

Twelve Ways To Interpret The Legend of Ponnivala

(Teachers: Can you come up with still more ideas?)

Suggested Approach:

Divide your classroom into teams (or allow students work independently) on one of the following topics. First have them read the entire graphic novel set. Then ask them to choose one of the following topics and prepare an argument advocating the perspective selected. Either ask for an essay or for a list of talking points. If the later, set up a series of presentations based on this work where the ideas and examples used are presented before the entire class. Make sure that a number of different interpretive perspectives are represented.

Learning Points: 1) That there are many ways to understand the meaning of a story. 2) That good stories, and especially long ones, gain depth and interest from providing multiple understandings that are buried within the text itself. 3) Improve skills related to building and defending a specific point of view. 4) Enhance oral presentation skills, especially performance ability as part of a debating team. 5) Improve skills relating to text analysis and data assembly. 6) The story can also be used as a very powerful multicultural learning tool kit.

Twelve Assignment Choices: Can You Make A Case That The Legend of Ponnivala Is About:

- 1. The Hindu gods and the ways in which they influence the lives of individual human beings.**
- 2. The Hindu goddesses and how they work to help protect the earth while assisting human communities to prosper.**
- 3. The courage, inner strength and insights of human females.**
- 4. The evolution of the family and of human values.**
- 5. The history of a region, an area having its own identity and geography.**
- 6. The heroism of brave men and boys.**
- 7. The role and responsibilities of kings and leaders.**
- 8. The downfall of those who steal, cheat or lie.**
- 9. Family dynamics, especially the power of wives and sisters.**
- 10. Surprising spiritual powers earth-bound humans (and animals) possess from time to time.**
- 11. The power of curses (and blessings) and how these influence human life.**
- 12. A playful commentary or counterfoil to the greatest of all Indian epics (The Mahabharata).**

See Some Hints For Each of the 12 Topic Assignments, Below:

#1 The Hindu gods and ways in which they influence the lives of individual human beings.



There are two key male gods in the Hindu pantheon, Shiva and Vishnu. These two gods are portrayed very differently by the story. They stand on a relatively equal footing but have very different roles to play. Vishnu is the helper who travels back and forth from the heavens to earth with great frequency. He is also very close to the heroes' family and he is very concerned for their welfare. Vishnu repeatedly helps members of the family out of a tight spot by granting them a short-lived boon of some kind. Lord Shiva, on the other hand is a remote and more severe god. He spends most of his time in meditation trying to store up power that will help the universe live on. He does not like to be disturbed. When Shiva is pulled away from his meditation work it is usually to make a life-and-death decision or to operate as the supreme judge in some case that has been brought to his attention. Shiva and Vishnu look and dress very differently. They also pass their time in very different places. It is important to know that in this (Southern) story these two great gods are understood to be brothers-in-law. Vishnu's sister Parvati is married to Lord Shiva. In episode 13 Shiva and Vishnu strike a very interesting bargain. An important verbal contract is reached at the point where Vishnu hands over his conch shell to Lord Shiva. The latter will keep this powerful instrument (blown to announce a battle or to lead men into war) in "hock" for the entire sixteen years that the lives of the three human spirits Shiva has just placed in the Queen Tamarai's womb will be present on earth. This contract assures a kind of balance of divine forces. Vishnu gains power because his job will be to supervise and guide the two brothers and their sister during this time they must spend "down on the ground." Vishnu can and does influence these heroes' fate at many points. This great god does all of the following: a) Provide magical help, b) Offer useful advice, c) Test the heroes by teasing them or placing obstacles in front of them,. Shiva, on the other hand, makes life and death decisions. He tests his devotees too, but usually he just sends out a blessing, a curse, a punishment or he will issue a court ruling of some kind.

#2 The Hindu goddesses and how they work to help protect the earth while assisting human communities to prosper



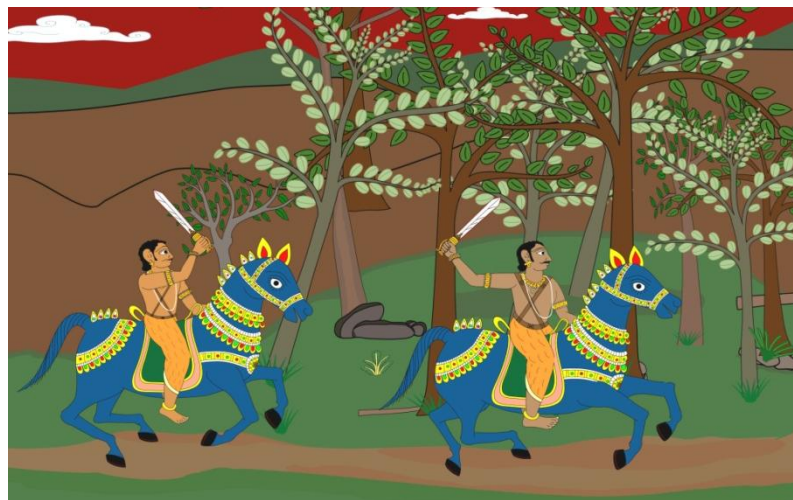
There are three key goddesses in the story: 1) Parvati who is Vishnu's sister and Lord Vishnu's wife, 2) Celatta who is the local goddess of the land, and the heroes' family deity, and 3) Kali who is the goddess worshipped by several of the heroes' rivals. In the broad view, all these goddesses are one, they are just different "manifestations" of the great female power known as "sakti." But the roles of the three goddesses differ in significant ways. Parvati stays in Kailasa, a kind of Hindu paradise high in the Himalayas. Her job is to be Shiva's wife and spend her time near him. In this story she has significant creative powers of her own, and she can also influence her husband in important matters. When her brother Vishnu, and her husband Lord Shiva are at odds, she also can serve as a mediator or a go-between. Celatta, by contrast, spends her time on earth and she is generally alone. Her main concern is mother earth and all the life forms found on it. Celatta pays particular attention to families who care for the earth well and she takes care to look after their welfare and well-being. Celatta works hard to insure that the earth will be fertile, prosperous and well-cared for by the humans that live on it. As the great Ponnivala legend unfolds one can see a gradual shift occurring. The emphasis on Celatta slowly wanes and is replaced by an emphasis on a fiercer goddess, Kali. The latter female divinity is more interested in human moral issues and she can be a harsh judge of misbehaviour. Kali is also the goddess worshipped by the heroes' main rivals and she presides over certain tough circumstances such as war and violent deaths. The goddess Durga, not directly mentioned in this story, may also have an implied presence. Durga has a strong association with a horned buffalo... a multiform of which could be the great boar Koman. Koman brandishes a magnificent set of curved tusks with which he uses to threaten prosperity in the heroes' world.

#3 The courage, inner strength and insights of human females.



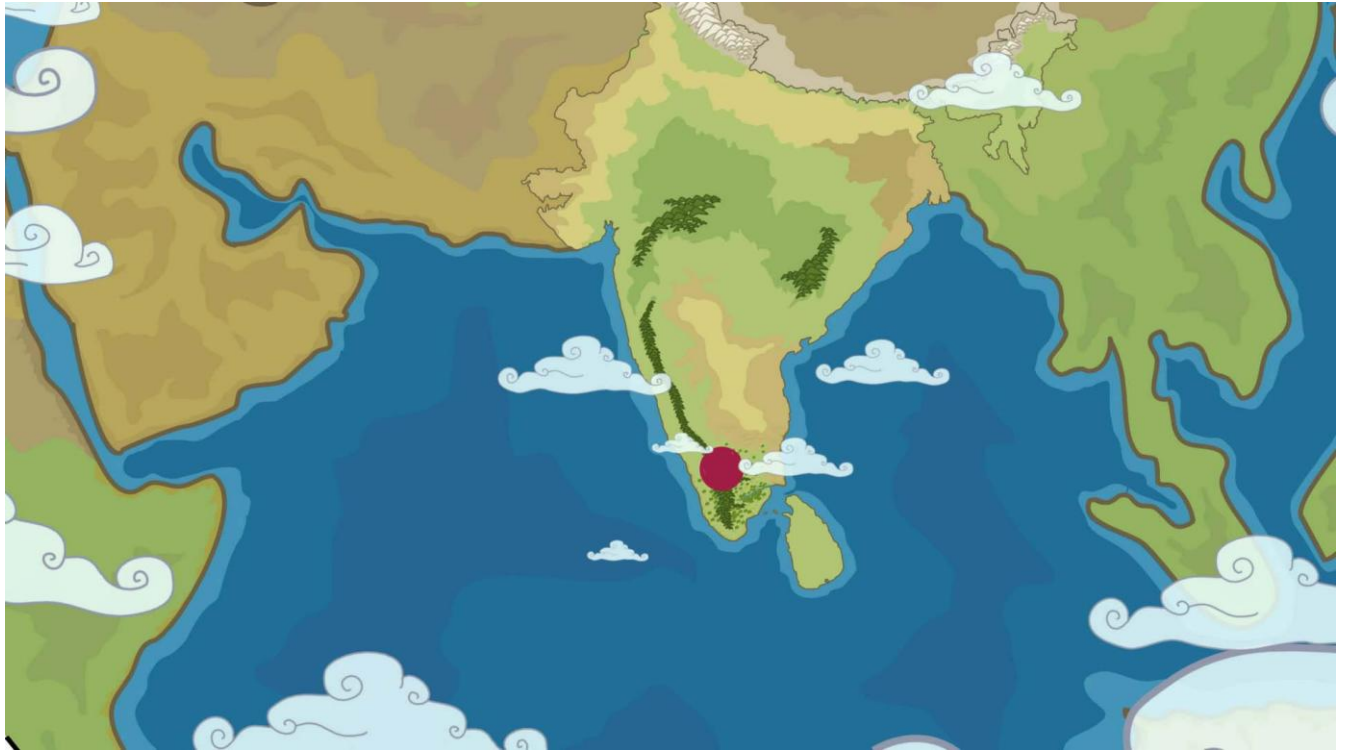
There are two key human females in this story, the heroes' mother Tamarai and the heroes' sister, Tangal. These two women can be contrasted in many ways, not the least of which is the fact that one spends 21 years sitting on a pillar and the other many years on her several palace swings. Both women use fire as a weapon when they wish to burn others with their anger. Both are also supernaturally born in an event engineered by the gods. Tamarai is full of determination and she is very devout. Tangal is unique for her dreams. In the main it is Tamarai that is associated with a pillar, but towards the end of the story Tangal also sits on a pillar briefly.... in order to win the gift of a magic wand from Lord Shiva. Tangal's power is enhanced by her two very special pets, a parrot and a small she-dog. Both of these pets can speak to her and they both have certain magical attributes which can serve to extend Tangal's own will power. Near the end of the story Tangal becomes associated with a third magical animal, a kind of golden goose. This goose serves as her vehicle (something only the gods use in Hindu mythology more generally). Hence by the time Tangal mounts this golden goose we can think of her as having developed the supernatural qualities of a minor goddess. When Tangal flies on this golden goose it takes her from the land of the living to the place where her brothers lie dead. Tangal is the only human in the story to fly and this unique journey of hers seems to symbolize her movement from the land of the living to a space meant for "transfiguration." Here, as she joins her dead brothers, she offers them special substances which act to resurrect them briefly. In fact this act of bringing her siblings back to life (if only briefly) could be called Tangal's greatest achievement. She does this so that she can talk with them. Tangal is the more complex of the story's two main females. She changes her mind at a key moment. She also finds ways to test her brothers, even lying to them at one critical point.

#4 The evolution of the human family and of human values



The story focuses on three generations of one family. The grandfather, Kolatta, is a pioneer and the first farmer in his area. He values hard work and is proud of being a new and previously wild area under the plough. His son, Kunnutaiya, becomes a wealthy landowner who builds a solid alliance with the local Chola king... a famous monarch who lives at a distance. This Chola king treats the Ponnivala area (also known as the Kongu region) as an outlying territory belonging to his realm of influence. As a result the heroes' family line gains influence and is able to prosper. They now have a grand palace and significant social status. They are able to hold off their rival cousins and also other challengers. In the third generation, however, the twin grandsons of this local farming family develop new ideas. Ponnar and Shankar want to be warriors. They are interested in battle and in defending the family name. They long for independence and are not much interested in how to rule a territory, once they have gained full control. It is important to note, however, that these "twin" brothers differ greatly in their personalities. Ponnar is meek, humble and obedient. He wishes to follow his father's instructions and to rule the kingdom peaceable. His brother, by contrast, is aggressive and belligerent. He wants to assert his family's honor by taking revenge on all who have brought hard to the family in the past. He is the rebel but also the one who seeks glory and fame. The one son replicates his father's while the other presents a new model for a ruler to follow. This contrast is important and is one of the key concepts the epic puts forth: Which style of kingship is best? Or, perhaps, is a compromise between these two extremes the true way forward?

#5 The history of a region, an area having its own identity and geography



The area known as Kongunadu (for which Ponnivala is a poetic label) is an upland region (the red dot) that is relatively dry. Furthermore, it is surrounded by high hills. This locale never had the status of a “famous kingdom” ruled by powerful overlords (the much renowned Cholas, Cheras or Pandyas). This may be why such a major epic story developed here. The Ponnivala legend affirms the pride of local residents, loudly proclaiming their heroism and the magical powers of their women. The story functions to give locals their own identity and social status vis-a-vis other cultural regions of the South. It also displays their poetic skills, their knowledge of a wider corpus of myth and story, and provides key details that reflect a local geography. Thus the story provides a touchstone or a bedrock on which to build both independence and social visibility. The area also has an interesting historical link with a key trade route that used to bring business men from the Middle East who were interested in trading their coins for Indian spices and gemstones. This merchant activity has been documented as having existed as early as 4,000 years ago. Boats would come down the Eastern edge of the Arabian Sea and land at the one area where there is a big gap in the so-called Western Ghats, a mountainous chain that runs down the West coast of India like a high spine. The only really significant break in that mountain chain, known as the Palghat Gap, still bears traces of the route these traders used. The portage trains, probably using pack animals to carry merchant’s goods, resulted in huge hordes of coins being left hidden along these pathways by the travelers (and perhaps also by bandits who regularly attacked them). Recent archaeological finds of Greek and Roman coins in this area are the largest such hordes uncovered and thus-far documented anywhere in India.

6 The heroism of brave men and boys



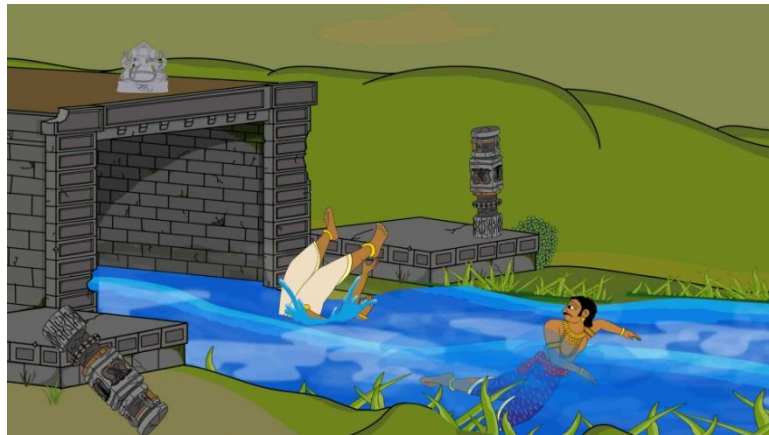
One can view Ponnivala the story as a celebration of brave and courageous men. The grandfather endured drought , exile and a lot of hard work before being able to open up new lands to the plough. He even endured a terrible divine test where the local artisans tried to cut off his head. Kolatta's "spiritual" son, Kunnutaiya, becomes an orphan early in life. He has to survive by virtue of his own wits for many years, cutting down forest wood to sell and wandering in areas that belong to others. Eventually the brave Kunnutaiya makes a marriage that goes against local norms. This happens when he selects a woman high above himself in status. Kunnutaiya also suffers under a curse of barrenness, and he accompanies his wife on a long pilgrimage to try to reverse this fate. Then Kunnutaiya's two sons appear and they provide yet another model of heroism. These twins, Ponnar and Shankar, are warriors par excellence, especially the second-born of the two. Now the focus turns to male courage and strength in battle, and to a final act of heroism in which both men fall forward on their own swords in order to dedicate their lives to the gods. The story is filled with multiple examples of who each pursue fame and fortune, each of whom follows a different drummer.

#7 The role and responsibilities of kings and leaders



One can argue that in the first half of this Ponnivala story gradually builds a model intended to describe the role of a “good king.” But then in the second half of the same story that model is torn apart such that it eventually tumbles into ruin. One can say that this legend shows how great kings are made and then, addresses how easily they can fail. Kolatta is honest and hard working. He leads his brothers into a new area and helps them find work. Kolatta also accepts a contract designed by Lord Vishnu that lays out an equitable balance of rights and responsibilities between rival groups. The family prospers under his leadership. Kunnuiya is also honest and kind but perhaps a little more ambitious. He works at building an alliance with a neighbouring Chola king that results in his being granted a “title.” Kunnutaiya is not at all ferocious or mean. He is loved and respected by his subjects. Kunnutaiya provides the story’s prime example of the “good king,” a man who is fair and caring in his administration of the territory. But this man’s two sons, especially the younger one, are not interested in following their father’s advice. He is out for revenge and seeks the glory of a good fight. Eschewing all contact with his wife, ignoring the welfare of his sister and never taking time to worship the family goddess, Shankar focuses on attacking his family’s rivals. Due to his inattention he loses all his local fighters in a great boar hunt. Even Lord Vishnu now takes the side of his opponents and leads them onto the battle field. Then it is these two brothers’ time to give up their own lives, and to leave their former fine kingdom in ruins. There will be no local males to do the hard work no ruler to take the reins. What has been nurtured for two generations now falls into ruin. Good rulers will rise and eventually be succeeded by bad kings ... who fall.

#8 The downfall of those who steal, cheat or lie



This reading of the Ponnivala story is simplistic but plausible, especially when the story is being told to children. In the first generation the artisans are not permitted (by Lord Vishnu) to hog their lovely lands. This caring god forces them to accept a bunch of hard working newcomers, and to establish a viable working agreement with those farmers over each groups rights and responsibilities. Then comes Kolatta's own punishment for wrong doing. He is guilty of having built a cruelly spiked iron fence that kills a group of sacred cows that try to jump over it. Kolatta did not do enough "research" before taking this action and Lord Shiva punishes him with a curse. That curse of barrenness is to lie on his wife and all of their descendents for seven generations. In the next time period we see punishments too. Tamarai, the wife of Kolatta's successor, curses her brothers' many children to a temporary death because their fathers have her beaten. They also try to deny Tamarai her birth right to re-enter her old family home whenever she pleases. Later in this same generation, a group of artisans are killed by the goddess for lying and plotting the death of the king and queen of Ponnivala. They are to die under the wheels of her festival chariot. When we reach the third generation there are still more such problems. Again an artisan tries to deceive others. This time it is the twin brothers and his attempt to steal their swords. Getting a just reward for this deceit the artisan slips and cuts himself instead. Later he dies in a battle with these men. Similarly, the family's clansmen are punished and sent into exile for having given the heroes' father a hard time. And in the end, the twins themselves are dishonoured when they lose all of their village men in an ill-thought-out boar hunt. Eventually the twins' sister uses fire to express her anger. She burns down her own sisters-in-laws' palace because of their refusal to perform her brothers' (their husbands') funeral rites. Although the fuller story is complex and balances out many points of view, it also provides a clear thread that urges honesty, kindness and compassion upon all.

#9 Family dynamics, especially the power of wives and sisters



The Ponnivala story has a lot to say about family dynamics but it focuses especially on parent/child and on brother/sister relations. On the first matter we have the example of Kolatta being cursed and then Lord Shiva relenting and granting him a magical child. That child has to be “accepted” into the family and there are several stages of ritual used to solidify this new bond. Later, when Kolatta and his wife die we again see the importance of the parent’s feelings towards their children and their extreme anguish when such bonds must be broken. In the next generation we also see the bond between parents and children addressed, especially at the moment when the former convey their “death-bed requests” to their twin sons. These are accepted humbly at the time of their pronouncement, but just a little while later we see the two children (especially the younger one) deliberately refusing to obey his parent’s last wishes. Hence, we see not only affection, and sorrow at parental loss, but also rebellion and denial on the part of two sons. The story presents a harsh but realistic view of family life. When it comes to brother-sister relations the story is also poignant, and it contains several specifically South Indian cultural twists. Tamarai has a serious row with her brothers which starts at the point when they try to prevent her marriage to a man they believe to be their social inferior. The local goddess and the local priest both try to “patch things up” but with only a certain degree of success. In the next generation the twin brothers start off caring for their sister but gradually grow more forgetful and disinterested. They also begin to play dice incessantly, a pastime associated with gambling and evil in general. No surprise then when something terrible befalls the kingdom so after each game finishes. All this upsets their sister. As a result, Tungal gradually begins to test her brothers, starts to criticize them, and to withhold information. Eventually she will refuse to bless their swords and come to openly predict their death. The story thus portrays the brother-sister bond as one of strong emotions but also shows glimpses of this relationship’s darker and more foreboding underside.

#10 Surprising spiritual powers earth-bound humans (and animals) possess from time to time



The Ponnivala story is full of interesting animals, many of whom can speak. There are cows and horses who ask the heroine Tamarai to bring them back a magical blessing of fertility upon return from her visit to Lord Shiva's Council Chambers. Then there is a mother boar that is kicked by Tamarai for lying on her footpath. That sow-pig swears that the queen's sons in return: she predicts that they will suffer at the hands of her son.... in the next generation. There is also a magical little dog who is cunning and courageous enough to defeat a huge wild boar. And then there is the boar himself, a huge black monster who can not only speak but even write messages (albeit in Tamil) with his tusks. Finally, there are also parrots who speak to one another, as well as with a forest princess. All this promotes the idea that life is more magical than we might think, and also that curses can have powerful effects. Two animal curses are especially important in this story and they make these creatures appear very humanlike. The sow-boar's curse lies behind her request to the gods to bear a son of her own who will be huge, tusked, black and very strong. When born this magical "child" becomes a "pet" for the forest princess and he represents the wild, hunter gathers of the forest who object to the farmer-heroes' presence. He tears up the farmers' fields and this aggression on his part is a key cause of the final great farmer/hunter war. But a little palace she dog, also a gift of the gods requested by her mother, provides a counter balance. Most importantly, she also curses the heroes, specifically this little dog named Ponnacci sends a cloud of illness to the twin heroes' war tent. There this nasty cloud hangs over them and makes them both (especially Shankar, the younger and fiercer twin) fall ill. That curse will not be lifted until Shankar apologizes for insulting this she-pup... who is their sister's special pet. Meanwhile, while the curse has been in effect, the two heroes loose all of their fighting men in an ill-timed expedition to find the great boar. Finally appeased, Ponnacci manages to defeat the wild boar by using her teeth (and her smarts). Although she steps back at the final moment to let the heroes have the glory of spearing the boar, it is clear that she really deserves the honor of this important kill that initiates the last part of the story. And this kill is culturally appropriate. In South India it was traditional to sacrifice a large black animal before setting off to war. (See a further discussion of curses in the commentary provided for #11)

#11 The power of curses (and blessings) and how these influence human life



The entire epic is driven by one major event that occurs right near the beginning of the story: the point when the grandfather/pioneer hero Kolatta is cursed by Lord Shiva to barrenness.... a spell that is to last over his family for seven generations. The family understands this curse to be real when Kolatta's wife finds she has gone years without bearing any children. But this curse is also a device.... it also allows the gods the opportunity to step in and provide divinely "created" children who will be adopted into the hero's descent line in lieu of actual biological offspring. This common "fairytale device" gives each and every key person in the story (man or woman) a divine parentage. In The Legend of Ponnivala every hero and heroine is, by their very "nature" imbued with a certain amount of superhuman power because they have been created by the gods... and not by a human couple in the normal biological way. The special "powers" the heroes and the heroines have, surface from time to time. They are particularly noticeable in the two heroines who use "truth statements" of obtain gifts from the gods. Both key heroines begin each request of the gods (for fire, for a magic wand, etc., with a statement that says "if it is true that I was born of the god's special powers then let me have..... " Special female powers that come to them during times of stress can be noted throughout the story. One particularly striking case occurs at the end of the story when the heroes' sister Tangal is able to briefly raise her brothers from death... in order to speak to them ...just one last time. Animals can also use curses, as seen in the commentary for #10.

#12 A playful commentary or counterfoil to the greatest of all Indian epics (The Mahabharata)



There are many, many ways in which this Ponnivala legend mirrors, but also plays with, the great and very early Mahabharata epic, a story known throughout India. First of all the twin heroes of the third generation are described as reincarnations of two great heroes in the Mahabharata: Arjuna and Bhima. Secondly the Mahabharata is referenced at the beginning to the bard's retelling... as his model. But going beyond these obvious linkages one can find many additional subtle and interesting overtones. One interesting one is the story of how Arjuna gets his magic bow from Lord Shiva, which appears in the Ponnivala legend in two parts, but transformed so that the heroes' mother stands and asks for a divine boon and instead of being granted a bow she is granted a son who will be an incarnation of Arjuna himself! There is a wild boar in this original story which has its counterpart, as well, in the local epic (just described in the commentary for #10, above). There is another famous story in the Mahabharata called "the Daksha myth" which has a clear parallel in the details provided about the heroine Tamarai and her marriage which was so unpopular with her brothers (who act as her father... see the commentary for #9, above). There is also a major struggle against male lineage cousins in this epic, just as we see in the Mahabharata. Although not THE ONLY conflict stage in this local epic, there is plenty of room for comparisons. And there is also an importance given to the dangers of playing dice in both epics. Plus there is a similarity in the beating of the heroine Tamarai (Draupadi in the great epic), in both cases by her husband's cousins. But in other respects Tamarai more closely resembles the Pandava's mother Kunti, which seems an appropriate comparison since Tamarai is the mother of Ponnivala's heroic twins. There are also "overtones" (and very interesting differences) in the story's treatment of a Bhagavad Gita-like segment in the Ponnivala legend. This is the famous spiritual text famous in the original Mahabharata story where Lord Krishna advises Arjuna, the warrior. In this regional epic we have Lord Vishnu (Krishna's father-like multiform) advising Shankar. But here Vishnu has sided with the enemy hunters, and thus performs in a role that is quite different from that played by Krishna in the very well-known Mahabharata counterpart. In sum, this local epic "plays" with much in the Mahabharata, retelling that much older story in a creative, almost topsy turvy way.

PLUS: Other Possible Topics For Student Essays:

- A) In what specific ways does the Legend of Ponnivala serve as an artistic/poetic statement about the beauty of South Indian folk traditions? Are there ways in which it “Misses the mark?”
- B) Was it a good idea to create 26 graphic novels that tell this story or does this “comic book treatment” downgrade and trivialize a great and sacred legend?
- C) Compare the Legend of Ponnivala to a great European epic (say Beowulf, The Kalevala, The Odyssey, Gilgamesh, or The Aeneid). What are some of the similarities and some of the differences?
- D) Compare the various “talking animals” in The Legend of Ponnivala to some of the more famous animals in European folktales.