

SUMMARY OF UGC MAJOR RESEARCH PROJECT

“ Orality & Young Children: Collection and Documentation of Lullabies in India”

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Introduction:

Lullabies are roughly defined as songs that are sung to assist infants to ease the process of sleep. They are spontaneously expressive with the goal of putting a child to sleep. Lullabies may be seen as the beginning of all music; it is also the beginning of poetic expressions. This is true in the life of every individual born into this world. It is also true of the history of mankind. Lullabies are the beginning of linguistic activity for children; it is the first music heard by babies; it is the first expressions of poetry every infant listens to. In the ancient periods mothers used to rock their babies with the epic poems and hymns. In many

cultures, pregnant women listen to lullabies. This implies that human beings are acquainted with the rhythm of rocking and lullabies even before their birth.

Perhaps, we may say that lullabies repeat the rhythmic movement of the heartbeat pulsating in the womb. Then, lullabies are the first literary and musical activities and they have a biological background. It is, however, a fact that not much study is undertaken about lullabies and the most important and obvious reason for this dismissive attitude in critical thinking is because the lullaby is a genre associated with women, children, and the oral tradition. Lullabies essentially portray feminine perspectives. They are the suppressed expressions of the weaker section of the society, the anonymous women folk of every culture. This major research project is an attempt to trace the thematic, functional, psychological, linguistic, and literary facets of Indian lullabies.

Themes and Functions of Lullabies:

There are many pragmatic functions for singing lullabies to children: Lullabies are sung to lull the child to sleep. They are musical songs that are essential for building up emotional bonding. Lullabies are useful for building confidence. They are necessary for cognitive development of the child. They assist the child's motor development and are capable of promoting good listening skills. Lullabies help children to acquire speech and language skills as well as initiate children to literature from early childhood onwards. These topics can be

summarized to form the constituent elements of this research and comprise of features such as the thematic content of lullabies, interrelationships of lullabies and religion, lullabies and psychology, lullabies and music, lullabies and language, and finally, lullabies and literature.

Essentially, lullabies are universal examples of instances of negotiating the child to a world of promises. The most common of these negotiations is optimistic as well as pragmatic in nature and are songs sung for humoring the child with the promises of delicious food. They are subjunctive conditions in linguistic and grammatical structures. Lullabies of this type are universal and structurally convey the same message: if you go to sleep, you'll get good food. But if we critically analyze the semantic reception of the child audience, it is a cruel fact that infants do not understand a bit of these words of negotiations. If the child audiences do not follow the language of promises, why are they still sung? Are not the lullabies, then, reflecting the mothers' intentions and desires? Sometimes, these desires are obvious in expressions as they relate to the wellbeing of the child and to the future marriage of the girl-child or the boy-child. Singing such optimistic lullabies of promises to ease the child to sleep is common in many Indian languages too. But that does not mean that optimistic promises are the only subject matter of lullabies. Some lullabies aren't optimistic at all.

As the child is unwilling to go to sleep, many lullabies are not happy promises negotiating children to sleep but comprise of fearful threats to frighten them to fall asleep. Many of these songs refer to real and imaginary dangers that threaten the life of the child. One arch enemy of fragile infants is death itself. In ancient agrarian oral cultures mothers are aware of this great danger. Famine, war, attack of enemies, demons lurking in the darkness, etc. are some of the possible threats referred to in lullabies. It is, however, a point to note that the music and melody of these lullabies are soothing and do not suggest the possibilities of dangers. While the words threaten the tone and melody comforts the child listener. Then, they are not really intended to threaten the child; they seem to have functions beyond that of apparently frightening the infants. According to Maria Warner, spelling out threats and dangers in lullabies suggest the magical function of language: just by naming the evil forces we make these supernatural creatures harmless. Lullabies, then, function as abracadabra – magical words that miraculously get rid of evil of this earth and those of supernatural world. Some cultures, besides, believe that endearing terms addressing a child to praise its beauty may make the supernatural creatures jealous. They also believe in the superstition that human jealousy can provoke some ill fate to the child. If the child is addressed as ugly, the evil forces lurking behind would lose interest in the baby. When we analyze Indian lullabies, we find that many lullabies in India too comprise of threats and curses and this major project reveals the magnitude of

such lullabies of threat, fear or curse existing in Indian religious lullabies as well as in popular mundane lullabies of oral as well as written traditions.

Songs sung to infants are delightful whether they contain cheerful or mournful words. What matters is the gentle musical tone, the familiar voice making repetitive lulling sounds and it leads the babies to the comforts of the miraculous world of falling asleep. When we sing lullabies we bring meaning through the tone of voice, the rise and fall of our breath and the intention to soothe both the singer and the infant. When the voice is infused with heartfelt care and love the effect is deep and long lasting, as effective for adults as for children. It is the sounds and rhythms that appear to identify a song as a lullaby in any language. These lullabies that have been passed on from generation to generation give the members of a particular cultural / linguistic group a sense of belonging to a particular family, and more importantly to a particular linguistic culture. Lullabies are cultural transmitters to posterity. One of the aims of this major project is to conduct a survey on the musical effects of lullabies as cultural transmitters. Though we may not understand the words at all, lullabies can evoke for the listener that sense of peaceful belonging no matter what our cultural or linguistic background is.

Aims of the Research Project:

The lullaby song ideally induces a feeling of calm. It is not merely melody that is responsible for this state of tranquility. Of course the music is significant; but the words of the lullaby are equally important too. Then, we may say that the combination of words, melody and vocal lulling sounds make up the whole experience. Whilst a voice singing a melody is capable of inducing the state of feeling sleepy, the meaning of what is being conveyed through words in conjunction with the essence of lulling the baby brings about a perfect union that results in a state of calm for the infant and it is culminating in sound sleep by the time the lullabies are sung. A female voice singing a familiar song is a double delight to the child normally. It is interesting to note what the content of these lullabies is generally. Many lullabies have a simple story to narrate. This narration is almost invariably about the child itself and it usually takes the form of a prediction about the future of the child. If it is not an optimistic tale that projects the ideal future for the child, it might be also a sorrowful tale of what is likely to happen to the child in future in the troublesome times. Some lullabies are a mixture of these two elements. It is a blending of hopes and fears. Different Indian cultural or linguistic communities have their own stories to narrate. While this project is a massive effort to collect these remnants of traditional lullabies almost lost and forgotten in many of the linguistic communities in India, it has

also collected some excellent literary lullabies existing today. But, this project has not dwelt into the vast area of film lullabies that have the highest popularity in many linguistic communities for reasons that they are beyond the scope of the subject matter considered for this major research project.

Relevance of the Accomplished Study of Lullabies:

Lullabies are universal practices for young children and there is nothing new in it both in the oral and written traditions. The Principal Investigator of this Major Research Project was, however, all the more fascinated with this topic for the University Grants Commission Major Research Project when he encountered certain peculiar traditions of lullaby in a remote part of our country – the distinctive practice in singing lullabies in remote villages. At Kongthong village in East Khasi Hills district in Meghalaya, he has noted during the field work of this project that mothers call their children not by their names but by singing specific ‘Jingrwai lawbeis’ or lullabies which are given to each of them at birth. Sounding similar to the tweets of birds, this is a marvelous tradition that has been handed down through generations. These lullabies that have a sufficient duration of singing infant songs have hundreds of variations to suit the purpose of addressing each child of the village separately. They are oral songs that resist any system of codification of lullabies and if a family has ten children, there will be ten different songs to address them. Addressing a child is done only by their lullabies and it is

not a practice just restricted to the family members; even other people can utilize these songs to call them. Names of the children are used only for other official purposes. The songs are highly effective especially when a family wants to gather together their members lost in a crowd. The children will hear their lullabies, which constitute their identity and the specific tune can help them to overcome being separated and lost in a crowd.

Moreover, these lullaby songs are sung even when the child matures to adulthood and they help the young fellows remember their childhood experiences better. Then, here is a community that lives lullabies. Lullaby is a ritual or a religion for them. It is, however, a strict observation that female grownups cannot use this musical language to address their male companions. So the purpose is essentially framed for addressing children in a musical tone, for the pure function of lulling the child to sleep, or for the grown up child to better recollect his or her childhood. When he focused my attention to lullabies during this research project, the Principal Investigator realized that our country has various cultural specialties in lullaby tradition, which we should proudly highlight in research writings. Every research requires the guiding inspirations from previous scholars who have undertaken similar studies in their own traditions. But, unfortunately there aren't any serious studies undertaken on lullabies in India, apart from a few articles that appear in journals related to folk and culture studies. Let alone, there are not many

book-length researches done on the subject even in the international level. The seeds of this UGC major research project originated from this academic curiosity to make a study of lullabies. Rather than a mechanical collection of as many lullabies that can be collected in the Indian context, which can be the work of a specialist in folklore collections, this study primarily aimed at establishing the close connections between lullabies and religion, to look at lullabies as literary expressions, the importance of lullabies in acquiring language skills, gaining psychological comforts, and finally to establish the interrelationships of the lullabies with music.

Main Points of the Project Report:

The report of the UGC Major Research Project on lullabies begins with an “Introduction” that discusses the scope for this research. A systematic study of Indian lullabies has not yet been achieved and this research is a pioneering attempt. Chapter 1 entitled “Lullabies & Religion” explores into the mythical and religious foundations of Indian lullabies and delves into the politics of cultural image-fixation in religious lullabies in general. The ever lively Indian tradition of religious lullabies is the focus of this study. The second chapter, “Lullabies & Literature” attempts to appreciate Indian lullabies for their literary content. This chapter demonstrates with examples how emotional language and innovative use of imagery have enriched the lullaby tradition in many Indian languages. Chapter

3, “Lullabies & Language” elucidates that lullaby is an initiation into daily linguistic experience for infants. It notes that Indian lullabies are linguistic spaces employing repetition, rhyme, assonance and alliteration to assist young children to have their first lessons in language. Chapter 4, “Lullabies & Psychology” demonstrates that lullabies, above all, help the child in identity formation. This chapter links lullaby with psychological aspects as infant songs charged with deep emotions assist the child in the process of identity formation. Lullabies help the child to distinguish the self / subject from other familiar non-self entities / objects as well as aids the child to distinguish the self from possible enemies. It invokes the child’s fears, imaginary and real. Finally, Chapter 5, “Lullabies & Music” prove that young children and music have a close association with one another. This chapter establishes the interrelationship between music and lullabies and shows how music in lullabies is effectively used for emotional, linguistic, religious, social or cognitive purposes. This study rounds up with a brief “Conclusion” that sums up the observations in the previous chapters and opens up scope for further research and fruitful academic discussions.

Conclusion:

Finally, this major research project presents a model collection of Indian lullabies in the production of a compact disc that celebrates our lullaby tradition in our Indian culture and ethos. It is a conglomeration of all the major traits of Indian

culture in lullabies. It includes lullabies from most of the official languages of India. It is a mixture of religious lullabies that form the myth and archetype of Indian lullabies, the representation of our traditional and folk lullaby culture, and it includes modern lullabies, performances of lullabies in Indian culture, celebrations of film lullabies in different languages, various lullabies in this collection are sung by male singers like father or grandfather, by grandmothers, and by siblings. It is a mixture that presents a cross representation of India in sweet lullabies.