

## **Ghosts in the Folktales of Bengal**

---

**Anjali Gour**, NET (JRF), Independent Researcher, Department Of English And Culture Studies, Hooghly Mohsin College, The University Of Burdwan

---

**Article Received:** 06/6/2022,

**Article Accepted:** 15/06/2022,

**Published online:** 16/07/2022,

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2022.4.7.09

---

### **Abstract**

Ghosts or 'Boots' have always been an exciting topic for discussion or an element in the art of storytelling. Witches and witchcraft in the urban imagination are parts of myths, stories, and foreign folklore. In the same way, ghosts or 'Boots' have also found an irreplaceable position in the Folktales of Bengal in an amusing way, without which the stories would be not so interested. At some point in their life, all Bengalis have heard these stories from their grandparents during bedtime. The idea of a ghost is always associated with feelings of darkness and death. Ghosts are always expected to scare us with their long nails, shark-like teeth, airy white appearance, etc. But in the Folktales of Bengal, these ghosts have different appearances, names, and qualities (both good and bad) because they are unique to the culture of Bengal. They like helping the poor in need, accepting invitations for dinner to enjoy a tasty fish dish, or sometimes getting angry when touched or mocked at. Also, the paper will highlight how these stories simultaneously teach moral lessons to children.

**Keywords:** Folk-tales, Bengal, Ghosts, Children.

### **Introduction**

Folktales or 'Lok-Katha' are an essential part of the culture of any region. Fable, fairy tales, old wives' tales, storytelling, etc., are some of the common categories of Folk-tales. Every human society has its Folktales; these well-known stories, handed down between generations, are an important way of passing along knowledge, information, and history. Bengal, with its rich culture and heritage, has its Folktales too. The stories area retelling of Folktales from Bengal written by Reverend Lal Behari Dey and Dakshinaranjan Mitra. Dakshinaranjan Mitra collected Folk-tales to preserve an oral tradition of Bangladesh. His collection is famous as 'Thakumar Jhuli' or Grandmother's bag of tales, children's all-time favorite.

The Bengali Folktales are primarily women's tales. The chief teller of these tales is mostly women- grandmothers, mothers, aunts, or elder sisters. The setting in which these tales are typically told- is at night by the bedside or in the kitchen. As a result, most of the stories center

around the theme of ghosts or 'Boots'. So that children may go to bed early, listen to the elders of their family, or fear stepping out of the house at night without anyone's consent. Folktales of Bengal, both old and new, uses the concepts of ghosts. References to ghosts are often found in modern-day Bengali literature, cinema, radio, and television media. Ghosts have been influential in the socio-cultural beliefs, superstitions, and popular entertainment of the Bengali people. The stories under discussion have ghosts like Brahmadaitya, Petani or Shakchunni, Dainese, etc.

In The Story of a Brahmadaitya from the collection Folktales of Bengal, the ghost here is a Brahmadaitya. In the story, an old Brahman lived a tough life with his family. They were so poor that they could not even get two meals a day. It so happened that when the laird was making inquiries of his servant about the village and its various parts, he was told that several ghosts haunted a specific banyan tree on the outskirts of the town and that no man ever dared to go to that tree at night. The laird promised to present a hundred bighas of rent-free land to any man who would go and bring branches from the tree. The old Brahman accepted the challenge to climb the tree and cut off a branch that night. To the Brahman, this was the only chance for a better life. As he set out; he went without fear till he reached a specific 'Vakula tree' which was the haunt of a Brahmadaitya. Seeing the Brahman, the Brahmadaitya stopped him and asked if he was afraid. He was so kind that he decided to fulfil the wish of the Brahman by helping him. The Brahman told him everything, and the Brahmadaitya helped him in return by commanding all the ghosts of the banyan tree to cut a branch of the tree and give it to the Brahman so that the laird would reward him. On his return, everyone, including the laird, was surprised to see the Brahman alive with a branch in his hand.

The Brahman was rewarded as promised with one bigha of rent-free land. The land was already covered with ripe paddy ready for the sickle. Unable to do the task or hire men for the same, the Brahman went to the Brahmadaitya again for the help. The Brahmadaitya, without second thinking, ordered the ghosts again to do the work for the Brahman, and the following day everything was perfectly done as promised. The Brahman decided to do charity and good service by arranging a feast for a thousand Brahmans. Again, his dream was fulfilled by the Brahmadaitya. When he decided to eat his meal by sharing with his ghost friend, he later informed him that his allotted period had ended by doing good service to the Brahman, and the Pushpaka chariot had been sent for him from heaven. The idea of a ghost doing excellent service to help a poor not only invokes pity and respect for a Brahmadaitya but also, at the same time, show that good things at last fall on the luck of good lots.

The second story, A Ghostly Wife, from the same collection, is about a 'Petni or Shakchunni' who takes possession of a Brahman's wife because the woman disturbed her who stood near. In Bangladesh, Shakchunnis are different from Petnis and are believed to be living in trees and attack passersby who worry them. The only way of getting rid of them is by calling an Imam or Pandit. The Shakchunni started living as the wife of the Brahman in disguise in the same

house. Her activities raised the alarm in the minds of her husband and mother-in-law. There, an 'Ojha' was sent for. The exorcist came and lighted a piece of turmeric and set it below the nose of the supposed woman. This was an infallible test; no ghost can put up with the smell of burnt turmeric. The moment the lighted turmeric was taken near her, she screamed aloud and ran away from the room. The Ojha then punished her with slippers. She then revealed who she was and where she kept the woman of the house. She also promised never to harm the Brahman family and was released from the spell of the Ojha. The story highlights the traditional practice of calling an Ojha to save an individual from evil spirits. The report also teaches children not to leave the house at night without informing the elders.

The following story is Neelkamal and Lalkalam from the Thakumar Jhuli collection, written by Dakshinaranjan Mitra. These tales sound beautiful in English as they do in Bengali. Sukenda Ray carefully translated them. The ghost or demon in the story is a 'Dainee'. Here she is mentioned as 'Rakhas Rani' or the demon-queen. Dainese means witch. Dainese is not a soul or spirit, instead is a living being. Usually, in villages of Bengal, suspicious older women who know black magic or other witchcraft are considered Dainee. It is believed that the Dainee kidnaps children, kills them, and sucks their blood to survive a hundred years. The story is about a king with two wives, each of whom had a son. One of the queens was a witch, and she hated the son Kusum born from the other queen. His son Ajit was very attached to his brother. The demon queen wanted to eat the flesh of Kusum as she found pleasure in eating human meat. Once she was successful in eating Kusum, his son Ajit attacked her. In a rage of anger, she swallowed him too. But she could not digest them and, as a result, vomited two eggs, one golden and one iron. She hid the eggs in such a way so that no one could see them. On the other hand, several other demons appeared to disturb and kill the kingdom's people. A farmer discovered the eggs. They hatched, and two beautifully dressed princes with crowns appeared. They were Lalkamal (Kusum) and Neelkamal (Ajit). With swords in hand, they went on a mission to destroy the demons and ogres that had overtaken the kingdom. This is by far one of the most loved of the Bengali tales. The heroes are children, and yet somehow, their bravery is unparalleled.

### **Conclusion**

Children live in a world of fantasy that is different from the adult world. And in this fantasy world, ghosts play an essential part. They like being scared, as long as the fear has a safety net, the net which the elders tie around. Scary stories help kids learn how to deal with the natural world because the real world is always a mixture of good and evil. In the battle between good and evil, always good wins. These stories help to acknowledge that life isn't always easy and learn that it is good to be scared. Ghosts are scary, but they also help to understand challenging situations and how to cope with them. Folktales enable children to learn about their ancestors and their culture and heritage. They are the generation who would carry forward the legacy to the coming generations.

### **References**

- Dey, Rev. Lal Behari. Folk Tales of Bengal. India: Script (Kolkata). 'Folktale' (2021) Wikipedia. Available at <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folktale> (Accessed: April 12, 2022). 'Folktale' Vocabulary.com, Available at <https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/folktale>
- 'Ghosts in Bengali Culture' (2022) Wikipedia. Available at <https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghosts-in-Bengali-culture>
- Rez. '5 Outstanding Bengali Folk Tales from Thakumar Jhuli' 'Desiblitiz .'Available at <https://www.desiblitiz.com/content/bengali-folk-tales-thakumar-jhuli>
- Chaudhuri, Dr. Sutapa. The Saga of Rakshashi Rani in Bengali Folktales' 'Balaji.' December 7, 2016. Available at <https://www.boloji.com/articles/13547/the-saga-of-the-rakshashi-rani>
- 'Folk Tales' (2021) Banglapedia. Available at <https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Folk-Tales>