



ORAL TRADITIONS: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL INSIGHT INTO KERALA'S CULTURAL HEGEMONY

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The struggle of pre-historic humans to establish a hegemonic identity in their newly discovered environs paved way for the formulation of a creative expression in the form of oral traditions. The complex process of transmitting the cultural materials and traditions, accumulated and inscribed in the cognitive faculties of human beings and which is passed on as a vocal narrative through generations in the form of folktales, sayings, ballads, songs, or chants describes the concept of oral traditions. This unique transmission of the cognitive faculties of man assumed a critical role in the community as he wove together the strands of beliefs, values, myths, superstitions, rituals and traditions into an invisible but strong cord that held it together. Stories and songs are ways by which people construct the sense of the world in which they live. These generally have the quality of conviction, with regard to the incidents even if it is cooked up.

The strength of a story can be measured by the intensity of its impact upon the reader. "When an oft-told oral story is not actually being told, all that exists of it is the potential in certain human beings to tell it" (Walter J Ong, 11). When we perceive an event with regard to its effect of on our emotive perceptions or make us dream of wonderful things and take us on an imaginative journey, then we conclude that the story has indeed touched upon the cognitive temperament of the reader.

Oral tradition is an integral part of lived cultures. In spite of its relation to indigenous histories, oral traditions and narratives remains still to be included in the comprehensive conception of geographical and cultural domains, which remain defined in terms of money and power. These authentic oral narratives and songs is a synthesis of the innate consciousness of a society, the correlation which connects orality to phenomenological dimensions which includes the memories, emotions, and perceptions that makes regional oral traditions very significant

The significance of oral tradition over the written one speaks volumes about the richness of a social tradition which is carried over successive generations through the maze of myriads of memories, transcending cultural and geographical discriminations and reaffirms the validity of a delighting chain of transmission that has withstood the trials of time. Much before the invention of written languages, oral tradition occupied a daily presence in people's lives than it is in our own world today. "Ring Around the Rosie is song is about the people who died of the bubonic plague in the 16th century England and this story, now a cultural memory has been passed down through a children's song for centuries. The rich and heroic period when the events of Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* materialized are said to be part of the oral tradition. Through these orally transmitted songs and stories, world culture has found a reliable medium to transmit its multifarious heritage across individuals and communities and inspire younger generations. "Oral verbalization was essentially the same as the written verbalization except the fact that they were not written down" (Ong, 10). From the 'Ollave' or the master poet in ancient Ireland to the 'Ashiks' or troubadours in the Arab world, these propagators of oral tradition have made history fluid, alive and dynamic. For many communities around the world, the transmission of oral literature from one generation to the next lies at the heart of cultural practice. The institutionalization of memory through commemorative rituals of the past is an essential means of cultural reproduction and transmission. Each indigenous community has its own unique skill of transmission. Five or six thousand years ago, the introduction of written literature in Sumer and Egypt capsized the totalitarianism of the folk tradition.

But whether songs and stories have been imbibed from unlettered bards or a literary story entered an oral tradition, the socio – cultural and historical relevance of this folklore transcends reservations. This process happening between the hearer and the speaker creates unification and strengthening of the cultural traditions by bringing individuals into the groups and encouraging full participation in the total cultural tradition. It engenders a simple cohesive view of the world; for, the entire cultural heritage, the standardized ways of acting and patterns of thought and feelings are transmitted by interpersonal interaction, imitation and verbalization, whereby protecting the oral tradition. The transmission of culture through oral tradition reflects the deepest, most intimate perceptions, relationships and attitudes of people, with respect to changing hegemonic structures.

Oral Traditions and Subaltern Movements in India:

The oral traditions, though have strived to attempt a Phoenician rise against the ravages of time, many have not survived the tyranny of historical forces. The Indian literary representations have left an unintelligible mark on in the documentation of the rich oral traditions of our nation, in spite of the technological

advancements. K. Ayyappa Paniker in his landmark study *Indian Narratology* says, “The freedom for improvisation may be the contribution of folk culture which by interiorizing, preserves the aesthetic content intact.” (17). The Indian oral tradition portrays the rich Indian imagination especially among the subaltern group as a paradigm to their evolving cosmopolitanism against the socio-cultural and political hegemonic structures which have dominated the entire written and unwritten records of India. This includes the tribal oral traditions, which aims at preserving its culture and vitality as well as the marginalized subaltern entities adopting this tradition to create a community consciousness.

In India, the subaltern movement against the caste system is generally known as the *Dalit Movement*. The movement has used popular cultural forms effectively to fight caste oppression. Traditionally, ‘cultural labour’ is imposed on the subaltern communities and they were required to work with animals’ skins which the upper caste found sacrilegious to touch, to make musical instruments. Thus, there existed many forms of music, dance and theatre chiefly designed for the upper caste’s entertainment but played and performed by the subaltern communities. Many of these cultural forms persisted as oral traditions as the caste system denied these communities access to literacy. The emergence of a concerted movement against caste oppression in the 19th century re-invented these popular cultural forms as movement medium, as sites of resistance and contestation. Two such popular forms are noteworthy: *Powada* (a praise song exclusively performed by lower caste males in Maharashtra) and *Tamasha* (a popular form of folk theatre). Conventionally, the lower castes used to compose *Powadas* in praise of the dominant ruling castes. It is in this art form the Dalit movement found a militant cultural expression. For example, one well-known *Powada* presents King Shivaji, a popular icon of Maharashtra for his brave feats in the 1600s against the Mughal emperors, as the leader of the lower castes and attributes his achievements to the strengths and skills of his lower caste armies rather than his court. As the majority of the lower caste masses were illiterate, the subaltern movement invented a new genre of tamasha, the *Jalsa*, as a form of movement media to communicate with the masses. The key elements of the new *Jalsawere* the *Vag* (extempore satirical performance), which often praised modern science and education, ideas of rights and equality, and was built around mockery of the oppressive Brahminical religious practices.

The subaltern movement’s first imperative was to overcome the hegemonic grip of Hindu culture and annihilate the strangle hold of Brahmins in the Indian society. A significant proportion of subaltern literature therefore was devoted to a scathing denunciation of Hinduism. The language used was often deliberately provocative, blasphemous and even obscene, designed to scandalize dominant caste values. Oral traditions which have played a pivotal role in civic edification, also assists in constructing the historical transformation of a society. Through the ages, oral tradition has performed this function by presenting its various genres as forms of entertainment that are designed to inculcate in listeners the social mores and world view of their communities. These subaltern stories and songs reconstruct the cultural hegemony and is a valid testimony of paradigm shifts in Kerala’s socio –cultural and historical outlook.

The Kerala Scenario:

Kerala’s socio-cultural history traces the exclusion of the lower castes from the dream of a liberated classless society and the so-called Kerala Renaissance. Early Dalit movements in a region malignant with untouchability and unsee ability, projected the essence of social justice as freedom .This exclusion of Dalits is also evident in the literary scene of Kerala where the mainstream Malayalam literature evolved a world totally inaccessible to the subaltern and marginalized. But this vacuum in the written genres is compensated by a strong presence of a tradition of Dalit Orality. The discriminatory fervour of the caste system finds a poignant expression in this oral tradition.

Exclusion has played a major role in the absence of Dalits in early Malayalam literature. But this is strongly surpassed by the powerful orality of the Dalit tradition which is seen manifested in folk songs like Chengannuradi, Idanadan Pattukal, and Krishigeetha. The irrationality of the caste system finds an outspoken expression in the complex matrix of dance and song passed on orally through generations. Even the musical instruments speaks of this subaltern oppression and the uprisings against the prevalent hegemonic power structures .The Pulaya who plays the *thudi*, the Paraya who beats the drum, the Pana’s skill in drumming the *uddukku*; the *chenda*, the *nanthurni* and the *pulluvan veena*, all which supplements the musical oral traditions of the untouchables and the caste system .

When we take a closer look at the oral traditions of Kerala, we can observe that there are innumerable numbers of songs which provides vivid description about the way of life of the people. The common man derives maximum enjoyment, not from the literary endeavours of *Aksharashlokam* or *Kathakali*, but from these oral traditions, which comprising of songs created by illiterate persons is pregnant with the smell and flavor of the soil. Though these verses in the initial stages were used for recreation, yet in the later stages it became the medium of the illiterate to vent their rage against the rigid caste system.

Conclusion:

Subaltern Communities have been the focus of several studies and they are also the victims of written traditions. In all written traditions they are projected just as objects and not as creators of history. In order to create a realistic picture of the subaltern community, the role of Oral traditions, rather than the written

literatures, should be highlighted. The need of the hour is to analyze the transition of a society not through the written literature which normally is a biased version about reality, but through a relevant reflection of human experiences of suffering and bringing about a vision of social transformation. We need to come of age and recognize that we need to visualize the true perspective of oppressed people whereby the collective experiences of the oppressed people gains recognition as legitimate source in a relevant reconstruction of a society and social way of life. The perspective of the oppressed is the need of the hour for it is the oppressed that becomes a mouthpiece of the truth.

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