UNIT 15  MYTHS OF MIDDLE INDIA BY VERRIER ELWIN

Structure
15.0 Objectives
15.1 Introduction
   15.1.1 Who are the ‘Folk’ in Literature?
   15.1.2 What is ‘Folk’ in Literature?
15.2 Verrier Elwin’s Myths of Middle India
   15.2.1 Verrier Elwin’s Early Life
   15.2.2 Elwin’s Later Life and His Work with the Tribes of India
   15.2.3 The Structure and Content of the Text
15.3 Let Us Sum Up
15.4 References and Further Readings
15.5 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

15.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to
- appreciate what we indicate by the term folk, both in terms of ‘people’ and ‘folklore’, and what we mean by ‘folk in literature’;
- realize the important role of Verrier Elwin in recording the folklore of Indian tribes and the various issues relating to this;
- understand the meaning of the terms ‘myth’ and ‘tribe’ and how they related to folklore;
- comprehend Myths of Middle India as a compendium of tribal myths of the central regions of India; and
- gain insights into how the tribal people perceived their world and its functions and phenomena.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

15.1.1 Who are the ‘Folk’ in Literature?

Now that you are doing a course on the broad theme of “Folk in Literature”, the first thing that you need to ask yourself is, aren’t you one of the “folk”? What does the word mean? The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary says that “folk” means “people in general”. The Macmillan Dictionary states that it means “people of a particular type or from a particular place”. Whether in terms of generality as indicated by the first definition, or specificity as indicated by the second, aren’t we also ‘folk’?

We also need to remember that as literate individuals, we are a small group of people against a larger majority of people who are non-literate: they cannot read and write, and their learning is dependent on what they see and hear, remember, imitate and create. Reading is a fairly recent development in the long history of mankind.
In the vastness of man’s accumulated knowledge – which only recently a few learned to preserve in books – are his entertainment in song, story, and dance; his beliefs in myth and ritual; his fears in superstition and taboos; his attitudes buried in his narratives and expressed in their very language. Out of these has come much of what we call folklore. For the many who do not read, folklore is the equivalent of schools and libraries. For the few who do read, folklore is that powerful, all-pervading portion of knowledge acquired apart from formal education, knowledge gained from environment. (Clarke and Clarke 1)

15.1.2 What is ‘Folk’ in Literature?

As a member of the folk, you will most probably feel that your own beliefs and practices are normal, and that of other folk/people slightly odd. As the definition above helps to illustrate, folklore is “that part of any culture which depends more on imitation and oral transmission than on formal instruction or written sources” (Clarke and Clarke 2). Folklore as an academic discipline studies material from all areas of life, and across various disciplines like anthropology, history, literature, music, arts and crafts, language studies and many other related disciplines.

Since we are concerned with literature, and in this unit, specifically with myths, it would be pertinent to state that as societies evolve towards literacy, much of their mythology, oral tales and songs will, in due course, emerge in a fixed, permanent form, and ultimately in print.

In this unit we will talk about the myths of middle India as recorded by Verrier Elwin in his monograph *Myths of Middle India*. He was a British national who came to India at the time of the Indian freedom struggle and after a lot of soul-searching, declared himself a “philanthropologist”, and lived on in India to work with the tribal people, first in central and then in eastern and north-east India. Let us first go through the life of Verrier Elwin, so that we can better appreciate his standpoint and involvement with the tribes of India.

15.2 VERRIER ELWIN’S MYTHS OF MIDDLE INDIA

15.2.1 Verrier Elwin’s Early Life

Verrier Holman Elwin was born at Dover in Kent, England, on 29 August 1902, the first of three children of Edmund Henry Elwin and Minnie Elwin. The other members of the family were Elwin’s sister Eldyth, younger by a year and a half, and his brother Basil who was younger by four years.

Edmund Henry Elwin studied at Merton College, Oxford, and was subsequently ordained in 1894. He was initially appointed curate of the Oxford parish of St. Peter-le-Bailey. However, in 1896, he left for Sierra Leone to be part of the Church Missionary Society’s station there. In Sierra Leone, he served first as the vice-principal and later as principal of Fourah Bay College, secretary and finally Bishop of the Sierra Leone Mission. His Evangelist faith and zeal was complemented by, as Guha puts it, Minnie Elwin’s “messianic belief in the Second Coming” (Guha 5). Bishop Elwin died in 1909, and Minnie Elwin filled the gap “with renewed devotion to her religion and her family” (Guha 7).

Verrier Elwin initially went to the Dean Close Memorial School in Cheltenham, and then to Merton College, the change from the regimented and closely supervised
atmosphere of the former to the more open and free atmosphere of the latter allowing him to test himself variously, though his life centered predominantly around religion: “[R]eligion was very exciting then and it did, I suppose, provide an alternative interest, taking the place of bridge or racing” (Elwin 28). After spending four years at Merton, Elwin joined the Christa Seva Sangh founded by Winslow, and set sail for India. The Christa Seva Sangh (CSS) was a Christian version of the religious ashrams of the Hindus, and its codes were similar. It aimed at addressing inter-racial strife in India. Elwin reached the CSS ashram in 1927. He returned briefly to England in 1928. When he came back to India in 1929, India was in turmoil, and by early 1930, with Gandhi announcing his Salt Satyagraha, the CSS had to take a position regarding which side it was on, and Elwin, who was then the acting acharya, sided with Gandhi and his concerns. Thus began his engagement with India.

15.2.2 Elwin’s Later Life and His Work with the Tribes of India

Elwin willingly involved himself in the Civil Disobedience movement, wholeheartedly supporting Gandhi and his actions, much to the chagrin of his countrymen in India as well as back home. He was “a man sympathetic to the Congress without actually being part of it” (Guha 48). Gradually, as Elwin’s support of the Indian nationalist movement became more of an embarrassment to the CSS and to the British in general, Elwin parted ways with the organization in 1931, and a series of acquaintances and events led him to decide to settle down in a Gond village called Karanjia in the district of Mandla in central India with the intention of doing something for the tribal populace there. His companion was Shamrao Hivale. It was a testing time for Elwin. On one hand, his position about “the chasm separating British precept from colonial practice” (Guha 67) led to run-ins with the political and clerical establishments; on the other, he was torn “between social work and political work, quiet service or heroic martyrdom” (Guha 68). His problems with the Church continued abated, as the form of Christianity that he believed in and practiced had few takers.

Elwin briefly returned to England on his mother’s request. When he came back in 1932, he devoted himself to his work with the tribal, at the same time handling adversities from every corner. The Englishmen disliked him “for the departure from the orthodox religion”, the Indians “could not “imagine any Christian tabooing conversion” (Thakkar qtd. in Guha 88) and he “did not appeal” the Gonds, for his agenda of “abstinence, hard work, and so forth” – did not appeal” (Guha 88). But Elwin and Shamrao continued their work among the Gonds.

Initially, Elwin was much influenced by Gandhi’s teachings and personality. However, in course of time, unable to reconcile the tribal scenario and his personal life with Gandhian precepts, Elwin staked out an independent path of his own. In 1935, he formally decided to part ways with Christ as well, deciding that he would no longer be “a member of the Church of England either as a priest or as a communicant” (Guha 93). The space that the decision offered him, intellectually and otherwise, integrated him more effectively with his milieu.

A tribal friend, Panda Baba, introduced him to the Baiga tribe in 1934. Moved by their plight in the face of the advancement of modern civilization, Elwin wrote to the administrative authorities, Congress leaders and friends, but found no assurance of any kind about protecting their natural forest environs and their practices. But the more he tried to get people involved with this issue, the more he realized that both the “colonial state and the national intelligentsia... seemed to think of the forest people as mere cipher in the population of India”’ (Guha 98). It is around this time that Elwin published Songs of the Forest, documenting the “vivid folk-
Folktales of India: Motifs, Modes and Mores

poetry of the Mandla tribals” (Guha 98) and *Leaves from the Jungle*, which is a “defense of tribal life … conducted with an easy wit and lightness of touch” (Guha 100). The success of the two works, particularly the latter, set Verrier Elwin well and truly on his path. Henceforth, he would write extensively on tribal and their culture in India; he had ultimately found his vocation as a “philanthropologist”:

Ethnography is itself a powerful instrument for the succor of the tribesmen. The more you can make people known, the more you will make them loved. If we can inspire officials, traders, contractors with a genuine interest in the life and culture of the villagers with whom they have to deal, they will treat them far better and try to further their interests. (Elwin qtd. in Guha 101)

The aboriginal tribes are now in a minority … and they have neither writers nor politicians of their own. I am trying to establish myself as an authority, to get myself into a position where I can fight for their interests; otherwise they will be swamped by a very corrupt form of civilization, not the finer side of Hinduism or Islam, but the exploiting greed which comes from the towns. (Guha 107)

A trip to England in 1936 and two novels, *Phulmat of the Hills* (1937) and *A Cloud That’s Dragonish* (1938) were followed by the first of Elwin’s monumental works *The Baiga* (1939). These were followed by a series of publications on various aspects of the lives and living of the tribes people of central India and Orissa, and later of the North-East frontier of India.

In 1940, Elwin, then thirty-seven years of age, got married to Kosi, a thirteen-year old Raj Gond tribal girl, and had two children, Kumar (also referred to as Jawahar) and Vijay (who was not Elwin’s, but probably sired by a Muslim shopkeeper named Sahid). Elwin and Kosi were divorced in 1949 by a verdict of the Calcutta High Court. Elwin, then Deputy Director with the Anthropological Survey, left his job around the same time. He felt “deeply vulnerable in the India of 1948 and 1949 … and seriously contemplated leaving India” (Guha 192). Unable to place himself with respect to his job, a free nation and the Congress, Elwin left for England the same year, but was put out by the situation there as well. He returned in 1949, and thereafter started living-in with Kachari, the daughter of a Pradhan Gond tribal chieftain from Patangarh, whom he later named Lila. They were formally married in 1953 and had three children, Ashok, Wasant and Nakul. Lila Elwin passed away on 14 July 2013 (Rehman n.p.).

Elwin was appointed Tribal Adviser to the administration of the North East Frontier Agency (now Arunachal Pradesh) in 1954, to provide an anthropologist’s perspective to the tribal issue, and also, as Nehru said, to advise the government “on the whole tribal problem in India” (Elwin qtd. in Guha 231). Nehru’s faith in him as “a recognized authority on the Indian tribes” (Nehru qtd. in Guha 253) was most helpful for Elwin to work in an unfettered manner. However, as it happened with his work before, Elwin’s approach to the NEFA tribal population was talked about much, in positive as well as dismissive terms. It was during this phase of his life that Elwin realized that his advocacy of protected isolation for the Indian tribes was not practicable, and gradually adopted a “middle way which sought to reconcile the benefits of the modern world with the preservation of tribal values” (Durrans 274) though the logistics of that reconciliation are not spelt out by him. He was honoured with the Padma Bhushan in 1961. Elwin passed away in 1964 in New Delhi, a man, as Guha notes:

apparently *always* out of place, always where tradition and history least expected him to be: a clergyman with Gandhi, a scholar in a tribal hamlet, a poet in the
science of anthropology, a rebel with an office in the secretariat. Placed on the margins, poised uncertainly between two worlds, he would imaginatively interpret one world to another. (314)

Elwin, in his Preface to his autobiography, The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin, writes: Europe is deep in my bones but India has gone even more deeply now, as I came to realize when I set out to write this book, for much of it is written from the Indian point of view and most of its characters are Indians. It could hardly be otherwise with an Indian wife and home, Indian interests, a majority of Indian friends, and above all my absorbed and concerned attachment to India’s tribes. (viii)

It was the one week that Elwin spent at Gandhi’s ashram after he first came to India that converted him to the cause of the Indian nationalist movement. Initially deeply influenced by Gandhi, he had decided to work with those who were considered untouchables, but eventually, he found his fulfillment in working for the tribes of India. It was in respect of his work with the tribes that he realized the constraints of both Gandhian ideology and his own religion in addressing their problems, and gradually, he moved away from both. As his life story and the excerpt from his autobiography serve to explicate, Elwin’s engagement with India, and particularly with the tribal population here were such as can be summed up in this exchange between Hem Barua and Jaipal Singh in course of a Lok Sabha debate of 1960:

Barua … made a reference to the ‘British philosopher-anthropologist, who seemed so influential in the north-east [in course of a debate about policies recommended in Elwin’s A Philosophy for NEFA]. He was at once contradicted by Jaipal Singh, leader of the Jharkhand movement for a separate tribal state, and also an Oxford contemporary of Elwin. ‘Dr. Verrier Elwin,’ he reminded his colleague, ‘is more Indian now than Hem Barua. He is more tribal now than Jaipal Singh.’ (Guha 277)

Elwin and Myths of Middle India

Having now briefly understood the concept of folk and folklore, and how it relates to Elwin and his work, let us move on to the text prescribed for you. Myths of Middle India was published in 1949. Myths of Middle India was written in the days that anthropology was still sourced in folklore and literature. Later on it became a science, moving away from these origins and “towards the structural analysis of kinship, power, agrarian relations and other impersonal phenomena”, and “brought with it a soulless dissecting precision far removed from the literary liveliness he (Elwin) so valued in anthropological writing” (Guha 210). Talking about the book, Elwin mentions in his autobiography that it was the second in series of the larger plan of documenting the oral literature of the Indian tribes of middle-India, the first being Folk-Tales of Mahakoshal (there are four volumes of folk tale under the general title “Specimens of the Oral Literature of Middle India” – Folk-tales of Mahakoshal, Folk-Songs of the Maikal Hills, Folk-Songs of Chhattisgarh, and the present volume):

Myths of Middle India … were not so good as stories, though of considerable significance for our knowledge of how tribal myths developed out of, and sometimes parallel to, the ancient Hindu traditions. Probably the most important section of this book was one, which some of my readers regarded as rather coarse, on the origin of the different parts of the human body and its natural functions. I was very pleased when the American Anthropologist described it as ‘a landmark in the exploration of the intellectual history of mankind’. (151)
Some of the key terms that are crucial to an understanding of the work need to be explicated here.

**Tribe**: Elwin’s effort of documenting tribal communities is based on a conceptual category used by the colonial government to classify what they considered “the primitive faction of the Indian society” (Devy xv). Most of these communities lived in forests for thousands of years, having occasional or sometimes no contact with societies extant then. Hindu societies and these communities existed peacefully, Hindus unenthusiastic to proselytize these communities which were outside their civilizational trajectory (except for the odd exception here or there) and the communities disinclined to participate in the Hindu way of life. There was no pressure of population or development to disturb this arrangement. However, the physical isolation of most of these communities was compromised when “developmental” initiatives like roads and railways made inroads into their habitat in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, leading to the enforcement of law and order in these areas which had previously been almost unadministered; growth in population also led to people moving towards the sparsely populated tribal areas. The inroad of law and order and people into these areas led to changes in the narratives of these people. Simultaneously, in the 1860s, the British encroachment into the forests where many of these communities lived led to clashes between the forest-dwelling communities and the colonial administration.

The Battle of Plassey and the Mutiny 1857 had generally led to the spread of unrest and insecurity in north-west and central India, soldiers of armies which had been disbanded (because states had surrendered to the British) often organizing themselves into groups to attack British convoys. The British administration, after surveying the attacks (referred to as thugee), formulated a “profoundly misguided piece of legislation… the Criminal Tribes Act, 1871” (which was subsequently revised in 1891) so as to be able “to isolate and reform the communities imagined to be associated with the thugee” (Devy xv, emphasis added).

The words “tribe” and “tribal” were, as Devy notes, was in general use from the seventeenth century onwards, but was later, as Devy notes “brought into use in a specific sense for only certain communities after a series of conflicts ensued between them and the colonial rulers” (Devy xv). The forest-dwelling communities and the communities covered under the Criminal Tribes Act were thus “bundled together by the colonial government under the term ‘tribe’” (Devy xvi). Colonial scholarship, especially the discipline of anthropology, then in its initial phase, was brought into use in order to politically premise these communities as “primitive”. Since these communities were not talked about/to in the scheme of the Indian freedom movement, their categorization remained uncontested, and these tribes remained “a forgotten issue” (Devy xvii). This explains why, when Elwin came to India in the 1930s, the “tribes” didn’t figure in the political discourse of the times. Elwin thus inherited both the colonial legacy as well as the nationalist disinclination with respect to the tribes, and it was this conundrum that probably ultimately led him to work with the tribes of India.

**Middle India**: Middle India is, to say in the least, an amorphous geographical entity. It is the region that falls between the Hindi-speaking northern part of India and the Dravidian south, stretching from the Arabian Sea in the west to the Bay of Bengal in the east, and could be said to comprise (with reference to the book on hand) of the southern part of Madhya Pradesh, Chattisgarh, Maharashtra and Goa, and parts of Orissa, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka as well. This is
because apart from the linguistic and cultural divide that marks the north as distinct from the south, there are vast swathes of in-between lands inhabited by tribal populations who do not have any connection with either. In his “introduction” to *Myths of Middle India*, Elwin elaborates on the region he wants to concentrate on:

There are no formal geographical boundaries of Middle India. In the text I have confined myself to myths from the Central provinces, the Chattisgarh and Orissa States (Elwin footnotes this nomenclature with the following classification: This book was completed in 1945, long before the administrative changes that have redrawn the map of India. The states of Bastar, Bonai, Keinjhar and Pal Lahara are now (1949) merged in the neighbouring Provinces) and western Orissa … But this territory is not the whole of Middle India and in the introduction to each chapter I have included such additional myths as have been recorded by other writers. I have drawn these from the adjacent areas of Bihar, Central India, Mirzapur, Rajputana and neighbouring districts. (213-14)

It is therefore a very flexible definition of Middle India that Elwin uses in his book, certainly not based on any stringent logic, but negotiable.

**Myth:** Myths are narratives that deal with the origin of the world or of a people, their gods, demi-gods and heroes, how the present order was established, and so on. The subject of myth and ritual has been of fundamental interest to anthropologists (and others) from the very beginning. They were supposed to have formed part of the characteristics of ‘primitive society’, like animism (the worship of nature) and euhemerism (the worship of the dead). As such they are the features of ‘other cultures’, outside the bounds of ‘modern’ rationality, obeying another system of logic, or indeed being ‘pre-logical’ or ‘irrational’ in our terms. (Goody 1)

Elwin makes some important observations about the definition and use of myths in his “Introduction”. He dismisses the view that a myth is “bad history written in symbolical language”, “speculative symbolization of natural phenomena”, or “merely a form of recreation”. Elwin does not agree with Malinowski’s derision of the view that myths were an attempt to explain or make intelligible abstract ideas, or Lord Raglan’s view that myth is nothing else other than a narrative linked to a rite. Contrary to these positions, Elwin holds that a myth is not a mere relic of the past, but “a living reality vitalizing and to some extent controlling the present” (215-216):

Myth as it exists in a savage community, that is, in its living primitive form, is not merely a story told but a reality lived. It is not of the nature of fiction, such as we read today in a novel, but a living reality believed to have once happened in primeval times and continuing ever since to influence the world and human destinies. This myth is to the savage what, to a fully believing Christian, is the Biblical story of Creation, of the Fall, of the Redemption. (Malinowski qtd. in Elwin 216)

Myth is not just explanatory in nature, it is the tribal people’s “motive power and authorization” (216). However, Elwin goes on to stress that we must not attempt to read too much of anything into these tribal myths. Myths could be associated with magic and ritual, or could simply be explanations and attempts at some sort of science, some kind of scientific romances, simply for amusement or serious or vital realities dominating the life of tribes.

He finds that more recent writers have gone too far in maintaining that a myth is “a narrative linked to a rite”. He succeeds in making the reader feel that a myth is a “living reality vitalizing and to some extent controlling the present”. Contrary to Malinowski’s and Lord Raglan’s insistence that a myth is never intended to explain
anything, he believes that the “aboriginals of Middle India are consumed with curvature about everything in the world”.

The “Publisher’s Note” to the Oxford India Elwin: Selected Writings refers to it as the record of a sphere of experience “far removed from the everyday rational urban world that we inhabit”, and show “the importance of nature, magic, the supernatural, and song and dance in tribal life” (xii).

15.2.3 The Structure and Content of the Text

It was, as Elwin notes, an aboriginal Purana, “a compendium of tribal stories about natural and human creation, rich in expressive imagery, with stars flashing and gods appearing and disappearing, tales of magic and wonder impossible to summarize or condense” (Guha 207-8). It contains 537 myths in story form dealing with twenty-three large topics, which are classed into four broad divisions:

1) Man and the Universe (the creation of the world and mankind; sun, moon and stars; air and water; fire)
2) The Natural World (metals and minerals; grass, flowers and trees; arthropods; reptiles; fish; birds; mammals)
3) Human Life (the human body; the invention of implements; food; tobacco; mahua spirit; disease; psycho-pathology: the vagina dentata legend; the coming of death)
4) Human Institutions (some aspects of religion; witchcraft and magic; custom and taboo; festival, dance and song)

We shall now look at some myths from each of these divisions:

1) Man and the Universe

This is an Agaria myth from Kareli, Madhya Pradesh which deals with the creation of the world and mankind:

Bhagavan initially tried to create the world by laying a great lotus leaf on the face of the water, but the sun arose and withered that leaf with its heat. He then used lac to make the world, but when he tried to climb on it, it broke. Then, using the dirt of his breast, Bhagavan made a crow, and allowed it to suck his milk two-and-a-half times and said: ‘Now you’ve drunk my milk, you’ll never hunger nor thirst; you and I will search for the earth together.’ The crow flew further and further, until it was so tired that it collapsed, and fell on the body of the great crab, Kakramal Kshattri. Kakramal also got involved in the search. He went underwater and woke up Nal Raja and Nal Rani, who had been sleeping for twelve years. Nal Raja said, ‘Nizam Raja has the earth, not me.’ But Kakramal squeezed Nal Raja’s throat till he vomited up the earth in little balls. The crow took the earth back to Bhagavan, who then made the world.

Five years later, Nanda Baiga and Nanda Baigin were born out of a crack in the ground. Nanda Baiga asked Mother Earth, ‘Mother, where is my fiddle?’ She replied, ‘Child you are you but a navel and a cord. What need is there of a fiddle?’

“So said Mother Earth, but on that day Basin Kaniya (the Bamboo Maiden) was born, and Nanga Baiga went to cut the bamboo, in one breath, above and below. And he made his fiddle with his own hair for strings, and played it, and Bhagavan’s seat shook with the sound. Then Bhagavan knew that the Baiga were born, and sent to call them. But his messenger found Nanga Baiga asleep in a winnowing-fan.
Mother Earth said, ‘Don’t go, my son,’ but Nanga Baiga took his fiddle and went. Bhagavan said to him, ‘Drive your nails into the earth to make it steady.’ But nanga Baiga had no nails, so he cut off the little finger of his right hand and drove that into the ground. But Bhagavan was not satisfied. “I want strong pillars,” he said.

So Nanga Baiga called Agyasur and worshipped him, and Agyasur flamed up with great flames, and from the fire an Agaria was born. Since we Agaria were born from fire, we never fear it, and can beat the slag from the glowing iron with our hands. Then that Agaria made twelve pillars of virgin iron and set them at four corners of the world, and it became steady, and Bhagavan sowed seeds everywhere.”

2) The Natural World

This is a Dhulia myth from Karondi, Madhya Pradesh that deals with trees:

“The wife of Mirchamal Dano, Buchki Rakasin, was a strange woman. She never bore a child; she did not even have a monthly period. The Dano got her a lot of medicine and called many medicine-men, but it was no use. One day Dano went to visit his father-in-law and on his way home picked up a dead crab. He gave it to his wife and said, ‘Your father has sent you this for supper.’ Buchki roasted and ate it, and that very night she began to menstruate. In a week she washed her head, that night lay with her husband, and conceived. In due time a child was born. He was Bakrenda Dano. Mirchamal Dano took the placenta and cord to Tehardongri jungle and there made a peacock trap with it. Next day there were three peacocks caught in the trap. But when the Dano went to see what had happened the following morning, he found that the trap had turned into a camel’s-foot creeper; the ord was the stem and the placenta had turned into great broad leaves.”

This is a Bhaina myth from Kenda Zamindari that deals with birds:

“At first birds could not fly; they used to walk or hop about. One day there was a Raja’s wedding. Everyone was invited. Among the guests were a Baiga Guru and a Bhaina Gunia. They tried to prove who was the greater magician. First the Baiga turned the guests into horses and asses. But the Bhaina turned some into water, and some into fire. When they had been turned back again into men, they came to the angry magicians and fell at their feet saying, ‘Trouble us no more; we have seen what great power you have.’”

The Baiga was going home. He saw many birds who had been invited to the wedding following him. Across the path he set bird-lime. A bird was caught in it and began to weep. The Bhaina saw it and by his magic gave the bird wings. It flew into the air and escaped the Baiga, who was very angry. But since that day birds have been able to fly.”

This is a Maria myth from Lakhopal, Bastar State that deals with mammals:

Long ago, before the Rebellion, when a man died, and the soul (jiwa) left the body, it was chased by the village dogs. In those days Maria could understand dog-language, and the dogs would inform the people, barking. ‘It has gone to Mahapurub; we watched it go.’ Then the people would not bury the body. After a while the soul would come down to earth to see what had happened to its body, and the dogs would bark, ‘The soul has come; it has gone into the corpse.’ The relatives would rush to the corpse and catch the soul and the dead would return to life. In this way Mahapurub lost all the souls from his kingdom and he was very worried, for there were not enough people to live in the Upper World. Mahapurub said, ‘From today when you bark no one will understand your language.’
Yet even now when a dog barks we know why; it sees a dead man’s soul going about the world. Once Mahapurub had many souls in his kingdom, he turned them into Duma and these live in their old homes and help their descendants. Should the Duma get angry and leave the house, many disasters follow.”

3) **Human Life**

This is a *Kahar* myth from Khuria, Bilaspur district, Madhya Pradesh that deals with the human body:

“At first men had nothing inside them; when they ate any food it went straight down – *bhang* – onto the ground. Sankasur and his wife Sirbhang called mankind to a feast, but they found that however much food they provided it went straight out of their bodies. Sankasur thought in his mind, ‘What can we do about this?’ He said to his wife, ‘Give me the cord round your waist.’ When he got it he wound it round and round and round and stuffed it into a man’s belly. For a liver he took the seven leaves of the *karowan-sok* tree. For kidneys he got leaves of the *takla* tree, and with its flowers he made teeth. With a stick he made a hollow in the middle of man’s chest and fixed the ribs in place and made the backbone. He put everything right; all men and all animals were repaired – except the camel and the tortoise. To this day the tortoise has no liver or teeth and the camel’s back is not straight.

A man breathes because of the trembling of his liver.

Sirbhang took a bell in her hand and worshipped. But Sankasur troubled his wife. He took the bell from her and stopped her worshipping. But she made him open his mouth and tied the bell inside his throat. When the bell rings we say that a man is coughing.”

This is a *Chokh Agaria* myth from Thanakar, Bilaspur district, Madhya Pradesh that deals with the birth of children:

“From the head of the fish Raghuman bloomed a lotus and bore two fruits. One day they broke open and from one came Mahadeo, from the other Parvati. When Mahadeo grew up, he could not control his desire for his sister, so he turned his back on her and refused to see her face. But when Parvati too became mature, she also was filled with desire and begged her brother to look at her. At last he turned round and as he did so his seed sprang from him. Parvati caught it in her hand and held it in her clenched hand. Soon she was pregnant and after that children were born in the world.”

4) **Human Institutions**

This is a *Muria* myth from Palari, Bastar state that deals with the coming of death.

“At the beginning of the world men were very small; they ploughed with rats and had to pull down brinjals as if they were getting mangoes. The ground was so soft that you could fall through it down to the Lower World. In those days men could remove the tops of their heads, examine them for lice, and put them back again.

When the first men died, their neighbours took them out to burial, but the corpses got up and came back and sat in front of their houses. When the neighbours came in, they asked, ‘What sort of folk are you? We were just sleeping and you carried us here and there. When we awoke we returned home.’

When Mahapurab heard of this, he wondered how he was to get lives for his kingdom. He thought, ‘I must stick the tops of their heads on; then they will certainly die.’ He ground flour, mixed it with water into a paste and hid it. Then he went to see the
first man and woman. ‘What have you got inside your heads?’ he asked. ‘Do show me.’ They removed the tops of their heads, and Mahapurab quickly smeared the edges with paste, muttering, ‘Never come unstuck again.’ When the first man and woman put the tops of their heads back, they stuck and soon afterwards people began to die.

And now for fear that the dead might come back again to their houses, the neighbours burnt their bodies and they never returned to life.”

15.3 LETS SUM UP

Ramachandra Guha’s statement that Verrier Elwin was “unquestionably the most colourful and influential non-official Englishman to live and work in twentieth-century India” is no exaggeration. Elwin’s contribution to the documentation of the lives of India’s tribal population, though lacking in anthropological rigour, is his most important contribution in this direction. His sensitive understanding reflects in each page of his work, and is not just a reflection of their lives but also their predicament. In *Myths of Middle India*, Verrier Elwin gives us story versions of hundreds of myths concerning human life and institutions, god, the universe, natural phenomena and the natural world. It focuses on ‘Middle India’ an area that is largely not talked about in the context of the country, a space between the Hindi north and the Dravidian south. The language and culture of the tribal people who inhabit this place does not correspond to either of these two regions. The book focuses exclusively on origin myths and has 537 original myths from the whole region, and focuses on the common stories that all tribes in Middle India share. The book deals with the creation of the world, and the human beings and animals in it. The book exemplifies Elwin’s contention that these stories are a “living reality vitalizing and to some extent controlling the present”.

15.4 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


Folktales of India: Motifs, Modes and Mores


15.4 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

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

1) Who was Verrier Elwin and what was his contribution to Indian folklore?

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2) What are the stories you like the most in this collection? Elaborate on the reasons.

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