

The cultural ethos of Indian folklore



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Abstract

Folklore has a uniqueness about reinventing itself. The verbal traditions, through the process of visualisation, be it through fiction, fables, mythology, music, craft or literature become the theme of illustrative depiction and re-invention. The source of subject and the medium or style of manifestation of the narrative is usually individualistic, reliant on the various regional stories, culture and also the intrinsic talent or the artistic, training of the folks or their individual expertise. In this article I have briefly touched upon the origin of Indian music, the multiplicity of Indian diaspora, and have dwelled upon the large canvas of Indian folklore, the verbal and inscribed circulation of traditional folktales, folk art, folk literature, folk science and technology; Agreeing with Mazharul Islam (1985), I have reviewed the earlier understanding and belief of folklore's oral character and also recognized the visual and practical influence of performances, publications and documentations towards sustaining folklore. The purpose of this paper was to take cognizance of the implausible range of Indian folklore and consequently apprise the youth regarding it. If the significance and multiplicity of the Indian folklore is industriously enthused amongst the Indian span and impetus given towards its awareness, then, it will have a salutary effect on the growth and conservation of its rich cultural ethos. For writing this paper both primary and secondary sources have been consulted. While the primary sources were based on observations and field visits, engaging with artistes and artisans, the secondary were, references and books on the subject. The variability of cultural wealth in India is indeed second to none in the world. Therefore, it is imperative to sustain and provide a stimulus for its propagation.

Key Words: Oral Traditions, Cultural-Multiplicity, Folk-Literature, Folk Music-Dance-Drama, Folk Art-Craft-Technology.

Research Paper

The Indian Subcontinent has one of the richest treasures of folk lore in the world. Although its dynamics still remain to be reconnoitered even by some of the erudite folklorists, yet there are several scholars in various disciplines who have produced huge quantum of monumental work in this area. The study of folklore could be gigantic, branching out not only towards the socio-cultural aspect but also to an open field for very profound research in archeology, genetics, anthropology, ethology, sociology and ethnomusicology.

“William Thomas was the first scholar who coined the term folklore in English in 1846 to replace ‘popular antiquities’ and ‘popular literature’ ”.[1]

In general terminology ‘folk’ usually refers to the people belonging to a community, culture or a country, who share some common influences or mutual reasons. ‘Lore’ is the art, music, literature, many customs, traditions, beliefs, and tales belonging to the folk of that particular group, community, culture or country.

For centuries folklore has flowed as a natural expression of life's emotions through the various stages of rural and urban life in terms of poetry, literature, song, music drama, arts and crafts.

Particularly in India, folk traditions stand unmatched. Being a diverse nation with its many states, many villages, many ethnic groups, many tribes, many cults, each unique in culture, languages,^[2] traditions, art forms and handicrafts, including a large canvas of folk literature, folk music, folk dance, folk drama along with a plethora of folk and tribal musical instruments- the array of variation is really large.

The connotation of ‘folklore’ is usually in a rural or tribal context but even the urban communities do have their own traditions, norms and rituals.

The ancient history of Indian music has its roots and origin in the Vedic times (5000 BC) undergoing various stages of evolution and development. References on Geet, Gandharva and Gaan, Margi and Deshi Sangeet are authenticated in the 13th century treatise Sangeet

Ratnakar by Pt. Sharangdeva according to which in simple terms is that Margi had a specific melodic pattern whereas Deshi did not. It was not encumbered with grammatical restrictions. Margi was devotional and labeled as Gandharva 'pleasing to Gods' and Deshi as Gaan 'pleasing to humans'- more earthly in nature.

Both Margi and Deshi survived the ravages of time and progressed together as the classic and the folk.

Margi sangeet sustained as the Sam Gayan of the Vedic Puranic ages, exclusive, classic and spiritual in value, and Deshi sangeet emerged as folk, informal, spontaneous and dialectic in nature, meeting the common expression of the ethnics.

Passing through the ages, both Margi and Deshi became the musical heritage of India, linking the present with the past giving impetus to the creative impulses of both the exclusives and the masses.^[3]

Deshi sangeet or folk music is just one aspect of folklore, whereas the entire gamut of folklore consists of the creative arts, social norms and cultural ethos of the people of different regions. It is the cultural repertoire of a province representing the society's social systems. It carries lineal value which is adapted through societal interaction and forwarded vocally from one generation to another.

It may be pertinent to note that every aspect verbally handed down through generations may not necessarily be considered as folklore. Particularly in a non-literate society, there may be many aspects of everyday living which would be passed on orally as part of daily routines and chores such as drawing water from the well, making cow dung cakes, tilling fields or feeding cattle. Logically such basics which are imbibed in the natural course of everyday living can be considered as part of folk culture and not folklore.

The thin line within folklore and folk culture^[4] is an arena which may not need much deliberation yet one should try not to confuse one with the other. Folklore is basically a product of a community, which shares the continuity of its dwelling place. The customs and beliefs, the way of life, the languages, the tradition, the livelihood are patterned in the same manner. "Folklore is the creation of human civilization, creation of people who live in a particular geographical area, share the same language, culture, mechanism of livelihood, and living conditions; whose way of life and traditional heritage are bound by a common identity"^[5]

Similarly what could be contained within the purview of folk culture would be the orally learnt folk way of living, the daily routines, the dialect, the usual chores, the food and habitat, rituals, festivals.

At the same time to term folklore only as an oral tradition or a verbal art may well need to be reviewed as how to reckon folk arts like the folk dance, sculpture, painting or handicrafts as a verbal art? All these would need visual and practical adaption, learning, training and practice. Similarly chants, charms and folk beliefs are very much a part of verbal folk lore but cannot be considered as art. Likewise, folk sports and games, (like the bird and bull fights, buffalo and ox racing, playing *chaupar*, *kanchhe*, *gulli-danda*, *giti*, *stapu* etc.)

Most folk medicines are made with natural herbs, plants and ingredients, sometimes supported by curative chants and mystic practices, the technique of which can be passed on both orally and practically. The therapeutic properties of plants and roots such as *Ashwagandha*, *Amla*, *Basil*, *Bhringa*, *Haldi*, *Adrak*, *Paan*, *Lavang*, *Gaund*, *Moringa*, *Lasuda*^[6] and numerous other herbs are well known in Ayurveda since centuries which can be contained within the ethnic origin of folk medicine but cannot be understood as art.

Similarly, home-grown folk technology as in making tools, utensils, and essential articles is neither verbal nor an art; though colorfully designed pottery or etching intricate motifs on the floor or walls is an art, making of jewelry, musical instruments is a skill and an art and these are also not just verbal.

Making vegetable dyes from plants and flowers, wooden blocks for printing on fabrics, looms for weaving cloth. Printing and weaving techniques and technology differ from state to state, eg. *sanganeri* printing from Sanganer in Rajasthan, *ajarak* and *kalamkari* from Andhara Pradesh, *chattai* borders and *chanderi* from Malwa Madhya Pradesh, *tye* and *dye*, *bandhej* from Gujarat, *mirror work* from Kutch, *narayenpet saris* and *kohlapuris* from Maharashtra, *dhakail* and *balucherry* weaving from West Bengal, *bamboo art* from the North Eastern states, *sandal wood carving* from Tamilnadu, *silk weaving* from *Chaumandi*, *embroidery on pashmina*, *silk carpet weaving*, and *walnut wood carving* from Kashmir, *Phulkari embroidery* *punjabi jutti* from Punjab, *handmade carpets* from Mirzapur, *banarasi jari* and *silk weaving* in Uttar Pradesh, *madhubani* and *santhal paintings* traditional *pattachitra* and *filigree* on silver from Orissa, together all these form a part of art and technology of the Indian folklore.

Therefore in a wider perspective what could be included in the realm of folklore may be considered under the following categories ^[7] :

- i. Folk Literature
- ii. Folk Songs-Music, dance and drama
- iii. Folk art

iv. Folk Practices

v. Folk science and technology

Folk literature mostly expanded verbally and gradually seeped into written literature. Like the great Sanskrit epics Mahabharata, Ramayana, the Bhagvat Katha, the Garud Puranas. The fables like the Panchtantra (300 CE), Hitopadesha (Pt Narayana (9th to 12th century), Jataka in Pali, (300 BC and 400BC) Vidhyapati in Maithli (1358-1448), the 11th century Vikram-Betal (SomDev Bhatt), Heer- Ranjha by Waris Shah(1722-1798) in Urdu-Punjabi from Sheikhpura* the 18th century Sohni- Mahiwal which originated from the undivided Punjab and Sindh,* the stories of Sassi- Punnhun, by Shah Abdullah Latif Bhatta 1689-1752, Mirza-Sahiban (Khewa Sial area of Jhang District)* by the 17th century poet Peelu or the kafi's of the sufi poet Bulle Shah(1680-1757) from Uch Multan*and 16th century Punjabi poet Shah Hussain (1538-1599) from Lahore*[8] all, eventually found their way to written folk literature. Most of the other aspects of folklore like dance drama poetry is a consequence of the above. Poems, riddles, dictums, fables, fairy tales, mythology-epics, sagas and songs are heavily aligned to folk literature.

Oral Literature:

“All literature oral or written, springs from life, but oral literature is a better propagation of the inner most recesses of the socio cultural life of a society and its traditions, customs, social values, rites and rituals.”[9]

“Oral Literature in essence is a spontaneous outburst of the innermost feelings which emerge from the depths of a subconscious mind of the community. It has its roots in tradition and is preserved in memory.”[10]

Folk songs, dances, drama, are mostly derived from folk literature but when performed they become a performing folk art. Likewise the folk instruments which are first crafted with native tools and ethnic technology and are later unified during performance enjoy the privilege of dual placement under both the classifications of folk music and folk craft and technology.

In comparison, folk music is distinctively different from urban music. It is an extempore expression of the rustic since many ages depicting the unique civilization and culture of a particular region. Songs display the local dialect of that precise state or county, echoing their emotions and beliefs. All this has remained extremely important to the rural society's informal social norms.

Rural regions or tribes have their own explicit folklore with songs to suit every occasion, be it songs of harvest, love ballads, wedding ceremonies, childbirth or solemn moments, festivals or songs for the four seasons or Baramasa- songs for the twelve months of the year. Prevalence of patriarchal power/system has always dominated various societies therefore the lyrics of the songs and the stories also have the painful emotive jargons of the women folk. Many a times the songs are mirthful and sung on occasions in a lighter tone for amusement as well. All these form a musical gamut of emotional expressions during various social occasions. Songs are usually sung in rhythmic poetry set to simple beats and easy rustic tunes, easily adaptable by the local village community.

These are symbolic to the culture and superstitions of a province and commonly belong to the pastoral communities. Such songs are composed at some stage by certain creative individuals and are consequently adapted verbally by the village population. Later they became the existing philosophy of their region. What is most incredible is that amongst such multiplicity, religion is a great unifying factor amidst such diversity.

Usually, the poetic and lyrical themes of the songs center upon valor and heroic deeds of the great warriors and traditional folk stories. These are derived from folk literature and sung during festivals, wedding ceremonies and other occasions. Gradually these songs are nurtured and verbally forwarded through generations by the villagers, bards and folk artistes. The content of the folk songs and the style of singing are profound to each community, to each region and to each period. The repertoire of such songs is considered as a precious treasure to be preserved as heirlooms by inheritance through generations. “Folk songs form the bulk of folk literature, and like poetry in written literature, occupy a place of pride in oral literature”[11]

The preservation of the songs and ballads through the generations has been simply through singing and memorizing. Although, the lyrics of the songs may have been flexible to modification but their tonality and the regional dialect has remained intact and well-formed. The refrains, whether joyful or poignant are free from classical norms and mostly rendered in chorus with the accompaniment of a variety of traditional indigenous musical instruments. “Folk music is one of the important aspects of folklore which shows a man's relation with nature and human behavioral ways of life. It not only helps in understanding the Socio-cultural and religious life of community, but also helps human psychology. The adjustment of an individual to his culturally constituted world. In fact, folk music

unfolds various social cultural complexities of society. Every community, ancient or modern, has its own precious treasure of songs although the content of songs and the style of singing differ from community to community, place to place and period to period”^[12]

In a country like India, with its vast rural span, where numerous religions, rituals and superstitions are all woven into its basic cultural fabric; where music is a natural medium of expression (particularly during religious ceremonies and cultural festivities) obviously then, it makes its native music play an indispensable role in its indigenous atmosphere. “The definition of folk music accepted in 1954 by the International Folk Music Council is ‘folk music’ is the product of musical tradition that has evolved through the process of oral transmission”^[13]

Folk Dance: Dancing to rhythmic music is a natural instinct of any person or individual even more so in a rustic environment where the local population is uninhabited and revels in the festivities with full fervor. Folk dance gains momentum during harvest which is a festive season and time for gaiety and celebrations. Since ancient times, gods were invoked through rituals with music and dance during this time. Natives pray for a successful harvest and bountiful crops. Dancing comes as an unprompted expression of joy during several community celebrations, festivals, weddings, birth of a child, and religious ceremonies. The natives dance to a solo as well as in groups and have their own typical dance forms. They also have their detailed identifiable colorful costumes, ornaments, masks and accessories, indicating their kinfolk and status. Dance forms are both popular and ritualistic, they are exceptionally vibrant, a visual delight which emanate jubilant energy.

Folk Drama

Folk drama is multidimensional. It is a combination of religious-cultural performances which includes all the aspects of music, dance, poetry, theatre, mime and rituals. It embraces the overall character of the folk culture by not only fulfilling the spiritual, emotional and aesthetic desires of the natives but also in inculcating traditional values and customs. A drama performance usually commences with prayer to the native deity. Songs instrumental music and dances are included for special effects providing complete entertainment to the folks. The success of the folk drama lies in its flexibility in adapting to the old as

well as the contemporary themes. Folk dramas also include open street plays which often represent social issues through interesting sardonic acts. Customarily the presentations are not scripted and are open to modification at the spur of the moment by the skilled actors if needed.

Ballads and ballets are centered on the various episodes of the old epics, such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Usually it is combination of dance drama and music. The very popular *Ramleela* is an annual song and drama event spanning over three weeks before *Dassehra*. It is structured with great fervor almost in all the rural, tribal and even urban areas of various Indian states. *Raslila*, *Swang* and *Nautanki* are also synonymous with folk drama.

If one is to study the folk culture of a nation like ours we will see that our folk music and folk dances and drama are braided together. Many celebrations like the harvest seasons, marriage ceremonies, religious festivals and joyful occasions are where the natives dance to the tune of the folk songs expressing their zest during these gatherings. The fact remains that this is the integral part of the folk life of our country through each and every state.

The other aspects of the folk culture are mime, poetry, mythological storytelling and theatre.

All these are also supported with folk music, folk dance and folk instruments. There are a variety of instruments like the drums, bells, symbols, horns and trumpets which are effectively used to create the desired impact in a performance. The natives seem to be naturally adept in creating the required emotion or a dramatic effect or the *rasa* like Love, valor, pathos, compassion, fear etc. performances are further enhanced with innovative handmade costumes and props. Such events provide entertainment to the local inhabitants.

There are over a 100 varieties of drums and about 120 string, wind, and percussion instruments which form a part of the folk music ensemble^[14]

Since Vedic times musical instruments used during performances belong to the four categories of *Tat*, *Avnadh*, *Ghana* and *Sushir Vadhaya*.

For any impactful musical performance accompaniment of supporting musical instruments it is absolutely essential. Folk musical instruments can be placed both under folk music and folk technology.

The *Tat Vadhayas* are the string instruments such as the *Tambura*, *Ravanhatta*, etc made from natural

resources like the vegetable Pumkin (*Kaddu*) and soft wood. Pumpkins are dried for several years, processed and hollowed for resonance. The Rabab is made from wood, leather and gut. Strings are made from beaten iron.

The Avnadh or the drums are made from hollowing a tree trunk with saws and cutters, leather and teak eg: *Dholak, Nagara*.

The Ghana, or the chimes are made from wood and beating metals alloys such as Kaanshi, Peetal (brass) and iron eg: *Jhanjh, Manjeera Chipli*

The *Sushir* or the wind instruments are made from home grown bamboo such as the *Algoza, Bansuri* -name derived from bans or bamboo, meaning tuneful bamboo. Round incisions are made at appropriate distances for playing with fingers and blowing air into it.

Through the entire expanse of our nation there are presently twenty eight states, twenty two major languages and around six hundred and forty five recognized tribes. The multiplicity of their cultures and folklore, both in the rural and urban scenarios, is enormous and way beyond imagination and essentially needs to be conserved. It is evident that urbanization, modernization and economic requirements of the migrants have impacted the art and culture of various societies and states; and the dilution of ethnic dialects is greatly visible. Consequently, since many decades the Government of India, Department of Culture-Sahitya Akademi and Sangeet Natak Akademi, Indira Gandhi National Centre for Performing Arts in the national capital, have been working towards promoting folk literature through publications and folk music, folk dance, folk drama, folk art, folk science and technology, through organizing programs and conferences.

Folk handicrafts have been stimulated through cottage industries, state emporiums, exhibitions, crafts museums, fairs and a chain of Khadi Gram Udhoygs.

With the incursion of the multinationals, it is essential to disseminate knowledge amongst citizens, particularly amongst the younger generation, regarding the cultural wealth and the incredibly rich heritage of the various states of our country.

Folklore is the pulse of any civilization. It is the pillar which supports the socio-cultural systems of any society. It also is a reflection of the value systems and beliefs which are depicted through folk art and

literature, songs, dance, drama, legends, festivals, fairs, customs and religion. Hence it forms the cultural ethos of any nation or state. The variability of cultural wealth in India is indeed second to none in the world. Therefore, it is imperative to sustain and provide an impetus for its propagation.

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