



INDIAN INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY GUWAHATI
SHORT ABSTRACT OF THESIS

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SHORT ABSTRACT

Although children's literature has gained considerable currency in the West in the recent decades, it receives very little scholarly consideration in India, and in regional literatures of India. In Assam, apart from a few scattered articles across newspapers and journals, book-length scholarly studies on children's literature are almost non-existent. It is against this backdrop that this thesis attempts to undertake a critical study of children's literature emerging from the Indian state of Assam, focusing on its formative period in the late nineteenth century and early decades of the twentieth century. The study also examines a few recent cinematic adaptations that pick up issues from and resonate with this body of literature.

A unique impact of British colonialism in Assam was the perceived loss of a distinct language and cultural ethos of the land, as the region of Assam was subsumed within the larger Bengal province soon after the colonial conquest. The historical trauma of colonialism in Assam eventually gave rise to a sentiment of cultural nationalism which was particularly discernible in

its literature for children. The study attempts to examine how children's literature, in this regard, served as a discursive entity to inculcate a sense of a distinct cultural identity in the attempt to envision and shape the Assamese nation. The primary goal of the study, therefore, is to foreground the cultural discourses that inform the evolution of children's literature as a distinctive genre during the colonial era in Assam. The second goal, however, is to bring current perspectives in literary scholarship on the broad topic of children's literature into conversation with what came to be understood as the canonical works of children's literature in Assam. By setting up a dialogue between the selected texts and current critical scholarship, the thesis attempts to highlight how these stories are entwined with issues now understood as ableism, sexism, and other 'dark' aspects. Such an exploration would enable key insights into ideological and cultural formulations that are entrenched and eventually perpetuated through literature for children.

One of the socio-cultural biases ingrained in tales for children in Assam is the ableist bias. In order to see how stories/tales have functioned to 'entrench the idea of the disabled' in the cultural context of Assam, the present study attempts to locate the discursive and ideological regimes of ableism in the world of folk narratives by borrowing theoretical insights from the cultural models of disability.

There is no denying the fact that colonial modernity brought in its wake devastating and debilitating impact on the ecology of the region. The thesis undertakes a study of animality in the twentieth-century children's literature from Assam, deploying critical inputs from animality studies and critical posthumanism. It particularly attempts to see how fantasy narratives of certain writers such as Navakanta Barua and Atul Chandra Hazarika consciously attempt to

subvert the ‘speciesist’ colonial ideologies by blurring the boundaries between humans and animals.

Most of the characters from the corpus of the folk and fairy tales from Assam are also subject to social inequalities owing to their gender or class location. The study in this regard, attempts to examine the representation of violence in varied forms—physical, structural, symbolic, and epistemic in children's literature through the examples of folk and fairy tales from Assam. The thesis attempts to address the issue of ‘violence’ in the light of editorial intervention and self-censorship in order to discern the violent and darker elements entrenched in the tales.

The current study specifically attempts to examine fantasy literature from Assam in its varied forms—folktales, fairy tales, supernatural fiction, and wonder tales. It attempts to offer fresh perspectives in understanding this body of literature through the lens of perspectives evolved from current developments in critical thought, that afford crucial means of engaging with issues of gender, disability, animality, and violence. Connecting the idea of children's literature as a cultural capital, the study examines how the broad spectrum of children's fantasy narratives from Assam has larger socio-cultural implications. A critical inquiry into the *sadhu katha* lends the possibility of examining how such a body of literature provides glimpses of the cultural ethos of a distinct Assamese society thereby acting as a signifier of Assamese-ness. At the same time, the study also attempts to highlight how children's literature as cultural capital, particularly at a formative stage, runs the risk of reinforcing and/or perpetuating socio-cultural biases for generations to come.