

Contemplating Tales, Contemplating Narrators: A Study of Jharkhand by analysing the Khortha Folktales and the Narrators

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Abstract:

Oral histories have always been a record of societies since prehistoric times. They have often been used as anthropological records to know of the people and the days by gone. This study shall do the same via a study of the Khortha Folktales of Jharkhand. Khortha is one of the nine languages of Jharkhand, which also serves as the connecting language between the tribal and the non-tribal population (Sadan) of Jharkhand. The folktales/ myths have been regarded not just as an alter ego of a population of an age, but also a record of the collective consciousness. This study of folktales, via an analysis of the themes and archetypes shall try to study the region and its people, in the process of which, through a constant comparison of archetypes of other folktales it shall be concluded that human beings think alike no matter where they are, and hence are one. Humanity, above all is what should be valued is what this study of the tales and the narrators indicate.

Key Words: Khortha, Archetypes, Folktales, Narrators, Jharkhand, Humanity.

A man wanted to know about mind, not in nature, but in his private, large computer. He asked it (no doubt in the best Fortran), ‘Do you compute that you will ever think like a human being?’ The machine set to work to analyse its own computational habits. Finally, the machine printed its answer on a piece of paper, as such machines do.

The man ran to get the answer and found, neatly typed, the words
THAT REMINDS ME OF A STORY. (Ramanujan, 484)

Oral histories have always been a part of human civilization since ages, where for each and every occasions and purposes we have examples to prove it strongly- through a history, an example- a tale practiced and then told for generations to come to validate or to negate. As the anecdote by Ramanujan above suggests. We need our footnotes and our references to justify our findings, our hypothesis. And as far as India and its culture is concerned, folklore becomes all the more important, where the entire or the almost entire population runs by what

we call epic narratives like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. And, as for understanding India and its culture, folklore is of utmost value for

Anyone studying the culture of India needs to study not only its written classics but its oral traditions, of which folklore is an important part. Folklore pervades childhoods, families, and communities as the symbolic language of the nonliterate parts of the people and the culture (Ramanujan, 484)

And it is in keeping with this that this endeavour has taken place. In the age of electronic media, the sources of learning as well as entertainment have definitely changed, where we are familiar with electronic gadgets like ipods, pc's, radio etc; however there was once an age, for which to learn and to laugh we depended on nothing, but ourselves. Folklore has not just been a source of entertainment but also learning, when each and every child would, in the evening or dinnertimes, or while sleeping; or adults while working in the fields, or caught in some monotonous chore, would be acquainted with knowledge far beyond than his/her mind could think of, words of wisdom and the world then, manifested in terms of everyday mundane activities fairies and demons, where animals talk and heroes/heroines fly. Tales full of knowledge, purgation and entertainment, which would suffice their needs according to the situation.

As far the as this work is concerned, it deals with folklore and specifically folktales of Jharkhand of the Khortha language, which is one the nine languages of the region, and also forms a connecting language of the people of the region. These folktales like any other folktales have been there since ages, carried from one generation to another, reflective of the culture and the traditions of the region and its people, though they have been hardly dealt with, atleast never in the English language. This work hence, intends to put them on this platform, which in a way would not just recollect them to preserve for long but would also help them travel, wherever they can and reach to a greater audience via English, owing to the popularity and maximum connectivity of the language.

METHODOLOGY:

For this work the primary materials i.e., the oral narratives, were a result of field work, where tales were recorded in audio and video from different narrators, possessing this treasure. The secondary materials were collected by field work as well as from web sources, to get books and journals/articles pertaining to the topic. The research was definitely ethnographic in nature, where the researcher personally met and talked to the narrators, who were quite welcoming. Nothing was forced and there were easy recordings. The tale telling were also very informal, where, wherever the researcher went there were children or some other people around, and the narrators would comfortably, without asking, or without looking at the camera narrate the stories to the other people/children present. Ethnography has been described by Brewer as

the study of people in naturally occurring settings or 'fields' by means of methods which capture their social meanings and ordinary activities, involving the researcher participating directly

in the setting, if not also the activities, in order to collect data in a systematic manner but without meaning being imposed on them externally (Brewer, 312)

During the field work, sharing the same language as the narrators, it was not difficult for me to get familiar with them, owing to the same cultural background, it was easy to understand what they said, and when there was some difficulty, I could ask them, where they replied in as better way as they could. In order to collect the places that I covered were Jangalpur, Machhiyara (from where I got the maximum number of tales) Topchanchi, Kurmitand, Bokaro, Ranchi, Dhanbad, Dhैया and Manaitand, all of which are villages and towns of Jharkhand, to collect my primary and secondary materials. There were several conversations over the phone along with in person interviews and recordings. During my field work there were moments when we shifted to everyday conversations with the narrators, which gave a personal touch to the entire task, and it was more of a fun, when we got to know more about each other. where they would sometimes be surprised at a girl in twenties listening to tales and would ask in a light hearted way, ‘Why didn’t you come when you were a kid?’, when all of us would laugh, all these light moments made it all the more easy, when there were no hesitations in the tellers, nor in me while recording. It was not just a work, but a work that was lived and loved.

The results were obviously the priceless tales (which were collected in the camera), a storehouse to so many things about the people and the culture of the region. After collection, the first task was to transcribe them wherein the words as it is in Khortha were written down in the Roman script, and then translated. The translation process was a bit irksome, where I could not find proper equivalents for some of the words, whereas for maximum words I did find equivalents. Equivalents to maximum words are given, however there were some culture specific words, for which I could not find equivalents were left with the original, so that they also acted as the cultural signifiers of the region, words like *Handi*, or *Kend Lowathi* (a wooden stick which is used to stir food while cooking), which are very region/culture specific, were left untranslated so that it could speak of the culture and sound more authentic. Explanations are given for those words in the footnotes, to specify what they exactly meant in the culture of the region. As far as the syntax is concerned the sentence structure of Khortha is Subject Object Verb, where as for English it is Subject Verb Object, so in translation I had to change it according to the sentence structure of the English language. However, the way to address different people or relations have been kept the same, again to specify the culture aspects in relationships. There were often in the tales were found words which were similar to Bengali like *dada* for brother, *gaachh* for tree, etc. the reason for which could be accounted to the location of the region which has as its neighbour the state of West Bengal, and infact there was a tale narrated to me by one Fakir *Phuphu* of the village Jangalpur, who narrated the tale in Khortha, but when the songs came in between, she automatically shifted to Bengali, and kept singing unconsciously; very much like the bowl singers in tone and rhythm; without realising that she had to narrate a “Khortha” tale. She says she heard the tale from her husband, who I got to know, was a very young migrant from Bengal. Similarly, in some villages, like Machhiyara, the language had the tonality of Bhojpuri and Magahi. The region is again very close to, and once upon a time was a part of, Bihar, hence the influence in language as well as culture, so much so that once some scholars referred to Khortha as northern Magahi, or distorted Maithili (Mahto, 15). Infact there are

several words which are similar to Bhojpuri or Bengali, or other languages of the region like Nagpuri, Kudmali, etc. and so are the resultant folktales, which prove to be a semblance of the entire region and surrounding, perhaps counting to the diasporic narrators, who carried the culture along with the languages with them, for

Diaspora goes beyond mere isolation, to enforce a new and often unwelcome contact. Languages and traditions, “cultures” or “nation”, converge and clash.... (Lee, 149)

Then, do folktales carry their narrators lives, the surrounding and environment, of cultures and places they have been to? They have stayed in?

Times must have changed, because in fact folklore has much to say about cultural mixing, especially when the subjects are immigrants or borderers (Lee, 149)

The answer is yes. Folktales and hence folklore in general do depict the ways and the world they originated from, that is the people and the places the people have been to, giving rise to a very secular and universal concept of the folklore, shared by all. However as far as the language Khortha is concerned, according to several Khortha scholars, it is said to be the language of the Sadani population of Jharkhand, who were a result of the mixing of the invading Aryans and the native/Tribal people of the region (Ohdar, 21). Ages have passed, and nothing can be authenticated as certain, but the tales do show customs and culture which are common to both the *sadani* as well as the tribal population of the region for e.g. the *handi* system in marriage, a gift for the bride’s family from the bridegroom, that has been talked about in one of the folktales, is found in the tribals as well the non-tribal population of Jharkhand. Moreover, the human-nature bond has been a recurrent motif in almost all the tales, which very much depicts the primitive man’s affinity with nature as well as consanguinity, which is true of many other folktales of the world. This is also evident in the Khortha folktales. The Chhotanagpur region has always been full of Jungles or *Jhar*, whence came the name Jhara-khand (or the land of forest). Trees of all varieties are found in the jungles. Forest (and trees) were an important part of the social and economic scenario, and hence the culture. Thus, they get mentioned in the folktales, particularly the trees of *bhelwa*, *dumair* (the wild fig), banyan, as well as the mention of forests in a whole, where they play important roles in deciding the characters’ journey. Most of the tales are of human-nature set up, where they interact with each other, most of the times in solidarity, only in *The Tailless Wolf* do we see an anti-image of nature, where the wolf tries to harm human beings, proving as wolves have always been thought to be, a figure considered harmful or representing the harmful aspects (of nature as well) in many societies of the world (Peterson, 237). In one tale which only consists of animals called the *The Fox and the Hare*, is one where the hare outsmarts the fox. There are kinship tales of envious step mothers and step queens, and of relationship between sisters-in-law, where the wives of seven brothers are envious of their sister and torture her, the step mother wants to drink the blood of Seet and Basant, the step queens throw away the children of the youngest queen out of jealousy. Siblings keep fighting, and when one sister leaves home out of anger, she is given shelter by an animal. All these tales reflect the relationship patterns of the then society, as well as of the present society of the narrators as the tales were also affected as well as modified according to who the

narrators were, or the economic or socio-politico-cultural background they belonged to. There's one tale with the trickster theme, again a myth archetype¹, where a fox plays the trickster, who tricks human beings as well as his own relative foxes, which gives a certain comic angle to the tale. There is one tale with a fairy-tale structure, where a plain shepherd wins the heart of the youngest of a king's princess', and thus she marries him. There is one tale on mythology, and another with a mythological element (The elephant from *Indrasen*), however like it happens in folktales, the gods are somehow localised, and not presented in a legendary way like the ones in epics (Ramanujan, 515). So the elephant is no magical helper but a mere thief who steals grams from the peasants' field. And when Shiva is being talked about in the story about the three sisters, he is in a human avatar, initially, and is presented as the youngest sister's husband, rather than of Parvati, of whose husband he is believed to be. Regarding this B.N.Ohdar says in his book, *Khortha Bhasha Evam Sahitya: Udbhav evam Vikas*

*Aisen kehni me Shiv, Parvati, Vishnu, Narad aadik naam to aawe
he makin, aisen kehni se dharma puranek konho naat gota nayn rein
....isab khorthak apen kehni nayn*

or, In these tales, Shiv, Parvati, Vishnu, Narad's names do find mention but these tales are not at all related to religion...and moreover the -se tales would not be counted as the original Khortha tales

Thus, elucidating the origin of such elements in the folktales to be the influences of Hinduism, which reached the region later. Moreover in a number of tales, the narrators while narrating were constantly using expressions of grief or happiness for the characters according to their whims, fancies and religions. For e.g., in the tale, *Seven Brothers' Sister*, when the girl cries when her brothers are away and her sisters-in-law torture her, the narrator who was narrating the tale to me, who is a Muslim, narrated the girl's wail as, '*Hai Allah, hamor bhai gela nai, ar inkhai haamra satwo ho*', 'Oh Allah, my brothers are not here, and they torture me', however, later on, while narrating the part where the brothers come back and get to know everything, and in order to punish the wives ask them to get ready for the well-kissing ceremony and *puja*; she narrates how the wives get ready and take things for *puja*, quite unconscious of the fact that Islam does not have the concept of *puja* or idol/object worship. The fact that the tale did have a *puja* in the end as a trap to kill the wives is evident; for the same tale from a narrator later, who belonged to the Hindu religion, had the same ending. Islam came to the region with the entry of Muslim rulers, specially during the fourteenth century when Sher Khan and others made entry into the region. It was only after that and much later that Islam made its hold in the region. Before that there were rulers whose religion, if at all it could be referred to so, consisted of nature-worship (Jain, 8). Though nothing has been mentioned of the religion of the people in the tales, but that it was based on nature worship along with the local gods and goddesses, who were later sanskritized, can be concluded through the tales and the way they are narrated. That the narration of the tale is affected by narrators could be understood, by the fact that '*O Allah*' or any other expression or exclamation added by the narrators while narrating the tales, depended upon their religious-cultural or socio-economic backgrounds, as and when what the case was like. For example,

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here it speaks of the Islamic influences on the tales which could have happened only after the entry of Islam in the region. Intertextuality of the tales can also be proven by the fact that many of the tales do not just have the same motifs in them but they are also similar to tales elsewhere or of other texts. For example, the “number seven” is a recurrent motif of *Chhotki Rani* as well as *Seven Brothers’ Sister*, where there are seven wives of the king, and in the other there are seven wives of the seven brothers. Also, that of the “bad step mother” motif is similar in *Seet and Basant* and *Chhotki Rani*. Kinship of jealousy and rivalry of that between sisters-in-law or that between step wives, is made evident again by the tales, *Seven Brothers’ Sister* and *Chhotki Rani*, which is also reflective of the patriarchy that prevailed then, or that still prevails, and hence most of the kinship patterns were quite similar to the accepted norms of the society while the narration of given tales were recorded by the narrations happened. Moreover, in the tale *The Trickster Fox*, when towards the end the other foxes in the jungle, ask him as to where did he get the *lal maandar*² from, irritated he takes them to the well, and keeps the *maandar* in an angle so that its reflection could fall in the well. On seeing which, the foxes think it to be a real *maandar* and jump in the well to get it, thus the fox gets rid of them. This is very similar to one of the tales in the *Panchatantra*, where a small hare outwits the mighty lion by showing its reflection in the well, portraying it as the other lion who had stopped the hare, and the lion in order to kill the other lion (which in reality was its own reflection) jumps in the well and dies, and thus the hare gets rid of the tyrant (Singh, 60). In the tale of *The Fox and the Hare*, the same motif of a smaller animal defeating a bigger animal can be seen. In that tale can also be seen the theme of power politics where the fox on finding water first, puts snails on his ears and makes an earthen seat and thinks of himself to be of great stature. He asks the hare who comes to drink water later, to sing songs of praises for him. The clever hare on knowing his intentions, gives him a reality check and shows him his real position by singing about the fox’s reality, that he was not a king as he thought himself to be but was just a slave (a slave of greed for power), this theme is there in the *Panchatantra*, as well, where in a tale, a fox, who by mistake jumps into a tub of indigo, gets died blue in colour, he goes and advertises himself to be somebody special whom the gods had sent as the king of the jungle. All the animals including the tigers and the lions believe him, and they begin to revere him like the king, getting food for him, etc. However one day when all the other foxes howl, he starts howling like them and gets caught. The forest animals then kill him realising him to be fake. The power hungry has its fall and the fox dies (Singh, 88).³ In the case of the tale of *The Fox and the Hare*, the nasty fox has its fall and he too dies. This and many other stories have themes and motifs common to many other folktales, of different regions of India and the world, which shows how human beings everywhere think alike, or what Jung calls the “collective conscious”. There are tales based on human-human relationship, pure animal fables, animal-human, and human-plant relationship. Nature and human nature however are the most important element of these folktales, where animals bask and plants bloom and characteristics of human beings are found in each and every version in different variants of the tale. The person in the loom of worldly relationship and human bonds laughs and lives and when s/he cries, the forest is always there to offer her balmy hands of care and nurture. It’s like the respite, the resting place after all the world has done that it has to, on an individual, on a sufferer. It is there in the womb of Nature that solutions lie, for all the problems. It is there that happiness treads in slowly wiping the tears of sorrow and

² A musical instrument which is similar to a drum

sadness. It's in the forest that Seet and Basant get to meet their fate, which was kingship and a princess. The little girl, the sister of seven brothers meets her brothers and is saved by them in the forest; good things happen in the forest, as if it was Eden. When Peli has a fight with her sister, it is the Banyan tree and the Crane that offer her shelter and food. It is in the jungle that the hare and the fox meet and teach what it is to be like a cruel tyrant and a wise opponent, and how to defeat the tyrant. What could not happen in reality, was often attained in the myths, which serve as the alter ego of human beings. Thus,

...the forest provides a space for the resolution of contradictions which cannot be resolved otherwise in the society in which men live. At the manifest level, the forest is nature, unadulterated and unpolluted by man and his culture, but an exploration into the latent semiotic significance of these narratives reveals that there is a complete universe of the forest constructed and conceptualized in opposition to the social system and culture....the rules and norms of the social system which are ideological constructs to consolidate and perpetuate power relations in a society based on the suppression of human desire cannot be imposed in the forest (Kaur, 160).

In this manner these folktales also promote environmentalism, with a message of how important the forest or the environment is for us, where each and every aspect of our lives is guided by the surroundings. And as if they want us to know how important it is for us to save and protect nature, rather than just exploit, like man has been doing. And unlike the western discourse where everything thing is anthropocentric, in these folktales we see nature on par with human nature, where animals and plants speak like human beings. They have virtues (e.g. the hare) and vices (e.g. the wolf) like human beings. They speak, talk and sing, have business transactions (The Trickster Fox) with human beings like humans. Thus, they are considered to be equal to human beings in these folktales, where we know it must have been the case so. For

As people tell stories, they express and explore their ideas
 about the world and their place in it (Goldberg, 163).

Another thing to note here is the discourse and the manner of narration. These tales are in prose form with verses in between. And the original culture of poetry in the region and of the people could be seen all the more evident, where poetry/verses/songs find their place in each and every occasion of the region, be it a festival or a gathering. The culture of dance on the rhythm of *maandar* has always been there, where *Jhumar* or *Dharti Nritya* is performed in *Akhras*, with light verses and songs. This culture of songs or rhymes can be perceived in the stories too where it would be good to give an ethnopoetic angle to the tales. Ethnopoetics has been defined as

is a form of narrative analysis designed,
 initially, for the analysis of folk stories and based
 on an ethnographic performance-based understanding
 of narrative emphasizing that meaning is an effect of
 performance. It offers opportunities for analyzing 'voice'.
 The ways in which speakers themselves organize

stories along indexical patterns of emphasis, focus, super- and subordination and so on. As such, it is a potentially very useful tool for tracking 'local' patterns of meaning-making in narrative (Blommaert, 183) ⁴

Thus these poems in the narratives did hold an importance, when the narrator while narrating the poem had the exact expression and mood. When the rhyme came in the tale *The Fox and the Hare*, the feel of the characters could be felt in the narrator's voice too whereas when the narrator described the hare's speech, he spoke in a disgruntled way and with sarcasm, as well as a smile on his face, which was very much an expression of victory, as that of the hare, where as the feel of tyranny could be felt when he narrated the fox's rhyme. The poetical dialogues between the princess and the shepherd in the tale *The Princess who wanted to know the Colours*, the narrator sings them out with proper tone and mood, tapping his foot and shaking his head with the rhythm like it was he who was singing (he was definitely the best narrator!), adding all the more to the setting of the tale, which was that of a marriage for the princess and the shepherd. This method of using poetry to convey political or social messages shown in the tales is still in practice in the region, (and even elsewhere), for don't we use slogans to convey the best of our demands, and songs to convey our feelings in the best possible way. Whether it be *Sarhul* or *Karma*⁵, songs and dance has been an eternal part of the people of the region, and it can be felt/ seen in the tales too. The tales thus represent best the cultures, beliefs, characteristics of the way of lives of the region and its people.

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6. Pela, Peli Ekai Peli (No Companion for Peli)
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