

Performing Myth and Political Memory: An Analysis of *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* as Contemporary Assamese Theatre

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Abstract

This paper examines the performance of *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)*, a contemporary Assamese play written and directed by Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami, adapted from a story by Samudra Kajal Saikia. Drawing from performance studies, folklore theory, and memory studies, the paper explores how the live staging of the play mobilizes Assamese folk myths, rhymes, and symbolic figures as tools of political commentary and cultural resistance. Through the embodiment of characters like *Kankhowa* and settings such as the mythical Ratanpur, the performance transforms oral traditions into theatrical expressions of societal decay and moral urgency. Ritualistic structure, choreographed folk movement, and episodic narrative techniques contribute to the play's Brechtian strategy of estrangement. The analysis positions the performance as a living archive *a lieu de mémoire* (Lieu de mémoire is a French term that means "site of memory." It was introduced by French historian Pierre Nora in his influential essay *Between Memory and History* (1989).) where folklore becomes a medium to reactivate political memory, critique complacency, and reconnect younger generations with cultural identity. The study concludes that Goswami's theatre exemplifies the power of myth in shaping civic consciousness through performance.

Keywords

Assamese Theatre, Cultural Memory, Performance Studies, Political Allegory, Brechtian Dramaturgy, *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)*

1. Introduction

Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!) is a contemporary Assamese theatrical production written and directed by Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami, adapted from a prose narrative by Samudra Kajal Saikia. The play unfolds as a surreal allegorical journey of a young boy who must cross "thirteen rivers and seven seas" to save a princess, ultimately arriving too late to prevent her symbolic destruction. Structured in sixteen sequences, the performance draws deeply from Assamese folklore, children's rhymes, mythical animals, and oral storytelling traditions to construct a layered critique of modern Assamese society (Goswami, 2014, pp. 8–16).

The central themes of the play include complacency, cultural decay, communal memory, and resistance. The protagonist's sleep beneath a banana grove while a villainous triad of bureaucratic figures collectively known as the *Kankhowa Team* violates the princess is a metaphor for societal inaction and moral disengagement. As the boy fails to act, the princess (a

symbolic figure for cultural virtue) is turned into a lifeless statue, visually capturing the consequences of cultural amnesia (Goswami, 2014, p. 15).

This study adopts a performance-based analytical approach, viewing the play not merely as a literary script but as a lived theatrical event that mobilizes body, voice, space, and memory. Following theorists such as Richard Schechner (2013), who defines performance as “restored behaviour” and a site of symbolic cultural enactment (p. 35), and Marvin Carlson (2001), who describes theatre as a “memory machine” haunted by the past (p. 2), this paper explores how the staging of *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* transforms oral traditions into performative political commentary. The performance itself is conceptualized as a *lieu de mémoire*, or site of cultural memory, wherein forgotten or suppressed communal knowledge is reactivated through embodied enactment (Nora, 1989, p. 7).

Accordingly, this paper addresses the following research questions:

- How does the performance of *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* embody and reinterpret Assamese myth and folklore?
- In what ways does the play, as a performance, activate political memory and critique contemporary society?

By answering these questions, the paper positions *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* as a case study in how regional folk theatre can function as a tool of memory reclamation, socio-political reflection, and youth-oriented cultural resistance.

2. Theoretical Framework

This study draws from an interdisciplinary set of theories performance studies, folklore theory, memory studies, and dramaturgy and metaphor to analyze *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* as a culturally rooted political performance.

Richard Schechner’s concept of *restored behaviour* forms a core framework for understanding theatrical action. Schechner describes performance as “twice-behaved behaviour” ritualized and rehearsed enactments that are consciously displayed and re-contextualized in public (Schechner, 2013, p. 35). This is especially relevant in *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)*, where folk gestures, rhymes, and dances are “restored” in stylized scenes to comment on social issues.

Marvin Carlson’s theory of the *haunted stage* complements this view by proposing that theatre is inherently a space of memory, where past performances, cultural references, and historical residues “haunt” every act (Carlson, 2001, pp. 1–4). The play’s use of familiar Assamese folk characters, lullabies, and rhymes contributes to this effect, activating shared cultural memory.

Diana Taylor’s distinction between the archive (written, official records) and the repertoire (embodied performance) is also useful here. Taylor argues that “the repertoire enacts embodied memory” and often carries subaltern or suppressed histories that the archive omits (Taylor, 2003, p. 20). The performance of *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)*, with its emphasis on oral traditions and community-based knowledge, embodies such a repertoire of resistance.

Alan Dundes’ foundational claim that “folklore is a mirror of culture” positions oral traditions, tales, and rituals as reflections of social values, anxieties, and worldviews (Dundes, 1980, p.3). In *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)*, characters such as *Kankhowa* and

symbolic motifs like the fox-ear lamp of Ratanpur are not just narrative embellishments but encoded commentaries on corruption, fear, and innocence.

Jan Harold Brunvand's work on contemporary legends emphasizes that even seemingly fictional or humorous folk stories often function as moral allegories (Brunvand, 2000, pp. 11–14). This is evident in the play's use of children's rhymes and surreal episodes, which encode ethical tensions and critique societal decay.

Pierre Nora's concept of *lieux de mémoire* ("sites of memory") refers to symbolic spaces such as performances or rituals that emerge to preserve memory when "real" environments of remembrance are lost (Nora, 1989, p. 7). In this light, *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* serves as some theatrical *lieu de mémoire*, where fading folk memory is physically and emotionally reanimated.

Jan Assmann furthers this by asserting that cultural memory is shaped not just by archives, but through performances, rituals, and repeated symbolic acts (Assmann, 2011, pp. 36–37). The play's use of dance, rhyme, and ritual repetition functions as cultural re-inscription, allowing memory to live through performance.

The play's episodic structure and stylized performance also draw from Bertolt Brecht's concept of *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect), which seeks to prevent audience identification and instead encourages critical reflection (Brecht, 1964, p. 91). The transformation of characters (e.g., villains turning into banana trees), overt symbolic imagery, and narration all aim to "make the familiar strange," thus promoting political awareness.

Victor Turner's idea of *liminality* a space of ambiguity and transformation helps explain many scenes in the play where normal roles dissolve (e.g., talking animals, reversed logic, dream states). According to Turner, liminal stages allow participants to question structures and experience *communitas* (Turner, 1969, pp. 94–95), a dynamic clearly visible in the play's dream and river-crossing sequences.

Finally, *conceptual metaphor* theory of George Lakoff and Mark Johnson shows how abstract domains are understood through metaphoric mappings, such as "life is a journey" or "corruption is a disease" (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, p. 4). In *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)*, the Boy's quest across "thirteen rivers and seven seas" becomes a metaphor for the moral and civic journey, while the Princess's transformation into a statue signifies the petrification of cultural conscience due to inaction.

Together, these theoretical frameworks illuminate how the play as performed is not only a narrative event but a ritualized enactment of cultural memory, political critique, and folkloric transformation.

3. Contextual Background

Assamese theatre has long been a space of cultural expression and political engagement. Its roots extend to the early 20th century with figures like Jyotiprasad Agarwala, who is widely regarded as the father of modern Assamese drama. Agarwala's plays, such as *Karengar Ligiri* (1937), combined social commentary with poetic realism and were deeply influenced by nationalist ideals, indigenous folklore, and the freedom movement. Since then, Assamese theatre has continued to evolve through community-based performances, *mobile theatre* (Bhramyaman), and experimental staging's that integrate ritual, music, and political discourse.

Within this tradition, Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami represents a significant contemporary voice. His theatre practice is known for its use of folk motifs, ritualistic structures, physical movement, and mythic allegory. Goswami often draws on oral traditions, children's songs, and symbolic transformations to explore themes of social apathy, cultural memory, and resistance. His productions are notable for blending traditional performative idioms with critical modern concerns, often positioning the stage as a site of reflection and reawakening. In this sense, Goswami continues and innovates the socially engaged legacy of Assamese theatre.

The play *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* is adapted from a prose narrative by Samudra Kajal Saikia, a noted Assamese writer known for blending realism with metaphor. Saikia's original piece imaginatively reinterprets folk characters, oral rhymes, and symbolic animals from Assamese children's folklore, reframing them as metaphors for state power, cultural inertia, and ethical collapse. Goswami's stage adaptation retains the surreal tone and moral structure of the original while emphasizing performative embodiment, episodic staging, and dream logic. Characters like the Kankhowa, the Bird (Sakhiyati), and the Princess are not only literary symbols but also become ritualized figures on stage, connecting myth to present-day socio-political realities.

Thus, the play emerges from a confluence of literary imagination and performative heritage positioning folklore as both artistic inheritance and a tool of political critique.

4. Myth and Folklore on Stage: The Living Archive

Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!) brings the mythic and folkloric imagination of Assam into the theatrical present through carefully crafted performance. The play does not merely reference folk traditions it embodies them. Characters, rhymes, and motifs are performed in physical, musical, and visual forms that transform the stage into what Marvin Carlson (2001) calls a "memory machine" a space where cultural memory is enacted and shared (p. 2). Alan Dundes (1980) similarly argues that folklore serves as a mirror of culture, preserving values, fears, and identities within oral and performative forms (p. 3). Goswami's play functions precisely as such a living archive, drawing from Assamese oral traditions and reactivating them for contemporary reflection.

In Scene 3, the audience enters a world of children's play, filled with folk rhymes, nonsense verses, and rhythmic group movement. The children sing "*Irikati mirikati banhor shola / Momair padulit bandhilon ghonda*" a nonsense rhyme popular in Assamese village culture (Goswami, 2014, p. 9). This moment invokes both innocence and communal rhythm, which are immediately disrupted by the sudden arrival of the *Kankhowa* Team. In performance, this transition is marked by a dramatic shift in music and movement. The *Kankhowa* character, drawn from a humorous lullaby ("*Kankhowa... eats the ears of children*"), now appears in a grotesque form alongside a corrupt minister, army officer, and bureaucrat. This transformation literalizes Dundes's claim that folklore adapts to express collective anxiety (Dundes, 1980, pp. 3-4). Through exaggerated gestures, red umbrellas, and military props, these characters visualize state power as folkloric menace, symbolically devouring cultural purity (Goswami, 2014, pp. 9-10).

In Scene 11, the Boy arrives at *Ratanpur*, a mythical land derived from Assamese folktales. A fisherman narrates that in Ratanpur, people cut off a fox's ear to use as a lamp, referencing a lullaby that warns: "*Oh fox, don't come at night / We'll cut your ear and light a lamp*" (Goswami, 2014, p. 12). On stage, this is rendered through surreal staging glowing props,

animal masks, and dim lighting. Carlson's (2001) notion of "ghosting" is relevant here: the scene evokes both humour and horror, as past cultural memory returns in de-familiarized form (p. 7). The fox's mutilation becomes a metaphor for environmental violation and the grotesque instrumentalization of nature under distorted systems of belief.

The interplay between textual folklore and performative reimagining is central to Goswami's method. While the source material by Samudra Kajal Saikia presents these elements metaphorically, the performance gives them body, rhythm, and voice. Folk elements are expressed through costume design (e.g., camouflaged banana trees), mask usage (e.g., tortoises and camels), and folk-inspired movement vocabularies, creating an embodied archive of Assamese rural consciousness. Traditional musical patterns are adapted for emotional and narrative transitions, linking each surreal episode to cultural memory.

As Dundes (1980) asserts, when folklore is enacted, it does not simply entertain it teaches, warns, and encodes moral values (pp. 5–6). Similarly, Carlson (2001) notes that repetition and familiarity in theatre can "awaken the spectator's cultural memory" (p. 8). In *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)*, Goswami stages precisely this process. The lullaby about rivers and seas ("*Thirteen rivers and seven seas how will I cross?*") is repeated in multiple scenes as a haunting refrain, reinforcing the Boy's journey as both mythical and moral (Goswami, 2014, pp. 8, 13). This repetition functions as what Nora (1989) calls a *lieu de mémoire* a symbolic act that stores and transmits cultural identity (p. 7).

Thus, the performance of *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* becomes not just a dramatization of folklore, but a dynamic reactivation of collective memory. Through bodies in motion, voices in rhythm, and stagecraft grounded in oral tradition, Goswami transforms folklore into a living language of political and cultural reflection.

5. Political Allegory and Brechtian Distance

The performance of *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* operates as a political allegory that critiques bureaucratic corruption, public apathy, and the erosion of cultural ethics. Through deliberate estrangement, stylized action, and symbolic layering, the play employs techniques aligned with Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre, particularly the *Verfremdungseffekt*, or alienation effect, to provoke critical awareness in the audience (Brecht, 1964, p. 91).

One of the most striking examples of estrangement is the transformation of the Kankhowa Team into banana trees in Scene 14. Rather than disguising this as realistic magic, the transition is made visibly theatrical, with characters physically adopting plant-like stances as lullabies are sung to the Boy (Goswami, 2014, p. 14). This stylized moment "makes the familiar strange," encouraging viewers to see state authority (*Kankhowa*, the minister, army-man, and bureaucrat) not just as individuals, but as systemic agents of sedation and deceit. The Boy's sleep beneath the trees becomes a conceptual metaphor for collective societal inaction.

In line with Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) theory of conceptual metaphors, the Boy's quest represents a journey through moral confusion and political complexity "*life is a journey*" while the Princess, silent and vulnerable, symbolizes the conscience of culture, the ethical core of Assamese identity (p. 4). Her eventual transformation into a statue in Scene 16, following a violent interruption by the villains, visually captures the petrification of virtue how complacency leads to irreversible moral loss (Goswami, 2014, p. 16).

These symbols operate through visible transitions and metatheatrical commentary. Characters often shift roles or double as symbolic objects (e.g., trees, pirates, or animals), reflecting Brechtian principles of non-realism and performative critique (Brecht, 1964, pp. 91–92). The play's episodic narrative, non-linear logic, and exaggerated gestures distance the audience emotionally, inviting instead a reflective, politicized engagement.

The Kankhowa Team is particularly effective as an allegorical device. Each member represents an institution of power civil, military, administrative merged into one grotesque entity drawn from folklore. Their costumes (military caps, red umbrellas), synchronized movement, and brutal intrusion into the cultural space of the Bihu dance (Scene 3) transform them into a symbol of authoritarian control invading community life (Goswami, 2014, p. 9). Their comic menace gradually evolves into embodied violence, highlighting the escalating nature of unchecked power.

Victor Turner's (1969) notion of liminality a space of suspended norms and heightened symbolic action applies to several transitional sequences, including the desert scene and the final epilogue. Here, identity is unstable: animals speak, time warps, and morality is blurred. The Boy, in his state of in-betweenness, is neither fully child nor hero. This liminal ambiguity, according to Turner, opens space for social critique and transformation (pp. 94–95).

Ultimately, the performance creates a political stage where cultural metaphors are activated through theatrical form. By foregrounding stylization, disruption, and folklore, *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* transforms Assamese tradition into a critical lens on modern governance, where ritual and dream reveal the dangers of moral sleep.

6. Performing Memory and Resistance

Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!) functions not only as a theatrical allegory but also as a site of cultural memory and resistance. The performance space becomes a vessel through which the community remembers what has been forgotten, suppressed, or distorted in the process of modernization and political neglect. Through its revival of folk characters, songs, and mythic journeys, the play invites audiences particularly young viewers to re-engage with Assamese ethical frameworks and narrative heritage.

Incorporating Pierre Nora's (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire* symbolic "sites of memory" that emerge when traditional environments of memory vanish the play becomes a living memory space. Nora argues that in the absence of organic cultural continuity, memory must be actively preserved in symbolic forms (p. 7). The performance of *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* achieves this by staging elements like the lullaby of the rivers, children's rhymes, and traditional Bihu dance, not just for aesthetic effect, but as mnemonic devices linking past and present (Goswami, 2014, pp. 8–9).

The play also aligns with Jan Assmann's (2011) idea of cultural memory as a "collective concept for all knowledge that directs behaviour and experience in interaction with a historical past" (p. 36). In *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)*, such memory is embedded in performative rituals such as the rhythmic recitation of folk riddles, the ceremonial arrival of symbolic animals, or the repetition of mythic refrains. These sequences do not merely entertain; they re-inscribe communal identity through embodied performance.

One of the play's key contributions is its connection to younger audiences. By using playful folklore (e.g., nonsense rhymes, talking animals) alongside grave political allegory (e.g., the

violation of the Princess), the play bridges the gap between childlike wonder and adult critique. This allows viewers especially students, emerging artists, and rural audiences to access critical social commentary through the cultural codes they grew up with, now reimagined on stage.

Moreover, the play's impact is expanded through multilingual staging and digital dissemination. Performed in Assamese with folk dialects and stylized expression, *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* reflects the polyphonic nature of Assam's culture. The YouTube recordings of the performance, uploaded by the production team, have extended its reach far beyond the local stage. Viewers can now engage with the work asynchronously, making it part of a digital repertoire that preserves and spreads regional memory through global access (Goswami, 2014, p. 3).

The play also engages its audience through direct address and physical proximity, in some versions incorporating elements of immersive theatre, where viewers are drawn into the symbolic journey. This aligns with Diana Taylor's (2003) argument that performance, as repertoire, stores and transmits memory through the body, activating history not just through documents, but through repeated action and presence (p. 20).

In these ways, *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* resists cultural forgetting. By fusing orality, bodily movement, visual metaphor, and digital platforms, it transforms Assamese folklore into a theatre of remembrance, where memory becomes resistance, and performance becomes pedagogy.

7. Reception and Impact

The performance of *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* has generated significant engagement across live, community, and digital platforms. Audience responses during live performances were marked by emotional resonance, cultural recognition, and generational bridging, particularly in rural Assamese settings where folklore remains a living memory. Community discussions following performances often highlighted the symbolism of the Princess and the Kankhowa Team as deeply relevant to present socio-political conditions.

Theatre critics and viewers have interpreted the play as a call to wakefulness in a time of cultural erosion. In an article published by *Xahitya.org* (2014), the play was described as a "theatrical lament against moral inertia", (Sharma) with particular praise for its use of Assamese oral traditions and surreal metaphors to speak to young and old alike. The coverage emphasized how the staging of folk idioms in a fragmented, non-linear narrative "shook the audience out of its comfort zone" and forced reflection on governance and identity (Sharma, 2014, para. 3).

Similarly, *The Telegraph* recognized the production's ability to revive Assamese stage culture through politically aware, folk-based theatre. The newspaper report noted that the play "infuses traditional narrative forms with a strong contemporary message," and that it successfully "merged performance art with a critique of bureaucratic complacency," identifying Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami as a "voice of ethical urgency in contemporary Assamese theatre" (*The Telegraph*, 2014, p. 6).

The play's digital presence on YouTube has extended its reach beyond immediate performance spaces. Uploaded videos have received comments from viewers in both Assam and the Assamese diaspora, many of whom praised the play's cultural relevance, visual symbolism, and emotional impact. The platform has allowed for asynchronous viewing and wider

circulation, transforming *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* into part of a digital folk archive. This aligns with Diana Taylor's (2003) concept of the repertoire the embodied memory preserved not only through live performance but through mediated, recurring acts (p. 21).

In Assam's broader cultural landscape, the play has contributed to a revival of political theatre, encouraging emerging theatre groups to experiment with hybrid forms that combine ritual, oral tradition, and critical commentary. For diasporic audiences, the play serves as a cultural touchstone, offering a connection to homeland narratives while speaking to universal themes of resistance, decay, and ethical awakening.

Thus, the performance of *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* resonates as both cultural intervention and memory project, making theatre a medium for reflection, regeneration, and resistance.

8. Conclusion

This paper set out to explore how *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)*, written and directed by Dr. Mrinal Jyoti Goswami, uses performance to embody Assamese myth and folklore while also activating political memory and critiquing contemporary social apathy. Through the lenses of performance studies, folklore theory, memory studies, and dramaturgical analysis, the research has shown that the play functions not merely as a theatrical text but as a dynamic site of cultural resistance and remembrance.

The study's first research question how the performance embodies and reinterprets Assamese myth and folklore has been addressed through detailed analysis of key scenes, including the arrival of the Kankhowa Team, the dream sequences, and the surreal staging of Ratanpur. These examples demonstrate how traditional folk elements, such as lullabies, rhymes, mythical animals, and moral archetypes, are transformed into performative allegories. By staging these elements with visible theatricality, song, dance, and visual symbolism, the performance revives the oral and performative archive of Assamese rural culture in ways that are meaningful to contemporary audiences.

The second research question in what ways does the play, as a performance, activate political memory and critique societal decay has been examined through the use of Brechtian alienation techniques, conceptual metaphors (e.g., the Boy's sleep, the Princess as cultural virtue), and the liminal structure of the episodic narrative. These dramaturgical strategies provoke critical distance rather than emotional immersion, urging the audience to reflect on governance, morality, and cultural survival. The play's visual and rhythmic repetition of folk motifs creates a space of mnemonic engagement, consistent with the theories of Nora and Assmann.

The findings also highlight the unique role of folk-based political theatre in Assam's evolving cultural discourse. Following the tradition of socially conscious dramatists like Jyotiprasad Agarwala, Goswami's play contributes to a renewed interest in hybrid theatre forms that combine ritual, folk aesthetics, and political critique. The performance appeals to both rural and urban audiences, and its digital presence has allowed the work to circulate across diasporic communities, reinforcing its relevance as a cultural touchstone.

This study also suggests areas for further research, including comparative analysis with other South Asian folk-performance traditions such as Therukoothu in Tamil Nadu, Nautanki in North India, or Baul and Bhawaiya traditions in Bengal and Bangladesh. Examining how

different regional theatres use folk aesthetics to resist state power, assert identity, and preserve cultural memory could offer broader insights into the politics of performance in postcolonial South Asia.

In conclusion, *Tuponi E Ture Kalatalat Ghar (Complacency Ruins Us!)* demonstrates that myth and memory, when embodied on stage, can become tools for cultural survival and civic reawakening. The play affirms the enduring power of folklore not just to entertain, but to confront, provoke, and inspire resistance in times of ethical and political uncertainty.

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