

Block

# 2

**COMPARATIVE INDIAN LITERATURE-I**

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## **BLOCK INTRODUCTION**

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### **Comparative Indian Literature-I**

The different concepts associated with Oral Literature and Written Literature and the significance of the folk tradition will be explored by analysing two literary texts that have artfully and evocatively incorporated oral literature elements. This Block will trace the development of Indian languages and their corresponding literature, see how various movements impacted and led both the languages and literature to evolve in specific ways and how colonialism affected the literature being written in India and how, with the advent of English, there was a change in sensibility and expression. We will also open up the concept of culture as a way of life of social groups which is responsible for imparting a distinct identity and look at the Bhakti movement, important in Indian history with spiritual, cultural and sociological implications; its pan Indian features, the inclusion of female poets, the socio-historical reasons for its popularity and the nature of its rebellion against constricting religious authoritarianism.



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# UNIT 1 LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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## Structure

- 1.0 Objectives
- 1.1 Introduction
- 1.2 Culture: The History of the Concept
- 1.3 Understanding Culture as a Way of Life
- 1.4 Understanding Culture and Human Experience
- 1.5 Approaches to the Study of Culture
- 1.6 Cultural Diversity
- 1.7 The Cultural Studies Approach
- 1.8 Let Us Sum Up
- 1.9 Unit End Questions
- 1.10 References and Suggested Reading

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## 1.0 OBJECTIVES

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After reading the Unit, the learner will be able to:

- Understand the changing meanings and contexts of the term ‘culture’;
- Get an overview of the major approaches to the study of culture; and
- Understand cultural diversity and change in the context of globalisation.

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## 1.1 INTRODUCTION

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This Unit discusses the interplay between literature and culture. It aims to familiarize the learner with the concept of ‘culture’ which is a key concept in the area of comparative literature and anthropology. It is only through an understanding and appreciation of the complexity of the term that we can fruitfully study and compare literature and works of art across cultures. We will trace the development of the concept of culture and the relevance of the concept in literature. From its association with high art and intellectual pursuits to its broader definition as a way of life of a community, culture has been a complex and controversial concept. We will also attempt to understand how relationships of power articulate and establish what is culturally approved or disapproved. We hope to sensitize you, the learner, to the fact that literature is also embedded within structures of power and dominance. At the same time, it has potential for acting as a harbinger of change and challenging established orthodoxies.

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## 1.2 CULTURE: THE HISTORY OF THE CONCEPT

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The concept of culture is a highly contested one, and scholars have hotly debated exactly what it means. In the contemporary times, the utility and relevance of the concept has also been questioned. Rapid social change, globalization, hybridization and transnational transactions have made boundaries between groups and communities increasingly porous and permeable.

The well known British scholar Raymond Williams writes that culture is one of the two or three most complex words in the English language, not just on account of its complicated historical development but also because it has become a key concept in several intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and sometimes incompatible systems of thought. Its Latin root is *colere* which variously means to inhabit, cultivate, protect, honour with worship. The Latin word *cultura* pertained to husbandry or the tending of natural growth; it entered the English language as the word 'culture'. The early usages of culture were as a noun of process; the tending or nurture of something (basically crops and animals).

From the 16<sup>th</sup> century upto the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the usage of the term was extended from the tending of natural growth to the process of human development. Williams cites examples from Bacon: 'the culture and manurance of minds'(1605); Hobbes: 'a culture of their minds'(1651); Johnson: 'she neglected the culture of her understanding' (1759). However, it is only in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century that the word 'culture' came to be used as an independent noun, an abstract process or the product of such a process. Williams points out that by the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it came to be used as a synonym for 'civilization'. To be 'cultured' or 'civilized' meant being genteel and well-mannered; having the ability to appreciate the finer things of life like art, music, literature etc. Even today, the term is frequently used in this sense. A glance at the matrimonial columns in any Indian newspaper will show advertisements seeking a bride or groom from a 'cultured' family.

The growth of industrialization in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe resulted in mechanization and material advancement and the development of abstract rationality. Romantic writers like Wordsworth critiqued these developments and sought a more organic and empathetic relationship between human beings and Nature. Material or mechanical development thus came to be tagged with the category of 'civilization' whereas 'culture' symbolized spiritual, intellectual and aesthetic development of an individual or community.

Meanwhile, the German philosopher Herder introduced a critical idea that further developed the concept; namely, that we must speak of cultures rather than culture in the singular; in other words, whole ways of life of particular groups. From this emerged the anthropological understanding of culture as we know it today. Our usage of terms like 'tribal culture' 'Indian culture' or 'folk culture' derives from this understanding. However, as Raymond Williams points out, the 19<sup>th</sup> century idea of culture as a process of mental and spiritual cultivation gave it a special association with intellectual work and the arts. The term is a kind of shorthand for both, the process and product of these activities. Thus when we speak of "culture" the general association that comes to mind is that of literary works, painting, sculpture, music etc., in other words the creative or aesthetic dimensions or products of a particular society or community. However, sociologists and anthropologists, consider art and literature as just a part of the overall culture of the group. For them, cultures has a much broader meaning as the way of life of a community.

#### Activity 1

Make a list of the different words used to capture the concept of culture in the major Indian languages. How are these words used in everyday life? What meaning do they convey? Discuss with your peers at the Study Centre.

## 1.3 UNDERSTANDING CULTURE AS A WAY OF LIFE

As the anthropologist Ralph Linton (1945) explains, culture refers to the total way of life of society and not just those aspects which the society regards as 'higher' or more desirable. Thus reading Browning or Kalidasa are merely elements of the larger whole or totality of culture. This totality includes mundane activities such as cooking food or driving a car. It may therefore be concluded that for the social scientist there is no such thing as an uncultured person or society; every society no matter how small or simple possesses a culture, all human beings, by virtue of belonging to a group, are cultured.

Definitions of culture are many; yet it is argued by some scholars that the concept of culture is the single most difficult term in anthropology. Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) identified 162 different formal definitions! There is a general agreement that culture is learned; that it enables humans to adapt themselves to their natural and social settings; that it is greatly variable and that it is manifested in institutions, thought patterns and material objects and artifacts. (Herskovits, 1955). Often, it is used synonymously with 'society'. The distinction made by anthropologists between these seemingly interchangeable terms is as follows: Culture is the way of life of a people; while society is an organized and interacting aggregate of individuals who follow a given way of life. (Herskovits, 1955). Society implies relationships and groupings while culture implies ways of acting and living. In the words of Herskovits, "a society is composed of people; the way they behave is their culture".

Society is also defined by some scholars as a group of people who occupy a particular territory and speak a common language. By this definition, societies may or may not correspond to the contemporary categories of 'nation-states' or countries. Many countries, including India, have within their boundaries groups of people speaking different languages which may not be understood by other groups, and therefore may be said to comprise a number of 'societies' with distinct cultures. By the same logic we may say that some societies may include more than one nation or countries. Bangladesh and West Bengal in India, for example share a common language, Bangla. Punjabi and Sindhi are spoken on both sides of the Indo-Pak border. Can we then speak of Bangla or Punjabi society and culture that cut across national boundaries? Does this come in conflict with the idea of a 'pan-Indian' culture? What about ethnic, religious and other 'minority' cultures which fear that they are being subsumed or swallowed up by the majority? These days we also hear the term 'multi-cultural societies' further complicating the concept. Thus we see that culture is indeed a very porous and politically loaded concept.

One of the most durable and widely-used definitions of the term was given way back in the year 1871 by the British anthropologist E.B. Tylor. According to Tylor, culture "is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom, and any other capabilities acquired by man as a member of society".

Note that culture includes both material and non-material dimensions. Material culture refers to houses, tools, musical instruments etc. while non-material culture refers to learned behaviour and ideas (including beliefs, values, attitudes and ideals) that are characteristic of a particular social group. Material and non-material dimensions are intricately interconnected. If we take an example of material culture like say, a hand-woven silk *sari*, we find that there is an entire system of values underlying its production. The designs or motifs handed down through generations;

the myths and legends associated with it; the specific system of power relations and hierarchies that mark production and consumption (it may be a valued item in the trousseau of an upper-caste or upper class bride, but the weavers who make it are very poor); gender relations and so on. Thus the production of a material artifact is steeped in complex layers of culture and politics that must be delicately teased out to understand it properly.

Let us take another example from contemporary urbanized societies. Physical fitness and slimness is regarded as a highly desirable goal. This is directly related to the development of a consumption-driven society where food and food choices are abundant, where technologies for 'fitness' (exercise machines, gyms, special clothing and accessories etc.) are available to a large number of people. However, in a society where food is scarce and starvation common, the emphasis on diets and lifestyles would be, indeed, out of place and inappropriate.

While archaeologists and cultural anthropologists lay a good deal of emphasis on the material dimension of culture, historians and scholars of cultural studies emphasise 'symbolic and signifying systems' and thus pay greater heed to the process of production of cultural products rather than the products themselves. The relations between material and symbolic production constitute the central point in any discussion of culture, according to Williams, and thus must always be related rather than contrasted.

Taylor's definition of culture given above is a 'hold-all' one in which he included every human capability he could think of, which makes it both useful and all-encompassing in one sense, and far too general to be of much use in another. The American anthropologist Clifford Geertz's works suggested that culture be viewed as shared meanings expressed through public communication. While different individuals may not imbibe exactly the same knowledge or develop the same skills, they nonetheless share a common world-view and a common framework of values and meanings. In this sense, culture permeates all human activity; it shapes our understandings of what is valuable, desirable and undesirable; it regulates our behaviour and our interactions. According to the British scholar Stuart Hall, one way of thinking about culture is in the form of 'shared conceptual maps, shared language systems and the codes which govern the relationship of translation between them' (1997:21).

Culture, as you will have realized from the above discussion, is socially learnt and transmitted, and provides the mechanism through which human needs are satisfied. Unlike animals, which rely upon their instincts, humans are fundamentally social, and rely upon cultural practices to fulfill their physical needs as well as social needs for security and companionship. Culture prescribes certain norms or standards of behaviour which members of the society are expected to follow and each culture has its own distinctive beliefs, practices and ways of life that are passed down from generation to generation. At the same time, culture is not a static phenomenon and adapts and changes in accordance with changes in the environment.

When we examine the history of a society it becomes obvious that its culture has changed over time. These changes may be stimulated by changes in the external environment as well as in the social environment. The colonial expansion of Western societies over the past few centuries has led to dramatic changes in different parts of the world. In India, the British rule led to changes in systems of land tenure, agriculture, administrative and economic arrangements, education, law, political systems to name but a few. The introduction of English simultaneously undermined traditional hierarchies and put in place new privileged classes and elites.

**Activity 2**

Identify two or three members of your family or people in your neighbourhood who belong to the generation of your parents or grandparents. Discuss with them how material and non-material culture has changed over the years. How have they adapted to these changes? Write an essay of about 1000 words and share it with other learners at the Study Centre.

## 1.4 UNDERSTANDING CULTURE AND HUMAN EXPERIENCE

Anthropology as a discipline has been concerned with an in-depth understanding of ‘other cultures’. It concentrated on the detailed study of local life in traditional societies and in exploring the life worlds of peoples in far-flung corners of the globe that were sources of immense curiosity to Western eyes. It is said that early anthropology was the hand-maiden of the colonial enterprise of Western powers like England; by providing detailed accounts of the cultures and social organization of local people, anthropologists assisted colonial governments in ruling subject populations. Despite the taint of this colonial association, it is through anthropological fieldwork that the tremendous variety of human experience has come into public view.

Anthropologists explored societies and cultures in Africa, Oceania, Asia and the Americas that were considered ‘primitive’ or ‘pre-modern’ by the ‘developed’ West and through the idea of ‘cultural relativism’ asserted the uniqueness and relevance of every culture for its practitioners.

Anthropologists study cultures through a process of immersion in the life and daily activities of the people being studied. This method is known as ethnography. Doing ethnography involves fieldwork within the community; studying the language, participating in its activities, interacting with the people, attempting to understand how they interpret and live in the world and then making their understandings and world-views known to those in one’s own culture. Anthropologists would spend several years in the chosen field area and engage in ‘participant observation’ that would facilitate their understanding of the native or local way of life. Contemporary anthropology does not just focus upon the ‘primitive’ cultures, but also the ‘modern’. Its key objective continues to be gaining an insight on phenomena from the point of view of the participants themselves. Ethnography, in a nutshell, attempts to study culture ‘from the inside’.

Just as the work of the anthropologist is to understand the way of life of different cultures, the work of literature is to understand the human situation. Lewis, Rodgers and Woolcock (2014) point out that storytelling is one of humankind’s oldest methods of understanding and representing reality. Stories, plays, poems are considered the primary sources for narrating fundamental truths about human life and moral conflicts; they play a major role in shaping values and guiding human action. We have all grown up hearing stories about the values of truthfulness (eg the story of King Harishchandra) filial duty (the story of Shraavan Kumar) wifely devotion (Savitri) and many other tales, fables, songs and legends. The Indian epics, the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* are considered the blueprints for an ideal life, performance of duty and the ideal society.

Literature also provides us a gateway into understanding social continuity and change; and the creative writer can do so in a way that the social scientist simply

cannot match. The novels of Charles Dickens, for example, reflect the changing English society during the Industrial Revolution; portraying the poverty, inequality and dehumanization that marked the lives of the new labouring classes. V. S. Naipaul's works bring to life the migrant Indian community in the West Indies negotiating race, class and ethnic divisions and trying to keep alive the way of life of the Motherland. The lasting legacy of colonialism on the colonised can be seen in the works of authors like Chinua Achebe whose famous novel *Things fall Apart* (first published in 1958) brings us face to face with the cultural conflicts and power struggles unleashed in Nigerian society.

The sociologist Lewis Coser writes,

“The creative imagination of the literary artist often has achieved insights into social processes which have remained unexplored in social science.” (Coser, 1972, xvi quoted in Lewis et al, 2014, p.22)

The anthropologist R. K. Jain (2015) draws attention to the rich and insightful works of fiction in Hindi and other major and minor languages of India which can serve as a store-house of ethnographic information on which anthropologists can draw to better understand our heterogeneous society. His article discusses the genre of the ‘anchalik upanyasa’ or regional novel which, much like an ethnographic text, narrates the linguistic and cultural ethos of a region. He discusses Rahi Masoom Raza's famous novel *Adha Gaon* (1966) which is set in a Shia Muslim community in a village in Eastern Uttar Pradesh. The novel documents village life, collective identity, power struggles and factionalism and the impact of sweeping political changes including the Partition of India on the village and its people. The anthropologist Akhil Gupta (2012) in his analysis of bureaucracy and corruption and poverty in India draws upon Shrilal Shukla's famous satirical novel *Raag Darbari*. This novel, first published in 1968, was awarded the Sahitya Academy award in 1970 and is widely regarded as one of the richest works of fiction on local politics, corruption and the grip of poverty on the lives of ordinary villagers. As Shukla was himself a government officer and served in and around Lucknow for several years, he brought in his years of first-hand observation into his fiction.

The internationally acclaimed writer Amitav Ghosh is a trained anthropologist, and his works reveal a great attention to culture and context. For example, his work *In an Antique Land* (1993) is a fascinating combination of ethnography and narrative and has been acknowledged as a masterpiece.

Authors like Bharati Mukherjee and Jhumpa Lahiri in their novels and short stories also bring out the tensions between ways of life in the Indian immigrant experience in contemporary America. As students of comparative literature it will become evident to you that the social and cultural transformations underway across the world reflect in the themes and preoccupations writers and artists and that a study of literature also demands an appreciation of these processes.

### Activity 3

Select a novel/short story of your choice by an Indian author. How does the author understand and represent the culture of the community s/he is writing about? Write an essay of about 750-1000 words and share it with fellow-learners.

## 1.5 APPROACHES TO THE STUDY OF CULTURE

Various theoretical approaches have been deployed in Anthropology to study culture. It will be helpful to briefly describe them in order to give you an understanding of

just how complex and ‘slippery’ the concept of culture has become, particularly in the background of globalisation and transnational flows of people, ideas and products. The following summary of these approaches is based upon Ember et al (2007).

In the early years of anthropology as a discipline, it was believed that all cultures develop or evolve in a similar way from simple to complex; from primitive to civilized. The theory of ‘evolutionalism’ as it was called, was based more on speculation than facts, as anthropologists discovered the great variety of human culture through fieldwork explorations in different corners of the world. Anthropologists shifted their focus from origins to actually understanding the way in which the various aspects of culture contributed to maintaining the social system. This approach was known as “structural functionalism”, The ‘Culture-Personality’ approach focused upon the inter-relationship between the development of the personality of the individual and the culture of the group and was popularised in the United States by writers like Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead. A theory called Structuralism emerged in anthropology in the 1950s with Claude Levi-Strauss as its best known proponent.

From the 1960s, anthropologists began to experiment with different ways of studying and understanding culture. Alternative ways of studying and describing culture were attempted. These included the use of personal narratives, storytelling and poetry, giving voice to those being studied in more consciously participatory ways. The feminist movement, which had become prominent during that time, had a major influence on this new way of thinking about human experience and culture.

Anthropology was also influenced by the genre of literary criticism, and the idea that culture is like a literary text that can be analysed for meaning became popular. One of the major proponents of this kind of interpretive approach was the anthropologist Clifford Geertz. According to Geertz, the anthropologist (ethnographer) interprets those aspects of the culture under study that are of interest to him/her. S/he then conveys these interpretations to members of his/her own culture, thereby acting as a selective intercultural translator. For interpretive anthropologists, the goal is to understand what it means to be a person living in a particular culture. Understanding meaning can only be taken up through forms of literary analysis; these are necessarily personal and subjective. Thus one anthropologist’s understanding of a cultural phenomenon may be quite different from another’s; yet neither is ‘wrong’ or ‘right’ in an objective sense; they both reflect differing world-views of the anthropologists as well as descriptions of the culture. This understanding of the ethnographer’s craft as a literary, intuitive exercise in which the anthropologist is like a novelist or a literary critic, led to many debates within the discipline. Geertz’s book *The Interpretation of Cultures* published in 1973 is considered an anthropological classic.

Feminist and interpretive approaches gave importance to the subjective and contextual nature of knowledge. Postmodern approaches further developed the theme and attempted to show how ‘discourse’ or the body of knowledge and practices generally believed to be ‘true’ were shaped by structures of power and dominance. The work of the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) is particularly significant. Anthropologists who accept this view contend that the ‘subjects’ studied by them are dehumanized and thus controlled and manipulated through the operation of the powerful apparatus of ‘science’. They argue for an activist anthropology that speaks for the dominated and disenfranchised rather than study them as ‘objects’. Thus the study of culture is unavoidably political and must lay bare the dynamics

of hierarchy, control and hegemony that operate within a globalized world. Culture can no longer be conceptualized as a static, constant phenomenon, but rather as a dynamic, ever-changing 'flow' whose boundaries are permeable and indeed becoming harder and harder to define. (see Ember et al 2007 for a more detailed discussion of these approaches).

The above brief overview would have given you an idea about the fluidity of the concept of culture. Let us now attempt to understand 'cultural diversity' which is of crucial importance for your study of comparative literature.

#### Activity 4

Read the previous section once more and chart out how the different approaches view culture. Who were the proponents of particular approaches?

## 1.6 CULTURAL DIVERSITY

Cultural diversity implies two things: First the existence of 'native' cultures in every part of the world; as mentioned earlier, it has been the task of anthropologists to study them in detail. The other aspect of diversity is migrant or immigrant cultures across the globe. While humans have always migrated from one part of the world to the other, the improvements in the means of transport and communication and the integration of the world economy through colonialism, capitalism and globalization have resulted in unprecedented movements or migrations of peoples.

Countries like the U.S.A, Canada and Britain have become nations of migrants and immigrants; North American culture is known partly as a "melting pot" and partly a "mosaic of cultural diversity" (Ember et al,2007). The term 'diaspora' is used to denote major dispersions of populations on account of a variety of factors including war and persecution, human trafficking and slavery, economic opportunity and colonial compulsions. Indian diasporic communities in the West Indies, Malaysia, Fiji etc. were recruited as plantation labour in the British colonies. These migrant groups retained elements of their 'native' culture and assimilated with different degrees of success in the 'host' societies.

Following Erikson (2008), we note that in contemporary times, the expansion in foreign travel has made transnational flows of people, ideas and relationships even more intense. Tourism for adventure, cultural experiences and medical treatment is flourishing. Migrants from economically less developed countries are seeking opportunities and settling in Europe, America, Australia and Canada and bringing a 'taste' of their culture with them. The vast number of Indian restaurants across the world - from fine dining places to humble takeaways is a good example. At the same time, 'multi-culturalism' has raised issues of identity politics and assertion; for example religious minority rights that can be seen in the controversies over wearing the 'hijab' or the turban.

Technology has played a major role in bringing people into closer contact through satellite TV, cellphones, the internet and social networks. The development of 'virtual communities' and expansion of information and choices; the global economy and transnational companies have also made the labour process fluid. An Indian telemarketer working through the night in Gurgaon or Noida talking in an American accent, does business with American customers in their hometowns. Issues concerning environment, climate change, diseases and epidemics, terrorism, arms trade, human trafficking, cyber crime etc. are serious global problems which affect all humanity. There is a need for international cooperation to find solutions. As

Erikson aptly puts it: “This ever tighter interweaving of formerly relatively separate socio-cultural environments can lead to a growing realization of the fact that we are all in the same boat; that humanity, divided as it is by class, culture, geography and opportunities, is fundamentally one.” (2008:5)

In this turbulent, fast changing world, typical ways of life are fast being transformed. From family structures to food and fashion, change is taking place almost by the day. This has led to serious questions about the reality and stability of culture. Is there such a thing as “our” culture at all? At the same time, cultural identity and assertion is an important issue and oppressed groups have begun to speak up and demand recognition. Ethnic, religious and linguistic groups react against globalization and imperialism and attempt to strongly preserve their cultural uniqueness.

Against this backdrop, it becomes crucial for a student of literature to study and analyse a literary/creative work in a holistic manner, situating it in its socio-political context and attempting to unpack the multiple layers within which it is embedded. In the final section of this Unit, we shall briefly discuss how the interdisciplinary domain of cultural studies contributes to our understanding of literature and culture. Cultural Studies considers a ‘text’ not just in the form of written language but also films, photographs, fashion, hairstyles, cuisines, in other words all the meaningful artifacts of culture. As in anthropology, a cultural studies researcher considers culture to be not just traditional high culture of ruling social groups but also popular culture and everyday meanings and practices.

#### **Activity 5**

Read and review any literary work by a contemporary author documenting the experience of migrant/immigrant communities. Some suggested authors are V.S. Naipaul, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri, Amitav Ghosh. Share your review with your fellow learners.

## **1.7 THE CULTURAL STUDIES APPROACH**

Cultural Studies (CS) concerns itself with the meanings and practices of everyday life. It approaches the study and analysis of culture in an interdisciplinary manner. It studies how particular cultural practices in a society relate to wider systems of power (class, caste, gender, ideology, ethnicity, national formations etc.). It seeks to understand how meaning is constructed and transmitted against the backdrop of specific social, political and economic forces operating in a society at a particular point of time in history. To give an example from contemporary India, the growth of mobile telephony raises several interesting questions about relations of power, dominance and personal freedom. Why have some community elders decreed that girls should not use mobile phones? Has it contributed to greater freedom of association between the sexes? How is it impacting gender relations? Cultural studies sensitizes us to the fact that cultural artifacts and practices are bound up with complex socio-political realities and need to be studied in their totality.

The term CS was first used in in the U.K.in 1964 by Richard Hoggart when he founded the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural studies (CCCS). Stuart Hall , Hoggart’s successor at the Centre has been one of the best known names associated with CS. His work from the 1960s onwards along with that of his colleagues and students including Paul Willis, David Hebdige, Angela MacRobbie is well known.

The 1970s in Britain were a period of great economic and political turmoil. The strong working class movement in Britain was in a crisis as industries shut down and trade union membership declined. Despite the worsening of their condition, thousands of working class British people shifted their loyalties from the Labour Party to the Conservative Party. The rise of the Conservative Party's Margaret Thatcher who became one of Britain's most powerful Prime Ministers, was a puzzle to those who analysed society in terms of class interests. Why would workers vote for a Party and a leader who was so clearly on the side of the capitalist and business classes? The scholars at CCCS turned to the work of an Italian thinker of the inter-war period, Antonio Gramsci, to understand the situation. Gramsci tried to understand the rise of fascism in Europe in the 1930s. He modified classical Marxism which only spoke in terms of economic and political control and saw culture as a key dimension. Capitalism operates through the everyday culture of working people in order to control and regulate them. His theory of *hegemony* was picked up by CS and helped scholars to better understand the ways in which culture and power worked hand in hand. At the same time, it also opened up the idea of *agency* through which dominated groups contest, resist and counter dominant cultural narratives.

The British CS scholars wanted to lay bare the social power imbalances and the dominant ideology, and thus enable marginalized people to have a say in this world. CS in the USA was not so polemical in its approach and was rooted in a more liberal and pragmatic tradition. CS has also taken roots in India and is considered by scholars across disciplines as a fruitful method to analyse cultural production and consumption.

(see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural\\_studies](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_studies))

#### **Activity 6**

Select any popular television serial either in Hindi or a regional language. Using some of the ideas of cultural studies that you have read above, try to see how the ideas and values it promotes relate to the social and political processes at work. Write a note of about 500 words and share it with fellow learners.

## **1.8 LET US SUM UP**

Literature and all art forms are 'cultural products' that are created within a specific milieu and against the backdrop of a particular understanding of the world that is socially and culturally derived even when it is critiqued or contested. The creation of a text is not an innocent process which is solely concerned with the creativity of an author; it is a social and political act as well and embodies certain relationships of power, domination and control. How the text is received, who reads it, how it is evaluated and judged and how it travels, depend upon prevailing socio-political realities and the cultural climate. The issue of translation is also deeply connected with culture. Understanding the local context, the unique way of life, the historical experiences of processes such as colonialism, imperialism and globalization, help to situate a text within a context and facilitate cultural comparison.

In this Unit we have attempted to open up the concept of culture as a way of life of social groups which is responsible for imparting a distinct identity. We have noted that culture is both material and non-material and that it performs an important role in social integration and fulfilling both individual and social needs. We examined some of the major approaches to the study of culture in anthropology which reflect the evolution of the concept. We noted that interpretative anthropology saw culture as a text to be interpreted rather than as an empirical reality to be objectively studied.

We also examined some of the key ideas of cultural studies which attempts to locate cultural practices in their socio-political context and maps the relationships of power and control underlying the production and consumption of culture. Culture is a critical, multi-layered and evolving concept.

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## 1.9 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Briefly describe the evolution of the concept of culture in the English language.
- 2) Discuss culture as a way of life.
- 3) Write a note on cultural diversity in the contemporary world.
- 4) Can culture be viewed as a stable concept anymore? What are your views?
- 5) How do Cultural Studies contribute to our understanding of culture?

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## 1.10 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

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## UNIT 2 ORAL AND WRITTEN LITERATURE

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### Structure

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  - 2.2.3 Orature
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- 2.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 2.8 Unit End Questions
- 2.9 References and Suggested Reading
- 2.10 Appendix

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### 2.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit will introduce you to the concept of Oral Literature and the significance of folk tradition in how culture is transferred from one domain to another. By the end of this Unit, you should be able to:

- Identify Oral Literature, Written Literature, Orature, and Oral and Written literature as separate concepts and as interlinked manifestations too.
- Understand some of the divergences and convergences between Oral Literature and Written Literature.
- Familiarise yourself with works of some important scholars who have worked in the field of Oral Literature.

- Understand, with the help of examples, the different ways in which oral literature influences written literature.

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## 2.1 INTRODUCTION

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Oral literature predates written literature by many centuries; languages existed in the vocal and aural domains and it was much later that utterances were assigned ‘symbols’ or letters. Oral literature is a much discussed topic with regard to indigenous cultures in Africa, the Americas, India, China, and wherever indigenous people have maintained their unique culture and traditions. In this unit, you will see how oral literature is different from written literature, without, however, being encased in watertight compartments. There is considerable overlap between these two. The need to look at oral literature and written literature under one heading underlines the fact that oral literature has considerably influenced written literature. There are numerous examples from Africa, India, North and South America, Europe, etc., of the different ways in which oral literature has influenced written literature. Two such examples given at the end of this Unit will illustrate this and reinforce this influence.

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## 2.2 BRIEF DEFINITIONS OF CONCEPTS

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Before going any further, to make it easier for you, we shall try and define, in as simple manner as possible, some of the concepts:

### 2.2.1 Oral Literature

Commonly known as ‘**Folklore**’, Oral Literature can be described as ‘verbal art’; art that is delivered orally and transmitted orally from person to person, generation to generation, region to region, etc., by word of mouth. Oral Literature denotes traditional forms of entertainment. OL may include epic poems, folk tales, folk songs, myths, legends, ballads of people and events, etc. In fact, OL exists in the ‘**vocal**’ (speaking) and ‘**aural**’ (listening) domains, in the broad world of ‘**sound**.’ And therefore, OL is manifest in ‘performance.’

### 2.2.2 Written Literature

Written Literature is what we commonly understand as ‘literature,’ that is, novels, poems, stories, essays, or anything that is ‘primarily’ written down. It is written art.

### 2.2.3 Orature

As we have seen earlier, ‘literature’ itself means something that is written down, so the term ‘Oral Literature’ seems to appear oxymoronic. PioZirimu, the Ugandan linguist, had coined the term *orature* to bestow a higher status to the verbal arts that did not come through in the term ‘Oral Literature.’ ‘Oral Literature’ was considered inferior to ‘Written Literature’ and he rejected the term. But his brief definition of orature as the use of utterance as an aesthetic means of expression remains tantalizingly out there, pointing to an oral system of aesthetics that did not need validity from the literary. The term however has spread, and one reads variously of Hawaiian Orature, Namibian Orature, Ghanaian Orature and many others. Despite the widespread usage, very few have engaged with the term to tease out the various theoretical possibilities in the term. Pitika Ntuli of South Africa is one of the few who have attempted to take the term beyond its Zirimian usage.” (2007)

**Note:**The term ‘Oral Literature’ has continued to remain in currency in academic circles and is also used more widely than orature. For our purposes here, we will continue to use the term Oral Literature, at the same time being aware of the various resonances of the term Orature.

### 2.2.4 Oral Literature and Written Literature

If we take these two concepts ‘Oral Literature’ and ‘Written Literature’ separately, then it would appear that Written Literature is the opposite of Oral Literature – OL is ‘vocal/aural’ and WL is ‘written.’ If so, then we would be looking at two separate entities. But since we are discussing these two ‘entities’ under one heading in this Unit, we would assume there that there is some relationship between OL and WL. Indeed there is, and for that we will have to look at how Oral Literature has influenced and impacted Written Literature. So, here, we would be looking at Written Literature in a culture or language that is influenced by Oral Literature.

You will have to also bear in mind that OL is sometimes available as WL and WL in many cases is transmitted orally. There is nothing fixed about WL and nothing fluid about OL. We need to keep this in mind to avoid the mistake of making these two concepts appear inflexible.

#### Activity 1

From your reading of this introduction, note down any five characteristics that are specific to Oral Literature.

## 2.3 ORAL LITERATURE

Now that the various concepts are defined to suit our needs, we shall now take you to the next section on ORAL LITERATURE, which would give you a clear understanding of the concept:

### 2.3.1 Background

Story telling has an old and long history, as old as man. The practice of story-telling has existed ever since man learnt to speak. Probably people in the olden times (maybe prehistoric days) had nothing better to do after they were done with the day’s hunting, than sit around the fire and spin tales, fictional, and of days gone by. This might sound as if the ‘oral’ story telling is a phenomenon of old times. In actuality even today in many cultures, the oral tradition plays a vital and significant role. For instance, the Caribbean culture is largely oral and this is also true of many cultures across the world.

Folklore is another form of what we call ‘oral literature.’ It is basically the creative expression of the traditional beliefs and customs of people which is told by the old grandfather/mother to the little children, and passed on by these children when they grow up to their own children. The stories keep changing from generation to generation, and new elements get thrown into the story - things which are more contemporary and related to the changes in the society/culture.

Why are these stories told? What are these stories about? The purpose of these oral stories could be to entertain, to inform, to instil values in people, etc. In short, they could be told for any number of reasons.

### Activity 2

Who is credited with coining the term 'orature?' What is the intention behind coining a new term?

### 2.3.2 'Literature' in Oral Literature

We have looked at the 'oral' part of the term. Let us turn our attention to the 'literature' part of it. The expression 'Oral Literature' appears self-contradictory in the sense that 'literature,' strictly speaking is that which is 'written' down. Can we then 'use' the term 'literature' with any form that is essentially 'oral?' To understand this contradiction, here is an activity for you:

### Activity 3

From the knowledge and experience that you already have about 'literature,' tick the options that for you are characteristic of writing that can be called 'literature.'

- Creativity
- Permanence
- Amenable to constant improvisation
- Artistic record of life and events
- Appeals to emotions
- Imagination plays a vital role
- Vocal and aural elements are important
- Role of memory is crucial
- Presence of author
- Performance based
- Rooted in specific time
- Changing shape constantly

Now see which of these can be applied to oral story-telling and folklore. What aspect then differentiates 'oral' from 'written' literature? Which of these features look to you as belonging to both Oral Literature and Written Literature?

## 2.4 DIVERGENCES AND CONVERGENCES BETWEEN ORAL AND WRITTEN LITERATURE

Here we shall look into some of the features of Oral Literature and Written Literature. You will be able to see how some of these features overlap and some of the features that seem typically belonging to one exclusively are actually applicable to both Oral Literature and Written Literature.

### 2.4.1 Sound (Voice) vs. Symbol (Print)

Based purely on physical evidence, it can be said that literature signifies a written art work and folklore refers to an oral art. Folksingers, minstrels, bards, traditional folk theatre artists, community storytellers, etc., are generally considered to be unlettered and untouched by the print medium. Voice was the only medium through

which they expressed their art and through which they got their art from the mouths of others like them. But you should keep in mind that this is only based on what we see from the outside. Many folksingers and storytellers today are literate and sometimes incorporate what they read into their songs and tales. Though 'Voice vs. Print' cannot be considered as separate entities to distinguish between Oral Literature and Written Literature, it is a useful distinction to begin with.

### 2.4.2 Fluid vs. Fixed

Folktales and songs are fluid, that is, the way they are told and sung or performed changes with each performance, though the essence or the main theme or storyline remains the same. The singer or storyteller never tells the same story twice, each performance is different. He/she may alter the narrative, add something new, embellish the story with more detail, stop the song midway and narrate an anecdote, etc.

*Those of you who are familiar with Yakshagana performances would know that the performers start the night long performance only with the bare outline of the story. The only major cue that they have for the dialogues are provided by the 'bhagavata' or singer, who sings each separate portion, and then the performers take over. There have been many legendary instances where famous artistes playing adversarial roles have tried to outwit each other through the sheer power of their dialogues and wit. And these dialogues are never written down.*

A written work never changes once it is printed. The book will have the same story to tell at each reading or 'performance.' As long as the book exists and people care to read it, the 'telling' never changes. The oral text varies, even when singers memorise them.

### 2.4.3 Simplicity vs. Complexity

It might appear that folk art is simpler than literature. The folktale, the ballad, and the oral epic are simple forms of art that have arisen from innocent impulses and therefore lack the complexity that one sees in literature. It is also argued that folk art is the product of simple minds not capable of deep thought while reflective literature, which aims to imitate reality, is the product of sophisticated, civilized minds. There is also this argument that oral art is simpler than literature only because it represents an earlier stage in the development of civilization. However, oral literature has its own importance and space. Some kinds of folklore may be simpler, but oral literature as such cannot be considered as any less or better than written literature. We can say that as societies grew increasingly sophisticated, the simple forms gave way to written genres which met the same expressive needs.

*For example, the ballad form is a very popular genre in oral literature. This genre was borrowed and is now used extensively in written literature. The five-stanza ballad will always be simpler than a five-act play. It is not the nature of folk poetry, but the nature of the ballad genre which makes the ballad simple. The literary ballads of Wordsworth are bound to seem simple in comparison with King Lear, and both are 'written literature.'*

### 2.4.4 Style and Structure

Oral Literature differs greatly from Written Literature in matters of structure and style. Sometimes it would appear that in terms of structure and style, there is a great gap separating oral and written expression. It is generally accepted that Oral

Literature is characterised by features like repetition, stock epithets, stock characters, a marked preference for fantasy over reality, and an emphasis on action. The use of such features varies greatly according to the tastes and talents of the tellers. And the opposite of these would seem to characterize Written Literature. But these features are not specific to Oral Literature alone and to assign these features to Oral Literature and label it as simplistic and lacking in sophistication would be an injustice to some of the greatest epic poems and grand oral narratives in the world. And all these so-called Oral Literature features are also seen in written literature, right from Shakespeare to all the thrillers, mysteries, detective novels, and romances.

### 2.4.5 Authorship

One of the long-standing distinguishing features that appear to separate Oral Literature and Written Literatures is that of authorship. We have understood that Written Literature is the creation of a single individual and that folksongs and stories are communal compositions, arising collectively from the community. It is also assumed that folklore is faceless and static, while literary art is individualistic and creative. Though authorship of a given work in Oral Literature cannot be as easily determined as authorship in Written Literature, the concept of ownership does exist in Oral Literature. Certain folk artists are recognized as the owners of certain tales, and other folk artists will generally respect the superior ability of a folk artist to tell a certain tale. Individual narrators can be quite protective of their own works, even to the point where they will not allow rival narrators to hear them.

### 2.4.6 Audience

Finally, we come to the Audience. Among all the features, it is the Audience that marks the clearest difference between Oral Literature and Written Literature. Simply put, the oral narrative cannot exist without an audience. Literature is and can be written in isolation for an imagined audience, an audience which might never read the written work of art. For the folksinger or storyteller, the audience determines which story the narrator should tell, how long it is going to be, and whether the narrator can finish the story at all. The story or performance must please everyone, the tale should be comprehensible to all, and the story must be readily recognized and shared by everyone who hears it. S/he must gain the approval and understanding of the audience. Therefore, for the folk artiste, his/her artistry must not only consist of aesthetic training, but most importantly, must also consist of social training as well. The storytellers cannot distance themselves from the audience, the same way a writer can afford to do.

The writer has no visible audience for the creation of his/her works. The writer's audience is not an active participant in his/her performance. For instance, the writer's friends and immediate neighbours may never read the writer's book; and even if they do, they may dislike it intensely. The writer is never bothered about such considerations. S/he may write about things which s/he might never tell aloud or even be allowed to tell. The writer writes stories which are read only by isolated individuals. In this sense, Oral Literature is more oriented towards social consensus than Written Literature.

#### Activity 4

- 1) Would you consider that voice belongs to oral literature and print belongs to written literature exclusively? If yes, why, and if not, why not?

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## 2.5 IDEAS AND VIEWS OF SCHOLARS

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A number of scholars have worked in the area of Oral Literature and some have worked in the interface between Oral Literature and Written Literature. Let us look at the views and ideas expressed by some of the most influential among the scholars.

### 2.5.1 Walter J. Ong

In Walter J. Ong's most widely known work, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (1982), he attempts to identify the distinguishing characteristics of orality: thought and its verbal expression in societies where the technologies of literacy (especially writing and print) are unfamiliar to most of the population.

Many of the effects of the introduction of the technology of writing are related to the fact that oral cultures require strategies of preserving information in the absence of writing. These include, for example, a reliance on proverbs or condensed wisdom, epic poetry, and stylized culture heroes (wise Nestor, crafty Odysseus). Writing makes these features no longer necessary, and introduces new strategies of remembering cultural material, which itself now changes.

Walter J. Ong's major concern in his works is the impact on culture and education of the shift from orality to literacy. Ong describes writing as a technology that must be laboriously learned, and which effects the first transformation of human thought from the world of sound to the world of sight.

### 2.5.2 Ruth Finnegan (1933)

Ruth Finnegan is the author of the influential book *Oral Literature in Africa* (1970), an insightful study ranging over the whole of sub-Saharan Africa. Finnegan has discussed panegyric, elegiac, and religious poetry, lyric, topical and political songs, children's songs and rhymes, prose narratives, proverbs, riddles, oratory, drum language, and drama separately with examples from over 150 tribal groups.

She makes three major points: (1) that oral art can be studied as literature, (2) that a stylistic consideration of folklore is necessary, and (3) that the context of the oral form has great significance. For Finnegan, oral literature is only a type of literature, a type characterized by particular features to do with performance, transmission, and social context with the various implications these have for study. She takes a stand in defense of a stylistic theory of folklore which encompasses technique, tradition, and culture.

### 2.5.3 John Miles Foley

John Miles Foley effectively consolidated oral tradition as an academic field when he compiled *Oral-Formulaic Theory and Research* in 1985.

Foley has many times referred to oral tradition as the world's oldest thought technology. According to him, all the written literature we have is dwarfed by oral traditions. In light of this fact, Foley cautions that we must approach oral traditions differently from how we approach written texts. Of the eighteen books he has written and edited, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (2002) offers a methodology for approaching oral traditions while paying attention to crucial aspects such as performance, audience, structure, and specialized language. An oral poem doesn't stand alone, Foley explains. Like a single star that makes up part of a larger constellation, "any

performance (or item of oral poetry) is incomplete without the continuity of its tradition.”

Foley wrestles with this idea in many of his books, especially *Traditional Oral Epic* (1990), which examines the structure of three epic traditions (ancient Greek, early medieval English, and South Slavic) in order to show that, from poetic lines to scenes to whole stories, everything depends on generative patterns and variation within limits.

#### Foley’s unique experiment:

*Foley described his experiment with a South Slavic epic as particularly dear to his heart. Focusing in depth on one particular instance of oral poetry, The Wedding of Mustajbey’s Son Beairbey as Performed by HalilBajgoria (2004), together with its online electronic edition (<http://oraltradition.org/zbm>), Foley attempts to place this epic back into its oral and aural context. That is, you can download an mp3 from the website and hear HalilBajgoria sing the entire song (about 90 minutes long), originally recorded on aluminum records as long ago as 1935 in what is today Bosnia. While listening to this action-packed epic that recounts a wedding and a great battle, you can follow the lyrics in either the South Slavic original or its English translation. When you come across a word or idiom you don’t understand, you can simply click within the hypertext to bring up commentary and cultural context in a designated box on the same electronic page.*

*While The Wedding also exists in conventional paper format, its presence on the web is truer to the 75-year-old performance. Whereas the book chops up the performance into little pieces, segregating them for the sake of creating a physical book, the eEdition reintegrates the isolated parts. Though it can’t reproduce the original performance context, the electronic facsimile takes an important step in the right direction of “resynchronizing the performance” of oral poetry.*

#### 2.5.4 NgugiWaThiong’o

NgugiWaThiong’o is a Kenyan writer, who started writing in English and now writes in his native Gikuyu and Swahili. He has written novels, plays, stories, and influential essays in literary and social criticism. NgugiWaThiong’o talks about ‘orature’ (Oral Literature) in his essay “Notes towards a Performance Theory of Orature” (2007). This is an important essay which gives us an African perspective to Oral Literature.

NgugiWaThiong’o identifies riddle, proverb, story, song, poetry, drama and dance as the major generic elements of Oral Literature which are imaginative attempts to explain the universe:

- “The **riddle** as an image reflects the riddle of a universe, which is one in many. In the Agikuyu riddle, I have a house without a door, whose answer is egg; or I have a companion who never tells me rest, whose answer is road or shadow, the solutions to the riddles are aesthetically satisfying.”
- “A **proverb**, a codification of wisdom, has the three parts of the cognitive process: data of the sensory experience being the basis of a story, and the story being the basis of a universal, a generalized pithy statement applicable in similar situations. To every proverb among the Agikuyu, there is a story, itself obviously drawn from observations of characteristic behaviour of humans and animals.”

- “*The story whose central ingredient is the question of what happens next, or what happened next, raises an anxiety of expectation satisfied only by the final denouement. Nobody knows what will happen in the next hour, next day, next week, next month, next year, years to come, in short, the future. In a story, as opposed to real life, one can know what happens next. A good storyteller is the one who raises anew the anxiety of expectation. From the tongue of a master storyteller, even when his listeners already know the general outline of the story and the ending, he or she is still able to recreate afresh in the listener, the anxiety of expectation and then satisfy it. The story becomes new in every telling and retelling.*”
- “*Dance is a celebration of freedom from fixity, a momentary triumph over gravitational pull, a symbolic conquest of gravity. Dance is often accompanied by song, itself a celebration of sound, motion. And motion is the fundamental to change, growth, development in nature and nurture. Life is motion for we know that a thing is dead when it ceases movement. Sound also grapples with space, distance. It is there in all struggles with nature (hunting songs, work songs) and nurture (war songs and work songs) and in spirituality (songs that accompany religious rites, worship for instance).*”

For NgugiWaThiong’o the important element in orature is the interconnectedness of all these elements. Central to them, is performance. Each is a performance genre, but performance holds them together. Performance is the central feature of orature, WaThiong’o feels, and this he says, differentiates the concept of orature from that of literature.

### 2.5.5 A. K. Ramanujan

A. K. Ramanujan’s research on texts in three languages – Kannada, Tamil, and Sanskrit, on classical Tamil poetry, Kannada Bhakti poetry, linguistics, translation studies, folklore, and oral tradition, makes him the world’s most influential scholar on South Asian language and culture. Ramanujan’s essays on folk tradition “The Indian Oedipus,” “Tell it to the Walls: On Folktales in Indian Culture,” “A Flowering Tree: A Woman’s Tale,” “On Folk Mythologies and Folk Puranas,” and many more have become iconic over the years. On the back of his extensive work on Indian folk traditions, his views on oral and written literature assume critical importance. In the essay “Who Needs Folklore? The Relevance of Oral Traditions to South Asian Studies” (1990), Ramanujan discusses oral and written literature in his easy style interspersed with interesting examples.

Ramanujan says that the relations between oral and written traditions in any culture are not simple oppositions and that they interpenetrate each other and combine in various ways. One often identifies the “classical” with the written and the “folk” with the oral.

In the Indian context, Ramanujan distinguishes between three sets of independent oppositions – 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 “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**.*

Ramanujan observes an interesting contrast in the way the Vedas, oral texts (supposedly fluid), and the Ramayana, a written text (supposedly fixed), have been transmitted over the ages. He says that 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. 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. 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.

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. 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.

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 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.

#### Activity 5

Make a note of the main points that have been brought in (6.5). See where the various scholars agree and where they differ.

The previous section has brought up a number of names, concepts and ideas. Do take a break here and read the previous section again before going on to the next. It might help to write down a few points as you go along.

## 2.6 TWO EXAMPLES OF WRITTEN LITERATURE BEING INFLUENCED BY ORAL LITERATURE

Almost all literatures of the world have been influenced by their respective oral traditions, either directly or indirectly, at some point. Here, we shall look in some detail at two texts, *Hayavadana*, a play by Girish Karnad (Sanskrit-Kannada-English: India), and *Things Fall Apart* (Igbo-English: Nigeria), a novel by Chinua Achebe, and see how oral literature has influenced their respective literary works.

### 2.6.1 GirishKarnad's *Hayavadana* (Sanskrit-Kannada-English: India)

The path to the eventual play in English is slightly unusual. Two stories make up this play. One of the stories, the frame story, that of Hayavadana, is taken from *Brihatkathasaritsagara*, a collection of stories written by Somdeva in the eleventh century AD; and the main story, that of Devadatta and Kapila, is based on a story from *Vetalapanchavimshika*. Karnad does not take the Davadatta-Kapila story directly, but uses Thomas Mann's retelling of the story in *The Transposed Heads*. Mann gives the story his own interpretation. The original story in the *Vetalapanchavimshika* poses a moral problem, but in Mann's retelling it emerges as a tale which laughs at the ridiculous philosophy which holds the human head superior to the human body. Karnad takes up the elements of both the original and Mann's retelling and adds the story of Hayavadana, as a frame-story or sub-plot, and comes up with the play *Hayavadana*. In Karnad's play, it is the problem of human identity in a world of complicated relationships.

#### Elements of Oral tradition in *Hayavadana*

In this play Karnad has largely drawn materials commonly from Yakshagana and Kathakali, traditional folk theatres of Karnataka and Kerala. In any Yakshagana performance, the Bhagavata plays a very important role. He sings the story throughout the performance, while the actors come and enact these songs in the form of dialogues. So, the Bhagavata is the one who takes the story forward and controls it. Though he is not part of the 'story,' the Bhagavata participates in the performance as and when required, the actors sometimes talk to the Bhagavata and he responds, he sometimes asks questions. He is the one who holds the thread, the 'Sutradhar' of the performance. In *Hayavadana*, the Bhagavata plays a very prominent role in the Hayavadana episode. He acts as a bridge between the audience and the play, making it easier for them to digest the bizarre happenings on the stage with his wisecracks, witticisms, contemporary references.

The play opens with a song to the god Ganapati. It is a traditional invocation song which is called 'naandi' in the Yakshagana tradition, and it is always dedicated to Ganapati, 'the remover of obstacles.' The play also ends in a song, a prayer, thanking God for ensuring the completion and making the performance a success. Again, a Yakshagana would end with a 'mangalam' song, wishing everyone well.

Karnad introduces further elements from folk theatre like the half-curtain, masks, dolls, etc. Yakshagana performances are usually held in empty fields in villages on a bare stage with space for musicians and actors. Everything else has to be improvised either through temporary devices or dialogue. The half-curtain is not a fixed curtain that covers the entire stage; it is a decorative curtain which is temporarily held by two people, one of them could be the Bhagavata, to indicate the end of an act or to create suspense before the entry of a particularly interesting character on stage. Masks assume an important role in this play. We must remember here that the two male leads cut their respective heads off and Padmini comes and transposes these heads. So, masks were suggested as a strategy to show this transposition of heads. Both characters in the play wear masks right from the beginning and when Padmini transposes the heads, she actually exchanges the masks on stage. In some productions, the directors decided to do away with the masks and instead opted for an exchange of clothing to indicate the transposition.

And we also have two talking dolls. Devadatta buys these two dolls from the Ujjain fair, when he goes there after the transposition for the yet-unborn child.

These two dolls perform the roles of observers of the happenings in the Devadatta-Padmini household and their relationship. They speak, but only between themselves. Only the audience gets to hear them. They observe how Devadutta slowly loses his muscular frame and becomes flabby and soft. They also look into Padmini's dream and see that she is dreaming of someone who is not her husband. These two dolls are very caustic in their speech and do not mince words. And bizarrely, they argue, fight, bite, scratch, and hit each other. And then we have the 'chorus' like in Greek drama and also in traditional folk theatre called 'mela.' Here, we have the female chorus that comes in at crucial moments and joins the Bhagavata in singing songs that act like authorial observations on the dilemmas and inner thoughts of the lead characters.

### Activity 6

Look at some works in your mother tongue where the writer has used folk elements in the rendering of the tale. How does this affect the impact of the story?

## 2.6.2 Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (Igbo-English; Nigeria)

Chinua Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, the most widely read book in modern African literature, deals with the clash of cultures and the violent transitions in life and values brought about by the onset of British colonialism in Nigeria at the end of the nineteenth century. The novel was published in 1958 and it recounts the life of the village hero Okonkwo and describes the arrival of white missionaries in Nigeria and its impact on traditional Igbo society during the late 1800s.

### Elements of Oral Tradition in *Things Fall Apart*

The oral tradition makes its presence felt in a striking manner in *Things Fall Apart* in many ways. Achebe uses proverbs, songs and folk tales in this novel to illustrate the Igbo tradition. "He who brings kola brings life" is a proverb used when the tradition of passing the kola nut for fellowship and alliance is addressed and would have been a popular oral saying in that culture since the kola nut is an important part of the Igbo culture and was used for many things. The Ibo proverb "when the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk" seems rather odd in the novel, but within its context it refers to someone doing something secretive and perhaps even shameful at night when no one can see you doing it. This is prefaced by the statement "And perhaps those not so young would be playing pairs in less open places, and old men and women would remember their youth". Many of the proverbs refer to animals in the bush to make a cultural point and some of the proverbs use local myths or mythical characters. Nwakibie, a wealthy man in the novel, uses a proverb to describe his wise and careful attitude toward those who would borrow from him. He says, "Eneke the bird says that since men have learned to shoot without missing, he has learned to fly without perching." Achebe also uses proverbs and sayings to describe his characters especially Okonkwo. He is described by an old man thus: "looking at a king's mouth one would think he never sucked at his mother's breast". Such a statement defines Okonkwo as being proud as a king but also a self-made man, rising to fame and fortune within a short time. Proverbs like these makes the character come alive. No further description is required.

Traditional songs are used throughout the novel to give it a rootedness and an African feel. The entire novel is written in English, but interestingly, Achebe uses both translated and un-translated songs in the novel. The first song is a children's song:

“The rain is falling, the sun is shining, / Alone Nnadi is cooking and eating.” The song combines cultural themes and traditions with imagery that helps the reader picture the story. The context of the song is “Gradually the rains became lighter and less frequent, and earth and sky once again became separate. The rain fell in thin, slanting showers through sunshine and quiet breeze.” The village traditions of wrestling, marriage, work, and death see a lot of singing by the people and these songs are also included in the novel. The song for wrestling is written in English:

Who will wrestle for our village?  
Okafu will wrestle for our village.  
Has he thrown a hundred men?  
He has thrown four hundred men.  
Has he thrown a hundred Cats?  
He has thrown four hundred Cats  
Then send him the word to fight for us.

This is a typical ‘call-and-response’ song sung in many parts of Africa, and Achebe translates these into English and includes other such songs too in the novel. However, when Okonkwo sings, which is only once, it is left un-translated:

Ezeelina, elina!  
Sala  
Ezeilikwaya  
Ikwabaakwaoligholi  
EbeDandanechieze  
EbeUzuzuneteegwu  
Sala.

This very interesting traditional song is used to suggest the thoughts of the main character and describe his gait. After reading the novel, we can understand why Achebe has left only this song untranslated. Okonkwo remains in mind and heart an African till the end, whereas many people in his village embrace Christianity and accept English rule.

Achebe also uses many folk tales in his novel to show the nature of his characters. In chapter seven, Okonkwo is described as telling stories to his sons. Okonkwo deplored weakness and sloth and accordingly, he told them masculine stories of violence and bloodshed. Though Nwoye knew it was important to be masculine, he somehow preferred the softer stories his mother used to tell – stories of the tortoise and his wily ways, and of the bird *eneke-nti-oba* who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat.

Achebe uses the traditional tales to describe the cultural values of the village and how even the natural world they see around them is embedded with their own values and traditions. This can be seen in the image of the bird and cat wrestling. Wrestling was a big part of their culture and so they inserted it in the animal world as well. Nwoye prefers stories like the Vulture and the Sky which are much more interesting and less violent. However these stories are dismissed as being for young children and are hated by Okonkwo. Another folk story used in the novel is one that is a mother’s tale; the story of the tortoise. The folk tale within the story of the novel shows the behavior of certain characters, especially their knowledge and interest in the story, but also how African people used the stories to explain certain

natural phenomena like why the tortoise's shell is not smooth. This is the general nature of folk tales. Achebe's use of framed stories in this novel is not as purposeful as the Western notion of the literary device, yet they do serve in coloring and texturing the novel as a vivid display of African oral culture.

Achebe is a master of the oral tradition and his knowledge of it is shown in the prolific amounts of various kinds of oral traditions found in the novel. In addition to poems, songs, and folk tales, Achebe also uses local myths and legends. The oral traditions within the novel help illustrate its characters as well as describe the culture within the novel. Achebe skilfully describes a village culture to non-African minds that is very tangible. This helps non-African readers to understand the African mind and culture in a unique way.

### Activity 7

- 1) What function do proverbs perform in *Things Fall Apart*? Can you think of any other instances where proverbs are used in this manner? Ask the elders in your family to help you out.

## 2.7 LET US SUM UP

In this Unit, we have acquainted you with the different concepts associated with Oral Literature and Written Literature, looked at the relationship between the two forms, read the views of some of the important scholars working with Oral Literature, and looked at the analysis of two literary texts that have artfully and evocatively incorporated oral literature elements. To sum this up, you will have to keep in mind the following:

- Oral Literature and Written Literature are not mutually exclusive domains.
- In many cultures, especially in Africa and Asia, Oral Literature has influenced Written Literature in many ways.
- When we discuss Oral and Written Literature, it is always useful to look at Written Literature through Oral Literature.
- Development of technology in different fields related to speech, writing, and visual culture has impacted Oral Literature and helped in disseminating it (print technology, recording, and storing devices, the Internet). Foley's experiment bears this out very well.

## 2.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

- 1) What reasons can you give to substantiate that Oral Literature and Written Literature are not two separate inflexible entities?
- 2) You have gone through the various convergences and divergences between Oral Literature and Written Literature. How many of these features keep Oral Literature and Written Literature truly apart? If so, what are they? And why are they 'exclusive'?
- 3) A. K. Ramanujan distinguishes between three sets of independent oppositions while discussing Oral and Written Literature in the Indian context. Examine each set on the basis of his essay discussed in 1.6.5.
- 4) Read the outline of John Miles Foley's experiment given in a box in 1.6.3 and discuss this experiment in terms of technology aiding the popularization and dissemination of celebrated oral text performances.

- 5) You have seen how elements of Oral Literature have been used by Girish Karnad and Chinua Achebe in their respective works.
  - a) What elements of folk tradition are used in both works?
  - b) From what you have read, who (which author) do you think has made effective use of oral literature? Give your reasons.
- 6) What are Ruth Finnegan's views on Oral Literature and in what way do these views help in taking forward the study of Oral Literature? Do you think Walter J. Ong's and Ruth Finnegan's ideas are similar? State your reasons.
- 7) How has Chinua Achebe used songs and folktales in *Things Fall Apart*? What aspects does he highlight through folktales?
- 8) How have Yakshagana and Kathakali influenced *Hayavadana*? What are the other folk-theatre elements that Karnad has used in *Hayavadana*?
- 9) What function do the dolls perform in the play?
- 10) Ngugi Wa Thiong'o has outlined and discussed the major generic elements of 'orature' in his essay. What are they and according to him, how do these elements help in explaining the universe?
- 11) Ramanujan says that there are no clear cut distinctions between Oral and Written Literature. How does he elaborate this point?

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## 2.10 APPENDIX

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Summaries of *Hayavadana* and *Things Fall Apart*

### *Hayavadana*

The protagonists of *Hayavadana* are Devadatta, the son of the scholarly Brahmin Vidyasagar; his friend, the muscular Kapila, son of the ironsmith Lohita; and the beautiful Padmini, daughter of the wealthiest merchant of Dharmapura.

Devadatta and Padmini marry. Kapila is Devadatta's friend and 'dasa' as he calls himself. Padmini, though she loves the scholarly Devadatta, is at the same time fascinated by the strong, virile Kapila. Devadatta is jealous of the growing intimacy between Padmini and Kapila. Once when Padmini is pregnant, they go on a trip to Ujjain. They stop on the way, and Kapila and Padmini visit a Rudra temple. Devadatta, sulky, visits the Kali temple nearby alone, where he beheads himself in a frenzy of self-sacrifice. When Kapila and Padmini come back, they find Devadatta missing and Kapila goes in search of his friend. He finds Devadatta's beheaded body in the Kali temple, realizes what has happened and in a fit of sorrow beheads himself.

After a while Padmini too reaches the Kali temple, sees two dismembered bodies, finds no reason to continue living, and is about to kill herself when the goddess intervenes. The goddess asks Padmini to close her eyes and restore the heads to their bodies to make the two men live again. When she opens her eyes she discovers to her dismay (to a certain extent mixed with delight) that she has transposed the heads and the two men who are alive once more present a puzzle. Who is her husband? They appeal to a rishi who pronounces that, since the head is the greatest among the parts, the man with Devadatta's head and Kapila's body is to be Padmini's husband henceforth.

Dejected, the new Kapila, that is, Devadatta's body with Kapila's head, retires to the forest, while the new Devadatta, that is, Kapila's body with Devadatta's head returns with Padmini to Dharmapura. Padmini is satisfied now that she had achieved what she had wanted all along, a perfect man – Devadatta's scholarly head and Kapila's virile strong body. Padmini delivers a child, the result of her union with the earlier unchanged Devadatta. Gradually, Devadatta, after performing feats worthy of Kapila's body reverts to his scholarly activities. The 'head' takes over and the body loses its earlier rigidity and becomes soft and flabby. Padmini is exasperated by this change and takes her son to the forest to make him familiar with the beauties and ways of nature. She meets Kapila in the forest. Here too, the 'head' had taken over, and Kapila's head manages to transform the earlier soft and flabby body of Devadatta into a strong muscular one. Old memories are revived between Kapila and Padmini and they live together in bliss in the forest for five days.

Devadatta too comes to the forest in search of his wife and son. He meets Kapila. They decide that their common love for Padmini makes it impossible for both of them to continue living and the two former friends duel and die. Padmini asks the Bhagavata to leave her son with the hunters in the forest and to tell them that the boy is Kapila's son and when he is old enough to take him to Devadatta's father and to say that he is Devadatta's son. Padmini then commits 'sati' on the funeral pyre of Devadatta and Kapila.

Now, to the frame-story or the sub-plot of *Hayavadana*. *Hayavadana*, the horse-man (*haya* = horse, *vadana* = face), actually appears at the beginning of the play. A

princess of Karnataka was fascinated by a horse and married him. The horse was a gandharva who had been condemned to be a beautiful white stallion by the curse of the god Kuvara. Hayavadana is the progeny of this unusual marriage. The gandharva regained his original form after the effect of the curse wore off. But the princess refused to accompany him to his heavenly abode. The gandharva, incensed, turned her into a mare and left, leaving the strange horse-child an orphan. The horse-child had grown up and ever since had tried to transform himself completely into a man but failed. When he approaches the Bhagavata for help, he is directed to go to a temple on top of Mount Chitrakoot and seek the help of the goddess there. From this point on, Hayavadana disappears from the scene, and the main plot of Devadatta-Kapila-Padmini is introduced.

After the three protagonists of the main plot have killed themselves, Hayavadana comes back into the play. He returns in a jubilant mood. He had gone to the temple, found a sword lying there and was about to commit suicide when the goddess appeared. Hayavadana fell at her feet and begged her to make him complete. She granted him the boon, but in her hurry had failed to realize that Hayavadana wanted to be a complete MAN, but she had made him into a complete HORSE. Hayavadana is happy at this transformation but is annoyed that he still retains his human voice and is trying to change his voice to equine quality by singing all the patriotic songs he can remember. Padmini's autistic son joins Hayavadana and is fascinated by Hayavadana's laugh and suddenly brightens up and starts clapping and singing. In turn, the boy's urgings force Hayavadana to laugh uncontrollably. This laugh soon turns into a proper neigh and Hayavadana loses his human voice. The play ends here, when the main plot and the sub-plot merge and result in some sort of light-hearted resolution.

### *Things Fall Apart*

Okonkwo is a wealthy and respected warrior of the Umuofia clan. His father, Unoka, was a cowardly and spendthrift person, who died leaving many village debts unsettled. Okonkwo resolved not to become like his father and struggled hard and rose to become a clansman, warrior, farmer, and family provider. His main cause of worry is his twelve-year-old son named Nwoye who is lazy and Okonkwo is worried that Nwoye will end up like his father.

It so happens that Okonkwo takes custody of a fifteen-year-old boy, Ikemefuna, whom his tribe won from a settlement with a neighbouring tribe. The boy endears himself to Okonkwo and despite not showing any overt affection for the boy, Okonkwo finds an ideal son in him because unlike his son Nwoye, Ikemefuna develops a more masculine attitude. His son Nwoye too forms a strong attachment to Ikemefuna and looks up to him as an older brother. However, this bond is soon to be broken. Ogbuefi Ezeudu, a respected village elder, informs Okonkwo in private that the Oracle has said that Ikemefuna must be killed. He tells Okonkwo that because Ikemefuna calls him "father," Okonkwo should not take part in the boy's death. Okonkwo lies to Ikemefuna, telling him that they must return him to his home village. Nwoye cannot bear to be separated from Ikemefuna and is inconsolable.

As he walks with the men of Umuofia, Ikemefuna thinks about seeing his mother. After walking for several hours, some of Okonkwo's tribesmen attack the boy. Ikemefuna runs to Okonkwo for help, but Okonkwo, who doesn't want to look weak in front of his fellow tribesmen, kills the boy despite the Oracle's admonishment. When Okonkwo returns home, Nwoye realizes that his friend is dead.

After this killing, Okonkwo sinks into depression and is not able to sleep or eat. He visits his friend Obierika and begins to feel better. Okonkwo's daughter Ezinma falls ill, but she recovers after Okonkwo gathers leaves for her medicine.

The village elder, OgbuefiEzeudu's death is announced to the surrounding villages by means of the ekwe, a musical instrument. Okonkwo feels guilty because the last time Ezeudu visited him was to warn him against taking part in Ikemefuna's death. At OgbuefiEzeudu's large and elaborate funeral, the men beat drums and fire their guns. Okonkwo's gun explodes and kills OgbuefiEzeudu's sixteen-year-old son. There seems to be no end to the tragedies piling upon Okonkwo.

Since killing a clansman is a crime against the earth goddess, Okonkwo is punished and must go into exile with his family for seven years in order to repent. He gathers his most valuable belongings and takes his family to his mother's native village, Mbanta. The men from OgbuefiEzeudu's quarter burn Okonkwo's buildings and kill his animals to cleanse the village of his sin.

Okonkwo's kinsmen, especially his uncle, Uchendu, receive him warmly. They help him build a new compound of huts and lend him yam seeds to start a farm. Although he is bitterly disappointed at his misfortune, Okonkwo reconciles himself to life in his mother's village. During the second year of his exile, Okonkwo's friend Obierika brings several bags of cowries (shells used as currency) that he has earned by selling Okonkwo's yams. Obierika also brings the bad news that Abame, another village, has been destroyed by the white man.

Soon after this, Mbanta is visited by six missionaries. Mr. Brown, their leader, speaks to the villagers and tells them that their gods are false and that worshipping more than one God is idolatrous. But the villagers do not understand how the Holy Trinity can be accepted as one God. Despite his intention to convert the residents of Umuofia to Christianity, Mr. Brown is tolerant and does not allow his followers to behave rudely with the villagers.

As if to hasten the impending doom, Mr. Brown falls ill and is replaced by Reverend James Smith, an intolerant and strict man. Some of the converts, who are more zealous than the others, are happy that they are now free of Mr. Brown's policy of restraint. One such convert, Enoch, dares to unmask an egwugwu during the annual ceremony to honor the earth deity, an act equivalent to killing an ancestral spirit. The next day, the egwugwu burn Enoch's compound and Reverend Smith's church to the ground. (egwugwu are the spirits of the ancestors of Nigerian tribes and the great men of these tribes wear masks to represent these spirits during festivals and judgements.)

The District Commissioner is upset by the burning of the church and wants the leaders of Umuofia to meet with him. Once the leaders come to meet the District Commissioner, they are handcuffed and thrown in jail, where they suffer insults and physical abuse. After they are released, they hold a meeting. While this meeting is going on, five court messengers approach and order the clansmen to desist. Okonkwo is incensed and expecting his fellow clan members to join him in rising against the court messengers, he kills their leader with his machete. The crowd allows the other messengers to escape and Okonkwo realizes that his clan is not willing to support him in this rebellion.

The District Commissioner arrives at Okonkwo's compound to investigate and finds that Okonkwo has hanged himself. Since Okonkwo has committed suicide which is a grave sin, Obierika explains that according to custom, none of Okonkwo's clansmen may touch his body. The commissioner, who is writing a book about Africa, believes that the story of Okonkwo's rebellion and death would be an interesting episode to be included in his book. He has already chosen the book's title: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*.

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## **UNIT 3 INDIAN LITERATURE: HISTORIOGRAPHY AND PERIODIZATION**

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### **Structure**

- 3.0 Objectives
- 3.1 Introduction
- 3.2 The Idea of Indian Literature
  - 3.2.1 The Indian Linguistic Scenario
  - 3.2.2 Indian Literature
  - 3.2.3 Unifying Elements among Indian Languages
- 3.3 Historiography
  - 3.3.1 Work of Orientalists
  - 3.3.2 Linguistic Survey
  - 3.3.3 Post Independence Developments
- 3.4 Mapping of Indian Literature
- 3.5 Fundamental Concepts
  - 3.5.1 Collective Consciousness
  - 3.5.2 Modern Indian Languages (MILs)
  - 3.5.3 Socio-Cultural Conditions
- 3.6 Periodisation
  - 3.6.1 Ancient (Vedic Era-600AD)
  - 3.6.2 Medieval (600-1800 AD)
  - 3.6.3 Modern (Pre-Independence Era 1800-1947)
  - 3.6.4 Modern (Post-Independence Era 1947 Onwards)
- 3.7 Let Us Sum Up
- 3.8 Unit End Questions
- 3.9 References and Suggested Reading

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### **3.0 OBJECTIVES**

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This unit will take you through the development and evolution of the myriad languages and literature of India. You will have an idea of how languages developed and changed over the course of time and see the timeline of various socio-cultural, political and literary movements that impacted the output of Indian writers.

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### **3.1 INTRODUCTION**

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It is not an easy task to map the rich diversity of Indian languages and literature in the space of one unit. After all, dialects of one language change every few kilometers and each dialect and sub-dialect has its own unique idioms, proverbs, folk songs and tales and other literary forms in the oral tradition as well. Most Indians can speak and even read or write in more than language. So it might not be an exaggeration to say that our multi-cultural legacy has ensured that we are all comparativists to some degree! This unit will introduce you to the 'idea' of comparative Indian literature.

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## 3.2 THE IDEA OF INDIAN LITERATURE

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India is a country with a geographical and cultural diversity that is reflected in its flora and fauna, its people and languages. Many languages have been in use here for thousands of years; most of them have dialects and sub-dialects. They have a rich tradition of literature written in their respective scripts as well as an oral tradition of Loksahitya. There are also a number of languages of the tribal communities with only oral literature as they did not have a written tradition till recently. Some have adopted a script and are documenting their literature.

### 3.2.1 The Indian Linguistic Scenario

Sanskrit is considered the oldest language of the world. The *Veda*, great epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, the plays of Kalidas, Bhas, Bhavabhooti were written in Sanskrit. The discourse of Indian aesthetics developed in this language as did different disciplines of knowledge. Tamil enjoys the status of classical language as it has a tradition of literature and aesthetics since ancient times. Telugu, Kannada and Malayalam were also given this status some years ago.

Pali and Prakrit were the languages of common people during ancient times. Sanskrit was used by scholars, kings and the elite class of royal courts. Everyone else, including women of class communicated in Prakrit. There were many types of Prakrit according to the areas they were spoken in — Magadhi, Shaursheni, Maharashtri, Paishachi ... The Pali and Prakrit literary tradition was initially oral and it has the flavor and subtlety of colloquial ease. Gautama Buddha adopted Pali to communicate with the masses. Consequently Buddhist texts are documented in Pali. Apabhramsha is the language of transition from Prakrit to Modern Indian Languages and it has a huge amount of literature including Jain texts.

Modern Indian Languages (MIL) are the languages we use presently and their history may date back to a few hundred/ a thousand/ or more years. Bangla, Odiya, Asamia, Manipuri, Maithili, Kashmiri, Sindhi, Punjabi, Dogri, Hindi, Urdu, Gujarati, Marathi, Konkani, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, Malayalam are MILs. In addition, there are the languages of North-East India and hundreds of dialects with oral literature many of which have now been or are in the process of being documented in print or electronically.

English is a foreign language but has become a part of the Indian linguistic scenario for historical reasons. It was introduced for various purposes by the British and continues to be used. A good number of people also use it for creative expression and Indo-English writings have their own identity.

#### Activity 1

Jot down the types of Prakrit that were in use. Look up Schedule VIII and see how many Indian languages are listed.

### 3.2.2 Indian Literature

We have seen that India abounds in languages and most of them have a rich literary tradition. Thus Indian literature is not of any one language or a few particular languages but a literature written in many languages. This is what makes it unique. The literatures of most of the countries of the world are identified with the language of those countries. The concept of nation-state is linked with the language according to which a particular language is also a part of the national construct i.e. a specific

language is regarded as the national language and usually the literature of that language is called the literature of that country, eg. French literature, German literature and so on. English speaking countries have British literature, American literature etc. But Indian literature is neither the literature of a particular language nor of a particular area/time. It is the literature of Indian languages stretched across a period of three thousand years.

Now what makes it one entity as Indian literature? When dozens of Indian languages have their own literatures why should they be kept under one banner of 'Indian literature'? It is the Indianness in these literatures that makes them Indian literature.

Before studying the concept of Indian literature we have to understand the concept of India as a nation - its history, geography, culture and society. India is pluralistic in the real sense of the term: people of different religions, races, origins, physical structure have been living here since time immemorial ; different cultures, castes and creeds have emerged and flourished; its geography, nature, flora and fauna has tremendous variety. Every region has its specific socio- cultural identity; there are a number of languages to express the mind and heart and ways of living and doing. But in spite of variations in physical geography, there is an inner current or uniting factor in the behaviour and sensibility of people - their daily living, thinking, expressing, reacting in the state of joy and sorrow, celebrating festivals, playing music and dance, painting, sculpture and crafts - which binds people from Kashmir to Kanyakumari through a single string of this current of sensibility.

In other words we can say that it is the Indianness ingrained in these literatures that makes them Indian literature as a single unit. What then is this Indianness? It is the Indian world view and Indian self-view reflected in the way of life which links the people and this Indianness is manifested in multiple ways and forms.

#### **Activity 2**

Make a note of what qualities you think are uniquely 'Indian'.

### **3.2.3 Unifying Elements among Indian Languages**

We find that Indian multi-lingualism is different from American or Australian multi-lingualism where people of different origins, regions, languages and cultures have come to live together and their languages at home and in the world outside are different. In India, in spite of the fact that most languages have their own individual script, phonetic system, and terminology, we see that there are certain points of structural unity among them. For example there is a good deal of similarity (with a little variation) in sounds; alphabets have a similar order of vowels and consonants; they contain a good deal of common terminology. It is interesting to notice that speakers of these different languages read and write Sanskrit through their respective scripts i.e. a Bengali through Bangla or a Malayalee through Malayalam etc. yet when they read it loudly or chant a shloka, their pronunciation and rhythm is the same.

The common terms are often derived from Sanskrit or foreign languages like Arabic, Persian or English with certain variations. While adopting an equivalent for an English term or coining a new word, these languages usually look towards Sanskrit roots. There is similarity at the semantic as well as the structural level in the idioms and phrases of different languages. The order of words in the sentence structure of these languages is common - subject > object > verb. Most of these languages have Sanskrit models for metaphors and imagery. All of them were influenced by English during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries.

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## 3.3 HISTORIOGRAPHY

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In order to establish their supremacy over their subjects, British rulers labelled India as a land of snake charmers but Western scholars were curious about Eastern knowledge. During the late 1780s, British administrator Sir William Jones studied Sanskrit and translated Kalidas' play *Abhigyan Shakuntalam* into English. This created a new era of studying Sanskrit and Oriental learning in Europe. The contact with Indian knowledge and sensibility, the study of *Vedas* and associated literature – *Upanishadas*, *Aranyakas*, Brahminical texts, Philosophy and Grammar opened up new horizons in Western understanding and feeling and added dimensions in Western thought. Eventually this process led to the development of disciplines like Philology, Linguistics and Comparative Linguistics.

### 3.3.1 Work of Orientalists

Western scholars' idea of Indian literature was confined to Sanskrit or ancient Indian languages only. The initial work related to Indian literature was done by Europeans, the most important being *History of Indian Literature* (originally in German) in three volumes by Maurice Winternitz. The first volume (1907) contains information and analysis of Vedic literature, Epics, *Puranas* and *Tantras* etc. The second (1920) contains a discussion of Buddhist and Jain literature (Pali-Sanskrit and Prakrit-Sanskrit respectively). The third (1922) discusses classic Sanskrit literature. Works in modern Indian languages do not figure at all.

Another important work was Albert Weber's *History of Indian Literature* (1952) also originally written in German. Weber's work presented the development of the work of Indo-Aryan languages, but it was limited to the first and second phases only. It is a history of Vedic and classic Sanskrit literature which ends at discussion of religion, philosophy and politics in the medieval age. Weber admits that Indian literature is not limited to this but he could not find any other appropriate title.

Frazer's *Literary History of India* (1907), Govin's *History of Indian Literature* (1931) and Louis Rueno's *Indian Literature* (French, 1951, English translation 1964) also merit mention. Rueno has taken into consideration the literature of modern Indian languages also but here too Sanskrit literature is the focus of discussion. All these works are valuable in that they prepared the background for the study and research of Indian literature.

### 3.3.2 Linguistic Survey

British rulers wanted to have efficient administrative control over this vast land full of diversities and their officials realized they should have clear information about the languages used in the country. A linguistic survey was approved and the herculean task was assigned to George A. Grierson in 1894. Grierson discussed 364 languages and dialects; it took thirty four years to complete.

The significance of Grierson's work is that he concentrated on contemporary languages of different regions and their literature and it was he who realized the importance of modern Indian languages and their dialects. Although his work is simply information and not historiography, its value lies in the fact that, by identifying similar trends in the literature of different languages, there is the notion of 'Indian literature'. This approach proved to be a pioneering task in two ways - (a) various Indian languages undergoing literary and cultural renaissance during the freedom struggle inclined towards mutual interaction (b) encouraged later efforts to explore their literatures as different constituents of Indian literature. The linguistic survey

of India by the British was meant to serve administrative requirements but it caught the scholars' attention and the move towards the exploration of texts of Pali, Prakrit, Apabhraṃśa and modern Indian languages and Philological study began.

### 3.3.3 Post Independence Developments

Indian languages played an important role during the modern Indian renaissance and struggle for independence. The writers of different languages tried to awaken the people regarding imperial rule and fight against it. History and mythology were explored to arouse racial memory; geographical cultural symbols like rivers, mountains, and ocean were depicted as common heritage. After independence, Indian scholars tried to look back and trace the undercurrents in the literary traditions of different Indian languages. Many governmental and non-governmental institutions like Central Sahitya Akademy, state Sahitya Akademies, Bharatiya Jnanpith etc were established. These developments offered an opportunity to relook literary tradition as well as contemporary literature. This gave rise to the feeling of the fundamental unity of Indian languages and their literatures. Speaking at a function of the newly established Sahitya Akademy Dr. Radhakrishnan said, "Indian literature is one though written in many languages."

Discussions and debates configuring this concept of Indian literature were initiated, conferences were organized. These activities resulted in a number of published proceedings. Among these, *Languages and Literatures of Modern India* (Suniti Kumar Chatterji 1963), *Modern Indian Literature: A Panoramic Glimpse* (Krishna Kripalani 1968), *Literatures in Modern Indian Languages* (VK Gokak (ed), 1957), *Concept of Indian Literature*, (VK Gokak, 1979), *Bharatiya Vangamaya* (Dr Nagendra (ed) 1958), *Towards a Literary History of India* (Sujit Mukherji 1975) are worth mentioning. The Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla organized a seminar on Indian literature, the proceedings of which were published in 1968.

While these books may not be in-depth analyses, they played a significant role in creating and expanding awareness about Indian literature. Compared to these, *Indian Literature* (KM Institute, Agra) is a broader effort as scholars of different Indian languages presented a panoramic view of the literatures of those languages. The preface by the editor is an effort to underline the fundamental elements of Indian literature. The Information and Broadcasting Ministry publication *Bharatiya Bhashaon ka Sahitya* is an informative compilation available to readers of Hindi.

Prof. Sisir Kumar Das initiated the gigantic task of preparing an integrated history of Indian Literature through Sahitya Akademy. During the 1980s he formed a team of experts from various Indian languages and two volumes of modern Indian literature (from 1800-1910 and 1910-1956) were published by mid 1990s. After that he started working on medieval Indian literature (500 A.D. onwards). But unfortunately he passed away before it could be completed and only one volume (500-1399) could be brought out posthumously.

*Encyclopedia of Indian Literature* (in 7 volumes) brought out by Sahitya Akademy serve as a corpus of information about works and authors of different Indian languages.

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## 3.4 MAPPING OF INDIAN LITERATURE

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The concept of Indian literature encompasses within it not only writings in Sanskrit, Pali, Prakrit and Modern Indian languages but also the works of Indian writers in English because a good number of Indians have chosen English as their language

of creative expression. Many languages of the North-East did not have a script; towards the end of the last century they adopted the Roman script. (Manipuri is an exception; it is written in Bangla script though they are fighting for the use of their original Meitei.) The creative writings of Khasi and other North-Eastern languages have also become a part of this basket.

In addition to the literary writings produced in the country, Indians living abroad contribute to this corpus as well. Diaspora literature is in Indian languages as well as in English and it is a significant branch of Indian Literature.

Enormous in its expansion and profound in its sensibility, Indian literature is rich with writings of different genres - epics, lyrical poetry, drama, prose, theorization and appreciation of the creative process, and literary criticism. Indian literature represents the lives and desires, joys and sorrows, faiths and beliefs of the people of many ages, communities and sects. It is the recorded socio-cultural history of the mental and emotive activity of three thousand years. To quote Krishna Kripalani, its significant quality is the vital consciousness of the past which is still alive in the present. Linguistic diversity, span of historical time and geographical expansion have sometimes put the scholars in trouble in understanding the entity of Indian literature as one indivisible literary tradition. The names of Albert Weber and Nihar Ranjan Ray may be mentioned in this context. Dr. Ray's dilemma is that the undividable entity of all languages repudiates the independent identity of the language: "The literature totally depends on language and language is a cultural phenomenon which depends totally on its environment."

The difficulty in agreeing with Dr. Ray's view point is that literature itself is a cultural phenomenon which depends totally on environment. Actually it is literature through which the language associates intensely with the environment. Kalidas, Bhavabhooti, Tulasidas, Premchand, Homer, Virgil or Tolstoy could have written only in Sanskrit, Hindi, Greek, Latin or Russian. Shakespeare could not have written in Russian or Sanskrit nor could Tulasidas in English or Greek. Actually it is the Pan Indianness underlying the body and soul, form and content of Indian literature that manifests its identity as a whole. It is on the basis of this Indianness that Shri Aurobindo, Rabindranath or Suniti Kumar Chatterji supported the idea of consolidated Indian literature which gives expression to Indian scholarship. It is the idea of Indianness in Indian literature that led to the establishment of institutions like Bharatiya Vidya Bhawan by Kanhaiya Lal Manik Lal Munshi and the establishment of departments of Modern Indian Languages in different universities.

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## 3.5 FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS

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### 3.5.1 Collective Consciousness

The idea of Indian literature is based on the concept of Indian culture and Indian nation representing collective consciousness of past and present. This collective consciousness is made of racial memory and shared history. In spite of diversity and vast geographical distances, we see that Indian myths and symbols, traditions of learning and thought, beliefs and rituals, aesthetic patterns and parameters are evidence of a shared past. Shared mythology, rituals, folk traditions and ethos of different linguistic cultures of a pluralistic society make up Indian composite culture. Take for example the ancient epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Music, dance, drama, sculpture, painting - both in classical and folk traditions of different parts of the country - have borrowed from them. The *Ramayana* of Kamban (Tamil); Bhaskar (Telugu); Pampa (Kannada); Ezhuthachan (Malayalam); Moropant (Marathi);

Krittivas (Bangla); Madhav Kandali (Assamese); Saraladas and Balaramadas (Odiya); Tulsidas (*Ramacharitmanas*, Hindi) are a few of the widespread tradition of writing the Rama legend. Adaptation of tales from *Mahabharata* and *Shrimada Bhagawat Puran* have a similar tradition. Oral tradition of singing these epics is equally widespread.

Shakespeare's plays and Fitzgerald's 'Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam' were translated into many Indian languages. In those days many Indians knew Persian yet Khayyam was translated through English. The interesting thing was that though they were working far from each other in their respective languages, their interpretations and use of terminology has a lot of similarities.

Glancing at literary movements in different Indian languages, we find that the Bhakti Movement, originating in South India, became a country-wide phenomenon. It was a doing away of social constructs like rich/poor, high/low, king/subjects. Bhakti became a means of emancipation of the human soul. Shaiva and Vaishnava devotees drew from the best of Epic and Purana tradition. The ideas of Lord Buddha also permeated the spirit of Bhakti literature with non-violence, compassion and a deep faith in humanism. Sufi saints from the Middle East came to India; their poets assumed the mantle of social reformers; the movement spread in cross sections of society involving poets, musicians and singers, sculptors and painters countrywide.

Modern Indian literature represents the spirit of renaissance and desire for freedom. This led to the search for one's identity as an Indian, forgetting one's creed or region. This concept of Indianness can be best understood through classical and folk traditions of Indian dance and music. An artiste may perform in any language or 'shaili' (style). We can appreciate and enjoy it because it appeals to our sensibility with its familiarity. We find the terminology, symbols, the musical notes familiar as Indian classical and folk forms are not absolutely different from each other like high-brow and common people's arts; rather they are fed and watered from each other. Therefore in spite of the intensity of their local flavour, we can associate with them as something close to us.

### Activity 3

Enumerate the similarities in the writing that come under the term 'Indian Literature'.

### 3.5.2 Modern Indian Languages (MILs)

With the exception of Tamil (regarded to be an ancient language like Sanskrit) and Urdu (believed to have emerged in the 15<sup>th</sup> century though some people think it emerged in 13<sup>th</sup> -14<sup>th</sup> century with the writings of Baba Farid, Abdul Hamid Nagori and Amir Khusro), MILs started becoming visible during 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.

*Charyapada*, the early writings of Bangla were written in 10<sup>th</sup> -12<sup>th</sup> century; Hem Saraswati's *Prahlad Charit*, *Har-Gauri Samvad* and other early works of Assamese are of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The father of Odiya literature, Saraladas belonged to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Punjabi and Hindi writing started in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Shalibhadra Bharateshwar's writings in Gujarati and Marathi literature are of the 12<sup>th</sup> century. *Kavirajmarg* in Kannada dates back to the 9<sup>th</sup> century. The first literary work of Malayalam, *Ramcharit* is regarded to have been written in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

In spite of having originated from different linguistic families, MILs have a vital commonality of literary heritage - the Sanskrit tradition of knowledge, mythology and literature; Valmiki, Vyas, Kalidas, Bhavabhooti, Jayadev or Pali and Prakrit

works of Buddhist and Jain writers. In the area of aesthetics also, the *Natyashastra*, *Dhvanyaloka*, *Kavyaprakash*, *Sahitya Darpan*, *Rasa Gangadhar* have influenced both MIL creative writing and critical appreciation.

Most of the MILs have undergone four phases of development—ancient (till the 15<sup>th</sup> century), pre-medieval (till the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the last days of the Mughal Empire), later medieval (till the establishment of British rule), and the modern.

### 3.5.3 Socio-Cultural Conditions

In spite of different political conditions and their individual unique culture, the different regions of the country had many points of contact. Jainism and Buddhism spread in various parts of the land. Buddhism's sects coalesced with Shaiva and Shakta sects, leading to the development and spread of Nath Sampradaya. Siddha, Nath and Shaiva saints chose poetry as their medium of expression. Later came the Nirguniya saints after whom Sufi saints from the Middle East also had an impact on many parts of the country specially in the north, west and till Bijapur and Golconda in the south. The Vaishnava Bhakti movement led to the spread of Rama and Krishna Bhakti in various parts of the country. Nada Aradhana is a uniquely Indian way of devotion. Singing and music is not limited to Vaishnavism only; it can be seen in different sects and cults spread countrywide. The blend of poetry with music created a melody that has enchanted the hearts of the people for hundreds of years.

After the establishment of Muslim rule, many elements of Iranian civilization and culture permeated Indian life, leading to the development of grandeur, luxury, embellishment, spectacle as part of a newly evolved urban or court culture which became synonymous with opulence. After the arrival of Christian missionaries and Western traders and the establishment of British rule, contact with Western education and culture resulted in country-wide exposure to Western knowledge.

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## 3.6 PERIODISATION

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### 3.6.1 Ancient (Vedic Era-600 A.D.)

Sanskrit literature has been classified as Vaidik and Laukik literature. Vaidik literature includes *Veda-Vedanga* i.e. the four Vedas - *Rigveda*, *Yujurveda*, *Samaveda*, *Atharvaveda* - and *Vedanga* (anga or limbs i.e. a class of literature auxiliary to understanding the Vedas). There are six such limbs or subjects - *Shiksha* (phonetics), *Nirukta* (etymology), *Vyakarana* (grammar) *Chhanda* (metrics), *Jyotish* (astronomy) and *Kalpa* (ritual).

Each *Veda* contains four sections: *Sanhita* (hymns), *Brahmanas* (prose treatise discussing the significance of rituals), *Aranyakas* and *Upanishadas*, dating from 200 to 2500 BC. Before being written down, they were preserved in amazing feats of memory for over 2000 years (chanted and passed on from generation to generation).

After Vedic literature we have *Itihasa*, the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Laukik literature starts with *Ramayana*; Valmiki is regarded as the first poet (adikavi). Later epics are Ashwaghosh's *Buddha Charita*, Kalidas' *Kumarsambhava* and *Rahguvansha*. The drama tradition has plays of Bhas, Kalidas.

Sanskrit has a rich tradition of narratives going back to the *Sanhita*, *Aranyakas*, *Brahmana-grantha*. Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha* is a compilation of various cycles of popular stories knit together in delightful harmony. Another form of narrative is

story telling through fables and tales, a unique example of which is *Panchatantra*. Jainism and Buddhism also have an abundance of didactic stories. *Purana* (old narrative) is a separate genre in which mythological and legendary lore was compiled, the root of which goes back to the Vedic period. They are 18 in number and supposed to have been compiled between 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

Tamil Sangam literature dates back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. It has: (a) 8 anthologies (b) a set of long poems (c) a set of 18 works. Thiruvalluvars' only work, the famous classic, *Tirukkural*, belongs to the third set and is an extraordinary expression of human thought. It was possibly written somewhere between the beginning of the Christian era and the beginning of the second century ie. towards the end of the Sangam period. Another ancient work *Tolkappiyam* is regarded as the earliest ancient grammar in Tamil. Interestingly it clubs together a treatise on grammar with prosody and essays on love poetry. It is also significant to study its linkage with works in Prakrit and Sanskrit especially with the work of Panini, the *Natyashastra*, the Jain concept of Vangamaya and Kautilya's *Arthashastra*. *Silappadikaram* by Jain author Ilango Adigal and *Manimekalai* by Buddhist poet Sîthalai Sâttanâr are considered to be twin epics in the sense that they together expound the four values and objectives of life - virtue, wealth, love and salvation.

Gautam Buddha's preachings were compiled under the title *Tipitaka* (*Suttapitaka*, *Vinayapitaka*, *Abhidhammapitaka*) in Pali. *Tipitaka* and Pali reached countries in east and south-east Asia where they were transliterated into those scripts or translated. Other important works in Pali are *Milindapanho* (question-answers between king Milind - Greek king Menander - and monk Nagsen) and *Attakatha* (*Arthakatha*) of *Tipitak*.

Prakrit literature comprises Jain literature as well as other important creative works. Prakrit being the language of the common people, its literature is an important source of socio-cultural history. Beginning from 100 BC, writing in Prakrit continued till after the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Many Prakrit texts are of great literary value. *Ravanavaho* written in Maharashtri Prakrit is one such example. It was translated into Sanskrit under the title *Setubandha*. Sanskrit playwrights also used Prakrit in their Sanskrit plays for the dialogues of women and common people.

### 3.6.2 Medieval (600-1800 AD)

The period between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 11<sup>th</sup> centuries has been called the Apabhramsha period, a term initially used by Patanjali for corrupt or sub-standard form of word or speech. Eventually it was used for language that served as a bridge between Prakrit and MILs. Today linguists believe that like the literary Prakrit, literary Apabhramsha was prevalent almost all over India as a language of verse. Jain and Buddhist writers also adopted it because of its mass appeal. Yet in spite of its popularity, Sanskrit was the widely accepted pan Indian language because with time, the differences in the local dialects grew greater. Harsha, Shoodraka, Vishakhadatta, Bana, Bhavabhooti are the great Sanskrit writers of this period.

Medieval India inherited a vast literature. The ideas and images contained in Vedic and Upanishadic literature pervaded later works of literature and the constant sense of infinite, the cosmic spiritual experience expressed through images taken from the psychic plane is an integral part of creative literature and fine arts. Another unique character of this is to image the 'terrestrial life often magnified' as in the two epics, which provided links between past and present, ancient and medieval worlds.

*Purana* also had a role in moulding the mental landscape of medieval Indian literature. To quote Prof. Sisir Kumar Das, “The two epics, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* and the *Puranas* helped towards the growth of a perception of a unified India despite its political disunity. The medieval India inherited the idea of a sacred geography characterized by holy rivers and mountains and cities...The places recognized by Buddhism and Jainism also became the part of this cultural geography...The interpenetration of two geographies, the mythical and the real, the imaginary and the factual is a very important feature of medieval Indian literature.”

### **The Bhakti Movement:**

The greatest literary achievement of medieval India is the bhakti poetry by saint-poets, successive generations of whom continued for several centuries. It emerged and grew in Tamil Nadu between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> century. Through their hymns in Tamil, minstrel-saints - Nayanmars, the devotees of Shiva and Alvars, the devotees of Vishnu (identified with Rama and Krishna in their incarnations) - taught the people an attractive, practicable way of worshipping a personal God, the repository of all good qualities. With the message of love and the need to set a wonderful personal example of selfless ecstatic devotion, they attracted the masses to the Bhakti movement. Most of these saints were poets as well as musicians and their songs were rhythmical as they chanted from temple to temple followed by a large concourse of people. Great works of saint-poets are *Tevaram*, an anthology of poems by Shaiva poets and *Nalayira Divya Prabandham* by the Alvars. *Shrimat Bhagawat*, one of the *Puranas* is also believed to have been composed in southern India.

The significant thing about the Bhakti movement is that it developed as a movement of emancipation from all social bondage of class, caste, the feudal system and so on. Women-saints also received due respect. Bhakti reformed and democratized the society in the real sense of the term. Gradually it spread to other parts of the country and infused various Indian languages. Saints travelling to the south brought back some hymns of Alvars and Nayanmars with them; between 12<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century, Bhakti became the main voice of Indian poetry. In northern India, in addition to Shaivism and Vaishnavism, Bhakti acquired some more streams according to the socio-cultural situations of different regions. Natha-Siddha poets of the Gorakhanath-founded Nath cult were tantric yogis spread from Bengal to Punjab and till Maharashtra and Andhra. Buddhist Sahajiya mendicants' poetry and Charyapadas also intermingled with them. Other ascetics like Jnandev and Namdev of Maharashtra, Nirguniya saints Kabir, Raidas, Nanakdeva (whose preachings later on became the basis of Sikhism) of central India, Sufi poets Malik Muhammad Jayasi, Kutuban or Sufi mystics of Sindh - Sheikh Usman Qalandar, Qazi Qadan and many others of different regions added multifarious dimensions to the Bhakti movement. But the core emphasis on self-less love of the Supreme Being and fellow creatures continued to be maintained.

The spiritual element of ecstasy in union with the Supreme depicted through Radha-Krishna's erotic love eventually faded into worldly eroticism. In the name of Radha-Krishna, court poets depicted the erotic activities of their masters as gods in order to please them.

#### **Activity 4**

Make a chart and list the writers along with their work and period. Can you find more names not included here?

### 3.6.3 Modern (Pre-Independence Era 1800-1947)

The lines of development of modern literature have been similar in all Indian languages. Pre-independence literature has more or less four phases—

- 1) New awakening
- 2) Desire for reform and freedom
- 3) Blossoming of romantic aesthetic sense.
- 4) Rise of progressive communist socialism.

The beginning of modern sensibility manifested in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century i.e. around the Indian people's first struggle for freedom in 1857, but there had been a few developments in 1800 which contributed to the formation of this sensibility. It was in this year that the Fort William College was established in Calcutta; serious experiments with prose were started and the potentiality of prose as a vehicle of literary and intellectual expression was realized. The Serampore Mission Press was established that year for publication of the Bible in various Indian languages. This led the country into a new era of communication. The work of manuscript preparation was gradually replaced by technology. This provided greater freedom and self-respect to the author compared to the previous era of royal patronage. With the introduction of English in Education and establishment of Universities, the Indian mind grew aware of Western knowledge in modern science and technology, which made them conscious of the condition of their own people. The educated Indian middle class put its heart and soul in the struggle against all bondage - social, conventional and imperial.

Modern Indian writers represent this struggle and try to educate and reform the reader through a cultural awakening. Although devotional poetry and singing praises of patrons continued in 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, human conditions under imperial rule started becoming the subject of literature. Indian writers tried to look into the plight of common men and make them aware of the reasons of their misery. Ramalinga Swamikal, Subrahmanya Bharati (Tamil), Vireshlingam, Gurjad Apparao (Telugu), Kerala Varma, Raja Raja Varma (Malayalam), Keshavsuta (Marathi), Narmad (Gujarati), Bharatendu Harischandra, Maithilisharan Gupta, Makhnall Chaturvedi, Ramnaresh Tripathi (Hindi), Sir Atar Singh, Bhai Vir Singh and Purn Singh (Punjabi), Hali (Urdu), Anandarama Phukan, Kamalakant Bhattacharya and Hemkant Barua (Asamese), Fakir Mohan Senapati, Madhu Sudan, Radhanath (Oria), Madhusudan Dutt, Bankim Chand (Bangla) gave voice to a political, social, cultural renaissance.

Tagore's poetic vision was broader therefore his nationalism was founded basically on humanism and culture. Romanticism of modern Indian poetry in many languages was largely influenced by Tagore. Western romanticism did influence Indian writers but they were not blind followers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century romantic revival because they were aware of their own tradition of literature. Indian romanticism was an outcome of our own conditions which were absolutely different from the West that had experienced the French and Industrial Revolutions. The emergence of Gandhi on the Indian political scene, his concern for the poor farmer and craftsman and his path of civil resistance had a substantial impact upon contemporary Indian literature and continued decades after. Premchand (Hindi) gave voice to the plight of oppressed farmers, dalits and women.

By the third and fourth decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution was seen on the literature of all Indian languages. With the establishment of Progressive Writers Association in 1935, there was a move towards Marxism

and Communist ideology. Bharatidasan (Tamil), Shri Shri (Telugu), Akkitaam, N.V. Kurrupp (Malayalam), Krishnarava, Niranjan (Kannada), Sharad Muktibodh (Marathi), Maniyar (Gujarati), Subhas Mukhopadhyay, Manik Bandyopadhyay (Bangla), Amrita Pritam, Kartar Singh Duggal (Punjabi), Josh Malihabadi Ali Sardar Jafari (Urdu), Shiv Mangal Singh Suman, Narendra Sharma, Nagarjun, Yashpal (Hindi) gave voice to Communist socialism and people's revolution.

At the same time the trends of Freudian influence, intellectualism and modernism also found their way into Indian writing. Poetry replaced the passion of intellectual experiment, represented by Ageya in Hindi, Pritam Safir in Punjabi, Faiz Ahmed Faiz in Urdu.

### 3.6.4 Modern (Post- Independence Era 1947 Onwards)

Independence from the British in 1947 is one of the most important events in Indian history which has influenced literature in all Indian languages. The freedom achieved through the weapons of truth and non-violence was not merely a physical gain but also a spiritual emancipation and writers celebrated it through their songs of desire for people's well-being, hopes of dreams to be fulfilled. The expectations of an independent nation ruled by its own people could not be met in some measure due to various reasons. There was the background of WWII on the international scene, the holocaust, nuclear attack on Japan, the famine in Bengal and partition of the country, all of which shattered cherished human values and left indelible scars on the hearts of the people resulting in the loss of the old world of hope and faith, frustration, alienation, insecurity. Post-independence Indian literature is the literature of all these inner and outer sufferings, complexities and struggles; the literature of a shattering of dreams seen in 30s and 40s.

The young writers were disappointed by the development and progress of the Nehruvian era. Tension, depression, a sense of alienation was expressed in the poetry of Buddhdev Basu, Jivananad Das in Bangla, Agyey, Muktibodh Bharat Bhushan Agrawal in Hindi, Gopal Krishna Adiga, V.K.Gokak in Kannada, Umashankar Joshi in Gujarati, Dina Nath Nadim, Noor Muhammad Roshan in Kashmiri, Firaq Gorakhpuri, Kazi Saleem, Shaharyar in Urdu, Navakant Barua, Birendra Kumar Bhattacharya in Asamese, Kalicharan Panigrahi, Ramakant Rath in Oriya, N.B.Krishna Variar, M.Govindan in Malayalam, N.S. Chidambaram, Pavalara Ganapati Dasam in Tamil, Shishtala, Raman Reddi Varadarajeshwar Rao in Telugu, B.C.Mardhekar, Sharad Muktibodh in Marathi, Amrita Pritam, Guru Charan Rampuri in Punjabi, Govardhan Mahabubani, Motilal Jotvani in Sindhi.

Poetic Movements like Nai Kavita, Nutan Kavita, Vachan Kavita, Abhyudaya Kavita after the 1950s emerged as a revolt against idealism, individualism, romanticism. Economic and social disparity, deterioration of socio-cultural values in independent India resulted in a sense of frustration expressed through irony, sarcasm, satire, mockery. The content and form of the previous generation was rejected by poetry groups like 'Bhookhi Pidhi' in Bangla or Akavita in Hindi in the 1960s.

The agony and disillusionment found very intense and predominant expression in fiction. The pain of partition-displacement, corruption and the struggle to get rid of it, rupture of family bonds, tension in man-woman relations, villagers feeling cheated in the name of development and Five Year Plans, inhuman life-conditions as the outcome of urbanization and industrialization are featured in post-independence Indian fiction.

### Activity 5

List the elements that pervade modern Indian writing.

### Dalit Literature

One of the important post-independence trends is Dalit literature. Awareness about caste-based social injustice and attempts to abolish it was a part of modern Indian renaissance. Social reformers like Dr. Ambedkar, Narayana Guru, Jyoti Ba Phule initiated the struggle which became a socio-political and literary movement in the 1960s with writers like Daya Pawar, Sharan Kumar Limbale, Namdev Dhasal and magazines like *Kala Suraj*, *Mukti Nayaka*, *Naya Marg*, *Panther*. Gradually Dalit sahitya became an indispensable instrument in all Indian languages to seek social justice.

### Feminist Literature

Feminist discourse is another predominant trend in modern Indian literature. Women have been contributing to literature and culture since ancient times in India yet their independent identity or their central space in the literary work is a post-independence phenomenon. Women played an active role on the social, political, economic, cultural and literary fronts during the freedom struggle; women's issues were a part of social awakening and reform. After independence, feminism emerged as a powerful movement, deeply influenced by Western feminist literary theories. The worship of women has been as much condemned as the insult and atrocities inflicted upon them as feminists view both as patriarchal ways to control and suppress women. Rajam Krishnan, Sivakami, Anuradha Ramanan, Indumati in Tamil, Olga (P.Lalita Kumari) in Telugu, Lalithambika Antherjanam, Madhavi Kutty (Kamala Das), Gracy, Sarah Joseph, P.Vatsala, Sugat Kumari in Malayalam, Rajalaxmi N. Rao, N.V. Bhagyalakshmi, Vaidehi in Kannada, Shanta Gokhale, Kavita Mahajan, Usha Mehta, Urmila Pawar, Pradnya Lokhande in Marathi, Sarojini Sahu in Oriya, Mridula Garg, Chitra Mudgal, Maitrayi Pushpa in Hindi are a few of the names that have spoken against patriarchy. Some of them like Sivakami, Urmila Pawar, Pradnya Lokhande are also writers of the dalit voice.

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## 3.7 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we traced the development of Indian languages and their corresponding literature. We have seen how various movements impacted and led both languages and literature to evolve in specific ways. We discussed the linguistic plurality of India – Sanskrit and Tamil along with people's languages Pali, Prakrit and Apabhramsha and later Modern Indian languages. We saw that the emergence and development of MILs as languages of literary expression is also a shared experience, becoming the basis for the concept of Indian literature. We also looked at how colonialism affected the literature being written in India and how, with the advent of English, there was a change in sensibility and expression.

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## 3.8 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) Why is Sanskrit regarded as the mother of most Indian languages?
- 2) Trace the development of the Bhakti movement.
- 3) What are the differences between pre and post-Independence literature in India?
- 4) How did the socio-cultural conditions affect writing in India?

- 5) What is the significance of Dalit literature?
- 6) Why is feminist writing an important genre?

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### 3.9 REFERENCES AND SUGGESTED READING

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## UNIT 4 READINGS AND INTERPRETATION

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### Structure

- 4.0 Objectives
- 4.1 Introduction
- 4.2 The Bhakti Movement
- 4.3 Lal Ded
- 4.4 Meera Bai
- 4.5 Akka Mahadevi
- 4.6 Bulleh Shah
- 4.7 Sant Tukaram
- 4.8 Kabir
- 4.9 Let Us Sum Up
- 4.10 Unit End Questions
- 4.11 References and Suggested Reading

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### 4.0 OBJECTIVES

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This unit will introduce you to and familiarize you with the Bhakti Movement and the poets most known to be associated with it. A short introduction to each poet and the special features of their literary output followed by an in-depth analysis of some of his/her verses will help you to place their work in the proper perspective and understand the nuances of their poetry. By also reading about the lives of these poets, we will see how their personal experiences affected their thoughts and philosophical expression.

By the time you finish reading the unit you will have a comprehensive idea of the Bhakti Movement, some of its principal figures, familiarity with a selection of their work and be able to compare their writing to find similarities and differences.

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### 4.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this Unit you will be introduced to one of the most productive literary movements in India known as the Bhakti Movement. You will have the opportunity of reading and understanding the verses of some of the most secular poets, both female and male such as Lal Ded, Meera Bai, Akka Mahadevi, Bulleh Shah, Sant Tukaram and Kabir. The pan Indian quality of the movement erases all boundaries and points to the essential secular fabric of Indian society.

The humanist qualities of these poets universalizes them, making for a deeper understanding of the relationship between God and Man, Man and God, and our fellow human beings. By rejecting all constraints of caste, class and gender, they have immortalized themselves.

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### 4.2 THE BHAKTI MOVEMENT

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An important landmark in the cultural history of medieval India was the Bhakti Movement. The singing of Kirtan at a temple, the Qawaali at a Dargah, and the

singing of Gurbani at a Gurdwara are all derived from the Bhakti movement of medieval India (800-1700). The leader of this Hindu revivalist movement was a distinguished philosopher – Sankaracharya – and it was carried forth by Chaitanya Mahaprabhu, Namadeva, Tukaram and Jayadeva. The movement's major achievement was its abolition of idol worship.

The Bhakti movement originated in seventh-century Tamil Nadu and spread northwards through Karnataka and Maharashtra. By the fifteenth century, it was fully established in Bengal and northern India. In the vanguard were poet-saints who eschewed the Sanskrit language and rituals of Brahmin priests in favour of emotive devotional songs expressed in regional bhashas. While the southern movement favoured devotion to Shiva, Vishnu and his avatars, the northern devotional movement was centered on Rama and Krishna, both of whom are believed to be incarnations of Vishnu. Despite this, the sects of Shiva or of Vishnu did not go into decline. In fact, for all of its history, the Bhakti movement co-existed peacefully with the other movements in Hinduism. It was initially considered unorthodox, as it rebelled against caste distinctions and disregarded Brahmanic rituals, which according to Bhakti saints were not necessary for salvation. Women and members of the Shudra and untouchable communities were included rather than excluded.

In no other period of Indian history does one find so many saints and poets speaking different languages, practicing divergent rituals, belonging to different religious orders and yet behaving almost in an identical manner in their approach to God. The dominating note is that of ecstasy, a longing of the devotee for union with God and to merge his identity in the Godhead. Sisir Kumar Das speaks of the "mad Lover" who replaces the calm and restraint of sages sitting immovable in meditation far away from common humanity.

The epithet "mad" is not as Sisir Kumar Das points out, "a pejorative one". Siva is personified as a mad God, and the biographers of Chaitanya recorded his ecstasies and trances. Malayalam poet Ezhuttachalam, was often called kallukudiyam (a drunken man) and the Sindhi poet Sachal was called sarmast (the intoxicated one). Even Kabir, the most restrained of the Bhakti poets could not escape the frenzy of divine love. Included in the Granth Sahib are these lines of Kabir:

I am not skilled in book knowledge nor do I understand controversy  
I have grown mad reciting and hearing God's praises.  
O Father, I am mad; the whole world is sane; I am mad;  
I am ruined; let not others be ruined likewise;  
I am not grown of mine own will; God hath made me mad -

The Bhakti movement was of the common people; growing out of the need of the emotional requirement of the common people who found themselves bound in ritualistic chains set down by Brahmanical religious autocracy. Using song and dance and poetic expressions to revolt against established religious customs and social conventions, the bhakti poets celebrated the discovery of the beauty and power of the language of the people. Freed from elitist linguistic structures which imaged God in a complex and abstract reality, these poets sing of a God close to their heart. God as child, friend and most often as lover becomes a common feature.

The leader of the bhakti movement focusing on the Lord as Rama was Ramananda. Very little is known about him, but he is believed to have lived in the first half of the 15th century. He taught that Lord Rama is the supreme Lord, and that salvation

could be attained only through love for and devotion to him, and through the repetition of his sacred name.

Chaitanya Mahaprabhu was an ascetic Hindu monk and social reformer in 16th century Bengal. He worshipped the Lord in the form of Krishna.

Sri Ramanuja Acharya was an Indian philosopher who raised his voice against the increasing formalism of the orthodox cult and founded a new school of Vaishnavism based on the gospel of love and devotion.

Followers of Bhakti movement in 12th and 13th Century included saints such as Bhagat Namdev, and Saint Kabir Das, who insisted on the devotional singing of praises of lord through their own compositions.

Guru Nanak, the first Sikh Guru and founder of Sikhism, too was a Nirguna Bhakti Saint and social reformer. He was opposed to all distinctions of caste as well as religious rivalries and rituals. He preached the unity of God and condemned formalism and ritualism of both Islam and Hinduism. Guru Nanak's gospel was for all men and he proclaimed their equality in all respects.

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries continued to witness the rise of many religious reformers. The exponent of the Rama cult and the Krishna cult among the Vaishnavas branched off into a number of sects and creeds. The leading light of the Rama cult was saint-poet Tulsidas who was a very great scholar and had made a profound study of Indian philosophy and literature. His great poem, *Ramacharitamanasa*, popularly called Tulsi-krita *Ramayana* is very popular among the Hindu devotees. He set before the people the image of Sri Rama as all virtuous, all powerful, the Lord of the World, and the very embodiment of the Supreme Reality (Parabrahma).

The followers of the Krishna cult founded the Radha Ballabhi sect under Hari Vamsa in 1585 A.D. Sur Das wrote *Sursagar* in Brajhasha, which is full of verses describing the charm of Lord Krishna and his beloved Radha.

The Bhakti movement was a Hindu religious movement that was closely related to Islamic Sufism of the medieval period which promoted the idea that salvation was attainable by everyone. Both appeared around the same time, both advocated that a personal expression of devotion is the way to become one with God.

Sufi, Wali, Darvesh and Faqir are terms used for Muslim saints who attempted to achieve a relationship with God through ascetic exercises, contemplation, renunciation and self-denial. In the 12th century A.D., Sufism had spread the universal message that all could attain salvation.

### Activity 1

Make a list of the main figures of the Bhakti Movement, the regions they came from and the language in which they wrote.

The Sufi saints, transcending all religious and communal distinctions, worked for promoting the interest of humanity at large. The Sufis were a class of philosophers remarkable for their religious catholicity. Sufis regarded God as the supreme beauty and believed that one must admire it, take delight in His thought and concentrate attention on Him only. They believed that God is 'Mashuq' and Sufis are the 'Ashiqs'.

Sufism took root in both rural and urban areas and exercised a deep social, political and cultural influence on the masses. To a world torn by strife and conflict they tried to bring peace and harmony. The most important contribution of Sufism is

that it helped to blunt the edge of Hindu-Muslim prejudices by forging the feelings of solidarity and brotherhood.

### Activity 2

See if you can trace any sufi songs in Bollywood films. Listen to sufi songs rendered by Rabbi Shergill, or Abida Parveen, and see how the relationship of the devotee with God is expressed. Also see if you can locate a Sufi shrine somewhere near you and visit it for the experience.

## 4.3 LAL DED

We begin our study of some selected poets of that period with renowned Kashmiri poet Lalleshwari and three of her short poems or vakh as they are commonly known.

Lalla, also known as Lal Ded and Lalleshwari, was a fourteenth century mystic poet from Kashmir. Her verses, transmitted orally for centuries, have been an integral part of Kashmiri literature and culture. There are many legends about her life but it is her verses that reveal the trials and tribulations of a woman who had the courage to renounce her home and family and set out on a journey of self-realisation. Lalla's poems are called vakh and are considered to be among the earliest known manifestations of influences in Kashmiri literature. A total of 258 vakh attributed to Lalla have been circulating widely in Kashmiri popular culture since the mid-14th century to the present.

Her poetry is also a record of the emergence of Kashmiri as a modern language, from the Sanskrit-descended Apabhramsaprakrit which had been the common language of the region through the first millennium CE. Even after 600 years of a history full of political, social and economic upheavals in the region, the language has not undergone any major change. And so the vakh are as intelligible today as when they were originally composed.

The vakh reveal the diction and the terminology in vogue at that time and also reflect and represent a slice of the socio-cultural and political life of the period while the poetry allows us a glimpse into the personal life of Lal Ded, the saint-poetess.

The language of 14th century Kashmir as used in the vakh is of the Indo-Aryan sub-stock of languages spoken by the immigrants of that time who had crossed over to the Valley from the Northern range of mountains several thousand years earlier. Till the 14th century, or till Lal Ded's time, Kashmiris had borrowed and assimilated numerous words from Hindu, Shaiva and Buddhist religious vocabulary into their language, but had still retained the sentence-structure and sound system of proto-Kashmiri. The vocabulary keeps on changing but usually the sound-system and sentence-structure is not easily affected.

The word vakh, is used both as singular and plural, and is akin to vakya, 'sentence'. Translators have thus rendered it as 'saying', 'verse' and 'verse-teaching'.

### 1) I Was Passionate

I was passionate  
Filled with longing  
I searched far and wide.  
But the day

that the Truthful One  
found me,  
I was at home.

2) **A Thousand Times My Guru I Asked**

A thousand times my guru I asked  
How shall the nameless be defined  
I asked and asked but all in vain.  
The nameless unknown, it seems to me  
Is the source of the something we see.

3) **Day Will be Erased in Night.**

Day will be erased in night  
The ground's surface will extend outward  
The new moon will be swallowed  
in eclipse, and the mind in meditation will be completely absorbed  
By the void inside it. What clothes could be so beautiful, or more sacred?

**INTERPRETATION**

All three Vakh or verses are steeped in the poet's spiritual consciousness. A deep understanding of the soul's connection with the almighty, the atma with the param atma is intensely experienced and clearly defined. That the Seeker need not go wandering anywhere in search of God is expressed in the static nature of meditation as "home."

Self realization is discovered in vakh 2. When even the guru cannot answer the query relating to God... "A thousand times", finally the oneness of God is established in "the nameless one".

In vakh 3, meditation completely absorbs the mind, eclipsing all other thoughts. The universe convulses as the mind empties itself and makes way for a new state of being. The new clothes are symbolic of a significant transformation - of a oneness with the universe. All barriers will be removed, "the day will be erased in night". The mind's geography will be changed, "the ground's surface will extend outward," in a vast expansion of one's spiritual condition.

Lal Ded's sublime concept of a spiritual existence transcends the difficult material existence she herself has rejected.

**Activity 3**

Look for other Lal Ded's Vakh that you have not read in this section and try to interpret them in the light of what has been said. Can you think of any other poem(s) that resemble a vakh?

**4.4 MEERA BAI**

Meera Bai - another Hindu mystic poet and devotee of Krishna - was one of the most significant saints of the vaishnava bhakti movement. Some 1,300 *pad* (poems) commonly known as bhajans (sacred songs) are attributed to her. These are popular throughout India and have been translated and published worldwide. In the bhakti tradition they are in passionate praise of Lord Krishna. In most of her poems, she

describes her unconditional love for her Lord and promotes Krishna Bhakti as the ideal way of life because it helps us forget our desires.

Verifiable biographical information about Meerabai's life has long been a matter of scholarly debate. Priyadas's commentary in Nabhadas' Sri Bhaktammal in 1712 is considered to be the earliest account of her life. However, oral histories, songs and folk tales abound, which give an insight into the life and mind of this unique poet-saint.

Meera was born in 1498 A.D. in Kudki, a little village near Merta, Rajasthan to Ratan Singh, a descendant of Rao Rathor, the founder of Jodhpur. When she was only a toddler, a wandering mendicant is said to have come to her house and given a small statue of Krishna to her father. While her father considered it special, as a token of the Lord's blessing, he did not want to give it to Meera as he thought she was too young to grasp its significance. But he was proved wrong in his misgivings as Meera took an immediate, passionate liking to the statue and refused to eat till it was given to her. Gradually, the statue acquired the stature of a living presence which she then looked upon as a lifelong friend, lover, and husband. All the turbulences of her life never shook her or swayed her from this path of her youthful commitment.

Like Lal Ded, Meera Bai too escaped from an oppressive marriage to find an alternate existence steeped in spiritual ecstasy. Her poems are full of love and longing for her beloved Krishna. She is commonly believed to have been a disciple of Ravidas.

#### 1) **When Will You Come?**

I send letters to my Beloved,  
the dear Krishna.  
But He sends no message of reply.  
Purposely preserving silence.  
I sweep his path in readiness  
And gaze and gaze  
Till my eyes turn blood-shot  
I have no peace by night or day.  
My heart is fit to break.  
O my Master, you were my companion  
In former births.  
When will you come?

#### **INTERPRETATION**

Meera Bai's song "When Will You Come?" represents an impassioned soul's desire for union with the super soul...the godhead, Krishna. The restlessness of a constant craving for the Beloved is a life dedicated to the pursuit of bhakti. "...gaze and gaze ... a heart fit to break".

The letter writing signifies being in personal communion and images the personal connection between God and the devotee, the lover and the loved one. Meera Bai made Krishna her personal God thus allowing herself to convey many feelings and concerns which was otherwise not possible for her especially as a woman.

The "readiness" is perpetual, the silence is deliberate "purposely preserving silence." The devotee's total knowledge of the object of her devotion and the belief that this relationship is eternal gives her confidence, "O my Master, you were my companion in former births."

There is always the strong belief that He will come. The soft tone of “When will you come?” signifies this underlying trust and faith. The restlessness is stilled. The calm preceding the divine presence permeates the last line. A personal and intimate relationship is established.

God as beloved, the devotee in continuous dialogue with God, the sense of an intimate companionship, the eternal waiting signifying preparedness to receive, a never-ending longing and pining, and the constant reminder to oneself and the beloved of this immortal relationship are significant and common features of all Bhakti poetry - God is both personal as well as universal. The popularity of these poets among common people rests on this understanding.

## 2) **That Dark Dweller in Braj**

That dark dweller in Braj  
Is my only refuge  
O my companion,  
Worldly comfort is an illusion,  
As soon you get it, it goes.  
I have chosen the indestructible for my refuge  
Him whom the snake of death will devour.  
My Beloved dwells in my heart, I have actually seen the Abode of joy  
Meera’s Lord is Hari, the indestructible.  
My Lord, I have taken refuge with thee,  
Thy slave.

### **Interpretation**

The opening lines locate Krishna in Braj emphasizing his dark colour, “which will hide her from the world in its divine embrace removing all fear of the night and of the unknown.

Intimately she calls him “...my companion”. God takes on an equal position and the devotee’s passion merges together in a deathless relationship.

Material comforts are strongly rejected, and referred to as “an illusion”. They are perfunctory and impermanent. Since “The indestructible” is her beloved why would she seek comfort elsewhere? Meera Bai upholds her choice here as in many other poems where she rejects the constraints of family and marital bonds and stakes her claim to immortality in the embrace of Krishna.

The heart is the abode of God and of bliss and Joy. In that ecstatic state there is no sense of aloneness as the Lord “dwells in my heart.”

Again the ending note is of surrender - a soft acceptance of divine enslavement. The irony underlying the breaking away from material slavery is the slavery or devotion to spiritual service.

## 3) **Unbreakable, O Lord**

Unbreakable, O Lord,  
Is the love  
That binds me to You:  
Like a diamond,  
It breaks the hammer that strikes it.

My heart goes into You  
As the polish goes into the gold.  
As the lotus lives in its water,  
I live in You.  
Like the bird  
That gazes all night  
At the passing moon,  
I have lost myself dwelling in You.  
O my Beloved Return.

### INTERPRETATION

An eternal “unbreakable” bond of love between the worshipper and the worshipped is portrayed in a series of similes like the hard glittering quality of the diamond which breaks the hammer “which strikes it.”

A complete merging of the self makes for her an inseparable, inexpressible relationship with Krishna like “the polish in gold”, and “the lotus in water.” He lives in her and she lives in him in total reciprocation. The willing loss of identity is captured in the image of “the bird gazing all night at the passing moon” and the voice softens again even as it commands, “O my Beloved Return.”

Meera Bai’s deeply devotional songs that celebrate an understanding of God are also a defiant expression of a woman’s desire to find her own life. Lal Ded’s expression of passionate love for God as her beloved is similar to Meera Bai’s passionate relationship with Krishna. Both women reject worldly comforts and status as wives to establish their own separate identity. Their popularity among common people is a measure of their artistic development as poets as well as their empowering status as women. Both display similar traits of rebellion when they actively reject all familial bonds. Turning away from the mundane pursuit of happiness through domestic drudgery and humiliation, they find passion in poetic expression and social acceptance through a spiritually ecstatic life.

#### Activity 3

How does Meera Bai’s poetry echo the theme of rebellion?

## 4.5 AKKA MAHADEVI

Akka Mahadevi was born in Sivamogga in the twelfth century. Like Meera bai she too believed that she was betrothed to her personal god Chennamallikurjana, another name for Siva. Her failed marriage made her reject all human carnal love in preference to her mystical relationship with Siva. Revolting against all social conventions, she left her home and wandered naked like a “mad lover” seeking her lord.

Akka Mahadevi is also known for her rebellion against the social norms of the time. Her religious devotion began as a young girl when she became a Siva-worshipper. The form of Siva that she worshipped in his ascetic form was Chennamallikarjuna, translated as “the Lord, white as a jasmine” (Ramanujan 111). Her body covered only by her long hair, she began her journey in pursuit of spiritual union with Siva. She would wander to different towns and areas in her quest. Akka Mahadevi believed that she was already the wife of Siva and would not marry any other man. During the course of her journey Akka Mahadevi found herself in

Kalyana, which was a central city for Virasaivism at the time. She was, at this point, accepted into the group of saints after being questioned by the other saints (Blake-Michael 363).

Virasaivism was founded in the twelfth century in South India by a man named Basava (Basavanna). Virasaivism translates as “heroic Saivas.” They still flourish today and are known as Lingayats, “wearers of the Linga” (Olson 409). This group, which has been referred to as a protest movement, rejects many of the social constructs of the time period like the caste system and the marriage of children. They also allow widows to remarry and the dead are buried rather than cremated. They practice gender equality and therefore an equal access of salvation for everyone. With her protests and unconventional conduct and her association with Virasaivism, Akka Mahadevi became known as a rebellious woman but at the same time an important figure in the anti-Brahminical and anti-caste movement. Akka Mahadevi remained independent from male domination. Her spiritual quest was different than that of the married housewives of Virasaivism because she did not rely on guidance from any male figures; she only trusted in her devotion to Siva. According to traditional Virasaivism, one was to work and be self-reliant, and Akka Mahadevi represented a paragon of self-reliance (Ramaswamy 52). Her nakedness was seen as an ultimate defiance. As a result of the anti-Brahminical and anti-caste beliefs of Virasaivism, Akka Mahadevi became the symbol of the rebel and female saint.

Akka Mahadevi disagreed with the power of the Brahmins. As a rejection of the traditional roles of men and women, Akka Mahadevi strove to transcend her gender through her spiritual practices. As she described in her poetry, she is female in form, but is the male principle in essence:

Transcending the company of both,  
I have attained to peace.  
After forgetting this cluster of words, What if one lives  
An integral life?  
Once I am joined  
To Lord Cennamallikarjuna, I do not recognize myself as anything.

Remaining unmarried physically to a man resulted in society viewing her as ‘deviant’. Within Hindu society, unmarried women are largely viewed as temptations to men yet Akka Mahadevi believed that she was married to Siva and that he was her bridegroom. She also journeyed with no male escort.

The type of poetry that Akka Mahadevi composed was medieval bhakti (devotion) poetry called vacanas or sayings of the saints. Vacana is a lyric in Kannada written in free verse; the word literally means ‘saying’ or ‘things said’. Unlike the Sanskrit religious texts that are *shruti* (that which are received) and *smriti* (that which is remembered), the vacana is what is ‘said’, uttered here and now; it is an immediacy of experience, a way of being. Composed in colloquial Kannada, the vacanas reject traditional meters and genres in favour of free verse.

They are Bhakti poems, a personal expression of devotion to a particular form of God. The poet-saints not only reject the ‘great’ tradition of the vedas, they also reject the ‘smaller’ one of local gods and goddesses. They reject all traditional distinctions of caste, religion and gender. All true experience of god is emphasized as *kripa*, grace that cannot be demanded.

Akka Mahadevi's poetry consists of what can be interpreted as the three forms of love: love forbidden, love during separation, and love in union (Ramanujan 113). There is in her poetry like in most bhakti poetry, a constant search, a restless waiting, including others in the search, asking, querying, rejecting, expressing love, passion and final surrender.

Her poetry expresses her quest to find love and union with Siva, while wandering:

O swarm of bees O mango tree  
O moonlight  
O koyal bird  
I beg of you all  
one  
favour:  
If you should see my lord anywhere my lord white as jasmine  
call out  
and show him to me.

In her poetry Akka Mahadevi refers to Siva as "...my lord white as jasmine," or, as in the previous poem, "Lord Cennamallikarjuna". Through her poetry, Akka Mahadevi also expresses her emotions of being torn between being female and at the same time as being human. Her yearning is expressed by her desire to transcend the boundaries placed on her as female and human to achieve true union with Siva. As she states with reference to gender limitations:

As long as woman is woman, then  
A man defiles her;  
As long as man is man,  
A woman defiles him.  
When the mind's taint is gone, is there room for the body's taint?  
The entire world is mad  
Because of this adventitious taint  
Look you, good sir,  
For the great spouse  
Called Chenna Mallikarjuna, my Lord,  
The whole world is a wife.

Further study of Akka Mahadevi's poetry reveals her life story. One can follow Akka Mahadevi's life through her poetry with respect to her marriage to Siva. Her poetry begins with King Kausika, her rejection of the world and ends with her final union with Siva through whom she escapes the human world. Her final union with Siva is described in her vacana:

Hear me, O Father Linga:  
This feeling has become my life...  
Mark you, Cennamallikarjuna: Worshipping Thee with all my heart,  
My wheel of births has ceased!

Akka Mahadevi's metaphors of human love are expressions of her mystic journey. She is revered as the most poetic saint among the Virasaiva saints and many of her vacanas express her strong resistance to her situation as a woman, a mortal human being and a social being stuck with defined roles:

I love the Handsome One:  
He has no death  
decay nor form  
no place or side  
no end nor birthmarks,  
I love him O mother, Listen.  
I love the Beautiful One  
With no bond nor fear  
no clan no land  
no landmarks  
for his beauty.  
so my lord, white as a jasmine, is my husband.  
take these husbands who die,  
decay, and feed them  
to your kitchen fires!

### INTERPRETATION

In these vacanas she expresses her passionate love for Siva whose beatific persona is immortal. He is formless and beyond death or decay, with no physical identity. She expresses her realization of the oneness of god with herself. The relationship is simple, its expression is complex because at times he is formless and at times he is intimately her husband. This intimate connection of the devotee and the Godhead is seen as being married to divinity. For women-saint-poets, this could also protect them from social condemnation.

The plight of the widow also escapes them as the husband here is deathless in contrast to "...these husbands who die, decay."

"Kitchen fires" refer to the domestic drudgery of cooking, feeding and constant waiting on an insensitive man. There is contempt in the narrative voice as she consigns such mortal husbands to the funeral pyre. Obliquely it is a reminder of the consequent torture meted out to the widow.

#### Activity 4

Read the poems of the three poets just discussed and look for and make a list of the similarities and differences in their expression – the language, the imagery, the tone, the theme...

## 4.6 BULLEH SHAH

This saint-poet, whose real name was Abdullah Shah, was a Punjabi Muslim Sufi poet, a humanist and philosopher. Bulleh Shah is believed to have been born in 1680, in the small village of Uch, Bahawalpur, Punjab, now in Pakistan. His ancestors had migrated from Bukhara in modern Uzbekistan.

The verse form Bulleh Shah primarily used is called the Kafi, a style of Punjabi, Sindhi and Siraiki poetry used not only by the Sufis of Sindh and Punjab, but also by Sikh gurus. The kafi is traditionally a spiritual lyric; in Sindhi it was called a wai and was employed by both Sindhi and Punjabi Sufi poets. An indigenous form of poetry, the kafi was a musical composition with a marked rhyme scheme and a

refrain. Traditionally it was meant to be sung and its musicality is a characteristic feature.

Bulleh Shah's poetry and philosophy strongly criticizes the Islamic religious orthodoxy of his day. His era was marked by communal disharmony, during which he was a beacon of hope and peace for the citizens of Punjab. While Bulleh Shah maintained that violence was not the answer to violence, he also hailed Guru Tegh Bahadur as a ghazi (Islamic term for a religious warrior) and incurred the wrath of the fanatic Muslims at the time.

His poetry highlights his mystical spiritual voyage through the four stages of Sufism: Shariat (Path), Tariqat (Observance), Haqiqat (Truth) and Marfat (Union). The simplicity with which Bulleh Shah has been able to address the complex fundamental issues of life and humanity is a large part of his appeal. Thus, many people have put his kafis to music, from humble street-singers to renowned Sufi singers like the Waddali Brothers, Abida Parveen and Pathanay Khan, from the synthesized techno qawwali remixes to the rock band Junoon of UK-based Asian artists.

1) **Bulla ki Jaana.**

Bulleh! I Know, not, Who am I  
Not a believer inside the mosque, am I  
Nor a pagan disciple of false rites  
Not the pure amongst the impure  
Neither Moses, nor the Pharaoh  
Bulleh! I Know, not, Who am I  
Not in the holy Vedas, am I  
Nor in opium, neither in wine  
Not in the drunkard's craze  
Neither awake, nor in a sleeping daze  
Bulleh! I Know, not, Who am I  
In happiness nor in sorrow, am I  
Neither clean, nor a filthy mire  
Not from water, nor from earth  
Neither fire, nor from air, is my birth  
Bulleh! I Know, not, Who am I  
Not an Arab, nor Lahori  
Neither Hindi, nor Nagauri  
Hindu, Turk (Muslim), nor Peshawari  
Nor do I live in Nadaun  
Bulleh! I Know, not, Who am I  
Secrets of religion, I have not known  
From Adam and Eve, I am not born  
I am not the name I assume  
Not in stillness, nor on the move  
Bulleh! I Know, not, Who am I  
I am the first, I am the last  
None other, have I ever known  
I am the wisest of them all  
Bulleh! do I stand alone?

## INTERPRETATION

This popular song sets the tone of Bulleh Shah's philosophy of complete rejection of all institutions which bind people down and which create barriers and differences of caste, creed and religion.

The Mosque, the Jewish temple, the Vedic claims, the intoxication of wine as a means of spiritual search and experience, are of no meaning and use to Bulleh Shah's rebel spirit.

He questions the condition of being asleep or awake, of sorrow and happiness. It is the same plaintive cry of Tukaram's and of Lal Ded.

The constant refrain of "I know not who I am" subsumes the distinctions created and destroys the egotistic self as he surrenders himself to the knowledge of the oneness of God.

He details each distinction, defining his total un-acceptance of rituals, holy beliefs, institutions and individuals thus establishing his separateness from conventional modes of religious thoughts as propagated by those who claim to be its guardians.

This was the only way for the Bhakti poets to stand up to oppressive structures based on religious diktats.

Ultimately, in leaving behind all definitions and distinctions, the poet embraces the formless, eternal, oneness of God. Like Meera Bai and Lal Ded he too finds himself completely inseparable from God.

### 2) TERE ISHQ NACHAYE

Falling in love with you  
Was like taking a sip of poison  
Come my healer, forsaken, I am sad.  
Your love has made me dance like mad  
The sun has set, its flush only is left  
I'll give my life for a glimpse of you  
My fault I came not when you bade  
Your love has made me dance like mad  
Dissuade me not from the path of love  
Who can hold the boats on the move?  
Stupid, I joined the boatman's squad  
Your love has made me dance like mad  
A peacock calls in the grove of passion  
It's Qibla, It's Kaaba where lives my love  
You asked not once after you stabbed  
Your love has made me dance like mad  
Bulleh Shah Sits at Inayat's door  
Who has dressed me in green and red  
And caught me the instant I flew from the pad  
Your love has made me dance like mad

## INTERPRETATION

In this poem the poet expresses an ecstasy which is deeply rooted in his spiritual connection with the almighty. It takes hold of his persona and his physical self begins to dance to the tune of love.

Love for the Lord takes complete hold of him and he symbolizes a boat swaying in the waters. Meera bai too sings of wearing anklets and dancing madly drenched in her love for God.

The setting Sun signifies life coming to a close and the mounting desire to have a glimpse of God.

The reference to poison is an act of self destruction. This self destruction is necessary to break out of material attachments and to completely immerse oneself in the chosen path of love. It is transformative and therefore the irony of creating a new self.

The peacock and the poet are alike in their passionate dance. 'Stabbed' refers to pain and awakening out of stupor.

God is healer, creator, "who has dressed me in green and red". The free spirited flight of the bird is interrupted by the trap of love. Now he can only dance in abandon.

Such feelings are also expressed in the poems and songs of Lal Ded and Meera Bai. God is given a form only for an intimate personal connection. Otherwise He is formless, a manifestation of the devotee's love. He resides in the heart, causing both joy and sadness.

### Activity 5

See how Bulle Shah describes his relationship with God and write down the imagery that is used for the description.

## 4.7 SANT TUKARAM

Tukaram – a saint and spiritual poet during the Bhakti movement in India was born in Maharashtra. He was initiated without any intermediaries as the other saints usually were. He dreamt that he was initiated by the Lord Hari himself. He is commonly known in Maharashtra as Sant Tukaram while in south India he is known as Bhakta Tukaram.

This saint-poet continuously sang the praises of the Lord in the form of abhang, a popular form of devotional poetry in Marathi frequently set to music. While they are often sung by bhajan singers, they are also sung by classical singers both from the North and the South and it is not uncommon to hear an abhang in a classical concert.

The abhang was the favourite metre of all Varkari poets from the thirteenth century onwards and unlike classical Sanskrit-based metres, it is native to Marathi speech and its colloquial forms. It is extremely flexible. It consists of four lines and each line contains three to eight syllables. It has a fluid symmetry maintained by internal or end rhymes and often designed to be sung. It originates most probably in oral folk poetry. Poets such as Jnanadev, Namdeo and Tukaram have given it a classic status in Marathi poetry.

Tukaram's abhang express his feelings and philosophical outlook. During the 41 years of his life, Tukaram composed over 5,000 abhang. Many of them speak of events in his life, which make them somewhat autobiographical. Yet, they are focused on God, Pandurang, and not Tukaram. His abhang became very popular with the masses and it was this very popularity that caused the religious establishment (the high caste Brahmins) to hate and persecute Tukaram as he was causing them to lose their power over the people. When Tukaram was invited to an audience with the king Shivaji, he refused saying he had no reason to go; Shivaji himself then went to meet this great poet. Tukaram's total dedication to singing about God and taking his songs to the common people makes him one of the great bhakti poets of his times. Nearly 5000 such verses are part of the collective consciousness of the people of Maharashtra.

- 1) I was sleeping when Namdeo and Vitthal Stepped into my dream.  
 'Your job is to make poems. Stop wasting time,' Namdeo said.  
 Vitthal gave me the measure and gently aroused me from a dream inside a dream.  
 Namdeo vowed to write one billion poems.  
 'Tuka, all the unwritten ones are your responsibility.'
- 2) Words are the only Jewels I possess  
 Words are the only Clothes that I wear  
 Words are the only food that sustains my life  
 Words are the only wealth I distribute among people  
 Says Tuka Witness the Word He is God  
 I worship Him with my words
- 3) I am not starved for want of food, but it is Janardana who deserves my reverence.  
 I have looked on God as one who sees everything, on bright and dark days, alike.  
 God is like a father with his child,  
 who both feels and gives pleasure at the same time.  
 Good acts and bad acts vanish.  
 Tuka says, 'God's glory alone is left.'

## INTERPRETATION

- 1) God bids Tukaram to become a poet. He is consecrated only to sing of and for and about God.

It was a dream within a dream ... A vision in which Tukaram could and would sing only of God. That was his wish and within that desire lies the reason for his existence as a poet. "Gently" his spiritual consciousness is stirred by Namdeo and Vitthal. A billion poems are already sung, now all the unnamed numbers are Tukaram's 'responsibility'. It is endless, these songs of praise, filling an eternity. Tukaram will sing only hymns of praise henceforth.

## 2) INTERPRETATION

Directed by God to serve Him as a poet, Tukaram stakes claim to words as the only jewels that he owns. Words are his attire, and words alone are his sustenance. Words he says is all the wealth he has and the only thing that he can distribute among people! His songs of praise of the Lord are given away

to the people. These words alone are God, they belong to God, and they are the only means he has with which to worship his Lord.

### 3) INTERPRETATION

Hungering for the divine, Tukaram rejects any desire for food. He is only starved for a glimpse of the beatific face of God. Food signifies sustenance of the physical self which is not the goal for him. Only God whom he calls Janardana is the object of his worship.

God for him is omniscient. He sees equally the bright day and the dark night, meaning both happiness and sorrow. The fatherly figure of God balances all pain and pleasure, all good and bad. Only "God's Glory" is accounted for.

#### Activity 6

Attempt an interpretation of the following abhang:

This is why I have left my house and gone to the forest.

My love will be spoiled by the evil eye.

I will lose my love for Him.

I will not listen to this doctrine of unity.

Tuka says, 'This doctrine that God and I are one is false.

I will not let it interfere with me.'

## 4.8 KABIR

Kabir is one of the most well known poets in the history of Indian mysticism. Born in or near Benares, of Muslim parents, probably about the year 1440, he became in early life a disciple of the celebrated Hindu ascetic Ramananda. Ramananda had brought to Northern India the religious revival which Ramanuja, the great twelfth-century reformer of Brahmanism, had initiated in the South. This revival was in part a reaction against the increasing formalism of the orthodox cult, in part an assertion of the demands of the heart as against the intense intellectualism of the Vedanta philosophy, the exaggerated monism which that philosophy proclaimed. It took in Ramanuja's preaching, the form of an ardent personal devotion to the God Vishnu, as representing the personal aspect of Divine Nature.

Such devotion is indigenous in Hinduism, and finds expression in many passages of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Ramananda, through whom its spirit is said to have reached Kabir, appears to have been a man of wide religious culture, and full of missionary enthusiasm.

Living at the moment in which the impassioned poetry and deep philosophy of the great Persian mystics, Attar, Sadi, Jalalu'ddin Rumi, and Hafiz, were exercising a powerful influence on the religious thought of India, he dreamed of reconciling this intense and personal Mohammedan mysticism with the traditional theology of Brahmanism. Kabir was a hater of religious exclusivism, and sought above all things to initiate men into the liberty of being the children of God. His wonderful songs survive, the spontaneous expressions of his vision and his love; and it is by these, not by the didactic teachings associated with his name, that he makes his immortal appeal to the heart. In these poems a wide range of mystical emotion is brought into play: from the loftiest abstractions, the most other-worldly passion for the Infinite, to the most intimate and personal realization of God, expressed in

homely metaphors and religious symbols drawn indifferently from Hindu and Muslim belief. It is impossible to say of their author that he was Brahman or Sufi, Vedantist or Vaishnavite. He is, as he says himself, “at once the child of Allah and of Ram” (Underhill vii).

The doha is a rhyming couplet the meaning of which is complete in itself. Only the bare essence of a thought is expressed without elaboration, in an extremely succinct form. With a regular rhythm in its structure, doha was meant to be sung as well as spoken. The Abhirs who belonged to the Gandharva region used it extensively. The word Doha is supposed to have a Sanskrit derivation from words like dogdhaka, dvipadi, dvipathaka or dodhaka. Dohas have also been found written and cited in pali and prakriti which are older languages. They are quotations of worldly wisdom. In *Duhasuktavali* it is said that doha should be quoted where talented persons have gathered. The simplicity of its poetic form made it popular for describing spiritual states and experiences.

### **I Jab Main Bhûlâ, re Bhâî**

O brother! when I was forgetful, my true Guru showed me the Way.

Then I left off all rites and ceremonies, I bathed no more in the holy water:

Then I learned that it was I alone who was mad, and the whole world beside me was sane; and I had disturbed these wise people.

From that time forth I knew no more how to roll in the dust in obeisance:

I do not ring the temple bell:

I do not set the idol on its throne:

I do not worship the image with flowers.

It is not the austerities that mortify the flesh which are pleasing to the Lord,

When you leave off your clothes and kill your senses, you do not please the Lord:

The man who is kind and who practises righteousness, who remains passive amidst the affairs of the world, who considers all creatures on earth as his own self,

He attains the Immortal Being, the true God is ever with him.

Kabîr says: “He attains the true Name whose words are pure, and who is free from pride and conceit.”

### **INTERPRETATION**

The poem “jab main bhula re Bhai” echoes Bulleh Shah’s Bulleh Ki Jana Main Kaun. Here too Kabir openly declares his rebellion against rituals and idol worship. He places righteousness above all rituals claiming God is not inclined to be pleased by fasts and self inflicted physical hardships.

Only the heart that loves, and sees all with an equal eye attains the oneness with God which we all seek. Kabir says that only by freeing oneself from pride, arrogance and divisive thoughts can one acquire a calmness “amidst the affairs of the world.”

Only in that state of mind free from all worldly shackles can the pure of heart attain the divine name, becoming one with God. He attains the immortal Being - the 'True God is ever with him': it is a journey of self realization. It is for each one of us to make that simple journey to divest ourselves from all false rites and rituals and follow the path of humanity. 'I alone who was mad' signifies a deeply personal spiritual journey that cannot be understood by all while the poet revels in his madness and reviles the social system as "sane".

The brahmanical arrogance based on so called knowledge of the scriptures has to be actively rejected. From the moment he learned this from his guru, he turned away from a false life. No more ringing of temple bells, no more performing meaningless rituals with idols, no more punishing the body to please God, "no more rolling in the dust in abject prayer." God resides within us and we need to understand ourselves. We need to make our mind and heart an instrument of his compassion. We must be pure in word and deed.

#### Activity 7

Many interesting legends about these poets exist. Try to source as many of them as you can.

## 4.9 LET US SUM UP

The Bhakti movement was as important period in Indian history as there are cultural and sociological implications (apart from the spiritual significance) in what the many bhakti poets had to say in their writings. This unit looked at its pan Indian features, the inclusion of female poets, the socio-historical reasons for its popularity and the nature of its rebellion against constricting religious authoritarianism.

The works of a selection of poets like Lal Ded, Meera Bai, Mahadeviyakka, Sant Tukaram, Kabir and Bulleh Shah reveal the fermentation of ideas that swept over the society of that time. The writing of these poets is important and worthy of study not only for their thematic content but also the various linguistic and other poetic styles taken from the local languages.

Although hailing from different regions of the country, a comparative study shows a common thread of reinventing religiosity, the relationship between man and God, and the radical redefining of worship and divinity through exclusion of all divisive elements. Its essential communication was therefore, pan-Indian. We can further see how these poets even as they sing of their personal devotion to God are people-centric, inviting all categories of women and men to a simple philosophy of humane spiritual life.

Since these poets were not scholar poets and most often emerged from social and gender-based oppression, their language is of the people: simple, down to earth spoken language which communicated their philosophy of a formless, universal humane God who belonged to everybody. The bhakti poets expressed deep devotion and rejected openly all kinds of rituals and social discriminations like brahmanical dominance and a caste-ridden society

Bulleh Shah, Kabir and Tukaram all sang of God as one and humanity as the only way to worship the Almighty. In their poems they declared their philosophy of keeping away from mosques, temples, rituals and material things to embrace the One God. Intoxicated and ecstatic with love for God with whom they struck a deeply intimate personal relationship they also danced in abandon.

The movement is remarkable for the substantial presence and popularity of women poets who were also radical - Mahadeviyakka moved about naked in an act of denying and defying socially constructed taboos on women. Meera Bai cast off a luxurious life in pursuit of a creative, free, spiritually charged existence.

Their methods of worship, their expressions of passion and desire for God clearly rejected all carnal pleasure and all familial connections and spoke of the oneness of God through passionate devotional love for the Divine. They found acceptance for their songs in praise of God and their expressions of divine relationships appealed to the common man. By making poetic forms like the Vakh, Vacana, Bhajan, Kafi, Doha and Abhang the vehicle of expression, they were easily understood as these were familiar in local dialects and languages.

These poets radically shed their constricting caste and gender constructions to reject and refute religious authority and divisive rules to establish a religion of humanity. Theirs was a subversive rebellion against an inhuman social order through the introduction of an alternate social and spiritual space.

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## 4.10 UNIT END QUESTIONS

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- 1) List the features which mark the Bhakti Movement.
- 2) Explain the meaning of "I have actually seen the abode of Joy."
- 3) What is a Vakh? Is there a common theme(s) running through all of Lal Ded's vakh?
- 4) How did the women poets express their rebellion against societal oppression?
- 5) What is a doha? In what way does Kabir's poetry encapsulate the Hindu and Muslim traditions?
- 6) Name some sufi poets and discuss their recurrent themes.
- 7) Which personal God did Tukaram and Akka Mahadevi connect their devotion with? How did they express their devotion?
- 8) What is an abhang? Discuss the abhang of Tukaram from the viewpoint of imagery.
- 9) Comment on, "I only am Mad..."
- 10) Describe the special features of Vacana with appropriate examples.
- 11) Name a few salient features of the Bhakti Movement which you find being practiced today.
- 12) Which personal gods are popular in bhakti poetry? List their attributes.

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