

**ENTHRALLING FOLKLORE:
THE ELIXIR OF HUMAN EXCELLENCE**

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The contemporary fast-paced world is demanding and chaotic, leaving its harried inhabitants with little time to ponder over self-progress in either one's personal or professional life. Cut-throat competition rules the day. The evolutionary adage *survival of the fittest* holds true today more than ever. The unrelenting pressure to prove one's worth, the unrealistic aspiration to excel in all spheres and the constant endeavour to be better than other people are challenges and pressures negatively impacting the quality of life but sadly all too common to modern day technology-driven living. Materialism and consumerism rule the roost and there is seemingly no end in sight for wants. Acquisition is mistakenly viewed as excellence by the present populace, who seem unmindful of the fact that there exists such a thing as '**holistic achievement**' which alone sequels human excellence and it could be strived for and achieved by applying the Folklore formula in day-to-day life. Folklores keep yesteryear culture and ancient traditions alive, offer insights into the lives of people in a much earlier time in history and help shape and give direction to the values, hopes and aspirations of the future generation. The fact that there are successful books such as the "Modern Day Survival Guide" being published is proof enough that people actively seek to live better, wiser, healthier, happier lives.

A Didactical Definition

Though 'Human Excellence' is synonymous with *Eminently Good* (Bronner 2012) and *Best of its Kind* (Anderson 1998), the popular definition rendered by the 18th century Scottish philosopher and historian, David Hume

A man of honour and humanity, one of whom everyone who has any intercourse...is sure of fair and kind treatment. His company is enjoyed by all because he has so much wit with good manners, so much gallantry without affectation and so much ingenious knowledge. His cheerfulness ... runs through the whole tenor of his life and preserves a perpetual serenity on his countenance and tranquillity of his soul...

This definition clearly shows that there are inexhaustible human traits such as integrity, commitment, compassion, courage, discipline, empathy, patience, kindness, resilience, sensitivity, adaptability, humility etc. that makes a man as the best of his kind. Human excellence is when man constantly strives to rise above the mediocre by finding better ways of doing things, willingly shares them with others and tries to make a positive difference in the lives of people he comes into contact with regardless of race, age, gender, identity or culture. Undoubtedly, the seeds for this continuous

pursuit of excellence are sown in early childhood by inculcating core values that will shape future character and personality.

In the pursuit of excellence, the traditional value-based method of nurturing children is increasingly being replaced by modern gadgets in a tech-obsessed lifestyle which although does succeed in elevating people to a certain level of ‘excellence’ remains unbacked by the requisite ‘human’ values as it rightly should. Truth be told, there can be no great meaningful success without ethics and a strong moral value system; the man who treasures success more than values is bound to be bereft of both. It is in this light that the eminent physicist Albert Einstein (Eleanor 2017, 1) remarked

Try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value.

Substantiating the same, this study suggests the employment of a traditional practice, that of using *folklore* to inculcate moral and cultural values fundamental to good living, using it as a medium to not only entertain but also educate youngsters on the importance of striving for human excellence. In the words of the Greek philosopher Aristotle (Arcaya 2016),

There is an ideal of excellence for any particular craft or occupation; similarly there must be an excellence that we can achieve as human beings. That is, we can live our lives as a whole in such a way that they can be judged not just as excellent in this respect or in that occupation, but as excellent, period. Only when we develop our truly human capacities sufficiently to achieve this human excellence will we have lives blessed with happiness.

Here comes the context of folklore, through which the concept of human excellence can be instantaneously instilled in an excellent manner right from the childhood in the human beings.

Folklore – The Textual Frame

Folklore, mythology, fables, legends and fairy tales have regaled youngsters for years. They have not been completely forgotten but put on the back burner with the transition from antiquity to modernism. Passed on from one generation to the next by the word of mouth (they are more frequently told than read), such fictional stories help preserve for posterity the unique traditions, history and experiences of a particular culture or society.

Although there is often an element of truth lacing the tales, unfounded beliefs and superstitions form a good part of it too. The main purpose of folklore is to convey an important or useful message, often universal and timeless themes, in a simple and entertaining manner easily comprehensible by the common man. They take the characteristics of the time and place in which the tale is based and often the personality of the story-teller as well. It is one of the best mediums for asserting cultural identity, to pass on informal traditional culture of everyday of the people to the future generations. As defined by Dorson (1982), folklore is,

A study of the traditional beliefs, stories and customs of a community, passed on by word of mouth.

Recognizing the powerful role of folklore in asserting the cultural identity of different social groups and its continued relevance to contemporary culture, this exploratory study moves on to exemplify and analyze the wide spectrum of folkloristic features of Tamil Nadu.

Folk games

A veritable treasure trove of time-honoured Indian games ensure that children of all ages spend time playing versatile board games, instead of being hooked to electronic gadgets and ruining their eyesight by gazing at a screen and competing with a machine for hours on end. The advantages are many, such games tune motor skills, aid in the development of hand-eye coordination and help children develop social skills by challenging friends and family to a competitive game.

Pallanguzhi

This is a traditional memory game that originated in the villages of Tamil Nadu. Played by dropping tamarind seeds, small pebbles/stones, cowry shells or pits as counters (anything that is smooth, small and round can be used) on a rectangular wooden board with two rows of shallow cups and seven columns on either side, this game helps improve math and motor skills. It is an indoor game where two players sit opposite to each other.

The game starts by first putting in six counters in each hole. The seeds in one hole are scooped up and one seed is dropped in each hole, going counter-clockwise. When the seeds are over, those from the next hole are scooped up and the process is repeated till the point when there is nothing left to scoop in the hole next to where the seed ends. The player can then take whatever remains in the hole next to the empty one. If the player encounters two empty holes at the end of his turn, he cannot play and his opponent starts the game. The game continues until the opponent loses all his seeds.



The holes containing 4 seeds can also be scooped up during the game. The aim of the game is to take away the opponent's counters. There are, of course, many variations of the game. This game is even mentioned in the great epic, The Ramayana.

Pallanguzhi – A Calculative Game

This ancient game which was once played in every Indian household in villages has now got a new lease of life. To a generation immersed in smart phones, video games, computer games, television and tablets, this strategic native game has much to teach. In the present age of instant gratification, it is observed that right from

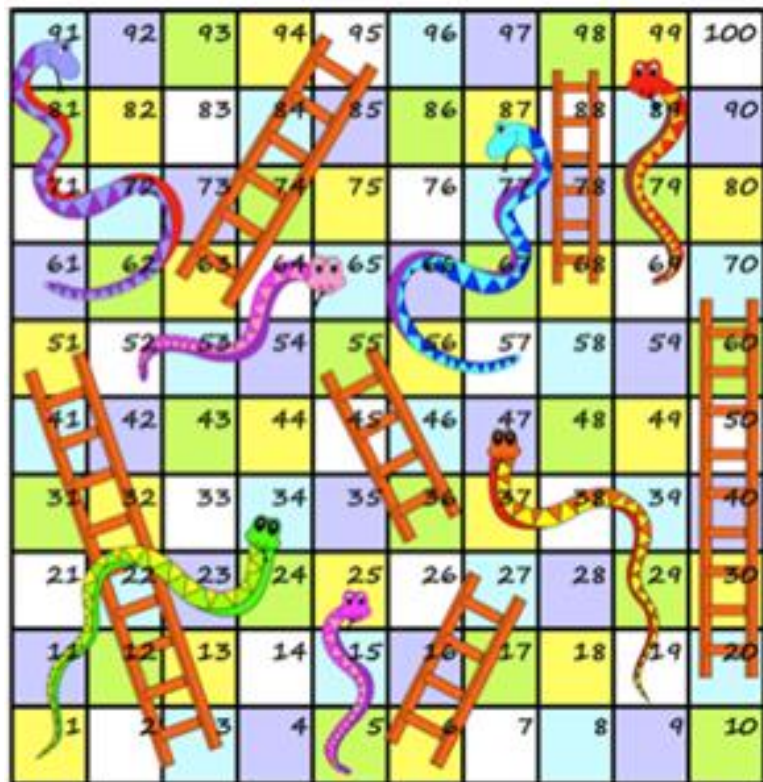
childhood children have low levels of patience and tolerance with little willingness to accept defeat. Many are seen to be depressed as they find it difficult to cope with the growing demands and pressures of a largely mechanized world. Besides social inclusion, the game demands rapid mathematical calculations to be ahead of one’s opponent, improves concentration and enhances memory as the player needs to keep track of the opponent’s counters.

Paramapadham

Yet another traditional game revived as an alternative to electronic entertainment is Paramapadham. The original version of this indoor board game was created in ancient India and was believed to be symbolic of man’s attempt to reach God.

The British renamed it as “Snakes and Ladders”. The term ‘ParamaPada’ means highest place. The board has a total number of 100 squares interspersed with random snakes and ladders. The ladders signify good habits or virtues that help a player move up rapidly towards the ultimate goal of enlightenment while the snakes representing vices slide a player lower down.

This simple but interesting game has an important lesson to teach, life has many ups and downs and one must patiently learn to handle both with equanimity. A player can commence the game only if the rolled dice displays 1. Till then the player waits for his/her turn. The players take turns rolling the dice and moving their counters. A player gets an extra turn if he gets 1, 5 or number 6 on his dice. The winner is one who reaches the last square, numbered 100.



Paramapadham (Snakes and Ladders)

This traditional game teaches children one of life’s biggest virtues – patience. In today’s fast-paced modern life, patience is a rare virtue but is an important value that must be cultivated. Children today do not seem to know how to wait calmly for their turn at something without complaining of boredom.

Instant gratification and immediate results seem the order of the day; most molycoddled children are accustomed to getting what they want on demand. No one,

including adults, likes to wait for their turn and advancing at the cost of others is sadly becoming an all too common occurrence. Children of today's modern world need to develop the ability to accept their own self, others and situations as they are without irritation, disappointment or resistance. This slow-paced game does not enjoy its rightful due in the modern context but can be a vital tool to inculcate moral values.

Folk Dances

Folk dances are quite pertinent to help keep a culture alive. For thousands of years, people are doing and watching folk dances as there is value keeping in it that keeps the tradition alive. Folk dances are important also, because they sustain the native culture and pass it on to the future generations.

Karakattam

One of the most prominent and ancient folk dances of Tamil Nadu is *Karakattam*, which is performed in praise of the rain goddess Mariamman. The performers, both men and women, balance a decorated pot on their head while they dance intricate and complicated steps. The dance is performed solo, in pairs or as a group. A largely rural dance, it is classified into two types- *Aatta Karakam* and *Sakthi Karakam*. *Aatta Karakam* is performed as a play with decorated pots on the head and symbolizes joy and happiness. It is mainly performed to entertain the audience during religious festivals and cultural programmes. The *Sakthi Karakam* is performed as a ritual only in temples as a spiritual offering.

It requires great skill and a lot of effort to learn the nuances of this dance as a heavy pot has to be balanced on their head through intricate steps and arm/body movements which come from years of practice, experience and synchronizing the movements of the body; dancers are rightly proud of their art. Utmost care is taken to ensure that the pot never falls and breaks as it is considered a disgrace to the dance form. Most Karagattam dancers are from the rural pockets of Thanjavur, Pudukkottai, Ramanathapuram, Tirunelveli, Salem and Madurai. Lately, to ensure its continued popularity, a number of acrobatic skills and circus-like acts are incorporated into the dance, like dancing on a rolling block of wood, going up and down a ladder or dancing on stilts.



Karakam or Karakaattam

In today's mechanized world, people fail to balance their life with various emotions. They find it difficult to work as a team. They are unable to either handle the pressures of life or develop a positive attitude to resolve issues. Pursuing and even witnessing (Vanama 2013, 83) this traditional folk dance would help youngsters learn life lessons like dedication, discipline, perseverance and team work that in turn will

help one be successful. Many a times, the people of Tamil Nadu themselves, unfortunately encourage their wards to go in for hip-hop, tango, ballet, disco and other western dances and do not favour the traditional dance forms.

A few other forms of Tamil Nadu's folk dances like Mayil Aattam, Kummi, Oyil Aattam, Kavadi, PoikkalKudiraiAattam, Kai Silambu Aattam, ChakkaiAattam, Thappaattam, Bommalaattam (Puppet show), Theru koothu, Urumi Aattam, Puli Aattam, Kali Aattam and Villu Paattu (Kulasekaran, 2013) elicits human values in the minds of the performers as well as viewers.

Folk Tales

Folk tales are an oral form of transmitting un-authored stories by a particular community from one generation to another (Francis, 1961). This practice can still be seen in the villages of Tamil Nadu. India is a veritable treasure trove of dynamic, inspiring and thought-provoking folklore. However, due to modernization the tradition of story-telling by word of mouth is fast disappearing due to the onslaught of television and computers in this digital age.

Some folktales attempt to explain events in the world. A few narrate tales of real people and actual events. Often, the stories feature typical character types – like clever old women and wise ministers. And in still other tales, myth and folklore are woven together with animals, birds, gods and demons having fantastic adventures with kings, queens, ordinary men and women.

India's rich culture, diverse languages and ancient history has spawned innumerable folklore and fables passed on from one generation to another by doting grandmothers and fond mothers regaling young children. The ageless and timeless stories range from celebrations of heroes to historical accounts and from religious parables to moral tales with values for human life. Fact is, there is something for everyone in Indian storytelling.

Most stories teach important life lessons, morals, traditions and values and were a part of everyday life in an earlier age. Pot-bellied Tenali Raman, one of the most famous characters of South Indian folklore is an eternal favourite. His tales are famous for his witty ways of solving tricky problems. Most of India's most popular folk tales belong to one of three main categories of stories, namely the Hitopadesha, the Jataka, and the Panchatantra. They have gained such popularity that the tales have spread to all parts of the world.

In fact, Panchatantra Kathaigal, is a collection of five volumes of stories written by a teacher on the different aspects of kingship for princes so that they would one day rule as ideal kings. *Hitopadesha* is a collection of Sanskrit fables in prose and verse and is known to be at least several centuries old. Jataka tales narrates stories about the earlier lives of Lord Buddha, in both human and animal form. Some of the best-loved folktales have been bedtime stories passed on down the ages from one generation to another and will doubtless go on forever.

Vikram & Vethal

Folk tales like *Vikram and Vethal*, also known as 25 tales of Vethal have continued to remain hugely popular down the ages despite being written nearly 2500

years ago by Somdev Bhatt. It is believed to be one of the oldest vampire stories from India and was originally written in Sanskrit. Vethal is said to be a sort of demon, ghost or celestial spirit with vampire-like qualities and Vikramaditya was the legendary King of Ujjain renowned for his intelligence, valour and bravery.

The setting of the storyline is as follows. Every day when king Vikram passes by the forest, Vethal jumps on him and poses a riddle after narrating a tale. “Answer the question, Vikramaditya!” the Vethal challenges the king, “If you keep your mouth shut despite knowing the answer your head will burst into a thousand pieces. If you don’t know the answer, then you are not fit to be a king”. King Vikram is expected to answer the question and only then Vethal would leave him free. As the King was a wise man, he could solve the puzzle and answer every riddle, most of which were philosophical questions about life. These tales are not only for regaling children and



Vikram and Vethal folk tales (Saurabh, 2018)

entertaining them but also to kindle thinking for the King pitted his wits against Vethal and children too will enjoy racking their brains to find a solution to the problem posed in the tale.

The tales enjoyed greater attention after they were published as a series in the popular children’s magazine *Chandamama* and featured as a television series by Doordarshan. The popularity of this tale was such that a web series was also released. Therein lies the wisdom in our traditional tales. The tricky question at the end of every tale will make youngsters furrow their brow and cudgel their brains. Today, most children are constantly glued to the screens of electronic gadgets and refuse to put their devices down to indulge in traditional pastimes such as listening to a story. Why blame the child alone? Mothers who will set aside time to narrate a tale are few and far between.

Tech-addicted children grow up in isolation, entertain themselves with smart phones, iPod, tablets, develop an unhealthy attachment to the idiot box (television), and are far removed from the real world as they live in a virtual world that leaves them ill-equipped to handle the challenges of growing up. The acute dependence of screen junkies on electronic media has been proven to negatively impact their physical health, behaviour, academic performance and impede their mental

development. Folklore can go a long way in developing critical thinking, encouraging communication, promoting social interaction and fostering problem-solving skills.

Folk Food

Food is fuel for the human body. The food one eats has a direct impact on the functioning of both body and mind. Technological advancements, modern lifestyles and time-saving measures have taken a toll on traditional cuisines with the industrialization of food supplies. Foods personally prepared in time-honoured tradition with fresh local unrefined ingredients, flavourful herbs and indigenous spices are totally free from artificial flavouring, harmful additives, preservatives, trans-fats and chemicals. They are wholesome, nourishing, balanced meals with the perfect blend of healthy proteins, beneficial fats and energy-giving carbohydrates. High in antioxidants, fiber, vitamins and minerals, these traditional dishes all have a distinct taste, flavor and aroma and are cooked in a manner such that their nutritive value is preserved.

Indian cooking uses a lot of turmeric, ginger, garlic, coriander seeds, coconut, millet varieties, tamarind and cumin seeds, all of which have excellent medicinal properties. Sadly, the modern generation is enamoured by junk food and apes the western diet of cakes, cookies, pastries, pies, pizzas, white bread, burgers, sugary drinks, French fries and potato chips. Most fast food chains serve high-calorie foods that are highly processed to add flavor, taste and ensure longer shelf-life but which on the flipside strips away all nutritive value. Besides they are all high in sugar, refined grains, refined oils and Trans fats. Their negative impacts on health are obesity, deterioration of health and nutritional deficiencies, to name a few.

Aavaram Poo Tea - (Tanner's Cassia)

Tea prepared from the bright yellow flowers Aavarampoo or Tanner's Cassia has anti-bacterial and anti-microbial properties and is said to have manifold health benefits. In the olden days, people who had to walk long distances under the hot sun carried along with them a bundle of Aavarampoo on their heads to keep their body cool and prevent dehydration.

The tea brewed from this flower is full of antioxidants and is very effective in



treating excessive thirst and painful urination. It is a tasty herbal drink that reduces blood pressure and cholesterol; it is also an effective remedy for diabetes, ulcers, diarrhoea and dysentery. Apart from this it energizes and revitalizes the person who drinks

it and is rather common in villages and tribal areas. It can be dried and powdered to make a rejuvenating drink whenever needed. It can be safely ministered to very young children also. It is used to treat many skin problems such as rashes and acne when applied externally. It is an excellent substitute for caffeinated drinks like coffee and tea.

Guzzling carbonated soft drinks and fizzy drinks like Pepsi, Thumbs up and Cocacola on a regular basis are a potential health risk and can harm teeth, cause obesity, heart disease and diabetes due to their high sugar and calorie content. Despite growing awareness of the harm they cause in the long run, such unhealthy soft drinks have made most Indian households their home and are a standard accompaniment to combo meals in pizza and fast food outlets.

Riddles

India has a rich history of riddles and other forms of word play. Riddles contribute immensely to the cognitive ability and language development of young minds. They are an excellent source of enjoyment for people of all ages with their thread of humour and promote logical, lateral as well as imaginative thinking. Problem solving and critical thinking skills are vital to cope with the pressures of the modern world. Riddles have been shown to foster both these essential skills as well as improve attention and concentration by expanding the ability to comprehend mind-twisters as one guesses, suspects or concludes the right answer. Riddles are in fact are really the

metaphor or group of metaphors, the employment of which has not passed into common use and the explanations of which are not self-evident.

(Robert and Alan, 1963)

One such challenging brain teaser given here rises the thinking level of the children.

A man is lost in a dense forest. The forest is between two villages. In village A, every resident is a liar whereas everyone in village B tell the truth. The man wants to get to village B but does not know the way. As he is walking he sees a woman. He can only ask the woman one question and he does not know which village she is from. What single question does he ask her in order to correctly find village B?

(<https://www.riddles.com/archives/3864> 2017)

Riddles such as these kindle the thinking capacity and reasoning ability of the brain, afford excellent amusement to youngsters who complain of boredom and promote problem-solving skills – all of which will stand them in good stead as they progress to adulthood and face the challenges of the workforce environment.

In this digital age in which we live, the modern generation has largely suspended their thinking capacity and automatically head to the Internet to Google up solutions to riddles and puzzles. This has a detrimental effect on self-thinking, comprehension and the process of coming up with solutions after looking at a

problem from all angles. Riddles can improve how people think by enhancing thought processes and sharpen the mind by keeping the brain active and agile. Riddles are pure fun and no one can stop with only one!

Concluding Remarks

Folk arts are a form of cultural expression and a tradition based creation of a community reflecting the community's unique cultural and social identity. Its forms are, among others, language, literature, music, dance, games, mythology, rituals, customs, handicrafts, architecture and other arts. Our ancestors commemorated and celebrated special occasions joyously with meaningful traditions and unique customs. The traditional inclusive way of celebrating happy events or grieving together on sad occasions offered a sense of belonging and kinship. Such traditions that bind people together are slowly fading with the passage of time.

Modern culture has caused members of nuclear families to become more self-centered; the commercially-driven society prefers to pay and buy instead of expending time and effort and more importance is given to possessions than people. In today's globalized, technology-driven world there are not many takers for traditional customs or unique rituals which are seen as old-fashioned but it is to be remembered that once upon a time in the past they gave people an identity and made life meaningful. The day is not far when they will be forgotten for good unless energetically revived and diligently pursued. Preservation of traditional knowledge, food, medicine, dance, craft and history must be given the recognition it rightfully deserves. We should be proud of our culture, traditions and history both in our homes and communities as they are an integral part of our socio-economic fabric. We must not overlook its importance to the present generation for they can continue to be an important link from one generation to another. It is well to remember that it is from lessons in the past that future successes are carved.

It is strongly argued here that traditional folklore enjoys a unique regional identity and forms an integral part of our cultural heritage. It can greatly promote important socio-cultural values by transmitting core ideals and beliefs from one generation to another. It is a powerful means of bringing generations together and its value must be recognized.

The attention of people should be drawn to the importance of folk arts and the need to preserve our unique cultural identity. It needs to be popularized and widely disseminated through organization of national and regional events such as fairs, festivals, films, exhibitions, seminars, symposia, workshops and training courses. The media must provide a broader coverage of folk arts in national and regional newspapers, television and radio broadcasts.

Folklore is the best possible therapy to achieve human excellence as it sheds light on the moral values and ethics of a particular culture and society. The most challenging task today is to shape the leaders of tomorrow by instilling essential human values such as respect, gratitude, humility, generosity, kindness, courage, honesty, compassion and perseverance. If folklore could be introduced and integrated into the school level curriculum, children will discover the different traditions, cultures, customs and practices of our diverse country and its multi-cultural society. By participating in non-academic enrichment activities like folk dances, folk games,

folk art and craft and telling folk tales children become active learners of the rich artistic traditions of our country. It helps to strengthen their cultural roots and serves as a bridge, connecting youngsters to community values.

The Tamil Nadu Government should play a decisive role in safeguarding our tradition, keeping our culture alive and revitalizing our heritage. It must ensure the continued practice of traditional art forms by seasoned practitioners, by creating sufficient job openings and offering liberal grants. The Government can definitely make an attempt to step in to make sure that the richness of our indigenous culture does not lose its distinct ethnic and cultural forms and performing styles. It must also encourage youngsters to take up the study of folklore. Special allowances and priority in jobs if extended to the students of folklore, more and more youngsters will willingly opt for this line of study. Steps must be taken to catalogue, record and maintain archives of various forms of folklore and research on folklore activities must be encouraged.

Many Researchers have recognized that folklores are carriers of wisdom, joy and learning; their therapeutic value is such that of late there are youngsters who come forward to be trained in folk arts such as paintings, sculpturing, quilting, pottery and furniture making using traditional styles and methods. The future of folklore is undoubtedly in the hands of the present generation who must recognize its intrinsic value and the need to safeguard it for generations to come.

Folklore has served as a medium of instruction and entertainment down the ages, it must not be allowed to fade away into oblivion. Its contribution to fostering human excellence is established beyond doubt. Also, the Tourism Department can identify areas in Tamil Nadu that are renowned for folklore exponents with a rich repertoire of authentic folklore and promote cultural tourism to such places. Travel agents could also contribute to popularizing folklore on a global platform, by promoting our country's rich folk traditions worldwide, by conducting folk art tour packages as tourist attractions for foreign tourists. May folk traditions will last forever with such resourceful revival efforts!

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