




Research Article

Rediscovering the Importance of Folk Narratives

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Abstract	Manuscript Information
<p>This article critically examines the enduring significance of folk narratives in the context of modern Indian literature. It explores how oral traditions—including myths, legends, folktales, and ritual stories—have long served as foundational sources of storytelling within Indian culture. The paper emphasizes that folk narratives are not only cultural artifacts but also active contributors to literary and social consciousness, evolving through oral tradition and later influencing written literature. Through references to key thinkers such as A.K. Ramanujan, Stith Thompson, and Bhalchandra Nemade, the study underscores the dynamic relationship between oral and written forms of literature. It highlights the integration of folk motifs by eminent literary figures such as Rabindranath Tagore and Girish Karnad. The article also explores the theoretical dimensions of mythology and its close ties with folktales, stressing their role in preserving and transforming socio-cultural values across time. In doing so, it argues for a renewed scholarly and cultural engagement with folk narratives as vital components of both heritage and contemporary literature.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ ISSN No: 2583-7397 ▪ Received: 16-01-2025 ▪ Accepted: 25-02-2025 ▪ Published: 27-02-2025 ▪ IJCRM: 4(1); 2025: 227-230 ▪ ©2025, All Rights Reserved ▪ Plagiarism Checked: Yes ▪ Peer Review Process: Yes
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INTRODUCTION

The present study is an attempt to rediscover the importance of folk narratives in Modern Indian Literature in a comprehensive manner. A folk narrative is one of the important aspects of folk lore of India. Folk narrative as we understand is nothing but the stories that exist in oral form and emerge from the mouth of

the common folk in general. Folk narratives include myths, legends and folktales and so on. Basically, the village folks of India had a rich tradition of storytelling in their own groups to share their common beliefs and practices. This storytelling tradition of folk narratives continues to remain alive through generation to generation via oral tradition.

One cannot separate the term folklore from folktales as both are an integral part of all the cultures of the universe. Folktales are a subdivision of Folklore in a broader perspective. So far as the Folktales of India is concerned, it has a multiple diversity of its texture and thematic point of view. India is a land of many cultures based on religion, languages and geographic borders. Due to this diversity, we are lucky enough to be acquainted with a wide variety's folktales, enriching our cultural heritage. Jawaharlal Handoo talks in his forward of the book 'Current trends in folktales in the following manner: "Indian folklore is scattered in several languages which have a long history. It invites all attempts to define and categorize its richness and complexity. For the past few years, scholars, native as well as foreign, have done tremendous work in collecting this rich and varied material. But attempts to study and analyse these collected materials are of very recent origin. Since folklore is not recognized as an academic discipline to attain independent status in our universities, very few attempts are made to study folklore seriously. Therefore, the scientific growth of this subject naturally did not take place. Contribution of Indian folklore scholars to the theory of folklore is practically nil." (Handoo, forward).

Stith Thompson once said, "The essence of all folklore study is collecting and attempting to understand that which has been collected." Indian folk narrative takes its source of inspiration from different epics like 'Ramayana', 'Mahabharata', and 'Bhagvad Gita', and so on. Apart from that, some of the folktales are emerged from the religious or sacred texts like The Bible, The Vedas, Upanishads, Puranas, and The Quran, and so on. But basically, folktales descend from the oral tradition. That means Indian folktales are oral and have been passed from one generation to another, creating a bond of traditional values with the present-day generation. These folk tales were not written down, but existed only in the memory of mankind. It is only now, as the tradition of oral storytelling is giving way to books and television, that such tales are being collected and written down in different formats and become the source of inspiration for sophisticated or mainstream literature. It has a unique feature of its expansion from tradition to modernity as if it crosses the borders of tradition and modernity in a world view.

Folk narrative is simply the narratives of oral tradition or it may exist in different art forms, and that to lead by orally among the common folks, generally weaker section of people belonging to the remote village. Recently, we can notice the popularity of Folk narratives even in urban area due the influential and catchy work of the researchers from all over the world. Folk narratives have been translated in English as well. As a result, people from all over the world got the opportunity to be acquainted with Indian folk narratives comprehensively.

It is very much true that Folklore is one of the sub-streams of Indian literature by not giving a prominent position in main stream literature. But we can forget the fact that folklore is the mother of Literature of all Indian languages. If we observe the western literature, we can notice that some of the most prominent writer like Chinua Achebe, WB Yeats are influenced by Folk elements in their writings. Even in India, Rabindranath Tagore

was influenced by the folk culture of Bengal. Moreover, Girish Karnad's writings are not free from folk elements and myth. All his plays are literary excavations of the Indian collective past – the racial, mythical, legendary, and historical and they have a strong contemporary relevance. Karnad's Naga-Mandala is based on two oral tales from Karnataka as we know from what he says in his "Introduction" to Three Plays: ... "these tales are narrated by women- normally the older women in the family, while children are being fed in the evenings in the kitchen or being put to bed. The other adults present on these occasions are also women. Therefore, these tales, though directed at the children, often serve as a parallel system of communication among the women in the family."

The inexhaustible lore of myths, parables, and legends that constitute and determine our cultural heritage offers immense scope and source of elements for the Indian dramatists as Shastri says, "Myth, at all events, is raw material, which can be the stuff of literature". As Dhanavel says, the borrowed myths are "reinterpreted to fit pre-existing cultural emphasis." One of the most important influential works has been done by A.K. Ramanujan in the modern context. He collected one hundred and ten folktales from twenty-two different Indian languages and translated them into English to reach all the readers. His work is a tremendous attempt to reinvent the charming quality of the folktales of India. This is an enchanting collection of folktales that plays an important role in the field of folklore of India. It can be defined as a comparative folklore that was not discussed so much in India, and a somewhat new and fresh endeavour to enliven folktales in a broader perspective. These folktales are allegorical, mysterious, sardonic, romantic, and comical. So A.K. Ramanujan was very much selected for choosing these folktales belonging to all the regions and languages. Due to this selection, A.K. Ramanujan had shown the world's view of the folktales in a larger form. This collection of Folktales from India by A.K. Ramanujan is undoubtedly an indispensable source and guide to India's ageless folklore tradition.

It is interesting to note that some folklorists tried to find out the relation between oral traditions and written literature in the Indian context. So, from this prominent study, we could get a review of the inner relationship between oral and written literature. If we study the origin of literature, we could notice that oral literature is the mother of all written literature. We have oral literature before the introduction of the printing press and written equipment. Here lies the importance of oral literature in shaping and constructing the written form of literature. In the context of oral literature, Asutosh Bhattacharyya comments, "Literature, as is well known, reflects the age and society which produces it and, looking from the point of view of its development, oral literature is much older than a country's written literature. At a time when people used to live in integrated social groups, the oral literature of each community grew and developed. It is a product generally of the unlettered classes' community as a whole and not of any individual belonging to any particular community or group. It is generally believed that initially oral literature is the creation of an individual and in a process of re-creation and constant variation; it gradually becomes a group product. Oral literature

is, therefore, a community-recreated and oriented form of individual creation. It is the re-created form that thrives in the life of the unlettered mass of the country and not the original. Thus, the form in which it is first created loses its stream.” (107)

Even Bhalchandra Nemade's comments also reflect the inner relation of written and oral culture. “In the Indian literary tradition, a clear division can be said to have existed between written and oral cultures. Writing was by no means unfamiliar to the people, but oral culture was consciously encouraged for various social and political reasons, the chief being the fact that reading and writing were the privilege of the upper castes.”¹ But we don't have so many methods or theories as to combine literary theories and folklore studies with an aim to devise indigenous methods of folklore study in the Indian literary scenario to accumulate this problem of study on the Indian context. We need to formulate a combined literary as well as folkloristic method of research to cope with this problem of study. All these comments of the folklorists have shown ample evidence of the importance of oral culture on the written form of literature. To make this point clearer and more authentic, we can quote the comments of Bhattacharyya, “In fact, it served as a storehouse of ideas and themes for written literature and, after the progressive enrichment of written literature, developed as a parallel to it, keeping all its freshness and liveness. The key to the mystery behind this strange vitality of oral literature lies in the fact that it always re-creates and transforms itself. It never stands still anywhere or on any belief or theme.”(Bhattacharyya, 107)

Now I will discuss about mythology in detail. There are lots of theoretical definitions on mythology. According to Earnst Cassirer, “All mythology was essentially the theory and history of the gods.”² Here Earnst had pointed out that history of god and religion are associated with mythology basically. Another folklorist L. Radermacher opined that, “Mythology was the equivalent term under which classical scholarship during the nineteenth century spoke of Greek and Roman religion.”³ Radermacher views are mostly on Western context but still it is very much fruitful in case of Indian folklore of mythology. Indian mythology also reflects the true colour of classical scholarship of the ancient India by reflecting the old heritage of India that exists mostly in folklore. So mythology as a branch of folk narrative plays a connecting link in between tradition and modernity. This is just the continuation of traditional things like mythology in the realm of modernity.

Mythology and folktale is inter-related subject of study. According to Benedict “For the purposes of the study mythology can never be divorced from folktale, and that myths and folktales are to be distinguished only by the fact that myths are tales of the supernatural world.”⁴ Benedict's definition emphasis the supernatural element of myths and its association with the world

of mystery and supernatural forces that is not existing in nature or subject to explanation according to natural laws; or something i.e. not physical or material exponent to explain in words.

Stith Thompson's point is more vivid and clear on this regard, as he comments, “There is little agreement in the use of the term myth. But it certainly can be regarded as one branch of the folktale”.⁵ On the other hand, G.S. Kirk comments on folktales, “They (folktales) are traditional tales, of no firmly established form, in which supernatural elements are subsidiary; they are not primarily concerned with serious subjects or the reflections of deep problems and preoccupations, and their first appeal lies in their narrative interest”.⁶ In the case of folk narrative, the primary importance has been given to its narrative technique and proficiency.

Folk- tales belong to a special period of cultural development; they pre suppose and demand a certain state of mentality, when the critical powers are not as yet sufficiently developed, to prevent certain flights of imagination or the enjoyment of obvious impossibilities.⁷

India has a rich and glorious tradition of folktales, which form a major part of the oral tradition of this country. The late Rev. Lal Behari De has published a collection of folktales under the title Folktales of Bengal. Folktales can be classified under the following categories

1. Fairy tales.
2. Animal tales.
3. Ritual tales.

Whatever the themes of these tales, they are universal in their appeal and texture.

Legends in oral literature are narrative songs based on the achievements of national heroes or saints. There are rudiments of history in it, but due to the extravagance of imagination applied to them by the rural composers, the historical elements ultimately became secondary, and at times not discernible at all.

As UNESCO declared the art to be an integral part of the intangible heritage of mankind, which needs urgent notice to survive the world over, the ethos of storytelling, especially for children, entails the weaving of a glorious story down the path of history. As words travel through oral traditions and across geographical boundaries, it is more than the essence of mere stories that are carried further, with the very socio-cultural attributes, in due course of time, being rendered a touch of the adopted region. Above all, we cannot deny the importance of folk narrative in Modern Indian Literature. Modern literature is enriched by the essence of the folklore of India. Indian vernacular literatures are more influenced by it.

¹ Bhalchandra Nemade P. 60.

² Ernst Cassirer, 1995. Mythical Thought. Eng. Trans., New Heaven. P.15.

³ L. Radermacher. 1938. Mythos Und Sage bei den Griechen. Vienna and Leipzig. P.43.

⁴ Ruth Benedict, 1933. “The Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. Vol. XI, p.179.

⁵ Maria Leach. Ed. 1949-50. Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend. New York. Quoted Thompson's remark in the Folktale chapter.

⁶ G. S. Kirk, 190. Myth, Its Meaning and Functions in Ancient and Other Cultures. Cambridge University Press. p.37. (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles).

⁷ P.O. Boddington, Santal Folk Tales, Oslo, 1925-1929, p.44

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