Folktales in Maharashtra

**Introduction:** Folklore is the generic name used to denote those traditional beliefs, superstitions, manners, customs and observance of ordinary people which have persisted from earlier into later periods and which, in fragmentary, modified or comparatively unchanged form, have continued to exist outside the accepted pattern of contemporary knowledge and religion, in some cases, down to modern times. Folktales, traditional ballads, folksongs, and proverbs also come under this heading and by a recent extension of meaning certain aspects of material culture originally excluded by definition.

Folklore is the body of expressive culture, including tales, music, dance, legends, oral history, proverbs, jokes, popular beliefs, customs and so forth within a particular population comprising the traditions of the culture, subculture, or a group. It is also the set of practices through which those expressive genres are shared. The academic and usually ethnographic study of folklore is sometimes called folkloristic. The word ‘folklore’ was first used by the English antiquarian William Thomas in a letter published by the London Journal ‘Athenaeum’ in 1846.

Folk Tales: The collection and interpretation of folktales has always been an important part of folklore studies and at one time seemed likely to overshadow all other sections of the work. Here, again, some tales are very old and embody in their incidents conditions actually prevailed in the regions where the tale is found at the time of its first telling is not so certain. The striking similarity of many stories found in different parts of the world suggests that they were carried from place to place by travelers. J. Jacob pointed out in his article in ‘Folklore’, vol.5,1894, that some of their primitive elements may have been introduced into a particular country only after they have already become survival. On the other hand, it has been argued that if men have passed through some stages of development everywhere they are likely to have embodied the details of that development in stories that are essentially the same.

The stories told by the early people, handed down from generation to generation or carried by migrating tribes, merchants, sailors and other travelers from one country to another, fall into three main classes: Myth, Legend and Popular tales intended mainly for amusement.

**Indian Folktales:** The folklore and folktales have been an eternal part of every culture since ages. When it comes to Indian folk tales, the country of diverse religions, languages and cultures has a complete range of tales and short stories. Indian folklore has a wide range of stories and mythological legends, which emerge from all walks of life. The interesting stories range from the remarkable ‘Panchatantram’ to ‘Hitopadesha’, from ‘Jataka’ to ‘Akbar Birbal’.

Not only this, the great Indian epics like ‘Ramayana’, ‘Mahabharata’ are full of didactic stories inspired from the lives of the great souls. Being full of moralistic values, Indian folklore makes perfect stories for children, who are required to be, instilled with right
values. All these ancient stories have been passed from generation to generation, creating bondage of traditional values with present day generation.

**Folktales in Maharashtra:** As the study of Indian folk literature started, the study of Marathi folk literature also started at the same time. At the beginning the folk songs in Marathi were collected and edited on a large scale. By and by Marathi folktales were collected, edited and published. Mary Friyar published the folktales on Marathi in her edited book, ‘Old Deccan Days’. Mr. Chatre translated ‘Esop’s Tales’ in Marathi. Mr. Vaidya and Mr. Date also published two collections of Marathi folktales. Mr. Rajwade, Mr. Chapekar, Ms. Durgabai Bhagavat collected many folktales and wrote critical articles on them in the periodicals published by ‘Bharat Itihas Sanshodhak Mandal’ and ‘Maharashtra Sahitya Patraca’. For the study and development of Marathi folk literature, ‘The Maharashtra Rajaya Folk Literature Samittee’ was founded in 1956.

In ‘Lokahityachi Ruprekha’, Durgabai Bhagwat has made the scientific attempt to describe and analyze the different types of Marathi folktales. Malatibai Dandekar also tried to describe the origin, development, types, characters and atmosphere of these folktales in her book, ‘Lok Katha Kalpakta’. Dr. Sarojini Babar’s, ‘Marathi Lokkatha’ is also important.

### Classification and Characteristics of Marathi Folktales:

According to Kenneth & Mary Clark, to study the folklore systematically, we have to follow the following steps:

1. Collection of specimens of oral traditions
2. Classification of it to study in an orderly manner
3. Conclusion by the honest evaluation of the material.

From the ancient times the attempts have been made to classify folktales. While doing this the general meaning and the composition of a folk tale were given more importance. In ancient India a folktale was classified in two types:

1. Tale and
2. Legend.

Haribhadra had classified tales in four kinds, Anandvardhan had made three kinds, Dighinikai had given a new name, ‘Bhavabhavkatha’ to tales and classified them in twenty seven kinds. In the modern times, Linda Degh classified folktales into three kinds, Sir George Gom and Dr. Dineshchandra Sen classified them in four kinds. Stith Thompson classified them into five kinds, Dr. Satyendra parted them into seven kinds.

Regarding the composition or arrangement of the tales, they are classified in

1. Prose tales
2. Poetic tales and
3. The tales which linger on the boundryline of prose and poetry.

We can broadly divide Marathi folktales into the following types:

1. Myth
2. Fairy tales
3. Legends
4. Romantic tale or novella
5. Fables or animal tales
6. Merry tales
7. Cumulative tales

**Myth:** Myths are sacred narratives with a practical purpose. They deal principally with past events of cosmic and permanent significance, like the creation of heaven and earth or the coming of death into the world or with such everlasting mysteries as struggle between good and evil or life beyond grave. By recount what is believed to have happen in primeval ages they provide supernatural sanction and precedent for existing rituals, traditional behaviour and custom and the accepted pattern of tribal society. In so far as they account for what now is by what was in the beginning, they have etiological significance, but the true
The function of a myth is not to provide explanation but to stabilize and unify the community or tribe to which it belongs.

The myths are considered religious and holy, so that to make any kind of change in them is strictly prohibited by the tradition. E.S. Hartland, in his ‘Science of Fairy tales’, says that, “under the influence of religious feeling the most mobile of races become conservative and hence traditions of a sacred character are handed down unchanged from father to son”. He says that not only the story teller but also the audience are not in favour of change. He says in the same book that, “the dislike of voluntary change forbids amendments even of formularies which have long ceased to be understood, and have often become ridiculous because their meaning have been lost.”

The Gods already have supernatural powers. The sun, the moon, wind, rains, sky, stars, birds and animals have been personified and given supernatural powers. In Marathi the pure myths are little. There are lot of tales of rituals or the tales of procedures of religious ceremonies which are known as ‘vrat katha’.

Example: The Woman Whose Name Is ‘Day Night’:
Long long ago, there lived a woman, whose name was ‘day night’. She had two sons—the sun and the moon and a daughter, Tara (star). Once her children were invited for feast. They went. The sun came back home, but he didn’t bring food for his mother. So that from that time his house is constantly in the heat and the people do not see at him. Her second son, moon had brought little food for her. So that his house is in shadow, but people don’t see at him all the time through out the month. But her daughter, Tara brought enough food for her mother, so that she lives constantly with her mother.

Fairy Tales:
Fairy tales are not always about fairies, though they are always full of strange and wonderful happenings. Most often fairy tales are about ordinary people – men and women, boys and girls – who somehow get caught up in magical events. Fairies may or may not appear, to either help them or to hinder them. According to Alexander Krappe, “By ‘fairy tale’ we mean a continued narrative generally of a certain length, practically always in prose, serious on the whole, though humans not excluded, centering on one hero or heroine usually poor or destitute at the start, who after a series of adventures in which the supernatural element plays a conspicuous part attains his good and lives happily ever after.” People know the element of imagination in the fairy tales. There is an exaggeration of every virtue or vice. For example, the hero or the heroine is too ideal and the villain is too cruel. Such characteristics give dramatic and magical atmosphere to the story.

There are lot of fairy tales in Marathi. The magical and supernatural power help to the sorrowful hero/heroine. Some fairies help them or give them some magical thing to help them.

Example: The Bandicote Rat Bride:
There was an old woman. She brought up one bandicote rat very dearly. Then she arranged her marriage with one man. That man married bandicote bride, but he was very ashamed of the people and so ordered his bride to live only in the upper storey of the house. The bride performed all the household works in the night. After some period God Shankar and Goddess Parvati blessed her and pulled out the nail out of the head of that bandicote rat and at once it converted into a beautiful young woman. Then her husband became very happy and they lived happily.

Legends:
Legend is traditional story of long long ago which is not definitely true. According to Stith Thompson this form of tale purports to be an account of an extraordinary happening believed to have actually occurred. Legend of the saga type like those of ‘Arthur’ or ‘the Homeric Heroes’ and the many stories of lands overwhelmed by the sea can perhaps be best described as twisted and broken fragments of history. They preserve traditions of heroic personages and of real or supposed historical happenings and contains a nucleus of true fact, heavily embellished, as a rule, by magical or romantic accretions or by borrowings.
from similar tales told elsewhere. They are concerned with particular places or individuals. Linda Degh quoted in her book ‘Folklore and Folk Life’: “The fairy tale flies, the legend walks, knocks at your doors…it is localized, down to earth and has historic validity”.

The purpose of the legend is entertainment, to remember the virtues of the people in history and to guide the people to walk on a virtuous way.

Marathi folktales are rich with legends. They deal with the people, places, incidents and flora and fauna from the ancient times to the modern day.

**Example: ‘Jeur’:**

There was a noble woman, Baijabai. She was very religious. Once she was going to the field to give meal to her husband. But on the road some soldiers stopped her and tried to tease her. They asked her to give them meal to eat. She told them that it was for her husband. But they were adamant and ordered her to give them meal in her basket. At last she opened her basket. In that basket there were only two *chapatis* and a bowlful of buttermilk. She prayed God and started to distribute the food to the soldiers. All the soldiers ate stomachful with those two *chapatis* and buttermilk. She was distributing enough food to all of them but her basket didn’t become empty. Seeing this miracle all the soldiers ran away with fear. And Baijabai also disappeared on the hill. People found only her statue there. So that the village was also named as ‘Jeur’*.

*‘Jeur’ is Marathi word which means remaining food after meal. In this story, though the number of soldiers ate, the food remained in the basket.

**Romantic Tales or Novella:** Linda Degh says in ‘Folklore and Folk life’, ‘This category includes complex tales of diverse nature having in common their realistic tendency. The novella has the same composition of the magic tale, but the fantastic element plays a lesser role.’

There is exaggeration in these tales but less or no magic. The hero/heroine goes away from home to achieve something, the villain plays his/her tricks, but the hero/heroine wins with their intelligence, cleverness, sense of humour, patience and calmness. There are number of such kind of tales in Marathi.

**Example: ‘Chatura’-The Intelligent Young Woman:**

Once upon a time there was a Prince. He wanted to marry, but he had one condition. He wanted to marry such kind of girl who must be intelligent though not beautiful. One Brahmin girl came ahead. Whose name was ‘Chatura’ means intelligent girl. As a test the prince kept her in prison. There she made the friendship with the watchmen and started to wander out of the prison freely. She used to come back after some time. She started to learn dance at one professional dancer. That dancer was often visited by the Prince. She made the Prince to fall in love with her with the help of her charms and dance. She became pregnant. Then once she asked for the ring of the Prince as a token and disappeared and went back to the prison. There she gave birth to a baby boy. When the Prince came to know this, he became very angry and came to the prison to punish her. At that time she showed him the ring given to her by him. She told him the whole story. He became very happy with her intelligence. He praised her and they married happily.

**Fables:** A fable is a story, often about animals, that points out some aspect of human behaviour and often has a moral attached to it. Many collections of fables exist such as the ‘Panchatatram’ from ancient India, ‘Aesop’s Tales’ from ancient Greece, ‘Phaedrus’ Tales’ from ancient Rome, ‘La Fontaine’s Fables’ composed in France in the 17th century. According to Kenneth & Mary Clark, ‘A fable is a short tale usually involving animal characters which express either implicitly or explicitly a moral principal’

The personification of the animals is the main feature of fable. In these tales the animals, birds, trees speak and think like human beings, behave like humans but while doing
all these things the typical characteristics of those animals are also revealed. The different
natures of the animals create humour in these tales. In Marathi such fables are very rare.

**Example: The Crocodile and the Fox:**

Once upon a time, there lived a fox in the dark and deep forest. He was very cunning
fellow. In the forest there was a river. In the river live many crocodiles. All of them were
very cruel but dull headed. One day the fox saw that on the other bank of the river there was a
tree of black berries and there were sweet black berries on the tree and the ripened were
scattered under the tree. The fox wanted to eat them, but he could not swim. So he thought a
plan. He saw that a crocodile was taking rest on the bank of the river. He started to talk with
her. He praised her lot. He told her about the black berries and asked her if she allowed him
to sit on her back and took her on the other bank of the river, he would give her plenty of
black berries to eat. To listen to the name of black berries, crocodile became very happy and
at once became ready to take him on the other bank of the river. The clever fox sat on her
back and they started their journey. Now the fox started to praise her that her back was very
smooth and he felt lucky that he got a chance to sit upon such a smooth back. The crocodile
became very happy and safely took him on the other bank of the river. As the fox climbed
down safely on the ground, he ran away as fast as he could and never showed his face to the
crocodile again.

**Merry Tales:** According to Alexander Krappe, ‘By merry tales we mean a short
narrative, in prose or verse, relating an episodic event or series of events culminating in a
humorous situation, the subject matter is taken from everyday life. The occurrence of
supernatural element is rare and even then serves only to create the basis underlying the
situation itself.

To create humour the different devices such as physical and psychological handicap,
humourous incidents, adamant human nature, foolishness etc. are used. Foolish son-in-law
and his humourous journey to his in-law’s house and his experiences are the popular subject
of such merry tales. Even different kind of vices are made the subject of fun in these tales.
There are lot of merry tales in Marathi. They deal with different castes in Marathi society.

**Example: The Chanting of Bhikambhat:**

There lived a very clever Brahmin, Bhikambhat. One day he and his son Keshav went
into the field of sugarcane to steal it. Keshav went inside the sugarcane and Bhikambhat
stood outside to keep watch. After some time some farmers came there and started to inquire.
Now he was afraid of those farmers and thought that his theft would come to light. So he
started to chant loudly. But it was not the chanting of the God but cleverly he was giving
suggestions and warnings to his son. Keshav understood it and stayed still in the sugarcane.
The farmers thought that he was chanting. They listened to him for some time and then went
away. In this way the father and the son stole the sugarcane cleverly.

**Cumulative Tales or Formula Tales:** According to Linda Degh, ‘The narrator of the
formula tale does not pay attention to and concern for the content but rather expects
emotional response to the stylistic device he employs.’

These tales are told in a typical manner. The human beings, animals, birds, inanimate
things all play the roles in these tales. One or two characters are introduced in the beginning
and then by and by number of characters enter in it. Through their dialogues, the story
progresses. The sentences spoken by characters and the incidents are repeated again and
again.

**Example: The Sparrow and the Crow:**

Once upon a time there lived a sparrow and a crow on the same tree. One day both of
them went in search of food. The sparrow found a pearl and the crow found a grain of gram.
The crow ate the grain and asked for the pearl to see it. But she was not ready to give it to the
crow. The crow started to request her. At last the sparrow gave it to him to see it. But the
crow took the pearl and flew high and sat on the branch of the tree. He did not give her, her pearl. Then the sparrow decided to punish him. She went to the carpenter and asked him to cut the tree, but he denied. Then he went to the Queen and requested her to punish the carpenter, but he denied. Then she went to the rat and asked him to nibble the sari of the queen, but he denied. So she went to the cat and asked her to eat the rat, but she denied. Then she went to the dog and asked him to bite the cat, but he denied. Then she went to the wooden thick stick and asked it to beat the dog, but it denied. Then she went to the fire and asked it to burn the stick, but it denied. Then she went to the sea and asked it to put out the fire, but it denied. Then she went to the elephant and asked him to drink the sea, but he denied. Then she went to the ant and asked her to enter the ear of the elephant. The ant at once became ready to enter the ear of the elephant.

The elephant afraid of her and became ready to drink the sea, the sea became ready to put out the fire, the fire became ready to burn the stick, the stick became ready to beat the dog, the dog became ready to bite the cat, the cat became ready to eat the rat, the rat became ready to nibble the sari of the queen, the queen became ready to punish the carpenter, the carpenter became ready to cut the tree. At last the crow frightened and gave back the pearl to the sparrow.

**Important Characteristics of Folktales in Maharashtra:** There is similarity among the features of the Marathi folktales and the folktales in the other parts of the world. But the following features are typical and are only found in the Marathi folktales.

In Marathi folktales the element of magic is found profoundly. In Marathi myth and legends also ‘magic’ plays dominant role. And it is the specialty of fairytales. The magic is performed by the various Gods and the Goddesses, fairies, the giants, ghosts, magicians, animals, trees and plants etc. the tension, the climax of the story aroused because of the magic. Thus this is all the wonderful world of magic. In Marathi fairy tales all the incidents and the actions are of typical nature, e.g. the cruelty of some supernatural persons, the help offered by supernatural relatives or friends, use of magic objects by the her/heroine etc.

The type and motif in Marathi folktales have similarity with the folktales in the different parts of the world. In it different types of people belonging to the different walks of life are described. Many characters are of symbolic type. And they are painted in the same manner in all the folktales.

The happy ending, the magical assistance, the marriage tests, magical transformation, magic objects etc. all these features of folktales are found in Marathi folktales also. The special feature of Marathi folktales is that all these tales are related to Hindu religion only. All the description, the themes, the names of the people, places are Hindu. The description of temples, festivals and beliefs all deal with Hindu religion. All these tales describe the psychological attitude and mental frame of the Hindu society in Maharashtra.

These tales predominantly sketch the royal families. The kings, the queens, the princes, the princesses, the ministers, the royal servants like royal barber, gardener, soldiers, commanders etc.

Though more importance is given to the royal family, these tales also describe the overall Marathi society. All the classes in Marathi society are found here. We meet the people from various business like Brahmin, goldsmith, cobbler, blacksmith, potter, carpenter, grocer, barber, washer man, gardener, butcher, hawker, farmer, merchant, money lender, a maker and seller of glass bangles that is *kasar*, shepherd, weaver, cowboy etc. in these tales. The snake charmer, magician, juggler, conjurer, astrologer etc. these people show their skills. The judge, the village manager that is- *patil*, district officer that is-*mamledar*, the guards, the chieftain, the village officer who collects revenue for the government that is *khot*, the police chief that is-*kotwal*, solider , divan, royal priest that is *rajguru*, the soldiers who guards the village gates-*weskari* etc. these government servants perform their duties. The Marathi folktales do
not bother to paint the courtesan, prostitute, the professional dancing girls etc., the people who are generally disgraced and neglected in the society. Though we find people who represented almost every class and caste in the society, but their inter relationship or conflict is not depicted in it.

One another important feature of Marathi folktales is that these tales depict all these characters on domestic level and their domestic relationship is described. They also describe the royal families only on domestic level and do not speak about the political life of the king or the relationship between the king and the society. But the depiction of the common man and his family/domestic life is mostly realistic. The relationship and conflicts among husband and wife, parents, children, brother and sister, daughters-in-law and sisters-in-law etc. are described quite interestingly.

Marathi folktales describe Maharashtrian culture perfectly. They represent Maharashtrian society. The four caste system, the excellence of Brahmins in the society, untouchability, the ban on intercaste marriage, the authority of the Brahmins only to read and learn the ‘vedas’, and other religious scriptures, male dominated society, these and many more characteristics of Marathi society are brought to light through these tales.

**Representation of Marathi Society:** Marathi folktales perfectly represent the Marathi society. The typical characteristics of Marathi society, religious beliefs, types of worship, various kinds of Gods and Goddesses, virtues, vices, taboos, rituals, festivals, worships, ‘wrat’ of Gods, domestic life of the people, love, affection, quarrels in the family are expressed in these tales. Folktales represent the social, cultural, religious atmosphere of Maharashtra region.

It is already mentioned that Marathi folktales are about Hindu people and Hindu religion. So that different kinds of worships, pilgrimages, rituals, festivals are presented here. Marathi people give much more importance to pilgrimages and it is considered as pious. There are so many tales about Jejuri-yatra, Panderpur-yatra etc. To perform an oblation or ‘yagna’ is always considered very pious and to achieve something people in these tales perform oblation. Some typical beliefs of Hindu religion like: God is Omnypresent, God ‘Brahma’ has created the universe, Goddess Laxmi becomes happy because of hard and honest work done by her disciples, if a person takes some vow-‘nawas’, then he has to fulfill that promise or vow, it is good to worship god, almsgiving is important, benefaction is good, chaste women are considered as good as goddesses for example people worship these women for their chastity-Ahilya, Sita, Gandhari, Sawitri, Draupadi etc., hospitality is good etc. all these beliefs are carried on traditionally.

Then the Marathi folktales tell us about the four caste system in the Marathi society, male-domination, joint-family system etc. In these tales some people are always painted in the same manner. This shows the typical characteristics of those people e.g. the Brahmins are always considered as noble and lofty, only they have the rights to take education in Sanskrit, to perform religious rituals etc., they are always described as intelligent but poor, the goldsmith ‘sonar’ is painted as greedy for gold and he steals the gold in spite of watch on him. The potter ‘kumbhar’, ‘teili’, gardener ‘mali’ are always painted as good people in the society. Marathi folktales love to paint the barber ‘napit’, as talkative, liar and backbiter. The priest ‘pujari’ or ‘gurav’ in the temple is described as greedy as he takes all the money and things offered to the idol in the temple by the people. In this way the folktales in Maharashtra throws light on the typical features of Marathi society.

**Motif Analysis in Marathi Folktales:** Some typical motifs are found in the folktales of Maharashtra which are also found in the folktales of the world. The important feature of the Marathi folktales is ‘the happy ending’; that is the virtuous people should get justice and the villains should get the punishment. They wish that the good people should live happily
and they should not be suffered by the bad people. And Marathi folktales fulfill this wish of the society through poetic justice and the happy ending.

Marathi folktales paint the interesting conflict between the virtue and the vice and always the virtue wins by using magic or by the help of some good person. Sometimes this conflict is between man and demon, king and the prince, magician and the princess etc.

**Example:** The prince married with the beautiful ‘Apsara’ and while taking her to his palace, one wicked cobbler woman pushed her into the well and wore her clothes and ornaments and went to the palace with the prince. The ‘Apsara’ was transformed into flower, when the cobbler lady destroyed the flower, it took the form of vegetable and thus through such transformation, one after another, she came into her original form. Then the Prince punished the cobbler woman and lived happily with his wife.

In familial feud also the family members quarreled with one another and the poetic justice is given. Unforture is always defeated by the fortune. People always keep their words.

The role played by the helper or the assistant in Marathi folktales is very important. Every tale emerges out of conflict. Sometimes this conflict is between the good and the bad, sometimes it is in the form of some danger or calamity faced by the hero or heroine. In such fierce or ardent conflict, there are always some helper or assistant who helps the hero or heroine and he/she wins. In almost every Marathi folktale we find the helper. If the danger is less fierce then the helpers are also less important or less powerful people, e.g. in order to keep watch or to steal something a servant or the old woman plays the role of good helper. But if the hero has to cross the ‘seven mountains’ or the ‘seven seas’, then some powerful helper like magician or Yaksha or Apsara or Demon offer his help.

In Marathi folktales God always gives his blessings and help to the human beings. The Saints, Sadhues and Sanyasies offer their help to man to conquer his misfortune. In the same way the Ghosts, Magicians, Mantrics, Demons, Devils, Pishachchya, Vetal (the king of the ghosts), Zotting (ghost) give their assistance happily. Sometimes the relatives, common people like neighbours, friends also help to the hero or heroine. The character of a good natured Old woman who often helps is a typical character in Marathi folktales. Many times the animals like Tiger, Elephant, fox, ants and the fauna like the plant of Tulsi, Neem tree, the Mango tree, Bunyan tree assist the hero to win.

In the same way the magical transformation of human being into any thing, animal or tree at his wish is another feature of the Marathi folktales. The magic, magical liquids, food, plants, leaves, fruit, flowers, animal, things, utensils etc. help the hero. Many kinds of taboos like ‘not to see behind’, ‘not to declare the secret’, ‘not to eat some typical food’, etc. the protagonist should follow in the Marathi folktales and they help them in a great to the hero/heroine to win and to live happily thereafter.

**Reference Books:**

**Acknowledgement:**
Dr. Sujay Kumar Mandal, Department of Folklore, Kalyani University, West Bengal, India

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