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Performing Folklore: Interplay of Community, Orality, and Literacy

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Abstract

Each telling and retelling of a piece of folklore is a cultural performance. It is not just the recitation of words; it is a dynamic event with layers of meaning and significance. Cultural performance of folklore is a living, breathing event. It is not just the transmission of a text, but a dynamic interaction between the storyteller, the audience, and the cultural context. This is what makes folklore so vibrant and enduring. A cultural performance of folklore is an expressive activity that requires participation, produces pleasure, and invites response. In order for a performance to happen, a recognized setting must exist (participants have to know a performance is taking place) and participants (performers and audience) must be present. To contextualize a tale fully, we need to know the teller, when, where, and to whom he or she told the tale, what he or she and the listeners thought of the tale, how the listeners responded when they heard it, and other such details. We need to bring also to this kind of ethnography of narrative a sense of where the tale fits in other texts and performance of the culture. The present paper discusses aspects of performance in Indian folklore. The focus is not on any particular genre, but an approach to the study of folklore.

Keywords: Folklore, Cultural Performance, storyteller, Text, Performance

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, the umbrella term, captures the daily experiences, beliefs, values, and social norms of common people. It gives you a sense of what life was like for different communities throughout history, their struggles, joys, and how they made sense of world around them. Every kind of Indian cultural performance, whether it is the classical epic and theatre or modern film and political rhetoric, is indebted to oral traditions and folklore. Sometimes people use “folklore” and “folk narratives” somewhat interchangeably in casual conversation. It may be wrong way of thinking. It can be understood in this way,

folklore is the entire house, including the foundation, walls, roof, and all the rooms inside. Folk narratives are like one of the rooms– a very significant room, perhaps the living room where the family gathers, but still just a single part of the whole house. Folklore encompasses all the traditional beliefs, customs, stories, songs, and practices of a community that are passed down orally. Folk narratives are a specific type of folklore. They are the stories within that broader cultural expression. Folk narratives are the myths, legends, folktales, folk epics, and fables that people tell each other. Each of these forms will have many sub-forms depending on the culture in which the form or forms are available. Richard Dorson says:

> While the renditions of a folktale or a folksong are now usually referred to as performances, they are more casual in nature than the conscious presentation of these arts by individuals or groups with folk instruments, dance costumes, and scenario props. The performing arts intersect each with the other and often appear in conjunction. (4)

Written and hallowed texts are not the only kinds of texts in a culture like India's. 'Cultural Performance' of every kind, whether they are plays, rituals, or games, contain texts, written or oral. In a sense, every cultural performance is a text in itself. Previous performances of an event became part of the standard "text" and, thus, influence future performance of that same event.

Folklore: The Deeper Necessity

William A. Wilson quotes David P. Gardner while writing on the relationship between humanities and folklore. David P. Gardner defines humanities as:

> The humanities are animated by the urge to understand human beings in all their complexity and contradictions. . . . They connect us to past, linking us to what other human beings have thought and felt and believed and suffered in the process of finding their own humanity. But the humanities not only connect us to our cultural heritage; they also hold the potential of connecting everything in our experience. . . . They offer us the experience of wholeness because they touch us at the deepest levels of mind and personality. They are inclusive disciplines, helping us to create larger and more comprehensive meaning out of the fragmentariness of everyday life. In the broadest sense, they are devoted to the task, as one scholar puts it, of "discovering what it means to be human." (157)

Wilson writes about the significance of folklore in humanities. He says:

> Surely no other discipline is more concerned with linking us to the cultural heritage from the past than is folklore; no other discipline is more concerned with revealing the interrelationships of different cultural expressions than is folklore; and no other discipline is more concerned, or no other discipline should be more concerned, with discovering what it means to be human. It is this attempt to discover the basis of our common humanity, the imperatives of our human existence that puts folklore study at the very center of humanistic study. (157-158)

The present paper discusses the complex interplay between community, orality, and literacy in performing folklore. These elements intertwine and influence each other. Folklore performances are often communal events. They bring people together, strengthen social bonds, and reinforce a sense of belonging. The audience is not just passive recipients; they are active participants in the performance. Orality (Primary Oral Cultures) is essential to the performative aspect of folklore. The performer uses voices, gestures, and interaction with the audience to bring the story to life. The advent of writing (Literacy) had a profound impact on folklore. It allowed stories to be recorded and preserved in a fixed form. This led to the development of written literature and the study of folklore as a scholarly discipline. This paper discusses how Orality and Literacy influence each other and how the community participation is affected by these two aspects.

Primary Orality

Most of the world's population is 'non-literate' made up of people whose education is dependent on hearing and remembering, seeing, and imitating. Managing and verbalization of knowledge in primary oral cultures (cultures with no knowledge of writing) is very significant. An oral culture has no texts. How does it get together organized material for recall? Folk literature is very much dependent on these fundamental questions–how a person in oral cultures creates, preserves, and transmits his thoughts and expressions? How his memory plays a crucial role in retention and retrieving the thoughts during the performance? There has been extensive discussion among students of the folk epic in recent years as to how singers manage to remember long stories, and how they manage to retell them so skillfully.

Milman Parry (1902-35), working on a corpus of Yugoslavian oral texts collected in the 1920s, first suggested that oral epics are not memorized line for line. He tried to show how such stories can be constructed afresh by a singer from a large corpus of formulaic stanzas that have been learned for a long period. That helped explain how a singer could sing in perfectly metered verse for hours at a time without a strictly memorized text. Albert Lord, refining Parry's observations, tried to show how a singer works with half lines and even shorter phrases, skillfully substituting and shuffling such small pieces within a larger metrical mold. Their memories are organized into rich bundles of multisensory associations. Each bundle contains musical sounds, words, rhythms, and visual representations. All these are stored together in the singer's mind. Each bundle is evocative. Each is full of mood and associated details of action and setting. An experienced singer can expand or contract his use of such bundles at will, responding to audience attentiveness, the amount of time available, and many other factors.

However, for understanding orality as contrasted with literacy, the most significant developments following upon Parry have been worked out by Albert B. Lord and Eric A. Havelock. In *The Singer of Tales* (1960), Lord carried through and extended Parry's work with convincing finesse, reporting on lengthy field trips and massive taping of oral performances by serbo-croatian epic singers and of lengthy interviews with these singers. Havelock's *Preface to*

Plato (1963) has extended Parry's and Lord's findings about orality in oral epic narrative out into the whole of ancient oral Greek culture and has shown convincingly how the beginnings of Greek philosophy were tied in with the restructuring of thought brought about by writing. Platos' exclusion of poets from his Republic was in fact Plato's rejection of the pristine aggregative, paratactic, oral-style thinking perpetuated in Homer in favour of the keen analysis or dissection of the world and of thought itself made possible by the interiorization of the alphabet in the Greek psyche. Havelock shows that Plato's hostility is explained by the continued domination of the poetic tradition in contemporary Greek thought. The reason for the dominance of this tradition was technological. In a nonliterate culture, stored experience necessary to cultural stability had to be preserved as poetry in order to memorize. Plato attacks poets, particularly Homer, as the sole source of Greek moral and technical instruction.

Fully literate persons can only with great difficulty imagine what a primary oral culture is like, that is, a culture with no knowledge whatsoever of writing or even of the possibility of writing. Try to imagine a culture where no one has ever 'looked up' anything. In a primary oral culture, the expression 'to look up something' is an empty phrase: it would have no conceivable meaning. Without writing, words as such have no visual presence, even when the objects they represent are visual. They are sounds. You might 'call' them back- 'recall' them. But there is nowhere to 'look' for them. They have no focus and no trace (a visual metaphor, showing dependency on writing), not even a trajectory. They are occurrences, events. Sound exists only when it is going out of existence. It is not simply perishable but essentially evanescent, and it is sensed as evanescent. When I pronounce the word 'permannence', by the time I get to the '-nence', the 'perma-' is gone, and has to be gone. Havelock writes:

> In a primary oral culture, to solve effectively the problem of retaining and retrieving carefully articulated thought, you have to do your thinking in mnemonic patterns, shaped for ready oral recurrence. Your thought must come into being in heavily rhythmic, balanced patterns, in repetitions or antithesis, in alliteration and assonances, in epithetic and other formulary expressions, in standard thematic settings (the assembly, the meal, the duel, the hero's helper, and so on), in proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily and which themselves are patterned for retention and ready recall, or in other mnemonic form. Serious thought is intertwined with memory systems. Mnemonic needs determine even syntax. (87-96,131-2, 294-6)

In an oral culture, to think through something in non-formulaic, non-patterned, non-mnemonic terms, even if it were possible, would be a waste of time, for such thought, once worked through, could never be recovered with any effectiveness, as it could be with the aid of writing. Formulas help implement rhythmic discourse and also act as mnemonic aids in their own right, as set expressions circulating through the mouths and ears of all.

"Red in the morning, the sailor's warning; red in the night, the sailor's delight"

"Divide and conquer"
"To err is human, to forgive is divine"
"Sorrow is better than laughter, because when the is sad the heart grows wiser"
"The clinging vine"
"The Sturdy oak"
"Chase off nature and she returns at a gallop"

Fixed, often rhythmically balanced, expressions of this sort and of other sorts can be found occasionally in print, indeed can be 'looked up' in books of sayings, but in oral cultures they are not occasional. They are incessant. They form the substance of thought itself. The performers of the folk epics also express their thoughts in mnemonic patterns, they use clichés etc. *Alha*, *Dhola*, and *Sobha Naika Banjara* are the most popular folk epics among the common masses of the Northern India in general and in the state of Uttar Pradesh, northern Madhya Pradesh, and Bihar in particular. During the performance of these folk epics, the performer has some kind of phrase book in his head. He repeats formula after formula during the performance. He regularly employs the same word or group of words to express a given essential idea in the episodes. The words may be proverbs which are constantly heard by everyone so that they come to mind readily.

When any action surprises the king or the heroes, the performers of *Alha* will sing in this manner:

"Itni suni kai raja Jambai, man main gaya sanaka khaay"
"Itni suni kai raja prithi, man main gaya sanaka khaay"
"Itni suni kai raja parmal, man main gaya sanaka khaay"
"Itni suni kai nuni Alha, man main gaya sanaka khaay"
"Itni suni kai bagh udal, man main gaya sanaka khaay"
"Itni suni kai lakhan rana, man main gaya sanaka khaay"

Whenever there is a description of the throne of the king, the performers sing in this way:

"Sat haant ka unch singhasan tame baith raja Parmal"
"Sat haant ka unch singhasan tame baith raja Prithi"
"Sat haant ka unch singhasan tame baith raja Jayachand"

Whenever there is a description of betrothal invitation (Tika in Hindi), the herald was forbidden by the father of the bride not to go Mahoba as there lives Banaphar Rajput of low status. The ten warriors of Mahoba namely, Dasraj, Bachhraj, Rahmal, Todar, Alha and Udal (sons of Dasraj), Malkhan and Sulkhan (sons of Bachhraj), Dhewa (son of Rahmal), and Tomar (son of Todar) are called Banaphars. The performer sing this episode in this way:

"Ek na jao nagar Mahoba, jahan oar base Banaphar Rai
Got jinki ochhi hai, wahan ham bayah karenge nai"

Whenever perform moves from description of one scene to another in a particular episode, he sings in this manner: "Yahan ki baatain tai hinyai rahi, ab aage ki suno hawaal"

Schomer suggests that the alhaeits used to incorporate fixed stanzas during their oral performance. On examining the transcript of our research material, we found that the alhaeits do use these fixed verse forms. We do not find such kind of incorporation in other recensions. In Kannauji recension, the alhaeits used to follow only the *alha* chhand. The alhaeit occasionally incorporates *Chhapay* meter in oral performance of *Alha*. *Chhapay* chhand consists of six lines in which four lines are in *Rola* meter and the last two lines are in *Ullal* meter. These chhand come in the category of sammatrik chhand. *Rola* chhand has twenty four matras (syllable) and *Ullal* chhand has twenty eight matras. We will illustrate this point with the following examples as recorded during the oral performance by Chandrabhan Singh Yadav:

Moti mahal vichitra chitrakari ati niki
Jag mag jag mag jyoti hot jahn nag mani ki
Mani panna pukhraj jawahar jade nagine
Bich bich lalit lalam laal nilam rang bhine
Kanak kanak khambhan lasain darshai mahan chhavi chhavti
Kahain kavi 'Jitendra' viraji Malhna dasi utare Aarti

(The painting on the palace is extremely great. The light sparkles from the precious pearl (nagmani). The pearls like panna, pukhraj, and jawahar are embedded in the palace. The red and blue colour from these pearls lightens the whole environment. The golden pillars beautify the scenery of the palace.Queen Malhna is sitting and the maid is serving her.)

The above stanza is in *chhapay* chhand and it describes the beautiful scenery of Queen Malhna's palace in Mahoba in the episode "Madogadh ki Ladai". Whenever the incident happens in Malhna palace, Chandrabhan Singh Yadav recites the same phrase in each episode. The same stanza with minute variation is incorporated when Chandrabhan Singh Yadav describes the palace of Queen Kusuma in Kannauj in the episode "Nadi Betwa ki Ladai".

Bundelkhand ki suno kahani, bundelon ki bani mein
Au Panidar yahan ka pani, aag yahan ke pani mein
Alha-Udal gadh Mahoba ke, Dilli ki chauhan dhani
Au jiye jindgi in dono mein laal kamane rahi tani
Dillipath ka baan laut ka daag lago chauhani mein
Au panidar yahan ka pani, aag yahan ke pani mein
Nagar Orchha mein dekho jahan Ramlala ka mandir hai
Nagar Orchha mein dekho jahan Ramlala ka mandir hai
Aur murat hai hardaul lala ki keerat bhara samundar hai
Pran gawan dai hain lala ne aesi bhari jawani mein
Panidar yahan ka pani , aag yahan ke paani mein
Awadhpuri se chitrakoot maan aay ke raja Ram rahe

Au jabtak rahe Bundelkhand pooran unke kaam rahe
Chitrakoot se chale agari bahu pade hairani mein
Chitrakoot se chale agari bahu pade hairani mein

(Listen to the story of Bundelkhand in the language of Bundels. The water of Bundelkhand is full of pride. Alha and Udal are from Mahoba and King Prithviraj Chauhan is from Delhi. Throughout their lives, there were confrontations between them. When Prithviraj Chauhan runs away from the battlefield, it leaves stain on his pride. There is a temple of Lord Ram in Orchha. There is an idol of folk deity Hardaul Lala in Orchha. Lake Kiratsagar is also there in Mahoba. The dearest brother (Lala) has sacrificed his life at such a young age. Lord Ram comes to Chitrakoot (Bundelkhand) from Awadhpuri. As long as he stays in Bundelkhand, all his work is accomplished. But when he moves from Chitrakoot, he faces many problems.)

Whenever the alhaeit has to describe the warriors in the Mahoba army, he incorporates the following stanza in *Chhapay* meter in his recitation:

Brahmjit, Ranjit, Abhai, Jagnik, Jujhara
Dongar, Sinha, Dubahu, Bahubal, Udbhat bhara
Keshav, Kayathrai, Aay Kalyan, sabhasad
Chhatrsaal, Bachhraj, Siya, Jalhan, Yodhha bad
Ari laksh laksh shar lakshkar raksh raksh ran kaksh ke
Rakshak 'Jitendra' Partaksh ye Parmale ke paksh ke.

(Brahmajit, Ranjit, Abhaijit, Jagnik, Dongar, Sinha, Dubahu, Bahubal, Udbhat, Keshav, Kayathrai, Kalyan, Chhatrasal, Bachhraj, Siya, Jalhan—all these are the great warriors in the court of King Paramardideva.)

It can be said that in the Bundeli version, the alhaeits use the *alha* chhand as well as the various metrical stanzas available in Hindi prosody. The audience likes these metrical stanzas and they ask alhaeits to incorporate in their recitation

Oral folk prefer not the soldier, but the brave soldier; not the princess, but the beautiful princess; not the oak, but the sturdy oak. This is called aggregative method to express the orally based thought. The performer cannot give the minute description of the princess, therefore, he uses the aggregative phrase 'beautiful' to give the essential idea about princess. This may be for the metrical purpose. In the folk epic *Alha,* we have many epithets as such: whenever the name of mama Mahil is taken by the performer, the 'chugalkhor' (back-bitter) is always used before his name as 'chugalkhor Mahil'. As this term is used, we have in mind all the qualities of a back-bitter. The performer sings not 'Udal' but 'bagh Udal'; not 'Alha' but 'nuni Alha'. In the folk epic Sobha Naika Banjara, not simply Jasumati is used but 'baari Jasumati'. These are also used because traditional expressions in oral cultures must not be dismantled. It has been hard work getting them together over the generations, and there is nowhere outside the mind to store them.

One genre melody-type frequently used in singing *Dhola* is *Alha*, a melody deriving from the martial folk epic *Alha*, also performed in the region where *Dhola* is found. *Alha*, sung by men, is a story of war and battle: it has a distinctive metrical pattern of twenty-four beats with an emphasis on every fourth beat. When used in *Dhola*, the strict four-four meter of *Alha* connects it to the martial themes and marching of the army. The audience knows *Alha* by tune and rhythm, and associates *Alha* with matters heroic and military, so a Dhola singer frequently uses *Alha* as a musical symbol to remind the audience of the heroic king marching off to war.

A second frequently used folk song melody is that associated with the women's genre *malhar*. *Malhar* are songs sung by women during the rainy season and mark the longing of a married woman for her natal home, and for her brother to take her there. Hence, the *malhar* genre is easily recognizable and marks things feminine, things associated with longing and love.

Thus, by using local song genres, the singers use these genres as a symbol that can convey a particular mood to the audience. Hence, it is possible for a singer to convey a particular mood or attitude through his choice of a folk song genre that emotionally connects the audience with the original genre and its texts, even if the melody is used for a different or only vaguely related topic in the epic performance.

Literacy

Writing (Literacy) had reconstituted the originally oral, spoken word in visual space. While most North Indian folk theatrical art is oral, which provides a firm ground for its distinction, it should be noted that the oral and the written are often complementary to each other and the boundaries between the two often blur and merge into each other. The opposition between the oral and the written dissolves and becomes meaningless when the written word, which is used as an aid to memory, is converted back into the oral and the written-oral confluence moves ahead with a life of its own. For instance, the performance of *Par Vachno* related to *Pabuji* and *Dev Narayan* brings together the visual experience of image/icons through their 'reading' by Bhopo in a verbal narrative, revealing an interconnectedness of the oral, the written and the visual. Further, the orality constitutes and influences the mental landscapes of not only non-literate people but also literates ones in a country like India where the oral and the written co-exist and sway each other. In comparison to the entrenchment over the printed word in Western cultures, in India the oral gets primacy over the written and both the written and the oral interact with each other while creating new versions in the process. While within the Western critical tradition, there is a tendency to go back to the roots, which is often a printed discourse, within Indian critical traditions, there is no single Ur-text as such. All texts are simply points of view from different angles and exist in simultaneity. Even the esteemed Sanskrit epics are not generic 'epics' in the Western sense of concept. They carry within them many aspects of oral performances which are subversive of official, formal narration of events and characters.

Performance is essential to *Dhola* because it is through the voices of the singers that the characters are brought to life, usually through the voice of a solo singer. That Dhola is about transgressing norms is given even greater impact because, despite the existence of the chapbook versions, the epic lives through performance. One of the principles of performance is identification with characters, the sharing of circumstances. Oral performance is based not on rhetoric deliberations but rather on engaging the sympathies of the audience with the very real human problems encountered by the characters whom the singer brings to life. The success of the tale being told ultimately depends on the abilities of its singers.

Community

When a particular story is borrowed from the epics and is performed before a rural audience, it undergoes many transpositions where the provincial mores of a rustic society modify those of the trans-regional ones. A sharing of its permeable boundaries with other regional folk expressive traditions such as folk epics, folk tales and folk songs makes the texture of North Indian folk theatre a part of all these expressive genres. All these folk arts share not only the cultural pool of stories, myths and motifs, but also reveal the effects of attributes such as the presence of an active audience, the mixing of poetic and prose passages, the use of the performer as the teller of the story and so forth on each other. The intertextuality and the sharing of spaces thus become a hallmark of all these folk texts. Malik notes that:

> Narrative text is composed of a deep play between itself and other narrative texts, some belonging to the puranic and epic streams of texts and others to 'folk'streams. The intertextual dimension of the narrative text reworks and repeats patterns found in other texts, which themselves draw from a 'common pool' of ideas, motifs and values (170).

Heda Jason proposed a model for examination of folk literature performance. The interrelationship between the performer and the audience can be determined. The performer's conscious shaping of the material on the one hand and the "preventive censure" of the audience on the other, put limits on the performer's freedom to depart from the traditional form and content. The *Alhaeits* follow the plot line and the 'typical Alha tune' and 'typical Alha drumming' accepted in Bundelkhand during the recitation of Alha. Whenever the Alhaeits deviate from this plot line, the audience becomes restless. Some people in the audience start saying 'This is not our story'; 'This is not our way of singing'. Karine Schomer describes an incident of an oral recitation of *Alha* on the 800th anniversary of the 1182-83 battle between King Prithviraj Chauhan and King Parmal. *Alha* singers from all over the Hindi area were invited to Mahoba for a three day *Alha* festival. Schomer says, "In Mahoba, the audience listened in pin-drop silence and with total concentration as long as singers from the Bundelkhand tradition were performing, but people started becoming restless whenever Kanauj-Baiswara ensemble groups come on" (The Audience as Patron 87). The same thing had happened in Kannauj when the Bundeli *Alha* singers came to perform *Alha*. People started getting up and walking out,

mimicking and making fun of the recitation style of the Bundelkhand performers. In both these performance styles, it can be seen that the audience acts as a patron. The audience successfully exercises the preventive censure in its role as patron in these performances.

Alha is performed as an entertainment genre for the common folk. At one time, only single episode is performed by the alhaeit, which continue for five to six hours. The singer sits on a raised platform and audience sits on the ground or on chair. The arrangement of light is mandatory during the night performance. In the duration of five to six hours, the alhaeit takes a break after one hour for some snacks and *bidis* or tobacco. The audience is free to drift in and out and occasional breaks to smoke bidis or for tea. After the break when the singing starts, the alhaeit has to do sumiran to all the gods and goddesses. He does sumiran each time after the break.

In Bhojpuri region, the Alhaeits are often hired to perform on some auspicious occasion like birth of a child, and marriage ceremony. Alha performance generally happens during the marriage ceremony. The alhaeits are hired by the groom's party for the performance. Marriages take place in the bride's village at the bride's house. The groom with all his relatives travels to bride's house for marriage ceremony which is called *barat.* The barat arrives in the evening in the bride's village. *Alha* performers are hired to entertain the groom's marriage party members during their stay in the bride's village. Here, the performance is carried out according to the demands of the *barat*. However, the audience consists not only of *barat* but also people from the nearby villages. The majority of the audience of the audience is male in such performances.

Conclusion

To conclude, we can say that oral cultures untouched by writing in any form learn a great deal and possess and practice great wisdom. They learn by apprenticeship, by listening, by repeating what they hear, by mastering proverbs and ways of combining and recombining them. It takes a long time for the performer to sing the story in the same manner as their masters do. The interplay of community, orality, and literacy is quite significant in the transmission of folklore.

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