

FEATURE FILMS – A CATALYST TO FOLKLORE CULTURE: A STUDY ON HINDI, TAMIL AND MALAYALAM FILMS

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Filmic Folklore

Films hold our fascination and are the flights of our immense imagination. One cannot negate its presence and the deep impact that it has had on Indian society. It was once held that mass media is the enemy of folklore. But, if the term 'folklore' is taken as a broader one to include the creation of any group of people having a common tradition, then mass media like television, and cinema are, with their oral-aural ambience, believed to provide greater currency to the wider varieties of folk culture. Folklore and folk life have contributed themselves in rich and varied ways when it comes to researching topics for documentaries. For the purpose of doing so, one can see the importance of folklore and films. So, folklore is placed within the complex whole of Indian culture, literature and religion and the pattern of interaction between the demands of the audience, both rural and urban, and what cinema has offered to them in last few years, the effects of folklore in films forms the base of this study.

Folk Films Across the Globe

Folklore films are those films that have documented folklore for research and other purposes. This was actually coined by Sharon Sherman. These 'films of fact' were shot as early as the 1900s. In Europe, short and direct folklore topics were taken for documentation purposes. Many Robert J. Flaherty that romanticised native Arctic life (Peter Claus 2006, 5). Some of the important filmmakers were Marc Savoy, Bill Ferris and Kathleen Ware. In America it was seen that the stories of 'others' became so important that they became weavers of their own stories and directly addressed the camera as experts. This can be seen in Zulay Saravino's *Zulay: Facing the 21st Century*. In Europe, short and direct folkloric subjects were taken for documentation purposes. An institute too was established that sponsored field work and to train ethnologists in the use of film equipment. These ethnological films were categorised by regions of the world, country-wise and then region-wise. Most of them were short – *Children's game from West Africa*, *A Festival Dance in South Africa* etc. Ethno-documentaries as described by Sharon Sherman document the lives of others which can be seen in Margaret Mead's *Trance and Dance in Bali*. The film focuses on traditional behaviour that range on events like rituals, ceremonies, folk art, material culture to folk songs (Peter Claus 2006, 6). Any film that has folklore content can be described as the folkloric one, as it focuses on the individual performer, the community and its culture and texts and artifacts.



Trance and Dance in Bali (2006)

Many of Walt Disney's animated films from the *Cinderella* to *Snow White* have bought the folktales to large audiences. Folk beliefs about vampires and werewolves can also be seen. In the world of movies, folklore, fairytales, mythology and fantasy have been blurred for quite some time. Let us look at two prominent movies – Disney Pixar's *Brave* and 20th century Fox's *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter*. *Brave* is Pixar's first attempt at a original fairy tale with roots in Scottish mythology and folklore and the other movie *Abraham Lincoln: Vampire Hunter* seeks to add new layers to the legend of the 16th President by making him a slayer of undead vampires. Both movies have their roots in real mythology and places and qualify as extensions of folklore (Caeser Bagchi 2010, 288).

In last few years or so, animated movies have been richly rooted in fantasy, some of which are based on regional folklore. Hayao Miyazaki, a famous animator has built a career on creating excellent worlds of folklore with movies like *Spirited Away*, *Princess Mononoke* and *The Secret World of Arrietty*. There are also movies that blend folklore and mysticism (Caeser Bagchi 2010, 288).

Indian-American writer-director Ajmal Zaheer Ahmad's movie *Jinn* (2014) is based on supernatural creatures in Islamic and Arabic folklore. His movie has all the classic elements of heroism and enchantment. He believes that hone can shape the world little by little by putting positive images into the collective consciousness.

Hindi Films and Folklore

Indian folklore, range from the *Panchatantras*, the *Jatakas*, *Hitopodeshas*, Akbar and Birbal and Tenali Rama to the religious *Vratkathas* as well as localised versions of the stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata. Folklore and folktales of India is a mirror to our diverse society and are important for passing on the age old eternal wisdom and the norms and mores of the society.

India is the largest film producing country in the world. Cinema not only mirrors culture but also shapes it. Folk ideas and folk motifs have also found their way in Indian cinema and have been in practice in film songs and dances. Several folk tunes are found in *Lekin*, *Yara sili sili* and *Keasriya Balama* (Ramachandran 1985, 15). Many dance numbers also borrow folk concepts. Another film that used documentary film genre was *Manthan*, inspired by the formation of AMUL in a place called Anand (Gujarat). It is so interesting to note that since the film was set in rural Gujarat, many folk motifs like costumes and folk songs were used heavily in the film. The song 'maro ghar anganana bhoolana' sung by Preeti Sagar became very popular during those days. This film had the ability to manipulate and coerce people's perceptions and attitudes.

Traditional Indian folklore comes alive in the charming movie *Paheli* (2005). It is one of the finest films produced in recent times. A film like this proves that we don't need to seek inspiration from outside Bollywood, when Indian literature is rich enough to provide us with captivating stories. Then there was *Gandikota Rahasyam* (1969), a telugu folklore movie produced by D.V.S. Raju with N.T. Rama Rao and J. Jayalalitha as actors. The movie was later dubbed in Hindi as *Bhagavat*. In 1997, there was a Kannada film *Nagamandala*, which was

based on the play written by Girish Karnad, based on a folk story (Gokulsing, Moti, Dissanayake 1998, 59).

By studying Indian cinema, we can enter productively into the thought worlds and the performance worlds of the traditional arts as the folk ones. Many Indian film directors from pioneers such as Dadasaheb Phalke to directors like Satyajit Ray, Ritwik Ghatak and Shyam Benegal have sought to employ creativity and visualizations and the colour symbolism that can be seen in folk dance, music, mime and theatre. In the use of song, dance, humour, structure of narrative, theme, melodrama, the folk plays of Lavani of Karnataka and Maharashtra, Tamasha of Maharashtra, Jatra of Bengal, Nautanki and Therukoothu of Tamil Nadu have had great influence on popular Indian film makers.

Folklore in Tamil Films



Pavalakkodi (1957) categories into three phases (Pandian 2014, 34) –

1. Puranic, mythological and folklore period (1931-1950)
2. Melodramatic story period (1951-1975)
3. Partly realistic anti-sentimental stories period (1976-1985)

In 1939, the Tamil Director T. P. Rajalakshmi made a film on *Madurai Veeran*. This was the first time folklore was picturised on the screen. The star casts were V.A. Chellappa, T.P. Rajalakshmi, M.M. Chidambaranathan, V.L. Manu and P.R. Mangalam. Again in 1956, another film based on the folklore of Madurai Veeran was directed by Dasari Yoganand starring MGR, Bhanumathi Ramakrishna and Padmini. But was not upto the mark. There is no official record to prove that *Madurai Veeran* existed. He is found in the folklore of ancient Tamizhagam, and those people who enervated the warriors and stones which were constructed in memory of such brave people. Over centuries, the Tamil people had admired *veeran* and worshipped him. It is believed when prayed for justice to *veeran*, if falsely accused of any crime, the perpetrator dies in fatal accident or else the house of the perpetrator will be burnt in a fire accident. *Pankajavalli* (1947) was a mythological folklore and biographical film directed by S. Soundarajan and produced by Tamil Nadu Talkies. The film was inspired by the popular Kerala folktale *Malayala Pankajavalli*.



Pankajavalli (1947)

As India approached its independence under the direction of the Congress-led nationalist party, a powerful opposition was cooking up in Tamil Nadu. Many south Indians, especially Tamils, saw Congress claim to power as the advancement of a North Indian Brahmanic campaign to exercise social, political and economic control over the southern regions. Thus, the Dravida Kazhagam (DK) was formed in 1944, and an offshoot the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) was founded in 1948 by two young playwright-screen writers, C.N. Annadurai and M. Karunanidhi. These men were great orators. They developed a style of rhythmic and passionate speech, full of alliteration, which was based on aspects of both folk oral and classical literature. Karunanidhi's most valuable contribution to Tamil culture has been a dramatic version of the 'Epic of the Anklet' which was also made into a film *Poompuhar* (1961). Therefore the advent of Tamil regionalism and the establishment of the Dravidian Progress Federation, constitutes an important epistemic shift in the relationship between Tamil folk cultural productions and south Indian identity politics. Thus, it was under their patronage and artistic direction that the genre of the Tamil folkloric films was fashioned and popularized.

As 'village sequences' were introduced into Tamil cinema with greater frequency, film directors were faced with the task of putting these scenes to music. In their attempts to depict the village on screen, the Dravidian film directors favoured particular sounds and musical conventions over others, contributing to the musical stereotyping of the folk or musical leveling. Musical leveling refers to the process by which complex musical cultures are reduced to basic patterns and structures that reflect engrained super-cultural assumptions and imaginations. Thus there were several DMK propaganda films released between 1950 and 1970 having musical figures like 'singing bullock cart drivers', 'snake charmer tunes', 'silent Dalit drums' etc. Bullock cart songs were one of the most common type of songs to be heard in early DMK cinema – films like *Veerapandiya Kattabomman*, *Nadodi Mannan*, and *Baaga Pirivinai*, where the hero and heroine are depicted singing while travelling on a bullock cart through the country side.



Chakravarthi Thirumagal is a 1957 Tamil folklore film, directed by P. Neelakantan, having MGR, Anjali Devi and S. Varalakshmi as the lead roles having the musical score by G. Ramanatham. It was a box office hit of the year. The prince wins a tough competition to marry the princess, wherein the villain plots to ruin their lives. The movie then deals with the prince foiling his enemies' plan in order to save the princess.

Chakravarthi Thirumagal (1957)

There are instances of Tamil folklore replete with honour killing incidents too. The growing number of honour killings in recent times across Tamil Nadu has sparked both outrage and despair. Ironically, many victims have become folk heroes with stories of their love and loss recalled in *Kaniyan Koothu* and *Villupattu* performances during festivals of folk deities in southern Tamil Nadu. *Kaanichaavu*, a folk literature too describes these murders as *Theetu Sandangu Kolai* (murders of untouchability ritual) (Perumal 2016, 2).

By the turn of the 20th century, boundaries between the so called high culture and the low culture were already affirmed in specific ways in the Tamil social milieu. On one side there was Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music which were almost exclusively monopolized by the Brahmins

and a very small section of the non-brahmin upper castes. In contrast to Bharatanatyam and Carnatic music, drama and *therukoothu* (folk street theatre) constituted the so-called low culture patronized by the Tamil subaltern classes. The use of folk oration influenced by folk theatre also saw in the characterizations, speech patterns and dialogue delivery of the famous actor Shivaji Ganesan in the 1950s and 1960s.

From the 1970's onwards one can see folk dances and tunes being popularized by actors like K. Bhagyaraj, Bharatirajaa and Rajnikanth. The lyrics of folk songs in Dravidian films romanticized the village sing tropes of group solidarity and homogeneity and metaphors that stressed the inseparable connection between folk-life and nature. By assigning the village a unified voice and speaking on its behalf, film lyricists and songwriters undermined the power of folk song as a medium for individual subjective expression and as a powerful vehicle through which the economically and socially disadvantaged can express resistance, formulate self-narratives, and articulate personal desire

Folklore in Malayalam Films

The colours, costumes, drama and love that lace Kerala's history and folklore have often made Malayalam filmmakers to turn towards folklore whenever they planned wide-canvas, big budget movies. In the past, several *vadakkan paattu* movies were made in studios like Udaya, while some of the most expensive productions in the past few decades be it *Oru Vadakkan Veeragadha* (1989), *Kaalapaani* (1996) or *Pazhassi Raja* (2009) were based on Kerala's history, ballads and folklore (Shibu 2018, 2). For Malayalees, wide canvas once meant Udaya-stable movies which narrated *vadakkan paattu* tales. Later in the 1980s too, movies with heroes from history and folklore were made in Malayalam. However, budget constraints did not give them the desired technical finesse with *Oru Vadakkan Veeragadha* being the only exception.

Perumthachan (1990) or the 'master carpenter' is a part of the Kerala's folklore and M.T. Vasudevan Nair gave it a fine cinematic script. Directed by Ajayan, the film tells the story of a master artisan, who cautions his son against being carried away by his own fierce ambition. Wonderful performances and great cinematography with a keen eye on capturing Kerala's architecture and aesthetics, make *Perumthachan* an important milestone in the history of Malayalam cinema. Histories and myths are getting retold every year. It is only natural that these retellings find their way to the big screen. Excavated from these stories are mythical and real super heroes of some sort. Few of them are - *Odiyan*, *Kunjali Marakkar IV*, *Randamoozham*, *Kayamkulam Kochunni*, *Chengazhi Nambiar*, (*Chaaver Warrior*) *Mamangam* and so on.



Mamangam (2019)

Odiyan (2018) directed by V.A. Shrikumar Menon is based on the legend of the Odiyan clan, who in Kerala folklore are men believed to possess shape-shifting abilities. The film narrates the story of Manikyan a member of the Odiyan clan, which – according to Malayalam folklore – has the ability to shape-shift into animals. The Odiyan clan functions when the night is at its darkest and scares people. This is a story of a man who instills fear in a community with his shape-shifting abilities and eventually falls prey to the art form.

Documentaries deal essentially with the themes related to reality. Documentaries project the state of affairs in the actual world. Hence documentaries are social and dynamic and are not merely textual. Documentaries have immense potential and prospects to offer effective representations of issues and situations that surround everyday life (Bagchi 2010, 288). Hence, many genres of folklore such as festivals, rituals, fairs, performing arts, mythology, food habits are recorded and viewed through the feature films. They are a powerful medium for the generation of localized content, specific to the values and lifestyles of the various communities.

Why make more movies on Folklore?

Folklore has created a deep impact in films. This provides for greater intimacy by the viewer and also it directly appeals to the emotions rather than in intellect. Indian folklore makes perfect stories for children who are required to be instilled with right values. All these ancient stories have been passed from generation to generation and generates a bonding of traditional values with the present day generation. After *Mirzya*, its' hard to ignore the potential of the Indian folktale when it comes to forming the core of a new Bollywood hits. The good news is that one has no shortage of material when it comes to fascinating and diverse folktales. Thus, cinema opens a new window into culture. By studying it, one get a deeper understanding of the customs, behavior patterns, values and arts and crafts of the Indian people. Deeper insights into the complex process of modernization, colonialism, nationalism and freedom and status of women can be acquired through Indian films. So, cinema not only mirrors culture but also shapes it.

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