



Representation of Life in Folktales of Bengal

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Abstract

Folktales are creations of the society as a whole. Human desire, experience, joy, sorrow and imagination are reflected in folktales. Folktales pass from generation to generation, age to age. These tales were in oral form until modern period. In India, collection of folktales was started in India by the British officials and scholars during the colonial period. Later on, Indian modern educated section started to collect oral literature. In Bengal, Rabindranath inspired the Bengali educated class to collect the oral literature of Bengal. Since then, different genres of folk literature are being collected though a rich tradition is yet to be collected and a large volume has already been lost. The study of folktales will give us a good representation of life. For this study, the collection of folktales, '*Folktales of Bengal*' by Lal Behari Dey and '*Thakurmar Jhuli*' by Dakshina Ranjan Mitra Mazumder will be taken into consideration.

Key words: Folktales, society, life, representation.

Introduction: Folktales are the creation of common people. So, one can find the life of the common people in the narratives of folktales. Human desire, experience, joy, sorrow and dream are reflected in folktales. "The last source of the folktales is human society itself. The elemental moorings that are the root of human society are sought to be illustrated in folktales. The day to day life of the common man finds its full depiction in the folktales. Parental love, family happiness, children's adventurous habits, love and fear of the unknown, greed etc. are some of the usual themes of folk tales. The common men yearns riches and comforts he usually look for. He dreams of riches, princes, kingdoms, etc. and find satisfaction in stories and fantasy. Men love gossip and scandal. Women cannot keep secrets. Children will love their parents; a mother-in-law will always think the daughter-in-law needs advice."ⁱ The people who have never entered a palace, or even never seen a royal palace can't give the description of royal life. Their description becomes the description of the life of the common people. When they say about a queen, she becomes a common Bengali woman.

Royal life as depiction of folklife: In the story '*Life's Secret*',ⁱⁱ the *Suo Queen* (*queen who is loved*) came to the door to give alms to the *Faquir* (Mendicant). In the story, '*KalabatiRajkanya*'ⁱⁱⁱ, the queens used to do the household chores. The king had seven queens. The *Boro Rani* (eldest queen) cooked rice, *Mejo Rani* (Second queen) cut vegetables, *Sejo Rani* (third) cooked vegetables and curries, *Noa Rani* (fourth) fetched water, *Kone Rani* (fifth) helped others, *Duo Rani* (queen who is not loved, here the sixth queen) ground spices with *shil* (bigger grinding rock) and *nora* (smaller grinding rock), *Choto Rani* (youngest) cut fish. This is not the picture of royal life. Here all queens are house wives of Bengali folk life. The



depiction of royal life is absent here, it becomes the representation of pure folk life. The queens are not above the common human fault: jealousy, cruelty and quarrel. In the story '*Life's Secret*' the king had two queens, Duo and Suo.^{iv} Duo queen was jealous of Suo queen's good fortune. Duo was neglected by King. Duo hated *Dalim*(pomegranate, prince was as beautiful as pomegranate), son of Suo, because the king neglected Duo more than ever and idolized Suo, the fortunate mother of *Dalim Kumar*(prince) after the birth of *Dalim*. So she was searching the chance to harm *Dalim Kumar*. At last she got the chance.

Position of women: After the death of *Dalim Kumar* the king was so shocked that he didn't allow to cremate or burry the body of *Dalim*. Suo queen was so shocked that she lived in retirement. It was the time when the Suo queen needed king's support but the king who idolised and loved Suo too much, gave up his nights entirely to Duo. It should be noted here that the patriarchal society doesn't mind the partiality of the king between the two queens. A barren woman is considered ceremonially unclean. So the faquir didn't take alms from the hands of Suo. The king was too much eager to have an heir i.e. boy child. The mentality towards women is portrayed in the stories. In the story '*The Origin of Opium*'^v, the sentiment of the elephant, who was transformed from rat through different stages/ forms was hurt when the queen mounted on its back. The elephant looked himself as lordly beast couldn't brook the idea that a woman though a queen should ride on his back. It was shown that women's jealousy has no limit. In '*The story of Prince Sabur*'^{vi}, the seven sisters planned to kill Prince Sabur, the husband of youngest sister out of envy of her fortune, her wealth and her husband who was a prince. They poured the glass powder on his bed.

Belief: People believed that blessing of saints would have made barren woman a mother. In '*Life's Secret*', the faquir(mendicant) gave the Suo queen a drug to eat. Taking the drug, the suo queen was blessed with a boy child. In '*KalabatiRajkanya*', the seven queens didn't have a child. One day a sanyasi(Hindu religious mendicant) gave the eldest queen the root of a tree and asked to make it paste . He told her that each of the queens would have a son like golden moon eating the paste. The five queens ate this paste leaving nothing for other two queens, Noa Rani and the Choto Rani. The Noa Rani ate the little leftover in the bowl and the Chhoto Rani washed the shil and nora and took the strained water. The five queens who ate the paste were blessed with one son each who were like five golden moons. The Noa Rani gave birth to an owl and the Chhoto Rani gave birth of a monkey. At present also, people believe that blessings of saints, sanyasis can make a barren woman a mother. In Indian society people especially women perform *brata*(vow) for fulfilling a special desire. For this reason they use to refrain from some activities. People respect the vow. In *KalabatiRajkanya*, Kalabati Princess pretended for a vow for one month and in the story '*Fakir Chand*'^{vii}, the princess pretended for a vow for one year. Both of them were allowed to perform their vows. Nobody dared to deny their vows. Both the princesses did this in the hope that they would be rescued within that period. People believed in Manikya on the crested hood of snake i.e. head-jewel of snake. Manikya had the capacity to bring good luck to man. In the story '*Fakir Chand*', the prince and the minister's son occupied



the manikya. The manikya had a magical capacity. With the help of manikya, they reached the magnificent palace under the pond and met the princess. The prince and the princess fell in love and got married. It was customary in those days to offer human sacrifice in different occasions. In '*The Story of Sabur*', the merchant was fallen into poverty. He became day labourer. The merchant and his wife came to engage themselves as labourer in digging of tank. They were called by their youngest daughter who was given up and became rich. They couldn't recognize their daughter. They were told to be seated and given new clothes to change their rags. They thought that they would be sacrificed in new pond. They were more frightened as the victims who were to be sacrificed were offered new clothes to change. In the story '*The Men Who Wished to Be Perfect*'^{viii} the mendicant sacrificed six persons to the altar of kali. He belonged to that sect of Hindus who seek perfection with intercourse with the spirits of departed men. The king had no child. The mendicant gave the queen a drug to eat to be mother on a condition. The condition was that after swallowing the medicine, she would have given the birth of twin sons. After the birth of the twins, one of the twins would have to be handed over to the mendicant. The queen gave the birth of twin sons. The mendicant appeared when the princes were sixteen and took the elder prince with him. He brought the prince to sacrifice him to the altar of the Kali after the completion of devotion. The prince would be the seventh sacrifice. After the sacrifice the mendicant's vow would be fulfilled. He would attain the virtue of perfection.

Representation of day to day life: Hospitality was common among the people. People provided hospitality even to the unknown guest. In the story '*Fakir Chand*', the minister's son went to the city and took him abode in the house of a Brahman. Extra marital relation was there in the society. In the story '*Life's Secret*' Duo Queen was in collusion with the physician. Fakir's mother captured the princess for the welfare of Fakir like any other mother. The economic condition of the priest Brahmans of Bengal was not good. They performed the day to day prayers. Some of them were too disciplined and punctual about their prayers. They had no options to solve their day to day maintenance. In the story '*The Indigent Brahman*'^{ix}, the Brahman(priestly caste, Brahmin in English) lived in the benefaction of the rich. Though his gains were considerable when marriage were celebrated or funeral ceremonies were performed but the occasions were not the daily events. It was difficult to make the ends meet. His wife rebuked him for his inability to give adequate support and his children often went about naked and hungry. He was diligent in his devotions and there was not a single day in his life in which he didn't say his prayers at stated hours. His titular deity was goddess Durga. On no day did he either drink water or taste food till he had written in red ink the name of Durga at least one hundred and eight times. Priestly profession made brahmans idler and dependent on others. In the story '*The story of the Rakshas*'^x, there was a half witted Brahman who had a wife but no children. It was only with difficulty he could supply the wants of himself and his wife. And the worst of it was that he was rather lazily inclined.



Social evils: Polygamy and child marriage existed at that time. It was very common in case of Kulin Brahman (Brahmins who maintained purity of caste in case of marriage). In ‘The story of the Rakshasas’, the Brahman went to a distant place. He met a *rakshasi*(ogress) in the guise of a young lady of exquisite beauty. The lady convinced him that he had married her at a very early age. The brahman was astonished beyond measure. He had no recollection of such marriage. At last he came in the decision that as they were Kulin Brahman, it was possible that his father had got him married when he was a little child.

Law and order situation: There were thieves and robbers in the society. In the story ‘Strike but Hear’^{xii}the subjects told the king that the kingdom was infested with the thieves and the robber. They requested him to catch hold of these thieves and punish them. In another story ‘The Adventures of Two Thieves and Their Sons’^{xiii}, there were two thieves with extra ordinary capacity. Their sons were genius in theft.

Different occupations: There were female barbers in those days. In ‘*Life’s Secret*’, Dalim’s wife entered the palace in the guise of a female barber. Like every female barber she took a bundle containing the following articles:—an iron instrument for paring nails, another iron instrument for scraping off the superfluous flesh of the soles of the feet, a piece of *jhama* (burnt brick) for rubbing the soles of the feetwith, and *alakta*(liquid lac) for painting the edges of the feet and toes with. She firstmet the Suo queen, mother of Dalim and then she met the Duo queen. Her intention was to get hold of the necklace on which her husband’s life was dependent. The Duo queen had occupied the necklace by her evil design. The princess gave her service to Duo. Duo was very much pleased with princess’s skill and above all her behaviour. At last she was successful to get hold of the necklace. There were professions like inn keeper, confectioner as we have seen in ‘*The Indigent Brahman*’^{xviii}.

Conclusion: In the above discussion we have seen the reflection of the life of the common people of Bengal. The queens represented the common Bengali women. They did the household chores. They are not above jealousy, hatred and other human error. The queens could do whatever needed for their interest. We have seen the life of the kings,rich merchants and people who could hardly manage their daily need. In the stories, the belief, position of the women in the society and day to day struggle of life has been seen. Even we have seen the law and order situation of the country though very seldom. In the stories people expressed the fulfillment of their dream.



ⁱChaudhury, P.C.Roy, General Editor's Introduction, Folk Tales of India, Vol.6. Folk Tales of Bengal by Geeta Mazumder, Sterling Publisher Pvt.Ltd., First Edition, New Delhi, 1960, p.10, Retrieved from <http://archive.org>.

ⁱⁱDey, LalBehari, *Folktales of Bengal*, <http://gutenberg.org>

ⁱⁱⁱMazumder, Dakshina Ranjan Mitra (1907), *Thakurmar Jhuli*. Retrieved from <https://panotbook.com>.

^{iv}In Bengali folktales, the king has invariably two or more than two queens. One of the queens is loved by the king and is termed as Suo Rani (Suo means loved and Rani means queen) and another of the queens is not loved by the king and termed as Duo Rani (Duo means not loved).

^vDey, LalBehari, op.cit.

^{vi}op.cit.

^{vii}op.cit.

^{ix}op.cit.

^xop.cit.

^{xi}op.cit.

^{xii}op.cit.

^{xiii}op.cit.