

FOLKLORISMUS: INDIAN FOLKLORE AND MASS CULTURE

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The main objective of this brief study is to focus the attention of the scholars of folklore on the relationship between the fast growing Indian mass culture or *folklorismus*¹ and folklore. By mass culture we mean modern mass produced artefacts, a kind of industrial renewal of old traditions shared and circulated in an industrialized society by written, oral or other means of mass communication. For instance popular films, advertisements, comic books and films, popular designs, folk cartoons, etc. One must remember that more often than not, mass culture can be, and is confused with urban folklore, which, however, is not correct. This confusion can be attributed to two factors, namely (i) the past-oriented definition of folklore theory which does not have the potential to distinguish urban folklore from mass culture and (ii) since mass culture derives upon folklore, even urban folklore, both for its form and content, there exist naturally many similarities between the two due to shared characteristics. These in turn are misunderstood and both phenomena treated as one. Let us have a cursory look at these shared characteristics of folklore, urban folklore and mass culture in the Indian conditions.

<i>Folklore</i>	<i>Urban (modern) Folklore</i>	<i>Mass Culture</i>
1. Oral (written)	Oral and written	Oral and written
2. Traditional	Traditional and contemporary	Traditional and contemporary
2. Groupy (folk)	Groupy (folk)	Groupy (folk)
4. Anonymous	Anonymous and known author	<i>Known</i> author
Multiple existence (versions)	Multiple existence (versions)	<i>Fixed</i> form (no versions)

The above comparison clearly shows that the only difference, if that can be called a difference, between the traditional folklore and modern (urban) folklore is that of anonymity. Due to the advancement made in the technology of dissemination (printing, xeroxing, photography, etc.) it is possible now to know about the authorship of certain folklore items such as a chain letter, a folk design or a folk cartoon, etc. However, the processes of dissemination of folklore items are so complex that anonymity seems, by and large, one of the main characteristics of even modern folklore. Mass culture, on the other hand, shares almost all characteristics with folklore — both traditional and modern folklore — except the aspects of anonymity and multiple existence; both being crucial characteristics for differentiation. It is precisely because of these two important characteristics, more particularly the latter, that mass culture has to be treated separately — a phenomenon which strictly speaking is not folklore but

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¹ See, for example, "Folklorismus" in *Zeitschrift Volkskunde*, 1969.

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resembles folklore and shares all its characteristics except two, e.g., anonymity and multiple existence both in time and space.

Mass culture or *Folklorismus* is the industrial renewal of folklore. It is the process of channeling the traditional folk themes, metaphors, motifs, ideas and beliefs into the mass produced industrial-commercial products, mass media and other forms of modern communication. Indian society, as we are aware, is not strictly speaking an industrial society at the present moment. However, as a developing country, industrialization is an important aspect of our growth and progress. On the one hand, the majority of our people live in the rural countryside in conditions which have not changed drastically since medieval times. On the other hand, the growth of metropolis culture since independence has been very fast and comparable to any developed nation of the world. These conditions have provided India with a double face: one of the village India — of filth, poverty and disease, of droughts, floods, of crowds, castes and religions — and the other of big cities, sky-scrapers, big business, T.V. and commercial culture. Mass culture, as should be clear now, belongs to this second face of modern Indian society.

POPULAR INDIAN FILMS

The popular films are an important part of mass culture everywhere, and more so in India where these films play a very important role in the society. In the first place, popular films in India, irrespective of the languages these are produced in, are more or less like "modern fairy tales"². The scholars have recognized that popular Indian films follow the same structural patterns as one notices in fairy tales and folktales. The popular films based on love themes (boy-meets-the-girl plots) seem to fantasize love and adventure (the little hero winning against great odds) as one would notice in the fairy tales³. The magic of the myth and the fairy tale has not died out completely, but survives in the changed forms in the Indian popular cinema. I can decipher, for example, the following four broader categories in popular Indian cinema which seem to operate on folklore.

(i) *Full Myth Films*: in which traditional myths or folktales or their national or regional versions are incorporated without changing the basic plot structure.

(ii) *Half Myth Films*: in which the myth or the traditional narrative is imposed on a non-traditional plot-structure or vice-versa. This trend, besides films, is very strong in modern Indian literature and contemporary painting. This form is also more appealing both to the city and the village people as it very appropriately establishes the relevance of the mythic metaphor in modern Indian society.

(iii) *Mythic Theme Films*: represent such films which borrow one or many mythic motifs and use them according to the needs of the plot-structure, which otherwise is completely non-mythic and modern. This form sometimes resembles the Half Myth form. However, the difference between the two is that in the former the

² See, for example, Richard M. Dorson (ed.), *Folklore in the Modern World*, The Hague / Paris, Mouton, 1978. See also Raphael Patai, *Myth and Modern Man*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1972, and V. Sudarsa, Reddy *et al.*, "Telegu Films: A Thematic Analysis", *Folklore* (Calcutta), Vol. 19 (1978), pp. 11-18, 27.

³ See Brenda Beck, "Social Dydes in Indic Folklore" in Stuart Blackburn and A. K. Ramanujan (eds.), *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*, New Delhi, Munshiran Manohardas, 1986.

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mythic theme hangers on like a shadow from the beginning to the end, whereas in the latter form the theme or motifs occur occasionally in inverted forms. For example, a modern plot-structure of a Mythic Theme film may use Mahabharata theme of Gandhari's forced blindness as an example of a "devoted wife" to direct the modern plot-structure towards its forceful idealized conclusion.

(iv) *Fairy Tale Pattern Films*: are those popular films which exhibit a deep structure pattern comparable to fairy tales. For example, the hero in such films, just like the fairy tale, has to pass numerous tests before being able to trace his heroine, liquidate the villain, win the heroine and marry her. The donor's and villain's actions, just like the fairy tale, are crucial in such films. The logic of the fairy tale pattern: from disequilibrium to equilibrium is an essential feature of such films. Thus the fairy tale, if not in its entirety, but in terms of structural frame and action patterns⁴ seems alive and thriving in one form or the other in modern Indian celluloid phenomenon. That these patterns and structures are still meaningful and relevant to Indian mind and society, and in fact form an important aspect of Indian mass culture is further supported by the recent phenomenon in the real political life of the same society which has accepted many celluloid heroes as political personalities who have or are shaping the political destiny of the land⁵.

T.V. AND MASS CULTURE

Most of what I said about popular Indian films seems true about the T.V. films and T.V. serials as well. However, T.V. being a special media certain differences can be easily discerned. Modern Indian Mass media, especially the T.V., just like Indian popular films, may need a book-length treatment for appropriate analysis as a strong component of Indian mass culture. For our purpose here a summary treatment should suffice.

The rise and spread of the T.V. phenomenon in India has been very fast. It has made a strong impact on Indian society and mass culture. Besides direct telecasting of great Indian myths, epics and other forms or oral narrative including "frozen"⁶ forms such as *Ramayana*, *Vikram aur Baital* (Vikram and the Baital) and living folktales in serials like *Dada-Dadi ki Kahaniyan* (tales of grandfather and grandmother), there are numerous indirect forms in which T.V. as a strong media of mass culture plays the role of renewing folklore and other forms of oral tradition in modern Indian society. One such example is *Ashcharya Deepak* (miracle lamp), which is the famous tale "Alladin and his Wonderful Lamp"⁷ of the Arabian Nights modernized to suit the industrial

⁴ See, for instance, V. J. Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 1968. See also Jawaharlal Handoo, *Current Trends in Folklore*, Mysore, University of Mysore Press, 1978; *Folklore: An Introduction*, Mysore, Central Institute of Indian Languages, 1989, and "Theory and the Problem of Meaning in Folklore", *International Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 2 (1982), pp. 7-27.

⁵ In this regard, M. G. Ramachandran and Miss Jayalalitha of AIADMK Party (Tamil Nadu), N. T. of Telugu Desham Party (Andhra Pradesh), Amitabh Bacchan and Sunil Dutt of Congress-I Party, and many others who are playing positive political roles both at the centre and the regions of India are worth note.

⁶ See Jawaharlal Handoo, *Current Trends in Folklore*.

⁷ See Richard H. Burton, *Arabian Nights*, New York, 1932.

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society and its needs. I am sure similar, if not identical, forms exist in the regional language programs.

The T.V. advertising is another area in which folklore metaphors, symbols, designs, motifs and ideas are transformed to popularize or boost the modern industrial products, and as such become an important part of mass culture. That such advertisements have more mass appeal is undoubtedly true in a society which is past-oriented, male dominant, strongly family centered and highly religious in character. So one should appreciate the industrial renewal of folklore when one notices a fairy appearing from the hump of a camel and produces numberless glasses of chilled soft drinks with the touch of her magic wand; or a tooth paste descends from the heavens just like a UFO; or a particular brand of glucose transforms a lazy boy into a super-kid cricketer; or one variety of coconut oil is still relevant for a modern young lady's hair because her grandmother used it once and also recommended it; or water-sprinkles bearing the brand name of the mythic Ganapati; or chemical fertilizers named after mythic and epic heroes; and, last but not the least, popular folktales being enacted for conveying the themes about limiting the size of the family and also for boosting the theme of national integration.

It is interesting to note that while the national channel of Indian T.V. was serializing *Vikram aur Baital* cycle, almost at the same time the *Kachuva Chap Agarbati* (turtle brand mosquito repellent coil) was being advertised with the help of an episode from the same serial. Here, then, is a good example to show the direct use of folklore for the purposes of T.V. entertainment, and its indirect use for boasting an industrial product. Not only the oral narratives, but folk beliefs and folk medicine also find respectable places in this form of mass media. So, in this setup, clove and turmeric are shown as essential ingredients of the tooth-pastes and facial creams respectively. In the same manner, the traditional folk designs of T.V. productions, whether commercial or otherwise.

Constraints of time and space prevent me from treating this subject at length here. However, the temptation of writing at least an introduction to this vast and promising area is great. Before I conclude this brief study, two things seem to be very crucial. In the first place Indian folklorists have traditionally been searching for folk elements in modern cultural expressions: literature, painting, art for instance. But they have not yet tried their tools on other kind of contemporary expressions such as films, advertisements, mass media, folk speech, particularly slang, commercial products and other forms of Indian mass culture. One reason for this lag could be the disinterest of folklore scholars in seeing and examining the continuity of themes and metaphors in modern Indian society. The dynamic nature of folklore and the diversity it presents in India combined with the emerging field of mass culture make such explorations not only highly promising, but highly rewarding as well. The second point which one has to keep in mind in the present circumstances is the fact that mass culture has not made such impact yet on Indian society as it has in the industrialized world of the West. The reasons are obvious: India has walked into the modern Industrial culture recently. Two or three decades are not sufficient for a country such as India to develop the kind of mass culture one notices in the West.

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However, the last decade has been very productive due to the impact of the T.V. network and other socio-cultural factors. I am sure there is going to be a big boom in the mass culture in India in the near future. So folklore scholars have to prepare themselves to face this new boom. If this brief introduction helps in this preparation and if my concerns about the position of folklore in modern Indian society are appreciated, I will consider that as my reward.

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RESUMO

Este breve estudo tem como principal objectivo alertar os estudiosos do folclore e da semiótica para as relações entre a crescente cultura de massas indiana (ou folclorismo) e a cultura tradicional. O presente artigo tenta encontrar a estrutura destas relações de uma forma sincrónica. Além de tentar definir os domínios do folclore, urbano ou moderno, e a cultura de massas, com os seus vários domínios que, como é tradicionalmente aceite, se inter-penetraram, este texto aponta como exemplos a necessitar de análise importantes áreas da cultura de massas indiana: a estrutura de conto de fadas dos filmes populares indianos, as séries televisivas independentes e os anúncios de produtos de massas. O artigo tenta mostrar a continuidade e a força das metáforas da cultura tradicional no moderno contexto da sociedade industrial indiana.