UNIT 4  TOWARDS AN INDIAN FOLK POETICS

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4.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit you will be able to

- appreciate the various folk texts and the adaptations of the epics,
- understand the dynamics and relevance of folk poetics,
- follow the modern reading of the epics and appreciate their contemporary relevance,
- acquaint yourself with the interpretations of the various folk Ramayanas,
- realise the rich potential of folk literature and poetics for future studies and research,
- explain the term open-endedness and contemporaneity in folk,
- know the relevance of folk materials and its hermeneutics and
- use it as an effective content material and a pedagogical tool.

4.1 INTRODUCTION

4.1.1 Folk poetics

Folk poetry reflects the life patterns of communities. It is passed by word of mouth and also referred to as oral tradition. It is rich in meaning and abounds in
metaphors, allusions, symbols, and images. Repetition is an important device in folk poetry. Folk poetics was believed to be more useful rather than beautiful. According to Americo Paredes “folk poetry works toward very evident patterns that stand out even more starkly because the lack of vivid imagery emphasises them.” They “express group feelings and attitudes that are natural and implicit in their own milieu. Torn out of its natural context, folk poetry loses a good deal of its emotional and aesthetic impact.” Alan Dundes classifies proverbs under one-line folk poems with a binary structure which consist of a topic and a comment. The binary structure appeals to our logical sense. The attractive and enduring characteristics of folk poetics are rhythm, metaphor, and rhyme. In proverbs they are evident not only through structure but also through texture. Folk poetry is performed, chanted or sung.

4.1.2 Indian poetics

Indian literature is a combination of the high and low, the margi and the desi, the classical and the folk. Poets use myth to abolish the historical basis of institutions to create popular imaginations. Indian folk poets are increasingly dependent on myths to capture the various cultural aspects of India. Poets and scholars like Michael Madhusoodan Dutt, Toru Dutt, Vivekananda, Aurobindo Ghosh, Tagore, Nissim Ezekiel, P. Lal, DomMoraes, Ramanujan, Jayanta Mahapatra, Kamala Das, Arun Kolatkar and Niranjan Mohanty used myth extensively in their poetry. They drew heavily from the Vedas and Upanishads and infused in their poetry a sense cultural ecology, nationalism, spirituality and mysticism.

Oral tradition is transmitted by word of mouth and consists of verse narratives, poems and songs, myths, dramas, rituals, proverbs, and riddles. The diversity of India’s culture helps create folktales in the vernacular languages. The epics are oral literature, classical in nature but transmitted orally. The folk versions of these stories are performed and the heroes are deified in villages. Like in the west, poetics and performances are logical. There is rhythm, metaphor, songs and rhymes that make them aesthetically appealing and enduring.

4.2 TOWARDS AN INDIAN POETICS

4.2.1 Early Indian folk texts: The Epics

Every culture and society, as we have seen, has its own folk literature or oral tradition that is transmitted by word of mouth. Poems, songs, myths, dramas, rituals, proverbs and riddles belong to this oral tradition. India, with its tremendous cultural diversity, has a knowledge base for every culture. The folk period is classified under three eras: the missionary period, the nationalist period and the academic period. After Independence, scholars realized the potential of the folk wealth of India and turned their attention to the collection, preservation, analysis and systematic study of the folk literature of all the major languages of India. Indian myths and folk tales have been analysed by scholars like Mueller and Benfey and have paved the way for the theoretical growth of folklore. The authors of traditional literature are usually anonymous. The folk stories embody basic human truths and values and provide cultural literacy; they are natural expressions of mysteries, fears and dreams. The stories are simple and easily understandable.
The actions are brief and features repetitive. They are vehicles of morality and
goodness.

India possesses the oldest narrative traditions in the world. The Rigveda, the
Ramayana, the Mahabharata, the Puranas and the Upanishads are treasure troves
of mythology, religion and philosophy. The other examples of Indian folk texts
are Narayan Pandit’s Hitopadesha, Gunadhya’s Brihatkatha, Somdeva’s
Kathasaritasagaras, Sihdasa’s Vetala Panchavimshati and the Jataka Tales. Later
texts gave the epic characters a regional flavour. The 12th-century epic poem
Prithviraja Raso by Chand Bardai of Lahore, Krishna poems by Jaydev, called
the Gitagovinda and the religious love poems of Vidyapati are telling examples.

In the bhakti tradition, divine heroes like Vishnu, Rama, Krishna and Guru Nanak
became subjects of hymns and poems. The Ramacharitmanas, the Adi Granth
and Mirabai’s and Narsinh Mehta’s hymns belong to this category. In addition,
national heroes, regional heroes and the local tribal heroes also reflect the
collective memory of the people. These heroes are deified and are worshipped in
the village. There is a thin line of difference between a mythic hero and romantic
hero in Indian folklore.

The Rigveda is believed to be the first work of literature in the world written in
Sanskrit. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana are the two main epics of India.
They are written in Sanskrit and are based on the fundamental tenets of Hindu
scriptures.

The Mahabharata is considered the longest epic poem of the world. It is attributed
to the sage Veda Vyasa. It has more than 1,00,000 slokas in 18 sections. According
to the tradition, Vyasa, who is also a major character in the poem, dictated the
text and Ganesha wrote it down. Ganesha is said to have agreed to undertake the
task on the condition that Vyasa never pause in his recitation. In turn, Vyasa also
set a condition that Ganesha understood what he recited before writing it down.
Legend has it that when his pen failed, Ganesha hacked off his tusk to use as his
pen so that the work was uninterrupted.

The epic employs the ‘tale-within-a-tale’ structure. Arjuna is the protagonist of
the poem. He is an excellent archer and closest to Krishna. Krishna is Arjuna’s
charioteer and his moral guide. The poem depicts the struggle for power between
two groups of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Arjuna is one of the five
Pandava brothers who fought against the Kauravas. The story is set in India.
Krishna plays a pivotal part. His conversation with Arjuna is a discourse on
morality and contains the core values of the Hindu religion and philosophy and
the purpose of life. It provides answers to the basic questions about human life:
its purpose, its origin and its meaning. This part of the narrative is the essence of
the Bhagavad Gita. The Gita discusses the threefold path to salvation: through
karma, jñāna and bhakti. The epic is about the importance of fulfilling one’s
dharma in life.

The Pandavas had been forced into exile for 13 years after Yudhisthira lost the
game of dice to the Kauravas. After 13 years of exile, when they were denied the
promised kingdom of Hastinapura by Duryodhana, they declared war on the
Kauravas. The Pandavas won the battle of Kurukshetra. The poem ends with the
death of Krishna and the Pandava brothers’ ascent to heaven. Krishna’s dynasty
comes to an end ushering in the fourth and final age of mankind, where the great
values and noble ideas have crumbled, and man is speedily heading towards the complete dissolution of right action, morality, and virtue. The main story is interwoven with many secondary plots like the story of Ganga, Satyavati and Bhisma, the curse of Pandu, Kunti’s boon, the story of Karna, Draupadi’s swayamwara, the game of dice, disrobing of Draupadi, the house of lac and various episodes during the period of exile.

The epic teaches one about lies, deceit, and other vices. It portrays ancient politics and how a person can let go of his or her principles for selfish desires. The prevailing theme of the story is that good always triumphs over evil.

The Ramayana is the other epic poem of India and of the Hindu itihasa. It narrates the journey of Rama, the prince of the Kosala kingdom. It is the earliest epic of India. It is believed to have been written in 6th century BC by Valmiki. Valmiki was the first poet in Sanskrit. It consists of 24,000 verses. It is arranged into six kandas or books. They are Bala Kanda, Ayodhya Kanda, Aranya Kanda, Kiskindha Kanda, Sundara Kanda and Yuddha Kanda. The seventh kanda is Uttara Kanda, the story of Lava and Kusha. The theme is the depiction of the duties and relationships characteristic of an ideal father, an ideal servant and an ideal king. Valmiki is the author of the poem and also an important character in it. He meets Rama during his exile and gives shelter to Sita when she is banished from her kingdom. He also undertakes to educate her twin children on the heroic feats of their hero father. The Ramayana depicts the story of Rama, who is considered to be the Supreme Being. It takes place in the kingdom of Ayodhya where Dasharatha was the king. Dasharatha of Ayodhya had no sons to take over the kingdom after him. In order to have sons, Dasharatha conducted a yajna for progeny. A divine being emerged from the sacrificial fire and gave Dasharatha a golden vessel filled with nectar to give to his queens. Dasharatha divided it amongst his three queens, Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi. Soon Queen Kausalya gave birth to the eldest son, Rama; Queen Kaikeyi to Bharata; and Sumitra to Lakshmana and Shatrughna. Dasharatha decided to make his eldest son Rama the successor to his throne. Overcome by jealousy, his wife Kaikeyi extracted a promise from the king to banish Rama into exile for fourteen years and crown her son, Bharata, as the king. Rama relinquished his claim to the throne and set out with Sita and Lakshmana for the forest. In the forest, Lakshmana was disgusted with Shoorpanakha’s advances and he cut off her nose. When her brother Ravana, the demon king came to know of her pain and humiliation, he abducted Sita to avenge her. Rama and Lakshmana then invaded Ravana’s palace with the help of Sugriva and an army of monkeys. After many battles, Rama defeated Ravana and won Sita back. After making Sita undergo a trial by fire to prove her chastity, they return to Ayodhya to live together. But soon Rama listening to the gossips of his citizens banished Sita to the forest where, under the care of Valmiki, she gave birth to twin sons, Lava and Kusha. When Rama came to reclaim her after 20 years in the ashram, she refused to join him and prayed to the mother Earth to swallow her and release her from her material bonds. In his Ramayana, Valmiki gives the human code of conduct. Dharma should be followed for its own sake, not for the pain or pleasure it brings. The Ramayana also reinforces the need for thinking about the consequences before making promises and being influenced by loose talk. The moral of the epic is that good triumphs over evil, and the values highlighted are the ones demonstrated by Rama.
The *Panchatantra* is a legendary collection of short stories from India. It is believed to be authored by Vishnu Sharma in the 3rd century BC and based on older oral traditions. Each tale has a moral lesson woven into it. The stories have plant and animal characters who can converse with humans. It illustrates the central Hindu principles of *rajaniti* or political science. The *panchatantra* or the five principles embedded in the collection are *Mitra Bheda* or the loss of friends, *Mitra Labha* or gaining friends, *Suhrudbheda* or dissension between friends, *Vigrahā* or separation and *Sandhi* or union.

Kalidasa’s *Abhijnanasakuntalam*, *Kumārasambhava* and *Raghuvamāe* are literary works based on the epics. *Abhijnanasakuntalam* is a beautiful tale of love and romance, dramatising the story of Shakuntala, the mother of emperor Bharata, referred to in the epic Mahabharata. It is the first Indian play to be translated into a western language. *Kumārasambhava*, another great epic poem, deals with the birth of Kumara Karthikeya, the son of Lord Shiva and Parvati. The epic has been regarded as the finest among the later Sanskrit epic poems. *Raghuvamāe* is another Sanskrit epic that narrates the mythical stories of the rulers of the solar dynasty which corresponds with ancient Indian chronicles. It has nineteen cantos.

The *Buddhacharita* is a great epic which narrates the life of Buddha. It is one of the best Sanskrit epics, written by Ashvaghosha, a Buddhist poet in 2nd century AD. This epic portrays Buddha’s life and corresponds with the available historical records and the facts. This epic consists of 28 cantos.

The *Jataka Tales* is a voluminous body of Indian literature comprising 547 poems. It concerns itself with the previous births of Buddha, in both human and animal form. Whatever be his form, Buddha epitomises virtue. The fables of *Jataka* impart values such as self-sacrifice, honesty and morality. The *Jataka Tales* showcases an array of characters who interact and get into various kinds of trouble. Buddha’s intervention resolves all the problems and brings about a happy ending.

The *Hitopadesa* is a collection of fables written in Sanskrit, in prose and verse, like the *Panchatantra*. It is penned by Narayana Pandit. The title *Hitopadesha* is derived from two words, *hita* and *apadeśa*, and translates to ‘advise with benevolence’. The purpose for creating the *Hitopadesha* is to instruct young minds in the philosophy of life so that they are able to grow into responsible adults. The stories feature animals and birds. Each tale carries a moral lesson.

*Shishupala Vadha* is a Sanskrit epic, written by the poet Magha, dealing with the life of Shishupala, a king of an ancient Indian province, and his death at the hands of Krishna. The story of Shishupala features in the *Mahabharata*. The epic extols hero worship and intense devotion in the Indian religious context.

The *Kiratarjuniya* is a Sanskrit epic, attributed to Bharavi, in which Lord Shiva tests the strength of Arjuna, one of the Pandavas in the *Mahabharata*. Arjuna fails the test but receives the blessings of Lord Siva. The story carries a moral – to respect all creatures irrespective of their status and upholds the Indian religious canon that every human being is a manifestation of the omnipotent.

*Silappadikaram* and *Manimekalai* are Indian epic poems written in Tamil by Ilango Adigal and Seethalai Saathanar respectively. *Manimekalai* is the daughter of Kovalan, the hero of *Silappadikaram*. The epic portrays her conversion to
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Buddhism. *Manimekalai* is a sequel to *Silapadikaram*, which deals with the myth of Kannagi, an ordinary-housewife-turned-Goddess.

*Shri Ramcharitmanas* by Tulsidas is written in the Awadhi dialect of Hindi, in the fifth century AD. It is retelling of the story of Ramayana, with very intense devotion.

### 4.2.2 Modern readings of the Epics

The reach of the Indian epics has become even more expansive, compelling and powerful with the rise of print capitalism and advent of digital media, which helped popularising the televised serialisation of the epics. Print capitalism enabled many persons to “become capable of comprehending one another via print and paper.” It gave “fixity to language, which in the long run helped to build that image of antiquity so central to the subjective idea of the nation.” The visual impact and the language of transmission enables widespread reach of the media, making the adaptations more forceful and powerful. The philosophical complexity and numerous intertwined stories enable reimagining and reinterpretations and have been variously adapted in literature. These provide new insights and new interpretations. They are instrumental in bridging the gap between religion and nation. The modern reading of the epics helps erect several modern mythologies, upholding specific beliefs about Hindu-ness, gender, patriotism and national culture. Epic narratives are linked to memories and are instrumental to the construction of the modern Indian nation and its culture.

The *Ramayana* tells the story of Prince Rama, who had to endure various trials before he assumed the throne of Ayodhya. Both Rama and his wife Sita chose duties at the expense of their personal desires.

The *Mahabharata* tells the story of a great war fought between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, to gain the rule over the Kuru kingdom. *The Bhagavad Gita* is an essential part of the epic where Krishna counsels Arjuna when he is faced with the dilemma of having to choose between his duties and the life of his kins.

Both texts raise key concerns about relationships, war, justice, politics and the restoration of order. In *Ramayana*, the personal is at stake; in *Mahabharata*, the political. The two epics have been presented differently in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The *Ramayana* is represented in idyllic terms glorifying a righteous leader. *The Mahabharata* is portrayed in terms of interpersonal rivalries and familial discord which culminates in chaos and disorder. In *Ramayana* the threat to the order comes from an outside source. *Mahabharata* demonstrates that the most compelling and troublesome enemies are intimate and familial and that the greatest threat to the nation exists within its own people.

The modern readings of the *Mahabharata* lend ample scope to reflect upon religio-political and socio-economical changes in contemporary India.

According to theorists like Herman Oldenburg, David Shulman, and James Hegarty, the epic text of the *Mahabharata* is inherently unstable and endlessly dynamic. The orality, plurality, and the instability of the text make it viable for adaptations. Adaptation, to borrow Hutcheon’s definition, is broadly described as an acknowledged transposition of a recognizable other work or works, a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation or salvaging and an extended intertextual
Mishra claims that “the Mahabharata is the founding text of Indian culture”. Theatre, literature and films endlessly and repeatedly borrow from this source. The Mahabharata is a palimpsest that has been variously adapted and also explored in various media. Mishra points out four such adaptations. The first is the edited, scholarly Sanskrit version of the text. The second is the translated version. The third is the multiple oral versions. The fourth is the popular version that is frequently reproduced in literature, drama and film adaptations. Translations, oral recitations, and literary adaptations of the epic have become the standard text for many audiences as Sanskrit versions are rarely used for scholarship studies. Many such adaptations concentrate more on the personal lives and the destiny of individual characters than on the events of the war. They give voice to the marginalised and women characters. Central male characters are portrayed in relation to these. During the nationalist period the adaptations were instrumental in instilling pride in an authentic past and whipping up nationalistic and anti-colonial fervour to establish the righteous ownership of land. The language of transmission and the mass-medium of television versions to reach out to a larger audience are instrumental in fuelling Hindu nationalism.

Echoes of oral narration are found in Raja Rao’s Kanthapura and The Serpent and The Rope; Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children; Vikram Chandra’s Red Earth Pouring Rain; Dharmveer Bharati’s Andha Yug; and Girish Karnad’s Nagamandala.

Writers like Shashi Tharoor, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Mahasweta Devi’s have also based their works on the adaptation of the epics. These adaptations not only critique Hindu ideology, but also deal with issues concerning women and their roles, as well as the issues of the Dalits. They powerfully portray a desire to return to the ideal past, and at the same time pose a challenge to emerge into a new future. The numerous reproductions and adaptations constantly reshape contemporary Indian culture and politics. At the turn of the twentieth century, Indian narratives and the nation were being discussed in various cultural and political centres. The mythical past drawn from the Mahabharata became the basis of Indian nation-making, as the epic has had a long-standing and complex relationship with the public and national imagination. The new national identity was consolidated with literature of mythological retellings.

William Hegarty writes that the Mahabharata had both philosophical and political functions. The narrative of the Mahabharata transmits both its ideologies and the discontent with the same intensity and persuasive quality every time it is repeated. The power of the epics gets extended as the events were believed to be based on real incidents. Epic adaptations ensure that the past stays in constant dialogue with both the present and the future. The epic adaptations have grappled with various issues from religion to colonialism, from the development and failure of secular nationalism to the Hindu nationalist present. They show how literature brings together the past and the modern in content and form, and how it mirrors the social, the political and the historical. Epic re-imaginings express and address the concerns of the present.

Shashi Tharoor’s, The Great Indian Novel, written in 1988, is an example of epic parody which features the nation and its discontents. It narrates an alternative,
satirical version of Indian national history, from the colonial period to the Emergency period. Tharoor employs the framework, devices and styles of the *Mahabharata* in his novel. Like the epic’s eighteen volumes, the novel has eighteen chapters. Narrators are adapted. V.V. is an unreliable and cynical narrator and the epic is employed as a formal device. The story of the Indian nation is the chief concern. The characters and events are real with invented names. The novel is primarily about the public situation of the country and its culture. Private lives of public figures are exposed only for the purposes of the satire. Tharoor holds the selfish makers of the nation responsible for undermining its sanctity, thereby steering clear from any blasphemy of the epic text. It is concerned with the failure of an older model of Indian nationalism demonstrated by the Emergency, which lasted twenty-one months between 1975 and 1977.

Tharoor’s novel censures Indira Gandhi, the then Prime Minister of India and the central figure of the Indian National Congress Party, for staging this chaos. In his novel he reimagines her as Priya Duryodhani, a feminine version of the epic hero Duryodhana. Jawaharlal Nehru is reimagined as the blind Fabian socialist, King Dhritarashtra. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is Ganga Datta or Gangaji. Gangaji is presented as a grand and wise martyr who is well-known for his benevolence and symbolic leadership of the nation. He is modelled after Bhishma of the *Mahabharata*. Krishna, who appears in the fifteenth chapter, is modelled after the communist leader A.K. Gopalan. Draupadi is personified as Democracy and was produced privately for the pleasure of the elite politician Dhritarashtra and Britain, personified by Georgina. She is admired for her virtues and political beliefs. Yudhisthira represents law and politics; Bhima the army; Arjuna the fourth estate; Nakula diplomacy; and Sahadeva the civil services. The first threat to Draupadi is Priya Duryodhani. The Emergency, called the Siege in the novel, is the Game of Dice in the Epic. Draupadi or democracy is wagered by Yudhisthira. Duryodhani is redeemed in the end of the novel just like Duryodhana is in the epic, because both are true to their jobs.

The novelist stays quite faithful to the characters and the narratives of the *Mahabharata*, but provides a counter-narrative to the history of modern India. He does not valorise the *Mahabharata* as the glorious past, but uses it to critique and unsettle the present. The past is used as an extended inside joke that exposes how national culture is constructed. It gives no directives about the future, but his readers may be compelled to consider ways in which the nation’s present and future may be improved. It affirms that nationalism in India is performed as a mythology. *The Great Indian Novel* can and should lead to a greater exploration of what lies within.

State-televised epic adaptations in the late 1980s serve the dual purpose of establishing a new hegemonic version of the text as well as reorienting the texts in service of a Hindu. The wide reach of television, coupled with the popularity of the epic adaptations, made it easier to disseminate this ideology. These versions also arouse the nation’s anxieties about its present state and the obvious failure of secularism. They go beyond the imperial past to emphasize a pre-colonial, indigenous cultural centre to reorganize the national project. The epic serials impacted the daily life because of a powerful combination of vision and imagination.
The televised version of Ramanand Sagar’s *Ramayana* is more conservative in terms of gender roles, family politics, and social mores than the original. The show glorified monogamy, subservience of wives, and the joys of the joint family.

This was a response to the social crises engendered by the change in women’s roles in the public and private spheres and the rise of nuclear families. The epic was altered for conservative nationalist purposes. The televised *Ramayana* of Sagar was nostalgic and co-opted to reimagine an ideal past and encourage dreams for the future. Chopra’s *Mahabharat* focussed on the fractures and tensions in the epic text and related it to the state of contemporary politics drawing equivalences between the epic’s events and the ugliness of the present. *Ramayana* was viewed as an epic about Hindu culture, *Mahabharata* was an epic of the present times. The epics had different moral and political messages. Together they suggest that the failure to establish a Ramayana-like ideal kingdom has led to Mahabharata-like chaos and corruption.

The epic adaptations also bear the ideas about gender roles. The epic texts provide a wide range of models for feminine, social, spiritual, and political behaviour. Rewriting the epic from the perspectives of female characters has acquired a political urgency because of the contemporary debates surrounding women. Sita is an ideal for female behaviour. She is seen as an ideal partner because of her “submissive acquiescence” and lifelong loyalty to her husband. She is believed to be the perfect woman whose life is marked by tragedy, which she ultimately accepts as a martyr. Sita is seen to blame herself for the couple’s misfortunes whereas Draupadi blames her husbands for theirs. The popular understanding of Sita is built on her being an ideal mother and wife. She relentlessly strives to assert her fidelity and is dependent on her husband. Her intelligence and individuality are never highlighted. Draupadi is considered “aggressive and outspoken,” and exerts control over situations. The epic *Mahabharata* hails Draupadi as an ideal wife but it is her anger that captures popular attention. She is sharp-tongued, ambitious and terrifying. She wields her extensive political knowledge against her husbands and other men. These traits are expanded in the adaptations of Draupadi’s story, like Krishnan Rangaraju’s novel, *The Importance of Being Draupadi*, Saraswati Nagpal’s *Draupadi: Fire Born Princess*, Padma Shenoy’s *Draupadi*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* and Mahasweta Devi’s *Draupadi*. These adaptations use the heroine as spokespersons of her own struggles and larger issues concerning women in modern and ancient India. They portray how ideals of femininity and celebrations of female heroism impact discussions of gender in the contemporary context and provide a feminist insight that connects to the larger realities of oppression experienced by Indian women today. They also address dominant and uncritical modes of thinking about women and femininity. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s *The Palace of Illusions* underlines the gravity of the epics and the consequences of adhering to their ideologies. Her Draupadi is pushed into a transnational feminist context. The novel attempts to raise questions in Draupadi’s voice about many contemporary feminist issues, including the neglect of female education and insistence on women putting their families’ honour before their own needs and desires. Divakaruni’s Draupadi is an exotically beautiful, anguished victim of patriarchy. She is a princess, brought up by parents who favour the intellectual and political education of her brother Dhristadyumna. Her education is limited to the culinary and seductive arts. Ultimately, she finds her salvation in Karna. The book underlines...
the vulnerability of a woman to social strictures against her outrage towards injustice and victimisation. The author also attempts to grapple with many concerns that link the problems of contemporary Indian women to ideals that are socially enforced through mythological narratives. Draupadi is depicted as a positive force that invites the reader’s empathy. The novel critiques the policing and social conditioning of feminine behaviour. Draupadi is trained to control her temper and taught the rules of comportment. It also hints at the solidarity between two marginalised groups, Draupadi a woman and Shikandi a trans man. Divakaruni’s pairing of Draupadi and Karna shows that for Draupadi, romantic love is primary. Other political, philosophical, and spiritual concerns are secondary. Divakaruni’s adaptation of the epic story of Draupadi falls into an established transnational genre. Divakaruni’s Draupadi becomes a protagonist for a modern love story. Prathibha Ray’s Odia novel, Yajnaseni raises crucial questions about the female spiritual path in Hinduism. Ray’s Draupadi eschews pativratakadharma for a more direct and meaningful connection with Krishna as friend, God and mentor. Ray’s adaptation grants the female heroine a direct access to spirituality. Desire, in Ray’s novel, is the means to attaining spiritual agency and salvation. Her Draupadi demands a one-on-one relationship with God.

Divakaruni and Ray humanise Draupadi by giving the heroine interiority. The epic does not provide an access to interiority. But they do not dwell long on the most uncomfortable moment of Draupadi’s life, when she is dragged into court and disrobed before male family elders. The Kaurava brothers wanted to make it known to Draupadi and the audience that her body is no longer her own but theirs to use and abuse henceforth. The epic Draupadi raises significant political questions. In the epic and in these adaptations, it is her access to divinity that saves her. Ray’s Draupadi’s anger extends beyond the space of the epic. She delivers a passionate speech where she cites a long tradition of gendered oppression in Hindu tradition. She warns that her humiliation will “demean the entire male sex for all time”. Divakaruni’s Draupadi spends time silently contemplating Karna’s inability to help her and prays before she speaks. Her speech is subdued. In these adaptations, Draupadi remains a figure with powers and privileges that save her from situations that contemporary women (especially those marginalised by caste or race) cannot claim. These adaptations stay close to the epic’s events. To address contemporary feminist issues, Draupadi has to be freed and moved out of the framework of the epic.

In the Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi’s short story, Draupadi is the heroine beyond the epic’s parameters. Mahasweta is a Marxist activist who spent her life fighting for the rights of marginalised tribal persons. The story clearly expresses the Indian feminist politics, which is conscious of the way that “class, caste, and religion, interlock to create the grounds for the oppression and exploitation of women” In Mahasweta’s work, Draupadi is recast as a tribal woman who is heroically defiant even in the face of unspeakable state-sanctioned oppression. As a tribal, she calls herself ‘Dopadi’ as she is unable to pronounce her name ‘Draupadi’. She lives a life of hard menial labour and uncertainty. She is a tribal woman persecuted by the government and is unintelligible, non-modern, and an anti-national subject owing to her involvement in the naxalbari movement. Dulna, her husband and their compatriots Lakkhi and Naran are charged with the murder of Surja Sahu, who kept generations of their families as bonded labourers and preyed on women like Dopadi. Dulna is captured and killed by the soldiers. Dopadi
evades capture for a long time. The villagers do not betray the fugitives. They do not have faith in the agents of the State or in their work.

Unlike the characters in the original epic, the characters in the story do not have a unified belief system. The story shows that post-colonial nation state has failed to inspire devotion to the same because it does not protect all its peoples. Even when God appears in the story in the form of Lord Krishna, he does not restore faith as he does in the epic. In the final unit of the story, Dopadi is captured, taken to the officers’ camp and is subjected to the most horrific gang-rape in custody. At the orders of the Senanayak, the soldiers brutally fragment her body to compel her to confess. Dopadi is far more vulnerable than semi-divine epic Draupadi as she is a tribal and a non-Hindu. In Mahasweta’s story, no God intervenes to protect Dopadi. Unlike Draupadi’s public humiliation, Dopadi is raped in a private space. Senanayak, the army chief did not actually witness the horrific consequence of his orders. The full force of the heinous act comes as a shock to him when he calls her to his tent. Dopadi with extraordinary bravery refuses to wear her clothes when she appears before Senanayak. She tears her own clothes so that he has no choice but to see her nakedness and the extent of her injuries. This unexpected behaviour frightens the officers. By forcing him to see the consequences of his orders, Dopadi shakes the Senanayak out of the comfortable, academic distance that he maintains from the actual violence of his work. She says, “What’s the use of clothes? You can strip me but can you clothe me again?” Senanayak is terribly afraid to stand before this unarmed target. Dopdi Mejhen has become as brave as, if not braver than, the epic Draupadi. She has no arms or armour. Her defiant and bleeding body becomes a weapon, terrifying Senanayak as much as “the male organ of a gun” or any other man-made instrument of power. She questions his masculinity by suggesting that it is more challenging to clothe a woman than to strip and rape her. Dopadi’s words make it clear that it is harder to find a man, in contemporary times, who respects a woman’s humanity than it was for Krishna to clothe the epic Draupadi. Her final stance recreates the image of Kali, the destructive female power that targets evil. The fearless Draupadi that emerges at the end of the story has become even more powerful than the epic Draupadi because she opposes the terms of her assault herself. Dopadi symbolises a crucial feminist idea, that all women are human beings of value and should be treated as such.

Reading Dopadi’s final act as an example for other women would be problematic because it puts the onus on the victim to change her own circumstances – a small shift away from the common rhetoric of victim-blaming. It also suggests that only women who visibly fight back are worthy of consideration and redemption. Dopadi speaks for herself within the story and stands alone. She is not protected by marriage or any association with a man. She dares her assaulter to “make” her. This suggest that no one can “make” her but herself. Ray’s and Divakaruni’s Draupadis also speak for themselves, but they desire to be included in male centric, spiritual and political schemes. Mahasweta ends her story with power changing hands and resting in the hands of the subject who is marginalised by class, modernity, national belonging and gender. The story expands the narrative of the epic and history to include groups of persons, such as a non-Hindu, tribal Dopadi, who did not have access to the Mahabharata.

Numerous writings on tribal women, articulate the problems of individuals whose personal struggles broadly fall within the geographical and social parameters of
the post-colonial nation, but engage more immediately with a different sense of collectivity. The epics clearly explore these problems.

Mahasweta Devi’s short story collection *After Kurukshetra* gives voice to lower-caste female characters who were marginalised or even entirely absent in the *Mahabharata*. Stories like *The Five Women, Kunti and the Nishadin* and *Souvali* bring marginalised voices to the forefront. Kiran Nagarkar’s play *Bedtime Story*, attempts a re-imagining of Eklavya, a minor character who was violently wronged in the epic.

Other adaptations of the *Mahabharata* include Devdutt Pattanaik’s *Jaya*, Kavita Kané’s *Karna’s Wife*, Aditya Iyengar’s *Thirteenth Day: A Story of the Kurukshetra War*, M.T Vasudevan Nair’s *Randamoozham* and its English translation by Gita Krishnakutty called *Bhima: Lone Warrior* and Chindu Sreedharan’s *Epic Retold*.

There are fewer adaptations of the *Ramayana* compared to the *Mahabharata* perhaps because it is remembered as sacrosanct and incontestable. There has been a brief spark of interest in *Ramayana* adaptations, especially those that highlight Sita’s perspective. Works such as Devdutt Pattanaik’s *Sita*, Samhita Arni’s *Sita’s Ramayana* and Nandini Sahu’s, *Sita – A Poem*. Adaptations based on othered characters from the epic are Vijeyandra Mohanty’s *Ravanayana* and Vikram Balagopal’s graphic novel trilogy *Simian*. Sarah Joseph has written a series of stories on the women characters of Ramayana, like *Shambuka’s Wife*, who is not a major character in any of the known *Ramayanas*. Sarah Joseph has also written stories on Sita and Mandodari from a woman’s point of view and to justify women.

C.N. Sreekantan Nair has also based his three plays *Lankalakshmi*, *Saketham* and *Kanchana Sita* on the *Ramayana*. Amish Tripathi’s popular trilogy, *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of the Nagas*, and *The Oath of the Vayuputras*, are works which reimagine Siva as an ancient superhero figure. Vikram Chandra’s *Red Earth, Pouring Rain* and Manil Suri’s trilogy *The Death of Vishnu*, *The Age of Shiva* and *The City of Devi* are other mythology-based books.

Popular adaptations of epic narrative are a fuel for the collective imaginings of the nation and its culture. Further, they also make their way into the post-national sphere where translocal solidarities can be built around them as a common heritage. Epics and their adaptations are part of an endless chain of memories that continually bind collective imaginings.

### 4.2.3 Folk Ramayanas

The *Ramayana* tells the story of Rama. The tradition identifies the author as Valmiki, who probably lived between 400 and 200 BCE. The story narrates the life of Rama from birth to death, praising his heroism and virtues. Besides the original Indian one, there are many other versions of the tale, found in countries like the Philippines, Thailand, Laos, Cambodia and Malaysia. Multiple versions of the *Ramayana* survive and the extensive tradition of oral storytelling thrives across the world.

The story of Rama is written in many languages: Annamese, Assamese, Balinese, Bengali, Cambodian, Chinese, Gujarati, Javanese, Kannada, Kashmiri, Khotanese, Laotian, Malaysian, Marathi, Odia, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Santali, Sinhalese, Tamil,
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Telugu, Thai, Tibetan. In some languages there are many versions of the Ramayana. The various narrative genres of the Ramayana include epics, kavyas, puranas or old mythological stories, dance-dramas, and other performances. AK Ramanujan claims that there are as many as three hundred versions of the Ramayana since Valmiki first wrote it, and many of them are in oral form, preserved and popularised by the tribals and illiterate villagers across India. Just as India is one country with many diverse units within it, there are many diverse Ramayanas enfolded in a single myth. Each of them is vibrant and intensely entrenched in the local flavour. There are diverse regional versions of the Ramayana written by various authors in India. Some of them differ significantly from each other.

Valmiki’s Sanskrit Ramayana is the earliest and most prestigious of them all. They bear different titles like Ramavataram (The Incarnation of Rama), Ramcharitmanas (The Lake of the Acts of Rama) and Ramakien (The Story of Rama). The Ramayanas in the form of folk stories and songs have a distinct regional touch. God and human beings are closely associated and behave alike. The gods are anthropomorphized and presented in the folk tales and songs with human frailties and features. They get drunk, marry, quarrel, and make up just like humans.

The Tamil Ramayana of Kamban, Ramavataram generates its own special sphere of influence. Its influence is evident in the Thai Ramakien, in Tulsi’s Ramcharitmanas in the Hindi language and in the Malaysian Hikayat Seri Ram. Jain tellings of the Rama story do not carry Hindu values. They express the feeling that the Hindus have maligned Ravana and made him into a villain. The Jain Ramayana of Vimalasuri is called Paumacariya. It opens with the greatness of Ravana. Ravana is hailed as one of the sixty-three leaders or salakapurushas of the Jain tradition. He is noble and learned and earns all his magical powers and weapons through austerities. Ravana falls in love with Sita’s beauty, abducts her, tries to win her favour in vain. This leads to his downfall and death on the battlefield. In these tellings, he is a great man undone by a passion which he has vowed against, but which he cannot resist. In another tradition of the Jain Ramayanas, Sita is his daughter, although he does not know it. They even rationalise the conception of Ravana as the ten-headed demon. When he was born, his mother was given a necklace of nine gems, which she put around his neck. She saw his face reflected in them and so called him Dasamukha, or the ten-faced one.

The Kannada folk Ramayana gives separate narrative poems on Sita’s birth, her wedding, her chastity test, her exile, the birth of Lava and Kusa, their war with their father Rama, and so on. The Tamburi Dasayyas is sung by the traditional bards, with a refrain repeated every two lines by a chorus. This folk narrative, sung by an untouchable bard, opens with Ravana and his queen Mandodari. They are unhappy and childless. Shiva gives him a magic mango and asks him to share it with his wife. But he doesn’t give her the fruit and becomes pregnant himself. In the ninth month, Sita is born through his nose when he sneezes. In Kannada, ‘sita’ means ‘he sneezed’. Her name is thus given a Kannada folk etymology. Later he puts her in a box and leaves her in Janaka’s field. The motif of Sita as Ravana’s daughter occurs in folk traditions of Kannada and Telugu, as well as in several southeast Asian Ramayanas. In some, Ravana in his lusty youth molests
a young woman, who vows vengeance and is reborn as his daughter to destroy him.

Thai Ramakirti is also a folk version of the Ramayana. Several kings with the name ‘King Rama’ wrote Ramayana episodes. Places in Thailand, such as Lopburi, Khidkin and Ayuthia are associated with Rama legends. There are three kinds of characters in the story, the human, the demonic, and the simian. The second part of the text describes the brothers’ first encounter with the demons, Rama’s marriage and banishment, the abduction of Sita, and Rama’s meeting with the monkey clan. Many incidents are similar to Valmiki’s Ramayana. There are some differences as well. The daughter of Surpanakha is depicted as one who is waiting to take revenge on Sita for her mother’s disfigurement. The reunion between Rama and Sita is also different. When Rama finds out she is still alive, he recalls Sita to his palace by sending her word that he is dead. She rushes to see him but flies into a rage when she finds she has been tricked. The account of Sita’s birth, too, is different from that given in Valmiki. When Dasharatha performs his sacrifice, he receives a rice ball. A crow steals some of the rice and takes it to Ravana’s wife, who eats it and gives birth to Sita. A prophecy that his daughter will cause his death makes Ravana throw Sita into the sea, where the sea goddess protects her and takes her to Janaka. Ravana and Hanuman are also portrayed differently in the Thai text.

For Kamban and Tulsidas, Rama is a god. When Kamban retells Valmiki’s Ramayana in Tamil, he is largely faithful in keeping to the order and sequence of episodes, the structural relations between the characters of father, son, brothers, wives, friends, and enemies. His work is much longer than Valmiki’s. It is composed in more than twenty different kinds of Tamil metres, while Valmiki’s is mostly in the sloka metre.

The style of Pampa Ramayana in Kannada is different from Valmiki’s style, though the story is the same. Their interpretations are different.

In the Bengali Ramayana, Kirttivasi Ramayan, also called Shri Ram Panchali by Krittibas Ojha, Rama’s wedding follows the Bengali customs and cuisine. Such a text embedded in a locale or a context, is called indexical. The Bengali Ramayana is a genre with a variety of instances.

In Malayalam there are at least 23 Ramayanas including Patala Ramayanam where Ravana is helped by another Ravana who lives in the netherworld called Patala Ravana. In the Adhyatma Ramayana by Thunchaththu Ezhuthachan, Rama ultimately pays a great tribute to Ravana acknowledging him as an ideal human being, a great fighter and a great singer.

The Ramayana of the Bhils does not have a war because they don’t believe in violence. In their Ramayana, Ravana realises his mistake and returns Sita to Rama and thus they arrive at a kind of compromise. The Gonds, the Bhils, the Agariyas and the tribals of Wayanad have their own versions of the Ramayana. They bring in their own gods, their beliefs, their goddesses, their own rituals and various geographical sites associated with the life of Rama and Sita in the forest. They conceive of Ram and Sita as tribal people. In Adayan Ramayanas, Sita descends the hill with a basket and Rama falls in love with her because she is uniquely beautiful. In a tribal folktale in Bastar district of Chhatisgarh, Ravana is
an ideal man, the *maryada purushottama*, because he strictly follows the ethical codes till his death.

The *Ramayana* of Telugu is *Ranganatha Ramayana*, by Gona Budda Reddy. In the Telugu women’s oral *Ramayana*, the woman is central and Sita becomes the main character. Her delivery, her pain in the forest, her whole life and attitude to Rama, Lakshmana and other people are important. The text is written from a woman’s point of view. Telugu folk songs speak of Kousalya’s morning sickness and baby Rama’s birth – things that women can relate to. In the folksong, *Lakshmana’s Laugh*, Lakshmana prays to the Goddess of Sleep that he be relieved of the need to sleep, in order to guard Sita and Rama round the clock. The Goddess agrees on the condition that he start sleeping from the moment he returns to Ayodhya.

The Gujarati poet Premanand wrote a version of *Ramayana*. The Odia *Ramayana* by Sarala Das, is *Vilanka Ramayana* and Balarama Das’s, *Jagamohana Ramayana*. The Marathi *Ramayana* is written by Sant Ekanath. It is titled *Bhavarth Ramayan*. *Ramayana* has also been retold by Father Camille Bulcke in his *Ramakatha: Utpatti aur Vikas* and Paula Richman’s various books on *Ramayana, Questioning Ramayanas: A South Asian Tradition*. Paula Richman says that in a Tamil folk song the pregnant wives of Dasharatha crave murukku, idlis, and dosas. In an interview to the Hindu, she says that in one *Ramayana*, Sita is portrayed “as a strong woman who faces difficulties unflinchingly. When Rama banishes her, she brings up her children all by herself. The world’s earliest example of a single parent!”

The *Ramayana* of Assam is Madhava Kandali’s *Saptakanda Ramayana*. In Assamese folklore, Sita and Surpanakha are good weavers because Assamese women are traditionally good at weaving.

There are written, oral, performed, painted and sculpted *Ramayanas*. Ezhuthachan’s *Ramayana* is based more on *Adhyatma Ramayana* than on Valmiki’s *Ramayana*. Krittibas’ *Ramayana* in Bengal and Kamban’s *Ramayana* in Tamil Nadu, are all different *Ramayanas*.

The *Chandrabati Ramayana* is completely from the women’s point of view where Rama’s ethics are questioned.

The *Mappila Ramayana* represents our syncretic tradition. It was propagated by a Hindu singer. In Indonesia, there are various Muslim versions of the *Ramayana*. Being of Muslim origin, the hero of this story is a sultan. Rama’s name is changed to ‘Laman’. The language and the imagery projected in the *Mappilapattu* are in accordance with the social fabric of the earlier Muslim community.

These versions of the *Ramayana* spread the epic to every corner of the globe and are important because, as A.K. Ramanujan said, “they show how both folk stories and modern short stories improvise in order to make the epic contemporary.”

### 4.2.4 Case Studies

#### Case Study – 1: *Sita (A Poem)*, by Nandini Sahu

Indian folk poetry has drawn heavily from the eternal founts of the epics of *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. We have seen how these epics have been variously
adapted. The characters in these epics have been redefined in the light of current theories and viewpoints. *Sita (A Poem)* by Nandini Sahu, to quote the poet, “fuels the mind in all thought and action”. It is a poem written in 25 cantos. Sita, for Nandini Sahu, is an epitome of modernity. The book attempts to deconstruct the epic subject of the female stereotype. In the deconstruction of Sita, Nandini Sahu looks back to move forward. Sita is placed vis-à-vis all women.

In the Preface to the poem, Sahu says that Sita is self-willed, stubborn and confident. Sahu asserts that Sita is every woman and there is ‘Sitaness’ in every Indian woman. Like any woman who learns to accept her lot in life, Sita’s acceptance, patience and positivity are traits to emulate. Sahu’s Sita is truly modern in that she stands up for her ideals and principles against injustice. Sita’s role as a successful single parent is also overwhelmingly contemporary. Sahu’s Sita is human and divine at the same time. She is mythified and demythified by the poet. According to her, Sita lives in our “collective consciousness as a powerful inspiration”. In her poem, she offers to elucidate Sita, “the mysterious, inexplicable character and her ineffaceable influence on our lives”. Sahu defines ‘Sitaness’ as being able to keep beauty beyond bounds with the armour of knowledge and power. Sahu also extols the quality of non-violence in Sita. Her confrontation with patriarchy is a sterling example. Sahu addresses the questions of patriarchy and identity politics in her poem. Her text is a subversive deconstruction of the epic from the subject position of a character subalterned by gender. From the narrow confines of the patriarchal, social ethos, Nandini Sahu’s Sita is elevated to a position of a universal ecofeminist.

Sita, like Nandini Sahu, is a true ecofeminist. She assumes the role of a witness and brings sweeping changes in social thinking of gender-driven roles, revealing depths of meanings and intense awareness. Her protest against injustice is fodder for thought in the modern era. Sita speaks the language of peace and tolerance. She is the perfect blend of the oriental concept of interpersonal harmony and the western theory of structures. Sita believes in equal distribution and reaches out globally.

“Call her what you may – *Sita, Janaki,*

*Vaidehi, Ramaa* – she is Woman.

She is every woman, the propagated, interpolated role model.”

Sita transcends all space-time bounds. Through her are redefined the politics of deification and gender sensitisation, still rampant in the Indian context. While being so, Sita steers clear from the blemish of hyperfeminity, or social conditioning of gender stereotypes. As Srideep Mukherjee states, “all of it is cumulatively universalized by an almost neo-historicist perspective wherein the poet binds history (as myth) and textuality in perfect reciprocity, syncing the voiced concerns with all time… Sahu transcends any temporal barriers to the metaphor of *Ramarajya* and questions subalternity inherent in stereotyping of gender, in a way that has always been a nagging thorn at the heart of the evolution of the nation and its ‘civil’ society.”

Nandini Sahu is a major voice in contemporary Indian English poetry. She is the Director of the School of Foreign Languages, IGNOU. She is a poet and creative writer of international repute. Her works are widely published in the UK, USA,
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Pakistan, Africa and India. *Sita (A Poem)* is her maiden foray into folk poetics. She takes her poem beyond the epic traditions. In the poem Sita is portrayed in modern terms as a progressive lady.

There is rhythm, flow and continuity as one moves from one canto to the next. Srideep Mukherjee says that this continuity is reminiscent of Gordimer’s phrase of “inward testimony”. The text is not a retelling of the *Ramayana*. It is a recreation of Sita to connect the epic with the modern and the past with the present. The poem is composed in the style of witness literature using the first-person narrative. Sahu invites the readers to participate in the act of reading and empathising.

Sahu demythifies Sita to problematise the role of myth to “create in the popular consciousness, an acceptance of the inevitable facts of class inequality and power” (Alan Swingewood) The demythification starts from Canto I. The details enumerated in prose in the preface, take eloquent poetic expressions. Sita is every woman seen in every household taking on every role from a Prime Minister to the mutilated baby girl at the AIIMS Trauma Centre. She is the new progressive woman, “truly animated to this living, present living”. Sita is the woman who “translates the communal and the cloistered cosmoses in the society, controls remotely the kingship and the exile of Rama and creates the realisation of the ethics of banishment, liability, assertion, loyalty and denunciation.” Sita, like many modern women is the single parent who “valiantly bears and rears her sons Lava-Kusha.” The idea of the ecofeminist Sita is loudly proclaimed when Sahu writes that Sita has “come back … from the segments of Mother Earth,” to dwell “in the mass consciousness of the universe.” In bestowing consciousness and human values on her, Sita is further demythified and hailed as a mother, a protector and nurturer.

Canto II describes Sita’s “professed duties of daughterhood, wifehood and motherhood.” The canto explores the contradiction of Sita’s love for Rama – her acquiescence on the one hand, and the oppression of patriarchy that they have put as her crown on the other. The mutually challenging qualities are evident in the woman of today; who has the strength of giving her all and also of combating the tyranny of patriarchy. Sahu also talks of sisterhood and female bonding and the “incredible tales of exoneration and extraction.” Sita rises from the epic world to the contemporary one of knowledge and power and occupies the stage of the flora and the fauna, rocks, rivers and clouds, the sky, the moon, the stars and the comets in beneficence and compassion. The concept of Sita as an ecofeminist is more clearly etched here.

In Canto III, Sahu questions the male prerogative of finding a groom for a woman. She questions the basis of today’s marriage based on a “decent job, an affluent family, a teetotaler, maybe two horoscopes to be matched by a Pundit and family’s alliances” and an obvious lack of love and desire. Sita’s *swayamwar* was ordained by her father. The qualification of her groom was physical strength. Sita wonders if strength was enough to qualify one to win over a woman’s heart and why she, who possessed all the elements of life, lay bereaved, hurt, forsaken and doomed on the lap of Mother Earth like so many others of her sex.

In Canto IV, Sita casts doubt on Rama’s virtues of compassion and justice. Rama, with his abundant love for all, had disregarded Urmila’s pain at being separated
Nandini’s Sita displays an ability to see through the defects of her lord and still adore him.

In Canto V, the image of rocked-Ahalya is conjured. Sahu/Sita asks,

“Can the grace of a woman redeem only with the touch of a man?
And can the grace of a woman wane only with the fraudulent touch of a man?”

Nandini Sahu raises the question of male gaze and touch both in the context of the epics and myths of Ahalya, Savitri, Anasuya and Draupadi as well as in the modern context of Nirbhaya. Such questions overthrow male bastions and threaten male complacence and sense of superiority. Sahu retorts that deification is a ploy to tame and keep under patriarchal reins a woman’s beauty, knowledge, skills and power. The Nirbhaya case is a telling instance of how patriarchy is embedded in the social milieu and how gender violence is made legitimate. Sahu points out that these social sanctions of gender inequity can be traced to the culture found in ancient epics.

In these instances, Sita and Sahu explore the age-old philosophy of touch, purity, pollution and chastity. Her poem is clarion call for all to garner courage and confront subversive social sanctions and protest against injustice. Both Sita and Sahu are ecofeminists who dare to bare the injustice woven in the patriarchal fabric of society and be the voice of the voiceless. “Wake up to the call of Nirbhaya, let them call it blasphemy.” She exhorts society to be the harbinger of a time when Nirbhaya would be adept to stand firm despite a thousand scars on her body and soul, to shun the hypothetical frailty of woman and to celebrate her courage and convictions conscientiously. Like Sita, every “woman knows when to spare the securities of her home and take up weathered severity.” She is a provider of solace and comfort.

Canto VI highlights the gruesome contemporary social malaise of “men eating flesh of loving kids and draining their tender bones.” The present callousness is reflected in the Dandaka forest, “as the barbaric supremacy of creatures.” The ecofriendly environment of Panchavati is graphically described with the happy harmony in nature. Here Sita dwell in a hut with the flora and the fauna, the music and the fragrance. In these idyllic environs, Surpanakha is disfigured by Lakshmana. Sita is abducted by Ravana. Sita asks, “Is woman only a means to generate and eliminate negative powers?” In all fairness she acknowledges that it is a woman’s greed and a man’s wrath that are responsible for the chaos and disruption.

In Canto VII, the poet uses the abduction of Sita to contextualize the current propensity of victimizing women. On the one hand, Sita craves protection against the evil that beguiled her. On the other, she desairs that women at all times are used as a means to an end. In her case it was to kill Ravana and wipe out evil. In Draupadi’s, it was to fight the Mahabharata war. It repeats today when, to boost the male ego, violation of a woman is the norm and to make successful men, female fetuses are killed before they are born.
In Cantos VIII, IX and X the message of ecofeminism rings loud and clear. Sita, in the Asoka Vatika of Ravana, ponders over the multiple roles of a woman, from the benign to the formidable. The outrage to a woman is an affront to the earth. When she converts from Parvati to Kali, there is chaos in the cosmos. “Adore her, she is Parvati. Overrun her... Kali descends on the chest of the fanatic.” These cantos deal with Sita’s sojourn in the Asoka-vana, Hanuman’s meeting with Sita and Rama’s preparation for war to release and reclaim Sita. Hanuman reminds Ravana that the imprisonment of Sita is a “dark disbanding perched over Lanka.” Amidst all the chaos, Sahu upholds conjugal love and the all-sustaining relationship of a man and woman. Vibhishana sees the “appalling omens occurring in Lanka” and warns Ravana against humiliating Sita and advises him to return her “with all respect due to a noble woman.” Sahu interprets the war from an ecofeminist perspective. The war between the divine and the devil is inevitable and imperative “to relieve the burden of Mother Earth and Mother Sita, both of whom are humiliated by the demon, Ravana.”

Amid the descriptions of the war, in Canto XI, Sita voices a pertinent question of history’s failure to acknowledge the heroism of people who fight and restore the dignity of a woman. The battle of dharma is universally relevant. Sahu cites from the Bible and alludes to the Iliad and the Indian epics. It concludes with the poignant observation. Women have always “been a trophy, a guiding agent for men to show their bravado.” Objectification of women is universal and rampant “in Western and Eastern civilization, in myth and folklore, in all the oral-written continuum.”

Cantos XII, XIII and XIV are a narrative on the war. Sita catalogues the losses in the war and the cantos end with the death of Ravana, his brother Kumbhakarna and all his sons – all of them acting against the basic law of nature, giving up their lives, to establish a code of social conduct. Sahu uses the war as a pretext to explicate the benevolent and healing power of nature. The folklore of Ayurveda, naturopathy and eco healing are interspersed with the ghastly and gory details of war and man’s all-consuming ego.

In Canto XV, Sita realizes the intensity of the ultimate and collective loss of women. The widowed queens of Lanka are plunged in grief. Sita in her seamless capacity for female bonding empathises with them. Like her, they too are victims of male ego. With the fall of Lanka, Sita’s fate also irrevocably alters. From an anxious, impatient wife waiting to get reunited with her beloved husband, Sita turns into a political prisoner. Her husband has won the war but Vibhishana is the crowned king, and Sita is Lanka’s property to be formally handed over. She is thoroughly commodified. She is made to go through the necessary ablutions to symbolically wash away the tarnish, because she had “lived alone in another man’s house day and night”, with no man of her clan to protect her. Her body, as Srideep Mukherjee puts it, becomes the site for contestation between private-public spheres. It is important to Rama that she be made to conform to the expectations of ‘civil’ society and that he be able to retain his social prestige unquestioned. Rama ridicules her unknown parenthood and is convinced that she is not chaste anymore. Mukherjee says that the paradox in Rama’s image and character is an epic ploy at glorification of Rama and defining social relationships from a patriarchal point of view. The pollution versus purity debate has been set in motion and Sita, filled with dismay and humiliation, emerges strong as she...
realizes that she must charter the course of life on her own henceforth. Rama’s stripping Sita of all virtues has its equivalent in the disrobing of Draupadi in the *Mahabharata*. It is a plea for gender sensitisation. Rama divests her of her essential personality for the offence of crossing the *Lakshmana rekha*. “What abides and binds this polyphony of woman voices is the Sitaesque ideal of sympathy as an answer to supreme ego.” The epic narratives lay the foundation of the social ethos and are legitimised by moral codes. Draupadi’s disrobing in the *Mahabharata* and Sita’s humiliation in the *Ramayana*, at the explicit sanction of their husbands, fall in this category. In today’s context, its ugly replication is seen in the way women are treated as slaves, dalit women are stripped and paraded naked, and wives beaten to death. *Sita (A Poem)* is an “inward testimony” to the social implication of being a woman.

Canto XVI theorises Sita. It deals at length with the history of femininity from the first wave feminism to the explication of the forces of *shakti* and *bhakti*. Sita’s volunteering to take the test of fire as Rama stands unmoved by her decision has been the subject of many feminist debates. Sita clarifies that it was more an “act of insolence than a weak capitulation.” It shows Sita as the nurturer of magnanimity that can “counterbalance the chaos of civilization”. Sita is hailed as a “compassionate mother, self-assertive wife, dutiful daughter, woman on a special pedestal.” Like Chitra, in Tagore’s play, Sahu’s Sita is no object of pity. She is a “Nature humanitarian”. She is the epitome of nonviolence like Gandhiji. This image of Sita with Gandhi, has been invoked to explain the mainstream of the Indian nationalist thought and movement.

Cantos XVII and XVIII sing of homecoming and the coronation of Rama. They record the pangs of separation the women suffered, the power of the silence of their sufferings and the ignominy and helplessness of those who had to marry the killers of their husbands. The joy is tinged with pathos and an underlying sense of the pensive. It is the woman’s prerogative to bring order, by being sympathetic when supreme male ego is dominant. With the onset of spring, Sita’s cup of joy overflowed at the prospects of motherhood and Rama’s willingness to honour her desire to “revisit the forests and the rivers”, her second home. All doubts are willingly suspended and peace and order restored.

In Canto XIX, the delicate balance of the semblance of order is wrecked irrevocably. Rama’s character is further downscaled. He is once again consumed by the of pollution-purity dichotomy. In the mental dilemma that he is fraught with, Rama chooses to desert his wife in the forest for safeguarding his ego, pride and obligation. By deserting his pregnant wife, King Rama is guilty of double violation. As a husband, he has failed in his duty of protecting his wife when she at her most vulnerable. As a king, he denies justice to Sita who is a citizen of his kingdom.

In Canto XX, Sita turns to ecology and nature for shelter and solace, and in the anonymity of the forest, under sage Valmiki’s care, she delivers her twin children. There is ecstasy and ache in her as she sees them deprived of their father’s love. Her status of a single mother is fraught with hope and despair and one that is brought upon her, not by choice, but by the exigencies of her circumstances.

In Canto XXI, Sita has evolved as a parent. Sahu’s Sita is an educationist and well read. Her concept of parenting is based on sound psychological concepts.
She is aware of the prevalence of children’s social-emotional well-being (SEW) and the impact of maternal psychological distress on growing children. She is determined to bring them up with good values and character. Though torn by grief, she learns to smile and does not fancy being “a mother nagging and morose.”

Sahu’s Sita is a tough and resolute woman and an ideal mother. She is “the eternal orphan, the elemental sufferer, single-mother” who decides that her sons must be educated. In a society operated by the standards set by men, where wives are deserted and the responsibility of rearing children is entrusted to the woman, Sahu raises uncomfortable questions on the ideals of fatherhood and husbandhood.

Sita is finally reconciled to the two dimensions of her personality – power and peace. She shrugs off the past without rancour and grief. Sahu portrays her Sita in the light of new historicism. The inequality of power in the mythification of Sita yields to the new order of acceptance and forgiveness, “of a peaceful disposition, all discord spent.” But Sita’s trials are not resolved.

Cantos XXII and XXIII bring the Raghupati clan on the common platform of the forest. Rama recognizes “the peerless twins” as his own. Sahu, the ecofeminist, steps in when the children are offered numerous gold coins as a token of appreciation. Children of the forests have no need for material wealth. Nature nurtures and nature heals. Sita is coerced into one more test by fire to prove her innocence and establish her purity. Patriarchy bestows on men the ownership of a woman’s body. It cries itself hoarse as Sita holds her ground and refuses to subject herself to the male gaze. She confronts Rama as a citizen abandoned by the throne and demands justice.

“I, Janaki, the mother of Lava-Kusha, demand justice today from the noblest king on earth, for the wrong done to a pregnant woman and her unborn children. And justice for the fatherless teens.”

Sita acknowledges that she has “unmatched mystic powers” to see her destiny through. She realised that the common lot of women is to be denied such exotic powers when overcome by assault and gender-based violence. In the words of Srideep Mukherjee, “Sita collectively questions the commodification of the female body through the paradigms of sin and purity as mind-games. She rightfully lays the onus of all future violations of womanhood on Rama as his dissolve desertion of her vindicates and sets the trend for the abject insensitivity of absolutist state power when the issue at stake is gender divide.” In a befitting gesture of her pride and strength, Sita leaves for her final abode, abandoning Rama and leaving him the poorer in the eyes of posterity. Her denial to live on with a disrespectful husband and her rejection of Rama is “an illustration of the highest dignity of a just woman.” Sita has lived out the entire purpose of her life amidst all odds, and it is with courage and conviction that she opts death by choice. Sita succeeds in shifting the onus of allegations from the oppressed to the oppressor and drives the final nail into the coffin of the dying cult of patriarchy.

Canto XXIV elucidates the various versions of the Ramayana. Sahu cites these folk Ramayanas to justify the demythification of Rama and Sita. She reiterates that in all versions the common thread is of Sita’s exile and abandonment.

Canto XXV neatly sums up the new historicity in the legend of Sita. Sita defeats patriarchy with invisible and imperceptible weapons. Phoenix-like, her spirit rises.
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and dwells in all women, mythical and real. Her story redefines the role of a woman as a human being, a citizen, a wife and a parent and strips society of the romantic halo of a subservient, docile perfect image of womanhood. Sita offers her unreciprocated sisterhood to all the women in the universe to live a life of the highest dignity. She exhorts humanity both by example and practice to be a bold defender, an ardent ecofeminist and an informed parent. Sahu resurrects the image of the Sita-myth and invests her with the breath, blood and flesh of the progressive woman.

According to the poet, Sita is not just a character, she is a movement. She is the ecofeminist, the satyagrahi, the optimist, the progressive one who never brooded, complained or cried over her destiny.

Sahu places her text in the domain of witness and protest literature. She has created a foray into the ecriture feminine in the genre of Indian folk poetics by putting “herself into the text-as into the world and into history-by her own movement.” (Helene Cixous) Sita, though bestowed with “unmatched mystic powers” has been consistently othered. In this sense Sita’s story is the story of the voiceless subalterns. Sahu’s gendered post-colonial adaptation of the myth “interrogates the shared concerns over the ever-evolving relationship between a woman and her milieu.” Sita (A Poem) is the poetic memoir of the protagonist Sita. Lines from Arnold’s Absence are quoted in the preface in a foucauldian understanding of the text to reinforce the fact that forgetting the real character of Sita is a compulsive and voluntary act. Sahu uncovers the fierce and real spirit of Sita through her poem. Sita is a text in progress. The contemporaneity of Sita (A Poem) lies in the fact that it addresses a host of 21st century concerns. To conclude, in this long poem, Sahu deconstructs the traditional understanding of Sita and reinterprets her character from a modern, ecofeminist perspective.

Case Study – 2: Jungle Nama, By Amitav Ghosh

Amitav Ghosh’s Jungle Nama is a verse adaptation of the story of the avaricious rich merchant Dhona; the poor Dukhey and his mother; Dokkin Rai, a mighty spirit who appears to humans as a tiger; Bon Bibi, the benign goddess of the forests; and her warrior brother Shah Jongoli. It was originally composed in the 19th century, in the Bengali verse metre of dwipodi poyar.

Amitav Ghosh was born in Calcutta in 1956. He has authored several works of fiction and non-fiction. His pet concerns are climate change and environmental degradation. He addresses these concerns through the narratives of folklore and history. Jungle Nama is the first-ever book in verse by Amitav Ghosh.

In the Afterword of the poem, Ghosh says that the poem is the adaptation of a legend from the Sundarbans, the world’s largest mangrove forest. It is written in English, in a poyar-like metre. The dwipodi poyar or the two-footed line metre consists of a rhyming couplet. Each line has on an average twelve syllables and each couplet has twenty-four syllables, with a natural break or a caesura. Other than the metrical device, the poem does not adhere closely to the original versions of the legend. Ghosh says that the vocabulary and the content of the legend are highly hybrid. The language of the legend is heavily influenced by Persian and Quranic Arabic. The legend overlaps the Islamic and Hindu folk elements so naturally and fluently that the story cannot be pinned to a single faith. It tells a story which is founded on a better understanding of the human predicament and
which transcends faith and tradition. It is spun around the values essential for this era of planetary crisis. Ghosh’s adaptation rests on the central ideas of limiting greed and preserving a balance between the needs of humans and those of other beings as a plea to environment protection. It is composed of seven parts.

Part I introduces the three main characters of the legend. Dokkin Rai symbolizes the destructive and negative forces of the jungle. He is haughty and strong willed. He is the lord of the jungle wielding terror in his tiger avatar. The mistress of the forest, Bon Bibi, is full of compassion and her brother, Shah Jongoli, is the epitome of strength and power. Bon Bibi and her brother arrive in the forest in response to the entreaties of terrified subjects of Dokkin Rai. The two forces, the evil and the benign, cross swords and soon Dokkin Rai was “lying prostrate, pinned under Shah Jongoli’s thigh.” Bon Bibi is fair-minded and kind. She does not want him dead, so they confine him to the “jungles of the south where land and water mingle at the river’s mouth.” Like other epic and folk heroines, Bon Bibi epitomizes harmony. Her magnanimity is such that “she gave every creature a place and ushered in peaceful coexistence.”

In the second part, the capitalists Dhona and Mona are introduced. Dhona is characterized with vaulting greed and mounting desire, unlike his brother Mona who liked “comfort and peace.” He persuades Dhona not to court danger and to live a contented life with what he has. But Dhona, like Ulysses, cannot rest from travel and craves to drink life to the lees. He refuses Mona’s counsel “to rust unburnish’d, not to shine in use.” He decides to go to the forest and make more riches. Mona helps him with vessels and men but refuses to accompany him. His crew is short of one man so he decides to include a poor cousin “at no cost to speak of.” In the character of Dhona and his poor cousin, Ghosh exemplifies the nature of the capitalist exploiter and the exploited subaltern and the overarching material greed in the modern times.

In the third part, Dhona approaches his cousin Dukhey and tempts him with money and prospects of marriage. His mother could not prevail upon him as he is “easily exploited in the restlessness of youth.” Seeing him determined to go with Dhona to the tideland”where dangers are legion”, she advises him to seek succour from Ma Bon Bibi if Dokkin Rai should come after him.

In part four, the sailors have set sail in search of honey. They cross many places and enter the dreaded territory of Dokkin Rai. Dokkin Rai has”spun a web of illusion”to trap the greedy merchants. He lures them with riches and honey and in turn demands Dukhey’s life. Dhona pleaded with and cajoled him, but to no avail. In the end overcome by greed and dread he agrees to leave Dukhey behind for Dokkin Rai to feast on. Ghosh observes that the man’s avarice to usurp the wealth of the forest in exchange for nothing is main cause of the imbalance in the ecology. Ghosh warns that the indiscriminate exploitation of nature will upset the delicate balance and bring chaos and destruction.

In part five, Dokkin Rai keeps his word and Dhona gets his reward aplenty. He is beside himself with glee when he sees his “waxen hoard”. Greed and desire have robbed him of his conscience and ethics. Dokkin Rai reminded him of his side of the bargain and he eagerly concedes to it. He has no qualms in staking Dukhey’s life in the bargain.
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Dukhey, the underprivileged, the subaltern, has no voice to speak on his behalf, nor is he able to express his innermost fears. In part six, Ghosh makes the feeble voice of the subaltern heard. Dukhey pleads, in vain, with his uncle to spare his life for the sake of the promise the latter has made to his mother. But through deceit and trickery Dukhey is discarded in the jungle for Dokkin Rai to feast on his young flesh. Out of his panic rises his mother’s advice to call upon Bon Bibi for help. He prays hard in the “metre of wonder”. Bon Bibi hears his frantic prayers and comes to his rescue. With her brother’s strength, she overcomes Dokkin Rai and Dukhey is “spirited away” to her home. At the behest of Bon Bibi, Shah Jongoli “tracked his quarry and dragged him to surrender to Bon Bibi.” Dokkin Rai lies repentant swearing he will be her loyal servant forever. Like Sita, Bon Bibi is also an ecofeminist. She forgives Dokkin Rai once again and exhorts him never to transgress his bounds and make do with what he has instead of seeking excess. She advises him to rein in his appetites and learn to speak properly. Under the care and nurturing of Bon Bibi, Dukhey is nursed back to health and life. Dokkin learns from his mistakes and decides to turn a new leaf. He agrees to compensate for his cruelty to Dukhey and promises to make him rich. Order is restored with the intervention of Bon Bibi.

The seventh and final part of Jungle Nama celebrates reunion and forgiveness. The legend of Bon Bibi, set in the island of Sundarbans, is, like Shakespeare’s Tempest, about magic, betrayal, love and forgiveness. Dukhey comes home to his mother with the secret of happiness that he has learnt from Bon Bibi. Bon Bibi’s secret echoes Ghosh’s solution for the present planetary crisis and environmental degradation.

All you need do, is be content with what you’ve got;
to be always craving more, is a demon’s lot.
A world of endless appetite is a world possessed.

Both Sita (A Poem) and Jungle Nama are seminal works in the genre of Indian folk poetics. Both the poems draw cognizance from the lore of yore. The story of Sita is from the epics and Bon Bibi from the Sundarbans legends. They are retold and redefined in the contemporary context to seek answers for present-day social issues like gender-engendered violence and climate derangement.

4.2.5 Indian folklorists and folk poetics: Scope for research and pedagogy

Literature is a study of man’s struggles and aspirations. In India, the struggle is to know the inner reality of the self without denying the outer reality. Life-denying and life-affirming concepts have existed side by side. Indian Literature is a synthesis of these concepts in the broadest sense.

Western scholarship has impacted the history of Indian literature. It runs the risk of replacing the dimension of the Indian tradition that is central to literature.

Indian poetics belongs to a tradition and is a self-validating activity, according to Edwin Gerow.

Folklorists are academicians, scholars, community organizers, and professionals whose interests range from local family traditions to transnational issues of ethnic
conflict, from publications to public programming, from the performing to the visual arts, from every day to community life, and from research to public policy. They publish scholarly articles and books and produce documentary films and recordings and radio programs, form communities to identify and conserve the folklore and cultural heritage, and work to establish public policy that honours and respects cultural diversity. The artistic, cultural, educational, historical, and political questions folklorists raise establish folklore as a part of the humanities.

India is a rich reservoir of folk material. But the scientific study of Indian folklore was slow to begin. In fact, it began with the missionaries in colonial India. They used the folk language with the aim of spreading Christianity. Soon the nationalists picked it up and folklore became a powerful tool to ignite nationalistic fervour in India. It was a viable and effective medium of ridding the country of the colonial shackles and winning India her Independence. After Independence, folklore studies took an academic turn and scholars pursued it and elevated the study to a science of culture, ethnography and anthropology.

The colonial folklorist has been credited with the collection and compilation of folklore material. Their contribution has been acknowledged by scholars like Richard M. Dorson and A. K. Ramanujan. It was assumed that the role played by the natives, commonly referred to as munshis, was limited to assisting the colonial folklorists with no claim to erudition for themselves. The roles of the munshis were considered insignificant and not worth even a mention in the documents. They were neither specified or acknowledged. Their capabilities were ignored by the colonial folklorist, like William Crooke. More often than not, the natives would give commentaries on the narratives and anthropological information about the texts. The historical documents reveal that the oral materials were of Indian sources. But studies on these colonial collectors remained essentially from the colonial perspective. A study of the archived documents shows that the native collectors were literate and in some cases intellectual with literary potential. Sadhana Naithani uncovers the historical value of one such manuscript collection. She asserts that one such native is the Indian scholar, Ram Gharib Chaube. Chaube’s work and contribution reflect his perspectives and capabilities on folklorists’ concerns. In her article, To Tell a Tale Untold: Two Folklorists in Colonial India, Naithani establishes that Chaube, an Indian scholar, who worked alongside Crooke was in pursuit of folktale in colonial India. He was also very conversant in the English language. She says, “Chaube emerges as one not only learned about the culture of his land but also steeped in the context of British colonial India.”

A.K. Ramanujan is a prominent scholar in Asian and Indian folklore studies. His ideas, translations, retellings and analyses, of Tamil and Kannada poetry and folktales have been discussed and researched in a number of academic groups and disciplines. The cultural material that he brings to academic forums is far-ranging and has direct, simple, individual applications. His contributions touch upon several disciplinary areas. He writes about Indian folklore and classic poetry. His works on Indian folklore, Where Mirrors are Windows (1989) and Three Hundred Ramayanas (1991) are context sensitive and exemplify the intertextuality of Indian literature. Some of his other notable works are The Interior Landscape: Love Poems from a Classical Tamil Anthology (1967) and Folktales from India, Oral Tales from Twenty Indian Languages (1991).
Rudyard Kipling was an English folklorist. His experiences in India and his familiarity with the Hindi language led him to create works like *The Jungle Book* and the *Just Go Stories* which are based on Indian themes.

Post Independent scholars in folklore include Dr. Satyendra, Devendra Satyarthi, Krishnadev Upadhayaya, Jhaverchand Meghani, Prafulla Dutta Goswami, Ashutosh Bhattacharya, Kunja Bihari Dash, Chitrason Pasayat, Somnath Dhar and Jagadish Chandra Trigunayan. Their studies were more literary than analytical. In the 1980s folklore studies were pursued systematically as a discipline with the formation of the Central Institute of Indian Languages and the American Institute of Indian Studies.

In contemporary India scholars like Jawaharlal Handoo, Sadhana Naithani, Kishore Bhattacharjee, Kailash Patnaik, VA Vivek Rai, the late Komal Kothari, Raghavan Payyanad, M Ramakrishnan and Nandini Sahu are committed to understanding folklore from an Indian point of view rather than from the western model. They attempt to uncover the hidden meaning of folklore directly from the folks. In their interpretations they explore the possibility of the use of folklore in the new socio-cultural domain. In the hands of these scholars, folklore studies have broken free from the constraints of the academic domain. They have bounced back to the folks to get their true meaning. Folklorists in India have contributed to South Asian folklore studies from a regional point of view. *Oral Epics of Kalahandi* by Dr. Mahendra Kumar Mishra from Kalahandi, Odisha, focusses on the tribal folklore of Central India and Odisha. He has also written on Saora and Paharia folk literature. His other works include *Visioning Folklore*, *Oral Poetry of Kalahandi* and three oral *Ramakathas* in the tribal oral tradition. Besides these, he has written five books on folklore theory and research methodology, adopting the folklore of western Odisha and Chhattisgarh.

Folklore, both in the cultural and academic domains, is significant for the role it plays in the contemporary socio-economic and political life of Kerala. The documentation, preservation and dissemination of Kerala folklore is undertaken by the Centre for Folklore Studies, established in 1999 at Vatakara, with Professor Raghavan Payyanad at the helm. Dr. Raghavan Payyanad has contributed substantially to the studies of Indian folklore. He has written many books about folklore. Some of his works include *Teyyavum Tottampattum*, *Folklore,Folklorinoru Padhana Paddhati* and *Folklore Sangalpangalum Sangetangalum*. He is an Indian folklorist of international renown and an international face of India. The National Folklore Support Centre in Chennai is also committed to folklore studies.

**Indian Poetics**

Indian poetics dwell on the concepts of *dhvani* and *rasa*. *Rasa* is the emotional experience. The first poetic compositions or *kavyas* show evidences of a self-conscious organisation of language, as in the Vedas. Indian poetics developed from an interest in the expressive devices of the Sanskrit language. The rationalisation of the well-crafted language is seen in later poetic traditions also. In the earliest known poetry of Bharata and Bhamaha, these expressions were not fully developed. It was during the first millennium AD that a unified theory of poetics, the *dhvani* theory, emerged. The two key poetic traditions that were illustrated in the works of scholars like Bharata, Bhatti and Dandin were the *rasa*...
bhava and the alankara-guna. Bharata lists four alankaras – upama or comparison, rupaka or metaphorical identification, dipaka, or enlightener, and yamaka or wordplay by means of repetition. His treatment of guna or merit and dosa or defect was developed by Dandin and Vamana. The language of poetry is concerned with generality and all poets agree that alankaras occupy the central position in poetic utterances. Poetry lies in the language the poet adopts to declare the meaning and the purposes or intentions of the poet himself. The use of alankaras is not just confined to the style of a poem; it lends credibility, poetic impact and beauty. The alankara theory with its use of upama (comparison), vastava (facts), atisaya (exaggeration), rupaka, (identification), utpreksa (metaphor) and slesa (pun) were further developed by Rudrata and Mammatu. Rudrata emphasised the guna, ojas, and integrated the riti theory with the alankara theory.

Kavyamimamsa, a notable work on poetics that followed the Dhvanyaloka, measures the authors against the presumed standard and provides a valuable insight into the Indian version of the distinction between the medieval and the classical. Poetry evolved into a free play of independent subjectivity. Kuntaka’s work is one of the most independently conceived in the history of Indian poetics. Other poets like Abhinavagupta, Bhoja and Rudrabhatia also seem uncommitted to any traditionally defined view. Mahimabhatta focuses attention on the function. He replaces dhvani with another function. Ruyyaka, author of the Alamkarasarvasya, was also interested in alankara, though different from the principles of Mammatu.

Hemacandra, Visvanatha, Vidyadhara, Vidyanyatha, Rupa Gosvamin and Jagannatha are later poets who gave comprehensive accounts of the dramatic rasa theory in the post-dhvani period. The poetic tradition was infused with the dramatic plot and character. The place of the nayaka or the hero was given emphasis. The rasa which touches upon the aesthetics and the verbality of poetic diction, which is inseparable from the notion of alankara, were the constituent elements of all good poetry and drama. The Dhvanyaloka offered a defence for dramatic poetry. The gap between the classical and medieval was bridged and this defence became the basis of later standards.

Over the years, poetry came under the sway of social and religious movements to express the needs of the times. New metres and modern rhyme schemes crept into Sanskrit from the popular levels. The new standards were formulated with Jayadeva’s Gita Govinda in the 12th century.

In the 15th century, the Malayalam poet Cherussery Namboothiri wrote the poem Krishnagatha. During the 16th century, Thunchathu Ezhuthachan’s Adhyathma Ramayana and Mahabharatham in the Kilippattu genre and Poonthanam Nambudiri’s Jnanappana followed the new trend initiated by Cherussery in their poems. Kunchan Nambiar introduced the new literary form called Thullal. Unnavi Variyar reformed the Attakatha literature.

The late 19th century poet Kumaran Asan transformed Malayalam literature from the metaphysical to the lyrical. Ulloor Parameswara Iyer contributed to the history of Malayalam. The nationalist poet Vallathol Narayana Menon wrote on contemporary social concerns. These poets contributed to the evolution of Indian poetics in general and Malayalam poetry in particular. A similar effluence can be seen in the other states of India like Assam, Bengal, Gujarat, Andhra Pradesh,
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Karnataka, Kashmir and the Hindi-speaking belt of the north. Contemporary Indian poetics is blended with Indian myths and legends. It is blended with Indian myth and philosophy. This can be seen in the works of Indian English writers like Mulk Raj Anand, R. K. Narayan, Raja Rao, Khushwant Singh, Anita Desai, Amrita Pritam, Toru Dutt, Sarojini Naidu, Kamla Das, Jayanta Mahapatra, Arundhati Roy and Jhumpa Lahiri.

Toru Dutta’s poems Savitri, Lakhman, Jogadhya Uma and The Legend of Dhruba deal with Indian myths and legends. In his epic poem Savitri, Sri Aurobindo uses the Savitri-Satyavan myth. Jayanta Mahapatra’s poems are drawn on symbols from the landscape of Odisha and from Hindu myths and philosophy. This is exemplified in his work Dawn at Puri. Sarojini Naidu’s well-known poem Village Song, echoes with the lovelorn cry of Radha for her lover Krishna. In the poem Damayanti to Nala, Naidu grapples with the problems of life and death. Her poems depict the Hindu ways of life. In Nissim Ezekiel’s very Indian poem Night of the Scorpion, the personal tone stands out. In Ayappa Panicker’s poems, the concept of modernism is dealt with. ONV Kurup, the poet-lyricist brought into poetry his socialist ideology. Akkitham Achuthan Namboothiri explored the themes of profound love and compassion in his works. Kamala Das wrote on diverse topics including women’s issues, child care and politics. Kadammanitta Ramakrishnan’s work was characterised by force, energy and a folk touch. The novelist Vikram Seth is also a successful poet. His works are based on contemporary events. The Frog and the Nightingale is written in the form of beast fable.

Nandini Sahu’s Sita (A Poem) is rich in folk-epic elements. Sita is both mythified and demythified in the poem. She is of the cosmos, and yet human. She is portrayed as an ecofeminist, educationist and a single parent. Contemporary social, gender and ecological issues find a blend in Sita, who is every woman.

Amitav Ghosh is a writer of international renown. He resorts to legends and folklore to seek answers to the present issues of climate derangement and human displacement. His latest book, Jungle Nama, is a verse adaptation of an episode from the 19th century Bon Bibi legend, popular in the Sundarbans.

There is ample scope for pedagogy and research in folk poetics in India. Folk studies are intrinsically enjoyable and may be used to inculcate values, style of language, and many other important learning items in the minds of learners. Unfortunately, however, they do not enter the mainstream of education, and are not included in the social stream either, because of the following constraints:

i. There is no newness in the text material, although new folk materials are being discovered.

ii. The pedagogical potential folk literature offers for the creative language curriculum, rhetoric, history, sociology, civics, and related subjects is not fully explored.

iii. The use of materials from folk literature for purposes of instruction at various levels of education is rather minimal.

iv. The three models of education – non-formal, formal, and informal – that teach literacy, literature and other subjects, do not adequately make use of folk literature as a powerful educational tool.
Formal education works under the framework set by the individual boards of education. It is very structured. To make folklore studies effective in the formal mode of education,

a. proper guidelines and framework should be designed;

b. the text should be made attractive both in content and presentation;

c. the language should be of the spoken form and should be lively, local and easily understood and imitated;

d. the lexical and sentence patterns should be those frequently used in daily life, as the present use of standard language dissolves all the peculiarities, nuances, and imaginative word play of the original form, and the stories lose their attractiveness when presented in dry language;

e. methodology to help the teachers to exploit folk literature as a pedagogical tool should be made a part of the curriculum; and

f. the assessment and evaluation tools should focus on the natural elements of folk literature and folk skills.

Non-formal education is based on the requirement of a particular job and is skill-based. It is flexible and offers courses as per the capabilities of the individuals. It does not have fixed schedules, and aids in developing specialised skills. The potential of folk literature as a pedagogical tool to impart training and skilling can be very effective if stories, tales and other instruction materials are flavoured with folk components like proverbs and songs.

Informal education is gained from family and life experiences. Transmission of core values start in the family. No cultural instrument can achieve this better and faster than the people’s folktales. This mode of education is most suited for folk instructions as it takes place easily and naturally. To enable learning, presentation of hands-on instructional material of folk art and crafts, architecture and medicine, and offering special mechanisms to use the materials properly, can enhance knowledge and skills and make learning practical and meaningful in the informal mode.

The New Education policy with its thrust on skill-based and project-based learning envisages a fruitful outcome in enabling students with 21st-century life skills. Folk literature studies can be the means to realise this vision. The potential of linguistic aspects of folk literature as pedagogical tools is an area that calls for thorough research and is yet to be fully exploited.

4.2.6 Contemporaneity of folk poetics

The term ‘folk poetry’ is used for texts which have characteristics of poetry that belong to the oral tradition of the common people. Writing did not play a prominent role in the transmission of folk poetry. The transmission is oral and a certain flexibility of transmission is acknowledged. The text is usually well-known to the audience. Heroic epics and poetry with romantic and religious themes are included under narrative folk poetry. The themes vary from historical to social, religious to love, and nostalgia to sadness. Folk poetry is also used during occasions like weddings and festivals in the form of live performances. These
performances were staged in small communities. Migrations to urban centres, the advent of television, tape recorders and digital media have enabled them to reach a larger audience and play a significant role in political, national and social life. The increased status of some folk poetry adds to its contemporaneity and may cause it to live on for future generations.

Folklore is now an oral tradition that is defined over and against technology and continues to be in the present without being fully of the present. It persists and is recreated in print, recordings, broadcasting, televising and through the digital media. Digital technology has disrupted the word of mouth culture because of the absence of face to face communication. “The electronic vernacular is neither speech nor writing as we have known it, but something in between, and increasingly, with the convergence of technologies, it is multimedia.” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett1996a). Digitisation and connections between orality, temporality, technology, and cultural production threaten to result in a folklore crisis today. The crisis is more pronounced because folklorists identify their work with anthropology, literature, sociolinguistics, performance studies, cultural studies, gender studies, ethnomusicology and oral history. Folklorists have also turned to commercial culture, mass or tourism; popular entertainment; and media. The shift in folklore studies from classic curriculum to national literature, from oral pedagogy to reading and writing has contributed to the emergence of oral literature as a category, taking folklore away from philology that linked folklore to culture studies, and reorienting it to a broader concept of orality and eventually performance.

Explicating the current crises and the contemporaneity of folklore, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, a scholar of Performance and Jewish Studies, is of the opinion that the notion of folklore has to be redefined and a new name has to be found that will better reflect the field, carry more positive associations and be able to plot a future. She says that folklore could be defined as the study of a particular mode of cultural production and its field restructured as a new kind of “science of tradition” by converting the historic repudiation of the “inauthentic” into the critical study of “heritage”.

Institutionalisation of folklore courses began in America after the 1940s. It became an independent field of study with Ralph Steele Boggs creating an interdisciplinary curriculum in folklore at the University of North Carolina. The course was offered in various universities which included Indiana University, University of Pennsylvania and University of California, Los Angeles, to mention a few. The programmes had different names, like ‘folklore’, ‘folklife’, ‘folk studies’, ‘oral traditions’, ‘folklore and folklife’, ‘folklore and mythology’ and ‘folklore, mythology and films’. These courses differed in their orientation, emphasis, resources and intellectual history. The Centre for Studies in Oral Tradition, University of Missouri, aligns the terms so that oral tradition is defined as a “a rapidly evolving consortium of disciplines”, subsuming folklore and other fields. The current trend of folklore programmes is alignment with art, culture and performance. In the 20th century, the contours of folklore have changed further. Difficult economic conditions change the course of a discipline. Rather than assuming the local, scholars in these areas are asking how the locality is produced, in the contexts of diaspora, transnationalism, globalism and postcolonialism (Appadurai 1997). New developments create new avenues for folklore. The threat
to folklore is its very term which carries negative connotations in both general and academic parlance.

Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett says that folklore “is built on paradoxes. The correcting of error is an overture to its eradication… Cultural forms are destroyed under the pretext of their preservation.” Technology plays an important role in structuring the discontinuities in the cultural field that produce folklore, and at the same time the technology of communication makes folklore a discipline. In the “telecratic age”, there is a rich potential for cultural production and folkloristic analysis, but as Dorst observes, “our discursive practices as folklorists do not equip us very well to deal with these unprecedented and complex conditions of cultural production”. Today, folklore is by definition a vanishing subject.

According to Dorson, “the flowers of tradition are being crushed by the steamroller of industrial civilization”. He predicts that in a few more years, there will be no more folklore, and there will be no need for folklorists. He concluded that lore will be found in the media and folk in the city. “To avoid the taint of antiquarianism”, oral culture must be substituted. In folklore, contemporaneity is opposed to antiquity. A more radical approach to a post-disciplinary formation of folklore studies is to go to the root of our intellectual history and disciplinary formation.

4.2.7 Open-endedness

An open-ended story is one in which the ending is left uncertain to some degree. It allows the readers to decide or think how the story will end. Open-ended stories can be based on character, situation or plot. A knowledge of these can guide readers to the most logical end of the story. Open-ended stories are closer to real-life situations, as in real-life experiences one rarely comes across neat, tied up endings.

In the context of folklore, the technique of leaving the end of a story in ambiguous terms has been mostly seen in legends. Legends are, according to Bascom, one of the subgenres of folk narratives, the others being folktales and myths. These are grouped together based on formal features like presence and absence of closing and ending formulas, the element of belief and the dimension of time. Folklorists and scholars have attempted to collect and classify legends. The systematic study of folklore helps to understand the nature of man. Legends can serve this purpose only if they are properly and adequately interpreted and are found appealing to other disciplines. Legends can be closely linked to psychology because of their open-endedness. The open-ended nature of legends makes room for the exercise of fantasy, which is valuable to the study of psychology. Bascom states that myths are set in the remote past and legends are set in the recent past. In his Analytical Essays, Dundes uses the imagery of the hourglass to explain the segments of time in legends, myth and tale. The hourglass is open at the two ends. Dundes says that the place of myth in the hourglass would be at the bottom of the hourglass and legend would occupy the upper part of the hourglass. He explains that both myth and legend happen in the time and place of the real world, hence their respective positions in the hourglass. He places myth at the bottom because there is no time before the myth time. Myth time is the earliest imaginable time and it runs up until the world and men were created. Continuing the analogy further, Dundes places creation in the middle of the hourglass. He ascribes to the legends
the upper portion as they are open-ended. Where the beginning of the myth time was open-ended, the end of the legend time is open-ended. The open-endedness is relevant because the action or plot of a legend is not completed in the narrative itself. It continues in the present and into the future. The action in the myth is normally completed in the myth while the action of the legend may never be completed. The individual feels closer to the action of the legend than to the action of the myth that happened long ago. Legends are closer to the individual in time than the action of folk tales that never really happened. Because of its open-endedness, the action of the legend remains incomplete and unpredictable. The sense of immediacy may produce fear or other emotions, which make them a more appropriate subject matter for psychological studies than myth or folktale.

Myth and legends are set in this world. Fantasy is introduced into the time and place of the real world. Folktales, on the other hand, are set in a fictional world. The reader leaves the time and place of this world and enter the fictitious world of the folk tale. Myth occurred before the world was what it is now. It tends to be removed from the contemporary scene. As the events in the myth took place a long time ago, they are less immediate than local legends. The immediacy of time and place of the myths do not impact the emotions per se.

Legends have a generic power and are infinite in number. They are open ended and hence there is a continuous supply of legends with multiple permutations and combinations of interpretation. Myths are, on the other hand, basic and finite in number.

Open-ended folk materials make excellent writing activities for students. Teachers may choose to take a close-ended story and leave it open to the students to finish before letting them compare their endings with the author’s ending.

4.2.8 Folk skills

Folk arts include oral narratives like stories, jokes and anecdotes; performances like music and dance; beliefs and customs; and material culture—what folklorists call “stuff” — like food, hairstyles, or crafts.

The study of folk arts and folklore can happen easily in any subject area with any age group and allows one to deepen self-identity, to better understand cultural differences and to strengthen cultural stewardship.

Folk skills are techniques which helped our ancestors to live, survive and thrive. They establish a connect with the past. They offer a physical and direct interaction with nature, engage one’s mind and body and offer solid practical outdoor solutions. Most importantly they are avenues for livelihood. With the growing dearth of sustainable options for livelihood, artistes are facing destitution, poverty and marginalisation. Honing up folk skills can open up a viable means of earning a living in unexplored sectors. They help make one self-sufficient and enrich life.

The Government of India introduced the ministry of skill development and entrepreneurship (MSDE) in 2014 with the aim of developing and honing these skills. The National Skill Development Corporation (NSDC) under the ministry has helped artistes with traditional skills that face severe marginalisation, into the job market to help preserve the folk item and enable them to earn a livelihood.
Folk skills like those of puppeteers, circus artistes, street artistes and snake charmers are thrust areas to help them compete with the emerging new economy and attract new audiences. Apart from these, raising livestock, fishing, gardening, hand-crafting, weaving, basketry, tent pitching, carving, carpentry, pottery, embroidery, sewing, quilting, thatching, plumbing, leather crafts, cooking, baking, food preservation and storytelling are considered traditional folk skills. Ethnobotany is an upcoming area that focuses on the skill of recognising and using plants for their magical and medicinal properties.

These skills are based on traditional knowledge and need to be passed over to the younger generation through education, arts and skills training, and social support.

4.2.9 Teaching of folklore in India

Folklore and culture studies are gaining importance in the teaching arena. The National Education Policy has laid emphasis on skill-based learning with due thrust on core values of integrity and patriotism. Ecological, cultural and gender issues are also high on the educational agenda, while the main focus continues to remain on science and technology.

The role and importance of folk literature in inculcating joyful learning and instilling core values has been recognised globally. Folktales are filled with moral and ethical values. It is hoped that these values, redesigned in the modern context, can create awareness of past traditions and help find solutions for the modern problems, ranging from the environmental crises and extinction of species to the melting of glaciers and depletion of the ozone layer. They also address problems of pollution and industrial effluence, leading to health hazards as fatal and all-consuming as the global pandemic.

The folk tales build on positive values of cooperation and interdependence which can easily imprint themselves on young minds. Stories on folklore lend themselves to all kinds of media. The visual and the print media are potent sources to capture the attention and the imagination of the children. The open-ended nature of these stories gives ample scope for applying them in the present context and interpreting them to address contemporary issues.

India has a huge range of short stories and tales because of its diverse culture, language and religion. Indian tales, sagas, myths and other narratives comprise the most interesting part of Indian literature in the form of folklore. Writers in all languages have taken recourse to the epics and legends not only to give a glimpse of past oral traditions but to recontextualise them in the present. Indian poets and writers from Toru Dutt to Kamala Das and from R K Narayan to Amitav Ghosh have made effective use of folklore in their works.

Folk literature is the greatest resource for students who want to learn about India. It can help them to know their culture or a culture different from their own. Including great works of religious, philosophical literature and traditions of Indian folklore and mythology with fantastic tales of demons and goddesses in the syllabus can be exciting and motivating. A close reading of these texts can offer explanations for the psychology of power struggles, patriarchy and gender discrimination. It can bring out newer meanings and purposes behind folkloric narratives.
Towards an Indian Folk Poetics

A well-designed curriculum with a framework of methodology and assessment will enable the learner to create new tales and invest old tales with new meaning. They will be able to realise that telling and retelling of the tales was not the prerogative of the past, but relevant in the present and the future too. A simple exercise to make a presentation and provide an interpretation on any tale they have heard will have far-reaching implications on their knowledge of folklore and their ability to reconceptualise it. Such an exercise will help in gauging, defining and fixing values in the learner. It can aid in comparative analysis of the folklore of different parts of the globe. The learner is able to comprehend culture that crosses over boundaries of geography, history and technology and also understand the thrust areas in the variant version of the same tale. The retelling of the tale provides insight into diverse cultures and experiences. The oral tradition is one of the oldest continuous traditions in the world. Several written compilations of Indian folk tales have been in existence for more than a thousand years, and have circulated through the Indo-European world, inspiring numerous translations and derivatives. Many of the same themes are found in the folktales of other cultures, either because of cultural contact or because they are so universal that they occur wherever people live together in a community.

Such presentations will put into perspective that folklore is not confined to a place or an era of distant antiquity but is an expression of their own generation. The flexible nature of the lore provides the context and the meaning in the contemporary milieu. The textualised and printed forms of oral narratives are useful for hermeneutic studies. The palimpsest of the epics can be read with the lens of modernity. Analysis of gender roles and insight studies in ecology, feminism and masculinity studies are enabled through the teaching of folklore.

When students are encouraged to collect and explain their own lore, they do so naturally and effortlessly. There is joy in the act as the telling of tales is a profoundly human endeavour. These tales are all the more “telling” as they provide insight into diverse cultures and experiences.

Board games are also an integral part of folk tradition. Folk games like chess, ludo and snakes and ladders originated from Indian epics. These games contain mathematical knowledge like counting, measurement, the concept of shapes and sizes, and geometrical ideas. It promotes analytical skills and socialization through action. The traditional games were found to be the best ways of teaching and learning when introduced in the primary schools in the eastern state of Odisha. The indoor board game, ‘kasadi’, played with tamarind seeds and a wooden board with 14 pits, is popularly used. Dr Mahendra Kumar Mishra, a folklorist and an educator, has collected these games and has documented them in video form. Other games like ‘goats and tigers’ and ‘ganjifa’, which were the forerunners of the card games of today, can help in concentration and the honing up of mental skills.

India is rich in the varied tradition of folk music and folk songs. Some traditional folk song genres are recognised as Intangible Cultural Heritage listed by UNESCO. These are powerful teaching aids that not only develop a skill with rigorous practice but afford tremendous relaxation. Among these traditions is the well-known musical and religious repertoire known as Baul, which has become famous in the world music scene.
The folk text of India can be used to teach religious precepts or moral lessons, especially to young learners. They are simple tools of entertainment that will help bring human beings on a common global platform of tolerance and respect.

Folktales are effective means to inculcate core values in the youth. In the formal and non-formal modes of education, it should be an ongoing process from the primary to the senior secondary level and beyond. The telling of stories should be worked into school curricula at all levels of the education sector. The mode of narration must change as the children grow older. The stories told should be more complex and touch on every subject relevant to the world view and tradition of the learner. It could also be infused with elements borrowed from other cultures. Stories about folk heroes will not only make the youth appreciate their people’s traditions and help them to assert their cultural identity, but will also teach them the virtues of bravery, endurance and self-sacrifice. These are qualities that characterised that our ancestors. These qualities are lost in this age of individualism, corruption, greed and inordinate ambition. Apart from folktales, other forms of folklore like proverbs and riddles should be made available to the youth. Using folklore to inculcate core values in the youth should also be a part of the home environment in an informal manner. The family can play a significant role in the wellbeing of the people through the transmission of core values. No cultural instrument can achieve this better and faster than the people’s folktales

According to Barre Toelken: “Folklore comes early and stays late in the lives of all of us.” This is especially true of Indians for whom folk was a way of life in the past. India’s rich folklore heritage can tell tales with a telling effect and is an ideal tool for all forms of education – formal, non-formal and informal.

It is one of the areas with immense potential for research and pedagogy today. The importance of folklore is evident from the fact that UGC Net examination has papers on folk literature, and many Indian universities have introduced folklore as a part of their postgraduate syllabi, bringing folklore studies to the mainstream. There are ample job opportunities open to students of folklore in academic departments, museums, archives, art centres, libraries, heritage homes, medicine, film and entertainment industry, language and linguistic departments and entrepreneurship.

**4.3 LET US SUM UP**

Folk poetics is an upcoming area of research and creative writing. The genre is viable and lends itself to interpretations and reimagining, from its nature of contemporaneity and open-endedness. In the case studies, one can discern a host of contemporary issues addressed in the retelling of the stories of the epics and the legends. The varied and contextual explanation of the folk texts and its rich oral tradition enliven and contribute immensely to modern literature. Folk poetics breaks free from the confines of the past and goes beyond place, time, space and relation. India’s strength in its diversity is what makes folklore multicultural. The orality, plurality and multiculturality of folklore lends solidarity to the Indian diversity. The unit also discusses the various folk texts including the epics as well as the modern readings of these texts. This offers insight to the rural, cultural, social and historical aspects of Indian society and provides a role model for identity and nationality. It signifies a possibility of looking critically at the past and redefining systems and customs to suit the present.
4.4 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS


### 4.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

1) Briefly describe two early Indian folk texts other than the epics.

2) Give one example each of an epic parody and of a tribal adaptation of the *Mahabharata*.

3) What is the significance of *Mappila Ramayana*?

4) Sahu’s Sita is a progressive woman. Discuss.

5) Trace the evolution of Indian folk poetics from the first poetic compositions to the contemporary Indian poets.
6) What do you understand by the contemporaneity of folk poetics?

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7) Explain open-endedness in folklore

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8) How are legends different from myth and folktales?

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9) Why is it essential to develop folk skills?

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10) How is the teaching of folklore of relevance, even though the focus is on science and technology?

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