

## NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON

# Oral Cultures: People, Poetics, Performance

organised by:

the Department of Cultural and Creative Studies,

North-Eastern Hill University, Shillong

Meghalaya, India

in collaboration with

Indian National Trust for Art and Cultural Heritage, New Delhi

and

Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya, Bhopal

### CALL FOR PAPERS

#### National Conference on “Oral Cultures: People, Poetics, Performance”

22<sup>nd</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 2017

Proposals are invited for stand-alone papers dealing with the theme and sub-themes of the conference. The language of the conference is English.

#### **Papers**

*Time:* Each paper will be allocated 25 minutes, which will include general floor discussion, and remarks from the chair.

Interested individuals are asked to submit an abstract not exceeding 500 words along with a one-page CV.

Submissions have to be emailed to the Conference Assistant at [oralcultures2017dccs@gmail.com](mailto:oralcultures2017dccs@gmail.com) by 20<sup>th</sup> July 2017. Participants will be notified about the acceptance of their papers by 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2017.

The submissions will be evaluated by the Conference Organising Committee and its decision will be final.

The final paper should be emailed to the Conference Assistant by 11<sup>th</sup> August 2017.

#### **Registration**

All participants, including session chairs will be required to register to attend the conference. Registration can be done on arrival at NEHU Shillong. Participants are expected to make their own arrangements for travel and should they require a letter to obtain travel funds to attend the conference they may write to the Conference Secretary. Local hospitality, which

includes accommodation, food and local transport from noon of the 21<sup>st</sup> August to forenoon of the 24<sup>th</sup> August, 2017 will be provided by the organisers.

The structure of registration fees is as follows:

Professionals	INR 1000
Research Scholars	INR 750

**Dates to remember :**

1. Submission deadline for abstracts and panels: 20<sup>th</sup> July 2017
2. Notification of paper acceptance: 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2017
3. Final paper due: 11<sup>th</sup> August 2017
4. Conference dates: 22<sup>nd</sup> – 23<sup>rd</sup> August, 2017

**Conference Organiser:**

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## **Concept Note:**

### **Oral Cultures: People, Poetics, Performance**

One of the primary concerns of Folkloristics is the study of oral communication and the peoples and cultures that produce them. The conventions and contexts of any form of 'oral communication' vary by culture, language, genre, situation, and participants, and also include a myriad range of non-verbal elements such as gesture, body positions, facial expression, visible movement, sometimes the clothing and adornment of participants, spatial arrangements, material accoutrements. As Ruth Finnegan asserts:

Studies of the manifold forms of oral expression – from interpersonal dialogue, oral poetry, sung lyrics, speech-making, ritual pronouncements, judicial proceedings, rhetorical display and lengthy epic to smaller-scale verbal arts like proverbs, puns, anecdotes or children's playground rhymes – have increasingly revealed the subtle multi-dimensionality of oral communicating as it is actually practised (Finnegan 1998).

Language occupies an exalted position among traits shared by all human groups. Through various ways, forms and genres, people share accounting and interpretation of events and experiences, important and mundane, public and private. The narrative is one of the most significant forms of communication, using the full range of its prose and poetry and primarily sustained in the oral tradition. Equally important are the events in which individuals perform symbolic actions through conversation, theatre, celebration and other categories of enactment.

Oral tradition is in numerous and practical ways anything but a unified field. While overtly it refers to all verbal art that comes into being and is transmitted without texts, it also has in recent years demonstrated how it encompasses myriad forms and genres that interact with texts and other forms of communications. If we accept literature to be a complex system, then oral tradition, which dwarfs literature in amount and variety presents an even greater challenge. It is now more than ever, we are coming to realise that oral tradition plays an enormously critical role in the transaction of our daily lives, formulating meaningful modes of existence and enfranchising whole cultures, legitimizing cognitive categories and social activities.

Largely, the application and representation of oral tradition is understood in the context of formalised verbal genres but it is important, now more than ever, that it is seen as a vital building block of ideas and practices we use in our everyday lives.

Anthropologist Victor Turner explicates that cultures are most fully expressed in and made conscious of themselves in their ritual and theatrical performances. A performance is a dialectic of "flow", that is, spontaneous movement in which action and awareness are one, and "reflexivity", in which the central meanings, values and goals of a culture are seen "in action", as they shape and explain behaviour. A performance is declarative of our shared humanity, yet it utters the uniqueness of particular cultures. We will know one another better by entering one another's performances and learning their grammars and vocabularies.

Performance as a word is very important with several other relevant intonations. The semantic structures of performance have different interpretations. At the very outset,

performance is something which is associated with a live event in front of an audience. The most significant characteristic feature of performance is its 'liveness'. A sense of presence is involved whenever the performer and the spectators are involved. A performance which is a form of presentation can be of various types, be it theatre, music, dance, circus or any form of martial arts (Allain 2006:20). Performance is always a kind of communication. At times it becomes a heightened mode of communication when something is put to display for the audience. The basic question that surfaces is how the level of communication can be analysed within the integrated system of performance. The performance concentrates on the social, cultural and aesthetic dimensions of the communication. The encoding and the decoding of messages become very important in theatrical communication.

Performance is a specific feature which is meant for an audience who should understand the conveyed messages. The exchanging of ideas from the performer to the group of audience acquires an important role. Schechner (1983), the noted performance theorist, tried to focus on the role reversals of the performers and the spectators. He has tried to show the performers and the spectators are transformed and transported by the medium of performance behaviour. With the performance of the actors, the spectators become displaced as the effect of the performance changes them to a certain effect. For Schechner, 'performance behaviour' is a form of 'practiced behaviour which is twice-behaved behaviour'.

The problematic diagram that he has presented before the readers is that performance behaviour is never free and can never belong to any performer solely. He critically defines the basic concept of performance where the performers become 'transformations' and when the performers are transferred back to their original form they become 'transportation'. These new concepts like 'transformation' and 'transportation' render an interesting study and offers wide scope for scholars. Schechner have delved deep into the psyche of the performers and have invented these theoretical assumptions of 'transportation' where the performers are 'taken somewhere' and at the end are transferred to their ordinary lives. Carlson (1996) provides a concise definition of the 'art of performance' and how the performance theory can highlight on the sociological and psychological structures of a performance. The multi-dimensional aspects of performance when studied through the lens of contemporary theories are thought provoking in nature.

In any culture, it is the people are the tradition bearers and repositories of heritage. When looking at India as a whole, the presence of a bewildering racial, linguistic, cultural and biological diversity has endowed the country with great wealth of folkloric, aesthetic and artistic traditions. The manifestation of these cultural traditions and heritage are in such diverse fields as the world views and philosophy, religions and folklore, customs and usages, arts and crafts, textiles and costumes, material culture and bamboo technology, cuisine and culinary skills, forestry and agriculture, performing arts and theatre, to name the obvious. The life of people is strongly ritualized. They pray, dance and make sacrifices for the fertility of their fields, and acknowledge the ancient force of the earth, sky, water, wind and stars. Close proximity to these forces is maintained through daily rituals and their benefits utilized. In trying to reflect and communicate concept of understanding peoples communication, identity, expressions, are mediated through their oral tradition.

Oral culture depicts a vibrant tradition of collective life. Everyone participates in songs and dances. Songs are mostly without names. Stories are anonymous and most community dances have no known originator. The songs and stories are about actual events, interwoven

with deeds and social customs. These expressions which are mainly oral, are appreciated by all, the appreciation offered by the best token – that of general participation. Thus, the artistic appreciation here is not formulated and stylized. It is not an alternative to anything. It has a complete identity on its own, with no middlemen to professionally relate art *per se*, and its appreciation.

**Sub-themes:**

1. Authorship and Authority of Oral Culture(s)
2. Tradition-oriented Communication: Episteme and Praxis
3. Vernacular Poetics
4. Ethnopoetics
5. Verbalization and Performance
6. Folk to Classical: Liminality in/of Performance
7. “De-shrined” Worship: Dance, Drama and Music
8. City Carnavalesque: Heroes, Heroines and Hierarchies