

## THE CULTURAL LEVEL OF UNLETTERED FOLK

It is often taken for granted that people who are predominantly unlettered inevitably have a low cultural level. The frequently used word "illiterate" does not merely signify inability to read and write but also implies a general lack of knowledge and culture. Indeed, some of the standard dictionaries mention "ignorant" as one of the meanings of the word illiterate. It is common for people belonging to modern industrial societies to look down upon the unlettered folk as uncivilized and incapable of finer intellectual and aesthetic sensibilities.

The aim of the present paper is to indicate that even though literacy is an important instrument for the acquisition of knowledge and culture, it cannot be regarded as synonymous with these. Just because a people does not employ writing as a vehicle of communication, it cannot be considered devoid of capacity for logical and symbolical thought. Conversely, the mere ability to read and write is no sure sign of a high level of knowledge, rationality, or aesthetic sensibility of any individual or group.

The widely prevalent assumption that literacy is "an indispensable condition of culture,"<sup>1</sup> besides being incorrect in point

<sup>1</sup> *Dictionary of World Literary Terms*, ed. by Joseph T. Shipley, London, George Allen & Unwin, 1970, p. 17b.

of fact, has serious policy implications. This assumption is embedded in much of the thinking of the people belonging not only to the modern industrial countries but is widely shared and strongly expressed by the urban middle classes in the developing countries. It distorts the vision of the developed industrial countries towards the industrially underdeveloped ones and is thus an impediment to a better understanding among the nations of the world. To the westernized urban middle classes of the developing countries, it imparts a self-righteous attitude of disdain towards the teeming millions in their own countries. Comprehensive and far reaching social change is bound to be the goal in these countries, but this attitude is not conducive to its attainment. Government policies based on a lack of faith in the critical abilities and adaptive capacity of the common folk lead to imposition of certain programs on them without any serious attempt to procure their consent through meaningful communication. Many of these programs, like that of population control in India, have laudable objectives. But there are disastrous consequences when these are sought to be put through by sheer governmental power on the assumption that the illiterate masses are unthinking beasts incapable of seeing reason. Such an estimate fails, of course, to utilize the vast potentialities of the traditional network of oral communication for furtherance of new ideas among the folk.

The tendency to blame "illiteracy" for all the ills in the developing countries seriously impedes the search for real causes. The fact is that if this attitude of unfounded scorn for the culture of the unlettered folk could be overcome, new avenues of modernization in the developing countries and growth of civilization might open up. In this paper we shall have the occasion to mention briefly some unprecedented possibilities arising out of the unique circumstances of interaction between vigorous folk cultures on the one hand and highly developed modern technology on the other.

It is not at all our contention that mass literacy is unnecessary for modern industrial civilization. On the contrary, rapid spread of literacy may be one of the most potent factors in the march towards modern industrial society. However, we do think that no civilization should be judged by the requirements and

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standards of another. Civilizations are too organic to permit this. Our plea is for an objective assessment. Even if we wish to change a system, condemning it would not suffice. To be effective, any plan for change has to be based on a sound comprehension of the system as it has been actually functioning.

Though this paper is concerned primarily with an assessment of the cultural level of the peasant folk, it may be mentioned that many other types of societies as well rely on oral communication as a vehicle of transmission of knowledge and cultural values. Indeed, even in modern times the written word is not considered sufficient for communicating knowledge; otherwise there would be no need of universities or colleges—books and magazines alone would do. Many ancient works which have continued to influence humanity through the ages were originally parts of oral tradition. They were written down much later. Such a great philosopher as Plato had grave misgivings about the virtues of writing. He maintains that the wise man when in earnest “will not write in ink.” Plato considered at some length the limitations of writing: “This invention [of letters] will produce forgetfulness in mind of those who learn to use it, because they will not exercise their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them. You have invented an elixir not of memory, but of reminding; and you offer your pupils the appearance of wisdom, not true wisdom, for they will read many things without teaching, and will therefore seem to know many things, when they are for the most part ignorant and hard to get along with, since they are not wise, but only wiseacres.”<sup>2</sup>

The elite in ancient India too did not have much faith in writing as a means to knowledge and wisdom. A well known Sanskrit couplet which is often used as a proverb says:

Knowledge contained in books, and money in someone else’s hands,

<sup>2</sup> Plato, *Phaedrus*, 273-78. Cf. A.E. Taylor, *Plato: The Man and His Work*, London, Methuen (University Paperbacks), 1966, pp. 816-17.

When the occasion for its use arises, neither is this knowledge nor is that money (of any use).

The idea of this verse is strikingly similar to what Plato said. Even after writing was known, texts continued to be memorized and taught by the master to his disciples. It was considered impossible to acquire true knowledge without sitting at the feet of the master. Dependence on books was looked upon with suspicion. Indeed, while enumerating impediments to knowledge, Narada<sup>3</sup> mentions "study of books" (*pustaka suśrūshā*) as one of these. The other impediments mentioned are gambling, addiction to drama, women, drowsiness, and sleep. The fact, however, remains that much of the knowledge of the elite in ancient and medieval India, as also in other parts of the world, continued to be transmitted through books. On the other hand, the peasant stratum of these civilizations depended solely on word of mouth for the propagation and transmission of knowledge, beliefs, and literature.

This assessment of the cultural level of unlettered folk is based on field studies of peasantry in various parts of India, and an analysis of their oral tradition.<sup>4</sup> However, peasant societies all over the world have so much in common in the basic features of their social structure and cultural pattern that the broad conclusions should be generally applicable to peasantry in other countries as well. This is significant because the vast majority of humanity still lives in peasant societies. The bulk of the population in the countries of Asia and Latin America are peasants. Despite this, and despite the fact that since the dawn of civilization the major part of human population has lived in peasant societies, social science has not given adequate attention to the study of peasant social structure and culture. Sociologists have generally studied modern industrial societies, and social anthropologists have concentrated

<sup>3</sup> Cited in *Smṛtichandrikā*, I, p. 52 quoted by K.V. Rangaswami Aiyangar, *Bṛhaspatismṛti*, Baroda, Oriental Institute, 1951, p. 77.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of the value and problems of the analysis of oral tradition, see my "Oral Tradition and the Study of Peasant Society," *Diogenes*, no. 85 (1974) pp. 112-27.

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on the study of tribal cultures. The assessment of the cultural level of peasants made here may well be applicable in many of its aspects to tribals also, but it is based on the analysis of material from peasant society, which sets the focus of this study.

Tribal societies are basically different from peasant societies in many ways. Tribal societies and cultures are socio-cultural wholes. A tribe may come in contact with other societies, but such contact is not essential to its existence—in fact it is often detrimental. On the other hand, peasant society is essentially a partial society.<sup>5</sup> It is part of a larger civilization, the other part being the elite stratum. There is continued interaction and give and take between the cultural streams of the two strata. Tribal societies, in their original state, are completely unlettered and cut off from the world of books. Peasants too are predominantly unlettered and away from books, but their interaction with the elite stratum relates them indirectly to written literature. However, for the most part the knowledge, skills, beliefs, values and products of aesthetic creativity such as poetry and tales of the peasantry are transmitted orally.

When we speak of levels a comparison is necessarily implied. How does the cultural level of the unlettered folk compare with that of the common people in developed industrial countries? Let us first think of the people belonging to the lower strata in advanced countries. Many of them are industrial workers. What are their chances of enjoying, not to speak of participating in, the creation of poetry, fiction or music of a high order? Though they know reading and writing and thus theoretically have access to all literature, most of them have never had a chance of cultivating their aesthetic sensibilities in a manner that would make them capable of appreciating and enjoying literature or music of a good level. Even otherwise the life is so hectic, the anxiety caused by unending competition so obsessive, and the routine of work so mechanical and monotonous, that one is hardly left with the poise necessary for mature aesthetic activity. The pattern of life tends to set

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Robert Redfield, *Little Community and Peasant Society and Culture*, Chicago, University Press, 1963 (Third impression), p. 40 ff.

in motion the well known cycle of boredom and excitement. Boredom of ordinary life is so deep and pervasive that it can be broken only by a massive dose of excitement. This explains the immense popularity of cheap, spicy thrillers and ghastly portrayals of crime and violence in printed fiction and films. The music too cannot be serene.

Whatever be the potentialities of mass literacy, the actual level of the aesthetic life of the common man in industrially advanced countries cannot be regarded as very high. In fact even the people of the upper strata in these societies are not in a very different position. They may have the material means to buy a few masterpieces of art as a part of conspicuous consumption, but it is doubtful how much time or inclination they really do have for high level aesthetic pursuits. Creative enjoyment of artistic activities, which should be a normal part of the life of any cultured human being, is set apart as a domain of the specialists who make it their *raison d'être*.

It is difficult to evolve cut and dried indicators of cultural level, but ability to enjoy, render and compose good poetry and music, comprehension of subtle philosophical ideas, an eye for beauty and integration of artistic objects and activity in everyday life, and ability to take a critical view of events and even traditional structures, can surely be taken as indications. With these criteria the unlettered peasant folk cannot be considered to be at a low level.

In traditional peasant society everyone sings, and sings well enough. Despite the shattering impact of unplanned modern forces one still finds this attribute of folk culture in most peasant villages of the interior. Of course there are different *genres* for men, women and children but all of these have many pieces (though not all) of high literary merit. It has been my experience during field work in the interior of India that almost every person, whatever be his age or sex or social stratum, has a repertoire of traditional songs, tales, pithy sayings, and riddles. Even the middle-aged man of the warrior caste, with awesome mustaches, will come out with a full throated melodious song if one is able to persuade him to sing. If you ask him in some other season for a song sung during spring, he may of course protest, "wouldn't people laugh at me—





work, such as those sung by groups of women while transplanting the seedlings of a paddy or weeding the fields. Men sing long songs while covering distances on foot, and break the silence of the open pasture by pithy and loud Birha songs. There are plenty of calendaric festivals and their rituals would not be complete without the narrating of appropriate tales and the singing of proper songs. Appropriate songs and dances must also accompany the numerous ceremonies of various *rites de passage*. Of marriage songs alone I collected twenty major types from a region. Flavorful songs are connected with harvesting seasons and rains. The singing of certain folk epics continues for long hours and draws huge audiences. Children have vast stores of play rhymes, riddles and marches. Illustrative short tales and proverbs are frequently employed with telling effect while settling disputes and striking bargains.

In a folk society which is still intact, literature and music are no preserve of specialists or of a particular class. All sections of the community have a share in its enjoyment, performance and creation. Women, who have usually had little chance of contributing to sophisticated literature, are at no disadvantage as far as folk literature is concerned. The types of songs sung by women are more numerous and their repertoires much bigger than those of men. That the songs of women are their own creation is obvious from the themes and portrayal of feelings. The anxiety and cravings of a woman during pregnancy find vivid expression. In a society which attaches great value to motherhood a barren woman is a most miserable creature. Songs portray in great detail the frustrations and fantasies of barren women. Such songs are full of pathos and are as touching as any good poetry can be.

Peasant society in India is severely hierarchical. Numerous castes, determined by birth, are arranged in the order of high and low. The caste system has rigid and intricate codes governing marriage and sharing of food. The castes lowest in this hierarchy are considered untouchable. Taking food or water from their hands, or even their touch, is supposed to pollute the persons of the upper castes. But as far as the sharing of folk music, literature, and mystical thought is concerned, even the lowest castes are far from deprived. In fact



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the repertoires of the low-caste men are usually much richer and bigger than those of the men of the upper castes. Some of the songs may be connected with the occupation of a particular caste, but there are many other types of songs and other forms of folk literature which are shared across the caste lines. It is no unusual sight that a person of a low caste narrates a tale, chants a folk epic, or sings a song, and a big audience comprising various high and low castes listens attentively and respectfully. Of course the persons in the audience take their seats in accordance with their position in the caste hierarchy, but the appreciation that the performance receives depends upon its quality.

An outstanding example is the singing of Nirgun songs by persons belonging to the Chamar caste. Nirguns are songs about the Nonqualifiable Absolute and present intricate metaphysical ideas through rich imagery and symbolism. Chamar is the typical untouchable caste of northern India. Its traditional occupation is disposal of dead animals of the village and leather work. It is placed at the lowest level in the caste hierarchy. And yet in many parts of northern India the Chamar is regarded as the chief exponent of the sublime Nirgun songs. Though the singing of Nirguns is by no means confined to the Chamar caste, or for that matter to any caste, a Chamar may often be considered its specialist. Persons belonging to higher castes, even to the learned and priestly caste of Brahmans, not only listen with reverence to the singing of the Nirguns by the Chamar but also to his exposition of the transcendental philosophy contained in them.

The complex metaphysical ideas are expressed in the Nirgun songs through lively imagery and symbols derived from the everyday life of the folk. They contain idealistic philosophy of a high order. The authorship of many of these is attributed to the famous saint poet Kabir (15th century). But there is hardly any way to know which of these were really composed by Kabir and which by the ordinary unknown folk. Kabir too was unlettered, though he is universally acknowledged as a great mystic and poet. Rabindranath Tagore, a Nobel laureate for literature, has translated one hundred of his songs into English. Kabir said of himself that he had "never touched paper and



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singing of heroic poetry or folk epics, which is often consciously taught and learnt, but generally speaking the participation is so ample that everyone acquires the necessary skill without any need of training separately. Most songs of women are sung in unison by large groups and a girl begins to join from a tender age. In a vigorous folk society occasions of singing are regular and frequent. Everyone therefore has an opportunity to acquire a good deal of competence, even though some do better than others. And the better ones are known and recognized.

It is not only in the matter of performance that the participation is wide; the ordinary member of the folk has his or her share in creativity as well. In fact performance and creation go together. As the singing of a song goes on, the singers introduce small changes as they wish. Through such reworking the folksongs grow and change. Each song therefore has innumerable versions, and none of them is the "authoritative" one. German folklorists of the nineteenth century were therefore not very far from the truth when they said that the whole community composes the folksongs and that folksongs grow like trees.

Similarly when a folktale is narrated or a folk epic is chanted, the performer does not adhere to any fixed text. His exposition undergoes changes according to his own mood, the nature of the audience, and the time available. A good singer of a folk epic never follows slavishly any fixed text.<sup>7</sup> He improvises instantaneously on the basis of the general frame of the story and his store of stock phrases and descriptions. This is how a good singer of the folk epic of Alha in northern India can sing the episode of the same battle throughout the night or finish it within a couple of hours as the need be. He also responds amply to the reactions of his audience which by no means remains passive during the performance.

Despite these facts, which can be observed by anyone in a vigorous folk tradition, the general estimate of the creative faculties of the unlettered folk is low. While distinguishing

<sup>7</sup> Like other characteristics of heroic poetry this feature too is not confined to India. It is widely shared by heroic poetry of various peoples of central Asia and medieval and ancient Europe. Cf. C.M. Bowra, *Heroic Poetry*, London, Macmillan & Co., 1952.

between the classical and folk streams of culture, such an eminent social scientist as Robert Redfield says: "In a civilization there is a great tradition of the reflective few, and there is a little tradition of the largely unreflective many,"<sup>8</sup> thus taking for granted that the folk are unreflective. The outstanding scholar, Andanda K. Coomaraswamy regards it a part of "democratic prejudice" to think that the folk can be creative. Distinguished literary critics have considered the unlettered folk incapable of composing even those pieces which belong to them. Critics like T.F. Henderson, for instance, have expressed doubt about the ability of "unlearned" peasants to compose ballads.<sup>9</sup> They think that originally such literature must have been composed among the learned aristocratic class and it filtered down later to the oral tradition of the folk. Henderson has such a low opinion of the abilities of the "uneducated" that he says that it has been to the ballad's "detriment to have passed through the crucible of unlearned generations" and that "it has been its misfortune rather than its facility."<sup>10</sup>

However, in the peasant societies of countries like India where the oral tradition of folk literature is still vigorous, the question of the origin of folk literature and the ability or otherwise of the unlettered to compose new pieces need not remain a subject of theoretical speculation alone—solid empiric evidence can be brought to bear upon it.<sup>11</sup> The continued composition of new but genuine folk songs, narratives and even riddles on contemporary happenings and modern objects leave little room for doubt about the creativity of the folk. One comes across many unlettered singers who have composed songs which became widely popular and have found a place in the oral tradition. Of course, these pieces too

<sup>8</sup> Robert Redfield, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>9</sup> T.F. Henderson, *The Ballad in Literature*, Cambridge University Press, 1912, p. 95 et passim.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 71 and 96.

<sup>11</sup> Criticizing Professor Kittredge's description of ballad composition, Henderson remarks: "One might almost suppose that Professor Kittredge has seen the ballad factories of the ancient village communities in full operation" (*op. cit.*, p. 75). The use of the phrase "ballad factories" is obviously unfortunate but in vigorous folk society we even now have an opportunity to observe how songs, ballads and other pieces come into being and undergo change.

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became subject to reworking by other members of the folk. It is not difficult to find unlettered singers of narrative poems who can compose and sing instantly on any event or theme with which they are familiar. Because of their control over the traditional techniques and phrases these improvisations need not be of a low literary quality.

In fact even new *genres* of folk literature have come into being as a result of the impact of modern forces. An outstanding example is provided by the emergence of Bidesia Natak, a form of folk-opera, a few decades ago in the eastern Uttar Pradesh and western Bihar states of India. The region where it emerged and became immensely popular is marked by heavy emigration of laborers to distant industrial and urban centers. Able-bodied menfolk go away in large numbers from this area in search of work leaving behind in the village their wives and children for long periods of time. This situation often puts too much strain on the traditional family system. The wife is miserable in more ways than one, and the husband faces many temptations. The folk opera, Bidesia (the literal meaning of this word is "one who has gone to a distant land") presents this situation graphically and with great pathos, with the aid of songs and dance. Bhikari, a man belonging to the low barber caste, was responsible for the emergence of this form, and until a few years ago, when he was in his prime his performances used to draw huge crowds. But he is at the most semiliterate and cannot write correctly Hindi, the standard language of the area. It may also be mentioned that the whole folk literature of this region, in almost all its *genres*, shows a deep impress of this heavy emigration.

Examples of creative response of the oral tradition to new forces and situations could easily be multiplied and they clearly show that the unlettered folk are by no means its passive carriers. Not only in the fields of literature but in other areas of aesthetic creativity as well, unlettered folk are far from sterile. Undoubtedly the folk tradition absorbs certain elements of the culture of the elite stratum, but there is enough evidence too of the borrowings by the upper strata and the classical tradition from the culture of the unlettered folk. Many *ragas* of the classical Indian music are known to

have their origin in folk melodies.<sup>12</sup> Many songs in modern Indian films show clearly a taking over of the folk tunes as well as words to songs though credit for "composing" the tunes and "writing" the lyrics is taken by film artists. Borrowing from one stream of culture to another often involves modifications. When folk melodies were taken over in classical music, they were refined to fit into the intricate rules of the latter. Adoption of folksongs in contemporary films frequently results in their artistic degeneration. They lose their subtle touch (which could be meaningful only to the folk steeped in tradition) and become gross and clumsy like other items of commercial entertainment and mass culture. Urban and "learned" culture also borrows from the unlettered folk in the field of visual objects of beauty. Many textile designs which become a fad among the sophisticated are often taken over from the folk and subjected to mass production.

The idea that the consciousness of the unlettered folk is necessarily local or "parochial" is not quite correct. A peasant village is related to other villages and non-industrial urban centers by traditional ties. These ties have existed for millenia and have economic and political as well as social and cultural dimensions.<sup>13</sup> Towns could not have come into being or survived without a regular supply of food and other agricultural and non-agricultural produce from the villages. One has to go beyond his village even for marriage, as village exogamy prevails in most regions. A common dialect and folk literature are shared over extensive regions by the population not only of thousands of villages but also of the lower classes and women of the traditional towns. The folk traditions are continually interacting with the elite tradition which has been

<sup>12</sup> D.P. Mukerji, *Indian Music*, Poona, Kutub Publishers, pp. 9, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Though the modern technological and economic forces have undoubtedly brought about a radical change in the relationship between villages and towns, it is not correct to think that they were unconnected in pre-modern times. The study of the change in the nature of this relationship can tell us a good deal about recent social change in peasant civilizations. Cf. my "The Changing Pattern of Rural Society and Culture: Significance of the Rural-Urban Nexus", in *Trends of Socio-economic Change in India*, Simla, Institute of Advanced Study, 1969, pp. 162-75.

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substantially the same throughout the vast length and breadth of India.

Though there are differences in the dialect and some aspects of the folk culture of various regions, there is ample evidence to show that the folk of a region have not remained isolated. The assumption that the folk are isolated is taken for granted to such an extent that McKim Marriot uses the word "parochialization" to designate the absorption of elements of elite culture in folk tradition.<sup>14</sup> The taking over of folk elements by elite tradition he calls "universalization." Though the process of give and take between the elite and folk traditions of culture undoubtedly exists, there seems no justification for taking for granted that elements of culture necessarily become localized or "parochialized" when they pass into the folk tradition. The fact is that folk traditions have traditionally been connected with each other. The basic common elements in their belief, ritual, superstitions and knowledge, as well as the form and content of their folk literature provide ample evidence of this interaction. When Marriot found similarities in the folk culture of various regions, he came up with an ingenious theory to explain it. He says that these arise not because of direct communication between the folk traditions of different regions "but only through triangular translations up to the higher levels and down again."<sup>15</sup> This means that elements of the culture of the unlettered folk of a region have first to be taken over by the elite tradition (which is pan-Indic) and then alone are they passed on by it to the folk tradition of some other region. Though such a process can be responsible for some of the common elements in the folk culture of various regions, there is no reason to suppose that this is the only way in which there can be mutual borrowings among folk traditions. There are no impregnable walls insulating various regional cultures and dialects. In fact there are no sharp boundaries. Regional cultures and dialects

<sup>14</sup> McKim Marriot, "Little Communities in an Indigenous Civilization," *Village India: Studies in the Little Community*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1955, pp. 171-222.

<sup>15</sup> Marriot, "Cultural Policy in the New States," *Old Societies and New States*, (ed. Clifford Geertz), The Free Press of Glencoe, 1963, pp. 27-56.



shade off into each other. There are border dialects and cultures. Marriages across the broad boundaries of dialect and regional culture often take place, and when a bride goes to live in her husband's village she takes along with her the lore of her parental village. Pilgrimages to centers like Badrinath and Banares in the north, Puri in the east, Dwarika in the west, and Rameshvaram in the deep south, bring together unlettered folk from all corners of the country. One can see unlettered folk in the millions from all parts of India rubbing shoulders with each other in the great Kumbh fair which is held at Allahabad every twelfth year. There is no reason to think therefore that bearers of the folk or "little" traditions remain isolated from each other, or that folk traditions are incapable of communicating with each other without the mediation of elite tradition.

Interesting evidence of communication between the "little" traditions of different regions, without the intervention of elite tradition, is provided by their massive sharing of common obscene elements in their oral literatures. A sizable part of the oral literature of the folk makes use of blatantly obscene expressions and incidents, notwithstanding the glorification of the folk by romantics. This is true of folk songs, tales, proverbs and riddles. Obscenities are often employed for spice or fun, but at times they are customary parts of ceremony. For example, while the bridegroom's party feasts at the bride's house, women of the bride's side must sing *garis* (abusive songs) caricaturing the bridegroom's people in unimaginably obscene situations. Comparative study of the obscene elements of the folklore of regions separated by thousands of miles shows a great deal of sharing. Not only are the symbols and images the same, we find the same words (even the nonsense syllables used in songs) distributed over areas separated by thousands of miles. Some of the common elements can be attributed to similar workings of the human psyche, but many of them such as the nonsense choruses of obscene songs attached to particular ceremonies, are clearly the result of mutual borrowings. It is inconceivable that the borrowings of these blatantly obscene elements took place through the mediation of the elite tradition. Elite tradition would never

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imbibe such obscene words and descriptions. The question of its passing through them over to the folk or "little" traditions of different regions does not arise. Marriot's view that borrowing between the traditions of the unlettered must be through the elite, therefore, seems to be erroneous. It may be mentioned that obscene pieces are not necessarily of a low artistic quality. If the aspect of obscenity is left aside they have as much imagination, ingenuity and effectiveness as any other piece of literature. And if the unlettered folk have composed these pieces, as they must have, they surely have the ability to compose other kinds of literature as well.

The command of the unlettered folk over language is remarkable. Their language is picturesque and effective. This is in marked contrast to Margaret Mead's description of the modern American language. According to Mead, American is already "a one-dimensional public language, a language oriented to the description of external aspects of behavior, weak in overtones . . . our words lack . . . the formal precision which comes from awareness of past and different usage."<sup>16</sup> On the other hand the unlettered folk, especially women, use language with telling effect. They have proverbs and idiomatic phrases which strike at the slightest deviance with meticulous precision, and put their victim to shame by subtle sarcasm. It is fun to watch the fireworks when women, preferably old women, quarrel. One suspects, and there is support for this in the folksongs, that the women take quarreling as a sport and look forward to it. Language of the folk is also a powerful instrument of disapproval of deviant behavior, and thus an effective means of social control.

The integration of aesthetic culture of the folk with other aspects of their life is not confined to language and literature alone. Beautiful objects, be they utensils or earthen pots for storing water or grain, are a part of their everyday life. There is no chasm between the objects' utility and beauty. The traditional potter, cobbler, or weaver surely makes utility goods but he makes them beautiful at the same time. Just as

<sup>16</sup> Margaret Mead, *And Keep Your Powder Dry*, New York, Morrow, 1942, p. 82.



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injustices by the unlettered woman. She protests even against nature's discrimination. In one song, a woman undergoing labor pains says to her husband: "We tied this knot together; but in untying it I am alone."

The caste system in India stratifies the whole society into well defined endogamous groups determined by birth. It imposes rigid norms of hierarchy and is accepted by all sections as divinely ordained. Any violation of caste norms is regarded a sin. And yet there is enough evidence in folk literature to show that people, particularly the unlettered low castes, are not oblivious to the bad traits, selfishness, and chicanery of the upper castes. The priestly caste of Brahmana is universally acknowledged as highest in the caste scale. Despite this the Brahmana is frequently pictured in proverbs and short tales as a glutton fond of the dainty dishes of ritual feasts, and of being unmindful of the expenditure which his clients have to incur in religious ceremonies. He is also accused of manipulating religious verdicts in his own selfish interest. An interesting story told in the villages brings out this trait. Once some boys of a village killed a fox. Their parents approached the Brahmana to ask him whether it was a sin. The Brahmana priest said that it was an odious sin and called for heavy penance. But when he was told that among the boys who killed the fox his own son Santosh was also there, he revised his verdict. He averred:

If five or seven boys kill a fox and Santosh is one of them,  
Then there is no sin at all in killing a fox.

This couplet with which the story concludes, is also used as a proverb to bring to book any attempt to manipulate law to suit one's selfish interest. Unwholesome traits of other upper castes are also brought out and severely criticized through proverbs and stories. Thus the persons of the warrior, land-owning caste of Rajputs or Thakurs are shown as pig-headed and incapable of understanding subtleties. Those of the trading caste, Bania, are pictured as ridiculously miserly and avaricious. It is said that a Bania must be dealt with firmly to get one's due: "Mango, lime and Bania yield juice only when pressure is put." Similarly the caste of scribes and officials, Kayastha,

is castigated for its chicanery, bribery and propensity to harm unsuspecting persons. It cannot therefore be said that the unlettered folk accept the traditional social structure without any question or criticism.

Even magico-religious rituals and beliefs are not taken without a grain of salt. A village proverb asserts bluntly: "One blow of the heavy end of a cudgel is more effective than a hundred recitations of incantation." Another proverb says, "The Pandit (priest-astrologer) tells the auspicious day to others, but he is always in trouble himself." When a partner in some venture tries to be too clever, his attempt is characterized by the proverb: "You place your hand on the snake hole, I shall recite the magical formula," implying that material harm is more certain than magical or religious cure. A popular traditional saying is: "One remembers gods and ancestors only when four morals are inside (the stomach)."

Proverbial sayings are a part of the equipment for living of the unlettered peasant. They abound in his everyday speech and through them he sizes up tricky situations and finds strategies to deal with them. Worldly wisdom and deprecation of romanticism mark these proverbs. Some of them are openly pragmatic and even cynical. For example, even though cooperation and mutual help are considered important virtues in the life of the village community, numerous proverbs warn that a simple fellow may be exploited in the name of these ideals. One such proverb says: "When the fool brought a she-buffalo, the whole village ran up with pots to take the milk." Another one is: "The needle borrowed from a simple person is put to the roughest use." Still another says: "Even the shell is sharp on (cuts) the banana plant." Some proverbs are pragmatic to the extent of being amoral. One of these affirms: "Money given as bribe and the grain that is sown as seed, are not lost." Another gives the advice: "Lie down after eating, get out of sight after beating." Romanticism is ridiculed in many proverbial sayings. If someone praises too much the bygone times, or something that has been lost, he is sarcastically told: "The dead son had large eyes." If something from outside looks too attractive a proverb cautions: "A son and a *lota* (spherical jug) glitter only outside," implying that

### *The Cultural Level of Unlettered Folk*

a closer look may reveal different attributes. Though there is hereditary ascription of social status in peasant society, boasting of good qualities only on the basis of parentage is ridiculed by many proverbial sayings: "My grandfather used to eat *ghee* (clarified butter), therefore my hand smells nice." The unlettered peasant is intelligent enough to realize that there can be different viewpoints on an issue. The same person employs a variety of proverbs to bring out different, sometimes opposite, aspects of the same problem. Even the mnemonic formulae which contain in capsule form practical advice or prescriptions on matters like agricultural operations or selection of livestock often have parallel formulae which present the opposite sides of a suggestion.

Folk culture is even now vigorous in countries like India. The way folk tradition maintains its flexibility and imbibes new elements shows that it not merely survives but continues to grow. Not only do we find the mention of contemporary events and things, but there are new images drawn from modern objects. Some western folklorists have expressed the view that images drawn from the railway train tend to be forced. This may truly describe the situation in the countries of the west where folk literature exists now only as a survival. But in countries like India we find plenty of true folk songs drawing beautiful new images from modern objects like the railway train. In a famous Avadhi folk song a woman calls the railway train her co-wife, for she takes away her husband. Other forms of folk literature too show magnificent response to modern forces of various kinds.

The fact that in the developing countries vigorous streams of folk culture are interacting with modern forces of the latter part of the twentieth century seems to open up possibilities for the growth of civilization in new directions. Technological, economic and ideological forces have undergone tremendous change since the early era of industrialization and modernization. The consequences of their impact on peasant society and folk culture need not therefore be as devastating as they were in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In those days coal was the chief source of energy and industries had to be concentrated around coal mines, for it is too costly and

cumbersome to carry coal in large quantities. Industrialization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries inevitably led to the disruption of the settled life of village communities. Today sources of energy like electricity can be easily taken to villages. With sophistication of technology and developments in fields like electronics, the size of machines has been considerably reduced. It is a distinct possibility now to disperse industries and take some of them to the villages. A new integration of modern technology with the folk way of life can emerge. Wholesale uprooting of the peasants is no longer unavoidable.

Modern economic and ideological forces too have come a long way since the beginnings of industrialization. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the nascent ideas of individualism, competition and activism were at the peak of their influence. Folk values of corporate life, security and contentment were looked upon with disdain and sought to be wiped out. Today these ideas have considerably mellowed down. Limitations of individualism are widely recognized. Numerous ideological movements emphasize the value of cooperation and security. There is a new urge for combining beauty with utility and for reducing alienation of work from life. The whole climate of thought is not so antagonistic to the folk way of life as it was in the early era of modernization. Under these changed material and ideological circumstances, it is not impossible that the culture of the folk may find avenues of growth along new lines. Folk culture can certainly not survive in its old form. But its chances of coming to terms with the modern forces of the latter half of the twentieth century are not negligible. If this possibility really materializes it can help humanity to correct some of the lop-sided aspects of modern industrial civilization.