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## **‘Folk’ and ‘Rural’ within Contemporary Aesthetic Sites: The Works of Phanishwarnath Renu and Manisha Kulshreshtha**

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### **Abstract**

Art and literature, already subjects of extensive debate, become even more complex when qualified as ‘folk’ or ‘rural.’ Defining these expressions is challenging because they draw from multiple disciplines such as anthropology, community studies, art history, narrative traditions, religiosity, and historiography. At their core, folk creative practices embody an intricate process where diverse elements converge into culturally significant forms. This convergence reflects the dynamic interplay between individual expression and collective cultural influences, intertwining both tangible artifacts and intangible beliefs, a discourse discussed by the Material Culture School. Consequently, these creations serve as indicators of broader socio-economic, historical, and political frameworks. Their inherent ambiguity defies simple categorization, urging continual reassessment of how creative practices express and shape the evolving cultural codes and social norms within any given society.

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Folk, historiography, appropriation, artifacts, Gramsci, *weltanschauung*.



The concepts of art and literature which are highly contested in themselves, become much more so when the prefix 'folk' or 'rural' is added to these. The attempt to identify unambiguous descriptors to define folk art and folk literature is bound to be inconclusive, since in its simplest form these inhere within themselves various areas of research and analysis like anthropology, community studies, art history, narrative traditions, religiosity and historiography, that in their scope and depth embrace multiple processes and interfaces between individual and group dynamics. The mystery about the ways in which the uniqueness of any work of art gets woven into the web of tradition is closely connected with the enigma of the process of creativity itself. Apparently unconnected threads are woven into patterns, texts, artifacts, and performances that become significant entry points into comprehending and interpreting the socio-economic, historical and political belief-systems of sites where these are born and take shape. This is also one of the ways in which many aesthetic theories attempt to unravel and understand the process of creativity. Material Culture School for instance, sees an organic relationship between people and the things they create, reasons why they create what they create, how they use what they create, and the ways in which what they create shapes/reshapes the existing aesthetic and social codes. The 'material/s' utilized include the ideational, theoretical, imaginative, and intellectual facets of individual as well as group existence. The concept generates a whole range of relationships between different features within any given society that appears to be vastly different from another one. A case in point is the symbolic connection between women's clothing and socio-cultural discourses existing around the concepts of femininity. Several complex and intricate connections emerge between intersections of material culture studies and the socio-economic



status of women reflecting the different ways in which women are conditioned, shaped and reshaped by the ideals of femininity in societies that may be vastly different in their social codes, ethnic roots, religious and spiritual traditions, and other defining aspects. These idealized concepts of femininity do not exist in isolation or abstraction from other societal constructs. The sartorial preferences of/for women that societies cherish and reproduce may, at times be identical but could also be vastly different among societies that may be marked at different points on the graph of similarities or divergences in their socio-cultural histories and contemporary modes. Needless to say, these become significant indicators of the worldview and layered ideological expressions of the feminine code of specific societies.<sup>1</sup> The physical objects thus become signifiers of values, social networks, as well as much wider constructs that include multiple patterns of beliefs, ethics, and cultural discourses including those of community, society, as well as the nation state. The idea clearly establishes an active contribution of the tangible as well as the intangible aspects within a socio-cultural construct that leads to the creation of physical artifacts as well as beliefs, values and assumption or *weltanschauung* of the specific social system. It is within this paradigm that the paper will attempt to draw together folk art, folk music, folk performance, and orality along with written words, language and fiction.

The dynamics of the complex relationships between the ‘folk’ and the nation state is one that can be understood only within the discourse of power relations which includes the appropriation, construction and reproduction of cultural, social and economic domains that are utilised for creating canons that in turn classify the multiple conceptions of art and creativity on a hierarchical scale. The dawning of independence in India was fraught with many challenges, including serious considerations about the nature of the new sovereign





state, its social and economic power structures, along with its priorities in the process of designing the trajectory of development to be followed in a nation state that was envisaged as a system with a robust functioning of democratic institutions, and rights of citizenship. Culture and language emerged as dominant markers of individual as well as community identity. Unity in diversity was declared as the widely accepted cultural project that was expected to shape the political discourse in independent India. However, rampant urbanisation, growth of cities and concentration of socio-political and economic control in the hands of the empowered classes resulted in the marginalisation of communities that were geographically, culturally, and socially distanced from the newly emerging political elite of the new nation-state. The expansion of print culture and reproduction of hierarchies of property and power resulted in the marginalisation of communities with their distinct civilisational and cultural codes that included all aspects of their material culture, creativity, art and music. Approached as the ‘folk’ from the vantage point of the urbanised elites, the creative expression of these communities is often described as ‘folklore’, ‘folk art’ and/or ‘folk music.’ Gramsci discusses this concept of folklore and states that the “whole phenomenon of folklore contains or expresses ‘a conception of the world and life’ which can be precisely located in socio-cultural terms in relation to other conceptions of the world” (Cirese 19). He further argues that folklore can be located “socially and culturally ‘in a framework of a nature and its culture’: characteristic of the subaltern classes on one hand, and in opposition to official conception on the other” (20). The ‘competition’ and ‘conflict’ reflects a kind of social domination that generates its ‘superiority’ through its discriminatory descriptions of the folk and folk culture as being ‘inferior’ and ‘unsophisticated.’



Nonetheless, it is worth examining the prospect of bringing together the two apparently ‘competing’ and ‘conflicting’ realms of creativity and culture. We tend to agree with Walter Benjamin’s opinion when he states that “the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition” (Benjamin 221), which, among other things, suggests the risks of distortions that creep in while transporting a work of art from its original fabric of tradition to another one. This possibility is further strengthened in his discussion is his statement that follows the one quoted above, where he says that, “This tradition itself is thoroughly alive and extremely changeable.” (Benjamin 221). It is within this context of continuum of tradition, including its unchangeability as well as its changeability, that the paper will attempt to discuss some selected writings of what may be described as two ‘mainstream’ Hindi writers Phanishwarnath Renu (1921-1977) and Manisha Kulshreshtha (b. 1967). One finds a gap of more than four and a half decades between the dates of births of Renu and Kulshreshtha. This in fact, is one of the rationales for selecting these two writers for detailed analysis of their works on the non-urban cultures. It is likely that this will make it possible for the reader to identify continuities and discontinuities in approaches towards the creative arts, language, music and performance of those communities which are identified as representing the subaltern, the ‘masses’ and the ‘folk.’ While there are several other writers in Hindi, like Maitreyi Pushpa (b. 1944), who have written about these communities, Renu and Kulshreshtha may be studied together fruitfully to enable us in tracing the transformations that may have occurred in official and unofficial responses of the urban, industrialised elite towards the creative universe of the non-urbanised and ‘folk’ communities of the country. Writers too have their own creative and ideological ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ groups that constantly assess and locate them on the scale of





accepted norms of literature and ‘non-literature.’ The works of both the writers cover a large range of social and political concerns but it is their writings about folk art, performance and culture that will form the main focus of this paper. Besides that, it would be interesting to study the ways in which folk and/or non-urban creativity is represented by these two writers who are separated from each other by more than four and a half decades. A study of works of the two writers establishes the fact of folk literature, art and creativity being dynamic as well as simultaneously rooted in tradition. In fact, the transformations creeping into folk creativity may often be traced back to its disadvantageous position in the power relations between powers of patronage and non-urban creativity. This inequitable relationship comprehends within itself the vulnerability of not just expressed creativity but even the group of disenfranchised creative folk artists that produce and reproduce these ‘artifacts.’

It is this co-existence of the past, sometimes even the primordial past, along with the present, that characterizes several written works of Phanishwarnath Renu as well as Manisha Kulshreshtha. When approached from the perspective of material culture studies, implements, colours, musical notes, languages, values and social codes, would all be treated as artifacts since these are grounded in specific physical contexts. It is around these that social structures of communities get created. Performance, art, stories, origin tales and music therefore are organically connected with rituals and religion and therefore follow strict social rules while these are rendered. G.N. Devy, while discussing the concept of indigenous art says that, “It might be said that tribal artists work more on the basis of their racial and sensory memory than on the basis of a cultivated imagination” (Devy xi). Memory plays an active role in recreating the past and connecting it to the present. Folk art too does the same and continues to evolve with temporal transformations without disconnecting with memory. The other



pertinent component that becomes pertinent is that of space or location. Displacement, or a shift from the original location, itself exposes art and the artist to various influences that are bound to impact the earlier discourse of folk art and culture. For instance, if one travels through the homes of the indigenous group of Rathwas in the area of Tejgadh and Chhota Udaipur in Gujarat, one sees the walls of homes painted by members of the community known as *lakharas*, literally meaning the writer/s. Their paintings on the walls of homes may be considered as the community script or the “painted words” inscribing the history of the community. The paintings narrate the origin stories, mythological and ritualistic symbols. The more recent ones include objects like the television and the lorry, making clear the inter-penetration between memory and lived objective reality.

Renu’s story *Bhittichitra ki Mayuri* (Peacock on the Wall) deals with the issue of Madhubani paintings that were originally auspicious paintings painted by women on walls of homes during celebrations of religious occasions and celebrations like weddings and naming ceremonies. Over the years, a central concern has been about the ways in which this tradition could be preserved within the expanding commercialisation of culture that has been hand-in-glove with urbanisation. Renu, born into a rural community in Bihar, understood only too well the complexity of the situation of highly talented women painters. He locales these women painters like Phoolpatti’s mother, living a life of complete poverty and deprivation, at the core of the story *Bhittichitra ki Mayuri*. It is only with the entry of Sanatan, the educated art collector from Patna that the lives of the mother and the daughter undergo a transformation. Sanatan takes Phoolpatti’s mother to Delhi, where she paints, wins awards, and comes back prosperous and respected. However, this kind of a facile resolution is not something at which Renu could have stopped. During the narrative, Renu finds enough space



to describe Sanatan's mental dilemma about the difficult choice between continuing with limiting Madhubani paintings within its original rural context or exposing it to the wider commercial and urbanised national and international world. The latter would eventually entail establishing factories for production of Madhubani paintings at a large scale for market consumption, along with engaging a workforce of local artists working like slaves in factories that are no better than "butcher houses" (Renu, "Raspriya" 575). There is clearly no easy way out and it is Phoolpatti who suggests some kind of a balance that appears to be highly evanescent, when she announces that she and her mother will continue to paint but never leave their village. The village must remain the fulcrum of all creative endeavours surrounding the village and arts of the village.

The case of Madhubani paintings is a special one as it happens to be one of the folk arts that received state patronage during the seventies. Madhubani artists were identified, encouraged, and commissioned. Their works were advertised, sold and circulated within India and many other countries around the world. This saw a phenomenal increase in output and marketing of Madhubani art. Once it became economically beneficial and profitable, Madhubani art moved out of sole custody of women and the concomitant entry of men along with that of money became a universal fact. The paintings are now seen on walls of many homes, offices, commercial establishments, dresses, bags, and even footwear. What belonged to specific sites and rituals has become a trading commodity and completely divorced from its original memory, space and past, that it no longer a part of either the painting, its meaning or its original experience.

The story titled *Ek Dolo Dooji Marwad ... Teejo Kasoomal Rang* by Manisha Kulshreshtha describes a bus journey through the Mewar region of Rajasthan. It narrates twin



love stories of a painter couple Fauzia and Shailesh and the unarticulated love between the young bus conductor and a childlike widow who probably takes the bus regularly. The title is taken from a folk song that is played in the bus and is specific to the region through which the bus is being driven. Like the song the *kasoomal rang* or the kasoomal colour too is a distinct colour of the region. Like the Madubani wall paintings, Mewar too is known for its Mewari wall paintings. In fact, Fauzia's father was a Mewari wall painter who painted elephants, wedding processions, and the Hindu god Ganesha on walls. Fauzia and Shailendra too paint on walls but these are not walls of homes celebrating rituals but walls of places like the office of the Ministry of Culture. They are successful mural artists and combine the modern, bohemian and rural art. While it is true that unlike traditional Madhubani painting, murals cannot be produced enmasse, we find that a great deal of Fauzia's individualized mural art simultaneously includes experiences of memories and histories of her traditional artistic heritage as well as highly differentiated and contemporary artistic expressions. Fauzia's ingenuity and speciality lies in a colour she uses that is neither purple, nor red, nor magenta, nor lilac. It is a colour that only she can create and she calls it the "kasoomal rang", the "kasoomal" colour.

The bus journey also turns out to be a journey into what Fauzia describes as her journey back into her past. She is surrounded by Marwari language and the folk songs that take her back to the courtyard in her childhood home and she relives the vision of her father's colours, coloured salts, lac, hingalu,<sup>2</sup> pestle and the flat stone mortar, hand-made brushes and different kinds of local vessels. Most of these are also artifacts that Phoolpatia and her mother use to prepare natural colours for their paintings. Yet each community and region have their own very specific features as far as folk art is concerned. It is when hingalu is mixed with a



specified amount of turmeric that the kasoomal colour comes into existence. It is this that is pulled out of its original ceremonial context and used by Fauzia in the murals in urban centres. Unlike the story of Madhubani paintings, the presence, the art semantics, and the identity of kasoomal rang gets subsumed in its coupling with the modern bohemian. “Rang” also carries the connotation of overwhelming love, both physical and devotional, which drenches everything completely. Meerabai the Hindu mystic woman saint of the Bhakti movement was also born in Rajasthan. In many of her hymns she sings of her love for Lord Krishna and expresses how she is drenched in the colour of the Lord. “Rang” for Meera represents unbreakable love, spiritual transformation and sacred surrender, all rolled into one. *Main to saanvare ke rang raachi* (I am drenched in the colour of the dark one), Meera sings. However, Fauzia’s kasoomal rang, as well as her love gets articulated through borrowed expressions from the world of literature and films, and the kasoomal rang, uprooted from her father’s courtyard, exists, though much like an orphan, in the urbanised forms supported by the aesthetics codes of the urban official institutions.

Artefacts take shape due to the human ideas, intelligence and diligence that bring these into existence and “reflect consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of individuals who made, commissioned, purchased, or used them, and by extension the beliefs of the larger society to which they belonged” (Prown 1-2). Within the wide category of artefacts, those representing the aesthetic temper of groups and communities, like the Madhubani paintings and the kasoomal rang, possess an additional layer of signification that communicates socio-cultural codes and relationships. Renu’s story *Raspriya* narrates the story of the aging Panchkauri, player of the drum *mridanga*, who was renowned for his skills in playing the *mridanga* and singing the folk form *raspriya*. After the injury to one of his



fingers, Panchkauri can no longer play the *mridanga* with his earlier mastery. The story revolves around Panchkauri and the young Mohana. While the story reflects the deprivation and poverty of the characters, it is replete with the harmony of music. The story revolves around the songs of Vidyapati (1352-1448) known as the *Maithil kavi kokil* (the cuckoo of Maithili). A scholar of Sanskrit, who was once a courtier, the royal poet and priest, Vidyapati's poems and songs are as much a part of the repertoire of Sanskrit literature as that of the popular culture of the masses. Renu infuses the world of destitution and penury with the honey of music, love and creation. A prominent critic and contemporary of Renu, Ram Vilochan Sharma, includes Renu's first novel *Maila Anchal* (1954) among the ten best novels in Hindi and unambiguously locates Renu within the tradition of Premchand. There are however, some later critics who draw distinctions between the fictional worlds of Premchand and Renu due to the presence of folk art, music and performance in Renu's writings that suffuses even the most abject poverty with a beauty that communicates the potential of human beings to create beauty, music and dance.

While it is true that artefacts provide significant entry points into study and analysis of value systems, attitudes and ethics of any particular socio-cultural collective, what is also clearly apparent is that cultural expression goes much beyond merely artefacts. It is also necessary to accept that artefacts need to be approached along with other intellectual, creative and spiritual discourses like spirituality, ethical codes, gender codes, concept of beauty, physical location, caste, class, and race that shape the existence of individuals and groups. Folk performances including dance, drama and puppetry often represent issues of major concerns of the community, including socio-economic aspects like relationships of power, evolution of aesthetic preferences, and impoverishment, with a traditional finesse rarely





found in other community structures. Vidyapati becomes a symbol of aesthetic spiritualism of the community that Phanishwarnath Renu writes about. The first literary reportage Renu wrote was titled *Bidapat Nach* (1945), or as a non-local Hindi speaker would pronounce it, “Vidyapati dance,” is a syncretic example of folk theatre. It combines ‘high’ poetry of Vidyapati along with the slapstick of badly dressed characters on the stage. Each character is simultaneously identified with the role played in the drama, as well as the member of the contemporary village. Personal histories of deprivation of these characters move in parallel with their divine roles as Radha and Krishna. Songs about their love and grief of separation are sung along those of hunger and debt that these characters are burdened with in their real lives. However, the reader/viewer is not allowed the luxury of losing herself/himself in the magic of performance and is reminded repeatedly that this is “merely Bidapat Nach” (Renu, “Bidapati” 21) and neither a classical performance, nor a representation of the ‘real’ village or villagers. The pattern gets repeated in several other fictional pieces including Renu’s magnum opus, his novel, *Maila Anchal*.

Performance as a part of folk art is the focus of several stories of Manisha Kulshrestha too. In the story *Kathputliyan* (puppets) she overlaps the poverty and destitution of the puppet maker ... with gendered social positions symbolised by the travails of young and beautiful Sugna who is married off to Ramkisan, the polio-stricken widower and father of two boys. Puppetry as an art is considered to be one of the oldest in India. It is prominent not just as a part of traditional entertainment but is also often used symbolically in the philosophical understanding of life itself. Ramkisan is a talented and devoted puppeteer but lives a life of extreme indigence and destitution. It is only after he finds a job with the government that his condition begins to improve.



Kulshreshtha's story *Swang* (impersonation) is a story that too brings several threads of folk performance together. It centres around the renowned and aging *bahurupiya* Gaffar Khan. *Bahurupiya* is a traditional performance that enjoyed heights of popularity in the past. Experts in impersonation, the *bahurupiya* artists disguised themselves as various characters. Gaffar Khan is an expert in disguising himself as a woman. Once a popular and richly awarded artist, he falls on bad days with appreciation for his art changing to ridicule, and even shame for his family. The story describes the attempt that Gaffar Khan' makes to receive some financial assistance from the government through its scheme of support for artists who have been awarded. The attempt bears no fruit and he is left stranded in the poverty that surrounds him and is a clear death knell of the art he practices.

Whether it be the dancers and singers of "Bidapat nach", the puppeteers, the *bahurupiyas*, or other forms and practitioners of folk arts, dance, music and performance, or cultural artefacts like painting brushes, colours and drums, these must be approached not as merely disembodied expressions of creativity. Behind all these tangible and intangible creative expressions are living individuals who are artists trained through tradition and generally marginalised within the network of state sponsored elitist art. The neglect of the traditional folk arts and artists represents the neglect of the communities to which they belong and it would be a serious gap in our democratic structures if they remain rooted there, getting stuffed out of life, suffocated by life's pressures, without the air and water of rights and citizenship.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Refer to *Through the Wardrobe: Women's Relationships with Their Clothes*, edited by Ali Guy, Maura Banjim, Eileen Green, Oxford, Berg Publishers, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Also known as Hansraj Hingalu, the paint is prepared from soot after adding other organic colouring agents like *kattha* (catechu), milk sheep and lemon juice.



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