



## Beyond the Mainstream: Bengal's Search for Identity through the Journey of Her Folklore from Oral Tradition to Web Series

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### Abstract

Folklore can be described as traditional knowledge, art, literature, practices which include folktales, proverbs, legends, chants, rhymes that are transmitted on in large part through oral communication. The information thus communicated through folklore reflects the values and cultures of a particular group. Folklore has a key position in validating and maintaining the stability of a particular culture. The changing formats of dissemination of folklore in Bengal from oral tradition to printed media and now in digital versions express the culture and values of Bengal through changing times. The preservation of oral folklore through printed media in Bengal began in the early twentieth century when the middle class 'bhadralok' of Bengal made an attempt to collect the folk arts and folktales which began as a tool of the Bengal *Swadeshi* Movement to disseminate the principles of “*bideshi drobyo borjon o swadeshi drobyo grohon*” (Elimination of foreign goods and acceptance of indigenous goods) among the mass. Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's *Thakurmar jhuli*, *Thakurdadar Jhuli* etc. were the products of folk tradition which was published as an attempt to restore the cultural identities of Bengal in an era when the Indian markets were overflowing with western folktales. Printing media has transformed the oral tradition of folklore. In the present age of digitization, the medium of communication of folklore changes from printed media to electronic media of television, animated cartoons and web series. The animated series of *Panchatantra*, *Gopal Bhar* on Zee Bangla is very popular among children living in urban areas. The modes of expression of folklore may be changed but it continues to resemble the customs and culture of Bengal from the days of oral tradition.

### Keywords

Bengal, identity, web series, folklore, nationalism

The folklore of Bengal has travelled a long way from being a part of oral tradition to written document in the form of black and white printed pages and now in the digital era, folklore finds its expression through films, soap operas, animated cartoons and web series. The early twentieth century is marked as an era when the middle class ‘*bhadralok*’ of Bengal feels an urge to collect the folklore in order to claim their indigenous identity. The revival of the folklore of Bengal was not only important for the collective self – rejuvenation of the Bengalis but also the identity of Bengal is inextricably related with its antique folklore. Printing media has given shape and structure to the orally transmitted folklore while the digital media retells the folklore that not only serves the purpose of entertainment but also plays an important role in the search of cultural identity and preserving the roots of one’s ethnicity. Although the mediums of dissemination of folklore may have changed but the basic importance of folklore in preserving culture remains the same in all the mediums. This paper attempts to explore the evolution of identity of Bengal and Bengalis with the changing formats of the dissemination of her folklore from the oral tradition to electronic media. This paper also portrays how in the age of digitization, folklore transmitted through various mediums from printed version to digital version like animated cartoons, soap operas and web series (with special reference to Netflix’s *Bulbul*) reflects Bengali culture and tradition in changing times.

The term ‘folk’ implies “the collective human clan and ‘lore’ implies the collective man’s wisdom of life, gained through thousands of years’ experience, knowledge and changes” (Biswas 125). Dr. Tushar Chattopadhyay has forwarded a definition of folklore in the All India Science Congress, held in Chandigarh in 1973, “Folklore is the total creation of life practice and the ideational pursuit of mainly collective, spontaneous and synonymous effort of an integral society”. (58) Some elements of folklore have originated from the beliefs, rituals, worships, customs, and festivals of the folks. Although it was started among the uneducated peasantry but it has transcended the boundary of the primitive and extended to the postmodern age where a man suffering from small pox is offered the *prasad* of *Sitala maa* along with medicines. Folklore includes legends, superstitions, tales, proverbs and folk literature, which is the type of literature “that spreads through the verbal expositions of its creator and in the course adheres to the transition of time and imbibes human experience for its survival” (Biswas 132). Folk literature is the product of unified society. The tradition of the folk literature is based on the interdependence of the members of a particular society. The common people are not only the creator of the folk literature but also the holder and

carrier of it, as it is dependent on memory. Folk literature is not only important for the joy and leisure but it has one significant characteristic – it is the recorder of the incidents of a particular age and a particular place. So it serves as an important document for the anthropologists to reconstruct the past based on the information provided by the folk literature. Unfortunately, the oral tradition of folklore is slowly being forgotten due to the modern busy lifestyles but it is essential to take immediate steps towards the preservation of folklore.

In search of their indigenous identity the middle class intellectuals of Bengal felt an endeavour of collecting the folklore of Bengal which includes folk tales, proverbs and legends, in the early twentieth century. Dr. Ashutosh Mookerji, the legend of Indian educationists and patron of Indian art and literature, is the person who brought the folklore of Bengal to the spotlight. He has decided to publish the folk literature of Bengal with the assistance of Dr. D. C. Sen. With the help of the large number of researchers, a vast amount of Bengali folktales were collected from Mymansingh which is now known as Eastern Pakistan. This huge amount of songs and stories were published by the University of Calcutta in four volumes as *Mymansingh Gitika*. Some years later, the English translation of these songs and ballads were also published by the Calcutta University under the name of Eastern Bengal Ballads with Dr. D. C. Sen as the editor. A detailed research and analysis of the folklore of Bengal has been introduced in the book *The Folk Literature of Bengal* written by Dr. Sen, where he has made a comparative survey of Indian and foreign folktales. *Haramani, The Last Jewel* is a book of Bengali folk songs that deals with the meditation and the art of yoga – the process of self – restraint. *Thakurmar Jhuli: Banglar Rupkatha (Grandmother's Tales: Fairy Tales of Bengal)*, a collection of Bengali folk tales has been published by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumadar in 1907. This book is not only related with Bengal's identity but it has a historical value also related with the *Swadeshi* Movement of Bengal. Rabindranath Tagore wrote in the introduction to *Thakurmar Jhuli*:

Is there anything more *swadeshi* than *Thakurmar Jhuli, The Grandmother's Bag*? But alas, in recent times, even this bag full of sweets has come already manufactured from the factories of Manchester. Nowadays, fairytales from the West have become almost the sole recourse of our boys. The Grandmother Companies from our country are bankrupt. If one rattles their bags, perhaps a copy of Martin's Ethics or Burke's Notebooks on the French Revolution might pop out – but where are our

princesses, our magic birds – *Byangoma* and *Byangomi*<sup>1</sup> – or the gem of seven kings that lies beyond seven seas and thirteen oceans? (Tagore 11)

This collection was introduced as an indigenous alternative to the western fairy tales and children’s stories. Hayden White, in his seminal works *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination of the Nineteenth Century Europe* (1973) and *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (1987), has asserted about the book *Thakurmar Jhuli* by Mitra Majumdar that “the collection is a looking glass of the *Swadeshi* Movement. The work not only reflects the principles of the movement but also carries the flaws inherent in the movement which divided the Indian *society* “(as qtd in Paul 156). The purpose of the *Swadeshi* Movement was to influence people to use the ‘indigenous ‘products and the keynote was ‘*bideshi drobyo borjon*’ (abolition of foreign goods) at a time when the British colonisers were filling their treasury with the money made from their business of foreign made products in India. The *Swadeshi* Movement aimed to call for people to establish their pride on the glorious tradition of folk art, folklore and folk cultures of Bengal. Partha Chatterjee in his book, *Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonised Women: The Contest in India* (1989) writes, “The discourse of nationalism shows that the material / spiritual distinction was condensed into an analogous dichotomy: that between the outer and the inner” (628). *Thakurmar Jhuli*, as analysed by Partha Chatterjee, shows that the outside world, the materialistic world, the ‘*bahir*’ is less important than the inner world, the spiritual world, the ‘*ghar*’. The ‘*bahir*’ was represented by the men; they fight with the *rakshashas* (giants) to save the lives of the *rajkanyas* (princesses), who reside in the ‘*ghar*’, represented by the women. Thus, it emphasizes upon the fact that the nationalists were to fight for independence, while protecting the ‘*ghar*’, the home. Including *Thakurmar Jhuli*, Mitra Majumdar wrote several other collections that revives the traditional folklore of Bengal. In 1909 , he published *Thakurdadar Jhuli : Banglar Kathasahitya (Grandfather’s Bag : The Narrative Literature from Bengal)* , and after that he published *Thandidir Thale (Grandmother’s Bag)* , *Dadamoshayer Thale: Banglar Rashakatha ( Grandfather’s Bag: The Humourous Tales of Bengal)* respectively. Kanailal Ghosal has published a book of Bengali proverbs named as *Probad Pustaka (A Book of Proverbs, Calcutta, 1890)*. He has been followed by others like Dwarakanath Basu , who has also published a book named as *Probad Pustaka (A Book of Proverbs, Calcutta, 1893)* and Rajendranath Banerjee, whose book *A*

<sup>1</sup> Byangoma and Byangomi are legendary fictional birds, appearing in the fairy tales to give wise advice to the deserving. Most of the stories of *Thakurmar Jhuli* often have them.

*Collection of Agricultural Sayings in Lower Bengal*, (Calcutta, 1893) was a collection of Bengali proverbs. Another collection of Bengali folk tales have been published by Lal Behari De under the name of *The Folk Tales of Bengal*. *Manikchander Git and Gopichander Git* have been published by the Calcutta University; both of these are the collection of the ballads. Manikchand, the main character was regarded as a legendary figure that has been referred in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, published by Dr. Grierson. Shri Gopi Nath Sen has established “The Asiatic Folk Literature Society” in Kolkata which has taken the initiative of collecting and preserving the folklore of Asia. Bengali folklore also contains folk rhymes which are anonymous, “if once created they become common property” (Shahed M. 155). Rabindranath Tagore, the Nobel – laureate of Bengal, played a major role in the preservation of folk rhymes. He has published two articles containing one hundred Bengali folk rhymes. His works have inspired many people to follow the path pioneered by Tagore. *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad* (Bengal Literary Council) established in 1893, became the centre of most Bengali writing and research. The council published its journal which contains the Bengali folk rhymes. The first collection of Bengali folk rhymes published in book form, compiled by Yogindranath Sarkar as *Khukumanir chara* in Kolkata in 1899. This book became a permanent source for researchers in the field of folk studies of Bengal. Some of the British missionaries in India also played significant roles in collecting the oral Bengali folklore. Reverend James Long was also a prolific collector of the Bengali folklore. He has published *Three Thousand Bengali Proverbs and Proverbial Sayings Illustrating National Life and Feelings Among Ryots and Women* (1872), *Eastern Proverbs and Emblems Illustrating Old Truth* (London, 1873) and *Two Thousand Bengali Proverbs (Probad Mala) Illustrating Native Life and Feelings* (1868). Another best collection of Bengali folktales was *Bengali Household Tales* (1912) published by William McCulloch. These collections show the importance of conservation of oral folktales of Bengal through the medium of print that helps the modern urban child to grasp the rural Bengali culture. The festivals of Bengalis mentioned in the folk tales like *poush parban*<sup>2</sup> provide a chance for today’s pizza and burger lovers to interact with the traditional *pithepuli*, *chandrapuli* and *narkel naru* of Bengal.

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<sup>2</sup> Poush parban is the harvest festival celebrated on the day of Makar or Poush Sankranti that is observed in the month of January every year. Sankranti refers both to a specific solar day in the Hindu calendar and a Hindu festival dedicated to the deity Surya. In Bengal, celebration of poush parban begins with holy dip in river Ganges before sunrise. Goddess Lakshmi is worshipped in every household and sweets made of notun gur (freshly made jaggery) and new rice is offered to the Goddess first.

The history of printing materials of Bengali folklore shows the transformation of the oral tradition into the written document. “With the development of printing and shaping of a new mass media of newspapers, books and journals, the path of oral tradition travelled through the gradually changing social and economic structure of the nation” (Maitra 88). This mass medium became not only the repository of folklore but also reflects the identity of Bengal with all its “anxieties and agonies of a changing society” (Maitra 78). With the developing technologies, the New Media has contributed further to the conservation of Bengali folklore and folktales – “traditional folktales saw immense popularity once again in the booming broadcast industry” (Maitra 90). The folktale of *Thakurmar Jhuli* that has been discussed earlier finds new meaning through DVDs, CDs and pen drives along with the animated representation of the same folktale on Zee Bangla on television. Similarly, the animated version of the famous tales of *Gopal Bhar*, the court – jester of Maharaja Krishnachandra on Sony Aath is also very popular among children. Furthermore, it should be reminded that the audiences of printing media of folklore are limited as compared to television, animated cartoons or web series. The audiences of printing media are not also diverse and varied. Soap operas , web series , animated shows for kids are organised programmes that engage the much needed divergent and varied audiences of different cultural backgrounds. These shows reflect the evolution of the identity of Bengal with the convergence of the folk culture with that of the popular culture where the Bengali folklore acquired renewed identity through the popular medium of television. In the era of digital India, the internet is a worldwide network that connects millions of people belonging from multiple regions and various cultures. Stith Thomson recognized the animated cartoons as a marvellous medium of tale dissemination and a kind of storytelling event:

The cinema, especially the animated cartoon, is perhaps the most successful of all mediums for the presentation of the fairy tale. Creatures of the folk imagination can be constructed with ease and given life like qualities...Many adults who had long ago dropped their interest in the fairy tale unexpectedly found great pleasure in this old product of the folk imagination. (Thompson 130)

Nowadays, smartphones have taken over all the digital devices. With the development of different apps like Hotstar, YouTube, the Bengali folktales have transformed into visual entertainment from the auditory version of oral tradition. “ For a modern child residing in an urban area within a nuclear family , where the grandparents’ presence is either absent

or low, the meaning of oral / folk traditions have also changed” ( Maitra 92 ). But the popularity of the Bengali folktales is evident from the numerous modern films and TV series that are based on the Bengali oral folklore – *Saat Bhai Champa*, a popular folktale first published by Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar in the book *Thakurmar Jhuli* has been premiered from 2017 to 2019 on Zee Bangla. The popularity of the series is clear from the fact that it continued for over two years occupying the prime time slot of 8.00 PM. *Kiranmala*, the folklore story of a brave princess has been premiered on Star Jalsha television series from 2014 to 2016. There are hundreds of mobile apps like *Lal Kamal Aar Neel Kamal* (the adventurous story of two princes fighting the demons to save their kingdom), the story of *Dukhu* and *Sukhu*, which could be easily downloaded, where children could watch the animated version of Bengali folklore. Although there are debates on how the repeated viewing of stories on DVDs or laptops wiped out the creativity of folklore but it should not be seen as problematic – “We need to forget about whether or not popular culture transmits folklore. Rather we begin to consider that certain popular culture forms succeed because they act like folklore. To some extent they may have replaced folk narratives, but not with something completely new. Thus popular culture is popular because of its resonance, its appeal to an audience ‘s existing set of story conventions” (Bird 147).

Folklore acts as a mediator between the past and the present, through the practice of arts, crafts, ballads, rhymes, lyrics, tales, instruments which are related to many explicit and implicit social processes. Along with validating culture, folklore also fulfils the function of maintaining the stability of culture as it ensures conformity to the accepted cultural norms and continuity through generation after generation. The younger generations acquire manners, rituals, beliefs through folklore. The age of Digital Media and the tremendous development of technologies have contributed further to the changing identity related with the oral tradition of the folklore of Bengal. The folklore of Bengal has travelled a long path from the oral tradition to television and reached the web series version. The Netflix , Zee5 , Amazon Prime , Hoichoi , Voot , MX Player etc. are the platforms where the modern web series based on Bengali folklores have been launched. The emotional realism of web series and the option for online comments have strengthened the social solidarity and facilitated the global approach of regional folklores. In India, the digital revolution is mainly driven by the increasing number of smart phone users, the wider availability of 4G, reducing data costs increases time spent on mobile phones. Web series based on Bengali folklore expands chances for Bengali culture to

reach the different corners of the world as it is the innovative and effective medium which maintains close bond with large number of audiences. *Netflix's Bulbul* is based on a Bengali folktale which shows the darkness of the 19<sup>th</sup> century colonised Bengal. Bulbul is the story of a free spirited and wide – eyed child bride whose quest for a kindred soul and kindness pulls her into deep peril (Hayat). In Bengali folktales, mansions play a significant role. Here, in Bulbul also the child bride after her marriage arrives in the mansion of the Thakur family, but the toxicity of the mansion begins to reveal itself as the story progresses. The patriarchal oppressive force devours the lives of women. Bulbul has been beaten by her husband with a metal rod until it breaks and twists backwards. On the verge of death, Bulbul is raped by her husband's mentally challenged identical twin Mahendra Thakur and succumbs to death. The hints at the intrinsic oppression, and their repercussions, pile on and reach the peak when a seemingly dead Bulbul is resurrected as a woman transformed from a naive housewife to a vengeful avenger – targeting men who cause trauma to women of any age (Hayat). The real horror is rooted in the society behind the shroud of the folktale of a bloodthirsty witch with feet twisted backwards. *Bulbul* is a document of the gruesome reality of patriarchy in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, and it unveils the disastrous secrets of the 'andarmahal' (inner apartments) of Bengali zamindar houses. The web series presents actual reality behind the folktale of the witch with twisted ankles to the young generation. Thus, Bengali culture reached vast numbers of people through the web series version of folklore.

The gadgets took the responsibility of story – telling from the grandparents of the family. “The reflection of folklore – be it in print or any form of New Media – bears a responsibility of highlighting the underlying message and functions through its tales of legends and mythologies to make the receiver perceive the story as a symbol, a function that it has been performing from the times of oral tradition. The extension of oral tradition into popular culture has amplified the perceived functionality of the same set of messages” (Maitra 87). The digital media brings up together the people from different parts of the world. Numerous people from different cultural backgrounds participate and perform as a critic in the discussion of the web series based on the story of a particular culture, where there is an opportunity of comparison between the multifarious cultures. Folklore is related to the notions of self-knowledge, identity, self-esteem and pride. It is possible for a Bengali born and brought up in a foreign country to represent the folk culture of her region in front of others if only he/she is conscious about the value of it. A sense of emotional unity and belongingness aroused when a person views the folklore in

his / her smartphone or laptop in a place which is geographically far from his homeland. Digital folklore connects him emotionally with the people of his society. Folklore is considered as the essence of the soil which has not only preserved the past but also helps to achieve self-identity and group identity and thereby establishing a historical value of the present and future. There is an evolution of mankind in every aspect of life including folklore, digital folklore is nothing exceptional. Although there is a tendency of altering the original folklore in digital media but Trevor J. Blank has recognized the digital media working in the similar way as the printed versions, as he asserted - “The internet is the new print technology, duplicating our materials from the physical field and transferring them into an electronic vernacular. The result is similar to the way that printed versions of folklore originally stimulated oral tradition in the past” (Blank 11). Now the question is, can digital folklores represent the Bengali culture exactly in the same way that the traditional version of folklores used to? Actually, the internet has the ability to reconstruct the flow of folklore through electronic devices. Krishenblatt-Gimblett has stated that “the very technologies that threaten to displace oral traditions are also instruments for preserving them” (177).

Bengal has a rich treasury of folklore, of which folk literature is an integral and important component. Bengali folklore plays a dominant role in establishing the identity of Bengal. In the contemporary society when people are constantly struggling to return to their own roots and to maintain their ethnic identities, the dissemination of folklore through different mediums play an important role in preserving culture. Folk literature of Bengal is an evident of the thousand year’s history of the Bengali language. The collection and compilation of Bengali folklore was inspired by the worldwide interest of preserving the culture of Bengal. The folklore serves as an important document of Bengali nationalism and the activities and contribution of Bengal in the Indian Independence Movement. The collection of Bengali folklore is linked with the history of social, economic and political transformation of Bengal. In order to recover the treasury of the glorious past, the initiative of collecting and preserving the folklore of Bengal took place. The development of printing paved the way for the transformation of the folklore from oral tradition to a written document. The great scholar Dineshchandra Sen has influenced the conservation of Bengali folktales during the time of *Banga Bhanga Andolan* in 1905. The digital folklore replaced the printed folklore. But whether the folklore remains in its printed form or digital form, it bears the responsibility of disseminating the values and cultures, a function which it has been performing from the

times of oral tradition. The modern child living in an urban area witnessed the tradition of his own region in the animated versions of folklore on the computer screen. The child connects his identity with the root of his soil as he discovers his own self by forming his self-identity and relating it with the social identity. Folklore presented in the forms of animated series, soap operas or web series, the essence of it remains the same which helps the child of the present age to remember the smell of the wet soil (*Bheja matir gondho*). Though the medium has changed but the same ‘desire for returning ‘is related with the folklore of Bengal. Although the absence of the grandmother who can sit under the dim lamp at night and tell the folktales with the concluding line ‘ *amar kothati furalo / note gachti muralo* ‘ cannot be fulfilled but folklore in digital media develops a cultural identity within the modern child, helps him to realise his true essence through tradition .

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