

TEXTS AND CONTEXTS: A STUDY OF CONTEMPORARY LEGENDS OF ASSAM WITH REFERENCE TO FOOD CONTAMINATION

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ABSTRACT

This article on the contemporary legends of Assam explores how the concern about food contamination in Assam has generated certain locally constructed and orally transmitted set of narratives. These narratives are derived from the broader perspectives of the contemporary Assamese society which have reflected one of the major problems of Assam related to health. This article attempts to examine how this contemporary legend critique paradigm shifts in the socio-cultural structures that are dependent on some serious social issues and administrative alertness. In addition to this, the article further explores how these contemporary legends are supported by the current Assamese belief system and social reality.

Keyword: Contemporary Narratives –Popular Beliefs- Food Contamination- Assam.

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CONTAMINATION**

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This study examines legends based on the introduction of foreign matters into food, various drinks including regular drinking water, which have become a risk to Assamese people. Studies have shown that numerous contemporary legends based on violations of rules such as food contamination- usually deliberately are available in Assam like the other parts of the world. In this paper, attempt will be made to assess the incidences of food contamination situation in Assam by studying some locally formed narratives. Secondly, how this social problem of food contamination in Assam has produced some popular beliefs and concepts which can be drawn from the discipline of folklore such as contemporary legends. Thus, an attempt would be made to understand the contemporary legends as unconstructed social problems. Like collective hysteria and organized claims making an effort, contemporary legends are the product of social strain and the response to that strain.

Northeast India has been struggling ceaselessly with the contamination of food infectivity for last few decades. Concern of this entire crisis of food security has literally introduced some belief narratives, which can be termed as “Contemporary Legend” or “Modern Legend” or “Urban Legend” in India. These legends are whimsical, 99 percent- apocryphal, yet believable stories that are “too good to be true”, neatly plotted to be accepted as literal truth in every place where they are told typically and attributed to a friend -of-a-friend (Brunvand, 2013). Apart from the various facts related to food poisoning, introduction of

various fast food franchises, packaged food manufacturers are the typical targets of food contamination in Assam with products that include soft drinks, packaged snacks, cereal, fried chicken etc. Typical contaminants include insects, rats, worms, plastics etc. The supposed motivation for contaminating food has further stretched by the virus of fatal diseases like Ebola, AIDS along with the role of public attention and community engagement in order to control the outbreaks.

“Contemporary Legend” is a very recent concept in the field of folklore introduced by Jan Harold Brunvand during 1980s. Brunvand in his collection of legends, *The Vanishing Hitchhiker: American Urban Legends & Their Meanings* (1981) has made two points clear: first, that legends and folklore do not occur exclusively in so called primitive or traditional societies, it can be from the contemporary society and time too; second, that one could learn much about urban, modern or contemporary culture, and society by studying such narratives (Dégh, 2001). The most important features of urban legends are:

1. A strong basic story appeal.
2. A foundation in actual belief and
3. A meaningful message or moral.

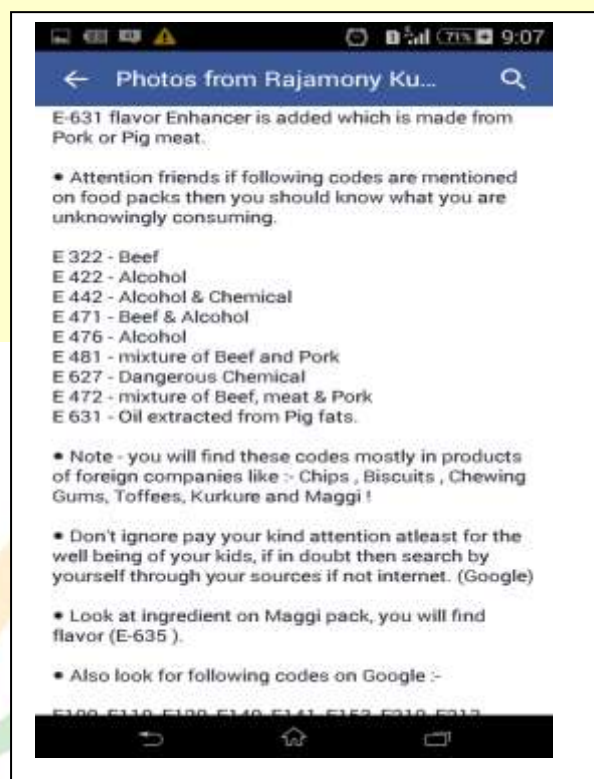
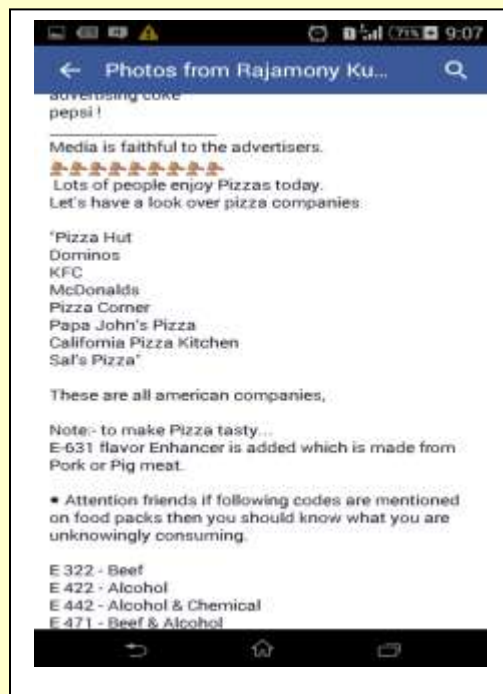
Contemporary Legends in Guwahati:

Belief is invisible, inaudible, part of local cultural heritage hidden behind acts and narratives. It lives in the minds, not on the lips of people; it is a convention, inherited and tacitly shared by a community's membership, composed of individuals who participate in shaping and internalizing the belief. Folklorists regarded belief manifested in legends as some sort of archaism, a primitive worldview and uncritical, naive scientific interpretation of observed reality. As outsiders, they surveyed legend telling communities with an air of superiority, assuming that the narrators of these absurd stories in which average people, not epic heroes experience supernormal or absurd encounters without leaving the

landscape and climate of ordinary life must believe what they narrate. Expansion of physical, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions of Guwahati has resulted in the change of people's life-style which has been influenced by globalization. For last few years, the city has been experiencing the growth of hotels, eateries, fast food corners, amusement parks, and malls in a large scale. Kentucky Fried Chicken (henceforth, KFC), a well known fast-food outlet from America, is no longer a new term for the people in Assam. It is been six- seven years that several outlets of KFC have been established in Assam especially in Guwahati and since then, it has become one of the popular eateries among the people. Soon after the establishment of KFC outlets in Guwahati, mere imagination of what seems plausible in the fast – food outlets popular in modern and highly urbanized society have actually initiated many stories. Although, sometime there are some well-documented instances of rodent parts found in food products, though they do not follow the plot of the actual legend. Belief in all these has initiated several such stories. Since fast food companies like KFC, Pizza Hut is a new concept in Guwahati; people have many doubts and misconceptions about the food that they serve; the ingredients, seasonings that they use. All these have started many discussions, arguments among the people. As a result of which, in the society there are various narratives that have been circulated orally and later through internet especially through the popular social network called Facebook and WhatsApp more recently.

In one of the very popular and widely circulated messages through Facebook is about various things that we use in our day today life such as health drinks, soft drinks or soda, fast foods, various flavours that fast food companies use etc. In this, the message is so intense that the comparison of a drink has been done with a toilet cleaner. Sometime, these messages are in a form of narrative totally but sometime not which carry some short lines that pass sufficient information about what happened and what may happen in future. One such message is as follows:



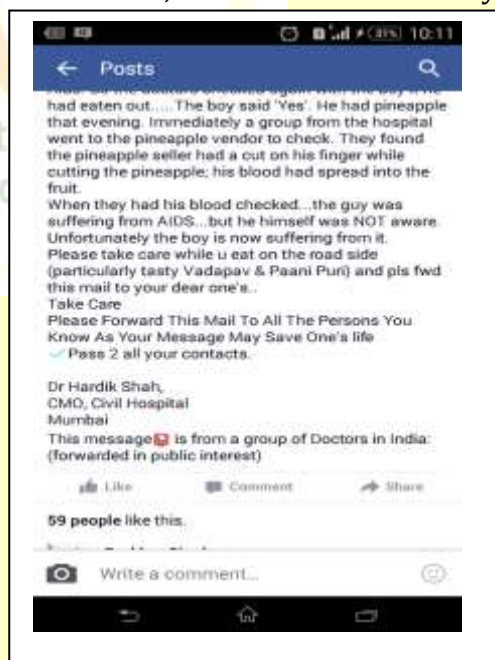


The urban condition in Guwahati reveals a very grim picture of the health and environment management. This is evident from the ground realities of the city in respect of water, drainage, garbage disposal, transportation, traffic situation and the congestion in the urban structure. With the river Brahmaputra flowing on the north and several hills and hillocks nearby, Guwahati stands as one of the most beautiful cities in India. But, because of the rising pollution, the growth of slum pockets which is result of concentration of beggars, sweepers, cobblers, street vendors, rickshaw and cart-pullers in certain areas, and above all mismanagement of all these urban elements are creating havoc in the city. Water logging which has become a major problem in the city creates many problems in every monsoon. It is not only an utmost possibility of contamination but also a matter of several health hazards.

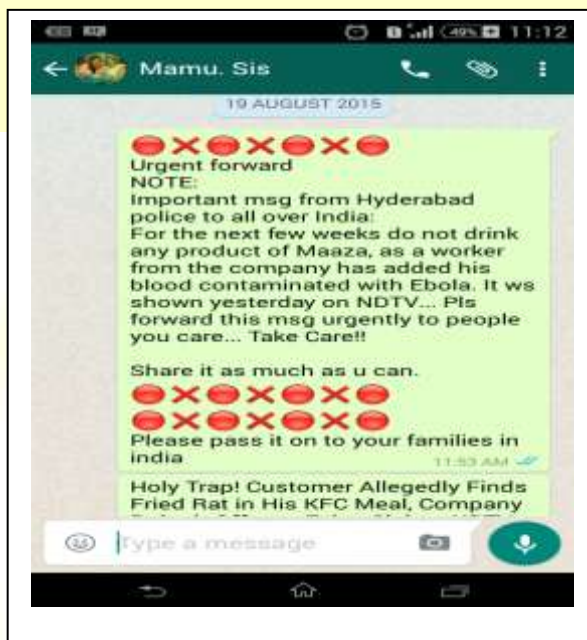
In Indian history, there are instances of students falling ill even dying after eating midday meal in schools for contaminated food with pesticides. Food poisoning is a common problem in Assam too. One of the major outbreak of food poisoning took place in Kamrup, Assam during the month of February 2013 on the event of Saraswati puja where the students of Durung ME School, Koraiguri LP School and Koikari LP School consumed gram (Prasad) and khichiri and within 2-5 hours of consumption the students suffered vomiting, fever, dizziness, diarrhoea and abdominal pain. More than 400 students were affected. Currently it has come into notice that, cases of food poisoning arise very frequently in different parts of Assam. As such, people in Assam feel that there is a great need to find out the causative agent of food poisoning in every outbreak so as to control the problem in due course and prevent for further spreading. The main causative agents of food poisoning are different bacteria, viruses, parasites, mold, toxins, contaminants, different chemicals and allergens. Food poisoning occurs after the intake of food or water that contains bacteria, parasites, viruses, or toxins made by these germs. There are some

micro-organisms produce toxins when they grow on food that affects the people during or after the ingestion of these foods. The common symptoms of food poisoning are diarrhea with or without blood, nausea, vomiting, abdominal pain and/or cramping, malaise (general uneasiness), and fever etc. With such a background, people in Assam are much concern about the outside food. Although the scene is not uniform but the fear and anxiety of food poisoning has made people much concern about the food that they are taking every day. Thus, it has resulted in the introduction of several oral narratives centering on food.

There is a very popular Indian snack called *panipuri*, originally from the southern part of India has always been discouraged by many Assamese people. In Assam, it has been found that there are several rumors and stories regarding the way that the vendor serves the *panipuri*. All these legends mainly signify the unhygienic conditions of these street foods including cut fruits too. The way that the vendors serve fruits is a matter of serious concern from the point of hygiene. Diseases that may arise out of it may be too serious. Thus, fear and anxiety caused by the various rumours have become so intense that people has got a tendency to link the story with dangerous diseases like AIDS, Ebola too. Such a story was widely circulated in Facebook which is as follows:



Another legend, which was widely circulated through watssup went viral where a very popular packaged juice in India was found to be contaminated with diseases like Ebola and people got scared to drink softpackaged drinks. The legend is as follows:



In June 2015, a Los Angeles man, Devorise Dixon posted a picture and a video in his facebook account where he claims that a rat was found in his KFC meal. Soon the image went viral with the alert of food contamination in the fast food corners. "Los Angeles Times" later reported that a third party independent lab has confirmed the suspicious meal to be a piece of hand-breaded chicken.



Soon after the outbreak of a contemporary legend “Rat in Kentucky Fried Chicken” worldwide, many people have stopped going to this place. What were realized that people in Assam have started localizing the story, which can be treated as a contemporary legend. There were several versions of this legend. According to one version, a customer of one KFC in Guwahati was allegedly found a batter-fried rat in a bucket of chicken. And then there was some inspection by the FSSAI. While collecting this legend in Guwahati, informants were very much shocked and got alert and literally stopped going to fast food corners. One of the informant was a middle aged person with two kids, seemed to be very frightened after hearing this as the kids visit KFC often. They thought this is something which needs careful attention of the government of Assam.

Cases of food poisoning arise very frequent in different parts of Assam. Every responsible Assamese feels the great need to find out the high risk areas and the causative agent of food poisoning in every outbreak so as to control the problem in due course. Moreover, fast food corners and packaged foods have always been a matter of doubt. There are abundant examples of rumours about food vendors in Guwahati. Cooking food without washing hands and raw vegetables etc are very common notion that Guwahati people have about fast food corners. A study was done in Silchar, Assam, where, a total no of 37 street vended food samples such as *Paanipuri*, *Chats*, *Egg rolls* were collected in sanitized container and later were examined. The isolates were identified as *Escherichia coli* (37.5%), *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* (3.57%), *Staphylococcus aureus* (14.2%), *Salmonella* sp. (5.36%),

Klebsiellasp.(10.71%), Shigella sp.(19.64), Enterobacter sp.(8.93%) respectively. In this study, 56 isolates were susceptible to ciprofloxacin. These findings demonstrated that the ready to eat foods vended in Silcharcity constitute an important potential hazard to the human health leading to food contamination. The fast food industry plays a major role in cities and towns of many developing countries like India both economically and in meeting food demands of city dwellers. Human being always has a tendency to make sense of random experience by the imposition of the story structures. Narratives are the central means by which people give their lives meaning across time: "We dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, plan, revise, criticize, gossip, learn, hate and love by narrative" (Hardy, 1968, p. 5). The cognitive processes that have historically been used to explain these stories can be derived from social properties of conversation. For example, leveling, sharpening and assimilation of stories (Allport& Postman, 1947; Bartlett, 1932) occur to make the story function better with audiences. As such, contemporary legends which concerns about the recent happenings of the contemporary world have gained much importance not only in our day today lives but also outside the arenas of literature, and folklore and has gradually become both a core of research and a rich source of data in several areas of comparative literature, linguistics, gender studies, anthropology, socio- linguistics, and language education (e.g. Berman &Slobin, 1994; Chafe, 1980; Tannen, 1980, 1982, 1993)etc.

In India, getting a cockroach in soft drinks, plastics in baby food, and several foreign matters in municipality drinking water is common day-today news. As such, these random experiences of listening to all these news entail some story which is circulated later through mouth to mouth and now days through the medium of Internet. In this context, well known Assamese writer and thinker DebakantaHandique has said that media especially various local news channels in Assam has been playing a major role in circulating these type of news for last few years. Expressing his thought over the various fast food or packaged food items he further said that sometime as an exception, mistakes can happen

but that may be an exceptional case, so it is better not to generalize it as the big and popular brands are conscious about their image and continuity of the items too. In contrast, he added that at certain point these types of stories are beneficial too as these alert us but everything cannot be accepted. Now, after getting lead in a popular Indian noodle brand known as Maggi, people have become more conscious about the food that they are consuming every day.

Urban Legends have been studied by different areas of knowledge, such as sociology, social psychology and folklore studies. According to Lopes (2007), sociologists see Urban Legends as a collective answer to fears, anxieties and beliefs of specific social groups. In that sense, such stories are told as a means of instruction, especially in the realm of morality (Harding, 2005; Brunvand, 1981, 1984, 1993, 2002; Berenbaum, 2001). Being a folk narrative, urban legend manifests various phenomena such as facts, knowledge, hopes, fears, behavioral rules, beliefs, values of human beings reflecting the society as a whole. Many a time human expectations influence their perceptions and sometime they see that they want to see or panic they might see. To prepare meat such as KFC chicken, McDonald's Chicken McNuggets, they use whole cuts of chicken which vary somewhat in size, weight, color and shape. Moreover the seasoned coating affects the final texture and shape of the cooked meat.

People have an affinity to select elements of day to day experience to which they attend, and they pattern those chosen elements in ways that reflect the stories available to us. Although the notion of story is common to every society, but the stories themselves differ widely and it defines the culture of the society. Historians have made it clear that narrative has an inherently temporal thread in that current events are understood as rising out of past happenings and pointing to future outcomes (Carr, 1986; White, 1981). Although many people have a laugh at the silly legend and take it as a joke but it still sticks to their minds and tell the story to get their attention and a feedback. Brunvand, the most famous

urban legend scholar has claimed that this legend about fried rat served in the outlet of KFC is a very popular and widely circulated since early 1970s in America and later it has spread abroad with the establishment of KFC franchises in other countries too (Brunvand, 2002). Thus, it can be said that like several other places, soon after the establishment of KFC franchisee, this legend has evolved in Guwahati too.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be said that the accounts for narrating urban legends or other forms of stories, need to be turned around. Apart from telling such stories, teller reduces his or her anxiety or helps us to find meaning in some events. Thus, these tellers utilize the very properties of apprehension and uncertainty to make a good story and improve their social relationships by making an effort to alert the society by raising catharsis.

Much of the beliefs and practices of old are viewed with a certain amount of skepticism by the younger generation, especially with the increasing exposure to western ways via the media explosion. Yet, such a society in transition is unique in that the old and new belief systems are able to exist side by side. In this age of widespread literacy, rapid mass communication and travel, it is only natural that new legends will evolve and become popular. Chain letters, anonymous emails and endless SMS jokes are passed on and in a short span of time, new lore are easily born. Traditionally steeped in myths, legends and folktales, it is perhaps not surprising that, along with the old beliefs, new legends continue to develop in contemporary times, legends and lores that are unique to the urban contemporary lifestyle, enriching the corpus of existing lores that brings a fresh insight into the evolution of the modern society. Every legend, if examined within the context of its telling and its listening, has the potential to influence the perspective of its teller and audience. Meaning that is generated via the legend is thus relevant to the social, political, and economic circumstances of the individual.

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