ALTERNATIVE PARADIGMS IN
FOLKLORE STUDIES: THE INDIAN CHAPTER

Caught between the horns of deconstructive challenges to grand ‘classical’ theories in social sciences and a renewed pressure to respect global trends, folklore studies are undergoing a thorough introspection in terms of appropriating paradigms and models that have problematised previous discourses. On the one hand is the pressing demand to transgress boundaries of specific cultures and locate discourses in broader terrains (Das 1995) while on the other, is the pull to recognize multiple realities and plural voices. In essence, the critique centres around the dominant intellectual order of juxtaposing cultural realities with issues of wider concern. Marcus and Fischer (1986) argue that the most interesting debates in a number of fields have shifted to the level of method, problems of epistemology, interpretation, and discursive forms of representation employed by social thinkers. Elevated to a central concern of theoretical reflection, problems of description become problems of representation. In the context of folklore studies, this entails a departure from established analytical principles in favour of re-examining the narratives. The interface of uniformity and multiplicity, totalising vision and heterogeneity is an important one calling for critical introspection of basic concepts and themes upon which major theories rest.

The field of folklore studies is characterised by at least three major paradigms: (i) the humanist, which treats folklore as oral literature with emphasis on the creativity of the folk performers or those who render it to other members of the community. The oral literature is inherited as part of cultural baggage; (ii) historical reconstructions, which treats folklore as an entry point into cultures of the past. Dundes (1975) explains that the extensive fieldwork in Yugoslavia and the detailed analyses of Serbo-Croatian folk epics were undertaken with the objective of ferreting out information on epic making techniques employed during the time of Homer. The historical bias in nineteenth century folklore studies drew attention and interest of Boasian anthropologists who were engaged in exploring cultural processes in a historical framework. The anthropological folklorists, however, suggested that while folklore did reflect cultures of the past, it also had a bearing on contemporary cultures. They conceive folklore as a mirror which reflects dominant values, beliefs and ethos of a cultural group; and (iii) psychological/psychoanalytic, which treats folklore as an expression of the unconscious mind.
The subject matter of folklore broadly consisted of oral literature, material culture, and cultural practices. The three categories subsumed narratives (myths, legends and tales), dances, ballads and lyrics, forms of speech (proverbs, sayings, riddles) and also festivals, rituals and their physical, tangible articulation in all that is understood as material culture.

Present day folklore scholarship seeks to document, interpret, present and advocate forms of undervalued cultural expression and in doing so weave webs of cultural meaning, link past and present through tradition and creativity and also articulate deeply felt values in meaningful ways (Zeitlin 2000). Despite the emphasis on cultural meanings, folklore continues to be treated as a layout for making interpretations and drawing inferences about a culture. Reducing folklore, though analytically, to being the substratum in which elements of culture are grounded is to rob it of its inherent vibrancy.

This paper is an attempt to negotiate the position of folklore in academic circles as an interactive dimension of culture, inseparable and undetachable from it. I take a position that myths, legends and folklore are woven into the fabric of culture as its warp and woof in such a manner that it is sometimes difficult to pick them out precisely from the meshwork of beliefs, values, tradition and knowledge systems of a people. Going beyond the framework of analyses derived from western concepts and paradigms that do not relate with Indian cultural reality, this essay seeks to emphasize and re-establish the relationship between folklore and the lifestyle of a people, particularly in the Indian context which belies the terms of reference in classical folklore studies. In doing so I wish to prepare ground for evolving indigenous models for understanding folklore. Reflecting on the nature of cultural knowledge and its implications for the understanding of folklore, I show how folklore operates in cultures by shaping collective psyche as also providing relevance to people’s thought and expression. I will conclude this piece by abstracting basic principles for a meaningful understanding of folklore in the Indian cultural scenario.

Paradigms emerging as alternative(s) to the outmoded ones of nineteenth century are grounded in the understanding of human existence, experience and expression in the larger matrix of nature, cosmology and social organization. To work out paradigms in a holistic framework by reflective consciousness, it is imperative to focus on the rich and variegated heritage of tribal and rural cultures of the Indian subcontinent. Crucial to this are the various links and interrelationships between the natural environment, daily life of people, annual calendar and lifecycle, worldview, cosmology, social structure, knowledge and skills, traditional technologies and artistic manifestations.
Lifestyles of many communities revolve around the agricultural cycle, circadian rhythms, movement of the earth, waxing and waning of the moon and the different processes of nature. Vatsyayan (1976) explains that the dussehra celebrates the harvest of the kharif (summer crop) as much as it does the victory of Lord Rāma over the demon Rāvana; Diwali celebrates the sowing of grains as much as it does the coming home of Lord Rāma to Ayodhya; Basant Panchami celebrates the cultivation of the Rabi crop, as much as it does the worship to Goddess Sarasvatī. Again, Kṛṣṇa (the divine cowherd with the flute) represents animal husbandry and Balarāma (the elder brother of Kṛṣṇa with his plough) represents crop cultivation. The feeling of and belief in myths, legends and worship of deities is common to village societies and townships. Deities are the icons around which many myths are constructed, treating human beings as an integral part of nature and cosmos. The myths establish human existence as being involved in an unceasing interplay with the physical space, habitat, environment and other life forms. It is this unfragmented vision of life, which both informs, and is informed by the repertoire of folklore as exemplified in the creation myth of the Santhals.

The cosmological myth of Santhals (the largest tribal group of the eastern ecozone, native to a region comprising parts of the states of Bihar, Bengal and Orissa) speaks of expanse of water. The all-pervading spirit, Thākur jīvi, desiring to create life, formed two birds out of dirt from his collar bone. He brought them to life by sprinkling water over them. The birds flew off. After much effort, Thākur managed to remove part of the water cover to reclaim a piece of land. Trees and plants grew upon the earth. Then the birds alighted and laid eggs from which the first man and woman emerged—the progenitors of the Santhals. From this myth, two ideas stand out: (i) water is life giving; and (ii) life is born of eggs. The same is reflected in their marriage ritual in which, as Bodding (1942) describes, the groom’s brother-in-law digs a small basin in the earth near a water resource with an opening that lets water flow into it. The village priest fixes arrows on three corners of the basin, places an egg near one of the arrows and winds thread around them. One of the girl’s shoots an arrow into the water another one slices into the water with a sword, while two of them draw out the water. It seems that the basin of water protected with arrows and the egg represents the womb, girlhood and virginity. The acts of shooting arrows into the water, slicing it with swords and drawing it out marks the end of girlhood, the initiation into womanhood. According to another Santhal narrative (see Bodding 1942), their ancestors cleared the jungle; they kept iri and erba seeds (pani cum crus galli L. and Setaria italica, kunth respectively) hidden away in gourd shells. When these were sown, the iri seeds grew into erba plants and erba into iri plants.
As you’ve probably guessed, in the language of the Santhals, iri means girl, and erba means boy. Santhals are primarily rice growers who perform the acts of sowing, transplanting and harvesting with tremendous passion. As the seedlings are born and are ready for transplanting, men and women sway in joy, addressing them in songs as their own children. The following is one of the songs cited from Archer (1974):

The paddy is weeping
The paddy is asking
When will be my wedding?
When the water of the sky
Drenches the earth,
Then will be your wedding

The seedlings, as children, are associated with prosperity, auspiciousness and happiness. The sky is male, earth female, and water represents semen or life itself. The act of transplantation, which involves a change of residence so to speak, is, in fact, the wedding of the children—an event to look forward to (Mathur, 2001).

Two critical questions emerge at this juncture: Why folklore? And, what does folklore mean to the ‘folk’? Notwithstanding the intellectual squabbles that often breakout wherein interpreting narratives for the people, their lores are both empirical and transcendental. They encapsulate a distinct way of experiencing and organizing the world around them as exemplified by the Gaddis of Bharmour in Himachal Pradesh. Kaushal (2001) mentions the image of Śiva (the principal deity of the Gaddis), which emerges from their cosmological myth and tales. He is thought to be a nomad migrating from mount Mani Mahesh, about 86km east of Bharmour, and the nether world. Following the migratory pattern of their deity, the Gaddis set the schedule for their travel between Bharmour, the high passes of Dholadhar and the low valleys of Kangra.

The nature of oral tradition cannot be easily perceived. The roots of traditions are enmeshed in textuality. This is not to say that oral tradition necessarily derives from textual tradition or vice versa. The orality/textuality matrix is complex. Interestingly, oral narratives surround the introduction of textuality in cultures. Many myths and legends, for instance, are appended to Ol chiki—the Santhal script. It is said (Mohapatra 2001) that when Raghunath Murmu was a child, he dreamt of two spirits who told him that they would reward him for worshipping them fervently. The Ol chiki script was ‘revealed’ to Murmu when he grew up. It is also believed that the alphabets of Ol chiki were inspired by natural phenomena.
The first letter ‘A’ originated from the lightning which created fire in the sky. With the formation of earth, the second letter ‘At’ appeared; the third ‘Ak’ came from water, the fourth ‘An’ came from air, and the fifth ‘Al’ came from the sky. Interestingly, the character ‘A’ looks like blazing fire; ‘At’ is rounded in the shape of the earth; ‘Ak’ echoes the sound of dak meaning water; ‘An’ is depicted like a pair of ups parted to blow out air and ‘Al’ is the sky or heaven. The tradition of writing is itself associated with oral tradition.

The sharp dichotomy between the oral and the textual is ill founded. Especially when you consider epics such as Rāmāyaṇa and Mahābhārata. The epics are codified scriptural material enshrined as physical texts, ritually worshipped but also passed on orally from generation to generation, transmitted through songs, incantations, rites and theatrical performances, all of which have a deep and abiding meaning in people’s lives. The two epics are variously interpreted, told, re-told and enacted in different cultures, making it difficult if not near impossible to pinpoint the ‘original’ or ‘correct’ text. Each version of Rāmāyaṇa is authentic for the people who create it, perform it and draw inspiration from it. Such performances differ from the enactment of a Shakespearean play on stage on many counts including improvisations, interpretations etc. There is no mention, nor reference to the ‘original text’.

The Mahābhārata exists both in a relatively fixed written form and in many oral folk forms that diverge sometimes more or sometimes less widely from the written version. The written version itself is not the product of a single author but an outcome of centuries of oral transmission. For long it remained preserved in hand written manuscripts, supporting the word of mouth. Since it first appeared between the fourth century BC and fourth century AD, the Mahābhārata has provided material for regional and local traditions all over the Indian subcontinent. Vernacular versions of the epic have generally remained autonomous faithful to the cultural dynamics of the region even as they continued to develop alongside the Sanskrit version, even interacting with it. (Leavitt 1991). The Mahābhārata, like several other ‘texts’ is inextricably entwined with the ritual, healing, performative and entertainment domains of many regional and folk cultures. It lives in the subconscious and cognitive maps of people as their personal treasure.

Sax (1991: 282) records the response of the people of Uttarakhaṇḍ on why they perform the episode of ‘Pāṇḍavaḷīḷā’ in Mahābhārata with tremendous fervour: ‘(1) it is a commendable form of worship of their personal gods (iṣṭadevata), the Pāṇḍava brothers; (2) they learn the Mahābhārata story, and also learn about religious and moral matters from
performing and observing *Pāṇḍavālīlā*, (3) it ‘closes the circle’ of their relations, providing an opportunity to visit with distant relatives whom they rarely have a chance to meet; and (4) they stage the *līlā* out of self-interest (*svārth*), since from doing so they obtain some benefit (*fāyada*) with regard to the health of their crops, avoidance of disease and calamity, and general well-being’. Performance, then, becomes a social event in which personalised interactions, social transactions take place apart from personal gains like prosperity and a feeling of well-being. People take pride in performing the eternal play of gods upon the earth. It empowers them, to be gods, even if only temporarily, and interact with them in their human form.

For the people, lores are the very essence of their being. They turn to them in times of joy and crises. Importantly, the base upon which folklores are founded, and from which they derive succour, is experience and transcendental knowledge, certainly not rationality. Many of them are ‘revealed’ to the people in moments of heightened sensitivity and liminality. And these are the ones that constitute the core of oral narratives, the ones that are most zealously guarded. There are others that relate to issues of identity and ethnicity. Folklore in any culture is said to be constituted of two layers. The outer is empirical, obvious and easily accessible and the inner is transcendental, deeper and available those who live by it for, in it lie embedded the beliefs, values and wisdom of the people. Knowledge, wisdom and experience get transmitted orally each time a lore is narrated, or re-created in rituals and theatrical performances. Evidently, Folklore is used by people to formulate, establish and assert the community’s concept of itself, drawing boundaries to separate it from others. This is not to suggest that there is an ideal ‘folk’ group with a distinct folklore tradition untainted by the processes of change. Folklore surely metamorphoses and re-aligns itself when a culture gets re-defined by the community’s ever-changing concept of self and by outside forces influencing it.

No longer confined to being an antiquarian engagement, folklore has entered the consciousness of nationalist politics and ideology. Its resurgence has coincided with heightened nationalism in many countries for folklore goes a long way in reinforcing a sense of identity. Intellectuals and policy makers look to folklore for nationalist images and qualities in tales, songs, proverbs and customs (Dorson 1991). Not surprisingly, therefore, their motifs from tales and legends are picked up not only for communicating effectively with the masses but also for furthering political agendas. In such cases, the text is recreated to suit specific situations and contexts. The utopian era of Rāma’s reign (*rāmarājāya*) for example, when there was prosperity and plenitude combined with moral and ethical order, as also that of Lord *Krṣṇa*
the charioteer representing control over basal senses. They are always attempting to find new meanings and interpretations from these old images. What is significant is the fact that while people tend to hold motifs and images close to their heart and soul as part of their religious experience and conjure up extremely personal images of deities in their own imagination, it is nationalist politics that has articulated them in public discourse and, more importantly, tried to create and interpret a new narrative which they present before the people differently nuanced ways. People’s sensibilities and politicians’ sensibilities share pathways and interact with each other to yield new configurations and new understanding of folklore. As older lores get re-interpreted, new ones are created.

Sociologically, folklore provides a holistic experience of life shared collectively and territorially in all spheres, activities and aspirations to give every being a distinct social and cultural identity. Its standards and values are authenticated by traditional insights and collective wisdom, its telos and traditions are transmitted orally, or by some other effective and immeasurable means. Folklore waits to be accepted as inherently rational, as the wisdom of being and becoming and not merely the manifestation of a pre-logical mind, and as containing within it the fundamental experience of human life and nor as a vestige of pre-industrial societies (Saraswati 2000). The essence of comprehending folklore in cultures lies in realizing the experience of people and integrating it with the existing body of knowledge. Methodologically, it calls for (i) understanding deep structures in ‘cultural texts’ comprising unwritten material (rituals, beliefs, lore, artistic expressions) as also written material (inscriptions, jottings, leaflets, books) in an integrated fashion; (ii) reaching out to the ordering of folklore in the experience and expression of people; and (iii) going beyond the objective, and conceptual to the cognitive consciousness of people.

Against this backdrop, folklore studies has entered the arena of postmodernist dialectics between personal-impersonal, self-other, and subjectivity-objectivity. Going by the recent insights into cultural studies folklore need no longer be treated impersonally, objectively and as material of the ‘other’. The relationship between professionals and ordinary folks which has been, until now, fraught with the ‘us-them’ dichotomy marked by distinct ethnocentrism needs no longer be stormy. Folklore studies have to be relocated in a new context which doesn’t treat it as an antiquarian, historically oriented discipline dealing with a faded past and picturesque but backward and withered subcultures and instead presents them as a contemporary discipline which is in tune with the issues and philosophies of today (Dorson 1978). Those who had been labelled ‘folk’ and pushed towards
the periphery must be drawn again towards the centre while researchers take up peripheral positions. Thus there will be a major methodological shift in setting parameters to analyse folklore in any culture.

Empowering people to become partners in sharing information is equally important, because that is how the common man will become involved in the processes of collecting, describing, interpreting and classifying folklore material. Reflecting on the current trends in folklore studies, Claus (1995) suggests that people themselves should be able to both access the material concerning them and understand what is being said about them as well as provide inputs to further enrich the database. This sort of ‘community database’ will then replace the older idea of an ethnography and enable true dialogue and discourse between the folk and the folklorist. Also modern anthropology and folklore have now begun to delve into contextual interpretation by integration of the text and the context. There are now attempts to represent the folk point of view, unsullied by researcher’s assumptions and beliefs.

There can be no doubt that our impressions of any new experience filtered are through the knowledge we already possess. Knowledge of the ‘self’ and of the ‘other’ thus come together as subjective and creative understanding (Hastrup et al 1994, cf. Malik 2001). This implies dispensing with biases, scepticism and rigid beliefs in favour of empathy, sensitivity and involvement. Malik (2001 : 113-114) writes, ‘There are many ways of viewing the world and describing it without any one way of being pre-eminent over the other. The need is to transcend one’s framework. This creation of pseudo-problems through an idea of ‘either/or’ framework, taking the atomisation of language and its separateness of things of the world as real: subjects and objects, man and the world, agent and re-agent, observe and the observed, life and philosophy, mind and bodies, self and the other.’ Understanding folklore is truly possible only when it is internalised as embodied knowledge, dynamic and ever-vibrant.

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