UNIT 9 MYTHS, LEGENDS AND TALES

Structure
9.0 Objectives
9.1 Introduction
9.2 Folktales
9.3 Myths
9.4 Legends
9.5 Let Us Sum Up
9.6 References and Further Readings
9.7 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

9.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to

- know about myth, legend and folktales;
- identify unique characteristics of myths, legends and folktales;
- evaluate the significance of myths, legends and folk tales;
- understand the differences between myths, legends and folktales; and
- know more about the cultural value of India through folklore studies.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

Folklore can be described as traditional art, literature, knowledge and practices that are passed on in large part through oral communication and example. The information thus transmitted expresses the shared ideas and values of a particular group. British antiquarian William Thoms is generally credited with coining the term ‘folklore’ in 1846. Elliott Oring states that folklore is the part of culture that lives happily ever after. Folklore is a tradition based on “any expressive behaviour that brings a group together, creates convention and commits it to cultural memory” (Harring 1). Folklore is passed from one generation to another, what we hear about village life often confirms our impression. Carl Wilhelm von Sydow noted that folklore varies from region to region and suggested that this indicates the communities’ adaptation to their own cultural environment.

Folklore is a broad field of study that concerns itself with the ways in which people make meaning in their lives. According to folklorist Alan Dundes, a folk group is a group made up of two or more people with at least one attribute in common. For example, there are religious folk groups, which are made up of people who belong to the same church or share the same beliefs; occupational folk groups are of people who do the same kind of work at the same place; and regional folk groups, who share an identity that is tied to that place. Folklore is, Alan Dundes says: “Myths, legends, folktales, jokes, proverbs, riddles, charms, blessings, curses, oaths, insults ... tongue-twisters, and greeting and leave-taking formulas” (387). Sandra Dolby Stahl in Literary Folkloristics and Personal Narrative explains folklore as “hearing tradition in personal narratives is a professional response made possible through a literary folkloristic methodology” (120). Folklorist William A. Wilson
avers that “the study of folklore is not just a pleasant pastime useful primarily for whiling away idle moments. Rather, it is centrally and crucially important in our attempts to understand our own behaviour and that of our fellow human beings” (203).

Story telling is common to every culture. Most people enjoy listening to stories. Story tellers have catered to the need for a “good story” since the beginning of the civilisation. Most people have their own favourite story from childhood and, often, these tales are both fascinating and frightening. These stories include legends, myths and folktales. Genres of folklore include folktales, legends and myths which are old stories written for adults and children. Legends, myths and folktales have won a special place among the great folk traditions of the world. They represent the distillation of the best of this remarkable tradition, toned over many centuries by the skill of the oriental storyteller.

Myths, legends and folktales are hard to classify and they often overlap one another. Esther Lombardi says, “Fairy tales, myths, legends and folklore are terms which may seem to mean the same thing: fanciful tales” (Web). Myths, legends and folktales are types of stories originally passed by word-of-mouth, but are now found in writing. They vary in their subject matter, from explaining the natural world and delivering life lessons, to exaggerated events and people grounded in history. These stories, told and cherished for countless generations, fire our imaginations. While it is true that the terms may refer to bodies of writing that are related at their most basic level as stories, they each present a unique reader experience.

9.2 FOLKTALES

- Introduction

Over a hundred languages, ten major script systems and seven minor ones, many old religions with innumerable sects and cults, racial mixtures over millennia, a variety of landscapes and climates have contributed to an incredibly complex braiding of traditions and counter traditions. Nothing exemplifies the variety of Indian scene better than the languages. The traditional stories around the world represent “the things that are valued most highly, fear most deeply, and hope for most ardently are valued, feared and hoped for by all people. Still, while the same yearnings are expressed, each culture has a unique response made richer by details from its society and the local ecology” (Web). Whatever the explanation may be, stories that have been told and cherished for countless generations are bound to be good. They fire our own imaginations.

A folktale is a story or legend forming part of an oral tradition. Folktales are generally passed down from one generation to another and often take on the characteristics of the time and place in which they are told. Folktales speak of universal and timeless themes, and help folks make sense of their existence or cope with the world in which they live. A folktale is “a poetic text that carries some of its cultural contexts within it; it is also a travelling metaphor that finds new meaning with new telling” (Ramanujan Preface).

A folktale is a tale because of its socio-cultural functions within a society. Similarly a folk expression operates in correspondence with other folk experiences, cultural practices and social mobility. The social system where the folk expressions concerned are practised becomes the basic text of any analysis. The particular grand narrative includes all the streams of a society, oral and written, great and little traditions. To
define verbal folklore of India is to say, “it is the literature of the dialects, those mother tongues of village, street, kitchen, tribal hut and wayside tea shop. This is the wide base of the Indian pyramid on which all other Indian literatures rest” (Blackburn xvi).

- Importance of folktales

Anyone studying the culture of India needs to study not only its written classics, but its oral traditions, of which folktales are an important part. These tales are meant to be read for pleasure first, to be experienced as aesthetic objects. An old Chinese proverb says “Birds do not sing because they have answers; birds sing because they have songs” (qtd. in Blackburn xiii). The songs of course have territories, species, context and functions. Folk texts are pervasive, behind, under and around all the texts of the society and in all its strata, not merely among the rural and the non-literate.

Proverbs, riddles, stories and tunes, motifs and genres of songs and dances are not confined to a region, even though they may be embodied in the non-literate dialects and may seem to be encased in those mythic entities called self-sufficient village communities. It is well known that such folklore items, like many others sorts of items in cultural exchange, are autotelic, they travel by themselves without any movement of populations. A proverb, a riddle, a joke, a story, a remedy or a recipe travels every time it is told. The languages and regions in India have, therefore, a large stock of shared folk materials; collections can be made of proverbs, riddle and tales common to widely separate and distant regions of the subcontinent. Cultural performances of every kind, whether they are plays, rituals or games, contain texts written and oral. In a sense, every cultural performance is a text in itself. Past and present, what is “pan Indian” and what is local, the written or the oral, the verbal and the non-verbal, all these are engaged in reworking and redefining relevant others.

Similarly a folktale goes on changing from teller to teller; the structure of the tale may remain constant while all the cultural details change; parts of different tales are combined to make a new tale which expresses a new aesthetic and moral form characteristic of the culture. When the same tale is told again in a different time or place, it may come to say fresh and appropriate things, often without any change in the story line.

Evidences of the folktale can be found all over the world; they are quite ancient, and they arise from different conditions, depending on place and time. The folktale arises from a need experienced at a certain stage of development in human society. It is the circumstances which generate a folktale, which informs its conception, its shape and its narrative style, and as long as these circumstances prevail, the folktale will endure. They all have something in common.

Folktale also stem from an oral tradition, passed down by the “folk” who narrated them. The term “folklore” is often used interchangeably with fable, since folktales can have a lesson at the end. Folktales are different from fables because they feature people as their main characters, but often with a twist. Every country has its folktales. Sometimes, countries as far apart as China and France can have a very similar traditional tales. The story of “stone soup” is one told all over the world.

Schossberger opines that there are three principal factors essential to the existence of the folktale, and their interrelationship forms. They are, “Traditional, communicational contribution of the past bearers of the tradition, the present story telling community, the narrator” (49). The traditional folktale which enters the life
Folk Literature: Sources, Characteristics, Classifications and Functions

of a community at a given moment thus acts as a model. It does not have an author; the folk community – or, as Anikin calls it, it is the chain of “collective authorship” that produces it. Mechtilda Brachetti exhaustively treats the question of whether folktale is a communal creation. Even though it was originally created by an individual, “the folktale is collective lore not according to its origin but according to its fate...because it mirrors the collective psyche of a community” (Web).

- **Contexts**

Tales are told in different contexts and function in a variety of ways. To contextualise a tale fully, one should know the teller, when, where and to whom he or she narrated the tale, what he or she and the listeners thought of the tale, how the listeners responded when they heard it and other such details. It is necessary analyse to this kind of ethnography of narrative, a sense of where the tale fits in other texts and performances of the cultural, what is considered significant, how it makes meanings, what’s taboo and what’s not, and the place of tellers in the community – not merely the facts of the telling but the feelings, the meanings and the meaning-making.

- **Why tales are told**

Tales are old, and yet are told and retold today. Tales are told in different contexts and function in a variety of ways. These tales are meant to be read for pleasure, first to be experienced as aesthetic rights. The tales are told often to keep the adult awake; “when farmers gather to watch crops all night or graze cows or sheep all day, or when workers slice areca nuts or roll bidis (cheap local cigarettes) in a factory” (Blackburn xxii). Tales are told to keep the children’s attention and to make them eat more and put them to sleep. It can ease work and serve as recreation after work, or it may simply be an entertaining pastime. Like work songs, these tales beguile time and ease the monotony of long labour by engaging with fantasy. Tales, like proverbs, are also enlisted to make a point to find precedent and authority in political speeches, religious discourses and legal discussions.

- **Who tells these tales?**

In South India, singers and tellers travel from place to place, their performances being engaged by families or organisations. Tellers of epochal stories from *The Ramayana*, *The Mahabharata* or the stories of gods from the *Puranas* and from Hindu mythologies highlight the spiritual dimension. Tales are also told by cooks in the house, and servants from another class would also tell stories, bringing one in contact with another class and caste. Grandfathers and senior male figures were also tellers; they did not tell stories in the kitchen but in the outer parts of the house and they would have audiences of children from other families as well.

In villages, there are bardic troupes that perform epics about caste heroes or local gods and saints. The bard will intersperse his recitation – which may be performed serially for hours, and/or over several nights – with shorter tales and anecdotes as well as poems and songs, just as he will introduce references to current politics. Thus ancient tales and epics are given contemporary relevance. In families, there were mealtime stories as well as bedtime stories.

People everywhere have listened to storytellers with the greatest of interest. They brought news of exciting events, praised heroic deeds and thus aroused interest in history; they provided models of religion and ethical perfection for the people to emulate. The narrators banished the drab monotony of everyday life by entertaining their hearers with exciting, adventuresome and highly imaginative stories. It was from these premises, and before the invention of written literature, that oral narrative forms originated.
A folktale goes on changing from teller to teller; the structure of the tale may remain constant while all the cultural details change parts of different tales that are combined to make a new tale which expresses a new aesthetic and moral form characteristic of the culture. When the same tale is retold in a different time or place, it may come to say fresh and appropriate things, often without any change in the story line.

- **Kinds of Folktales**

Classical folklores and tales can attract people of all ages. These classical tales were supposed to impart some moral advices to its readers, which they could apply so as to live life in a more beautiful manner. However, children love reading these folktales most, since they get a scope to escape to a world of fantasy and ideals and thus in way get a relief from their tedious home works and school schedules.

While myths or legends are transmitted orally or in writing, folk tales tend to be transmitted orally, and though they are transmitted from generation to generation and so their origin is unknown, they are more definitely felt to be stories/fiction. Usually the author is unknown and there are often many versions of the tale.

Different kinds of folktales include fairytales, tall tales, trickster tales, myths and legends. Some tales are based on a partial truth that is lost or hidden or mutated over time. Many folktales written during the 19th century are transformed into fairy tales. Folktales describe how the main character copes with the events of everyday life, and the tale may involve crisis or conflict. Superstitions and unbounded beliefs are important elements in the folklore tradition. Typically folk and fairy tales involve magic and magical creatures and people such as witches, dragons and dwarves rather than religion. Examples are Cindrella and Jack and Beanstalk stories.

Special ritual tales as Vratakathas are told as part of a calendrical ritual and their telling in that context has ritual efficacy. It is believed that both tellers and listeners receive benefits, as depicted in tales like “A Story in Search of an Audience” and “Brother’s day”, and “very often, an ordinary tale may acquire this status by being told in such a context” (Blackburn 10).

Indian folklore has a wide range of stories and mythological legends which emerge from all walks of life. The interesting stories range from the remarkable Panchatantra to the Hitopadesha and from Jataka to the tales of Akbar-Birbal. Not only this, the great Indian epics like The Ramayana and The Mahabharata, and works like The Bhagavad Gita are full of didactic stories inspired by the lives of great souls. Being full of moralistic values, Indian folklore makes perfect stories for children who are required to be instilled with values. All these ancient stories have been passed from generation to generation. Ramakrishna, a religious teacher, genius and saint “…was known to be illiterate and was a treasure house of oral traditions…” (Appadrai 44) created his own parables. Male-centred, female-centred, tales about families, tales about fate, death, gods, demons, ghosts and humourous tales or tales about a jester or clever person, tales about animals and stories about stories, all come under the umbrella term folktales.

## 9.3 MYTHS

India has been a land of myths. and mysticism. Myth and mysticism kept the readers spell bound once in India. Myths were used by “the writers ... to unearth the rich treasure of myth and mysticism” (Purohit 60). Mrs. Langer avers that legend, myth and tales are not in themselves literature, but fantasies. As such however, they are the natural materials of art. But many of the critics of our time have more boldly
Folk Literature: Sources, Characteristics, Classifications and Functions

seized upon the connection between myth and literature as providing a new key to criticism.

Myths proper or divine myths focus on the lives and ways of the gods and may be treated as sacred fact by the people telling them. They are set in the remote past, a vague time outside human chronology, often in a world different from the one familiar to the culture’s own. Myths explain a society, and its concerns and values, to itself. They provide models of behaviour in times of crisis. Myths never have authors; we just inherit later literary versions of the stories. Myth helps us in “formulating and rendering an image of the universe, a cosmological image in keeping with the science of the time” (Web). Myth helps us in validating and maintaining some specific social order.

Myth gives a religious explanation about the origin of the beginning of a particular custom or the world. There is “no attempt to fix the myth into a coherent chronology related to the present day, though myths or a cycle of myths may have their own internal chronology” (Web). The story is timeless in that the events are symbolic rather than just the way it happened.

Myth, derived from the Greek word ‘muthos’, means anything uttered by word of mouth. Homer used ‘muthos’, to mean a narration or conversation, but not fiction. Later the Greeks used ‘muthos’ to mean fiction. To Plato, ‘muthos’ denotes, “Something not wholly lacking truth but for the most part fictitious” (Cuddon 71). At present, myth symbolizes fiction but not that which carries psychological truth. Myths are living social events, intelligible only in the context of real humans in real places involved in social interactions. They are commonly described as stories. Myth is defined as a story that explains or justifies and prolongs existing social and geographical boundaries.

‘Myth’ is considered as a traditional story, especially one concerning the early history of a people or explaining a natural or social phenomenon, and typically involving supernatural beings or events. It carries the cultural values of a culture from one soul to other and from one generation to the next and also from one part of the world to the other. The word, ‘Myth’, itself conceives mystery with in itself. Myth is a story or an idea that is believed by many people, when something is believed by many people it becomes a part in the cultural life of those people. Academic American Encyclopedia, while explaining ‘Mythology’ states that;

Myths are stories that narrate in an imagination and symbolic manner the total and basic structures upon which a culture rests. Given this emphasis on what is fundamental to cultural meaning and value, the myth may appear to be fantastic and bizarre, because the mythic story cannot be explained in the terms of the ordinary conventions of the culture are understood as having their origins in the myth. (Web)

Myths have always played an important role in every human community. Such everyday phenomena as the weather and the passing of the seasons have been taken by myth makers and carefully woven into form that answers our restless questioning of a confusing and at times frightening world. Myths have gained a prominent place in human culture.

People have always tried to understand why certain things happen. Human beings have a constant quest to understand this world around them which was completely mysterious to his understanding. They had a lot of questions about nature and wanted to know why and how the sun rises and sets, what causes lightning, how the rainbow appears and many other things. Human beings had thousands of questions about
the rain, wind, storm, water, climate change and so many other things they came across. They wanted to know certain other questions also which were related to creation e.g., who created the earth and how? When and where did the first human race appear first? And how did they come into existence. They tried to find out the reasons behind all this, and in the process, formed stories. The World Book Encyclopedia states that,

Today, people have scientific answers about theories for many such questions about the world around them. But in earlier time, people lacked the knowledge to provide scientific answers. They therefore explained natural events in terms of gods, goddesses, and heroes . . . such stories are known as myths, and the study of myth is called mythology. In some parts of the world, myths are still used to explain scientific facts about our world. (Web)

Myth serves as a moral teacher who tunes the outlook of a person thereby guiding them to look and lead in a particular direction which was shown for the betterment of every human being. Myth may not be explained in a word, it is a combination of several ideologies which combine the full physical and mental growth of a society. Every culture has its own myth. The origin of these myths may be a great question which is difficult to answer. It is understood that the development of civilization could not have been possible without the help of myths. This mythical principle states that the culture lies on the basic structure of myth or stories. Myth is also considered a fundamental structure of a society which was modelled by values. Strength of a culture depends upon the strength of the myth which was created by them. Even the ordinary conventions of a culture could have been derived from the myth. Hence, it is clearly understood that the culture could have not evolved without the intervention of myth. “The word ‘myth’ has often suffered a wrong connotation. In general parlance, it means something false, fictitious and far removed from reality, and history. . . . Myth, today, need not be a blatant tale of some fictitious character in some fictitious past; it could be the memory of the past told in a fictitious way”, states B. A. Pathan in the Introduction to Gandhian Myth in English Literature in India (9).

• Definitions of myth and mythology

Distinguished philosophers and folklorists represent opposite extremes in the study of mythology. Efforts are made to fathom the inner meaning of myths because of the authoritative, indeed revelatory function they have for human existence. Mircea Eliade, a historian of religion, emphasizes that myth narrates sacred history. Scholars believe that myth is to be understood as a religious phenomenon and cannot fully be/cannot at all be explained in terms of non-religious (e.g. literary, psychological, sociological or economic) categories. Freud claims that “sometimes myths are public dreams which, like private dreams, emerge from the unconscious mind” (Web).

A myth is a traditional story, which may describe the origins of the world and /or of a people. A myth is an attempt to explain mysteries, supernatural events and cultural traditions. Sometimes sacred in nature, a myth can involve gods or other creatures and a myth represents reality in dramatic ways. A myth is a traditional, typically ancient story dealing with supernatural beings, ancestors, or heroes, and which serves as a fundamental type in the worldview of a people. The purpose of myths is to “account for the origins of something, explain aspects of the natural world, or delineate the psychology, customs, or ideals of society” (Web).

Myth also suggests a fresh means by which to study the laws of the imagination. Richard Chase explains that “myth is clearly a value term”. “Myth,” he writes, “is
only art” (11). Theodore Reik says myth is “not a story told as history but history
told as story... In other words it is a narrative of a real experience in the past.
What we call myth today is not an imaginary tale but a real life experience of the
primordial society” (9). According to Burke, an American critic, “myth is ultimately
the expression of non-temporal truths ... the expression of them in story form ... story is still what makes myth myth” (qtd. in Segal 85). Myths present the model
for behaviour. The word myth is a continuous source of knowledge needed for
crucial problems in man’s existence: war and peace, life and death, truth and
falsehood, good and evil.

Rudolf Bultmann, the grandest exponent of traditional religious myths, reads myth
symbolically. He demythologizes myth – which does not speak about the world but
turns out to be about the human experience in the world. In Bultmann’s words, “the
real purpose of myth is not to present an objective picture of the world as it is, but
to express man’s understanding of himself in the world in which he lives. Myth
should be interpreted not cosmologically; but anthropologically, or better still,
existentially” (qtd. in Segal 48).

Ira Progoff in Jung’s Psychological and its Social Meaning states that, “Myths are
held to be the direct expression of the collective unconscious. They are factual tales
produced, treasured and controlled by a collective working and thinking of the
religious community. Thus myths are the treasure houses of our recorded values of
the past” (89). C. G. Jung in the seventh volume of his Collected Works states that,
“The collective unconscious is the matrix of myth” (339). The “collective
unconscious” is a large, amorphous, creative area deep within the person wherein
dwell our repressed and forgotten contents. These contents are called “collective”
because they are not personal acquisitions but cultural. Sigmund Freud in his
Interpretation of Dreams showed the world that the motives for a behaviour lie not
in the rational and conscious mind but in the irrational realm of the unconscious
which manifests itself only in the dream.

The relationship between myth and literature has taken varying forms in literature.
Every community has a rich mythological heritage and the writers use myths to
narrate contemporary events, expose public follies, problems and mysteries of life
and death. Roland Barthes in Mythologies remarks that “myth has the task of giving
historical intension a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal”
(142).

The fairy tale tells of extraordinary beings and events and in that respect, resembles
myth, though it differs markedly in other respects. The typical fairy tale opens with
“once upon a time”, the typical myth begins with “in the beginning”; the fairy tale
carries no authority, even if sometimes a moral is presented. Many tales explain the
origin of rocks or mountains. Others such as the famous Hindu narrative that states
the blue neck of the god Siva is the result of the poison he drank in primordial
times, explain iconographic features.

Myths are accounts with an absolute authority that is implied rather than stated;
they relate events and states of affairs surpassing the ordinary human world, yet
basic to the world; the time in which the related events take place is altogether
different from the ordinary historical time of human experience; the actors in the
narratives are usually gods or other extraordinary beings such as animals, plants;
the very first people, or specific great men who changed the human condition.

The heroes and heroines of epic literature are in many instances the narrative
rejuvenation of gods and goddesses in myths. Although scholarly work in this area
Myths, Legends and Tales

is far from complete, it is probably safe to suggest that among the mythical themes that have appealed to epic poets are themes of the cultural hero or bringer of salvation and of shamanism. The epic itself can take on certain mythological functions. The Homeric epic became the basis of education in classical Greece. The great epics of India (Mahabharata and Ramayana) came to function as encyclopaedias of knowledge and provided models for all human existence.

9.4 LEGENDS

All over the world, there are extraordinary stories – stories that once upon a time were believed to be true but are today limited to the sphere of myths and legends. The question remains whether those myths are some things that existed in the minds of our ancestors, or were they based on true events? It is true that most of those stories appear to the scientific world as fictitious products of vivid imaginations.

Legends are among the most fascinating genres of folk, for they are timeless and universal forms of oral tradition. Legends reach back to antiquity, and they still survive in our highly industrialised modern society. Legends generally explain how a natural occurrence originated from the Gothic, supernatural world. It also refers to anything that inspires a body of stories, or anything of lasting importance or fame. The story is handed down from earlier times, but continues to evolve with time. A myth is a traditional tale handed down from earlier times and believed to have an historical basis. A legend, on other hand is a story which is told as if it were a historical event, rather than as an explanation for something or a symbolic narrative. The legend may or may not be an elaborated version of a historical event.

The word derives in Middle English from the old French “legend”, from Medieval Latin “legenda” i.e. “things to be read” and from Latin “legere”, meaning “read”. Merriam Webster dictionary defines legends as “a story from the past that is believed by many people but cannot be proved to be true” (Web). Macmillan dictionary claims that legend narrates stories about people and things that are admired and respected. Cambridge dictionary purports that “a legend is a very old story or set of stories from ancient times” (Web).

Legends are also stories that have been made up, but they are different from myths. Myths answer questions about how the natural world works, and are set in a time long-ago, before history was written. Legends are about people and their actions or deeds. Legends or sagas are the acts and great deeds of heroes, treated as sacred or secular fact by the people. These are set in the recent past, essentially in the world as the culture knows it.

A legend is a semi-true story, which has been passed on from person to person and has important meaning or symbolism for the culture in which it originates. A legend usually includes an element of truth, or is based on historic facts, but with “mythical qualities”. Legends usually involve heroic characters or fantastic places and often encompass the spiritual beliefs of the culture in which they originate.

While some legends have disappeared over years, new legends constantly are being created. The old legends that have survived generally have been changed a great deal, for legends are readily influenced by changes in historical, social and economic conditions. Since legends are of endless variety in content, length and form, they virtually defy definition. In Teutonic Mythology, Jacob Grim writes, “The folktale is with good reason distinguished from the legend, though by turns they play into one another. Looser, less fettered from legend, the folktale lacks that local habituation
which hampers could, but it makes it more home-like. The folktale flies, the legend walks, knocks at your door, the one can draw freely out of the fullness of poetry, the other has almost the authority of history…” (85).

Jacob Grim recognised the important qualities of legend that set it apart from other kinds of folktales. Legend formation often begins with an event or alleged fact and legends frequently serve to instruct or educate. William Bascom’s *The Forms of Folklore: Prose Narratives* defines legend, as a traditional old prose narrative that is set in this world in the recent past humans as main characters. It is regarded as fact by the story teller and his/ her audience, and it may be either sacred or secular. Wayland Hand has observed, the strong element of belief in the legend as told, or the individual folk beliefs inherent in the legend, constitutes the hallmark which sets the legend apart from folktale.

- **Categories of legends**

A committee of international folklorists proposed four general categories of legends: aetiological and eschatological legends, historical legends and legends of history of civilisation, supernatural beings and forces/mythic legends and religious legends or myths of gods and heroes. Since many legends are purportedly etiological and historical, including legends with supernatural or religious motifs, the first two categories, while recognising a function and quality of legends, are not especially useful in organising collections of American legends. For e.g. the tentative category of historical legends dealing with people, place and place-name legends are etiological. It is ethnocentric to place supernatural legends in one category and religious legends in another. Alexander H. Krappe pertinently observes that what others believe we call superstition, but what we ourselves believe we call religion. Most religious legends have supernatural motifs, so properly they are supernatural legends.

Since a commonly accepted system of legend classification does not exist, the legends are arranged under four general headings: Supernatural and religious legends, Personal legends, Place legends and Modern legends. In more than a few cases, a particular legend could fall into two or three of these categories.

- **Interesting Legends**

Interwoven with religious myths were a host of legends, traditional stories which though not wholly authentic had, like the tales of Troy, a substructure of fact. There were also all kinds of fables and anecdotes, folktales such as that of Perseus, and allegories and romances which fused with the myths and legends to make a fascinating complex of stories. Examples of legends are stories about Robin Hood, King Arthur and Blackbeard.

Some of the most interesting legends in India deal with premonitions, death and burial, ghosts, haunted houses, good and evil, special powers, witches and monsters or snakes. Omen stories are extremely common in Hoosier folklore, as they are throughout European and American folklore. These brief tales with folk beliefs inherent in them often relate first-hand experiences with prenatal influences, death signs, prophetic dreams, and other premonitions. Some are scary, some are funny and some includes ghost stories and stories of the evil eye.

Strictly speaking, these first-person accounts of encounters with the supernatural are memorates, or pre-legends; however, as these personal experience tales are repeated by other storytellers, they develop into legends. A collection of stories about an admirable person who is the centre of such stories captures the hearts of
the readers. The body of stories of this kind especially relate to a particular people, group, or clan. They personified everything like sky, clouds, thunder, sun, moon, ocean, earthquake and whirlwind. Stories learned in childhood from nurses and grandmas reproduce the most subtle thoughts and expression, and an endless series of complicated narratives, in which the order of incidents and the words of the speakers are preserved with a fidelity nowhere paralleled in the oral tradition of historical events.

9.5 LET US SUM UP

Folklore Studies is, broadly, a field of study that concerns itself with the ways in which people make meaning in their lives. Story telling is common to every culture. Most people enjoy listening to stories. Story tellers have catered to the needs for a “good story” since the beginning of the civilisation. These stories include legends, myths and folktales. Legends, myths and folktales have won a special place among the great folk traditions of the world. They represent the distillation of the best of this remarkable tradition, toned over many centuries by the skill of the storyteller. Myths, legends and folktales are hard to classify and they often overlap one another. While it is true that the terms may refer to bodies of writing that are related at their most basic level as stories, each one of these presents a unique reader experience.

9.6 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


Folk Literature: Sources, Characteristics, Classifications and Functions


9.7 **CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS**

**Note:** Your answers should be in about 300 words each.

1) Define myth and analyse the characteristics of myths.

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2) Trace out the origin of folktales and its relation with society and societal members.

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3) Categorise the legends and enumerate their functions.

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4) Who coined the term ‘folklore’? What do you understand by the term?

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5) Distinguish between a folktale and a fable.

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6) State the factors essential to the existence of the folktale.

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7) List out the different kinds of folktales.

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8) Who are the characters in a folktale?

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Myths, Legends and Tales
Folk Literature: Sources, Characteristics, Classifications and Functions

9) What is the relation between culture and myth?
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10) How does Grimm describe the quality of a legend?
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