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## Indian Stories as a tool for Psychotherapy

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**Abstract:** Stories have been an integral part of the Indian culture since ancient times. Before modern psychotherapy came into being, stories had served as a medium of solving complex and day to day problems of the common man. Stories have been extensively used by Yug Rishi Pt Shriram Sharma Acharya throughout his vast literature to illustrate the most difficult concepts. Acharya has at many places suggested the feasibility of using stories as an effective medium for psychological development and healing. Of late there has been an increasing interest in the psychological fraternity to utilise indirect methods of psychotherapy for mental healing. This paper attempts to explore the possible utilisation of Indian stories as a tool for psychotherapy.

**Key words:** stories, psychotherapy, tool, healing, psychological.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to find out whether traditional stories, folklores can be used as an effective method of psychotherapy.

**Research Problem:** Developing storytelling as an effective tool for psychotherapy.

### **Research Methodology:**

STEP 1: Reviewing of literature for ascertaining whether storytelling is being used as psychotherapy in our country or other parts of the world.

STEP 2: Identifying problems which can be treated by storytelling therapy.

STEP 3: Selection of Stories-Gurudev's perspective

STEP 4: Using appropriate stories from the vast repertoire of Pt Shriram Sharma Acharya as psychotherapeutic tools for

1. psychological problems in children
2. psychological problems in Adolescence

## **Indian Stories as a tool for Psychotherapy**

**Introduction:** India has had a rich culture and tradition of storytelling from ancient times. In fact all the oriental wisdom, knowledge and history was passed on from generations together orally in our country through the guru shishya parampara .Whether it be Vedas, Upanishads or Puranas, all were recited orally for centuries by the sacred Rishis before they were documented. Then came the great epics Ramayana and Mahabharata which have been recited , sung and read from centuries till date in every Indian home for inculcating the right kind of values in our children and to teach how to live life ideally. The mortal forms of Lord Vishnu –Ram and Krishna and their lives and stories are our parameters of living. The Bhagwad Gita which is recited by most of Indians everyday which is capable of providing solution to all our worldly problems and give us peace and solace. Anyone interested in Indian culture must study not only its written classics, but also its oral tradition, of which folklore is an important part. Folklore pervades childhood families and commodities as the symbolic language of the non-literate parts of the people and the culture. The stories of Panchtantra told by the sage Vishnusharma to the four princes who were morons to transform their personalities and are still relevant as a source of great learning for our children .Our corpus of stories also include jataka tales, stories of Akbar and Birbal, Tenalirama etc. Years before modern psychotherapy came into being stories and fables were the only and effective means of solving the problems of mankind whether it be stress, distress , grief , marital disharmony or financial difficultiesetc. These stories interwoven in our psyche have been an inseparable part of our mental development. The Mahabharata and the Ramayana or even Jataka tales or Panchatantra and the millions of folk tales abound in the oldest civilization of India passed on traditionally from older people in the family to the children which had following significant psychological benefits:

- Stories served as a means to help people confront their own experiences in an indirect way and gave them time to assimilate them in their own experiences.
- To some people, stories pointed out ways out of their problems.
- To some, stories acted as a simple reaffirmation of the power of the human will.
- For some, they offered guidance in moments of indecisiveness and the comfort of knowing that someone has walked the path before you.
- Stories generally put people at ease and offer room for expanded thought.
- Stories have served as a means to teach the values of self-sacrifice, honesty and other values.

Stories have formed a strong psychosocial fabric of our culture and every single person is a powerful testimony to stories that have informed, inspired and guided them through their lives. Joseph Campbell while talking about the importance of stories for the human race, says that stories represent what might

be called an archetypal adventure – the story of a child that is becoming a youth, or the awakening to the new world that opens at adolescence – which would help to provide a model for handling this development.

The aesthetics, ethos and worldview of a person are shaped in childhood and reinforced

later by these verbal and nonverbal environments. They were told as bedtime stories by our grandparents and served many purposes at once. A researcher -Kirsti A. Dyer, MD, MS, FAAETS has summarised the various ways in which stories can be used and their benefits in an article- The Important ways of telling (and Listening) to the Story:

Communicating

Educating and Informing

Building rapport

Establishing connections

Inspiring and Encouraging

Preserving cultural identity

Recreating and Entertaining

Clarifying emotions

Remembering

Translating memories into stories

Coping with death, illness, tragedy

Healing from loss

Leaving a legacy

Honouring the dying person's final journey



## Benefits of Telling the Story

1. Stories are a way of translating memories into a more concrete manner that can be handed down verbally or in written form, helping preserve culture.
2. Stories help us explain the world, making sense of the insensible.
3. Storytelling is considered one of the oldest healing arts; it has been used for centuries as a beneficial way for grieving people to cope with loss.
4. Stories provide the mechanism by which physicians and patients communicate, look for the meaning of their illness, and discover ways of coping with it. For many patients telling their story is what helps them to cope with or heal from their disease.
5. Dealing with loss involves creating a private personal story and then confiding the story to others to assimilate the loss.
6. Telling (or writing) the story about one's life experiences has been shown to have beneficial effects on illness symptoms and is associated with improved physical and mental health.
7. Life stories are rewritten to make sense of, find meaning in the loss & reassemble shattered lives. Losses and significant life changes become incorporated into a person's life story as the loss is assimilated.
8. Grieving individuals should be encouraged to tell their story of grief as often as needed so the reality of the loss becomes real.
9. Personal stories of loss can inspire and provide hope during dark times.
10. Listening to a patient's story of loss or illness is central to grief support; it can be beneficial for a grieving person in integrating, healing & recovering from the loss.

Unfortunately the age-long tradition of storytelling has taken a backseat as the technological entertainment comes to the forefront in the form of television and computers.

Yug Rishi Pt Shriram Sharma Acharya has strived hard to revive the art of storytelling and contributed phenomenally by writing so many books on stories for children.

His style of explaining the deepest and the most difficult concepts in a lucid way through appropriate stories can easily be recognised by the readers of AKHAND JYOTI.

Gurudev has stressed on using stories as the best way of instilling the right kind of values in children(chap 1.86,hamari bhavi pidhi aur uska navnirman)Here he has stressed on the benefits of using this medium not only for children but also for adolescents. He also discusses in detail about the way to select appropriate stories for this purpose.

“Pragyapuran” and “mahapurushon ke avismarniya prasang” are also full of the treasure of anecdotes and stories which can be used for the purpose of psychological counselling.

During my early years of practice as a psychotherapist I encountered a very high level of resistance to psychological treatment and a state of denial resulting from the reluctance to confront the real problems directly . That is when stories came to my rescue. The potential of stories for psychological healing has intrigued psychologists for long.

The contributors to psychoanalysis looked to mythology to understand the psyche. A

look into mythic and fairy tales patterns can still yield insights and clinical directions

for contemporary psychotherapists. Fairy tales help develop positive cognitive

Frameworks have existential messages, and images to transform pain into creativity. (Bette U Kiernan “The Uses of Fairy Tales in Psychotherapy”) The magical words “Once upon a time . . .” that often start a traditionally structured folktale can induce a soothing, healing

light trance state in listeners. Indeed, holding an audience spellbound is often used to describe an audience’s altered state of listening to a great tale told well, while therapists have claimed that storytelling performances contain many of the conditions necessary for inducing trances. A psychotherapist-storyteller from Boulder, Colorado, described such healing listening trances as *inner-directed* states of consciousness, such that although listeners’ eyes may be on the storyteller, their consciousness is turned inward (Martin, 1993).

### **Research Methodology**

STEP 1: Reviewing of literature for ascertaining whether storytelling is being used as psychotherapy in our country or other parts of the world.

1 . **(Bhaskar Roy Barman“Folklore of Tripura”)** Anyone interested in Indian culture must study not only its written classics, but also its oral tradition, of which folklore is an important part. Folklore pervades childhood, families and commodities as the symbolic language of the non-literate parts of the people and the culture. Wherever people live, folklore grows, new jokes, proverbs, rhymes, tales and songs circulate to the oral tradition. Verbal folklore in the sense of oral tradition with specific genres such as, proverbs, lullaby, song etc, nonverbal modes such as dances, games, floor or wall designs, artefacts from toys to outdoor clay horses in villages, and composite performing arts, such as street magic, street theatre etc. – all of these expressive folk forms weave in and out of city, village and small-town life. The aesthetics, ethos and worldview of a person are shaped in childhood and reinforced later by these verbal and nonverbal environments. The folklore of Tripura has evolved out of worship of tribal gods and goddesses. .

## 2. (Introduction to Storytelling Studies

by Eric Miller (Initially posted 1998, last updated 2008)) Story telling Studies is a clearly-demarcated field of study: storytelling can be defined as relating of a series of events, and Storytelling Studies concerns the forms and contents of this relating. Storytelling Studies can be thought of as an interdisciplinary field, or as a discipline.

As those of us who have tried to study or teach storytelling (also known as, oral narrative) in academia are especially aware, storytelling is considered in a wide variety of academic disciplines, including Anthropology, Communications, Computer Science, Creative Arts Therapy, Education, English, History, Library and Information Sciences, Performance Studies, Psychology, Sociology, Speech, Theatre, and Theology. Each of these disciplines has a unique and valuable perspective on storytelling. Folklore -- with its emphasis on the study of specific processes of verbal arts -- has developed an especially rich heritage of studying storytelling on historical, ethnographic, and mechanical levels.

3. (The wave yearns to be water: cultural practices in the Indian tradition to invoke wholeness Mrinalini Rao & Swami Brahmaildananda Saraswati) Power of history/stories/mythology/legends *Implications for counselling and psychotherapy: Over innumerable occasions, while teaching students as well as counselling, due to narration of stories, I have found the glimmer in a person's eye following an insight, a spring in the step, the will to live, inspiration to achieve and a sense of purpose.*

## 4. (Healing Through Story Telling ,By Nigel Baldwin)

Expressing what and how we feel is a fundamental need of the human psyche. If we don't pressure builds up until we implode or explode and if this is axiomatic then expressing it well, communicating it well, is even more cathartic. Storytelling is one means of expressing how we feel for we are nothing without our stories.

## 5. New Zealand Journal of Occupational Therapy Volume 57 Issue 2 (Sept 2010)

Healing through Story Telling: An Integrated Approach for Children Experiencing Grief and Loss **Scaletti, Rowena; Hocking, Clare<sup>1</sup>** Abstract: Stories convey complex meanings and facilitate understanding of human experience. This article presents a focused story telling approach to elicit, develop and share children's stories of grief and loss. Using an illustrative case study, it describes an integrated therapeutic approach based in familiar childhood occupations of constructing scenes using sand and objects, interacting with peers, and working with a therapist to write and illustrate the child's own story. The approach draws on the first author's many years of clinical experience and international evidence of the therapeutic power of narrative approaches, sand tray therapy and bereavement groups for children.



6. (*Storytelling, Self, Society 1(2)* (Spring 2005), pp. 1-10Sunwolf) *The story of narrative medicine is dynamic and is examined here, exploring specific cross-disciplinary research involving both storytelling and story listening in the context of health care. Specific findings concerning story sharing in a variety of health communities are described, and a functional model is offered for understanding the effects of storied communication for both caregivers and care receivers. The current challenges of research into storytelling and healing are explored, positioning the special issue articles into future directions for scholarship on stories as medicine.*

7. (The Importance of Telling (and Listening) to the Story Kirsti A. Dyer, MD, MS, FAAETS)  
At the most basic level "Telling the Story" is a means of transmitting ideas from one person to another. [1] Storytelling is a part of life, intrinsic to most cultures. They help people make sense of the world-- life's experiences, dilemmas and hardships. Stories can educate, inspire and build rapport. They are a means of communicating, recreating, and helping preserve cultures [2] by translating memories into a more concrete manner that can be handed down verbally or in written form. Telling the story can provide the opportunity to gain a deeper understanding of one's experiences and oneself.

STEP 2: Identifying problems which can be treated by storytelling therapy.

#### 1. Psychological problems in children

- Learning disorders
- Attention deficit disorders
- Hyperactivity

#### 2. Psychological problems in adolescence

- Identity crisis
- Stress management
- Substance abuse

#### 3. Common psychological problems

- Depression
- Anxiety
- Dissociative disorder
- Obsessive compulsive disorder
- Grief pathology
- Suicidal ideation
- Psychological trauma or illness
- Adjustment disorders

#### 4. Special uses

- The effects of catastrophic injuries and/or chronic diseases
- Life threatening illness
- Deal with their loss and grief
- Marital conflicts
- Pain management
- Personality development

#### STEP 3: Selection of stories Gurudev's perspective .

Gurudev in his writing has emphasised on the importance of storytelling to children for their character and mental ,emotional development. He says-it is important to be able to generate a child's interest and make him engrossed in the activity of learning values which can be easily achieved through the medium of storytelling. He illustrates this by giving numerous examples of children who became great when they grew up just by listening to inspiring stories in their childhood. The example of Shivaji is an outstanding one who became a valiant Maratha king by the storytelling efforts of his mother. His mother Jijabai instilled the values of valour , courage, patriotism and dignity by telling stories from the Ramayana and Mahabharata .Shivaji became a brave and great leader who fought against the mighty Aurangzeb for his motherland.

He also gives guidance about how to select appropriate stories for children. He denounces the use of ghost and evil stories and also love stories of prince and princesses as useless and meaningless for children .He advises to use stories which are close to nature ,where birds ,animals ,trees, flowers ,rivers and mountains are the protagonists. Stories should be crisp, easy and short not longer than 5-10 minutes and should have clear understandable message. They should be appropriate for the child's age and should have the potential to touch his tender sensibilities.

For adolescents he advises to use stories related to historical places and events, inspiring stories from the lives of great people , stories of valour and courage, stories from the religious epics and also stories about new discoveries and inventions.

Yannave Bhajne Lagna: Sanskar: Nanyatha Bhavet | Kathachton Balana Nitistdih Kathyate||

Thus he emphasises that whatever can be told to children by way of stories, he adapts it to his behaviour and these values stay with him throughout his life.

(excerpts from-chapter-1.86-Hamari Bhavi Peedhi Aur Uska Navnirman-Pt Shriram Sharma Acharya.)



STEP 4: Using appropriate stories from the vast repertoire of Pt Shriram Sharma Acharya as psychotherapeutic tools for

1. psychological problems in children –

A case of learning disorder

The following story from, chapter-1.86-Hamari Bhavi Peedhi Aur Uska Navnirman-Pt Shriram Sharma Acharya, was used.

“Lagan ka Phal”

Long time ago there was a very learned teacher. Children from faraway places used to come to his ashram for learning. Whenever he taught children used to listen attentively. But there was one boy who did not like to study at all. His name was Vopdev. Whenever something was being taught, he used to keep looking outside, watching deer running by or birds flying or children playing. He used to feel like going out and playing with them. But he couldn't do so because he was afraid of the teacher. As a result of all this Vopdev remained foolish while all his classmates became smarter by studying.

The teacher didn't like this, because he knew that children who do not take interest in studies right from the beginning cannot do well in life. He tried to lovingly counsel Vopdev but he paid no heed. One day, the teacher lost his temper and scolded Vopdev severely.

Vopdev was in tears after that. He was thinking how can he please his teacher and regain his love. He felt he was lagging much behind in his class and worried how could he cover up now? He came out of the ashram thinking about all this. He was upset that he had wasted so much time. Why didn't he take interest in studies? Whatever his teacher used to say was for his own good. He should have obeyed him only then he could have become a good human being.

As he walked down he became thirsty. He saw a well where some women were filling their pots with water. He went to them to drink some water. After he had finished drinking- Vopdev saw that there were some big round depressions on the boundary of the well. He was surprised. He asked the women who has made these smooth, shapely depressions? He wondered whether they had made them. The women laughed at hearing this. They told him “Son, nobody has made them, we keep our earthen pots here every day after filling water. It puts pressure on the stone and these depressions are formed as a result. This earthen pot is able to carve its place even on this hard stone. Vopdev was all the more surprised at hearing this. He asked them- Are you sure? These pots have caused these depressions? The woman replied- yes child, if we perform a task daily, we get practiced in doing that. If we persevere in our efforts wholeheartedly then even a difficult task can be accomplished Vopdev was happy at hearing this. He went running to his teacher and told him “Sir, I have lagged behind in my studies but doesn't matter, I will study with all my heart daily from now. When I work hard I will become a good child.

After that Vopdev started studying regularly and wholeheartedly . Earlier he used to find studies difficult but now it became easy for him. As a result of his determined efforts he became a great scholar one day. Vopdev became very famous for his knowledge when he grew up. He wrote a book on grammar called “Mugdhbodh” which is read and regarded by scholars even today.

The lessons learnt from this story are:

1. Success can definitely achieved by determined effort.
2. If a person sets his goals, he can surely achieve it.
3. No work is difficult in this world, sincere efforts makes everything easy.

### **Psychological problems in Adolescence:**

-Identity Crisis

-Image consciousness

-False Ego.

Story used anecdote from- Sudhar Tatha Paropkar Ke Devdoot- Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar. By Pt Shriram Sharma Acharya.

Once a young man was coming to meet Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar.He went to the station to receive him .The young man was carrying a small briefcase as he alighted on the village station. He started shouting for a coolie . Where could he find a coolie in such a small village? Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar heard his voice and went towards him. The young man mistook him to be a coolie and handing over the briefcase to him , he told him to take him to Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar’s house. Vidyasagar humbly took the briefcase and proceeded with him. As he reached his home he kept the briefcase and told him this is the house of the person whom you have come to meet.The young man looked for some money to give him. Vidyasagar smiled at this and told him we cannot accept money from you as you are our guest. He said you can pay for my labour by learning to do your work on your own. The young man fell on his on his feet and begged for forgiveness as soon as he realised he was talking to none other than Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar himself!

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