



READING OF FABLES IN INDIAN CLASSROOMS: A SURVEY

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ABSTRACT

Children's Literature is a vast canvas, painted with so many imaginative stories and pictures. This world is not very far from real life experiences. Children have their own way of learning about the world often with the help of things which appear fantastical. I tried to explore the world of children's imagination with the help of fables. Fables populate the world of children at an early age. In this research project I decided to discover how fables play role in building the imagination and character of children. I would like to share my experiences during the project that gave me a chance to interact with government school kids. The assumptions with which I approached these children, *changed* in the course of my visits. Before I approached the children with stories, my homework was to delve deep into the concept of fables itself. While popular definitions define fable as a short allegorical narrative making a moral point, traditionally by means of animal characters that speak and act like human beings, it is also important to notice that fable is a form that has its roots in the genre of folk tales.

Keywords: Fables, Fiction, Imagination, Morality, Violence, Allegory, Education

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INTRODUCTION

Joseph Jacobs defined the fable as "a short, humorous, allegorical tale, in which animals act in such a way as to illustrate a simple moral truth or inculcate a wise maxim" (1892, p. 204). In other words, the fable is a tale in which animals, acting as *dramatis personae*, behave like people while keeping their animal traits. Although this view is still held by a large number of scholars, especially non-folklorists, it has also raised some serious objections. Ben Edwin Perry, following the observation of the classical rhetorician Aelius Theon, has suggested that the fable is a rhetorical form of expression which dramatically communicates an idea or a truth of some kind in a metaphorical manner (Perry, 1984, pp. xix, xxiv, xxxiv). Works recognized as fables may come from oral or literary sources, appear in prose

or verse form, vary greatly in terms of length, and serve as vehicles for social commentary and satire as well as for philosophical and moral instruction. In particular, the assumption that the fable is "an animal tale" has been challenged. Some fables are not animal tales at all. Fables may have gods, heroes, plants, and even inanimate objects as their *dramatis personae*.

The *International Dictionary of Regional European Ethnology and Folklore* (II, p. 94) defines the fable as "a short, usually mono-episodic narrative with animals, occasionally humans or gods, as *dramatis personae*. It is a literary genre which is used to illustrate ethical and moral teachings. The teachings may be placed in the introduction (promythium), or in the ending (epimythium) of the

narrative." Such fables may vary greatly in terms of length, may be written in prose or verse.

With the advance of society it is asserted the need of a different kind of fable, more critical towards man and society itself: and therefore emerged the Aesop fable which, employing the animals as main characters, intends to represent, by them, well-defined human types: the *bully*, the *insatiable*, the *sly*, the *fool*, the *vain*, the *arrogant*, etc. Also hundreds of fables were composed in ancient India during the First millennium BC, often as stories within frame stories. These included Vishnu Sharma's *Panchatantra*, the *Hitopadesha*, *Vikram and The Vampire*, and Syntipas' *Seven Wise Masters*, which were collections of fables that were later influential throughout the Old World. Ben E. Perry (compiler of the "Perry Index" of Aesop's fables) has argued controversially that some of the Buddhist *Jataka* tales and some of the fables in the *Panchatantra* may have been influenced by similar Greek and Near Eastern ones. Earlier Indian epics such as Vyasa's *Mahabharata* and Valmiki's *Ramayana* also contained fables within the main story. The most famous fables from the Middle East were the *One Thousand and One Nights*, also known as the *Arabian Nights*.

I would first like to write briefly about the infrastructure of the school I chose.

The school is situated in Dhaka village in Delhi and has about 200 students. Though I was not surprised to find the lack of writing desks and chairs for students, but their talent did surprise me in more ways than one. The class rooms were not particularly clean yet the students had to sit on the floor while they were taught. There lay a chair and a desk for the teacher, and a small blackboard hung on the front wall facing the kids, which was made readable by the natural light that entered the room from a window in the class. Assuming that there would only be day sessions of teaching, the room was devoid even of a tube light. The ceiling of the room was not plastered like the walls; in fact, it was merely covered with tin sheets to prevent water from dripping into the room in monsoons. There were no arrangements for children to sit on a carpet or a mattress, in the approaching winter. The absence of sanitation facilities and only one

washroom for students in working condition – are facts that not only expose the indifference of the authorities responsible for taking care of these basic amenities, but also throw light on the plight of the students and partly on the teachers who get only fewer more facilities than the students. For instance, the teachers were at a loss when asked how they carry out the practical sessions in a computer class with only one out of three computers was working.

The school playground was also a small one making it a cramped up place for students during the recess or what they call the 'mid-day meal time', with all of them rushing at once to the field to play. There was no sports teacher assigned to the school to monitor the physical activities that the children should engage in, in their games period. Instead I was told that a teacher teaching the 2nd standard children has been given the task of assigning activities to children in their sports period. I will come back, in a while, to the small duration of time called the break time, in which I explored the school premises and the children in a better way than I could, while our interaction with them within the class room space. But before I proceed further I would also like to talk briefly about the children.

I held about 5 sessions with these children and on all days I noticed that their uniforms had not been washed. On asking them why they continue to wear dirty uniforms every day, most of them replied hesitantly by revealing us their economic background. Most of them were below poverty line since their parents worked as rickshaw pullers, masons, while others ran tea shops in winters and sold ice cream in summers. They said that their parents would return home after seven in the evening and either the lack of running water or fatigue after the day's work prohibited their parents to wash their uniform, besides the fact that they had only one pair of uniform, which was given to them free of cost once a year. Their reluctance (in telling us what made them use to wearing dirty uniform) was evident of a subconscious discomfort with their status as below poverty line while at the same time they were extremely confident about themselves as great performers and students. Some of the students told us that their parents had migrated to Delhi from Uttar Pradesh and Calcutta. Thus when

asked about their take on fables, they said that such stories or for that matter stories of any kind as long as they are fictitious and fantastical, offer mere entertainment. They believed, even at such a young age as theirs, that stories of any kind, whether in books or in the films, are far removed from the reality that surrounds them or the reality that they inhabit and though they may occasionally enter the world of these stories, they eventually have to live in world outside these stories. I was quite astonished at such thoughts, given the fact that they were aged 8 to 11 years and not more.

Coming back to the midday meal I would like to relate an instance where a child whose mother had been working as a cook in the school, refused to eat the food that the school served them citing the reason that each time he ate from school, his stomach would ache. This came as a surprise after I learnt that his mother was one of the cooks that prepared lunch for these children. But nonetheless, recess time or the midday meal time has been the most interactive and interesting time we had with the kids.

I would like to begin by informing you about the objectives we had in mind. Our job was to read the fables to these children differently from the manner in which their teachers taught them, to help them make their own stories and corresponding illustrations, as children loved to draw and I have a few samples with us in the scrap book. I also showed them videos, drew pictures for them on the blackboard, gave them punch lines to begin their own stories with, made them compete with each other in making those stories and later asked them to enact a few, of which we have a video. I conducted a survey of the library books, observed the teachers teach in class and later interviewed them.

I shall now begin by telling you more about the activities I made them do. In the very first session I introduced a few fables and asked them how many stories of the same kind have they read or happen to know. They found it interesting to have us discuss the characteristics of different animals and in what qualities they appear like human like, something that a regular teaching session would not allow for. I started with some of very simple and

popular fables like 'The Crow and The Fox', 'The Greedy Dog' and 'The Ant and The Pigeon'. Most of these stories were known to them earlier. But our motive was not only to make the stories familiar but to find out how these children receive and interpret these stories and what do they actually learn from them, without having them *taught* these in the usual class-room teaching manner. I would narrate stories making visual and vocal gestures that kept the children glued to their places out of interest. They said that they have never been a part of a story telling session where the narrator made them laugh with him, or even created suspense at various points in the story.

I am not sure whether to call it a disadvantage, a hindrance of sorts or to see it positively, that all students preferred to speak in Hindi even in the English period that made it necessary for them to read from a book which had stories written in English. They felt more relaxed and at ease to discuss the events from any story in Hindi, even when they understood the same in English. To be able to articulate their thoughts in a language they felt comfortable in, was more important to us than forcing them to translate their thoughts into English. Instead we translated most of the stories for them from English to Hindi. Language never became a barrier for these children in understanding (if I may call it) the *language of the story*. I showed them two Manipuri videos. I would like to explain here the reason behind our choice of these stories told through the medium of animation. My aim was to get a first-hand experience of the difference that it would make to story-telling itself and to the children as audience on being (a) read a story and (b) shown an animated version of a story they'd been narrated orally. The sound effects had a great impact on these kids who'd, I am sure they must have seen a Bollywood film on the television at some point or the other in their life but may not have come as close to a laptop as they did when they watched the animated film. They all hooted when their favourite characters emerged victorious in the story, or the evil natured ones were punished. They laughed at the funny parts in the story and cried when the music played soft at episode where the girl transformed into a bird. Another reason behind

showing them this video was that, usually animal characters play their part of the role in the story without being transformed into another being or creature, like simple Aesopic fables show. But, in the story, the girl who is tortured by her step-mother undergoes a metamorphosis and acquires bird like physical features, where she can flap her wings and fly like them. My part was to push their imagination and questions a little further and into a deeper understanding of the same by asking them whether they were happy with her transformation into a bird. Whether they think that her transformation is only limited to her physical appearance or does it affect her mind to think like a bird too? They even replied by saying that they wished they could fly like that girl who was blessed by the birds and like her, could rise above their miseries too.

Though Nirupama (one of my friend whom I took along for the experiment) was the only one among us to understand Manipuri and the rest of us only guessed at the meaning of a story by looking at the scenes, yet I was not always right in concluding with the story teller's intended meaning. But to our amazement, the kids were. Though Nirupama had translated the story for me, she had not done so for the kids, yet they came out with many logical interpretations of the videos that were played in Manipuri. Even though it took them a while to put together all the pieces of the puzzle in the story, it was worth listening to the varied conjectures that they came up with in the whole process of interpreting the animated movies. Belonging to the lowest strata of the class and caste structure, these kids loved to make fun of the *Pundit* cat in the movie named *Pebet*, where the cat is ridiculed for his high-mindedness and wears a dhoti. The end of the story, rightly interpreted by the kids, revealed an apparent stupidity of the *pundits*, who no doubt are swift like a cat, yet, can be ousted by their victims in no time. The ending of the story throws light at the kind of audience that such movies would cater to.

The main objective of showing them the videos in a completely alien language was to find out if language could act as a hindrance in the imagination of students. But we found that pictures and expression play more active role in building their imagination than the texts. They were also able

to notice even the minute details which we often miss.

The other day we showed them some fable videos in Hindi, it had been a long session. Nirupama had carried her laptops along and we divided the class into two groups since the strength with many kids having left for Diwali, was about 25 to 30. We had played the story of *The Monkey and The Crocodile* on both the laptops simultaneously but one of the laptop's battery soon gave up and we decided that instead of asking all the kids to share one laptop, we would pause at that very moment the story was interrupted and ask the children, even those who were watching it on the other laptop, to continue the story from there with their own imagination. The story stopped at the point where the crocodile carries the monkey on his back to his home. Some of them came up with easy conclusions like the monkey having died or eaten up by the crocodile's wife, but a few of them invented various complicated extensions of the story too. At many points where we felt that they will end their story, but they would give it a new turn. They loved to make complicated stories and revealing the mysteries in the end. We have attached some of the interesting stories in the scrap book provided.

In another session we read them fables from books other than their prescribed textbooks. Having observed the way their own teachers taught them we noticed that the students' participation in the regular class had almost been nil, where the teacher merely narrated the story without the tonal nuances that should have been used while distinguishing sounds of various animals or even vocal expressions as in emotions such as anger, happiness, excitement or sadness. When we held fable telling sessions with them, our basic idea was to make them alert to these very points that their teachers had missed. They loved the way we read them the stories. This was noticed by the teachers too, but they explained why they never read the stories in so dramatic a fashion because, if they did, they would never be able to finish the syllabus which required them to read the chapter in one go and then come straight to the exercises at the end of every chapter. In one of the sessions, one of our group mates – I sketched a few animals on the

blackboard with a few trees around them, a sample of which we've tried to reproduce in our scrapbook too, and asked the children to make stories using the components of the scenery in a week's time. We gave them three animals – a giraffe, a lion and a mouse. The idea behind giving these three animals was (a) they are distinct in their attributes such that the giraffe is not as ferocious as the lion and the mouse is neither as huge as the giraffe nor as violent as the lion and (b) each child could use each animal in the manner he or she liked in the story. We were actually hoping that the kids would come up with stories assigning these three characters attributes different from the ones that are traditionally associated with them where the lion would be a docile one and the mouse would trick the lion to become the king of the jungle and so on. Though most of the kids did try to experiment with traditional notions about these animals found especially in textbooks, others found it *safe* to stick to the popular opinion. Some of the stories that we found interesting have been collected in the scrapbook. They had fixed notions in their mind that if there's a mouse they are to work with, in a story, it would be employed to nibble and gnaw at a net and help a friend, if there's a lion he has to be a cruel one, a giraffe is useful only for his neck and so on. We observed after having collected all the stories that most of the children managed to stick to the number of characters we gave them to work with, while others introduced newer characters. On asking them why they did so, they responded with – '*yeh baaki jaanvaro ki madad karte hain*'. The range of their imagination took them beyond the stories they'd known or read till now. Some of them combined plots that they were familiar with, while others invented their own.

What we noticed in this exercise was, that they loved to complicate the plot of the story and tried to give it many twists, of which the best were Sachin's, but they usually ended on a very simple and not to forget, a happy and positive note where everything was reconciled, everything fell back in place in harmony, everyone having learnt their lessons and so on. We never asked them to end the story with a moral, but it seemed to us that because their textbooks had morals in coloured boxes at the

end of every story, the kids too had a tendency to shape their story in such a way that they came up with a moral in the end. But on the other hand they would love to alter the features of the animals and teasingly identified features of many of their classmates with those of the animal characters. We also noticed in them the belief that it is important for a story to be entertaining and funny, rather than being written in style and sophisticated language.

In another session I divided the class into two halves. The kids suggested I make one group of girls and the other of boys. It was a competition of sorts where we gave characters such as a King a Queen, a Fairy, a lion and a mouse and asked each group to provide one line each and carry the story forward. I noted down the sequence of events and then asked the children to enact the very story they had constructed.

I also worked with illustrations in picture books asking them to identify the expressions that animals had on their face and make up a story. It is interesting to see how animals are given human emotions and the child is *tutored* to almost face-read such animal characters. Had these stories been populated only by human characters, one cannot say if they would still be as interesting. Making the children enact their own created story was the last exercise we did with them where they engaged in role playing and even tried to mimic the gait of various animals. Almost all of them wanted to be the King among the boys and girls wished to play the butterfly and the fairy.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude by saying that these children redefined the way I understood or understand fables as a form. They challenged most of the assumptions I had in mind when I approached them for the first time. For these children the animals could be as significant as a human in the story or could play a role as minor as that of a pet. My aim was to look at their interpretation of the various stories we narrated to them and others that they saw from videos and picture books of whose text was only later revealed to them. I also found that these children did not have a library as public schools do. They had a small room which was called *Bal Bhawan* which was not allowed to be accessed

since its ceiling was heavily damaged and had the risk of collapsing. A teacher had been assigned the duty of distributing various story books every fortnight to these children for reading at home. Thus they weren't allowed the option to actually pick and choose the one book that appealed to them, but were asked to settle with the one that was handed to them by the teacher. I was surprised to know that in spite of a huge dearth of reading material for these kids, they knew about many famous stories, such as *The Thirsty Crow*, *The Fox and The Grapes*, *Cinderella* and so on. On asking them how they managed to know so many stories, they could never pin point any one source, but they did tell us that most them were orally heard either when their teachers referred to some instance in a story, or from their elder siblings and their parents, or even their grandparents. By the end of the project, the students became a part of our life and we of theirs. Every Wednesday they eagerly waited for me with more story books and colorful picture. In the last session I got a few fable books in easy English for the students so that they could even learn the language since school textbooks often appeared less attractive than the colorful books that we use to take with us to the class. I bade them good bye with sweets in the last session but they still insisted us to visit again. Some of them also promised to bring more such stories class just to make us visit them again. All this made us believe that the students are very enthusiastic to learn, very creative and imaginative in thinking and nowhere lagging behind. Despite of insufficient infrastructure and untidy clothes, they have great potential and imaginative power. I believe if would have been provided with better infrastructure and other educational facilities they could excel in every field of life, surpassing their counterpart.

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The PDF is an essential account of different fables from various cultures of the world, both from the ancient and modern times.