



Conversation 1: Folklore and Development

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Subbachary: Generally, how are you looking at this issue, folklore as discourse? You mentioned in your paper that a lot of confusion has been created in the name of discourse. Everything is brought under the subject. So, how would you limit the meaning of the word, discourse, in this context?

Bapat: To begin with, the word, discourse, is being used in several disciplines, not only in Folklore. And in each discipline it is used with a slightly different meaning. Particularly now when we come to folklore, the question of discourse becomes important because, in the first phase, folklore items were collected. In those days we had a romantic notion of folklore, but now we realize that folklore also has a very fundamental contemporary relevance, not merely to our cultural self, but also as a political force, as a social force, especially in regard to its potential for helping to correct the imbalance between the subjugator and the subjugated, between those who

rule and the vast mass of our society which has been suppressed. I see folklore as one of the ways by which this subjugation can be delineated, confronted, and even possibly alleviated. The worldview and native wisdom of a vast section of our society manifests itself in folklore. I believe this should be the main thrust of how one looks at folklore as a discourse: that it is a discourse of the suppressed, the weak, the oppressed. Sometimes very clearly and sometimes in very symbolic terms, folklore discourse subverts the official discourse, or at least comments upon it. These are the ways in which many communities have learned to live.

It is a very healthy development that Folklore is becoming inter-disciplinary. There was time when only students in Literature and Linguistics used to participate along with self-identified folklorists. Now, it is becoming more open, and people from disciplines such as History and Sociology are also participating. In all of these disciplines there are similar questions, for which answers can be found only in the study of folk-systems. Ultimately, the aim of all of these disciplines is the betterment of society.

Subbachary: In recent times, we have begun looking at folklore as an ongoing process in a live event. Now we are also calling this process a discourse. How do you feel about this concept?

Payyanad: There is a lot to it. A performance is also a discourse between two generations — that part we never considered here. Another point I would like to make is that most of the papers referred to oral discourse: we did not give very much attention to pictures, dramas, music, dance, gesture, and so on. If an activity communicates, if it transfers a message from one person to another, it is a type of discourse.

Subbachary: Many scholars want to give importance to texts. They think in terms of analyzing texts under the term, discourse analysis. What does this have to do with the whole gamut of folklore activity that you mentioned just now? And what about ritual? How do you look at a ritual as a text? It seems that now-a-days, in modern Folklore theories, it is said that a text need not be literary: they are looking at entire social events as texts.

Payyanad: Yes, the term, text — just like, discourse — is being defined by different disciplines in different ways. Literate people are so dominant in many areas, and to many of them, only a piece of literature can be called a text. But in folklore this is not true. Because, as you know, in folklore, the spoken words occur within a context. Whatever we get in the context — gesture, movement, interaction between people, everything — all of this discourse is part of the text. That is the definition of text as far as folklore is concerned.

Subbachary: Our senior folklorist has stated that discourse analysis should help with the development of our society. How do you react to this comment?

Nair: Actually, in my paper I have sided with this notion. Rather than bringing up pure theoretical frameworks, I have argued that we should look at things from the people's points of view — or at least, that we should present and discuss those points of view.

The authors who created the theoretical notions had certain social conditions which prompted them to think and write in that way. Our condition is totally different. For one thing, we have a condition of ruralism. For us philosophy is different. The meaning, the function of philosophy is different from what it is the West.

So, in this way I have always had the feeling that we should not be looking at folk discourse from a merely theoretical point of view. We should look at it differently. Let the people of a community speak and say whatever they want, and let their voices be heard. And in this there is a big problem, as Dr. Payyanad has pointed out: "Where do I locate myself?" As an author I have to locate myself somewhere. This is a problem I have been trying to analyze in my paper, and at this conference.

Bapat: For too long — at least for the last twenty years — Western theoretical models have dominated our minds so deeply that perhaps we have not asked certain salient questions. To what extent are these theories really relevant in the Indian context? Can we apply them wholly? Or do we need to make certain changes or additions? I think the time has come for Indian folklorists to get out of this straight-jacket of Western models. Because the situation in India, the kind of tensions in which we operate, the kind of problems that Indian society faces — our traditions, our modernity, our caste system — all of these are very different from conditions in the West, which is where these models emerged. So I think it is high time now that Indian folklorists should think of things in different terms. In my paper I have given just one or two hints in trying to evolve certain theoretical positions from the performers themselves, the kind of concepts that they make use of. But can we term such concepts as theoretical postulates?

Nair: That approach itself is a theoretical postulate.

Subbachary: Discourse analysis is a meaning-making process. A scholar deciphers a discourse and brings out a meaning from it. He says what he thinks it means — that is his meaning. Then, you need to look at the issue of subjectivity — the socio-cultural background of the scholar. For example, when I am analyzing a caste myth and discussing its meaning, my social background is bound to affect my theoretical and social concepts. Should the scholar's point of view be the dominant voice in the discussion?

Bapat: No doubt the scholar has a major role to play, but what should it be? I think the real makers of the meaning are the people who participate in the folk performance. The performers as well as the spectators — together they are the folk. Whether it is the telling of

a folktale, the performing of a ritual, any kind of folk item — they continue doing it only because they find it meaningful. Otherwise they wouldn't be doing it. So I think the task of the folklorist is to humbly try to find out what the meaning is according to the participants of the folk item, instead of trying to impose our meanings on it. But sometimes scholars have the ego or the pride to decide, "I am the meaning-maker."

Payyanad: We are in an international social-political situation. We are loaded down with all these canons. And then we have this idea of development. What is development? We are for the development. Our country is for development. So it is easy to go away from what we have inherited from the West and make our own approaches. Only if we make such a decision confidently can we change this academic system, this knowledge-creating system, this knowledge industry. Whom is knowledge for? What is it for? These are the questions we need to ask and answer.

Bapat: I think that as a nation, we should grow confident enough to say that we will create positions which are more relevant to us. We may not succeed in the beginning, we may not be heard in the West, but I think that if we, as a scholarly community and as a nation, are strong enough, we can make ourselves heard.

Payyanad: No. We are instruments in the hands of a political system. What they suggest, what they request, we do. That is all academicians can do. When we prepare the syllabus, the syllabus is coming from this sector. Everything is by this. We are accepting even globalization. So what we are discussing is a political issue also, and not just a purely academic one.

Subbachary: Regarding developing our own theoretical models: Do you think that our Indian *Shasthras* might be helpful in analyzing some folklore genres?

Bapat: In the *Kavya Sasthra* there are certain methods to understand the meaning. Let us say, *Lakshya Sasthra*, and *Avidha Lakshya*. But when we make use of either the Western paradigms, or paradigms taken from Sanskrit critical cannons, particularly in the South Indian context, we find that all of these cultures are in a kind of a tension, a kind of a give-and-take, love-and-hate, relationship. Anyway, we should try to find the meanings of folk activities from within the community itself. The task of the folklorist is to find out what needs the folklore item is fulfilling in a community.

Payyanad: Aesthetic needs.

Bapat: Yes. And ritualistic needs.

Payyanad: They have their own measurements. When a performance or a performer is considered amazing by people, people have their own idea and criteria for that. You have to discover that criteria and apply it accordingly.

Subbachary: Just now we were hearing that some Folklore departments are in crisis in some other countries. In the

Third World countries, new Folklore departments are coming in, whereas the established Folklore departments in the developed countries are not receiving funds. How do you look at the future of the Folklore discipline in India, and around the world?

Payyanad: We in India are always behind. After twenty-five or thirty more years, our departments may also be in danger. When we reach the level of those people, the same thing might happen in India also. The other thing is that now in the world everything has to have financial potential. So, subjects that have no financial potential will be discarded.

Subbachary: But the question of financial potentiality is applicable to every Humanities discipline.

Payyanad: Yes. And look at what is happening to most Linguistics departments. Then, Philosophy.

Subbachary: Regarding Folklore, there is a difference between the context which is there in the developed countries and in India. In America, they may not have enough material for their studies in their own country. In Finland, no road singer is living. But India is still rich in folk traditions. So, don't you think there is a lot of scope, there are a lot of chances for survival of Folklore departments in India in contrast to West?

Payyanad: If our nation defines what is our nation's objectives, and defines the development — then only disciplines that fit within that development can sustain.

Bapat: Folklore studies are also political statements. Within India, you will find that Folklore departments are very strong only in certain regions — for example, in the South, in the Northeast, in the regions which try to define themselves as different from what may be called the mainland of India, the Aryan–Brahmanical belt. You will find that folklore is a strong assertion of these other region's identities — identities that are different from the pan-Indian identity that is being projected by some people. It seems that Folklore departments are not very strong in any of the Hindi-speaking states.

Subbachary: Do you see any kind of threat to Indian folklore, or Folklore studies, by Western patronization?

Bapat: Just now I spoke of Indian political statements. Western patronization is an international political statement. If we believe international funding agencies are innocently providing for the survival of a discipline, that will be too naïve. A variety of factors are involved. But even before the Ford Foundation arrived, Folklore as an academic discipline was the pursuit of certain committed scholars who have developed very strongly, especially in South India.

Payyanad: And Bengal.

Subbachary: The discipline of Folklore is looked down upon by some people in the other social sciences. You

are from History. Some anthropologists do not even recognize Folklore as an independent discipline, even after hundreds of years. How do you see the future of Folklore in India?

Nair: Folklore studies will remain. It has its main idea. It is a discipline also. There is no doubt about it. What I and many anthropologists and historians have done is that we have borrowed from Folklore. Because if you stick to your own discipline, it will be very difficult to understand certain processes. So when you come to a Folklore conference such as this one, there is a dissemination of knowledge. Ideas are presented, and some of them are very strong.

You know, many people in the sciences look down on all of the social sciences. That is in part because of the market forces we were discussing, and the whole notions of globalization and development. So, many disciplines are in crisis, and not only in social sciences, but in disciplines such as Mathematics and Physics also. Everyone is going for disciplines which are job-oriented. So, there is a general crisis in education.

Bapat: There is no doubt that Folklore studies will continue. Whether or not it will continue to be prominent academically depends on many variables, over some of which perhaps we don't have very much control. We should remember that Folklore studies is not restricted to academics only. There are a good number of people outside the universities who are also doing serious work in this area.

Payyanad: Folklore has within it different ideologies that are colliding with each other, and wanting to say something. These diverse ideologies, these different ways of understanding the universe, make up folklore. And the balance has to be arrived at. Then only will we do justice. Because if we are looking only from the top, we will see nothing from below. More of a participant model has to be brought out, so that when problems arise they can be discussed from different points of view.

For example, when I presented my paper, the person concerned did not ask me any questions, but when I came out she told me that she belonged to a particular community and she asked me why, in my opinion, had the performance not been done in the night. I gave an answer that it was done by an agrarian community and that is why it was not done in the night. She suggested a reason that was different from mine: she said that most of the Brahmanical gods are present in the morning but the others, the gods of the marginalized communities, are present only in the night. So, there is a participant's view, which is not given its due. We should do something about it. Instead of looking at a situation from theoretical assumptions, when we look at it as a ground reality, a lot of things will come out and that is what we need.