Dimensions of Jain Folklore

S.P. Padmaprasad

Background History

Studies in Jaina folklore in India is a recent one. Though in states like West Bengal and Uttar Pradesh it started as far back as 1940s, it was only an incidental one, not specific. That means, materials (folk songs, stories etc) related to Jains were collected and discussed while dealing with such materials of all communities in a region. Even such studies had not taken place in South India. That started around 1970s. That too, recognizable part of the study has taken place in Kannada - the state language of Karnataka. In other South Indian languages, such study has not yet begun on a recognizable scale.

It is the fortune of the author of this paper to pioneer the serious study of Jain folklore in Karnataka in 1970. His friend Dr. M.A. Jayachandra started such a study from another angle about at the same time. Later, handful of other enthusiasts jumped to the field and contributed something by collecting material through field work. But none of them stayed as researchers.

Jaina Population in Karnataka

According to census report of 2001, Jaina population in Karnataka is little more than four lacs. But this includes Swethambar Jains also, who have nothing to do with the Kannada folk literature. Native Jains belong to Digambar sect and speak Kannada as their mother tongue. However, people in border areas speak both the languages like Kannada – Telugu or Kannada and Marathi.

Jaina Folklore

The folk songs, folk stories, riddles, proverbs, rituals, religious performance like ārādhanas etc., which bear an exclusive Jaina touch-have to be recognized as parts of Jain folklore. Even though detailed studies about every one of these aspects have not been undertaken so far, it is done about literary and religious aspects.

Dimensions of Jaina folklore are mainly the following:
1. Literary dimension

Folk literature prevailing among Kannada speaking Jains is quite a voluminous one. Author of this paper, for the first time, collected varieties of folk songs and legends between 1972-77 and on studying it in detail, prepared a thesis in Kannada and got the doctoral degree in 1981. The book, later recognized as master piece on Jain folk literature, presents different types of folk songs sung by Jaina folk, living in different parts of the state.

1. Majority of Jain folk songs contain religious motifs like names of gods and goddess, place of pilgrimage etc.

2. Some examples for such motifs are translated below (Translator – Dr. Padmaprasad)

1. A poem tells about the tradition followed by Jains not to take food from sunset to sunrise.

   Till morning rays reach the temple doors
   Jains won’t take curds| the little
   brother also observes the vows||

2. This poem describes what to offer to whom –

   Take blossomed Jasmine flowers to Arihanta
   peacock brush for guruji | moist
   peas to the goddess of Humcha ||
It is customary in all Indian religions that flowers are offered to god. The same tradition is followed by Jains also. But the second line is specific for Jains alone. Only Jain saints hold and use a cluster of peacock feathers bundled into a dust-sweeping brush used to brush the dust while sitting. That Peacock brush is softest and that sweeps out all germs with the dust and thus the violence caused by our movements is much reduced. Only gift the devotees can offer to a Jain saint is such peacock brush!

Similarly – ‘goddess of Humcha’ is – Padmāvathi Yakshi. Humcha (Hombuja) is a small town in Shimoga district. Padmāvathi is believed to have stayed here and blessing the devotees.

4. A folk song called ‘Dīkshe hādu’ (song of renunciation) is prevailing among Jains. It is about a young man announcing his renouncing the world affairs and going to take dīksha, saint hood. His parents try in so many ways to dissuade him from that path. They tell him that it is difficult to follow the rules of saint hood, tell him that he can marry any spinster of his choice and live happily. But the youth negates every such offer and firmly leaves the house and takes the saint hood. This song is very heart touching.

5. Beautiful similes are found in Jaina folk songs. Some egs –

1. “My sister is a beautiful doll. She casts shadow to the moon”.

2. “The parrots of our village (i.e., maidens) stir the water in the pond, at dawn”

3. “Who is leaning against the festival chariot at Humcha? Moonly daughter of mine | standing there sends shadows to moon”

6. Some other beautiful expressions please our heart. Egs-

I Planted jasmine in mind, watered heartily
Nurtured it with all love and labour | plucking flowers.
I sent it to the tower of Lord ||

(- here, jasmine represents pure thoughts. Last line means that the speaker submitted his whole life at the feet of Jina.)
2. The fragrant Jasmine infront of temple door

Dear parrot, shed not them down | the garland of buds

is needed for Padmavva in the temple ||

(Padmavva – means mother goddess, Padmāvathi yakshi)

7. ‘Tripadi’ or three-lined poem – is the popular metre in Kannada folk songs, though some other metres are also there. Majority of Jaina folk poems are also composed in that metre. Examples cited above illustrate this point.

II Social dimension

Folk songs and stories realistically report the social relations and interactions taking place in Society. Jaina folklore is no exception. Here we find the relationships within Jain community, and also the relationships among different communities in a region. Some illustrations could be given:

1. A folk song tells that when the chariot with the idol of goddess of Humcha (Padmāvathi) was stopped by quarrelling groups. Then one leader convinces both groups and makes the stopped chariot move –

Why the chariot of goddess of Humcha is stopped?

Quarrel has flared up among farmers| My brother

The king has made the stopped chariot move

2. In songs related to Shravanabelagola – The leader asks the messenger servant to call all those who wish to see the place, to Jain the pilgrimage caravan –

‘O ! you the messenger with pearled ring

who beat the drum on the bank of Gutti river | tell those

who wish to see Belagola, to come with us ||’

In the same song, we get further details of pilgrims coming to this organiser host, requesting him to accommodate them, advice to other participants, gives precautions – etc. All this tells us the social relation and cordiality that existed among people in a village.
3. Another song describes the context of opening of a basadi at Ainapur in Belagaum district. That song proceeds in a spirited tone and calls people in different villages to come on bullock carts to bring the idol of Lord Neminatha, to install in the new temple. That song describes the attitude of Jains to Join hands for a public cause.

Many other such instances are available in Jaina folk literature which describe the social relation that existed in Karnataka villages.

Jaina folk stories are mainly legends. They are related to Carving of Gommata statues at Shravanabelagola, Karkala, Venur and to some other historical persons and places. Here we see the nature of relationship that existed among different communities.

III Religious dimension

This is the main domain that is covered by Jaina folk literature. Jaina folk songs powerfully express the beliefs, traditions, devotions, rituals etc., performed by them as part of their religious life.

In Jaina folk songs following specific motifs are found-

i. Mention of Jain pilgrimage places like Shravanabelagola, Hombuja, Stavanidhi, Sommeda Shikhariji – etc.,

ii. Jain temple in certain small villages are mentioned. Those shrines (Basadis) are still existing and daily worships are going on.

iii. Specific religious and spiritual vows (vrthas) like – Anantha Nompi, are mentioned in certain folk songs.

iv. Special pooja ceremonies like Mahamasthakabhisheka to Lord Gommata are described.

v. Yakshi Padmāvathi, Jwālāmālini, Kūshmāndini are prayed in many folk songs. Many songs describing the generosity and kindness of Padmāvathi – are available.

vi. Many thirthankaras like – Mahāvīra, Pārshva, Neminātha are prayed to in these folk songs.

vii. Songs related to dīksha (leaving the worldly links to practice spirituality) ceremony and the dilemma preceding that, are available.

Eighty percents of Jaina folk literature exhibits this dimension. Some examples can be cited here:
1. Stavanidhi in Belagaum district is a pilgrimage place for Jains. Brahma Yaksha’s temple is there. People visit that temple often. This poem expresses the wish of a shrāvak to return majestically after visiting the temple festival:

Sitting on horse back, son infront

Wearing the sacred silkin Dhoti | I should return

After visiting Stavanidhi festival||

2. Another song describes how to pray and what to pray with Jina –

with the black-eyed coconut, wheat in the lap

go and bow to Jina ! O, sister

pray fortune for parent house ||

3. Cutting the child’s hair for the first time is a ceremony among native Indians. Jains also follow that custom. They prefer to do that function in the temple of their family god/goddess. In one such poem, a devotee requests the Brahma yaksha to open his doors so that he can perform that ceremony before him:

Holding the pet child I’m standing long

open the door O Bharamappa | before thee

I get my child’s hair cut ||

Thus – Jaina folk literature in Kannada has different dimensions. All these together establish one point in unequivocal terms – rural, illiterate Jaina folks are producing such beautiful oral literature since centuries, that is equal in grandeur to that of others and unique in content.

Sources: 1’Jaina Janapada Sahitya-Sampadane mattu adhyayana’-Ph.D thesis in Kannada by Dr.S.P.Padmaprasad,1987,2009