

Indian Folklife

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Folklore and Biopolitic





NATIONAL FOLKLORE SUPPORT CENTRE

National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC) is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation, registered in Chennai dedicated to the promotion of Indian folklore research, education, training, networking and publications. The aim of the centre is to integrate scholarship with activism, aesthetic appreciation with community development, comparative folklore studies with cultural diversities and identities, dissemination of information with multi-disciplinary dialogues, folklore fieldwork with developmental issues and folklore advocacy with public programming events. Folklore is a tradition based on any expressive behaviour that brings a group together, creates a convention and commits it to cultural memory. NFSC aims to achieve its goals through cooperative and experimental activities at various levels. NFSC is supported by a grant from the Ford Foundation.

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COVER ILLUSTRATION

Front: Karaikkal Ammaiyaar. Prime among women saints from the southern state of Tamil Nadu, is Karaikkal Ammaiyaar who lived in the 6th century. When the young and beautiful woman, who lived in the town of Karaikkal, beseeched the god Shiva to divest her of the burden of her flesh, asking only that she watch him dance into eternity, a miracle occurred. In place of the young woman stood an emaciated old woman, known from henceforth as Mother of Karaikkal (Karaikkal Ammaiyaar). Courtesy: *INDIA: Art and Culture 1300-1900* (1985, Prestel: Mapin Publishing Pvt. Ltd.), p.29.

THIS ISSUE

The focus of December 2003 issue is on *Folklore and Biopolitic – Visual motifs* courtesy: M.S. Nanjunda Rao's *Leather Puppetry in Karnataka* (2000, Bangalore: Karnataka Chitrakala Parishath Trust)

NEXT ISSUE

The theme of the March 2004 issue of *Indian Folklife* is on NFSC's forthcoming conference on Folklore as Discourse, which will be held from February 2 – 4, 2004. This conference is being organised in collaboration with CIIL, Mysore and Department of Anthropology, University of Madras, Chennai.

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Exerpts*

CHOLERA AND VERNACULAR HEALING



* *Stories in the Time of Cholera: Racial Profiling during a Medical Nightmare* by Charles L. Briggs with Clara Mantini-Briggs, (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003, pages xxvi + 430, ISBN 0-520-23031-0) pp. 241 – 246.

Vernacular healers, particularly *wisidatus*, came to play an increasingly important role in the process of rendering the epidemic comprehensible in historical, political, and social terms in the fluvial area. To be sure, the early days of the epidemic dealt a powerful blow to the prestige of noninstitutional medicine in the delta. Healers were unable to treat patients, and they admitted ignorance of the new disease. They were also quick to admit that institutional practitioners enjoyed remarkable success. A substantial proportion of the noninstitutional healers died in the epidemic. Nearly all the *wisidatus* who are recognised as powerful through their abilities to “own” sacred ancestral stones and other ritual objects, hold *nahanamu*, and cure patients are senior men holding other positions of authority. Since the epidemic threatened the legitimacy of vernacular medical knowledge and, to an extent, patriarchy, leaders sought to reestablish their authority, particularly after the terror began to subside and many of the people who had fled the delta returned home.

...

It is clear that the cholera stories told in June 1993 by men in Mariusa and other parts of the delta had changed radically from the previous year. From fragmented adumbrations of a range of possible scenarios, which were often marked as unverifiable gossip, healers had moved to dreams that purported to reveal the invisible dimensions of the disease, objectify it, and locate its “master” or “leader.” Rivera reveals the name of the *hebu*, “Poison,” thus suggesting that he can now control it. For vernacular healers in the delta, healer’s dreams are regarded as the most definitive form of evidence, far more powerful and reliable than what is seen or heard. Instead of punctuating his narrative with “I don’t know,” Rivera uses evidentials, grammatical forms that mark the nature and strength of the evidence that lies behind a statement, such as *saa*. ...

Rivera places cholera in a very prominent place in the ontological realm of *hebu*. The narrative of the “origin” of the Sun is one of the most powerful narratives that informs vernacular healing practices. Some of the most potent forces dwell where the Sun rises, and the *arotu* (master) of the cholera *hebu* is none other than the *arotu* of that realm. Rivera provides a nifty rationalisation for his inability, and that of other *wisidatus*, to communicate with the cholera *hebu*: they are mute and, as he explained later, deaf as well since they have no ears. The word he uses, *dibumoni*, creates a double entendre: it refers to *dibu* (speech) that has become defective,

unintelligible. *Dibumoni* is often used to refer to the English language, and its use here thus links the epidemic to Trinidadians as well (an allusion that Rivera clarifies later by referring to the *hebu* as *mekoro*, or “black”). Having learned the identity of the pathogens, he determines their goal—to exterminate all “the Warao.” Although the *hebu* also try to kill him, Rivera constructs himself as being such a powerful healer that he is no harmed by their bullets and is able to kill the “master,” destroy the *hebu*’s means of transportation, and send the remainder of the *hebu* away. He thus claims to have rid the area of cholera.

...

Since Rivera is an elderly *wisidatu* who lives in the moriche groves near the coast in the most “culturally conservative” area (as anthropologists and Tucupita residents often put it), his narrative would be a good candidate for this reading. But Rivera’s story resists appropriation by dominant narratives. Cholera is not constructed as a “traditional Warao” *hebu* but as a “new” disease that is associated with *criollos* and Trinidadians. It is modelled on the poisons used by *criollos*,



Cholera refugee cooking.

and its secret name in the Spanish, not Warao. Moreover, by dreaming of medicines, Rivera indirectly incorporates biomedical therapies into vernacular medical practices. The dream thus ratifies the status of institutionally based treatments as the cure for cholera, and it follows on the heels of River’s sojourn as a cholera patient in the Nabasanuka clinic. Believing in vernacular disease etiologies and receiving treatment from vernacular healers did not preclude *indígenas* from seeking institutional health care or

following through with treatment, and it did not undermine the success of biomedical treatment.

Rivera’s narrative clearly racialises cholera, pitting all *criollos* and Trinidadians against all Warao. He is aware of assertions that *criollos* want to get rid of *indígenas* and that the former believe that cholera just might accomplish this. Diego River the *wisidatu* of La Tortuga, reported a dream in which Trinidadians sent two *wisidatu* who were half wild pig (*vaquiro*) and half human to kill all the Mariusans to take their lands. A number of accounts suggested that *criollos* had, through their own vernacular practitioners, ordered “*criollo hebu*” to come and kill all Warao so that they could have the entire delta to themselves. People often described Caracas as the place of “origin” of cholera, strongly implying that officials of the national government had started the epidemic and were attempting to exterminate *indígenas*. Most of the dream-based narratives amount to charge of genocide.

Most surviving healers moved from confusion to a recovery of knowledge and authority, but a few practitioners claimed that they had dealt successfully with cholera right from the start. We came upon one case in España, a community located along the Winikina River. The chief *wisidatu* was Raul Leoni. Sixty-eight years of age at the time, thin and frail, Leoni

Photo: From the book

Photo: From the book



A cholera refugee carries her belongings...

was unable to walk without assistance, and he wrestled with symptoms of d e m e n t i a . Nevertheless, he was tremendously engaged with questions of healing, and he demonstrated a dramatic flair and more than a touch of bragadocio, much like Rivera.

Unlike Rivera, however, he had a strong sense of humour, and he enjoyed making fun of himself and others. The two men's lives had been quite different as well. Missionaries had not made more than occasional visits to Mariusa, but they have had a strong presence in the Winikina area since the early part of the twentieth century, and Leoni was taken as a child to a mission boarding school in the delta. "Interned" by the Capuchins, he escaped.

Leoni was one of the first residents of España to contract cholera. After he was treated in Nabasanuka he was able to combine what he had learned at the clinic with his own training as *wisidatu* to develop ways of treating cholera. He dreamed the name of the cholera *hebu* and the song he needed to send them away. Accompanying himself with his rattle, which provides voices of the spirits, he sang the cholera music for us. Leoni noted that he used these songs both in treating his grandson and in the course of a *nahanamu* ritual that he held to rid the community of cholera. In his dream

Cholera, although it can kill an adult through dehydration in half a day, is easily treated. Yet in 1992-93, some five hundred people died from cholera in the Orinoco Delta of eastern Venezuela. In some communities, a third of the adults died in a single night, as Charles Briggs and Clara Mantini-Briggs reveal in their frontline report. Why, they ask in this moving and thought-provoking account, did so many die near the end of the twentieth century from a bacterial infection associated with the premodern past?

It was evident that the number of deaths resulted not only from inadequacies in medical services but also from the failure of public health officials to inform residents that cholera was likely to arrive. Less evident were the ways that scientists, officials, and politicians connected representations of infectious diseases with images of social inequality. In Venezuela, cholera was racialised as officials used anthropological notions of "culture" in deflecting blame away from their institutions and onto the victims themselves. The disease, the space of the Orinoco Delta, and the "indigenous ethnic group" who suffered cholera all came to seem somehow synonymous.

One of the major threats to people's health worldwide is this deadly cycle of passing the blame. Carefully documenting how stigma, stories, and statistics circulate across borders, this first-rate ethnography demonstrates that the process undermines all the efforts of physicians and public health officials and at the same time contributes catastrophically to epidemics not only of cholera but also of tuberculosis, malaria, AIDS, and other killers. The authors have harnessed their own outrage over what took place during the epidemic and its aftermath in order to make clear the political and human stakes involved in the circulation of narratives, resources, and germs.

he learned that he was indirectly responsible for bringing cholera into his community because he had insulted *criollo* politicians when they came to campaign in Winikina. In retaliation, they sent the disease. Cholera was, once again, the vengeance that the nation-state exacted on *indígenas* who dared to resist it. Leoni claimed the capacity to identify state violence, render it important, and return it to its source: his song sent cholera back to Caracas. Although cholera is often imagined as a racialised form of violence, in his song, Leoni ordered the cholera *hebu* to leave *criollos* in peace as well. Leoni, along with his son and grandson, who are local officials, made sure that España residents drank only potable water, washed their hands, and cleaned food containers well. We discovered a remarkably successful integration of institutional and vernacular healing in Wakuhana, which is quite close to the large coastal settlement of Cangrejito. In November 1994, with the help of Tirso Gómez, I extended our survey of health conditions to the community. We were astounded to find that the Wakuhanans had been unaffected by recent outbreaks of measles, whooping cough, and chicken pox, that they had had only one cholera case, and that the community was, according to *wisidatu* Eulalio Torres and other residents, free from other diarrhoeal diseases. Amazed, we ask Torres why Wakuhana did not suffer from the diseases that had taken many lives nearby. Torres said that one person had shown symptoms of cholera. They took him to the hospital in Curiapo, and Torres listened carefully to the doctor's instructions. Upon returning to Wakuhana he announced that every drop of water destined for consumption in the community would henceforth, be boiled, that no one would travel to adjacent communities, thereby avoiding the risk of becoming infected and bringing the disease home, and that a *nahanamu* would be held to send away the *hebu* causing cholera. These three steps were performed, the community continued to boil drinking water, and health conditions improved considerably. Wakuhana's experience provides a model for generating the sort of integration of medical perspective that could save lives elsewhere.



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"Sometimes the historian can only envy the ethnographer's ability to observe and configure complex social and conceptual worlds. This study of cholera constitutes one of those occasions: I can only admire the authors' ability to unravel class, attitudinal, and institutional relationships, using social responses to cholera as their sampling device."
- Charles E. Rosenberg, author of *Explaining Epidemics*

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Notes have been omitted.



Kanchana Natarajan

THE TALE OF ALLI



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The *Chandogya Upanisad*, a widely read religious-philosophical classic from the pre-Buddhist era, has a wishful prayer by a spiritual aspirant: “May I never, ever, enter that reddish, white, toothless, slippery and slimy *yoni* of the woman”¹ thereby depicting the vagina, body and sexuality of a woman as something repugnant and abominable. From time immemorial, a woman’s sexuality has been seen by the dominant classes as threatening, troublesome and dangerous, and hence to be kept under vigil and control. Her body is regarded as a field (*kshetra*) where male seed can be sown for male progeny. By virtue of possessing a biological body with a womb, vagina and breasts, the female is ascribed a restrictive gender role and re-egated to a position of subordination within the family unit and society in many patriarchal social orders. In the orthodox Vedic tradition, by virtue of possessing a female body with biological functions such as menstruation and reproduction, the woman is declared unfit for philosophical scholarship, or for higher spiritual pursuits such as liberation. Even today, the Vedic orthodoxy does not permit the communication of Vedantic *mahavakyas* (the highest spiritual instructions) to women and Shudras. Even if we ignore Manu and the misogynistic lawgiver’s views on the woman’s body and sexuality, we are still confronted with the wellpreserved genre of Sanskrit literature called the Puranas, both ancient and medieval, many of which abound with anecdotes and stories about good/chaste women and bad/unchaste women. An unchaste woman has a loose tongue and licentious behaviour, while the one of few words, who allows her body and sexuality to be controlled by men, is declared a good woman. She silently suffers all her trials and is ever subservient to the patriarchal norms. To illustrate this, we have a quotation from the *Brahmavaivartapurana*,² which categorises women into three groups on the basis of sexuality. It proclaims: “All women are sprung from *prakriti*! The best, the worst and the intermediate, / The best are derived from the *sattva* portion, / The intermediate are parts of *rajas*, / Seeking pleasure and ever intent on their own ends, / The worst are parts of *tamas*, of unknown ancestry, / Bad-mouthed, unchaste, licentious, independent, fond of quarrel, / Unchaste women on earth and the heavenly nymphs, / Are known as prostitutes, and are parts of *tamas*.”

Such orthodox views have percolated deep into the mass psyche in many parts of the subcontinent, creating a powerful patrilineal and patriarchal Indo-Aryan kinship form of social organisation. This has remained a dominant form for centuries, with some exceptions in the Northeast and South India. But often, these exceptions offer us the voice of the

other. Many are the articulations of women, indigenous people and ordinary folk of the oppressed classes — the subalterns — who intelligently resist the norms of the prevalent dominant hierarchy by introducing refreshingly new and alternative conceptions of female sexuality and body through their oral and performing arts.

This essay exposes some essential differences in perceptions of female sexuality and body in the *Samkhyakarika*³ of Isvarakrishna, an important philosophical text of the fourth century AD, and the *Alliyarasanimalai*⁴, a popular Tamil folk ballad. The Samkhyan understanding of *prakriti* and *purusha* has had immense influence on the constructions of the physical

and social woman and man in the Indian social system, including the perpetuation of dominant hierarchies and inequalities. These culturally sanctioned constructions, based on male privilege, were seen as part of the larger scheme of nature, and therefore as inviolable truth. This school of philosophy, which upholds a sharp dualism positing two independent realities, matter and consciousness, ascribes the feminine gender to matter or *prakriti* and the masculine to consciousness or *purusha*. Materiality or *prakriti* is constituted of a tripartite process, called *sattva*, *rajas* and *tamas*, with an ethical dimension of moral excellence, moral decadence and amoral indifference. Lack of intellectual capabilities, desire and deviance are construed to be feminine, while renunciation, asceticism, sophisticated intellectual capabilities and spiritual pursuits as masculine.

Though every biological male or female possesses soul/consciousness/*purusha*, and every physical body is a product of *prakriti*, in many places the text *Samkhyakarika* blurs the philosophical principles with those of anatomy. Biological females are identified with *prakriti* and her evolutes, while males are equated with *purushas*. Thus the perceptions of both are rendered almost permanent, and cultural constructions are assigned the status of nature. The text feminises *prakriti* by calling her a dancer who performs for her male. As a dancer, she is a seductress, stimulating desire in *purushas*/men. She is fecund but anarchic, requiring control and order by the masculine principle. She is also a nurturing principle, benevolent like a cow that provides milk for others. She is likened to a bashful virgin, who will flee if her nudity is exposed.

What develops from this scheme — *purushas* bondage by *prakriti* and his struggle to rediscover his essential identity and subsequent liberation from her force — is the different spaces allotted to *prakriti* and *purusha* on the one hand and women and men on the other. The domain of *prakriti* is the world, while that of a physical woman is home and its immediate surroundings. The sphere of operation for *purusha*



Kali trampling upon the body of Shiva

Courtesy: Jyotindra Jain's *Everyday Art of India* (2000, New Delhi: Sanskrit Pratishtan)

is apparently twofold. One is the world created by *prakriti*, and the other the space away from the web created by *prakriti*, the renunciate's trajectory into the wilderness. This is transposed onto the activity of the biological male. Men are granted two spaces, one within the house, where they cohabit with wives, have control and domination over sexuality, derive sexual pleasures and have as many male children as possible. This is only a temporary or even a fictional field of operation. For whenever interaction within the home proves to be binding and restrictive, men have the privilege of detaching themselves from it and practising ascetic spiritual disciplines, far away from domestic pressures, as well as familial and conjugal responsibilities.

Masculinity, according to Samkhya and elsewhere in Indian philosophy, is to ultimately give up all desires and retire to the wilderness to practise discrimination between the self and *prakriti*/matter/sexual temptation. Masculinity consists in using the intellectual faculty to understand one's essential nature as consciousness, which is in essence detached from matter. Disentangling from *prakriti* is symbolically represented as disentangling from woman and home. Woman here represents bondage, emotions, desires, lack of intellectual ability, anarchy and seduction. Hence woman *prakriti* must be scrupulously avoided if liberation is to be sought. If masculinity is freedom from home and household chores, femininity is confinement to the walls of the house, the cowsheds, marriage, male progeny, and service to the husband and his relatives. Femininity is the ability to be fecund, to nurture and be sexually available to the husband at all times. If masculinity stands for intellectual pursuits, femininity represents subservience to the male in all respects. However, in the following section we shall see a radical and liberating construction of femininity in the Tamil folk ballad *Alliyarasanimalai*.

Alliyarasanimalai is radical in many respects, two of which can be stated at the outset: (a) it overthrows almost all the orthodox conceptions of female sexuality and body; (b) it is a woman-centred ballad with an emphasis on female desire, in its description of a powerful all-female kingdom where men are rarely active agents and are presented more as intruders.

The Tamil folk ballad subverts classical norms by ingeniously reworking them to liberate women from the prevailing constrictive models of family units. It not only provides an option to the exploitative heterosexual familial archetype, but creates an alternative by placing women in an autonomous, efficient and self-validating homo-social/erotic unit. If Arjuna, the

invincible hero of the *Mahabharata*, epitomises the masculine ideal of the Sanskrit tradition (based on the Samkhyan model of first enjoying and then renouncing the female at his own convenience and will), Alli, the indomitable empress of the Tamil folk tradition, uses her martial prowess, intellect and the strength of her female associates to systematically fracture the masculinity of her power-ful and privileged male opponents, Neenmukan, Arjuna, Bhima and Krishna. Thus in *Alliyarasanimalai*, the motifs from the well-known classical epic/myth *Mahabharata* have been put into local Tamil narrative contexts, introducing many drastic changes.

The ballad of Alli exemplifies A.K. Ramanujan's theory about the folk tradition. "Folklore offers another alternative, bounces off the so-called high culture in systematic ways,"⁵ he said. Ramanujan, the renowned folklorist and linguist, has identified three kinds of folklore: man-centred, woman-centred and animal-centred. Each has a different set of symbols, values and priorities, offering different roles and modalities to its members. For our present purpose, Ramanujan's description of woman-centred tales is crucial. He notes, "...by women's tales I mean two things: tales told by women, and tales that are centred on women."⁶ Ramanujan explores another significant and useful genre of clas-sification. Legends told by women are located in and around the home and describe generalised human and familial relationships. They have a particular style and mode of communication. He calls them the domestic or interior (*akam*) genre. This may be contrasted with the exterior or public (*puram*) genre. "This is performed in public by men and contains personal names, historical, mythological, communal events, especially battles."⁷ For a long time, in the history of village public performances, all roles (male and female) were enacted by men. Some tales centring on women may have been created by men. Quite often, the ethical values of classical literature are reversed. Ramanujan's study of the folk legends also reveals that the norms and values — of marriage, chastity, fidelity, etc. — stipulated for women by patriarchal systems are overtly dismissed in women's tales, and female members of the audience appreciate the conspiracy of women in sabotaging male values.

The folk legend *Alliyarasanimalai* is one such performative ballad, which is quite popular in rural Tamil Nadu even today. It must be pointed out that this legend is not a rare exception. In the districts of Madurai and Kanyakumari, powerful women-centred legends have emerged, some performed as bow songs. Some folk legends like the story

Courtesy: M. Krishnan's "Dancers and musicians at Belur", *Sringee Natyak*, 1992, No. 105-106, p. 34.



Natyamohini

of *Pennarachiyar*⁸ depict extraordinary women who live with other women, establish an all-woman fortress, never indulge in heterosexual marriage, but give birth only to female children by allowing the erotic, feminine breeze from the south to touch their bodies and impregnate them. When attacked by curious neighbouring kings, they fight valorously. In the face of defeat, pregnant women prefer to kill themselves in the battlefield by slashing their bellies with swords and exposing the foetuses, rather than allowing the male raiders to take them captive. Temples are dedicated to such warrior women and queens, who have been later deified, and annual festivals commemorate their valour. That these legends might have had some historicity cannot be denied. *Alliyarasanimalai* belongs to the genre of *Madar manjari* or collection of woman-centred ballads portraying women who resist prevailing heterosexist norms.

The expression *Allirajyam*, derived from the legendary hero-ine's name Alli, literally means the kingdom of Alli. The Tamil word *Allirajyam* communicates the idea of the Sanskrit *strirajyam*, or the "land of women" — a kingdom where men are redundant. Women do not require men even for sexual pleasure or progeny. Female characters in the *Pennarachiyar Katai* and *Alliyarasanimalai* have created a space for women where men are literally banned. In a paper entitled "*Strirajya: Indian Accounts of Kingdoms of Women*,"⁹ W.L. Smith delineates the accounts of *Strirajya* or "land of women" or societies ruled by

women in the Northeast and north-west of India. According to Smith, “the most common conception of a land of women” is that they are “ruled by predatory female magicians”. Through their sexuality, these women sap the strength of male visitors and often magically transform them into beasts or birds. Smith also makes a passing reference to Chinese sources which contain numerous references to women’s countries and woman-dominated countries. According to him, there are two types: mythical or fantastical countries, and countries in the historical record. In the first kind, women live in “maleless lands (and) mate with apes, dogs or demons, and become pregnant by bathing or drinking water from a certain river or well, or exposing (themselves) to the wind.”¹⁰

Our folk ballad, the *Alliyarasanimalai*, is silent about the sexual exploits of women while definitely mentioning that men were not their partners of choice. The other ballad, *Pennarachiyar Katai*, has the recurring motif of royal women getting pregnant from the soft southerly breeze touching their bodies. In these two ballads, women are not predators. The entry of a male in any form, human or animal, is banned. According to Smith, the fact that the Amazon theme proved to be so sterile in India indicates that it is probably not an Indian theme at all. The notion of the Amazon kingdom could have been taken from the Greeks, but since the Indian texts say so little about it, there is no way to tell. It could just as well have been suggested by Chinese or other Asian sources. Smith concludes that they are projections of identical male presumptions and fears. Since it was presumed that women were essentially licentious, if lands were exclusively inhabited by women, they would be sexual predators since they were no longer under male control. Another point that Smith makes is that the narrators of the *strirajyam* were more interested in the erotic than the military aspect of their subject matter.

Smith’s conclusions may be true with regard to Sanskrit literature of the

great tradition, but analysis of the folk ballads uncovers a very different narration of the “lands ruled by women.” The Tamil folk ballads are pointers to a far more emancipated understanding or the phrase, in that the legends originated in the matrilineal Madurai and Kanyakumari districts where women have historically ruled. The legend of Alli is situated in the Pandya region, with Madurai as its capital. This is significant because of the association of women with political power in the Pandyan kingdom, according to the historian Vijaya Ramaswamy. She draws our attention to the historian Neelakanta Shastri’s remarks in his *History of South India*: according to oral tradition, the Pandya kingdom was founded by a woman. The portrayal of the land of Alli, for example, is therefore indigenous and not borrowed from Greek or other Asian legends. Further, the Tamil folk ballads are unique in portraying women as strong, adept in the martial arts, living in the company of women, drawing support and sustenance from one another, not requiring male presence, prescriptions or domination. There are no references to women in the land ruled by women as being licentious and draining the sexual energy of males. The Tamil ballads focus on the prowess, power and martial tactics of the heroine and her female warriors, not on their erotic life.

Folk ballads are not single-author texts. They are collective phenomena in the social and cultural history of a population. Both women and men of other castes and communities could have contributed to the richness of folk legends. *Alliyarasanimalai* derives from the grand classical parameters of the *Mahabharata* but is deeply influenced by local motifs and legends. It is useful to remember Ramanujan, according to whom we cannot talk of classical and folk as antagonistic terms, but as part of a continuum of forms, the endpoints of which may look like two terms in opposition. But in this case, the classical epic and the folk legends are oppositional. The Tamil ballad is woman-centred, focusing on the woman Alli as invincible, while the Sanskrit epic is consistently male-centred, with Arjuna as the invincible hero.

The folk legend *Alliyarasanimalai* was written down in the 19th century along with other legends with a variety of topics, themes, diction

and styles of narratives. Though it was essentially authorless, there was a literary need to ascribe authorship to the enormous range of this matter, which had been published for the first time. One Pukalenti Pulavar, who was actually of the 14th century, was chosen to be the author of a large number of Tamil folk ballads. It could have been a matter of convenience to select a single eminent poet from the classical Tamil tradition. The actual poems of Pukalenti, however, demonstrate very different stylistics.

The focus of the ballad is the almighty queen Alli (Tamil for ‘lily’). Her story is located in the city of Madurai, where the goddess Meenakshi is worshipped as the supreme empress even today. As mentioned earlier, this is not just a freak folk legend but belongs to a genre of legends characterised by non-conformist women - unmarried, childless, who take up well-defined masculine roles. The over-emphasised quartet of feminine virtues in Tamil society - timidity bashfulness, naiveté and delicacy — are not simply ignored in these legends but relentlessly satirised, and in their place infidelity, ingenuity, astuteness, valour, courage, learning, resistance to the heterosexual models of marriage, a capacity for leadership and administration etc., are strongly propagated. The classical and Brahminical ideals of distinct spaces for men and women are boldly subverted.

This genre of legends promoted a different value system by applauding female characters who, through successfully practising masculine activity, violate the exclusive and sexist Brahminical zones of the world (for men) and the home (for women), and discard all the established conventions of virtuous womanhood. Women occupy both domestic and external spaces. They war and go on elaborate hunting expeditions. They avoid heterosexual marriages, and instead pursue interests in the political, social and economic spheres. As a young girl, Alli goes to school, learns to read and write, masters algebra and multiplication, practises martial arts, reads and writes Tamil literary classics. There is no way to confirm if this was a social reality for the ordinary folk, especially women. But the very existence of this Utopia is stimulating and refreshing to readers.

Castes, geographical regions and religious denominations divide Indian women into complex groupings. But in the present context, we are referring to non-Brahmin Tamil women. An important factor that creates a deep connection among all Indian women is a segregated, gender-specific and highly gender-coded way of life. Sex segregation has been integral to the functioning of modern as well as traditional India. A significant component of Indian society lives in



Arjuna bending the bow...

Photo: NIFSC Archive.



Draupadi at swayamvaram

joint families,¹² which promote strong inter-feminine bonding. Despite rapid industrialisation and urbanisation, the nation continues to segregate cultural, social, religious and familial spaces by sex. While modern nuclear families are generally organised around heterosexual relationships, the traditional joint family is conducive to the existence of gender-coded spaces.

Such marking and limiting of space can be interpreted either as disempowering women by controlling their movements, or empowering women by creating homosocial, eroticised spaces wherein women lend and receive mutual support. Both interpretations are historically legitimate. I subscribe to the view that sex segregation allows women to bond freely with other women. One feature of spatial sex segregation is the construction of gendered worldviews in which women and men perceive the world and utilise their spaces differently. In a recent survey of village clusters outside Bangalore in Karnataka, southern India, Seemanthini Niranjana discusses the strong spatial narrative of "*olage-horagi*" (inside-outside) that govern people's lives.¹³ These spaces are seen to be circumscribed by gender. Femininity, the female body, morality and women's activities are embodied in the idiom *olage*, often depicted as the household, the centre of women's lives.

Niranjana's study can be extended to the neighbouring state of Tamil Nadu, which too makes a strong division between the female *ullakam* (interior) and male *velipuram* (exterior). The identification of women's interest with the household has been prevalent among the upper-class, upper-caste, non-working women who occupy the interior space as their legitimate territory. Here, women participate in many chores together waking, bathing,

washing, cooking, eating, sleeping, and raising children. In such family systems, women experience their significant life events in the company of other women, rather than the men of the clan. A strong consciousness of solidarity between -women develops in this space, according to the anthropologist Margaret Egnor.¹⁴ It is not improbable to conceive that within this area, women cultivate erotic relationships with one another, even while their primary function as wives of the clan is to create male progeny. Hence, there is tremendous silence about erotic bonding between women. *Alliyarasanimalai* replicates this homosocial space for women. Though the ballad is silent about the erotic bonding between women, the reader is sensitised to the desire of the heroine Alli to bond only with her female companions. Alli is born out of the flesh of the shoulder of Meenakshi, which the goddess plucks and casts into the lily pond. The child is picked up by the goddess from the lily flower and handed over to the thousand Pandyan kings who performed intense penance for the child. The goddess says: "On the lily is a beautiful son, / It is both male and female / Carry it." So saying, the goddess vanishes.

Alli, the girl child, is from the beginning referred to as both male and female. The goddess does not create her through her will, but from her body. The child's gender is throughout blurred in the ballad, often quite deliberately. She is feminine, beautiful, loves and bonds only with women. Women are her political advisers, women render personal services to her. She also adores ferocious snakes who are at her beck and call. According to A.K. Ramanujan "...a snake in a male-centred tale is usually something to be killed, a rival phallus, if you will. In woman-centred tales, i.e., where woman are protagonists and usually the tellers, snakes are lovers, husbands, uncles, donors and helpers." She falls in love with the beautiful young wife of an old Brahmin and shelters her and her old invalid husband, only to realise later that they are Krishna and Arjuna, who had assumed such appearances to gain entry to her all-female fort. The folk ballad also characterises Alli as a fierce fighter, who rides horses and elephants, goes on hunting expeditions and kills ruthlessly in war. Alli threatens and challenges all her enemies, including the trickster Arjuna, who has stealthily tied the wedding string around her neck, saying: "I am a fish-hook for your throat, a sharp nail to your navel, / An axe to your skull, an iron pestle to your chest, / I am a sword under your neck... a serpent by your pillow..."

The ballad uses the metaphor of 'inside' and 'outside' to demarcate Alli's kingdom and the male hero Arjuna's

lust-provoked wanderings. Alli has an all-woman fort and lives 'inside' while Arjuna is 'outside' the fort, constantly desiring to penetrate, invade, capture, possess and violate the kingdom as well as its queen. But Alli is not restricted to the inner space of the fort; she also accesses the 'outside' when as a child she goes to school to acquire her skills, when she goes on a grand hunting expedition to the forest, when she wages war against the usurper of her father's kingdom, when she travels from the southern peninsula to the north with her female army to battle Arjuna, who deviously married her. Similarly, Arjuna does manage to access the inner space of both fort and queen, but only through trickery, intrigue and supernatural assistance.

Arjuna, the valiant Pandava prince, unmatched as an archer with his victorious Gandiva bow, is a great *Mahabharata* hero, but in the legend of Alli he is portrayed as selfish, compulsive and delinquent. He cannot make a single rational or irrational move without the aid and the magic of his companion Krishna. Despite having several wives and mistresses, he lusts after other women. He is not interested in male activities such as warfare or hunting, and he loses to Alli in battle. He cannot accept his failure to penetrate the all-woman fortress and turns into a sexual predator when his desire is thwarted.

Having seen his eldest brother Yudhishtira and their common wife Draupadi making love on a saffron bed on the terrace of the palace, Arjuna decides to expiate this sin by undertaking a pilgrimage to all the holy places, including Madurai, where Alli reigns supreme. Yudhishtira and the Pandava matriarch Kunti summon Krishna, the companion and the Lord, and beseech him to accompany Arjuna. The two set out on this long journey and finally arrive at the outskirts of Madurai, and hear from a pearl merchant all about the mighty unmarried queen Alli. Arjuna falls hopelessly in love and pesters Krishna for help in forcing Alli into marrying him. The pearl merchant warns Arjuna of the consequences of even proposing marriage to Alli. According to him, Alli has declared: "She will flog the groom with the horsewhip, / The marital kin and kith will also be whipped, / Eyes will be plucked from sockets if anyone utters the word 'marriage' / At the palace gates she has displayed a severed male head, / The flying crows dare not lift their heads, / Not even a whiff of man can enter the palace, / She mounts a mare and not a stallion, / Her army is made up of female warriors..."

The pearl merchant informs Arjuna that Alli sees marriage as something that would ruin her power and status. She

has vowed to harm the man who seeks her hand. In her palace, she exhibits the spoils of war. No man has the courage to seek entry into the palace. At strategic points, women warriors are deputed to guard this space from male intrusion. In that all-female city, women are administrators. Alli's friends are women, her advisers are women, her carpenters, priests, executioners, hunters, snake-charmers are all women. Even her royal elephants are female.

Krishna advises Arjuna to forget about Alli. If Arjuna insisted on marriage, he would arrange an alliance from his own country, caste and clan. But Arjuna is agonised, so Krishna finally decides to help him. However, Arjuna is quite often portrayed as comic and idiotic, almost a buffoon. When Alli goes on a hunting expedition, Arjuna follows her, disguised as her female companion, retrieves her arrows, massages her feet and entertains her with stories while she rests. But wanting to draw her attention to his self-proclaimed glory, he begins to give her his autobiography. Hearing a story about a man, Alli flies into a rage and looks at the face of the storyteller, and notices the thin line of hair revealing his manhood. Before Alli can collect herself, Arjuna darts like the wind into the forest.

Arjuna tries to gain entry into the palace but Alli's female guards and companions throw him out. With the help of Krishna's divine powers, he assumes the form of a huge serpent and is carried to Alli's fort by the snake-charmer, which is Krishna himself in disguise. Alli is captivated by the serpent and asks the snake-charmer to leave the snake with her for a night. Stealthily, Arjuna enters her bedchamber and beckons the sleep goddess to overwhelm Alli. Arjuna rapes her while she sleeps and manages to impregnate her. Later, Arjuna gains entry into the palace in the form of a woman and in the middle of the night, while Alli is asleep, he ties the marriage string around her neck and leaves for his hometown with Krishna.

Alli wakes up, sees the string around her neck and is furious. She tries to sever it with a saw, a sword and other means, but is unsuccessful. Enraged, she decides to wage war on Hastinapur, Arjuna's home, with her army of female troopers - which include Tamils, Telungas, Kannadigas, and Muslims. The army and the pregnant Alli are invincible. Arjuna and his divine companion Krishna run away from the battlefield in shame. Krishna is badly wounded, his body is covered with blood and he must face his failure. The indomitable Pandava brother Bhima throws down his weapons and fears for his life. Arjuna rushes to his half-brother Sahadeva and tells him to somehow, by any means, capture Alli. Sahadeva connives with the

gods to create a magic cage with several doors and bars, draws Alli into it during the fight and traps her.

Alli is portrayed as a ferocious caged lion wanting to break free, but is told by Draupadi, one of the wives of Arjuna, that only if she gives up her weapons and marries Arjuna will she be released and allowed to go back to her country. Draupadi sings the glory, valour and chivalry of her husband to Alli, who rebuffs and ridicules every claim. However, in order to be free Alli surrenders her weapons and once more Arjuna marries her. Immediately, Alli leaves for Madurai with her warriors, and in due course gives birth to a son who will be taught to take revenge on his father, Arjuna.

The folk legend of Alli is unique in reversing the almost inviolable gender norms prescribed by Brahminical traditions. The warrior queen is born after her parents and Pandya kings perform severe penance, in which all the citizens and animals of Madurai participate. Pleased with the collective effort, the goddess of Madurai creates Alli from a fragment of her shoulder and hands her over to the parents, saying "she is both male and female".

Alli lives with her parents in the village, goes to school, learns to read and write. She comes home to gulp down her afternoon meal and runs back to school to learn more. Thus when she is nine, she learns about the kingdom being usurped by her half-brother, Neenmukan. She engages him in battle, wins back the kingdom and rightfully establishes her all-female empire, in which men are at the periphery, receiving orders from and dependent for their survival on women.

This female space is portrayed as being well organised and self-fulfilling. It is disturbed by Arjuna, whom we may identify with the Samkhyan *purusha*, whose function is to establish order in the chaotic world of *prakriti*. However, in this legend Arjuna, over-powered by lustful desire for Alli, is an agent of profound disorder.

The obsessive Arjuna seeks Krishna's help. The latter, knowing of Alli's reputation as a huntress, conjures up wild and ferocious animals in forests around Alli's kingdom, metaphorically signifying Arjuna's desire and his readiness to let the blood of slaughter flow, to satiate his own desire for the few drops of the warrior queen's virgin blood. Intimidated by the prowling animals in the forest, the foresters seek Alli's help. She decides to go on a hunting expedition, a typical masculine, heroic act, in this case not to claim territory or to subjugate but to fulfil the duty of a sovereign.

With a strong entourage of heavily armed female soldiers, Alli ceremo-

niously goes to the forest. Arjuna assumes a female form and accompanies her until he is found out. What is significant here is the reversal of masculinity and femininity. If Alli represents *prakriti*, she is exactly the opposite of the Samkhyan definition. Arjuna, the male principle, driven by ego, is never in control of himself. He lives in the world of fantasy and delusion, utterly abandoning the power of discrimination that is so prized in the Brahminical model. In the classical tradition, desire, lust, delusion or *maya* are identified with the feminine, but in this representation of the folk tradition, it is satirically inverted. Arjuna's every fantasy, every desire causes increasing turbulence in the well-ordered female kingdom. His fantasy makes him rape and impregnate Alli. His lust makes him so unstable that he quite often changes his sex, age, caste, class and form to achieve his scheming end. Totally lacking discrimination, he is unable to see the web of delusion in which he has ensnared himself, even while he focuses obsessively on mechanisms for ensnaring Alli.

The deviant Arjuna's lack of discrimination and pursuit of darkness instead of light, and ignorance instead of knowledge, is satirised from the very beginning of the narrative. Supposedly undertaking a journey of penance and propitiation to counter the sin of accidentally witnessing his respected elder brother and their common wife in the sexual act, Arjuna bathes in holy rivers on his pilgrimage, but is actually immersing himself further in the waters of his own desire and fantasy. Alli is the pearl that he must possess at all costs, even his power of discrimination. The omniscient Krishna is by his side, yet the only advice Arjuna wants from him is about how to conquer Alli, through either guile or force.

According to the Samkhyan model, woman has the power to seduce,



Courtesy: Purisai Kannappa Thambiran Troupe.

Purisai Kannappa Thambiran as Arjuna

deceive, bind and destroy. But in the folk legend it is man who initiates the cycle of physical violence that culminates in his raping the virgin warrior queen within her homosocial/homo-erotic space. The binding is materially asserted through the symbol of the magic marriage string that he ties around her neck, and which she cannot take off. The string legitimises his claim on her body and on the body of the child he has implanted in her - his offspring trapped in the interior/house of Alli's womb. Externally, the marriage string is the perfect symbol of the household, the space that the man of discrimination is supposed to renounce in his quest for knowledge and freedom.

Later in the narrative, Alli is rendered captive in the interior of the magical cage erected on the battlefield by Sahadeva, on Arjuna's request. Only thus can Alli's force be contained. Arjuna's act of deceiving, violating, and binding Alli expands into grotesque and blood-soaked parameters that compel others to participate in the thickening veil of pathological fantasy which now clouds the individual and collective discrimination of his family, army and the kingdom of Hastinapur, his homeland.

The power of the Alli legend lies in its satirical subversion of Samkhyan-influenced gender-coded worldviews, its blurring of the sociological boundaries between the household and the world, its radical reworking of the classical stereotypes of masculinity and femininity, and its audacious deconstruction of the principles of *prakriti* and *purusha* that have profoundly influenced Hindu culture for millennia, and continue to do so.

Notes:

1. *Chandogya Upanishad*, VIII, 14.1, Gita Press, Gorakhpur, 2000.
2. *Brahmavaivartapurana of Krishnadvaipayana Vyasa*, part II, J.L. Shastri (ed.), Motilal Banarasidass, Delhi, 1986, Mantras 28-40.
3. *The Tattva Kaumudi: Vachaspati Mishra's Commentary on the Samkhya Karikas*, tr. into English by Ganganath Jha, with an introduction and critical notes by Har Dutt Sharma, Oriental Book Agency, Poona, 1965.
4. *Alliyarasanimalai* by Pukalenti Pulavar, Longman's Green and Co., Madras, 1914.
5. *The Collected Essays of A.K. Ramanujan*, Ramanujan, A.K., Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1999.
6. Ibid.
7. *Another Harmony: New Essays on the Folklore of India*, eds., Stuart H. Blackburn and A.K. Ramanujan, University of California Press, 1989.
8. *Pennarachiya Katali*, eds., K. Jayakumar and D. Boominathan, English translation by S. Mark Joseph, Institute of Asian Studies, Madras, 1996. The ballad of *Pennarachiya* is sung to the accompaniment of the musical bow, *villu*, and the drum, *utukkai pattu*. When the bow, a weapon of war, is transformed into a musical bow, a number of jingling cymbals are strung along the string and the performer hits the string in a rhythmic beat as he sings his/her ballad.
9. See *Vidyarnavavandanam: Essays in Honour of Asko Parpola*, Studia Orientalia, eds. Kalus Karttunam and Petri Koskikallio, published by the Finnish Oriental Society, Helsinki.
10. Ibid.
11. Vijaya Ramaswamy, "The Taming of Alli: Mythic Images and Tamil Women", *Journal of the Inter-University Centre of Humanities and Social Sciences*, Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 5, No.2, 1998: pp. 71-84. I do not subscribe to Ramaswamy's account of the ballad as "the taming and domestication of Alli into a virtuous and obedient wife of Arjuna." From beginning to end of the plot, valiant Alli resists Arjuna. Even when he forces her into marrying him, she continues to reject and fight him.
12. Irawati Karve, *Kinship Organisation in India*, Deccan College, Poona, 1953. Karve, a noted sociologist, defines a joint family as "a group of people who generally live under one roof, who eat food at one hearth, who hold property in common and who participate in common family worship and are related to each other as some particular kindred."
13. See manthini Niranjana, "Feminity, Space, and the Female Body: An Anthropological Perspective", in *Embodiment: Essays on Gender and Identity*, ed. Meenakshi Thapan, Oxford University Press, 1997.
14. Margaret Egnor, "On the Meaning of Sakti to Women in Tamil Nadu", in *Powers of Tamil Women*, ed. Susan S. Wadley, Manohar, New Delhi, 1991.

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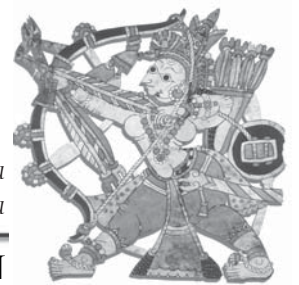
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Ajit K. Danda
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BODY PAINTING: AN AGE-OLD TRADITION

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I

Once the basic necessities have been met, human beings always wanted to adorn themselves in various manners so as to look more attractive or to ward off evil eyes or insects. Body painting is one such tradition which men have found to have come down to them over the years bringing along with it a vast collection of designs and motifs.

Amongst the youngsters of today, the fashion of having their body painted is the 'in thing'. All such craze notwithstanding, does the man with a tattoo painted across his chest or the woman painted all over, facing the dazzling lights of the camera only to feature in some glossy film magazine, ever ponder over the origin of this rich tradition or its significance? In all probability, they do not, no matter how much relevant the question is.

It will, therefore, be important at the outset to deal with the origin of body painting in brief, discuss its

significance and the various methods of execution of the same. Thus the point of focus of this exercise will rather be on a broad speculation of body painting as a concept, with some extra emphasis on the body paintings of the Onge, a small Negrito population from the Little Andaman, the southernmost among the Andaman group of islands.

Numerous research studies have been carried out by anthropologists on the Onge and so much manifest was their nature of body paintings that they hardly missed attention of scholars (Plates 1 & 2). In fact tribal life and culture in



Plate 1



Plate 2

general is a much talked about issue among anthropologists wherein we do get adequate mention of body paintings, particularly in connection with the ceremonies and rituals they are involved with. Despite such references, the aesthetics of this rich ritual representation of man's/woman's creativity has hardly received its due appreciation. Therefore, an attempt is being made through this paper to insist on the study of these paintings not only from a pure anthropological perspective but also from the viewpoint of art appreciation. The question that instantly surfaces out at this stage is, can body painting be considered as a form of art? This question will be duly addressed as we proceed with our discussion and particularly refer to the designs and motifs of such paintings.

II

Most of the primitive people who remain habitually unclothed by and large adorn their body in some way or the other. Thus body painting may have originated as an adornment or a part of decoration or ornamentation of the self and only at a later date acquired its value-loaded meanings and symbolic attributes, with its gradual attachment with various rites and rituals. Whatever its source of origin may be, body painting as a form of artistic expression can be divided into two broad categories: (i) tattoo and (ii) surfacial application of pigment. In tattoo, the subcutaneous application of pigment provides it with permanent character. Often it acts as an identity marker for an individual or represents his/her social status, etc. The other form of painting being the surfacial application of pigments lasts only for a short while. Their requirements are associated with ceremonies, rituals or to ward off insects and evil eyes.



Tribal woman

Courtesy: <http://www.kamat.com>

III

Tattoo as an expression of art deserves some elaboration here. The word as such originates as the anglicised version of the Tahitian word "Tatu" which signifies the practice of permanent ornamentation. In fact tattoo as body adornment lasts a life time and acts as human display indicating, as already stated, social status, sexual prowess, nature of aggressiveness, group allegiance, etc. for the individuals.

Tattooing as an ancient art form had been known to nearly all cultures. It was known to the ancient Aegean and European cultures during the Bronze Age, as proved by excavated finds of instruments for the purpose of tattooing. Tattoos have also been found on Egyptian mummies dating from 2000 B.C. Their use has been mentioned by classical

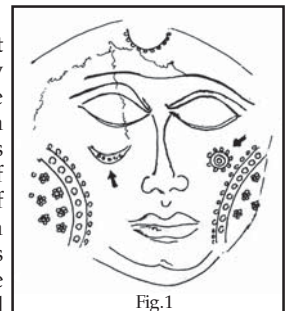


Fig. 1

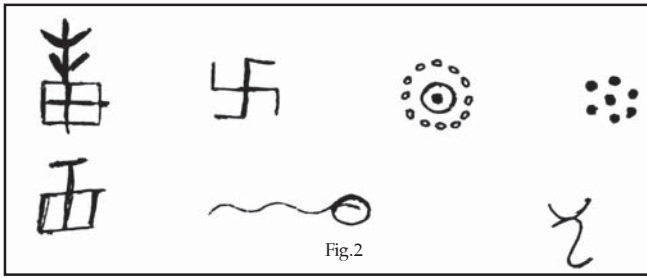


Fig.2

texts of the Greeks, Gauls, ancient Germans, and the Britons. In India there are evidences of tattooing from the Sunga period where the female sculptures from Bharhut have tattoo marks carved upon them. Yakshini Chanda has been adorned with motifs like the sun, moon and small flowers on her cheeks and chin (Figure-1).

The application of tattoo is ordinarily carried out in association with certain life-style rituals like initiation, marriage, etc. In fact in Solomon Islands, a girl does not become eligible for marriage until she has undergone tattooing on her face and breast. The Australian aborigines, instead, inflict fearful scars on the backs of the young girls in order to declare her qualified for marriage. Similar practices are also observed among various tribes in Central India. Among the Khonds of Orissa, a girl is required to be

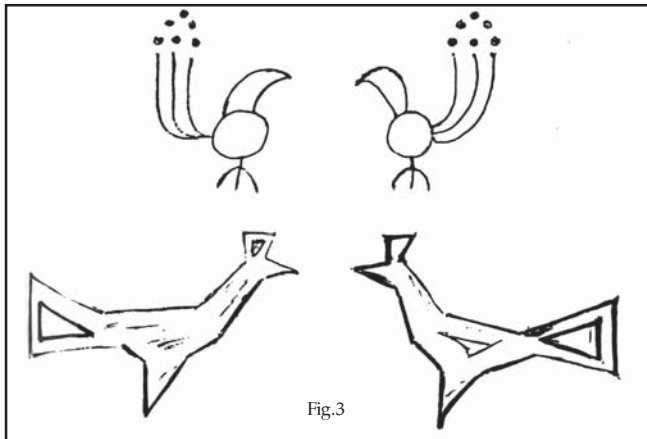


Fig.3

tattooed before her marriage. Women from this region are also found tattooing their forearms after marriage. Such tattooing is locally called 'godhna'. In Nagaland, the Konyak girls are tattooed behind the knees at the time of marriage. Men from this region too found to tattoo an elongated tiger form upon their chest. This symbolises their head-hunting achievement.

Although most of the tattoo motifs and ornamentation of early rural populations are lost today, yet some have come down to us that can be traced back to thousands of years. For instance, a pictorial shorthand that recurs in slam seals and potteries of Harappan period and later in Indian coins have more or less remained the same even though



Plate 4

the messages they carry might have changed from epoch to epoch (figure-2). Motifs like two commonly in tattoos could be traced back to early rock-paintings (Figures 3 and 4). Besides animal motifs, a geometric form (*chauky*) is also frequently seen amongst the tattoo motifs which again may be traced back to the rock-paintings (Figure-5). Historians are of the opinion that these forms from the rock paintings were transmitted from one place to another in the form of tattoo marks on the body, a theory that explains dissemination of the motifs throughout the sub-continent.

In modern times there has emerged a new breed of tattoo art, which is seen especially in cities. Here the whole trend is dictated by fashion designers rather than by any social or traditional need. Motifs include nude female figures, flags, and hearts (as were used by soldiers and sailors during the British rule). Popular religious symbols are also quite common, mostly amongst the rural folk. However these artists do not necessarily cater to a particular groups of people. Instead, they have now become commercialised and thus are keeping up with the most popular images of the time wherein the motifs, too, accordingly keep changing. Sporting figures of matinee idols as motifs has of late emerged as a manifest behaviour of a section of the youth.

IV

Let us examine the visual and aesthetic aspects of these motifs, particularly those that we come across in body paintings among the Onge of Little Andaman Island so as to be able to trace out the basic common principles on which most of the tribal art forms are based.

The primitive communities of the Andaman group of islands as surviving today are the Jarawa, the Sentinelese, the Great Andamanese and the Onge. They all belong to the Negrito race having pigmy stature, pepper-corn hair

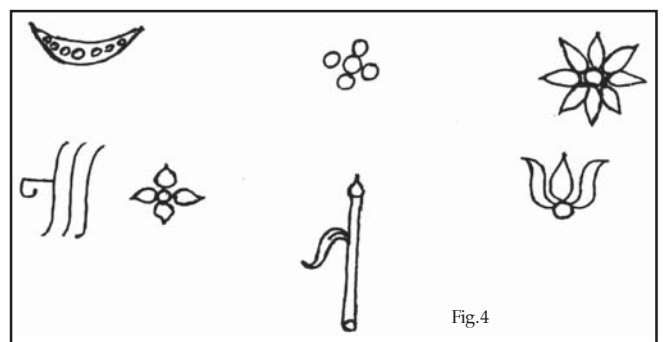


Fig.4

and jet black complexion. Out of them, very little is known about the Sentinelese who inhabit the isolated North Sentinel Island. In fact, the people here are yet to be studied from close proximity. The great Andamanese, who live in Strait Island, themselves constitute a composite population claiming ancestry from 10 different tribes most of whom due to over-exposure to civilisation got into oblivion. Nevertheless, we have fairly good accounts on the Onge of Little Andaman Island. Both the Onge and the Jarawa practise body painting. The Great Andamanese do not do it and we do not know whether they ever did so. Regarding the Sentinelese practice, we do not have any definite knowledge yet.

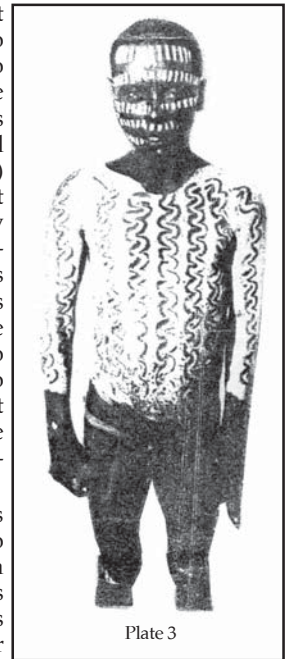


Plate 3

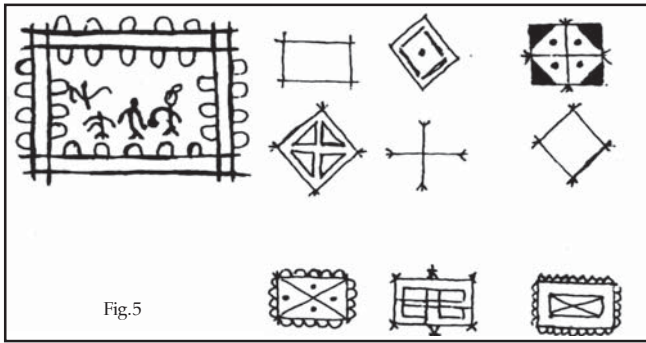


Fig.5

It may appear curious through a fact that unlike most other primitive people from the mainland, the Onge or any other Negrito tribe do not practice tattooing, even though the tribes from the neighbouring Nicobar group of islands do so by puncturing the skin with tiny slivers of obsidian or quartz. Perhaps because of their very dark skin complexion, the Onge and the Jarawa prefer to paint themselves with red ochre and white clay. Both men and women adorn themselves with paint. Traditionally painting is exclusively a job of the women. It is done either with red ochre or with clay commonly called 'Alame' by the Onge. However, red is generally used on sad occasions like death. Painting with white clay, on the other hand, is indicative of rejoicing, love, festivity, and success in hunting expeditions.

V

To begin with, Onge apply paint made out of red ochre or white clay mixed with animal fat to the entire surface of the body or face to be painted. The paint is then scraped out either with finger nails or an indigenous scraping implement called 'Juge' at intervals before it totally dries up.

As already stated, it is the woman who generally does the painting. In fact, an Onge woman, immediately after her marriage, usually applies paint on her husband's body and face with white clay. It is believed that the more the wife loves her husband the more carefully she does the painting. Even after a successful hunt, the women usually apply paint to the body or face of their respective husbands.

One after across the Onge with their face and the rest of the body simply daubed with white clay having no particular design as such. This is usually for the reason that white clay is believed to have medicinal qualities, providing relief against body aches, headaches, or any other pain. As already indicated, it also acts as an insect repellent.

These body paintings, as already mentioned, are mostly carried out during certain ceremonies or rituals. For instance, during initiation ceremony the body of the concerned male is painted with white clay. Similarly during the rite of puberty, i.e., the first menstraul discharge of a girl, she is painted with red ochre by a female relative. During as well as the day after the marriage, the wife embellishes the face and body of her husband with designs in white clay and she too gets herself painted by another woman. The relatives around may also get themselves painted on the occasion to take part in a group dance along with the couple in the evening.

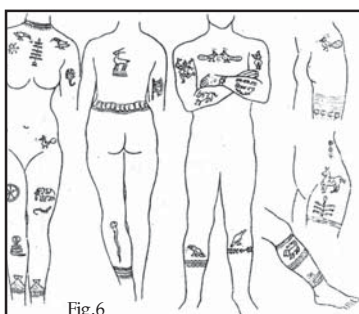


Fig.6

Ordinarily the Onge have an elaborate ceremony to observe after the death of a person. Once death occurs, the body is buried under the log bed of the deceased person. The period of mourning continues for at least four to five months, or till such time when they are sure that the flesh of the deceased has completely decomposed. The mandible of the deceased

is then exhumed out of the grave and decorated with red ochre. For a few days, it is worn around the neck as a locket by the close kin of the deceased. All the relatives of the deceased abstain from using the red ochre till all the rituals are over. As a mark of completion of the rituals, however, the relatives invariably paint themselves in red ochre. Thus centring around the life-cycle rites, the Onge art forms get expression.

VI

The creative art of painting is, in fact, a ritual too. The painter ordinarily does not begin with a preconceived notion of what he/she is going to paint. It is by and large a spontaneous act. Under such circumstance, form evolves automatically through intuition. Both in tattoo as well as in body painting, on the surface level, one will notice that there is a drive towards simplification which finally leads to abstraction. These abstract forms then act as a schema which are used and reused in various combinations. However, individuality is not at stake since each painter adds his/her own motifs as well as imagination within this scheme. Thus out of their own perception, certain modules are created which pass through a series of changes in order to get into the final outcome. This then certainly manifests itself in the vocabulary of the creative art. Thus the creative art as such is not a separate entity but a part or a way of life. The body paintings of the Onge are no exceptions in this respect.

Styles of art enormously from tribe to tribe due to the existing differences in their socio-economic and environmental conditions. As the tribe can be categorised on the basis of their livelihood pattern, similar categorisation is possible according their styles of art. Nevertheless, in almost all forms of tribal art, the vocabulary of art as such is direct, intuitive and simple. Form, performance, and transformation are the integral parts of their art. According to Haku Shah (1995), "Thus art form becomes a living entity, a part of the tribal self, family, village and , that way, the universe-cosmos".

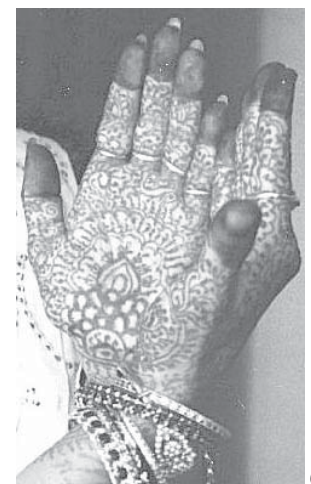
Unfortunately, the surface body painting is not as well documented as the tattoo simply because of its impermanence. However, at this stage, in view of their different nature of execution, we need not look at the two separately; instead, we may study the motifs and the basic formal qualities they share.

In tattoos on the one hand we have beautiful images of floral pattern, geometric designs, religious designs and animal forms which are most intricately rendered. The most interesting in terms of form are those of the animals where elephant with riders, scorpions, peacocks are painted in the most simplistic or cryptic manner, yet not losing the essence of the particular animal (Figure-6). The basic preoccupation is towards simplicity which leads to abstraction and stylisation and at places exaggeration of form



The Henna Tattoo

Courtesy: <http://www.kamat.com>



The Henna Tattoo

Courtesy: <http://www.kamat.com>

in the interest of expressiveness. Relatively more commercialised motifs are those of flags, hearts, and religious symbols. Nevertheless, the range of treatment differs from motif to motif but simplicity prevails all through. The simplicity in this case is no naïve but originates from a deliberate attempt of the painter himself. As a result, it loses its charm to a considerable extent. As it appears, it merely stands as a display from the tattooed person's point of view and has no identity of its own. This has been caused more or less solely by commercialisation.

VII

In comparison with commercialised motifs, the body paintings of the Onge are tuned to a different mood altogether. They are most innovative, original and bold. No two designs are exactly similar, yet each one is most wonderfully balanced and creates interesting rhythmic effects. The black complexion of the body and the whiteness of the paint gives rise to a graphic element which is indeed most fascinating. The paintings are highly innovative though definitely not done arbitrarily since each and every stroke is in coordination with the anatomy. Some patterns are also painted like garments where in the neat lines show the design of a full sleeve T-shirts (Plates 3 & 4). Even though the patterns are mostly geometric, they are definitely not monotonous.

Here a mention may be made of *The Andaman Islanders* edited by D. Taylor Cox wherein the author has this to say: "They (the Onges) have never developed any graphic arts and have only a crude form of body decoration based on geometric designs". He further adds in the appendix that "the Onge have no idea of symbolic representations. They use only geometric designs. These invariably seen spontaneous, and in my view do not represent a degenerate form of ... more highly evolved art, half forgotten over the centuries; in short, the artists of the Andamans, with no conception of symbolism, are even today less advanced than their Palaeolithic counterparts" (Cox: 1966). These observations are rather harsh as well as extra-simplistic. Even though these paintings may be most spontaneously rendered, but the balance are over-all integrity existing in the whole painting with the body does speak of well-thought-out project. Thus taking all these aspects into consideration, it is justifiable to consider body painting as a form of art and not merely as a ritual. Thus body painting remains as one of the most primitive, age-old art traditions which has come down to us through ages.

VIII

The act of smearing *vibhuti* (sacred ash) across one's forehead, a prevalent custom amongst the Vaisnavites and Saivites from down south of the Indian peninsula, may be a close parallel to the art of body painting. Accordingly, one can

safely assume that the art of body painting has been gradually developing and adopting with the changing times. Despite all its association with the rituals or ceremonies, body painting can trace its roots from the universal attempt to heighten, emphasise, and harmonise the natural beauty of the body through such paintings. Thus this predilection for simple outlines characterised by a type of line drawing which finally dispenses with additional elements gives rise to a simplicity of considerable beauty. In fact, in order to enhance the beauty of the painted person (tattooed as well as superficially painted), often a line or band is painted by the Onge around the neck or the girdle. This visually breaks the length of the body emphasise a part of the body. Such repeated bands make us visually aware of the volume and contour and thereby giving a more tactile appeal. Isolated motifs too create a point of immense interest. Such a well-thought-out, programmed piece of art work needs to be given its due acknowledgement.



Courtesy: <http://www.kamat.com>

So far, not much has been or is being done about this fascinating medium which is still practiced in various pockets of the Indian subcontinent. If something is not done soon enough to appropriately record its details, we will lose yet another major item of our rich cultural heritage. It will be really unfortunate if this art form gets wiped out from our culture for ever.

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Sources of Plates and Figures

- Plates 1 and 2: From Badal Kumar Basu, *The Onge*, Calcutta: Seagull Books, (1990).
- Plates 3 and 4: From D. Taylor Cox, *The Andaman Islanders*, (1966).
- Figures 1-6: From Ananda Ghosh, Dissertation entitled *The Art of Tattoo*, Calcutta: Rabindra Bharati University, (1991-92).

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UNESCO



MASTERPIECES OF THE ORAL AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGE OF HUMANITY

[Twenty-Eight Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity Proclaimed by UNESCO – A Report available on the UNESCO's website]

A thousand year old Chinese musical idiom that is mastered by a mere 50 people, the know-how of itinerant doctors in South America who are familiar with the properties of almost 1,000 plant species, a communication system among different language communities in Vanuatu using finger drawings in sand, these are but three of the 28 cultural expressions proclaimed by UNESCO today as Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity.

Director-General Koïchiro Matsuura today [07-11-2003] made the proclamations in a ceremony that was held in Paris, at UNESCO Headquarters, in the presence of members of the Jury and its President, Juan Goytisolo. "The proclamations are UNESCO's first concrete response in meeting the pressing need to safeguard intangible heritage", declared Mr Matsuura. He stressed that "the purpose of these proclamations is not simply to recognise the value of some elements of the intangible heritage; they entail the commitment of states to implement plans to promote and safeguard the inscribed masterpieces."

The masterpieces proclaimed are:

1. Azerbaijani Mugham (Azerbaijan)
2. The Carnival of Binche (Belgium)
3. The Andean Cosmivision of the Kallawaya (Bolivia)
4. The Oral and Graphic Expressions of the Wajapi (Brazil)
5. The Oral Traditions of the Aka Pygmies of Central Africa (Central African Republic)
6. The Royal Ballet of Cambodia (Cambodia)
7. The Art of Guqin Music (China)
8. The Carnival of Barranquilla (Colombia)
9. La Tumba Francesa, Music of the Oriente Brotherhood (Cuba)
10. The Al-Sirah al-Hilaliyya Epic (Egypt)
11. The Kihnu Cultural Space (Estonia)
12. The Tradition of Vedic Chanting (India)
13. Wayang Puppet Theatre (Indonesia)
14. The Maroon Heritage of Moore Town (Jamaica)
15. Ningyo Johruri Bunraku Puppet Theatre (Japan)
16. The Art of Akyns, Kyrgyz Epic Tellers (Kyrgyzstan)
17. Woodcrafting Knowledge of the Zafimaniry (Madagascar)
18. The Indigenous Festivity dedicated to the Dead (Mexico)
19. The Traditional Music of Morin Khuur (Mongolia)
20. The Pansori Epic Chant (Republic of Korea)
21. Lakalaka, Dances and Sung Speeches of Tonga (Tonga)
22. The Arts of the Meddah, Public Storytellers (Turkey)
23. Vanuatu Sand Drawings (Vanuatu)
24. Nha Nhac, Vietnamese Court Music (Viet Nam)
25. Iraqi Maqam (Iraq)
26. Songs of Sanaa (Yemen)
27. The Baltic Song and Dance Celebrations (Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania)
28. Shashmaqom Music (Tajikistan and Uzbekistan).

This year, the Proclamation is especially significant because of the recent adoption by the 32nd session of the General Conference of UNESCO of a Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The proclaimed masterpieces will be inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Heritage of Humanity provided for in the Convention, as soon as it enters into force, i.e. once it will have been ratified by 30 states. The

jury, comprising 18 members, met to examine 56 national and multi-national candidatures submitted by Member States of UNESCO from November 3 to 6. Each case had already been evaluated by specialist NGOs such as the International

THE TRADITION OF VEDIC CHANTING IN INDIA

The Vedas comprise a vast body of Sanskrit poetry, philosophical dialogue and thought, myth, and ritual incantations brought to India by the Aryans over 3500 years ago. Regarded by India's predominant religious majority, the Hindus, as the ultimate source of knowledge and the sacred foundation of their religion and culture, the Vedas embody one of the world's oldest surviving cultural traditions.

Expressed in elegant Vedic language, the ancestor of classical Sanskrit, the verses of the Vedas were traditionally chanted during sacred rituals and ceremonies and recited daily in the Vedic communities. Although Vedic texts were recorded in writing some fifteen centuries ago for reference purposes, their principal means of transmission remains oral to the present day.

The outstanding value of the Vedic tradition lies not only in the rich content of its oral literature but also in the unique and ingenious techniques employed by the Brahmin priests in preserving the texts intact over three and half millennia. The complex recitation technique, requiring rigorous training from childhood, is based on a specific pronunciation of each letter, tonal accents and specific speech combinations to ensure that the sound of each word remains unchanged.

The Vedic heritage comprises a multitude of texts and interpretations collected in four Vedas, commonly referred to as "books" of knowledge even though have been transmitted orally. The Rig Veda is an anthology of sacred hymns; musical arrangements of hymns from the Rig Veda and other sources are found in the Sama Veda; the Yajur Veda abounds in prayers and sacrificial formulas used by priests; and the Atharva Veda, attributed to the legendary sage, Atharvan, includes hymns, charms and spells. The Vedas also provide an extraordinary historical panorama of Hinduism and offer insight into the early development of several fundamental artistic and scientific notions, such as the concept of zero.

Although the Vedas continue to play an important role in contemporary Indian life, this ancient oral tradition now faces many difficulties owing to current economic conditions and modernisation. Experts claim that four noted schools of Vedic recitation - in Orissa (eastern India), Maharashtra (central India), and Kerala and Karnataka (southern India) - may be in imminent danger of disappearing.



Council for Traditional Music, the International Social Science Council, the International Council for Philosophy and Humanistic Sciences, the International Puppeteers Union, the International Theatre Institute and the International Council of Museums.

The goal of the Masterpieces of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity programme is to raise public awareness of the value of this heritage and encourage governments to take legal and administrative steps to safeguard it.

In the first Proclamation, in 2001, 19 masterpieces were given recognition.

The third Proclamation is scheduled to take place in 2005.

The intangible cultural heritage, which is sometimes called living cultural heritage, is manifested, *inter alia*, in the following domains:

- Oral traditions, expressions and language
- The performing arts
- Social practices, rituals, and festive events
- Knowledge and practices about nature and the universe
- Traditional craftsmanship.

The intangible cultural heritage, while being transmitted from generation to generation, is constantly recreated by communities and groups in response to their environment, their interaction with nature, and their historical conditions of existence; the intangible cultural heritage provides people and groups of people with a sense of identity and continuity. The safeguarding of the intangible cultural heritage promotes, sustains, and develops cultural diversity and human creativity.

Proclamation's main objectives

The Proclamation encourages governments, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and local communities to identify, safeguard, revitalise and promote their oral and intangible cultural heritage. It also aims to encourage individuals, groups, institutions and organisations to contribute to the management, preservation, protection and promotion of this heritage.

Courtesy: <http://portal.unesco.org>



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AIESEC, a global association with activities in over 83 countries, with more than 50,000 members in 780 academic institutions worldwide, is the world's largest student-managed, non-political, non-profit educational organisation established in 1948.

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AIESEC's Global Internship Programme (GIP) aims to develop young people through global exchange. The GIP offers practical work experience in a diverse cultural environment to recent graduates and professionals from following backgrounds:

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The organisations usually provide the trainee with a monthly stipend that covers the basic living costs (i.e. the rent of the accommodation), or some of them cannot provide the monthly

stipend, but provide the trainee with free accommodation. But all volunteers are expected to meet their own airfare, travel insurance and extra daily living costs.

Application and other details:

The cost of application form cum information brochure is Rs. 200. The brochure provides information that would be relevant during the AIESEC interview and is necessary for anytime reference.

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Since its inception in 1948, AIESEC has contributed to the development of society by serving as an agent of positive change through education and cultural exchange.
- KOFI ANNAN, *Secretary-General, United Nations.*

AIESEC has admirably met its objectives of providing students with the opportunity to interact with the business community internationally, thus providing students the necessary industrial exposure, so vital to their future careers.
- RATAN TATA, *Chairman, Tata Sons*

AIESEC



Folklore as Discourse
Organised by National Folklore Support Centre
 in Collaboration with
Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore &
Department of Anthropology, University of Madras, Chennai.
February 2 – 4, 2004, Chennai



Sponsored by Ministry of Culture and Tourism, Government of India

We are inviting faculty, scholars, and students to participate in the conference to address the various issues of folklore. The formal description of sets of words beyond the level of the sentence is known by the word 'discourse' in modern linguistics. Although it has been a subject of traditional rhetoric also it is difficult to give a single definition of discourse analysis as a research method. Indeed, numerous "types" of analyses ranging from Derrida's deconstruction to Foucault's genealogy are grouped under the rubric of 'discourse analysis'. However the contribution of the post-modern discourse analysis is the application of critical thought to social situations and the unveiling of hidden politics within the socially dominant as well as all other discourses. Given such contribution, discourse analysis is meant to provide a higher awareness of the hidden motivations in others and ourselves by making us ask ontological and epistemological questions.

With this background on discourse analysis when folklore (both the material and the discipline) is seen as a discourse it immediately brings to focus the general frame of understanding of the material on the one hand and the intellectual foundations of the discipline on the other. By focusing on folklore as discourse the conference seeks to address the following questions:

- What is the status of folklore as discourse in the changing world?
- What are all the epistemological breaks that have occurred in India in understanding the discourses of folklore?
- How exactly the relationship between orality and literacy gets defined through the uses of folklore discourses?

- How do the underlying concepts of tradition, ethnicity, authenticity, individuality, creativity and folk determine the course of folklore discourse?
- How do genre specific qualities, say the qualities of verbal arts contribute to the understanding of folklore as discourse?
- What are the processes by which folklore becomes the enveloping phenomena of other forms, say, Indian cinema?
- How does the understanding of performances, legends, spaces and specific societal and historical phenomena as discourses contribute towards the development of general theory of Indian culture?

While the above list exemplifies the directions the conference can help to define, it no way constrains the emergence of new thinking in the discipline.

Hopefully this conference will become a pace setter in defining or changing the course of the discipline of folklore.

In addition to the stated objectives the conference, the gathering of the scholars for three days would greatly facilitate to do the preliminary work towards the preparation of a directory of Indian folklore scholars. This may be treated as one of the supplementary goals of the conference.

The National Folklore Support Centre will stand committed to the publication of the papers presented in the conference in collaboration with the participating institutions.

For further details, please contact:

M. D. MUTHUKUMARASWAMY, *Director*, NFSC.

Call for participation

Gathering/ Place: Folklore, Aesthetic Ecologies, and the Public Domain

40th Anniversary Conference and Reunion • April 2-3, 2004: University of Pennsylvania Campus, Logan and Houston Halls

We are inviting all Penn alumni, faculty, students, and friends to join us in an exploration of the scholarship and practice that continue to emerge from Penn's folklore program, and to imagine the future of folklore at Penn and beyond.

We are interested in how the notion of "aesthetic ecologies" can both clarify and complicate our inquiry into collective, vernacular ways of knowing, sensing, and inhabiting that combine to produce locality and the spaces of everyday life, and how this term can be brought to bear on folklore research and practice that seeks to name and ameliorate the related processes of displacement and crises of the commons and the public sphere. We therefore invite proposals for organised sessions that explore folklore's circulation within aesthetic ecologies.

How might the concept of aesthetic ecologies move us toward an understanding of folklife as the medium of place, and vice versa? What might the concept of aesthetic ecology, plied by folklorists, suggest for our study of place and of region? Do aesthetic ecologies integrate the material with the social and the spiritual, and if so, how? What is the promise of this concept for critiquing the work of urban and regional planners that ends up supplanting commons with themed parks and landscapes (what Susan Davis has called the "husk" of public space)? Where are new commons emerging through vernacular practice? What role does folklore, circulating as public intelligence (folk knowledge and belief), play in ecological production? Where are folklorists engaging in the coalescence of cultural conservation, environmental stewardship, and sustainable livelihoods?

What is the bearing of civic professionalism (guided by sustained engagement with local publics, in contrast to what John Dorst has described as "anonymous, portable, expertise"), on the role of folklorists in the work that Archie Green described as "amplifying voices in a democratic polity" (Gross-Bressler)?

We are calling for session proposals that examine these and related questions from multiple vantage points wherever folklorists practice. We are particularly interested in the ways in which folklore practice crosses disciplines, sectors, careers, and international borders and therefore welcome proposals that speak to these diverse contexts of folklore engagement.

We invite abstracts (300 – 500 words) that describe session formats and the topics to be addressed and that list the names of participants, along with their institutional affiliations, paper titles, and brief summaries. Sessions should fit within a 90-minute time slot, and may combine papers with discussants, or may be organised for a discussion. Proposals for performances and other presentation formats are also welcome. Abstracts should be submitted by January 15 to:

Rosina Miller, Centre for Folklore and Ethnography,
 University of Pennsylvania, 313 Logan Hall, 249 South 36th
 Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104-6304.

Email: romiller@sas.upenn.edu (attachment)

Fax: 215-573-2231 (Attn: Rosina Miller)

For updates on the conference and information on accommodations and logistics, please visit our website early and often: <http://www.sas.upenn.edu/folklore/>

Sponsored by the Centre for Folklore and Ethnography and the Graduate Students in Folklore and Folklife



Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Fellowship Programme

THEORISING CULTURAL HERITAGE 2004-2007



Rockefeller Foundation Humanities Fellows at the Smithsonian Institution Centre for Folklife and Cultural Heritage will help expand and refine a theoretical framework for cultural heritage discourse that reflects the perspectives, activities, and participation of academic specialists, civil society groups, and public cultural organisations and that can inform dialogues across social, political, and disciplinary boundaries.

Cultural heritage is today a rubric of ever-expanding scope in the international arena, and increasingly so in the United States. Its meaning largely determined by experts, cultural heritage is used as a basis for multinational, national, state, and local programs. Cultural heritage is also the focus of ideas and programs generated by hundreds of non-governmental organisations, ethnic, regional, and community-based groups.

However, despite its growing popularity across official, community, and even business sectors, the concept of "cultural heritage" is vastly under-theorised. It has lacked an academic, disciplinary base, has generated only an attenuated theoretical literature, and has generally failed to accommodate terminologies and narrative representations developed by grassroots and advocacy groups. This results in the curious contradiction that cultural heritage discourse becomes a uniform globalised mode of apprehending the diverse localised cultural expressions that are ostensibly its subject, yet that elite discourse is insulated from the diverse localised conceptions with which it converges. The voices of the bearers and stewards of cultural heritage—often, the poor, excluded, and marginalised—are typically silenced in those very forums in which the discourse of cultural heritage is articulated and realised.

The Smithsonian will host up to six humanities-oriented scholar/analysts for each of three years to work on the theoretical development of the concept of cultural heritage and its intersection with theories of culture, class, race, ethnicity, gender, and globalisation. Fellows will be drawn from three sectors of cultural engagement — academic institutions, public organisations, and cultural communities — and approximately half of the fellows will come from outside the United States. The intention is both to cross-fertilise sectors of cultural heritage work and to expose international and U.S. thinkers to one other.

The primary focus of 2004-2005 fellowships is the relation between cultural heritage and political representation; of 2005-2006, between cultural heritage and economic pursuits; of 2006-2007, between cultural heritage and the arts.

Fellowships include a stipend in addition to an allowance for travel to and from Washington, D.C., as necessary, for the residency. Applicants need not be U.S. citizens to be eligible. These fellowships are not intended to support undergraduate or graduate studies.

The Smithsonian Centre for Folklife and Cultural Heritage—where cultural heritage is the subject of ongoing, daily intellectual and practical activity—will host the fellows. Given the Centre's location within the Smithsonian and in Washington, D.C., and given its strong connections to international and national institutions, service organisations, NGOs, and community groups, fellows will partake of an incredibly rich environment and find colleagues strongly interested in their work.

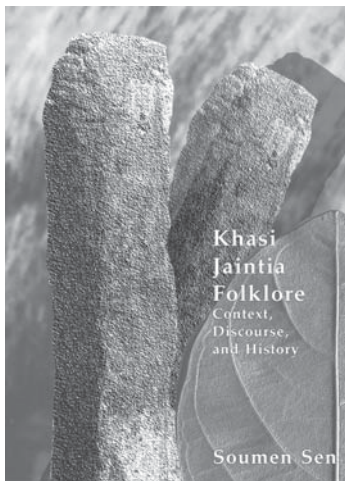
Application: Submit a letter of interest (not to exceed three pages), in English. This letter should outline the proposed work and how it will further the theoretical development of the concept of cultural heritage. Applicants should attach a resume or C.V. and include the proposed dates of the residency. Based on letters of interest, a limited number of applicants will be notified and invited to submit full proposals by February 27, 2004. Full proposals will be due April 1, 2004, for the first year's fellowships.

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Khasi-Jaintia Folklore: Context, Discourse and History

By Soumen Sen

"In the matrilineal Khasi society of Meghalaya, a narrative is distinguished by its preference for such a prescriptive communication and at times by almost a direct reference to the social milieu reflecting the matrilineal kinship principles. Other issues, sentiments or even prescriptions for norms with a demand for conformity to initiate an individual into a communal life and renewing and strengthening shared convictions with a correspondence to experiences in reality also find place." - Soumen Sen

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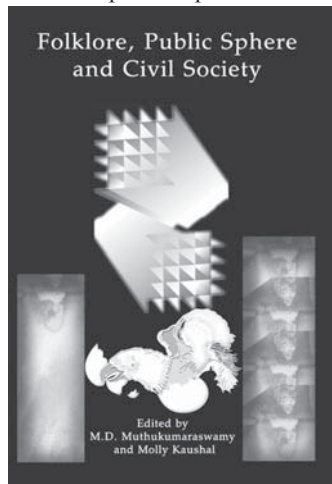
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The discipline of folklore has always addressed the travel of folklore by consistently paying attention to several versions of the same texts and by offering meticulous sociological accounts for their existence. The philosophical premise of acknowledging versions even when they are contradictory lends itself, by expansion, to a vision of a multitude of public spheres inside a civil society. The emerging vision of society is one of polyphonic concert punctuated by recognisable gestures. What we see is a 'performing society' that generates public opinion not necessarily through rational verbal arguments and dialogues but also through gestures, genres, frames, versions, performances, stories, narratives and codes.

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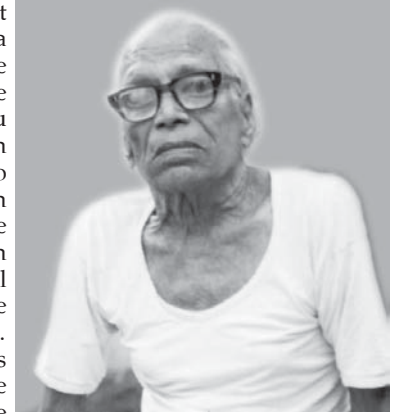
PURISAI KANNAPPA THAMBIAN: AN ARTIST WITH LONG WINGS*

VELI RANGARAJAN is Chennai based writer and theatre critic. He can be contact at rangarajan_bob@hotmail.com

After having lived a full and contented life, Purisai Kannappa Thambiran passed away recently on October 6, 2003 at the age of 92. A committed artiste who continued to perform Koothu roles till the age of eighty-two, he thereafter involved himself in direction, scripting and composition of songs till his last day. It is indeed rare to find such commitment. The contribution made to the Koothu tradition over last 150 years by six generations of the Thambiran descendants including Veerasamy Thambiran, Raghavan Thambiran, Natesa Thambiran, Kannappa Thambiran is immense and immeasurable. To the Thambirans go the credit for establishing Koothu with a kind of classical language style in the Thondai region. When one takes into account various "schools" of Koothu such as Kongu, Southern Tamil Nadu, Thanjavur (Nartthevankudikkadu, Archuthippattu) and Thondai (consisting of North Arcot and Chengalpattu districts), the contribution made by the Thambiran descendants to modernise and create a unique style of Koothu in the Thondai region will go into the annals of the history of theatre.

It was only after a connection was established between modern theatre artistes and Koothu artistes that the aesthetics of Koothu and the underlying worldview of rural people came to be appreciated and understood from a modern perspective. In that sense, the contributions of Venkat Swaminathan, Na. Muthusamy and Veerasamy are

involvement. In the meantime, although research on Purisai Koothu by E. Krishnaiyar and Shyamla brought artistes like Natesha Thambiran into the limelight, it cannot be denied that Koothu attained a new dimension only after it came to contact with modern theatre. It must be admitted that it is an important cultural exchange within the space of theatre. Muthusamy and his Koothu-p-Pattarai troupe played a significant role in making this exchange between Koothu and modern theatre possible.



If truth be told modern theatre may have benefited more from this exchanges. Importantly, modern theatre, which believed that the literary form of the text was drama, because of the involvement of Koothu, suddenly 'saw' theatre in a whole new way and there was a complete change in perception about the aesthetics of performance. Similarly, after participating in a theatre workshop held in 1978 at Gandhi Gram, Sambantham (Kannappa Thambiran's son) trained in and familiar with Thambiran's Koothu tradition, made thematic changes. Later other like Arumugam from the Koothu tradition, obtained a degree in Drama and enhanced the interaction between Koothu and modern theatre. In this respect, Koothu-p-Pattarai laid the foundation and worked as a driving force and as think-tank for this interaction.

This interaction between Koothu and modern theatre benefited not only the younger generation of Koothu artists like Sambantham, Kashi, Arumugam, but also the older generation such as Kannappa Thambiran, who after the age of 65, spent rest of his life exploring the possibilities of new perspectives, exhibiting his maturity as an artist. In this respect, writing the script and the songs for 'Panjali Sabadam' or scripting a Koothu performance out of Gabriel Marque's story the 'Old Man with Long Wings' in association with Columbia's Mapa Troupe is an evidence of how a real artist will never hesitate to participate in the current of art. The dialogue composition of the recently staged 'Kadothgajan Vatham' performance, under the guidance of Kannappa Thambiran, in which Sambantham had a leading role, was perfect, sharp and similar to modern texts. Without any formal training in Carnatic music, Kannappa Thambiran used many classical tunes in Koothu relying solely on his experience and music sense proving the richness of folk tradition. ...

He dreamed of establishing a school for Koothu. ... Some of his Koothu works are remain still as manuscripts.

* The article was originally published in *Uyirmmai* (November 2003, pp. 4-5) in Tamil. Translated by M. Ramakrishnan, NFSC.



Receiving the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award...

Courtesy: Purisai Kannappa Thambiran Troupe.

noteworthy. Particularly, Venkat Swaminathan's articles on the aesthetics of Koothu published in the Sangeet Natak Akademy's magazine drew national attention towards the Tamil folk arts. Moreover, the fieldwork carried out on Koothu and other folk forms by Richard Frasca and research students from Madurai Kamaraj University broadened this

The Tamil Nadu Eyal Isai Nataka Manram honoured Kannappa Thambiran in 1972 with the title of Kalaimamani. He has also received the Sangeet Natak Akademi Award in 1989.



S.A. Krishnaiah



KOGGA KAMATH: AN EMINENT PUPPETEER OF SOUTH INDIA

S.A. KRISHNAIAH is Chief Researcher at Regional Resources Centre for the Folk Performing Arts, M.G.M. College, Udupi. He can be contacted at mmusica@sancharnet.in / musica_2003@satyam.net.in.

Kogga Kamath, who passed away recently (27th August 2003) in his native village of Uppinakudru near Kundapur (Udupi District, Karnataka), was a great folk artiste, exponent and flag-bearer of puppetry tradition of Karnataka and he was India's number one marionette player. His contribution to the Kannada, Konkani folklore, particularly Yakshagana string puppetry in Karnataka can be remembered for centuries to come. The string puppets of Coastal Karnataka, a unique performance that has retained its popularity since sixteenth century, received a good support and appreciation from the people one of the reasons could be of the Kogga Kamath's Puppet Troupe. The Yakshagana puppetry performing art takes its content from the epics and *Bhagavatha Purana*. The essential tradition has remained but many features have been added to make the effect more spectacular. The string puppet or marionette play is a popular folk art form of Karnataka and the puppets play known as 'gombe aata'. The Coastal Karnataka marionette plays are highly stylised as far as the technique is concerned and the show runs like a theatre performance. The Kogga Kamath troupe of Uppinakudru in Kundapur region has played a major role in taking this form to the mass. As a veteran artiste with his stylised presentation, Kogga Kamath, who adhered strictly to the norms and standards of 'Yakshagana Bayalata' (Folk Theatre of Coastal Karnataka), is always synonymous with the string puppetry of Coastal Karnataka. With his proficient skills, he always thought the art form in terms of new vision and worked hard for the development of the performance within the traditional perspective. He has proved that his unseen hands can create a miracle while presenting different mythological stories and teaching the thousands of audience with the simple media puppetry. With his performance excellence – powerful and mesmerising dialogue, he safeguarded the Yakshagana puppetry art throughout his life.



Kogga Kamath's son, Bhaskar Kamath receiving the Prof. Haridasa Bhat Memorial Award

Kogga Kamath was born in a poor family and he was not able to continue his education after the fifth standard because of the poverty. He went to Bombay where he worked as a cook, bookseller, and server in a hotel till he came back as his father was ill. He had to take up a small job in a tile factory at Kundapur besides his assistance to his father in his puppet performances. With the help of Kamala Devi Chattopadhyaya, President of Handicrafts Board, he continued to perform the traditional art of puppetry besides his job in the tile factory. He married Lakshmi Devi in 1942 and had four daughters and one son. She encouraged him in his performances till her last breath in August 26, 2001. Like his father, Devanna Kamath (1888-1971), he also



Prof. K.S. Haridasa Bhat Memorial Award function...

introduced the Yakshagana puppet theatre tradition in foreign countries. Notably, he has inherited this magnificent art from his father Devanna Kamath, who was the recipient of President Award in 1966. Kogga Kamath was a recipient of a National Award from the Sangeeth Natak Akademy, New Delhi, the 'Tulasi Samman' award by Madhya Pradesh Government, and Kannada Rajyotsava Award from the Government of Karnataka. He has also been honoured by a number of non-profit organisations. National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC), Chennai has also honoured him with its first Prof. K.S. Haridasa Bhat Memorial Award for distinguished Kannada folk artist at a public function organised under the auspicious of Regional Resources Centre on August 21, 2003 at M.G.M. College, Udupi.

While continuing with the tradition got from his grandfather and father, Bhaskar Kogga Kamath, son of Kogga Kamath, is presently developing new staging and performing techniques to broaden the appeal of *Yakshagana Gombeyata*. Bhaskar Kogga Kamath can be contacted at:

Sri Ganesha Yakshagana Gombeyata Mandali / Uppinakudru
Sri Devanna Padmanahba Kamath Memorial Yakshagana
Gombeyata, Uppinakudru – 576 230.
Kundapur Taluk, Udupi District, Karnataka (India).
Tel: 91- 825 - 721402 (R)/ 720757(O)

"These are magnificent puppets – beautifully designed, made with activity of great craftsman, the designs, constructions and painting-all shows the love and awareness of the true artist. I am very impressed. I hope to learn from such a great Artist and Guru as Sri Kogga Kamath."

PROF. MELVIN HELSTIEN, Department of Theatre Arts, University of California (USA)



Molly Kaushal

KRISHNA'S PLAY – AN ENACTMENT FOR THE MANIFESTION OF LOVE

Celebrating Krishna by Shrivatsa Goswami, (Photographs by Robyn Beeche) (Vrindavan: Sri Chitanya Prema Samsthana Gambhira/Sri Radharamana Vrindavan, 2001, pages 243, ISBN 81-901381-0-3)

(MOLLY KAUSHAL is Associate Professor at Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi. She can be contacted at mollykaushal@yahoo.com.)

It is a sheer joy to behold the book, *Celebrating Krishna*, brought out by the Harvard returned scholar, Head of the Vaishnava Sect in Vrindavan, Shrivatsa Goswami and the accomplished photographer Robyn Beeche. The book celebrates Vraja, and the way of life of the inhabitants of Vraja, the devotees of Krishna and Radha in whose hearts Radha Raman resides and through whom he continues to play his *lila* and enchant the world.

Stretching 240 km between Delhi and Agra, the Vraja of which the book writes about is not just a physical entity, but Vraja that Krishna chose as his playground. He came to Vraja 'to play and play and play' 'fully with his creation, and humanity...' and 'in the centre of that creation' to forge a 'complete relationship with humanity.' The author poses the question, 'Why did Krishna select Vraja?' and provides the answer, 'Krishna's incarnation in Vrindavan is a fulfilment, in which the divine enjoys himself without the restraints of divinity....'

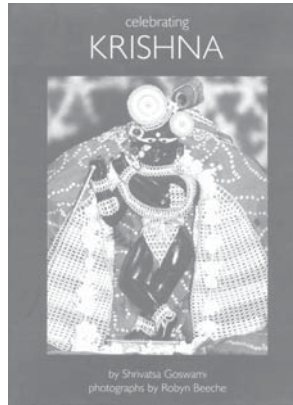
In the year 1515 Shri Chaitanya rediscovers Vraja and recreates the Vrindavan. Of this visitor from Jagannath Puri and of this act of rediscovery the author writes that 'a peculiar *lila*, since for Shri Chaitanya it was a journey into his own past as Radha and Krishna.' The book traces historically the sojourn of Shri Chaitanya and his team and later effects of Vallabhacharya, Hit Harivansha, Swami Haridas and other Acharayas and Vaishnava saints. It narrates various episodes, events and happenings that were responsible for transforming the Vraja into a sacred place; making it the epitome of spiritual movement in the sixteenth century; and establishing it as the fountain head of universal love. Here even a single speck of dust becomes manifestation of Krishna. The Author details the processes that transform physicality of Vraja into a vibrating, throbbing energy centre of divinity. The act of recreation of Vraja and re-enactment of Krishna's *lila* forever transforms the Vraja into the abode of Lord Krishna, where he dwells and plays eternally. Thus, the *Celebrating Krishna* is not about sacred geography alone. Told in the distinct Indian style of *katha vachana*, it combines myth and history, geography and pilgrimage, ritual and festival, dance-drama and poetry, temple and icon. In fact, it combines all the tangible and intangible aspects of culture to weave a narrative that guides the reader through the lanes and by lanes of Vraja, allowing him to explore its inner and outer landscape and the rhythms of the 'Ras' in the lives of the Vrajasis

The history of the establishment of Vaishnava Sect in the region and its gradual transformation into a sacred centre is told in a manner that captures aspects of *shruti* and *darshan* through telling the tales of Krishna's escapades with the skilfulness of a *katha vachak*. Beautifully translated poetry and the sheer magnificent and stunning quality of the photographs instantly transport the reader to Vrindavan, where Krishna's life and the lives of devotees intermingle and merge into each other. There is no space for doubt here; faith, devotion and love alone guarantee an entrance into this enchanting realm of the Lord.

Krishna manifests himself as Govind Dev, Gopinath and Madan Mohan, but as the author puts it "For the absolute manifestation of the Absolute, the world had to wait for the year 1542 for the self manifestation of Radha Raman, when not only did the dark Lord manifest as he is but carried his beloved Radha inside his heart. This darling of Radha again became manifest in the place of a *shaligram*, to give ecstasy to every one in Vrindavan." (p.28). This joy, this ecstasy of beholding the Lord in all his beauty and splendour is recaptured for the connoisseur by Robyn Beeche's discerning eye for beauty and detail. The play of light and shade bring imparting a translucent glow, the riotous colours of Holi and the frenzied joy of the players leaves the viewer spellbound and speechless.

The book is also about the people of Vraja, the Vrajasis and their life. In their memory and act, in their body and heart Krishna resides forever. They play the *lila* of the Lord for the Lord himself. While tracing the path of the Lord through the pilgrimage circuit or *vanayatra*, the devotees demonstrate that 'the dweller and the dwelling are one and something. The entire *darshan* is Krishna *darshan*, because the Vraja *mandal*, with its forests, is the body of Krishna himself' and 'he lives in the temples and he dances in the Raslilas.' Vrajasis not only visit the various houses of Krishna, but also lovingly serve him and celebrate him on 'eternal and daily basis.' This unique theatre of Vraja, enacted in daily life of the Vrajasis, in their *lilas*, prayers, worship, rituals, songs, dances, ornamentation and decoration, in their festivals and *yatras*, obliterates all distinctions between the divine and the human, between the actor and the audience, between man and nature by the overpowering presence of 'Prem' love sustained through the process of *seva bhakti* service.

Finally, as put by the author himself, "[t]hese pages narrate those stories. These pages unveil that face of the Dark Handsome Lord. For those in love, seeing the beloved and hearing about him is the greatest celebration. It is an attempt to narrate his *Katha* as heard and as seen. This story shall continue..." (p.237). The story that is told is full of *rasa*, aesthetic ecstasy, *bhava*, emotional identification with the deity, and *prema* – overpowering love for the deity and is rendered as an offering, encapsulating the intensity of Vaishnava *bhakti* towards the deity.

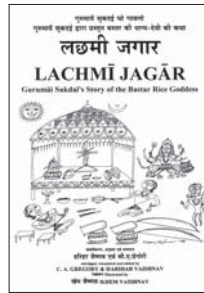




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 Delhi, New Delhi: IGNC A & Motilal Banarsidas Publishers
 2002, pages xxxii + 476 Rs. 1000
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 Bhubaneswar:
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 2002, pages 206
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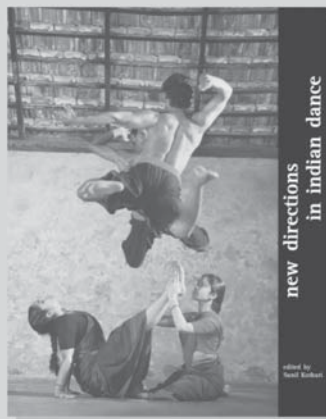


LACHMI JAGAR: Gurumai Sukdai's Story of the Bastar Rice Goddess
 C.A. Gregory & Harihar Vaishnav
 Kondagaon(Chhattisgarh):
 Kaksad Publications
 2003, pages xviii + 147
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For over five decades, Komal Kothari has journeyed through Rajasthan exploring its rich cultural and musical traditions. Neither an old-fashioned seer nor a modern academician, he has developed an understanding of people's knowledge systems in a manner that is uniquely his own. In this book, Rustom Bharucha attempts to map his vast experience of the desert, drawing on extended and freewheeling conversations with Kothari.

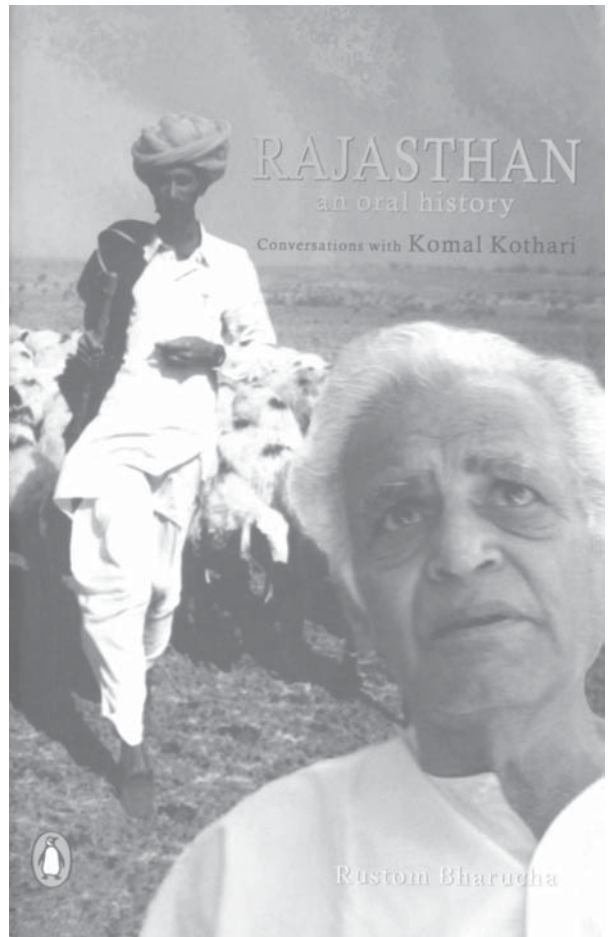
Weaving in and out of several contexts, Kothari's interconnected reflections on land, water, agriculture, irrigation, livestock, sati and shrines supplement his observations on musical and performance traditions—puppetry, Terātāli, and the folk songs of the Langas and Manganiyars. Geography colours the chants and vocal improvisations of nomads, and agriculture is embedded in the performative rituals of pastoral communities. Also discussed here are the intellectual property rights of folk musicians in an electronic age, and the challenge of globalisation. The outcome of this process of recording India's master folklorist itself becomes a history, in its frame, texture and timbre.

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RAJASTHAN: AN ORAL HISTORY Conversations with Komal Kothari

by Rustom Bharucha

New Delhi: Penguin Books, 2003
pages x + 358. Paperback: Rs.325



ISBN 0-14-302959-2

The book is available for review; the potential reviewer can contact the Editor, *Indian Folklife*.

Rajasthan
A Musical Journey

This CD supplements Rustom Bharucha's book
'Rajasthan - An Oral History : Conversations with Komal Kothari'
published by Penguin India, 2003.

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