STORYTELLING AND THE MODERN DEVELOPING WORLD: 
EXPLORING THEIR COMPATIBILITIES 

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Introduction 
In an article for the Asian Folklore Studies Journal in 1993 Kirin Narayan claims that here is a gap in our understanding of how folklore can reshape itself according to the new needs of ‘changing social realities in India’ (p178). Previous scholarship, Narayan argues, has made over-arching assumptions regarding folklore as synchronic, bounded, and largely unchangeable. However, those who recognise its ability to change either fall into the trap of regarding such change with peculiar amusement, or by labelling it as a form of subaltern resistance against institutional powers (ibid p180-181). Narayan therefore explores the emplacement of new political messages in folklore and the everyday changes in stories and songs made by people in everyday life to effectively demonstrate the flexible nature of folklore through the various forms it is expressed. 

This essay aims to contribute to such existing scholarship yet does so through exploring the ways storytelling and folklore have been utilised in a development context. This essay will not however focus on the intricacies of how stories and folklore are changing, but rather provide an overview of how they are used within the development industries, for what purpose and by whom. To do this I firstly explore various debates relating to the concept of development and its ideas surrounding tradition and modernity. I aim to find linkages to the folklore discourse and the problematic way ‘culture’ has been viewed in such contexts. By providing examples of how various folk forms have been used by development agencies in India I then move on to question the idea of ‘folk’ as a unified community, and scrutinise the conditions of such changes within the art of storytelling and folklore. 

Development, tradition and culture 
As it is seen as one of the principle agents of social change, the development industry in all its shapes and forms is an excellent place to enquire about how folklore and storytelling is reshaping and being reshaped by it processes. Development’ is a contested term, with multiple linked debates and interpretations. In simple terms we can view it as socio-economic and political process which operates on a ‘future orientated logic’ (Appadurai 2004: 59), a form of progress, advancement and ‘dynamic process in the desirable direction’ (Joseph 1997:1). A system based on ‘ideas of neoliberal reform, democratisation and poverty reduction within a framework of ‘global governance’’ (Mosse 2005:1). Critics, such as Arturo Esocbar (1995), claim development to be a form of Western neocolonialism; a way of maintaining control over the so-called developing world. Instead, Escobar advocates for a plurality in the practice of ‘development’, which should be defined by the grassroots communities themselves in the form of diverse social movements. More recently ethnographies on the aid giving world, whose various aims include poverty reduction and women’s empowerment, shows that the development world has a multitude of actors, priorities and practices unfolding across the global North and South and can be seen less and less as a ‘monolithic’ structure. In recent years development practitioners have increasingly attempted to incorporate local culture and voices into development planning. Consequently there has been a growth in practices such as participatory development, whereby the ‘ownership’ of a development project is said to be with the local people it seeks to serve. Yet
critics such as Cooke and Kothari (2001), claim that participatory development can be empty rhetoric, leading to a more sophisticated form of domination. Perhaps central to this problem are some deep-rooted assumptions made regarding ‘local cultures and practices’ which are often labelled as ‘traditional’. Crewe and Harrison (1998) claim that development workers often believe that tradition is the very obstacle to development and is ‘often conceived of as being linked to a psychological or cultural disposition that is in some sense backward and prevents people from embracing modernity’ (p43).

Various customs, norms and social practices are regarded as fixed or synchronic and therefore in contrast to apparently flexible modern values (ibid).

This discourse regarding local tradition as synchronic, in opposition to the so-called flexible principles of development and ideas of modernity, are similar to the views on folklore as highlighted by Naryan (1993). This strict division between tradition/ modernity consequently seems like a false imposition; a way of neatly categorising the world. Such ideas are explored by the well known historian Eric Hobsbawm (1983), whose seminal book ‘The Invention of Tradition’ is well-known for highlighting how so-called ‘traditions’ have at some point or other been deliberate inventions. As Appadurai (1991) explains: tradition itself is a temporal ‘zone of contestation’ (p23) and the past itself changes as the ‘modes of cultural reproduction change’ (ibid).

Valuing culture
The implication is that there can be a tendency to view various parts of cultural life, including rituals, festivals and folklore as exotic, thus limiting our ability to see such elements as a living and breathing element of life. Appadurai explains that such limitations and failure to see their flexible nature can lead to the commodification and reproduction of cultural artefacts (1991:23), which crystallises the idea of a rigid ‘pastness’ and tradition.

As I have already established, it has often been assumed that development workers regard culture and its associations as an obstacle to development. Yet, anthropologists have been hard at work establishing strong arguments in favour of cultural understandings of development. Again, Appadurai’s influence can be felt in this discussion:

‘The answer is that it is in culture that ideas of the future, as much of those about the past, are embedded and nurtured. (2004: 59).

He argues that by seeing culture as a capacity, we can view it as a space where aspiration is developed, which in time will aid what he calls the ‘future-orientated’ goal of development (ibid).

Appadurai’s article was published within the book ‘Culture and Public Action’ (2004), coedited by two rather unusual World Bank economists: Rao and Walton. Within this book Arjo Klamer’s article (2004), ‘Cultural Goods Are Good for More than Their Economic Value’, invites us to question our assumptions regarding development, which still inevitably assumes that securing food, clean water and shelter comes before the need to address cultural needs. But should it? He highlights how

‘people in the most deprived conditions find time, resources, and energy to make music, build religious temples, maintain sacred places, engage in extensive burial ceremonies, cherish icons, and fashion all sorts or art’ (2004:6)
Rao and Walton also acknowledge that cultural processes ‘can be harnessed for a positive social and economic transformation’ (2204: 4). In the process culture becomes a lens through which to view development which can help ‘improve public action [and] alleviate human deprivation’ (ibid p30) and be included in social and economic policy.

They also acknowledge how culture can also be a common and unifying dimension of social life building social cohesion. They consider the roles of ‘collective celebrations and heritage’ which can serve an end in itself but should also be given attention by policy makers within the development sector (Rao and Walton 2004: 34). They argue that such celebrations, a form of ‘culture as expression’, can ‘build social cohesion by reinforcing ties within a community’ (ibid) and thus build potential for collective action. Yet, to appreciate cultural forms in this way does not necessarily result in appreciating their adaptability; it could in fact reinforce a synchronic view of such activities. Additionally, it is important to note that although there are mechanisms set up to maintain and support cultural life, such as the United Nation’s Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), such establishments are often viewed outside of the goals of mainstream development initiatives.

The folk in development

So, how is storytelling and folklore, as forms of cultural expressions, being used in India to encourage collective action and social mobilisation? Firstly, we should consider an example demonstrating how the use of various folk forms can be used as a tool to form a collective identity as a way of establishing rights, community and nationhood. Established in 1943, the Indian People’s Theatre Association’s (IPTA) used folk forms to mobilise a pan-India theatre movement is a well cited example (see Dharwadker 2005; Da Costa 2010: 47) of folklore’s relevance. As Srampickal reminds us: ‘through folklore, the oppressed have tried to assert themselves and retain their self-esteem’ (72). Da Costa claims that in this instance folk was of particular importance due to its links to rural history and tradition and therefore had ‘authentic’, rather than colonial’ associations (2010:47). Not only was this seen as a way of ‘revitalising the stage and traditional arts’ but also as an ‘expression and organiser of...people’s struggle for freedom, cultural progress and economic justice’ (Pradham 1979:129 cited in Da Costa 2010: 47).

Development agencies and various grassroots social groups have also tapped into the communicative potential of folklore and storytelling in India. Pandey (1991) writes about India’s Community Action Group’s, whilst Srampickal considers the work of Social Action Groups (SAGs) and their use storytelling, poetry, songs and dance of as a form of effective communication. Srampickal notes that SAGs, which are independent from the government and development NGOs, will within local communities to agree themes based on people’s daily lives (Pandey 1991: 188).

An example of such work is provided by Naryan who explores the work of Astha who in the 1980s revised traditional stories told through song and dialogue and performed to women living in Mumbai’s slums. A publication from Astha themselves (1988), draws attention to the benefits of such work and shows how folk forms can be used in interactive street theatre to highlight sensitive matters of communal and domestic violence as well as women’s rights (p46). Such techniques can be seen as ‘collective mobilisation across communal boundaries’ (Narayan 1993: 189).
However, there are examples that suggest it to be a top-down messenger service with little transformative elements. In her book about Indian folk theatre, *Indian Folk Theatre* (2007), Hollander describes how the conventions of Tamasha’s folk performance, originating in Maharashtra, are being used to highlight ‘contraception, female emancipation and even taxation in UNESCO sponsored Tasmania’s’ (p120) whilst also the ‘the fundamentalist political parties are not averse to financing [shows] ...to get their message across’ (ibid). Folk forms can therefore be used as a convenient mode of communication, *without* shifting a community’s power differentials.

This sentiment is echoed in the words of Na. Muthuswamy, a Tamil theatre maker who uses various conventions of Kattaikuttu/ Therukoothu in urban and contemporary plays, and believes that development or government sponsored Koottu, such as a two-hour segment of a ten-day *Draupadi Amman* village festival dedicated to publicise the state’s meal scheme for pregnant women, has so far been ineffective (Hollander 2007: 174/175). He believes that the development workers themselves ‘have no belief in the effectiveness of koottu as a vehicle....[so it] won’t work unless those employed by the NGOs put in enough effort and believe in it’ (ibid).

**Which folk?**

There is a tension therefore in assuming that changes in *content* have come from the so-called ‘folk’ themselves, i.e. the audiences and the various communities that watch them. Folklore can be flexible to the changing needs of society, yet there is a danger that their format may be used as a simple messenger-boy service which does not have a transformative agenda. Similar to the claim made by Da Costa, who argues that the IPTA incorporated rural culture into political theatre without giving its ‘citizens means of representation’ (2010: 51), the potential for change is driven from above and not from the ‘folk’ itself. It seems that in this sense folk forms have been reformed ‘to fit the norms’ as defined by elites (c.f. with De Bruin 2010: 13).

However, if we are to imply that using folklore and storytelling in a development context does not necessarily equate to bottom-up change, we must scrutinise the idea of ‘folk’ and explore its limitations. Dharwadker pinpoints the concept to the European Enlightenment period (2006: 312), which linked ‘folk’ to ‘the people’. This idea still holds weight today, with researchers such as Julia Hollander (2007) in her book about Indian folk theatre, *Indian Folk Theatre*, observing that what makes a folk form distinctive is in fact its local audience, or its ‘folk’ (p19).

Yet, it is all too often assumed that these ‘folk’ are the rural indigenous crowd (Da costa: 40). In other words, ‘folk forms embody the culture of the village rather than that of the city’ (Dharwadker 2005:311). However, such assumptions simply reinforce such binaries as tradition/ modernity, village/ city and folk/ classical. With a rise in urbanization and migration such oppositions are harder to maintain. Examples from Meertens (2008: 89) who describes the increase in Kattaikuttu performances in urban Chennai supports this. Whilst Narayan’s valuable point that all people regardless of class/ caste will have their own ‘folklore’, reminds us not to ‘fetishise’ the idea of folk, something which G.P Deshpande has since accused the IPTA of doing by alienating the middle-classes (Dia Costa 2010: 51). It seems that we cannot assume ‘folklore’ to belong to anyone, in which case it becomes all the more important for people to have a say over their own versions and modes of representations
which changes along with society, as well as in some instances providing the space for change to happen.

**Conclusion**

Over the past three decades there has been a shift in how the development industry views itself and the way it attempts to instigate change. This paper has charted some of these basic changes, and focused on how ‘cultural understandings’ of development is now used to aid development. However, such understandings are not there to develop culture itself it seems, but rather to aid the overarching goals and mission of development. As Rao and Walton simply put it: culture matters as it ‘affects development’ (Rao and Walton 2004: 10).

Storytelling and folklore may be an unsuspecting space to explore development aims, yet as mediums of communications they are increasingly being used as a form of cheap, and sometimes interactive form of communication to highlight a wide-range of development goals. Yet, we have seen that although when used closely with local communities this can be a positive, it can also be used to assert a top-down agenda, resulting in a loss of control over the ‘folk’s’ very own cultural representations.

However this ‘folk’ is indeed a fluid idea, as are concepts of ‘tradition’ and modernity’, and must be viewed loosely. However, if folklore and storytelling’s content are being changed from above, to provide messages of women’s empowerment, health and poverty alleviation, then we must ask who are the authors of such lessons. Such questions can be constantly linked to ongoing debates in development, probing at ‘whose development are we really promoting’? In answer to Naryan’s question about how folklore can reshape itself according to the new needs of ‘changing social realities in India’ (1993:173), this essay highlights that often it can mirror and communicate change yet we have to be wary about who drives this change; the ‘folk’ themselves or someone else?

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**Bibliography**

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End Notes

1 Although focusing on the art of storytelling, I will often use the term ‘folk forms’ which can encompass the various ways folklore can be expressed: dance, singing, poetry, visual art and so forth.

2Culture is itself a much debated term and concept, with a multitude of definitions and connotations. It is not the intention of this paper to give a definition but to appreciate its value to society, as a system of itself and also as something which expresses a society.

3 The choice of names here refers to an interesting debate regarding how various Kattaikuttu/ Therukoothu companies wish to represents themselves and their ongoing attempt at self-defining themselves in the face of assumptions regarding their rural and folk origins. For more information see: De Bruin, Hanne, 2000, ‘Naming a Theatre in Tamil Nadu’, in Asian Theatre Journal, Vol 17. No 1 pp 98-- 122