

**SOUMEN SEN**

**Folklore  
in  
NORTH EAST  
INDIA**

North-East India is a confluence of people, popularly described as tribals, living in different stages of under-development and, in most cases, without a written history of their own. The region provides vast folklore material which, if studied systematically and scientifically, may help building up the history of different social groups residing here.

The present volume is a collection of papers presented to a seminar on Folklore in North East India organized at Shillong in November, 1982 by the North East India Council for Social Science Research.

Eminent social scientists and experienced folklorists presented papers in the seminar and it can legitimately be hoped that the volume will generate interest among the folklorists and researchers in social sciences working and interested in this region.

The editor of this volume, Dr. Soumen Sen, teaches Political science in Shillong College, Shillong, and has got his Ph.D. degree on a study of the social and political contents of the folklore of the Khasi-Jaintia Hills of Meghalaya. Dr. Sen is a member of the Governing Body of the North-East India Council for Social Science Research.

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# FOLKLORE IN NORTH-EAST INDIA



*Edited by*  
**SOUMEN SEN**

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## PREFACE

North-East India Council for Social Science Research in collaboration with University of Gauhati held in November, 1982 a seminar on Folklore in North-East India in its effort to study scientifically and systematically oral history of different social groups of the plural society of the North-East. Folklores portray the culture of the people, their beliefs, customs, their history and hopes.

We were very much encouraged in our work by the scholars from different regions. The University of Gauhati, its Vice-Chancellor Dr. J. M. Choudhury, the Department of Folklore Research of Gauhati University, its Head Dr. Birendranath Datta, an eminent Folklorist by his own right, Central Institute of Indian Languages, Mysore and among others the Doyen of the Folklorists of North-East India, Prof. Prophulladatta Goswami came forward and helped us in this work. We are grateful to Dr. J. M. Choudhury, Vice-Chancellor, Gauhati University who inaugurated the seminar, Rev. Brother M. G. Shannon, Principal, St. Edmund's College, Shillong, Dr. Birendranath Datta, Dr. P. Goswami, Dr. S. K. Barpujari and other scholars who generously extended their support to us.

Dr. Soumen Sen who has been associated with NEICSSR from its inception and an eminent folklorist has kindly edited the papers for publication in this volume. We thank him for it. We also thank Mr. Ramesh Kumar and Western Book Depot, Gauhati for undertaking the printing of this book.

Shillong,  
12 March 1984

B. Datta Ray  
Secretary

North-East India Council for  
Social Science Research

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Folklore represents the archaic thought of mankind, their feelings and world-view. It articulates a culture and provides a part of the historical picture of the bygone ages. This is, however, a generalized approach to the study of folklore and its use. It is agreed that there are many aspects of folklore which are as wide a life itself. So appears the urgency of delimitation and that is why there is much disagreement about the definition and scope of folklore. Because of this disagreement it is yet to emerge as a distinct discipline and the vast material spread over the world has hardly been exposed to scientific analysis. What is more, there has been, and still is, a tendency to take folklore as only oral literature or verbal art thereby robbing it of its *clan vital*, that is, its historical potential. Of late, however, writers have started discovering the insufficiency of defining it as 'literature orally transmitted and the method of studying that literature' and found (as observed by Francis Lee Utley in 1968) that such an operational definition 'may play havoc with the general field of folklore studies', although may be useful for specialized study. Folklorists should, therefore, value all those expressions of folk-culture such as oral literature, dance, crafts, customs and beliefs and reckon them as social phenomenon and as 'the shared experience and wisdom' of social group which can be used and analysed fruitfully to explain social formations. And, this explanation may lead to the discovery of a people's history.

In this sense the Indian equivalent of folklore, *lokayana*, coined by Suniti Kumar Chatterji, expresses the real scope of folklore as it signifies a way of life (*yana*) of a people (*loka*). The area of folklore is, therefore, circumscribed by a pedagogical motive of adjusting the members of a social group to the

needs of the group. Folklore thus ultimately becomes the means of expression of a group's own attitudes and cultural life. The civilization of a people being a movement from unconscious to conscious, it is obvious that their beliefs and customs would be didactic with an end of adjusting man to his immediate surroundings for a leap forward to his future.

Talking of folklore in this vein, most of the folklorists in recent years appear to be in agreement in accepting its historical potential. Being the result of the working of imagination upon the facts of collective experience of a social group it often provides the material for history without being the direct evidence of history. There lies the importance of folklore studies.

This function of folklore becomes all the more important in a region of India called the north-east. Being a confluence of people, popularly described as tribals, living in different stages of underdevelopment, and in most of the cases without a written history of their own in the absence of those materials including written literature on which historiographers are used to depend conventionally, the region provides vast folklore material which, if studied systematically and scientifically, may help building up the history of these people.

And, with this end in view, the North-East India Council for Social Science Research organized at Shillong in November 1982 a seminar on Folklore in North-East India. The present volume is a collection of papers presented to that seminar. The contents of the volume show that all the states and union territories of the region and wide range of aspects have been covered. If the number of papers on one or two areas are more than those on other areas, the reason is either simply the dearth of experienced folklorists to deal with the diverse aspects of folklore or that the organisers, with their limited resources, could not tap in time all those working in different states. The editor hopes that this imbalance will not in any way minimize the importance of a more or less appropriate coverage. More so, when the task was undertaken by experienced folklorists and eminent social scientists. This is the reason why the editor did not make any attempt to introduce the papers to the readers. Each paper goes by its own merit. If can, therefore, be

legitimately hoped that the volume will generate interest among the folklorists and researchers in social sciences working and interested in this region.

The editor is thankful to the Governing Body of the North-East India Council for Social Science Research for asking him to edit this volume and particularly to its Secretary, Dr. B. Datta Ray, whose all out support made the task easier.

SOUMEN SEN

## CONTENTS

Editor's Note/vii

*Introductory*

Jawaharlal Handoo—Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction/1

*Arunachal Pradesh*

J N Chowdhury—Basic pattern in Myth-Making: Myths of Arunachal Tribes/17

P C Datta—Folk Stories associated with the Origin and Migration of the People of Tirap, Arunachal/27

A R Das and Surendra Pal—Folk Songs of Arunachal Pradesh/32

D N Pandey—Kebang: A Folk Tale of the Gallongs/43

*Nagaland*

P P Giridhar—Folk Literature as Critique of Culture/46

*Manipur*

Asok Kumar Ray—Thadou Folklore/54

*Assam*

Praphulladatta Goswami—Social Criticism in Assamese Tales/62

Nabinchandra Sarma—Folk Epic and its Impact on Early Assamese Literature/70

- Devajani Saikia—Some Folk Songs of a Tribal Community in the Urban Fringe of Gauhati/77
- Prabinchandra Das—Magic and Supernaturalism in Hajo/85
- B.N. Bordoloi—Masira Kohir: The Holiest Verse of the Karbis and its Significance/93
- Tarun Goswami—Rendezvous with a Dimasa Folk-melody and a Few Observations on Folk-music/97
- Parthasarathi Misra—Myths and Rituals of Dimasa-Kacharis of Assam/108
- A.S.M. Idrish Ali—Tiwa and Lalung : Two names of a Tribe and the Folklore connected with Them/113
- G.C. Sharma Thakur—Pu Son Lan : Folk Tradition of the Tai Phakes/121
- Sujit Chowdhry—The Eunuch Priesthood and Deity Daria: A Case Study/137
- Amalendu Bhattacharjee—Marriage Songs of the Bengalee Hindus of Cachar District of Assam/146
- J.B. Bhattacharjee—History and Folklore in the Context of Cachar valley/156
- Meghalaya*
- I.M. Simon—Some Common Themes in Khasi Oral Literature/159
- Soumen Sen—From a Legend to a Myth: Feudal Consolidation of Jaintia Kingdom/167
- D.N. Majumdar—The Story about the Origin of the Koches and their Migration to Garo Hills/183
- Mizoram*
- Lalruanga—Hero of Mizo Folktales/191
- Tripura*
- J. Gan Chaudhury—Tripuri Folktales/195

*Sikkim*

- Aparna Bhattacharya—Legends about the Origin and Migration of the Sikkim-Bhutias/202  
 P.B. Chakrabarty—Folklore of the Lepchas (Rong-Kup) of Sikkim/210

*General*

- Sunanda Ghosh—Socio-Economic Study of a Song/218  
 G.P. Singh—Folklore of North-East India: Some Historical Observations/224  
 N. C. Das—Weaving in the Folklore of North-East India/228

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At the time Thoms coined this term, it seems he had a very clear idea in his mind as to what he meant by folklore. This, however, does not mean that Thoms presented a definition of folklore in the manner we are attempting these days or in the manner we would have expected him to attempt one, keeping in view our present standards and controversies. But Thoms certainly had come of an itemized view of folklore in mind. His words and phrases such as 'manners', 'customs', 'observations', 'superstitions', 'ballads', 'proverbs', and 'neglected customs', 'fading legends', 'fragmentary ballads', etc., do present a rough outline as to what folklore meant to him. It also presents a picture of his increasing awareness of folklore, which was 'closely associated with nineteenth century intellectual currents of romanticism and nationalism' (Dundes, 1965 : 4).

William Thoms' contribution in coining and introducing the term 'folklore', as we realise it now, had two important consequences. In the first place it led to the establishment of an academic discipline known as folklore (or folkloristics) in many parts of the world. Secondly, it also generated a long and unending controversy, perhaps unknown in the history of any other disciplines of equal strength, about the definition and more often than not about what should and what should not be included under the gamut of this new field of learning.

Historically speaking, many new fields of inquiries, sometimes investigating similar data, were ushered into the area of cultural studies, almost under similar circumstances since Thoms coined the term 'folklore', with the result a variety of overlappings occurred in the sense that many disciplines began studying the same cultural phenomenon, and at times on identical lines. This led to controversies regarding the boundaries of each area. The inevitable result was that each discipline armed with the imperialistic concept of annexing as much as possible began trying to bring the other under its own umbrella. For example, since folk literature (text based ballads, epics, myths etc.) were being studied both by literary scholars representing the discipline of literature and folklorists, sometimes on similar lines and at times differently, folklore studies began to be considered a part of literary studies denying it the status of a separate

discipline, with its own distinct characteristics which it, rightfully deserved. (And in fact since folklore studies began much later than the establishment of strong departments of literature everywhere this trend continued and still continues in many developed countries of the world).<sup>6</sup> Similarly when non-literary artifacts of cultures were studied by folklorists, anthropologists behaved exactly in the manner scholars of literature had in the case of studies carried on text oriented folk literature. The real problem was, and still continues, that the data a folklorist normally studies falls within the provision of two or more disciplines and this generates controversy regarding the boundaries of the discipline in question. Moreover, each discipline at times was studying the same thing differently depending on the indigenous methods of the discipline concerned. Unlike pure sciences, such as physics or chemistry, where the concept of a molecule or atom may be studied by both and may in fact generate a similar theoretical attitude in both the sciences and both may as well study the same substance or a phenomenon in an identical manner and yet not cause any controversy, social scientists seem to be behaving differently. They do sometimes seem to recognize the fact on a purely theoretical level, that a given phenomenon needs to be studied by an united effort irrespective of the hard-to-define lines drawn between various disciplines, but when it comes to the practical handling of the data among various cultures, they seem to ignore this theoretical postulate. Folklore, unfortunately, has been a victim of these double standards.

Very few scholars seem to have realized that the links which connect folklore on the one hand with humanities and on the other with social sciences are so strong that ignoring them might not put only folklore studies but even those subjects that represent humanities and social sciences into jeopardy. While it seems necessary to draw a line, however thinner it might look between the areas of folkloristic studies and the areas that come under the gamut of related disciplines, at least for marking the boundaries of the discipline, the fact remains that folklore still concerns many disciplines, and will certainly be studied across disciplines and sometimes with entirely different perspec-

tives. For example, an anthropologist studying a given phenomenon of a culture, say kinship systems, almost always uses folklore data as supportive evidence to sustain his conclusions. Similarly a literary scholar tends to relate a literary piece or its certain aspects such as theme, etc., he studies, to an item or items of folklore. A historian, particularly in the present times when academic faith in written histories has begun to shake<sup>7</sup>, uses folkloric evidence for reconstructing the real history of the masses : known as 'oral history'. This kind of history writing is practised in communities or cultures who lack all forms of written documentation of their pasts. Obviously, the objective here too is to write the history and not study the folklore item for its own sake. Linguists or psychologist in the same manner use folklore data for their own purposes. Their main concern has primarily been, and rightly so, to study a given phenomenon in their own fields of inquires and use folklore data as supportive evidence whenever possible. A folklorist, on the contrary, studies a given item of folklore for its own sake and in doing so he relates the item to the culture as a whole. Thus in a way both types of scholars engage themselves more or less in a similar exercise. However, a real folklorist nevertheless uses his own techniques and methods to study an item of folklore. For example, a folklorist, if he is a narrative specialist, studies the structure, language, motifs or style of a narrative ; its problems of diffusion, dissemination, aspects of narration and the narrator, besides the factors other scholars sometimes study. It is precisely at this point that a folklorist's work becomes different than the work of a literary scholar, or a historian. That folklore items need the attention of such scholars as well, besides the folklorist himself, needs hardly to be emphasized. In a country like India this kind of collective attention gains more prominence in view of the fact that Indian folklore represents Indian heritage, Indian history and the complex Indian cultural system. This complexity is such that no folklorist can describe it correctly or interpret it accurately without the help of scholars representing other related disciplines.

Before commenting upon the concepts of material culture and folklife—a new demension added to traditional folklore

scholarship—it is important for a student of folklore to have a rough idea of what falls under folklore and what remains outside it.

Although it is difficult to suggest a ready-made framework in which folklore items of various cultures or nations can be fixed, yet there does exist an internationally accepted format which with a little modification, can be followed in respect of each culture or nation. This concept has been the guiding principle for collecting, indexing, archiving and above all for analysis of global folklore data. However, if a culture shows that the format does not suit its requirements, which theoretically speaking, seems very rare, then a new format needs to be devised. The point is that there is no known human society which does not possess folklore. All available evidence leads us to believe that all human societies have folktales, myths, folk songs, proverbs, riddles, ballads, epics, folk drama etc. Despite this universal trait, there however are certain genres which seem to be culture specific. For example, it has been noticed that some cultures are particularly rich in certain genres. It is well known that the fairy tale (*marchen*) is primarily a narrative genre of Indo-European peoples, which has diffused into other cultures and in the process also undergone some changes. The type of 'transformed' *marchen*, one finds among American Indians, Central and South-African cultures are the fine examples of diffusion. Similarly, based on my own observations, the Dravidian cultures of Southern India seem very rich in performing folk arts than their counterparts in the Northern parts of the country, who seem to have thrived in narrative forms. Moreover, it is also true that diffusion and diverse dissemination of folklore materials result in the mixing up of certain genres or in other words two or more genres may lose the distinction by which they could be separately recognized. This loss may be functional, structural or even both. I am told that in Tamil and Kanada, proverbs and riddles are in free variation in certain situations.

However, despite these problems of genre and analytical categories, folklore has been defined differently by different scholars.<sup>8</sup> These definitions not only define the folkloric pheno-

menon, but also try to list the genres which make this phenomenon. Naturally, as I said earlier, the controversies emerged and these as expected, centred around the same old problem trying to draw a line between cultural anthropology and folklore studies. Within these definitions and outside them in the wider academic circles—both of anthropology and of folklore—there was at least one thing on which, by and large, all seemed to agree and that was folk literature or to use Bascom's term "verbal arts".<sup>9</sup> Scholars generally seemed to be in agreement that verbal art of folk literature *is* folklore and is an independent area of inquiry different from cultural anthropology. But when it came to stretching the word folklore to include besides verbal arts or oral literature, material culture, social folk customs performing folk art etc., generally designated by the term folklife, the controversies became more evident. Scholars began suspecting that both the students of folklife and cultural anthropology might be finally studying the same subject matter with identical theoretical perspective and hardly differ in conclusion. However, the following remarks of Ward H. Goodenough, puts to rest such speculations :

"We are reaching a point when we can say that folklife represents that aspect of cultural anthropology which concentrates in the study of one's own national cultural heritage. When an American studies Japanese community, he is doing anthropology whereas his Japanese colleague is studying folklife. When a Japanese anthropologist studies an American community, he is doing anthropology, but an American working in the same community is studying folklife".<sup>10</sup>

One of the major differences between cultural anthropology and folklife studies is the manner in which the data is approached. A folklife specialist treats the data as his 'own'; looks at it from the viewpoint of his 'self' being a part of the phenomenon. Furthermore he also hesitates to treat this phenomenon as 'past', instead looks at it as a part of the present and not far from civilization, but a living aspect of his civilization.

These and other attitudes certainly change the dimensions of theoretical bias and folklore specialists begin thinking of their areas of inquiry as a living phenomenon with hopes, both for the present and the future.

Four broad sectors of folklore and folklife studies have been outlined by scholars.<sup>11</sup> These are (1) Oral Literature, (2) Material Culture, (3) Social Folk Custom and (4) Performing Folk Arts. Let us have a cursory examination of these four groups keeping in view the Indian conditions.

### Oral Literature

(Oral literature called verbal art or expressive literature are 'spoken, sung and voiced forms of traditional utterances'. Traditionally this has been known as folk literature as well. Oral narrative is one big sub-division of this group, which in turn has its own manifold distinctions. For example, myth, fairy tale or *marchen*, romantic tale or novella, religious tale, folk tale, legend, animal tale, anecdote, joke, numskull tale, etc., are the major forms of oral narrative genre. Each of these forms will have many sub-forms depending upon the culture in which the form or forms are available.) For example myths have many forms in India. Aetiological myths, for instance, are very common in India, and so are religious myths. Many of these ancient myths and the religious tales have been recorded in ancient works such as *Kathasaritsagar* etc. Similarly we have the world's best tradition of written animal tales as evidenced by famous *Panchatantra* and *Jatakas*. Legends too have many forms. The historical legends of Western India, particularly of Gujarat and Rajasthan are very famous. Mythical legends and religious tales of South India are also very well known.

(Another major sub-division is oral poetry or folk poetry. This too has its own family of related forms. For example, folk epics, ballads, folksongs, lullabies, work songs, and songs associated with ritual and rites (*Samakaras*), such as birth, marriage and death are commonly found in almost all parts of India. And so is the rich oral poetry connected with festive occasions, feasts and

ceremonies. *Holi, Dipavali, Pongal, Onam, Durgapuja* and *Baisakhi* are well known festivals of the country.

Proverbs and riddles are also an important part of oral literature. Unlike prose narrative forms and oral poetry, proverbs and riddles do not show repetitive patterns, but are highly structured set forms of oral literature. While proverbs and proverbial expressions have, due to reasons of their important communicative function formed an inseparable part of the written literatures throughout the world, riddles have stayed in folk-life and still function in folk societies as important devices for imparting knowledge about cultural semantics, logical paradings and behaviourable patterns among the younger members of such societies. Many collections of proverbs and riddles in various Indian languages have appeared now.

Folk speech "embraces the local and regional turns of phrase that deviate from the standard language"<sup>12</sup> which is usually taught in schools in a formal manner. One of the main characteristics of folk speech is that it is more restricted to oral circulation. Within the total vocabulary of every speaker there are a large number of words that he never writes and seldom uses in formal situations. These words or expressions may be taboo words or expressions or they may be a kind of passive vocabulary. Furthermore, these characteristics of folk speech are not only limited to vocabulary but these exist at the level of grammar, idiom, and even phonetics. For example, slang in this respect is folk speech. India abounds in language diversity and therefore, the potential of folk speech research is great in this land. Besides these major forms of oral literature, there are minor forms which also come under the above category. These are chants, prayers, laments and cries.

### Material Culture

In contrast to verbal art or oral folklore physical folklore is generally called material culture. According to Dorson, "material culture responds to techniques, skills, recipes, and formulas transmitted across the generations and subject to the same forces of conservative tradition and individual variation as verbal

art".<sup>13</sup> This aspect of folklore and folklife is visible rather than the aural. The kind of questions that concern a student of material culture are varied. He might want to know how men and women in tradition-bound societies construct their homes following the traditional norms of folk architecture. He might as well want to know how people in traditional societies "make their clothes, prepare their food, farm and fish, process the earth's bounty, fashion their tools and implement and design their furniture and utensils".<sup>14</sup> A student of material culture knows that this kind of folk behaviour existed prior to and continues alongside mechanized industry and therefore, he might also compare the two traditions—the folk and the modern—and try to establish correlations. For examples, a student of folk architecture may discern certain patterns in the overall folk architecture of a given folk culture area and then find their modified improved versions in the modern present-day architectural styles of the same region, thereby proving the continuity of folk designs in the modern urban civilization. By similar endeavour, he might come up with similar results as regards food, tools, methods of agricultural production etc. In India, most of such work is done by cultural anthropologists although admittedly not from the same viewpoint a folklife expert would have done. For instance, despite this massive anthropological effort very little has been done in the area of folk architecture and folk food. A real folklife study in India will make some impact on the Indian folklore scholarship when we have books and specialized papers on the fishermen of coastal Kerala, carpet making of Mirzapur, the Patas of Midanpur, the pottery and toy-making of Assam, and dyers and quilt-makers of Rajasthan, the agricultural tools and bullock carts fashioned by Gadia Lohars, the boat-makers of Kashmir, the huts of high altitude living Gojars, the ox-rearers of Haryana, the silk weavers of Sambalpur and the basket making crafts of Meithis and Thangkul Nagas of Manipur.

One of the most fascinating and interesting aspects of the material culture of the Indian folks is their arts and crafts. These arts have followed a definite continuity in the history of folk arts of this country. Yet these arts have not received the

attention they deserve and are still in a state of neglect. Folk arts in India have a vast range of forms, diversity and function. The decorative paintings on the walls and entrances of rural homes, having both ritualistic and aesthetic significance is a pan Indian phenomenon. Although the motifs of such paintings might vary from one region to another or from one folk culture zone to another, the structural unity, by and large remains the same. For instance, the snake and sparrow motifs are predominant in South and East coast; and animal, tree and flower motifs seem very common in northern plains. The ritualistic *Rangoli*, the *Mehndi* decorations on bride's hands, the *Thapa* of festive occasions are some of the best examples of this kind of folk art in India.

### Social Folk Custom

Another important area of folklore and folklife, very close to material culture, is the field of social custom. "Here the emphasis is on group interaction rather than on individual skills and performances".<sup>15</sup>

Investigations in this area are more concerned with the family and community observances of the people living in village, tribal belts and even industrial areas of Indian cities. Of particular importance are the *rites de passage* such as birth, initiation marriage, death and similar rites. These rites as is well known, have special significance in Hindu life and therefore, studying them and similar rites in other communities forms a well-spread field.

Similarly, the ritual and custom associated with the festivals also form an important segment of social folk custom. Most of the festivals in our country are embedded with agricultural activity and therefore follow a calendrical cycle. Moreover, these folk customs are closely associated with religious practices and the concept of Indian world view. For example, there are thousands of customs and ritualistic practices being observed by Indian village folks for the sake of rains, agricultural prosperity and for warding off natural calamities such as floods,

famines, etc. Among tribal populations such practices are more common.

The religious aspect of social folk custom in India is multi-dimensional and highly complex. This aspect also encompasses the most complex caste hierarchy we have in our society and the world has ever known. This also concerns the network of inter-relations the caste hierarchy has with the religious hierarchy. For example, besides the by and large pan-Indian mode of worshipping the Hindu pantheon, there are other modes of worship in India which seem to be vary ancient and are still practised, by a sizeable population. Despite intense acculturation between the established pan-Indian tradition and the local or regional traditions one finds elements which are distinguishable from the other. The *Bhuta* and *Teyyam* worship in the South-West coastal India is a good example to show the process of acculturation and the survival of local traditions.<sup>16</sup> Similarly the religious practices of many tribal groups of the country who did not maintain close contact with the established mainstream religious systems also shows maintenance of indigenous modes of worship which have obviously been preserved carefully.

### **Performing Folk Art**

The fourth and the last sector of folklore and folklife studies may be designated as the performing folk arts. This sector concerns primarily traditional music, drama, and dance. One of the most important areas of this sector is the traditional music which is "passed on by ear and performed by memory rather than by the written and printed musical core".<sup>17</sup> Besides, having its limited independent place in the genre of performing arts, traditional music, as we are aware, usually crosses the generic barriers and forms part of many other genres. For example, folk dance, folk drama, dance-drama, oral poetry, ritual and prayers always carry some amount of music with them.

Folk music more often than not is confused with popular music. Avoiding the pitfalls of controversy about "folk" and "non folk", suffice it to say here that "folk music and popular music are not synonymous terms although as forms they share

common traits. Popular music may or may not be transmitted by the musical score. It is often varied in performance and at times is improvisatory in nature. Popular music, however, is generally an ephemeral commercial product intended for mass consumption rather than a tradition known and practiced in a restricted area or by a sub culture.<sup>18</sup> However in India, cities and villages have always been in contact and popular and folk music have influenced each other. Folk music has not only influenced popular music in India but also some of the classical forms of music.

For the sake of theoretical purposes also traditional music of India has a hidden potential. In fact it can, perhaps, answer many complex questions ethno-musicologists have been facing not only in respect of Indian traditional musical systems but of the entire South Asian musical phenomenon. For example, there seems a kind of inbuilt categories in Indian folk music which might answer the problem of genres scholars find hard to explain in this kind of folkloric phenomenon. Traditional musical systems and associated dance forms have generic names. *Kajri*, *Lila*, *Phag*, *Bhajans*, *Jhumars*, etc., are not mere names of folk tunes but folk categories denoting genres and their complex relations. In a way they look simple ; but in reality they represent complex phenomena.

Of equal importance are the traditional musical instruments of this land. In fact particular kind of folk music is at times identifiable by its instruments only. Just as a tale or a folk-song is passed from one generation to another by word of mouth so is the instrument and its kind of music passed on from one generation to another by ear and memory. The impact of instruments on folk music in India as elsewhere, is so strong that many kinds of folk traditions are known by the name of the instrument or instruments. For example' *Ladisah* of Kashmir, *Pena* of Manipur, *Kamsale* of Karnataka are not only the names of instruments, but strong folk musical traditions.

A similar situation exists when we talk of folk dances and the highly sophisticated classical dance forms of India. That they have not only influenced each other, but have in fact nourished each other, is a fact that hardly needs emphasis. "In the

Indian sub-continent. . . dance forms. . . have survived, whose origins can be traced back to pre-historic times ; new forms have grown up in other places ; the bouyant tenacity with which they have continued in spite of may momentous historical, sociological changes presents a bewilderingly rich and complex phenomenon".<sup>19</sup>

Folklorists who specialize in performing folk arts of India, particularly dance forms, are sure to face the problem of classical and non-classical traditions. The success of a skilled folklorist does not lie in wasting his energies in drawing lines between folk and non-folk traditions, which however do not seem to exist, or even if they do they are in such ever-changing and floating condition that it could be a kind of deceptive illusion to claim that one can hold on to such lines ; but in viewing the entire phenomenon of continuities, of changes, of mutation, and transformations, for these are so essential for a living civilization that India is.<sup>20</sup>

Like folk music, the area of Indian folk dances is also very vast. Most of the time they go together and share many important characteristics. Furthermore, these art forms not only require the keen eye of an expert as far as the ear and action is concerned, they also need equal attention for the constumes, stage instruments, the audience and the overall interaction of all these aspects which are essential for the totality of the performance.

Dance has a special status in the daily lives of our tribal people. These dances retain their originality, simplicity and spontaneity, be it *Kimbu* or *Zeling* of the Nagas, *Laho* of the Jaintias, *Wangala* of the Garos, *Dimasa* of the Kacharis, or *Lai Haraba* of Meithis. When one studies these dance forms one does not fail to notice that there is no conflict between the classical and the folk forms, for every form in the tribal content is at once both classical and the folk.

Folk drama is another important field in the performing folk arts sector. Drama in folk communities has been little discussed by folklorists primarily because it has not often been regarded as a folk genre. And even when it has been so designated it has commonly been discussed as a part of performance

types in festivals and rituals.<sup>21</sup> However, in recent years more folkloristic work on South Asian data had widened the scope of studying folk drama and has also helped the theoretical growth in both anthropology and folkloristics, so much so that anthropologists like Peacock believe that semantic aspects of cultural change and the cosmological categories of human societies can be accurately deciphered through drama and more particularly through folk drama.<sup>22</sup> Needless to mention here that folk drama's special characteristic is that it differs from the written, sophisticated drama in performance-audience relationship and also in mode of transmission.

The traditions of Indian folk drama are ancient and vast. Most of the forms of folk drama, as said earlier, are associated with ritual and festival and have close affinity with music and dance. Some of these forms, as is well known, are movable and resemble the village drama of Africa<sup>23</sup> and yet many have fixed stages as one notices in the classical drama whose tradition is equally strong. Many fascinating forms of Indian music and dance are however linked with what is now being labelled as dance-drama and recognised as a kind of new genre, as it contains the elements of both the dance and the drama. For instance *Yaksagana* of Karnataka, *Kathakali* of Kerala, *Tamasha* of Maharashtra are some of the famous dance-drama forms of our country.

However, one has to be cautious in following these genre models developed primarily on western data. The Oriental, particularly Indian folk drama almost always carries the element of dance and music within it so much so that it is impossible to draw a line between the dance, the music or the drama part of it. It is in view of this fact that I suggest that Indian folkloric phenomena, particularly the phenomenon of performing folk arts need to be viewed holistically instead of fixing it in an *a priori* western genre-model. The elements of dance and drama seem in fact a fundamental characteristic of South Asian drama and needs a different treatment given so far.



## FOLKLORE AND FOLKLIFE

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3. For a scholarly appreciation of Thoms' letter it is better to read the letter in original as it has been reproduced in Alan Dundes' *The Study of Folklore*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J. (1965), p. 4. rather than depending on second-hand information.
4. See Alan Dundes' comment on Thoms' letter in *The Study of Folklore*, pp. 4-5
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