Documenting the Traditional Folk Knowledge

Abstract

Traditional Knowledge reflects its multiple dimensions in our society. The present paper involves issues like-

a. Traditional Knowledge to Modern Technology: The Development and interrelationship

b. Necessity to Document the Traditional Knowledge from being extinct

c. A tentative Scheme of Scientific Documentation of Traditional Knowledge

In this connection I have presented a Case Study on Conch-Shell Craft of West Bengal that involves the case of folk art in particular.
1. Introduction:

The traditional folk knowledge (TFK) has significant role to play the recent development of our nation. Hence, traditional knowledge has its due significance. Traditional knowledge reflects its multiple dimensions of our society. In today’s context, in view of UNESCO, IPR, TRIPs, WIPO, CBD, WTO and such other noted organizations and institutions, it has become mandatory to document the inherited traditional folk knowledge of the people. Here the word “mandatory” carries important meaning in the field of even folkloristics. The present paper involves issues like-

a. Traditional Knowledge to Modern Technology: The Development and interrelationship
b. Necessity to Document the Traditional Knowledge from being extinct
c. A tentative Scheme of Scientific Documentation of Traditional Knowledge

In this connection I have tried to mention the suggestions of UNESCO regarding the documentation and have presented a case-study on conch-shell craft of West Bengal that involves the case of folk art in particular.

2. Traditional Knowledge to Modern Technology: The Development and Interrelationship:

Before we enter into the main theme, it is necessary to throw light on the concept of 'traditional knowledge' itself. In folklore, traditional knowledge implies certain technical connotation. Traditional Knowledge generally refers to the matured long-standing traditions and practices of indigenous communities. Some communities depend on their traditional knowledge for survival. This knowledge also encompasses the wisdom and teaching of any concerned community. Traditional knowledge is transmitted orally or imitatively from person to person. Some forms of traditional knowledge are expressed through tales, legends, proverbs, songs, rituals and other genera of folklore. Other forms of traditional knowledge are often expressed through different means. Such knowledge may have theological and spiritual meaning.

The United Nation's University proposal defines Traditional Knowledge Systems (TKS) to be "local knowledge". It is the record of human achievement incorporating the complexities of life associated with survival. Traditional knowledge may be technical, social, organizational, or cultural usually obtained as part of the man's experience, experiment as well as his struggle for survival and development.

Traditional knowledge, if perceived in diachronic perspective, will tell its relation with the modern development. A general overview says that the modern technology is based on the traditional knowledge. If we accept this notion, then we have to accept that folk knowledge makes the basis of our sum total knowledge system. The new inventions can not deny the traditional knowledge. For example, some instances may be cited below:

2.1. Blacksmith - The blacksmiths, one among the castes of Indian society is known for preparing artifacts of iron. They know the basic mechanism of softening iron with the help of fire and know the techniques of molding it with hammer. Their knowledge is traditional and traditionally communicated from one generation to the other. And the knowledge goes on with their skill. It is not recorded. Yet it is there. Such basic
knowledge has contributed a lot in developing the sophisticated technology of iron industry.

2.2. Weaving - the entire weaving technology, even in the folk level, involves stages like thread making, loom making, weaving technology etc. All the techniques have evolved form the long-time experience. Later on, the textile technology has developed where the basic technology of weaving remained the same.

2.3. Dokra - the "lost wax" process as is used by the Dokra artisans, is an old and traditional method. The process of melting the metal is worth mentioning in this context.

2.4. Boat Making - the basic principal of designing a boat, that gives the advantage of buoyancy, was discovered and developed traditionally. Making a boat demands a lot of mathematical calculation. But, people have their own traditional technique in preparing the boat.

2.5. Folk Medicine - Folk medicine is considered as the forerunner of the modern medicine. The history of medicine is not possible without the history of folk medicine.

The above examples prove that, the modern development is rooted on folk and traditional knowledge. Hence, the traditional knowledge needs to be perceived in terms of historical relation between the past and present.

3. Necessity to Document the Traditional Knowledge from being extinct:

   Documentation in an academic context is an absolute term in the field of study that is known as information science. The documentation of folklore does not mean to become graveyards for past cultural forms. Their materials must be recycled in the society in an appropriate manner. This is the only way to let people reflect upon their own customs and learn to understand it in the mirror of folklore. Today numerous previously passive cultures have become activated and emancipated; common people use terms like 'tradition' and 'identity' to reflect the phenomena (Choudhury, 1997). Preservation is concerned with protection of folk traditions. There are various categories of rights which are already protected and should continue to enjoy protection in the future in folklore documentation. The scope of Documentation of Folk knowledge is shown belwo -

| Folk Literature |
| Folk Practices |
| Day to Day Practise |
| Occasional Practise |
| Folk Art |
| Performing |
| Non-Performing |
| Folk Science |
| Folk Technology |

The general conference of the UNESCO (1989) regarding Recommendation on
the Safeguarding of Traditional Culture and Folklore, stated some suggestions:

### a. Identification

i) a general outline of folklore for global use  
ii) a comprehensive register of folklore  
iii) regional classifications of folklore

### b. Conservation of Folklore

i) establish national archives where collected folklore can be properly stored and made available;  
ii) establish a central national archive that would function for service purposes;  
iii) create museums or folklore sections at existing museums where traditional and popular culture can be exhibited;  
iv) give precedence to ways of presenting traditional and popular cultures that emphasize the living or past aspects of those cultures (showing their surroundings, ways of life and the works, skills and techniques they have produced);  
v) harmonize collecting and archiving methods;  
vi) train collectors, archivists, documentalists and other specialists in the conservation of folklore, from physical conservation to analytic work;  
vii) provide means for making security and working copies of all folklore materials, and copies for regional institutions, thus securing the cultural community an access to the materials.

Now, in the time of globalization, these types of traditional folk knowledge are doomed to extinction. Hence, the traditional folk knowledge needs to be well documented and preserved in proper managed way. It is essential for reasons like -  

a. To search out the root of modernity  
b. To make archival document for research

### 4. A Scheme of Scientific Documentation of Traditional Knowledge:

Making documentation of traditional knowledge is a huge task. There are different methods and efforts in this field may be taken. Every genre of folklore needs a distinct way of documentation. A tentative scheme of documentation of TFK is given below:

#### A. Identification

a. Geographical distribution  
b. Cultural/Ethnic identity  
c. Regional classification  
d. Tradition bearer (ATB, PTB)  
e. Function

#### B. Preservation and Conservation

a. Desk Research  
b. Collecting related database
c. Making database (Print, Audio-visual, photography, digital data)
d. Museum (National, Regional, Local- Govt/ NGO)
e. Archiving
f. Exhibition ( Permanent, Special)
g. Workshop and demonstration of process and techniques
h. Awareness Raising
i. Intellectual properties
j. International, National, Regional and Local cooperation
k. Dissemination
l. Fairs and Festival
m. Documentary Film
n. Publication
o. Training
p. Documentation Centre

In this paper I have tried to suggest a tentative scheme of how the document may be made on Conch-Shell craft, as a case study, with particular reference to West Bengal.

**Case Study: The Conch-shell Craft of West Bengal:**

Conch-shell craft may be considered as a mark of ethnic and cultural identity of West Bengal. Conch-shell Craft is one of the oldest folk crafts. The craftsmen of Conch-shell products (known as Shankhari or Sankhakar) belong to the ancient 'Nabasakha' which is one of the so-called nine Craftsmen Communities. Over the years craftsmen have been carving the picture on Conch-shell reflecting the social mythological and historical expression with the help of the traditional folk knowledge based on folk technology. These crafts have an important relevance on Hindu culture on the one hand and interior decoration on the other.

Conch-shell craft manufacturing is a family profession, in which all the members of the family take an active part including the female members and even the children. The traditions, skills and techniques needed here are confined to family members only. It is transmitted through the practical demonstration.

A significant number of people are involved in this profession in the rural areas of West Bengal. But unfortunately the percentage is dropping fast and the tradition is now on the brink of extinction.

**Indigenous Tools**

The conch-shell surface is very hard and it is difficult to work on it or to cut them into slices. The slicing is now done largely by electric disc-saws having diamond teeth. The traditional method of cutting is very laborious. It is done with a special type of semi-circular saw havingly minutely sharp edge. The saw is able to cut in both the directions. In Bengali language, this saw is termed as - *Sankher Karat*.

*Sankher Karat* is made by the Karmakar or the Blacksmiths. *Sankher Karat* is still used by some craftsmen for doing special jobs. Decoration and engraving on conch-shell are done mainly with a variety of files and hammers.

**Indigenous production Process/ Techniques**

The entire manufacturing process is indigenous and traditional. This has been fol-
allowed down through generations, with negligible change. The entire process involved in traditional conch-shell craft manufacturing can be divided into certain well-defined steps or categories according to the nature of its operations:

a. The collection of raw materials
b. The processing of the conch-shell (washing & primarily shape)
c. The finally shaping of the object with the help of the tools
d. The engraving or embossing various designing stage
e. The final polish and finishing the product

Generally the articles manufactured in a workshop are polished and finished by another artisan in different phases. Thus there is a continuous economic relationship and mutual cooperation among the fellow workers of this community.

For preservation and conservation of the conch-shell craft in West Bengal, some among the measures should be taken into consideration -

**Documentation of Conch-shell Craft in W.B.**
(1) Identification (2) Conservation and preservation (3) Dissemination

a. Desk research
b. Pilot survey
c. Classifying the conch-shell objects
d. Making artisan's register
e. Making a database (Emphasis on tools, production process and information about the use of the byproducts as medicine needs to be documented)
f. Making digital database
g. Archiving
h. Museum
i. Permanent exhibition
j. Workshop and demonstration of craft techniques
k. Fairs and special exhibition
l. Documentary film
m. Publication
n. Awareness Raising
o. Cooperation (Govt/ NGO)

5. Conclusion:

As it has been told earlier that documenting traditional knowledge is complex and scientific process. In this paper I have presented an overall view of documentation along with a case study of the conch-shell craft. I have humbly suggested a tentative scheme for making documentation of TFK and the Conch-shell craft, highlighting some theoretical issues, in brief.

To conclude this paper, I must admit that time has come to give enough emphasis on documentation of TFK. How documentation might be made, may differ according to the context and item. Yet, there must be some guiding principles that are globally accepted.
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