

Block

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June, 2018

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ISBN : 978-93-87960-59-6

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Printed and published on behalf of the Indira Gandhi National Open University, New Delhi by Prof. Satyakam, Director, School of Humanities.

Cover Design by : ADA Graphic

Laser Typeset by : Tessa Media & Computers, C-206, A.F.E.-II, Okhla, New Delhi

Printed at :

BLOCK 6 FOLK IN CONTEMPORARY INDIAN FICTION

In this block, the units discuss what constitute modern Indian literature and how it is different from pre-modern Indian literature with special reference to fiction. They also try to understand to what extent modern Indian literature, especially fiction, differs or whether it shares commonalities with pre-modern Indian literature in terms of the use of folk elements in literature. One general factor that distinguishes modern Indian literature from pre-modern Indian literature is the print tradition. The primary critical role that print culture played in two spheres of literature are the mass production of books and the changes in the narrative structure used in literary texts. The relation of 'folk' to modern Indian literature is also fundamentally associated with these two spheres of change. The emergence of modern Indian literature in the 19th century was closely associated with another development—the division of languages in India into 'major' and 'minor' languages. In the multilingual context of the subcontinent, the languages which came to represent the cultures of the middle classes (the dominant educated group and the elite which emerged across the subcontinent) were the ones which came to be categorized as 'major' languages. The process of formation of major languages was also linked to the national movement. Much of what came to be recognized as modern Indian literature, especially in narratives like novels and short stories, were written in these major Indian languages. The 'minor' languages were basically the languages of the common man which were the folk languages. This block will introduce you to the major and the minor languages of India, and to the signature novels of our Bhasha literatures that extensively used folk elements.

UNIT 21 *PATHER PANCHALI* BY BIBHUTI BHUSHAN BANDOPADHYAY

Structure

- 21.0 Objectives
- 21.1 Introduction
- 21.2 About the Author
- 21.3 About the Novel
- 21.4 Themes of the Novel
- 21.5 Folk Elements in the Novel
- 21.6 Let Us Sum Up
- 21.7 References and Further Readings
- 21.8 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

21.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- Understand the dimensions of the ‘folk’ in literature;
- Know about Bibhuti bhushan and the assimilation of the folk in his fictional works;
- Appreciate ‘Pather Panchali’ and the idea of ‘folk’ in it; and
- Understand the presentation of the social life in the text.

21.1 INTRODUCTION

- **What is ‘folk’?**

The Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary terms the word “folk” as “people in general”; and also identifies it as something which is “originating from the beliefs and customs of ordinary people”. Folklores as part of ‘naturally’ oral/non-written traditions of any society around the world have remained instrumental in shaping the cultural life of the mass. From this point of view, folklore is synonymous with the expression of consciousness of the larger mass of the society irrespective of their religious and class differences.

21.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born on September 12, 1894, at Muratipur village in district Nadia of the British Bengal, Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay is a renowned literary figure of the Bengali literary and cultural sphere. His father Mahananda Bandopadhyay was a scholar of Sanskrit and a *kathak* – one who recites stories to earn his living. Bibhutibhushan studied at the Bongaon High School struggling with extreme poverty. However, he did manage to complete his graduation in History from Surendranath College, Kolkata. The financial crunch made him work at various positions before taking up the pen as his profession. He taught at his alma mater, took the position of a secretary, and was also an estate manager for some time. It all began with his first short story ‘Upekshita’, which got published in a premier Bengali literary magazine *Probasi* in

the year 1921. Seven years later, in 1928, with the publication of his first novel *Pather Panchali* he received his due popular applause and critical contemplation. With simple setting, familiar characters, and the cosy environmental essence of rural Bengal, he could successfully string the popular cord. The real colours of his plebeian palate, consisting not only of the human, but also the animals, the birds, and the natural, create an immediate familiarity. It is specifically this characteristic of his novel *Pather Panchali* which seems to have been the catch for the renowned film-maker Satyajit Ray in developing it into a movie of the same title. Apart from it Bandopadhyay has many other works to his credit, titled *Aparajito*, *Aranyak*, *Chander Pahar*, *Heera Manik Jwale*, *Adarsha Hindu Hotel*, *Ichhamati*, *Bipiner Sangsar*, *Anubartan*, *Kosi Pranganeyer Chitthi*, *Dristi Pradeep*, *Debjan*, *Ashani Sanket*, *Kedar Raja*, *Dampati*, *Dui Bari*, *Kajol* (the sequel to *Aparajito*, later completed by his son Taradas), *Mismider Kabach*, *Jatrabadol* and others. His untimely demise was due to a coronary attack on November 1, 1950. Though he received a lot of praise for his works, his lifelong dismay remained that he had to struggle for a proper shelter and livelihood for himself. The fact that a person of his calibre who granted a world view to his readers had to struggle for a livelihood shows how writers are treated in our society.

21.3 ABOUT THE NOVEL

First issued serially in the journal *Vichitra* in 1928 and 1929 and published in book form in November, 1929, *Pather Panchali*, translated as *Song of the Road*, is the magnum opus of Bibhutibhusan Bandopadhyay. The novel exquisitely delineates the lives and events of an imaginary village – Nischindipur, located in the ‘Rarh’ area of the then undivided Bengal, pivoted on the family of Horihor Ray. As the main characters, the novel accommodates the members of the Ray family, that is, Opu, a small boy; his elder sister Durga, and their parents Shorbojoya and Horihor. The novel sympathetically portrays the poverty stricken childhood of the brother-sister duo and their relation and interaction with Nature and the culture of their village. Through the portrayal of subsidiary characters whom the duo have confronted, like the aged Indir Thakrun; Opu’s *Vaishnava* grandpa; jealous Shejbou; Proshonno, the school master; Ajoy, the child actor; the unhappy widow of Tomrej; callous and selfish Onnoda Ray; Gokul’s wife; Niren and others, the writer projects the socio-cultural world of a remote village of the colonial Bengal. The novel is divided into two parts and twenty eight chapters. Part I, *The Old Aunt* prepares the ground of the novel whereas Part II, *Children Make Their Own Toys*, becomes a bildungsroman of Opu. An analysis of the novel also unearths the strains of realism and autobiographical elements in it. As an admirer of Realism, Bandopadhyay’s portrayal of different events such as the descriptions of *Brata* (Rituals performed by women), food habits of the villagers, *Jatra* (folk dramatic performance), fairs (Kuluichandi and Chorok) and superstitions are brimming with realistic fervour. Pointing out autobiographical elements in the novel, T. W. Clark states, “The author was able to live in Opu and make him so convincing, because in a very true sense he was Opu. Opu’s childhood was a reflection of his own, and Opu’s environment a reproduction of that in which he himself grew up, for Nischindipur was no purely fictitious village” (Bandopadhyay xvi). As aptly summarised,

Pather Panchali (*Song of the Road*) is a vivid, moving and authentic portrayal of the life of a Brahmin house hold seen through the eyes of the two young children of the family, Opu and his elder sister Durga. Few authors in any literature can rival Bandopadhyay’s understanding of the child mind. He writes of Opu and Durga and their friends, at home or out at play, with a natural realism unmarred by adult condescension.

The social environment is all-embracing: Work and holidays, religious festivals, daily worship and the grim rites of death. The reader senses the reality of family ties, the power of the supernatural in ordinary things, the relations between the castes and between rich and poor. (Bandopadhyay Back Cover)

21.4 THEMES OF THE NOVEL

One of the most recurring themes in the novel is how poor people being thronged by every hardship do not give up the spirit to live and even in most adverse circumstances never shy away from cherishing the little pleasures of life and the thing which gives them hope and keeps them bonded and combats the poverty from which they are suffering is nothing else but love. It is also the portrayal of idyllic village life where people are satisfied with little things. Joy and grief of one family are also shared by the others in the village.

Pather Panchali, on one level though is a portrayal of the life of Ray family but the principal character is here Opu. It is how he views life, his bond with sister Durga, his involvement with outside world, his responses to the acute poverty, loss of his sister and finally his mental state when the Roy family leaves Nischindipur village and departs for Varanasi. So, the development of the plot in the novel is correspondent to the gradual psychological maturity of Opu's character and the way his mind responds to the changing circumstances.

The two principal incidents in the life of Opu which left a deep impact in his life were first, the death of Durga, his sister and second, his family's decision to leave the village and for better living depart for Varanasi, which was as big a loss as his sister's death. First was the loss of human love and second was the loss of his root, the place where he belonged. So, for Opu, life in astute poverty was still enjoyable as he was bonded to the love of his sister and to the nature with which his sister helped developing a bond. But with these loses, he is endowed with deep experience of life which ultimately leads to the self revelation on the part of Opu and he realizes that life moves on and there is no way going back. So, the story is not only a realistic portrayal of poverty of rural life but also a marvelous expression of human feelings and sentiments.

21.5 FOLK ELEMENTS IN THE NOVEL

Pather Panchali revolves around the lives and events of the people of Nischindipur and thus portrays "the beliefs and customs of ordinary people". In the novel, folk elements can be located in diverse layers. Here, folk elements are not unwilling intruder; rather the proportionate amalgamation of these elements adds an ethnic flavour to the novel and elevates its position as the *Odyssey* of rural Bengal. An intricate analysis of the lifestyles of the characters, their food habits, rituals, utterance of folklores and sayings, fairs and entertainments and also superstitions point out the presence and prominence of folk elements and their functions in the novel.

Life Style

The novel features Horihor Ray and his family's struggle against poverty as its main theme. The description of Horihor's aunt, Indir Thakrun's hut lays bare the poverty stricken skeleton of Ray family. The author describes,

In the eastern part of Horihor's compound there was a thatched hut, which had lain unrepaired for a long time. It was there that the old woman lived. On a bamboo peg hung two dirty garments, the torn ends of which she had knotted together.To one

side of the room there was a frayed grass mat and few torn baby quilts, crude patchwork affairs. Some torn clothes, which were all she had, were tied up in a bundle. ... The old woman had a jar too, made of sheet brass, an earthenware vessel for curds, and a few odd earthenware pots. (Bandopadhyay 9-10)

The novel gives a chance to its readers to be familiar with the inclusive features of village life of Bengal. It exhibits the coexistence of pundits and ignoramus by narrating the characters of Bhubon Mukherjee, a rich and respected man to callous and selfish Onnoda Ray in a series. Metal-smith Pitom, Sweet Vendor Chinibas and milk man Shorno also get respective attention in the narration. The humorous descriptions of village school and its principal, Proshonno have a realistic flavour. In the author's words,

The village school master Proshonno ran a grocery shop as well as a school. The two were in adjoining rooms and there was no partition. The class room had none of the usual appurtenances except a cane; but the faith of the parents in the efficacy of the cane was no less than that of the schoolmaster: in fact they gave him authority to use it as much as he liked subject only to the trifling reservation that the boys did not become lame or lose an eye in the process. Proshonno's ability with the cane more than made up for his ignorance of educational methods and the absence of proper equipment. He used it with such careless abandon that it is a wonder that the students escaped with their lives, let alone being lamed or blinded. (Bandopadhyay 115)

The harsh realities of so called 'romantic' village life ventilates through the characterisations of the widow of Tomrej. Onnoda Ray's inhuman behaviour to the widow of Tomrej is unbearable and pathetic. Tomrej was indebted to Onnoda Ray and after his death it becomes his wife's duty to pay back the money to Onnoda Ray. The widow tries her level best to pay back the money but remains unsuccessful. Onnoda Ray does not shower mercy on her and locked Tomrej's rice store without providing her any solution of the problem. The novel records Onnoda Ray's shameless confession where he says, " 'She's Tomrej's wife from the other side of the village. Her husband died some four or five days ago. They owed me forty rupees in all, so the day he died I put a lock on their rice store. And now she wants me to open it up for her as if the matter were settled.' (Bandopadhyay 183).

Food Habits

Nischindipur is a society of agrarian Bengal with a carnivalasque flavour. The population of the village has different shades. It does not only portray the rich – poor binary but their mind set and domestic lives also become the centre of attraction. The author has mastery in the portrayal of different food habits for different classes. And he also gives a description of different typical rural Bengali dishes. The main protagonists of the novel, Opu and Durga belong to a very poor family and for them good food is a distant dream but in their own way the brother-sister duo arrange different food items which satiate their desire for good food. In the Eighth Chapter of the novel, the author paints a scene where Opu and Durga relish green mango with salt and mustard oil and compare it with mango pickle. In the author's words,

She had a coconut shell in her hand, and she held it out for him to see. There were some slices of green mango in it. Then lowering her voice Durga said, "Mummy hasn't got back from her bath yet, has she?"

Opu shook her head, 'No.'

Then she said in a whisper, 'Do you think you could get some oil and salt? I want to make a mango pickle.' (Bandopadhyay 61)

Through the description of the village feast the author describes different dishes of rural Bengal which act as an instrument for him to highlight the disparity between the villagers on the basis of economic strength. The food prepared by Shorbojaya, Opu's mother and Shejbou, a rich neighbour of Shorbojaya indicate the different economic structures of the two families. The author describes,

The custom was for every family to take its own food; and some of the women used the occasion to show off to their neighbours by making a public display of what they had brought.... All the unhappy Shorbojaya could scrape together was some coarse rice, and not much of that, a little very ordinary pulse and couple of egg plants. Shejbou of course was there with all the Mukherji children; and their banquet, which was spread out for all to see, included milk thickened with a syrup made from fresh sugar cane and a delicious confection of bananas and rice. (Bandopadhyay 225)

Rituals

Brata or rituals performed by women in villages of India always attract the attention of the researchers of folklores. Though it bears the baggage of the religions of the Great tradition, in its own way it assimilates *Lokayat* cultures and concentrates more on the performative aspects rather than religious philosophies, dictums and rituals. *Brata* basically provides the space to the women folk of rural area where they can breathe freely and communicate their aspirations, hopes, happiness, struggle and anger in a creative way. Songs and performances become the heart and soul of any *Brata*. Like other states or provinces (at the time of the composition of the novel) of India, Bengal has its own *Bratas* which reflect the diverse cultural plurality of Bengal. The setting of the novel is the 'Rarh' area of the then undivided Bengal and the author assimilates the *Bratas* of this specific part of Bengal within the narrative. The novel depicts the detailed description of different *Bratas* with great importance. In eleventh chapter of the novel, where the author describes the relation between Opu and Durga, he very aptly introduces the Holy Pond Brata which a sister observes for the long life of her brother. The author gives a detailed description of the rituals observed by Durga and tries to locate her love and affection towards her brother, Opu. The writer describes,

It was the festival of the Holy Pond, when sisters pray for their brothers. There was a small square pit in the yard. Some days before she had planted pulse and peas in it, and already the shoots were showing in the damp soil. She had also set some banana suckers outside the pit, and when Opu found her she was tracing pictures round them; lotuses, birds, bundles of rice, and the rising sun. (Bandopadhyay 92)

The novel also accommodates the song of Holy Pond Brata where a girl asks the Holy Pond (treating it as god) to grant a long life to her brother by considering her character as a maiden:

“Oh, holy pond; oh, holy flower!
I worship you beneath the noon-day sky.
A maiden's purity is my dower;
My brother lives and blest am I.” (Bandopadhyay 93)

Though generally *Bratas* have a relation to the women folk, but in rural Bengal some *Bratas* are also observed by men. Chorok is one such example. This 'brata' continues for a period of one month (the last month of Bengali year, Chaitra). On the last day of the month the observers of the *Brata* perform different difficult tasks

of physical strength to prove the presence of spiritual or supernatural power which they have gained through the month long penance. The author describes the events of the *Brata* in detail:

Some ten days after the gajon dance came Blue-Worship Day, so named after Shiva, one of whose many epithets was God of the Blue Throat. The day after that was Chorok itself.

The principal rite of the Blue-Worship ceremonies took place in the evening. The sannyasis first performed a dance round a date-palm tree and then broke off the spikes from its trunk. (Bandopadhyay 247)

Some time the *Bratas* observed by the males transform into a celebration of hoary superstitions. In Chorok Brata, often the observers get themselves entertained by a mock performance of the cremation of a dead man. Through the description the Chorok Brata, the author presents this particular aspect also and describes it with intricate details:

One of them will pretend to be a corpse, and the others will bind him up in funeral clothes and carry him to the chatim tree, where they burn dead people. When they've taken him there they'll bring him back to life again; and they'll hunt round for a dead man's skull ... and when they've got one they'll march round with it in a procession, singing songs and reciting holy texts. They recite lots of holy texts as they go round and round with the skull. (Bandopadhyay 247-48)

Ballads and Sayings

Bengali folk ballads enjoy a long and illustrated heritage. Since the medieval period, common people of Bengal have been ventilating their domestic hope, aspirations, enjoyment and familial values through the ballads. In the colonial period, the exposure of Western knowledge system limited the reach of ballads to the common mass and made it accessible to only the rural women folk. Devoid of formal education, women of the then time, employed ballads and sayings as the tool to impart spiritual and mundane knowledge amongst them. Generally, the tradition of ballads and sayings was passed on from older people to their younger counter part. In the novel, the author portrays the aged Indir Thakrun who is very much conversant with the ballads and loves to pass on this treasure to Durga, a representative of new generation. At the time of describing Indir's affection towards her duty, the author says,

Indir Thakrun knew a number of old Ballads by heart, and in her young days she had been an object of much admiration with her playmates because she knew so many. She had not had such a good listener for many a long year, and she used to refresh her memory now by reciting all her ballads to her young niece in the evening; and in this way she did not get rusty. She droned through them in a long sing-song chat." (Bandopadhyay 10)

The novel also points out diverse ballads suitable for diverse emotions and purpose and assimilates them in the narrative. In the first chapter, at the time of her tryst with her little niece, Durga, Indir is in her high spirit and her emotional state is reflected by the ballad which she sings:

"O Lolita and Champo, I've a song to sing – O

Radha's thief wore his.....hair in a ring – O" (Bandopadhyay 11)

Here, Indir chooses the ballad which is related to the legendary love of Radha and Krishna. But in the fifth chapter when the poor woman receives a red cotton cloth as a wrapper from Ramnath Ganguli, she is delighted. At that very time also she expresses her happiness by uttering an age old sayings which celebrates the life:

“Canes and birches may hurt the feet
But a bowl of rice still tastes as sweet.” (Bandopadhyay 37)

Durga also follows the footsteps of the aged widow at the time of expressing her happiness. In the twenty first chapter of the novel, at the time of enjoying Chorok festival, Durga expresses her joy by singing a ballad taught her by Indir. In author’s words:

Durga was off like a shot and very happily too. The orchard was thick with bushes as high as a man’s head, and as she pushed through in search of the leaves she sang a song her old auntie had taught her and nodded her head as she sang. ‘When I saw the yellow gleam in the forest my heart was glad; But I lost the ring from my nose and now I’m sad.’ (Bandopadhyay 254)

In another case, to stop rain Durga takes refuge to the traditional sayings which commonly used in villages as the *Mantra* of preventing rain. Durga utters:

“Rain, rain go away from me,
There’s a koromcha fruit on our lemon tree.” (Bandopadhyay 110)

The novel incorporates lullaby also. In the twelfth chapter, Sharbojoya has been portrayed as a caring mother singing a song to put Opu sleep. She sings:

“Sing little birdie, on your tree top;
Swing your long tail and my little one rock.” (Bandopadhyay 101)

Songs of different festivals also play an important role to decipher the nuances of Bengali folk culture. The novel illustrates the song of Chorok festivals (happens in the last Bengali month, Chaitra) which the observers of the *Brata* sing at the time of performing different rituals. Though the song carries a religious flavour, but folk imagination is also amalgamated with religious thought. The song is:

From heaven there came a chariot, down to earth’s wide plain;
The Lord God Shiva was in it, and his arrows fell like rain.
A corpse from the age of Satya and mud from the age of old;
Sing Shiva Shiva, brothers all, and their drums like thunder rolled.” (Bandopadhyay 248)

Fairs and Entertainments

Pather Panchali tells the story of a village in the interior of Bengal and it is quite obvious that the fairs and other entertainments of the village do not bear any distinct relation to their counter parts in towns and cities. The novel narrates the different social events of the village and their importance in the lives of the villagers. In the fifteenth chapter of the novel, a picnic has been described. Once in a year, the villagers worship the goddess Kuluichandi and on that very day they take lunch in the open countryside in north of the village. In the words of the author: “Kuluichandi was one of Shorbojoya’s personal feast days, and whenever it came round she used

to take Opu with her for a picnic in the open country to the north of the village where there was an old, overgrown pool” (Bandopadhyay 173).

The author also describes the fair of Chorok which is organised at the completion of the one month long ritual and penance in respect to Lord Shiva in Chaitra, the last month of Bengali year. The fair includes the song and dance of the *Sannyasis* (observer of the *Brata*), difficult tricks of physical powers, and a theatre show. Generally village children enjoy this festival most. In the novel, the writer gives a glimpse of this festival:

The procession to the tree was followed by a swarm of children, Durga and Opu among them, who clustered round to watch. The spike-breaking dance over, the sannyasis led the way to the Chorok tree, the huge chatim in the village cremation ground. Nearby stood a hut, walled in with palm branches where the Blue-Throated God would be venerated by the people. (Bandopadhyay 247)

Folk Dramatic Performance

Jatra is the popular dramatic performance which has been prevalent in Bengal (including Bangladesh), Odisha and Assam since a long time. The word *Jatra* is derived from the word ‘*ya*’ – means to go, thus *Jatra* means a ‘cavalcade’ or a ‘procession’ in the honour of the God or Goddess. *Jatra* in the late medieval age grew out of the confluence of the popular performative genres of Bengal like *Kavi Gaan*, *Panchali*, *Kirtan* and *Kathakata*. In Bengal, *Jatra* as a distinct dramatic presentation had begun to take its shape with the worship of Shakti cult in Chandi *Jatra*. It dealt with the Great War between the demons and the Goddess, Chandi. Later, when the Eastern India was swiped by the wave of Vaishnavism during 16th century, a new kind of folk performance called Krishna *Jatra* became predominant in popular imagination. Towards the end of the Muslim rule, in the new form, Amateur *Jatra*, the divine love and devotion slowly yielded to secular theme dealing with human love and attraction and thereby *Jatra* began to lose its glory. Ultimately *Jatra* succumbed before the colonial discourse of high and low culture. The rapid growth of urban culture and taste had appropriated and expropriated *Jatra* to give way to British theatre which became *our own* form of entertainment and education. It is unfortunate that from then on, *Jatra* has been living in the fringes of our social periphery with an identity of being a matter of ‘gross rural entertainment’.

In the twenty second chapter of the novel, the author gives a description of *Jatra*. At the time of Charok festival, people of Nischindipur arranged the performance of *Jatra* in their village. In the words of the author, Opu’s first experience of watching *Jatra* is described as:

The *jatra* at last began; and from that moment the earth for Opu ceased to exist, and all the people on it, except for himself and the actors on the stage in front of him. The stage was his entire world, and the players its entire population. The atmosphere of the play was set by the violinists who opened the performance just before dark with a tone poem in a traditional mode known as *Imon*. The stage was lit with lights which hung in clusters from the wooden structure above. (Bandopadhyay 255)

Superstitions

Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay’s depiction of rural Bengal in the novel is not one sided or partial, but in his own way he points out the darker side of the popular imagination. Illiteracy is the mother of superstition and clutched under the grip of

superstition, illogical activities such as the *Sati Pratha*, child marriage and others, became the common practice of rural Bengal in the pre-colonial and colonial period. In the novel, the writer does not present a plain description of superstitious activities, but he paints it from a child's perspective. By sketching Opu's encounter with a 'so called' witch, Aturi, he wonderfully demonstrates the effect of superstition on a child's mind. Believing in all the rumours about an old lady, Aturi, Opu becomes fear stricken and at the time of their confrontation Opu feels nervous and flees from that very place. The thoughts and actions of Opu are perfectly illustrated by the author when he describes,

Opu went pale. 'Aturi the witch!' And they had come there just as it was getting dark. Everybody knew the story of the fisherman's son. He went to steal some of her English plums and she caught him. She sucked the spirit out of his body, wrapped it up in leaves, and threw it into the water; and the fish ate it..... Everybody knew also that if she wanted to she could suck a little boy's blood by just looking at him, and then she would let him go. He would not realize at the time that his blood had been sucked, but when he got home and had his dinner and went to bed he would not be able to get up again.....The old woman screwed up her eyes. Her sunken cheeks were quivering. She thrust her face forward to see them better, and then she began to move towards them, one step at a time. Opu knew he was caught. Escape was impossible. She was angry, and for some reason or other it was with him. Any minute now she would suck the spirit out of him and wrap it up in leaves. (Bandopadhyay 135-36)

21.6 LET US SUM UP

In a folk narrative of any culture there are always both romantic and realistic elements. Generally the description is romantic with realism lurking within it. Thus, *Pather Panchali* by Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay is a perfect example of semblance of both. The novel beautifully paints the life of rural Bengal with minute details. In a way the novel makes the readers acquaint with the diverse culture of rural Bengal, its idiosyncrasies, food habits, religious customs, and superstitions. Again, the most significant aspect which the novel highlights through the depiction of Ray family is how life endures in absolute poverty and how even in dearth the two children Durga and Opu harp on the simple pleasures of life. The life of rural Bengal depicted in the novel is free from the humdrum and modernization of the city life. The people are poor but they still follow every custom, participate in religious festivals and enjoy life in their own way because they are satiated with whatever little they have as their minds are not inflected by greed. The novel is depicted from the point of view of child Opu, his perception of life around him, the strong bond he has with his elder sister Durga, how he learnt from sister to develop an involvement with the natural world and how he gets psychologically affected after the loss of her sister and departure from Nischindipur to Varansi . So, the novel also symbolizes the journey of Opu from innocence to experience.

21.7 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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21.8 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: Your answers should be in about 300 words.

- 1) Why do you think the author Bibhutibhusan could write the novel so very convincingly?

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- 2) What do you think of the character of Opu and Durga?

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- 3) What are the folk elements in the novel?

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- 1) Were you familiar with the aspect of 'brata' while growing up? If yes, elaborate. If no, please elaborate on your thoughts about it.

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2) Have you seen any folk play like 'jatra'? Please write about it in detail.

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UNIT 22 THE FOLK CULTURE OF ODISHA: GOPINATH MOHANTY'S *PARAJA*

Structure

- 22.0 Objectives
- 22.1 Introduction
- 22.2 Folk Culture of Odisha
- 22.3 Historicity and Religiosity
- 22.4 Women as the Custodians of Culture
- 22.5 Folktales and Folk Music of Odisha
- 22.6 Oral Traditions
- 22.7 Study of Gopinath Mohanty's *Paraja*
- 22.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 22.8 References and Further Readings
- 22.9 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

22.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to

- understand the interplay between the cultural identities of folk and tribal culture in Odisha;
- distinguish the oral and written traditions in their literature;
- read Gopinath Mohanty as a modernist who borrowed plots from folk traditions; and
- generate a dialogue about marginalization of the tribals with reference to the novel *Paraja* by Gopinath Mohanty.

22.1 INTRODUCTION

In this unit, we will discuss the interplay between the cultural identities and the homogeneity associated with the folk culture and the tribal culture of rural Odisha, the existence of historicity, religiosity and oral traditions in their literature, with a spotlight on the novel *Paraja* by Gopinath Mohanty. Even if folk culture and tribal culture are used synonymously, both are fundamentally different in the sense that the former is dependent on different traditions whereas the latter is independent; it is rather an end in itself. Critics like Robert Redfield interpreted the folk group as a contrast to the tribal tradition in the 1950's. Folk tradition is a macro-base of the micro tribal traditions. The idea of cultural identity and group feeling is less in the folk tradition. Qualities like regional identity in terms of culture, sharing of the common group behaviour, common religiosity, historicity, oral traditions, strong feelings of caste and tribe are the factors that constitute the folk tradition. It is all the more so in case of Odia folk literature.

As a representative of the modernists who borrow the plots from the folk and the cultural traditions, Gopinath Mohanty, in his masterpiece *Paraja*, shows the life, art, music, song, dance and also the defenselessness of the tribals. The novelist's

plan is to generate a dialogue about the subjugation and cruelty towards the minority group. Through the heart-breaking story of the *Paraja* tribe, Mohanty supplies us the food for thought about the anguish of the tribals, the marginalized, all over the world. *Paraja* is much beyond a sociological and anthropological text because its characters are not merely primitive tribesmen trapped by a greedy moneylender. Gopinath Mohanty's protagonists are also characteristically men and women declaring a heroic but defeating war against an antagonistic cosmos. They are to the Gods, 'as flies to the wanton boy'. In the first part of the unit, let us discuss the common features of all tribal folks in Odisha. The second part is a case study—a reading of the novel *Paraja*.

22.2 FOLK CULTURE OF ODISHA

The common characteristics of the folk culture of Odisha are homogeneity, cultural consciousness, group identity, dying languages, folk beliefs, rituals and practices, less interaction with the outside world. The components of folk culture are, living in a larger social unit, having an elite culture and following the rural Hindu traditions. The distortion of cultural items, meanings and values are a threat to its literature which needs a continuous evaluation. It is an accepted opinion that folk literature follows oral traditions which are handed down to progeny conventionally through folk songs, folk tales, legends, mythology, superstitions and proverbs. To Foster, "a folk culture may be thought of as a common way of life which characterizes some or all of the people of many villages, towns and cities within a given area". (*American Anthropologist* 48). Let us emphasize on the role played by religious, historical and oral traditions behind the rich cultural heritage of the folk literature of Odisha. A group may belong to different sub-groups in sharing a common way of life which creates a cultural awareness and a sense of oneness among the folks which may be defined as homogeneity. This wider cultural system which may be tribal, rural, ethnic, urban or industrial—all of which have the common religiosity and historicity—are the points of focus.

Odia folk culture has always been vulnerable to alien influences which have given rise to the distortion of cultural items, values and morals. Amid all these changes, too, Odia folk literature has maintained a paradigm of its own. Folksongs, folktales, myths, legends, superstitions, proverbs, riddles and stories are orally transmitted from one generation to another. Efforts are being made to include these orally transmitted genres in the mainstream literature. It has always been a matter of debate that all folk literature is orally transmitted, but all orally transmitted literature is not necessarily folklore. Non-verbal aspects of the folklore such as games, dances, street-plays may not be truly oral, those are learnt by the progeny as a habit. But there are folk songs in Odisha which are now slowly evolving into written texts like *Dalkhai*, *Sajani*, *Rasarkeli* songs of Sambalpur, Koraput, Malkangiri, Rayagada, Nowrangpur, Nuapada, Kalahandi, and Sundergarh which had been following an oral tradition till date. Localization of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have also given birth to stories which are orally transmitted. The oral nature of the folklore is the biggest hurdle to trace out the origin of most items of the folklore.

22.3 HISTORICITY AND RELIGIOSITY

Now, let us illustrate some epitomes and customs that would emphasize the historicity and religiosity in Odia folk culture. *Dandanata* is a popular folkdance of Odia which is considered as a source of entertainment and a popular folk ritual since time immemorial. It begins from *Chaitra Purnima*, the full moon day of the month

of March-April and continues till *Pana Sankranti*. The origin of *Dandanata* goes to the worship of Lord *Shiva* and *Sakti* (Goddess *Parvati*). The myth and the literature behind this ritual is that a *Brahmin* teacher had many students, and a child of lower-caste used to observe him teaching *yoga* and meditation. The child developed interest and started practicing *yoga*, as a result of which the teacher bit him mercilessly. The child uttered some incantations which almost burnt the teacher. The other students took away the knowledge forcibly from the child and concealed it in the cave of Lord *Shiva* who later came to know about it and ordered his bull *Nandi* to release this knowledge of higher order and distribute it among the people of lesser origin. Lord *Shiva* introduced *Tandav Nritya* to purge the lower caste people from all sins. *Dandanata* is performed by the lower caste people of Odisha which is a reaction against the *Brahminical* domination in the past. As per historical reports, the origin of *Dandanata* dates back to the *Somagupta* period to the *Kesari* period of western Odisha which might be the reason behind the amalgamation of Hinduism and Buddhism prevailing in the rituals of *Dandanata*. Buddhists were hated by the (caste) Hindus for which they got a chance to worship Lord *Shiva* only once in a year during *Dandanata*. An important aspect of *Dandanata* is that the lyrics are very poetic in nature. With the use of local dialects, cultural components, conversational songs, satirical stories, myth and history, use of gorgeous dresses and ornaments, *Dandanata* is an important source of entertainment for the people of Odisha. The female characters in *Dandanata* and most folk dances use conventional ornaments like *ganthi*, *sikla*, *jhalka*, *bentla*, *guna*, *phuli*, *dandi*, *kalangi*, *kaudi*, *ghanti*, *ghagudi*, etc. *Dhol* and *flute* play a predominant role in tribal dances. The kings of the *Kesari* Dynasty who ruled Bhubaneswar from the 5th to the 11th century were the worshipers of Lord *Shiva* and introduced this ritual into Odia culture. *Danda* means a pole, *Nata* means dance, which means a pole represents the God. In *Dandanata*, dance, songs and physical feats are meant to praise Him. The songs are composed by the village poets who have great knowledge of the *Puranas*. Some songs have the oral tradition, some are composed in the form of questions and answers like:

Why did *Krishna* kill his own uncle?

Why did *Draupadi* wash her hair with blood?

Why did not *Sita* destroy *Ravan* herself?

The answers to these questions are given by another party in a sing-song manner and this is the main attraction. Some of the songs are didactic and pedantic; some are too simple to be easily followed by an illiterate audience. Overall, *Dandanata* is a popular dance-drama by the village folks of Odisha.

One of the important festivals of the tribals in western Odish is the *Nuakhai* festival, which literally means the consumption of the new crops of the year. The process of Sanskritization/ Aryanization is closely associated with this festival, thus leading a tribal festival into a Hindu one to be followed by the elite. Agriculture is the main source of livelihood in Odisha and majority of the tribal population belonging to *Saura*, *Gond*, *Binjal*, *Mridha*, *Bhumia*, *Kondh* tribals are the cultivators, farm servants and labourers. *Nukahai* has a major influence on the life and culture of these people; it is the day of merry-making and celebration because it is the day of the harvest of rice, paddy and other crops. On the occasion of *Nuakhai* ritual, the tribals and the caste Hindus worship Goddess *Lakshmi* along with the entire family as this day brings friendship, equality, cooperation, help and prosperity.

Another important and colourful tribal ritual followed by the tribals of central and western Odisha is the *Karma* festival. The festival is celebrated in the month of *Bhadrava* (August / September) and Sal tree is worshiped by the tribals. Sal tree is

one of the most useful timbers used for the furniture, railway, bridge constructions, boat building, tent houses, carts and carriages etc. Thus, most folk traditions and festivals have a social, economic or scientific cause behind them. Another probable reason behind the association of the Sal tree with this festival may be the influence of Buddhism on the tribal people as the Sal tree is regarded as most sacred by the Buddhists as they believed that *Goutam Buddha* died in a grove of Sal trees.

Karma worship is a famous festival during autumn in rural Odisha, and the *Karma* tree represents the God of Fate which is worshipped as the incarnation of God. *Karma* controls the human destiny, gives the people prosperity or pain. The folktale behind this ritual is the story of a rich merchant and his six sons. The five elder brothers punished the younger one and his wife for worshipping the *Karma* God, after which they themselves had to face the pangs of destiny. The elder brothers repented and worshipped the *Karma* God, and they got prosperity. The *Karma* dancers have a professional troupe; they roam from village to village and sing the mythological songs, tell the folk tales and entertain the people. *Karma* is a famous harvest festival among the coastal districts of Odisha. The *Karma* God is an aboriginal God whose influence gradually spread from the tribal areas to the urban Odisha.

Chaitighoda-Nata is one of the most prominent festivals of the fishermen of Odisha celebrated among the coastal tribals. A Goddess possessing the head of the horse name *Basuli* is worshiped. It is well decorated and a man enters the head and dances. Its origin goes to the *Ramayana* where Lord *Rama Chandra* rewarded a horse to the boatman for rowing him safely during his exile. *Basuli* is worshiped at *Puri*, the land of Lord *Jagganath*. *Chaitighoda-Nata* is an occasion for the lower castes to display their taste for culture and also their martial arts. *Chadak Puja* is a puja of Lord *Shiva* and *Gauri* in some districts of Odisha and Bengal. The devotees worship *Tarkeshwar* and display physical exercises. They worship the *Ghata* which means destruction of desires. They practise hard exercises like walking on a pole and on fire. Wine and meat are strictly prohibited while sanctity and spirituality dominate.

Dalkahi is a ritual folk dance of western Odisha in Sambalpur region. This is dedicated to *Dalkhai Devi*, Goddess *Durgra*, *Parvati* and *Kali*. It is the form of *Shakti* or power of the Goddess which is worshiped during *Dalkahai*. On this day the devotees create a rectangular or square shaped area and arrange sixteen Gods all around with *Dalkahi Devi* at the center. *Ravana* is also worshiped for his wisdom. A festival of nine days, *Dalkahi* songs and dances are becoming popular day by day and for commercial purposes.

Pala is a popular institution which aims at propagating the ancient Odia literature through songs by street poets and singers which have an oral tradition. *Sirini*, a sweet dish is distributed among the devotees after being offered to Lord *Satyanarayana*. *Pala* derives its origin from an effort of the Hindu-Muslim unity, for the avoidance of fanaticism and intolerance. After the reign of *Aurangzeb*, the people of both the communities attempted to live together, exchange their ideas and culture, and teach the principles of their religion to each other. The Sufi poets like *Kabir*, *Gurunanak* and Hindu poets like *Sri Chaitanya* took up the charge of writing such devotional songs that could satisfy the spiritual quest of both the communities. These songs were mainly propagated by the *Pala* singers by which *Pala* could gather an audience from both the communities. *Pala* singers are great entertainers. It continues overnight, there is a main singer and another follower and they sing the story in the form of questions and answers. Use of comic relief and tragic relief, anecdotes, use of attractive outfits, jewellery and traditional musical instruments are the common features of *Pala*.

22.4 WOMEN AS THE CUSTODIANS OF CULTURE

The religious functions of the Odia rural folks are mainly left to their women who perform the rituals with sanctity and sincerity. They believe that the security of the village and the home depends on their local deities. Women worship idols of gods made of clay, stone or metal, gods of rice powder, flowers, plants, herbs by taking fasts and vows. *Kukkuti Brata, Kedar Brata, Bajra Mahakali Brata, Rabinarayan Brata, Sudasa Brata, Rai Damodar Brata, Nisha Mangalbar Brata, Janhi Ossa, Buddhei Ossa, Khudurukuni Ossa, Kharkhari Ossa, Sathi Ossa, Kanjianla, Dutiya Ossa, Balitrutiya, Bada Ossa, Pana Sankranti, Akhay Trutiya, Sitala Sahthi, Raja, Jagulei Panchami, Rekha Panchmi, Garbhana Sankranti, Prathmastami, Panchdol* and in addition to these some of the common religious festivals are celebrated by the rural Odia women.

The tribal art and architecture are also some popular forms of folk art. The Puppet play of Odisha is internationally adapted as an art of making the lifeless puppets dance and sing on the stage. With the skill of the artist, the inanimate puppets are made into characters on the stage delivering great performances. Puppet show is closely associated with Odia folk literature and culture. In Odisha this puppet making has developed as a family art since long. Four persons are required to stage a puppet play: one *Sutradhara* who controls the threads of the puppet, two singers and one drummer. Usually religious stories are taken as themes of the puppet plays.

The sacred Gods and Goddesses have their own images in the society as perceived by the tribals. The villagers are ignorant of the higher metaphysical concepts of Hinduism and the Hindu Gods like *Vishnu, Rudra, and Varuna* are mere names for them. The caste Hindus have a feeling that they are the chosen few of Gods for which they do not allow the tribals to touch or approach their Gods. This has made the tribals create their own Gods, taking ideas and offsprings from their daily lives. The financial status of the tribals can be easily comprehended by looking at their wretched Gods, who are the phenomena of nature like earthquake, sun, moon, birds, beasts, fish, reptiles, trees and plants, stones and articles of daily use. Some famous local deities of tribal folks of Odisha are *Budhi Pallien* (the Goddess of forest), *Hilli Pallien* (a huge piece of stone), *Banka-Mundi* (Goddess of hunting), *Bhuan* (a vigilant God to keep an eye on the crops), *Hada Bai* (Goddess of wealth and power), *Mounabati* (a Goddess to destroy the enemy), *Banaspati* (the Goddess of the mango trees), *Bentakumari* (Goddess of water), *Batighanta* (a Goddess in the form of a light guarding the animals), *Ranaghanti* (Goddess of war), *Swapnabati* (Goddess to help against evil dreams), *Sauruni Debi and Mundabarik* (a wonder woman who was killed by the king into two, the body being *Sauruni Debi* and the head being *Mundabarik*). These fetish Gods are instituted by the roadside, in the river banks or under some shady tree. The tribals make every effort to ascribe dignity and splendor to their fetish Gods like the Vedic and the Hindu gods. For example Goddess *Durga* manifests into *Jagulei, Hengulei, Paneswari, and Patrasuni* in Odisha. Animal sacrifice is common among the tribals. There was a time when the *kondhs* of Phulbani (a central Odisha district) used to steal a boy or a virgin girl to sacrifice him/ her in their fields to satisfy their Gods. Later on, this practice vanished and now they sacrifice a buffalo or a goat, cut the limbs of the live animal till it bleeds to death. Some Mexican tribes also have the same practice. *Hercules*, the Greek hero, worshipped running streams, which, again, is found among some tribes of Odisha. Also, a few tribes in Philadelphia have the practice of worshipping earthquake, which is found in some tribal areas of Odisha. The bull is worshipped as the pet of Lord *Shiva* and the snake as his garland, the rat as the pet of Lord *Ganesh* and

Biccha or the scorpion as the pet of Goddess *Saraswati*, monkey as the favorite of Lord *Rama*, cow as *Kamadhenu*— a wonder cow of the heaven. Worship of trees and plants, like basil plants, peepal tree, rice plants, articles of daily use like the husking paddle, a painted coconut, sword, shield, wheels, potters is a common practice.

22.5 FOLKTALES AND FOLK MUSIC OF ODISHA

Folktales and folk music play a vital role in the lives of the tribal folks of Odisha. The folk songs are the spontaneous overflow of their feelings, joys and sorrows. The villagers are conservative in their outlook and they love to stick to their hoary past. A little digression from the norms prescribed by their ancestors is considered as a punishable sin. They believe in ghosts, spirits, witchcraft and sorcery, and their age old superstitions keep them away from modernization and keep them undeveloped and a prey to diseases. They retain the most savage customs and are proud of the same.

Storytelling is an ancient and rich folk art. The stories may not be didactic in nature, but they are told in a sing-song manner. The folk stories can be classified into legends and folk tales: a legend is a historical narrative and the folk tales are purely imaginative stories which might be having an oral tradition. To quote Dr. Kunja Behari Dash, who classifies the folk tales into five categories: “The folk tales of Odisha may be broadly divided into five classes:

- 1) Tales of Kings who are stupid, whimsical and despotic.
- 2) Tales of adventure by the sons of Kings, Ministers, Merchants and Police Officers.
- 3) Tales of giants, witches, ghosts and demigods.
- 4) Tales of birds, beasts, snakes, flying horses, magic boats, magic jewels and fish.
- 5) Tales of sea voyage reminding us of the golden age when Odisha had an overseas empire and trade with China, Indonesia, Cambodia, South Africa and Ceylon (now Sri Lanka)”. (*Folklore of Odisha* 38)

A folk tale is a blend of illusion and reality, depicting the faith, taste, social customs, outlook and imagination of the village folk. Among the folksongs of Odisha, the *Sajani* Songs of Sambalpur and East Madhya Pradesh depict the worries, joy and sorrows of women. These folksongs have an oral tradition, and much care has not been taken to preserve and make an archive of these songs for the future generation and in this process most of the *Sajani* songs have been disappeared. In the case study I would quote a few of those recorded by Gopinath Mohanty in his novel, *Paraja*. Due to urbanization and industrialization, these songs are going to oblivion. *Sajani* songs form the mainstream culture of Odisha society; the songs express the creative imagination of the people and also a means of entertainment for the tribals. Their songs are entertaining and lyrical. They are ballads, are meant to be sung on occasions like the village festivals. *Puchi Khela* is a game of the young girls where the village girls sit in a circle and play a game of throwing their legs and hands while singing romantic and nonsense verse quite rhythmical in nature.

22.6 ORAL TRADITIONS

Odia folk tales have a strong oral tradition. Those who come under the enchanting charm of folk tales in their budding years are privileged, because folk tales help

them to build up the power of imagination, hone their appreciation and sensitivity to beauty, stimulate the spirit of sympathy and co-operation and a love for humanity and literature. In villages, boys and girls gather at the door of the story-teller who, in most cases, may be an old woman on whom rests the responsibility of keeping the children in good humour. The children have finished with their play and they have no assignments at home except to trouble their mothers. So the best means devised to keep them engaged and quiet is story-telling. It makes them sit noiselessly and uncomplainingly for hours, inculcates the habit of good listening, and a readiness to attend to others' interests. It also keeps the oral tradition of the folk art alive narrative. Here I would like to give an example of an oral quoted from *Folklore of Odisha* by Dr. Kunja Behari Dash:

“Evening is now gone. Stars twinkle; ploughmen take rest at their doors. The village appears calm, serene and sacred. The grandmother starts her story with the following meaningless lines:

Let me tell you a story,
Let me tell you a story.
What story? – Of a frog,
What frog? – A wooden frog.
What wood? – An oilman's wood.
What oilman? – Who moves a pressing machine.
What pressing machine? – Of sugar-cane.
What sugarcane? – ‘Kanthari’ sugarcane.
What Kanthari? – An old woman who knows charms.

And she ends her story with the following:

My story ended; the flower plant died.
Well, flower plant, why did you die?
The black cow ate me up.
Well black cow, why did you eat away the plant?
The herdsman did not watch me.
Well, herdsman, why did you not watch the cow?
The eldest daughter-in-law did not give me food.
Well daughter-in-law, why did you not give him food?
The child wept.
Well child, why did you weep?
I was bitten by a dusty black ant.
Well black ant, why did you bite the child?
I live under the earth; when I find a soft flesh, I bite.”

There are plenty of stories like this in the oral tradition of seach folk and tribal group of Odisha. These stories, transferred from one generation to their progeny through an oral tradition, are lyrical, entertaining, soothing like a lullaby, based on non-serious themes, conversational, to be told in a sing-song voice. Unfortunately, these tales are slowly passing into oblivion, and a revival of these tales would be an important step to preserve a culture.

Odia writers frequently make use of proverbs / *dakbachans* and local sayings to make their language forceful and rooted to the soil. Sometimes the wise and pithy

words of great writers are repeated by the people and they gradually become a part of the treasury of proverbs. Thus the illiterate as well as the intellectuals participate in this exciting and basic exchange of each other's culture and ideas. There are popularly accepted proverbs in every culture on interesting themes like co-wife, villainous mother-in-law, conjugal life, worthless husband, sarcastic comments on various aspects of human society, cultivation, maxims and local deities. In the course of time, *dakbachans* are also going to oblivion and towards the void of extinction, which are of serious concern.

The life of the village folks are predominated by history and myth, music and folk tales, traditions and cultural heritage. Their religious ceremonies, their local Gods, their thoughts and language, beliefs and customs, acts and rituals, songs and tales are a part of their living and stay complimentary to them during their lifetime. Their proverbs, which are called *Dakabachans*, have an oral tradition since time immemorial, which speak of their lives and their different traits. Folk culture is susceptible to the outside world in the sense that it is constantly open to anonymous influences. In such a situation, sufficient care must be taken by the rural folk to test out the distortion of their cultural items and value system. The food for thought may be— can academics, teachers, researchers, writers and readers of folklore take up the responsibility of the preservation of folk culture?

22.7 STUDY OF GOPINATH MOHANTY'S *PARAJA*

Now let us study Gopinath Mohanty's Odia novel *Paraja* as a story portraying the culture and heritage as well as the struggle for survival of the *Paraja* tribe of Odisha. The *Paraja* are the representatives of the subjugated and exploited milieu, they stand for the millions of tortured indigenous tribes all over the world. Gopinath Mohanty's award winning Odia novel *Paraja* (1945), (translated by Bikram. K. Das into English) has documented the life, customs, the culture, the festivals and the songs and dances of the *Paraja* tribe of the Koraput region of Odisha as well as their poverty, struggles, deprivation and exploitation by the non-tribals. In the Introduction to the English translation of the novel, the translator Bikram. K. Das says, Gopinath Mohanty 'spent a life time trying to understand these tribals of the mountains and forests,' and attempts to tell their story in a number of his novels. The novel *Paraja* is about the unrecorded tribal history, practices and ethnicity which are swiftly evaporating. The *Paraja* as well as the other tribes are being driven from their land and a cultural death is round the corner. Gopinath Mohanty has gone back to time immemorial, to the oral tradition of the *Paraja* and has penned a novel which throws light on their life style and their philosophy which is being corrupted by forces of a materialistic, modern society. It appears to be derived from the Sanskrit word '*Praja*' which literally means the common people, i.e. subjects, as distinct from the rulers called the *Raja*. The word *Paraja* also has another meaning in the Odia language, namely the tenant (farmer) or Royat. In Koraput, the *Paraja* live with other tribal groups like the *Rana*, *Paika*, *Mali*, *Domb*, *Gadaba* and *Kondh*. In the novel, Sukru Jani and his family can be taken as the ambassadors of the *Paraja* tribe. It is the story of Sukru Jani and his family in a village inhabited by the *Paraja* who live in thatched huts on *Paraja* street, while in the next street live the *Dombs*. Their lives are simple and their desires limited— a bowl of mandia gruel, a piece of land to cultivate, and a few pieces of cloth to cover their body. Sukru Jani's wife Sombari was killed by a man-eating tiger and since then he has lived with his sons Mandia and Tikra, and his daughters Jili and Bili. He dreams of a future, when he will play with his grandchildren and great grandchildren, and "he has a deep faith in the kind and benevolent spirits— Gods— which have gifted his

life with peace and contentments (*Paraja* 38). He plans to build separate houses for his sons when they get married as it is the *Paraja* custom that married sons cannot live with their parents.

Their courtship and marriage customs are also typical. In traditional *Paraja* society, the institution of the youth dormitory exists in every village. The unmarried boys and girls spend the night in their particular dormitories and enjoy the autonomy of knowing one another closely. The boys and girls converse their ideas and feelings through passionate love songs. In the novel, Jili and her friend Kajodi are courted by Bagala and Mandia through songs with a single-stringed musical instrument called *dungudunga*. To the accompaniment of the *dungudunga*, Bagala *Paraja* courted Jili by singing an ancient ballad which had an oral tradition:

To the rhyme of the maize that is fried
Or the maize that is boiled,
I fashion my song;
Oh my darling who keeps her word,
Lovely is your nose-ring of gold.
My *dungudunga* wears only a brass string
But it makes exquisite music.
Like a daughter crying out her heart
When her widowed mother is taken away
By another husband,
I pine and weep for you.
Oh my darling, do keep your word,
Save me, for I die with your name on my lips,
Oh Jili! (*Paraja* 18)

As soon as the song is heard the girls run off the dormitories to meet their lovers. Jili's lover Bagala is not in a hurry to marry Jili as he cannot pay the bride price. Bride price is the cash given to the girl's family by the groom at the time of marriage. The *Paraja* tribe may marry only in the months of February, March, April and May. The other types of marriages are marriage by capture and marriage by elopement. The huge bride price virtually makes the groom's family penniless. It is quite an accepted thing for a young man, unable to pay 'bride price,' to become a *goti* (bonded labourer) of his future father-in-law for a particular span of time. After he has paid off the bride price through his labour, he is permitted to marry the girl. Bagala wishes to borrow money and become a *goti* but Jili does not want him to do so. Nandibali, the strong but penniless man in the novel, agrees to become the *goti* of Sukru Jani in order to marry Bili, Sukru Jani's younger daughter. This practice within the tribe causes no excessive concern, but it is a matter of great apprehension when a tribal man becomes a *goti* of a moneylender, someone not belonging to their tribe. Bagala does not marry Jili as her father and brothers become *gotis* of the Sahukar. He captures Kajodi and marries her, breaking the hearts of Jili and Mandia. The tribal marriage rituals are described in immense specification by Gopinath Mohanty: "Bagala pressed Kajodi's left foot with his right foot and spat three times in her face, and Kajodi did the same. Their necklaces and rings were exchanged; the ends of their clothes were knotted together and each took a ritual dip in the stream. The priest offered some eggs in sacrifice to the planet Rahu." (*Paraja* 189)

Religion and rituals play an important role in the culture of the tribals, According to S C Mohanty, "The *Paraja* worship a number of gods and deities for their well-

being. ... Dead ancestors ...receive routine worship and sacrifices at festive occasions. The Paroja observe many seasonal festivals with pomp and ceremony round the year in order to propitiate their deities and ancestors as well as for their own enjoyment....The Dishari, the village astrologer, determines auspicious dates and moments for holding marriage ceremonies, communal festivals and rituals, and so on.”(Tribes of Orissa 257) In the novel, Gopinath Mohanty gives a narrative of the functions of the *Dishari*. The *Jani* is the village head priest. *Dishari* acts as the astrologer. “To help him in his divination the Dishari uses a medium known as Beju (or a Bejuni, if it is a woman), who is possessed by some ancestral spirit or tribal god or goddess, and temporarily acquires supernatural powers of prophecy.”(Ibid143) The *Paraja* tribes worship nature in the form of gods and goddesses, as discussed in the first part of this paper. Dharmu is the chief god and others are ‘Basumati, Earth goddess, Jhakar, the god for all seasons and Bagh-Debta, the tiger god’. (*Paraja* 144) During the harvest festival celebrated in December, Earth goddess is worshipped with the blood of a black rooster. For the spring festival, the god of spring had to be invoked with the sacrifice of a chicken when the barking deer called. Just about that time a pigeon would be sacrificed on the appearance of two stars on Elephant Hill. The ‘shrine’ of the god of spring was an ancient and enormous mango tree deep in the jungle, where the villagers worshipped with song and dance to the beating of drums. The priest chants a long incantation to the god of Spring, the first stanza of which is:

O mighty god of Spring
Awake!
Shake off your sleep.
See, the trees are heavy with flowers;
The Chaitra moon is in the sky.
We are all dressed up for the dance
In your honour,
And the young men and girls are waiting,
Wake up, and come! (*Paraja* 146-147)

In the month of Aswina came the Durga Puja which is presented vibrantly by Mohanty “The spirit of the goddess was abroad, and the soothsayers and witch-doctors, the kalisis and shamans and begumis, possessed by the deity, danced wildly; buffaloes were sacrificed, their blood spurting out in lurid jets to mingle with the mud; drums throbbed...trumpets shrilled... There were flags and processions, displays of swords, battle-axes and spears, and always the shouting and roaring and grunting for blood, more blood.”(*Paraja* 322-323).The novel *Paraja* is rich in ethnographic details as Gopinath Mohanty gives a pictorial account of the rituals, beliefs, ceremonies and tribal wisdom regarding the eco-system and the landscape. He presents an illustrative account of the mountains and forests of Koraput, of the numerous activities of the *Paraja* starting from one winter to another winter across a year. An important event in the novel is the annual hunt during the spring festival. All the young and strong men of the village proceed on a hunting expedition which continues for two or three days. “The men would go out into the jungle, prepared to face the taunts of their women if they should return empty-handed. The women would tie their clothes together and hang them up on a rope, and anyone who failed to kill something would be made to crawl under the garments; he would be pelted with dung-balls and other filth...but success was greeted with garlands and dancing and rejoicing.”(*Paraja* 159) The hunting expedition is allegorical as Mandia and Bagala set out not just to hunt an animal but also their companion. Bagala captures Kajodi and runs away into the jungle and exercises the ancient *Paraja* right of wedding by

capture. Every festival is accomplished by singing, dancing and drinking. The men had “mahua wine and the women pandom-strong mandia beer – or landha, which is only slightly less potent.” (*Paraja* 171) The mahua wine is made from the flowers of the mahua tree, with clay pots to ferment and boil and the stream water is used to cool it. Gopinath Mohanty describes the process of cleansing very ornamentally: “The tribesman needed liquor not only to propitiate his gods but also to drown his hunger and his misery.” (*Paraja* 98) The *Paraja* commemorate their dead by planting a stone vertically for a man and laid horizontally for a woman, in the open space in the centre of the community place. Bonfire is lit and the young men and women make merry celebrating the spring festival. “The dead and the living came together to worship the joy of spring.” (*Paraja* 149)

Mohanty is deeply critical about the concept of bonded labour prevalent in Odisha. The forest guard has his evil eye on Jili, but after being spurned by her and insulted by her father, he takes his revenge on the family by accusing Sukru Jani for the illegal felling of trees. To avoid imprisonment, Sukru borrows a lumpsome amount from Sahukar Bisoi to pay the fine and as a result becomes a debt bound *goti* or a bonded labourer. The tradition of *goti* among the *Parajas* means a fixed agreement by which a man has to work for the moneylender instead of making repayment. The tribesmen seek loans from the Sahukar for marriages or bride price, and for grains during the rainy season. The “interest far exceeded the principal and the debt went on increasing from year to year.” (49) The poor tribals would mortgage their land and the Sahukar becomes master of their land, their bodies and souls. According to the agreement on which Sukru Jani and his illiterate son, Tikra Jani plant their thumb impression, the Sahukar charges compound interest at fifty percent per year and only rupees five a year for the services rendered by Sukru Jani and Tikra. Along with Sukru Jani and Tikra, his son Mandia also becomes the Sahukar’s *goti*. Mandia is caught while selling liquor which is illegal. Gopinath Mohanty points out that the selfish interests of the non-tribals risks the relationship between the *Paraja* and his land. Sukru and his sons lament that they cannot plow their land while they work on the land of the Sahukar. The *gotis* live in “ragged mud-walled huts drooped as if they were too tired to stay up; the thatches had grown bald from the wind and the rain; tattered rags hung from the rafters, and men, women, children, chickens, dogs and swine groveled in the same dust.” (120) At times the tribesmen are cheated by the Sahukar who puts down all mutinies by ruthlessly beating them and handing them over to the police who again are kept happy by the Sahukar by giving favours. Even though bonded labour is abolished now, 87% of Scheduled Tribes in South Odisha live below poverty line, and it still continues in some or other form.

The Migrant Labourers are another face of the exploitation to the tribals about whom Mohanty shows deep concern. The exploitation of the *Paraja* by the outsiders is evident in the migration of Jili and Bili as labourers at a road construction site. Sukru Jani brings them home once he frees himself from the Sahukar after mortgaging his land to the Sahukar. ‘A *Paraja* girl works only for her father or her husband.’ (239), as Sukru Jani says. The young men also dream of escaping to the tea plantation of Assam for better wages but as the Sahukar’s *gotis* they are unable to do so.

The *Paraja* are not aware of any law, like any other tribe. They live in the fear of the law. The literacy rate among the tribals is low and this leads to the *Paraja*’s panic of the law, government officials and the police. This is one reason why they are trapped by the moneylenders. The tribesman has a natural horror of the law as he has no idea of the terms of the contract between the Sahukar and the *goti*. Gopinath Mohanty explains, “He has his own rough-and-ready system of accounting a length of rope

in which he ties a knot for every year of goti-hood completed by him.”(123) They are also dismayed of the prison and the novelist says, “it is altogether beyond his comprehension for it belongs to a system in which he has no part, though he lives on its fringes.”(104) Once a *Paraja* goes to jail he is ostracized from the society. Hence Mandia decides to take a loan of fifty rupees from the money lender and become a *goti* as an alternative of imprisonment after being caught for selling illicit liquor. Gopinath Mohanty mentions, “The law forbade anyone who is not himself a tribal to buy tribal land.”(194) But the moneylenders find a way out to acquire the lands of the tribals. The Sahukar’s cordial relationship with the headsman and other officials earns him the rights of the tribal lands. Mohanty says, “The revenue records were doctored to show that the lands in question really belonged to the Sahukar ...” (197). Sukru Jani mortgaged his land to the Sahukar without any written document, “it was all done by word of mouth, tribal fashion. There were no witnesses either... And, by tribal custom, Sukru Jani ceased to be a goti from the very moment that the agreement was made; ... and the land passed into the Sahukar’s hands.”(233)

Justice seems to be far away from the lives of the *Paraja*. It is unfortunate that while the *Paraja* enjoy together and unite at festivals, hunts and bazaars, they do not support Sukru in his hour of need. The fear of the Sahukar, poverty, withdrawal and materialistic problems have eroded their unity and strength. As a last choice, Sukru, Mandia, Tikra and Nandibali try to talk to the Sahukar, but the Sahukar throws them out. In a mood of anger, Mandia axes the Sahukar and the three surrender before the police. The bloodshed at the end of the novel is a repurcation of the silent suffering and anger, which is like ‘a fire that feeds on itself and waits’ (127) till it cannot be suppressed any more. According to Mahasweta Devi, violence is defensible when tribals are exploited. “When the system fails in justice, violence is justified.... The individual cannot go on suffering in silence.”(Imaginary Maps xii) Gopinath Mohanty is a bureaucrat, and this facilitates him to work with and for the tribals in a productive, humane and meaningful way. This has been interpreted by Prof. Manoj Das like, “Gopinath Mohanty, while giving the tribals justice as magistrate, educating them about their rights as their guardian, was preparing to expand the horizons of Odia literature, exploring areas till then uncharted and characters till then unknown.” (IL 258).

Gopinath Mohanty’s prose incorporates a vibrant folk-idiom with submerged lyricism, recapturing symbolism and allegory. He is, undoubtedly, the greatest Odia writer, widely translated into most Indian and foreign languages.

22.8 LET US SUM UP

Folklore burgeoned since the origin of civilization through it had to wait for a long time for the researchers to pursue research and treat it as a specialized area of literature. It had a prosperous tradition in India and was used in the day to day life of people, as well as in the sophisticated works of art of the elite. This sustained till the English came and introduced the study of the folklore as a distinct genre and it was soon followed up at the national level. In the post-independence period, the research and pedagogy in the study of folk literature has got importance and support from the government with introduction of modern techniques and methodologies. The phenomenon is common to all Indian regions though their achievements vary in degree. Folklore had always been incorporated in abundance in the epics and *kavyas* of ancient Odia literature. The great epic *Mahabharata* by Sarala Das of 15th Century personified folklore to such an extent that it has been termed as a folk-epic. It will not be inappropriate if Sarala Das, the creator, is accepted as the

first representative of Odishan folk literature. Folk-elements had found an important place in the medieval *kavyas* as well. In our ancient literature, the dramatis personae and plots were very often drawn from the folk-world. During the period of renaissance, poets had an inclination to make use of folk-elements in their poems and illustrate rural life. Some of the literateurs in Odisha using the folk elements in their works of art were Radhanath Ray, Gangadhar Meher and Nandakishore Bal. The novels of Fakirmohan Senapati are also replete with folk-elements. In the modern Odia literature, Gopinath Mohanty has attributed a new meaning to this genre, *Paraja* being one of his stories on the tribal issues. In fact literature being the mirror of the society, has succeeded in celebrating the culture and tradition of the folks. The academia, researchers and the folklorists may play a more meaningful role in the preservation, documentation and archiving of our culture.

(P.S. Parts of this unit have been borrowed from the paper written by Nandini Sahu titled ‘Gopinath Mohanty’s Paraja: A study of the Folk culture of Odisha’; *Folklore and the Alternative Modernities*, Vol. 1, Ed. Nandini Sahu, Authorspress, 2012.)

22.9 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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22.10 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: Your answers should be in about 400 words.

- 1) What is the difference between the tribal and folk cultures in any given culture?

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2) What do you understand by the term 'homogeneity'?

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3) Write a critical essay on 'Dandanata' and 'Pala' as folk performances.

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4) What is the importance of street poets and singers in Odia culture?

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5) What are your suggestions for the preservation of folk culture?

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6) What are the numerous divisions of folk tales?

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7) Narrate the typical Paraja custom of marriage.

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8) Attempt a critical note on the ethnographic details and eco-systems of the *Paraja* tribe.

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9) Write a note on the illegal exploitation of the *Paraja* tribe.

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10) Do you find poetic justice in the novel *Paraja*?

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UNIT 23 *MAILA ANCHAL* BY PHANISHWAR NATH RENU

Structure

- 23.0 Objectives
- 23.1 Introduction
- 23.2 Synopsis of the Novel: An Overview
- 23.3 The Theme of Village Life
- 23.4 As a Bhasha Novel
- 23.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 23.6 References and Further Readings
- 23.7 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

23.0 OBJECTIVES

This unit introduces you to the genre of Indian novels by critically analyzing Phanishwar Nath Renu's novel *Maila Anchal* (1954) (*The Soiled Border*). Phanishwar Nath Renu is one of the most influential Hindi writers of the twentieth century. The aim of this unit is to introduce you to the life and works of Renu. Then we shall endeavour to present to you the peculiar flavour of Renu's locale with its myriad representations of people and events. We shall also lay stress on Renu's subtle use of irony to bring home the point to the readers. Renu's distinctive style and use of Indian words to impart a local ingredient are also most relevant in this context. *Maila Anchal* is a distinctive manifestation of Renu's style of writing with his ironic vision and satirical device. Renu's gentle irony and mild satire is nothing but an honest recording of facts, without any colouring of conventional bias. After reading this unit you will be able to

- comprehend the importance and relevance of Phanishwar Nath Renu as an Indian novelist;
- understand the skill of Renu in handling his characters and situation; and
- understand the critical aspects of Renu's writing— his distinctive style, use of irony and satire, importance of using Marygung as an imaginary locale and his idea of social reform.

23.1 INTRODUCTION

Renu's Life (1921-1977) and Works: Renu was born on 4 March 1921, at a small village, Aurahi Hingna, near Forbesganj of Purnea district (now Araria district) in the state of Bihar in a middle class farmer family. His father's name was Sri Shila Nath Mandal and mother's name was Pano Devi. His original name was Phanishwar Nath Mandal. His grandmother used to call him Rinua (literally meaning 'dust' or 'pollen grain'). It was later changed to Renu and it eventually became his pen-name. His primary education was at Lee Academy, Forbesganj, Araria. He completed his matriculation from Viratnagar Adarsh Vidyalaya, Viratnagar, Nepal while staying with the Koirala family of Biratnagar. He finally accomplished his higher education from Benaras Hindu University. In 1942 he took active part in the Indian freedom struggle. He served a three-year rigorous imprisonment sentence in Bhagalpur Jail. In 1950 he participated in a revolutionary movement against the Nepal monarchy

which ultimately resulted in the establishment of democracy in Nepal. Later he produced a very comprehensible report on that era titled *Nepal Kranti Ki Katha* (*Tales of Nepalese Revolution*), which remains as a crucial document of that landmark era in Nepal. Phanishwar Nath Renu married at fourteen but his wife died leaving behind a child. Several years later he married Padma. He has three sons and four daughters. In 1954, he married Laika. Both his wives supported him during his life.

He introduced regional rural voices into mainstream Hindi literature. His writings had an intimate feeling with the reader, which he developed by using the local flavour instead of Khari Boli. His works include— *Maila Anchal*, *Parti Parikatha* (1957), *Juloos* (1965), *Deerghatapa* (1963), *Kitne Chaurahe* (1966) and *Paltu Babu Road* (published posthumously). He also wrote short stories: *Maare Gaye Gulfam*, *Ek Adim Ratri Ki Mehak*, *Lal Pan Ki Begum*, *Panchlight*, *Thes Samvadiya*, *Tabe Ekla Chalo Re*, *Rinjal Dhan Jal* and *Wighthan ke Chhanh*. His collections of stories include *Thumri Agnikhor*, and *Acche Aadmi*. For some time he was in Bombay and tried his hand at scriptwriting. He penned his story *Maare Gaye Gulfam* for the film *Teesri Kasam* in the mid-sixties. This legendary writer left us on 11th April 1977.

23.2 SYNOPSIS OF THE NOVEL: AN OVERVIEW

Tehsildaar babu, Bishwanath Prasad, by virtue of his position in the administration, has acquired large tracts of land, and has turned into a zamindaar (landlord) himself. He has a daughter named Kamla, who suffers from hysterical fits. Doctor babu, Prashant (Dagdar babu), has left his city life to work in these hinterlands. This is the realm where malaria, kalaazar and numerous such epidemics run havoc, where innocent villagers have no recourse to modern medicine, they are easily duped by the people who practice black art and magic, where poverty itself is the biggest disease affecting people, and besides lack of basic amenities, people lack education and faith in government as well as in the doctor himself. The story of Dagdar babu is based on the life story of Dr. Alakh Niranjana. Prashant, the doctor, takes pains to fight disease and disbelief, in his battle for making people survive their ailments and superstitions. Kamla, who is his patient, falls in love with him.

Lakshmi lives on the *math* (a kind of monastery), serving the old *mahanth* (a priest), with whom she is in a scandalous relationship. The *mahanth* has a servant, who bears all insult from his master, and even though he was of low birth, is admitted into the *math* as he is adept at playing the *khanjira* (a musical instrument). Baldev, a freedom fighter, comes in contact with Lakshmi, and is attracted to her. After the *mahanth's* death, the servant assumes office with the help of Lakshmi, and because of her position, she is the object of several people's lust, till she gives up her position in the *math*. There are a whole bunch of characters who get involved in caste-based politics. Apart from Baldev, who is a disciple of Gandhi (and gives inspirational speeches in pure Hindi, which most villagers admire, but never understand), there is a dwarf who has had correspondence with Mahatma Gandhi himself and who, after Mahatma's death, wanes away like a celebrated candle of dark hours, flickers away unnoticed, once electricity connection is restored. There are the village hooligans who are lured by the Communist party. There is a division of ranks between different castes and groups, and the divisions become harsher as politics promises power and money, and if you wonder about caste based politics, its roots and consequences, *Maila Anchal* has a perfect script for tracing its roots. The events speak for themselves; they shed light on how Gandhi was revered in even these remotest villages and how his death was mourned by most who did not know what difference becoming "free" would make to them. For them the simile of being

like a free bird means nothing, for they are like wingless birds who know not what wonders a flight entails, what sceneries lie beyond the horizons. The events reveal how the followers of Gandhi and idealists lost hope and direction after Independent India thrust itself into games of endless corruption and caste-based politics. The events prescribe the socio-economic condition of the villagers, the unequal sharing of crops, the inherited hierarchy of caste and money, and the crux of family values. The novel exposes the divided social set-up, hollow codes of religion, and hypocrisies of political leaders. The author demasks those in power and illustrates the *anchal* of Mother India getting *maila* (soiled) by her own sons.

23.3 THE THEME OF VILLAGE LIFE

Maila Anchal is the story of a place, a village, its existence in mythical times, its transformation as a result of the incursion of Gandhian ideology, and its erosion as a result of its political clashes with the newly formed government. *Maila Anchal* is distinctive in the history of Indian Literature in its foregrounding of a spatial construct, a village in Bihar, rather than the exploits of individual characters. In fact there are too many characters in the novel, many of them are shadowy, underdeveloped or introduced only to be forgotten in the end.

It is important to note that this importance given to village-space in Renu's novel is not an entirely arbitrary decision, or even a decision born out of purely aesthetic reasons. In fact the idea of going back to villages or upliftment of village-India was the focus of Gandhian struggle for *swaraj* or independence from colonial rule. In 1922 (in his Presidential address), it was C. R. Das who first spoke of the importance of the village in the nationalist struggle. He had noted that real *swaraj* could come only through the "organization of village life and the practical autonomy of small local centres" (40). In fact the major thrust of the Congress movement was the upliftment of village India and a programme for decentralization, with the fostering of *gram panchayats*.

In fact Gandhi was unique in transforming this political and organizational importance given to villages into an ideological and cultural programme aimed at mass mobilization. He embraced the village as truly Indian, and rejected urban spaces as contaminated by foreign rule. Thus he was able to establish the desired difference between the European and Indian discourses of nationalism. In this context one should remember that *swaraj* also means control over our selves. Renu's *Maila Anchal* is thus not simply a village, but a cultural and ideological concept, a representative of India as a whole, struggling to free itself not only from the chains of colonial control, but also its own rooted caste and gender prejudices. Renu's portrayal of village life of Marygunj is not so much related to the outward changes wrought upon a remote village in Bihar as a result of its being drawn into the vortex of the nation-wide agitation of 1942. There are two paradoxical movements in *Maila Anchal*. In realistic terms he portrays the conflicts of Marygunj with the British government. The villagers have to combat the various reprisals meted out to them by the British administration. On a psychological level *Maila Anchal* is about the making of a village that never existed. The novel begins with the arrest of deaf Chetru by the British soldiers, but soon we come to witness a loose confederation of people occupying a village-space called Marygunj, divided radically along lines of caste, gender and wealth. There is a Kayasth tola, Rajputs who are in constant conflict with the Kayasths, Yadav Toli, Tatma Toli. Each of these has a powerful leader and the novelist has dexterously brought out the nexus between these leaders at the micro level with the nationalist parties at the macro level. It is a well known

fact that all political parties in India are deeply rooted in caste politics. Thus, Marygunj has no common minimum programme or common trajectory. The political leaders only take advantage of the ignorant village people.

Teshildar Vishwanath Prasad and others shudder at the prospect of caste pollution, reversal of gender hierarchies, and impending miscegenation as a result of the proliferation of Gandhian ideologies. When the *mahant* arranges for a feast for the entire village, the differences along caste becomes exposed:

The Brahmins have flatly refused to eat in a public feast unless separate arrangements for them are made.The people from the *Sepoy*-quarter aren't going to eat either. Hibaran Singh's son came and told me that his people won't eat in the same row with cowherds.....the Yadavs will say that they won't eat in the same row as *Dhanuks* (MA 22).

Though the novel speaks of one village named Marygunj, the deep sense of division and difference in terms of demography is a feature of almost every village. The differences between the 'righteous' and 'pure' or the pure 'us' and the impure 'them' gets highlighted. This village in the Purnea district is visibly as well as demographically divided between the upper and lower classes. We get to see a hierarchically organized group of people, operating under principles of rigorous segregation, connected by ties of mutual mistrust, hatred, and resentment. What Baldev's propaganda does is to make the people of Marygunj aware of their 'sameness' rather than 'difference'. In fact Renu's dream was of the formation of a united group of people sympathetic and responsive to each other's needs, and to him it is the most important aspect of village life. Thus we can say that the novel *Maila Anchal* is about the making of Marygunj, through the spiritual union of its inmates, rather than its physical erosion. He describes it beautifully:

Every ditch and pond here is covered with lotus leaves. They say that when the lotuses are in bloom, even the puddles are covered with all kinds of lotuses..... But you could hardly call these people 'lotus eaters'! I've been tasting water samples from these ditches....I suspect that the land here is wet all year round.

The villagers seem to be quite simple, if you take that to mean illiterate, ignorant and superstitious— very simple I'd say! As for worldly wisdom they'll cheat people like you and me five times a day. And the amazing thing is that even after getting cheated , you're so charmed by their simplicity that you let them get away with it!.....This little region midway between Bengal and Maithila is really lovely. The women are generally beautiful, and pretty healthy!...." (MA 51).

23.4 AS A BHASHA NOVEL

According to the New Encyclopedia Britannica, "Region is a cohesive area that is homogeneous in selected defining criteria and is distinguished from neighboring areas or regions by those criteria". It is an intellectual construct created by the selection of features relevant to a particular problem and the disregard of other features considered to be relevant. Regional boundaries are determined by the homogeneity and cohesiveness of the selection. Practiced and popularized in the late 19th and 20th century English literature, the concept of regional writing is not a new phenomenon. Thomas Hardy has created an immortal region – Wessex – for all his novels. His Wessex has become a dominant character in his novels. In Indian Writing in English, R. K. Narayan is regarded as a regional novelist. Much like Hardy's Wessex, Malgudi is the chosen region which forms the background to the

works of Narayan, whether novels or short stories. According to M. H. Abrams, “The regional novel emphasizes the setting, speech and social structure and customs of a particular locality, not merely as local colour, but as important conditions affecting the temperament of the characters and their ways of thinking feeling and interacting”.

The title of the novel is taken from Sumitranandan Pant’s poem “ Bharat Mata”: “Kheton mein faila hain shyamal, dhool bhara sa maila anchal”. In the preface to *Maila Anchal* Renu says: “It has flowers and thorns; it has dust also rose; it has mud, sandal wood; it has beauty and also ugliness— I could not escape myself from any of them.”

The village was renamed as Marygunj after Mary, wife of an English officer named Mr. Martin, who passed away prematurely in a malarial attack due to non-availability of instant medical treatment. Mr. Martin, as a glowing tribute to the dear departed, allotted land for a malaria centre at Marygunj to avoid any such untoward happenings in future. Despite his best efforts, his proposed centre could not materialize for many years. It was only after independence that his long cherished dream of opening the centre could be fulfilled. Dr. Prashant was appointed as a doctor at the centre. He internalizes the locale of Marygunj and identifies himself with it. After his short stay at the village, he became so engrossed and emotionally attached with the villagers that he gave up the golden opportunity to go abroad for higher studies. He becomes very popular with the local people and brings in new awareness to fight against the zamindars who have unlawfully grabbed their land. Dr. Prashant’s effort to create a new sensibility among these rustic folks is a sure step towards modernity.

Marygunj, is divided radically along lines of caste, gender and wealth. There is a Kayasth tola, Rajputs who are in constant conflict with the Kayasths, Yadav Toli, Tatma Toli. Each Tola has a powerful leader and the novelist has dexterously brought out the nexus between these leaders at the micro level with the nationalist parties at the macro level. There also exists a marginalized group called Santhals located at the outskirts of the village. They are treated as outsiders by the prominent groups of the village. Marygunj is also affected by politics. There are two parties – Congress and Socialists – which are functioning to create an impression on the simple village people. The activists of both these parties tend to maximize the membership by enrolling new members on a nominal membership fee. Choudhary, Baldev, and Bawandas are honest and dedicated Congress supporters who really want to carry forward Gandhiji’s messages in the larger interest of the people. As such, a centre for spinning wheel and handloom opens in Marygunj and one mistress and two masters are appointed to train people for jobs. Kalicharan, a wrestler of high repute and formerly a follower of Baldev, supports the socialist party, as he finds the policies of Congress ineffective and unpractical. He convinces the innocent people of Marygunj that the Socialist party is the only party that can safeguard the interests of the poor, the exploited and the oppressed, and condemns the landlords and capitalists: “These capitalists and landlords suck our blood like bedbugs and mosquitoes” (*MA* 176). Another supporter of the Socialist party called Sainik gives inspiring speeches: “Wake! True sons of the soil! True master of the land! Wake move forward with the torch of the revolution” (*MA* 103). These highly sentimental speeches accelerated a large membership from the Santhal group, as they offer voluntary membership of the Socialist party to get rid of the ignominious situations imposed on them by confronting groups. The Congress party also extends full co-operation and coordination and the Socialist party emerges as the biggest party.

The novel also presents how people from various groups forget their internal differences, and join to celebrate the happy moments of the independence of India. This vision of a united village is the most remarkable aspect of Renu's portrayal of village-life in Marygunj. While the sky is echoing with resounding slogans – “Mahatma Gandhi ki jai”, “Jawahirlal ki jai”, a strange sound comes partly with the reacting slogan as: “yeh aazadi jhoothi hai, desh ki janta bhukhi hai”(MA 225). [This freedom is untrue, country people are still hungry.] This stranger is nobody else but perhaps the novelist himself who is unhappy with the tantalizing appearance of freedom where the poor are still oppressed and have no access to justice. He essentially points out that political independence has not wiped away their tears. *Maila Aanchal* throws light on how Renu mocks the democratic parliamentary system of the new nation called India and shows clearly how these subjugated people fail to understand the real meaning of independence itself. They fail to understand their new cultural identity. The process of General Election is incomprehensible to them. Nor can they understand the meaning of Census. Even after the formal decolonization, the tribal life world represents a space outside the nation. He their countries are still very much colonial countries, both in terms of their values and behaviours. He Hargues that his country is still a colony, both in terms of value and behaviour. Independence did not touch the lives of these subaltern subjects. Decolonization has not reached the poor. This is why these things happen. Women are just merchandise, commodities. For instance, Phulia is obliged to share bed with Sahdev Misir simply because of the fact that he is economically capable of assisting her family as he is a railway employee. Rampiyariya accepts to be *dasi* of Ramdas as she needs to quench the fire of hunger. Besides them, so many other sexual relations have been depicted throughout the novel. Land and woman are intimately linked. Phulia's sexual exploitation alludes to the appropriation of *adivasi* land by the same people who sexually exploit the women. The subjugation of women continues. While the phallogocentric tropes of society are all set to crush the subjugated women, agents like Sahadev Misir carry out its orders. These men come to stay in our memory by virtue of their exploitation, violence and notoriety. There is also a *math* in Maryganj which was earlier looked after by Mahanth Sevadas but after his death it is taken care of by Ramdas. The *math* grapples with its own problems regarding the selection of a leader. Lakshmi, who is a *dasi* in the *math*, takes part in political activities of Congress and supports Baldev emotionally as well as financially. There is also a realistic picture of armed fight between the *Santhal* group and other integrated groups where a number of people from both the groups are seriously injured and killed. A police case is registered whereby Kalicharan, Dr. Prashant and many others from the confronting groups are arrested and put behind the bars. This entire event is manipulated by Teshildar Bishwanath Prasad in order to win the favour of integrated groups. Lastly, he sends his force against the *Santhals*.

As a regional novel requires multiplicity of characters, *Maila Aanchal* consists of a gallery of approximately two hundred characters representing different strata, sections, groups and aspects of the social structure. Both male and female characters are beautifully blended in the texture of the narrative, and serve to bring out the real status of Marygunj. Dr. Prashant, whose role is quite significant in the novel, is a stranger in the true sense of the term. His real mother, perhaps, discarded him as he was an illicit child, in the overflowing Koshi River, to avoid public disgrace. Fortunately, he was found by an Upadhyay family of Nepal. The family established an ashram called Adarsh Ashram, which was shared by a poor lady Snehmaya. This kind lady took the responsibility of his upbringing as a mother would. After matriculation, he comes to Varanasi along with his mother to complete his higher education. Unfortunately, one day, Snehmaya disappears mysteriously from Varanasi forever. Prashant's life is in a mess. However, Prashant completes his education

from Banaras Hindu University and later on takes admission in Patna University to become a doctor. Thereafter he joins the malaria centre to serve the needy people in Maryganj. He also treats Kamala, the daughter of Teshildar Bishwanath Prasad, and cures her permanently of her hysterical attacks. During the treatment Dr. Prashant and Kamala fall in love with each other. It results in the birth of their son Nilotpal. Despite his passionate love for Kamala, he never fails in carrying out his duty to people who are his prime concern in life.

Dr. Prashant, apart from being a good human being and a doctor, is also gifted with poetic sensibility. During the Bidapat Dance, he is deeply touched by the melodious songs presented by people in Maryganj. He finds true melody in the spontaneous overflow of these exploited, poor and illiterate people. He is reminded of the great Hindi poet Vidyapati who once had said, “Chalo kavi, van phoolon ki ore” (MA 184). [Poet, let’s move towards forest full of flowers]. Baldev, a follower of Gandhi, is an active Congress worker. In true sense of the term, he is a committed worker and extends his full cooperation to Dr. Prashant in the management of the Malaria Centre. He also supports Lakshmi who is a supporter of Congress party. But people do not approve this kind of association between them and are sarcastic about them. Therefore in order to legalize their relationship, both decide to live together as husband and wife, a little away from the *math*. Kalicharan, initially an associate of Baldev, later joins the Socialist party as he finds it is the only party which takes care of the innocent rustics. He is a champion wrestler. His guru advises him to keep himself away from woman to maintain discipline and his championship in wrestling. He supports Dr. Prashant whole-heartedly and once rounds up hundreds of people to give them injection to dislodge cholera. Bavandas and Chunni Gosai are Congress activists. Bavandas is acknowledged as a great leader who has had written communication with Gandhiji.

Bishwanath Prasad, head of the Kayastha group and Tahsildar possesses acres of land. He is corrupt and greedy. Though an oppressor earlier, now he has better understanding and insight of what may be the likely position of the village in the future. He therefore resigns as Tahsildar saying it is a sin which he can carry no more. Once he told Dr. Prashant light-heartedly: “The day people treat the rich, the landlords and businessmen as mad and leper, that day only true *swaraj* can be attained by the country” (MA 275). On the birthday celebration of Kumar Nilotpal, he distributes hundred bighas of land among the poor and thus materializes what once he had said to Dr. Prashant. There is a change in the perception of Bishwanath Prasad too, as he now tries to keep pace with the changing scenario of Marygunj. He changes for the better. On the other hand, Ram Kripal Singh possesses two hundred acres of land but is quite selfish and there is no change in his selfish attitude despite the phenomenal changes taking place in every walk of life in and around Marygunj. He shelters Baldev for his personal benefit but dismisses him the moment he realizes that he is not suitable to his end. Hargauri Singh, a new Tahsildar belonging to the Rajput group, is killed by the Santhal group. Jotakhi, an old Brahmin, always instigates the Rajput group to lock horns with the Yadav group. On his advice, Hiru kills Parvati’s mother after branding her a witch. Other characters are equally important, and each play their own subsequent role in the novel. Some of them are Sumritdas, Sahdev Misir, Ramdas, Larsingh Das, Chotan Babu, Shanichara, Sunderlal, Sukhilal, Soma Jat, Charittar, Rampal, Tilhara Chamar, Nakchheddia, Ramkishun etc. Female characters, on the other hand, are much less in number as compared to male characters. Kamala, the only daughter of Bishwanath Prasad, gets engaged thrice, but every time one or the other obstacles comes in the way of her marriage. She suffers from hysteria which is ultimately cured by Dr. Prashant. Lakshmi is an orphan and stays in a *math* under the service of Mahanth Sevas. He

promises his advocate that he will treat her as his daughter, but as soon as he brings her to the *math*, he forces her to become his *dasi*.

Maila Aanchal has some other specific ways to celebrate memorable moments of life. All happy and notable occasions are celebrated with the beats of certain kinds of musical instruments peculiar to that locality. Drum, *digga*, *mridunga*, *nagada* and *jhanjh* are the oft-used musical instruments. The novelist has an ear for music – he not only recognizes the sounds of these instruments but also tries to decipher their intricate meaning. For example, in the wrestling ground the beats of drum create sound like, “*Chat dha gid dha, chat dha gid dha*” (MA 68). They mean in Hindi *aa jaa, bhid jaa, bhid jaa, aa jaa, bhid jaa* [Come and wrestle, come to wrestle]. So many other sounds too are referred to in the novel. The villagers practices two forms of dances such as *nautanki* and *bidapat*. There are also varieties of songs as *jogira* [a song sung on the day of Holi], *barahmasa* [a song vividly describing all twelve months], *chaita* [a song sung in the month of Chaitra only], *phagua* [a chorus sung in the month of Phalgun only], *sohar* [a chorus sung by women to celebrate the birth of a son at least for twelve days] etc. As a matter of fact, Renu intentionally integrates these songs to comment on the existing social and political practices. For instance, the *jogira*, which is sung to celebrate the happy moments of Holi, sharply comments on the dubious culture creeping into politics: “*Charakha kato khadi pahno, rahe hath mein jholi Din dahade karo dakaity, bol suraji boli— Jogi ji sa ra ra ra ra*” (MA 125). [In the name of Gandhi people use spinning wheel, wear khadi clothes, and have begging bowls in the hand, support swaraj, but commit daylight robbery.] Generally it has been a practice to write a novel in *khari boli* in Hindi literature. *Khari boli* is the literary form of Hindi. But in order to give a feel of local colour and regional flavour, an artist selects certain words of that dialect which he wants to render through his work. In *Maila Aanchal*, approximately two hundred regional words have been meticulously used to give the feel of regionalism. To mention a few, *kaniya* (bridegroom), *bhurukwa* (morning star), *purain* (lotus), *hoolmaal* (revolution), *kiriya* (oath), *chumauna* (engagement) etc. are the words used to impart local colour to the novel. Some characters try to speak commonly used English words, which, with the impact of local tongue, sound quite humorous, e.g. *lalmunia* for aluminium, *resarv* for reserve, *luchkar* for lecture, *pulogram* for programme, *rat* for right etc. Renu has made a balanced use of local words to avoid miscommunication and gap of communication in the novel.

In *Maila Aanchal*, people sometimes speak a word with similar-sounding alliterative prefixes such as *kar-kachahari*, *mar-mahajan*, *far-faujdar* etc. The language varies from person to person depending on the status of the speakers. Manager Dough, an Englishman, tries to express himself in Hindi as follows: “*Amara estate mein ek bhi badmas ab nahin dekhane mangata*” (MA 136). [I do not want to see any naughty fellow in my state]. Aabharani, a Bengali speaking lady, treats Bavandas as a god and advises him when he is sick: “*Bhagban, aaj theke tomay roj ek gilās yehi ras, aar ratre dudh khete habe*” (MA 133). [Respected sir, I shall give you a glass of this juice in the day and milk in the night]. A very young Ganesh lisps while speaking about Dr. Prashant – “*Poolab chhe chhaheb aaya*” (MA 145) [Sahib has come from the east]. Some proverbs used in the novel give it a pronounced regional flavour, such as – “*nau do gyarah hona*” [to run away], “*mitti ka mahadev*” [to be an innocent], “*sab dhan bees paseri*” [to treat everyone equally] etc. Dialogues in local language also deserve mention. The maid servant conveys the news of Kumar Nilotpal’s birth as “*naati bhayal ho*” [a grandson has born]. The bullock cart driver says at Kalimuddinpur that “*Gaddi to na lauti*” [cart will not go back], to which Bavandas responds in the same dialect, “*lauti na to thaadh rahee*” [will stop, if not go back] (MA 295).

In conclusion we can say that the novel *Maila Anchal* fulfills all the requisites meant for a regional novel – *anchalik upanyaas*. It presents a vivid and lively picture of Marygunj, a selected locale, situated on the bank of the Koshi River. The entire story, compressed in one and half years, offers an honest thumbnail description of the selected region. Besides, the novel tends to shape an ideal society which needs better life conditions to go forward in life. It is the duty of an artist to sharpen the awareness of people to such an extent that they should be in a position to act conscientiously in the larger interest of mankind. In *Maila Anchal*, Dr. Prashant, Baldev and Kalicharan are the major characters who instil a new kind of sensibility and realization in people who are now able to handle their predicaments independently and wisely. For instance, people who earlier had an unflinching faith in the ideology of the Congress can now partly show their disagreement after hearing the high sounding phrases being used by the percussionists in favour of the Congress Party. They immediately realize that the Congress is celebrating its victory of Independence, while the common man is starving and getting entangled in rigmaroles of complex situations. Even though a general sense of euphoria swept through India as it gained political independence after years of political and cultural subjugation, independent India did not, in any way, change the cartography of a common man. Modern India has only renamed the places as well as spaces of the common men, it has in no way touched their lives. The novel also suggests the abolition of the feudal system in India. Tahsildar Bishwanath Prasad, once a strong pillar of feudal system, changes his mindset and returns to the poor their lands which were once unofficially acquired by him. These ideological and perceptual changes will definitely offer the people of Marygunj healthy surroundings and better life conditions in future. The novelist was closely familiar with the region and successfully created a literary form with a regional consciousness. Thus, Phanishwarnath Renu holds a unique place as a regional novelist in Hindi, and enjoys the status of one of the most representative literary artists to have introduced a new sensibility in the arena of the novel in Hindi literature.

23.5 LET US SUM UP

Renu enlarges the *anchal* to represent the entire India, not just Marygunj. He has selected this remote village in Purnea district and through the lens of Marygunj, he has made the readers see the fast-changing pan-Indian society. The “Marygunj” that he projects is politically-charged; corruption has seeped in, leading innocent villagers to change sides, but without any relief to their abject poverty and suffering. Renu uses wit and irony to ridicule the contemporary political scene. Marygunj is a space where poverty and atrocities on women are part of the everyday life of the villagers. Renu is the son of the soil and has studied closely the lives of the “others”. It represents a space outside the nation itself. In *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha talks of such spaces as “the scraps, patches and rags of daily life” (Bhabha 209), the “unruly ‘time’ of national culture”, “the liminality of the nation” and “the margins of modernity” (Bhabha 211) which are unfortunately unrepresented. They seem to challenge the pedagogical discourse of the nation itself. In post-colonial societies, where nations like India recovering from an infection of foreign ideas, women’s rights are among the first irritants to be regurgitated, and this social sickness appears strongly in the literatures of these nations. Women in these literatures are trapped by social and religious obligations, as well as the cycle of domestic abuse, and are the most tragic and invisible victims of decolonization. Renu represents exactly this world – especially that of the gendered subaltern. This novel evokes a multiplicity of questions and examines the intricate layers of various politics of decolonization, exacerbating the painful existence of women in society. As he chooses to speak

about the marginalized “other”, he essentially points out that political independence has not wiped away their tears. In the new nation called India, “secularism”, “democracy”, “socialism” and “national identity” remain mere jargons. For centuries, common people have been subjugated to isolation and deprivation, and have been exploited by the caste-ridden Indian society. The higher classes (akin to the colonizers) have treated them not as human beings but only as the “other”, the “subaltern”, and as “pieces of trembling humanity”. Even after Independence, they continue to be the weaker strata of society. They have no place and space in this new nation called India.

The political background of Marygunj further aids the dynamic and round portrayal of the characters. In fact, the characters and the setting beautifully complement each other in bringing out the minute intricate nuances. The end of the novel leaves the readers pondering – with so much of dirt around, how can the soiled *anchal* of the motherland be cleaned? Renu mocks the democratic parliamentary system of the new nation called India and shows clearly how the subjugated people fail to understand the real meaning of independence itself. They fail to understand their new cultural identity. The process of General Election is incomprehensible to them. Renu reverses the role; his conscious endeavor to ignore the colonial legacy is evident. The novel historicizes the struggle of the subalterns. From the *alterity* of the post-colonial site Renu transfers Marygunj’s particular history to a universal one, he relocates the locale of Marygunj in our own perspectives of difference, domination and discontinuity.

23.6 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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23.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: your answers should be in about 400 words.

i) Discuss Phanishwar Nath Renu’s life and works

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ii) Renu’s writings displaced the primacy of *khari boli*. How did it affect the reader?

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iii) On whose life is the character of *Dagdar babu* modeled?

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iv) What is Dr. Prashant's role in the novel?

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v) Comment on the role of Lakshmi in *Maila Anchal*.

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vi) What is the role of Baldev in the novel *Maila Anchal*?

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vii) Comment on the importance given to village space in Renu's novel.

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viii) Discuss the caste divisions in *Maryganj*.

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ix) *Maila Anchal* can be read as a finest Bhasha novel. Discuss.

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x) *Maila Anchal* is a postcolonial text which critiques the independent nation by taking an inverted look at its hybrid modernity. Discuss.

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UNIT 24 *THE DILEMMA* BY VIJAYDAN DETHA

Structure

- 24.0 Objectives
- 24.1 Introduction
- 24.2 About the Author
- 24.3 About the Story
- 24.4 Critical Themes of the Story
- 24.5 Let Us Sum Up
- 24.6 References and Further Readings
- 24.7 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

24.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to understand

- the dimensions of the folk in literature;
- the importance of Vijaydan Detha in Indian folk studies;
- the elements of the folk in *The Dilemma*;
- folk as a form of resistance, as a critique of the prevalent norms of the society; and
- the role of a narrator in the folk.

24.1 INTRODUCTION

What is “folk”?

What do you understand by the term “folk”? Folk, according to the Concise Oxford English Dictionary, are ordinary people, or refer to “originating from the beliefs and customs of ordinary people.” The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines folk as “the great proportion of the members of a people that determines the group character and that tends to preserve its characteristic form of civilization and its customs, arts and crafts, legends, traditions, and superstitions from generation to generation.” Hence folk are both ordinary people like us and people of a particular place and culture, who try to preserve their distinctiveness through their various modes and medium. But then, are we the folk of our folk studies or are they represented by the pre-literate groups of a community who are devoid of any formal training? Folk music, folk literature, and folk culture are more often than not transmitted orally. During our childhood, the stories told to us by our grandparents, aunt and cooks in our kitchen or during long summer afternoons are mostly transmitted orally across generations. Thus folk, according to Richard M. Dorson, has sometimes:

... suggested the outlines of a hidden, forgotten, and backward culture. This culture of the folk was hidden in two ways: deep in a remote time, in a prehistoric past, when early man perceived the world animistically or at least in the pre-Christian era, when pagan man indulged in barbarous rites; and far off in places, away from the busy centres of civilization, in the peasant villages of the countryside and mountain ridges. (*Folklore in Modern India*, 11)

Hence, as Propp puts it, the folk constitutes “the art of the lower social strata of all peoples, irrespective of the stage of their development” (5). But then unlike the west, the folk in India is not a part of the pre-civilized society, nor is it essentially a part of the peasantry, rather it is a part of the “little traditions” of the society or it can also be claimed to be a part of the alternative traditions of the society (represented by *Bhakti* tradition).

24.2 ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born on 1 September 1926, Vijaydan Detha, also known as Bijji to his close friends and associates, is a renowned and celebrated author of Rajasthan. He belongs to the bardic community of the Charans of Rajasthan, who sang praises and at times criticized their landlords. Detha had great faith in the power of stories. His father and grandfather were known in the entire Marwar region for their creative abilities. It was the creative legacy inherited by Detha that prompted him to become a writer at an early age. Detha lost his father and two brothers in a family feud at the age of four. Since his brother had a transferrable job, Detha had to move with him. He did his schooling at Bihar and Barmer. It was in Barmer that he realized that he wanted to be a poet. By the time he joined college in 1944, he had already established himself as a poet. Though he gives credit for it to his cousin Kuberdan Detha, he considers Sarat Chandra Chatterjee as his inspiration. He was also influenced by the celebrated Russian short story writer Anton Chekhov and by Rabindranath Tagore. Though initially he was quite critical of Tagore, later in life he started appreciating him. But it was the influence of Russian literature that egged him to return to his native village Baroundi, and to write in his vernacular tongue, Rajasthani. It was this unwavering faith in the power of stories that propelled Detha to gather and restore oral literature of Rajasthan. Determined to garland the age old oral literature of Rajasthani folklores, he along with his friend Dr. Komal Kothari set up the iconic Rupayan Sansthan, an institution that has done path breaking research and archival work. In his words, his land is full of stories, and whatever he has written is not even a drop in the fathomless ocean of stories. He reproduced those stories through a hand composed press that brought out the periodical *Lok Sanskriti* (Folk culture). These stories were later compiled in his *Bataan ri Phulwari* (Garden of Tales [1960-76]), a fourteen volume collection of stories drawing on Rajasthani folklore. Having always strived to articulate his creative spirit in his mother tongue, Detha has penned more than 800 stories in Rajasthani. He has received several honours and awards in his seventy-year long literary career, which includes Padma Shri (2007), Shatiya Chudamani (2006), Katha Chudamani award (2005), fellowship of the Sahitya Akademi (2004), and the first Sahitya Akademi award for Rajasthani (1974). However he came to limelight when his story “Charandas Chor” was first adapted by Habib Tanvir for his play (1975). This was later converted into a film by Shyam Benegal. The story that we will discuss here was adapted by the renowned filmmaker Mani Kaul for his film with the same title, *Duvidha*. However we also remember this story for the film *Paheli* starring Shah Rukh Khan and directed by Amol Palekar.

24.3 ABOUT THE STORY

“Story is who we are”: they not only mirror life, but also critique that life. “The Dilemma” (*Duvidha*) by Vijaydan Detha is a short story inspired by a Rajasthani folk tale. It has been taken from the second volume of a two volume collection entitled *Choubali and Other Stories*. Can a narrative prose then be both a folktale and a short story? To have done so seems to be one of the achievements of the

celebrated Rajasthani writer, Vijaydan Detha. As Detha's American translator, Christi Merrill (who works on Detha in tandem with the poet, folklorist and translator Kailash Kabir, who has himself translated Detha's works into Hindi), observes in her introduction to *Choubali and Other Stories*, Detha's writing involves both conservation and creation, notation and invention. It narrates a story of love between a woman and a ghost. The story begins with the marriage of the only son of a rich Seth with a beautiful girl. The bridegroom and the bride were on their way back to the former's home, when they had to stop in the dark and cool shadows of the forest. In the forest lived a ghost, who was dazzled by her beauty. She inspired him to inflict the pain of separation upon himself, rather than causing injury to the beautiful bride or her husband. The ghost never felt that way for any other woman. He was jealous of the fortune of the Seth's son. He was in a peculiar "dilemma": neither was he able to cause harm to the bride or the groom, nor could he bear the pangs of separation. After taking rest, the procession resumed their journey to their final destination. But to the surprise of the bride as well as the readers the groom was immersed in his ledger book, which he deemed to be dearer than marriage itself. He married so as to comply with the social customs and tradition of the society, but it was the blissful joy of accounting and trade that interested him the most. Hence what is invaluable for one is of little importance for someone else. The bride clamoured for attention of the groom, only to be snubbed every time. But when her mercantile minded husband broke the news of his business trip to another land for five long years on the auspicious occasion of *Teej*, her world of dreams was shattered. Then finally that day arrived when her husband set out for his five year long business journey and she was left alone to nurse her wounds in her new home. On the way he was intercepted by the ghost of the jungle, who through guile and trick got him to cough out his secret. The ghost saw this as an opportunity to fulfill his desire. Assuming his form, the ghost entered the house of the Seth. Surprised at the sudden arrival and the subsequent obstinacy of his ever obedient son, the Seth considered it to be the effect of marriage – a man is rendered slave to the dictates of a woman, and consequently becomes unfit for worldly affairs. But the ghost proved shrewd enough to understand how to satiate the needs of the greedy Seth. He concocted a story of a miraculous saint, who had blessed the Seth's son (the ghost in disguise) with a boon of five gold coins every morning. The ghost thus entered the house of the Seth, and it was time for the fulfillment of his desire. However, he was again on the horns of dilemma, as to whether he should weave his nest of love with the straw of lie and deceit. The bride was too happy to notice any change in her newlywed husband; she rather complemented herself for this pleasant surprise. Well aware of the fact that the bride would be disappointed at the sudden revelation of truth, the ghost dared to narrate the bitter truth. But to his surprise the bride, though disappointed, did not ask him to leave, as this was the only occasion in her life that she was treated with so much love and respect. For the first time in her life even the wrong seemed to be right. She willingly accepted him as a part of her life. Then they lived happily, immersed in the love of each other; but not ever after. The idyllic days rushed by. The daughter-in-law became pregnant. The couple started weaving their dreams, oblivious of the fact that four years had almost flown by and it was time for the Seth's son to return. Meanwhile, as the Seth's son was busy in making money, disturbing news started pouring in. Initially he continued to brush them away, but after he heard of his wife's pregnancy, he could wait no longer and started for his home. When he reached home, to his horror he found the rumour to be true. But no one was ready to accept him as the real son of the Seth; even the Seth himself accused him of being an imposter. The Seth was embarrassed. He could not allow a trickster to malign the name of his family. He threatened him to be thrown out by his servants. But the villagers were not ready to let such a golden opportunity

of humiliating a rich man go astray. It was decided that only the king was the right person to put an end to this confusion. The husbands were tied up and the entire procession led them to the land of the king. But before reaching the king's court, they bumped into a rustic shepherd and he offered to be the mediator in this complicated case. The shepherd, contrary to the popular perception of the people, was able to see through the things and hence offered the ghost and the Seth's son three improbable tasks. First, he asked them to open their mouth, so that he could ram his shaft down their throat to drag out the truth from their bellies; next, he asked both of them to collect all the sheep grazing on the ground before he clapped seven times and finally he implored the true husband to enter his waterskin before he snapped his fingers. The ghost, ignorant of the guile of the men's world, did all the tasks with right earnestness, and was trapped by the shrewd shepherd. Thus the story ends with the ghost being trapped and thrown into the stream. The wife in this case, from the beginning till the end, has a very limited subjective voice. She is represented in her basic social standing of a "woman" in the "male" dominated world. The story ends on a sublime note, and the woman stoically resigned herself into the hands of fate. She reconciled with her harsh reality and continued to be an obedient wife and dutiful daughter-in-law.

Title of the Story

Folk is generally oral in nature; it is sung, narrated or performed. Hence rarely do they carry authorial impositions. Like garments they change narrator, and with the change of narrator, the mood and temper of the story changes. Thus folk is fluid; it is colloquial. But when it is adapted for a canonical form of literature, it tends to stifle or clog the spontaneity. Novel, short story and drama are both canonical and urban in nature; they are refined, structured and authored. Folk is not. Thus when Vijaydan Detha transformed this folk story into a short story, on one hand he had to conform to the form, content and tenor of the short story and on the other, he had to retain the spirit and the soul of the folklore. In his review of Detha's *Choubali* and other stories, Nishat Zaidi writes:

Stories by the self-proclaimed folklorist Vijaydan Detha stand at a unique juncture, where the ever dynamic collective consciousness preserved in oral cultures of folk tales is represented through the privileged retailing by the author and where the sheer choice of medium tends to freeze the inherent fluidity and flexibility of these tales. Transmuting oral forms into such new mediums as writing, is not unknown to the Indian narrative traditions, as some texts, like the Buddhists *Jatakas*, *The Panchatantra* (fifth century), and the *Kathasaritasagarh* (eleventh century), owe their origin to oral traditions. Detha's stories are inimitable as they epitomize the confluence of the age-old folklore and relatively modern genre of such short story in which the interiority is as much a concern as the world of action; in which there is no moral compulsion of privileging good over evil; and most important, which is meant for readers, not listeners. (1)

A story needs a title and a title is always suggestive. In Detha's story, the title *The Dilemma* (Duvidha) hints at the inherent confusion that lies at the core of the entire development. The element of dilemma is distinctly evident in at least four parts of the story. The first instance of moral dilemma occurs when the ghost fell in love with the bride at first sight, and was unable to decide his next course of action to win his love: "The Ghost had never known such conflict" (Detha 33). He could neither "take up habitation" in the body of the bride, nor could he cause harm to the bridegroom, as it in turn too would cause sorrow to the bride. He was ready to suffer, bear the pangs of separation for such a beauty:

If such a beauty were to grieve, the clouds would withhold their waters and lightning veil itself. The sun would not rise nor the moon. Nature would be despoiled. Never before had he felt compassion for anyone. Today he felt that he would prefer to suffer himself than to inflict pain on such beauty. (32)

It was love, which brought about such a change in his demenour. He had to let her go and suffer from the pangs of separation. But when fate presented an opportunity, the ghost was quick to capitalize on it; he took the subterfuge of the Seth's son to enter the house of the Seth. It was never a difficult task for him to convince the Seth. He was again at the end of his wits when finally the time for the fulfillment of his desire arrived, and he could not lie to his love, well aware of the fact that the revelation might cause heartbreak. The ghost was now a transformed self. The emotional exuberance of the bride perplexed him, and he thought:

How could he mix filth in this pure milk? To deceive her would be a great sin. She was so happy because she thought he was her real husband. What lie could be meaner, more despicable? This was indeed the ultimate lie. How could he play false with love's unconsciousness? (36)

He could no more keep her in a world of delusion, and narrated the truth. At the revelation of the truth, the bride was also taken aback; she said, "I can't make up my mind whether it is better that you have spoken the truth or whether it would have been better had you not spoken it" (37). To this the ghost comes up with almost a Freudian explanation, that in case of most of the supposedly "chaste" women, chastity is only a tangible parameter, since though they do not indulge in infidelity in real life, but in reality they are attracted to someone else. Hence their virtue is a want of opportunity. Unable to spurn the sincere and honest confession of this ghost, the bride could not but accept his love. The third instance of dilemma in the story arises when the real son of the Seth reappears and asserts his claim as the true heir to the family. When the Seth's real son suddenly came back from his four year long business trip after hearing the shocking news of his wife's pregnancy, his father thought him to be a imposter, and his mother was petrified. The Seth replied: "Who are you, anyway? My son came back three days after he set out. Don't think that I'll be taken in by any of your tricks" (39). People were amused and did not want to waste this golden opportunity to humiliate the Seth. They, along with the real son of the Seth, vehemently insisted for justice. The dilemma this time was more tangible in nature, yet it was highly intriguing, both for the villagers as well as for the readers.

Hence the title of the story at no point seems to be incongruous with the natural progression of the story. Even the conclusion of the story leaves the readers in a state of dilemma: as readers we are left pondering as to whether the end of the story is a logical conclusion to the development of the events.

24.4 CRITICAL THEMES OF THE STORY

Students, you should always remember that folk is essentially polyphonic in nature. It tends to subvert the accepted norms and practices of the society. Vijaydan Detha's stories try to create an alternative trajectory and *The Dilemma* or *Duvidha* is no different in this sense. The main motif of the story is virtue which has a direct correlation with morality. Sexual purity is construed to be moral righteousness and ironically the onus rests on women. The story tries to depict the situation of women in the society, where they are bound by the rituals and customs of the society; they are culturally constructed in a patriarchal society. Women-centric folktales ensure a

counter discourse, and hence ensure the presence of polyphonic voices in the society. They tend to contest the stereotypical claims of traditional society.

The Dilemma or *Duvidha* is also a love story, but with a difference. This story of affection is not between a man and a woman, rather it tells the tale of love between a ghost and a woman. The supernatural agent is used to highlight the glaring glitches in the fabric of the society.

Dilemma between Purity and Impurity (Sacred and Profane)

“I would never let a strange man touch me, not even in a dream, let alone in reality. If you were a strange man, you would long ago have been consumed by the fire of my virtue” (36). These words are uttered by the bride in the story of our discussion. The conviction with which she utters these words, insinuates to the fact that in spite of being a woman she conforms to the patriarchal value system. From her childhood she is tutored and nurtured in a way that she is supposed to obey, she has no agency of her own. As a girl child, she was grudgingly accepted into the folds of the family, as she is “dust in the house . . . Her mother’s womb had given her a place but there was no place for her in that house” (37). To speak about one’s desire is blasphemy. The change of house, and the change of hand have had little significance in her life, since she was supposed to be passive receiver of things in life. Assertion of desires, wishes, whims are proscribed in her life. Hence, gradually those proscriptions get naturalized and unconsciously one becomes a party to it. To fulfill unfulfilled desires appears to be a catastrophic sin, and here virtue assumes a colossal importance in life. Sexual purity has always been a dominant theme in the Indian context. We are all familiar with the story of Ahalya, where she is transformed into a rock for being unfaithful, even after being a sexual victim. On the other side, Draupadi at the end of the war smears her hair with the blood of her disembowelled molester Dussashana, and in the process tries to redeem her virtue. Stories of wives being punished for being licentious are not very hard to come by in Indian folk literature:

Various motif listings specific to India further indicate a special cultural concern with persecuted wives. These include: Wife Banished for some Small Fault; Barren Wife Sent Away; and Queen Banished When She Defeats King in Argument. The fact of the rejected female partner is also vividly portrayed in many stories. A few motif examples are Cast-Off Wife’s Head Shaven; Cast-Off Wife Sent to Herd Cows; and Abandoned Queen Blinded. Such typical motif patterns seem to document female fears about losing a husband. (Brenda E. F. Beck n.p.)

Thus the question of chastity is at the heart of the story and the ghost tries to set the perspectives right. Thus as in *Nagamandala* (the union between a naga and a woman), the union of the ghost and the bride desecrates the issue of chastity, challenges the notion of purity and criticizes the accepted norms of society.

A Woman’s Tale

We have already discussed about the subversive nature of folk. Yet, here, we must refer to what A. K. Ramanujan had to say about the intrinsic relationship of folk and the societal discourse:

Folklore (where ethos, aesthetics, and worldview meet) is an excellent place to examine such notions. For instance, classical texts like the Ramayana and Cilappatikaram present no unchaste women; or, where they are presented, they are chastened by unchastity (ahalya, etc.). But folklore is full of ingenious, promiscuous betrayers of ideal. In legend, women saints break every rule in Manu’s code-book, disobey husbands, take on divine liaisons, walk the streets naked. Such contrasts

between 'classical' and 'folk' materials may imply more than one system. ("The Relevance of South Asian Folklore" n.p.)

Thus folk challenges the set principles of morality. Unlike modern texts, where the author is central in determining the tone and texture of the concerned text, in the folk, the version changes along with its narrator. One might here find the distinction between *akam* (domestic tales narrated by both male and female) and *puram* (public, heroic tales narrated by male narrators) tales of Ramanujan both interesting and helpful. In his words, the essential differences between the two are:

One of the important characteristics of *akam* or interior poetry is that there are no names of places or persons in it; in *puram*, names are obligatory. One finds a similar difference between Kannada folktales (*akam*) and (*puram*). Furthermore, as the same tale moves from the domestic *akam* teller and sphere to a public context when told by professional bard, the style and motifs (but not always the central structures) change. ("The Relevance of South Asian Folklore" n.p.)

Further, Ramanujan narrates an Oedipal tale, where a girl is born with a curse on her head that she would marry her own son and beget children by him. She tries to escape her fate by retiring to a jungle, eating only fruit, forswearing all male company, but unfortunately she is impregnated by a mango from a tree under which a king who was passing through the jungle has urinated. She gives birth to a male child, wraps it up in saree and throws it in a stream. The king of the neighbouring kingdom picks him up and he grows up into a handsome prince. Incidentally he comes to the jungle for hunting and at first sight the girl falls in love with the stranger, telling herself she is not in danger anymore as she has no son alive. She marries him and bears a child. According to custom, the father's swaddling clothes have been preserved and are now brought out for the newborn son. The woman recognizes at once the piece of sari with which she had swaddled her first son, now her husband, and understands that her fate had caught up with her. She waits till everyone is asleep, sings a lullaby to her child and hangs herself from the ceiling with her saree. But the ending of the story varies according to the male and female narrator. The characteristic response of a male narrator to such disorienting sin is suicide (of the mother, heroine), or a renouncing of the world by everyone concerned. Such a renunciation, a withdrawal of all relations, in Indian terms, is a kind of social suicide — one becomes an ascetic (*sanyasi*) by performing a funeral rite on oneself. Quite contrastingly, in case of a female narrator, the ending of the story is sometimes both subversive and scandalous. A. K. Ramanujan reports a variant narrated by an illiterate Marathi woman to her daughter. Instead of killing herself or renouncing the world, she recognizes that her fate has been fulfilled, doesn't tell anyone about her incestuous marriage, lives happily with her husband, blessed by her aged parents-in-law to whom she was always kind and dutiful.

In reference to the elaborate discussion on the *akam* and *puram* tradition, even after being narrated in the modern literary genre of a short story, "The Dilemma" is more close to *akam*. Quite in contrast to the narrative tradition of a short story, the present story in discussion desists from naming its characters. On the other hand the ending to the story is both interesting and poignant. The bride gets away with her illicit affair with the spirit, because in first place, her lover was a ghost and no man of flesh and blood. Moreover, since the entire family was beguiled by the tricks of the spirit, the bride, being a woman, was condoned for her crime (as women are mostly considered to be naïve and foolish). The bride in turn preferred to remain silent and endured the painful marriage only for the sake of her baby girl, with the hope that destiny might have some favourable plans for her.

It is often believed that a tragedy is quite rare in the Indian folk tradition. A.K. Ramanujam in this context rightly observes that it is certainly true for Sanskrit drama and *kavya* narratives. But may be in the case of folk stories, we do have tragedies and as Ramanujam puts it, the main features of Indian indigenous tragedies are:

A dark desecration in the family, most often having to do with irreversible caste-pollution of a sexual kind, a growing recognition of it, the consequent rage, the violent bursting-through of ordinary bonds of role and domestic culture, the expansion of a household affair into a communal conflagration involving the whole village irrespective of caste and class, the rise of a goddess of terrifying power crying for vengeance and pacified by a ritual of animal sacrifice. . . (46)

In this case, the irreversible separation of the two beings brings in the essence of tragedy. Like Shylock in *The Merchant of Venice*, rather than being the perpetrators of crime, they have been victimized. On the other hand, we cannot even expect an improbable union between a spirit and a woman of flesh and blood. Hence, the alliance was destined to be doomed.

Ghosts or Supernatural Agent

The belief in ghosts is almost universal. In many parts of the world there is a close correlation between child-rearing practices and the character of the supernatural beings of that society, including ghosts. Ghosts, however, can be both malevolent and benevolent in nature in some society, but most often they are either close relatives or lovers, rarely are they strangers (Arcgettoes and Ni 189). In Detha's *The Dilemma*, the ghost is a stranger and is smitten by the beauty of the bride. At the beginning of the story, the ghost appears to be a malevolent agent. He contrives to take possession of both the bride and bridegroom. But his compassion for the bride forces him to forsake the idea. Here we find that even spirits are influenced by mundane emotions. Compassion is not so rare amongst spirits. For example, in Japanese folklores, we find a mother returns from the grave to suckle her child. This motif is particularly strong in Japanese death legends in oral, artistic and film representations (Arcgettoes and Ni 189). Ironically in this case, the child is the cause of the mother's death, yet the mother's spirit considers it to be her obligation to protect or nurture the child even after her death. In the above case, the ghost has blood relations, but there are innumerable examples, where the ghost, even after being a stranger, helps people out of compassion. In the motif of the grateful dead, the hero, who at the outset of his quest has spent his last penny to pay off creditors of a dead man so that the corpse can be buried, is later aided by a mysterious helper who turns out to be the ghost of that dead man. He appears sometimes as an old man, a servant, or a fox (Arcgettoes and Ni 189). Interestingly in northern India, we find a similar folktale where the son of a *Sepahi* helped in the burial of a corpse of a man named Murad Khan, with all he had. The story is titled "The Story of Murdan Khan and the Daughter of the Jinn", collected by William Crooke and Pandit Ram Gharib Chaube. Later we find that the ghost of Murdan Khan helps him, not only by gaining lot of wealth and valuables for him, but also gets him married to a princess (15).

Again transformation is another strong motif in folktales. The fantastical is real, and helps us to find the real perspective. Other than Indian folk tales, tales from across the world are replete with stories of 'transformation'. In Indian context, change of 'form' always adds another paradigm to the perceived notion of the real and fake, truth and untruth, moral and immoral. The ghost goes through his process of transformation thrice in the entire span of the story. The transformation in this case is both physical and spiritual. The ghost we witness at the end of the story is no

more cruel, and sadistic; no more does he take pleasure in inflicting pain, rather he is ready to take the acid test to protect his loved one. He refrains from causing harm to the son of the merchant, though it could have prolonged his blissful days with the bride. In the very first place, he could have lied to the bride, who in turn would have never suspected his camouflage. Then again as things started to take an ugly turn, when the real son of the Seth arrived, the ghost could have reignited his old sinister self to maneuver things in his favour, but then, he didn't want to malign the name and honour of the bride. Hence, he chose to compete with the real son of the Seth and never did he doubt the intentions of the old shepherd, who successfully outwitted the ghost and brought an end to all the chaos and confusion. During this contest also, the display of the magical powers by the ghost got him trapped in the human web of lie and deceit, consequently discriminating between the incorporeal and the corporeal.

24.5 LET US SUM UP

Folk is a brilliant amalgamation of the real and fantasy. The story by Detha involves telling as well as retelling. The human and the supernatural is brought together to mirror reality. Detha is highly critical of a society that tends to commodify women; through this captivating short story he redefines "chastity", which has always been a prerogative of the patriarchal society. The parameters that are used to define honour have been challenged through collective folk wisdom. But then, Detha's short story ends up tragically, and quite spontaneously, our heart goes out for the ghost, who transformed himself in more than one way to be a faithful lover, a sincere and accommodative husband. As expected, the bride continues to live a claustrophobic life as a woman is supposed to. We are reminded of the Latin adage, '*Tota mulier in utero*', (Woman is nothing, but a womb) (qtd. in Selden, Widdowson & Brooker 121). Apparently, the story seems to be a strong indictment of the patriarchal hegemony, but it fails to bring about a sustainable change in the life of the bride. Since it was adapted for a short story, Detha might have wanted to be more faithful to original version of the Rajasthani tale, which, in spite of its tragic ending, is quite revolting and sacrilegious.

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24.7 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: Your answer should be in about 200 words.

- 1) When was Vijaydan Detha awarded the Sahitya Akademi award for his contributions to Rajasthani literature?

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- 2) Name the play which when adapted by Shyam Benegal for his film, brought Detha’s name to the limelight.

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- 3) Name the writers who inspired Vijaydan Detha as an author.

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- 4) Name the work from which the story “The Dilemma” is taken.
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- 5) Vijaydan Detha used to produce a journal on Rajasthani folk literature. Name it.
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- 6) On what auspicious occasion did the groom decide to embark on his business trip?
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- 7) Why, when the ghost that fell in love with the bride, did he fail to kill the bride or the groom?
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- 8) What explanation did the ghost offer to the greedy Seth, when it came to the household disguised as the Seth’s son?
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9) Comment briefly on the title of the short story "The Dilemma".

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10) How did the shrewd shepherd trap the ghost?

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UNIT 25 *CHEMMEEN* BY THAKAZHI SIVASANKARA PILLAI

Structure

- 25.0 Objectives
- 25.1 Introduction
- 25.2 Analysis of the Text
- 25.3 Let us sum up
- 25.4 References and Further Reading
- 25.5 Check your Progress: Possible Questions

25.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- know about the works of Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai;
- comprehend *Chemmeen* as distinctly different from his other works;
- understand folk broadly in the context of this text;
- locate social forces as determining the discourse of folk life, hence the pragmatics of individual aspirations pitted against or getting shaped by dominant social mores; and
- comprehend a picture of a regional society in post-Independence India.

25.1 INTRODUCTION

The Writer's Bio-brief

Thakazhi Sivasankara Pillai (1912-1999), has to his credit thirty nine novels and more than five hundred short stories, apart from four autobiographical memoirs and some miscellaneous writing. Perhaps the most widely known Malayalam novelist and an active leader of the Progressive Literature Movement to begin with, Pillai's initiation to literature happened very early in life by listening to his father's readings from the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* almost every night after dinner at family gatherings. If the form and structure of such oral narrations made a lasting impact on his works, his own reading of European masters like Zola, Balzac, Maupassant and Chekov further honed Pillai's authorial skills. His own social position as the son of a landed farmer from a primarily estuarine region thickly peopled with agricultural labourers and backward classes invested Thakazhi's works with a deep insight into the implications of both the human struggle against nature and social forces. Much of the naturalistic mode that he imbibed came from an intense awareness of and interaction with this milieu, as the writer himself wrote in "Society as Hero in Fiction":

I was born and brought up there and if at all I have achieved anything, all those achievements are part and parcel of the calmness of the place ... I belong to the lower middle class section of Kerala. Not an aristocrat, nor a landlord, my father was a farmer. He was not a peasant. He was not tilling his own soil, but he was only managing it. He was also a trained Kathakali artist, but he never gave any performance. I am the son of such a man.

Thakazhi initially achieved fame as a writer of short stories; his first published tale came around when he was just 17, and the ones that followed began to show a maturing psychological insight and empathy for the subaltern. In a way, his stories paved the way for the maturity he showed as a novelist, and his first published novel *Thyagathinu Prathiphalam* came out in 1934 when he was only 22. In quick succession followed works like *Pathitha Pankajam*, *Susheelan*, *Thottiyude Makan*, *Randidangazhi* and others. In most novels of the early phase, he comes across as an advocate of naturalism, incessantly battling prevalent societal and linguistic taboos, cumulatively giving the Malayalam socio-realistic novel a direction as it were.

Chemmeen, which came in 1956 and immediately got Thakazhi the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1957, is apparently a romantic tale set against the backdrop of the lives of Kerala fisher-folk. While it is an evolution from the earlier explicit socio-realist mode, it is, however, not just a romance. As students of Indian Literature, you need to look out for what the writer himself had to say of it in the same speech transcript that has been referred to earlier. While accepting that it was his first attempt at a love story, Thakazhi also clarified that “love in *Chemmeen* is only a peg to hang on several things to it, like the philosophy of the fisher-folk of Kerala and the secrets of Kerala, which (he) really wanted to depict through a love story”. This will broadly explain and justify the inclusion of this text in the multidisciplinary curriculum of Folklore which is a vital aspect of Culture Studies today. *Chemmeen* may indeed be considered Thakazhi’s magnum opus for the mature blend it shows of the inner turmoil of human beings, the local colour amidst the ordeals of a fishing community, and above all, the challenges of men and women belonging to a society and an era that is in transition mode.

In the post-*Chemmeen* phase, Thakazhi’s major novels include *Enippadikal* and *Kayar*, the latter being virtually an epic novel which is an ambitious recounting of more than two centuries of Kerala life spread across no less than six generations of characters! For all the controversy that his works in general and *Kayar* in particular have generated (mostly because of Thakazhi’s refusal to let his Communist moorings weigh narrowly on his depiction of real human beings in life-like situations), he has remained, undeniably, one of the major novelists of Malayalam literature. In its obituary to Thakazhi, the Sahitya Akademi placed him on equivalence with the likes of Shivarama Karanth, Gopinath Mohanty, Tarashankar Banerjee, Phaneeshwarnath Renu and Birendrakumar Bhattacharya. The historical, social and psychological concerns they shared, and the interrogations these writers made from the common man’s perspective have made them doyens of Indian literature.

Story of *Chemmeen*

“That father of mine talks of buying a boat and nets.” With these words said to Pareekutty, the small time fish trader, Karuthamma – the elder daughter of Chembankunju, who is a fisherman working on other people’s boats and nurturing a desire to own a boat himself, and his wife Chakki – bursts on to the opening scene of *Chemmeen*. Karuthamma and Pareekutty have grown up as children playing on the shores of Neerkunnath, and share a deep love which is, however, deemed forbidden by the norms of the fishing community, where a Hindu girl cannot, or rather should not, think of a future with a Muslim boy. So for a major part of the novel, we see Karuthamma being subjected to overt censure by the community, suspicion and restraint by her mother, and conflict within her own self. The myth of womanly chastity being the safeguard of a man who goes to sea is repeatedly invoked, as is the folk belief of the presence of sea goddess Katalamma, who must be appeased at all times for the sea to remain bountiful. Karuthamma thus blossoms into womanhood while she is enmeshed in a constant conflict with her milieu. Much

before her marriage, she undergoes constant admonishments for harbouring thoughts of a forbidden love. Even after marriage, when she has come to terms with the fact of her lost love, it remains a burden she has to carry on living with. And all this while there has really been nothing more explicit than stolen looks, giggles and the pangs of fore-doomed lovers between the two of them.

Chembankunju, obsessed as he is with dreams of owning a boat and nets, has not much of an ear for local gossip. So he does not know any of this, and he picks upon young Pareekutty as a relatively soft target to source the loan money required for buying boat and fishing equipment. Pareekutty, or the Little Boss as he is endearingly known, is in turn elated to be of help to Karuthamma's family, and makes the necessary arrangements, without ever bothering to ensure the terms of the loan, unlike what any other professional money lender on the shore would have done. With money thus acquired, and by dint of his adventurous nature coupled with hard work, Chembankunju does achieve his goals, but it soon transpires to Karuthamma and Chakki that he has no plans of repaying Pareekutty's money. A small trader that he is with not much worldly wisdom, the Little Boss loses all his capital and is reduced to a pathetic morose lover who roams the seaside singing songs of unfulfilled love that pierce Karuthamma's heart.

Meanwhile, Chembankunju, now a name by himself after overcoming all opposition to his acquiring riches unbecoming of his caste, hits upon Palani, an orphan but a very capable fisherman from the neighbouring coast of Trikunnappuzha, to get Karuthamma married to. After a heart rending adieu to Pareekutty, Karuthamma, who has no choice but to abide by the norms of the shore in order to save her parents from disgrace, goes through the ritual of the marriage that is bereft of any fanfare. Chakki, who has all along known her daughter's predicament, falls mortally sick at the prospect of her daughter's departure and yet, forces her to leave, lest the staying back of a married daughter, who has been rumoured to have had a clandestine affair, raises eyebrows in the village. Chembankunju, who knows nothing of this, looks upon his daughter's act of leaving her sick mother as being an act bereft of any filial gratitude, and this causes a split between Karuthamma-Palani and Chembankunju. Not only are the couple never invited, Chembankunju does not allow even news of her mother's death to be sent across to Karuthamma. He takes a second wife, the circumstances of his life get convoluted, and he loses steam with age and wilting prowess.

Life at her husband's place too is no bed of roses for Karuthamma. She has to battle poverty, manage the bare household of a man who has none to call his own, and become the woman to her fisherman as the customs of the shore demand. Getting over the love of Pareekutty and giving her woman-self to the unfolding blisses of the new connubial has, for Karuthamma, both its practical challenges and enticements. To add to it, her virtually orphaned state after being deserted by her father makes her the talk of the place, and it does not take much time for her rumoured past to reach Palani's ears. Thus while both Karuthamma and Palani share almost the same fates, the attainment of domestic bliss amidst a glib community life is not an easy proposition for either. Helpless, she makes as much of a clean breast as possible to Palani and tries to settle in, and the couple are even blessed with a daughter.

However hard pressed Karuthamma might be to convince her husband, slander from the community keeps provoking him till one day, he rows the boat recklessly out of despair and is grounded. The power of beliefs and omens in the lives of the fishing community is once again revealed. If the safety of a fisherman's life at sea

depends on the chastity of his fisher-woman, the loss of it is also squarely the responsibility of the woman. And Karuthamma, as you have read earlier, fails the benchmark at Trikunapuzha too, for no real fault of hers. To the man whose prowess on the stern had made him an ace fisherman and the cynosure of all eyes even on shores beyond his own, this is a dual blow – both financial and psychological. Once again Karuthamma becomes his comfort and stay, as they begin to try out the difficult task of etching a living by the sea through hazardous means.

At such a time, Panchami, Karuthamma's sister, unable to put up with the goings on at home any longer, flees Neerkunnath and comes to her ichechi (elder sister). It is an emotional moment for both and in recounting tales of home shore, there is obviously talk of how the sisters' home is now a broken place after ammachi's death, the plight of a devastated Chembankunju, and of course the paupered wandering singer Pareekutty. Palani, who always had his doubts about having won the heart of Karuthamma, has been eavesdropping and enters at this point of time, and thus the secret bursts. The realisation that Palani never after all trusted her to the full, the presence of Panchami or even the protracted circumstances of her life – all cumulatively give Karuthamma a strength from within, and she bare-facedly accepts before her husband that she was in love with Pareekutty. Obviously, this is not taken in a very simple manner, and Palani is agitated.

As Palani sails out on his flimsy boat, a primeval force seems to have seized him from within, and in deep sea he first falls into a whirlpool and then attempts to catch a shark. Meanwhile on shore, in her hut, Karuthamma could just not pull her mind out of thoughts of Pareekutty, for whom she always felt long and deep within. At this time she hears a call by her name, wonders who it could be, and as she steps out of the house, Karuthamma finds it is none other than her Bossman who is only a lean spectre of what he once was. For once, the woman in her rises up and acknowledges this man who, having loved her, has lost his all. She throws to the winds all caution and belief in customs of wifely piety required when the husband is at sea, and the lovers embrace.

As a simultaneous happening in the novel, Palani loses his battle with the elements, he screams out the name of his wife, but does not manage to survive. With a sweeping drift of the narrative, the dead bodies of Karuthamma and Pareekutty locked in an eternal embrace are washed up on the shore. On a coast farther away at Cheriazhikal, a dead shark with a line still attached is found on the shore. Panchami is left with her tears and with the difficult task of consoling the child of Karuthamma and Palani.

The Translated Text

The translation followed for this study material is by Anita Nair, published in 2011 by Harper Perennial Publications. There was also an earlier translation (1962) by Narayana Menon that carried an Introduction by the Indian-born American writer Santha Rama Rau. Apart from having been rendered in several other Indian languages, *Chemmeen* has also been translated into Russian, German, Italian, Arabic and French. While Thakazhi wrote the novel in eight days flat, Nair devoted as long as two years and several rewrites before she could get her act together. A look at her "Translator's Note" affixed to the text will reveal how in trans-creation, a text can gain multiplicity of dimensions. While Pillai did not intend to foreground love as he said, Anita Nair finds it as the basic trope with which to bring out the lives of the fishing community. She says in her "Translator's Note":

Chemmeen is a novel about forbidden love. It is also a novel that bares the seams of the mind of a fisherman who goes out into the sea. What brings him back to the shore? What causes him to lose his way? *Chemmeen* is about hopes and hopeless love. It is a story that lives long after the book is read. And reverberates in the mind just as the waves dash on the shore. Again and again.

As a reader you need to understand the translator's use of the epithet "forbidden" for love in *Chemmeen*. In a way, it circumscribes the life of the community by defining its mores, the social ethos and customs, and also the inevitability of fate and the circumstances that societal pressures can lead to. The intervention of folkloristics lies in the fact that fate and social norms operate in a parallelism to simultaneously destroy Pareekutty and Karuthamma, both very average human beings; and yet engenders for them a place in myth. The mythicising might well come with a cautionary note as to the plight of a dissenter, but nonetheless, it catapults them into the realm of lovers who cannot but be dissenters to their milieu.

25.2 ANALYSIS OF THE TEXT

- **Characters**

Having taken up a brief analysis of the plot in the preceding section, it would be helpful to introduce the characters in terms of how they figure in the novel. You are already acquainted with the major ones by now. Here we briefly enumerate the distinguishing aspects of their characters that will help you understand the novel better:

- **Chembankunju**

A sturdy, able-bodied fisherman who has ambitions of owning a boat and nets, hence the equivalent of an agrarian worker who wants to transcend his class and rise higher. But being a Mukkavan by caste, the dictates of the shore do not allow him to do so. Being a "child of the sea", he is not supposed to hoard riches as, notionally, he is the "inheritor of countless riches" that lie scattered in the bosom of the vast sea. Added to the norms of the shore, he is also to abide by the belief in the sea-mother as goddess and live a meager life. He is also culpable of not having married off his elder daughter, the dictates of the shore saying that the marriageable age for a girl is ten years.

- **Chakki**

Wife of Chembankunju. A "fisherwoman born and bred on the seaside, hence the inheritor of a long tradition of sea lore" is how the novelist/translator describes her. She is the counterpart of the agrarian worker who now dreams of social ascent, is hence torn between hopes of a better life and flouting social norms and customs. Naturally, in her we see the impact of Chembankunju's actions at the domestic level. Besides, as the mother who knows of her daughter's forbidden love, Chakki is constantly torn between her womanly understanding of passionate emotions and fear of being socially ostracised. It is her inability to reconcile these two, coupled with the deep sadness caused by the unceremonious marriage of Karuthamma to Palani that bring about Chakki's untimely death.

- **Pareekutty**

A small time wholesaler of fish on the Trikunnappuzha shore, Muslim by religion, and has inherited his father's business but is too helplessly romantically inclined to Karuthamma to be able to manage his business. It is tempting to look upon him as

a romantic hero, but given the novelist's predilection that love is not the mainstay of *Chemmeen*, he must be seen as embodying the problematic of social equations and religious identities among the fishing based communal life shown here.

- **Karuthamma**

Daughter of Chembankunju and Chakki. The novel evolves primarily around the ordeals of her life, and she becomes a classic example of the female subject as a multi-layered marginal in a postcolonial society. From her life-long abidance of the diktats of patriarchy to her final act of revolt and self assertion that culminates in annihilation, Karuthamma is the subject of what comprises the dissenting inner voice of the subaltern in a study of emerging cultures at crossroads.

- **Palani**

Fisherman who marries Karuthamma. His depiction as an orphan with immense individual agency is strategic. Governed by subversive societal norms (nurture) while being an offspring of nature (in the sense that he has none to call his own till he marries), Palani is perforce comprador to society's othering and discrimination of Karuthamma, though the two could have been each other's comfort and stay. His perishing at sea, which is a realistic outcome of his daring, however serves to validate the myth of the wrath of the sea-mother, since his wife on shore has transgressed the vows of chastity. As husband to Karuthamma however, he is vital in providing the novel with the only scenes of uninhibited (natural again) conjugality befitting the hard living conditions of the fishing community. His oscillating between being a husband who wants to care and a gullible man who gets swayed by rancorous gossip about her, shows the power that social forces wield on non-discerning folks who have to make a living through community based activity.

- **Panchami**

Chembankunju's younger daughter. She is one character who matures in course of the novel. From a little girl who believes her ambitious father will spare some small fish for her, or one who finds fun in complaining about her sister's so-called affair with the Muslim, to running away from home being unable to withstand the hysterics of Chembankunju's new family, Panchami too eludes the social topos of a marriageable girl, though in a very different manner from Karuthamma. At the end of the novel, as she stands with the wailing child of Karuthamma-Palani in her arms, Panchami enters the realm of the nondescript grown up girl who will predictably have a hard living to make.

- **Society**

Apart from the major characters mentioned above, *Chemmeen*, like the novels of Thomas Hardy, abounds with people from the community who constitute what has been called Society. There is for instance the family of Achakunju who is Chembankunju's peer; there are fishermen like Raman Moopan, Vellamanalil Velayudhan and others, the fisherwomen, the Shore Masters of the two places, the fishermen from Neerkunnath and many others. Collectively, these voices and their actions figure out in a choric manner both the cross-currents and the nuances of rural life by the sea in the novel. As learners, you need to read for yourselves the translated text to get the real feel and comprehend the situation.

- **Situating *Chemmeen* in the domain of Folk**

As you have learnt earlier, folk implies the masses; hence any form that crystallises their ways of life forms the staple of folk art. Folk art therefore takes many forms and mediums of expression as you have been seeing while going through this course.

Of these, folklore, like literature, takes the form of verbal art. This explains the close connection between folklore and literature. In his “Introduction” to *Theory and History of Folklore*, Propp says:

Literature and folklore overlap partially in their poetic genres. There are genres specific to literature (for example, the novel) and to folklore (for example, the charm), but both folklore and literature can be classified by genres, and this is a fact of poetics. Hence there is a certain similarity in some of their tasks and methods.

The “tasks and methods” that Propp talks of, when read in contiguity with his broad assumption that in talking of folklore we almost always imply the art of the lower social strata of all peoples, whatever their stage of development, becomes clear as we place these in the context of a novel like *Chemmeen*.

We might now turn to Thakazhi’s own view of the novel before moving on to more specific aspects of folk culture and idiom in it. Having said that love is not the primary interest in the novel, the author said in an interview to R. Surendran that he was basically writing about a “lifestyle”, one that came as an impulse after being in contact with their lives – that way, all things described in the novel are ones that he has seen and known for himself:

I had infact merged with the life of those fisherfolk. Living on the seashore, there are many things special about their customs unlike ours... My concept is that the sons of the sea can live only like that. Do they know that they are the sons of the sea? But infact they are. It never occurred to me that *Chemmeen* is a different one among my works.

It is in these twin aspects of recording the minutiae of the life of a vocation based community placed away from our known surroundings, and more so, doing it by becoming an integral part of the community (hence not an eco-tourist’s gaze) that *Chemmeen* becomes a classic exploration as a text of folklore.

The Sea: Realities and Myths

Like the Aran islanders in J. M. Synge’s one act play *Riders to the Sea*, the characters in *Chemmeen* lead a life that is perforce bound to the sea. Since fishing at sea is the only source of sustenance known to the community, all their activities revolve round the endless blue waters. The men-folk are either owners of boats and nets, or workers on other’s boats, or moneyed people who run usury business for needy fishermen. Similarly, the women either sell fish inland or manage home and hearth. Thakazhi himself sums up this relationship with the sea that is the crux of his novel in the essay “Society as Hero in Fiction”:

The people there, as they rise from their sleep in the early morning and rub their eyes, the first thing that they look at, everyday, is the vast expanse of the sea – the mystery that is called the sea. The sea is *Ratnakara*. It contains treasures. Seeing the sea for a lifetime from birth to death must have some influence over the human soul, and there is the idea of the Goddess of sea, *Katalamma*, the Sea-Goddess, the Mother-Goddess... Kerala has a peculiarity. There is nothing like a wide meadow in Kerala, but in Tamil Nadu you find expansive meadows. Likewise, we have the sea, the concept of *Katalamma*, and from that concept was born the story of *Chemmeen*.

Worshipping nature the provider either to propitiate wrath or to regard her for countless blessings has been the norm in all cultures in their preliminary stages of development. You will find this in the history of Asia and Europe alike.

It is this very idea that is echoed in the words of the people of Neerkunnath. Achakunju, the childhood friend of Chembankunju tells his wife Nallapennu: “Woman, why does a fisherman have to hoard anything? His wealth lies to the west; a whole expanse of it” (Thakazhi *Chemmeen* 28. For all subsequent references to the text, only page numbers are mentioned). Raman Moopan, another fisherman who believes in sticking to traditions and is therefore against Chembankunju’s acquiring of boat and nets says: “The children of the sea are the inheritors of countless riches. It is customary for their palms to brim” (30).

The reality of the economic dynamics of their lives shapes their morality quotient too, and the myths that surround the sea find validation in discourse from this. So the traditions of the sea that bind Karuthamma prevent her from responding to Pareekutty. As Chakki counsels her daughter on these mores, we see how closely myth becomes interwoven with social customs, ways of life and of course imposes restraints on free play of emotions:

Do you know why the sea cries at times? The sea knows that if the sea mother gets angry, all will be ruined. But if she is pleased, she will give you everything, my child. There is gold in the sea, my daughter, gold! (9)

Thakazhi’s aim being to prioritise the local flavour and thereby perceive *Chemmeen* as a society novel, we can understand why he says love is not the main theme here.

To get back to the more immediate context, notice that in talking about Chembankunju’s malafide intentions of not returning Pareekutty’s money, when Karuthamma questions her mother if the sea mother won’t be angry if a fisherman cheated people, Chakki has no answer. Thus you realize that the sea, which is both provider and destroyer, is looked upon as a force of retributive justice in *Chemmeen*. Folk customs in a way act as a regulatory force by providing answers to such questions by invoking mythical tales of punishment against transgression. There are, for example, old sea ditties of waves rising high as mountains, dangerous serpents foaming and frothing as they slither on the sands and even sea-monsters with cavernous mouths chasing boats and swallowing them whole – all results of women falling from grace, that are sung by women of the fishing community. While the sea is a source of infinite treasure, the conservation of such ecology too is embedded in folk beliefs – thus no fisherman is allowed to go to sea twice the same day. You will notice that when Chembankunju exhorts his fishermen workers to do so in a time of plenty, none agrees to it.

The sea in *Chemmeen* almost gives the novel the ambience of a *sthala purana* – the embedded quality of regionalism that is a hallmark of Indian literature. Thus when Karuthamma goes to Trikunnappuzha after marriage, she feels a stark difference:

Even the sea here seemed strange. The water was a different hue. It wasn’t a quiet sea here. Beneath the waves lay a capricious undercurrent that would churn the sea up into a swirl causing treacherous whirlpools. The sands too were coloured differently. (125)

Such local variations do not however alter the validity of the people’s beliefs in the mythical powers of the sea, whether as provider or destroyer. This reality is borne out in the nemesis of Chembankunju who violated several norms of sea-faring in search of riches. It is equally brought out in the way Palani, an ace fisherman, perishes mid-sea in baiting a shark after he gets caught in a whirlpool and is caved in by a fierce storm. As you know by now, this happens at the same time when his wife, Karuthamma is breaking the vow of wifely chastity on shore. Look at this

portion from the text that brings out the significance of the sea and its myths in bringing Palani's life to a close. It will give you a clearer understanding of why the sea is such an important factor in the novel:

The fury of the storm grew. But Palani vanquished that as well. The storm aligned itself with the waves. Yet another wave came towering in! By the time his lips formed 'Karu...' the wave was on him. Nothing was visible. The winds, thunder and lightning all together vented themselves. It was a last big effort. All the forces were united in their fury. They were putting the final touches to that act of destruction. (237)

As the whirlwind becomes a tangible force, the star by which fishermen navigated at sea loses its radiance, thus symbolising the end of Palani. Seldom has myth and reality been so inextricably woven into the texture of human life to signify its fragility in the face of an inscrutable natural force.

Community Life

The first unique phenomena you might notice in community life in *Chemmeen* is, unlike most of our middle class homes, the aspect of privacy in the family lives of the seaside people is conspicuous by its absence. This is to say that just like the absence of the concept of private property among fishermen, their family life too is fused with that of the community in the main. Thus domestic quarrels, happy times when the sea is aplenty and trying times when it is the barren season, community feasting and drinking – everything takes place on the shores of Neerkunnath and Trikunnapuzha with the involvement of everyone around. At large therefore, you will find a socialist ideal at work; aberrations to which are not taken kindly by the community.

Terms of endearment that lovers use to address each other are here driven by vocation – thus Pareekutty is the Little Boss and Karuthamma, Big Momma Fisherwoman. There is definitely a suave hint at her physiognomy in this, but more important than that is the way identities are governed by family positions vis-à-vis that of the fishing community. Chembankunju becomes the subject of censure primarily because he does not marry off his daughter who has come of age long back. The secondary cause of censure – his attempts to buy boat and nets, is also linked to this:

Raman Moopan added, 'Listen, when you have a marriageable girl in the house, what kind of man buys a boat and nets instead?'

In ancient times, the Shore Master wouldn't allow it. Those were laws that couldn't be defied. And the fisherman, who was protector of the shores, would make sure that the laws were followed. It was for the well-being of the fishermen that these laws were made. (30)

Thus the first critique of one's actions comes from the community, and it is taken in all seriousness, unlike modern societies of each to his own. That Chembankunju's caste position does not allow him to be the possessor of boat and nets has already been discussed. We shall talk more about this in the subsequent section. There are two major points that need to be noted here. First, within the unwritten codes of community life in *Chemmeen*, Chembankunju comes across as a disruptive force – he embodies the voice of one with capitalist longings of transcending his class and caste by dint of his entrepreneurship (and of course his unfair treatment of Pareekutty), and he thereby embodies winds of change amidst a still predominantly agrarian society. Second, while efforts to dislodge him are basically driven by

jealousy, the semblance of a prevalent social order (that which he challenges time and again) gives a degree of legitimacy to the voices of those opposed to him. This explains the several skirmishes he has with his fellow mates – first when he launches his own boat, then over the marriage of Karuthamma to an orphan Palani, and finally when he remarries after the death of Chakki. The way speculations on the character of Karuthamma run amok at Neerkunnath basing first on her father's choice of an orphan for husband, and then the way she is left at large by her family also bring out the damaging facets of community life in the novel. In fact the big issue over bride price that almost mars the marriage at one point is glaringly realistic proof of this. The unforgiving nature of the community over one whose name has the slightest hint of a scandal is evident from Panchami's information to Karuthamma that word of the Muslim having seduced her still does the rounds long after she has left Neerkunnath. Naturally the effect of this comes to Trikunnapuza too, and becomes responsible big time for the othering of Karuthamma and Palani from community life.

Caste, Class and Religion in *Chemmeen*

You need to understand that in *Chemmeen* we are looking at a slice of Indian society from a pre-Independence era. As such, caste or class and religion are seen as important social markers. On the whole, the novel is peopled with characters belonging to the lower or at best the petty middle class. Most fishermen families here are seen to lead a life of poverty, though their belief in the sea makes them notionally believe that they are the possessors of infinite riches. The Indian sociology of stratification that makes caste and not class the vital marker of identity is however at work here. Thus Raman Moopan, an old-timer, clearly states that the children of the sea are of four specified kinds – Arayan, Valakkaran, Mukkavan, Marakkan. Of these, the Valakkaran alone is allowed to own boats and nets. There is further, a fifth caste of no particular name; while in the east there are some subsets of men who do the task of manning the boats. You definitely realize that this vocation based gradation of castes corresponds in an autonomous way with the *chaturvarna* and a fifth *antyaja* (broadly nomenclatured as dalit, irrespective of religion) classification of mainstream Indian society. Trouble brews because Chembankunju, who is a Mukkavan, aspires to own a boat and nets. As suggested earlier, such aspirations also show early attempts at individualism by subverting the dictates of caste structure and efforts at transcending one's class.

It is interesting how class and caste dictate not just the level of riches but also ways of life as in dress, food habits, demeanour and all such parameters. The working classes, men and women alike, are used to minimal clothing. The appearances of a once rich netsman like Pallikunnath Kandankoran and his wife Papikunju (who later becomes Chembankunju's second wife after the deaths of Chakki and Pallikunnath) are the subject of animated discussions among the fisher-folk. After his first visit to the Kandankoran Mansion, Chembankunju too waxes eloquent to his wife on the opulence of life he sees there. It is as if he finds in it an objective-correlative of all that he wants to acquire.

In a society where caste matters so much, Chembankunju's (and by implication Chakki's) resolve to give Karuthamma in marriage to Palani, an orphan with completely unknown antecedents, simply by virtue of his being a born fisherman, is an exceptional happening. However, Chembankunju's is not the only voice of dissent against time ordained caste-class societal adherence norms that we see in *Chemmeen*. The younger crop of fishermen which includes the likes of Velayudhan, though a miniscule minority, are yet gradually shaping into a discursive counter discourse of individual merit that needs to be kept in mind. You will definitely read the full text for a better understanding of this.

The religious divide is however potently strong and pronounced in the world that Thakazi draws out in the novel. The Muslims are necessarily the moneyed people and hence the traders in fish. But apart from this, no social or personal interaction between a Muslim and a Hindu is conceivable here. The travails of Karuthamma just because she is into an unfulfilled love relationship that has blossomed unknowingly since childhood with Pareekutty is well documented all along. The fact of his being a Muslim only accentuates the “moral flaw” of Karuthamma and exposes all concerned to insufferable social censure. At a gathering of village women at Kalikunju’s house in Neerkunnath, as the discussion veers on this alleged love affair, even older tales of transgression are evoked, and finally the levels of religious intolerance surpass all bounds of civility:

As the quarrel grew noisier, they began talking of Karuthamma again ... She was Pareekutty’s mistress! Only someone like him, a brawny Muslim, could control and keep a lusty warhorse like her satiated. They were not marrying her off only because they were terrified of losing the income she brought in. (39)

Much later, in Trikunnappuzha, when it is known that Pareekutty had come to inform Karuthamma of her mother’s death (it was a “brotherly” duty he was discharging at the behest of now dead Chakki), the couple are socially ostracised, for the act lends credence to the slander of being a slut that has always pursued Karuthamma. So Palani too has the same insinuations for her:

“Didn’t you know that you are a fisher girl? So why then in your childhood did you frolic and play with that Muslim boy?” (179)

In the face of such hostile social forces, it is remarkable that Chakki, cornered by women of her own community, dares to throw the gauntlet at them by saying they might as well become Muslims or convert to any other religion if need be, to bypass the wrath of the Shore Master! Such a pragmatic view of religion from one of her station in life is indeed a master-stroke from Thakazhi. In fact her death bed adoption of Pareekutty as son, and hence brother to Karuthamma, though devoid of either a witness or of social sanctity, shows Chakki’s innate ability to see life in her community beyond the obvious. This way, while making a realistic portrayal of the prevalent religious divide, the novelist also adds a human dimension to it.

- **The Modernity of Folk: Magic Realism and Allegory in *Chemmeen***

Of the many forms that magic realism can take in literature, the one that applies to *Chemmeen* is the bringing of folk tales, fables and myths of the shore into contemporary social relevance. By so construing events as to make the death of Palani at sea coincide with Karuthamma and Pareekutty’s final passionate embrace on land, Thakazhi invests with reality all the myths of the sea that are uttered all along the text by the characters. You may locate the same design behind the destiny of Chembankunju who begins to border on insanity as he sits by the shore on the ruins of his own exploits – the once glamorous boat. By extension of literary thought, you will also find in these endings an allegory of morality in the form of nature’s vengeance on human beings who deviate from the golden mean of life. Having read the novel, you need to question yourselves whether Thakazhi is using these literary tropes to underscore a point or two about the naturalistic way of life that he depicts here. Think for yourselves.

- ***Chemmeen*: Exploring the Romantic-Lyrical in Prose Fiction**

You must have understood by now that love was at best a secondary consideration for Thakazhi in writing *Chemmeen*. Yet as students of a literary text, it is impossible

to disentangle the intense love interest that pervades the novel and look at it purely as a social document relegating the martyrs of love to oblivion. There is an unmistakable element of the lyrical in the romance that is built up between Karuthamma and Pareekutty; the inherent aspect of dissent it contains catapults this relationship into the realm of the romantic as revolutionary. The romantic in the sense of a refusal to out-grow the past also suffuses their relationship. Having grown up as innocent play-mates on the shores of Neerkunnath, they do comprehend the forces of an inimical society, but neither can stay away mentally or emotionally from each other. While Pareekutty's staring at her breasts and bums from over her sheer thin mundu embarrasses Karuthamma, it also undeniably brings her around to the first stirrings of womanhood. There is in him the apprehension of her being offended, and yet the desire to have a glimpse of her; and the novelist also makes clear that these are reciprocated feelings: "It seemed that the two of them needed to seek redemption in each other's eyes." (5)

There is intense lyricism in the plaintive song of Pareekutty that becomes a motif of the novel as it were. The song and its impact on Karuthamma in different phases of her life, whether heard in person or in absentia, are immense – the love lore that emerges out of it is comparable to that of the music of the flute in the myth of Radha-Krishna that is immortalised in Indian folk imagination. For Pareekutty too, it is a means to remain connected to the love of his life. As Panchami reports before their final meeting, the song is the anthem that has kept the forlorn Pareekutty going on the shores of Neerkunnath when he has had nothing left in life. If we see the ending of *Chemmeen* from this point of view – and as students of literature we need to remember that the text is open to interpretations notwithstanding the authorial point of view – then it is likely that we see the romantic potential inherent in the text.

The romantic in the sense of an adventurous quest is very strongly present in *Chemmeen*. The courageous sea-faring Chembankunju and Palani, the intense descriptions of their riding atop the waves on the sterns of their boats, the myth making about Katalamma – all these are extensions of romantic imagination based on the reality of lived lives that the novelist weaves with dexterity.

- **UNESCO References**

You have already learnt that *Chemmeen* has been translated into a number of major Indian and foreign languages too. Presumably, the blend of inner landscapes of the minds of the characters with the minutiae of social life by the seaside in the novel is what has caught the attention of readers of all languages. Thakazhi's weaving of the story rich in circumstantial details and replete with what Henry James had called "solidity of specification" that works amply for both the locale and the authentic integration of folk elements has also given *Chemmeen* a pride of place in the UNESCO Collection of Representative Works (or UNESCO Catalogue of Representative Works). This was basically a UNESCO funded translation project that was active between 1948 and 2005. This inclusion effectively means the acceptance of Thakazhi's contribution to authentically depicting the cultural life of a community in a manner that appeals to an international readership.

- ***Chemmeen* on Screen**

While reading the novel you must have felt that it has all the makings of an effective cinematic representation. It was in fact made into a much awarded film directed by Ramu Kariat and cast into screenplay by S. L. Puram Sadanandan. Apart from its technical and artistic brilliance, *Chemmeen* was recognized as the first major creative

film from South India, and it went on to win the President's Award the same year. Internationally, *Chemmeen* has travelled to the Cannes and Chicago Film festivals where it has been highly awarded too. With lyrics composed by Vayalar Ramavarma and put to music by Salil Choudhury and sung by the likes of Manna Dey and Yesudas, it was indeed a delectable combination. The mellifluous voice of Manna Dey singing his first Malayalam song "Maanasa maine varu" – which is Pareekutty's anthem all along the novel – knows no bounds of language and captures the ears and minds of audiences of all hues. You can log in to this link – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4FHG5baLOM>. – and see for yourselves how different mediums of art converge in immortalizing Thakazhi's novel.

25.3 LET US SUM UP

To return to the beginning and sum up this unit in the light of the 'Objectives' we had set as the preamble, you should, after reading this, be able to:

- Locate where the uniqueness of *Chemmeen* lies in the light of Thakazhi's other works
- Identify the close blend of folk elements as a way of the lives of common people
- Situate man in society, as being both in conformity with and in opposition to social forces – the incumbent results of such positions
- To understand the workings of change in a post-colonial marginal society that stands at some remove from the mainstream, and is yet affected by winds of new socio-economic thought
- And finally, to study human emotional factors in the light of all the above.

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25.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE ANSWERS

Note: Your answer should be in about 200 words.

1) Who would you consider the real hero of *Chemmeen*?

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2) How does Chembankunju transgress the norms of the life of a Mukkavan?

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3) What is your opinion of Thakazhi's art of characterisation?

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4) Comment on "society" as a character in the novel.

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5) How does caste hierarchy operate in *Chemmeen*?

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6) What is the role of religion in the novel?

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7) How would you place *Chemmeen* as a folk text?

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8) How would you view the aspect of human relations in *Chemmeen*?

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9) How does Thakazhi's narrative art shape the novel?

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10) Discuss the screen adaptation of *Chemmeen*.

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UNIT 26 *KANTHAPURA* BY RAJA RAO

Structure

- 26.0 Objectives
- 26.1 Introduction
- 26.2 *Kanthapura* : The Text
 - 26.2.1 The Text in a Nutshell
 - 26.2.2 Folklore, Myth and Marginal Representation in *Kanthapura*
 - 26.2.3 Critical Approaches
- 26.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 26.4 References and Further Readings
- 26.5 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

26.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading the unit you will be in a position to understand

- the unique world of Raja Rao;
- appreciate how the topographical, cultural and political distinctiveness generate a very unique kind of literature from this region;
- the representation of folk elements in Rao's *Kanthapura*;
- comprehend how Raja Rao, who is one of the representative and internationally acclaimed writers from south India, deals with the contemporary realities in conjunction with the wealth of traditional oral literature that is present in the world of local myth and tradition; and
- how he comes to terms with the Kachamma myth which is a modern avatar of ancient myth that characterizes the myth and folklore of India in its variegated form.

26.1 INTRODUCTION

The aesthetics is that, sometimes I like to write like a *Purana*. I like the *Puranic* conception. That is the only conception of the novel for me. I don't want to compare my novel with any foreign novel. I am very much an Indian and the Indian form is the *Puranic* form. Form comes naturally to me. Hence, it is wrong to study my novels in the light of the Western conception of a well made novel, (Raja Rao).

Raja Rao has written in English, which is not one of the fourteen languages of the constitution, but his novels are Indian because he has progressively evolved for himself a definition of India which gives a certain unity of purpose to all his work, (S. Nagarajan).

Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* delves deep into the Indian struggle for independence, and into how Mahatma Gandhi gave a clarion call to the people of the country to sacrifice their lives for the cause of the nation. These issues become its main thematic concern. Gandhi's ideals of truth and ahimsa gave fresh impetus to the freedom struggle in the 1930s; the Britishers were squarely blamed for social and economic instability in India. Gandhi advocated indigenous ideals and he fought against the British employing the best that is available in our culture and religion. In *Kanthapura*,

Raja Rao has depicted the Gandhian model at work. It shows the resistance of the villagers for the national cause. It thus becomes a microcosmic representation of India's freedom struggle where an attempt has been made to protect and preserve not only the political freedom, but also the economic and cultural autonomy, to compete with the imperial hegemony. In the all important foreword, Rao writes back to the western notion that we lack a coherent sense of tradition and history. In the novel, he argues in favour of an indigenous and innovative approach:

There is no village in India, however mean, that is not a *sthal-purana*, or legendary history, of its own. Some god or god like hero has passed by the village— Rama might have rested under the papal-tree, Sita might have dried her clothes, after her bath, on this yellow stone, or the Mahamta himself, on one of his many pilgrimages through the country, might have slept in this hut, by the village gate. In this way the past mingles with the present, and the gods mingle with men to make the repertory of your grandmother always bright. One such story from the contemporary annals of my village, I have to tell. (5)

Drawing upon the rich layers of history and tradition, Rao has created a mythic framework to communicate to the Indian mind. The crux of the structure of the novel is India's freedom struggle under Gandhiji, and it brings into play India's rich layer of folklore and myth in a unique way that is representative of the much sought after Indianness. The conversational style of folklore and storytelling are put to use, the style harking back to the days of *The Ramayana*. The reader is always at home in the world of Rao where the past and present coalesce in a familiar atmosphere. When one compares Mulk Raj Anand, who enjoys a cult status, with Rao and R. K. Narayan, the difference between mundane and metaphysical is obvious. Anand's *Coolie* and *Untouchable* explore man's quest for social perfection, Rao, on the other hand, is in search of a spiritual quest which imbibes the immortal Indian tradition of spirituality to perfection. Dwelling upon spiritual and metaphysical aspects of life, Rao finds a safe anchorage in religion and culture. Gandhi also explores the rich layer of religion to cater to social and political needs. In sharp contrast to western ideology, Gandhi relied on traditional culture and religion to bring about a change in the approach – he brought in a new dimension and definite shape in Indian politics, one that would enable him to free India from the clutches of the British. In Gandhi's approach, we find a remarkable blend of religion and politics. Gandhi says:

My own devotion to truth has drawn me into the field of politics; and I can say without the slightest hesitation and in all humility, that those who say that religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion means.

He had a firm faith in the philosophy of Karmayoga of *The Bhagvadgita*, where the essence of man's life is performance of action without expecting fruits. In a sense, to attain spiritual enlightenment one need not go to a temple; the righteous action would prove more than handy in the direction of god realization. Rao has vindicated Gandhi's opinion when he says that, "For me, literature is Sadhna....My writing mainly the consequence of a metaphysical life".

Rao assimilates the Gandhian movement with mythological events. In the novel, Gandhi is considered as a Lord Krishna who will assuage the sufferings of the oppressed Indians. Mother India, symbolic of the nation, resembles the enslaved daughter of the mythic Lord Brahma, and Shiva has been entrusted with Gandhi's incarnation to free Mother India from British rule. There are mythological allusions to the characters of *The Ramayana*— Gandhi in Rama's cast and the British Government as Ravana, mother India represents Sita, Nehru is considered as Rama's

brother Bharata. The idea of liberation is presented through Gandhian ideology alluding to it within the framework of the *Ramayana* myth.

The inner conflicts of protagonists and their stark ways to cope with the societal commitments characterizes Rao's other novels like *The Serpent and the Rope*, *Comrade Kirillov* and *The Cat and The Shakespeare*. Quest for freedom perturbs the protagonists the most and their underlying struggle to realize it forms the bedrock of the plot; the iron grip of establishment is an element they are not comfortable with and they are waging a metaphysical war of a sort to justify their identity.

26.2 KANTHAPURA : THE TEXT

26.2.1 The Text in a Nutshell

The locale of the novel is a small, unknown village in South India: "Kanthapura is its name and it is in the province of kara. High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast is it, up Mangalore and Puttur"(7) . The village is a happy amalgam of all communities. Cut off from the mainstream, the village revels in a life of its own, notwithstanding its traditional and conservative mode of operation. The religious undercurrent characterizes peace and harmony in the village. The twist in the plot comes when an ardent follower of Gandhi, Jayaramachar is arrested. Agitated over the incident, the young men of Kanthapura resort to burning foreign cloth s.

Moorthy is a man modeled upon Gandhian ideology. He takes charge of the reformation of the village in Jayaramachar's absence. He spreads the message of Gandhi in the entire village and convinces the villagers to boycott foreign clothes by distributing spinning materials he got from the city Karwar Congress Committee office, free of cost. When Nanjamma asks if Gandhi himself practices what he preaches, Moorthy offers an interesting and practical explanation: "The Mahatma sister? Why every morning he spins for two hours immediately after his prayers. He says spinning is as purifying as praying" (32).

What assumes greater significance in the present context is Moorthy's free access to the marginal pariah community where the charkha has been accepted as a symbol of victory for two reasons: one, victory from their marginal status and two, victory over foreign bias in spinning their own clothes. When a Brahmin preaches them the ethics of spinning it becomes all the more important. Moorthy has moulded himself in true Gandhian colours. Rangamma's remarks about Moorthy stands out: "he is the saint of our village".

In contrast to Moorthy's generosity, we have Bhatta, a greedy money lender and a miser who has no heart even if he owns thirty seven acres of dry land in the village. Money matters more for him than anything else. He is very shrewd accumulator of money. Rao writes, "With his smiles and his holy ashes, we said he would one day own the whole village" (35). Suman Bala's perceptive remarks about Bhatta proves our point: "Bhatta represents the government repression let loose by the British once the Gandhi movement started gaining ground" (*Raja Rao's Kanthapura: A Critical Study* 21).

The Skeffington Coffee Estate represents a microcosm of the British Raj in India. Labourers are pushed to the extreme, and any deviation results in brutal punishment. When the officer at helm is changed, corporal punishment gave way to sexual exploitation, which in turn instigated the rebellion against the British Raj. Bade

Khan, the policeman in charge of security, stops Moorthy from entering the estate; violence ensues as a result, and women form a formidable resistance, putting the atrocity of Bade Khan and the foreman in check. Moorthy's protective proclamation that there should be "No beatings in the name of Mahatma" (88) saved these two from the wrath of agitated women. A case was registered against Moorthy and he did not want to defend himself by appointing a lawyer. He wanted to seek truth through suffering, much in the manner of Gandhi.

In the absence of Moorthy, the movement is considerably weakened. Ratna takes the charge of *Satyagraha*. The freedom struggle is being carried out in the name of Satya Narayana Puja to escape police atrocity. But sloganeering like, "Bharat Mata Ki jai", "Vande Mataram", and "Inquilab Zindabad" instigated the police to disperse the crowd through lathi charge. But "the flag of rebellion" (238) wouldn't stop and Ratna recharged the depleted village folk to dare police ruthlessness, carrying out rebellion supported by the city people who volunteer themselves, to save the Kanthapura village from the treachery of imperial power.

Moorthy was finally released from jail in keeping with pact with the Viceroy to release the Satyagrahis. Consequent to this, his perception to the rebellion has changed a lot; he just can't take to his heart that the Mahatma's ways have been overpowered by the English in a very shrewd manner. He argues, "The Mahatma is a noble person, a saint, but the English will know how to cheat him, he will let himself be cheated" (256). But he was not pessimistic and reposed faith in the rise of another leader, Jawaharlal Nehru. He is a bit down but does not lose hope and this is evident when he says, "Ratna things must change. You know Jawaharlal Nehru is like a Bharata to the Mahatma, and he, too, is for non-violence and he, too, is a Satyagrahi" (256-57).

The novel ends on a sad note where pathos and empathy characterize the somber mood. But in keeping with the ancient Indian wisdom that what we do today will reap rich returns for the future generations, the novel ends with note of implied optimism that well began is half done. Ecstasy comes through agony, and has some positive bearings here. The novel is an open ended one where the onus is on the country men to rise up to the occasion, and realize the idea of self government which needs mass participation rather than individual brilliance.

26.2.2 Folklore, Myth and Marginal Representation in *Kanthapura*

The folk elements augur well for the narrative structure and thematic strands of the novel. That carts were used quite frequently in ancient India and formed the bedrock of transportation is well picked up by Rao for serving the cause of folklore with its all important emphasis on oral forms of expression. Folk songs formed an integral part of village tradition and culture and the farmers using songs at harvest time is also a common standard which has been picked up by Raja Rao in the novel.

Mythological elements play a vital role in the human life. They have been connected with our daily life. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* reflects the Indian Vedanta tradition and the acumen of age-old Indian scriptures. The novel is like a grandmother's tale which depicts an authentic picture gallery with living human beings. Raja Rao's novel *Kanthapura* is based on the pattern of the Indian epic *Ramayana*. Much in the same way that *The Ramayana* is narrated by the sage Valmiki, Achakka, who is an old woman of Kanthapura, acts as the narrator and commentator in the novel. She compares Gandhiji with Rama and India with Sita. Gandhiji going to England is compared to Rama's exile and the Indians like Nehru are compared with Bharatha.

Like Ayodhya, Kanthapura village is a traditional caste ridden village which is deprived of modern ways of living.

In the novel the people of India are compared to Sita in *Ramayana*, and Sita's distress because of being abducted by Ravana is equated with the way India struggles in the clutches of Red-men, and lastly, how Rama leads the *vanara sainya* and rescues Sita from the clutches of Ravana is likened by Raja Rao to how Mahatma Gandhi led the people of India against the Britishers. In *Ramayana*, Rama fought heroically against Ravana, and in *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao showed Gandhiji as a hero who fought with weapons like ahimsa, satyagrahas and non-violent protest. A war between Rama and Ravana results in the death of many people. In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao showed that many people in the village also died or were imprisoned and suffered lathi blows of the Britishers when the village people aligned with rebel coolies of the Skeffington Coffee Estate. The way in which Rama fought with Ravana and liberates Sita, Mahatma Gandhi also sought Swaraj for Indians by using non-violence. Rao uses India's mythological resources and legendary history to good effect for evolving an innovative plot and narrative structure.

Consider Rao's concern for the village folk and the use of carts plying village roads with the accompaniment of folk songs: "Cart after cart groans through the roads of Kanthapura, and on many a night, before the eyes are shut, the last light we see are those the train of carts, and the last voice we hear is that of the cart-man who sings through the follows of the night" (7).

The Kenchamma myth has a live presence among the village folk – she is said to look after the village when the villagers face any crisis. She is offered rice from the first harvest so as to save the entire village from "death and despair and famine and disease" (9). She is looked upon as the saviour of the village, and is believed to protect them of all evil omen. These beliefs and practices still continue in some part of India even today. Rao uses the Kenchamma myth adeptly to give logical coherence to the form and structure of the novel.

Goddess Kenchamma saves the villagers from famine and diseases. The people have full faith on goddess Kenchamma and offer prayers and they believe the story that the goddess Kenchamma killed a demon which wandered in the country side, and it is his blood that makes the hill red in colour. The villagers pray her as follows: "Kenchamma, Kenchamma, Goddess benign and bounteous, Mother of earth, blood of life, Harvest – queen, rain – crowned, Kenchamma, Kenchamma, Goddess benign and bounteous" (*Kanthapura* 10).

In the novel, the protagonist Moorthy is a Brahmin. Like a noble cow and an elephant he is honest, generous, munificent and benevolent person. Everybody in the village calls him "corner house Moorthy" or "our Moorthy". The villagers treat him as a 'small mountain' while Gandhiji is referred to as the 'big mountain'. He is the person who discovered a half buried lingam from the village and installed it. Slowly a temple is built and it became the centre point of the village, the place where all the important festivals and occasions were celebrated. They also celebrate Sankara Jayanthi, Sankara Vijaya, etc. at the temple.

The novelist represents women as various forms 'Shakti' i.e., Goddess Parvathi or Kali, etc. He generally depicts Indian women as demure, decorous, delicate and docile persons. But when she is infuriated she becomes Shakti. The novelist represented Ratna as Shakti where she takes over from Moorthy and leads the Satyagrahis against the British government. When the police ill-treat them and brutally thrash them with sticks and boots she gives strength to all the women by

saying that lathis and blows can affect only the body, but never the soul. "Well, we shall fight the police for Kenchamma's sake, and if the rapture of devotion is in you, the lathi will grow as soft as butter and as supple as a silken thread, and you will hum out the name of the Mahatma,' And we all grow dumb and mutter 'Yes, sister, yes'" (112). This results that all the women rising up to the occasion and manifesting the dimension of Shakti.

As referred to earlier, the novelist also made an attempt to show the parallelism between *Ramayana* and Kanthapura. Just as Rama freed Sita, the Mahatma also brings Swaraj. In spite of many obstacles and pains, the Mahatma adheres to dharma and is portrayed as a perfect man. Just as in the *Ramayana*, Lord Rama went to Lanka to bring Sita, the villagers of Kanthapura hear about how that the Mahatma was going to the Red-Man's country, and they were sure he would bring Swaraj for them.

They say the Mahatma will go to the Red-Man's country and he will get us Swaraj. He will bring us Swaraj, the Mahatma. And we shall be all happy. And Rama will come back from exile and Sita will be with him, for Ravana will be slain and Sita freed, and he will come back with Sita on his right in a chariot of the air and brother Bharatha will go to meet them with the worshipped sandal of the master on his head. And as they enter Ayodhya, there will be a rain of flowers." (183)

In *Kanthapura*, Raja Rao juxtaposes the past with the present. And thus Kanthapura became an excellent Gandhian epic in the same way as *The Ramayana*. By using the myths Raja Rao has augmented the consistency of the novel and imparted to it a rare expansiveness and dignity.

The much acclaimed Harikatha man from the city, Jayaramachar, has reiterated the faith of the village people in the folklore. The blending of folklore and contemporary reality is what makes the novel special. The religious backdrop is used to good effect to depict the contemporary reality of Gandhian vision of independence. He provided contemporary thrust to Siva-Parvati story aimed at the morally depleted villagers by likening Gandhi to Siva. Rao writes: "Siva is the three-eyed... and Swaraj too is three-eyed: Self purification, Hindu-Moslem Unity, Khaddar." The birth of Gandhi is structured to resemble a mythologically critical moment where a savior is needed to rid humanity of the present crisis:

There was born in a family in Gujrat such as the world has never beheld. As soon as he came forth, the four wide walls began to shine like the Kingdom of the sun, and hardly was he in the cradle than he began to lisp the language of wisdom. You remember how Krishna, when he was but babe of four, had begun to fight against demons and had killed the serpent Kali. (22)

Rao uses the mythological vocabulary to draw the attention of the villagers to the important national need. He knows that it is easy to connect the conservative culture of the village people for a national cause through a religious analogy which could appeal to mind of the people the most.

Gandhi is thus appropriated into the Siva myth and his incarnation is supposed to free Brahma's beloved daughter India from her enforced slavery. Gandhi was in charge of slaying the serpent of foreign rule. Jayaramachar uses the religious sentiment of the people to good effect for espousing indigenous insight: "if you spin, he [Gandhi] says, the money that goes to the Red-man will stay within your own country and Mother can feed the foodless and the milkless and the cloth-less. He is a saint, the Mahatma, a wise man and a soft man, and a saint" (22-23). Harikatha

being an oral tradition, it was effective in bringing in the contemporary need for instilling patriotic fervor among the youth of the village to boycott foreign clothes and become Gandhi's disciples. The impact of Harikatha assumes immense importance as the government was forced to arrest Jayaramachar in order to prevent people from developing a hate ideology towards the government. Instead of using any western models, Rao unravels the rich treasure of Puranic past as an effective ploy. *Harikatha* actualizes the Shiva, Krishna and Rama myth and conflates it with Gandhi who has vowed to free India from the clutch of Red-men.

Moorthy, a young man is at the helm after Jayamachar's arrest, impressed upon the ignorant village folk to adopt Gandhian ideology to boost their economic and political status. His persuasive message convinces the village people to spin their cloth: "Because millions and millions of yards of foreign cloth come to this country, and everything foreign makes us poor and pollutes us. To wear cloth spun and woven with your own god-given hands is sacred, says the Mahatma... our country is being bled to death by foreigners. We have to protect our Mother" (29).

Considering the linguistic aspects of the novel, it is evident that he succeeds in his attempt to dislocate, or at least reduce the addiction to British English in Indian literature, with his innovative use of language. In the novel, Rao experiments with the language of the colonizers. Standard British English is not to be found in Rao's work in the way it was used by other writers of the colonial period. The norms regarding the use of the coloniser's language are subverted in *Kanthapura*. The language used in *Kanthapura* conforms to the ideal that a novel in English by an Indian author must be essentially 'Indian'. The language of the novel reproduces the speech patterns of Indians using English and represents the way the people of India talk and think. The words used in the novel are English but the organisation of the sentences is in an 'Indianised' way. The syntax of the English language (i.e. the SVO structure) is subverted. Usually, in Standard English proper nouns appear at the beginning of any sentence. But Raja Rao breaks the syntax of the Standard English language and forms his own by using the proper nouns in the middle of the sentence or at the end, for instance, "She was a pious old woman, Narasamma, tall and thin" (Rao 39); "She has never failed us, I assure you, our Kenchamma" (Rao 65); "From that day on they never spoke to each other, Narasamma and Moorthy" (Rao 48). To a native English speaker it might feel strange, but for an Indian, it sounds absolutely natural. The influence of Rao's mother-tongue, i.e, Kannada can be seen in *Kanthapura*. To give an example, Rao frequently changes the usual structure of sentences and the order of words, and tries to construct the language in a pattern of his own. For example, consider the description of the village: "High on the Ghats is it, high up the steep mountains that face the cool Arabian seas, up the Malabar coast is it" (Rao 1); also consider the expression that he uses several times during the story "Defend one must against evil" (Rao 86). The verbs and pronouns are placed in the way they are placed in Indian languages, as is evident in the first example. The novel is full of such constructions. Besides, Kannada words and local expressions are used extensively. The new technique gives the sentences a look which is unfamiliar but not objectionable, because of the content which is denser with significations. This novel use of the English language by Raja Rao, is a reflection of the essence of regional realities flavoured by his native language.

The narration is full of Indian phrases and proverbs. One can locate many examples of the literal translation of Kannada expressions into English, for example – "Every squirrel has his day" (Rao 77), "The policemen are not your uncle's sons" (Rao 162), "If you are the sons of your father", "we are the lickens of your feet" (Rao 52), "you cannot straighten a dog's tail" (Rao 140), "with his week's earning at his waists" (Rao 140) etc. Needless to say, all these have sprung directly from peculiar

Indian situations. The writer is obviously trying to give a comfortable location for local expressions in an 'alien language'. This endows the work with an authenticity and 'Indianness'. It becomes more intense when one finds the language of the novel packed with Indian flavoured abuses, for instance – the abuses thrown by Venkamma.

26.2.3 Critical Approaches

In this section an attempt has been made to explore the multiple strands of the text offering different interpretations. The first of such interpretations that obviously comes to our mind is the New Historicist approach which deals with unearthing the past to cater to present need. Critics aligned to this movement claim that literature and history are inseparable, and that the present generation could use them to their own benefit. Louis Montrose maintains that the main concern of New Historicism is the "historicity of the texts and the textuality of the history" – that is, the "social and cultural contexts determine the authenticity of a text". "Textuality of the history" lays emphasis on past knowledge and understanding of a particular culture from the surviving textual sources which have undergone subtle processes of "preservation and effacement". Montrose forms the opinion that no knowledge exists "outside the realms of narrative, writing or discourse" (Branigan 418). Revisiting history has become indispensable because the available accounts are more a distortion than a real representation in view of conflating interests of specific contexts being operated upon the history itself. In other words, New Historicism revisits the past literary and cultural history in order to represent the case of the marginalized and oppressed and colonized. This kind of interpretation suits Rao well to represent a Gandhian epic in a persuasive way by reverting back to the glorious Puranic past.

Rao uses the Puranic epic style in the novel to good effect – two benefits accrue out of one pursuit. One, by taking recourse to such a method, one is able to revive interest in indigenous culture that is the need of the hour at the time, and secondly, using indigenous ploys Rao could achieve an Indianness that could challenge the British hegemony face-to-face. That brings us to the issue of the novel being a postcolonial text. It is very interesting to see how Rao has used the English language in the manner of defying the Britishers, using their language, but with an Indian accent, as a precursor to what Ramanujan, Kamala Das and Arundhati Roy did remarkably from our indigenous trajectory. The text of *Kanthapura* is replete with scores of instances where Rao uses English language as if it is one among many "Englishes" prevalent in India. A Kananda flavor is discernible in Rao's use of English language. It is no wonder then that coinage of new terms based on Indian sensibility becomes the mainstay in *Kanthapura*. Consider the use of Rao's language skill: the narration is flooded with Indian phrases and proverbs. One can locate many examples of the literal translation of Kannada expressions into English, as discussed earlier in the unit.

Typical Indian situations have contributed to the mite of the novel. The writer is making a deliberate attempt at indigenous representation, Rao has acclimatized local situations in an "alien language". This endows the work with authenticity and "Indianness". It becomes more intense when one finds the language of the novel packed with Indian flavoured abuses – the abuses thrown by Venkamma are especially noteworthy. She says about her sister-in-law Rangamma: "If her parents are poor, let them set fire to their dhoti and sari and die. Oh, if only I could have had the courage to put lizard-poison into their food." (Rao 10), or "then there is such a battle of oaths – 'son of concubine' – 'son of a widow' – 'I'll sleep with your wife' – 'you donkey's husband' (Rao 59). Moorthy's mother can be quoted when she says – "Oh, you prostitute of a wind. She is showing her tricks again. Stop, you bitch" (Rao 17).

The literal translations of the speech are deliberate attempts by Rao to impart “Indianness” to the language. It is more evident that the use of English in the novel is quite distinctive – and it has a regional flavour, and a recognizable style which well presents ways of thought and feeling for an Indian audience. Rao’s technique of mixing the oral traditions of India and the written form compels us to explore the kind of ‘reality’ he attempts to represent. Folk tales and epics play a very significant role in the novel, as while describing the freedom movement in the form of *Hari katha*. For instance Rao uses his technique of *Puranic* narration in the form of oral narration to describe the month of Kartik or autumn. Nature is personified:

Kartik has come to Kanthapura, sisters – Kartik has come with the glow of lights and the unpressed footsteps of the wandering gods; white lights from clay-trays and red lights from copper-stands, and diamond lights and glow from the bowers of entrance-leaves; lights that glow from banana trunks and mango twigs, yellow light behind white leaves, and green light behind yellow leaves, and white light behind green leaves; and night curls through the shadowed streets, and hissing over bellied boulders and hurrying through the dallying drains, night curls through the Brahmin streets and the Pariah street. (Rao 87)

This passage echoes the localised myth of the Kartik festival. The structure and construction of the sentences show the explicit influence of Kannada, especially in the use of the connector ‘and’. Rao employs a profusion of archetypal regional words like, ‘Ayyappa’, ‘Ayayyoo’, ‘Nay nay’, ‘hobli’, ‘khanda’ and so on” (Raj Kumar 3). He moulds the ‘alien language’ in such a way that it doesn’t give any sense of the bizarre while using these indigenous terms. Moreover it helps one identify with the characters, thereby increasing the appeal of the novel. Rao expands the borders of the English language to make it accommodate expressions and experiences that are particularly Indian. The story begins by evoking a strong sense of place. As it unfolds, the topographical features of the landscape are revealed: the Kenchamma Hill, the Skeffington Coffee Estate, the temple of Kanthapurishwari, and the river Himavathy, which become “at once landscape, life, history, people, ideas, and ideals”. What is striking is the hidden quality of nature in the novel: that is very significant in the narrator’s tone. Nature exists, rather, as a symbol of the rooted quality of the land, exercising tremendous hold over the villagers. The river Himavathy or the red Kenchamma Hill, soaked with the blood of a demon, are presented as animate features of the landscape. Typical local landscapes dominate the novel making it a postcolonial novel where the local and universal share a global platform. Rao has taken much effort to this end. He says:

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. I use the word ‘alien’, yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up-like Sanskrit or Persian was before- but not of our emotional make-up. We are all instinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and in English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. (Forward v)

26.3 LET US SUM UP

Kanthapura is not just a tiny community of people but represents a mini-India where every village has participated in the freedom struggle spontaneously. It created an impact in literary circles where Rao, being a patriot himself, contributed his share in the freedom movement. His uncanny knack of experimenting with foreign language through Puranic traditions has inspired many later writers. It has paved

the way for Indian literature to carve its own niche in world literature with a definite authenticity and purposeful “Indianness”.

Kanthapura, a postcolonial novel, written almost seven decades ago is still as relevant as it had been then. Even then, it had taken the Indian canon by surprise. It is still relevant in this era where the very concept of the canon of Indian English writing is being contested on various grounds. Using the colonizers language, Rao has turned it into the prized possession of Indian Literature in *Kanthapura*. It has become India’s pride and envy of the British hegemony. As a result, now English is as much an Indian language as Hindi or Kannada or Marathi or Odia or Bengaili or Telugu is. It is no longer the colonizer’s language. As Kamala Das says in “An Introduction”:

... I am Indian, very brown, born in Malabar,
I speak three languages, writer in
Two, dream in one.
Don’t write in English, they said, English is
Not your mother-tongue. Why not leave
Me alone, critics, friends, visiting cousins,
Everyone of you? The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone.

Raja Rao has given us sufficient clues for generations of writers to stand up for their country and their own identity which is Indian and cosmopolitan at the same time.

26.4 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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26.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

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

- 1) What does Raja Rao say in his foreword to *Kanthapura* regarding indigenous traditions and history?

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- 2) What do you understand by the term *sthala-purana*?

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- 3) How does Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* reflect the Gandhian concerns?

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- 4) What innovations does Jayaramachar make in the Harikatha with respect to Gandhi?

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- 5) Would you regard *Kanthapura* as a postcolonial novel? Substantiate with textual references.

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- 6) What is the Kenchamma myth in *Kanthapura*?
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- 7) Describe briefly the character of Moorthy as Gandhi's disciple.
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- 8) Who takes up the cause of nationalism after Moorthy is arrested and how?
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- 9) What effect do you achieve by reviving past tradition and glory?
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- 10) How do you justify a novel like *Kanthapura* in the present context?
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