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Morality in Orality: The Panchtantra Tales

Kriti Songriwal

Ph.D. Research Scholar

University of Delhi

Abstract

Story telling is the most important form of oral tradition as it provides the society with exemplary role models through their characters. However, stories are most of the time considered merely a source of entertainment. People tend to ignore their valuable contribution towards humanity. My paper aims to talk about contribution of the art of storytelling through the oldest collection of stories: The Panchatantra Tales. It takes into consideration few stories from the collection and mentions how they contain the wisdom of ages.

Key Words: Storytelling, oral tradition, Panchtantra, niti, teachings, worldly, wisdom

Introduction

I will tell you something about stories; they are not just for entertainment. Do not be fooled they are all we have, you see, all we have to fight off illness and death. You do not have anything if you do not have the stories.

(Leslie Mannon Silko)

So I told stories As my racial responsibility. To instil in the young the art of perpetuating existential history and essential tradition to be passed on to the next generation.

(Temsula Ao)

Planet in which we reside is full of variety of living organisms, and out of all, human beings are the most superior ones. We are above each species and rule almost every zone. However, if one stops to think about the reason behind this innate superiority, he or she will realise that, man's ability to speak and communicate distinguishes him from the other beings.

Communicating through speech, using intelligence, the cognitive ability to be aware of the surroundings and the power to visualise everything in our mind, not just set us apart from every other living species, but are also important factors in the progression of human society. As communicating, especially through speech, is in direct link with the progression and development of human society, there has always been a curiosity to explore the sphere of Oral Tradition. Many people have tried to define the term in their own ways. For example:

- **Toyin Falola**, a Nigerian Historian and Professor of African Studies: “Accounts of the past of people passed on only from one generation to another up to the present. For example, tradition of origin of Nigeria people is thus oral accounts about the beginnings of various ethnic groups usually given from generation and from time immemorial”
- **Joseph C Miller**, Professor of History at University of Virginia since 1972 referred to oral tradition as a “narrative describing or purporting to describe the eras before the time of the person who relates it “.
- **Dioulde Laya** a noted Nigerian sociologist states that the “oral tradition is the whole of all testimonials types, verbally transmitted to people on their past.”
- **Albert B Lord** a Professor of Slavic and Comparative Literature at Harvard University describes old tradition as a way of communication "which is learnt orally, coined orally and transmitted orally”

Hence, one can say that there is no definition of oral tradition but by taking into consideration all the notions & viewpoints, it can be understood as a form of human communication wherein art, ideas and cultural material are received, preserved and transmitted orally from one generation to another.

Oral Tradition & Indian Religion

Oral tradition plays a very important role in building of the Indian religion. The ancient text of Hinduism were most of the time preserved and transmitted by oral methods. People in ancient times developed the techniques of listening, memorisation and recitation of their knowledge in the school called *Gurukul*. There were different forms of recitation designed to transmit *Vedas*, from one generation to another. There were different set ways to recite each text, to pass on the ideas and information. In Indian religion oral tradition formed the base of transmission of knowledge, facts, ideas, culture and tradition and hence a played a major role. The greatest example to highlight the relation between Indian religion & Oral Tradition is the great epic of Mahabharata.

The Art of Story Telling

Story telling is the most important oral tradition that humans have. In addition, the base on which this importance of storytelling stands, consists of one basic thing: Art of Instruction. Each story teaches us something or the other. It teaches to love, to hope, to aim for better, to be a bigger person, to respect, to care, to be just.

The tradition of storytelling provides the society with exemplary role models through their characters. Characters presented in the stories, always follow the right path, not because they have to but because they choose to do that. Protagonist presented in the stories always set up a moral path for other people to follow. They inspire the people living in a particular society and shift their thoughts towards the importance of moral actions. There have been a lot of inspiring protagonist in the history of storytelling, who have actually brought positive changes to the society & have made it a better place to reside, by transforming the residents into moral and just human beings.

Storytelling is a tool that helps to pass the epic tales of inspiration. Now, one wonders why we always go for storytelling to impart values or for that matter, to pass the tales of inspiration to the society. Explanation behind this 'obvious' concept of choosing story telling over every other means, is its lack of a strict structure and precise limitations. One can note that a story has infinite ways of narration. Each storyteller can narrate the same story in different style. 'This liberty in the art of storytelling makes it not just a vital tool but a consistent one, for teaching. The personalization of the story by the storyteller shows that every story, told differently with every recounting, has an infinite number of lessons. Its ability to teach anything and everything in an infinite number of ways that can be tailored to the audience, makes storytelling the most influential and important tradition to society today'¹.

Another point in the favour of the art of storytelling is the way it effects our daily life in innumerable ways. It is not something, which is, noticed on special occasions, or for special class of people. It is an everyday day process, for everyone and is almost an indispensable part of our life. And this angle helps to leave a high degree impact on each and every person's life and maybe this 'commonness' and 'dailyness' is the reason that, storytelling has been one of the most effective sources of inspiration known to man. Originated with the dawn of society and coping up in this age of technology, where everything is just a click away, storytelling has proven its resilience and necessity beyond any shadow of doubt.

The Panchtantra Tales

The Panchatantra Tales has been the oldest collection of stories and 'the first anthology of animal stories'. The Panchatantra stories contain the wisdom of ages. It was a unique contribution of India to the world of literature and is one of the best-known classics of ancient India. "Composed in Sanskrit about 1600 years ago, its lively stories, and its simple but vivid prose punctuated by pithy verses, assured it a continuing place of prominence in classical literature through the centuries. On account of its uncomplicated and easy-to-understand diction it has been particularly popular. The belief that it is suitable only for children is a misnomer. In fact it has an enduring appeal for all ages, and all times alike."(R Sunitha, 2009)

¹ <https://hslda.org/content/Contests/Essay/2013/Cat3/Carpenter.pdf>

Writing of Vishnu Sharma, a great master of storytelling, his narrative technique makes the tales enthralling and enjoyable. He was a believer in the karma theory and most of his fables are only illustrations in defence of it. Not much about his life and personal background is present.

Panchatantra means Five Books or Systems. The characters in these fables are animals as well as humans. The settings are situations from everyday life in 50 towns and villages, in places, on farms and in forests. The characters exhibit human foibles and follies, virtues and villainies. They utter wise words and perform good deeds as well as indulge in every kind of wicked practice. According to its own narrative, it illustrates, for the benefit of three ignorant princes, the central Hindu principles of *nīti* (wise conduct of life)

Apart from a short introduction, it consists of five parts. The five books of The Panchatantra Tales are:

- Book 1: *Mitra-bheda* (The Loss of Friends)
- Book 2: *Mitra-samprāpti* (The Winning of Friends)
- Book 3: *Kākolūkīyam* (On Crows and Owls)
- Book 4: *Labdhapraṇāśam* (Loss of Gains)
- Book 5: *Aparīkṣitakāraṇam* (Considered Action)

There are eighty-four stories and many sub stories in it. The genre of the composition is the *nidarshankatha* or illustrative story, which is satirical, didactic and pictorial. The purpose however was to teach statecraft and the rules of politics in an attractive simple and delightful manner

Introduction from The Panchtantra

In the southern part of India, there was a city called Mahilaropya. Amar Shakti was the name of its king. He was a genius in all the sciences but unfortunately, the father of three dull-headed sons named Vasu Shakti, Ugra Shakti and Anek Shakti. Observing his sons aversion to learning the king called his ministers and said:

“ Gentleman it is known to all that these three princes devoid of discrimination. Seeing them thus, even this vast kingdom gives me no pleasure. As had been well said: Better than a foolish son is one deceased or never born, the pain that gives at least is brief But the fool gives cause for lifelong grief. Better abortion or no cohabitation, better still born **or even a daughter**, better a barren wife, but not a foolish son, even if a rich or handsome one what can one do with a cow which gives neither calves nor milk...so, a way should be found for enlightening their minds. Here five hundred professors enjoy stipends given by me. Something should be arranged so that my wishes are fulfilled.” (TPT,1&2)

One of the king’s ministers by name Sumati said that learning takes time. He suggested that a Brahmin by name Vishnu Sharma, adapted in all the sciences and famous for his ways of imparting education was the one king should approach to seek help. As soon as the king heard it, he sent for Vishnu Sharma.

Satisfied, relieved and immensely happy King handed over the princes to Vishnu Sharma. Brahmin on his part composed and taught the young princes the five chapters or five systems entitled, The Panchatantra Tales. Having studied them, within six months, they became as he had assured the king.

Since then The Panchatantra Tales is not just a book to be enjoyed but rather it has become an institution for the enlightenment of the mankind.

‘The introduction’ not just sets the base of the book, but also the base of the society in which it was written. Women are always treated as ‘the other’ sex. They are always the unwanted one and The Panchatantra Tales here is stating the obvious by mentioning how a helpless king after having three dull headed sons, first pray for a “still child” and after that “a girl”. Girls are always the last choice. One usually prays for a lifetime impotency or a dead boy child instead of a girl child. A dead and lifeless boy gives much more happiness and satisfaction to the parents than a living girl child.

In addition, a Brahmin teacher again bleakly hints towards the class distinction of the society. It talks about the natural superior position provided to the class of Brahmins and how even the power of King fails in front of knowledge & education of this class.

Panchatantra as a School of Teaching

The Panchatantra Tales is a work that instructs *niti*, the art of running the kingdom and in general, to lead a successful life. The term '*niti*', '*tantra*' and '*yukti*' are used in India with a wide scope of importance in political science. The word *niti* means roughly the wise spectrum of life. “*Niti* is guiding, guidance, directing, direction, management, a manner of conducting oneself, propriety, right or moral or prudent behaviour, prudent counsel, policy, political wisdom or science, political economy, state policy, statesmanship, the administration, of Government, moral philosophy, ethics, precepts for prudent and moral behaviour, prudence or policy personified; leading or acquisition presenting, offering, relation support.” (R Sunitha, 2009)

Each and every doubt in our life revolves around the conflict between *Dharma* (the right path) and *Artha* (the worldly wisdom). The most difficult choice in our life is to choose between both of these and in this process, there is always a reference of the ‘natural law’.

Natural law has two varied aspects, one of which states that man’s good deeds are always rewarded in this life or some other future life and the bad deeds are always punished. Whereas the other aspect talks about the notion of self-protection and provides it the status of ‘highest duty’. All the other moral and religious duties are nothing when they go against self-protection.

Throughout the book, conflict between worldly wisdom and high moral values is depicted, also both the aspects of ‘natural law’ has been personified. The Panchatantra Tales acts a school and teaches us most important values that are required to live not just a moral but also a victoriously successful life.

Analysis of Few Stories from The Panchtantra Tales

The Stork And The Crab

In a forest was a lake in which an old stork lived with all aquatic creatures. Once it was crying as it was hungry and a crab approached to ask the reason. The stork replied he was crying because a drought was expected soon and the lake would become dry. The crab spread this news to others who lived in the lake. Others came rushing to the stork and asked for way to save them. The cunning trick of the stork worked out, one by one the stork swallowed all the fishes of the lake. One day the crab requests to be taken to the other lake. While nearing the rock the crab saw the bones of the fish, and realized the trick of the stork. It quickly caught the stork's soft neck and killed him. He slowly dragged the neck of the stork to the lake and explained the situation. Now all will be well for them, the crab said:

He who knows stratagems,

Even though weak,

Cannot be defeated by warriors

Having devoured many fish,

The big, the medium and the small,

The stork did die, by excess of greed,

In the pincers of the crab.(TPT, 7)

Moral: As long as greed is stronger than compassion there will always be suffering.

The Generous King

Bhola, a Brahmin, lived in a village. He ploughed his field everyday but the land did not yield anything. He continued to plough the unproductive land. One day while he was resting under the mango tree, he saw a snake on his field in the anthill. Bhola offered a saucer of milk and to his surprise the next day he saw a gold coin in it. Thus, everyday Bhola brought milk and received a gold coin. One day Bhola left for an odd job in a nearby city. He asked his son to take the saucer of milk to the anthill. Bhola's son saw a gold coin. The next day also he got a gold coin, so he thought that surely there were a lot of coins in the anthill, and maybe the snake was guarding it. So he decided to kill the snake and take all the coins, but the snake escaped. In anger, the snake struck the boy and the villagers cremated his body.

Live and let others live

A pair of crows lived on a banyan tree. They did not have any issues and so they were very sad. One day a snake came to live in the hole beneath the tree. After a few days the female crow laid four eggs. Both the crows were happy, and in turns took care of their young ones. One day when both went in search of food, the snake climbed the tree and ate the children. When the female crow returned and did not find the

young ones, she cried .Once again the female crow laid eggs. Seeing only the female crow the snake again climbed up and ate all the eggs. She cried and the male crow suggested a shift to another tree, but she was determined to take revenge on the snake. So the male crow asked for suggestion from his friends. The rabbit unfolded a plan. As suggested the crow went to the nearby palace, took the precious necklace of the queen, and dropped it into the snake pit. Within no time the servants from the palace came and killed the snake and took the necklace. Thus, the crows were happy with the death of the cruel snake and thanked their friends for their timely suggestion.

Moral: What you give is what you get.

CONCLUSION

Close reading of The Panchatantra Tales highlights the tradition of storytelling and its importance. It presents how, stories are not just for entertainment, but serves as a very powerful & impactful tool for passing on the knowledge from one generation to another. The Panchatantra Tales sets the framework for statecraft and rules of politics. Through the medium of three dull-headed kings, it teaches us the basic principles to follow, to lead not just a happy but a successful and moral life too.

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