Ruminating the Rural Rhythms: A Study of Odishan Folk Tales

Pramod Kumar Das & Narayan Jena

Abstract

The central concern of the paper is to highlight how folk tales constitute the strain of narration in which the rural life and socio-cultural reality of Indian villages find utmost expression. In addition to this, the paper also examines the role of folk tales in present day context. To substantiate the above mentioned ideas two collections titled *Folk tales from Orissa* and *Folktales from Southern Orissa* are examined succinctly in this paper.

**Key Words:** Folk Tale, Tribal Life, Oral Tradition, Rural Rhythm

The stories from Indian countryside have a sylvan flavour and they are replete with myths, fables, adventurous tales of the warriors, fairy tales etc. They speak of the idyllic and innocuous nature of rural life. The moral values they entail reveal the orientation of their mind towards value act and keep them remote from the corrupt city life. In other word the rhythm of nature and the carnival of rural life find expression in the stories told by the rural folks, down the centuries, which are widely known as folk tales. It is widely acknowledged that folklore constitutes the central position in the Indian literary tradition and cultural expression and social life etc. In it we find a vast treasure of mythical legends, Puranic stories, fables from *Panchatantra and Hitapodesa etc.* on which the tradition of Indian literature and culture foreground. It has a very long history, which can be traced back to the age of *Vedas and Upanishad.* Indian folktales succinctly present a genuine picture of the social reality, the family life of rural India. It reflects joy and sorrow, happiness and miseries of the common people, love and devotion in the families, relation with nature and community etc. Apart from this the religious beliefs, the economic and political condition, the historical and geographical conditions of the rural folks find delineation.
in the course of folk narration (Upadhyaya 2009). In other words we can say that such stories of people presents the true picture of rural India.

So far as tribal society is concerned folklore is considered to be one of the major living traditions presented in oral forms. Usually folk tales get transferred from one generation to another generation through words of mouth. Moreover, through pilgrimages, melas and fairs this oral tradition reaches others. When people of one place go to other places these mediums of social gathering help them to know about the culture and tradition of that area. All of us are aware of the fact that dharnsalas, inns and other resting places are storehouses of folktales and traditional songs where people from many parts of the country meet and share their experience by telling different stories of past. When pilgrims of one area go to other places they interact with other pilgrims and share the cultural and social life. Gradually they come to know each other’s tradition culture, customs, tradition and social way of living.

People of all ages children, young and old people get attracted to folk tales as it creates a temptation of curiosity among them because of its fascinating thread of connection which weave the stories neatly. The level of curiosity increases and the intensity of listening get strengthened while lending ears to the stories. Even the advancement of science and technology has failed to replace the joy of listening to folktales. On the contrary, folk tales have become instrumental in arousing the scientific curiosity of modern man. Let’s take an example of earthquake in this context. Why earthquake does happen? As per the myth a big snake has hold the entire earth on its hood and when it shakes its hood bit then the earth shakes and there happens earthquake. Science will try to examine the surface structure of earth, the deep structure of the earth, the placement of earth and so on so forth. It will put many queries in order to know the exact reason of earthquake. But listening to such myth a scientist will definitely be curious and anxious to enhance his investigation in a different way.
In fact William John Thomas introduced the word “folklore” into the English language—“folk” means “common people” and “lore” means “a body of traditions and knowledge on a subject or held by a particular group, typically passed from person to person by word of mouth”. (98, http://www.egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/3698/4/unit%2013.pdf) According to the Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp, “the entire creative output of people is folklore”. (99) Thus it includes dances, songs, legends, myths, tales, beliefs, superstitions, riddles, proverbs, art and craft etc. Some people are of the opinion that folklore is that literature which gets transferred from one generation to another through oral tradition. Alan Dundes is of the opinion that “Since materials other than folklore are also orally transmitted, the criterion of oral transmission by itself is not sufficient to distinguish from folklore from non-folklore.” (1965: I) American folklorist A. Taylor defines folklore in the following manner:

Folklore is the material that is handed on by tradition, either by word of mouth or by custom and practice. It may be folk songs, folktales, riddles, proverbs or other materials preserved in words. It may be traditional tools and physical objects like fences or knots, hot cross buns, or easter eggs; traditional ornamentation like the Walls of Troy; or traditional symbols like the swastika. It may be traditional procedures like throwing salt over one’s shoulder or knocking on wood. It may be traditional beliefs like the notion that elder is good for the ailments of the eye. All of these are folklore (1948, 216).

In India epics like the *Ramayana, the Mahabharata, Silapatticaram, Kathasarit Sagara, Panchatranta, Betal* etc are great repertoire of folklore. These stories are transferred from one generation to another through words of mouth mostly. India has a grand oral tradition which is believed to be the oldest in the globe. The Kathak Vchan or in other word the story telling is one such example which exists for thousands of years. As we know the tales, epics, songs, riddles, proverbs get passed on to the next generation via oral tradition which happens in one thousand six hundred dialects of India.
The theme of folktales varies depending on place, region, climate, crops and other such factors. In most of the folktales animals and birds are characterized as those of human beings and very interestingly they perform their duties. Animals like tiger, monkey, lion, cow, cat, dog etc and birds like crow, peacock, chicken, hen, duck etc. are major characters in folk tales. The day-to-day happenings of people find expression in such tales. Love, happiness, greed, adventurous efforts etc. contribute largely to the theme of folk tales. Even, religious beliefs, food culture, dress, superstitions etc. get reflected through folktales.

In Odisha the study of folklore became more intensified after independence. As Shyam Sundar Mohapatra argues that even before independence poets like Radhanath Ray, Gangadhar Meher and Nandakishore Bal used folk elements in their poetry. The novels of Fakirmohan Senapati also are an example of this kind.

In fact Gopal Chandra Praharaj made a genuine effort in the study of folklore in a grand manner. At the end of 19th century he published “Utkal Kahani” which attracted many scholar and readers of folklore. Mention must be made of ‘Gauñli Gita Chumbak’, ‘Utkal Gauñli Gita’(1959) by Shri Chakradhar Mahapatra, ‘Gandharbika Satadals’ and “His Tribes of Jeypore” by Laxminarayan Sahu for the wonderful attention and details of folklore study in Odisha. After independence Verrier Elwin, Chakradhar Mahapatra and Kunjabihari Das are the three major scholars who contributed largely to the study of folklore in Odisha. Verrier Elwin’s *Tribal Myths of Orissa* (1954) and Kunj Bihari Das’s *A Study of Orissan Folklore* (1953) heralded a new era in the field of folklore studies. Das along with Prof. L.K. Mahapatra wrote *Folklore of Orissa* (1979). It is apt here to mention that Kunja Bihari Das’s PhD thesis titled ‘Odia Lokgita O Kahani’ (1954) is the first thesis contributed on Odishan folklore which was awarded from Viswa-Bharati, Shantiniketan. In this context mention must be made of Dr. Prahlad Charan Mohanty’s *Oriya Yatra O Lok Natak* (1984) and Dr. Mahendra Kuma Mishra’s *Lok Sanskrutibit Nilakantha* (1990) and *Paschima Odisar Adivasi Lok Sanskruti* (1992), *Kalahandira*

In this context we intend to put forward our discussion on folk tales by taking Tribal Folk Tales from Orissa and Voices of the Forest: Tribal Folktales from Southern Odisha into consideration. These two significant collections of folk tales through sufficient light on the cultural milieu of the Odishan tribal who inhabit in the rural pockets of Odisha. Reflecting on the social practices and social customs these slender volumes zeroes in on the rural rhythm in the form of dance, song, tradition and custom as well as storytelling. It is interesting to note here that the tribal communities tell each other different stories to each other while performing various jobs be it working in the field, collecting flowers, leaves and the like. The tales also offers an opportunity to know the social customs and rituals performed by the tribal people during various occasions and festivals of day-to-day life. In addition to this the values, ideology and world view of the tribal people get highlighted via folk tales. In the Odishan context it is apt here to mention that almost all the tribal communities have a store house of folk tales of their own.

The life style, culture, custom, tradition of the tribes namely Oran, Kui Koya, Kharia, Juang, Didai, Desia,Bonda, Bathudi, Mundari, Langia are the central concern of Tribal Folk Tales from Orissa. In one of the stories titled “The Khoko Bird” the Sadhaba’s people dressed up a girl and sang a song by playing Changu music:

The hills have moved
The hills have moved
The same old man and woman
Got married again
Ghinchan, Ghinchan!(37)

In another story titled “The Old Man and His Four Daughters” were weeping at the missing of their father. The weep in the following manner:
Our father went somewhere
By leaving us
Little girl—“I will say little girl”
I say, “get married with Karla flower”
Or feel shy, I say little girl. (22)

The day-to-day life of the tribal people finds full expression in these tales. It reflects daily chores, tears and joys of the various tribes residing in Odisha. This book undoubtedly offers its readers an insight into the culture of tribal people indicating their customs, traditions, manners, habits, rites, games, apparels, ornaments, myths and morals, religion and popular beliefs. The folk tales contained in this volume are, infact, a vital element in a living community reflecting the peculiar culture, custom, tradition and belief system of that particular community.

Similarly Voices of the Forest: Tribal Folktales from Southern Odisha demonstrates the cultural tapestry of rural Odisha in an engaging manner through the presentation of folk tales. The tales included in this volume entails the language, culture, traditions, marriage rituals, dress pattern, world vision of the tribes namely Gadaba, Bonda,Didai and paraja who reside in Koraput, Malkangiri, Rayagada, Nabarangapur and in some other regions. The tales also tell us about the belief system, superstitions of these communities. The day-to-day chores such as food gathering, participation in agricultural activities and other such works pertain to bread and butter finds full expression in these tales. As Ganesh devy rightly observes in the forward:

When one thinks of various forms of creative expression of the Adivasis, one naturally turns to Odisha for the most alluring instances, be it dance, painting, song, theatre, music, craft, traditional medicine, agricultural practices, rural architecture and such. All these have been kept alive by the Adivasis for centuries through their oral traditions. Therefore, when one looks at the oral traditions of Odisha, one must at once think a little beyond the normal expectations that ‘folklore’ brings to us. (ix)
In these tales characters are not human beings always rather birds, animals, insects, flies, plants, rivers, trees, mountains, flowers, fruits become characters; they talk, dance, sing and do all kinds of activities as those of human beings. For example, in the story, “The Dove and the Mouse” after the death of the mouse King the liti bird was weeping:

“I am liti, I am liti
Dead is the mouse king
I shall wash clothes
Hitting them on the rock

Then the crow wept

I am the crow, I am the crow
The mouse king is dead
Come and eat
Weep no more.” (Voices of the Forest, 6)

The narrative style employed in this volume allows us to reflect upon the traditional mode of storytelling and the need and value of folktales today. Very interestingly the stories included in the volume are set in the forest which is not restricted to jungle only but inclusive of the surrounding area of the tribal community including trees, fields and wild animals. For maintaining their livelihood these tribal people work in the fields and forests. Therefore in a certain sense forest has become a part and parcel of their life.

This is how the folk tales try to preserve and promote cultural and personal values. These stories offer varying degree of explanations to different aspects of life, tradition, custom and culture. The rural rhythm gets remembered via these tales. It is our duty and responsibility to promote
and preserve this universal human activity of storytelling. In other words we must strive to highlight the need to preserve such a lively oral tradition.

References:


Web Sources:

http://www.egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/33469/1/Unit-3.pdf
http://www.egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/38696/1/unit-20.pdf
http://www.egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/3698/4/unit%2013.pdf
http://www.google.co.in/#gs_rn=17&gs_ri=psy-ab&cp=7&gs_id=r&xhr=t&q=lore+meaning&es_nrs=true&pf=p&output=search&sclient=psy-ab&oq=lore+meaning&gs_l=psy-ab.3...17.519.0.549.1.1.0.0.0.0.1.7.0.64.s815.3.s0.0.0.0...0.0.0....0...1c.1j.3..64.psy-ab.PjCzS3b7O6M
Pramod Kumar Das is a Ph.D scholar in English Literature at the English and Foreign Languages University, Hyderabad, India. He translates Oriya literary pieces into English and vice-versa. His
areas of interest include Historiography, Postmodern studies, Green Studies and Indian Writing in English. He can be contacted at pramodka11@gmail.com.

Narayan Jena is a Ph.D scholar in the school of Liberal Arts at IIT, Hyderabad. His areas of interest include Postcolonial Studies, Postmodern Literary Studies and Ecocultural Studies. He can be contacted at jarayan83@gmail.com