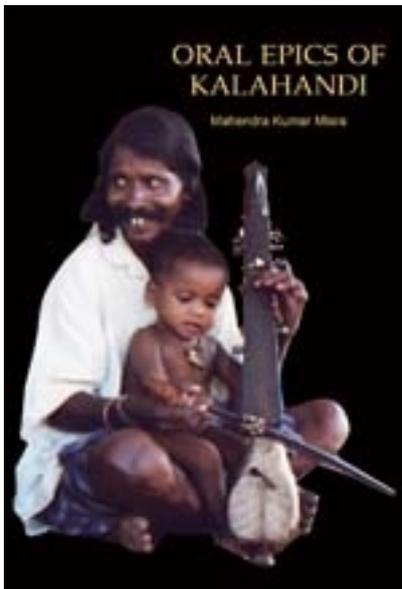


Oral Epics of Kalahandi

by Mahendra Kumar Mishra. Chennai: National Folklore Support Center, 2007, p. 302, Rs 600, US \$ 30. ISBN. 978-81-901481-9-1.



Oral Epics of Kalahandi is the outcome of the comprehensive research work of Dr Mahendra Kumar Mishra, a well-known scholar in the area of folk studies. The book is based on the author's intensive fieldwork in the undivided Kalahandi district, located in the western part of Orissa, which is known to the world more for its poverty than its cultural riches.

Adjoining Chhattisgarh, and thereby the central region of India, Kalahandi is an erstwhile princely state ruled by kings of the Naga dynasty. It became a district after Independence and was later divided into two districts: Kalahandi and Nuapada.

Significantly, Kalahandi proves to be a treasure house of resources for folklorists and anthropologists for being home to lakhs of tribal population. Dr Mishra's book is not only a collection of the oral epics collected from seven ethnic communities of Kalahandi, the Gond, Kondh, Bhunjia, Kamar and Banjara tribes and the Gaur community, but also those of the *Debgunias*, a singer community.

The volume contains the social history and the caste-tribe continuum of Kalahandi region down the ages. The co-existence of a number of ethnic groups has shaped the local culture of this region, nurtured by the indigenous culture on one hand and the greater Indian tradition on the other.

The ethnography of the singer community called the *Debgunias* and the resource of oral epics are discussed by the author along with the classificatory scheme of oral epics and song-narratives performed on socio-religious occasions. Each and every ethnic group has its own origin myths, culture heroes and the legendary narratives that are sung by the respective ethnic bards accompanied by traditional musical instruments.

Each community, as the patron, owns the oral epics and myths of the singer community and perpetuates the tradition of knowledge. Thus, oral narratives constitute part of the collective literature of the people who have produced the narrative. The content

of the songs/ epics contains the knowledge of the land and the forest, society and the culture in a symbolic manner. The essence of the epics is based on stories of love and war, conflict for land and resolution after a struggling life of a culture hero. Supernatural solution of natural problems is narrated in almost all the epics.

Interestingly, Dr Mishra's book reaffirms the hypothesis that the transition of forest human techno-economic life to a settled agricultural life is the foundation of most of the epics. The *Parghania* or the Gond-bard sings on such a variety of subjects as Chitalsingh Chatri, Budharaja myth, creation of paddy and origin of the Gond gods from the supreme God. These songs are believed to be true among the Gond community.

The epics of Bhima (the culture hero as well as the rain god) and Nangmati-Rajaphulia, represent the Kondh culture in oral epics. The Bhunjia and the Kamar are two endangered communities maintaining their ethnic identity through their language and group solidarity. Their oral epics are rich with local and esoteric knowledge with indigenous imagination.

Banjaras are north-western tribes who sing Raja Isalu, Ramji Huna Sati, Hiro Diwani and Lakha Banjara epics which bear the legacy of their north Indian culture as distinct from that of Kalahandi. The Gaurs are a major settled agricultural community of the region. They sing their thousand-line long *bans geet* which glorifies the culture hero and heroine of their community. Their narratives are replete with tales of struggle with their enemy castes.

Mishra's collection reveals that besides the traditional tales, the oral epics, with the passing of time, have also incorporated such episodes of recent political history as the nineteenth-century Kondh rebellion against the British rule and semi-literary songs related to droughts (1966) in Kalahandi as well as the Lakshmi Janam epic of the Debgunias. The author presents his interpretations of the epics of these seven ethnic groups keeping in view the wider cultural landscape and to comprehend the purpose and meaning of the epic songs. The oral epics as both text and performance reveal the collective memory of human creativity.

Oral Epics of Kalahandi is a well-organised and well-documented first work which will go a long way towards motivating more such work in the field. It includes relevant maps, photographs, etc. as well as a bibliography. There is also a glossary (291-99) of tribal words. The translation of the songs/epics is lucid and lyrical, though one wishes a few original ones had been included in either Devnagari or Roman script.

However, the uniqueness of the book is that the writer has tried to explore the text and performance of the epics from the singer's point of view and has interpreted the texts from their cultural context. More importantly the author, belonging to the region of his study and having access to the language of the singers and their performances, has succeeded in interpreting the texts from an insider's point of view.

Dr. Mishra is a scholar in Indian Folklore. He is the recipient of Orissa Sahitya Academy award for his work *Folklore of Kalahandi*. For the past 10 years Mishra has been working on using language and folklore in primary education under the Orissa Multilingual Education Project for ten indigenous languages. At present Mishra is the State Tribal Education Coordinator in the Department of School and Mass Education, Government of Orissa, India.

We would certainly expect Dr Mishra to produce the many voices of

unlettered intellectuals through his creative vision which he gathers from the nature and culture.

Contents in Oral Epics of Kalahandi

Preface

Maps of Kalahandi

Chapter 1: Introduction to Kalahandi ;

Chapter 2: Methodology ;

Chapter 3: Singers of Oral Epics ;

Chapter 4: Oral Epics of Kalahandi ;

Chapter 5: Gond Oral Epics ;

Chapter 6: Kondh Oral Epics ;

Chapter 7: Kamar Oral Epics ;

Chapter 8: Bhunjia Oral Epics ;

Chapter 9: Banjara Oral Epic ;

Chapter 10: Gaur Oral Epic ;

Chapter 11: Debgunia Epic ;

Chapter 12: Drought Songs ;

Chapter 13: Observation and Interpretation ;

Chapter 14: Conclusion ;

Photos of Kalahandi ;

Bibliography ;

Glossary ;

Index

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