

- Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal
- Index in NepJOL
- Permanently Archived in Portico



The Historicity of Food Habits as Imagined in the Folk Literature of Erstwhile Kalingo: A Study through the Folk Songs of Chati-Ghoda of Odisha and Bitiali of West Bengal

Dr. Sachidananda Panda¹ & Dr. Abhik Mukherjee²

¹ Associate Professor of English, XIM University, Bhubanaswar, India

² Asst. Professor of English, XIM University, Bhubanaswar, India

Corresponding Author: Dr. Sachidananda Panda, Email: sachidananda@xim.edu.in &
Dr. Abhik Mukherjee, Email: abhik@xim.edu.in

Copyright 2023 ©The Author(S). The publisher may reuse published articles with prior permission of the concerned author(s).

Abstract:

An effort to get a glimpse of a world-view can be seen through the prisms of rural folk music. They are not only a medium of entertainment for the rural masses, but also a reflection of the untainted rural society that has remained untouched by the humdrum of modernity even today. The rural people live by the age-old practises, beliefs, rituals, and wisdom of traditional knowledge. This paper aims to reproduce the concept of folk music and its typical characteristics, replete with nuances of those pearls of wisdom, that have remained a guiding force for the country people for generations, and how folk music, other than being the prime source of entertainment, is a storehouse of knowledge about the customs, food habits, rituals, and other social behaviours that resonate with the life and living of the populace. This will also highlight some of the extensive citations from the available oral traditions of music.

Keywords: Folk Song, Food, Heritage, Historicity, Tradition

Introduction:

Music as a derivative of traditional culture is called “folk music”. All sorts of musical content, either oral or written, representing a particular community, region, or society all across the world can be brought under the same category. They carry a standard message that has been passed down orally for generations, even though they are found in written form in isolated cases, either their composer remains unidentified, or they have been performed for a long period of time according to custom. A folk song signifies different types of music. The term has different meanings depending on the region of the world, social class, or historical period. Its concept and utility vary by culture, but it is most useful as a label for types of music such as the *Baul*, *Ramprasadi*, *Bhatiali*,

etc. of West Bengal and *Dasakathia*, *Danda Nata*, *Palaa*, and *Ghodanacha* songs so far as eastern parts of India are concerned, besides other parts of the Northeast, and that amounts to Indian folk music. If we look at the global picture, we may find African folk, European folk songs, Afgan *Sufi* culture, *Kawali*, or Nigerian *Julu* songs to be some of the prominent categories.

Folk songs describe the rich beauty of nature, the chirping of birds, the murmur of the spring, and the silence of the forest. It tells simple stories about the joys and sorrows of everyday life. Popular literature, such as folk music, will not rise with the flight of thoughts. It may not have the flashiness of classical music with its embellishments or elaborations. But deep down, there is the music of pure joy. Also, a poet who can write songs about the daily life of a village with rhymes, in reality, gives a voice to the inarticulate common mass.

Folk songs have unique characteristics that distinguish them from songs in the modern world. Its characteristics are, as Mahapatra argues, the “peculiarity of the song is that it lacks the author’s style, personality, and idiosyncrasies that characterize high social literature. Folk songs are therefore the expression of a simple spirit with primitive impulses and the creation of a society with diverse life activities” (156).

Historicity:

The earliest records of Indian folk music are found in Vedic texts that date back to 1500 BC. Some scholars believe that Indian folk music may be as old as the country itself. For example, “*Pandavani*,” a piece of popular music in most of central India, is considered as old as the “*Hindu*” epic “*Mahabharata*”. This interest is supported by the fact that the *Pandavani* theme is associated with one of the five brothers [Madhyama Pandava], “*Bhima*”, the key character of the *Mahabharata*. The theme of “*Pandavani*” has been the same for centuries! Over time, we find, as Manik Raha states that “folk songs were widely used for entertainment and to celebrate special occasions such as weddings, births, festivals, etc. Folk songs are also used to pass important information from one generation to the next. This shows that these songs will have played an important role before arriving on paper in India.”

Since there was no reliable resource to store ancient documents, transmitting important information through song has been more viable as a medium than anything else. Thus, folk songs are respected by local people not because they provide entertainment, but because they present important information that can be used in the daily lives of the common masses. The Irony of the matter is that - humanity has moved from a “collective goal” to a “self-goal”. The collective consciousness commands unity and brotherhood; in earlier days, it was natural for country dwellers to work together and eat together, in groups. It is a time when we thought the world was an opportunity for us to live our lives, not our things, and hence, any piece of literature is meant to provide a prospect to express our views, opinions, and thoughts, but not our things. At a time when the concepts of “self” and “object” had not surfaced, the stuff that was created was not meant for any specific person or about a specific community but for the whole of humanity. Even its preservation becomes the responsibility of the collective and not of the individual.

Therefore, even if an artist disappears after creating a work of art, their writings, etc., continue to live as the property of the user. It hardly matters - who invented folk songs for all of us rather than the contents that imbibed the common mass for so many years as annals of education, entertainment, and wisdom, which are more important than the individual. All those pieces of literature are part and parcel of our daily routine. We seldom try to figure out who invented the beautiful maxim of timeless truth ingrained in those songs that can be heard in every community,

and that keeps us awestruck at how they have been successful in creating a common culture that is relevant today. Kulburgi states that the “[s]cholars of Folklore often call this the *law of no master*” (emphasis ours).

This may be hard to believe, but the folklore we find today, surrounding food, is created from the uncertainty and fear of scavenging. In an attempt to control their destiny, people created many magic tricks, which are believed to increase the food supply. Customs and beliefs never lagged in promoting and serving as patrons in creating a space, and in incorporating different food habits of the populace, as per season, environment, and time, there always remained a kind of “popular logic” explained behind the claims they made, a philosophy of epidemiology and health and hygiene. This “logic” extends to certain practices such as preparing food, eating it on certain days, using food to treat certain illnesses, and not eating at certain times, etc. People tried to fix the events of their world according to their myriad needs, compelling reasons, and values. The majority of Odia and Bengali food and dishes still echo these common practices even today. They reveal the root and declare the richness of a fixed world, they once ruled the roost and for thousands of years survived the onslaught of time despite impending interpolations, and intimidations of aggressors that looked down upon the local culture as regressive, only to advance their commercial needs or as a tool for political foul play.

Problems and prospects:

A look at the evolution of Indian folk music can be traced through many historical and cultural factors, including the arrival of the Mughals, the British colonial period, and the influence of religious and Sufi music. However, the 20th century saw a revival of folk music as artists and musicians incorporated traditional elements into their recent works, which became quite popular amongst the masses, resulting in a surge of interest in similar content. This is the time, when an unrestricted interpolation occurred, to suit the commercial needs of the artists, or they used it as a means of easy popularity gain. This also established the argument that Folk music still enjoys a prime share of popular choices.

The British rule in India after 1757 led to increased resistance and rebellion, mostly from the peasants and tribal communities. During the Bengal famine of 1770, poor peasants and refugee zamindars joined the sanyasis and fakirs (wandering Bengali religious loners) in a fierce rebellion that lasted until 1802. *Anandamat*, a Bengali novel by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee still stands as a testimony to this struggle. The stiff resistance from - Birsha Munda or Tilaka Manjhi, the Sambalpur revolt of Odisha, the Santal rebellion etc. antagonized the colonial masters to become more repressive in initiating every possible action to unsettle the social fabric of those communities, wherefrom, the opposition was severe. This includes taxation on religious and cultural practices, destruction of scripts and common clusters, etc.

The question is, despite innumerable upheavals, ebbs and flows, and myriad stumbling blocks across the ages and centuries, have the folk songs been successful in proving their mettle, and standing afoot as proud claimants of “people’s songs? The answer is imminent and finite; they still resonate with our social life, carry the religious flavour, culture and tradition, food and clothing, beliefs and opinions, and above all, are the protagonists of a privileged heritage, we are all proud of. Indian cultural tradition has been all-encompassing and has always given windows for other cultures to flourish, and with time, though it has been diluted by intrusions, yet, has been successful in retaining its originality. Rabindranath Tagore once said, “Clouds come floating into my life, no longer carry rain or usher storm, but to add colour to my sunset sky.”

Art is all about being open to peripheral influences, getting inspiration from the situation, marrying them with one's style, and creating elegance with all of those to make it a congruous and harmonious whole. Even though British rule stands as a synonym to Modern India, like the clouds in the sunset sky, it has become a part of the canvas of the Indian culture

Tagore further says that “we may discover in these folk-rhymes many a trace of joy and sorrow, pleasure and pain coming down the ages. Entwined in their broken rhymes, one may still trace many a tale of hurt and sufferings. They are fragments of emotions and sentiments from bygone days” (2).

Although it is not possible to create a unified taxonomy that accounts for all references to foods in folk songs, a few simple analytical samples can provide a candid prism through which we can look at the food content in folk songs. Foods in a community not only include consumption references but also the exclusion of certain food habits, besides food, storage, etc. These also include health and nutritional knowledge, the foods that are special or should be avoided by certain groups of people, and the study of specific laws that govern the conditions under which certain foods can be eaten. In events that involve the serving of food—from ordinary meals to holiday feasts—preparing and being served, get articulated. Differing customs pertaining to food also signal boundaries between different groups of identification. Thus, Folk songs, tend to provide a rich subject for folk explanation about any one group's culture and social engagements.

It is axiomatic in the field of folklore that folklore genres—whether food, story, art, or song—amount to an expressive culture. Such culture is seldom passively received and involuntarily reproduced. Instead, when engaged in folk expression, individual tradition bearers in any cultural setting consciously build on the past to create one emerging culture. A corollary of this axiom is the idea that these folk phrases are intentionally rhetorical: That is, they are designed to persuade their audience of the validity of their point of view about a subject. From this axiom and corollary, it follows that folklore about food in particular, - that is, food in folklore, the subject of this paper, can be viewed through the cited examples - first as an expressive culture that offers a commentary on the food habits of the people, and second as a commentary designed to persuade its followers” point of view.

Chaiti Ghoda folk song of Odisha:

The cultural web of Odisha reflects the combination of different colours. It is a heterogeneous combination of classical and folk music. It is the only state in India that has recorded the necessary assimilation of innumerable races and cultures. The *Chaiti* song of Odisha. “*Chaiti Ghoda Nacha*” or Dummy Horse Dance, is the best example of the fishermen community, played for eight long days during the month of February every year from the full moon days of the Hindu Month of *Chaitra*, hence named “Chaiti Dance”. Some of them are mentioned below. Stanzas from various sources describe different techniques for cooking different types of fish. This process is still followed by the public and is still followed as a sacrosanct manual not only by the community but also by the common masses.

କଉ ମାଛ କୁ ଲଠି ଖାଟା ମିଠା ଦଲେ
ଭାଜିଦେବୁ ଯତନରେ, ଲବଙ୍ଗ ଲଠି
ଭାଜିଦେବୁ ଯତନରେ
ତାହାକୁ ଖାଇଲେ ଆତ୍ମା ଶାନ୍ତି ହବେ
ବାସି ପଖାଳ ସାଙ୍ଗରେ

Translation:

Prepare the climbing perch fish with a mixture of
Sweet and sour, and fry with care,
people will go crazy with the taste of it
The taste of it would bring absolute satisfaction
If taken with “Basi Pakhal” [a typical Odia recipe]

Likewise, there are several other types of fish and the recipes for each are lucidly explained in the verses in a very entertaining way. For clarity, a few examples may be cited here. Salmon is the most common fish everywhere, and people in different regions and countries have different ways of preparing salmon or curries/chips, but the terms presented below date back thousands of years and are very well-known in rural areas. Odisha presents a recipe for cooking Rohi fish. The process and ingredients add to the taste and aroma of the curry, makes your mouth water and making your memories unforgettable.

ରୋହି ମାଛ କୁ ଲଢ଼ା ଦହି ଭାଗ ଦେଇ
କରିଦଲେ ତ ତିଅଣ
ଖଣ୍ଡିଏ ଖାଇଲେ ହାଣ୍ଡିଏ ମାଗିବୁ
ଝୁରୁଥିବୁ ସବୁ ଦିନ

Translation:

Rohi if prepared with curd/yoghurt
It becomes so tasty that if one eats a piece
shall ask for the entire bowl, and shall remember for life

The Chaiti songs not only reflect the food habits they also spell about different perceptual, emotional, and social aspects i.e. Fathers, like mothers, are the pillars of their children’s emotional development. Children look to their fathers to create and enforce the rules. They also take care of their father to be physically and mentally stable. Children want to please their fathers, and father involvement promotes inner growth and strength. Research shows that when fathers provide love and support, they have a significant impact on their children’s learning and development. It also instils complete happiness and confidence. Whereas a mother is always concerned about the food. That is their difference and typical approach towards the upbringing of a child. As stated in the traditional folk songs. Example:

ପନିକିର ଶାଗ କାଟ
ନାଇଲେ, ରଖି ଛିଣ୍ଡାଲଲେ ଜଟ
ବାପା ଯେ ଦଖେନ୍ଦି ପିଠି ଆଡ଼କୁ
ହଲେ ମା ଉଣ୍ଡାଲଲ ପଟେ

Translation:

Cut the leafy vegetables in the slicer
Else, can split like hermit’s *Jata* [matted hair]
A father is concerned about profile and status
But, a mother worries about only the stomach

The folk songs of tribal West Bengal also reflect the same taste and tempo. The simple rhyme and the rhythm resonate with the rustic lives of West Bengal. The pleasure and pain, food and food habits, desires and grievances find a voice through the songs composed and sung by them. One such type of song is “*Bhatiyali*”.

The word “*Bhatiyali*” means “low tide” and refers to the phenomenon of the movement of

tides in the sea and rivers. “*Jwar*”“ *implies* high tide, which is the inverse of “*Bhata*”. The river”s banks get broader during the *Bhata* or low tide phase. This phenomenon could have given rise to “*Bhatiyali*”. These songs are sung by river boatmen known as “*Naviks*” or “*Mallahs*”. While crossing rivers in Bengal, they sing “*Bhatiyali*” songs. *Bhatiyali* is typically sung solo rather than in groups. Farmers ploughing their fields sing *Bhatiyali* melodies and take extended notes in an open, full-throated voice. Shepherds

This note pattern is comparable to Baul and *Bhatiyali*. The rhythms of these songs differ from those of other folk tunes, giving them a particular identity. They are often based on four beats; however, “*taal*”s with three beats in a division can also be found in these tunes. Variants of the *Khemta Taal* can be found in some of these tunes. Some *Bhawaiya* songs are sung in “*Vilambit Laya*” without “*taal*”, which suits the theme and lyrics of the songs. “*Bhatiyali*” songs are those of the East Bengal fisherman or boatman community, whereas “*Bhawaiya*” songs are those of the people who live on the sea coast. Similarly, the fishermen of North Bengal (the region bordering Bihar and Bengal) who live on the river banks sing “*Bhawaiya*”, which is often accompanied by a dance.

Below is one such example of a folk song (lullaby/ cradle song), which is typical of its kind and often sung by parents and grandparents to their sons /grandsons/daughters. There too, we notice the references of different popular food items and recipes aimed at wooing the moon.

ছড়া

আয় আয় চাঁদ মামা
টিপ দিয়ে যা
চাঁদের কপালে চাঁদ
টিপ দিয়ে যা।
ধান ভানলে কুঁড়ো দেব
মাছ কাটলে মুড়ো দেব
কাল গাইয়ের দুধ দেব
দুধ খাবার বাটি দেব
চাঁদের কপালে চাঁদ
টিপ দিয়ে যা।

The English translation is as follows:

*Come uncle moon! Give a tip
Give a tip on the moon”s [baby”s] forehead, O moon!
When I cut a fish, I shall give you the heady
When I husk the paddy I shall give you the chaff,
I shall give you the milk of a black cow,
I shall give you a pot for drinking the milk,
Give a tip on the forehead, O moon!*

Similarly, “*Bauls*” are those folk singers dedicated to their mystic religion and gods. *Baul* songs are made of very simple words and thoughts, but they have a deep meaning inside. Initially, those songs were for and by the uneducated people of Bengal. Tagore was probably the first to revalue those songs, and now it is a recognized and favoured genre in Bangla songs. On various occasions, *Baul* songs are played with the sole purpose of entertainment; It is because of their common appeal, simplicity, and rhythm when accompanied by musical beats. An annual *Baul* fair is organised in Kenduli, West Bengal (near Durgapur) in the memory of Jayadev, the poet who composed the famous *Gita Gavinda* in Sanskrit. The fair is organised at the bank of Ajoy River in

memory of Jaydev and his wife, Padmavati. The celebration continues for three days with much gaiety and reflects the touch of antiquity of Bengali tribal culture as well as folk tradition. It is when people distribute boiled rice mixed with winter vegetables and some indigenous sweets to the visitors for free.

The growing awareness of folk music and folk traditions is gaining momentum all across the world. In this context, the folk music revival that started in America in the 1960s could be the best example of acknowledging their worth. It was when Americans rediscovered many of the old English ballads, some of which are found in the Joan Baez Ballad Book recordings by Jean Redpath. But sadly, in the age of postmodernism, these simple, old songs have been forgotten again and are not being given the attention they deserve.

However, Baul songs and their lifestyle are important in discovering the indigenous food habits pertaining to the Indian climate and soil that prevailed down the ages. The famous Baul guru, Lalon Fakir who is known for his secular propaganda campaign through his appealing songs among the ordinary working-class of Bengal, particularly when casteism among Hindus and communal fights between Hindus and Muslims were prevalent in Bengal, is also known for teaching people the right food habits. The following song has a universal appeal:

“By consuming excess food, you earn diseases.
By taking medicines
You blame your physician

By following the physician’s prescription
You get rid of diseases
By often trying to be a health specialist,
You get into a fix.

By taking doses of medicines
It’s hard to free yourself from disease
By submitting yourself to greed for food
You can only woe.

Greed is sin, and sin leads to death
Don’t you know?
Lalon says you go to hell
You die in a deep anomaly.” (Zakaria)

The minimalist approach to food habits is notable in the above stanza. If we examine the food habits practiced by the Bauls individually or in a community, we shall find that the prescribed food habits are not only good for health but also economical, thereby reducing the carbon footprint of the Baul community. Besides, they need to collect the food by entreat. That is supposed to destroy their human pride and ego, which in turn brings satisfaction and deep pleasure to the soul. So the Baul community and their songs propagate a psychosomatic approach to the body and diseases, while at the same time preserving the natural environment and ecosystem. They are vocal about complete vegetarian foods with no meat, fish, or eggs. Debora Jannat Fakirni (a female Baul) dissuades people from eating beef and mutton by arguing that neither a goat nor a cow eat meat. So, the required nutrients and protein that people are getting from meat can be directly obtained from grasses and vegetables. The Bauls believe people are what they eat. So, eating habits and choices of foods are critical to having a disease-free, and healthy life. Therefore, instead of eating meat, people should eat more vegetables because, not only are they cheaper, but they are also healthier.

The Bauls traditionally follow typical food habits as part of their daily routine, that is four times a day, named “Ballyaseba” (Breakfast), “Purnaseba” (lunch), “Joloseba” (afternoon snacks), and “Adhibas” (dinner). They consume soaked grains for breakfast, boiled rice for lunch, homemade dry foods for supper, and again, boiled rice and cooked vegetables for dinner. It is believed that- probably, they preach what they practise, and through the songs, they spread awareness of healthy habits. This traditional culture in Bengal was also declared a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in November 2005, besides, it is also on UNESCO’s Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage for Humanity.

Conclusion:

In the age of extreme technological progress and at the height of AI in almost all spheres, the relevance of Folk songs is fast losing its grip over the public memory. We tend to remember them as symbolic stuff, which limits their worth as proud claimants of our heritage. They are simple and representatives of self-reflections, about family and loved ones, about everyone and everything around, the rich beauty of nature, the singing flocks, the whisper of the spring, or the calmness of the forest. It tells humble stories about the delights and distresses of everyday life. It may not have the flair of classical music to win accolades and hype its glory, but it is replete with glamour and sophistication that will remain there despite unflattering discredit. Deep down, there is music of pure joy. Therefore, the folk song is the expression of the simple spirit and primitive impulses that create a society with diverse cultural richness. However, popular literature, like folk music, will not rise by the competition of emotions. The principal question before us is therefore the patronage, protection, and celebration of such literature of anonymity that once resonated in public life, as elements and rudiments of literary pursuit, founded in the obsolete history and times immemorial, and now demands respect and recognition, to forget that would be a treachery to our past and probably to the roots of inheritance.

The essay argues that the traditional folk songs of two neighbouring states of erstwhile “Kalinga” of ancient India are very similar in their approach to the ideal foods and food habits for the indigenous people. British colonialism threatened their existence as the British rulers tried to “correct” traditional Indian culture by injecting Western/ European culture to justify British rule. Their main strategy was to prolong economic imperialism by asserting cultural supremacy and, thereby, cultural imperialism, at the cost of destroying local dominant cultures. However, folk songs, because of their popularity among common people and by their very nature of being orally transmitted, resist this colonialist attempt to an extent. We also argue in this essay that the ideal food habits that the folk singers propose through their songs are scientifically valid and are conditioned by the Indian climate and body types.

Forgetting the traditional foods completely may lead to a discontinuation of the historical sense naturally inculcated in a nation, and this historical sense is important for harbouring self-esteem and confidence in the minds of the people, which is crucial for a nation to grow and prosper. As T. S. Eliot remarks in his famous essay, “Tradition and Individual Talent,” “Tradition is a matter of much wider significance. It cannot be inherited, and if you want it, you must obtain it through great labour. It involves, in the first place, the historical sense...” (37), we have to toil a lot to preserve our folk songs and ensure their required growth and continuation. Folk songs have played and are playing the great role of reminding people of their long, great heritage, the inseparable memories of the nation in the form of myths, along with some necessary guidelines in choosing their foods and the way they should take it for the holistic development of the body and the soul.

Works Cited

- Eliot, T. S. "Tradition and the Individual Talent." *Perspecta*, Vol. 19, 1982, pp. 36-42.
- Kulburgi, M.M. "The Future of Folk in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." November, 2015 Accessed on May 5, 2023. <https://thewire.in/books/the-future-of-folk-in-the-age-of-mechanical-reproduction>
- Mohapatra, P.K. "Folk songs: Problems of collecting and editing." *Folk music and Folklore: an Anthology*, ed. by H. Biswas, 1967.
- Raha, Manik Kumar. "Folk songs of tribal West Bengal." *Indian Culture*, 1974. Accessed on May 12. <https://www.indianculture.gov.in/folk-songs-tribal-west-bengal>
- Tagore, Rabindranath, "On folk music and folk song: excerpt." *Folk Music and Folklore: An Anthology*, Vol.1, ed. by H. Biswas, 1967.
- Zakaria, Saymon and Nurunnabi Shanto . "Traditional Food Consumption of Baul Communities in Bangladesh: Towards the World of Zero Hunger." *Intangible Cultural Heritage NGO's Strategy in Achieving Sustainable Development: Goal 2. Zero Hunger*, Bhabanagara Foundation. Bangladesh, 2020.