

Lesson: Linkage between oral and literary traditions
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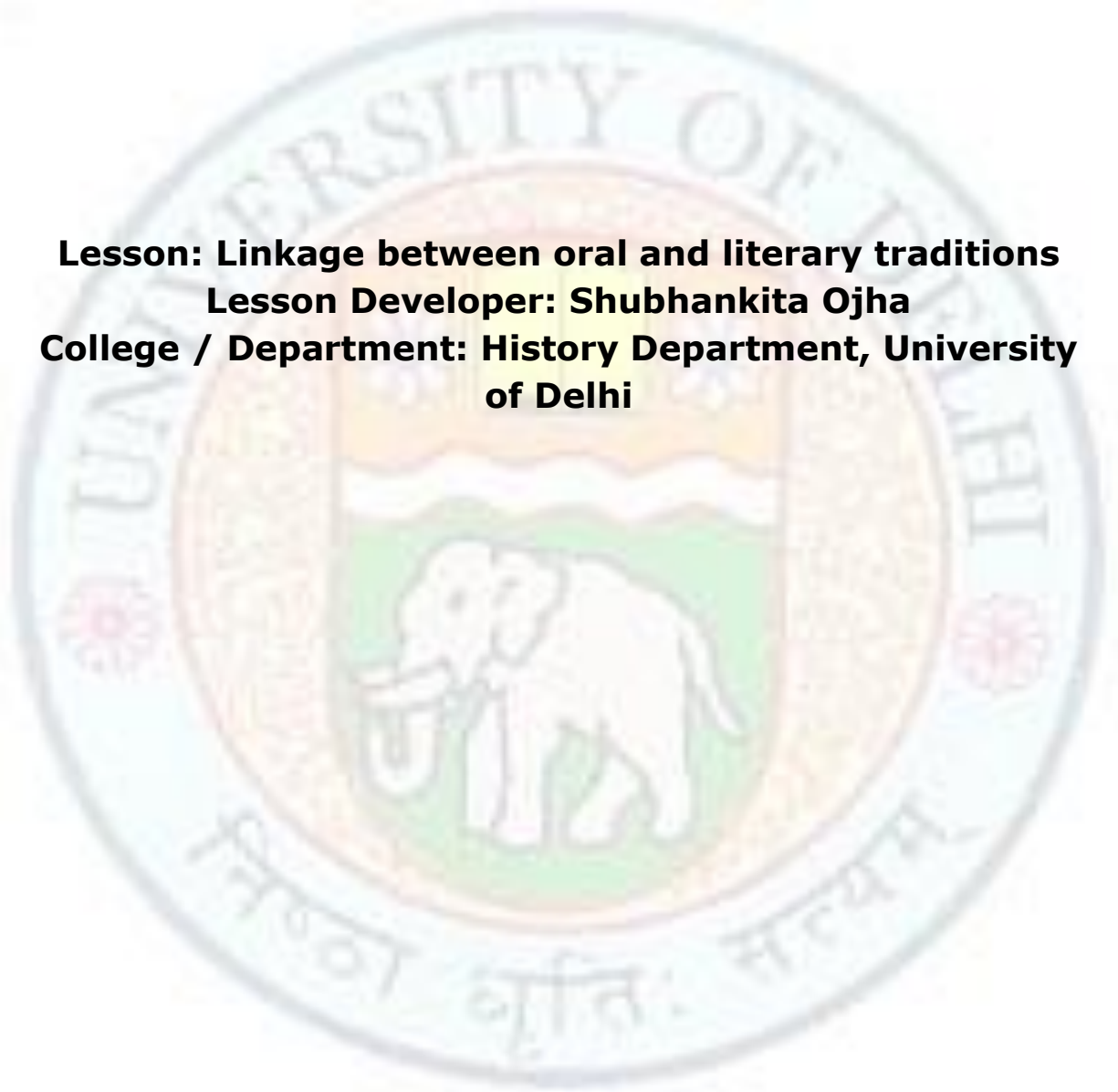


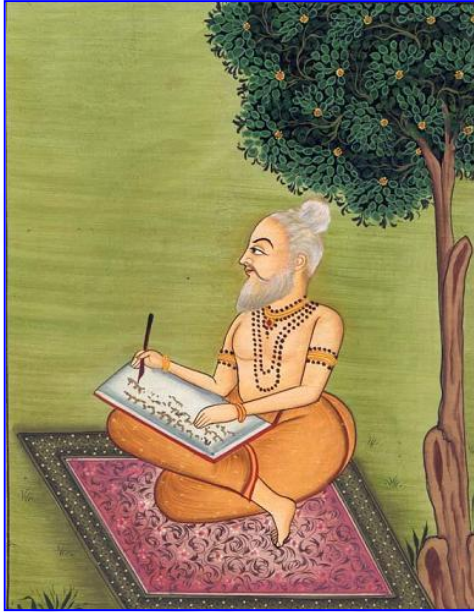
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5.3: Oral and Literary Traditions

In the Hindu tradition beginning with the Vedas, a huge corpus of literature contribute towards classical literature from which emerges a 'literate tradition'. While literary traditions are self explanatory, meaning traditions that emanate from a 'literate' culture, it is the 'oral traditions' that require some explanation. Apart from the literate tradition, there exist more popular forms of traditions. Sometimes the two are broadly and quite wrongly classified under categories of the 'Great Tradition' and the 'Lesser Tradition' and it is the scope of this chapter to enquire into linkages (if any) between the two.

One of the stalwarts in the study of Indian folklore was A.K.Ramanujan whose contribution to the study was to reconceptualise the debate about 'Great and Little Traditions'. This concept, as originally developed by Robert Redfield and applied to India by Milton Singer in the 1950s and 1960s, suggested that a great civilization, such as India, evolved from local folk roots in the process of civilization. The labels 'great' and 'little' had however a hierarchy bias towards written, brahmanical, Sanskrit traditions. Ramanujan moved beyond this dichotomy and developed a theory of Indian civilization as 'context sensitive', 'pluralistic' and reflexive. According to him, folklore is one of several systems, several languages or registers, that people use depending on the particulars of context and audience. These systems— Sanskrit, classical literature, bhakti, folklore— comment on each other, and cannot be understood independently of each other. Ramanujan thus found continuities as well as alternatives between folklore and classical traditions.



(Source: www.entelokam.com)



A recital of the oral epic of Pabuji in progress

(Source: www.india-forums.com)

5.3.1. Oral Tradition

While Vedic culture with its attendant penumbra of ritual, sacrifice and ceremony was clearly monopolized by the Brahmins, Pauranic culture opened doors to other modes of religious experience. Bhakti and yoga were given a new importance while vrats and the undertaking of pilgrimage became recognized forms of activity. This generated a considerable body of oral material which is indicative of the social mores of the time. Apart from this religio-mythical body of knowledge, oral communication also reflected itself in folklore and associated media such as ballads, proverbs, riddles, parables, superstitions and beliefs. Although educated in the Indian 'classics' like the Mahabharata, the Ramayana, the pauranic mythologies, Indians are also exposed to customs, tales and beliefs that may either conform or be quite contrary to what they find in the classics. Women tales for example, show how oral traditions provide a counter-system to many of the standards put in place by classical texts. While on the one hand the sanskritic classics, the two epics and the puranas are peopled with examples of chaste wives, pativratas, folktales mock the classic chastity test.

Interesting Detail



(Rama liberating Ahalya)

In the Sanskritic classics, any transgression of chastity is punished swiftly as in the case of Ramayana. Ahalya is seduced by Indra, who comes to her in the shape of her husband. Gautama comes home, discovers the erring couple, and curses Indra to lose his testicles. Ahalya, the erring wife, is cursed to wander bodiless or to become stone. Later Lord Rama liberates Ahalya.

In folktales however, for example the famous tale of the serpent lover this world of the chaste, devoted etc. turns upside down. This is a tale of Kamakshi whose husband went after a concubine. One day, an old woman

Source : http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ahalya_rama.jpg

gave her a love medicine to be mixed with the husband's food that would enslave him. Kamakshi mixed the potion with sweet porridge, but to her horror, the porridge turned blood red. Instead of giving it to her husband, she poured it into a snake hole behind her house. A snake, the cobra living in that

hole drank it and fell madly in love with her. It took the husband's form and went to Kamakshi night after night, and in a few days she was pregnant. When the snake came to know about it, he told her the entire truth. When the errant husband heard about it, he flew with rage. Kamakshi was called upon to speak the truth upon which she said she had done nothing wrong. In order to prove her chastity she said she could put her hand in the cobra's hole. If she had done any wrong, it may bite her and kill her. She put out her hand and took the cobra, who was none other than her lover. He hung around her neck like a garland, opened all his five hoods and swayed gently. The onlookers were awe-struck and saluted Kamakshi while the husband felt like a fool. Several months passed and Kamakshi gave birth to a divine looking son. The husband became very fond of the kid and forgot all about the concubine. In the happiness of regaining her husband, Kamakshi forgot the king of snakes. One night, he came to see how she was doing. He saw her lying next to her husband and child, happy and content. Unable to bear the change, he twisted himself into Kamakshi's tresses which hung down from the edge of the cot and hanged himself by them. Next morning Kamakshi discovered the carcass of the snake. Grief stricken she arranged for his funeral rites which were performed by the son. Kamakshi lived happily with her husband and son.

Source:

In the above folktale, the lover is never discovered, helps the wife get a son, helps bring the husband and wife together. He even dies in a fit of jealous rage over something that he himself had so nobly arranged for, while the wife gets everything. The chastity test resembles the classic case of Sita's *Agnipariksha* in *Ramayana* but while Sita comes through the ordeal because she is truly chaste, here the woman comes through the ordeal because she has a lover.

Those who are interested in India and its culture cannot afford to ignore oral traditions. One's sense of what is beautiful and poetic, of what is moral and right, and even one's most abstract sense of values are shaped in childhood by his/her verbal and non-verbal environments. Also, because India's active cultural world includes large numbers of women, children, tribal people, the underprivileged classes and those at the margins, no understanding of the country's inner lives can be discerned without careful attention to oral traditions expressed in the dialects of everyday life.

5.3.2. Worlds Apart

According to Susan Wadley, there exist differences between the oral and the written mainly due to their performance mode. Spoken language is notable for its “concreteness” and imageability, for its personal quality and emphasis on people and actions, as well as for its use of parallelism, paralinguistic features, and the lack of complex grammatical constructions, such as relative clauses. Written language is more compact, detached, and marked by formal cohesive devices and external evaluation.

J.D. Smith talks of how Rajasthani oral culture diverges from literate norms by citing an example of the *bhopos*, performers of the Pabuji, both competent and pious and engaged with Smith in the recording of the epic. Early in their performance they invoked various gods and *avatars*. But on being asked as to who these figures were avatars of, they were simply clueless. And when Smith himself suggested the name of Vishnu, it became evident that the name was not familiar to them. It may appear a little weird for the bhopos are the main performers of Pabuji and the legend has a context in classical literature as well where he has been seen as an avatara of Vishnu. The story of Pabuji has close resemblances to Ramayana as well. An ignorance of this context as well of the ‘Great Tradition’ itself suggests that oral and literate traditions diverge immensely from each other.

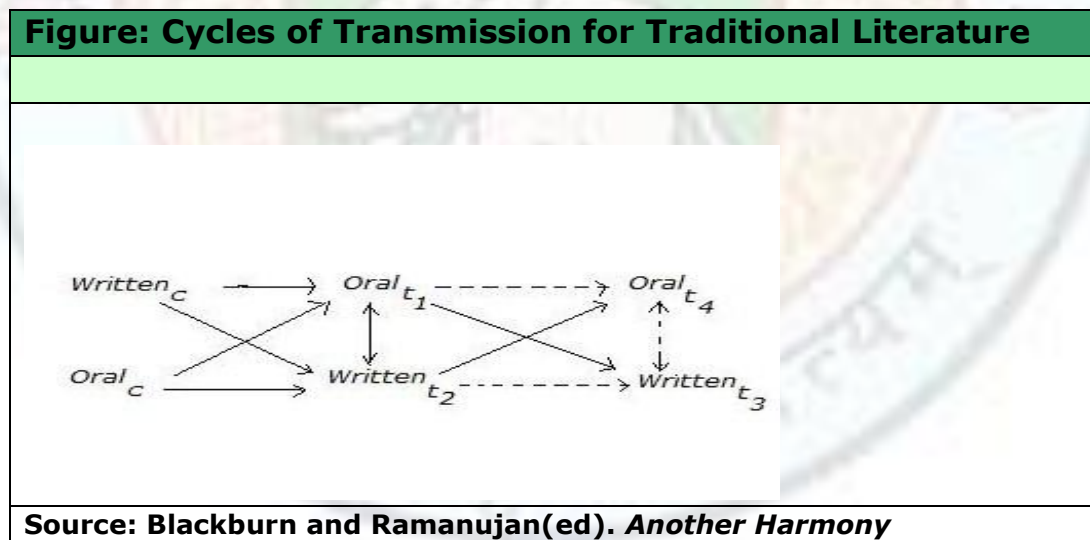
There is a similar account that Komal Kothari gives regarding the Langa musicians on the oral-literate divide. “In the 1950s, I used to transcribe songs dictated by a few Langa musicians living and working in the Jodhpur area. All of them were illiterate. Later, we thought that if they could join adult education classes they would be able to read and write, and this would make it easier for us to collect songs written by them. But this is not how it turned out. We found that when Lakha, one of our chief musicians, learned how to read and write, he needed to consult his diary before he could begin to sing any song. To this day he continues to do this, but the rest of the singers, who are illiterate, don’t have to touch a book and they will be able to render hundreds of songs.” Hence, literacy raises a lot of complex questions relating to memory. When the written word is not available, the brain itself develops a capacity to memorize, by frequent oral performance there is a new learning by rote. When folk musicians become literate, the text of their songs diminishes. Also sometimes, in a number of performances, written texts have considerable influence on the oral tradition. When the singers sing portions of the texts, they follow them closely, sometimes verbatim. Performances adhere to the written texts because the ability to summon deities is indispensable to the success of a festival; narrative accuracy it is thought, guarantees ritual efficacy.

Rise of literacy have given rise to new support systems to facilitate the memory of oral traditions in folklore which is why Kothari says that folklore is always contemporary, even when it deals with cultures and communities who continue to live outside of modernity.

5.3.3.: The complementarity of the 'oral' and 'literate'

Another discourse that talks of continuities between folk and classical literatures in India says that even though oral presentations differ from classical texts in that they use a greater array of delivery styles, still since the classical texts are presented as if they were to be overheard with reciters and audiences within the text, they too, include an oral performance tradition. This is explained by the performance of many stories or episodes from classical literature in folk drama, narrative and puppet theatre traditions in India.

Oral and written traditions often coexist, that there is a borrowing from each other that never ceases, and that most of the 'modern' folktales are as old as their parallels in classical literature. A.K.Ramanujan and Stuart Blackburn talk of the written form as only part of the history of texts, one phase in the cycles of transmission. "A tale, for instance, might originate orally, then be written down by a collector, the written version might then disseminate the tale to an oral teller, who, in turn, might give rise to new written or oral versions". An oral story gets written, the written text then reaches 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. In this way texts often get reworked through oral cycles that surround the written word. They talk of these cycles through a figure in which the subscripts c and t stand for composition and transmission respectively.



The folk and classical transmissions of a single story parallel each other in time, and that any version may draw from either or both. Hence, the written text does not interrupt or intercept, but actually furthers the oral tradition. The famous tale of the wagering sisters supports the idea that written sources transmit folk literature.

Though I am not discussing the tale here, it is important to discuss Stuart Blackburn's analysis of the different variants of the story. Quite clearly it emerges that the tale of the wagering sisters once a folktale incorporated into classical literature, had become part of that literature that could then be inserted into a collection of popular stories. It is believed that a folktale dies, is reborn in written sources, and is revived again in folk tradition. However, Blackburn says that many stories have numerous parallels and versions in Indian folklore and thus it is probable that they circulated in oral tradition as well as through classical literature.

The folklore in India should not be contrasted with the classical traditions. There are various psychological and thematic continuities between classical and folk traditions which David Shulman and V.Narayana Rao talk of which turn our attention toward variation in the image of women and goddesses. In his work, "Battle as metaphor in Tamil Folk and Classical Traditions", Shulman compares classical Sanskrit, classical Tamil and folk Tamil variants of the Rama story, and finds a pattern in the portrayals of Sita and her husband Rama. As we move from the classical to the folk texts, Sita becomes more powerful and dominant, so that in the folk story she actually replaces her husband on the battlefield against the many headed demon Ravana. According to Shulman, this contrast is a 'complementarity': control and restraint in the classical texts balanced by chaos and energy in the folk text.

Narayana Rao further situates these psychosexual dimensions of the folk-classical relationship within a sociological and historical framework. He identifies a correlation between type of caste, attitudes toward women and ethos of the epics patronized by those castes in the folk epics in Telugu. He says that the trading castes, for instance, in which women enjoy relatively more freedom, are also those who patronize the sacrificial epics with a heroine, a leader of her caste who in the end becomes a goddess, a "deified virgin". However, when the same caste tries to move up the social ladder, they necessarily must accommodate themselves to the dominant agricultural castes and their martial, male-centred values. This ideological accommodation is reflected in new versions of the trading castes' epics: the female leader changes from active to passive, from defiant to compliant. In the epic of the Komati traders, for example, the rebellious Kanyaka who defies a king in the primary versions is made to endorse brahmanical values and is ultimately replaced as caste leader by a Brahmin guru figure in the secondary version. The deified virgin of the primary epic becomes a "chaste wife" in the transformed epic, or in Ramanujan's words, the "tooth" goddess becomes the "breast" goddess. Similarly in the Rama's story, from a primary folk form to a more Sanskritic form, the transformation is from a powerful, dynamic female to a decorous, passive wife.

In Kannada villages, according to Ramanujan, folk mythologies parallel, overlap or rework standard Sanskritic myths. A favourite way of integrating the village goddess into a Hindu system has been to see them as *avatars* of Kali or relatives of Siva, so many of the Mariyamman goddesses are given legends and names that connect them with Parvati and Siva. Often this leads to classical myths being borrowed and

retold by folk performers. In doing so, first of all, the gods and heroes are domesticated.

One widely told folk myth is The Quarrel of Ganga and Gauri (another name for Parvati), the two wives of Siva. They are as jealous and catty as any pair of co-wives. They even fight hand-to-hand, tear each other's hair, and roll on the ground. Then Gauri menstruates, and Ganga seizes the chance to humble her. She withdraws all the water of the world and takes herself to the white mountain where she came from. Gauri has no water to wash or bathe anywhere in the world. Until she has a ritual bath, the pollution of her period is not washed away. So she has to go and beg Ganga for water, and promises to share her husband, Siva. Then Ganga relents and lets the waters flow. According to Ramanujan, their saucy colloquial dialogue and jealous exchanges, no less than the indignity of the menstruating Gauri left without bath water, truly "domesticate" the great goddesses. In Sanskritic mythology, gods and goddesses do not even blink or sweat, let alone weep tears, sneeze or menstruate. "In taking the same gods and heroes as in the Sanskritic Epics and Puranas and making them do, say, and mean different things in a local milieu, the folk myths domesticate them, incorporate them in bodies that sweat, stink, defecate and menstruate, localise them, and often contemporise them."

Source:

The folk renditions localize the pan-Indian epics and myths, often with the help of local names, places, motifs, and folk etymology. Various local places, hills, rivers, trees and birds are given names that connect them with the great gods.

5.3.4. Reinterpreting the 'oral' and 'literate' genres

A.K.Ramanujan in his classic essay "Who needs folklore?" talks of the interpretation of orality and literacy, and not just their opposition. Emphasizing that the classical, the written and the fixed are not necessarily yoked together. Vedas, which belong to the classical genre are fixed, and yet had an oral mode of transmission until two hundred years ago when they were finally written down. So it is not necessarily the 'folk' that is oral and fluid. This phenomenon has been called as 'oral literacy' by Narayan Rao. While Vedic pundits are learned in Sanskrit 'grammar, syntax, logic and poetics', their literacy is 'imbued in their bodies', in so far as their mode of acquiring and transmitting knowledge is entirely 'oral'. A learned man is referred to as 'kanthastha', one whose knowledge is contained in his throat. On the other hand,

folktales transmitted orally may have fixed motifs embedded in their structures which may or may not be linked to written versions of the tale. The Vedas which belong to the oral tradition is by large fixed while an epic story in the written tradition of the Ramayana seems to allow endless variations. Hence to assume that oral traditions necessarily precedes a written one would be wrong, rather the relationship between the two is volatile and multivalent. The oral and written are often enmeshed in another way. Over a long history, a story may go through many phases.

Written and hallowed texts are not the only kinds of texts in a culture like the Indian. Oral traditions of every kind produce texts. 'Cultural performances' of every sort, whether they are written or oral acts of composition, whether they are plays, weddings, rituals or games, contain texts. Hence to talk of things like a great tradition or a little tradition is wrong. The so called 'Little Traditions' especially folk traditions are not necessarily confined to small localities or dialectal communities. Proverbs, riddles, and stories, and tunes, motifs, and genres of songs and dances are not confined to a region, even though they may be embodied in the non-literate dialects and may seem to be enclosed in those mythic entities called self-sufficient village communities. However folklore items are said to be autotelic, i.e. they travel by themselves without any actual movement of populations. A proverb, a riddle, a joke, a story, a remedy, or a recipe travels every time it is told.

The relations between oral and written traditions in any culture are not simple oppositions. They interpenetrate each other and combine in various ways. Written traditions live surrounded by oral ones and are even carried by oral means. Writing lives within the context of oral traditions has been the defining feature of the cultures of India.

Summary

- Any discourse on the cultures of India begins with highlighting the gap between the two worlds of 'literacy' and 'orality'.
- The literate culture is often seen to belong to the 'Great Tradition' while the oral belongs to the 'Lesser Tradition'.
- While Vedic culture was purely brahmanical, the Puranic culture opened up for a number non-Vedic practices into the brahmanical order. Vrats, Tirthas, Parbs were incorporated and so was folklore which expressed itself in the form of oral tales, ballads, superstitions and beliefs.
- Oral traditions play a crucial role in discerning the real culture of India because it lends voice to the traditionally underprivileged and marginalised sections of the society i.e. women, tribals, low castes etc.
- Undoubtedly there does exist a world of difference between the two genres of literacy and orality. One is ofcourse in the performance mode of the genres and the other is the role it plays towards memory. When the written word is not available brains develops a learning by rote.
- However, there are continuities and parallels between the two traditions. The two constantly borrow from each other. Some oral tales are written down and then passed over generations to again find place in the folk tradition. Hence, written texts actually furthers the oral tradition.
- There are various thematic and psychological continuities between the two in that they complement each other. Control and restraint in the classical texts is balanced by chaos and energy in the folk texts.
- Folk mythologies parallel, overlap or rework upon Sanskritic myths. In doing so, they contemporize and domesticate classical gods and deities.
- Inorder to understand the classical and folk traditions, we must stop looking at them in opposition to each other. It is important to understand that classical texts are not necessarily fixed and similarly oral traditions are not necessarily marked with variations.
- Written texts are not the only texts in a culture like that of India. Oral traditions in the form of cultural performances too produce texts of their own kind.

Exercises

Essay questions

- 1.1 Elaborate on the meaning of 'Oral Tradition'.
- 1.2 Do you agree with the relevance of 'great and lesser tradition' discourse?
- 1.3 On what grounds is the difference between orality and literacy emphasized?
- 1.4 What is A.K. Ramanujan's contribution to the study of Indian folklore?
- 1.5 How do oral and literary traditions complement each other?

Objective questions

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
1	Match the following	

Question

Match the following:

- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| a) A.K.Ramanujan | i) <i>The Little Community</i> |
| b) Milton Singer | ii) <i>Folktales from India</i> |
| c) Robert Redfield | iii) <i>Krishna Myths, Rites and Attitudes</i> |
| d) Stuart Blackburn | iv) <i>Oral Epics in India</i> |

Correct Answer / Option(s)

- a) and ii)
- b) and iii)
- c) and i)
- d) and iv)

Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

The following are major works written/edited by authors. Folktales from India has been written by A.K.Ramanujan and was first published in 1994. Milton Singer's Krishna Myths, Rites and Attitudes and R. Redfield's The Little Community came out in 1966 and 1956 respectively. Oral Epics in India is Stuart Blackburn's work and was first published in 1989.

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

Other combinations are false due to reasons mentioned above.

Reviewer's Comment:

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
2	True or False	

Question

True or False?

- A.K.Ramanujan critiqued the concept of 'Great and Little Traditions'.
- The classical and oral texts are simple oppositions to each other.
- Transformation of women representation from classical to folk is from fierce to passive.
- Even though folklore deals with cultures and communities who continue to live outside modernity, folklore is always contemporary

Correct Answer / Option(s)

- A.K.Ramanujan critiqued the concept of 'Great and Little Traditions' :True
- The classical and oral texts are simple oppositions to each other: False
- Transformation of women representation from classical to folk is from fierce to passive :False
- Even though folklore deals with cultures and communities who continue to live outside modernity, folklore is always contemporary :True

Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

While anthropologists in the 1960s and 70s did pay attention to folklore and oral tradition apart from the classical tradition, they were still caught up between the hierarchical dichotomy of 'great and little traditions' where the folk was necessarily seen as the little tradition. A.K.Ramanujan pathbreaking contribution to the study of folklore was to move beyond this dichotomy and proposed that both cannot be understood independent of each other.

The classical and oral texts do appear as opposites in their performance mode, however one finds several continuities between them. They constantly borrow themes, tales etc from each other. Often they also complement each other by acting as counter-systems.

In acting as such counter-systems most of the characteristic traits of classical literature are turned upside down in oral ones. For example, in women tales, a woman' representation changes from being passive to fierce.

Rise of literacy has given rise to new support systems to facilitate the memory of oral traditions in folklore by enabling it to be written which makes it contemporary and unforgettable.

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

The classical and oral texts are not simple oppositions, rather there is a more complex relationship between the two.

The representation of women in classical texts is not fierce rather a passive one.

Though representing people outside modernity, oral culture no more represents a forgotten culture. Rather with most of the performances now written down, it is as much a part a part of our present times.

Reviewer's Comment:

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
3	Multiple choice	

Question

Choose the correct answer:

- The concept of 'Great and Little Traditions' was originally conceived by (a) Robert Redfield (b)A.K.Ramanujan (c)Milton Singer (d)Stuart Blackburn.
- What makes folklore contemporary? (a)orality (b)the process of writing it down and recording (c)relevant themes they address (d)none of these

Correct Answer / Option(s)

- The concept of 'Great and Little Traditions' was originally conceived by (a)Robert Redfield (b)A.K.Ramanujan (c)Milton Singer (d)Stuart Blackburn

Answer: (a)

- What makes folklore contemporary? (a)orality (b)the process of writing it down and recording (c)relevant themes they address (d)none of these

Answer: (b)

Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

The concept of 'Great and Little Traditions' was conceived by Robert Redfield. New support systems provided by literacy have made folklore contemporary and highlighted their relevance to present times.

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

Milton Singer had used the concept of 'Great and Little Traditions' and applied it to the case of India. A.K.Ramanujan infact critiqued the concept.

Reviewer's Comment:

Glossary

Parables: A simple, short story which teaches or explains an idea, especially a moral or religious idea.

Etymology: The study of the origin and history of words, or a study of this type relating to one particular word.

Syntax: The grammatical arrangement of words in a sentence.

Further readings

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