



TRIBAL FOLKLORE OF INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Indian society is a unique society with diversity of nature and people. Almost every thirteenth Indian is a tribal. The present study makes an attempt to understand the tribal folklore of India and cultural traditions of tribal communities. The folk literature is of many types such as (i) Folktale (ii) Myth (iii) Legend (iv) Folk song (v) Riddle (vi) Proverb (vii) Folk speech. These types are in both poetic and prose form. The folk tales, myths and legends are prose form while the folk songs, riddles, proverbs are in the form of folk poetry. The present study focuses on folk literature such as Folktale, Myths, Legend, Folk song, Riddle, Proverb, Folk speech, folk song, folk dance and folk art along with examples wherever possible. The paper also throws some idea on the features of tribal art and Indian folklorists. It would be helpful to give idea to the people who are eager to know regarding Indian folklore.

Introduction

Indian society is a unique society with diversity of nature and people. Almost every thirteenth Indian is a tribal. The term tribe derives its origin from the Latin word '*tribus*' meaning three divisions. The tribe was the highest political unit comprising several Districts, which in turn, were composed of tribes. It occupied a definite geographical area and exercised

effective control over its people. Permanent settlement in a particular area gave geographical identity to a tribe.

The present study makes an attempt to understand the tribal folklore of India and cultural traditions of communities that have, by and large, lived in isolation till recently, viz. tribal communities, as reflected in their performing art forms. Tribal, conventionally, are considered to be a group of people supposedly living in remote places, untouched by modernity, have little interaction with outside world, have very limited exposure to external environment, have their own symbols of worship and have preserved and safeguarded their traditions and customs. It was also assumed that so called modernity would not pollute their way of life due to their limited exposure to outside world and also with technology. However, to label them as primitive, uncultured would be quite wrong. The advent of communication and exposure of tribal to other communities and societies could also have produced some changes in their values, beliefs, culture as reflected in performing art forms. It is also likely that old traditions and culture will give way to new patterns, sometimes even at the cost of survival of these forms, that might decay over a period of time, because the cultural values, tastes, interests change due to the exposure of tribal communities to modern societies and systems. The change in cultural values and traditions are best reflected in contemporary literature.

Unfortunately, such documentary evidences in written form, among tribal societies are rare and scanty. Nevertheless, tribal societies do have a rich tradition of performing arts like dances, theatre and oral narrative traditions, etc. The changes in these forms might also indicate the pattern of cultural change over time. The proposed study focuses on folk literature such as Folktale, Myths, Legend, Folk song, Riddle, Proverb, Folk speech and folk art.

Tribal Folklore

Folk literature, also called folklore or oral tradition, the lore (traditional knowledge and beliefs) of cultures having no written language. The tribal folk literature is largely an artistic expression of tribal thought, emotions, feelings both in happy moments as well as sorrowful moments. Happy moments is reflected in dancing, hunting, merry makings and sorrowful memories are connected with frustration, crop failure, distress and disappointment. In majority cases it is available in oral form. Every tribal community has its own language. Different items of folklore like folk literature, myths, legends, etc. are available in oral form. Folklore characteristically centers on the study of currently living traditions. It is transmitted

by word of mouth and consists, as does written literature, of both prose and verse narratives, poems and songs, myths, dramas, rituals, proverbs, riddles, and the like. Nearly all known peoples, now or in the past, have produced it.

The term folklore is defined as knowledge of group of people. One of the traditional meaning of folklore indicates that it is an oral tradition. Folklore reveals values and goals of people. Folklore helps in the oral exchange of knowledge in a non-literate society. Folklore performs many functions. Myths explains the universe and provides basis for rituals and beliefs. Tales are regarded as an unwritten record of tribal history. Riddles help by serving as a test of wits. From legends people draw all ideas necessary to their existence. Folklore reflects both its natural and cultural setting. From a great collection of myths are abstracted descriptions of tribe's material culture, economy, social structure, religious beliefs, etc. Folklore can be described under four major items :

- (1) Folk literature
- (2) Folk art including song and dance
- (3) Folk beliefs and customs
- (4) Folk crafts and languages

The folk literature is of many types such as (i) Folktale (ii) Myth (iii) Legend (iv) Folk song (v) Riddle (vi) Proverb (vii) Folk speech. These types are in both poetic and prose form. The folk tales, myths and legends are prose form while the folk songs, riddles, proverbs are in the form of folk poetry.

Folk Tales

The folktales have been an eternal part of every culture since ages. When it comes to Indian folk tales, the country of diverse religions, languages and cultures has a complete range of tales and short stories. Indian folklore has a wide range of stories and mythological legends, which emerge from all walks of life. The interesting stories range from the remarkable 'Panchatantra' to 'Hitopadesha', from 'Jataka' to 'Akbar-Birbal'. Not only this, the great Indian epics like 'Ramayana', 'Mahabharata' and 'Bhagvad Gita' are full of didactic stories inspired from the lives of great souls. Being full of moralistic values, Indian folklore makes perfect stories for children, who are required to be, instilled with right values. All these

ancient stories have been passed from generation to generation, creating bondage of traditional values with present-day generation.

The folk tales are composed of a mixture of actuality and fantasy. The folk tales can be classified into two categories such as (1) The tales having no poetic elements and (2) The tales having poetic elements in the form of verses and proverbs. India possesses a large body of heroic ballads and epic poetry preserved in oral tradition, both in Sanskrit and the various vernacular languages of India.

Myths

Myths are an important part of the prose order of the folklore. A myth consists of plot on the faith of a tribal community concerning supernatural beings and imaginary persons or things. Myth is the product of the intellectual thoughts of folk mind. Myths describe the origin of natural and cosmic bodies. Thus the myths can be classified into two categories :

- (1) Functional myths (2) Cosmogonic myths

Tribal myths can also be classified as those dealing with 1. Periodic natural and seasonal changes 2. Natural objects and extraordinary natural phenomenon 3. Origin of universe and Gods. 4. Origin of animals and of mankind. 5. Heroes, families, village and tribe 6. Belief in existence after death and places of the dead.

The functional myths are related to everyday life. Numerous myths are connected with the regular alteration of day and night, and of winter and summer. The Sun & the moon are regarded as beings. The Moon & its phases are commonly believed to have intimate connection with the birth and growth of animals and plants, the Sun being male and Moon female.

Riddles

W. H. Jansen has defined the riddle as “A riddle is a question, direct or indirect, complete or incomplete, in traditional form, whereby the questioner challenges a listener to recognize and identify the accuracy, the unit, the truth in a statement that usually seems implausible or self-contradictory, but that is true in its own peculiar light”.

In other words, a riddle is a witty and puzzling question related to something which is obscure. The questioner asks this question asking the listeners to say what that thing is.

The riddles may be broadly classified into two types namely riddles of structure dichotomous found in the proportions and riddles of description (obscure in nature). The riddles of structure may be divided into two categories namely

1. Riddles containing one self-contradictory proposition
2. Riddles containing more than one self-contradictory propositions in sequential order.

Riddles are more formally structured than proverbs. Available in rhythmic prose, verse, or song, they have a tighter text that is less frequently changed in use than are the texts of proverbs. It was suggested that riddles are more frequently used by children and young adults than by older people. Further discussion of this suggestion indicated that children use riddles in games while adults use them in rituals. Also, adult use of riddles occurs in tales presenting problem situations, such as marriage, selection of a husband by a woman, selection of a minister by a king, and selection of a successor to the throne. Utterances of wise people, statements of lovely ladies to young men, and utterance of deities or their priests are made up of riddles.

It was also suggested that children's riddle games are close to adult rituals. A riddle is an open-ended problem with only one correct solution. One who knows the answer by virtue of prior knowledge alone will be able to give the right solution. By definition, it is not resolved by intellectual abilities such as logical thinking or methodological investigation of information. Therefore, it is significant that riddles should be related to rituals and tales of problematic occasions. Like terms associated with ritual around the world, many of the terms for riddle in Indian languages literally mean some sort of opening up to find out the answer. This suggests that knowledge pre-exists, and it is revealed to the knower.

Proverbs

According to R.B.Browne, "To the most credulous members of society proverbs and the proverbial expressions are the accumulated knowledge of the ages, the voice of the history, they are tried and true, and as such are pragmatic unassailable wisdom". According to Archer Tylor and B. J. Whiting the description of proverbs as "short, plain, common, figurative, ancient and true", is as good as any formal definition. They have also characterized the proverbs as "Sayings" which "summonses a situation and in its own inimitable way passes some sort of judgement on it or characterizes the essence". Proverb in a large measure is thought to be the wisdom of many and wit of one.

Another important aspect of the use of proverbs relates to the hierarchy of the users of proverbs. A proverb is considered appropriate only when the user is superior in status to his or her listeners. Like water, proverbs flow from a higher to a lower level and never vice versa. Proverbs are used by older men when they talk to younger persons or by socially superior persons to socially inferior persons. Also, they may be used among social equals. But even then, the person who uses them establishes for himself the status of a wise man. Or, if the user of proverbs happens to be a woman in mixed company, she is either older and also of higher status than all the men in the group or at least of equal age and status as the men. In the case of husband and wife, a wife could, and often does, use proverbs aimed at her husband only if such proverbs are "female proverbs".

Folk Speech

Folk speeches are the everyday spoken language of the people. Folk speech is the dialect of the common people of a country, in which ancient idioms are embedded. These speeches are used on certain special occasions. Such items as teasing, joking, taunting, cursing, blessing, chanting, oath taking, insulting and sarcastically speaking, etc. are some of the expressions which come under the folk speeches of folklore. Similarly, gestures, greetings, bidding farewell, nicknaming, etc. are also the folk speeches.

Folk Song and Folk Dance

Some of the primitive sections of the tribal groups are most colourful and are frequented by tourists and visitors. Whatever may be their economic backwardness and development most tribal communities have a fairly high level of performing and plastic arts. Songs and dances punctuate their individual and social life. Appropriate to different social and ritual occasions different songs are sung and different dances are performed. To them dances and songs are part of their life and source of enjoyment and relaxation. Different musical instruments like Nagara, Dholki, Flute, String instruments etc. are used in accompaniment of singing and dancing. Birth, death, marriage, name giving, attainment of puberty, sowing of seeds, harvesting, wearing new flowers and eating new crops and fruits, hunting, curing illness, thanksgiving to dead ancestors, etc. every occasion has its appropriate songs and dances.

Moreover, the regional dances of India, such as the the Dandiya of Gujarat, Bhangra dance of Punjab, the Bihu dance of Assam, etc, which project the cultural heritage of those regions, are prominent contenders in the field of Indian folk art. These folk dances are

performed by people to express their exhilaration on every possible event or occasion, such as the arrival of seasons, the birth of a child, weddings, festivals, etc.

Folk art

India had always been known as the land that portrayed cultural and traditional vibrancy through its conventional arts and crafts. Various states and union territories sprawled across the country have their own distinct cultural and traditional identities, and are displayed through various forms of art prevalent there. Every region in India has its own style and pattern of art, which is known as folk art. Other than folk art, there is yet another form of traditional art practiced by several tribes or rural population, which is classified as tribal art. The folk and tribal arts of India are very ethnic and simple, and yet colorful and vibrant enough to speak volumes about the country's rich heritage.

Folk art in India apparently has a great potential in the international market because of its traditional aesthetic sensibility and authenticity. The rural folk paintings of India bear distinctive colorful designs, which are treated with religious and mystical pattern. Some of the most famous folk paintings of India are the Madhubani paintings of Bihar, Patachitra paintings from the state of Odisha, the Nirmal paintings of Andhra Pradesh, Warli paintings from Maharashtra, Tanjore paintings from southern India incorporate real gold into their paintings and other such folk art forms. Folk art is however not restricted only to paintings, but also stretches to other art forms such as pottery, home decorations, ornaments, cloth-making, and so on. In fact, the potteries of some of the regions of India are quite popular among foreign tourists because of their ethnic and traditional beauty.

Tribal art, like folk art, has also progressed considerably due to the constant developmental efforts of the Indian government and other organizations. Tribal art generally reflects the creative energy found in rural areas that acts as an undercurrent to the craftsmanship of the tribal people. Tribal art ranges through a wide range of art forms, such as wall paintings, tribal dances, tribal music, and so on. Art forms in India have been exquisite and explicit. Folk art forms include various schools of art like the Mughal school, Rajasthani school, etc. Each school has its distinct style of color combinations or figures and its features.

Features of Tribal Art

There is so much in the everyday life of the Indian tribal folk that requires to be changed: there is poverty, disease and ignorance. But there is so much in it that has to be

preserved and nourished for the good of the country as a whole, and that includes tribal art in all its forms. The major features of Tribal Art of India are discussed below:

- There is such richness in the folk-music and the folk-dances of India as can enrich and inspire the efforts of the most advanced of India's modern artists.
- It is good to note that dance and music performances by invited representatives of various Indian tribes now form a regular item of the official programme for the annual Republic Day celebration at New Delhi.
- Every tribe has several myths, often mutually contradictory, about its origin.
- Poetry, dramatic stories and music generally go together. All kinds of poetry have been found among the Indian tribes. They have seasonal songs, marriage songs, dance songs, hunting songs, prayers, and funeral chants. Songs are sung in solos, in duets and also in choruses.
- Riddles, proverbs and sayings also are common among all tribes. They are the 'spice' of every language.
- Tribal dances like the karma of the Gond and the bihu of the Assam tribes are justly famous, so is tribal music.
- Among the musical instruments used by Indian tribes are drum of various types, pipes, flutes, horns, anklets, brass-plates, etc.
- Within the range of graphic and plastic arts among Indian tribes mention may be made of painting; wooden and stone sculpture and statuettes.
- Decoration of the human body is a pleasing artistic activity, executed by using elaborately decorated clothes as also ornaments and cowries, by scarification and tattooing.
- Embellishment of dress, combs, head-dresses and tobacco-cases is common.
- Art is also bestowed on hair-pins used by brides, marriage-posts, marriage-litters, metallic lamp-stands used at marriages and marriage-crowns.
- The representations of demons, dummies and other products of fantasy are also artistically produced.

- Funerary pillars and memorial tablets are art products all over tribal India.
- Walls and doors, and even floors are decorated. These decorations often acquire highly stylized and conventionalized forms.
- Stools, chairs and cot also come in for decoration through engraving.
- Totemic flags and emblems are always products of artistic effort.
- In dances musical instruments and masks are widely used. Whereas the former receive artistic embellishments the latter are entirely products of art.
- Animals, birds and hunting scenes are also depicted in painting or in engraving.
- Textiles, basketry and pottery come in for occasional ornamentation.

Indian Folklorists

Indian folklorists during the last thirty years have substantially contributed to the study of folklore. Devendra Satyarthi, Krishna Dev Upadyhayaya, Prafulla Dutta Goswami, Kunja Bihari Dash, Ashutosh Bhattacharya and many more senior folklorists have contributed for the study of folklore. But it is during the 1970s that some folklorists studied in US universities and trained up themselves with the modern theories and methods of folklore research and set a new trend of folklore study in India. Especially, south Indian universities advocated for folklore as a discipline in the universities and hundreds of scholars trained up on folklore. AK Ramanujan was the noted folklorist to analyse folklore from Indian context. The Central Institute of Indian Languages has played a major role in promoting folklore studies in India to explore the reality of Indian culture.

Recently scholars such as Chitrasen Pasayat, M. D. Muthukumaraswamy, Vivek Rai, Jawaharlal Handoo, Birendranath Dutta, P. C. Pattanaik, B. Reddy, Sadhana Naithani, P. Subachary, Molly Kaushal, Shyam Sundar Mahapatra, Bhabagrahi Mishra and many new folklorists have contributed in their respective field for shaping folklore study as a strong discipline in representing the people's memory and people's voice. Recently the National Folklore Support Center in Chennai has taken the initiative to promote folklore in public domain and bridging the gap of academic domain and community domain.

Conclusion

A humble attempt has been made to give idea regarding Indian folklore like folk tales, myths, riddles, proverb, folk song and dance, folk art, etc. along with examples wherever possible. It would be helpful to give idea to the people who are eager to know regarding Indian folklore which is full of variety. The tribal people are preserving these tribal cultures of India. The government of India, as well as other societies and associations, have made all efforts to promote such forms, which have become an intrinsic part of India's cultural identity.

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