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FOLK TRADITIONS AND CULTURAL IDENTITY IN
KANNADA LITERATURE

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Abstract

Kannada literature represents one of India's most ancient and culturally rich literary traditions, deeply rooted in the folk life of Karnataka. Folk traditions encompassing oral narratives, songs, rituals, myths, proverbs, and performance arts — have played a central role in shaping the thematic, linguistic, and ideological foundations of Kannada literary expression over more than a millennium. This paper offers a comprehensive and critical examination of the role of folk traditions in the construction and continuity of cultural identity in Kannada literature across classical, medieval, modern, and contemporary periods. Adopting a qualitative and interpretative research methodology grounded in secondary sources, the study analyzes how folk elements function as repositories of collective memory, social values, and



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indigenous knowledge systems. The paper explores the intersections of folk traditions with agrarian life, ecological consciousness, gendered experiences, subaltern voices, and cultural resistance. It argues that folk traditions are not peripheral influences but constitute the cultural core of Kannada literary consciousness. By integrating folk idioms, ritual practices, and oral aesthetics, Kannada writers have consistently negotiated identity, modernity, and social transformation. This research contributes to interdisciplinary scholarship in folklore studies, literary criticism, and cultural studies, offering insights relevant to regional literature and identity-based literary discourse.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature functions as both a mirror of society and a medium through which cultural values, social structures, and historical experiences are articulated and preserved. In a culturally diverse country like India, regional literatures play a crucial role in sustaining linguistic and cultural identities that might otherwise be submerged beneath pan-national or global narratives. Kannada literature, with a documented and continuous history spanning over a thousand years, stands as a remarkable example of a literary tradition deeply interwoven with the folk culture of Karnataka.

Folk traditions represent the earliest and most organically developed forms of cultural expression, emerging directly from the lived experiences of communities. Before the advent of written literature, oral traditions — folk songs, myths, ritual chants, proverbs, and storytelling — served as primary modes of cultural transmission. These traditions encoded social norms, moral values, religious beliefs, occupational knowledge, and historical memories in performative and accessible forms, making them available to all members of the community regardless of literacy or social status.

The relationship between folk traditions and Kannada literature is not merely historical but continuous and dynamic. From classical epics and Bhakti literature to modern poetry, drama, and fiction, Kannada writers have consistently drawn upon folk traditions to articulate cultural identity and social consciousness. This paper undertakes a comprehensive examination of how folk traditions shape cultural identity in Kannada literature across historical periods, while also assessing their enduring relevance in an age of globalization.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The study of folklore and its relationship with literature has attracted considerable scholarly attention across disciplines. Alan Dundes (1980) conceptualized folklore as a living and adaptive cultural system rather than a static body of antiquated traditions, emphasizing its dynamic interaction with contemporary life. A.K. Ramanujan (1991) highlighted the fluid interaction between oral and written traditions in Indian literatures, drawing attention to the importance of context, performance, and regional variation in understanding folk texts.

In the Kannada context, K. Shivaram Karanth's extensive documentation of Karnataka's folk arts laid the foundation for systematic folklore studies in the region. D.R. Nagaraj examined how folk



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traditions challenge elite literary canons and provide alternative cultural narratives, arguing for a more inclusive understanding of the Kannada literary tradition. M.M. Kalburgi's landmark studies on Vachana literature reveal strong folk influences in language, imagery, and performative aspects of medieval Kannada poetry.

Feminist scholars such as Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (1993) have drawn attention to women's oral traditions and their role in articulating gendered cultural identities that are often absent from male-dominated literary histories. Tejaswini Niranjana's (1992) work on translation and cultural representation provides a framework for understanding how folk traditions are mediated through literary and academic discourse. Subaltern studies have further highlighted the importance of folk traditions in representing marginalized voices excluded from dominant literary histories.

While these studies provide valuable insights, most focus on specific periods, genres, or social categories. This paper builds upon existing scholarship by offering an integrated, historically comprehensive, and identity-centered analysis of folk traditions across the full spectrum of Kannada literature, from classical compositions to contemporary digital storytelling.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study is guided by the following specific objectives:

- To examine the nature, forms, and regional variations of folk traditions prevalent in Karnataka.
- To analyze the incorporation of folk elements in Kannada literary texts across distinct historical periods.
- To explore the role of folk traditions in constructing, sustaining, and contesting cultural identity.
- To assess the significance of folk traditions in addressing subalternity, gender, and social resistance.
- To evaluate the relevance of folk traditions in modern and contemporary Kannada literature amid globalization.
- To contribute to interdisciplinary discourse on folklore, literary criticism, and cultural studies.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research adopts a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretative methodology appropriate for humanistic inquiry. The study is based on secondary data collected from classical and modern Kannada literary texts, folklore collections, ethnographic studies, scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed journal articles, and critical essays. Primary sources include canonical literary works in Kannada and their translated versions, while secondary sources include critical commentaries and scholarly analyses.

Textual analysis and thematic interpretation are employed to examine how folk elements are integrated into literary works. Cultural contextualization situates texts within broader social and historical frameworks. The methodology is well-suited to humanities research, where the objective is



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to interpret meanings, symbols, and cultural practices rather than quantify variables. A comparative approach is also employed to trace continuities and transformations in folk-literary relationships across different historical periods.

5. Conceptual Framework: Folk Traditions and Cultural Identity

Cultural identity refers to a shared sense of belonging shaped by language, traditions, beliefs, values, and collective memory. It is not a fixed essence but a dynamic construct continuously produced and negotiated through cultural practices. Stuart Hall's (1990) influential formulation of cultural identity as a 'production' rather than a stable property is relevant here: identity is always in process, shaped by history and difference.

Folk traditions play a crucial role in this process by preserving indigenous knowledge systems, social norms, and communal narratives. In Kannada literature, folk traditions contribute to cultural identity through the use of regional dialects and linguistic registers, the representation of rural and occupational life, the preservation of myths and rituals, and the articulation of community ethics and collective wisdom. These elements provide authenticity and cultural specificity to literary expression, reinforcing a sense of cultural continuity and belonging.

The interaction between folk traditions and formal literature is inherently dialogic: while folk elements preserve tradition and rootedness, literary reinterpretation allows for adaptation to changing social realities, critical reflection, and cultural innovation. Kannada literature exemplifies this productive tension between tradition and modernity.

6. FOLK TRADITIONS IN CLASSICAL AND MEDIEVAL KANNADA LITERATURE

Early Kannada literature exhibits strong connections with oral narrative traditions and regional folk culture. Classical works such as Pampa's *Vikramarjuna Vijaya* (941 CE) and Ponna's *Shantipurana* adapt pan-Indian epics to local cultural contexts by incorporating regional myths, heroic ideals, and narrative techniques rooted in folk storytelling. Pampa's celebrated portrayal of Arjuna as an idealized Kannada hero reflects the values of warrior culture embedded in regional folk traditions.

The Bhakti movement, flourishing between the 10th and 16th centuries, marked a transformative shift in Kannada literary history by democratizing literary expression and challenging caste-based hierarchies. Vachana literature, associated with Basavanna, Allama Prabhu, Akka Mahadevi, and other Sharanas of the Lingayat tradition, employed simple vernacular language, folk idioms, proverbs, and performative modes to communicate profound spiritual and social ideas. These texts emphasized egalitarian values, social justice, and ethical living, grounding cultural identity in lived folk experience rather than elite textual authority.

The Vachana tradition is particularly significant because it illustrates how folk linguistic resources — including everyday metaphors, occupational imagery, and colloquial speech — can be elevated into sophisticated literary expression without losing their popular accessibility. This democratization of literary language had lasting consequences for the development of Kannada literary identity.



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7. FOLK RELIGION, RITUALS, AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Folk religion forms an integral and vibrant part of Karnataka's cultural landscape. Village deities (grama devatas), ritual practices, seasonal festivals, and oral myths surrounding local shrines play a crucial role in shaping collective identity at the community level. Festivals such as Karaga in Bangalore and Yellamma Jatre in North Karnataka are not merely religious events but occasions for the performance and renewal of community identity through music, narrative, and ritual.

Kannada literature frequently draws upon these elements to depict the texture and depth of cultural life. Ritual performances associated with folk deities — including possession rituals, votive offerings, and processional theatre such as Yakshagana and Bayalata — reflect community values, social hierarchies, and modes of conflict resolution. Literary representations of such practices preserve indigenous belief systems and assert cultural autonomy in the face of dominant Brahmanical religious narratives.

The tension between folk religious practices and orthodox religious authority is itself a recurring theme in Kannada literature, from Vachana poetry's critique of temple-based religion to modern writers' explorations of caste discrimination within ritual contexts. This critical engagement with folk religion underscores its centrality to questions of cultural identity and social power.

8. AGRARIAN LIFE, ECOLOGY, AND FOLK CONSCIOUSNESS

Folk traditions in Karnataka are inextricably linked to agrarian life and ecological cycles. A rich body of folk songs accompanies agricultural activities such as sowing (bidugadeere), transplanting, harvesting, and threshing, reflecting the community's deep relationship with land, water, and seasonal rhythms. These songs encode indigenous knowledge about weather patterns, soil management, seed varieties, and sustainable farming practices developed over generations.

Kannada literature incorporates these agrarian traditions to articulate ecological consciousness and rural identity, offering an alternative to urban-centric and industrialist worldviews. Kuvempu's portrayal of the Western Ghats landscape and its communities in works such as Kanooru Heggadithi draws heavily upon folk ecological knowledge and the intimate human-nature relationships embedded in folk culture. Such representations highlight sustainable ways of life and indigenous environmental knowledge, contributing meaningfully to contemporary ecological and environmental humanities discourse.

9. FOLK TRADITIONS IN MODERN KANNADA LITERATURE

Modern Kannada literature, roughly spanning the late 19th century to the mid-20th century, witnessed a conscious and programmatic revival of folk traditions as a response to colonial modernity and cultural alienation. Confronted with the homogenizing pressures of colonial education



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and Western literary models, Kannada writers turned to folk traditions as a source of cultural authenticity, national pride, and aesthetic renewal.

Kuvempu (K.V. Puttappa), awarded the Jnanpith Prize in 1967, emphasized a universalism rooted in the specificity of local culture — what he termed 'vishwamanava' (universal humanism) expressed through the idioms of Malnad folk life. D.R. Bendre, another Jnanpith laureate, drew upon the folk rhythms, musical forms, and imagery of North Karnataka to create a distinctive lyrical poetry that merged folk aesthetics with modernist sensibility. K. Shivaram Karanth's novels explore the complexities of coastal Karnataka's folk culture, including Yakshagana performances, with sociological depth.

Girish Karnad's dramatic works represent perhaps the most internationally recognized engagement with folk traditions in modern Kannada literature. Plays such as *Yayati*, *Hayavadana*, and *Nagamandala* reinterpret myths, folk tales, and ritual theatre forms to address contemporary social and psychological concerns — including gender, identity, and the complexities of the self — demonstrating the enduring adaptability and critical potential of folk traditions.

10. SUBALTERNITY, FOLK TRADITIONS, AND CULTURAL RESISTANCE

Folk traditions have historically served as the primary cultural medium of communities marginalized by caste, class, and colonial hierarchies. Excluded from elite Sanskrit and English literary traditions, Dalit and other subaltern communities in Karnataka preserved and transmitted their histories, values, and aesthetic sensibilities through oral forms: lavani songs, work songs, narrative ballads, and communal storytelling.

Contemporary Dalit Kannada literature, represented by writers such as Siddalingaiah, Devanuru Mahadeva, and Mudnakudu Chinnaswamy, draws extensively from these oral histories and folk forms to challenge dominant upper-caste narratives and assert alternative cultural identities. By incorporating folk traditions into formal literary expression, these texts perform an act of cultural reclamation, insisting on the validity and dignity of subaltern aesthetic traditions.

Folk culture thus functions simultaneously as a medium of cultural memory and of cultural resistance and social transformation. The mobilization of folk traditions in subaltern literature is not nostalgic but strategic: it challenges the hegemony of elite literary culture and demands recognition of the cultural contributions of marginalized communities to the Kannada literary tradition.

11. GENDER, WOMEN'S ORAL TRADITIONS, AND FOLK EXPRESSION

Women have historically been the primary custodians and transmitters of folk traditions in Karnataka and across India. The songs women sing — related to marriage (hadu), labor, childbirth, festivals, and devotion — constitute a rich and largely understudied archive of women's experience, emotion, and social commentary. These oral forms create a space for the articulation of women's perspectives that formal literary genres have often denied them.



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Feminist literary scholarship has increasingly recognized the critical importance of these women's folk traditions. A.K. Ramanujan's translations of women's folk songs and Susie Tharu and K. Lalita's anthology have helped bring women's oral expressions into the mainstream of literary and scholarly attention. These traditions reveal how women negotiate patriarchy, social constraints, and emotional life through coded and collectively sanctioned oral forms.

Contemporary women writers in Kannada, such as Vaidehi, Sara Aboobacker, and Yashoda Devi, draw upon these folk traditions to reimagine gendered identities and give literary form to experiences of domestic life, desire, resistance, and solidarity. Their work demonstrates the living connection between women's folk expression and contemporary feminist literary practice in Karnataka.

12. FOLK PERFORMANCE ARTS AND THE LITERARY TRADITION

Karnataka's vibrant tradition of folk performance arts — including Yakshagana, Dollu Kunitha, Kamsale, Goravara Kunitha, and Suggi Kunitha — constitutes an important dimension of the folk-literary relationship that deserves special attention. These performance traditions combine narrative, music, dance, costume, and communal participation in ways that challenge the boundaries between literary text and embodied performance.

Yakshagana, the coastal Karnataka theatre tradition dating back several centuries, incorporates episodes from the Mahabharata, Ramayana, and Puranas but adapts them through local folk aesthetics, improvised dialogue, comic interludes, and community-specific concerns. It represents a living example of the dialogue between Sanskrit literary culture and vernacular folk performance that characterizes much of Kannada cultural history.

Modern Kannada playwrights and directors, inspired by these forms, have developed an aesthetically distinctive and politically engaged theatre tradition. The folk performance arts thus function as both a source of literary and theatrical inspiration and as a model of community-centered cultural practice that challenges the elitism of formal literary institutions.

13. GLOBALIZATION, DIGITAL MEDIA, AND THE CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE OF FOLK TRADITIONS

Globalization, rapid urbanization, and the proliferation of digital media have created unprecedented challenges for the survival and transmission of folk traditions. Young people in Karnataka increasingly grow up in urban environments disconnected from the agricultural rhythms, ritual practices, and community networks that sustained folk culture for generations. The dominance of English-language global media poses additional threats to the vitality of regional folk expression.

However, the picture is more complex than simple cultural loss. Contemporary Kannada literature, cinema, and theatre continue to engage creatively with folklore, often in ways that critically interrogate rather than simply celebrate folk traditions. Kannada cinema, from Rajkumar-era films



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drawing on folk themes to more recent art-house productions, has played a significant role in disseminating folk narratives and music to mass audiences.

Digital platforms have created new possibilities for folk preservation and innovation. Online archives, YouTube channels dedicated to folk music and performance, and social media communities of folk enthusiasts have extended the reach of Karnataka's folk traditions to new audiences within and beyond the state. Academic documentation, scholarly translation, and interdisciplinary research — including projects at the Kannada University at Hampi — have further contributed to preserving folk traditions for future generations. The adaptability of folk traditions, their capacity to migrate across media and contexts while retaining cultural meaning, ensures their continued relevance to Kannada cultural identity.

14. CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that folk traditions are not peripheral or decorative elements but foundational constituents of Kannada literature and cultural identity. From the earliest classical compositions to the most recent experimental fiction, Kannada writers have consistently drawn upon the rich resources of folk culture — its languages, narratives, performance traditions, belief systems, and social values — to give literary form to the complex, diverse, and evolving cultural identity of Karnataka.

Folk traditions perform multiple and overlapping functions in Kannada literary history: they preserve collective memory and indigenous knowledge; they provide aesthetic resources and formal possibilities unavailable in elite literary traditions; they articulate the experiences and values of communities — agrarian, subaltern, gendered — that dominant literary cultures have excluded; and they enable cultural resistance to colonial, casteist, and globalizing homogenization.

Far from being relics of an irrecoverable past, folk traditions remain living and dynamic forces in contemporary Kannada literary and cultural life. Their continued relevance in an age of digital media and globalization testifies to the enduring power of rooted cultural expression and the human need for identity, belonging, and community. Future research should explore the digital mediation of folk traditions, the intersectionality of folk culture with caste and gender politics, and the global circulation of Karnataka's folk arts in diaspora communities.

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