UNIT 2 TRIBAL, FOLK AND CLASSICAL CULTURES: DEFINITIONS AND INTERRELATIONSHIP

Structure

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2.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- examine 'tribe' and 'tribal' culture;
- describe the 'folk' culture;
- identify the characteristics of classical culture;
- examine the interrelationships among 'tribal', 'folk' and classical cultures; and
- list out some of the problems faced in strict definition of culture.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

In this Unit, the discussion would focus on some of the important conceptual approaches to defining culture and classifying them into 'tribal', or 'folk' or classical. Concept and classification are interrelated. In fact, they could be both premised upon each other. It is important to note that behind any concept or classification of culture (or society), a set of assumptions are generally in operation. Therefore, the role of assumptions in informing the theoretical and empirical foundations of concepts or classifications is significant. In due course of the unit, it will be evident that much of the conceptualizing and classifying of different kinds of cultures into categories like 'tribal' or 'folk' or classical are grounded on specific sets of assumptions.

Further, it is also important to note that these classifications now commonly followed in contemporary studies of culture have been influenced by the modern European perspectives of what is culture and in what way Europe as a cultural paradigm differs from the other cultures, especially those of their colonies. We know that most of the world was under European colonialism through most of the 19th till the middle of the 20th century. Classification of 'tribal' or 'folk' or 'classical' cultures, therefore, were premised on the assumption that culture as a
way of life and thought process that could be found in colonizing Europe as 'modern' while the others were not. The features that constituted European, especially Western Europe, culture were considered as elements of 'modern' culture against which elements of other cultures were judged and classified. There were two factors in operation in this process of classification, viz. (a) power, i.e. Western Europe as the dominant referent culture, and (b) assumption of evolution, i.e. industrial society as the highest stage of human societal evolution. On the basis of the above two criteria, cultures other than 'modern' European came to be classified as 'tribal' or 'folk' or 'classical' in nature.

However, in the post-colonial period (second half of the 20th century), numerous researches increasingly came to point out that the assumptions behind the classification of cultures into 'tribal' or 'folk' or classical or 'modern' were largely untenable. Two fundamental reasons were forwarded in this regard. Firstly, it was pointed out that the assumption of human societal evolution from hunting gathering to industrial society was an incongruent assumption on social and historical change. It was noted that in many cases such neat classifications of societies and their cultures could prove impossible since a society could bear elements of all the classifications at the same time in the contemporary period. Secondly, it was pointed out that classification of culture was premised on the modern West European culture as the referent culture. The practice of this assumption in terms of production of knowledge and creating institutions based on it was made possible by the European control over most parts of the world as its colonies. In other words, the critique was against the very knowledge that classified cultures into categories like 'tribal', 'folk' or 'classical'. It was this critique of Western knowledge that led to investigations into newer categories of classification of culture.

2.2 'TRIBE' AND 'TRIBAL' CULTURE

It is important to note that 'tribe' as an anthropological category in South Asia as we have come to understand in the modern period is a social classification that began with colonialism. 'Tribe' in this sense is different from the pre-modern concept of jati that was in general usage in the subcontinent. The term jati generally lacked the anthropological connotation of 'tribe'. 'Tribe' refers to specific patterns of economic and socio-cultural modes of life. In modern anthropology, 'tribe' also came to be conceptualized as a stage in social development. It came to be assumed that hunting and gathering society would develop into 'tribal' formations, which then would develop into state societies, whether republic or monarchy. In other words, 'tribe' is a stage in the evolution of human society from primitive to modern. Thus, vis-à-vis modern society, tribal stage came to be seen as primitive, i.e. in a stage of social development earlier to modern society. However, recent researches have proved that locating 'tribe' in the evolutionary scale of progress from primitive to modern is untenable. It has been shown that 'tribe', when seen in terms of social organization or cultural practices, needs to be understood as a certain mode of existence among other modes with its own codes. These codes, such as kinship relations, cultural narratives, strategies of economic existence or political formations, are related more to their geographical and historical context of existence than any general principle of social evolution.

The above conceptualization of 'tribe' played a significant role in colonial anthropology on South Asia attributing importance to 'folk', i.e. oral narratives
as well as visual narratives such as handicraft or textile to understand 'tribe' and their culture. This was especially because written culture was assumed to be the marker of social development, which 'tribe' lacked. 'Tribe' expressed itself only in oral or visual narratives. Through various anthropological fieldworks, colonial anthropology collected a rich body of empirical information to establish their case that study of 'folk' narratives is central to understand 'tribe' and 'tribal' culture. Recent researches on society and culture in the subcontinent, however, has highlighted the fallacy of the above assumption that only 'tribe' and 'tribal' culture needs to be associated with folk traditions. It has been proved that in the case of numerous written cultures as well, folk or oral/visual narratives continued to play a major role. In fact, it has come to be established firmly today that the integral relation between the written and the oral traditions historically constitutes one of the hallmarks of culture and society formation in South Asia.

From the above discussion, it is clear that (a) the assumption of colonial anthropology of 'tribe' as a stage of social development, and (b) that 'tribe' and folk traditions are as a result integral to each other stands largely discredited. In the modern period in South Asia, another peculiar development vis-à-vis the question of relation between 'tribe' and folk culture has been that since many tribes are educated and have their own body of written narratives for preservation and transmission of knowledge, what significance can one attribute to folk narratives as a means to understand such 'tribe'? Further, if by socio-economic parameters of Human Development (a set of UN criteria of societal well being) of education, health, or standard of living, such 'tribes' (for example, many 'tribes' of North East India) exhibit modern markers of social development, in what way does one continue to refer to them as 'tribe'? These two issues mentioned above highlights two things. Firstly, it highlights the incorrectness in the assumption of 'tribe' as stage of social evolution, progressing from primitive to modern. In fact, it has highlighted that in contemporary times, the possible approach to explain 'tribe' is in terms of the geographical and historical context of its existence. It is this approach that can possibly not only explain the issues mentioned above, but also that why different 'tribes' across space differ from each other in their modes of existence and cultures. Secondly, with regard to 'tribe' and folk narratives, it has highlighted that folk narrative need not be the central means to understand 'tribe' and 'tribal' culture. (For example, the Naga 'tribes' of North East India have adopted English as the medium of production and preservation of knowledge in the modern period rather than any oral tradition.) It is not only that the importance of written or oral narrative to understand a community depends upon the specific cultural formation of the society, but also that in the case of South Asia, the written - oral continuum is a cultural paradigm in itself (vis-à-vis, for example, Europe) wherein both the written and the oral have their distinct roles and significance and which has come about historically.

**Check your progress 1**

**Note:** 1) Your answers should be about 300 words each; 2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

1) How was 'tribe' conceptualized in South Asia?
2.3 'FOLK' AND CULTURE

In the previous section, we focused on the classification of 'tribe' and 'tribal' culture. We had also outlined in the section some of the key markers of 'folk' culture, viz. oral and visual narratives. In this section, we will try and understand some of the problems faced in interpreting 'folk' in terms of oral or visual narratives in South Asia.

One of the central premises for the study of 'folk' culture in South Asia was that it constitutes a basic cultural formation in non-modern or semi-modern or pre-modern societies of the area. In other words, 'folk' and its cultural connotation were associated with societies which were not 'modern'. The predominantly assumed criteria of modernity were written culture, individualism and industrial society. To understand and explain societies wherein the three features were not predominantly evident, study of their 'folk' culture was seen as the possible method. The two basic challenges to this conceptual approach to 'folk' culture in South Asia were (a) the historical interrelationship and inter-dependence between various modes of cultural processes, and (b) how to define 'modern' culture in relation to 'folk' culture.

With regard to the historical interrelationship and inter-dependence between various modes of cultural processes, it has been pointed out that the distinction between 'folk' and written narratives in pre-modern literatures of South Asia is difficult to locate. Pre-modern literatures in South Asia were not premised upon the strict differentiation of oral and written narratives. For example, many of the epic traditions in pre-modern South Asia were in the form of katha which were tales that were also performed before the audience. In other words, they not only existed as texts but also as performing traditions. In that capacity, these epic traditions were both oral and literary at the same time. They were oral because their mode of practice or communication was verbal and they were literary because their mode of existence was textual, i.e. written. One of the best cases of such inter-relation between oral and written narrative are the various Ramayana traditions across the subcontinent. It is also possible to find literary traditions in South Asia which existed as oral traditions and later transformed into written traditions. The early epic tradition of the Gangetic area was oral in nature, i.e. the epics were orally transferred from one generation to another through specific methods of memory. It was only towards the close of the first millennium BC, i.e. after nearly centuries of existence as oral literature that they were written down and came to exist as literary texts.
The inter-dependence between the written and the oral became far closer during the second millennium AD. This has also been seen as a part of the development of 'regional' languages since the period. Other than linguistic factors, the role of the Bhakti and Sufi movements during the period has also been considered significant reasons for this particular nature of linguistic formation in the subcontinent. One of the basic features of Bhakti and Sufi movements during the period was the historical development of popular culture. Language and literature were also a part of this historical development. In terms of methods of culture, since the movements were located at popular culture, both the use of folk narratives, i.e. oral narratives, in literary texts as well as the performance of the literary texts assumed significance. The growth of the katha tradition, i.e. performance of tales which exists in written form, was closely related to this period. The Ramayana or Mahabharat traditions, the epic traditions, which could be found across the subcontinent during the period, were also mostly performing texts, i.e. kathas.

The katha traditions in terms of performing texts were, however, not the only kind of relation between the 'folk' and written that could be found in South Asia. For example, in the case of the Panchatantra or the Jataka tales, though they were written narratives, they were also 'folk' because of their mode of narration or communication. In other words, though they were written narratives, in terms of narrative methods, they were also oral. Further, they also existed as people's tales or knowledge rather than existing as produced by individual authors. This characteristic also made such tales 'folk' along with being literary. It is this relation of inter-dependence that became differentiated with modern literary narratives such as novels and short stories. Whether in terms of narrative structure or in terms of mode of narration or communication, modern literary narratives discounted the role of the oral as well as the role of the social as producers of literature in favour of an individual author. In the pre-modern period, names of individual authors (for example, Kalidas or Tulsidas or Madhab Kandali) as producers of literature existed along with that of community, i.e. the social, as producers of literatures. The latter constituted an example of people's literature or culture as literary practice.

With regard to the second problematic of what constitutes the difference between 'modern' and 'folk' cultures, it has been noted that oral narratives have historically played a critical role in modern literature of the subcontinent. Oral narratives as narrative techniques have been used primarily in two ways in modern literature of South Asia. Firstly, oral narratives have been used as a marker of community. For example, in the Dalit literature of Bama (Tamil), the variant of Tamil language as spoken by the Dalit community is used in place of literary/standard variant of the language to indicate (a) that the literary variant cannot express Dalit society and experience since it is external to the Dalit community, and (b) that through the use of the oral Dalit variant of Tamil, the text (i.e. the novel) is a Dalit critique of culture as defined and imposed by the upper castes. Use of oral narratives or variants of a language other than the literal variant can also be found in the novels and short stories of Indira Goswami (Assamese). In her fictions, the various variants, both written and oral, are used to indicate not only that there are many variants of the Assamese language and that different groups of people speak in these many different variants, but also that the kind of variant a certain group of people speak indicates the relations of power that it shares with the other groups that together constitutes the Assamese identity.
Besides being used as a marker of community, oral narratives have also been used in modern literatures in South Asia as a means of authenticating 'modern' literatures in the South Asian context. Further, since literature emerged as a means of nation building, authenticating modern literary narratives such as novels and short stories as indigenous became important. Through the use of traditional folk narratives, for example, songs, proverbs, tales and myths or riddles, modern literature attempted to depict the category of people that it dealt with as culturally authentic, indigenous, and therefore politically valid. Similarly, in the case of poetry, the difference in the Romantic genre between English literature and that in South Asia in the 19th and early 20th century is also worth taking note of. Whereas in English literature, Romantic poetry emerged as a response to industrialization of society, in South Asia, it emerged as means of legitimizing constructs like nation, ethnicity and the other categories indicated earlier. The objective was to depict these categories of people as culturally traditional and authentic, and therefore politically valid.

One of the most significant forms of folk culture that has emerged in the course of the 20th century in most parts of South Asia is urban folk. Urban folk in South Asia, unlike as it is generally understood in the American culture, does not comprise only legends or oral narratives or modes of communication or expression that originate in the context of urban social life. Urban folk in the subcontinent also includes the various forms of transformations that traditional/non-urban forms of culture or tradition has undergone due to their translocation in the urban context from the traditional context. For example, the role of public stage played a crucial role in the changes in the nature of folk art (visual/performed) when compared to their traditional setting of practice. Folk culture, in such cases, from being a part of a community and its practices, transformed into an element in the relation between performers-audience-organizers of stage shows. To this, one may further add the element of commerce that gets incorporated in the production and consumption of folk culture in urban context, i.e. folk culture and the role of market. Therefore, it is evident that folk culture of the urban context differs in both meaning and content from its practices as part of the traditional context.

Check your progress 2

Note: 1) Your answers should be about 300 words each;

2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

3) What is urban folk in the context of South Asia?
4) Give two examples of 'folk' narrative being the marker of community in literature.

2.4 CLASSICAL CULTURE

Classical culture has been generally associated with the idea of 'golden age' of a historically ancient period of a society. The concept of 'classical' culture however did not emerge in the ancient period itself. It emerged in the later period as a method of characterizing a particular period of past wherein the pinnacle of culture in the fields of art and aesthetics was achieved. In the traditions of the West, the Greece-Roman period from around the middle of the last millennium BC to the first few centuries of the first millennium AD came to be considered as their 'classical' period. This characterization of the period was associated with the Renaissance period in European history (c.15th - 17th centuries AD). In the case of South Asia, the concept of classical period could be traced to the 18 - 19th centuries resulting from two simultaneous factors. On the one hand, as a result of the role of Indological study (studies pertaining to culture related to the Sanskrit language of ancient India that began under the leadership of Western scholars such as Max Muller), the cultural practices or forms, especially with regard to Sanskrit literature, came to be seen as High Art, (i.e. art of supreme aesthetic standard) and therefore that the period around the early to middle centuries of the first millennium AD was the classical or golden age of Indian culture. The other factor that contributed into this was nationalism against British colonialism. The idea of the classical period became an important means to refute the colonial claim of India being a nation that lacked any claim to glory as a nation, unlike the British nation. In the post colonial period, however, the idea of classical era came to be discredited in historical studies with a shift in focus from High Art to popular art as being more representative of common people and their life.

The question that we can pose here is that, do classical period and classical cultural forms mean the same? Though there is one major commonality between the two, viz. that both classical period and classical cultural forms trace themselves to an early historical (i.e. ancient) period. However, there are also major differences between the two. If the classical cultural forms are divided into the cultures of voice, dance and instruments, in numerous cases, they cannot be traced to an earlier period in terms of their historical development. For example, with regard to classical dance in India, though the dance of Bharatnatyam is traced to the Natyasastra by Bharata, its development and practice as 'classical' dance is of more recent origin. Bharatnatyam emerged as a classical dance in the modern period from its past as a temple / devadasi dance. Whereas as a temple
or devadasi dance it was not a part of High Art, once changes were introduced into it in the 20th century (for example, by Rukmini Arundale wherein the sexual mudras/movements were replaced by Bhakti mudras/movements), it came to be considered a 'classical' dance. Similarly, the transformation of Kathak dance in northern India as a dance of courtesan culture to 'classical' also can be traced only to the modern period. In either case, the restoration of dance as 'classical' dance was closely associated with the notion of national cultural glories that India or the colony of India possessed. However, this history of classical dance, i.e. classicism of more recent origin though traced to an early past, cannot be attributed to classical music. The tradition of classical music, especially the Hindustani classical genre, is generally traced to the 12th - 13th centuries, and especially to the contributions of Sufi saint Amir Khusru. Thus, unlike classical dance forms, classicism of classical music in the subcontinent can be traced to an early period. Nevertheless, what is significant is that it cannot be traced to the classical period of 3rd century AD to 7th century AD. Among the media of art and culture, only that of Sanskrit literature can be traced classical period. The historical development of most other languages (other than Tamil, another classical language of the subcontinent) prevalent or practiced in the region can only be traced to the early centuries of the second millennium AD.

The fundamental premises of an art form being classified as 'classical' are (a) method of training and (b) antiquity. However, in the preceding discussion we have seen that they alone do not suffice for an art form being recognized as 'classical' in the modern period. Further, it also needs to be noted that the sharp distinction between 'classical' and 'folk' that is drawn in modern practices of classical music or dance could be untenable when their relations are traced into the past. Numerous studies have shown that many of the 'classical' art forms as well as genres in the respective forms can be traced to 'folk' culture. For example, in the case of Thumri (a genre of Hindustani classical music), the role of popular or 'folk' music has been significant. Similarly, the difference between 'classical' and 'folk' or popular could be difficult to be located when the traditions of devotional music in the subcontinent are taken into consideration. For example, the tradition of Bargeet (Vaishnava devotional songs) in Assam could be considered both classical as well as popular. Though based on the Hindustani classical culture of voice (i.e. on different ragas), they were intended to be part of popular culture, i.e. to spread the tradition of Bhakti among the common people of the Brahmaputra valley. Another example of inter-dependence between 'classical' and popular can be located in the field of literature as well. It can be seen in the case if Urdu literature, especially Urdu poetry. The origin of the Urdu language can be traced to both Persian and Hindi languages. The development of Urdu is significantly connected to the popular culture, i.e. culture in which the mass is involved rather than the elite, of the Sufi tradition. The contribution of Amir Khusru in the development of Urdu was once again very notable. However, the Urdu literature of the 18th - 19th centuries, especially Urdu poetry, came to be considered in the 20th century as the classical period of the language and its literature. It was also during this period that Urdu poetry got the status of court poetry, whether in the Mughal court or the court of the Nawabs of Lucknow. The uniqueness in the case of Urdu poetry, therefore, was threefold. Firstly, it emerged as a popular language or as the medium of popular culture in the 12th/13th century. Secondly, in the course of next six hundred years, it emerged as the medium or bearer of court culture. In the 20th century, the period of efflorescence of Urdu poetry of the 18th and 19th century came to be regarded as the classical phase of
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Check your progress 3

Note: 1) Your answers should be about 300 words each;
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

5) What do you understand by classical period?
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6) Do you think 'classical' and popular cultures are closely interrelated?
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2.5 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have discussed some of the major conceptual problems in classification of culture into 'folk', or 'tribal' or 'classical'. The discussion highlighted how classification of culture is closely related to classification of society and that such classifications have been based on the European understanding of society and social evolution in the course of time. The Unit also noted the problems in such approaches to classifications of society in terms of stages of social evolution and classification of culture based on it. In the detailed discussions on 'tribal', 'folk' and 'classical' cultures, we tried to highlight how various types of cultures are interrelated and inter-dependent in nature. The specific nature of a cultural type depends upon the context of the culture to a significant extent.

2.6 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


2.7 GLOSSARY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Term</th>
<th>Definition</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bharatnatyam</td>
<td>a South Indian classical dance form.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Kathak</td>
<td>a North Indian classical dance form.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devdasi</td>
<td>dancing women of the temple.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natyasastra</td>
<td>treatise on Indian performing arts, written by Bharata Muni.</td>
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2.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

1. 'Tribe' as an anthropological category in South Asia as we have come to understand in the modern period is a social classification that began with colonialism. 'Tribe' in this sense is different from the pre-modern concept of jati that was in general usage in the subcontinent. The term jati generally lacked the anthropological connotation of 'tribe'. 'Tribe' refers to specific patterns of economic and socio-cultural modes of life. In modern anthropology, 'tribe' also came to be conceptualized as a stage in social development. It came to be assumed that hunting and gathering society would develop into 'tribal' formations, which then would develop into state societies, whether republic or monarchy. In other words, 'tribe' is a stage in the evolution of human society from primitive to modern. Thus, vis-à-vis modern society, tribal stage came to be seen as primitive, i.e. in a stage of social development earlier to modern society. However, recent researches have proved that locating 'tribe' in the evolutionary scale of progress from primitive to modern is untenable. It has been shown that 'tribe', when seen in terms of social organization or cultural practices, needs to be understood as a certain mode of existence among other modes with its own codes. These codes, such as kinship relations, cultural narratives, strategies of economic existence or political formations, are related more to their geographical and historical context of existence than any general principle of social evolution.

2. 'Tribe' as it came to be conceptualized in colonial anthropology on South Asia attributed importance to 'folk', i.e. oral narratives as well as visual narratives such as handicraft or textile to understand 'tribe' and their culture. This was especially because written culture was assumed to be the marker of social development, which 'tribe' lacked. 'Tribe' expressed itself only in oral or visual narratives. Through various anthropological fieldworks, colonial anthropology collected a rich body of empirical information to establish their case that study of 'folk' narratives is central to understand 'tribe' and 'tribal' culture. Recent researches on society and culture in the subcontinent, however, has highlighted the fallacy of the above assumption that only 'tribe' and 'tribal' culture needs to be associated with folk traditions. It has been proved that in the case of numerous written cultures as well, folk or oral/visual narratives continued to play a major role. In fact, it has come to be established firmly today that the integral relation between the written and the oral traditions historically constitutes one of the hallmarks of culture and society formation in South Asia.

From the above discussion, it is clear that (a) the assumption of colonial anthropology of 'tribe' as a stage of social development, and (b) that 'tribe'
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and folk traditions are as a result integral to each other stands largely discredited. In the modern period in South Asia, another peculiar development vis-à-vis the question of relation between 'tribe' and folk culture has been that since many tribes are educated and have their own body of written narratives for preservation and transmission of knowledge, what significance can one attribute to folk narratives as a means to understand such 'tribe'? Further, if by socio-economic parameters of Human Development (a set of UN criteria of societal well being) of education, health, or standard of living, such 'tribes' (for example, many 'tribes' of North East India) exhibit modern markers of social development, in what way does one continue to refer to them as 'tribe'? These two issues mentioned above highlights two things. Firstly, it highlights the incorrectness in the assumption of 'tribe' as stage of social evolution, progressing from primitive to modern. In fact, it has highlighted that in contemporary times, the possible approach to explain 'tribe' is in terms of the geographical and historical context of its existence. It is this approach that can possibly not only explain the issues mentioned above, but also that why different 'tribes' across space differ from each other in their modes of existence and cultures. Secondly, with regard to 'tribe' and folk narratives, it has highlighted that folk narrative need not be the central means to understand 'tribe' and 'tribal' culture. (For example, the Naga 'tribes' of North East India have adopted English as the medium of production and preservation of knowledge in the modern period rather than any oral tradition.) It is not only that the importance of written or oral narrative to understand a community depends upon the specific cultural formation of the society, but also that in the case of South Asia, the written - oral continuum is a cultural paradigm in itself (vis-à-vis, for example, Europe) wherein both the written and the oral have their distinct roles and significance and which has come about historically.

3. One of the most significant forms of folk culture that has emerged in the course of the 20th century in most parts of South Asia is urban folk. Urban folk in South Asia, unlike as it is generally understood in the American culture, does not comprise only legends or oral narratives or modes of communication or expression that originate in the context of urban social life. Urban folk in the subcontinent also includes the various forms of transformations that traditional/non-urban forms of culture or tradition has undergone due to their translocation in the urban context from the traditional context. For example, the role of public stage played a crucial role in the changes in the nature of folk art (visual/performed) when compared to their traditional setting of practice. Folk culture, in such cases, from being a part of a community and its practices, transformed into an element in the relation between performers-audience-organizers of stage shows. To this, one may further add the element of commerce that gets incorporated in the production and consumption of folk culture in urban context, i.e. folk culture and the role of market. Therefore, it is evident that folk culture of the urban context differs in both meaning and content from its practices as part of the traditional context.

4. Oral narratives have been used as a marker of community in modern Indian literature. For example, in the Dalit literature of Bama (Tamil), the variant of Tamil language as spoken by the Dalit community is used in place of literary/standard variant of the language to indicate (a) that the literary variant cannot express Dalit society and experience since it is external to the Dalit
community, and (b) that through the use of the oral Dalit variant of Tamil, the text (i.e. the novel) is a Dalit critique of culture as defined and imposed by the upper castes. Use of oral narratives or variants of a language other than the literal variant can also be found in the novels and short stories of Indira Goswami (Assamese). In her fictions, the various variants, both written and oral, are used to indicate not only that there are many variants of the Assamese language and that different groups of people speak in these many different variants, but also that the kind of variant a certain group of people speak indicates the relations of power that it shares with the other groups that together constitutes the Assamese identity.

5. Classical period has been generally associated with the idea of 'golden age' of a historically ancient period of a society. The concept of 'classical' period however did not emerge in the ancient period itself. It emerged in the later period as a method of characterizing a particular period of past wherein the pinnacle of culture in the fields of art and aesthetics was achieved. In the traditions of the West, the Greece-Roman period from around the middle of the last millennium BC to the first few centuries of the first millennium AD came to be considered as their 'classical' period. This characterization of the period was associated with the Renaissance period in European history (c.15th - 17th centuries AD). In the case of South Asia, the concept of classical period could be traced to the 18 - 19th centuries resulting from two simultaneous factors. On the one hand, as a result of the role of Indological study (studies pertaining to culture related to the Sanskrit language of ancient India that began under the leadership of Western scholars such as Max Muller), the cultural practices or forms, especially with regard to Sanskrit literature, came to be seen as High Art, (i.e. art of supreme aesthetic standard) and therefore that the period around the early to middle centuries of the first millennium AD was the classical or golden age of Indian culture. The other factor that contributed into this was nationalism against British colonialism. The idea of the classical period became an important means to refute the colonial claim of India being a nation that lacked any claim to glory as a nation, unlike the British nation. In the post colonial period, however, the idea of classical era came to be discredited in historical studies with a shift in focus from High Art to popular art as being more representative of common people and their life.

6. The sharp distinction between 'classical' and 'folk' that is drawn in modern practices of classical music or dance could be untenable when their relations are traced into the past. Numerous studies have shown that many of the 'classical' art forms as well as genres in the respective forms can be traced to 'folk' culture. For example, in the case of Thumri (a genre of Hindustani classical music), the role of popular or 'folk' music has been significant. Similarly, the difference between 'classical' and 'folk' or popular could be difficult to be located when the traditions of devotional music in the subcontinent are taken into consideration. For example, the tradition of Bargeet (Vaishnava devotional songs) in Assam could be considered both classical as well as popular. Though based on the Hindustani classical culture of voice (i.e. on different ragas), they were intended to be part of popular culture, i.e. to spread the tradition of Bhakti among the common people of the Brahmaputra valley. Another example of inter-dependence between 'classical' and popular can be located in the field of literature as well. It can
be seen in the case if Urdu literature, especially Urdu poetry. The origin of the Urdu language can be traced to both Persian and Hindi languages. The development of Urdu is significantly connected to the popular culture, i.e. culture in which the mass is involved rather than the elite, of the Sufi tradition. The contribution of Amir Khusru in the development of Urdu was once again very notable. However, the Urdu literature of the 18th - 19th centuries, especially Urdu poetry, came to be considered in the 20th century as the classical period of the language and its literature. It was also during this period that Urdu poetry got the status of court poetry, whether in the Mughal court or the court of the Nawabs of Lucknow. The uniqueness in the case of Urdu poetry, therefore, was threefold. Firstly, it emerged as a popular language or as the medium of popular culture in the 12th/13th century. Secondly, in the course of next six hundred years, it emerged as the medium or bearer of court culture. In the 20th century, the period of efflorescence of Urdu poetry of the 18th and 19th century came to be regarded as the classical phase of the language and its literature. As in the case of classical dance or music, therefore, literature too faces problems in classifications of 'classical' or 'folk'/popular.