

Book Review

Life's Little Tales

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ISBN No. 978-81-955752-0-6 Price: Rs.195 By B.N. Patnaik (printed book)

Life's Little Tales is a collection and compilation of personal and reflective essays written by Dr. B.N. Patnaik (former Professor of English and Linguistics, IIT Kanpur). He mentions in the Preface to his book how Covid-19 enforced him to stay at home for a prolonged duration and how the book is a result of the thoughts and memories that buoyed him up during this period. Dr. Patnaik's research areas and fields of expertise as well as interest are in the field of linguistics and in translations of the great Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*. The Great Epic's retelling in Odia, namely the *Sarala Mahabharata*, is entwined in the essays' lucid, vivid and sometimes even candid, narrative prose. The book achieves a circular pattern; it begins with the Great War at Kurukshetra and Duryodhana awaiting death with his head on Yudhistira's lap and concludes with "ordinary mortals" facing death and managing to look beyond self to consider other people's interests. The final line of this thought-provoking book resonates in the mind of the reader, "There is indeed no one path to *mukti*" (Patnaik 2002: 175)

Dr. Patnaik mentions the transition in his life as a village boy growing up on the banks of the Mahanadi river, his transformation after entering Cuttack's famous Ravenshaw College and later seizing an opportunity to study linguistics in Hyderabad which led to his tenure at IIT, Kanpur. The essays are marvellous expositions on the role and responsibility of some of the major characters in the Kurukshetra war (Bhima, Bhishma, Duryodhana, Dhritarashtra, Krishna, Shakuni, Sahadeva, Yudhistira, to name only a few). The syntactical style and interpretation by the author of the *Sarala Mahabharata* differentiates actions and consequences according to the cosmic and *laukika* (wordly) perspectives. The second essay is a brilliant analysis of King Dhritarashtra's role and his fate in the *Mahabharata* and how the poet Sarala specifically states that Dhritarashtra was missing from the temporary abodes of *swarga* and *narka*, "the son of Dharma saw his entire clan/ Only Dhritarashtra he did not see" (Patnaik 2002: 20) The mystery of Dhritarashtra's final fate and the pain and humiliation of his miserable existence are brought out poignantly. Dr. Patnaik concludes by saying the lack of a sense of closure in Dhritarashtra's case may be regarded by some as ambiguous and discomfoting. In the second essay titled "Lockdown Ramblings on *Sarala*

Mahabharata,” Dr. Patnaik mentions the “dusta” character of the Pandava Bhima and goes on to describe how certain words cannot be completely translated as they are “language specific and partly because these carry culture” (25). Bhima’s extreme oath is never criticised or even mentioned in the passing in the text as being wrong in itself. The cycles of karma, curses and redemption; foresight and what appears as callous unfairness or even the killing of innocents is difficult to reconcile in the *Sarala Mahabharata* but the “careful and discriminating reader” must choose how to comprehend the words of the text so as to not fall in despair. The third essay “The Assertive Wife Wins her Space” is a balanced and witty discussion of Balaram Das’s Odia *Lakshmi Purana* elucidating upon a feminist stratagem for destroying inequality in the worship of Lord Jagannath. Balaram Das’s revolutionary rejection of casteism in the heyday of Brahminism can be interpreted as a wife’s demand for space in her family. Dr. Patnaik displays his mastery as a storyteller by knowing how to pique the reader’s interest and then leave one craving for more as he refuses to reveal the next part of the story or analyse beyond a certain point! The fourth essay “And the Offended Wife Has Her Sweet Revenge” continues the tale of Goddess Lakshmi. The narrative of the angry wife and the happy melting of her anger are humourously conveyed through the descriptions of the Rathayatra rituals of “Hera Panchami”, *Niladri Bij*e (“return to the temple”) and the sweet *rasagola*. The narrative of the sweet *rasagola* is returned to in an essay titled “Rasagola” where Dr. Patnaik links the quality, variety and quantification of sweets like the *khirmohan* to culture in the preference for *Salepur rasagola* and from 2015 onwards the annual Rasagola Day celebration in Odisha. The fifth essay is “The Story of Alakshmi”—a detailed and interesting narrative from the Odia *Kartika Mahatmya* by Mahadeva Das and a retelling of Alakshmi’s story in the Sanskrit *Padma Purana*. Once again the story of the two sisters Lakshmi and Alakshmi provides a fresh perspective on the women’s point of view.

The middle of the book mainly revolves around various aspects of Linguistics, language and takes Noam Chomsky’s theories as models. Interestingly titled “Right Speech”, “Bad Language”, “Honeyed Language”, “Dying Languages”, “Thinking About Language and its Use”, “Linguistics”, “CIEFL” and “The Sahadeva Condition” (which also quotes Said on the responsibility of the intellectual in society): these essays range from the critical, political, philosophical to downright personal. “Right Speech” is an insightful discussion on changing perspectives as society changes and what constitutes value, information, truth and fact from traditional or social viewpoints. Dr. Patnaik elaborates on “PNPC—*para ninda para charcha*, the *adda* in Bengali and *gapasapa* in Odia and *chuguli* or gossip” (57-8) as valuable linguistic contributors to the debates in fact vs fiction! Quoting Chomsky that no information comes with a tag that it is fake, Dr. Patnaik contextualises the statement in the present information-overloaded society which has easy access to developments in technology and improved communication devices. “I-centric language” signifies intellectual arrogance

and boasting is condemned as not being “right speech”. “Bad Language” raises questions that the professor faced from his student regarding “polite language”—what constitutes it; whether there should be a norm and who decides that norm. To argue about the merits and demerits of bad language, examples are drawn from childhood, mythology, popular sports and even the quarrels of family and neighbours.

A good linguist whets the appetite for further discussion. In “Honeyed Language” “euphemisms” are analysed, both in the Odia language and English, which are in turn linked to hierarchy and power. Albert Camus points out the limitations of the euphemism when he describes their use to deflect attention from the realities of human brutality. “It seems that sometimes society needs the truth” (77) “Dying Languages” mentions the number of languages dying all over the world and in India. Should one conserve languages as one would an endangered species or should one value the usefulness of languages more and shift to another available language? Patnaik refuses to prioritise utility alone. He addresses his friend Subbakrishna Saab and frames the debate in the form of a colloquial conversation. The distinction between categories of information are dealt with in “Thinking About Language and its Use” and Dr. Patnaik talks about how language studies can be fun and amply rewarding. “Linguistics” refers to the renowned linguist Dr. Suniti Kumar Chatterji and the world of “*bhashatatwa*”. Dr. Patnaik’s initial personal motivation for studying Linguistics opened his mind to the diversity in dialects and made him respect language teaching as the finer aspects of language were analysed. Marginalisation on the basis of language is another serious social issue. The stint in CIEFL in Hyderabad allows Dr. Patnaik to discuss gender in the 1970s and he does this with wit in his sketches of fellow participants in his PGDTE course. The funny side of the problems of “functional English” and pronunciation are presented rather neatly. “The Sahadeva Condition” dwells on the dilemma between truthfulness and a failure to tell the truth. Sahadeva, the youngest Pandava, gifted with special powers, faced this challenge. Patnaik points out how neither Chomsky nor Said think about the individual intellectual’s “extremely unenviable situation” (163) The *Sarala Mahabharata* speaks about the sharing of knowledge and it being a responsibility of the person who has that knowledge.

The essays “Bhuta”, “Upuri (Side Income): The Other Culture of Ours”, “The Hand of God Goal” and “Of Retirement” contain individualized anecdotes and are more personal in tone. Ghost television serials and film preferences to real-life narratives on ghosts or supernatural manifestations in Odisha, Simla, Nainital and England are augmented with a lively discussion on categories of ghosts and the past or “*bhutakala*”. The dosa or “dosi” a gastronomic delight becomes the basis for discussing food habits, food places, politics and food culture. Curd rice and the romance of mixing rice and curd initiate a food lover’s descriptions but end on the sombre reality of diminished food intake in old age. *Upuri* is

the culture of extra or illegitimate income or side income. The “aspirational” facet of a community and “lived” facet of a community becomes a discourse on culture, morality and a desire to protect reform in governance along with the interests of the poor and marginalized. “The Hand of God Goal” refers to the famous footballer Diego Maradona’s goal in the 1986 World Cup which has become a part of football lore. Dr. Patnaik wonders if the phrase could be extended linguistically to include other footballers’ actions of saving, refereeing or passing the ball and includes anecdotes of famous rivalries in football. “Of Retirement” is a melancholic reminder for all working people and it segues into the essay “Facing Death”. The pandemic and diseases like cancer provide greater clarity on the reality of death. Patnaik resorts to the *Sarala Mahabharata* once again as he talks about the sense of duty and situations that elevate human actions from the mundane to the noble or spiritual and the book ends on a wonderful note.

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