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FOLKLORE AND CONVERGENCE: EXPLORING THE UTILITY OF FOLK CINEMA AND NEW MEDIA IN DEVELOPMENT

Dr. Vidya.R

Abstract

Being digital has become the phrase of the time. The COVID pandemic has altered the thinking streams of people all over the world. Each and every field of human enterprise, including entertainment, art, business, academics, has explored novel ways of existence in this 'new normal' period. Thus, digital and online have become common in otherwise digitally divided world.

The development of a community largely depends upon the resources they use in their daily life. Although folklore has been identified as a strong medium of development by many scholars for its far-reaching faculty among the grass roots population, the population who conducts the traditional folkloristic practices and the society in which they reside needs empowerment. Folklore had long back found film as a complimentary medium. Folk cinema which adopts the myths and folklore in its narrative texts had become popular, globally. But the community which practice the folklore need new milieus to develop. Folklore had also found its locale in the digital world. But the new normal world has shown that adopting online streams can be extremely helpful in reaching a global audience. Film, the biggest entertainment industry, found its ground in various online platforms in this new normal world, entertaining every section of the society. This model can be adopted by the folklore practitioners to popularise the medium and thus aiming for the community development. This article explores the chances of development of folklore and its practising societies through convergence of media. By in-depth interviews and focus group interactions with experts, artists and viewers, the research explores how far the possibilities of using various online platforms and folk cinema can succeed in the development of folk media, folk artists and thus lead to community development.

Keywords: Media convergence, Folklore, Development, New Media, Folk Cinema

INTRODUCTION

Amartya Sen defines development as freedom expansion (Sen, 1999). According to him, development is the freedom to get education, health care, opportunity, political dissent and the like. The development of each community can be thus explained in terms of freedom for access to the resources which make life better. In these terms, freedom thus includes digital access and curbing the digital divide. It also in extension include, utilising the digital world and its opportunities for one's development.

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The development of a community largely depends upon the resources they use in their daily life. Although folklore has been identified as a strong medium by many scholars, through which development can be brought into the society for its far-reaching faculty among the grass roots population, the population who conduct traditional folkloristic practices and the society in which they reside needs empowerment. They need to find a milieu to expand their freedom. Folk cinema has contributed to an extent in popularising the folklore practices among public. It has found folklore as a complimentary medium by adopting folklore into its narrative practices. Still the community practising folklore needs empowerment. Folklore practitioners need to expand their reach by being digital and finding online platforms can be a way to attain this.

This is an exploratory study to find the chances of development of folklore and its practising societies in Kerala through convergence of media, especially film and new media. Since a pan national study cannot be opted due to time and resource restrictions, the study has been limited to the southern Indian state of Kerala. By in-depth interviews and focus group interactions with experts, artists and viewers, the research explores how far the possibilities of using various online platforms and folk cinema can succeed in the development of folk media, folk artists and thus lead to community development.

FOLKLORE

Folklore represents the people and their cultures. These are the "traditional items of knowledge" which can be found in the performances of a society (Abrahams, 1976). They can be described simply as wisdom of a culture which is transmitted through generations in oral traditions. There are different genres of folklore, varying from myths, proverbs, legends etc.

FOLKLORE OF KERALA

The Southern Indian state of Kerala can be divided majorly into three zones, Travancore, Cochin and Malabar. Malabar region can further be divided into North Malabar and South Malabar. These three zones are diverse in its cultural fabrications. The folk forms of these regions also differ to a large extent.

The folklore of Kerala incorporates in its narrative, the values, customs, beliefs, rituals, legends, myths and traditional ways of living of Keralites (Sruthi, 2015). There are ritualistic and non-ritualistic folk forms in Kerala. Ritualistic folk forms comprise of devotional forms, where performance are done to can be further classified as ritualistic and magical. Devotional folk forms are performed to satisfy and as a prayer to various gods or goddesses. Some are performed to honour and worship the valour of warrior chieftains. Theyyam, thirayattam, poothamthirai, kanyarkali, kummatti, panappattu, thottampattu etc are ritualistic devotional folk forms. There is another category of ritualistic folk form which is called Magical folk forms. These are performed for specific purposes like destruction of enemies or exorcism.

The government has established Kerala Folklore Academy under the Ministry of Cultural Affairs, to promote traditional folk forms of Kerala. They provide financial assistance to the artists and practitioners.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- Which medium is more effective in popularising the folklore practices and forms of Kerala and thus cater to the development of the community?
- How can the digital platforms be used to popularise the folk forms?
- Are there any new formats possible to promote the practices of folk artists?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Folklore and Folk Cinema

Graham Seal (1989) identifies the social functions of folklore as follows:

"education": Folklore carries lessons from legends and myths and "likely consequences of actions and intentions"; "maintain group identity"; "amusement, entertainment or diversion"; "a safety valve function" (Seal, 1989).

The diffusion of folklore through various generations is essential for the existence of its culture, since it is the wisdom of the society which is being transmitted.

The folklore has always enthralled the filmmakers due to its diverse nature and acceptance among public. The demand for new pastures has drawn them to folklore and myths, the collective story telling practices evolved in different cultures. The term Folkloric film or Folklore films have been in the academic milieu since 1930s. The Folk Cinema give the audiences not only the knowledge about the practices of folklore, but also about one's own culture and identity. It is the folklore which is entwined in the narrative of film as representation, imagination or hybridization (Zhang, 2005, Abrahams 1977, Bauman 1977). Folk cinema has expanded new boundaries to folklore. Folklore can be present in the film as plot, action, event, scene, or as any *mise-en-scene*, diegetic or non-diegetic element (Zhang, 2005). Like folk cinema, digital folklore has also created interest in public.

Digital Folklore

The scholars have always argued about the usage of internet among people in various communities. Research have probed into the usage of online resources by people after getting access to the internet world (de Seta, 2020). They have thought whether if spaces have been used by for the creation of communities and have inquired if this dissemination of online content has contributed to cultural growth. Many theorists applied the theories already in discussion in the domain of folklore to the online medium(de Seta, 2020).

Brenda Danet(2001) focused on the aspect of the creativity of the user of online content. She analyses "cyberplay" to include online greeting cards which are interactive or animated and emoticons used by the online users (Danet, 2001) She identifies and integrates the usage of these platforms and found similarities in embroidering or quilting. She thus expands it to the "emergent" folk art, thus stating that online access has given opportunities for expressing the emotions and ideas of the users who are not much equipped in computer programming (Danet, 2001). The consumers use memes and thus get involved in the generation of folklore, leading to common usage of folkloristic content, knowingly or unknowingly (Shifman et al. 2014). Memes has become readily available digital folklore texts for the consumers (de Seta, 2020).

While Danet focus on the user's creativity, Monica Foote (2007) calls to the folklorists to put forwards the uniqueness of "cyber folk art". Foote's essay is considered as one of the initial articles concerning digital folklore (de Seta, 2020). Foote has thus stressed the relevance of the cyber folk art in the digital culture. She addresses both the creators of folk-art and the users of the folkloristic content. The folkloristics should not demean their work in the digital medium by turning it into a "repetition of the pre-existing folk genres" (Foote, 2007).

The regionalisation of folklore has opened up discussions on the "vernacular" in online platform. The interactive and participatory media has contributed to the change of form of traditional practices while using Internet (Howard,2008). The term vernacular has to be used in a new form according to researchers (Howard, 2008; Burgess, 2007; de Seta, 2020). According to Howard (2008) the vernacular has been used differently, especially as a "performed aspect of specific communication events". He offers the term "vernacular web", in view of the usage of vernacular in the online platform by the users (Howard, 2008).

Studies have linked the change in the economy and the digital content creation (Burgess, 2007). The technology should be made available to the common people and they need to be trained in its various aspects. This can provide more opportunities to them, converting them from mere consumers to users of digital content and providers of digital content. This can become a revenue generation scheme for the users of this medium (Burgess, 2007).

The previous research on linking the online platforms and folklore and Folk cinema is largely limited. This study explores the chances of development of folklore and its practising societies in Kerala through convergence of media.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Jean Burgess (2007) proposes the term "vernacular creativity", where she focuses on the concept of vernacular and expands it to the new medium of Internet. The global communication has offered new milieu to the vernacular where the users can come up with new concepts contributing to the digital folklore (Burgess, 2007). According to her, technology has to be

democratised. This can provide opportunities for the consumers of the digital media to explore their creative potential giving them agency. They can utilize these digital platforms to use their creativity as revenue generation (Burgess, 2001).

In the Language of New Media (2001), Lev Manovich distinguishes the difference between old media and new media. He proposes some principles to identify the new media and differentiate it from old media. Manovich in this paper proposes Cinema as a new medium. He notes that cultural products have been transformed into computer programs (Manovich, 2001). While recording the research paradigm of new media, he proposes the new cultural interface (Manovich, 1997).

He identifies three key cultural forms which shape these cultural interfaces: cinema, printed word and Human Computer Interface (HCI) (Manovich, 1997). Cinema which has a language of its own is considered as a new form of tools and techniques which can be used to interact with any cultural data" (Manovich, 1997). Thus, cinema gets its raw material from the culture. Another key cultural form is HCI. Human computer interface, according to Manovich, "describes the ways in which the user interacts with a computer" (Manovich, 1997). The hardware devices which are used to input data and to receive output are essential HCI. It also includes the "metaphors" assisting the conceptualisation of data and the way it creates, manages and manipulates data. According to him, HCI includes "grammar of meaningful actions which the user can perform on it" (Manovich, 1997).

The data provided by the user can thus be described as Human Computer Interface. The two key concepts of cultural interface, cinema and HCI can be combined and used by the folk artists. This article thus proposes the usage of New Media and Folk Cinema for the development of folklore and its practitioners by the combination of two of the three forms of cultural interface. Cinema has provided an excellent medium for popularising Folk Cinema and art. The Digital Media platforms can be used to promote Folk Cinema created by the practitioners themselves. Thus creation of a Digital Folk Cinema is proposed by this paper.

METHODOLOGY

The study explores the opportunities of development of communities practising folklore in Kerala. It tries to find out far the possibilities of using online platforms and folk cinema can succeed in the development of folk media and artists and thus provide community development.

The research applied multiple methods to collect information due to its exploratory nature. In-depth interviews and focus group interactions with experts in folklore studies, film studies, artists and viewers were done to collect data. Due to the nature of the study Snowball sampling was the sampling method used.

Focus group discussion was conducted online with experts and viewers of folklore and folk film, both digital and non-digital. Two discussions were conducted with eight members in each group. Their opinions were analysed and interpreted. In depth interviews were done both offline and through telephone with practitioners and academicians of folklore studies and film studies. Six experts and nine practitioners were interviewed.

ANALYSIS AND INTERPRETATION

Most of the members of focus group were finding the online platforms as a powerful medium to popularise folk forms and presentations. Films can only provide a platform to subtly present folklore. Folk cinema in Kerala has added elements in its narrative structure. Commercial cinema has contributed only in popularising certain folk forms and myths in the society. The benefit of this could only be shared in filmic realm by the filmmakers and creators. Main practitioners were mostly forgotten.

The experts view that some folk forms are popular due to its representation in films and online platforms. Theyyam has a wide acceptance since it has started appearing in movies. Theyyam also generates spectacles because of its iconic representation as Kerala's traditional folk form. Many Theyyam performances are popularised online through YouTube and other social media which has even attracted foreign tourists.

The documentaries on various folklore can also be a way to generate interest among general public. But they have limitations since the non-fiction documentaries are not much popular among the public. A few experts propose

the solution of posting the documentaries online through OTT platforms. The government can promote documentaries and folk cinema, by giving grants and support to the artists and the crew. The groups also had opinion that excellent presentation and innovative script treatment can make these documentaries entertaining, rather than the traditional mode of documentary production. They also opined that the cultural affairs department can initiate OTT platforms and can adopt these both commercial films and documentaries. One the experts in his research has used Virtual Reality to recreate a myth, which was highly appreciated at the locale. He said that the technical know-how should be given to the communities in a subsidised rate, so that they can utilise this to have their own space.

The focus group and interviews generated further opinions from the practitioners and experts. Many new folk-art forms can be created by blending various existing forms. Digital folklore should not be just to showcase the existing forms. They should be seen as a method of expanding artistic boundaries. Regionalised specialisations can also be considered. Though, a small state, Kerala differs in its folk practises in south, central and north. This is a great opportunity to popularise the formats. Some respondents were even talking about using Malayalam Rap for popularising the art forms. They were of the opinion that the rap music in Malayalam is getting popularised through online and social media. If the narrative of the myths and folklore can be the content of rap music, this can create wide acceptance among public. There were mixed responses for this opinion. Some opined that this will contaminate the essence of the folk form.

While interviewed, practitioners said that some of the YouTubers offer promises and make them present but do not turn up after the shoot. They get excellent viewership due to these artists but the artists do not have the agency. They are reluctant to perform for online media since they need more assurances from the stakeholders. But the viewership for their performances can be an indicator to the interest users have on the folk form. This should be utilized by providing the digital know-how and technical support to the artists.

COVID pandemic has made their life miserable. Most of them have other means of livelihood other than these practices. The younger generation are reluctant to continue the traditional practises. This is due to the minimal income generation from it. The younger generation are more interested in film making. If given a chance to learn the production techniques and if they get some sponsors for production, they are interested in making docu-fictions since films pose a charisma to them. The experts said that finding an online platform will be another challenge for them and this also need to be attended while considering the probabilities of film production. The artists thus feel that their traditional practices would get extinct after their time. Unless supported by government, they cannot continue their cultural heritage. The Kerala Folklore Academy provides grants for the artists. The experts are of the opinion that the academy has to be empowered more to provide financial assistance. They also suggest that the cultural Affairs ministry can work on establishing OTT platforms under the auspices of the academy.

CONCLUSION

Cinema can be thought of as an effective medium for popularising folklore practices. Both fiction and non-fiction films can provide folk forms great opportunities to reach public. But the community which practices folklore should be directly involved in the production of the film. Thus, these communities can find better ways to use their traditional knowledge to find new living conditions. The folk cinema thus produced need to be popularised through online platforms. The technical knowhow should be provided to the practitioners by government. The folklore practitioners should thus have the agency. Initially films need to be supported by the government agencies. It can provide online platforms through private tie-ups so that these films can find an opening in them.

Media Convergence has opened up new possibilities. New Media and online platforms have become the word of the time in this 'new normal' world. The societies practising folklore can have a holistic development only if they too can access this digital world. The digital divide should be lessened and opportunities need to be given to all. The online platforms can offer a huge opportunity for the folklore artists and partitioners. New type of folk arts by blending many practices can be found and uploaded making use of the internet. Once the younger generations are digitally empowered, they can find their opportunities if they are correctly motivated. The folk media can find immense acceptance among the public. But initial work needs to be offered from the society itself.

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