Threads of Folk Tradition in the Indian Literary Tapestry

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Abstract

Folk tradition forms the foundation of cultural construction of the nation and embodies the cultural memory and psychosynthetic consciousness of the society. It consists of the accumulated treasure of myths, ballads, beliefs, rituals, proverbs, songs and oral narratives. Having the spontaneous fertility of traditional knowledge and beliefs, India's soil is fructified by oral and performative modes of expression, which transcend chronological limits and remain evolving across generations. The interrelatedness between folk traditions and Indian literature is foundational and constant as Indian literature is a compendium of documented oral lores and folk narratives from Vedic hymns to contemporary writings. This chapter explores the akinness of India's diverse as well as affluent folk traditions with Indian literary text highlighting their mature resonance across classical, medieval and modern literature. This study deliberates on multidimensional aspects of Indian folk literature which is based on the rainbow effect of traditional language and customs from various regions, religions, societies and tribes of India.

Keywords — Folk tradition, Indian literature, Oral narratives, Culture.

The entity of Indian literature seems incomplete without the reference of folk substratum as the soil and roots of folklore have been continuously providing the vitality and nourishment to 'literature' in India. In the literary realm, these folk traditions, culture and customs are not just relics of the past; rather they are vibrant, energetic sources of fostering, moulding and renewing literary texts. A K Ramanujan clarifies in the preface of 'Folktales from India', " A folktale is a poetic text that carries some of its cultural contexts within it; it is also a travelling metaphor that finds a new meaning with each new telling." *(Ramanujan xi)*

Rooted in oral narrative and performative modes of expression, folk tradition appears still vital due to its seamless flow and its universal as well as transcendental depth. So it is an interrelation of reality and textuality that ensures plethora, dynamism and lasting vibrancy of Indian text. Unlike the binary contradictory notions regarding the term 'folk' and elite culture, the Indian approach towards these traditions appears robust, interactive and mutually productive. The tales of Mahabharat and Ramayana were widely uttered and sung before they were documented. Bhakti poets like Kabir and Mirabai composed in vernaculars; regional literary works from Tamil to Assamese amalgamated local folktales and ecological myths in their literary outcomes. The analysis covers the paradigms of oral narratives and epic imagination, folk motifs and archetypal resonances, folk voices in the Bhakti and Sufi Movements and modern reimaginings. This scrutiny will tempt intellectuals to ruminate how the reciprocity of orality and textuality has preserved India's rich literary legacy. As Ramanujan opines in the 'Collected Essays', "Folklore is not what precedes literature; it is literature in another mode." *(Ramanujan 27)*

Oral Narratives and Epic Grounds

The great epics- the Mahabharata and the Ramayana were emanated in the rhythmical voices of wandering bards in ancient times. They used to perform them in rural gatherings as well as in royal courts. These bards were curators of collective memory weaving myths and ancestry and pouring didacticism into narratives. The Mahabharat cannot be summed up as a linear historical narrative rather it is a panoramic repository of umpteen cultural folk instances. Ramanujan endeavours to manifest in 'Collected Essays' that Indian epics are not just literary works rather they are 'constellations of stories' that are hued with regional and folk colours at every retelling. *(Ramanujan 131)* Mahabharat cannot be analysed only as a historical aspect

or a royal chronicle of the Kuru dynasty as it is not a linear narrative but an encyclopaedic compilation of folk imagination. It is declared in the Mahabharata itself-

Yadihasti tadanyatra yannehasti na tat kvachit

(Adiparva 56:33)

The reason for such exaggerated declaration lies in the insertion of umpteen myths, fables, parables, ritual lores and rural legends along with heroic narrative. The tales of Nala-Damyanti, Savitri-Satyavan, Shakuntala-Dushyant, Shikhandi's gender, Nal Kuber's curse, Panchtantra Stories and so on— they all exemplify a cultural continuity and exhibit the everlasting bond between oral and classical values. In 'Speaking of Siva', A K Ramanujan elaborates the whole concept in this manner— "A Sanskrit epic like the Mahabharata contains in its encyclopedic range much folk material, like tales, beliefs, proverbs, picked obviously from folk sources, refurbished, Sanskritized, fixed forever in the Sanskritic artifice of eternity. But in a profoundly oral culture like the Indian, the Sanskrit Mahabharata itself gets returned to the oral folk tradition, contributing the transformed materials back to the 'little' traditions to be further diffused and diffracted" *(Ramanujan vi).* The folk tradition and performance of Ram Katha developed during the ancient times and are still popular and flourished by amalgamating folk cosmologies and community values. The theatrical performance of Ramlila includes oral culture, folk songs, dances, pantomime and artistic exhibitions which are laced with symbolic undertones revealing self experiences, collective recapitulations, religious and ritualistic importance. Shri Ramcharitmanas of Tulsidas and Valmiki Ramayana keep an indelible place in traditional, cultural and religious treasure chest. Regional retellings further enhance the folk impact of the epics. Krittivasi's 'Ramayana' of West Bengal establishes rural idioms and agrarian symbols; Kamban's Tamil 'Iramavataram' integrates Dravidian aesthetics; In tribal adaptation of Ramayana from central India, Rama appears as a forest dwelling hero close to local deities. In Odiya, the Jagmohan's Ramayana by Balaram Das and the Thai Ramakien possess an unparalleled position in this respect. In this way, Ramayana continues to exist not as a sacred scripture only but as a dynamic folk literary transmission of customs which is staged, adapted and dwelled within the cultural memory of India.

The story of Shakuntala is preserved in oral narrations as well as in the Mahabharata's Adiparva. Having variant versions, this simple folk story gets refined transformation and classical touch by Kalidasa in his Sanskrit play 'Abhijnana Shakuntalam'. Yet under the layers of aestheticism, psychological subtlety and lyrical elaboration of natural phenomena, the folk foundation remains undamaged in the play. The reason behind it is that the essence of this folktale lies in its folk narrative core- the test and trial of a woman, the delicacy of promises and ecological elements as moral witness. This masterpiece of Kalidasa manifests how Indian classical literature took nourishment from folk compositions without marring their authenticity.

Bhakti and Sufi Traditions: Folk Voices in Poetry

"Bhakti cannot be separated from its folk context of song, performance and oral circulation" *(Vaudeville 143).* The Bhakti Movement (14-17th centuries) encapsulates the alliance of folk tradition with Indian literature. Bhakti poets like Kabir, Mirabai, Ravidas in Hindi; Namdev and Tukaram in Marathi; Nammalvar and Antal in Tamil and Baba Nanak, the first of the Sikh Gurus, in Punjabi– they all used local and informal language of specific regions in their compositions and created devotional aura among the common people. Their poetic expressions found the base of vernaculars like Avadhi, Brij, Maithili, Punjabi, Marathi, Tamil–not limited to Sanskrit and Persian only. A K Ramanujan expresses his views regarding it that "Bhakti poetry speaks in the voice of the street, in the dialects of villages and bazaars, where the folk imagination thrives" *(Speaking of Siva xiii).* The couplets of Kabir contain folk utterances and local examples to exhort the philosophy of life to the masses. His dohas exemplify the folk idiom of paradox, simplicity and sharp satire-

pothi padh padh Jag mua, pandit bhaya na Koi

dhai aakhar prem ka padhe so pandit hoi. *(Kabir)*

(Reading books, the world died, none became wise; he who learns the two-and-a-half letters of love, he alone is the learned one.) *(Vaudeville 121)*

Such profuse proverbial verses of Kabir have become literary scriptures. His didactic maxims, mystical insights, and practical approach prove to be hallmarks of oral wisdom. The devotional songs or bhajans of Mirabai continued to be a traditional part of Rajasthani and Gujarati marriage celebrations, melancholic moments and religious ballads. It is an evident of bringing the folk melodies and lyrics into the mainstream of literary outpourings. Her self identification as the bride of Krishna discloses the folk ritual songs of Gopi Lila/Raas Lila. Rejecting patriarchal bonds and superstitions, she boldly declares Krishna as her divine husband-

mere to Giridhar Gopal, dusro na koi

Jake sir mor mukut, mero pati soi. *(Mirabai)*

It resembles the surreal notions of Saint Kabir who utters-

Ram more Piyu, main Ram ki bahuriya *(Kabir)*

Here the folk idioms appear recharged with divine vehemence though in different perspectives- Sagun and Nirgun. They are not referring to the corporal rituals rather the basic preaching is to consider the soul as bride and Supreme power as bridegroom. In this way, folk tradition preserved its position in the treasure chest of Indian literature.

Likewise, Sufi poets like Bulleh Shah, Amir Khusro and Shah Abdul Latif utilized folk myths, allegories, proverbs, riddles and even qawwali lyrics to pour out the deep rooted philosophy of mysticism and celestial reconciliation. Khusro possessed a unique penchant to play with words by using common folk language in his emerging genre of Paheli. These riddles are the fine examples of Indian poetry laden with symbolism as well as mystic emotions. Simultaneously, they appear to represent folk tradition, culture and lifestyle of common people. For example-

Ek thaal motiyan se bhara, sabke sir per ondha dhara

Charon or vah thali firaye, moti usse ek na giraye. *(Khusro)*

(It is a giant saucer full of pearls, kept upside down on everyone's head; In all four corners, the saucer moves, not a single pearl even falling down) (Hindvi poetry)

In one of his oft-quoted songs (kafi), Punjabi Sufi Bulleh Shah reveals-

Bulla ki jana main kaun

Na main moman vich maseetan

Na main vich Kufar diyan reetan

Na Main pakan vich paleetan. *(Bulleh Shah)*

(Bulla! I know not what I am / nor am I believer of mosque / nor am l in rituals of the infidel / not am I the pure inside the impure) *(All Poetry)*

The song discusses the infinite mystery of existence teasing baffling questions of entity in quite simple style and rhythm which echo Punjabi folk song structures and reflect the folk credibility of openness. The legacy of these Bhakti Sufi literary personas still thrives because of their easy approach, adaptability and resonance with the everyday life of common people.

Regional Folktales and Oral Epics

Multilingual regions in India provide an abundant stock of shared folk stuff originated from proverbs, riddles, songs, dances, jokes and umpteen told tales. Defining verbal folklore, A K Ramanujan writes in 'Folktales from India'- "This is the wide base of the Indian pyramid on which all other Indian literatures rest" *(Ramanujan xviii).* Due to such various cultures and rituals, India has been fortunate to have a permanent foundation of rich legacy for its modern identity. The desert ballads of Rajasthan, Mangal Kavyas of Bengal, Pandvani of Chhattisgarh, Oggu Katha of Andhra Pradesh— every region seems enriched with social memory, local histories, oral narratives and unparalleled form of story telling that remains both literary and performative. As Stuart Blackburn exhibits,"The oral epics of India are not minor variants of classical texts but autonomous literary traditions with their own poetics, aesthetics and social functions" (Blackburn 18). Pandvani is a common performing style of folk singing which includes narration of legendary tales from the Mahabharata. It is predominantly performed in Chhattisgarh. Artists like Teejan Bai or Ritu Verma perform the art of Pandvani singing with dramatic gestures and expressions and the tambura becomes a prop to represent different characters and the objects. Such performances eliminate the differences between text and context, literature and community. India's varied art forms, being drenched in tradition and culture, have narrated tales for centuries through vibrant visual or oral performances. For instance, 'Pabu ji ka Phad', a folk epic still survives In the villages of Rajasthan in the form of storytelling tradition of the Bhopas (priest-singers) Literarily, 'Pabuji ka Phad' assimilates distinctive features of cattle raids, consanguine ties and local deities. These folk concerns, which are still alive in desert communities, preserve the folk belief through the medium of literature. The conversion of orality into the forms of art or literary documentation plays an important role in overcoming language barriers and approachable circulation of the epic or story. Some other examples of folk tradition inscribed into literature are Oggu Katha and Mangal Kavyas. Oggu Katha is a dynamic folklore tradition elaborating the divine acts of deities like Mallanna, Beerappa and Yellamma by Oggu (traditional priests) performers. Mangal Kavya, a genre of religious narrative poetry which gets its origin in 13th century medieval Bengal. The whole written folk expression of praise enhances the glory of three important goddesses and gods- the snake goddess- Mansa; the folk goddess Chandi and the Non Aryan God Dharmathakur. They are infused with the concept of Indian cohesion. In order to sustain the regional folk culture, women prove to be foregrounded curators or guardians. Sohar (birth songs), Vidai geet (farewell lament at wedding), jhoomar (seasonal songs) often encode the unheard knowledge and experiences of the marginalized. They appear the bearer of psychological resonance and social critique. Modern Indian writers continue to contribute and carry the rich legacy of regional folklore in their literary works. Vijaydan Detha, an Indian writer of Rajasthani literature composed 'Batan ri Phulwari' *(Garden of Tales)* regenerates Rajasthani folktales dipped in psychological depth and social annotation. Mahashweta Devi, in her literary pieces like Draupadi and Chotti Munda and His Arrow, assesses exploitation and celebrates the inherent capacity of surviving native to adapt, drawing it on Santhal and tribal folklore. Another significant Indian literary persona is Girish Karnad whose dramas Hayavadana and Nagmadala reshape Kannada folktales into modern theatre manifesting folk imagination to give attention to contemporary afflictions and existential anxieties. The above conversions and modifications disclose that folk tradition is not stationary rather than continuum of reworking within Indian literature. This is the reason that the present literary aura remains scented with folk soil and roots and provides a vast stage of myths as well as folktales for a global audience. R. K. Narayan, O. V. Vijayan, Temsula Ao are some of modern Indian writers who repeatedly return to folk tradition and embellish the heritage of folk literature. In the words of Ramanujan in 'Folktales from India'-

"The oral tale is the seedbed of literature, it is both archaic and ever-renewing." *(Ramanujan 27)*

Rudyard Kipling, one of the early modern adapters of Indian folktales, has the credit of migrating Indian folk traditions beyond cultures and languages and this trend assisted to multiply the scope of folktales into global modern literature. His 'Just So Stories' elaborate the etiological tales of tribal regions, where animals take the responsibility of revealing the facts and origin of natural phenomena. His other work 'The Jungle Book', though weaved for a worldwide child audience, preserves the animistic ideology of tribal oral traditions as well as India's abundant animal folklores. For instance, the ancestral figure of Bagheera in Kipling's book, emerges as a representative of defensive animals as are specified in Gond and Bhil oral folk customs.

In the age of digitalization, youngsters are detaching from multicultural and mutli-linguistic traits of their own native place. There is an urgent need particularly for the younger generations to comprehend the plurality of Indian folk traditions which prosper across various regions. In this era, the endeavours of A.K. Ramanujan have surpassed expectations as his 'Folktales from India' proves to be an incredible job to rekindle the ignition of folk spirit. By accumulating, translating, and elucidating folk stories from numerous languages and regions, he paved the way towards the extraordinary heterogeneity of Indian imagination. He shares his experience in the introduction of 'Folktales from India'- "the languages and regions in India have a large stock of shared folk materials. A proverb, a riddle, a joke, a story, a remedy or a recipe travels every time it is told." *(Ramanujan xxx)*

Literary flavour always enhances the ethical mode and cultural paradigms of folktales. Ramanujan's 'The Son of Seven Queens', illustrates this conception clearly. This story, as is told in Northern India, narrates about a king with seven queens who were unable to produce offspring. One of them miraculously gives birth to a child. Rest envious co-wives conspire to replace the new-born prince with a stone. Fortunately, the disowned baby grows up with the aid of supernatural powers and ultimately restores his mother's dignity and position. This theme contains various folk motives which are potential enough to be pondered and to direct the social and ethnical norms. The forsaken baby reminds of abandoned Karna in Mahabharata, and renounces Shakuntala's forest birth. It also puts a question to patriarchal polygamy and highlights maternal devotion. These multidimensional themes are continuously retold in folk narratives, echoed in women's folk songs, and later they are ruminated in literary works like Mahashweta Devi's 'Mother of 1084'. Many other stories like 'The Tiger, the Brahmin and the Jackal' and 'The Barber's Clever Wife' are depicted as social critique and literary reservoirs.

The synergism and mutual akinness between folk tradition and Indian literature exposes that literature in India is not only textual but also performative, communal and ecological. Just as roots nourish the organs of a tree, folk traditions revitalise literary forms beyond temporal boundaries while literature continues to pour out new resonances in written, translated and global contexts. Ab initio, this culture remains the vital pulse of Indian literature and remains of the rich diverse heritage of the nation. The realisation of its present in mind and soul causes aesthetic productivity. Thus, folk spirit affirms the democratic quintessence of Indian literature; its dexterity to utter to and for the people. Indian literature can be a testimony to the nation's innovative perseverance and its ability to transfigure memory into meaning and tradition into timeless art.

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