Folklore and the Construction of National Tradition

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... the distinction of marga from desi is not necessarily a distinction of aristocratic and cultivated from folk and primitive art, but one of sacred and traditional from profane and sentimental art.

(Ananda K. Coomaraswamy: “The Nature of Folklore and Popular Art.”)

... the Indian spirit... finds formal expression from prehistoric times onward in two distinct channels or margas... The first may be designated as the imperial-cum-priestly or court-cum-shastric marga and the second as the sahaja (spontaneous or natural) marga.

(Gurusaday Dutt: “The Living National Art Tradition of Bengal.”)

The folk in relation to an Indian aesthetic

Folklore played a significant role in the reconstitution of tradition in the nationalist discourse in India. However, while it served as an important source of historical reconstruction, there were divergent views on its relationship with the present, with modern Indian society – shaped as it was by the forces of imperialism and colonization. In this essay I shall examine some of the concepts used by prominent nationalist scholars like Ananda Coomaraswamy and Gurusaday Dutt to reconfigure folklore within an essentially ‘Indian’ discourse. The constitution of a national tradition involves an act of translation by which cultural meanings are addressed to and through an Other (Bhabha 1994). The Other that the Indian nationalists were responding to were the ‘colonizers’ – the British intellectuals who viewed Indian art and culture through categories of Western aesthetics but also the ‘orientalists’ whose idealized representations of Indian civilization, provided a prism through which they addressed questions relating to Indian art and culture. The tradition that they were trying to reconstitute had a synthetic, even hybrid, quality. However, to understand the nature of this hybridity one will have to unravel the different strands in their discourse. Was this tradition discontinuous and would it therefore allow for selective reappropriation or was it unbroken and continuous, unscathed by historical events? For scholars who held to the former view folk culture was a trace of a time gone by and a sign of temporal disruption and for those holding the latter view, it was the source of authentic tradition that continued to exist from pre-historic times. The process of translation, however, resulted in the destabilization of the term “folklore”, giving it new and unexpected connotations.

Thus Coomaraswamy uses an Indian classificatory scheme – the division into marga (highway) and desi (byway, local) – in his essay on folklore and popular art (1956). However, unlike the Western case, he finds that folk art falls within the category of marga or high art. According to Coomaraswamy universal and eternal values are always embodied through the sacred. Therefore, since Indian folklore speaks exclusively in the voice of the sacred it must necessarily embody universal values. Rather, it is the courtly arts like Mogul miniature painting that deal with worldly and secular themes that must be characterized as desi or parochial.

Coomaraswamy’s essay must be viewed in the light of his life-long endeavour to establish a separate and distinct aesthetic tradition in India. He was reacting to colonial representations of Indian art as merely decorative and sensuous and sought to highlight the spiritualism behind the appearance of sensuous form (Guha-Thakurta 1992). As a nationalist he was also deeply interested in the ‘Bengal School’, painters and their efforts at reconstituting the Indian art tradition. Painters belonging to the Bengal School, like Abanindranath Tagore, were conscious that they were in the process of constituting a national tradition – an aesthetics that could represent the whole of India. They tried to create a synthetic and universal style borrowing elements from different regional styles and techniques, even some from outside India. For example, Abanindranath Tagore adopted the wash technique in watercolour painting from Japan as this enabled him to express the innate spiritualism of the Indian tradition. Thus this technique enabled him to portray indistinct forms in misty grounds, allowing him to express the inner meaning of the images by negating the distinctiveness of material form (Guha-Thakurta 1992). Interestingly Tagore was also interested in folk art. In a book on the folk rituals of Bengal he says that these rituals, which are still performed in rural Bengal, show traces of pre-Aryan, pre-Brahmanic culture (1350 BE).

Village India, especially the spheres associated with the home and with domesticity are represented as an autonomous inner space in the nationalist discourse. This space continues to exist in modern times untouched by the effects of colonization. Thus the Indian people are thought to be the inheritors of a discontinuous tradition. Folklore bore the traces of another time.
Coomaraswamy says that, “folk memory” serves “the purpose of a sort of ark, in which the wisdom of a former age is carried over (tiryate) the period of dissolution...” (1956:139). This wisdom is not necessarily understood by the ‘folk’ (jana) but forms part of their lived tradition.

Folklore and folk culture was thought to have a significant role in the making of an Indian aesthetic tradition. However, the nationalist discourse was by no means homogeneous in its conceptualization of the folk. Gurusaday Dutt, who became interested in the folk culture of Bengal in the course of his work as a colonial administrator, had a perspective on folk culture that was diametrically opposed to that of Coomaraswamy and the Bengal School artists. He did not believe that India had ever had a unified aesthetic tradition. Each region had its own distinctive style and any attempt to create a pan-Indian style would be detrimental to the living cultures still flourishing in the different parts of India. Let me elaborate on his position.

For Dutt (1990) folk culture represented the national culture of Bengal. It was in a relationship of unbroken continuity with pre-Aryan Indian civilization but also managed to absorb the best of Aryan culture. It was able to synthesize both these civilizational streams. However it was only able to express its true significance in certain phases of Bengal’s political history. That is when it was freed from the domination of pan-Indian imperial powers viz the Guptas, Palas and Senas that held sway in Bengal till about the 12th century. He made a distinction between the aristocratic art tradition that he called the ‘patroned marga’ (courtly or aristocratic way) and the ‘sahaja marga’ (the popular and spontaneous way) represented by the work of village artists who created artistic forms within ritual and in the activities of daily life.

Coomaraswamy did not believe that there was a fundamental difference in value between aristocratic and folk art. They were both embedded within the sacred tradition. However it was only the folk who still survived and managed to preserve this tradition in modern India as I have already said. Dutt believed that the sacred realm itself was divided between the institutions shaped by priestly and imperial power and the natural religion of the folk. However, in spite of their differences their perspectives have something in common – the folk, whether defined as a jana or “a unanimous community” in Coomaraswamy’s terms or as a ‘race culture’ in Dutt’s terms – are unaffected by institutional forms of inequality based on class, caste or ethnicity. This made the ‘folk’ non-contemporaneous with modern India. However, the tension between the universal and the local that informs the work of both Coomaraswamy and Dutt has been extremely productive for folklore scholarship, as we shall see in the next section.

Local culture and pan-Indian civilization

It is important to remember that in Coomaraswamy’s scheme the local has a place within the universal. Regional culture is subsumed within pan-Indian civilization. For him, the category of folk is a way of producing the local (cf. Appadurai 1997) that must in turn address the universal. This idea has been used by some Bengali folklorists to re-constitute Bengal’s regional culture. Thus Mahua Mukherjee (1996) finds in Purulia Chho, a folk dance from the Purulia district of West Bengal, the living memory of a classical dance tradition that has vanished from the urban areas. Interestingly Mukherjee’s work combines aspects of the two perspectives discussed above. She follows Coomaraswamy in thinking that there has been an interchange between folk and aristocratic (she calls this classical) forms of culture over time. But she also shares with Dutt the opinion that Bengal has a distinctive regional culture that is threatened by the presence of an outward oriented elite. Unlike Dutt, however, she locates this elite not in the medieval period but in the colonial period of Bengal’s history. Mukherjee tries to reconstitute a Bengali aesthetic within the perspective of pan-Indian civilization.

Other scholars speaking from the vantage point of tribal studies say that some groups whom they characterize as ‘jana’, that is egalitarian tribal societies, are qualitatively different from the rest of India, which is dominated by institutionalized systems of inequality based on caste (jati) (Bosu Mullick 1991). Arguing against the official representation of Indian culture as a ‘unity in
diversity’, Bosu Mullick says that this was “the diversity of incompatable qualities. And its unity was not the unity of agreeable diversities”(1991:vi). He says that historically, mainstream Indian society dominated by caste ideology has always rejected the tribal groups (jana societies) that lived in their midst. Bosu Mullick is speaking specifically about the tribal groups who inhabit the Chota Nagpur plateau in Central India. Many of the tribal groups in this region have a history of rebellion against the colonial administration in the past and more recently against the Indian state. According to Bosu Mullick, the movement for the separate tribal state and the assertion of a collective tribal identity has reaffirmed the common values between the different groups as well as intensifying their sense of separation from mainstream caste society. Bosu Mullick’s views on regional distinctiveness resonate with those of Gurusaday Dutt. It is important to note, however, that he is the only scholar discussed so far who speaks of caste inequality. But this is achieved only by separating the ‘folk’ into tribal and peasant societies. (The latter being seen as part of an essentially stratified social formation.) Another point worth noting is that he includes Purulia in the Chota Nagpur cultural region that he calls the society of janas or tribes. Mahua Mukherjee, whose views have been presented above, includes the folk dances of Purulia within the culture of Bengal and would like to see it reconstituted as a classical or margic form based on the canonical Indian text, the Natyashastra
t. To understand Purulia’s dual identity- as part of the cultural tribe of Chota Nagpur as well as the folk culture of Bengal we have to first determine the political stakes involved in such classification. After independence, the Indian state invested considerable resources in the revival of Indian aesthetic traditions. This meant that regional forms were often recast as ‘classical’ traditions, which were thought to reflect the cultural unity of the country (or rather its ‘unity in diversity’). At the same time as this was happening, India was also being reorganized into states on the basis of common language. Over time this has led to the growth of a regional chauvinism and to competition between regions for cultural recognition by the government (Swapnasundari 2005). Both Mukherjee and Bosu Mullick are speaking about the production of locality as Appadurai says but within a global context. For Bosu Mullick this global context is a syncretic tribal society that has always co-existed uneasily with the rest of India and for Mukherjee it is a syncretic Bengali culture that must find its distinctive voice within Indian civilization.

Secularism and the folk

Since the early part of the 20th century nationalist Bengali folklorists have characterized the voice of the Bengali folk as intrinsically secular (Sarkar 1926, Sen 1985). At first sight this seems to contradict Coomaraswamy’s view of folk culture as essentially sacred. Is it still possible to speak of a nationalist discourse in the face of such divergent views? For the early Bengali folklorists, the portrayal of the folk as secular was a strategic devise by which they were able to establish Bengal’s distinctiveness without repudiating her place within the civilizational mainstream. Under the influence of orientalist representations of Indian civilization, scholars like Coomaraswamy tended to underplay the significance of the Muslim period and characterized Indian civilization as essentially Hindu. Bengal was home to a large Muslim population and had many heterodox sects and cults that bore the traces of ancient Buddhist and pre-Aryan practices. By characterizing Bengali culture as folk culture and emphasizing its syncretic nature the Bengali nationalists were able to locate Bengal’s culture within the dominant civilizational paradigm. Hindus and Muslims were thought to share a common culture that was secular and worldly. The gods, goddesses glorified in popular religious rituals shared by both religious communities were human figures expressing human interests. Thus folk culture was essentially universal and the folk in all parts of the country and at all times, shared the same concerns. Secularism was presented as a primordial sentiment of the folk. In more recent times it is used by Left oriented intellectuals to counter the cultural nationalism propagated by right-wing political parties. Thus suggesting that secularism is an indigenous value. In this context women become the privileged representatives of folk culture - the subaltern voice that cuts across such conflicting divisions such as those based on class, caste, religion and locality (Sinha 1997).

In this essay we get a somewhat different representation of the ‘folk’ than the common sense connotation of the term. The ‘folk’ suggests a bounded community in which face-to-face relations predominate. In contrast to ‘civilization’ that connotes universalism, ‘folk’ connotes localization (Chatterji 2003). Coomaraswamy (1956), as we saw, thinks of folklore as a civilizational category. Even Dutt (1990) who has a more conventional understanding of the concept of folk does however think that it has an important role in the revitalization of national culture, which has to be built up through dialogue between different regional traditions. Why is folklore so often used to reconstitute national culture especially in newly emerging nations? The ‘folk’ is a complex semic category suggesting both a primordial sentiment as well as contemporary orientation such that it can refer to tradition as well as co-exist with modern social formations. Let me explain what I mean by citing an example from the folk painting of Mithila in Bihar. Santosh Kumar Das, an artist trained in modern art techniques, has returned to the traditional folk style of his community to depict a contemporary event – the communal riots in Gujarat in 2002. In a sensitive analysis of the paintings, Mani Shekar Singh (2005) explores the artist’s consciousness, the reasons he may have had for choosing to return to a style that he had earlier repudiated. As Singh (2005) says, “the Gujarat series is a lament, an expression of a sense of loss of tradition articulated by Hindu fundamentalist’ politics. As the compositions in the series make evident, not only humans but also Hindu gods and
Endnotes

1 Mukherjee (1996) says that the uncritical admiration of Western culture and the north Indian musical tradition led to the demise of Bengal’s distinctive classical dance tradition.

2 In this regard it is important to remember that the division between folk and classical in also a bureaucratic classification conferred by the Indian state. Dances that are designated as classical have access to the resources of the state (Swapanasundari 2005).

3 See also Asad (2002)

4 This refers to the political activity of right-wing fundamentalist parties in India.

References


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