

REPORT

International Seminar on
Belief Narratives in Folklore Studies: Narrating the Supernatural
 Organised jointly by
 Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art and Culture, Assam (ABILAC) and
 Belief Narrative Network (BNN) of
 International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR)
 6th to 8th February, 2019
 Venue: Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship (IIE)
 Lalmati, Guwahati – 29

A three day International conference on the topic **Belief Narrative: Narrating the Supernatural** organised jointly by Belief Narrative Network for International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) and The Anundoram Borooah Institute of Language, Art & Culture (ABILAC), Assam was conducted from 6th to 8th February, 2019 at the Indian Institute of Entrepreneurship, located at Lalmati Guwahati -29. This three day conference provided the opportunity to around 50 folklorists from around the world including India to present and discuss as many academically stirring aspects of folklore in the form of papers and interactions.

The inaugural session was chaired by Prof (rtd) Ashok Kumar Goswami , a renowned indologist, who is a former Head, Department of Sanskrit, Vice-Chairman, Governing Council and Chairman, Executive Committee of ABILAC. Other dignitaries who graced the occasion were Prof Satyendra Narayan Goswami and Prof. Dipti Phukon Patgiri, Members, Executive Committee of ABILAC, Prof Sadhana Naithani, Chairperson, ISFNR, Prof. Mirjam Mencej, Chairperson, BNN, Prof. Ulo Valk Renowned Folklorist from University of Tartu, Dr. Anil Baro, Head, Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University and Prof. Dilip Kumar Kalita, Director, ABILAC.

Prof. Dilip Kumar Kalita while welcoming the scholars on behalf of the organising committee and other dignitaries presented the scenario of Folklore studies in India as well as Assam and also referred to the heritage of belief narratives in the Indian context. He mentioned that belief is the primary concern of the whole gamut of the text of Atharva Veda, the treasure house of ancient knowledge in India. Prof. Mirjam Mencej, Chairperson, BNN delivered her address as the guest of honour. She outlined the events in the previous BNN conference where Guwahati was chosen as the next venue of BNN. The other guest of honour Prof. Sadhana Naithani, Chairperson, ISFNR and Professor of German Studies JNU hailed the effort of ABILAC in holding a seminar of such a mega scale. She also stressed on the importance of the genre of Belief Narrative within the broader scope of Folklore studies. Renowned folklorist Prof. Ulo Valk, while addressing the gathering, described this Northeast Indian region as the *paradise of folklorists*. He also stressed on the need of more research based studies into the realm of folklore studies to be undertaken in this part of the world. Prof. Anil Kumar Baro, Head, Department of Folklore while addressing the gathering commented that this is the first BNN conference held in Guwahati and wished the conference a success.

Following the trend of offering the best Research Paper award to one of the student participants of the conference for the last few years, Prof. Mirjam Mencej announced the name of Ms. Kikee Doma Bhutia from Bhutan, presently a PhD candidate in the Department

of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu, Estonia, as the recipient of this honour for the year 2018 and presented the award. The anchoring of the meeting was done by Dr. Palas Kumar Nath, Assistant Professor, ABILAC and the vote of thanks was offered by Dr. Karuna Kanta Kakati, Associate Professor, ABILAC.

The inauguration session was followed by a high tea for the guests and scholars.

Parallel sessions, each of which consisted of four paper presentations, were conducted in two halls on each of the three days of the conference. These sessions led to a substantive amount of discussions and interactions on the main as well as sub themes of the conference. The sub themes were *Beliefs and Supernaturals*, *Beliefs and the Lore of Saints*, *Beliefs and witch hunting*, *Contemporary belief Narratives (Urban legends, the play on belief narratives by politicians and so on.)*, *Beliefs and Vernacular Practices*, *Beliefs, Faith and Fear*, *Beliefs and Sacrifice*.

- a) The participants were given 20 minutes for presentation of their papers.

Details of the papers presented

Day 1 (06/02/2019) Wednesday: Hall 1

The first technical session in Hall 1 dealt with papers read under the sub theme of *Beliefs and Supernaturals*. The session, chaired by Prof. Ulo Valk started with a paper titled ‘*Memorates and Legends of Pinching: Spider Bites and Other “Supernatural” Punishments*’ read by Michele Tita from the University of Tartu, Estonia. The next paper titled *Belief and Disbelief: Trajectory of Meitei Faith Demeaning the Hegemony of the Myth of Hinduism in Manipur* was presented by Prof. Moirangthem Mani Meitei from Manipur University. The third paper titled *Supernatural Turning into Natural in Today’s Modern world* was presented by Vandana Rani from Lovely Professional University. The last paper of the first session titled *Children’s Negotiation of Supernatural Beliefs: Narrating the Summoning of Spirits in Online and Offline* was presented by Angelina Kozlovskaya from European University at St. Petersburg.

The second session also dealt with papers read under the sub theme, *Beliefs and Supernaturals*. The session, Chaired by Vandana Rani started with the presentation of Reep Pandi Lepcha from Jadavpur University, India on *The Natural in the Supernatural: Exploring the Metaphysical in the Belief Narratives of the Indigenous Mutanchis of Sikkim*. The second paper titled *Folk Narratives exemplifying the Supernatural Belief, Splendour, and Extraordinary Giftedness in Braj (India)* was presented by Prof. Tulika Chandra from Shiv Nadar University, India. *The Role of Maibi as a Medium to Supernaturality* was the title of the third paper presented by Smiti Rajkumari from Department of Cultural and Creative Studies, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong.

Day 1 (06/02/2019): Hall 2

The first technical session was started at 12 noon and it continued up to 2pm. This session was chaired by Prof. Sadhana Naithani, Chairperson, ISFNR and Professor in the Centre of German Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India. Three papers were presented in this session. First paper was presented by Kikee Doma Bhutia on the topic “*Possession Narratives and the Role of Ritual Healers in the Everyday Life in North Sikkim*”. She is a PhD candidate at the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu, Estonia. Second paper was presented by Savannah Rivkah Powell on the topic

“*Narratives of a Songbird: Beliefs Transmitted through the Music of Native American Ensemble Tzotzollin*”. Third paper was presented by Pratibha Pun on the topic “*Belief in Supernatural Power of Jhakri*”. She belongs to Kathmandu, capital city of Nepal and she has been engaged in research and teaching at college for last seven years.

The second technical session was started at 3pm and it continued up to 4:30pm. The theme of this session was *Beliefs and Supernaturals* and Prof. Kishore Bhattacharjee chaired the session. He is a professor in the Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University, India. Three papers were presented in this session. First paper was presented by Jyrki Pöysä on the topic “*Karelian Water Spirits and Blood-Stopppers: Traces of Past or Rifts in Worldview?*”. Second paper was presented jointly by Sanatombi Soram and Pragya Moirangthem on the topic “*Vernacular Religion of Manipur: Goddess Panthoibi*”. Third and last paper of this session was presented by Prof. Ulo Valk on the topic “*The Supernatural, Interpretive Frameworks and Vernacular Knowledge: Perspectives from the Folkloristics of Religion*”. He is a renowned folklorist and the former chairman of ISFNR. Now he is a professor at the Department of Estonian and Comparative Folklore, University of Tartu, Estonia.

Cultural Programme on Day 1

After the sessions are over by 5 PM, the gathering was entertained by cultural performances of dances, songs. One of paper presenters, Svetlana Rhyjakova from Russia, captivated the audience with her performance of Kathak, a classical dance form of India. The other performances of the evening were presented by a team of professional artists from the Directorate of Information and Public Relations (DIPR). Two varieties of the famous Satriya dance namely Chali and Bhor Taal was performed during the show that took place on the first day of the conference. The spectators were also entertained with solo songs (Bhupendra Sangeet and Modern Assamese song) sung by the professional singers from DIPR.

Day 2 (07/02/2019) Hall 1

The third session dealt with papers read under the sub theme of *Beliefs and the Lore of Saints*. The session, chaired by Jelka Vince Pallua started with the presentation of Dr. Eviatar Shulman from Hebrew University of Jerusalem on *Narrating the Supernatural Buddha: Literary and Folkloristic Dimensions of Early Buddhist Scripture*. This paper was followed by a paper presented by Yutsha Dahal from Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi, India on *From Godly Priests to Godly Spirits: Analysing the Influence of Ritual Practice on Forming A Hierarchical Social Dominance*.

The fourth technical session dealt with papers read under the sub theme of *Beliefs and Witch Hunting*. The session, chaired by Ankita Gupta started with the presentation of Aurimas Bačiulis from The Institute of Lithuanian Literature and Folklore, Lithuania on *The Uniqueness of Witchcraft Phenomenon in Lithuanian*. The next paper titled *Prayer Centers, Arasentsürs, and Strange Potions: Contemporary Beliefs and Practices of Exorcizing the Kimong Tsüngrem* was presented by Talilula Longchar from Jamia Millia Islamia in New Delhi. Sandis Laime from Institute of Literature, Folklore and Art, University of Latvia presented the next paper on *Reflections of Witch Persecution and Witch Trials in Latvian Oral Tradition*.

The fifth session dealt with papers read under the sub theme *Contemporary Belief Narratives (Urban legends, the play on belief narratives by politicians and so on.)*. The Session, chaired

by Kikee Doma Bhutia started with the presentation of Prof. Mirjam Mencej on *Stories of Muslim Martyrs in Modern Media: Oral Legends about Muslim Martyrs and their Appropriation by Popular Magazines*. This paper was followed by another paper titled *Assamese Place Name Legends: Narrating a Pluralistic Society* which was presented by Pallabi Borah from Gauhati University.

The Sixth technical session dealt with papers read under the sub theme *Contemporary belief Narratives (Urban legends, the play on belief narratives by politicians and so on.)* The session, chaired by Prof. Sadhana Naithani started with the presentation of Aniket Vaibhav from Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, India on *Belief Narratives and Everyday Life: A Case Study of Whatsapp in India*. Another paper titled *Evidentials in the Ritual Speech of a Hungarian Seer* was presented by Bea Vidacs from Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Dr. Palash Kumar Nath from ABILAC, Assam, India presented a paper titled *Folklore and Language Research*.

Day 2 (07/02/2019): Hall 2

The third technical session was started at 10am and it continued up to 11:20am. The theme of this session was *Beliefs and the Lore of Saints* and Prof. Desmond L. Kharmawphlang chaired the session. Four papers were presented in this session. First paper was presented jointly by Lily Díaz-Kommonen, Neha Sayed and Salil Sayed on the topic "*Saint Lores of Tapal Naka: Meaning of Architectural Place as Generated through Belief Narratives*". The second paper was presented jointly by Desmond L. Kharmawphlang on the topic "*Tales of the Tigerman*". He is a Professor in the Department of Creative and Cultural Studies, North Eastern Hills University, Shillong, India. Third paper of this session was presented by Saša Babič on the topic "*Folklore Weather Beliefs Based on the Acts of Saints*". The Fourth and the last paper of this session was presented by Vinitoli H Zhimo on the topic "*Understanding the Relevance of Faith Healing in society: A study of Sumi Tribe in Zunheboto, District of Nagaland*".

The Fourth technical session was started at 11:40 am and it continued up to 1pm. The theme of this session was *Contemporary belief Narratives (Urban legends, the play on belief narratives by politicians and so on.)* and Prof. Terry Gunnell chaired the session. He is professor of Folkloristics at the University of Iceland. Three papers were presented in this session. The first paper was presented by Uri Gabbay on the topic "*From Literary Genre to Performance: Ancient Mesopotamian Myths in Ritual Narratives*". He is an associate professor in the Department of Archeology and Ancient Near East, Hebrew University, Jerusalem where he teaches the language and culture of ancient Mesopotamia. In this session Terry Gunnell himself along with Helga Gunnell presented paper on the topic "*The Rise of Chupa-sangue in a World of "Fake News": Living Legends of Vampirism in Mozambique and Malawi*". The third and last paper of this session was presented by Svetlana Ryzhakova on the topic "*Bhairav and Kālī-mā: Belief Narratives among Dancers and Musicians of Rajasthan, India*". She is a research fellow in the Institute of Ethnology and Anthropology, Russian Academy of Science, Moscow.

The Fifth technical session was started at 2 pm and it continued up to 3:20 pm. The theme of this session was *Contemporary belief Narratives (Urban legends, the play on belief narratives by politicians and so on.)*. This session was chaired by Dr. Mrinal Kumar Medhi, retired Associate Professor from Domdama College and presently guest faculty in the department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University. Only two papers were presented in this session. The first paper was presented by Rohit Sharma on the topic "*The Gurū Śiṣya*

Paramparā In Tāntrik Tradition With Special Reference To Śrīmālinī Vijayottaratantra". He is doing Ph.D. in the Department of Philosophy, Chandigarh University, India. Second paper of this session was presented by Arunima Das on the topic "*Vernacular Expressions in Digital Media: An Analysis of Contemporary Legends of Assam with reference to Social Networking Sites*". She is working as assistant professor in the Department of English, Gargi College, University of Delhi, India.

The sixth technical session was started at 3:40pm pm and it continued up to 5 pm. The theme of this session was *Beliefs and Vernacular Practices* which was chaired by Dr. Pallabi Borah. She is an assistant professor in the Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University. In this session only one paper was presented by Sangeeta Das on the topic "*Folk Beliefs and Supernatural: A Cross-Cultural Study of Frog's marriage*". She did M.Phil and Ph.D. from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

Cultural Programme on Day 2

The cultural programme on the second day Professor Dilip Kumar Kalita enthralled the audience with the recital of the Raga Vrindavaani Sarang in his violin, accompanied on the Tabla by his younger brother Pradip Kalita. The other performances comprised of scintillating dance as well as song performances by the artists from DIPR. A composite dance performance exhibiting the folk culture and dresses of the ethnic communities namely Assamese, Bodo, Naga, Tiwa, Rabha and Tea tribe communities were performed. This was followed by Assamese Bihu songs and Goalparia Folk song sung by the professional artists. People from the audience rose up the stage and danced to the tunes of these songs creating a jovial atmosphere.

Day 3 (08/02/2019) Hall 1

The seventh technical session dealt with papers read under the sub theme of *Beliefs and Vernacular Practices*. The session, chaired by Prof. Mirjam Mencej started with the presentation of Rosana Ratkovčić from University North in Koprivnica, Croatia on *Beliefs in Unconventional Healing Practices*. This was followed by another paper titled *Belief Backgrounds of Estonian Riddles* presented by Piret Vooloid from University of Tartu, Estonia. The next paper titled *The Rich Symbolic Language of the Mythical Frog as the Path to its Image and Role in (Pre) History* was presented by Jelka Vince Pallua from *Institute of Social Sciences Ivo Pilar*, Zagreb, Croatia.

The eighth technical session dealt with papers read under the sub theme of *Beliefs and Vernacular Practices*. The session, chaired by Prof. Mani Meitei started with the presentation of Auswyn Winter Japang from NEHU, Shillong on *Ka Niam Phur Sohbar: A study of Belief Narratives from Nongjri and Sohbar*. This was followed by another paper titled *Ritualization of a Taboo: Role of Religious Narratives in the 'Taboofication' of Menstruation in India* presented by Ankita Gupta from University of Delhi. Rupam Gogoi from North Lakhimpur College, North Lakhimpur, Assam, India presented the next paper on *To Believe or not to Believe: A Study of the Folk Beliefs of the Nagas in the novels of Easterine Kire Iralu*.

The Ninth session which also happens to be the last session in Hall 1 dealt with papers read under the sub theme of *Beliefs, Faith and Fear*. The session, chaired by Prof. Tulika Chandra started with the presentation of Natalie Jo-Anne Diengdoh from Shillong on *The Khasi Faith In U Lum Sohpetbneng (Navel Of The Earth)*. This was followed by the next paper titled *In the name of.. Biaste swearing Beliefs and Practices* presented by Lalfani Durpui from Department of Cultural and Creative Studies, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong. The next paper titled *Bali: Dravidian Beliefs and Practices* was presented by Balakrishna B.M.

Hosangadi from Government College Kasaragod, Kerala. The last paper in Hall 1 on *Women Entry into Shabarimala Temple: Changing Subjectivity through Ages* was presented jointly by Arshad V. and Bhabesh P.K. from University of Calicut, Kerala.

Day-3 (08/02/2019): Hall 2

The seventh technical session started at 10am pm and it continued up to 11.20 a.m. The theme of this session was *Beliefs and Vernacular Practices* which was chaired by Dr. Prabin Ch. Das. Dr. Das is a folklorist and retired from Gauhati University as Secretary, University Classes. Three papers were presented in this session. First paper was presented by Proggya Ghatak on the topic “*A Paradigm of Folk Existence of the Sitala Cult in West Bengal*”. Second paper was presented by Kõiva Mare on the topic “*The Shepherd of Animals and Ruler of Wolves in Baltic-Finnic Tradition*”. She is professor of Univeristy of Tartu and editor of the Journal entitled Journal of Folkloristics. Third and last paper of the session was presented by Kelleney Kitbok Suting on the topic “*Behdeiñkhlam Festival: A reflection into the belief of the Pnars*”. He is a Research Scholar in the Department of Cultural And Creative Studies, North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong, India.

The eighth technical session started at 11:40am pm and it continued up to 1pm. The theme of this session was *Beliefs, Faith and Fear* which was chaired by Prof. Kõiva Mare. In this session, three papers were presented. The first paper was presented by Sarmistha De Basu on the topic “*Traditions of Beliefs in the Supernatural Power of Ancestors among the General*”. She did M.A. and Ph.D in Bengali from Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata, India. Second paper was presented by Daisy Barman on the topic “*A Study of the Myths surrounding the River Brahmaputra*”. Third and last paper was presented by Rajashree Chowdhury on the topic “*Goddess with a Thousand Faces: Kamkhya and her People*”.

This was the last and ninth technical session of the conference which was started at 2pm and it continued up to 3:20pm. The theme of this session was *Beliefs and Sacrifice* and the session was chaired by Dr. Anil Kumar Baro. He is the Head of the Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati Univeristy, India. Four papers were presented in this session. The first paper was presented by Daijee Kalita on the topic *Role of Ojapali in Transmitting Manasa Myth among the Common People of Assam*. She is doing PhD in the Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University. Second paper was presented by Utpala Das on the topic *Sacrificial and Oral Narratives associated with Megalithic Ritual among the Karbis*. Third paper was by Karuna Kanta Kakati on the topic “*Belief, Faith and Fear associated with Witchcraft and Witch-hunting in and around my Native*”. He is associate professor in the Department of Culture, Art and Music of Anundroram Borooah Institute of Language, Art and Culture, Assam (ABILAC), India. The last and fourth paper of this session was presented by Anamika Mahanta on the topic “*Conflicting Context in Beliefs and Religions among the Karbis of Kaziranga National Park*”. She is doing PhD in the Department of Folklore Research, Gauhati University.

Meeting of BNN:

The meeting of the members of the BNN was held on the 7th of February, 2019 at 4p.m. during the conference where all members of BNN committee present in the conference took part.

VALEDICTORY

The valedictory session which followed immediately after the 9th session on the 8th provided the organisers and the participants to express their opinions and feelings about the conference. Terry Gunnell speaking on this occasion expressed happiness on the presence and presentations of young researchers in the conference. He expresses his confidence and hope that these set of young researchers will continue to contribute to the field of folklore studies all over the world. Prof. Ulo Valk, former chairperson of ISFNR also praised the participants for the presentations. He also admired the organisers for the smooth functioning of the conference. Prof. Subbachary Pulikonda, one of the senior participants in the conference urged the organisers to bring out a good quality volume of all the papers read at this conference. Prof. Dilip Kumar Kalita, Director, ABILAC which has hosted this conference has in response to Prof. Pulikonda's request, consented to publishing of the papers. This was welcomed by everyone present in the valedictory session. Prof. Mirjam Mencej, Chairperson ISFNR also has expressed her satisfaction and happiness at the successful completion of the conference.

Prepared by

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And
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