

# Digitisation and Challenges: A Study of Assamese Oral Narratives

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**Abstract-** Digital technology has modified the oral narratives including myths, legends and folktales by providing the complexity of visual modes which has transformed indigenous folktales into contemporary technology-based stories which can be accessed via the screen. Modern technology has reshaped conveyance of oral narratives bringing new possibilities into this repackaging has had on the genre and its function to the people who produces them. This paper attempts to talk about the various changes that take place during the process of digitisation and its impact on the text and context of the contemporary legends of Assam. This paper is also based on the hypotheses that in order to transform the oral narratives into an electronic text, a lot of cultural overlooking, misplacing or mislaying happen which may lead to several wrong interpretations in the future and may get documented forever like this. This paper also tries to reiterate the significant challenges that one may face while digitising the oral narratives of Assam.

**Key words:** Assamese Oral Narratives, Digitisation, Challenges, Solution

## INTRODUCTION:

“Talking the way, a storyteller does... means being able to feel and live in the very heart of culture means having penetrated its essence, reached the marrow of its history and mythology given body to its taboo, images ancestral desires and terrors.” The statement quoted by Dr. Desmond L Kharmawphlang (2021) from Llosa Mario, Vargas, Trans, Helen Lane, 1989 in *The Storyteller*, New York: Farrar, Strans and Giroux.

Tradition states in many ways that the Word is the World. Storyteller through his art of word gives us access to the very heart of the world with the primacy of visual perception and descriptions with aural sensitivity by descending into a landscape, the music of the world, rhythms and melodies. Oral narratives being one of the significant collective and cultural representations interplay with perception, observation, categorisation, experience and get manifested in the intellectual and spiritual attitude of the mass in general. Thus, the dynamics of the process of oral tradition transmitted from generation to generation results orality manifested in a more creative way.

Oral tradition of Assam promotes education, history, and culture through the verbal and non-verbal communication like performing arts, oral literature, oral history and sometimes indigenous worldview along with the modern scientific ways of contemporary lifestyle of the state. Oral narratives such as contemporary legends of Assam reflect several social issues of Assamese society told in many different modes and media, where readers find many challenges: Are they true? History or present or where should this be placed? Who in the earth have faced it and so on? Digital technology has popularised the oral narratives such as contemporary legends by repackaging with audio-visual techniques which is easily accessible through screen. This technique is certainly a process of documentation and preservation of the age-old traditional cultural items by bringing together lots of innovations. This technology based representation of oral narratives produce filmic narratives very close to what is treated as ‘reality.’ While going through this process, the whole unit goes through a lot of technical assessment and they get modified, reshaped and repackaged in order to get success including audience. Digitisation has come a long way by the mean of preservation, collection, documentation and archiving this intangible heritage. During this entire process of digitisation, screen replaces the traditional oral structure by the performances acquiring alternative dramatic techniques which also can be considered as the loss of traditional form of cultural loss. However, creativity and balance transformation would give traditional items all the capital that it needs in order to re-enforce, restore and rebuild the pride and constitute the new deal. Assam, being an abode of several tribal and non-tribal needs lots of attention while considering the task of digitisation of oral narratives. It needs to concentrate on the sensitivity of the whole community including text, context, history, and politics based on some research on proper socio-cultural situations as the situation. As Bhattacharjee has said, “Identity is coarse that provokes us to think in Levi-Straussian was that how a community chooses its metaphor as coarse against fine? Is it accepting stereotype or subversion? Have we asked these questions?”

This paper tries to propose some systematic ways in order to study different possible elements to upgrade the oral versions of folk literature to digital versions in its own Indian way.

## Digitisation of Oral Narratives in Assam:

India carries the South Asian Art Traditions of the treasure of ‘established epics’ the Mahabharata, Ramayana is acknowledged as one of the living, vibrant areas of the world. These treasures of ancient history and collective memory need to be collected, consolidated and preserved in order to keep them alive. Complex nature of orality, ways and means of expression, function and transmission make oral literature special. Oral narratives of Assam are an excellent medium of communication on the basis of

sharing knowledge, ideas, information passing through ages to reach out the present juncture and also to carry on. Prafulladatta Goswami in his book "Ballads and Tales of Assam" has mentioned that "Assamese speaking people is touched on all sides by Mongoloid tribes, some Aryanaized and some still retaining their tribal affiliations, the folklore of the former raises problems, of borrowing, of lending and of synthesis." They can neither be considered as primitive nor have been carried away with modern industrialisation. However, the flavour of ancient, agricultural and industrial ages is anyway keeping a pace in order to grow and make a position in the society. Assamese ballads, tales, riddles, jokes, legends, songs, myths, graffiti are an important element of folk literature can be considered as an excellent mode of keeping the history, heritage and consciousness of our ancient cultures alive since times immemorial. Assamese folklore has come a long way from British Missionary Civil Servant period of Indian Folklore Studies. Assamese folk literature was well collected by the British Missionaries and colonial administration. Genre analysis, classification reached an international standard on the hands of Prafulladatta Goswami. However, later Dr. Birendranath Datta has raised the question of ethnic genre.

In the contemporary world, human lives are interwoven with "New Media" or "Digital Media" and so we may call ourselves "Digital Natives." It's a continuity of earlier forms of communication and information such as printed books, journals, newspapers which are referred as hardcopies. Television, radio, computer are the medium which can be considered as digital media that accepts the technique of literature preservation that has been widely accepted and supported by indigenous communities around the world in order to have cultural restoration.

A significant collection of oral literature from different parts of tribal and non-tribal communities from Northeast India has been seen restored in digital media. Folk tale collection "Burhi Aair Xadhu", "Koka Deuta and Natilora" are being released as short videos, movies, documentaries and have been made popular. Blogs, Vlogs are new ways of promoting cultural items extensively in social media representing a vast range of Assamese folk beliefs, legends released in a global scale. Ritual texts, curative chants, epic poems, folk tales, creation stories, songs, myths, spells, legends, proverbs, riddles, tongue-twisters, recitations are available in YouTube, Spotify. Mythical figures are represented through serials, movies. Folk customs, rituals, beliefs included in the Ankiya Naat (Dance drama initiated by Sanakaradeva, the Vaishnavite religious master, social reformer, poet and dramatist of Assam in fourteenth century) have showcased all over the world and have been documented in the digital media ensuring the collective memory from one generation to another generation over the popular mythical figures, stories related to them especially related to mythical figures of the epics like Ramayana, Mahabharata.

Rediscovery of old narratives raising some social issues especially contemporary problems related to anxiety, fear, belief among general people have been commonly identified by the contemporary legends. Current urbanisation has contributed towards the development of folk literature and it's gradually becoming a closed up chamber for contemporary legends especially after the infrastructural changes that have been happening in the field of road, residential complexes, business centres, shopping malls and so on. As such we see a major transformation happening in case of contemporary legends especially after digital revolution. Assam being a meeting point of many communities, faiths and cultures has been the hub of cultural diversity owing to multiple ethnic and non-ethnic communities living herein. Problems of housing, pollution, transportation, economic growth are on the rise besides age old problems related to caste-creed, superstition, safety, education, medical and hygiene. Urbanisation has profoundly influenced our day today lives and livelihood which has been changing the day today discussions and literature of the common people. Stress, anxiety, expectations getting reflected through their thoughts, language, writings and also through literary genres like jokes, legends and anecdotes. Widespread social media communities such as Facebook, Twitter, Blogs and Personal Homepages are strongly involved in connecting, influencing and disseminating those genres. Apart from orally circulated contemporary legends, we find several websites documenting the beliefs, tales of northeast, India. As Vos has argued that despite the many directives from innumerable sources to check possible contemporary legends with responsible websites such as [www.snopes.com](http://www.snopes.com), the mediated transmission of contemporary legends has not subsided. Apparently, these websites are functioning as a restoration house of the legends, emails and hoaxes and so on (de Vos, 2012). In one of the study in Assam, 46% contemporary legends are collected from Internet (Das, 2018). Out of this, 34% contemporary legends are descriptive without visuals whereas, 66% contemporary legends contain some digitally altered photographs followed by description. Most of these descriptions and referred pictures are based on the oral narratives that were in circulation earlier.

Online archives show two types of purposefully altered photographs are found in this study: first, real photograph and second, trick photograph. These photographic urban legends are seemed to be extraordinary yet believable and express anxiety about threats to our society. Software applications have reduced the cost and labour intensiveness in producing these texts. As a result of which, these texts are available to amateurs on a range which was not possible earlier (Frank, 2011:215). In case digital folklore, legends have been collected from internet, where, different technologies become multi-modal. Texts of narratives are full of images, videos, symbols, which have been used in order to make the text more powerful. The data in the digital folklore presents several instances of multimodality that can be related to the legitimation of that which being narrated. Data are typed and this allows going for the choice in the use of Italics, Bold and overuse of punctuation in a personalised way in order to make the sense more intense. Images are fabricated ones combining elements from two separate and disparate life forms to produce an intuitive response from viewers. Documenting vernacular, traditional beliefs, customs, narratives, performances and physical entities through theatres, movies are extremely helpful in order to restore age old folklore. One of the most important globally popular urban legend of late is Slender Man. Digital portrayal of Slender Man was first created in 2009 by Eric Knudsen/Victor Surge, who says he "invented the character as an explicit 'attempt to cooperatively create new folklore' by mixing stock horror tropes with the generative power of the Internet" (Evans, 2014). In Assam, we have BurhaDangoriya (old big man stays in religious places like Naamghar, Ghorapaak, or Paak (a supernatural entity who looks like humans but with hooves of horses), bamboo ghost (large size human figure living in the middle of bamboos) resembles with Slender Man that we see in the western legends. Movies on famous Assamese folk tale collection Burhi Aair Xadhu has been made. Many characters of Burhi Aair Xadhu have

been represented in songs and videos. A movie on Assamese very popular legend Ghorapaak has been recently released, shows how Ghorapaak steals fishes from the houses and shows its existence. Few Assamese vlogs have started broadcasting videos about supernatural elements of Assam, thus documenting the colloquial beliefs, superstitions. Similarly, several versions of the very popular contemporary legend “The Vanishing Hitchhiker” which has contributed a lot in the Hollywood film industry are available in Assam. Desmond L. Kharmaphlang, the famous folklorist has also claimed that in Meghalaya, many versions of the same are available in Shillong and its neighborhood giving it a universal representation. Brunvand stated that the contemporary legend is losing its vitality as an oral narrative legend and it has mostly shifted from “folklore into popular culture, where they become stereo-typed, standardized, exploited, co-modified and repackaged in a number of ways” (Brunvand, 2001: xxvii). But, looking at the vitality of internet, he further states that performances of contemporary legends are now being shaped by the Internet rather than face –to –face communication (Brunvand, 2001: xxviii). As such with the help of emerging cyber ethnography, by the mean of chat groups, blogs, online activities of communication and interaction folk groups can be easily identified.

Alan Dundes, too in similar tone says in his presidential plenary address to the American Folklore Society in 2004 that the future of the discipline folklore is dark by challenging that the “state of folkloristics at the beginning of the twenty-first century is depressingly worrisome” (Dundes, 2005: 385). In a similar perspective, Richard M. Dorson said in 1972 “a few more years, there will be no more folklore, and no need for any folklorists”. But later, Dorson himself responded again by looking elsewhere and found folklore in the media and a folk in the city (Blank, 2009:8). Similarly, Dundes also realized that despite all the doom and gloom, folklore “continues to be alive and well in the modern world, due in part to increased transmission via e-mail and the Internet” (Dundes, 2005: 406). This is evident in the process of digitisation, where people continue to restore, research and represent the Assamese rich legacy of oral literature. All the orally circulated narratives along with the beliefs, stories are getting circulated, modified and discussed in the social media. Kid in nuclear families living in a metro gets the benefit of listening the stories through podcasts, YouTube, Spotify may enjoy the vernacular folk tales. Online archiving of audio and video recordings of oral narratives is a technique of cultural preservation that has been widely welcomed by indigenous communities around the whole state of Assam. Through the amalgamation of some extra-diegetic elements such as soundtrack and music, colour, lighting set up and voice-over with music, these stories through electronic media provide cause and effect relations, creating suspense, surprise, fear, pleasure, and anxiety among others. Thus, the filmic representations of the contemporary narratives encompassing landscape, action, function, information, emotions provide an overwhelming catharsis affect to the whole discourse is many a time considered to be a reality, all of which brings together a platform for collection, preservation, archiving and digitisation with the combine effort of the tools of The Information and Communication Technology.

### **Challenges during Digitisation of Oral Narratives in Assam**

As Jawaharlal Handoo rightly stated that in the context of folk literature or folklore of the tribes of Assam, we have neither archive, bibliography nor sufficient collection (Bhattacharjee, 2021). In the same tone, Shinjini Das, a post-doctoral research fellow at the University of Cambridge said, ‘the culture of preservation and archiving historical resources is poor in India, and only large-scale digitization can help conserve the priceless documents that are on the brink of decay (Basu, 2014). Digitising these narratives presents significant challenges that must be overcome to ensure that these valuable cultural artefacts are not lost to future generations. However, this process may be challenging. This paper also tries to focus on some challenges during the process of digitisation.

One of the primary challenges in digitising Assamese oral narratives is the lack of standardisation in transcription. The Assamese language is unique, with its own set of dialects and variations, making it difficult to transcribe accurately. The dialects and variations in pronunciation can differ significantly from one region to another, making it difficult for transcribers to standardise the transcription process. This challenge can be addressed by establishing a standardised transcription process, including the development of a pronunciation guide for transcribers, and the use of modern technology, such as speech recognition software, to improve the accuracy of transcriptions.

Another significant challenge in digitising Assamese oral narratives is the lack of access to reliable digital infrastructure. Many of the regions where these narratives originate are located in remote and underdeveloped areas, where access to the internet and digital technology is limited. This lack of access to digital infrastructure makes it challenging to digitise the narratives and preserve them for future generations. One potential solution to this challenge is to establish community centres equipped with digital infrastructure, such as computers and internet access, to provide local communities with the necessary resources to digitise their oral narratives. Another challenge in digitising Assamese oral narratives is the lack of standardisation in digitisation methods. The methods used to digitise these narratives can vary significantly, making it difficult to create a consistent database of digitised narratives. This challenge can be addressed by developing a standardised digitisation process, including the use of consistent file formats, metadata standards, and indexing protocols, to ensure that the digitised narratives are easily accessible and searchable. Additionally, a significant challenge in digitising Assamese oral narratives is the lack of trained professionals in the field of digitisation.

Digitising oral narratives requires specialised knowledge and expertise in areas such as linguistics, folklore, cultural studies, anthropology information science, and digital preservation. However, the number of professionals with this expertise is limited, making it difficult to develop and implement effective digitisation strategies. Addressing this challenge requires investing in education and training programmes to develop a new generation of experts in the field of digitisation. Finally, a critical challenge in digitising Assamese oral narratives is the ethical considerations surrounding the digitisation process. Oral narratives are often considered sacred and deeply connected to the cultural identity of local communities. Digitising these narratives without proper consultation and consent from the communities involved can result in the loss of cultural and spiritual significance. Addressing

this challenge requires involving local communities in the digitisation process, ensuring that their voices and perspectives are heard and that their cultural heritage is respected and preserved.

### CONCLUSION:

Abhijit Bhattacharya, documentation officer at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta (CSSSC)—an institute that works closely with the government in nurturing research on humanities—has taken up the challenge of converting old books and documents found in eastern India into digital form and making them available for everyone to access on the Internet. In a project funded by British Library, Bhattacharya and his team have so far collected 27,000 books printed before 1950 from different libraries and private possessions. Out of this, 3,850 books with 380,000 pages, accounting for 24 terabytes of data have already gone online (Basu, 2004). “This is no rocket science; rather a simple use of existing technology to feed data in a universally accepted form,” Bhattacharya said. What can make the project achieve its potential, though, is its importance among scholars of Asian history the world over, he said.

In conclusion, digitising Assamese oral narratives is a crucial aspect of preserving the cultural heritage of Assam. However, this process presents significant challenges, including the lack of standardisation in transcription and digitisation methods, limited access to reliable digital infrastructure, and the lack of trained professionals in the field of digitisation. Additionally, ethical considerations surrounding the digitisation process must be addressed to ensure that the cultural and spiritual significance of these narratives is respected and preserved. Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative effort between government, academic, and community stakeholders to develop and implement effective digitisation strategies that preserve the rich cultural heritage of Assam for future generations.

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