FOLKLORE STUDIES IN ORISSA

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Folklore flourished since the dawn of civilization through it waited, for centuries, for the so-called folklorists to appear and treat it as a special branch of learning. It had a rich heritage in India and was used not only in practical life but also in sophisticated works of art and treatises. This position continued till the English came and started collecting and study of folklore materials, which was soon followed up by native scholars. During the British period both English and Indian scholars, taken together, have laid a sound foundation of the study of the subject. In the post-independence period, however, the activities have been intensified with general awareness of its importance and support from the Government. In recent years, the study is becoming more and more sophisticated with introduction of modern equipments and methodologies. The phenomenon is common to all Indian regions though their achievements vary in degree.

Pre – Independence Period:

Like other parts of India, Orissa is rich in folklore. Though none bothered about its collection and study before the English scholars. It is found that folklore has been incorporated in abundance in the epics and kavyas of ancient Oriya literature. The great epic Mahabharat by Sarala Das (15th C.) embodies folklore to such an extent that it can, very well, be termed as a folk-epic. It will not be improper if Sarala Das, the author, is accepted as the first Collector of Orissan folklore. Folk-elements found a prominent place in the medieval kavyas as well. Dramatis personae and themes were very frequently drawn from the folk-world. Some kavyas such as Sasisena and Kanchikaveri (18th C.) were completely designed after folktales and ballads prevailing then.

During the period of renaissance, on Western impact, too, poests had tendency to make use of folk-elements in their poems and depict rural life. Some poets worth mentioning are Radhanath Ray, Gangadhar Meher and Nandakishore Bal. The novels of Fakirmohan are also replete with folk-elements.
The English scholar and administrator who first took interest in Orissan folklore was John Beams. He was the then Collector of Balasore. The folk-materials which attracted him most were the superstitions and charms prevailing among the peasants. His article ‘Folklore of Orissa’ appeared in Indian Antiquary in the year 1872. The author, at the outset, records his impressions on the life and behaviour of Orissan peasants. To him, they were full of superstitions and ‘shy of imparting these ideas to strangers’. He attributed the reason to the ‘isolation’ of the land from outside world for a long period.

John Beams was preoccupied with the belief in witchcraft. He devotes a few paragraphs to record the habits and habitation of the so-called witches, the symptoms of the person possessed by them and also the ‘mantras’ that are uttered to counteract their spell. He also had recorded some traditions and taboo relating to construction of houses, effects of coming across an empty vessel while going out on a suspicious work, touch of a broomstick and so on.

Beams did not attempt at classifying, coordinating or analyzing the folklore that he collected. He made his intention clear in the essay itself that he did not wish ‘to complicate his simple remarks’ but to ‘string them together’ as he heard them ‘nothing here and there curious parallelism’ between them and those of the English peasantry. He wanted to collect folk-materials because it was necessary for his administration. He believed that ‘human nonsense, like human sense is very much the same everywhere and it is only because in ruling men one must take their nonsense into consideration quite earnestly as their sense that those scraps of folklore are worth recording at all’.

Though Beams laid the foundation of collection and study of Orissan folklore, his contribution is limited only on one article on the subject. However, he inspired some native scholars who developed an interest in the subject. Fakirmohan, the pioneer Oriya novelist, was one of his companions at Balasore. Beams discussed matter relating to folklore with him. Fakirmohan drew inspiration from him and made free use of such materials especially proverbs, in his novels.
Another English administrator who took interest in the subject was T. E. Revenshaw, the then Commissioner of Orissa. Pt. Kapileswar Bidya Bhusan Nanda Sharma collected some sayings and published them in book from in 1876 under his patronage.

In the early part of 20th Century – a number of local scholars engaged themselves in collecting folklore materials. The tendency was to collect folk-songs and sayings. While Nilamani Vidyaratna, Seikh Abdul Mazid, Chandrasekhar Bahinipati, and Pt. Raghabananda Nayak collected only those related to agriculture. Shri Apanna Panda published three volumes of sayings in 1905. One of them was ‘Dhagamalika Tatwabodhini’ with annotations.

It was actually Gopal Chandra Praharaj the complier of Oriya encyclopedic dictionary and an eminent writer who planned collection and study of Oriya folklore on a large scale. He felt the need of such collection to give a comprehensive shape to his dictionary. He divided his collection of sayings into 5 volumes out of which only 2 were published. He collected folktales too. The volume ‘Utkal Kahani’ published by him at the close of 19th Century is still popular and has won appreciation from all quarters.

Contribution of Praharaj to the field of Orissan folklore is immense. It is for the first time that he opened the eyes of Orissan scholars to the vast store of their folklore. He was also quite aware of the methods of field study. He laid particular emphasis on the points that the language of the folk in songs and tales should strictly be maintained, men and women belonging to a particular locality are the fittest persons to collect folklore from that locality and so on. Thus with Praharaj the folklore-methodology was emphasized, which is the basis of any scientific study.

The eminent Indian folklorist Devendra Satyrathi, visited Orissa in 1931. He made an extensive tour in different parts of the State and collected a good deal of materials out of which only a few songs were published in English and Hindi journals like Modern Review, The Asia and Viswamitra. His venture, however, was an inspiration to the Orissan youth. Shri Chakradhar Mahapatra who came under his influence made a laudable collected of folk-songs from the princely States of Orissa. His first collection ‘Gaunli Gita Chumbak’ (1939) presents samples of Oriya folk-songs along with their Hindi transcriptions and
translations in English. His outstanding collection of folk-songs ‘Utkal Gaunli Gita’ appeared 20 years later.

So far the emphasis was laid on collection of Oriya folk-songs. But Laxminarayan Sahu, a member of Bharat Sevak Samaj, paid attention to tribal folklore. He collected songs from the Khond, Saura, Gonda, Gadaba, Santal, Paraja, Koya and other ethnic groups and published them under the title ‘Gandharbika Satadals’ (1937). He published a critical study on their religion, faith, rituals, songs, tales, etc., in “His Tribes of Jeypore” (1942). His work on ‘Danda Nata’, a dance drama of Orissa (1947), is also of worth mentioning.

Post – Independence Period:

The years following the independence saw the appearance of at least three major scholars in the field of Orissan folklore, namely, Verrier Elwin, Chakradhar Mahapatra and Kunjabihari Das though it had nothing to do with independence. All the three had started their work much earlier. But their major works appeared only in the fifties. Besides, we have a non-folklorist in Pt. Nilakantha Das who had much to do with folklore and perhaps deserves to be mentioned first.

Pt. Nilakantha Das the veteran poet, philosopher and critic has discussed, in depth, the role of folklore in the development of Oriya literature and culture. He has also stressed on the contribution of the tribal inhabitants to the Oriya language and culture in his ‘Odia Sahitya Krama Parinam’ (1948-53) and in his other works.

The contribution of Verrier Elwin to Orissa, folklore deserves special mention. He spent years among the tribals and brought out a monumental volume entitled Tribal Myths of Orissa (1954). What is striking about his collection is his field method. He almost settled down among the people, lived with them, shared life as an outsider could and did several works together. This means that he did not depend merely on asking questions but knowledge of the people gradually sank in until it was a part of him. In fact, his works were the fruits of participant observation.
The Utka Gaunli Gita (1959) of Chakradhar Mahapatra, referred to earlier, is not only a magnificent collection of about 800 pages but also is valuable for containing a long introduction bringing out salient features of the materials.

Dr. Kunjabihari Das has made his mark among Indian folklorists both for the corpus of materials he has collected and comparative as well as analytical study of the same. With him the folklore studies in Orissa attained a height which could very well be compared with that in other parts of the country at least in the fifties. He did his Ph. D. degree on Orissan folklore from Viswa-Bharati in 1954. The thesis ‘Odia Lokgita O Kahani’ was the first thesis on Orissan folklore. It comprises of a general survey of Oriya folk-songs and tales and also critical studies on the special features. ‘A Study of Orissan folklore’ (1953) written in English made his own laurels from abroad. In the N.B.T.’s folklore publication series he wrote ‘Folklore of Orissa’ (1979) in cooaboration with Professor L. K. Mahapatra. He has several papers in English and Oriya on Orissan folklore to his credit.

Dr. Das has made an enormous collection of folk-songs and tales. Those folk-songs had been published in several volumes under the title “Palli Giti Samachayan” and out of six volumes of folk-sayings under the title “Lok Bani Samachayan” four have been published till now. He has published two volumes of folktales too. The “Lok Galpa Sanchayan” contains over 200 tales classified into 16 types. Such collection was possible on the part of Dr. Das as he was dedicated to his subject, he carried on his work for long three decades and also he used both the open and closed systems of field methods. He made extensive tour in Orissa and also had collected folk literature through Government agencies, especially with the help of school teachers; Through Government circulars. While adopting the open system he had to depend upon many untrained collectors. As he himself admits, there was a lot of unwanted rubbish with genuine folklore pouring on and he had to depend upon his long experience in the subject, to sort them out.

Dr. Das has done the best that was possible on his part in the circumstances prevailing then. Even in his thesis he had devoted a chapter to the ‘motifs’ of Orissan folktales. This was the prevailing tendency in the study of folklore in his time. He paid visits to the States and had contact with leading folklorists like Stith Thompson and Richard M. Dorson. This made him up-to-date in his field. After Dr. Das, folklore studies in Orissa
came to ebb. The study was not encouraged by the Universities. No scholar appears to have taken up folklore studies for a career. Folklore studies became everybody’s business and of none.

Dr. Natabar Samanta Ray, Dr. Krushna Charan Behera, Dr. Gopal Chandra Mishra, Dr. Narendranath Mishra and Dr. Gagendranath Das occasionally wrote on folklore of Orissa.

Dr. Samantaray’s ‘Odia Palli Sahitya’ (1970) is a handby book lucidly written, introducing Oriya folk literature to general readers. Dr. K. C. Behera’s ‘Mogal Tamsa’ (1946) brings to light the history and salient features of a folk drama of the Bhadrak area which was on the wane. The work is useful from the point of view of research on the subject. Dr. C. N. Das’s Janasruti : Kanchikaveri (1979) are commendable works, which try to give historical interpretation to myths woven around the temple of Lord Jagannath. Dr. Bhabagrahi Mishra did his Ph. D. thesis on Verrier Elwin from Indiana University under the guidance of the distinguished American folklorist Richard M. Dorson. The work had been published by the Asia publishing House, New York. Besides, he had published several papers on the subject. Some other significant publications of the period are ‘Purva Bharatar Lok Myth : Orissa’ (1981), the Ph. D. thesis of Dr. Prasanna Kumar Mishra, ‘The Osa Brata Katha’(1982) by Aurobinda Pattanaik, ‘Odia Lok Natak’ (1983) by Hemanta Kumar Das, ‘A Study of Oriya Folk-Ballads’ (1988) and ‘Santal Lok Kahani’(1990) by Dr. Shyam Sundar Mohapatra and ‘Lok Sahitya Charcha’ (1989) a collection of papers on folklore by Dr. Kailash Pattanaik. Besides, 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 Lokasamskruti ( 1996) Visioning Folklore ( 2002) and Oral Epics of Kalahandi ( 2008)are worth mentioning.

It is heartening to note that there is a growing interest in the study of folklore in the State. Folklore is being taught as a special paper in M. A. Oriya curriculum. Recently, the subject has been introduced in B. A. Honours level covering a full paper. More and more students are working for their Ph. D. degrees in the subject. There are a number of such theses unpublished. The works centre mostly on different genres of folk literature, comparative studies, folk influences on ancient and modern literatures, tribal literatures
and so on. Modern methodologies and equipments have been resorted to. Materials are being collected through field study. Summarizes of 23 theses in the form of self-contained papers edited by Dr. S. S. Mohapatra and Dr. M. K. Sahoo was published in 1999 under caption ‘Lok Sahitya Gabesana’ and another such volume is in press.

The Department of Oriya, Viswa Bharati, has been the centre of studying Orissan folklore since Dr. Kunjabihari Das worked here. The tradition has been continued through the works of Dr. Bhabagrahi Mishra, who later joined the Indiana University, Dr. Prasanna Kumar Mishra who joined the Deptt. of Education, Govt. of Orissa, Dr. Shyam Sundar Mohapatra and others. Here Oriya folk literature has been included as compulsory paper in M. A. curriculum, it is taught as a special paper and research works are being conducted leading to Ph. D. degree. Project works on folklore are also being carried out.

Both the Government and scholars in the field of folklore are playing more and more attention to tribal literature and culture of Orissa. The Academy of Tribal Dialect and Culture, Bhubaneswar with Dr. Khageswar Mohapatra as its Director has done commendable work in collection, study and publication of works on tribal folklore. Sitakanta Mohapatra, the noted poet and bureaucrat also has made worthwhile contribution to this field.

Different organizations of folklore-fellows of Orissa are gradually coming forward to serve the cause of folklore. Some of such organizations are the Cultural Forum and the Folklore Academy of Bhubaneswar and the Orissa Lok Sanskruti Parisad of Mayurbhanj. They are rendering yeoman service to folklore in organizing seminars, symposia and publication of books and papers.

Besides the scholars already mentioned, there are quite a number of others engaged in the study of folklore. We have, of course, to be contended, here, only with an enumeration of some of the names. A special mention, however, may be made of Dr. Prasanna Kumar Pradhan, who has done substantial work in the Oriya speaking areas of the adjoining State, Bihar. Among other, noteworthy, are Dr. Kumuda Ranjan Panigrahi, Dr. Adikanda Mahanta, Dr. Dologobinda Bisi, Dr. Niladri Bhusan Harichandan, Braja
Mohan Mohanty, Dhiren Pattanaik, Dr. Kunjabahini Prusti, Dr. Mihir Kumar Sahoo, Dr. Anjali Padhi, Hussan Rabi Gandhi and Dr. Nagendranath Mahapatra.

Thus, though folklore research has been invigorating in Orissa, it is quite inadequate in consideration of the vast field and materials. Even some basic needs of folklore research such as publication of a journal, establishment of a folklore museum and an institute of folklore are yet to be achieved. However, there are good signs to affirm that tomorrow will be better.

References:

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