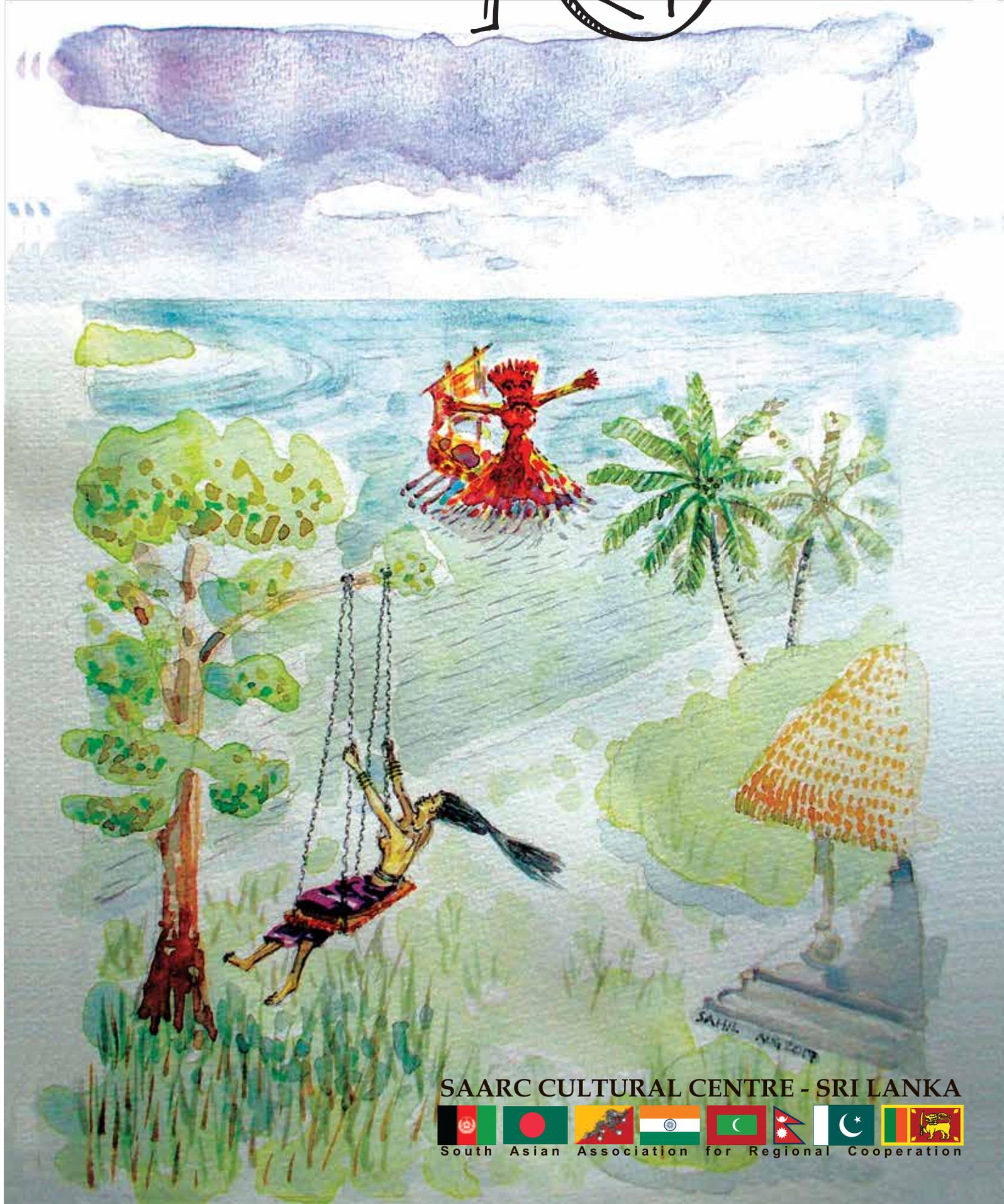




# SAARC ART

September, 2017 | Issue No. 4



SAARC CULTURAL CENTRE - SRI LANKA



South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation

# content



September, 2017 | Issue No. 4

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Designed by:  
**Yashika Uthpala - Vishwa Graphics**

Printed by  
**Vishwa Graphics (Pvt) Ltd.**

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# Message from the Director



Wasanthe Kotuwella  
*Director*

It gives me great pleasure to announce the publication of the fourth issue of SAARC Art Magazine from SAARC Cultural Centre (SCC), Colombo. Our programmes and events always gives us an opportunity to meet many personalities from across the SAARC nations and this issue of the SAARC Art is a reflection of the same as we continue our journey of exploring the concept of 'Art' through the kaleidoscopic lenses of the ethos of Intangible Cultural Heritage. This issue is dedicated to the understanding of the concept of 'Storytelling and Folklore'. From time immemorial, stories have been a part of human civilisation in the form of music, dance, painting and in later years- architecture, sculpture, theatre and cinema or existing simply as its name suggests- as 'stories'. We explore this multifarious perception of 'Storytelling' as well as 'Folklore' as an important part of our socio-cultural existence in this issue of SAARC Art. The concept note, explaining this perspective has been penned down by Culture Specialist (Research)- Dr. (Ms.) Lopamudra Maitra Bajpai. The issue has articles by esteemed personalities from various cultural disciplines as well as members of academia from all the eight countries of the SAARC Member States, including Ali Sahil from Maldives, Dr. (Prof.) Jeyasankar Sivagnanam from Sri Lanka, Dr. Ajay Joshi from

India, Ms. Nayyara Rahman from Pakistan, Mr. Najib Manalai from Afghanistan, Dr. (Prof.) Prem Kumar Khattry from Nepal, Dr. Swadhin Sen from Bangladesh and a special note on Bhutan by artist Dr. Sumera Jawad (esteemed participant of the SAARC Artist Camp in Bhutan, 2016). Many of these dignitaries have been part of various events and programmes of SAARC Cultural Centre- including, Ms. Nayyara Rahman, Dr. Swadhin Sen, Ali Sahil, Dr. (Prof.) Prem Kumar Khattry and Dr. Sumera Jawad. The photographs of the issue have been contributed by the authors themselves and also forms parts of their significant research in the discipline. We feel privileged to have all the authors and contributors helping to make this issue successful.

From the publication of our third issue at the beginning of the year (March, 2017, Issue-3) - the SAARC Cultural Centre witnessed several events and programmes. The Centre successfully celebrated International Women's Day on March 8 at Lionel Wendt Theatre in Colombo with significant dignitaries present from various cultural backgrounds of not only Sri Lanka, but other SAARC countries as well. The all-women's drumming ensemble from Colombo- 'Thuuryaa' enthralled the audience across an hour-long performance. The SAARC Exhibition of Paintings took place at the University of Visual and Performing

Arts (Colombo) grounds on March 6 and was organised in collaboration with the Saundaryabhimani Arts Festival of the University of Visual and Performing Arts. The SAARC Artist's Camp took place in Kathmandu (Nepal) from July 28-31, 2017- with participation by painters from all across the SAARC region. The SAARC Research Project on Buddhist Cultural Trails: Journey Through Time & Space, of Merchants, Monks and Pilgrims was organised in Colombo (Sri Lanka) between August 26 and 27- followed by a one-day Post-Seminar Tour to Dambulla UNESCO World Heritage Site and Arankele Meditation Monastery- Archaeological Site on August 28. The resounding success of this event was made possible through the earnest efforts and the wide participation of members of academia from across the SAARC Member States. We are including some significant moments of the same event within this issue of SAARC Art.

We, at the SAARC Cultural Centre, look forward to maintaining our rhythm of organising various programmes and events for the remaining part of the year of 2017 and beginning of 2018 with the same tempo- bringing the people of South Asia together, forging brotherhood and spreading the richness of culture. The forthcoming issues of SAARC Art promises to surge forward with the same notion of unity.



# The Mythical, Majestic and Mysterious and its Magical influence on Music

By

**Kishani Jayasinghe – Wijayasekara**

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*In addition to being the Deputy Director for Programmes at the SAARC Cultural Centre, Kishani Jayasinghe - Wijayasekara is an International Opera Singer and International Commercial Lawyer. She is a former Young Artiste at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden and has the distinction of being the first South Asian Soprano soloist to perform there. Winner of six International Vocal Competitions, Kishani is a Pioneer for Opera in the South Asian Region. She has been adjudicated The Asian Woman of Achievement for Art and Culture, having competed with finalists from India, China, Pakistan and Iran, and was presented to HM Queen Elizabeth II as a Young Commonwealth Ambassador for the Arts. She is also a Goodwill Ambassador for the South Asian Women's Fund, and Women in Need. She is the creator and author of the National Weekend Newspaper feature 'Voice for Women', an Educator, Philanthropist, Rotarian, Wife and Mother.*

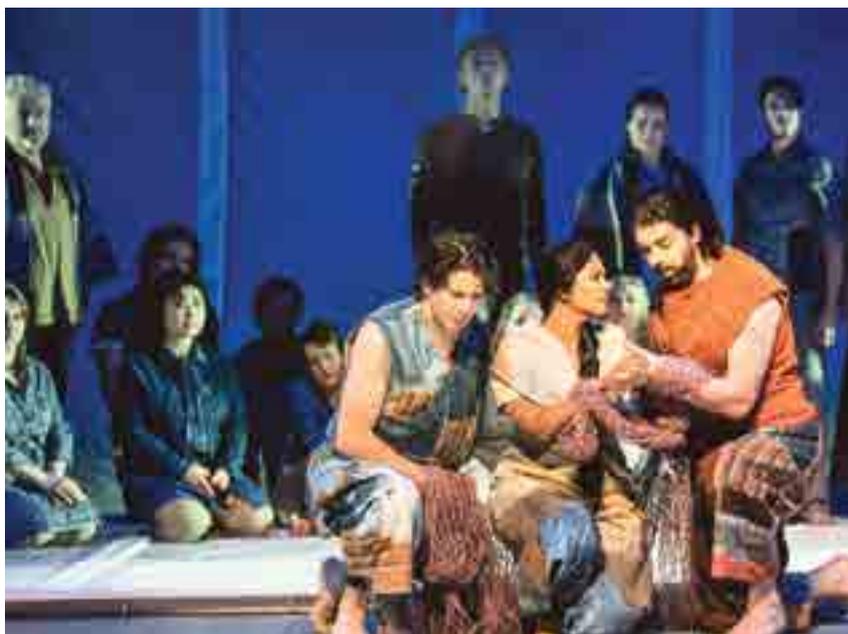
Fantasies and fiction have been the corner stone of good stories and popular productions from the very inception of the theatre. The world of music - specifically opera and the performing arts - the world I inhabited as a professional international opera singer for over a dozen years and still keep a foot in - is steeped in it. It is this very feeling of wonder and exploration of imagination that brings the theatre-goer and music lover flocking back on to the red velvet covered seats in the gold gilded traditional theatres, to watch the Artistes tread the thick wooden floorboards time and again.

The act of immersing oneself in the Performing Arts - whether it be as the Artiste spinning the story through dance, movement, music, speech or song, or the spectator drinking it all in as a visceral experience - is a veritable feast for the senses. This only becomes more potent and more powerful with the depth and perceptible truth of the story which underpins the performance as a whole. The more realistic the story, the more we feel and therefore the more we are directly moved by it. This could explain the modern trend towards realism, within the performing arts. However, on the other end of the spectrum, there is our never-ending love affair with myths and legends...stories of times gone by when Gods and Goddesses in the lands and the world in general had an underlying feeling of...magic and nostalgia.

Perhaps this is why, even centuries later, we still relish stories of rescuing maidens, sacrificing virtuous nobles, protecting kingdoms, forbidden love affairs, dungeons and dragons, poisoned apples and evil step mothers, hidden relics and jewels in elaborate hair adornments, giant beanstalks and golden eggs, spinning wheels, handsome young princes and the all-important beautiful and feminine - but also of late, strong - princesses. We still take the trouble to preserve the art of storytelling, to pass it down from one generation to the next and create an interest within the young and impressionable minds of the future, and make every effort to

help them imagine the impossible, is in fact possible.

Perhaps, this could also then explain the abundance of folk stories and legends woven into the very fabric of opera and theatre. It would be natural to assume that eastern themes and 'local' South Asian legends are unlikely to underpin the traditionally western and European art form of Opera. Nevertheless, they exist and have universal themes across Asia and Europe by way of protecting, sacrificing and wooing nobles and their legacies. They still number in the few and far between category, however they have stood the test of time and in some instances, it is unclear how they came to feature in these stories at all.



*Nadir, Leila and Zurga in a production of The Pearl-fishers in The Netherlands*

Whilst several examples are available, one which perfectly illustrates the point, and is worthy of further exploration is *Les pêcheurs de perles (The Pearl Fishers)* by the French opera composer, George Bizet, with a libretto by Eudène Cormon and Micheal Carré. It premiered in Paris at the Théâtre Lyrique on the 30 September 1863 and is set in ancient times. It tells a story of two best friends, Zurga and Nadir, who vow eternal friendship, in an operatic duet that over 150 years later is still considered one of the most beautiful pieces of music ever written. This eternal oath is threatened and then shattered as a result of their love for the same woman Leila - a noble priestess. Leila is torn between her secular love and her honourable promise to save her homeland. She is a noble priestess, chosen by her people as an offering to the Gods. The Villagers hope to appease the torrents of nature in the hope that her noble sacrifice would stem the raging seas and calm the fierce storms that threaten their shores and their very existence.

A general enough story until one looks beneath the surface and realises the opera, which was based in Ancient Ceylon - modern day Sri Lanka - also appears to be loosely based on the life and legend of Viharamaha Devi. Daughter of a King and mother to one of Sri Lanka's

most significant and memorable hero Kings, Dutugemunu. Legend says in order to appease the angered Gods for her father's crime, Viharamaha Devi sacrificed herself to the Gods of the Sea to save her land from the raging storms and the tempestuous floods. A moving and deeply felt story line which forms the basis of an opera that is once again making its way into mainstream repertoire on the international Opera circuit and bestowed me the opportunity of being the first Sri Lankan to ever sing the role of the Sri Lankan priestess on an international operatic stage.

A stage where language, colour,

race and religious beliefs become irrelevant and the only thing that ultimately matters, is telling the story. Under the costumes, the scenery, the make-up, the props, the music and the madness, what matters is telling a story that touches us, makes us feel something deep in our hearts, transports us to another place and gives us the time and space to imagine, explore and experience. It is finally the story that endures and the legend in all its mythical, majestic and mysterious glory, that creates the magic that causes even the most modest of music, to shine and shimmer in its harmonic and simplistic beauty.



*Nadir and Leila in a production of The Pearlfishers in London.*



## Voices of the Past: Memories of Oral Transmission of Folklore and Stories

By

**Bindu Urugodawatte**

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*Bindu Urugodawatte is the Deputy Director Research at the SAARC Cultural Centre and she is an Archaeologist by profession, trained in both east and west. She obtained her MA from Harvard University on a Fulbright Scholarship and a Harvard University Grant and her First-Class Honours Degree from Peking University on a Chinese Government Scholarship. She was an Asian Fellow of the Asian Scholarship Foundation to Peking University and Kizil Research Institute in P.R. of China from 2010 to 2011. Her research interests include Buddhist Archaeology of Sri Lanka, Silk Road Buddhist Art and Archaeology, Buddhist Art and Archaeology of China and Central Asia. She has contributed her research to both national and international publications and presented her research findings in international forums in Asia, Europe and America. She has worked in governmental, non-governmental, national, international and private sector organizations. She is an avid photographer, traveller and a lover of nature.*

**M**y childhood was before television, computers, mobile phones became an integral part of our lives. I don't have any memories of storytelling as child, no memories of my parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles telling me stories. But what I do have is embedded stories which I knew before I could read, they were a part of my life which I never cherished or even realised I had until I was an adult.

I have no recollection of who, how, when or where these stories including *Jataka* stories (stories about the previous births of Sakyamuni Buddha), stories from the life of the Buddha, stories from Sri Lankan and Indian history including *Ramayana* etc., were shared with me. Some of these stories were probably told during road trips, visits to Buddhist Temples, Hindu Kovils, etc. I never realised that I had inherited these memories from my parents and grandparents, a part of the intangible heritage of generations of Sri Lankans had acquired through storytelling. Unfortunately, this intangible heritage which is a part of my life is lost to the next generation due to the rapid development and easy access of visual media.

The birth of prince Siddharta, marrying princess Yasodara, the four omens, birth of prince Rahula, six years of hardship, becoming Buddha, first sermon, all the way to *Mahaparinibbana* I learned to identify before I was even able to read. I do not remember reading any of these stories myself until I became an adult and commenced research on Buddhist art and archaeology. The intangible knowledge bestowed upon me by parents made me able to identify numerous paintings and sculpture of my studies due to the inherited knowledge received as a child. This was the oral transmission of Sri Lankan intangible heritage received through temple

education, farming, rural living and dissemination of information from generation to generation.

I have heard my father repeat a Sinhalese riddle numerous times *“Walking on four legs in the morning, walking on two legs at noon, using three legs in the evening, if you solve this riddle it shows your intellect”* describing the different stages in the life of humans. Recently reading *“Daham Geta Malawa”* (Riddles of the Doctrine) ascribed to Ven. Veedagama of the Kotte period (1411 – 1597 CE) I realised that the above verse and many other stanzas of riddles- which I remember from my childhood- were a part of temple education my parents had received orally in their villages. Born and bred in the capital of Sri Lanka I didn't have the same association with the temple my parents did, but was lucky enough to receive their intangible knowledge as a part of my embedded memories.

The living tradition of Buddhism with its tangible and intangible heritage is steeped into the fabric of Sri Lankan culture and society. The tangible heritage of Buddhist temple is surrounded by the intangible heritage from the selection of the location for the temple to construction of monastic structures to the everyday rituals practiced by the devotees at the monastery. The creation of stories through paintings and sculpture was an amalgamation between the artistic talent and the knowledge of the resident monks selecting and guiding the creation. The traditional temple artists were proficient in both painting and sculpture, trained by traditional schools of temple painters. These traditional craftsmen enhanced their creativity through rituals- requesting for the support from the pantheon of deities with stanzas and verses compiled in honour of each deity. The craftsmen during this period become vegetarians and observe the



*Kotikagoda Purana Raja Maha Viharaya*



*Veheragalle Samudragiri Purana Viharaya*

five precepts of Buddhism and forego marital relations .

Today, the temple painters are artists trained in Art Schools without any knowledge, perception or even understanding of the intangible heritage associated with the creation of Buddhist art. The oral transmission of stories, stanzas, verses, etc., have disappeared from even the rural areas replaced with computers, mobile phones and digital accessories. The only way to preserve this intangible knowledge passed through generations is to preserve it in digital format, for future

generations. The oral transmission of knowledge my father received from his father, temple and elders in the village provided the embedded knowledge of Sri Lankan Buddhist culture which laid the foundation for my understanding of intangible heritage associated with Buddhist art and archaeology- however, has unfortunately disappeared from the fabric of Sri Lankan culture.

1. Field work in Ratnapura District of Sri Lanka, personal conversations with traditional temple painters.



## Loksahitya (Folklore), storytelling and its myriad reflections across the SAARC region

By

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BA (History Hons- Presidency College- Kolkata, India)

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*A Visual Anthropologist- her work is mostly based on Intangible Cultural Heritage, ethnographic explorations and historical reflections and popular culture. She has been a Merit Fellow of University Grants Commission (UGC- India) and Symbiosis International University with honours in each discipline and also finishing at the top of her batch. She has nearly 20 years of work experience as a field-researcher in ethnoarchaeology, folk culture and popular culture- along with a decade's experience of teaching at various universities in India. With many international publications, including research papers in books and journals to her credit, she has also worked as a correspondent for various leading Indian English dailies, including The Indian Express, The Statesman and The Times of India. She has been awarded many international grants to represent India at various international conferences on panels which deal with Intangible Cultural Heritage and Culture Studies of India and South Asia.*

It gives me immense pleasure to pen down the concept note for this issue of the SAARC Art (Issue 4, 2017). The focus of the issue is the art of 'Storytelling and Folklore'- forming an important part of the concept of Intangible Cultural Heritage and I begin by highlighting a popular storyline amidst folklore from across the SAARC region. A very famous folktale from South Asia narrates the story of a tiger trapped in a cage by mistake. He appeals to a 'learned man' passing by and also promises that he will not eat him upon being released. However, once released, he wanted to eat the 'learned man'. They appealed to few 'friends' for justice for this ungrateful demand- but everybody agreed that the man should not be spared as men (in general) never spares anybody. Unanimously, such a decision was considered as the correct judgement. However, a fox intervenes at last, settles the matter by confusing the tiger and puts him back into the cage and locks him up from outside. In the *Old Deccan Days* from (central) India one can get to know about a similar story- where the tiger is replaced with an alligator and the matter was finally settled by a clever jackal after several appeals were made to a banyan tree, camel, bullock and an eagle. In another version, as mentioned in *The Tales of Punjab* from (northern) India - the matter was referred to a *pipal* or *Bo* tree and a road, while the final dispute was settled by a jackal who puts the tiger back into the cage. In another Sinhala version from Sri Lanka, a crocodile attempts to eat the man and appeal was variously made to a *kumbuk tree*<sup>1</sup> and a cow and finally a jackal settles the dispute. A version of the *Panchatantra* from India also comes close to the Sinhala version where a crocodile attempts to eat a *Brahmin* priest and various appeals were made to a mango tree and an old cow and finally a jackal

1. Kumbuk tree- Terminalia

settles the matter<sup>2</sup>. In another version from the region of Mymensingh in Bangladesh- a tiger tries to cheat a *Brahmin* priest, appeals are made to a ridge amidst an agricultural field and a banyan tree- when a fox finally saves the day. This version is also well-known across many regions of present day Indian state of West Bengal- especially across its southern and eastern parts and is famous as part of the publication- *Tuntunir Boi (The Book of Tuntuni- the tailor bird)* of 1910 by famous author, poet, illustrator and publisher Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury. Thus, the storyline seems to revolve across the region- reflecting the flora, fauna, the society and the temperament, and most importantly- the similarities of emotions of the common man. The slight variations add to the degree of uniqueness which makes each of the variants an exclusive example. These variation also highlights the importance of each of the plants or animals mentioned within the storyline- with respect to the region of its origin- e.g. the immense prominence of *kumbuk* tree across the region of Sri Lanka, the significance of the mango, banyan or *pipal* trees in the regions of India, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh or the importance of an agricultural field across the region of South Asia. In a similar manner, the mention of the animal changes from region to region- e.g crocodile changes to a tiger in the regions of Bengal and Bangladesh or the jackal changes to a sly fox as the latter used to be widely available in the region, etc. Since many of the folklore from South Asia are available through various printed versions across the last two centuries, a reference in modern days becomes easy. This helps to understand and comprehend the significance of the art of 'Storytelling'- of which 'Folklore' forms an integral and inseparable part. This issue of SAARC Art explores this aspect of similarities and uniformity amidst our

diverse culture across the SAARC region through the powerful medium of 'Storytelling and Folklore.' We have contributions in this issue from across all the eight Member States of the SAARC region.

Sri Lankan author, historian, philosopher and linguist, the Late Martin Wickramasinghe on the folklore of the region had mentioned- "*Folk songs and poetry of the Sinhalese reveal the Buddhist view of life, the expectation of loss as something inevitable and a readiness to be reconciled to such loss*"<sup>3</sup>. Thus, forming an essence of the society- folklore and storytelling has its origin in the distant past. To that essence- it originated as a communal activity and does not distinguish between a rural or an urban environ even in present times. To have a better understanding of the same, it is important to imagine and step away from the world of modern gadgets- which helps to record and replay activities at a later time and space. As traditional perception goes- no story is ever 'told' the same way twice- in the same way that- no traditional song is ever 'sung' the same way twice. The stories- as much as the songs- are handed down orally through time, and represents socio-cultural specificities, as each age contributes to the revolving mass of stories with their constructed 'images'. This also brings to mind the practice of the learning through '*smriti*' (memory) and '*sruti*' (hearing)- which even helped to preserve the RgVeda (composed through various small sub-stories) till they were finally printed during the colonial times. This method of learning through storytelling is also seen in the fields of music and dance. In music as the intonation,

lyrics and expressions reaches out with its unique storytelling- the many aspects of dance forms also exhibit similar examples. In Sanskrit, the explanation of a performance of play or a *abhinaya*- means the art of expression and it is primarily formed of four elements- *angika* (the language of expression through the medium of the body or sarira, the face or *mukhaja* and movement *cestakrta*), *vachika* (the expression through words, literature and drama), *aharya* (expression through decoration such as make-up, jewellery and costumes) and *sattvika* (expression through acting and different states of the mind). Different classical dance forms from across India combine all of these four elements gracefully and through centuries- and retell stories from history, mythology and the epics. Thus, from the fields of performing arts to the simplest fields of learning- 'storytelling' has its unique place. Woven into the very fabric of every socio-cultural existence- it carries an important burden on its shoulder- to convey the particular message of a community, a geographical identity and a history<sup>4</sup>. Rabindranath Tagore mentioned in his *Lokasahitya* (Folklore) published in 1907- this very essence with perspective of the folklore from Bengal (present day state of West Bengal in the eastern part of India and the country of Bangladesh). He specified folklore as being vital from which an "*uncontaminated and unadulterd Bengali cultural identity can be accessed*". Mirroring the trend which were popular in late 18th and early 19th century European romantic nationalism, Tagore from 1880's onwards focussed on the centrality of folklore as an "*authentic transmitter of Bengali customs and traditions*

2. *Village Folktales of Ceylon* by H. Parker (1907, Asian Educational Services: New Delhi. p- 315-317) (Translation) *Upan da Sita (From the Beginning)* by Martin

3. (Translation) *Upan da Sita (From the Beginning)* by Martin Wickramasinghe, pp.271

4. *Oral-written nexus in Bengali chharas over the last hundred years: Creating new paradigm for children's literature* by Dr. Lopamudra Maitra Bajpai. (2012. SAARC Culture journal. Vol 3)

and his validation of folklore helped to encourage others to collect and compile folklore”<sup>5</sup> -finally the attempt of Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury gave the very first Bengali folklore book- *Tuntunir Boi* - from which the story of the sly fox and the unwise tiger is mentioned above.

On a visit to the Sri Palee campus of Colombo University (Kalutara district at Wewala, Horana, Sri Lanka), I had the fortune to witness a small and comfortable shed-roof cottage inside the university campus and atop a steep climb on the side of a hill. In this cottage once, various discussions were held between the late Mr. Wilmot A. Perera- a veteran politician and well-known philanthropist- who also donated the lands and buildings to the university and Rabindranath Tagore- over the latter’s various visits to the place across 1933 through 1935. These discussions inspired initiation of the Arts and Aesthetics Department of the university- being encouraged by the same curriculum at Tagore’s *Shantiniketan*. Today, being used as a Fine Arts classroom and teeming with students at most parts of the day- the little cottage commemorates those discussions from the past. The lore of the region and the historicity is perpetuated through the many canvasses, easels, paints and brushes that one can witness across the two rooms of the cottage- with ardent students attending to their many artistic creations everyday.

Thus, stories are created and stories are made. At times they reflect history and at other times they speak of history amidst us- but at all times- they speak of our common emotions, needs and expressions. As several regional stories add to such plethora of myriad likenesses, the greater epics from the sub-continent also echoes a similar sentimentality- of the reflections of uniform thoughts

and mentalities. Famous author, the Late R.K. Narayan in his *The Indian Epics Retold* spoke about the beauty of the great epic- *The Mahabharata* while mentioning its length and the historical references within its text and how much of actual history is part of the story- “*The original composition in the Sanskrit language runs to one hundred thousand stanzas in verse, thus making it the longest composition in the world: in sheer quantity eight times longer than The Iliad and The Odessey put together. A great deal of scholarly research, based on internal evidence, cross references and astronomical data occurring incidentally in the texts, has gone on for years in order to reach a conclusion in regard to the authorship and date of this epic. There can, however, be no such thing as a final statement on the subject.*” (pp.192)<sup>6</sup>. He also further goes to explain the perspectives, philosophical discussion and discourses on life and conduct which are further explored within the body of the text of *The Mahabharata*- sometimes running into several hundred lines as he mentioned - “*although this epic is a treasure house of varied interests, my own preference is the story. It is a great tale with well-defined characters who talk and act with robustness and zest- heroes and villains, saints and kings, women of beauty, all displaying great human qualities, superhuman endurance, depths of sinister qualities as well as power, satanic hates and intrigues- all presented against an impressive background of ancient royal capitals, forests and mountains....*” (pp.196).

Thus, lies the beauty of ‘Storytelling’

5. *Colonial India in Children’s Literature* by Supriya Goswami (2012, Routledge: New York)

6. *The Indian Epics Retold- The Ramayana, The Mahabharata, Gods, Demons and Others* by R.K. Narayan (Introduction by S. Krishna) (1995, Penguin Books: India)

and ‘Folklore’ - it has its common aspects and it has its unexpectedness and yet leaves never a stone unturned to explore the myriad perspectives of man and his surroundings. This issue of SAARC Art contains the many articles that sum up this very essence of the art of Storytelling and Folklore. We explore this not only through mere oral stories, but also through the artistic representations of folk songs, theatre and music across the eight Member States of the SAARC region. The essays towards the same by the Deputy Director (Research)- Ms. Bindu Urugodawatte and Deputy Director (Programmes)- Mrs. Kishani Jayasinghe – Wijayasekara highlights the significance of storytelling through performing arts, architecture and local reflections. Ali Sahil from Maldives, Ms. Nayyara Rahman from Pakistan and Mr. Najib Manalai from Afghanistan highlights the historical reflections through respective folklore from the three regions. Dr. Ajay Joshi from India brings to light an almost obsolete art of storytelling from western India, Dr. Prem Kumar Khatri speaks of the folklore of an important community from Nepal as much as Dr. Jeyasanker from Sri Lanka who highlights a form of theatre from the region, painter Dr. Sumera Jawad highlights through her note the beauty as reflected through the architecture and natural wonder of Bhutan and Dr. Swadhin Sen’s quest to find an identity of the folklore and its representation in Bangladesh speaks of significant questions.

As we continue to explore further the essence of Intangible Cultural Heritage through SAARC Art in our future issues, we hope to present you further with different perspectives from across the diverse socio-cultural ethos of the SAARC Member States.

Namashkar

**Dr. Lopamudra Maitra Bajpai**

# Buddhist Cultural Trails- Journey through time and space of merchants, monks and pilgrims Colombo, Sri Lanka. August 26-27, 2017



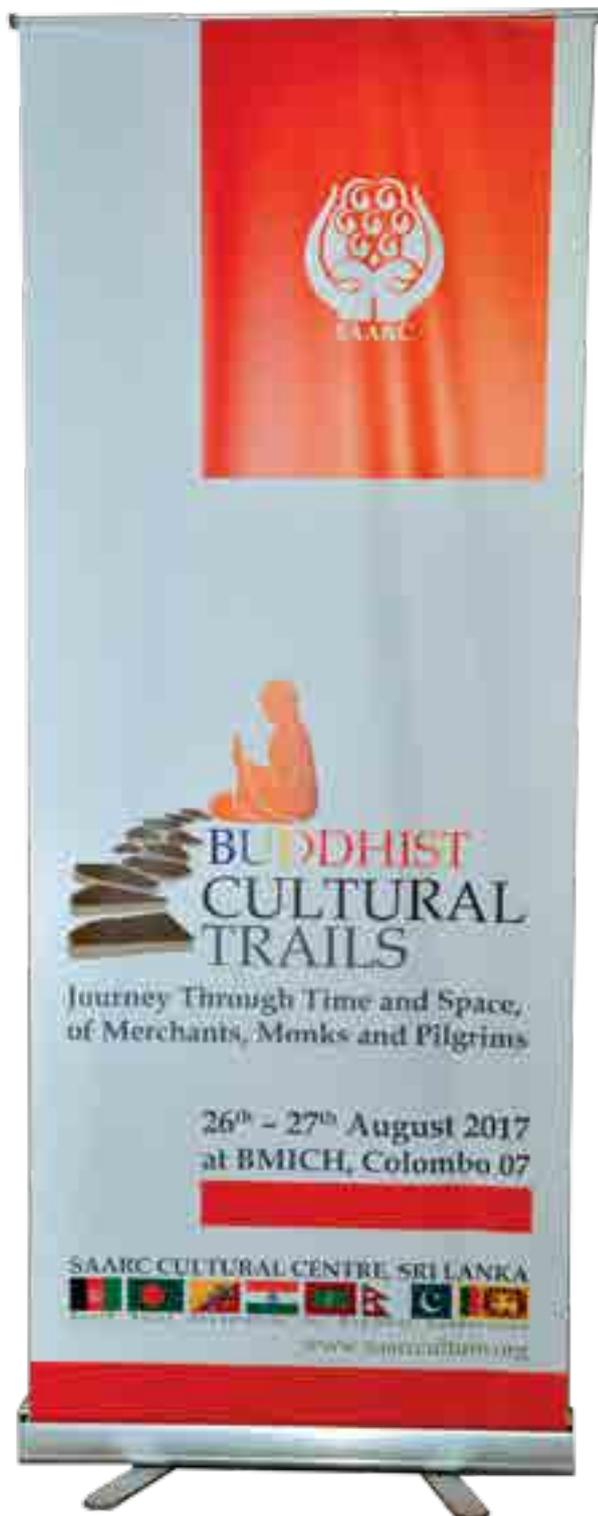
*Inauguration ceremony- Buddhist Cultural Trails- Journey through time and space of merchants, monks and pilgrims, Colombo, Sri Lanka. August 26-27, 2017. (From left to right) Keynote speaker- Prof. Nimal de Silva, Mr. J. Dadallage (who participated on behalf of the Chief Guest- Prime Minister's Secretary- Mr. E.M.S.B Ekanayake)- Consultant Public Relations- Prime Minister's Office, Sri Lanka, Former Secretary- Ministry of Public Administration and Management and Former DG of SLIDA, Mr. Wasanthe Kotuwella- Director, SAARC Cultural Centre and Guest of Honour- Mr. Ashoka Girihagama- DG SAARC Division.*



*Inauguration ceremony- Buddhist Cultural Trails- Journey through time and space of merchants, monks and pilgrims- Mr. Wasanthe Kotuwella- Director, SAARC Cultural Centre*



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*Buddhist Cultural Trails- Journey through time and space of merchants, monks and pilgrims, Colombo, Sri Lanka. August 26-27, 2017*



*Keynote speaker- Prof. Nimal De Silva*



*Various dignitaries and members of academia (including the Official Nominees and Other Participants) participated to present their respective research papers from across the SAARC Member States of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal and Sri Lanka and made the sessions interactive*



*Venerable Mahasangha and representatives from the Hindu and Islamic Churches graced the occasion of the inauguration ceremony*



*Several research paper presenters, other than Official Nominees, also shared their knowledge with the audience. Amidst many esteemed others, (Right column. Clockwise-top to bottom) From India- Prof. Amareshwar Gala- Executive Director- International Institute for the Inclusive Museums, Chief Curator- Amaravati Heritage Town and Babu Museum, A.P. & International Heritage Adviser, AP Govt., Dr. Prerana Srimaal- Assistant Professor- Christ University, Bangalore, Mr. Worrell Kumar Bain- Junior Research Fellow, Anthropological Survey of India (Govt. of India, Ministry of Culture), Dr. Garima Kaushik- Assistant Professor- School of Buddhist Studies, Comparative Religion and Philosophy- Nalanda University.*

*(Left Column. Clockwise-bottom to top) From Sri Lanka- Ms. K. Sumedha Kumari and Ms. R. Nishanthi Ranasinghe- Department of Archaeology, Dr. Ayesha Abdur- Rahman- Independent Researcher, Dr. Hema Goonatilake- Immediate past-President, Royal Asiatic Society of Sri Lanka and Dr. Nilam Cooray, Secretary- ICOMOS, Sri Lanka*



Post-conference tour (August 28, 2017) to Arankele Meditation Monastery- Archaeological site- along with the participants



Post-conference tour (August 28, 2017) to UNESCO World Heritage Site of Dambulla Cave temple- along with the participants

# Esteemed Official Nominees of SAARC Member States presenting research papers and receiving mementos from Mr. Wasanthe Kotuwella, Director, SAARC Cultural Centre.

(from left to right)- Ms. Apsara Karunaratne, Research Assistant, SAARC Cultural Centre, Dr. Lopamudra Maitra Bajpai, Culture Specialist- Research, SAARC Cultural Centre and Mrs. Kishani Jayasinghe – Wijayasekara, Deputy Director- Programmes, SAARC Cultural Centre



Official nominees from various SAARC Member States- Clockwise from top right- (Bangladesh) Md. Altaf Hossain- Director General (Additional Secretary), Department of Archaeology, (Nepal) Ms. Mandakini Shrestha, Deputy Director General, Department of Archaeology, (Bhutan) Ms. Tshering Choki, Archivist Department of Culture, (Afghanistan) Mr. Noor Agha Noori, Director of Archaeology, Archaeology Institute of Afghanistan, Kabul.



(Left- Sri Lanka) Mr. Prasanna B. Rathnayake, Acting Additional Director General (Academic), Department of Archaeology. (Right-India) Dr. Shivakant Bajpai, Deputy Superintending Archaeologist, Archaeological Survey of India.



# Storytelling and folktales from Afghanistan- Narratives, fiction, poetry and history

By  
Mr. Najib Manalai<sup>1</sup>

Mr. Najib Manalai was born in is born in Kabul. His primary education was in Lycee Esteqlal in Kabul. He studied Geology, Computer Sciences and Work Psychology in French universities. He served as a Pashto language teacher in the French Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales, as a software engineer and later, in Afghanistan Islamic Republic's Government, as Deputy Minister for Culture and Information then as Communication advisor to the Minister of Finance. At present, he is Cultural Affairs Director at the Office of the National Security Council.

He has created the Golden Reed Prize which distinguishes every year some of the best Afghan literary talents. Najib Manalai writes poetry, narrative fiction, columns, political analysis and essays

in Pashto, Dari (Persian), French and English. Familiar with both Afghan and French culture, he often says "I walk on a tightrope between Western philosophy and Oriental mysticism". Najib Manalai dedicates most of his work in literature to build bridges, through translation, between western and Afghan literature.

## Storytelling and folktales have an important role to play in Afghanistan.

Even few decades ago, local folk music and storytelling were the only available entertainments in rural Afghanistan. Even in cities, kids were raised with folktales as their main window about the imaginary world. Many decades ago, there were some professional story-tellers who used to go from village to village, telling stories on the village place and get some food stuff or very exceptionally, some money in return. In the villages, there were some elders known for their art of story-telling. Kids and grown-ups both- would come to these elders and listen to all kinds of tales till late in the night. Amongst the youngster, teenagers and some adults would get-together in the communal guest-rooms during wintertime or a

tree-covered terrace to play music and listen to stories.

Nearly forty years of continuous wars and massive migrations (during the late 1980's Afghanistan held the tragic record of the number of refugees in the world) destroyed the traditional social structures and with it, all kinds of related entertainment and festivities were left aside by worldwide dismantled communities. As a reaction to the forced acculturation happening in the Afghan nascent diaspora, in early 1990's, Afghan refugees worldwide tried to reconnect with their roots through cultural events held in the host countries and to some extent through publication of translations of some folklore related material. After the fall of the Taliban regime (end 2001) Afghans

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Picture courtesy- All- by Mr. Najib Manalai

were exposed to an explosion of media, communication and cultural activities supported by international aid. This ended in a massive presence of foreign cultural products (Indian, Iranian, Turkish, European, American, etc.) in the Afghan media-market and as result, local cultural creations, especially folklore were totally subdued. But within this changing scenario- there was an important positive streak, as-nearly all good writers, narrative fiction and poetry and many good artists, musicians and of course painters, found a highly valuable source of inspiration in the national folklore of which the folk tales are most important. Thus, the massive influence of foreign media left an important mark. Afghan media outlets understands that its survival depends on the production of local cultural material and as a matter-of-fact folklore, traditional knowledge and



*Bost fortress*

Afghan historical events constitute a priceless warehouse for information for new developments.

### Highlighting some famous folktales from Afghanistan

Afghanistan is a multilingual and multicultural country. Each community has its own folkloric material, but there are many common features. Folk stories can be classified in 5 main categories:

- Jokes and anecdotes
- Fables
- Tales related to the historical-legendary background of a community (mythological material)
- Fairy tales
- Hagiographies and real or imaginary facts related to saints and prophets

A masterpiece of world literature, the Shah namah (Book of the Kings) written in Ghanzvi in the first years of the 11<sup>th</sup> century by Firdowsi is based on oral tradition. Another set of a few dozens of tales mixing historical facts and fiction related to the Pashtun community culture could be situated somewhere in between the legends and heroic myths. The Afghan folktales, as in many other places, also uses a significant amount of fiction material provided by the “*One thousand and One Nights*” collection of tales. Most famous tales existing with some variation in nearly all linguistic groups are the adventures

of Alexander the Great, Arab lovers Leila and Majnoon, Sassanid King Khosrow’s love for Shirin, fairy tales such as *Saif-ul-Moluk* and *Badi-o-jamal*, *Salim the jeweler*, *Sindbad the sailor*, etc.

The very characteristic set of Pashto tales- a collection of which has been published under the name of ‘*National Mirror*’ in the 1960s (recently translated into English), depict the practice of the Code of Honour- ruling the social life of the Pashtuns for centuries. These tales are usually tragedies based on Pashtun community social life. Reflecting the deeds of heroes who are supposed to have really existed, these stories are often situated in real historic times (though historic references are highly

doubtful and needs verification) and real geographic places. King Akbar and his court is often seen as the *Golden Age* of the region comprising of today’s Afghanistan, Pakistan and India. Several of these “*legends*” are situated during Akbar’s reign but these stories are also related to real places (however- it should be mentioned that the archeological facts of these places speak of much older times).

An interesting feature in all these tales is that adventures concerning fairies and supernatural forces- usually carry a “happy ending”, while tales with heroes or personalities from the native culture- are usually otherwise. This is reflected in the story of Fateh Khan and his lover Rabia. According to the story, they along with their sixty friends, fled to India- after having some trouble with the king of Bost (an old fortress in the southern Helmand province). In India, they challenged the local Raja. A long battle ensued for sixty days- resulting in the death of one young man everyday. When the last one, the Prince Fateh Khan dies, his wife, Rabia, is the only survivor who gives some tough time to the Raja’s soldiers. The story ends by the death of all Pashtuns involved. Parts of the Bost fortress- which is still surviving- can be visited even now. The monument is supposed to be of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. *Band-e-Amir* is a series



*Band-e-amir*



*Traditional clothes*

of fantastic blue mountain-lakes which were, according to the legend, erected by Ali, the fourth Caliph of Islam (c. 594 – 29 January 661) to control the flood flow in the valley.

**Preservation of this intangible aspect of storytelling and folklore. Many important contributions from young generation also needs to be highlighted**

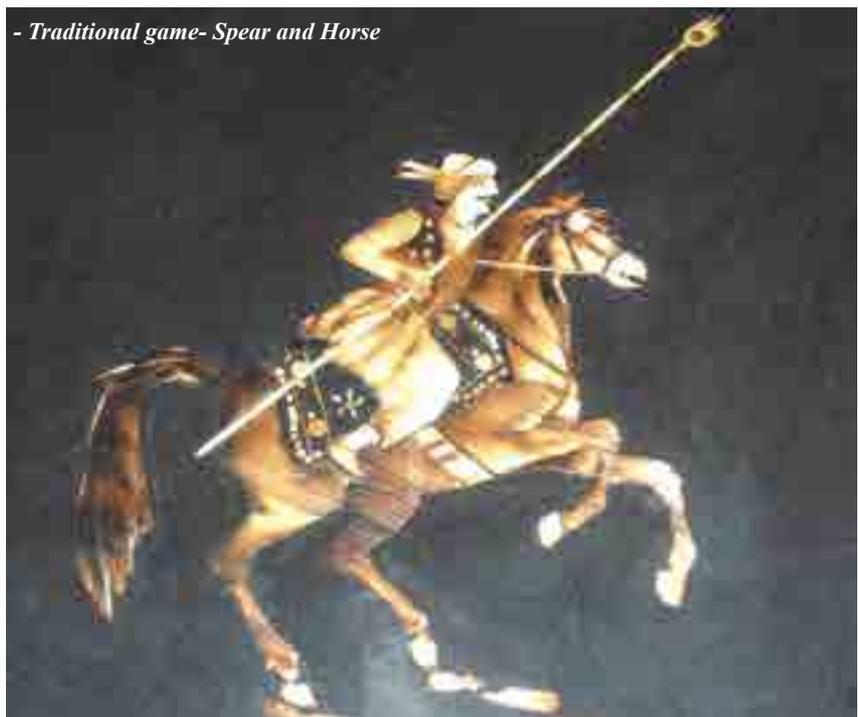
In present day Afghanistan we have few examples of good work by the young generation. Though these are few examples but one can imagine much wider opportunities to preserve the folklore and integrate it to a modern cultural economy.

- A significant number of folk songs and traditional music has been collected in several provinces by a young musician and musicologist- Waheed Qasemi.

- A group of young Afghan artists made an excellent cartoon animation story of one of the most popular Afghan tales (*The Chinese Goat*) which made its way to some international festivals.
- The Ministry of Women Affairs and several NGOs working for women empowerment developed a network of handicraft producing women all over the country.

Some of the folkloric materials have been collected and preserved (at least in written form) during the 20th century. Very little data related to folklore and the traditional knowledge has been preserved orally or through pictures. The young generation can find a huge thesaurus of themes, facts, images, voices and stories to boost new creation with modern methods and technologies. Folklore can hardly survive in the context of highly volatile, instable and unpredictable socio-political conditions. Therefore, it is vital for the new generations – Afghans of course but also other citizens of the global village – to seek, retrieve, record and preserve whatever can still be reached. Traditional Music can constitute a fantastic “Bank of sounds” for new creation, folktales are the immense warehouse of topics and ideas for modern creative industries.

*- Traditional game- Spear and Horse*



# Embodiment, performance and shared transformation:- A quest to understand the idea of 'Folklore' in Bangladesh

By  
Dr. Swadhin Sen

Swadhin Sen is a Professor in Department of Archaeology, Jahangirnagar University, Dhaka, Bangladesh. He was born in Barisal, a city in the southern part of Bangladesh on 4 January, 1973. He did his graduation in Archaeology and subsequently, did his PhD on field archaeology and geoarchaeology in the context of northwestern part of Bangladesh. He is working in northern part of Bangladesh in archaeological and ethnographic fieldwork since last 16 years. He is also working on Public Archaeology, Critical Studies of Heritage, Politics of the Past, Archaeology of Religions and Rituals and Public Perception of Landscape and Materiality. He is interested in the understanding of the past as entangled with the present. He has published widely in Bengali and English in peer reviewed journals, as popular pieces and articles. He has published a book in Bengali on the Dominating Paradigms of Archaeological Concepts and Practices in Bangladesh. He also maintains a popular blog on narratives on various encounters during his fieldwork.

## 'Folklore' as an invalid category in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has diverse and different versions and narratives of 'folklore'. If we, however, would like to engage with and make any attempt to the understanding of the genres and multiplicity, we have to address the problems of the very definition of 'folklore' in our modern living, in the disciplinary domain and in the discourses of protecting and preserving them. The category of 'folklore' including various and often, conflicting enactments of oral narratives, myths, legends, stories, riddles, performances, rhymes, etc. has emerged within the unequal encounter between the 'west' and 'the rest'. The projects of modernity under the colonial and nationalistic paradigms have transformed, incorporated, rejected and consequently essentialised the notions and studies of 'folklore' and the very desire and sensibilities to protect and preserve them.

In the post-Enlightenment Europe, a growing interest in the popular culture including the genres of narratives defined as folklore was concomitant with and conditioned

by the rise of the nation-state and nationalism. Various structures and versions of narrative making attracted attentions from the upper-class intellectuals for various reasons. The fundamental among them was the encounter with the non-western people, cultures and religions. Many scholars have already pointed to the differential, yet far-reaching consequences of these encounters. The societies, lives, customs, rituals, performative narratives, myths and all other aspects of non-European life was the object of ethnographic inquiry and knowledge production during this colonial and imperial expansion. Many modern academic and institutional disciplines, including anthropology, sociology and folklore studies, formed and evolved during this period.

The folklore thus, on the one hand, became representative of the people who possessed a tradition of oral history and performative narratives. It was constructed and selected as one of the standards to determine who are civilized and who are not. The oral traditions, in contrast to the written traditions of civilizations, on the scale of socio-cultural evolutionary framework, were yard-

sticks to construct and represent the non-western societies, cultures and religions within a distinct and inferior stage of evolution which was long gone for European (or western self-hood). Yet, to understand the (pre) history of European self it was also necessary- as the post-enlightenment intellectuals, administrators, travelers and missionaries claimed, to study the non-European oral and performative traditions. In this way, we have to acknowledge that initially folklore studies were essentially entwined with the construction and representation of 'the other' in relation to the 'European self'. This was true even in a slightly later period when they were identified by the orientalists as romanticised and glorified essence of non-Western 'other'. When the structures of these narratives- with their unique, open-ended and infinite varieties were being studied, textualised, analysed and represented, they were reified and homogenised according to the conditions and standards of Colonial Modernity. In South Asia many of these standards were fundamentally Victorian with their particular moral, religious, elitist and dominating predicaments. In this process, the narrative structures those were

compatible to these versions under the projects of colonial modernity, gained their ascendancy. They were refashioned, reshaped, translated and represented in different manners, they were meticulously surveyed, documented and museolised, and transformed into a referent to the lost glories, hidden symbols, deep structures, and to the functional role they played for maintaining and transforming the equilibrium of the 'people without (written) history'.

### Embodied, performative and shared traditions in subaltern domain

In South Asia, the native folklorists were deeply influenced by the conceptual and methodological paradigms. They attempted to represent their enterprises of collecting, documenting, translating and archiving in the name of protecting and preserving the folklores as fossil remains from the janaparisar (popular domains). The nationalist and regionalist turn in folklore studies in the name of protecting and preserving the traditions inherited the same conceptual and methodological apparatus from their colonial masters. Many of the religious traditions were essentialised, sacralised and sanitised. Thus, in Bengal, we can see the terms like 'Obscure religious cults' for the alternative religious traditions which fought against the tyranny of dominant religious worldviews and modernity. The traditions of *adivasis* were textualised, classified and published with the ethnographic details which enabled the dominant class, caste, religious and ethnic groups to construct a network of surveillance and management of the people at the margins.

The traditions, which are now famous as belonging to *dehotattwo* (various distinct traditions of/about body), were homogenised and reduced into narratives of hedonism, promiscuity and perversion by the nineteenth century scholars. The scholars, who claimed to protect them, basically, stripped them of the body and



*Shared reading from Manasa angala by the women in Guptabari of Barisal (Photo: Shuvo Sen)*

the performances or in contrast, connected them to the liberating humanism by refashioning them according to the Victorian notion of body, love, devotion and sexuality. For example, when in Bangladesh Fakir Lalon Sai or the other gurus are celebrated as representing the resistance against the dominant and authoritative religious and casteist practices, they are disassociated from the multiple histories of traditions of Tantrism, Sufism and Vaisnavism. They are transformed into icons of religious harmony and secular humanism. Their embodied performative rituals and worldviews are either represented as essentially body centric in terms of the Victorian notion of sexuality, or as a practice of sexual emancipation in modern and liberal humanist sense. Although they seem to be contradictory to each other, like many other essential contradictions of modernism at large, this particular example of appropriating different traditions in the contemporary popular culture can be cited as only one of the numerous ways in which 'folklore' is defined, referred to and appropriated into the mainstream authoritative discourses of elitist nationalism. It is evident from the works of many contemporary social scientists that complex processes and structures of appropriation, refashioning and rejection are at interplay in the actions of Nationalism.

Another important aspect pointed at by Kamaluddin Kabir, a faculty of Department of Theatre of Jagannath University, could be touched upon<sup>1</sup>. Referring to the problems of appropriation and translation, he referred to the term '*geetika*' in the celebrated and monumental collection of different varieties of narratives of songs and performances under the title of '*Maimansigh Gitika*' which were primarily collected by Acharya Dinesh Chandra Sen. Kabir referred to the misleading use of the term '*Geetika*' which is a direct translation of ballad from the western context. Originally, these are popularly identified as '*geetaranga*' (songs with embodied performances), according to Kabir, in that regional context. The entire seminal project of collection and textualisation, albeit noteworthy on its own accord, splits the body and its enactment in performative context in connection to the audience. Similar pattern of disjunction of body from the tradition in particular and selective imposition of body on specific traditions [i.e. various genres of *keertan* performed in different parts of Bangladesh- e.g.- *Paalagaan, Jaarigaan, Saarigaan, Bhaitiyali, Bhawaiya, Gajirgaan*, street performances of popular songs specially during the auspicious

<sup>1</sup> Kamaluddin Kabir- Personal Communication.

occasions of the birth or death anniversary of a *sufi* or *fakir* or saint, *royani* (the embodied enactment from *Manasha Mangal* in Barisal of Southern part of Bangladesh), etc.] can be mentioned in this regard. Interestingly, the works on popular culture in contemporary Bangladesh have also raised the particular issue of selection, appropriation and reshaping of particular binary categories as ‘folklore’ and ‘mainstream’.

The ‘*Baul-Fakir*’ traditions and songs, exhibited as a homogenised category of ‘folk-songs’ or folk-culture, are well celebrated and represented as the emblem of nationality and identity by the elite upper and middle class in Bengal region. The entire articulation and power relations in this representation processes are also extremely problematic. The contemporary consumerism and politics of representation have selectively manipulated various genres of traditions and their representations in popular domain under the rubric of ‘*Baul/Fakir song*’, culture, and lifestyle. They are one of the most celebrated products in commoditised consumer culture these days. The invention of the categories in Bangladesh, like *lokgaan* (folk songs), *loksahitya* (folk literature), *loksanskriti* (folk culture), *loknritiya* (folk dance), *loknatya* (folk drama), etc., overtly represent homogenisation and reductionism of differences, plurality, and embodiment into authorised, sanctioned and commoditised categories of ‘folk’. It is, therefore, important to attend to the ways in which sensibilities, dispositions and practices are entangled to the differential perceptions and also the manifestations of body in traditions which go through complex processes of reconfigurations and rejections. It is crucial, under these circumstances, to delve into the questions about how and why these processes are articulated within complex structures of power and capital.

The image of a *Baul* singer in



*Performance during the festival celebrating Peer Sultan Mahisawar’s birthday at Mahasthan, Bogra (photo: Masud Karim)*



*Royani, a performative enactment of Manasamangala at Kaunia, Barisal (Photo: Ashok Ghosh)*



*Rituals of Buri worship on an archaeological site during excavation at Birol (Photo: Swadhin Sen)*

mainstream media and narrative is a stereotype developed out of romantic nostalgia about the ‘cultural roots’ on one side and of reshaping them according to the dominant taste, expression and capital, on the other. It is interesting to note, in reference to Manosh Chowdhury, a faculty in Department of Anthropology of Jahangirnagar University and

a researcher on Popular Culture, that the very category of ‘Folk’ is very important to negotiate with contemporary Bangladesh<sup>2</sup>. He argues that the traditions that are part and parcel of the subaltern domain are embodied, performative, oral, open-ended, flexible, and transformative. In the fluid space of intimate relationship among the performers,

2 Manosh Chowdhury, Sonabandhur Pereteo Bhalobasar Sushil Discourse. In S. M. Nurul Alam, Aion Naher and Manosh Chowdhury (eds.) *Sampratik Nribigyan*, Department of Anthropology, Jahangirnagar University, 1999

the plural audience, and discursive traditions themselves the ownership to these traditions develops and evolves. There are no copyright or singular ownership on the materials that are being enacted. They transform according to the regions, audience and discursivity.

This is what we may call the art of storytelling and performing in corporeal intimacy. The tangible and the intangible are inseparable in contrast to the transnational and official heritage vocabularies. These obvious, yet (un)comfortable terrain of jan (public/popular) are subverted completely when they are represented in a selective way as traditional or as tangible heritage within the category of ‘folk’ by the educated Bengali/Bangladeshi middle class and/or by the nationalist discourse in a symbiotic relationship with the transnational definition of heritage.

### The essentiality of the recognition of plurality and flexibility of traditions

‘Heritage’ is an idea, a process and a representation, though it is assumed and presented as something taken-for-granted. Scholars like Laurajane Smith<sup>3</sup> have attracted our attention to these processual and representational aspects of ‘heritage’. When we say something as our heritage, we are giving particular meaning to that something; the meanings are generated within a certain process and structures. The disjuncture between tangible and intangible is an imposed one. In the popular domain, performative and embodied oral traditions are entangled to the archaeological or material domain. For example, the site that is being excavated by our team right now is identified and recognised by the local Hindu communities as the place of a local goddess named Buri. There is also a place/than of



*Epiphany and performative rituals at Madhabgaon Buruj Mound, an archaeological site considered by the locals as the place of local deities, at Kaharol, Diranjpur (Photo: Didar Hossein)*

a peer (Muslim religious saint). Elaborate performances and rituals are organised on this particular site. At the same time, by excavating the site on which a Brahmanical Temple of c. 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> century CE has been identified, we, as archaeologists, are generating new and additional meanings. Given that the entire excavation works are also performative, the oral history, the rituals and performances and our performances- act in conjunction to generate new meanings in both official and popular domains. At the same time, alternative and multiple narratives of the invoked traditions are being produced and reproduced throughout our work on the site.

The idea of tradition and the idea of heritage are connected, yet they are different. Traditions are open ended, flexible, selected to be represented as something immemorial, unchangeable and given. Heritage, on the other hand, is processual and manufactured according to the authoritative discourses. The arguments by Ashis Nandy on the difference between Myth and History and the interpretation of oral traditions by several historians of subaltern studies could be referred

to as examples to point at the ways in which alternative narratives could be created for a more nuanced and multilayered understanding of traditions. Elsewhere, I have also attempted to attend to these traditions from the perspectives of Public Archaeology<sup>4</sup>.

In Bangladesh, the oral and embodied performative traditions and their reconfigurations must be taken into account for any initiative to protect and preserve them. Their character as fluid, transformative and shared on differential discourses of embodiments have to be delved into and negotiated, first, by recognising all these characteristics, second, by engaging with the historicity of the category of folklore, and third, by asserting the fact that communities are the owners of these shared traditions. There is nothing ‘pure’ or ‘original’ category of ‘folklore’. By abandoning the idea and characters of the category of ‘folklore’, by embracing the heterogeneous, non-definitive and performative dimensions of traditions, which are continuously being born, shifting and reconfigured, we may usefully start thinking about inhabiting these traditions in a more meaningful way.

3 Laurajane Smith, *Discourses of heritage: Implications for archaeological community practice*. Nuevo MundoMundosNuevos, 2012 (<http://nuevomundo.revues.org/64148>).

4 Ashis Nandy, *History's Forgotten Doubles* (<http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/~sj6/nandy%20history%27s%20forgotten%20doubles.pdf>) Shahid Amin, *Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern UP, 1921-2* (<http://jan.ucc.nau.edu/sj6/AminGandhiasMahatma.pdf>). Swadhin Sen, *Our past, their pas(s): Cultural Heritage and Popular domain in Bangladesh* (<http://old-archives.newagebd.net/special.php?spid=7&id=26>)

# Exploring narratives of nature and history from Bhutan through the eyes of an artist

By  
Dr. Sumera Jawad <sup>1</sup>



Dr. Sumera Jawad is an Assistant Professor at the University of Punjab, Lahore in Pakistan and completed her PhD dissertation on the topic "*Women image, an everlasting journey.*". Born in Pakistan, she is an academic of Studio Practice in Fine Arts at University of The Punjab, Lahore – Pakistan, She is also a practicing artist with multiple solo and group shows to her credit. She has been awarded a Gold Medal, MFA (Painting), University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan and a Gold Medal, BFA (Painting), University of the Punjab, Lahore, Pakistan. She was awarded the Young painters Award in 1992 from Lahore Arts Council. She has also produced research project documentary film (12 minutes) shot in Derawar basti, Cholistan, Pakistan, titled "Aesthetics of the sand" in 2015. She is held in high regards by both the academia for her teaching skills and knowledge as well as the professionals in her chosen field of practice. She has been a chief guest and a judge at numerous events and competitions throughout Pakistan and her work has been received with great enthusiasm in several places around the globe- including Europe, Far East and the Middle East.

She is adept in studio practice and conducts regular workshops to share her valuable knowledge with upcoming professionals and students of Fine Arts. She stays abreast of all concepts by attending residencies and workshops herself and considers herself a lifetime student of the Arts. Through her work, Sumera explores the concepts of 'Identity' and the 'Self'- using the female form as her preferred medium. According to Sumera, the level of multiculturalism and diversity to which many of us are exposed to these days has the potential to cause the discord, displacement, and division of the 'Self'. As a result, Sumera posits, '*Ideas and ideals are mingled and morphed; metaphors are understood and misunderstood according to context and audience; cultures cross and clash. All the while, the authentic Self – if there is one – is via distortion, alteration, and compromise, made and unmade, struggling for accessibility to popular culture.*'

Using emotionally-charged colours, Sumera intentionally provides a contrast to the melancholic narratives, which are intended to 'create alienation among audiences'. The relatively large sizes of her works are meant to engage her viewers. Ultimately, by combining the emotional elements of her work with their own 'biases', Sumera's audiences are able to experience something totally unique.

<sup>1</sup> From Pakistan at the SAARC Artist Camp in Bhutan, 2016

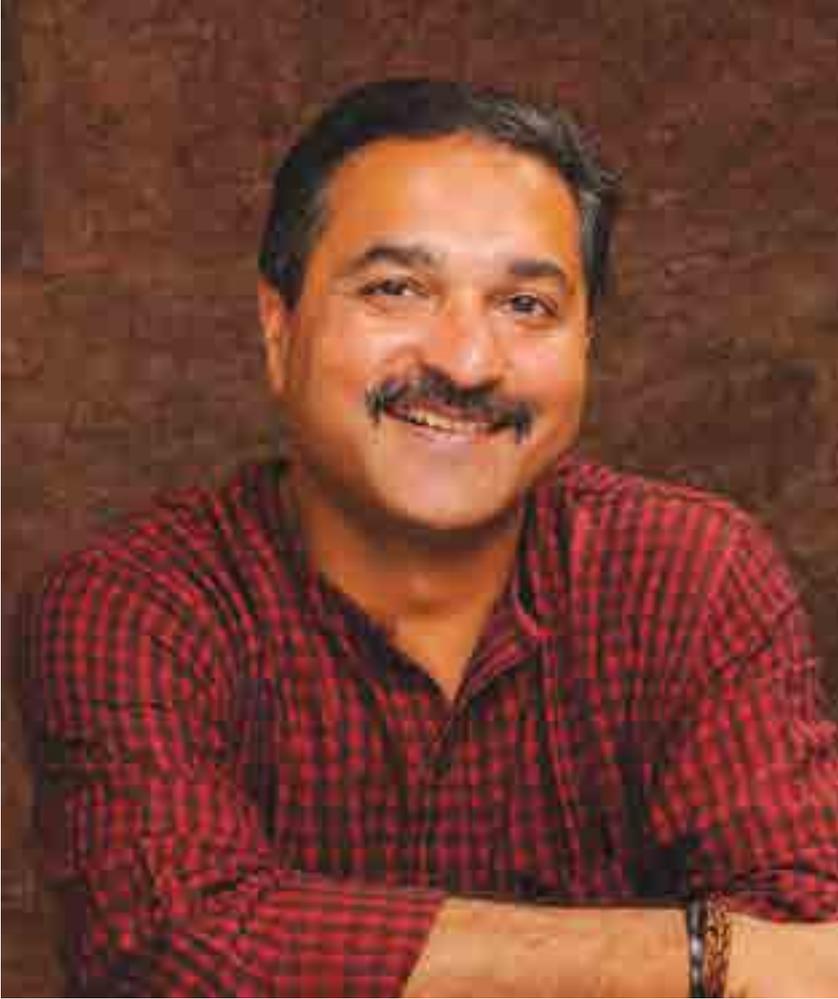
People of Bhutan are surrounded by a nurturing environment that holds the greatest potential for a true exchange of human emotions and spirit. It encourages individuals to use artistic expression to explore the infinite depths of their souls and the soul of the world. Bhutan, a Buddhist kingdom on the Himalayas' eastern edge, is a land of monasteries, fortresses and dramatic topography ranging from subtropical plains to steep mountains and valleys. The culture of Bhutan is fully reflected in Thimphu in respect of literature, religion, customs, and national dress code, the monastic practices of the monasteries, music, dance, literature and in the media. My journey from Katmandu to Paro airport became another monumental memory, peeping at the very top of Mount Everest from above the clouds and the mesmerising valleys of Bhutan was awe-inspiring. Starting from the architecture of the Paro airport which is decorated with traditional art and reaching Thimphu was another overwhelming experience.

With a well-organised trip, it was a fortunate experience to witness the magnificent grandeur of Bhutan, its history and culture- as well as delectable food- where each one was tastier than the other. The visit to the Buddha point was memorable. Buddha Dordenma is a gigantic Shakyamuni Buddha statue. Completed in September 25th 2015, in the mountains of Bhutan- this celebrates 60th anniversary of fourth king Jigme Singye Wangchuck. The statue will house over one hundred thousand smaller Buddha statues, each of which, like the Buddha Dordenma itself, will be made of bronze and gilded in gold. Upon completion, it will be one of the largest Buddha rupas in the world, at a height of 169 feet. It was built in 1974 as a memorial to the third king, Jigme Dorji Wangchuck (1928-72). The visit to Dochula or Dochula Pass was another exciting experience. The Dochula Pass is a mountain pass in the snow-covered Himalayas within Bhutan on the road from Thimphu to Punakha where 108 memorial chortens or stupas known as "Druk Wangyal Chortens" have been built



by Ashi Dorji Wangmo Wangchuk- the eldest Queen Mother. Apart from the chortens there is a monastery called the Druk Wangyal Lhakhang (temple)- built in honour of the fourth

Druk Gyalpo and head of the state of Bhutan Jigme Singye Wangchuck. It was a wonderful experience and the history, art, architecture of Bhutan are truly inspiring for an artist.



## Chitrakathi storytelling from India- A performative folk art with a unique tradition of narratives

By  
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Dr Ajay Joshi is a well-known theatre personality with a PhD on Theatre Criticism, and a Masters in Journalism and Mass Communication. In spite of being a practicing Dentist, his love and active participation in theatre and the performative arts has made him a well-known figure in the genre- especially in western India as well as abroad- including Italy, Georgia, Ankara and Sri Lanka. He has participated in numerous seminars and international projects on theatre and also has been involved in various international theatre festivals as media person, organiser, coordinator and jury. He is the member of IAPAR (International Association of Performing Arts and Research), an executive committee member of ISTR (Indian Society for Theatre Research), member of IATC (Indian Association of Theatre Critics) and Vice President of the Indian Chapter of ITI (International Theatre Institutes). He has translated many Marathi language plays into English in India. He is also a visiting lecturer in India on theatre and journalism at Symbiosis International University, Ranade Institute of Journalism and University of Pune. Having freelanced for various Indian national and international dailies and journals on topics of theatre and culture for the past 22 years, at present his columns are regularly published in the Indian daily Saakal times, *E-Rang* (A e-theatre journal of India Theatre Forum), *Mumbai Theatre Guide and Critical Stages.org* (A Journal of the International Association of Theatre Critics). He has also authored two books on theatre- *Five plays for children* (2009)- which is a translated work of children's plays and was originally written in the Marathi language by noted Indian playwright, writer and essayist- the Late Mr. Vijay Tendulkar and *Pen....People...Performances- A theatric Odyssey* (2015).

Various folk forms of entertainment have always been an important part of India. In the western Indian state of Maharashtra too, there has always been numerous examples of folk forms of entertainment which led to influence and shape modern entertainment for the masses. These folk forms of entertainment included- *Naman, Khele, Dasha Avatar, Lalit, Bhajan, Bharud, Gondhal, Vasudeo, Tamasha*, puppetry etc. The varied formats of storytelling used across these folk mediums led to influence Marathi language play or theatre in later years in the state of Maharashtra. At present, though some of these old forms still exist, the socio-political, economic and cultural equations have undergone drastic changes and these have inadvertently metamorphosed the artistry of presentation of these forms. The semiotics of tradition, its implication as it is performed in the form of folk theatre in-situ, the receptor of these presentations, as in the audience and the interpretation- has all undergone a marked change over the years. The changes are also not only limited to the themes selected or the modernisation of expression, but covers a wide gamut of theatrical conventions. The *Chitrakathi* tradition of folk art from Maharashtra, is an excellent example to demonstrate this varied format of storytelling.

The *Chitrakathi* folk tradition is from the Ratnagiri district of the western Indian state of Maharashtra. An almost obsolete art, I would like to elaborate upon the storytelling by highlighting especially four aspects namely- use of performative space, element of spirituality, stories taken for presentation and the social politics of performance and the impact of modernity and resultant adaptation by the performers on the traditional form of *Chitrakathi*.

### A brief history of the Chitrakathi tradition

The history of *Chitrakathi* of the Indian state of Maharashtra is prevalent only in one village named

<sup>1</sup> Picture courtesy- All by Dr. Ajay Joshi



*Chitrakathi artist Ganpatrao Mhaske and his team performing. The performative art helps to narrate the folktale with the help of visuals and music. Specific musical instruments are used. The performance begins by worshipping Lord Ganesha (idol of the deity sitting in front)*

Pingoli in Ratnagiri district of the state. This form of storytelling is practiced by the Thakkar tribal community, who were known to be the 'secret agents' in the reign of the very important and popular Maratha warrior king- Chhatrapati Shivaji. They had a coded language, which was known only to their community. They thrived well during his rule, where apart from their job as secret agents and messengers, they also practiced their art forms which entailed a form of recitation and storytelling. Till date- they practice thirteen art forms within their community, which is a rarity.

After the debacle of the rule of Shivaji, when the Peshwas (local landlords who were very powerful and also had a good military strength) took over the control of the Maratha empire, this community was sidelined. They had to venture elsewhere in search for a living. They came down to the Konkan region and their art was patronised by the erstwhile king of Sawantwadi, who gave them refuge and encouraged them to preserve their art. This Thakkar community settled down in these parts. Being storytellers they were given a job to recite these stories in the temples, during the ten days of the Dussehra festival. Thus, began the story of the Chitrakathi storytelling- accompanied by the pictures. Till date the pattern of the performance is maintained in the same manner. The performances start at night and extends till the crowing-of-the-crow or the wee hours of the morning- which also announces the break of dawn. Thus, being practised for generations- according to many researchers- they can be dated to about 400 to 500 years from present



*Chitrakathi artist Ganpatrao Mhaske and his team performing. The performative art helps to narrate the folktale with the help of visuals and music. Specific musical instruments are used. The performance begins by worshipping Lord Ganesha (idol of the deity sitting in front)*

times. Sadly, now it is slowly getting extinct, along with the other art forms of this region, for want of patronage and government support.

#### **About the performers and their stories**

Ganpatrao Mhaske is the sole performer of the Chitrakathi form and has a set of 78 stories in his repertoire, where each set has 60 to 120 pictures to accompany. Each of these paintings have been drawn with natural colour and are believed to be about 450 years old. The manuscript is called Pothi (Book). The paintings are in the size of 8x12 inches. The picture is pasted on both sides with progression in the narrative. These stories are mostly from the two famous Indian epics- *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. As these

are done orally without any written aid- these also form an important part of the oral traditions of the region. Amongst their popular stories, some are well-loved across the region, like the mythological story of the righteous king- *Harishchandra*.

#### **Elaborating upon the performance of the Chitrakathi**

There is namely one reciter, accompanied with the musicians. As the story progresses, which is in prose and verse, the pictures are changed, taking the narrative forward. These narrations have come down from generations and have no written text available for referencing. The performance commences with the artistes paying respect to Lord *Ganesha* and Goddess *Saraswati*, after which the storytelling starts.

The first picture is introduced with musical compositions. Then there is the recitation of an ancient Maharashtrian verse called *Ovi*, which has the music and the narrative juxtaposing each other. The reciter plays multiple roles. At times he explains the context or setting of the story and becomes a commentator or *sutradhar*. At other times, he takes on the role of one of the characters in the painting and establishes a conversation between the *sutradhar* and the characters- i.e. between the characters in the paintings themselves. This melange continues for hours together as the story progresses. The traditional musical instruments used were the *Tambora*, *Huduk* and *Manjiri*, which have now been replaced by the *Tanpura*, *Dumru/Tabla/Dholak* and a small bell alias *Tal*. No other forms of support or music is used throughout the storytelling. While reciting, the man who plays the *tanpura*, displays the picture held against the *tanpura*. His helper plays on the *dholak* and also enters into dialogues and comments on the story.

**Various changes have taken place amidst the *Chitrakathi* tradition over the years. It is important to highlight a few**

With the decline in performance and demand by the audience, many storytellers have sold their paintings to tourists and new ones are not being made. The *Chitrakathi* pictures of Maharashtra have marked similarity with the iconography of the shadow puppets of Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. These paintings adhere to the conventions of miniature paintings tradition following the method of continuous narration. It is the same with the scrolls used in various other traditions. The narrative is distributed in several registers following the progression of the stories. The oral traditions with many strands of narration have a similarity with pictorial traditions- medieval miniature and folk paintings, Buddhist panels and freezes and sculptural panels depicting episodes from the epics from many other parts of the world.

**Changes pertaining to the concept of 'space'**

Traditionally the *Chitrakathi* was performed in temples. In the context of the continuity of the ancient tradition of recitation and storytelling in oral narrative forms prevalent in different regions of the country, it must be noted that these influenced the evolution of a variety of traditional performance forms- e.g.- the simple-community based and the complex temple-based ones as well. They evolved during the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries in and around the temple, when the temple had become a most important centre and promoter of the arts.

Ganpatrao Mhaske, today have to strive real hard to make ends meet and keep the tradition alive. A lot of concession is done on the space of performance, which often is outside the temple premises. When I witnessed one such show in the confines of a proscenium space, at Ninasam, Heggodu, it lent an entirely

*Ganpatrao Mhaske performing. The musical instrument- tanpura- is an important accompaniment during the storytelling performance of the Chitrakathi*





*Dr. Ajay Joshi introducing the Chitrakathi artist Ganpatrao Mhaske and his team, the visuals and the storytelling to an audience*

different flavour to the presentation. And it seemed highly compromised to accommodate the space and the audience, losing the intensity of its focus.

#### **Changes pertaining to the concept of the 'recitation of the stories'**

There are four aspects of the epic tradition, namely the oral, the literary, the pictorial and the performing. They have shared cultural settings and have coexisted in a lively relationship of exchange and interaction for all these centuries. The stories that are performed in temple- drama, portrays great secular and humanistic values. In Indian tradition, religious values and aesthetic qualities are not separated, it is the same in the case of folk arts and crafts which contribute functional purpose with artistic quality and aesthetic values. The main recitation of the epic text follows a certain register accompanied by the high notes of the musicians and with each diversion, the tonal value of the reciter changes and the speech becomes more interactive and personalised or person specific. This excites the audience and draws them back to the main performance.

In performance the pictures serve a semiotic function and emphasise the word- image relationship, which is a distinctive trait of the Indian performance tradition. The performing tradition takes thematic and textual material, both from the

literary and the oral traditions, and also influences the form and structure of the literary tradition. With its broad social base and absorbing capacity, the performing tradition of the epic has evolved through multiple forms. Most of these forms with flexible and open structures freely incorporate elements from the social, religious, and artistic life of the people, and make epic theatre a most important cultural document. In present times however, the performer also ropes in contemporary issues, which is an offshoot from the principle narrative. On one hand, the flexible and open structures of the narrative enable this embodiment of contemporary topics, while on the other hand, it dilutes the essence of the story, giving it a feel of the slapstick. If one is to watch the performance outside the temple and in urban settings these compromises are easily noticeable.

#### **Changes pertaining to the concept of the 'social politics of performance'**

Since it was performed in the temples, only Brahmins had access to its viewing in earlier times. Even today in many remote parts, temples are sacrosanct for the upper- caste Brahmin communities and out of bound for the lower classes. Further since most of these sessions would start in the night, (which was practical, since then the villagers would finish their daily work and look out for entertainment), women

used to mostly refrain from attending these night-long sojourns. Apart for reasons of safety, the absence of women were primarily a result of a need to look after the household, livestock and attend to the children. This aspect raises many gender and caste issues, which like any other religious functions or ceremonies or for that matter performances, are never analysed or contested. Since this is a dying art and rarely performed beyond the precincts of the temple space in the rural settings and especially in the Pingoli village in the Sindhudurg region of Maharashtra, this discrimination is accepted and goes unquestioned.

#### **Changes pertaining to the concept of the 'elements of spirituality'**

Needless to say, since this was a temple art and used the premises of the temple, the element of spirituality pervaded. As per tradition the narratives would commence with obeisance paid to the principal deities. Though a ritual of sorts, even today, if the performance takes place in a space outside the bounds of the temple, the ritual is not broken. This puja at the beginning, brings in an essence of spirituality within the performance. Adding to this is the fact that the stories narrated are heavily drawn from the epics, which in itself is coloured by religious and spiritual overtones- even when the story takes on a trajectory from the principal story and invade the space of contemporary issues.



# Reflecting a close bond with nature- The folktales of Maldives

By  
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Folktales and storytelling has traditionally been a part of Maldivian daily island life. Conservation is important, since retelling past through art & literature is essential to preserve intangible heritage.

## Some famous folktales from Maldives

Of the many popular folktales of Maldives, it is interesting to see the close mention of man-nature relationships. Many of these folktales are preserved through the observation of various festivals, like- *Bey Banun* and *Koadi*. Many of the folktales also highlight cross-cultural communication and references, like the story of *Buruni Kamana Raivaru*- which is very similar to the story of the great Indian epic- *The Ramayana*. Below are some of the most popular folktales of Maldives.

The story of *Rannamaari* is mostly translated as sea monster. It resembled a ship full of lamps. It used to come on the shore once every month to a temple which was especially built for him. Sadly, a beautiful, young and virgin girl used to be kept there each month to be sacrificed to the monster- or else the monster threatened to destroy all humanity. This story is described in detail by Moroccan traveller Ibn Batuta (1304-1378)- in what has been considered the earliest descriptive work on the islands. It is the most famous legend of the Maldives, found in Maldivian schoolbooks and tourist brochures alike. The local name for the demon that came from the sea is

*Ranna Māri*. As the description of the story goes by Ibn Batuta, each month the islanders found the girl who has been chosen and tied to the sacrificial temple the night before- dishonoured and dead the next day morning. This continued every month, till one day when the monster was finally defeated by a man from the Maghreb called Abul Barakat-ul-Barbari who knew by heart the glorious Qurān. He came to defeat the monster to stop the sacrifices and sat chanting the Holy Qurān. After a fight, he defeated the monster and the king was happy and promised to convert to Islam if Abul Barakat-ul-Barbari could defeat the monster a second time. In the second month, Abul Barakat sat chanting the Qurān till morning and the monster did not appear out of fear and it was realised that the island is finally free of the monster. The king of the land and his subjects were happy and as promised- all of them embraced Islam and they finally demolished the sacrificial temple. The king also sent messengers to the other islands, whose inhabitants

were also converted. Xavier Romero-Frias in his book *Folk Tales of the Maldives* says this is identical with the *Nandapakarana* story in the *Panchatantra*. Romero-Frias lived for about fourteen years on the Southern island of Fuvahmulah or southern Maldives.

Another story is of *Koimala*. This is after the name of a person who began a unified kingdom and was the first amongst the future ruling dynasties. Legend says that he came in two ships from abroad and there were people living on the island who welcomed him and his people. First, they settled on the island of Rasgethemu in Maalhosmadulu atoll in Northwestern Maldives. Later they sailed and anchored in a sandbank which belonged to the Giraavaru People. There they planted trees and built a home. This sandbank became Maale- which is the current capital.

The story of *Bey Banun* is still performed in Eid festivals. It is a community entertainment where the



*Traditional woven mat form Maldives*

performers are wrapped in various creepers and climbers. In Laamu Atoll these climbers are called En'boo Veheli. It is the local medicinal plant Velan'buli / Umbulivella (Dodder Laurel / Love-Vine - *Cassytha Filiformis* / *Cascuta Reflexa* in the family of Lauraceae). They are variously painted with soot and mud. The *Bey* - which are the persons wrapped- is a representation of a creature that runs around island after children and others as well.

The story of a 'Cat Kingdom' is explained through the folktale of *Bulha Raskan*. This is a folklore about the island of Gan in Huvadhu Atoll. It is one of the largest and most fertile lands in Maldives. There lived a large population who were all 'eaten' by large 'cats' which came to the island by sea as some say and by a 'Cat Kingdom' as others say. In the capital, this story is told as large 'cats' which ate the people. But in the atoll of

Huvadhu, people of almost all islands there speak about a 'Cat Kingdom' which came and killed everybody on the island of Gan. There still remain ruins of ancient settlement. The largest ruin mound in the Maldives is in that island. Thor Heyerdahl and his team excavated the site.

The story of *Buruni Kamana Raivaru* is very similar to the storyline of the famous Indian epic- *The Ramayana*. Originally narrated across a format that constituted of three or six lines called as *Raivaru*. This folklore is about a *Kamana* from the island of Buruni in Kolhumadulu atoll of Maldives. *Kamana* is pronounced with a retroflex 'N' and is a common name for a young lady. A modern retelling of this folklore is a story published in the name of *Don Hiyala and Alifulhu* written by Abdulla Sadiq.

Another story- of *Koadi*- is still performed during *Eid* Festivals. This is a performing art which involves a larger group to be a part of it and the whole island participates in it. It is a folk art based on an ancient pre-Islamic ritual. Moosa Ali, in his book *Dhiveheenge Aadha Kaadha* (translated as Maldivian Culture) published by the National Library on their fiftieth anniversary in 1995, wrote about *Koadi* as- "*Koadi is part of Bodu Eid Festivity. It is played during 11, 12 & 13th day of the month of Hajj. Koadi is made in a variety of forms. Some people make it to wear as a large cone shaped headdress. Around it is hung newly grown leaves of the coconut plant. Others make a frame in tree branches, have a face mask and around it are hanging objects to decorate for elegance. In different atolls and islands, kodak is made in different ways, shapes. Main objective is to keep it on the head.*"



*The weaving is done by hand*



*The traditional walls often influences modern architectural patterns and perspectives*

*When playing Koadi, men put it on a woman's head. Women put it on men's head. Then when one team puts Koadi on a head, the other tries to remove and take it. The people who put it will try to protect it from being removed. They run around and show their power not to lose their koadi. Swiftly climb and put it atop coconut palms and tree tops in order to protect it. This is when the excitement is at its peak. Then people stay guard to see if others climb these palms or trees. That is, it protects others from climbing those palms & trees. At last someone may climb them and cut the Koadi. Even women's Koadi is highly decorated. Even these type of kodak is cut while running away to protect it. Those who cut the Koadi wins & those who couldn't are the ones who lose. This is a highly competitive game played by both women and men. This is a public festival played out of doors."*

In 2000, I had the chance to see Koadi festival during *Eid*- at the Goidhoo Island of Shaviyani atoll, which was played by young and elderly men & women of that island. Few elders informed me that traditionally it is a game of adolescent and elder men & women. According to the ritual, the man who cuts the kodak is taken to the sea by all the women, who gives him a thorough bath. This is often considered an indecent act and thus, *Koadi* is not practiced in its pure form in most islands- however few still follow the rite. I remember witnessing a group of young children and men going into the woods to prepare *Koadi*. These were the people who would play it. They covered the bodies of some of the participants with pitch black and others with mud.

For preparing *Koadi*, they cut young newly sprung leaves of young coconut palms- as these young leaves are flexible and do not break as in mature leaves which are brittle and have a thicker spine. They made beautiful objects with the leaves- including various shapes of birds and many other geometric designs. Then they fixed these objects on a frame made of thin branches. The main part was a cube and on top of it was a pyramid shape. Together it resembled a small hut in itself. Then they cut a long piece of tree branch and fixed the whole *kodak* on the thin end of the main branch. One person lifted it and together the whole group started to walk towards the centre square of the island. They went in a procession with traditional drummers along with them. The person leading the team, was covered in a white cloth. As they came to the square, the leading person sat in the center and others started to walk around in a circle. *Koadi* was brought to the center and they were playing and singing a traditional song. After this, one of them took the *Koadi* and fixed it atop a palm tree. Some groups tried to pull the *Koadi* from the palm and others tried to protect it. On the other hand, women prepared a traditional food and hid them. Many men and children around the island tried to find these foods. Those who were able to find some ate them on the spot. Then late in the afternoon, just before sunset, someone climbed the palm and cut the *Koadi*. At this moment, all women of the island came and took the man who cut the *Koadi*. The women took him to the sea and threw him in the water.

### **The important participation of the young generation towards the preservation of this intangible aspect of storytelling and folklore**

To conserve intangible heritage, retelling folklore is very important. Some cooperative societies in different parts of the country are engaged in preserving the cultural diversity by teaching and performing during festivals. In recent times, the government organises festive-activity series called *Fan*. It is a series of cultural festive activity season, specially organised for each atoll for a particular *Eid*. All islands of that atoll participate in the festivity and almost all the traditional festival performing arts are performed. These activities are recorded by the Public Media network and others and also live broadcasted on national TV channel so that everyone else can see them too. Last such event was in Laamu atoll- in the south-central region of Maldives.

The cooperatives mostly do community based activity. Marketing of local farming, sweets or craft produce, island cleaning activities, etc. Some cooperatives run preschools in their local islands and some do awareness programs on different aspects of the community. The government and private sector need to encourage local settlements in preserving these ancient folklore and culture.

A national list of intangible heritage is as important as the existing list of tangible heritage which is in a draft form at the Heritage Department. There is a preliminary National



*Lagoon of Maldives, surrounded by reef. On the rim can be seen the reef flats, on which sand banks form and in time, trees grow and become islands. Coconut and other seeds come adrift to grow naturally on these islands. With rain, a natural water table is formed underneath the islands, which were used in olden times as fresh water.*

Tangible Cultural List, though it remains to be completed. It includes some existing pre-Islamic sites of the Maldives, existing old mosques, some shrines and other monuments. An Intangible Cultural Heritage list is not there at the moment. Recently UNESCO Delhi office held a workshop on conservation of intangible heritage. A temporary committee was formed and one meeting was held. A first meeting, after that workshop was organised. This was by the Language Academy, together with the Heritage Department under Education Ministry. It was discussed to take initiative in collecting and documenting a list of National Intangible Heritage. We are still meeting monthly, and in the process of collecting existing data, analyse them and do more necessary research to achieve the target. We can form a permanent committee under Ministry of Education, in order to function properly. UNESCO aid for necessary research and assistance could come once the Convention is

ratified by the Country. Currently there are different government bodies working on the same subject, like the Heritage Department under the Ministry of Education and Bahuge Academy (Language Academy) under

same ministry. There is the National Archives, which either does similar research or have most data. The Maldives National University have a research department, who does and also funds similar work. Earlier most related departments were under one roof- National Linguistic and Historic Research Centre, but later was divided into several departments. Currently the relevant departments and their parent ministries are as such:- National Library - Ministry of Youth, National Museum - a Section of Heritage Department, Heritage Department - Ministry of Education, Bahuge Academy (Language Academy) - Ministry of Education National Archives- Ministry of Finance, National Centre for the Arts (NCA)- Ministry of Youth. There are also many individuals who does similar research as independent scholars. I also believe, although departments are working independently, there is an imperative need for coordination for all these departments to collaborate, share and work together. This will also minimise repetition of work and make effective use of resources & public funds. I hope that in time to come, we can compile more comprehensive work and gather data to preserve this vital section of our culture.



*Painting by Mr. Ali Sahil- reflecting the essence of Maldivian socio-cultural ethos*



# Storytelling and folktales from Nepal- An important part of various communities and their beliefs

By  
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## Importance of folklore and a dire need to save this integral part of our Intangible Cultural Heritage

Folk culture is an important and integral part of our lives. However, with our fast-paced modern lifestyle amidst modernisation and changes in this age of globalisation, several features of folk life and culture are facing challenges of existence. There was a time when people drew morale from such stories and folktales. People who listened to the nature of the characters mentioned in the folk stories, considered them as their own clansmen, clan deities or sources for inspiration, to set order and system in their lifestyle. Elderly generation would always like to hand such morale over to the new generation. There are still few storytellers in many rural parts of Nepal. Nepal has hundreds of languages and communities (Kirati is one of them and a popular folklore is reproduced below).

## The diversity of believes and stories amidst folklore in Nepal

In the north of Nepal, stories regarding the hard life in the Himalayan region are well-known. In this region, various stories about the mysterious “Yeti” is very popular. The “Yeti” is considered a hairy and strange looking creature living in the snow and many people claim to have seen him as well (this is comparable to the famous Blackfoot in California, USA). Yeti is considered to resemble a huge ape- however it should be kept in mind that this is only a myth, but this belief forms an integral part of the Himalayan people. This belief has helped to keep the folklore alive through generations.

There are also other popular tales in the hilly region about *Ban Jhankri* (the powerful Shaman who dwells in the forest). He is thought to be

a carnivorous creature, but is kind and considered to have immense knowledge about the powers of healing (physical and mental). The folklore states that he likes to help humans by sharing his knowledge of healing and also train them through his knowledge. Unfortunately, the many folk beliefs also state that his wife likes to ‘eat’ the humans since she has to feed herself and the children. However, the *Jhankri* does not allow this to happen. In fact, he always looks for young boys with pure body and heart who thus have chances to go near him and learn the art of healing directly from him. After learning, once they come out of the cave dwelling of the *Jhankri*, the humans will also be healers with special power granted to them by the invisible and cave dwelling *Jhankris*.

Another popular belief narrates an interesting folktale from amongst the Kirati community of Nepal. Their culture is rich in terms of

<sup>1</sup> Picture courtesy- All by Dr. Prem Kumar Khatri

folklore and oral traditions and at present, I am also exploring more of their culture through UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage documentation program. I think, the significance of the Kirati folklore can be best understood through one of their popular stories which I am reproducing below. This story gives a glimpse of their origin philosophy and beginning of the civilization and their beliefs. I am reproducing the story here- translated from a Nepali original Kirati story<sup>2</sup>. The name of the story is- *Origin of Ninamma and Henkhama*. According to this story- many many years ago, there was no Earth, no Moon, no Stars or Planets. There was darkness without any Motion of any kind and there was no Knowledge and Consciousness. Then all of a sudden came the Motion, followed by Taya or Knowledge. With Motion, Consciousness and Knowledge appeared Ninamma or God- the All Powerful. God came with Light- the fastest source of Energy.

*The body of Light was so big, God divided it into billions of separate parts each with Knowledge and Motion. Thus, were created stars*

*and planets including Sun and Moon. One such Body was very hot and full of vapour. God let it cool down and sowed here the seed of Knowledge. Rain caused the Body to cool further with different forms of gas formations like sweat. This Body was Henkhama- the Earth- which was cool and hospitable and created by God. However, Henkhama was not only sweating, she was also sunk in big body of waters. Obviously, Henkhama was seen suffering from pain. So God, out of Compassion, commanded Tataripchi to offer Taya to Henkhama. Tataripchi experienced difficulty to rescue Henkhama and installed Taya on her. In fact, Kukumi- a Satan, had blocked the heat of sun and created pain for her. It is said, this is how Darkness was created on Earth.*

*When Tataripchi knew how Kukumi was responsible to create Darkness on Hankhema, he created Male Energy in the form of Paru Hang and Female Energy in the form of*

*Sumnima. He asked Sumnima to light the oil lamp and Paru Hang started to create rocks and soil. But when he did this, Kukumi would bring water and sweep the soil right away. So in order to save the formation of soil and rocks, Paru Hang created Vayu Hang out of the Water to revenge Kukumi's evil actions. At birth, Vayu Hang was seen as a huge body of water. She approached Kukumi and shook her body like a whirlpool and caused Kukumi to lose consciousness. Paru Hang then planted the Khapchitang tree. He then put a Choilungma or a small boat under the tree. He placed some soil there. However, the soil didn't slide away and remained fixed. Paru Hang went on adding more soil there until Henkhama- the Earth- which had further sunk into the water- would finally appear on the surface.*

This is a very popular folktale and well-known not only across the Kirati community, but across Nepal as well.

2 Source:-Title of book- *Kirata Lok Katha (Kirati Folktales)*- November, 1998. Compiler- Vartaman. Publisher- Kirat Rai Yayokkha, Central Committee, Bansbari: Kathmandu.



*Landscape and the Kirati*



*The mountains of Nepal and its communities preserve many wonderful folktales.*

**A need to preserve folktales and the participation of the young generation**

Since the folktales and lore come from ancient times and play significant role in the society, the young generation is aware of the important role they play in our culture and society. Unfortunately, in the present times, the younger generation of shows much less concern and interest in such stories. They are often seen to consider old and traditional aspect of culture as ‘out dated’ and ‘irrelevant’. Secondly, their education pattern and socialisation styles have changed over time. Under the strong wind of consumer culture, folktales are playing increasingly less a role, compared to new agents of socialisation such as the modernising peer-groups, the media and new electronic gadgets. Thirdly, there is increasingly a widening gap between the grandparents and their grandchildren. However, in places far off from the limits of the cities and in remote, hilly and mountainous areas, the old and traditional methods of education still survive. Thus, the significance of folktales also exists as a medium of learning and communication. In the Tarai plains of Nepal, especially in the Mithila and Awadh (corresponding to Bihar, and Uttar Pradesh of India), Maithili and Awadhi cultures preserve old time folk stories. There are also storytellers whose job in the past was

to tell religious and other categories of stories to their audience. Such persons and groups are now rare.

Thus, as folktales reserve so much of our culture, it is important to

preserve them in return and also save them for posterity. They are not only reflections of the present, but the past as well and also helps to keep the socio-cultural ethos of a region alive through generations for the future.



*Kirati community folktales are intrinsically related to nature*



*Dr. Prem Kumar Khatri*

# The story of *Gul Andaaz Badhshah* and reflections of the Palace Paradigm in Sindhi folklore



By  
Ms. Nayyara Rahman <sup>1</sup>

Nayyara Rahman is a management professional and an award-winning writer. Her laurels include the SAARC Young Writers Award, and a SAMPAD Prize for poetry. She was one of five winners of a national short-story writing competition by the British Council. Her work has featured in the journal of the Sahitya Akademi of India. Her writing has also been a part of the *Pakistan Academy of Letters'* annual journal, and she has several anthologies to her credit as well- including *Dilli*, *Trainstorm*, *The Silver Anklet And Other Stories*, and *Half The Sky And Other Stories*. Her fiction has been included in anthologies published by OUP, CUNY and Harper Collins, India.

“*Storytelling is one of humanity's most important inventions*”

As a not-quite-teenager sitting through history class, I remember how this statement gave me the cerebral equivalent of an electric jolt. It was nothing short of a revelation. Because up until that point, in my mind, inventions were limited to tangibles, to science. The fact that something inherent to our species, something that came universally and naturally was a deliberate *invention* was a fascinating—even disturbing-discovery.

In many hours since, I have wondered what tools did humans actually use- to convey ideas, experiences and history, before they discovered the utility of what we recognise as a story. Did reality have versions before the story was invented?

It was much later, when I realised that being a woman isn't just a gendered identity, but a political one as well and this question expanded to include what is '*inherent*,' '*universal*' and '*natural*.' How do responses to this question change between power structures? I feel- in that respect, both folklore and power paradigms are helpful references to turn to.

## ***The Palace Paradigm and some prominent observations***

I would like to highlight few important aspects with reference to perspectives and socio-cultural reflections amidst folktales from the region of Sindh- which helped me to further channelise a better

understanding of the concept of 'storytelling'. Having gotten acquainted with the concept of '*Palace Paradigm*' in 2009, during a conversation with eminent Indian folklorist and scholar, Dr. Jawaharlal Handoo, I got interested about the formations of stories. It is interesting to note- how many of the practices and customs we take for granted in public and private spheres- particularly in South Asia- can be derived from their cultural ancestors in the *Palace Paradigm*. I was interacting with Dr. Handoo over a conference on the role of literature in times of terrorism <sup>2</sup>. Quoting Dr. Handoo- “If someone today thinks killing innocents is heroic, it is because someone, somewhere

1 Picture courtesy- By Ms. Nayyara Rahman and websites (mentioned under respective picture)  
2 SAARC Festival Of Literature, Agra. 2009-[http://foundationsaarcwriters.com/add\\_festival\\_des.php?fes\\_id=10](http://foundationsaarcwriters.com/add_festival_des.php?fes_id=10)

wrote a song in praise of terrorism. Someone was glorifying a king who had killed innocents.” Dr. Handoo further mentioned in a print interview<sup>3</sup> “*The Palace Paradigm, has been responsible for isolating the region’s history to “stories of kings, queens, princes and princesses....” Everything in India which is respected and valued has come out of palaces. This palace paradigm has moulded the behavior of Indian elite society.” In a dedicated volume on the subject, Dr. Handoo had also further highlighted- “In the Indian context, and I guess in the context of other neighbouring countries as well, the palace paradigm, because of the feudal structure of the Indian society- became the ideal of a “civil society.” He also further elucidated- “Indian collective subconscious structured all its capabilities in terms of this paradigm. This civilising effect was intentionally made more dangerous and subversive by mixing it with religion and rewards by the powerful and highly influential institutions...Indian literature remained imprisoned in the confines of the palace paradigm till the beginning of the last century... literary discourse, and literary folklore, which had a much wider mass-base and the sharing potential. Therefore, it was natural that oral discourse, such as the common fairy tales and literary animal tales, whose importance as instruments of the civilising processes, particularly the effect these tales have on the psyche of children and consequently on their social attitudes, behaviour and creativity in terms of the amusement these offered, was recognised and these and other genres of folklore were assimilated into “high art” and then frozen in an ideology of subversion. This was easy because the ideology of the palace paradigm could not be opposed at the levels of subconscious structures.”*”<sup>4</sup>

### Folklore as Vehicles of Perception and Ideology

Folklore has been one of the most powerful and most enduring forms of storytelling. Possibly because it blurs the line between fact and social belief, the spiritual and supernatural;



Lok Kahanian (Hissa Awwal). Sindh Adabi Board, 2007

and because of its primarily inherited medium. It remains porous, through absorbing the evolved wisdom and shifting cultural nuances of each generation.

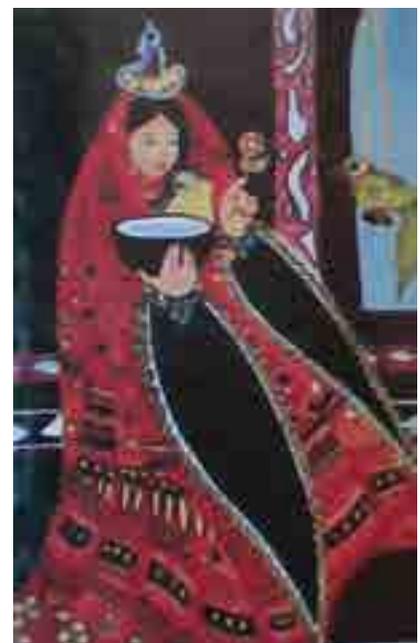
For this essay, I focus on a specific type of relationship present in folk stories- that between men and women against the *Palace Paradigm*. I limit my study to a folk story called: *Gul Andaaz Badshah*<sup>5</sup>, due to its richness in portraying the interplay of:

- Royalty’s relationship with commoners
- Elements of the magical and supernatural
- Fluidity of time
- Justifying irrational and cruel acts with imminent awards

### Gul Andaaz Badshah

Within the brief telling of the story below, I would also like to highlight specific reflections which are prominent to understand socio-cultural echoes within the story. As the story goes- a powerful king is miserable because none of his six wives have produced an heir. That is, until a *Dervish* (wandering mystic, typically male, often sought by royalty for their wisdom and insights) tells him that he is destined to have a child, but only after he gets

married for the seventh time. There is no mention that either the *Dervish* or the king paused to consider that the *latter* might be fertility-challenged- a reflection, which also highlight’s the social identity of a woman with relation to her power of reproduction. The king deposes his minister to search for this next wife, and to distract himself from this all-encompassing woe, he embarks on a hunting trip. There, he encounters a poor girl- Jiyendi, whose clever-riden repartee impresses him so much- that he decides to marry her.

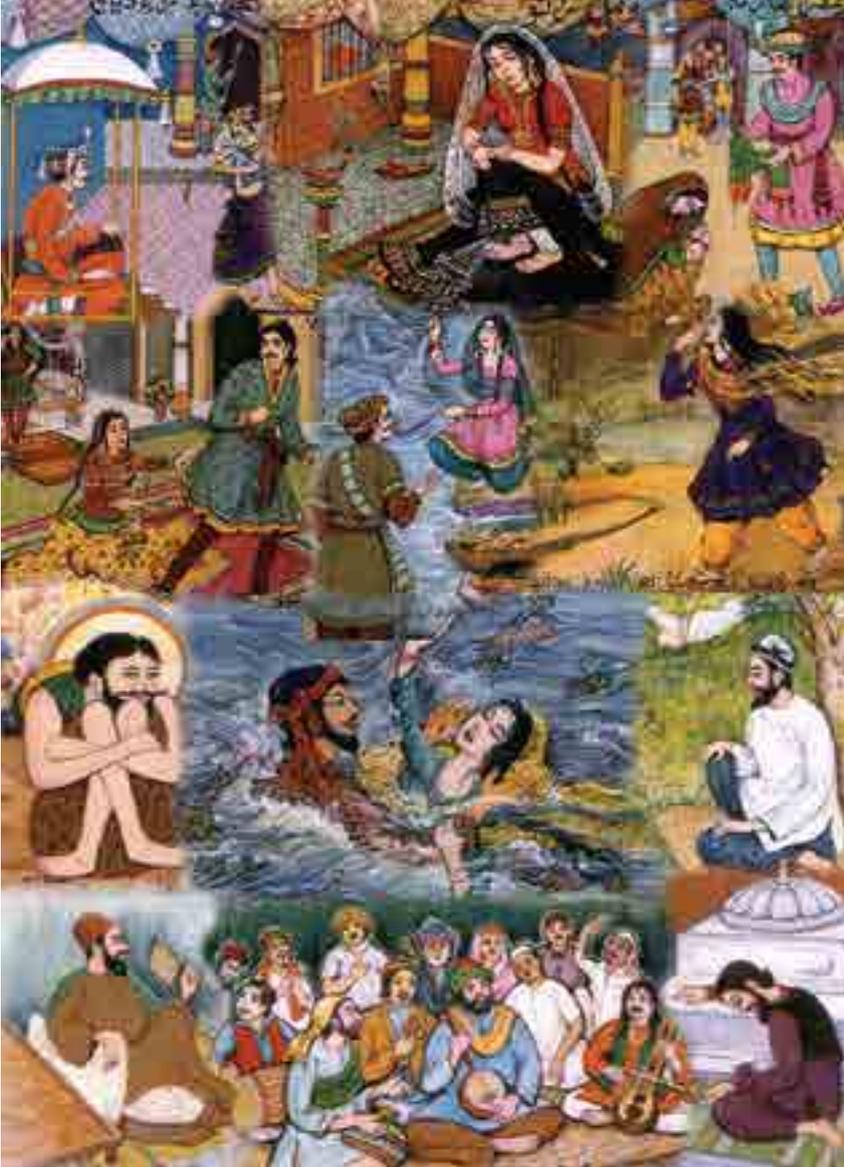


Lok Kahanian (Hissa Awwal). Sindh Adabi Board, 2007

3 Naha, Abdul Latheef -*Life spent in studying the folklores of India*. In The Hindu, 9th October 2005, <http://www.thehindu.com/2005/10/09/stories/2005100902020200.htm>

4 Handoo, Jawaharlal. *Folklore in Modern India*. Folklore The Intangible Cultural Heritage Of SAARC Region Volume – I. Foundation of SAARC Writers and Literature (FOSWAL), October 2009, pp. 20-35

5 Lok Kahanian (Hissa Awwal). Sindh Adabi Board, 2007



*Sindhi Folklore. Courtesy*

[https://farm4.static.flickr.com/3376/3447331870\\_8ff94e068d\\_b.jpg](https://farm4.static.flickr.com/3376/3447331870_8ff94e068d_b.jpg)

It is important to mention here that while explaining her witty riddles to the king, Jiyendi says: *“My mother has gone to sell buttermilk, and my father has gone to guard my mother, lest she falls in love with someone,”* – this on the other hand also helps to reflect- economic responsibility, fidelity and personal freedom.

True to the *Dervish’s* prophecy, shortly after the seventh marriage, the king’s earlier six wives become pregnant; and coincidentally, all of them give birth to sons. Jiyendi, the most recent wife, also became pregnant, but the king is so overwhelmed by finally reaching long-awaited fatherhood, that he forgets all about her, and neglects her completely. She vies for his attention, but to no avail. The king is so engrossed in rekindling his earlier relationships he pays her no attention, nor does he *‘even glance in the direction of her palace.’* Possibly

as revenge, Jiyendi does not inform him about his son’s birth, but contents herself in raising him. The son—who grows up to become Gul Andaaz Badhshah- is trained in all the martial arts of his time. All goes quietly until the king sees an unusual dream, and is told that only his sons can interpret the dream for him. His six sons are delegated on a mission- following the dream and the commands of the king- but all are promptly captured. Gul Andaaz is suddenly discovered by the king with the Dervish’s assistance, and is deputed on this mission as well.

Thus, began Gul Andaaz’s heroic journey. His first action was to rescue a man’s bride from an evil magician. It is important to add here a relevant point which the story portrays- the legitimization of an abduction and a form of power play, vengeance and aggression, with

an implicit agreement of, ‘winner keeps the spoils.’ During this rescue operation, Gul Andaaz encounters many more brides the magician had captured earlier, including two orphaned princesses. He ‘hands them over’ to the bridegroom for ‘safekeeping’:- *“Take your baraat (wedding procession) and go. But I’m placing these two princesses in your possession as safekeeping. If I come back safe, I will take them back from you, else they are yours. Guard them with your life.”*

On reaching *Neend Nagar* (literally ‘City of Slumber’), Gul Andaaz had nearly completed his mission. As the name suggests, *Neend Nagar’s* citizens are overpowered by sleep for six months a year. It envelops them spontaneously, so that they fall into slumber wherever they are and whatever they are doing. One of these citizens, a beautiful fairy called *Neend Pari* was about to bathe when slumber overwhelmed her. And it is in this state that Gul Andaaz finds her and falls instantly in love with her. He picks up this sleeping beauty and places her on a bed; exchanges his own shawl for hers, and his own ring with hers. As mentioned clearly in the story, *‘he spends the night there’*. I encountered an almost identical depiction of non-consensual-sex in another short story. But this one was a translation of Urdu writing published in 2013, which goes on to suggest—if not proven—how collective social morality conveniently overlooks the need for consent<sup>6</sup>.

Unlike the princess-brides and *Neend Pari*, some female characters appear to be unusually emancipated in this folk story. We find a group of fairies playing *Chaupar* (a 4<sup>th</sup> century board game) when they encounter Gul Andaaz. A friendship soon forms and the fairies agree to *‘share him equally’* amongst themselves, to Gul Andaaz’s great joy. Each evening, they perform a dance for him, entertain him and lavish him with attention and gifts. While enjoying himself so much, Gul Andaaz forgets his promise to his father. When he remembers, the fairies promise to help him, provided he does as they say. And this is what they have to say:- *“Each evening we will dance for you, as we always do. One by one,*

exhausted by our dance, we will come before you, and you must chop our heads off." Gul Andaaaz obliges as instructed and as soon as their heads are cut off-each fairy transforms into a pillar of silver, gold and jewels, interpreting the dream for him, soon after that- they come back to life. This also brings to question the apathy accorded to these women- inspite of their friendly help. On the other hand, for the rest of the story, there is no mention of Gul Andaaaz reciprocating their kindness and generosity. He soon persuades them to accompany him on his return journey, so that he can prove the dream's interpretation to his father. They agree.

On the way back, Gul Andaaaz settles in a city (the fairies cannot settle in cities, because they are...fairies), in a house rented to him by an old woman. While his earlier benefactors (*Faqirs, Dervishes, even a hawk*) have been described in detail, the landlady receives a complete omission, apart from stating that she rented him a house. In this city, Gul Andaaaz discovers that a king's daughter is about to choose her prince. He dresses in rags and makes himself as grotesque and uncouth (in manner and presentation) as possible and presents himself with the other eligible bachelors. The princess chooses him. Readers/listeners never discover *why* the princess made this choice, or even why she stubbornly insisted even after the king- her father- threatened to kill her. They are married, and Gul Andaaaz's demeanor becomes even worse. The princess begins to abhor his manners, struggles to win him over- and despite his overt failings, loves him and cares for him. She puts up a brave face in front of the king. Here is the portrayal of the concept of a socially schooled 'good woman'. Meanwhile, the king, already humiliated by the princess' choice and stubbornness, decides to discreetly 'do away' with his son-in-law. As if on cue, plans emerge for a battle, and Gul Andaaaz takes the lead on war and asks the fairies to make necessary arrangements for his victory. They do, and the aggressors experience a crushing defeat at the hands of *Deeos* (Demons) brought in by the fairies. Gul Andaaaz manages



A display of Sindhi folklore. Courtesy- <http://culture.pakistansource.com/2009/12/sindhi-topi-ajrak-day.html>

to get the *Deeos* rewarded, is himself bestowed with laurels, but nothing comes in the way of the fairies- yet again. Here, one can raise a doubt- was it because their contribution to the battle was insignificant? Or because it was easier to exploit their selflessness and devotion to Gul Andaaaz? However after the victory, Gul Andaaaz enjoyed his new found victorious status for sometime and finally decides to return home, and persuades his wife- the princess to accompany him. The king is saddened—his only child is leaving him. He offers his kingdom to Gul Andaaaz in an effort to stop him, but to no avail.

On his return-path, Gul Andaaaz recalls the two princess-brides, 'collects them' and is on his way. The princesses live with his wife and him in a rented house. Gul Andaaaz finally returns home. Here he demonstrates the interpretation of his father's dream by cutting the heads of the fairies once again. His father is overjoyed, and wishes to see the spectacle again. To which Gul Andaaaz says:- "You may see [the spectacle] as many times as you like. These fairies are your daughters-in-law, and will always stay here." In the meanwhile, *Neend Pari* awakens and sets in search for her husband. After much travel, effort and announcements on her part, she and Gul Andaaaz are reunited and she becomes his eighth wife. Much is said about Gul Andaaaz's grand wedding suit, encrusted with jewels, but nothing is said of his bride's dress- possibly because she did not accompany him in the prolonged wedding procession across the city?

The version of this folk story I have referred to, was translated and published in 1956, and reemerged in a new edition in 2007. Although the provincial board, that supervised the whole effort has updated the collection, it is interesting that the gender assumptions that have existed at least since the 4th century A.D. continue to surface without being called into question even today. Here mention may be made of Dr. Handoo's *Palace Paradigm*- to be reflected in this story from Pakistan. As I re-read this folk story, I was able to see how individuals in Sindh, (particularly those in rural Sindh) carry the burden of mores imposed by a vehicle of history that excluded the marginalised. Thus, the story of *Gul Andaaaz Badhshah* is an important example as it often speaks of the many demons, evil magicians and witches we are afraid of and may not live in elusive caves or *waadis* any more- but amidst us and thus perpetuates the *Palace Paradigm*.

Down the course of history however, it is also important to remember various positive changes which can highlight a fight against such 'evils' as are revealed in stories. Of Pakistan's four provinces, the provincial assembly in Sindh has been amongst the most progressive- passing legislation against domestic violence in 2013, criminalising child marriage through the *Sindh Child Marriage Restraint Act 2013* (which covers child marriages, honour killings, harassment of women and acid attacks), and introducing the *Right to Information Act* in 2017.<sup>7</sup> This is a very positive aspect to reflect upon and consider.



# Storytelling, *Kooththu*<sup>1</sup> and modernisation

By  
Dr. S. Jeyasankar<sup>2</sup>

Dr. S. Jeyasankar has over 25 years of professional experience in Traditional, Modern Theatre practices and has been working in various capacities with relation to the same and performing many roles thereby, including- performer, director, playwright, trainer, workshop conductor, action researcher, critic, facilitator, teacher, examiner, publisher, promoter, translator, program manager, campaign designer and organiser. He also helped to innovate and reintroduce the concept and practice of Reformulation of *Kooththu* in Theatre Studies. Since he is enthusiastically engaged in performance art and installation art, music and

dance performances, demonstrations, and festivals, he also prefers to popularise and help to promote within markets- local arts and crafts and entrepreneurship- by arranging exhibitions, display and sales and also social media campaigns. Being an ardent teacher, he has also helped to prepare module, and also to introduce and promote participatory theatre action research, performance research and indigenous research methodologies within higher education. He is also actively engaged in social issues as an academic, artist and activist- e.g. right based issues such as education, gender, caste, environment, economic etc.

**S**ri Lanka's struggle against colonial aggression and the rise of nationalism created an urgent need for the formation of a national culture that was distinct from that of the colonisers. Anti-colonial activities were the prominent socio-political activities of the years surrounding the Second World War. Countries newly liberated from direct colonial rule waged a parallel struggle on the cultural stage, where complete liberation from the colonial past was actively sought. Yet continuing economic dependencies, an educational system and media established by the colonisers, and a social construction formed through colonial rule, restricted the establishment of a truly indigenous society. Such conditions create a strange phase in societies where their identity is constructed through the clash of oppressive worldviews coming from —both indigenous cultural traditions and Western ones imposed by the colonisers- leading to a revival of local traditions through a

Western or modern worldview. In post-colonial Sri Lanka the theatrical works of Professor E.R. Sarachchandra (1914-1996), especially '*Maname*' (1956) and '*Sinhabhahu*' (1961) came to be considered as the Sri Lankan nation's theatrical legacy. In reality, in political and cultural terms, these works represented the national theatre of Sri Lankan Sinhalese. This defining of national cultural identity through these works, with all of their political and cultural implications, inspired the Tamil community in the 1960s, in particular Tamil intellectuals from within the Sri Lankan universities, to produce their own dramatic works— to give shape to their thoughts. Thus, was created- *Ravanesan*, *KarnanPor*, *VaalyVathay* and *NondyNadaham*- as landmarks of national theatre.

These post-liberation works by both Sinhalese and Tamil intellectuals and artists clearly demonstrate how the concept of the modern Sri Lankan nation and its cultural identity were being perceived. Both groups were conceiving of a national theatre within ethnic boundaries and elite framework. The artistic and aesthetic theories incorporated into these productions, along with their target audience, support this argument as well.

Within Tamil theatre, S.Viththiananthan modified *Kooththu* (Tamil traditional theatre) to be performed on the stage, rather than in its traditional context. This modernisation process of community theatre adapted to a 'picture frame' stage, followed what E.R.Sarachchandra had did to the theatre of the Sinhalese. In the Tamil context, *Kooththu* was relocated from an open space-*VaddaKalari* (round stage)- which was open to the entire community, to a controlled-

- 1 *Kooththu*- Traditional Tamil Sri Lankan Theatre
- 2 Photo courtesy:- Mr.A.Vimalraj and Mr. Arul Sanjith



Children's Kooththu, Batticaloa, Sri Lanka

space auditorium- available only to a privileged audience- which was also a construct introduced by the colonial powers. Highlighting the same mentioned Ngugi Wa Thiongo in 1986 - *“Both the missionaries and the colonial administration used the school system to destroy the concept of the ‘empty space’ among the people by trying to capture and confine it in government-supervised urban community halls, school halls, church buildings, and in actual theatre buildings with proscenium stage.”*

S. Viththiananthan's university-based revival and modification of *Kooththu* created a generation of modern theatre practitioners who re-interpreted *Kooththu* and its various elements for their own purposes, while working primarily within the controlled space of the proscenium stage.

The first proscenium theatres were built in Bombay and Calcutta in the 1860s, having first appeared in England in 1576. Three centuries and colonialism allowed the tradition

to find a place in South Asia. Yet it seems paradoxical that in a local theatre tradition which offers a variety of spaces of performance – temple precincts, fields, streets, and market squares – the modern theatrical works of the post-colonial period chose for themselves the colonizer's space of the proscenium theatre. Once this change came, it totally transformed the traditional concept and character of theatrical space, from the viewpoint of both actor and audience. In short, it brought an unfortunate separation between the two, critically affecting their traditional intimate relationship. At the same time, the proscenium stage forced spectators to view the performance frontally from a fixed seat and fixed angle, while traditionally they had watched from different angles with a constantly changing relationship to the performance. With the traditional arrangement, space along with the placement of the audience within informal and neutral contexts played a critical role in shaping the overall performance.

Concepts of modernity played a major role in the process of forming a post-colonial nation and a national cultural identity. At the same time, concern with ideas of modernity was limited to the 'educated' elite. While Tamil intellectuals recognized *Kooththu* as a critical component of Tamil cultural identity, they saw it as a mere artifact of cultural activity rather than a living tradition, inseparable from its context and the very people who performed it, observed it, and together crafted its meaning.

The approach taken by the university-based intellectuals, alienated *Kooththu* from the people who had been performing it for generations. By placing the art world's valuing of aesthetics at the fore, and reducing the audience to middle-class spectators rather than community-at-large participants, the art form underwent a dramatic shift. Within academic and artistic circles, the new works were viewed as 'high culture' while the traditional art which had been appropriated was labeled folk art – in other words, 'low



*Children's Kooththu, Batticaloa, Sri Lanka.*

*Head Gear of 'vada mody kooththu' (Northern Style) of Batticaloa, Sri Lanka.*



culture'. New productions belonged to society's elite while those who helped in its origination within their own communities- were forgotten. Rather than a 'return to the roots' as was claimed, the transformation and 'modernisation' of *Kooththu* served only to disconnect the art from its roots. There was a danger because of this one-sided intellectual exercise and the importance of keeping the *Kooththu* community full participants and at the heart of any *Kooththu* reformulation programs. Questions were raised as to "Why are you an outsider with limited experience in *Kooththu* working on *Kooththu* in the villages?- when well-experienced people who are 'insiders' in the art alienate themselves from the art in the villages and work on it in middle-class-centered spaces with modern concepts?" To such queries, my reply has always been- "This is the essence of my work."

*Kooththu* is a living art of community. It is much more than a performance. It is a process of the people. In my work, I concentrate on this aspect to partner with the *Kooththu* community

in formulating an organic form of community-theatre, based on their *Kooththu* tradition. The essence of this work is the creation of our collective community's own spaces and practices by the community itself for the betterment of the overall society. Quoting NgugiWa one again- *"It was imperialism that had stopped the free development of the national traditions of theatre rooted in the ritual and ceremonial practices of the peasantry. The real language of African theatre could only be found among the people – the peasantry in particular – in their life, history and struggles."*(p. 41) *"Kamiriithu then was not an aberration but an attempt at reconnection with the broken roots of African civilization and its traditions of theatre. In its very location in a village within the kind of social classes described above, Kamiriithu was the answer to the question of the real substance of a national theatre. Theatre is not buildings. People make theatre. Their life is the very stuff of drama. Indeed Kamiriithu reconnected itself to the national tradition of the empty space, of language, of content*



*'Kalati'-performing space of 'Kooththu'*

*and of form."*(p. 42) . Further, to quote Peixoto Fernando (1989) - *"National characteristics are not abstract in theatre because a theatre is in dialog with the social changes it continuously modifies. To keep theatre forms from the past may be useful as a way of preserving a cultural heritage, but a theatre that limits itself to preservation misses participating in the dynamic transformation of society."* (p. 60).

Thus, the art of storytelling of *Kooththu* survives today- as not only part of a traditional heritage, but an integral part of modern method of communication which has its deep root to reach out to a wider audience through various perspectives and innovations. The touch of modernisation of *Kooththu* has imparted a fresh new appeal to its storytelling.



*Reformulated Kooththu performance at Swamy Vipulananda Institute of Aesthetic Studies, Eastern University Sri Lanka, Batticaloa, Sri Lanka.*



*Painting by Mr. Ali Sahil- reflecting the essence of Maldivian socio-cultural ethos*



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