

The Role Of Folklore In Dalit Literature

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Abstract

Folklore in Dalit literature serves as a powerful tool for reclaiming histories that have been marginalized or erased by dominant narratives. Dalit writers often draw upon oral traditions, myths, and folk tales to reconstruct a past that reflects their lived experiences and struggles. For example, writers like Namdeo Dhasal and Bama use folk songs and oral storytelling to highlight the resilience of Dalit communities against caste oppression. These narratives challenge mainstream historical accounts that often overlook the contributions and suffering of Dalits, thereby creating a counter-discourse that reclaims their rightful place in history.

Beyond preserving historical truths, folklore in Dalit literature also fosters a sense of community and solidarity. Oral traditions, such as the telling of folktales or the singing of resistance songs, serve as a means of collective empowerment, strengthening communal bonds among Dalits. For instance, the Bhakti movement poets like Ravidas and Chokhamela infused their poetry with folk elements that spoke directly to the struggles of the oppressed, offering both spiritual and social liberation. Contemporary Dalit writers continue this tradition by integrating folk narratives into their works, ensuring that these cultural expressions remain relevant in modern struggles against caste discrimination.

Furthermore, folklore significantly shapes the aesthetic and thematic aspects of contemporary Dalit literature. Many Dalit writers use folk motifs, proverbs, and storytelling structures to craft narratives that are deeply rooted in their cultural heritage. For example, Arjun Dangle and Sharankumar Limbale incorporate folktales and oral histories into their writings to emphasize themes of justice, dignity, and resistance. This integration not only enriches the literary landscape but also serves as a reminder of the enduring relevance of folklore in articulating Dalit identity and aspirations. Through these literary efforts, folklore becomes a dynamic force that bridges the past and present, ensuring that Dalit voices continue to challenge oppression and assert their cultural legacy.

This paper explores how Dalit writers incorporate folklore in their narratives to challenge dominant historical accounts and create a counter-discourse. It examines the oral traditions, myths, songs, and storytelling practices that influence Dalit literary expressions, highlighting their significance in preserving historical truths, fostering community solidarity, and shaping contemporary Dalit literature.

Keywords- Storytelling, Dalit Literature, Folktale, Folklore, Oral tradition, Contemporary

Introduction

Folklore in the Indian context is a vast and diverse field that encompasses oral traditions, myths, legends, songs, proverbs, rituals, and storytelling practices passed down through generations. Given India's rich cultural and linguistic diversity, folklore varies across regions, communities, and social groups, reflecting the unique histories, beliefs, and struggles of different peoples. It serves as a medium for preserving collective memory, imparting moral lessons, and expressing social realities. Folk traditions such as the Panchatantra tales, the Jataka stories, and regional epics like *Padmavat* and *Parayi Petta Panthirukulam* have played a significant role in shaping Indian cultural consciousness. These narratives are not just entertainment; they carry deep social, political, and philosophical meanings that continue to influence contemporary Indian literature, art, and performance traditions.

In the context of marginalized communities, folklore serves as a tool for resistance and identity assertion. Many Dalit, Adivasi, and other oppressed groups in India have maintained their own rich folk traditions that counter dominant historical narratives. For example, the oral epics of the Bhil and Gond tribes offer alternative perspectives on Indian history that are often absent in mainstream accounts. Similarly, Dalit folklore, including the songs of Bhakti poets like Kabir, Ravidas, and Tukaram, critiques caste hierarchies and advocates for social equality. Folk deities such as Jhalkari Bai, a Dalit warrior in the 1857 revolt, and Birsa Munda, an Adivasi leader who fought against British colonial rule, are celebrated in oral traditions, keeping alive the memory of resistance and struggle.

Folklore also continues to shape contemporary cultural and political movements in India. Folk music and street performances, such as *Tamasha* in Maharashtra and *Therukoothu* in Tamil Nadu, are used to raise awareness about social issues, from caste discrimination to gender equality. Filmmakers and writers often incorporate folk elements into their works to highlight regional and subaltern voices, as seen in the works of authors like Mahasweta Devi, who extensively used Adivasi folklore in her literature. Even modern popular culture, including Bollywood films and music, frequently draws from folk traditions, blending them with contemporary narratives to create a unique cultural synthesis. Thus, Indian folklore remains a dynamic force, continuously evolving while preserving the essence of the country's diverse heritage.

Folklore as a Vehicle of Historical Consciousness

Folklore serves as a powerful vehicle of historical consciousness by preserving collective memory and offering alternative perspectives on history, particularly for marginalized communities. While official historical records often reflect the viewpoints of dominant groups, folklore carries the lived experiences, struggles, and aspirations of people who have been excluded from mainstream narratives. This is evident in Mahasweta Devi's *Aranyer Adhikar* (Rights of the Forest), where she reconstructs the life of Birsa Munda, a tribal leader who fought against British colonial exploitation. Instead of relying solely on documented history, Devi integrates Munda folklore, myths, and oral traditions to depict a history that emerges from the voices of the oppressed. By doing so, she reclaims an indigenous historical consciousness that colonial and upper-caste narratives have ignored or distorted.

Dalit literature also demonstrates how folklore preserves historical realities through storytelling, songs, and myths. In Bama's *Sangati*, the everyday struggles of Dalit women are intertwined with folk traditions that function as an alternative historical record. The folk songs and oral tales recounted by the women serve not just as cultural expressions but as lived histories of exploitation, survival, and resistance. These narratives highlight injustices that are often left out of mainstream historical accounts, ensuring that the voices of the marginalized continue to shape historical memory. Similarly, Sharankumar Limbale's *The Outcaste* (Akkarmashi) incorporates folk motifs and oral traditions that expose the deep-rooted caste oppression in India, revealing a history of suffering and defiance that is seldom acknowledged in official records.

Folklore also reshapes historical consciousness in literature by blending myth and history to create layered narratives. Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* is an example of how local folklore can illuminate hidden histories. The novel weaves in the legend of Bonbibí, a guardian deity of the Sundarbans, whose mythological role reflects the historical struggles of displaced communities in the region. By integrating folklore with historical events, such as the Morichjhanpi massacre, Ghosh presents a history that is not merely factual but deeply embedded in cultural memory. The **Morichjhanpi Massacre** refers to a tragic and largely overlooked event in Indian history that took place in **1979** in the **Sundarbans region of West Bengal**. It involved the brutal eviction and killing of thousands of Dalit refugees, mostly from the Namasudra community, who had migrated from East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) after the Partition and the Bangladesh Liberation War.

Manoranjan Byapari, a prominent Dalit writer and former rickshaw puller, has played a crucial role in exposing the Morichjhanpi massacre and the betrayal of lower-caste refugees by the Communist government in West Bengal. As a refugee himself, Byapari's personal experiences of displacement and caste oppression deeply inform his writings. His works, particularly his autobiographical novella *Itibritte Chandal Jibon* (translated as *Interrogating My Chandal Life*), and other novels like *Chhera Chhera Jibon* (*Torn Lives*), provide raw and powerful accounts of the struggles faced by Dalit refugees and their brutal suppression during the Morichjhanpi incident. In *Interrogating My Chandal Life*, Byapari narrates his own experiences as a refugee in Dandakaranya, highlighting how Dalits who fled from East Pakistan were systematically abandoned, exploited, and oppressed by the Indian state. The book exposes the false promises of the Communist Party, which initially supported the refugees but later turned against them. Byapari describes how these lower-caste refugees, who were already displaced multiple times, hoped to find a permanent home in Morichjhanpi but were instead met with violence, starvation, and police brutality. His depiction of the blockades, the police firing, the drowning of refugees, and the sexual violence against women paints a haunting picture of the state's betrayal and inhumanity. In *Chhera Chhera Jibon*, Byapari expands on these themes, showing how caste played a decisive role in the government's refusal to accept these refugees in Bengal while allowing upper-caste migrants to settle in Kolkata and other urban areas.

Myths and Legends in Dalit Literature

Myths and legends in Dalit literature often undergo reinterpretation to expose the inherent caste biases in traditional narratives. For instance, the character of Eklavya from the Mahabharata, a lower-caste warrior denied formal education, is frequently reimagined in Dalit literature as a symbol of resistance against Brahmanical hegemony. Similarly, the folk deity Birsa Munda, a tribal leader and freedom fighter, is invoked in Dalit narratives to inspire a sense of pride and rebellion.

Namdeo Dhasal, one of the most powerful Dalit poets, often questions the Brahminical myths of divine justice and karma in his poetry. In his poem collections like *Golpitha*, he directly challenges Hindu legends that justify caste oppression, exposing the hypocrisy of religious texts that claim to uphold righteousness while maintaining a rigid caste hierarchy. He uses brutal imagery and subversive retellings to show how Dalits have been denied justice both in mythical narratives and real life.

In *The Outcaste* (Akkarmashi), **Sharankumar Limbale** subverts traditional Hindu myths that glorify upper-caste virtues while portraying lower castes as impure. His autobiography highlights how these myths are used to justify **violence and discrimination against Dalits**. Through his narrative, Limbale exposes the **contradictions in religious stories**, showing how they have been historically manipulated to maintain caste supremacy.

Manoranjan Byapari, in his novel *There's Gunpowder in the Air*, reconstructs the myth of the revolutionary hero from a Dalit perspective. While mainstream Indian history often glorifies upper-caste revolutionaries, Byapari tells the story of lower-caste radicals who challenge oppression through armed resistance and intellectual defiance. He deconstructs the elite myth of revolution and replaces it with a Dalit-centered narrative, where the heroes are those who have suffered the most but continue to fight back.

Oral Traditions and Storytelling in Dalit Folklore

Oral storytelling has been a key feature of Dalit folklore, passing down community experiences from one generation to another. These stories often contain moral and social lessons that reflect the realities of caste-based oppression.

Sant Tukaram, a 17th-century Bhakti poet from the Mahar caste, composed **Abhangs** (devotional songs) that were passed down orally for generations before being written down. His poetry, like that of **Sant Chokhamela** and **Sant Ravidas**, critiques Brahminical rituals and caste oppression while emphasizing a direct connection to God, without the need for intermediaries. These verses, sung in Dalit communities, continue to serve as both spiritual and political resistance against caste-based discrimination.

In the anthology *Poisoned Bread*, **Arjun Dangle** collects oral histories, folktales, and narratives of Dalit suffering and resistance. Many of the included stories and poems reflect traditional Dalit storytelling methods, where historical oppression is remembered through spoken accounts, songs, and shared experiences. The anthology highlights how oral testimonies function as alternative history, ensuring that Dalit experiences are not erased from public memory.

In her autobiography *The Weave of My Life*, **Urmila Pawar** recalls how her grandmother and other Dalit women used folktales and oral storytelling to pass down their knowledge and struggles. These stories, which were rarely documented in mainstream literature, contained subtle lessons on caste oppression, gender roles, and survival strategies. Pawar's retelling of these stories in written form helps preserve them for future generations while integrating Dalit women's voices into literature.

Tamil Dalit writer **Imayam**, in his novel *Beasts of Burden*, captures the spoken rhythms of Dalit life by incorporating folk speech patterns, storytelling techniques, and idiomatic expressions. The dialogues in the novel closely resemble how oral stories are told in Dalit communities, giving the narrative an authentic, lived-in feel. The novel reflects how storytelling is a natural part of everyday Dalit experiences, preserving knowledge and resistance through oral means.

Dalit-Adivasi writer **M.M. Vinodini** integrates Adivasi oral epics, myths, and storytelling traditions into her literary works. Her stories often draw from Adivasi legends that center on nature, ancestors, and spiritual forces, challenging the dominant Hindu mythological framework that often marginalizes Dalits and Adivasis. Through her writing, Vinodini ensures that these oral traditions are not lost but instead recognized as a vital part of India's literary and cultural history.

Songs and Proverbs as Expressions of Resistance through Folklore

Dalit folk songs and proverbs are rich in symbolism and critique of social injustices. Songs sung during community gatherings, labor work, and festivals often contain implicit protests against caste discrimination.

Tamil writer **Perumal Murugan**, in his poetry collection *Songs of a Coward*, incorporates rural folk rhythms and idioms that resemble the oral traditions of Dalit labourers. His use of simple yet profound folk-inspired lyrics turns everyday suffering into literary protest, much like how Dalit laborers have historically used work songs to cope with oppression.

In his autobiography *Baluta*, **Daya Pawar** recalls the songs of Dalit Mahars in Maharashtra, which reflect their social struggles and aspirations. These songs, sung at community gatherings, serve as both mourning and motivation, reinforcing a shared resistance against oppression. One recurring theme in these songs is the betrayal by upper castes, where Brahmins pretend to be allies but maintain caste supremacy. By integrating these songs into his memoir, Pawar captures the oral history of Dalit defiance, preserving voices that would otherwise be erased.

Telugu Dalit writer **Kalyan Rao**, in his novel *Untouchable Spring*, highlights the role of folk songs in inspiring Dalit movements. His novel traces the history of a Dalit community and its use of music and storytelling as a tool for mobilization. The protagonist, a singer, passes down folk songs that document injustices and revolts, ensuring that Dalit struggles are not forgotten. The novel emphasizes that music is not just entertainment—it is memory, protest, and survival.

In his short story collection *Unclaimed Terrain*, **Ajay Navaria** uses Dalit proverbs to expose caste hypocrisy. His characters often speak in sharp, ironic proverbs that reveal the realities of oppression. One such proverb is: "A Brahmin's sin is washed in the Ganges; a Dalit's shadow pollutes the temple." This proverb reflects the casteist double standards in Hindu society, questioning the hierarchy of purity and morality. By embedding these proverbs in his narratives, Navaria keeps alive the spoken traditions of Dalit resistance, ensuring that oral wisdom continues to challenge systemic oppression.

In *Ants Among Elephants*, **Sujatha Gidla** recounts the political and social struggles of her Dalit family. She describes how folk songs, especially those of Dalit Communists, were used as rallying cries during political movements. These songs often contained hidden messages of rebellion, calling for unity among the oppressed. By documenting these songs

in her memoir, Gidla preserves the oral histories of Dalit movements, ensuring that these voices continue to inspire political activism.

Madara Chennaiah, a 12th-century Kannada poet, is considered one of the earliest Dalit poets. His songs challenge the dominance of Brahmins in spiritual matters, asserting that one's caste does not determine their devotion or wisdom. His verses, still sung today, remain a symbol of Dalit defiance against religious exclusion. His poetry represents how folk songs have historically been a mode of protest, even centuries before Dalit literature was formally recognized.

Vemana, a 17th-century Telugu poet, was known for his anti-caste proverbs, which continue to be spoken widely in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. One of his most famous proverbs states: “**Caste is an illusion; a good person is a good person.**”

Such proverbs, simple yet revolutionary, challenge Brahminical superiority and assert the equality of all humans. Vemana's sayings, like those of Dalit proverbs across India, remain a powerful tool of resistance, spoken in daily life to counter casteist ideology.

Impact of Folklore on Contemporary Dalit Literature

Folklore plays a vital role in contemporary Dalit literature by serving as a repository of collective memory, cultural identity, and resistance. Dalit writers draw from oral traditions, myths, songs, and storytelling practices to challenge dominant narratives and offer alternative histories. Folklore not only preserves historical truths erased by mainstream historiography but also shapes the aesthetics, themes, and politics of Dalit literature today. Below are examples demonstrating the influence of folklore on contemporary Dalit literature.

Bama's *Karukku* (1992), a groundbreaking Tamil Dalit autobiography, incorporates oral storytelling traditions and folk expressions to depict the struggles of Dalit Christian communities. She frequently uses colloquial Tamil idioms, local proverbs, and folk tales to narrate the caste-based discrimination and gendered oppression faced by Dalit women. The rhythmic storytelling in *Karukku* mimics the oral traditions of Tamil Dalit villages, preserving the voices of the marginalized and making folklore an integral part of Dalit literary expression.

Marathi Dalit poet **Namdeo Dhasal**, in his collection *Golpiha*, draws from folk songs, Bhakti traditions, and street music to create a unique poetic form that captures urban Dalit struggles. His poetry carries the raw energy of folk protest songs, using folk metaphors and direct, unfiltered language to attack caste oppression and Brahminical dominance. By incorporating folk rhythms and oral storytelling techniques, Dhasal transforms folklore into a modern revolutionary literary tool.

The anthology *Poisoned Bread* (1992), edited by **Arjun Dangle**, showcases how folklore preserves Dalit history. Many stories and poems in the collection draw from folk legends, oral narratives, and traditional proverbs that have been excluded from mainstream historical records. The use of folklore in *Poisoned Bread* serves to counter the erasure of Dalit voices, ensuring that generations of caste oppression, struggles, and triumphs are not forgotten.

Telugu Dalit writer **Gogu Shyamala** incorporates Adivasi and Dalit folk traditions into her storytelling. Her stories often feature oral legends, indigenous songs, and rural folklore that depict land struggles, caste violence, and the resilience of Dalit communities.

Kalyan Rao's novel *Untouchable Spring* (2000) traces the history of a Dalit family through generations, showing how folk songs function as historical records and instruments of resistance. The protagonist, a folk singer, passes down songs of caste struggles and oppression, ensuring that the pain and resistance of Dalit communities are never erased.

Tamil writer **Perumal Murugan** frequently incorporates local folktales, village myths, and oral traditions in his novels. In *Poonachi: The Story of a Black Goat*, he uses animal folklore as a metaphor for caste oppression, while in *One Part Woman*, he draws from folk rituals and myths to critique societal hypocrisy regarding caste and gender.

In his short story collection *Unclaimed Terrain*, **Ajay Navaria** integrates urban folklore and Dalit proverbs into his narratives. His stories use spoken traditions and popular sayings to expose the hidden injustices in Indian society. Proverbs such as “**The temple doors are open to all, but not the hearts of men**” serve as sharp critiques of caste hypocrisy.

Conclusion

Indian folklore, particularly in the context of Dalit and Adivasi communities, serves as a crucial medium for preserving collective memory, asserting identity, and resisting dominant narratives. It functions as an alternative historical record, ensuring that the lived experiences, struggles, and aspirations of marginalized communities are not erased. Through oral traditions, storytelling, songs, and proverbs, folklore challenges the mainstream historiography that often privileges upper-caste and colonial perspectives. The reinterpretation of myths and legends, such as Eklavya's story in Dalit literature, highlights how folklore can be reimagined to expose caste injustices and inspire resistance. Writers like Mahasweta Devi, Manoranjan Byapari, and Amitav Ghosh have effectively integrated folklore into literature, offering nuanced and layered historical narratives that reflect the voices of the oppressed. The oral epics of the Bhil and Gond tribes, the folk songs of Dalit laborers, and the proverbs critiquing caste hypocrisy all contribute to an enduring cultural memory that continues to shape contemporary social movements and literary expressions.

The impact of folklore on contemporary Dalit literature underscores its transformative power in redefining cultural and literary paradigms. Dalit writers like Bama, Namdeo Dhasal, and Kalyan Rao draw from oral traditions, folk songs, and storytelling techniques to challenge Brahminical dominance and caste oppression. Their works bridge the gap between oral and written traditions, ensuring that the wisdom and defiance embedded in folklore remain relevant in modern literary and political discourse. By integrating folklore into literature, these writers preserve not only the cultural heritage of marginalized communities but also provide a powerful means of protest and self-assertion. The continued influence of folk traditions in literature, cinema, and political movements highlights the dynamic and evolving nature of Indian folklore. As a repository of cultural identity and historical consciousness, folklore remains a vital force in shaping narratives of resistance, solidarity, and transformation, ensuring that the voices of the oppressed continue to be heard and acknowledged in the broader socio-political landscape of India.

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