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Tripura Folklore

Guest Editor:
Saroj Chaudhuri

NATIONAL FOLKLORE SUPPORT CENTRE

National Folklore Support Centre (NFSC) *is a non-governmental, non-profit organisation, registered in Chennai, dedicated to the promotion of Indian folklore research, education, training, networking, and publications. The aim of the Centre is to integrate scholarship with activism, aesthetic appreciation with community development, comparative folklore studies with cultural diversities and identities, dissemination of information with multi-disciplinary dialogues, folklore fieldwork with developmental issues folklore advocacy with public programming events and digital technology with applications to voice the cultures of the marginalised and historically disadvantaged communities. Folklore is a tradition based on any expressive behaviour that brings a group together, creates a convention and commits it to cultural memory. NFSC aims to achieve its goals through cooperative and experimental activities at various levels. NFSC is supported by grants from the Ford Foundation and Tata Education Trust.*

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EDITORIAL

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Tripura, a small North-eastern state of India, possesses the unique character of a confluence. There are as many as nineteen ethnic groups among its ancient inhabitants; added to them are the Bengalis, the Manipuris, members from other Indian communities, even descendants of Portuguese soldiers under the service of Tripura Kings. All these people have been living in the state for generations and constitute the population of the state. There is a confluence of ethnic groups, of traditions and of culture, and yet, it is not the 'melting pot' where the distinctive identities are lost. Each stream has its own distinctive character, and yet, there is a unique synthesis. There is no invasion, no confrontation and no inherent conflict. Cultural dissemination and cultural assimilation are regarded as essential features of civilisation; even where these processes have been at work in this land, it has been without transgressions. This synthesis has been achieved with a true spirit of acceptance and mutual regard. Culture and tradition are best borne by folklores and oral literature. In the study of oral literature of Tripura, it is interesting to note that while folklores have retained their originality; folk lore from each source depicts a world of its own-with its faiths, beliefs, values, norms and ways of life.

It will not be just or fair to presume that folk tales from two different sources never have anything in common amongst them. Values and norms are more or less universal in nature. Taboo on incest may be reflected in the oral literature of many communities. "It is a great pity that most of the peoples of the world do not realise how many folklore they have in common" (Allan Dundes). Early man's concept of creation also might have imaginative similarity. This may account for the similarity between the Chakma tale of Genesis and the Santhal tale of Genesis. There is a discernible similarity in the concept of endless placid water at the beginning; the amphibian (tortoise / crab) being instrumental in creating land; the Creator creating life out of the dirt of his own body etc. Another reason for similarity can be the similar life-conditions. When the occupations for livelihood are the same, and almost the same privileges and predicaments guide the living, similar ideas can be reflected in folklores. Yet another reason for similarity can be identified among the folklores of different ethnic groups, barring a few exceptions, when their cultural matrix is more or less homogeneous. Similarity need not concern the readers, the only concern can be when there is mark of deliberate imposition.

There are about a score of ethnic groups in Tripura, and each has a treasure trove of folklores. The Mogs, the Chakmas, the Tripuris and the Bengalis have prominent cultural entities, and they constitute the main sources of the variegated oral literary pattern. Manipuri oral literature carries the legacy of the homeland. Tripuris, Reans, Noatias, Jamatias, Rupinis, Kolois, Murasings and Uchois use Kokborok, the state language besides Bengali. Methodical collection, categorisation, analysis and interpretation of oral literature is quite young in Tripura. In view of the huge and varied range, it will take quite some time. Therefore, any effort in the field is bound to appear insufficient and incomplete. This effort is nothing more than a humble attempt to introduce the huge and enchanting territory of oral literature of Tripura to the rest of the world. It is heartening to note that a group of dedicated and enthusiastic scholars are engaged in exploring the field. With the establishment of North East Centre for Oral Literature in Agartala, the process will surely gain momentum.

I express my heartfelt gratitude to MD Muthukumaraswamy who offered me the honour of editing this issue as Guest Editor. I have very little contribution of my own. I am indebted to the scholars: Dr. Nanigopal Chakrabarti. Sri. Chandra Kanta Murasing, Sri. Kumud Kundu Chaudhuri, Sri. Gitya Kumar Reang, Sri. Santimay Chakrabarti, Sri. Sunil Debbarma. Dr. Mrs. Arundhati Ray, Sri. Rupak Debnath, Dr. Nirmal Das and many others, whose collections I have compiled. ❁

Murasingh

The Land

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A look at the map of eastern India shows a strip of Indian territory protruding into Bangladesh from the south-east -- that is Tripura. Slightly bigger than Sikkim among the eight north eastern states, Tripura remained lesser known because of the difficulties in transportation and communication. The present shape and size of the state is truncated as a result of the partition of India. The difficulty of communications is man-made. Originally, the princely state of Tripura's boundary extended on all three sides into the lands of erstwhile East Pakistan. The state consisted of hilly tracts and plains. Most of the plains were cut off during partition, taking away the entire transportation system with them. The present day state of Tripura is the area which was previously known as 'Hill Tripura.' Now, the state is surrounded on all sides by foreign territory, except for a narrow tract of land in the east connecting it with Assam and Mizoram. The border with Mizoram is virtually inaccessible, thanks to the intercepting hill ranges. Tripura's only link with the rest of the country is through Assam, and that too through a winding and tortuous highway. And though the capital of the state is connected to Kolkata and Guwahati by air; it is not the usual means of travel for the common man.

Reduce space

The last ruler of Tripura in pre-independence times, Maharaja Bir Bikram Kishore Manikya (1923-47) prior to his death (months before independence) had expressed his intention of acceding to the Indian Union. Accordingly, the regent queen signed the instrument of accession. The administration of the state was taken over by the Government of India in October 1949. Through the stages of Part-C state, and Union Territory, Tripura earned the status of a state in January 1972. In a sense, Tripura is probably among the worst affected states due to partition. It not only lost its fertile crop-growing land and its system of transport and communication, but also had to bear the brunt of each exodus that accompanied the socio-political upheavals in the adjoining country. The demographic character of the state is forever changing with the surge of displaced people from across the border.

Tripura is filled with lush green bamboo and cane groves, dark primeval forest, transparent lakes and dancing streamlets. Plains and hills alternate each other. Seven long hill ranges run across the land at regular intervals. The hills are modest, never ~~raising their heads~~ over a thousand odd metres. The rivers are neither broad nor deep enough to inspire awe or allow heavy navigation. They are stretches of undulated strips between hills. Our knowledge about the earliest human settlements in this region is extremely limited. It is presumed that communities migrated from North-east, South-east and West. The earliest settlers are believed to belong to the same origin as the 'Kacharis.' Later, other ethnic groups also settled here. The Royal house maintained a close contact with Bengal, fostering education, trade and commerce; as a result, a Bengali population also grew. From the ancient times, the population of Tripura shows a chequered pattern of variety. Among the original inhabitants, there are as many as nineteen ethnic groups, many having their own language and cultural tradition. Among them, the dominant language and tradition is that of the Tripuris. The language is known as Kokborok. It belongs to the Bodo branch of the Tibeto-Burmese family of languages. Eight communities, out of the nineteen groups of original inhabitants of Tripura speak this language or some variety of it. Besides, some other indigenous people of the state and adjacent areas also use Kokborok as their language for communication. The other important language current in the state is Bengali. Besides, Manipuri, Chakma and Mog languages also are used by a considerable number of people. Kokborok and Bengali are the two state languages.

Reduce space

Tripura has great antiquity, ruled for thousands of years by kings who claim descent from the ancient king Yayati of the 'lunar dynasty.' There are references to the state in the Mahabharata. Yet, neither the precise location of its first establishment nor the source of its name can be identified beyond all doubts. The kingdom might have expanded, contracted or even shifted in those ancient days when migration to better lands and livelihood was quite common. The name might have also changed from Kiratadesha to Tribeg, to Tripura. The name Tripura can be related to the tyrannical king Tripur destroyed by Shiva, or might have come down from the name of the guardian goddess of the state – Tripureswari. Or it could even be from the native expression 'Twipra', meaning confluence of rivers. The cultural heritage of the state is significant. It is of the nature of a mosaic. On the one hand, the ancient ethnic groups inherited and developed their cultural identity, on the other hand, the large number of Bengalis, Manipuris and others who settled later on the land, practised their own. A composite cultural scenario presents varied elements in co-existence.

History does not pay even half the attention to artistic creations as it does to feats of fights; but fine arts and crafts are the most important documents of human civilisation and culture. The kings of Tripura were great patrons of art; many of them were themselves talented artists. Tripura can justifiably take pride in its cultural heritage of rock-sculpture. The ancient huge rock sculptures speak of an illustrious artistic past. In music, Tripura provided a congenial ground for practice and development of folk musical forms of different communities along with the development of classical music. In fact, there is a rich and varied heritage of folk musical songs among all the sections of the populace. As among other ancient ethnic groups in the North-east, 'Jum' or shifting cultivation was the usual practice among the indigenous people. The life pattern woven around the Jum was also the source of aesthetic activities like songs, music and oral literature. A man, even when he leaves his hearth and home behind, can seldom leave behind his cultural heritage held in oral literature; and as a man grows on a land, he grows with his tradition documented in the store of oral literature. Thus, the residents of different communities in the land have enriched its varied store of oral literature.

Being the court language, writing in Bengali flourished in Tripura from the early sixteenth century. Rajmala (the history of Tripura-kings) is considered the oldest historical writing in Bengali. Members of the royal household followed literary pursuit in great earnest and many of them were literary artists of high order. From mid-nineteenth century the Tripura kings came in close contact with poet Rabindranath Tagore which added new vigour to Bengali literary practice in the state. Kokborok literature appeared in written form towards the middle of the last century; but there is reason to believe that there had been one which was lost. The original Rajmala (history of the kings) is said to have been composed in Kokborok, and later translated into Bengali. The late beginning of Kokborok written literature has been compensated by a rapid growth into maturity. It is largely because Kokborok literature has its foundation in the rich and varied ground of oral literature. Each ethnic community has its rich treasure of folk-lores that reflect its cultural pattern, social organisations, practices, ethical values and even self-identity. Mythical, legendary and historical past also remain contained in oral literary tradition. Even within this small state scholars find astonishing variety indicating the distinctive features of different ethnic groups. Some of the tales have identical elements. Common ways of life and identical or near identical cultural matrix of different communities can be one reason for this similarity, while the other most probable reason is that folk-tales always have some common characteristics like simplicity of tales, characters as types and focus on a particular issue. Division of the world into two clear hemispheres of good and evil and the role of man in it, /the outcome and the presence of the magical element are some other identical aspects. Only a comprehensive and methodical exploration of the vast and uncharted territory of Tripura-oral literature can provide any certain answer. The process of exploration is on, but there are yet many more 'miles to go.' ❁

The World of Folk Literature: Kokborok

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Founder Secretary of Kokborok Sahitya Akademi

The two prominent languages used in Tripura are Kokborok and Bengali. The mother tongue of the 'Tripuris', the majority among the indigenous people of the land, is Kokborok. Eight communities out of the 19 of the original inhabitants speak this language. It belongs to the 'Bodo' branch of the Tibeto-Burmese family of languages. Earlier, this language was known by different names. Dr. Sukumar Sen and other renowned linguists used the names: Tip-ra, Tipra, Tipura, Tiperah etc. But the language of the indigenous people has been almost always called Kokborok in the hills and plains of Tripura. During the long years of princely rule, Kokborok suffered the worst neglect. Although it was the mother tongue of the rulers, the Maharajas felt ashamed of speaking the language of the poor common subjects and of the near-naked hill people practising Jum. In the absence of recognition over a deplorably long period of time, a script acceptable to everyone has not yet been developed. The word Kokborok means the 'language of the Borok race.'

At one end of the spectrum was the wishful claim of the royal family to have hailed from the illustrious pre-historic 'Lunar dynasty' (Chandra Vamsa), while at the other end on flowed the stream of Kokborok language with its tributaries, satiating the thirst for self-expression of its poor commonplace speakers. As a living language Kokborok developed into a wide range of oral literature, flowering into stories, proverbs, riddles, songs and lyrics. Life and living are pictured in Kokborok oral literature in their details. Starting from the description of the advent of a new season, Kokborok oral literature notices the power of hierarchy in nature, it comprehends and states, in its own simple way, abstract concepts of good and evil, of justice and duty. Ranging from a child's first look at the sun, lullaby, love in youth, even death and last rites are all included. A nomadic way of life had developed among the Tripuris who had to move from place to place every year in search of suitable hill slopes for 'Jum' (shifting) cultivation. They went deeper and deeper into the dense forests. In due course of time some small permanent villages came up in the forests, but the Jumias had to go to their Jum fields from these remote villages. In their daily journey to and fro, and during work in the fields young men and women developed relationships which often culminated in love, and such love stories are celebrated in songs and stories.

The traditional Jum cultivation demanded back-breaking labour from sunrise to sunset. After such a day of toil, evenings called for recreations. This included songs and dances and story-telling sessions. With the rainbow colours of their stories the elderly narrators carried their audience, mostly young, to a world between reality and dreams. The Jum being the principal economic activity of the Tripuri life, it frequently formed the backdrop of the stories. The tales also introduced the social and religious practices, social and political customs, faiths, beliefs, values, taboos and totems. The Kharengbar-tale is about a taboo, so is the Chethuang tale. Some of the folk-tales hold in them suggestions of social evolution. In spite of being one of the most ancient races, a comprehensive history of the Tripuris has not yet been reconstructed. Attention of history has been almost always invariably drawn to the kings and the court. The course of development of the indigenous society has remained mostly unknown. As a source material for social history, oral literature is of great value. With the passage of time, the present generation is moving away from the treasures and pleasures of oral literature. Story telling (obviously a folk-tale) was cultivated as an art. A popular Kokborok saying goes, "One who leaves would have to drone on

and on, all alone, before a bunch of deeply sleeping listeners." In most scholarly circles folklores are categorized as folk-tales, fairy-tales, myths, legends etc. In Kokborok such a division is absent. In Kokborok there is a single term for folklores, that is 'Kerang Kothoma'. A Kerang is a land-tortoise and Kothoma means a tale. Folk-tales are, therefore, tales of the wild land tortoise, whether there be a tortoise in it or not. The reason for this nomenclature is not known but it continues from the remote past. Tortoise belongs to the turtle group, but is an exception. Instead of water, it lives on land. Its appearance is strange and defence mechanism stranger; it is said that even a tiger cannot make an easy prey of a tortoise. When under attack it draws itself up in the fortress of its shell. Even if it is present in a story, the tortoise, by itself, may not have any special significance. In the story of the yellow tortoise and the doe, the focus is on 'natural power hierarchy'– why snakes never look up at kites.

The Bengali folk-tales are deeply linked with their original vast repertoire, without much change in the content or character; what is interesting, though, is that those prevalent in Tripura have sometimes assimilated the local background, local flora and fauna. Otherwise they are more or less uniform all over Bengali speaking communities. The Chakma tales, in that respect, have distinctive features. Their story of the 'Beginning' does not have any close parallel. Oral literature of Tripura is a field worth the attention of scholars.❁

Garia : A God of the Soil

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The Tripuris and most other ancient ethnic groups of Tripura celebrate Garia Puja at the end of the last month of Bengali calendar (Chaitra). It continues through the first week of the first month of Bengali calendar (Baisakh). Tripura has been called a land of 'composite culture'. Different cultural traditions co-exist so harmoniously without losing their respective identity, that, when looked from the surface, one looks identical to the other. The Garia festival often coincided with Bengali New-year celebrations and Ganesh Puja. To a discerning observer though, the differences become clear. There is no denying that because of its being a 'Hindu Kingdom', and because of long neighbourly association with Bengalis practising the Brahmanical rites, Tripuris and other communities might have taken some elements; but these remained only external. In spirit, Garia is a God of the soil, result of indigenous spiritual thought.

In the worship of Garia, a whole bamboo stands as the symbol. For all the clans the struggle for existence starts almost invariably with hunting. The early hunters on Tripura soil soon discovered bamboo to have the potential of being a very important weapon for hunting. In ancient worlds, whatever brought benefit was attributed to magical or divine powers. "To the savage the world in general is animate, and trees and plants no exception to this rule" (Frazer). Trees are credited with power in most ancient communities, and their beneficial powers raised them to the status of gods. Since the 'soul' in the bamboo was performing a good act for the community, they donated through 'sacrifice' blood and flesh of birds and animals for the satisfaction of that soul. This ritual of sacrifice continued and grew even stronger in the cultivation age. "The work of tilling, sowing and reaping is slow, arduous and uncertain. It required patience, foresight, faith. Accordingly, agricultural society is characterised by the extensive development of magic"(Thomson). In later agricultural society, bamboo found many more uses: It was essential for the

construction of shelter, it provided containers for liquids, it could be used both as a faggot and as a cooking utensil. For Jum cultivation, bamboo groves had to be burnt. It further necessitated the propitiation of the bamboo spirit. Thus, the symbol of bamboo comes from its association since the beginning of clan-life. It is a purely indigenous concept.

Risa (Ria:home-woven breast-cloth) is hung from the bamboo symbol. In all agricultural societies increase in harvest is the dominating desire. The fertility cult originated from this desire. In agricultural activities the role of the female acquired importance. The belief equating female with soil was formed. This belief supported the basic dictum of ancient life: 'Live and procreate.' Garia worship, which became primarily a ritual for plentiful harvest also assumed the significance of the reproduction cult. The Risa and the festive abandon subsequent to the actual 'Puja' of Garia suggest that. More harvest and more members in the community were the two important elements for clan security. Garia, from the guardian God of plentiful harvest, also became the benefactor and guardian of the clan in all respects. This aspect of Garia festival is marked by its festive character. Dance was added, and accompanying songs were composed. There are expressly erotic expressions in Garia songs. It is said that, being instructed in a dream, King Dhanyamanikya of Tripura reclaimed God Garia from Kuki Kingdom. The victorious army brought a number of beautiful Kuki women as captives. The erotic element in the songs was a result of that. Whatever be the reason, a suggestion of the reproduction cult cannot be denied. In the festival part, there is the custom of drinking galore. Wine was recognised as a potent aphrodisiac in ancient societies. A Santhal myth states that Maran Buru (the Creator) had created man and woman, but they knew no urge for procreation. So, Maran Buru taught them how to make wine. After drinking wine, they felt the urge for procreation. With regard to the role of dancing in the festival, Frazer says that community people thought singing and dancing had magical powers and could hence translate into more production. Even the movements in the dances closely resemble the world around, and gets inspiration from everyday activities. This leads to the idea that the Garia festival originated from the soil, mirroring the history of the formation of society. Traces of ancient animism, fertility cult and reproduction cults are not matters that could have been brought in from outside. ❁

TALES

Collected and retold by:
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Poet, Playwright and Journalist

[This is a collection of folk-tales from different ethnic groups. The selection is so wide and so varied that no collection can satisfactorily be called 'representative.' For obvious reasons, the stories are given in skeleton only. Such renderings cannot do justice to the artistic structure and temper of the tales. For the sake of giving some idea of the craftsmanship in the structure and treatment, two stories: Why the snakes never look up at a Kite, and How the World was Made – have been given in details, keeping as close as possible to the originals in their translations. - Editor]

THE KHERENGBAR (The Orchid)

After a long period as an 'apprentice' at his father-in-law's house, a boy got married to his daughter. The newly wedded couple were returning to the boy's home dreaming about the blissful days ahead – the happy days of their next Garia festival together. The road ran through a forest. As they were walking, an exceedingly sweet fragrance greeted their nostrils. They found a tree with Kherengbar flowers blossoming on it. The wife requested the boy to get her the flower so that she could put it in her hair. Though the husband wouldn't have denied his wife anything on earth, the Kherengbar flower was a different kettle of fish altogether. It is believed that an 'Apsara' (heavenly dancer), while cursed to spend her days on earth, brought this favourite flower of hers with her. So, it has no root on this earth. Humans are forbidden to use it. If anyone dared, he would surely meet his doom. The boy told all this to his wife, but the girl persisted in her demand. The husband conceded ultimately, albeit reluctantly. He climbed up the tree and threw some flowers to her, but at same time he warned her to not put them in her hair. But, the wife was so charmed by the fragrance and beauty of the flowers that she paid no heed to his warnings and wore them on her bun; and lo! and behold before she could put on the last flower, the man turned into a Hoollock (a whooping monkey)! The wife lamented with heart-rending wails, but to no avail. She banged her head against the tree and killed herself. She was reborn as a lizard. Even today, when the Kherengbar blossoms, the Mufuk (lizard) comes under the tree and beats her tail on the ground. The Hoollock loudly laments 'Hoo, hoo, hoo,hoo…' and they unite. To save men from further temptation, gods took away the fragrance from the Kherengbar. [It is a Koloi folk-tale. The story is about the violation of a taboo; the belief of magical transformation by a flower is quite common in folk-belief. There is also the suggestion of the lizard totem.]

Collected and re-told by: Dr. Nanigopal Chakrabarti.

CHETHUANG (The Chhatim tree)

Once there lived a brother and sister. The sister was a paragon of beauty. Everyday they went to their Jum field and returned home after the day's work. One day, on their way to the Jum, the sister was going ahead of the brother. They had to cross a Chhara (a small stream) on the way. She raised her Rignai (skirt) to avoid getting it wet. Her exceedingly fair thighs flashed before the eyes of her brother. He was stricken by lust. The boy came back home. He sulked and gave up food. No one in the house could make out what had happened to him. His grandmother asked him the reason and found out that he wanted to get married. The grandmother asked him for his choice listing all the eligible maids of the locality, but the boy approved of none. Angrily, the grandmother asked, "Then would you marry your

own sister?" He assented and added that he would die otherwise. It was a strange situation! To save his life the members of the family surreptitiously started making arrangements. The girl, however, was not aware of anything. One day when rice was being dried in the sun to prepare wine from it for the wedding, fowls fell upon on it and started pecking the grains. The grandmother cursed the fowls by shouting that they were eating up the rice kept for the strange marriage between brother and sister. It was then that the girl came to know about the whole thing. She smarted in shame. Life became unbearable for her. In her dream, God told her to plant a Chethuang tree that would bring her freedom. She went to the Jum and when the others were busy tending the crops, she found a Chethuang sapling and planted it and watered it. In no time at all the plant grew into a big tree and the girl climbed on to it. The top of the tree kept growing higher and higher. When the news reached her home her parents came rushing to the tree and begged her to come down. She said, "My brother wants to marry me, O tree go up higher." The tree was growing taller and taller every moment. Her parents promised to kill her brother. Instead, they killed a black dog and showed her the blood as her brother's. "Don't I know it's the black dog's blood? O tree go further up," she said. The tree-top finally reached the clouds and the girl stepped out into the clouds. While leaving she broke the top of the Chethuang tree by kicking it. Since then, Chethuang trees have no top (Chatims are flat-topped). Flash of lightning on cloudy days is believed to be the view of the girl's fair thighs. The rumbling of thunder is the sound of Chethuang top breaking.

[A Tripuri folk-tale. Incest was not taboo in earliest societies, it came with the dawning of civilisation. This story comes from the days when society had taken up civilised values. This is also a story of violation of taboo. A black dog is symbolic of soul and Chethuang tree and lightning have sexual associations.]

Collected and re-told by Dr Nanigopal Chakrabarti.

THE WOOD PECKER (Bird)

In a village there lived a poor wood-cutter. He had quite a big family, but the man was rather lazy and he was not very intelligent either. He did not work hard enough, and whatever little wood he could collect, people bought those at a very meagre price. As a result, often his wife and children could not afford two square meals a day. Two of his children died due to malnutrition. Quarrels between husband and wife was a daily feature. One day a weaver bought all the wood from the wood-cutter in exchange for a small red towel. The wood-cutter was very happy with the brilliant red piece wrapped around his head. He returned home empty-handed. Seeing him thus, his wife became very angry. Shouting at him, she started beating him with the broom. The man was already hungry, and the insults made him angry as well. He left the house with his axe. Blinded by rage and hunger, he struck the very next tree at sight. It was a tree laden with fruit. The moment he struck the tree, a transformation started happening. The man gradually turned into a woodpecker bird. The wife had followed him out of remorse for her ill-treatment of the hungry man; but by the time she reached the spot it was already too late. There was only a wood-pecker bird pecking at the tree; but she recognised his red towel – a wood-pecker has a scarlet crown. The wife returned home, alone and sorry. Even now, in villages when a wood-pecker pecks at a tree, people say, "Enough, no more wood is needed. You've worked enough for a meal."

[It is a folk-tale from the Bengalis of the Chittagong area. The story focuses on the punishment of transformation into an inferior being for violating a taboo. It is forbidden to fell a fruit-laden tree. It is symbolic of a pregnant woman – a mother. The wood-cutter was also indirectly responsible for the death of near ones – his two children. Matricide is a general taboo in all societies. The suggestion of matricide is all the more clearly stated in another version of the wood-pecker story. In that version the bird is regarded as the mythical Parasuram in subsequent birth. Parasuram killed his mother at the behest of his father. The scarlet crest of the bird is regarded as the stain of his mother's blood spilled on Parasuram's head while killing her.]

Collected and re-told by: Dr. Nandigopal Chakrabarti

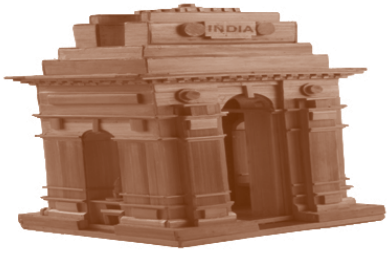
HOW THE CHHAN GRASS (Thatch) GREW

Once there lived a well-to-do farmer. He loved his youngest daughter the most. She was the blue-eyed baby of the family. The farmer searched far and wide for a suitable match for her and ultimately found one. The girl was given away in marriage at the age of eight. She went to her in-laws' house; but all did not go well. A few days later the girl returned back to her parents. She was not ready to go back, for, the mother-in-law was cruel and tortured her. She could not take it any more. The farmer tried to reassure her, but to no avail. It is considered a social stigma to keep a married daughter at her parental home, away from her husband's house and his kins. One day the farmer started with his daughter for her husband's house. It was a long way off and both father and daughter became tired due to the long journey. The girl felt thirsty and the father stopped by a tank on the roadside. He got down to fetch water for his daughter, and at that moment a tough rope appeared out of nowhere and coiled itself around the girl's ankles. It started dragging her towards the water. The girl shouted for her father, and he came running. He tried to pull his daughter free, but in vain. Desperately the father tried to stop her and caught her by her hair. The hair remained in his hands and the rope dragged the girl down under water. The grief-stricken father spread the hair all around and from it sprang the wild Chhan grass. Chhan is only used to cover roofs, but is never used to light up household fire.

[A Bengali folk-tale current among the Bengalis from the Noakhali area. Finding metaphorical affinity between dissimilar objects is a feature of ancient thought process. Hair covers the top of the human body, i.e. head and Chhan grass covers the top of a house. 'Woman drowned' has a relation to fertility cults. Rope coiling around a female's legs has symbolic sexual connotations. Some of the social customs are also brought forth in the tale.]

Collected and re-told by Dr. Nanigopal Chakraborti

Why the Snakes Never Look Up at a Kite



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Once upon a time, on a hot summer day, a yellow she-tortoise and a doe were grazing around a Jum. The two were close friends, eating, playing and staying together. That day the doe said to the tortoise, "Let us jump over and across this narrow valley and go up the next hill. The same kind of plants grow here and I am bored of the same food." The tortoise said, "A good proposal, no doubt, but how can I jump across the valley?" The doe got vexed and said, "It's a problem to remain with you. On this hot noon who will go downhill once and then uphill again? Don't you think it's an unnecessary trouble? If I can leap across this narrow strip of valley, why can't you? Aren't you my friend? What I can do, you can too. Well, why don't you try? Come along." Saying these words the doe ran and sprang across the valley and went up the next hill. The tortoise felt helpless. To please her friend she jumped. But instead of crossing the lowland, she fell right in the middle of the valley. A big python was dozing there while hatching its eggs. The tortoise landed right on top of the eggs and broke all of them.

Angrily, the python raised its head and saw the tortoise

running away. In great rage it hissed and shouted, "Running away after breaking my eggs? How dare you? I'll swallow you up in a moment." Saying this the python chased the tortoise. The tortoise ran for her life. She came across a big Tokbru bird. Panting, the tortoise fell at its feet and said, "O Tokbru bird, you are my god-father. I'm in great danger. Please save me." The bird could not make out anything and asked the tortoise, "What has happened to you? What danger are you talking about?" The tortoise was about to tell the bird what happened when with great hissing the python approached. Upon seeing the python the Tokbru quickly flew away. Finding no other way, the tortoise took to her heels once again.

In its breathless run, the tortoise came across a big wild boar resting. She fell at the boar's feet and blurted out "O great boar, you are my god-father. Save me. A huge python is chasing me. Save me please." "What's the matter? Why is the python chasing you?" asked the boar. The tortoise narrated the entire story. After listening to the whole story, the boar said, "So what? I'm your god-father. Who can dare to harm you? Never mind. Go and rest in peace." In the meantime, though, the python arrived making a crashing sound like that of a storm. Seeing it from a distance the boar felt numb with fear. It told the tortoise, "You rush! The python's coming like a storm. I can't save you." The boar fled and the tortoise also started running.

The tortoise was about to faint out of exertion and fear when suddenly she saw a huge kite looking at her from the top of a tree. With a choked voice she breathlessly appealed, "O king of birds, O kite, you are my god-father. Save me." "Why ? What's the matter?" asked the curious kite. Again the tortoise narrated everything; why she jumped, how she broke the eggs, how and why the angry python was chasing her to kill her and eat her up. She piteously appealed to the kite to save her life. The kite took pity on the tortoise. As the python was approaching, the kite flew down the tree, held the tortoise in its claws and took her up the tree. The python watched everything from a distance and became even more angry. It came near, hissing vehemently, and asked the kite to hand over the tortoise to it. The kite did not do so. Furious, the snake abused the entire race of birds.

At its hissing and offending words, the kite also got angry. As the python was trying to climb up the tree, the kite threatened it and said, "Look, you snake. You have insulted my whole race. Call all of your race and come to fight with us. We, the birds, will be here to fight, all you reptiles come prepared. If you win, you will get the tortoise. If you are defeated, we shall tear you apart and eat you up." Angrily the python shouted, "We are coming tomorrow. I shall see who saves you," and left in a great huff.

On the next day, all the reptiles of the world gathered to fight the birds. On the other side, under the leadership of the kite, birds of various kinds and sizes swarmed the sky. A terrible battle ensued. At first the birds were suffering more losses by being wounded by the poisonous strikes and bites of the reptiles; then, under the guidance of the kite the situation changed. The birds started swooping down on the reptiles from above, striking at the eyes of the reptiles with their sharp beaks and talons, turning them blind. In the end the reptiles became helpless. The birds tore them to pieces and started eating their flesh. The birds had won. From his perch high above the kite noticed a young snake trembling in fear, hiding under a bamboo leaf. The kite was about to swoop down on it when the young snake appealed weeping, "O king of birds,pardon me and spare my life. So long as my descendants will live on this earth, they shall never raise their eyes and look directly at you. We shall live as subordinates to you." The tortoise also requested the kite to spare the young snake. The kite agreed and granted their appeal. Kerang Karma, the tortoise, thanked the kite and other birds profusely and left. From that day onwards, snakes never raise their eyes and look directly at the kites. They even run away in fear at the sight of kites. ❁

How the World was made
(CHAKMA FOLK-TALE)

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Before the creation of earth and all the things we see today, things moving or static, breathing or inert, there was only water, an endless stretch of water, the depth of which was known only to the gods. The water itself was in an endless stillness because there was no wind.

Our *bujyā-buris* tell us that out of the still stretch of unending water emerged a singular tree. It was quite like the banyan tree we see now, but so huge that its roots daunted the heart of the seabed and its several branches bending down into the water formed additional trunks. Some of those trunks were almost as broad as the main trunk, which was so broad that a light-flying cotton teal of our time would pant for breath to circle it.

Things were in that state for a long stretch of eternity. Then, Gozen, the sire of the universe, plucked a leaf from the tree, and, sitting on it, began to meditate. No one knows how long he sat thus, meditating, because time did not exist. Also, there was neither the sun to count the days nor the seasons to mark the years during which Gozen meditated. But from the tale that the ancestors of the Chakma people have told their children, it is learnt that Gozen sat in that liquid stillness, meditating for many thousand years.

At long last, he opened his eyes, and lo! Before him lay a wide stretch of land with the huge tree standing upright in the centre. He looked at the land and knew at once that while he was absorbed in deep meditation, Kāngārā the crab had toiled and toiled ceaselessly under the water, digging up with his claws the clay from the roots of the tree and slowly piling it in little mounds around the trunk to make this wonderful specimen of expertise.

Then Gozen set to work. He made another sea. He placed this sea upside down and high above the reach of the land and the sea below, and called it Āgāz the sky. In this sky-sea, he set afloat a boat. Then Gozen made Bel out of the heat of His body. And he made Chān from the calm light of His eyes. Having thus made Chān and Bel, Gozen called them brothers, and he assigned to them the duty of acting as the custodians of light, saying, 'Go forth and illuminate the world.' Everyday, Bel the great ball would traverse the sky from the east to the west everyday and dispel the darkness that enveloped the world. Chān would also do the same work but only after the tired Bel rested in the evening.

So, days and nights were created. And he made the day warm and the night cool.

Then, Gozen bestowed plenitude on the land by making mountains and rivers, hills and dales, forests and plains. And he called the land *Pitthimi* and to every kind of creature that walked or crawled, flew or swam he gave separate names to each of them.

One day, it so came to pass that Gozen felt that he should take a close look at the world he had made. He came down from heaven to *Pitthimi* and was delighted at the fruitful abundance he saw around him. And he began to walk on the land. He walked and walked. While he was thus walking, delighted at his own creation, he suddenly felt that someone was following him. He stood and asked, '*Kedugā*?' (Who is it?) When no one replied, he started to walk again.

Some time later, it again occurred to him that he was still being followed by that someone. He stood for a moment and repeated the same question. '*Kedugā*?' Again, no one replied.

When the same thing happened for the third time, Gozen became annoyed. '*Kedugā*?' He cried, 'Why don't you answer my call ?' And he quickly turned around only to see his own shadow behind him. He was deeply embarrassed by his own foolish annoyance. 'Bah!' he

said to himself, 'It's my own shadow and so long I have been trying to get an answer out of it.'

But the next moment, he contemplated something remarkable. 'Why not fill this shadow of mine, which follows me, with clay and breathe life into it,' he thought. Soon Gozen moulded a creature in the shape of his own shadow and called him Kedugā after the first word he had uttered on mistaking his own shadow for a man.

And so the first man was created.

But the man was alone. He had no company to converse and beguile his leisure, none to share the emotions that swelled his heart and made him sigh. And so, Gozen, the sire of all creation, scratched the filth of his own body and accumulating it in the palms of his hand, made the woman out of it and called her Kedugi.

Then Gozen called them to his presence and told them 'You'll live on *Pitthimi* to be masters of it. I have given fruits to trees and flesh to animals, so that you may eat them and remain strong and healthy. I've also made the velvet grass for you to sleep on. Now go forth at your will and happily multiply your race." Thus said, Gozen retired to heaven.

And the first man and the first woman were left to themselves to make their own living. At that time, they did not know how to make fire. They did not know how to Jum the land or how to produce the things we now eat. And they were naked and nomads, and, roaming the land, which Gozen made them masters of, they ate fruits, leaves, roots, tubers, and birds and animals and fish that did not taste bitter.

Time passed in this way. Then, one day, children were born to Kedugā and Kedugi. They grew up and, in the course of time, fathered their own children. In this way, many years passed, and the race of man multiplied amid peace and plenitude.

But, one day, a severe *khabāt* set in, ruthlessly laying its icy hands on the abundance Gozen had left for man to thrive on. A severe frost that occasioned the *khabāt* soon bared the trees of all foliage and fruition. It also penetrated deep into the soil to destroy the roots and tubers that grow there, and suddenly the children, Kedugā and Kedugi were left with no food to eat. The terrible frost had even killed the birds, the animals and the fish.

Helpless, man searched every corner of the earth but found only exhaustion and intense hunger. Very soon, it became obvious that their entire race would perish. Deeply moved by the suffering of man, Gozen decided that he must do something. So, he sent Kālayyā to replenish the earth again. He said, 'O Kālayyā, a disastrous *khabāt* threatens to annihilate the race of Kedugā and Kedugi. Go down to *Pitthimi* and save them.'

Then Kālayyā came down to earth. And he restored the trees with foliage and fruits, the fish with scales, the birds with feathers and the animals with hide. And he breathed fresh life into every creature he restored and let them go out into the wild. Then he summoned the trees at one place and asked them, "Can you produce enough food for the children of Kedugā and Kedugi?" Not all trees were certain that they could do so, and some of them, ashamed of their inability, quietly stole away from Kālayyā's presence. Only the *jaganā* tree, proud that it was of its plentiful fruits, came forward and cried out boldly, "O Kālayyā, why do you ask? Look at me. Already my limbs are aching with sweet fruition. Don't you see that I alone am capable of sustaining the entire human race?"

And for sometime, the *jaganā* tree produced so much fruit that there was no scarcity.

But the human race continued to multiply and increase everyday. Then, one day, they had become so numerous like the stars of the night that the tree could not produce enough fruits for every one. On that day, some men went hungry. When Kālayyā heard about it, he came and asked the tree, "What is it that I hear?" The *jaganā* tree told him that animals had eaten some of its fruits, causing the day's shortage. "But," it said, "don't you worry. No man will go hungry another day."

Yet, the same thing happened on the following day. Again the *jaganā* tree laid the blame on the animals. This continued for days, then for weeks, then months. And finally, a year passed but no change occurred, and Kālayyā found it difficult to contain his rage. One

day, he cried out in anger, "That braggart of a tree must be taught a lesson!" And boiling with rage, he went down to the riverside where the *jaganā* tree stood, and kicked it with so much of aggression that it writhed in pain and its body became twisted. And while it was still smarting in extreme pain, Kā layyā cursed it, saying, "Henceforth man will shun the fruits you bear."

The Chakma people believe that since the day Kālayyā kicked it, the *jaganā* tree has had a permanent curvature in its trunk. And the fruit of the same tree is no longer edible.

In the meantime, the food shortage with which the children of Kedugā and Kedugi were beset began to turn acute, compelling Kālayyā to seek Gozen's intervention. And after hearing all the facts Gozen sent Kālayyā to invite Māh-Lakkhi-mā to *Pitthimi* that the food shortage may end. So Kālayyā went to Māh-Lakkhi-mā and, appraising her of the sufferings of man, said, "O mother, you must come to *Pitthimi*. For, there is no one except you who may teach man the ways to produce grains."

Mah-Lakkhi-mā told Kālayyā that she would accompany him on the morrow. "O Kālayyā, take a little rest tonight. You look so tired and the journey ahead is a long one," she said to him. Then she called her attendants, and instructed them to see that the god lacked nothing during his stay. Actually, she wanted to test Kālayyā.

Soon the attendants served the god with all the delicacies of heaven, placing in front of him every variety of meat and wine. Kālayyā enjoyed the sumptuous feast and gorged on entire plates in gulps.

But once he took a sip of wine, he lost all restraint. He emptied tumbler after tumbler, forgetting who he was and where he had come. And in that state of inebriation, he began to show off, shouting and violently shaking his head and kicking utensils and breaking pots. When Māh-Lakkhi-mā came top see how her guest was doing, Kālayyā, who was then quite beside himself, began to prattle, addressing his hostess sometimes as *jedai*, sometimes as *kākki*, and sometimes as *bhuji*. When Māh-Lakkhi-mā saw the things that Kā layyā did, she became so annoyed that she decided not to accompany him.

Kālayyā's failure prompted Gozen to send his son Biyetrā on the same errand. And he blessed Biyetrā, saying, "Surely you must succeed where Kālayyā failed and bring Māh-Lakkhi-mā to *Pitthimi*. Also remember not to dilute the respect she deserves."

And Biyetrā bowed his head and said, "O Father, I'll do as you bid me. But allow me some time to dwell among the race of man so that I might know their ways of living."

"So be it," replied *Gozen*.

So Biyetrā came down to *Pitthimi* and began to dwell with the children of Kedungā. And when he had lived with them for sometime, he saw that man lived under trees and in caves and ate only those things that tasted sweet. They did not know how to build a shelter. They did not even know how to cook and make palatable things that did not taste sweet. So he taught them to make the *māzāghar* with bamboo and *sunn* grass, that they might live in comfort. Then he brought fire from heaven and taught them to cook food.

In this way some time passed. There had been no shortage of food since Biyetrā came to live among man but he knew that at some time, in the unknown future, there would be problems unless man acquired the means to produce food to feed himself and his family. Besides, while he did these things, Biyetrā never for a moment forgot that Gozen had asked him to bring Māh-Lakkhi-mā to live among man.

Then, one fine morning, Biyetrā set out quietly, taking with him as companions *Kāngārā* the crab, *Sugar* the boar and *Māgarak* the spider, and set out for the heavenly abode of Goddess Lakshmi. He walked and walked until he came to the shore of a weird and wonderful sea, somewhere between earth and heaven, in which there was no water but only milk. The waves of that sea broke softly and gently, like morning dew on the petals of the *nāksā* flower, against the shore, leaving behind thick layers of cream instead of foam. And Biyetrā called this sea the Milk-Sea.

Then summoning the powers that enable gods to fly through the invisible air, he crossed the Milk-Sea, and when he had reached the other shore, he left his three

companions there and, asking them to await his return, proceeded all by himself to the abode of Māh-Lakkhi-mā.

Biyetrā was welcomed and treated to a sumptuous feast of meat and wine, just as Kālayyā was tested some time ago, but he was clever enough to spill the wine while pretending to gulp it down. Māh-Lakkhi-mā, who could see everything, was very pleased with Biyetrā, and she consented to accompany him to *Pitthimi*.

Then she filled her bag with seeds of paddy, sesame, millet, cotton, and also with vegetables such as *mārmāh*, *chindirā*, brinjal, and varieties of yam and spinach. This done, she ascended the back of her bird-mount, *Me-Me-Chāgli* and set out on the precipitous descent to *Pitthimi*. When they arrived near the Milk-Sea, Māh-Lakkhi-mā stood on the shore and looked doubtfully at it. She cried, "O Biyetrā, the Milk-Sea is too vast and *Me-Me-Chāgli* is not strong enough to take me across it." Biyetrā knew that the goddess would look for some pretext to test his resolve. He had foreseen these things and had made all arrangements in advance. So he smiled now and said, 'O Mother Goddess, I have already arranged a safe conveyance for you and for your mount across the Milk-Sea.'

Then he summoned *Māgarak* the spider and asked it to weave a thread long and strong enough, and connecting the opposite shores on the sea. The spider hesitated for a while but Māh-Lakkhi-mā, who knew what was in its mind, assured the creature, saying, "O *Māgarak*, do as Biyetrā bids you. I grant this boon that the thread you weave shall never end." And so it was from that day that the spider acquired the ability to weave its thread endlessly.

Now, after the spider had connected with a thread the two shores of the Milk-Sea, *Me-Me-Chāgli* sat on the back of *Sugar* the boar while the boar stood on the back of *Kāngārā* the crab, which then swam slowly across the thick foam of milk and cream. Then Māh-Lakkhi-mā stood on the back of *Me-Me-Chāgli* and kept her balance by gripping firmly to the thread the spider had spun.

They arrived safely to the opposite shore. Māh-Lakkhi-mā was very pleased with the intelligence and gentle manners of Biyetrā, and blessed him with the words, "From this day, O Biyetrā, people will worship you before every other god." Then, she blessed the pig and and the crab. And from that day, the pig excelled all creatures in the possession of bodily fat, while the crab acquired the ability to move with equal agility in both land and water.

Having thus blessed Biyetrā and the three creatures that had patiently worked to bring her to *Pitthimi*, Māh-Lakkhi-mā went to live among the children of Kedugā and Kedugi. She would teach them the ways to produce food through *Juming*. But that is another story, which Chakma *Kadhagis* still love to retell. ❁

Folklore: The Unexplored World

Dr. Mrs. Arundhati Ray
Social Worker and Activist

Folklore, a major genre of oral literature, is a cultural heritage of all communities. These tales, in the ancient societies of remote past, were told in the hours of rest after a hard day's work. The story telling sessions were a means of relaxation. The listeners comprised of the young and the old. If the tales provided relaxation to the grow-ups, they played a more important role in shaping the younger minds. While giving a free reign to young minds' imagination, these stories inculcated ethical values, religious practices, an idea about social organisation and customary laws. In fact, these tales constructed the self-identity of the society. Folklore also formed the 'world-view' of the youngsters. Oral literature is, to the

scholars, a very important material for historical reconstruction. The social and economic structure of a particular society, in those distant days, are reflected in the oral literature of a community.

That the folk-tales contain materials more than meet the eye, was realised as early as in the seventeenth century, when the genre appeared in printed form in France. However, it took nearly a couple of centuries to formulate scientific approaches to its study. At first folk-tales were equated with fairy tales. Only later, the anthropologists and folklore scholars identified its inherent property of belonging to oral tradition. Like the 'natural epics', folklores also grow in the society without specific authorship. Unlike those epics, they are seldom attributed to any illustrious individual in later periods. Folklores are 'texts' in the true sense, and not 'works'. We may locate the beginning of systematic study of folk-lores as a subject in early nineteenth century. The early studies were comparative in nature; trying to locate the origins and meanings, and also attempting to compare the variations. In the process, different assumptions were forwarded like the theory of inheritance of common Indo-European past. Most of these hypotheses have lost importance in more modern approaches; but some of these older assumptions appear worth reconsideration, like the Comparative Mythological theory, when we come across Indian folklores bearing similarities, even if distant, with ancient epics, religious texts or myths. In modern studies of folklores the Historical/Geographic approach receives importance. The Structural Study Approach has also helped scientific classification. The materials are now classified into 'tale types' backed by an almost exhaustive 'type index'. Each traditional tale having an independent existence constitutes a type. There are variables in folk-tales; through these variables, the relationship of the constant element can be discovered among folklores through the categorisation of motifs. Motif-index is thus another very useful means in the hands of folklorists. Folklore, folk-tales or oral literature as such, are a subject of methodical scientific study today. The processes are rather elaborate and complex, but the labour is always well rewarded. In present-day study of oral literature, a relevant question has raised its head: Whether oral literature should be subjected to the tenets of literary criticism used for written literature, or should it have its own aesthetics? Opinions differ widely. One school holds the thought that oral literature is also basically literature. In modern schools of criticism we have learnt to judge a creation as a 'text', by its own merit and by its own standards. Such approaches can well accommodate oral literature into its compass. Yet, it does not appear to be the only way; for oral literature has in it some elements of performing arts. Renderings by different individuals may affect the meaning without any change in the content. Conventional critical principles are more or less rules to judge the perfection in the application of skill in conscious artistic creations, which oral literature is not.

Dr Mrs Arundhati Ray

The contributor: A social worker and activist, Dr Mrs Ray is a familiar name in literary circles. A performing artist of merit, Dr Ray is a free-lance writer. For her Doctoral work, she had undertaken extensive research work on oral literature, particularly folk-tales of the locality. Sometimes she accepts assignments as visiting faculty to University departments. ❁

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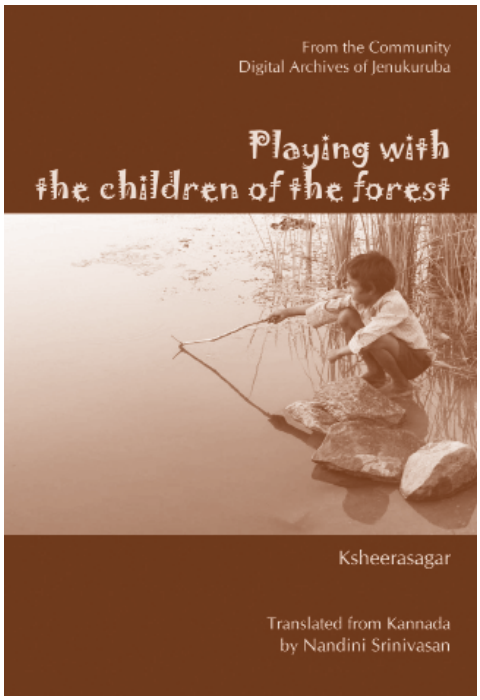
Playing with the Children of the Forest

by **Ksheerasagar**

Kannada original **"Kaadina Makkala Odanaatadalli"**
Translated into English by NANDINI SRINIVASAN

ISBN 978-93-80431-00-0



Beetles become live pin-wheels, mushrooms turn into bombs and lion ants tell directions in this intimate and delightful glimpse of the life of Jenukuruba children on the fringes of forests near HD Kote, Karnataka. Ksheerasagar's fieldwork observations record the lives of this indigenous community, inter-woven with their natural environment, with candour and empathy. Amidst a constant struggle for food, water and land,the endlessly inventive children find many ways to play with the birds, beetles and plants of the forest they have been displaced from. This book paints a picture darkened with social injustice with a tender affection for the children it portrays.

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Glossary vii + 102 pages, Rs.250 (India)/
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by **Gabriele Alex**

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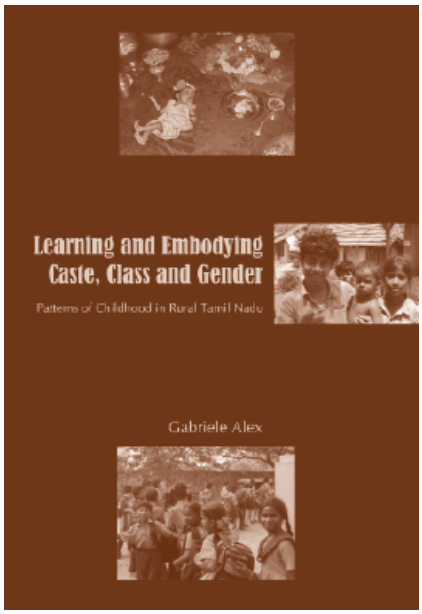

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Gabriele Alex is a Senior Research Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Department of Socio-Cultural Diversity in Göttingen, Germany. She is currently working on medical diversity in Tamil Nadu, South India.

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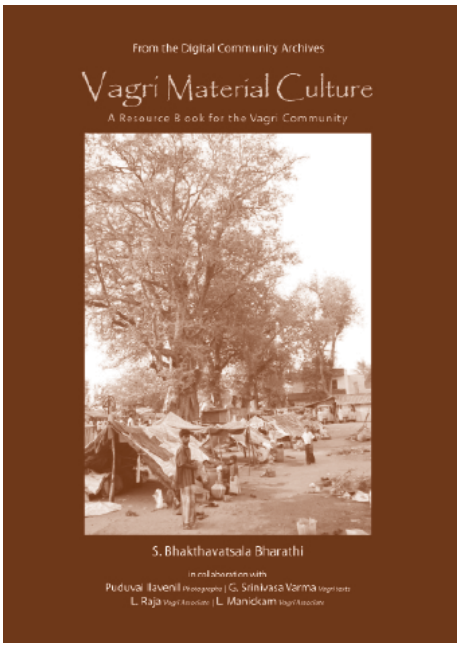

As a part of the ongoing community digital archiving process, we documented Vagri material culture intensively across a wide region, covering eight districts in Tamilnadu. Material culture is the generic term that includes all kinds of tangible things used by the Vagri. Their material culture forms an excellent base for learning the language and understanding the cultural concepts (lit.: Vagri heathenism). Further, a realm of communication and symbolism through tangible artifacts is achieved in every sensory existence. Vagri material culture, though the inventory is rather small, is largely functional, utilitarian, adaptable, innovative and flexible. Vagri material culture adheres to modernity through acculturation, assimilation, absorption and adoption of many modern inputs.

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