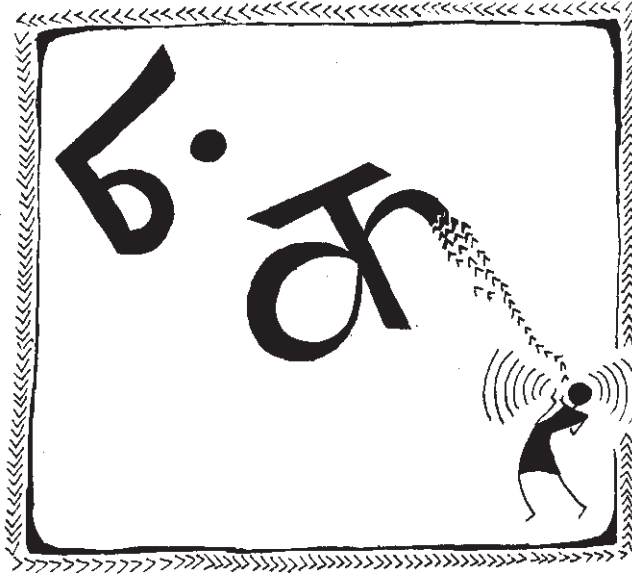


# Who Needs Folklore?

## The Relevance of Oral Traditions to South Asian Studies\*

by

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*In the last few years I've been writing a series of interlocking papers on the subject of Indian folklore using Kannada and Tamil examples from my field notes. Now I will touch on a number of issues I've touched on before, refine them further, relate them to other issues, and generally bring them into a unified perspective. My theme is not folklore in general but Indian folklore within the context of Indian studies. I wish also to do several things: (1) give a state-of-the-art report on the field of Indian folklore; (2) clarify some notions and add some; and (3) generally ask and answer questions about what the study of folklore, as a subject matter and as a discipline, would do to some of the notions of humanists and social scientists about Indian civilisation.*

*When some years ago I first approached this subject—the place of folklore in the study of Indian civilization—I heard a little skeptical voice from my past say “Folklore? Who needs folklore? Old-wives’ tales and peasant superstitions, who needs them?” As you know, the past never quite passes. We may hear that voice again. Here, I’m going to take that question literally and answer it.*

### Why Folklore?

For starters I for one need folklore as an Indian studying India. It pervades my childhood, my family, my community. It is the symbolic

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*\*This is the text of the first Rama Watamull Lecture on India delivered at the University of Hawaii in March 1988. The author is a professor in the Department of South Asian Languages and Civilizations at the University of Chicago*

language of the nonliterate parts of me and my culture. Even in a large modern city like Bombay or Madras, even in Western-style nuclear families with their 2.2 children, folklore is only a suburb away, a cousin or a grandmother away. One of the best folk plays I’ve seen was performed in the back streets of Madras city by *teruk-kuttu* troupes. When a friend of mine in Bangalore, the capital city

of Karnataka state, said to me, “How can you collect folklore in a big city?” I asked him to try an experiment. He was a professor of Kannada, and he had a composition class that afternoon at his college. I asked him to set a composition exercise to his class of urban students. Each of them should write down a folktale they had heard and never read. That evening, my friend sought me out excitedly to

show me a sheaf of 40 tales his students had written down for him in class from memory.

I shall not speak here of Indian urban folklore, for wherever people live folklore grows—new jokes, proverbs (like the new campus proverb, “to xerox is to know”), tales, and songs circulate in the oral tradition. Similar to chain letters, Murphy’s Law, and graffiti, folklore may also circulate on paper or on latrine walls (Dundes and Pagter 1978). You don’t have to go to Pompeii to see graffiti. Verbal folklore, in the sense of a largely oral tradition with specific genres (such as proverb, riddle, lullaby, tale, ballad, prose narrative, verse, or a mixture of both, and so on), nonverbal materials (such as dances, games, floor or wall designs, objects of all sorts from toys to outdoor giant clay horses), and composite performing arts (which may include several of the former as in street magic and theatre)—all weave in and out of every aspect of living in city, village, and small town. What we separate as art, economics, and religion is molded and expressed here. Aesthetics, ethos, and worldview are shaped in childhood and throughout one’s early life by these verbal and non-verbal environments. In a largely nonliterate culture, everyone—poor, rich, high caste and low caste, professor, pundit, or ignoramus—has inside him or her a large nonliterate subcontinent.

In a South Indian folktale, also told elsewhere, one dark night an old woman was searching intently for something in the street. A passerby asked her, “Have you lost something?”

She said, “Yes, I’ve lost some keys. I’ve been looking for them all evening.”

“Where did you lose them?” “I don’t know. Maybe inside the house.”

“Then, why are you looking for them here?”



**Deepalakshmi, Madurai, Crafts Museum Delhi (From Aditi)**

“Because it’s dark in there. I don’t have oil in my lamps. I can see much better here under the street lights,” she said.

Until recently many studies of Indian civilisation have been done on that principle: look for it under the light, in Sanskrit, in literary texts, in what we think are the well-lit public spaces of the culture, in things we already know. There we have, of course, found precious things. Without carrying the parable too far one may say we are now moving inward, trying to bring lamps into the dark rooms of

the house to look for our keys. As often happens, we may not find the keys and may have to make new ones, but we will find all sorts of things we never knew we had lost, or ever even had.

### **Regional Languages**

Four centuries ago, just a century after Vasco da Gama landed on the west coast of India, just decades after Gutenberg had printed his first Bible in Europe, Christian evangelists had begun to study our mother tongues, compile dictionaries, make grammars, and even print them in India. Yet, until recently, Sanskrit almost exclusively represented India to most people in the West.

In America, it was only about 25 years ago that universities began to study Indian regional languages. At least three or four major languages, such as Tamil, Hindi, and Bengali, began to appear in course listings. Both linguists and anthropologists went to these language regions, studied the languages in the field, and wrote about the texts and the cultures. These languages are only a minute fraction of those spoken in the subcontinent. In the 1971 census more than 3,000 mother tongues were recorded with the names of the speech varieties that the speakers said they spoke. Linguists have classified and subsumed these speech varieties, or dialects, under 105 languages or so which belong to four language families. Of these 105 languages 90 are spoken by less than 5 percent of the entire population; 65 belong to small tribes. Including Sanskrit, 15 of the languages are written, read, and spoken by about 95 percent of the people. We, in universities outside India, have just begun to study a few of these 15 languages.

The literatures of these 15, some of which have long histories, are just beginning to be taught and translated. Literature in a language like Tamil goes back 2,000 years, and in several others,

like Bengali and Gujarati, at least 800 years. In addition to these literatures there are oral traditions, riddles, proverbs, songs, ballads, tales, epics, and so on, in each of the 3,000-odd mother tongues that we have classified under the 105 languages. It is true, as they say, a language is a dialect that has acquired an army, but all these myriad dialects carry oral literature, which is what I call folklore. One way of defining verbal folklore for India is to say it is the literature of the dialects, those mother tongues of the village, street, kitchen, tribal hut, and wayside tea shop. This is the wide base of the Indian pyramid on which all other Indian literatures rest.

We have valued and attended only to the top of the pyramid. Robert Redfield, the Chicago anthropologist who influenced Indian anthropology in the 1950s and 1960s, said, "In a civilization, there is a great tradition of the reflective few and there is a little tradition of the largely unreflective many" (Redfield 1960:41). That is a famous formulation that deserves to be infamous. Traditionally Indians also make a distinction between *marga* "the high road" and *desi*, "the byway, the country road" in their discussion of the arts.

The "Great Tradition," with capitals and in the singular, said to be carried by Sanskrit, is *p a n - I n d i a n*, prestigious, ancient, authorised by texts, cultivated and carried by what Redfield calls "the reflective few." The "Little Tradition," or traditions in the plural, are local, mostly oral, and carried by the illiterate (the liberal would call them nonliterate) and the

anonymous "unreflective many." Redfield himself and Milton Singer later modified these notions and others have been critical of them. They were seminal at one time, especially because they urged anthropologists not to ignore the "texts" of a culture in favor of "fieldwork."

### Cultural Performances as Texts

Now we need a new emphasis, a larger view regarding texts themselves, as text theory in literary criticism and philosophic analysis urge us to do. Written and hallowed texts are not the only kinds of texts in a culture like the Indian. Oral traditions of every kind produce texts. "Cultural performances" (Singer 1972:47) of every sort, whether they are written or oral acts of composition, whether they are plays or weddings, rituals or games, contain texts. Every cultural performance not only creates and carries texts, it is a text.

When we look at texts this way we can modify terms such as *great* and *little* traditions and see all these performances as a transitive series, a "scale of forms" (a phrase in a different context, from Collingwood

1933) re-responding to one another, engaged in continuous and dynamic dialogic relations. Past and present, what's "pan-Indian" and what's local, what's shared and what's unique in regions, communities, and individuals, the written and the oral—all are engaged in a dialogic reworking and redefining of relevant others. Texts then are also contexts and pretexts for other texts (Ramanujan 1989). In our studies now we are beginning to recognise and place folk texts in this everpresent network of intertextuality. For folk texts are pervasive, behind, under, around all the texts of our society, and in all its strata, not merely among the rural and the illiterate, the "unreflective many." City and village, factory and kitchen, Hindu, Buddhist, and Jaina, Christian, and Muslim, king, priest, and clown, the crumbling almanac and the runaway computer—all are permeated by oral traditions, tales, jokes, beliefs, and rules of thumb not yet found in books. I shall say more later about the dialogic relations between folklore and other parts of this Indian cultural continuum.

### Interactive Pan-Indian Systems

In the view being developed here, even what's called the Great Tradition is not singular but plural—it is a set of interactive pan-Indian systems, *B r a h m i n i s m*, Buddhism, Jainism, with tantra and bhakti interacting variously with these. To be comprehensive we should add Islam, Christianity, et cetera, and modernity itself as the other active systems that participate in this give-and-take. (For a fuller



Juggleer with monkey, Jammu, 1750 A.D. (From *Aditi*)



development of this idea, see Ramanujan 1989.)

Let's examine briefly the idea that some traditions are pan-Indian and some not. Sanskrit and Prakrit, though they have a pan-Indian distribution, still originate in particular regions; Sanskrit itself, though translocal and apparently a-geographic, has varieties of pronunciation that can be identified as Bengali, Malayali, or Banarasi (Staal 1961). Nor are the so-called "Little Traditions," especially folk traditions, necessarily or usually confined to small localities or dialectal communities. Proverbs, riddles, and stories, and tunes, motifs, and genres of songs and dances are not confined to a region, even though they may be embodied in the nonliterate dialects and may seem to be enclosed in those mythic entities called self-sufficient village communities. It is well known that folklore items, like many other sorts of items in cultural exchange, are autotelic, that is, they travel by themselves without any actual

movement of populations. A proverb, a riddle, a joke, a story, a remedy, or a recipe travels every time it is told. It crosses linguistic boundaries any time a bilingual tells it or hears it.

Neighboring languages and regions have, therefore, a large stock of shared folk materials. Collections, for instance, have been made of the proverbs shared by the four Dravidian languages. Similar ones can be made for other genres and for other neighboring language areas, and indeed for the whole subcontinent. A proverb such as "It's dark under the lamp" (*dipada kelage kattale*, in *Kannada*) has been collected in Kannada and in Kashmiri, at two ends of the Indian subcontinent. The sentence is the same in each place, but it means different things. The reference is the same, but the sense is different. In Kannada it means that a virtuous man, like a lighted lamp, may have dark hidden vices. In Kashmiri, I'm told, "It's dark under the lamp" has a political sense—that a good-

natured king may have evil counselors. This is, of course, characteristic of cultural forms. The signifiers, of which even the so-called structures and archetypes are instances, may be the same in different periods and regions, but the signification may go on changing. You cannot predict the one from the other. For the meaning of a sign is culturally and contextually assigned. A sign requires an assignment.

Not only do folklore items—arising and current in apparently narrow incommunicable corners and very localised dialects—travel within the country or culture area, they are also part of an international network. Archer Taylor's *English Riddles* (1951) gives us current English riddles and their centuries-old written variants, as well as variants from Africa, India, and the New World. One can collect today, as I know from experience, oral tales from illiterate women in Kannada villages that are similar, motif for motif, to the tales of



Ritual Dance, Mesolithic rock painting, Madhya Pradesh. (From *Indian Folk Art* by Heinz Mode)

the Greek *Oedipus* or to Shakespeare's *King Lear* or *All's Well That Ends Well*.

Here we begin to glimpse a paradox: where the so-called pan-Indian Hindu mythologies of Visnu or Siva, or the great classics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* are unique to India, folklore items such as proverbs and tales participate in an international network of motifs, genres, types, and structures—using them all, of course, to say something particular, local, and unique. One arrives at the paradox that the classics of a culture, like the well-wrought epics or plays and poetry, are culture-bound forms, but large portions of the so-called little traditions are not. The latter mold and express the values and concerns of the culture nonetheless. Their forms, their signifiers, however, are not ethnocentered.

One has to resort to subterfuge and theoretical acrobatics to compare the Sanskrit *Mahabharata* and the Greek *Iliad* or invoke ancient Indo-European structures (such as the tripartite division of priest, warrior, and service classes) as Dumézil (1968) does. But the comparison of Cinderella tales from China to Peru begins with transparent structural resemblances and may end with significant contrast between one culture's assignment of meanings and another's (Ramanujan 1983). Unfortunately, comparativists have not paid attention to Indian folklore and folklorists have usually stopped at identifying types, rarely going further to ask questions of cultural significance. Detailed comparative studies of particular proverbs, tales, and so on, for which there are well-attested comparative materials, are called for and would greatly enhance our understanding of what is specifically Indian, or Tamil, or Bengali. Because some of these tales, for example, can be identified in

European languages, Classical Sanskrit, and in our mother tongues, we can arrive at a most useful three-way comparison between what is Indian and what is Western; and within India, between what is Sanskritic and what is characteristic of a regional culture and a mother tongue—and of course the dialogues and exchanges among these. Such triangulations, if replicated for several tales, would give us a body of unique comparative data and analyses.

### Written and Oral Media

Folklore also raises and makes us face other central questions; for instance, questions regarding the differences and relations between written and spoken media in Indian oral culture.

The relations between oral and written traditions in any culture are not simple oppositions. They interpenetrate each other and combine in various ways. Each of us produces more oral materials in our lives than written. We begin our lives in an oral universe, learn our mother tongues orally first and imbibe our culture through it. As adults, on any day or occasion, we say much more than we write. Talk surrounds us and we talk to ourselves, not only to others, not always even silently, and often we do not even stop when we fall asleep. Our dreams are filled with speech. Yet writing is more permanent; it takes us out of a face-to-face communication and can reach people far away and centuries later, in ages unborn and accents yet unknown, as Shakespeare would say. In Sanskrit, a written letter is called *aksara* "imperishable." In India, literacy has always been restricted and today in many states is less than 30 percent. Written traditions live surrounded by oral ones and are even carried by oral means. As in many other languages, in Kannada the word for writing (*bare*) is the same as that for drawing;

and until recently to read meant to read aloud. I've heard of a grand-uncle who would say he couldn't read a novel because he had a sore throat. So too, to write meant to write down. Writing was an *aide memoir*, a mnemonic device, for materials to be rendered oral again. Speech lies dormant in writing until it is awakened again by one's own or another's voice, like these words on this page as you or I read them.

Sometimes it is thought that the so-called classical texts are fixed and the so-called folk texts are constantly changing. Similarly, writing is thought to be fixed and speech constantly changing. One often identifies the "classical" with the written and the "folk" with the oral. But, for India, we should distinguish between three sets of independent oppositions. We may then proceed to examine, complicate, and dissolve them. The three are classical vs. folk, written vs. spoken, fixed vs. free or fluid. The classical, the written, and the fixed do not necessarily belong together. A text like the *Vedas* is fixed but was not written down until a thousand years after its composition. The *Vedas* were esoteric and credited with magical properties that would devastate anyone who mispronounced them. They were transmitted orally but rigorously in elaborate teaching systems from guru to disciple. Pundits and Vedic experts had what Narayana Rao calls "oral literacy"; they used an almost entirely oral medium, but were learned in grammar, syntax, logic, and poetics. Their literacy was, as it were, imbued in their bodies. We speak of a learned man having all his texts in his throat, *kanthastha*; when one is ignorant, one is called "a fellow who has no letters in his belly" or a *niraksarakuksi*.

Although such oral literacy produced texts that were carefully preserved verbatim, allowing little

change, a text like an epic story in the written tradition of the *Ramayana* seems to allow endless variations. Hundreds of versions exist, written, sung, danced, and sculpted in South and Southeast Asian languages. Though I would insist that each of these many tellings should be treated as a separate (often fixed) text, it is still remarkable that the orally transmitted *Vedas* should be remarkably fixed and the written *Ramayanas* should take such liberties with the story and should be almost as fluid as an oral folktale. The contrast will become clear when we compare the great Indian epics with the great Western texts. Imagine a Shakespeare play or Homer's *Odyssey* having as many widely differing versions in different ages and languages. We cannot jump from this to the paradox that in India the oral is invariably fixed and the written is what is fluid. The fixed and the fluid, or what should be called fixed-phrase and free-phrase forms, exist in both written and spoken texts.

Language, like other communication systems, depends on both fixed or invariant forms and free or variant ones. Without the one the system would not be stable; without the other it would not be capable of change, adaptation, creativity. Our ordinary language is full of fixed forms, not only in terms of underlying structures at every level, but even in lexical combinations. To give just one example, idioms like "he kicked the bucket" cannot be changed for tense, article, or number. Any variation such as "he is kicking the bucket; he is kicking a bucket; they are kicking buckets; he has been kicking the bucket for a week now" would all be ungrammatical, mean other things, and be seen as funny. In language, as we move

from phonology to syntax, we become freer and freer in combinatory possibilities. Still, some things are not subject to variation and not open to innovation. Not even Shakespeare or Kalidasa, acknowledged masters and not servants of their languages, can make a new pronoun or add a tense to the language. When writers like Joyce try to take such liberties, they achieve such specialised effects that they require glossaries and notes, and explication quickly becomes cult and a cottage industry.

In discourse too different genres allow different degrees of fixity and freedom. Where the written form is only a mnemonic, a score to be performed orally, it is used freely for improvisation. The texts of a *Yakshagana* performance or a *Kathakali* performance are hardly a few pages long, but an actual performance may take a whole night.



**Yellamma-Gangamma, Andhra Pradesh, 20th Century, Rajeev Sethi Collection. (From *Aditi*)**

The text of a song may be only a few lines long, but when sung may take an hour, and usually does. On the other hand, orally transmitted texts have fixed components, formulae, refrains, obligatory descriptive passages, and traditionally defined motifs and narrative structures. Different genres have different proportions of these; for example, a proverb is an entirely fixed-phrase form within a speech community. One can play on its fixity to produce new effects as wits like Oscar Wilde did: "Nothing succeeds like excess," or my favorite, "All's well that ends." In a joke, everything may be free, but the punchline may be fixed—to garble it would be to muff the joke. A folksong would have practically every word fixed, except performance elements like the number of repetitions, or the way a phrase is broken to accord with the musical phrase. A folktale told by a grand-mother in the kitchen may have nothing at all fixed in the phrasing, only the design of the story and the sequence of motifs. Yet it may have fixed phrases, like "Open Sesame" in the story of Ali Baba—a phrase that his brother treats as a free phrase, with disastrous results. The *Vedas* are an extreme case of a 4,000-hymn cycle fixed in oral transmission, as if it were inscribed (as secret codes are in spy stories) in the transmitter's memory.

Furthermore, oral and written forms in a culture often wish to be like each other, like the two sexes, male and female, each envying what the other has. Yet each defines and marries the other. In the oral forms, in folklore, many devices such as refrains, formulae, and memory training exist to give the relative permanence of writing. From time to time, in writing traditions, writers wish to return to the freshness of speech and imitate it, as in modern Indian



(and other) poetry. Flaubert, master of the written word who waited for days for the *mot juste* is the exemplar of the opposite end of the oral arts, where to hesitate is to be lost. Yet it was Flaubert who said that style should be adjusted to the rhythms of respiration.

In all cultures, and especially in the Indian, the oral and the written are deeply intermeshed in another way. If we distinguish composition and transmission, as Ruth Finnegan (1977) reminds us we should, we find that in the history of a text, oral and written means may alternate. A work may be composed orally but transmitted in writing, as Vyasa said he did with Ganesa as his scribe. Or it may be composed in writing, as Kumaravyasa (Vyasa junior) said he did in Kannada, but the text kept alive by *gamakis* or reciters who know it by heart and chant it aloud. There are of course texts, such as proverbs and tales, that are usually composed orally and orally transmitted, many of which never get written down. And texts, like newspapers—written, printed, and silently scanned or read—may never go through an oral phase. Thus, over a long history, a story may go through many phases. An oral story gets written up or written down in the *Jatakas* or the *Pancatantra*. Then (as W. Norman Brown tried to show in a famous paper) the written text may reach other audiences who pick up the story and retell it orally, maybe in other languages, and then it gets written down somewhere else, perhaps starting another cycle of transmissions. That's one kind of cycle; another may be entirely oral and may run parallel to the oral-written complex. Many of the differences in our classical texts like the *Mahabharata* recensions, may be due to the way the texts do not simply go from one written form to another but get reworked through oral cycles that surround the written word.

Western critical methods, based entirely on an examination and reconstruction of written texts, made the Critical Editions of Indian texts possible. But they may not be suitable for a reconstruction of the *Mahabharata* at all. For methods of Western textual criticism aim at making tree-diagrams, relating one written version to another, demonstrating that one came directly from another, reaching back to a single Ur-text. Texts like the *Mahabharata* may not have a reconstructable Ur-text at all, enmeshed as they were in oral traditions at various stages of their composition and transmission.

In a folktale told about Aristotle in Europe and about a philosopher in India, the philosopher meets a village carpenter who has a beautiful old knife, and asks him, "How long have you had this knife?" The carpenter answers, "Oh, this knife has been in our family for generations. We have changed the handle a few times and the blade a few times, but it is the same knife." Similarly, the structure of relations may remain constant, while all the cultural details change, as in a folktale that goes on changing from teller to teller. Any fixity, any reconstructed archetype, is a fiction, a label, a convenience.

### **Oral Traditions: The Difference They Make**

Thus anyone concerned with written texts has to reckon with the oral materials that surround it. This contrasts strikingly with modern America, where the end of any formal oral communication is a written text. You speak in Congress so that your speech may be read into the Congressional Record; everything anybody says in a court is typed up; and at the end of what's supposed to be spontaneous conversation on a TV talk show you get the message, "Send three dollars and you can get the transcript of this show." And finally the most popular TV game show,

"Wheel of Fortune," has to do with spelling words and phrases. Every letter is cashed into dollars, every phrase into furniture and a trip to Hawaii. In a culture like the Indian, however, and certainly in villages and certain communities to this day, writing lives within the context of oral traditions. Even newspapers are read aloud. If you have been near any primary school in a small town or even in Madras, you would hear the pupils a mile away, for the classes recite their lessons in a loud chorus. Not only the alphabet and the multiplication tables, but every major religious or literary text like the *Ramayana* is memorised and chanted aloud. As Philip Lutgendorf (1987) has shown, in a Chicago doctoral dissertation, Tulsidas' *Ramacaritamansa* is the focus of cults, festivals, formal and informal recitations, tableaux, and oral forays into interpretations of the most wide-ranging and ingenious kinds. The author and the text themselves are the subject of innumerable tales. Every text like that creates a textual community held together by oral traditions as well as written ones. Scholars are just now realising that this interweaving of the oral and written is true of the *Quran* and the Bible as well (Graham 1987). But the Indian examples have needed no pointing out, except of course to scholars like ourselves. As a proverb in Kannada says, "Why do we need a mirror to see a blister on our hands?" Yet, we seem to, for we believe in the mirror of writing, or even better, the mirror of print.

Oral traditions thus enlarge the range and they complicate and balance the texts we know. Yet we ignore the oral. Take mythology for instance. At present, in all our anthologies of Hindu mythology there is not one folk myth. Every text is from the Sanskrit, though myths occur in Tamil and Bengali and every other language. They even occur in scores

of written texts like the sthalapuranas, which David Shulman has studied (1980), or the mangal-akavyas which Edward Dimock (1988) has written about. In the oral tradition, that literature without letters (*eluta eluttu*), there are hundreds more. As Alf Hiltebeitel's work on Draupati eloquently demonstrates (1988), they complement the Sanskritic myths and epics in important ways. Oral traditions give us alternative conceptions of deities that balance and complete, and therefore illuminate the textual conceptions. For instance, the goddesses of pan-Indian mythologies, like Lakshmi and Saraswati, rise out of the sea churned by the gods and the antigods; Parvati is the daughter of the King of Mountains. They are consort goddesses; their shrines are subordinate to those of their spouses,



**The Goddess riding the tiger. A wall drawing, Orissa, 20th Century (From *The Earthen Drum*)**



**Maithili painting depicts Shiva being fanned by Parvati. (From *Aditi, The Living Arts of India*)**



Visnu or Siva. Their images are carefully sculpted to the fingertips. They are usually *saumya* or mild and docile. They preside over the normal auspicious cycles of life, especially marriages, prosperity, and such.

But look at the village goddesses and see how different they are. Their myths tell us of ordinary human women who were cheated into marrying untouchables, or raped by a local villain, or killed and buried by cruel brothers. Out of such desecrations they rise in fury, grow in stature to become figures that span heaven and earth, with powers of destruction that terrify the village into submission, sacrifice, and worship. Theirs are not myths of descent or *avatara*, but of ascent from the human into divine forms. They become boundary goddesses of the village, give it their name, or take their names from the village. While the Sanskrit Breast Goddesses (as I call them because they give us their breasts) receive vegetarian offerings of fruit and flowers, these village goddesses require animal sacrifices and a sprinkle of blood on their devotees. The Tooth Goddesses represent the other side of the mother (as stepmothers do, in folktales), who punish, afflict people with plague and pox, and when propitiated heal the afflicted. They are goddesses of the disrupted lifecycle, deities of crisis; they preside over famine, plague, death, and madness. Their images are often pots and pans, faceless stones, sometimes only a severed head. They dwell outside the village boundaries and are brought in only for special worship, often in times of crisis. Without them, life is not complete, nor is the Hindu view of the divine.

The goddess Kali, as the Sanskrit texts present her, is a Sanskritised version of hundreds of village goddesses all over the country and certainly partakes of their fierce aspects. Yet, in the Sanskrit *puranas*

(encyclopedias of Hindu myths) and myths based on them, Kali is created by the gods pooling their weapons and powers and let loose on the Buffalo Demon whom the male deities cannot destroy. The emphases, details, and major themes of the village mythologies are quite different. The village *Mariyamman* goddesses arise out of human deception and tragedy. If the Breast Goddesses are consorts to their male spouses, the Tooth Goddess is often a virgin and, if married, she tears her villainous male consort to pieces. He is later symbolically offered as a buffalo or goat sacrifice to her images. The consort goddesses are auspicious, consecrated. The village goddesses

are ambivalent, they afflict and heal (Brubaker 1978).

Such a conception of divinity is not confined only to female deities. Consider the village gods, such as *Muttupattan*. He is a Brahmin who falls in love with a cobbler chieftain's daughters, marries them, skins and tans cowhides, eats cow's flesh, dies in battle defending his village against robbers, and becomes a god to whom his community of cobblers makes offerings (*kodai*) of gigantic leather sandals. It is one of the most moving long poems of South India. Until recently no record or translation of this tragic story was available. Now Stuart Blackburn has made an effective translation of it (1988).



**Kali, wall painting by village women. Madhubani, Bihar. (From *The Earthen Drum*)**

I use the word *tragic* advisedly. It is customary to speak of Indian literature as having no genre of tragedy. In the Sanskrit tradition (by which I mean both works in Sanskrit and Sanskritised works in our regional languages), it is true there are no tragedies in the Greek or Shakespearean sense, though some plays of Bhasa may be an exception. It is significant, I think, that his plays were unearthed in South India in areas where dance dramas like *Kathakali* developed, dramas that do not flinch from gory scenes, and where also the more tragic aspects of the *Mahabharata* are fully enacted. Our sense of our literature and its possibilities would change if we included oral epics like the Tamil *villuppattus* and the Tulu *paddanas* (e.g., Claus 1989) in our studies. (Fortunately, a book of essays on Indian oral epics has just been published: Blackburn et al. 1986; see also Beck 1982; Roghair 1982). Oral epics embody a theory of emotion different from that of *rasa*, explore ranges in the emotional spectrum like shame, terror, fury, and disgust that are not usually explored in the Sanskrit poems and plays. And how can we, mere mortals, do without them?

The oral traditions offer us also a different view of the female from the views found in the written texts. When the *Ramayana* is sung by the Tamburi Dasayyas of Mysore, the center of attention is Sita, her birth, marriage, exile, sufferings, and final disappearance into Mother Earth. In the Tamil story of *Mayili Ravanaan*, set in a time after Rama has defeated the ten-headed Ravana, a new thousand-headed Ravana arises to threaten the gods, and

this time Rama cannot handle it. It is Sita who goes to war and demolishes the impossible demon (Shulman 1986).

In the Upanishadic creation myth, the Primordial Person or *Purusa* is alone, needs a companion, and splits into male and female, for he is originally the same size as a man and a woman put together. Then the male pursues the female and unites with her, creating mankind. She runs from him, saying, "I was born out of you, I cannot unite with you," and becomes a cow he becomes a bull and unites with her, creating cattle. Then she becomes a she-goat, he a he-goat; they unite and create goats. And so on down to the ants.

But see what happens in an oral folk *purana* sung ceremonially on Madeswara hill (Karnataka) every year by several bardic groups during the festival devoted to this hero/saint/ god called Madeswara (Ramanujan 1985). *The purana* begins with a creation myth.

The Primordial Goddess is born

three days before everything else. She grows up very quickly, attains puberty, and wants a man to satisfy her. Finding no one around, she creates out of herself Brahma, the eldest of the gods, and asks him to grow up quickly and sleep with her. But as he grows up and she urges him on, Brahma says, "You are my mother. How can I sleep with you?" She gets angry, calls him a eunuch, and burns him down to a heap of ash with the eye of fire in the palm of her hand. The next day, she creates Visnu, who is very handsome. She can't wait for him to grow up and satisfy her. But he too will not sleep with his mother. So, in a rage, she burns him down to a heap of ash. On the third day, she creates Siva, and urges him to grow up and become her lover. He too has misgivings until she says, "Look around and see what happened to your brothers who refused me." He turns around and sees the two heaps of ash that were once his brothers. He sizes up the situation and says to his mother, "All right, I'll do as you say. You want me to be your husband, don't you? Don't you want your husband to be at least equal to you? Don't you want to teach him all your skills and give him your powers?" The Mother Goddess, Ammavaru, is delighted and says, "Of course, I want you to have everything," and teaches him all her magic arts and bestows on him all her powers. Then Siva, now grown up, says, "Let's dance. You must do whatever I do. Let's see who is better." They whirl around in a fantastic cosmic dance together, each mirroring the other, until suddenly, Siva puts his hand on his head in a dance movement. His mother, following him, puts her hand on her own head and the eye of fire in her palm begins to burn her. As she burns, she



**Primordial goddess, Anthropomorphic form, 2nd Millennium B.C. (From Aditi)**



curses Siva, “You, you refused a woman. May one half of your body become female, may you never get rid of her!” That’s how Siva came to be the lord whose one half is woman. Then as his mother burned down and became a heap of ash, the eye of fire that lived in her hand came to Siva and said it had nowhere to go. So he took it and slapped it on his forehead. That’s how he got the third eye.

After his mother had gone up in flames, Siva looked around and found the two heaps of ash that were once his brothers. With his newly learned powers, he revived them. Now the three gods, Brahma, Visnu, and Siva, said to each other, “There’s work to do. We must create the worlds.” One of them said, “How can we create without women?” Then Siva sees the third heap of ash that was once their mother, divides it into three smaller heaps, and gives them life. Out of these portions of their mother’s ash, come Lakshmi, Saraswati, and Parvati, the three consorts of the Hindu trinity, who then marry them. Creation begins.

In the Sanskrit myth, the male gods create the goddess and give her their powers. In the foregoing myth it is exactly in reverse. She gives Siva his powers. In the Sanskrit myth it is the father figures that lust after the daughters. Here the female too has her share of sexual desire, made explicit. She is cheated out of her powers by the male god who uses them to destroy her. Further more, her sons still end up marrying portions of their mother—both Jung and Freud would be interested in that. But the male gods marry her only after fragmenting and domesticating her into a nice tame threesome—feminists would be interested in that. This is a way

of looking at male/female power relations very different from anything we know from the better-known written texts.

I could go on to talk about alternative views of the gods, karma, and chastity, as well as why tales themselves are told. Since I have talked about them elsewhere, I shall content myself with giving you some short examples. The gods in the *puranas* and the heroes in the epics have bodies without bodily functions: they are not supposed to sweat, urinate, defecate, or pass wind. They do not blink their eyes nor do their feet touch the ground. But in folk traditions, they have bodies, they are embodied, localised, domesticated. In the place legend of *Gokarna* (which I heard from Girish Karnad), Ravana

prays to Siva and receives from him the boon that Siva, with all his goblin attendants, should go with him to Lanka. Siva gives him the boon, but doesn’t really wish to go. He tells Ravana that he can carry him as a *linga* all the way, but that he should not put it down anywhere until he reaches Lanka. Ravana agrees. When he gets to Gokarna, he must answer the call of nature. He cannot hold the sacred *linga* in his hands while he takes a crap, can he? So he puts it down, and the *linga* begins to grow downwards and take root. Ravana hurries back and tries to twist it out of the earth, but he is not able to. That’s how Gokarna has a *linga* and they say that, if you dig under it, you’ll find that it’s twisted. Aldous Huxley once complained that, even for a

realistic novelist like Tolstoy, the heroines never go to the bathroom nor do they menstruate. In the village oral traditions, they do. Gods like Ganesa, heroes like Bhima, demons like Ravana, or even poets like Vyasa cannot help going to the bathroom, and goddesses like Ganga and Gauri menstruate. As the bhakti poem says:

*Bodied, one will hunger.  
Bodied, one will lie.  
O you, don’t you rib and taunt me/  
again for having a body:  
body Thyself for once like me  
and/  
see what happens,  
O Ramanatha!*

**Devara Dasimayya, tenth century, Kannada**

(tr. by Ramanujan 1973:107)

Folklore that is in many ways close to bhakti traditions, gives to them and takes from them, sharing genres, motifs, and attitudes, and seems not only to



**Shadow play puppet illustrating Sita, Andhra Pradesh, 19th Century. (Crafts Museum)**



ask the gods to embody themselves, but actually envisions them as having bodies with all the needs and ills that flesh is heir to.

When Rama and Laksmana come as wandering exiles in the forest toward a place (now in Hassan district in Mysore), they haven't had a bath for days and are stinking. Rama especially stinks to high heaven. In the water of the stream near the village, he washes himself clean, and so the village is named Ramanathapura. In Sanskrit, it would mean, the place of Rama's lord; in Kannada, however, *natha* means "stench, stink," which makes Ramanathapura mean "the place where Rama stank." Such bilingual puns highlight the conceptual difference between Sanskrit and the mother tongue, and the way the latter de-Sanskritises not only the word but the god himself.

Folk renditions of the pan-Indian epics and myths not only bring the gods home, making the daily world mythic, they also contemporise them. In village enactments the *Ramayana*, when Sita has to choose her bridegroom, princes from all over the universe appear as suitors. In a North Indian folk version, an Englishman with a pith helmet, a solar topee, and a hunting rifle regularly appears as one of the suitors of Sita. After all, since the eighteenth century the English have been a powerful presence in India and ought to have a place in any epic "bridegroom choice" or *svayamvara*.

In a Karnataka performance, Rama is exiled, and as he takes the little boat on the river Sarayu to go to the jungle, all of Ayodhya follows him in tears.

\* I have said little about Indian oral tales, though I end this paper with an example. See Beck (1987) for a recent, wide selection with anthropological notes, and Narayan (1989) for a fresh contextual study of tales in religious teaching.

He bids them farewell from his boat, making a short speech: "O brothers and sisters, please go home now. I take leave of you now, but I'll be back in fourteen years." Then he leaves, and wanders through the forests. Sita is abducted by Ravana, Rama gathers the monkey army, kills Ravana, and returns victorious with Sita. When he arrives at the spot where he had bid his people farewell fourteen years earlier, he sees a group standing there, their hair grown grey, their nails long and uncut, their feet rooted to the banks of the Sarayu. He asks them who they are. They say, "O Rama, you forgot us when you took leave. You bade farewell only to the men and women, calling them brothers and sisters. We are the eunuchs of Ayodhya. We have waited for you here all these fourteen years." Rama is very touched by their devotion and, feeling guilty at his negligence, gives them a boon: "O eunuchs of Ayodhya, may you be reborn in India again and rule the country as the next Congress party!" (Ramanujan 1986)

I can go on forever, detailing what happens to karma or chastity in the oral tales,\* retelling the bawdy tales of the villages about clever women who cheat on their husbands and get away with it, unlike all the chaste women of the epics who never cheat or the unchaste ones who are chastened by their infidelity like *Ahalya*. But I think I've said enough to argue the essential relevance of folklore to Indian studies and the alternative views and systems folklore carries. Folk materials also comment continually on official and orthodox views and practices in India. So I wish to end with a satiric tale about kings, gurus and disciples, the legal process, belief in rebirth, and the very logic of karma that looks for causes in infinite regress. I shall tell it without any further comment than that here, if we listen, we can hear the voice of what is fashionably called the subaltern—the woman, the peasant, the nonliterate, those who are marginal to the courts of kings and offices of the bureaucrats, the centers of power.

## In the Kingdom of Foolishness\*

In the Kingdom of foolishness, both the king and the minister were idiots. They didn't want to run things like other kings. So they decided to change night into day and day into night. They ordered everyone to be awake at night, till their fields and run their businesses only after dark; and they should all go to bed as soon as the sun came up. If anyone disobeyed, he would be punished with death. The people did as they were

told for fear of death. The king and the minister were delighted at the success of their project.

A guru and a disciple arrived in the city. It was a beautiful city, it was broad daylight, but there was no one about. Everyone was asleep, not a mouse stirring. Even the cattle had been taught to sleep. The two strangers were amazed by what they saw and wandered around till evening, when suddenly the whole town woke up and went about its daily business.

The two men were hungry. Now that the shops were open, they went to buy some groceries. To their astonishment, they found that everything cost the same, a single *duddu* (a small coin)—whether they bought a measure of rice or a bunch

\* This tale reproduced here in translation from my forthcoming book of Kannada folktales, is also told in many other regions and languages of India. The Stith Thompson index of international tale types (1961) identifies it as 1534 'An Innocent Man Chosen to Fit the Stake'. This tale has so far been recorded in Kashmiri, Kannada, Tamil, Marathi, Hindi, Garhwali, and so on.

of bananas, it cost a *duddu*. The guru and his dis-ciple were delighted. They had never heard of anything like this. They could buy all the food they wanted for a rupee.

When they had cooked the food and eaten, the guru realised that this was a kingdom of fools and it wouldn't be a good idea for them to stay there. "This is no place for us. Let's go," he said to his disciple. But the disciple didn't want to leave the place. Everything was cheap here. All he wanted was good cheap food. The guru said, "They are all fools. This won't last very long and one can't tell what they'll do to you next."

But the disciple wouldn't listen to the guru's wisdom. He wanted to stay. The guru finally gave in and said, "Do what you want. I'm going," and he left. The disciple stayed on, ate his fill everyday, bananas and ghee and rice and wheat, and grew fat as a streetside sacred bull.

One bright day, a thief broke into a rich merchant's house. He had made a hole in the wall, sneaked in, and as he was carrying out his loot, the wall of the old house collapsed on his head and killed him on the spot. His brother ran to the king and complained: "Your Highness, when my brother was pursuing his ancient trade, a wall fell on him and killed him. This merchant is to blame. He should have built a good strong wall. You must punish the wrong-doer and compensate the family for this injustice."

The king said, "Justice will be done. Don't worry," and at once summoned the owner of the house.

When the merchant arrived, the king asked him questions.

"What's your name?"

"Such and such, Your Highness."

"Were you at home when the dead man burgled your house?"

"Yes, my lord. He broke in and the wall was weak. It fell on him."

"The accused pleads guilty. Your wall killed this man's brother. You have

murdered a man. We have to punish you."

"Lord," said the helpless merchant. "I didn't put up the wall. It's really the fault of the man who built the wall. He didn't build it right. You should punish him."

"Who is that?"

"My lord, this wall was built in my father's time. I know the man. He's an old man now. He lives nearby."

The king sent out messengers to bring in the bricklayer who had built the wall. They brought him tied hand and foot.

"You there, did you build this man's wall in his father's time?"

"Yes, my lord, I did."

"What kind of wall is this that you built? It has fallen on a poor man and killed him. You've murdered him. We have to punish you by death."

Before the king could order the execution, the poor bricklayer pleaded, "Please listen to me before you give your orders. It's true I built this wall and it was no good. But that was because my mind was not on it. I remember very well a harlot who was going up and down that street all day with her anklets jingling and I couldn't keep my eyes or my mind on the wall I was building. You must get that harlot. I know where she lives."

"You're right. The case deepens. We must look into it. It is not easy to judge such Complicated cases. Let's get that harlot wherever she is."

The harlot, now an old woman, came trembling to the court.

"Did you walk up and down that street many years ago, while this poor man was building this wall? Did you see him?"

"Yes, my lord. I remember it very well."

"So you did walk up and down, with your anklets jingling. You were young and you tempted him. So he built a bad wall. It has fallen on a poor burglar and killed him. You've killed an innocent man. You'll have to be punished."

She thought for a minute and said, "My lord, wait. I know now why I was walking up and down that street. I had

given some gold to the goldsmith to make some jewelry for me. He was a lazy scoundrel. He made so many excuses, said he would give it now and he would give it then and so on all day. He made me walk up and down to his house a dozen times. That was when this bricklayer fellow saw me. It's not my fault, my lord, it's that damned goldsmith's."

"Poor thing, she's absolutely right," thought the king, weighing the evidence. "We've got the real culprit at last. Get the goldsmith wherever he is hiding. At once!"

The king's bailiffs searched for the goldsmith who was hiding in a corner of his shop. When he heard the accusation against him, he had his own story to tell.

"My lord," he said, "I'm a poor goldsmith. It's true I made this harlot woman come many times to my door. I gave her excuses because I couldn't finish making her jewelry before I finished the rich merchant's orders. They had a wedding coming, and they wouldn't wait. You know how impatient rich men are!"

"Who is this rich merchant who kept you from finishing this poor woman's jewelry, made her walk up and down, which distracted this brick-layer, which made a mess of his wall, which has now fallen on an innocent man and killed him? Can you name him?"

The goldsmith named the merchant and he was none other than the original owner of the house where the wall had fallen. Now justice had come full circle, thought the king, back to the merchant. When he was rudely summoned back to the court, he arrived crying, "It's not me, but my father who ordered the jewelry! He's dead! I'm innocent!"

But the king consulted his minister and ruled decisively, "It's true your father is the true murderer. He's dead but somebody must be punished in his place. You've inherited everything from that criminal father of yours, his riches as well as his sins.

I knew at once, even when I set eyes on you that you were at the root of this horrible crime. You must die."

And he ordered a new stake to be made ready for the execution. As the servants sharpened the stake and got it ready for final impaling of the criminal, it occurred to the minister that the rich merchant was somehow too thin to be properly executed by the stake. He appealed to the king's common sense. The king too worried about it.

"What shall we do?" he said, when suddenly it struck him that all they needed to do was to get a man fat enough to fit the stake. The servants were immediately all over town looking for a man who would fit the stake, and their eyes fell on the disciple who had fattened himself for months on bananas and rice and wheat and ghee.

"What have I done wrong? I'm innocent. I'm a *sanyasi*!" he cried.

"That may be true. But it's the royal decree that we should find a man fat enough to fit the stake," they said, and carried him to the place of execution. He remembered his wise guru's words: "This is a city of fools. You don't know what they will do next." While he was waiting for death, he prayed to his guru in his heart, asking him to hear his cry wherever he was. The guru saw everything in a vision. He had magical powers; he could see far and he could see the future as he could see the present and the past. He arrived at once to save his disciple who had gotten himself into a scrape again through love of food.

As soon as he arrived, he scolded the disciple and told him something in a whisper. Then he went to the king and addressed him.

"O wisest of kings, who is greater? The guru or the disciple?"

"Of course the Guru. No doubt about it. Why do you ask?"

"Then put me to the stake first. Put my disciple to death after me."

When the disciple heard this, he caught on and began to clamor.

"Me first! You brought me here

first! Put me to death first, not him!"

The guru and the disciple now got into a fight about who should go first. The king was puzzled by this behavior. He asked the guru, "Why do you want to die? We chose him because we needed a fat man for the stake."

"You shouldn't ask me such questions. Put me to death first."

"Why? There's some mystery here. As a wise man you must make me understand."

"Will you promise to put me to death, if I tell you?" said the guru. The king gave him his solemn word. The guru took him aside, out of the servants' earshot, and whispered to him, "Do you know why we want to die right now, the two of us? We've been all over the world but we've never found a city like this or a king like you. That stake is the stake of the god of justice. It's new, it has never had a criminal on it. Whoever dies on it first will be reborn as the king of this country. And whoever goes next will be the future minister of this country. We're sick of living the ascetic life. It would be nice to enjoy ourselves as king and minister for a while. Now keep your word, my lord, and put us to death. Me first, remember."

The king was now thrown into deep thought. He didn't want to lose the kingdom to someone else in the next round of life. He needed time. So he ordered the execution postponed till the next day and talked in secret with his minister. "It's not right for us to give the kingdom to others in the next life. Let's go up the stake ourselves and we'll be reborn as king and minister again. Holy men do not tell lies," he said and the minister agreed.

So he told the executioners, "We'll send the criminals tonight. When the first man comes to you, put him first to death. Then do the same to the second man. Those are orders. Don't make any mistakes."

That night, they went secretly to the prison, released the guru and disciple, disguised themselves as the

two and, as arranged beforehand with their loyal servants, were taken to the stake and promptly executed.

When the bodies were taken down to be thrown to crows and vultures the people panicked. They saw before them the dead bodies of the king and the minister. The city was in confusion.

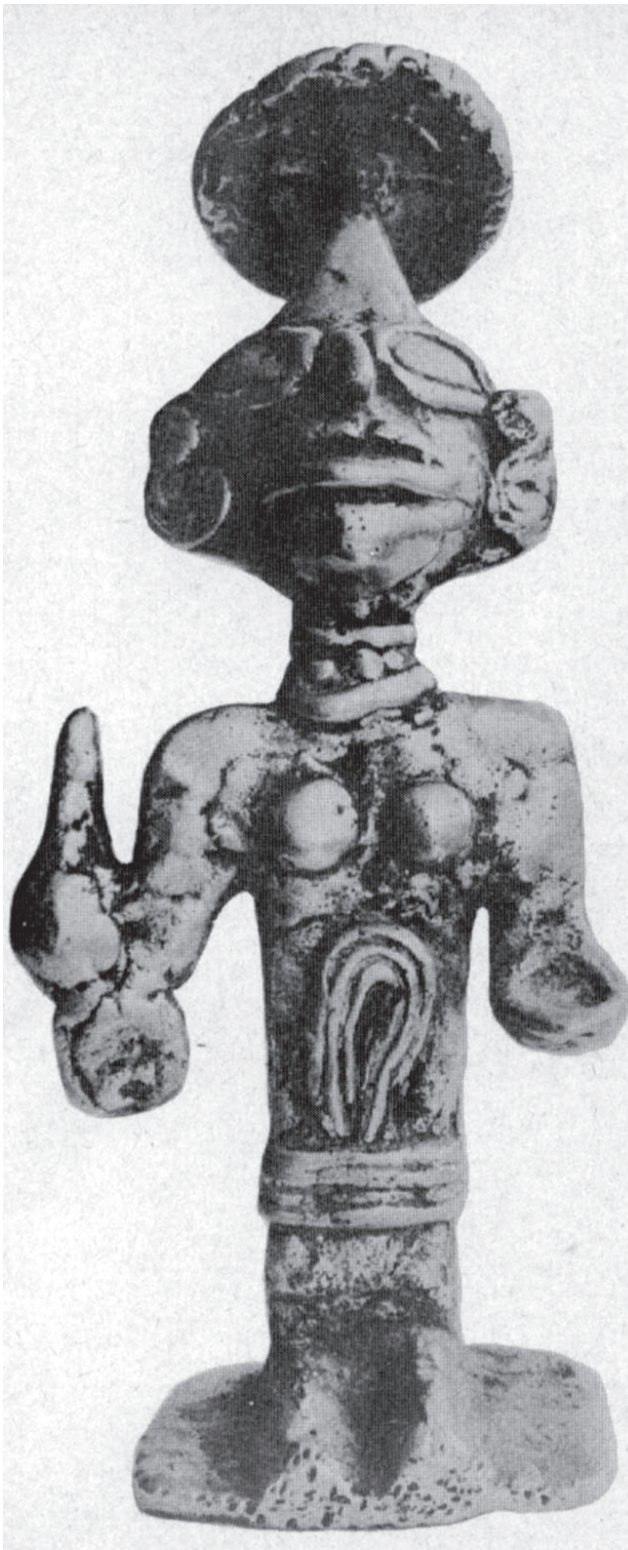
All night they mourned and discussed the future of the kingdom. Some people suddenly thought of the guru and the disciple and caught up with them as they were preparing to leave town unnoticed. We people need a king and a minister, said someone. Others agreed. They begged the guru and the disciple to become their king and their minister. It didn't take many arguments to persuade the disciple, but it took long to persuade the guru. They finally agreed to rule the kingdom of the foolish king and the silly minister, on the condition that they would change all the old laws. From then on, night would again be night and day would again be day, and you could get nothing for a *duddu*. It became like any other place.

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**Grama Devata - great Earth Mother.**  
**(From *The Earthen Drum*)**

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