CHAPTER – 1

INTRODUCTION
FOLKLORE: NATURE AND SCOPE

Folklore is a general term for the verbal, spiritual, and material aspects of any culture that are transmitted orally, by observation, or by imitation. People sharing a culture may have in common an occupation, language, ethnicity, age, or geographical location. This body of traditional material is preserved and passed on from generation to generation, with constant variations shaped by memory, immediate need or purpose, and degree of individual talent. The word folklore was coined in 1846 by the English antiquary William John Thoms to replace the term popular antiquities.

By the word 'folk-lore' a folklorist means myths, legends, folktales, proverbs, riddles, folk verses, folk beliefs, folk superstitions, customs, folk drama, folk song, folk music, folk dance, ballads, folk cults, folk gods and goddesses, rituals, festivals, magic, witchcraft, folk art and craft, and variety of forms of artistic expression of oral culture or rural and tribal folks or unlettered city dwellers that bind man to man.

Many folklore scholars have attempted to define folklore, although it is difficult to give a definition of folklore. It's one of those things
where the more we know about it, the harder it gets to define.

According to Dan Ben-Amos (1972)

_Folklore is very much an organic phenomenon. . . . It is possible to distinguish three basic conceptions of the subject underlying many definitions; accordingly, folklore is one of these three: a body of knowledge, a mode of thought, or a kind of art. . . . Folklore is not thought of as existing without or apart from a structured group. . . . Its existence depends on its social context. . . . As an artistic process, folklore may be found in any communicative medium; musical, visual, kinetic, or dramatic._

He further said “Folklore reveals and helps us understand our humanity. Communities throughout time and space have created stories, songs, dance, music, rituals, customs, festivals, and various material artistic genres to make sense of and to celebrate the world and the human condition. Our expressions flourish when tradition connects communal wisdom with innovative inspiration. As its name indicates, folklore involves both "folk" (a group of people) and "lore" (creative expressions). Hence folklorists study "artistic communication in small groups"._

Meaning, folklorists focus upon the relationship of individual creativity to the collective order. Folklorists are equally concerned with aesthetic and expressive aspects of culture and the people and societies that make and respond to creative acts.
Traditional arts, belief, traditional ways of work and leisure, adornment and celebrations are cultural ways in which a group maintains and passes on a shared way of life. This "group identity" may be defined by age, gender, ethnicity, avocation, region, occupation, religion, socioeconomic niche, or any other basis of association. As New York folklorist Ben Botkin wrote in 1938,

"Every group bound together or by common interests and purposes, whether educated or uneducated, rural or urban, possesses a body of traditions which may be called its folklore. Into these traditions enter many elements, individual, popular, and even 'literary,' but all are absorbed and assimilated through repetition and variation into a pattern which has value and continuity for the group as a whole".2

Alan Dundes, in 1965 said that

"It is possible...to define both folk and lore in such a way that even the beginner can understand what folklore is. 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."3

Anthropologists and Folklorists of previous generations sometimes lamented that an age of high technology and global capitalism
would result in the demise of “traditional” cultures. According to Stith Thompson

"The common idea present in all folklore is that of tradition, something handed down from one person to another and preserved either by memory or practice rather than written record."\textsuperscript{4}

In this regard John L. Mish said that

"The entire body of ancient popular beliefs, customs, and traditions which have survived among the less educated elements of civilized societies until today. It thus includes fairy tales, myths, and legends, superstitions, festival rites, traditional games, folk songs, popular sayings, arts, crafts, folk dances, and the like."\textsuperscript{5}

Folklore is not static. Tradition is not static, nor is it in the past. Neither folklore nor tradition remains fixed, for they are not things, but processes as mutable, as dynamic as the lives and minds of the humans who create them. The art is merely the product of the process of convergence between individual, willed creativity and communal life. As Glassie writes in 1993,

*tradition “is rooted in volition and it flowers in variation and innovation. It opposes the alien and imposed . . .”* so that the "center of folklore is the merger of individual creativity and social order. Philosophically, politically, my discipline upholds the human right to the construction of a meaningful universe through artistic
action; it stresses the interdependence of the personal, the social, the sacred; the aesthetic, the ethical, the cosmological; the beautiful, the good, the true. Practically, folklore is the study of human creativity in its own context".6

CLASSIFICATION OF FOLKLORE

Folklore is not restricted to rural communities but may commonly be found in cities, and that, rather than dying out, it is still part of the learning of all groups from family units to nations, albeit changing in form and function. In this way Folklore has come to be regarded as part of the human learning process and an important source of information about the history of human life.

Folklore materials may be roughly classified into five general areas: ideas and beliefs, traditions, narratives, folk sayings, and the folk arts.

Folk beliefs include ideas about the whole range of human concerns, from the reasons and cures for diseases to speculation concerning life after death. This category therefore, includes folkloristic beliefs (superstitions), magic, divination, witchcraft, and apparitions such as ghosts and fantastic mythological creatures.

The second classification, that of traditions, includes material
dealing with festival customs, games, and dances; cookery and
costume might also be included. The third category, narratives,
includes the ballad and the various forms of folktales and folk
music, all of which may be based in part on real characters or
historical events. The category of folk sayings includes proverbs
and nursery rhymes, verbal charms, and riddles.

Folk arts, the fifth and only nonverbal category, covers any form of
art, generally created anonymously among a particular people,
shaped by and expressing the character of their community life.

*Folk arts are traditional cultural expressions through which a
group maintains and passes on its shared way of life.* They express
a group's sense of beauty, identity and values. Folk arts are usually
learned informally through performance, by example or in oral
tradition among families, friends, neighbors and co-workers rather
than through formal education. A living cultural heritage, folk arts
link the past and present. Never static, folk arts change, as they are
adapted to new circumstances while they maintain their traditional
qualities.

The folk arts and crafts are those that are learned as part of the
lifestyle of a community whose members share identity based upon
ethnic origin, religion, occupation, or geographical region. Highly varied, these traditions are shaped by the aesthetics and values of the community and are passed from generation to generation.

Folk art is not easily amenable to definition. Every time we use the term ‘folk art’ we need to redefine the sense in which we use it.

Here, we mean by ‘folk art’ primarily non-professional art, art practiced in any community by ordinary men and women in various walks of life, who have undergone no regular training or apprenticeship, who do not belong to any professional guilds and do not practice it as a trade at the behest of other but for decorative and ritual use in their homes and communities.

Such an art exists separately from the stream of professional art, although when it grows in body and momentum it enters into various relationships with the professional art and craft traditions of the time. As a result, the folk artist makes use of motifs drawn from the professional artist giving them a change of meaning and adding to them a certain earthiness and vigour; the professional artist draws on folklore and folk forms in his turn.
FOLK ART OF INDIA

In India folk art was discovered in Bengal and began to be collected by the Tagores, Ajit Ghosh and other artists and connoisseurs early in 20th century. In more ancient times while folk art undoubtedly existed there was hardly any consciousness of it. The discovery of folk art is linked to the development of national consciousness: provinces, isolated pockets of territory and regional areas now regarding their own folk art as a special and unique heritage. Maharashtra, M.P. and Orissa are still continued to be the important centres of folk art where a large number of tribal communities are settled and their descendants are still restoring their heritage through their artistic creativity.

Some forms of folk art is found in most provinces of India in local variations. The range of work is immense: terracotta's, wooden and clay toys, dolls and images, paintings, objects of pith and cane, rag, embroidery, metal objects of miscellaneous materials. Most of them require some form of craftsmanship, and show a lively imagination and an uncluttered understanding of the materials. The basic characteristic of folk art is that its forms are simple, bold and clear.
Their strong living shapes and bright colours contribute to a vigour and animation not to be found in more complex art.

According to Jaya Appasamy, the following are the common stylistic characteristics in folk-art:

1. Preference for simple outline, choice of typically representational lines and rejection of accessory elements.

2. A simplification of colours and volumes so that shading is eliminated.

3. Exaggeration of gestures for expressive reasons and primitive use of relative size.

4. Stylization of motifs to create decorative elements.

5. Repetition of lines, of entire figures, of dots for intensive or rhythmical purposes.

Folk art is purposeful, but non-commercial. The present day contemporary artist proclaims that art is for art sake. The ancient aestheticians of India repeatedly emphasize that Art must have a purpose; Art must stand for lofty ideas.

In folk tradition, art is a nourishment to the daily life of the people. Whether he is a Tamilnadu potter who creates a massive terracotta, Aiyanar or a Madhya Pradesh tribal who creates Pithora painting, at
the moment of creation, the poverty-stricken, illiterate folk, becomes a master-crafts-man who can create marvelous plastic and visual forms with a creative genius handed over to him by generations from time immemorial.
EFFECT OF TOPOGRAPHY AND GEOGRAPHY

In folk art the direct effect of the environment emerges in the form, style and material of product. People living in mountainous and forest areas are adept at handling wood, while those in deltaic plains create fired objects from clay, especially terracotta. Pith is used where available also palm leaves and fibres, while weaving gives rise to woven and embroidered clothes. Paintings on floors, walls and papers vary from places to places and may be connected to myths, special festivals, rites and other specific occasions. Topography and geography have much control over the medium of art. In the case of Uttar Pradesh, we can find folk paintings on the walls of the houses. Whereas in Assam, one cannot find wall paintings because most of the walls of the house are built with cane or bamboo.

Diversity in the topography and geography of our country gives room for multiple styles in folk art. Each part of the country with it’s own trees and plants, birds and animals, hills and dales has inspired Indian folk artists to have multiple metaphors, series of symbols and innumerable images to build a rich treasure-house of art. Out of various folk styles some are described below.
Pata paintings (Orissa)

Artists who make paintings on walls of temples and on cloth are called *chitrakars* in Orissa state. A very prestigious assignment of chitrakars is executed in the temple of the triad Jagannath, Balbhadra, and Subhadra in the coastal town of Puri in Orissa. The town attracts a large number of pilgrims from all over India for the *rath yatra* or car festival of Lord Jagannath. Just before the festival, the three wooden idols of the triad in the temple are taken behind closed doors to be freshly painted. During this period, the triad, painted on freshly painted cloth, are hung on doors for prayers. The paintings of the triad are done by highly competent *chitrakars*. These artists also do smaller paintings on religious themes for sale to pilgrims.

Garoda (story tellers of Gujarat)

*Garodas* hailed from northern Gujarat and Rajasthan. They travelled from village to village with their painted paper scrolls and narrated popular legends. Painted scroll were usually divided into 19 compartments by thick, black horizontal lines. The style of painting in scrolls was marked by use of bright colours and thick outlining of figures in black. The scroll depicted popular deities,
for example Krishna, Ganesha, Siva, Goddess Lakshmi and scenes from local legends, like the story of Dana Bhagat, Raja Harishchandra, Krishna legends with local variations of Mahabharata and Ramayana.

**Tanjavore Painting**

Tanjavore paintings are practiced in south India. The style was essentially of Tamil origin but it spread gradually to Andhra Pradesh and in Karnataka. Tanjavore art is practiced by artisans from traditional families. They were commissioned by devotees to make paintings of Hindu Gods mainly infant Krishna. This folk art is patronised by the affluent who have custom made paintings created which are adorned with gold and genuine precious stones.

**Chitrakathi Paintings (Maharastra)**

Chitrakathi are a community of migrating story tellers found all over Maharashtra and some parts of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. They made a series of single sheets of paintings All paintings belonging to one story were kept in a bundle called potli. Theme of a Chitrakathi painting includes stories on local versions of Ramayana and Mahabharata and mythical themes. Use of brownish
Chitrakathi Painting (Maharastra)

Kalighat Painting (Kolkata)  Madhubani Painting (Bihar)
tones of stone colours gives a remarkable effect. Figures in paintings were generally stylised.

**Kalighat Painting (Kolkata)**

Kalighat is a place of pilgrimage. It is a centre of art with a distinct style of Indian paintings known as Kalighat pata painting. Kalighat painters are mostly Bengali Hindu of pata community, who came from rural Bengal to Calcutta and found in Kalighat a centre, which could sustain them. Their work was religious in nature and puranic in content. The subjects were usually mythological and gods and goddesses. Painters used local paper, which was thin and cheap and water colour easily available in the city.

**Madhubani Paintings (Bihar)** It is a domestic art practiced from house to house. Through this religious symbolism is expressed in a beautiful way. In Mithila, women folk of all communities paint. Madhubani paintings are primarily wall paintings like frescoes. Most famous are Kohber paintings (marriage alpana). The central theme is love and fertility. Passion, love and desire are reduced to symbols to suggest and evoke the mood, to create the atmosphere and environment. The paintings are done by the household ladies as an ordinary domestic art.
Bhitti chitra or Wall Decorations

Decorative Alpana
Bhitti chitra or Wall Decorations

Bhitti chitra or mud wall painting is an attempt by simple villagefolk to beautify bare mud walls of village huts and its surroundings with auspicious folk motifs called mandanas. They adorn clay walls with puranic gods and ornamental forms of birds, serpents, flowers and geometrical designs on festive occasions. The ground is never left blank. The deity always occupies a central place. Floral and animal forms provide an appropriate decorative design, and at places and in some occasions, only geometric arrangements are used as motif. The paint is prepared by mixing rati (colour made of red earth) and khadia (white chalk) in water. A cement plastered wall of today is not a good canvas for this art.

Alpana

Alpana is an art for women both in villages and in cities. It is practiced within the boundaries of a house. This art includes a variety of bhumi chitra or floor decorations known as chowk, alpana, mandala and rangoli. It is made as a daily routine and is also used on ritualistic and auspicious occasions. Mud floor is an ideal base for alpana. The history of alpana designs goes back to the Vedic period. The Aryans, authors of Vedas, worshipped fire
and other forces of nature. Because of their profound knowledge of the Supreme Reality, they expressed their gratitude to the creator by performing *yajnas* or sacrificial ceremonies. For this occasion they decorated worship area with designs composed with dots, lines, circles drew them with a paste of *haldi* (turmeric) and *kumkum* (vermillion).

Alpana, also known as Rangoli or Kolam and by other names, is a traditional art of decorating courtyards and walls of Indian houses, places of worship and sometimes eating places as well. The powder of white stone, lime, rice flour and other cheap paste is used to draw intricate and ritual designs. Each state of India has its own way of painting Rangoli.

One characteristic of Rangoli is that it is painted by commoners. On some special occasions it is painted in every home, with or without formal training in Rangoli art. The art is typically transferred from generation to generation and from friend to friend.

Women use their bare fingers or a brush to create various designs from sandstone powder or grain-flour. Sometimes colors and petals are used in addition to flour paste. Some women are so skilled with their fingers that they can create figures of deities, chariots,
temples, etc., on the finely layered floor. Petals of various flowers, such as oleanders, cosmos, zenia, chrysanthemums, and green leaves provide the artist the ability to work out various patterns and colors. In the evenings of festive occasions, when oil lamps are lit, and the atmosphere is cool and pleasant, such floral designs create the atmosphere of a well-planned divine garden. This Rangoli garden surrounds the sacred spot where pooja (prayer) is performed or a child is seated for his or her birthday, naming ceremony or thread ceremony. Newly-weds also receive guests in such decorated surroundings when the wedding celebrations are ongoing.

These folk paintings are made in Indian villages, by both men and women, for ornamentation of their abodes, portrayals of their gods and for their various rituals. All these paintings were produced in a variety of styles and themes. History, sociology and geography infused the painting of each region with local flavour. To some extent their style and quality depended on the materials available in the place in which they were executed. These very factors help us to identify them region wise. And yet, through all the apparent diversity there runs an underlying unity, which makes them 'Indian'.
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