

Jawaharlal Handoo, a Legendary Hero of Folklore Studies in India

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I had the profound privilege of meeting Professor Jawaharlal Handoo (1945–2025) in the year 1985, during the IXth Indian Folklore Congress hosted at Sambalpur University, India. At that time, folklore had yet to gain formal recognition as a full-fledged academic discipline within Indian universities, unlike the more structured presence it enjoys today. I had presented a research paper titled “*Female Infanticide among the Kondh Tribes of Kalahandi*”. Following my presentation, Dr. Handoo approached me with a keen interest in my work. I informed him that I was a student of literature, and I had arrived at the university to submit my doctoral thesis on the folklore traditions of Kalahandi.

To my astonishment, he invited me to his guest house for an in-depth discussion on the emerging contours of folklore studies. It was during that intimate exchange that I first realized folklore was not merely a peripheral cultural pursuit but a prestigious and evolving academic discipline in its own right. When I confessed my limited familiarity with global folkloristic theories and methodologies, Dr. Handoo graciously promised to invite me to a specialized workshop, where I could deepen my understanding and engage with the broader, international discourse on folklore studies.

Dr. Handoo, alongside Dr. Dulal Chaudhuri of Calcutta, was instrumental in establishing the Indian Folklore Congress, a pioneering platform that galvanized scholarly discourse across the country. Together, they organized a series of folklore seminars in collaboration with universities and cultural institutions throughout India. Over a span of four decades, no fewer than thirty-five

seminars were conducted, attracting scholars, academicians and researchers from both India and abroad.

In India, folklore often finds itself caught between disciplinary boundaries. Anthropologists tend to view it as an extension of literature, while literary scholars often relegate it to the domain of anthropology. This disciplinary ambiguity has led many literature departments to undervalue or overlook the study of folklore altogether. During our conversation, Dr. Handoo urged me to take folkloristics seriously following the theoretical frameworks originating in the western world. Inspired and guided by his wisdom, I embarked on a scholarly journey into folklore studies through a more structured, comparative and theoretical lens.

Since that formative encounter, I have remained a devoted admirer of Professor Handoo – whose vision, mentorship and unwavering commitment to Indian folkloristics have left an indelible mark on generations of scholars.

In October 1986, I was deeply honoured to receive an invitation from Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo to participate in a fifteen-day intensive course on Folklore Theory and Methodology, held in the historic city of Calcutta. This meticulously curated workshop, led by Dr. Handoo himself, proved to be a turning point in my academic journey. Under his erudite guidance, I was introduced to the theoretical frameworks, research methodologies, and critical paradigms that shaped global folkloristics. His teaching was not merely instructional – it was transformative. Recognizing my fervent commitment to the field, Dr. Handoo nominated me to serve as the Regional Secretary of the Indian Folklore Congress (IFC), a responsibility I held with great pride for five consecutive years.

During this period, we collaboratively organised several annual sessions of the Indian Folklore Congress in various Indian universities, fostering dialogue and scholarship among researchers, students and cultural practitioners. In 1994 and 1996, Dr. Handoo and I jointly convened three significant folklore workshops and seminars across Odisha, bringing the discipline into the heartland of indigenous oral traditions.

A landmark event unfolded in 1995, when Dr. Handoo, then the Head of the Folklore Unit at the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysore, orchestrated the prestigious 9th Session of the International Society for Folk Narrative Research (ISFNR) – the first of its kind to be held outside of Europe. Hosted at CIIL, the conference brought together over 400 eminent folklorists across the globe. The presence of a diverse range of folkloric genres and sub-genres elevated the status of global folkloristics, inspiring Indian scholars to recognise the urgent relevance and global resonance of folklore studies in the national context.

Dr. Handoo was instrumental in establishing dedicated folklore departments in several Indian universities, as well as extending his influence across borders to Bangladesh. Over the span of his illustrious career, he conducted more than fifty folklore workshops across various Indian states, tirelessly advocating for

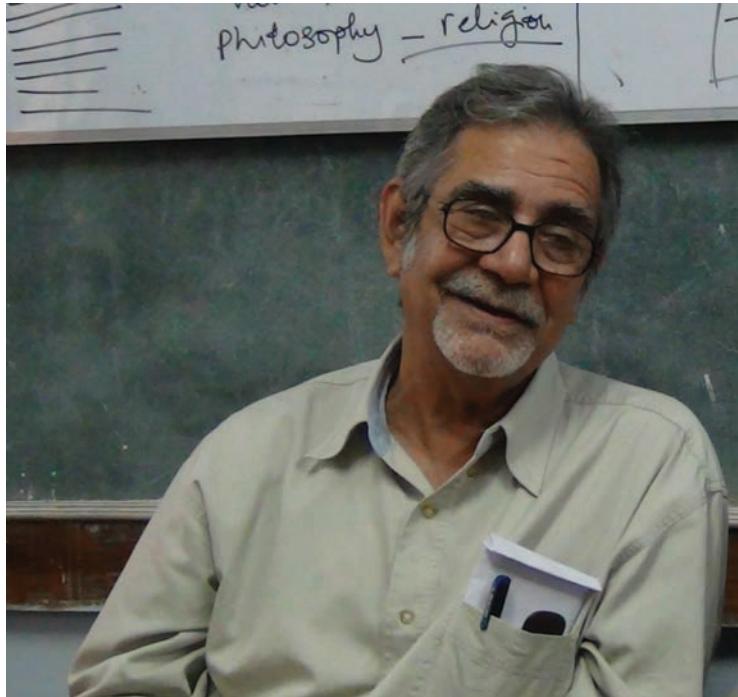
the inclusion of folklore as a distinct and essential subject within departments of literature and humanities.

What truly distinguished Dr. Handoo was not only his intellectual prowess but his gracious and magnetic personality, which inspired countless young scholars to venture into the vibrant world of folklore. His vision, charisma and indefatigable spirit laid a strong foundation for the study of folklore in South Asia, turning an often-neglected cultural heritage into a thriving field of academic inquiry.

After earning my doctorate in folklore, I entered the field of education as an Assistant Director in Primary and Basic Education under the Government of Odisha. Simultaneously, I served as a member of the State Academy of Letters, bridging two seemingly distinct realms – education and folklore. Yet, beneath the surface, there existed an intangible synergy between my administrative responsibilities and my scholarly devotion to cultural traditions. This hidden connection was gently illuminated by Dr. Chittaranjan Das, a Gandhian thinker and psychoanalyst trained at Copenhagen University, who profoundly influenced my intellectual path. He affirmed that education and culture are not parallel pursuits, but complementary forces, each enriching the other. Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo, too, shared this conviction. It was through their insights that I envisioned a new academic direction – applying folklore in school education by integrating community knowledge systems into classroom teaching, particularly in language and environmental studies at the primary level.

Jawaharlal Handoo
in 2011 at a folklore
seminar in Vidyasagar
University, West Bengal.

Photograph: Mahendra Kumar
Mishra, from personal archive.



When I joined the Multilingual Education (MLE) programme for indigenous children in Odisha, it was folklore that lit the path forward. Drawing from community oral traditions, I developed a culturally responsive curriculum and context-specific teacher training – an endeavour that placed Odisha at the forefront of inclusive educational reform in India. This vision would not have been possible without the foundation I received from folklore studies, and it was deeply appreciated and affirmed by Prof. Lauri Honko and Dr Handoo.

Thus, my engagement with folklore transcended theoretical inquiry and found practical expression in applied folkloristics within the school curriculum. Even as I redirected my academic compass, I remained steadfast in my research on oral epics, which garnered encouragement and scholarly camaraderie from eminent Western folklorists such as Prof. Lauri Honko, Karsten and Anniki Kaivola-Bregenhøj, Mary Ellen Brown, John Miles Foley and Gregory Nagy.

Throughout his journey, Dr. Handoo remained a central force, deeply connected with the nation's intellectual stalwarts including Kapila Vatsyayan, Dr. Debi Prasanna Pattanayak, Dr. Molly Kaushal, Prof. S. C. Malik, Prof. Brindavan Chandra Acharya, Prof. Khageswar Mahapatra, Prof. Birendra Nath Datta, Dr. Dulal Chaudhury, Dr. Soumen Sen and Krishnadev Upadhyay. These towering figures of Indian folkloristics, under the banner of the Indian Folklore Congress, convened annually to advance the cause of folklore scholarship in India.

Over the years, Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo and I participated in numerous national and international seminars devoted to folklore, oral epics and folk narratives, where his towering presence and impassioned advocacy for India's oral traditions were always profoundly felt. His lifelong commitment to institutionalizing folklore studies in India was not merely an academic pursuit, but a devotional struggle – gentle in spirit, yet resolute in purpose. Establishing oral traditions and folk knowledge within the formal academic structure of India was no simple feat. Yet, through his unwavering dedication, formidable intellect and visionary leadership, Dr. Handoo carved a lasting space for folklore in the Indian knowledge system.

It was under his influence that folklore gained recognition as an academic subject by the University Grants Commission (UGC), and several state governments were inspired to initiate research, documentation and publication projects that elevated indigenous knowledge traditions. Dr. Handoo's encouragement of individual scholars, his ability to discern potential and his generous mentoring spirit became the cornerstone of a movement that brought folkloristics into national academic discourse.

His contribution, spanning nearly five decades (1975–2025), represents a veritable epoch in the history of Indian folklore studies. As a legendary teacher, he transformed the academic landscape, making space for the oral

traditions of India to breathe, speak, and thrive within the walls of universities and research institutions.

I, too, had the privilege of walking alongside him on this remarkable journey. Together, we shared many platforms, and in Odisha, I organised three folklore workshops and a major seminar, all of which were enriched by Dr. Handoo's support and scholarly presence.

Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo was a towering intellectual force who endeavoured to place folklore at the very heart of the humanities in India. Endowed with a rare blend of acute observational insight and analytical depth, he drew inspiration from the giants of Western folkloristics while forging a distinctly Indian scholastic voice. His landmark work, *Current Trends in Folklore* (1986), served as a pioneering beacon for Indian scholars, introducing them to global theoretical and methodological frameworks with clarity and conviction.

Between 1978 and 1980, Dr. Handoo also edited the *Journal of Indian Folkloristics*, curating essays of international calibre and offering Indian academia a rare window into world folkloristics. Although financial constraints led to the journal's untimely discontinuation, its impact on the Indian folklore community remained indelible.

As the head of the Folklore Unit at the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL), Mysore, Dr. Handoo worked with tireless devotion, often single-handedly managing the department with the support of a lone research associate and his devoted wife, Lalita Handoo, who served in the institute as well. His vision was vast, his commitment unwavering. He championed a scholarly approach that honoured the rich cultural plurality of India, nurturing a national consciousness rooted in the shared wisdom of its oral traditions. Through his work, Dr. Handoo not only advanced folklore as an academic discipline but also reaffirmed its role as a vital vessel of Indian cultural identity.

Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo championed the cause of folklore with a deep conviction that distinguished it from other fields of knowledge, particularly linguistics, which he regarded as primarily concerned with the formal structures of grammar – thus often confined to the intellectual domain of grammarians and linguists. In contrast, folklore, he believed, embodied the lived wisdom of the people, rooted in the rhythms, rituals and oral traditions of everyday life. It was, to him, a mirror of the lifeworld, a discipline intimately woven into the cultural, emotional and cognitive fabric of communities.

Folklore, as Dr. Handoo often emphasized, was not merely an archive of narratives or customs but a dynamic force that sustains social cohesion, identity and moral values. It serves as a vital reservoir of collective memory, regulating both personal and communal consciousness through stories, songs, rituals and customs. He saw in folklore a profound educative power, nurturing cognitive development while preserving ethical worldviews and inherited wisdom.

Here, I am reminded of the visionary insights of Dr. A. K. Ramanujan, who once envisioned the Indian cognitive system as being inextricably linked to its

oral traditions, seeing in them the distilled spirit of Indian values and cosmologies. Ramanujan and Handoo, though distinct in approach, shared a common aspiration – to uncover an Indian epistemology within folklore, to explore how India thinks, remembers and imagines through its oral legacy. Both scholars recognized that while folklore universals transcend national boundaries, there remains an Indian way of seeing and knowing folklore, deeply rooted in the subcontinent's pluralistic ethos.

Through his tireless scholarship, institution-building and international engagement, he not only advanced Indian folkloristics but also placed it firmly on the global academic map.

Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo's publication of *Indian Folklore* Volumes I and II under the auspices of CIIL, Mysore, marked a moment in the study of Indian folkloristics. These volumes served as invaluable resources for both Indian and international scholars, offering deep insights into the multilingual and multicultural fabric of Indian folklore. With scholarly precision and cultural sensitivity, Dr. Handoo illuminated the vast and varied narrative traditions of India, foregrounding the diversity that defines its oral and performative heritage.

His writings reflect a seamless interplay between scholarly analysis and cultural empathy. He was never dismissive of indigenous knowledge systems. On the contrary, his position was both inclusive and harmonizing – he asserted that folklore transcends the binaries of indigenous and non-indigenous, elite and subaltern, and instead constructs a cultural unity that fosters social harmony.

Dr. Handoo was particularly critical of the anthropological gaze that often fragmented society into categories of elites, tribes and peasants, thus reinforcing hegemonic binaries. He argued for folklore as an autonomous discipline, distinct in its foundations and approach. While disciplines like anthropology and literature have historically dominated and overshadowed folklore within Indian academia, folklore, in his view, was not merely a derivative subject but a foundational discourse capable of reimagining cultural studies through the lenses of lived experience, marginal memory and ethical imagination.

In a landscape where oral traditions, local wisdom and vernacular knowledge systems have long been marginalised, Dr. Handoo envisioned folklore as a form of cultural resistance and empowerment – a space where the silenced voices of subaltern communities could find legitimate scholarly expression. He championed folklore as a site of cultural democracy, one that honours plurality, dignity and human values, deeply rooted in the civilisational ethos of India.

Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo's journey as a folklorist was profoundly enriched by his enduring engagement with the global community of folkloristics. Through his extensive travels across the East and West, he forged intellectual companionships with some of the most eminent voices in world folklore, including Richard Dorson, Alan Dundes, Dan Ben-Amos, Kenneth Goldstein, Lauri Honko, Lauri Harvilahti, Anna-Leena Siikala, Mihály Hoppál, John Miles Foley,

Mare Kõiva and Ülo Valk, among many others. These associations allowed him to reimagine Indian folklore through a global lens, situating it within the broader frameworks of comparative and collaborative folkloristics.

A tireless ambassador of cultural scholarship, Dr. Handoo played a pivotal role in fostering Indo-European and Indo-American academic collaborations. He facilitated transnational research projects and supported legendary scholars such as Peter J. Claus in the study of Tulu epics and Lauri Honko in documenting the Siri epic tradition of South India. Under his mentorship and vision, folklore studies flourished as a discipline in several Indian universities, including Kannada University, Mysore University, Gauhati University, Tezpur University and Kalyani University, where structured M.A. and Ph.D. programmes in folkloristics were formally established.

As an author Dr Handoo published his research work such as “Current Trends in Folklore”, “Folklore in Modern India”, “Tradition and Modernity in Folklore Theory”, “Theoretical Essays on Folklore”, “Folklore and Discourse: A Study of Communicative Interaction in Folklore Performances”, “Folklore and Historiography”, “Folklore and Tribal Studies”, “Language, Culture and Folk Wisdom”, “Text and Performance: A Study of Oral Narrative Tradition”, “Folk Epics of India.”

Among his distinguished contemporaries in Indian folkloristics were luminaries like V. A. Vivek Rai, K. D. Upadhyay, Kunjabihari Das, Prafulla Dutta Goswami, Vidyanivas Mishra, Birendranath Datta, Soumen Sen, Dulal Chaudhury, Somnath Dhar, Surajit Singh, Sudhakar Reddy, S. Lourdhru, Hiranmay Ambalike, Bhabagrahi Mishra and Bhakta Batsala Reddy. Together, they constituted a vibrant intellectual circle that laid the foundational stones of South Asian folkloristics.

Dr. Handoo’s contributions extended beyond India’s borders. His deep association with the Nepal Folklore Society, the Bangla Academy, and various universities in Bangladesh reflected his commitment to shaping the cultural identities of neighbouring nations through folklore. His frequent visits to these countries were not mere ceremonial exchanges but strategic efforts to promote the academic growth and cultural preservation of South Asian folklore.

A visionary par excellence, he dedicated his entire life to the pursuit of folkloristics, nurturing it not just as a discipline, but as a calling, a dream, and a national cultural mission. His commitment was uncompromising; he held high expectations for academic rigor and was deeply pained whenever scholarship faltered in quality or vision. Yet, it was precisely this rigorous standard and ethical clarity that shaped a generation of Indian folklorists – many of whom today serve as professors and cultural thinkers across Indian universities.

Dr. Handoo was a man of warmth and humour. In informal circles, his quick wit, affectionate storytelling and infectious laughter made him beloved by colleagues and students alike. Even in scholarly settings, his creative wit and psychological insight allowed him to unearth deep meanings from symbolic

narratives. He leaned more toward psychological interpretations of folklore than rigid anthropological frameworks, always seeking to relate the content with context, and the individual with the collective.

His unyielding commitment to academic integrity sometimes made him a misunderstood figure. Yet, those who truly knew him understood that his sternness was born of an unwavering love for knowledge and a desire to uphold the dignity of folklore as a serious academic discipline. He stood firm in his ideals, never compromising on the standards he believed folklore scholarship must embody.

Dr. Handoo was indeed a global folklorist rooted in Indian soil – a scholar trained in Western traditions, yet wholly committed to the richness and complexity of Indian folklore. His tireless efforts brought academic recognition to regional and indigenous knowledge systems, giving Indian folklore a global voice while preserving its local soul.

His passing is a profound loss – a void that cannot be filled. He was, and will remain, a legendary hero of Indian folkloristics, whose influence radiates across continents and generations. I am grateful to the Estonian Literary Museum for honouring his memory with an obituary volume, a fitting tribute to a man who gave his life to understanding and celebrating the oral wisdom of humankind.

Dr. Handoo's legacy will endure, not only in books and institutions, but in the hearts and minds of those he inspired. His spirit lives on in every tale retold, every voice preserved and every scholar he awakened to the power of folklore.

Dr. Mahendra Kumar Mishra is a noted folklorist of India. He has written "Oral Epics of Kalahandi", "Visioning Folklore", "Paharia Oral Tradition", "Saora Folklore", "Ramayana in the Oral Tradition of Odisha" and, "Multilingual Education in India". Dr Mishra is the first recipient of UNESCO's International Mother Language Award in 2023. He is the Chief Editor of Lokaratna, an international E journal of Folklore Foundation, India.

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