UNIT 14  WHEN THE WORLD WAS YOUNG BY VERRIER ELWIN

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14.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you would

• be aware of the innate wisdom of the tribal communities that get reflected in their narratives;
• appreciate the rich imaginative faculty of the tribal communities;
14.1 INTRODUCTION

Verrier Elwin, the well-known anthropologist, writer, and activist, came to India as a British missionary, with a view to bring in change in the “primitive” world. It did not take much time for his perspective to undergo a transformation when he came in contact with the Adivasi community. He was fascinated by their innate sense of aesthetics and vigor, their world view, which was intensely intricate and profound, though many a time expressed through simple imagery and metaphor. As he grew familiar with the cultural practices of the Adivasi communities in India, he grew determined to enlighten not only himself but also the whole world. He then resolved to document the rich oral narratives which till then were given significance only by a selected few in the literary world in India. Verrier Elwin went on to collect a good number of tribal tales from different regions in India and transcribed them as they were, without trying to impose his own impressions and interpretations.

Verrier Elwin had collected stories during his journeys in the hills and forests in India over a period of thirty years and had published almost two thousand of them in his five collections: Folktales of Mahakoshal, Myths of Middle India, Tribal Myths of Orissa, Myths of the North-East Frontiers of India and the Baiga.

In When the World was Young, Verrier Elwin had chosen some tales from all the above mentioned collections in a systematic order, in the context of the motif they speak of, ranging from “The beginning of things” to “The end of things”. There are six parts in this book, based on six motifs. As the title suggests, the readers would get a glimpse of the fertile imagination of the storytellers who take us into the world when it was very young and things were just beginning to take shape. The collection of the tales captures the thought processes of the narrators who had let their creative minds travel unhindered from one theme to the other thereby stimulating the minds of the listeners to think about the world. These tales were passed from one generation to the other through oral tradition. Verrier Elwin had presented the tales precisely the way they were being narrated by the storytellers of his times and through them the readers get a peep into the innovative minds of the varied tribal communities.

Let’s visit look at each segment and perceive the thought processes encapsulated in the tales:

14.2 “THE BEGINNING OF THINGS”

In part one, Verrier Elwin had documented some of the tales which focus on the origin motif. Each tale is imaginatively related to the origin of an element that had gone into making this stupendous Universe: earth, Sun and Moon, thunder and lightning, rainbow, snowflakes, rivers, and earthquake. The narratives are also about the nuances and layers in human emotions and human relationships. While the first narrative which is about the origin of the earth is from the rich repertoire of narratives of the Baiga tribes in Madhya Pradesh, the rest of them originated in the fertile mindscape of the narrators from the North East.
14.2.1 The Making of the World

The first story in part one is from the Baiga tribe in Central India, a tribe endowed with a rich imaginative faculty. This is the theme which is widespread among all the tellers of the tales in the hills and forests and while they may differ in terms of some of the elements that went into making this earth, they all have imagined a great ocean, a stupendous water body from where the earth had originated. While in some of the narratives, the earth was thought to have been “hatched out of an enormous egg”, in other tales the earth was shown to be “molded by God in his own hands”.

The Baigas had visualized the earth to be filled with water and had imagined how it was in the beginning, when there was nothing on this earth, not even wind, rock or forest. There was absolute silence, not even the voices of God or demon could be heard. God alone sitting on a leaf kept on drifting in the endless flow of water till he felt utterly lonely and decided to create a crow, his daughter, from the dirt of his palm. When she was old enough to fly, he sent her in search of clay with which he wanted to create this earth. When crow could not find it after days of flying across the water and fell, completely exhausted, with a thud on the back of a tortoise, the latter told her that all the clay had been swallowed by the earthworm. The narration then gears up in search of the way to trace the earthworm and to make the earthworm regurgitate different kinds of earth with which God then created the earth and all its inhabitants. The tale reflects the built-in the wisdom of the tellers who had spoken of the different layers of the earth, each with different characteristics: each layer was of a different colour like black, yellow, red, white etc. and was rocky or sandy, fertile or arid, or sometimes, it was the combination of all these traits. There was a layer which quaked and there was even a layer of earth which was sinful in the sense that humans in that layer could be easily killed by a tiger. The Lords of Iron (Loharsur), the Lords of Copper (Tamesur), and the Lords of Fire (Agyasur) were also involved in the making of this earth, as they were the ones who made a great iron cage with windows in which the crow and the tortoise had voyaged down to reach the bottom of the earth to locate the earthworm and then had carried up the diverse kinds of earth. There is a beautiful description of how the earth was rolled out by God like a huge thin cake and spread over the water. And when it was found to be too slippery, like mud in the rains, the Wind God (Pawan Daseri) was called, the Pawan Desari, whom God had made from the breath of his mouth, then kept on blowing till the earth began to get solidly even. But as the wind is blind, it kept on knocking things over and banging up against people and so, the work was far from perfect. The earth became hard but when people stood on one side, the other side would tip up. Therefore Bhimsen, the great giant, was called. But he wanted to eat first, and after eating up twenty five sacks of rice, twelve sacks of lentils, twelve sacks of gram, he wanted to drink something. God sent him in search of a drink and when Bhimsen came to a Mahua tree, he saw birds like pigeons, blue jays, parrots, crows, mainas drinking a spirit found in the hollow of the Mahua tree and then sitting on the branches intoxicated, nodding their heads. Once he drank the spirit, Bhimsen also started nodding his head, along with the birds, sitting by them on the branch of the tree. Later he filled twelve gourds with that intoxicating spirit and brought them up to the God who drank it along with crow and wind and then all three of them began to jiggle their heads. In the mean time Bhimsen began to walk around the earth and where it was thin, he put a mountain, where it was too heavy, he made a valley, where it was too slippery, he put trees to hold it together. But the earth even then was quite wobbly and not firm, and was so scattered and uneven that it resembled a broken spider web. In this origin myth, it is ultimately the Baigas who made this earth firm, steady and habitable. The narrative further says that
when Nanga Baiga (the first Baiga) and his wife were born from the crack of this earth, he made his fiddle out of the bamboo tree with his hair as the strings, and then when he kept on playing it, the seat of the God shook with the sound of its vibrations and God came to know that Baigas were born. And then God asked Nanga Baiga to make the earth steady. Nanga Baiga prayed to Agyasur, who blazed up with great flame and Agariya, the blacksmith was born from that fire. He then made twelve iron pillars which were put in the four corners of this earth to make it steady and firm. And after this, God sowed seeds all over the earth.

14.2.2 The Origin of the Sun and the Moon

This story comes from the Minyongs who live by the river Siang in the north east frontier. They have imagined the earth as a woman and sky as a man and that when they married and came together, the spirits, animals and humans were afraid of getting crushed between them and so, Sedi-Diyor, one of the greatest spirits started beating the sky. The sky fled far up into the heaven. In the meantime, earth gave birth to two daughters but she was heartbroken due to her separation from the sky and so she did not take care of the girls. It was Sedi-Diyor who found a woman who took care of the two daughters. When these two little girls when started walking, light began to shine from them, and as they grew up, the light also grew stronger. But one day, when the woman who reared them died and was buried, both the sisters wept so much that they too died, and along with them, the light also died.

Now, the earth was drowned in darkness and everybody – spirit, humans and animals – was afraid. They could not understand the deep love which the little girls had felt for the woman who, to them, was their mother in the real sense, and concluded that the woman must have stolen something from the girls and that is why they had cried so much and had eventually died. And so, they dug up the earth to find her body. But the body had rotted away, and what they found was a pair of her eyes.

Now, the eyes were shining brightly and when they saw their own reflections, they thought it were the two little girls who were living inside those shining eyes. They tried their best to bring them out, washed the eyes under a stream for five days and five nights, and ultimately it was a carpenter who cut the eyes open and the reflections turned into two living girls whom they named Sedi-Irkong-Bomong and Sedi-Irkong-Bong. They were kept inside a house and were taken care of. They grew up. One day, Sedi-Irkong- Bomong wore gaily coloured clothes and many ornaments and came out. As she came out, it was day since there was light shining from her and she kept on walking and went across the hills and never returned. The younger sister when went in search of her, the light shone so intensely that the rocks broke, the trees withered and people and animals and birds all fainted. All of them then decided to kill her and it was the frog that shot arrows at her and killed her. The moment she was killed, light began to go from the earth. The rat carried her body to a river from where the older sister would pass and while carrying the body, the rat fell down again and again and since then the rat’s legs have become crooked. When Bomong saw her sister’s body, she wept out of sorrow as well as fear and hid herself in a cave drowning the earth in complete darkness. When rat, wild bird, and cock were sent to find the missing girl, it was the cock that found her. When she refused to come out till her sister was brought back to life, the carpenter was called to do so. The carpenter made a small body so that her light would not be too bright to make rocks break, trees wither and humans faint. And so, it became the moon. And when Bomong heard her sister was again alive, she threw away the stone and stood up. The day returned and along with it, the different sounds, the cocks ‘kokoko-kokoko, the wild bird’s ‘pengo-pengo’ and the rat’s squeak ‘taktak-taktak’.
14.2.3 The Origin of Lightning and Thunder

In the third segment, Verrier Elwin had kept a few stories from different regions about the origin of lightning and thunder. The first narrative is from Orissa, in which the seven beautiful daughters of Jogi Jhoria were so very engrossed in dancing with the boys at the drums that they did not realize when they were being whisked away into the sky and intoxicatingly when they kept on at it while in front of the Cloud God, the latter was so immensely joyful that he would not let them go back to the earth and said to them that when he sends rains down, they must keep on dancing across the sky and beat their drums. And so, the Cloud God named the girls lightning and the boys, thunder.

In the North east, the Noctes have another story which goes like this: Long ago, there were two brothers, and while the elder lived on earth, the younger brother lived in the sky. The younger one was fond of dancing and would dance sometimes and drop raindrops from above. And then he would ask the lovely girls on the earth whether they ever had beads as beautiful as the raindrops. He would throw lightening down and ask whether the earth ever had such wonderful magic. And then he would beat his drum which made thunders go across the sky and would ask the people of the earth whether they ever had created music which could match the sound of the thunder.

Verrier Elwin had included one more story about thunder and lightning which was from the Mishmis in the north east and he felt Mishmis were less romantic because they had imagined the clouds as the pig in the sky. The Mishmis believed that there was a long chain tied across the sky on which the cloud pigs wandered about. When two pigs would break into a fight, their bristles would scrape against each other making the lightening flash across the sky. And the sound of their grunts led to thunder.

14.2.4 The Origin of Rainbow

About the origin of the rainbow, Verrier Elwin has selected a tale from the northeast in which there are four water spirits. Lukarpo, a white spirit, Lunakpu, a black spirit, Lusirpu, a yellow spirit and Lumarpo, a red spirit. All the four spirits live in springs and they wander across the sky seeking wives. When they wander across the sky, they create a coloured path and that is the rainbow. During their journey, they drink tea and rice beer and when that falls on the earth, we say that “it is raining”.

14.2.5 The Origin of Snow

The origin of snow was traced in a tale from the north east and the tale tells us about two brothers and their wives who lived in the Phong Langra Mountains along with their children. There was never enough food and therefore, the parents one day took the children to the top of the hills in search of food and when they did not find any food over there, they left the children there itself and went away. The children kept on looking up towards the sky and cried out of intense hunger.

The Gods Lujuphu and Jasuju sitting amidst clouds looked down to find out who were crying and seeing the children down there, they started throwing down the cooked rice which they had collected in ample and as the rice began to fall on the earth, it turned into snow.
14.2.6 The Origin of the Rivers

In the sixth segment, Verrier Elwin had kept those tales which were about the origin of the rivers. The first tale is about the river Brahmaputra, told by the Idu Mishmis, one of the communities from north eastern India. The Idu Mishmis believe that the river Brahmaputra is the sister of the Sun and she lived in a great lake called Nimtubram. The Sun, being up in the sky could travel without any hindrances but Brahmaputra found it really difficult to move freely on the earth. And so, the people and animals would faint due to lack of water and were always in search of it. One day, a worm that lived close to Nimtubram dug a small waterway and quenched its thirst. When the cat saw the trickle of water, tried to drink it but finding it too little and that too muddy, dug a big channel and drinking the fresh water went away. Brahmaputra began to follow the cat and like the cat, she too started wandering about on the earth, quenching the thirst of many. But she had to stop moving when God Drakub got a wall made on her way. Seeing human beings and animals dying of thirst, God Chainye went to God Drakub and reminded him about how great he was for he was the one who had made this world, and asked the latter to undo the mischief. When Drakub did not relent, he told him that he should go home because his wife had died. Drakub’s answer was that it did not matter, that if one wife died, he could have thousands of wives. Chainye wanted Drakub to go away so that the dam could be broken away to let Brahmaputra move around freely, and so he was very disappointed. Then he said to Drakub that his son had died but Drakub gave the same answer that he could get thousands of sons. Then Chainye told Drakub that his mother was dying. This time Drakub immediately set off for his home saying if his mother died, he could never get another mother. Immediately Chainye broke the dam letting Brahmaputra continue with her journey, satiating the thirst of many, and coming down to the plains of Assam.

Another story about the birth of river was told by the Kamars of Orissa. There was an old couple who were panic stricken when their only son fell ill and nothing seemed to help him get well. They did whatever they were told to do. They offered goats and pigeons to the Gods, brought medicine for him but nothing helped. One day the father went in search of a magician about whom he had heard a lot and when he ultimately found him, he requested him to see his son. But sadly by then, the son’s life had left the body. The mother was inconsolable and she cried so much that a river was born out of her tears. When she did not stop crying, the river got overwhelmed and there was flood. In the meantime, the father, along with the magician had reached the village, but they were astonished to see the rushing stream which did not let them go close to the house. The father, sensing that something was terribly wrong, asked the magician to go back and he himself kept on trying to reach his house. When the mother gradually stopped lamenting, and the flood receded, he could enter the house. He was grief-stricken as he said to her that had she not cried so much, he could have brought the magician home and their son could have been saved. Then the mother said, “I wept to create rivers in this world.” The father was so angry that he pushed her into the water and he himself also jumped into the water and both were drowned. But the world was alive with refreshing water.

14.2.7 The Origin of the Earthquake

This is a tale from the Baigas. It is about Bhima Raja who had set up a kingdom in the Mahullakta hill, and he had started forcing people work for him in the palace. Every household had to send one person to the palace to work and moreover, had to give him tax twice a year. Bhima Raja gave one more order which irked the people to no end. Bhima Raja told them that he would not accept tax money from his
subject’s hands that they had to put little sacks of coins on the back of the hares and drive them to the palace. To do this, the people had to tame hares and feed them and fatten them. When they grew big, they would be loaded with sacks but the hares found it difficult to walk with such a load and would take a month to reach the palace. All these the people found very dreary and one day they decided to kill Bhima Raja. Sharpening their weapons, they started for the palace. Bhima Raja’s two sons were very young and so when the queen found the people coming closer to the palace, she hid her sons in a cellar and locked it from outside. And when Bhima Raja got killed by the people, she put all her gold and silver ornaments in a little box and threw it in a well and then along with her women attendants, she too jumped into the well and died.

Since then two little sons shake and bang the door of the cellar from time to time and want to come out and avenge the death of their parents. And this is why the earth shakes.

14.3 THE FIRST MEN

If the first chapter is on “the beginning of things” perceived by the tribal communities from different regions in India – the making of the world, the rainbow, the rivers – the second one focuses on the “first men”, how men lost their tails, how they began to talk and many more related ideas which dwelt in the world of fantasy and imagination and inspired a sense of wonder in the listeners. In part two, eight stories from different regions about the first human have been put together. Each tale is about acquiring or losing a particular attribute. If the first tale in part two is about how humans lost their tails, another tale is about how eyes were acquired.

14.3.1 How Men lost their Tails

In the hills, there are many tales about how humans originated. Some tales say that the first humans were created out of clay by God himself with his own hands while others claim that they were hatched from mammoth eggs. While some tales tell us about how they emerged from a crack in the earth, others say they were born of a Goddess or born of animals. All the tales convey the uniform belief that the first humans were very different from the contemporary humans.

In Orissa, the Saora tale says that the first humans had tails with which they used to sweep the ground. In the beginning, there was no trouble but as the number of humans went up, the tails got in the way and during gatherings like weddings or funerals, humans would step on each other’s tails and fall down. Sometimes it would lead to amusement; sometimes they would get severely hurt. And then one day it so happened that the great God Kittung fell down very badly. As he was wandering around in a bazaar, someone stepped on his tail and God Kittung, losing his balance went sprawling on the ground. Not only did he fall, he in fact dashed against a stone and his two teeth got knocked out. All the people present over there laughed and that made God Kittung lose his temper. What he did after that made all the tails very frightened. He gave a violent pull to his tail and when it came out, he threw it away. All the other tails began to separate themselves from the human bodies and started running away. The story says that God Kittung’s tail had turned into the Sago palm while all other tails had turned into grass with which humans started making brooms.

14.3.2 The Little Men

The second story emerges from the Murias of Bastar according to whom human beings were initially very small in size. The Sun and the Moon were not there and
the earth and the clouds were always very close to each other since they were husband and wife. The human beings were tiny creatures since they had to move about between the earth and the clouds. The tiny humans would plough their land with the help of rats. They were all growing very tired and exhausted with their heads banging against the sky and so, one day an old woman got so angry when she hit her broom on the sky that she gave a violent push to the sky and the sky went up and up till it reached a great height. Thereafter, the human beings had plenty of space to grow tall.

14.3.3 The First Eyes

This story is about the human beings having no eyes in the initial stage. They were like puppies that have no eyes and they would trip up and fall constantly. They could do no work and they died very early. One day when God came down to see his children, he was very disturbed. He then decided to get them eyes and went into the forest to search for eyes. Near a stream, he found a big crab with huge eyes and thought he would give those eyes to the human but as he tried to catch the crab, the crab bit him and fled. Then he saw an owl and tried to catch it but it struck him on his face and flew away. God was very tired by then and as he sat down under a fir tree, a few stones of the plums fell down on the ground as a crow was trying to eat the fruit perched on one of the branches on the tree. God then fitted them on the faces of men with which they began to have eye sight.

But then, they had no eyelids and eyebrows and so, they slept with their eyes open. One night when the water fairies came to visit them, they were surprised that they were not greeting them though they seemed to be wide awake. And when they realized they were sleeping, they made lashes out of the lovely feathers of the peacock and then fixed them on their eyes. After that they grew lids and slept with their eyes tightly shut.

14.3.4 How Human Beings Began to Talk

The early human beings had no tongue and so could not speak. God wanted to give them tongues, but failed to invent anything. One day after bathing in the river as he sat down on a rock to be in the sun, he heard a frog saying to his mate that it might rain, and this could lead to floods, and all their children would get swept away. God caught hold of the frogs and checked the tongues and then cutting them fixed them in the mouths of human beings. After that, human beings began to talk.

14.3.5 Big Ears

In this section, the next story is about human beings having enormous ears. The ears were so big that human beings could use them as mattresses and blankets, sleeping on one of them and covering with the other. One day, even God mistook a human being for an animal and he killed him with his arrow. God was very sad and he then cut off the ears, leaving only a small part of it. Since then we have had small ears.

14.3.6 The Women with Beards

In the beginning, women had beards and moustaches. The tiger who was the king of the forest was in search of a pretty girl for his son and all the animals in the forest thought, “If my daughter gets married to the son of the tiger, she would be then known as the queen of the forest”. There was a she goat that lived with an old woman as her servant. She got thrilled at the thought of becoming the queen of the forest. She requested the old woman to lend her beard and moustache to her so that
the tiger would make her his daughter in law and she promised she would return the beard and the moustache. But she never came back from the forest and since then women ceased to have beard and moustache.

14.3.7 When Life was Dull

The Konds of Orissa believe that in early times, girls and boys would not giggle or flirt with each other. They would always be very serious and would only talk about their debts or the condition of the crops. Goddess Nirantali got very tired seeing them grave all the time and then she made ‘Tickle Bug’ out of wax and sent it into the tummies of the boys and girls, advising it to live in the armpits, under the chin, in the ribs. She told the Tickle Bug to run about inside the body the moment one touches the skin outside. This way, the girls and boys will get tickled and would want to laugh. After eight days, when she went to see them again she was happy to see them full of laughter and love and not talking of debts all the time. This way Goddess Nirantali brought in joy and humor in the lives of humans.

14.4 DISCOVERIES

In this section, there are tales about discoveries and inventions: of house, fire, hammer and tongs, clothes, tobacco, dance.

14.4.1 How to Build a House

In the hills, there are many stories prevalent about the different ways human beings lived in the beginning. They lived in caves, on trees, in huts made of grass and leaves.

The Saoras in Orissa believed that human beings were very small in height and they were always trying to find places where they could live in peace. During rains, they would try to dig holes and live inside the holes like hares do but then they would be buried alive many a times when the roofs fell on them. And then a man called Jangu Saora had a novel idea and he built a house by using toddy palm leaves and the house resembled an umbrella because it had a circular roof fixed on a single pillar with no walls. These were the houses the Saoras lived in for many centuries and even today, their temples are like that.

An interesting story prevalent among the Singphos of north eastern India is that the first humans learnt the art of making houses from different animals. Initially they lived in caves or on trees. And then there were two friends, Kindru Lalim and Kincha Lali Dam who learnt the art from the elephant who asked them to make wooden pillars like the strong and thick elephant legs and when they asked what they should do after that, the elephant said, “I haven’t the least idea”.

In a similar fashion, the other animals gave them information one by one. The snake told them to “cut poles as long thin as a snake”, the she buffalo pointing at her dead buffalo husband said, “Put cross-poles and make a roof like the bones of this skeleton”, and the fish told them “to get plenty of leaves and put them on the roof, one above the other like my scales”. This is how the first house got built.

14.4.2 Hammer and Tongs

Intupwa, a craftsman, had learnt to make a hammer out of stone when he had watched the elephant’s feet crushing everything under its impact. Then Intupwa was trying to cut wood with sharp stones but was finding it very difficult. He went in search of
iron, of which he had dreamt, and he knew he could make an axe out of the metal. He asked the tree, the grass, and the wild animals where he could find iron but they all refused to tell him saying he would then make an axe to cut them down or an arrow with which he would then kill the wild animals. At last, water told him to go to Numrang-Ningpu where a goddess lived and that very night she gave birth to a child who was as red as fire but soon the child cooled, and became as black as iron. Intupwa cut a small piece and took it home where it burst into thousands of pieces and a stream carried them to different parts of the earth. When Intupwa heated the iron, he did not have anything to hold it. As he went to a stream to drink water, a crab caught hold of his arm. Intupwa screamed in pain but as he looked at the claws of the crab, he got the idea of making tongs. This is the way that the hammer and tongs were made.

14.4.3 Making of Clothes

The Mishmis of north-eastern India believe that the first weaver was Hambrumai, who had learnt the art from God Matai. Hambrumai got different patterns from nature and wove the clothes. She would watch the waves and the ripples in the water or the trees and ferns, plants and flowers and the sky and the clouds, and weave the designs in the clothes. But one day, when Hairum the porcupine came to steal her cloth from her cave, he pushed the rock so hard that Hambrumai, who was sitting by the river, got crushed under it. Even her loom got broken into thousands of pieces and as the river carried them to the plains, the people picked up them and learnt how to weave. The designs of Hambrumai then turned into butterflies and people still can see the patterns that Hambrumai weaved, on their wings.

14.4.4 How Fire was Discovered

In Central India, in Kawardha, a story was being told about the discovery of fire. During the hunting stage, humans ate everything raw. They would hunt a variety of animals and would then eat them raw. They had no homes to live in. So, they would live under trees or inside caves. They wore no clothes and had their nails and hair very long since they never cut them. During summer, when the wind blew very forcefully, the dry bamboos got rubbed very hard and a fire broke out. The fire spread very fast and the whole jungle got totally burnt. The human beings had taken shelter in the caves and so were saved. When they came out, they found many animals burnt dead. One of the men touched a burnt body, his finger got burnt, and he quickly put his finger into his mouth. Then he forgot about the pain and relished the taste of the burnt flesh. After that human beings started eating roasted meat.

14.4.5 Tobacco Discovery

This is a poignant narrative about the daughter of a king whom no one was willing to marry, as she was not conventionally beautiful. Her father tried to buy her a husband, but when suitors would see her deformed arm, her dwarfish body, her cross eyes and the sores that covered her body, they would refuse to marry her. She felt that the rest of the world was living in great happiness for all were in pairs – ants, rats, birds, cattle, men and women. She told her father that she did not want to live and lying down, she died right there. When the great God asked the soul of the girl to ask for anything she wanted, she requested him to make her into something that the whole world would love. The great God granted her wish by turning her into a tobacco plant. And therefore the unhappy girl became a happy one since men started saying, “There is no difference between a wife and tobacco; we love them equally.” The girl is happy since all wise men love her and no one goes to work without first kissing her in his pipe.
14.4.6 Dance

The Gonds have a narrative about how they started dancing and from whom they learnt it. They learnt dancing from the peacocks. There was a hill of peacocks and once when people were crossing the hills, they found peacocks dancing away to woo peahens and so they stopped there and watched them dancing and soon, they started dancing along with the peacocks. As the peacocks have tufts on their heads, the people also put tufts on their turbans and as the peacocks look at their own beauty while dancing, the people started watching their own shadows while dancing away. Later when they had learnt dancing, the peacocks went away from there, giving them their feathers, asking them to put them in their turbans and dance since that would ensure that their dance will never go wrong.

14.5 THE TALKING ANIMALS

The First Monkeys

In the hills and the forests in India, people mostly believe that monkeys descended from men. In Orissa, the Juangs believed that once upon a time, the monkeys were men. It so happened that one day, they were trying to make a clearing for cultivation in the forest by cutting down the trees. But the dry leaves and wood would not catch fire. They brought fire from the village headman’s house, priest’s house, magician’s house, and from the watchman’s house, but the wood did not catch fire. Their moustaches and beards got burnt in the process and their hands were all sore. They were afraid of their wives, and about what they would say. To distract their attention, they tied some wood to their back and started jumping, shouting, “hoop hoop hoop hoop”. And then the woods turned into tails and the dirt got stuck in the hair of their body and they turned into monkeys and went to live in the jungles.

14.5.1 The Frog and the Monkey

This story is about how the monkey got a tail and and why the top of the frog’s head is flat.

In olden times, animals could talk and so they worked in palaces as servants. In one of the kingdoms, the king had a frog and a monkey working for him and every day, he would ask them to do a certain task. The monkey was very deceitful and he wanted to be the king someday. One day, when the king asked the monkey to get fruits from the forest and the frog to get fish from the river, the monkey spent the whole day in the forest, eating fruits and sleeping for long hours. While coming back, when he found the frog carrying a huge fish, he was afraid that the king would beat him up. So he covered himself with mud and then he threw the frog with all the fish into a stream, asking him to tell the king that he could not get any fish. He told the frog that one day he would become the king by killing the present king and he would see to it that the frog did not have to work at all. When they both came back to the palace, the monkey told the king that he had tried the whole day to get fruits by climbing hundreds of trees and in the process had fallen down and got covered in mud and dust. And then he told the king that the frog never made any attempt to catch fish and that he kept on bathing in the river. The king got so furious that he hit the frog on the head. The narrator then says, “That’s why you will notice the top of the frog’s head is flat”. The frog got so angry that he told the king what the monkey had said and then he went and jumped into the river and lived there forever.

And then the monkey collected all his friends and relatives and with bows and arrows came to attack the king. The king made a black paste, and coloring his face
with it, he sat quietly waiting for the monkey. When the monkey came in, he asked the king where he got the color, and that he also wanted it for himself. The king said to him that he sat inside the hollow of a tree and asked his servants to bring wood and set fire to it, and that smoke made his face black. The monkey liked the idea so much that he collected all his friends and did what the king said he had done. They all were tied with a rope and then all the monkeys died of burning, except one. This she monkey escaped because the rope itself had got burnt leaving a little bit of it hanging from below, which then became the tail of the monkey.

14.5.2 The Two Friends

Tiger and frog were friends. Tiger always invited frog for meals and so one day frog also invited tiger to his house for a meal. But how to feed him meat? Frog tried to bite off flesh from a horse’s back but the horse kicked him so hard that frog started limping. When tiger came for dinner, frog did not know what to give him. And then he started removing the flesh from his own legs to offer meat to tiger. When tiger heard his moaning, he came to see what the matter was. He was very sad to see the frog in such a condition. Tiger then said to frog, “Friend, there was no need for you to do this. In any case, I would not eat your flesh” But frog felt so ashamed that he jumped into the river and lived there forever. Since then, frog has very thin legs.

14.5.3 The Flying Elephants

The Saoras in Orissa believed that there was a time in the past when the elephants could fly. The elephants possessed four great wings and God would ride on one of them. But later when the world was made and human beings began to live in houses, the flying elephants began to create problems. They would come down when tired and would sit on the roof of the houses. The houses would break and that annoyed the human beings. When they told the God about it, God was also angry. He invited the elephants to a feast and made them drink and eat so much that they fell asleep. While they were asleep, God cut all the four wings and then he gave two wings to the peacock and two wings to the plantain tree. The elephants woke up to find their wings gone and were very angry. They went into the jungle and since then the elephants are afraid of human beings.

14.5.4 The Snake Husband

There was an old woman who had two daughters. The elder daughter was beautiful to look at but she could not weave the way her younger sister did. The younger sister always made fun of her and so, she felt miserable at times and went to the river and sat by it. Once when she was bathing in the river, a big snake came towards her and that frightened her a lot. Strangely, the snake transformed himself into a handsome young man and asked her not to be afraid. He said he could take the form of snake and man as he pleased. They fell in love with each other and met there every day. One day, when she was sad, he asked her the reason for her sadness. When he came to know the reason, he turned into a snake and asked her to carry him home, and then instructed her to put him on her lap, sit on her loom and copy the pattern of the beautiful snake skin. This way, she began to make the finest clothes in the village. She gave one cloth to her sister and one to other girls in the village so that they could copy the pattern and sell the clothes. And then she told her mother that she would marry the snake man. Her mother did not want her to marry a snake and scolded and cajoled her a lot but she was determined. And so, he came to her house with a big procession and while the villagers could see only the snakes, the girl could see the man. The girl went down the river with her husband. After a few years, the younger sister went to the river bank and lay down by the side of a
snake-hole thinking she would also marry a snake, but this time the snake was real and it killed her. The mother was all alone. She went to the river and sat there crying and calling out for her elder daughter. The elder daughter came up immediately and took her down to her palace of gold where many children came to her, climbed onto her lap and called her “granny”. But suddenly when they turned into snakes, the old woman said to her daughter, “Send me home”. Her son-in-law gave her four small cloth bags containing sand, grain, a scrap of rope, and a bit of wood. He asked her to put them in separate baskets as big as possible after reaching home. The old woman was upset that he gave her those wretched things and did not give her any money. And after reaching home, she just put all these in small baskets. But after a week when she opened the baskets, she found that the bit of wood had turned into dried fish, the rope into dried meat, the sand had become rice, and the grain had turned into rice seed. She regretted that she had put them in small baskets.

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**14.6 ADVENTURES IN A MAGIC WORLD**

**The Hospitable Birds**

The son of a king and the son of a blacksmith, an Agariya became good friends. But the king was angry with their mischievous ways and he banished them into the jungle. In the jungle, they felt very hungry and when they asked the sparrows where they will get food, the sparrows said “You go to Aonrapur patan bazaar”. The two boys walked and walked and at night, they sat under a cotton tree. One boy slept while the other kept awake to tend the fire. In that tree lived chakka and chakki, the two birds who loved each other like the two parts of a grind-stone. Chakka said to chakki that it is their duty to give the two boys something to eat. Chakki told him that since they had no food to offer to the boys, they should jump into the fire and let the boys have roasted meat. And they did that. The Agariya boy who was awake that time divided the roasted birds equally and keeping one portion for his friend, he ate his own share. When the king’s son woke up he ate his share and as the Agariya boy fell asleep, the king’s son went away quietly. He wandered across the world and prospered until he heard that the king had died, after which he went back to his kingdom and became the king.

The Agariya boy was very afraid when he woke up and did not find his friend. Thinking that his friend must have gone in search of Aonrapur Patan Bazar, he went in search of his friend. One day he came to the Hathak river by the side of which an old woman lived. The boy lived with her and served her in every way. And then the old woman asked him what she could give to him. He immediately said that he wanted to see Aonpur patan bazaar. She then asked him to pick a mango and return to her without looking round. But the boy looked around and the moment he did, the mango flew out of his hand back to the tree. This happened thrice and then he could bring the fruit back. The old woman then showed him the way to the bazaar. As he went along, the mango turned into a beautiful girl. And so, they went together in search of the bazaar. But on the way, thieves threw him into a well and tried to carry the girl away. But the girl turned back into a mango and the thieves ran away in great fear.

In the meantime, the Agariya boy’s friend, who has become the king came to the jungle for hunting and as he was resting under the same cotton tree, he heard the children of chakka and chakki talking about the Agariya boy, that he was thrown into a well. He immediately set off to find his friend and soon he found him in the well from where he pulled him up. Then together they went in search of the mango and then one day, they found the mango lying under a tree. And then the mango
turned into a girl and then a strange thing happened – out of her body came the Aonpur patan bazaar with a whole lot of shops. There was no shopkeeper and one could pick up whatever one wanted. The Agariya boy was very happy. Then he turned the bazaar into a mango and went back home. He led a very happy life: In the morning, he would turn the mango into the bazaar, take all the things he wanted from the shops. At night the mango turned into the beautiful girl who became his wife.

14.7 THE END OF THINGS

How Death Came to the World

In the beginning, people never died and they did not know the meaning of weeping. The people would go on living and as they would age, they could not walk properly; neither could they go out for getting food. It was a very miserable life. One day, a kite caught hold of a squirrel and killing it, threw it on the ground. The squirrel lay there still. A man whose name was Singra-Phang Magam was passing by and when he saw the squirrel, he was stunned. Why is the squirrel not moving at all? He then picked it up, put it in a corner in his house, covered it with a cloth. Then he called the moon and the sun, saying a man has died. The moon and the sun came down crying away for the dead man but when they saw it was not a man, they got angry. Then Singra Phang Magam asked them why humans did not die? Why was the squirrel privileged to die? The Moon and the Sun wanted to know whether man wanted to die. Singra Phang Magam and his wife immediately said that they too wanted to die, as life gets very miserable in old age. Then they were told to cut the squirrel into pieces and distribute it all in the world to eat it. Since then humans also started dying. And they also learnt to weep.

14.8 LET US SUM UP

Verrier Elwin had collected thousands of tales and wanted to preserve them in print before they died out. Had he not collected them, many of the stories would have vanished. He gathered the tales that describe the tribal people’s idea of what life was like in the days when the earth was young. The book When the World was Young is a fascinating collection of tales that shape the imaginative world, and inspire creativity and a sense of wonder in people.

14.9 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


Propp, Vladimir. Morphology of the Folktale. The American Folklore Society and Indian University, 1928

14.10 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: Your answers should be in about 200 words each.

1) Why did Verrier Elwin collect and document tribal tales?

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2) How is Elwin’s *When the World was Young* composed?

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3) Which story of the origin motif do you like the most? Please elaborate on it.

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4) What do you think about the visual each narrative evokes in your mindscape?

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5) Have you heard any of these narratives before? If yes, elaborate. What do you think of these narratives?

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6) The part on the “first men” shows humans to be literally growing in size. Is there some logic to this “growth”?

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7) Briefly enumerate the various discoveries narrated here.

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8) Which narrative did you like in the section 4? Please elaborate why.
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9) How did death come into the world?
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10) How important is Verrier Elwin’s contribution to the documentation of oral tradition?
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