AN EXPLORATION OF THE INTERSECTION OF GENDER AND DISABILITY IN ASSAMESE FOLK TALES

JYOTISHMITA SARMA

zubaan

ZUBAAN
128 B Shahpur Jat, 1st floor
NEW DELHI 110 049
EMAIL: contact@zubaanbooks.com
WEBSITE: www.zubaanbooks.com

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My interest in the area of gender and disability was first stimulated when I saw my father struggling with his newly-acquired hemiplegia after a stroke in January 2009. He lived for three years after the incident and passed away in January 2012 after battling with a number of diseases. I had moved out of my hometown, Guwahati in 2007 to pursue higher studies in Delhi. After his impairment, my parents came to Delhi quite often for his treatment. Whenever I met him during that period, whether it was in Guwahati during my vacations or in Delhi where my parents stayed at my elder sister's place, I saw my father struggle with mundane activities at home. He did not go out much after his impairment, both due to his physical difficulties and infrastructural barriers. To see him struggle with his day-to-day activities caused much pain to all of us, as we had never seen him inactive or dependent on others before.

My father passed away in a hospital in Delhi. We cremated him two days later and went back home the very same day. During the period of mourning, several relatives frequented our home to offer condolences. At that time, I heard my mother lament to her relatives that she had only seen *dukh* (sorrows) and *bemari manuh* (literally sick people, but here it refers to people with disabilities) in her life. Her wails brought back memories of my maternal grandparents, both of whom had passed away before I was born, but whose stories I had grown up listening to. According to my mother, my *Aita* (maternal grandmother) was 'tom-boyish' in her childhood and often climbed trees and rooftops with her seven brothers and other male cousins. The reason my mother gave for this was that in a house full of young boys, if her mother did not behave like one, she would not get to partake of the fruits and berries that the boys gathered. She often got hurt while jumping from a height. According to my mother, this was perhaps the reason for her impairment. This perception had an immense impact on my mother and her mother's psyche, and they did not allow a carefree existence to the young girls in the family from my generation.

My Aita got married at the age of 12 as per the customs of middle-class, upper-caste households during that period. She had three children and, by the age of 20, developed immense body ache that left her bedridden. She passed away in 1986, when she was 51. According to my mother, although Aita's family consulted several doctors, her condition was never diagnosed. She explained this by saying that it was not uncommon for different conditions to go undiagnosed at the time, as medical technology was not very advanced. Aita's condition was, and still is, simply referred to as *gaar bikh* (body ache) in the family.

My *Koka* (maternal grandfather) was supposedly very good-looking. It was his good looks and his job in a bank that encouraged my mother's grandfather to give his daughter's hand in marriage to him. He got married in his 30s, at a time when he was transferred to different parts of Assam for his job. Koka suffered from a stroke when he was 41 and survived for about ten years after that. Considering the physical condition of both of my mother's parents, her maternal

grandfather considered it wise to shift the entire family to their home in Guwahati. Their disabilities and the pitiable condition of the three young children, all below 10 at that time, perhaps relaxed the gender norms of that period, as no one raised an eyebrow about this shift. My mother and her two siblings grew up in a loving home under the supervision of their strict grandparents, surrounded my numerous uncles, aunts, and cousins.

Apart from my maternal grandparents, there was also my mother's aunt, my *Maahi-Aita* (grand aunt), who was born with a congenital anomaly that restricted her growth physically, and perhaps also mentally. Like my Aita's condition, her condition her condition was never named. However, unlike Aita, she never got married, because her condition was congenital and she did not have any children. When she was younger, my mother's Aita wished for her beloved daughter to die early so that she did not become a burden on anyone later in her life. Maahi-Aita, however, lived a very long life and passed away perhaps in her late 60s or early 70s, in the early 2000s. During the last years of her life, she lived with her different brothers and nephews, as no one wanted to take her sole responsibility. As a teenager during that period, I vividly remember how, whenever someone considered to be worthier of living passed away, everyone cursed the almighty for not sparing that poor person's life in exchange for Maahi-Aita's, who was collectively considered less worthy of living owing to her disability, old age, and lack of her own children to take care of her. When I reflect on this now, I realise that since my Aita had children, she never had to grapple with such humiliation when she was alive.

When I came across feminist disability studies during my Masters, all these memories and experiences of different family members started making sense to me. Influenced by the work of feminist disability scholars, I wanted to understand the lives of persons with disabilities more deeply from an intersectional perspective. Hence, for all my research projects over the years, including my M.A. dissertation and my M.Phil and Ph.D research, my focus was on the lived experiences of women with disabilities. Through my reading and research, I also came

to realise that men with disabilities are particularly under-represented in studies on the lived experiences of persons with disabilities.

Apart from gender and disability, another area of interest for me has been folk tales. Like most young children from my generation in my community, I was very interested in listening to folk tales at bedtime in my childhood. I often pestered my elders to narrate one of the tales from the *Burhi Aair Xadhu* (Grandma's Tales) collection. My wish was seldom granted. I suppose by the time I was growing up in the late 1980s and early 1990s, folk tales were already considered to be a part of the past. Yet discussions with my Assamese friends much later in our lives revealed that most of them had at least heard a few stories from *Burhi Aair Xadhu.* Out of the many stories from the collection my favourites were 'Tejimola' and 'Silonir Jiyekor Xadhu' (Tale of the Kite's Daughter).

I remember that as a child I wanted to be like one of the female protagonists in the folk tales when I grew up. I wanted to be beautiful, innocent, docile, and caring towards my future husband, who would love me more than other women because of these qualities. I despised the other women in the tales: the stepmothers and co-wives, who had nothing better to do than to plot against the innocent female protagonists. I also never questioned the intentions of the male protagonists who often remained silent regarding the predicament of the female characters. Thankfully, over the years, I have given up these notions about good woman/bad woman and have started looking at women and men's roles and actions in these folk tales more critically. However, despite this, I had never considered retelling the folk tales to the younger generation as problematic.

Due to my fascination with folk tales, for a presentation on a course titled 'Introduction to Gender' during my Masters, I chose to present gender dynamics in two Assamese folk tales: 'Silonir Jiyekor Xadhu' and 'Tula aru Teja'[1] (Tula and Teja) from the collection *Burhi Aair Xadhu* published in A.K. Ramanujan's *Folktales from India* (1991). In my presentation, my focus was quite narrow—condemning the patriarchal implications in these tales. However, for someone who had

listened to these stories from a very early age, I failed to understand and explore how violent these tales were and what kind of influence they may have on young impressionable minds. The stunned reactions of my North Indian classmates after the presentation stunned me too, and I gave up my academic interest in folk tales completely after this. However, I tried continuing discussions on the unsuitability of these folk tales for young children in family gatherings. My arguments often went unheard.

The topic of Assamese folk tales was again raised in 2016, when I was doing my Ph.D fieldwork on the lived experiences of women ageing with locomotor disabilities in the Kamrup Metropolitan District, Assam. During the course of my fieldwork, I interviewed a middle-aged woman who had got her impairment at four due to a head injury. In one of my interviews with her mother, she said that, after the injury, her daughter's behaviour changed completely. She no longer paid attention to her lessons or her teachers in school and was deemed to be a bad influence on other students. Although her parents were in denial initially, other family members persuaded them to seek treatment for her condition outside the state. Her mother said that the process of seeking a 'cure' did more harm to her daughter, and when she returned home after several several surgical interventions that did not improve her condition, she found that her daughter was not able to talk to anyone. Her mother was emotionally distraught, but the family doctor urged her to continue talking to her daughter. Her mother obliged and started narrating folk tales to her daughter at bedtime. On one of these nights, her mother realised that after a point in the narration of 'Tejimola', a particularly disheartening folk tale about a young woman who was tortured by her stepmother when her father was away on business, her daughter cried loudly and put her hand on her mother's mouth not allowing her to continue with the tale.

During the interview, her mother said that this was the first instance in several months that they had realised that even though her daughter was not able to speak, her capacity to understand things was not hampered.

This anecdote remained with me as I wrote my thesis, but unfortunately the objectives of my study did not allow me to delve deeper into it. In the following years, when I re-read some of my favourite tales from my childhood, I realised that many of them were particularly ableist[2] and demeaning of persons living with disabilities in their approach. Interestingly, during the course of my research for this paper, I came across Amanda Leduc's *Disfigured on Fairy Tales, Disability and Making Space* (2020), where she makes similar claims about the omnipresence of disability in western fairy tales that she grew up reading and loving. This implies that disability as a motif has been used for inculcating moral values among young children all across the world without much consideration for the lived experiences of people with disabilities. While the issue of disability may not have garnered much attention at a time when these folk tales/fairy tales were collected or written, their current retellings must incorporate a disability rights framework, as in their original forms these tales tend to marginalise a significant section of the global population.[3]

This paper's objective is exploring selected stories from Lakshminath Bezbaroa's (1864-1938) famous collection of folk tales, *Burhi Aair Xadhu* (1911) using an intersectional feminist disability framework. The paper's aim is highlighting that several tales from this collection are extremely brutal and disparaging of persons with disabilities. In recent years, the problematic gender dynamics of some of these folk tales have been noted by some scholars (Barua 2020; Moran and Handique 2018; Nath 2011). However, the focus on gender and disability from an intersectional feminist disability framework is still wanting.

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In the discipline of disability studies, the lived experiences of persons with disabilities are described with the help of *models* (Ghai 2003). These models represent socio-cultural assumptions about disability and persons with disabilities in various periods of human development, along with the ways in which they were subject to different forms of

stigmatisation and discrimination (Ghosh 2012). Mike Oliver (1990), who has been credited as being one of the pioneers on the discussion of models of disability, conceptualised them as a binary distinction between what he termed as 'individual' and 'social' models of disability.

The *individual model of disability* encompasses several models like the moral model, the charity model, the personal tragedy model, and the medical model (Bhanushali 2007; Ghosh 2012). The fundamental tenets of the individual model are: firstly, the 'problem' of disability is located within an individual; and secondly, the causes of this problem are believed to originate from the functional or psychological limitations which are assumed to arise from disability (Oliver 1990). Medicalisation is considered to be a significant component of this model, as disability is often looked at as a medical deficit, and medical professionals frequently dominate the lives of persons with disabilities (Ghosh 2012; Oliver 1990).

In contrast, the *social model of disability* is a rejection of all these tenets and instead locates the problem of disability within society (Oliver 1990). The important tenets of this model are: firstly, it does not refute the importance of appropriate medical and rehabilitative interventions in relation to disability and instead demonstrates the drawbacks of this approach for the purpose of empowerment of persons with disabilities; and secondly, this model makes a conscious attempt to shift the attention away from the functional limitations and physiological and cognitive impairments of individuals to society's ability to systematically oppress and discriminate against persons with disabilities (Barnes 2003, 2012; Lang 2001).

An understanding of the social model had a great impact on the mobilisation of persons with disabilities in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s (Shakespeare and Watson 2002). Despite the positive role played by this model, from the 1990s onwards, an increasing number of disability scholars from the minority world, informed by feminist and post-modernist debates, have raised an internal critique about leaving out the body from the experience of disablement (Crow 1996; Morris, 2001; Shakespeare and Watson 2002; Swain and French 2000).

More recently, the relevance of the social model has also been questioned in the majority world,[4] as disability scholars have argued that the social model promotes a universal discourse on disability that fails to understand the broader socio-cultural, economic, and political environment in which disabilities are created and sustained in the majority world (Grech 2009). Further, the social model makes a homogenising assertion that all persons with disabilities are oppressed and excluded, while in reality this may not be the case. This is because different studies have shown that persons with disabilities experience both positive as well as negative attitudes along a continuum, even within the same country (Grech 2009).

The two predominantly used models for understanding disability in the Indian context are the religious/moral model and the personal tragedy/charity/pity model. In the *religious/moral model*, disability is regarded as divine retribution for past sins committed either by the individual or by their ancestors. In this model, the concept of *karma* governs the basic assumptions about disability and persons with disabilities are considered to be suffering from god's wrath. Due to this reason, persons with disabilities are feared or despised by wider society (Ghosh 2012). Another related notion in this model is that god inflicts suffering on good people to test their resilience and inner strength. The common factor in both these understandings is that disability is god's will, which must be respected (Dalal 2002). Such beliefs have resulted in ready acceptance of disability, and consequently less effort is put in for alleviating the life conditions of persons with disabilities (Dalal 2002; Mehrotra 2013). Additionally, this model also stigmatises family members of persons with disabilities, due to which disabilities are sometimes hidden by their families (Bhanushali 2007).

The *personal tragedy/charity/pity model* considers individuals who are diagnosed with a particular condition or impairment to be helpless dependents who need care and protection by others (Bhanushali 2007; Ghosh 2012). In this model, disability is considered an eternal childhood, where survival is contingent on constant care and protection (Ghai 2001). This model relies on charity and benevolence

rather than justice and equality (Bhanushali 2007). Labels like *bechara* (poor thing) accentuate the victim status of persons with disabilities, at the root of which lie cultural perceptions that view impairments as a result of the wrath of fate and, therefore, beyond redemption (Ghai 2002). In this case, destiny is considered the culprit while persons with disabilities are seen to be the victims (Ghai 2002).

In the area of disability, feminist research has been critiqued for its inability to adequately explicate the experiences of women with disabilities. Feminist disability scholars have critiqued that research on women with disabilities has usually focused on the *double disadvantage* that they experience, and which among the two, sexism or disablism, is more disempowering for women with disabilities (Morris 1998). Feminist disability scholars have also critiqued the male-dominated focus of the disability rights movement (Morris 1991). Feminist disability studies, however, are dominated by concerns of white middle-class women from the minority world, who tend to overlook the experiences and concerns of women with disabilities in the majority world. Due to this, the intersectionality perspective is an important analytical framework for studying the lived experiences of women with disabilities from the majority world, as it challenges the additive frameworks on the one hand and the primacy of one identity over another on the other (Miles 2019). The primary focus of this perspective is examining the complex relationships between different dimensions of differences such as race, gender, class, ethnicity, and sexuality (Miles 2019).

Persons with disabilities in Indian mythology are usually portrayed in a negative light. Some of the disabled women mentioned in Hindu mythology include Manthara, a woman with a locomotor disability who strategised Lord Rama's exile and Kubja, a hunchback *gopi* in Braj, whom Lord Krishna addressed as *sundari* (beautiful), for which he was teased for liking an impaired woman. Another example is that of goddess Lakshmi's older sister, whom Lord Vishnu refused to marry because of her facial disfigurement saying that there was no place for such women in heaven! Eventually, she was married to a peepul tree,

which was regarded to be another form of Lord Vishnu so that he could marry her younger sister, goddess Lakshmi (Bhambani 2003). In contrast to such a pitiable depiction of women with disabilities in Hindu mythology, men with disabilities are shown to occupy prominent positions. For instance, Dhritarashtra, born into a royal family with visual impairment, held a significant role as the king of Hastinapur despite being deprived of his throne initially due to his disability. Another example is his brother-in-law Shakuni, who plotted against the Pandavas. Eventually, both of them sided with with evil in the battle of Kurukshetra (Bhambani 2003). Such portrayal of persons with disabilities has had a detrimental effect on the minds of the people in India, who either perceive persons with disabilities as objects of pity or a personification of evil (Bhambani 2003).

Thus, while there have been analyses of gender and disability narratives in Hindu mythological literature over the years, a similar interest has not been shown in the case of folk literature. This paper bridges this gap by focusing on gender and disability narratives in *Burhi Aair Xadhu*.

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Folk tales can be defined as stories that are passed on orally from one generation to the next. According to Ramanujan (1991), to understand India's culture, it is not enough to restrict oneself to written classics, as oral traditions throw important light on the cultures of different societies. This is considered to be particularly true for societies with a dearth of written documents, archaeological and other evidence, such as in the context of India's Northeast (Deka 2011). For having better and prolonged administrative control over the native population of Assam, the British colonisers encouraged a study of folklore. The British produced remarkable volumes of folklore material in the late 19th century. They were soon followed by Assamese scholars who made a notable contribution to the collection of folklores from different parts of Assam in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (De, n.d.). Notable among Assamese scholars is Lakshminath Bezbaroa's work. Bezbaroa

was a prominent intellectual, whose literary contributions significantly contributed to the development and promotion of modern Assamese literature (Gogoi 2018). For his contribution, he was awarded the title *Sahityarathi*—the charioteer of literature (Gogoi and Boro 2016). This is significant because this was a time when the British did not consider Assamese to be a language distinct from Bengali.[5] Bezbaroa, along with others like Chandra Kumar Agarwala and Hem Chandra Goswami, were some of the crusaders who refused to accept the dominance of Bengali language over the people of Assam and chose to revive the Assamese language's lost identity. They started the publication of a revolutionary journal, *Jonaki* (meaning firefly) with the mission of not only reviving the Assamese language but also providing a space to write about its cultural and political aspects, guided by nationalistic sentiments (Gogoi and Boro 2016).

The Assamese word for folk tales is *xadhukotha*, which, according to Goswami (1960), means tales (*kothas*) that are recounted by a wandering *xadhu* (either a merchant or a wise and moral person). According to Bezbaroa (1911), xadhukotha means that a tale is narrated with the intention of teaching a moral lesson (Nath 2011). He had a keen interest in folk tales, as, according to him, the history of a folk tale of a particular nation is comparatively more valuable than the history of a great war. Bezbaroa had collected folk tales from different parts of Assam and had published three different volumes on them: *Burhi Aair Xadhu* (1911), *Kokadeuta Aru Nati Lora* (Grandfather and Grandson) (1913), and *Junuka* (1913) (Gogoi and Boro 2016; Nath 2011). In these folk tales, Bezbaroa assimilated dialects and speech from the native communities to give them a unique Assamese touch (Gogoi and Boro 2016). Although the target audience of these folk tales is little children, Bezbaroa did not compile them with the intention of amusing the children. It was instead a part of his life-long mission to establish the uniqueness of Assamese language and culture (Nath 2011).

According to Bezbaroa, even though similar folk tales existed in different parts of India, especially Bengal, the unique cultural

references in these folk tales distinguished them as solely Assamese tales (Gogoi and Boro 2016).

This relationship between folk tales, culture, and nationalism is not unique to Bezbaroa's work, as a similar relationship can also be seen in the work of the Grimm Brothers of Germany who published their famous fairy tale collection *Kinder-und Hausmarchen* (Children and Household Tales) between 1812 and 1857. Their main intent in collecting these folk tales was preserving the natural poetry (*naturpoesie)* inherent in German folk tales and stories, which they felt was at its truest form among the peasant class. They feared that these tales were at risk of disappearing as the world slowly turned towards the preservation of literary forms in books and other publications. The Grimm Brothers saw the advent of a literary culture as a threat to the traditions of storytelling that they had known all their lives. Ironically, however, they had collected a majority of their tales from women from aristocratic families and not from the peasant class. It is also interesting to note that at the time of their first publication in 1812, the Napoleonic wars were in full swing and parts of Germany were occupied by the French. As a result, in the subsequent editions of the tales, several references to France and French culture were removed in the interest of furthering German nationalism (Leduc 2020).

It is also important to remember that the Grimm Brothers were raised as Calvanists with strict adherence to their faith, and this is evident in many of the tales that they published, especially in relation to gender roles (Leduc 2020). A similar comment can also be made about the stories that Bezbaroa collected for his *Burhi Aair Xadhu*, which is the most popular among his three volumes of folk tales. It is a collection of 30 folk tales that depict different aspects of rural life such as marriage, polygamy, family, friendship, greed, trickster stories, relationships between humans and animals, and human-animal conflict. It is interesting that in *Burhi Aair Xadhu*, even though the narrator (*Burhi Aai* or grandmother) is supposed to be female, Bezbaroa only acknowledges male informants who collaborated with him for this project. This is despite the fact that out of the 30 folk

tales, 11 are about women (Barua 2020). The depictions of women in most of these tales are based on stereotypes of good women/bad women. This, according to Barua (2020), was to further Bezbaroa's nationalistic agenda wherein he could be seen to have co-opted women to valorise a distinct Assamese cultural and national identity.

In the 110 years since its publication, *Burhi Aair Xadhu* has been translated into English by several writers to make the stories accessible to a larger audience outside the state (Barua 2006; Borooah 1915; Phukan 2012). While the availability of these folk tales in the written form and in English language has enhanced their longevity, the drawback is that the narration of these folk tales has become fixed and rigid, as narrators remain confined to the written word. Gohain (n.d.), however, is of the opinion that folk tales are meant to be heard in the form of oral narratives and not meant to be read. He writes that, when he was young, he had heard most of the tales from the *Burhi Aair Xadhu* collection from his *Aita*. Hearing these stories from her created a different universe for him in his mind, which could not be recreated when he read those stories later in his life. He further adds that while narrating these folk tales, his *Aita* often infused in them stories from her own life, making these tales all the more remarkable for him.

It is perhaps because of such nostalgia for the past that certain scholars regret that children from the current generation do not show much interest in folk tales. Some of the reasons for this are the proliferation of English-medium education, the breakup of the traditional joint family, and the propagation of a homogenised mass media all across the world (Gohain n.d.; Nath 2011). According to Gohain (n.d.), the present generation of children in Assam is detached from the folk tale universe that Bezbaroa created through his writings. Instead, they are obsessed with Batman, Superman, and other such superheroes. As a result, most children are unable to relate to the cultural references and the atmosphere of the Assamese countryside. Further, children nowadays are kept away from people's indifference, jealousy, and cruelty, as a result of which they are not able to empathise

with the tragedies that befall the innocent and vulnerable protagonists of these tales.

After spending time with his grandson in the US and after observing the kind of educational and entertainment material that he was exposed to, Gohain realised that most of the content produced for children depicted fun, happiness, magic, and love. What was missing, however, was people's negative emotions such as envy, injustice, betrayal, and cruelty. In contrast, folk tales do not hide such realities from children, which, according to him, enables them to develop empathy for others at a very early age. He also asserts that many of the tales in *Burhi Aair Xadhu* provide inspiration, if not wisdom, to young children on how to tread through the difficult phases of life. He asks, if real life is so complex, what what is the harm in stories told to young children reflecting these complexities?

The harm that Gohain completely overlooks, supposedly because of his own non-disabled status, is that many of the folk tales in *Burhi Aair Xadhu* depict women and persons with disabilities in extremely poor light. What possible influence this might have on children who are different from the norm is difficult to ascertain. However, Leduc's (2020) descriptions about her own life trajectory of growing up with cerebral palsy clearly shows that such portrayals definitely leave a lasting impact on children's minds, especially those who have disabilities. In her analysis of western fairy tales, Leduc (2020) writes that she found two different lines of thought: in the first, persons with disabilities miraculously got cured towards the end of the tale, and in the second, persons with disabilities were a personification of evil and beyond redemption. Hence, many of them in the latter category died a violent death. After re-reading *Burhi Aair Xadhu* recently, I realised that even though the folk tales are specific to Assamese culture, many parallels can be drawn between western fairy tales and these folk tales.

This paper highlights how gender and disability issues have been portrayed in the folk tales in *Burhi Aair Xadhu.* After several readings of the text, I was able to identify four different themes that are significant from an intersectional feminist disability perspective: parents' reaction

at the birth of a disabled child; the perception that disability can be 'cured' after finding a suitable partner for marriage; disability and extreme physical brutality as a punishment for sins committed in one's lifetime; and disability, gender dynamics, and masculinity.

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PARENTS' INITIAL REACTIONS TOWARDS THEIR CHILDREN WITH DISABILITIES

When parents are expecting a child, they generally assume several attributes of the child, like their gender and appearance, and also have expectations about their child's future. However, when this idealised picture of a 'normal' child is shattered due to prenatal complications or postnatal discoveries of developmental disabilities, parents may experience a *grief cycle*, which can be compared to the death of a loved one (Barbosa et al. 2008; Dhar 2009). In *Burhi Aair Xadhu*, even though none of the folk tales explicitly talk about giving birth to a child with disabilities, in a few stories it is seen that pregnant women give birth to inanimate objects, fruits, and vegetables. Parents' reaction to the birth of these inanimate objects can be seen to be analogous with parents' reaction to the birth of children with disabilities. The folk tales, 'Ow Kuwori' (The Elephant Apple Princess) and 'Mekurir Jiyekor Xadhu' (The Tale of the Cat's Daughter), depict the parents' initial reactions after the birth of their 'odd' children.

In 'Ow Kuwori', the two queens of a king are expecting at the same time. While the first wife gives birth to a baby boy, the second wife gives birth to an *ow* (elephant apple). This depresses the second wife and she throws the ow in a dumping ground at the back of their palace. Despite Ow Kuwori's neglect at the hands of her mother, she never fails to roll back to her mother every night. The folk tale does not reveal the reason why the second queen despises her daughter so much:

listeners/readers are expected to empathise with her reaction. It also does not reveal if the second queen has a change of heart in the years that follow given the relentless love and clinginess of her daughter, who rolls back to her no matter how many times she is pushed away.

Existing studies show that having a child with disabilities is especially hurtful for mothers, as they find themselves unprepared to deal with the situation (Barbosa et al. 2008). The situation must have been similar for Ow Kuwori's mother who preferred to throw her daughter into the dumping ground over and over again, instead of raising her.

Another reason why disability in a child is particularly difficult for mothers is that they are often blamed for their children's condition, which can sometimes even lead to their abandonment by their husbands (Chakravarty 2002; Ghai 2003). This is evident in the folk tale, 'Mekurir Jiyekor Xadhu', in which after the death of their cat mother and the abduction of the older sister by the Jol Kuwor (River Prince), the visibly upset younger daughter of the cat meets a merchant by the riverside who takes her home as his third wife. In her new home, the merchant showers his young wife with care and affection. This, however, makes his two older wives very jealous, and they decide to do something about the new rival. An opportunity presents itself when the young wife is about to deliver her first child and the merchant is away on a business trip. The two former wives blindfold the young wife at the time of delivery and replace her new born baby boy with a wooden pestle. Thereafter, they get rid of the baby by leaving him in the river. They repeat the same tactic when the young wife is about to deliver for a second time. This time they replace the baby boy with a pumpkin. While the merchant's reaction at the time of the first delivery is not revealed, at the time of the second delivery he considers his young wife a bad omen who gave birth to strange objects and throws her out of the house. He constructs a small hut in the backyard for her and severs all ties with her.

From this turn of events in the folk tale, it can be seen that the merchant invokes the moral model of disability by stigmatising

the mother for supposedly giving birth to 'abnormal' children. The merchant's action, however, of taking a young girl he found on the streets as his wife despite having two wives at home is never questioned. Unfortunately, in both the tales the listeners/readers are not made to empathise with the plight of the 'abnormal' children. Instead, we are expected to rejoice when the Ow Kuwori comes out of her shell to her 'normal' human form, or when the two grown sons of the merchant come back from under the river, where they were brought up by their aunt (the cat's older daughter) in search of their mother. Even though these are merely folk tales, they send the wrong message that children who are different from the norm are not loved by their families, that their mothers face stigma and neglect for giving birth to them, and that they should aspire to be as 'normal' as possible to gain acceptance by society.

Leduc (2020) asserts that even though fairy tales have been promoted as just bedtime stories that no one really believes, people like her who have grown up with disabilities and have faced bullying from their peers in their growing up years are acutely aware that even though these tales are not real stories, they are also not 'only stories', as some people have faced repercussions in their own lives. A similar argument can also be made in the case of Assamese folk tales.

'CURE' FOR DISABILITY AFTER FINDING A 'SUITABLE' PARTNER

In *Burhi Aair Xadhu,* one of the common themes in most of the stories is that of marriage. This is also the case when characters are born as inanimate objects or animals. In most such tales, it can also be seen that after getting married to a 'suitable' partner, most of the inanimate objects transform into beautiful human beings endowed with all the good qualities that one might look for in a potential life partner. The

content of these tales is analogues to what we see happening to people with disabilities in popular Hindi cinema (see Bhambani 2003).

The tales 'Ow Kuwori' and 'Paanesoi' deal with female characters who are inanimate objects. In both the tales, the women find marriage partners for being extremely beautiful, even though their bodies are 'trapped' inside an inanimate object or animal. In the folk tale 'Ow Kuwori', one day the Ow Kuwori rolls down to the river bank to have a bath. After reaching there, she comes out from the shell of the ow. At that moment a prince from a neighbouring kingdom sees her and is so besotted by her beauty that he wants to marry her immediately. After reaching home that day, he enters the *roh-ghor*[6] to express his desire to his parents about marrying the Ow Kuwori. When his parents learn that he is serious about his proposal, they try to dissuade him by reasoning with him. However, when this does not work, they have no other option but to reach out to Ow Kuwori's parents to ask for their daughter's hand in marriage for their son.

When *Ow Kuwori's* mother hears this news, she considers this to be a personal insult, as she has never accepted her daughter and cries bitterly over this. However, the prince is adamant about his decision to marry her daughter, so she has to give in. After their marriage, although the prince and Ow Kuwori share the bedroom, according to the tale, they do not engage in any relationship or communication with each other, the reason for which is not revealed. This upsets the prince. One day he meets a beggar woman who tells him what to do to get back his wife from the ow shell. The prince burns off the shell as he is told to do and is able to recover his beautiful bride. The next morning he shares this happy news with everyone and Ow Kuwori's parents are particularly delighted with the turn of events. This time they marry their daughter again to the prince with real pomp and fanfare, after which they live happily ever after.

In this story, for everyone to be happy, the Ow Kuwori has to let go of her shell. While the folk tale elaborates on the feelings of the prince towards his wife, it does not reveal anything about the princess who perhaps was not even asked about her willingness to marry the prince.

Secondly, the tale does not tell us what she thought of her shell and whether or not she wanted to live out of it.

A similar plot can also be seen in 'Paanesoi'. In this folk tale, an old woman lives with her beloved young son. One day, he finds a duck's egg and hands it over to his mother, who keeps it on a wooden shelf in the kitchen. In a few days, the egg hatches and a beautiful girl comes out. She, however, preferrs to remain hidden in the shelf. Eventually, one day, the old woman finds her and asks the little girl to stay in her home as her daughter. The old woman names her Paanesoi. As Paanesoi grows up, the old woman's son develops feelings for her and wants to marry her. However, he feels shy in disclosing his feelings to his mother. So, he decides to go into his roh-ghor and sulk. When his mother realises that he was in the roh-ghor, she promises to grant him his wish, whatever it may be.

When she learns about her son's desire to marry Paanesoi, she is not able to go back on her word. She fixes his marriage with Paanesoi without informing her. When Paanesoi comes to know about this from an old beggar, she tells the beggar that she has no intentions of marrying the person whom she considers to be her brother. The beggar then tells her what to do to avoid this marriage. Subsequently, Paanesoi transforms into a duck. One day, the old woman's son sees the duck and finds it unusual. He again goes to his roh-ghor to sulk to persuade his mother to buy the duck for him. When his mother buys the duck for him, the son takes good care of it and also sleeps with it at night. One day, a beggar woman comes to him and tells him that the duck is his Paanesoi. She then gives him a plan for bringing back Paanesoi in her human form. The old woman's son follows all the instructions and burns off her duck attire. Once Paanesoi is in her human form, he marries her and they live happily ever after.

In this folk tale, it can be seen that, unlike Ow Kuwori, Paanesoi had expressed her unwillingness to marry a man whom she considered to be her brother. However, despite this, many people around her tricked her into getting married to him. It can also be seen that the boy entered the roh-ghor whenever he fancied something, and his mother would

grant his wish without a second thought. Similar concern, however, is not shown towards her adopted daughter who did not want to marry her son. Like in the case of the Ow Kuwori, Paanesoi's duck attire was also burnt off by the boy at the advice of a beggar woman without her consent. All this was done to make her acceptable as a 'normal' human being so that she lived as a wife for her husband, and not as the free spirit that she wanted to be.

Apart from the question of consent and acceptance by wider society, it is also seen that these tales are extremely gender biased and have different standards for men and women who are different from the norm. In these tales about 'abnormal' women, what attracted the prince and the old woman's son to Ow Kuwori and Paanesoi respectively was their beauty. In tales about men who are different from the norm, however, they have to prove their worth through hard work to be able to find a woman to marry. In the folk tale, 'Eta Singora Maasor Xadhu' (The Tale of a *Singora* Fish), a very poor man catches a tiny singora fish that has two sturdy spikes sticking out from both sides of its neck. The man takes the fish home and is about to cut and clean it to cook it for dinner. At that time, the fish speaks to the man, pleading with him not to kill him as he is the king of the singora breed of fish. He promises the man that if his wish is granted, he will always watch the poor man's cow while it grazes.

The man agrees not to eat the fish. From the next morning onwards, the man feeds the fish well and then sends him to watch his cow while it grazes. The fish jumps on to the cow's back and then pokes the cow with his spikes urging him to graze in the field. Time passes by happily for everybody until one day, when the fish takes the cow to the forest for grazing, a monster who lives in that forest wants to eat the cow. The fish and the monster have a fight, in which the fish wins with the help of his venomous spikes, despite his small size. In exchange for his life, the monster gives a magical ring to the fish and tells him that it will make him rich. The fish faithfully returns home and gives the ring to his master. The master is overjoyed with the sudden turn of events and very soon his house is filled with gold and silver. Happy with the fish's

conduct, the old man gets his daughter married to him. After their marriage, one day when the fish goes to the river bank for his bath, his wife witnesses that a young handsome man lives inside the shell of the fish. Seeing this, she quickly burns down the covering of the fish, and he is instantly transformed into a handsome young man. Thereafter, he lives happily ever after with his wife.

In this story, the singora fish is considered to be worthy of marrying the old man's daughter only after he is able to make the old man rich through his superhuman capacities. Despite proving his worth to his in-laws' family, the singora fish has to be transformed to a 'normal' human being for him and his wife to live happily ever after. It is also interesting to note that, in most of the folk tales, women's perspectives regarding marriage or marriage partners are never depicted. In this tale, for instance, the poor man does not ask his daughter whether she wants to marry the fish.

In another folk tale, 'Kanchani', however, the old couple do ask their daughter if she wants to marry their dog, as her mother had promised him marriage to her daughter who was not even conceived at that time. Only a few months after her mother's casual remark, Kanchani was born. When she grew up, both the parents felt that it was their duty to keep their promise to the dog. When her parents ask her about this decision, Kanchani tells them that it is her duty to honour her parent's promise to the dog. The dog, in fact, is a handsome and well-mannered young man who was transformed into a dog because of the unusual and unnecessary powers vested in him by his six older brothers. This resulted in a lot of jealousy and irritation among the wives of the brothers, who had to ask for their youngest brother-in-law's permission before doing anything. On the advice of a beggar woman, they transformed the young man into a dog. After his marriage to Kanchani, one day while giving him a bath on the river bank, she was able to transform the dog into a human being. Although the end of this tale is quite tragic, as both of them die, the folk tale follows a similar theme in the beginning as the others discussed here: a suitable partner is able to transform an inanimate object or an animal into a

human being. Additionally, Kanchani's mother passed that casual remark about marrying her daughter to the dog because of his good qualities.

Such stories give a dehumanising impression about people with disabilities, as if they are not worthy of love and companionship in their real forms. To gain acceptance by society, they must change their inherent characteristics as per the standards prevalent in society. This is what the *individual model of disability* explained earlier propagates: an individual will have to make all the necessary changes in herself/himself to be accommodated by society, while society won't change. This is where the *social model*'s understanding of disability is crucial, as it argues that it is not a disabled individual who needs to make an effort to be accommodated by society, but it is society that needs to change to accommodate individuals who are different from the norm.

It is also important to understand that the folk tales' universe is different from the real world. While in the folk tales those who are different from the norm transform into 'normal' human beings after finding a suitable partner for marriage, this is not true in real life. Studies conducted among persons with disabilities have shown that in Indian society, since arranged marriage is the norm, it is particularly difficult for persons with disabilities to find marriage partners. It is also seen that it is much more difficult to find marriage partners for women with disabilities in comparison to men with disabilities (Addlakha 2007; Ghai 2003; Ghosh 2013; Klasing 2007), even though very few studies have been done on the lived experiences of the latter group.

It is noteworthy that some tales provide unnecessary hope to such persons and their family members that finding a partner is not difficult and also that once they have found a suitable partner, their disabilities will be cured in no time. Such stories have a great impact on the minds of vulnerable people, as studies have shown that persons with hidden or mild disabilities are usually married off by their family members without disclosing complete information about their condition (Klasing 2007). Unfortunately, unlike these folk tales or movie depictions where persons with disabilities find miraculous cures

towards the end, in the case of people with disabilities in real life, this can often lead to disastrous consequences such as domestic violence, desertion, or divorce (Klasing 2007).

DISABILITY AND EXTREME PHYSICAL BRUTALITY AS A PUNISHMENT FOR SINS COMMITTED IN ONE'S LIFETIME

As elaborated earlier, sometimes disabilities are treated as retribution for sins committed by an individual himself/herself or by his/her relatives. Similar reasoning is seen in folk tales where wrongdoers are either disfigured or dismembered or even brutally killed as punishment for their sins. Such depictions are not only violent and brutal but also give the wrong message to contemporary persons with disabilities about their impairments, especially when they have to face stigma and disdain because of their impairments. In 'Burhi Aair Xadhu', 'Mekurir Jiyekor Xadhu', and 'Kota Juwa Naak Kharoni Di Dhak' (the title is translated as 'Tit for Tat' in Pallavi Barua's translation and 'An Unscrupulous Thief' in Deepika Phukan's translation) show us how wrongdoers are punished. For the purpose of this paper, I only elaborate on the punishment meted out to the two former wives of the merchant in the story, 'Mekurir Jiyekor Xadhu'.

In 'Mekirir Jiyekor Xadhu', two sons of the cat's younger daughter are brought up by the cat's older daughter, who is now married to her abductor, the Jol Kuwor. Several years later, when the younger daughter's husband, the merchant, is going on a business trip, his boat is held up in the middle of the river by the Jol Kuwor. While the merchant is wondering what to do, he hears a voice from the riverbed asking him to perform a religious ceremony at his home on a date of his choice. The voice also asks the merchant to leave his stick and his *gamosa*[7] that he usually carries on his travels. It is only after adhering to these instructions that the boat is set free. On the day of the ceremony, the two boys go to their mother's hut first to convince her that they

are her two sons who were set adrift in the river by their father's first two wives. Following this, they go to the ceremony and introduce themselves as the sons of their father's third wife. Thereafter, they narrate their life stories to everyone present in the ceremony and, to corroborate their stories, also produce the merchant's stick and gamosa that their father had thrown in the river. After seeing this, the father realises that the two boys are telling the truth. He also understands the cruelty of his first two wives. To teach them a lesson, after the religious ceremony, the merchant cuts off the noses and ears of his first two wives and throws them out of the house. At the same time, he brings back his youngest wife and he lives happily with her and their two sons.

In this folk tale, it can be seen that the first two wives of the merchant were mutilated by him when he came to know the truth behind his third wife's two sons. The folk tale wants readers/listeners to empathise with the cat's daughter's life story, but no thought is spared for the life stories of the first two wives who faced neglect at the hands of their husband. While what they did was very wrong, no questions were raised about the character of the merchant who happened to marry a much younger girl despite having two wives at home. The merchant in the story is all powerful, while all the women in his life live at his mercy and are all wronged by him. However, there is not one comment about this in the story. The folk tale also does not talk about the cat's younger daughter's feelings towards her husband at any point in her life when he takes major decisions for her. She remains a passive sufferer throughout her life till her two sons come back to her life to take her out of her miseries so that she can live happily with her husband.

A similar trope can be seen in other folk tales in *Burhi Aair Xadhu* like 'Silonir Jiyekor Xadhu', in which a rich merchant brutally kills his first six wives when he comes to know how they sold off his favourite eighth wife to a trader who had briefly stayed in their village to sell his wares. Like 'Mekurir Jiyekor Xadhu', in this tale it can be seen that the first seven wives of the merchant had committed several crimes

out of jealousy for the new and young co-wife. However, the root of the problem is that although the merchant chose to marry several women, as time passed he did not give sufficient attention to his first wives. This injustice created jealousy and hatred in their hearts for the young wife. From the folk tale we know about the precarious life of the kite's daughter who was initially abandoned by her birth mother. This abandonment stemmed from her mother's fear of her husband, who had threatened to cast her out if she gave birth to another girl child. We know nothing about the lives of the other co-wives. However, it can be easily ascertained that due to the patriarchal structure of society, these women did not have any livelihood, and therefore could not imagine separation from their husband.

Several other folk tales in the collection also talk about the cruelty meted out to the 'evil' stepmother and co-wife as a punishment for their sins. In the folk tales 'Tula aru Teja' and 'Champawati', evil stepmothers are so blinded by their hatred that they end up harming their own beloved daughters. These tales are supposed to teach a moral lesson that one should do no harm to others; in the process, it also alludes to the *karma* theory of suffering. Such depictions, however, are extremely derogatory towards contemporary persons with disabilities.

Another important point that needs to be highlighted here is that punishments are usually only meted out to female characters. The male characters' intentions regarding having several wives is never questioned.

Different from the other folk tales in the collection is 'Tejimola', perhaps the most famous folk tale in the collection. In this tale Tejimola's stepmother wants to get rid of her, and when an opportunity presents itself, she does not lose much time thinking about how she will execute her plan. She deliberately harms Tejimola, and later grinds her hands, feet, and then her head in her *dhenki*[8] in feigned anger to kill her. Tejimola, however, does not leave her stepmother's side so easily and presents herself in multiple inanimate forms to finally let her father know what has happened to her in his absence. Tejimola's father, out

of love for his daughter, is able to bring her back to life. Unlike the male characters in the other stories, however, he does not take revenge on his second wife by harming her but only throws her out of his home.

DISABILITY, GENDER DYNAMICS, AND MASCULINITY

People with disabilities are often treated as genderless in our societies. However, they live as much of a gendered life as everyone else. Since disability is often considered synonymous with dependence and helplessness, women with disabilities find it much easier to live with their disabilities as compared to men with disabilities; being a man often collides with attributes such as virility, autonomy, and independence, which several men with disabilities fail to imbibe. As a result, living with disabilities is particularly difficult for men (Shuttleworth et al. 2012).

As mentioned earlier, very few folk tales in the collection deal with people living with disabilities. Three of the tales that do are 'Tikhor aru Sutibai' (Tikhor and Sutibai), 'Numoliya Pu' (The Youngest Child), and 'Kukurikona' (The Man with Night-Blindness). What is interesting is that the importance given to each of these disabled characters is based on their gender, and, accordingly, the gender dynamics in the folk tales also vary. Only 'Tikhor aru Sutibai' deals with a female disabled character, but she is secondary to her younger brother, Tikhor. In this folk tale it is Tikhor (his name literally means the cunning one) and his older sister, Sutibai (*Suti* literally means short and *Bai* is a kinship term used to refer to older sisters; in the folk tale Sutibai literally refers to the older sister who is of short stature) are orphans, who are barely surviving with the support that they receive from the community. One day, Tikhor tells his sister that he is craving *pithas* and wants her to make some. Sutibai reminds him that they have a hand-to-mouth existence and cannot afford to buy sticky rice, oil, and jaggery to make the pithas. Tikhor uses his cunning to get all the

necessary ingredients for his sister to make him pithas. In the process, he also outsmarts a tiger and kills him eventually. Thus, this is a simple story, where the protagonist is Tikhor and not his sister Sutibai, who is simply cooking for him. Regardless of her depiction, she does not face any difficulties in her daily life due to her disabilities.

Unlike this folk tale, in two other folk tales people with disabilities are the protagonists. In 'Numoliya Pu', there is an old couple who gives birth to a baby boy. When they are unable to decide a name for the new born, the old man decides to seek the help of an astrologer. On learning that the couple has given birth to the child at an advanced age, the astrologer decides to name him 'Nomol' which means the last one or the youngest one. It can be understood from the story that the man has poor memory. While returning from the astrologer's home, the man goes through several mishaps and is beaten up several times. This frustrates the old man. After reaching home, he tells his wife everything. His wife tries to cheer him up and asks him about the name that the astrologer has suggested. The man realises that he has completely forgotten the name. The woman does not want to disturb her husband any further. So, to change his mind, she tells him about cultivating a tiny corner of their plot with young seedlings, which could be his *noomaliya* cultivation. This makes the old man remember the name that the astrologer has chosen for their little son. He gets very angry with his wife. Shouting at her, he says that if she had known the name all along, why did she send him out to get beaten by so many men? Thereafter, he also starts beating his wife. After venting his anger, the old couple name their child 'Nomol' and live happily ever after.

In the other story, 'Kukurikona', a couple with their two beautiful daughters live in a small village. The older one is named Rupeswari (because of her beauty), while the second is called Guneswari (because she had many good qualities). When Rupeswari is of marriageable age, her parents get her married to a man who does not live very far from their home. This is by design as Rupeswari's mother does not want her daughters to get married far away. Her husband, however, suffers from night blindness and does not disclose this to anyone. After his

marriage, he had borrows a bullock from his father-in-law to till his land. One day, his father-in-law asks for the bullock back. This puts the son-in-law in a fix, because, by the time he leaves for his father-in-law's home after working on the fields, it is already evening. He then comes up with the idea to allow the bullock to walk ahead and hold on to its tail. The bullock would know his way to his house, and in this way, he would be able to reach his father-in-law's house. True to his plan, he reaches his father-in-law's home without any difficulties. His plan is to return home quietly. However, his father-in-law hears him in the cowshed and urges him to stay back for a meal. This again puts the son-in-law in a fix. He tries to hide his impairment from his in-laws by bossing over his sister-in-law, Guneswari, and by trying to act smart with his in-laws. Eventually, however, his mother-in-law finds out about his condition and takes him inside, offers him a change of clothes, and asks him to sleep at their home for the night.

In these two tales, it can be seen that the two men were insecure about their impairments and wanted to hide them from the people around them. In 'Numoliya Pu', the old man wanted to hide his forgetfulness from others, while in 'Kukurikona', the son-in-law wanted to hide his night blindness from his in-laws. In both the stories, the men failed miserably in their attempts. As a result, they took out their frustrations on the women around them. In 'Numoliya Pu', the old man ended up beating his wife thinking that she had deliberately put him in several difficult situations, while in 'Kukurikona', the son-in-law bossed over Guneswari in his attempt to escape the humiliation of disclosing his ailment to his in-laws. The reason why both these men considered it necessary to hide their impairments was because of societal perceptions about men with disabilities being weak and dependent, which did not fit with their perceptions of themselves. As a result, they found it shameful to disclose their conditions.

These two tales are supposed to be humorous. But one can see that they are derogatory to persons who are actually living with these conditions.

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The aim of this paper was exploring selected stories from Lakshminath Bezbaroa's *Burhi Aair Xadhu* using an intersectional feminist disability framework. The discussion showed that several stories from the collection portray disability through the lens of ableism, wherein most characters overcome their impairments towards the end of the tale, usually after finding a suitable life partner. I argue that such depictions are derogatory and dehumanising for persons who are actually living with disabilities. It can also be seen that the depictions vary according to the gender and social class of the individuals. As shown in this paper, the folk tales depict a gender-biased society, in which women with 'disabilities' who are submissive and passive are rewarded with a 'cure' for their impairments towards the end of the tales, while non-disabled women characters who engage in evil activities aimed at the main protagonists are punished with disabilities, disfigurement, death, and, if they are lucky, only abandonment.

In contrast, men 'born with disabilities' have to prove their worth to the world through sheer hard work so that they are able to find a suitable life partner. Significantly, in most of the folk tales, the antagonists are women and not men.

This brings us to an important point in these tales: cure and overcoming impairments are usually contingent on an individual's will, while society continues to remain discriminatory and unaccepting of persons with disabilities. This is where the role of the social model of disability is significant, which suggests that it is not people with impairments who need to change for gaining acceptance in society, but rather it is society that should be more accepting of people who are different from the norm. Significantly, the social model critique that persons with disabilities are not a homogeneous group and that people face different struggles based on their location in society also comes out clearly in the folk tales. In most stories, people who overcome their impairments are usually from the king's family or from a merchant's family, while those who continue to live with their impairments are usually from a poor socio-economic background, with no means of contact with those in power. Usually when one reads stories of the

first kind, it gives hope that given one's individual characteristics, s/he might overcome her/his impairments. Such stories, referred to as stories of the SuperCrip,[9] are also usually more popular among non-disabled people, because they stress the importance of individual will. In contrast, stories about people who continue to live with disabilities are usually written in a jocular fashion, as if it is funny to have a disability. Such portrayals can have a deep impact on the minds of people living with disabilities.

While such interpretations of these tales can be seen as far-fetched as these are 'simply folktales which everyone knows are not real', as Leduc (2020) points out, repeated retellings of these tales without any modification to their structures according to changing times can have a deep impact on the minds of young children who are different from the norm. Due to these reasons, unlike a few scholars who lament that these 'rich' folk tales are no longer narrated to young children, which can have an impact on the continuity of these tales in the future, I argue that it is time to create new stories for children that are relevant in the contemporary socio-political landscape in Assamese society, are politically correct, and which acknowledge diversity of the people who live in Assam and uphold the virtues of peace and harmony.

During the course of this research, I conducted a few interviews with persons with disabilities and their family members from different parts of the Brahmaputra Valley to find out their thoughts about these folk tales. After about five interviews, it was clear that many did not pay enough attention to the folk tales. Since the research was carried out at the time of the Covid-19 pandemic, the people I interviewed were overwhelmed by the current situation and were not in a position to critically think about the folk tales that they had heard during their childhood. This is a major limitation of this paper.

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NOTES

1. Ramanujan (1991) collected the folk tales for this volume from actual tellers and not from any written text. Hence, the title of the folk tale in his collection is 'Teja and Teji'. Some of the details of the folk tale are also different from those in *Burhi Aair Xadhu.*
2. Ableism is defined as 'a system that places value on people's bodies and minds based on socially constructed ideas of normalcy, intelligence, excellence and productivity…. This form of systemic oppression leads to people and society determining who is valuable and worthy based on a person's appearance and/or their ability to satisfactorily [re]produce, excel and "behave"' (Lewis 2020).
3. According to the World Report on Disability, the global prevalence of disability among the adult population is estimated to be between 15.6 and 19.4 per cent (WHO & The World Bank 2011). This number is gradually increasing worldwide due to a number of factors such as wars, ethnic conflicts, HIV/AIDS, industrial injuries, road accidents, population growth, medical advancement and increasing life expectancy that make people more susceptible to old age-related, chronic illness-induced disabilities (Addlakha 2010). Due to this reason, persons with disabilities are regarded to be the world's largest minority group (United Nations, n.d.).
4. The term 'majority world' refers to countries where the vast majority of the world's population resides, but which have access to only a small portion of the world's resources and power. 'Minority world' on the other hand refers to the richest countries in the world where less than half of the world's population resides, but which possesses a large proportion of global resources (Stone 1999).
5. Following the signing of the Treaty of Yandabo in 1826, Assam was annexed to the British colonial empire (Nath 2014). During 1826-1873, Assam was administered as part of the Bengal Presidency (Barua 1978). In 1836, the Assamese language was replaced by Bengali in schools and administrative offices in Assam. This replacement of the native language by a foreign one led to a lot of dissatisfaction among the common people, especially Assamese elites. After a prolonged struggle, in 1873 the British government acknowledged the distinctiveness of Assamese and Bengali languages and decided to replace the latter with the former in schools and offices in Assam (Nath 2014).
6. Roh-ghor is a place for someone to retreat to express sorrow or displeasure. Although most of the stories analysed here show that it is mostly men who

retreat into a roh-ghor to get their wishes fulfilled, in one of the stories, *The Tiger and the Crab,* a princess also retreats into a roh-ghor when she is smitten by the hair of a man that a fish has swallowed, which is later brought to her father's court. Just by looking at the strand of hair, the princess wants to marry its owner.

7. A gamosa is a traditional Assamese cloth, typically rectangular in shape, characterized by its white color with a red border on three sides and red woven motifs on the fourth side. Gamosas hold great cultural significance for the indigenous people of Assam, irrespective of their religious or ethnic backgrounds, and are used for various purposes.
8. Dhenki is an old style rice mill or husk lever made out of hard wood. It has a fulcrum that supports the weight. Due to the force of the weight upon the rice pods, the rice and the golden brown husk separate. Dhenkis are found in the eastern Indian states of Assam, West Bengal, Odisha, and the neighbouring country, Bangladesh. They are usually operated by women to produce rice from paddy and grind rice to powder.
9. The SuperCrip image in disability studies refers to a person with comparatively milder impairments, whose only problem in life is a physically inaccessible environment (Morris 2001). While the question of a physically inaccessible environment does not arise in the case of these folk tales, having milder impairments that are not difficult to overcome cannot be negated in these tales.

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