UNIT 4  DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO
FOLKLORE AND CULTURAL
PRESERVATION

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this Unit you will be able to:

- describe the nature of folklore literature;
- classify the types of folkloristic manifestations like proverbs or dakbachans, folk dance, folk music, folk tales, etc.;
- understand the importance of oral and written traditions;
- discuss the importance of folklore for preservation of culture;
- analyze the death of folklore and language death;
- examine the consequences of decline of folklore;
- list the methods of cultural preservation through the preservation of folklore;
- identify the close association of language, folklore and culture.
4.1 INTRODUCTION: LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND IDENTITY

We all care about our identity. A Welsh proverb captures the essence of the answer to the question 'Why should we care if languages die?' "Cenedl heb iath, cenedl heb gallon" meaning 'A nation without a language is a nation without a heart'. (David Crystal). 'Language…is not only an element of culture itself; it is the basis for all cultural activities.' Bloch and Trager (1942:5). So much of one's culture is articulated in its language that it is not possible to be a member of a community if one does not speak its language for language is an essential attribute of its customs. What elements of the old language can be taken over by the latest, without major cultural slaughter? It might, however, still be possible to narrate the old literature through the medium of the new language, and much of the old lore and wisdom can also be elucidated and referred to in it. But the fact is that a great deal will be lost in the conversion, and the new language will be incapable of putting into words the tenderness or fortitude of the literature that the older language could do so well. In the process, the repartee will be lost, anecdotes and gags will lack a convincing thump and ritual terminology would not have the same alliterative or graceful magnitude.

4.2 DEATH OF FOLKLORE AND LANGUAGE

In the last Unit, we studied that language is a sacred activity and this is predominantly correct about our local languages. The world of all native tongues is personal and subjective rather than objective. There is nothing more essential for local young people than to know their native language and the tribal lore and wisdom embodied in that language. It is the very heart of individuality. Language has to be a foundation upon which education can be built and it is through this institution that the personality is built up by gaining knowledge of our inherited wisdom and the language controlling that wisdom. In this context, I shall quote M K Gandhi, the father of our nation, "Of the Languages of the people we know next to nothing. We hardly understand their speech. The gulf between them and us, - the middle class, is so great that we do not know them and they know still less of what we think and speak. Folk-lore is the literature of the people, but it belongs to an order of things that is passing away, if it has not already done so". (Folklore of Orissa)

A folk-song is a natural outpouring of the life of those people who live in more or less primitive circumstances outside the sphere of sophisticated persuasions. It is the original poetry of any people, unpremeditated and unwritten, fresh and simple, genuine and natural. It is popular because it alludes to incidents connected with people's lives. It carries the voice and vocabulary of the masses. With modernization, the death of our folklore has become a major concern at par with language death. In folklore, the individual author is so unimportant that he usually is lost - precisely due to its oral traditions - but the lore should not get lost in the process.
Conservation and Preservation: Some Ethical and Legal Issues

Check your progress 1

Note: 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;

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

1) Do you feel that the folklore of a region and its language are closely associated? Why?

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4.3 FOLK CATEGORIES

Let us discuss some of the folk categories which have been an integral part of the folklore, and which are slowly moving into the clutches of oblivion, causing a cultural decline.

4.3.1 Folk tales

Story-telling is the historically oldest folk art. It is the intellectual pastime of some villagers, specially old men and women who are gifted with great skills, thoughts, power of expression and theatrical action. To recount a story is the easiest possible thing but demands greater sanctity, greater concentration and attention to detail. Folk-tales have their roots in the hoary past when Man acquired the power of articulate expression. He proudly expressed his heroic feelings when hunting a ferocious tiger, lion, killing his inveterate enemy or narrated his pitiable lot in the face of storms, floods, famines or earthquakes. He used his rich imaginative power in devising the circumstances of the creation of the earth and voiced his eternal interest in natural phenomena. He painted his nascent feelings and emotions on the wall, sang them in song or expressed them in the form of tales. We can find a trace of those very ancient stories among the aborigines. It either forms a part of their current tales or some traditional social beliefs, which are slowly fading into oblivion. To preserve folk culture, their revival has to be the first step.

Folk-Stories are generally classified into Legends and Folk-Tales. A legend is a storyline of things which are assumed to have happened about a historical dignitary, region or occasion. But a Folk-Tale is a complete fantasy which may not have any relation to reality. But there has not yet been any standard effort to collect the thousands of legendary tales associated with historical personages,
4.3.2 Classifications of folk tales

Folk-Tales may be broadly divided into the following categories:

1) Saga of kings who were dim-witted, capricious and dictatorial;
2) Stories of voyages by the sons of kings, ministers, merchants;
3) Tales of monsters, witches, ghouls and demigods;
4) Tales of birds, beasts, snakes, illusory beings, magic boats, magic jewels and fishes; and
5) Myths of patriotic warriors when they are caught between love and loyalty to nation, and where duty wins over love, leading to sacrifice.

4.3.3 Oral traditions of the folk tales

Those who come under the enchanting charm of folk tales in their impressionable and budding years must be considered particularly privileged, because folk tales help them to build up the power of imagination, hone their appreciation and sensitivity to beauty, stimulate the spirit of sympathy and co-operation and a love for humankind and literature.

In villages, boys and girls gather at the door of the story-teller who, in most cases, may be an old woman on whom rests the responsibility of keeping the children in good humour. The children have finished with their play and they have no assignments at home except to disturb and trouble their mothers and other members of the family. So the best means devised to keep them engaged and quiet is story-telling. It makes them sit noiselessly and uncomplainingly for hours, inculcates the habit of good listening, and a readiness to attend to others' interests. It also keeps the oral tradition of the folk art alive and flowing from generation to generation.

Here I would like to give an example of a story of the oral tradition quoted from Folklore of Orissa by Dr. Kunja Behari Dash:

"Evening is now gone. Stars twinkle; ploughmen take rest at their doors. The village appears calm, serene and sacred. The grandmother starts her story with the following meaningless lines:

Let me tell you a story,
Let me tell you a story.
What story? - Of a frog,
What oilman? - Who moves a pressing machine?
What pressing machine? - Of sugar-cane
What sugarcane? - 'Kanthari' sugarcane.
What Kanthari? - An old woman who knows charms."
And she ends her story with the following:
My story ended; the flower plant died.
Well, flower plant, why did you die?
The black cow ate me up.
Well black cow, why did you eat away the plant?
The herdsman did not watch me.
Well, herdsman, why did you not watch the cow?
The eldest daughter-in-law did not give me food.
Well daughter-in-law, why did you not give him food?
The child wept.
Well child, why did you weep?
I was bitten by a dusty black ant.
Well black ant, why did you bite the child?
I live under the earth; when I find a soft flesh, I bite."

There are plenty of stories like this in each folk and tribal group. These stories, transferred from one generation to their progeny through an oral tradition are lyrical, entertaining, soothing like a lullaby, based on non-serious themes, conversational, to be told in a sing-song voice. Unfortunately, these tales are slowly passing into oblivion, and a revival of these tales would be an important step to preserve a culture.

4.3.4 Proverbs or 'Dakbachans'
Poets and writers frequently make use of proverbs and local sayings to make their language forceful and rooted to the soil. Sometimes the wise and pithy words of great writers are repeated by the people and they gradually become a part of the treasury of proverbs. Thus the illiterate as well as the intellectuals participate in this exciting and basic exchange of each other's culture and ideas. There are popularly accepted proverbs in every culture on interesting themes like co-wife, villainous mother-in-law, conjugal life, worthless husband, sarcastic comments on various aspects of human society, cultivation, maxims, gods and goddesses. In the course of time, dakbachans are also going into decline towards the void of extinction.

4.3.5 Community features in proverbs
Society is a system of associations of a diversity of persons who form its structure. Our predecessors believed that the social order was created by God who entrusts his powers to the king. Noncompliance to the king was considered the equal of disobedience to God. Individuals gave up many of their legitimate rights to this emblem and assurance of security, the king, however oppressive he might be. Leaders of society, in their attempt and eagerness to play the role of the savior, sometimes acted in the most inhuman way. Some people were excommunicated. Thus many of the aspirations of the people were crushed under the wheels of social laws. The basic urges and interests of men are modified by social and cultural influences of primary groups of which the most familiar types are represented by
family, caste, community or neighborhood. In the process of socialization the younger generation accepts the behaviour patterns, the values and ideals of the family group. Economic, intellectual, moral and aesthetic traditions play a part in the moulding of his character. The society we are introduced to in the proverbs of the folk groups is a feudalistic one dominated by kings, nobles and priests. Ideal characters such as those of great conquerors, famous heroes, poets, philosophers, artists or sculptors are rarely depicted. We come across mostly common people who are vital for the existence and well-being of each other.

4.3.6 Legends

A legend is generally about a place of pilgrimage, a fetish god, and there is, almost about every god, some legend or the other. Through the folk legends, we can find our ancient world silently breathing within us. These legends, if documented and made available, will give us a picture of our past which, though it may not be historically genuine or verifiable, can offer fascinating insights into the lives of the people and their culture and institutions.

Most families tell stories of various gods and goddesses specially during the time of festivals. The narrator of these stories are usually elderly women of the family and the art of this type of storytelling is gradually dying out under the onslaught of modernity, TV and film.

Activity

What are the stories told in your family during festivals? Are they same as those of other families or communities? How do these stories depict the gods and goddesses?

4.3.7 Beast tales

In Beast Tales, the protagonists are animals who converse and behave like human beings. These beasts are clever, considerate and dignified. They never show disloyalty to Man. Sometimes strange happenings are described in Beast Tales, like for instance, the lives of men or animals are saved by a benign prince when a forest fire breaks out. The thankful tiger and tigress accept him as one of themselves and are ready to serve him at any time. Or a princess is lost in the forest in childhood, she is brought up by a lioness who becomes a mother to her. But ultimately she is united with her family after falling in love with her prince charming. The lioness sacrifices her life for the princess. These are always stories with a moral. The stories are like fables in which the animal characters are imbued with human traits, nobility and even, occasionally, failings and always have a lesson to offer to both young and old people.

Activity

See how many Indian folk beast tales you can compile by talking to members of your community or people in the neighbourhood. Compare them, see what values they embody and what are the lessons that they hold out. Also see if any of them have been written down or published or whether they only exist in the oral tradition.
4.3.8 **Ploughman's songs**

Culture has two main torrents. One flows among the erudite in the form of the Vedas, Upanishads and different branches of higher literature and the other among the primitive, unrefined common mass of people in the form of folklore. The common public is a prevailing force in directing the fortune of a nation and its civilization. Their God, Ganapati, though it possesses the head of an elephant (Gaja means a 'Fool') is worshipped as the most scholarly being in the world. This group adopts a country's culture in its own way, gives it a new character, a new shade and a new energy. The ploughmen comprise the major segment of the mass who sell their labour for two square meals a day. They work hard all day long. All the doors of culture are closed to them. They have no learning, no leisure. A cultivator's life is one of hard toil, stern realities and no imaginings. His only entertainment, his songs, forms a part of his daily work. They are not the compositions of idle hours. Work and song and work - one stimulates the other; both are interlinked in a knot of companionship. Thus, there is no point in seeing whether the lines rhyme properly or not, whether the ploughman has been able to generate a new meter or not, or if the idea expressed is creatively original or plagiarised. Typically the songs are very short - three or four lines each - all composed in a limited repertoire of one or two meters. The ploughman reverentially keeps away from the songs of great poets, his songs are the songs of the common man, down to earth, which are passed on to him through an oral tradition from his forefathers. He sings his own songs, is the protagonist of his own poetry, the performer of his own life's theater. His own life is his best source of inspiration. These interesting songs must be preserved, documented, and written down as these are an important facet of our culture.

4.3.9 **The puppet play: a folk art**

We are the proud originators of an important folk art - the puppet play. The motionless puppets come alive under the expert hands on stage and generate great curiosity in the minds of the viewers at the very first sight. The audience lose themselves in the dancing movements of the lifeless puppets in the hands of the artists. Like the actors and actresses of flesh and blood, the puppets appear lively, filling the viewers with awe and delight. Puppet plays do not require a screen, but in order to hide the strings hanging from above and preserve the mysteries of the play, only one screen-like cloth is suspended from above while another is raised up from the ground. Behind these two purdahs, the artists do their work. They send out the puppet-actors and actresses through the dividing line between the strips of cloth. The puppets are made of wood and carved by the village carpenters. Puppet-making has been developed as a family art through centuries in the villages.

As a family art, it has its good points. It is independent, self-supported and remains under the authority and management of the guardian of the artist. In this way this art goes on developing for generations and is conventional and specialized as well. For the development of this art, neither wealthy support nor great investment is necessary. It is fundamentally a folk art. The supporters of the village folk have been helping the puppet tradition to flourish, which is again struggling against the challenge of the impact of information technology on us. Due to our disinterest and indifference, this fascinating art form is going into oblivion.
Check your progress 2
Note: 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.

2) What are the folk categories?
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3) Why are oral traditions so important?
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4) What is the cultural significance of the Puppet Plays?
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5) What is a legend?
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4.4 FAIRY TALE ELEMENTS IN FOLK ART

In folklore literature, gods and goddesses are of great help to men or women in danger. They shower sacred water on a dead man and make him come alive again; they walk on fire and water; they vanish into thin air at their sweet will; they safeguard law and justice. Many impossible and magical things are conceived by the story-teller, like flying horses, magic boats, enchanted jewels etc. Fairy tale elements have dominated folk literature from time immemorial.

4.5 MOTIFS/ THEMES IN FOLK LITERATURE

What do we mean by pattern or a motif?
The motif is an inspiration or perception of the folk-tale. A folk tale may change from place to place; it may even be completely forgotten, but the motif is too distinct a feature to be lost in oblivion. It blends the various skeins of the imagination of a people, and gives a fresh impetus to the development of a story. The hero puts on the cap of invisibility, mounts a winged horse, retreats into the stomach of a fish or eludes a giant. Each of these motifs has a long charter of existence. It appeals to generations of listeners and deciphers some definite, complicated problems of the folk tale.

The motif is something amazing and extraordinary, beyond the unique world of folklore. The motifs taken together form the main substance of a tale or a folk song, simple and easy to remember. A tale may have much of local colour and spirit, but the motif is common to others in its quality. No country can assert it absolutely as its own - that is the unique characteristic of world folklore. It is also not easy to mark out its chronological progress or actual line of descent from some common source.

Motifs of the folktales of the world are mostly similar in character. The angel, the god, the ghost, the heartless step mother, the frightening giants, birds, beasts and reptiles which talk like human beings, may all be taken as motifs. The motif may be a short and simple story in itself. But it should be of a very strange and entertaining nature which can charm people so much that they do not get tired of repeating the same throughout their lives -thus keeping the oral tradition intact. The folk-tale or the folk song may remain confined to a constricted geographical area. But motifs have magical arms that spread timelessly, beyond any boundary. They travel from country to country. They seem to be more independent than the folk-tale itself. Motifs are milestones that indicate the progress of a folk-tale. They give length and speed to it and are mainly responsible for moulding its character and changing its course.

Folk literatures can be classified according to their motifs and this pattern of classification is unanimously accepted by scholar-critics worldwide. Motifs or themes of folklore can be categorized as follows:

- legendary motifs
- flora and fauna
- the inviolable
- the supernatural
- the lifeless
- the amazing
- the giant
- the ordeal
- the shrewd and the imprudent
- dishonesty
- reverse of destiny
- command over the prospect
- fate and chance
• culture and civilization
• rewards and punishments
• captives and fugitives
• aberrant vindictiveness
• gender
• the nature of existence
• religious faith
• persona and character
• wit
• diverse groups
• formula
• protagonist
• imagery

Check your progress 3
Note: 1) Your answers should be about 30 words each;
2) You may check your answers with the possible answers given at the end of the Unit.
6) How do you define motif in folk art?
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4.6 LET US SUM UP
Folk art is an important phenomenon of any culture. The decline of the folklore of a region is a great loss to the culture as a whole. The preservation, archiving, documentation and maintenance of the folk art is of utmost importance for the researchers, the elite, the politicians, bureaucrats and all responsible citizens of a region.

4.7 ACTIVITY
We have together, above, discussed the different aspects of folklore, its gradual death and the necessity of its preservation. Do you think that now you understand folklore, its preservation and its cultural implications better? Try to address this issue by explaining it to another friend of yours and see how well you have understood it.
4.8 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

4.9 GLOSSARY
Dakbachans : Proverbs and sayings that are prevalent in a particular region or community.
Legends : Myths that are told in traditional ways, associated with supernatural beings or the exploits of larger than life human heroes and heroines.
Beast Tales : Fables like the Panchatantra that feature animals and birds in the main roles and who are imbued with human qualities and emotions. They conduct themselves like people and every tale has a moral.
Ploughman's Songs : Songs composed and sung by the common people about ordinary life.
Puppet Play : Stories told through the use of puppets on a small stage. May be accompanied by music and dance as well.

4.10 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS
1) The language of a nation is carried forward by the folk groups from generation to generation. We all care about our identity. A Welsh proverb captures the essence of the answer to the question 'Why should we care if languages die?' "Cenedl heb iaith, cenedl heb gallon" meaning 'A nation without a language is a nation without a heart', and different folk arts/ folk groups are mostly responsible to keep a language living.

2) The folk categories of universal importance are folk-tales, folk songs, popular proverbs, ploughman's songs, puppet plays, beast tales, legends-and mostly those traditional arts that pass on from generation to generation through oral traditions.

3) The oral tradition keeps the folk art flowing from generation to generation in an interesting and unbroken manner. Unfortunately, the oral traditions of the folklore are slowly being forgotten due to the hectic modern life but it is essential to take immediate steps to preserve it.

4) The Puppet play is a family art which has many inherent advantages. It is independent, self-supported and remains under the authority and management of the guardian of the artist. In this way this art goes on developing for generations and is conventional and specialized as well. For the development of this art no rich backing is necessary. It is fundamentally a rich folk art.
5) A legend is generally about a place of pilgrimage, a fetish god, and almost about every god, there is some legend or the other. Through the folk legends, we can find our ancient world silently breathing within us. These legends, if collected and made available, will give us a portrait of our past, though not historically genuine, and can make a fascinating picture.

6) The motif is an inspiration or perception of the folk-tale. A folk tale may change from place to place or it may even be totally eclipsed, but the motif is too distinct a feature to be lost in oblivion. It blends the imagination of a people, and gives a fresh impetus to the development of the folk art worldwide.