



Blue Ava Ford Publications

International Journal of Trends in English Language and Literature (IJTELL)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal; ISSN:2582-8487
Impact Factor: 8.02 (SJIF); www.ijtell.com Volume-6, Issue-3; July-Sept(2025)

Folklore: A Rich Heritage of Humanity

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Article Received: 05/08/2025

Article Accepted: 01/09/2025

Published Online: 02/09/2025

DOI: 10.53413/IJTELL.2025.6304

Abstract

Folklore, often described as the collective autobiography of humankind, is not merely a mode of entertainment but a living archive of people's experiences, beliefs, values, and struggles. This paper explores the meaning, scope, and significance of folklore as an intangible cultural heritage, tracing its manifestations from oral traditions to contemporary digital platforms. Drawing upon definitions and perspectives from Indian and Western scholars, as well as insights from UNESCO, this study highlights folklore as both a cultural resource and a medium of social transformation. With a special focus on Indian and Marathi folklore, the paper examines how folk songs, oral narratives, proverbs, riddles, festivals, and rituals shape identity and preserve collective memory. Further, it investigates the global dimensions of folklore by analyzing examples from Africa, Europe, Asia, and the Americas. In the digital era, folklore continues to evolve, appearing in films, social media, and podcasts, showing its resilience and relevance. The conclusion emphasizes the urgent need for preservation and promotion of folklore as a universal cultural treasure.

Keywords: Folklore, oral tradition, intangible cultural heritage, Indian folklore, Marathi folklore, social transformation, digital age.

Introduction

The study of folklore is the study of humanity itself. As Dr. R. C. Dhere observed, "Folklore is the collective autobiography of the people" (Dhere 21). This statement resonates even in the twenty-first century, where folklore continues to mirror collective memory, social experiences, and cultural practices. Folklore embodies the wisdom, imagination, struggles, and celebrations of communities across generations. It transcends boundaries of literacy, class, and geography, creating a bridge between tradition and modernity.



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Folklore is not confined to written texts or historical records. Instead, it resides in lullabies sung to infants, chants at harvests, epics narrated in village squares, dances performed during festivals, and beliefs embedded in local rituals. Its oral transmission across generations has ensured cultural continuity, even when formal documentation was absent. In recognition of its importance, August 22 is celebrated worldwide as World Folklore Day, an initiative that emphasizes not only the celebration of folk traditions but also their preservation, research, and transmission to future generations.

This research paper seeks to explore folklore as a rich heritage of humanity. It will examine its definitions, traditions, and features, drawing on both Indian and global perspectives. It will also highlight Marathi folklore as a unique and vibrant expression of social, spiritual, and cultural life. Finally, the study will discuss the challenges and opportunities of folklore in the digital age.

Review of Literature

Scholars across the world have studied folklore from multiple perspectives. William Thoms, who coined the term “folklore” in 1846, defined it as the “mirror of people’s mind” (Thoms 12). Later, Alan Dundes, a leading American folklorist, emphasized folklore as a form of cultural expression that provides insights into collective psychology (Dundes 9). Stuart Blackburn, who extensively studied Indian oral traditions, described folklore as “the pulse of Indian culture” (Blackburn 54).

In India, scholars like Dr. V. K. Rajwade and Dr. H. B. Pandit examined folklore as the living heritage of communities. Rajwade considered it a reflection of cultural consciousness, while Pandit regarded it as “the collective mentality of people expressed through beliefs, songs, riddles, and artistic expressions” (Pandit 41). Dr. R. C. Dhere, one of the foremost Marathi folklorists, argued that folklore is inseparable from the history of common people and must be studied to understand cultural roots (Dhere 78).

International organizations like UNESCO have also contributed significantly to folklore studies. UNESCO recognizes folklore as an “intangible cultural heritage of humanity”, urging nations to preserve oral traditions, rituals, festivals, and folk knowledge (UNESCO 2003).



These perspectives highlight that folklore is not static but a dynamic cultural resource, shaped by collective creativity and adapted across generations.

Definition and Concept of Folklore

The word “folklore” is simple in appearance but encompasses a vast range of meanings. It derives from the English words “folk” (people) and “lore” (knowledge). Thus, folklore literally means the knowledge of the people. However, it is not restricted to information; it includes artistic, emotional, and symbolic representations of collective life.

Several definitions illuminate the scope of folklore:

1. Dr. R. C. Dhere: “Folklore is the collective autobiography of people. It reflects the joys and sorrows, faiths and superstitions, hopes and struggles of common life” (Dhere 34).
2. Dr. V. K. Rajwade: Folklore is the literature that emerges from the experiences of common people and survives through oral traditions across generations (Rajwade 67).
3. Dr. H. B. Pandit: Folklore is “the collective mentality of people, consisting of beliefs, imagination, songs, proverbs, riddles, and artistic expressions” (Pandit 41).
4. William Thoms: “Folklore is the mirror of people’s mind” (Thoms 12).
5. UNESCO: “Folklore is an intangible cultural heritage of humanity” (UNESCO 2003).

From these definitions, one may conclude that folklore is not just entertainment but also a repository of human truth, experience, and culture.

Folklore: Tradition and Characteristics

Human beings have an innate need to narrate, listen, and express. Folklore emerges from this basic urge. It thrives in oral traditions, collective experiences, and cultural practices.

Oral Nature

Folklore has primarily been transmitted orally. Before the invention of writing or printing, communities relied on songs, stories, and rituals to preserve culture. Even in the digital age, this oral character continues in podcasts, performances, and folk festivals.

Collective Authorship

Unlike literary texts authored by individuals, folklore is created collectively. It belongs not to a single creator but to the community that refines and transmits it.

Cultural Continuity

Folklore ensures the continuity of cultural values across generations. Proverbs, riddles, and folk narratives preserve moral lessons, practical wisdom, and social norms.

Diversity of Forms



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Folklore appears in various forms: tales, songs, dances, sayings, riddles, rituals, and visual arts. Each form reflects specific cultural needs. For example, lullabies express maternal love, harvest songs celebrate collective labor, and folk dances symbolize social unity.

Global Folklore

Folklore is not limited to a single culture or nation; it is a universal human expression.

Africa: The stories of Anansi the Spider convey lessons of wisdom, wit, and resilience. African drum dances are more than entertainment; they express social unity and spiritual beliefs (Opoku 91).

Europe: Irish and Scottish folk ballads, as well as the fairy tales of the Brothers Grimm, reflect European folklore traditions (Briggs 203).

Asia: Japan's Noh theatre and China's dragon legends reveal how folklore is intertwined with spirituality and national identity (Kawamoto 56).

The Americas: Native American oral traditions, particularly creation stories and spiritual songs, preserve tribal identities. Afro-American spirituals, born from struggle, are a testament to folklore as resistance (Harris 74).

UNESCO has declared many such traditions as "Intangible Cultural Heritage", thereby giving folklore global recognition and protection.

Indian Folklore

India, with its cultural diversity, is a treasure house of folklore. Every region, language, and community has its distinctive folk traditions.

North India: The Alha-Udal ballads and devotional bhajans are popular.

South India: Karnataka's Yakshagana combines dance, music, and drama, while Tamil Nadu's Kavadiyattam celebrates devotion.

East India: Assam's Bihu dance and songs symbolize fertility, joy, and social bonding.

West India: Maharashtra's lavani, tamasha, and powada traditions express both entertainment and socio-political messages.

India also gave the world the Panchatantra and Jataka Tales, which offer timeless moral and practical lessons. These texts demonstrate how folklore has influenced world literature and education.



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Marathi Folklore

Marathi folklore is deeply rooted in agrarian and working-class life. Its forms include lullabies (angai geet), grinding songs (ovya), wedding songs, devotional abhangas, and folk performances like tamasha and lavani.

Grinding Songs (Ovya): These songs, sung by women while working at the grinding stone, reflect both their labor and emotions. They portray suffering, hope, and humor.

Wedding Songs: These capture joy, satire, and sometimes critique of social customs.

Devotional Traditions: Saints like Tukaram, Namdev, and Janabai composed abhangas that blend spirituality with folk culture. Tukaram's line—"First a seed was sown, then it sprouted, and thousands of branches blossomed"—captures collective wisdom (Tukaram 45).

Powadas: These ballads narrate heroic tales and social struggles. Shahirs (folk poets) used powadas to inspire masses during the freedom struggle and social reform movements.

Dalit Folklore: Figures like Annabhau Sathe transformed folklore into a tool of protest against social injustice. His line—"There is no savior of caste, rise and show the power of the oppressed"—resonates as a revolutionary folk slogan (Sathe 102).

Thus, Marathi folklore has not only entertained but also functioned as a medium of social change.

Folklore in the Digital Age

In the twenty-first century, folklore has entered new spaces. While globalization and urbanization have endangered many traditions, digital platforms are offering revival opportunities.

YouTube and Podcasts: Folk songs and stories reach millions of audiences globally.

Social Media: Young generations create reels and remixes of folk music, giving it renewed relevance.



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Films: Movies like Natarang, Fandry, and Sairat use folk traditions to address contemporary issues.

Digital Archives: Efforts are underway to document folk songs, dances, and narratives for preservation (Joshi 88).

However, modernization has also distanced youth from traditional performances such as ovya or bhajans. Hence, institutional efforts, school curricula, and folk festivals are necessary for safeguarding folklore.

Folklore and Social Transformation

Folklore is not just cultural expression; it is also a weapon of social change. Saints like Tukaram and Namdev used devotional folk songs to promote equality and morality. Dalit folklore challenged caste oppression, with shahirs like Annabhau Sathe turning powadas into revolutionary tools. During the Indian freedom struggle, folk songs and ballads inspired nationalist sentiments (Handoo 66). Festivals and rituals fostered social unity, while satirical folk performances critiqued injustice and hypocrisy. Thus, folklore bridges art and activism, making it both a cultural and political force.

Conclusion

Folklore is humanity's true heritage—an intangible treasure that reflects past memories, present realities, and future possibilities. To forget folklore is to lose touch with one's cultural roots. As UNESCO emphasizes, folklore is an "intangible cultural heritage of humanity." It is both a record of human creativity and a guiding force for collective identity. Preservation and promotion of folklore require academic research, digital documentation, and policy support. Schools and universities must include folklore studies in curricula. Governments and cultural institutions must support folk artists. Communities themselves must take pride in their oral and artistic traditions. Ultimately, folklore is more than songs, tales, or rituals. It is the soul of humanity. Protecting it is not only an academic responsibility but a cultural duty.

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