



Folklore: A Comparative Study of North Indian and American Lores

Authors

Dr Shipra Ahuja Joshi

Associate Professor Medicaps University Indore

Dr Anurag Joshi

Asst. Professor

Shri Vaishnav Vidyapeeth Vishwavidyalaya, Indore

Dr Ranubala Marothiya

Asst. Professor Medicaps University Indore

The most common criterion for definition of folklore is the means of its transmission. Specifically, folklore is said to be or to be in “oral tradition”.

This criterion, however, leads to several theoretical difficulties. First, in a culture without writing (termed “non literate” cultures by anthropologists) almost everything is transmitted orally; and although language, hunting techniques and marriage rules are passed orally from one generation to another, few folklorists would say that these types of cultural materials are folklore. Also, even in a culture with writing, some orally transmitted, the criterion of oral transmission by itself is not sufficient to distinguish folklore from non-folklore.

Second, there are some forms of folklore, which are manifested and communicated almost exclusively in written as opposed to oral form, such as autograph-book verse, book marginalia, epitaphs, and traditional letters (e.g. chain letters). In actual practice, a professional folklorist does not go so far as to say that a folk tale or a ballad is not folklore simply because it has at some time in its life history been transmitted through writing or

though print. But he would argue that if a folk tale or ballad had never been in oral tradition, it is not folklore. However, the written forms previously mentioned are rarely if ever communicated orally.

The third difficulty with the criterion of oral transmission concerns those forms of folklore depending upon body movements; i.e. there is some question as to whether folk dances, games, and gestures are verbally transmitted. The same problem is found in folk art, as traditional symbols like swastika, are not orally transmitted. It would thus appear that folklore is transmitted from an individual to individual, often directly by word or act, but sometimes indirectly, as when a folk artist with whom he may have had little or no personal contact.

It is possible, however, to define both folk and lore in such a way that even the beginner can understand what folklore is. The term “folk” can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is- it could be a common occupation, language, or religion- but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some tradition which it calls its own. In theory a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consist of many individuals.

Often competent investigations can show that these individual family traditions (which family may insist are its very own, unknown to anyone outside the family) are found among many families and sometimes even among many societies of the world. The family tradition for disposing of a child’s baby teeth (by means of a good fairy, tooth fairy or fairy mouse) is an example of an international family custom.

Folklore includes myths, legends, oaths, insults, retorts, taunts, teases, toasts, tongue twisters, and greeting and leave-taking formulas (e.g. see you later, alligator). It also includes folk costumes, folk dances, folk drama (and mime), folk art, folk belief (or superstition), folk medicine, folk instrumental music (e.g. fiddle tunes), folk songs (e.g. lullabies, ballads), folk

speech (e.g. slang), folk similes (e.g. as blind as a bat), folk metaphors (e.g. to paint the town red), and names (e.g. nicknames and place names). Folk poetry ranges from oral epics to autograph book verse, epitaphs, latrinalia (writings on the walls of public bathrooms), limericks, ball bouncing rhymes, jump-rope rhymes (to bounce children on the knees), counting out rhymes (to determine who would be “it” in the games), and nursery rhymes. The list of folklore forms also contains games; gestures; symbols; prayers (e.g. graces); practical jokes; folk etymologies; food recipes; quilt and embroidery designs, houses, barn, fence types, street vendor cries and even conventional sounds like used to summon animals or to give commands. There are such minor forms as mnemonic devices (e.g. the name Roy G. Biv to remember the colours of the spectrum in order), envelop sealers (e.g. SWAK-Sealed With A Kiss), and the traditional comments made after body emissions (e.g. sneeze or burp). There are such major forms as festivals and special day (or holiday) customs (e.g. Christmas, Halloween and birthdays).

In order to discern the uniqueness of folklore, it is first necessary to change the subject. So far, most definitions have conceived of folklore as a collection of things. These could be either narratives, melodies, beliefs, or material objects. All of them are completed products or formulated ideas and it is possible to collect them.

Folklore is an action that happens at that particular time. It is an artistic action and involves creativity and aesthetic response, both of which converge in the art forms themselves. Folklore in that sense is the social interaction via the art media and differs from other modes of speaking and gesturing.

NORTH INDIAN FOLKLORE

From the earliest ages the population of Northern India has been the result of the amalgamation of many streams of foreigners with the indigenous races, or those who occupied the land before the dawn of history. The linguistic survey of India shows that at least as far west as Nimar in the Central Provinces the most primitive stratum was that of the Mon-khmer people, Mongoloids from Eastern Tibet and the head-waters of the great Chinese rivers, now represented by tribes on the Assam frontier and by the Kols and their brethren in the range of hills crowning the peninsula from west to east. Next came the Dravidians, who are represented by tribes like the Gonds and Oraons who are later emigrants from their original home in the southern India. The population in the north, particularly in the Punjab, is of a mixed character, the original stratum, whatever it may have been, having been leavened by successive immigrations from regions beyond the Himalayas-Indo-Aryans, Persians, Greek, Sakas, Indo-Parthians, Huns, Mongols. These foreigners quickly succumbed to the influence of their new environment and became Hinduized, one Hun tribe, the Gurjara, being the ancestors of some of the Rajput clans.

Thus, it is impossible to draw a clear line of distinction between these tribes, like those on the Assam frontier, Munds or Dravidians, from the peasantry of the northern plains. Both retain certain beliefs and usage, which, in default of a better term, may be called 'Animistic', some have been, at least nominally, absorbed into Hinduism; in others the process of absorption is still in progress. But all these varied strains of blood which flow in their veins have been controlled by the influence of their environment.

If an attempt is made to describe in a summarized way this type of religion and ritual, we may notice the feeling of pessimism, a tone of thought based on the exposure of the

people to dangers resulting from their environment- fierce heat, torrential rain, the prevalence of malaria and epidemic diseases, the periodical occurrence of drought and famine, the economical low standard of subsistence due to the pressure of a superabundant population and the disinclination to adopt improved agricultural methods. This growth of pessimism accounts for the contrast between the happiness and cheerful view of life characteristic of the Vedic culture as compared with the theology and ritual of Brahmanic period, which succeed to it. This feeling was translated into official religion, the doctrines of the illusory and worthless character of the world, which Buddhism inherited from the Hinduism prevalent at the time of its origin. Hence, the religion of the peasant is largely based on a feeling of fear, which it has never wholly shaken off. There are, it is true, some beneficent deities- the kindly spirits of the ancestral dead, who become testify if they fail to receive due suit and service, the house, cattle, and field guardians enumerated in the following pages. But, alas, as will be seen by numerous instances, the peasant is encompassed by myriad forms of the evil- the Evil Eye, the Bhoot, and the other demons, the godlings which cause disease, the mechanization of the witch.

Secondly, the influence of these godlings is essentially local, confined to the village, tribe, or clan. The village in its most typical form is a community closely linked together by sharing a common life and common interests, with the natural result of the absence of privacy, the subordination of its members to the community represented by a village council. Among its members the highest rank, who gained possession of the area by conquest, state grants, or peaceful statement are represented by a headman or a body of joint proprietors, often drawn from the higher castes, while below them is a body of cultivators, artisans, traders, or menials, who serve the community. The entry of a stranger being a source of risk, the village depends for its protection from spiritual or temporal evil on its own godling, served not by a Brahman priest, but by an officiant of lower grade who, being supposed to be

autochthonous understands the way of the local spirits and knows how to conciliate or coerce them. When one of these shrines reaches a special grade of efficiency by the working of miracles or the cure of disease and the removal of other evils.

Though the nation of India is deeply influenced by custom and respects the wisdom of the old men, inherited according to the theory of reincarnation from their earlier progenitor, even the religion and cults of the peasants are liable to change. The railway and road communication provided by the British government reduces to some extent the parochialism of rural life, and the effect of Christianity and the more clearly-cut monotheism of Islam tends to encourage the belief in a Father deity which recent observers have reported to be on the increase among the peasantry. But in the present life, there seems little chance of the decay of this rural worship its ultimate fate will be a more or less complete absorption in Hinduism, whatever the form may be and ritual chances to assume.

American Folklore

“Folklore” is a relatively new word in the English Language, which has only lately been included in the American dictionaries. “Folklife Studies” or “folklife research”- which is shaping up as an academic discipline in the United States in the 1960’s- is a total scholarly concentration on the folk levels of a national or regional culture. In brief, folklife studies involve the analysis of a folk culture in its entirety. Folk culture is traditional culture bound by tradition and transmitted by tradition, and is basically rural and pre-industrial.

To those who are beginning to use it in Britain and the United States, the term “folklife” is intended to include the total range of folk culture phenomena, material as well as oral and spiritual. In a sense folklore and the folklore movement represent a nineteenth

century discovery in the English speaking lands, of a partially conceived folk culture, basically oral tradition.

The exciting thing about folklife is precisely this, that it covers everything. Every phase of life in traditional or folk society can be studied, with the interrelationships and functions of the part to whole.

In United States, folklore has customarily meant the spoken and sung traditions. After an initial thrust of interest propelled from England, which led to the founding of an American Folklore Society in 1888, the subject languished going by default to the anthropologists, who concentrated on North American Indian Tales.

To some extent the modern American folk derived song like that: an artistic recomposition of songs from hill folk and cowboys and buffalo skinnners and lumberjacks and sailors, from the workers and the unprivileged. But like many twentieth century movements, it has become a kind of prestidigitation, crossing and crisscrossing its origins. One youth imitates the songs of the Woody Guthrie, who had an authentic folk repertory but who also composed protest songs in New York in the 1930's and 1940's.

American Folklore includes not just orally transmitted literature, but also the arts and crafts, beliefs and customs of people in the American lumber camps, city evangelical storefront churches, back-alley dives, farmers' festivals and fairs, hill frolics, carnivals, firemen's lofts, sailors cabins, chain gaus, penitentiaries, American Patriots, city dwellers and college students.

Men were obviously interested in lore long before the nineteenth century. Greek and Roman intellectuals even had theories about it: that popular lore was a decadent representation of a former golden age that the poets felt bound to restore, or the related (and much debated) view attributed to Euhemerus that myths and legends represented allegories of

the real historical events of former times, distorted by memory and confused by substituted elements.

Not only in Greek and Latin, but also in most other written languages of ancient times, we are indebted to the curiosity and the interest of our ancestors in the lore of their forebears for the recording and preservation of a huge corpus of folkloristic materials: Aesops' *fables*, the *Vedas*, *Brahmans*, *Upanishads*, *Jatakas*, the *Mahabharata*, and *Panchatantra*, *Thousand and One Nights*, the *Avesta*, the *Old Testament*, the *Sagas* and *Eddas*, the romances, *exempla*, *fabliaux*, the *Gesta Romanorum*, the *Shih Ching*, *Tripataka*, and the *Pert em Hru* or "book of the Dead" – thousand of pages of ancient literature that would otherwise be lost to us.

Folklore presents itself as a very powerful media of communication and entertainment. The survival of folk literature is the indisputable evidence of the strength of oral tradition. Folk tales have been described as the television of a printless society. They are a part of the common stock of humanity and are closer to mankind than any written word. Stories were narrated orally for a thousand years before an audience of family, neighbours or patrons. People also regaled themselves with poems, riddles and other oral forms of expression as accompaniment during work or to teach morals and customs to the young.

The genre of folktale is a vast and varied storehouse where magic and common sense rub shoulders. The world of folk tales has its own laws, physical, moral, and metaphysical and Fables, *Marchen*, tales of animals, comical anecdotes, tales of adventure, romances, moral tales and legends all could be incorporated into a folk tale and passed down to posterity. In the past, men and women who knew and loved the original material with which they worked, set standards of excellence in this art of retelling folk literature. These stories not only opened the minds of the listeners, particularly children, to an apprehension of the

greater world literature but they also gave the art of story telling a richness of the source material, which stimulated the story teller as well as the audience.

A folk tale usually tells a single story; there are no sub-plots and the tale concentrates on a single figure, which dominates the action. These may have a situational realism but they do possess psychological realism where in the characters act according to the generated laws of human nature.

Folk lore includes songs, tales, riddles, etc. and the while studying, a researcher studies not only the verbal acts of these- which the folklorist has long ago made his province- but also agriculture and agrarian history, architecture, cookery, costume, recreation, religion, medicine, literature, arts and crafts. While watching all these closely, we can make a conclusion that regardless the country, the culture, the religion, or the people, the folk stories seem to have a very common origin i.e. of entertaining the people and teaching the moral ethics to the younger generation. It is also quite visible that these somewhere all these are very similar to each other. We can estimate that these may have traveled from one country to another because the human experiences and the expressions such as joy, sadness, etc. remain the same anywise. So, just the change in language and may be the climatic conditions bring a variety in the folk but by and large, teach us the development of human race on the whole.

References

- 1) William Crooke. *Religion and Folklore of North India*. N. Delhi: S. Chand and Company, 1925.
- 2) Richard M. Dawson. *American Folklore*. America: The University of Chicago Press, 1959.

- 3) Soumen Sen, ed. *Tradition and Folklore in North –East India*. N. Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 2000.
- 4) Dan Ben Amos. *Folklore in Context - Essays*. Madras: South Asian Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 1982.
- 5) Alan Dundes. *The Study of Folklore*. USA: Prentice Hall, 1965.
- 6) Munro S. Edmonson. *Lore: An Introduction to the Science of Folklore and Literature*. USA: Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1971.

