

## HISTORY FROM BELOW A CASE STUDY OF FOLKLORE IN TULUNADU

by

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### Introduction - Subaltern Historiography

This paper attempts to delineate and examine the uses and limitations of folklore and folk literature in the writing of history through the subaltern paradigm. The subaltern or "history from below" approach had originated in the 1980s in Indian historiography due to the efforts of Ranajit Guha and others. In the last two decades, the subaltern scholars have contributed immensely to the enrichment of historical writings on South Asia.<sup>1</sup> Edward Said has said: "Subaltern studies represents a crossing of boundaries, a smuggling of ideas across lines, a stirring up of intellectual and, as always, political complacency".<sup>2</sup> David Cannadine has described it as "Gettysburg history" – of the people, by the people and for the people.<sup>3</sup> It is an attempt to meet the demand for "de-elitisation" of history and write the history of the historyless.

Like other historiographical schools in Indian history, the Subaltern school is also indebted to Western scholars and their ideas. They are considerably influenced by the writings of Karl Marx, Antonio Gramsci, A. L. Morton, E. P. Thompson, Eric J. Hobsbawm, Frantz Fanon, George Rude and a host of others.<sup>4</sup> The ancient regime in historiography or "from the top down" approach in historical writing is considered obsolete at least from the last quarter of the twentieth century in India. History, as a

1. For a detailed explanation of the meaning and nature of subaltern historiography, see Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1982), Preface and pp. 1-8 and the other volumes in this series.
2. Edward Said, 'Foreword' in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (eds.), *Select Subaltern Studies* (New York, 1988), p. 6.
3. David Cannadine, *The Pleasures of the Past* (Glasgow, 1990), p. 185.
4. B. Surendra Rao, "Subaltern Perspectives" in T. R. Venugopalan (ed.), *History and Theory* (Thrissur, 1997), p. 79.

subject of study and research, has been cutting across its traditional boundaries and sources. It has become more vibrant, lively and responsive to the new theories, ideas and realities. History has become more relevant to society due to its applied nature. This is due to the historiographical revolution and the use of different varieties of sources sifted and interpreted through scientific historical criticism. The different theories of history coupled with sociological and anthropological models and other modern tools of historical analysis have rendered history richer and meaningful. Interdisciplinary approach to history has been gaining momentum and the ancillary disciplines have been increasing. It is in this historiographical and methodological context that we view folklore and folk literature as sources of history.

### **Folk Literature of Tulunadu**

It is important to note that in the diverse socio-cultural setting of India one could notice thousands of varieties of folk traditions and they differ from place to place and from time to time. As it is impossible to cover all such aspects of folklore together here, we have confined ourselves to the case study of the folk literature of Tulunadu, that is, the present day Dakshina Kannada and Udupi Districts of Karnataka State, and the Kasaragod Taluk of Kerala State. The Kannada word, used to refer to folklore, is *Janapada*. Folklore represents the traditional beliefs and tales of a given community or set of people. It is the supreme representative of people's ethòs, thoughts, conscience and mirrored their ways of life. The folk literature embodies the ways and methods of life of the people, their beliefs and practices. It furnishes information on the system of war, administration, slavery, education and medicine, agricultural and revenue systems, sports and games, religious and family systems and traditions. The utility of folklore, as a source for subaltern history, is all the more significant because it depicts and bears testimony to the social, cultural, economic and political aspects of a given society or group of people.<sup>5</sup> It really belongs to the people because most of the folk songs, dances, dramas, proverbs and riddles were sung or performed or carried down to posterity generally by the illiterate, the socially and economically

5. Kanaradi Vadiraja Bhat, *Paddanagalu* (in Kannada) (Yugapurusha Prakanalaya, Kinnigoli, 1974), pp. 24-25 & p. 117; Sushila P. Upadhyaya, *Dakshina Bharatada Janapada* (in Kannada) (Rashtrakavi Govinda Pai Samshodhana Kendra, Udupi, 1998), p. 2.; B. A. Vivek Rai, *Tuluva Adhyayana, Kelavu Vicharagalu* (in Kannada), (Tuluva Prakashana, Mangalore, 1980), p. 16.

backward classes of society. The oral tradition or oral information and transmission of knowledge from the older to the new generation got consolidated here. In history, at various points of time, a few creative minds had created the content, form and function of folklore. The term, folklore, coming from the Old English *folc* and *lar* (that is, wisdom of the folk) was first introduced into British academic discourse by William Thoms in 1846 to replace the term 'popular antiquities', which was being used until that point. Thoms defined folklore as the 'traditional beliefs, legends and customs current among the common people'.<sup>6</sup> In Tulunadu, the folk songs or performances were not generally sung or performed by the upper classes of society, at least not by the Jains and Brahmanas. But all sections of society, including the Brahmanas and Jains, participated when it came to superhuman beliefs and practices, for instance, *bhuta* or devil worship, and the belief in tradition like worship of Balindra at the time of Diwali. Balindra is worshipped by all and Balindra *paddana* is sung by all including the Brahmanas.

The folklore of Tulunadu is a well-researched subject. Research in this area goes back to the mid-nineteenth century when the Basel Missionaries took up the folklore of Tulunadu for a systematic historical investigation. A large number of scholars, both foreign and Indian, such as Rev. J. Brigel, Rev. J. Makker, Rev. A. Manner, A. C. Burnell, R. C. Temple, Sheenappa Hegde, M. Ganapathi Rao Aigal, B. A. Saletore, K. Vadiraja Bhat, K. Shivarama Karanth, Peter J. Claus and Frank J. Korom, B. A. Vivek Rai, Amruta Someshwara, Susheela P. Upadhyaya and others have researched and published on the folklore of this region.<sup>7</sup> The folk literature of Tulunadu is generally divided into the following categories: a) *Paddanas*, b) Folk songs such as *Kabitas*, *Sandhis* and *Urals*, c) Folk tales, d) Proverbs and e) Riddles.<sup>8</sup> Let us examine these different categories in a little more detail to see their contents, forms, functions and uses as sources of history.

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6. Peter J. Claus and Frank J. Korom, *Folkloristics and Indian Folklore* (Regional Resources Centre for Folk Performing Arts, Udupi, 1991), p. 8.; Sushila P. Upadhyaya opined that the word folklore or *janapada* came to be used from the eighteenth century. See Sushila P. Upadhyaya, *Op. cit.*, p. 1.
  7. B. A. Vivek Rai, *Tulu Janapada Sahitya* (In Kannada) (Bangalore, 1985), pp. 17-23; Amruta Someshwara, *Tulu Paddana Sampattu* (In Kannada), (Hampl, 1997), pp. 39-49.
  8. Amruta Someshwara, *Op. cit.*, p. 2; B. A. Vivek Rai, *Tulu Janapada Sahitya*, see Table of Contents.

### The Paddanas

The *paddanas* are very important in the poetry tradition of the folk literature of Tulunadu. They generally belong to the category of ballads (simple songs or poems telling a story). Some of them are considered as folk epics.<sup>9</sup> Looking at their contents or subject matter, they may even be called myths. There are two varieties of *paddanas*. The first category of *paddanas* are sung at the time of *bhuta* or devil worship. Here superhuman subjects are involved: devils or *bhutas* (men who died a premature death became *bhutas*), Puranic heroes or heroines like Rama, Sita, Ganapathi, Krishna, Balindra and others. This can be compared with the *Teyyam* cult of Kerala. The second category of *paddanas* are sung at the time of working, for example, at the time of paddy cultivation, ploughing the land, etc. While uprooting the paddy plants, *paddanas* are sung. While replanting them *kabitas* are sung. In this category, we see material subjects (of the physical world), both comedy and tragedy. *Paddanas* are folk songs of an oral nature. Only "low caste" persons, who performed or acted as *bhutas*, sang these and they alone preserved this folk tradition. *Paddanas*, like *sandhis* and *kabitas*, were sung by the agricultural workers. Obviously, it was mainly the lower categories of people in the caste hierarchy who contributed to the origin, growth and diffusion of *paddanas*. Various types of animals, like pig, tiger, bull, buffalo, serpent, and others are connected with devil worship. This might be to win over the wild animals.

Some eminent men, who suffered a premature death, are worshipped as *bhutas*. This tradition is seen in Kerala in the *Teyyam* cult. The idea behind this tradition, as with the *viragals* and *mastigals* of history, is to perpetuate the memory of someone. In Tamil Nadu, one could hear about Brahman *bhuta*, Arasu *bhuta* (King), Vanika *bhuta* (trader) and Velam *bhuta* (farmer). They are meant for guarding temples of gods and goddesses.<sup>10</sup> The same features are also identified in the *bhuta* worship in Andhra Pradesh.<sup>11</sup>

9. "Folk or (oral) epic songs are narrative poems in formulaic and ornamental style dealing with adventures of extraordinary people" - Felix J. Oinas: "Folk Epic" in Richard M. Dorson (ed.), *Folklore and Folklife* (Chicago, 1972), p. 99 - quoted in B. A. Vivek Rai, *Tulu Janapada Sahitya*, pp. 33-34. Also, B. A. Vivek Rai, *Tuluva Adhyayana: Kelavu Vicharagalu*, pp. 1-2.

10. Amruta Someshwara, *Op. cit.*, p. 13.

11. *Ibid.*

The *paddanas* give information on various practices related to life and their celebrations. In fact, they are immensely useful to understand and reconstruct the cultural history of Tulunadu during the early and medieval times.<sup>12</sup> They deal with varied topics like birth, naming ceremony, first haircut, puberty, marriage, rituals related with death, family life and the routine work at home. They throw light on agriculture, trade and commerce, animal fair, education, medicine, arts, administration, war, sports and amusements. References to castes like Bunts, Settis and Marakkals (traders) and communities like Jains and Muslims are seen in the *paddanas*, which also refer to commodities of trade. For example, they indicate that Surat was connected with tobacco. Further, they throw light on the trading centres, places of exports and other related matters. One comes across references to Goa as a trading centre in the *paddanas*. Musical instruments, such as drum, flute and *panchavadya* are referred to in the *paddanas*. Important sports and amusements like *kambala*, boar-hunting, cock-fight and coconut breaking find mention in the *paddanas*. *Kambala* or buffalo race in the ploughed field with water has been a very popular game with much competition in Tulunadu. It is practiced today also.

The *Panjurli paddana* (*Panjurli* is one of the *bhutas*) informs us that marriage between a brother and a sister is not permitted. It also provides information on fauna, flora and hunting. The *Kott-Chennaya paddana* provides details relating to agriculture, customs, war, transport, entertainment, etc. It informs us that a Brahmana girl, who attained puberty before marriage, is sent to the forest. This provides evidence that the system of early marriage or child marriage was in vogue among the Brahmanas of the region. The *Siri paddana* depicts the matrilineal system of succession or property inheritance among the Bunts of Tulunadu. It tells us about the role of women in the family, the divorce practice and the dowry system. The custom of engagement before marriage was prevalent and the *Maisandaya paddana* alludes to this social system. Information on how to cut wood for a boat, on alcoholic drinks and Diwali celebrations, on medicine and treatment of diseases is found in the *paddanas*. The *paddanas* are thus a rich source of information on various mundane topics.

The *paddanas* are available both in Kannada and Tulu, the most popular spoken language of Tulunadu. In fact, the name of

12. B. A. Saletore, *Ancient Karnataka*, Vol. I, *History of Tuluwa* (Oriental Book Agency, Poona, 1936), p. 459.; B. A. Vivek Rai, *Tulu Janapada Sahitya*, p. 172.

Tulunadu is derived from the language, Tulu, which indeed reflects the popularity of the language as a medium of communication in this region. Therefore, it is understandable that the number of Tulu *paddanas* are much more than the Kannada *paddanas*. This again indicates the close connection between the Tuluvas or the Tulu-speaking people and the *paddanas*.

The *paddanas* cannot be easily dated - for two reasons. Firstly, the Tulu language was not used in writing until the end of the nineteenth century. Secondly, the *paddanas* were composed at different times and, with interpolations, were changed from time to time. Some of them even contain English words. Their dates could be roughly decided only with the help of the following details:

- a) References to the *bhutas* in the inscriptions of Tulunadu;
- b) Historical personalities and events and references to them;
- c) Reference to historic places;
- d) Cultural features of various periods.

On the basis of the above corroboratory evidence, the *paddanas* of Tulunadu in general, and the *paddanas* related to devil worship in particular, could be considered as composed during the period from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries.<sup>13</sup>

### **The *Kabitas***

The *paddanas* (folk songs), sung at the time of paddy transplantation, are called *kabitas*. The *sandhis* are sung at the time of the removal of paddy plants. In these, there are no serious or long stories. They are light and meant for entertainment. They refer to ornaments, place names, names of birds, etc. and hence are important sources of historical information. They are sung for pleasure, to get rid of fatigue, to increase the efficiency of work and to promote the spirit of oneness, cooperation and living together. These songs might have originated with their respective works and deciding their dates is almost impossible. Further, they are waning with the decreasing number of farm labourers. Working hands are being replaced by working machines and agricultural enterprises are declining with urbanization and industrialization. Whatever is preserved will be available for the future and will bear testimony to the history, culture and heritage of the region.

The *urals* are songs of two lines only. They are sung during ploughing and riding the bullock cart. In addition to these, there

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13. Amruta Someshwara, *Op. cit.*, p. 39; B. A. Vivek Rai, *Tulu Janapada Sahitya*, p. 234.

are songs sung by the navigators and the fishermen, and romantic songs, children's songs and marriage songs.

### **Folk Tales**

It is only from the 1970s that Folklorists have evinced a keen interest in the study of the folk tales of Tulunadu. These tales do not contain religious symbols or religious beliefs. They are meant for enjoyment and refer to birds and animals and daily folk themes. Some are woven around wild animals and a few are magic tales. These are told during the night, particularly to the children, to put them to bed. This tradition is also on the decline in the last quarter of a century. It is attributed to the modern means of amusement, the mass media like radio, television, cinema and others.<sup>14</sup> It may be noted that the tradition of story telling is found among the Hungarian peasant community<sup>15</sup> and in other European communities too.

### **Proverbs**

The proverbs of Tulunadu, like those in other parts of India or in other countries, have artistic and literary value. They are lucid and terse in nature with a literary and contextual meaning. Many of them are balanced (in two parts), having the feature of rhymes. Comparison is another important feature of the proverbs. Proverbs were the result of man's experience in life and give much information related to history and culture. The proverbs have functions to perform and are used in education, society, cultural development, courts and other places. These proverbs are also withering away. More than 1600 Tulu proverbs have been collected and preserved. Today they are used chiefly for amusement in Tulu drama and cinema.

### **Riddles**

Riddles are used by different groups of people, young and old, the elite and the subaltern groups, and are meant for improving one's thinking skills as also for entertainment. Sometimes two groups may compete by presenting riddles to the other and inviting solutions. While the riddles may have some foundation in historical facts, these are relatively less useful as sources of history.

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14. B. A. Vivek Rai, *Tulu Janapada Sahitya*, p. 314.

15. Linda Degh, *Folktales and Society: Story Telling in a Hungarian Peasant Community* (Bloomington, 1969), quoted in B. A. Vivek Rai, *Tulu Janapada Sahitya*, p. 315.

### Conclusion

Folklore has been now recognised and accepted by historians as a very useful source in reconstructing the history of a place or a people. The folk literature, generally speaking, belongs to the common people and deals with their beliefs, practices, activities, social customs and way of life. Rarely will folk literature enlighten us on the elite traditions of society. Nevertheless, folk literature provides valuable information on the history, society and culture of the common people. The folklore of any region, studied with the assistance and collaboration of folkloristics, sociological and anthropological theories, can yield valuable information on subaltern history, society and culture. Folk literature can be analyzed from the point of view of linguistic and literary sciences and will be useful also for the study of the environmental history.

However, the few limitations relating to folklore as a source of history need to be noted. Folklore presents little of factual and scientific information. The historian or the social scientist faces chronological and methodological problems in collecting and using folk literature or oral traditions as a source of history. Accuracy in dating events or chronology is a major problem in folklore. Events can only be dated with the assistance of other corroboratory historical evidences like literature and inscriptions. The influence of legendary material, of beliefs in the superhuman or supernatural is very noticeable in folklore. The historian needs to be very careful in the sifting of folkloric evidences and using them. One should be aware of the problem of subjectivity here. Further the collection of folk literature, recording of the oral tradition and preservation need to be improved. This involves considerable amount of field work and interviews. It is gratifying to note that in the case of Tulunadu many folkloric studies have been undertaken.<sup>16</sup> They need to be analysed and utilised in the rewriting of the history of Tulunadu from the subaltern point of view or from the people's perspective. While doing this a broader and holistic approach to history should be followed. Folklore should be considered as one of the ancillary disciplines in the historical method.

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16. For the published works on the folklore of Tulunadu, see Amruta Someshwara, *Op. cit.*, pp. 500-502. B. A. Saletore also had extensively used the *paddanas* in his work. For details, see B. A. Saletore, *Op. cit.*, Chapter VI, Life in Early Tuluva, pp. 459-583.