Geography of Folk Culture: Special reference to Birbhum, West Bengal

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Abstract – The concept of space and place are the major fundamental geographical concepts and have very significant influence on the structure of folk culture of any geographical region. Both the oral and written literary forms of folk culture have specific “Culture Specific code” of both space and place. It is well known to us that “Folk Culture is a lively fossil which refuses to die.” The folk tradition of Birbhum is the great literary reservoir which can dictate/influence the cultural spatiality of Birbhum. This paper examines the impact of different concepts of space and Yi Fu Tuan’s concept of place on the literary narration of folk traditions of Birbhum. This paper also intends to investigate the effects of spatial and place centric influence of literary values of different folkdances, songs and rural plays (or popularly known as Jatra) on the cultural economy and socioeconomic life of the people of this district.


Folk culture has some symbolic identities which are associated with different ethnic aspiration of the world. Literary and oral text of folk culture have some distinct spatial characteristics which are associated with any geoethnicity. There are mutual influence of both physical and socio-cultural geographical aspects on the narrative and literary cultural discourse of folk culture. The influence of place on literature particularly folk literature exposes the emotional attachment. Place and placelessness are the important aspects of geographical knowledge. In his book “Place and placelessness” (1976 London Pion) Edward Relph emphasized that the practical knowledge about place is essential for human existence and social relation between mode of production and productive force. As Charles Francis Potter said, “Folklore is a lively fossil which refuses to die” (Page1 “Jangal Mahaler Sanskriti Lok Sanskriti Adivasi Kendra” Govt. Of West Bengal Kolkata-2010). The folk tradition of Birbhum is the great literary reservoir which can influence the cultural special significance of this region.

The objectives of this paper are as follows:

A. Examine the influence of space and place on folk tradition.
B. Folk tradition as a spatial political weapon.
C. Post Topophilia/ Topophobia.

METHODOLOGY:

1. Analysis of archival and secondary data.
2. Field survey.
3. Analysis of different aspects of folk culture.

It is well known to cultural geographers that there are close relationship between space, place and folk culture and that is shown in a schematic chart below.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND:

There are many previous discussions on the influence of space and place on literary text and vice versa. In his book “Topophilia : A Study of Environmental Perception, attitudes and values...
“(1974) Yi Fu Tuan investigates the ‘affectionate bond’ between people and place with the emphasize on ‘ways of perceiving environment’. The broad meaning of the term “Topophilia” is human love for his/ her dwelling/ living place through the expression of pride (page 92 do). Yi Fu Tuan identified seven components of ‘Topophilia’ namely, (i) aesthetic appreciation (ii) physical contact (iii) health and topophilia (iv) familiarity and attachment (v) patriotism (vi) urbanization and attitude to the country side (vii) wilderness (page 93 do).

The word ‘Topophilia’ also introduced by Yi Fu Tuan means, “Fear about landscape or loosing of fear about his/ her dwelling place.”

Ernest W. B. Hess Luttich wrote ‘The paper draws the attention to the approach of Jurij M Lotman who understands text as a cultural specific code for space and symbolic space in literature as a result of culturally specific uses of signs ‘ (1972) Spatial Turn: On the concept of space in cultural geography and literary theory- Ernest W. B. Hess Luttich-Journal for Theoretical cartography Vol 5 2012 www.meta-carto-semiotics.org )

So the influence of concept of space and place on the text of folk culture/ literature are classified into three broad categories:
A. ‘Topophilia’
B. ‘Topophobia’
C. ‘Concept of spatial turn’

SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDIED AREA:

Before British era entire Birbhum/ Manbhum region was a distinct cultural region which also included Chhoto Nagpur Plateau region. Local Bhumi aristocracy absorbed other indigenous population such as Kudmi Mahato, Kuiri, Gope, bauri, Hari, Ghasi and Nat to create sovereign indigenous caste coalition had the support of the local tribal communities of Santhals, Koras, Mundas, Oraon, Ho, Duduck (Muslims) and others and developed distinct indigenous spatial economic system popularly known as ‘Garh’ economy and socio culturally known as ‘Harmitan’ economy. (These terms were first introduced by two famous Indian anthropologists Dr. Surojit Sinha and Dr. Poshipati Prasad Mahato). There are close relationship between ‘Garh-Harmitan’ economy with folk culture of Birbhum which is shown below.

A. Examine the influence of space and place on folk tradition:

Different folk dances, songs and rural play or Jatras have made great influence on the spatial turn of the folk culture of Birbhum/ manbhum region. Bhardu, Tushu, Jhumur, Pranpakhi, Baha, Chang, Banhdhna, karam, gajon, Panchali etc. Are the different forms of traditional folk culture which are popular among local tribal and indigenous communities. There is an example of a Santhal marriage song with dance which is the typical example of concept of ‘Topophilia’ which is given below :

“Birburu dare sakam
Gada Sod: dare nir
Joto hate debon bachantao
Ana sangate Jalam arang Santhalang
Ary choli enech sereng
Joto boy hate debon bachao"

Bir= Forest, Buru= Hills, Dare Sakam= Tree leaves, Gada sod= Rivers , Darenir= Weeds
Debon= Defence , Senthalago= Santhal tribe , Ary choli= dance music ,Enech= Protect (page-23 Bazar Hembram –Dhirendra nath Baske Dipankar Ghosh: Loksanskriti and Adivasi Kendra Govt. of Wb 2010 Kolkata)

It is evident from this song that the influence of “topophilia” of Santhal on their immediate dwelling environment. Indigenous tribes/ communities of Birbhum are very much emotionally attached with their dwelling place particularly with their forest and immediate physical geography of hills/ Burus, small rivers (Gada God), rocks etc.

Texts of Jhumur songs are also shown the effects of ‘Topophilia’ and the topographical turn of the narrative through the depiction of their daily ‘life world’.

“Amra Manbhumer botigo
Puruliay dhan na holy
This tiny para of this Jhumur song shows the socio economic condition of the agrarian economy of Birbhum by depicting ‘Puriliyay dhan na holey’ a typical example of spatial turn of the folk text. This line shows two hard realities of socio economic life of Birbhum. The rice economy of Birbhum depends on two factors- (i) availability of rainfall (ii) irrigation facilities but due to the drought conditions and underdevelopment of irrigation sector agricultural development in Birbhum faces several constrains with resulting effects of out migration to Burdwan (Namaliyas) for search of alternative jobs and livelihood.

B. Folk tradition as a spatial political weapon :

Different forms of folk traditions such as songs, dances, drama are used as democratic political weapon in different parts of the world. Lok Sevak Sangha or Lss a Gandhian political organization of Birbhum played very significant role in the geo ethnic political mobilization for the demand in the state of West Bengal during 1952. They used folksongs, dances, music particularly the ‘Tushu’/ ‘Tusu’ songs as a political weapon to mobilize the people in favour of their political demand. As Ernest WB Hess Luthich said “……..topographical turn focuses on the representation forms of space, the topographical turn moves the description of spatial structures, relations, positional concerns to the fore”(page 7….). The geographical (resemble as physical space) space of Birbhum/ manbhum and its geoethnic cultural forms such as ‘Tusu/ Tushu’ songs were the main psychological motivators for the greater political movement (Bengal Merger movement initiated by L. SS). This has been expressed through a famous ‘Tusu/ Tushu’ song given below :

“Shuno Bihari Bhai
Tora rakte narbi dang dekai
Tora apon tore bhed barali

Bangla Bhasay dili chari,
Bhaike bhule korli boro
Bangla Bihari buddhitayie"
Bangla Bihari Sobai
Ek Bharater apon bhai
Bangali ke marli tobu
Bish chorali Hindu tai
Ek Bharatye bhai bhai
Matri Bhasay rajya chai”

[This “Tusu” song was written by famous LSS leader ex freedom fighter and ex MP Sri Bhajahari Mahato]

The entire song is the typical example of ‘Topophilia’ showing its different components such as,

(i) “Ek Bharatye bhai bhai Matri Bhasay rajya chai”= ‘Topophilia’ of patriotism
(ii) “Shuno Bihari Bhai Tora rakte narbi dang dekai”= ‘familiarity and attachment’

Patriotism of Manbhum during 1956 also annoyed the people of Birbhum known as ‘Topophilia’ well expressed in another Jhumur song,

“Manbhumer manat thaklo nai
Gel koi Bihar ke
Tukchu bhum takli na Banglay”

(page 99 Jolly Bagchi, Gupta J)

Typical example of Topophobia

C. Post Topophilia/ Topophobia ?

Now questions arrises that weather is there any effects of “Topophilia” and “Topophobia” exist in our globalized economy ? There is a rapid change in the every sphere global capitalist economy. What was relevant in 1975, is not relevant in 2017. Whether this era can be termed as era of post ‘topophilia’ and post ‘topophobia’. In this regard I find some new components of spatial cultural economy of any region particularly of Birbhum which are as follows :

(i) New forms of spatial political economy where
Labour market is flexible.

Informal labour market is dominant than formal labour market.

Migratory labour force who are moving to all large urban parts of India for search of permanent jobs.

Locally migrated labour forces or Namaliyas.

Continuous out migration from rural areas

Dominance of popular culture in rural areas through TV, Cable networks, FM radio, mobiles (3G/ 4G – Gio sim)

Excessive monetary supply in rural areas through different govt. schemes such MGNREGA.

Predominance of wage economy over agrarian economy.

As a result of this – all this factors are adversely effects on different forms of folk culture. It also creates lack of attachment about place/ Space (Post Topophilia) and lack of fear about their dwelling place (Post Topophobia). There is a overall confusion and contradiction in the 'life world'. We conduct a household survey at Banior village with certain questionnaire i and got some result which are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table: 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Household viewing/ participating in both popular culture and folk culture at Banior village (March 2016) [%]</td>
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<tr>
<td>A. Both viewing different popular culture and folk culture= 78%</td>
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<tr>
<td>B. Actively performing different types of folk forms= 68%</td>
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<tr>
<td>C. Only viewing folk culture= 12%</td>
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<tr>
<td>D. No leisure time= 22% to 32%</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Field survey, March 2016)</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

From this table some facts are derived,

(a) Both the popular culture and folk culture are still dominant in this village.

(b) Participations in different folk forms are still very high (68%)

(c) But another significant factor is that nearly 22% to 32% of the responds don’t any leisure time due to their busy engagement in economic activities.

Table: 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>House hold survey of Banior Village showing % of viewing different forms of popular culture and folk culture (%)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>(Viewing)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(a) Hindi cinema = 8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(b) Bengali cinema = 8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(c) Bengali serials = 22%</td>
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<tr>
<td>(d) Internet through mobile = 13%</td>
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<tr>
<td>(e) radio = 3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total = 54%</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

It is evident from the table-2 that,

(i) More people are engaged in popular culture than folk culture.

(ii) Different forms of popular culture are more strong than folk counterpart.

From evidence of empirical data we can construct the components of post topophilia and post topophobia which are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Diagram of Post Topophobia and Ppost Topophilia</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lack of attachment: fear about space/ place</td>
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<tr>
<td>Different forms of dominant folk culture</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structural change in rural economy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arrival of new economy</td>
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<td>Out migration of labour force</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

CONCLUSION:

From the following discussion it is evident that there is a close relationship between space, place and folk culture. Due to the arrival of new globalized economy this organic relationship is felt threatened.

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