

DASTANGOI AND SEANCHAI: TWO STORY-TELLING TRADITIONS KEEPING ORALITY ALIVE

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ABSTRACT

Humans have been bestowed with a magnificent gift, language. Our civilization has reached its zenith due to this incredible ability we possess. Understandably, speech is the oldest method of language usage we have had and with this we developed the skill to narrate stories. Thus storytelling has been part of human civilization for ages and so storytelling is perhaps as old as humankind itself. Stories are an inseparable part of our life experiences. We all have stories to tell and we all love them. Much before printing came into existence, we carried forward orally our myths and beliefs, weaving stories out of them, and these have been carried forward for generations. Every nation, every culture has its own storytelling tradition and in each, it fulfills a different purpose. Their importance in transmitting and preserving rich cultural heritage of nations cannot be undermined. They were not just for entertainment, they were cultural symbols. Not just stories, riddles, songs, and jokes are all a part of this rich tradition of orality. In the present paper two traditions, diverse stylistically and geographically, have been taken up. Dastangoi or Kissagoi is the Indo-Persian storytelling tradition and the other is the Irish Seanchai. The two rich forms have a cultural connotation, and both have been preserved through various ways and endeavours in the present scenario to carry forward the heritage. The paper will also examine some names associated with these forms and how they are being carried forward in our times.

Key Words: *Dastangoi, Seanchai, Folklore, Kissagoi, Irish, Oral Tradition, Myths, Fairies*

INTRODUCTION

Legends and myths, prayers and hymns are the vehicles through which oral tradition develops. "So oral tradition develops as the community looks for a recreation of memory in community life."(*Importance of the Oral Tradition*, White) Let us consider the Bible for

instance. Even before the gospels came into existence, Jesus' first followers would have sustained his memory by sharing stories of his life, death, and teachings.

“The fact that we're dealing in oral medium of story- telling is very important to the development of the tradition itself because stories tend to be told in some units that can be passed along easily, easily remembered. Sometimes they may even be put in different order or you may only tell certain parts of the story.” (White)

According to Britannica dictionary, Oral Tradition, “. . . refers to a dynamic and highly diverse oral-aural medium for evolving, storing, and transmitting knowledge, art, and ideas.” (“Oral Tradition”)

Oral tradition was and is adopted by historians, ethnographers and the storytellers to transmit myths and folklores to future generations. This peculiar way of passing down the information can also be termed as ‘text less communication’.

Orality connects the world. All nations, cultures and communities have their distinct oral traditions which have been passed on from one generation to another. The world is sort of woven together through these oral traditions. Whereas Dastangoi is a unique eastern storytelling tradition, Sheanchai is the Irish, western form, an age- old storytelling genre.

When the world hadn't seen publishing, when the digital wave was still thousands of years away, stories kept people entertained and informed. It is interesting how diverse and enriching these are, now that there is published content of these forms available, while at the same time many are being kept alive in some way or the other. Some have even been included under UNESCO's list of intangible heritage. For instance both Dastangoi and Seanchai have been kept alive by practioners, and thanks to the digital platforms available now, they have a wider reach as well.

DESCRIPTION

In India itself we have an immensely rich variety of oral traditions from the *Kaavad* in Rajasthan to the Kamsel of Sikkim; the list can go on and on. It is interesting how oral

traditions originally performance based since they were carried forward verbally, became part of written literature once printing began. This is how orality and literature intermingled and many rich traditions could be preserved. When we talk in terms of oral traditions, we more often than not talk of them in terms of being performances meant for audiences. In this again there could be two categories-the casual exchange which happened in market places, or informal gatherings, or households and the more formal and elaborate performances. The requirements for both differed, the former needed a verbal play on the part of the natives, while the latter being more structured and complex, required skill and training on the part of the performer. Each category had its own social, political, cultural implications.

Let us understand what performance is. Performance “encompasses cultural knowledge and experience-as they are available to members of the community in verbal, visual, musical, and mimetic symbolic forms...” (Green 632)

The story made the memory alive, living and story-telling is fluid. Fluid because each time a performer narrates or enacts it, he/she adds something to it or moulds into something new, knowingly or unknowingly. Second as when an oral story is written, it is not that it doesn't get modified after that. It undergoes many changes as it is rewritten in new sociological or religious or political situations. The same holds true of Dastangoi.

The term ‘dastan’ interpreted as story, and ‘goi’ as telling, meaning literally telling a story, Dastangoi belongs to the larger framework of storytelling. The need for documentation of these stories was not felt until long after, since the thrust was on the oral form from generation to generation. Each Dastango or storyteller modified the stories in his own ways, adding to the texture and form in his own style. The authenticity of the texts is therefore difficult to fix. This narrative genre dates back to medieval Iran. Frances Pritchett in his book *The Medieval Persian Romance Tradition* provides us with 9th century as being the date of this popular form. Their tales consisted of the tales then mainly consisted of various themes, most particularly the very popular theme of romance and adventure. “Subsequently, the tales wove themselves around the gallant, chivalrous prince and his encounter with tyrannical kings, demons, sorcerers, Jinns of the Howling desert, enemy gladiators and champions and demure, peerless princesses- either of the human or the pari (fairy) race. It is also inclusive of the

cunning and shadowy agents called aiyars- whose roles are either supportive or destructive.”
(Pritchett 1)

The most popular in this narrative genre has been the tale of Hamza, known as the Dastan-e-Hamza, greatly influenced by Shahnameh as highlighted by scholar William Hanaway. Hamza possibly revolves around the stories of Hamza none other than the paternal uncle of the Prophet Mohammad. Another theory points that the protagonist is Hamza Abdullah, who led a bloody rebellion against the existing Calipha. Whatever the case maybe, the tale has been the most narrated one by Dastngos.

There are many versions of the narrative from Turkish to Balanese to Sudanese. From Sindh, this form found way into India and flourished in Mughal courts with Persian being the language. It is believed that Akbar himself spend time indulging in telling tales and he had more than one thousand passages of the tale compiled in an illustrated form which came to be known as Hamzanama. With the development of Urdu in India, first in the Deccan, then eventually in the north, from 16th to 18th centuries, saw Urdu words and phrases penetrating into the storytelling form of Dastans, though slowly. In the 19th century Delhi, Kissagois/Dastangois were performed on the stairs of the Jama Masjid in the evenings.

The turnaround came only in 1858, when Munshi Naval Kishor founded his famous Lucknow press and the era of dastan publishing begin. By publishing a great deal of literature on dastans, he added and augmented the canon. In 1881, he published the Dastan-e-Hamza, a great contribution to the world of literature.

Eventually, the form lost precedence, with the death of Mir Baqar, the last of the performers, until the 1980s when the Urdu poet and critic Shamsur Rahman Farooqui came in touch with Pritchett and did a massive research on the form of Dastangoi. He then advised his nephew Mehmood Farooqui to revive the genre, who then gave great impetus to it after a great deal of research into the art form. The first our age performance of Dastangoi took place in the India International Auditorium on 4 My 2005. The form then gained momentum and found an international platform as well. Farooqui has taken it to colleges and universities as well.

It is performed in festivals, for instance at the Jaipur Literature Festival in 2008 (Farooqui's performance), the Udaipur Storytelling Festival in February 2020 where Syed Ali Agha performed. When I spoke to him for *Confluence: South Asian Perspective*, for which I freelance, he opined that keeping our oral traditions alive is important for our culture as our culture is our identity card.

The scope of the contemporary Dastan has widened. It adapts tales which reflect the soul of the contemporary societal, political, cultural scenario, observing, commenting, criticizing, in short accepting into its fold almost any theme, even mobile phones.

The other oral form of storytelling taken up in the paper is Seanchai. In Scotland and Ireland, a Seanchai (Plural: Seanchaithe) is a traditional storyteller and a historian who spreads traditions and important historic events worldwide using his/her narration skills. He is a carrier or bearer of the beliefs, aspects or things that have not been mentioned in any of the manuscripts of ancient times, thus preserving and reflects the hidden cultural heritage.

When we contemplate on its origin in Pre-historic Ireland, we come to know that this vital tradition would have died out if it has not been saved by King Huga. In 576 AD Colmcille, an Irish scholar and promoter of storytelling, along with his fellow friends, had been exiled by the royal court of Ireland. Consequently they found shelter in Scotland. They never disheartened and kept in contact with the king of Ulster, 'Huga'. Finally, the time occurred when religious leaders, nobles, ollamhs, bards and poets were summoned to the court for expulsion. They all were accused for misusing their power for personal interests. Earlier these accused were the advisors of the predecessors of king Huga and later during the reign of King Huga were collectively hailed as '*Filid*'. *Filid* were condemned but "... the reigning king of Ulster had intervened on their behalf and granted sanctuary." ("How The Ancient Irish Oral Tradition was saved From Extinction") And so storytellers survived and carried forward Seanchai.

The oldest Irish tradition can be studied under the four cycles.

A) Mythological Cycle encompasses around the stories of Irish Gods and Goddesses, their origin and the people who invaded the island. Like Hindu mythology, Irish Goddesses

are named after water, air, land and sovereignty. There are stories of some warrior goddesses who accompanied sacred animals to encourage their combatants in battle field. ‘Triad’, ‘Morrigan’, ‘Macha’ and ‘Badb’ are some well-known goddesses of war in Irish mythology. The Macha of Eamhain Mhacha, Carman and Tailtiu etc. are the goddesses who are associated with seasonal festivals. (“Irish Mythology”)

B) Ulster Cycle deals with heroic tales of the kings of Ulster, especially the lives and deaths of Macnessa and Conchobar Mac Nessa (kings of Ulster).

C) Fenian Cycle covers the stories of the Irish heroes but in poetic form. It creates a link between Pre-Christian and Christian time.

D) Historical Cycle glorifies the stories (in verse as well as in prose) of Buile Shubhne, the king of Dal nAraidi who was driven insane by the curse of Saint Ronan Finn.

Apart from these stories from royal families, there were some tales related to the voyages and adventures too found weight from Pre-historic Celtic age to medieval period. Seanchai is hailed as, “the custodian of history” and maintains, “... the richest folklore traditions in the world.” (“Seanchai Keeper of Ireland Folklore Heritage”) They dealt with oral history and Irish tradition simultaneously. The Irish folklores were the means to explore oral history eloquently. The core area of folklorists was to depict those ancestors, warriors, colonizers, and invaders lyrically, who contributed towards the grandeur of Medieval Ireland and its tradition. This Medieval Irish Literary Tradition contains, “material of very great diversity. There are lyric and panegyric poems, historical and pseudo-historical and antiquarian texts, stories of pure entertainment, a great deal of religious matter, and much else.” (Jackson 1)

Seanchaithe were the helping hands and service providers in the royal courts and they witnessed numerous events. They were in regular contact with the court happenings and by using small and interesting stories tended to communicate them publically. They guarded their folklores and moved them forward orally, thus maintaining records of genealogies and laws which were approved by the court. Some stories can relate listeners to the historical backdrop and living style of the common people. The characters along with the protagonist are portrayed in such a vivid way. Few are “. . . prose tales purporting to describe a ‘heroic’ stage in Ireland’s distant past, telling of the wars and adventures of a group of characters thought of

as having been real people, living long ago in a setting which it is implied was a genuine one.” (Jackson 2)

According to Eamon Kelly, “There is a misconception that Irish stories are about freedom fighters and the country’s struggle against the English oppressors.” (“Seanchai of Ireland and their stories”) But Irish stories are related to the common man too. Some of the Seanchaithe belonged to gypsy or tinker families and traveled from place to place. At that time they memorized all relevant information and incidents of the lives of commoners as well as about the existence of early nomadic clans and narrated them as a source of their livelihood.

They were expected to showcase their knowledge on request or demand from the kings to unfold Irish myths and legendary stories. It is very amazing to know that in Ireland, there are few Irish myths, still in practice, which have been transmitted for generations only through oral tradition. These myths were evolved before the Christian age when there was no sign of written communication. Seanchaithe still exist and doing their work creatively. In their stories, few obsolete words seem challenging, but once they proved their importance in the contemporary age, they were preserved in the vocabulary.

Presently there are some well-known Seanchaithe who have been narrating stories for years:

1) Eamon Kelley:- He is the Irish Storyteller , actor, and playwright who has mastery to hold the audience through his magnificent voice. His stories are perfectly woven with humour, irony, idioms and proverbs. Somewhere there are traces of historical events and names of famous personalities found that create impact on the listeners. In also he uses voice modulation technique in accordance with rhythmic words. He reads about Island of Manhattan, “Up the Hudson and down the bay, tents corny and Rockaway.” (*Emon Kelly- Stories from Ireland 2*)

His use of simile, “The Irish people took to drinking tea like dogs to water” and his use of exaggeration, “Teeth were swimming inside in his mouth for a bit of it” reflects his visual imagery.(*How To Tell A Story- The Seanachai (Eamon Kelly)*)

2) Eddie Lenihan :- He is an Irish Folklorist who carries certain myths to the next generation. In his video, *A Little Bit Irish- Folklore- Part 1*, he disclosed the names for Irish fairies like Medina Ginet (a goddess fairy), Elia, Ashla and Banshee. He added Banshee with a famous

myth, “Banshee is the one who warns Irish families of a coming death in the family. Irish people were not afraid of Banshee, most people heard from Banshee rather than saw her.” (Part 2) Here, “... few of the characters are clearly supernatural and some of the scenes involve supernatural events and motifs.” (Jackson 2)

3) Jim Maher: - He is a promoter of traditional music and incorporates it with old stories. This Kilkenny based artist is able to bring the gone days alive only through his “Irishness” and his narrative perfection.

CONCLUSION

Seanchai proved the famous Chinese proverb wrong, “The faintest ink is more powerful than the strongest memory.” This form has the power to carry listeners into realms of imagination. Using a coherent language and memorizing hundreds of stories, these storytellers have kept alive a tradition despite threats from the internet age proving that creativity can’t be copied and it lasts for eternity. Seanchai though culturally and geographically far removed from Dastangoi, shares some things in common. First that it has survived despite all other means of entertainment, that narration skills are important for this form too, and that it is a continuation of tradition and sustenance of heritage.

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