

## Beyond Boundaries: A Study of Folktales

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### Abstract

Folktales are the tales which give knowledge and help to bring harmony among the members of a group or folk. The folktales are an essence of collective consciousness of humanity. This paper aims at the universality and timelessness of folktales. The aforementioned are the core characteristics of folktales. The values they teach are universal in nature and have the power to erase all man-made boundaries. These boundaries are between human race and animals, between human race and plant kingdom. Only in a folktale a prince comes at the doorstep of a poor man demanding shelter, seeking love and help. In folktales we have stories of brave girls and women erasing the stereotypical images of the fair sex. Birth stories of Lord Buddha, better known as *Jatakas* have erased the political and geographical boundaries as they travelled from India to Burma to Japan.

Thus the role of folktales in erasing boundaries could be well established. It also helps in implementing the philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakum* (the world is one family). Folktales can play an important role in curing racism, maintaining ecological balance and can create better sensibility in using natural resources. Folktales erase boundaries among various disciplines like history, psychology, medicine, oral traditions and literature. Folktales many times erase boundaries between real and imaginary world. Studies of folktales are always welcomed by different communities all over the world with less or no resistance.

**Keywords :** folktales, society, integration, global concerns, boundaries, culture, folklore

The capacity of humans to communicate and collaborate has brought them to pinnacle of living kingdom. The rise of the human race is because of social and communication skills. Humans have this tremendous quality to work in groups. Humans live various aspects of their lives in their respective social circles and groups. The human race has an innate desire to manifest itself, to express and substantiate itself. A human being must communicate and that desire is at the core of all humanness. What are our fears? What are our aspirations? What are our deep seated desires? We want to tell it all. We express ourselves through music, painting, mimicry, acting and writing. The oral form of storytelling is one of the oldest forms of communication. It is also one of the most satisfying forms of expression as well. Folktales emanate from that oral tradition. There is an endless ocean within the human mind and soul. Humans think, feel, act, create, imagine, predict, compare, arrange, question and rearrange their thoughts. Thus they create stories to express what lies within.

Human creativity knows no limits. Human imagination has made impossible possible. It is basic human tendency to make sense of his/her situations, understand and classify the world. To classify, categorize and to discern is a basic human instinct. A human being yearns for order, clarity and understanding. Since time immemorial,

our ancestors have tried to answer various questions. A question has many answers, many layers. The search for answers continues and it will continue. The past generations have tried to gather their wisdom in words. They have tried to pass on their knowledge to their coming generations. The old generation tells stories to the younger generation in order to love and amuse them and also to prepare them for facing the challenges and difficulties of life. The collective human knowledge and wisdom is our reservoir. The human being inherently wants its progeny to defeat all challenges and survive. With the advent of internet and modern means of storing knowledge in the electronic form, this passing of the reservoir of human mental wealth has become more easy and accessible. All the knowledge now is stored in an electronic capsule. The stories have been bettered and the entertainment value has also increased. But the main objective of folktales remains the same and that is to express inner self, to share knowledge and to train the new members of the group or folk.

Just as a fountain cannot contain itself and gushes out at various points, human creativity also forces itself out through various channels. This original gush of creativity is refined by art. In the pre historic era, humans carved stories through symbols. Music came as a natural instinct of the human race. Through the powers of memory, speech and writing, humans have developed an intricate system of storytelling. Folktales have been an intrinsic part of this journey of storytelling. Folklore and folktales in particular reflect the collective consciousness of a society in a subtle manner. The special thing about folktales is that when we scratch their surface, we find similarity in folktales of all parts of the world. The message and spirit are often similar. Therefore, folktales have universal appeal. They communicate easily to people of the whole world. Simplicity is the hallmark of folktales. Just as the humans have created arms but arms can harm the human race, similarly humans have created boundaries of class, caste, religion, nationality, gender and these boundaries do nothing but harm human interest. These boundaries were created to bring order to the society but now they have become a burden. The very things that were created to create a system are now creating problems and unrest.

The world view of folktales is full of cooperation and co-existence of animals, trees and human beings "The sea there, it has its own system and patterns of behaviour. The fish (sting ray) and the turtle have each got their own language. That's why male and female turtles, when they meet, they know each other, they can talk. All the different animals have their own groups. Seagulls, crows, live by themselves, They have their own rules, style of talking and living with one another, in their own language. The birds and animals know where to sleep, where to put their babies, where to build their nests. The same for trees and bushes. The land knows what their language is." (Bawaka Country et al.2013,para.11.35)

In folktales we see easy narration between humans, trees and animals. We at once personify animals and trees. Those who are listening to folktales especially children immediately imbibe that animals and trees have life, they are living beings and they are to be loved and respected. No extra lesson is needed. When rabbit and lion talk to

each other or when squirrel and the human baby play and communicate with each other, we are not even aware of boundaries. Boundaries between species, humans and Mother Nature are all automatically erased. The Indian concept of rebirth that everything on this earth has the same spirit, exemplifies itself in folktales. Life takes various forms and there are no boundaries among all forms of life. It is a firm Indian belief that even rocks, mountains and water bodies whether large or small have life. The Jataka depicts that before taking birth as Lord Buddha, the Lord had taken birth as various forms of life. In these lives he was called Bodhisatva. Once upon a time the Bodhisatva (the future Buddha) came to life as a young lion. He lived in jungle. There were many of species in jungle. One day when a rabbit was resting under a tree, a ripe fruit from the tree fell down on dry leaves that produced some noise like cracking. The rabbit thought that this was the sound of cracking of earth. He started running and shouting "the earth is cracking, the world is towards its end". Hearing this, other animals like deer, jackals, goats, buffaloes and elephants started running and shouting 'the earth is cracking, the world is towards its end'. Bodhisatva (the future lord Buddha) who was in the form of a young lion observed all this. He thought that "I have to stop all this. Otherwise these fools will die, running like this." He went there and roared three times loudly. The animals stopped at once. The lion enquired that why all of them were running. Elephants told that "the earth is cracking, the world is towards its end". The lion asked that how they knew it? Elephants answered that jackals told them. Jackals told it was rabbit who told all this. The lion asked to the rabbit that who told him? The rabbit narrated the incident that how he heard the sound of cracking of the earth. The lion again asked that he wanted to see that place. All the animals reached there. The lion saw the tree and ripe fruit that had fallen there. At once he understood that it was nothing but a misunderstanding of the rabbit. Thus being powerful and wise Bodhisatva saved all the animals. This story clearly portrays that all animal species get affected by each other. The wise and powerful animals should save other animals. Thus this establishes that with power there comes responsibility. (*The Jataka* 49-52).

While talking about the human-nature relationship, it is quite natural to talk about Guru Nanak, the great preacher of humanity. Once upon a time Nanak's father instructed him to take care of fields and ward off birds. Nanak along with his childhood friend Mardana sat under a tree busy meditating. Suddenly they heard the chirping of birds. The birds' twitter came to Nanak's ears. Instead of flying them away he enjoyed the scene. He uttered "*Rab di chiriya, Rab de khet, chug lo chiriya bhar lo pet*" ("The crop and the birds all belong to God . Oh, birds, feed yourselves full".) This shows that he was well aware of the needs of others. He always cared for each life form and enjoyed good relationship with the surrounding creatures. There is another story when Nanak was taking rest under the open sky a black cobra came there to give shade to Nanak. People around them were worried about security of Nanak. But the cobra did not harm Nanak. This story also tells us that man and animals can live in harmony. They are not a threat to each other but they complement each other.

Lord Rama and Laxmana shared very special bond. It is very hard to give their relationship a name. They are epitome of brotherhood all over the world. Their personalities were like two extremes. Lord Rama had cool temperament. But Laxmana was known for his fiery temperament. Once upon a time when Laxmana was busy, doing some work in woods, a monkey came there. The monkey puzzled and disturbed him so much that Laxmana got angry.

He beat the monkey badly. The injured monkey had marks on his back. After roaming for sometime in the woods Laxmana came to Lord Rama in the evening. Rama asked "Why have you beaten me badly?" Laxmana wondered and said that he could never even think of beating Rama. How could he beat him. He worshipped Rama. But Laxmana saw the marks of lashes on Rama's back. His back was bleeding. Laxmana realized his mistake. Beating monkey, he had hurt God himself. There is life, same 'Prana', same consciousness in all forms of life. This beautiful story shows that there are no boundaries at all. Each and every creature on this earth belongs to Almighty God. This story teaches us to be sensitive towards other creatures and ask us to maintain harmony.

Folktales smoothly walk from natural to the supernatural. Magic, magical happenings, mysterious characters, unknown lands, witches and fairies all make their appearances in folktales. The boundary between earthly and supernatural is easily broken. Folktales have very profound messages. There is a very famous folktale of Raja Rasalu in Punjab. The second wife of Raja Salbahan punishes and tortures the son of his first wife. As the cycle of time glides her own son Raja Rasalu faces similar hardships. In many folktales when a kind soul quenches the thirst of a dog or a bird, he/she also receives the same kindness in the course of time. Folktales tell us that the wheel of karma returns. We get what we do. The beauty of folktales is such while crossing all artificial boundaries and while giving such subtle messages, they remain simple.

Vladimir Propp a well known folklorist and scholar says that folktales all over the world have some inherent similar patterns. He has written a classic on forms of folktales. There is a villain, a donor, a helper, a princess and her father, a hero and a false hero in many folktales. He has discerned about thirty universal motifs, patterns and guiding principles of folktales. First there is an initial situation or the set up. Then there are abstentions where someone leaves or dies usually a parent or a guardian figure. Then there are hurdles and problems. There are efforts to overcome those problems. The villain comes and creates hurdles in overcoming the problems. There is a helping party. The hero is often tricked or duped by magic to do something bad. The villain has a chance when hero blunders. The helping party prepares a plan. The hero chooses to fight back. At this point the hero comes across the supernatural helping agent. The hero usually passes a test to prove his character. The supernatural donor or helper has a kind of magical way to help. The hero is taken to a new place. The hero can be taken physically, emotionally or spiritually. Finally the hero beats the villain, with his wits and his special abilities and depth of character. There is

recognition for the hero. The false hero and the villain are punished. The end is not difficult to guess. It is usually a wedding. (*Morphology of the Folktale* 1968)

While there are many folktales on this pattern in India; all Indian folktales certainly do not follow this pattern. In India we have many spiritual folktales. We have folktales depicting family bonding and family honour. We have folktales of revenge. We also have folktales of debt and repayment. Indian folktales are very rich. The oriental culture has immense diversity in folktales. *Panchatantra* is a well known collection of fables. It is a valuable treatise for scholars of folktales. *Panchatantra*, written by Vishnu Sharma contains Indian folktales. These folktales were specially picked with a purpose to educate. There was a king whose sons were foolish. He appointed a teacher Vishnu Sharma to guide them and impart wisdom. The purpose was to teach *niti* (political wisdom). A society or a kingdom needs people who are competent enough to survive and prosper. It is needed that one must be wise and clever, just being good is not enough. Goodness must be guided by intelligence. So the folktales in this treatise show Nature in her red tooth and claws. These folktales tell us how one must take care of one's own self. To be able to achieve something, one must have a plan and one must have a sharp mind. Life is unforgiving. If one has to survive, one has to be clever. No one is going to pardon a foolish person. People will take advantage of their foolishness. One must stand for one's own safety and take steps to solve problems. There is a folktale, named 'The Elephant and The Rabbit'. Once upon a time there was drought and due to this elephants were dying of thirst. They decided to move to another place in search of water. They got a pool of water. But the area around the pool was inhabited by countless rabbits. Elephants and their activities around the pool became a big problem for the rabbits. The elephants were killing the rabbits unknowingly. The rabbits decided to solve this problem. They sent a rabbit as an ambassador of the king to the elephants. The rabbit asked them to leave the place on orders of their king Moon. The messenger told the elephants that their king is in deep meditation. As the elephants went towards the pool they saw the reflection of moon in it. They were overawed. They saluted the image of moon and left. This story tells us that if one is not physically strong he/she must use the brain to solve the problem. The story also underlines the importance of communication skills of the messenger.

*Aesop's Fables* are considered to be western counterpart of *Panchatantra*. Aesop was a courtier. His task was to entertain as well as educate the courtiers. While the purpose of Vishnu Sharma was to educate young princes and train them in the art of ruling, the purpose of Aesop was to face the ruler and save oneself from their claws. But the tales of *Panchatantra* and *Aesop's Fables* both establish that weaker creatures can get rid of difficult situations by using their brains. They can also save themselves from the stronger ones. As is the case in the story 'A lion out of the cage'. Once upon a time a lion was trapped in a cage. He convinced a passerby to unlock him. But when the man rescued the lion, he was up to killing the man. Luckily a fox came there. The man asked the fox to help him. The fox said that he could not believe that a big lion can

be trapped in a small cage. The lion said that he can show him, saying that he entered the cage. The fox locked the lion again in the cage and saved the man.

The tales of *Panchatantra* and *Aesop's Fables* give the same message that nobody can help foolish people. Even their friends cannot save them. A story from *Aesop's Fables* named 'Foolish Mouse' interestingly gives the above message. Once upon a time two mice were wandering here and there. They saw a cat who was sitting quietly with her eyes closed. One of the mice got impressed by her saintly looks. The foolish mouse tried to be friends with the cat. The other mouse tried to warn him. But he was not ready to accept the friendly advice. Suddenly the cat pounced on him and he lost his life. The intelligent mouse failed to convince the foolish one. A story from *Panchatantra* 'The Cranes and The Tortoise', tells us a well meaning friend may not be able to help a person because of the person's own stupidity. Once upon a time two cranes and a tortoise were friends. They were having good time together. But in hot summer days the lake dried. The tortoise was unable to find a new place. So the cranes decided to help him. They wanted to take him to a pleasant place. They instructed the tortoise to hold fast a stick in his mouth and not to open it anyway. They held the stick between their beaks and started flying. But the stupid tortoise opened his mouth to say something while they were flying high in the sky. He fell down and lost his life.

Tales from *Panchatantra* and *Aesop's fables* instruct and entertain through humanization of animals. Human traits as foolishness, cleverness, cunningness, intelligence, goodness etc. get personified through animals in these tales. A well known story from *Aesop's Fables* is 'The Hare and The Tortoise'. This story establishes that a determined person can achieve anything by constant efforts. The speedy Hare was defeated by the slow and steady Tortoise. The rabbit was confident about his victory and rested under a tree for some time, but the tortoise kept moving slowly. The tortoise managed to win by his undying efforts. ([Fables Compared-Shodhganga](#))

We can see that the boundary of place, language and time are broken when we talk of Vishnu Sharma and Aesop. Both personified animals. Both of them gave message of similarity of all beings. They might not have known each other but the approach is similar. Both the tales are catering to the curiosity and reading need of the children.

Folktales are cultural expressions of people and societies. The study of folktales reveals how the people and the communities maintained their relationship with others throughout several generations. Further, it reveals the esoteric and exoteric nature of human groups in identity formations. The motif of transformation is there along with other motifs. The non-living (like stones, rocks etc) got transformed to into living (human beings, trees, flowers etc) and *vice versa* (humans into stones, tress, animals). One touch from Lord Rama transformed a stone in a lady Ahilya. Folktales emphasise that human society and Nature are not antagonistic. We should identify with environment. The same spirit runs through all animate and inanimate objects. Folktales help to bring people close and increase understanding among them. It is need of hour as we are living in era of globalization and social transformations.

Folktales can be helpful to train global citizens who must respect diversity and human rights. Folktales also help in increasing awareness for ecological balance and sustainable development. Competency and social awareness in citizens can be inculcated through folktales. Folktales are simple in structure and easy to understand. This quality of folktales make them a perfect tool to enhance communication skills. The messages are deep and direct and help to inculcate morals in young generation. Folktales can be accessed through the use of multimedia to young generation.

The beauty and significance of folktales lies in the truth that they are effective till date to meet challenges in modern times. Folktales can play an important role in instilling environmental ethics in people. The earth is facing environmental changes due to irresponsible behaviour of people and organizations. Folklore can play its role in communication and promotion of new ideas regarding ecological balance. If human race wants sustainable development, we have to revive good relations with our surroundings. Folktales teach us to maintain good interpersonal relations. They help us to understand self and motivate self discipline. When human race practices self discipline and uses the available resources sensibly, it will be an investment for future. Thus folktales can inculcate global responsibility in folk.

The most distinguishing feature of folktales is that they are relatively close to the ordinary world of experience and actions. They derive their material from all the possible sources. They provide reminiscence of the social world around them. Today's civilization can take pride in various things. Technological developments have affected every sphere of life on this planet. People feel well connected via social platforms. Communication technologies are well developed. There is a well developed transportation system. One has to just think about what one needs, all the things are available on a single click. Human race of current world can be considered as the most civilized one. But it is partially true. There are various problems that need to be solved. There are some vital issues that are pulling us back to barbaric times. The resources that must be available to all citizens of earth are used by some and rest of the population are totally deprived of it. Increasing crime and social unrest are some of the symptoms only. The real causes are injustice and discrimination on various levels in society.

People are struggling for food and other basic requirements of life. Poverty, hunger, diseases and religious conflicts are the problems that exist even today. Our planet earth has some natural boundaries and some man-made boundaries. There are geographical and political boundaries. Financial status like rich and poor is another boundary. Gender roles and gender discrimination is a boundary which is a threat to humanity. Racism has created boundaries and disturbed the harmony in social life of individuals. Colour of skin, language and religion have created boundaries that do not allow humans to live as humans.

'Sassi-Punnu' is a romantic folktale from Punjab. The speciality of Punjabi

storytellers is that while presenting folktales they vividly describe social traditions, cultural values and the natural beauty of Punjab. 'Sassi-Punnu' is a love tale. Sassi was abandoned by her father at the time of her birth. The father was superstitious and on the basis of astrological forecast he abandoned the girl. He feared that the girl would bring bad name to his family and she might marry a man of another caste when she grows up. A washer-man and his wife take pity on the fragile, small, beautiful new born girl. They take her as their own daughter and name her Sassi. As Sassi grows into a beautiful, idealistic woman, she decides to take care of her parents in their old age. She refuses all marriage proposals because marriage would have taken her away from her parents. Then prince Punnu visits her village. They fall in love with each other. It is love at first sight. Sassi clearly tells the prince that she always wanted to marry a man who would cooperate with her in taking care of her parents in their old age. Surprisingly the prince is open-minded. He is beautifully portrayed as a strong, well built man. He leaves his palace and comes to the village of Sassi and lives with her. One small story strikes down racism, gender discrimination, social status, financial status etc. The beautiful story conveys so many messages at so many levels. It is clearly a feminist folktale. It erases boundaries. Both girls and boys can look after their parents in their old age. We should not discriminate against children on the basis of gender. No barrier works in this story. The prince is at the door step of the washer-man. The story breaks the stereotypical image of girls in the society. Sassi is brave and intelligent. She has her own ideas. Since Sassi and Punnu first saw each other through their portraits, we assume that both of them are art lovers. Art becomes a vehicle of love in this story. Distance also does not count here. The prince covers miles to reach his lady love. So geographical boundaries are also broken. (*Love Stories from Punjab* by Harish Dhillon, 1998).

Through the study of folktales implementation of Indian philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbkam(the world is one family ) is possible. Folktale studies evoke curiosity about other cultures. Folktales can help folks to be sensitive towards diverse human personalities and cultural beliefs. Universal elements of folktales may serve to increase empathy with people of other cultures. Folktales depict victory of good over evil. They help us to develop a better sense of morality. People today can learn from folktales that we all are citizens of earth. Traditional values and customs get illuminated by folktales. They help us to understand what is distinct in all cultures. Thus they help us empathize and understand other peoples' point of view. Folktales are meant to be shared. This makes their transmission easy. They are not a matter of copyright law and thus they erase boundaries of all types as generation gap, cultural gap etc. Folktales may be understood and enjoyed by uneducated as well as educated folk. On the other side one must be learned to understand literature. Folktales are flexible enough to reduce conflict of traditional versus modern. Folktales can take the flavour of the place, where they are told. Scholars claim that integrity is one of the functions of folktales. Adam named some functions of folktales as validation, maintaining conformity or control, escape and education. Adam says that telling legends can act as "icebreaker" to allow an outsider into the close group. Folktales

work as a binding agent. Listening and telling tales does wonders to maintain harmony. According to Dundes integration is one of the functions of folktales. **(Chapter-2 Functions of Oral Narrative Tradition: Theoretical Background)**. In folk narratives humans converse with flora and fauna. All living and non living things are in coordination. The folktales are like time machines taking the audience to bygone times to relive the experiences. Folktales help to develop understanding that cultural diversity is strength of a nation. It must be respected by all whether it is in India or in America. Paradoxically folktales are stories of particular folk but do not create boundaries among folk. They act as a unifying force. They bring harmony in a country having diverse cultures like India. Folktales go beyond religious and supernatural beliefs and they are able to erase all sorts of boundaries.

Saint Raidas said that he as devotee and God are like sandal (chandan) and water, "Prabhujī tum chandan, hum paani". Can we separate water from sandal paste? No, we cannot. This analogy goes for folktale and society as well. Any given society has folklore woven into it. The society and the folklore cannot be separated. Every living society has its folktales which define the basic fabric of that society. Surprisingly, folktales of all regions of the world, of all races and religions have universal patterns which transcend boundaries and create a beautiful whole.

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Fables Compared - Shodhganga

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