

WHAT IS FOLK LORE?

What is Folklore? Who were its creators? How did it survive through the stress and strain, wear and tear of centuries, nay, millenniums? What is the secret of this perennial and persistent nature? What is its function in the modern world, which swept away into the dustbins of history the social formation, which give birth to and nurtured this exquisite phenomenon called folklore?

Attempts to answer these questions were made by many brilliant minds. Actually the attempts started almost a century before the English antiquarian William John Thomas coined the seminal word folklore in 1846. His own countryman Bishop Thomas Percy's publication *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* in 1765 was a landmark. The monumental work of the great German philosopher, historian and folklorist Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803) who coined the word Volkslied (Folk song) in 1771 was even more significant. Then followed a galaxy of luminaries – the famous Grimm brothers and Theodore Benfy in Germany, Max Muller, Cecil sharp and Andrew Lang in Britain, Francis J child in USA, Julins Kron in Finland, Paul Sebillot and Emanuel Cosquin in France and so on. With Thomas participation the first English Folklore society was founded in 1878 and closely on its heels in the eighties the American folklore society took shape under the inspiration of Francis Child of Harward. Although it is plausible exercise to push back the beginning folkloristics (collection and study of folklore) by a few centuries more, we may safely assume that its foundation were laid and contours drawn in the prime of the nineteenth century. But

during the century that followed and afterwards this new and exciting science grown to incredible proportion and branched out in innumerable directions.

Rival schools for thought contend for the exclusive possession of the field and many a discipline seeks to part its private label on its forehead. Anthropology and sociology, linguistics and aestheticism, history and psychology are all suitors for the hand of folkloristics. Therefore it is understandable that the folklore which was a nebulous and elusive concept from the very beginning, still wriggles out of the maneuvers to pin its down to a generally acceptable definition even by the most outstanding in this field.

Maria leach's well-known dictionary plays safe by listing out 21 definitions of folklore by contributors of unassailable stature. But except on the scope and variety of folklore items most of them disagree with each other. The scope is wide and the items are numerous. Stith Thomson says:

“Although the word folklore is more than a century old, no exact agreement has been reached as to its meaning. The common idea present in all folklore is that of tradition, something handed down from one person to another and preserved either by memory or practice rather than written record. It involves the dances, songs, legends and traditions the beliefs and superstitions and proverbial sayings of the peoples elsewhere. It also includes studies of customs of traditional agricultural and domestic practices, types of buildings and utensils and traditional aspects of social

organisations but for these latter aspects, there seems to be a general agreement to consider them, when found in a primitive or preliterate society, as a part of ethnology rather than folklore. This latter division of labour is largely a matter of convenience is not universally accepted. At least among literate peoples all the subjects mentioned above are considered as folklore, since all of them are truly traditional” (Leach 1975 p 43)

This is as good a description as any other but for a few ambiguities the words like “traditional”, “primitive” and “preliterate” are clear enough, but in the context of folklore theory leave certain areas delightfully and conveniently vague. This type of image is common among a large number of folklorists.

The epithets like “primitive”, “ancient”, “preliterate” connotes a chronological or temporal quality – which would imply that folklore in some thing which precede the rest of the “lore” of the civilized, the advanced. Though Charles Francis Potter claims that the experienced folklorist is never patronizing toward primitive patterns of life- adjustment” his explanations and definition lead to nowhere else. He says:

“Folklore is a lively fossil which refuse to die. It is a precipitate of the scientific and cultural lag of centuries and millennia of human experience ... Folklore is the survival within a peoples later stages of culture of the beliefs, stories, customs, rites and other techniques of adjustment to the world and the supernatural, which were used in the previous stages ...” (Ibid, p.401)

This idea of the folklore being a residue or relic of the distant past fails to examine the phenomenon of the continuous creation and recreation of folklore from the past to our own times. If being ancient and predated in the criterion of the folk creation a large quantity of various folklore items have to be rejected in the face of more ancient literate and sophisticated lore. Certainly there are marks of ancient usages and beliefs in folklore, but they cannot be taken as the points of departure in defining this genre of the vast corpus of folklore of all nations collected up-to-date, no more than a small percentage could be traced to origins older than a Sop odes, a Valmike or Kalidasa. A large part of them actually are their origins to an era not older than three or four centuries. Take Kerala's Theyyam or Northern Ballads. Take Karnataka's Bhootha Nrithyas or number items in Banjalata. Or any of these genres. Only a very rash folklorist would dare to bestow on them histories longer than four or five centuries. Academician Y M S Soklolv writes:

“A number of researchers tried to reduce the essence of folklore to the understanding of culture ‘survivals, relics as if even forming the specific character of folklore in contrast to literature ... In the content and form of folklore, it is impossible to deny the presence of survivals for the old cultures of earlier socio-economic structures (feudalism, tribal society) There is no aspect of the life and activity of human society, which does not reflect, in one degree or other, the experience of the part stages in human culture; but to isolate folklore solely on the basis of this characteristic into a special field of knowledge is in expedient and

groundless. Those same surviving elements are to be observed also in material culture, as well as in customs, manners, opinions and finally in art. In a word, in the whole of social life. The historian for any phenomenon will discern individual elements of the past in the view, in the contemporary; elements, of course, which in an appropriate manner have been changed, worked over and transformed” Then Sokolov proceeds to pronounce on the “relics” - “fossils” – “survivals” etc theory: “ Nonetheless, to make these ‘survivals’ the basic object of a knowledge of folkloristics would be an unjustifiable extension, and at the same time a contraction of its task” (Sokolov: 1950 pp14-5)

The “survival-relic-fossil” theory can also be presented in an apparently opposite direction in a reverse order so to say. The theories of Max Muller in 19th century England, and his Russian contemporary A N Afanasyev, the 20th century German scholar Hans Naumann and Shrimathi Durga Bhagavat in India of our times among others belong to this category.

The German born English scholar Max Muller the famous modern compiler of Rig Veda considered myths and consequentially much of folklore as nothing but a corruption or malady of the original and exalted forms for classical languages like Sanskrit. He worked out ingenious formulas of the decadence of languages, which ended up in myths and folktales. Responding to concerted attacks of Theodore Ben Fay, the great translator of Panchatantra into German, Muller later came to accept his “migratory theory of folklore”. But his Russian contemporary Afanasyev borrowed his

original point essence. The representatives the pre-revolution “historical school” like V. Miller and V.A. Keltuyala developed this tendency to absurd lengths. For example Keltuyala in his book *A course in the History of Russian Literature* (1911) put forth the categorical assertion that not only the epos of the byliny (folktale in Russian) but also “all kinds and aspects of oral creative work had their origin, not in the masses of people, but their upper classes...” (Sokolov: 1950 pp 116-7)

This fantastic claim is not different from what Durga Bhagavat has written in her widely noticed book “An outline of India Folklore”. She says: “The cultural harmony in India despite differences in provincial traditions, is unique. Unity inspite of diversity is what the divergence of traditions in folklore points to. Whether you study a proverb or myth or a riddle or a song you almost certainly find its prototype either in Vedic, Buddhist-Jain literature, on in epic and puranas. Though we are yet unable to find an exact duplicate of any and every piece of folklore, we surely find the seed in some of the above-mentioned sources. By these variants we are bale to trace the evolution of various forms of folklore”. (Bhagavat: 1958 1-2)

Before we begin examining in detail the validity this type of exercise in turning the natural order of development upside down, let us also refer to a recent German scholar with pronounced pro-nazi proclivities. His name is Hans Naumann who set forth his theory of folklore in the early twenties after the First World War. Sokolov summarizes this:

“Naumann perceives two contrasted beginnings in folklore: gesunkenes Kulturgut (Sunken cultural values and die primitive

Gemein Schafsts Kulture (Primitive Communal culture). In the first category Naumann includes those manifestations of culture, which were created among the ruling classes of the ear of feudalism and the later eras, but with the passing of time have been swept down from the cultural ‘heights’ to the ‘lowest depths of the people’. Thus the songs of the poets of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were transformed in the nineteenth, into popular songs; the chivalrous poetry of the middle ages became the folksongs of the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries”.
(Sokolov: 1950 pp 119-20)

The theories of origin and development for folklore immunicated by this formidable array of scholars from Max Muller to Naumann and Bhagavat are all based on certain unproved historical assumptions and are riddled with logical in consistencies. They run counter to the generally accepted ideas of social and cultural evolution and turn a Nelson’s eye to incontrovertible facts of empirical evidence.

When they say emission with individual variations that we all had a very exalted culture, language and literature once upon a time and that the forms of folklore are but decadent derivatives, they fail to enlighten us as to how we achieved that pinnacle in times of yore. At what point of time that miracle took place? What was the shape of things before that time? As we have seen “it is impossible of the old cultures of earlier social-economic structures” in folklore, we have also to admit that the upper class and elitist culture keeps on bombarding and influencing it. But admitting this fact in

very far from conceding the origin of all folklore to the so-called “literate literature and lore” is a very late arrival on the scene of history. Rhys Carpenter, a well known classicist says:

“Speech must be almost as old as mankind: song must be as old as speech; and poetry almost as older as song. Against this enormous vista, writing on which our normal literary types depend is almost a modernism. It is idle to ask how old is languages, since, no one, seemingly. Yet knows securely the age of the sentient eloquent man’ wherefore it is impossible to venture even a plausible guess at the antiquity of oral literary forms. Yet it is fairly safe to say that, with the antiquity of writing nowhere transcending five thousand years, the literature of unwritten speech must outdate its written competitor and successor by many times its measure. Attic tragedy and history, Plato and pre-Socratics will then become milestones set only a little distance back along the road which leads to the shadowy unwritten beginnings of literature”(Carpenter: 1946 pp 1-2)

So the claims of high culture over the oral and folk culture is clearly untenable. Then what exactly are the relations between the two genres? Maxim Gorky once said:

“The true story of the toiling people cannot be learnt without a knowledge of the folklore which continuously and definitively influenced the creation of such outstanding literary works as Faust, The Adventures of Baron Munchausen, Gargantua and

Penta gruel, de Coster's Thyl Eulenspiegel and Shelly's Prometheus Unbound. Since hoary antiquity folklore has accompanied history unflinching and in its own manner"(Gorky: Moscow p 243)

In the case of older classics and epics the debt to the folk and oral traditions is much more pronounced and direct. No one seriously disputes today that Iliad, Odyssey, Ramayana, Mahabharatha were all once upon a time oral compositions sung by wandering minstrels, bequeathed from sire to son from generations. Even after centuries since they were reduced to writing the epics still retain explicit evidences for such origin and propagation. Valmiki's protégés Lava and Kusa were the oral propagators of the great sage's creation. Many suthas who passed the Mahabharatha epic from generation to generation are mentioned by name in its present inflated edition also. The growth through the centuries of the original version of "Vijay" to later "Bharata" to present massive "Mahabharatha" with its eighteen parvas and over hundred thousand stanzas was made possible by continuous waves of interpolations, the major part of which come from the rich storehouse of folklore. Even after the sharp trimmings Dr Sukthanker for his definitive edition, many a frill from the colorful folk tradition adorns its pages. If such is the case of the two epics, the case of the plethora of Puranas can very well be imagined. And Vedas too are not exception. Learning by rite and memorizing of Veda by Brahmins continues right to the close of our century. It is very doubtful whether the Rig Veda and its younger companions were committed by writing at all till four or five centuries ago when Sayana of Vijayanagara collated and edited them and gave them the present shapes.

Invention and knowledge of the art of writing do not necessary imply that oral traditions are given up Carpenter says:

“Because they belong to oral literature they need not therefore be older than writing. Such an inference would be faulty because oral literature can continue to flourish during and after the introduction of letters. Writing will ultimately kill it: ‘cci tuera cela’; but the death may be slow and lingering. In Russia literacy and oral literature existed side by side for a thousand years”(Carpenter: 1946 p.11)

In India oral literary tradition still flourishes after about 25 centuries of writing. These arguments do not and are not intended to prove that the ancient classics were all folklore, which certainly they were not. All that is sought to show is that the claims for Durga Bhagavat and others ascribing a derivative status to folklore in relation to the great classics are not in consanance with historical reality. On the contrary a reverse order fits in with the known process of development in art and literature.

As Herder pointed out long ago the downgrading of folk art in comparison to the so-called civilized art was an aspect of the peculiar euphoria and inflated ego of the era of European enlightenment in the 18th Century. Gene Bluestein writes:

“... Almost from the beginning of modern interest in folksong, the seeds of antiquarianism were sown. Folk songs, in this view, were remnants from the past, artifacts of by gone cultures, and

their significance for the scholar lay in the glimpse they provided into the moves of attitudes of ‘primitive’ unenlightened men. It followed also that there was a distinct gap between the rude and clumsy poetry of the folk and the polished verse composed by the sophisticated writers. In this too (Bishop Thomas) Percy is a precursor of numerous modern folklorists who would not seriously compare folk poetry with the effort of any sophisticated writer. Although there were and are exceptions folklorists in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries were in general agreement with Percy. Folk song was quaint curious of some historical or linguistic interest, but it came to be identified essentially a thing of the part a kind of literary fossil which considering its low origins was clearly inferior formal verse (Bluestein: 1972 p.3)

It is interesting to note that the same type of condescending and patronizing altitude to folk compositions is expressed by Mahakavi Ulloor S Parameswara Iyer in his monumental history of Kerala’s Literature. Herdr pokes fun at those victims for the enlightenment faith that approached the level of a superstition that the eighteenth century Europe was the apogee of human civilization. He said:

“It would be the most stupid varity to imagine that all the inhabitants of the world must be Europeans to live happily”.
*(Outlines of Philosophy of the History of Man by J.G. Vontterder
 quoted in Bluestein: 1972 p 7)*

So we find that both the ‘fossil-relic’ theorists and ‘decadence-derivate’ theorists though each starts from different points of time agree on the inferior status of folklore. Now there is another type of argument that though apparently seeks to exalt folklore to a higher and universal pedestal, really robs it of its vigor, vitality and unique characteristics. Those people say that folklore is the creation of the entire nation, one and all and hence the property for all. One of the earliest examples for this attempt to drown folklore in the amorphous corpus of the main stream of national culture was the pronouncement of the British Board of Education in its *Handbook of Suggestions for the consideration of Teachers* published in 1905. Its chapter on “teaching of singing’ contained the following;

“National or folk songs... are the expression of the idiom of the people, of their joys and sorrows, their unaffected patriotism, their zest for sport and the simple pleasures of a country life. Such music is the early and spontaneous uprising of the artistic power in a nation and the ground on which all national music is built up; folk songs are the true classics of a people, and their survival so often by the tradition alone, proves that their appeal is direct and lasting ...”(Quoted in Reeves: 1962 p 5)

After these spasms of panegyric the *Hand book* did not forget to warn against ‘some for the folk music of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales’, which were considered unsuitable either in words or in compass for the use of schools”

Cecil J Sharp, the greatest figure in British Folklore collection and studies, took up cudgels against assessment in the Handbook. James Reeves who has edited a collection of songs from his left by Sharp recollects the controversy in brief:

“It (the Handbook) was seized on by Sharp as a warrant for the educational campaign he was to begin immediately. But first there was an important preliminary battle to be fought. He felt obliged to establish, with the maximum of publicity, the true nature of the folk as distinct from ‘national’ song ... Sharp’s contention was that there is an essential difference between an authentic, traditional song of the kind he had been noting in Somerset from the lips of the villagers, and composed songs like Tom Bouling and Rule Britannia’.

Sharp believed that the former were quite different from and superior to the latter musically. With regard to the content and theme also there were essential differences between the two types according to sharp. This subject he took up later in 1907 when he published his English Folk songs: some conclusions. In that he observed, justly, that the true folk song had little concern with patriotism or sport. The outlaw was, he said, more popular than the hero Robin Hood was preferred to Nelson. As for sport, folk songs were little preoccupied with the per suit of the gentry, preferring poaching to fox hunting. Again praise for the home and domestic life, Sharp remarked, was not among the themes of the folk songs. The wide spread popularity of The Raggle-Taggle Gypsies was significant”(Reeves: 1962, p.5-6)

Though many folklorists either through in difference or design blur the respective frontiers of folk and national some like Sharps younger Hungarian contemporary Bela Bartok (1881-1945) emphasize it all the more. A.L.Lloyd quotes Luis Armstrong's dreary anxious: All music's folk music; least ways I never heard of no horse making it' and continuous;

Against this broad and hardly manageable 'popular' view of folk song as national song is set the restricted picture offered by sever scientists of musical folklore who follow Bartok in considering the term 'folk-song' to be synonymous with peasant song, and who maintain that no other part of the nation but working farmers and farm labourers are the true shapers and bearers of traditional verse and melody"(Lloyd: 1970 p.12)

In common parlance the word folk is loosely used to mean 'a people', 'a race', 'a nation' etc. But in folklore studies we make use of the word more restrictively. Devoid of such precision and limitation the term loses its utility as a scientific concept.