

The Evolution of Folklore Studies : From Cultural Marginality to Academic Recognition

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Abstract

Folklore has always been part of human life, long before it became the subject of academic study. Communities preserved and passed on stories, songs, myths, legends, rituals, beliefs, customs and everyday knowledge from one generation to another. Yet for a long time, the people who carried these traditions were often described in dismissive terms such as “primitive,” “superstitious,” “illiterate” or “backward.” Folklore itself was consequently treated as something belonging to the margins of culture rather than as a serious form of knowledge.

The gradual emergence of folklore studies as an academic discipline changed this understanding. Scholars began to look beyond the idea of folklore as a collection of old customs or disappearing traditions and started examining the ways in which it functions within communities. Attention shifted from merely collecting texts to understanding performance, context, memory, identity, transmission and the relationship between tradition and social change.

This paper traces that intellectual journey and examines how the meaning and scope of folklore have changed over time. It argues that folklore should not be understood simply as a survival from the past. It is a living and adaptive form of cultural expression through which communities remember their histories, communicate shared values, negotiate social relationships and respond creatively to changing circumstances. The development of folklore studies, therefore, represents not only the recognition of a new academic discipline but also a significant change in the way traditional knowledge and the communities that sustain it are understood.

Keywords: Folklore, Folklore Studies, Oral Tradition, Folk Culture, Cultural Memory, Performance, Tradition, Cultural Identity

INTRODUCTION

Folklore has achieved an independent discipline. Folklorist concern themselves with traditions within their own cultures. The term was synonymous in 19th C with bygone, popular antiquities, survivals, coupled with this notion of folklore were perjorative terms, such as superstitious, illiterate, backward, primitive, which were applied to people who preserved this culture for instance in one of the places they have been referred as 'savage' who are accomplished in the task of preserving and transmitting knowledge *"Let me try to tell you what folklore is ... It is now well established that the most civilized races have all fought their way slowly upwards from a condition of savagery. Now, savages can neither read nor write yet they manage to collect and store up a considerable amount of knowledge of a certain kind.... The knowledge, organization, and rules thus gathered and formulated are preserved in the memory and communicated by word of mouth and by actions of various kinds. To this mode of preservation and communication, as well as to the things thus preserved and communicated the name of tradition is given; and Folklore is the science of tradition."*¹

But another set of terms simple, unspoiled, pastoral, close to nature viewed them in a nobler light. Whether admired or despised, the folk represented a world difference from the centers of power, wealth, progress, industry and intellectual and political activity in the metropolises.

*It is possible to define both folk and lore in such a way that even a beginner can understand what folklore is. The term folk can refer to any group of people whatever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is—it could be a common occupation, language and religion—but what is important is that group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory a group must consist of at least two persons but generally most groups consist of many individuals...*²

These 'group of people' become a medium of oral transmission of their cultural contexts—occupation, language or religion forming a pool of folk elements including folktales. A folktale then becomes a poetic text that carries cultural contexts within it; it is a travelling metaphor that finds a new meaning in context with each new telling³

Linda D'egh states '*Narration is ageless*'. The impulse to tell a story and the need to listen to it have made narrative the natural companion of man throughout the history of civilization. Stories are able to adapt themselves to any local and social climate. They are old and venerable, but they are also new and up to date.

While recognizing that folk narratives contain persistent and yet continually reinterpreted ideas, the student of folklore observes folktales mainly as an art creation shaped and carried by different groups of people. She views the diverse forms of the narratives, including their content elements and structural framework, as complex wholes of an oral art. Scholars stress the following questions: What is the message of folk tales? What are the forces that create, launch, disseminate, maintain, vary, corrupt, and reinforce them? What do they mean to their performers and their audiences?

¹Edwin Sidney Horsland.

² Dundes, Alan.

³ Narayana, R.K.

Scholars of today employ the principles of cultural anthropology based on scrupulous ethnographic fieldwork. Local collections are no longer limited to the recording of texts but include the totality of the cultural context, performance of the narrators, and the response of the audiences.

Folk need not apply exclusively to country folk, but rather signifies anonymous mass of tradition oriented people. The countryfolk move to the cities and in the past decades the metropolises of the world have been swelling from the inflow of rural population. Urbane generation donot necessarily fail to qualify as folk groups: for their lives too may be shaped by traditional codes of behaviour, dress, customs, expressions, world view. Traditions are continually big updated. Survivalist Hartland expressed this idea prithily in 1885: *I contend that tradition is always being created a new, and that traditions of modern origin wherever found are as much within our province as ancient ones.*⁴ It becomes imperative to study each aspect, for instance historical, individual, cultural, traditional, aesthetic, economic, environmental, for comprehending the folk art process.

Folklore emerged a new field of learning in the 19th C, when antiquaries in England and philogists in Germany began to look closely at the ways of the lower classes. In 1812 the German brothers Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm commenced publishing influential volumes of oral folk narratives of interpretations of Germanic mythology. Then on 22 Aug, 1846, an English antiquary William John Thomas, sent a letter to a magicians catering to the intellectually curious, suggesting that the new word “Folklore” be thenceforth adopted in place of the cumbersome phrase “popular antiquities”. The term subsequently proved its value in depriving a new area of knowledge and subject of inquiry, but it has also caused lot of confoundment.

The beginnings of Indian folklore are intricately woven with the beginnings of the international discipline. Once J. Grimm (1835)⁵ had postulated a connection between Indian and European mythology, and M. Muller (1856)⁶ had detailed it, the study of Indian folklore became essential to the development of folklore theory in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In fact, India was thought by some like Benfey(1859), Cosquin(1886), Clouston(1887) to be the origin of nearly all European folk narrative. Some like Willson believed that the mythical image of India is a major source for European, particularly German Romanticism. Indian tales and myths also provided the supporting evidence for two, more enduring theories: that narratives(not just people) migrate, and that literary versions are important links in the chain of transmission. The interplay between oral and written versions seemed symbiotic.⁷

In this initial period, Indian folklore research was dominated by philogists and linguistics working in Sanskrit, Persian, or Arabic with little, if any, direct knowledge of India. In the second period, the emphasis shifted away from classical texts to the field collection of materials in the modern languages of India. By the early twentieth century, extensive collections and descriptions of nearly every genre were published by British government officials and their wives, and by missionaries living in India. Among them, two men were primarily responsible for leading the study of Indian folklore into international

⁴ Hartland

⁵ Grimm

⁶ Muller, Max

⁷ Narayana, R.K.

academic circles. One was William Crooke⁸ whose two volume study of folklore in North India . The other was R.C.Temple⁹ who published three volumes of legends from the Punjab. Although both men were British civil servants, they were very different folklorists. If Crooke studied the customs and beliefs of his subjects to better grasp their mores, Temple pursued his legends with the fascination and empathy. Crooke later became president of the Folklore Society in London, and both he and Temple contributed influential articles to its journal, *Folk-Lore*.

The study of Indian Folklore have been initiated in the wake of a ‘need’ of Europeans to understand their folk mythologies better and it has ever remained so. It proved to be an literary exercise severely affected by their Cartesian vision. Inhabiting a postcolonial space, the researcher could appreciate scholars like Sadhana Naithani¹⁰ who were and still are instrumental in rectifying the approach towards these colonial collectors. Although Crooke’s collections remain ‘unmatched in scope and depth’¹¹ and Temple’s work had set ‘high standards’¹² and ‘great scholarship’¹³ and yet one can see against the grain if one comprehends that ‘need’ of these colonial folklorists.

Through the decades of post-colonial history, scholars like Richard M. Dorson (1968), Heda Jason (1983), and A. K. Ramanujan (1993) have lauded colonial folklorists without questioning their claims or investigating their processes of compiling materials...Colonial British collectors of Indian folklore did mention "Indian assistants" (munshi), but they never specified the roles and capabilities of these native collaborators. Latter-day scholarship has neither searched out these aides nor tried to understand their distinct intellectual motivations. Writings of British collectors have led scholars to accept that the munshi was nothing more than a clerk trained by the collector for clerical assistance. The studies on colonial collectors have remained essentially "colonial" in perspective¹⁴

The third period of Indian folklore research were in the same vein as the preceding two: philology and field collection. In the early decades of this century., American Sanskritists led by Maurice Bloomfield published a series of studies on themes culled from the classical tale collections (*Jatakas*, *Panchatantra*, *Hitopadesia*, *Kathasaritsagara*, *etc.*) One major piece of research was W.N. Brown’s study of the relationship between Sanskrit story material and “modern” Indian folktales.¹⁵ Brown found that fully half of the three thousand tales (then available in printed collections) had parallels in the Sanskrit literature, and then concluded that the former were derived from the latter. Such parallels, of course, do establish borrowing between folk and classical traditions.

Folktales current in the twentieth century are thus necessarily derived from written literature and are termed “modern”. The written form is only part of the history of the texts, one phase in the cycles of

⁸ Crooke,

⁹ Temple,

¹⁰ Naithani,

¹¹ R.K. Narayana,

¹² Narayana,

¹³ Narayana,

¹⁴ Sadhana Naithani,

¹⁵ W.N. Brown

transmission. Some of these possible cycles are indicated by R.K.Ramanujan.¹⁶ The process may be infinitely repeated. Transmission includes of course, recomposition and many kinds of change. A tale, for instance, might originate orally, then be written down by a collector; the written version might then disseminate the tale to an oral teller, who, in turn, might give rise to new written or oral versions.

The first systematic collections of Indian oral traditions were made by the linguist M.B. Emeneau¹⁷ research on tribals in South India (Emeneau 1994-46, 1966, 1967, 1971) He became one of the first persons to treat it as valuable in itself and not as a derivation (or deviation) from classical models. More than this, his attention to social context, compositional techniques, and stylistics in oral literature place his work, in a dialogue with contemporary research. Emeneau's collections, however, were surpassed in volume (at least) by an even more active student of tribal lore, Verrier Elwin.¹⁸ Finally, in reviewing this third period, one cannot fail to mention also the contribution of Sarat Chandra Mitra.¹⁹

The field collection of oral traditions was not much pursued again until the 1950s, which marks the fourth period of Indian folklore study. In this period, anthropologists and language specialists began to record the major genres of verba, folklore in most regions of India (see Ramanujan 1956a, 1956b; Singer²⁰ 1959; Vatuk²¹ 1966; Vatuk and Vatuk 1967). Nevertheless, the portion of all research on India devoted to folklore during this period was small and was usually subordinated to the larger purposes of ethnography or literary studies.

In the fourth period following World War II, folklore studies developed considerably, particularly in India. The nationalist movement spurred new respect for and interest in folk traditions. The methods of colonial paradigms, seeded in Cartesian vision, has fated the study of folklore to be highly diachronic and devolutionary. The social change brought about by Bhakti movement made folklore as a main instrument of ordinary discourse. But the key concerns of folktales have been mostly power and oppression; that is why peasants were predominately attached to tales and became its prime carriers. When India achieved independence, the benign concepts of "Padyatra" and "Ramrajya" were the readymade paradigms on which the concepts of nationalism, cultural values could be comfortably constructed, as opposed to western dichotomous approach. The search for ancient origins and the desire to present a "pure" heritage, which accompanies such nationalistic movements everywhere, cast this research in a decidedly antiquarian and chauvinistic mold. Still, the sheer amount of work accomplished placed the study of Indian folklore on a more solid descriptive foundation. Following independence, and especially after the 1960s, Indian scholars turned to intensive field research; folklore journals appeared in local languages and in English; research institutes and societies sprang up; and degree courses in folklore were established in several universities. Backed by this institutional support, Indian scholars have now amassed a collection of folklore that is one of the largest of its kind in the world

¹⁶ R.K.Ramanujan

¹⁷ Emeneau

¹⁸ Verrier Elwin,

¹⁹ Sarat Chandra Mitra

²⁰ Singer,

²¹ Vatuk

The fifth and current period of research in Indian folklore has only just begun. It is characterized by extensive field research which has produced a growing body of publications (J.D. Smith²² 1977; Wadley²³ 1978; Claus²⁴ 1979; Blackburn²⁵ 1981; Beck²⁶ 1982; 1986). The result of this work is that new materials are being studied from new perspectives. Some previously unknown previously only in textual form have now been collected in their performance context. And these materials are being interpreted using concepts (ethnography of speaking, performance analysis, semiotics) not previously applied to Indian folklore. As a result, the conceptual basis of the field is shifting: ethnographic and linguistic skills in South Asian research have now been enriched by the comparative reach and specialized focus of folklore studies. This combination of new materials and new approaches promises to find new meanings for Indian folklore.

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²² J.D.Smith,

²³ Susan Wadley,

²⁴ Claus,

²⁵ Blackburn,

²⁶ Brenda Beck,