UNIT 4 THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO FOLKLORE

Structure
4.0 Objectives
4.1 Introduction
4.2 Evolutionist Theory
4.3 Diffusionist Theory
4.4 Primordialist Theory
4.5 Modernist/Constructionist Theory
4.6 Dialectical Theory
4.7 Folklore: A Counter-Discourse
4.8 Hegemony of the Written Discourse
4.9 The Sway of the Palace Paradigm
4.10 The Palace Paradigm and the Epic Discourse
4.11 The Critique of the Concept
4.12 Sanskritization
   4.12.1 Brahminization vs. Sanskritization
   4.12.2 Sanskritization and Westernization
4.13 Critical Assessment
4.14 Let Us Sum Up
4.15 References and Further Readings
4.16 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to

- understand that folk identities are dynamic in nature;
- see the connection between folklore and some common discourses;
- acquire clear idea about the way popular discourse of insurgency has made way into our folklore;
- understand the idea of ‘Counter-Discourse’;
- explain how this dynamism is the result of those very processes that constitute an identity;
- understand how different theories have attempted to analyse and theorise the processes that underlie this dynamism in identity formation of a folk;
- explain what ‘Palace Paradigm’ is;
- understand the differences between written and oral traditions;
- explain how culture is produced in a society;
- explain the relation between the concept of Palace Paradigm and performing arts;
- understand what ‘Sanskritization’ is;
• explain the strengths and weaknesses of the concept of Sanskritization; and
• know what the application is of the concept to understand Indian culture.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we will discuss some of the theories that have tried to explain how folk identities are formed and how they change. It is a well known historical fact that even as identity provides an individual with a sense of belonging and stability, at the same time identities change over a period of time. In a sense this dynamism is inherent in the very processes of constitution of identity. Every identity has a temporal and a societal matrix. Both these matrices impart an inherent dynamism to identity.

Let us take the temporal matrix first. The acknowledgement of the sense of time in the very constitution of identity imparts a possibility of dynamism in identity, where identity could display the traits of both being tenacious and unchanging and also volatile and capable of very rapid change.

The same possibility of continuity and change is imparted by the societal matrix of identity. It is stated that community links an individual or a subject to a community, yet the boundaries of this community are not permanently sealed. On the contrary, most theoreticians accept that the boundaries of societies may be not only relative but also “permeable” in the sense that people may cross into another society (i.e. another ethnic group), and finally, the members of an ethnic group need not share all the characteristics deemed as defining of the group (a polythetic “family resemblance” is sufficient). Identity creates problems of both adhesion and dissent, of belonging and repudiation or innovation.

Evidently, both the temporal and societal matrix of identity allow for dynamism in the very process of their constitution. In this unit we will focus primarily on how various theories take account of transformation of identity. We will deal briefly with some of the important theoretical schools such as, the evolutionist, the diffusionist, the primordialist, the modernists/ constructionist, and finally the Marxist.

4.2 EVOLUTIONIST THEORY

Let us then begin with the evolutionist theory. This school of thought seeks to understand how human societies progress through various evolutionary stages, for instance from a ‘lower’ to a ‘higher’ stage. However, unlike the other theories of transformation, this school of thought borrows most significantly from sciences, especially biology. Adherents of this theory advocate that societies dispersed the world over exhibit the process of evolution from ‘savagery’ to ‘civilization’. They seek to answer the question that why so many independent projects of evolution follow a remarkably similar path of evolution i.e. from savagery to civilization? They derive the answer to this question from biology and argue that this striking similarity in patterns of evolution is based on the fact that human beings the world over share the same psychic structure.

One of the most famous adherents of this school of thought was E. B. Tylor. E.B. Tylor was a cultural evolutionist who believed that diffusion was involved in the process of humankind’s cultural evolution from savagery to civilization. He promoted the idea that culture probably originated independently more than once, owing to the psychic similarity of men the world over, but that actual historical development involved numerous instances of cultural diffusion, or inheritance from a common
tradition. He traced diffused traits side by side with a deep conviction that there had been a general uniformity in evolutionary stages.

Formulated thus, this school of thought imposes a very rigid and monist pattern of evolution for human societies, cultures and identities. In this sense, since all human beings share the same psychic structure they are destined to follow the same stages of evolution till they complete the developmental process from savagery to civilization. In other words, it imposes, teleology of development on societal evolution, where every society is destined to develop from savagery to civilization. Consequently, as per the tenets of this theory, we can take account of only instances of development of human society, culture and identity. Unfortunately, human societies, cultures and identities do not follow such a unidirectional pattern of change and transformation. There is a plethora of historical evidence where human societies, cultures, etc. do not progress but decline. This theory is incapable of explaining these processes of stagnation or decline.

4.3 DIFFUSIONIST THEORY

Diffusionist theory is distinct from the evolutionist theory in very important respects, two of which are especially significant. First, in understanding society and societal transformations, it does not emphasise on biological or genetic traits, instead it emphasises on cultural traits. While analysing transformation of societies, cultures and identities, the emphasis of this line of research is to understand and explain how dominant cultural forms are “imposed, invented, reworked, and transformed” (Modernisation of Indian Tradition, 18). The second important difference with the evolutionists is that unlike them the diffusionists do not believe that change occurs primarily due to the independent origination of culture probably more than once. Instead they forward social structural explanations, which made the process of diffusion a more feasible cause of transformation than the process of innovation. They understand transformation of cultural traits in terms of two historical processes, diffusion and modification.

We have already discussed the view of Boas, who was one of the most prominent intellectuals of this school of thought. However, on the question of socio-cultural change, the contributions of American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan are equally significant. Lewis Henry Morgan claimed that diffusionism was one of the mechanisms by which the substantial uniformity of socio-cultural evolution was made possible. Lewis Henry Morgan infuriated his British contemporaries when his research demonstrated that social change involved both independent invention and diffusion. He agreed with British socio-cultural anthropologists that human progress was due to independent innovation, but his work on kinship terminology showed that diffusion occurred among geographically dispersed people.

In other words, this school postulates that transformation occurs due to the diffusion of influences and traits from more developed centres to those which are less developed. Given this explanation, all transformative changes in human history ought to emanate from culturally advanced centres. However, human transformation has rarely followed such linear process of change. History is littered with examples where impulse for change came from relatively less developed centres. For instance the emergence of a feudal society, culture and identity was not the result of influences and traits emanating from Rome that was the most advanced culture of the period; on the contrary it emerged due to the imposition of values, practices, traits and norms of the tribal society that overran the Roman empire. Similarly capitalism did not emerge in the advanced cultural centres such as China, Italy or even southern
England, instead it emerged in backward and rural northern England. In short, processes of transformation are never linear, instead they are always uneven. However, it is this unevenness in the processes of transformation that the diffusionist theory can not explain.

### 4.4 PRIMORDIALIST THEORY

Primordialist theory differs with some of the core assumptions and conclusions of the diffusionist theory. It is pertinent to point out here that the diffusionist theorists argue that owing to contact, trade, warfare etc. inventions and traits created in the advanced centres of culture get diffused to less developed centres whereby substantial uniformity of socio-cultural evolution is made possible. Primordialist theorists deny that this process of uniformity takes place. On the contrary they point out that ethnic boundaries persist despite interchange and intermingling, and cultural differences persist despite interethnic contact and interdependence. They argue that ethnic groups are not groups formed on the basis of a shared culture, rather the formation of groups are on the basis of cultural differences. According to the primordialists, any process of change or transformation is never carried out in an abstract space; on the contrary it happens in a space that is already inscribed by ethnic identities. In fact they go on to argue that ethnicity preludes and underpins all processes of change of a pre-modern identity under the processes of contemporary times.

How are these ethnic boundaries created? What are the internal processes of constitution of an ethnic identity? In this section we are more interested in tackling how the primordialist theoreticians analyse the processes by which pre-modern ethnic identities relate with modern processes and determine the process of change and transformation. Just as Frederick Barth’s contribution was seminal in elaborating the concept of ethnic boundaries and the determination of the processes through which in everyday situation an individual relates with and makes sense of outside world, the contributions of Anthony B. Smith are extremely important in elaborating the processes through which ethnic identities determine the course of transformation in modern times.

In his influential book *Theories of Nationalism*, Anthony D. Smith states:

“It is ...(the) prior socialisation into traditional image and ethnic, and into the whole network of social relations which have been gradually built up around these convictions and prescriptions, that makes the confrontation between the modern ‘scientific state’ and the old cosmic outlook so serious. It is a total dilemma— in the mind and in daily action a difficult and painful choice is continually posed.” (88)

It is this confrontation, as it were, of the two worlds that make it possible to account for not only the continuation but re-emergence of xenophobic ‘non-traditional’ identity even in the ‘modernising’ potential of nationalism.

The primordialist theorists ascribe an extreme potency to tradition and pre-modern ethnicity. Since these theoreticians argue that the members of human groups have an ‘innate’ propensity to distinguish between insiders and outsiders, to delineate social boundaries and to develop stereotypes about ‘the other’, it follows that the theory subscribes to the view that tradition and ethnicity are the causes of the construction and changes in identity. However, this is not always the case. Ernest Gellner has recounted how the identity of the Estonians does not seek any traditional root. Even in our country people belonging to the state of Bihar are identified as
Biharis, yet no such identity existed prior to the 20th century. Primordialist theoreticians fail to take account of these aspects of construction and transformation of identities.

4.5 MODERNIST/CONSTRUCTIONIST THEORY

Modernist/constructionist theoreticians conceptualise formation and transformation of identities in a way that is diametrically opposite to that of the primordialist theoreticians. While primordialist theoreticians ascribe absolute potency to the traditionally available ethnicity, the modernist theoreticians ascribe absolute generative power to the modern processes in the formation and transformation of identities. Thus, we witness that whereas the primordialist theoreticians emphasise upon the etic aspects of identity, the modernist theoreticians emphasise upon the emic aspects of identity. It is to be emphasized that the modernist theoreticians do not necessarily deny that elements and traits of traditional identities may survive processes of change. However, they go on to argue that these traits and elements enter into a absolutely new relationship with other elements under the demands of the present conjuncture whereby the forms and functions of these elements and traits undergo a fundamental change.

How does the present rework identities? There are two significant explanations forwarded by the modernist theoreticians. It had been pointed out that Abner Cohen takes up the political aspects of the reconfiguration of identity while Epstein takes up the emotive aspects of the reconfiguration of identity. However, in spite of these differences both the scholars give primacy to the present in explaining the reconfiguration of identity. Given the significance of these two scholars in study of identities it will be worthwhile to briefly present how they take account of the formation and transformation of identities under the actions of modern processes.

According to Abner Cohen, under specific circumstances, ethnic communities undergo a process that he terms as retrabilisation. Abner Cohen defines retrabilisation as:

“a process by which a group from one ethnic category, whose members are involved in a struggle for power and privilege with the members of a group from another ethnic category, within the framework of a formal political system, manipulate some customs, values, myths, symbols and ceremonials from their cultural tradition in order to articulate an informal political organisation which is used as a weapon in that struggle.” (*The Anthropology of Globalization* 88)

Epstein explains this reconfiguration from the emotive standpoint. He regards the search for, and psychological need for, a sound, secure and more or less bounded social identity as fundamental, and connects this need – under particular historical circumstances – to the formation of ethnic identities. This stable and secure basis is threatened in periods of dramatic and rapid change. This change robs communities of security and the present appears before them as disconnected fragments of life. In such a scenario ethnicity as reconfigured past is an attempt to make whole the disconnected fragments of life made available by the present. Epstein views this emotive aspect of kinship as deriving from a sense of collective history, and from identification between generations.

The biggest drawback of this school is that it is extremely doubtful as to whether the past will make itself available as a completely plastic material amicable to manipulation in any direction. This failure to take account of the specific weight of the past lends a certain artificiality to the theory which reduced formation and transformation of identities to a realm of manipulation and conspiracies.
Dialectical theory views the process of formation and transformation of identity as a necessarily complex process. Furthermore it argues that no identity is homogeneous. It states that every identity far from being homogenous is necessarily complex and internally ruptured. Though the objective to study identities in their complexity seeks to understand them in historically and socially relevant ways, it is not so easy to achieve.

Theoretical studies on identity are dominated by rival claims of primordialism and constructionism. Constructionists argue that all identity, whether that of large entities such as nation or that of a community are adaptations to the process of modernisation. Contrary to this, a rival group of theoreticians emphasises on primordial roots of every identity. Some amongst them, however, emphasise primordial social and cultural roots of identity while others take recourse to genetics and biological determinism. There are a wide variety of theoretical positions and the debate between them is cacophonous. The constructionists reduce the textures of identity to an uninterrupted and homogenous process of functional adjustments to the impact of process of modernity, while the primordialists reduce the textures of identity as nothing but ephemeral elaboration of a primordial root. Thus, even though the rival groups disagree on the causal process of identity formation, the modernists reduce it to the teleology of present and the primordialists reduce it to the teleology of past/origin. Both agree that identities are essentially homogeneous and tend towards stability.

We have already discussed the uneven process of dialectical exchange between the past and the present in the formation and transformation of identity. This dialectical exchange is grounded on the contours of struggles that articulation of local with the transnational process and institutions unleashes. Construction of an identity follows the parameters of resistance or alternative mobilisation required to adequately address the extent of process and agencies of exploitation. The shifting contours and fault lines of struggle and exploitation ensure that formation and transformation of identities never follow linear and predictable processes. Instead the process of formation and transformation of identities is marked by unevenness. Let us take the argument further and demonstrate that this same struggle ensures the identity constituted by it is never homogeneous, on the contrary it is internally ruptured. We will demonstrate this by summarising the findings of a published study on Naga identity.

For a researcher, Naga identity presents two significant quandaries that seek explanation. Quandary number one is that for the peoples being studied it has often been the case that a pan-identity (here Naga) has co-existed with particularistic identities such as the tribal identity of Angami, Konyak, etc. Both these identities have a specific weight and a historical anchorage. Thus, even while a particular tribe acknowledges being a part of the larger pan-identity of Naga, it does not amount to the dissolution of the specific identity of the tribe. Quandary number two is that the relationship between the pan-identity and the particularistic identity is not always that which holds between a building block to an architectural edifice, what to speak of that of a drop of water. On the contrary the relationship amongst the particular identities and between them and the pan-identity are at times fractious whereby they become building blocks to competing and rival discourses. How does one take account of these quandaries?
Relationship between pan-Naga identity and particularistic identities continues to pose a problem. The resolution to this by V. Elwin and G. Kabui leads to the erosion of historical materiality of particular identities. On the other hand, the resolution sought by Dr. Horam compromises the materiality of the pan-Naga identity. By projecting the pan-Naga identity as simply an aggregation of tribes identifying themselves as Naga, he ignores the specific process and basis that sustains pan-Naga identity. Relation between the two forms of identity appears as a Gordian knot to these scholars since their work is based on the disciplines of anthropology and sociology. Consequently they see the two forms of identity as a pre-given anthropological/sociological datum. Then, they seek to unravel the anthropological or sociological principles on which the two identities ought to relate.

Anthropological and sociological reductionism preclude these scholars from observing that one of the fundamental processes that determine the existent (as opposed to the desirable) relationship is derived not from anthropological or sociological logic but from a deeply fractious political process and discourse. This results in a peculiar situation whereby anthropologists and sociologists might be correct in arguing that the relationship between pan-Naga identity and the particularistic tribal and regional identity ought to be governed by anthropological or sociological logic. Yet asymmetrical political structure and fractious political processes that it unleashes may (and in the case of the Nagas it has) result in the inscription of the two forms of identity in contending political discourses.

The fact of existence of related but distinct form of identities viz. the pan-Naga identity and the particularistic tribal and regional identities have made them significant ingredients of two competing political agenda — that of Naga nationalism and Indian nationalism. Elements who perceive themselves as Naga nationalist have since the inception of this ideology made the existent pan-Naga identity as a potent ingredient of their political discourse to achieve hegemony over the political consciousness of the Nagas. Claims of uniqueness, distinctiveness and common roots of the Naga ‘nation’ are the specific traits of this discourse.

The older colonial and current Indian nationalist discourse privileges the particularistic identity. The state’s political initiatives and policy measures have always reflected this privileging of particularistic identity. Particularistic identity is privileged to unravel the claim of political rivals to being the representative voice of the Nagas and/or erode the cohesiveness of the pan-Naga identity. Such inscription of the pan-Naga identity as well as the particularistic tribal and regional identities in political discourses opens up an entirely new angle. Thus, while the pan-Naga identity and the particularistic tribal identity have sociological and anthropological basis, their inscription in political discourse determines the relation between the two.

Thus, dialectical theory gives primacy to the historically determined processes of exploitation and struggle as the main elements in the formation and transformation of identities.

4.7 FOLKLORE: A COUNTER-DISCOURSE

Judicial discourse of the ruling powers are so designed as to support the political establishment. The language of legal structures in a society perpetrates and supports existing power structures. This was especially so during colonial rule in India. This means that the definition of what was illegal or criminal would necessarily be a reflection of colonial policies. Certain communities traditionally living on the fringes
Folk Literature and Language: Research and Pedagogy

of society or living a nomadic lifestyle came to be defined as ‘criminal’ by colonial authorities. The imposition of such titles and the ensuing curtailing of the social rights of certain communities gave rise to a lot of confusion and resentment. This colonial definition of ‘crime’ and ‘criminality’ has been questioned in folklore. An instance of this can be seen in the Chauri Chaura incident which happened during the Indian struggle for Independence. The judicial discourse of colonialism would sell off Chauri Chaura as ‘a series of criminal acts rather than a violent instance of mass peasant politics’ (Baxi 260). Similarly the mass uprising of 1857 was established by the judicial discourse of colonialism as an event of ‘mutiny’ and criminal act/s instead of a ‘movement’. The common folk engaged furtively, covertly, or defiantly in a sort of counter-discourse to this discourse of power as their folk forms celebrated and valorized the so-called ‘criminal acts’.

The peasant’s own perception of ‘criminality’ or ‘violence’ can be the reverse of that held by his enemies and the establishment. The establishment perceives all violation of law or defiance of law as ‘crime’. On the other hand the rebellious peasants can perceive the same acts as gestures of social protest and therefore valorize them as honourable and just acts of protest. This we have seen in the Robin Hood ballads of pre-industrial England which used to enjoy great popularity among poor villagers. The popular local tales about Banjara Singh, who operated around the Chambal ravines, ring with reverence for a man who was merciless to the rich and benevolent to the poor. Sympathy and admiration for the outlaw are visible in similar stories about Goreya Baba. Goreya Baba was originally the chief of a robber gang who came from Delhi to Bihar. Goreya had many encounters with the police and landed gentry. Finally he was killed near Sherpur (district Patna) and a shrine was built there. A mound of earth came to represent Goreya and gradually Goreya worship spread through Bihar. Eventually he became a “popular godling” with the Dushads. After deification there was an interesting image shift. The Dushadhs in Champaran district of Bihar came to worship Goreya “mainly for the exorcism of the malignant spirits who have taken possession of some persons and also by lepers for recovery” (Roychowdhury 42). Thus the affirmation of community identity which may be in opposition to official definitions of the criminality or criminal or outlaw nature of that community can be called ‘Counter-Discourse’.

4.8 HEGEMONY OF THE WRITTEN DISCOURSE

In this section, we will try to understand what written discourse is and the role that it plays in shaping culture in a society. Closely related to the palace-oriented historical discourse is the preponderant role of the written document as the sole authentic source of historical facts. As the written discourse had been the exclusive preserve of the few literate elites even in the not so distant past, it is their worldview and interests that determined the tone of the historical discourse. These literate few, on the other hand, had mostly been under the patronage of either kings or other members of the ruling class. Naturally, they assumed the role of advocates of the ruling class. The voice of the vast majority of marginal, illiterate, powerless masses hardly found any space in the framework of their writing. Instead of being a poly-vocal system, history became a mouthpiece of the ruling elites. History-writing did not only distort the real story of mankind but also became a powerful discourse casting human civilizations and their future in a particular mould. Thus, Handoo contends that history became a monolithic concept and a discourse of subversion with a strong philosophical foundation of its own. Civilizations came to be recognized by this concept of discourse and by this philosophy of monolithism. The discourse of Palace Paradigm became the discourse of civilizations. The strength of a culture and a
civilization began to be judged only in terms of stone structures – palaces, forts, stone bridges, prisons – and discussion of all these in big books. This metaphor was also extended to wars, conquests, bloodshed, colonization and slavery.

In the Indian context, it is difficult to trace the exact time since when written discourse became the sole arbiter of ‘knowledge’ and began to be associated with power. However, according to Handoo, it seems that the pre-eminence of the written discourse and the knowledge, power and a strong patriarchal value system – all ran parallel to the emergence of feudalism in India. (Handoo 2006: 24) The palace being the epicentre of the feudal system, it became the ideal of all social discourses and came to shape the collective consciousness of the people. The privileged section of the society including the educated elites, rich traders, and so on who could not have managed a comfortable lifestyle without coming under the sway of the heavy wings of the palace understandably became advocates of the palace paradigm. Handoo, however, says that it is also possible that this powerful section of society might not have been conscious of the hazards of this paradigm and the discourse it generated because of its strong civilizing effect. The latter made the discourse of Palace Paradigm appear the most normal and obvious thing which was beyond any question. This civilizing effect was all the more effective because of its deliberate integration with religion. (ibid: 25)

The suppressive character of the written discourse in the Indian context, Handoo argues, is most evident in case of Indian literature. He points out that India has a very ancient tradition of written literary works; yet there is no clear evidence that this mighty tradition of literary activity ever, even by mistake, addressed the problems of the common masses of the land. Except the literature emerging out of the Bhakti movement of the medieval period, Indian literature remained imprisoned in the confines of the Palace Paradigm till the beginning of the 20th century. (Handoo 2006: 25)

This discourse, Handoo alleges, did not allow the ordinary, collective and shared discourse to develop in its own terms. In fact, there was pressure on it to either go out of circulation completely or merge with the powerful high discourse by restructuring itself to suit the hegemonic designs of the dominant written discourse. On the other hand, Handoo contends that folklore, more particularly folk literature, in spite of these pressures, seems to have become the centre of the ordinary discourse in India. It continued to represent the collective sharing and concern for ordinary human conditions while the palace-centric written discourse became an instrument of power and exploitation. The latter, in due course, developed such complex linguistic, stylistic and semantic markers that interpretation became inevitable, which in turn developed as a means of exerting power on the marginal people who could not understand, share or benefit from such markers.

4.9 THE SWAY OF THE PALACE PARADIGM

In the previous section we focussed on the role of written texts in shaping culture. In this section, we will highlight the relation between written texts/discourse and palace as the centre of production of culture. It is not that only the written discourse and the historical space come under the sway of the palace paradigm. Most of the social behaviour and cultural expressions of the feudal society in India yielded to the latter. For example, the Indian classical music, dance and drama, cuisine, costume, philosophical discourse, language, religion, and literary folklore which enjoyed a much wider social base were influenced by the discourse of Palace Paradigm to a considerable extent. It was only natural, Handoo argues, that the civilizing power
of oral discourse such as fairy tales and animal tales which have significant influence on the people, especially the children, in shaping their social attitude and behaviour, was recognized and were therefore assimilated into the so-called ‘high art’ conforming to the ideology of the ruling elites and then frozen into an ideology of subversion. (Handoo 2006: 26)

Handoo argues that the literary fairy tales, like many other genres, was essentially designed for children both to divert as amusement and instruct ideologically as a means to mould the inner nature of young people. In fact, here amusement has to be seen as a direct creation of ideology. With the same end, literary animal tale was also redesigned and was used for generating religious discourse, ethics and politics of the palace paradigm. Handoo illustrates his contention with examples drawn from the tales of the Jataka and the Panchatantra. In these tales, the world of animals is consciously modeled on human society. An imaginary world peopled with animal actors is constructed. This imaginary world of the animal tale is differentiated from the real world by a simple device of inverting the characteristics of its animal inhabitants in relation to their real-world counterparts. In the process, the “large animals such as the elephant, apparently powerful and wise, are portrayed as weak and foolish while small creatures that seem of little account are bestowed in these tales with wisdom and courage. It becomes possible, by reversing the play of metaphor, to imagine a differently constructed human society.” (Handoo 2006: 27)

Handoo points out that such literary animal tales were used for training children and young princes in the art of kingship and diplomacy in the palaces of India. The Buddhists and the Jains also used this genre of folktale for religious discourses. He contends that “through the medium of inversion…children and adults are taught to recognize certain basic truths of life and existence. And in this way perhaps the impossible was made possible, at least temporarily.” (Handoo 2006: 27)

Handoo states that the above-mentioned metaphor is present everywhere. Even in the modern world, the symbolism of the animal tale is very popular among children and has been extended to suit new situations. He cites examples of the heroes of modern popular culture such as Donald Duck and Spiderman who appear to be the extensions of traditional symbolism. (ibid: 27)

This affair of role play and symbolic inversion is witnessed in other genres too. Handoo examines this in the case of Holi, a folk festival, celebrated widely in various parts of India, especially in north India. A festival of colours, Holi coincides with the harvest time. The festival is celebrated with dance, music, feast, fasting, and other festivities. The structure and performance of this festival suggests that just like the animal tale, Holi makes an attempt at symbolic inversion of the rigid barriers of social structure, kinship roles, and powers of hierarchy, howsoever temporary. Colour as a marker of race, community, gender, status, etc often provides symbolic social sanction to the maintenance of different social hierarchies and kinship roles. Yet it is with the same colour that these hierarchies and roles are reversed symbolically. In Holi, everybody irrespective of age, caste, economic status, and gender are free to hug and apply colour on each other’s face as a way of greetings. This is simply not possible in regular, normal times. As coloured faces blur identity of the people, forbidden behaviours occur freely and a collective catharsis is reached in the form of doing funny things. Similarly, obscene and vulgar language becomes the normal language of discourse during the festival. Handoo contends that both the above-mentioned genres of folklore, the animal tale and Holi and similar festivals, are using the discourse of reverse role play in a symbolic attempt to overcome the anxieties created by the hegemony of the palace paradigm.
One may point out here that similar role reversal is experienced in the carnivals of the western societies. The entire feudal order is turned upside down in the carnivals. Eminent Russian scholar Mikhail Bakhtin develops his concept of ‘carnivalesque’ from the carnivals. In the carnivals, the existing social hierarchies, the customs and etiquettes associated with these hierarchies, the taken-for-granted truths – all are profaned and overturned by the suppressed voices of day-to-day life. In the process, fools become wise, kings become beggars, and so on. Besides, there occurs a wholesale intermingling of opposites like fact and fantasy, heaven and hell, and so on. Bakhtin coined the term ‘carnivalesque’ to refer to that literary mode which subverts the ideologies and the institutions of the dominant order through shocking wit and absurdity. [Bakhtin 1929(1984); 1965(1984)]

4.10 THE PALACE PARADIGM AND THE EPIC DISCOURSE

We will now focus on the Indian epics in our attempt to understand what Palace Paradigm is. It has been recognized that both ballads and epics as strong genres develop mainly among politically marginal people. However, Handoo holds that the Indian literary epic, just like the fairy tale, was assimilated into the discourse of the Palace Paradigm and used as a civilizing instrument for the royals and the elites besides glorifying the kings and their kingships. An epic always has a long and powerful narrative recited with music. It also is studded with elements from myth, history and religion. With all these attributes an epic becomes a fine source of amusement irrespective of time and space. Handoo says, “(M)ore than any other literary genre, epics present the story of the kings without any symbolic disguise. The question is not that these epics offer the historical discourse of the feudal society and … the past of humankind; the real issue is that these epic metaphors have penetrated into the subconscious structures of the Indian society … in such a forceful manner that these have, it would seem, the same medieval effect in modern times.” (2006: 29)

For example, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, the famous Indian epics, recount the stories of the Kshatriyas, the traditional warriors and royal caste. Yet even folk epics which abound throughout regions and communities having nothing to do with either the Kshatriyas or kingship, were highly influenced by the famous pan-Indian epic structures. Thus, “these great stories of bloodshed, palace feuds, wars and conquests, abduction of women, concubines, treasure hunts and sibling rivalries seem to have set standards and ideals of a feudal society that resulted in setting role models for men and women that are thriving even now and directing the behaviour of the Indian society.” To illustrate this, Handoo points out the fact that “most of the literary epics are raised on male bias. Epic poets are men singing the glory of other men, armed men, to be precise. …(O)ut of the thirty eight basic themes upon which most epic narratives of the world are based, only nine are associated with women. The ideals of the epic world obviously do not have much to share with women, nor do the women enjoy the heroic values. There is little they can do there other than getting abducted or rescued, or pawned, or molested, or humiliated in some way or the other.” (2006: 29)

Handoo further points out the fact that the practice of burning alive of the widows (sati) of the dead warriors is basically a palace practice, perhaps the outcome of a historical need of the royalty and the feudal elites which was glorified in the epic discourse so much so that it became a civilizing force for the womenfolk of the Indian society. According to Handoo, the Indian women have a special relationship
with fire throughout their lives as housekeeper, food maker and food-provider. Besides fire also acts as an instrument of survival, power and purification and also of ultimate self-destruction (agni pariksha, sati, and dowry death = bride burning) for them even today seems to reinforce the relationship of this epic metaphor with the Palace Paradigm and its relevance in modern Indian society.

Further, Handoo claims that the models of violence in the Indian, particularly male, collective subconscious are rooted in epic metaphors. All epics, mentioned earlier are epitomes of the palace discourse, are constructed around themes of violence and war. In this regard, Handoo contests the thesis that Indo-Aryan epics such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata or the Iliad are raised on violence while many non-Aryan epics such as the Cilappatikaram (a South Indian epic) is highly representative of non-violence. On the contrary, he argues that if the Indo-Aryan epics are “full of war, bloodshed, sibling rivalry, abduction of women, disputes over land and property, etc, and that such things establish these epics as epics of violence, then the Cilappatikaram too is full of extramarital relations, prostitution, theft, disputes, murder, death, suicides, fire and destruction. This non-Aryan epic also by and large seems to share the basic characteristics of the Indo-European epic repertoire…The point here is to define violence in the context of an epic and also realize its relationship with the culture and its paradigms that created the epic in the first place. Murder/death in war and murder/death in the palace are definition violent acts and share the semantics of violence equally.” (Handoo 2006: 30).

Handoo makes an interesting observation while he states that unlike in other cultures such as Christianity or Islam, most of the hero-gods in the Indian epics are essentially rooted in royalty or feudal order…These hero-gods, more often than not, indulge purposefully in defining or redefining the philosophical dimensions of kingship, sometimes ideal kingship and the discourse of religion that they practice through the epic metaphors. Handoo points out that the impact of these epic metaphors and the palace discourse extend to the political ideology of modern India, too. Thus, padayatra, Ramrajya, and other loaded epic metaphors that fill the political vocabulary of modern India’s social and political ideology explain the historical connections between the epics and the contemporary political discourse.

Even a cursory observation of some more such terms would illustrate this. The terminologies such as rajkiya (literally means royal, but is used to mean official matters at present), raj marg (lit. royal street, but is used to mean high ways in the present parlance), raj bhavan (lit. royal abode, now used for the residence of state governors) conspicuously testify to the existing sway of the palace paradigm. Handoo mentions an interesting point when he states how a god, a king, and a Kshatriya is implied by the same term thakur (literally, it means both god and the kshatriya caste) in Hindi. Here, god seems to be realized through the metaphor of maharaj (literally a king of kings) or thakur and vice-versa. Expressions such as ‘kripa karo maharaj’ (have mercy, o’ king of kings/god) and ‘thakur ke gun gaun’ (praising the god/a king/ a landlord) are used interchangeably to pay tribute to both god and kings and powerful landlords. (Handoo 2006: 34)

4.11 THE CRITIQUE OF THE CONCEPT

In the previous sections, we have introduced you to the concept of Palace Paradigm and the various perspectives that see culture as centred on the significance of palace, i.e. elites, in society. In this section, we shall highlight some of the major critiques or drawbacks of the concept of palace paradigm. There is no doubt that the ‘palace paradigm’ approach delineates a number of interesting facts about the nature of our cultural artifacts and the ideologies inherent therein. However, many of the concerns
raised by it have been addressed by other interpretations of Indian culture too. It is true that the kings and powerful feudal lords set the standards of socio-cultural behaviour of the Indian masses. Yet there are many customs and cultural artifacts which cannot be said to have emerged from the discourse surrounding the palace. The tribal art forms of the northeast that Handoo mentions, for example, did not have a palace origin. Similarly, there are many folk forms (which range from folktales and folksongs, etc. to riddles and witchcraft) which often demonstrated anti-palace orientation.

Not only that, anti-palace ideology has been evident in many written literature as well. It is a different matter that many such written documents questioning the dominant discourse have been destroyed by the ruling classes. Thus, it is clear that the palace was not the only centre for cultural production and dissemination.

Further, ‘palace paradigm’ speaks only of the manifestations of a feudal order which is projected as a rather static, monolithic concept. It does not delve into the dynamics of the feudal socio-economic structure and the conflicts within it, a study of which perhaps would have provided better understanding of its influence on the cultural domain of the Indian society.

The claims of the approach often appear overarching. The approach offers a partial explanation of the process of cultural production and their dissemination in India.

### 4.12 SANSKRITIZATION

#### 4.12.1 Brahminization vs. Sanskritization

We have discussed what Palace Paradigm is and what are the strengths and weaknesses of the concept. Now let discuss what Sanskritization is. Sanskritization is found to be identified with imitation of the Brahminical customs and manners by the lower castes. Srinivas presumed the Brahmins to be the sole model of emulation for the sanskritizing groups. However, he abandoned the term for ‘Sanskritization’ on account of a number of reasons and defined Sanskritization as a process that refers to “the process by which a ‘low’ Hindu caste, or tribal or other group, changes its customs, ritual, ideology, and way of life in the direction of a high, and frequently, ‘twice-born’ caste. Generally such changes are followed by a claim to a higher position in the caste hierarchy than that traditionally conceded to the claimant caste by the local community.” (Srinivas 1966/77: 6)

The reasons which persuaded Srinivas to redefine the above process of caste mobility may be briefly discussed as below:

Firstly, Srinivas found that “Brahminization is subsumed under the wider process of Sanskritization.” (1962/1989: 42) However, he also points out that the two may be at variance with each other at times. For example, though Sanskritization necessitates renunciation of certain habits and customs on the part of the sanskritizing groups such as drinking liquor, eating beef and pork, etc, the Brahmins in the Vedic period drank *soma*, an alcoholic drink, ate beef, and offered blood sacrifices which were given up in post-Vedic times. Though the Brahmins today, by and large, are vegetarians, there are non-vegetarian Brahmins too. The Assamese, Bengali, Kashmiri, Maithili, Odia and Saraswat Brahmins eat non-vegetarian food. The Brahmins are characterized by many other regional variations suggesting that they cannot be treated as a homogeneous group with respect to their habits and customs. Therefore, if the term Brahminization was used it would have been necessary to specify which particular Brahmin group was meant. Moreover, as the Brahmins are
also undergoing various changes over time in the cultural domain it would have been further necessary to specify at which particular period of its history a particular Brahmin group is referred to as a model for Sanskritization.

Secondly, the agents of Sanskritization are not always the Brahmans. In fact, there was prohibition on the non-twice-born castes from following the customs and rites of the Brahmans, and it is not unreasonable to suppose that the Brahmans were responsible for this. On the other hand, there were non-Brahman agents of Sanskritization. The Lingayats of South India, for example, have been a powerful force for Sanskritization of several low castes of Karnataka. Though founded by a Brahmin named Basava in the 12th century, the Lingayat movement was anti-Brahminical in tone and spirit drawing a large number of followers from the lower castes. In fact, the Lingayats of Mysore claim equality with Brahmans, and the more orthodox of them do not accept food cooked or handled by Brahmans. (Srinivas 1962/89: 43)

There are many such examples. What comes out clearly from the above is that Sanskritization as a process of social mobility cannot be explained only with the help of the Brahminical model. There can be other models (Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra) as well depending on the context. In fact, Srinivas also highlights the fact that the Brahmin claim to supremacy was contested by the Kshatriyas on various occasions. (1966/77: 23-4)

Srinivas also cites anthropologists D. F. Pocock and Milton Singer to justify his contention. Pocock pointed out to the existence of a Kshatriya model of Sanskritization. Singer states that there exist not one or two models of Sanskritization but three if not four. (Srinivas 1966/77: 8). Srinivas quotes Singer:

“The local version (of Sanskritik Hinduism) may use the four varna labels—Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra—but the defining content of these labels varies with locality and needs to be empirically determined for any particular locality. It has also been discovered that the relative prestige and rank of these different varnas tend to vary with locality, time and group. In many areas, e.g., the kingly or martial, life-style has a rank equal with or sometimes higher than that of the Brahmin. Groups in these areas who wish to improve their status do so by adopting some of the stigmata of the Rajput life-style, i.e., by “Rajputizing” their way of life (Sinha). Even the life-styles of the merchant and peasant have been taken as models in localities where these groups are dominant.” (Srinivas: Ibid)

Yogendra Singh theorizes this situation when he states that there are two levels of meanings which are implicit in the concept of Sanskritization. These two levels may be described as ‘historical specific’ and ‘contextual specific’ connotations of Sanskritization. He says, “(I)n historical specific sense, Sanskritization refers to those processes in Indian history which led to changes in the status of various castes, its leadership or its cultural patterns in different periods of history. It is indicative of an endogenous source of social change in the broad historical spectrum of India. In contextual specific sense, however, Sanskritization denotes contemporaneous processes of cultural imitation of upper castes by lower castes or subcastes, in different parts of India. The nature of Sanskritization of this type is by no means uniform as the content of cultural norms or customs being imitated may vary from Sanskritic or Hindu traditional forms to the tribal and even Islamic patterns.” (1996: 6-7)

The contextual process of Sanskritization is illustrated by various studies undertaken in different contexts throughout India. These studies show that at many places the
lower castes imitate the customs of other non-Brahmin castes as mentioned above. In some exceptional cases, even the higher castes have been found imitating the tribal ways which may be described as the process of ‘tribalization’. In some other contexts, even Muslim cultural model is found to be emulated by both the upper as well as lower castes.

4.12.2 Sanskritization and Westernization

In this section, we will focus on the comparison between Sanskritization and Westernization. Like Sanskritization, Westernization is another concept propounded by Srinivas. Westernization refers to changes brought about as a consequence of the contact with western culture, particularly the British. Though there have been other western groups such as the Portuguese, the Dutch, and the French to India and have influenced Indian society and culture, none had the same scale of influence as the British, precisely because of the fact that the latter had ruled almost all over India for a period of two hundred years. Their rule produced radical and lasting changes in Indian society and culture. They brought with them new technology, institutions, knowledge, beliefs, and values which often went against the traditional Indian institutions, values and practices. For example, the British judicial system based on the principle of equality went directly against the traditional system of law based on status and hierarchy.

Thus, apparently the process of Westernization appears to be diametrically opposite to that of Sanskritization. However, a closer look gives a totally different picture. As Srinivas says, “(T)he spread of Sanskrit theological ideas increased under British rule. The development of communications carried Sanskritization to areas previously inaccessible, and the spread of literacy carried it to groups very low in the caste hierarchy. Western technology – railways, the internal combustion engine, press, radio, and plane – have aided the spread of Sanskritization.” (1962/89: 48-9) He cites the example of the tradition of harikatha (a religious discourse where a priest reads and explains a religious story to his audience. (Harikathas may be held at any time, but important Hindu festivals are considered especially suitable for the purpose). The reach of the harikathas have spread much wider with the introduction of microphone for the narrator. Indian films have been also playing a very crucial role in the popularization of the stories from the epics and the puranas. In the more modern context, the television has played an extraordinary role in the spread of the Sanskritic stories to the nook and corner of the country.

Besides, it is seen that the castes which took the lead in undergoing Westernization were mostly from the upper echelons, particularly the Brahmins, of the traditional hierarchy. Even a cursory observation at the composition of the Indian officers, social reformers, educationists, lawyers, army men, traders, etc. right from the early colonial period, testify to the fact as to how the upper castes, that is, the more Sanskritized castes, were frontrunners in seizing the opportunities offered by the colonial administration. It is also true, however, that in certain cases it appeared that the Brahmins were handicapped by some customs in the race for Westernization. For example, the Brahminic customs such as vegetarianism and teetotalism were in sharp contradiction with the English habits of eating beef and pork, drinking whisky and so on. Nevertheless, that the Brahmins were the most westernized caste group in India is beyond doubt and they have been able to perpetuate their traditional hegemony.

Thus, Srinivas contends, “the assumption of a simple and direct opposition between the two (Sanskritization and Westernization) and of the ultimate triumph of
Westernization, I find too simple a hypothesis...considering the great complexity of the processes involved.” (1962/89: 61) While in some cases, they were in conflict with each other, in others they complemented each other.

However, as to whether Sanskritization of a lower caste or tribe is an essential preliminary to Westernization, Srinivas says that though he finds empirical evidence of this being true, he is quick to add that such empirical evidence is limited to some non-Brahmin castes of Mysore and does not refer to any logical necessity for Sanskritization occurring prior to Westernization.

It is possible that Westernization may occur without the intermediate process of Sanskritization. (1962/89: 60) Indeed, rapid industrialization has made it possible a process which has been conspicuous in the post-independence period. Social movements among the backward castes have been anti-Brahmin in their overtones right from the very beginning. After independence, the constitutional provisions along with various affirmative actions initiated by the government in various spheres (social, economic and political) have also created conditions and opportunities for the lower castes and tribes to bypass the process of Sanskritization.

4.13 CRITICAL ASSESSMENT

Let us now critically examine the concept of Sanskritization. Sanskritization has been a very dominant perspective in explaining social changes in the Indian society. However, the changes that it addresses are confined to the domain of culture to the exclusion of other much more significant political and economic processes. Sanskritization offers only a partial explanation to the social changes in Indian society. However, Srinivas himself is apt to point this out when he states, “(T)o describe the social changes occurring in modern India in terms of Sanskritization and Westernization is to describe it primarily in cultural and not structural terms.” (1962/89: 55)

Besides, Sanskritization is concerned mainly with social mobility within the Hindu society while the Indian society is a heterogeneous complex of many sects and religions. The emergence of some of these sects and religions were directly related to the objective of freedom from the oppression of the traditional caste system. In recent times, the social movements among the backward castes and tribes have sought social mobility, as mentioned above, outside the framework of the caste society. They are no longer keen to go through the process of Sanskritization. Even if they come under the influence of it, it is not acknowledged by them and they do not look for the recognition from others for higher status. In fact, the recent times have witnessed a strong tendency among many castes to demand lower caste status to get the benefits of the policy of affirmative action (popularly known as ‘reservation’) reserved for the lower castes and tribes in the spheres of education, employment and electoral politics. With this same end, some castes which previously enjoyed relatively higher status in the caste hierarchy are now demanding tribal status. In such a situation, there is hardly any case for the tribal groups to change their existing status to caste.

It is clear that the significance of a higher ritual status that Sanskritization facilitated in the erstwhile feudal society does not seem to hold good in the politico-economic order of post-independence India. The symbolic status which caste mobility promised in the feudal society has lost much of its meaning today as the new Indian constitution facilitates social mobility among the backward groups by their educational,
economic, and political empowerment through access to various opportunities and resources of the state.

Further, it is true that Sanskritization has resulted in changes in the status of castes but it has not led to changes of the caste system. That is, whatever change in mobility of a caste has occurred, it has occurred within the framework of the caste system. Sanskritization has not led to any change in the system. As Srinivas himself says, “the mobility characteristic of caste in the traditional period resulted only in positional changes for particular castes or sections of castes, and did not lead to a structural change. That is while individual castes moved up or down, the structure remained the same.”(Srinivas 89)

Nevertheless, the concept of Sanskritization has been very influential in the explanation of social change in India. Despite various limitations it has provided a lot of insight into the complexities of the traditional Indian society and as against the widely prevalent stereotypical view of the Indian caste system being a static system offered a fresh perspective by highlighting the dynamism within it.

4.14 LET US SUM UP

In this unit, we have discussed some of the major theories that try to explain why identities change over time or across space. We have discussed the evolutionist model which argues that the change in identity can generally be seen in terms of progress from early to developed stages of civilization. Then we discussed the diffusionist model that argue change as a result of contact between ‘higher’ and ‘lower’ cultures resulting in the latter assuming traits of the former. In our discussion of the primordialist theory, we showed how the theory considers change to be based on inherent and intrinsic traits that any community is constituted with. The discussion on modernist/constructionist theory tried to explain how the theory emphasises the role of the present factors, mostly political, rather than any factor from the past as crucial to understand why change of identity takes place. In the last theory that we took up for discussion, the dialectical theory, we discussed how the theory emphasises the role of both the past and the present and its specific interactions in given historical circumstances as the way to understand why identities change and why and how new identities come into existence.

From the early studies of folklore which were focused upon tracing the archaic customs of a society to later studies involving nationalistic aims and goals of reinforcing ethnic identities, the study of folklore has a varied spectrum of approaches. In recent decades, attention has moved to understanding the meanings behind the narration or performance of folklore. These meanings may be different from apparent meanings and there may be deeper subversive elements in them. This whole process of understanding performances and narration according to various theoretical contexts is an element of viewing folklore as discourse. Discourse involves grounds on which social relations between individuals can be negotiated. This means that all forms of communication and social behaviours can be seen as a discourse. The discourses operative in folklore can be seen sometimes, though not always, as counter-discourse to a prevalent mainstream discourse. These are products of the entire community and not of an individual. Folklore contains countless micro-narratives in contrast to the grand/macro-narratives of history, and can open doors into new horizons in discourse studies.

Folklore offers narratives about past, present and about the land and people. These are micro-narratives reflecting different discourses. The discourses of insurgency
as recorded in oral or folk memory, contain forms such as tales, rumours, folksongs, etc. which give images of the enemy and information on events in history. Discourse is complemented by counter-discourse. In any society, law and legality support existing power structures. Definitions of crime and criminality may marginalize entire communities or individuals living at the fringes. In this context the figure of the outlaw can sometimes acquire a heroic status and though he may be an outlaw in legal terms, he may be a hero of the people, remembered in tales and cults. Crimes generated by poverty and social inequalities can also be read as acts of rebellion. This sort of perception and its expression can be called a counter-discourse.

The discourse of prominent religious establishments in any society is contested by the counter-discourses of folk-cults. This can be seen in the instances of the Bauls and the Satnampanth to name a few. The opposition of these two cults to organized religion and caste definitions and their support of the individual seeker form the core of their counter-discourse. Close to this is the idea of counter-belief. This term refers to beliefs held by communities in their daily lives which may be at odds with religious values that are officially embraced by that society. Belief in ghosts, spirits, faith-healers, etc. are elements of counter-belief. Viewing folklore as discourse is a process involving varied opinions and theoretical frameworks. This offers interesting points of analyses for folk narratives and performances with a view to understanding how communities affirm themselves in various contexts. As discourse involves the study of all forms of communication and social behavior, folklore as discourse encompasses a large number of approaches.

Thus in this unit, we are throughly acquainted with different theories and discourses vis-a-vis the study of folklore and culture.

### 4.15 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


4.16 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

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5) What are the main tenets of dialectical theory of identity and its transformation?
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6) How, according to J. Handoo, written discourse in India has historically been hegemonic?
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7) What is the role of Palace Paradigm in Indian culture formation?
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8) What is the main critique of the concept of palace paradigm?
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9) Do you find any difference between Sanskritization and Westernization?
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