## Block 4

### FOLKTALES OF INDIA: MOTIFS, MODES AND MORES

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Folk in modern Indian literature can be seen in two categories — first, as a conceptualization of people, and second, in its nature and use of folk narratives in literature. Both these processes are inter-related. The development or the emergence of modern literature in South Asia was not based on rejection of the pre-modern literature. Modern literature continued to engage with themes such as religion, customs and traditions or social relations that were found in pre-modern literatures as well. Folk in modern literary narratives could also be studied in terms of literature being socially inclusive or exclusive in nature. *Panchatantra* or *Jataka Tales*, which were written narratives, were also folk because of their mode of narration. Though they were written narratives, they were also oral. They existed as people’s tales rather than as literature produced by individuals. Whether in terms of narrative structure or in terms of the mode of narration, modern literary narratives were influenced by the oral as well as the written. That is how, in the pre-modern period, names of individual authors (like Kalidas or Tulsidas) as producers of literature existed along with that of a community. This block deals with the moods, motifs, modes of folktales and more than that, with the unique *Bhasha* literatures of different regions of India.
Folktales from India
by
A.K. Ramanujan

UNIT 13 | FOLKTALES FROM INDIA BY A. K. RAMANUJAN

Structure
13.0 Objectives
13.1 Introduction
13.2 About A. K. Ramanujan
13.3 About the Texts
13.4 Let Us Sum Up
13.5 References and Further Readings
13.6 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions
13.7 Appendix

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 folktales played an influential role in the history of folklore scholarship, supplying pioneers in the discipline. The pioneer folklorists in contemporary India include Jawahar Lal Handoo, Chitrasing 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 folktale 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, Satwai 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.
and 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 brother’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**

Folktale is 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 a 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

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| 2) Name some pioneer folklorists of India; write briefly about them. |
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| 3) Sketch Ramanujan’s achievements. |
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<p>| 4) How does this story “Mother marries the Son” relieve and relax the readers? |
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| 5) Who is Satwai? What is the duty given to her by God? | .....................................................................................................................
| 6) Who is Mother Fate? | .....................................................................................................................
| 7) What is brother’s day? | .....................................................................................................................
| 8) How did the sister save her brother from the snake? | .....................................................................................................................
| 9) Who is Bopoluchi? How did she kill the robber? | .....................................................................................................................
| 10) What is Birbal known for? | .....................................................................................................................

Folktales from India
by
A.K. Ramanujan

13.7 APPENDIX

Mother Marries Son
(Marathi)

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 ad 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
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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 the girl, “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 the robber came home and saw the figure in the bridal dress sitting in the bridal chair spinning, he thought it was Bopoluchi. He called her to help him with the millstone, but she didn’t answer. He called again, but she still didn’t answer. After calling a few more times, he flew into a rage and threw the millstone at her head. The figure toppled over, and when he came close, it wasn’t Bopoluchi at all but his own old mother with her head bashed in. The robber wept and cried aloud and beat his breast because he thought he had killed his own mother. Soon it became clear to him that Bopoluchi was no longer around and had run away. He was wild with rage and ran out to bring her back, wherever she was.

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 completed 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.
UNIT 14  WHEN THE WORLD WAS YOUNG BY VERRIER ELWIN

Structure

14.0  Objectives
14.1  Introduction
14.2  The Beginning of Things
  14.2.1  The Making of the World
  14.2.2  The Origin of the Sun and the Moon
  14.2.3  The Origin of Lightning and Thunder
  14.2.4  The Origin of Rainbow
  14.2.5  The Origin of Snow
  14.2.6  The Origin of the Rivers
  14.2.7  The Origin of the Earthquake
14.3  The First Men
  14.3.1  How Men Lost their Tails
  14.3.2  The Little Men
  14.3.3  The First Eyes
  14.3.4  How Human Beings Began to Talk
  14.3.5  Big Ears
  14.3.6  The Women with Beards
  14.3.7  When Life was Dull
14.4  Discoveries
  14.4.1  How to Build a House
  14.4.2  Hammer and Tongs
  14.4.3  Making of Clothes
  14.4.4  How Fire was Discovered
  14.4.5  Tobacco Discovery
  14.4.6  Dance
14.5  The Talking Animals
  14.5.1  The Frog and the Monkey
  14.5.2  The Two Friends
  14.5.3  The Flying Elephants
  14.5.4  The Snake Husband
14.6  Adventures in Magic World
14.7  The End of Things
14.8  Let Us Sum Up
14.9  References and Further Readings
14.10  Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

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;
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- grasp the motifs around which narratives are woven;
- appreciate the heterogeneous nature of our cultural tradition;
- know about Verrier Elwin, the anthropologist and folklorist; and
- know about various narratives veering around varied themes.

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, alongwith 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 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.

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 Aonpur Patan Bazaar, 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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UNIT 15  MYTHS OF MIDDLE INDIA BY VERRIER ELWIN

Structure

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

15.0 OBJECTIVES

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

15.1 INTRODUCTION

15.1.1 Who are the ‘Folk’ in Literature?

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

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

15.1.2 What is ‘Folk’ in Literature?

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

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

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

15.2 VERRIER ELWIN’S MYTHS OF MIDDLE INDIA

15.2.1 Verrier Elwin’s Early Life

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elwin, in his Preface to his autobiography, *The Tribal World of Verrier Elwin*, writes:

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

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

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

**Elwin and Myths of Middle India**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

### 15.2.3 The Structure and Content of the Text

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

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

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

1. **Man and the Universe**

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

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

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

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

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

2) The Natural World

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3) Human Life

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

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

A man breathes because of the trembling of his liver.

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

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

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

4) Human Institutions

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

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

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

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

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

15.3 LET’S SUM UP

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

15.4 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


15.4 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

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

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

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

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UNIT 16  MANOJ DAS’S *TALES TOLD BY MYSTICS AND THE LADY WHO DIED ONE AND A HALF TIMES AND OTHER FANTASIES*

Structure
16.0 Objectives
16.1 Introduction
16.2 The Texts
16.3 Let Us Sum Up
16.4 Reference and Further Readings
16.5 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

16.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to

• understand the making of the author Manoj Das, and his artistic form and style;
• appreciate his concern for certain values that lead us to live better lives;
• figure out how he achieves this through his creative work; and
• analyze the sources which he delves into in order to achieve this.

16.1 INTRODUCTION

Manoj Das is an award winning and internationally recognized writer, columnist, editor, philosopher, educationist, radical student leader and a devoted disciple of mysticism and yoga. He currently lives in Pondicherry, working as a Professor of English at the Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education. He writes in Odia and English. As a bilingual writer, he has nine novels, nineteen short story collections, six travelogues, two collections of poetry, and several other writings on history and culture to his credit. Graham Greene writes:

I have read the short stories of Manoj Das with great pleasure. He will certainly take a place on my shelves besides the stories of Narayan. I imagine Orissa is far from Malgudi, but there is the same quality in his stories with perhaps an added mystery (quoted by Sachidananda Mohanty).

He is greatly influenced by Fakir Mohan Senapati, pioneer of modern Odia fiction, and by Vyasa and Valmiki. Manoj Das’s short stories are especially acclaimed world over. Two recent short story collections, *Tales Told by Mystics* (2001) and *The Lady who Died one and a Half Times and other Fantasies* (2003), mark Manoj Das out as an explorer of mysticism and a seeker of the right path after long years of meditation at the Pondicherry Ashram. These two collections of short stories are eye-openers in this era of rapid industrialization and material pursuits. These two collections lead its readers away from the mechanized and dehumanized realities which they inhabit towards an enshrined and enlightened path of divine grace. In other words, these two works posit the message that esoteric aestheticism is transient and only the divine path is eternal. Concurrently, Manoj Das, in order to arrive at his
formulations, falls back on the rich culture and heritage of our country. His stance is that of a pilgrim of rare sense and sensibility and his authorial personality is that of a visionary seer.

16.2 THE TEXTS

- **Tales told by Mystics**

*Tales Told by Mystics* authenticates Manoj Das a seeker of truth, justice and enlightenment. Life, for him, changes, and so do his thought, perception and writing. Born in Shankhari in Balasore, Odisha, Manoj Das grew up as a staunch supporter of Marxism in his student career. He was a radical thinker who believed in social action and its impact on the world. Later on, however, he was transformed into a seeker of realism, and is now an ardent quester of spiritualism. In this collection, Manoj Das has attempted to compile a hundred short stories from the mystics against the backdrop of the rich resource of Indian mythology – the *Puranas*, the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, among others. Das writes in the preface:

The India of yore, evidently, was an astoundingly fertile ground for the growth of several genres of fiction. Parallel to the chronological development of its mythology (the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Itihasa or the epics and the Puranas), there grew a solid ethical, moral pragmatic and purely earthly tradition of literature consisting of the *Brihatkatha* (only a part of which is available to us as the *Kathasarit-Sagar*), a compilation of lively tales of wisdom, wit and delight; the *Jataks*, the world’s first compilation of fables, apart from stories based on dramatic events and characters of a remote past, like those of Savitri and Satyavan, Dushyanta and Shakuntala, Nala and Damayanti, king Hariskhandra etc. some of which were in corporate in the *Mahabharata* an came to be regarded as aspects of our mythological lore. (ix)

Whatever themes he takes in his stories, one thing is sure that nostalgia/memory haunts him to the very core. Manoj Das has a different kind of artistic form and style from other famous short story writers like Ruskin Bond, O’Henry, Guy de Maupassant, Anton Chekov and R. K. Narayan. His stories usually begin with innocence, and recreate credibly the distant horizons through folk, mysticism and divinity. In an interview with Sachidananda Mohanty, Manoj Das validates his fondness for Odishan background and indigenous art from:

Our indigenous can find appreciation in pastures new around the world, similarly, Indian literature, to whatever region it might belong, must remain Indian. With the knowledge about India growing in the world, it should find wider appreciation. The best Indian literature is to be found in regional languages.

Manoj Das’s *Tales Told by Mystics* is an accumulation of short stories and tales from different sources collected over the past four decades – told by Sri Ramakrishna Paramahamsa, Sri Ramana Maharshi, Swami Vivekananda, Swami Ramdas, Sri Vijay Krishna Goswami, Yogiji Maharaj and many others. These stories are the part of our culture and heritage. The collection is published by Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi. The significance of the stories lies in the fact that they are appreciated not just within the culture in which they are located, but also beyond it. The reason behind this is the universal significance of these stories, and the honesty and faithfulness maintained by Manoj Das when he writes: “To the best of my conviction, the theme and the spirit of the stories have been faithfully projected (xii).”
As we go on reading the stories, we can be sure of one thing that there was no dichotomy between mundane life and divine life in the Vedic era. The picture that Das presents seems to substantiate this contention. Everyone in this era performed yagña early in the morning. The ghee used for the yagña was produced by cow-rearing in each home. The cow was considered sacred, and her milk was considered auspicious. Even cow-dung was used as the most holistic element. Cows were an asset, property and wealth not only for common people but also for kings. The king possessed a number of cows. It was an era of honesty, simplicity and faith in human life. Sanctity and positivism prevailed everywhere.

This was followed by the tretaya yug in which one-fourth of the earth was only negative or devilish in nature. The Ramayana reveals that Lord Rama had taken birth to crush the evil attitude of mankind. He vanquished the raksha vamsa of Ravana and overrode his territory to restore peace in the world. In the dwapara era, God in his incarnation of Lord Krishna not only conveyed the message of love but also restored dharma (nobility) through the greatest war ever fought, the Mahabharata war. It is held that Krishna himself preached the lessons of truth and justice on the battlefield of the Mahabharata, and that the Bhagvadgita records all that he spoke. Half the population comprising inhuman and anti-social sections were completely destroyed in the war, and the rest of humanity was restored in continuation with the goodness. In the present era, the ratio between the good and the evil in society is skewed again, and just opposite to what it was in the tretaya yug. Goodness among people is almost non-existent as a result of the evil forces all around. Goodness and positivity are imperilled as there is no end to horror, terror, brutality, bloodshed, inequality, injustice, indiscipline, jealousy, intolerance and all kinds of inhuman qualities. In this situation, Manoj Das’s stories act as remedial measures. He says:

I must hasten to add that even stories with a strong ascetic orientation were designed not so much to inspire disgust for the mundane world as to warn man against attachment to false values, greed, lust etc. and his readiness to use even occult powers for satisfaction of blind desires. (xi)

It is the human stupidity and foolishness as revealed by seers, saints and monks that Manoj Das attempts to curb. He further clarifies:

But satire against stupidity (the first sign of stupidity is, it never suspects itself—says a mystic), inhumanity and exhortation to broaden the consciousness assume an equally great importance in many such tales and several of them reveal subtle mysteries of the spiritual world. (xi)

What Manoj Das intends through his stories is to simplify present human living and to lead readers into the depth of judgment and consciousness. He knows that all are one and grace is one. Unless one is showered with grace, it is impossible for him to grow. The truth is that there are experiences and inspirations, but without grace nothing is fructified. Life’s ultimate goal can be achieved through strong faith, confidence, labour and ceaseless effort, not by greed, vanity and pretention. Better understanding helps one grow in a holistic way. Similarly spiritual awakening gives the insight into problems of earthly life.

Our natural environment is our home. We can’t save ourselves unless we save it. Before an incident or accident, nature gives us ominous warning. We can therefore follow these omens of nature for our betterment. Karma (action/work) is what results in joys. The resolution depends on it: good acts lead to good results, evil acts to evil results. Pain, agony and suffering are all the result of karma. Indian mysticism lays a great emphasis on human consciousness behind the action. The stories Manoj
Das has written also present the same truth – that virtue is always rewarded and vice is definitely punished. The stories go through examining knowledge and ignorance, scholarship and innocence, faith and faithlessness, miracle and incessant labour. *Satsang* or befriending the truth and benevolent one, leads man to spiritualism, but there can be no attainment/salvation or purgation unless we surrender completely to God. It is this that gives man all kinds of happiness. Manoj Das, in certain stories, tries to show the distinction of body and soul. A body decays, not a soul – the soul leaves the body after death to dissolve in the super-soul or God. The satisfaction of the body never gives happiness unless the soul is satisfied. Realizing the truth is not knowing it. Rigorous discipline is needed for fulfillment in life. *Mantra* – the chant of holy lines – brings *siddhi* or success. For each success, a teacher/guru is required to guide life towards the right path. Again, success without divine grace is futile.

Manoj Das’s use of a number of images, symbols and allegories make the short stories an impressive exercise in addressing mental blindness or hollowness and directing it towards truth, honesty and reality. Another aspect of the story-writer that has a deep significance is that freedom of choice without wisdom is valueless and meaningless. This short story collection makes Manoj Das traverse a journey from earthly life to ascetic life, worldly life to spiritual life, esoteric life to divine life. The varied paths of mystic lore are laid before the reader as the author explores the path of renunciation to attain the goal.

What Manoj Das verily believes in is that one can change one’s fate by promise and determination. Human commitment is an important determinant. In one of the stories, the writer narrates about *maya*, which has two ways – *vidya* and *avidya*, deed and misdeed, acceptance and non-acceptance, action and non-action. The parables behind the stories are rare and immensely significant. Each story illustrated in this collection emphasizes two things – inner being and outer being, inner action and outer action, inwardness and outwardness. One can seek the inner self by prayer and meditation to reach the ultimate destination of life. Acquiring knowledge cannot alone help one to cross the river of life. What is necessary is to have strong faith in God. There is a difference between theoretical knowledge and practical knowledge. Practical knowledge is more important than the theoretical one. Thus to know the inner self and to work accordingly is the best remedial step for this world of crises. It is the inner self that always works like a true friend. It never allows ego and envy to live within and to ruin us.

**The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies**

Manoj Das’s *The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times and Other Fantasies* consists of twelve short stories. The first five are rooted in the Odia folk-story of the *Samant* and *Abolkara*, two folk characters – the former has an insatiable curiosity for travelling and acquiring a great deal of knowledge and the latter is portrayed as his assistant and a servant who accompanies his master on the condition that he will stop travelling the moment he is not satisfied with the answers he gets from his master to any query that he raises regarding a scene or sight that intrigues him. He would resume walking only after he had been convinced. There are volumes of *Abolkara* stories in Odisha, which perhaps influence Manoj Das to build up stories in this manner. Seven stories in this collection are almost a continuation from the *Jatakas* and the *Panchatantra*. The title story, “The Lady Who Died One and Half Times”, is an original creation of Manoj Das, and the twelfth story is quite novel – it narrates about how human beings today pursue name, fame and money by bartering even their bodies, and putting their lives at risk. In the blurb of this collection, the author says:
In this collection, I have made an experiment (it was in fact an inspired step) in reconstructing some of the stories from the *Panchatantra*, the *Jatakas* and the *Kathasaritasagar*. This is done through two characters from the folklore, Samant, the master, and Abolkara, the companion-cum-servant. They are indefatigable travelers. Whenever Abolkara sees something that intrigues him, he refuses to move unless his master reveals its mystery to him. This back ground helps me to let Abolkara sees something associated with one of the ancient tales. Samanta then not only reminds him of the original story but also narrates to him what happens after the point at which Vishnu Sharma or Somadev had stopped.

Manoj Das is drawn to nature, natural landscapes, trees, birds and animals, highlighting his ecological concerns in this era of environmental destruction. Besides, the plots, subplots, characters and incidents he creates in his stories elucidate his fondness for human values, spiritualism and divine blessing. Meditation clears the path to the ultimate destination of life, and this seems to be the motto behind the short stories of Manoj Das. A devotee of Sri Aurobindo, Manoj Das discusses and elaborates on the distinction between body and soul, soul and great soul, materialism and divinity. All these things categorize him as a seeker of divine path, a quester of God, and a staunch believer of prayer and meditation.

Manoj Das as a humanist and a short story writer is conscious enough of the reality in life and the fantasies around it. This is evident from the title of the volume. He is interested in the dichotomy between reality and fantasy:

These satires presented through an ambience of fantasy are few in the genre in which serious themes are presented in a satirical and humorous vein.” Similarly what Manoj Das says about his own words, story and characters: Characters follow the theme of a story, and the words are merely added by author to represent the thoughts of the character. (Web)

Bhabagrahi Maharana, in his article titled “The Locale in the Short Stories of Manoj Das”, states:

Manoj Das, the modern Vishnu Sharma of India is a wizard of words who wields his pen like the wand of a magician to take his readers to the land of his wonder and reality now in a ship in the heart of the sea of his fancy and fantasy and now in the chariot of realism to show the happenings of real world against the backdrop of fantasy. He is the only post-independent modern short story writer in India who has acclaimed international fame as a story teller par excellence. (60)

Indeed, in terms of technique, Manoj Das is superbly different from other contemporary short story writers from India and abroad. The stories have arresting openings, interesting plots, well connected subplots, flourishing structure, appropriate action, recognizable climax, satisfying ending, eye-catching atmosphere, effective images and imagery in colloquial language, interior dialogue, skillful exploitation, conventions of the genre, enhanced narratives, perfect and often chosen language to make the story charming in general. In addition to all this, one can expect the unexpected, gentle demonstration and neat setting of motives, celebration of local settings, nature, descriptions of the environment and the Odishan background. The storyteller never forgets his place, people and time, nostalgic reminiscences, numerous accounts of human misery, emotional country side folks, tradition, mythology, heritage culture, shrines, temples, and numerous other rural associations, both human and non-human. in this way, one finds that through his stories, Manoj Das restores the lost past, and in the process, delves into unexplored frontiers and writes insightfully about the stark realities of life. He is thus able to transport readers to a new and unknown realms of experience and perception.
Manoj Das almost always locates himself amid the ever green environment of rustic life which is often mysterious and adventurous. He is a master of subversion who can subvert for turns into misfortunes and vice-versa. His evocation of other worlds is not only comical and amusing but also magical and mysterious. He deals with common people with an uncommon touch which transcends both natural and supernatural elements. His sense of judgment is incomparable and more interesting than the Arabian Nights and The Adventures of Aladdin.

The title story of The Lady Who Died One and a Half Times opens with Abolkara’s question to Samanta, his master, about a tomb located at the centre of a beautiful park where both have arrived after a long walk through an inhospitable forest. Samanta says that the tomb is of a one-and-half times dead lady. The story telling is continued therefore sitting under a banyan tree. Sage man’s brilliant disciple, Tanmoy is adept in yoga who falls in love with Susmita, the adopted daughter of tantrik, Chandra Gauranga. In due course, Susmita persuades Tanmoy to practice Tantra for siddhis or powers for performing miracles to achieve success. Here Manoj Das tries to distinguish the practice of Yoga (Vidya) and tantra (Avidya) in order to maintain Swadharma or true inner freedom. The story writer shows Tanmoy, a believer of karma or the Divine Grace whereas Susmita, a supporter of tantra occult practice for a change in one’s destiny. The next evening, the king’s massive decorated elephant pours fragrant water from the golden pitcher on Tanmoy and he is then received as the king to ascend the throne of the king in his death. He is also compelled to marry princess Haimavati as it is the custom and tradition of the province. After marriage, the queen is critically ill on the couple’s travel to kashi. Treatment fails and she dies. There appears Susmita’s vital being, the life force and air explosive reserve of her desires and passions. The queen gets life again with Susmita’s vital being but she becomes more tyrannical and terrific. The queen also takes revenge in the absence of the king by executing the prime minister on the charge of murdering Tantrik Chandragauranga and his daughter, Susmita. On meeting Sage, Dhimon at Badrinath, Tanmoy returns to his kingdom and continues to rule lonely and successively by suppressing the attack of the General that has already put the queen to death. Thus Susmita has received death for one and half times in her life once in her own body and later her vital being in the body of the queen. Now Abolkara is happy to resume walking.

The second story “The Last Demoness” is taken from Jataka Stories in which Manoj Das brings an association of human and non-human. Bodhisatva one of the incarnations of Lord Buddha being the son of a demoness leaves his mother in her absence and goes to a civilized society with his father. The demoness dies of grief in losing her husband and son. But she delivers a female baby before her death. If her son has been like her husband, her daughter is akin to herself, a demoness as she has properly followed the laws of genetics. Demon-kids are never feeble and helpless like their human counterparts. The baby crawls into a hut of Rishi while a flash flood sweeps her mother’s body into the sea. She grows with the care of the Rishi till his death in her marriageable age. The Rishi appeals Vratarup, a local young resident to take care of the last member of the demon species on the earth. When Vratarup approaches different persons with marriage proposal of the demoness girl, none of them such as the radical youth leader, a handsome and affluent young visitor, a smart musician and a young landlord agrees to marry her. Vratarup has no other way to accept the girl in marriage as he has committed to the Rishi. And finally, he brings the demoness to home, which is strongly protested by the innocent peace-loving citizens. Both of them therefore leave for the forest to live like two hermits. Their vacation of the colony leaves fear, anger, depression and mistrust among other residents, which also shortens the lifespan of the citizens and the colony.
has now lost its attraction. The charming hill top town becomes a place of curse thereafter and it is therefore a pile of ruins now. This is narrated to AbolKara when he has asked Samanta about the ruins of the hill top town in the beginning of the story.

The third story, “The Lion Who Sprang to Life after a Century” is hailed from the *Panchatantra* of three young men reviving a lion who after getting life howls to eat them up all. This story is also formed in the pattern of question-answer between Abolkara and his master, Samant, a man of vast wisdom and knowledge. The three young princes of the local king want to attend the sick father for which the Guru, Sage Trichakshu allows them to go accompanied by Dhiman, a young brilliant and trusted disciple, who is also a spiritually awakened soul with a direction to the eldest one, the crown prince to make Dhiman minister when he ascends the throne. On their way through the forest next morning, they find some bones lying scattered on a rock. Curiously enough, the three brothers try to test the occult feats they have learnt beyond the knowledge of their Guru in the hermitage. Disobeying Dhiman, they chant mantras one after another by collecting the bones of a lion. Being alive, the lion roars to attack the three princes who are now trembling and grabbing one another as tightly as possible. Dhiman from his tree climbing stops the monarch of the beasts from devouring as he has mastered the art of talking to the beasts and birds. Manoj Das through this story discusses on one’s goal of life that is to go from darkness to life and from ignorance to knowledge. The story also teaches about one’s duty, sincerity, sacrifice and commitment. It is Dhimon now who earnestly gives up himself to the lion to meet its hunger in place of the three princes. Another important aspect what the story writer wants to highlight is the hypocrisy of man. The three princes give a slip away to alert to local hunters when Dhimon and the lion are engaged in conversation. The hunter kills the lion and escorts the princes to the kingdom. Dhiman returns to the hermitage and later takes up the charge of the hermitage that has been preserving the lion’s skin as his *gurubhai*, a fellow seeker because the lion wakes him up with a bang to the goal of his life. In this way, Abolkara’s question about the preservation and the show of reverence of the lion’s skin is neatly answered.

The fourth folktale between Abolkara and Samanta, “Jewels from the Sky” opens with Abolkara’s dream of a dagger, a dazzling one that has dangled before his eyes and blood is dripping from it accompanied by bizarre noises, a mixture of anguished groan and pathetic cries. Presently, the smiling Samanta is explaining the story. Manoj Das has taken the main plot from the source of one of the stories in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* by employing Bodhisattva character from the *Jataka*. Manoj Das always tries to seek for two things in his stories-human welfare and the divine grace. Besides, his intention behind his stories intensifies that he is a true lover of nature because nature guides man well. Bodhisattva’s teacher, an old Brahmin pundit is capable of showering jewels from the sky by performing a few rites in a precious full moon night, when there is a certain auspicious planetary conjugation. The coincidence is fortunately taking place the very next night – a full moon night. While walking through the forest path, both the pundit and the disciple fall in the captivity of a gang of bandit. The Sirdar demands Bodhisattva a thousand gold coins in seven days to release the pundit for which Bodhisattva more confidently goes away to collect the same. In his absence, the pundit, by performing rites, rains jewels from the sky for the bandits, which also attracts another gang of bandits and they start quarrelling among themselves and in consequence, every one dies except two survivors. The unfortunate pundit is also not spared, who falls prey to the miracle’s temptation. Bodhisattva, after making him able to collect one thousand gold coins within three days, returns to the forest on the fourth day. Studying the
situation, he grieves for the death of the pundit and hands over everything to the king to be used for human welfare.

As there is no noble inspiration behind the pundit’s miracle except lust, greed and violence, therefore Abolkara is not able to sleep at the same place of treasure after a terrible dream. Abolkara is convinced but not the story writer because his real exploration of the story treasures within the divine grace. For him, wealth found through miracles and not through genuine effort or talent would never sanction happiness. In spiritual life, fondness for miracles is bound to create an immeasurable distance between the seeker and the divine.

The fifth story taken from the *Panchatantra*, “The Last Night”, in its opening, makes Abolkara agog with a dog trying to attack a cat outside Ahladpur village yesterday is so chummy with the other inside the village today. Manoj Das, while raising his voice against the dowry system in our society, seems to be more interpretative on other aspects such as the mystery of the sublime in the air of this village, soul and great soul, mystery of life cycle, prayer to the divine Mother to win a decisive victory over sex, violence against prudent laws of nature, etc in this story. Regarding Abolkara’s question about the dog and the cat, Manoj Das has a possible explanation of ‘vital spirits’ of the two dead gentlemen, father of a bride and her groom. Any father who auctions his son and demands dowry from the bride’s father becomes a cat in the next birth. Similarly, the vital force of the bride’s father, being tortured in his life time, becomes a dog in the next birth to take revenge on the other. So they quarrel with each other outside the village but live like chums inside the village due to the mystery of the sublime in the air. The mystery is that the air inside the village is filled with the occult power of ascesis of a Goddess who in her human incarnation marries an octogenarian at her tender age of only sixteen. The old ape after losing seven wives marries her for the eighth time. Though the young lady is non subservient of her age-old husband in the prime of her spousal life, yet she becomes kind enough to take care of her husband after receiving a warning from a ferocious bandit one night. On the other hand, the old man leaves his house for Himalayan valley to gain a youthful vigor at least for a year. The old man after going through some nauseating rites at his venerable age in order to give his wife a satisfaction returns home in a morning. The wife welcomes him, serves him properly during the day and sits in meditation, and then dies in her trance at sunset. Her death drives out all the passionate desires and yearnings from the old man who also breathes his last at dawn. The villagers cremate them together. The hermit who has been guiding both the couple earlier, now reveals that the lady is a highly evolved soul, almost a Goddess. Abolkara is happy enough to lift the luggage for later journey with his master, Samanta.

In the sixth story “The Tiger and the Traveller”, Manoj Das has been reminded of a picture when he was the student of primary education. It is one of the stories from the *Panchatantra* and written in the first person narration as if it is a personal experience of the short story writer. The story depicts how the traveller turns into a tiger when he shows his lust for the gold bangle. The traveller enters into the pond, not for the gold bangle, but to lose his life slowly but finally finds his human shape changing into a tiger, when he beholds the gold bangle. The moral of the story is that the traveller will have no liberation until he succeeds in handing over the bangle to some other traveller in this lonely forest.

In the seventh story, “A Turtle from the Blue”, Manoj Das fixes a limit for everyone. Crossing such a limit is not only a violation but also a great life risk and danger. Kambu-griva, a turtle falls from the sky to death when he goes beyond his limitation
as his thirst for knowing the unknown is endless. The wisdom of his proposed venture evolves a technique to fly in the sky together by holding the centre of a stick, the two ends held by two swans, Sankata and Vikata. Kambugriva’s notion of breaking history as the first astronaut among the turtles is rather high in him. However, Manoj Das remarks that this invasion of the sky by a turtle surely marks the beginning of the end. Later Manoj Das makes his own point that life is meant for rising high up. But to rise higher can also lead to dangers, and this is evident as the turtle comes crashing down on the palace roof when he opens his mouth. Its meat is eaten with great relish.

“The Stupid Servant” is the eighth story in which Manoj Das wants to justify that man and monkey are two different species and there is no overlapping between the two. He also cites an example in this story how the monkey accidentally kills his master in a bid to kill the fly sitting on the forehead of his master. The latter phase of the story sees the death of the queen too in grief and the monkey never gets the chance to occupy the throne despite each effort and plan made by the Genius, who is an old monkey and a pundit. Thus the monkey in the story is received as a stupid friend of the king and what Manoj Das focuses in the story is that a conscientious foe is preferable to a stupid friend.

“Story of a Strange Last Journey” is the next story in this collection written in the first person narration and the narrator acts as a reporter reporting to his editor of his investigation. He hopes that he has done justice to the assignment. It is all about the animal’s revolution in the Luvurva forest. Manoj Das, as a true revolutionist, since his youthfulness, knows the anthem of revolution and therefore, he has created a revolutionary story, which shows his great love for performing art in this manner. This story also brings out a supplement on the epoch-making episodes in the Luvurva forest. Manoj Das also calls the story ‘a great supernatural journey’ and wants to prove jackal as the shrewdest animal among others in this forest. Because Jackal senior makes the president dead in his living state, and it is his cleverness that ousts the president from the forest. He finally rises to power and occupies the throne to become in Manoj Das’s terms, “the de facto boss of the Luvurva forest.” In connection with the story, Manoj Das likes to clarify in the preface.

By the way, I had not read Orwell’s *Animal Farm* when I wrote “The Story of a Strange Last Journey.” Even though the theme of my story is quite different – the development leading to the predicament of the ‘President’-probably I would not have used this technique had I read the former. (xi)

“The princess and The Story Teller” is the tenth story in which the story teller wins the hands of the virtual as well as beautiful princess in marriage who in a bid to marry an intelligent man, prince or pauper needs to be succeeded in answering three questions asked by her. A dozen of princes have not only failed but also have been humiliated earlier by the princess. Thus begins the question – answer session between the princess and the one-eyed story-teller. In her first question, the princess asks about his half-eye sight, half-visibility with a single eye. The story teller proves that he has the capability of seeing double what she sees because he sees two eyes of the princess with his one eye while she with her two eyes sees an eye of the story teller. Similarly, the princess in her second question tells him to carry the hill yonder on his head for a mile. Everyone goes to the hill along with the king and his daughter. The story teller humbly says to the princess there to lift the hill up and place it on his most willing head. Neither can the princess lift the hill up nor does the story teller carry it for a mile. Thus he gets success in his second answer. Now it is time for the third question when the princess asks him to tell twelve stories that are
never heard by her maids. More wisely the story teller continues telling new kinds of stories to the audience present there. However, the princess in her whisper compels the maids to say ‘yes’ before the twelfth story is narrated by the teller. In his story telling, surprisingly and cunningly, the story teller builds up such a story related to the personal anguish of the princess, which can never be agreed by the maids to have known before. His narration is that he secretly visits the princess with a lotus every night and gifts her the same. As he is not able to collect a lotus one night, he has sacrificed an eye as the gift. Thus they have already married without other’s knowledge. The king becomes happier with the last story to declare him his son-in-law. The story teller is not in fact, one-eyed and also opens his closing eye. The real marriage between the princess and the story teller is settled then.

In the next story, “He Who Rode the Tiger”, the short story writer describes about the show of false pride of the royal officials in connection with riding a tiger. What Manoj Das wants to elaborate in this story is that none is less arrogant including the king, his commander, minister and other officers. The event related to riding a tiger finally takes a dramatic turn. A tiger from the jungle has intruded the royal orchard and a mali (gardener) spreads this news all over the grand kingdom. Therefore, the king, the prince, other ranking officials and even common people gather in the royal orchard. The high officials not only enjoy there but also do not hesitate to show their false ability to capture the tiger. Besides, they take much credit in explaining each one’s forefathers with their bravery to domesticate tigers as their pets. However, no one dares to face and bring the tiger to captivity. Finally, the king, in a show of pride, announces that the prince would ride the tiger. The prince at last rides the tiger and the wild beast gradually lead in him to the jungle, never to return. When the king orders the commander to return his son, the crowd there melts away and after two hours the commander along with his soldiers return with only a piece of the prince’s garment. The story thus reveals how the pride and king unnecessarily loses his son and pays a heavy price for his own foolishness.

The last story of this collection “Sharma and The Wonderful Lump” is rather a long short story written in ten sections about the miraculous appearance and disappearance of the aboo, the wonderful lump. Sharma, a petty clerk, a dutiful employee of the Rooplal Textile Company, now holding the position of a senior executive after promotion, grows with an unexpected aboo or wonderful lump on his head. He has been admitted into the posh clinic in the states for a surgical operation of his aboo by Dr. Hardstone. What Manoj Das intends to write here is that the aboo is entirely a handiwork of the omnipotent. The tumor grows larger day by day, and Indian doctors do not dare to perform a successful surgery. Mr. Sharma is still surviving with the biggest ever tumor known in the medical history the world. However, the American doctors console Mr. Sharma to depend on them as they will remove the tumor as easily as one pluck might a fruit. Not even an iota of his precious life shall go with it. The aboo of Mr. Sharma is also feature or television networks in their programme. Mr. Sharma not only becomes popular in the States but also earns a handful of American dollars from the advertisement. Manoj Das’s interest in medical science not only decorates the story but also creates a lot of humour about the character of the aboo man, and other western characters. The theme of love associated with the story, the craving for power and money by making aboo as the capital for which the aboo man, Mr. Sharma is kidnapped and his life put to risk, talk on yoga and aboo, Indian folk of Tulsi, criticism of western women for their living style, the exploration of yoga, moksha and nirvana Manoj Das compares and contrasts India and America in the story. Sharma, the aboo man is finally so threatened by the kidnappers that he remembers his mother and motherland at the night moment and returns to India overnight. Here ends the name, fame, popularity, egoism, arrogance,
lust for money and power of an Indian. This is the ultimate motive of the short story writer who pays the highest regard to mother and motherland by reciting the Sanskrit dictum not written in this story, but probably must be on the writer's mind: “Janani Janmabhumicha swargadapi gariyasi. Manoj Das writes: “Indian mothers are nonpareil’ and invokes mother land as Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s patriotic song follows: “sujalam, sufalam, malayajashitalam”. It provides a national feeling and his heart is crying for the nationals of his own country as revealed in this story. The story sanctions much faith in Indian lore, folk and mysticism that the aboo of Mr. Sharma has dispersed’ when he falls prostrated at the guru’s feet along with his mother and the guru gives him a holy touch on his head. The guru’s blessings, a channel for divine grace, liberates Mr. Sharma from the aboo, the wonderful lump.

16.3 LET US SUM UP

Manoj Das’s stories tell their readers how to transcend the transitoriness of life and how to lead life to peace, progress, permanence and spirituality. He is a seeker of swadharma – true inner freedom – which has no conflict with the collective life. It requires only a transformation of human consciousness. Both the Mahabharata and Homer’s Ulysses are abundantly present in his novels and short stories. His vision is routed through his nativity – through Odisha, its landscapes, culture, heritage, and life patterns.

16.4 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


16.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: Your answers should be in about 400 words.

1) What does Graham Greene say about Manoj Das? Justify his views in this unit

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2) *Tales told by Mystics* bases itself on rich indigenous mythological resources. Discuss.

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UNIT 17  THE LEGENDS OF PENSAM BY MAMANG DAI

Structure

17.0 Objectives

17.1 Introduction

   17.1.1 Locating North East India
   17.1.2 Locating Writing from the North East
   17.1.3 The Oral Tradition in Folklore and Literature from the North East

17.2 Mamang Dai’s The Legends of Pensam

   17.2.1 Introducing the Author
   17.2.2 Introducing the Location
   17.2.3 The Text: Structure, Content and Analysis

17.3 Let Us Sum Up

17.4 References and Further Readings

17.5 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

17.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to

- understand the unique position of the North East with respect to the rest of India;
- appreciate how the topographical, cultural and political distinctiveness generate a very unique kind of literature from this region;
- be able to understand the specificities of Arunachal Pradesh and locate Mamang Dai as a writer from Arunachal Pradesh and from the North East;
- comprehend how Mamang Dai is one of the writers from the North East who handles the existing realities in conjunction with the wealth of traditional oral literature that is present in Arunachal Pradesh; and
- realize that The Legends of Pensam is a modern response to an ancient and traditional culture that both particularizes and universalizes its extant reality.

17.1 INTRODUCTION

17.1.1 Locating North East India

We are all aware that the North East comprises the seven states of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura. It is a study in diversity:

The North-east … is an extraordinarily rich and diverse region, in natural resources and beauty, in its peoples and their rich social and cultural inheritance, in the resonance of its complex politics and post-border ethnicities. But the place is also extraordinarily tragic in the range of the violence it has suffered and the blood that has been shed in the name of preserving national unity and upholding India’s security. (Hazarika Writing on the Wall ix)
You will all agree that the image that the word North East conjures up for most Indians is of an entity distinct from the mainland and populated by people equally dissimilar – geographically, historically, racially and linguistically. One of the reasons for this perception is its geographical position, which makes the region almost detached from the mainland: “India’s Northeast is a misshapen strip of land, linked to the rest of the country by a narrow corridor just twenty kilometers wide at its slimmest which is referred to as the Chicken’s Neck” (Hazarika *Strangers of the Mist* xvi).

This is further accentuated by the fact that the Northeast India is located at the junction of four geographical areas: Central, South, South East and East Asia. There are international borders on almost all sides – Tibet and Bhutan to the north, Myanmar to the east, and Bangladesh to the south and west. The intersectional location of the region accounts for the fact that there are perceptible influences of China, Tibet, Myanmar, Bangladesh and even the South-east Asian region, which are seamlessly integrated into the local cultural structure and milieu, thus making it a “cultural treasure-trove” (Datta 3-4). Paradoxically, however, this identification with neighbouring countries in terms of cultures and physiognomies also makes the average North Easterner distinctive from the rest of the population of the country. Most of the people inhabiting the region are of Indo-Mongoloid origin, while many scholars have also discerned Austric, Aryan, Islamic and Dravidian affiliations (Datta 4). The diversity of the Northeast can be gauged from the fact that it is home to over two hundred ethnic groups which constitute 42% of the entire tribal population of the country. Vaishnavism, Buddhism and Christianity coexist with the animistic faith practiced by a large section of the tribal population, and there are “scores of different languages and dialects, most of them belonging to the Tibetan-Burman cluster of the Sino-Tibetan family … [and] some languages with Austric affiliations” (Datta 5). Most of these languages have rich stores of oral literature and other folklore material.

The topography too is varied, and comprises lofty mountains and small hills, plateaus and river valleys and plains. The diversity of physical features is matched by an equally rich variety of flora and fauna, and weather and soil conditions. The topography and ecology have influenced every sphere of life in the region and these and other miscellaneous essentials account for the unique tapestry of material and socio-cultural diversity that is characteristic of the North East. However, this discussion does not just intend to give you a picture of how ‘different’ the North East is. We have to keep in mind the link between the particular and the universal, succinctly articulated by Mamang Dai herself:

The image of the North East region of the country is that it is a mosaic of tribal culture. That it is very remote. That it is full of trees and mountains and that it is a troubled place with lots of insurgency and army, and counter insurgency operations. All of this is true. Many people also associate the region with a beautiful landscape, a naturalist’s paradise, a land of big rivers and colourful festivals in worship of benevolent gods and goddesses. All this is equally true. So what have we got here then? There is conflict and there is tranquillity. This must be like everywhere else in the world. And like everywhere else, moving through this landscape, there is a band of people struggling with pen and paper … to express their feelings. (“North East Poetry”, online article)

This brings us to the issue of creative writing from the North East, and we will discuss this in the ensuing section.
17.1.2 Locating Writings from the North East

The first thing that needs to be acknowledged while speaking of the North East, as the above discussion illustrates, is that it is a mosaic of cultures. There can be no overarching narrative that subsumes the whole region into a single entity, as that would risk “homogenize[ing] a location where no homogeneity can ever be imagined” (Satpathy, online article). In fact this would replicate the predicament that the region itself has experienced with respect to the larger nationalist narrative, a problem that Paolienlal Haokip of the Institute of Peace and Conflict Studies, New Delhi, succinctly summarizes in the following words:

Besides, the nationalist discourse, a dominant theme in most historical texts, which legitimizes nationhood, based on differences with ‘others’ tends to influence regional, ethnic and religious communities. Those on the periphery of a state whose heroes are not featured as heroes in the national historiography, whose cultures finds no mention in the national culture and whose religion is identified with ‘others’ and vilified are extremely vulnerable to the temptations of secessionism. Augmented by the lack of economic welfare and the collapse of governance, these disillusionments can give rise to revolts. This thesis fits the situation in North East India. (qtd. in Gupta Singh, online article)

The North East had always been placed outside the purview of studies in Indian culture and history, and till very recently, serious attempts to study this region in conjunction with the larger narratives of the nation have been few and far between.

The fact that a considerable majority of the population is tribal was one of the causes for the interest of colonial ethnographers and anthropologists in this region. They recorded the customs, manners, languages and everyday life of the people. The incursion of Christian missionaries began around the same time. Except for Assam, Tripura and Manipur, which had linkages with the Indic culture of South Asia, the rest of the North East had affiliations with Mongoloid South East Asia. However, as the British ensconced themselves in India, colonial political expediency led to the entire region being yoked together with India. The region was evidently a colonial construction as was the demarcation of borders, which were also imposed. This historical legacy was handed down to independent India as well, and the interests of the Indian nation state have been at odds with the reality and the aspirations of the people of this region. There is a history of resistance to both British as well as Indian attempts to administer the area, most of the issues being linked to cultural conflicts which translate into identity-based political agitations. However, the renewed political and academic interest in the region at the turn of the century holds promise for the generation of a proper perspective to understand the region and its variegated reality.

Historical exclusion is just one part of a larger picture, where, apart from freedom fighters, creative writers, thinkers, academics, artists and many others find no mention beyond the borders of the region in nationalist discourse. Writings from and about the North East tend to focus on these unresolved issues. Most of the literature from this region reflects the experience of change and the response to it. Identity, ethnicity, violence, marginalization and life lived amidst this volatility are, understandably, the content of creative and critical writings from this region. Urvashi Butalia of Zubaan, talking of creative writers and writings from the region, observes: “When publishing writers from the North East it is difficult not to look at the political nature of that writing. Virtually everyone writing from there is somehow or the other rooted and involved in the politics of the region” (qtd. in Borpujari).
However telling the story as it is just one part of the reality. There are narratives which chronicle change from a different perspective. Tilottama Misra, who recently brought out the two-volume *Oxford Anthology of Writings from North-East India* observes:

An intense sense of awareness of the cultural loss and recovery that came with the negotiation with ‘other’ cultures is a recurrent feature of the literatures of the northeastern states. Each small community or linguistic group has responded through its oral or written communication to the encounters with the majoritarian cultures from either mainland India or from outside the borders of the country, in its own distinctive manner. (qtd. in Borpujari)

It is this oral communicative tradition and its transliteration into the written that we will now talk about.

### 17.1.3 The Oral Tradition in Folklore and Literature from the North East

Geographical seclusion and inaccessible terrain have helped the North East remain one of the few places in the world where some pockets of tribal life and its cultural traditions and institutions still remain almost untouched. The unique identities of various tribes, which have their basis in ethnic difference and in their distinct cultures, have not yet been run over by the process of globalization and its commodity culture that has erased the distinctive identities of many cultures. Though not completely untouched by these processes, the tribes’ negotiation with the onward march of globalization and its discontents are still in evidence. And it is the folklore and the folk-life of the region which is the repository of their unique identities. It would be relevant if you go through what Mamang Dai, the author whom we will take up for discussion next, has to say about this in her essay, “Oral Narratives and Myth”:

In the fast-paced global world of today, one may well ask what the worth of these old stories and legends is. The question of direction and destiny has become one of great complexity and soul searching. And the question is ‘Where do we begin? What is the most important thing to start with?’ Perhaps in this, myth and memory have their role too. How do we identify ourselves as members of a community belonging to a particular place, with a particular history? Some of the signs for this lie with our stories. We are here today as members of a community with a particular set of beliefs, by an act of faith, because we believed in the ‘word’ as composed in our myths and legends. It is here that we may find that peculiar, indefinable something by which we recognise each other, and make others see us as a group, a society, a people of a particular community. Today I might say that these stories of gods and demons have no basis in logic, but the storyteller will tell me that they were born out of reason, out of the minds of men. The stories did not come out of nowhere like a bolt of lightning. Life generated it in us, and the significance of songs and stories is that they demonstrate the complex nature of human faith founded on memory and the magic of words in the oral tradition. With time, the collection of myths developed into parables and a code of conduct that became the basis for daily customary practice as observed by the tribes. Everyone knows the stories, in one form or another, and it is this knowledge that links the individual to a group, a certain region and community, but most often the stories are inseparable from the routine of daily life that they are not even perceived as stories anymore. (5-6)
That is why, in these times of change, it is even more important to negotiate the content of these stories and keep them alive. It is these stories that give their people the sense of identity, and help people relate to and think about their culture.

17.2 MAMANG DAI’S THE LEGENDS OF PENSAM

17.2.1 Introducing the Author

Mamang Dai is a poet, novelist and freelance reporter. She has worked as correspondent for various dailies like Sentinel, The Telegraph and Hindustan Times. She was the Project Officer in the Biodiversity Hotspots Conservation Programme of the WWF in Arunachal Pradesh. Dai, who was conferred the Padmashree in 2011 for Literature and Education, has also been associated with the Arunachal Pradesh Literary Society, Sahitya and Sangeet Natak Akademi, Raja Ram Mohun Roy Library Foundation and the North East Writers’ Forum in various capacities. However, Dai is principally known as a creative writer and a historian who writes about Arunachal Pradesh. A one-time civil servant, she quit her job to devote herself to writing. She is the author of Arunachal Pradesh: The Hidden Land, a documentation of the culture and tradition of a state about which not much is known, and Mountain Harvest: The Food of Arunachal Pradesh. Her creative writing includes two novels, The Legends of Pensam (2006) and Stupid Cupid (2009), two volumes of poetry titled The River Poems (2004) and El bálsamo del tiempo (The Balm of Time, bilingual edition, 2008), and two illustrated books of folktales for children titled Sky Queen (2005) and Once Upon a Moon Time (2005). Mamang Dai talks of herself as an Itanagar-based writer.

17.2.2 Introducing the Location

I happened to visit Arunachal Pradesh in February 2014. As I was preparing for my journey, I tried to find a detailed map of the state on the internet, but the maps I came up with appeared curiously bare. I conjectured that probably, because of the sensitive and disputed nature of the region, complete geographical details might have been deliberately withheld from the public domain. However, just to cross-check on this idea that occurred to me, I tried an internet search about the data regarding the state. I found that Arunachal Pradesh is the largest of all the states which comprise the North East having an area of 83,743 sq. kms, and one of the...
larger states in the country. However, it has a population density of 17 per sq. km., the lowest in India, as per the State Census of 2011. The maps that seemed blank and incomplete now made sense. The region is the most sparsely populated in India. It is only in the last decade or so that it has opened up for tourism and development. Earlier known as NEFA (North East Frontier Agency), it was accorded union territory status in 1972 and named Arunachal Pradesh, or the Land of the Dawn Lit Mountains. It was accorded statehood in 1987. The state shares its border with three countries – Bhutan to the west, Myanmar to the east, and China to the north and north east. The 1080 km. long international border with China is a site of incessant conflict, with Chinese incursions and claims of Arunachal Pradesh being a part of China being a regular occurrence.

Mamang Dai’s *The Legends of Pensam* talks about Arunachal Pradesh from the perspective of its original inhabitants, the tribal populace. In her “author’s note”, Dai says:

Arunachal Pradesh … is one of the largest states in the country, and also one of the greenest. It is the homeland of twenty-six tribes with over one hundred and ten sub-clans, each with a different language or dialect. Part of the Eastern Himalaya, the land is criss-crossed by rivers and high mountain ranges running north-south that divide it into five river valleys. The mightiest of its rivers is the Siang, known as the Tsangpo in Tibet, and the Siang valley, stretching northwards to the Tsangpo gorge where the river enters India, is the territory of the Adi tribe who are the subject of this book.

Like the majority of the tribes inhabiting the central belt of Arunachal, the Adis practice an animistic faith that is woven around forest ecology and co-existence
with the natural world. There are few road links in their territory. Travel to the distant villages still entails cumbersome river crossings, elephant rides, and long foot marches through dense forest or over high mountain passes. (xi)

It is this land that Dai talks of as an Arunachalee and an Adi: a land of “pristine forests and rich bio-diversity” whose beauty makes you “forget your aches and pains” (xi-xii). The Legends of Pensam is “an intricate web of stories, images and the history of a tribe” set in the territory of the Adis nestled in the mountains of Arunachal Pradesh, the ‘pensam’, or ‘in-between’ place:

In our language, the language of the Adis, the word ‘pensam’ means ‘in-between’. It suggests the middle, or middle ground, but it may also be interpreted as the hidden spaces of the heart where a secret garden grows. It is the small world where anything can happen and everything can be lived; where the narrow boat that we call life sails along somehow in calm or stormy weather; where the life of a man can be measured in the span of a song. (Epigraph, vi)

17.2.3 The Text: Structure, Content and Analysis

The Legends of Pensam is a series of interconnected stories divided into four sections titled “a diary of the world”, “song of the rhapsodist”, “daughters of the village” and “a matter of time”. The first issue that I would like to draw your attention to is that there are some standard features of narrative fiction which are not followed in this work:

1) The title of the book, the titles of the four sections and of the stories within them are in lower case. This conscious stylistic differentiation is probably meant to foreground the movement away from universality and towards indeterminacy and fluidity as suggested in the word Pensam.

2) Instead of a single protagonist around whom the story of a novel usually revolves, the focus here is on an entire community, the Adis. This shift of focus from individual to community is also part of the same attempt to position the text in an in-between space, away from the markers which are the standard interpretative apparatus of narrative fiction.

3) The absence of an overarching narrative focusing on the protagonist is also noticeable. Instead, there are a series of stories that are disparate, yet interconnected.

What seems to be the primary focus of the author is her desire to chronicle how an entire way of life changed when it came in contact with the colonial regime in the late 19th and early 20th century. The stories relate not just to the location called Pensam, but also metaphorically to the issue of how the Adi are negotiating this change, and how they are in an “in-between” position. The structure of the work may be interpreted as reflecting this indeterminacy.

The Legends of Pensam begins with a “prologue” which frames the narration. The prologue talks of a group of six people including the narrator flying from Assam to Arunachal Pradesh. As the helicopter in which they are travelling leaves the plains behind and approaches the hills and mountains, the narrator reminiscences her childhood and the stories which sustained the dream-like quality of the early years of her life. Now as she traverses the path which takes her back to the land of her birth, she attempts to bridge the disconnect between her past and her present, the stories that nourished her childhood and the realities that sustain her in her adult life.
The book begins with a description of the narrator’s return to Gurdum town, where she lived before she moved to the “big city”. From there she, along with her friend Mona, travelled together to Duyang, “the village of widows”, which was also the ancestral village of the narrator’s mother (12). The homecoming was in major part occasioned by the fact that Mona, proprietor and editor of a glossy magazine called *Diary of the World*, was always on the lookout for “unusual true-life stories” (16-17). Mona is of Arab-Greek extraction and her husband Jules, a famous development scientist, is French. Theirs was a “mobile lifestyle” that entailed a lot of travel across countries and continents, and they were on a brief posting in New Delhi at that time.

The first section, “a diary of the world” opens with the story of Hoxo, “the boy who fell from the sky” and was found in the forest by Lutor, famous chief of the Ida clan of the Adis, who brought him home. When asked about the child, Rakut’s father, who was with Lutor, replied: “There was a great noise and fire in the sky and then our son fell to earth” (40). Hoxo was brought up by Lutor and his wife as their own child. Lutor was later killed in a hunting accident, an event portended by his sighting of the water-serpent named Birbik:

Anyone studying the signs could understand that something unnatural was bound to happen … now that Hoxo’s father had seen the serpent. … So no one was surprised when Hoxo’s father was killed in a hunting accident shortly afterwards. A tragedy was expected. (10)

Hoxo grew up and married Losi, a warm and innocent girl who was born to the river woman. Their house was a warm and happy place full of people: there were his two sons, their five children, and friends, brothers, sisters and relatives who came and went at any time, and there were visitors. “Day or night, the fire was always burning and the enormous pots and pans with heavy lids were full of food or contained enough leftovers to feed another ten people” (12).

The narrator and Mona climbed the hill to reach the village of Duyong, and to meet Hoxo and his family. They were welcomed by Losi, and soon Hoxo’s mother also emerged from the house. Her presence induced a spell on her two visitors. The narrator told Hoxo’s mother about Mona’s interest in the stories of the village. Hoxo’s mother remembered that her grandson Bodak had an interesting story to tell, the story of “the strange case of kalen, the hunter”. One day Bodak and his friends decided to set off for a hunt. They were joined by Kalen who had been ill with malaria for the past one month. Sighting a band of monkeys, the hunters decided to follow them. However, Kalen went off by himself. The weather changed suddenly and the band of monkeys also disappeared. All this augured some evil. Loma, one of the members of the party, fired at what he thought was a monkey, but it turned out that his shot killed Kalen. On the way back, just as Bodak and Loma crossed the bridge to the village with the dead body of Kalen, the lashings of the rope bridge came undone, and the rest of the party toppled into the stream below. Bodak observed that it was a cursed afternoon, and that the men “had come back from the realm of malevolent spirits” (15). Kalen’s widow, Omum “carried on with her life without stopping to pine or utter recriminations” and “[t]he village, too, carried on” (15).

As the narrator and Mona sat sipping rice beer brought for them by Hoxo’s mother, waiting for the feast that Losi was preparing for them, Mona narrated how her daughter Adela had been diagnosed with autism, and how she and her husband had to leave Adela in a school for autistic children. Hoxo, who was listening to the story, narrated an incident that occurred in the neighbouring village of Yagbo around
the same time that Adela was diagnosed with autism. Kepi, the two-year old son of Karyon Togum, had high fever, and after that he could cry, eat and sleep, but couldn’t move. The parents went to the hospital in Pigo, and consulted many famous shamans. Almost a year later, someone remembered that Togum had shot a python and maybe it was the spirit of a snake that had coiled itself around the child. In “the silence of adela and kepi”, Hoxo tells Mona and the narrator that it fell upon him to perform the snake ritual that would free the child, but it was too late, and “the spirits had moved away to a place beyond recall” (24).

The next story, titled “pinyar, the widow” tells of the tragic tale of Pinyar, who fell in love with Orka, a member of a different clan, and bore him a child out of wedlock. Within a year, Orka left Pinyar and took the child with him. After some years Pinyar was married to Lekon, but tragedy struck again when Lekon was killed in a hunting accident. Soon after, her house caught fire and as was the custom, she was banished to live on the outskirts of the village. However, this was not the end. Pinyar’s son, Kamur, who had grown up into an able-bodied young man, cut down two of his children with a dao in a fit of madness. Pinyar did all she could to save him, and in the end she was able to secure his release from the authorities. The tribespeople could not understand the meaning of the incident, but as always, “the community rallied to restore sense and order” and things gradually returned to normal (31).

The animistic faith of the Adis, who believe in spirits and supernatural powers, was a faith of coexistence. The characters, steeped in traditional beliefs, could coexist peacefully. But the times when people negotiated the space between the lived world and the world of the supernatural in a way that allowed them to exist harmoniously with each other and with nature changed in the 1800s with the advent of the first white priests, surveyors and soldiers. It is this time of change that is talked of in “small histories recalled in the season of rain”, when Lutor and Rakut’s father go to work on the infamous Stillwell Road being built by the Bee-ree-tiss (British) and American migluns.

The first four stories in the first section are independent stories and thus not really in continuity except for the fact that some characters are common. They are logically untenable, unreal and open ended. They do not yield to any attempt at rational interpretation. But they are sustained by the community’s unshakeable belief in the stories and how they generate an understanding of the world. As Pinyar the widow says: “Faith is everything”(Dai 35). However, the last story in this section opens up a further dimension. On the one hand the narrator tells us how the spirit of the place and its people “had this quality of absorbing visitors into a forgotten newness of things… a feeling of how things might have been”(37); on the other, it tells us how the incursion of the migluns brought them face to face with change. Hoxo puts it succinctly when he says:

We saw a strange new glimmer in the distance. Our footsteps led us down unknown paths. We wanted more. Suddenly we knew more. There was more beyond our poor huts and cracked hearths where we once eased our dreams with murmured words and a good draft of home brew. (43)

The changes were plenty. People who practiced animistic faith in community oriented setups suddenly came face-to-face with the realities of Western modernity, the Christian religion and individualism as a way of existence. All that followed was inevitable.

The second section, “songs of the rhapsodist”, comprises four parts – “travel the road”, “the heart of the insect”, “the case of the travelling vessel” and “farewell to
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jules and mona”. The first three narrate, through myth and memory, stories of the lives of the ancestors in the form of the ritualistic song and dance performances of the ponung dancers. The rhapsodist is the miri, the great shaman, dressed in a ga-le (traditional lower garment worn by women) and wearing a dumling (intricate hair ornament). He is the narrator of these stories. In “travel the road”, Jules, Mona, Rakut and the narrator travel to Komsing, “the village where the migluns had gone”. There the miri, with the help of the Ponung dancers, narrates the story of the killing of Noel Williamson. It was in Komsing that a series of confusions led to the unfortunate death of Noel Williamson in 1911, along with Dr. Gregorson and forty-seven coolies and sepoys. Williamson had been working in the region for almost two decades, and when he was killed he was exploring the course of the Siang river. This led to the punitive Abor expedition of 1912, intended to catch the culprits and send them to the Andamans. A memorial stone for Williamson was also erected in Komsing.

A story relating to another aspect of Adi life is recounted by a rhapsodist in “the heart of the insect”, in which we have a glimpse of the Adis’ annual ritual of travelling to the snow-mountains to harvest the root of the deadlyaconitum which is used to poison arrows.

In “the case of the travelling vessel”, the headman of Komsing recounts the story of a fabulous vessel called a danki which was owned by the Lotang family of the Migu clan. The vessel was cherished by family as an auspicious gift from the gods which was responsible for the good fortune of the clan. One day, the vessel was found split into two and this was followed by a decline in the fortune of the clan. The clan decided to perform an elaborate ritual and a miri was called from a neighbouring village. The miri decamped with a bag full of stolen coins and a number of heavy necklaces of precious stone. A maternal uncle of the Migu clan gave chase, and when he finally managed to locate two women to whom the miri had given the necklaces, he killed them in a fit of rage, and also killed an onlooker. After the incident, he did not return to his village. He married and settled down in Sirum village of the Duyang group. He returned back to his own village after fourteen years, but a link had been established between the Migu and the people of Sirum. All history, the headman concluded, was a history of connections:

There are many stories that link clans. Sometimes we forget how these connections were made, but everything is interconnected. Sometimes a connection is born in the middle of war. Sometimes it is through a woman, sometimes land, and sometimes it is through an object out of the past. (61)

The headman explains to Jules that these histories are recorded by the shamans and rhapsodists, and in times of crisis, “all the remembered links of kinship are called up and word is sent to clan members to come to the aid of their brethren” (65).

The section concluded with Jules and Mona being given a traditional sendoff from Duyang village. The entire village came to see them off. As they were leaving, Hoxo and Losi bade them goodbye: “You who travel, may you not tire on the way” (69).

The section called “daughters of the village” comprises five parts. The first two parts, “the words of women” and “a homecoming” describe how the narrator, who had left her village and settled down far away, eventually comes back and settles down in Gurdum town. The section discusses her relationship with her mother, her experiences of love and the lives of the village women in general. Old Me-me puts it succinctly when she admonishes Arsi who complains about her life and dreams of a freer existence:
‘You waste your life thinking useless things,’ she was telling Arsi now. ‘What is the use? And where is the time to think, tell me. In this one life it is enough work just trying to keep body and soul together. You must marry. A woman’s marriage beads and the obligations she fulfils as wife and mother are the true measure of her worth.’ (76)

The lives of the village women continued in this strain, their unhappiness and rage both ineffectual. Folk wisdom helps them come to terms with the inexorable laws of nature and society.

The other stories in the third section – “river woman”, “the scent of orange blossom” and “rites of love” – deal with story of Nenem and her daughter Losi. Nenem was a young girl of legendary beauty, a woman who could be as calm or as impulsive and unpredictable as the river. Her beauty attracts David, a young British officer posted in the region and soon, an enigmatic romance blossoms between the tribal girl and the miglun, an unheard of occurrence in those days. However, when David is transferred to some other place and wants to take Nenem with him, she is unable to let go of her roots – her land and her people. She stays back: “No one dies of love. I loved him, and now I am enough on my own” (109). After some years, Nenem gets married to Kao and has a child, Losi. She comes to terms with the pangs of her aborted relationship and draws contentment from her present life. However, when she has to leave her village and settle in some other place when her village is destroyed in the flood following the earthquake, she cannot tolerate the pain and passes away.

Nenem’s life and death epitomize the pangs of transition from one way of life to another, and Mamang Dai’s movingly poetic description of the tenderness of love and the pain of separation that characterizes the relationship of David and Nenem, and later, the relationship between Nenem and Kao exemplify the middle ground between polarities that characterized the region at that time.

The last part is titled “a matter of time” and comprises five parts. It talks of how change has affected the individual and the community. The road becomes a symbol for encroachment into the pristine lands in the name of progress and development, a symbol of injury to the land:

The village had moved to its own quiet rhythm for centuries, with old certainties and beliefs, but the road was changing all that … The red gash turned in great loops and bends and plunged into the heart of the far mountains, trying to reach the scattered villages buried deep in the land of mist and wild chestnut.” (148)

The people did not know what to make of the developments that were taking place in the name of progress. The old life was lost, and there was nothing tangible occurring yet:

The old days of war and valour had vanished. They had surrendered their lands to the government and now the road and the things that came with it seemed to be strangling them and threatening to steal their identity like a thief creeping into their villages and fields. (157)

The four parts of the work trace the history of the evolution and growth of the region. The first part deals with the generation that existed before the colonizers came in. The second part outlines the coming of the colonizers and the changes that were occasioned due to this. The third part outlines the lives and experiences of the generation that grows up after the advent of the migluns, as their world opens up
and they have access to education and professional opportunities. The last part outlines the effect of modernity on contemporary society. Standing face-to-face with the changes that have engulfed the traditional tribal societies, the author is apprehensive about what would happen next and that all these musings might lead nowhere. Rakut puts it succinctly when he says: ‘We are peripheral people. We are not politicians, scientists or builders of empires. Not even the well-known citizens or the outrageous one. Just peripheral people, thinking out our thoughts’ (190). However, Rakut further argues that one need not be afraid of change as the resilience of the Adi people will see them through these upheavals as well:

‘Why should we be afraid of change?’ Rakut was arguing. ‘Change is a wonderful thing! It is simply a matter of rearrangement, a moment of great possibilities! Why should we be so afraid? We all want to be happy, but happiness eludes us as we keep thinking about it all the time. Sleepless nights. Sad, bereft mornings. Then suddenly, for no reason, the blood hums and a feeling of elation carries us through another day! This is how it has always been. We have nothing to fear.’ (190-1)

17.3 LET US SUM UP

Mamang Dai uses the ancient myths and rich tribal folklore in a framework of past historical events and contemporary reality to build up a complex document that celebrates both the commonplace and the mystic in nature and life. Her description of the surroundings, the relationships and the lives of people is lyrical and draws the reader into the spirit of the region. A whole way of life is brought alive from the times of its origin through the appearance of the colonizers to the present day. The concerns articulated by another powerful voice from the North-East, Temsula Ao, make it clear that *The Legends of Pensam* is a work which is relevant in the contemporary turmoil of change:

The cultures of North East India are already facing tremendous challenges from education and modernization. In the evolution of such cultures and the identities that they embody, the loss of distinctive identity markers does not bode well for the tribes of the region. If the trend is allowed to continue in an indiscriminate and mindless manner, globalization will create a market in which Naga, Khasi or Mizo communities will become mere brand names and commodity markers stripped of all human significance and which will definitely mutate the ethnic and symbolic identities of a proud people. Globalization in this sense will eventually reduce identity to anonymity. (Ao 7)

17.4 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


### 17.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

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

1) How do writings from the North-East reflect the concerns of the region?

2) Describe briefly the locale in which The Legends of Pensam is set.

3) How does The Legends of Pensam give voice to a whole way of life that is caught in the throes of transition?
4) What is the relevance of a text like *The Legends of Pensam* in a world that is fast being globalized?

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