

Anthropology and Folklore Studies in India: An Overview

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Abstract: *Anthropology has a long tradition of folklore studies. Anthropologist studied both the aspect of folklore i.e. life and lore. Folklore became a popular medium in anthropological studies and using emic approach researchers try to find out the inner meaning of different aspects of culture. This paper focused on the major approaches of the study of Anthropology and Folklore. It is an attempt to classify different phases of Anthropology of Folklore studies in India and understand the historical development of Anthropology of Folklore studies in India. It is observed that, both theoretical and methodological approaches were changed with the time and new branches are emerged with different dimensions.*

Keywords: Folklore, emic approach, lore, Anthropology of Folklore, culture.

1. Introduction

Of the four branches of Anthropology, Cultural Anthropology is most closely associated with folklore (Bascom, 1953). The term folklore was coined by W. J. Thoms in the year 1846 and was used by him in the magazine entitled *The Athenaeum* of London. Folklore consists of two words- folk and lore. Folk means unlettered mass and lore means learning. Thus, it stands for the orally handed down knowledge of the unlettered mass. Anthropologist studied both the aspect of folklore i.e. life and lore. The principal objective of folklore discipline is to study the lore of the folk (people or community). There are two meaning of the term lore- (i) lore is the knowledge, tradition, belief, traditional skill of a particular community and (ii) lore is the traditional knowledge of pre-scientific level i.e. the activities and expression (verbal, behavioural and ritualistic) of a particular community (Bandyopadhyay, 2012). The study of lore is significant for the anthropologists to understand the structural and functional dimensions of society.

Folklore is a nineteenth century term first used to refer to the traditional oral stories and saying of the European peasant, and later extended to those traditions preserved orally in all societies. Anthropologist George Peter Murdock (1945) described folklore including oral literature as cultural universal, though written literature is not a universal. Mazharul Islam (1998) defines folklore as- "the peoples of a culture or a country are folk and their lore is folklore". Alan Dundes defines folklore as- "the term folk can refer to any group of people what so ever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is- it could be a common occupation, language, or religion- but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which is called its own". According to Alan Dundes (1989), folklore is a broad category comprising all the myths, legends, folktales, ballads, riddles, proverbs, and superstitions of a cultural group. In general, folklore is transmitted across generation orally through the process of enculturation. But it may also be written. In Dundes's view, oral literature is part a more

closure term 'folklore'. Folklore includes both verbal and non-verbal forms. Oral literature, however, is usually includes verbal folklore only and does not include games and dances. Different cultures have different categories of folk literature. Dundes is of the opinion that contemporary study of oral literature tends to see folklore as a reflection of present culture rather than the past (cf. Boas' view on reconstructing past).

Folklore has an important place in primitive culture everywhere. It is through the medium of folklore that the culture of a primitive society is transmitted from one generation to the other. The folklores contain the philosophy of the primitive people. How the world was evolved is a theme of many of folklore current in different tribes. A comparative study of the folklores of different countries reveals that the ideas of the people about the creation of the world are similar, to a great extent, everywhere in the world. Its shows a similarity of the factors working in human thought, feeling and imagination everywhere in the world. Man's reaction towards nature is clearly depicted in folklores. In this way, folklores are important means to understand human culture.

Relation between the two discipline - Anthropology and Folklore

Folkloristics is a field that tends to overlap with several other fields of study, most notably cultural anthropology and literary studies. Anthropologists and Folklorists may easily study the same subjects in similar ways, but some patterns have developed over the years. Folklore studies the informal elements of culture (customs, rituals, tales and legends, jokes and so on) which transmitted with generations. Anthropology studies the institutional aspects of cultures (economies, political, religious, kinship systems, governments and so on). In comparative sense we find folklore focuses on contextual holism while Anthropology emphasis on holistic approach. Folklorists tend to look inward, at their own culture, while Anthropologists tend to look outward, at other cultures. Folklorists may often have a narrative focus, tying their work to literary analysis, while Anthropologists may often have a societal focus, tying their

work closer to Sociology. Folklore is often described as the study of everyday life, and while Anthropology described as the study of human culture. The functions of folklore are important aspects, which drew the serious attention of the anthropologists more than that of folklorists. (Islam, 1985).

We need to remember that anthropology also employs methods in the humanities to interpret human endeavours in religion, art, folklore, oral and written poetry, and other complex symbolic activities. Boas pioneered the study of art, religion, folklore, music, dance, and oral literature, providing the humanistic aspect of the anthropological enterprise (Scupine, 2012). Among the earliest anthropologists, it was Herskovits who systematised folklore studies in anthropology. He suggested five themes occurring in the myths and folktales of all the societies- catastrophe, slaying of monsters, incest, sibling rivalry and castration (Herskovits, 1955). William R. Bascom (1965) wrote, "Anthropologists recognize that an important group of individuals known as folklorists are interested in customs, beliefs arts and crafts, dress, house types and food recipes; but in their own studies of the aboriginal peoples of various parts of the world, these diverse items are treated under the accepted headings of material culture, graphic and plastic arts, technology and economics, social and political organization and religion and all are subsumed under the general term culture." J. Steward (1955) linked basic technologies and folk culture. Material culture is an increasingly studied dimension of folklore. So, in the material culture level both anthropologist and folklorist studied side by side. Folklore became a popular medium in anthropological studies and using emic approach researchers try to find out the inner meaning of different aspects of culture.

Anthropology and Folklore - The Approaches: Context, content (structural analysis), function and style are four aspects which form the main domain of any folklore. According to Dr. Peter J Claus and Dr. Frank J Korom (1991), there are three major approaches of the study of folklore. These are-

Cross cultural study approach – the comparative dimension of the study of folklore.

Holistic approach – all aspects of a culture are interrelated and all aspects are fully integrated in the lives of people.

Ethnographic approach- the work of folklorist is not merely the collection of texts, but also the study of the context of particular performances. The folklorist must attend the performances and record many aspects of the performance, observes many types of activities and interview many people (performers and audience). The 19th century evolutionist saw folklore as a survival of earlier stages of mental and cultural development. So, they don't feel the importance of record the present context of folklore. Today the performers and the context gained their rightful place in the study of folklore. Brownislaw Malinowski (1926) said that, the text of course is extremely important but without the context it remains lifeless. Mazharul Islam (1998) support Malinowski and said, "we must give

sufficient emphasis to the collection of text with context thus broaden the footings of the study of folklore."

Phases of Anthropology of Folklore studies in India: Folklore studies in India can be broadly divided into three phases (Dr. Jawaharlal and Prof. M. Nagaraju, 2016)-

(i) Folklore study during missionary period (1800-1900): The first phase was the work of British administrators who collected local knowledge and folklore to understand the subjects they wanted to rule.

(ii) Nationalistic Period or Romantic National period (1900-1950): The second phase includes the missionaries, who wanted to acquire the language of the people to recreate their religious literature for evangelical purpose.

(iii) Academic or analytical period (1950 onwards): The third phase was the post-independence period in the country, where many universities, academic institutions and individuals started studying folklore and opening departments of folklore in their respective regions. After independence, disciplines and methods from Anthropology began to be used in the creation of more in-depth surveys of Indian folklore. The purpose was to search for the national identity, cultural identity and linguistic integrity through legends, myths and epics.

Historical development of Anthropology of Folklore Studies in India

Many anthropologists explore the creative cultural dimensions of humanity, such as myth, folklore, poetry, art, music, and mythology. In the world context many anthropologists like Brownislaw Malinowski (1926), Franz Boas (1911,1914,1927), Elsie Clews Parsons (1918, 1923, 1924), Ruth Benedict (1931, 1934, 1969), Joseph Jacobs (916), M. J. Herskovits (1955), Claude Levi-Strauss (1969, 1978), Katherine Luomala (1907-1992), William R. Bascom (1953, 1965) Michael Herzfeld (1986) and others contributed anthropological approaches to studied folklore. Studies of Anthropology of folklore was influence by the British and American anthropologists. Anthropological theories proposed during the folklore study are diffusion concept by Boas, Malinowski's concept of psychological reflection in the myths, Benedict's concept of the release of suppressed desires of the society as manifest in oral literature and Bascom's concept of functionalism. The studies on kinship and folklore in the field of folklore studies was influenced by the approach of Levi-Strauss, French Structural anthropologists.

In India, folklores are an important part of tribal traditions and studied by various scholars like Cole (*Santal Folklore in Indian Antiquary*, 1875), A. Campbell (*Santal Folk tales*,1891), Houghton (1893), Bodding (*Santal Folk Tales*, 1925; *Studies in Santal Medicine and Connected Folklore*), J. D. Anderson (*A collection of Kachari folk tales and rhymes*, 1895), Dracott (*Folk tales from Simla*, 1906), C.H. Bompas (*Folklore of the Santal Parganas*, 1909), Roy (1916), Rafy (*Folk tales of the Khasi*, 1920), Mitra (1922), and U.N. Dutta Gupta (*Folktales of Orissa*, 1923). After that as an anthropologist Verrier Elwin (1902-1964) contributed to the study of folklore studies. He contributed a large section of tribal oral tradition- myths, folk poetry, riddles, folksongs, festival, tribal deity, legend, art, dance and folk medicine. His publications include *Songs of the Forest: the*

folk poetry of the Gonds (1935), *Folk-songs of the Maikal Hills* (1944), *Folk songs of Chhattisgarh* (1946), *Tribal Myths of Orissa* (1954).

Folklore study in West Bengal has a long history. The study was started by foreign and Indian scholars with an antiquarian zeal during the colonial period. In Bengal attention was given to the collection of folklore early in the 19th century by a handful of brilliant British scholars, including such pioneers of Indology as William Jones, Charles Wilkins, William Carey and later Gorge Grierson. Scholars attempted to account the different genres of folklore and undertook area studies. The *Journal of Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal* established in 1774 was the pioneer in bring out some publications of folk songs and folk tales.

A systematic study of folk literature began during the formative period of the Anthropology discipline. Vidyarthi and Rai (1976) observed that interest in the study of folklore increased when journal *Indian Antiquary* (1872) was founded in Bombay under the editorship of James Burgess. He gave particular attention to the study and publication of myths, folktales, folksongs and popular traditions. The first Indian Journal of Anthropology - *Man in India* (1921), from Ranchi have often included papers concerning folklore. The other journals like *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Bombay* (Bombay, 1886), *The Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society* (Bangalore, 1909), *Journal of the Bihar and Orissa Research Society* (Patna, 1915) documented valuable folklore materials. S. C. Dube (1922-1996) of Sagar University has collected the folk songs of the peasantry of Chhattisgarh and which have been published under the title *Field Songs of Chhattisgarh* (1923). Coming to the contribution of modern writers of folklore and social anthropologists, the early writings of S. C. Roy (1871-1942), M. N. Shrinivas (1942), deserve special mention. S. C. Roy got impetus from the works of A. R. Wright and Andrew Lang and said folklore is the base of all other sciences. His monographs on the tribes of Chotanagpur (*The Mundas and Their Country*, 1912; *The Oraons of Chota Nagpur*, 1915; *The Birhors*, 1925; *Oraon Religion and Customs*, 1927) were very much influenced by the presentation of the vast amount of folklore materials in the way of life of the people studied. (Sarkar, 1972) T.C. Das (1898-1964), pioneering Indian anthropologist made immense contribution through the study of kinship and social organization and two valuable books written by him are *Sun-Worship amongst the aboriginal tribes of eastern India* (1924) and *The Purums: An Old Kuki Tribe of Manipur* (1945).

During the academic or analytical period (1950 onwards) of anthropological development, significant contributions to this field came from the anthropologists and folklorist like Sankar Sengupta's works- *Tree symbol worship in India: a new survey of a pattern of folk-religion* (1965), *Women in Indian Folklore* (1969) and *The patas and the Patuas of Bengal* (1973); P. D. Goswami's researches on motifs of Assamese folklore, and the social anthropological interpretation of folklore by the other scholars (Indra and Vidyarthi) deserve special mention. Ethnographic and Folk Culture Society was founded by Prof. D. N. Majumdar

(1903-1960) in the year 1945 for the study of anthropology and folklore. It published a periodical journal named *The Eastern Anthropologist* (1947). He was keenly interested in the study of Indian society and culture.

With the passage of time the social elements hidden in the folklore were unearthed by a few anthropologists and also by several scholars of different literatures specially Bhojpuri, Assamese and Marathi in a number of publications bringing out the social, historical and behavioural usage of folklore (Vidyarthi and Rai, 1976, p.15). Indu Prakash Pandey published two books entitled *Awadhi lokagit aur parampara* (1957) *Awadh ki loka kathaye* (1959). He has presented a sociological analysis of Awadhi folksongs related to rites de passage of Awadhi society. Milton B. Singer (*Traditional India: structure and change*, 1959; *Krishna; Myths, Rites, And Attitudes*, 1968), S. Srivastava (1974), Kapila Vatsyayan (*Traditions of Indian Folk Dance*, 1987) and H.C. Das have written and edited research articles on Indian tradition, culture, performing arts, folk culture and change. Gradually the need for inter disciplinary researches on ethnomedicines, ethno- musicology and folk dances have been seriously realized by the Anthropological Survey of India, University departments of Anthropology and ICSSR. Recent discussions of the history of folkloristics in India may be found in Ben- Amos (1972), Islam (1974), Jawaharlal Handoo (*Folklore: An Introduction*, 1989), Peter J. Claus (1985), Stuart H. Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan (*Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*, 1986; *Folktales from India*, 1994). L. P. Vidyarthi's contribution to the cause of Indian anthropology and folklore is also very significant. He edited books like *A Century of Folklore in India* (1973) and *Essays in Indian Folklore* (1978). He has introduced folklore as a subject in M. A. course in Anthropology Department.

Professor P. K. Bhowmik was carried out the tradition of folklore studies in Anthropology and his famous books are- *Banglar Loko utsav* (1968), *Occultism in fringe Bengal* (1978), *Loko samaj o Sanskriti* (2003) and so on. Professor Onkar Prasad made significant contribution in the field of ethno- musicology in India and published books- *Santal Music: A study in pattern and process of cultural persistence* (1985), *Folk Music and Folk Dances of Banaras* (1987). Pashupati Prasad Mahato collects *jhumur* songs texts from the tea garden labourers in Assam. His contributions were published in *Chho Nach* (A rejoinder to Dr. Asutosh Bhattacharya) in 1978, *In search of roots, tea garden labours of Assam and North Bengal* (1984), *Performing Arts of Jangalmahal and Jharkhand* (1987). R.M. Sarkar studied various aspects of folklore through the anthropological lens like religion, folk music, methodology to study folklore and so on. His famous books on folklore study are (*Folklore in Relation to Anthropology*), *Religious Cults and Rural Traditions: an interacting pattern of Divinity and Humanity in Rural Bengal* (1986), *Bauls of Bengal: in the quest of Man of the Heart* (2003) *Indigenous Knowledge in Traditional Folk Panorama: Genesis, Development and Applications* (2011). Much recent scholarship in anthropology found in the works of Arjun Appadurai (1986). He crosses the boundaries between anthropology and folklore to study the cultural aspects, effect of globalization

on material goods. He put material objects firmly at the center of social analysis.

2. Summary and Observation

Folklore studies have been the interesting arena in contemporary anthropological studies in India. Both theoretical and methodological approaches were changed with the time and new branches like urban folklore, applied folklore and public folklore, post-modern folklore and so on. are emerged. It is believed that huge social elements remain hidden in folk songs and folk-tales, which need to be unearthed. The study and research in Anthropology of folklore are going on in different ways in India. Recent time scholars of Anthropology studied different dimensions of folklore like – Folklore: tribal and cultural studies, folklore and tribal lore, folklore and tangible & intangible cultural heritage, folklore and popular culture, folklore and Traditional Knowledge System, folk medicine, folk sports, folklore and performing arts, theoretical and methodological issues in folklore, documentation of oral history, effect of globalization on folklore and so on. In summering the review, it can be said that at present day some studies in Anthropology on rural, urban, suburban, tribal studies going on and its main intention, intensity and potential is to focus on folklore and its historicity.

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