

Editorial

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Evolving areas of research in the recent times have not only looked ahead but also backwards in an attempt to come up with innovative solutions to contemporary problems. This is the case not just in medicine or climatology or agronomy but also in social sciences. Cultural studies, likewise is no exception as the focus of research on indigenous literatures is increasingly becoming popular. The study of the cultural practices of the natives, their strong association with their land which is invested with notions of identity and being along with their communicative practices throws up interesting insights into human behaviour and life. What is of special interest to litterateurs and academic scholars is their art of storytelling which is perhaps as ancient as mankind itself. An art form, which a close scrutiny reveals to be self-reflexive and highly evolved. Generations have heard these stories, which have found continuum in orality as elders narrated them whether in the form of performative practices or bedtime tales. Culture and history was transmitted along with earthy wisdom as wide eyed audience, be it adults or children imbibed age old truths and wisdom.

These stories are rich sociological archives which record the linkages between the individual, community and social structures. They chart the historiography of beliefs and living practices and at the same time establish interconnectedness between the past, present and future. Indigenous belief systems are embedded in their stories and are at the core of epistemology and knowledge systems. These were not static tales but organic and dynamic as the shifts occasioned by

the relationship between the storyteller and his/her audience led to significant modifications. And by virtue of its ever-changing nature inherent in orality one single story led to several morphed forms reflecting the changes in the prevailing socio-economic environment. Research is increasingly training its lens on not only the originaries of these cultural practices but its trajectories too.

In India, the documentation of the spoken word was found much later in transcriptions by the British, by both missionaries and commissioned officers, whose limited knowledge of the culture and the dialect led to misappropriation of the folk narrative. Discourses of hegemony and marginalisation were imbedded in this transition from orality to print as the speaker's voice and agency were both appropriated by outsiders. Vested interests along with lack of understanding of indigenous cultures and languages led to distortion of cultural and literary histories. This led not only to silencing of voices but a rewriting of history and culture from the perspectives of those in power, an increased marginalisation of the marginalised, an exclusion of those on the periphery. R.C. Temple, William Crooke, Flora Annie Steel, Cecil Henry Bompas, Robinson Edward Jewitt, John F. A. McNair, Mary Frere, Thomas Lambert Barlow, E. M. Gordon and Verrier Elwin are just a few leading oriental folklorists in a long list whose attempts to document stories of the indigenous are still valuable resources despite the inherent distortions. Nationalism in India brought along essential shifts in the perspective towards these tales and songs. Lakshminath Bezbaruah, Dinesh Chandra Sen, Suryakaran Parikhs, Narottam Swamy, Ramnaresh Tripathi, A.K. Ramanujan and Devendra Satyarthi are a few stalwarts amongst several others whose attempts to restore the indigeneity in these narratives are truly commendable. A much needed shift which brought back several communities and their narratives back into the fold.

Daniel Heath Justice, Chair of the First Nations Studies Program and an Associate Professor at the University of British Columbia points out, "Indigenous writing—by Indigenous peoples, with self-determined concerns, ideas, and priorities at the center—offers an important corrective to these reductive ideas. There's as much diversity and disagreement in Indigenous communities as in any other groups; there's never one single voice or perspective that speaks for all, no single way of being that captures the complexity of experience." Be it the Aborigines of Australia or the indigenous

communities in America, Canada or elsewhere, the concerns of palimpsest are the same and as pertinent as the rewriting of narratives of marginalised tribes in India.

Till the recent past, attempts at historicizing and analysing the songs and stories of the indigenous communities have been through the theoretical prisms of western models - through a dichotomous and rational approach of mapping, categorising and subsequent analysis. This is true of scholars in India as well. Instead of turning the lens inwards, more harm is done than good as the voice of the native gets subsumed in academic rigour and discipline. A paradigmatic shift in research is needed, a methodology which takes into account the diversity, pluralities, and inter-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary engagements of the cultural and communicative practices of the indigenous tribes. The art of storytelling for them is sacral in nature and religion, ritual and the banal form a comfortable alliance in this art form. Research objectives, methodology and practices must account for folk memories as a powerhouse of archives, deconstruct earlier interpretations and build strong bonds with indigenous communities to unravel the layers of discourse and ideologies for a far more nuanced understanding. Several universities have set up departments of folklore and indigenous studies to encourage a systematic and methodical approach to understanding and analysing the narratives and cultural practices of the indigenous. Initiatives and funding by the Government and Institutions will encourage and accelerate research to safeguard the rich diversity inherent in the literatures of the indigenous. We have come a long way but there is a lot more ground to be covered to benefit from the voices of the indigenous and their stories.