

Understanding Popular Culture

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Oral Tradition, Popular Culture and Folk Culture vitally connect us with the imagination and histories of ancient times. Oral tradition disseminates both Popular culture and Folk Culture in India, During the ancient and medieval period (ie., from 4th to 18th CE), Oral Tradition as compared to Classical (written) was far more popular.eg, Ramayana as a Sanskrit text, was the preserve of the Brahmanas and was confined to the so called “upper class”, whereas Ramaleela, had a greater mass following. Even today instead of reading the original texts of Mahabharata, Ramayana, Gita etc., people have come to know about our Classical texts by just listening the stories from the elders in their families or by watching plays, movies or tele serials. Consequently, in India, Oral tradition is also called Popular Culture or Folk Culture. That’s why we have used these terms like **Oral tradition or Popular Culture or Folk Tradition inter changeably** in this work. We will try to discuss ‘Oral Tradition’, its origin, nature, types, character, relationship with literary sources, etc., in order to examine its role as a source material in history writing in India ,

Overview

History, without literary source, is termed as Pre-history. Rig Veda is our earliest literary text (1500-1000 century B.C.). Although, we have earliest evidence of scripts in the fifth Century B.C., it appears that most of the literary works got recorded and canonized during the fourth c. A. D. Actually, a majority of Brahmanical and Buddhist sources were oral in nature, i.e. they were transmitted orally for generations. **Secondly**, different areas of ancient Indian knowledge system (like Medicine, Arithmetic, Agriculture, Grammar, Language, Dance, Music and Astrology, etc.), are expressed and represented in written (shastra) as well as oral (lok parampara) forms. In contemporary India, both oral and literary traditions symbiotically coexist.

Causes

We, as a student of history in Delhi University, at graduation and post graduation level only believed in Ranke’s dictum (Positivism) that “History is based on 2 types of sources- literary and archaeological”. It was at M.Phil Level, while studying ‘Historiographical trends of the world’, we came to know about a third type of source i.e. oral sources in the reconstruction of history.

Origin

19th century Europe experienced immense political turmoil – an important outcome of the French Revolution of 1789, was the rise of Napoleon Bonaparte (1792-1815). Napoleon’s belligerency (Continental Blockade) against the British naval supremacy led to anarchy in Europe. It united other European nations like Britain, Austria, Sweden, etc (Conservative Consolidation or ‘Metternich System’ at the Congress of Vienna, Austria, 1815), to check the rising democratic forces in Europe. This system faced stiff opposition in the form of Carbonari Movement (for the Italian unification in 1830s) and Bunschenschaftlen Movement

(for the German unification in 1840s). Later, in 1856, the 'Eastern Question' or East European Crisis got its manifestation in the Crimean War (Russia vs. all other European nations), which ultimately culminated in the 1st World War (1914).

Historians were being held responsible for series of those events. It was widely believed that historians as a community, by championing war (and warriors like Alexander, Changez Khan, etc.,) in their respective works, had created a very hostile atmosphere leading to wars. This rampant negative public sentiments prompted many prominent historians to switch over their theme from political to cultural one. Thus, the Modernist school (Virginia Woolf, T.S.Elliot, Pablo Picasso) evolved, where different art (forms like painting, dance drama etc.) and literature became the popular subject of the historians. And that's how oral tradition became an integral part of history writing

Contemporary Examples

In recent times, Dan Brown's 2 books -The *Da vinci code* (2003) or *The Lost Symbol* (2009) to some extent, exhibit the Modernist tinge. Especially, in his first work, the writer by interpreting Leonardo da vinci's paintings, propounded a new theory related to Christianity. The Vatican condemned Brown's interpretation. But, this work proved to be immensely popular and was not considered blasphemous. In fact, it was the best selling book of 2003.

Oral Tradition in various Schools of Thought

Even the Annales school (Marc Bloch, George Duby) talked about the unconventional sources for history writing like cartography, drama etc, and termed it as 'Popular culture' or 'Folk culture'.

Many other schools of thought like the Functionalist (Durkheim, Parson, etc) the Structuralist (Saussure , Levi Strauss), Post-Structuralist (Derrida, Foucault, etc)), Post-Modernist (Toynbee, *Nietzsche*) endorsed 'Oral culture' or 'Oral tradition' in their studies. In India, in this regard D.D. Kosambi (*Myth and Reality: Studies in the Formation of Indian Culture*) was again, the pioneer. Thereafter, oral traditions began to attract the keen eye of every social scientist, so much so that interpreting socio cultural information now is considered incomplete without recourse to folklore. This is applicable to various schools like the Nationalists, Marxists, Feminists and especially, the Subaltern schools in India. The Marxist, the Feminist school in general, and the Subaltern school in particulay found oral tradition very useful in the study of history from below with a greater emphasis of the trial and peasant masses of India.

Indian Literature and its relation with oral tradition

Indian Classical literature is unique. As mentioned earlier, majority of Brahmanical, Jaina and Buddhist texts like the earliest Rig Veda (1500BCE) were orally transmitted for generations. Although, the earliest Indian epigraphic evidences belong to the Mauryan period, a majority of Indian literature got canonized, recorded and inscribed as manuscripts very late in the 5th- 6th CE during the Gupta period. So from oral form they became archaeological source during this period as we all know, epigraphy is an integral part of archeology. The Indian literature became literary sources 'literally' after the advent of the Turks (in 13th CE) who brought paper technology (borrowed from the Chinese) to India. Not a single Indian classical literature book is older than 13th CE. However, the

Portuguese introduced the modern printing technology to the Indians in the 17 CE when book publication became quite widespread. Brahmanical texts like *Vedas*, (*Rig, Sama, yajur, Atharva*) *Vednagas* (*Shiksha, Nirytta Chhand, Kalpa, Jyotuissha, Vyakarana*) *Vedantas* (*Brahman, Aranyaka and Upanishad*), appears to be transmitted orally. **Shiksha one of the six Vedangas (limbs of Veda) that dealt with phonetics and phonology of Sanskrit, laid down rules for correct pronunciation of Vedic hymns and mantras. Even secular literature like Mudrarakhshasha, Abhijnan Shakuntalam, Raghuvamsham etc. have been orally carried forward for years.**

The classical example is Shudraka's *Mudrarakhshasha*. His other composition *Devi Chandraguptam* was the biography of his mentor Chandragupta II (375 to 414 CE) of Gupta dynasty. While in his former work ie. *Mudrarakhshasha* Shudraka gives the vivid account of Chandragupta Maurya, who usurped the throne by assassinating Dhanananda (of Nanda Dynasty) with the aid of Chanakya in 322-321 BCE. There is a gap of almost 750 yrs between the foundation of Mauryan dynasty and composition of *Mudrarakhshasha*. In this case one can speculate that the story of confrontation between Rakshasha, the minister of Dhanananda and Chanakya, the fugitive mentor of Chandra gupta Maurya, was orally transmitted for 750 long years. Moreover, the two epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* appears to have been part of the Indian tradition and were (eg. Ramaleela) orally transmitted since time immemorial. Ramaleela, is a form of ritual folk dance-drama depicting scenes from the *Ramayana*. In recent times both *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* got popularized and propagated through TV serial produced by B. R Chopra and Ramanand Sagar, respectively. Even classics like Kaalidas' *Shakuntla, Raghuvamsa* etc. are being performed as drama by all types of folk and elite theatre groups. My grandfather who was my Guru whispered the Gayatri mantra in my ears after the sacred thread ceremony in 1977. He had strictly instructed me to practice it secretly. But now a days kids chant Gayatri mantra in their class assembly. We get them as ringtone in our mobile phones. It simply implies that they are secret no more. It is widely believed that people were capable of memorizing the vast classical literature like the four Vedas during the ancient period. The popular surnames among the North Indians like Chaturvedi, Trivedi, Dwivedi, etc., probably reflect in this direction. Before the coming of the mobiles in our day to day life, even in the late eighties and early nineties, people (even myself) remembered the landline numbers of all my important friends and relatives but nowadays, once mobile crept into our life actually all numbers are just fed in them and it becomes very difficult anyone to recall any number if the mobile is destroyed or lost. My proposition is that dependence on gadgets and machines, has adversely affected our memorizing capacity other wise man, by instinct, is capable of restoring enormous data in his mind.

On the contrary, in recent times, the schools that teach vedic sciences have developed special methods of memorising the verses. To this day, the vedic verses are transmitted orally and there are scholars who can recite the entire body of this ancient poetry without the slightest change of a syllable, and exactly in the original oral form.

Even the Buddhist texts like the Jatakas (stories of Buddhas previous births in different species) reveal that they are structured for oral transmission by wandering minstrels.

The *shaddarshan* or 6 philosophies of ancient India *Mimamsa, Yoga, Nyaya, Sankhya, Vedantika and Vaishesika* was based on discussion (philosophical discourses or *shastrarthas*.) So the very basis of 6 ancient philosophies exhibit orality.

Mimamsa, Tantra, Yoga and Prabhakaras viewed and interpreted the origin and nature of the Universe by exploring the nature and manifestations of the sound. They built elaborate philosophical edifices

around the concepts they evolved during that process. Those traditions considered sound as one of the most important principles of existence; as the source of matter and as the key to be free from it. They described Sound as the thread-like link between the material and spiritual realms. Panini's Astadhyayi, the Grammar, is also based on the sound of spoken Sanskrit.

The French philosopher Jacques Derrida said: The spoken word is given a higher value because the speaker and listener are both present to the utterance simultaneously. There is no temporal or spatial distance between speaker, speech, and listener, since the speaker hears himself speak at the same moment as the listener does. This immediacy seems to guarantee the notion that in the spoken word we know what we mean, mean what we say, say what we mean and know what we have said.

During the medieval period Bhakti movement and later Sufi tradition gave a new dimension to the Indian oral tradition, Great saints like Kabir, Nanak, Tukaram, Chaitanya, Mirabai, Eknath, Shirdi Sai baba, etc. are the most suitable examples to support this point. Sufi movement of Islamic origin believed in the Hindu Muslim unity and their central theme was love for God. Their 'devotion in God' got the expression in the form of songs or qawwalis. Even in recent time the songs of Bulle Shah is popularized (orally transmitted) through many Bollywood songs. (viz. Beshak Mandir masjid todo (Bobby 1970) (kun faya kun, Bulla ki Jana ki main kaun 2012,) In recent years, the contribution made by anthropologist A.K. Ramanujam who published folk stories of tribal origin and Habib Tanveer who made a significant contribution in the field of folk dance and drama among Chhattisgarhi Tribals, are worth mentioning. The popularity of Sufi songs in today's Cinema world, the productions of Tanvir, the stories retold by A. K. Ramanujan and all such other works go to show that the oral traditions of literature in India are as active as the traditions of written literature.

In recent years, the Indian Diaspora in Mauritius, Surinam and other Caribbean islands are involved in many projects based on oral tradition of their respective regions. The cultural heritage projects in these regions are focused on Bhojpuri dance, drama and music. As many of their forefathers were transported to these islands as indentured labourers from Bhojpuri speaking belt of modern states of Bihar and U.P.

● Ongoing Research

Ramdin S : Bhojpuri-Hindi-English Dictionary

A reference work of 30 000 entries

Compilation work completed

Final Editing work underway for Press copy to be published in India.

- Production of Records & Cassettes of Folk Music of Mauritius

In the series of pre-recorded audio cassettes of the wedding songs of different linguistic groups in Mauritius, the Department will soon undertake the production of another project relating to traditional Tamil wedding songs of Mauritius.

- A Learning Kit of Traditional Singing Games of Rodrigues

In accordance with the national policy of the Government of Mauritius to promote educational and cultural growth, especially in the field of pre-primary schooling and early childhood development in Mauritius as well as in Rodrigues, the present project aims at producing a second Learning Kit which will consist of :

1. A pre-recorded cassette of 10 or 12 singing-games
2. An illustrated handbook
3. A video manual

The project will be worked out by the Department - MGI in collaboration with :
The Ministry of Education and Scientific Research
The Ministry of Rodrigues
The Ministry of Arts and Culture
The Mauritius College of the Air

- Collection of Oral Literature for the Folk Archive of the Department

The task of building up the collection of folk material for the archival collection as well as for the Folk Museum of the Department is underway and the collection presently counts around 200 recorded cassettes, slides, photographs and cultural objects.

- Cultural and Linguistic Aspects of Bhojpuri in Mauritius with Special Reference to the Traditional Folk Songs

'*Bhojpuri folk song*' is best understood as a very broad term that includes many different types of singing and songs of many periods as performed by the singers.

The bulk of Bhojpuri folk songs of Mauritius comes from the past. Much of the repertory, which travelled all the way to Mauritius, is known to have been currently used in India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Some are earlier in origin, and it is likely that some very old melodies and lyrics have survived having been adapted to modern forms.

The Indian Immigrants in Mauritius were the natural ambassadors of their culture and they possessed all the elements to recreate on the Mauritian scene, the diversity of the cultural and linguistic aspects as represented in India.

- Saddul, V : Godna - The Art of Traditional Body-Tattooing in the Early 19th Century

A monograph describing and analysing the old custom of tattooing among the Indian immigrants of North India in Mauritius and some ritualistic songs relating to same.

- Deerpalsing, S : 19th Century Social History of Mauritius

Primary and secondary source material to be identified locally at the Mauritius Archives, the National Library and other private libraries.

- Ramhota, P : Kalimay Cult - Its Role in the Socio-Economic Development of Mauritius

Project underway and being worked out through interviews in the south, north and western fishing villages of the island.

- Govinden, V : Indian Immigration in Mauritius - The Role of Free Immigrants in the 19th Century

Research from primary and secondary sources at the Mauritius Archives, local as well as overseas libraries 1997-2001

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These cultural heritage project by our own natives settled in distant countries clearly envisages the oral tradition in the reconstruction Cultural history of India.

South India –Kochi as a case study to examine its history based on its oral tradition.

We will try to do the case study of the Oral traditions related to the coastal regions of Kochi and the Lakshadweep Islands. Kochi was the centre of Indian spice trade for many centuries, where traders of diverse nationalities (the Greeks, Romans, Jews, Arabs, Chinese, Portuguese, Dutch, etc.) came to trade, since ancient times. The Lakshadweep islands had *served these* foreigners as a *halting* place during their voyages to India via Kochi. Secondly, the legends of Islam in Kochi and Lakshadweep are inter-related. Moreover, it appears that the geographical isolation of the Islands of Lakshadweep from the South Indian mainstream, enabled it to preserve its tradition (i.e. Arabo Islamic Culture) to greater extent. It will help us to undertake comparative studies of both the regions,.

According to the Popular Culture or Oral tradition of Kochi, it is widely believed that chronologically respective preachers of Zionism, Christianity and Islam migrated to South India by landing on the seashore of Muziris (identified as Kochi) in different phases of time.

Kochi and Lakshadweep.

Identification of Oral Traditions associated with the historical events of Kochi and Lakshadweep Islands (in chronological sequence) are as follows :

Kochi

1. Indo Roman Trade --- There is a Jews town in modern Kochi which is an exclusive spice market.
2. Judaism-- There is a Synagogue adjacent to this market, which is believed to be of ancient origin.
3. Christianity—Most popular belief is that in the 1st CE St. Thomas migrated to Kochi after being persecuted at his native place. Later he shifted his base to Mylapore in Tamil Nadu where there is St. Thomas Church.
4. Islam--- According to another legend, the second oldest mosque (first being constructed at Saudi Arabi by Prophet Md. Himself) was built by Ubaidullah (the disciple of the Prophet) in 628 CE at a place, Kodangallur, in Kochi. Its still operational there.

Christianity

Most famous is the legend that St. Thomas one of the 12 twelve disciple of Jesus came to Kochi in South India and spread Christianity among the masses in the 52 c. A. D . This legend was deliberately ignored by the British historians, as it became very difficult for them to accept the fact that Christianity came to India much earlier than it came to England. Even the Vatican for verification purpose came to this Church on 5th Feb. 1986. However, after Pope John Paul II personally came to offer prayer in this Church, he didn't acknowledge it categorically which created lots of controversy at that time. Unfortunately, History of Christianity in ancient India is still ignored. We have only passing reference to this legend in most of our ancient Indian history text books. As a matter of fact, we have corroborative literary and archaeological evidence at various places in the modern states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu. In Kerala, we have Syrian Christians, who believe that they were Baptised by St. Thomas. According to the book *Act of Thomas*, he first settled at Kochi and started propagating Christianity and. In 72 c.A. D., 20 yrs later he attained martyrdom at Mylapore (Chennai) Tamil Nadu. The shrine of St. Thomas Basilica is built on the Tomb of St. Thomas. Consequently, the disciples of Thomas (or Syrian Christians, as Thomas and Jesus, both belonged to the middle east Syria) are primarily confined to the Malabar regions in Kerala so they are also called Malabari Christians, Mappila or Malyalee Christians.

Islam

Believed to be built in 629 by Malik Bin Deenar, Cheraman Juma Masjid (near Kochi in Thrissur) is considered as the oldest mosque in India, and the second oldest mosque in the world to offer Jumu'ah prayers. Constructed during the lifetime of Muhammad, the bodies of some of his original followers are said to be buried here. Unlike other mosques in Kerala that face westwards this mosque faces eastwards. Though, generally it is considered to be the second mosque of the world after the mosque in Medina, Saudi Arabia.

The legend has it that a group of Muhammad's Sahaba (companions) visited Kodungallur. Cheraman Perumal (Rama Varma Kulasekhara), then the Chera ruler, had witnessed a miraculous happening — the sudden splitting of the moon, the celebrated miracle of Muhammad — and learned on inquiry that this was a symbol of the coming of a Messenger of God from Arabia. Soon after, Perumal travelled to Makkah, where he embraced Islam, and accepted the name Thajudeen. On his way back to India he died at Salalah in the Sultanate of Oman. On his deathbed he is said to have authorised some of his Arab companions to go back to his kingdom to spread Islam. Accordingly, a group of Arabs led by Malik Bin Deenar and Malik bin Habib arrived in north Kerala, and constructed the Cheraman Juma Masjid at Kodungalloor.

LakshawEEP

Early history of Lakshadweep is unwritten. What now passes for history is based on various legends. Local traditions attribute the first settlement on these islands to the period of Cheraman Perumal, the last king of Kerala. It is believed that after his conversion to Islam, at the behest of some Arab merchants, he slipped out of his capital Cranganore, the present day Kodungallor - an old harbour town Kochi, for Mecca. When his disappearance was discovered, search parties went after him in sailing boats and left for the shores of Mecca, in search of the king from different places. It is believed that one of these sailing boats of Raja of Cannanore was struck by a fierce storm and they were shipwrecked on the island now

known as Bangaram. From there they went to the nearby island of Agatti. Finally the weather improved and they returned to the mainland sighting other islands on their way. It is said that after their return another party of sailors and soldiers discovered the island of Amini and started living there. It is believed that the people sent there were Hindus. Even now unmistakable Hindu Social stratification exists in these islands despite Islam. Legends say that small settlements started in the Islands of Amini, Kavaratti, Andrott and Kalpeni first and later people from these islands moved to the other islands of Agatti, Kiltan, Chetlat and Kadmat.

Judaism

Cochin Jews, also called Malabar Jews (*Malabar Yehudan*) and Yuda Mappila, are the oldest group of Jews in India, with roots claimed to date to the time of King Solomon, though historically attested migration dates from the fall of Jerusalem in 70 CE. Historically, they lived in the Kingdom of Cochin in South India, now part of the state of Kerala. Several rounds of immigration of the Jewish diaspora into Kerala led to an ethnic, but not a linguistic, diversity: the community was divided into White Jews (Paradesi Jews) and Black Jews (Malabari), both of which spoke Judeo-Malayalam, a dialect of Malayalam. The vast majority of Cochin Jews emigrated to Israel after its formation, the number remaining in Kerala itself is minuscule, and the community faces extinction there.

Trade

The Marine Archaeology and Oral tradition corroborate each other in the context of the Indo Roman trade of early centuries. We have many foreign accounts of this trade (The Periplus of the Erythrean Sea, Pliny's Natural History or Ptolemy's Geography, etc.) In recent times, under the aegis of Kerala Council for Historical Research (KCHR), legends have been effectively used to undertake successful archaeological excavation of the sea bed. It gave rise to a new field of Marine Archaeology, where legends and oral tradition play a pivotal role. Eg. Marine archaeological excavation at Bangaram (Lakshadweep Islands) on the basis of a legend of a ship wreck.

Hypothesis--- If these legends are cross examined properly, we will get an opportunity to study the history of Islam, Christianity and Judaism in the ancient Indian History, itself.

Kochi witnessed a very peaceful co existence of Judaism, Christianity and Islam since ancient times. Many epigraphic evidences (like the Pahlavi inscription of uncertain date¹) collaborate with the Malayalee oral tradition to support it. The earliest most authentic evidence is the Kottayam Syrian Christian Plates, also known as Tarisappa Plates.² We have 2 cp of different times one belongs to the 5th reign year of Chera ruler S.Ravi (844-883 c. A.D.) In the second grant the recipient is Mar Sapir Iso and appears to be a later copy of the original. They are in Pahlavi, Kufic and Hebrew. It indicates that apart from the Christians even the Jews and Muslims had an influence in the society esp. in Kollam region. In the first set of inscription, the beneficiary was Church of Tarisa built by Esoda Tapirayi at Kurakke. It had a list of dues from which the Church was exempted. The second cp plate

¹ C.P.T. Winkworth, Cultural Symbiosis in Kerala, Trivandrum, 1972, p.5.

² The document has been a subject of interest among historians due to varied reasons. Rev. Monteiro d Auguiar, "The Magna Charta of the St. Thomas Christians", translated from the Portuguese and annotated by Rev. H. Holstein, Kerala Society Papers, Series 4, 1930, pp.169-200. Attempts to decipher and to make sense of them at an academic level began with Hermann Gundert in the 19th century: Madras Journal of Literature and Science, Series (TAS).

mentions the name of Maruvan Sapiriso who granted land for the maintenance of Church of Tarissa. It is interesting to find the God here is called Deva and is offered a sacred oil lamp. Local practices had considerable influence on the Church. In fact Christians incorporated many local religious ideas and practices. It is really very intriguing to find that papacy training at institutional level resembled that of gurukula style³. The Christians dressed themselves like the Nairs. The Christians followed caste rules rigorously like untouchability, etc., and celebrated Malyali festivals like Onam. They even worshipped in Brahmanical temples. That's why, Roman Catholic Church when reached Kerala during the Portuguese rule, got shocked by their identity. In fact the famous Synod of Diemper was convened in 1699 for the purification of their pagan brethren. The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diemper identified many of these heresies and banned them.⁴

Same thing happened with the Jews and the muslims in Kochi. Like the Christians even the Jews and the muslims were influenced by the local Malyalee tradition⁵. Local rituals and beliefs got a place in their respective religions. As stated earlier, like Christians the muslims and the Jews were treated as another category of caste. All of them celebrated Malyalee festival Onam with great fervour. Especially among the muslim hierarchy was created due the local influence. In short all the three world religions i.e. Judaism, Christianity and islam sociologically got parochialised or localized in its nature. All contemporary evidences especially the oral tradition indicate a peaceful coexistence of the three religion in a land of Brahmanical dominance. One can safely speculate that this eclecticism must have paved way for the growth of a composite culture in Kochi during the ancient times.



³ Quoted in Scaria Zacharia ed., *Udayamperur Sunahodosin Kanonaka Edamattam*, 1994, p.33.

⁴ Scaria Zacharia, ed. *The Acts and Decrees of the Synod of Diemper Edmattam*, 1994, tr. By Michael Geddes in 1680.

⁵ Kesavan Veluthat, *Heretical Practices or Composite Culture? The Christians of Kerala*,



