

THE NATURE AND MEANING OF FOLKLORE

There are a number of words and phrases in common parlance, whose the meaning and usages we often take for granted. But when we set ourselves to define them in a scientific manner we find them irritatingly elusive. For example take so common a word as culture and try to define it. The we will realize as Raymond Williams correctly says: “culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language (Key words) could there be by any one, at least moderately educated in literary terms and styles, who is not acquainted with ‘romanticism’? But try to define it. F.L.Lucas once counted 11,396 definitions of Romanticism. What is the use of a definition if it could take thousands of varial and often contradictory connotations and forms? For that matter try Modernism? Irving Howe I his standard anthology admits that the “term (modernism) is elusive and protean, and its definition highly complicated” Now let us turn over to another field, political science and history. Could you readily supply a working definition of Nation?

Well, if that in the case with many meaningful word in our work a day world, we many not grudge the honour of ambiguity shrouding our present theme word ‘Folklore’. Of course, it is a well known feet that this exquisite word in English was coined in 1846 by a ninetieth century antiquarian named William John Thomas. But when called upon to give a precise as well as comprehensive definition to the word, Maria Leach, the Editor of the excellent reference book, Standard Dictionary of Folklore Mythology and Legend adopted the safe course of leaving the impossible task to twenty-one outstanding authorities in the field. These men and women of impeccable record in erudition and scholarship gave twenty-one different versions, some long, some short, but most of them at variance with each other. So to attempt a satisfactory one is bound to be too tall an order to execute with in the compass of this short piece. But we must have some working definition to start with, however unsatisfactory it might prove to be. So I propose here a negative approach, to delineate those items which obviously do not belong here.

First of all we have to draw a line between folklore and folkloristics. The former is the subject for study the vast and ever-growing corpus of a variety of materials and the latter the study and investigation of these materials. About the folklore material proper, we may not agree with John L. Mithras (in the Dictionary referred above) who defines:

“The entire body of ancient popular beliefs, customs and traditions, which has survived among the less educated elements of civilized society until today”

So too is the definition offered by Charles Francis Potter in the same Volume. He says:

“Folklore is a lively fossil which refuses to die, It is a precipitate of the scientific and cultural lag of centuries and millennia of human experience”

The definitions like these, subscribed to by many authorities, are beset with a number of hurdles. The idea that folklore items are ancient relics is one such. These definers ignore the patent fact that most of the folklore genre currently in circulation belong to eras much later than most of the extant classics of the elite. They also overlook the pervasive phenomenon of folklore creation here and now. Does it mean that folklore is a more or less recent and contemporary phenomenon with no ancient roots? Not at all. Most of the ancient folklore do survive but as an independent and parallel genre. During turning points in history, marked by social commotions and accompanying literary and artistic renaissances, the folklore then available was absorbed into the main stream. Maxim Gorky says:

“The true history of the toiling people cannot be learnt without a knowledge of the folklore which continuously and definitely influenced the creation of such outstanding literary works as Faust, The Adventures of Baron Munchausen, Gargantua and Pantagruel and Shelly’s Prometheus Unbound. Since hoary antiquity folklore has accompanied history unflaggingly and in its own manner”

India affords no exception to this universal characteristic of development of great art and literature. The texts themselves of our Epics and Puranas acknowledge that they were compiled and edited versions of