

## *The Possession of Narratives: Telling and Transmitting Caste in Indian Folktales*

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The European Conference of Arts & Humanities 2017  
Official Conference Proceedings

### **Abstract**

This paper postulates that caste in India is not just a sociological category, or an existential reality, but has been historically constituted of narratives that shape both. It will elaborate this by offering a brief survey of the rich store of myths, fables and parables meant for the children that have emerged and been transmitted over a millenia in the subcontinent. These include the *Jatakas*, the *Panchtantra*, and the *Hitopadesh* – a few of its most famous examples. These stories are deployed today to instil in children the cultural values and a sense of history. Hence, the paper will also examine some of these narratives, to see how caste is represented in them, and to analyze the implications of such representations in their repeated retellings today. It will attempt to show that choice of subject, theme, mode and genre of Children's Literature all substantially determine the meanings of 'caste' for the 'impressionable minds' they target. Through the detailed analysis, especially of highly popular stories in *Baital Pachisi* and *Singhasan Battisi* (both 11<sup>th</sup> CE), this paper will attempt to reveal how children in India are introduced to the ideas of *caste*: how, when narrated by the paternal/maternal figure, the child imbibes the ideals of caste along with the other societal norms: how these ideas are juxtaposed by the child onto her social reality, leading to the verification and concretisation of caste ideologies. Towards this end, the author will also discuss, given the current political dispensation, how important it is to question this ideology and how it can be excoriated through the very process it seeks to be validated by.

Keywords: Children Literature, Indian Folktales, Caste System, Bedtime Stories, Short Stories.

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## Introduction

“Stories that are handed down from one generation to the next connect us to our past, to the roots of our specific cultures, national heritage, and general human condition. Stories are the repositories of culture. Knowing the tales, characters, expressions, and adages that are part of our cultural heritages makes us culturally literate.” — (Lynch-Brown & Tomlison, 1993)

It can be said that humans are the storytelling animals. We make sense of the world around us through the stories we choose to tell about it. The narratives of our origin, the origin of the universe, the Gods and the religion we believe in are all different stories we have told ourselves and chosen to believe in. These stories fashion our self and help us situate ourselves in our own culture and environment. In this context, I would like to stress the importance of the stories we tell our children, during their early stages of growth. These stories come in multifarious forms, be it bedtime stories drawn from the memory of the narrator or told with the help of books available in the market or the stories read from picture books or through many animated videos freely available for kids on YouTube and other video sites. These stories, according to Karen Coates:

“By offering substantive representations for words and things to the child, stories, especially those found in children’s literature, provide signifiers—conventional words and images—that attach themselves to unconscious processes and have material effects on the child’s developing subjectivity. Thus we could say that the stories we read or are told as children have as much to do with shaping our subjectivity as do our primary existential relationships. (Coates, 2004)

This paper would first map the field of Children’s Literature in India, then it will look at how this literature is intended to serve several purposes and, hence, it will emphasise on how sometimes this literature gives out more than what the adults prescribing it to a child, bargained for. For this purpose, using the Indian context, and through the examples of my own child’s encounter with this literature, I will highlight how the one size fits all approach is deficient in preparing the child for the future to come. I am going to use the immensely popular tales from *Baital Pachisi* and *Singhasan Battisi* as examples to highlight my thesis that Popular Indian Literature for children is casteist and dangerous. This literature, in the early childhood, creates such a jaundiced worldview that any dose of liberal education at the latter stage is unable to cure it. A tentative solution, however, would be proposed to counter the ill effects on children of such literature.

## Children Literature in India

Children Literature as a distinct category is a recent phenomenon in India because although the child was an integral part of the family but it was never considered a separate entity. Hence, literature meant specifically for children was never produced. According to Manorama Jafa, in the article titled “The Indian Subcontinent” in *The*

*International Companion Encyclopedia of Children's Literature* (2004), the first phase in the development of Children's Literature in India was the oral tradition with its rich content of mythology, folktales and legends. The Jatakas, Hitopadesh, Panchatantra, Kathasaritsagar have always provided a rich source of stories for children in India. The second phase resulted due to the interaction with the British Children's Literature and the third phase dawned when the Indian writers themselves started writing for children.

A visit to any bookstore in India will confirm that for the most part the tales from Ramayana, Mahabharata, Panchatantra, Jataka, Hitopadesh etc. form the core of what constitutes the indigenous Indian Children's Literature. The stories contained therein and their many variations are continued to be read and told either as bedtime stories by parents or used in the textbooks of pre-school children. These tales and legends are presented to the children as *Niti* tales. Jafa (1982) quotes Arthur W. Ryder's description of *Niti* as rules which ensure "the wise conduct of life"

Niti presupposes that one has considered and rejected the possibility of living as a saint. It can be practised by a social being, and represents an admirable attempt to answer the insistent questions how to win the utmost, possible joy of life from world of men. (Jafa, 1982)

They provide a child, like any other children's literature, a better understanding of herself and the others and her relationship with the world around her. The world with its socio-economic, cultural and religious structure is revealed to the child through this literature. A child develops the ideas of right and wrong, the permitted and the prohibited, culturally sanctioned rules of social engagement, customs, etiquettes etc. via these stories meant for her. Here I am not saying that these rules are explicitly stated or emphasised. They are revealed through the way the stories are structured, that is through its plot, characters and the way the central problem in the story is resolved in the end. Sometimes the story may not even serve its intended purpose at all: that is, when the stories explore in detail the exploits of the evil character then they may not have the intended effect on the reader or the listener.

Early childhood years are especially important for the emotional and intellectual growth of the child because it is the time when she is busy absorbing the experiences which will shape and define her relationship with the culture and the larger world she is placed in. It is the time when stories, help form in a child's mind the notions of gender roles, religious norms, cultural practices and modes of social behaviour. A child who is not able to read and actively interpret data the world presents her with, trusts what parents and other adults tell her. It is through this belief in the testimony of the adults, Paul L. Harris (2012) claims:

They accept the extraordinary claims that are widespread in their community. They come to believe in the miraculous powers of God, in the efficacy of prayer, and in an after-life. Such beliefs can even infuse what children say they have seen and heard. When 5- and 6- year- old believers in the Tooth Fairy

were asked to describe her last visit as truthfully as they could, not only did they often weave in implausible details—“She flid in the window” or “My cat got her stinking fairy dust all over her fur”—they claimed to have personally witnessed her visit. (Harris, 2012)

As it is evident from the quote that a child does not only just believes in what she is told but also imaginatively creates the world according to what is contained in the stories that are told to her by the adults. To continue with Paul L. Harris, “Well before children go to school, they are capable of engaging in a sustained conversation. They can follow a story or an explanation, can reflect on what they are told, and can ask questions. Young children also have a powerful imagination.” (Harris , 2000) Besides the formation of the notions of gender roles, religious norms and patterns of social behaviour, caste structure is also emphasised in the stories in case of an Indian child. This paper will show how the narratives of Indian Folktales meant for children take possession of their worldview and instils in them the basic structure of the caste system as practiced in India along with the belief in the superiority of the higher castes and the inferiority of the lower castes. But before I move on to talk about the kind of stories that an Indian child is exposed to, and the contents of such stories, let me first talk about what triggered the idea for this paper.

### **A Personal Anecdote**

I have a seven year old son, Kanishk who is growing up on a rich diet of bedtime stories ranging from Cinderella to Sleeping Beauty. He has been listening to stories since he was he was two and half and has been doing it regularly. I am the responsible for getting him to sleep. Hence, the task and responsibility of telling him stories every night rests with me. About a year ago, I found an illustrated copy of the *Singhasan Battisi* lying around the house, which I began reading to him from every night.

On the eighth night, my son nonchalantly closed the book and said, “Enough, I don’t want to listen to these stories anymore.” When asked why, he said that they are boring. He also said they were all similar. I was shocked, I understood that the narrative structure of the stories was repetitive, i.e. every morning King Bhoja would approach the Throne of King Vikramaditya to sit on and every time he would be stopped by a figurine studded on the throne, which would come alive and tell him a tale about the greatness of King Vikramaditya. The tale would end with the challenge that if King Bhoja thinks he is as great as Vikramaditya then he can sit on the throne otherwise he should leave. So King Bhoja would leave. Surprisingly my son didn’t find all that boring. What he found boring was the fact that in every story Vikramaditya would go on an exploit and would come back victorious with some invaluable gift or prize and in almost every story a poor Brahmin would appear in the end and would either demand that gift directly or talk about his problems which would prompt Vikramaditya to partake with his gift to solve that problem. My son also said that he hated the Brahmins in the story.

I was shocked at such decided views of Kanishk who was barely 6 at the time. When asked for the reasons, he volunteered that all the hard work is done by King Vikramaditya but prize is ultimately given to the Brahmins. This episode led me into

reading the Tales from *Panchatantra* and *Baital Pachhisi* also. In all of the above stories I found a pattern and structure which glorified the Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas and also indicated a definite relationship between them. These stories also presented and glorified the caste stratification and in the process valorised the upper castes and presented the lower castes in villainous or demeaning roles. All this made me realise how the impressionable mind of a child can be a site for planting ideas which leads to the rich harvest of caste prejudice later in life.

## **Caste System in India**

Before digging in deep into the stories in both *Simhasan Battisi* and *Baital Pachhisi*, let us pause here to talk briefly about the caste system ingrained in the Indian society. According to an article in BBC News, *Why are UK Hindus against a caste law?* dated 18/01/2017:

The caste system is thought to be an ancient Indian social hierarchy and a defining feature of Hinduism. It is described as a hierarchy of four varnas or caste categories found in Hindu scriptures, with brahmins (priests and teachers) at the top, followed by kshatriyas (rulers and soldiers), vaishyas (merchants and traders) and the shudras (labourers and artisans). Beneath them all are the dalits—so-called "untouchables" —who are completely excluded from society. (Samani & Ahmad, 2017)

The most common features of the caste system in India are: segmental division of society on the basis of heredity and by birth, a system of hierarchy on the basis of purity and impurity, dietary and other restrictions on social interactions, endogamy and lack of choice of occupation, etc. Another BBC article *What is India's caste system?* dated 25/02/2016 makes it amply clear:

For centuries, caste dictated almost every aspect of Hindu religious and social life, with each group occupying a specific place in this complex hierarchy. Rural communities were long arranged on the basis of castes—the upper and lower castes almost always lived in segregated colonies, the water wells were not shared, Brahmins would not accept food or drink from the Shudras, and one could marry only within one's caste. Traditionally, the system bestowed many privileges on the upper castes while sanctioning repression of the lower castes by privileged groups. (BBC News, 2016)

Although caste discrimination has been proscribed by the Indian Constitution and has been turned into a criminal offence through various acts regulating the caste discrimination and atrocities but we still find incidents of violence, rape and arson resulting in the deaths of the lower castes a routine matter in the daily life of India as a nation. Many crimes against dalits (untouchables) and shudras are reported while

countless go unreported as lower castes continue to live a life either under constant threat or fear of persecution on caste lines. The caste system finds its basis in the notion of purity and impurity which entails that upper castes are pure and the lower castes are polluted and polluting. It is with this view that we should understand a recent incident reported in BBC News:

The 42-year-old from Bedford identifies herself as Ravidassia—a group regarded by some as at the lower end of the caste system. She says she was in a supermarket when two women began verbally abusing her. "They started calling me a low caste chamar (a derogatory term used to describe an individual belonging to a low caste), a dirty bitch. "At that time, I got a bit frightened, I thought 'no, no this can't be happening.'" She said the women, who had seen her at a wedding previously, followed her and her nine-year-old son to her car. "There were two of them and one of them was going to hit me, I thought they were going to really rip me apart." My son kept asking 'mummy what is a dirty chamar? Is that a swear word?'" (Samani & Ahmad, 2017)

It is within this context one has to understand how deeply entrenched is the caste prejudice in the consciousness of the Indian mind that it refuses to loosen its grip in the liberal and educated social atmosphere of UK. This paper is part of an attempt to understand how this notion of caste takes hold of the mind of the child at an early age, an age when she is not ready to evaluate, test and verify the claims made in the stories being read out to her.

### **Simhasan Battisi and Baital Pachhisi**

Considerable body of literature in Sanskrit contains numerous stories of Vikramaditya. Although the authorship and date of the Simhasan Battisi (*Simhasan Dvatrimsika* in Sanskrit) and Baital Pachhisi (*Vetāla Pañcaviṃśati* in Sanskrit) are unknown but it is agreed that both were written originally in Sanskrit. It is claimed that *Simhasan Dvatrimsika* must have been written in 11<sup>th</sup> century as King Bhoja mentioned in it died in 1055 AD. Similarly, the oldest recension of Baital Pachhisi is found in the 12<sup>th</sup> book of Kathasaritsagar, a Sanskrit work compiled in 11<sup>th</sup> century by Somadeva.

Both the collection of stories contain a frame narrative, within which the different stories are told. The frame narrative of Simhasan Battisi has already been mentioned in an anecdote about my son, the 25 stories in Baital Pachhisi are told by the eponymous Baital, the undead, to pass the time and to test the wisdom of Vikramaditya while he is being carried to a Yogi for sacrifice. So every tale told by Baital ends in a riddle for Vikramaditya to solve. These tales are also interspersed with various didactic and ethical exhortations drawn from such varied sources like Ramayana, Mahabharata, Garuda and Skand puranas, Kalidasa's works, Bhartrihari's *Niti Shataka Traiye* and from various verses on conduct and policy from Chanakya's *Arthashastra* (Haksar,

1998) It is through these tales, didactic verses and riddles that the social values, the morality and above all the caste structure is enunciated.

I must mention here that I have studied the standard English translations of both the works for reference while comparing it with the edited versions made available in the market to the kids as children's literature. Most of these versions for kids do away with the references to sexual promiscuity, long didactic verses and the bristling misogyny that is at display. Most of these versions available for children are in Hindi and have some basic illustrations. Although the order of the stories might change, even the names of the characters change across editions and publications but in most cases the basic plot and the conclusion remains the same. These versions for kids retain the elements of magic, adventure, horror, bravery and morality which the various editors deemed fit for the consumption of the child. Even in these bowdlerized versions the various aspects highlighted below shine through.

Here are the few facts which emerge on reading both the story collections:

- 1) Every story in Baital Pachisi starts with the mention of the city and its ruler; Even if the king may not have any role to play in the story but it is as mandatory to mention the king. Since, Singhasan Battisi is about Vikramaditya himself so all 32 tales start with him and King Bhoja.
- 2) Every story has either a Brahmin or a Vaishya, either as a protagonist or as an important character. Baital Pachisi has 22 out of 25 tales with a Brahmin mentioned while in Singhasan Battisi almost every tale has a mention of Brahmin.
- 3) In most of the stories a Brahmin might be poor, ugly or old but he is never evil. If he appears evil it will be revealed in the end that he was not so.
- 4) The King in the stories and even King Vikramaditya himself respects the Brahmins and the Vaishyas. There is no sin greater than angering or insulting the Brahmin as it is emphasized in several stories.
- 5) The King, a Kshatriyas by caste, is supposed to maintain the *Dharma*, which essentially get translated into observing and maintaining the rules of caste system.
- 6) Shudra (lower castes) are either conspicuous through their absence or are present as evil figures.

To illustrate these points, two examples, one from Baital Pachhisi and the other from Singhasan Battisi are given here. The VII story of Baital Pachhisi is a very common story found in almost all the editions available for children. This story like all stories in Baital Pachhisi ends with a riddle to be solved by King Vikrama. The story goes like this: In a city there was a king who had a very beautiful daughter. When she came of age king and the queen were anxious about her marriage. Many suits from different kingdoms came for her hand, but none of them suited her fancy. After some time four suitors from four directions arrived. When enquired by the king of their superior qualities, one of them said:

‘I possess such knowledge that I can manufacture a cloth and sell it for five rubies. When I realize the price, I give one of the rubies to Brahmans, of another I make an offering to the gods, a third I wear on my own person, a fourth I reserve for my wife, the fifth I sell, and constantly support myself with the money so obtained.’ (Platts, 2000, p. 75)

The second one said that he is ‘acquainted with the languages of both land and aquatic beasts and birds,’ similarly the third one said that he understands the shastras, the ‘learned writings that no equal of mine exists,’ and the last one claimed: ‘I stand alone in my knowledge of the use of weapons; there is no one like me; I can shoot an arrow which will strike an object which is heard, but not seen.’ After hearing all of them the king was confused and took the matter to his daughter and she also kept silent. Baital, the sprite, who has been telling this story to king Vikrama now asks him thus, “Now King Vikram! For which of them is this woman suited?” this is how King Vikram replies:

“He who makes cloth and sells it is a *sudra* by caste; and he who knows the languages is a *bais* by caste; he who has studied the learned writings is a *Brahman*; and he who hits with an arrow an object which is simply heard, and not seen, is of her caste: the woman is suitable for him” (Platts, 2000, pp. 76-77)

Another version, meant for kids, states the solution in following terms:

“A man’s identity is generally established through his profession. A princess is expected to marry a person of warrior caste....as the other remaining three princes were a Shudra, a Vaishya and a Brahmin.” (Kumar, Anil, 2015, p. 45)

Two more versions of the story, both in Hindi, which are more popular in terms of sales volumes, present a grimmer version of caste system. These version however replaces the suitor who had studied the learned writings, of the previous versions, with a Brahmin who can bring the dead back to life. (note: translation mine) Here again the solution is presented like this:

“Think about it yourself, how can a kshatriya girl be given to a shudras weaver? A kshatriya girl also cannot be given to a vaishya and then what is the point in giving her to the one who knows the languages of the animals and birds? Third one, a brahman, who left his own occupation and became a sorcerer, is also not suitable to be her husband, because that brahmin had become a degenerate when he quit his prescribed profession. Hence, that



kshatriya man is the most suitable for the Princess.”  
(Bhatt, 2014, p. 58) (Gupta, 2013, p. 137)

As we can see in all the versions, that I have studied of the story, how: (a) caste hierarchy is maintained, (b) the caste of the person is determined on the basis of his profession, (c) endogamy is practiced when the a kshatriya man is found suitable to marry the Princess, and (d) a Brahmin is considered a degenerate/an apostate for giving up his prescribed profession.

After some brief examples from Singhasan Battisi, which are interspersed throughout the 32 tales, I would talk about how these stories shape the worldview of a small child. In one of the stories, this is how Vikramaditya’s rule over his kingdom is described: “The noble Vikrama was king in Avanti. Under his rule, the people eschewed the seven vices. Nor did they transgress the rules of their respective castes.” (Haksar, 1998, p. 68) Here is how Vikramaditya himself describes his rule over his kingdom to a visiting Brahmin: “...there is no transgression of proper governance in my kingdom. Nor is there any propagation of wrong policies... There is no animosity towards religion or interference in pious works;... Neither is there any destruction of sacred images, or affliction of sages, or departure from the rules of caste.” (Haksar, 1998, p. 147) Or as in another story wherein king Vikramaditya saves a drowning Brahmin and his wife and the Brahmin offers the king all his ‘merits acquired by the difficult lunar fast and other rights. King replied: “I am born in a kshatriya family, and cannot accept reciprocal favours. ...For Kshatriya who follow the righteous path ordained for them, protecting people is their bounden duty.” (Haksar, 1998, p. 98). On hearing these words Brahmin realized that he is in the presence of Vikramaditya, and he goes on to say:

“What Your Majesty has said is both proper and true. Nevertheless pay attention to my words. In the beginning Brahma had created people from his head, arms, thighs, and feet, and ordained that they should all help each other. But only the brahmins and the kshatriyas were in particular called to help and protect one another as has been prescribed. Therefore it will be quite proper for you to accept my request on which I insist.” (Haksar, 1998, p. 98)

So King Vikramaditya accepts the boon from the Brahmin but as my son, Joy, would have already predicted if he had shown interest in these stories, an extremely hideous brahmin demon appears and asks the king for the same boon so that he can be relieved of the misery of ten thousand years because of his arrogance about his learning, conducting forbidden sacrifices, accepting tainted gifts and insulting the senior hermits. On hearing this the King gave him the store of merit immediately. “With it the brahmin demon was freed from his karmas and, assuming a divine form, he went to heaven, singing king’s praises” (Haksar, 1998, p. 99)

It is relevant here to ask how these stories influence the child growing up in India and how these stories create certain stereotypes in the mind of a child which are later transformed into a worldview which is blatantly casteist. The child may not understand the complexities of the *varna-jati* system, she may also not understand

what a Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra means in the world outside but certain kind a perspective is formed wherein a Brahmin is a reverential figure, a kshatriya is someone tasked with protecting the society and hence to be looked up to. A vaishya is someone who is engaged in business and earns money through fair or foul means but as long as he is earning money it is fine. Shudras are rare in these stories but still when they are there they are presented as evil yogis or demonic figures as in the frame story of Vetala or shrewd and cunning as in the case of the weaver (Haksar, 1998, pp. 50-51) in Simhasan Battisi. Most of these tales in their resolution blatantly enunciate the glory of the Brahmins and Kshatriyas which go a long way in formation of the casteist mind-set in the children of India.

A lot of research is done in America to understand and reveal the biases and prejudices in their children's literature. Works like, Clare Bradford's *Unsettling Narratives: Postcolonial Readings of Children's Literature* (2007), Gillian Klien's *Reading into Racism: Bias in children's literature and learning materials* (2002) and Donnarae MacCann's *White Supremacy in Children's Literature* (2001) are the few relevant examples in this regard. But in India much needs to be done. The so-called cultural organization, (which must not be named lest you desire to be beaten up by its supporters and members) realizes and understands the importance of possibilities that a young mind presents in inculcating their virulent agenda and hence they seek to catch'em young through their own established schools and early morning arms training sessions. We keep coming across several news reports about the changes in the school textbooks to further certain agenda. Much effort is spent by the academics in criticising these organizations and state governments for tinkering with liberal values that the education is supposed to promote. But we ignore that the real threat to these values is already present in the stories we tell or read to our kids during bedtime when we are so anxious to get them to sleep that we ignore the true import of what the child is actually learning through these stories. There is a compelling need to look at these stories which we, with all our best intentions, tell our kids to infuse them with moral values drawn from India's purportedly glorious culture. But then, we may be unwittingly creating a patriarchal, casteist, regressive, superstitious individual who can be used as a readymade tool by certain organizations, leading to horrible consequences.

I can tentatively suggest that we should intervene creatively, firstly by carefully selecting the materials that we read out to our kids. Secondly, we should not shy away from making any changes deemed fit which make the story culturally and socially appropriate. Lastly, in the Indian scenario, we have to be more careful, and need to either purge the text of all the caste and patriarchal elements in the telling or use the tools like sarcasm and reading-against-the-grain to combat the subliminal and blatant indoctrination in kids. Coming back to my son Joy, you may ask what do I do now since he has already rejected Simhasan Battisi. Well, in rejecting those tales he has already displayed the ability to think critically and against the grain, which has prompted me to push my own agenda by buying him the Amar Chitra Katha version of Babasaheb Ambedkar and reading from it. Although he doesn't understand the concept of the lower castes and I too am replacing lower castes with "the poor" in these stories but all this is having the intended effect. He is now more sensitive towards the poor and has also started questioning the valorization of Gandhi in India politics and society. I haven't stopped telling him the tales from

Sinhasan Battisi but now we both enjoy calling Vikramaditya 'stupid' when he is fooled into giving away his hard won gift or prize to the 'wily' Brahmin.

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