

World of Sabar Folktales: A New Looking Glass for Sabar Tribe

Devapriya Bhattacharya*

Submitted: 28.02.2025

Revised: 25.04.2025

Accepted: 10.06.2025

Abstract: Folktales have served as manifestations of culture for decades. Often found in oral traditions, they provide vital clues to the actual reality. Actions such as storytelling to children for their entertainment during special occasions or in daily lives serve as the medium through which the traditions of folktales are kept alive within a community. The Sabar tribe is one such community whose rich traditions and culture remain trapped within their unwritten folktales, recited orally as opposed to written formats. This paper will focus on certain folktales of the Sabar tribe (both the Lodha and Kharia branches) and unearth how their folktales present us with information about their culture, societal life, and ways of life in general. Apart from an intensive literature review, thematic and content analysis are used to dig out the hidden narratives. The piece seeks to investigate the multitude of ways in which the stories represent the Sabar tribe's culture and identity. The Sabar tribe would be referred to as "Sabar" for the sake of this article, and tales belonging to the Lodha and Kharia branches of the Sabar tribe will be included.

Key Words: Sabar Tribe, Lodha Sabars, Kharia Sabars, Folktales, Women, Nature.

*Ph.D. Scholar, Women's Studies Centre, Vidyasagar University, Midnapore.
e-mail: devapriyajuly@gmail.com

Introduction

Lived experiences woven with threads, traditions, customs, beliefs and even teachings transform into a quilt known as folktales. Folktales are not mere stories made for entertainment; instead, they serve as a conduit for the transmission of the cultural elements of a community from one generation to another. All they admit to be a common aspect of temporal history used to set the stage for every tale. Every community, with its unique system of beliefs and practices, possesses their own culture and folktales. This paper will deal with the folktales of the Sabar tribe. Found mainly in the districts of Paschim Medinipur, Jhargram and Purulia of West Bengal, they were a community of hunters and gatherers. Recently, many have been forced to move away from their traditional hunting and gathering practices and have engaged themselves with agriculture. However, they maintain strong connections with their natural identity as forest dwellers mainly through the following traditions and the retelling of folktales. Accepting the fact that the Sabars as a tribe have a vast repository of folktales, most of which have circulated through oral traditions. This paper would limit its focus mainly on the tales found in the works, *Sabar Lokgan O Lokakatha* edited by Mahasweta Devi, and *Lodha Sabar People* by Prahlad Kumar Bhakta for the sake of interpretation and analysis. With the approaches of thematic analysis and narrative analysis as a methodology, this paper aims to reveal and demystify hidden narratives and contexts of the stories. An important point to be noted is that the both branches of Sabar tribe, Lodha Sabar and Kharia Sabar address themselves as 'Sabars' within the context of their folktales. Thus keeping this in mind, the author has used the tales from both branches of Sabar tribe for analysis and interpretation.

Discussion

On the surface, folktales seem like entertainment designed to engage children. However, that is quite far from the truth; Handoo argues that along with being a source of amusement for children, folktales, especially animal-centric ones, can be used as a means to shape the minds of children. Those were used to ingrain in them the importance of the desirable values in an engaging and simple manner. Here, the animal-centric folktales represented society in a symbolised manner, where roles are often reversed, differentiating it from the real world. The idea of creating a different society where the weaker ones may win using their resources of wit against the brutal force of big and strong could be created. Handoo quotes, "Large animals such as the elephant, apparently powerful and wise, are portrayed as weak and foolish while small creatures that seem of little account are bestowed in these tales with wisdom and courage. It becomes possible, by reversing the play of metaphor, to imagine a differently constructed human society."¹

"Chalak Seyal Boka Kumir"² traces the story of a crocodile and a fox. After the fox helps a man cross the river on the crocodile's back and stops it from eating the man, the crocodile is bloodthirsty and seeks revenge against the fox. However, the fox uses his wits and outsmarts the crocodile at every turn; as the name suggests, the crocodile is too stupid to understand the fox's ploy, who is very smart. In this story, the crocodile is a big, bad, powerful animal but not

smart, unlike the fox, who is weaker in strength but stronger in wits. The roles are reversed; in this animal kingdom, the weaker animal manages to outwit the stronger one with its mental faculties, and power resides among the weak. Thus, the value imparted to children through this story could be that even if your opponent is stronger than you, you can still win if you can use your mental faculties wisely. Make the impossible possible.

The holy grail of folktales is a value rendering of jocularity to children and multidimensional, with complex themes and intricacies.

Colonial Past of The Sabar Tribe

Victims of a harrowing past, the members of the Sabar tribe were branded as 'born criminals' by the British in colonial times. The formulation of the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act by the British and the listing of the Sabar tribe as habitual offenders created the perception of them being criminals for decades. Originally, the Sabar tribes were hunters and gatherers by nature and dwellers of forests; like many others, the Sabar tribes depended on collecting forest products and hunting for survival. They were not settled agriculturalists and instead preferred a more nomadic lifestyle. However, with British rule, Sabars were restricted from accessing their daily livelihood, the forests, and were also tagged as criminals. With their livelihood options dwindling, many were forced to choose the line of petty crime; there were others whom landlords recruited to commit crimes. These actions further led to the solidification of the judgment that Sabars were criminals by nature. They became imprisoned in the manufactured persona of a criminal by birth. They got the receiving end of suspicions, humiliation, pain and torture not only by the authorities but also by society in general.

Tales as Modes of Rebellion

The colonial masters were able to subjugate and suppress the Sabar tribe. Under the system of draconian laws, the nomadic lives of the Sabar tribe as hunters and gatherers crumbled into pieces. They were pushed to the verge of extreme poverty and desperation and with no means of escape; their folktales became their method of escapism as well as their quiet ways of protest.

Lines of folktales, myths, epics and historicity blur when it comes to the tale of the origins of the original Sabars. Sabars, as a tribe, connect their ancestry with the Hindu epic of Ramayana and Krishna. According to the story, in the war of the monkey brothers, Sughriv and Bali, Bali was killed unfairly by Lord Ram. After the war ended, Lord Ram lamented his mistake and confessed his crime to Bali's son Angad. Furthermore, it was here that the Lord decided that he would pay for his sins in his next birth in human form as Lord Krishna. Time changed, and divine will interfered; Lord Krishna was killed by an arrow shot by Jara Sabar, a reincarnation of Bali's son Angad, who had avenged his father's death in this life. Jara Sabar became the first original Sabar of the Sabar line of ancestry and tribe. Jara Sabar had found the Indraneel jewel and the piece of wood that represented Neelmadhav. In the later years, the King Indradumnya of Odisha, along with his advisor Vidyapati, a Brahmin, had managed to acquire the idol of Neelmadhav using deceit and conspiracy from Vishwabasu Sabar, the son of Jara Sabar. Then, the idol of Neelmadhav became Lord Jagannath of Odisha. The Sabars became permanent servers and worshippers of the Lord, caring for him between the days of Rathayatra and Ulto Rath when he was considered ailing as accorded by the legend. This custom continues to date.³

Tying the Sabar line of ancestry with that of Lord Krishna exhibits the influence of the palace paradigm, where even the fount of the Sabar tribe occurred as a method of revenge on Kshatriyas, a dominant caste. Ergo, not as a primary being but instead an instrument of revenge who gains primacy only after the performance of pre-destined action. Nevertheless, at the same time, the same lore appears as a counter-discourse to the palace paradigm, the history dominated by kings, with the aspect that it was Lord Ram who had committed a crime and was repenting for it.

Thus, the attaching of the Sabar line of ancestry with worshippers of Lord Jagannath, establishing their presence within epics, can be interpreted as an action by Sabars to reclaim and redefine their history and the rejection of the imposed criminal past as a direct protest against the British and others who have perpetuated similar perceptions. Also, the fact that within the story, it was Jara Sabar, a member of the Sabar tribe, who had managed to find the wood and jewel representing the Lord and not the other Aryans, the Pandavas showcases their belief of them being pure and more worthy of being true worshippers than the upper castes who have discriminated and oppressed them. The deed of Brahmin priest, Vidyapati who had conspired and stole the idol of Neelmadhav along with the king Indradumnya from Bishwabasu Sabar can directly be translated as oppression by the upper castes, namely both Brahmins and Kshatriyas. The subsequent divine intervention and retention of rights of worship by the Sabar tribe is a direct challenge to the dominance of the caste system and the Sabar tribe's reclaiming their position in the face of oppression.

Oppression and exploitation within a society not only come from privileged caste positions that the Sabar tribe lacks but there is also the factor of class.⁴ In "Two Theoretical Frameworks of Folklore Studies and Two Selected Tales from the Collection of the Assamese Folktales Entitled Burhi Aair Sadhu: A Discursive Analysis" Sikha Devi Nath, discusses the idea that folktales in general often have a context of class hidden within them. The stories often depict the conflict of people from opposing economic backgrounds in a metaphorical or in a very subtle manner. From an economic point of view, the members of the Sabar tribe are mostly illiterate and do not possess material resources such as land and education. Almost all of them depend on either collecting forest products or working as landless labourers in others' fields. This lack of material resources, compounded with the lack of opportunities, makes members of the Sabar tribe easy targets in the hands of authority and society alike. The economic inequalities and unequal power relations often manifest through folktales and provide a social commentary of the actual society.

In the tale "Four Friends"⁵, four animals, a tortoise, a goat, a crow, and a mouse share a great friendship. Their peaceful lives are disrupted by the arrival of a hunter whose main aim is to hunt them all. The rest of the plot revolves around the actions by which all three friends work together to save their fourth friend, the tortoise, from the hunter who had been caught. Putting it into the frame of Social Commentary, the story first critiques and lays bare the exploitation and oppression faced by the Sabar people at the hands of society and authority, represented by the capturing of the tortoise. Then, it strives for social change, which might happen if the poor,

weaker individuals unite and fight against the exploiter. This is showcased by the other three friends who come together to help the tortoise, and together, not individually, they manage to defeat the hunter much stronger than them. Therefore, through this tale, the Sabar tribe aspires to fight against the injustices meted out to them by society or authority in a unified manner. This desire to fight exploitation is an act of rebellion against the dominant powers showcased not directly, which might not have been possible, but indirectly through the tale of Four Friends.

Role of Women

Hidden narratives within the tales are not only about nuanced forms of resistance but also mirror the emplacement of women within society. Sabar folktales do not betray this matter.

The folktales of Sabars paint a dreary picture regarding women, placing them only secondary to men. They lack an independent outlook or agency; mostly, their lives and actions revolve around men and marriage. Furthermore, the independent agency of women is portrayed as dangerous, and most women get punishments for their transgressions.

Almost in all stories, a woman's agency is explored within the boundaries of the space occupied by men that is limited to her aspiration of getting together with her husband, being married or being rescued by her brother or husband. The plotlines are not always male-centric in obvious ways, but the main reward at the end is always being tied to a man, either in marriage or finding her place with a family dominated by a man.

The story of "Belboti"⁶ narrates the story of Chotka, a single man searching for a wife. He gains a wife in the form of Belboti (a girl who had emerged from a golden apple). He loses his wife when she is murdered by a jealous woman, a cobbler's daughter (the Other Woman). However, Belboti resurrects herself into a beautiful red lotus within the same river where the Other Woman drowned her. She catches Chotka's attention, who plucks her and takes her back home. The Other Woman forces Chotka to throw the lotus away out of spite. Then Belboti transforms her form into a bottle gourd plant and eventually a golden apple plant, but each time, the envious Other Woman uproots her. Moreover, in every form, Belboti continues to torment the Other Woman and seeks revenge.

The continuous metamorphosis of Belboti from human to other plant forms can be interpreted as a dead woman resurrecting herself into other forms, gaining mobility, speaking up, and leaving the confines of her previous domestic sphere, where she was speechless. Here, the original golden apple from where she was born serves as her location. As cited by Jharna Choudhury in her article, "Aesthetics of the Grotesque Body: The Dismemberment Metaphor in the Assamese Folktale 'Tejimola'", "these dead women, at least the more literary ones, constitute a tradition in which writers address pressing social issues that refuse to stay dead".⁷ She is gaining her agency and actions and avenging her death through her resurrections. However, this new agency is severely punished every time, as seen through the Other Woman's actions, who constantly uproot her every form out of jealousy. The uprooting of the plant forms can be compared to the dismemberment metaphor; the Other Woman is essentially dismembering

Belboti by uprooting and removing her farther away from her person of interest, Chotka. First as a lotus she was at Chotka's bedside then she was cut and thrown behind the house, then again cut and thrown into the yard. She changes her location to another house (the farthest distance from Chotka) after her latest form of golden apple tree is cut by the will of the Other Woman. However, one must note that this dismemberment is dependent on the villainous actions of the Other Woman, whose intent behind her acts was sexual jealousy. The Other Woman got jealous of the attention Belboti received in her plant forms from Chotka. The red colour of the lotus could be interpreted as sexual enticement. The other two forms are analogous to human bodies with a hard exterior, like flesh filled with softness and fluids. These apparent bodies were receiving sexual attention from the main male, Chotka.

The story of Belboti demonstrates male centrism in the manner that the ultimate reward for all the actions partaken by Belboti is marriage to Chotka (the man), and the antagonism towards Belboti by the main villain, the Cobbler's daughter, was due to the point that Chotka (the man) was giving attention to Belboti. Therefore, even if Belboti showcases agency by partaking in actions that torment her murderer, the justice served to her is in the form of marriage to Chotka. Furthermore, no attention was given into the fact that, in the story, it was due to the carelessness and irresponsibility that got Belboti murdered. It was he who could not recognise his wife and took another woman as his supposed wife. In other stories, such as "Kopaler Likhon"⁸ and "Rakhaler Kopal"⁹ the princesses have no role or aspiration except for their determination to marry the hero. Thus, the reduced position of women is only secondary to men, where the man is the sun, and the women are the planets revolving around the sun, gets clarified.

"Dhanu Sabar bouke dhamak diye bollo, ki kore jete paro dekhbo. Koto boro baaper beti!"¹⁰ (Dhanu Sabar remarks aggressively, will see how you can leave. How much power does your father have) is a line uttered by Dhanu Sabar, the hero of the story of "Chirkin Bhoot"¹¹ as a reply to his wife's condition that she will leave the household if she faces domestic abuse. The above line makes the stance of subjugation of women by men, especially husbands, quite clear. The husband behaves aggressively when the wife questions her husband's behaviour, protesting a situation of future domestic abuse. This aggressive reaction to a valid point raised by a woman depicts the normalisation of domestic abuse by husbands within the household and the expectation that women, the wives, are supposed to endure without a line of protest. The story of Chirkin Bhoot recounts the tale of the Chirkin ghost. Chirkin ghost takes birth when an unmarried pregnant Sabar girl commits suicide either by hanging herself or by consuming poison or burning herself. Chirkin ghosts live near water bodies and cremation grounds and hunt young males. She takes the form of light that flashes in intervals, which is thus named Chirkin. Chirkin ghosts can be kept as wives by humans if the human is a gunin who can subjugate and control spirits. Dhanu Sabar, who possessed the ability to subjugate, trap and control spirits, trapped the Chirkin ghost and made her his wife.

There is a recurring theme of vilification of women. In most stories, the women's actions run against another woman; it is a world where it is woman versus woman. Often in the stories,

the heroine is portrayed as a damsel in distress, tormented by other cruel women. She gets saved by the interference of a man. In the story of “Saat Beta Ek Beti”¹², the sister endures cruelty from her sisters-in-law. They forced her to perform herculean tasks of fetching water in a pot with a hole, bringing piles of wood from the forest without a rope and picking flowers from a high tree. Also, they refused food and water; it was only after her seven brothers returned that she got saved.

In another story, the Sabar woman who had dared to fulfil her desires outside of marriage was severely punished by the Sabar man, who had chopped off her monkey lover and made her cook the meat and fed it to her. Only when the Sabar woman found her lover’s head instead of a pitcher did she realise her situation. Thus, the woman’s cheating is interpreted as the wilful action taken by her to satisfy her sexual desires is observed as the ultimate crime, for which severe violence and the grotesque action of feeding a woman her own lover’s meat is justified as a proper punishment for her transgression.¹³

Connection with Nature

The Sabar tribe continues to have deep respect for nature. This is demonstrated in stories such as “Belboti Kanya”¹⁴, in which Chotka, the hero, shows a fondness for all the plant forms of Belboti. In others, the friendship between man and animals, such as in the story of “Saat Beta Ek Beti”¹⁵ where the animals frog and snake help her fulfil the tasks. Another feature highlighted in the stories is the notion of a community resource; in “Belboti Kanya”¹⁶, when the golden apple tree was cut, all the people from throughout the village were invited to take part and get golden apple fruit in return as per customs. It demonstrates that even if the golden apple tree was in the yard of a single family, the whole village had shared rights over it.

Another attribution that comes up is the factor of eco-spiritualism. The connection between nature and religion is directly demonstrated by the story of “Boram”¹⁷. The Boram god is depicted in two forms: “Dala Boram” and “Dhulo Boram”. Boram God, who saves Sabar people from diseases, receives the offering of a tree branch of Dala Boram and the dust of Dhulo Boram. Thus, the tree branch and dust are considered part of nature and represent the Boram God.

Conclusion

A grim conclusion can be made that folktales’ fictionality often depicts society’s reality-its mindset, ideas, and philosophies in easily digestible ways. Often, these do not meet the moral standards of today; the vilification of women’s sins is often accompanied by tales where the woman herself gains autonomy to stop her oppression. Other times, age-old ideas like working in unity and the need to tell the truth emerge. In other cases, the mere retelling and discussion of the folktales serve as a counter-revolutionary move, an open defiance to the dominant mainstream literature created by the dominant elites. It represents the voices below. The constant stream of narrative often favours one side, creating strange synergies. It is natural that a hunter hunts, but that is vilified by making the small animals the protagonist. This creates a fantastic balance with juxtaposition considering that Sabars were naturally hunters.

These, therefore, show a strange suspended reality where our rights and wrongs are decided by which point of the story we reside in the Sabar folktales. Furthermore, one must never forget that despite sometimes controversial elements, these stories provide an alternative outlook, a viewpoint different from the dominant mainstream ones. Therefore it becomes imperative that we critically analyse and etch out the hidden, twisted narratives.

References:

1. Sharma, Chandan, (2017). *Unit-1 Sanskritization and 'Palace Paradigm'*, IGNOU, p. 120. (e-book: <http://egyankosh.ac.in/handle/123456789/38846>) Accessed 26th February 2025
2. Devi, Mahasweta, (2019). (Ed.). *Sabar Lokgan O Lokakatha*, Sahitya Akademi, p. 34.
3. Bhakta, Prahlad Kumar, *Society, Culture and Indigenous Worldview of Lodha Sabar People*, Vidyasagar University Publication Division, p. 3.
4. Nath, Sikha Devi, (2023). Two Theoretical Frameworks of Folklore Studies and Two Selected Tales from the Collection of the Assamese Folktales Entitled Burhi Aair Sadhu: A Discursive Analysis, *Pertanika Journal Social Sciences and Humanities*, Vol. 31 (1), pp. 25–40.
5. Devi, Mahasweta, (2019). (Ed.). *Sabar Lokgan O Lokakatha*, Sahitya Akademi, p. 25.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
7. Choudhury, Jharna, (2021). Aesthetics of the Grotesque Body: The Dismemberment Metaphor in the Assamese Folktale “Tejimola”, *DUJES*, Vol. 29, pp. 125-143.
8. Devi, Mahasweta, (2019). (Ed.). *Sabar Lokgan O Lokakatha*, Sahitya Akademi, p. 68.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 83.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
13. Bhakta, Prahlad Kumar, *Society, Culture and Indigenous Worldview of Lodha Sabar People*, Vidyasagar University Publication Division, p. 85.
14. Devi, Mahasweta, (2019). (Ed.). *Sabar Lokgan O Lokakatha*, Sahitya Akademi, p. 53.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 63.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 53.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 79.