

# Orality, Folk And History In The 21<sup>st</sup> Century

Edited by  
Gitanjali Roy & Dr. Sayantan Thakur



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# Content

Abstracts			16
Sl No.	Title of the paper	Author	Page no.
1	Reviving the Tradition of Picture Recitation in India	Priyanka Jain	23
2	Of Idols and Their Ideals: History and Mythology in Rss' <i>Organiser</i>	Prateck Paul	32
3	Negotiating the Creative Space between Oral and Written Tradition: West African Griots as Record Keepers and Historians of Past	Anju Devadas R D	43
4	The Myth of the Nanda Devi	Ashutosh Kant Prabhakar	50
5	Secret Of 'Srishti': A Comparative Study Of The Theory Of Creation According To A Tribal-Religion Of Arunachal Pradesh In Mamang Dai's 'The Legends Of Pensam' And Swami Vivekananda's Lectures In Relation To Ancient Hindu Scriptures	Diptarka Chakraborty	56
6	<i>Baidyar Dighi</i> and <i>Pukhri-Leikai</i> : In Search of Lost Stories	Sukla Singha	60
7	Understanding the Contemporary Manipuri Society through a Critical Reading of Popular Manipuri Folktale, "Kabui-Keioiba" and Its Variations	Hemchandra Nameirakpam	65
8	Indian People's Theatre Association and Salil Chowdhury: Cultural Appropriation of Folk	Debolina GuhaThakurta & Mayukh Lahiri	70
9	<i>Haabugaan</i> : A Critical Study	Prof (Dr.) Susanta Kumar Bardhan	79
10	The Lore of Folk In Cinema: A Study of Folk Music of North India as Disseminated Through Hindi Cinema	Sakshi Dhaulta	84

# Indian People's Theatre Association and Salil Chowdhury: Cultural Appropriation of Folk

Debolina GuhaThakurta & Mayukh Lahir

"Folklore is an ideological discipline." (Propp, 88)

The above quoted statement by Vladimir Propp, discussing the theory and history of folklore, is significant. It not only designates a position to folklore, making it an area of knowledge, or what Propp believes as "the popular-scientific study of one's native country" (Propp, 87), but also in its claim as 'ideological', makes folklore intellectual in nature while at the same time imaginative. If one has to accept the former, then folklore corresponds to a genre to be explored through education and training, enriching the body of knowledge; but if it is also imaginative, then the area becomes problematic. Imagination is relative in nature; it alters, varies, recreates and thus changeability is essential to imagination. Therefore, the idea of a system of knowledge that presupposes structure and method, contradicts with the imaginative nature that is variable. To accept this proposition is to reiterate what Propp has opined that folklore is always in flux. It is altered, redefined, recreated both historically as well as momentarily (depending on the socio-cultural context) to cater to the demands of the native country. Although many scholars have retorted that folklore is a 'living antiquity', this oxymoron itself speaks volumes of the altered nature of folklore – a genre which had its emergence in the oral, mythological traditions of the past but has been revisited through ages and continuously redesigned linguistically and musically to adopt and adapt to the different ages.

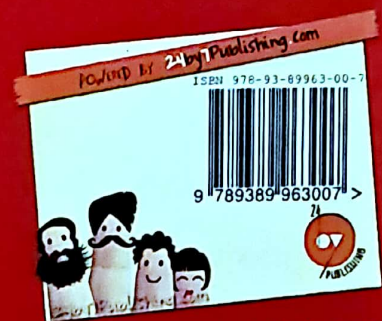
To go deeper into the nature of folklore, the primary task is to define the genre. Propp states that in Russian literary scholarship, 'genre' stands for a 'specific' concept, whereas German *gattung* is synonymous to the Latin *genus*. In literary criticism, genre is understood 'by the entire poetic system' (Propp, 123). The 'poetics' of folklore are the laws and properties of this art form, an art form that, to quote Propp again, is 'verbal' in nature. The essential property of folklore is its orality. Oral narratives, or mythical stories which were orally transmitted through generations, found their expression in different folk forms – song, dance, poetry (literature), theatre. Thus, the exposition too is varied in nature. Again, the inventory of folklore depends on the application as well as performance. A folklore presentation for harvest will differ from the one for sea voyage, or a boatman's song (eg. *bhatiyali*) sung in the mid river will obviously differ from the devotee's earnest musical expression for the devoted (eg. *agomoni*). The differences in these presentations are not only on the basis of the applicability, but it also differs in the mode of performance. This mode of performance can further be divided depending on the attire of the performers which must correspond to the occasion, the musical instruments to be used in case of a song or the theatrics to be required in case of other ways of exposition, the language which plays a pivotal role. One important area of concern is the class of people that constitutes the performers. The Oxford dictionary defines the word 'folk' as people in general, the archaic meaning being 'tribe'. The word now is often used to designate the peasantry, the downtrodden, people from the lower strata of the society. To quote Propp again, "Folklore is the art of the oppressed classes..." (Propp, 88) seems appropriate keeping in mind the derogatory meaning the word 'folk' now in popular parlance. Interesting to note, folklore is understood, according to the dictionary, as the traditions of

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