



Influence of Mythological Names on the Construction of Societal Roles in Kamrupi and Goalpariya Oral Narratives

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Abstract

Human cultures revolve around their oral traditions, through which they communicate their gathered experience and wisdom from one generation to another. In these traditions, most prominently in Indian culture, we often observe a tendency to name certain societal roles from historical or mythological contexts. This practice bears meaning beyond just labelling and cementing people's roles or actions within the societal context. This is more than a simple practice and bears deep cultural meanings within the threshold of oral tradition and cultural consciousness. In this study, we explore how Kamrupi and Goalpariya oral traditions in Northeast India assign mythological names to social roles, creating a system that encodes cultural knowledge and delineates roles within established parameters. When we examine the repertoire of folksongs, lullabies, ceremonial wedding songs, or biyanaam, we notice a pattern referencing mythologies. When mythological figures like Krishna appear in love ballads, Ram and Sita in wedding songs, or ritual participants are addressed as Yashoda or Devaki, these names immediately invoke specific social expectations regarding status and behaviour, guiding individuals toward culturally recognised roles. By combining insights from linguistics, memory studies, and sociology, this paper examines how mythological naming functions as a powerful cultural language that bridges the past with the present through shared cultural threads.

Keywords: Folksongs, Goalpariya folksongs, Kamrupi folksongs, Mythological naming practices, Oral traditions.

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Introduction

Human cultures fundamentally depend on their languages and dialects to communicate and convey meaning that extends beyond lateral communication. These linguistic systems are precursors to oral traditions designed for trans-generational communication as they impart valuable wisdom and experiences from one generation to another. Within this process of cultural communication, we see the ingrained practice of anchoring societal roles by designating community positions with names drawn from well-accepted and familiar contexts such as history, mythology, or even local legends.

We discuss this practice, which is a unique and all too prevalent aspect of Indian culture. For instance, while it might be a taboo in other countries to even mention or hint at the name of Hitler or the Nazi party, Indians have no compunction at using these names in their everyday speech. In India, it is possible for a young protagonist of a movie to exclaim, “kaun kambakht kehta hai Hitler mar gaya” (which rascal says that Hitler is dead), just because his boss is a tyrant and rules with an iron fist. Yet such films get approved without any such dialogue being censored. This is not the only example; adolescents are often seen referring to their parents, the patriarch of the family in particular, imposing strict rules upon them, by the name of Hitler; the young beau of a girl referred to as Romeo or Majnu—both characters from beloved texts; traitors being christened Bibhishan, Mir Jafarⁱ, or Badanⁱⁱ, all three referencing a mythological or historical betrayal.

This practice of drawing names from mythological or historical contexts for social roles does not simply offer linguistic convenience, but also constructs a semiotic system that translates and signifies cultural values and behavioural expectations. This paper examines how, in Indian culture, mythological texts permeate rites, customs, and everyday life,

beginning with an exploration of mythological naming practices within a community, culture and folklore.

When a social role is associated with a mythological figure, it becomes associated with communal understandings that predefine its responsibilities and social standing. The community, recognising these mythological references, immediately grasps the role within their shared cultural memory, enabling the people to act with the appropriate expectations.

Oral narratives serve as the primary repositories of cultural knowledge in most traditional societies, especially in communities in which written documentation or scripture has historically been limited. These narratives, such as myths, folktales, proverbs, songs, and ritual recitations, function as cultural archives to preserve knowledge, experiences, and metaphysical concepts that shape the community. These oral narratives are dynamic, hence, capable of accumulating more knowledge over time while preserving fundamental elements of culture and worldview.

Studying oral narratives creates a unique understanding of the worldview and cultural progression of a community. These narratives reveal underlying concepts such as cultural contexts, assumptions, values, and moral codes that shape how community members perceive and interact with the world. An analysis of recurring motifs, character archetypes, narrative structures, and linguistic patterns in oral traditions allows us to reconstruct a community's understanding of nature and society. This approach is especially important in contexts where historical documentation is scarce or filtered through colonial perspectives.

The Goalpariya and Kamrupi oral traditions of Assam offer us an opportunity to examine how mythological naming practices construct social relationships and cultural memory.

Developed within the culturally diverse region of Lower Assam, these traditions have retained distinctive narrative forms despite modernising influences. By examining how these communities assign mythological names to social roles, we gain insight into their social organisation and value systems. When a naughty child is referred to as Kanai—the young lord Krishna, who frustrated the entire population of Gokul with his shenanigans—it offers social boundaries and moral responsibilities as well as expectations of behaviour that come with the name. This practice of mythological association offers an explanation as to how societal roles exist in their current form and, at the same time, reinforces how individuals in these positions ought to behave. This offers the community a chance to adhere to the olden codes and open new avenues as per the time demands, simultaneously.

Theoretical framework

The practice of designating mythological names to social roles can be examined through a multidisciplinary theoretical lens that combines semiotics, memory studies, depth psychology, and sociological theory. Mythological naming is not merely a stylistic or narrative device, but a culturally embedded semiotic system that codifies social meaning and behaviour. When a culture invokes a mythological figure to describe a person or role—calling a devoted wife to be Parvati or a cunning trickster to be Narada, it is a way of establishing a metaphor that reflects and shapes the collective understanding of social norms and identities, leading us to Roman Jakobson's concept of Metaphor. According to Jakobson, metaphor is essentially substitution, where a concept or an object is replaced by another object with which it shares a semantic similarity (55-82). When, in an oral narrative, the beloved is metaphorically referred to as Radha, it is not simply a literary flourish. Instead, it is a categorical substitution that communicates the need for a general set of values and expectations. This metaphor compresses the entire set

of values, expectations, and understandings into a single term. It enables listeners to immediately understand the role being played, the values being represented, and the potential consequences of such behaviour. In this sense, mythological naming is a semiotic strategy that maximises interpretation.

Jan Assmann's concept of cultural memory analyses how mythological figures function as stable reference points within a society's semiotic understanding. Cultural memory refers to the long-term, collectively shared knowledge that a society maintains across generations through rituals, texts, and symbols (Assmann 36). Mythological names, in this context, would serve as figures of memory which are the iconic carriers of meaning that transmit the entire concept of ethics, behavioural patterns, and societal expectations. These names belong to what Assmann calls the "cultural canon," a specific collection of symbols and narratives that translates to the society's foundational values. Thus, by designating social roles with mythological names, a culture ensures the continuity of its morality and worldview, reinforcing metaphysical concepts such as loyalty, heroism, sacrifice, or treachery. Such naming practices are thus not only narrative tools but mechanisms of ideological reproduction.

Naming also functions as a social framing device, a concept drawn from the sociological theories of Erving Goffman and subsequent scholars. Frames are interpretive structures that allow individuals to understand "what is going on" in any given situation (Goffman 21). When a mythological name is applied to a person, it acts as a frame signal, cueing the audience to interpret the person's actions, status, and meaning within a predefined narrative. The name effectively scripts behaviour and expectation: to be named "Lakshmi" is to be read as auspicious and nurturing; to be called "Narada" is to be positioned within a frame of ethical grey area or mildly malicious gossiping. Through this framing, mythological naming not only reflects a

perceived social reality but also contributes to its ongoing performance and negotiation.

Discussion and Analysis:

In the oral traditions prevalent in Kamrup and Goalpara, we see such practices in abundance. Use of mythological names to define social roles is an accepted and encouraged practice in oral narratives. The researcher speculates that the cause of this is rooted in the folk belief of using one's name. In many cultures, of which Assam is also one, belief assigns a huge importance to the name of a person. In the Lower Assam area, it is said that too much usage of one's name saps their vital forces. At the same time, referencing relatives for the purpose instead of using one's name is not perilous. Therefore, people are usually referred to as so-and-so's father, so-and-so's mother, so-and-so's wife, etc. Thus, the usage of mythological names in place of the actual name allows the people to avoid this evil omen.

A simple folk belief certainly does not explain the widespread tendency of the Kamrupi and Goalpariya culture to designate mythological names to societal roles. For this, one needs to delve deep and scrutinise the usage of mythological naming in oral narratives.

An examination of oral narratives from Goalpara reveals that this practice is widespread and well established. Of course, the Goalpariya oral traditions also show the use of Bondhu (Goalpariya dialect meaning "friend") to refer to friend/paramour/ beloved. Other terms used in a similar context are Sonar Bondhu (golden friend) / Sakha (friend) / Chengra (boy) / poraner bondhu (friend of my heart) / poti (Husband) / potidhon (precious husband) / bondhujan (friend), and others. The feminine counterpart is represented in the songs through terms such as Sokhi (female friend), Kanya (girl/bride), sojoni (beloved friend), nari (woman).

However, we also see mythological characters making appearances, Kanai or Krishna as the eternal beloved and the feminine counterpart as Radha, the beloved sacred feminine.

Oho re, kemone jaibo nodir oi pare/ Aami satar nahi jaani re.

Oho re, nodir oi pare pare/ Kanai (Kala in other versions) bajai mohan banshi re.

Translation (mine): Oh, how do I cross this river, I don't know how to swim. Oh, on the other bank, my beloved is playing his mesmerising flute (Nath 382).

Tor ei madhur banshir sur re/ Laaj bhoi mor naai re.

Oho re kemone bajan Kala re/ sur sunong mui kanere.

Translation (Author): This sweet melody of your flute/ has taken away my inhibitions. Oh, my beloved, how you play the flute, it reaches straight to my ear (Nath 382).

Hai re hai, saak tulite joubon korim daan, oho dhon kanaiya re.

Translation (Author): Oh, I'll gift you my youth when I leave to gather green leaves, oh my beloved (Nath 385).

Here, we see Kanai or Kala is used to refer to the singer's beloved.

Oho kala, aar nabajan banshuri, banshir sure radha mui roite na pari...

Translation (Author): Oh, beloved, don't play your flute anymore. Your flute doesn't let your beloved rest (Goswami 140). Here, the singer asks her beloved not to play his flute anymore as she can't rest hearing the melody. The singer

also refers to herself as Radha, and her beloved is referred to as Kala. We can also point out the anthropomorphisation of the moon as one's beloved in these haunting folksongs of love, desire, and despair. The names usually seen being used are Chand (moon), Sonar Chand (the golden moon) as the masculine term referring to one's beloved, and Chandmoni (the moon gem) and Chander Sokhi (the beloved of the moon) as the feminine term. There are also instances where the characters are called by their professions in the oral narratives. Thus, we see the words Moishaal (buffalo herd), Mahut (elephant keeper), Sadhu or Saud (merchant), manjhi (ferryman), Doiyaal (dairy merchant), haluwa or Sasha (farmer). Some such instances are as follows,

Aakashote chondro uthere manjhi, oho Manjhi songe loiya taara.

Aar koto kaal roibo Manjhi, sathi haara hoiya, Manjhi re.

Translation (Author): The moon rises in the sky, oh my ferryman, with the stars. How long do I wait, my ferryman, without a consort? (Nath 437)

Oho mor hai hastir konya re, khaniko daya nai mahutok *lagiya re...*

Translation (Author): Oh, my maiden of elephants, take pity on this poor mahut (Goswami 135).

Khata khuta mahut re tur gale chap dari, sotyo koriya kon re mahut konba deshe bari re

Hostire norang, hostire chorang, hostir paaye beri, sotyo koriya koilam konya gauripure bari re.

Translation (mine): Oh, short, short-statured mahut, you sport a beard on your cheeks. Tell the truth, where is your home? I move the elephant, I herd the elephant with chains

on their legs, I tell the truth, girl, my home is in Gauripur (Nath 442). As we see, the two lovers call each other mahut and kanya.

Similar practices are also observed in Kamrupi folksongs. However, this trait of mythological naming is not limited to songs of love and despair, where the only characters are two lovers. Other social roles are also designated with names from mythological contexts. The folksongs sung during Anna-prashanna, the first ritual rice eating of a newborn, is one such example. The ritual demands that the maternal uncle of the baby feed it the first bite of rice. As ritual demands, the annaprasoner geet (the ritual song of Anna-Prasanna) asks,

Oho re chawar mama- krishna mama oi,

Anna khuwate lage Sajiya aayre tui.

Translation (Author): Oh, the maternal uncle of the child, oh Krishna, you need to feed the rice, get ready, and come (Nath 572).

Similar instances are seen in the Churakoroner geet, the ritual song of cutting a baby's first hair.

Jonomer chuli thoise bhage bhage, bamuner bakye chuli felowa lage.

Yashodar kolat thoi Nandai bhagai chuli, mamai je katite laage.

Translation (Author): The baby's hair from birth is parted with care, the priest asks to cut it off. Put the baby on the mother's lap, let the father part the hair, and let the maternal uncle cut it off (Nath 272). This song calls for both the father and the mother, who are referred to as Yashoda and Nanda, the parents of Lord Krishna. Thus, the social role of the father and mother of the child is filled by the mythological

context of Krishna's parents. Notably, this ritual calls for the maternal uncle as well; however, since in the context of the myth, the maternal uncle is evil, the uncle is not named and is just referred to as *mama*.

It must be reiterated that Krishna or Kanai is not limited to only one societal role. In the stories, he is not just a lover. He was also known as a naughty child, a devoted husband and friend, and a devoted maternal uncle to Abhimanyu. Thus, depending upon the context of the oral tradition, the societal role depicted by the name Kanai or Krishna would vary.

Amar kanai hashe, sonar nupur pawot diya jhumur jhumur nache.

Translation (Author): Our child smiles, wearing golden anklets, our child dances (Nath 46-47).

This is a lullaby, where the child is referred to as Kanai. However, in the Bhomra geet, we find,

Krisna aar tumi oli ekoi soman, pratifule pori tumi koro modhu paan.

Translation (Author): You honeybees are just like Krishna; you taste honey from every flower (Nath 39). Here, Krishna is depicted as the eternal lover who had affairs with many women. In the examples above, we have also seen Krishna or Kanai fulfilling the role of the good maternal uncle and the devoted lover wooing his lady with his melodious flute. In some of the songs, we also see a back-and-forth dialogue between two amorous singers, who usually refer to themselves as Krishna and Radha. Studying these songs, folklorist Dwijen Nath observed, "... using dialogues inside the song is a notable trait of Goalpariya folk songs" (459).

While Krishna is portrayed as either the beloved or the naughty child, once the marriage ceremony approaches, the societal role changes, and so does the character. In both Kamrupi and Goalpariya oral narratives, the bridegroom is usually referred to as Ram, and the bride is referred to as Sita or Janaki. However, we also see Shiva and Parvati in the same context. Similarly, the bride's father is referred to as Janak. We don't see a mention of Janak's wife, Sunaina, in such oral narratives.

Aaier haater kata guwa ram nakhai laaje

Hatot dhorī sifal kore somajer maaje

Translation (Author): the groom does not eat betelnut cut in the mother-in-law's hand; he keeps holding it among the crowd (Sarma 57-58). Here, we see the groom being referred to as Ram, but the bride's mother is simply referred to as aai.

Other examples include,

Sobe bole ramor biya, anandito hoiya, raaijok matiya anise, tamulpaan diya.

Translation (Author): People say, today is Ram's wedding, everyone is invited with betelnut and leaves (Sarma 57-58).

Doi maser bhar re, kataya guwa paan re, kiba sajane janakir, Joran aahil re

Translation (Author): Shoulderfuls of curd and fish, cut betel leaves, and nuts. Is Janaki ready yet? Her Joron is here (Sarma 63). These examples show the bride and groom being traditionally referred to as Ram and Janaki. In Kamrup, the folksongs sung during various rituals of the wedding ceremony are extensive. There, we note that the bride and groom are almost always imagined as Ram and

Janaki or Shiva and Parvati. In scattered examples, Radha, Rukmini, and Krishna also make appearances.

What is of note about these songs is that they do not describe the marriage ceremony of, say, Ram and Janaki. Rather, these songs describe the rituals wherein the bride and groom are referred to by the names of their corresponding mythological characters. This observation gains further traction when, in the same Biyanaam, the mother and father of the groom are referred to as Yashoda or Daivaki and Nanda or Vasudev, respectively, while the bride and the groom are still being referred to as Ram and Janaki.

The song with reference to this observation is sung during “Pani tola.”

Maruwa... jiliki aahise, maruwa... Ramchandra re

Maruwa... Jiliki aahise ting

Maruwa... pani tuli aahe maruwa... Daivaki Sundari

Maruwa... haatot muthikharure chin.

Translation (Author): The groom is coming upon a boat that has a shining front. The groom’s mother is coming with the water, wearing bangles in her hands (Sarma 48). Here, the groom is called Ram, while the groom’s mother is called Devaki. Another panitola geet shows social roles being named after mythological figures that fit individually but come from different mythological stories.

Ehhate chati loi ulale Daivaki, joloke kamona kori o

Uthore Sankar, o Gouri, Digambar, Parvati gangake jai o.

Kaaxe ghot lua raadhe, oi ram, mathe lua mala he

Jamunak jaba lagi, oi ram, nokoriba hela he.

Translation (Author): Daivaki leaves with an umbrella in her hand to get water. Oh, young groom, get up, your bride also leaves for the river. Take a pitcher, blushing bride, wear a garland on your head, you're going to the river, do not tarry (Goswami 121). Here, the song describes the mother of the groom (as Daivaki) going to the river for the *pani tola* ritual. However, the groom is referred to as Sankar and the bride as Parvati. In the very next stanza, the blushing bride is painted as the amorous girl who wishes to wed her beloved, and hence, she is now referred to as Radha.

Nonetheless, conscious efforts to align mythological characters in these oral traditions can also be observed. In songs where Shiva and Parvati are the characters, the father of the bride is referred to as Hemavanta and the mother as Menaka, which tallies with the mythological context. Similarly, we see mentions of Bhishma and Janak as the fathers of the bride, where the bride is referred to as Rukmini and Janaki.

Thus far, in view of the linguistic and anthropological theories, the study has shown that oral narratives adopt different approaches in assigning social roles. The paper shall now discuss what this tendency of naming such roles from a mythological context has achieved.

Establishing context through mythological reference, Mythological names in Goalpariya and Kamrupi oral traditions function as cognitive shortcuts that efficiently communicate complex character attributes and expected behaviours. When narratives employ names like Radha or Parvati, they immediately evoke the archetype of a beautiful maiden experiencing first love, complete with emotional landscapes and behavioural expectations. Similarly, Krishna or Kanai references instantly conjure the beloved archetype characterised

by playful mischief and romantic pursuit. Figures like Shiva or Ram represent powerful masculinity, tempered by devotion and duty, demonstrating how mythological naming stratifies archetypes into distinct modalities with specific behavioural scripts.

This transmission of contextual information through mythological naming preserves narrative economy, ensures accessibility across varying levels of cultural literacy, and reinforces shared cultural references that strengthen community bonds. It also establishes continuity between mythological context and present experience, thereby suggesting that certain things, such as expectations from a societal role, are eternal.

Names from a mythological context can script behavioural expectations for both ritual participants and narrative characters. In ritual contexts such as the *Biyanaam* (wedding songs), participants are temporarily assigned mythological identities that guide their actions. When the groom's mother is referred to as Yashoda or Devaki, she is expected to embody these roles and perform according to their mythological precedents.

Anthropomorphisation of abstract concepts also takes place. The naming practices in these traditions frequently render philosophical and emotional complexities accessible through personification. Kanai (Krishna) invokes not merely a character but the embodiment of romantic love itself, while Yashoda concretises the concept of maternal love, giving form to universal emotional experiences.

This anthropomorphic function allows these oral traditions to explore complex emotional terrain through character-driven narratives rather than abstract discourse. By encoding concepts like devotion, sacrifice, and desire within mythological figures, the narratives create accessible entry points for engaging with profound cultural values. Community members develop

affective relationships with embodied concepts more readily than with abstract principles, strengthening cultural transmission through both emotional and cognitive channels.

The selection of specific mythological names from among potential alternatives signals moral judgments about societal roles. This selective deployment is particularly evident in the portrayal of kinship relationships such as the maternal uncle (mama), where multiple mythological options exist but carry distinct moral valences. When oral narratives represent the maternal uncle as Krishna (Abhimanyu's maternal uncle), they signal positive expectations for the role as protective and supportive. Similarly, references of Kamsa or Shakuni, maternal uncles with malevolent mythological precedents, immediately mark the character as untrustworthy or harmful.

This naming practice demonstrates how mythological references function as a cultural metaphor, communicating ethical inclinations without explicit commentary. By consistently associating positive portrayals of maternal uncles with Krishna and negative portrayals with Kamsa or Shakuni, the oral traditions establish and reinforce cultural expectations regarding appropriate behaviour within this relationship, creating a set of moral instructions encoded within a narrative.

Conclusion

The analysis of mythological naming practices in Goalpariya and Kamrupi oral narratives reveals sophisticated mechanisms through which these communities maintain cultural continuity while efficiently transmitting complex social knowledge. By designating societal roles with names with mythological contexts, these traditions create multidimensional frameworks that simultaneously provide context, script behaviour, personify abstractions, and signal moral valence. This naming system functions as a form of cultural language that allows performers

and audiences to access rich networks of association with minimal linguistic investment.

As demonstrated through Assmann's cultural memory theory, these practices go beyond simple labelling to become a medium to communicate values, expectations, and worldviews. The mythological names serve as an aide-memoire that connects present experiences to foundational narratives, establishing continuity between mythology and reality. This communication of memory reinforces cultural identity while providing a pre-determined way of navigating social relationships.

In an era of rapid cultural change, understanding these naming practices offers valuable insights into how oral traditions maintain resilience through symbolic efficiency. The Goalpariya and Kamrupi oral traditions demonstrate how mythological naming allows cultures to encode vast repositories of social knowledge within compact linguistic references, ensuring cultural preservation while facilitating adaptive interpretation across generations.

End Notes

- i Mir Jafar was the general who betrayed Siraj-ud-Daulah in the battle of Plassey in 1757, which led to the first threshold of East India Company rule in Bengal.
- ii Badan Barphukan was an advisor and general of the Ahom kingdom. He is known for his defection to the Burmese empire and the subsequent Burmese invasion of Assam.

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