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Examining the Folk-Mythology Aporia : *Baromasha* and Revisionism in Chandarbatī's *Ramayan*

Saumyadeep Bhattacharya and Bidisha Kanha

Abstract

The genre of mythology and folklore are difficult to distinguish as mentioned by H.R. Ellis Davidson, who states, "Both myth and folklore are terms notoriously difficult to define." However, a general differentiation might be attempted in the Indian context, where the prevalence of mythology in the centre as well margins of human society is an accepted phenomenon, whereas folklores have remained in the margins for a long time. What intrigues the most in the collusion of mythology and folklore are certain novel creations such as in the *Ramayan* by Chandrabati. This work is significant on multiple grounds, the primary of which is the fact that no other known record exists of a woman attempting the re-creation of an epic poem before Chandrabati. One of the significant aspects of his creation is the inclusion of the *Baromasha* (song for 12 months) in her *Ramayan*. This formative recalibration of one of the most well-known epics of the Indian subcontinent deserves an extensive evaluation considering the signification of such ingenious application of a folk element in the structuring of a mythological narrative. This article intends to shed light on the brilliance of the concoction of mythology, folktale, gender and revisionism as witnessed in the brilliance of Chandrabati's *Ramayan*, which serves as a precursor of feminist revisionist narratives in the Indian context.

Keywords: Chandrabati, *Ramayan*, *Baromasha*, Mythology, Folklore, Revisionism

Introduction

The genre of folklore is a complex one. Considering the variety of ingredients that make up the gamut of the discipline, it is interesting to note that the multifarious attributes of the genre adds to the



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Saumyadeep Bhattacharya and Bidisha Karmakar

Abstract

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Introduction

The genre of folklore is a complex one. Considering the variety of ingredients that make up the gamut of the discipline, it is interesting to note that the multifarious attributes of the genre adds to the

complexity and hence the appeal of the genre. Considering this, the word is said to include the following:

the word 'folk-lore' a folklorist means myths, legends, proverbs, folk songs, folk music, folk dance, ballads, folk cults, folk gods and goddesses, rituals, festivals, magic, witchcraft, folk art and craft and a variety of forms of artistic expression of oral cultural or rural and tribal folks or 'unlettered' city dwellers that bind man to man. (Sen Gupta 37)

It is interesting to note that in a majority of cultures, the most ancient form of knowledge is considered to have arisen from some or the other oral tradition. However, what may be considered in a more concrete manner is the fact that these domains of popular knowledge have sustained their popularity with the combined effort of a group of people who were invested enough or entertained by these forms adequately to keep them in circulation. This propagation of folk tradition is symptomatic of the growth and proliferation of the cultural consciousness of people. A.K. Ramanujan, in his essay "Who Needs Folklore" states the following:

For starters I for one need folklore as an Indian studying India. It pervades my childhood, my family, my community. It is the symbolic language of the non-literate parts of me and my culture. Even in a large modern city like Bombay or Madras, even in Western-style nuclear families with their 2.2 children, folklore is only a suburb away, a cousin or a grandmother away.

It thus follows that at any given moment folklores are the micro narratives that emerge from the living residents of an era. Their propagation is essentially dependent on their acceptability and the entertainment quotient they promise. More importantly, a rigorous study of folklore would unveil prevalent cultural politics of a time. While talking about the scope that folklore studies occupy, D.K. Bhattacharya comments thus:

...I have always argued with him about the need to re-emphasise Folklore studies in ccAnthropology. Yet to him and many other structural-functionalists there is 'no Anthropology' in such studies.

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This is my humble thinking about Folklore which I would like to resurrect Anthropology on this platform. (Bhattacharya 2)

In the Indian context, folklore enjoys such a rich and varied existence that Indian folklore tradition is considered a storehouse of intricate and intertwined cultural knowledge, a fact expressed in a personal letter by Dr. M Eder, Editor, "Asian Folklore Studies", Tokyo, who claims, "Indian folklore in all probability is the most complicated in the world, such a long historical past, so many ethnic and linguistic groups." (qtd in Sen Gupta 3). Sankar Sen Gupta comments on the origin and nature of Bengali folklore, while Carola Erica Lunz comments on a segment of the existing folklores in the Bengali countryside. In the latter book, the author concentrates on a singular form and particularly comments on the 'Bhabapagla', a name synonymous with religious songs by an ascetic devoted to the worship of goddess Kali. In various such works, rigorous studies have been conducted to understand the essence of Bengali folklore. It is interesting to understand that the term Bengali folklore is not delimited to the geographical area of contemporary Bengal but transcends to reach out to a culture of a combined linguo-cultural heritage. Thus, Bengali folklore cannot be considered to be limited to West Bengal but is inclusive of the cultural landscape of Bangladesh as well, as seen in the title of the book by Sankar Sen Gupta, *A Study of Folklore Tales of Bengal: West Bengal and East Pakistan*.

In the domain of folklore, much like the domain of mythology, it can be well imagined that the areas dominated by women have undergone structured suppression. While mythological revisioning has started gaining ground particularly with respect to the representation of the women characters of the myths, the same cannot be said for the domain of folklore. The struggle in the domain of folklore is rather different. While the gamut of myths that have been re-imagined in Tulsidas' *Ramcharitmanas*, Kamban's *Ramayana* and the rest, the characterization of the women characters in these individual renditions had hardly undergone much alteration; it is only with the work of recent authors such as Yagnaseni by Pratibha Ray, *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, *Five Lords yet None a Protector* by Saoli Mitra, *Lanka's Princess* by Kavita Kane, *Mandodari* by Koral Dasgupta that one can find re-conceptualization of the women characters of the tales. It is therefore clear from the

...of representation that a significant issue in the manner of representation is the gender of the author. While Devdutt Pattanaik has undertaken the task of revisiting mythological narratives, even his works seemed to have shied away from creative reimagining of the women characters and maintain a distanced stance from commenting on the vilification of characters such as Kaikeyi and Surpanakha. A. K. Ramanujan in his seminal work "Three Hundred Ramayanas" has talked about the existence of numerous Ramayanas and supported the multiplicity of narratives, but the element of re-thinking the roles cast upon women remains unspoken about. It is rather disheartening to witness that works by Chandrabati and Molla do not find mention in his work. However, the benefit of doubt resounds in the comment of Prof. Alan Dundes, who mentions, "...The opportunities of folklore research in India is unparalleled anywhere in the world" (qtd. in Sen Gupta 17).

Data Source and Methodology

This research paper uses an eclectic nature of resource papers spanning published articles, books and theses, both online and in physical copies. The materials were collected over a period of time and some were specifically sought after the conceptualization of this research article. Qualitative methodology was followed with emphasis on literary analysis of the texts. Comparative understanding of texts was conducted after a literature review of materials to provide a holistic overview.

Discussion

The year of publication of "Three Hundred Ramayanas" was 1987. Since then, while revisionism has gained prominence, Chandrabati's Ramayan continues to suffer neglect. The only notable scholarly discussion is by Nabanita Dev Sen in "Rewriting the Ramayana: Chandrabati and Molla". While such neglect may be attributed to a time when women were denied educational agency, its continued under-valuation raises questions about the reception of women's writing. It has been argued that the work was ignored because it does not conform to epic conventions. However, this very departure invites critical engagement. Structured as a three-part ballad, the text

foregrounds Sita's trials during captivity through the Baromasha (song of twelve months). Nabanita Dev Sen aptly observes:

To the contrary, Chandrabati ignores the war and describes it through a Baromaasi, a woman's song about her everyday sorrows, narrated by Sita herself. Sita devotes only two couplets to the epic battle because she saw it in a dream. It is not surprising, therefore, that Chandrabati's retelling of the Ramayana, with its disregard for epic conventions, was labelled as all wrong.

This is where the confluence between the folklore tradition of Bengal merges with the tradition of mythopoeic imagination. The difference between mythology and folklore has been established by Theodore Gaster, who comments:

Folklore is that part of people's culture which is preserved consciously or unconsciously, in beliefs and practices, customs or observations of general currency, in myths, legends and tales of common acceptance, and in arts and crafts which express the temper and genius of a group rather than of an individual. (qtd. in Davidson, 132)

However, H. R. Ellis Davidson is unsatisfied with this definition and states that he would prefer to deduct myths from Gaster's framework. He adopts the perspective of Joseph Fontenrose and defines myth as a "...traditional story accompanying rituals, a story with a definite plot, purporting to tell of occasions when some institution or cult, or certain rites and festivals, had their beginning, and of the original act which set the precedent for this." (Davidson 132).

Folklore, as a genre, reflects gender differentiation within the cultural milieu of Bengal. Rural Bengal provided a space for feminine performance, largely confined to the domestic sphere. While explaining women's roles in Hindu households, Devdutt Pattanaik highlights the link between femininity and chastity, a practice associated with the well-being of the household. Pattanaik states:

Sat is the product of a totally domesticated womb. It forms the bedrock of a stable society. Belief in Sat was and still is the most powerful means of ensuring a woman's fidelity in Hindu society. It mentally pressures a woman to be faithful under all circumstances.

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... her husband is alive, her children healthy, and her
... She is respected in society as an auspicious
... invited to all wedding and birth ceremonies. If she is
... her household collapses and her husband dies. She becomes
... widow, shunned by all." (The Goddess in India, 117)
... between feminine virtues, particularly chastity, and
... well-being is rooted in the socio-cultural outlook of Indian
... although the detailed rationale behind this link may have
... over time, the association between a woman's virtue and
... prosperity persists. Reflecting on women's position within
... sphere, Manu Bhattacharya observes:

... well known, domestic and other rights allotted to a woman in
... with her husband's status. The rule generally followed is that "
... be treated according to the status of her husband." A woman
... husband is described as "a lamp without a wick." In the
... countryside the idea of spinsterhood is unimaginable. There are
... songs, proverbs, and sayings that stress the norm that a husband
... central for a woman. An ordinary woman stays with her husband
... whether he is virtuous or not, security, her regard, her status, her
... life is linked to her married position. This overdependence
... on the husband creates a favorable social context for male
... priority.

... therefore, songs for the appeasement of gods and goddesses remained
... the domain of women, who, in the absence of educational or momentary
... agency, remained within a defined feminine forum of ritual worship
... and community activity.

The concept of Baromasha—a literary form depicting a character's
... experiences across the twelve months—in Bengali folklore was
... largely restricted to women. As Sovan Chakraborty notes, brata refers
... to ritual vows performed to obtain material or worldly benefits (20).
... Forms such as Bratakatha, Baromasha, and Mangal Kavyas reflect the
... cultural and gendered ethos of the time, offering insight into women's
... lives. Participation in these traditions, however, was often limited to
... women with living spouses:

The brata narratives or stories are often narrated, and the rhymes are
... sung, by bratinis or actual female performers. It is their wishes,
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exaltations, pains and pangs that find ways of expression in stories and songs. The objectives behind the narratives relate to their own and their families' material and spiritual welfare.

This brings one back to the connection between womanly virtues and the rights they promised. Therefore, it would not be wrong to conclude that the right to participate in the social communion of women in the form of agency, denied to those who receded to the margins of society. A fact explicated further by Chakraborty when he claims:

The bratas play an important role in upholding and maintaining social structures through the virtues associated with women's different roles as wives, daughters, mothers, etc. These ritual stories are strongly indicative of the fact that if women are not rigorously and "virtuously" performing their respective roles in society, the family-based social system is likely to collapse. It is only through their active participation and their wishes, will-power and prayers from the core of their hearts that society is able to survive. Thus, far from being the underdogs or playing second fiddle, they become the central force in propelling social structures. They, in turn, become the originators of human progeny, protectors of their husbands, shelters for the fathers, and the upholders of familial and social well-being.

To understand the significance of Chandrabati's Ramayan, it is essential to recognize the stereotypes it challenges. Its foremost importance lies in a woman entering a domain traditionally reserved for men. Her re-imagination of an epic centred on the 'Maryada Purshottam' in free verse reflects notable audacity. The work ends with Rama doubting Sita's chastity, a conclusion often deemed incomplete by scholars. However, this ending may reflect the lived reality of women whose lives were shaped and often curtailed by societal suspicion. As a text written by a woman for women, the seeming incompleteness mirrors the fractured experiences of women in Hindu society.

Further, the absence of a courtly audience suggests that Chandrabati addressed marginalised women with limited agency beyond marital status. Her choice to render the epic in the form of Baromasha—a genre accessible and resonant with women—can be seen as an act of

...able rebellion. As Helen Cixous asserts in *The Laugh of the Medusa*,
women must write:

It is impossible to define a feminine practice of writing, and this is an
impossibility that will remain, for this practice can never be theorized,
enclosed, coded—which doesn't mean that it doesn't exist. But it will
always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogocentric system; it
does and will take place in areas other than those subordinated to
philosophico-theoretical domination. It will be conceived of only by
subjects who are breakers of automatisms, by peripheral figures that
no authority can ever subjugate.

Chandrabati's endeavour could be considered similarly. However,
Peter Barry in *Beginning Theory* claims that in the use of an adopted
language—that of the colonizers—the colonized follows a three-step
process of adopt, adapt, and adept, wherein the adopted and adapted
language often renders them capable of subverting pre-established
colonial structures. Considering the overlapping modalities between
oppressors and the oppressed, the same holds true for the marginal.
Chandrabati's creation, however, creates an aporia. Her work does not
use the language of the mainstream; the treatment of her subject
remains marginal, considering the use of free verse and the folk
Baromasha, yet she succeeds in overturning a structure that
necessitated the interpolation of her work. Khitish Chandra Maulik
included additional chapters in his edited version of *Prachin
Purbabanga Gitika* (1975). This intervention completed the seemingly
incomplete story of Sita and altered the original significance intended
by Chandrabati. This incident has received criticism from feminist
critics such as Nabanita Dev Sen (Aku 70)

The fact that the domain of the folk has remained on the periphery of
society, as against mainstream literature and mythology, establishes it
as marginal. Whether one considers the Bauls or the Chhau dancers of
Purulia, it can hardly be denied that folklore as a genre was treated as
the 'other' of literary culture. D.P. Pattanayak's take on the treatment
of folklore is significant in understanding its position in the academic
world:

Many people dismiss folklore as traditional. Others pursue the study
of folklore with traditional methods and approaches of investigation.

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Serious interdisciplinary study of folklore, though it has made some headway in the west, is yet to take root in the Indian soil. Even if attempts have been made, the western orientation often stands as a barrier in pursuing an understanding of Indian folklore in its own terms. (Foreword V.)

It is only in contemporary times, with the rise of experimental music and that folk—particularly in lyrical forms—has come to occupy a central stage in mainstream performances. However, the use of limited agency by women of erstwhile Bangladesh as early as the 16th century by Chandrabati qualifies as a case study of the innate human urge to live free of shackles. Furthermore, the use of free verse by the poet, as against lyrical poetry, signifies the acceptance of her limitations and the adoption of a form requiring little to no education from its audience.

The Ramayana by Chandrabati's successor, Molla of South India, provides a contrast to Chandrabati's work. While Chandrabati treated the path determined by her gender, Molla's Ramayana sought to create the epic in a form accepted by society. This was another approach by the poetess who, unlike Chandrabati, adopted the mainstream form of narration, yet faced cultural prejudice. Molla's endeavour, however, may be considered a different kind of victory, as she hailed from a socially marginalized caste. Thus, her adoption of the epic form and its re-telling, despite being socially denied access to it, is a praiseworthy attempt. While understanding the difference in perspectives between the two authors, the following excerpt clarifies the distinction:

That Chandrabati's Ramayana is not comparable to Molla's is evident from the prologue itself. Chandrabati's attitude is very different, as is her diction and her style. Her father, Dwija Bansi Das, a wandering minstrel, lived in Kishorganj, Maimansingh (now in Bangladesh). He was an impoverished Brahmin who worshipped the snake goddess Manasa. Evidently Chandrabati was not interested in creating sophisticated urban literature as Molla was. Nor did she want her Ramayana to be a part of either the court tradition, or the devotional Bhakti tradition. Not once has she paid her respects to Rama—her Ramayana doesn't contain even a cursory dedication to the epic hero at the beginning or at the end! Nor does she mention the spiritual advantages of listening to the sacred Ramayana, as does Molla. Chandrabati's Ramayana begins humbly by mentioning the little river

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the village, immediately making it clear that her work stands outside the so-called "Great Tradition". (Dev Sen 166)

The Ramayana by Chandrabati's successor, Molla of South India, provides a contrast to Chandrabati's work. While Chandrabati followed a path shaped by her gender, Molla's Ramayana adopts the epic form accepted by society. This marks another approach by the poetess who, unlike Chandrabati, embraced the mainstream form in narrating the poem, yet faced cultural prejudice. Molla's endeavour, however, may be considered a different kind of victory, as she is believed to have belonged to a socially marginalized caste. Thus, her adoption of the epic form and its re-telling—despite social constraints—remains a praiseworthy attempt. While understanding the difference in perspectives between the two authors, the following excerpt clarifies this distinction:

Conclusion

Thus, while Chandrabati's work subscribes more to a feminist angle, utilizing a female language through her departure from the Virya Rasa in the exclusion of war scenes and inclusion of the Baromasha, Molla's rendition adheres to the socially acceptable epic form. However, as evident from the reception of both authors, neither work achieved the credit due to it. On reconsideration, particularly of Chandrabati's work, it is evident that such a confluence of folklore and mythology has rarely been attempted since. The subversion of established structures in her work remains exceptional in both form and conception and continues to demand recognition as a precursor to revisionist narratives in the contemporary literary world.

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