

Traditions of folk in Literature

In the Indian context, the loka and Shastra (folk and elite) contrast is contrary to the western contrast between great and little Tradition. India does not believe that non-literate cultures are 'Knowledge blanks' which need to be filled in with the modern knowledge of different discipline and dominant cultures.

Cultures are never 'blanks'. In some matters, eg., in the ecological management practices used by tribals are for superior to anything we could teach them. The tragedy is that modernism has imposed a single perspective in dealing with human culture and today this kind of fixed perspective is challenged by the indeterminacy of experience. The search for the one truth in the many is at odds with the relativist experience of anthropology.

In reality traditional Indian mind thinks that loka or desi and sastra or margi contrast represents two different expressions of the same tradition and not of different tradition.

These folk literary approaches are not liquidated or co-opted by core literary tradition but assimilated as alternative models of human expressions or as parts of the whole.

In this way, classical Sanskrit literature describes, on one side, the core regions, Dakshina-patha, Kuru-Panchala, Madhyadesa, Gandhara and on the other peripheries like Naga, Shabara, Dasa and Kirata to share the making of Indian literature.

The main narrative view point of Indian literature consists of a classical core trinity. But there is no denial of the fact that the periphery in Indian literature is very vital and hence in Banabhatta's Kadambari or Bharavi's Kiratarjuniam, the periphery always comes and speaks in classical texts. For example, in classical literature, Shiva appears as Shabara in Kiratarjuniam. Bana has a Chandala girl as an important character woven in his story.

The focus of classical regional trinity was to create something vital with the help of the periphery, and in the process, both the geographical region and the social sense were brought into focus, but by keeping it outside the framework of the caste system in society.

These two literary expressions of core and periphery are always taken together in Indian literary context but of course not as a monolithic unity but as diverse structures complementing each other.

The complementariness of loka and shastra is very deep and intricate.

In the folk stories of the marriage of Shiva and Parvati, the words of praise for Shiva are shastra oriented but the words of praise for Paravati who is the mother of the universe, are folk in content.

Similarly the notion of Shakti puja belonging to Anga, Banga, Kalinga and Kamboja regions gets absorbed into the Puritanical Brahminical orthodoxy of the classical core regions which felt psychologically assured to relate itself with Tantric Hinduism.

These are examples of such contacts between the classical creative mind and the culture of excluded peoples and classes. To give another example of such contacts is the loom of a weaver or the wheel of the potter which are used to explain many intricate literary philosophical theories.

Similarly Rajasthani folk singers use classical forms with their folk singing to create a universe of vibrating melody.

In Indian context oral, tribal or folk lore are neither the residue of the past, nor the behaviour of the uncivilized but it is the continuity of a rich culture and also a process of making the present more life worthy.

This process of socio-cultural interaction is a dominating factor in India's literary scene which swept all the regions, and with the passage of time, created different important literary movements including the Bhakti movement, which fostered a sense of identity in the use of languages and cultural specificities, and the historical functioning in the context of the community.

But, at the same time, the pan-Indian ness of the content structure of Bhakti once again established the fact that the unitary vision of art and literature, consisted of profound speculations contained in the systems of Sankhya, Vedanta and Yoga philosophy and were transformed into the living harvest of the people's literature and in this way loka and sastra were merged together to reveal the essence of Indian philosophical discourse.

Abanindranath Tagore came also to regard the folk arts and village crafts as the finest repositories of Indian tradition.

It was a conscious attempt to appropriate the popular in a sanitized, idealized form within the scope of the reconstructed tradition—to create for Indian art both the legacy of a classical past and the pride of an uncorrupted living tradition.

This philosophy brought pastoral romanticism and the iconography of the early folk pata-chitra and tribal art into focus as indigenous response to the challenge of

western academician and made a constructive effort for a viable national aesthetic not as a monolithic structure but an unity of many structures.

A well known art critic J. Swaminathan once said that a truly contemporary Indian art could be developed only if it broke through the metropolitan barriers of art school and gallery and immersed itself in the resources of folk and tribal art.

But unfortunately being steeped into western literary theories, as we were, we never gave any place to oral/ folk literature in the histories of literature in different Indian languages.

Dr. K. M. George in his two volume history of comparative Indian literature added a lengthy chapter on Indian folk literature but it was just an addition not an acceptance of folk in the totality of Indian literature. Oral/ folk literature could not be resurrected from its marginality.

It was for the first time Professor Sisir Kumar Das in his two volume history of Modern Indian literature recognized oral/ folk literature as a strong voice of the literary tradition of India.

While describing the literary scene after British crushed down the 1857 war of independence Professor Das reveals that there was a complete silence in the Indian literary world about the war of independence and if there was any voice to be heard only of praise for the British as described in the Kasidas of Mirza Ghalib or in the Gujrati poetry of Narmad or in Bengali by Ishwar Chandra Gupta.

However the bards of oral poetry gave vent to their feeling of anger and frustration against the British during that period of silence subjection.

This oral voice became a constant refrain later for the Indian poets to write poetry of revolt and freedom which became a major thrust in the making of Indian literature. The folk allahas of Madhya Pradesh inspired the Hindi poetess Sumitra Kumari Chauhan to write her famous poem “Khub lari mardani vaha tou Jhansivali rani thi”.

Orality or folk is never marginalized in India it is always an alternative tradition and alternative is not to be understood as “The opposite”. If you want to draw a white line, you need a black or grey or any dark colour background, so it is a mistake to say white is the opposite of black or grey or blue. We have to make use of black or grey or any dark colour to bring out white in all its distinction.

Here in India the glory of “main stream” literature rests not by marginalizing but by accepting oral or folk as complementary.

In its final analysis, I am sure; this conference will like to assert that there is no scope for the literate tradition to hold orality in the margin. The loka and shastra are

complementary and enable us to understand the range and the entirety of Indian aesthetic tradition and negotiate the whole issue of marginality in the context of shastra.