



FROM FOLK TO DIGITAL: SOME THOUGHTS ON MEELAD RECITATION

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ABSTRACT

Oxford Advanced Dictionary defines folklore as the traditional beliefs, customs, and stories of a community, passed through the generations by word of mouth(1). M. H. Abrams explains that it is a collective name applied to sayings, verbal composition, and social rituals that have been handed down by word of mouth and example rather than in written form (2). Folklore studies have become popular since the mid 19th century. With the advent of technology, like other aspects of life, folklore is also affected. From a very superficial view, digitalization helps in preserving and reviving folklore but it also damages the very spirit of it. This short paper tries to enlist and examine the changes that take place in the transformation from folk to digital. It takes the instance of Meelad recitations as a case study.

INTRODUCTION

Meelad is an Urdu word with its Arabic root as *Mawlid* which means birth. *Meelad* celebrations are the celebrations of the birth of Prophet Muhammed (PBUH). These celebrations are part of traditional Islamic culture. Though there are certain scholastic differences among the religious scholars about the ways of celebrations, a common thing is to narrate the events related to the birth of the Prophet (PBUH). These narrations are partially in prose and partially in verse. There are a few standard texts written in Arabic called as *Meelad* texts. Among them, the texts *Sharful Anaam* and *Barzanji* are popular in India. Another popular text across the world is *Qasida Burda*. It is written by Imam Sharfuddin Buseri. It is said that the poet was suffering from some disease and after he wrote this poem, the Prophet (PBUH) visited him in his dream and gave him a mantle or shawl (*burda* in Arabic). Next morning when he woke up, he was cured. Thus, this is a poem written in praise of the Prophet (PBUH) and rewarded by the Prophet (PBUH). So, it is believed that its recitation brings rewards and cures illness. In the traditional Muslim families, apart from Prophet

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Muhammed's (PBUH) birth celebrations *Qasida Burda* is recited on all festive occasions including weddings, house warming, etc. Another benefit of this recitation is that it promotes the love for the Prophet (PBUH) and religiosity among the readers/singers (3).

Now the question remains if *Meelad* recitation can be considered as part of folklore when there are specific written texts by individual authors. The answer is though the texts are individually written the ways in which they are recited and partially performed vary from group to group. If these devotional songs may not qualify to be the folksongs, at least the recitation of these songs qualifies to be part of folk singing. There are no written rules of performance. It has been transferred from generation to generation by word of mouth and by example. It is community and even area specific. For instance, within India the tune of *Burda* recitation in Kerala is different from that in Deccan. The same in Deccan is again different from that in Kashmir. It is part of social and religious rituals. Like a folk performance, while reciting a *Meelad* text both the performers and the audience are actively and equally involved. They sit either in a circle (3) or in two parallel lines facing each other. It begins with the prose narration and then followed by a song. This sequence is repeated till end of all songs from the *Meelad* text. The end of a prose text and beginning of a song is marked by reading *Durud Sharif* (Salat in Arabic). The performers are called *Hadi* and the audience are *Raddadi* (). *Hadis* recite a couplet and *raddadis* answer it by reciting either the first couplet of the song each time or next one. At the end of *Meelad* text both the groups stand and sing *Salam* (Salutation) to the Prophet (PBUH) which is the culmination of the entire performance (3). Neither the performers nor the audience are professionally trained in singing or music. More than the quality of voice the purity of intent and intensity of involvement increases the effectiveness of the recitation. No musical instrument is used except *Daf* (tambourine). Thus, as claimed earlier these devotional songs may not qualify to be the folksongs, at least the recitation of these songs qualifies to be part of folk singing.

Let's move onto the digitalization of these *Meelad* recitations. In the last one and half decade, the technological advancements have marked the beginning of a new era. In the Indian sub-continent especially among Urdu speakers the arrival ARY Q TV, a Pakistani TV channel which presents only religious programmes has redefined *Meelad* recitation with its regular programmes of *Naat*. *Naat* is a poetic form in Urdu especially meant for praising the Prophet (PBUH). These *Naat* programmes generally have a composition based on few (4-5) selected couplets from *Qasida Burda*. Since it is a TV programme they use all the digital instruments to enhance the quality of presentation. Moreover, the singers are professionally trained ones. Each singer tries to recite these couplets keeping his individuality intact. The element of music is also increased. From the traditional *Daf* to all the modern instruments are used as an accompaniment to the recitation. The digitalization also adds various special effects to the sound like echo and so on.



The popularity of TV singers of *Qasida Burda* and other related devotional poems has given birth to a new lot of professional *Naat Khwan* (one who recites Naat). As part of *Meelad* celebrations *Mahfil-e-Naat* (Naat programme) are organised inviting these singers. Mostly they recite *Naat* in Urdu and in some cases (like Kerala and West Bengal) in regional languages. They rarely turn to the traditional *Arabic* texts. When they do so, they do not move beyond *Qasida Burda*. *Sharful Anaam* and *Barzanji* remain absolutely untouched by them. Even from *Qasida Burda*, they generally remain contented with 10-15 couplets out of 165. When they recite the whole of it, they divide it among the group of singers. The singers do not care for the participation of the *Raddadi*/ audience. Instead they have their own chorus. This results in lack of involvement on part of the audience. The inactive audience fail to receive the same spiritual pleasures as were received by the traditional gathering. The increase in the amount of music gives it a form of concert than a religious ritual. To have a program of such professional singers, the organisers have to spend the amount ranging from 5000 to 100000 rupees depending upon the level of popularity of singers and the number of singers. They also have to spend some amount on the venue and publicity of the event. For this they start searching for the sponsors. If the sponsors have something to be promoted, like all commercial events, the singers have to spare some time for it either in the middle of devotional songs or towards the end.

On the next level, the audio and video recordings of these programmes are done and sold in the form of CDs and DVDs. More recently they are available on the individual websites and on Youtube as well. The youth gets attracted to its musicality, downloads it and listens / watches it on smart phones and tablets. In the last 15-20 years, since the recitation by audience has stopped and the singers are required to be paid, it is slightly difficult to have *Meelad* recitation for smaller family functions like housewarming. Again those who play these recorded audio clips on amplifiers have the same problem of involvement. Like other songs which are meant for entertainment, the recorded recitation goes to the background while the participants are either quiet or talking to each other in whispers.

Thus, saying that digitalization helps to preserve the folklore does not seem to be completely true. Firstly it changes the very purpose of recitation. Secondly, there are changes in style of presentation because of the change of medium. Thirdly, involvement of audience and the resulting receptivity is minimized to zero. Fourthly, transferring the art of *Meelad* recitation to the next generation has also stopped. Fifthly, commercialization has crept in. Finally, the religious and cultural aspects are lost.



WORKS CITED

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