Folk performers have a dynamic relationship with other traditions...

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You have devoted a great deal of your research to the study of Tulu Paddanas; about the space of women’s singing, their bond in matrilineal relationship, etc. Also you attempted to develop a methodology that is more attentive to its content and expression. Do these songs approach the past to unsettle the stability of imposed hierarchies and divisions? What do they signify for our current folklore engagements and can we hear a kind of rebellious murmur in those songs?

That’s a complicated question, because you are talking about social system on one hand—matrilineality—and a song tradition on the other hand. To use the word ‘song’ of course is to make small of what is really great: these ‘songs’ are ‘mini-epics’ often 4 to 6 hours long, or more. Some are clearly ‘epic’ in length, and the Siri Paddana is a very specific set of those. The genre called Paddana, itself is complicated with male sub-genres and female ones.

I have to say that with regard to the song part of it, the actual recitation, I was attracted both to the male sub-genres of this tradition which occur during the bhuta kolias (bhuta rituals), which are different from the Siri Jatras. Both of these are ritual contexts. But I was also attracted to the women’s songs, which are sung when women are transplanting paddy in the paddy fields. These are attractive for very, very different reasons. They are all different in some ways, and I have tried to talk about the differences in some of my articles. But the women’s traditions—singing the very same songs—elaborates the stories in beautifully poetic ways.

My original research proposal in 1975 was to collect ones related to specific bhuta cult activities (and I use the word ‘cult’ here not in any derogatory sense... a label for a group of people that have a common sense of interest in religious matters). I chose the Billava Koti-Chennaya Paddana cult as one, the Mundaldakalu, (a so-called dalit caste), Kordabbu Paddana and thirdly the Siri Paddana, which is totally different: it is associated with a cult which is not caste associated—it is multi-caste. Initially I did work on the male hero traditions, especially with the Koti Chennaya tradition, but then when I started working with the Siri Paddana I was drawn to the women’s traditions. And from that Paddana to other women’s Paddanas that they sing in the fields. The sheer beauty of those Paddanas made me want to collect a whole bunch of them... just to listen to them, just to experience the imagery. This is what brought me back about five years later to do research pretty much exclusively on the women’s tradition. And as I collected more and more of those I was able to see the Siri one, as well as the men’s song traditions in much better perspective.

As to matrilineality in any of these, I don’t think it’s an important feature. Even in the Siri tradition, it is about men and women, no doubt, but matrilineality, I think is secondary. I think all South Indian Dravidian cultures (maybe not all but certainly the majority) give a lot of prominence to women in comparison with other types of kinship systems. They all give, I think, an outsider, a male such as myself, much freer interaction with women. I don’t know, maybe matrilineality gives a slightly greater edge to this but I don’t think so actually.

As to rebellious, I don’t think that is what characterises the Siri Paddana or any of these Paddanas. The Siri Paddana is particularly associated with the Siri Jatra, the Siri cult ritual that occur once a year. It’s not about rebelling, it is about a mutual sense of curing, help, and aid. It’s true that in those cult activities, women have a visible prominence. That is what amazed me the first time I saw a Siri Jatra—the thousands of possessed women doing and acting in ways that were extraordinary. However quite as equally extraordinary for men’s behaviour too—but there are fewer men who are participants in the Siri cult. In the fields when the women sing the Siri Paddana, that’s where you see the greatest elaboration of the story and the narrative takes its fullest form. Whatever rebelliousness there may be in the narrative it is most elaborately detailed in the women’s field song. When you get to the cult recitation, it’s the male control of the women’s possession, which predominates, but again there is not a sense of rebelliousness, but of competition between women: sisters. There is also a sense of collaboration, there is a sense of curing, there is a sense of focussing everyone’s attention—men and women’s attention—on a woman, a single and usually young woman, who is experiencing difficulties, and how the aid of the Siri spirits can be brought to bear on that. Her difficulties are with one of the Siri spirits. If indeed she is possessed by a Siri spirit, then the issue is how that possession can be turned from a difficult one in to one that she can control for the benefit of everyone involved. Once she can control the spirit herself, she can help others.

So the male involvement is what transforms spirit possession from difficulty to social good, but women also participate in that transformation. I don’t see a competition in which there would be rebelliousness. So your full question was about Tulu Paddanas, matrilineality and rebelliousness has been atleast partially answered. Siri narratives brought me to look at the women’s Paddana tradition, but what brought me to do the collections that I have done on them is the sheer beauty of the women’s traditions.

When you say that they contain a curative value it is...
interesting to see a social fabric which supports male dominated perspective and within that structure women occupy a space other than what is known in general. It is significant to the study of the narrative mode of Paddanas and also to conceive it as a chronicle of our time. Is there any singular point or multiple factors which makes them so unique and what is that seminal position which women occupied in that? I remember your article also stress the role of women and the supportive role of men. So does that make the feminine voice very seminal in the narrative?

It is important, there is no doubt about that. But I don’t see it as unique or extraordinary. It’s definitely also a part of Kerala’s Pampontullal, where women play a very prominent role. It is part of Andhra Pradesh—David Knight has written about the Veerabhadra cults and the Perantalu cults there. I understand from Isabelle Nabokov’s writings and Margaret Trawick’s writings that women play a very prominent role in Tamil culture too, and in Tamil families. I don’t think there is anything extraordinary about the Tulu situation, within South Indian context. But perhaps it is revelational what I have written about how narrative song traditions view women’s role in the kinship systems and society in south India. I don’t know why other anthropologists did not write about it. It may have been my focus on the oral literature that women sing. But I always felt that Dravidian kinship systems placed women in equal position—not equal as in democracy, individuality—but equal prominence, equal importance in the family. Although that is malleable too—in some communities, it is more subtle, in some it is more exposed.

Much has been made in the folklore literature by Kannada folklorists about the nature of Siri and how it expresses the women’s rebelliousness, but I have never entirely gone along with that. Anything I might have written that suggests that, was not meant to support that sort of idea. There have been many kinds of extravagant ideas expressed by Kannada folklorists about the Siri material, and viewing the Siri Jatra activities. The word Siri in Kannada in some parts of Karnataka means a rebellious, headstrong woman, but I don’t get the impression in Tulunad, among the Tuluvus that it means that; maybe it has something of that connotation but not to be over-interpreted.

The uneasiness and vigilance is in a way connected to your comments about margi and desi. Also, you are of the opinion that some of the words which regional languages developed are not very subtle or productive categories for understanding the idea of folklore. I can see that there is a kind of imagination behind refusing to accept these limited definitions. However, would you explain that tension more clearly? It is one thing to say that these categories are not useful anymore to understand the history of the present. At the same time, it is important to identify those categories, which are operational or conceptually useful to understand the idea of folklore. Maybe the idea of folklore itself is undergoing change in our times.

Well, the terms margi and desi are terms that were not in any way developed by people who deal in terms of folklore today. There was a relationship between regional and Sanskritic traditions, and folklore was left out of this. Folklore, the culture of the untouchable, the marginalized, the tribal was never part of that binary. Perhaps a new category had to be introduced to draw attention to their traditions and that it is very much a part of what people have done under the label of folklore. But I also have an objection to ‘folklore’ and its implied opposite, whatever that may be. I don’t exactly know why a category of folklore exists as if that is something that has to be different from everything else. In any case, ‘folk’ vs. ‘the rest of us’ is a European and English and American set of distinctions that have a wholly different baggage to them with a very different set of historical significance, that I don’t think apply very well to India, or to Africa or to other parts of Asia.

Is it because of the cultural diversity?

No, it has to do with what needs to be distinguished, and I don’t think folklore needs to be distinguished. It is sort of the baseline of culture. In fact, it is the new kinds of movements which are distinguished by people within a culture, such as America, with movements like ‘post-modern’ having to distinguish itself and ‘Modern’ and before that ‘enlightened’, etc. Those were types of writing or types of art that, as they developed in a culture, get distinguished from other things seek to distinguish themselves. We view all of this from our perspective as if ‘modern’ and ‘post-modern’ and ‘enlightened’ was normal and ‘folk’ is something different, needing a label: it’s not, it is what’s normal, usual, everyday thinking and practice.

Why we needed to create a word like ‘folklore’ to identify the baseline, I am unsure. Because culture is always changing and the word ‘folklore’ implies that there is some point at which that baseline was solidified and made static, made unchanging. If that’s the intention of use of that word is, then I have no interest in that word because it does not pertain to any sort of reality that I have ever encountered. Everything that I have studied in folklore is under constant change. Change, not only in terms of
Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka and the Kuravas

Right now I am studying a group called the Gollas of all which you have mentioned about nomadicity. But I don't think these labels identify anything. Perhaps they identify, if anything, maybe a process: something becomes loosened from restriction within an identity group to become more popular, then you call it popular culture. When it is constrained and identified with one group, then you call it that group's folklore. So that you talk about Italian customs, food and stories and you call it Italian folklore and that identifies a group of Italian Americans, or German folklore, or British folklore. These phrases identify a collection of things, practices, stories and so forth within a restricted group of people as an identity. But you don't need the word 'folklore' either when you talk about German customs, German tales: there are few (if any) customs or tales that are found only among the Germans. All can be shown to have developed out of practices and stories shared far more broadly than just among Germans. There is a process by which they may have become restricted to Germans (If they did) that leads them to be identified as German folklore.

Why I asked you the question about cultural diversity is that during our afternoon interaction at NFSC, you were talking about border communities and nomadic peoples folklore. We did not pursue further but the idea of nomadicity generates new possibilities in understanding folklore. The idea of nomad provides new dimensions to the study of folklore. The idea of nomad does not support the idea a fixed place in space and time. It also contains lot of creative potential, which the idea of group or community doesn't have. When we did a series of workshops on visual art traditions of India, I always thought that it is the communal which contains the individual. The individual is like a picture of that being. The individual exists only during the singularity of that event or performance or during the making of that work of art. This status of nomadism also allows variation within the collectivity. They don't govern the practice. It allows the performer or artist to be close to his/her community as well as makes possible the movement away from it. Why you hold the opinion that folklore does not really need all that?

Well, I don't know I agree although I have thought about all which you have mentioned about nomadicity. But I like the idea, I think it is something that hasn't been explored very well, especially with regard to Indian folklore – of course, it has been done with European folklore, especially in America because American folklore is all about where your ancestors came from: Italy, Germany, Sweden, England, Spain or where you supposed your ancestors came from, those you want to identify with. But it also happens in India, and the material that we are talking about, let's call it folklore, often or sometimes has that characteristic of nomadicity (I like that word).

Right now I am studying a group called the Gollas of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka and the Kuravas too, which are widely dispersed people. Actually my interest in them was to get myself back to looking at more thoroughly anthropological issues, less folklore ideas, but I found myself concerned with folklore once again in just exactly that aspect of folklore that nomadicity implies. It is what holds a people together, in a sense, a micro-diaspora of Gollas. The Katama Raju Katha for some Gollas, or for Kuravas, the Mallana, Mailara, or Kandhoba story and others—they have a huge repertoire of folklore hold these diasporic peoples together. There are performing groups and importantly, I believe, they travel throughout the Kuraba and Kurama and Golla diasporas, performing these stories about the Golla and Kuraba heroes. Their performances have the effect of maintaining a certain cultural unity within the diaspora, it holds together an identity group and keeps them as a social group, as opposed to a group that disperses and dissolves. And what I found myself doing in my present research is seeing the degree to which those performers and their songs and performances are effective in holding the group and the group identity together. Our research is in progress and I don't have any answers, although my preliminary findings are in an unpublished paper from a conference of the Hyderabad Central University Centre, which speaks about some of these issues. The Social Effectiveness of Performance is I think what I call that particular paper, and it begins to address some aspects of your question, your identification of nomadicity of folklore. It doesn't address some of the aspects that you mentioned – the aesthetic dimension, the artistic dimension – I don't know quite how to address those. My expertise lies in social anthropology, not in aesthetics, although the aesthetics of folk traditions always attracts me, but in terms of what gives me something to work with is the social effectiveness. Everything that I have done with folklore actually is on the social effectiveness of folklore.

You are also involved in the setting up of few folklore institutions in India. These institutions in a way attempt to reinvent wheels-one's knowledge or entire work become another individual's tool or baseline. The folk artist also transforms his/her expertise, innovativeness, through what is preserved, archived and presented by these institutions to the community. These processes may also revitalise the tradition. What are your experiences in working in India?
I don’t think that the ‘folk’ ever-needed folklore centres to become inspired. I could give innumerable instances to show that folk performers draw techniques and content they see in other traditions into their own tradition. Folk performers are not as isolated from one another as most of us like to think. We like to imagine them as ‘pure’ or something like that, but they are not. They have a dynamic relationship with other traditions around them. That is as it should be.

So its not for the sake of the folk that the centres are needed. It is for our sake, to inform us what we are missing in our isolated lives, to bring us in touch with those who share our times. In that regard, there is an enormous amount of material that needs to be gathered. We need to use the most up-to-date equipment to record it. It has to be stored in an environment such that it isn’t lost as fast as it is gathered. It needs to be understood in so many different ways… and it needs to be accessible, conveyed to those of us who are interested. All of this takes huge sums of money. The Ford Foundation has provided all this. My primary association with the centres has been through a series of workshops meant to enhance links between folklorists within India and between Indian folklorist and folklorists around the world. One of the most important aspects of those links, in my view, was communication and a mutual understanding of one another’s methodologies and uses-primarily interpretative uses-of the material gathered in the centres. Our hope was to develop a cadre of younger folklorists who could establish these kinds of links. The actual results of the workshops may be seen in the works of those who had participated, and in the activities of the institutions such as NFSC (Muthukumaraswamy had participated in the workshops), Fossils (most of its leading figures had participated) and the Centres themselves (most employ folklorists who had participated in these workshops). I think it can safely be said that the hoped for linkages have come about. I think there are further kinds of development which need to take place, though I don’t know whether The Ford Foundation is still willing to provide its monetary support, but I am always willing to continue my interaction with Centres and the folklorists. Infact, I am in touch with many of them every time I come to India, we continue to communicate and share ideas.

Of course the materials collected in folklore Centres may be of value to people of many different interests: artists, scholars, school children, the general public in urban as well as rural areas. All are welcome, as long as they use the material in ethical ways, respecting, acknowledging and protecting the property rights of those who created the art in the first place.

Notes

The following words are used without diacritical marks in the text:

- Siri Paddana (Siri Păddana); bhuta kolas (bhūta kūlas); bhuta rituals (bhūta rituals); bhuta cult (bhūta cult); Billavakoti (Bīllavakōti); Chennaya Paddana (Chennaya Păddana); Koti Chennaya (Kōtī Chennaya); Paddanas (Păddanas); Siri Jatra (Siri Jātra); Katama Raju Katha (Kātama Raju Katha) —— Editor.

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