

A Shared Heritage of Humanity: A Glimpse into The Folklore of Odisha

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Abstract: Folklore is an umbrella term that covers the knowledge of the people which is traditional as well as creative according to the environmental needs. It is also concerned with the traditional ways of life and customs of the people of a society. Class, gender, age, occupation, local linguistics, ethnic or national identity are some of the defining features of the phenomena of folklore. This paper analyses the diverse aspects of folklore like folk beliefs, folk arts, folk literature and the customs of Odisha - a state located on the south east coast of India, by the Bay of Bengal. It is an assessment of an array of Odia folklore from historical, geographical and cultural perspectives.

Keywords: Odia folklore, cultural identity, Navakalevar, Gotipua dance, pattachitra, folk music.

Folk, as we know is an emblazonment of the cultural heritage of a place. The study of folklore is fascinating as it typically displays the best of humanity, shows the strengths of one's community, and binds people to their traditions while serving to shape their future. Folklore is timeless; it is a part of the present as well as of the past. The New York folklorist Benjamin A. Botkin wrote in 1938:

Every group bound together by common interests and purposes, whether educated or uneducated, rural or urban, possesses a body of traditions which may be called its folklore. Into these traditions enter many elements, individual, popular, and even 'literary', but all are absorbed and assimilated through repetition and variation into a pattern which has value and continuity for the group as a whole (Shanny Peer: 226).

Folklore is defined as the traditional beliefs, practices, customs, stories and songs of a group of people, handed down orally or behaviourally from one individual to another. Interest regarding folklore studies was created among scholars with the publications on German mythology by the Grimm brothers, Jacob and Wilhelm in 1812. The original word employed for these studies was *volkskunde* (in German) which connotes oral folk narratives. The word 'folklore' was first used by the English antiquarian William Thomas in a letter published in the London journal *The Athenaeum* in 1846 (Georges: 313). Folklore as a cultural substructure is merged in Odisha's culture. This paper analyses the aspects of the folklore (folk literature, folk arts, folk beliefs and customs, folk crafts, plant lore and body lore) of Odisha - a state located on the south east coast of India, by the Bay of Bengal. The melange of Aryan and non-Aryan cultures in Odisha has greatly helped the growth and development of its folk literature. The population, both Adivasis and non-Adivasis, are always passionate in folk celebrations, mainly through

music, dance and merriment. Odisha is famous for folk paintings, sculptures and statuary, the Odia technique and style of temple architecture, tourist and pilgrim mementos made of horn, papier-mache, and applique work. The classical Odissi dance, the virile chhou dance, colourful folk dances with indigenous musical instruments, dance dramas, shadow plays with puppets, folk opera or *jatra* are also very well-known. Odia folklore is transmitted by word of mouth, by presentation, or by a concoction of the two. It is time-honoured, conventional and traditional and is passed from one person, place, or time to another in a conventional form that preserves and protects cultural continuity. It is mercurial and often being changed by individuals who make use of it. Folklore of Odisha is unidentified or anonymous. It is passed on through persons who are frequently modifying or remaking it to go well with their moods and needs, and therefore the authorship is lost in transmission. Odia folklore is not static but it is formularised, or set in traditional patterns. Class, gender, age, occupation, local linguistics, ethnic and national identity are some of the defining features of the phenomenon of folklore. Odia critics state that folklore has been assimilated in the epics and *kavyas* (a form of poetry) of early Odia literature. The 15th century epic *Mahabharata* by Sarala Das fuses folklore to such a degree that it can be termed as a folk-epic (Ayyappa Paniker: 401). Radhanath Ray, Gangadhar Meher, Fakirmohan Senapati and other renaissance writers of Odisha made use of folk-elements in their works. John Beams, the English administrator published his research article 'Folklore of Orissa' in *Indian Antiquary* in the year 1872. T. E. Ravenshaw was another English administrator who took interest in the subject. Gopal Chandra Praharaj, the compiler of *Oriya Encyclopedic Dictionary* studied Odia folklore on a large scale. '*Utkal Kahani*' which was published by him at the close of 19th century is still popular. Laxminarayan Sahu was mainly concerned with tribal folklore and published songs under the title '*Gandharbika Satadals*' (1937). His work on '*Danda Nata*', a dance drama of Odisha (1947), is also of worth mentioning. In the post independence years many scholars worked in the field of Odissan folklore, the most renowned being Verrier Elwin, Chakradhar Mahapatra and Kunjabihari Das. Verrier brought out a monumental volume entitled *Tribal Myths of Orissa* in 1954. Kunjabihari Das's *Odia Lokagita O Kahani* was the first thesis on Odissan folklore. Pandit Nilakantha Das, a poet, philosopher and critic has discussed, in depth, on the function of folklore in the growth of Odia literature and culture. Sitakanta Mahapatra, the noted poet and bureaucrat is considered as the interpreter of the oral poetry of Indian primitive tribes. He has done excellent translations of *Sabara* (a tribe found in the mountainous region of Odisha) and folk songs from Odisha. Even though science and technology have become significant parts of contemporary life, people still attach weight to folk beliefs. It may be noteworthy in this connection to write about the cult of Lord Jagannath of Odisha, which is believed to be different from all other religions of the world. He is perhaps the only God whose rituals, worship and customs are human. His ways are deeply esoteric - specifically His Incarnation, when

He casts off His old wooden body and embodies a new one during the *Navakalevar* ('*Nava*' means 'new' and '*kalevar*' means 'body') or the New Embodiment. The folk belief associated with *Navakalevar* symbolises the temporariness of material existence. The second vital significance of it is that of the belief of rebirth. Lord Jagannath takes a new body as man is believed to be reborn after death, takes a new body, the soul migrates, but the body decays. That death is an unalterable truth is the message of *Navakalevar*. The gap between humans and Almighty or Divine has been bridged in the Jagannath cult. It is found that Sri Jagannath culture has a great impact on the social, religious as well as the economic life of the natives of Odisha.

Folk art "either engages a process of transcendence of consciousness or leads us into an awareness of our position in the cosmos" (Glassie:119). The traditional name of Odisha, '*Utkala*', literally implies 'the highest excellence in the arts'. Folk art communicates cultural identity by disseminating shared community values and aesthetics. It circumscribes an array of utilitarian and decorative media, including cloth, wood, paper, clay, metal and more. If long-established or traditional materials are beyond reach, prevailing and latest materials are often substituted, resulting in contemporary expressions of traditional folk art forms. Folk art mirrors the traditional art forms of diverse community groups (ethnic, tribal, religious, occupational, geographical, age or gender based) who identify with each other and society at large. The folk art of Odisha centers on the social and religious activities of the state. The Odia women worship Goddess Lakshmi during the harvest season. During this auspicious occasion, the floors and even the mud walls of huts (in remote rural areas) are smeared with cow dung and are decorated with murals or white rice paste termed as *pithau*. They are termed as *jhoti* or *chitta*. *Jhoti* (or *chitta*) is drawn not only with the purpose of decorating the house, but also to create a connection between the mystical or spiritual and the material, thus being highly symbolical and meaningful. *Chitta* is believed to have an aesthetic form that symbolises the aspects of cosmic order. The evolution of an intricately designed *chitta* over the years is undeniably an invaluable gift to the folk art and culture of Odisha. Folk paintings mirror the vivacity and strength of living, the patterns of memory, a philosophy of life, besides an extensive and geometric vocabulary imaging the world view of the given society. *Pattachitra* (in Sanskrit the word '*patta*' meaning 'canvas' and '*chitra*' means 'picture') or painting on fabric is one of the most distinct forms of traditional painting in Odisha. The iconic paintings portray religious motifs like stories from the Ramayana, Mahabharata, Krishna Lila, incarnations of Lord Vishnu. The canvas is prepared skillfully. Cloth is bonded with gum prepared from powdered tamarind seeds, dried out in the sun and polished on both sides by means of a stone and later with a smooth stone or else a pebble. The crude brushes employed for the paintings are prepared from the hair of domestic animals. The cloth is given a protective shielding with lacquer to guard it from the effects of nature and to give it a glossy appearance. Another form of painting - the *muruja* painting is used in religious

ceremonies in the form of *mandals*. The women folk of Odisha draw *muruja* on the floor of houses with powders of different hues. Native methods are used to obtain coloured powders. Powdered rice is used as white powder; black from burnt coconut shells, yellow from the petals of marigold flower or turmeric and red from clay or bricks.

Human life is almost everywhere on this globe inter-woven with, and to a great extent dependent upon, plant life. "The fact that plants, in common with man and the lower animals, possess the phenomena of life and death, naturally suggested in primitive times the notion of their having a similar kind of existence" (Thisteltton-Dyer: 5). Plants are associated with many social customs and religious rituals of Odisha. Marriage of trees (two categories – marriage between particular plants/marriage between a plant and a human being) is one such unique socio-religious practice still prevalent in rural Odisha. In the first category, two childless couples nurture a Banyan (*Ficus benghalensis*) and a Peepal (*Ficus religiosa*) tree and finally give them in marriage like their son and daughter observing all the rituals and customs as in a social marriage. The motive behind this is to overcome issuelessness. In the other practice, the widower whose spouse died untimely, marries a Sahada (*Streblus asper* Lour) tree to overcome the ill effects of the planets, after which he can marry again. Different beliefs are recorded in various legends regarding the various species of Ficus, Bael (*Aegle marmelos*) and Tulsi (*Ocimum basilicum*). The trees in Odia mythology as well as folklore bear spiritual significance in history. The Vedas, Puranas and Epics bear special references on these mythological trees. Therefore these trees are worshipped across Odisha along with the deities even in the recent times. It is one of the oldest practices in Odisha that palm leaves were used to prepare horoscopes and for recording literary works. The palm leaf manuscripts are written with an iron stylus termed *lekhani*. The custom still prevails in some parts of Odisha but it has almost come to an end as it cannot compete with the printing press and the modern look. Dancing serves as a catalyst to socialization, an important aspect of individual and community development. Folk dances in Odisha have always had a spiritual rationale and religious background. Through them the key values and ideals plus the philosophic truths of the core religions have been enabled to infuse into the minds of the masses. At the same time, they have been the most appropriate means of reflecting the community life and belief, the social customs and manners, and the hopes and aspirations of the populace at large. Odissi is an ancient dance form. Other folk dances like chaiti ghoda, chhau, ghoomra dance, ranapa dance, paika dance, gotipua dance have also influenced the socio-cultural life of Odisha to a great extent. Gotipua dance is a fascinating folk dance of Puri where boys below fifteen years clad in female dress dance to the tune of the music. Young boys put on sarees and ornaments and paint their faces to appear like girls. The acrobatic poses attached to the dance enthrall the audience. The subject matter of Gotipua dance is invariably mythology and stories from Pauranic literatures. Paika nrutya ('paika' owes its origin to the Sanskrit word '*padatika*' meaning the 'infantry') or battle dance is another form of

folk dance. It is practiced among the Paikas - the warrior class of the old Odia army. Kandhei nacha or the puppet dance of Odisha, is an assimilation of dance, drama and songs. Chaiti ghoda or dummy horse dance is connected with the Shakti cult of coastal regions and confined to the people of fishermen community. These dances are held to the accompaniment of music and are a spontaneous human expression of the joy of living.

Folk music is sung for pleasure rather than for profit. It appeals to the physical, intellectual, emotional, moral and spiritual instincts of humans. The appeal lies in the rudimentary plainness or simplicity of the musical patterns that make the people engrossed in group behaviour. Usually the composer of folk music is unknown. Most of the activities of the members of the societies spin round the rituals, festivities and merriment allied with their traditional music. Music functions as a communication tool when it is employed through the language and accepted melodic patterns of a community. A folk instrument usually does not have a known inventor. It can be made from wood, metal or other material. Ektara, a one-string instrument is most often used in traditional music of Odisha. This instrument is commonly used in *kirtans*, or Hindu devotional songs. The dhol, a double-sided barrel drum is played as an accompanying instrument in regional music forms. The dhol is played using two wooden sticks, usually made out of bamboo and cane wood. Flute (bansuri) and manjira accompany all kinds of singing, especially devotional songs. It is made of two small copper plates tied together with a string. Hitting one against the other at its edge produces a high pitched sound. *Palas* and *Daskathias* are musical dramas organized to give entertainment to the masses. They are quite educative and appealing. The recitation of the *palas* is based on religious sermons, ethics and morals. They bring harmony and togetherness among the people. These events work as unifying force in rural Odisha. Amaresh Datta in his work *Encyclopedia of Indian Literature* writes about folk-songs (*lok gita*) as an important form of folk literature. One of the categories of folk-songs is the ceremonial or *sanskar* songs. These songs form an essential part of rituals of various ceremonies relating to child-birth, marriage and in some areas with rituals of death as well. *Jogi gitas* are sung by mendicants while begging alms and *kandana* is a song of weeping usually sung by maidens at the time of their marriage, and especially when they take leave of their parents and relatives to go to their husband's home. Folk poetry is another genre cherished among the people of Odisha. It was developed by the wandering bards who travelled around the countryside reciting poems they knew by heart with the common folk. They often accompanied their performances with musical instruments. Festivals and celebrations are human efforts to connect people and cultures. *Raja Parba* (which falls in mid June) is a four day long folk festival celebrated in Odisha which welcomes the agricultural year. During these days women are given break from household work. Girls play swings (*dolis*) tied on branches of trees. Various folk food or *pithas* are made during *Raja*. The *Raja gita* - a folk song sung by the odias is: "*Banaste dakila gaja, barasake thare asichi raja,*

asichi raja lo gheni nua sajabaja", the English meaning of this being "the Raja carnival has come with the pomp and pleasure of newness". The folk games like '*puchi*', '*khapara dian*', '*kaudi khela*' are the various traditional games played during the festival. Other folk festivals of Odisha include *Sitalshasti*, *Nuakhai*, *Sudasha Brata*, *Jhamu Jatra*, *Garbhana Sankranti*, *Bali Jatra*, *Dhanu Jatra* and *Manabasa Gurubara*.

Body lore or body ornamentation and festivals share a typical relationship. "Presentation of the body is a treasure trove of information concerning a society's values, aesthetics, and embodied practices. It can incorporate attire, adornment, markings, piercings, tintings and colorings or tattoos and other bodily inscriptions" (Linda Watts: 42). In fact body lore involves all human modifications of the physical form undertaken for cultural reasons. Other examples of body lore are ephemeral markings affixed to the skin with pigments such as henna and alta, piercings done on ear lobes, eye brow, navels, and tongue, tattoos used as amulets and talisman against being envied. Alta (a red coloured liquid) which signifies prosperity and purity is used by brides and married women for decoration of feet. Tattooing is one of the popular arts of body decoration among the tribal communities (especially among the *kandhas*) of Odisha. The tattoo marks are drawn on one's body by pricking pigments into the skin with the help of a needle. The tribals of Odisha treat the tattoo marks as worthy of social importance. As Linda Degh has stated very aptly, 'the impulse to tell the story and the need to listen to it have made narrative the natural companion of man throughout the history of civilization'(53). Folk tales play an important role in knowledge transfer and in the advancement of personality. Tales also have the power to influence an individual's perception, attitude, behaviour, and many other factors vital to a human being's life as well as the society. Folk tales are considered as cultural heritage and are sources of entertainment too. Folk tales and legends in Odisha are used by the elders to teach wisdom to the younger generation. Most stories contain moral lessons teaching the importance of tradition and to display reverence to elders, parents and superiors. The folk tales such as '*Tuan tuin*', '*Sahada Sundari*', '*Chari Sangata*' are very popular. Most vital facet of Odia culture is association of Ramkatha in the socio-religious life of the natives. 'Ramkatha' is a universal cultural tradition in the folk life of Odisha encompassing the urban, rural and tribal. Folk tales are narrated with ordinary words. "Folk tales", according to Bibhuti Bhushan Malik, "are not usually based on historical facts; but are mostly of fictitious nature and have predominance of fanciful ideas of the folk. Telling of folk tales includes, not only the texts but also the fanciful expression, gesture, acting, repetition and other recurrent patterns of the story-tellers" (193). The proverb, a genre in folk literature, has been preserved orally from generation to generation. The truths and accumulated insights of Odia culture is carried by the proverbs. According to R.B.Browne, "To the most credulous members of society proverbs and the proverbial expressions are the accumulated knowledge of the ages, the voice of the history, they are tried and true, and as such are pragmatic unassailable

wisdom"(Patnaik:11). According to Archer Tylor and B.J.Whiting the description of proverbs as "short, plain, common, figurative, ancient and true" (Eugenio: xxxvi) , is as good as any formal definition. They have also characterized the proverbs as sayings which "summarizes a situation and in its own inimitable way passes some sort of judgment on it or characterizes the essence"(Eugenio: xxxvi). Folk proverbs as "monumenta humana", are short, usually fixed, phrases that comprise bits of wisdom and advice passed along in folk groups, as a way of making a specific point with brevity. Since the proverb format is old, proverbs are generally viewed as the compacted wisdom of the past - expressions which are both wise and true. In Odia proverbs we often find the topic-comment schema. Proverbs are still used in the teaching of character education in the elementary schools of Odisha. Folk medicine refers to the traditional resources used in the maintenance and restoration of health, drawing from traditional, rather than modern, biomedical knowledge. Odia folk medicine encompasses the indigenous cultural knowledge and practices used in diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of illness. The knowledge on which Odia folk medicine is based is acquired from concrete experiences in local environment and transmitted orally from one generation to the other. Folk ways of treatment is practiced by some *vaids / kavirajs* in remote areas and some folk preparations are of surprisingly high curative value. A large number of persons residing in Odisha still rely on traditional practitioners, including traditional birth attendants, herbalists and bonesetters (of Kalupada and Kuleilo), and on local medicinal plants to satisfy their primary health care. Use of plant based drugs and chemicals for curing diverse ailments and personal decoration is prevalent in the state of Odisha. The traditional use of seeds in different forms (raw, seed paste, powder, decoction, or oil extracted from the seeds) as medicines for curing diseases is still customary among the tribal communities. Turmeric, lotus (*Nelumbo nucifera*), honey are still used in therapeutic preparations. Odisha's folklore, art and culture are the products of a long historical process in which the spiritual, philosophical and the human dimensions have merged to produce the finest effects of cultured and civilized life. Folklore, used as a mechanism to reconstruct ancient beliefs, customs and rituals, helps us to understand the mystic tradition of our ancestors. In understanding and appreciating the folklore of our ancestors, we develop an understanding of their culture from whence we sprung. Another motive for the study of folklore is nationalism, which reinforces ethnic identity and figures in struggles for political independence. Folk culture is a way of establishing unity among the people. Traditional culture is seen as proof of distinctiveness among different societies and as continuation that a culture can be based on oral traditions.

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