What is “folk” after all? – Gouri Nilakantan

“Folk”, the ordinary, the mundane, the one without any purpose, that’s the first thing that comes to ones mind when we think of the word. Is that true, can we negate the voice of the common man, the arts belonging to the masses as just meaningless, not to be cared for? The recognition for folk arts, theatre, music, oral ballads, tales, stories now is a recognized study on its own. It is being now seen as strong discipline to be studied and understood. To categorize and delineate any dramatic performance as being folk, traditional or modern would be simply dispensing them off that can endanger our readings and interpretations for it. Our tradition has to be also be seen in through the eyes of the masses, the simple potter, the folk stories and the music of our villages, or cooking recipes and our theatrical shows all need to be studied in much more depth. While talking about theatre, all dramatic performances display set codes and conventions such as costumes, makeup, text, and use of diction prose or poetry and evolved choreography, movement or premeditated action. It can be said as one having a “traditional process” as pointed out Brynjulf Alver.

By definition it is the process of tradition which creates, alters and renews, chooses and works in new topics in an endless chain, by the interaction between the individual bearer and the community. (Alver, 47)

Folk drama is said to often belong to the common and non-literate people. It is time to go beyond the ‘folk’ or the common and rethink about this dramatic form as an ongoing concern of contemporary life. As in the words of Steve Tillis,

…folk drama might be present throughout a culture, employing

of any social rank who use texts that might either be freshly composed or have a basis in literature, and whose performances are an ongoing concern of contemporary life. (35)

Indian theatrical tradition goes back to antiquity and is deeply rooted within local culture and consciousness. Therefore, it has its own uniqueness and structure that is truly eastern in its orientation. The theatrical traditions of India are divided into Loka dharmi (the popular), the folk, which includes Nautanki of Punjab and Swang of Himachal Pradesh and the Natyadharmi(the traditional), the classical, based on ancient texts on drama, like the Bharatanatyam. Several characteristics delineate the classical and the folk. The classical performances of India are based on a set of codified laws, such as those of the Natyashastra, but at the same time are "open" to interpretation. The Natyashastra (800 A.D.) is an ancient Indian treatise on drama, written in Sanskrit that is the foundation for not just the classical dances but also most of the theatrical dance forms prevalent in the country such as Kuttiyatam of Kerala, Ankiya Nat, Ramlila and Raslila of Uttar Pradesh and Terukootu, of Tamil Nadu and Chhau of Eastern India.

This demarcation unfortunately has given the classical arts an " high and elitist definition. It's time to rethink and reconsider what is "high" and "low" after all? Its time for a change in thinking, for reconsideration and perhaps a redefinition to all arts in general. The future students and communities of practitioners now need to speak in favor of all arts, it's time to think act now and implement the much needed change now!