

Block

5**FOLK POETRY**

UNIT 18***Oral Epics in India* by Stuart H. Blackburn** **5**

UNIT 19***The Awakened Wind: The Oral Poetry of the Indian Tribes* by Sitakant Mahapatra** **18**

UNIT 20***Ramayana in Modern South India* Ed. Paula Richman** **44**

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BLOCK 5 FOLK POETRY

The oral songs of India are on wide-ranging themes like birth, death, love, sex marriage, misery and tragedy of human life, the concept of time, eternity, spirituality, various rites, rituals, and celebrations that are different from clan to clan, village to village. Oral poetry reflects the socio-cultural, religious and economic life patterns of the communities and thus its documentation is an authentic source of knowledge. Oral poetry, as is obvious from the nomenclature, is passed from generation to generation vocally and is rich in meanings, allusions, references, images, symbols and metaphors. Remarkably skilful heroic meters of the Indian epics have been developed out of the oral stream of narratives, which, after suffering many changes, eventually ceased to be oral literature and are now enshrined in manuscripts and books. This block will acquaint you with our great epics like the *Ramayana* and with several folk and tribal versions of the epic poem.



UNIT 18 *ORAL EPICS IN INDIA* BY STUART H. BLACKBURN

Structure

- 18.0 Objectives
- 18.1 Introduction
- 18.2 Indian Epics as a Genre
- 18.3 Let Us Sum Up
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18.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- appreciate what we indicate by the term ‘oral epic’, both in terms of ‘community’ and ‘performance’, and what we mean by ‘oral epics in literature’;
- understand what is meant by epic performance;
- follow the relations between the folks and the Sanskrit epics (*The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*);
- comprehend *Oral Epics in India* as a compendium of myths of the various regions of India; and
- gain insights into Indian epics as a genre.

18.1 INTRODUCTION

The history of literature dates back to the earliest human society. Right from the early days, people created stories, mainly to entertain themselves, sometimes to educate others, and for several other purposes. Even before the introduction of the writing system, such stories were transmitted orally from generation to generation. The term “oral literature” originates from here; at the early stage of human history, all literary works were preserved by oral tradition. As writing systems were invented and literacy replaced orality, oral literature was also written down as fixed texts. The codification of oral literature, however, is not a simple event in which a work of literature merely changed its form from one to another.

The key term, “oral literature”, needs to be defined. The term “oral literature” is an oxymoron because “literature” implies the usage of script. Even if we assume that the term poses no internal ambiguity, it refers to a distinct conceptual field of literature that is spread by word of mouth without recourse to writing, both the shorter forms (tongue twisters, war-cries, hitches etc.) and the longer forms (legends, songs, stories, epics, etc). Therefore the definition of “oral literature” would exclude those which do not have any narrative structure (examples would be proverbs and war cries) and include the written extensions of various oral texts. Thus, the term “oral literature” would refer to a work of literature with narrative structure which has spread by oral-aural medium and mainly its textualized extension.

In this unit we would use the term “oral epics” for contemporary performance traditions of Indian epics, including the Sanskrit epics (the *Ramayana* and the

Mahabharata). We would also use the term “folk epics” which are sung and heard and usually patronized by low and middle castes in small towns and villages in India.

18.2 INDIAN EPICS AS A GENRE

The emergence of oral epics in regional languages also accompanied the crystallization of cultural, literary, and historical regions. Several oral epics in India situate themselves at the cusp of this historical development. While some articulate the tensions of a critically transformational period in social and political history, others may have an overtly romantic character expressive of the varied emotions of a passionate and sometimes tragic love between individuals. Indeed, oral epics in India may be classified according to the themes they articulate martial, sacrificial, and romantic, rather than solely heroic. Felix Oinas speaks about triad features that typify the Indian oral epics – narrative, nature, poetic, and heroic. He observes that “folk (or oral) epic songs are narrative poems in formulaic and ornamental style dealing with the adventures of extraordinary people”. These triad features are also predominant in epics from Central Asia, Africa, epics in Slavic and Romance languages. Epics tell stories. They also contain heroic elements. The heroic nature of the panegyric and the lament has made scholars think that they are “pre-epics”. A recent study shows that some African “praise poems” are epic in nature. According to Brenda Beck (“Core triangles in the Folk Epics of India”) some performances of the *Annamar* epic have more panegyric features rather than narrative features. On the other hand Komal Kothari stresses the role of praise-songs in the performance of Rajasthani folk epics in the essay “Performers, Gods and Heroes in the Oral Epics of Rajasthan”.

The second generic feature of the oral epic is its poetic nature. Indian oral epics are essentially poetic in nature. However from our text we come to know that there is a shift from poetry to song in many of the Indian oral epics. Beck, Blackburn (“Patterns of Development for Indian Oral Epics”) and Smith (“Scapegoats of the Gods: The Ideology of the Indian Epics”) have emphasized that the language of the epic in India is more influenced by song rhythms than by poetic meters. Another feature which characterizes Indian oral epics is nonconformity of poetic meters with rhythmic structures in music. Epic performances are dominated by the song although there are prose and non-sung sections too (*vacanam*, *varta*, *arthav*), which are simultaneously used to elaborate the sung material. “Song” is integral to Indian epics (Chattisgarhi *git*, Tamil *pattu*, and Tulu *paddana*). Propp reiterates this fact by saying that “musical, vocal performance is so essential to it ... that works not meant to be sung do not qualify as epic”.

The third generic feature of the epic is its heroic nature. One thing we should remember in the context of oral epics is that heroic is seen to be martial and is quite different from magical, human, or celestial. Even though many epics indulge in supernatural occurrences as in *The Kalevala* (Oinas), many African epics do have magical heroes. While talking about one West African oral epic Martha Kendall and Charles Bird observe: “One bard...sings for three hours about Sunjata’s quest to discover his adversary’s *nya* (secret power), and then describes the war ensuing between them in three lines”. Oral epics in India touch both the human and the supernatural. The divine and the human are closely linked in Indian culture and in Hinduism itself. The divine and the devotee are an inseparable part of one other. Indian oral epics set down a classificatory system comprising martial, sacrificial, and romantic epics. Martial epics mainly deal with war or political conflict. Romantic

epics deal with a quest of love. Sacrificial epics are based on a heroic act of self-sacrifice, like performing the act of *sati* (a woman immolates herself on her husband's funeral pyre). Martial epics are closely followed in legends, myths usually tell about sacrificial heroes and folktales centre on romantic epics.

| Martial | Sacrificial | Romantic |
|---------------------|-------------|---------------------------|
| Tampimar | Kanyaka | Muttupattanam (bow song) |
| Annamar | Ellamma | Lorik-Canda |
| Palnadu | | Guga |
| Pabuji | | Dhola |
| Devnarayan | | Tolubommalata |
| Jungappa | | |
| Alha | | |
| Kordabbu (paddana) | | |

Following is a list of Oral Epics in India by performance context:

| Ritual | | Entertainment |
|------------------------|----------|---------------|
| Tampimar (bow song) | Kanyaka | Tolubommalata |
| Muttupattan (bow song) | Jungappa | Lorik-Canda |
| Kordabbu (paddanna) | Guga | Dhola |
| Teyyam | | Alha |
| Annamar | | |
| Palnadu | | |
| Ellamma | | |
| Pabuji | | |
| Devnarayan | | |

Epics and Community

Oral epics occur in local and regional contexts all over the Indian subcontinent, engaging a wide range of audiences, singers, and ritual specialists. They represent some of the most striking and complex expressions of narrative culture found within Hindu traditions. Usually closely tied to the geography and history of a particular region, their plots invariably play out in a landscape that is recognizable to audiences. Their main characters and themes are intimately connected to the caste identities of singers and audiences of a particular group, of a new setting, or its locale, thus making these lengthy and complex narratives a conduit for the (re)creation of social identities, and local, subaltern histories. Oral epics in India emphasize song and declaimed prose, sometimes in distinction to poetry. In India epics help to shape a community's self-identity. Since multiculturalism exists in India, the epics in India tend to become stories of various communities. It is only when a community identifies itself with the epic, the epic becomes an epic in the true sense of the term. Stuart Blackburn's essay deals with the geographical and cultural spread of epics and how a local hero acquires a national identity over a period of time. Joyce Flueckiger's close study of the *Lorik-Canda* epic also reiterates the close link between the narrative content and epic community. In the essays of Blackburn and Flueckiger we come across processes through which epic narratives change in response to the

communities in which they are performed. Epic traditions are dynamic in nature and continue to change and respond to the various communities in India where they are performed. Peter Claus in his study of the Tulu story of Koradabba shows how the variants of the story are used mainly to express change in response to the various communities in the southwest Karnataka. Epics shift according to shifts in the expression of a particular community. A social group's identity predetermines the epic's characteristics. The Finnish epic Kalevala is an apt example. Oral epics in India chronicle the past. They become documents of their own caste or region. Thus epics and community are interlinked and interrelated in India. The progress and success of these epics historicize the community into which they are born.

Oral Epics and *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana*

By definition, oral epics are distinct from the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, which were written and composed in Sanskrit; however, oral epics sometimes interact with Sanskrit in intricate and reflexive ways, extending or reworking themes and even characters from the Sanskrit epics. For example, the plot of an oral epic may deal with some kind of relationship with characters from the *Mahabharata* or *Ramayana*, who may themselves then appear as incarnations or *avatars* in the oral epics. Moreover, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are also performed by various social-groups in regional languages and local contexts, we are to remember that *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are national epics. In general, we can state that oral epics exist within an ecology of texts, of which the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* form a part. Jonathan Goldberg cites the example of the shadow puppet theatre in Andhra Pradesh. This performance is based on Telugu literary texts of the *Ramayana*. In many ways it deviates from the original *Ramayana* written by Valmiki in Sanskrit. On the other hand there are examples where folk epics follow the Sanskrit texts very closely. The *Annamar* and *Alha* epics closely follow the *Mahabharata*, the *Pabuji* epic follows the *Ramayana*. In this epic we find Laksmana is reborn as the protagonist *Pabuji*. Ravana is *Pabuji*'s chief enemy. However one should never assume that all oral epics in India strictly adhere to the Sanskrit epic frameworks. John D. Smith notes that the only version of the *Mahabharata* that is performed in Rajasthan is completely different from the original Sanskrit version. The folk community in Rajasthan has made it its own version, and it is imbued with the local flavor. These folk epics carry new bearings with them which has no connection with the original version.

Karine Schomer points out that the *Alha* epic inverts the *Mahabharata* in significant ways, so that it becomes "a Mahabharata of the Kali Yuga". John Smith and Brenda Beck speak about the commonalities between folk and Sanskrit epics. Beck is of the view that there lies a structural unity underlying folk and Sanskrit epics in a triangle of characters at the core of the stories: there is a chief hero or heroine, there is a secondary male and there exists a secondary female character too. Thus to be prudent we cannot afford to generalize the commonalities nor the striking differences that exist between the folk and Sanskrit epics.

Epics in Performance

Performance of the oral epics necessarily involves interaction with its audience. In contrast to Sanskrit epics, the performer of an oral epic is there with his own social group, so he modifies the work, sometimes omitting some details from the original version and at other times adds an extra explanation, in consideration of the level of the social group and the time, place, and occasion the work is orated. Because of this, oral epics are highly variable; it could be altered in detail or in content according to its new setting, locale and social group. Performers are exclusively male. Only in

the Rajasthani *par* tradition a husband and wife form as a team and perform together. There are virtually no instances where a woman performs alone or women perform as a team. Epic performance in India is largely a male bastion. Performers are usually from the lower sections of society, mostly the untouchables. The middle-caste landowners are the patrons. On the other hand the upper echelons of the society, the Brahmins dominate the classical performance of the Sanskrit epics.

Song-recitation and dance-drama are two broad groups which characterize the performances of Indian oral epics. A small group of men accompanied by some musical instruments (sometimes with a painted scroll, shadow puppet theatre etc.) perform the song-recitation, and dance-drama exists where song-recitation exists. In a way dance-drama is a secondary form. Susan S. Wadley, while speaking about the performance strategies in a North Indian epic, observes that the performances, performers and the choices they make are all closely inter-linked. In the *Dhola* epic the shifts in song genre are linked to shifts in content and mood. She clearly shows that specific delivery styles are used for specific functions. In India the performances of oral epics are guided by the culture-specifics of the locale rather than by its narrative feature.

Beck has essentially pointed out that ritualistic performance is genuine to the oral epic in India. This is especially true of the martial and sacrificial epics. Ritual features like trance dance, acts of self-mutilation, and the tradition of deification of the hero (singing of him as god, whose power is then present to protect his community) mark the folk genres in Rajasthan. In this process the heroes of oral epics crystallize through a vertical process of deification from “real” hero to epic hero or deity.

Epics: Oral and Written

The orality of a text speaks of its composition, performance as well as transmission. Some of the oral epics in India have no written text at all. They are transmitted orally and pass on from one generation of folk performers to the other. The Sanskrit epics exist at the national and international levels and are transmitted as books. In fact Dennis Tedlock, following Ruth Finnegan’s earlier observation, has shown that oral epics have a tendency to develop along the literature cultures around the world. In Indian epic traditions there are a large variety of written texts. Sometimes they are inscribed on palm leaves (which are known as *punthis*), sometimes they are handwritten on paper.

Performers of oral epics in India generally use the written texts in a number of ways. Performers of the folk tradition who come from the lower sections of society are usually non literate, and the text becomes a symbol of authenticity for them. Some other performers seem to memorize and repeat parts of the text in their performances. Blackburn (1988) points out that an oral performance is not necessarily an exact duplication of the text. Rather it is the text which grows out of an oral tradition. It is through the oral performances that the epic hero becomes a real hero. The text then becomes an accompaniment, the performance and the oral tradition matter the most. When the bow song text is recited exactly as it is in the written text, even then the tradition remains oral.

Oral performance is characterized by its episodic nature. The long epics are commonly divided into segments for the process of performances. The *Pabuji* epic is usually divided into twelve *parvaro* (episodes), the *Palandu* epic which takes hundreds of hours to sing is also divided into segments, for the smooth progression of the epic story. The *Alha* is divided into various *larai* (battles). Over time, when

certain episodes become more popular among a particular social group, they are more often repeated, whereas certain episodes remain unpopular and are rarely heard and remain unknown to the oral performers also. Rarely is the entire text repeated in a performance. The full story remains confined to the text whereas we are more concerned with the epic tradition which outgrows the text, which comprises the unwritten and unperformed aspects of the oral tradition. Oral epics in India serve as means to educate and entertain members of the society as well as to preserve the cultural traditions of the Indian society reflected in its form and content. Often the performances of oral epics serve to provide a role model for new (or revived) values, as in cases of the Sanskrit epics. The insight into the society provided by the process help to understand the performances of the oral epics better and to look into Indian society in relationship with a cultural phenomenon.

The Structure and Content of the Text

The book is divided into two parts. The first part of the book records the studies of oral epics in their social and performance contexts. Several essays draw a comparative profile, while others analyze single traditions, a shared pool of information as oral epics in India. It has three sections which concentrate on epic and community, epic performance, and relations between the folk epics and Sanskrit epics, as we have already discussed. In part two we have the synopsis of the epic stories and an overview of each epic tradition.

We will now look at some of the epic stories and have an overview of them:

Alha: It is a regional or supra-regional epic sung throughout north India. It is an entirely male performance genre, the performers are male and it is performed before male-audiences in the “heartland of north India”. The subject-matter is that of the Sanskrit epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. The setting of this oral epic is the late twelfth century A.D. on the eve of the Turkish conquest of north India. It speaks of the fate of the Chandel king located in the city of Mahoba. The epic consists of a series of battles (*larai*) between the Rajputs, the dwellers of Mahoba and their enemies. At the end the Chandels are annihilated.

There are fifty-two larais in this epic-cycle. However, the performers only sing the popular ones. The performances range from being solo, where a man is accompanied by a dholak (drum), to group performances led by the head-singer. These performances occur at night, mainly during the monsoon season, when there is no work for the agricultural labourers. The performers comprise of professionals, nonprofessionals as well as semiprofessionals. The performance begins with an invocation (*vandana*) to Sarada Devi of Maihar (now in Madhya Pradesh). *Alha* as a folk genre is highly popular in north India even today.

Annamar: The *Annamar* story takes place in fifteenth-century in Tamil Nadu (Kongu area). It is a martial folk epic. It has both oral versions as well as texts. There are no fixed texts or fixed number of episodes. However there is a continuity among the many versions which points out the fact that Annamar has one story. There are two brothers and a sister all born of the same mother within a span of few minutes. In some versions of this folk epic the brothers steal the limelight, the sister is a shadowy presence. In other versions the sister occupies the centrestage. The singers are usually professionals or semi-professionals who are male, and who sing along with a hand drum. There is, however one professional female singer.

This folk epic genre is commonly performed in the temple courtyard. This is basically a public epic and not a household one. The male audience usually join the male

singers during the performance. Sometimes they come to feel themselves possessed and attain a trance like state. In the climactic scene they draw the swords and reenact the battle. At the end the warriors fall to the ground and attain a death-like stupor. Their bodies are then covered with white clothes to symbolize their death. The lead singer then comes to the foreground and chants magical verses, the same verses that the sister is said to have sung over her dead brothers. The magic works, the performers are revived. The sister, along with her brothers, ascends a small chariot and moves towards heaven.

Bow Song (*Muttupattan*): This dates back to a seventeenth-century Tamil poem. It is not a single epic tradition but comprises hundreds of shorter narratives that share many features with various Indian oral narratives. This epic tradition represents a folk Hinduism of hero stones, spirit possession and magical healing powers which are common all over India. In the recent times the bow song is found along the Western Ghats to the Bay of Bengal, and in Kanya Kumari.

The performers are usually male, sometimes only the lead singer is a woman. The performers are semi-professionals with little formal training. They sit around the upright bow, the lead singer strikes a pair of sticks on the taut string, shaking the metal-bells which hang from the wooden-frame. Other performers lay with a pair of slim wooden blocks, an hour-glass-shaped drum (*utukkai*), and a pair of brass cymbals. A festival is held every year near every temple (a tree, a walled structure, an anthill) for three days and nights. The singing on the bow song is indispensable to the festival; it is through the human mediums that the gods descend on the earth. Depending on the ritual importance of bow songs it can be largely divided into two broad groups. The first group comprises “birth stories”; the second group comprises of “death stories” which are usually historical accounts or biographies sung in praise of the local heroes.

Candaini (*Lorik-Canda*): This epic tale of *Candaini*, the daughter of Raja Mahar from Gaura Garh and Lorik is performed from the Gangetic plains of north India to the central Indian region of Chattisgarh. The literal meaning of Chattisgarh is “thirty-six forts”. There are thirty-six lores in this folk epic genre. It is a secular story; there is no interplay of any religion in this folk epic. There are two primary styles in Chhattisgarh: *git* (song-recitation) and *naca* (dance-drama). The original performers of the *git* used to sing without any musical instrument and were members of the *Raut* (cowherding caste).

The members of the Satnami sect of the Camars (leatherworking) perform the *git* in today’s world. These professional singers have added certain musical instruments like the tabla and the harmonium. These performances have as their audience the males; women are allowed to stand on the sidelines and listen. The *naca* is a form of dance drama held on urban-square or a main street which is nowadays heavily influenced by modern Hindi films.

Devnarayan: Devnarayan or Devji is an incarnation of Lord Vishnu. The oral epic of *Devnarayan* is a two-part story about the twenty-four Bagaravat brothers of the Gujar community. It is often sung with a painted scroll called a *par*, without props and sometimes finds its way into sessions of devotional songs. It is usually performed at the shrines in all-night wake ceremonies called *jagaran*. The professional singers from the lower-ranked Nayak caste celebrate the birth and heroic deeds of the hero-deity Devnarayan. Singing is forbidden during the monsoon when Lord Vishnu is slumbering, and also during periods of the year when the dead are mourned (called *sraddha*).

Dhola: It is a romantic epic found in the western deserts of Rajasthan and in the plains of western Uttar Pradesh and Chhattisgarh. The popular epic spreads over three generations and tells the story of Raja Pratham, the king of Navagarh, his son Nal, and of Dhola and Maru, the daughter of Raja Budh. *Dhola* is performed by professional and non-professional singers from low and middle-caste groups. A trained singer sings the song accompanied by a *cikara*, a two-string, bowed instrument. There is also a drummer playing the *dholak* and a *cimta* (steel tongs). *Dhola* when performed by a solo performer requires no props or costume.

A second form of this performance is the dance-drama, for which ten to twelve men are required. Some sing the roles of the epic, others act, and some others play the musical instruments. We cannot categorize the *Dhola* epic as a regional or caste epic. However one should remember that it offers useful social commentary. We can have significant insights on the caste-hierarchies of the multi-caste peasant communities of western Uttar Pradesh.

Guga: Queen Bachal, Guga's mother has been barren for ten years. She meets Guru Goraknath. He tells her to serve his disciples for twelve years in order to have a child. At the end she should then bring some curd. She agrees and acts according to the directions of the Guru. However she is duped by her own sister Kachal who is also barren. Through the Guru's blessings she becomes pregnant. Bachal is heartbroken. She then persuades the Guru to help her out of the crisis. He asks his disciple Janamejaya to sacrifice himself for the sake of Bachal. Guru Goraknath extracts Janamejaya's soul makes it into a mixture, and it is through its powers that she conceives. Guga is born. He is believed to be an incarnation of Janamejaya, the epic hero in Mahabharata.

Guga the Rajput prince has control over snakes and is venerated most during the rainy season. This cult formed around this Rajput prince is found throughout Rajasthan, Punjab, Haryana, and also in districts of northwestern Uttar Pradesh. The story of *Guga* is commonly told by Bhagats (ritual specialists of the Jogi caste). Accompanied by a drum and *sarangi*, these singers mix the stories of Guga's life with the devotional songs. During the ninth day of the dark half of Bhadon (August-September), in small communities in the villages of Rajasthan and Punjab, women set up small shrines to worship Guga. He is seated on his horse (Nilata) and carries blue flags (representing his paternal relatives) and yellow flags (representing his maternal relatives). He also carries with him an iron whip (*cabuk*).

Kanyaka: It is a sacrificial epic associated with the traders and merchants of the Komati caste of Andhra Pradesh. The epic is set in the Penugoda district in Andhra Pradesh. The traditional singers who performed for the Komatis were from the Mailaru caste. They claim themselves as direct descendants in the epic story, the devotees of the goddess Kanyaka. With the passage of time the Komatis now employ Brahmin priests in the temples, the singers from the Mailaru caste have lost their skills and expertise in performing the traditional text – *Kanyaka Ammavari Katha*. This is a Sanskrit literary version and is famed to be part of the *Skandapurana*. Its Telegu verse retelling is ascribed to the great author Bhaskaracharya. The chief performer of the Mailaru caste sings the verses from the printed text and comments about the episodes in musical prose. The other singer plays a harmonium.

Kordabbu: This is a martial epic found in the coastal regions of Karnataka. The oral tradition of the Tulu speakers is known as *paddana* (*pad*-to sing, *paddanas* "must be sung"). It is ancient Dravidian oral poetry, and *paddana* is an integral part of the Tulu languages. The stories themselves number into hundreds and vary in length from one another. Some of them require an hour to sing, but others may take

several evenings. A common tragic theme predominates the stories. Both men and women sing *paddanas*.

However the men (professionals of certain castes) sing *paddanas* in the context of a village ritual. Their singing leads to a state of possession and they sing about the spirits of heroes and gods – both called *bhutas*. Women sing *paddanas* while working in the paddy fields. They lack any formal training. One lead singer, usually an experienced older woman, is the lead singer, and others join the chorus. This is how the women learn about the stories and the techniques used to elaborate them in verses. The women also sing of the *bhutas* – the songs are usually longer and are richly poetic in nature. Kordabbu is a low-caste hero.

Pabuji: Pabuji is the son of Rajput Dhahal Rathor and a nymph (*pari*). The epic *Pabuji* is performed in Rajasthan. He is a medieval Rathor Rajput and a celibate hero. He is venerated by the old traditional people of Rajasthan. The untouchable Nayak caste travel from one village to another in pairs, normally the husband-wife duo, and perform the ritualistic worship. They carry with them a fifteen-foot-long cloth painting or *par*, which contains the exploits of the life of Pabuji. The male performer accompanies the songs on a simple spike fiddle which is made of a length of a bamboo and a coconut shell. He dances and the skirt like dress swirls around and the ankle bells jingle in tune to match his rhythmic steps. The devotees of Pabuji wait for the occasion for *darsan*, “seeing” the deity.

Palnadu: *Palnadu* is the story of Alugu Raju, a north Indian monarch. The epic of *Palnadu* is common throughout the Telegu-speaking province of Andhra Pradesh and is performed in the yearly festival of the heroes in Karempudi. The story of *Palnadu* is sung by the main singer who is often from the untouchable Mala caste. During the epic performance he carries a sword and a shield of brass; he is accompanied by three relatives or members of the same caste who play a goatskin bag-pipe, finger-cymbals and a set of double-ended brass drums. The performance of the epic is always associated with rituals and is preceded by worship to the goddess Ankamma. The epic is identified by its singers as a thirty-night story, even though it is never performed continuously for thirty nights.

Tolubommatala: This is a regional retelling of the Sanskrit epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. An example of the leather puppet theatre of Andhra Pradesh and eastern Karnataka, it is performed by a group of clown puppets, the content comprises of the folk traditions. It was performed during the weddings and post-harvest village celebrations. The traditional families of the Are and Bondili caste are the performers of this local folk tradition. The men, women and members of the extended family group usually perform the shadow puppet tradition throughout the year except the rainy season.

In the course of time the *Tolubommatala* is attracting many sponsors who are trying to revive the age old tradition of the puppet theatre. Many social activists are also trying their best to revive the dying tradition. Nowadays the performances start at eight or nine o'clock in the night and, depending on the mood of the audiences and the demand of the sponsors, they extend from one to four hours. They are trying their best to replace the aging instruments and upgrade their puppets. The puppeteers are also fast adapting to the new situation.

18.3 LET US SUM UP

Oral epics in India serve as means to educate and entertain members of the society as well as to preserve the cultural traditions of the Indian society reflected in its

form and content. It deals with the geographical as well as cultural spread of individual epics that we have discussed above. The evolution of these oral epics was gradual. It is a continuous process, not a set of discrete events, through which we perceive it as a dominant media of transmitting information of Indian society. There are sometimes shifts from orality to literary texts (Sanskrit epics) signifying several changes. There exist small communities in the villages of India whose members are able to memorize certain texts and perform it before the literate portion of the population, as in the case of Sanskrit oral epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Depending on the particular society, there are performers who are able to recite certain portions of the literary text to the literate elite; the interpretation varies depending on the changes of the locale and setting. Also, it signifies the possibility of the criticism to the text; the semi-permanent form given to the former oral epics enabled people to compare the various versions and point out the ethnicities of different communities in the villages of India.

Several essays in the book emphasize the evolution of oral epics in India. These are often seen to coincide with the important shifts in a society. It is a process which has to be understood in the historical context, but it also has some impact on society as much as it gets influenced by societal norms. Often the evolution of oral epics serves to provide a role model for new (or revived) values, as in cases of the Sanskrit epics and the folk epics in India. Moreover, the various rulers sponsor the performers of oral epics to look back to the glory of the past and connect them with their own time. Many oral epics in India reflect the change of dominant culture in that particular society. In most cases the performers are male; women play the second fiddle. However, in some of the oral epics we have discussed, men and women perform as team. Some oral performances provide new identities to people in accordance with the change, like the *Tolubommalata* oral epic which is changing according to the needs of the time, while others sought to preserve the old ideas from extinction. In some cases, oral epics stimulated the sense of nationalism among its people.

The impact of such oral epics on Indian society cannot be told separately from its historical context. It provides a role model or identity to the rural people in India. Further, it serves as a means to integrate the vast Indian population by injecting common traditional values such as a common sense of identity, and sometimes nationality, induced by these oral epics; moreover it has also contributed to the development of Indian national culture and leads to the vibrant growth among the various communities in India. From the south to the north, from middle to central India, these oral epics in India speak of the traditions and values that exist in the Indian society.

The history of oral epics in India and its various aspects discussed in this unit, whether the *Pabuji* epic, or the *Bow Song* or *Devnarayan*, it would do well to remember that these oral epics are not merely a list of dates in which this or that piece of oral epic was codified; rather, it is a living history reflected in the process of oral literature, and the history of these individual epics influenced the multicultural Indian society by the same process. The insight into the Indian society provided by the process helps to understand the work better and to look into its society in relationship with a cultural phenomenon. After understanding the social background of these individual epics in India and also understanding these epics as a piece of literature and its impact, one would surely be able to see beyond the surface of single event and look deeper into the particular history of that region and the society that it reflects.

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18.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: Your answers should be in about 300 words.

1) What is an oral epic?

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2) What do you understand by the social and performative contexts of an oral epic?

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3) Write a note on the oral epics in India.

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4) What are the relations between Indian folk epics and Sanskrit epics?

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5) Write about the points on which Indian folk epics differ from Sanskrit epics.

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6) How are *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* related to the tradition of oral epics in India?

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7) Write a note on the importance of songs in the performance of Indian oral epics.

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8) What is *Dhola*?

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9) Write a short note on Bow Song (*Muttupattan*).

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10) Give your personal views on the future of oral epics in India.

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UNIT 19 *THE AWAKENED WIND: THE ORAL POETRY OF THE INDIAN TRIBES* **BY SITAKANT MAHAPATRA**

Structure

- 19.0 Objectives
- 19.1 Introduction
- 19.2 The Text
 - 19.2.1 The Kondhs: Their Oral Poetry
 - 19.2.2 The Santals
 - 19.2.3 The Mundas
 - 19.2.4 The Parajas
 - 19.2.5 The Hos
 - 19.2.6 The Oraons
 - 19.2.7 The Koyas
- 19.3 Let Us Sum Up
- 19.4 Reference and Further Readings
- 19.5 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

19.0 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to:

- understand the wisdom of the tribal communities;
- appreciate their world view which speaks of inclusion;
- understand the nuances and layers in their songs; and
- appreciate their immense perseverance.

19.1 INTRODUCTION

Sitakant Mahapatra, the eminent poet from Odisha, has, over the years, collected a vast array of oral poems from various tribal communities. He had travelled extensively to different parts of Odisha in his capacity as an administrator, and during his journeys, he collected oral poetry from various tribal communities like the Kondhs, the Mundas, the Santals, the Parajas, the Hos, the Oraons and the Koyas.

The oral songs that he collected are on wide-ranging themes like birth, death, love, sex marriage, misery and tragedy of human life, the concept of time, eternity, spirituality, various rites, rituals, and celebrations that are different from clan to clan, village to village.

The oral poetry reflects the socio-cultural, religious and economic life patterns of the communities and thus its documentation is an authentic source of knowledge. Oral poetry, as is obvious from the nomenclature, is passed from generation to generation vocally and is rich in meanings, allusions, references, images, symbols and metaphors.

Sitakant Mahapatra in his introduction to the volumes of oral poetry writes, “Most tribal languages are unwritten; conventional from the point of view of us aged but fresh and inventive. They are also highly musical. They contain a large number of symbols. It is necessary to retain in translation as much as possible of the symbolism as it is the essence of poetry. It is also necessary to preserve, as far as possible, the line – structure of the original.” (5)

There are about one hundred tribal communities in the three states of Odisha, Bihar and West Bengal and a large number of them – sixty two tribal communities to be precise – are from Odisha. But unfortunately, their oral poetry had not only been sidelined but also quite often been distorted and misinterpreted, as it is very difficult to retain the originality of the tribal songs in transliteration. In transliteration, the original poetry often gets twisted. A translator requires a thorough understanding of their language as well as the cultural traditions of the said communities.

As regard to Indian tribal poetry, Verrier Elwin’s *Folk Songs of Chhattisgarh*, his *Folk Songs of Maikal Hills* with Shamrao Hivale, W. G. Archer’s *The Blue Grove: The Poetry of the Oraons, The Dove and The Leopard* and *The Hill of Flutes* are significant contributions towards understanding and appreciating folk songs and poems. Verrier Elwin had made extensive use of songs as sociological “documents” in his ethnographic monograph, *The Baiga*, in which poetry and ethnography are inseparable. Archer’s translations of Oraon songs in the two anthologies referred to follow the technique of Arthur Waley’s brilliant transcriptions of Chinese poems.

Many believe that *The Blue Grove* contained some of the finest translations of Indian tribal poetry and they reflect his deep sense of appreciation for the Oraon way of life and their sensibilities. Mention may also be made of Hem Barua and Gopinath Mohanty’s contribution in this field. However, barring these and a few other works, the picture, unfortunately, remains as bleak today as it was in the forties. (11)

Oral songs can be classified into four categories: **life cycle songs, ritual songs, festival songs and cosmological songs**. Narrative poetry relates to the community’s perspective about cosmology, and also about their historical origins and migration in historical times. There are poets and writers who are engaged in bringing the tribal poetry and songs to the forefront, to preserve and promote their perspective on the importance and sacredness of nature, as well as to enrich the existing literature. Oral poetry expresses their joy and ecstasy relating to the cycle of seasons, festivals, rituals and ceremonies and also conveys their anguish about poverty, undernourishment and exploitation. The different motifs of myths, symbols, religious faith and traditional values have appeared in their poetry from time to time.

The composition of songs differs from tribe to tribe. It has been noticed that the songs of the Kondh and the Koya are longer in nature. The rituals of their everyday life have an artistic aspect. The singers decide the emotive aspect of each song. The songs emanating from the Kondh community reveal a greater tragic sense of life compared to Santali, Munda and Oraon songs. Sitakant Mahapatra is highly moved by the tribal communities – their poise and simplicity, naturalness and elegance that get reflected in their songs. He says:

“I have sought to present the poems as poems of today, living, vital and warm, and not as dry ethnological data of a complex and strange “primitive” world. Being a poet myself, I have tried to see and feel them as poetry and no other condition has mattered neither ethnology nor religious association or ritual significance. In can’t but conclude this note by quoting Brandon from his preface to *The Magic World*:

American Indian Songs and Poetry: “All that we want from any of it is the feeling of poetry. Let the ethnologists keep its science and the on coming generation of Indian poets its mystery.” (33-34)

19.2 THE TEXT

19.2.1 The Kondhs: Their Oral Poetry “Dharmu Above, Dhartani Below”

The Kondhs are the largest tribal community in Odisha, inhabiting in the districts of Phulbani, Koraput and Kalahandi. In writing about the poetry of the Kondhs, Mahapatra begins his first chapter with the scenery of the golden sunshine of *Pausa*, the ninth Odia month that usually falls in the end of December. The Kondhs celebrate the worship of *Dhartani*, the earth Goddess, in this month. The whole village which generally consists of ten /twelve households participates in the festival, singing and dancing away with great reverence. The *saonta*, that is the village head, has a significant role in this veneration and he plays on his flute and dances like a possessed along with the rhythmic beats of the drum till he falls on the ground. Besides, the role of *disari* and *jani* also appear to be important since the former is the astrologer and the latter conducts the worshipping and the ceremonies.

Most of the songs of the said volume were collected by the renowned Odia author, Gopinath Mohanty. While selecting the songs from this volume for translation, Sitakant Mohapatra chose the Meriah songs, the songs for the ancestors and spirits invoking Goddess Chitagudi (Sitagudi or Sitama), songs or shokas to exorcise diseases, love songs and wedding songs.

Meriah or sacrifice offered to gods and goddesses is considered auspicious and the Kondhs try to appease God by sacrificing in order to live in peace and prosperity. They also pray for a good harvest and protection from enemies and wild animals by offering *meriah*. The object of *meriah* is usually nurtured in the Saonta’s house and the Kondhs gather there on the day of the sacrifice, sing meriah song and purchase the object. Sitakant Mahapatra titles his *meriah* song as “Purchase of the *meriah*”:

O’ our Saonta
Our village elder
Have you Baby Kutras
Have you got tiny fowls
Have you got sons?

The season has come
The season of Dhartani
The earth Goddess.
Give us young fowls
Baby Kutras
We will buy. (51)

The villagers later sing in chorus before the first stab is inflicted on the object of sacrifice or meriah:

The gods need so many bribes,
So many offerings.
Let there be no dark forests,
No calamity
Let all be happy
Let all live in peace (51-52)

The Kondhs offer *meriah* to their pantheons invoking Dharani or Jhakar, the earth Goddess and also sing about the hills from where they had originally come:

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Mahapatra*

Let onion grow well
Garlics grow well.
We commit no sin,
We have no guilt
We only feed the Gods. (52)

The sense of sin and guilt is not there while performing *meriah* as they know that everything is created by Gods and are therefore meant for them. They sing:

O' God
This rope you have made
To tie the meriah,
This sword and the axe you have made
They eat the meriah.

We have no sin,
We have done no wrong,
No crime have we committed.
Your blacksmith has fashioned
This axe. (53)

Another Kondh song, collected by Sitakant Mahapatra, talks of how the Kondhs have to make so many offerings to the Gods:

Durga eats,
Durga eats everything
Below: Dhartani, the quiet ancient earth,
Above: Dharma, the God of justice;
And we offer
Only a small offering,
Insignificant
The land will be happy,
The God will be happy
Let them prosper.
The lance eats the sacrifice
O' God we offer you
So many bribes. (53)

The Kondhs offer prayers to Goddess Chitagudi or Sitagudi or Sitama on Mondays, in the month of Chaitra, the last month in the Odia calendar. This is the time when the Kondhs go to the forest for hunting. Chitagudi grants people and cattle protection from epidemics of all kinds and also from wild animals and snakes.

Mother Sita Goddess, Mother, elder sister,
Mother Laxmi, elder sister,
Thou, the protector of the horse,
Thou, the Goddess of the house,
All my blessings and wealth
Due to you,
All my health – excellence
Due to you
Mother, the earth Goddess below,

Dharmu above
We all your sons
Are in peace due to your blessings. (56)

Songs of Death

The Kondhs are proud of their ancestors and are immensely grateful to them. On the 8th, 9th or 10th day after a death, ceremonial rituals are performed to appease the spirit of the departed one, to let them know that they are no longer living on this earth. The Kondhs believe that the spirits are still amidst them and they do not know that they are no longer alive. Therefore, through their song, they tell the soul of the departed one to accept what is being offered by those who are still alive, and the fact that they are able to offer to the departed soul is an evidence of them being alive. They ask the spirit to take it and return from where they came, that they should not cause pain to the ones who are not dead.

This we offer to you
We can,
Because we are still alive
If not,
How could we offer at all,
And what?
We give a small baby fowl
Take this and go away
Whichever way you came.
Go back, return.
Don't inflict pain on us
After your departure. (54)

The death of someone is lamented in chorus. The chorus for the dead is grievous and heart-rending. The Kondhs mourn by asking whether some evil spirit has devoured and eclipsed the dead. They cry:

Did some evil spirit
Devour you, eclipse you?
Alas! Alas!
What justice! What pain!
Did some sorcerer kill you?
Alas! Alas!
Or did we ourselves
Kill you?
Where did you hide, dear one?
We do not know
Who killed you, ate you.
Let your sigh, our curse
Be on his head;
Let him die accursed
Like you. (55)

The earth where they bury the ancestors become holy and sacred for the Kondhs and they believe the land would yield better crops:

With the help of all the son-in-law
We will make a bonfire
We will spread the compost,
Come dear brother. (59)

They believe that the spirit of the ancestors, the Duma, can see everything and hear everybody though they possess no body. Even the dead animal's spirit is considered a Duma. For the health and happiness of the family, the Kondhs pray and worship the dead ancestors and offer them food on several occasions during the Chaitra festival:

In all the festivals
During Chaitra
O our ancestors,
Please come
And take what we offer to you
With love.

Songs of Love

The love songs are ceremonial and have the element humor. They are conversational, argumentative, symbolical, metaphorical and heartwarming. The songs contain messages about how to strengthen family and social life, and talk of the values of oath, promises and the need for strong determination. The images, symbols and metaphors the Kondhs use in their oral songs, especially love and marriage songs, are rich and ornamental. The songs nurture the intimacy between the boy and girl in their adolescence.

The Kondh youth live in the dormitory, which is made specifically for them. Together they sing and dance, play on the flutes. The *dhangda* (male) and the *dhangdi* (female) have the right to choose their own life partner and in this dormitory, the perfect ambience is provided to them. Sitakant Mahapatra, while closing the "Love Song: 1" (Intimacy, Ring to the Ear) depicts the sense of vacuum created when the lover leaves and the song is rich in relating intimacy to anklet to the feet or to ring to the ear:

Didn't you proclaim unending love?
Our intimacy that is
Anklet to the feet, ring to the ear.
Why, why, then did you leave? (61)

In most of the love songs of the Kondhs, the imagery has been drawn from the daily life to demonstrate how the lover is pouring out all the love for the beloved like a basket of vegetables emptied in the weekly market. Love then flows forward like a *siali* creeper. "Love Songs: 2" articulates it as follows:

Like an over flowing basket of vegetables,
Thinning to emptiness in the weekly market,
Like articles sold out on the way,
All love, all affection you pour away,
Nothing remains. (62)

The Kondhs gleefully utters love names for their beloveds – Nilas, Talas, Lember, Dumbar, etc. For them, the maternal uncle's daughter is preferred as lover and as wife. In comparing energetic and vigorous young age with exhausting old age, the song indulges in philosophical contemplation. It also depicts the lover taking delight in inviting the lady love for making love, for play and rejoicing:

Life is fleeting,
Old age exhausts everything
As crops do not thrive well
On lands once cultivated
And again dug up,
In an old man's life
Joy withers;
So long as life lasts
And hearts beat
Come, let us rejoice,
Let us play. (63)

This playfulness is manifested in how the songs compare love to honey and sugarcane juice, and the lady love is compared to a *narangi* (a smaller variety of oranges). The lover is compared to the deer which gives a fleeting look at the lover, steals his heart, and then vanishes. "Love Songs: 4" says:

You have become the sambar
The deer which silently steals
A look at you and then is gone. (64)

If lovers suffer, the reasons may be manifold – parental disagreement, rivalry, or non-payment of bride price. The lovers proclaim their faith in destiny in some of the songs like "Love Songs: 6":

Everyone loves like this,
Not we alone,
But why do you suffer for me?
That is my destiny. (66)

Turmeric is a valuable commodity for the Kondhs. It is likened to love, and the singer sings that like a money lender who stores turmeric, the person who has found true love is also rich. The person who has not found love is considered poor.

You are the rich Sahukar
You have stored so much turmeric
That turmeric powder rains everywhere
In your house
You are rich
I am poor. (67)

After choosing each other for life, the *dhangda* sings about adorning the *dhangdi*, and promises to take her away to a place where he would keep her in happiness always. "Love Songs: 8" describes the intensity of love:

In this moonlit night
I will adorn you
With a thin veil
And carry you away.
I have a selected place
To keep you in happiness
There you will be. (68)

The banana fruit has been symbolically used, and it is the male partner who offers it to the female partner. “Love Songs: 9” is quite metaphorical in its interiority:

Love, roots grown into....
Entangled in unseen nets.
The banana bunch on my shoulder
Who intends to eat?
Eat and have stomach pain?
Who intends to eat?
The dhangdis will eat. (70)

Marriage Songs

Love is described as a powerful force, one that spreads like the sunshine in the hearts of the lover and the beloved, who latter decide to live a spousal life. They usually meet near the hills, fountains and the mango grove. The marriage songs of the Kondhs sing are sung against the background of natural landscapes which are spectators as well as silent witnesses to them.

Mahapatra’s collection of Kondh marriage songs is often quizzical and lovingly argumentative. In it, one can easily discern nudism, naturism and eroticism. For example, when the *dhangdi* sings in “Marriage Songs: 2”, the double entendre is evident:

You have stolen our bride,
We have seen her in your house,
We have enquired about your name,
And then come
Leaping over the hills and mountains,
Running through forests and bushes. (73)

In “Marriage Songs: 3”, Mahapatra captures the *dhangdi*’s argument, as she pleads that she has treasured all her chastity only for her lover, which he has stolen after marriage. Singing and arguing like this, the couple enhances the love between them.

In “Marriage Songs: 5”, the poet writes about what the men of older generation recite. In this song, one can notice the jocular relationship between the old man and the bride. It is wistful and comic at the same time. The old man’s reference to the young bride as “My dear, dear sweetheart,” is interesting, and also articulates the strength of the relationship. However, the main thrust of the poem is in the sense of gratitude for being alive and for being able to participate in the great jubilation and the overflowing joy of a marriage ceremony. Simultaneously there is also an awareness of personal tragedy and miseries, of “ceaseless labour.” There is a realization that life is only a tragic song. The young girls provide no consolation about the destiny of pain. “Marriage Songs: 5” is a brilliant celebration of commitment to life and joy despite miseries and deprivations:

We make merry,
My dear, dear sweetheart,
My bride-to-be,
I will have fun with you;
My maternal uncle's daughter,
You are first charge to me.
And here I call you as the groom,
O Sangar-Godi, O Bandhar- pani.

In this song, "O Sangar-Godi" and "O Bandhar-pani" refer to Nilas, Talas, Lembar, Dumbar, etc., the love-names given by young bachelors to their sweethearts. For Kondhs, life is only a tragic song and they try to enjoy life oozing out of tragedy, hard and ceaseless labour.

"Marriage Songs: 7" sings of how the *dhangdas* admire the *dhangdis* with great fondness as they walk in the procession:

Silver girdle
Round your slender waist
Siali creeper round your body
Silver ring
Round your ankle
We will stand
Under the wild banana trees
And throw off our clothes
We will eat everything
All together, o dhangdi.

Nudism and naturism both are prevalent in the poetry of the Kondhs. Songs speak about the wind that fans the sexual desires of the lovers. The unmarried *dhangdas* of the village carry tubers and yams on their shoulders. They follow the bride and her friends in a procession, singing all the way. The *dhangdis* too join in to make this a colorful, riotous and wistful song.

It will tickle us
We will all enjoy it together, o dhangdi
We, all of the same age,
When the water in the stream
Is warm, we will bath together, o dhangdi
We will weather all storms
Relying on Dharmu's grace, o dhangdi. ("Marriage Songs: 7")

The poet observes that there is seriousness in the marriage songs as well. There are oaths and a swear-in-ceremony before marriage. The Kondhs' songs depicts fervent wish for bliss and for peaceful family life:

Why pine, O dhangdas
Why weep
We will all have fun together
We, all of same age,

We will bathe in the stream together.
Secret bonds, secret dreams
Unite us
Why are you afraid
O dhangda
I will obey
Your parents, brothers and sisters.
Till life lasts
We will enjoy if together. (“Marriage Song: 7”)

The marriage ceremony is formally over when the priest asks the bride and the bridegroom to bow their heads together while he pours water over them. This is normally done under a canopy of twigs and poles. This song for the bride is sung as she is led away after marriage:

We take you away
The young and the old of the village
Are witness,
Not by force, but in marriage.
We take you. (“Marriage Songs: 8”)

The bride is assured of a good life after marriage. There is a promise not to burden the wife and to remain loyal and responsible to each other.

When we take you with love
Who will defy us?
When we take in happiness
Who will hesitate?
Do not be unhappy
We will keep you in a nice house
Always look to your welfare. (“Marriage Songs: 8”)

The purification rite by water brings an end to the ceremony. Water is the source and symbol of life for the Kondhs. The Kondhs sing songs in chorus in the marriage ceremony in the presence of relatives and the priest, who has an important role in the marriage. The burden of life is to be taken seriously by both and the promise of better care is also solicited in beautiful metaphoric language. The groom assures the bride that she would not need another *dhangda*:

Paddy has to be husked
In the proper hole
It has to be winnowed
In the proper fan,
Why do you grieve
Why look to somebody else
No more you need
Another dhangda.

19.2.2 The Santals

The Santals are one of the major tribes of India, with a population of a little more than four million according to the 1971 census. The Dhanbad, Hazaribag and

Singbhum districts of Bihar, Birbhum, Purulia, Bankura and Midnapur districts of West Bengal, and Mayurbhanj district of Odisha are richly populated with the Santals. Like the Kondhs and the Mundas, they are also fond of songs and dances who usually love fun and frolic, good food and good drink. It is the pleasure principle of the Santals that has probably prompted them to try to adopt modern social values and changes. The Santals are also known as the Kolean. They believe that their earliest name was not Santals but Kherwar. In an unpublished manuscript called *Hital*, Raghunath Murmu, the spiritual guru or Guru Gomke of the Santals, traces the origin of the tribe. The myths and legends of the Santals establish them as innocent and industrious like other tribes.

Sal and mahul trees, karam, papal, palas and lac-bearing kusum are the main flora of the Santal regions. The sal tree is also a common symbol for a girl. The idea of feminine beauty is symbolized by the tall and slim sal tree. A Santal village is generally neat and clean, with a road running between two rows of houses. The Santal house is a model of strength, elegance and beauty. Its mud walls are beautifully plastered with cow-dung and are smooth and polished. They are painted with floral designs and geometrical patterns using four primary colours: white, black, red and yellow.

March and April are months of joy for the Santals. The Sal, mahul, palas and simul trees are in bloom, and the entire landscape becomes a riot of colour. The Santals have a language of their own, but, because of their physical distribution, they write in different scripts – Oriya, Bengali, and Devnagri. The Santal polity is elaborately organized, starting with the village and going up to the *pada* and *paragana*. The village headman or *Manjhi* is helped by a *jog-Manjhi*, a *godet*, a *naike* and a *paranik*. The *naike* is the village priest and his special function is to propitiate the hill spirits. The *godet*, a messenger, is generally at the service of the village headman. The *jog-Manjhi* is number two to the *Manjhi* (headman) in ritual and social matters. The *paranik* is an assistant headman who also has a number of social and ritual functions. Above the village are the inter-village council presided over by a *desh pradhan*.

There are a number of ritual celebrations for occasions such as birth, attainment of puberty by a girl, marriage and death. These occasions are treated as rites of passage, as the links in the lives of an individual and, therefore, are marked by appropriate ritual ceremonies that give them social recognition. They have several forms of marriage, including orthodox marriage, forcible marriage and the *ghar juania*. The last form literally means “daughter with son”.

The Santal *ojha* occupies a position of respect as he is expected to exorcise evil spirits and cure diseases by spiritual methods. Generally, it is women who are supposed to practice witchcraft and therefore murders of women in this tribe are a frequent occurrence.

The Santals also have a large variety of musical instruments – drums of various types and string instruments, and the flute. There have been a fair number of collections of Santal songs, both in original Santali and in English translation. Sometimes the songs are essential parts of ceremonies such as the *karam* or the *Baha* which the Santals share with the Mundas. Apart from the *binti* (songs describing Santal cosmology and recited during a marriage), the *bakhens* (invocation songs) and the *kudums* (Santali riddles), a selection of Santali love songs, marriage songs, *Baha* songs and miscellaneous songs (comprising some songs on death and some associated with funeral rites and social customs) are also observed.

Bakhens: The Ritual Invocation Songs of the Santals

The world of the tribal supernatural is inhabited by Gods and Goddesses, both benevolent and malevolent. This supernatural world is always in an intimate, yet ambivalent love-hate relationship with the world of the living. The blessings of the spirits are invoked by the community for personal and communal welfare such as for rich harvests, for peace and plenty, for cows to yield sufficient milk, etc.

The Santals have a very elaborate system of invoking the blessings of the Gods and spirits. Their invocation songs bear the distinctive mark of their culture. As a matter of fact, the Santal tribes search for the Great Tradition which is inextricably linked to their minds with the antiquity and the sanctity of their ritual invocations. These invocation songs can be broadly categorized into two groups. The first (nos. 1-10) group relates to different stages in the agricultural cycle and the rituals relevant to each such agricultural or allied activity, *Magh Bonga* is one of their more important festivals. Similarly, the three invocations during the *Sohrae* festival are rare and unique. The three invocations during the *Sohrae* festival (nos. 8-9) are also related to agriculture since there is worshipping the cattle and the cattle-shed, which is a very important part of agricultural activity. The second group of invocatory songs (nos. 11-16) relates to the festivals of birth, marriage and death. *Magh Bonga* and *Baha Bonga* are always celebrated at the place for communal worship, the *Jaher era*. The *Jaher era* symbolizes the remnants of the original village forest.

Three sal trees are dedicated to *Maran Era* (the God of the Great Mountain), *Jaher Era* (the Lady of the Holy Grove) and *Maneka Turuiko* (literally the Five-Six-Five brothers who married six sisters). In addition to these three, *Dharam Devta* (Supreme Deity who resides in the sky), *Gramdevi* (the village goddess), and *Sima sale Bonga* (the God who protects the village from the intrusion of evil spirits) are also located within the *Jaher era*. They are invoked by ritual incantations, the spirits of the gods and goddesses enter the souls of the individuals concerned. Each of the gods and goddesses have their appropriate weapons or distinguishing marks. *Gramdevi* and *Sima sale Bonga*, it is believed, do not “possess” human beings. The symbolism that the Santal songs of invocation bear identifies certain words and objects as evil and hence not to be uttered, as the evil object itself may “materialise” the moment the word is uttered. The worship the Santals perform is for a social and moral purpose, namely, the prosperity of the community. Each ritual physically brings together the community in the celebration. Either subscription is raised for conducting the ceremonies or each family contributes in kind for the rituals by way of fowl, rice, *handia* (liquor brewed from rice), etc.

Mythology does not dominate the Santal oral tradition and value-system to the same extent as it does for the Kondhs and the Mundas. In Santal rituals, each of the articles used for invocation and worship and even the gestures they show are both verbal and non-verbal. The ritual connected with death has a special significance. Among the Santals, as among many other primitive groups, the period between death and final burial and the performance of the last ritual functions in connection with that death may be an extended one. Thus *bhandan* is a communal second funeral held once a year for all who have died since the last *bhandan* was held. The dead person is believed to leave the world of the living only after the second funeral has been completed.

The occurrence of a death brings about a serious disruption in the network of social relationships and inter-personal obligations. The ritual of death helps rehabilitate not only relations but also the stability of the entire group. As Monica Wilson observed, “Rituals reveal values at their what moves them most, and since the form

of expression is conventionalized and obligatory, it is the values of the group that are revealed..... I see in the study of rituals the key to an understanding of the essential constitution of human societies.”

“Kuli Bida” is a poem in which the Santals pray to God: “Oh God gives us pleasure, happiness and joy forever.” One of the songs Mahapatra translates speaks of their zest for life:

Let them be happy to take your left-over food and drinks.

Let them have no headache or stomach-ache.

Let no evil eyes haunt them.

Have mercy on them and on us.

Let not our kinsmen quarrel with us.

Let them always be happy.

Let them and let us be strong in body and mind. (“Giditara”)

Binti: The Song of Creation Myth

Binti is the Santal song of cosmology and is recited by a group of three or more singers at the time of the marriage ceremony, after the members of the bridegroom’s party arrive at the bride’s house. The song is in question and answer form. The entire song is meant to put the particular occasion in a wider context, the universal context of society and tradition. Marriages as an institution take one back to the beginning of human creation, and in larger context, one can also imagine the creation of the world and subsequent developments. In every village, there are some professional singers who learn the Binti from their forefathers and recite it from memory. It is true that there are occasional additions or modifications, which is common to all oral tradition.

Maran Buru, literally “Great Hill”, is believed to be the creator. He is said to have planted a Karam tree on the earth. Two birds lived in the Karam tree. They built a nest in the tree and laid two eggs. Out of the two eggs the first humans were born – a male and a female. The moment they were born, they started crying. The Gods built a dwelling house for Pilchu Kala and Pilchu Kuli. Gradually they grew up. They lived naked and did not know what shame was. In the meantime, the Gods consulted Maran Buru as to how it could be arranged that mankind would multiply. Maran Buru advised Pilchu Kala and Pilchu Kali to cook rice with Sagah grass seeds and to soak it with water and three powdered ranu (a substance used for fermentation). This caused the stirrings of desire and they fell in love. With love came feelings of shame, sin, good and evil.

In the forests, the seven sons and seven daughters of Pilchu Kala and Pilchu Kuli fell in love in pairs. Maran Buru again advised Pilchu Kala and Pilchu Kuli that there was no sin in this even though they were brothers and sisters, but later marriage would have to be according to the prescribed laws of *gotras*. Gradually mankind increased in numbers with the birth of children to these seven parents. They assembled in the shade of three trees in the forest, namely, lepejreel (the kendu tree), khad matkom (mahul tree) and ladeya bale (banyan tree) and discussed where to establish their settlement.

Other Santhali Songs

The Santali riddles songs, the Kudum, are presented in two categories – those which paint a still, symbolize an object and work out a static or frozen gesture, and secondly, those which symbolize an activity, the dynamics of a movement, a fluent gesture.

To the first category belong the picture of fruits and vegetables (nos. 1- 4), fishes, frog and tortoise (nos. 20, 26-28). In the second category we find images of dried-up fruits bursting and scattering the seeds (nos. 13, 15).

The love songs of the Santalis are quite ornamental. These are also often metaphorical. The lover finds his beloved's lips blossoming like a lotus flower. Similarly, the marriage songs of the Santalis delineate that a girl is meant for another house. They sing that girl is born for another family; parents cannot keep them forever:

A girl is meant for another house

Parents cannot keep her forever. ("Marriage Songs: 5")

Besides love and marriage songs, there are miscellaneous Santali poems which sing of their history, creation and migration. "Hihidi Pipidi" is a mythological place in the history of Santal migration. The song is a dig at the male sex:

In Hihidi Pipidi the cattle were born

At Nalam the men were born. ("Miscellaneous Songs: 1")

The Santals also sing songs about how the love and affection of parents is like sugarcane and the love of a step mother is like bitter neem leaves:

Sweet is the Sugarcane

And the love of the parents

Bitter the neem leaves

Bitter its Flower

And yet more bitter a co-wife in the house. ("Miscellaneous Songs")

The Santali song also depicts that there is an end to a life. In their lifetime, the Santalis have conquered the east, west, north and south. It means life for them has passed in the four directions of their village, particularly in the vast forests all around them. Death is the time and call of Maran Buru, the creator the God of life and death:

I have looked East, West, North and South

No witch, no Magic killed me

My life ended, my allotted time was over

Maran Buru wanted me to return. ("Miscellaneous Songs: 12")

19.2.3 The Mundas

The Mundas mainly live in the northern districts of Odisha, particularly the district of Sundargarh, which adjoins the Chhotanagpur Division of Bihar. Their language is Mundari. It does not have a script of its own. The Mundas live in close physical proximity to the Oraons and the Santals. The living styles and cultures of these three tribes are similar in many ways. The Munda language has a lot of similarity with the languages of the Santals, Hos and other tribes inhabiting the Chhotanagpur plateau of Bihar and Odisha. This entire linguistic group forms a sub-family of Austro-Asiatic, which includes Mon Khmer, Nicobarese, Khasi and the aboriginal languages of Malacca. S. C. Roy believes that the Mundas originally lived in the hilly regions of central India and the Gangetic plain, from where they migrated in different groups to Assam, to the northern parts of Orissa and to Bihar, and even further South.

The majority of Munda houses consist of at least two huts: the *giti-ora* or the sleeping-house and the *mandi-ora* or the eating house. The festivals of the Mundas are religious and social ceremonies having elements both of ritual celebration and ordinary festivity. The Mundas are like other tribal groups and therefore there is no distinction between occasion of happy celebration and serious religious worship. The important festivals in Munda society are given below:

- 1) Mage: festival of ancestor worship and thanks giving for good harvest.
- 2) Phagu: festival of worship of *bongas* or deities presiding over hills, jungles, fields and streams at the beginning of the *shikar* or annual hunt.
- 3) Sarhul or Baha: spring festival.
- 4) Honbaha: festival for the worship of household gods by the head of each family.
- 5) Batauli or Kadleta: sacrificial feast for transplantation of paddy seedlings.
- 6) Karam: another festival for ripening crops and worship of gods.
- 7) Dasa: a festival of the Mundas is borrowed from the Hindus, which corresponds to Dussera, and meant for only singing and dancing but no worship.
- 8) Kolom Sing Bonga: a festival for harvesting of transplanted paddy.
- 9) Jom Nowa: festival for eating the newly harvested rice or flattened rice, *chura*.
- 10) Ind: festival celebrated in memory of Munda ancestor, the first Magabansi chief
- 11) Sohrae: festival for worship of cattle.
- 12) Soso-Bonga: festival to appease and drive away ghosts with the ghost-finder or *mati* officiating as priest.

The most important festivals are Karam and Sarhul. In Munda society, Karam festival is observed only in certain families and the village priest, *pahan*, has no role in it. The head of the family brings two branches of a Karam tree on the eleventh day, at noon, in the month of Bhadrab (August). Milk, ghee and bread made of rice-flour are then offered to the Gods. In and around the courtyard, singing, dancing and beating of drums go on all night. Next morning the branches are carried in a procession by a number of young men to the accompaniment of songs and music and thrown into a stream. Karam songs are also sung at marriages and at that time when the newly wedded girl leaves for her husband's village. There is a great variety of these marriage songs and they invoke almost the whole range of human emotions—grief at the departure of the girl from the village; the desolation of the family when the girl goes away; everyday aspects of married life; and the association of marriage and sex. The departure of a girl after marriage to her father-in-law's place is one of the most moving events in tribal life. Girls are compared to doves, flowers, fish and so forth.

Sarhul is celebrated by the Mundas and Oraons in the month of Chaitra (March-April) when the sal trees are in blossom. Sarhul and Karam are actually the extensions of each other and similar dance forms and dance poems are used for both the festivals, as both include exultation in the brilliant weather and the flowering trees and the sense of sprouting life.”

Food is cooked in earthen pots. The congregation then returns singing, dancing and beating their drums and tom-toms with sal blossoms in hand. The family heads also worship ancestors in their own houses garlands of sal flowers are hung about the houses and girls tuck the flowers into their hair. At meals sal leaves are used as cups, plates and even to sit on. The next morning, the priest brings a number of sal

blossoms and tucks a bunch each to the door or roof of each house and gets a small gift in exchange. All work in the fields is suspended for the two days of the festival and there is a lot of rice-beer, singing and dancing.

To celebrate Phagu (which has obvious resemblance to Holi), the Mundas cut down a young silk cotton tree. The next day, singing japi dance tunes, the Mundas go to the forest beating their drums and tom-toms. They cut a semar tree and return to the village singing the popular song "The God reigns in the Madkam Sarna." This is the beginning of the hunting season for the Mundas and Orason.

Mage Parob is also a very important festival for the Mundas. It is celebrated on the day of the full-moon in the month of Pous, which the Mundas call Gota Mage. To worship the spirits of ancestors is the main feature of this festival. The season for Mage dances and songs begins after the Sohrae festival in Kartik (October-November) and continues right up to the Kolom Sing Bonga and Mage festivals in Pousa (December).

There is a large variety of festivals and songs and dances, the principal classes of Munda songs and dances are the mage or jarga, the jadur, the japi and the karam. Jadur and Gena songs and dances are taken up and continued up to Sarhul. One Gena is sung after every two jadur. After the 'Sarhul festival the japi or hunting songs and dances are taken up and continued for two or three weeks. The Karam or Lahsua dances and songs, continuing up to the Sohrae festival in Kartik. The calendar of dances is only a rough one. The successive song and dance festivals often overlap. Munda songs have a rhythm and melody unsurpassed by, or at least equal to, the best of any tribal poetry in India. This is achieved by the repetition of the lines, or ideas, usually not in identical words but by using synonyms as a device to mark the intensity of feeling. This synonymous repetition is an important feature of Munda poetry. Munda poetry is flexible and has a large variety of forms.

Jadur are the most important and perhaps the most ancient of the Mundari songs. Jadur songs are sung both by boys and girls dancing separately and in two inter-mixed parties. They sing the lines of the songs alternately and then together. When spring comes to the Munda country, there is a virtual riot of colour. All kinds of forest flowers are in blossom. The trees are also full of delicate green leaves. The kusum tree becomes a canopy of copper-red leaves. The palas and the simul are aflame with their blazing red blossoms. The Munda, like the Santal, is very fond of flowers. Jadur songs come after the Mage festival and continue to be sung for three to four months. The seasonal changes overwhelm the Mundas, and the songs show the celebration of the nature through all kinds of beauty and colour:

You have taken away the old yellow leaves
And dressed the tree in a sari of green leaves.
I saw the trees in the jungle
They are filling up with buels, flowers and fruits. ("Jadur songs")

The Mundas respect God because of the beautiful things all around such as vast jungle, tree, and sal flowers. The song narrates this:

Standing under the canopy of the jungle tree
I salute the god of the sky
Happy with the thought of celebrating sarhul
I ask for a bunch of sal flowers. ("Jadur songs")

Next to Jadur, karam is the most important group songs. Karam songs start after the end of the Sarhul festival. On the last days of the festival, the Mundas sing a group of karam songs and welcome the karam season. An example of a karam song is as follows:

The fasting women have arrived
Their faces sparkle like ghosts'
They are sitting round the karam tree
They look like a cluster of ghosts.

They story-teller guru says:
Hold on to the karam twig;
The karam God will bestow riches
And Budhan singh agrees on that. ("Karam Songs")
Another karam song speaks of kindness towards animals:

The forest is on fire
Run away O tiger;
The river is drying up
Run away O fish.
Men will kill you
Run fast O tiger;
Men will catch you
Run away O fish. ("Karam Songs")

The Mundas are often conscious of time that makes the young old. They bemoan the loss of youth and sing:

Time, time, time
Alas, time passes!
Youth, youth, youth
Alas, youth ends!! ("Karam Songs")

Like the Kondhs, the Mundas too are fond of hunting or *shikar*. The following song captures the spirit of *shikar*:

Where are they going?
Their axes sparkle in the sun.
Where are they going?
Their arrows are whistling in the wind. ("Karam Songs")

Jarga songs are sung after the Karam season, generally from the month of Kartik till the onset of Mage, the harvest festival. This is a period when work in the fields is coming to an end. There is satisfaction with the crop and the jarga songs and dances are generally representative of this spirit of happiness and prosperity. The jarga songs are perhaps the sweetest among the Mundari songs. There are very few of them, far fewer than either the jadur or the karam song.

The Japi Jatara, Gena and Adandi songs are generally simpler in structure. They are also small in number. The Gena songs are actually complementary to the jadur. Often two jadur songs are followed by one Gena song. This helps the performers to change the *tal* (rhythm) of the song and the pattern of rhythmic beat of the feet. This is because unlike the difficult and vigorous rhythms in jadur songs, Gena songs are

simple in structure and easy to sing. They are fewer in number than the karam or the jadur songs. An example of a gena song is as follows:

Your anklets and bracelets shine
Like ghosts in the dark night. (“Gena Songs”)

The japi are songs accompanying shikar (hunting). Jatra is a non-specific song which can be sung during any festival or any occasion of merriment. The Adandi songs are meant for the occasion of marriage. Adandi Songs also deal with the aspects love. The metaphors they use in their songs are not only rich and archaic but also charming and decorative:

This girl is casting
Her greedy eyes on me
Catching me in her charm’s net
I must apply
The counter-charm
Of white or black gram. (“Adandi Songs”)

While translating the following Adandi Song, Mahapatra captures the Munda belief that the sun is male and the moon is female:

My mother, the sun rose
A son was born;
My mother, the moon rose
A daughter was born. (“Adandi Songs”)

In their Adandi Songs, the Mundas also sing of the king’s dynasty and their visit to their land on horse. This is the revisit to the past in which the Mundas seem to be much happier than the present:

Whose horse is many-coloured and glittering
And has ghungur on its feet?
The raja’s horse is many-coloured and glittering
And has ghungur on its feet. (“Adandi Songs”)

19.2.4 The Parajas

The Parajas (also pronounced Porajas) are found mostly in the Koraput district and, to an extent, in the Kalahandi district of Odisha. ‘Paraja’ does not connote a well-defined exclusive tribal group. There are minor variations among different groups from the point of view of their totems, language-use, marriage customs and other ritual ceremonies. For example, the Pengo Parajas have the tiger and cobra as their totems whereas the Jhodias have the vulture, the tiger and the cobra as totems. Among the Jhodias and the Pengos, marriage to one’s paternal aunt’s daughter is customary. Like the Kondhs, the Parajas have an elaborate system of socialization through the institution of youth dormitories and the system of *dhangda-dhangdi* relationships. Marriage by choice is the normal practice and such choice is made possible by free union of the sexes before marriage. Bachelors and unmarried girls sleep separately in the houses meant for each group and these are very important socio-cultural institutions. They learn the intricate arts of love, social relationships, music and dance. These dormitories thus play a very important factor in the socialization process. Songs and dances, being an integral part of the social fabric, are accepted as a life-building process for them. Beauty is integrally linked to health, vigour and zest for life. Remarriage is common and normally the younger brother marries the widow of his elder brother. Paraja women are fond of brass ornaments

and brass beads.

The Paraja language is extremely sweet and alliterative and the lines of the songs with the rising and falling voices of the boys and girls are like the waves of the sea pounding on the shore and receding. is common and normally the younger brother marriage the widow of his elder brother. Paraja women are fond of brass ornaments and brass beads.

The Jhodias and the Pengo Parajas worship *Bhumi Devata* (the earth Goddess), who is also known as *Jhakar Devata*. Cows, goats and pigeons are sacrificed in her honour. The earth goddess is represented by a stone under a tree outside the village. The village priest (Jani) conducts the ceremony of worship on a date specified. The whole village is present at the festival and they wind it up with a feast and drink. is common and normally the younger brother marriage the widow of his elder brother.

Paraja dance is extremely vigorous and elegant. The Paraja girls are fine dancers and their foot and body movements have delicate nuances. Unmarried boys and girls, the *dhangdas* and *dhangdis*, are the main participants in these song and dances. Without them, the village becomes “a rotten village, fit only for dogs and jackals.” When a dhangda does not join in a dance, he is ridiculed in these lines the poet composes:

Did an ant bite you
Or a wasp sting,
Why could you not join us,
Could you not dance or sing?
Then go,
Go and keep the company
Of faded old women.
The dhangdi is then also welcomed as a delicate pumpkin creeper:
Come running,
Come and entwine me,
Delicate pumpkin creeper.

When love is not reciprocated in time, the sweet agony of the dhangda seems to be intolerable, and resounds in the brass string of the dung-dunga; the bare naked voice of grief merges with the vast emptiness of the moonlit landscape:

My dear, dear girl,
With your name jili-jili
Quivering on my lips
I die.

The *dhangdi* is the “rain drop that would completely fill up” the life of the *dhangda* and in the dance-hall of the earth, when the Chaitra festival comes, it is a “rare day, a rare month.” Mahapatra writes about their union, love, laughter and marry making:

And we come together
In this land of dead ancestors,
Of our father’s father,
A lost world awakens.

19.2.5 The Hos

The Hos are found mostly in the district of Mayurbhanj in Odisha and also popularly referred to as Kols. As a matter of fact, people variously call them as Kols, Kolhas and the Kolah-Kol-Loharas, because they all belong to the Ho tribe. According to D.N. Majumdar:

If there be any word that the Hos dislike most, it is the popular epithet Kol by which they are known to the outside world. Whether the word is derived from Sanskrit Kola meaning a pig, as Dalton has suggested, or from the word 'Hero', which in course of time has assumed different forms, namely, 'Koro', 'Kola', 'Kol', it is difficult to decide but it is certain that the word has an unhappy connotation."

The Hos are like the Hindus to a large extent have adopted a number of Hindu festivals. Most of their festivals are linked to the stages in agricultural operations – Akshaya Tritiya, Salui Puja, Makar Sankranti, Sohrae or Bandana, Gamha Purnima, Raja Sankranti and Karam are some of their more important festivals. With Maran Buru (literally, the "Great Hill"), the Hos also believe in hill spirits and witchcraft. The Sun, the moon, the rivers and the mountains are the principal *bongas* of the Hos. They have a strong faith that in the village sacred grove or Jahera resides *desauli*, the protecting spirit of the village. The ritual occasions linked to the agricultural cycle are primarily eight in number: (i) Mahe Parab (ii) Baha Parab (iii) Hero Parab (iv) Batauli Parab (v) Jom Nowa (vi) Gowar Puja (vii) Buru Bonga and (viii) Kalam Parab.

Mage Parab is celebrated in the Month of Magh (February-March). In this festival, goats and chicken are offered to the Gods. The Mage festival lasts for seven days. On the first day, called *ate-ili* (literally, earth and rice-beer), rice-beer is prepared in each house. The second day is devoted to the ritual washing and purification of houses and clothes. Much of that day and almost the whole of the night are also devoted to dancing and singing. The third day is devoted to ritual worship by the village priest on behalf of the entire village. After the worship, the villagers play the *nagera*, *dhumsa* and other musical instruments and sing and dance. Everybody is dressed in new clothes. The festival continues for the rest four days.

Herab or Hero Parab is celebrated in the month of Asadha (June-July) for three days. It is meant to propitiate the village Goddess and seek her blessings for good crops. *Asadi* or Gowar Puja is the occasion of worship to ensure good crops and is undertaken at the time of de-weeding operations in the fields. Different lands of grains are taken only after this worship. Jom Nawa is celebrated in the month of Bhadraba (August-September). An offering of chicken is given to the village Goddess *Desauli*, who protects the village from natural calamities and enemy attack. Batauli Parab is an occasion for Prayer for the fertility of the crops. Buru Bonga worship, or the worship of the Hill God, is generally for rain when there is a large-scale failure of rain and the standing crops are in danger of being totally destroyed. Kalam Parab is the occasion for thanks giving to *Desauli* and sing Bonga for good harvests. Thus most of the festivals are linked to the agriculture cycle and the offerings are made to the Gods, Goddesses and spirits are generally chicken, goat, *arua* rice and liquor. Like the Santali bakhens, these ritual occasions of the Hos are used to propitiate the gods and spirits and to seek their blessings for the community's welfare.

Marriage is the most important social institution among the Hos and an elaborate ritual-complex marks marriage ceremonies. Bride price amounting to several heads of cattle or equivalent cash makes marriage a difficult proposition for poor bridegrooms and their parents. Negotiations are conducted through traditional marriage brokers known as the *dutam karji*, who rely a lot on good or evil omens in encouraging or discouraging unions. Marriage as depicted above is not easy. It is rather hard for the parents of a girl who are travelling from village to village to search for a groom as there lays the hardship to pay the bride's price. The poet beautifully cites:

We went from village to village
From country to country
Looking for a groom.
We could not find a groom
And have now returned empty-handed. (“Marriage:1”)

After marriage, the bride’s male and female cousins are served rice-beer and some cooked rice by the bridegroom as a part of the ritual. In this song, they chastise the bridegroom in mock-anger, threatening him with dire consequence. Mahapatra’s translation of these Ho songs is exemplary:

Give us some rice-beer
Give us some rice.
The rice-beer your mother takes
It tastes insipid, like water
The broken rice which your father takes
It tastes like straw. (“Marriage: 6”)

19.2.6 The Oraons

The Oraons live mostly in the district of Sundargarh in Odisha. This district adjoins the Oraon belt of the Chhotanagpur division of Bihar. They thus live in close vicinity of the Mundas, the other major tribal group in this north Odisha district. They prefer to call themselves Kurukhs. The most important institution of Oraon social life is the youth dormitory called the dhumkuria. The dhumkuria for the unmarried boys is known as the jonkh-erpa and that for the unmarried girls as the pel-erpa.

The Oraon songs are excellent as poetry, making very clever use of symbolism. The symbols are generally drawn from events or objects of their daily life. The “red cock crowing all night” is the smart young boy who sings and dances without getting tired on a festival night. Similarly, “oranges” symbolize a girl’s breasts and the ripe, raw and half-ripe are described as being “too sweet” “too sour” and “sweet-sour” respectively. This can be compared to a folk song of the Maikal Hills area in Elwin’s collection:

He saw ripe lemon on her tree
How could he control his hunger?
Mahapatra observes the jocund spirit of Oraon poems:
To a tree full of fruits
Come birds to peck
Crows, pigeons, doves
And they chirp and frolic.

The tree is the house of a man who has a number of marriageable daughters. In certain Oraon poems, the symbolism consists in putting the comparison side by side with the statement of the song as in the following instance:

When the paddy stalks are full of sap
The grains mature and ripen,
The pigeons come crowding
I have a grown-up daughter
And friends and relatives

Even from distant villages
Come crowding to my houses.

The Oraon poems are organized in six different groups on the basis of the occasions of marriage and cultivation. Besides, they sing of animals too. Animals in jatra poems are very beautifully decorated because the animals are co-operative to each other. Mahapatra cites:

In the sparkling hills, mother.
The tiger, the bear and the jackals perform a jatra;
The tiger fasts, the bear dances
And the jackal plays the madal
In great glee. (“Jatra: 1”)

Almost all the oral poetry of different tribes are examples of social life and activity. The following song records a conversation between a child and the parents in which the child is complaining:

O my mother, my father
You gave birth to me
And brought me up
But did not tell me how to live life. (“Jatra: 4”)

19.2.7 The Koyas

The Koyas are a Dravidian-speaking tribe living in South Odisha, mostly in the Southern part of the Malkangiri sub-division of Koraput District. Malkangiri is now a district in itself. *The Gazetteer* (1945) once described the history of the locality as follows: “The history of the land is the history of the primitive tribes who have made it their home....The earliest inhabitants were the wild Kolarian tribes which still inhabit the hilliest parts of the district and are still most tenacious of their old customs.” The Boiparis, a group of Hindi-speaking people who have migrated to Malkangiri, are professional traders who live in intense symbiotic relations with the Koyas. They provide most of the dancing dresses for the koyas. They receive goats, paddy and pulses in exchange. A loin cloth is the normal dress for the northern Koyas. Koya language is a Gondi dialect of the Dravidian group. They also use Telugu, Hindi and Odia words in their language. Koya language is compared to the Kondhs and Mundas. Normally, a Koya village is a cluster of thirty to forty houses. Each village has a central place for dancing and singing called the end bayil.

The Koyas chiefly depend on agriculture. Their agricultural practices are still at a primitive level. Monogamy is the rule. When sons reach a marriageable age, they build their own homes adjacent to the ancestral home. Koya houses are generally small and are not noted for cleanliness, orderliness or feeling for beauty. This again is in complete contrast to a Santal house which is usually a picture of beauty and elegance. Bride prices are heavy among the Koyas. It occasionally also happens that a married man elopes with an unmarried girl or a married woman lives with a man other than her husband. When a boy carries away a girl with the help of his friends while she is in the forest or the fields, the marriage is known as karsu pendul or forcible marriage. Marriages (pendul) are perhaps the most important of the Koya social functions.

The Koya song-structures reveal superb aestheticism. The lyrics are charmingly alliterative. According to the poet, the lines have harmoniously blending metaphors and onomatopoeic words which produce an exquisite melody and strong visual flavor. Singing generally takes place in groups, only one in each group is the leading voice. Dancing and singing never go together. As dancing is always accompanied by the beating of drums, singing either precedes the drumbeats or is done when the beating of the drums is muffled and nearly silent. Koya drums are fairly large and can be compared only with the Santal drums. The drum (dhola) and the flute (wasad) are the main musical instruments used by them. A song goes by the name of pata and the act of singing is called parna.

The magician's song is generally referred to as *siran uge*. The song is recited by the wadde, the koya magician, invoking the blessings of the twin goddesses of magic to initiate the new entrant to this secret art. The birth of a child with matted hair indicates that he is destined to play the role of a magician or wadde in future. As such, he is taken care of by an adult wadde and is initiated into the intricate art of magic by performing magical rites. The guru chants incantations with sharp variations in speech and in modulations of his voice. He also makes symbolic bodily movements frequently touching the long matted hair of the baby. Normally, the incantations are very long.

The koyas are extremely fond of singing and dancing. A marriage ceremony provides a very intimate and happy occasion when groups of singers and dancers, both male and female, from different village come together and dance almost continuously throughout the days and nights of the celebration. This frustrated desire to dance is reflected in the present song. One may notice the capacity for image-making in comparing the crowd gathered for the marriage ceremony to the small kendu fruits which occur in dense cluster of this forest tree. The poet writes:

The gathering for the marriage

It is a cluster of kendu fruits. ("The Peacock Dances")

The country is compared to the *beshikara* plant, which resembles the turmeric, and with its bushy growth and beautiful white flowers, looks elegant and charming, like the Koya village landscape. By contrast, the foreign land where they had gone seeking jobs is compared to the crafty asupitte, a long-tailed black bird symbolizing craftiness and unreliability. Koyas drive away birds which destroy maize and other crops by shooting stones at them at high speed with catapults. The speed of the automobile is compared to the speed of a stone hurled by a catapult. The song thus recapitulates the experience of those who go to Assam highly elated (Many Koyas Migrate to the tea-gardens of Assam) with the prospects of visiting a new country. The poet writes:

Assam was like asupitte

When we return for there

No cattle in the fields

No cows in the cow-shed

No fowls in the poultry shed

No goats in the shed

No grains in the store

Rice container empty

House looks like an empty container. ("The Empty House")

Another song is as follows:

We are like cluster of Oogetunda bush in the jungle

Your mother-in-law, your mother-in-law

Mother-in-law is dimiri flower

Your mother-in-law is useless as dimiri flower

She is not good, she is not good

Teeth like Mahul fruit

Her teeth are ugly like the seeds of mahul fruit. (“Useless as Dimiri Flower”)

The most striking characteristics of the song above are the words in the original which are not merely melodious and alliterative but also perfectly in harmony with the natural landscape. What Mahapatra illustrates in the song-structure is extremely interesting. Each line has the same phrase repeated twice, like “Poyur Manitke, which literally means “your mother-in-law, your mother-in-law or “kis pudia kudke, kis pudia kudhe,” which means he is like a box of matches. Every line is thus repetitively sung. The groom is compared to a wei tree whose fruits are very hard.

19.3 LET US SUM UP

Oral poetry thus gains its own beauty and charm that needs to be examined and researched extensively. Nature has given ample space to the tribes not only to grow but to create their own voice, language and poetry. Though agriculture retains its value as the base of each tribal existence in India, yet oral poetry is the evidence that mere food cannot fulfill all the human needs. People cannot live without song, dance, love and marriage. In their own tastes and flavours, the tribes have attempted to embellish their life by singing and dancing. One can often discern that almost all these tribes follow their own folk, myth, tradition and culture in order to systematize their living. Another aspect leaves an indelible mark on the mind of readers is that even in their illiteracy and difficult circumstances, these tribes exemplify their own progress and development with much faith on God, especially ‘Nature God’. Through phases of hardships and through times of exploitation by outsiders to their land, faith and culture, they have always tried to keep themselves happy and festive with their songs, folks and dances. It is the tribes in different parts of the country that have enlivened and contributed to literature to a great extent. Their poetry – oral, mnemonic, mythical, traditional – can be termed as place-bound, space-bound, location-bound, time-bound and relationship-bound in a multi-cultural country like India.

19.4 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

Mahapatra, Sitakant. *The Awakened Wind: The Oral Poetry of the Indian Tribes*. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, 1983. Print.

Archer, W.G. *The Blue Grove*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2006. Print.

Patnaik, Nityananda. *Folklore of Tribal Communities*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, 2002. Print.

19.5 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: Your answers should be in about 300 words.

- 1) Write a note on contribution of Sitakant Mahapatra to Indian literature.

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- 2) What is his contribution to the oral tradition of the tribes?

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- 3) Who are Dharmu and Dharitri?

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- 4) How do the Kondhs look at death in their songs?

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- 5) How is a Santhal village structured? Who are the important people in the village?

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- 6) Write about the Santals' *bintis*.

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7) Write a note on the Ho tribe and their life.

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8) Who are the Oraons?

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9) Can the Parajas be called a tribe in the strictest sense of the term?

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10) Discuss the Munda songs and their main concerns.

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UNIT 20 *RAMAYANA IN MODERN SOUTH INDIA* ED. PAULA RICHMAN

Structure

- 20.1 Objectives
- 20.2 Introduction
- 20.3 'Do You Accept My Truth, My Lord?'
- 20.4 The Poet and the Poem
- 20.5 'Lakshmana's Laugh'
- 20.6 Orality of the *Ramayana* Songs
- 20.7 Various Versions of *Ramayana* in India
- 20.8 The Culture Element: Do the Poems Belong to the High Culture or the so-called Low Culture?
- 20.9 Gender in the *Ramayana* Songs
- 20.10 References and Further Readings
- 20.11 Check Your Progress: Possible Questions

20.1 OBJECTIVES

After reading this unit, you will be able to

- understand the dynamism of the great Epic, *Ramayana*;
- comprehend the culture and traditions of the time; and
- realize how the Epic presents a model society, conflict between individualistic tendencies versus public good.

20.2 INTRODUCTION

The term 'folk poetry' can be properly used for texts which have some characteristics marking them as poetry that belong to the tradition of the common people, as against the dominant 'polite' literary culture of the area.

The tradition of folk poetry in India is ancient and rooted. The idea, the word 'folk' has wide range of understanding and connotations – ranging from 'natural' to 'native' to 'traditional' to 'rural', and in some cases 'from the heart.' The 'outpourings from the heart' of native or traditional people later takes the form of folklore.

All folklores are oral traditions, the lore, traditional knowledge and beliefs of cultures often having no written language and they are transmitted, generally, by word of mouth. Like the written literature, they contain both prose and verse narratives in addition to myths, dramas, rituals etc. All the cultures have their own folklores. In contrast and traditionally, literature is understood to mean any written work.

All folklores do more than merely conveying heart-pouring of natives about the nature around them. They are often the carriers of culture, of social mores, customs and forms of behaviour – that of a society and life in a nutshell. Folklores contain the lofty thoughts of yore and highest metaphysical truths, normally incomprehensible to laymen, in a subtle story form.

Literature, in written form, helps in preserving the folklores and oral traditions. But for the literature in this form, the world would have lost almost all the folk and oral traditions. Written books, as recordings of folklores help in passing on the lofty thoughts and ideas to posterity with no or very little changes in contrast to oral traditions where they often get lost in transition. Literature also can highlight the relevance of the stories of the past to the generation of the present, something which the oral traditions cannot strongly do.

Indian Literature, compared to any other literature in the world, played a dominant role in the preservation and propagation of oral traditions and folklores. Very ancient scholars and texts of this land, India, were past masters of all art forms that is folk. *Sama Veda*, to name one, is probably the oldest form of folk music that has survived till date. Even if one takes *Sama Veda* as a folk music, then it is the finest and ancient folk music that the world has ever witnessed.

From the Epics of India, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* to *Jataka tales of Buddhism* to *PanchaTantras* and *Hitopadesha* to *Katha Saritsagarain* the medieval period to mystic songs of Bauls of Bengal to numerous works in almost all the main languages of India, the scholars, saints and writers have kept the oral traditions and folklore alive by writing down many a tale.

What is more unique to Indian attempts over centuries in preserving the folklores is the role played by women in it. The roles played by Gargi and Maitreyi of the distant past to Andal of Tamil Nadu at the beginning of the previous millennium to Lalleswari of Kashmir to Molla of Nellore in Andhra Pradesh to Akka Mahadevi of Karnataka to Sahajo Bai, is nothing short of stellar.

India remains as one of the world's richest sources of folktales. Not merely folktales but all forms of oral traditions – proverbs, aphorisms, anecdotes, rumours, songs, impromptu folk street plays – mirror the culture and values of the land in which they take place. They have also helped in binding vastly differing mores and customs of even a single given place. India is one place where the speech of even the most illiterate farmer is filled with lofty thoughts and metaphors.

20.3 'DO YOU ACCEPT MY TRUTH MY LORD SITA'S POWERS' — BY LEELA PRASAD

The Text:

Go to the river bank and make a ball of sand.

Make a vessel and fetch water in it, Sita.

Then I will accept your truth.

Making a vessel of sand, taking water in it,

she placed it in front of Rama – did Sita.

Do you accept my truth, My Lord?

Using a serpent's coil for a pot – rest on your head, Sita,

if you fetch me water in a sheaf of paddy,

then will I accept your truth

going to the ant hill, standing there,

reaching into the snake hole – what did she say?

You who reside in this anthill, O Serpent,
Sovereign of the Earth,
won't you at least bite me to death?
Bringing out the hissing one, coiling it around her arm,
Slipping it off to make a pot – rest, she place sit on her head.

With the serpent coiled into a pot – rest , Sita,
carrying water in a sheaf of paddy, Sita
placing it near Rama – what did she say?
Do you accept my truth, My Great Lord?
As jasmine in the hair does not fade,
as draped silk does not get soiled,
as vermilion does not get discoloured by turmeric,
as the hand does not get weighed down by a tender leaf,
like that, you must stand in the fire,
that I will make in front of the palace.

She has combed her hair, she has decorated it with jasmine.
She has donned a silk sari — has Sita.
She has adorned herself with turmeric and vermilion – has Sita.
She holds a tender leaf in her hand.

A fire has been made in front of the palace.
She has gone around the fire three times.
Going around the fire three times, she says – What does she say?
Dasharatha, father-in-law, you who have passed on,
won't you at least come to my rescue?

He came, did king Dasharatha, and said—What did he say?
I am your father, Ramachandra
Don't bring ill – repute to Mother Sita.
Just because of somebody's idle talk, don't make Sita a laughing stock.
Accept my word as truth, Son and
make your devoted and pure wife Sita happy.

The water-fed furrow in which Sita was born
is the nether world of Sitala.
Sita, who sank into a furrow twelve man- lengths,
that Sita's virtue is true virtue.

20.4 THE POET AND THE POEM

Leela Prasad directs the Duke Engage Hyderabad program. She is an Associate Professor of Ethics and Indian Religions in the Department of Religion at Duke University. She received her PhD in Folklore and Folklife from the University of Pennsylvania in 1998. Her interests are in ethics and its 'lived,' expressive

dimensions, particularly in Hindu contexts. She also works in the areas of colonial and postcolonial anthropology of India, folklore, narrative, gender, and the South Asian American diaspora. In *Poetics of Conduct: Narrative and Moral Being in a South Indian Town* (Columbia University Press, 2007), she draws on a decade of ethnography in Sringeri, a well-known Hindu pilgrimage town in South India, to explore the relationships between oral narrative, ethical discourse, and the poetics of everyday language. This book was awarded the American Academy of Religion's 2007 prize for the "Best First Book in the History of Religions."

Critical Appreciation of the Text

In general we find that religious texts remain static and the *Ramayana* epic is an exception as this has been retold in a variety of ways over the centuries and across South Asia. 'Sita's Power' translated from Kannada, comes from the folk stories of "Ramkatha" which focuses on the aspects of Sita's experiences. This song informs us about tests she went through to prove her purity. After her abduction she was forced to reside in Lanka and when she was saved and brought back, her husband Lord Ramachandra ordered her to take up some impossible tasks to prove her chastity before gaining her the position of a Queen. And to surprise all, she performed and emerged successful proving her purity.

The song belongs to the vast repertoire of women's expressive traditions that construct and imagine the detail of everyday life of women, detail that is often missing from the Sanskrit epic narrative, ringing of experience and wisdom, such folksongs are mostly sung by older women.

The moral complexity of the song is reflected in its development. It begins with the searing words of Lord Rama to his wife Sita, moves on to provide examples of Sita's extraordinary powers created by her purity, and the song reaches its climax when she is ordered to take the fire test. And at the end we find her taking ultimate refuge in her natal home.

The song shows Sita undergoing a series of trials before the climactic fire test (agnipariksha) with each trial demonstrating her quintessential purity and the powers she derives by virtue of that purity. The analogies Rama makes are shown on Sita's body. Sita prepares herself for the flames in a silk saree, adorned with vermilion, turmeric and jasmine with a leaf in her hand. The song reflects that Sita's purity extends far beyond the usual units of measurement, but Rama is not ready to accept Sita's "truth" and the refrain "Do you accept my truth?" becomes ironic. The further irony lies in the fact that the late Dasharatha has to vouch for Sita, who has already become successful in the performance. Lord Rama's unquestioning devotion towards his father is proved by Sita's appeal. The song highlights the ironies in the male authored epic, telling about Rama, making these ironies available to those who hear this song of Sita.

The end of the song elevates the position of women in the society as she established her purity and clings on to her self respect and returns to Mother Earth, her original house, as she is born of Mother Earth.

20.5 LAKSHMANA'S LAUGH (WOMEN'S OLD SONG) TRANSLATED BY V. N. RAO FROM TELEGU

The text can be downloaded from:

About the Poet:

Velcheru Narayana Rao is a Distinguished Visiting Professor of Middle Eastern and South Asian Studies at Emory University in Atlanta. Since 1999, he was Krishnadevaraya Professor of South Asian Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, where he worked for almost four decades until his retirement. In 2010-2011, he was the Visiting Professor of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago. Narayana Rao is the foremost scholar of Telugu literature in North America and he has authored, co-authored, or edited more than fifteen books and numerous articles. One of his more recent works is *Girls for Sale: Kanyasulkam. A Play from Colonial India* (Indiana University Press: 2007; Penguin India: 2011). He was the recipient of A.K. Ramanujan Prize for Translation awarded by the Association of Asian Studies in 2004.

Critical Appreciation of the Text

In general, when we talk about the sleeping episodes, the first thing that comes to our mind is Urmila's sleep. But a related song of great interest is also about Lakshmana's sleep. When the goddess of sleep visits Lakshmana in the forest, he asks her to leave him alone for fourteen years and go to his wife instead. The goddess could come back to him fourteen years later when he returns to Ayodhya. Sure enough, when Lakshmana was serving Rama in the court hall after their return from Lanka, the goddess of sleep visits him. Amazed at the punctual return of the goddess, Lakshmana laughs at her. Lakshmana's laugh in the midst of a serious court hall makes everybody wonder. The song describes in great detail as to how each person in the hall interpreted Lakshmana's laugh. Each of them thinks that Lakshmana laughed at him. Siva who is present in the court thinks that Lakshmana laughed at him because he brought this low caste fisher woman (Ganga) and put her on his head. Sesa, the ancient snake, thinks that it was him that Lakshmana was ridiculing because he served Vishnu for a long time and now he is serving Vishnu's enemy, Siva. Angada assumes that Lakshmana laughed at him. Angada joined the service of his father's killer, Rama. Sugriva has his apprehensions too. He had his brother killed unfairly and took his brother's wife. Vibhisana revealed the secrets of his brother's kingdom to his enemy Rama and caused the ruin of Lanka and he thought that Lakshmana was laughing at him. Hanuman is bothered by the fact that he was caught by a young warrior, Indrajit. Bharata and Satrughna, too, had something to be ashamed of. They got the empire as result of their mother's trickery. Even Rama thinks that Lakshmana laughed at him. Rama's problem is that he has accepted a wife who lived in another man's house. Sita thinks that Lakshmana laughed at her. She has lived away from her husband. She was responsible in forcing Lakshmana away from her with harsh words, causing a chain of events leading to the battle of Lanka. Everyone in the court has some anxiety or the other and Lakshmana's laugh causes all of them to bring their insecurities to surface. In a skillful way the song presents that there really is no character in Ramayana free from blemishes.

Rama gets angry at Lakshmana for his improper behavior of laughing in court. He draws his sword to cut Lakshmana's head off. Parvati and Siva intervene. They suggest that Lakshmana should be asked to explain his reasons for such irreverent behavior. He is a young boy. He should not be punished harshly. Rama withdraws his sword and asks Lakshmana to explain why he laughed. When Lakshmana explains why he laughed Rama is embarrassed for his rash and uncontrolled anger. As a

proper king he asks Vasista how he should expiate his sin of attempting to kill his innocent brother. Vasista suggests that Rama should press Lakshmana's feet. So a bed was made for Lakshmana to sleep on and Rama, like a dutiful servant, presses his feet, when Lakshmana goes in deep sleep.

20.6 ORALITY OF THE RAMAYANA SONGS

The Ramayana has many forms and many different texts, both literary and oral. Educated upper caste men associate the *Ramayana* with Valmiki and the Sanskrit text attributed to this legendary author. But for the Brahmin women of South India the *Ramayana* is not an epic story composed by the great sage Valmiki: it is real, it happened.

The events of the *Ramayana* are sung by these women in separate songs, some long and some short. The songs are sung in private gatherings usually in the backyards of Brahmin household, where the men do not usually enter. Altogether, about twenty five different songs are popularly sung. They constitute a fairly connected story of the epic.

Brahmin women who sing these songs are generally aged between thirty-five and seventy. They come from traditional families, literate but not formally educated. Their audience consists of women from similar background, usually relatives and neighbors. There are also children, unmarried young women, and newly married brides visiting their mothers' house for a festive occasion. Often there is a marriage or a similar event which gives an occasion for a number of women to gather. The audience does not include women of other castes. The time of the singing is usually late afternoon, after the mid day meal when the men of the family have all retired to the front part of the house.

Deshi and Margi Traditions

We know that *Ramayana* is a dynamic text which belongs to a definite culture but we find that the text has got a far reaching appeal. The words Deshi and Margi evolved from Sanskrit, the first one stands for country and the second one stands for direction. *Ramayana* songs deal with the "deshi" culture and traditions but it is successful in providing direction to everyone, it is not just a book or a text rather it is a way of life. Consciously or otherwise, these songs have influenced the psyche of the people timelessly and immensely.

Ramayana and Indian Tradition and Culture

The Ramayana and *The Mahabharata* are not simply stories of heroism, but they embody the socio-religious ideals of millions of people of India known as Hindus. Rama and Krishna are thought to be incarnations of God and their ways are to the believing Hindu's the ways of God. They are worshipped in temples and remember in time of stress and strain in national and personal life. The freedom movement of India received huge inspiration from the Gita. Its ideal of doing work without any expectation of result colours the dram of many Indians.

The characters of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* breathe the sentiments of Indian people and the teachings of these two great epics are being handed down from generation to generation.

Importance of Ramayana

- *Ramayana* deals with the various aspects of man's life – love, duty to superiors, treachery, devotion to parents, selflessness and what not.

- These characters of *Ramayana* stand as symbols of love, charity, patriotism, conjugal love, and obedience to parents, self-sacrifice and the like.
- The characters of Sita and Urmila stand for ideal womanhood.
- The character of Ravana teaches us how a man can ruin himself for his own follies and unholy ambitions.
- Dussehra is a great Hindu festival and is celebrated all over India. The festival relates to Rama's victory over Ravana.
- The Ram Navami is a great festival celebrated over a large part of North India.

20.7 VARIOUS VERSIONS OF RAMAYANA IN INDIA

Ramayana in Dasaratha Jataka: The earliest literary of the Rama story of its component is recorded in the *B.Pali Verses (Gathas) of Dasaratha Jataka* (Number 461) which perhaps form the nucleus of the *Ramayana* [13]. There are number of noticeable points of difference in respect to name and theme. For example Dasaratha was a king of Banaras and not of Ayodhya. The reason might be that king of Banaras has a special learning to the Kashi city. According to this , Rama , Lakshmana and Sitadevi are children of king Dasaratha from the eldest queen. Bharata is a son from second wife (after the death of queen). The twelve years exile period is give by king himself on fearing a mischief from second wife. Rama marrying Sita may be because none else was willing to take her to be wife on account her pollution by the touch of demons. In this work, there is no mention of the abduction of Sita by Ravana and all subsequent events. It is believed to be based on much older version of Rama story.

Oldest Ramayana : Ramayana Kamban : In Dravadin language, the oldest *Ramayana* is that of Kambau known as *Tamil Ramayana*, written in somewhat 9th century AD. The basic story line is same, with minor changes in accordance to their own traditions. Here, emphasis on Kamban devotion is more of an argument. God is a part as well as a whole. Part is his incarnation, whole is absolutism. He has compared the dryness of desert in two persons – those who search for God and those who are prostitutes. A person in search of divinity frees himself from all passions and desires and prostitutes who sell their body are also above passions. To Kamban, life has a meaning signifying something.

Lok Ramayana in other Indian States: The Odia *Ramayana*, tingled with local colours, is a unique expression of sublime devotion, complete surrender and self forgetting love of an essentially pious soul who sometimes challenges his beloved lord and takes him to the task in the most daring terms, which clearly brings out the real bhakta in him. Bengali *Ramayana*, *Krittivasa*, is a first rate folk literature, in which all characters are represented as Bengali men and women in general. Himachali *Ramayana* is also composed as folk songs in different local languages with local flavors. Since upper Himachal has boarders with Tibit, it has an influence of Buddhism in it. As middle belt of Himachal is greatly influenced by *Mahabharta*, so somewhere in their *Ramayana* Pandvas are also fighting against Ravana. In some folk stories, there is a mention of Muslim and Pathans invasions to their areas. This might happen due to the fact that *Ramayana* reaches Himachal Pradesh by the Rajputs, who were uprooted from their territories by Muslims they started shifting towards Himalayas. Local traditions, rituals, food habits, plants, animals, tribes and places have become part and parcel of their *Ramayana*. These folk tales not only make *Ramayana* more popular but also increases the credibility of the characters among common people. In Punjab, *Ramayana* has such an influence on the day to

day life that *Ramayana*'s characters are common house hold names. Even All the Sikh Gurus belong to the race of Rama. Ramlila is the most famous folk theater for *Ramayana* in India, although its costumes, makeup and style differ from state to state. Till date, *Ramayana* scenes are major themes for any kind of painting in India.

20.8 THE CULTURE ELEMENT : DO THE POEMS BELONG TO THE HIGH CULTURE OR THE SO CALLED LOW CULTURE?

“The term culture has different associations according to whether we have in mind the development of an individual, of a group or class, or of a whole story. Culture of the individual is dependent upon the culture of a group or class, and that the culture of the whole society to which the group or class belongs.”

T. S. Eliot *From Notes towards the Definition of Culture*

Therefore it is the culture of the society that is fundamental, and it is the meaning of the term culture in relation to the whole society that should be examined first.

High Culture

Notwithstanding this modern condition, High Culture yet retains much of its essence as a set of cultural products in the arts that are held in the greatest esteem by a sophisticated, aristocratic and/or educated class (many middle-class educated people are now included in this culture).

Low Culture

Also referred to as “subculture,” low culture is a disparaging term for some forms of popular culture that have appeal to the masses.

In his book *Popular Culture and High Culture*, Herbert J. Gans defines low culture:

“...there is no explicit concern with abstract ideas or even with fictional forms of contemporary social problems and issues. ... Low culture emphasizes morality but limits itself to familial and individual problems and [the] values, which apply to such problems.” Both the songs represent a combination of High culture and Low culture. They songs deal with lofty values and ethics essential for the smooth running of the society and at the same time. They have got on impactful appeal on the individuals, thus it can be said that *Ramayana* is not an epic, rather it is a way of life.

20.9 GENDER IN THE RAMAYANA SONGS

After this rapid summary of several of the *Ramayana* songs sung by women, let us attempt a brief analysis of the songs. As a structure, each song resembles the construction of the Brahmin house. In the front, it is the men who dominate. All the conventional male dominated values of the house reign strong at the main entrance of the house. But the interior of the house, especially the back part of it, is women's domain. They are relatively free in that area, free from the censoring gaze of their men. They control their own lives in that area, and men are ridiculed even for entering that area. The song structure precisely replicates this design.

Each song respectfully begins with a tribute to Rama, the king. Rama in these songs is not the God, as in the bhakti *Ramayanas*. He is rather the yajamani, the master of

the house, a Master who is not really in control. Once the opening is properly made, the songs move with great freedom. People who inhabit the interior of the songs are mostly women. Men who acquire the same freedom as the women in this area are Lakshmana, the younger brother-in-law, and Lava and Kusa, the young twins.

Despite the freedom, the language of the songs is very gentle, properly feminine. There are no harsh words, no strong diction. Everything is very refined and appropriate to the occasion. However, both the affections and the tensions of a joint family come out clearly through these songs. Underneath the apparent calm of the house, joint family women suffer severe internal tensions. Movements from one room to the other and contacts between one person and the other are closely observed and carefully monitored. The songs reveal a similar atmosphere in their use of language. The general style of the language is deceptively gentle; the syllables blend harmoniously. With very few Sanskrit words, the choice of soft Dravidian words lend to the texture of the songs an idyllic atmosphere of calm and contentment. But the underlying meanings reveal an atmosphere of subdued tensions, hidden sexuality and frustrated emotional fulfillment. On occasions, words burst forth like sharp darts and hit their targets with precise aim. Under the pretext of family humor, every character is lampooned. No character is clean and no person really loves the other. Even Sita's ideal chastity is open to doubt. Her drawing of Ravana's big toe is a veiled reference to his sex organ. The daughters-in-law of the family claim, under the cover of protesting Rama's banishment of Sita, that all of them are in love with Ravana. This is Sita's desire expressed through surrogates. The final picture that emerges is not one of the ideal *Ramayana* with an ideal husband, an ideal wife and ideal brothers, but one of a complex joint family where every one suspects the other, lies to the other and lives a constant life of tension and fear, coupled with love and affection. In a way, the *Ramayana* songs are also a statement against the public *Ramayanas*, the bhakti *Ramayanas*, where the accepted values of a male dominated world are glorified. Here, in these texts, the minor and lower characters come out as winners. Urmila, Lakshman, the twin sons, Santa and even Surpanakha, have a chance to take their revenge. Sita alone does not fight her own battle. Others fight it for her. She even enjoys the freedom she acquired by the news of her death. For once, she could live life without existing for Rama. As Rama prepares for her death ceremonies, burdened by the guilt of having her killed unjustly, Sita quietly gives birth to sons and waits for her final victory over Rama, won through her agents, her sons.

It is, indeed, Sita's *Ramayana*, a real 'Sitayana'.

20.10 REFERENCES AND FURTHER READINGS

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Herbert J Gans, *Popular Culture and High Culture*. (www.philpapers.org). Print.

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Sahu, Nandini. *Sita: A Poem*. The Poetry Society of India, New Delhi, 2014. Print.

20.11 CHECK YOUR PROGRESS: POSSIBLE QUESTIONS

Note: Your answers should be in about 200 words.

- 1) Why do you think that folk poetry is the 'out pouring from the heart'?
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- 2) Do you believe that traditional literature means only any written work? If so, why ?
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- 3) What role does Indian Literature play towards the preservation of folklore?
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- 4) What are the important oral folk forms which contribute to the preservation of a culture?
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- 5) Discuss the characterization of Sita in folk *Ramayanas*.
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6) What is the irony behind Sita's question, 'do you accept my truth?'

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7) What is the cultural significance of the folk *Ramayana* songs?

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8) Discuss a few other texts where the *Ramayana* has been narrated from Sita's perspective.

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