

Lullabies, Riddles, and Rhymes: Children's Folklore in Assamese Households

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Abstract:

Children's folklore is an essential part of everyday culture in Assamese households. It plays both functional and emotional roles in the development of young minds. This article looks at three main elements of children's folklore in Assam: lullabies, riddles, and rhymes. It examines how these traditions are shared within families. The study aims to document and explore these oral traditions, focusing on their forms, meanings, and significance in modern Assamese society.

The paper views these folkloric forms as more than just entertainment or childcare tools. They are cultural expressions that carry values, beliefs, language, and social instructions. The data collected includes traditional lullabies sung by mothers and grandmothers, riddles exchanged during play, and rhymes used for teaching basic counting or moral lessons.

Using secondary sources and targeted interactions with families in rural and semi-urban Assam, the research identifies patterns in how these forms are passed down and how their presence has changed due to social changes and media influences. Findings suggest that while lullabies are still common in rural areas, riddles and rhymes are declining due to digital distractions and changes in language. Nonetheless, these forms remain important for emotional bonding, moral education, and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Assamese folklore, children's oral traditions, lullabies, riddles, rhymes, cultural transmission, folk education

Introduction:

Children's folklore includes a range of oral, musical, and performative traditions shared with kids. This includes lullabies, riddles, rhymes, songs, games, and simple stories passed down through generations. In many societies, especially those with strong oral traditions, these forms are vital for raising, educating, and entertaining children. They amuse young ones and communicate values, beliefs, and social norms.

In Assamese culture, children's folklore holds a special place. From soothing lullabies sung by mothers and grandmothers to playful riddles exchanged among siblings and rhymes used in early learning, these traditions provide the first layers of cultural experience for children. Oral traditions in Assam, like in many places, have often been a primary way to pass on culture. They maintain language nuances, embed familial and moral values, and create early emotional bonds between generations.

The choice to focus on lullabies, riddles, and rhymes comes from their commonality and cultural importance. Lullabies, or nisukoni geet, often carry the melody of maternal love and cultural symbols. Riddles offer both fun and mental challenges, while rhymes serve as rhythmic, repetitive tools for teaching and play.

This research aims to explore how these forms are practiced, preserved, and perceived in Assamese households today. The key questions guiding this study are: How do Assamese lullabies, riddles, and rhymes reflect cultural

values? What role do they have in child development and socialization? How are these oral traditions changing due to modernization and digital media?

This article aims to answer these questions through a mix of descriptive and interpretive analysis, drawing on both literature and lived experiences. It highlights the lasting value of children's folklore and the ongoing need to document them in a rapidly changing cultural environment.

Conceptual Framework:

Folklore broadly refers to traditional beliefs, customs, stories, songs, and practices passed orally from generation to generation. Within this, children's folklore is a distinct category, focusing on materials created for or shared by children, including lullabies, rhymes, and riddles. These elements are integral to daily household life and shape childhood experiences and early learning.

Several theories help frame our understanding of children's folklore. The functionalist theory, developed by Bronislaw Malinowski, views folklore as serving practical purposes in society. In this lens, Assamese lullabies help soothe children while passing on cultural norms and emotional values. Riddles sharpen memory and reasoning, and rhymes enhance language rhythm and vocabulary.

Structuralist theory, as described by Claude Lévi-Strauss, emphasizes the underlying structures in cultural narratives. Assamese riddles and rhymes often use binary oppositions (day/night, animal/human, good/bad) to help children make sense of the world through patterned thinking. These structures offer a framework for understanding social relationships and natural events.

Performance theory is another useful perspective. It suggests that folklore should be seen as an event—something performed with participants and audiences. A lullaby is more than just a song; it is a personal performance filled with emotional depth and situational meaning. Riddles gain significance from the playful interaction between speaker and listener, while rhymes are often performed in group games or learning moments.

In addition, children's folklore serves as a tool for education and socialization. These oral traditions introduce children to languages, cultural codes, and moral expectations. They teach children how to behave, imagine, and belong. In Assam, where oral traditions thrive in many rural homes, these forms are still crucial for informal education and cultural grounding.

Thus, this conceptual framework combines functional, structural, and performative perspectives to explore children's folklore as a dynamic part of Assamese households. This approach allows for a deep analysis of how oral traditions shape children's lives and the cultural fabric connecting generations.

Historical and Cultural Background of Assamese Oral Traditions:

Oral storytelling and folklore in Assam have a long history, forming the cultural backbone of rural and indigenous communities. Long before written literature became common, stories, songs, and rhymes were shared from one generation to the next through word of mouth. This rich oral tradition preserved collective memory, moral values, spiritual beliefs, and everyday knowledge.

In Assamese society, oral narratives have always been vital, both in households and the larger community. Whether through bedtime stories from elders, harvest songs during the Bihu festival, or chants recited in rituals, these traditions created a living archive of experiences, beliefs, and life instructions. In rural and tribal areas, oral forms like folktales (burhi aair sadhu), lullabies (nisukoni geet), riddles (phanki), and rhymes (chora) are central to both social gatherings and home life.

Seasonal festivals in Assam, such as Rongali Bihu and Bhogali Bihu, are closely linked to folklore. During these events, songs, dances, and performances tell stories about nature, love, and farming life. Folk songs like Bihu geet and Ojapali performances are not just entertainment—they express a community's collective feelings of joy, sadness, resilience, and hope. Children often participate in these events, playing folk games and performing rhymes that help pass on cultural knowledge.

Gender plays a key role in transmitting folklore in Assamese households. Women, especially mothers and grandmothers, have traditionally been the main keepers of children's folklore. Their role in raising children makes them natural storytellers, singers of lullabies, and reciters of rhymes. Through daily tasks—rocking a child to sleep, cooking, or bathing—their routines become infused with layers of cultural meaning. Their voices preserve not just the words of folklore, but also the emotions, rhythm, and context often missing in written texts.

Assamese oral traditions create an active and vibrant space where memory, performance, and identity are continually formed and reformed. These traditions are not remnants of the past; they are living practices that change with each generation, particularly through the voices and actions of women in the household.

Typology of Children's Folklore in Assam:

Children's folklore in Assam is a significant part of its intangible cultural heritage. It represents the oral traditions, games, and creative expressions passed down through generations. These forms are not just sources of fun; they also transmit values, moral lessons, and cultural identity to younger people. Due to the state's ethnic diversity, children's folklore in Assam has many forms shaped by local traditions, languages, and social contexts.

1. Nursery Rhymes and Lullabies

One common form of children's folklore is nursery rhymes (xoru geet) and lullabies (nidora geet). These are simple, rhythmic pieces that are easy to remember and often include movements or clapping. Lullabies comfort children to sleep, while rhymes use images from nature, rural life, and familiar animals. Songs like Aai Mur Bapu and O' Bokul Phool emphasize parental love and the beauty of daily surroundings, fostering emotional connections and early language skills.

2. Oral Storytelling

Storytelling (Katha kowa) is important in Assamese children's cultural life. Elders narrate folk tales, fables, and moral stories, especially during evening gatherings. Stories such as Tejimola, Tula aru Teja, and those in Burhi Aair Xadhu by Lakshminath Bezbaroa combine entertainment with moral lessons, often using symbolic characters and situations to teach values like honesty, kindness, and courage.

3. Songs for Play and Group Activities

Songs linked to games (khebor geet) are popular in Assamese childhood. These songs are sung together during group play, often with clapping, circular formations, or simple dances. Counting songs (ganatiya geet) help choose players in games, allowing children to learn numbers and coordination while enhancing social skills.

4 Traditional Games and Play Culture

Games like guti khel, posua khel, ghila khel, and seasonal games such as koni juj during Bihu make up another category of folklore. These activities mix physical movement with verbal expressions, rhymes, or chants that have been passed down orally. They also help develop teamwork, strategic thinking, and agility.

5. Riddles and Verbal Puzzles

Riddles (ukham) are a fun form of children's folklore that improve memory, reasoning, and observation skills. Typically based on everyday objects or local customs, riddles are shared during leisure time, enhancing mental sharpness and cultural knowledge. An example is, "Dinae hoi naai, rati hoi naai, bhoru hoi" (It is neither day nor night, yet it is morning—dawn).

6. Proverbs and Sayings

Short proverbs (bakor-bani) and moral sayings are shared with children to impart discipline and practical wisdom. These brief expressions often carry deep cultural meaning and are remembered into adulthood.

Children's folklore in Assam connects generations, nurturing language skills, cultural values, and social behavior. While modernization and digital entertainment reshape childhood experiences, preserving and documenting these traditional forms is essential. They are not csak pastimes; they hold Assam's cultural memory, shaping identity from the earliest years.

Regional and Social Variations in Children's Folklore in Assam:

Children's folklore in Assam is diverse. The state's varied geography and ethnic groups lead to noticeable differences in the songs, games, and stories shared with children. Although common elements unite these traditions, their forms and content often vary based on the region, community, and social context.

Regional Distinctions

In the Brahmaputra Valley, where Assamese is the main language, rhymes and stories often reflect river life. Common images include boats, fishing nets, seasonal floods, and paddy fields. Outdoor games like guti khel, posua khel, and ghila khel thrive in village courtyards and along riverbanks.

In the Barak Valley, where Bengali is spoken by many, children hear rhymes and lullabies similar to Bengali folk traditions but influenced by local pronunciations and experiences. Games here may adapt to smaller courtyards or indoor spaces due to the higher population density in towns and villages.

The hill districts present another variation. In the Karbi, Dimas, Mising, and Bodo communities, songs and stories often center on forests, hunting, and farming rituals. A Karbi children's song might celebrate a good harvest, while Mising games are closely linked to festivals like Ali-Aye-Ligang.

Social Differences

Rural communities tend to preserve traditional children's folklore more vigorously. In the evenings, grandparents often share folk stories, and children's games usually involve songs or counting rhymes that have been passed down through the years. These often reflect farming life, changing seasons, and local wildlife.

Urban areas depict a different scene. Here, modern schooling, television, and online media bring new songs and games, often in English or Hindi. While some traditional forms persist, they frequently blend with contemporary influences. For instance, a counting rhyme may mix Assamese numbers with English words learned in school.

Ethnic Influences

The various ethnic groups in Assam each bring their own children's traditions. Bodo children's songs (Khontha) include references to nature and local deities. Rabha children's games often follow the rhythm of their farming seasons. In Muslim communities along the riverine Char areas, lullabies sometimes blend Islamic expressions with Assamese folk patterns, creating a unique cultural mix.

Seasonal Variations

Festivals add a lively touch to children's folklore. During Bihu in the Brahmaputra Valley, children play koni juj (egg fighting) and join in playful songs. In tribal regions, harvest festivals like Bushu Dima or Ali-Aye-Ligang introduce their own games, chants, and songs designed especially for children. These seasonal customs keep folklore tied to the agricultural calendar and community life.

The regional and social differences in Assam's children's folklore demonstrate how adaptable and deeply rooted these traditions are. Each community shapes its rhymes, games, and stories to fit its environment, language, and lifestyle. This diversity enriches Assam's cultural heritage, ensuring that children's folklore remains a meaningful tradition across generations.

Documentation and Preservation:

The survival of children's folklore in Assam faces growing challenges in the 21st century. Rapid modernization, urban migration, and the rise of digital content threaten many oral traditions, especially those meant for children. Traditional forms like lullabies, riddles, and rhymes, which used to thrive through oral sharing in households or communities, are now less frequently passed down from elders to younger generations.

One significant challenge is that oral traditions are inherently fleeting. Without written records or audio-visual documentation, unique local versions of folklore may vanish with the passing of older community members. The lack of organized archiving, especially in indigenous or remote areas of Assam, significantly contributes to the erosion of these traditions.

Recognizing this issue, several academic and cultural institutions have started taking steps to document and preserve children's folklore. Departments of Folklore and Cultural Studies at universities like Gauhati University and Tezpur University have launched ethnographic research projects focusing on oral traditions, including fieldwork aimed at recording and studying children's songs and stories. Cultural organizations like the Srimanta Sankaradeva Kalakshetra and Assam Sahitya Sabha have also begun promoting folklore documentation as part of broader efforts to preserve Assamese heritage.

Additionally, NGOs and independent researchers are working with local communities to capture folk narratives, rhymes, and performance practices through audio and video formats. For instance, documentation projects in Dhemaji and Barpeta districts have successfully recorded lullabies and riddles recited by village elders, later converted into accessible digital formats or published in regional journals. These materials are crucial not just for academic purposes but also for cultural revival, allowing younger generations to reconnect with their intangible heritage.

Despite these efforts, the process remains fragmented and underfunded. A more coordinated policy initiative is necessary to ensure the continuity of Assam's rich oral legacy, especially regarding childhood traditions.

Children's Folklore in Contemporary Assam:

Children's folklore in contemporary Assam exists in a dynamic, albeit complex, space. While many traditional forms like lullabies, riddles, and folk tales still hold cultural significance, their expression and presence have evolved, often reshaped by changing lifestyles, media habits, and schooling.

In rural regions, particularly among tribal and riverine communities, children's folklore still plays an essential role. Oral traditions are often woven into daily activities—recited during play, agricultural festivals, or family gatherings. Grandmothers continue to sing lullabies (niyoror geet) and share animal stories that impart moral

lessons, keeping emotional and cultural ties strong across generations. However, in urban areas, these traditions are becoming rare, often replaced by digital entertainment, YouTube rhymes, and television cartoons.

Fortunately, efforts have emerged to revive and reinterpret children's folklore in Assam. School curricula, particularly in Assamese-medium government schools, have begun to include folk rhymes and stories in language textbooks. Integrating traditional riddles and rhymes (e.g., "Moi jabo ali, tu jabi lali") into early learning modules helps bridge formal education with local oral culture. Furthermore, community radio programs in places like Darrang and Goalpara now feature storytelling sessions where children are encouraged to listen to and engage with folk tales in their mother tongue.

Storytelling festivals supported by cultural NGOs and literary societies have raised awareness of these traditions. Events like "Xoru Xahitya Xonmilon" and school-level folk competitions in Nagaon and Jorhat not only celebrate oral arts but also inspire children to learn and perform them.

Digital media poses both challenges and opportunities. While global content dominates children's screens, some Assamese YouTube channels have started producing animated versions of local folk tales and rhymes, repackaging folklore in appealing formats for today's tech-savvy kids.

Overall, children's folklore in Assam continues to serve vital roles—teaching values, preserving language, and fostering community identity. Its future, however, depends on thoughtful cultural education, inclusive policies, and innovative strategies to keep folklore relevant in both classrooms and homes.

Findings and Discussion:

The study of Assamese children's folklore reveals a lively but uneven landscape of survival and adaptation. Lullabies, known as Nisukoni Geet, remain well-preserved in rural areas. Mothers and grandmothers sing these calming songs while putting children to sleep, keeping the oral tradition alive in quiet moments. These lullabies often express themes of love, divine protection, and longing, providing emotional security and cultural identity. Although they are not widely recorded or broadcast, their presence in rural households highlights the strong connection between family and tradition.

Conversely, riddles (Phanki) are on the decline, especially in urban areas. Children in towns have limited interaction with traditional riddles, as mobile games and video content replace interactive play. Elders express regret over the fading of this once-popular pastime that encouraged creativity and critical thinking. The educational value of riddles—promoting reasoning and memory—is now often supplanted by classroom exercises.

Rhymes (Chora), however, have adapted more successfully. Many traditional rhymes are now part of primary textbooks or are reimagined in animated videos and songs on digital platforms. While the original melodies and rhythms may change, the educational purpose—teaching language, counting, seasons, and moral values—remains intact. This merging allows rhymes to persist within modern educational frameworks.

Together, these findings show that Assamese children's folklore continues to play a crucial role in emotional bonding, early language development, and cultural continuity. However, how it is passed down is significantly affected by location (rural vs urban), access to media, and evolving family dynamics. There is an urgent need to document and revitalize these traditions, particularly for forms like riddles that are in danger of disappearing without active preservation efforts.

Conclusion:

Children's folklore in Assam is a vital part of the state's rich intangible heritage. The study highlights the deep cultural, emotional, and educational importance of oral traditions like lullabies, riddles, and rhymes in childhood experiences. These forms are not merely entertainment; they are essential tools for teaching language, moral values, social norms, and emotional resilience. Passed down through generations, they create bonds between children and caregivers, instill cultural identity, and support cognitive development.

In rural areas, traditional forms like lullabies are still widely practiced, often in their original shapes. They play a significant role in early childhood care. However, other forms like riddles face decline due to urbanization, lifestyle changes, and growing dependence on digital entertainment. While some rhymes have found new forms in textbooks or media, they often lose their original oral character in the process.

The findings emphasize the pressing need to preserve and revitalize children's oral folklore in Assam. Increasing interest through educational curricula, community storytelling initiatives, local media, and cultural festivals can narrow the gap between tradition and modernity. Institutions like schools, universities, and cultural organizations must actively participate in documenting, researching, and creatively adapting these traditions. Ensuring that these oral traditions are passed down through generations is crucial for preserving heritage and promoting holistic child development.

Future research might explore digital archiving, intergenerational learning platforms, and community-based preservation projects. Policymakers, educators, and cultural practitioners need to recognize folklore's potential as both an educational tool and a cultural asset. In conclusion, Assamese children's folklore, despite facing various challenges, remains a living, evolving tradition that deserves renewed focus, creative investment, and institutional support for its ongoing significance in contemporary society.

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