



The satiric content of urban jokelore : a study in a metropolitan city of north east India

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Abstract

Folklore is an integral part of human beings as they interact with each other on a daily basis in a variety of expressive ways. It includes all those processes, forms and behaviours through which thoughts, feelings, beliefs and knowledge are communicated from one person to another. So whether oral literature, like folktales, legends, jokes, myths or proverbs; material things, like houses or folk crafts; performing arts, like folk music or dance; or customs and beliefs; all come under the purview of folklore. Urban folklore, of which joke is an important segment, gives an insight into the working environments, the pressures and challenges as well as the fears and anxieties of the urbanite. A study of these would throw light upon many aspects of urban behaviour and life. The study follows the Descriptive Survey Method combined with analytical explorations.

Keywords : Folklore, Humour, Jokelore, Satire, Urbanization.

1. Introduction

The term folklore has been initially thought of as something associated with the backward culture of primitive country folk, deep in remote time and away from the centres of civilization. But some modern folklorists like Alan Dundes and Dan Ben Amos have contended against the antiquity of folklore and emphasized the contemporaneity of folklore. Folklore does not necessarily have to be limited to traditional forms orally transmitted by folk who belong to the lower strata in society or the folk inhabiting the rural countryside. According to them, the folk can be any folk residing in any part of the world, be it rural or urban, and their lore can be originated and transmitted through any available medium, be it by word of mouth, by electronic media or by any non oral or aural means.

2. Urban life at crossroads

Accelerating urbanization is powerfully affecting the transformation of Indian society.

Slightly more than 26% of the country's population is urban and more than half of the urban dwellers live in urban agglomerates or cities of which Guwahati is one. Being the capital of Assam and the gateway to the north-east part of India, Guwahati is the largest urban centre and a million plus city. The city has experienced multifold growth during the past three decades to emerge as the primate city in the region. Like all other fast growing cities of India, this city is also densely populated. On the one hand, it is a city of proliferating shopping malls, big corporate houses and branches of giant multinational companies, trendy cars and food chains. On the other hand, it is also a city of abounding problems like, grossly inadequate water supplies, sewerage, electric power and housing. Congestion, corruption, crime, noise, broken roads, haphazard constructions, spilling drains, garbage dumps, traffic jams, pollution and major shortages of key necessities characterize urban life. An increasing number of trucks, buses, cars, auto rickshaws, motor cycles,

scooters as well as cycle rickshaws and hand drawn carts play an important role in the city thoroughfare, most of them spewing uncontrolled exhaust fumes. Accident rates are high and it is almost a daily occurrence for a city dweller to witness a crash or the running down of a pedestrian.

3. Attempts at humour in the urban setting

Folklore is first and foremost a behavioural phenomenon. "It originates in the human brain, and it exists and persists because of and through human actions. Phenomena become folklore because other individuals besides their creators find them meaningful and subsequently behave in ways that enable them to generate those phenomena anew" (Georges and Jones 1995 : 231). Folklore is not the result of formal, institutionalized education. Instead, folklore occurs in the minds of the folk, with the knowledge of what is happening around them. For the urban man, the urban setting with its awesome challenges is the breeding ground of folklore creation. Amidst all the heterogeneous exigent issues, the urbanite has not only to survive but to cultivate resilience to thwart the fears, apprehensions, insecurities common to urban living. The conduits opening up to leisure and relaxation have to be sought and here folklore, specially jokelore, plays a very crucial role. Jokelore serves as an escape valve to diffuse the mounting pressures on the nerves of a harassed urbanite seeking solace and respite from the sick hurry, suffocation and exertion of urban living.

With the explosion of urban population in the nineteenth century following the rise of industrialization, a whole new corpus of urban folk literature came into being. This includes urban legends, proverbs, jokes and riddles which originate as well as circulate among the urban populace and are reflective of their culture. Jokes belong among the most dynamic of oral genres. Jokelore exists in various layers among the urban folk which mirror their inner and outer lives, their fears and anxieties, their working conditions, their places of dwelling, their fantasies and their outlook on life.

4. Jokelore as a vehicle of protest

Jokelore can be an effective vehicle of protest against higher authority and the administrative set up for the common man. Through a joke, a subject can be derogated by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of contempt, scorn or indignation. In the context of Guwahati, the failure and inefficiency of the government, the inadequacy and corruption of officials have made life for the common man full of problems in his day to day living. But protests usually go unheard and do not reach up to the level where changes could be made in the positive direction. Herein jokelore serves as a medium through which the discontentment and angst are voiced forth in a satiric vein. Analyses of some jokes are done to study the resentment and strong disapproval evident in the contents and thus reveal the workings and thoughts of the urban minds.

4.2 Some examples of jokes where the people at the ministerial level are attacked are :

(a) Conversation between two politicians :

1st man : "It is becoming increasingly difficult to endure."

2nd man : "Yes, first, long wait for the results, now for a Cabinet berth."

(b) One minister tells his colleagues :

"I think we deserve an entry in the Guinness Book for our record in scams."

The police department is not spared for being corrupt and jokes are made to lash out at them with the intention of deriding them. For example,

(a) An Officer-in-Charge of a police station :

"Our duty is to register cases and keep the records, not to find out the culprit."

(b) "The name of a police officer itself is a terror for people like us," says a common man.

(c) A man reports to his neighbour about an incident of robbery in his house :

"They (robbers) were in uniform and behaved like CBI officials and subsequently looted everything."

In all of these jokes some harsh contemporary realities come into focus. The power mongering politician, the shameless notoriety of ministers as they ransack the public coffers, the inactive policeman or the thugs looking like CBI officials and the police itself incriminated as faces of terror are true pictures of the system, though some of them are hyperbolic statements. Satiric humour is evoked and people take pleasure in it, for such jokes allow them to let off steam even though the situations remained the same.

4.3 The frequent power cut suffered by the urbanite has led to the creation of such joking rhymes following the pattern of a traditional children's rhyme :

*O ASEB, O ASEB
Light nidio kyo???
Pradyute je bidyut nidiye.....
Moinu dim kyo???*

*O Pradyut, O Pradyut
Bidyut nidio kyo???
NHPC'ye je turbine niniye.....
Moinu dim kyo???*

*O NHPC, O NHPC
Turbine ninio kyo???
Akhile je nibo nidiye.....
Moinu dim kyo???*

*O Akhil, O Akhil
Nibo nidio kyo???
CM sir'e je misa maate.....
Moinu dim kyo???*

*O CM Sir, O CM Sir
Misa maate kyo???
Misa kole kidal hobohe.....
Americatu light jaai...Axomot nejabo kyo???*

The English rendering of the joking rhyme is as follows :

*O ASEB, O ASEB (Assam State Electricity Board)
Why don't you provide electricity??
Because Pradyut (Power Minister of Assam) does not provide electricity.....
So, why should I....???*

*O Pradyut, O Pradyut
Why don't you provide electricity??
Because NHPC (National Hydro-Power Corporation) does not take the turbine....
So, why should I.....???*

*O NHPC, O NHPC
Why don't you take the turbine??
Because Akhil (Leader of Krishak Mukti Sangram Samiti) does not let me take the turbine....
So, why should I.....???*

O Akhil, O Akhil

Why don't you let me take the turbine??
Because CM (Chief-Minister) Sir tells lies....
So, why should I....???

O CM Sir, O CM Sir

Why do you tell lies??
What is the point of telling lies.....
If there is power cut in America why not in Assam...???

In the above joke not only the conflict between the government willing to set up river dam under NHPC, and the leader of the party opposing dam construction becomes very clear, but also the shirking of responsibility by one and all who should have been answerable becomes evident. The chief minister's ready comparison of situations between America and Assam has reached extreme proportions as numerous such other real comparisons are made from time to time to let serious situations pass as trivial and insignificant ones. This joking rhyme actually exposes a matter of serious intent and one of the grave issues troubling one and all alike. Direct names of people are brought within the ambit of the joke which has anonymous origin. The satire here evokes scornful laughter and the purpose of pacifying frayed nerves through verbal attack is served.

4.4 The problem of illegal migrants from neighbouring Bangladesh into Assam is another serious matter threatening the demographic pattern of the state. The incompleteness of the fencing of the Indo-Bangladesh border till date has led to unabated infiltration with serious economic and social ramifications. Jokes relating to the influx problem have emerged and are in circulation among the common populace. Some examples are :

- (a) Discussion among people:
The way our borders are being encroached upon, it's time we redraw the map of Assam.
- (b) A teacher once asked his students to draw the map of Assam. One student picks up a

chalk and puts a dot on the blackboard. The teacher responded, "I asked you to draw the map of present Assam. Don't be a smart futurist by putting just a dot."

In both these jokes, the burning issue of illegal immigration is highlighted. It seems that those at the helm of affairs have miserably failed to resolve the issue. A time would certainly come when Assam would lose large portions of its area. This is a real fear felt by the indigenous people. So, though the statements in the jokes at present seem to be exaggerations that the map of Assam would diminish in size to the extent of even becoming a dot, they reflect the feelings of insecurity and wrath of the common people. Below the humorous exterior the jokes here serve as means of protesting against the non-activity and perhaps unwillingness of the government to address such issues more seriously.

4.5 Another problem of alarming proportions going on unhindered in an around the peripheries of Guwahati city is rampant felling of trees and hill-cutting. The problem of deforestation is confined not only within the urban limits, but extending to many other areas of the state leading to destruction of wildlife habitats and consequent man-animal conflicts. Some jokes which deal with such grave issues in a satiric mode are :

- (a) That forest is thick which is probably not under the jurisdiction of the forest department.
- (b) A man pointing out to a vast area of barren land remarking, "This vast area has been deforested to help the forest development corporation to do new plantation."

In both of the above jokes, the government comes under scathing attack for its inability to stop deforestation. It is also incriminated here very humorously that only those land which are not under the forest department are rather safe. It is the forest department which is held responsible for all such related environmental problems.

5. Conclusion

Thus it is seen that satire is a powerful weapon of attack against all wrongs done by the powers to be. It serves as an escape valve for the outpouring of the pent-up feelings and frustrations

of the common man who finds it difficult to digest such gross misappropriations and yet would not seek to protest through legal action. Such oral literature comes as an aid to raise such issues in a humorous way without making the underlying problems lose their significance and validity. Thus, folklore serves as an effective means to voice forth the resentments, the loss of faith, the unhappiness, the insecurity and uncertainty of the present times. In a way, folklore helps reduce tension and frustration of the masses by providing an outlet through anonymous and collective expression.

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