

Indian Journal of Modern Research and Reviews

This Journal is a member of the '*Committee on Publication Ethics*'

Online ISSN: 2584-184X



Review Article

A Critical Study of Folktales of Maharashtra

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ABSTRACT

This study gives a full critical look at the folktales of Maharashtra, focusing on their unique cultural, religious, and social aspects. Marathi folktales are similar to folktales from throughout the world in some ways, but they are very much based on Hindu traditions and the Marathi way of life. The study divides the stories into seven main groups: myths, fairy tales, legends, romantic tales, fables, joyful tales, and cumulative tales. It gives samples of each kind. These stories not only have mystical aspects and magical themes, but they also give a detailed picture of everyday life, caste relationships, and gender roles in traditional Maharashtrian culture. The stories' symbolism, character archetypes, and cultural values are very important. The report also talks about the history of collecting and writing down folktales in Maharashtra, mentioning important people who have helped the area. In the end, the study shows that Marathi folktales are important for maintaining regional identity, moral lessons, and social and religious continuity.

KEYWORDS: Marathi folktales, Indian folklore, Hindu tradition, Caste system, Domestic life, Magic and supernatural, Legends and myths, Oral tradition, Maharashtra culture, Gender roles in folklore, Fairy tales and religious rituals.

INTRODUCTION

The folktales have been an eternal part of every culture for ages. When it comes to Indian folk tales, the country of diverse religions, languages, and cultures has a complete range of tales and short stories. Indian folktales have a wide range of stories and mythological legends, which emerge from all walks of life. The interesting stories range from the remarkable '*Panchatantram*' to '*Hitopadesha*', from '*Jataka*' to '*Akbar Birbal*'. Being full of moralistic values, Indian folklore makes perfect stories for children, which are required to be, instilled with right values. All these ancient stories have been passed from generation to generation, creating bondage of traditional values with present day generation. Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia, defines Folktale as: "Folktale is a general term for different varieties of traditional narrative. The telling of stories appears to be a cultural universal, common to basic and complex societies alike. Even the forms folktales take are certainly similar from culture to culture, and comparative studies of themes and narrative ways have been successful in showing these relationships. Also it is considered to be an oral tale to be told for everybody" [1].

Article History

- ISSN: 2584-184X
- Received: 06 Oct 2024
- Accepted: 22 Nov 2024
- Published: 29 Nov 2024
- MRR:2(11) Nov 2024: 67-71
- ©2024, All Rights Reserved
- Peer Review Process: Yes
- Plagiarism Checked: Yes

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There is similarity among the features of the Marathi folktales and the folktales in the other parts of the world. But some features are typical and are only found in the Marathi folktales. In Marathi folktales the element of magic is found profoundly. In Marathi myth and legends also 'magic' plays dominant role. And it is the specialty of fairytales. The magic is performed by the various Gods and the Goddesses, fairies, the giants, ghosts, magicians, animals, trees and plants etc. the tension, the climax of the story aroused because of the magic. Thus this is all the wonderful world of magic. In Marathi fairy tales all the incidents and the actions are of typical nature, e.g. the cruelty of some supernatural persons, the help offered by supernatural relatives or friends, use of magic objects by the her/heroine etc. The type and motif in Marathi folktales have similarity with the folktales in the different parts of the world. In it different types of people belonging to the different walks of life are described. Many characters are of symbolic type. And they are painted in the same manner in all the folktales. The happy ending, the magical assistance, the marriage test, magical transformation, magic objects etc. all these features of folktales are found in Marathi folktales also.

The special feature of Marathi folktales is that all these tales are related to Hindu religion only. All the description, the themes, the names of the people, places are Hindu. The description of temples, festivals and beliefs all deal with Hindu religion. All these tales describe the psychological attitude and mental frame of the Hindu society in Maharashtra. These tales predominantly sketch the royal families. The kings, the queens, the princes, the princesses, the ministers, the royal servants like royal barber, gardener, soldiers, commanders etc. Though more importance is given to the royal family, these tales also describe the overall Marathi society. All the classes in Marathi society are found here. We meet the people from various businesses like Brahmin, goldsmith, cobbler, blacksmith, potter, carpenter, grocer, barber, washer man, gardener, butcher, hawker, farmer, merchant, money lender, a maker and seller of glass bangles that is *kasar*, shepherd, weaver, cowboy etc. in these tales. The snake charmer, magician, juggler, conjurer, astrologer etc. these people show their skills. The judge, the village manager that is- *patil*, district officer that is-*mamledar*, the guards, the chieftain, the village officer who collects revenue for the government that is *khot*, the police chief that is-*kotwal*, soldier, divan, royal priest that is *rajguru*, the soldiers who guards the village gates-*weskari* etc. these government servants perform their duties.

The Marathi folktales do not bother to paint the courtesan, prostitute, the professional dancing girls etc., the people who are generally disgraced and neglected in the society. Though we find people who represented almost every class and caste in the society, but their inter relationship or conflict is not depicted in it. One another important feature of Marathi folktales is that these tales depict all these characters on domestic level and their domestic relationship is described. They also describe the royal families only on domestic level and do not speak about the

political life of the king or the relationship between the king and the society. But the depiction of the common man and his family/domestic life is mostly realistic.

The relationship and conflicts among husband and wife, parents, children, brother and sister, daughters-in-law and sisters-in-law etc. are described quite interestingly. Marathi folktales describe Maharashtrian culture perfectly. They represent Maharashtrian society. The four caste system, the excellence of Brahmins in the society, untouchability, the ban on intercaste marriage, the authority of the Brahmins only to read and learn the '*vedas*', and other religious scriptures, male dominated society, these and many more characteristics of Marathi society are brought to light through these tales.

As the study of Indian folk literature started, the study of Marathi folk literature also started at the same time. At the beginning the folk songs in Marathi were collected and edited on a large scale. By and by Marathi folktales were collected, edited and published. Mary Friyar published the folktales on Marathi in her edited book, '*Old Deccan Days*'. Mr. Chatre translated '*Esope's Tales*' in Marathi. Mr. Vaidya and Mr. Date also published two collections of Marathi folktales. Mr. Rajwade, Mr. Chapekar, Ms. Durgabai Bhagavat collected many folktales and wrote critical articles on them in the periodicals published by 'Bharat Itihas Sanshodhak Mandal' and 'Maharashtra Sahitya Patrica'. For the study and development of Marathi folk literature, 'The Maharashtra Rajaya Folk Literature Samittee' was founded in 1956. In '*Loksahityachi Ruprekha*', Durgabai Bhagwat has made the scientific attempt to describe and analyze the different types of Marathi folktales. Malatibai Dandekar also tried to describe the origin, development, types, characters and atmosphere of these folktales in her book, '*Lok Katha Kalpakta*'. Dr. Sarojini Babar's, '*Marathi Lokkatha*' is also important.

We can broadly divide Marathi folktales into the following types: 1) Myth 2) Fairy tales 3) Legends 4) Romantic tale or novella 5) Fables or animal tales 6) Merry tales and 7) Cumulative tales.

Myth: Myths are sacred narratives with a practical purpose. They deal principally with past events of cosmic and permanent significance, like the creation of heaven and earth or the coming of death into the world or with such everlasting mysteries as struggle between good and evil or life beyond grave. By recount what is believed to have happen in primeval ages they provide supernatural sanction and precedent for existing rituals, traditional behaviour and custom and the accepted pattern of tribal society. Stith Thompson talks about myth in his book *The Folktale*. He observed as:

"Of all words used to distinguish the classes of prose narrative, myth is most confusing. The difficulty is that it has been discussed too long and that it has been used in too many different senses. The history of such discussion is interesting but inconclusive" [2]. In so far as they account for what now is by what was in the beginning, they have etiological significance, but the true function

of a myth is not to provide explanation but to stabilize and unify the community or tribe to which it belongs. The myths are considered religious and holy, so that to make any kind of change in them is strictly prohibited by the tradition. The Gods already have supernatural powers. The sun, the moon, wind, rains, sky, stars, birds and animals have been personified and given supernatural powers. In Marathi the pure myths are little. There are lot of tales of rituals or the tales of procedures of religious ceremonies which are known as '*vrat katha*'.

Example: The Woman Whose Name Is 'Day Night'

Long long ago, there lived a woman, whose name was 'day night'. She had two sons—the sun and the moon and a daughter, *Tara* (star). Once her children were invited for feast. They went. The sun came back home, but he didn't bring food for his mother. So that from that time his house is constantly in the heat and the people do not see at him. Her second son, moon had brought little food for her. So that his house is in shadow, but people don't see at him all the time through out the month. But her daughter, *Tara* brought enough food for her mother, so that she lives constantly with her mother.

Fairy Tales: Fairy tales are not always about fairies, though they are always full of strange and wonderful happenings. Most often fairy tales are about ordinary people – men and women, boys and girls – who somehow get caught up in magical events. Fairies may or may not appear, to either help them or to hinder them. By 'fairy tale' we mean a continued narrative generally of a certain length, practically always in prose, serious on the whole, though humans not excluded, centering on one hero or heroine usually poor or destitute at the start, who after a series of adventures in which the supernatural element plays a conspicuous part attains his good and lives happily ever after. People know the element of imagination in the fairy tales. There is an exaggeration of every virtue or vice. For example, the hero or the heroine is too ideal and the villain is too cruel. Such characteristics give dramatic and magical atmosphere to the story. There are lots of fairy tales in Marathi. E.S. Hartland, in his '*Science of Fairy tales*', observed as:

"Under the influence of religious feeling the most mobile of races become conservative and hence traditions of a sacred character are handed down unchanged from father to son" [3].

The magical and supernatural power helps to the sorrowful hero/heroine. Some fairies help them or give them some magical thing to help them.

Example: The Bandicote Rat Bride: There was an old woman. She brought up one bandicote rat very dearly. Then she arranged her marriage with one man. That man married bandicote bride, but he was very ashamed of the people and so ordered his bride to live only in the upper storey of the house. The bride performed all the household works in the night. After some period God *Shankar* and Goddess *Parvati* blessed her and pulled out the nail out of the head of that bandicote rat and at once it converted into a beautiful

young woman. Then her husband became very happy and they lived happily.

Legends: Legend is traditional story of long long ago which is not definitely true. According to Stith Thompson this form of tale purports to be an account of an extraordinary happening believed to have actually occurred. Legend of the saga type like those of 'Arthur' or 'the Homeric Heroes' and the many stories of lands overwhelmed by the sea can perhaps be best described as twisted and broken fragments of history. They preserve traditions of heroic personages and of real or supposed historical happenings and contains a nucleus of true fact, heavily embellished, as a rule, by magical or romantic accretions or by borrowings from similar tales told elsewhere. They are concerned with particular places or individuals. The purpose of the legend is entertainment, to remember the virtues of the people in history and to guide the people to walk on a virtuous way. Marathi folktales are rich with legends. They deal with the people, places, incidents and flora and fauna from the ancient times to the modern day.

Example: 'Jeur':

There was a noble woman, *Baijabai*. She was very religious. Once she was going to the field to give meal to her husband. But on the road some soldiers stopped her and tried to tease her. They asked her to give them meal to eat. She told them that it was for her husband. But they were adamant and ordered her to give them meal in her basket. At last she opened her basket. In that basket there were only two *chapaties* and a bowlful of buttermilk. She prayed God and started to distribute the food to the soldiers. All the soldiers ate stomach full with those two *chapaties* and buttermilk. She was distributing enough food to all of them but her basket didn't become empty. Seeing this miracle all the soldiers ran away with fear. And *Baijabai* also disappeared on the hill. People found only her statue there. So that the village was also named as '*Jeur*'*.

*'Jeur' is Marathi word which means remaining food after meal. In this story, though the number of soldiers ate; the food remained in the basket.

Romantic Tales or Novella: The hero/heroine goes away from home to achieve something, the villain plays his/her tricks, but the hero/heroine wins with their intelligence, cleverness, sense of humour, patience and calmness. There are number of such kind of such kind of tales in Marathi.

Example: 'Chatura'-The Intelligent Young Woman:

Once upon a time there was a Prince. He wanted to marry, but he had one condition. He wanted to marry such kind of girl who must be intelligent though not beautiful. One Brahmin girl came ahead. Whose name was '*Chatura*' means intelligent girl. As a test the prince kept her in prison. There she made the friendship with the watchmen and started to wander out of the prison freely. She used to come back after some time. She started to learn dance at one

professional dancer. That dancer was often visited by the Prince. She made the Prince to fall in love with her with the help of her charms and dance. She became pregnant. Then once she asked for the ring of the Prince as a token and disappeared and went back to the prison. There she gave birth to a baby boy. When the Prince came to know this, he became very angry and came to the prison to punish her. At that time she showed him the ring given to her by him. She told him the whole story. He became very happy with her intelligence. He praised her and they married happily.

Fables: A fable is a story, often about animals, that points out some aspect of human behaviour and often has a moral attached to it. Many collections of fables exist such as the '*Panchatatram*' from ancient India, '*Aesop's Tales*' from ancient Greece, '*Phaedrus*' Tales' from ancient Rome, '*La Fontaine's Fables*' composed in France in the 17th century. Kenneth & Mary Clark in *Ethnology: A Folklore Reader* observed as:

"A fable is a short tale usually involving animal characters which express either implicitly or explicitly a moral principal"^[4]. The personification of the animals is the main feature of fable. In these tales the animals, birds, trees speak and think like human beings, behave like humans but while doing all these things the typical characteristics of those animals are also revealed. The different natures of the animals create humor in these tales. In Marathi such fables are very rare.

Example: The Crocodile and the Fox: Once upon a time, there lived a fox in the dark and deep forest. He was very cunning fellow. In the forest there was a river. In the river live many crocodiles. All of them were very cruel but dull headed. One day the fox saw that on the other bank of the river there was a tree of black berries and there were sweet black berries on the tree and the ripened were scattered under the tree. The fox wanted to eat them, but he could not swim. So he thought a plan. He saw that a crocodile was taking rest on the bank of the river. He started to talk with her. He praised her lot. He told her about the black berries and asked her if she allowed him to sit on her back and took her on the other bank of the river, he would give her plenty of black berries to eat. To listen to the name of black berries, crocodile became very happy and at once became ready to take him on the other bank of the river. The clever fox sat on her back and they started their journey. Now the fox started to praise her that her back was very smooth and he felt lucky that he got a chance to sit upon such a smooth back. The crocodile became very happy and safely took him on the other bank of the river. As the fox climbed down safely on the ground, he ran away as fast as he could and never showed his face to the crocodile again. Thus, Marathi folktales are some special feature. Marathi folktales perfectly represent the Marathi society. The typical characteristics of Marathi society, religious beliefs, types of worship, various kinds of Gods and Goddesses, virtues, vices,

taboos, rituals, festivals, worships, '*wrat*' of Gods, domestic life of the people, love, affection, quarrels in the family are expressed in these tales. Folktales represent the social, cultural, religious atmosphere of Maharashtra region. It is already mentioned that Marathi folktales are about Hindu people and Hindu religion. So that different kinds of worships, pilgrimages, rituals, festivals are presented here. Marathi people give much more importance to pilgrimages and it is considered as pious. There are so many tales about *Jejuri-yatra*, *Panderpur-yatra* etc. To perform an oblation or '*yagna*' is always considered very pious and to achieve something people in these tales perform oblation. Some typical beliefs of Hindu religion like: God is Omnipresent, God '*Brahma*' has created the universe, Goddess *Laxmi* becomes happy because of hard and honest work done by her disciples, if a person takes some vow-'*nawas*', then he has to fulfill that promise or vow, it is good to worship god, almsgiving is important, benefaction is good, chaste women are considered as good as goddesses for example people worship these women for their chastity-*Ahilya*, *Sita*, *Gandhari*, *Sawitri*, *Draupadi* etc. , hospitality is good etc. all these beliefs are carried on traditionally. Then the Marathi folktales tell us about the four caste system in the Marathi society, male-domination, joint-family system etc. In these tales some people are always painted in the same manner. This shows the typical characteristics of those people e.g. the Brahmins are always considered as noble and lofty, only they have the rights to take education in Sanskrit, to perform religious rituals etc., they are always described as intelligent but poor, the goldsmith '*sonar*' is painted as greedy for gold and he steals the gold in spite of watch on him. The potter '*kumbhar*', '*teli*', gardener '*mali*' are always painted as good people in the society. Marathi folktales love to paint the barber '*napit*', as talkative, liar and backbiter. The priest '*pujari*' or '*gurav*' in the temple is described as greedy as he takes all the money and things offered to the idol in the temple by the people. In this way the folktales in Maharashtra throws light on the typical features of Marathi society.

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