

# The concept of Folklore in India and Pakistan

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## The Concept of Folklore in India and Pakistan

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The term *Folklore* has always remained a debatable subject since its coinage by Thoms in 1846 among the European and American scholars, and in India and Pakistan the situation is not much different. Indian folklorists have been using for a long time another term *Lok Varta* parallel to the term *Folklore*, but as regards its exact scope and meaning the state is still more confusing than in the western countries. It will be too hasty a step to define this new discipline of *Lok Varta* but something can be made out from what others have been saying in connection with its nature, form and content. The term *Lok Varta* consists of two words, viz. *Lok* and *Varta*. Both of these words stand, more or less, equivalent to the words *Folk* and *Lore* respectively in their broadest usage. By *Lok* is meant the "Folk" in the widest sense or the common people in general, and the other word *Varta* usually means the «talks» or the "gossips" or the wisdom of the common people. Both of these words are very old in Indian history, if taken separately. Words like *Lok* and *Parlok* have been often used in the oldest religious and secular literature of the Vedas which are the oldest written documents of India, and the word *Varta* too can be traced back at least as far as the Middle Ages, where it is mostly found associated with saints and religious devotees. There are some books dealing with the day-to-day life, miracles, teachings, etc., of the mediaeval Hindu and Muslim saints who belonged to the lower classes of the society. For example, the books like «Chaurasi Vaishnavan Ki Varta» (i.e. the lore of the eighty-four Vaishnava saints), "Do So Vaishnavan Ki Varta" (i.e. the lore of the two hundred and fifty-two Vaishnava saints) can be mentioned at this place. Their anecdotes, connected narrative pieces, etc., have been termed as *Varta*. But the joint use of these words as *Lok Varta* is of recent origin which can be said gaining currency from near-about 1920 onwards and V. S. Agrawala is probably the first person who suggested this name for the western Folklore.

Indian scholars have not accepted, and they still do not accept, the narrow use of the word *Lok* in its strict sense of the European *folk*, as the history of civilization and the social pattern of India have been much more different than those of the countries of the West. There never existed a marked clear-cut distinction between the rural and the urban life in India as one may find it elsewhere. By the folk in other countries is generally meant that common mass of people who live

outside the civilized circles of the society, who are mainly village-dwellers, uneducated or illiterate people, and, when this word was added as a prefix to other words like folk art, folk drama, folk culture, etc., it gave a totally very limited idea of the concept of folklore. But considering the special surroundings of the Indian people, this limitation of the term could not be accepted, simply because the cities and the towns as well as the villages and the rural areas always remained prominent in the Indian society. The rural life was equally important as the urban one.

Further, there were saints, intellectual persons and devotees from ancient times in this country who, though living in far-off hermitages in the forests, equally held influence at the courts of the kings and at the large gatherings of the village-masses. Then an idea was formed that the word *Lok* stands for the total cultural unit of the whole Indian nation. From its very conception, therefore, the word *Lok* has been understood in the widest sense of the term and it does not denote simply a cut-off minor section of the society.

However, oral tradition is the main characteristic of this term *Lok Varta*, i.e. the Indian folklore as we may put it, and it now implies the materials of folklore as well as the science of it. The concept is still in its infancy; it is not yet possible to define it exactly for the same reason. Scholars in India, Pakistan, Burma, and Ceylon are trying to put forward different meanings and different interpretations for the same. All of them explain this new discipline mostly through the sidelights of anthropology, or ethnology and sometimes through history and culture. Nonetheless, the main points of this branch of study in India can be roughly outlined as follows:

1. It studies the survivals of tradition, customs, beliefs and manners in a local society;
2. It includes the study of (a) folksongs, narrative songs, stories, riddles, proverbs, children's games, etc., (b) fairs, festivals, worship of domestic deities, chants, fasts, ceremonies, rites, etc., (c) magic, witchcraft, totems, taboos, devil lore, etc., (d) folk arts, folk crafts, and history, philosophy, psycho ogy too to a certain extent;
3. It is an independent discipline, having certain principles of its own, and its stylistic aspect too is not negligible;
4. Its material is mainly oral, but sometimes written material can also be included;
5. It offers a comparative method of study;

6. Besides a traditional part of the folk-life, it is still a dynamic force in the society;
7. Broadly it analyzes the human culture, and it chiefly concentrates on all the basic fields of folk-culture.

But it should be always kept in mind that these characteristics of the Indian *Lok Varta* are almost theoretical because no one so far has covered all these distinct fields of particular study. Mostly, Indian scholars have studied the folklore material from the literary point of view. They are of opinion that the study of *Lok Varta* should be restricted to this particular sense. When the folklore material is to be studied from this particular point of view, it is sometimes given a different name, viz. *Lok Sabitya*, which is the parallel term for the western "folk-literature". Folk is the same as the *Lok* in our sense, and *Sabitya* means the literature. This *Lok Sabitya* or "folk-literature" is a branch of the discipline of *Lok Varta* (i.e. Folklore) which differs completely from the written literature of the higher classes, in its fundamental contents and its expression.

Now the concept of Folklore in India and Pakistan generally connotes the idea of folk-literature and, therefore, this consideration needs some further elucidation. We must find out what *Lok Sabitya* exactly means and what its exact scope is. During the third decade of the present century there were some Indian writers who, instead of *Lok Sabitya*, preferred the use of a different term *Jan Sabitya*, meaning thereby the people's literature, but their explanation of this use could not gain much ground among the folklorists of this country. The critics of this school of folklore (i.e. *Jan Sabitya*) said that actually "people's literature" (*Jan Sabitya*) came into existence quite late in the Middle Ages and that it is composed mainly by individual authors for the general public. *Lok Sabitya*, on the other hand, is composed by the people themselves for the people. In one genre the individual composer holds a distinct identity, whereas in the other genre he remains simply a means of communication to the public. The critics also said that the term *Jan* (people) is more well-organized, more self-conscious in the society than the *Lok* (folk), and that it is usually associated with a political background. It can also be written down to propogate a certain ideology and may not be as natural a term as the *Lok Sabitya* (folk-literature). They maintained that the structure of these two words is completely different. *Jan Sabitya* is published and printed from the press, and it does not mean oral literature like *Lok Sabitya*.

Actually the point is not so controversial as it is being understood by the schools of folklore in India. What was the fact, was probably

like this. *Jan Sabitya* was being accepted more and more by the progressive writers and thinkers of India at that time of national resurgence and, and so it was also due to the impacts of many foreign countries. In Europe too the word "People" was being used in a particular sense, where class-conflict was to be searched out, and the folklore studies were being diverted to that channel. Naturally in India when the word *Jan* was associated with this word *People* (and it was a mere coincidence, too), it gave the same ideas of class-conflict. But in its purest sense the word *jan* in the Indian usage stands for the common folk, for the general mass, which is included in the subject of folklore everywhere. Later on the use of the word *Jan Sabitya* was given up.

For many regional songs, prose-poetry works, etc., there were some other words too, used to connote the same idea of our *Lok Sabitya*. For example, R. N. Tripathi thought it better to use the word *Gram* in the place of the "folk". He argued that such songs are the sole property of the villages, they have travelled to the towns no doubt, but they are not born there. Then why should the glory of the villages be neglected? But this word very soon lost the currency, as it was obviously too narrow in its meaning. It restricted literature to the boundaries of villages, whereas folk-literature happens to be the property of the towns as well.

Then the word *Lok-geet* came into light. By 1927 this word had already become popular in the regions of Gujrat, Maharastra and Rajasthan. For some time the controversy again lingered between the use of the *Gram* and the *Lok*, but after 1940, on the whole, the term *Lok-geet* prevailed. S. K. Parikh of Rajasthan was of opinion, that the limitation of the folklore material to the villages means to reduce its wider popularity; in its composition villagers or towns-people as such do not matter much, it is the commoners, the folk or the *Lok*, who matter most.

The word *Lok Sabitya* was generally accepted in this way by all folklorists of India and Pakistan after a brief but good controversy in the history of its development. India and Pakistan were one country up to this time, only after the partition in 1947, Pakistan came into separate existence, but the concept of this *Lok Sabitya* remains the same in both countries.

Now, not every type of literature can be included in the group of *Lok Sabitya*. To make a particular genre a true *Lok Sabitya*, it must be in accordance with the innermost beats of the human heart. From the higher, sophisticated literature in the society, it is still on a different

footing. It represents all that is traditional, oral, and sometimes also written material, that is supposed to be the work of the general mass as a whole, though an individual or some individuals are definitely at its base. It covers all the manners, customs, ways of thinking, living, means of entertainment, relics, and rites, etc., of the people or of a group of people who live in the society or in a particular region. Broadly speaking it includes all those expressions wherein the heart and the mind of the common man are reflected. It is most natural, and it is directly connected with the emotions of the human beings at large. Such works are, no doubt, the works of authors or they may be of single composers, but they are not abstract or subjective. Actually they deal with the day-to-day life of the men and women, and impersonality is to be taken as their fundamental trait.

This folklore denotes a certain stage in the evolution of the human civilization and in India too the term *Lok Sabitya* well illustrates the gradual development of the national society. The Indian society and the civilization roughly present three main stages of development:

1. Undeveloped or underdeveloped society in which man was living almost in the hunting stage;
2. Growing society in which man gradually found larger settlements having agriculture, etc., as its main occupations;
3. Fully grown-up society wherein man, after the industrial revolution, began to live in the big towns, and his mind predominated the heart.

Between these three stages of development there may be other stages of gradual evolution, and even now-a-days we may find, in the most developed stage of the society, certain races, or tribes, who are far behind the second stage. Conversely in the second stage of this development, there may be groups of men who are comparatively more advanced in their mental outlook. But this point merely indicates the gradual pattern of development and for our purpose the *Lok Sabitya* can be easily placed in the middle of these three successive stages. Now speaking from the historical point of view roughly, the literature of these three successive stages can be respectively said to be the primitive literature, the folk-literature, and the cultivated literature, though there has been a consistent change in their mutual fields and in the subject-matter. *Lok Sabitya*, therefore, holds a peculiar position in this way. Its aim is neither to study the primitive literature, though the primitive expressions are reflected through it, nor is it aiming at the study of the cultivated literature of the higher classes, though borrowings and lendings have been a common feature of these two genres. If one margin of this literature (I think of the *Lok Sabitya*) touches the

primitive level, the other is surely to touch the cultural level of the higher literature. This is the reason why, on the one hand, many poetic devices, motives, and folk patterns are reflected in it and, on the other hand, these very patterns are carried over to the cultured literature. Conversely at times we may find many elements of the higher literature to be peeping into its various sub-divisions. If analyzed in this way the *Lok Sahitya* of India and Pakistan will furnish a good proof for the fact how the folklore materials are sometimes adopted into the higher literature and, at times, how the elements of the higher culture and literature, too, influence the folklore materials of a particular place. It, no doubt, possesses a good old tradition as background through which it was created, modified, and was handed down mostly by words of mouth to the present generation. The concept of folklore in India is, therefore, restricted to the study of folk-literature up to the present day, as we have already seen, and a considerable field has been dealt with in this direction. But it seems more useful and a point of greater importance, too, at this time of national awakening, if in India the concept of folklore is broadened, as it is being done in many foreign countries.

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