

# **Evolving Oral Traditions The Cultural Links between Ethnography and Literary Classics in the Last Decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

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## **Abstract**

An Ethnographic Approach of the links between *The Ramayana* and the Oral Traditions of Ramakatha, evolved around the Rash region in West Bengal in the last decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century can bring out a wide range of significant cultural evolutions in a varied sphere of social practices and conventions of this region.

The Oral Traditions, forming quite a significant part of Folklore have always been analyzed by Indology, especially by the sub-disciplines of culture studies, Sanskrit and ethnography and Folklore, especially the Oral Traditions have always been found as important agents of cultural evolution, usually marked by the written materials or the frozen variety of Folklore, that have always formed an important part of this

branch of knowledge.

I, in this paper would look into the oral traditions in the form of anecdotes, riddles, poems and songs from the Radh region. It portrays an analysis of historical representation of data through the collection of a vast amount of folklore from this region. These not only help to ascertain a reflection of a rich tradition transmitted through generations, but also help portray the cognitive representation of socio-cultural and religious developments through history which serve as important contexts for their origination. Their survival itself is a testimony to this, a testimony conveyed, communicated and transferred through time. It led to a euphoric exploration of a venerable tradition that is partly lost in oblivion under the pressures of modern civilization.

### **Paper**

The verbose referring to a custom that talks about a continuous tradition of survival of ethnic identity amidst changing socio-cultural and religious contexts that have nevertheless resulted in the accumulation of a colossal amount of information and mention may be made of the attempts of Lal Behari Dey, Dakkhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, Dinesh Chandra Sen, William McCulloch, Rabindranath Tagore and others. However, mostly all of these data were limited in nature with the exclusion of further scrutiny of contexts, causes and implications. Nevertheless, it is also significant to mention that each and every of these attempts also provided a rich source of study for future reference works and researches, acting as the mainstay, strength and support for various studies of varied disciplines including, folk culture, linguistics, sociology, philosophy and literature. Most of these data collected from the Radh, over the last century, are

generally in the form of fables, folklore, poems and riddles. At closer observation, they can be further divided between eastern and western Bengal, with the former constituting a significant section of the erstwhile eastern Bengal or most parts of the country of Bangladesh and the latter was formed of prominent parts of modern western Bengal, including the erstwhile Jangalmahal - constituting parts of modern Jharkhand and parts of Orissa and also the present region of study the Radh region. Geophysical constituents made the two regions differ in nature, flora and fauna with the former being more fertile and well-drained, fed by both perennial and non-perennial rivers and the latter forming sections of a more arid region of the Chhotanagpur plateau. Difference in landscapes naturally evoke an image of diverse habitation, however interestingly enough, the folklore in the form of fables, riddles and poems, contained a continuous strain, which spoke of the proximity of the regions and also the remarkable possibilities of their traveling from one region to another.

With a history of varied religious influences, including Jainism, Tantric Buddhism, Vaisnavism, Saivism, Saktatism, Brahmanism, Islam and finally Christianity, the region under study experienced various changes in thought processes, political scenarios and cultural affiliations. As the larger representation portrayed motley of heterogeneous and diverse socio-cultural elements, it is also important to mention about the minor depiction in the form of ethnic identities. This was prominent through the importance of folk divinities and deities and local ruling authorities, which helped to strengthen the native history to a great extent. The present paper focuses on this character and distinctiveness of the region, which

helped to shape the regional socio-cultural and religious ethos. The paper looks into a brief history of the region which influenced the local religious belief structure and in turn also influenced the local lore and fables that exist today as a mode of continuous human communication between existing societies and religions. Amidst this, ecology occupies a significant pivotal role, aiding the diachronic development of thought processes down the path of history.

The significance of folklore of the region also lies in its tradition, which speaks of a parallel belief structure alongside the mainstream - so-called Brahminical religious belief system in the region - which has oft been repeated in the writings of historians and linguists like Niharranjan Ray, Suniti K. Chattopadhyay and others. The lore is helpful in not only understanding the settlement patterns, migrations and change of habitation, reflection of day-to-day activities and anxieties concerning livelihood, but also reflects a story of continuous struggle for acceptance within a framework of society, which, historically speaking, has been dominated by sections of higher caste with the *vratyas* (the marginalized people) occupying a secondary role down the path of regional history. The region under study Archaeological records provide vital information pertaining to settlement pattern of the region in relation to the local inhabitants from the very early times, however, it is not until the Historical/Late Historical periods, that information pertaining to religious as well as developing economic activities are available. However, the origin of fables and lore is difficult to measure nevertheless, and cannot be studied with historical references till later times.

The oral traditions collected from the region can mainly be divided into two major segments. With varied regions across

the nation offering their intrinsic ways of life, the culture of India reverberates with a multitude echo of customs and traditions- preserved in the various vernacular languages of the nation. Thus, is woven the art of storytelling within the cultural mosaic of the nation. With various recent publications highlighting important and significant aspects of folktales from across the nation, they also help to keep an age-old tradition alive- the messages conveyed through the art of storytelling. Significantly, it should also be mentioned here that the practice of storytelling in India can primarily be divided into two broad categories. In further explaining this, one can refer to the help from the akam (meaning inside) and puram (meaning outside) traditions of Tamil literature- where the akam tradition signifies the stories retold within the household and the puram tradition signifies those recited and narrated outside the household and in various public places. Almost all oral traditions all across India occupies these two patterns. Thus, there is an element of the stories which is famous and handed down through generations within households, while on the other hand, there is a section of stories, which are famous for being retold in public places. This latter is often retold with the help of various props, e.g. the patachitra traditions of West Bengal or shadow puppetry using leather puppets as part of the tradition of Kerala- Tholpavakoothu or even the Bhopa storytelling tradition in front of a tapestry in Rajasthan. In all of these instances, the stories are represented through oral epics- depicting the characters of the stories and these often function as a portable temple. The characters can be historical incidents or stories from mythologies as well- and mostly refer to the victory stories and ballads of local princes and kings as well as local deities

who act as the protector of various villages and alongside the wide range of people telling stories with the help of props, it is also important to mention about the large number of storytellers across the nation- whose profession was specifically to tell stories. Thus, mention may be made of the kathaks of Bengal- whose recitations used to be referred to as kathakatha. As the tradition of kathaks is almost a dying art, some specialised narrators are still seen thronging the banks of the ghats of Benaras. Often well-travelled people, these storytellers used to be paid for their services and thus, were often also hired by zamindars or local kings and ministers on auspicious occasions or even otherwise- to tell stories of mythological characters as well as various incidents which they have encountered in the various lands that they have visited.

The other aspect of storytelling speaks of narration within interiors or home and other areas where the listener and narrator are directly displaced away from a public gathering and hearing. This form of storytelling in India occupies the narration and subsequent passing of the tradition to the following generations. In this procedure, the stories are handed down from predecessors in the form of parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts. Mostly retold for the amusement of young children, the ideas and themes of the stories often include fictitious characters from mythology or otherwise. The stories are shorter in comparison to the other ones which are recited to a wider public. The use of language, repertoire, pitch and body expressions changes from the former as well- to suit the likes of a young child. Thus, as stories from Panchatantra, Jataka tales or the Puranas are repeated, quite like the former process of storytelling in public

places, they also weave various stories from local oral tradition or simple stories woven with fictitious and imaginary characters by the narrators. Important work has been contributed towards understanding folklore and its various channels of expression by certain dignitaries in Bengal over the last one hundred years in India, including Gurusaday Dutta, Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath Tagore, Dineshchandra Sen, Dhakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar, amidst others, the last four decades have also witnessed various other folklorists across the nation contributing substantially towards the understanding of folklore and storytelling in India, e.g. Devendra Satyarthi, Durga Bhagwat, Krishna Dev Upadhyaya, Prafulla Dutta Goswami, Kunja Bihari Dash, Ashutosh Bhattacharya and many others. And to this was added the work of several recent Indian scholars as well, including- M. D. Muthukumaraswamy, Vivek Rai, Jawaharlal Handoo, Birendranath Dutta, P. C. Pattanaik, B. Reddy, Sadhana Naithani, P Subachary, Molly Kaushal, Shyam Sundar Mahapatra, Dr Bhabagrahi Mishra, Jyotindra Jain and others.

The Ramayana and the Oral Traditions of 'Ramakatha: an Ethnographic Approach

To begin the discussion on the oral traditions of 'Ramkatha' in Radh Bengal In the last decade of the 20th Century as a cultural link with the *Ramayana*, I would like to refer to a comment of M. Winternitz, present in his quite a celebrated essay, "The Popular Epics and the Puranas, the genuine and the spurious in the Ramayana", published in A History of Indian Literature. Vol I, Section II. "The only explanation for the great differences between the receptions is the fact that the text of the epic was for a long period only

handed down by oral transmission. It is conceivable that the order of the verses became dislocated in the memory of the rhapsodists, that the wording must often have suffered considerable changes, and that the singers of different regions made different additions and extensions respectively". Along with various versions of the Ramayana in various regional languages we can trace various oral traditions too. We are quite familiar with the Ramayana by Krittivasa, written in the 15th century in Radh Bengal. Just as a parallel to this written rendering, I would like to refer to a few oral traditions of this region, e.g. vrata katha, riddle, folk song and yatra. In this context I would like to refer to a comment by Rabindranath, made in his essay, "Ramayana " published in *Prachin Sahitya*, "The mass has not only learnt lessons from Ramayana, they have derived pleasure out of it. They have not only worshipped it, but have also placed it in their hearts. Its not only a scripture for them, but is an epic in its true sense."

While discussing Ram katha' in Radh Bengal the most powerful oral tradition that comes to my mind is definitely 'Kathakathan'. It had specific sociocultural impacts but the entire tradition is so miserably missing In the last decade of the 20th Century that I failed to trace a single example of it. Hence, I am going to discuss the 'Vratha Kathas' which are called 'charas' (rhymes) too. 'Dasaputtal Vrata' is taken up by young girls in the Radh even today. The 'chara' goes, "Sitar mato suttee hobo, Ramer moto pati pabo, Lakshmaner moto debar pabo, Kausalya sasuri pabo, Dasarather mato swasur pabo." (I will become a suttee like Sita, I will have husband like Rama, I will have a brother in law like Lakshmana, I will have mother in law like Kaushyala, I



will have father in law like Dasharatha). Sita has always been the darling of the Patriarchy. Even according to Swami Vivekananda Sita is one of the ideals of the iconic concept of femininity in India. It is a common blessing for young girls to be like Sita. Winternitz quite rightly comments, "the women love and praise Sita as the ideal of conjugal fidelity, the highest virtue of woman". Hence the desire to be like Sita is quite obvious. Rama, at the same time is a God incarnation, a kind of Super-Hero, a representative of iconic patriarchal authority of India. His conjugal fidelity is usually considered to be beyond question and the hassles, Sita has to bear for him are usually taken as minor ones. Lakshmana is so favoured as a brother in law that 'Lakshmana Dewar' is quite a common qualifier in most parts of India. His faithfulness and sacrifices are unquestionable. The idea of Kaushalya as an ideal mother in law can be related to the idea of patriarchal approval as the mother of the great son, Rama and a line from *Ramayana* in Bengali by Kritwivasa, "Toma hano badhu ami bhagya kore mani" (I have fortunately got a daughter in law like you), whereas the favour for Dasaratha as father in law emerges from his unparallal love and favour for Rama and a line from *Ramayana* by Valmiki, "Na dwesta vidyate tasya sa tu dwesti na kanchana" (He does not have jealousy for anybody in the world and nobody in the world has any jealousy for him). In this context Rabindranath's projection of *Ramayana* as poetry of household order is quite significant. He comments, "The main feature of the Ramayana is its emphasis on the domestic world. The ultimate elevation of the sacred bond between a father and a son, among brothers, within conjugal relationships, within the relationship between the ruler and the ruled and so on are portrayed with utmost perfection". Hence

the Ramayana enters into the common paradigm of domestic expectations quite thoroughly.

The chara of the 'Bhaduli' vrata in the western part of the Rash unfolds another dimension of the inclusion of the *Ramayana* within the domestic world of the Rash, " Sagar! Sagar! Vandi, tomar songe sandhi./ Rama asen Lakshmana asen, ar asen Na/ Tai dekhe theme thakben samudrer jal." (O! Sea! I worship you, I want your friendship/ Rama comes, Lakshmana comes and comes Na/ Hence the sea will remain static.) This vrata is primarily for the family of the business community, who have to travel across the sea. Goddess Bhaduli is related to the month 'Bhadra' and is the goddess of rain. This vrata requires a pot hole, symbolizing the sea, in the courtyard of the house. Beside it six circles are drawn, placing three on each side. They symbolize six other seas. A couple of Parallel lines representing a large river having thirteen heads get connected to that hole. Then the lady, performing the vrata, sprinkles water on this drawing and the hole while uttering this chara. Na, here is the son of God Visvakarma, the skilled maker of the universe as he helped Rama to construct a bridge accross the sea for easy passage of Rama and his army to Lanka. This vrata aims at the safe passage of near and dear ones, trvelling accross the seas. In this vrata the *Ramayana* is used as an iconic example of exerting control over the usually uncontrolable aspects of nature. It does also bring out Animatisms, quite an integral component of any form of paganism. In 'Sundarakanda' of the *Ramayana* by Kritwivas we find Rama worshiping the sea as can be found in 'yudhakanda' of the Ramayana by Valmiki.

Along with 'vratas', charas bearing references of the Ramayana are uttered in marriages too, " Shunun shunun

mahasaya kari nivedana. Janaki Ramer vivaha korun sraban. Sriramer vivaher kale sunechilam jamon. Harer dhanu bhangilen Sri Raghunandan. Janaka pravriti kari Mithila nibashi. Sabha kori basilen jata bipra rishi. Agrete basilen jata devagana. Paschate bosilen Mithilar prajagon. Ajnate nripabara gelen anthapure. Kanya nie asilen vivaha-mandir. Satapak pradakshin hailo jamon. Swarga haite puspa bristi kare devagan. Aha! Anandita aj Mithila Bhuvan. Malyadala naren jakhan Narasundar bhai. Rama-Janaki vivah dakhe anande sabai..... (Ladies and gentlemen, please lend me your ears. I will describe the marriage ceremony of Rama and Sita. Rama broke the holy bow of Lord Shiva and projected himself as a prospective groom of Sita before king Janaka and the respected gentry of Mithila. King Janaka then went in and brought Sita for marriage. Gods hailed them with a shower of flowers from heaven. Everybody was happy in Mithila. Brother Narasundar performed rituals and everybody gathered there saw this extraordinary marriage ceremony of Rama and Sita.) It projects the marriage of Rama and Janaki as a celebrated one and wishes the present day marriage to turn up as an equally celebrated one. In some cases a list of gift items is included within this 'chara'. This chara may have an intention to protect the bride and the groom from all sorts of evil forces too.

Charas connected with magical enterprise do often bear references of the *Ramayana*. Some are related with White magic and some with Black Magic. Let me give one example of each of these types,

Bhut amar put, petni amar jhi. / Rama- Lakshmana songe ache korbi amar ki? (A ghost is just like my son and a lady-ghost is just like my daughter/ As Rama and Lakshmana

are there with me, you can do me no harm.) It is related to White Magic and used for driving away the evil spirits. The proverb, vuter mukhe Rama nama (A ghost, uttering the name of Rama) is quite closely associated with it. Usually the name, Rama is uttered for driving away ghosts. Though the characters like Rama and Sita are hardly related to Black Magic, there are quite popular rhymes, involving Rama and Sita, having definite inclination towards Black Magic, Rama katlen kala, Sita dilen jag, / Je varner kala tui sei varnei thak (Rama cut down the bunch of bananas and Sita placed them properly for ripening/ Let the banana remain green for ever). The magical power of Rama and Sita and the magic in these names have probably led towards this association of Black Magic. In the *Motif Index of Folk-Literature* by Smith Thompson I found sufficient support of my opinion, Magic results from uttering powerful name.

The next interesting use of such charas is as riddles. Mystery of birth and family history is quite a common motif in folklores and in the Radh many such riddles can be traced related to the Ramayana. I would like to refer to two of them, the first related to the mystery of the birth of Sita and the next related to that of kush, Bap janma dila kintu ma chilana kache,/ Bhumite utpanna bote nahi fale gache./ Asambhav katha jadi manaha sakale,/ ei katha mithya noe matite nari mile (Father gave birth without the presence of the mother,/ Its born of land but not of plants./ If you agree to accept something apparently impossible,/ It is true that a woman was born of land.) and Janma dilana janmadata janma dila pare./ Jakhan tahar janma hala ma chilana ghare (Inated of the progenitor she was given birth by someone else/ When the father gave birth, the mother was absent). In the *Motif Index*

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of *Folk-Literature* by Smith Thompson I found, Earth gives birth to woman is quite a common motif of folk lore. But in this case this motif is just one possible understanding as there are lots of other references too. Nityananda Acharya (Adbhuta Acharya) in his 17<sup>th</sup> century *Adbhuta Ramayana* in Bengali presents Sita as the daughter of Mandodari, the wife of Ravana. She buried little Sita in Kurukshetra as Sita was conceived in absence of Ravana and in presence of a few hermits, who visited her as guests of Ravana. Then she was found by King Janaka, while farming the land of Kurukshetra. In *Ramakatha Prak Itihas* (1977) by Acharya Sukumar Sen we find Sita as the daughter of Dasagriva (Ravana), who abandons Sita as an evangelist foretells that she will be responsible for the fall of her paternal dynasty. Then she was found by Valmiki, who nurtures her and later on when Rama and Lakshmana came to the Ashrama of Valmiki, Sita falls in love with both and gets married with both in due course. In this context Bharatbarsher Itihaser Dhara by Rabindranath is quite significant. He has presented the actual meaning of Sita as plough- line. She was found by king Janaka at the edge of his plough and the end of her life was by entering into the Earth. Hence, she is a symbol of agriculture and is quite significantly rescued by Rama from the Rakshas (Demons), who were mere hunter- gatherers. Rama thus saved agrarian civilization from the forest- dwelling hunters.

The next riddle bears the common belief that Kush was not born of Sita but was a doll of kusha, made and alleviated by Valmiki, who asked Sita to nurture him as her own son and a brother of Lab. This issue can hardly be traced in any written version of the Ramayana, but there are various folk references of it, Sita gaiche sinan koirte/ Sitar chila nai

ghate/ Kusher chila Benai muni/ Rakhyeche Sitar ghate./  
Sinai asye sudhae Sita/ e chila to ke bote?/ Lao ma Sita, lao  
ma Sita/ Tumari Lab kush bote. (Sita went off for bathing/  
Sitas was not there in the bathing ghat/ Hermit Benai has kept  
a doll of a very young boy, made of fiber on the ghat/ After her  
bath Sita asks, who is this boy?/ Accept the boy as your son,  
Accept him as your son. ). Its a Bhadu song and bears a  
common folk- motif, man made from grass (*Motif Index of  
Folk-Literature* by Smith Thompson).

Along with Bhadu, Jhumur and Tusu do also bear several  
references of the Ramayana, haro re, Lakshman bhai,  
kutirete Sita nai/ Rakshase gililo bhujhi bhai he./ Ha ha, dhani,  
gunamani, kutha galo Sitamoni,/ Vyakulita manihara fani he.  
(Look! O! Brother Lakshmana! Sita is not there in the cottage/  
Perhaps the Demons have engulfed her./ Where has she  
gone! I am utterly upset without her!!!). In this Jhumur song  
the loss of Sita does seem to have affected the entire mass,  
whereas in a Tusu song we find a note of consolation towards  
Sita, Ashoke bone kancha Sita, Ashokeri dal dhare./  
Kaindona kaindona Sita, tumar Rama asbe fire. (Sita is  
lamenting in the garden of Ashoka/ She has clutched a  
branch of Ashoka itself./ Do not lament ! Do not lament! O!  
Sita! Your Rama will deginitely return to you). Ramakatha in  
the Radh is thus a strong contestant of Shivakatha and  
Krishnakatha. It is really fascinating as the number of  
worshippers of Shiva and Krishna are several times, if  
compared to those of Rama and it has been possible for the  
varied influences of the various forms of the Ramayana.

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