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Folklore and Ideology: A Critical Study from Indian Perspective

Molla Hafizur Rahaman (W.B.E.S)

Assistant Professor in English,
Bidhannagar College, Salt Lake,
Kolkata, (West Bengal, India) and
Research Scholar, Department Folklore,
Kalyani University, Nadia.

E-mail: hafizurbnc@gmail.com

Prof. (Dr.) Sujay Kumar Mandal

Department of Folklore,
Kalyani University,
Nadia (West Bengal, India)

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Abstract:

The German term 'Volklehre' means 'people's customs'. The term 'Folklore' has been derived from the German term Volklehre. Now, the term 'Folklore' has been used to denote myths, folktales, legends, folksongs, chants, formula, prayers, speeches, puns, proverbs, riddles and a variety of forms of artistic expression whose medium is the spoken word. Folklore includes all types of verbal art. Folklore is an expression of human existence, with folk painting, narratives, language, culture and literature. Literature was basically folk literature due to its orality. Writing developed in the years between 4000 and 3000BC. Various groups handled their folk literatures in their own ways. Folklore influences consciously or unconsciously human civilization. The journey of folklore is actually the journey of a nation. A nation's progress or regress is silently recorded in its folklore. The history of the marginal section of the society is artistically delineated in its folklore. Sometimes the dominant classes of the society utilize folklore so that they can remain dominant in the society. Indian folklore has been used as Ideological State Apparatus. The aim of my paper is to show how folklore has been treated in India since the period of colonization.

Keywords: folklore, ideology, colonization. ISA, cultural integration

Introduction:

Jacob Grimm(1785-1863) and Wilhelm Grimm (1786-1859) made an extensive effort to collect German folklore materials to trace the root of German language by studying German words, folk narratives, myths and tales and the result is the significant books related to folklore—*Deutsche Mythologie* and *Kinder-und Hausmarchen* (Children's and Household Tales). These two epoch-making works of Grimm brothers imparted decisive influence on folklore studies in later times and guide the scholars about data collection, methodology of study and publishing of folkloric materials. They were influenced by the industrialization that started to annihilate the traditional landscape and

traditional cultural resources of the peasant communities. The diachronic study of German oral poetry and narrative forces the emergence of 'mythological school' in later times.

Discussion:

In 1846 British antiquarian William John Thoms coined the word 'folklore' to denote manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs and other materials of the older time. Prior to that in England it was termed as 'popular antiquities' or 'popular literature' and in Germany such resources were called as *volkskunde*. Under the pseudonym of Ambrose Merton, William John Thoms argued in the journal *The Athenaeum* that the word 'folklore' is the composite of 'folk' (people) and 'lore' (knowledge). His observation or argument led to the establishment of an international discipline known as folklore, folklore studies or folkloristics.

Folklore materials like tales, songs, traditional customs etc are as ancient as human civilization. The systematic study of folk materials in the spirit of modern academics is of relatively recent origin. German scholars and intellectuals like Jacob Grimm and Wilhelm Grimm showed sincere fascination in the collection and study of the various forms of folk materials in the nineteenth century. The meaning of the term folklore is little bit confusing. Different countries followed different opinion about the meaning and scope of folklore. Folklore used to suggest the so-called unsophisticated peasant culture comprising of community performance of music, dance and festival in some parts of South Africa and Europe and at the same time the relics of the past, ballads, tales and superstition were accepted as folklore in America.

Because of multifaceted features of folklore materials researchers from various disciplines like literary studies, anthropology, psychology, history etc. have explored and enriched the theoretical and methodological aspects of folklore studies.

Simple ignorant and uneducated or semi-educated people, especially the rural peasant folk are generally associated with folklore while the elite class of the society are connected with high classical arts.

Folk culture cannot be limited through geographical notions or literary reasons. It overcomes geographical boundaries. It is a close human to human interaction. It is noticeably moulded by technology and highly developed modern society. Individual creations may be regarded as an ingredient of folk culture when the creation is shared and disseminated cutting across various boundaries of the existing society.

Folk is not limited in just rural or lower peasant class it is also clearly visible among strong urban civilization. Jokes, songs, stories, myths, proverbs are also parts of folklore and they have been highly impacted by television, computers, mobile phone, Facebook, WhatsApp and countless electronic gadgets. Folk ideas are communicated in the society by both print and visual media also.

Folk culture is dynamic, alive and vibrant because it changes its meanings, scopes, and

aspects with the passage of time and context. Many scholars think folklore is closely related with falsity, fantasy, and incorrect facts but falsehood is not inherent in it. It is very much associated with material life of the people, their habits, rituals, nationalism and their various institutions and expressions. Folk culture encompasses whole human existence.

Through informal methods or means in the society folklore is transmuted orally. It is largely verbal. World famous creative personalities ventilate their thoughts, emotion, passion, feelings, and valuable values through their artistic creations such as theatre, dance and painting. Sometimes they discover folk motifs in their artistic works.

Folklore is always in the state of flux. It is traditional, dynamic, symbolic, creative, imaginative, inherently and inconsistent but it values morality, filial love, love between mother and child, family bonding, patriotism, unity between man and nature. Sometimes it binds men with songs and passions but humiliating jokes separate man from man. So contrasts are inherent in folklore.

Folklore may be personal or public, global or local, national or international, authentic, reliable or imaginative and anonymous. Aesthetics and the appreciation of beauty, sense of style and artistry are also closely associated with folklore. It is not detached from social process and its functioning. Education, religion and political set up, economic structure, family life, aesthetic and cultural values, rituals, patterns of belief and behaviour, expressions and institutions of any society are important and so quite significant is the folklore.

So folklore is intimately linked to the nation as in most cases it addresses the lower levels of the social hierarchy. Folklore is a broad category which includes culture of any group spread through verbal or expressive literature, behaviours visible through material life.

Relationship between folklore and ideology:

Marxist criticism suggests that all cultural forms seek to ensure that the dominant classes in a society remain dominant. In order to do so, it must convince the working classes and the oppressed not to rebel or revolt. The dominant classes usually achieve this by suggesting to the working classes that the present social condition is 'natural', benevolent and ultimately beneficial to them. They use cultural forms to carry the message that things are quite all right. They are shown films and plays created from the upper-class point of view and they naturally believe the twist of reality. This twist of reality is what Marxist criticism calls ideology (Nayar, 2010)

In *The German Ideology* (1867) Marx and Engels opine that ideology is a world of false conceptions about what [human beings] are and what they ought to be (Chakraborty, 2019). Ideology refers to those ideas that corroborate the existing mode of production so as to protect the interests of the elite (Chakraborty, 2019). In *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays* (1971) Althusser says that ideology represents the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real condition of existence. In a capitalist society there are institutions like the police and army which maintain the social

superstructure and existing relations of production through the use of force (Repressive State Apparatus or RSAs). Institutions like schools and churches ensure intellectual or spiritual submission to the status quo (Ideological State Apparatus or ISAs). ISAs contribute to the proliferation or consolidation of dominant ideologies. Althusser lists many ISAs like family, educational institutions, churches or any other religious equivalent, constitutionally sanctioned legislative bodies, mass media, literatures and the arts, sports and so on (Chakraborty, 2019). Following this logic various forms of popular culture may also function as Ideological State Apparatus. Folklore is one of the visible ingredients of popular culture.

Folklore is intimately and intricately associated with political ideological motivation. The various elements of folklore are always associated with a kind of collective pride and national glory. This collective pride and national glory prompted Grimm brothers in Germany to be keenly interested in German folklore materials for the study of the roots of German language.

Folklore was initially regarded as the lore of the unsophisticated ordinary rural people, it was highly humanistic, and it was very close to nature. For that reason folklore attained especial status during the age of romanticism. For various political ideological motivations folklore had extensively been used in Norway, Finland, Soviet Russia and India.

Indian Folklore:

India is a land of countless folk traditions. India is famous for its bewildering richness of various oral traditions. It is house of *Vedas*, the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas* and the *Upanishads* and the birthplace of the folktales like *Hitopadesa*, *Brihatkatha*, *Kathasaritsagara*, *Jataka* and *Betalpanchavimsatika*. It is multilingual, multi-cultural nation. Its multiracial, multilingual and multicultural traditions attracted and charmed eminent anthropologists and folklorists like Max Muller and Benfey who were enthralled by the beauty and variety of Indian myths and folktales. But Indian folklore was seriously dealt with the arrival of British colonizers in India and the contribution of Jawaharlal Handoo, one of the eminent scholars of folklore studies in India cannot be forgotten. According to Handoo the growth of folklore study in India may be divided into three different periods like—the Missionary Period, the Nationalistic Period and the Academic Period (Handoo, 1989).

Utilization of folklore in India:

Because of highly political ideological motivations folklore had not only been utilized but also created a new to meet the definite socio-political objectives of the nation. According to Russian scholar Y. M. Sokolov 'folklore is an echo of the past, but at the same time it is also the vigorous voice of the present. And in this context India is not an exception. India possesses massive body of folklore materials as India owns many racial, cultural and linguistic communities. Many intellectuals and literary scholars discover nationalistic spirit in folklore. In the colonial period, Indian freedom

fighters very effectively deployed folklore symbols for the reconstruction of identity.

The ideologies of the Christian Missionaries in the Indian Missionary Period:

The Christian missionaries visited India with an ideology of spreading Christianity among the rural Indians. They collected and published the first-hand resources of Indian traditional cultural lives to materialise their ideology of spreading Christianity. Jawaharlal Handoo noticed 'These Anglo-Saxon fathers recorded all kinds of information –habits, manners, customs, oral traditions, rituals etc –about their subjects. They used some of this information in spreading the Christian faith and were successful in delivering their main message through the native symbols.' (Handoo, 1989, p. 135).

Besides the Christian missionaries, some powerful administrators of the British Government in India showed sincere interest in collecting and studying Indian folklore materials in the Missionary Period. The objective of study was to rule India effectively by gathering local information.

Utilization of folklore in the Nationalist Period and ideology:

It cannot be denied that Christian missionaries and the colonial British administrators handled data of Indian folklore with their non-Indian viewpoints but their study undoubtedly awakened newly emerging intellectual groups. Educated by the colonizer the new group of Indian intellectuals initiated a renewed nationalistic attitude towards their own societies, cultures, traditions and folklores. Newly discovered Indian local traditions indirectly contributed a sense of nationalistic consciousness among the Indian intellectuals. Indians started to explore their own cultural roots and traditions. Folklore resources aligned with Indian national unity and identity. In this context Mahatma Gandhi's Khadi costumes and spinning wheel may be mentioned. Folklore was utilized for promoting ideologies of the Indian freedom fighters.

Folklore in the Academic Period:

India got political independence from the British colonizers in 1947. After independence folklore get enormous importance in India. Gauhati University started a Folklore Archive, the first department of folklore in an Indian University. Now, folklore has been used to trace glorious past traditions of India. Indian Folklore scholars like Birinchi Kumar Baruah, Birendranath Dutta, Indranath Choudhury, A.K. Ramanujan, K. Sachindanandan, Manoj Das, Jawaharlal Handoo, Prafulladatta Goswami are trying their best to present a true picture of Indian folklore through their artistic creations. Various Government and Non-Government Organizations are striving sincerely to promote and spread Indian folk tradition in the international world.

Conclusion:

Many folktales and folksongs were composed during the Indian National Movement, which helped in awakening the masses. Folklore exerts its assertion in the political world also. Now-a-days

during the general elections, we notice various political parties shrewdly choose folklore as medium of their party propaganda. Different political parties compose different popular folksong to woo the voters. Folklore plays a vital role in bringing about the emotional and national integration of India. Importance of folklore cannot be overlooked. The true picture of a nation is no doubted reflected artistically through folklore, through oral tradition not through written history. But sometimes folklore becomes apparatus for spreading ideologies of the dominant groups in the society. Ideologies change with the passage of time. In India the shifting nature of ideologies is visible in Indian cultural history. In the Missionary Period Indian folklore was used to execute the ideologies of the missionaries. But in the Nationalist Period and Academic periods Indian folklores are utilized to project unparalleled unique India in the international domain.

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