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Irula Folk Songs

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Folklore Studies

India is a land of rich and varied folk art tradition. Folklore is important for the passing on of values, beliefs and moral teachings of a society. Since time immemorial, it has been an eternal part of Indian culture. The grass fields, flowing rivers, alluring temples, folklore, culture, heritage and agriculture define Indian society. “The folk and tribal arts of India are” simple, “ethnic and colorful” (vserveyou.com, 2009). It speaks volumes of our country's rich heritage.

Nils-Arvid Bringéus (1968) says:

The focus of the study of Folk life is to obtain and understand the present way of life itself. In the future we must not simply be content with

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reminiscences, instead testimonies. We must also study what is alive. The ethnologist is looking for the normal situation. Superficially, it may mean that ethnology becomes less historical. But its objectives in the study of society must still be to demonstrate the part played by tradition as the motor of our culture. Consequently, a historical perspective is needed in an analysis of the present and in planning the future.

The folklore studies include oral literature, material culture, social folk custom and performing folk arts. The words and phrases such as "manners", "customs", "neglected customs", "fading legends", "fragmentary ballads", etc., present an outline of Folklore (Dundies, 1965:4).

Indian Tribes

The tribes constitute a rich, unique, varied and critical elements of Indian tradition. Tribal life is an epitome of paradox. Even though, they are living in an enriched environment full of colors and music, their personal life is an untold agony arising from alienation, deprivation and enslavement.

The Irulas

The term *Irular* is derived from the word Irul meaning darkness. The language of this tribe is known as *Irula Naya*. It remains only in its spoken form without a written script. The "transmission of oral literature from one generation to the next is of paramount importance for Irula cultural practice (oralliterature.org, 2013). The local language acts as a vehicle for the transmission of unique cultural knowledge.

Folk Revival around the World

In the 19th century English speaking world, intellectuals felt anxious to preserve the traditional culture, which they felt was threatened by rapid industrialization and urbanization, creating and imposing upon people a mechanical form of entertainment. This interest found much of its impetus in the antiquarian research of Allan Ramsay, Burns, Thomas Gay and Scott as also the Grimm Brothers of Germany.

Particular focus was directed to the Celtic culture which later formed part of the Celtic revival. Large scale efforts were made to collect folk songs in different parts as is evident in the words of Sabine Baring Gould whose researches in and around Devon parish yielded a wealth of material. Similarly, Frank Kidson explored around Yorkshire to spearhead the folk revival in England, while Francis J. Child worked on similar lines in the U.S.A.

The English and Scottish Popular Ballads (1882-84) is a pioneering work in this regard. Scholars from different areas joined these efforts with musicians like Ralph Vaughan Williams, Percy Gramphir and E.J Moeran, and literary men such as George Gardiner. In the early 20th century, a society named ‘The London Headquarters of the English Folk Dance and Song Society’ was founded and named after Cecil J. Sharp (1879-1924), who collected English folk songs and was deeply interested in dances.

After World War II there occurred another wave of interest in folk revival and a number of intellectuals undertook expensive research on the topic, focusing on folk-song ‘as a means of politicizing the working class involvement in its own traditional artifacts’. Among them, the major figures are Ewan Mac Col and E. L. Llyod in England, Hamish Henderson in Scotland and in U.S.A. Pete, and Sugar. Marxist angle is provided in Llyod’s *Folk Song in England* (1967). He collaborated with Vaughan Williams to produce *Penguin Book of English Folk Songs* (1967).

What is a Traditional Ballad?

“A ballad is a song that tells a story. A traditional ballad is a ballad whose origin is unknown and which has been passed on orally over time. We know about ballads because mostly literate people have collected them from often pre-literate people and put them together in collections” (jonandrika.org, 2014). It is from these collections that the participants of the folk festival have chosen the songs. “The melodies and texts may vary greatly, but the story is always recognizable. It is, in fact, the story that defines a ballad” (telus.net, 2012). These ballads are sung very differently in different places but the story is the same.

A Narrative Composition

So, a ballad is a narrative composition in rhythmic verse suitable for singing. Defined in simple terms, it tells a story which was originally transferred by word of mouth and was usually sung. Ballads became popular throughout the British Isles in the late medieval and Elizabethan times. Its emergence from the popular tradition of lyrics, carols, the French ballet, and other forms of minstrelsy has generated much heat and debate among scholars.

Gradually its constituents became stereotyped with stanza forms and images and even vocabulary being used by poet after poet repeatedly. Some examples of the stock expression used conventionally are, 'blood-red wind, 'the gold so red, 'the wan water', etc. Though free from the usual moralizing and descriptive construction, ballads developed their own convention which was liberally imitated, such as stylized descriptions of heroes and heroines, stock phrases, use of ghosts and fairies and a typical mood evoked by a conventional background description.

Some of the renowned ballads originated in Arthurian legends and romances composed by the minstrels, as Robin Hood Cycle, Robin Hood and the monk, Robyn and Gandeley, Robin hood and the Petter, Alytell Geste to Robyn Hood, Robin Hood and Guy of Bisborne, True tale of Robin Hood, Robin Hood and the Beggar, etc. The legend continued to feed some of the finest ballads in English. Other famous ballads include The Rising in the North, Young Anderw, Wilke and Hamilton, Death of Parcy Reed, The Wife of Ushere's Well Thomas Rigger. In the nineteenth century Sir Walter Scott, Lord Tennyson and several others once again popularized this form in such works as The Lady of Shallot, The Rhyme of the ancient Mariner, and such.

Irula Tribal Songs and Dances

The tribal people play a vital role in transmitting history, cultural traditions, and the way of living to new generations. Tribal songs and dances are the main media by which transmission is done.

One of the tribal songs has the following as its theme. It is sung by a woman while her husband is about to sleep. She sings:

Let us cut the ragi plant at its seed bunch; let us collect the torn sheaves
in the upper fold of the 'chela'. For both of us to play, let us tie the

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double-seated swing on the branch of Dhani tree. If you were a basket swing it to the settler. A basket with two pockets is better for our use. Let us go to our lord and pray for the gift of a child. If we get a baby boy, we will give him your name, Thampaso, if it is a baby girl, let us give her my name. Let us please the Goddess, Thotere (the goddess of prosperity) and offer her 'pongal' (krpcds.org, 2010).

The woman is using her leisure time to advise her husband about her knowledge and practices. While harvesting, she collects the sheaves that fall away in her own 'chela'. She cannot afford to allow any grain to go waste. If husband and wife are united in will and work, they can enjoy life and perform useful duties. If they are not united, the benefit will go to the settlers. The intuition of the tribal woman is well depicted here. Unity and co-operation are considered as the base of prosperity. Pleasing God is essential for the prosperity of their progeny. The tribal woman welcomes their expected child with great enthusiasm and delight irrespective of whether it is going to be a boy or a girl.

Plant Growth

Another song gives graphic details of plant growth. It speaks of how to prepare the ground, how to prepare the seedlings, how to plant them in the furrows, how to watch their growth, how to harvest and how to prepare the food out of the harvest. The details of how to remove stones and thorns from the furrows are also given.

Red Thina and black Thina seeds should be mixed and sown; birds that come must be chased away. You have to look after the cultivation by watching from a small hut built on the top of the tree. The hut should be 12 feet high from the ground. Take the trips to drive the birds and say, Aha Aha, and throw stones at them.

The Role of the Elders

Irular customs and traditions are handed down from generation to generation, by word of mouth. The elders play a vital role in this process. They hand down to successors their songs and

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stories. In an ethnographic research, to study about a community, it is vital to analyze their problems in various perspectives. The study of the cultural priorities of the tribal folk has enabled researchers to look at the problems, beyond the extent to which an outsider can perceive.

Needed: A Culturally Specific Syllabus

Being the inheritors of a wealthy culture, the tribals would have hesitancy to adapt and compose tunes to the prospects of a foreign language such as English. Certainly, initiatives have to be taken to evolve a culturally specific syllabus and curriculum for the tribal people. A learning environment has to be created in the classroom that nurtures the curiosity and the path to knowing. The skills of language are important for the balanced participation in tribal community, as well as the larger world community. “Practice and preparation in the cultural traditions, interwoven with language experiences, reflecting all education domains, helps the learners understand and participate in their rightful place in the universe” (ruralec.msstate.edu, 2010). Tribal history is World history. Tribal culture has several elements that mainstream people should emulate. The noble values and attitudes which may at times be found in such cultures can be transplanted into the present-day world at large.

Irula Lullabies

Some of the Irula lullabies describe the difficulties which have arisen in the present world. They are songs based on realities. There are also quite a number of songs centered on love. Every line in a lullaby ends with the Irula word ‘joo’ or ‘coo’.

Seven Ballads

There are at least seven ballads commonly known now among the Irulas (of the original eleven). They are: Jogi Nandamma katha, Yeladumban katha, Thulasilamma katha, Thundu Malli katha, Liamen katha, Amba Vallaiyan katha and Kovae konaee kovaedode katha

These ballads are the unique literary treasures of the Irulas and are not to be found among any other hill tribes apart from the Irulas, although their other folk-songs and tales are found in other communities and regions outside of their own with some variations.

These ballads do not have any written text corresponding to them and are oral, aural and visual since they are part of a larger tradition of performance. There is no conceptual, literary space for art as independent and apart from the ordinary event of life for the Irular. The performance as such does not take place as an event by itself on a specific occasion, but is always part of a larger communal activity. This may be alongside the activities in the household or the fields, and is most often performed by women when they work in the forests and fields. However, community could be the performer, participant and audience. Events of life in the settlement form the substance of these songs.

The Ballad of Jogi Nandamma

The headman Kuniyamoopan and his wife have six sons, of whom five are married. They long to have a daughter. Performing several austerities, they appease the forest goddess Veeramachi who blesses them with a lovely girl child. Born of divine intervention, the child is very dear to them and her arrival is celebrated with great fanfare. One day, the people of their settlement approach the headman and insist that they go and clear a patch of the forest so that it can be cultivated. The headman's wife is reluctant to leave behind the little girl, who is barely ten years old, and pleads with her husband to postpone the event. Putting the needs of this community before his wife's hesitation, he decides to send her. But he is firm that he and his wife will be away only for the count of a single sunset. His wife cautions her daughter not to go beyond a boundary-line that she draws outside their hut. Soon after, they leave with the rest of the community, taking flint stone and cotton with them to burn down the bush.

The five daughters-in-law send the girl to graze their cattle. The child is hesitant to cross the line drawn by the mother. But she obeys her sisters in law. She is thirsty and asks her sisters-in-law to give her some water from the pots they have filled in the river. They refuse on the pretext that if the level of the water went down, it would splash on the way. So she goes to fetch water. What follows is not elaborated, but is suggested that the child has been incestuously attacked and raped. The parents return and the song notes in veiled terms the sorrow of her parents. Jogi Nandamma becomes a part of the eternal waters. The goat and cows, which were born when the girl was born, also transform to become deers (Perialwar, R. 2013).

The Ballad of Yeladumban

Yeladumban is a young man who has been married not very long ago. His young wife is in the sixth month of pregnancy, when he has to go to the Yela mountains to fetch the mythical pearl that can be found there. He is unhappy to leave his wife behind, but his mother wants the pearl. He tells his mother repeatedly not to give the girl difficult chores, such as fetching huge pots of water from the river.

After Yeladumban goes away, the girl's mother-in-law bids her daughters take a small pot each and give a big one to the pregnant girl. The three girls go up and down from their hut to the river and back, before the huge containers at home are filled to the mother-in-law's satisfaction. Then the mother-in-law tells her daughter –in –law to cook a gruel and sauce for the family. The girl is very tired, but she cleans and grinds the grain and cooks a meal for the family. Meanwhile the mother-in-law, who had managed to obtain a female cobra, keeps it hidden in a pot of water and covers it with some leaves to prevent it from being seen.

As the exhausted girl lies down to rest near the grinding stone, the mother-in-law cooks the snake and serves it to the girl with some rice. When the girl complains of giddiness and asks the older woman what is being served to her, the woman replies that it is meat brought home by the father-in-law. The girl dies of poisoning.

When Yeladumban returns home he finds his three sisters and parents, but not his wife. So he questions them and, not satisfied with the reply that she may be visiting a neighbor, he runs about wildly in search of her. In the vegetable patch which he had cultivated lovingly, he finds a long and beautiful strand of hair which he recognizes as that of his wife. When he digs the fresh earth, he finds his young wife's body. Enraged, he hacks his parents and sisters to death. Burying his wife once more, he plants an arrow where he thinks her heart would be and flinging himself upon it, kills himself, not wanting to live in a world where his beloved wife is no longer alive (Perialwar.R, 2013)

The Ballad of Thulasilamma

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The third ballad “Thulasiamma” is also known as the “Koda Valliyan” song. Kovanoopanin is the son of an elder of the “kodavalliyar” community of a village called Kodoor, and so this reference goes.

The mother of a young man asks her son what kind of a bride he wants. She suggests number of possible places where the bride could be found, but the son disapproves of every town. He sets out to go around the world himself. He travels widely, but does not find a bride to his liking. Finally, by the riverside of a small village he espies a beautiful girl and her blind sister bathing. He steals their clothes and when they ask for them after bathing, he returns them.

He discovers that the name of the beautiful girl is Thulasilmma, and proposes to her. He tells her also to keep a fast for three days, refusing food and drink so that their steadfastness in love is made known to all. He also assures her that he too would fast in the same manner till they meet on their wedding day.

On the appointed day, the groom arrives in a fanfare, riding an elephant, but the blind girl is dressed and brought before him. The young man notices the deception and demands that the right girl is brought to wed him. The wedding takes place and the happy young couple return to the young man’s village.

Thereafter his parents send him away to fetch wild honey from the forest. The young man is unhappy to be separated from his bride barely three days after the wedding. However, his parents are insistent, because it is to be given as an offering to their chief. Therefore, in spite of many ill omens the young man goes to collect honey. Meanwhile, his father calls the girl and lies down on her lap. The ballad does not describe the manner in which the father-in-law takes advantage of his position as the head of the family, and has an incestuous relationship with his daughter-in-law. It is only suggested, as in the other songs.

Later when the son returns he beats his chest and laments his misfortune. After this he enters the river inviting his wife and mother to join him if they are innocent. The three of them

become statues, with the son standing in the middle and the wife on the left and the mother on the right (Chellaperumal and Sujatha Vijayaraghavan)

The Ballad of Thundu Malli

Kavamooan, the tribal chief, had six sons and one daughter. One day the chief and his wife leave with the people of seven villages to clear and cultivate the forests. The six brothers and their wives, who live as one large extended family, get the girl married to an orphan. Sometime later, the six brothers decide to go hunting. They want the sister's husband to accompany them, because he is a skilled hunter and his dog is an excellent helper. His young wife has just given birth to a baby girl and he is unwilling to leave his family, nor is his wife willing, for she is still lying in bed and is not able to fetch water herself. But the brothers persuade the couple and the young man leaves with his dog. The hunters track a wild boar and when it goes into hiding in a hole they smoke it and send the young brother-in-law inside it to fetch the animal. After they haul up two wild boars, they roll a huge stone into the mouth of the hole leaving the young man inside as he cries out for help. The brothers roast the animals and slicing two portions of meat, tie them around the dog's neck with the young man's head cloth and chase it away. The dog runs back home to the young mother with the share of meat sent to her and barks frantically. Picking up the new-born, the girl follows their dog which takes her to the mouth of the sealed pit. The brothers feign ignorance about her missing husband.

Meanwhile, the young man goes deeper into the pit and finally reaches the kingdom of the netherworld, whose inhabitants look strange to him and who are cannibals. He is taken to their king, whom the young man hesitates to face, because he is only partially covered. The king takes off his head cloth and gives it to the young man and assures him that he need not fear and that his people will not harm him. The young man introduces himself as an orphan and describes his plight. The king gives the visitor a bag full of varieties of grain to sow and reap. The young man returns to the mouth of the pit where his wife is crying piteously, while the dog is pawing and digging around the stone that seals its opening. The young man kicks the stone from inside and it falls away. They hug each other and vow to leave the place. Crossing the forest and moving to a distant place, they clear the bush and trees by burning them. The ash that comes from this rises waist high and nourishes the land. In the course of time the crop that grows is so

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abundant that its owners find it difficult to take it home, for no sooner one's load is taken, then another comes up in the fields. So they look for labourers who would help them carry and store the grain.

Driven by famine, starving and wearing only a loin cloth, the brothers arrive there with their wives and children. They work for their brother-in-law not knowing that he is their employer, though the latter stands upon a high mound and points out the scene to his wife. When the harvesting is completed, the young couple treats all their workers to a rich feast after which cloth and money is given to them. When the brothers come up, the sister falls at their feet seeking pardon for putting them to work. The brothers confess and finally they all live together happily. "Thundu Malli" which is the name of the girl literally means "Little Jasmine" and is also a term of endearment for the youngest of the children and the only daughter. Her name suggests how dear she was to her parents (as told by Ponnamma).

The Ballad of Liamen

The word "Liamen" in Iruliga means paternal uncle, i.e. father's younger brother. The headman and his wife go with the rest of their people to clear the forest and cultivate it; the young daughter is left alone at home. Despite the girl saying that she is forbidden to enter the kitchen for some days, she is told to serve the rice left on the ledge if her uncle comes home. The uncle comes and demands hot food, so she cooks rice and meat.

After the two of them eat, the uncle bids her to fetch the karakandi nut and plays with her. While he prepares to leave, the girl tells him that on the next day he would hear the drums that are beaten in a death house. Left alone, the girl spreads her long hair, decorates herself and then puts an end to her life, after locking the seven doors of their house. When her parents return, they question the old woman minding the hens. She replies that she saw the girl's uncle visit the house. The uncle is summoned. Guessing what may follow, he wears his wedding shirt and takes leave of his wife. On the way he hears the drums beaten for the dead. When he arrives at his elder brother's place, he bends over the body of his niece and laments her passing away and the men scythe him to death. The two are buried side by side; on her grave grows the banana, and on his the bitter berry.

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Conclusion

Folklore travels across language boundaries but it always represents the cultural background of the particular community. Tales, songs and myths are transmitted to posterity. The Irulas have a stock of folktales and folk songs which reflect the tribe's socio-religious and family life. Some of these songs and tales show the tensions of love and hate on the domestic front. The familiar theme of ill-treatment of children of the first wife by the sister of the husband, and man's helplessness is also common in many folksongs. The tragic story of the two brothers, one of whom is cheated by the other is known particularly to most of the Irulas. Many of the folk songs speak of the sexual exploitation which the socially better-off groups impose on the women of this poor and weak tribe. In spite of the cycle of social changes that have crept into their customs and manners, they cherish their culture and tradition and love their folk songs, folk tales, folk dance, games, etc.

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