



Narratives of tribal lifeworld in folktales of Odisha: A critical enquiry

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Abstract

Folklore is the pulse of rural life in Odisha. It runs through the cultural ethos of the rural setting in various forms of big and small stories. This paper foregrounds the significance folk tales bring to rural life. It studies how they constitute such narration where the socio-cultural ethos of Odia tribal culture finds natural manifestation. The paper also analyses the role of stories in present day tribal pockets of Odisha. By referring to *Tribal Folk Tales from Orissa* and *Voices of the Forest: Tribal Folktales from Southern Odisha*, the paper aims to examine how the tribal Odia life is supported and preserved through folktales.

Keywords: Folk tale, myths, legends, tribal life, oral tradition

Introduction

Stories from rural Odisha are of a sublime nature. They are replete with myths, fables, adventurous tales of the warriors, fairy tales, and animal fables. These stories illustrate the halcyon days of rural life. The values and rituals from the stories exemplify the substantial engagement of rural life with the belief systems which keep them safe from the corrupt systems of the world. In other words, the rhythm of nature and the carnival of rural life find expression in the stories told by the rural folks, which are widely known as folk tales and they constitute a significant part of Indian oral tradition. Legions of scholars acknowledge that folklore constitutes the center of Indian literary tradition and cultural expressions, and they inspire values for the augmentation of social life. It is a vast treasure of mythical legends, Puranic stories, fables from the *Panchatantra* and *Hitapodesa* etc. on which the tradition of Indian literature and culture foreground. It has a very long history, which can be traced back to the period when humanity used the verbal mode of communication and to the glorious Indian tradition of *Shruti* and *Smriti*, on the principles of which Vedas and Upanishad were based. Indian folktales succinctly present a genuine picture of the social reality, the family life of rural India. They reflect joy and sorrow, happiness and miseries of the common people, love and devotion in the families, relation with nature and community etc. Apart from this the “religious beliefs, the economic and political condition, the historical and geographical conditions of the rural India find delineation in the course of folk narrations” (Upadhyaya, 2009, p. 156)^[1].

Tales that carry human imagination and experiences are meant to be told. Retelling of stories as a part of rich literary tradition of India, exemplifies the originality of Indian thoughts and opulence of the Indian consciousness. This practice of retelling is never confined to one generation; rather the act continues to be present through time and beyond time. The tales get transmitted from one generation to another through words of mouth. Moreover, through pilgrimages, *melas* (Village fairs), festivals, rituals and many other forms of cultural enactment this oral tradition

reaches people of other cultures. When people of one place go to other places, they carry manifold stories that revolve round their life and culture. These festive occasions offer them the platforms to share the stories of the culture and tradition of one area with others. As a matter of fact, *dharmsalas* (local resting places), inns, religious places are the locations where folktales were transferred quickly because in these places people from many parts of the country meet and share their experiences by telling different stories of past. Thus, these were the places, where cultural boundaries continue to melt, and these locations turn out to be the spaces of cultural transaction and hybridity of narrations. Such transactions give birth to new stories, which subsequently become the part of the repository of the existing popular stories.

Although folktales are the assortment of different stories, yet they are told with such arrangement and craftsmanship that one can find fascinating thread of connection among the stories. Here, the conclusion of one story carves way for the beginning of another story. As Vladimir Propp observed that all Russian folktales have the same structure of ‘narrative functions’ (Propp, 1984)^[2]. Although he made this observation in the context of Russian Folktales, yet this idea has universal implication. Indian folktales like Russian share a common narrative pattern although they do not contribute to one particular theme. When a reader glides along the stories (s)he finds them quite fascinating as they present quite fanciful stories of bucolic country sides and sylvan experiences. The level of curiosity of the listener increases and the intensity of listening gets strengthened when one lends appreciative and inquisitive ears to these stories. Even the advancement of science and technology has failed to replace the pleasure of listening to folktales. There are innocuous stories that stand as fantastic equivalent to the scientific discourses. There are stories for every phenomenon and natural happenings; there are stories to commemorate every natural object; and stories behind every religious and cultural practice. For example, there are many geo-scientific reasons behind the occurrence of an earthquake, which the scientists try to explore by examining

the surface structure, the deep structure, and the placement of the earth. But many Indian folktales present this complex phenomenon in a splendidly innocuous and fantastic manner. Folktales say that the archetypal snake (*Vasuki*), which holds the burden of earth on its infinite hood, when shakes its head due to the unbearable burden of vices on earth, causes earthquake. Such stories which engage profound imagination and thoughts, sometime sound like modern Sci-Fi's.

According to William John Thoms, the British writer who introduced the word "folklore" into the English language, folktales are the body of "traditions and knowledge" created by the common people (Thoms, 1872, p. 339) ^[3]. His idea suggests that the metanarratives of greatest classics are not the only narratives that enrich the literary tradition of a nation; rather every common individual substantially contributes to the national treasure. The diversity of such tales enriches the tradition of folklore. According to Propp, "the entire creative output of people is folklore" (Propp, 1984) ^[2]. Such creative outputs include not only tales but also dances, songs, legends, myths, beliefs, superstitions, riddles, proverbs, art and craft etc. Alan Dundes is of the opinion that since materials other than folklore are also orally transmitted, the criterion of oral transmission by itself is not sufficient to distinguish from folklore from non-folklore. (Dundes, 1965) ^[4] American folklorist, A. Taylor defines "folklore as the material that is handed on by tradition, either by word of mouth or by custom and practice". It may be "folk songs, folktales, riddles, proverbs or other materials preserved in words". It may be "traditional tools and physical objects like fences or knots, hot cross buns, or easter eggs; traditional ornamentation like the Walls of Troy; or traditional symbols like the swastika. It may be traditional procedures like throwing salt over one's shoulder or knocking on wood. It may be traditional beliefs like the notion that elder is good for the ailments of the eye. All of these are folklore" (Taylor, 1948) ^[5].

These definitions expand the scope of folklore. Any cultural symbol with a strain of connection to the people's practices of a location, in this sense, can be regarded as folklore. It also suggests that there is a continuity of semiotic relationship between various objects and manifold cultural narratives. And the narratives and the symbols are constitutive to one another. Here, the study of Propp and Taylor expands our understanding of Folklore. In the sense of Propp, the epics like *the Ramayana*, *the Mahabharata*, *Silappatticaram*, *Kathasarit Sagara*, *Panchatranta*, *Betal* etc. can be read as folklores. And with reference to Taylor, the symbolic narratives in such epics have close communication with people's life.

Folklore is a combination of creativity and imagination that is expressed through human experience and need. It includes various elements such as literature (myths, legends, fables), practices (rituals, festivals, games), arts (dance, painting), medicinal and scientific (concoctions, preparation and preservation of food items like curd, and treatment through charms), technology and architecture (tools and fishing net). All of these elements are transmitted using the primary element, which also acts as a mode of transmission, the literature. Comprising of myths, legends, fairy tales, fables, domestic tales, animal fables, ghost and witch tales, proverbs, anecdotes, riddles, ballads etc. the folk literature is commonly called as folklore due to its expansive scope of storytelling. Folklore in this sense becomes the expression

of culture. Edward Taylor's definition of culture says that "it is a complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1871) ^[6]. Folklore plays a major role in the legitimization of culture. It is the result of man's urge for creativity and impulsive love for beauty – in one he finds his intellect and sense of refinement released, in the other his creative ideas are expressed and shaped, his aesthetic impulse speaks (Islam, 1970) ^[7].

The varied themes of folktales are the metaphorical representations of different places and region, with different geo-climatic conditions. In most of the folktales in India regional animals, birds, trees and crops are personified as moral beings who tell human stories for the edification of human characters. In many folklores, non-human beings play the role of the protagonist and they offer very infrequent points of views in the story. In other words, folktales present the most complex criticism of life from the perspectives of the non-human beings. Here, not only the living beings but also the non-living agents of nature take part in human action. They stand as the epitome of love, happiness, greed, jealousy, sympathy, anger and other humanly emotions; and they inspire such emotions in human self. They also give account of religious beliefs, food culture, dress, and superstitions etc., which appear like discourses in the folktales.

Shyam Sundar Mohapatra argues that even before independence, the popular Odia poets Radhanath Ray, Gangadhar Meher and Nandakishore Bal, used folk elements in their poetry. The novels of Fakirmohan Senapati also are an example of this kind (Devy, 2002) ^[8]. However, folklore as a distinct area of study emerged during the British colonization. Gopal Chandra Prahara's "Utkal Kahani" was published towards the end of the nineteenth century as an influential text for many of his predecessors. His predecessors namely, Chakradhara Mohapatra published "Gaunli Gita Chumbak" (Melodious Tribal Folk Songs) and Utkal Gaunli Gita (The Rural folksongs of Utkal) in 1959 as a form of cultural expression of the tribals. Similarly, Laxminarayan Sahu collected these folklores in his texts 'Gandharbika Satadals' and "His Tribes of Jeypore". A major contributor in locating and collecting Odia folklore, Verrier Elwin collaborated with Kunja Bihari Das, L.K.Mahapatra and Chakradhara Mohapatra to produce various crucial texts. Among them are Elwin's *Tribal Myths of Orissa* (1954) and Das's *A Study of Orissan Folklore* (1953) and *Folklore of Orissa* (1979). Some of the more recent collections are by Mahendra Kuma Mishra. His *Lok Sanskrutibit Nilakantha* (1990) and *Paschima Odisar Adivasi Lok Sanskruti* (1992), *Kalahandira Lokasamskruti* (1996), *Visioning Folklore* (2002) and *Oral Epics of Kalahandi* (2008) are well researched collections that bring out the hidden metaphors of land, time, spirituality, and culture in folktales.

Methodology

Ganesh Devy states that the most apparent indicator of tribal identity is language, because the tribals are not interested in wealth accumulation and capital formation. They nurture a distinct worldview where nature, God and man are interconnected, which reflects their ability to spell and interpret the truth. They live intuitively rather than with reason in spaces that they deem sacred, and temporally

personal rather than objective. Due to their ability to sense time personally, the tribals imagination exists on various planes and levels of time simultaneously. Therefore, there is no restriction of spatial and temporal sequence in their narratives (Mohapatra, 2008) ^[9]. Considering the aforementioned ideas the texts *Tribal Folk Tales from Orissa* and *Voices of the Forest: Tribal Folktales from Southern Odisha* are considered for analysis. They are important compilations of folk tales which showcase the cultural milieu of Odia tribal. Reflecting on the social practices and social customs these slender volumes focus on the rural rhythm in the form of dance, song, tradition and custom as well as storytelling. It is interesting to note here that the tribal communities tell each other different stories while performing various rituals, festivals, agriculture and doing household chores and community activities in the villages. The tales also offer an opportunity to know the social customs and rituals performed by the tribal people during various occasions and festivals in the day-to-day life. In addition to this the values, ideology and world view of the tribal people are highlighted through these folk tales. In the Odishan context it is apt to mention that most of the tribal communities have a unique store house of folk tales of their own. Richness of folktales of a community or village determines the cultural affluence of that community in the tribal packets of Odisha.

Results

The depiction of cultural life and traditional values of the tribes namely Oran, Kui Koya, Kharia, Juang, Didai, Desia, Bonda, Bathudi, Mundari, Langia are the central concern of *Tribal Folk Tales from Orissa*. The stories in this volume metaphorically represent the tribal moral and eco ethics, while they narrate the innocuous rustic life, in which life of human and non-human, animate and inanimate, the real and the ideal (supreme) dance with the rhythm of nature and culture. The stories render ethical and moral lessons represent the life of the tribal, which are synonymous with the narratives guided by moral human values. The fantastic and supernatural having been combined with the natural render moral lessons for the edification of human characters. The stories are like fables having close proximity with the tribal world but they disseminate universal human values.

The great array of stories offers moral lessons. The story "The Cowherd Boy" describes how the presence of mind of a rustic boy saved his life from the wrath of a mindless king. When the queen ordered for *Alsi Flower*, to be brought by the cowherd boy and the boy asked the pigeon to bring the same, it was felt as an insult to the queen. That led to the declaration of punishment for the boy, who reached the royal court late. His narration of a fabricated story that he went to Yamlok to meet his ancestors not only saved his life but also tempted the king to be buried in the pit, from which the boy escaped through a mouse hole. The suggests that being wise and intelligent has its own virtues and foolishness leads to the end of life. And the goddess of destiny favours the wise and the fool is its victim.

"The Story of the Bitter gourd" narrates the story of a demoness. As the fountain head of evil, she tricked the innocent village boy to take his life. But in a state of sheer confusion, she had killed her daughter by misconceiving her as the village lad. Similarly, the old man in the story "The Oldman and His Four Daughters" has helplessly suffered the curse of his four daughters and has gone mad. Such

curse is the repercussion of his merciless act of leaving his daughter in the midst of the wild forest, by breaching their trust. Again, "Dove Queen" narrates the story of the frog queen and dove queen. It shows how the frog queen has been punished for her greed, selfishness and lies; on the other hand, the dove queen has been rewarded for her unconditional love, selfless nature and virtuous qualities. When "The Hen and the Jackal" justifies the punishment for jackal for his unethical act, the story of "Alsu" renders the idea that goodness of people will never be punished. "The fruit of Greed" presents a glaring example of the negative consequences of greed. The rise and fall of the fisherman have depended on his moral and wrong deeds respectively.

This story also presents miraculous happenings, in which lies the intension of the divine. Good fortune comes to human life in the vein of a fantasy. It changes the destiny of the human. But it is human through his virtuous action can bring the fortune in his favour. But some time human being has to accept what fortune gives or the result of the game of destiny. "The Story of Childless Couple" best exemplifies this philosophy. In spite of a lot of attempts to beget a child, the couple have failed at it. It seems behind every phenomenon, there is the intension of the providence; there is a celestial plan for everything and the plan is well designed and the consequences of the plan are predetermined. "The story of the Origin of the Juangas" narrates a story of the sage who killed his first son by following the directives of God. The plan for killing the sage's son was the intension of the god. From the blood of the son *Juangas*, the famous tribes got their origin. When the man was killed his hair, hand and legs gave birth to grass, flowers, forests and mountains. These are the parts of the beautiful creation of nature. Similarly, "The story of Old Demoness" gives an account of the beginning of the agriculture in the tribal world. Agriculture as a sacred practice has spiritual connection. The saint's son after getting married to the daughter of the demoness, has taught the techniques of agriculture to his fellow people. After knowing the importance of agriculture in food security, it became a common practice in most part of Odisha. Again, another story "The story of Ib, Sankha and Koil" presents a very magnificent account of the origin of the three important rivers in the south and western region of Odisha. And these rivers are the soul of these regions; and without them the regions would not survive. Their cultural identity is deeply associated with these rivers. This story entails that these three rivers have human lineage. Therefore, these rivers are the life line of the western Odisha. This story also gives certain prescriptive rules not to do something on certain days.

Discussion

In most stories, we come across the direct role of celestial bodies in the course of human activities. Such acts of Hindu Gods and goddess suggest the potential of human beings to be elevated to the level of the ideal. The stories like "The Moon and the Sun", "The story of the Sun and the Moon" present human stories associated with the celestial bodies. Such stories are like the Greek myths, in which the line between the divine world and human world disappear. Apart from this, there is a strong line of connection between nature and humanity. The relation is symbiotic. As in the story "The Dove Queen" it is uttered by the queen that "We have mountains and forests, flowers and fruits. If we take care of

them, they will offer us food to eat”. It suggests that the protection of the vegetative kingdom is the responsibility of all beings; and in return the animal kingdom gets food from the vegetative world. The disturbance in such relation may lead to disharmony and dissolution.

Similarly, *Voices of the Forest: Tribal Folktales from Southern Odisha* demonstrates the cultural tapestry of rural Odisha in an engaging manner through the presentation of folk tales. The tales included in this volume entails the language, culture, traditions, marriage rituals, dress pattern, world vision of the tribes namely Gadaba, Bonda, Didai and Paraja who reside in Koraput, Malkangiri, Rayagada, Nabarangapur and in some other regions. The tales also tell us about the belief system, superstitions of these communities. The day-to-day chores such as food gathering, participation in agricultural activities and other such works pertain to bread and butter finds full expression in these tales. As Ganesh Devy rightly observes in the forward: When one thinks of various forms of creative expressions of the Adivasis, one naturally turns to Odisha for the most alluring instances, be it dance, painting, song, theatre, music, craft, traditional medicine, agricultural practices, rural architecture and such. All these have been kept alive by the Adivasis for centuries through their oral traditions. Therefore, when one looks at the oral traditions of Odisha, one must at once think a little beyond the normal expectations that ‘folklore’ brings to us (Mishra, 2012) ^[10].

Conclusion

In these tales, characters are not human beings always rather birds, animals, insects, flies, plants, rivers, trees, mountains, flowers, fruits become characters; they talk, dance, sing and do all kinds of activities as those of human beings. The narrative style employed in this volume allows us to reflect upon the traditional mode of storytelling and the need and value of folktales today. Very interestingly the stories included in the volume are set in the forest which is not restricted to jungle only but inclusive of the surrounding area of the tribal community including trees, fields and wild animals. For maintaining their livelihood these tribal people work in the fields and forests. Therefore, in a certain sense forest has become a part and parcel of their life.

These stories undoubtedly offer insights into the culture of tribal people indicating their customs, traditions, manners, habits, rites, games, apparels, ornaments, myths, morals, religion and popular beliefs. Folklore in Odisha brings a great deal of cultural uniformity among the people (Nayak, 2013) ^[11]. The folk tales are vital elements in a living community of the tribal that can bring about moral edification of the modern life. It is true that such tales with bucolic connection try to preserve and promote cultural and human values. These stories offer varying degree of explanations to different aspects of life, tradition, custom and culture. The rural rhythms reverberate and remembered via these tales. The most intellectual and critical tradition of story-telling in India, which has a very longest and richest history, is promoted and preserved in such acts of storytelling. In these folk tales the immense future of the lively oral tradition of Odisha rests, for which such tales demand immense intellectual strives to be reflected, critiqued and to be made indelible.

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