

Folk Culture of Orissa in the Stories of Manoj Das

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Abstract

Folk literature is the part and parcel of life and plays a paramount role influencing the culture and literature. Folk culture and literature is confined within a limited areas but its impact on the modern literature is immense. The story telling or *kathaparampara* is one of the oldest forms of Indian folk literature. It is deeply rooted in Indian tradition and is enriched by oral and written tales. This form has inspired even the modern Indian short story writers. Manoj Das is one such writers who have used Indian indigenous *kathaparampara* in their writings. His short fiction is medelled on the very tradition of telling stories by synthesizing the folk tales of Odisha. The present paper is a modest attempt how he uses the Indian pattern of telling stories in his short fiction. The stories which I have chosen for the study are “The Submerged Valley” “The Crocodile’s Lady” “Jackal” “The Rain”.

Keywords: Folk tale, folk literature, folk culture.

Manoj Das has brought about an awareness about the rural Indian life. He portrays the life of rural people with concreteness and authenticity. He depicts very effectively and skillfully a way of life of people living in villages, their values, norms, beliefs, attitudes, traditions, customs, superstitions, religion etc, in his stories. The prominent features of rural culture are reflected in the various collections of the short fiction of Manoj Das. He also depicts various facets of human existence in his stories against the background of rural India.

In the story “The Submerged Valley” Manoj Das portrays rapid changes taking place in the life of people living in Indian villages due to developments in science and technology in early twentieth century. The story reflects dominant features of the rural culture. The narrator of the story critically views the ongoing changes in modern society. The story takes place in a village. The story centres around the character of father and son. The father who is an engineer represents modern society. On the other hand, the son who is the child supports the traditional way of life of the villagers. He represents public voice of the villagers.

The authentic rural sensibility is evoked by the setting of the story. At the beginning of the story the narrator describes his village as follows:

We become conscious of our village the day our headmaster asked the students of Class Three to write an essay on the topic. So far we had taken the village for granted-like our breathing or our mother’s love. But thereafter the elements that made the village – the trees, the pools, the Shiva temple and the hillock adjacent to it – had begun to look significant. (SVOS 1)

There is beautiful description of Nature at the beginning of the story. The trees are personified. The narrator while describing the trees states:

The trees that stood in front of our school were as human to us as the one of wandering bull of Lord Shiva. One of the trees looked as if it knelt down in meditation. Two more were never tired of chattering between them. If the teacher had scolded or thrashed us, they seemed to be sympathising with us. At the approach of a vacation they seemed to be talking of the many sweet moments that were in store for us. (SVOS 1- 2)

Further the village is going to be submerged on account of the construction of a dam by the Government. The villagers as well as the narrator got this news. They became gloomy. They came to the narrator's father to use his influence to stop its execution. The narrator states the deep-rooted love of villagers for their native place as follows: "Mother wept. By and by several respectable men of our area visited us and not one of them went back without shedding tears"(SVOS 3).

The 'native place' is the dearest thing to the villagers. The villagers' love for land is a prominent feature of rural culture. They don't want to be separated from their "God given lands".(SVOS 3) The father heard in silence the appeal made by the villagers. Then he reveals the benefits of the construction of the dam. He remains unmoved by the emotional account of the past history of his village and explains:

Where is *Harapa* today and where is Babylonia? Time has licked them off – just for the sake of change. On the other hand, if we are losing our lands, it is for a change for the better, for the welfare of a larger population. And we ought not to ignore the fact that the Government is ready to compensate for our loss and to provide us with every facility for rehabilitation. (SVOS 12)

He consoles the villagers. He tells them about the compensation and rehabilitation schemes of the Government for the affected villagers. At last the villagers reconciled the situation. Half of selected alternative site a valley eighteen miles away. They carried their deities and the bull of Lord Shiva with them. The rest chose cash compensation and dispersed in bazars and towns in search of jobs.

While departing from village, the villagers expressed their attachment to their soil. The narrator states it as: "We heard that on the eve of their departure most of the people rolled on the

ground, crying and beating their heads against it and smearing themselves with the soil” (SVOS4). Five years has been passed since the making of the dam. The writer critically gives details of benefits of the dam as follows: “Three districts has now less to fear from floods. Regulated irrigation gave some boost to agriculture, though increase in population did not let it mean anything more than a statistical satisfaction” (SVOS 5).

The people did not receive benefits which were promised when the village was submerged. After five years, the locality has been completely changed. There were two decent bungalows stood on two ends of the embankment. A cluster of small buildings was constructed for the dam officials. A bazaar has also has established in the locality. In this way, the whole face the village is changed in the process of modernization. For this change, the villagers has sacrificed their native place.

At the end of the story, in summer, the villagers went to see their ancestral place. They greeted narrators father and mother. There was Abolkara (literally disobedient) who has not left the place. Suddenly the water level began to rise. All the visitors left the place by boats and launch except Abolkara, who refused to leave the place. But the father risking his life brought Abolkara in his launch and saved the life of a rude and orphan boy. It shows that though he is practical, he has respect for the forefathers of the village. He has also love for his native place. Thus the story suggests that in the process of change which is encouraged by deliberate measures, a part of the traditional culture may suffer extinction.

In the story “The Crocodile’s Lady” Manoj Das presents the sociocultural life of rural people. Customs, beliefs and superstitions form an inextricable part of rural-religious life. The story takes place in a village from Orissa. Dr. Batstone, the sociologist from the west visits the

village to experience a real Indian village. The writer portrays very effectively the placid village life of the people as follows:

Dr. Batstone who had lived in a city of skyscrapers all his life had expressed a desire to experience a real Indian village. This was before Indian villages were reduced to distorted miniatures of bazars with huge red triangles to glorify family planning, politicians preaching patriotism and bill-boards informing the villagers of the virtues of small savings and cigarettes, and loud-speakers blaring from the community centres. Dr. Batstone relaxed in an armchair on our spacious verandah and muttered to himself, every five minutes, “wonderful, fantastic!”

There was no need to ask him what was wonderful or fantastic. That one could view the whole sky, from east to west, all along one’s journey, was wonderful enough. That a hundred cattle would move through fenceless cornfields with absolute abstinence obeying a tiny tot’s hooting was as fantastic as the Pied Piper’s magic. Wonderful was the huge rainbow, fantastic the revelation that ninety-seven percent of our villagers lived quite contented without having seen a locomotive or a cinema. (SVOS 17-18)

Dr. Batstone gets a wonderful experience when he comes across the head-pundit of the ‘Model’ Lower Primary School of the village. The head pundit Shri Maku Mishra has a teaching experience of forty years without having heard of Hegel or Marx or Freud or Einstein or even Bernard Shaw and Charlie Chaplin.

The writer criticises The *Malika*, an ancient folk epic of prophecies. The people of Orissa have a strong faith in the *Malika*. But this sacred book fails to make any prophecy about the visit of foreigner to their village. Further there is dialogue between the villagers and Dr. Batstone. Dr. Batstone wants to know the way of life of the rural people. It is not easy to present Indian rural life in an alien medium. There is effective use 65 of ‘rustic speech’. ManojDas’ use of rustic

speech adds to authenticity of rural life. He uses Indian idioms and proverbs in their translation.

While presenting the dialogues between Dr. Batstone and the villagers the writer writes:

“Will you believe, Sahib, that he was my cousin, my very own father’s own maternal uncle’s own son-in-law’s own nephew? And hadn’t I done everything for him, from sharing my own pillow with him to doing half the shopping for his marriage? Yet who in this wide world does not know that this treacherous brother-in-law of mine, I mean his ghost, chose to harass me out of the millions and billions of people of my village, within a week of his death? who does not know that for a whole year, till his annual *shraddha* fully satisfied him – and for your information I was obliged to share half the expenses – I never stepped out of my house at night even at the most violent call of nature?” Declared Shombhudas, the money-lender.

“No Sahib, you, after all, are a foreigner. How much are you familiar with the ghosts of this country? You ought not to trust them. If they get a chance they twist the necks of even the exorcists!” revealed the second pundit of school. (SVOS19-20)

A good deal of ‘village sensibility’ is evoked in the story through presentation of supernatural element. Dr. Batstone and the villagers visit riverside. At that time the narrator tells story of a village girl to Batstone. There is a girl who has been married at the age of three and has become a widow at four. One day while bathing in a river side is dragged away by a crocodile. A decade later she suddenly returns in the village. But a strange story circulates; the lost girl has been transformed into a crocodile and married the crocodile who has carried away her. The crocodile, unable to bear separation comes to take her back but got killed by the villagers.

Manoj Das gives an account of a realistic picture of rural culture through the presentation of beliefs, customs and superstitions of the villagers. His character Aditi Chatterjee sums up by commenting on the mystic village environment in the story:

This is a world where everything is predestined. Nothing ever has occurred which could not be predicted. The appearance of the real sahib has inspired the awe of the rustics who could not stop gaping wide-eyed at him. But the awe-inspiring “Sahib” is himself captured into the mysterious environment created by the villagers and he cannot resist himself from falling a prey to their fantasies by asking, “do all these people believe in ghost?”. And definitely, the answer leaves the Sahib spell-bound, who can only utter the word “Fantastic”. (132-33)

The story narrated by the old woman transports us into a mystical world where all reality is temporarily suspended. Like any good folk lore it captures our imagination, a world which can be fathomed by heart and rationality.

Manoj Das has represented his childhood experiences also in his short fiction. His stories are remarkable for its beautiful snapshots of Nature which includes birds, animals, trees, and rustics. He glorifies rural culture for its innocence and simplicity and condemns urban culture for its hypocrisy and artificiality. In “The Jackals” he throws light on the intimate relationship between man and animal. The story also depicts the writer’s nostalgic yearning for rural culture which is disappearing in the process of the globalization. At the background of the story there is a village with the river. There is small forest on the other side of the village. The story centres around the character of Sarveswar, a school going boy. From his childhood, the fearful picture of a jackal had been printed on his memory. The jackal dyed in blue supposed as a supernatural creature increased his terror of the jackals. While returning from school to home at sunset he

used to listen collective howl of jackals. The writer describes this atmosphere with supernatural touch:

... Walking along the river bank, his eyes would revert to the meadow on the other side. That was the time for the jackals to gather amidst the shrubs and make their collective howl, looking at the serene and sad twilight sky. The gait and style of their performance left Sarveswar in no doubt about some ominous significance sealed in the ritual. It filled him with melancholy. (MOS 55)

Then there is an unexpected and unforgettable event that takes place in the life of Sarveswar. The young new teacher plans an excursion into the forest for the senior class students. The writer gives very beautiful snapshots of the forest with its river, trees and flowers which are the dominant characteristics of the rural culture. The writer pens it as:

There was a small forest on the other side of the river. In spring the cuckoos who lived in silence for months at a stretch suddenly made a riot of coos, creating the effect of an indisputable argument assuring everybody of a passionately sweet, romantic tomorrow. The flowers of different hues covering hundreds of trees in a row appeared like a notice prohibiting entry into the fairyland they guarded. (MOS 55)

In the afternoon, Sarveswar with his friends and teacher cross the river to visit the forest. They bring puffed rice and sweetmeats of coconut and jaggery with them. When they reached the forest, they enjoy the flavour of rice and sweetmeats. Their teacher allows them to play in total freedom with some important hints. They start to play hide and seek. While hiding from friends, Sarveswar comes across bushy shrubs with Vainch, the berry which he is very fond of. While busy in search of berries, he finds a pair of piercing eyes of jackal focused on him. He started running fast. The jackal is also running fast but in the opposite direction. Sarva is moving away from his

friends. It is nearly dark. He is frightened and about to burst into a cry. Now the luminous eyes surveying him are not four but six or eight. He listens their howl at sunset. Then he collapses and passes from unconscious stage into a slumber. When he opens his eyes, he notices a mother jackal with her cubs. He feels that she is there in order to guard him. Then his teacher and friends arrive there. They thank God to see him safe.

Now Sarveswar has been a city-dweller all his adult life. But he plans to build a bungalow in his village to pass his last days. On his occasional visits to the village he notices his village fast growing into a bazaar. He is surprised to notice drastic change in his village during the one and half decades. His mind confuses on his decision of shifting from town to village which is growing into a hick town. Here the writer comments on the urbanization of the villages which is an inevitable process. Further Sarveswar comes across Samaresh Devta, the would be builder of the apartment in the village. He informs Sarveswar that he has killed hundred jackals. He is proud of his shooting feats. Sarveswar wants to slap him for his shooting jackals cruelly.

Thus the writer comments on the large scale of deforestation. He criticizes modern man's action of destructing flora and fauna of the forest. Man is destroying eco-friendly atmosphere which results in global warming. In a word, the story is a masterpiece of nostalgic longing for rural culture which stands for rustic innocence, simplicity, love as well as healthy and eco-friendly environment.

In "*The Rain*" Manoj Das glorifies rural culture. The story reflects the writer's nostalgic attitude towards ideal rural life which is changing in the course of modernization. The writer shows a greater sympathy towards traditional rural values. He focuses his attention on the simplicity, innocence, affection and humanistic attitude of the Indian villagers.

The central character of the story is Jaipal. He used to live in air conditioned rooms and cars in the city. He and his companions propose to set up business far from the madding crowd. Jaipal experiences a thrill in the company of nature. He and his would be partners decide to visit the site for their business. He experiences a joy when he watches the river and the meadow. His companions drove away towards their broker's village. Jaipal remains alone in the company of nature. The writer gives very beautiful snapshots of nature. He describes it as:

It was after nearly three decades that Jaipal experienced such a thrill. The ripples on the river surface reflected silver flakes of light from some secret cracks in the overcast sky. Birds flew by with a kind of abandon he had not seen for long; the breeze was tender yet exhilarating, evoking sensations he had not had for years ... (FGS 155)

Jaipal gazes to the river. He experiences highest joy while watching ripples on the river. He experiences much different type the pleasures which he cannot get from the clubs and the cocktail parties in the city. When he looks up, he watches heavier clouds. He receives the first drop of rain. He recollects so many lost moments of his childhood. He takes shelter under the old banyan tree. Then he observes two rustics gazing at him. The writer uses 'animal imagery' to evoke rural sensibility. He puts it as, "The two strangers who sat under the tree and surveyed him with the eyes of a couple of hungry hyenas in the zoo waiting for their daily meat ..." (FGS 156)

Jaipal becomes frightened. When the rustics ask him the price of his costly watch, Jaipal suspects them as thieves. Further they also ask about his pack of notes in his pocket. Now Jaipal's heart begins to beat violently. He thinks that the two rustics will kill him for his costly watch and money. Then the junior rustic disappears. Jaipal feels terribly giddy. He is lonely in the critical situation. Fortunately his car comes with his two friends. He flung himself into the

car. The Junior rustic also arrives from the rain. Here the writer highlights affection, simplicity and humanity of the simple villagers. The writer puts it as:

‘So, the car is back. Good. I fetched my umbrella for Babu – for the sake of his costly watch and his stack of notes. Did you cover your watch with your handkerchief? Wise of you.’ The young man, breathing heavily, unfurled his old and faded umbrella which till then he had kept tucked under his arm, drenching himself. The older villager came closer and bowed to Jaipal conveying his farewell. (FGS 158-59)

Jaipal becomes astonished. He is very much influenced by the simplicity and affection of the villagers. He cancels the site chosen for his proposed business in the village. He does not want to spoil the simple and innocent way of life of the villagers. He wants to preserve rural culture which is changing in the process of globalization. The writer depicts this feeling in a poetic manner. He states:

No, he would never allow a bazaar to crop up here. Long live the banyan tree; long live the tribe of the two he met; long live their wretched umbrella!

He strained his neck to have another glimpse of the banyan tree. It was lost in the rain like an infant in its mother’s bosom. (FGS 159)

The story is a masterpiece of the writer’s plea for the nourishment of rural culture which stands for purity, innocence, simplicity and straightforwardness.

Thus Manoj Das has experienced the rural life in its natural environment and in chaos also. The present story describes an authentic picture of changing rural India under the impact of industrialization. The background, characters and setting are true representation of the rural culture, which leave a deep impact on the mind of the readers. His short stories are made by using

analytical and interpretative methods which are helpful to seek certain observations for the concrete predictions. The stories selected for the actual analysis have the setting of a village or a small town or a rural region. Then these stories are broadly categorized into satires, moral fables and fantasies; and the mysteries and the ghost stories. While analysing the stories first the brief introduction with its thematic occupations is provided. While focusing the folk sensibility in the stories important quotations from the stories are cited to highlight folk background.

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