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THE KIND TIGER AND THE TRUTHFUL COW: FOLK DISCOURSE IN ORAL AND WRITTEN LITERATURE

Mahendra Kumar Mishra

It was a June evening in Bhubaneswar in 1993. My children asked me to tell them a story, so I started narrating the well-known story “The Old Tiger and the Golden Bangle” about how an old tiger could not catch prey, so he cleverly promised to give golden bangles to anyone who would take a dip in the nearby pond. None but the greedy Brahmin believed it, and when he was taking a dip, the tiger ate him.

No sooner was the story completed than my grandmother told me, “Don’t you know, my boy, that if the Brahmin had made the tiger to take a vow before entering the pond, it would not have eaten him up.” I was a bit puzzled to hear this misrepresentation of a well-structured Sanskrit tale. Why should the Brahmin have taken a vow from the tiger? My grandmother explained that tigers like any other creatures follow the truth. To this point, she in turn related the story of “Baula the Cow”:

A Brahmin had a cow named Baula, who used to go to the forest all by herself. One day on her way back from the jungle she met a tiger. The tiger wanted to eat her up, but Baula told the tiger that she had a three-day-old calf that was very hungry. She pleaded the tiger to let her go back and feed it, promising to return after she had fed the calf. She repeated the promise three times and the tiger let her go. Baula fed her calf and returned to the tiger as promised, her calf running after her. When the tiger saw Baula and the calf, he could not believe it. Out of pity he let the cow free.

Another case in point would be the epic story “Savitri and Satyaban”, where the protagonist is Yama, the god of Death, who returns Satyaban back to life as his death had kept him from fulfilling a promise to his wife Savitri.

In the Sanskrit story “The Old Tiger and the Golden Bangle”, the tiger’ character is quite realistic, whereas in the tale “Baula the Cow” the tiger is portrayed unrealistically as a kind-hearted character. Tigers are commonly regarded as cruel animals and not depicted as kind-hearted, therefore the tiger in the Baula tale appears unnatural. A parallel can here be drawn with stepmothers: the cruel stepmother is a common motif in folk tales, while the kind stepmother is very uncommon.

Dan Ben Amos has correctly observed the social “order” and “disorder” current in the tradition of African folklore. According to him the creation of “order” is an attempt to conceptually duplicate reality verbally, to tell history as it is, to narrate experience as they really happened and to recount visions as they were actually seen. In contrast, narratives of “disorder” are for all intent and purpose verbal creations that establish a world of a different reality, one that is unknown to either speaker or listener (Ben Amos 1978).

“Order” in a narrative is hereby understood as the actual reality, and “disorder” as the imaginary reality. Any piece of literature, either oral or written, is a part of the imaginary reality. For instance, myths, legends, folk tales, oral epics and epic performances are full of imaginary realities with the underlying actual reality. A good piece of literature expertly creates an imaginary reality through the use of similes, metaphors and symbols.

Thus, disordered narratives are just as important as ordered ones. “The creation of disorder,” says Amos, “could be interpreted as a verbal creation of wishful reality, a desired state of affairs that does not exist” (Ben Amos 1978). The disordered narrative depicting a wishful reality created by the group mind allows us to examine the narratives in terms of “order” and “disorder”. The basic questions to ask here are:

1. Why is there the “disorder” in a universally accepted character, such as a cruel tiger turning into a kind-hearted tiger? Why do people create and accept this?
2. Why do people alter “ordered” literature and create different narratives?
3. Why is there a difference between “order” and “disorder”?

We can also view contemporary Indian oral and written tradition from these points of view. Folklore is the collective creation of people: it has content, form, characters, performance context and social function; it carries meaning, communication and transformation. Oral narrative presents the minds of both the creator and the listener. Literature, whether oral or written, has individual, social and verbal implications. Verbal performance carries a meaning as well as has a specific purpose. Oral tradition not only represents social realities but also attaches importance to imaginary realities. So literature, or any piece of art, is an embodiment of reality and imagination. Any narration takes form depending on the age of the narrator, place of performance and the audience addressed. Oral expression is the individual's creation embedded with cultural components of the society; no narrator stands outside society. If the audience finds the narration acceptable, the narrator has been successful. Thus it is the audience that determines the success of a narration. If the audience appreciates the disordered content of a particular narrative, they must be trying to identify themselves with the imaginary reality that does not exist – but they like it and believe it to be true.

The aim of the current paper is to identify how social order and disorder are reflected in oral tradition. The main question is why a particular character or event that is socially accepted as “ordered” is found “disordered” in folk literature. Why does this role reversal take place? To examine these points, let us elaborate on some narrative motifs common in the Indian society:

1. Fire and women in the Indian society. Fire ordeal for women.
2. The status of the youngest and eldest brother in the society.
3. The sacred place: the temple, the city or the jungle?
4. Weak character versus strong character.

1. FIRE AND WOMEN IN THE INDIAN SOCIETY

Indian literature includes innumerable motifs of fire and of fire as related to women: being born of *Agni*-fire (e.g. Parvati), undergoing fire ordeal (e.g. Sita), taking a daily bath in fire (e.g. Draupadi) are but some examples. Indian women have a close link with fire from birth to death. Fire symbolises the purity and austerity of women.

The Indian woman takes a vow before sacred fire to accept one husband for life; the fidelity of women is tested in fire ordeal.

The authority of man over woman was the law in traditional India. This was owing to two purposes: to keep the women chaste, and to have rights on women's property. There are female goddesses in India (Durga, Laxmi, Saraswati, Parvati, etc.), but in real life women are tortured, sexually abused, raped and murdered for bride price. Could it be that the worship of women as goddesses is a compensation for women's low status in the society? Is it not then the wishful reality to compensate for the natural loss through cultural sanction, i.e. creating female goddesses?

Why fire ordeal for women only? Why not for men, too? Are there any cases of males undergoing the fire ordeal to prove his austerity? Not only in the great epic *Ramayana*, but also in many oral epics and narratives, the heroine has to make the fire ordeal to prove her chastity. In *Ramayana*, Sita had to undergo fire ordeal to establish her chastity, even though Rama did not doubt her chastity.

Interestingly, in addition to *Ramayana*, there is a good deal of other mythological narratives where the heroine is to face fire ordeal to prove her chastity. Could this be due to the fact that these stories are written by men and thus represent male-dominated values? There is no evidence of protesting against the fire ordeal; on the contrary, women who have sacrificed their lives in fire are deified. The worship of such *satee* in the form of "sati stone" is evident in *Orissa*, *Rajasthan* and *Madhyapradesh*.

One uncommon motif rejecting the stereotypes of fire ordeal for women only is found in the folk tradition of central India. The case in point is the oral epic *Lakshman jati*, sung by the singers of Baiga community. The uniqueness of this oral epic lies in the fact that it is a folk version of the *Ramayana* episode with Lakshman, the younger brother of Rama undergoing the fire ordeal instead of Sita. The story of the epic goes as follows:

On their wanderings, Rama, Lakshman and Sita stopped at a Baiga village. Lakshman used to play kikri-fiddle every night. His wonderful musical skills and the sweetness of the music attracted Indrakarnini – the heavenly maiden. She offered her love

to Lakshman, who refused her for the reason that he had been a Brahmachari for fourteen years and had not even touched the shadow of a woman. Out of anger, Indrakarnini took revenge on him by leaving her bangles and earrings in his bedroom. Lakshman did not know about this. In the morning when Sita cleaned Lakshman's room, she found the broken bangles and earrings and reported to Rama. Rama called a village meeting where each and every woman was examined with the bangle and earrings. Curiously, the earrings and bangles fitted only Sita. Rama's suspicion fell on Lakshman, so he had to undergo fire ordeal. He came out safe and proved his fidelity. Everyone was happy; but out of grief, Lakshman entered the nether region Patala.

The narrative purports the “disordered” events and characters of *Ramayana* in tribal context. Why did Lakshman have to undergo the fire ordeal? Why not Sita? Things become clearer when we look into the context of the Baiga society and culture.

The cultural context of this epic is the Baiga society. The epic song *Lakshman jati* is performed with the accompaniment of the *kikri-fiddle* by the bards of the Baigas. The Baiga bards have moulded the character of Lakshman into a bard who is a member of the Baiga community. Lakshman had not accepted Srupanakha (sister of Ravana, who is the villain of the *Ramayana*) despite her request and in this epic story, Indrakamini was also rejected. But when Lakshman was suspected by his elder brother Rama, what could he do? Here it must be kept in mind that the heroes of *Ramayana* had no tradition of adopting non-Aryan women during their wanderings. They did not even consider the possibility of having more than one wife. The situation is reversed in *Mahabharata*: Bhima and Arjun fell in love with the Naga, Rakshsa and Jakhya girls on their wanderings and did not hesitate to identify them as their wives. However, in *Ramayana* this is a sin. Thus, Lakshman had to undergo a fire ordeal.

Furthermore, the flexible relationship of the younger brother with his elder brother's wife was common in tribal society. For the sake of the honour of having one, the relationship could also be fictitious. But the most important motif in this narrative is that instead of Sita, Lakshman had to undergo the fire ordeal, which clearly

indicates the male-female equality in tribal society. Therefore the man has to be examined for fidelity first, and only then the woman. So, singers have reinterpreted the written text to fit their socio-cultural context.

2. THE ELDEST BROTHER AND THE YOUNGEST BROTHER

In the traditional Indian society, the eldest brother always becomes the king and the youngest brother carries his sunscreen. So the relationship of the youngest brother with the eldest is like that of an umbrella over the throne; but the umbrella has no power. Similarly, the eldest brother in the family possesses the utmost power in the Indian society. In royal families the eldest brother was to become the king after his father, not the youngest. In South India, the eldest son of a Nambudri Brahmin could become a priest, while the youngest brother could not. The social rules of the Indian tradition thus left no room for the younger brother, though it is true that in the absence of parents, it is the eldest brother who nourishes younger ones.

In the Indian joint family system, the eldest brother is entitled to enjoy the land and property on a bigger scale than the younger ones. Traditionally, younger brothers do not fight against the elders. There is little evidence of a youngest brother ascending the throne at the cost of his elder brother. Therefore in *Ramayana*, Bharata (the younger brother of Rama) did not ascend the throne even though he had the opportunity. Instead, he put Rama's shoes on the throne and ruled Ayodhya during Rama's exile for fourteen years.

In classical epics and *puranas*, we witness that the eldest brother enjoys enormous power. The youngest brothers are never depicted as prominent in the Purana and Kavya tradition. In *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* younger brothers like Satrugna, Nakula and Sahadeva were not as glorious as Rama, Lakshmana, Arouna and Bhima. In a way, this explains why Rama and Laxman are worshipped, and Bharat or Shatrughna are not.

On the other hand, in many regional epics, folk tales, romances and oral epics the hero is a younger brother.¹ He leaves the house

being neglected by elder brothers and their wives. Then he gets a divine blessing and enjoys supernatural powers, makes the impossible possible, wins the enemies, has success in love and war. He regains his lost power from his elder brothers; in some cases, the youngest brother kills the eldest brother.

The importance of the younger brother in folk tales is a universal motif. In the story "Search for the Golden bird" (AT 550) the king has promised half the kingdom to whoever fetches the golden bird. Out of three brothers, none other than the youngest brings the golden bird and is awarded with half the kingdom (Thompson 1960).

The Gond and Bhunjia tribes of Western Orissa have a number of folk tales, which heroize the youngest brother. The precise form of such a tale is as follows:

There lived an old man and his wife. They had two sons. The elder brother was hard working and took care of his parents. The younger was a lazy one, never doing any work. One day the old man rebuked his younger son, saying "You are an ass. You should die. I do not want to see your face anymore. Get out of my house." So the younger brother left his house. Before leaving the village, he met the girl he was to marry. No sooner had he completed his story than he turned into an ass. The girl felt very sorry for him and left the village with the ass. She went to another kingdom where all the women were infertile. The king of that country asked the girl to do something about it. The girl worshipped a dry sal-tree. All of a sudden the tree sprouted leaves; and when the tree bloomed, all women in the kingdom became pregnant. The youngest brother transformed back into a human, too. The king was so grateful that he gave them half the kingdom.

Another story about Gonds goes like this:

An old Gond had seven sons. All but the youngest, Chittal Singh were married. One day the eldest five brothers killed him in the field, but Mahaprabu brought him back to life. He left the village vowing to revenge his elder brothers. He had acquired supernatural powers from the goddess and he had three friends with supernatural power, who agreed to help him. Chittal married the daughter of a demoness. When his wife was abducted by a tantric yogi,

he killed the yogi. On the way back from there, he faced a formidable foe, but killed him. Finally, on his way home he killed all his elder brothers, except the sixth brother who had favoured him.

In tribal society the struggle for power and land with elder brothers not giving the youngest their equal share is constant. So the younger brother is a hero in narratives, tales and epics, whereas in real life he is neglected and in the *Purana* and *Itihasa* (myths and epics) the eldest brother is a hero.

3. THE SACRED PLACE: THE TEMPLE, THE CITY OR THE JUNGLE?

Today, cities are the accepted centres of power. The ruler and the capital are the powers which rule the state; villages and jungle have no power. However, in actual fact the sources of revenue is not the cities; village people give power to the ruler. When power is violated, it is people that change the system. Power is shifted from one ruler to another.

In the Indian tradition, the sage, or *sanyasi* was more powerful than the king. The importance of sages is manifest in *Purana* and *Itihasa*. Powerful rulers needed the blessings and advice from sages to govern their state. The inauguration ritual of the new king was performed in the presence of sages supported by tribal chieftains, symbolising the recognition of the king by the people as well as the king's acceptance of his position. The king's deviation from laws was considered improper for rulers and was subject to criticism by the sages.

The question of the sacred and profane is important in the Indian culture. Temples are commonly considered more sacred than any other place. People have created a number of beliefs as to what is sacred and profane, attaching values and attitudes to places and things. Those values and concepts can be seen in the form of practices, rituals and rites. Temple is a sacred place, but in tribal and folk tradition there is a more sacred place than the temple – the jungle. Although it is a sacred centre, the purity of the temple is

maintained through certain rituals. Orissa, the place of origin of several gods and goddesses, is considered to be an eternally sacred place. All gods and goddesses originate in some temple, cave, mountain, or river far away from human settlements; then some priest discovers the god or goddess in the jungle, and the king of the state builds a temple and installs statues. Some examples to the point would be:

Original form	Neelamadhab Stone image	Manikeswari	Rakatmaili	Duarsani
Priest	Savara	Kshyatriya	Kandha Tribe	Bhunjia
Place	Neelagiri	Kashi pur, jugsai-patna	Palmagarh	Guru- dangra
Installed form	Lord Jagannath Balabhadra Subhadra	Manikeswari	Raktambari	Duarsani
Priest	Brahmin	Brahmin	Brahmin	Gond
Place/ temple	Puri	Bh. patna	Khariar States	Boden

Interestingly, in Kalahandi it is believed that the original power (*sakti*) of the gods and goddesses lies in their place of origin and not the temple. So every year during the Dashara festival, a ritual of symbolically bringing *sakti* from the place of origin, is conducted; this is believed to give the goddess of the temple a new life. Soon after the ten-day Dasahear ritual is over, the *sakti* is taken back to the place of origin through another ritual.

The above tells us that the non-human existence of gods in the jungle is pure and sacred, whereas the human relationship with gods in temple is less pure. Sometimes the temple relationship becomes even profane when the rules and practices for retaining purity are not followed. Hence, the reincarnation of temple goddess via *sakti* from their place of origin validates them. The logic behind this practice is that it is the man who contaminates the place, and for purification the presence of a divine power is needed. The jungle is sacred, as it is the abode of gods and goddesses.

Kandabora is one such rite practised by the Bhunjia tribe of western Orissa that symbolises the sacredness of the jungle. The Bhunjias believe that it is the sacred jungle that purifies the impure human being. The rite is as follows:

Kondabore is a symbolic ritual of the Bhunjias where the girl is married to an arrow before she reaches puberty. But if a girl attains puberty before the Kondabora rite, she is considered sinful and the house, as well as their god becomes impure. The common practice among the Bhunjia is that if a girl attains puberty in her father's house before the Kondabora, she is exiled to the jungle and tied to a tree till her uncle or close relatives rescue her.

The Bhunjia consider the jungle to have supernatural powers to purify the girl. The Bhunjia worship a living tree, which is the symbol of the purity of gods and goddesses. The tree is sacred, but the man is not; the man is impure. Gods and goddesses speak through humans only so long as the mind and heart of the mediator are pure.

In rural and tribal India, the jungle has been the centre of power and attainment of truth, vision, and aesthetics. The non-human is something related to spirit and nature, while the existence of the human is impure.

4. WEAK CHARACTER VERSUS STRONG CHARACTER

In folk tales, strong characters are less intelligent than the weak. Such motifs are common in animal stories, for example. Such oppositions are most evident in the oral tribal epics; minor ethnic groups portray the stronger ethnic group exercising power over them as inferior. So, in a way, the smaller ethnic groups have a strong sense of solidarity to retain their ethnic identity and superiority (Mishra 1995).

SUMMARY

The creation of such worldviews and ideologies is parallel to the written discourse: the wishful realities created by people. The whole picture of the Indian society and culture can not be understood unless one considers the discourse in the context of the Indian folk tradition. On the other hand, written discourse represents only the “ordered” society. Hence the creation of the “disordered” in folk tradition is only to counteract the forces dominant in society. Thus folk discourse reveals another reality of the Indian society, a different worldview of the “ordered” society.

Comment

¹ Similarly, in folk tales and oral epics, the younger sister-in-law, younger sister, younger daughter is first neglected and then regains her valour.

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