

FOLKTALES OF ASSAM

TEJIMOLA (An Assamese Folktale (... from Joi Barua)

Once upon a time there lived a merchant with his beautiful wife and daughter Tejimola. He soon lost his wife and married another woman. The daughter was then under the care of her stepmother. The stepmother showed fake love towards Tejimola in front of the merchant to please him but deep within she actually hated Tejimola for her intelligence, beauty and the love her father had for her.

One day the merchant had to travel for his business trip. He left his wife and Tejimola and set off. During the absence of father the step mother became very cruel towards Tejimola. He scolded her, made her work tirelessly and even beat her. She wanted to get rid of the daughter, she thought "one day we have to marry this girl and give dowry as well. Why should we waste money in someone who's not even mine? I'll get rid of her and take all the riches to myself".

So one day a friend invited Tejimola to her wedding and to her surprise the stepmother let her go. She packed some clothes and jewelry's for her and told her to open the box only after she reaches to her friend's house. Tejimola agreed and when she reached her friend's house and opened the box she was shocked to find old rags and broken pieces of jewelries. She said "oh no, what will my mother do to me". Her friend however lend her some clothes and after the wedding when she reached home and showed the box the stepmother reacted in her worst possible way.

She took her to dheki (traditional assamese wooden rice powder) and made her pound rice. As she was doing this she slipped the girls hand into the heavy tool and crushed it. She then told her to do it with her legs and repeated the same action and crushed her legs.

Tejimola was in so much pain that her head fell on the dekhi and taking this chance the mother crushed her skull and killed her. She then buried her body in the backyard. When the concerned neighbor asked about her whereabouts she said she hadn't returned from her friend's wedding.

One day an old beggar knocked her door and begged for food " could you please pluck some of the lou (assamese gourd) from your backyard" the stepmother said" we do not have any lou".

The beggar took her to the garden and the mother was shocked and left. As the old lady reached out her hands to pluck the fruit a voice sang “

“Hato nemelibi lawo nisingibi kore mogonia toi, pat kaporor logote mahi aai khundile Tejimolahe moi.”

(Don't stretch out your hands or pluck my fruit oh beggar woman. My name is Tejimola and my step-mother buried me here, all dressed up in Assamese finery.)

The old lady got scared and reported this to the evil step-mother. Hearing this, she chopped down the bush and threw its remains in a desolate corner of the garden.

Which then turned into a plum tree, and was noticed by a group of travelling gypsies. They asked the mother and went to pluck the fruit only to hear the weeping and soulful voice of Tejimola.

“Please don't pluck me. Tejimola is my name. My evil step-mother murdered me, and now I am a tree with plums.” Startled beyond belief, the gypsies left the tree and promptly reported this to the evil step-mother. Infuriated hearing this, she took to the tree with an axe and chopped it down.

She then threw the remains of the tree into the river. Her husband was coming the next day, by boat. As he looked out to the waves of the rolling river, he spotted the most beautiful lotus he had ever seen in his life. It was large, and a beautiful bright pink with etches of white. “How my Tejimola would love it!” he thought and reached out to pluck it.

As his fingers caressed the very first petal, the lotus sang out in grief “Please don't pluck me father, this is I, your Tejimola. Your evil wife murdered me and now I am a lotus.” Stunned, the father thought it to be some kind of witchcraft and decided to challenge the lotus. “If you really are my Tejimola, turn into a bird and enter this cage I hold up and come home with me.” The merchant held out a cage, and before his very eyes, the lotus turned into the most beautiful white dove and flew right into his cage.

When he got home, he asked his wife where Tejimola was, to which she said the girl had gone to a friend's house and never came back. The merchant turned to the dove in the cage, and said “If you are really Tejimola, turn into your human form and come out of the cage.” The dove flew out and morphed into the beautiful Tejimola. The evil step-mother could not believe her eyes and fled the house forever. Tejimola and her father embraced and lived happily ever after.

FOLKTALE OF ASSAM

This tale has been taken from "Burhi Air Sadhu"- a collection of Assamee folktales, collected by Sahityarathi Lakshminath Bezbaroa and published in 1911. translated from Assamese by Madan Sarma and Gautam Kumar Borah

Once in a village there was a farmer called Phoring. His wife was rather selfish. The husband and the wife were the only members of the family. They did not have any children. It was the month of *Magh*, and there was a little drizzle. Phoring got up early in the morning and said to his wife, "It's cloudy today. I feel like having rice-cakes. Can't you bake some for me? I think I'll not have rice today." The wife said, "But where is *bara dhan* for making rice-cakes? We don't have any in the granary." "Well, it seems we can't have rice-cakes, then," the husband said.

The wife then said, "Please go out and see if *bara dhan* is being threshed in any household. Please go and ask for some."

The husband thought for some time and made a plan. He wrapped an *eri* warmer around his body and went out. Seeing that the threshing of *bara dhan* (a sticky variety of rice) was going on at a neighbor's place, Phoring went in. He sat near the threshing floor and initiated chatter with the householder about this and that. He sat there for quite some time, continuing the chatting. Meanwhile, the grains of rice got separated from the stalks. The householder shook the straws free of the grains and pushed them aside. Just then Phoring, complaining of a griping pain, rolled over the heap of paddy with the *eri* wrapper still around his body. The grains of *bara dhan* were covered by very fine bristles so that the grains of rice got stuck to the *eri* wrapper which had a rough surface. Phoring rolled three or four times over the heap of rice before leaving for home, pretending to be writhing in agony.

On reaching home, Phoring shook the *eri* wrapper and got a basketful of *bara dhan*. The wife was very happy to see the basket of rice. She at once boiled them, then sunned them and then removed the husks by beating the dried grains. And then she ground the sticky rice. In the evening, after cooking and serving meal to her husband, she took to prepare for baking rice-cakes. After food Phoring was sleepy and so he went to bed.

The wife baked twelve scores of cakes and put them on a bamboo tray. Then, she ate most of the cakes and put away the remaining few in a bowl. Before going to bed she woke her husband up and said, "I've finished baking rice-cakes, but I want to set a condition: Whoever gets up earlier tomorrow will eat one third of the cakes, and whoever wakes up late will get the two-thirds." Phoring agreed and went back to sleep.

Next morning none of them was ready to get up from bed. The sun was getting hotter, yet both went on snoring, pretending to be asleep. In the end, Phoring realized that he could not afford to go on sleeping like this by neglecting his work in the field. Let his wife have two-thirds of the rice-cakes, he would have just one-third, he thought and got up. Seeing him getting out of bed, his wife said, "You've got up before me. So you'll have only one-third of the cakes."

"It's all right, you have two-thirds," said her husband.

Phoring went to the kitchen to eat his share of rice-cakes and found that there were only a few. He asked his wife, "Where are the remaining rice-cakes?"

"Remaining rice-cakes? All the rice-cakes that I had made are there in the bowl. Have one third and keep the rest for me", she said.

How strange, thought Phoring, only these few cakes from a basketful of rice. Suddenly his eyes fell on the round bamboo tray hanging from the wall. He saw there the impressions left by the rice-cakes. He counted them up to find that they were three scores in total. Without saying anything to his wife he came out and sat down outside. His wife brought the *bota*, the bell-metal tray, and offered sliced areca nuts, paan and slices of *sali* bark to her husband. As he took them from the tray Phoring recited a proverb:

Divine the future with the plough
Drive with sticks the spirits out
Someone ate cakes three scores
Who can tell who knows?

His wife had understood the hidden meaning of the lines. She was ashamed of herself and immediately left the place to fetch water from the river. She met a number of women at the river landing and confided the story of rice-cakes to them. She concluded her narration by saying that her husband was in fact a fortune-teller. The word quickly spread, first among the village women, and then all the villagers came to know that Phoring was a fortune-teller.

A villager had lost one black cow of his. When he had failed to find the cow after searching for five days, the man approached Phoring, who he had meanwhile heard to be a fortune-teller. The man asked him if he could find some clue. Co-incidentally, that morning Phoring saw that black cow grazing in the field filled with tall reed-like grasses behind his homestead. So Phoring told the man, "Go and find your cow behind my homestead." The man followed his advice and immediately found his cow. After this incident it got well grounded all around that Phoring was an accomplished fortune-teller.

The news soon reached the King. Incidentally, the king had lost a gold necklace worth one hundred thousand coins. He searched it in every nook and cranny of the palace but the chain was not to be found. So, the King summoned Phoring to the court and asked him to find the lost gold chain.

When the King's messenger conveyed the King's order to Phoring, he was about to faint. If he refuses to go, the King will execute him. The King will execute him even if he goes but fails to find out the chain, or confesses that he is not a fortune-teller. He was completely at a loss, unable to decide what to do. So, by leaving everything to destiny and God he had left his home and presented himself before the King.

The King warmly welcomed the fortune-teller and ordered that he should be taken inside and served refreshments. Phoring was served such tasty foods as *doi*, milk, softened rice, molasses and other delicacies.

The King had two queens; one was called Madoi, the other Hadoi. It was Hadoi who had stolen the gold chain and hidden it somewhere. Learning that the fortune-teller had arrived, she was utterly terrified, apprehending that she would get caught. So she stood near the room where Phoring was eating and observed him through a chink in the wall. Phoring was equally frightened. When he saw the bowl of softened rice and *doi* (curd), he said to himself, aloud, "Uh-huh-*doi*! Eat well today; who knows what the King is going to do to you tomorrow!"

When the junior queen heard these words, she said "oh I am done for the fortune-teller has got me." She came out and said, holding his hand, "O Fortune-teller, please do not reveal this secret. I'll give you whatever you want."

It was immediately clear to the fortune-teller that queen Hadoi was the thief. He said to the queen, "Your Majesty, I'll not divulge the secret but you must bring the chain immediately and put it in the King's handy box." Then and there the queen followed his instruction.

Next day the King summoned the fortune-teller and asked him to tell who had stolen the necklace. The fortune-teller bowed to the king and said, "My Lord, I don't see anyone stealing the necklace. I think it is in your lordship's handy box."

The King had his handy box brought to him. When it was opened the gold chain was found to be lying there. Everybody was astounded at this. The King honoured him by making him a courtier and by generously rewarding him with lands, cash and other goods.

One day the king caught a *phoring*, a grasshopper, and held it in his fist and then asked the fortune-teller, "Tell me what I have here in my fist."

The fortune-teller thought his days were over. So he said in a saddened voice:

One I predicted by counting
Another by seeing
Saying *ha-doi* brought out the chain
Now Phoring, your life comes to an end.

The King did not know the fortune-teller's name. So he thought that by "phoring" he meant the grasshopper. The King released the grasshopper and gifted the fortune teller with his own dress.

One day the King hid a *xeluk*, the root of a water-lily, in his palm and said to the fortune-teller, "Tell me what I have in my fist." Utterly nervous, Phoring muttered, *barepoti xolako*, meaning, "I escape somehow every time!" The King heard it as the proverb, *burepati xeluk*, meaning "I find the root of a water-lily at every dip." The King rewarded the fortune-teller once more with a handsome amount of gold and silver.

Our clothes got blackened and so we came back home.

SECOND STORY

Once there lived a king who had seven sons and seven daughter in-laws. The youngest daughter in law was Rani and she was an orphan so she was loved by everyone. They made sure she never had to go through any sufferings or pain or see the cruel world outside so they kept her away from all of it instead of teaching her to cope up with it. Everyone called her sweet and simple Rani.

During the evening the seven wives or sisters sat together and wove clothes on their handlooms and had a long conversation amongst them, sharing secrets and stories until dinner. It was soon the time of the much awaited festival "Bohaag Bihu", where newly hand woven clothes were gifted to the family members. The seven sisters had cartloads of clothes to weave from flower patterned gamosas, finely threaded dhotis, scarves, shawls and chadors. They gathered in the courtyard and worked, making thread of cotton, late night for the festival.

During the conversation among themselves each sister shared as to how they planned to celebrate their festival and when they wish to go to their respective homes. The elder sister asked the middle one "