

Forms and Applications of Folk media in West Bengal: Notes from Empirical Observations

Dr. ¹Sumahan Bandyopadhyay

Abstract: Folk media are a part of traditional media that do a great deal of communication in our society particular in the areas where the reach of conventional media is limited or discouraging. There are a number of folk media traditionally present in predominantly rural West Bengal. An attempt has made in this paper to classify these folk media and to know the current state of their applications. Here evolution of folk media vis-à-vis folk journalism has been discussed. The examples of various forms of folk media have been presented to show that it basically rooted in the particular socio-economic context. Thus one cannot deny the relevance of folk media even today.

Keywords: Folk media, Traditional media, Folk journalism, Caste, Tribal society, Mass communication.

The traditional media has been defined as ‘ The non- electronic medium which works as part of our culture and as vehicles of transmitting tradition from one generation to another generation is called traditional media’(nos.org/srsec335new/ch25).In a country like India we can really be proud of having quite a large number of traditional media. These are divided into a number of types and sub-types representing several regional variations. A quick look into these may allow us to list the following: traditional dance, drama, puppetry, painting, sculpture, song, music, motifs and symbols. Besides these storytelling (*kathakatha*) or narrative discourse plays a vital role in transmitting messages contained in myths, legends, folktales, folkgames etc. The simple riddles, proverbs, rhymes are also forms of traditional media. Traditional media thus represents a form of communication employing vocal, verbal, musical and visual folk art forms, transmitted to a society or

¹ Department of Anthropology, NarasinhaDutt College, Howrah. E-mail: sumahan.b@rediffmail.com, Mob.983052438

group of societies from one generation to another. They are indigenous modes and have served the society as tools/medium of communication for ages (nos.org/srsec335new/ch26). In addition to these oft mentioned folk forms for media communication, there are some interesting folk media in Bangladesh like *chonga*, bell and *kansar*, animal games, farman, dakharkara, sang etc. (Habib, 2008).

Forms of folk media

The folklore as a whole is characterized by a quality of facile communication. Therefore by a natural choice it has been accepted as a folk media. However it is a gross generalization to call entire folklore as folk media as it defeats the other purposes or utilities of folklore. For this the folklore items/ genres can be attempted to classify from the media perspective. Two broad divisions of the folk media are: i. Folk media proper, ii. Ancillary Folk media.

Folk media proper are those items or forms that are used only for the media communication. The dholsaharat, dangradeya, dhyaradeya, chonga, salgira among the Santals are included in this category. It is used directly for communicating a particular information.

Ancillary folk media are those forms of folklore that is traditionally and/or principally an entertaining event, but also used as a vehicle of information. The folk song, folk drama, *patachitra*, dolls and puppetry are some of the popular examples of this category.

There are some forms of folklore, that are not entertaining genres yet may have significant role imparting information. These forms include proverbs, rhymes, riddles, terracotta panel. The proverbs sometimes are created out of an actual event, so whenever people hear it they are reminded of the incident. Therefore it indirectly transmits some information. Thus we find that a sort of inter-genre is there as a category of folk media.

The folk media may be classified on the basis of the substantial nature of the media. Thus it can be divided into following types:

- i. Instrumental folk media (dhol, dangra, dhamsa, sal leaves, chonga)
- ii. Non- Instrumental folk media (folk song, folk drama, puppetry, etc)

This Non-Instrumental folk media can again be divided into various types. These are:

- a. Performance based folk media - folk song, folk drama, puppetry, bahurupee.
- b. Folk literature based folk media – rhymes, proverbs, riddles, ballad etc.
- c. Socio-religious – *lagan supari* among the Lodhas, *girabandha* or *baplagira* among the Santals.
- d. Material folk art based folk media – terracotta panel, *patachitra*.

It cannot be denied that these divisions and subdivisions are often interpenetrating. However for the sake of a simpler understanding on the basis of prominence of feature such scheme is proposed.

Folk media: Its evolution and folk journalism

The evolution of these traditional media should be studied with reference to the technological advancement. In these sense we can make two broad divisions – pre-industrial traditional media and post –industrial traditional media. The post- industrial can again be divided into pre –electronic and post –electronic periods. In all these ages the nature of traditional media has undergone significant changes.

The pre-industrial folk media was technologically less sophisticated. The simple materials available locally were used in the production and perpetuation of the media. It has great flexibility to context. It can instantly reformulate itself in response to the need of the people. However it is guided by the cultural rigidity to certain extent. Folk media is less expensive in comparison to modern media. The folk media transmit the message before a live audience. Its reach is limited, too.

In contrast to the above features of traditional media, contemporary modern media is characterized by high technological sophistication. It enjoys rather more cultural freedom compared to folk media. However the modern media is expensive so far as the infrastructure and production is concerned. In this medium message can be stored. It transmitted or broadcast. The reach of modern media is vast.

So, the modern media have great impact upon the folk media. This modern media is a boon of technological innovation of the industrial period. Before that it was all folk media. The folk media was then attuned to the need of the mechanical social system or the folk society. The folk society as conceptualized by noted anthropologist Robert Redfield was homogenous in nature. It was characterized by face to face interaction. He particularly mentioned four features of this society which according to him is little community. The features of this little community are: distinctiveness, smallness, homogeneity and self-sufficiency (Redfield, 1955). Folk media are very much effective in such little community. In this community economy is depended much on the nature, there is a more or less predictable cycle of economic activity along with seasonal variation. This would allow considerable leisure to engage in entertaining activities. But their entertainment was not bereft of socializing purposes. The folk media used to impart instruction about various issues which were normative as well as practical. The interactions between different societies were limited and each society was less self-sufficient. Here they were content with this iota of information. Folk media also did the balancing job by preaching moral precepts on one hand, on the other by allowing people to playfully criticize the authority or

to do humour with the authority. This would vent the anger of the people. There were little more options for the people to compare folk media with some other entertaining genre, or to take up some other variation.

Post –industrial technological revolution opened a door of immense possibilities. Print media, audio and visual media and then the electronic media came into being. Gradually a deluge of information has been flooding our every moment. Earlier the distinction between information and entertainment remained often blurred in folk media. Now one can sharply distinguish between news information and entertainment. The choice has increased manifold. Side by side if we keep the developments in the socio-economic front, we can understand why such change was imminent in the media .With the growth industrialization, no society remains practically isolated from each other. Exchange of information and also the demand for information are great. People have better options for different channels of entertainment and information tailored to individual suitability. In the industrial set up, the emphasis has been shifted from collective to individual. The economic unit is no more the family or the group. Therefore whatever technological innovation is devised, that has targeted the individual consumer. For this the folk media has to change its conventional mode of delivery.

The present age is a period of simulation. From live performance of folk media we have passed over to hyperreal documentation. Now the 'folk' in the folk media bears symbolic connotation. We consider it a pious duty to document all the vanishing tropes of folk media. It still has a special appeal for the people to experience the performance folk forms. Here it finds its reinvented relevance in disseminating information as folk media. Let us have some examples.

Drumming: It has been one of the oldest forms of folk communication using mechanical means. By beating drums the attention of the people of a large area can be attracted. Disseminating information by beating drum is known by different names such as *dhyana*, *dholdeya*, *dholaharat*, *dangra* in different districts in West Bengal. One case study would throw some light on the nature and practice of this medium as it is prevalent in rural West Bengal.

J.Kalindi (M/ 50) lives in Patpur village of Khatra P.S. in Bankura district. He belongs to the Dom community, traditionally a very low caste in the hierarchy. He is entrusted with the task of *dangradeya* that means informing villagers about the public meeting convened by village *sholoana* (body of villagers or caste panchayat). Usually the news of meeting for the public ceremony and festivals are spread through *dangra*. The *sholoana* appoints him on annual contract. The rate for spreading news by this means in a single village varies from Rs.30 to 40. His name is also enlisted in the Gram Panchayat. This is not a permanent

appointment. Whenever panchayat wants to inform villagers about any government programme, meeting, schemes he is engaged to spread the news by dangra. For this he receives a sum of Rs.159 at present the payment fixed by the government for one unskilled labour as daily wage.

The case of this individual points to the social connectedness of the folk media. This person is by caste Dom who is traditionally the drum beaters on various socio-religious occasions. Earlier a detailed jajmani network used to enmesh him with all other castes. Now that elaborate jajmani system is no more found, however like a remnant of the old arrangement this service caste is still employed in the task of beating drums on an annual contract. For his payment the villagers collectively raise sum as Sholoana subscription. Now when fulcrum of power shifts more on the statutory Gram Panchayat, this institution of local self- governance cannot ignore the importance of this age old arrangement of folk communication. It has also appointed the same person for announcing the official programmes.

Folk Media among the Santals: The Santals have a number of means of communication for making public announcement. *Dhaura*, *Baplagira*, *parkombabergira* are used for this purpose. Dhaura is a branch of sal leaves in which the number of leaves indicates the number of days left for the occasion. It is carried about by godet or dehri or any other person in the village. The person carrying it particularly stands at the crossing of the roads or in the village market where people mastered strong. By waiving the dhaura he catches the attention of the passersby who ask him about the venue and time of the event. Usually the news about meeting, annual hunt or festivals are spread through this. Sometimes parkombabergira(literary means the knot of cot –string) is used to spread information about some urgent meeting. For this knots are tied on the string with about six inches distance so that these remain reasonably visible and the string is tied at the end of staff that is carried by godet or any other villager. By looking at the number of knots one can easily understand the date of meeting. More individuals may be involved in this if the meeting is very urgent and a large number of people spreading over a considerable tract are to be informed.

The baplagira is used for informing the day of marriage at the time of marriage invitation. This invitation is a socio-religious affair as the villagers are informed with sundried rice, turmeric and the baplagira wrapped in sal leaf. The number of knots in the string indicates the date of marriage as with each passing day they untie one knot when last knot is untied it is the day of marriage. Among the Lodhas similar practice is noticed in the name of *lagan supari*. In this case the Kotal of the respective village informs the news and marriage

and invites the villagers by giving betel leaf and betel nut to each of the family. Therefore the main purpose of this ritual is giving particular information.

The traditional media, as they appear among the Santals are embedded in the socio-religious context of their society. Drum beats no doubt convey certain messages that are of social importance, but the spreading information without making a fuss carry symbolic connotation characteristic of their culture. At the time of Santal rebellion they could have informed co-villagers about an imminent event without making any sound which might invite attention of the British forces deployed to smash the rebels. This points to another feature of folk media which is always suitably developed in a particular society according to its needs and ethos.

Entertaining as well as informing: The importance of folklore in generating awareness about government programme has been conceived by the administration. The purposeful use of folklore in this way may not be above controversy as the critiques suggest that the very spontaneity of folklore will be hampered by such indoctrinated creations. But one can deny that the media have always been used as double edged sword – at one side it has spoken in the mouth of the ruler, on the other it has contested the established power. Leaving aside this debate what we notice that the folksongs are being composed on the various burning issues, social evils, government programmes etc. We may cite some examples of Patua songs. This song is on dowry:

Daroga gelo arrest holo jamai Ajoy Das

Pondabirta kar janno holo sarbonash

Chalan dilo bichar tar koren magister

Ponerosal saja holo sunte chatmatkar (Manna, 2012: 82)

(Police Officer came and arrested Ajoy Das, son-in-law/ [He] was ruined for the demand for dowry/ [He] was sent to jail and tried by Magistrate / It is nice that he was sentenced for fifteen years imprisonment/)

Applications of folksong, gambhira, puppetry, patua song, baul for the communication in rural milieu are also reported from Bangladesh (Hossain, 2011). The uses of folk art in social communication in other states of India have been referred to by Mukhopadhyay (1994). He has mentioned the significant role of Jatra of West Bengal, Tamasha of Maharashtra, Swang of Haryana, Koodiyattam of Kerala, Burrakatha of Andhra Pradesh, Therukuttu of Tamilnadu, SahiYatra of Odisha, Ankiyanat of Assam in this regard.

Relevance of folk media

The traditional media has made a large shift in 1960s and 1970s with the convergence of new technology into it in the third world (Lent, 1980). During this time its importance in

the development activities was emphasized. Talking about the importance of folk media Ranganath writes (1976: 25).

‘These media are comparatively cheap. They do not have to be imported and, therefore, involve no foreign exchange, a scarce commodity except for oil kingdoms. They belong to the community and not to individuals, state or private/public industry. Many of the developmental efforts, anyway, have to be aimed at the community as a whole rather than at atomised individuals if behavioural change is to occur There is no threat of cultural colonialism and foreign ideological domination. Also, local talent and localised message would have more credibility than those centralised ones emanating now from state capitals. Folk media are egalitarian. They may prove a better outlet for egalitarian messages than the present elite press, film or radio-TV. There is a commonality about them. Acceptability, cultural relevance, entertainment value, localised language, legitimacy, flexibility, message repetitionability, instant two-way communication, etc. are among their virtues. Folk forms may be better carriers of the 'total' message - welfare of the whole society in the many-sidedness of cultural, economic and social development - for up-lifting the quality of rural life in its entirety rather than bifurcated and narrow message beams such as those of family planning.’

Therefore, the features of folkmedia as it appears include the following features (Ranganath, 1976; Dissanayake, 1977):

- i. Traditional media is close to the life of the people.
- ii. There is a rich variety of folk media in the rural region.
- iii. It is available at the low cost.
- iv. It is relished by the different age groups and both the sexes.
- v. It has a potential of persuasive communication as well as face –to-face communication.
- vi. Instant feedback is possible in traditional media.
- vii. Dissanayake has pointed to the credibility of the traditional media before the masses because of its existence in the rural life and expressing their joys and sorrows, triumph and defeat.

Dissanayake has argued that the peasants feel that the modern mass media is elitist in orientation and mostly aligned to the centers of power. On the other hand the traditional media employ the idiom and symbols that are readily intelligible to these people. To emphasize the importance of traditional media in effective mass communication we can cite two case studies (c.f. Lent, 1980). Vergese and Bhandari studied the comparative effectiveness of *munadi*, a traditional medium of disseminating information followed by drum beating and public address system used by government in generating awareness of a

particular event in rural India. The message was about a particular event in the Primary Health Centre in the village. In the survey conducted after three days of announcement, it was revealed that both the media were effective in transmitting the news. But people above thirty were more informed by the traditional media where as the literate section got the news of public address system better. But all alike prefer the traditional medium.

Another study conducted in Malay by Sargent (op.cit) has come to the conclusion that the interpersonal communication is more important in multi-racial/ethnic society and can be done better through folk media. There are a number of examples that show the importance of folk media in disseminating information and generating awareness.

Boria music, a popular Penang blend of calypso rhythm and traditional music in Malay was used to transmit government information about the use of a new strain of rice In the Boria plays, themes like unemployment, the New Economic Policy, social problems etc were portrayed (Lent: 1980:83). In Nigeria students of the drama department of Ahmadu Bello University experimented with *WasanManoma* i.e. plays for farmers to communicate specific developmental objectives to rural people. They used various folk media, such as masquerade, drumming and dancing, story- telling and songs for this purpose (ibid). Medium of Yellamma songs that are sung in praise of Goddess Yellamma, in northern Karnataka was purposefully rendered to spread the family planning messages. However this experiment was not successful. But another experiment with Yakshagana, traditional dance-drama of coastal Karnataka was more or less a success after a persuasion of long five years. The dance –drama was made to carry the messages of family planning, communal harmony and national unity (ibid). Noted folklorist Professor Barun Kumar Chakraborty has mentioned a number of instances where effective use of folk media can be noticed.¹ Once Dr. Chakraborty was invited in a district level fair at Purulia. There a puppet show was staged. The theme of the show was the detection and eradication of leprosy. The people are usually very sensitive to this disease and do not disclose the onset of disease due to the fear of social ostracism. For this it had become a matter of great concern for the health administrators to identify the diseased persons and run proper medication on them. In the puppet show the puppet doll as patient approaches the puppet doctor with the symptoms of disease. In this way one can be informed how he or she will detect the disease himself or herself. Behind the screen there is one qualified doctor for the quarries to be made before him (puppet on stage) by the audience on the disease. Here as if the puppet is responding. In this way proper awareness and guidance have been made on public health by using a folk media. For awareness on aids dolls were used in West Bengal.

As early as in 1982, Government of West Bengal organized a seminar on the role of Panchayat in folklore. In the seminar it was clearly spelt out that folklore could be

effectively utilized for the purpose of building a democratic structure and awareness about it at the grass root level under active support from the panchayats. It also suggested to include folklore in the development programmes.² Later we have seen that these folk artists have been involved in generating awareness about various governmental programmes.

Endnotes

1. Professor Barun Kumar Chakraborty , Ph. D. , D.litt.was the first Professor and Head of the Department of Folklore, Kalyani University, Nadia, West Bengal. He recounted the incidences in personal communication.
2. Pamphlet. *Loksanskritir Charchai Panchayeter Bhumika*. Sudhi Pradhan and Manik Sarkar. Information and Culture Department. Government of West Bengal, 1982.

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