

HISTORY AND FOLKLORE OF COIMBATORE

Dr A Manimekalai, Associate Professor of History, Government Arts College, Coimbatore-641018, Tamilnadu, India.

Abstract: The research paper is about relationship between history writing and folklore. The study area is Coimbatore an integral part of Kongu region of Tamilnadu, India. The main aim of the research is to bring out the historical aspects that evolve from folklore of this region. The Research has tried to prove that a new method of historiography using folklore as the source is getting popular.

Key Words: Folklore, Historiography, Non-Conventional sources of History.

Introduction

Historiography is writing history. Historians used the traditional approaches that concentrated on dynasties rather than society. The ruling classes, which were in a minority, received major portion in the pages of history. The impact of masses on the important incidents, which took place in the course of history, was often neglected. Non-conventional sources such as folklore though like candles, throw enough light to discover the so far neglected or gray areas of the past. The historians at present divert their attention towards non-conventional sources to justify their writing.

Objectives

- To explain relationship between history and folklore
- To identify the historical aspects of the folklore of Kongu region

Approaches

The subaltern approach helped to concentrate on Common man. Descriptive and historical methods were followed

Traditional paradigm of History Writing

As per the traditional paradigm, history is essentially concerned with politics. They thought that history is a narration of memorable events particularly of wars.¹ It focused on the deeds of great men - a king, a dictator, or a minister- and the masses were ignored or given a minor recognition.

In the later part of the 19th century, there was a notable change in the attitude of the historians. The society and social history turned out to be the focal point attention of the historians of this period. When Marxian historians were prominent in England in the middle of the Twentieth century naturally that had an effect on Indian historiography. The Indian pioneers like Jawaharlal Nehru spread out the Marxian philosophy that gave

importance to the so-called non-politicized history. It gave more importance to ordinary people than authoritarian leaders.

'New History' showed its face in Indian historiography only in the twentieth century. Bharatidasan, the notable Tamil poet followed the concepts of 'New history'. The heroes and the heroines in his works were humble folk like Kuppan, Kuppamma. One hears the voice of the subaltern from Bharathidasan's heroine, Kuppamma who chooses self-immobilizes to vindicate her honor. Such common incidents were the indicators of great revolutions.

It is the 'Subaltern' kind of studies. In this connection, the role of Ranajit Guha should be noted. He is an international figure in the field of Subaltern studies. The articles in his books speak volumes about people's movements during and before British Rule.

Historians like K.K.Pillay wrote social history based on the Sangam literature. Many literary works of Sangam Age, such as Silappathikaram are based on a collection of legendary stories, heroic accounts, and folk tales. Somalay, a historian cum folklorist says that Silapathikaram contains in a regular order the songs of the seashore, the hunters, the cowherds and the maidens of the hilly region.² Thus, many historians neglected the fact that folklore forms the basis for writing history.

The historians who wrote on people's history face many problems because the sources are biased In favor of the rulers, administrators, and the dominant classes in general, The records, relate to the lives and activities of ordinary people, were created by the dominating classes. This was done mostly for administrative purposes. The records also suffer from hyperbole, neglect, and misrepresentation. For example. the police records revealing the subversive activities among the masses are often exaggerated In the study area, one of the early freedom fighters Theeran Chinnamalai was figured as an outlaw in the records. They often ignored the role of folklore in understanding a particular region.

History and Folklore

Folk traditions are the ways of life, which the folk people believe, do, know, and say. Our ancestors wanted to keep their traditions and experiences intact for ages. Their experiences became the folklore of later years. In many cases: traditional knowledge has been passed for generations from person to person. Some forms of traditional knowledge are expressed through stories, legends, folklore, rituals, songs, and even laws.

The historian belongs not to the past but to the present. According to the historians 'History is an unending dialogue between the past and present' The past is intelligible to us only in the light of the present. We can view the past, only through the eyes of the present. The oral folklore should be used as primary source in the same manner, as the material folklore served to the historian until now.

Our National Epics Ramayana and Mahabharata combined aspects of oral literature and oral history. Homer's epic poetry of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are compared with our Indian Epics. They are the important source of history of the ancient period. Even today, they make fascinating reading to millions of readers the world over. Every Indian knows the story of Ramayana and the Mahabharata. The local village myths and legends also have some valuable historical sources hidden in them.

One aspect to be noted is that the epics and Puranas and other oral literature have different verses in different places. The variant verse is one of the characteristic features of folklore. However, the basic theme is the same in all the verses by which history can be reconstructed. The legend of Kovalan and Kannaki is one of the versions of the story of Silapathikaram. a sangarn work, but to the ordinary folk who have not read Silapathikaram, the story is familiar only through folklore.

In the area the Kannaki cult which is also known as *Pattini* cult. She is known for her extreme devotion to her husband in spite of his infidel behaviour. Kannaki or Kannaki Amman is eulogized as the epitome of chastity and is still being worshipped as goddess of chastity. The basic theme is that Kannaki took revenge on the king of Madurai, for a mistaken death penalty imposed on her husband Kovalan, by cursing the city with disaster.

Use of Folk Literature in writing History

The lullabies, the lamentation songs, the field songs, riddles, proverbs etc are in poetic form. The folk tales, myths, legends ballads etc are in prose form. They are of immense use in order to know about the history of the area.

Poetic Folklore

There are a number of folklore forms, which are in poetic form.

- Children have vast stores of play rhymes, riddles, and marchers. They have ethnographic details.
- During agricultural operations like ploughing, reaping and threshing people sing *kulvai* and other agricultural songs.
- While transplanting the seedlings of paddy or weeding the fields, women sing songs reflecting the social condition, which they experience.
- Yetrapattu is a song sung by men when they lift water from a well by using a device called Yetrarn which has a picotta attached with a horizontal pole crosswise. The song has been devised in such a way that the tiller would be able to know how many buckets of water he had bailed out to irrigate the soil.³ By the song the singer brings out his inner wishes, the social and cultural conditions etc. *Vandikaran Pattu'* is a song by men while riding carts carrying goods to the markets.⁴

- In a tribal folk society, occasions of singing are regular and frequent. Women in unison sing the songs and a girl joins the group from a tender age. Among them, the better ones are known and recognized. They are encouraged to continue the singing tradition.
- Appropriate songs and dances accompany the numerous ceremonies of the various rites and rituals.
- The singing of folk epics continues for long hours and draws huge audience.
- In the prose form, illustrative short tales and proverbs are frequently employed while settling disputes and striking bargains. The folk ballads are in prose and poetic form. A careful analysis of folklore will bring out the historical values found hidden in them. A true historian should get the sources of history more from folklore than from any other material sources.

Folklore as Source

Folklore is that of people's culture which is preserved consciously or unconsciously, in beliefs and practices customs and observances It has various features, which help the historian as source.

Folk songs

Folk songs form the bulk of folk literature, occupied a place of pride in oral literature. According to the Encyclopaedia Britannica, folksongs are 'primitive spontaneous music'. In the study region, a number of folk songs unfold various socio - cultural complexities of society.

Folk Tales

Folk tales are highly expressive genres, which are analogous to the life situations and function as the referents of culture in which they were formed, transformed, transmitted and perpetuated.

Ballads

Vanamamalai, a noted folklorist, published a number of manuscripts based on folklore. Pulavar Rasu of Kongu region contributed a lot for the collection. Some of the local poets compose songs in praise of the local heroes and sometimes on rich people. Many such songs are popular in the study area. At times, they would be written down in the manuscripts. The 'Kodumanal Ilakkiyangal (Literature of Kodumanal, of Kongu region) edited from manuscripts by Pulavar Rasu is an example for such a ballad. Such ballads contain a lot of information on the geographical, socio economic and cultural condition of the people and local leaders.

Pulavar Rasu registers a folk ballad on Vellaiyammal. She is praised as Kannaki of Kongu nadu. Vellaiyammal is the native of Kongunadu. She fought for her legal land rights against her brothers and got successful. The ballad describes the role of a Muslim *Sardar* (Army Chief) in her fight for right. The folk ballad explains the tripute paid by the Vellayammal's family to Islam, because the *Sardar* belonged to Islam. It also says that her sons and their generations called as mulukkathan kulam. (The clan with ears not pierced)

Vanamamalai talks of a different type of folk ballad called Kolaicindu or Tarrkolaicindu, which reflect a living tradition of a particular area. They are called as the ballads of 'suicide and murder' He explains that 'whenever a sensational murder is reported in the newspapers, the folk-poets are inspired to compose ballads, print them and circulate them. Many folk singers of the area learn them and sing them to groups of audience on different occasions.

Legends

Legends play an important function by recording the historical aspects in folklore. They are believed to be historically true. In the study area, many prevailing legends talk about local heroes who serve the society by their life sacrifice. The legend about Rakkapoonan who was a local bandit in the *Iromporai* of Coimbatore District is popular in the local area.

Mythology

They are stories that explain the origins of current phenomena. They are of two types. They are the functional myths and the cosmogonist myths. The functional myths are related in everyday life covering customs, behavior, social activities such as food habits, dress youth organization dance etc. The rural folk connect myths with all the social activities. The myths about local deities of Kongu region also contain the historical aspects.

The Folk Language

The everyday spoken language of the folk people contains sources for historical interpretation. The speeches are used on certain special occasions such as teasing, joking, cursing, blessing, oath taking, sarcastically speaking etc., The Kongu people use many peculiar words that belonged to the soil. *Vatto* denotes a plate, which is used for taking food and not for any other purpose. The people wanted to identify the plate, used for taking food from the other plates. Similarly to mention tabooed objects or dangerous animals indirectly, some other words were used For example, the term *poochi*, which is meant for an insect, is used instead of a cobra.

Folk Sayings

The experiences of the folk people are expressed through popular sayings. They reflect social relationship of the folk with nature. For instance, weather forecast formulae, conceived in the folk saying are of importance to the peasant community. Thus, the folk sayings prevalent in the area play quite an effective role in history writing.

Riddles

Riddles are a part of regional folklore. During the leisure times, the folk used to tease one another through riddles. In the riddles, the words are used in such a way that they have moral lessons in them. Through them, the socio-cultural life of the people is understood.

Proverbs

The elderly people use the proverbs to regulate the younger generation. They are used to impart instruction and guidance. They explain the ideas concisely. For example, a proverb explains that the judgment of the king cannot be presupposed as a river changes its course during floods. In the same way, the proverbs help to understand the mentality of the people, which is essential in social history. *Oonda Vanda pidari Ur pidariyai thurathnathu pola* - is a proverb, which explains that the English who came as traders however they have taken over all the authority of the natives.

Customs and Conventions

Through religion, the people execute their laws, tradition, customs, conventions, etc. Reading or learning is forbidden on the day of *Sarasvati* worship. There is a belief that on *Vijayadasami* day, the learning of a child should start.

The caste system of the area can best be understood only through folklore, as there are no other better sources than the folklore. The governmental orders can divide the castes as forward castes, backward castes, scheduled castes, scheduled tribes, etc., They do not mention the hierarchal order among different castes. However, the hierarchy of the castes is given in the folklore alone.

The Place Names

The place name study of the area is also helpful to understand the local history. Each town or village has its own story for its name. For example, *Ramanathaporam* is a place after *Ramanathan*, a freedom fighter. Erode was derived from *eri* and *odu* (meaning thrown away skull, thus connecting Lord Siva and Erode.) Some places are named after the main occupation or after a particular caste of the village. For example, *Vettuvapalayarn* is a village that comprise of the *Vettuvars*. In the same, way we get information on *Kannarpalayarn*, *Kosavampalayarn*, and *Andipalayam*, *Vadugapalayarn* that were named on the particular caste people who were living in the places.

The city Coimbatore has derived its name on a historical background in the folklore. The place names ended with *Padi*, *Tholuvu* etc prove that the cattlebreeding was main occupation of the people. *Karapadi*, *Kaundapadi*, *Edapadi*, *Mayilampadi* etc prove that Kongu Nadu is rich in cattle wealth. Perur is called as *Melai Chidambaram* and the other name of Annur is *Melai Thanjavur* of Cholanadu and thus has evidences of Chola migration. *Veerakeralam* in Coimbatore District has historical associations of Chera dynasity. The migration of different communities to the Kongu region is better explained in place names.

In addition to the above sources, the folklore of Kongu region can be identified in the folk belief, folk medicine, folk games, and other folk forms.

Historicity of Folklore

The historical ballads are an important source for history. Somalay, the historian who is interested in folklore studies says that 'Historical ballads give a glimpse of the political situation and portray the qualities of well-known heroes, sometimes graphically and in minute detail'.⁵

Any ballad such as *Annanmar kathai* or a legend such as Kovalan kathai seems to be historical for a casual listener. In the first place, the folk ballad or folk legend aims to glorify certain hidden aims. Secondly, in the folklore, the supernatural machinery, which makes one, doubts its historicity. Some characters in the folklore are legendary in their actions such as, the horse in *Annanmar Kathai*. The horse is said to have fly over the clouds.

The legends are believed to be historically true. It refers to an exaggerated and colorful account of an event. A folk tale becomes a legend when heavenly characters appear in the story. The story of Kannaki becomes a legend when Kovalan, her dead husband drove a chariot, from the Heaven to take her with him. From the legend of Kannaki, we come to know about the social, economic, and cultural history of Tamil land. The names of the contemporary rulers, the political conditions are also to be understood by the legend. We also know the rulers of the neighboring kingdoms. Thus, a legend becomes historically true.

Given this scenario, the historians trying to write history from below have to rely on indirect sources. There is a problem that the masses have generally not left much record of their own. Popular culture is generally preserved through the oral medium and not through written medium.

Oral traditions also have their problems. They cannot be stretched back too far and one has to work within living memory. However, one has to depend on folk sources to understand traditional knowledge. The history writing would be more fruitful if sources are drawn from folklore.

References

¹ B Sheik Ali,(1978), History : its theory and method, Macmillan Publishers, p 26

² SML Lakshmanan Chettiar,(1980) Folklore of Tamilnadu, National Book Trust, Delhi, p 119

³ K S Ramasamy Sastri, (2003), The Tamils- the people, their history and culture, vol III,Cosmo Publications,p-248

⁴ M Ponnusamy, (2000), Vandikaran PAttu (Tamil),Indu Pathipagam, Coimbatore, p 5

⁵ SML Lakshmanan Chettiar, Op. cit, p-114