CHAPTER III

FOLKLORE AND ITS AREAS
THE CONCEPT OF FOLKLORE:

The term 'folklore' is composite one consisting of two terms 'folk' and 'lore' having separate meanings. The term 'folk' is akin to *folc* in Anglo-Saxon, *Volk* in the Dutch and *Volk* in German and the term 'lore' is akin to *lare* in Middle English. *Lar* in Anglo-Saxon, *Lear* in Dutch and *Lehre* in German languages. Literally, the term 'folk' means the people and 'lore' means knowledge, thus literally 'folklore' means the wisdom of the people or peoples' knowledge.

The term 'folklore' was first coined and suggested by William John Thoms, a British antiquarian in a letter signed as Ambrose Merton (pseudonym of William Thoms) published in the *Anthenaeum* (No.982) of London, August 22, 1846. In the letter, he urged to record and preserve "the manners, customs, observances, superstitions, ballads, proverbs etc. of the olden times" which were then labelled as 'Popular Antiquities' or 'Popular Literature' and suggested to designate this field of antiquity with the 'good Saxon compound Folklore- the lore of the people' replacing all the other cumbersome terms. The new term 'folklore', coined by Thoms was quite rapidly adopted by the scholars in many other countries and soon became an international one. As Handoo assesses, "William Thoms' contribution in coining and introducing the term 'folklore', as we realize it now, had two important consequences for the global folklore scholarship. In the first place it led to
the establishment of an academic discipline known as folklore (or folkloristics) in many parts of the world. Secondly it also generated a long and unending controversy, perhaps unknown in the history of any other discipline of equal strength, about the definition and, more often than not, about what should and should not be included in the gamut of this new field of inquiry.”

Although the term was coined in 1846, nevertheless scholarly collections and study of folklore material began very much earlier than the coining of the term 'folklore' by Thoms. He himself recognized the study of J.Grimm under the heading Deutsche Mythologie in the said letter. Scholarly collections of folklore materials were done in India long before Grimm. We may point out Kathasaritsagar, Panchatantra or Jataka in this regards. Folklore is perhaps as old as mankind, but those were not designated as 'folklore' before Thoms.

The term was at first used to denote only the materials included in the scope of study; later on, it was also used to indicate the branch of science which deals with these materials. Now, the term 'folklore' is used to designate the materials and the term 'folkloristics' (suggested by Alan Dundes) for the study of the material. Although the term 'folklore' has gradually become the prevailing one in the majority of the countries, a single meaning has not been definitely fixed for this term. Hence Dorson mentions 'folklore is a

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1 Handoo, Jawaharlal: Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction, p.3.
word with a short but turbulent history.² Different scholars hold different views about its definition and hence, there are as many as twenty-one definitions of folklore from American Scholarship alone in the first volume of "Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology and Legend" edited by Maria Leach. In the folklore scholarship of the world, the greatest difference of opinion prevails on the question of the content and scope of the concept of folklore and also concerning the nature of folkloristics and the boundaries which devide it from related disciplines.³

The concept of folklore was begun with an antiquarian outlook. However, A.H.Krappe has treated folklore in a restricted sense of "a study of the unrecorded traditions of the people as they appear in popular fiction, custom and belief, magic and ritual,... it was solely and singly concerned with the history of human ideas and their utterance in words and gesture, that is, in tales, songs and rites."⁴

There are some misconceptions on folklore among some scholars. Some consider folklore as the literature of the folk that is handed down to the present generation from generations through oral tradition, while others hold it as the elements in the form of literature, beliefs and customs, drama and dance, art and craft, painting and sculpture, belonging to the past. Those antiquarians believe that with the development of modern

³ Sokolov,Y.M.: Russian Folklore,p.3-4.
⁴ Krappe,A.H.: The Science of Folklore, pp XV and XX fn.in Introduction.
societies, these elements are gradually dropping out. They hold that folklore depends on tradition, mainly oral, and there is no scope of its creation or re-creation and change in the developed societies. Therefore, many of them call folklore "primitive culture", some call it "non-literate" and some "rural culture." This school believe that elements of folk literature can never be created through writing and as soon as they enter the written tradition, they cease to be what is called folk literature. If we agree with this school, the tales collected in Burhaburhir Sādhu by Bezbaruah are not to be treated as 'folk'. Although it appears from the various definitions of folklore that the 'oral' nature is the important criterion of folklore, it seems to be vague in modern scholarship. Alan Dundes says: "This criterion... leads to several theoretical difficulties. First, in a culture without writing (termed "non-literate cultures" by anthropologists) almost everything is transmitted orally; and although language, hunting techniques, and marriage rules are passed orally from one generation to another, few folklorists would say that these types of cultural materials are folklore.... second, there are some forms of folklore which are manifested and communicated almost exclusively in written as opposed to oral form, such as autograph book verse, book marginalia, epitaphs, and traditional letters (e.g. chain letters)....a professional folklorist does not go so far as to say that a folktale or a ballad is not folklore simply because it has at sometime in its life history been transmitted by writing or print.... The third difficulty with the criterion of oral transmission concerns those forms of folklore depending upon body movements; that is, there is some questions as to whether folk dances, games, and gestures are passed on orally."5 The modern concept

5 Dundes, Alan (ed): The Study of Folklore, pp.1-2.
of folklore believes it as variable and changeable. It is living and changing day by day as the basement of folklore, i.e., society itself is changing. On the other hand, folklore is not only the product of the past only, as some anthropologists says, though tradition is an essential criterion. The outcomes of today and the folkloric variation of today are also folklore, the criterion of 'orality' is vague. As the written tradition was absolutely unknown to the pre or non-literate society, so, propagation of culture was through oral tradition.

As we say that folklore does not belong to past only, so, now-a-days, in a literate society, the way of transmission may not be strictly oral. On the other hand, in a literate society, many learnings are transmitted orally, but all of those are not covered under 'folklore' though these are basically oral. Hence Alan Dundes rightly observes, "since materials other than folklore are also orally transmitted, the criterion of oral transmission by itself is not sufficient to distinguish folklore from non-folklore."\(^6\)

The concept of 'folk' is explained by Dundes as, "The term 'folk' can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is— it could be a common occupation, language or religion— but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reason will have some traditions which it calls its own. In theory a group must consist of at least two persons, but generally most groups consist of many individuals. A member of the group may not know all other members, but he will probably know the common core of traditions belonging to the

\(^6\) Dundes, Alan : Ibid, p.1
group, traditions which help the group to have a sense of group identity." Moreover, 
'there are many other forms of folk in addition to nation and family. Geographical-cultural 
divisions such as religion, state, city, or village may constitute folk groups." He further 
clarifies that " I suppose one might be tempted to test the limits of the definitions by 
asking if one person could constitute a 'folk'. If an individual created a set of idiosyncratic 
gestures, terms etc. be folklore ? I would say no on the grounds that the notion of folk 
does imply some form of collective plurality. Individuals do have idiosyncrasies, but at 
least two individuals would have to share them before I would be comfortable in calling 
such behaviour traditional or folk. I must stress that the idea of a two-person folk group 
is essentially a matter of theory." 

The term 'folklore' is not the synonym of 'folk culture,' though 'Lokasamskriti' 
(Loka-folk, samskriti-culture) is often used to mean 'folklore'in Assamese as well as 
Bengali and Hindi or in some modern Indian languages. The field of culture is far wider 
than that of folklore; obviously, folklore forms part of the culture of any society. 'Although, 
there is a tendency of refinement in the performances and activities of a society which 
we include in the fold of its culture, the area of culture embraces almost the total way of 
life, while folklore restricts its jurisdiction to the creativity of a society taking shape both

7 Dundes, Alan: I bid.p.2 
8 Dundes, Alan: Essays in Folkloristics, p.7 
9 Dundes, Alan: Op cit, p.14
in material and non-material or spiritual form of things."\textsuperscript{10} Hence, the term Lokavidyā (Loka-folk, vidyā-learning) is seemed to be more competent term to denote 'folklore'.

However, the study of folklore is confined to certain areas and those elements covered by the areas are termed 'folklore' as a whole.

\textbf{AREAS OF FOLKLORE :}

The demarcating line between folklore or folklife study and cultural anthropology is very thin, rather confusing to some extent. However, there is basic difference in the manner of data approaching. While an American studies Indian society, then he is doing anthropology, whereas his Indian colleague is studying folklife. Hence, we may say that, 'a folklife specialist always treats the data as his 'own'; looks at it from the viewpoint of his 'self' being a part of the phenomenon. Further more, he also hesitates to treat his phenomenon as 'past' instead looks at it as a part of the present and not far from 'civilization' but a living aspect of his civilization. These and other attitudes certainly change the dimensions of theoretical bias; and folklore specialists begin thinking of their area of inquiry as a living phenomenon with hopes both for the present and

\textsuperscript{10} Islam,M.: Folklore: The pulse of the People, p.4
future....Folklife studies do not focus on the remnants of primitive cultures "still alive today", instead such studies focus on the individual in the midst of social conflict, the present and the future.¹¹

Richard M. Dorson has outlined four broad sectors in the following ways:

1) **Oral literature**: Sometimes called verbal art: "Under this rubric fall spoken, sung, and voiced forms of traditional utterance that show repetitive patterns.

2) **Physical folklife**: generally called material culture: It covers "the visible rather than the aural aspects of folk behaviour that existed prior to and continue alongside mechanized industry.

3) **Social folk custom**: This is an area of traditional life which lies in between oral literature and material culture. Social folk customs are often closely bound up with deeply held folk beliefs, and they cover the fields of festivals and ceremonies, folk religion and folk medicine and

4) **Performing folk arts** which encompass primarily traditional music, dance and drama."¹²

¹¹ Handoo, Jawaharial,: Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction pp.11-12.

Dorson's classification has been accepted internationally more or less. Hence, the area of folklore study confines under the above mentioned sectors. Mazarul Islam classifies folklore into four broad sectors elaborately distinguishing the different areas as follows:

1) **Folk literature** *(What is called oral literature or verbal art by Dorson.)*

2) **Folk-practices** *(They are neither literature, nor art):*

   (i) **Day to day practices** *(some are occasional):* Folk beliefs, customs, superstitions, rites and rituals, folk festivals, some of the religious practices of the folk, traditional procedures *(for example, knocking on wood, throwing salt over one's shoulder).* Some of these elements are oral.

   (ii) **Occasional:** Folk games, folk sports, fighting competitions of animals and birds. In some society, games, sports and gladiatorial performances are related to rituals, customs or festivals.

3) **Folk arts of artistic folklore** :

   (i) **Performing:** Folk dances, folk dramas *(they are also literature)*, rhyming and rope-jumping, folk caricature, folk gestures *(in all these three elements, there are arts, sometimes prominent, sometimes very minor)*

   (ii) **Non-performing:** Folk paintings, sculptures, arts and crafts, embroidered quilt,
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doll-making, images of gods and goddesses, alpana (drawing on the ground or door-steps
drawn using rice-powder mixed with water) designs on cakes, on furniture, body paintings
ornaments, archery, costumes (colourful), traditional swastika emblems.

4. Folk science and technology :

(i) Folk Science : Folk treatment, medicine, arithmetic.churning milk for preparation
of butter, butter oil, curd, food recipes, preparation of drinks from rice, palm juice.
Chemical used for colouring cloth, dye,use of fertilizer, preservative of plants, crops and
trees by the folk in a manner different from botanist or agricultural scientists.

Some of the items of this group like treatment by chants and charms, folk
arithmetic belong to the non-material group of folklore, they are basically oral.

(ii) Folk technology : Folk architecture (tools made of iron, wood and bamboo are
used in day-to-day life), houses, fences, barns, nets for fishing, carts, palanquin, ' duli'
barks, knots, armaments, smoking pipes, pottery, bags, cooking (preparation of cakes and
other foods with design from rice and other materials. These items may even belong to
folk science), hot cross burns (cited by Taylor), mode of stacking hay or straw, weaving
and so on.13

13 Islam ,M. Op cit.pp.8-10
GROWTH OF FOLKLORE STUDIES: AN INTRODUCTION

Through the concept of folklore as an academic discipline was introduced in the middle of the 19th century A.D. as the study of ancient observances and customs, the notions, beliefs, traditions, superstitions and prejudices of the common people, the study of folklore (Folkloristics) gradually generates its momentum from a mere antiquarian hobby to a major discipline.

' A folklorist is to face the onerous task of raising folklore to the pedestal of a creative art through a series of meticulous efforts. He envisages a critical, comparative, rational and impartial analysis, observation of the micro-cultural as well as macro-cultural milieu by delving into the tradition and the cause of changes. He draws artistic conclusion which reveals the merits and demerits of the changes thereby suggesting, homogeneous directive turns. Thus, the latitude of folklore holds the mirror of both rural and urban culture. Its operation does not necessarily extends only in segregated rural life. Folklore aims at the reconstruction of the spiritual history of man, not as represented by the outstanding works of poets, artists, and thinkers, but as exemplified by the more or less inarticulate voice of the folk. The numerous folklore genres and their study accentuate in discovering principles controlling human culture generally.'14

Folklore is treated as the springing humanitarian science. It derives its stimuli from other branches of knowledge such as literature, linguistics, history, geography, psychology, sociology, anthropology etc. 'In folklore, the modern scholars have embraced methodologies such as aesthetic and literary, comparative, nationalistic, anthropological, psychoanalytical and structural. These methodologies have received so much importance in different parts of the world that they seem to have assumed the stature and dignity of theories.' Hence various scientific theories of approaches to this pregnant science of folklore are innovated and applied by the modern folklorists such as, Historical-Geographical theory, Historical-Reconstructional theory, Functional theory, Structural theory, Psycho-Analytical theory etc. A brief introduction of these theories is given below:

1. HISTORICAL-GEOGRAPHICAL THEORY:

The Historical-Geographical theory of folklore is known as Finnish school and comparative methodology too. In fact, it is a method than a theory. A comparative folklorist want to reconstruct a complex myth, tale or folksong historically and geographically. Under this theory or method, a folklorist is to collect hundreds of variants of a particular myth, tale, ballad or folksong. Then he goes for analysing the basic plot into essential components, makes percentage of frequencies of occurrences of each trait, finds out the regional distributions through map, judges the early literary or oral version

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and fixes the oldest form of the tale known as archetype.¹⁶

The hypothesis of the Finnish school is that, there are hundreds of variants of a tale, myth, ballad, proverb etc. In fact, there is one original version which was certainly created once at a particular spot consciously by a particular person. Later, the tale spread to other places through diffusion. On the other hand folk tales are migrated to other geographical region through manuscript and printed text.

It is not so easy to locate the archetype of a tale, ballad, proverb and song, but certainly we may make a comparison between the item under our study with the variants found in other parts of the world or in other languages and cultures.

2. THE THEORY OF POLYGENESIS:

According to this theory, a cultural artefact of an element of folklore could have originated at two or more different unrelated places independently at the same time or at different time, but under the same circumstances and same favourable environment.

It is sometimes call as anthropological school. The followers of anthropological school or polygenesis theory believe that, as all men evolve in on evolutionary path through absolutely identical stages of savagery, barbarism and civilization, so creation

¹⁶ Islam, M.: Op cit p. 66
of a cultural artefact in two or more different culture independently is not unnatural. On the other hand, 'The theory of polygenesis is often quoted in support of the concept of the psychic unity of man by those who believe that because of the psychological uniformity of man, folklore created in different culture can be the same.'

3. **THE THEORY OF DIFFUSIONISM : THEORY OF BORROWING :**

The followers of this theory believe that, cultural traits were born in one place or probably in a very few places and they were transmitted to other places through diffusion. This theory is a combination of monogenesis and diffusion. Theodore Benfey, a German Indologist was the profounder of the theory and her termed some nations of the world as borrowers of folklore, and some suppliers, some are manufacturers and some consumers. It is not possible to decide and pinpoint such positions in fact, 'Folklore travels, but does not travel up to the extent as to destroy the independent birth of folklore in other areas where they travel. The elements are transmitted and diffused, they also exert influence over the other, one variant is mixed up in a peculiar way with the other variant of another country, near or far away, which has given folklore an international character; but in spite of these factors which are true, every culture gives birth to its folklore according to its own requirement and characteristics.'

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18 Islam, M. Op-Cit., p. 72.
'However, Benfey's theory had for reaching influence on the folkloristic studies of the late nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. In the first place, it provided support to the historical reconstruction methodology of Max Muller with another theoretical and also methodological shield, i.e., diffusion in genetically non-related cultures. It also inspired a group of Scandinavian scholars, particularly Finnish, to undertake the tedious task of finding out the origin, history and the travel routes (in terms of geographical situations) of tales. This subsequently resulted in the founding of the most famous and to some extent formalistic school in folklore studies known as the "historical-geographical" or more popularly "Finnish school."'19

4. STRUCTURALISM: SYNTAGMATIC AND PARADIGMATIC APPROACH:

Structuralism is an influential and attractive method in the folklore studies as well as in linguistics and literature. Though, the real father of this method is Vladimir Propp, a Russian folklorist, and structural approach appeared in his famous book *Morfologiya skazki* (Morphology of the folktale) published in 1928, this method entered to the American folkloristics in the sixties only when Alan Dundes used the Propp's method in *The Morphology of North American Indian Folktales* (1964). 'After the pioneering work of Propp, western scholars such as Claude Levi Strauss, Alan Dundes, E.Kongas Maranda, P. Maranda and William O. Hendricks have attained a remarkable level of sophistication

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The structuralists believe that, folk-narratives change in subject matter and theme, but its structure remains almost unaffected. Propp observes that:

(i) "Function is understood as an act of a character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action."

(ii) "Functions of the characters serve as stable constant elements in a tale, independent of how and by whom they are fulfilled. They constitute the fundamental components of the tale."

(iii) "The number of functions known to the (fairy) tale is limited."  

Propp calls the elements that do not change as constants (as for examples motifs and functions) and those which change from one tale to another tale as variables (as for example, the characters or objects). Analyzing the component parts of folk narratives, the structuralists determine the constants and variables of the narrative. This method is called as Syntagmatic Model. According to Propp, "The sequence of functions is always

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21 Propp, V.J.,: Morphology of The Folklore, pp. 21-22.
identical."²² Hence, functions, being the constant elements of a narrative, one could study the narratives according to the functions of the *dramatis personae* (characters). Thus function became the basic classificatory and analytical unit".²³

Claude Levi-Strauss, a France anthropologist introduced another method of structural analysis of folk-narrative. Levi-strauss believes that a myth can be decomposed and reduced to its basic components named as "mythemes" (which according to him, are its molecules). These mythemes can then be rearranged into meaningful or logical paradigms so that the relations thus established reveal the mythic message. These messages are binary in nature and always turn out to be logical formulations to overcome contradictions humans or cultures face. This method thus gives new interpretations to myths.²⁴

'Unlike Propp, Levi-Strauss does not see any possibility of analysing structurally a given item of folklore in isolation, i.e., when the item is separated from its cultural context. This basic difference is due to the fact that Levi-Strauss' structural analysis does not separate form from the content while Propp's work gives more emphasis to form. In other words, Levi-Strauss' methodology is concerned about the structured meaning in myths, which according to him, is a single reality and observable as such. Propp on the

²³ Handoo,J: Op-Citp.56.
other hand, does clearly distinguish between the form and the content and treats them as two separate entities. This is precisely why Propp does not go beyond the surface structure of a folktale and discerns its morphology in terms of its linear syntagmatic Structure. Levi-strauss, on the other hand, delves into the deep structure of myths and rearranges the elements into meaningful paradigms.⁵

5. CONTEXTUAL THEORY

The followers of this theory believe that, folkloristics is not only the study of folklore text. As Malinowski says, 'The text, of course, is extremely important, but without the context it remains lifeless.' Therefore, the contextualists insist that the concept of folklore apply not to a text but to an event in which a tradition is performed or communicated. Hence, they stressed to record not only the text but the whole circumstance (even gestures) in which the text is delivered by the narrator and received by the audience. Roger Abrahams, Dan-Ben Amos, Alan Dundes, Robert Georges, Kenneth Goldstein etc. followed this method.

6. FUNCTIONAL THEORY

The main object of functionalists is to determine properly the functions of folklore

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⁵ Handoo, J.: Op-Cit, p.57.

element in the society. According to Bascom, there are four functions of folklore:

(a) Amusement is, obviously, one of the function of folklore, but folklore,\textsuperscript{27} also reveals man's attempts to escape in fantasy from the conditions of his geographical environment and from his own biological limitations as a member of the genus and species Homo sapiens.\textsuperscript{28}

(b) Folklore plays in validating culture, in justifying its rituals and institutions to those who perform and observe them.\textsuperscript{29}

(c) Folklore plays in education, particularly but not exclusively, in non literate societies.\textsuperscript{30}

(d) Folklore fulfils the important but often overlooked function of maintaining conformity to the accepted patterns of behaviour.\textsuperscript{31}

7. PSYCHOANALYTIC THEORY:

This theory was introduced after Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis. According to Freud, myths, folktales, and other forms of folklore looked like dreams and the myths and

\textsuperscript{27} Bascom, W.R. : \textit{Four Functions of Folklore}, artin \textit{Folklore and Folklife}, (ed) R.M. Dorsan p 290
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Ibid}, p.291
\textsuperscript{29} \textit{Ibid.} p. 292
\textsuperscript{30} \textit{Ibid},p.293.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid}.p.294.
tales are nothing but sex symbols. 'Many folklorists following Freudian principles believed that the "dream is the myth of the individual." some even declared that myth is the dream of a culture; and therefore the same psychological mechanisms operated in dreams and myths and were subject to the same interpretations. According to those scholars if the dreams expressed the infantile desire of one human being, myths revealed psychic repressions of the whole race or culture.\footnote{Handoo, J.; Opcit. p.48}

Freud, Oppenheim, Earnest Jones, Erich Fromm, Gaza Roheim etc. have done remarkable work in analysing myths, tales and literary works of different cultures according to psychoanalytic method.

Apart from the above seven theories or methods, there are more theories and methodologies, which are followed by different eminent folklorists. Here, we have no scope to discuss all the theories and hence, we have given outline of only a few important theories to show the line of the growth of folklore in this century.