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Urban Legends reflect societal anxieties and offer a symbolic message: A study of urban legends of Assam

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Abstract

Assam is rich in folklore and tradition. The folklore of Assam has much been explored. A lot of study has been done in this area. However, more research needs to be done in the modern folklore of Assam as this area still remains uncharted. Though, legends of Assam have been written about, studied, researched on, yet, one genre still needs attention and that being urban legends. The towns of Assam have seen a rapid growth of urbanization in the recent years with mushrooming of flats and townships, construction of roads, improvement of the drainage system, and growth of international fast food chains like Subway, KFC and the like. With urbanization come urban problems which lead to anxieties. And this becomes the breeding ground for urban legends. These legends, not only, express societal anxieties and fears, but also, deliver a message. This paper is an attempt to understand urban legends as they reflect societal apprehensions and convey a symbolic message. The paper focuses on some urban legends evolving in some towns of Assam and explores the fear and hopes of the people as they find expression in the legends.

Keywords: *Urban legends, urbanization, collective anxiety, societal apprehensions.*

Introduction: Urban Legends are a prose narrative considered as true by the people in whose society the narratives circulate. The time of occurrence is current or recent past and since these legends talk about contemporary life they hold the interest of men of all classes. They are sensational stories that circulate in the city and the veracity of which is debatable. They are often referred to as FOAF since people claim to have heard them from a 'friend of a friend.' The term 'Urban Legend' refers to events experienced by known people, at known place and known time. The beginning lines of these stories are often 'it happened to a friend of mine or I heard it from a friend's friend.' The credit of popularizing this term goes to Jan Harold Brunvand with series of publications on this topic. According to him urban legend is an "apocryphal contemporary story, told as true, but incorporating traditional motifs and usually attributed to a friend of a friend." (Brunvand, 1996:730) Carroll believes that many of them are told for entertainment.

These are stories which circulate widely in industrialized societies, which are believed to be true by those who pass them on, which are usually localized in a place familiar to the teller, and which-upon investigation-almost always prove impossible to verify. A good many of them seem to be told as much for entertainment as anything else, and books and articles on them have proved to be extremely popular with the general public. (Carroll, Vol 98)

These legends are a shift from a rural locale to an urban milieu and are a part of post World War II urban industrial world. Linda Degh opined that "they merely denote legend-like stories that are part of the everyday lives of people in the post World-War II urban-industrial world." (Degh, 2001: 86)

Urban Legends reflect societal anxieties and offer a symbolic message... Shibani Sarmah

However, some critics argue that despite its name these stories need not necessarily originate in a city as the term is used in relevance with time instead of geographical boundaries. It is used to draw the line between traditional folklore in pre – industrial times and modern folklore. The term deals with urban ness. In today's fast developing world the urban- rural division is getting blurred. In this urban transformation as cities grow rapidly they swallow up neighboring villages. Thus, adding urban elements to the rural areas and the legends may find a rural setting.

Urban legends verbalize human anxiety and give vent to innate fears. They send out messages and function as warnings. They narrate unusual experience of people and transmit some messages. These messages being the nucleus of the legends. Most legends deal with characters attempting to gain some- thing dubious such as money or a good time, while acting against dominant norms. In the process of achieving an illicit goal, an ironic twist occurs, in which something negative happens to the characters.

Background: Urbanization in Assam is going on at an accelerating speed. Its impact is immensely felt by the city dwellers. The study concentrates on few major commercial and trading centres of **Assam. It includes:**

Guwahati: Guwahati is the gateway of the Northeast region and is growing fast. The city is one of the most rapidly growing cities of India. Infact, according to a survey done by a UK media, Guwahati is among the first hundred fastest growing cities of the world.

Tinsukia: Tinsukia is the commercial hub of eastern Assam. The commercial activity of the town has attracted people from all over the country to settle here giving the town a cosmopolitan character.

Jorhat: Jorhat is a rapidly developing city of Assam. It has the distinction of having the largest number of educated residents in Assam, among all other districts of Assam and is one of the major business hubs of the state.

Sibsagar: Sibsagar is the historical city of Assam. It had been the capital of the mighty Ahom kingdom. There are famous temples of historical importance. The town is fast growing in commercial and educational activities.

Haunted Highway: On the National Highway 37 there is a point at Sivsagar called Pragati Chariali which is believed by the people to be ill – fated. At one particular point nearly 30 accidents occurred in one year. That point is considered by the locals to be boding evil. The people were so horrified that on March 4th, 2013, people gathered in large numbers and mass prayers were offered at the ominous site to ward off any evil eye. *Naam kirtans* were held to purify that area of any bad spirit. ¹

Some points on a highway are prone to accidents. This may be for different reasons- a sharp curve, fast and rash driving, bad road condition, alcohol consumption by the drivers and the like. Rapid road construction and building work is going on all over Assam as per the four-way lane plan. When construction is going on driving becomes riskier because of a missing road sign or bad weather condition. Vehicles move at a very high speed on the highways and a slight error on the part of the driver could be dangerous. When several accidents occur at one particular spot people's tendency to consider that spot as inauspicious is high instead of investigating the actual cause of repeated accidents. The same could be said of the Pragati Chariali accidents.

In Sibsagar again there is a bridge which is believed to be haunted. Many accidents occurred on the bridge. There is a local rumour that the unfortunate drivers who were killed in the accidents had been tricked by the bridge by optical illusion. The moment they reach the bridge they see a

¹ The mass prayer was telecast live on a local TV channel, News Live on 4th March, 2013.

Urban Legends reflect societal anxieties and offer a symbolic message... Shibani Sarmah
divergent which they presume to be the actual path. They proceed in full speed only to fall into the watery death bed.¹

The credibility of such stories is, however, questionable. How would anyone possibly know if the drivers were actually tricked by the bridge or died because of their own fault? But again the truth of the matter is not significant.

As far as legends are concerned, it is irrelevant whether they are true. Most likely, some of them are true, others are erroneous, and others are deliberate deceptions, although in most cases such distinctions cannot be made with certainty. The truth of a story neither qualifies nor disqualifies it as a legend. (Degh, 2001:4)

On the Jorhat- Tinsukai highway in Itakhuli tea garden there is a bridge where many accidents occurred. This bridge is considered to be haunted. The area near the bridge is believed to have been the execution site of the Ahoms. It is believed that many people were tortured and killed in this site. The tortured souls, according to legend, still roam in that area and seek revenge by causing accidents.²

Urban ghosts: “The Gymkhana club in Jorhat has come to the forefront for some mysterious happenings. So interesting were the reports that it was covered by a news channel for their occult based program *Kon Hai*. It has been reported that the so called haunted house was a Lodge of the Freemasons during British rule. The general population still considers them to be practitioners of some occult rituals and black magic. It is said that the house or lodge was abandoned after a ritual went wrong and since then mysterious sounds can be heard coming from the house.”³

Black magic practice is still common in some parts of the state. It either fascinates or scares the people. It led to the growth of many legends. Needless to say of the fearsome witch hunt legends that have been causing formidable damage and loss of innocent lives since time immemorial to the present.

Lord Ganesha drinking milk: In September 25, 1995, the state along with the rest of the country had a divine experience of watching the Hindu deity, Lord Ganesha drink milk. It all began when an otherwise ordinary man dreamt of Lord Ganesha craving for milk. Next morning he rushed to the nearest temple to become the initiator of a legend which spread like wild fire across the country. The media had a big role in disseminating the news of Lord Ganesha drinking milk. People flocked in the temples to offer spoonfuls of milk to the statue of the Lord and attained great satisfaction to see the milk disappear. The phenomenon of idols drinking milk was scientifically explained by the theory of capillary action.⁴ However, the phenomenon was widely accepted as a miracle. The miracle recurred once again in August 2005 and then in 2010.

According to the eminent scientist Prof. Yash Pal, “The reason behind people thronging temples with pots and pans filled with milk could be termed as ‘mass religious hysteria’ caused by gullibility and scientific ignorance.’ People have a strong desire to believe in the paranormal. They welcome any kind of supernatural happening as it adds suspense to an otherwise mundane life and also help

¹ This legend is collected from Aradhana Talukdar , a 30 years old housewife residing in Guwahati but originally from Sivsagar , who heard it from her grandmother.

² The informant is a 60 years old lady from Jorhat who often travels to Tinsukia

³ Source is www.Friedeye.com/paranormal-tourism-and-the-north-east/

⁴ The movement of liquids within spaces of porous surfaces due to surface tension, adhesion and cohesion

Urban Legends reflect societal anxieties and offer a symbolic message... Shibani Sarmah
them to escape from harsh reality. City life is full of expectations. When wishes are not fulfilled and all means fail people wait for some miracle to happen and divine intervention is always a welcome. It is also interesting to note that out of some crores of Hindu Gods only Lord Ganesha's name surfaced. This elephant headed lord is considered to be the harbinger of all things good. At the onset of a *puja* to any of the deities, obeisance is paid to Lord Ganesh. This reflects the mental make-up of the God fearing lot who even plays safe in the selection of its deity.

Baby-sitters giving relaxants to infants: There are many legends on danger to children and babies being cruelly treated. Brunvand has four entries on this topic in his encyclopedia. The urban legends as mentioned by him talk about how babies are neglected, mutilated, lost or cruelly treated by those responsible for their care.

As innocent victims of neglect or violence, babies are killed or seriously injured in most of the urban legends in which they appear. The four entries...plus other legends discussed in this book, describe babies being abandoned, abducted, killed by a rampaging animal...poorly or cruelly treated by those responsible for their care. (Brunvand, 2001:25)

Babies are subjected to deliberate or inadvertent neglect by their caregivers and this proves injurious to their health and sometimes even fatal. Urban legends of babies being given relaxants by their nannies are often in circulation. In most of the nuclear families in the city of Guwahati where both parents go out to work, the infant or the young child is left in the care of part time or full time maids. The part time maids reside in the city whereas the full time ones may belong to any part of the state. Nannies from the neighboring state of Meghalaya known as "kongs" are hired from various agencies working in the city. They are well trained in baby care. In spite of their exorbitant salary they are highly sought after because of their competence. However, stories floated regarding their credibility. It was believed that these 'kongs' sedated the babies by giving relaxants like cough syrups or adding sleeping pills in the baby's milk so that they could relax while the babies slept for long hours. Fear and insecurity of the working mothers to leave their infants in the hands of total strangers give rise to such tales. Another possible reason could be the lack of trust by the orthodox grand parents or older relatives on nannies from not only a different community but also from a different state. In Mizoram also such tales circulated as mentioned by Cherrie Lalnunziri Chhangte in their article published by Sahitya Akademy. They attributed the growth of such lores to the fear and insecurity arising out of the illegal immigration of Myanmar citizens into their state and their blending into the urban households of the state as domestic helps.

The widespread illegal immigration of Myanmar citizens into Mizoram across the Champhai border has resulted in an influx of foreigners in the State. These immigrants usually seek employment in the domestic circles of the urban areas like Aizawl, Lunglei, Kolasib, Serchhip, etc. Most of the household help, as well as many taxi drivers, are people from these areas. This, in turn has given rise to a number of new lores, again, arising from a mixture of fear, suspicion and insecurity, the added ingredient being that these tales are believable because there is a high probability that they may contain some truth. Such tales include the belief that housemaids give cough syrup and other relaxants to the infants they baby-sit in order not to be disturbed by them. (Chhangte, Vol. 50)

Many urban legends about drugs are created. Cough syrup being fairly dangerous for infants and younger children has given rise to such urban legends.

Conclusion: In this paper, I have tried to highlight that urban legends express a symbolic message. Urban legends mirror the societal attitude and approach towards fears and anxieties that exist amongst people and they also convey a message. In the 'haunted highway' legends the message is very clear. It serves as a warning to drivers to drive with alertness and full caution.

Urban Legends reflect societal anxieties and offer a symbolic message... Shibani Sarmah
The reason for telling a legend is basically not to entertain but to educate people, to inform them about an important fact, to arm them against danger within their own cultural environment. Therefore, as Matthias Zender expresses it, understanding of the legend is possible if one views it through the general living conditions, belief, and ideology of a culture. (Dorson, 1972: 73)

The legend of ‘baby sitters giving relaxants to infants’ warns the working mothers to be careful while leaving their babies in the hands of nannies. Urban legends also give respite to anxiety ridden people. When all means fail to relieve them from the problems of their lives people wait for divine intervention. Very willingly they start believing in legends. The legend of Lord Ganesha drinking milk is the outcome of such a frantic need for the relief of pent up anxiety. The legend always tells about some extraordinary incident which stimulates interest in the people. The unusual experience of someone takes the form of legend and in it society unearths a hidden message.

Each legend informs, explains, instructs, warns or exemplifies through the telling of an extraordinary, unexplainable experience that a known person has encountered. Something in its extra normality is neither absurd nor completely impossible, which suggests that ordinary human beings have similar experiences. In fact, sooner or later, most people are touched by a never-to-be-forgotten extra normal experience, and in it they find a message that makes them ponder or act. This message is the core, kernel, or nucleus of the legend, and because to communicate it to its audience is the main goal, the shape it takes is subordinated to the message it transmits. (Degh, 2001:99)

Our society like any other societies in the world is also subject to angst and fear arising from modern urban lifestyle. Urban legends spring from such apprehensions. They are shaped by the mental structure of the society. Thus they reflect collective anxiety and communicate a message. As Stolley puts it ‘Urban legends provide cautionary warnings about modern society. (Stolley, 183)

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