

APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF FOLK ART: CONTEMPORARY TRENDS IN WEST BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

Material culture constitutes one major aspect of human culture. In folklore, material folklore is one of the main branches of the discipline. In the domain of material folklore, folk art is probably the most prominent and widely studied representative. However, this important branch of folklore studies received less attention in formal academic exercise by the scholars in comparison to its more fortunate counterpart of formalized genres of folklore. The study of folk art as a category was started more than a century ago. Defining folk art has never been an easy task and free from debate. Its boundary appeared to be somehow porous. The earlier studies on folk art showed a tendency to appreciate the artistic creativity of its makers. These studies either focused on the regional specialty/affiliation or the particular form that it represented. The studies were descriptive in nature and tried to find out origin and distribution of a particular folk art. The next important trend that emerged in the study of folk art aimed at finding out the social significance of folk art. Then the emphasis was not restricted to the object only, its makers also received a great deal of attention. Thematic discussions on the different dimensions of folk art have been emerging as popular undertakings. Apart from serious or formal academic studies popular writings on the folk art can be seen as another development. Therefore, it can be said that the theoretical approach to the folk art studies was more of an evolutionist and diffusionist bent at the beginning, which gradually shifted to a functionalist approach. Again there were some aesthetically oriented researches on folk art. At

present the study is characterized by a postmodern epistemology that grows out of the blurring of genres, de-contextualization, and intervention by media. The more pragmatically oriented studies of this period were informed by the concerns that used to take an account of the impact of increased commercialization and globalization on folk art. Another trajectory of growth may be seen from a salvage folk art to an invented tradition that is again enmeshed with the applied and public folk lore in general and folk art in particular.

INTRODUCTION

Material culture constitutes one major aspect of human culture. In folklore, material folklore is one of the main branches of the discipline, however the study of material folklore developed later into some prominence in respect of folklore studies. In comparison to the genre-wise study of folk art in folklore, the material culture made a later entry. Such a development of material folklore study may be attributed to at least two factors: (i) Development of folk life movement i.e. increasing interest in the folk life studies; (ii) Changing concept of 'folk'. These developments may have roots in the changing socio-political situations. The traditional non-literate or oral societies were on the wane with the approach of more mechanized way of life and engulfing of the so called simple or peasant societies by modern techno-economic inventions. This changing course of events had far reaching consequences in folk lore scholarship. It debilitated the classical distinctions between folk lore and anthropology. Folklore and anthropology though developed side by side as domains of academic activities in the west, they used to maintain a significant distinction between them.

LITERARY FOLKLORE IN THE BEGINNING

The idea of folklore as it was in the beginning focused on the literary creations or creations based on the word of mouth. Talking about the subject matter of folklore, Bayard (1953) writes: "Widely held beliefs, tales, legends, anecdotes and jokes; ballads, songs, and oral epics, decorative designs and symbolic mythological motifs in graphic and plastic art, ceremonies, rituals, dramas, dances, and processions; and their special occasions; music, both vocal and instrumental, magical techniques and procedures of all sorts; esthetic notes; games and children's rhymes; local and national heroes; special societies and orders; charms, prayers, incantations, riddles, proverbs, and

mnemonic devices; and a host of other customary practices regarded as desirable or necessary, or associated with religious beliefs, and too varied and numerous even to commence classifying—all traditional, all dateless, and all passing as folklore” (Bayard 1953, 7). The said enumeration included apart from the literary creations the magical practices and super natural beliefs of the people. In characterizing the folklore materials Bayard (1953) emphasized three main features: (i) Certain categories of creative ideas, (ii) Traditional, and (iii) Communal ownership. In his words: “... the primary materials of folklore must be certain categories of creative ideas¹ which have become traditional² among the people of any society and which may be recognized as their common property” (Bayard 1953, 8).

Why his view has been so elaborately presented? The reason is that this view had an overarching influence on the studies that were being conducted so far since the emergence of folkloric studies as a distinct field of scholarship. It was not the fact that all of the scholars went through his instructions or overtly referring to his views, but his characterization reflected the dominant sense of the meaning of the word folklore at that time.

Dorothy Norman (1957) while studying the folk-art of Odisha went on to focus on the symbolic elements that were present in the various folk art forms: festival umbrella to wall paintings. The scholars who concentrated on the study of folk art in Indian subcontinent also engaged substantial energy to the issues of design, motifs and ritual values of the folk art. In fact a survey of the folklore studies in India done in the 1950s also identified this trend (Upadhaya, 1954, 201–212). The only study on folk art that Upadhaya (1954) mentioned was Elwin’s work on tribal art. The other studies that were referred by him for the Bengal region were ballads like *Maimansingha Gitika*, Dr. D.C.Sen’s folk literature of Bengal, folk tales (Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar’s *Thakurmar Jhuli* in 1907 and Lal Behari Day’s *Folk-Tales of Bengal* in 1883), *Haramoni*, and folk songs. The folk lore was broadly equated with the folk literature.

However, what Upadhaya (1954) could not take into stock was a rich body of studies on the folk art published in the vernacular language (Bengali). These studies were done on varied theme. But it is interesting to find that the use of the term *lokoshilpa* meaning folk art in Bengali was almost infrequent in the writings on the objects that the studies after 1950s identified as folk art. But more precisely it can be said that the works on folk art started with adequate academic focus in the 1960s and it continued with much prominence in the 1980s and 1990s. In the books the

word *lokoshilpa* was emphatically used, for example– *Banglar Lokoshilpa* by Rabindra Majumdar (1363 B), *Banglar Lokoshilpa* by Kalyankumar Gangopadhyay (1968), *Paschimbanger Lokoshilpa* (1976). But before 1950s we find very few mentions of the word *lokoshilpa*. Rakhaldas Bandyopadhyay wrote the article ‘Dakshin –Paschimbanger Lokoshilpa’ in 1929 in *Prabasi*. From the review of the studies on folk art it appears that the major orientations were the following:

- (i) The studies were conducted on the localized nature of the object. The area in which the particular folk art is met with has been very mentioned in these works (Sarkar, 1329B; Mitra, 1926a, 1926b; 1334B; Dutta, 1956).
- (ii) The word *lokoshilpa* was yet to receive universal acceptance. The words like *Rasakala*, *Pallishilpa*, *Prachinshilpa*, *Gribashilpa* were taken as equivalent words to mean *lokoshilpa*. The most general use was the word *shilpa* meaning ‘art’, the particular object name was added before it to indicate that it is distinct from formal art, for example, *darushilpa* (wood carving; Chattopadhyay, 1927), *lakshashilpa* (Lac Art, Mitra, 1334B), *gajadantashilpa* (ivory art, Chattopadhyay, 1928) etc. It may be assumed that still the distinction between art and folk art was not quite clear. It is also probable that the scholars or authors were not much interested in drawing such distinction given the socio-political situation of the period. The nationalist sentiment might have played a crucial role. In that situation the authors were keener to find out and to do a ‘salvage’ of the indigenous tradition (Chattopadhyay, 1310B; Debi, 1927; Dutta, 1956. Then the artistic expression bearing national imprint was more important. Thus the invention was of ‘national’ (*jatiyo*), ‘indigenous’ (*desiyo* or *desaja*) tradition. The list therefore included particular forms of folk art: weaving, wood carving, lac art, earthenware, *alpana* (design motif on the ground), *resham –tasbar* (silk), ivory, boat making, ornaments, *Pat* painting, stitching, *nakshikantha* (embroidered quilt), tattoo/ulki, toys, basketry, cane work, sholapith, terracotta, mask, metal craft *dokra*, conch shell, brass work, dolls, mat, palanquin.
- (iii) The forms of the objects and designs on them are getting more emphasis in these works. Sometimes it is seen that a folk art is being discussed in its popular form – for example, in the category of dolls, we find discussion on *dipabali* dolls of Purulia (Sengupta, 1383).
- (iv) The study of folk art in Bengal was not undertaken as a part of the study of material culture. In fact the orientation towards the material culture study developed later than the study of folk art. In this connection Bayard’s view

seems to be of substance. On the materials of folklore, he writes that– “Fundamental material of folklore may be comprehended under four heads, consisting of notions about (1) the origin, nature, and regulation of the universe and all its creations;(2) the world of supernatural or spiritual forces and beings, and man’s relation to it; (3) wisdom, natural and preternatural, and its sources, attainment, and uses; (4) heroism or virtue, beauty, desirability, and propriety in social products and intercourse ; and their opposites or contrasting qualities and expressions, including the humorous, grotesque, evil, and generally undesirable” (Bayard 1953, 8).

In this paper, he has added an illustrative list (not comprehensive) that does not show any engagement with technology or craft; however designs on homemade utensils and costumes have been included in the list. His view was that the study of traits or technological domains is basically the area of specialization by the anthropologists. This has been reflected much in the studies of the period. Therefore the study of folk art followed the aesthetic line of research; the material aspect of the folk art has remained less elaborated. Even in 1966, Norbert Riedl (1966) wrote that the material folklore studies remained largely ignored. But things began to change after that with the shift in the notion of folk and the emergence of folk life movement. In a survey in 2010, Bandyopadhyay (2010) has found that the attention towards the study of material folklore is not even across the institutions. In that paper, he mentioned Jalil’s study on the trends of folklore researches in Bangladesh (Jalil, 2008). His paper shows that the publications on material culture occupies second place in *Loukik*, whereas it finds no place in *Lokoshruti* or in the works done in Bangladesh (Bandyopadhyay, 2010).

GROWTH OF MATERIALISM: THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL TURN

The growth of interest in the folk life studies can be seen since 1960s in the West except some stray references in the 1950s (Bandyopadhyay 2016, 1–6). Don Yoder (1976) wrote that the folk life studies circumscribed a holistic approach that analyzed traditional cultural elements in complex society. Now the approach is not only directed towards the understanding of creative ideas, but also the context and people in which these ideas take shape. Riedl (1966) has mentioned that the term *volke* also changed its meaning from the social group to a kind of behavior. The emphasis is now on the unconsciously learned traditional elements in behavior in each individual whether he or she resides in town or in village.

The folk art study in Bengal has shown some of the indications of the shift in perspectives. Ghosh (1971) in a paper on the Dokra craftsmen attempted to relate the craft with the agricultural activity and he searched for 'cultural parallel'. He cited anthropologist Rivers. Ghosh (1981) continued with his sociological engagement in his subsequent study of the folk art of Bengal. Sarkar's (1997) work on conch-shell art dealt with the social life of the crafts men. The study is based on field work and followed ethnographic approach. The study is presented in five chapters— chapter two deals with research methodology and chapter three is on the technological aspect, its design and marketing. It is quite clear from this study that the author has paid adequate attention to the craftsmen, its technology and context of production along with the design and literary aspects. Basiruddoza's (2001) work on the *dokra* metal craft also reflects the paradigmatic shift in the approach. He has done extensive fieldwork on the *dokra* craftsmen who use the ancient lost wax method of casting to make various metal objects particularly idols of gods and goddesses, human figures, decorative objects etc. The author and his supervisor admitted that they have not only focused on the craft but also on the craftsmen, the history of the craft and the social and cultural background of the craftsmen. In fact the two out of three chapters of the book have dealt with the technology of production and the socio-economic life of the craftsmen. Henry Glassie (2000) in his *Traditional Art of Dhaka* concentrated mainly on the clay craftsmen. Glassie (2000), a US professor of folklore has done an interesting ethnography to see art in the everyday life of the people. Unlike studying people as generally held in the fieldwork, Glassie liked to be taught by the artists – to learn from them. He writes about his approach in following words: "To study art, we need not sneak about like spies or thieves or detectives, wheedling for information or bullying our companions into uncomfortable confessions. We stand with them, letting their work set the agenda for inquiry. We look together at what they have done, using it to discover what they think and intend. Learning to be fascinated by what fascinates them, overcoming our separation in oneness of interest, we find in art a courteous entry to the life of the creator and the culture of creation" (Glassie 2000, 1).

Another major trend that reflects the materialist orientation of the folk art study is generated by the archaeological or ethno-archaeological interests. As early as in 1961, Gangopadhyay (1961) showed the archaeological importance of the study of folk art. Biswas (1981) studied the terracotta art of Bengal to 'understand the basis of visualization and aesthetics of the terracottas in their archaeological background'. Here he believed that the art would provide some evidence in support of the ancient

population movement. It would open up a window to look into the life and thought of the past people for which we had hardly any documentary proof. The study of social contents constituted a chapter in his book. Talukdar (2001) studied a large number of folk art forms of Bangladesh from ethno–archaeological point of view. His list is quite exhaustive. It includes terracotta arts, painted pottery, embroidery works, drawing and painting including Alpana, body decoration, folk ornaments, *tabiz* (amulet), decorative ritual art, wood carving, metal art, sola pith, mould for sweetmeats etc. ,clay work (not burnt), folk instruments. In this study he has taken up many of the objects or themes that seemingly do not have any decorative or artistic value. So, we may infer that the word folk art is including the craft too. When the folk art thus become inclusive, we may surmise that it does not focus on the aesthetic value only, it has now entered into the broader domain of folk life that has been hitherto considered to the materials for study by the anthropologists (Bayard, 1953).

CONTEMPORARY TRENDS

In a recent publication this domain of folk art study has further been expanded (Chakraborty, 2011). In this book forty four folk art items have been discussed. Here, the folk art objects have been divided into six major types: (i) folk paintings, (ii) metal crafts, (iii) bamboo and cane work, (iv) wood and clay art, (v) weaving and (vi) others. The wood and clay could have been separately discussed as different types. But the interesting inclusions in the folk art category have been made in under others items of folk art. Here floral decoration, *bori* (pulse paste dried in the sun), folk arts by leaves have been included.

The study on how the folk art is transforming and coping with the changing times forms another dimension of the contemporary trends. The boundary between art and folk art is gradually melting. The media is influencing this change very much. The artists or craftsmen are recreating their traditions that are rooted in the myths and narratives handed down to them on one hand, and on the other hand the new mediascapes are bringing new terrain of experiences to their lives. Transformation of folk art is another recent topic of discussion. Hauser (2002) discussed the transformation of scroll paintings of Bengal from a picture–showing oral tradition to a marketable folk art. The paper tries to see the politics of production and consumption of folk art in contemporary India and how this is related to aesthetics and development. Another trend of study on the transformation of folk art focuses on the recycled art which centers on the making of folk art objects from discarded

materials (Cerny and Seriff, 1996). Chatterji (2012) has shown how the *patuas* have blended the Manasamangal stories with the destruction of World Trade Centre in 9/11 incident. When depicting Laden, the artists are being influenced by the *Pir* stories. Thus the interaction between local and global is taking place in these *patuas*. It is a new site of discovery, a new land within the familiar landscape. The globalization has brought this tradition to the contemporary folk art market which is spread across the countries. So, again a transformation is taking place and it is from invented tradition to recreated tradition.

CONCLUSION

Studies on folk art and material culture from both folkloristic and anthropological perspectives share many overlapping areas. From the beginning anthropology put much stress on material culture study, whereas the folklore concentrated more on the literary genres. This emphasis on formalized folklore is also attested by the publications. The study of folk art began to occupy important position in academic discourse only after 1950s, though the studies on folk art started quite substantially in the early 20th Century. The nationalism played a significant role in its growth. 'Folk art' as a separate category of objects in folklore scholarship developed later, initially more emphasis was put on specific genres and localized productions. With the 'anthropological turn', the folk art scholarship began to include not only the art objects but also the makers of these objects. In the recent years, the trends of transformation of folk art and studies on their transformation indicate that that globalization is an important topic of research. The researches make the formal boundaries between folk art and art blurred at times. The folk art objects are being consumed as an object of art. A new market of the folk art objects is emerging globally. The folk art tradition is being invented and recreated.

Notes

1. "By *creative ideas* I mean ideas which are not ephemeral or immediately topical, but long-lived; which potently affect the society which adopts them, and show these effects in many social products; which are capable of adaptation to differing circumstances and of development as their products themselves develop; and which have had accumulated around them their products in the shape of accretions of belief, action, and emotion" (Bayard 1953, 8).
2. "By traditional I mean; transmitted mainly by word of mouth and examples, not promulgated (or no longer promulgated) by any school or other official or administrative

governing body as the outgrowth of ostensible scientific investigation; informally, casually - or unconsciously on occasion – absorbed, cultivated and transmitted among the people in general; usually accepted uncritically by possessors; and constantly varied and occasionally readapted, developed, or re-created by learners, users and transmitters” (Bayard 1953, 8).

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