Recognising moments of history in folklore and creating a museum thereof

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The vision of life embedded in the discipline of folklore is one of seeing everyday life as a kind of pilgrimage where every act is significant in enriching, contributing and in certain cases transforming community life, conventions and cultural memory. Diverse activities and objects that result out of such everyday expressive behaviour may only have fleeting significance for the historians of grand narratives and may not be securely instituted as a ‘tradition’ nonetheless marks the making of existence, culture and history. Identifying, isolating and re-presenting the moments entrenched in the folklore objects do not require any specialisation but do warrant a sharing of the vision. In a way, escaping essentialism, folklore defines ‘culture’ in a deconstructive, nominalist way: ‘as a name lent to a complex strategic situation in a particular society’ as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak would argue in a totally different context.

By all means, it is not appropriate to suggest that culture equals group as a corollary to the vision of folklore. It is true that folklore brings a group together, sustains its artistic creativity, creates a convention and commits it to cultural memory but it is also true that folklore travels, merges, migrates, assimilates and creates new contexts. Such transportability of folklore makes it extremely vulnerable to change and new contacts. As a curious consequence culture being a ‘complex strategic situation in a particular society’ and folklore being a rational and aesthetic elaboration of such situation its contemporaneous qualities need to be constantly highlighted in public spaces like museums. Especially in India where the entire public sphere is both constituted and occupied by the idiocy of commercial television and cinema museum is the only alternative possibilities of enquiries folklore sections in the museums would open up. It is not an argument for the necessity of folklore in museums but rather the attitudinal changes towards traditionalism. Although the desire to collect and present folklore derives largely from the anxiety that certain aspects and qualities of cultural expressions are vanishing or have already vanished leaving only a few traces, then my argument is for using museum spaces to construct histories of the present through folklore and to plant road signs for the future. While the presentation techniques would construct the histories (plural) of the present the attitudinal changes would pave way for the future. The idea of linking up everyday objects to the historically important and

at least we need to constantly revisit bronze gallery in the Chennai museum. The reconnection is possible only when we see the continuum between everyday objects that we take for granted and the aesthetic objects, which we relegate to the uninteresting pages of indology and history or to the unlit corners of our neglected museums.

Such reconnections happening through folklore activities in the museums directly address the dilemmas of our post-colonial situation: what is our modernity in the face of qualitative loss of our traditions? Do stainless steel vessels, plastic bags, electronic goods, new kinds of soda and unsuitable clothes define our modernity? Is this the quality of life we want? Why is that the access to material wealth that was so easy for our ancestors, is so difficult for us? Are the economic and cultural impoverishment results of our colonial attitudes to our own traditions? There is a quote from Ngug Wa Thiong’o’s Decolonising the Mind that comes to my mind: ‘The biggest weapon wielded and actually unleashed by imperialism against the collective defiance is the cultural bomb. The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people’s beliefs in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance with other peoples’ languages rather than their own. It makes them identify with that which is decadent and reactionary, all the forces that would stop their own springs of life. It even plants serious doubts about the moral rightness of struggle. Possibilities of triumph or victory are seen as remote, ridiculous dreams. The intended responses are despair, despondency and a collective death-wish’.

Well, my intention is not to turn this essay into a lamentation about our post-colonial situation. My purpose is more to draw the reader’s attention to the possibilities of enquiries folklore sections in the museums would open up. It is not an argument for asserting political conservatism and uncritical devotion towards traditionalism. Although the desire to collect and present folklore derives largely from the anxiety that certain aspects and qualities of cultural expressions are vanishing or have already vanished leaving only a few traces, then my argument is for using museum spaces to construct histories of the present through folklore and to plant road signs for the future. While the presentation techniques would construct the histories (plural) of the present the attitudinal changes would pave way for the future. The idea of linking up everyday objects to the historically important and
aesthetically pleasing is to drive home the idea that certain traditions come to an end or are modified; certain events, objects, forms of expression degenerate, change or evolve, but the continuity of process ensures transmission of traditions. The idea then is to hold a dynamic view of folklore, to nourish ideological pluralism and to animate museum spaces with intellectually challenging and artistically engaging folklore contents.

The engagement then is to make people see slippages from the stable, recognise gestures of the present and to construct episodic fragments of the invisible whole called tradition. It is an attempt towards celebrating becoming by obliterating the hierarchical differences between trivia and edifices, objects and artefacts and mundane and iconic. In real terms that would mean placing the bronzes I already spoke about, and broomsticks, say, in the same exhibitory space. The micro history of broomsticks would speak volumes about the changes within a region, as it would be in the case of iconic bronzes. The broomsticks made up of coconut twigs are becoming rare and they are replaced by green grass ones with proud plastic handles. The new sweepers with long poles and mopping cotton clothes are intermediaries towards vacuum cleaners. If they were to be presented in museum spaces along with proverbs, riddles, jokes, excerpts from oral poetry on broomsticks and allied crafts associated with the material used then the broomsticks would surprise anyone with the cultural material they hide behind their humble presence. Bronze or broomstick once moved to the exhibitory space that they become interpretative tools for understanding cultures and traditions. In that sense, museums are extraordinary vehicular spaces for folklore presentations and so great spaces for focusing one's attention on becoming.

Becoming as the theme, poise, a stance and a radical incommensurability between any two given moments or objects holds the interpretative key to recognise the flow of history. As the flow of history makes neither any concessions nor accessibility to the ones living beyond the public sphere museums need to be enlivened with folklore activities. The pleasures are many: sociability, aesthetic pleasures, theatricality, amusement born out of intelligence and irreverence, self reflection and a gainful knowledge towards the possibility of beautifying everyday life.

The invitation is permanently open to all.

Announcement

Voicing folklore: careers, concerns and issues

edited by M.D. Muthukumaraswamy

Supported by a grant from International Institute of Education and the Ford Foundation M.D. Muthukumaraswamy traveled to Singapore, Japan, United States of America, France and England from July 4, 2001 to August 29, 2001 to do tape recorded interviews with leading folklorists and heads of cultural institutions. Thirty-five interviews collected together in a single volume are to be published by National Folklore Support Centre in January 2002.

Products of contexts and instances these interviews are nonetheless ultimately artifacts of reflections on what it means to do folklore or to be engaged in the broad field of culture. Conjuring the promise of personal histories intersecting with national histories and disciplinary engagements of their time these interviews chart out an alternative cartography of the discipline. Set in the mode of personal narratives public programming, engagement with other cultures, multiculturism, intellectual foundations of folklore, cultural identity, issues of cultural funding, nation building and negotiating cultural otherness become issues of current interests in these interviews. As colleagues in conversation the interviewees expand the discipline of folklore to have valuable bearing on cultural studies. Perhaps this volume will stand as an eclectic testimony of the fact the folklorists are the new public intellectuals of twenty-first century addressing issues of integrity and representation, cultural freedom and justice, aesthetics of tradition and change and contributing to the development of civic republicanism.

This volume is an invitation to listen to Alan Jabbour, Alison Bernstein, Asutosh Kandekar, Barbara Lloyd, Barry Bergey, Bruce Robinson, Christine Kalke, Cecily Cook, Dan Ben Amos, Dorothy Noyes, Duane Anderson, Dimitri Koundiouba, Elizabeth Peterson, Ethel Raim, John Mc Dowell, Joyce Ice, Julia Hollander, Karna Singh, Kathy Whitaker, Lee Haring, Margaret Mills, Mary Hufford, Masatoshi Konishi, Peggy Bulger, Peter Mattair, Phillip Zarrilli, Ralf Samuelson, Richard Kurin, Robert Baron, Roger D. Abrahams, Shibuya Toshio, Steven Zeitlin, Stuart Blackburn, Teiko A. Utsumi, Thirunalan Sasitharan, Timothy Lloyd and William R. Ferris.

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