UNIT 13  

FOLKTALES FROM INDIA BY A. K. RAMANUJAN

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13.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to

- know about A. K. Ramanujan;
- discuss folklore and folktales;
- evaluate the significance of folklore tradition;
- understand the different stories from different languages; and
- learn the use of myths and rituals in the stories.

13.1 INTRODUCTION

This unit aims to have a detailed study of the motifs, modes and mores present in A. K. Ramanujan’s folktales. Folktales are used as a vehicle to transport the culture of a society to the readers. This unit presents a brief note on the writer and the cultural aspects of the select stories of Ramanujan. The unit demonstrates the enduring strength, richness and vitality of the Indian folklore tradition as portrayed in the select stories. The tales comprise a collection of folktales from a rich diversity of languages in India. They are also an interesting cultural artefact of oral traditions from many Indian cultures.

13.2 ABOUT A. K. RAMANUJAN

Attipat Krishnaswami Ramanujan (1959 -1993) was a trans-disciplinary scholar, poet, translator, linguist, philologist, playwright and folklorist. He received his B.A. and M.A. in English Literature from the University of Mysore in 1949 and 1950 respectively. During the 1950s, as a young college lecturer in several towns across South India, Ramanujan began to collect tales that fascinated him. In 1956, he met Edwin Kirkland of the University of Florida, who encouraged him to send his translations of Kannada tales for publication in the United States. A few years later, he went to Indiana University to study Folklore and Linguistics. He received his doctorate in 1963 and joined as a faculty at the University of Chicago. He also taught for 30 years in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilization. In three decades, he inspired a generation of scholars in Indian Literature, Folklore,
Folktales of India: Motifs, Modes and Mores

and Linguistics, while as a poet, translator and humanist, he reached even wider audiences.

Ramanujan was among the first Indian thinkers to take a serious look at oral tales, lullabies, proverbs and songs. His academic research ranges across five languages – Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Sanskrit, and English. He is the author of eighteen books and many influential essays, although his public lectures and informal conversations must also be counted among his many means of coming out with new ideas. No other scholar in the twentieth century had fostered such a broad understanding of Indian culture as Ramanujan. His stature was recognised both at home and abroad. In 1976, he received the Padma Sri, the prestigious Cultural Award from the Government of India, and the Macarthur Fellowship in 1983. He was elected to the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1990. Towards the end of his life, Ramanujan returned to his “oldest project”, folklore. He was interested in all forms of folklore, but as a miniaturist and a student of literature, he was especially drawn to the tale. He was involved widely and deeply in folktale scholarships, and his essays on an Indian Cinderella and an Indian Version of the Oedipus story bear clear testimony to that.

Folklore pervades childhoods, families and communities and is also the language of the illiterate. Even in large, modern cities, folklore – proverbs, lullabies, folk medicine, folktales – is only a suburb away, a cousin or a grandmother away. Wherever people live, folklore grows. India is a country of many languages, religions, sects and cultures. It is a land of many myths and countless stories. The stories are told in a crisp language and readers from all over the world enjoy it. Fantasies and fables woven around kings, princes, animals, common men and women entertain the people.

Indian folktale played an influential role in the history of folklore scholarship, supplying pioneers in the discipline. The pioneer folklorists in contemporary India include Jawaharlal Handoo, Chitrasen Pasayat, Nandini Sahu, Sadhana Naithani, Kishore Bhattacharjee, Anjali Padhi, Kailash Patnaik, Vivek Rai, Komal Kothari, Raghavan Payanad and M. Ramakrishnan. A. K. Ramanujan had carved a special place for himself in folklore writings. His knowledge of Indian languages and cultures is relevant no doubt, but what is even more important is his inventive use of theory, cultural, psychological and literal. He had keen interest in the folktales as a genre, yet he always positioned it within wider systems of meaning such as India’s classical literature and devotional poetry, “guiding everything, however is what we might call Ramanujan’s response to the folktale as an aesthetic form” (Blackburn xii).

The stories of Ramanujan are unparalleled in its scope of sources. They are rich and fascinating tapestry of stories infused with the author’s unique sense of humour and sense of beauty.

Ramanujan published works on both classical and modern variants of the literatures and also argued strongly in his writings for giving local, non-standard dialects their due place. Entranced by oral tales, Ramanujan began collecting the tales in the 1950s and continued to collect them until about 1970. His great collection of folktales from a rich diversity of languages in India is an interesting cultural artefact of oral traditions from many Indian cultures. Ramanujan said, “In my twenties ... I collected tales from anyone who would tell me one: my mother, servants, aunts, men and women in a village families with whom I stayed when I was invited to lecture in local schools, school teachers and school children, carpenters, tailors” (Blackburn ix). Ramanujan’s tales reflect the life of ordinary persons.
13.3 ABOUT THE TEXTS

- **Mother Marries the Son**

"Forbidden feelings of incest on the part of fathers and mothers towards their children or brothers and sisters towards their siblings are faced and unpacked with all their implications" (Dundes xxvi). Ramanujan’s stories were woven with such threads to portray the reality of the contemporary time. Tales about families were common among the people. As these tales were told to children in the context of the family, they are the part of the child’s psychological education facing forbidden feelings and finding a narrative that will articulate and contain if not resolve them for the tellers as well as their young listeners.

Ramanujan’s aesthetic vision of the folktale always illuminated the tale itself. He is often commended for his many Indian tales that are “stories about stories”. It reflects his belief that tales affect those who tell them as much as those hear. Ramanujan listened closely to Kannada tales, letting them tell their own story. He knew how they lived in their telling, which is why he loved the tales about the tales.

*Mother Marries the Son* is a story told with hope to make people aware of the old mythical stories and transport them to an imaginary land where the rules and ethics that govern the mortal world becomes nothing. It is an incredible story laden with a lot of mythical beliefs and it reflects the mental state of the mother who cannot bear the odd happenings. Fate forms one of the major motives in the tales. Many different views of fate are made possible by the tales. Fate overpowers all other features and one feels that his/her life is being governed by fate.

In *Mother Marries Son*, goddess Satwai was appointed by God to write “the future of every child on its forehead, the night of the fifth day after its birth”. When the daughter asked about her fate, Satwaii revealed it after a long silence that, “it’s your fate to marry your own son.” And the daughter made up her mind to cheat her fate. She determined never to marry, never even to see a man. So she went into a deep forest, built a hut there, and lived all alone for some years till she grew up to be a young woman.

The girl drank the water which contained the mouthful spat out by the king, and as soon as it reached her belly she became pregnant. After the delivery, she wrapped the baby in a piece of her sari and threw him from a steep mountainside. The inexorable fate made her marry her son and she lived with him. After knowing the truth, “she did not tell anybody what she knew, and lived on with her husband happily, blessed by her old parents-in-law, to whom she was always kind and dutiful”.

*Mother Marries Son* was adapted from a Marathi version. The variants are found in Kannada, Konkani and Tamil. Here, the Oedipus story is told from a mother’s point of view and that makes it a woman-centred story. The son was merely a pawn in her fate. The Marathi tale did not end with the mother’s suicide as the Greek myth did, nor did the son blind himself. The story followed the narrative techniques used in the great epics and classics. Many Indian narratives including *The Ramayana* had two or more endings, the one tragic, the other happy or at least resigned. This tale too had another ending in the Kannada versions. The mother had a son by her own son, then discovered the truth about her marriage, sung a lullaby that truly expresses the horrible way in which incest destroyed well-ordered family structures. “Sleep, my son/ My grandson/ husband’s son ... sleep well”. Then, she hung herself with her own saree. In the third ending, she ran to the goddess in her confusion and grief.
said, “O, Goddess, what have you done for me? You’ve made me marry my own son?”’. The Goddess smiled and said, “Such things happen. Accept them. It’s not your fault. Go home and serve your parents-in-law and take care of your husband and your baby”. The mother had to endure all these because she is bound to fate and its play in her life. Entirely unacceptable as such as ending may seem, these stories do not flinch from exploring different possible solutions, those of resignation, defiance, suicide, absolution by a goddess even outwitting fate.

Iravathy Karve, the anthropologist, who overheard this story told by her servant woman to her daughter, notes that both teller and listener laughed out loud at the end of the story, amused by the queer happenings. These stories relieve and relax the listeners, entertain them.

A number of tales show how a faithful servant or a mother or a sister overhears a conversation between birds or fate. Fate in the woman’s tale is a woman and proceeds to avert the preordained disasters like the thorns that are about to fall on him as in *Brother’s Day* and *Untold Stories*. Such tales give shape to the stereotyped characters such as peasants, illiterate folk or Orientals. The fatalists passively accept their destiny as the mother in the story accepts her fate.

- **Brother’s Day**

*Bhai Dooj* takes place twice a year on the second day following Diwali, the festival of lights. For this day, daughters, fetched by their brothers, return to their parent’s villages. If a sister/wife is unable to attend, her brother comes to visit her with gifts. *Brother’s Day* portrays the loving brother who visits his sister. Versions of *Brother’s Day* are common not only in Rajasthan but all over North India.

*Brother’s Day* is adapted from Rajasthani. Rituals and beliefs are part of the life of Rajasthani people. *Brother’s Day* celebrates the love of a brother and sister. It is the custom of the Rajasthani to see their sister on a brother’s day. The brothers bring new clothes and they like to see their sisters dressed well on that day. In *Brother’s Day*, the brother said to his mother, “I want to visit my sister on bother’s day and see her dressed in new clothes”. Sending new clothes to the girl in the family and her husband is a practice among the Rajasthani. The mother prepared bundle with a long skirt and a wrap for her daughter, and a turban and a shirt for her daughter’s husband. “Go safely and see your sister dressed in new clothes for brother’s day”, said the mother.

The brother and the sister, each in their own way tries to rescue the life of one another. The love and affectionate bond are woven with silken threads by the narrator in such a way that the love and sacrifice seems dear and divine. Just like all fairy tales and bed time stories, *Brother’s Day* narrates the story of the celebrated love and sacrifice of a brother and sister. Animate and inanimate objects speak and their words are given due importance in the story. The conversations between the brother and the enormous tree, river, snake and lion which threaten the brother’s life form the core of the story. The tree said, “Brother, I’m going to fall on you”, and the river said, “I’m going to wash you away”. But the brother told them that “I’m on my way to see my sister dressed in new clothes for Brother’s day” and asked them to take his life on his way back.

The close brother-sister bond may lead to protective and generous feelings as in *Brother’s Day*. Sisters rely on their brothers for many things in their life. Brothers are their links with their parental home.
Beliefs form a part of their life. People had solid reasons for their each and every belief. It is believed that “if you greet a guest when your thread is broken, harm will come to that guest”. That is why the sister did not get up and greet her brother and said “Oh! Brother, I couldn’t greet you with a broken thread”.

The love and bonding of the sister-brother relationship is presented picturesquely. The brother and sister went into the dangerous jungle together. His sister took her necklace to give the river, a cup of milk for the snake and a goat kid to feed the lion. She took five toy pebbles to please the enormous tree. The sister saved her brother from the lion, the snake, the river, and the tree by offering them the things she had brought for them.

The sister ran to Mother Fate to save her brother’s life. Mother Fate told her, “After Holi and after Diwali, on Brother’s Day, tell the story and worship your brother. Worship him, but on Brother’s Day curse him. By these curses your brother will be saved”. The sister started cursing, “May my brother’s bones be gathered! May my brother die!” She behaved like a mad lady asking her parents to do everything that was done to her brother. At last, on the nuptial night of the brother, the sister waited patiently in her brother’s room, “spotted the snake, struck it, cut it into three pieces, and hid the pieces under a shield. Then she went to sleep in peace”. Note that although the sister almost harmed her brother unintentionally several times, she ultimately saved him, first from the perils on the road and finally from the dreaded snake enemy.

The rituals of the festival are performed near an outside wall, with cow-dung figures of brother, sister, bride and snake, as well as the inside of the house with a cooking hearth. The figures are made before the story is told. Offerings of food are made and left to be eaten by stray animals like dogs, goats and birds. At the end of the story, all the women whose brothers are alive, stretch their hands up as far as they can reach, repeat the curses from the story as well as the blessing. “May he live long!” The ritual is said to promote long life for all brothers of the women who participate in it.

Ramanujan’s aesthetic embraced the social as well as the formal; “although one of the enabling contributions of his scholarship will be that, with others, he drew attention to the importance of women’s tales in Indian folklore and culture generally” (Blackburn xiv). Women’s tales are sometimes “counter-tales, revealing alternative understandings of such key concepts as karma and destiny”.

- **Bopoluchi**

The study of folk culture and oral tradition may contribute to our understanding of culture and its functioning in human societies. It may be of some help in understanding human psychology and the adjustment of the individual to his culturally constituted world. But the distinguishing feature of all these oral tales is that in them it is the women who have the energy, wisdom, foresight and cunning to save their men. The active, often heroic, role of the women in many of these tales are in contrast to the stereotype of the submissive Indian women, based on classical heroines like Sita in the *The Ramayana*. On this point too, folk traditions counterpoint classical ones.

Ramanujan’s *Bopoluchi* is about a courageous girl who saved her life from the wicked thief. It is the story of a clever maiden at home who alone kills the robbers. The way of life of the Punjabis is portrayed; the mores and modes of Punjab are pictured well in the stories. Each and every character in *Bopoluchi*, from the robber to the old mother pictures the cultural traits of the Punjabi life.
Young girls have dreams about their marriage. A number of young girls were drawing water at the village well and “telling each other their fantasies of when and whom and how they would marry”. They dream of princes with fortunes who would crown their life. These girls long to be in the midst of gifts and silks for their wedding. A robber, disguised as a peddler, was so struck by Bopoluchi’s beauty and spirit that he decided to marry her. The robber told her that he was her uncle, her father’s long-lost brother, and had come home to arrange his niece’s wedding with one of his sons.

People believe that Lord Almighty governs all our lives and so he warns his children of the impending danger. Animate and inanimate objects take the place of God and admonish the innocent common folk about the forthcoming danger and indirectly advise them to be safe from any danger or harm. In Bopoluchi, the jackal, crow and peacock warn the pretty Bopoluchi: “… beware!/ Smell the danger in the air!/ It’s no uncle that relieves you/ But a robber who deceives you!”. The disguised robber was so cunning that he diverted her mind and said that all animals and birds behave in a funny manner. When he disclosed his guise, she wept and wailed. But, he left her with his old mother to make arrangements for the feast.

Bopoluchi’s long beautiful black cascade of hair caught the attention of the old mother and she enquired, “How did you manage to get such beautiful hair?” Courageous Bopoluchi had a cunning idea, and said, “My mother had a way of making it grow by pounding my head in the big mortar for husking rice. At every stroke of the pestle, my hair grew longer and longer”. The foolish old hag tried the trick and died. Bopoluchi dressed the old lady in her bridal dress and put the spinning wheel in front of her. She dressed herself in the old lady’s dress and picked up her belongings and ran away.

Punjabi wedding rituals are grand. The marriage feast is on a large scale with delicious food made out of grain flour. They prepare flour from grain using the millstone. In this story, the robber, after locking Bopoluchi in his house, went in search of it and “stole a millstone to grind the grain for the feast”. Returning back, he was shocked to know that Bopoluchi escaped. The robber made up his mind to bring her back, wherever she was. Bopoluchi knew that he would come. So initially she hid herself in her friends’ house one after the other, in order to escape from the dreadful villain. She then decided to brave it out and sleep in her own bed with a sharp billhook next to her. The robber teamed with his men, lifted her and walked off. When the men carried her to the deserted spot, “she whipped out the billhook in a flash cut off the heads of the two thieves at the foot of the bed”. When the robber saw this, he climbed up a tree. Bopoluchi gathered sticks and piled them around the tree. He got stifled by the smoke, fell down and broke his neck. Later, she went to the robber’s house and carried away all silver and gold on camels and donkeys. The confidence and presence of mind of Punjabi girls are portrayed by the author in the story.

• **Akbar and Birbal Stories**

From our childhood, we have all grown up listening to Akbar-Birbal tales, and though the stories always fascinated our young minds and still do, we never really got to know the historical background of these tales. The tales usually followed the pattern of Akbar entrusting Birbal with an unusual task and ending with Birbal coming up with a witty rejoinder or explanation, thus turning some impossible situation to his own favour, and in the process often making a fool of his master Akbar. The character of Akbar in these stories is rather fanciful and that of an extremely curious king.
Folktales emerge as a history of a sort contributing to our understanding of political history – not as a commentary on it, but as processes aiming at quite varied effects within different traditions and context. These stories poke fun on a general level at the human imperfections in the character of the king and suggest a corrective to his behaviour. This, in fact, is a universal feature of folktales concerning kings and comic figures in diverse cultural traditions all over the world. The stories contain the meaning of kingship for the people and help to understand the meaning of culture in the medieval milieu when kingship played a dominant role in the everyday lives of the people.

Lee Siegel points out that through the stories, Birbal made the king see that the plight of his servants and his subjects as his own plights. Implicitly, he taught the king an ancient Indian ideal of kingship, that “the happiness of the king lies within the happiness of his subjects, his welfare within theirs”. Thus, the themes of humour and wit in the tales had the capacity to affirm that identity.

C. M. Naim says that the generic context of the stories was specific to cultural traditions within which they are conceived. For instance, in the Indic tradition, the stories about the king and the jester were symbolic of the normative scheme of Hindu kinship where the Brahmans hold legitimizing and corrective powers over the Kshatriya king. However, when this was placed against the Mughal backdrop, Akbar and Birbal are chosen as the protagonists with former being popular and apotheosized in popular Hindu tradition with the Brahman identity of Birbal emerging as crucial factors.

A difference that arises in the stories coming from the Islamicate lands and those from India is that in the former, there are no caste distinctions between the kings and the clowns, whereas in the India context Birbal was a Brahmin whose ritual and legitimizing role is referred to by various scholars. Brahmans represented their own particular social group within the larger body politic and not the subjects of a king as a whole. Meenakshi Khanna pointed out that these entertaining stories appeared as satires about the political, social and religious systems, enriching our understanding of kingship and courtly culture through the comic mode of the jester, dispensing with the myth of narrowly defined identities.

Folklore provides proofs to historiographers. The exciting thing about folk life is that it covers everything. Every phase of life in traditional or folk society can be studied with the interrelationship and functions of part to whole.

- **A Malcontent Cured**

Folktales are a vehicle of conveying messages to the people that will enrich and enlighten their lives. These messages are often instructions and advices that lead the common folk in the righteous way. *A Malcontent Cured*, adapted from Knowles’ *Folk-Tales of Kashmir* tries to bring the message of accepting things in the universe as such. God has a plan and he is right in placing everything in the right place.

This story portrays a dissatisfied person who judges the creation of God. The malcontented person said, “O God, how foolish you are to give such small nuts to this big (walnut) tree and such immense fruit to this thin (pumpkin) plant”. When a walnut fell on his head, he shouted, thank God that I am saved for it was the nut and not the pumpkin. The story rightly teaches the people to be contented and shrewd.

- **The Four Jogis Santali**

Adapted from Bompas *Folklore of the Santal Parganas*, “The Four Jogis Santali”
narates the tale wherein a king buys precepts that save his life. The four Jogis were out on a begging expedition. They decided to beg from the Raja. So they planned to write greeting quotes. Greeting the king with good quotes is a significant one. The innocent jogis asked a man to write the meaningless greetings on a sheet of paper and presented it to Raja. The Raja could not make anything out of it. The Jogis saw him looking puzzled, “took to their heels, for they themselves could not read and were no longer sure what the paper contained”.

Ramanujan in this story pictured the real envy and wrath of the people working in the palace. The planning and the execution of killing the Raja were neatly sketched by them. The tehsildar asked the barber to cut the raja’s throat and the bailiff to steal his money and jewels. When these three started to execute their plans one by one, the raja started reading the greetings of the four jogis one by one. The greetings indirectly revealed the plotting of the tehsildar, bailiff and barber. The king punished the three and went in search of the jogis to reward them.

*The World and the Other*

This story, translated from Bengali, gives a message to the people that we should concentrate on the work we are doing. The story narrates the mental state of two friends, one going to a religious meeting and the other to a woman. Both of them called their friends to the place where they are going. But each went his way. The man who went to the religious preaching wasted his life when he was listening to the preacher because in his mind he was thinking of his friend and “the wonderful time his friend was having in the arms of s lovely woman”. But the other man, who was in the arms of the lady, was thinking of his good friend who “was earning merit and a place in heaven by listening to the hymns and stories about saints and Gods”. The universal truth that man will neither give up this world for the other nor the other for this one is proved clearly.

### 13.4 LET US SUM UP

The striking feature of all these explorations of Ramanujan is how he starts with things which were considered small, almost insignificant, such as women’s tales or songs, and from there goes on step by step to look at some very important if hitherto ignored aspect of our lived social canvas. He is not contemptuous of the products of the illiterate and the weak, nor is he afraid to look at large issues. Ramanujan pursued cultural meanings in the tales; writing a generation later, “with the benefits of improved collections and new theory”, Ramanujan set high standards in his scholarship on Indian folktales and stands as a model for others to follow. Although the motifs might appear to be interchangeable because they occupy the same slot in a plot, they are not identical. Ramanujan could unearth the folklore myth in the stories and present it to the readers with ease. Life is painted sans artificiality in the stories with all its folklore cultural traits.

### 13.5 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


### 13.6 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

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

1) Write about Ramanujan and his growth as a folklorist.

2) Name some pioneer folklorists of India; write briefly about them.

3) Sketch Ramanujan’s achievements.

4) How does this story “Mother marries the Son” relieve and relax the readers?
5) Who is Satwai? What is the duty given to her by God?
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6) Who is Mother Fate?
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7) What is brother’s day?
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8) How did the sister save her brother from the snake?
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9) Who is Bopoluchi? How did she kill the robber?
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10) What is Birbal known for?
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Everyone knows the goddess Satwai. She is the one who has to write the future of every child on its forehead the night of the fifth day after its birth. And what she writes must happen.

Now, Satwai had a daughter. Every night she was left alone when her mother went out to write some baby’s fate on its forehead. She asked her mother one day, “Mother, why do you go out every night and leave me alone?”

Satwai answered, “Daughter, I have to perform the task for which I’m appointed by God. I must therefore go and write the fate of newborn babies.”

“Can anyone read what you write?”

“No, not even the gods know what I have written out for them.”

“Did you write on my forehead also when I was born?”

“Of course.”

“Then, Mother, tell me what you have written for me.”

Satwai refused to tell her anything and went out as usual. But her daughter gave her no peace, pestered her, and threatened to leave the house if her mother didn’t tell her what she had written on her forehead. At last, Satwai told her, “Daughter, it’s your fate to marry your own Son.”

Shocked at this revelation, the daughter asked her, “Can’t you change it for your own daughter?”

“No, I told you, what I write cannot be reversed. It must happen as I have told you.”

The daughter was furious. “You did this to your own daughter?” she screamed. And she made up her mind to cheat her fate. She resolved never to marry, never even to see a man. So she went into a deep forest, built a hut there, and lived all alone for some years till she grew up to be a young woman.

Now it happened that a king, who was out hunting, passed through that forest. He came to a lovely lake filled with clear, sweet water. He was thirsty; his mouth was parched. So he took some water in his cupped hands and drank it, gargled with a mouthful, spat it back into the lake, and then rode away.

The young woman came to the same lake a little later. She had been gathering fruit and roots all morning and she was tired and thirsty. She stopped at lake, took some water in her cupped hands, and drank it. That water contained the mouthful spat out by the king, and as soon as it reached her belly she became pregnant. At first she didn’t know that anything had happened to her, but soon realized she had a baby growing inside her. She was scared and didn’t know what to do. In a few months, she gave birth to a handsome boy. As she knew the prophecy, she decided to destroy the baby. So she tore a piece from her sari, wrapped it around the child, and threw him from a steep mountainside.

Below the cliff lived a gardener and his wife, who had a beautiful grove of closely planted banana trees. The bundle of cloth with the child wrapped in it alighted on top of some thick, stout banana leaves and lay there till the gardener’s eye fell on it.
He took it down gently and brought it home to his wife. The couple, who were childless, were delighted and full of gratitude for this gift of the gods. The baby grew and thrived in their care and grew up to be a handsome young man.

Satwai’s daughter lived on in the forest for years until she grew tired of her lonely life. She thought that she could now go back to the world; after all, she had killed her son and there was no danger of the prophecy coming true. She walked to the end of the forest, rounded the great cliff, came down into the valley, and arrived at the homestead of the old couple. They were very hospitable. When they found she had nowhere to go, they asked her to stay with them. She lived and worked in their house. They all liked her; she was lovely, and she worked hard.

In a few months, the old couple thought that God, who had sent them the boy, had now sent them this woman as a daughter-in-law. So they married their son to her. The woman became the mistress of the household, and her chores took her into every nook and corner of that house. One day, she was looking for some old pots in the loft and came across the torn piece of a sari. It didn’t take her long to recognize it as her own. To make sure, she went down in a hurry and asked her mother-in-law about the old piece of cloth. Her mother-in-law told her the whole story of how they had found her husband as a baby wrapped in that cloth on top of a banana tree.

She knew at once that what Satwai had written had come true. She did not tell anybody what she knew, and lived on with her husband happily, blessed by her old parents-in-law, to whom she was always kind and dutiful.

**Brother’s Day**
*(Rajasthani)*

Once there was a brother whose sister was married and lived far away. He said to his mother, “Mother, I want to go visit my sister on Brother’s Day and see her dressed in new clothes. Many other men are going to see their sisters and I too want to go.”

The mother said, “My son, you are still a child and your sister lives very far from here. How will you go? On that road there are lions and wild animals. They’ll scare you. How will you go?”

But he replied, “No, Ma, I want to go.” The mother prepared a bundle with a long skirt and a wrap for her daughter, and a turban and a shirt for her daughter’s husband. She gave the bundle to her son and said, “Go safely and see your sister dressed in new clothes for Brother’s Day.”

The youth started out. On the way, he met an enormous tree. The tree said, “Brother, I’m going to fall on you.” He said, “Don’t fall now. I’m on my way to see my sister dressed in new clothes for Brother’s Day. You may fall on me when I come back.”

Continuing on his way, he met a river, which said, “I’m going to wash you away.” He said, “Brother River, don’t wash me away now. I’m going to see my sister dressed in new clothes on Brother’s Day. After I’ve done that, I’ll return. Then you may wash me away.”

Next he met a snake. The snake said, “I’m going to bite you.” He said, “Don’t bite me now. I’m on my way to see my sister dressed in new clothes for Brother’s Day. After I’ve done that, I’ll return. Then you may bite me.” Then he met a lion, and it said, “Brother, I’m going to eat you.” He said to the lion, “Don’t eat me now. I’m
going to see my sister dressed in new clothes on Brother’s Day. When I return, you may eat me.”

At last he came to his sister’s village, and there he found his sister sitting at the spinning wheel. Their eyes met, but she did not get up because just then her thread broke. (It is believed that if you greet a guest when your thread is broken, harm will come to that guest.)

But the brother did not know why she did not get up to greet him at once, and he thought to himself, “Oh, I’ve come so far to meet my sister but she, my own sister, doesn’t speak to me.” He quickly turned to leave, but she joined her thread in a hurry and said, “Oh Brother, where are you going? I was only protecting you. I couldn’t greet you with a broken thread.”

The brother and sister joyfully greeted one another, and she went hurrying to the neighbour woman’s house.

“Oh, neighbour lady, my brother has come and brought me gifts of clothes for Brother’s Day. What should I do?”

The neighbour was not a kind woman. She said, “You slut, plaster the courtyard with oil and put butter on the fire to boil.” So the sister quickly filled a big pot with butter and put it on the fire to boil, and began to spread oil around the courtyard. But the butter didn’t boil and the oil didn’t dry.

She hurried to another neighbour and said, “Oh auntie, my brother has come to give me clothing for Brother’s Day. I asked the other auntie what to do and she said to plaster the courtyard with oil and put butter on the fire to boil, but the oil won’t dry and the butter won’t boil.”

This neighbour woman was kind and said, “I’ll tell you what to do. Take yellow clay and cow dung and plaster the courtyard with these. Put rice in water to cook. When it is cooked, serve it to your brother with butter and a lot of sugar.”

She came back to her house, plastered the courtyard with yellow clay and cow dung, cooked the rice in water, and put lots of butter and sugar on it. Then she fed her brother sugar-rice.

One day passed, then two, then four, and the bother said, “Sister, I’ll go now.” When she heard that she thought, “I’ll make some round cakes for my brother. I’ll shape them and send them home with him. My father and my mother can eat some of them and my brother will have them to eat on the road. I won’t pack ordinary bread. I’ll pack nice round cakes.”

Next day, she got up in the middle of the night and began to grind some wheat. She had just begun to grind it when a black snake fell into the flour grinder. The snake got ground up, and she didn’t know it because it was night and very dark. She made all the flour into round cakes and packed them in a cloth. At dawn she bade farewell to her brother. She gave him the bundle of cakes and said, “Go, Brother, go safely.”

She had kept a few of the cakes, only two or three, for her children. After her brother left the children began to pester her: “Hey, Ma, you gave him something all wrapped up. Now give us some too.”

She said, “I gave all the cakes to your uncle.” But her children didn’t believe her words and would not stop pestering her for the sweets. So she took two cakes and
broke them into halves, one half for each of the four children. She had just begun to hand them out when she saw that black snake’s bones were scattered throughout the cakes. They were sticking out. She cried out, “Oh no, at this very moment my brother may be eating this and dying.” And she ran to the kind neighbor woman and pleaded, “Auntie, please watch my house and take care of my children. At this very moment my brother may be eating those cakes and dying.”

The neighbour woman agreed, and the sister went running after her brother through the jungle. Twenty-four miles this way, twenty-four miles that way, she ran through forty-eight miles of jungle. As she ran she called, “Oh Brother, stand still, stop!”

At last she came near; the brother heard his sister coming. He recognized her voice and thought, “Why has my sister come running after me? I’ve taken nothing of hers. Why is she calling me?” When he saw her, the sister said, “Brother, you’ve not eaten the food, you’ve not eaten it, have you?”

He said, “See, Sister, this is the way you wrapped the round cakes and they are still wrapped the same way. I haven’t touched them. They’re still in my bag.” She cried, “Oh my brother, a black snake’s bones are ground up in them. When I broke one, they were sticking out.” He threw down the packet of cakes and went back with his sister to her house.

The sister kept him with her for nearly a week. Then her brother said to her, “How much can you protect me? As soon as I left our village, I met an enormous tree which said, ‘I’ll fall on you.’ After that I met a river which said, ‘I’ll wash you away.’ Then I met a snake and it said, ‘I’ll bite you.’ After that I met a lion and it said, ‘I’ll eat you.’ How can you protect me?”

His sister took her necklace to give to the river; she took a cup of milk for the snake and a goat kid to feed to the lion. She took five toy pebbles to please the enormous tree. Then she ran to her neighbour once more and said, “Oh auntie, please watch my house and look after my children. I’ll accompany my brother to my parent’s home, and then I’ll return.”

Then the brother and sister went into the dangerous jungle together. The sister saved her brother from the lion, the snake, the river, and the tree by offering them the things she had brought for them.

After they had walked for a long time, she became thirsty. Her brother said, “Sister, I’ll climb that tree and look around. Wherever I see herons circling in the air, below them I’ll find water.” He climbed a tree and did see some herons circling over a place at some distance in the woods. He said, “Sister, there is surely some water over there. Herons don’t circle unless there’s water below. You wait for me in the shade and I’ll go and bring back some water.”

While he was gone, the sister saw Mother Fate wandering in the forest, and heard her saying to herself, “I’m making a cover for the heart of the only son.” The sister called out to her, “Old woman, mother, what are you doing?”

She answered, “I’m making a cover for the heart of the only son.” At once the sister understood from this that her brother was going to die.

“What can I do, mother?” she pleaded.

Mother Fate told her, “After Holi and after Divali, on Brother’s Day, tell the story and worship your brother. Worship him, but on Brother’s Day curse him. By these curses your brother will be saved.”
Right then and there the sister began to curse her brother: “May my brother’s bones be gathered! May my brother die!” She did not stop even when her brother came back. He was shocked to hear her cursing him and thought, “What will happen now?”

They continued on their way and reached their home. There they found that arrangements were under way for the brother’s wedding. The sister said, “You are fixing his engagement. Fix mine also.” This was a crazy thing to say, as she was already married. The brother said, “My sister used to be good and smart. What’s happening to her now?”

It was time for the pre-wedding ceremony, and the groom was seated on a special stool. His sister said, “Why is he sitting there all by himself? Let me sit there also.” The others thought this weird, but the brother said, “Let her alone. Do as she asks. Let her also sit on the wooden stool.”

When the groom was rubbed with oil and turmeric to make him fair and handsome, the sister cried, “Rub it on me also. Rub it on me also.” The brother said, “She has gone crazy. Let her be.”

When he was called to eat special meals at the homes of friends and relatives she said, “I will go too.” And thus she did everything that the brother did.

When it was time for the groom’s departure from the village on horseback (grooms must go to their brides’ villages for the wedding ritual), she insisted on riding the horse with him, and he said, “Let her be. Let her sit with me.”

When the brother was going to strike the wooden marriage emblem over the bride’s doorway with his sword, his sister said, “Me too!” And when he sat with his bride to worship the gods, she sat with him. The brother said, “She has gone crazy. She must do whatever I do.”

When it was time for the couple to take the marriage rounds around the sacred fire, completing the ritual, she also took them. When the wedding party returned to the groom’s home with the new bride, the sister went too.

Then when the bride and the groom were going inside to sleep, the sister said, “I’ll sleep near them.” The brother said, “Let her sleep here.” So they stretched a curtain between the bridal bed and the side of the room where the sister slept on the floor.

The new husband and wife fell asleep. But in the middle of the night the snake came there, slithering towards the sleeping couple. How could the sister sleep when she was waiting for her brother’s enemy? She spotted the snake, struck it, cut it into three pieces, and hid the pieces under a shield. Then she went to sleep in peace.

The next morning when the others woke, she was still asleep. The brother said, “My sister is asleep. I’ll say farewell to my guests now. She is crazy and who knows what she will do when she wakes up?” But his mother protested, saying to her son, “No, she is not crazy. It’s not like her to sleep like this. from her birth, she has been a light sleeper. Wake her up now, while your guests are still here, or else you’ll have to call them back.”
A number of young girls were drawing water at the village well and telling each other their fantasies of when and whom and how they would marry.

One of them said, “My uncle will come loaded with wedding presents and dress me in brocade, and I’ll get married in a palace.” Another said, “My uncle is coming soon with a camel-load of sweets.”

The third said, “Oh, my uncle will be here in no time in a golden carriage filled with jewels.”

Bopoluchi was the prettiest of them all and she looked sad—she was an orphan and had no one in the world to arrange a marriage for her or give her a dowry. Still, not to be outdone by the others, she said, “And my uncle will bring me dresses, sweets, and jewels in golden plates.”

A robber, disguised as a peddler selling perfumes to country women, happened to be sitting near the well. He heard what Bopoluchi said. He was so struck by her beauty and spirit that he decided to marry her himself. So the very next day, he disguised himself as a rich farmer and came to Bopoluchi’s hut with trays full of silken dresses, sweets, and rare jewels—things he had looted and put away.

Bopoluchi could hardly believe her eyes, for it was just as she had fantasied. The robber even said he was her uncle, her father’s long-lost brother, and had come home to arrange his niece’s wedding with one of his sons.

Bopoluchi couldn’t believe her ears, but she believed him and was ecstatic. She packed up her few belongings and set off with the robber.

But as they went along the road, a crow in a tree croaked:

* Bopoluchi, beware!  
  Smell the danger in the air!  
  It’s no uncle that relieves you  
  But a robber who deceives you!

“Uncle,” said Bopoluchi, “that crow croaks in a funny way. What does it say?”

“Nothing,” said the robber. “All the crows in this country croak like that.” A little farther on, they met a peacock which, as soon as it caught sight of the pretty girl, began to scream:

* Bopoluchi, beware!  
  Smell the danger in the air!  
  It’s no uncle that relieves you  
  But a robber who deceives you!

“Uncle,” said Bopoluchi, “that peacock screams in a funny way. What does it say?”

“Oh nothing,” said the robber. “All the peacocks scream like that in this country.”

Then a jackal slunk across the road and began to howl:

* Bopoluchi, beware!  
  Smell the danger in the air!
It’s no uncle that relieves you
But a robber who deceives you!

“Uncle,” said Bopoluchi, “that jackal howls in such a funny way. What does it say?”

“Oh, nothing,” said the robber. “All the jackals howl like that in this country.”

So Bopoluchi traveled with him many miles till they reached the robber’s house. Once they were inside, he locked the door and told her who he was and how he wanted to marry her himself. She wept and wailed, but the pitiless robber left her with his ancient crone of a mother and went out to make arrangements for the marriage feast.

Now Bopoluchi had long, beautiful hair that reached down to her ankles, but the mother of the robber was so old she didn’t have a hair on her head.

“Daughter,” said the old hag, as she was getting the bridal clothes ready, “how did you manage to get such beautiful hair?”

“Well,” replied Bopoluchi, “my mother had a way of making it grow by pounding my head in the big mortar for husking rice. At every stroke of the pestle, my hair grew longer and longer. It’s method that never fails.”

“Maybe it will work for me, too, and make my hair grow,” said the old woman, who had always wanted long hair and never had very much.

“Maybe it will. Why don’t we try it?” said Bopoluchi.

So the old mother put her head in the mortar, and Bopoluchi pounded away with such force that the old woman died.

Then Bopoluchi dressed the dead body in the scarlet bridal dress, seated it on the bridal chair, drew the veil over its face, and put the spinning-wheel in front of it, so that when the robber came home he might think it was his bride. Then she put on the old woman’s clothes, picked up her few belongings, and stepped out of the house as quickly as possible.

On her way home, the robber saw her hurrying by. He had stolen a millstone to grind the grain for the feast. She was scared he would recognize her, but he didn’t. He thought she was some old woman hobbling along. So Bopoluchi reached home safely.

When she reached home, Bopoluchi knew that the robber would certainly come after her. Every night she begged her neighbors to let her sleep in a different house, leaving her own little bed in her own little house empty. But she couldn’t do this forever, as she soon came to the end of friends who would let her sleep in their
houses. So she decided to brave it out and sleep in her own bed, with a sharp billhook next to her. Sure enough, in the middle of the night four men crept in, and each seizing a leg of the bed, lifted it up and walked off. The robber himself held the leg close behind her head. Bopoluchi was wide awake, but she pretended to be fast asleep until they came to a deserted spot and the thieves were off their guard. Then she whipped out the billhook and in a flash cut off the heads of the two thieves at the foot of the bed. Turning around quickly, she cut off the head of the third thief, but the robber himself ran away in a fright and scrambled up a nearby tree like a wild cat before she could get at him.

Bopoluchi cried out to him, brandishing her billhook, “Come down, if you are a man, and fight it out!”

But the robber would not come down. So Bopoluchi gathered all the sticks she could find, piled them around the tree, and set fire to the. The tree caught fire, and the robber, stifled by the smoke, tried to jump down and broke his neck.

After that, Bopoluchi went to the robber’s house and carried off all the gold and silver, jewels, and clothes that were hidden there. She had them brought home to her village in silver and gold platters, on camels and donkeys. She was now so rich she could marry anyone she pleased.

**Akbar and Birbal**

(Urdu)

Akbar, the great Moghul emperor, had a Hindu raja in his court who played the jester, counsellor, wise man, and fool. His name was Birbal. Many stories are told about Birbal’s wit, wisdom, and occasional folly.

**A Malcontent Cured**

(Kashmiri)

One day a dissatisfied fellow was sitting under a walnut tree, and his eyes fell on a great pumpkin growing nearby.

“O God,” said the malcontent, “how foolish you are to give such small nuts to this big tree and such immense fruit to this thin plant! Now if pumpkins were growing on this big tree and nuts on the pumpkin plant, I’d have admired Your wisdom!”

Even as he finished saying this, a walnut fell down on the man’s head and startled him.

“O God,” he continued. “You are right after all. If the pumpkin had fallen on me from such a height, I would surely have been killed. Great is your wisdom and Your goodness.

**The Four Jogis Santali**

(Santali)

Once four jogis, mendicant holy men, were out on a begging expedition and decided to beg from a raja. As they went along they discussed how they should beg of the raja. And while they were discussing it, they saw a field rat and one of them exclaimed, “I know how I shall beg of him. I shall say, ‘See, he throws up the earth, scrapety-scrape!’ “ This did not help the other three, but farther on, some frogs jumped into a pond as they passed by, and one of the others at once said, “I know
what I shall say. I shall say, ‘Plumpety-plump, down he sat.’ “ A little later they saw a pig wallowing in the mud, and the third jogi said, “I have it! I shall say, ‘Rub away, rub away! Now some more water! Rub away, rub away! I know, my boy, what you are going to do.’ “ The fourth jogi was still at a loss for what he could say to the raja, but when he came in sight of the raja’s city, he exclaimed, “I know what I shall say: ‘Highways and byways, what a big city! The bailiff is going his rounds, his rounds.’ “ Then they got a man to write down these four forms of address on a sheet of paper and presented it to the raja. The raja took it, read it, but could not make head or tail of it. And when the four jogis saw him looking so puzzled, they were afraid that he would ask them to read it. They took to their heels, for they themselves could not read and were no longer sure what the paper contained.

Now, the raja had a tehsildar, a chief officer, who looked after his accounts, and a barber who shaved him every day. That evening after the jogis had run away, the tehsildar proposed to the barber that, when shaving the raja the next morning, he should cut the raja’s throat and they could then control the kingdom. The barber consented. Not content with this, the tehsildar plotted with the palace bailiff that same night to break into the raja’s palace and steal his money and jewels. They began to cut a hole through the mud wall of the raja’s room, but it so happened that the raja was in it, puzzling over the paper the jogis had put into his hand. He kept reading it over and over again, and just as the tehsildar and the bailiff had cut halfway through the wall, they heard the raja saying, “See, he throws up the earth, scrapety-scrape!” At once they concluded that they had been heard and they crouched down. The raja went on: “Plumpety-plump, down he sat.” This made them think they had been seen, and the bailiff crept to the door to listen. He heard the raja saying, “Highways and byways, what a big city! The bailiff is going his rounds, his rounds.” Then the bailiff felt sure that he had been discovered, and he ran off with the tehsildar, without completing their burglary.

The next morning the barber went to shave the raja, and while he was sharpening his razor, the raja began to study the mysterious paper, murmuring, “Rub away, rub away! Now some more water! Rub away, rub away! I know, my boy, what you are going to do!” The barber thought the raja referred to his rubbing the water over his face for shaving, and concluded that the tehsildar had revealed the plot. So he threw himself at the raja’s feet and confessed everything, swearing that the tehsildar and not he was to blame. The raja at once sent for the bailiff to take the tehsildar and the barber to prison. When the bailiff came in, he found the raja repeating, “See, he throws up the earth, scrapety-scrape!” He at once concluded that the raja was referring to the burglary, and he fell on his knees and confessed all that had happened. This was news to the raja, and he went and saw the place where the wall had been partly cut through, and then he sent all three guilty men to prison. Then he dispatched messengers to look for the jogis who had been the means of saving his life and property. But the jogis had been so frightened and had run away so far that they were never found.

**This World and the Other**

*(Bengali)*

Two friends met on a street. They were going in opposite directions. One was going to see a woman and the other to a religious meeting where a great preacher and storyteller was featured that day. The man who was on his way to the religious meeting said to the other, “Why do you want to go to that woman? Come with me to the religious meeting. The preacher is an inspiring speaker. He can dance, sing, and tell wonderful stories about saints and gods. Come with me.”
The other man said, “Why don’t you come with me? I’ll find you a beautiful, sexy woman just like mine. Why do you want to waste your time on dull religious things?”

Neither could persuade the other. Each went his way.

But the man who went to the religious meeting couldn’t concentrate on religious matters that day. He could only think of the wonderful time his friend was having in the arms of a lovely woman, and here he was wasting his life listening to a preacher.

And the man who was in the arms of the woman could not enjoy himself either. He could only think of his good friend who was earning merit and a place in heaven by listening to hymns and stories about saints and gods, while he was frittering away his life with a silly, frivolous woman.

That’s why they say that man will neither give up this world for the other nor the other for this one.