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Folklore Studies in East and West

Dr. Mahendra Kumar Mishra

Folklore is the collective creation of a society where as folkloristics is the study of folklore. Walter J Ong writes, human beings in primary oral cultures, those untouched by writing in any form, learn a great deal and possess and practice great wisdom, but they don't study. people in oral culture learn from apprenticeship – hunting with experienced hunters, for example by disciplines, which is a kind of apprenticeship, by listening by repeating what they hear, by mastering proverbs and ways of combining and recombining them, by assimilating other formulary materials by participation in a kind of corporate retrospection not by studying in the strict sense. Ong : 1982:8

Study of folklore in western world : Folklore is historically considered as a custom, and knowledge of the peasant and non-literate communities as defined by William John Thoms in 1846 in England. The same definition prevailed among the social elites and this notion is still alive among the elites of South Asia. Franz Boas, the first President of the American Folklore Society was an anthropologist much interested in folklore and established this discipline. 19th Century in Europe and 20th Century of America engaged their scholarship on rural folklore and indigenous folklore, as a branch of linguistics and anthropology and termed as folk literature, and oral literature, indigenous folklore. Eminent folklorists like RM Dorson and Alan Dundes in US and British, Finnish, and Danish Folklorists in Europe did substantial work on the study of folklore.

In the 1960s when some professors of History and anthropology and linguistics studied folklore as an instrument of their respective disciplines, folklore was redefined with any social group with common interest and objective. Dan Ben Amos in 1973 in his seminal article “ The definition of folklore in context , (JAF) defined **folklore as a body of knowledge, a mode of thought and a means of communication** that captured the broad spectrum of human knowledge. Another definition by Alan Dundes redefined folklore as a community expression of a social group with community interests and objectives. Many universities in the US set up the department of Folklore and ethnomusicology set up folklore as a discipline.

In the second half of 20th century ethno-linguistic, cultural anthropologists and post formal psychologists established the cognitive characteristics of different social groups and inferred that any act of a human group is embedded with a social cognition that enriches the individual cognition in a social context. The 19th-century psychology of defining five kinds of intelligence and three kinds of human categories (civilised, savage, and barbarian) are questioned by the post formal psychology, ethno-linguistics, anthropology, and social history. They proved that the socio-cultural dynamics of human civilization is equally important, and the artificial division of human civilization based on race, gender, and literacy are constructed to legitimize the power of culture. The state defined the culture to safeguard their interest in power and, therefore the languages and the knowledge not recognized by the power was not accepted as knowledge. The social division of human culture created by the state authority was challenged and the people who believed in a cultural and linguistic democracy advocated for local knowledge and culture. Even in Linguistic study while Noam

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Chomsky propagated language as a set of rules governed system, and advocated language universals across the languages, Dell Hymes studied the indigenous language and folklore and established that language and culture have diverse characteristics with varied contexts. His study challenged the linguistic universals and asserted that context, speech act, speech situation, and speech event determine the nature of language and folklore. His seminal work on communicative competence in linguistics influenced the study of Ethnopoetics and brought a revolution in these areas. Their exploration established the rich cognitive characteristics of the who maintain their productive knowledge through practice embedded in their everyday life. Now folklore as a discipline has more role to play to maintain cultural and linguistic identity of many ethnic groups, lands identified with languages and heritage. For instance, after the modern literature was at the peak in Europe there was a thought that the poetry is dead and the age of reason has come. But no, same time the scholars of English literature studied oral epics of Yugoslav and reinterpreted Iliad and Odyssey and established that these epics are a set of oral formulas drawn from the composition of the oral singers. Milman Parry and Albert B Lord studied the European oral epics and proved it, and after this now many parts of the globe have engaged in the study of oral epics and at present more than hundreds of oral epics are documented stretching out from the epic of Gilgamesh, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, The epic of Manas, Mongol, Biliny, Kalevala and many south African, South Asian and East Asian languages. This study proved that with modernity, people in oral society have not abandoned their heritage culture and language, but a new discourse of identity and folklore including its political and socio-cultural dimension has attracted many regional and

subregional languages, representing the identity politics where folklore was in the center.

Folklore Study in India

In India, in the later part of the century, some British Administrators and Missionaries documented Indian folklore whatever may be the objective they had in their mind. After that, the national movement (like that of German folklore) in India also stimulated the Indian nationalists to explore local myths and legends for a national identity and thus the trajectory of Indian folklore emerged as a stronger area of cultural studies. However, folklore as a discipline in England, Finland, Sweden, Germany, Denmark and Russia, along with many parts of the United Nations, universities could establish it as a discipline in the academic domain. But in colonial India, barring the collaborative efforts with US and Europe, this discipline was not accepted to date, though it is true that the study of folklore in 21st century is gaining momentum.

The dichotomy of written as opposed to oral, academic as opposed to nonliterate, continued and till date, and may continue in future. In social domain production and practice of folklore is a part of human society. The diversity of culture in India is so rich and complex that many global folklorists find it as a virgin land of folklore. But where is the gap? the National Education policies have repeatedly suggested for using folklore as curricular knowledge. To date folklore has not been a goal but has been instrumental to the study of literature and anthropology, social history and indigenous studies. However the communities maintain their folklore as an integral part of life. The written culture of reading and writing is of course absent, but the oral tradition continues, and it is substantially expressed in the visual and performative art. The

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temples of India contains the culture of India, the rituals and festivals contain the symbols of expression, and the visual and performing arts perpetuate the knowledge that was not expressed in oral tradition. A complete whole gamut of expression is found in the multigene of Indian folklore complementing and reciprocating each other. Here an epic is not found in written classic language, but expressed in the rituals and festivals, scroll narratives, among the musicians, and in stone sculptures. One can imagine why after so much westernization or technologizing of the modern society, Ramleela is staged by the most educated people in Delhi and other parts of India.

In the last part of the century, many western universities have reduced the term folklore and redesignated the department of folklore into culture studies or folklife studies, performance studies, In 2002-03, some Finish folklorist wrote to all folklorist to appeal the minister of Education and Culture to retain folklore department and not to assimilate it in the umbrella of Cultural Studies. Why at all the policy makers are averse to the term folklore. Has it not been able to assert its authenticity in the academic domain as other disciplines? Is it because folklore is a highly cross disciplinary study, people in conventional discipline don't feel like accept it as a discipline. Now UGC, India has adopted folklore course for master's degree? It is a welcome step. Similarly, as learnt from Dr Hari Mohan Roy, Folklore unit has started in Jawaharlal Nehru University. Infact, folklore should have been a study of exploring the people's knowledge for reconstructing Indian cultural democracy and linguistic democracy to fight the colonial paradigm perpetuated in academia, school education and many development sector like organic farming, ecology and many more skills.

Folklore as a collective creative genius in India is unique in terms of its diversity of cultural co-existence. Tagore, Gandhi, and Many national heroes had promoted to use folklore for a national identity, and led by this, many intellectual and political leaders had studied language and folklore during early 20th Century. The study of Linguistics in Kolkata during last two centuries is the origin of linguistic study in the globe Comparative philology in Kolkata university during first four decades of 20th century along with the writings of Viswakavi Tagore with many other scholars were the founder of folklore studies in Bangla and at the same time folklore study was initiated in many regional languages. In Odisha, Pundit Utkal Mani Gopabandhu Das imagined of Loukika sahitya. He wrote, the social elites of this country may be the head, but the "heart of the body" of the nation is the community, the farmers, workers, tribal and women, They have wisdom and knowledge while they practice their productive work and without their folk wisdom, the national cannot develop. We must combine the head and heart together. For this we must make Loukika sahitya in Loukika Siksha. We may count such intellectual leaders of those time who had aspired for a national way of looking at the culture of India. They were optimistic to reconstruct a colonial free knowledge – a true India knowledge that will equally be local, national and international. During this period thinkers like Anand Coomaraswamy, Nirmal Kumar Siddhant, DD Kosambi, Baladeva Upadhyaya, Basudev Saran Agrawal, Ramachandra Shukla, Hajari Prasad Dwivedi, followed by the eminent writer Kalipa Vatsayan and Vidyanivas Mishra, are some of the thinkers enriched the study of folklore. Similarly, BN Saraswati, Nirmal Kumar Bose, Sarat Chadra Ray, Surajit Sinha, BN Datta, and many scholars have reimagined Indian folklore. Now, I witness hundreds of scholars from English literature are engaged in the study of folklore adopting

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the multifaceted genres and producing their theses. This indicates that there is a gradual development of folklore study in India. Another group of Indian folklorists outside of the universities and institutions have been engaged in the deep study of Folklore items, no matter how much they have mastered the western theories and methods or expressed in English language. They are home grown scholars, more enriched with the community knowledge, deep in understanding the meaning and metaphors of myth and folklore and have substantially contributed to the regional folklore. Many of these works are not translated in English. Their contribution will have to be understood from the real study of folklore being among one in the community and interpreted the texts from the singers or storytellers viewpoint. For them, the purpose and meaning of the items of folklore is well embedded in the text and performances. They are the best interpreter of folklore study but are limited to their languages, and hardly their work are known to the English writer. Some of these are BD Patel, Jhabber Chandar Meghani, Komal Kothari, Narmada prasad Gupta, and many more.

After independence, the educational institutions were still following the western knowledge and thus the idea of Indian ness or Indian way of thinking is still to emerge. We are not against the western theories and methods, but have got an insight to study the discipline, but at the same time we don't practice an Indian way of understanding the folklore as a cognitive system that invites the state and the nation to rebuild the knowledge and wisdom through foundational research and applied research. Post independent India has made several institutional efforts to study the genres of folklore. Some of them are CIIL, Mysore, IGNC, Center for folk performing Arts in Udupi. Now the first folklore university in Karnataka has been set up

Till date folklore is a subordinate or second line knowledge in society. Community and parents are in a culture of forgetting and are bound by the restrictive knowledge prescribed by the state system where one knowledge and one language is considered as the sign of development where majority of community knowledge and Multilinguality is historically ignored. For this, parents from oral society and indigenous societies are still skeptical to enter into the gate of school or classroom.

In search of a Practice based theory of folklore

Folklore as a subject has enriched with theories and methods. The solar mythology theory, migration theory, comparative philology theory, structural approach, functional approach, theory of monogenesis and polygenesis, psychoanalytical theory, myth ritual theory or functional approach, orality and literacy approach, folk linguistics approach, Marxist theory, text and performance theory are well discussed and applied in the study of folklore research. However applied folklore has been a neglected area of study. How folklore, the wisdom and knowledge of the people contribute to the human development system is a question that has not been answered. Folklore as a tool for folkloristics has been served in academic domain, but the role of folkloristics to give back the community with the strategies for human development, may it be multilingual education, or health education of food preservation and food security, cultural biodiversity, organic farming, environmental studies, traditional medicine etc. has not been addressed properly. In this context, there is a visible gap between the folk, the nonfolk and the folklorists. Development planners still unaware of the importance of folklore as a knowledge system highly important to contribute to human cognition and creativity. Children's folklore, traditional games, music and dance, and oral

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tradition as a social system is quite not included in the curriculum to connect the children's classroom learning. What the children come to schools is their prior knowledge and experience is no doubt the folklore and language they communicate. Their community knowledge is not allowed to enter in the classrooms. Therefore, ethical questions arise, why to study folklore if it is not useful for the society? What happen with the knowledge of folkloristics studied in the universities? Who use these findings for what ?

Folklore in academic domain

Now we find that the young generation educated are in a moribund state. You ask any tribal educated youth about his gotra and barga, or you may ask him to talk about the ancestral knowledge he has learned from his elders, his response will be disappointing. After being educated in schools and colleges, youths do feel that their ancestral culture or community knowledge is a matter of past and has nothing to do with their future. This culture of forgetting with in this generation will certainly results in a great loss. However, this threat is not realised now. After modernisation, many people feel the transition of culture in a rapid way and many items of culture are disregarded or forgotten. Why such a self-hate developed among the parents and communities of India about their culture and language. What is the role of the state system and the academicians to promote, revitalise and maintain community knowledge in the nation? I remember Vidya Sagar University Midnapur has been organising many workshops and seminars where the professors, students and the community resource persons from different communities discuss about their folklore, ethnography and languages. This is the moral quest for folklore. How the most educated person would relearn the

knowledge from the most nonliterate people and how the nonliterate village resource persons would understand that their productive knowledge has been a part of study and for why. The role of universities is to connect with the multiversity. The intellectuals must rethink their social and cultural responsibilities to rebuild the folklore. I understand that administration has always restrictive policies, and they hardly accept the research and studies for the development programmes in participation of the community in any academic or socio – economic development is ought to create a dichotomy of folk and non-folk.

We have witnessed that the subject folklore is still struggling in the academic domain for its recognition. When some people consider folklore as a counter hegemonic, some people believe that the socio- cultural knowledge expressed in folklore are for maintaining cultural and linguistic diversity. Why the discipline is not attracting modern students? The prime reason could be, what are the opportunities for a PhD scholar after doing folklore studies?

Folklore in Social Domain

At present we find that folklore in social domain has gained substantial space by the community who create folklore. They do it for their identity and maintain of their heritage convention. The creator of folklore and their social patronization also feel that the art forms should be saved from the danger of extinction. The basic idea of restoring oral tradition and art forms is to restore language and knowledge ecology. There is a need for making folklore inclusive in academic domain ranging from early childhood education to postdoctoral studies. Yes, the form may change, but the tradition will continue taking shelter in new forms. Multimodalities Electronic media has a major role to play to capture the living tradition

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during the performance context. Current age is highly communicative than ever before, so the advantage of doing folklore can be very useful to apply in different socio cultural domain.

It is not too far that the stud of folklore will gain its ground in both academic and sociocultural domain for its inclusiveness, mobility and identity. Many scholars s from anthropology , sociology, literature and history, English literature and linguistics are engaged in studying field based folklore and validating their theses to authenticate their research. Folklore in sociocultural domain is also gradually turning to wards technological world and capturing the performance of time and space to connect the past with the present there by developing a continuity of culture.

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