

Report

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International Seminar on Folklore, Public Space and Civil Society

Jurgen Habermas, the German philosopher, has been one of the most influential thinkers of the 18th century. His work 'The Structural Transformation of the Public sphere' has had a major impact on the cultural theory and has generated many productive debates. The concept of 'Public Sphere' developed by him was embedded in the 18th century Europe. It referred specifically to bourgeois public sphere, which gave direct expression to all individual needs, helped generate opinion and arrive at consensus. This sphere was the realm of civil society that could put question to the powers that be. This 'Public Sphere', in the Habermasian framework was available, only under the conditions of bourgeois democratic state and modernity. What about societies, which did not necessarily follow the Enlightenment agenda of the West and whose notions of relationship between the State and Individual were different from that envisaged by the Western style democracy? Was there a pre-bourgeois 'public space' available to individuals to articulate and generate opinions? What was the nature of such a 'space'? In the Indian context folklore played a major role in the formation of such a 'public space'. It provided for both legitimization and contestation of world views and socio-political order. Though Habermasian concept of 'Public Sphere', helps understand the spatial and ideological organization of this space and the place of cultural subtexts within it, its applicability in the Indian context, especially with reference to folklore, requires a much broader and wider outreach than envisaged by Habermas.

Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts, New Delhi, and National Folklore Support Centre, Chennai, organized a five day International Symposium 'Folklore, Public Space and Civil Society' on 7-11 October, 2002, at IGNC, New Delhi, to explore and understand the role of folklore in the formation of public space in the Indian context, Scholars from India and abroad took part in the deliberations. Folklorists, anthropologists, sociologists, historians, art-historian, philosophers, linguists, folkartists, theatre-personalities, and film critics among others presented their views, backed by rich empirical data and original theoretical insights. Thirty-four papers were presented, that ranged from traditional genres of expressive tradition to contemporary forms, their shifting, context and changing modes of transmission.

The academic agenda for the symposium was spelt out very precisely and lucidly in the Inaugural Address, given by Prof. N.R. Shetty, Member Secretary, IGNC. Beginning with the very title of the symposium, he pointed out that each of the term here is value-loaded and embedded in specific socio-historical contexts and is a result of specific political agendas and management strategies. He emphasized that it was important to understand the processes that generated this specific nomenclature. Folklore, he stated, was not a relic of the past, but a phenomenon, constantly happening. The bearers of this tradition were themselves a fluid category, generating fluid signs and symbols of Nationhood, Personhood and Humanity. He asked the participants to explore the philosophical and aesthetic streams of the East and see how this tradition recognizes and provides space for diverse voices and world views. He emphasized that there was a need to recognize the exclusivist agenda of the Enlightenment, which postulated dichotomy between culture and nature, mind and body, reason and emotion, familial/individual and public. He said that it would be worthwhile to explore if the world view emanating from below, from folklore, mythology and counter-mythology has something different to offer.

The inaugural address raised many questions and issues that set the academic tone of the entire symposium. Presentations were grouped under six different themes, exploring the historical dimensions of the expressive tradition as well as its contemporary form and context. These were inter-linked and reflected the continuity of the main theme. The session on 'Concepts and Definitions' explored the historical and socio-political context of key categories and their usefulness in understanding Indian reality. Presentations under 'Expressive Traditions and Organization of Public Space', discussed specific artistic traditions and explored their role in the constitution of Indian public space. The theme of 'Sacred to Secular' looked at the cultural sub-texts, resonant with socio-political conflicts and tensions that are

sought to be overcome within the structural framework of religious or ritual performances. The session on 'Historical Dimensions' focused on the historical organization of public space in different socio-political and religio-cultural contexts as well as addressed the issue of changing patronage. Papers in this session also dealt with the organization of public space in pre-colonial and colonial periods. 'Contemporary Forms and Shifting Contexts' dealt with the issues of emergent forms, processes of creolization and the ability of specific genres to influence public thinking. The last session 'Modes of Transmission' looked at the role played by media and new technology in the transmission of oral tradition. Presentations focused on this shift in the medium and context of presentation of traditional forms, its implications in relation to orality and emerging public spheres.

The symposium traced the organization of public space in the Indian context and the role of folklore in its creation to royal courts, which patronized artists and artistic expression. This space was often used to present a critique of powers that be, through a clever use of satire and humour. Artist and his art played the role of a mediator between the public and the royal authority. The temple courtyards and village grounds held theatrical performances that provided ample scope for airing contesting view points and staging counter mythology. Village 'Chaupals' served as a meeting point for both interested and disinterested participants and contributed towards generating public debate. Folklore in public spaces served as a medium for both legitimization and contesting dominant world views. It could be used either to stress homogeneity or articulate heterogeneity. The symposium demonstrated the existence of multiple 'public spheres' available outside the structural framework of bourgeois democracy. It questioned the idea of a monolithic civil society and public sphere and drew attention towards plurality of competing, alternative discursive spaces and counter voices. Folklore played a major role in the constitution of these discursive spaces and generating opinions.

Jawaharlal Handoo's paper questioned the traditional paradigm of history writing, which he called the "Place Paradigm". It not only obscured the real story, but also perpetuated the dangerous ideology of power politics. He advocated the oral word as against the hegemony of the written word. Pankaj Jha's paper on the other hand focused on the complex relationship between the written and the oral word. Basing his arguments on 'Sufi Malfuzat' he showed the enmeshing of the oral and the textual. He underlined the need for the historians to bear in mind this complexity while turning to the text as a piece of information. Alan Jabbour in his presentation explored the intra and inter-cultural aspects of folklore that made it cross group boundaries to redefine groupings, while Roma Chatterji examined the processes by which particular forms of folk culture come to occupy certain discursive fields and are constituted as folkloric objects. Deepak Mehta's presentation focused on the impinging of public space by the state, through systematic displacement of sections of society and rational explanations for this 'reconfiguration' and 'reclaiming' of space.

Shail Mayaram drawing upon a 19th Century bandit oral narrative of the Meo Muslims, explored the subaltern voices and parallel discursive arenas. She drew attention toward the subaltern resistance and alliance in the narrative that cut across lines of caste, gender and religion. Shivaprakash drew upon the folk epic of Manteswami and Male Madeshwara Kavyas, which present a critique of the hegemonic order of both religion and politics. While Sudha Gopalakrishnan talked about the transgressive dimensions of Vidhushaka's Character in the Sanskrit theatre of Kutiyattam, where his role is even more important than that of the hero, Madhu Khanna's paper talked about crossing of boundaries of caste and class in the public space of the Brahmin agrahara during the Bhagvata Mela at Melattur. Advaitavadini Kaul's paper emphasized the role of folklore in perpetuating Shaiva philosophy of Kashmir. Drawing upon the legend of Lala Hardaul of Bundelkhand, R.K. Jain discussed the role of rituals in the public sphere, which is transformative and empowering. Arambam's presentation focused on the pre-colonial ritual theatre state of Manipur. Rites and ritual ceremonies were used to achieve an organized form of socio-political order. These rites and rituals were not only concerned with political authority but also reflected a deep concern for the welfare of the people and the state.

Drawing upon the folk festivals of the Gaddis of Western Himalayas, Molly Kaushal's paper focused on the mundane spaces opened up by religious traditions. She explored the multiple discursive texts generated during these festivals that reveal existing caste tensions, social hierarchies and competing

political interests. Purushothama Bilimale's paper also focused on tensions and contending power equation within the performative space of Yakshagana, which has resulted in the redefining of the form and creation of new secular performance space. Saugata Bhaduri's paper dealt with creation of sites and spheres through celebrations of Durga Puja, which emerged in Bengal only in the nineteenth century and redefined symbols of post eighteenth century Bengali identity.

Protest, dissent, messages of social reforms and political interests articulated in folklore were the subject of many presentations. 'Dhadi voice and agency' by Michel Nijhawan, 'Protest songs of women from Garhwal' by Anjali Capila, 'Political themes in Jungamkatha and Burakatha of Andhra Pradesh' by Daniel Negers, and 'Emerging new forms and themes in the folk theatre of Bihar, Kashmir and Jharkhand', by M.K. Raina demonstrated the ability of folk forms to reinvent and redefine tradition under shifting contexts and lend voice to contemporary issues and concerns. D.R. Purohit's paper focused on the traditional mask theatre of Garhwal and its adaptation by contemporary stage to present a critique of the powers that be.

Hanne-de-Bruin used the example of 'devadasi tradition' and 'popular natakam theatre' to illustrate how public opinion can be mobilized in order to effect social change. Susan Wadley focused on transformation and shift in the presentation of North Indian oral epic 'Dhola' and its entry in the arena of mass culture. New modes of transmission also bring about a shift in the thematic emphases and performative style. Sunddhakar Reddi's paper 'Folklore in public sphere: reflections in contemporary civil society' voiced a concern over the impact of globalization on folklore, which was on the one hand, getting marginalized and on the other getting popularized through new technology. Kavita Singh spoke about the commercialization of Pata painting of Bengal and resultant loss of aesthetic qualities, though the tradition continues to live by responding to the needs and changes within the 'modern' world. Eric Miller's emphasis was on the positive role interactive telecommunication plays in the dissemination of culture, as well as puts folk artists in the position of being co-researchers and co-presenters. Anthonranga Sangtam talked about the difficulties in presenting folklore events in an urban space.

Pulak Dutta concentrated on Shantiniketan, where one can see a natural movement between the private and the public. Shantiniketan was an attempt at creating a genuine 'public sphere' where a dialectical relationship exists between the private and the public, the personal and the social, between self-interest and love. Manju Kak looked at the Bhotia Route as a public space, which has been ideologically created afresh by each participating group be it traders, colonial masters or governmental agencies. Kailash Mishra explored the role of 'Chaupal' as a 'public space', as a 'platform' to transmit ideas, programmes and policies.

All these presentations, though dwelling on different aspects of expressive space, displayed a thematic unity and supported the argument that there is no one monolithic public sphere, as there is no one monolithic concept of civil society. Different Socio-historical conditions generate multiple spheres and public groups that are engaged in the continuous process of defining and redefining relationship between the state and individual.

In the context of India, expressive traditions and bearers of these traditions have been an effective means to articulate diverse interests and opinions, to mediate between state authority and local communities. Folklore continues to fill this space between political authority and individual group interests of the common people. It acts as a potent means to generate opinion, achieve consensus and also put questions to the powers that be.

(Report by Dr. Molly Kaushal)