

**Department of Cultural and Creative Studies
North-Eastern Hill University
Shillong-793022, Meghalaya**

**World Folklore Day
National Symposium on
Urban Folklore with Special Reference to Northeast India
22-23 August 2019**

Concept Note

Since the translation into English of Henri Lefebvre's 'The Production of Space' in 1991, historians, especially urban historians, have sought to 'spatialise' understandings of identity, social relations and human activity. The urban environment comprising the material fabric of streets, houses and public buildings and in the last decade the rise of the mall culture and the multiplexes can no longer be seen as passive actors in the historical process: rather urban space was both moulded by and moulded the behaviour and actions of urban inhabitants. If the distinctiveness of urban history as a discipline is no longer so clearly demarcated, this is due to changes in the nature of historical discipline itself rather than to any crisis of confidence in the validity of the town or city as the object of historical research. The 'cultural' turn, as noted above, has helped to dissolve the boundaries between many different subgenres of history, not just urban history.

The cogency of urban history as a framework for historical inquiry, however, remains powerful and it continues to evolve in new directions. Increasingly, in the 21st century there is a sharper focus on unprecedented urbanization in several countries brought about by novel social and political dynamics and thus while losing its Eurocentric slant urban history is taking on a wider global perspective. The emerging economic powers of Asia, the shifting paradigms of labour and resources and the self-make rhetoric have become key-players in the creation of transnational history in cities and across national and international borders. The proliferation of environmental discourses is again contributing in a very significant way to the writing and production of urban history as the interaction between urban spaces and the environment becomes a critical point of engagement. It is in this context a critical study of urban folklore in

the broader disciplinary context of folkloristics makes a tremendous sense both academically and popularly.

As a serious academic discipline, folkloristics is devoted to the identification, documentation, characterization and analysis of traditional expressive forms, knowledge, wisdom, processes and behaviours. In fact, folkloristics is constantly engaged in the envisioning of theoretical and methodological discourses calling for new perspectives to be considered, new areas to be explored. One such area is lodged in the crux of the etymological construction of the word folklore, which, as many know, was coined by William Thoms in 1846. When Thoms first used the word folk, it was perceived as an appellation to a group of people who constituted to lower stratum in contrast to the elite of that society. It was defined with respect to its supposed relationship to the elite in urban mode of living. However, this perception of placing folk and urban at opposite ends of a continuum has been completely rejected. To simplify matters, we accept that fundamental definition of the term folk to refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor. A group formed will have some oral traditions which it calls its own. Therefore, one can speak of Indian folklore, Northeast folklore or urban folklore, e.g., the folklore of Shillong city and its denizens, its localities and place names, its colleges and schools, its traffic jams and taxi drivers, its rock bands and football teams, etc.—the list is inexhaustible! Here, it would be important to quote Kirin Narayan (1993) who very aptly observed “English-speaking school children, apartment dwelling urban elite, immigrant academics may just as much constitute Indian folk...”

Blackburn and Ramanujan (1986), calling for new directions in folkloristics, invite scholars to explore one of the areas for future research in South Asian folklore and that area being ‘traditions peculiar to the city, for example, industrial workers’ song certain folk cycles or tales and legends among college students.’ Another important dimension which guides the approach of this work apprehends the study of folklore as a communication system and how this trait is ingeniously reflected in the dynamics of urban or city lore. Arewa and Dundes assert that ‘Folklore is used primarily as a means of communication, and it is as communication that it needs to be studied.’ Dan Ben-Amos, Roger Abrahams, and Robert Georges extended this conception about the nature of folklore and in a meeting of the American Folklore Society Ben-Amos offered a new definition of folklore as ‘artistic communications in small groups.’ Ben-

Amos' redefinition of folklore as artistic communication and symbolic action found further support in Roger Abrahams' conception of folklore 'as a mode of spoken verbal communication' which 'consists in the assumption of responsibility to an audience for a display of communicative competence' in his work 'Introductory Remarks to a Rhetorical Theory of Folklore' (1968).

The study of urban folklore, though comparatively a recent venture, had its first embryonic form in some lesser known, but highly illuminating works of obscure authors, the most extensive of which is 'London Labour and the London Poor',ⁱ the four-volume classic reportage of the Bohemian journalist named Henry Mayhew, who went about his work collecting, in his words, "The habits, opinions, morals and religion of Patterers generally". This task was accomplished in the span of 11 (eleven) years, from 1851 to 1862. Though Mayhew did not intend his work to be a search for survivals, he produced a first class account of some aspects of the folklore of early Victorian London. As Donald McKelvie (1963), who highlighted the contributions of Henry Mayhew, remarked: 'He was a folklorist by default, perhaps, but nonetheless, a folklorist'.

Another important work which has given importance to the study of urban folklore is Robert Chambers' (1825) 'Traditions of Edinburgh', based on prowls in the old parts of the town and interviews the author conducted with 'ancient natives', as early as 1824. One of the most significant works which has given direction to the study of urban folk speech is Roger D. Abrahams' 'Deep Down in the Jungle: Negro Narrative Folklore from the Streets of Philadelphia'. The book is an interpretive collection of black expressions in the northern cities of the United States. The expressions are obscene in nature and are referred to as "toasts" (long, often obscene verse narratives), jokes, and games of "playing the dozens", which are ritualized exchanges of insults. Abrahams, in this milestone work, revealed the existence of a powerful black folk expression in Northern cities, which is quite at variance with Southern plantation lore. These expressions reflected the new toughness of ghetto street life. Every city is unique and it is this characteristic that creates space for the generation of narrative, traditions and practices and the people of the city articulate this voice. 'What makes a city a city?' asked B.A. Botkin in 'Sidewalks of America'. 'What makes it different from other cities?' humanly, not statistically speaking." Botkin goes on to answer his own question: 'From the folklore point of view, a city

is ‘we’, you and I and everybody else, what people say, especially what they have to say about themselves in their own way and their own words, folk-say, and what they choose to remember” (1954:1).

Keeping these interesting ideas of urban folklore in view, the department of Cultural and Creative Studies at North-Eastern Hill University is organizing a national symposium on *Urban Folklore with Special Reference to Northeast India* during 22-23 August 2019 on the occasion of the World Folklore Day in the premises of NEHU Shillong Campus. In this endeavour, dedicated papers are expected from scholars who may send their abstracts of 300 words to this email ID: desmondkharmawphlang@gmail.com or to email ID: nanda_subrat2@yahoo.com

Further communication will be sent to those whose abstracts will be selected for presentation at the symposium.

Last date for submission of abstract: 29th July 2019

Last date for submission of full paper: 9th August 2019

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