CHAPTER 3
LEGEND AS FOLKLORE: PLACING AITHIHYAMALA IN KERALA FOLKLORE

Legend comes from the Latin “legenda” meaning “things to be read”. It is believed that the word “legend” came into English language around 1340, perhaps transmitted through French. Before the invention of the printing press, stories were passed on via oral tradition. It is said that the English speaking Protestants of the 17th century were the pioneers of nonhistorical and unrealistic “legends” of the saints and what they propagated became a foil to the “real” saints and martyrs of Reformation whose authentic narratives can be read in Book of Martyrs by Foxe. Therefore, legends gained the connotation of “undocumented” and “spurious” accounts.

In simple terms, the stories of deities and heroes all come under the broad umbrella term “myths and legends”. However, we can make a distinction between myths and legends and also categorize them further into fairy tales and folktales. But it is possible that the same story may have elements of folk, myth, legends and even fairy tales, therefore shifting between these classifications. Legends emphasize the story more than the significance of the story. We might gain a philosophical and moral meaning form a legend.

Legends are different from genre of chronicles in that they are mostly didactic with a moral at the end. This makes the legends universal and they have the quality of being handed down through generations. Legend is separated from history by the fact that its content, once believed to have been true, turns out to be fictional. The heroes of
legend in this sense are fictional heroes or real people whose exploits are not quite what they are made out to be, who were either so lifelike or so admirable that people wished they were real. This description fits the works and heroes typically associated with the genre. A legend is a story narrated as if it were a historical event, rather than as an explanation for something or a symbolical narrative. The legend may or may not be an elaborated version of a historical event. Famous examples of legends are the stories about Robin Hood and King Arthur which have been elaborated and expanded on down the years.

Folklore, the comparative study of folk knowledge and culture, is often created out of the traditional beliefs, practices, legends, and tales of a people, transmitted orally through generations. It is generally a body of widely accepted but specious notions about a specific place, ethnic group, or particular institution that is usually surrounded by a clear set of superstitions. The terms legend and folktale are sometimes used interchangeably with myth. Technically, however, these are not the same. Donna Rosenberg, in her book *Folklore, Myth, and Legends: A World Perspective*, offers some useful guidelines.

A folktale is a story that, in its plot, is pure fiction and has no particular location in either time or space. However, despite its elements of fantasy, a folktale is actually a symbolic way of presenting the different means by which human beings cope with the world in which they live. Folktales concern people—either royalty or common folk—or animals who speak and act like people.
The history of theoretical folklore

Any strict definition of folklore is bound to exclude someone or something. Therefore, it is perhaps better to define folklorists to define it as a perspective or a way of looking at things or a mode of asking questions. One of the most influential contemporary folklorists, Alan Dundes redefines folklore by defining the two components of the term. The term folklore can refer to any group of people whatsoever, who share at least one common factor. It does not matter what the linking factor is—a common occupation, language or religion—but what is important is that a group formed for whatever reasons still have some traditions which it calls its own (Dundes 2). So there are urban folk, occupationally defined folk (such as academics), ethnically defined folk and so on. There are also forms of folklore, which are simply not transmitted orally like types of dance and visual designs.

Three stages (Payyanad 27) can be traced in the development of folklore studies:

1. The stage of enquiry into the history of meaning
2. The stage which brings out its unique characteristics
3. The stage which enquires into its meaning

In the first stage, the beginnings of folklore are found out. The second stage is understanding what folklore is. The third stage understands why folklore is there.

The first stage of enquiry into the history of folklore starts from Grimm brothers in the 18th century even before folklore had taken form as a discipline. They theorized that mythology is created in savagery and later they change form, as folktales in the
agrarian community. The basis of this theory is, of course, the historical outlook of
the scholars. In the history of a folklore form, three main aspects are taken into
consideration, which are: time of origin, place of origin and its archetype during the
time of origin. Grimm brothers had concentrated on the enquiry of the archetype of
tale. Theodore Benfey’s Indianistic theory examines the tales similar to
Panchatantra, which were popular in Europe. The theory examines its origin and
spread. Benfey, through this theory, examines the history of the Panchatantra tales
which reached Europe through Persia. It can be seen that in historical studies too,
there have been two schools of belief. Benfey believed in the former contention that
tales originated in one place and spread to other places (diffusion theory). However,
another group believes that they originate in different places and develop in the same
places where they originate (evolution theory).

Max Muller’s theories at one time caused upheavals in the area of the study of myths.
His solar mythology is an enquiry into the origin of the folklore item, namely myth.
The theory established by Andrew Lang and followed by W. J. Cox against Solar
Mythology was that myths originated from rituals. This, known as Anthropological or
Ritualistic Theory also enquires into the origin of myth.

The logical and scientific study of historical folklore is the Finnish method known as
Historical-Geographical Method as introduced by Julius Krohn at the beginning of the
twentieth century and later developed by his son Karl Krohn. This was the method
which he discovered to find out the time, place and spread of the archetype of the
Finnish epic Kalevala which has a number of variants. Later when this method was
experimented to find out the history of other folklore forms, it was established that
this was the most practical method in folklore studies.
A descriptive study approaches the folklore form objectively, without considering its past, future or surroundings. Though this discipline was established in the seventies, the work was only later known to the world as Prop's *The Morphology of the Folktale*. His model of folktale morphology is an explanation of the syntagmatic structure of the folktales from Ukrain, known by the name “skazki”. This is based on the structural theory. The nature of any structure is such that the units have fixed mutual relations and at the same time each unit is related to the whole. In the above manner, Propp took hundred “skazki” stories and found out the constituents of each tale. Then he analyzed the relationship of these constituents among themselves and to the story as a whole.

Another kind of structural analysis employed is what Levi Strauss used in the analysis of myths. While Propp tried to analyse the syntagmatic structure, Levi Strauss aimed at the study of the paradigmatic structure of the myth. Levi Strauss's attempt according to the Saussurean model was to reach at 'Langue' from 'Parole'. He has classified myths into units and has found out a paradigm based on binary opposition and mediation of the opposition. Yet another theory based on structural folklore study is that of Milman Parry which was later developed by Albert B. Lord. This theory is known as Theory of Oral Composition (Foley). The advocates of this theory state that the folk singer, who sings thousands of lines at a stretch is not singing them through memory, but is creating lines, descriptions, stanzas and stories at appropriate contexts. Each folk singer belonging to a group has a specific technique, of arranging the lines, creating descriptions through such arranged lines, creating events and creating a story by joining all these together.
Historical and structural studies mainly stress universals. When it is stated that folktales are born out of myths and myths are born out of rituals, the attempt is to arrive at the universal popularity of the folktale, myth or legend. The theories of Propp, Levi Strauss and Albert B. Lord are attempts at discovering the universal features of folklore. Folklore varies in different groups and has variants. However, the descriptive studies were attempts to prove that all cultures, though apparently different, are similar in many ways.

But modern folklorists are concentrating on studies that explain meaning through analysis. They take the help of social sciences like anthropology, psychology and sociology for their analysis.

Folklore changes as the society changes. The extensiveness of the definition of folklore has expanded the area of folklore studies. That is the reason why the concepts like Folklorism and Applied folklore came into being. Folklore appears in different contexts other than the original one. The folklore form in the primary context spreads to the secondary and tertiary contexts, because of the change in social life too, which is inevitable. The modern capitalist society having understood that this external form of folklore is a strong conveyor of ideas makes it an instrument for the transference of ideas, for instance using the attractive tone of a folk song to sell products.

Many folklore forms are not very old or ancient. Some pieces, which appear to be recent, may turn out to be very old. It is impossible to say how old a piece is without exhaustive research. Probably all folklore forms exist in multiple versions. It is usually meaningless to ask which one of the versions is correct, authentic or oldest.
Modern folklorists rarely ask these questions any more, for answers to them are usually based on personal opinion, folk conventions or incomplete information. Folklore is rarely memorized and repeated verbatim in each performance. Differences arise not out of a failure to remember but because the performer recreates that piece for each occasion and for each audience. The performers recall and his/her skill at working within the tradition do affect the outcome of a performance event producing variance. The performer draws upon the past but infuses it with elements of the present, pertinent to contemporary situations and audience interests. The ongoing tradition thus represents both the individual performer and the community. Each performance event is a sort of negotiation between the community (and often between different elements within the community) and the performer (Claus and Korom 39).

A folk tradition has several dimensions (Blackburn 6):

- The cultural context refers to all the cultural knowledge one must possess to fully understand a piece of folklore and what it means to the people who transmit it. This includes the understanding of the language and the use of special linguistic forms, not just the meaning of the words of a piece. It also includes the social reference it may make, namely particular customs and beliefs, symbolic and metaphorical dimensions of items and much more.

- The performance context is the social and temporal contexts as well as the location in which a piece of folklore is performed. A large and important part of this is the social context — the social status of the performer and the social makeup of the audience. The temporal context is important too and includes
aspects of the time of the year and the time of the day. Many pieces depend on
the location and often the location is elaborately altered in preparation for a
performance as in the case of many rituals and festivals.

- The individual context is that the folklore does not just exist in a society; it
exists in the lives of individuals. So, many of their experiences in their roles in
life as father, daughter, sister and so on go into their performances. There is
always a psychological element in the recreation of a tradition.

- The comparative context is that to fully understand a piece of folklore one
must go beyond the particular event and often beyond the particular culture in
which the event takes place. It is rare, if not impossible to find an item of
folklore that is unique to a specific culture. For instance, psychological
configurations, such as the Oedipus complex, are found in tales of virtually
every land.

Within the study of folklore one should include, the study of culture, history and
psychology. What forms and shapes any expression is the past (history and tradition),
the outer context (culture) and the inner motivation (psychology).

**Folklore in India**

In India, *janapada* is an artificial term made up by folklorists to serve as a translation
of the English compound, "folklore". In pre-colonial times Indian scholars
distinguished between the "folk categories", *samskriti* (cultured/refined) and *prakriti*

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(natural/rustic) – as in the distinction between the high, courtly language Sanskrit and the colloquial language called Prakrits. They distinguished traditional styles under the terms *marga* (path/road) and *desi* which refer to roughly, “classical” and “regional” respectively. “Folk” and their “lore” were a cultural category to be ignored as improper for scholarly attention. Folklore study in India stems from colonial days and British ideas and owes its current popularity to democratic forms of political ideology. In some languages there are whole genres catering largely to caste or regional stereotypes. Some genres of folklore are exclusively the “property” of certain castes and other types of groups.

The study of Indian folklore has not been a sharply defined field. India has usually been identified with classical traditions and culture. But there is “another harmony” (Blackburn I) that is found in India’s folk traditions. Ramanujan has emphasized on the “harmonizing” folk culture across India as contrasted with the classical traditions and culture. The early stages of Indian folklore are difficult to separate from the beginnings of the international discipline. After J. Grimm (1835) had postulated a connection between Indian and European mythology and M. Muller (1856) had detailed it, the study of Indian folklore became essential to the development of folklore theory in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In fact, India was thought to be the origin of nearly all European folk narrative. In the nineteenth century the mythical image of India was a major source for European, particularly German romanticism. Indian tales and myths also provided the supporting evidence for two enduring theories: that narratives (not just people) migrate and that literary versions are important links in the chain of transmission (Blackburn 2). While diffusion is no longer a central issue in folklore research, the interplay between oral and written
versions has attracted the attention of scholars beyond the bounds of folklore. This continues to have special significance for complex cultures like India where oral and written traditions are symbiotic.

In the initial period, philologists and linguists working in Sanskrit, Persian or Arabic dominated Indian folklore research and linguists with little, if direct knowledge of India. In the second period, the emphasis shifted away from classical texts to the field collection of materials in the modern languages of India. By the early twentieth century, extensive collections and descriptions of nearly every genre were published by British government officials and their wives and by missionaries living in India. Among them, two men were primarily responsible for leading the study of Indian folklore into internationally academic circles. One was William Crooke whose two volume study of folklore in North India is still unmatched in scope and depth. The other was R. C. Temple who published three volumes of legends from the Punjab. Temple collected oral texts, published the transliterated originals and included an exhaustive description and classification of their motifs. Although both men were British civil servants, they were very different folklorists. If Crooke studied the customs and beliefs of his subjects to better grasp their mores, Temple pursued his legends with the fascination and empathy that mark all great scholarship. Crooke later became President of the Folklore Society in London and both he and Temple contributed influential articles to its journal “Folklore”.

The third period of Indian folklore research joined the methods of the preceding two: philology and field collection. In the early decades of the century, American Sanskrit’s led by Maurice Bloomfield published a series of studies on themes culled
from the classical tale collections (*Jatakas*, *Panchatantra*, *Hitopadesa*, *Kathasaritsagara* and so on). One major piece of research was W. N. Brown’s study of the relationship between Sanskrit story material and “modern” Indian folktales. Brown found that almost half of 3000 tales had parallels in the Sanskrit literature and then concluded that the former were derived from the latter. Such parallels, of course, do establish borrowings between folk and classical traditions but indicate nothing about its direction. Brown did consider the possibility that literary versions might be taken from oral sources but only in a “pre-literate past”. Later he implies written literature replaced oral traditions. Folktales currently in the 21st century are thus necessarily derived from written literature and are termed “modern”.

What Brown did not realize is that oral and written traditions often coexist, that borrowings from one to the other has never ceased and that “modern” folktales are as old as their parallels in classical literature.

One should also distinguish between mode of origin and mode of transmission. For instance, many texts, like the poems of medieval Indian khaki saints were most probably composed orally, written down later by disciples and then disseminated orally. There was also transmission through writing. The figure below shows the cycles of transmission for traditional literature:
Folk and classical transmissions of a single story parallel each other in time and any one version may draw from either or both. As in language, the relation to oral variants is a complex, many-phased interlacing (Blackburn, 5).

In India however, folklore studies developed considerably following World War II. In particular, the nationalist movement spurred new respect for an interest in folk traditions. The search for ancient origins and the desire to present a “pure” heritage, which accompanies such nationalistic movements everywhere, cast this research in a decidedly antiquarian and chauvinistic mould. Still the sheer amount of work accomplished placed the study of Indian folklore on a more solid descriptive foundation. Following independence, Indian scholars turned to intensive first hand field research. Folk journals appeared in local languages and in English, research institutes and societies sprang up and degree courses in folklore were established in several universities. Backed by this institutional support, Indian scholars have now amassed a collection of folklore that is one of the largest of its kind in India. It is indeed important to isolate folklore as a realm for analysis and academic discipline.

Folklore in Kerala

Folklore study in Kerala was inaugurated in the year 1791. By that time the Europeans had already made significant contributions to the advancement on the subject. The first work was published by Fr. Polinose in 1791 under the title Adagiya Malabarica which was a collection of proverbs. For half a century until the 1840’s, no serious work was done in the field. In this decade, a number of foreigners contributed
a great deal to this subject. Native scholars followed it. The emphasis was more on
anthologizing and publishing rather than on any original work.

It is interesting to find out what prevented the native scholars from pursuing folklore
studies before the work of Fr. Polinose. Two reasons could be traced out. Primarily,
Kerala was not in the least urbanized or industrialized as it happened in the West.
However, changes did happen to the social fabric of Kerala on a lesser scale through
foreign contact, trade and religious conversions but these were welcome changes.
Secondly, the educated and the scholarly were guided by the thought that the
anthological works of folk songs and riddles deserved no serious study. We too had
the concept of “higher tradition “and “little tradition” in our culture. The
compartmentalization of folk arts and classical arts into “little tradition” and “higher
tradition” respectively was prevalent at that time (Payyanad 80). The “higher
tradition” which dominated the intellectual and cultural spheres of our life never
allowed the “little tradition” to emerge from the shadows.

It is worth examining the factors that prompted the foreigners to pursue folklore
studies when the native scholars ignored it. Firstly, they were not merely interested in
the popular culture or its studies but the nature of their work. As missionaries they
wanted to be acquainted with the cultural artifacts of the folks they deal with. In as
early as the 19th century, they established seminaries in Kerala and started imparting
theological lessons in the vernacular. It was both a necessity and an intelligent move
that resulted in learning the native language. Their devotion to their work resulted in
the anthologies of proverbs, publishing of Keralolpathi (origin of Kerala) dictionaries
etc. At the same time, they did not have much regard for the folk life in Kerala and
their cultural products, which the missionaries considered inferior to that of the
Westerners. This is evident from Gundert’s words, “Many people are convinced that
idol worship and worship of false gods are not good, nevertheless, due to the inherent
fear of human beings they continue to do what they have been practicing. They are
slowly moving towards the Bible and Christianity” (Payyanad 80). Hence, their
professional aim in pursuing folk studies was to refine and perfect the cultural
artifacts and they considered them deficient and imperfect. Such prejudices did stand
as obstacles in the path of folklore studies in Kerala.

Another group of foreigners like Edgar Thurston, William Logan and Percy Me queen
were colonial administrators. It was not the rustic life in India or the village culture
that fascinated them but the stakes of the imperialists. They were part of the
imperialist force that looted our country keeping it as their perpetual colony. It is
natural that the ideology represented by their country was upheld by these scholars.
This is evident in the maps, for instance, in ‘Malabar Manual’ by Logan, the then
Malabar collector that display the important crops of Kerala, the seasons favorable for
them and the exact locations where they are cultivated. The preface presents his faulty
information and biased views of the people of Kerala. He says “The malayali race has
produced no historians simply because there was little or no history in one sense to
record” (Payyanad 82). Edgar Thurston also conducted studies on folklore as part of
the policy of the then British government. He says, “It will not be worthwhile to
attempt a description of the marriage ceremony of the Thiyyans of North Malabar
because there is none or next to none” (Payyanad 82).
In short, their colonial interests largely dictated this first phase of folklore studies started by the foreigners. It was either for religious conversion or for exploitation that they were interested in learning and understanding more about the natives and their popular culture. They considered themselves the spokesmen of a superior culture and looked down upon the uncivilized and uncultured natives and their folk traditions.

The first serious work worthy to be noted by a Keralite came out in the year 1881 entitled *Bhashacharithram* by P. Govinda Pillai who studied the folksongs of Kerala. The news magazines gave the much needed impetus to folklore studies. They published folksongs and descriptions of the tradition of folk arts. *Vidyavinodini* and *Viodyavilasini* were two of the magazines in which people like Appan Thamburan published *Kaikottikali Pattukal*, a dance form accompanied by rhythmic clapping of hands and swaying of body and their brief descriptions. Then came the epoch making compilation of legends called *Aithihyamala* by Kottarathil Sankunni, a collection of 126 stories in eight volumes, the first one published in 1909 and the last one in 1934.

From the 1930's for almost three decades, there was a great increase in the quantity of such anthologies along with their studies although qualitatively they were not so outstanding. However, the works of Dr. Chelanatt Achuthamenon, Dr. S. K. Nair and M. D. Raghavan were notable. The scholars concentrated on the anthologizing folksongs and folk arts. Attempts were also made to study folk through the study of various titles of folklore. Some scholars also tried to incorporate ideas from similar studies conducted outside the country and thereby bring up folklore as a separate branch of study.
By the end of 1950's, the experts in the field started concentrating upon description too, rather than confining themselves to anthologizing. By the end of the 70's certain descriptive studies on folksongs and folk arts too came out, written by people like Kilimanoor Vishwambharan, C. R. Kerala Varma, S. Guptan Nair, Kanhiramkulam K. Kochukrishnan Nadar, M. C. Appunni Nambiar, Chirackal T. Balakrishnan Nair, G. Sankara Pillai, T. H. Kunhiraman Nambiar and C. M. S. Chandera. The support extended by National Book Stall, Sahitya Pravarthaka Sahakarana Sangham and government controlled academies and institutes were of much importance. The broad outlook that pervaded all fields of knowledge influenced folklore studies in Kerala too.

The seventies brought the decline of the joint family system and the feudal structure of the society and in turn, it brought down the joint family system based on agriculture. Even when people started dreaming of a healthier way of life they indulged in nostalgic thoughts of the past, which incidentally triggered off an added popularity and recognition to the anthologies and descriptive studies of folklore. In the first few decades of the present century social reformers like Sree Narayana Guru, Ayyankali and in the forties and fifties communists and agriculturist movements worked for the upliftment of the downtrodden. The Sree Narayana movement recognized the 'little tradition' but at the same time considered their rituals and customs inferior to higher tradition and needing reformation. It was only by the end of the 1970's that the present folklore studies evolved, although many changes have been happening till then, both in attitude to the discipline and in the discipline itself. Such awareness was late to come.
In the eighties, folklorists became aware that they should pose a strong resistance to certain challenges and create awareness in the society about this. The advent of alien cultural concepts like consumerism and globalization which interrupted the quiet life of the folks in Kerala made folklore study all the more significant. The challenges posed by the new culture of globalization and its ideological basis posed serious problems to the folk life in Kerala. A group of important personalities too emerged in this discipline like Chummar Choondal, G. Bharghavan Pillai, M. V. Vishnu Namboothiri, A. K. Nambiar and Raghavan Payyanad. Folklore academies too caught up with the changes in the present age.

Folklore as a discipline of academics is no longer viewed as inferior to other branches of knowledge. However, it has not gained the importance it deserves. The range and scope of this field of knowledge has not attained popularity among the public. The folklore activists themselves have not been able to comprehend the developments in the field beyond the fifties and sixties. The studies are mostly descriptive in nature and superficial which merely evokes nostalgia. The new awareness attained by certain scholars on a theoretical level and to a certain level in practical studies has not been imbibed by the rest. The reason lies in the lack of interest or application.

However, the folklorists have their own reasons to counter these accusations. Universities have almost sidelined if not ignored this subject. In Kerala, students of folklore do not pursue it at a higher level. In the West the folklore organizations coordinate folklore studies and chalk out strategies for the growth of the subject. In Kerala however, these organizations lack initiative and objective. In addition, there is
an absence of journals to publish the serious work done. Therefore, it becomes the responsibility of every folklorist to face the challenges posed by the subject and the age in which we live, by making the subject contemporary and popular.

We are passing through a highly complex, conflict-ridden era of liberalization and open market policy. The imperialist forces, which control the world market and invisibly direct the whole world, attempt to control even the life and individuality of the folks in such a way that they enhance their own policies and interests. However, as a reaction to this, a mode of restoration is gaining prominence the world over. This is reflected in the domains of knowledge in the entire world. Truth and knowledge which had been marginalized in premodern and modern era have come into prominence because of this. This is evident from the fact that local history and narratives have become significant in historical studies, local culture in cultural studies and dalit literature in literary studies. A study of the politics and power, which dominate and control history and legend making, becomes significant in this context.