About Moribund Folklore

Abstract

Folklore, being an integral part of our cultural configuration, technically, is subject to vertical transmission for its persistence first, and then spatial or inter-societal diffusion. Transmission and diffusion of folklore depend on multiple sociological factors and are highly conditional.

During its passage through time, different folklore genres may lack the favourable sociological conditions to be continued any more, inviting an inevitable moribund consequence. An observation of the folklore heritage, sometimes reveal some moribund genres, already on the verge of oblivion.

Studies on moribund genres of folklore is very much significant in folkloristics for multiple reasons. Some times the historical elements of a tradition, its origin and originality lie in the moribund culture(s). Those forces which altogether have caused a tradition moribund, speak of social change and transformation in multiple ways. From this point of view, moribund cultures, seem to be an index of cultural-history.

This paper proposes to throw light on the theoretical as well as philosophical stand point of moribund folklore, with specific reference to a performing genre known as “Sanger Gan” of Bengal (India).

Sanger Gan is a kind of short satirical drama (5 to 10 minutes duration) which presents small episodes of life reflecting - cruel reality, merciless criticism and virtuous fun. Being performing art, Sanger Gan involves - oral literature, acting, song and music, dance and dialogue. A male performer, dressed up as female, is the main character of Sanger Gan. Right now, the last performer of Sanger Gan - Chandi Maji - is at his age of 68. After him, this genre will be succeeded by none. The reasons that have altogether pushed Sanger Gan to a moribund position will be addressed in the paper, along with audio-visual presentation (video clippings) and live performance (by singing song).

1. Introduction: The Organic View of Culture

Culture and Language in general is subject to vertical transmission\(^1\), and intra-societal transmission\(^2\). Culture, having been originated amidst people, is found to have diffused\(^3\) amongst the community members by way of socialization\(^4\). This is a general observation regarding culture.

A more critical and interpretative explanation says that, culture always is not able to make its passage through time, space and society, by way of transmission and diffusion. Sometime, the dynamism of culture is retarded by multiple factors, pushing them into oblivion. In contrast to its vitality, culture sometimes ceases to exist.
The reality is that - culture continues and culture fades out. The question is how to put the two contrastive realities into one frame to explain such dynamism? Oswal Spengler⁵ (1880-1936) had formulated an organic view⁶ (basically assumption) by mentioning that – culture is born - grown up - and die. To what extent the organic view of culture is tenable in the academic, may be questioned, but Spengler was able to pronounce that “culture dies”, which certainly points out to a perceptible consequence, which is immensely relevant in the discourse of moribund languages and cultures.

2. Flexible Semantic Boundary of Moribundity (or Obsolescence)

So far as folklore⁷ is concerned, we perceive that some traits or genres of folklore are on the verge of extinction. Such traits are termed as moribund folklore. Before I make any review, I would like to appreciate the flexible semantic boundary and the underlying connotation of the term “moribund folklore”. The adjective moribund implies – dying – in general. But in cultural space, we find its multiple connotations and implications which need to be represented in structured model as shown in Diagram-1, below:

![Diagram-1](image)

The concept moribund folklore, to the best of my appreciation, must involve a wider and flexible domain to give space to all possible situations of cultural stagnancy.

3. Thrust areas of Moribund Folklore

Some thrust areas of moribund folklore may be categorized for scientific and structured understanding. The areas of moribund folklore primarily, is suggested below –

(1) Oral heritage (language and literature)
(2) Performing forms (drama, music, dance)
(3) Musical forms (both vocal and instrumental)
(4) Art and crafts (material and performing)
(5) Architecture
(6) Material culture
(7) Science, techniques and technology
(8) Medicine, treatment and healing system
(9) Rites and rituals
(10) Faith and beliefs
(11) Way of life
(12) Vision, philosophy, cognition - and so on

Actually, obsolescence may occur in any genre of folklore and culture. *Moribund folklore* is more a consequence of a trait or tradition than a genre itself. What I find as moribund in a particular area, may be a flourishing genre in other place. Thus, stereotyping of moribund folklore, may not be, always justified in true technical sense.

4. Sociological Factors of Moribundity (Obsolescence)

Obsolescence, with reference to any particular trait, has its local confinement within perceptible time frame, having been influenced by multiple sociological factors. But, obsolescence as a trend - is rather a global phenomenon. So far as the configuration of folklore is concerned, several sociological parameters are responsible, in configuring culture into reality. And their change is also responsible for the extinction of culture or language. Some among such factors may be identified as -

[1] Categorized Community (class, caste, community, tribe - etc.)
[2] Religion (Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs etc.)
[3] Gender (Male, Female, Third gender)
[4] Age-group (1 – 5; 6 -10) or Age category (Child, teenagers, youth, old age)
[5] Education and Literacy
[6] Economy and Occupation
[7] Family Structure (Extended family, Joint family, Nuclear family)
[8] Domination of the society on individual or group (social control in technical term)
[9] Political domination (not influence) in different sense
[10] Collective or Individual’s inclination in maintaining tradition (psychological)
[11] The overall pattern and degree of response towards culture and tradition

These are some of the major factors which altogether execute their function in determining the “life” and “death” of culture. But, I can not claim that the factors mentioned above, is able to give explanation of all

*The Bird: Made of Horn*
A Moribund folk art of Howrah District; West Bengal (India)
cases of obsolescence. Specific case has its own sociological perspectives. Depending on that - the scheme may include other factors as well. To explain this point, I may cite examples of two folk genres and examine the causes of their decline.

4.1. Horn-work: Causes of Decline

The *Horn Work* of Howrah district (West Bengal) is on the verge of extinction. Some of the major causes are –

[1] Substitute plastic goods are cheaper
[2] The cost of raw materials (horn) has increased and went beyond reach
[3] This occupation is not profitable; sometimes income is lower than the labour charge
[4] The aged artisans continue with this traditional profession, because, they have no other alternative to do
[5] The new generation is trying with other profitable professions
[6] Naturally, future generation is not there to carry on this art-tradition

We must see that the factors altogether have facilitated the *negative conditions* (-), bringing about genuine crisis in horn-work, in this particular region.

4.1. Muslim Marriage Song: Causes of Decline

The *Muslim Marriage Song* (*Biyer Git*) another performing genre of Howrah district, is gradually getting reduced day by day, particularly, form the literate and educated Muslims. “Advancement” as a result of its impact, has caused *Muslim Marriage Songs* declined in some places. The reasons may be identified as -

[1] Literacy, education and advancement has brought about a remarkable Change in their minds, which is reflected through their response towards culture
[2] Disorder in joint family setup also brought about genuine crisis in performing the marriage rituals, of which, *Muslim Marriage Songs* are inseparable part
Young generation is reluctant to follow such tradition considering it to be “back dated” and “time consuming” (3 - 7 days)

Aged women are the skilled singers. Their number is rapidly decreasing

Muslim Marriage Songs are gender specific songs (performed exclusively by the women). In actual situation, no male member sings this song. If gender restriction becomes free, some tradition may get a bit long life. Such example is there in the folklore of Bengal (Example – Bhawaiya Song).

The two examples reveal that the factors of obsolescence of culture certainly vary depending upon its sociological, economic and psychological perspectives. Actually, some of the sociological forces altogether make a network providing either favourable or adverse forces. The Favourable forces allow any culture to be continued. And, the adverse forces may cause culture “die”.

5. The Condition Scale and Condition Mechanism

Considering the favourable and adverse forces as two poles (positive and negative), we may theoretically suggest a condition scale of moribundity, with reference to the functioning of the forces. We may suppose that - in the dynamics of culture, the function of favourable [positive; (+)] and adverse [negative; (-)] forces, make a condition mechanism – involving its functional dimension. If the network of the entire sociological factors provide positive condition (+), the culture is flourished. In case of the opposite, culture gradually comes at an end. A schematic representation of this theoretical assumption may be rendered in Diagram-2, below:

![Diagram-2](image-url)
Diagram-2 represents a *condition scale* having its two poles, namely, – positive (+) and negative (-). If any culture is favoured by *positive forces* it gets a *flourishing motion* and continues. The circular arrow as is shown in the diagram implies a movement between the two poles as well as the *social mechanism* which determines the persistency of culture in a given community, amid time and space.

But if the culture, for reasons altogether, undergoes *negative circumstances*, it results in a moribund condition. Technically, it is not merely the factors that determine moribundity of culture. It is rather the *functioning of the factors*, which seems more responsible in inviting obsolescence in cultures and languages. This idea is shown in Diagram-3, below:

![Diagram-3](image-url)

6. Importance of the Study of Moribund Folklore

Study of moribund culture, incorporating folklore, has its immense significance in the study of cultural history. Researches on moribund cultures, of which language is an integral part, help to explore the *origin* and the *originality* of any culture and tradition. The *root of culture* may also be explored in the moribund elements.

Sometimes, the moribund elements of culture seem to be significantly important to reconstruct the *missing link* of history which seemingly appears “lost”.

Culture has the potentiality to make its passage through *time*. What appears to be moribund element today, speaks of a course of *time* (may be dateable or un-dateable).
Certainly, the cultural elements make the record of time into its crux, and the elements themselves function as the mode or vehicle of carrying the mark of time in technical sense.

The degree of change and transformation of any society with reference to its past, can also be examined by comparing the moribund and flourishing elements of culture.

Taking all these points together, we may say that studies and researches on moribund culture -

[1] helps to explore the origin / root of any culture
[2] helps to explore the originality of any culture
[3] helps to explore the cultural identity
[4] helps to observe the mark of time
[5] helps to appreciate the growth and development of any society
[6] helps to reconstruct the missing link of history
[7] helps to compare the change and transformation of a society with its past
[8] inspires us to preserve and document the moribund elements

7. Sanger Gan – A Case Study of Moribund Folklore

Sanger Gan is a performing genre of folklore, now, faintly prevalent in Howrah and Midnapur districts (West Bengal, India), is a moribund genre. Chandi Maji is the last performer of this genre. Since, he has no successors this performing genre will come at a halt after him. In true sense, Sanger Gan is a moribund folk tradition. Information about the performer Chandi Maji is mentioned in a structure format10.

7.1. Sanger Gan: General Introduction

Sanger Gan is a short drama, performed within 5 to 10 minutes highlighting the disorders and decadence of social and moral life. It presents merciless criticism in the form of wit, fun, satire and laughter. It is really a unique and powerful composition that has given enough space to the tears and cheers of human life.

Two characters (one male, one female) and at least two musicians (Dhol and Harmonium player) are essential for this performance. Chandi Maji is famous for presenting himself as female character in Sanger Gan. During performance, six to ten short drama or independent episodes
are presented together, which consists of acting, dialogue, song and music. Hence, *Sanger Gan* is a composite form of performing art.

It is performed as an inseparable part of religious festivals known as *Gjan* and *Desh Puja*. Now the performance of *Sanger Gan* has reduced to six or seven per year and is performed by *Chandi Maji* alone. (While twenty five years back, there were ten to fifteen performers in different areas of these districts). The decline in frequency of performance as well as the decline in the number of performers, tell of its acute crisis and moribund nature.

### 7.2. Why *Sanger Gan* has become Moribund Tradition

Now the question is – why the occurrence of *Sanger Gan* has come almost at a halt? The reasons are -

1. The society, the socio-economy, and its ways of functioning have changed
2. The religio-cultural structure and festivals like – *Gajan, Gjan Bhata*, *Desh Puja*, which have spontaneously promoted *Sanger Gan* for long time in the traditional social set up, are on the verge of abolition
3. The character of recreation in rural areas has been changed
4. the mode and means of recreation have also been changed
5. Performance of *Sanger Gan* was unable to give sustenance to the performers
6. Number (frequency) of performance has been awfully declined
7. People are not ready to view *Sanger Gan* by paying money (around Rupees 1000–1200/- for the entire team [5 members], including their conveyance)
8. Sometimes, the professional musicians get more money in other programmes. They are reluctant to play with *Sanger Gan*
9. Alternative amusement like TV is easily available, CD/Cinemas are cheaper - more colourful, more attractive
10. A section of the literate society considers it to be a “less refined” tradition
11. The perception of life is changed. Evaluating social and individual life is changed.
12. Leisure time is measured in terms of money or material gain. Community is getting exposure to more materialistic and realistic point of view than that of spirituality and devotion, which has long promoted many folk-cultural traditions
13. Community is not aware about the historical value of *Sanger Gan*, and about the reality that it is “dying”

### 8. Conclusion: Rethinking Moribund Culture

At the end of this paper, we may rethink about the concept – *moribund culture* itself. Obsolescence has its different semantic dimensions as well as connotations (See: Diagram-1). What actually is signified by the adjective – *moribund*? – Dead? Should we accept the very concept –“death” with regard to culture in conformity to organic view?

Anthropologist Alfred Lewis Krober (1976-1960) explained that culture can not be compared with organism, for, culture is something super-organic and super-
individual\textsuperscript{15}. Hence, culture can not die. Culture may change. Culture has high adaptability to equip itself with emerging situation and goes on by way of transmitting from past to present and future. (However, Edward Sapir\textsuperscript{16} has criticized Krober’s concept of Super Organic and Super Individual.)

It appears to be a paradox whether culture dies or die not? It is true that there are ample examples of apparent extinction. Even in contemporary scenario, we find some cultures on the threshold of oblivion. If we disagree with the concept of death, then what would be the explanation of those cultures that have ceased to exist?

8.1. Author’s View and Explanation

I would like to present my theoretical view and explanation in this regard with due modesty. The concept “death” may not be always the real fact in case of culture. Because –

[1] lost culture is sometimes revived. A dying tradition sometimes gets motion in new socio-economic perspectives

[2] people in diaspora consciously try bring back some of their lost cultures, to project their origin and cultural identity

[3] Revival of culture implies its latent\textsuperscript{17} existence in any form, in the dynamic core of cultural configuration

Thus, there are enough examples to challenge the concept of absolute extinction of culture. To the best of my appreciation, culture – being a process – is more a manifestation, containing the cognitive potential\textsuperscript{18} of our collective thought, vision and realization. The manifest\textsuperscript{19} form of any cognition may apparently disappear, but, the cognition itself is more persisting.

The culture of Harappa-Mahenjodaro has apparently disappeared but it still remained as the source of inspiration in the form of heritage for the entire Indian sub-continent.

In conformity to manifestation, it may be suggested that cultures sometimes undergo two phases, like – manifest and latent. In a particular point of time, culture is manifest in the surface level and hence, we perceive its diverse expression.

But, when culture lack necessary positive forces it goes to the sub-surface and remains latent (not dead). When a culture is revived, it is reappears from its latent existence.

The organic view considers culture in terms of linear order - birth, growth and death and never returns. But, I would like to suppose that culture has its circular order which –

(1) goes form surface level to sub-surface due to adverse situation, and some times

(2) returns to surface level form the sub-surface, subject to favourable conditions

The theoretical point may schematically be represented in Diagram-4, below:
Hence, explanation of moribund culture with particular reference to “death” may be re-examined in the light of \textit{Surface-Subsurface Model of Culture}\textsuperscript{20} for a more flexible appreciation. There is no disagreement that obsolescence of culture is a perceptible phenomenon and its scientific understanding is certainly essential.

\textbf{Notes:}

1. \textbf{Vertical Transmission:} According to modern folkloristics culture has its two dimensions – Vertical (time) and Horizontal (space). When culture passes through time it is called - vertical transmission.

2. \textbf{Intra-societal transmission:} when culture transmits within the community members is called intra-societal transmission.

3. \textbf{Diffusion:} The spatial transmission of culture is called diffusion.

4. \textbf{Socialization:} Socialization is a process through which the younger generation of a community is indoctrinated with their tradition and culture. It is the process by which culture is learned. During socialization, people internalize any culture's social controls, along with values and norms, about right and wrong. Socialization is also called \textit{enculturation}.

5. \textbf{Oswal Spengler} (1880-1936) was a German Philosopher.

6. \textbf{Organic View:} Oswal Spengler equated culture with organism. He mentioned that cultures are born, pass through childhood – maturity - old age and finally die (Upadhyay-Pandey; 1997: 139)

7. \textbf{Folklore:} In earlier days the term folklore was used to mean oral composition (lore) in particular. But folkloristics of recent times appreciates this epithet as the entire cultural configuration of the “folk” incorporating Oral heritage (language and literature), Material cultures, Performance, Arts and crafts, Faith and beliefs, - and so on (Islam; 2005:26). Synonymous expression is - folk culture.

8. \textbf{Biever Git:} Muslim Marriage Song is known as \textit{Bbiyer Git} in Bengali language. The word \textit{Biye} (< \textit{Bibaha}; Sanskrit Word) means - marriage. \textit{Git} (< \textit{Giat}; Sanskrit Word) means - song. The bound morpheme – “r” (< \textit{er}) signifies –“of”. \textit{Biye Git} (< \textit{Biye + er + Git}) means - Song of Marriage.

9. \textbf{Bhawaiya:} The predominating song of North Bengal, mostly sung by the people belonging to Indo-mongoloid ethnic stock and other communities like - \textit{Khen, Jugi, Muslims} - etc.

10. \textbf{Information on Chandi Maji in “Structured Information Format”}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General Information</th>
<th>Chandi Maji</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Chandi Maji</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (October 2008)</strong></td>
<td>68 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------</td>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mother Tongue</strong></td>
<td>Bengali</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Literacy</strong></td>
<td>Class-III</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Whether Scheduled Tribe</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Whether Scheduled Caste</strong></td>
<td>No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Belong to Below Poverty Line</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital Status</strong></td>
<td>Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children</strong></td>
<td>2 daughters (Married)</td>
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</table>

**Postal Address**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Village</strong></th>
<th>Anchaipur</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Post</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Police Station</strong></td>
<td>Tamluk</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Block</strong></td>
<td>Matangini</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>District</strong></td>
<td>East Midnapur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>State; Country</strong></td>
<td>West Bengal; India</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Detailed About Performance**

| **Total year of performance** | 56 years |
| **Name of Guru (Master)**    | Sachindranath Mondal |
| **Age when started performing first** | 12 years |
| **First Performance as**     | Female character |

**Economy and Occupation**

| **Former Occupation** | Roof-Carpenter |
| **Present Occupation** | Performing *Sanger Gan* |
| **Frequency of performance per year** | 6 to 7 (average) |
| **Income from one performance** | Rupees 125/- (average) |
| **Any other source of Income** | Nil |
| **Average yearly Income** | Rupees 600 - 1050/- |
| **Compare with cost of 1 Kg Rice** | Rupees 20/- |

**Earning Member and Dependent Member**

| **Total Dependent Members (DM) in Family** | 3 |
| **Earning Member (EM)** | 1 |
| **Ratio of DM : EM** | 3 : 1 |

**Savings and Bank Account**

| **Savings** | Nil |
| **Whether possess any Bank Account** | Nil |

**Debt and Loan**

| **Whether he has any Bank/Private Loan** | Yes; Private Loan |
| **Mention the amount** | Rupees 12,000/- |
| **Rate of Interest per month** | 8 % |
| **Rate of Interest per annum** | 96 % |
| **Terms and conditions / mortgage / others** | Nil |
| **Mentioned the paid amount** | Rupees 3700/- |
| **Mentioned the unpaid amount** | Rupees 8300/- |
**Possession of Land**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Whether possess land for cultivation</th>
<th>Nil</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Whether possess land for business</td>
<td>Nil</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whether possess land for residence</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**General Health**

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Problem</th>
<th>Health Issue</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Problem-1</td>
<td>Acute Bronchitis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problem-2</td>
<td>Acute Asthma</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11. **Gajan**: A *Shaiva* festival [associated with Lord Shiva, occurred in the month of *Chaitra* (March-April)]

12. **Desh Puja**: A series of *Puja* altogether is called *Desh Puja*. The word *Desh* (Sanskrit) means – land or country. But here, it implies - village (contraction of meaning). *Puja* (Sanskrit) means worship. Actually, it is the Puja of Village Gods / Village Goddesses (*Gram Devata*). In Bengal, Goddesses like – *Stula* (prevents small pox), *Manasha* (Goddess of Serpent), *Chandi* (Saves human beings form all evils) and gods like *Shiva* (the creator), *Dakshin Roy* (God of tiger) are also worshipped in *Desh Puja*.

13. **Gajan Bhata**: It is actually the festival of *friendship* associated with Gajan. The members of one village go to the neighboring village with the *Gajan*. The other villagers welcome them. There occurs dance with songs and music. In this occasion *Sanger Gan* is performed. But no *Gajan Bhata* is already vanished.

14. **Super Organic**: Anthropologist Alfred Lewis Krober considered culture to be super organic (Upadhyay-Pandey; 1997: 139)

15. **Super Individual**: Anthropologist Alfred Lewis Krober considered culture to be super individual (Upadhyay-Pandey; 1997: 139)

16. **Edward Sapir**, who is remembered for - the pattern of anthropological linguistics – hold that importance of individual in culture can not be denied Upadhyay-Pandey; 1997: 141)

17. **Latent Phase of Culture**: I tried to mean that culture has two phases – manifest and latent (See: Doagram-4, pg: 10). A trait or tradition may remain latent due to adverse condition. It may appear in reality or manifest in reality is it is supported by favourable conditions.

18. **Cognition**: High level intellectual functions carried out by the human brain, including comprehension, speech, visual perception, calculation ability, attention (information processing), memory, and executive functions such as planning, problem-solving and self-monitoring (Web Reference: www.msnz.org.nz / aboutms / glossary.asp)

19. **Manifest Phase of Culture**: See Note: 17.

20. **Surface-Subsurface Model of Culture**: I tried to explain the moribund nature of culture not in terms of life and death, but in terms of Surface and Sub-Surface Model (See: Point 8.1. of this article for theoretical assumption and Diagram-4 for visual illustration)

**References:**

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Upadhyay-Pandey 1997  V. S. Upadhyay and Gaya Pandey, History of Anthropological Thought; Concept Publishing Company; New Delhi, India

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