Communal Narratives of West Bengal: Re-presenting the Cultural Hegemony

Dr. Soumita Das

Assistant Professor, English, Techno Main, Saltlake

Abstract

The study attempts to revisit the traditional art forms, rituals and customs prevalent in West Bengal. The information is transmitted into cultural artefacts and translated while unveiling the cultural differences that they share with their modern counterparts. Representations in films and television provide a stark comparison with not so popular beliefs of *Ghetu Gai* and *Bohurupi* appearing before *Charak* puja in West Bengal. The subsequent struggles are also seen when *Patachitra* artists and occurrence of Terracota tiles redefines cultural diversity of indigenous art forms. The assimilation and amalgamation purviews its arena through cultural translation and its mediation into popular culture. The production and distribution sustains the story telling experiences of indigenous people and preserve their beliefs and traditions.

Keywords: Communal narrative, storytelling, mainstream culture, translation, representation

1. Introduction

Myths or folktales talk about traditions practiced by small homogeneous groups and their localized lifestyle depicts compassion and affinity to uphold ancient customs. Conflict may arise when it encounters other heterogeneous institutions. The study encompasses various possibilities where communal narratives are re-presented and popularized through many dimensions. The cultural components are values, norms, artefacts which are often derived from local beliefs and practices.

In *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men* (Pollock, 2011)*,* Pollock explores the shifting dimensions of exchange within indigenous narratives and how Sanskrit language finds a place in courtly atmospheres. When the "ancient" is interpolated into "modern" life, it is necessarily reworked and is deepened with various interpretations (Pollock, 2011;162). A storytelling experience relentlessly reproduces the ancient in a medium of thought provoking ideals. Individual perception is experimented in retelling the tales of antiquity. The examples are paintings of *Patachitra*, representation of Hindu mythology in Terracotta tiles, emergence and existence of *Bohurupi* (a Bengali term used for performers who can transform into different characters and personas) in West Bengal are some of the narratives which are mentioned as connotations of various cultures and the study focuses on how they are transmitted into newer realms. The methodology employed in this study is based on critical analysis and interdiscursivity. This study cannot go into the presumptions of dates and figures as being outside its purview. Rather the work tries to sketch only the transformation and its contrast and similarities to the modern and provides a new cultural approach.

2. Transmitting 'Culture'

The idea of 'culture' as something that can be manufactured and consumed by a mass population had its

inception in the modern, mechanical and industrial society where the capitalist motive of financial and economic benefit derived the communal narratives into commodities. As a result, the mass culture is perceived through production, distribution, and consumption of cultural artefacts where the industrial society endeavoured to outgrow.

The understanding of the word 'culture' had its roots in the etymological history of the term and in the influence of Marxist social theory. The word 'culture' had its root in the Latin noun *culture*, meaning "cultivation", and the past participle verb form *colere*, which means "to till tend or guard." (Bhaba, 2019).The invention of agriculture empowered humankind to develop regular methods of working and living respectfully. The allegorical utilization of the term 'culture' to connote the refinement of certain basic human characteristics goes back to the old Roman speaker Cicero, who authored the articulation *cultura animi* to signify

"development of the spirit." (Buden, 2009; 211)

In medieval France, the term 'culture' additionally signified "to secure or respect" (Buden, 2009;212) , mirroring a person's feeling of having something that is important and hence should be guarded. The folk narratives and traditions are the means of protecting the heritage and harvest its prosperity by amalgamating the experiences through singing, dance, painting, making sculptures and representation through short dramas.

In eighteenth-century Europe, the Enlightenment brought learning and scholarly work into the spotlight and a change was observed when science and reason are emphasized over superstition and tradition. In the nineteenth century, the term 'culture' obtained a more extensive social implication and was used to refer to the convictions, thoughts, and traditions of a specific class of individuals. It was amid this time 'culture' progressed toward becoming related with ideas of taste, refinement, and legacy as it was, for the most part, used to allude to the propensities and traditions of the upper classes of society. The division between individuals who were seen to have culture and the individuals who did not possess the same became a marker of social stratification. (Buden, 2009). 'Culture' was seen as the proponent of Marxism, a concept, practice, idea, belief or an institution which was formulated in relation to the power structure and economic structure of a society. The consumers or the buyers translate the meanings of the cultural artefacts accordingly.

The social scientific theory that explained society in terms of social inequalities dated back to the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Marx said, "It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but on the contrary their social being that determines their consciousness."(Marx,1859). The Marxist approach read culture and its artifacts in its immediate political and economic backdrop to form a radical understanding of history. Marxist model of society observed class conflict, (the conflicts and tensions between land-owning class; middle class and the farmers on land; the working class) was based on the model of "base" and "superstructure", that helped to draw a link between the economy and social structures. As seen in the former discussion the meaning of culture was based on efficacies of cultivation, to outgrow an opinion and new model of thinking where Marx made the subjugated working class think about the power relations, the negligence and instilled and demanded a communal feeling in society. (Storey, 2019)

The base was "the material means of production, distribution, and exchange" and superstructure was the "cultural world of ideas, art, religion, law, and so on." (Barry, 2010;151). The economic foundation of society would determine class identity and class relations. Those who owned the mechanics of production were wealthier and influential and therefore enjoyed power. The power was enforced through certain

institutions, termed as the superstructure. The power operated through the base (economic conditions) but sipped through the superstructure which was built up into many layers. Culture became the super-structural condition which concealed the actual power relations that existed in society. The power was invisible and abstract, incorporated into making other people what we believed in. The system of rethinking the prospects can be mentioned as an ideology. (Barry, 2010;157; my emphasis)

Films and television serials conveyed a particular way of thinking--an ideology. The stereotyping of women as the dominated and unequal gender relations in television drama over a period of time made us believe the remorseful condition women were living in, thus the power of patriarchy was invisible but manifested with cultural manifestations. Ideology and power were imbibed and delivered through symbols, representation, and cultural practices. The concealed power relations present an ideology surfaced with meanings entitled to representations in contemporary society.

3. Translating 'Culture' through storytelling experiences

Cultural translation is an arrangement of representations through which a certain perspective is disguised into a system of social relations of control and subjection. Based on these premises Theodore Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin and later Jurgen Habermas established The Frankfurt School in 1923. While Marx's critique of capitalism revolved around the mode of production and immiseration of the working class, the critical theorists explored the impact of capitalism in shaping the social and individual consciousness through such phenomena as mass culture and the "culture industry"a notion faintly similar to Marx's concept of "ideology." (Storey, 2019) .The premises discussed how culture worked like industry and relied upon certain ideological conditions.

Horkheimer and Adorno contested on the excessive presence of media and in the socio-cultural realm, how culture was commodified and artifacts produced to fulfill the fetishes and desires of the population. The audience responded as passive consumers when they accepted the omnipresent popular media representation. (Horkheimer and Adorno, 2002; my emphasis). In Bengali serials sometimes women characters are sketched as representatives of tribal rusticity. The dress, mannerisms, dialect, religion, food everything recapitulates the traits of a certain community which demands attention from the audience and focuses on indigenous cultures. The tribals are sometimes looked upon as empowered individuals or fall prey to the city etiquettes. The representation persuades to narrate experiences of their day to day livelihood. Deblina Talukdar has rightly mentioned in her article that "Social Media are the web apparatuses that empower individuals to look and learn new data, share thoughts, and regularly interface with new individuals and associations." (Thakur, 2021) .This depoliticizes the means of storytelling as an urge to dominate the arena where tribal cultures are included as part of mainstream culture and finds a place in the contemporary world.

Figure 1: Protagonist from the soap opera *Ishti Kutum* representing Indigenous community

The Frankfurt school reviewed the inert passive consumption as not an unintelligible process, the ideology was so powerful that the layering of the economic production and social relations were not noticed. In the process, films and television eroded the authenticity of representation into an acceptance of images which put the media into a powerful position. "The effect of television cannot be adequately expressed in terms of success or failure, likes or dislikes, approval or disapproval." As mass media could not be boiled down to propagate some "unmistakable 'message" but the hidden message on television escaped the "control of consciousness" to made the audience think about the underlined tensions before reacting and accepting the representation but "sink into the spectator's mind."(Horkheimer, 1944)

3.1 Role of Audience

Television focused on the changing nature of social relationships and cultural products, as attaining a part of popular culture. People in a rural environment, intimately knew each other whereas, in a mechanical urban environment, there was a more of a professional relationship between the participants of a group, society, and country. This stage was the second historical narrative stage as mentioned by Grossberg Lawrence while looking at the stages to understand the contemporary media. Television, when accepted by a large group of audience, was a part of popular culture. Lawrence mentioned that in high culture communication was through art and aesthetic; folk culture referred to the product of particular race and community. The popular culture accepted as part of the larger narrative structure, exerted power over the interactions and conversations while channelizing the communication between media and society. (Lawrence, 1992)

Purnima Mankekar is one of the first leading researchers who conducted an ethnographic study on Soap opera in India demonstrated how television in India has shaped women's place in the nation, community and in her family while television played a crucial role in the realignment of class, caste, religion, and politics as a part of the everyday sociocultural experience. There is a construction of Indian womanhood through TV viewing while the focus was on the nation's integrity. (Mankekar, 2000)

Female gender and household became an aspect of the discussion in many television genres."Tune in tomorrow, not in order to find out the answers, but to see what further complications will defer the resolutions and introduce new questions." (Modleski, 1979). Women's presence on television is mostly confined into a family busy with household chores. The tribal characters are mostly female participants who somehow land into a township with the help of the male lead. Thus, it is again seen here indigenous culture infuses into urban periphery with a hope of refinement. The private space confined to a house or

home was processed into complex social units and domestic arrangements. As television images travel and transgress the boundary, the domain of media is invited to translate and transmit social phenomena in search of recognition in the public sphere.

In recent times films also narrated folk archives and henceforth media became an important tool of representation. A movie was released on *Bohurupi* culture named as 'Bohurupi' (the film was released in 2024 and directed by Nandita Roy and Shiboprasad Mukherjee). The lead character amuses audiences by impersonating various characters/ roleplay and gets involved in crimes while crossdressing and fooling people around with his tricks and motifs. Media plays a critical role in the dissemination of culture and therefore established as another area of articulation. Media is invariably connected to and is associated with popular culture, both deriving from it and shaping/ transforming it.

In contrast to a media representation *Bohurupi*'s are existent in the real world and this has been a part of Bengali traditions. In the month of Chaitra a Hindu folk festival of *Gajan* happens in the honour of the deity Shiva. Before this festival takes place, sometimes men dress up as Shiva and Parvati and sing and dance with their group of people playing certain instruments. They perform from door to door and beg for money. The money that's been collected is used for the worshiping rituals. The streak of contrast lies in the representation of these *Bohurupi*'s in different scenarios. While in the second example there is a religious connotation but in the first example of *Bohurupi*'s, it holds a cultural significance and an utilisation of skills and performative art is seen to encounter criminal offence. "Indigenous or tribal people, all across the world, not only live in seclusion from the mainstream culture of their respective lands but also are disconnected from the other tribes. Anthropologists have found it virtually impossible to locate a common tribal consciousness. Despite such disconnectedness they have traced many commonalities in the ritualistic and cultural practices of different tribal people." (Sarkar and Modak, 2022; 489) Such is the case where it is difficult to understand the position of the cultural drifts and their representation in contemporary society.

Figure 2. Two men dressed as Shiva- Parvati dance while begging for money from door to door before Charak puja in West Bengal.

Another tribal ritual which is existent in parts of West Bengal is *Ghetu Gai*. It is a folk custom of worshipping the deity Ghantakarna for well being and prosperity. Small children chanting "ghetu gai, ghetu gai" visit homes and ask for donations like rice or other food items. This tribal festival has its significance in remembering their ancestors and carrying forward a tradition or custom where children were sent to ask for donations and later all these food items can be cooked and enjoyed in a feast. The existence of these customs are specific to villages and the city people remain unaware of these storytelling experiences. In mainstream culture these customs remain unnoticed.

Figure 3. *Ghetu* **puja in West Bengal**

Figure 4. Children singing the *Ghetu Gai* **song**

4. Theorizing representation and reality

Roy L Brooks stated that "cultural assimilation", "transculturalism" and "pluralism" are the characteristics of cultural diversity which helps to understand the values or perspectives of certain communities. Every model has their "inherent weakness", and tries to hide it under fanciful imaginations. (Brooks, 2012). The perceptions taken into consideration through signs and symbols maximized the chance of appropriate behavior and upheld as a mass culture. The mass culture mediates the social institutions which impacts the decline of agrarian structure and supports the growth of industrialization and urbanization.

Terracotta tiles and *Patachitra* paintings are appropriate examples of tribal art forms which are poised with refinement and can be included in mainstream culture. These art forms are prevalent in townships and getting popularized as decor items in city homes. Natural clay is used to make terracotta tiles, which

are burnt at high temperatures to produce long-lasting, rustic-looking reddish-brown tiles. They are renowned for their durable qualities, rough surface, and earthy hues. In the Hastashilpa mela which happens in Kolkata, West Bengal every year, *Patachitra* paintings consisting stories of Ramayana, Manasamangal kavya and tribal stories, narrates experiences which showcase traditions and customs of Hindu mythology. If someone buys a painting consisting of a whole story then the seller often sings to explain the events. It is very interesting to note the tune and lyrics of the stories. This is also a method to relive the long forgotten past and a strategy to popularize the stories. These art forms cater the market through their consumers who are interested in Indian traditional art forms. One interesting fact is the men and women who paint the pictures hold a title or use a surname of *Chitrakar* (painter or artist). They reside in the district of Pingla in West Bengal and proudly own this art form in their names. Their sustenance and livelihood depends on the popularity of this art form in contemporary society. These are some examples of communal narratives which are translated into cultural artefacts and dominate the hagemonical existence and get compared with other popular art forms.

Figure 5: Terracotta tiles depicting the story of Mahabharata

Figure 6. An artist displaying Patachitra paintings in Hasta Shilpa Mela.

5. Conclusion: Communal narrative and translation

The concept of "cultural translation" arose from Homi Bhaba's discussion on cultural interactions beyond the territory within the multicultural communities is mentioned in the last chapter, "How Newness Enters the World: Postmodern Space, Postcolonial Times and Trials of Cultural Translation" in his influential work *The Location of Culture* (Bhaba, 1994). Bhaba treated Salman Rushdie's Satanic Verses as a distinguished example of cultural translation. The remark of Rushdie describing himself as another

diasporic postcolonial writer or "translated men" is reviewed by Bhaba. As translation referred to the idea of "carrying across", hence Rushdie considered himself as the translated man who had borne across the geographical and linguistic boundary. Bhaba propounded the claim of Rushdie as the translated man in the intermediary position of the translator or the migrant. The movement of people rather than texts helped into the emergence of new cultural forms and multiculturalism. Hence, it is established that the relocation of the artists from villages to townships indicates a cultural shift.

The translation is considered as the process of human migrancy where the migrants from the Indian subcontinent to the West would react to the cultural hybridity either by remaining the same or adapting to the new environment. When audiences and consumers have individual contradictions as part of being different social groups and gender relations, representations and their acceptance into the mass culture varies. They are in the position of "in-betweenness" where they could neither shed the inhibitions nor fully accept the change and this creates a flux which contradicts the space as the "third space."(Bhaba, 1994)

Bhabha proposed the "third space" as the space for hybridity, subversion, transgression and blasphemy. He referred to this "idea of negotiation" as the cultural translation "where an emancipatory extension of politics is possible only in the field of cultural production, following the logic of cultural translation."(Bhaba, 1994). The hybridity the audience had to face is reassured by the social semioticians who see "social life, group structure, beliefs, practices and the content of social relations as functionally analogous to the units that structure language." (Bhaba, 1994) The culture is seen as the reference point where signs and symbolic activity of textual and media representation constituted the cultural dilemmas as cultural differences.

Bhabha proclaimed cultural differences as "the process of signification" where culture "differentiate, discriminate" and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity." (Bhaba, 1994). The proclamation of a new identity and "in-betweenness" brings together traditional art forms and establishes intertextual relationships. Hence, creating a sociocultural identity. In the words of Lawrence Venuti: "A translated culture should be the site at which different cultures emerge, where a reader gets a glimpse of cultural others and resistance." (Venuti, 1995;305). The representations break the stereotype and break the code of conventions to assert a change in the public discourse.

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