Folk Deities as the Alternative Myths in India

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ABSTRACT

My purpose in this work is to interpret and critically investigate folklore and social epistemology, with specific reference to some folk deities and practices that I refer to as 'alternative mythologies,' and I dare to do so with tenacity. In the Indian cultural context, classical Sanskritic and Brahmanical religious acts have largely taken center stage in the religious panoptical system, at the expense of subverting extremely significant and relevant local and vernacular practices and doctrines. The blending of mythology and folklore, the blending of local deities with the ostensibly "official" ones, can be seen in practically all public spaces in India. To comprehend the exchanges between myth and folklore, one must first comprehend India's geographical and cultural diversity, as well as the practical requirement of holy ceremonies. This technique considers the distinct sociological, anthropological, and psychological roles that myth and folklore play in a group. It becomes necessary to penetrate society's sympathetic grasp of the implications of a certain rite, whether mythological or folkloristic. Dussehra provides an opportunity for a thorough explanation and sensitization of that spiritual system, as well as an appropriate example of acceptance and inclusion of diverse religious activities.

Keywords: Folk Deities, Myths, hybridized, Folklore, intertextuality.

In this paper, my objective is to interpret and make a critical inquiry of folklore and social epistemology, with special reference to certain folk deities and practices, who I term as 'alternative myths'-- and I dare do that with a persistent resolve. The Routledge Handbook of Social Epistemology defines social epistemology as "the interdisciplinary inquiry into the myriad ways humans socially acquire, create, construct, transmit, store, represent, revise, and review knowledge, information, belief, and judgment." Folklore has been one of the most substantial ways in which societies direct their characters and transfer their traditional knowledge systems from one generation to progeny. My argument here is definitely not that folklore is stationary, being a reservoir for a lingering past that has no bearing in the present context — that way, I do not romanticize folklore. My idea of folklore is flexible. On the divergent side, folklore is the intergalactic where indigenous groups negotiate their knowledge systems with altering as well as alternative times while they are absorbent of that which is

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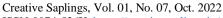
crucial to their communal and religious identities. They simultaneously integrate deviations that are obligatory for them, consequently making folklore a dynamic, breathing, and existing cultural system. Investigation of folklore can provide us useful insights into how social and religious identities of cultures evolve over time, and the means through which they are maintained and sustained. This method is particularly germane in the context of the Indian subcontinent which is rich in multiplicity with various cultures that have a collective dialogic affiliation since time immemorial, being seminal and formative for inimitable socio-religious identities. With this as my research background, during Durga Puja as the occasion for the benediction of 'Shakti', whom I address as 'an alternative myth of folk deities', I pose the following research questions in this paper, which I shall consequently attempt to address:

- Comprehend and distinguish 'folk religions' and 'religious folklore' with their theoretical ethers.
- Define the devices of critically perusing the connection between folklore and religion, with special reference to folk and local deities.
- Critically perceive the ways in which religion generates folklore, yet folklore silhouettes religious politics (read, Body Politic).
- Understand the nuanced traditions in which folklore couriers religious beliefs, and subsequently encounters normative behavior of religion.
- Focus acumens into collective features and heterogeneity of religious notions articulated through folklore.

In religions like Hinduism and Buddhism, notions like dharma and dhamma dictate belief systems as a way of life, which means that it would collate one's attitude towards seemingly secular social realism. It comprises opposite behaviour in all aspects of life, including public, lawful, ethical, and cosmological. Our social identities are instituted on multiple surfaces that embrace gender, caste, class, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability, or disability -- everything that makes us our elemental selves. All these sides impact the ways in which we intermingle with our environs, the way we define ourselves, and epitomize in artistic terminologies of a culture. Folklore of a society absorbs these social structures and characters.

When I chose to talk about myth as an alternative of the folk deities, I penetrate into the collaboration between folklore and religion with all their minutiae and convolutions with my singular focus on the folk ethnicities. Religion is one of the momentous substitutions through
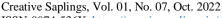
which we grasp the world around us. Since folklore is an aesthetic countenance of the veracities, cognizant and otherwise of a community, religion establishes a major component of it. Folklore as a part of religion not only replicates the deeply apprehended ethics and theories of society, but it also validates the community's conceptualization of mysticism and eternal life.

'Folk Religion' and 'Sacred Folklore', hitherto Hypothetical Debates

The set of disagreements and hullaballoos is around the term 'folk religion', which I even have the incitement to term as 'alternative myth'. Before we delve into the comprehension of the diverse features of folklore and religion, it is imperative to realize what is folk religion and how the discernment of this has advanced over a period of time. Folklore was primarily considered as an inventive terminology of groups that were measured as pastoral and primitive. Folk religion, subsequently, was seen as a belief system that occurred in conjunction with established and official religions and mythical practices. In the Indian cultural milieu, the classical Sanskritic and Brahmanical performances of religion have mostly taken the centre stage in the religious panoptical system at the cost of subversion of very important and pertinent local and vernacular practices and theories.

Folklore on conviction is instituted as an external force, sometimes in routine places that are most commonplace. As a researcher of folklore and myth, I am wary of considering these two genres as impermeable and watertight compartments, but am simultaneously wary of looking at the sweeping ways of intersecting the two without much critical thought by the academia of folklore. Most of these ideas have been fashioned by Western scholars who occupy homogeneous rooms in Cultural Studies. Primaro writes in his article, 'Vernacular Religion and the Search for Method in Religious Folklife' that "by naming and categorising scholars are invested with the power of controlling perceptions about a culture". (Primaro 37) This curious and exclusionist observation has been rather challenged by contemporary folkloristics.

One has to appreciate the rapport between folklore and religion in bi-cultural ways. Religions have a body of folklore inherent in them that replicate their overriding standards and principles, ethnicities, rites, mythical principles, etc. Thus, folklore turns out to be a route to focus and disseminate religious values. However, folklore can also be utilized to yield religious individualities. Folklore is both a creation of religious homily and a manufacturer of religious theories, particularly when it comes to talk about folk deities. Moreover, religious folklore is
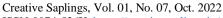
instituted both within our systematized belief systems and otherwise. Folklore as a part of alternative myths also surpasses the much desired revered space. One can securely contextualize this with the Shakti deifying traditions of the Navaratras, Durga Puja, and the devotion towards the folk deities replete in all parts of India. This does not necessarily mean that these two traditions are one and the same, or interchangeable, transposable and identical.
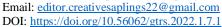
It is the exercise or presentation of a folk tradition of Shakti that makes it tangible. Simultaneously, it externalizes the mythical belief systems. It is through repetition and recital that the inner involvements and profoundly apprehended ideals of civic society can be made evident. Religion and religious performance become physical only through praxis when they come in connection with a people. This practice tenderloins and challenges the idea of transparency and the limpidness of religions. By religious views or sacraments voiced through folklore, one can eyewitness the way religious myth resolves with folklore in all genuineness. As a folklorist, it is decisively critical for me to re-think my style of looking at alternative myths which have been stimulated by a candid curiosity in reviewing the methods in which the believers articulate their innate religiosity rather than their imminent interests in trying to crush the assorted, multicultural and pluralistic politics into rich classes.

To talk about the intertextuality and polyphony of the folk and the mainstream deities, I would like to take a case study here. The subject of emphasis can be how the northern states in India have a devotion towards Ahoi Maa. She is the folk deity of fertility and fecundity. She shelters and blesses the devotees with good health. In many north Indian states, women observe fasts for the welfare of their children. But with the changing roles of society, gendered practices are being challenged. These vicissitudes replicate the dynamic nature of sacred traditions, blurring the thin lines between local/folk deities and mythical goddesses, like Goddess Durga. However, this goddess Ahoi Maa is not representative of the fragment of Brahminical Hinduism. She does not fit in to the cosmos of Kali and Durga. But the dichotomy is that, Kali and Durga have important roles to play in folk expressions. This can be seen as an instance of the alternative mythical practice and evidence that has been espoused and integrated into vernacular philosophies.

Correspondingly, 'religious folklore' has been another controversial term for it has been meant to imply unofficial practices that are associated with the mainstream religion. Implying that folk religious practices are 'unofficial' or tangential is problematic in folklore research and pedagogy. It is crucial to understand the politics behind the dichotomies like 'official' and
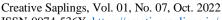
'unofficial'. To begin with, the tendency to speak in binaries is an externally imposed one, and it is specifically Western in nature, derived from the definitions like those given by Durkheim. Also, when we discuss specific religious practices in terms of folk religion or sacred folklore, we imply that these categories are branches or deviations from a center. This implication is flawed in its very perception as it assumes that somewhere religion exists in its pure and essential form, and as soon as it interacts with communities, it gets contaminated and hybridized. One needs to challenge such essentialist views of religion when one tends to talk about folklore and alternative myths together.

Another example of the folk deity represented as an alternative myth is a tale from Haryana. Folklore, in the forms of folk songs, tales, and legends, echoes the composite exchanges between various religious observations. In a folktale from Haryana, a character from the Ramayana is presented as a folk deity. In a folk story, Ravana encounters Bemata --the folk deity who writes the destiny of children -- during one of his incognito nocturnal reviews of his subjects. The story exaggerates the node between the classical mythological characters and the folk/local deity. Interestingly, the folktale ends with Ravana's reception of the powers of Bemata. The existence of these two characters from apparently two disparate dominions is not a surprise for the corporeal characters in the folktale. But it is quite a tremor for the mythological characters who are well-thought-out in their fitting into the land of classical mythology.

Also, a concrete example of the plurality of myth and folk beliefs as practiced amongst multiple groups and the intricacy of the same can be perceived in the interface between *jogis* and *sufis*. The negotiation between *jogis* and *sufis* in terms of syncretism of the amalgamation of different schools of opinions are the apt examples of alternative myths. In the communities, at one point, those divisions were distorted. If we interpret the *jogis* as Hindus, we waver, because they confronted Vedic Hinduism. Also, several *jogis* are Muslims. Similarly, *sufi* saints contest established ideas of Islam. In the public domain, phrases like *baba, pir,* and *fakir* are used for both *jogis* and *sufis*. We need to re-examine and question the idea of 'alternative myth' which presumes existence of 'pure Islam', 'pure Hinduism', 'pure folk', or 'pure myth', for that matter. Folktales like Heer-Ranjha echo the fluidity of such religious beliefs. Ranjha who is Muslim converts into a *jogi* when he hears of Heer's marriage to another man. In folk chronicles like these, the hybridity of myth, folklore and their practices are replicated.

Worshipping the *Gram Devta / Devi* (village deity) is a common practice across the regions in India, and it has a deep connection and connotation with the Adi-Shakti puja. Adulating the ancestors and folk deities like *Gugga Pir* (the folk snake deity) we replicate local belief systems of cosmology and lifecycle. In north India, the cosmogeny contains Devlok and Naglok-- the world of the Gods and the netherworld of the snakes – and I find no better example of an alternative myth than this practice. It also establishes the folk practices of *Matlok or Narlok,* which is a contingent of the region. Then there is a fourth group that is absorbent of myth and folklore, and that cuts across the tripartite dissection of Pitrulok (the world of the ancestors).

I am tempted to look at these myths and folk practices from the perspective of Cultural Materialism and Ecocriticism. All these folk belief systems have something to do with livestock and sustainability. In folk authority, it is as imperative to mollify the ancestors and keep their spirits happy as the Gods. Their survival wields power over the spirit and perception of the locals as gods/goddesses of the myths they adapt to. Also, snakes have been one of the most relevant menaces to folk societies that are engaged largely in agriculture or animal husbandry. Benediction to a snake deity is an image of the concerns that people have in their daily lives. Their credence is a discourse of their inimitable worldview and their cohabitation with ecology, flora, and fauna.
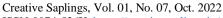
In Indian folkloristics, the oral forms are replete with themes like birth, death, love, marriage, and tragedy of human life, the concepts of time, eternity, spirituality, and various rites, rituals, and celebrations that are different from each other. It replicates the socio-cultural, religious, and pecuniary life forms of the societies and thus its credentials are a dependable foundation of data. Orality, as is apparent from the terminology, is conceded from generation to generation insistently and is rich in connotations, insinuations, orientations, images, representation, and metaphors. According to Bhaktin, the dialogical process multiplies in discursive space. Several voices demand the textual construction as 'polyvocal representation'. (Bakhtin 82) The pertinent local deities and folk deities of our concern can be safely interpreted through the lens of multimediality and intertextuality. Multimediality is the distinctive voice of modern media that has the capacity to transport social existence through orality. "We cannot assume that all literature should be written. One doesn't have to be so patronizing about oral literature… The art of the speaking voice can be brought back so easily… We don't have to write for readers, we can write for the listeners." (Aidoo 77)

Hitherto, the ethnographer trails monistic illustrations and gives them the authorial supremacy as the 'informant' whose voice is narrowed as citation or paraphrase. Once 'dialogism and polyphony' are documented as methods of textual creation, the monophonic authority of a text becomes disputed. This situation raises critical issues of the oral informers and ethnographers as co-authors and depicts them as scribe-archivist, correspondingly throwing numerous hermeneutical complications about the process of textualization and its legitimacy. Ethnographic treatise is neither an object to be epitomized nor an illustration of an object. It moves beyond the figurative meaning of signs. This polyphonous expression can be authenticated with the mention of folk deities from Rajasthan, who are multilayered in their social statuses and approaches. The signature folk deities from Rajasthan and many other states are instrumental in the construction of an alternative myth, with their advocacy for the protection and preservation of ecology. *Hingula Devi* from Rajasthan, also worshipped in Talcher, Odisha, is the Goddess of Fire. While worshipping her, the devotee is connected to Goddess Hingula from the Hingul River from Afganisthan –thus, being instrumental to cultural exchanges. Some of these folk deities have been called *Pir*, which means a consecrated person. There are important folk deities in Rajasthan, whose names are Pabuji, Harbuji, Ramdevji, Goga Ji, Meha Ji, Elaji, Khetla ji, Veer Teja ji, Rani Sati, Rani Bhatiani, Shitala Mata etc. Most of these local deities represent a cause and cultural connotation. The composite cultural conglomeration is, indeed, the alternative myth in most cases. Jambeswar ji, an important folk deity from the region, advocates for ecological balance, Chipkoo Movement, and the anti-animal killing movements. The fact of the matter is—these folk deities are a part of our social mobility and functional knowledge system, thus, a much-debated alternative myth. The parallel can be drawn between the folk deities of Rajasthan with that of Odisha, and many other Indian regions, that promote the regional identities thereof. Majjighariani Mata, Gojabayani Mata, Badaraula Mata, Ghantashuni Mata, Maa Samaleswari, and the Sapta Matrikas are some of the important folk deities in Odisha. The folk and local deities, who I term as our alternative myth, are in fact the embodied deification of kinship, fertility, construction, destruction, creation-myth.This is an incarnation of the Earth Goddess who embodies the abundance of the planet earth. The other such vividly powerful Goddesses are Mata Vaishno Devi from Jammu and other multiple female goddesses from Jammu Tawi. They are paralleled with the natural world, and such deities are referred to as Earth Mother, Bhu-Devi, ('bhu' means 'bhumi' or the earth), the divinity in the pantheistic convictions. The earth goddess is referred to as the female counterpart of the Sky Father or Father Heaven. In polytheistic philosophies, like the Ancient

Egyptian creed, there is this 'cosmic egg' myth, where the sky, as an alternative, is taken as the Heavenly Mother or Sky Mother, and she is called 'Nut' and 'Hathor'. The earth god is regarded as the male, paternalistic and telluric partner of the female. Male local deities in ancient Egypt, like 'Osiris' or 'Geb', are hatched out of the maternal cosmic egg. Here I am obliged to quote an interesting folk belief system about the cosmic egg: "The world-egg, cosmic-egg or mundane-egg is a mythological motif found in the cosmogonies of many cultures that is present in the Proto-Indo-European culture and other cultures and civilizations. Typically, the world egg is a beginning of some sort, and the universe or some primordial being comes into existence by "hatching" from the egg, sometimes lying on the primordial waters of the Earth. Eggs symbolize the unification of two complementary principles (represented by the egg white and the yolk) from which life or existence, in its most fundamental philosophical sense, emerges." (Wiki) This is where dialogism and polyphony are at work, vis-à-vis the interpretations and the reading of the folk deities as the 'alternative myth'.

The conglomeration of myths and folklore, the amalgamation of local deities with the supposedly 'canonical' ones, can be witnessed in almost all public spheres in India. To understand the exchanges between myth and folklore, one has to understand the geographical and cultural heterogeneity of India and the functional necessity of the sacred rituals. This method takes into deliberation the definite sociological, anthropological, and psychological functions that myth and folklore play in a community. It becomes obligatory to be penetrating society's empathetic understanding of the implication of a particular ritual, be it mythical or folkloristic. Dussehra is the occasion for the clear understanding and sensitization of that belief system, being the apt instance for acceptance and inclusivity of multiple religious practices.

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