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Defying the Divine: Rebellion against Vedic Authority in Indian Folktales

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Through a comparative reading of Rig Vedic hymns and oral traditions, the study explores how these narratives reflect resistance to Brahminical Hinduism and its caste-based hierarchies. The analysis highlights motifs such as the pestle used in rice pounding, where domestic labor and ordinary voices symbolically displace cosmic order, undermining the supremacy of deities.

The paper argues that such folktales serve as counter-narratives, providing marginalized communities with an oral weapon against religious and social domination. By situating these tales within broader debates on folklore, caste, and resistance literature, the study contributes to an understanding of oral tradition as a vehicle for subaltern expression and cultural critique.

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Defying the Divine: Rebellion against Vedic Authority in Indian Folktales

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I. Introduction

Belief in a higher power that orders the universe is a common feature across world religions. Monotheistic traditions such as Christianity and Islam proclaim the absolute supremacy of God, while Hinduism and Zoroastrianism similarly attribute creation and cosmic order to divine beings. Folklore, however, often complicates this pattern. Indian folktales, in particular, present a diverse range of perspectives in which gods may be revered, ignored, or even mocked, depending on the teller's cultural and social context.

In most Indian narratives, figures such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva from the Hindu pantheon, or the Sun and Moon as deities, appear frequently. Yet indigenous traditions often portray nature itself—the sky, the earth, and natural forces—as divine powers. These traditions developed independently of Aryan religion, even as contact with Vedic belief systems gradually shaped aspects of oral storytelling. (Dowson 344-45; Frazer 383-84, 423, 427). The result is a rich hybrid space where reverence, resistance, and reinterpretation coexist.

The present study focuses on two folktales, "The Separation of Heaven and Earth" (Kadar) and "Why the Sky Went Up" (Kannada), which exemplify this dynamic by depicting rebellion against divine authority. Unlike the Rig Veda, where Heaven and Earth are revered as cosmic parents, these tales attribute the separation of sky and earth not to gods but to human or communal action. This inversion reveals not only narrative creativity but also an implicit critique of Brahminical hierarchy and the caste system that accompanied Vedic religion.

While considerable scholarship has examined Vedic cosmologies and Hindu mythology, relatively little attention has been paid to how Indian folktales, particularly those from indigenous and marginalized communities, function as counter-narratives. Blackburn and Ramanujan describe folklore as "another harmony," where suppressed or subaltern voices subtly transform dominant religious symbols into spaces of cultural negotiation (3). By juxtaposing Rig Vedic hymns with oral tales, this paper explores how folklore reflects cultural resistance, reconfigures divine-human relationships, and affirms the agency of subaltern voices.

II. Notes on the Tales

This study examines two folktales that share a common motif of the sky's closeness to the earth: "The Separation of Heaven and Earth", a Kadar tale from Zacharias P. Thundy's *South Indian Folktales of Kadar,* and "Why the Sky Went Up", a Kannada tale recorded by A. K. Ramanujan in *A Flowering Tree and Other Oral Tales from India.*

The Kadar are an indigenous community living in the forests of the Western Ghats along the Tamil Nadu–Kerala border. Their oral traditions, as Thundy observes, are deeply interwoven with songs, rituals, and communal memory. By contrast, Ramanujan's Kannada collection reflects the storytelling traditions of agrarian communities in Karnataka, where narratives frequently

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combine cosmological motifs with the lived realities of rural life.

Both tales recount a time when the sky pressed close to the earth, obstructing human movement and making life unbearable. In each version, human action—rather than divine will—forces the separation of sky and earth. This motif not only challenges the Vedic narrative, in which the separation is the work of gods such as Indra, but also highlights the power of ordinary labor and collective voice.

III. Criteria for Selection

These two tales were chosen for their thematic coherence and symbolic force. Both dramatize a God-human conflict in which divine figures are defied, cursed, or displaced by human agency. Unlike other Kadar tales that deify the Sun, Moon, or Earth, "The Separation of Heaven and Earth" portrays the community itself as the agent of cosmic change. Similarly, "Why the Sky Went Up" emphasizes the suffering of ordinary people—a farmer, his daughter, and a grieving woman—whose actions and curses alter the order of the cosmos.

Particularly striking is the pestle motif, in which women pounding rice inadvertently push the sky upward. This image situates domestic, agrarian labor as a force capable of reshaping the universe, offering a gendered perspective rarely acknowledged in Vedic texts. It also illustrates how oral traditions transform everyday practices into cosmological metaphors, embedding resistance within the fabric of daily life. As Skaria observes in his study of forest communities, indigenous practices often carry symbolic weight far beyond their material function, acting as registers of both survival and resistance (112).

By foregrounding these tales, the study emphasizes how marginalized communities reinterpret mythological motifs not to glorify divine supremacy but to subvert it, offering a distinctly human-centered worldview.

IV. The Separation of Father-Heaven and Mother-Earth

The separation of Heaven and Earth is a recurring origin-myth across world cultures. Frazer notes that many communities once believed the sky and earth to have been united until a god or hero forced them apart (26). In the Rig Veda, this separation is attributed to Indra, who "parted twofold the eternal and united spheres of heaven and earth" (*Rig-Veda Sanhita* I.62.7). The texts exalt Dyaus (Heaven) as father and Pṛithivī (Earth) as mother, imploring: "O Heaven our Father, Earth our guileless Mother . . . bless us" (*The Hymns of the Rig Veda* VI.51.5).

These hymns depict the cosmic parents with awe and reverence, reinforcing divine supremacy. The select folktales, however, reverse this posture. Rather than celebrating Heaven and Earth, they portray the sky's oppressive closeness as a burden to humanity. The Rig Veda does not explain why separation occurred, but the folktales provide pragmatic reasons: unbearable heat, cramped space, and danger to human life. By doing so, they shift the focus from divine agency to human experience. This contrast underscores a tension between canonical religion and lived folklore.

V. Vedic Impact on the Select Folktales

While the Rig Veda attributes the ordering of the cosmos to deities such as Indra, Dyaus, and Varuna, the folktales mock or parody this divine authority. In "The Separation of Heaven and Earth", the Kadars face a sky so low that humans crawl "on all fours . . . like monkeys" (Thundy 4). To resolve this, they devise a communal act: pounding rice with mortars and pestles, lifting the sky higher with each stroke. In "Why the Sky Went Up", the problem turns tragic—a farmer dies from a cracked skull, his daughter is crushed, and a grieving woman curses the sky and sun until they recoil.

Both tales highlight how ordinary people—not gods—shape the cosmos. Their use of rice pounding, a domestic and agrarian activity often performed by women, is particularly telling. It suggests that everyday labor, especially women's labor, holds cosmological power. In contrast to Vedic hymns where gods perform heroic feats, these tales attribute change to collective effort, grief, and protest. The pestle motif, therefore, functions as a gendered and subaltern metaphor: ordinary human acts become instruments of cosmic transformation (Thompson 64).

The divergence between sacred text and oral tale also reflects social conflict. The Rig Veda speaks from the perspective of Aryan priestly elites, exalting divine order, while indigenous and marginalized communities narrated folktales that voiced frustration with oppressive conditions. By juxtaposing these traditions, the ideological divide becomes clear: reverence in Vedic hymns versus ridicule and resistance in oral storytelling.

VI. Rebellion Through the Folktale & Caste Conflict

a) Folktale as Oral Weapon

The selected folktales depict rebellion not through divine intervention but through human voices and actions. In "The Separation of Heaven and Earth", the Kadars confront the oppressive closeness of the sky with collective ingenuity, using pestles to push it upward. In "Why the Sky Went Up", grief and curses spoken by a woman compel the sky and sun to retreat. These episodes demonstrate how folktales act as an oral weapon: in societies where marginalized groups lacked access to written texts, storytelling provided a

means to challenge religious authority and reframe cosmic order.

The notion of ridicule and defiance is central. By attributing cosmological change to human protest rather than divine power, the tales mock Vedic hierarchies and empower ordinary voices. They reveal that resistance need not take the form of organized rebellion; it can be encoded in narrative, metaphor, and performance.

b) Caste and Resistance

The deeper context of this rebellion lies in India's caste history. The Aryan invasion around 1500 BCE established the Varna system, reducing original inhabitants to Shudras and Untouchables, while others fled into forests and became tribal groups (Clayton 4; Rajshekar 44). Excluded from temples, scriptures, and social status, these groups found in folklore a means of asserting dignity. Ambedkar emphasizes that the Untouchables and Tribals, though condemned by Vedic texts, sustained their own gods, culture, and identity, refusing assimilation into Brahminical Hinduism (9).

Against this backdrop, the folktales' defiance becomes clearer. The farmer, washerman, and grieving woman in "Why the Sky Went Up" are not noble figures but representatives of the lower strata—possibly Shudras or landless laborers. Their suffering under oppressive heat and their power to curse or command the sky reflect the lived realities of caste-bound communities. The tales suggest that the gods of the elite were unworthy of reverence when they caused human misery. Omvedt underscores that Dalit struggles for recognition were never confined to politics alone; cultural expressions such as stories, songs, and rituals were vital arenas of democratic resistance (54).

c) Ridicule of the Gods

Ridicule is perhaps the sharpest form of rebellion in these tales. In the Kadar narrative, the sky is shoved upward not by Indra or Varuna, but by villagers pounding rice. In the Kannada version, the gods' failure is even more pointed: the sun and sky mistake the cry of a washerman to his donkey for a divine command to halt. This moment overturns hierarchy—the voice of a low-caste laborer carries more weight than the decrees of gods.

Such ridicule directly undermines Vedic exaltations of divine omniscience. Varuna, praised in the Rig Veda for knowing men's thoughts and actions, appears ignorant in the folktale, unable to distinguish human cries. Gratitude, which in Vedic hymns is directed toward gods, is instead offered to the washerman whose accidental shout preserved life on earth. This shift in reverence illustrates how oral tradition redistributes authority from divine to human, from elite to subaltern.

d) Gendered Dimensions of Resistance

Equally significant is the gendered symbolism in these tales. Women's actions—whether pounding rice or cursing the heavens—initiate cosmic change. In a religious tradition where women were largely excluded from Vedic learning, folktales grant them agency as catalysts of transformation. Their domestic labor becomes cosmological, and their grief and protest reshape the universe. Narayan's study of Dalit women's cultural assertion emphasizes that grief and anger, voiced through oral traditions, often serve as political interventions in otherwise silenced spaces (88). This feminist dimension complements the caste critique, showing how multiple axes of marginalization intersect in oral narratives of resistance.

VII. Findings

The comparative analysis of Rig Vedic hymns and the two folktales reveals a stark divergence in how divine authority and human agency are represented. In the Vedic tradition, the separation of Heaven and Earth is a sacred act accomplished by powerful gods such as Indra or Varuna. By contrast, the folktales depict the same event as a human struggle against oppressive conditions, carried out through ordinary labor and collective resistance.

The figures in these narratives—farmers, washermen, grieving women—are not heroic deities but marginalized individuals. Their actions and voices displace divine authority and relocate power in the human sphere. This shift suggests that oral tradition functioned as a medium through which subjugated communities resisted caste hierarchies and questioned the supremacy of Brahminical religion.

Furthermore, the tales highlight the symbolic importance of everyday activities, such as rice pounding, and emotional responses, such as grief and anger, as catalysts for cosmic transformation. These motifs underscore the way folklore encoded both social protest and cultural survival. Sundar has shown, in her anthropological history of Bastar, that such oral traditions preserve memory and dignity precisely by opposing hegemonic religious and political narratives (147).

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that Indian folktales not only reinterpret mythological motifs but also operate as counter-narratives: they resist divine hierarchy, contest caste oppression, and affirm the dignity of human experience.

VIII. Conclusion

The folktales "Why the Sky Went Up" and "The Separation of Heaven and Earth" reveal how oral traditions challenge divine authority and reallocate power to ordinary people. In contrast to Vedic hymns that exalt Heaven, Earth, and the gods, these tales deny cosmic supremacy and foreground human experience—often that of the marginalized. By attributing cosmic change to the actions of farmers, washermen, and women engaged in domestic labor, the

narratives invert the hierarchies upheld by Brahminical Hinduism and its caste ideology.

The study demonstrates that folktales serve as counter-narratives: they ridicule deities, question oppressive practices, and grant dignity to voices excluded from Sanskrit tradition. In societies where the touch of a Shudra or Untouchable was considered polluting, folklore provided a space to reverse these ideologies by mocking divine order and celebrating human resilience.

These findings suggest that folktales were more than entertainment; they were instruments of cultural resistance. By juxtaposing Rig Vedic hymns with oral narratives, this paper shows how indigenous storytelling preserved subaltern perspectives and transformed myth into a vehicle of protest.

Ultimately, these folktales exemplify oral tradition as a human-centered narrative form that resists hegemonic ideologies and affirms marginalized voices. They remind us that the cosmos, rather than being exclusively shaped by divine will, can also be imagined—and reimagined—through the labor, suffering, and creativity of human communities.

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