

# **Folk Literature - Past, Present and Future: An Indian overview**

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Folk literature is a part and parcel of the language and culture of any society. Folk literature, also called folklore or oral tradition, is the lore (traditional knowledge and beliefs) of cultures having no written language. It is transmitted by word of mouth and consists, as does written literature, of both prose and verse narratives, poems and songs, myths, dramas, rituals, proverbs, riddles, and the like. Nearly all known peoples, now or in the past, have produced it.

Folk literature is studied for its intrinsic merit and for enjoyment, more as an independent literary genre, but using these materials as an integral part of our educational and socialization process is conspicuous by its absence. The stories that are included in elementary school textbooks years ago continue to be repeated, even with newer discoveries of folklore materials. These may be used to imbibe values, style of language, and many other important learning items in the minds of learners.

India is a country with a tremendous cultural diversity. Each culture has its own knowledge system. Since Independence, collection, preservation, analysis, and study of folk literature have received a lot of attention in all the major languages of India. However, use of materials from folk literature for purposes of instruction at various levels of education is rather minimal. The three models of education, non-formal, formal, and informal that go from teaching literacy to literature and other subjects, can make use of folk literature as a powerful educational tool.

This paper focuses on the system of knowledge construction embedded into its socio-cultural context. Here is an attempt to recognize the pedagogical potential folk literature offers for creative language curriculum, rhetoric, history, socialization, civics, and related subjects.

As per the Encyclopedia Britannica, "Of the origins of folk literature, as of the origins of human language, there is no way of knowing. None of

the literature available today is primitive in any sense, and only the present-day results can be observed of practices extending over many thousands of years. Speculations therefore can only concern such human needs as may give rise to oral literature, not to its ultimate origin.”

#### Need and Relevance:

- Folk literature includes all the myths, legends, epics, fables, and folktales passed down by word of mouth through the generations. The authors of traditional literature are usually unknown or unidentifiable.
- These stories have endured because they are entertaining, they embody the culture’s belief system, and they contain fundamental human truths by which people have lived for centuries. Knowing the characters and situations of folk literature is part of being culturally literate.
- Folk literature, regardless of its place of origin, seems clearly to have arisen to meet a variety of human needs:
  1. The need to explain the mysteries of the natural world
  2. The need to articulate out fears and dreams
  3. The need to impose order on the apparent random, even chaotic, nature of life
  4. The need to entertain ourselves and each other
- Their brevity, **immediate** action, easily understandable characters, recurring features, fantastic elements, and happy endings particularly appeal to children between the ages of three and eight.
- Folk literature can help children begin to develop a sense of morality. It helps children to sort out good and evil in the world and to identify with the good.

The beginnings of written literature in Sumer and Egypt 5,000 or 6,000 years ago took place in a world that knew only folk literature. During the millennia, written literature has been surrounded and sometimes all but overwhelmed by the humbler activity of the unlettered. All societies

have produced some men and women of great natural endowments—shamans, priests, rulers, and warriors—and from them have come the greatest stimulus toward producing and listening to myths, tales, and songs. To these the common man has listened to such effect that sometimes he himself has become a bard.

Not everywhere has the oral literature impinged so directly on the written as in the works of Homer, which almost presents a transition from the preliterate to the literate world. But many folktales have found their place in literature. The medieval romances, especially the Breton lays, drew freely on these folk sources, sometimes directly. As the Middle Ages lead into the Renaissance, the influence of folk literature on the work of writers increases in importance, so that it is sometimes difficult to draw a sharp line of distinction between them. In literary forms such as the *fabliau*, many anecdotes may have come ultimately from tales current among unlettered storytellers, but these have usually been reworked by writers, some of them belonging in the main stream of literature, like Boccaccio or Chaucer. Only later, in the 16th and 17th centuries, in such works as those of Gianfrancesco - Straparola and Giambattista - Basile, did writers go directly to folk literature itself for much of their material.

### **Indian Context:**

India occupies a specific place in the history of World Folk lore. The marvelous tales from the Indian sub-continent have contributed in shaping the theoretical growth of folkloristic itself. For example, Max Muller's works on Indian Myths and Theodore Benfy's translation of the world famous 'Pnchtantra' gave rise to the theory of Indian origin of the fairy tale. The vast narrative material existing in the sub continent has the unique fortune of possessing the oldest narrative traditions in the world. Besides the 'Rigveda', the Ramayana, the Mahabharat, the Puranas and the Upnishads, have all claims on being called an encyclopedia of Indian religion and mythology. Narayan pandit'd 'Hitopadesha', Gunadhya's 'Brihatkatha', Somdeva's 'Kathasaritsagar', Sindhava's 'Vetal Pnchavimashti', and other works such as 'Sukhasaptadi', 'Jatakas' are the best examples.

**Historical Perspectives:** From the linguistic point of view, the Indian subcontinent has a very rich cultural diversity. All the four major languages (Indo-European, Dravidian, Tibeto-Burman and Austro-Asiatic) are spoken here. This linguistic diversity is reflected in cultural diversity of equal magnitude.

Alexander's (327 B.C.) invasion resulted in the establishment of the first Indian Empire under great kings like Chandragupta Maurya and Ashoka. In medieval Indian literature the earliest works in many of the languages were sectarian, designed to advance or to celebrate some unorthodox regional belief. Examples are the *Caryapadas* in Bengali, Tantric verses of the 12th century, and the *Lilacaritra* (circa 1280), in Marathi. In Kannada (Kanarese) from the 10th century, and later in Gujarati from the 13th century, the first truly indigenous works are Jain romances; ostensibly the lives of Jain saints, these are actually popular tales based on Sanskrit and Pali themes. Another example is from Rajasthan, which addresses the bardic tales of chivalry and heroic resistance to the first Muslim invasions - such as the 12th-century epic poem *Prithiraja-raso* by Chand Bardai of Lahore.

Most important of all, for later Indian literature, were the first traces in the vernacular languages of the northern Indian cults of Krishna and of Rama. Included are the 12th-century poems by Jaydev, called the *Gitagovinda* (The Cowherd's Song); and about 1400, a group of religious love poems written in Maithili (eastern Hindi of Bihar) by the poet Vidyapati were a seminal influence on the cult of Radha-Krishna in Bengal.

### **The Bhakti Tradition**

The full flowering of the Radha-Krishna cult, under the Hindu mystics Chaitanya in Bengal and Vallabhacharya at Mathura, involved *bhakti* (a personal devotion to a god). The earlier traces of this attitude are found in the work of the Tamil Alvars (mystics who wrote ecstatic hymns to Vishnu between the 7th and 10th centuries). At a later surge of *bhakti* flooded every channel of Indian intellectual and religious life.

*Bhakti* was also addressed to Rama (an avatar of Vishnu), most notably in the Avadhi (eastern Hindi) works of Tulsi Das; his *Ramcharitmanas* (Lake of the Acts of Rama, 1574-77; trans. 1952) has become the authoritative. The early gurus or founders of the Sikh religion, especially Nanak and Arjun, composed *bhakti* hymns to their concepts of deity. These are the first written documents in Punjabi (Panjabi) and form part of the *Adi Granth* (First, or Original, Book), the sacred scripture of the Sikhs, which was first compiled by Arjun in 1604.

In the 16th century, the Rajaasthani princess and poet Mira Bai addressed her *bhakti* lyric verse to Krishna, as did the Gujarati poet Narsimh Mehta.

### **Heroes, Villains and in between:**

Indian folk heroes in Sanskrit epics and history and also in freedom movement are well known to every one. They have found a place in written literature. But in Indian cultural sub-system, Indian folk heroes are most popular. The castes and tribes of India have maintained their diversities of culture through their language and religion and customs. So, in addition to national heroes, regional heroes and local folk and tribal heroes are alive in the collective memory of the people. If, for example we consider the Santals or the Gonds, we find that the Santals have their culture hero “Beer kherwal” and “Bidu Chandan”, Gonds have their folk hero “Chital Singh Chatri”. Banjara folk hero is “Lakha Banjara” or “Raja Isalu”. But not only heroes, the heroines of Indian folklore have also significant contribution in shaping the culture of India. Banjara epics are heroine-centric. These epics reflect the “sati” cult. Oral epics with heroic actions of heroes and heroines produce a “counter texts” as opposed to the written texts. The younger brother killing his elder brother and becoming a hero is part of an in an oral epic, which is forbidden in classical epics. Folk heroes are some times deified and are worshipped in the village. There is a thin line of difference between a mythic hero and romantic hero in Indian folklore. In Kalahandi, oral epics are available among the ethnic singers performed in ritual context and social context. Dr Mahendra Mishra, a folklorist has conducted research on oral epics in kalahandi taking seven ethnic groups. Dr.

Chitrasen Pasayat has made an extensive study of different folk and tribal forms of Yatra like Dhanu yatra, Kandhen-budhi yatra, Chudakhai yatra, Sulia yatra, Patkhanda yatra, Budha-dangar yatra, Khandabasa yatra, Chhatar yatra, Sital-sasthi yatra and examined the 'hero characters' of the local deities. Indian oral epics are found wherever there are caste based culture. Prof. Lauri Honko from Turku, Finland with Prof. Vivek Rai and Dr K Chinnapa Gawda have conducted extensive field work and research on Siri Epic and have come out with three volumes on Siri Epic. Similarly Prof. Peter J Claus has done intensive work on Tulu epics. Aditya Mallick on Devnarayan Epic, Pulikonda Subbachary on jambupurana, Dr JD Smith on Pabuji epic are some of the commendable work that have been drawn attention of the wider readership.

The scientific study of Indian folklore was slow to begin: early collectors felt far freer to creatively re-interpret source material, and collected their material with a view to the picturesque rather than the representative. A. K. Ramanujan's theoretical and aesthetic contributions span several disciplinary areas. Context-sensitivity is a theme that appears not only in Ramanujan's cultural essays, but also appears in his writing about Indian folklore and classic poetry. In "Where Mirrors are Windows," (1989) and in "Three Hundred Ramayanas" (1991), for example, he discusses the "intertextual" nature of Indian literature, written and oral...He says, "What is merely suggested in one poem may become central in a 'repetition' or an 'imitation' of it. His essay "Where Mirrors Are Windows: Toward an Anthology of Reflections" (1989), and his commentaries in *The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology* (1967) and *Folktales from India, Oral Tales from Twenty Indian Languages* (1991) are good examples of his work in Indian folklore studies.

Rudyard Kipling was interested in folklore, dealing with English folklore in works such as *Puck of Pook's Hill* and *Rewards and Fairies*. His experiences in India led him to also create similar works with Indian themes. Kipling spent a great deal of his life in India, and was familiar with the Hindi language. His works such as the two *Jungle Books* contain a great deal of stories that are written after the manner of traditional

folktales. Indian themes also appear in his *Just So Stories*, and many of the characters bear recognisable names from Indian languages. During the same period, Helen Bannerman penned the now notorious Indian-themed tale of *Little Black Sambo*, which represented itself to be an Indian folktale.

Post Independence, disciplines and methods from anthropology began to be used in the creation of more in-depth surveys of Indian folklore. Folklorists of India can be broadly divided into three phases. Phase I were the British Administrators who collected the local knowledge and folklore to understand the subjects they want to rule. Next (phase II), were the missionaries who wanted to acquire the language of the people to recreate their religious literature for evangelical purposes. The third phase was the post independent period in the country where many universities, institutes and individuals started studying folklore. The purpose was to search for a national identity through legends, myths, and epics. In course of time; academic institutions and universities in the country started opening departments on folklore in their respective regions, more in south India to maintain their cultural identity and also maintain language and culture.

Scholars like Dr Satyendra, Devendra Satyarthi, Krishnadev Upadhyaya, Jhabberchand Meghani, Prafulla Dutta Goswami, Ashutosh Bhattacharya, Kunja Bihari Dash, Chitrasen Pasayat, Somnath Dhar, Ramgarib Choube, Jagadish Chandra Trigunayan and many more were the pioneer in working on folklore. Of course, the trend was more literary than analytical. It was during 1980s that the central Institute of Indian Languages and the American Institute of Indian Studies started their systemic study on Folklore any after that many western as well as eastern scholars pursued their studies on folklore as a discipline.

The pioneer of the folklorists in contemporary India are Jawaharlal Handoo, Chitrasen Pasayat, Sadhana Naithani, Kishore Bhattacharjee, Anjali Padhi, Kailash Patnaik, VA Vivek Rai, late Komal Kothari, Raghavan Payanad, M Ramakrishnan, Nandini Sahu and many more. A trend has emerged of new folklorists, who are committed to understand

folklore from an Indian point of view than to see the whole subjects from the western model. Some of them prefer to understand folklore from the folklore provider and consultants who are the creator and consumers of folklore. User of folklore, know what folklore is, since their use folklore with purpose and meaning. But theoreticians see folklore from their theoretical angle. From an ethical point of view, folklorist should learn from the folk to be as practicable as possible and folk should give the hidden meaning of folklore to the folklorists, so that both of their interpretations can help give a new meaning to folklore and explore the possibility of use of folklore in new socio-cultural domain.

National Folklore Support Center, Chennai (since the last decade) has created a space for the new scholars who are pursuing the study of folklore.. One important breakthrough in the field of folklore is that it is no more confined to the study in the four wall of academic domain; rather, it has again found its space within and among the folk to get their true meaning.

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