

BOOK REVIEW. *FOLKLORE IN BALTIC HISTORY: RESISTANCE AND RESURGENCE*

Naithani, Sadhana. 2019. *Folklore in Baltic History: Resistance and Resurgence*. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi. 128 pages.

Since the mid-1980s, one of the central questions of anthropology has been the issue of representation: how to understand and describe the Other. Different cultural and linguistic backgrounds, but also power relations, make it complicated to justly represent any group that a researcher chooses to study. These issues become especially clear when the researchers themselves become a research object, studied by their colleagues.

In 2019, *Folklore in Baltic History: Resistance and Resurgence* was published in which the folklorists of the three Baltic states were the Other to be represented by a researcher from far away. Sadhana Naithani, an associate professor at the Centre of German Studies at Jawaharlal Nehru University in New Delhi, discussed and described folklore studies in the Baltics. Without knowing the languages and having only a brief previous knowledge of the historical development of the area, she used various written and oral sources to understand how folklore has been studied in these countries since the end of the Second World War. Written sources on the history of folkloristics in German and English, were accompanied with oral interviews: Naithani recorded her conversations with 25 folklorists, ethnologists and historians from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania.

Naithani's previous research interests included Indian folktales, she has explored colonialist aspects of folkloristics, and folklore studies in post-war Germany. Her interest in the international history of the discipline of folkloristics also brought the Baltics to her attention. She spent three months in 2016 and five weeks in 2017 at the Univer-

sity of Tartu, Estonia and also visited the other two Baltic countries to study the history of folklore studies in the area. Naithani had been to Estonia several times before and came to the conclusion that the political situation that shaped Estonian folklore collections were a topic she wanted to explore further. Apart from these research visits her experience in postcolonial folkloristics gave her the tools to understand the political processes that formed folklore studies.

In the Baltics in particular, the connection between politics and folkloristics is unique, according to Naithani. That folkloristics had a high status both in Soviet and nationalist agendas during the Soviet period makes it a compelling field to study. In *Folklore in Baltic History: Resistance and Resurgence*, she chose an interdisciplinary and multimedial approach to understanding Baltic history, claiming that the book is "not a complete and comprehensive history of folkloristics in the Baltic countries, nor is it an even representation of all" (p. vi). Yet, Naithani introduces the most important developments in the past 80 years presenting a compelling investigation of the recent past in folkloristics in the Baltics. The point of view of an outsider makes it possible to see patterns that the indigenous researcher might miss and creates an understanding of the most powerful parts of the narratives about the disciplinary history.

While contemporary folkloristics is discussed in the book, the main focus of the work is on the years 1945–1991, i.e. the Soviet period, which Naithani characterises as a dramatic period. The first chapter intro-

duces her theoretical and methodological choices. After the look back of chapter two, which characterises the development of the discipline of folkloristics in the Baltics, the third chapter is constituted as a drama in three acts: censoring, purging, and constructing folklore in the early Soviet period. The three subsequent chapters show the three resistance sites where folklore was seen ways other than the Soviet framework proposed: universities, folklore archives, and the countryside. Not only does Naithani discuss folkloristics, she also wished to understand cultural trauma in the history of the Baltic states, a topic that she introduces in the last chapter, about the folk, not folkloristics: the dramatic changes in everyday life, mass deportations, repressions. The chapter is based on life stories and includes descriptions of collapsing residential areas in the villages based on Naithani's field trip to Estonian countryside.

Naithani discusses the struggles that researchers had with Soviet regulations and analyses knowledge production during fieldwork, as well as when archiving and teaching at the university. She uses the concepts of her informants, for example she describes references to Marxist-Leninist works as a "very thin layer of rhetoric" (Dace Bula) and uses Tiiu Jaago's idea of parallel knowledge systems to describe the ways people used both Soviet and national understandings of folklore. While the purges, censorship, and ideological constraints are the main aspects of the Soviet period, she also notes the rare positive aspects of the Soviet period mentioned by her interviewees, for example stable funding and collective expeditions. In comparison, the short overview of post-Soviet developments describes the funding problems that folklore institutions have faced in recent decades.

One of the central issues in the book is the question of nationalism. Contextualising nationalism helps to understand if it was a positive or a negative force in the course of history, claims Naithani. She states

that nationalism in the Baltics – which for example lead to the founding of the folklore archives in the 1920s – was very different from the fascist nationalism in Central Europe. She compares nationalism in the Baltics with the nationalism in South Asia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which were both anticolonial struggles and therefore neither violent nor ethnocentric (p. 17). The importance of folklore in national and cultural identity before and during the Soviet period shaped both the folk and the folkloristics of the Baltics.

While Naithani acknowledges that the three Baltic states are considerably different, she focuses on similarities in order to find ground for comparison. The book is largely based on examples from Estonia, where Naithani spent most of her research time during her visit in the Baltics. For example, chapter two, which depicts the developments in folkloristics in the interwar period, largely describes Estonia while the other two Baltic states are discussed briefly at the end of the chapter. The nature of the available sources shapes the narrative that Naithani presents in her book. The literature about folklore studies in the Baltics in English mainly covers interwar developments and the Stalinist period. The personal experiences of the interviewed scholars describe the late Soviet period in which they started their studies and academic work, therefore the period between the mid-1950s and 1970s is less represented in the book. Naithani generally follows the statements of the interviewed folklorists in her descriptions without using other sources to support their claims. As the quotes by the informants form the narrative that Naithani presents, it is a multivocal narrative that describes general developments, although this means that the book has fewer factual details to portray the particularities of the Soviet period.

In some cases, the language barrier or uncertainties in understanding cultural history have led to factual errors: for example, Estonian pastor and initiator of folklore col-

lecting Jakob Hurt is described as Baltic German (p. 43); Naithani claims that there are no supporting documents in the archives to be found about the Soviet period (p. 7), whereas in fact there is an abundance of archival sources depicting the institutional history of Baltic folkloristics, documents that continue to be used and discussed. There are also several typographical errors in Estonian names – the book could have used more proofreading.

Naithani's work brings the issues of Baltic folkloristics more into international discourse, being the first monograph about the history of folklore studies in English to cover developments in all three countries. Although there is a growing number of articles by Baltic researchers that discuss the Soviet period, there was no comprehensive overview before Naithani's work. The book therefore adds more aspects to the international discourse on folkloristics in totalitarian states. While folkloristics in Nazi Germany or the Stalinist Soviet Union, with a focus on Soviet Russia, has been discussed quite widely and there is much literature about folkloristics and ethnology in the Soviet Bloc, the Baltics states are more seldom discussed in this context, a gap that Naithani's work fills.

*Folklore in Baltic History: Resistance and Resurgence* is a representation of the work that folklorists in the Baltics states did under Soviet rule and afterwards. It is a text by an outsider written mainly for outsiders: excellent for a condensed yet nuanced overview of general developments in the disciplinary history. More detailed discussions of the history of folkloristics are carried out by indigenous researchers – the folklorists from Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania – although Naithani's study reflects what it was and is like to do folkloristics in the Baltics.

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