The Symposium seeks to explore and understand the contribution of folklore to the formation of ‘public space’ in the Indian context. This space provides for both legitimisation and contestation of world-views and the socio-political order. The concept of the ‘public sphere’ developed by Jurgen Habermas gave rise to many productive and meaningful debates since its entry into cultural theory, and has subsequently come to be seen as a normative concept. Though useful in understanding the spatial and ideological organisation of public space and the place of cultural subtext within it, its applicability in the Indian context with reference to folklore requires a broader and wider outreach than that envisaged by Habermas.

Habermas developed the concept of ‘public sphere’ with reference to 18th century Europe. It referred specifically to the bourgeois public sphere. For him, the public sphere was a mediator between the private concerns of individuals in their familial, economic and social life and the demands and concerns of social and public life. It consisted of organs of information and political debate such as newspapers and journals, as well as institutions of political discussion such as parliaments, political clubs, literary salons, public assemblies, pubs, coffee houses and other public spaces where socio-political discussion took place. The aim was to give direct expression to all individual needs, to arrive at a consensus and to shape public opinion, forming a civil society that could put questions to the powers that be.

In the Indian context, organisation of public space and contribution of folklore towards its creation and generating public opinion can be traced back to the royal courts, which patronised artists and artistic expressions that, through satire and humour, presented a critique of the powers that be and played the role of a mediator between the public and the royal courts. The temple courtyards and village grounds held theatrical performances that provided ample scope for airing contesting viewpoints and staging counter mythologies. Village chaupals served as meeting points for both interested and disinterested participants and contributed towards generating public debates. Folklore genres - be it myth, tale, legend or drama - served as a medium for both legitimisation and contesting dominant world-views. They could be used for either stressing homogeneity or articulating heterogeneity. The struggle for a nation saw appropriation of many folk forms to generate public opinion. In order to understand the role of folklore in the constitution of Indian public space, it becomes pertinent to discuss and debate the very concepts and definitions with which we wish to operate. The session on Concepts and Definitions, seeks to explore the historical context in which notions of Public Sphere, Civil Society and Modernity are embedded and their usefulness in the context of Indian reality.

The session on Expressive Traditions and Organisation of Public Spaces seeks to explore the organisation of public space and the role of artistic traditions in their constitution. The session on Sacred to Secular seeks to explore the ways in which a religious tradition opens up secular spaces. The session on Historical Dimensions focuses on the historical organisation of public space in different socio-political and religio-cultural contexts, and also addresses the issue of changing patronage. Papers in this session also deal with construction of public sphere in the pre-colonial and colonial periods.

The session on Contemporary Forms and Shifting Contexts seeks to provide an understanding of the uniqueness of particular genres in their ability to influence public thinking. The session on Modes of Transmission looks at the transformation that has taken place in the modes of transmission. Radio, television, Internet and new digital technologies play an important role in the transmission of oral tradition. Presentations in this section focus on this shift and its implications in relation to orality and emerging public spheres.