

Relooking at Meanings and Representations in Folklore

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Over a recent conversation with an Indian author of childrens' stories, an important fact came to light. While discussing some of her recent interactions with children and young readers at one of her workshop's she mentioned that there seemed to be a significant change in the way in which stories are perceived by children in present times. She elaborated further by explaining that the tradition of narrating a story by starting with the words 'once upon a time' or 'this is a story from a long time ago' is gradually fading. Previously, if a group of children were asked about their favourite fairy tale, there always used to be an answer, however, that trend too, seems to be diminishing. There are no answers for fairy tales, but there are answers about other stories, which the children have either read, heard or seen (mostly on internet or on television).

This conversation led to an important discussion about fairy tales and whether the conventional form of the story lines of fairy tales are gradually disappearing from our midst? There is no definite answer to this question, which is more of a query and finds a resonance amidst almost all over the world. This paper attempts to delve into some parts of this query as a significant contribution towards understanding narratives and its evolving formats.

Folklore, including fairy tales, have traditionally been associated to serve specific sociocultural purposes. Over a broad and basic understanding, these can be understood as follows :

- For amusement (this should not be confused with storytelling to kill time)
- Teaching significant lessons of life and society
- Imparting moral lessons
- Distinguishing the good from the bad
- To offer rudimentary explanations about questions of existence (i.e. how the world was created or how animals and plants were created, etc)

It is also significant to note that the traditional role of folklore did not only include children or young spectators as its receivers but included people of various age groups. In that case, since, folklore have been with us through centuries, it is important to understand then the concept of representation, images and symbolism which occupied and continues to occupy a significant space midst folklore. This paper attempts to highlight the same through few specific examples of folklore in Bengali and in some other languages of South Asia. Following stories are published in various books, all dating back to more than a century from the present times and around the first quarter of 20th century. These stories were collected, compiled and published

by the authors, who went onto to be known as significant Indian storytellers and folklorists of the early 20th century, namely, Dakkhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar and Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury.

Some examples from Bengali folklore, including fairy tales and the representations within them

The first story I would like to discuss is titled, '*Ukune Burir Kawtha*' (The Story of the Old Woman with Lice in her hair). This is part of the famous book, '*Tuntunir Boi*' (The Book of the Tailor Bird), compiled, written and published by Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury in 1910.

The story thus goes (Maitra, 2023:33-39): Once, there was an old lady, who suffered from lice infestation in her head. This was well-known in the village and thus, everyone referred to her as '*ukune buri*' (in Bengali, meaning an old lady with a head full of lice). Because of the lice, the old lady would often be rebuked or beaten up by her husband. Once, after a sound thrashing from her husband, the old lady left her home in a huff and went and sat sulking on the banks of a river. There, a kind crane took pity on her and invited her to stay at his house. The old lady happily began to stay at the crane's house as a cook and spent her days cooking delicacies for him. Unfortunately, one day, she succumbed to some severe burn injuries she got from cooking over a clay oven. The gruesome death of the old lady greatly upset the crane and he left eating and sat fasting for several days on the river bank. The river saw all this and finally questioned the crane about his strange behaviour. The crane spoke about his grief, but also warned the river that his grief was so great that all the water of the river would froth up upon hearing the news. The water did froth up and this further surprised an elephant who used to frequent the river-bank everyday for a drink. Thus, the story progressed with more characters enquiring about the sadness and in return, each one met with a sudden accident. Thus, throughout the story, an elephant lost its tail, a tree lost all of its leaves, a dove lost one eye, a cowherd's stick got stuck to his hands, a servant-girl's winnowing basket got stuck to her hands, a plate full of delicacies got stuck to the hands of a queen, her husband, the king, got stuck to the wooden seat he was sitting on for his lunch and all the ministers in the king's court also got stuck to their respective wooden seats. Finally, a carpenter was summoned, who came and axed out the seats, the plate, the winnowing-basket and the stick and freed everyone.

Here, it is important to note how the story mentions the old-lady as '*Ukune Buri*', which in itself is an insult for a body-condition of any individual. These words are repeated each time the sad death of the old lady is narrated to a different character in the story. She is referred each time as '*ukune buri*'. Thus, instead of a name, the body-condition of the old lady takes the form of a Proper Noun- a name and an identity and both. Repeated mention of the 'adjective' also normalises the symbolism rendered to the unfortunate old lady. Finally, it is important to see a strain of a gory detail in the story. That is the vivid detail of the death of the old lady through burn injuries and the repeated mention of this in the poem in the story. The storyline aims to use 'fear' as a tool to convey the plight of the old lady.

I would like to mention a second story from the same book, titled '*Bagher Radhuni*' (The Tiger's Cook) (Maitra, 2024:81-84). The storyline thus goes: Once, a tigress passed away, leaving behind two cubs. The tiger was in distress. He felt, need for a wife in the house to look after the cubs and also manage the house. He decided to remarry, but this time, he decided to marry a human girl instead. He felt that thus the children would be better taken care of and the household would also have proper meals cooked by the human wife. The tiger had heard about a beautiful young girl, who used to reside in a specific house with her parents and younger brother in a nearby village. He went over and abducted the girl one day and brought her over to his house. The girl was put in chains, lest she tried to run away. She was strictly instructed to cook nice delicacies and feed all the three tiger-members of the household. However, the children disliked her immensely. They hated her as she was a human and always threatened her that when they are big enough, they would gobble her up one day. Meanwhile, the brother and parents of the young girl were crying their hearts out. One day, the brother decided to go in search of his sister. Soon enough, he arrived at the cottage where the sister sat captive. At that moment, tiger was not at home. Overjoyed at seeing the brother, the siblings hatched a plan to escape. They killed the two cubs, skinned both of them, cut them up into small pieces and then hung these pieces over a cauldron full of boiling oil. They also set the house on fire and ran away to their house in the village. When the tiger arrived, he heard from a distance the sound of the blood dripping on the hot oil and thought that the girl was cooking something scrumptious. However, as he entered his house, he was stupefied to see the condition of his cubs and his house on fire. Enraged, he attacked the village, but was killed by the angry villagers.

Here, it is important to note how the aspect of abduction as well as gruesome death is normalised through the story. As folktales often reflect socially assigned duties towards specific genders, this story too, speaks of the duties of a mother. Thus, the tiger goes in search of the 'suitable bride.' However, the search of the bride takes a violent turn as the concept of abduction is eloquently woven within the story. The story progresses to mention a life of servitude and of possible molestation or rape of the young girl at the hands of the tiger. The ending of the story is even more macabre with the vivid description of the siblings killing and skinning and cutting up the tiger cubs into pieces, followed by the sound of the blood dripping on the hot oil. Finally, the story mentions the highest form of punishment for the tiger for his unforgivable misdeed, that is death. It is important to note here, the strong patriarchal language throughout the text, especially with reference to the representation of women. A significant use of fast-changing sub-texts within the storyline, makes the reader unsympathetic towards the ghastly occurrences. Folklore, not only of India, but all over the world, are often charged with this reckless fault, which often distances the listener.

I would like to mention another folktale from the book '*Thakurmar Jhhuli*' (Grandmother's Bag of Tales), compiled and published by Dakkhinaranjan Mitra Majumdar in 1907 from Kolkata. The title of this story is '*Shaat Bhai Champa (Aar Parul Bon)*' (The story of the seven brothers who were Champa flowers and their sister who was a Parul flower). The story goes: Once in a

specific kingdom, there was a king who had seven queens, but he only loved the six elder queens the most. The king did not have any heir to the throne, so he always remained sad. One day, there was news of the youngest queen to have delivered a baby. The king was jubilant, however, he was sad to see that the queen had delivered a frog instead of a human child. The youngest queen delivered seven more babies and each time, the king was informed that the queen delivered frogs and crabs. A furious king, finally drove away the youngest queen from the palace. Meanwhile, the six elder queens had buried all the eight infants in the garden at the back of the palace.

In a few years time, two beautiful trees grew on the spot and they soon bore flowers. On the *champa* tree (frangipani/*Plumeria rubra*), grew seven beautiful flowers and on the *parul* tree (Fragrant Padri/*Stereospermum chelonoides*) grew a beautiful pink *parul* flower. These were the children of the youngest queen, who were reborn as flowers with a curse and this could only be broken when their biological mother came to meet them in the garden.

One day, the king's gardener informed the king that he would pluck these eight flowers from the garden for a specific puja to be held in the palace. The king agreed. As the royal gardener arrived, they refused to get plucked by him and requested the king to arrive. When the king arrived, the flowers still refused to get plucked and requested the eldest queen to arrive. When the eldest queen arrived, the flowers still refused and requested the second queen to arrive. Thus, they requested each of the queens to arrive and lastly called for the youngest queen. When the youngest queen arrived, all the flowers transformed into small infants and jumped onto her lap. The youngest queen understood everything and stood crying with her children. The king too understood everything and justly punished the six queens by beheading them. Then he took the youngest queen and all the children back to the palace.

It is important to note here several social issues, including harassment, domestic violence and infanticide. Once again, the many ghastly incidents within the storyline and the fast-paced manner in which it proceeds, makes the listener distant and unsympathetic to the sorrows within. The representation of women and children are reduced to mere props added within the storyline as women are portrayed as either evil and conniving or as the victim. This also calls for looking into specific representation of women as the antagonist in popular fairy tales, which are an important part of the patriarchal storyline. Within this storyline, the women are represented as scheming against their own kind. There are many fairy tales, where such scheming women are represented as supernatural entities, including witches or ghosts. I would like to elaborate upon this later on in this discussion.

The portrayal of fear within the stories

With the discussion on representation of emotions in folklore and fairy tales, the element of fear is a common connection in all the above stories. Following the general structure of fairy tales, of course, there are messages within the storyline, however, these are embedded in the portrayal of fear. While discussing representation, it is important to look at this very element of fear and how

it is also often associated with specific characters in a story and this, further builds up as an inseparable part of the representation of that specific character. This often proves to be detrimental as it creates a generalised negative image of the specific character, which resonates within other stories of folklore as well. Maintaining the basic rhythm of folktales, most of these stories have a non-linear method of narration. As each character is elaborated upon, the unfortunate fate of a single character is almost lost within the narrative. On the one hand, this normalises the storytelling to a great extent and makes the storyline move forward. On the other hand, a careful reading of the sub-text of the story reveals volumes about specific representations of each character.

I would like to further discuss on this by looking at the representation of women in the folklore of the supernatural, which has female ghosts or spirits of various kinds and forms.

Across India and across mythologies, folklore and modern legends, there are many regional variations with different names of female supernatural entities including witch, devil, *chudail*, *dayen*, and many others. I would like to mention in brief a folktale from Madhya Pradesh titled as '*The Chudail who Stayed Back*', which I was fortunate to collect in one of my most recent field works (Maitra B. 2021: 221-222) for my book on folklore of India. This is a modern legend and according to this, once a *chudail* (a cunning witch) 'trapped' (read- enticed) a *sahukar* (a merchant) and became his wife. One afternoon the *sahukar* met the *chudail* next to a *baoli* (a stepwell) near his house and .The *sahukar* had understood that the lady was a *chudail* since her ankles pointed to the opposite direction. Nevertheless, the *chudail* was so beautiful that the *sahukar* could not resist her charms and they kept meeting for the next couple of days. Finally, on the third afternoon, the *chudail* proposed to the *sahukar* and asked him to marry her. The *sahukar* was advised by a village elder to accept the marriage proposal only after she had handed over her *chunri* to him. He was then advised to take that *chunri* and bury it under the mortar and pestle in the *sahukar's* house. It was instructed that only then it would be possible to have the *chudail* stay in the house as a wife. The *sahukar* did as per the instruction and the couple got married. In due course, they had four boys born to them. Many years later, when the eldest was about to get married, the *chudail* told the *sahukar* that it had been years since they got married and begged the *sahukar* to take out the *chunri* from under the mortar and pestle. The *sahukar* too believed that the *chudail* was right and felt that nothing can go wrong after so many years. Thus, the *sahukar* took out the *chunri* and handed it over to the *chudail*. She took it, wrapped it around her head, danced a few times and vanished forever, never to be seen or heard of again.

Here, it is important to note the representation of a woman and the supernatural in the folklore. The above story, especially refers to the lady as a *chudail*; who, from the very onset of the story, is portrayed to do very 'un-lady-like' things, including, having the 'audacity' to propose to her partner and also 'enticing' the seemingly innocent *sahukar*. She is also considered to be 'unfit' for domestic life and thus, needs to be 'tamed'. This entire aspect is described through hiding the *chunri* under the mortar and pestle. This aspect is for subduing the woman and is interesting and is almost similar to harnessing of the 'wild powers' of the independent

woman. The portrayal of such a representation is also not a lone instance as several such examples of women, who have dared to live and act differently, have often been at the receiving end of such shame throughout the world. Folklore in India is no exception and we often find such stories of witches and *chudails* from all across the nation. Finally, the ‘taming’ of the *chudail* is revealed through the fulfillment of her ‘duties’ towards her household and children, which is often considered to end with the marriage of the children. In this story too, the *chudail* thus, like a good housewife, seeks her freedom only after fulfilling her household duties. As we try to understand the reference of fear, it is important to note the very strong patriarchal voice, which has led to the formation of the storyline in the first place.

Similar representations of women as supernatural entities are also quite common in modern popular culture and I would like to mention the *chudail* from a recent Hindi movie ‘*Stree*’ (2018) (the word ‘*stree*’ translates as ‘woman’ in Hindi and Sanskrit. Therein lies a sarcasm against the belief). The makers of the movie said that the storyline was inspired by an urban legend from the 1990s from the city and the outskirts of the town of Bengaluru in Karnataka, which inspired the movie. According to this urban legend, the villagers were once very scared of a *chudail* as she was considered to haunt the houses to charm, entice and finally abduct unmarried men. Thus, they took to writing the words ‘*Nale Ba*’ (meaning ‘come tomorrow’ in Kannada) on the outside walls of their houses. It was believed that the *chudail* would read this and not enter that specific house. The words acted like a totem to ward off the evil. The story of the movie ‘*Stree*’ exactly revolves around such a storyline. In real life, the urban legend and the fear or both, died down with time, especially when people realised that they had no time for superstitions.

The above mentioned examples, reveal that this aspect of fear has traditionally been woven into the very fabric of most traditional folktales, including fairy tales of India as well as other regions of South Asia.

This also renders an interesting perspective to the debates about representation in folklore. Since narratives bear a significant responsibility of carrying socially constructive messages to instill specific life-lessons among the young. There are various methods of storytelling, which does the work. The element of fear is an important tool, which is often used to convey the same. All the examples cited above follow such similar messages. It is also important to see that the period of each story is vastly different. Some stories are centuries old and others are more recent. This also reconfirms the perspective of fear in storytelling. Examples of age-old living folklore, which still uses fear as an effective tool to ‘teach the young’ are found extensively in many parts of the world. I would like to cite examples from the Inuit community, where the sea and the ocean is mentioned as a symbol of fear. Children are taught not to go near water through a story, titled ‘What’s inside the water? the sea monster.’ It is narrated that if a child goes too close to water, the monster will appear and put the child in their big pouch and drag them down to the ocean. Another story of the Inuit community encourages kids to keep their hats on in the winter. Kids are warned that if a child goes out without hats, the northern lights will chop off their heads and use it as a soccer ball.

These examples finally bring an important question into the forefront, such as, is it important to tell stories to scare kids to teach them the right from the wrong? This question also brings me back to the discussion at the very beginning of this article: Are there more ways and methods of storytelling which can be effective? Or is fear necessary to 'teach' lessons?

With this ongoing debate occupying a significant part in most discussions about folklore and storytelling at present, the aspect of the inclusion of fear is often severely criticised all over the world. It is also for the same reason, several folktales, including fairy tales, are often shunned or retold through 'sanitised' versions at present in various parts of the world. These altered story lines or 'sanitised' versions are especially created, keeping in mind the young readers and listeners of the present times. There are several such examples in popular culture at present, including most of the animation feature films made by the Disney Production House, which are after famous European fairy tales, namely, '*Cinderella*', '*Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*', '*Beauty and the Beast*', '*The Little Mermaid*' and others. The storyline of these popular European fairy tales were presented in a very different format from its original stories, which, the production house felt, was suitable for very young spectators. This also often resulted in completely altering parts and sections of the original folklore or fairy tale as well.

Obviously, further question arises; if many of the lessons, which traditional folklore aims to impart is often deemed unsuitable at present, what is the significance of these folklore?

There are not one answer to this often debatable question as it poses many challenges, along with a complex set of troublesome equations about inter-generational communications. It also aims to address, such issues as representation, especially of women and children within the folklore and if the incorporation of fear is considered detrimental and unfavourable.

Then how does one 'learn' from traditional fairy tales? I believe, keeping this in mind, it is indeed important to venture further and deeper into the subtext of lesser explored folklore around us. A deeper look will guide us with a fresh perspective and to re look at lesser-explored concepts within traditional folklore, like migrations, displacements, health and hygiene and languages.

Below, I would like to explain this with examples from traditional folklore from our Indian subcontinent as well as those of few ethnic communities of Sri Lanka and Bhutan. These are traditional folklore that had been around for centuries and they highlight significant information about migrations, resettlement, acculturation, medical history, and also issues of Human Rights.

A story from a popular folklore from the Indian subcontinent

A story titled '*Dushtu Bagh*' (The Naughty Tiger) forms part of the Bengali book '*Tuntunir Boi*' (*The Book of the tailor bird*) by famous author, poet, illustrator and publisher Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury. The book was published by Upendrakishore in 1910 at his own press 'U Ray and Sons' in Kolkata. Since the book is based on compiled stories which Upendrakishore collected from all across the region of Mymensingh at present Bangladesh, it is also possible that he came across the stories in various local languages, which were then transformed into literary Bengali and published. It is possible that the present stories were told in a varied

regional dialects of Bangla (Bengali). Nevertheless, Upendrakishore's Bengali book made the stories famous across the entire region of undivided Bengal (including the present country of Bangladesh). These stories are still famous in present state of West Bengal (India), in Bangladesh and also in various parts of the world among the Bengali diaspora. The story of '*Dushtu Bagh*' from the book '*Tuntunir Boi*' continues (Maitra 2023:50-54) as follows:

Once a tiger was captured and put into a cage by the king of a kingdom. This cage was kept near the main gate of the king's palace and the tiger kept appealing to every passer-by to set him free. No one paid heed. Finally, a Brahmin Pundit (a symbolism of an erudite scholar of erstwhile times), who was passing by, took pity on the tiger's plight. This gentleman was known as kind-hearted but gullible and thus, many a times, he was mistaken as a simpleton by many. As the Brahmin Pundit agreed, the tiger understood that he was indeed naïve. He thus, feigned innocence and promised the Brahmin Pundit that he will not eat him upon being released. However, once released, the tiger wanted to eat the Pundit, who was shocked to see the deceiving nature of the tiger. Desperate to save his life, the Pundit gathered an idea to appeal to three juries to seek justice for this ungrateful demand. With much difficulty, they managed to find two juries- a banyan tree and a dyke, locally referred to as 'aal' in Bengali, which is a slight elevated land that separates two agricultural lands. As the Pundit sought justice from both, he was highly disappointed to see how cruel they were with their instant verdicts of agreeing with the tiger to instantly kill the Pundit. The sentence was against the entire human race as they destroy nature and thus, the Pundit was told to suffer. The Pundit was in a fix and right at that moment, a third jury, in the form of a very clever fox intervened and saved the Pundit by putting the tiger back into the cage by fooling him and fastening the cage door tightly.

Moving away from this Bengali version, let us see how the storyline is evident across indigenous languages of Central and Southern India. This is seen in the book, the '*Old Deccan Days*' (1870)¹ by M. Frere, which had stories collected from various indigenous languages. In this book, the story is titled, '*The Brahmin, the Tiger and the Six Judges*'. In this version, the tiger attempts to eat a foolish Brahmin and they seek help from six juries, including a banyan tree (*Ficus benghalensis*), a camel, a bullock, an eagle and an alligator. Finally, they approached a clever jackal, who saved the Brahmin by tricking the tiger back into its cage.

There is yet another version of this story in indigenous languages in northern and northwestern parts of India, presently parts of Pakistan and Afghanistan. The story is titled, '*The Tiger, the Brahmin and the Jackal*', and is part of the book, '*Tales of The Punjab*'² by Flora Anne Steel (1894). According to this version, a shrewd tiger fooled a poor Brahmin and they sought the help of four juries- a peepul tree (*Ficus religiosa*), a buffalo and a road and the fourth jury, a jackal, who saved the Brahmin from his unfortunate fate.

Coming very close to this version is the story from various indigenous languages of northern India. Titled as '*The Tiger, the Brahmin and the Jackal*', this story is part of the book '*Indian Fairy Tales*'³ by Joseph Jacobs (1892). In this version, the appeal is made to a peepul tree

(*Ficus religiosa*) and a buffalo and finally, the third and the last jury, a jackal resolved the dispute by putting the tiger back into the cage.

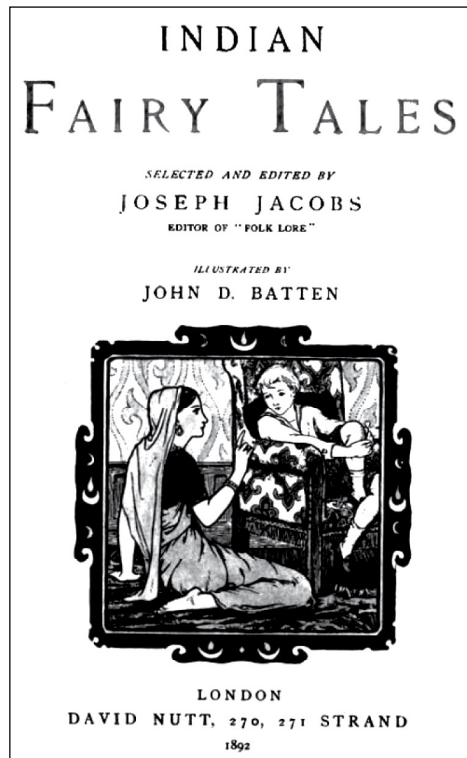


FIG- 1- The illustration on the cover of the book- 'Indian Fairy Tales' (1892) shows an Indian woman, possibly an 'ayah' or a governess or a maid or a caretaker, telling a story to a child, who is painted to resemble a typical British child of yesteryear, as is understood from the clothes. (source in bibliography)

There are also many regional versions across the Indian subcontinent and one such example is the version from the Santhali language of central and eastern India. Titled '*The story of a tiger*', this is part of the book '*Santhal Folktales*'⁴ by A. Campbell (1891). This mentions a cowherd, who saw a tiger trapped in a quagmire as he was grazing his bulls in the forest. The tricky situation arose when the tiger was set free from the quagmire and he wanted to eat the cowherd. Finally, they sought advises from a *mohwa* tree (*Madhuca latifolia*) and a cow. Both proved to be of little help. Finally, a jackal helped to resolve the matter and saved the poor cowherd.

Interestingly enough, this storyline spreads far and wide across South Asia. In a version from Sinhala language from Sri Lanka, a crocodile attempts to eat a simple villager and appeal was variously made to a *kumbuk* tree (*Terminalia arjuna*) and a cow and finally a jackal settled

the dispute. This Sinhala version is part of the compiled book, 'Village folktales of Ceylon'⁵ by H. Parker (1817). It is also interesting to see the similarities between the various versions, in spite of geographical differences. Thus, a version of '*The Panchatantra*' from India comes close to the Sinhala version where a crocodile attempts to eat a Brahmin priest and various appeals were made to a mango tree and an old cow and finally a jackal settled the matter.

In a similar manner, another version is seen in Korea, which begins with an interesting description of a small village, threatened by regular visits of a maneater. Being terrified of the tiger, which was killing people and domestic animals, the village chief instructed to build a trap. A pit was dug and covered with leaves and food. That night, the tiger fell into the pit and the very next morning, as the nephew of the village chief was passing by, he pleaded him to take him out. As the tiger came out, the young man realised that he was in danger. He sought help from two juries; a cow and a rabbit. The cow advised to kill the young man, the wise rabbit saved him.

Needless to say, the above story too, 'tries' to teach through a degree of fear. However, in the process an important aspect is highlighted through the story. The need for understanding Human Rights and how it almost failed the protagonist, who is variously represented by the Brahmin Pundit, the cowherd, a simple villager or the nephew of the village chief. If it was not for the intervention of the last jury in each storyline, the protagonist would have surely succumbed to the greed of the antagonist, represented variously by the tiger or the crocodile. Finally, the problems of the common man being the same, the storyline survived as an important thread, connecting various regions across South and Southeast Asia.

The folklore of the Veddah community of Sri Lanka

The Veddahs of Sri Lanka is often referred to have been primarily a foraging community. They are an ethnic community of Sri Lanka, however, today they are thought to account for less than 1% of the national population. Originally, they lived in eastern Sri Lanka, in the Danigala mountain and the surrounding forests, but the construction of Senanayaka Samudra, the biggest man-made lake in Sri Lanka in 1949, displaced the Veddahs. Presently they live in tiny settlements in the Hunnasgiriya hills in central Sri Lanka and their habitation is found up to the coastal lowlands in the east of the country. Very recently, in 2022, the Sri Lanka Department of Archaeology and the Ministry of Heritage built the 'Veddahs Heritage Centre' in Rathugala, just before the pandemic and tourism tours began in 2022.

The folklore of the Veddahs speak of the many trading work that the community members were conducting through more than one and a half thousand years. The information of the folklore are also corroborated by the accounts of various foreign travelers, who visited Sri Lanka. It is important to note that the traditional folklore of the Veddahs in their original language is also on the verge of extinction as the language of the Veddahs is marked as an 'endangered language' (UNESCO)⁶

Relooking at Meanings and Representations in Folklore

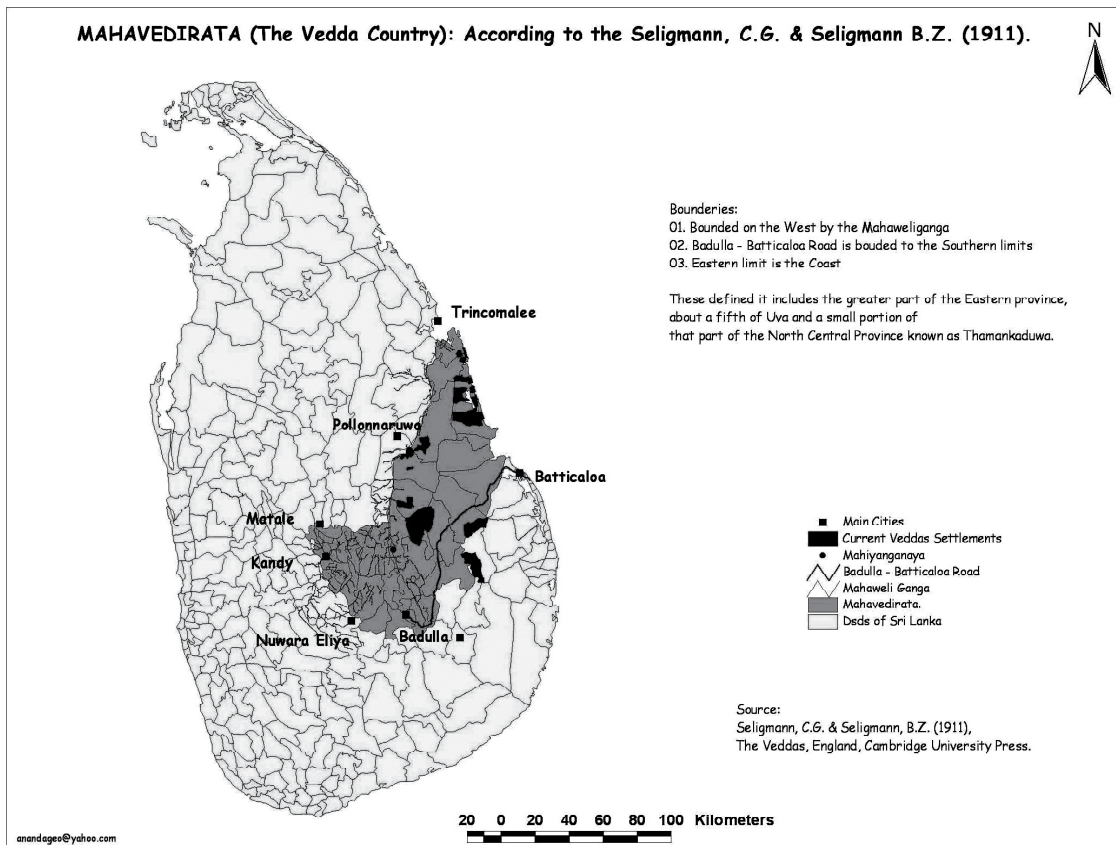


*Fig-2 The original homeland of the Veddahs of Sri Lanka
 (De Silva and Punchihewa, 2011, pp-3)*

The original language is an Indo-Aryan branch of Indo-European languages but the parent Veddah language(s) is of unknown origins. This original language of the Veddahs (Dharmadasa 1990) is said to be a creole which has evolved to its current state (De Silva and Punchihewa, 2011, pp-1). The original language is still used by Coast Veddahs and Anuradhapura Veddahs, especially to communicate at the time of hunting and while chanting during religious ceremonies. Among the rest of the communities, the language is heavily influenced by either Sinhala or Tamil, depending on where they reside, e.g. the Sinhala speaking Veddahs are seen in the vicinity of Bintenne in Uva District, (southeastern part of the country). On the other hand, the 'East Coast Veddahs' have adopted Tamil, which includes the Veddahs in the Eastern Province, lying between Batticaloa and Trincomalee.

Since the original Veddah language is being fast replaced by other dominant languages of the country, the folklore of the Veddahs are also being greatly influenced, including their songs,

stories and also their knowledge about traditional medicine, among others. Thus, the preservation of folklore of the community is facing dire situations as the original language itself is in difficult situations. This difficult situation is also coupled with a general seclusionist mindset, which has been carried-on through centuries. In spite of the Veddah's being referred to often as the earliest inhabitants of Sri Lanka, many people know little to nothing about them.



Fig-3- Photograph (circa 1970s) of the Most Prominent Veddah Chief, Late Tisahamy Aththo. (Media Jet/ CC BY SA 4.0)

For many centuries, Veddahs were stigmatised and oppressed by the Sinhalese rule, and limited only to tourist interest. Thus, very little is often discussed about the Veddah folklore, which reveals some very interesting information about their lives. Apart from being the main representation of their sociocultural ethos, their folklore also speaks of many other aspects of their lives, including their activities of trading with many people from nearby lands and outside of their forest habitat. The folklore mentions that the Veddahs traditionally traded with people living outside the forests in honey and forest products. Stegeborn (2004:46-47) mentioned, "The forest was always there for them in case the crops failed. The Veddahs also utilised the forest to obtain raw materials to make tools, weapons, utensils, adornments, shelters and clothes. Eventually, this led to trade with non-forest people. Fa Hian, the famous Chinese Buddhist pilgrim who lived in Sri Lanka in the fifth century A.D. (Beai 1968: xi) recorded that the

Veddahs traded as far back as 337-422 a.D. Fa Hian noted: “This kingdom had originally no inhabitants, but only demons and dragons dwelt in it. Merchants of different countries [however] came here to trade. At the time of traffic, the demons did not appear in person, but only exposed their valuable commodities with the value affixed. Then the merchantmen, according to the price marked, purchased the goods and took them away, (in Beai 1968: lxxii).”

Figure 7.1. Transformation of language use / disuse within a generation

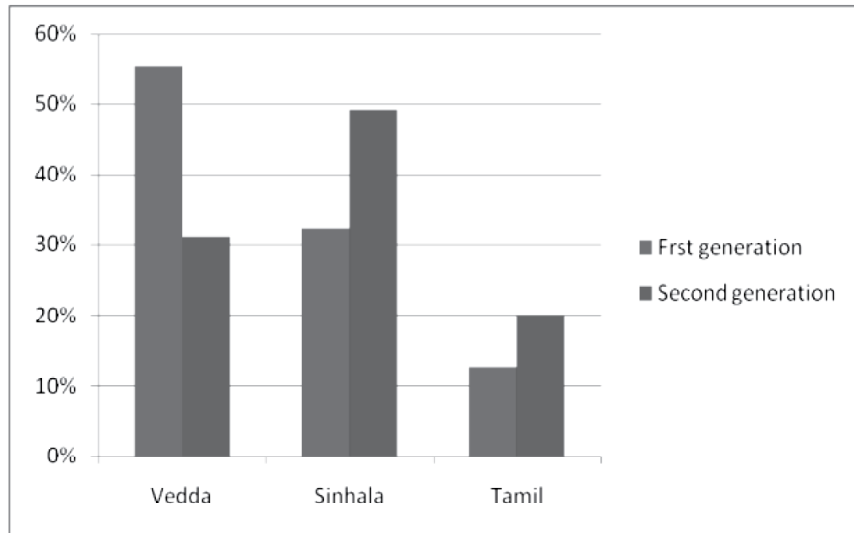


Fig-4- Fast diminishing Vedda language. Presently, only 11% of Veddahs in Sri Lanka are conversant in their traditional language, in comparison to 85%, who are not. (De Silva and Punchihewa, 2011. pp-94)

Later, the mention of the trade of the Veddahs with people outside of the forests are also made by the Arab scholar, Al-beruni (cited in Spittel 1957: 58) and also later on in the 17th century in the accounts of Robert Knox, who was an Englishman, and was a captive in the prison of Kandy’s king for thirty years (1681: 98). However today, the story of the trade of the Veddahs in honey and other forest products is very different as the Sri Lanka Wildlife Authorities confiscate any honey or meat or other forest products, which the Veddahs collect for trade. This also poses a problem as it brings the trade with the people outside of the forests to a sudden halt and necessary items, which the Veddahs used to purchase thus, have limited or no supply. This is essentially because the Veddahs, primarily being foragers, have no skills of blacksmith, weaving and clerking. Thus, access to goods and services to the ‘outside world’ is needed for supply of basic items of life and survival. Finally, in the near future, if an attempt is made to preserve and save the Veddah language, the folklore will greatly benefit to be preserved for posterity.



Fig-5- A Veddah hunter with bow and arrow (wanni77/ CC BY SA 2.0)

The Lhokpu folklore of Bhutan

The Lhokpu is an indigenous community of Bhutan with around 2500 speakers according to the latest census data of UNESCO. With a very few speakers, their language is marked as an ‘endangered language’ by UNESCO and it is within the folklore of this language that some vital information is embedded. These are pertaining to the original land of the Lhokpu, their migration to a different region within Bhutan, where the community faced two major bouts of pandemic, that resulted in the death of a majority of the villagers. This created severe fear among the remaining people and they left their villages in search of another region, where presently they reside. It is also often accorded that the pandemic was brought over by migrants from the Nepal valley, who came and settled within the villages of the Lhokpu. Thus, within the folklore of the community lies information about migration, settlement, acculturation, pandemic and resettlement.

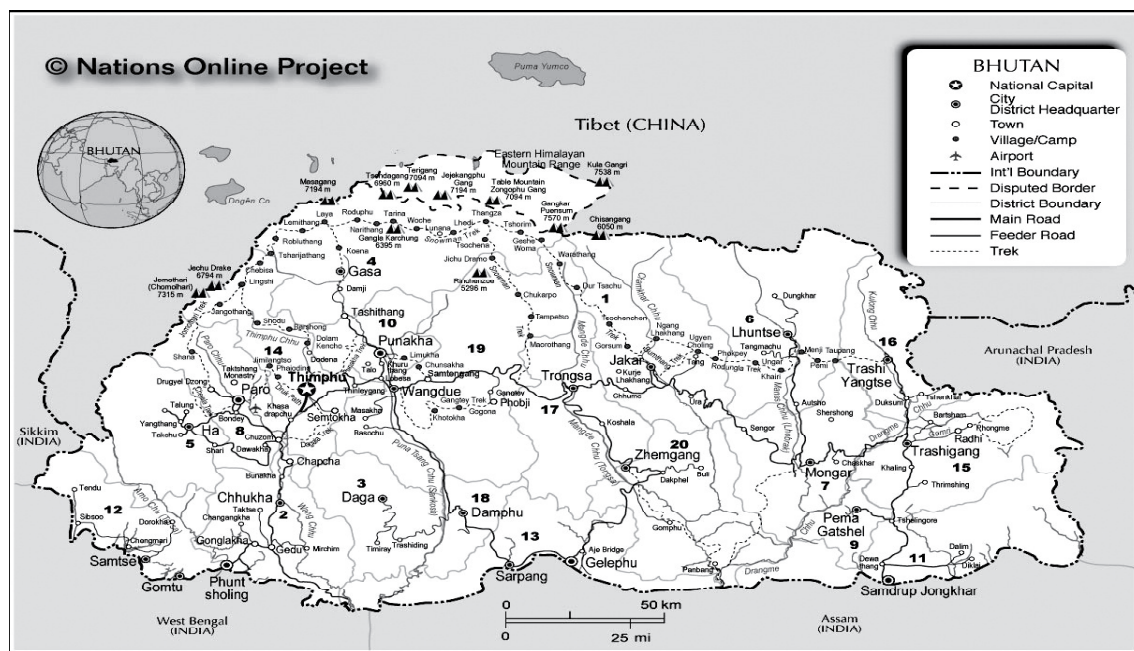


Fig-6- Political map of Bhutan
(Nations Online Project- Political Map of Bhutan - Nations Online Project)

In Bhutan, the Endangered Languages Documentation Programme is under the Dzongkha Development Commission and this is also part of the Himalayan Languages Project of Royal Government of Bhutan and is sponsored by Leiden University of Netherlands. The Dzongkha Development Commission, in the past few years, have been working and documenting about three specific languages, namely, Gongduk, Lhokpu and Monkha, the three endangered languages of Bhutan. The report of the Dzongkha Development Commission mentions these three languages as important because of being “the most intriguing from the comparative and historical linguistic point of view because of the key positions which they occupy within the Tibeto-Burman language family and because of what these three languages can tell us about Bhutan’s past and about the prehistory of the entire greater Himalayan region.”

Let us briefly look at the narratives of the Lhokpu language. The Lhokpu folklore mentions a place called as Celo, which is an integral part of the Lhokpu language. The word 'Celo' means an area, where three rivers converge or 'three confluences' or 'triple confluence'. This actually refers to the original homeland of the Lhokpu, which extends across the Jaldakha river, including the area called Bara Tendu in Sipsu. These three rivers, in Lhokpu language are- Sihti, Cunti and Dronti. The second syllable of each of the names of the river, i.e. 'ti', actually means 'water' in Tibeto-Burmese. The Lhokpu also has their own names for every stream, cove, brook, hillock or ridge in the area.

The Lhokpu are the aboriginal Dung population, native to western Bhutan. At present the Samtse district administration of the Royal Government of Bhutan is pledged to protect the interest of the native Bhutanese Lhokpu population. According to Bhutanese government records, Nepalese immigrants began to encroach upon Lhokpu lands as woodcutters during the first decade of the 20th century. This was compelled by Sir John Claude White, political officer in the British Indian government. This revenue from the timber was put to educate young Bhutanese in British India. The most elderly Lhokpu generation recalls the advent of the first Nepalese immigrants to the area and these stories are embedded within the endangered language of the Lhokpu.

The story of the displacement of the Lhokpu mentions that the present day Dorokha, to have once been a major Lhokpu settlement, with the village of Pumta being a significant settlement. The region of Denchukha was an important town of the Lhokpu, which was also the seat of the Lhokpu kings. Today, both Dorokha and Denchukha are important Nepali settlements and the Lhokpu settlements have extended beyond present-day Sipsu. Besides Lhokpu, there are also other indigenous communities in the region, such as, Meche, who have moved out beyond their original regions. They lived at the bottom of the hills in the jungles of the Bhutanese Duars. At present no Meche is found there. The area is inhabited by Bengalees from West Bengal. The toponyms of the Lhokpu language provides an interesting data of the dramatic changes of population in the region around 19th century. This is important to understand migration and resettlement histories of various communities of the region.

The Lhokpu folklore speaks of two bouts of epidemic, which led to large number of deaths of members of the community. The first pandemic is referred to in the Lhokpu language as ‘leyam’ or blood dysentery, which was accompanied with high fever. In the Loto Kucu area, only 12 households survived this pandemic. Many of the kids from these families, who are now grandparents themselves, recount, that many women and girls came to reside in Loto Kucu as they fled from other Lhokpu settlements, which were wiped away during the leyam pandemic. However, soon after arriving, they died.

After this pandemic, large number of Nepalese came in and settled in the area. Soon, another round of pandemic struck the region, after the new Nepali immigrants arrived. This is referred to as ‘rhihka’ or fever and is mentioned to have been brought by the new settlers in the region, as the hosts of the vectors. Thus, the Lhokpu narratives and folklore mentions how they were once lived isolated and possessed a strong civilization, which decayed because of the pandemics. The words like pandemic and epidemic thus, still instil fear in the hearts of the Lhokpu community.

Discussion

The story of the tiger and the foolish man from various parts of India, specifically portrays some patterns because, “... the storyline seems to revolve across the region reflecting the flora, fauna, the society and the temperament, and most importantly the similarities of emotions of the common man. The slight variations add to the degree of uniqueness which makes each of the variants an exclusive example.” (Maitra Bajpai, SAARC, 2017). There is also an interesting factor in each of the versions of the storyline. Each one of them highlights the importance of local plants or animals,

e.g. the immense prominence of “kumbuk tree across the region of Sri Lanka, the significance of the mango, banyan or peepul trees in the regions of India, Sri Lanka or Bangladesh or the importance of an agricultural field across the region of South Asia. In a similar manner, the mention of the animal changes from region to region, e.g crocodile changes to a tiger in the regions of Bengal and Bangladesh or the jackal changes to a sly fox as the latter used to be widely available in the region, etc. Since many of the folklore from South Asia are available through various printed versions for the last two centuries, a reference in modern days becomes easy. This helps to understand and comprehend the significance of the art of ‘Storytelling’. ‘Folklore’ forms an integral and inseparable part in them” (Maitra Bajpai, SAARC Art, 2017).

However, along with the specific natural and the sociocultural ethos of the region, an important aspect is highlighted through the storyline, that is, the need for understanding Human Rights and how it almost failed the protagonist, who is variously represented by the Brahmin Pundit, the cowherd, a simple villager or the nephew of the village chief. If it was not for the intervention of the last jury in each storyline, the protagonist would have surely succumbed to the greed of the antagonist, represented variously by the tiger or the crocodile. Finally, the problems of the common man being the same, the storyline survived as an important thread, connecting various regions across South and Southeast Asia.

The Veddah folklore from Sri Lanka represents a part of their life, which is under severe threat at present, that is, the trading of Veddahs in honey and other forest products with the people outside the forests. This trading has historically been a part of their lives through centuries and has been corroborated by different travelogues of pilgrims and historians to Sri Lanka. However, the same is almost extinct at present and can only be found in the folklore of the community. Unfortunately, the language in which this folklore was originally formulated in, is also an endangered one. There is an imminent danger of the folklore being obliterated altogether sometime in near future.

The folklore of the Lhokpu community of Bhutan mentions how they were once an isolated and strong civilization, but fell into decay because of the pandemics that struck them severely in the 19th century. Thus, the words like pandemic and epidemic still instills fear in the hearts of the Lhokpu community. The language of the Lhokpu community is also an endangered one, like that of the Veddah’s.

Each of the examples cited above are all from traditional folklores, which have been around across centuries and if analyzed carefully, their subtext will reveal perspectives, which have been least explored till date. Thus, the storyline from various parts of India speak about Human Rights, while the stories of the Veddahs mentions about an integral economic activity of the community and finally, the stories of the Lhokpu community speak about migrations, settlements and resettlement, as well as information about demographics of health and hygiene

Conclusion

Folklore in the modern world, often faces various challenges, especially from secondary tradition. Technology is one of them. The examples cited above from the urban myths of modern India are

typical examples of these. Modern technology, “speeds up and also expands the processes of folklore communication, but does not change the needs of the people using folklore as a part of their lives.”(Smidchens, 1999:54). On the other hand, Smidchens also argues (quoting Bausinger, 1971 and 1990) that “Folk culture is folk culture, regardless of the fact that it exists in a world of technology (Bausinger [1971] 1990) or in a nonindustrial peasant village”(Smidchens, 1999:54). Thus, folklore survives in the present world despite several challenges as more often than not. Many stories also face severe criticism for being unsuitable for young listeners and readers. This has resulted in ‘renovating’, ‘reworking’ and ‘sanitising’ many folklore and fairy tales from around the world. In an attempt to rework the old and the traditional folklore, many new stories have also been created especially keeping in mind the young audience that it wants to address. As debates continue over ‘sanitising’ folktales and fairy tales or omitting them altogether on various grounds of representation or portrayals of aggressiveness and violence, it is also important to consider, how traditional folklore and fairy tales can best be explored through various other perspectives, which have mostly been neglected so far. It is also important to mention that examples of environment, ecology and preservation and conservation of them have often been the highlight of many stories of folklore through centuries. These narratives are those of resilience and endurance. ‘Re-looking’ or ‘reassessment’ of similar traditional folklore will only add further to the myriad palettes of narratives.

Finally, as debates over changing formats and rediscovering folklore continues, it would be interesting to witness how folklore survives in the near future and under what kind of changed formats?

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Notes

- ¹ Book- *Old Deccan Days* (1870) by M. Frere-https://www.gutenberg.org/files/36696/36696-h/36696-h.htm#FNanchor_80_80
- ² Book- *Tales of The Punjab* (1894) Flora Anne Steel. London & New York: Macmillan and Co., 1894. <http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/steel/punjab/punjab-12.html>
- ³ Book- *Indian Fairy Tales*, ed. Joseph Jacobs, 1892, pp-66-69- https://www.gutenberg.org/files/7128/7128-h/7128-h.htm#Page_66
- ⁴ Book- *Santhal Folktales*- A. Campbell (1891)- <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/35060/35060-h/35060-h.htm#t10>
- ⁵ Parker, H. 1907 *Village Folktales of Ceylon*. Asian Educational Services: New Delhi.(p- 315- 317)
- ⁶ Interestingly enough, the 'Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger' of UN mentions Sri Lanka to be the "least heterogenous linguistically" as approximately 70% of its 13 million population speak Sinhala (closely related to Indo-Aryan languages) and 25% speak Tamil, a dialect of the language spoken in South India (pp-63).The 'Atlas' also mentions the Vedda language of Sri Lanka to be spoken by a very small population of the Vedda community of around 300 people. Thus, along with the community, the language too is endangered and this is rightfully mentioned in the Atlas as well— "Vedda, itself (is) related to Sinhala, but it may be extinct within a decade." (Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger, pp-63). Traditionally noted as hunter-gatherers, the Veddhas have also been practicing fishing as well as honey-gathering as their main occupation, however, over the years and in recent times, they are seen to practice many other professions, including in many urban centres.

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