

TRIBAL STUDIES IN INDIA: INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVES AND APPROACHES

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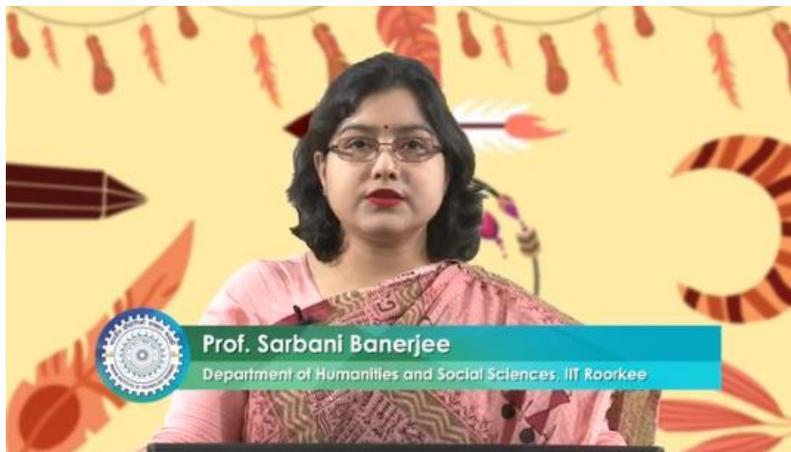
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Lecture48

Lecture 48: Oral Traditions of Tribes in India

Thank you. Good morning and welcome back to the lecture series on tribal studies in India: interdisciplinary approaches and perspectives. Today, we are going to talk about the oral traditions of the different tribes in India. As I have mentioned in my previous lectures, oral tradition is prevalent among the different indigenous or tribal groups. Their mode of passing down knowledge to the next generation is through telling myths, retelling, and remembering them.



Oral tradition, therefore, is the process of handing down a given group's ancient heritage and knowledge system to younger generations through non-written, non-documented means. It encompasses a wide range of cultural expressions, including ballads, folk songs, stories, traditions, and beliefs, games, dances, music and musical instruments, social customs, as well as popular arts and crafts. Oral tradition comprises the conveying of statements, beliefs, rules, customs, and practices through spoken words or direct

practice, which needs to be inculcated in turn by the younger generation. Rather than through, you know, referring to any written piece or documented work.

Introduction

- Oral tradition is the **handing down of a group's ancient heritage to younger generations through non-written means.**
- This encompasses a wide range of **cultural expressions such as ballads, folk songs, stories, traditions, beliefs, games, dances, music and musical instruments, social customs, and popular arts and crafts.**
- It is the **conveyance of statements, beliefs, rules, customs, and practices through spoken words or direct practice, rather than written documentation.**



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There is a very famous African proverb quoted by D.K. Bhattacharya in his work. It says, 'When an old man dies, a library burns to the ground.' The old man, the wizened person from any community or family, is a repository of knowledge. When he dies, the knowledge goes with him or her.

So D.K. Bhattacharya notes that such unrecorded wisdom of oral traditions includes crucial insights into the ecosystem and the efficacy of different herbs. So it's the way of living, it's the worldview that the older generation carries with them, and this worldview includes their spirituality, their philosophy, their world system, their social systems, their customs, traditions, and so forth—their myths, their knowledge of ancestors.

Introduction

- "When an old man dies, a library burns to the ground".
~ African proverb, (qtd. in D. K. Bhattacharya (2015))
- Bhattacharya (2015) notes that such unrecorded wisdom of oral traditions includes **crucial insights into the ecosystem and the efficacy of different herbs.**
- Recognizing its importance, UNESCO's intangible heritage website specifically emphasizes the **need to safeguard this knowledge that exists without written records.**



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So it's like a history that is additive in nature, where the next generation and the generation after that will keep adding their own knowledge, their own records of history. So, recognizing its importance—recognizing the importance of oral literature or oral knowledge—UNESCO's Intangible Heritage website specifically emphasizes the need to safeguard this form of knowledge that exists. Without any written records, because it is the receptacle of an entire people's knowledge or wisdom that has been accumulated over a long period of time. According to Indira Choudhury, oral tradition recognized as cultural heritage includes various performances as well as spoken stories. Oral history and oral traditions both provide narratives as well as storytelling forms.

Introduction

- According to Indira Chowdhury (2014), oral tradition, recognised as “**cultural heritage**,” includes various performances and spoken stories. Oral history and oral traditions both provide narratives and storytelling forms.
- Furthermore, the interpretation of these can serve as a **resource for historical understanding**. Understanding their historical value requires different interpretive methods.
- Dismissing them as fiction reduces their worth as historical resources (Chowdhury, 2014).



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What is more, the interpretation of these can serve as a resource for historical understanding of these tribes. So understanding the oral tradition's historical value entails different interpretive methods. Dismissing oral culture as fiction, on the other hand, reduces its worth as a historical resource. While anthropology in the West has long dismissed oral tradition as relevant to its analysis, India's profound richness in the area of oral culture and oral tradition means that it cannot afford to disregard such a valuable body of knowledge for academic purposes. Scholar and critic Nandini Sahur writes that tribal communities preserve their shared history through diverse literary forms, which include folktales, epics, songs, ballads, proverbs, myths, riddles, and ritual chants.

These are not merely artistic expressions. They embody the lineage of any clan, the tribal knowledge systems, as well as the cosmologies, all of which generate their entire philosophy, the tribal ritual complex, which may be very different from and therefore challenge Western literary concepts and Western standards. Tribal literature extends beyond art. It is integral to their cultural heritage, strengthens their social bonds, and reflects their unique understanding of the world. There are rituals where the older

generations narrate the story of origin, the tribal myth about the origin of Earth, and it is told to the younger generation, who sit together and listen.

So it is a moment of the community coming together, and through shared memory, they reinforce their sense of community, the sense of a unified community, right? It's knowledge being acquired from the older people by the younger ones, and they, in turn, will retell it to the next generation. That's how oral culture, the oral tradition, survives across time and space. So these oral traditions have long been excluded from mainstream literary criticism. In fact, they have not been taken up much and have often been dismissed as primitive or unsophisticated.

This marginalization tends to overlook the complex narrativity, the philosophical insights, as well as the socio-political critiques that are present within tribal literature. A lot of these pieces of wisdom or these adages, these wise sayings, are also very scientific in nature. They enable us to decode different mysteries of nature, even cures to different ailments. Cues to different, you know, social maladies.

Introduction

- Tribal literature extends beyond art; it is **integral to their cultural heritage, strengthens social bonds**, and reflects their **unique understanding of the world**.
- These oral traditions have long been **excluded from mainstream literary criticism**, often dismissed as primitive or unsophisticated. This marginalization tends to **overlook the complex narratives, philosophical insights, and socio-political critiques** within tribal literature (Sahu, 2024).



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All of these are present in the form of oral tradition. Verrier Elwin and Shamrao Hivale, in their work *Folk Songs of the Maikal Hills*, which came out in 1944, observe that tribal poetry often possesses remarkable beauty in both its form and content, its imagery and symbolism. The subtle artistry of the original works is, however, frequently impossible to capture in its entirety when translated to another language. So in translation, a lot is diluted, corrupted, and lost.

However, an attempt to translate the tribal oral tradition is crucial. It's a meaningful and timely intervention before such extraordinary oral literature disappears due to the spread of education—modern education—and the decline of tribal communities. So there has to

be an active intervention and translation of these works; otherwise, they may disappear fast, and it would be very difficult to trace back to the roots of these works or even capture them in another language in their authentic form. Symbolism abounds in the material of this entire volume titled Folk Songs of the Maikal Hills, and it forms the core of the songs' poetry, often rendering these songs unintelligible. They are not immediately intelligible to the readers unless the readers are

Symbolism

- Symbolism abounds in the material of this volume, forming the core of the songs' poetry, often rendering them unintelligible without understanding the references.

*"O ho hai! In the middle of the path
Is a creeper heavy with gourds
I have searched in every creeper
Every creeper, but I have found nothing." (237)*



The image shows a slide from a presentation. It has a blue header and footer. The main content is white with a blue border. The title 'Symbolism' is in bold. Below it is a bullet point explaining that symbolism is common in the volume and often makes songs hard to understand without context. A quote in italics follows, describing a search for a wife through a metaphorical journey. To the right of the quote is a small photo of a woman in a pink sari. The footer contains logos and the text 'www.jal...'.

making an attempt, making an effort to, you know, understand the tribal cosmos, the alternative tribal ecosystem. So the readers should have the references clear in their mind if they are to appreciate the tribal poems, the tribal ballads, and myths. Here is one such piece I'm going to read out: 'Oh ho hi, in the middle of the path is a creeper' heavy with goats. I have searched in every creeper, every creeper, but I have found nothing. So a young man's search for a wife has been poetically expressed through this poem, and it tells of a fruitless hunt for goats on creepers, where the creepers symbolize the villages and the goats represent the girl—the girl that the man is searching for and wants to marry. But the entire search has so far been fruitless.

This musical symbolism is interwoven with that of dreams, omens, and riddles, and also draws on folk tales. The authors note that the Gond and Pardhan tribes, I quote, 'think and talk in symbols all their lives.' So they think and talk in symbols all their lives, unquote. Underscoring that the symbolism of the songs is simply the symbolism of their everyday life that has been set to music. Next, we are going to talk about the Sua songs.

Whether in Chhattisgarh or in the Mykal Hills, the swan dance and songs exhibit minimal variation. Women form a circle, bending forward and clapping as they move, their steps imitating a parrot's gait. So at this stage, I would also like to talk about another tribe, a major tribe, the Santalis. Whose dance forms or their dancing style is equally

coordinated. So one thing that informs the dance of the different tribal groups, one common factor, is that the dance movements are highly coordinated.

Sua Songs

- Whether in Chhattisgarh or the Maikal Hills, the Sua dance and songs exhibit minimal variation. Women form a circle, bending forward and clapping as they move, their steps imitating a parrot's gait.
- At festivals, they occasionally carry clay parrots on their heads. The songs frequently feature the parrot as a trusted friend and guide, especially for young married women.



Women performing Sua dance around clay parrots.

Photo credit: Rohit Rajak



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They emulate the planetary movements. And so each unit, each dancer as a unit, is only one strand in the larger pattern. It actually sheds the human egotism about the self being above a community, above everything else. One human is just a strand, just one unit in the larger chain of being, the larger chain of this system, within the larger scheme of things, be it the cosmological movement, the planetary movements. They consider themselves as only a tiny dot.

And so when we interview such indigenous people about where they have learned their dances, they say that they were born with dance and music in their blood. Maybe they learned it from their mother's womb. And that is to an extent true because even the children match the steps so well with the adults, as if they grew up just listening to songs and dancing. There is no such formal training. And yet the steps, the foot movements, are so coordinated.

It intrigues an outsider. It amazes an outsider how well-coordinated and synchronized their movements can be. And how well-disciplined the movements are, how graceful and effortless their movements can be. Actually, they look so spontaneous and natural. At festivals, the tribes occasionally carry clay parrots on their heads.

The songs frequently feature the parrot as a trusted friend and guide, especially for young married women. In the following song, the bird offers comfort with soothing words,

doing its best to console a sorrowful lover. So this is how the sua song goes. You sit with your flute in the cold shadow of the kadam tree. The cows are scattered in the honey-sweet forest.

Listen, little brother, asks the parrot. What sorrow has withered you in the honey-sweet forest? Go home today, little brother. I will look after your cows. There are many such poems where the bird speaks to the sorrowful lover or even to a mahua tree.

The enactment of this conversation, when performed by a tribal, is so interesting. There is another such poem, but I don't have it with me right now. It's a song where the bird and the tree, the mahua tree, sing together. They speak to each other and lament the process of deforestation. They lament how urbanization is stretching its arms, spreading its claws, and causing all the greenery to disappear. So it's a lamentation through a conversation between a bird and a tree. Where will the tree go next, and where will the bird make its nest, right? And the performance is so beautiful. The tribal person who sings it uses a dual voice—first that of the tree, then that of the parrot.

Political Songs

- Elwin and Hivale (1946) record some political songs as well. The most deeply felt songs, however, concern a more ancient grievance: **the loss of land and status due to modern competition.**

Eh hey hai the German-English war
From Jabalpur the lorries run
From Bombay come the cars
The railway comes from Delhi
From Raipur runs the wire
As I was selling sweets
In the Raipur bazaar
The English troops came running
The planes flew overhead. (159)



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Elvin and Hivale recorded some political songs as well. The most deeply felt songs, however, concern a more ancient grievance, as I was saying—the grievance of the loss of land and status. Due to modern competition, modernization, and urbanization, their natural organic way of being is disrupted. This is how the song goes. Eh, hey, hi!

The German-English war. From Jabalpur, the lorries run. From Bombay come the cars. The railway comes from Delhi. From Raipur runs the wire.

As I was selling sweets in the Raipur bazaar, the English troops came running. The planes flew overhead. Do not trick us into decay, as in the old days. The gone Raja, the gone landlord, remitted our taxes. Let us graze our cattle free.

Political Songs

*Do not trick us into decay
In the old days
The Gond Raja
The Gond landlord
Remitted our taxes
Let us graze our cattle free
But today
The Hindu landlord
The Hindu merchant
Taxes twice as much
And snares us with sweet words.*

(162)



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But today the Hindu landlord, the Hindu merchant, taxes twice as much and ensnares us with sweet words. So that grievance of being exploited, of being cheated, is clearly reflected in the poems. Poems become, you know, they actually act as pieces of history. They attest to their past. They are like records of their past experiences.

Once the Gond Raja had the land; now the English have the Raj. Now before you put down your foot, you must blow on the path to clear it. Rama and Lakshman were dwellers in the forest. They chased the deer and killed it when the Gond Raja had the land. So in Gond, you know, tribal poems, there are frequent references to the Ramayana characters and the different chapters, different episodes of the Ramayana.

Political Songs

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Owing to the fact that their geography centers on the Dandakaranya forest, where, you know, a large part of the Ramayana narrative also takes place, where Rama and

Lakshmana stayed with Sita for some time. So we see that in Gond poems, this inspiration, you know, reflects from time to time. These oral narratives also preserve the shared history of the tribe. As W.G. Archer notes, the records of these songs convey the community's sentiments.

And these songs can also be very political in nature. Like some of the previous songs that I just read out, the song I will mention now also has a strong political undertone. Sidhu, why are you bathed in blood? Kanu, Why do you cry, hul, hul?

For our people, we have bathed in blood, for the trader thieves have robbed us of our land. So, to conclude, one of the most devastating aspects of the interaction between tribal or aboriginal peoples and civilization—modern civilization— is the often-resulting destruction of the former's art and culture. So whenever aboriginal culture meets modern civilization, it results in demolishing, destroying, or corrupting the tribal art and culture.

Conclusion

- One of the most devastating aspects of the **interaction between aboriginal peoples and civilization is the often-resulting destruction of their art and culture**. This echoes William Morris's concern about the danger of civilization's current path leading to **the loss of life's beauty** (Elwin and Hivale, 1944).
- Sahu (2024) notes that the *Bihanbora Tales* of the Santhal community, like the widespread Creation Myths, narrate the origins of life and humanity's relationship with Nature.



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This echoes William Morris's concern about the danger of civilization's current path, which might lead to the loss of life's beauty altogether. Nandini Sahu notes that The Bihar Bara tales of the Santhal community, like the widespread creation myths, narrate the origins of life and humanity's relationship with nature, right? which are found in all religious traditions and often held as sacred, are the mystical stories that explain the origins of the universe, life, earth, and humanity, as well as the beginnings of social and natural aspects of existence. However, a general neglect of the tribal knowledge repertoire by mainstream scholarship and academic curricula has led to the exclusion and overlooking of their oral narratives from the literary canon.

So, they have seldom made it to the literary canon. They have never been included as part of the literary canon and something that needs to be taught at school, college or university levels. So this way the culture becomes decadent, dying, evanescent and the larger audience, the larger readers have no clue about such rich tradition even existing. In Odisha, the vibrant oral epics of tribes such as that of the Kondh and the Sora are rarely found in academic syllabi or literary anthologies. Same with other parts of India.

Conclusion

- Creation Myths, found in all religious traditions and often held as sacred, are mystical stories explaining the origins of the universe, life, Earth, and humanity, as well as the beginnings of social and natural aspects of existence.
- However, a general neglect of the tribal knowledge repertoire by mainstream scholarship and academic curriculum has led to the exclusion of their oral narratives from the literary canon. In Odisha, the vibrant oral epics of tribes such as the Kondh and Saura are rarely found in academic syllabi or literary anthologies.
- The Legend of Tara Tarini, a foundational Kondh epic, remains largely unrecognised outside of tribal circles. Such marginalisation continues a cultural hierarchy that devalues Indigenous knowledge systems.



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They do not incorporate it as part of the academic system or academic curricula. And so these areas remain blind spots. They remain highly under-researched. which leaves the desire, which, you know, brings the desire to unravel and study them further. The legend of Tara Tarini, a foundational Kondh epic, remains largely unrecognized, unread or even unresearched outside of the tribal circles.

Such marginalization continues a cultural hierarchy, which devalues the indigenous knowledge systems. So tribal literature, which is largely oral, has historically been sidelined in literary discourse and has been viewed as inferior to written forms by mainstream criticism. And this entire perspective is bequeathed to the Indian academic system by the Eurocentric view, by the European civilization. So the European civilization understands history to be only something that is written, that is a concrete book, a text, a palpable text.

If it is not something like that—if it is more complex, ramified, discursive, and exists you know, in a fluid form among the people, then it is not given the status of literature or art, which is fallacious once again. So we have to understand tribal literature in its own right for what it has to offer, rather than studying or approaching it through Eurocentric perspectives. With this, I come to the end of my lecture today. Let us meet for another topic and another round of discussions in my next lecture.

Conclusion

- Tribal literature, largely oral, has historically been sidelined in literary discourse, often viewed as inferior to written forms by mainstream criticism due to colonial and Eurocentric perspectives (Sahu, 2024).



Thank you.