Terror of Human Trafficking: A study of Assamese Contemporary Legends

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This study examines legends circulating in Assam, Northeast India, particularly those which deal with thefts, frauds, scams, murders, kidnapping, and drug violations that have become a threat to the people of Assam. It has resulted in the introduction of numerous contemporary legends based on crimes such as human trafficking are circulating in Assam. In this paper, I assess the incidences of human trafficking in Assam to evaluate whether these locally formed contemporary legends reflect reality. Secondly, I discuss how this social problem of human trafficking of Assam reflects some concepts drawn from the discipline of oral narratives. Finally, an attempt is made to understand Assamese contemporary legend as a product of social strain and the response to that strain.

Northeast India has been struggling ceaselessly with human trafficking for last few decades. Human trafficking is nothing but modern day slavery, wherein the victims involved are forced, deceived and compelled into cheap labour, organ trade, prostitution, sexual assault and sometime murder (Kharbhih, 2013: 347). More than 98 percent of Northeast India has borders internationally with Bangladesh, Bhutan, China, and Myanmar. This unique geopolitical zone sets the entire region at the threat of cross bordering human trafficking across borders especially trafficking of girls and children. Discrimination, natural calamity, poverty, unemployment, armed conflict, and oppressive social structures are among the most important causes of trafficking. As such, alertness of this entire crisis has literally introduced some narratives, which can be termed as "Contemporary Legend". These legends are whimsical, 99 percent- apocryphal, yet believable stories that are "too good to be true", neatly plotted to be accepted as literal truth in every place where they are told typically attributed to a friend -of-afriend (Brunvand, 2013: xxviii). For the purpose of this study, the term chosen to designate the narrative genre under examination is "contemporary legend", which was first introduced by Jan Harold Brunvand during 1980s. Brunvand in his collection of legends, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends & Their Meanings* (Brunvand, 1981: 3) has made two points clear: first, that legends and folklore do not occur exclusively in so called primitive or traditional societies but can be from contemporary society; second, that one can learn much about urban, modern or contemporary culture, and society by studying such narratives. In the last few decades, there has been a rapid urbanization in Assam with a phenomenal growth in the number and size of its cities. Being one of the poor regions of India, the region suffers from comparatively a sluggish economic growth, political conflict, poor health care and a lack of higher education facilities. Even after the enormous impact of urbanization in many cities of Assam, as well as entire northeast, there are many subsistence living rural villages througho ut the entire northeast India that have become target for human traffickers. Traffickers usually target women and children for sexual exploitation or child labor throughout India, who come from impoverished backgrounds and deceive these children into "job or educational opportunit ie s elsewhere in India" (Kharbhih, 2013:346). Upon the arrival to the big cities in India like Mumbai, Delhi, Bangalore, these children are forced to child labor and girls to prostitution. Often the children's families are unaware of the mess their children are in and report them missing.

Due to these assertions and people's consciousness regarding crimes, sins, misdeeds, crimina ls etc. have given rise to some localized and historicized narratives. These are told as believab le in a conversational mode which is psychologically a symbolic representation of folk belief that reflects the collective experiences and values of group to whose tradition it

belongs to. Most of them are eventually localized, where horror perpetrated or said to have been perpetrated as the victim loses possession of his/her body, which becomes a commodity later. I have collected few categories of stories with several versions from all over the state of Assam, which were mainly circulated orally. For the purpose of the study, these orally circulated stories were tape recorded and later translated to English. Few stories were collected from Internet too, which have been stored with the help of Screenshots.

I begin with some widely known and frequently found stories related to the stolen body parts which might fit into Brunvand's category of "Organ Theft "(Brunvand, 2001:302) and Bennett's classification of "Dispossessed" (Bennett 2005:188-246). These stories concern body parts acquired by someone else, where, body parts have been stolen. Various tales circulated orally, for example in which eyes, kidneys are missing from the patients, who later die for unknown reason. There is always a hint of some unknown leader under whom all these ghastly possessions happen and who is hidden by conspiracy. In some other cases, the missing person is alleged to become a commodity but later freed under the pressure of politics (2.Save Me Save Me). In some cases, rumour becomes more like a legend and less like news (3. Nightmarish Right 4. Attack of Burundanga) where, a public transport has become a symbol of crime, driver and conductor becomes a symbol of distrust.

Here is a version of one contemporary legend, which was commonly circulated during 2003 in Guwahati, the main city of Assam. It was described by a middle aged academician in a social science department in Gauhati University.

1. Charity for Profit

In this story, a famous businessman is found to be establishing a hospital in a rural area of Assam (place name is not mentioned). He invested lots of money and there was scope for charitable treatment. For that reason, many poor people of that area who could not afford expensive treatments came to his hospital. The seriously ill poor patients, who showed no signs of recovery, were taken abroad for better treatment at the expense of the hospital. If they died outside, their physical organs like kidney were taken out to sell them. Their bodies are brought back to India. But, inside the bodies, smuggled goods and money were allegedly brought (Das, 2004: 47)

"1. Charity for Profit" is a legend where we find illicit taking and trading of bodies and organs for unknown reasons probably cash, surgery and research. Studies show that these "Organ Theft Narratives" such as "Charity for Profit" are not a new phenomenon. According to Bennett, this type of narratives were first drew attention in Poland in the middle of 1970s and it was later popularized in Russia, Ukraine and Belorussia. Between 1977 and 1989, the distribution was intense. Dionizjusz Czubala has reported that one could hardly meet a Pole, who is not familiar with this type of stories (Bennett, 2005:191). These sensational narratives began to appear in Assam and in the entire Northeast India in early 2000 (Bhattacharjee: 2006). Around ten different versions were collected in the period 2003-2015. During my study, I have found that in some versions of "organ theft" legend, the body needs to be operated for some reasons, like contracted appendicitis, gall bladder stones or kidney stones and the victim later discovers that the supposedly affected organ is still working well but another vital part such as kidney is missing for no reason. In many versions, the hospital authority takes the patient to a hospital outside the city in order to get a better treatment at a lower cost, a consideration attractive to patients below the poverty line. But, later the family is informed that the patient deteriorated suddenly and died. In order to bring the dead body home, authority needs to undergo the process of embalming. So, in the name of embalming, much needed organs such as kidneys are taken out for business. Later they stuff the body with drugs and thus smuggling

continues.

The State Government of Assam has been emphasizing the adequate provision of primary health care as well as awareness programmes on health issues, hygiene and healthy practices, food security and nutrition, family welfare etc. but, everyday local newspapers, local television channels are talking about corruption, deceitful cases or various other scandals relating to the state politicians, businessman etc. As a result, people have lost faith in the rulers or authorities also. They do not feel secure even in the hospitals. Several private hospitals in the city are performing surgeries without permission against which Government is taking legal actions too. Numerous cases have been lodged against wrong treatment. According to Planning Commission of India, Assam has the 12th highest number of poor people in the country where, 31.98 percent of the total population is living below the poverty line (Times of India, 2013). The gap between rich and poor is significant. Government facilities are not sufficient and thus people have to move to private hospitals. Since poor people do not have money to go for the expensive private hospitals, they rely on medical facilities based on charity. People believe that this is how some people are taking the opportunities to continue the organ deal. Moreover, extremist problems, ethnic clashes and news of smuggling of various non-permissible drugs in and around the city may have created such images of organ smuggling in the contemporary legends. The rumors typically found of abductions followed by mutilations such as the child reappeared, blinded, scarred or missing kidney etc. During my study, another type of contemporary legend regarding child kidnapping was found, where the kidnapped child is safe even after the abduction and being in their custody. In this category, sometime the child is found to be a son or daughter of a politic ia n or a rich businessman; sometime the gang is collapsed, whereas sometime the child escapes. One of these stories, which were much in circulation during 2002-2004, can be mentioned as follows :

2. Save Me, Save Me

This is a story about one young boy who was found to be kidnapped one day while he was on his way to school. One day a four wheeler came and forcefully picked him up. Due to the effect of some drugs being injected into his body, the young boy became unconscious. After a while, he got up but found himself locked inside a room. He tried to open the door but could not. One man used to came in regular intervals to offer him meal. Several months and then years passed on like this.

Moreover, what was more astonishing and frightening for the young boy was that room in which he was kept captive was full of letters written with blood. He saw that different writings on the four walls of the room in letters that spells like "save me save me". To his surprise and fear, he found the letters were written with blood.

After many days, once again some drugs were pushed into his body in order to make him unconscious. When he opened his eyes, he found himself sleeping in a bed in a hotel in Guwahati. At last, the boy found his family after along separation. But the most important thing is that there was no harm to his body (Das, 2004:52).

In a similar legend titled "The Attempted Abduction" (Brunvand, 2001:19), a small child was found to be missing in a shopping mall, amusement park or a departmental store. Later, the child can be found with the help of the authorities of the mall or park. Virtually the same legend with minor variations has been told in USA during mid -1970s and it continues to be told. Often it is proclaimed that the abductors intend to force the children into making kiddies porn films and later the child is recognized by someone viewing such films (Brunvand, 2001: 19).Trafficking

in Assam happens both across the borders and within India to many destinations including New Delhi, Mumbai, Goa and Kolkata, and it extends till Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore. It was reported that from 2001-2006, 4000 people had gone missing (Daily Agragadoot, 2007, 3rd March). Folklorists claim that sometime, plenty of actual atrocities and killings to be found in urban legends and with a minor variation, people distinguishes these to be some interesting, sensational stories reported as true individual experiences mainly talk about some of their concerns and mix bits of fantasy with real incidents (Brunvand, 2001: xxviii). These reported incidents in Assam may have introduced these contemporary legends in and around the state of Assam. In the above legend, the narrator is a father of three school aged children, and he believes this story to be a true incident, a warning for other parents who used to send their children to school alone especially during 1990s when extremist problems were at the peak in northeast India (Das: 2006). The anxiety of the parents is thus reflected in the legend. Attitude towards belief is the main essence of one legend and can be expressed in diverse ways which may vary according to sex, gender, age, and context. In another legend collected from a twenty years old girl says that the trafficked girl has forgotten everything while she was saved from a brothel. After a long medication, she gets back her memory. She reveals that through the internet she had developed a friendship with a boy and one day she went to meet him. After that she does not remember what has happened to her (Barman: 2006). Thus, depending on diverse descriptions, interpretatio ns of similar extra normal experiences of individual tellers, this identical content of the same legend type may have developed differently.

Another legend claims that prospective drivers and bus conductors can play prank with the helpless innocent women when they are on board alone, especially in the dark evening hours. This rumour caused a major scare in the city of Guwahati during early 2000s, when super- fast deluxe mini buses were introduced and were much at work. Later, police departments allevia ted the anxiety though the alarm remained for a long time. These legends contain some common features such as that victims are most often women or children; violence seems pointless and culprits comes from a relatively low socio-economic category. Although the position of woman in Assamese society is comparatively higher than several other parts of the country, stories regarding "eve-teasing", "molestation", "rape" are very much in circulation. In these stories women are always found to be an object of gross and severe violence at the hands of men. Crimes against women are as old as the civilization and equally ancient are the efforts to fight against them. In the great epic of Ramayana, Ravana abducted Sita and taken her to Lanka and in Mahabharata, the Kauravas insulted Draupadi. Perhaps these are the beliefs which result in the formation of several stories in the modern times too where violence against women are prominent. Moreover, as with the trend of Bollywood movies of sexual violence, depiction of crimes and brutality, rape scenes cannot be denied in the formation of narratives among the common people. A sample version of this type of legend, collected from a thirty years old woman goes like this:

3. Nightmarish Ride

According to the informant, this particular story is alleged to have occurred during the time when Deluxe City Bus Operations was first introduced in the city of Guwahati from 22yrs old girl studying in college.

As the story goes, two young ladies boarded a Deluxe Bus on their way home in the evening. As ill luck would have it, they happened to be the only passengers in the bus. Besides them, only the bus driver and the helper were on board. Taking the advantage of the situation, an evil design was developed in the mind of the driver and his supporting staff. They decided to play a prank on the two ladies. The driver drove through the street at breakneck speed without stopping at any

of the bus stoppages. Frightened by the sudden change of the situation both the girls started to shout and requested the driver to stop the bus. But the driver turned a deaf ear to their request and drove about aimlessly in the streets.

It was evening time, and was getting dark as time was passing by. People outside in the streets failed to notice the agony of the girls because the driver had switched off the lights inside the bus. It was dark inside and really difficult to anticipate anything happening inside the bus.

Finally, after a couple of hours the driver stopped the bus. He let the ladies get down and fled from the scene. It was sheer luck of the two ladies that they were let off their captors without harming their chastity or abusing them physically (Das, 2004:32)

Above was narrated by a woman, who has lost her father and brother at a very young age and who lives with her mother in Guwahati. Apart from earning bread and butter, both mother and daughter need to do their entire household activities by themselves (Malakar: 2006). As a result, they are solely dependent on public transport. This narrative seems to be a reflection of their insecurity while travelling by public vehicles especially in the evening hours. In December 2012, as reported by cops throughout the world, 23-year-old medical student was brutally gang-raped inside a moving bus and thrown off from the bus in New Delhi. The fatal assault generated widespread national and international coverage and was extensively condemned, both in India and abroad. Subsequently, public protests against the state and central governments for failing to provide adequate security for women took place in New Delhi, as well as major cities throughout the country (Zee News:2012) Later it was seen that this real incident has resulted in the formation of multiple numbers of Assamese contemporary legends with some local details and an air of conviction that public transport is a symbol of insecurity and unknown danger. According to "Feminization of migration", demand for women and children is more because they are considered to be the soft targets, less empowered, more submissive, and less complaining as compare to the men-folk (Mishra, 2013:8). As a result of which, women are making up around half of the world's 214 million international migrants (United Nations, 2009). Domestic service, demand for Nannies or elderly care, demand for surrogate mothers, bride markets and sex industry are the main causes behind the women trafficking in Assam. Over the last few years, thousands of people have moved out of rural areas like Amri, Umswari, Chintong in Assam for various reasons significantly for their backwardness. Such communities do not have a functional school. As a result, migrants prefer being a domestic help to going to school (Bhattacharjee, 2012). Awareness of these factors have certainly developed some stories where, women are the victims at the hands of men leading to physical violence such as "eveteasing", "molestation", "rape", and "murder". Thus, performance of folklore forms can be within their culturally defined events or outside their boundaries, but they can never be out of the context (Dan, 1996:158). This certainly implies that there must be some context similar to women trafficking or exploitation as well as the belief under which this particular legend has communicated even though age, gender, affects the performance, styles and repertoires.

Like collective hysteria and organized claims making, effort urban legends are product of social strain and response to that strain. The warnings of criminals in various parts of the Indian cities using Burundanga, scary drug soaked business cards used to incapacitate momentarily their victims, began to circulate through legends, chain letters, and emails by 2010-2015. It started orally and later was disseminated through internet and most recently through the very popular Facebook, WhatsApp, a popular social networking apparatus found in Android phones. In the contemporary legend "4. Attack of Burundanga ", we see a lady in her twowheeler bike, who meets a stranger and offers her a business card laced with a Burundanga,

in order to benumb the lady. Somehow the girl escapes and they failed to incapacitate her. Different versions were found in the cities of Delhi, Mumbai and Banglore. Police denied its authenticity and said that they have not come across such incidents. Doctors could not tell the nature of the drug used on the victims (Ghosh, 2011). In most of these Burundanga legends from Assam, a lady is robbed and sexually assaulted; a shop keeper loses all his stuff from the shops and a beautician loses all make-up articles from her parlour. Burundanga has no scent and causes dizziness and disorientation. These Burundanga card stories are much available in North American cities too. (Vos, 2012: 92). What common can be seen is in most of the stories is that the victims are not in danger from any type of drug embedded piece of paper as reported and the victims are often female.

" 4. Attack of Burundanga" is a screen shot taken from a Facebook message , which was sent to me by a working self driven woman on 12the september 2012 . This legend has encountered a great deal of mass- media debunking in recent times especially the cyclical appearances of Internet. Many a time, the horror legends of human trafficking, organ theft are created and maintained even now by the exploitation of these propagandists and the media industry who utilize the stories for commercial advantage in selling their stories making it more sensational (Campion- Vincent, 2005: 192). Frequent appearances in fictional narratives aids in promoting the belief of crimes like child trafficking. Moreover, vampires, monsters, zombies, dissection, mutilations, blood suckers also lay at the centre of many horror films and literature (Bennett and Smith, 2007: 126). As such, these have certainly influenced these stories about human trade a very common phenomenon.

4. Attack of Burundanga

Another class of legend "Kidnapping by Kids" is a popular legend in Assam. Published in Assamese, one version says that while helping a missing small child to find out his/her parents, one should not follow the child. Instead of taking a missing child to his/her home, people should take them to the police station as that is a new technique by criminals to rob, kidnap and rape. This type of legend has been further made more influential by the included claims that this news has been broadcast by the popular Indian TV channels such as CNN and

NDTV. Robbery, organ theft, kidnapping, rape, prostitution are the recurrent motifs in all these collected legends circulating orally and through mass media. Several contemporary legends seem to be the renewed tale with a current event twist that reflects hopes, fears, and anxieties of present time. There is one more version where we find that while playing in the park, kidnappers take the help of other kids. They send few kids to play with the target and taking the advantage of their parent's slight distraction; they bring the besieged child to a corner and take away (Chetia: 2009)

5. Kidnapping by Kids

There are few legends much in circulation in Assam, where we see kidnapping happens in disguise. For example, in 6. Kidnapping in Disguise, we see a lady who introduces herself to be a representative of a gas company and shows her identity card. After entering into the house, she tries to use the washroom and thus tries to rob the homeowner. These are some rumours that have been going around since ancient days, where kidnappers come in disguise. In India, stories about kidnapping have been circulating since ancient time. In Ramayana, we get the reference of kidnapping of beautiful queen Sita by Ravana, the king of Lanka who concealed as a monk. These stories about kidnapping might have influenced the modern tales to some extent. This perennial theme in accusations brought against persecuted minorities is that they indulge in all these disgusting businesses are made for personal some gain or most of the time in the service of some dark lord. Unlike myths, legends are set in the recent past and involve normal human beings rather than ancient gods and demi gods.

6. Kidnapping in Disguise

Another type of stories in circulation among the working mothers is about a baby sitter who has a gang and who sends the baby with the baggers. The beggar keeps the baby for the whole day in the road side with her to show that this baby needs food making the baby a source of earning. Later in the evening the beggar brings the baby back home just before the mother reaches from the office. Rumours were also multiplied that sometime, this gang tries to kidnap the baby too. In the screenshot no. 7. Gang of Babysitter, showing two ladies and the viewer can distinguish that the baby is not at all similar to the lady who claims the baby to be her own. Many a time, a well dressed baby is seen with a poor man who is travelli ng in a bus sleeping and people clicking pictures of him believing the baby to be kidnapped by the man. This message was sent to me by a mother of one and a half years old boy, who used to keep her baby with the babysitter first. Later she stopped keeping the baby with the baby sitter and started sending him to a day- care centre.

7. Gang of Babysitters

Contemporary legends travel far and wide and have been told and retold from person to person in the same manner as myths, fairy tales or ballads spread in earlier cultures (Brunvand, 1981: 4). Internet plays an important role in disseminating these legends, and it incorporates verbal and written scripts as well as images, and videos that assist the process of legitimizat io n or de legitimization of the legend .

Expressing Ambivalence in Assam: Natural Calamity, Ethnic Conflict, Urbanisation, and Changing Cultural Spaces

India despite of being a fast –growing developing economy has been pursuing the policy of liberalization and globalization since 1980s. In the northeast, some states like Assam, Meghalaya and Arunachal Pradesh are lagging behind while some states like Mizoram, Nagaland, Sikkim, Tripura and Manipur have performed better than India as a whole. In Assam, the escalating rural–urban gap is a major concern in regard to human development. As a result, various social problems can be witnessed in Assam, among which human trafficking is a major problem. Over the last few decades, Assam has witnessed large- scale migration of the native populace to richer parts of the country and abroad. The urgency of this problem can be realized from the fact that there is a rapid increase in the number of missing persons in the state. According to the report entitled "Action Research on Trafficking in Women and Children in India" by the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), "The situation in the North-eastern part of the country demands special attention. Trafficking of women and children in this region cut across different states and extends beyond national boundaries, involving Bangladesh, Myanmar and other countries " (Mishra, 2013:9-15). Conflicts and natural disasters are the biggest causes of human trafficking in Assam. According to the data provided by the Indian Ministry of Home Affairs, in 2012, 3500 adults and children were disappeared from Assam, which ordinary people think as the probable victims of human trafficking. Every year, hundreds of thousands people have been affected by flood, landslide in Assam. Then the relief camps become the target for the traffickers to lure people with handsome proposal. At that time crisis, guardians find it suitable to send children off to cities against some payment from richer states like Delhi, Maharashtra or abroad where industrializat io n of a globalized economy is facilitating the invisible face of modern day slavery in the form of sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and forced labour. Since 1995, the districts in Lower Assam have been experiencing Bodo- Adivasi and Bodo-Bengali speaking Muslim clashes, where villages were razed down, people were killed by bullets of armed forces; peoples belongings were scattered around, food and medicine were not even counted. Schools were shut down for countless days as they were the shelter for the refugees. In 2008, the Dimasas in Assam's North Cachar Hills clashed with Zeme Nagas Similarly, Nagaland- Assam border i.e Golaghat district of Assam has been suffering from some border line issue. Thus, politics of ethno-exclusivism has remarkably affected the area as a result of which social devils tried to take all sorts of advantages. Conflic t leads to displacement, which causes Assam a focal point for trafficking (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

Conclusion

It can be said that by telling such legends, story tellers reduce their anxiety or help themselves to find meaning in some events. At the same time, these narrators utilize the very properties of apprehension and uncertainty to make a good story and improve their social relationships by making an effort to alert the society by releasing tensions. Much of the beliefs and practices of old are viewed with a certain amount of skepticism by the younger generation of Assam, especially with the increasing revelation to western ways via the media. Yet, the old and new belief systems are able to subsist side by side in this age of widespread literacy, rapid

mass communication and travel. It is quite natural that new legends will evolve and become popular. Chain letters, anonymous emails and endless SMS jokes have largely taken the place of traditional myths, legends and folktales. Every legend in Assam, if examined within the context of its telling and its listening, has the potential to influence or to reflect the perspective of its teller and audience. The meaning that is generated via storytelling is thus relevant to the social, political, and economic circumstances of the community, where the legend belongs and lives.

Narratives are the central means by which Assamese people give their lives meaning across time: "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative" (Hardy, 1968: 5). Social properties of conversation like leveling, sharpening and assimilation of stories take place to make the story function better with audiences. As a result, contemporary legends have been gaining a growing sense of importance outside the arenas of literature and folklore, becoming both a core of research and a rich source of data in several areas of comparative literature, linguistics, gender studies, anthropology, socio- linguistics, and language education (Tannen, 1980: 57).

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