

Faith, Reason and Wisdom

A Folklore Perspective

Vincent B. Wilson

National Association for Tribal and Folk Media

Bangalore 560 046

Abstract: Folklore is often thought of as unscientific and neglected in the academic world. This paper tries to deconstruct this myth and tries to establish that the 'folk' have a different logic, different ways of knowing and a unique wisdom that is different from the wisdom of the literate world. Without claiming to have the last word on the Folklore Perspective on Faith, Reason and Wisdom, this paper tries to take the reader to the world of the folk and initiate a process of reflection to bring out some of the positive elements of the culture of the simple and ordinary people, without in anyway romanticizing it. It is hoped that the questions and challenges posed by this paper would prompt further study and dialogue with the literacy/ classical world to arrive at a more integral and Indian approach to religious studies in India and Asia today.

Keywords: folk perspective, syncretism, Christian folklore, performative hermeneutics, folk wisdom, irrationality, critical appropriation.

1. Introduction

The National Seminar on "Faith, Reason and Wisdom" conducted by Jnana-Deepa Vidyapeth, Pune on 12-13 Nov. 2013, was a very commendable effort to search for a holistic, integral and Indian approach to religious studies. Hopefully this initiative will go beyond acknowledging that the neglect of the '*feminine, tribal, folklore and ecological perspectives*' has resulted in the '*fragmentation of knowledge/faith/life at the expense of an integral view of life*' and shed more light from these neglected perspectives. This paper for its part, would try to view faith, reason and wisdom from a folklore

perspective and point out some of the challenges it poses to religious studies in India.

Folklore has been neglected in the academic world for a long time, both in the religious and secular sphere; it was compared to literary discourse and found wanting as a source of knowledge and wisdom. This paper will try to deconstruct this “myth” and establish that the ‘folk’ have a different logic, different ways of knowing and a unique wisdom which the literacy world may find it very difficult to fathom. For, it questions, challenges the dominant worldview and proposes another approach to faith, reason and wisdom. Without claiming to be the last word on the folklore perspective on faith, reason and wisdom, this paper tries to initiate a process of reflection by placing before the reader some positive elements in the wisdom of the simple and ordinary people. It is hoped that the questions and challenges posed by this paper will be a starting point for a careful study and purposeful dialogue with the literacy/ classical world to arrive at a more holistic, integral and Indian approach to religious studies in India and Asia today.

1.1. Who are the Folk?

At the outset, let me try to situate the ‘folk’ and the ‘folk perspective’. From a panoramic and sociological view of human life, the earliest forms of organizing human life are found in the tribal societies. The *tribals* were our true ancestors; they lived in clans, groups and tribes with a deep sense of community bonds, ancestor worship, rituals, and totems that linked them to one another and to nature. In the slave societies that followed, the society was divided into slaves and masters; the slaves were treated as lesser human beings. *Slave lore* grew up within this ambience but separate from the masters’ cultural institutions. The feudal society, which was basically agrarian, had the serfs or the ‘folk’ as against the land lords. The former slaves now had more freedom yet lived mostly as bonded labourers of the landlords and higher castes. Their cultural production came to be known as the *folklore/folk media* as against the classical traditions that were patronized by the feudal lords and kings. The capitalist society has its working class or the subalterns (all the people in the fringes of society) as against the capitalists.

From a historical perspective, therefore, folk are the *peasants and serfs of the feudal society*; today, they are the working class, the oppressed, the poor and the marginalized. They are the people in the periphery- the subalterns and the *dalits* who are in search of identity and liberation. Folklore is the creative expressions of these 'lower strata' of society. It questions the practice of keeping the 'folk' in the periphery.

A Folk Perspective, therefore, is the perspective of the marginalized. It challenges the elite /classical traditions with an *emancipatory concern*. As a culture of the 'human hearted,' it justifies the protest of the oppressed. But folk culture has diverse elements and not all of them are emancipatory. Therefore, there is a need to *critically appropriate* those elements that would enhance and contribute to their emancipation. These elements would be the focus of this paper. It uses ethnography and field work to substantiate its arguments and not the 'literacy' methods.

1.2. Key Features of Folklore

Although long neglected, there is a growing interest in the folk traditions in the contemporary world. It is seen in the academia, in the film world, in music and in literature. Literature that give us the basic knowledge about folklore abound (Dundes, 1978; Lee Utley, 1965; Ben-Amos, 1982; Dorson, 1972). Most scholars agree on the following features as characteristic of folklore: it is orally transmitted; based on a tradition; has no single author (its authorship is collective and anonymous); it is commonly shared by a group; it has a formula and diffuses into many forms.

Folklore takes many forms. The main ones are: *Verbal Art or folk literature* (songs, stories, ballads, proverbs , riddles etc.), *Material Culture* (housing, implements used for cultivation, the household objects, vessels, seating arrangements, kolam– rangoli, ornaments and the dress codes.. etc.), *Social Customs* (village meetings, *Pathilaal* system or the of sharing work, village festivals and games, *Shared beliefs* concerning cause of sickness, life cycle ceremonies, etc.), *Worship* (Nature Worship, Ancestor Worship, Animism, Totemism, magic and hero worship) and *Performing arts*.

Performing arts include *social and martial arts* (such as kalari payatu and silambam), *worshipping arts* (Karagam or bow song), *ritual arts* (vow offering), *mythical and puranic arts* (therukoothu , yakshagana, puragatha, leather puppet) and *occupational arts* (handicrafts) (Lourdu D,1997; Islam, 1985).

2. 'Beliefs' in Folklore

Sometimes practices like touching a statue or kissing a relic are considered 'simple faith' of the people. But the fact is that the folk do not have the concept of faith as adherence to some dogmas and doctrines of the Church. But there are plenty of 'beliefs' and practices. These beliefs cannot be dismissed as irrational, superstitious and foolish as more and more studies show them playing a variety of psychological, social, economic and healing roles in the lives of the simple 'folk'. They point to a faith that is more experiential than intellectual and these will be of great value to those who seek to understand the Indian religious reality. We shall return to this point later.

2.1. Folk Belief Systems

Our primitive ancestors believed that every animate and inanimate parts of nature had a spirit or a soul in them. This is known as animism (Tylor 1817; 1958; Korovkin 1965:19; Leach 1972:62). These spirits were considered to be either benevolent or malevolent. Such beliefs can be seen even to this day in popular Christian devotions and practices related to spirit possession and exorcism (Wilson 2010:112). Animism implies the belief that some things had supernatural powers (Wilson 2010:113). Magic is another element of primitive religion; it seeks to control the powers of nature to get positive or negative results (Bharathi, 1990: 336-337). Later on, magic developed into *black and white, protective and destructive, witchcraft, voodoo* and so on. Even today many beliefs and practices related to magic can be seen among Catholics (Wilson, 2004; 2010:115-116).

Rituals and magic reached their high point of development in feudal society. They played a meaningful role in pre-modern societies.

According to Siva Subramanian (1988:17) magic played an important role in the economic activities of the folk and it was an integral part of their production process. But with the advent of capitalism, together with its rational and scientific outlook, such practices began to be treated as meaningless, superstitious and irrational. For example, with the advent of electricity, lots of beliefs and fears about devils and demons disappeared; because of modern medicine, many beliefs related to sickness disappeared; due to economic changes, employment and higher studies, many beliefs regarding women disappeared. Marxist and other rationalist movements also helped to destroy many such beliefs and practices. Such changes brought about a cultural vacuum that needed to be filled with new myths, beliefs, meaningful rituals and symbolic actions. However, instead of creating new practices, some so called religious persons, priests and magicians began to rejuvenate the old and outdated beliefs to make a living for themselves (Wilson, 2010: 222-224).

The challenge of religious studies today, therefore, is to address this cultural vacuum. Not all the tribal and folk beliefs have become obsolete and irrelevant. The question is whether we are in a position to discern the relevant/irrelevant practices and replace the irrelevant ones with those that can meet the cultural and religious needs of today. In the following section we shall try to describe some of their helpful beliefs and practices.

2.2. Beliefs for Conservation of Life

Indians have for long been involved in constructing explanatory systems for psychic and physical distress/disorders and evolving techniques for their alleviation. There are palmists, horoscope specialists, herbalists, diviners, sorcerers and a variety of shamans whose therapeutic efforts combine elements from classical Indian astrology, medicine, alchemy and magic with folk traditions (Kakar 1990:2-3). Some scholars come to the conclusion that the western model of psychotherapy and the Indian folk healing practices, although different in methodology, have the same healing process (Lewis, 1993).

Many tribal and folk beliefs are helpful for the conservation of nature. For example, the *adis* of Arunachal Pradesh believe that the huge trees like *Rotne* found in their surrounding forest is the abode of the evil spirit called *Epom*. Therefore they usually don't fell such trees. In case it is inevitable to cut them, then they perform rituals by sacrificing pigs and fowls to appease the spirit whose habitat is being destructed. Similar restrictions apply to the cutting of cane bamboo and leaves used for thatching houses. For instance, *Epoeng* (*big bamboo with huge circumference*) is felled during the *Ruruk* – the dark fourth night after the full moon, as it is commonly believed that during that period this bamboo remains free from a insect locally called *Takit* which can reduce its longevity. They seldom cut some plants and trees, such as, *Tattong*, *Taapit*, *Tan* etc., as they are believed to have sprung from the bones of *Kari Bote* - the great mythical hunter who is considered repugnant to the evil spirits. (Chaudhuri, 2007). There are many such folk beliefs and practices that need to be reinterpreted and maintained if we are to overcome the present day crisis with ecology and resource conservation (Vatsyayan, 1992; Gadgil, Chandran, 1992; Shiva, 1992; Kthori et al, 1998; Ramakrishnan et al, 1998).

2.3. Christian Folklore: A Different Logic

Historically, there has existed and still exists, folk beliefs and practices along with the official Church doctrine and rituals. Christian folklore, though formed on the basis of official religious dogmas, has absorbed a lot of ideas based on the living experience, traditions, needs and interests of ordinary believers. Therefore, it differs in many ways from the official forms of the Christian religion with their teaching authority, theological interpretations and canonical sanctions.

Some see the divide between 'popular' and 'elite' Christianity as two aspects and others see them as levels of the same continuum that are not mutually exclusive (Wilfred, 1995). Christian Folklore is not to be seen as a degraded form of official Christianity. The socio-religious practices of people produce an original wisdom. It is a *different logic* altogether (Parker, 1996; Espin 1997, Goizueta 1995). The interpretations and faith expressions of the folk may be discounted by the Churches' theology and its magisterial; but it is here, among

people, that the Church is alive and active. Therefore it becomes necessary to study and bring to light Christian Folklore in all its aspects.

2.4. Inculturation by the people

The true identity of Indian Christianity may be found only in the Little Traditions comprised largely of popular/folk devotions. Questions of contextualization, adaptation, accommodation and the cultural transformation of the Christian faith may be the topics of hot debate in the Great Traditions, whether Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant denominations. But the Little Traditions have no difficulty in finding appropriate cultural incarnations of the faith. Ethnography and field work attest to this process taking place throughout history. It is essential to unearth and bring to light the undirected inculturation processes (Bahmat, Weist, 1999; Rowena and Kujur, 2010; Baily, 1989).

Further, so far the attempts at inculturation in the Church have followed the Sanskritic tradition. In the case of Catholics, the process has resulted in a form of Brahmanism that has failed to strike a chord amidst the common people. Sanskritic inculturation has positively ignored the already inculturated nature of folk Christianity. Many Christian folk devotions have been created as parallel alternatives to the worship of folk deities. Thus one can find village shrines, street shrines, family shrines, memorial shrines and wayside shrines in the area that have sizable Catholic population (Wilson, 2004).

These Christian shrines have imbibed many elements from prevailing folk traditions. Thus, besides being the place of inculturation from below, popular Christian shrines also become the loci of interreligious dialogue as they also attract people of all faiths. Studies show that stories of origin have inter-religious roots. *Velankanni Matha* of Nagapattinam is in fact the *Kula deivam* (family deity) of a fishermen community known as *Pattanavar*. The officiating priest of the *Kulatheivam* temple is the catechist in the shrine too. The changing of the *sari* of Our Lady is done in his presence. The flag for the feast is brought by the *Pattanavar* people

even today, seeking protection for their caste and community. The *chapparam* or *ther* (car) is in the control of the *Pattanavar* caste head. The virgin Mary of the Chapel of apparition is the *Kiramateivam* (village deity) of the pilgrims. Brigitte Sebastia, who has studied these syncretisms, finds many similarities between the *Maariamman* (rain goddess) and the *Mariamman* (Mary) in Veilankanni and says that the caste structures and the ritual practices of folk worship have been absorbed into the Christian devotions (Sebastia, 2002). The Veilankanni Shrine is truly a syncretism of Christian and Folk traditions. In a country like India, where Christians are an insignificant minority this kind of syncretic, cultural reciprocation can be an effective means for involvement in the culture and life of the people at large.

2.5. Folk Experience of God

The Christian folk understanding of ‘faith’ is quite different from the classical one; normally they do not understand the classical concepts like the Trinity, two natures of Christ, etc. Their understanding of God is experiential. “*Our Saint/Maatha will save us*” is one of their firm beliefs. They believe that their saint will solve all their problems. The childless go to the saint for children, the unemployed for employment, the farmers for a good harvest, and so on. They would say, “Don’t worry Our Lady (Maatha), Our St. Michael, will not let us down”. Basic to this experience is the belief that “*Our Sami (God/ Goddess)* is powerful,” even more powerful than Jesus himself. He will punish the evil and bring justice. The folk understand God as a friend, and not as a mystery; theirs is not unknowable or abstract God. For the folk, saints/Our Lady/ godmen/ women are the tangible ‘faces’ of God. Due to this familiarity, the deity can possess the priest in a Trance Dance (*Saamiyattam*) and the charismatics can call God as “daddy”. This also enables them to bargain with their God or the saint.

The folk experience of God has also a strong communitarian dimension. In the cooking of food and sharing (*Asanam*) in a community celebration and other common devotional practices, for example, one can notice a community feeling that leads to a transcendence of ego, selfishness, likes, dislikes and desires resulting

in a real concern and care for others. Such transcendence is also seen in their ritual actions; their participation in rituals is characterized by tremendous involvement and surrender of the self to a greater power; this gives meaning and will power to do their daily activities well (Turner, 1969).

The folk experience of God has also a liminal character. In a liminal state a person is neither “here” nor “there” but “in-between” the traditional and ceremonial positions (Turner, 1979). Rhythmic loud sound or music (*Aaravaaram*) plays an important role in their God experience, as against the silence that is emphasized in the contemplative traditions. Therefore, their trance-inducing dances (*saamiyattam*) and praying in tongues in charismatic prayer groups are not to be easily dismissed as aberrations. Visions and dreams are also prominent in folk religiosity, just as it does in the biblical apocalyptic tradition.

Scholars point out that all the basic elements of a ‘God Experience’ are found in the folk religiosity as well (Turner, 1979). Therefore, rather than dismiss it as aberration of faith, we need to evolve a theology of a Folk experience of God.

3. ‘Irrationality’ Of Folklore

3.1. Folk Ways of Knowing

We have already noted that the folk have a different logic and rationality. This can seem irrational and superstitious to others. Although Walter Ong is not a folklorist himself (Farrell, 2000), his description of the characteristic features of Oral discourse is helpful for understanding the ways of knowledge practiced by the folk for centuries (Ong, 1988).

According to Ong, folk way of narration is *additive* rather than subordinating. This means that sentences are used to coordinate structures rather than to subordinate them. A familiar instance of additive oral style is the creation narrative in Genesis 1:1-5, which is indeed a text but one preserving recognizable oral patterning. The Douay Version (1610), produced in a culture with a still massive oral residue, keeps close in many ways to the additive Hebrew original.

*In the beginning God created heaven and earth. **And** the earth was void and empty, **and** darkness was upon the face of the deep; **and** the spirit of God moved over the waters. **And** God said: Be light made. **And** light was made. **And** God saw the light that it was good; **and** he divided the light from the darkness. **And** he called the light Day, **and** the darkness Night; **and** there was evening and morning one day.*

There are nine introductory ‘ands’ that shows the additive style. Adjusted to sensibilities shaped more by writing and print, the *New American Bible* (1970) translates:

*“In the beginning, when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland, **and** darkness covered the abyss, while a mighty wind swept over the waters. Then God said, ‘Let there be light’, **and** there was light. God saw how good the light was. God then separated the light from the darkness. God called the light ‘day’ and the darkness he called ‘night’. Thus evening came, and morning followed – the first day.”*

In this translation, there are only two introductory ‘ands’, each submerged in a compound sentence. The Douay renders the Hebrew *we* or *wa* (‘and’) simply as ‘and’. The New American Bible renders it ‘and’, ‘when’, ‘then’, ‘thus’, or ‘while’ to provide a flow of narration with the analytic, reasoned subordination that characterizes writing.

Oral thought is *aggregative* rather than analytic. Rather than taking an idea and breaking it down into its separate parts (*analysis*), oral thought tends to build meaning by adding details. Oral folk prefer to use many adjectives and flowery language to describe a person, a place etc. Orally based thought and expression tend to be clusters of integers, such as parallel or antithetical terms/phrases/clauses and epithets.

In oral discourse, there is nothing to back-loop into anything outside the mind, for the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered. Therefore, an idea tends to get repeated in different ways in order to make sure that the listener understands the point. This makes oral communication full of *redundancy* and *repetition*. Such

redundancy may be looked down upon by the literate, but is more natural to thought and speech than sparse linearity that is characteristic of writing.

Since oral societies have no dictionaries, records or history books, they invest great energy in saying over and over again what has been learned arduously over the ages. The rural folk regard highly those wise old men and women who specialize in conserving knowledge, who know and can tell the stories of old. Folk discourse, therefore tends to be *conservative* or traditionalist; folks find it hard to understand and accept new things. So, a speaker stands a better chance of being understood if he conveys his ideas in old, accepted and “conservative” ways. But oral societies are better described as *homeostatic* rather than conservative. This means that while the purpose of oral discourse is to maintain the stability of the group by passing on traditions and stories, this stability is more a matter of achieving an equilibrium or homeostasis with the present. This process calls for sloughing off memories that no longer have present relevance.

Folk knowledge is close to their life world. Oral cultures conceptualize and verbalize their knowledge with more or less close reference to human life. In that sense Folk knowledge is *situational* rather than abstract. This means that it is tied to specifics and concrete particular details rather than generalized into abstract concepts. An oral culture has no vehicle as neutral as a ‘list’ that is entirely devoid of the context of human action. The folk do not speak in universal concepts about God or Nature. Their idea of God is found in their stories of gods and goddesses and their idea of nature is correlated with fertility cults and other rituals.

Since the meaning of words is controlled by real-life situations, and communication is often accompanied by gestures, vocal inflections, facial expression, etc. oral cultures have few semantic disagreements. Rooted in the life world, oral knowledge tends to assimilate the alien, objective world to the more immediate, familiar interaction of human beings. Such close relation to the life world requires that the speaker explain his or her meaning in terms that the listener can relate to, often by comparing his idea to something in the listener’s world.

By keeping knowledge embedded in the human life world, oral discourse situates knowledge within a context of human struggles. Therefore it is *agonistically toned*. Many art forms, folk literature and folk worship are polemic by nature. Folk literature, like proverbs and riddles, are not used simply to store knowledge but to engage others in verbal and intellectual combat: utterance of one proverb or riddle challenges hearers to top it with a better one to counter it.

Oral expression is a *product of give and take*. Because of the immediacy of speaker and audience, the speaker can adjust to the audience, and the audience's reaction becomes a factor in the production of the discourse. A speaker can also defend himself against another's attacks. In written language, there is no immediate give-and-take, no adjustment to language as a reaction to someone else's response. Writing fosters abstractions that disengage knowledge from the arena where human beings struggle with one another. It separates the knower from the known and thus sets up conditions for 'objectivity', in the sense of personal disengagement or distancing. Oral knowledge, in contrast, is *empathetic* and *participatory*. For an oral culture learning or knowing means achieving close, empathetic, communal identification with the known. This can be seen in ritual celebrations, playing folk games, or participating in a story telling.

In short, an integral approach to religious studies must take these folk ways of knowledge and expression seriously especially in our Indian context. Can our papers, theology studies, philosophy studies and dissertations accept these folk ways of knowing and expressing as an alternative epistemological tool that would make more sense to the ordinary people in our parishes?

3.2. Folk Hermeneutics

Hermeneutics plays a decisive role, in all realms of human life and expression. The folk have their own way of interpreting life from their world view and experience. Felix Wilfred has enumerated some aspects of folk hermeneutics that could be considered here. (Wilfred, 1995)

In folk hermeneutics, it is the folk who become the interpreters of their religious traditions, history and its contents. It is the bards,

story tellers, folk artists, shamans and leaders of the ritual ceremonies who interpreted the stories of their gods and goddesses and not the experts. In day-to-day living, the people themselves interpret the meaning of their religious traditions according to the need of the village or the household.

Folk hermeneutics is characterised by a certain *earthiness*. Through their experience of oppression and subjugation, there takes place, a “de-construction” of the religious tradition. As a people who have been denied bread, freedom and human dignity, their focus is on this worldly life. For the subaltern groups, being religious is a matter of performing a series of rites and rituals, experiencing certain events and intervening with some actions. In other words, they interpret the “heavenly”, the “mysterious” and the “sacred” through their earthly experiences, actions and performances. Their main concern centers around a prosperous and happy life devoid of the harms by evil powers.

For the folk, all interpretations take place in the form of performance as there are no written documents to fall back as a reference. This we can call *performative hermeneutics*. A performance approach to oral literature has been developed over the past decade chiefly in the discipline of folklore (Abrahams 1968; Ben-Amos 1972) and its allied field of socio-linguistics (Hymes 1974, 1975). In the performance of folklore, the *texture, text and context* are considered very important (Dundes, 1964; Stucky, 1995:1-14). The time and place of performance (*story - telling, singing, performing, sculpturing, painting, playing, designing, framing*), the particulars in detail of those belonging to the two sides i.e. the gestures and postures of the narrator, the nature of his performance, facial expression, mimicry, his dance and acting, impersonation etc. of the performer and the total reaction of the audience (*their occasional comments and laughter, their response in the form of dancing or singing or acting out parts in a tale*) make up the texture, text and the context of the performance. Oral tradition also has a strong collective character and therefore the communitarian aspect of the performance has to be taken into account in the folk hermeneutical process.

The life of the folk (*mostly dalits and the underprivileged*) was and is lived in the context of exploitation and injustice. Their oppressors were so powerful that the folk could not protest or retaliate directly as it would invite worse consequences. Therefore they had to invent indirect forms of protest. There is an enormous amount of such protest material in folk literature. The stories of folk heroes tell us that they stood for a cause and paid the price of fighting for the rights of the oppressed. Many folk religious traditions and folk deities also have this protest character. As the life of the folk is predominantly combative they tend to interpret everything from a *combative perspective*. Thus liberation can be seen as a hermeneutical principle for the folk.

In the 1990s, scholars in increasing numbers began to call for a consideration of orality in New Testament studies. (Botha, 1990; Achtemeier, 1990; Dundes, 1977). Nevertheless, most biblical scholars continue to examine the New Testament documents using presuppositions that apply more to nineteenth and twentieth-century literary/print culture than to the culture in which those documents were originally produced. Well, then this is the challenge before us. Can we interpret the scriptures using a folk hermeneutics? James George Frazer has written three monumental volumes on Folklore in Old Testament (Frazer, 1918). Alan Dundes has tried to interpret Jesus as a folk hero (Dundes, 1977). More such studies and interpretations have to come in biblical studies.

3.3. Folk Philosophy/Theology

An oft repeated complaint of ministers and Church activists is that lofty theological concepts and Church doctrines do not get communicated to the folk. It is possible to argue that the difficulty of communication is precisely the result of a cultivated discourse (philosophical and theological studies) that has marginalized the folk discourse. The ineffectiveness of Christian ministry should, at least partly, be attributed to this. Among the Christian churches themselves there is a growing conviction that “the Christian faith must be rethought, reformulated and lived anew in each human culture...and this must be done in a vital way, in depth and right to the culture’s roots” (David, 1991:55; Thumma, 2000).

A Christian theology that is alive to the Indian reality could only be shaped by an understanding of the faith expressions and cultural practices of “folk” Christians and a meaningful interaction of the Gospel with such expressions and practices. This kind of folk theology / philosophy will rely on *irrationality* and *imagination* rather than the rationality of the West. It will use *symbols* and *art forms* instead of concepts to theologize or philosophize. Instead of literacy methods or the written word it will use *orality* and *performance* to express its ideas. In place of grand theories or ideologies folk theology/philosophy will use *narratives* that keep on changing according to the context; in place of scientific discourse it will use *rhythmic discourse*.

4. Folk Wisdom

As pointed out earlier, the rationalism, modernism and the romanticism of Western science slowly eroded the wisdom of the people; folk wisdom began to be regarded as ignorance and superstition. Globalization also has made a huge impact in the life and culture of the folk, destroying many traditional practices and altering the lifestyle of the ordinary folk. But all the same, a critical appropriation of their folklore can reveal the real wisdom and the philosophy of the simple folk. Here we shall see some of those aspects of the wisdom of people that cannot be ignored by our religious studies.

4.1. Folk Philosophy of life

Simplicity is the key feature of the folk way of life. Oral nature of folklore makes it very flexible as it has no grammar or fixed structures. Folklore or folk arts are also easy to learn. So are folk songs and music; they can be learnt easily as they are based on some kind of formula or *santham*. The life style, dress, food and the house patterns of the folk also tend to be very simple. Images of folk gods and goddesses are simple; often they are made up of a stone, a mud figure, a *chulam* (forked spear) etc.; their places of worship are either just an open space (e.g., under the tree) or a small temporary shed); their worship patterns have no agamas or prescribed rituals.

Strong community feeling is another positive aspect of the folk life. Most of the folk ballads and stories stress unity and equality as values to be cherished. It is interesting to note that most folk dances are communitarian and they are performed in groups; so are folk games. Their strong community and family bond is also shown by the fact that they honour relationships up to five generations. The sharing practiced in village festivals, the *panchayat* system and the voluntary service on behalf of the family to the village (*pathilal system*) are clear examples of a strong community feeling.

The protest character of folk culture is also commendable in the context of the oppression and discrimination practiced on the basis of caste, sex, economic and social status. Stephen Fuchs enumerates a number of protest religious movements that arose from the folk traditions of India (Fuchs, 1965; see also Chanda, 1998). Oneness with nature is another aspect of folk wisdom that needs to be preserved. They have learned to live in harmony with nature, including animals and other living creatures.

4.2. Folk Knowledge and Wisdom

There is much wisdom in proverbs, riddles and other forms of folk literature.

A proverb is an example of a coded communication that would hardly be possible today because people no longer know the double or hidden meanings in them. In other words people have lost some cultural competence today. In the villages older people can create an entire dialogue consisting only of proverb citations. Riddles were meant to sharpen one's mind and stimulate creative thought process and produce a wealth of ideas.

Games play an important role in the life of the ordinary folk. There are games for children that taught them to walk, run, breathe, sing and think; there were games for women, adults and old people that gave exercise, entertainment, and joy besides teaching morality and discipline (Kumari Aathavan, 2009). Unfortunately, much of these beautiful traditions have been lost to money mongering and destructive popular media.

Folk Technology is another area of folk wisdom which the modern people have to learn from. The *Warlis* of Maharashtra, for example live in harmony with their environment and their culture incorporating the spiritual and the material, the living and the nonliving, into one integral whole (Pereira 1992:189). The agricultural system of the tribal and the folk, often ridiculed as primitive, is in fact very sophisticated, having been carefully developed over several millennia. The folk know the nature of the soil; know how to obtain multiple crops from the same plot without irrigation; know the use organic manures and natural pest control. The indigenous technologies for fishing, irrigation and conservation of food are true wisdom of the land that is being forgotten and neglected.

Folk Art Forms have so much to learn from. They evolved as the folk lived, worked, worshiped, and celebrated their lives. It has a local character on the basis of caste, occasion, worship, gender, place, theme, time of performance etc. It means that folk arts have a context. A folk performance is not one-way traffic. This is a 'live' show in which a face-to-face situation is created between the communicator and the receiver with the possibility of instant feedback. The structures of the dances point to unity, equality and solidarity. The folk songs and ballads reflected the reality of its time. Their roots are deep in the earth. Because of this deep-rootedness, they can command the confidence of the local people. Since the villagers acquire the needed skills easily and the art forms are mobile, they are also economically feasible. They are performed in street corners also without the use of any special lighting and sound system. The improvisational nature of such forms is an important strength. These folk media are an alternative media and could also serve as an alternative language for religious studies.

Folk medicine is another rich tradition; it includes specialized practitioners as well as home remedies for common ailments. Folk medicine includes knowledge regarding the relation between food and health, as well as practices of a preventive nature. Specialists practice in fields like bone-setting, treatment for poisoning and birth attendance, etc. A conservative estimate is that there are around 70,000 traditional bonesetters throughout the country. They attend to over two-thirds of fractures, as modern orthopedic facilities are

few in number and are concentrated in urban areas. Some 600,000 traditional midwives perform home deliveries.

In the tribal areas the folk medical practices include herbal treatments, often in combination with reciting certain *mantras* and the use of symbols, such as ritual chalk drawings or *gondas*. Often the sacred stick and rings are used to invoke the blessings of the gods/ spirits for healing. Moreover, there is a tremendous depth of tribal knowledge regarding the use of natural resources. The tribal communities alone use over 9,000 plant species, including some 7,500 species of plants for medical properties. Besides this, a considerable number of materials of animal and mineral origin are used in traditional medicine. Is it possible to critically appropriate these riches that are getting lost under the pressure of globalization?

5. Conclusion

That the 'Folk' have a different logic, different hermeneutics, different ways of knowing and a wisdom different from that of the classical and literacy world cannot be discounted, denied or ignored. At the same time one has to accept the fact that the folklore and folk life have not remained the same down through the centuries. Lots of oppressive and inhuman elements have crept into them, very often due to the hegemonic ideologies imposed on them by the upper class and sometimes due to the sanskritization process by the folk themselves. The influences of globalization have certainly eroded folk life and wisdom of the simple people to a large extent. Above all the economic, social and political deprivation of the folk (*dalits*) has also pushed them to take up violent and unpleasant means, at times, in their pursuit of self identity and social justice. All these factors have to be taken into consideration while studying folklore and one has to carefully sift with an *emancipatory concern* all that is inhuman, unjust and irrelevant while highlighting the wisdom of the folk in our pursuit for an integral approach to religious studies in India and Asia.

Bibliography

Abrahams, Rogers (1968), "Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore," *Journal of American Folklore*, 81:143-58

- Achtemeier, P. J. (1990) "Omne Verbum Sonat: The New Testament and the Oral Environment of Late Western Antiquity," *JBL* 109 (1990) 3–27.
- Bamat Thomas, Weist Jean Paul, (1999), *Popular Catholicism in a World Church: Seven Case Studies in Inculturation*, New York: Orbis Books.
- Baily, Susan, (1989), *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bharathi, Baktavachala, (1990), *Cultural Anthropology* (Tamil), Annamalai Nagar: Manivasagar Library.
- Ben-Amos, Dan (1972), "Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context. in Americo Paredes and Richard Bauman (eds), *Towards New Perspectives in Folklore*, 3-15. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Ben-Amos, Dan (1982), *Folklore in Context*, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers,
- Bosch, David (1991), *Transforming Mission: Paradigm Shifts in Theology of Mission* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, p.55
- Botha, P. J. J. (1990) "Mute Manuscripts: Analysing a Neglected Aspect of Ancient Communcation," *Theologica Evangelica* 23 (1990) 35–47;
- Chanda S.N. (1998), *Saints in Indian Folklore: Tales of Saints Known in Various parts of India*, Delhi: Konark Publishers Pvt Ltd.
- Chaudhuri, Sarit K., (2007) *Folk Belief and Resource Conservation: Reflections from Arunachal Pradesh*, Arunachal Institute of Tribal Studies, Rajiv Gandhi University, Rono Hills, Arunachal University.
- Dorson, Richard M. (ed) *Folklore and Folklife: An Introduction*, Chicago and London: The Chicago University Press, 1972.
- Dundes, Alan (1964), "Texture, Text and Context", *Southern Folklore Quarterly*, 28 pp.251-265

- Dundes, Alan (1977), "The Hero Pattern and the Life of Jesus", in *Essays in Folkloristics: Kirpa Dai Series in Folklore and Anthropology-1*, Berkley: Folklore Institute.
- Dundes, Alan, (1978), "Who are the Folk", in *Essays in Folkloristics*, Meerut: Folklore Institute, pp. 1-21.
- Farrell, T. J. (2000). *Walter Ong's contributions to cultural studies: The phenomenology of the word and I-Thou communication*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press.
- Frazer, James George (1918), *Folklore in the Old Testament* (III vols). London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd.
- Fuchs, Stephen. (1965). *Rebellious Prophets: A Study of Messianic Movements in Indian Religions*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House.
- Goizueta, Roberto S., (1995) *Caminemos Con Jesus: Toward a Hisponic/Latino Theology of Accompaniment*, New York: Orbis Books.
- Hymes, Dell. (1974) "Breakthrough into Performance", in Ben-Amos and Goldstein (eds) *Folklore: Performance and Communications*. The Hague: Mouton.
- Islam, Mazharul (1985). *Folklore, the Pulse of the People: In the Context of Indic Folklore*, New Delhi: Concept Publishing House.
- Korovkin F.P. (1965), *Ancient History*, Moscow: Progressive Publishing House.
- Leach, Maria (ed) (1972). *Standard Dictionary of Folklore*, USA: Funk and Wagnals.
- Lee Utley, Francis, "Folk literature: An operational Definition", in Alan Dundes (ed), *The Study of Folklore*, (Berkley: University of California, 1965), pp. 7-24;
- Lewis I.M. (1993), "Possession and Psychiatry", in *Ecstatic Religion: A Study of Shamanism and Spirit Possession*, New York: Rutledge, pp.160-184.
- Lourdu D. (1997), *Folklore: Some Basic Concepts*, (Tamil), Palayamkottai: FRRC.
- Ong, W. J. (1982, 1988), *Orality and literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*. London and New York, Methuen.