VALUE OF CHANGING FORMS: INDIAN FOLKTALES

FROM COLONIALISM TO BOLLYWOOD

In folklore studies it is not possible to be unaware of change – the process of study itself being part of the change. One could say that CHANGE is the keyword for understanding folklore as phenomenon and as individual texts. 'Change' in folklore exists at many levels – as change in performance, change as perceived by the performers, change as perceived by the folklorist, changes caused by technologies, changes caused by ideologies, changes created by designers, changes created by commerce, changes that glamorize, changes that demonize, changes that threaten existence, changes that promise rejuvenation, change that makes folktales disappear, change that brings them to the fore, changes in language, changes in form, changes in modes of dissemination, changes in forms of reception – the list can go on! When we assess change it is imperative that we identify a situation, a point of time as base line and then see the changes that emerge henceforth. This baseline happens to be defined by the following two universally accepted features – that folktale was originally oral expression, and that in modern history its orality was replaced first by the medium of printing and then by the audio-visual language of cinema.

Change has often been seen as regrettable, and certainly as deficient of the features of orality. While this may very well be true, but it is probably also true, though not often stated, that change causes the appearance of another phenomenon and another text which has its own features that erase the deficiency of orality. And yet, if the folktale continues to exist, then the change has created a new phenomenon and a new text which also has a different value from that of the authentic, oral text. It is through the creation of this value, rather of new value, that the new form seeks to establish itself over and above the older one, and the more valuable it becomes, more the significance it gains in society and culture and as such becomes as important for the understanding of a culture as folktale has been.

In this paper today I am going to discuss two particular types of changes in the form and value of some Indian folktales caused by colonial and cinematic translations. These are changes that have internationally influenced the perception of Indian folktales in academia and in popular spheres of communication.

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Colonial Globalization of a Local Hero

One of the biggest projects of colonialism was the translation of orality into written word. The British Empire, for example, was constituted by continents that were predominantly oral – Asia, Africa, Australia and the Caribbean. All knowledge about these continents and the people living there was derived from oral sources, and within this the collections of folktales were a special category as it served two purposes – of creating knowledge for scholars and administrators in England, and of entertaining the general public. Colonial folktales' collections could not even be thought of without translation. The value and the change were both connected to this process of translation. Indeed, it is a unique case of translation - where the translated text was more important than the original. For example, none of the colonial collectors kept the manuscripts in the vernacular languages. The status of English texts has gained even more significance due to this absence.

In India, which then included the present Pakistan and Bangladesh, one of the most favorite regions for the colonial British folklorists was Punjab, today divided between India and Pakistan. Out of a dozen colonial British folklorists whose work had scientific significance, four collected folktales in Punjab. Of these, the three-volume work *Legends of Panjab* (1885) by Richard Carnac Temple tops the list, followed closely by three different books by Charles Swynnerton on the same subject. There were two common elements in the works of the two: one, that both had recorded from professional narrators called *mirasis*, and two, some of the tales were common to both the collections. We shall return to the subject of the narrators a little later, but right now let us stay with the common narratives. Of the common narratives – one became particularly important.

This was the narrative or narratives of Raja Rasalu [King Rasalu]. R C Temple had recorded a long versified version of the narrative and swore by its authenticity. Swynnerton had presented his collection in a different form which was more accessible for the lay readers in England and had produced an entire volume titled *Adventures of Raja Rasalu*. The narratives were extremely popular in Punjab and Raja Rasalu was seen as a historical figure of the yore. Raja Rasalu seems to have been a Hindu ruler in the north-west of India and may have ruled in the region currently extending from Pakistan into the present day Afghanistan.

The narratives establish him not as a fabulous oriental king of the medieval times, but as a brave young man who is dispossessed by his royal father and establishes his own area of influence fighting his battles with wit and bravery. So, Raja Rasalu became a story that the colonial collectors found not only interesting, but important.

Temple and Swynnerton both wrote about it and differed significantly in their translation and interpretation of it. This difference that became public in the newspapers as in the learned meetings of the Folk Lore Society, London, reflects the core issues involved in the interpretation of Indian folktales during colonial times. The second half of the nineteenth century was dominated by diffusionists in folklore theory – scholars who believed that similarity in Indo-European folktales was to be explained by one single origin of them all, and that this point of origin was India. The diffusionists were challenged by solar mythologists – those who believed that the common elements were among people who were sun worshippers, and that the record of sun worship was coded in various metaphors in stories. Both the perspectives searched for Indo-European unities and were challenged by historical-geographical school which wanted to distill historical elements from folklore, but not accept this at face value. Historical elements need to be cross-checked with more dependable sources. Raja Rasalu - a local folk hero of Punjab got caught in this international debate.

Temple declared his position on the issue "I have been unearthing all that can be ascertained about Raja Rasalu, the King Arthur of Panjab. To my surprise about two years ago I found that in the Westminster Review a mythologist had duly appropriated the hero as a solar myth." [TEMPLE] It was actually Swynnerton's translated version of the story which lent itself to the interpretation that Raja Rasalu was a solar myth – the symbol of energetic, forward looking, brave, honest, and importantly, male force. Swynnerton himself was a missionary, somewhat charmed by the beauty of India which was made accessible to him by the Empire, and made comfortable by civil servants who hosted him and facilitated his research. R C Temple, on the other hand, was not only experiencing the Empire, but actively helping in creating it. He was a military officer in Punjab and part of the battalions that marched into Afghanistan and captured some territory. Temple was a supporter of the historical geographical school. He was more definite about what the word folklore

means for him: "Lore means and has meant learning in general, but […] I think it is fair to say that "lore" nowadays, and at any rate in this connection, is learning of the kind that is opposed to science, meaning by "science" ascertained knowledge. […] Unascertained knowledge is, of course, apt to be very wrong…" [Temple 1886:194]. He was of the opinion that Rasalu and other such legends were to be cross checked with historical records before conclusions can be drawn. And here we enter the other interesting side of the argument – what can be considered a historical record, or, is folktale a historical record? More specifically, Temple wanted to answer the question, whether the popular, brave, honest and energetic figure of Raja Rasalu had been a real ruler of the Indians. To accept Rasalu's historicity he needed records more definite than legends. But records of that nature were not to be found, not only for Rasalu, but for many other matters of Indian history. Temple admitted and yet denied historical identity to Rasalu by saying "… it is capable of historical proof that Rasalu was a popular leader on to whose name has been hung, as a convenient peg, much of the floating folklore of the Panjab". He was of the opinion that the tales surrounding Raja Rasalu "are by no means confined to that hero, but are the general property of the heroes of India, told of this one or that, as the occasion arises" [204]. Temple dismissed the possibility that tales of Raja Rasalu might have some historical content by saying that the characteristics of Rasalu were common to all folk heroes of India and there was no historical evidence to suggest that in this case these characteristics were of the real person. To accept these as such would be tantamount to accepting Indians' own version of their history, but colonialism implied rewriting the history of the colonized. Temple was unwilling to grant a historical status to Rasalu, and did so citing the lack of objective evidence. Stories themselves were no record, because they were STORIES that shared elements with other Indian stories. But, on the other hand, Indian folktales were regularly interpreted to explain socio-cultural phenomena. Temple too used the legends he had collected to comment on many issues of Indian society, particularly social ills. In an article on the feature of Indian folktales Temple points to the frequent mention of the desire for a male child. From this occurrence he moves on to the reality " A desire so universal, so strong, so important to the peasantry necessarily finds expression […] in the acts of daily life, sometimes of a very serious nature". Temple then goes on to tell some shocking tales of infanticide and human sacrifice. Interestingly, in all such matters Temple treats folktales as

"ascertained knowledge". In another article he says "In the Legends we have distinct proof of this [cannibalism], where faqirs eat up the body of a famous leech in order to obtain his curative powers..." [Temple 1899:403]

And yet, details regarding the narrators of tales were systematically not included. For example the *mirasi* narrators of Raja Rasalu would have narrated the story in a combination of verse and prose, accompanied by at least one musical instrument, often more, and sometimes the narrators would have performed the heroic exploits of Raja Rasalu. The *mirasis* of Punjab would have had their peculiar costume and style of narration – about which colonial collectors told us nothing.

What we see in the example of the treatment of Raja Rasalu is that in the colonial context there are many layers of translation underlying and overlying the linguistic translation of Indian legends. A disjunction entered here between 'scientific' understanding of history and the local, or rather 'LORAL' to coin a term, perception of history. This continues to remain – all such narratives can be believed in by the people, but that belief may not be recognized by institutions of education, history and the state. When Temple says that Rasalu is just like other folk heroes of India, he diminishes the importance of an oral text which he collected precisely because it was important for the native populace. Once the narrative is disconnected from the element of belief, its status changes in society. Indian folktales and folk heroes, in spite of their popularity, never became included in education curricula, not even in post-independence India. These are changes created at academic and popular levels, and cannot be reversed.

Colonial folktales collections gave Indian folktales an international identity, but sans the language and interpretation of their carriers. Translation and interpretation belonged to the collector who changed their value through these two acts.

The pre-colonial value of Indian folktales changed in the colonial times, also for Indians, who were systematically taught to believe that folktales are pre-modern narratives which are as such disconnected from their modernity. The image created by colonial folklorists was of a beautiful country rich in folklore, but full of backward, superstitious people practicing a number of social ills which are reflected in the tales. The large numbers of folktale collections published by colonial translators show that there was immense interest in the subject among scholars and general public in

England. The image of India emphasized by folktale collectors created a new tale – a tale about India – which became more popular than any folktale. I have elsewhere termed it *A Folktale Called India*. This folktale got communicated to the Indians too. Its integration in 'Indian' perceptions in the course of history finds reflection in academic circles in terms of the status of colonial collections as standard collections of Indian folktales across the world that are constantly reprinted. At the popular level the folktale called India finds ever new expression in the Bollywood films.

In the second part of my paper I want to explore how the icon of Indian culture industry – the Bollywood films – relate with images of India based in folklore and folklife created by colonial folklore collectors. We will also ascertain how the films themselves create changes and new values. And in the third part of this paper the colonial and the Bollywood examples may let us compare the kind of changes that have been experienced at the two planes.

Indianization and Globalization

Cinema is the international language of the industrialized world – the audio and the visual being capable of communicating beyond the language of words. And yet, it has very local forms of expression that differ from each other essentially – like the Bollywood and the Hollywood films. The most important difference between the two is not of technology, but of the form of storytelling: Bollywood narrates differently from Hollywood in form and in content. These differences are becoming increasingly well-known, and the most obvious and visible difference is, that a Bollywood film is never without song, music and dance. Song and dance are not only essential parts of these films, but essential tools of storytelling – they do not merely create an interlude but carry the movement of the story. Within the span of a song the story really moves on in leaps and bounds, or is narrated at an altogether different plane. I have elsewhere traced in more details the relationship of this form of storytelling to forms of oral storytelling in India – the performance of folktales was often a combined expression of narrative, song and dance, particularly the combination of the first two. In the following I will take up two examples: one in which the folktale called India, created by the British, gains an altogether different meaning, and two where well-known folktales have been made into films.

So, the example number 1, that is the transformation of *the folktale called India*, comes from a filmmaker of the 1970s – maker of super-hit movies with overt patriotism, often romantic-cultural-patriotism, but very conscious of the folktale called India. One of these films was *Purab aur Pashchim* (East and West) made in the context of the post independent India still struggling to find its own identity. Our hero of the film gets faced with a similar situation among the ex-pat community in London who believe that India's contribution to the world of science is "zero": He responds – with a narrative-song about the discovery of mathematical 'zero' in ancient India, which begins with the lines "When my India gave zero, the world learned to count.." In the same film when the hero returns to India with the anglicized Indian heroine and shows her INDIA – it is the rural India. Please notice the totality of the visuals – apparently a rural field where agricultural and cultural activities are happening simultaneously and the cultural activities reflect folk performances of different regions.

[**CLIP: P&P.** Song about the rural/beautiful India].

No subtitles, so an oral translation:

Nowhere else have I seen such a beautiful morning..

Like the smile of a child..

Or somewhwre far away in a temple the sound of flute…

The pleasant easterly wind has arrived.

The queen of seasons has arrived.

My feet won't stop…

The whole village is dancing

On love youth has arrived.

While this is rather an overt and conscious playing up of the folktale called India, the paradigm has been common to many Bollywood films.

From this indirect relationship of Bollywood to folk forms of storytelling, let us consider some films directly related with famous folktales. One of these is actually of Arabic origin, but well-known throughout the subcontinent as a tale located in its own Muslim community. This is the great romantic-tragic story of Laila-Majnu which used to be performed by the *mirasis* of Punjab. I would like to show you the

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beginning of the film and you may notice an audio-visual translation of a typical oral style of beginning such long narratives.

[**CLIP Laila Majnu 1**   BEGINNING OF LAILA MAJNU]

The beginning literally translates an oral style of entering the narrative, but then the Bollywood style has to take over and construct the narrative around a hero and heroine with attendant villains and comedians. What we want to see here is whether the identity of the narrative as folktale in any way determines the cinematic translation of it? Yes, it does – as other signs and symbols are also then derived from ethnic contexts. Film story is visually located in the region where the folk story was located, and the music and song too tend to be in the ethnic styles of the region. In the Indian context the religion of the imagined community too plays a role, but the film has to appeal to audiences of all religions to be a commercial success. So the makers are faced with quite a challenge – to retain ethnic authenticity and create modern, nationally and even internationally acceptable narrative. This traversing the fine line between tradition and modernity, between religiosity and secularity is clearly visible in one of the songs: the narrative is based in feudal Muslim community, the heroine is barred from meeting the lover-hero, the hero is so desperate that he has no recourse left but to seek divine intervention. The Bollywood film maker takes him to a Sufi saint's *mazar* (holy grave). Now this is a choice which allows the trademark element of Bollywood – song and dance - to enter without contradicting the restrictions on music in Islam: In Sufi shrines, music is promoted, unlike in the mainstream Islamic mosque. Additionally, women are also allowed in Sufi shrines. And finally, the genre of music at Sufi shrines – Quwwali – is a folk form which is Indian in its origin though identified as devotional Islamic thought. The genre emerged in the middle ages when Islam came to India where the religious activities of Hindus almost always required music and song, and occasional drama too. Quwwali emerged as a syncretic synthesis of the two religious practices and became very popular among Hindus and Muslims, and of course, is a favorite genre of Bollywood. So, here in the filmic retelling of the folk narrative of Laila Majnu, the romantic couple meets at a Sufi shrine where the hero can say what he wishes to, publicly yet discreetly, and in a form that would engage audiences of the two big religions in India. And it matches even

philosophically, because in Sufism God is addressed as a beloved – a feature shared by many Hindu traditions. Have a look for yourself.

[**CLIP: Laila Majnu 2** RISHI KAPPOR AT MAZAR]

In many ways the language of cinema makes possible the narration at another plane. An oral narrator would narrate in one genre, but the film mixes many folk genres to create a new kind of authenticity. Whether the oral narrators ever took the couple to a sufi shrine or not, leave alone suddenly singing in another genre altogether, the Bollywood film can and does do it. This narration that seems simplistic and bizarre to a more literate audience is rather complex in its layered construction – the layers that emerge due to the context of film makers as narrators of folktales. In this context creating a commercial super-hit is the ultimate goal, but the challenge is to appeal to highly varied audience. Quite often the attempt is successful. And the film makes super profits from the use of uncopyrighted pieces of narratives and songs, and quite often even by use of folk artists who remain without identity.

The use of folktales has continued and such films emerge at regular intervals. But every time the expression changes, marching in step with the current Bollywood style. Most recently it has been a story relatively lesser known, but otherwise a story that has had its own post colonial history. First of all translated into Hindi and also adapted creatively by one of the first promoters of folklore in independent India – Vijay Dan Detha – an author of great repute – who is known to have written stories based on folktales of Rajasthan. This is the story of a young woman married to a man who deserts her soon after marriage to go away on family business. A ghost falls in love with her and assumes the guise of her husband, and lives with her like a very loving husband. The real one returns at the end and the dilemma begins the climax. Vijay Dan Detha's story was translated into English by a fiery feminist in 1970s and has recently been made into a film by art house film makers. I would like to show you how the main actors, director and script writer related with the folktale through their interviews.

[**VIDEO CLIP: PAHELI**]

This film did not achieve popular success. This time the folktale vanished in the background of discussion, and the focus of discourse was the designer dresses, designer jewelry and big stars.

The art filmmaker followed the commercial routine far more faithfully, but less creatively. Rajasthan is today the poster region of tourism industry – a tourism defined at its upper end by heritage palace hotels of the erstwhile royals who were not allowed to remain in power after independence. In reality it is a state extremely rich in varieties of folk performers. The film based on a folktale is actually shot in touristic locales and in false sets. What we see here is the increasing distance between the narrative and its ethnic integrity. This distance is not a conscious artistic distance that the new narrator filmmaker wants to bring in, but the distance between this new narrator and the folktale. The context in which the tale is based is known to the narrator as a tourist. And tourism is the other industry which thrives on the promise of providing the folktale called India. The problem is that this is a false tale having no unity of language, spirit and nation, and as such a bad form for the folktales of India. In comparison with recent Hollywood films like *Pan's Labyrinth*, Bollywood treats folk narratives literally and romantically, trying to recreate an imagined reality of folktales, and this imagination is often very akin to the images of India created by colonial rulers. A modernist, or post modernist, aesthetics of folk narratives in Bollywood is yet to appear. But the present form of Bollywood's relationship with folktales is rooted in colonial representations and would not have been possible without that precedence.

[Projection off]

Indian Folktales from Colonialism to Bollywood

In this final section of the paper I would like to briefly reflect upon what has happened to Indian folktales through colonialism and cinema. Let us return to the baseline – that the relationship between folktale and orality is genetic – and then see how that has changed due to displacement of orality by translation, colonialism and cinema.

German pioneer folklorist Johann Gottfried Herder, the inventor of the term folksong, talked of folklore as representative of the unity of language, spirit and nation. In other words as a composite symbol of culture. This idea is common to the most popular notions about folklore across the world and I would call it the 'Herderian Unity' and in the following check out what happened to the Herderian unity of Indian folktales. By this I do not mean to reaffirm Herder's idea, because I do not believe in its existence as a continued state-of-being. I believe folktales have been

changing for as long as they have been there, but at smaller scales of time the Herderian unity may emerge and remain stable for a while. So, the form of Indian folktales in Punjab when the British started making interventions had in all likelihood emerged in the middle ages and gained a continuum in value. This momentary Herderian Unity is our baseline here to understand and evaluate changes in form and value that emerge in the colonial and post-colonial contexts of Indian folktales. The colonial translation projects cared for the narrative, but nothing else: not for the language of narration, nor style, and least of all for the narrators. It treated folktale as an object that could be collected from the field, detached from its location, and replanted in translation in another locale. In this process the Indian folktale became more widely known and more widely discussed, but it certainly lost the unity of language, spirit and nation. It experienced its first modern disjunction that was composite in itself: disjunction from orality, language and spirit at one go. But then, the very definition of modernity is based on its disjunction from tradition.

Now let us see what happens in the Bollwood style translation/transformation: the folktale may be from any Indian language or dialect, but is translated into the Bollywood style Hindi. In this translation, however, the original language does not completely disappear. So when the narrative is located in Muslim community, Hindi is liberally peppered with Urdu; when it is based in Rajasthan then a Hindi dominated by Rajasthani accent. Cinema is capable of going beyond – of integrating the style of narration, but Bollywood is not interested in that; it is also interested essentially in the narrative. Not only does it not care for the oral genre of narration, it freely mixes genres of narration, music and dance. Herderian unity is not forgotten, but created artificially. The unity is superficial, but commercially very powerful within and outside India, probably because it conforms to the already internationally known folktale called India. The truth is disjunction from orality, its narrators and its genre.

The two examples – colonial and Bollywood transformations of Indian folktales – show that DISJUNCTION is a constant element in the change in the value of any form; or the form of the change and its value; or the value of changing forms. DISJUNCTION does not have an ideology of its own. What defines disjunction for me is that it bursts the Herderian Unity from within and without. It cannot be predicted in advance whether disjunction will be only destructive, nor can it be

predicted as to what kind of new value will actually be created by it. What seems more certain is that every created value will change over time.

I think the tenacity of folktales lets them acquire new Herderian Unities. So, the translations of Indian folktales by colonial collectors created images about India, its languages, its spirit and its people at a far wider scale. The colonial collectors too claim that there is unity of language, spirit and nation behind the Indian folktales, and yet they change the form and value of precisely these. The Herderian Unity is falsified at one plane and reconstituted at another plane. These planes are connected in time and space. The change in the value of Indian folktales that the colonial collectors cause gets reconstituted in time somewhat later, when the Indians themselves claim these to be their 'own' tales. For example, when a university in Punjab reprints Temple's collections in 1960s with pride and without a postcolonial commentary on it! Or when A. K. Ramanujam publishes a volume *Folktales from India* in 1970s in USA compiled largely through selections from colonial folktales translations! Or when Bollywood generally replays the folktale called India again and again! Or when tourism industry internationally uses fragments of the images inspired by a European folktale called India. Although partially this may be a residue from the colonial mentality, yet they are changing the value of colonial translations. And this analysis of Indian folktales lets me conclude that the relationship between Herderian Unity and Disjunction is dialectical. So, the university in Punjab actually makes available to contemporary students objectively the biggest and the best collection of Punjab folktales; Ramanujam makes a free selection from colonial sources and is appreciated internationally for his contribution; Bollywood propagates a popular form of cultural identity through folktales; and the tourism industry earns revenue for the Indian state.

All these are, however, still using the form and value created by colonial translations. Postcolonial and postmodernist projects have not created radically new value of Indian folktales, and in my opinion, they cannot, until they focus on the location of Herderian Unity in the specific context of Indian folktales. In this specific context the Herderian unity is located in the professional performer of orality who has been completely neglected and marginalized by colonial and Bollywood translators . Change of form and value are constant features of folktales, but in the last one hundred and fifty years this change in the form and value of Indian folktales is traceable, and it is rather dramatic. I hope you would agree. Thank You.

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DVD containing the cited films' clips enclosed with this paper.