UNIT 2 THEMATIC AND NARRATIVE CONCERNS OF INDIAN FOLK LITERATURE

Structure
2.0 Objectives
2.1 Introduction
2.2 Thematic Concern in Folk Literature
2.3 Narrative Concern in Folk Literature
2.4 Let Us Sum Up
2.5 References and Further Readings
2.6 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

2.0 OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit on Indian folk literature, you will be able to

- get an idea of what is folk literature;
- know the significant texts of Indian folk literature;
- understand the thematic concerns in folk literature; and
- appreciate the narrative concerns in folk literature.

2.1 INTRODUCTION

Folk literature forms a vast corpus of legends, stories, fables, fairy-tales, religious tales and mythological tales present in oral as well as written practice of a culture, language and people. In fact folk literature has been considered synonymous with oral literature. Jawaharlal Handoo defines oral literature while synonymising it with folk literature: “Oral literature called verbal art or expressive literatures are spoken, sung, and voiced forms of traditional utterances. Traditionally this has been known as folk literature as well”. (Web)

Folk literature represents limitless literary pursuits that keep evolving, progressing, adapting and reorienting along with the dynamism of time and need of the people who create, possess and further folklore generation after generation. Folk literature is characterised by the people it belongs to. Therefore it will not be wrong to call it people’s literature. Folk literature emerges out of people’s desires, aspirations, creativity and aesthetic impulse and it is closely related to people’s lives and experiences, efforts to resolve the conflicts, struggles to better the life, emotional and intellectual journeys, reason and rationality, issues of existence and conservation as well as preservation of nature. Complexity wrapped in simplicity and innocence rooted in the integrity to uphold humanity is the hallmark of the wide range of human experiences and the narrative that folk literature comprises. Permeability in the cultural boundaries acts as a replenishing process for the folk literature since borrowing and sharing are healthily required and practised in the world of folklore.

In India folk literature has been progressive, revolutionary and rich in terms of themes, narratives and issues like most of the folk literatures of the world. In fact
Indian texts are inspiration to the folk literatures all over the world. According to Handoo,

No country in the Eastern civilization offers the students of folkloristics an excellent opportunity to trace the links of unity amidst clustered diversity as does India... India, as is well known, occupies a special place in the history of world folklore. The marvellous Indic tale has contributed in shaping the theoretical growth of folkloristics itself. For instance, Max Muller’s works on Indian myths and Theodore Benfey’s translation of the famous *Panchatantra* gave rise to the theory of Indian origin of the fairy tale... the richness and variety of Indian folktales has the potential of inspiring such theories. This also reminds us of the importance of oral traditions that still flourish on this sub-continent. (Web)

India has a unique culture of the oldest written tradition which interestingly has been a source to oral tradition and folklore. Following texts are not only the compendia of mythological, religious, spiritual wisdom in written form but also the resource texts to the folklore comprising folk literature, oral tradition and folk performance:

- *Ramayana*
- *Mahabharata*
- *Puranas*
- *Upanishads*
- *Panchatantra*
- Narayana Pandit’s *Hitopadesa*
- Gunadhya’s *Brihatkatha*
- Somadeva’s *Kathasaritsagara*
- *Dasveta Panchavimsatika*
- *Sukasaptati*
- *Jataka Tales*

These texts have originated over the last few millennia. Most of these are originally written in Sanskrit but the influence, inspiration and adaptations of these texts are present in all the languages of the Indian subcontinent and beyond.

### 2.2 THEMATIC CONCERN IN FOLK LITERATURE

Folk literature displays a close proximity with the socio-cultural undercurrents and ebb and flow of life like any other literature. This is a generalised feature of all literatures but for folk literature this is an exclusive requirement. The world of folk literature has never been based on publication business with its multi-layered processes of making a successful text; rather it has always sustained on its capability to provide people with a medium of expression which smoothly tells their story and enriches itself with every fresh narration. The instinct to listen to a story and tell a story is not exclusively a child’s trait. This instinct characterizes the nature of all humans irrespective of age. Therefore when it comes to people’s literature i.e. folk literature, then the story-telling becomes the central tenet. The creative manifestations of this universal instinct in the form of folk literature are celebrated all over India through stories and legends told, adapted, improvised and innovated with an amalgam
of real incidents, personal experiences, cultural appropriations, historical and contemporary relevance. As Raja Rao says in his Foreword to *Kanthapura*:

There is no village in India, however mean, that has not a rich sthala-purana, or legendary history, of its own. Some god or godlike hero has passed by the village – Rama might have rested under this peepal-tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow-stone, or the Mahatma himself, or one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, the low one, by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with the present, and the gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals of my village I have tried to tell. (5)

The stories in the aforementioned classical Indian texts have been told and retold innumerable times. A folk text grows on being ‘told’ even if the original story comes from a book. For generation after generation the stories and tales are passed on by word of mouth as part of the oral tradition. Oral tradition and folk literature go hand in hand and it is difficult to imagine the existence of one without the other. Each retelling adds new dimensions to the text. Often similar stories or instances are found being told in different culture-specific narratives in different parts of India. For example some stories of Birbal, Tenali Raman, Mullah Nasruddin often have similar basic structures but are narrated with the rootedness in the milieu of the listeners. The three legendary figures are popular among the masses for the wit and humour with which they would handle the most complex situations and problems. Not only this, their wit and humour provided an amiable orientation to their preaching and teaching which these characters are often portrayed to be involved in for the sake of truth and justice. Many of their stories are replete with episodes on beggar, donkey, thief and priest. Thus, the stories that are attributed to them are often structured around this system of resolving issues and one finds similar situations with relevant cultural differences. This kind of similarity is not a weakness, rather it is a virtue in folk literature since in order to attain the closest connect with the listeners, folk literature often turns to most popular materials on life present in the popular discourse. The telling makes it unique and fresh. The retelling of every folk text leads to creation of a new text. This feature also qualifies the themes and narratives of folk literature. The themes are part of the practice of folk literature which is structured to balance the telling and aesthetics with fine narrative features and idiomatic language.

The themes in the folk literature are inspired by universal truths, lessons, and values related to people’s lives and actions. Often folk tales are oriented in advocating reason and rationality over superstitions and blind-faith. It is significant to note that notwithstanding the lack of formalised system of theoretical and modernised literary paradigms, folk literature gets shaped out with a liberal worldview. On an apparent level, the texts may appear to be handling the dated stuff like not having children, kings without heirs, superstitions related to various socio-cultural issues but on the whole the folk literary spirits uphold the positive and liberal shades of humanity. For example one of the medieval Jain tales, ‘Prince Charming’, questions the importance of physical beauty over the inner or spiritual self. This story brings into light the futility of the corporeal exquisiteness and accentuates the ethereal self. The story goes thus:

There was a prince who was besotted with his own beauty. If any traveller came to the palace he would ask him: “Have you ever seen anyone as handsome as me?” No one ever had. One day an obsequious traveller said to him: “I don’t think there
could be anyone in the whole world as good-looking as you. I don’t think even a god could be as handsome.”

This made the prince very happy and he went around telling everyone that he was more handsome than any god. One day he had two visitors who identified themselves as gods.

“We have come to see if you are as handsome as you claim,” they explained.

“Aren’t I?” he asked.

“We visited you earlier in the day when you were asleep,” said one of the gods.

“You were more handsome then.”

“How could my looks decline within a few hours?” said the prince. He turned to his servants.

“Did I look better in the morning?” he enquired.

“You looked the same,” said his servants.

“We are gods,” said one of the visitors. “We can see what your servants cannot. Their vision is imperfect and we’ll prove it to you. Bring a bowl of water.”

A bowl of water was brought. The god asked the servants to study it closely and then leave the room. When they were gone, he removed half a spoonful of water from the bowl. Then the servants were called back in.

“Is there any change in the bowl of water?” asked the god.

“None,” said the servants. “They cannot see that the water has diminished,” said the god, “just as they cannot see that your beauty has deteriorated.”

The prince was shaken. He thought: “My beauty is diminishing by the day. It is short-lived. Why am I besotted by something so fleeting? I should concern myself with that which is eternal.”

He never again looked into a mirror and in course of time renounced his throne and became a monk. (Web)

2.3 NARRATIVE CONCERN OF FOLK LITERATURE

Personification is a popular feature in folk literature. In keeping with the spirits of pagan traditions and various nature-related myths and legends, folk literature maintains a general worldview of “vasudhaivkutumbkam”: a Sanskrit phrase which means whole world is a family. The world as a family includes animals and plants too as members. Therefore in folk literature the protagonists and characters are equally represented and portrayed through human beings, animals and plants. This sharing of the life’s and world’s concerns within one big family affirms an inherent truism that the world is incomplete without the existence of all kinds of living beings and thus it strengthens cause of preservation and conservation of the nature. The story “The Mighty”, a short yet comprehensive story about a huge tree and a willow provides us with an inlight into how these inanimate objects are given human attributes. These objects are made into characters that stand with two distinct opinions:

At the edge of a forest, stood a big tree. Its branches spread out majestically and so did its roots. It shielded people from the sun under its shady leaves, and provided
shelter to countless birds and other small creatures in its branches. It buzzed with activity all the time. At the foot of the tree grew a little plant. The plant was willowy and delicate, and tended to keel over at the touch of the slightest breeze. One day, the two neighbours were having a little chat.

“Well, little one,” said the tree to the plant, “Why do you not plant your feet deeply in the ground, and raise your head boldly in the air as I do?”

“I see no need to do so,” whispered the plant with a smile. “Actually, I think I may be safer this way.”

“Safer!” sneered the tree. “Are you suggesting that you’re safer than I am? Do you know how deep my roots are buried, how thick and strong my trunk is? Even if two men hold hands they would not be able to surround my trunk. Who could possibly pluck me by the roots or bow my head to the ground?”

And the tree turned away from the plant in a great huff. But the tree was to regret its words very soon. One evening a great hurricane arose in the region. It hurled the trees off their roots and almost completely destroyed the forest. It uprooted the neem tree and hurled it away with great force. When the storm had passed, the villagers living nearby surveyed the damage. Mighty trees that had once almost touched the sky, were now reduced to stumps or worse. The forest was littered with their carcasses. But there was one exception. The little plant. The plant had been tossed and turned under the fury of the hurricane, and bent completely. But when the hurricane ended, it sighed and stood upright again. No trace remained of its mighty neighbour though. (Web)

Irony makes folk literature interesting because it provides unexpected, surprising and amusing contradictions. Irony is mostly manifested in the wit and humour of the characters who turn the situation in their favour to attain justice and uphold moral values. The narratives also gain strength through irony since the telling of folk tales and stories gets facilitated to build up to an unexpected conclusion which keeps the listeners attentive and alert with their wits. Stories of Mullah Nasruddin are known for wit and irony. The story which might appear simple ends on a baffling note. One such story is “The Crowded Home”:

One day, Mulla Nasruddin was talking to his neighbour. The neighbour was looking so miserable that Nasruddin asked him what was bothering him. The man started to complain about the lack of space in his house and said, “It is such a small house, Mulla. And me, my wife, my three children and my mother-in-law, all have to live together in the same little cottage. It is very cramped and there is hardly any space to move around.” He asked Nasruddin for some advice on how to deal with this problem.


The man was really very troubled and wanted to find a solution to his problem. He decided to give the Mulla’s advice a try. So the man went home and brought all the chickens into the house. Next day, he went to meet Nasruddin again. He said, “Mulla, I followed your advice and took the chickens into the house. But it did not solve anything. In fact, it has made matters worse. My house is even more cramped now.
“I see,” said Nasruddin. “Now take your donkey and keep it inside your house. The man did not think much of this idea but Nasruddin managed to convince him to do it.

The next day, the man came to Nasruddin, looking very distressed, and said, “Now, it’s six humans, ten chickens and a donkey inside my house. It is so crowded that one can hardly move.” Nasruddin replied, “You own a goat too, don’t you?” “Yes, I do,” said the man. “Great,” Nasruddin said. “Take it inside the house too.” The man objected, “How is that going to solve anything?” but Nasruddin once again convinced him to do as he had said.

The next day, the man walked up to Nasruddin in a state of anger and distress and said, “Your plan has made our lives miserable. The house is now so crowded that we are finding it difficult to even breathe. My family is upset and everyone is complaining about the lack of space.”

“Don’t get so upset, friend,” said Nasruddin. “Go back home and take all the animals back outside.” The man did as he was told.

Next day, when the man came across Nasruddin, he was beaming. He said, “I must thank you, Mulla! Your plan has worked wonders. Now that all the animals are outside, there is enough space in the house for all the family members. Everyone is happy and content with the house now.” (Web)

Hyperbole is commonly present in folk literature. The stories of human and other animate characters often portray larger than life deeds and events involving the virtuous who outshines all vices. It creates a world of make-beliefs in the situations where realistic portrayals may lead to curtailed imagination. For the young readers and impressionable minds the use of hyperbole creates awe and lasting impression which eventually secures their memory a place for that piece of folklore. The same piece is passed on to next listener through a recollection from the memory which has captured strength of the fantasy generated by the hyperbolic elements in the story. Thus it helps in the sustenance of folk literature. For example the following Tamil folktale ‘Transformation’ depicts how the crows come into existence:

A frog was once so enamoured of the cuckoo’s sweet voice that he begged the bird to teach him to sing.

“My only ambition in life is to be able to sing like you,” croaked the frog, hope bulging in his eyes.

The cuckoo was not immune to flattery and he agreed to take on the frog as his pupil. Day after day, he sat on a bough overhanging the pond and instructed the frog:

“Saa, ree, gaa...,” the cuckoo would trill melodiously.

“Saa, ree, gaa...,” would croak the frog, trying hard to soften his harsh voice.

A week passed and then two. The cuckoo persevered, though all his pupils emitted by way of song was only a series of croaks in different notes. Soon, the cuckoo began hearing his pupil in his dreams. He would wake up shivering and a feeble croak would escape his beak. One day, the cuckoo’s nightmare turned into reality. In the midst of a lesson, his once-lovely voice emerged as a guttural croak. He stopped and as his stunned pupil watched, tried again. All that came out was a ear-splitting “Caaw...caaww...!” Which is how crows came into being. (Web)
Folk literature belongs to people; therefore it gets carved out in the system of people’s languages which are often dialects. Use of cultural terms, local idioms, proverbs and colloquial expressions characterise folk literature. The stories of Akbar and Birbal explicate the use of dialects. These stories, which are known for Birbal’s quick-wit, also provide ample examples of this kind usage. The title of the story “I Am Your Servant, Huzoor” highlights this fact through the usage of the word ‘huzoor’ (a person of high rank or Sir). But this should be noted that the use of English word ‘Sir’ cannot truly define the stature of Akbar, the emperor, in the following story:

Once, Akbar and Birbal happened to pass through some cabbage fields while riding on their horses. Looking at the cabbages, Akbar said to Birbal, “What a delicious vegetable the cabbage is! I like it very much.” Birbal immediately seconded Akbar’s opinion and said, “Huzoor, You have a royal taste in vegetables as well. The cabbage is the king of the vegetables. It ideally befits your status…. ” (Web)

Another example depicts the caste-system, a societal division which is an important aspect of the Indian society. The Rajasthani folktale titled “Witness” brings out the stereotypical traits of a ‘baniya’, an astute businessman, and a strong-headed yet foolish ‘thakur’. The story also foregrounds the uninhibited use of caste-indicative words as the names and titles of the characters, like baniya and thakur. Such harsh truisms should not be interpreted as insensitivity towards the caste and class of the people; rather such narratives capture people’s behaviours and discourse in true light. In real life prejudices attached to people’s class, caste, community, religion and gender are inherent in people’s discourse. These may be innocuous in most of the usages but also lead to stereotypical projection of people’s identity and behaviour leading to unreasonable and irrational beliefs. The following story exemplifies these:

A Thakur borrowed a large sum of money from a Bania and despite repeated reminders failed to repay it. One day, the Bania went to the Thakur’s house when he was entertaining guests and demanded the money. The Thakur, embarrassed, promised to come to his place the next day with the money. But he had no intention of repaying the loan. Instead, he wanted to take revenge against the Bania for humiliating him in front of his guests. So one evening, he waylaid the man on a deserted stretch of road.

“No one can insult me and get away with it!” he said, drawing out his sword.

The Bania thought fast.

“I was expecting you would do something like this,” he said. “I’ve left a letter with my wife. If I do not return home by nightfall, she will take the letter to the Rana. The letter details the business transaction between us and the steps I took to recover the money. It also expresses the fear that you might do me some harm.”

The Thakur lowered his sword. He knew that the Bania could be bluffing but he did not want to take a chance. The Rana was known to be harsh on defaulters and murderers.

“I’ll spare your worthless life,” he said, finally”, but I’ll chop off your nose. That’ll teach you a lesson you’ll never forget.”

“If I write off your loan, will you forgive me?” asked the Bania.

“I might”, said the Thakur, guardedly, “but you must give me a receipt to say I’ve paid you in full. I don’t trust you.”
“I’ll make out a receipt right away,” said the Bania, hastily opening his bundle of books. “But we’ll require a witness.”

“No witness!” cried the Thakur. “Just give me a receipt to say that I’ve paid you in full.”

“The receipt has no value unless there is a witness,” said the Bania. “Why don’t we make that old banyan tree a witness?”

The Thakur reasoned that there could be no harm in making a banyan tree a witness. It could not reveal the circumstances in which the receipt was made. So he agreed. They stood under the banyan tree, and the Bania wrote out the receipt and gave it to the other man. The Thakur pocketed it and went away, very pleased with himself.

But the very next day, he received a summons from the Rana. When he went to the Rana’s palace he found the Bania there.

“Did you borrow money from this man?” asked the Rana.

“I did,” said the Thakur.

“Why haven’t you repaid it?”

“But I have,” said the Thakur and triumphantly taking out the receipt from his pocket, handed it over to the Rana.

“So your witness was a banyan tree,” said the Rana, looking at the receipt.

“Yes,” said the Thakur, “there was nobody else there.”

“So you admit accosting him in a deserted spot?”

“No, no,” said the Thakur, panicking. “I...I... just happened to meet him there.”

“Anyway this receipt is useless,” said the Rana. “It does not carry this man’s signature, only the witness’s.”

“What!” gasped the Thakur, taking the paper from the Rana’s hand. He stared at it and turned pale. Instead of putting his signature at the bottom, the Bania had scribbled: “Banyan Tree”. (Web)

Allusion to mythology, historical events, cultural beliefs and myths is a dominant trait of folk literature. Allusions increase the familiarity and build on the associations that the people have with them. In fact one of the major sources for folktales has been mythology, irrespective of the religion and sect; the traditional stories have been inspired time and again by the mythological figures. One such example could be taken from the following Bengali folktale “Half Hungry”:

Bidhata, god of destiny comes into direct contact with a man, Niloy, who tries to change his destiny, but his challenge is in vain.

When Niloy was born, his father had a dream in which Bidhata, the god who writes the destinies of men, appeared to him.

“Your son,” said the god, “will never be able to fully satisfy his hunger. Train him to be satisfied with a minimum of food.”

His father tried but Niloy never succeeded in overcoming his love for food, and when he couldn’t get enough of it, it made him miserable. The years passed. Niloy
married and raised a family, but poverty dogged his footsteps, and there was not a day when he could say he had had enough to eat. He always went to bed half hungry. One day he was invited to the wedding of a rich man’s daughter. It made him feel that perhaps his luck had changed.

“There will certainly be a lot of food at the wedding,” he thought. “I’ll eat to my heart’s content.”

There was certainly a lot of food at the wedding, but when he had eaten just a little, a heavy decorative piece under which he was sitting fell on him, rendering him unconscious. When he had recovered, all the food was over. His host, wanting to make up for the distress caused to him, invited him to lunch the next day. When he presented himself at the house the next afternoon, his host instructed his servants to take good care of him and to see that he was well fed. Bidhata, god of destinies, was alarmed when he saw the servants piling food on the banana leaf from which Niloy was eating. He quickly took the form of a tiny frog and hopped onto the leaf, hoping that Niloy would be so filled with disgust that he would lose his appetite. What the god did not know was that his victim was extremely short-sighted. Niloy scooped up the frog along with a ball of rice and swallowed it. The god was trapped. His only consolation was that Niloy had begun to feel uneasy after swallowing him and had stopped eating. Bidhata called out to Niloy while he was returning home and explained his predicament.

“Spit me out,” he entreated.

“Spit you out!” exclaimed the man when he had got over the shock of hearing a voice from his stomach and that too of a god.”You have troubled me all my life. Do you think I will let you go so easily!!”

“My duty is to write the destinies of men,” said the god.”I derive no pleasure from their tribulations.”

“Be that as it may,” said Niloy. “I will not let you go until you promise to end my state of perpetual hunger.”

“I cannot alter anyone’s destiny,” said Bidhata, “but if you become my devotee and worship me in an appropriate manner you will have my blessings.”

“One can achieve great things with divine blessings,” thought Niloy. He forced himself to bring up the food he had eaten, and the frog came out in the process. As Bidhata assumed his true form, Niloy said to him: “Now tell me, what is the appropriate way to worship you?”

“In your case,” replied Bidhata, “the only way you can worship me is by never fully satisfying your hunger. Remain hungry all the time.” (Web)

Religious allusions are interwoven and often the stories are narrated with the gods being the protagonists. The humaneness in the persona of gods and goddesses creates inversion to the hyperbolic deeds of humans thus the follies and struggles of the gods and goddesses bring them closer to the humans. For example, we can read the following story “How the Ketaki fell from Grace”:

Once while Vishnu and Brahma were quarrelling about which of them was superior to the other, Shiva, in the form of a column of light, appeared beside them. The column seemed to have no beginning or end, stretching upwards and downwards as far as the eye could see. The two gods decided that whoever found the top or the
bottom of the column first would be deemed to be superior to the other. So they set out, Vishnu in the form of a boar, and Brahma in the form of a swan. Vishnu descended for aeons together, but could not find the base of the column, and finally gave up the search. Brahma, soaring upwards, was equally unsuccessful in reaching the top. He saw a ketaki flower wafting down, and catching it, returned to the starting point where Vishnu was waiting for him. Then followed a spot of duplicity. Brahma, claiming success, waved the flower, which he said he had found at the summit, in Vishnu’s face. Vishnu doubted his claim. He asked the ketaki if what Brahma said was true. The flower said it was. The barefaced lie infuriated Shiva, and he cursed the flower (another version says the flower refused to substantiate Brahma’s claim and that it was Brahma who cursed it). The ketaki, till then considered the best among flowers, lost its importance and was never again offered in worship except on Mahashivratri when it makes a shy appearance. (Web)

Court-wits have always been an inevitable part of Indian folktales. From the stories of Birbal to Tenali Raman they have always made their presence felt. One of the seminal aspects of these court-wits is their place in history and how historical events are inter-woven into their narratives. “Tenali Raman in the Delhi Durbar” is an interesting episode of Tenali’s presence in Babur’s court:

When Krishna Deva Raya used to rule in Vijaynagar, Babur ruled Delhi. Babur wanted to meet Tenali Raman as he had heard a great deal about Tenali’s quick wit. Babur’s messenger arrived in Krishna Deva Raya’s court one day. He said, “Greetings, King Krishna Deva Raya. Emperor Babur wishes Tenali Raman would visit Delhi.” Krishna Deva Raya replied, “So be it.” Tenali Raman reached Delhi and settled in the guesthouse. Meanwhile, Babur spoke with his courtiers in council. He had a plan. “No one will laugh at Tenali Raman’s jokes tomorrow! I want to see how he will make us laugh then.” The courtiers chorused, “Yes, Your Majesty.” The next day, Tenali Raman arrived in the court. Tenali Raman started to narrate one of his jokes. “Once there was a …” The courtiers cut him off by yawning profusely. On the sixteenth day, Tenali Raman stopped going to the court. Tenali Raman thought to himself, “Let me follow Babur to see where he goes everyday.” He wore such clothes that no one would be able to see his face. Babur and his minister would walk by the Yamuna every morning. Babur said, while giving gold coins to beggars, “There you go! Make good use of them.” Tenali Raman thought of a plan. The next day, Tenali Raman disguised himself as an old man. He also had a spade and mango sapling. Tenali Raman thought, “Let me wait for the king here.” Seeing the king approach, Tenali began planting the sapling. Babur said, “You’re old, you won’t be alive when this tree bears fruit. Why are you planting it?” Tenali Raman said, “Your Majesty, I tasted the fruits of trees my forefathers planted. Similarly, my grandchildren will enjoy the fruit of this tree.” Babar exclaimed, “That is a noble thought!” Wanting to reward the old man, Babar took a bag and and said, “Here, take this bag of gold coins.” Tenali Raman replied, “Thank you, Your Majesty. You have given me the fruit of planting this sapling before it has grown.” Babur, pleased with this answer too, said, “Well done, again. Take this second bag of gold coins.” Tenali Raman said, “A tree gives fruit once a year, but I am getting the fruit of my labour twice, Your Majesty!” Babur again appreciated this clever reply. He said, “Bravo! This third bag of gold coins is also yours.” Babur’s minister whispered to him, “Your Majesty, at this rate you will give all your wealth to him. Let’s go.” Babur, laughing, agreed. Tenali Raman took off his fake beard and called out to them as they were going, “Your Majesty, please look at me.” Babur was astounded at Tenali Raman’s intelligence. He said, “Tenali Raman, you are truly a great wit! Come back to court for more rewards.” Tenali Raman went back to Babur’s court and entertained him for many days. Finally, he returned home. Krishna Deva Raya said, “You have
brought glory to the kingdom, Tenali!” Tenali Raman flashed back, “Your Majesty, then I deserve a reward from you too!” Krishna Deva Raya said, laughing, “Yes, indeed. Here are 10,000 gold coins.” Tenali Raman replied, “Thank you, Your Majesty! (Web)

- **Characterization**

Characters are generally flat with either very good or very bad qualities pronounced distinctively. The hero is usually young, honourable, courageous, unselfish, and caring and the heroine is young, fair, kind, charitable, and caring. The stories of Akbar and Birbal and Tenali Raman serve a similar function. The stories like ‘The Princess and the Water Sprite’ present a hero who is not only obedient and humble but courageous and sacrificial.

- **Setting**

The setting of action is often not elaborately described. Expressions like ‘simple cottage’, ‘magic kingdom’ suffice to present the locale of the culture. It may sometimes be not at all mentioned but is simply assumed. Time is mostly in the past set within the history of the particular culture and place. Expressions like “Once upon a time” provide fantastic airs and set the story on the go. “They lived happily ever after” provides closure to the tales and stories. Stories from *Panchatantra*, like “The Fox and the Cream Biscuit” elucidate such aspects of the setting:

Once there was a poor man who lived in a village. He had a very beautiful daughter. There was a dense forest near the village in which there lived a fox. The fox wanted to marry the poor man’s daughter. One day, the fox dressed himself like a man and went to the girl’s father. He said, “Sir, I want to marry your daughter. Will you give her in marriage to me?” The girl’s father was pleased and gave his consent. Soon, the girl and the fox were married. But the girl’s father never got to know that his son-in-law was a fox.

The fox started living in the girl’s house. He enjoyed good food and was leading a life of luxury. Then, one day, the girl’s father told the fox that he should now take the girl to his own house. The fox had no house of his own. But he could not say this to his father-in-law. So, he took the girl and started walking.

After a lot of time had passed, the girl asked the fox, “Has your house come yet?” The fox replied, “No, we have to cross one more river.” They kept walking. After they had walked quite a distance, the girl asked again, “Has your house come again?” But the fox again gave the same reply, “No, we have to cross one more river.”

A few days went by in the same way. Finally, the girl understood that her husband had no home. By this time, she had also found out that he was not a man but a fox. She said to him, “Let us go back to my house. We can live there in peace and comfort.” The fox agreed readily and they started walking back to the girl’s house. On reaching, the girl secretly told her father all about the fox. The girl’s father was filled with rage. He called a few of his friends and with their help he beat up the fox badly and chased him away. (Web)

- **Plot**

Plot is usually simple though interesting in folk literature. The plots are stimulating as well as instructive. Action begins right in the opening generally following explicit and simple patterns. The plot moves fast and keeps the listeners’ attentive. Conflicts are by and large resolved through larger than life actions and acts of compassion displayed in the situation associated to good and bad/evil. This could be explained
by reading the famous *Jataka Tales*. The stories like the following moralise without being monotonous:

A wealthy man requested an old scholar to wean his son away from his bad habits.

The scholar took the youth for a stroll through a garden. Stopping suddenly he asked the boy to pull out a tiny plant growing there. The youth held the plant between his thumb and forefinger and pulled it out. The old man then asked him to pull out a slightly bigger plant. The youth pulled hard and the plant came out, roots and all.

“Now pull out that one,” said the old man pointing to a bush. The boy had to use all his strength to pull it out.

“Now take this one out,” said the old man, indicating a guava tree. The youth grasped the trunk and tried to pull it out. But it would not budge.

“I.. It’s impossible,” said the boy, panting with the effort.

“So it is with bad habits”, said the sage. “When they are young it is easy to pull them out but when they take hold they cannot be uprooted.” The session with the old man changed the boy’s life. (Web)

- **Style**

The descriptions in tales and stories are not verbose, rather to the point, with minimal detailing. Use of magic, supernatural beings (animals and humans) and objects like mirror, houses, pens etc., spells, enchantments, magical transformations, character transformed by a spell which only love or labour can break, ugly person possessed in a spell and after getting rid converting into a beautiful prince and princess are often resorted to in folk literature to knit out interesting tales which offer the listeners an escape into a world of fantasy which the modern day entertainments offer through animations and special effects. The following Indian folktale “The Power of Rumour” displays the similar narrative dimension:

“What would happen to me if the earth were to break up?” wondered the hare. Suddenly, there was a ‘thud’ followed by a rumbling sound.

“It’s happened,” thought the hare, “the earth’s breaking up!”

He jumped up and ran.

“Why are you running?” asked a hare who crossed his path.

“The earth’s breaking up!” shouted the hare. “You’d better run too.”

The second hare ran so fast he overtook the first.

“The earth’s breaking up, the earth’s breaking up!” he shouted to other hares he passed. Soon thousands of hares were scampering through the forest. Other animals got caught up in the panic. The word spread from mouth to mouth, and soon everyone knew: the earth was breaking up. Other animals got caught up in the panic. The word spread from mouth to mouth, and soon everyone knew: the earth was breaking up. It was not long before the whole jungle was on the move. Reptiles, insects, birds and four-footed animals fled in wild disorder, and their cries of terror filled the air. A lion standing on a hillock, saw the animals coming and wondered what was going on. He hastened down and positioning himself in front of the horde called for it to stop. His commanding presence stemmed the rising tide of panic among the animals. “The earth is breaking up!” shrieked a parrot, alighting on a rock near him. “Who says so?”
The monkeys said they had heard it from the tigers, who said their informants were the elephants, who gave the buffaloes as their source. When the hares were finally implicated they pointed one to another until the one who had started it all was identified. “What makes you think the earth is breaking up?” the lion asked him. “I heard it cracking with my own ears, sire,” squeaked the hare, trembling in fear. The lion investigated the sound the hare had heard and found that it had been caused by a large coconut falling from a tree. It had landed on a pile of rocks, causing a minor landslide. “Go back to your homes,” said the lion to the animals who had been running away, and who were now looking very foolish. “The earth’s safe. Next time, check a rumour before acting on it.” (Web)

Point of View and Tone

Point of view in folk literature is generally represented through third person narration. Tone of the narrative is often directed to foreground the preference of good over bad/evil. Through the tone and language human strengths, weaknesses and limitations are reflected upon. The Reader is led to new insights and understandings. The following story “An Ascetic Returns Home” sums up the aforementioned points:

A young ascetic sitting in meditation under a tree was splattered by the droppings of a bird.

He looked up angrily at the culprit and such was the intensity of his wrath that the bird was reduced to ash. His concentration disturbed, the ascetic got up and went in search of food. He knocked at the door of a house but there was no answer. He knocked again and the lady of the house shouted that she was coming. Presently she came out with food and seeing that he was annoyed at having to wait so long, smiled and said: “Please don’t try to burn me with your angry glance like you did that bird. My dharma as a housewife is first to take care of the needs of my family before attending to the needs of others.” The ascetic realised that she was no ordinary woman and was ashamed of himself. He asked her to teach him what dharma was. She said he should see Dharma Vyadha. The ascetic went in search of Dharma Vyadha expecting to find a venerable sage but the man turned out to be a meat-seller. Dharma Vyadha made him wait while he served his customers. When the ascetic showed signs of impatience, the meat-seller smiled and said: “Just as the woman’s first duty was to her family; my first duty is to my customers.” So the ascetic waited. When the last of his customers had gone, the meat seller turned to the ascetic and invited him home. When they reached Dharma Vyadha’s house the ascetic was again made to wait while his host lovingly attended to his parents. It was quite some time before the meat-seller could return to his guest but the young man showed no trace of anger. A transformation had come over him. “Now I know what dharma is,” he said, rising and bowing to the meat-seller. Giving up the path of asceticism he returned home and begged forgiveness of his parents for having deserted them in their old age. “I seek your blessings,” he said, “to give me strength to do my dharma.” (Web)

2.4 LET US SUM UP

Folk literature is an example of the continuously changing nature of literary pursuits, that adapt according to the needs of time and space. Folk literature is characterised by the people it belongs to; therefore it will not be wrong to call it people’s literature. Folk literature emerges out of people’s desires, aspirations, creativity and aesthetic
impulse and is therefore closely related to people’s lives and experiences. Folk literature displays a close proximity with the socio-cultural undercurrents and ebb and flow of life like any other literature. In India folk literature has been progressive, revolutionary and rich in terms of themes, narratives and issues like most of the folk literatures of the world. In fact Indian texts are inspirations to the folk literatures all over the world. India has a unique culture of the oldest written tradition which interestingly has been a source to oral tradition and folklore.

2.5 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


Claus, Peter J., Jawaharlal Handoo and D. P. Pattanayak (Eds.). Indian Folklore. Vol. II. Mysore: Central Institute of Indian Languages. Print.


—. ed. Folklore in Modern India. Mysore: Central Institute of Indian Languages. Mysore. Print.


Web Resources:


Thematic and Narrative Concerns of Indian Folk Literature

“How the Ketaki fell from Grace”
(http://dimdima.com/khazana/stories/showstory.asp?q_cat=Mythological+Stories)
Accessed on October 17th 2015

“I am your Servant”.
(http://mocomi.com/fun/stories/akbar-birbal/i-am-your-servant,Huzoor/) Accessed on October 17th 2015

“Prince Charming”.
(http://dimdima.com/khazana/stories/showstory.asp?q_title=PrinceCharming)
Accessed on October 17th 2015

“The Crowded Home.”
(http://mocomi.com/mullah-nasruddin-the-crowded-home/)
Accessed on October 17th 2015

“The Delhi Durbar”

“The Mighty”
(http://www.pitara.com/fiction-for-kids/folktales/the-mighty/) Accessed on October 17th 2015


“Witness”

“The Fox and the Cream Biscuit”

“The Power of Rumour”

2.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS : POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: Your answers should be in about 200 words.

1) What are the major thematic concerns in folk literature?

........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

2) Make a list of folk literary texts which depict various themes listed by you in your answer to the previous question.

........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................
3) How will you define and characterise folk literature?
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

4) Which Indian texts are significantly associated with folk literature?
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

5) How does the device of personification accentuate the story?
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

6) Explore some stories and list them to substantiate the notion of “vasudhaivkutumbkam” as a component in folk literature.
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

7) How does the use of irony help in engaging the listener in the folk tales?
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

8) What is the significance of hyperbole as a literary device in folk literature? 
   Give some examples.
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

9) How does the use of dialect highlight the essence of folk literature?
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

10) What is the impact of the use of allusion in folk literature?
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

11) Why are the characters generally flat or stock in folk literature?
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

12) Why do you think the plot is often kept plausible?
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................

13) Discuss the importance of point of view as a narrative technique in a folktale.
........................................................................................................................................
........................................................................................................................................