

THE FOLK TALES OF BIHAR: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Folklore, like all other products of man's artistic endeavour, is an ideological manifestation of human creativity. Folklore includes all myths, legends, folk tales, ballads, riddles, proverbs and superstitions (Dundes 1989). The term *folklore* was first coined by William J. Thomas in 1846. Like other elements of human culture, folklore is not mere the creation of chance. Folklore exists in time and space, and is are current in people's linguistic and social contacts, during the passage of years and accompanying historical change (Thompson 1946).

The folk tale is an important constituent of folklore. Even today the folk tale is one of the principal forms of entertainment and education for a large proportion of the world's inhabitants. In India, for example, millions of people narrate folk tales for entertainment and aesthetic purposes. Folk tales are orally transmitted from one generation to another; often, especially in recent times, this may also occur in written form. Characterised by improbable background, folk tales usually emphasise a moral at the end of the story.

The folk tales of different regions represent the thoughts, ideas, mental state, traditions, manners and customs and even the wit and wisdom of the people of that region. Apart from their entertainment value, they provide an insight into the present and past traditions and culture of the region from which they originate.

Bihar, one of the most important states of India, has a rich tradition of folk culture. 'Panchtantra', the collection of famous Indian folk tales, has its origin in the telling of morality stories to the princes of 'Pataliputra' (Patna – the capital of Bihar). Apart from folk tales, Bihar is rich in numerous ballads and folk songs sung on different occasions either in order to increase the efficiency of human labour or for recreational purposes. Similarly, proverbs and riddles indicate a deep insight into worldly matters.

TYOLOGY OF FOLK TALES

Folk tales are generally woven around supernatural, mythological, devotional, historical, and social topics (Chettiar 1973). Physical and psychological manifestations, the appeasement of wicked spirits, horror situations, devils and evil spirits, human sacrifice and other strange features are the most common elements of folk tales.

The categories and examples of the features we encounter in folk tales are:

1. The supernatural adversary, e.g. a dragon or animal such as a horse and parrot.
2. Magic and magical objects, e.g. the magic ring which causes disappearing, the speaking conch, the flying carpet, a staff which beats the enemy until called off, the magic lamp, etc.
3. Preternatural powers, e.g. the understanding of animal speech, etc.
4. Extraordinary strength.
5. Mission and quest e.g. to fetch three golden hairs of a giant, to free a princess, etc.
6. Loyal relatives, e.g. aunt, grandmother.
7. Unfriendly relatives, e.g. in-laws, stepmother and sister, etc.
8. Supernatural powers, e.g. an ability to see hidden objects anywhere, to unlock any lock, etc.
9. The three spheres of the world – Heaven, Earth and Hell.

The presence of the uncanny in these stories generally seeks to illustrate the triumph of good over evil. The objects of folk tales are panoramic: they may be romantic, imaginative, humorous, based on local traditions, bizarre and might even protest against injustices committed in the past.

UNIVERSALITY AND PARALLELISM IN FOLK TALES

The paradigmatic foundation of an unreal world on real life surpasses the boundaries of any region. The primary features of most of the folk tales of different regions often coincide. In spite of varieties and local peculiarities, the folk tales of different regions share

a common pattern. Stories about the genesis and origin of mankind, animal stories about the supposed cleverness of the jackal, the mischief of the crow and the royal magnanimity of the tiger are recounted throughout the world. The life of a single sister among her seven brothers, the jealousy of a second wife, the villainy of an ogre, the simplicity of a scholar, the ultimate triumph of goodness and virtue, happiness after all trials, worries and deprivation, are some of the basic common features of folk stories not only in different parts of India but also in different countries of the world (Chaudhury 1994).

The similarities between the different elements of the folk tales of different regions were first noticed by Tylor and Lang, theorists of cultural evolution. They developed a theory for explaining these characteristics, known as parallelism, arguing that several cultural elements evolve in parallel and almost simultaneously in different societies. The universal human psyche transcending the limits of time and geographical boundaries forms the most logical basis for explaining such similarities in the folk tales of different regions. The essence of the universal psychic unity lies in a similar human response to his surroundings under similar socio-cultural conditions (Prasad 1989).

NON-VERBAL MESSAGES IN FOLK TALES

Generally balance in folk tales is achieved through underlying meaning and appeal. Different kinds of folk tales have different effects on people. Years ago, when learning from written sources was less common, folk tales, with their hidden moral values and lesson, functioned as the promoters of personal development and socialisation of the people of India. “Panchtantra” and “Fatak Katha” illustrate this quite well. Some of the morals and messages commonly found in folk tales are:

1. Good will eventually triumph and evil will be punished. – Everyone gets his just deserts.
2. Truth comes to light.
3. The lesson of kindness.
4. Warning against making a foolish commitment for temporary gain.

5. A friend in need is a friend indeed.
6. Greed leads to great loss.
7. Bad deeds do not lead to good results.
8. Might makes right.

Folk tales include warnings, e.g. to rulers (a simple peasant kills a king in disguise, a rat or a rabbit defeats an elephant or a tiger), help preserve tradition and avoid certain taboos.

Below we present some folk tales of Bihar with comments as to the contents, characters, interpersonal relations, etc.

Bawan Ganga

Once there was a poor low-caste man who eked out his living by hiring himself out as a field-labourer and by rearing pigs. The man had a daughter whose duty it was to drive pigs to the field. While grazing pigs one day on the full moon of an important festival, the girl saw a young Brahmin hurrying by. She was curious why he was almost running and asked him the reason. The Brahmin replied that he wanted to reach the river Ganges and bathe at the time of the full moon. The girl smiled and told him that he could not possibly reach the river Ganges in time, as the river was far away, but that she could solve his problem. The Brahmin wanted to know what she had in mind. The girl pointed to a dirty pool where her pigs were wallowing and told him that if he had real faith in his heart and if he had complete trust in her, he should dip into the pool, and she would bring about the exact auspicious moment of the full moon, and he, in turn, would earn all the merit of bathing in the Ganges. The Brahmin dived into the pool and found the bottom full of jewels and brought out a handful of them. The girl wanted him to dive again and he did so once more. This time he found mud at the bottom. The girl then told him that he had got the reward he deserved for the implicit faith in his mind and his confidence in her. The astonished Brahmin was very attracted to the girl and proposed marriage. The girl blushed, but smilingly said that she could not marry without her father's consent.

The Brahmin youth approached the father but the father did not wish to accept a high caste man. The young Brahmin was heart-broken at the refusal and threatened to commit suicide.

The father was frightened of being responsible for the death of a Brahmin and reluctantly gave his consent. The marriage was duly performed. When the bride and groom were taking their leave, the father wanted to give a dowry. The girl told her husband secretly that he should only ask for a particular cow, a particular pig and a particular parrot. The poor man was taken aback at the son-in-law's request, but was obliged to grant the gifts asked for. The bridegroom and the bride left the village.

The parrot was not an ordinary bird. It had access to Lord Indra's court and visited it every day, bringing its mistress news of happenings in the court. The pig was the leader of all the pigs in the country; the cow was a "Suravi" or the auspicious cow that yields plenty.

The Brahmin boy and his wife lived very happily. One day the parrot brought the girl news that Indra had decided that in the approaching rain season there would be no rain anywhere in the districts except for on the barren hills and valleys of Rajgir. Everywhere else there would be famine. Hearing the news, the girl asked her pig to dig up the entire barren hillside and valleys with its herd of swine, which it also did. Then she asked the Suravi Cow to manure the fields, and that was also done. Then the girl asked her husband to sow rice in the dug-up area. The Brahmin husband was very puzzled but did as his wife requested. After some time it rained and that particular area was congested with rice. The couple supplied food to the other areas where the harvest had failed.

Indra was perturbed that his plan to bring about a famine had been thwarted. He ordered an army of rats to destroy the crops. The parrot smuggled the news out to its mistress, and the Brahmin husband procured an army of cats to guard the crop and the rats fled. Indra was furious and ordered a storm to be raised when paddy was being cut and stored on the threshing floor; the idea being that the grain would thus be blown away. Again the parrot brought the news and the girl advised her husband to dig a deep moat round the wall at the foot of the hill. This was done. The storm came but the paddy remained safe in the trench. This way the country was saved from famine because of the virtues, cleverness, and also resourcefulness of the girl.

The moat is still there. The pool in the southern defile of the south gate of the hill-girt Rajgir, where the pigs used to wallow, was named Bawan Ganga, or the Fifty-Two Ganges.

Bawan Ganga is a water-pool near Rajgir in Nalanda District and is associated with a folk-tale fondly recited by the people of Rajgir area. Rajgir, with its ancient relics, has been the seat of many kings and saints. The place, associated closely with Buddhism and Jainism, is picturesque and attracts many visitors.

The story is quite complex and multilateral. Man has always cherished a desire to have control over supernatural powers, or at least have a source of communication with them. In the story he fulfils his desire. Several stories centre around the fight between ordinary man and supernatural being, and this story is one of these. Some of the basic values and morals contained in this story are the following:

1. An ordinary man can defeat a great ruler if he is just and intelligent.
2. It reflects the people's belief in three spheres of the world – Heaven, Hell and Earth.
3. The main female character possessed the ability to understand animal speech.
4. The story shows how animals and birds contribute to the life of a happy couple.
5. This story also refers to the established social practice that a girl cannot marry without her father's consent.
6. Marriage alliances between young women of low caste and young men of high caste were not unknown.
7. This story also reveals that virtue and merit are not the monopoly of people of high caste.
8. The story supports the ingenious and highly imaginary theory about a great cyclopean stone wall at Rajgir which still exists; and through this an attempt is made to render the story more realistic and associate it with a particular place.

Vermilion and marriage

Four Oraons (members of a tribe) were fast friends from boyhood. They used to dance together on the same dance floor and had sworn mutual friendship.

When growing up they took to different professions. One of them hawked vermilion, another became a weaver, the third took to wood carving and the fourth became a goldsmith.

Once they came upon the idea of going and seeing new places while earning their livelihood. They took their tools and started walking.

They visited many places. Once they had to spend a night in a mango orchard. After having their meal they decided that as it was an unknown place they had better take turns in keeping watch overnight. The wood-carver was the first to keep the vigil while the other three slept. After some time the wood-carver got tired of sitting idle and, taking up a piece of dry wood, he chiselled it into a female figure. He put the woman thus shaped on her feet and woke up the goldsmith to take his turn.

The goldsmith got up and after a while spotted the wooden figure. He thought, "She is a lovely girl but she needs an ornament". So he made a gold chain and put it around her neck. He also made a pair of earrings and bangles and put them on her. He then woke up the weaver and went to sleep. During his vigil the weaver saw the wooden woman, admired her figure and ornaments and started thinking, "Something is missing. Ah, she should have a sari". That very minute he counted up the threads for a sari and wove a garment. Very fondly he wrapped her in it. He then woke up the vermilion-hawker and saying, "Your turn has come, brother; please be on the watch," he retired. The hawker, while on the watch, saw the wooden woman and anointed her forehead with vermilion just at daybreak. The wooden woman came alive and stood there, a coy and beautiful damsel.

The four friends started quarrelling as to who should marry the girl. The wood carver said that if he had not given her a shape she would have remained a log. The goldsmith claimed her for the ornaments he had given her. The weaver said, "I gave her clothes so she is mine". The hawker insisted that he had the best claim.

While the four friends were quarrelling they saw a holy man coming. They made him their arbiter.

The holy man heard the claims of the four friends and said, "He that made her is her father; he that clothed her is her elder brother; he that gave ornaments is her uncle; but he that brought her to life and put vermilion on her forehead is her husband."

The four friends bowed to the decision and the woman became the wife of the hawker.

The story refers to the custom prevalent among the tribes of Chotanagpur, that "Sindur-daan" or applying vermilion on the forehead of a girl means that she is married to the boy who does so. The story tries to preserve tradition.

Even today marriages are forced this way in tribal society. This custom is also cleverly exploited by couples who have fallen in love. At the weekly fair a boy suddenly appears before a girl and applies vermilion on her forehead. The girl's parents are then forced to recognise the marriage.

This story also reveals that fighting for a girl has always been a common practice in Indian society. At the same time the story supports the proverb that one who possesses skills cannot sit idle. The four friends were all endowed with skill, and rather than sitting idle they preferred to work, even at night, and could also enjoy the fruits of their labour.

The two friends

Once there were two close friends who both possessed supernatural powers. One could judge the quality of rice and the other the personalities of men. Both of them started a long journey to see the world. They passed many small villages and then came to a large village which was the seat of the Raja. They went to the Raja's court and were hospitably received and asked to stay as guests. They agreed, but when rice was served, the man who could judge its quality refused to eat. The other man refused to eat vegetables. The Raja was informed and, as the usual custom is, wanted to have their food. They said they had reasons for refusing the food. The Raja asked them, "Please, tell me why you refuse".

Thereupon the first man said, "Oh, Raja Saheb, the paddy of which the rice was served to me was grown on a piece of land which was once a burning ghat. I can smell the ashes of the burnt bodies and wood." The Raja then turned to the other man and asked him why he was refusing to take the vegetables and told him that his own daughter had cooked them. The second man replied, "Oh' Raja, I am very sorry if I am rude. But your daughter's breath has wafted to the vegetables. The food has a strong smell of goat's milk. I think that as a child your daughter was nursed on goat's milk." The Raja at once sent for the Rani to find out the truth.

The man sent out earlier returned and told the Raja that about thirty years ago there was a patch of land used for burning corpses. Paddy had been growing there since and the rice given was of the paddy grown there. The Rani, too, confirmed that as she had not had sufficient milk she had nursed his daughter with goat's milk.

Perceiving that both of his visitors were right and had supernatural powers, the Raja persuaded them to stay in his court. The two friends accepted the proposal and from then on lived in the Raja's court.

This story is quite bizarre and could be classified under the category of possessing supernatural skills. If today anyone were to claim to possess such powers, he would not be taken seriously. People, however, tend to accept the information contained in folk tales as being true.

CONCLUSION

India has a long and varied history, and its people are of most diverse origin and of different religious traditions. As might be expected, the folklore of India reflects this diversity of history and population. Several old literary collections of tales have been popular among the population for centuries.

Folk tales, like other genres of folklore of any society, reflect emotions, needs, conflicts and other aspects of human psyche that people acquire as a result of growing up in a specific culture. Folk tales are probably the most crystallised and apt expression of hu-

man thoughts. The study of folk tales prevalent in a society helps to understand the common universal elements on the one hand and certain characteristic traits specific to that society on the other.

The present article is based on an attempt to introduce some of the popular folk tales of Bihar.

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