season?)

C: Woman

- *Chore bhāl nedekhe chandrar jyoti, Dusta strir nāi putrat rati.* (Thieves despise moonlight; women with loose morale despise their children).
- *Gāir barjita ulomā bāhi, Strir barjita ghāne tole hāhi.* (A cow with a loose udder and a funny woman both are avoidable).
- *Nasta hal krishi majhe hol bāt, Nasta hol stri ghane behai hat.* (An agricultural land where a trespass cuts through as well as a woman visiting market places very frequently is a spoiled one).

D: Social Practices

- *Sabale nirbale kihar niyā, Pāche panchāse kihar biyā.* (There should not be close friendship between a strong and a weak, there should not be a match between an aged and a teenage).

- *Nidhanijan ji ghare jāy, Achorak bhāt- pāni mātō nāpāy.* (A poor is not entertained with food, not even with a welcome note).
- *Bhāl kāpor nasta gel nite lale jhāpat, Bhāl pu nasta gel nusudhile bāpat.* (A fine shawl is spoiled if used regularly in folds; a boy is spoiled if he does not take advices from his father).

E: Economic affair

Bāt bulibā dekhi, Kadi labā lekhi. (Look ahead before you go, receive money after counting).

F: Governance

- *Rajāk chinibā dānat, Ghudāk chinibā kānat.* (Judge a king by the rewards he gives away; judge a horse by its ears).
- *Ji nubuje rāj karyya, Tāk napathābā Sabāar majh.* (He who does not have idea on administration should never be considered for the government).
- *Parihār tāmbul kare runjhun, Parihār nripiti jār nāi gun.* (Stay away from the betel nut that causes disturbance in the head; avoid that king who does not have qualities).

G: Medication & Healthcare

- *Tarun jbarat nākhāi doi, Enyā bhāngile nākhābā edā choi.* (Avoid curd in fever; avoid ginger and betel nut if nasal polypus bleeds).
- *Jhāluk pimpali edā khāi, Dāke bule tār kāh palāi.* (Dāk prescribes, cough surrenders before one who takes (a ground mixture of) black pepper, wild pepper and ginger).
- *Triphalā diyā nimar chāl, Tāk dugdhare batibā bhāl. Nishār bhāgat tāk niyarat thoibā, Prabhāta samaye tāk māthāt loibā. Hāte ghahi ghahi māthāt loibā, Sukhāile pāse snān karibā. Jijane kariba ehi prakār, Krusek (a distance of more than two miles) pathaloi dristi tār.*

(A mixture of hog plum, myrobalan, emblic myrobalan and neem bark pounded in milk should be kept under the sky at night. If one massages with this lotion in the morning, especially on head and washes thereafter, the user gets a best sort of eye sight).

H: Recipe

Chāul dibā jatek, Pāni dibā tini tatek. Pāg āhile dibā kārhi, Tebe karibā jui kāthi. Jebe nisije chāul, Tebe bulibā Dākak bāul. (Put water three times of rice to cook, strain when it boils, then flicker the flame; call Dāk a lunatic if you do not get properly cooked rice).

I: Wife

Suddha bhāwe suddha bongse bhoilā utapati, Swāmit binā nāhike gati. Madhur bachane bule sadāy, Swāmir bākya kisu nepelāi. Randhan kare bachan mista, Xehi grihini bulibā ista. Shāsulik pusi kare āy byay, Xi nārik sadā lakshmi nasadāy.

(She is a lucky wife who is from a good lineage, for whom the husband is everything, who always talks in a sweet voice, never disobeys her husband, and who cooks delicious food, manages the family treasury with due consultation with her mother-in-law).

J: Household

- *Paschime bāh pube bet, Uttare tāmūl dakshine khet; Pube bhāndār paschime gohāli, Dāke bule tār saphal suwali.*

(Dāk opines, a household with the field of bamboo to the west, of cane to the east, that of betel nut to the north, gardening to the south and granary to the east, cow shed to the west, is a flourishing one).

- *Dui hāt dui muthi kurar nāl, Bukar samān tukan dāl. Ek hāt emuthi kutharar nāl, Āmar siyā karā dār nāl. Dui muthi rākhi pelābā kāti, Pāse sālībā paripāti.*

(The length of the handle of a hoe should be as long as two hands and two punches (40 inches), a cudgel should be as long as one's breast, the length of the handle of an axe should be one hand and a punch (20 inches), mango root is suitable for the handle of a knife). Remnants of the dialectical variation: Anyone having the slightest information of the social as well as linguistic pattern of Assam knows that the Assamese language contains some significant dialectical variations- Śivasāgarīya dialect, Kāmṛūpīyā dialect and Barpetīyā dialect etc. the first being accepted as the standard form. The researchers are of the opinion that Assamese Dākar Bachans were basically originated in and around Barpeta district of the state. So, remnants of 'Barpetia dialect' is evident in most of the dialects: - *nāhike* (Standard Assamese (SA)- *nāi* meaning 'be not'), *thoibāhā* (S A- *thobā* meaning 'keep'), *tatek* (S A-*timān/simān* meaning 'that much'), *jatek* (S A *jimān* meaning the much), *Śāsūrik* (S A *Śāhu* meaning 'mother-in-law'), *Tāhār* (S A *tār* meaning 'her/his'), *nasta gel* (S A *nasta hol* meaning 'got spoiled'), *jhāpat* (S A *jāpat* meaning 'in folds') etc.

Whether Dāk is a historical person or not and if historical, whether or not he belonged to the 14th century, it has by now a point of consensus that the tradition of Dāk is an age old one. That is why frequent use of archaic words is seen in the maxims of Dāk. For instance-*Kadi* (coin).

Since the maxims of Dāk were conceived by some illiterate person(s) vocabulary of these maxims are packed with words generally used by this class of people. Example-*edā* (Standard Assamese- *ādā* meaning 'ginger').

A Glimse of All India Tradition of Maxims of Dāk and Others

Maxims of Dāk are a part of the all India tradition of maxims. Remarkable affinity-both thematic and structural can be observed between Assamese *Dākar Bachan* and other maxims of the various parts of the country. Maxims of Dāk in Maithili, Maxims of Ghag, Bhaddar, Bhaddari and Dāk in Bhojpuri, Maxims of Ghag in UP and Maxims of

Bhaddar/Bhaddari and Danka in Rajasthan are some other instances of all India tradition of Maxims of Dāk and others.

A Brief Analysis is being drawn towards this end

i. Assamese and Bengali

The tradition of Dākar Bachan and Khanār Bachan is a very interesting source of its folk literature. "Generally it can be guessed that maxims related to agriculture are attributed to Khanā and those associated with astronomy are attributed to Dāk"-Ashutosh Bhattacharyya, **Banglar Lok Sahitya**. A few from many of the kind can be cited where close thematic and structural affinities between the maxims of the two different languages are easily felt.

A. On Household Management

Assamese Dākar Bachan (AD) *Alap khāi pelāi prasur, Dāke bule tāik nikāl dur.*
Bengali Khanār Bachan (BK) *Phelāi khāy, chāy prasur, Bale Dāk nikālaha dur.*

(Dāk advises, one (a woman) who spoils more than what she consumes should always be kept away)

AD *Pube hās paschime bāh
Uttare guwā dakshine dhuwā*

BK *Pube hās paschime bās*

Uttare kalā dakshine melā (Keep Animal enclosure to the east, bamboo to the west, garden to the north, bathroom to the south).

B. On Woman

AD *Jalake pelāi jalake jāi, Para purushar
mukhaka chāi*

BK *Pāni pheliyā panike khāi, Ān purusher āde
chāi.*

Tāre nā balihā sati, Swarupe se dustamati.

(If a woman looks for chances to fetch water and looks towards the males secretly- she is definitely not to be considered as a chaste woman)

C. On Recipe

AD *Purulā sāk ruhit mās, Dāke bule sei byanjan sāch*

BK *Paltā sāk ruhi mās, Dāke bole sei byanjan sācxh.*

D. On Governance

AD *Ji rājay prajāk pāle Tahite basati kariba bhāle.*

BK *Jathā rājā pāle, Tathā basati bhāle.*

E. Agriculture

AD *Tini sa shāthi jupā rubā kal Māheke pasheke sikonābā tal.*

Pāt patuwā lābhat pābā, Lankār banij gharate pābā.

BK *Dāk sede bale rāvan, Kalā lāgābe āsād srāwan.*

Tin sa shāt jhād kalā ruye, Thāk grihastha gharat suye.

Ruye kalā nā kāt pāt, Tātei habe kapad bhāt.

ii. Assamese *Dākar Bachan* and *Dhāgar Bachan* (Maxims of Dhāg) in Orissa

- A. AD *Jadi barashe māghar sesh, Dhanya rājā punya desh.*
 Maxims of Dhag (DhB)
Jadi barasai māghar sesh, Dhanya se raj dhanya se desh.
 (Showers by the winter brings luck to the ruler and the ruled)
- B. AD *Chore bhāl nedekhe chandrar jyoti, Dusta strir nāi putrat rati.*
 DhB *Choraku adua chandni rāti Dāriki adua Pua.*

iii. Assamese *Dākar Bachan* and *Shaluk Bachan* (SB): Maxims among the tea tribes of Assam are known as *Shāluk Bachan*. Similarity between the maxim of Assamese *Dāk* and *Shāluk Bachan* can be drawn very easily:

- A. AD *Chore bhāl nedekhe chandrar jyoti, Dusta strir nāi putrat rati.*
Shaluk Bachan (SB) Chore ninde chānd ke, Beshyā ninde bhātār ke.
 (Thieves despise moonlight; immoral women (not having interest in children's care- AD/ in their husbands- S B)
- B. AD *Bāt bulibā dekhi, Kadi labā lekhi*
 SB *Kadi lebe gain ke Rāstā salbe phuik ke.*
 (Check well before you step ahead; count before you receive any amount of money)
- C. AD *Garu kinibā chikan jāli, Dui chāri chay datiyā bhāli.*
 SB *Garu kinbe chikan gat, Dui chāri chay gainbe dāt*
Hariner matan jār kān, Se rakam bujhe ān.
 (While purchasing oxen (for cultivation), one should ensure that they be whether four or six toothed and well built or not).

A Critique

1. It needs no special so called critical insight to understand that Assamese '*Dākar Bachan*' in particular and all maxims in general are some useful advices to the fellowmen especially in regards to agriculture and household affairs. As any piece of oral literature, these maxims have had every possibility of being interpolated from time to time. They may vary slightly even from place to place for the same reason too.
2. Similarity of theme and metaphor - It is not surprising that significant similarities of theme and metaphors can be drawn in the maxims of different languages. The identical cultural atmosphere that the maxims originated and run in is the dominant reason behind the affinity felt easily. Considerable affinities can be drawn of theme and metaphor in the maxims quoted above as examples. Even most of the themes and metaphors are quite identical to each other. The following reasons may be considered as the main reasons behind the significant similarities among Assamese '*Dākar Bachan*' and other maxims of the various parts of the country like '*Dākar*

Bachan' and 'Khanār Bachan' in Bengali, and, maxims of Dāk in Maithili, Maxims of Ghag, Bhaddar, Bhaddari and Dāk in Bhojpuri, maxims of Ghag in UP and Maxims of Bhaddar/Bhaddari and Danka in Rajasthan etc.

- Agriculture is the primary mood of livelihood of the society, with similarity of way of life and livelihood facing uniform problems and prospects.
- Most of the maxims of the Indian tradition are of anonymous origin.
- No watertight boundary within the area talked about above. So, reciprocal influence in popular use of the maxims can even not be ignored.

C. A few tiny differences even can be seen in some metaphors behind which respective cultural background works as the major factor:

...

Pāt patuwā lābhat pābā, Lankār banij gharate pābā. (Assamese Dākar Bachan)

...

Ruye kalā nā kāt pāt, Tātei habe kapad bhāt. (Bengali Khanār Bachan)

Here Dāk in Assamese by way of inspiring his followers says that if they follow his advice, in addition to getting enough production of banana, they will be able to avail banana leaves etc for gratis. Bengali Khanā on the other hand restricts her followers from cutting the leaves of the banana trees in order to get assured production. This major difference prevails for the reason that each and every part of a banana tree is useful in Assamese society- banana as fruit, leaves as plates especially in any festivity and social gathering, the body and the root for preparing soot- a very popular traditional food ingredient. It is considered to as mandatory to serve 'prasad' and food on plate pieces of banana leaves on social gathering, especially on religious occasions. The tip of a banana leaf when used as a plate is even reserved for the seniors as a matter of respect in Assamese society.

Rationale

- Oral literary tradition is a potential resource of literature, and of literary criticism
- Maxims can be promising area of Comparative Literature

Conclusion

Study of the Indian tradition of maxims can be a potential area of study, especially of Comparative Literature. Such a study would definite help understanding the man and manners of the rural India society and their heritage finally to understand the socio-cultural affinity and differences and their causes. It may be an attempt of rebuilding the concept of cultural state which is of vital importance in a country with pluralistic identities like ours.

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