



IMPORTANCE OF FOLKLORE AND MAITHILI LITERATURE

Literature

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ABSTRACT

A land of vastness and diversity, India is replete with a natural treasure of folklore. Based on the traditional language and customs of different regions, religions, social groups, and tribes, the diverse culture of India ensures a wide but complex range of literature. Folk literature exercises a powerful influence over the popular imagination; the villagers often deify the folk heroes. Hence, people create, spread, and retain their folklore in vernacular languages. Maithili literature, one of the oldest and most vibrant literary traditions in India, has a profound connection with the rich tapestry of folklore that has been passed down through generations. The Maithili-speaking region, predominantly found in the northern part of Bihar and some parts of Nepal, is renowned for its cultural diversity and the way it has embraced and incorporated folklore into its literary corpus. My paper delves into the intricate relationship between folklore and Maithili literature, emphasizing how folklore has been a wellspring of inspiration and cultural sustenance for Maithili writers.

KEYWORDS

Indian Culture, Maithili literature, Oral tales, Tradition, Vernacular language.

INTRODUCTION:

Regarding the origin of folk literature, the Encyclopaedia Britannica says, "Of the origins of folk literature, as of the origins of human languages, there's no way of knowing. None of the literature available today is primitive in any sense, and only present-day results are often observed of practices extending over many thousands of years. Speculations, therefore, can only concern such human needs as may give rise to oral literature, not to its ultimate origin" (Encyclopaedia Britannica-Folklore).

Folklore, also called folk literature or oral tales, suggests the lore (traditional knowledge and beliefs) of cultures with no written communication. It is inherent in the language and culture of any society, transmitted orally, and consists, like written literature, of both prose and poetic narratives, poems and songs, myths, dramas, rituals, proverbs, and the like.

All the myths, legends, epics, fables, and folktales transmitted orally through generations can be found in folk literature. The authors of folklore are generally anonymous. However, their tales have endured and sustained for thousands of years because of their quality of being entertaining, embodying culture's belief system, and containing basic human truths which make individuals live for hundreds of years. A culturally literate person can best understand the characters and situations of folk literature. Not to talk of its origin, folk literature is supposed to have the quality of satisfying a bunch of human needs – the necessity to elucidate the mysteries of wildlife, to articulate human fears and dreams, to impose order on the random, even chaotic, nature of life, and to entertain the audience. The brevity, immediate action, easily understandable characters, fantastic elements, and happy endings of folklore are appealing particularly to kids between the ages of three and eight. Moreover, children can also develop a way of morality through folk literature.

Written literature took its start in olden Sumer and Egypt when the world knew only folk literature. It has, during the millennia, remained surrounded and sometimes overwhelmed by the humbler activities of the unlettered. Every society produces some men and women of great natural endowments – shamans, priests, rulers, and warriors – and these stimulate people to produce and take note of myths, songs, and tales.

However, folklore has not impinged so directly on the written literature as compared to the works of Homer, presenting a transition from the preliterate to the literate world. However, folklore has found its place in written literature. The medieval French and English romances, especially the Breton ones, can be found drawing freely on folk sources, sometimes even directly. The Renaissance increased the importance of folk literature in the works of several authors. Many anecdotes of modern literature might have come from the tales of unlettered storytellers. Many mainstream writers like Boccaccio and Chaucer might have reworked folklore, and several ones in the 16th and 17th centuries might have taken their materials from the folk literature.

India enjoys a distinct place in the history of folklore. Max Muller's works on Indian Myths and Theodor Benfey's translation of the world fame Pancha-tantra (an Indian animal fable considered to be the Indian origin of the fairy tales) are glaring examples of Indian contribution in shaping the theoretical growth of folkloristic itself. The existence of vast narrative material in the Indian sub-continent has the oldest narrative traditions across the globe. Besides, the *Rigveda*, the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas*, and the *Upanishads*, the encyclopaedia of Indian religion and mythology, add feathers to the crown of Indian folklore. Some other simple examples include Narayan Pandit's *Hitopadesha* (Beneficial Advice, an Indian text in Sanskrit consisting of fables with both men and animals), Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha* (The Great Narrative, an ancient Indian epic), Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagara* (Ocean of the Streams of Stories, a famous 11th Century collection of Indian legends, histories and folk tales), and some other works like *Sukasaptati* (Seventy Tales of the Parrot, a collection of stories) and *Jataka Katha* (Birth Story, a voluminous Indian literary text concerned with the previous births of Gautam Buddha in both human and animal form).

Linguistically, the Indian subcontinent features a very rich diversity. All four major groups of languages - Indo-European, Dravidian, Indo-Tibetan, and Austro-Asiatic – are spoken in the subcontinent. Linguistic diversity equally reflects cultural diversity, too. The folklore tradition can be traced back to medieval Indian literature. However, the earliest different works are sectarian. They were designed to advance or to celebrate some unorthodox religious beliefs. We can take the examples of *Charyapadas*, a collection of mystical poems written between the 8th and 12th centuries in Bengali and Assamese (Chatterji 80), Tantric verses of the 12th Century, and the *Leela Charitra*, a biography of Chakradhar Swami, the guru of Mahanubhava sect in Marathi (Nagendra 205). Some other texts in the series can be taken from Kannada and Gujarati languages, too. However, the primary truly indigenous folk works are Jain romances, popular texts in Sanskrit and Pali dealing with the lives of Jain saints.

We can also take another example of the Rajasthani bardic tales of chivalry and heroic resistance to primary Muslim invasions, such as Prithviraj Raso, the 12th Century heroic poem written by Chand Bardai of Lahore, the court poet of the king (Mandal 8). However, most important were the traces of Indian folklore found in the vernacular languages of the northern Indian cults of Lord Rama and Lord Krishna. *Gita Govinda* (The Cowherd's Song), the 12th Century poem by Jaydeva (Datta 1414-1423), and a gaggle of spiritual love poems written by Vidyapati around 1400 C.E. are some examples of Radha-Krishna cult.

There needs to be more written records of folklore in Maithili literature. It has been passed down orally by men and women who have afforded to transmit wisdom, recreation and entertainment. People credit Sir George Grierson as the first scholar to collect Maithili folklore in such works as *Bihar Peasant Life* (1885), *Maithili Chrestomathy* (1882), *Bihari Grammars* (1887) and *Dina Bhadraka*

Git and *Nebaraka Git* (Grierson 617). However, some other notable figures in this field are Ramananda Thakura, who published *Gonvinoda* (1919) in two parts. It is a cycle of stories on Gonu Jha, a read-witted character and contemporary of Hari Singh, the king of Mithila in the 13th Century. Another notable figure of the cult is Rama-ikbala Singh, who is credited with having written several articles on the 'Folk Songs of Mithila' and published a volume named *Maithili Lokagita* (Mishra 7).

However, Jayagovinda Mishra of Vishnupura and Laksmipati Singh of Madhepura are the two most devoted players in the field of Maithili folklore. However, their extensive collections have yet to result in a published form. There is still a great need for scientific study of the subject. Thus, with limited sources of available material, my paper has shown the variety and richness of Maithili folk poetry.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION:

Types of Folklores in Maithili Poetry

1. Songs

Maithili folk songs are integral parts of Maithili poetry. Maithili women find several types of these songs and divide them broadly into two types – '*Deva-Paksa Songs*' and '*Rasa-Paksa Songs*' (Mishra 4). However, these songs cover almost every aspect of life and can be divided into various sub-headings such as *Bhajanas* (devotional songs with religious or spiritual themes), *Devi-Devata-ka Gita* (songs related to gods), *Pabanika Gita* (songs related to clan affiliation, origin, patronage, parentage, etc.), Birth Songs, *Samskara* (a purificatory ceremony) Songs, Seasonal Songs, and *Laganis* (marriage songs).

Generally sung in the early morning or on an auspicious occasion, *Bhajanas* are also of different kinds. Prati (a type of Bhajana) songs are sung in praise of Lord Vishnu. These songs can be sung on several other occasions, too, such as Satyanarayana Puja (worship of Lord Vishnu), Yajna (a ritual done in front of a sacred fire), *Udyapana* (the ritualistic ending of a Hindu festival), etc. *Gosauni ka Gita* (songs of ploughing), another type of *Bhajanas*, has much importance in Maithili poetic achievement. However, Maithili people also sing these songs on several other auspicious occasions.

The second great Maithili folk devotional song, *Devi-Devata-ka Gita*, is sung to worship *Brahma* (the Hindu god referred to as 'the Creator'), *Bhairava* (a Shaivite deity worshipped by Hindus), *Govinda* (Lord Krishna), *Hanumana* (the name of a Hindu god) and various other gods. Maithili people have possibly borrowed these deities from different sources. The village *Bhagats* (worshippers) worship these deities and claim the entrance of particular deities in their bodies on particular occasions.

The *Pabanika Gita* is a type of song which are sung on the occasion of *Vrata* (religious votive practice in Hinduism). Some of these songs glorify the occasion, while others rise in devotional feelings. Apart from this, there are some other folk songs that also belong to this group. These folk songs are *Madhsravanika Gita*, *Chhathi ka Gita*, *Sanjha ka Gita*, *Sama songs* and *Gauri ka Gita*.

The *Chhathi* songs are sung by women in praise of the Sun god and Chhathi goddess. These songs poetically conceive these two deities lying in their sleeping chambers, thus delaying the dawn that the fasting women are eagerly waiting for.

The *Sama* (a bird) songs are sung on an interesting festival called *Sama* to describe the pathetic story of the bird. The festival starts on the seventh day of the latter half of the Hindu month, *Kartika*, and ends on the full moon of the same month. The origin of the festival can be traced back to the *Padma Purana* (a Hindu religious text) and the *Skanda Purana* (a Hindu religious text) (Mishra 7).

Birth songs comprise 'pregnancy songs,' '*Mangala* (auspicious) songs,' and 'cradle songs,' or lullabies. In Mithila, *Soharas* (typical regional songs) are sung for the first two types of birth songs. Maithili women sing these songs on the birth of a son, on the *Upanayana Samskara* (Sacred Thread Ceremony) of a son, or even during marriages. Some of these songs touch our hearts. The lullabies are jingling rhymes rather than poetic.

Sung on different occasions, *Samskara* songs can be divided into four categories: *Mundana* (tonsure) and *Chudakarana* (arrangement of the hair tuft) songs, *Upanayana* (a Hindu educational sacrament) songs,

Marriage songs and Tattooing songs (Mishra 11). *Mundana* and *Chudakarana* songs are few in number and are generally associated with 'blessing songs' and *Upanayana* songs. *Upanayana* songs have several types. However, the most important and common song of this group is the blessings of the ancestors of the boy. Some songs under this category present the life and responsibilities of the new *Brahmachari* (celibate) (Singh 92).

Marriage plays the most important role in the life of a woman. It provides the woman with a large number of ritualistic occasions. As it is one great occasion, it is celebrated with highly poetic songs. Some of the marriage songs indicate divine marriages, some describe the joys of the couple, and some welcome and taunt the guests and, thus, build up a gaiety and mirthful atmosphere.

Maithili marriage songs are of three types: (a) songs of the marriage of a daughter, (b) songs of the marriage of a son, and (c) songs of *dviragamana* (second entrance ceremony of the bride in her husband's home).

Kumara (bachelor) song, a type of song about the marriage of a daughter, is sung up to the day of marriage. These songs present the daughters asking their parents to find a suitable husband for them. These songs are full of delicate emotions and also describe the settling of marriages. There are different songs for different customs and rites related to marriages in Mithila. Most of these songs describe a particular custom. However, folk songs for love are the most poetic. Maithili marriage songs are peculiar. One of their peculiarities lies in their association with the act of the bride and the bridegroom. When they are in the courtyard, women sing different kinds of marriage songs. Nay, when the bridegroom eats, women are supposed to sing different songs, such as welcome songs, songs of eating curd, and songs of washing hands.

Songs of the marriage of a son are very few in number. They are mostly sung to welcome the son when he returns home.

Dviragamana songs are just repetitions of the marriage songs. However, some of these songs are beyond the level of folklore. They, in a diverse way, portray the second departure of the bride to her husband's home. The songs representing her remembrance of her father, mother, brothers' wives, and friends are full of pathos.

Tattooing songs are sung to celebrate an important ritual of a newly married woman of lower class. The woman undergoes the pain in this process but continues thinking of good results.

Seasonal songs are of different types and present the climate where health, life, and comfort depend on the regularity of the seasons. Their themes generally revolve around frustration or disappointment in love. *Barahamasa*, one of the types of seasonal songs, is sung following the old poetic tradition and shows months of separation of lovers.

Lagani songs are those types of Maithili folk songs that class women sing while operating their handmills. These songs symbolically portray the moving stories of lovers. One of these beautiful songs tells the story of a female parrot waiting for her lover who elopes with another female parrot but, later on, gets back to his first love.

Maithili folk songs have some distinct features. They build up a series of parallel images and are connected to Sanskrit poetic diction. However, these songs need to find new symbols and conventions. They present images of sandal trees, clove trees, parrots, crows, etc. and continue with the presence of legendary figures such as Rama, Krishna, and Sita. The writers of these songs do this partly as the symbols for the bride and the bridegroom and partly for the subjects of the songs.

2. Ballads and Tales

(i) Ballads

Some of the ballads in Maithili poetry, such as *Salahesa* (a folk hero of Maithili people) and *Dina Bhadri Gitas* (God of Humans), lack rhyming or even versified language, though they are not in prose and are chanted, not recited. However, *Jalecha* (a type of folk ballad) and *Rani Dhonruani Gitas* (a type of folk ballad), some other types of folk ballads, have melodious verses. The latter types of ballads are recited by lower-class men and women for the recreation of the higher-class people. The stops, the sighs, and even the coughings of these ballads,

unlike some of the Maithili prose folk tales, are worth preserving through the ages. Maithili folk ballads are of different kinds.

(a) *Lorika ka Gita* (the glories of lower-class heroes): It is one of the earliest Maithili ballads that deal with the stories of *Lorika* (a lower-class heroic person). This ballad was popular during the times of Jyotirivara, the author of *Varna-Ratnakara* (Ocean of Description) (Chatterji 10). The exploits of this hero were exciting and given space in the neighbouring provinces' ballads. Mr. Varrier Elwin also collected and discussed the accounts of some variants of this legend (Elwin 338).

(b) *Salehasa ka Gita*: A prominent schedule caste personality across Maithili legends, Salehas was a watchman of Raja Bhimasena of Keolagarha. His bravery and valour were remembered for catching a thief who tried to steal the necklace of the queen. However, people started deifying him as a kind of demi-god only after his death.

(c) *Dina-Bhadrika Gita: Musahara* (a scheduled caste in Mithila) considered Dina and Bhadri their gods. *Salehas* helped *Photara* (wrejackal) to kill Dina and Bhadri (Grierson 640).

All these ballads mainly celebrate the exploits of certain semi-religious folk heroes. Of course, these ballads generally represent the symbolic latent desires of communities who sing them.

(ii) Tales

Tales are the second group of songs more appropriately suitable to be called Gita-Kathas (tale songs). These are also of different kinds:

(a) *Jataka ka Katha*: This tale tells the pathetic story of a daughter who sacrificed herself to fill the water tank of the king. Owing to the suggestion of his priest, the king called his married daughter, Jalecha Kumari. However, her arrival was grimly greeted by her mother. The most poetic but tragic scene of the story was the inch-by-inch sinking of the daughter in the water and, simultaneously, singing a piteous song requesting people to save her. It was not a physical compulsion to sacrifice her life. It was rather a religious compulsion on behalf of the king for the welfare of his people. An English Miracle Play also deals with the same story where Abraham sacrificed Issac.

(b) *Bihula Katha*: This story got its fame when it was published in Bengali by Rai Bahadur D. C. Sen. *Visahar*, the daughter of Lord Shiva, got married to *Basuku Naga* (the serpent in Lord Shiva's neck) at the age of twelve. She bit *Gauri* (wife of Lord Shiva) but later made her live again. In return, Lord Shiva blessed her with the boon of being worshipped by a trader named Cando. However, when she went to Cando, he refused to worship her. It was due to this reason that the trader suffered throughout his life. His sons were killed. Finally, one of his sons, Bala Kumara, got married to Bihula, who, like Savitri, saved him. The whole plot of the tale moves around different measures Bihula took to avert the certain death of her husband.

There are several ballads and tales of these kinds in Maithili villages. The main features of these tales are to cultivate the minds and hearts of the listeners by telling them about sacrifices, heroisms, tenderness and womanly affection.

(iii) Topical Songs and Ballads:

Maithili folk-bards, the *Bhatas of Sylhet* (Sen 151), record the leading historical and social events of Mithila and sing them moving door to door. It is worth noting the comments of D. C. Sen regarding these types of songs. Sen observes, "These songs...have now grown out of fashion, and the descendants of these minstrels have long ceased to follow the profession of their ancestors for lack of encouragement. They kept afresh the memory of stirring events and historical episodes and of village politics that led to the subversion of the power of a particular line of aristocracy and the growth of the power of new families to their stead. The simple village folk did not care to know what transpired beyond the Himalayan ranges or Khybar pass, but they knew what the historical events that occurred in the province were...in those days when newspapers and journals did not bring a report of daily occurrences to their doors every day" (Sen 152).

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined the integral relationship between folklore and Maithili literature, showcasing how traditional narratives, folk songs, and rituals have been pivotal in shaping the literary landscape of the region. Maithili writers, from the Bhakti poets to modern novelists,

have drawn inspiration from their cultural roots, weaving folklore into their works. This has not only contributed to the cultural preservation of Maithili traditions but has also allowed for the exploration of contemporary issues through the lens of folklore. While the challenges posed by globalization and modernization are evident, the preservation efforts and continued integration of folklore in Maithili literature highlight the resilience of this unique literary tradition.

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