

Folklore and its interpretation

As my grandmother tells me this story of the old woman who prayed so reverently to Tulsi that Lord Krishna may be her pallbearer, I can feel the absolute belief she has in the lore. The story is from around the regions of Vrindavan and Mathura in India, where the love for *Kanha* exceeds every other kind of devotion. It is incredibly popular among the widows who reside in the two cities devoting their entire lives to the service of Lord Krishna. My grandmother hails from the nearby city of Agra and tells me that her mother told her this story, whose mother told her the story, and so forth.

The folk tale was probably a product of the Bhakti Movement and Brahminic Vaishnavism, and spread in the form of orature within the late medieval period. The Bhakti Movement became popular in Northern India in the 15th Century and along with it the concept of an individual-focussed spirituality regardless of one's birth/caste/gender became popular. The saints in the Bhakti tradition taught their followers about forbearance, devotion, love, reverence and release. Salvation now became available to all and so did the concept of '*bhakti*,' where the devotee loves God and God loves them back. Devotional songs, stories and poems were the means to attain salvation. One of the most famous of the Bhakti saints was Meerabai.

This story, like the others that originate from this era, talks about the importance of "bhakti" and how it is the means to being one with god. The old woman in the story is the perfect devotee – she prays first thing in the morning, no matter the weather or the circumstances. She prays fervently to Tulsi, asking her to make sure that her family has enough food, and that whenever she dies, she dies in Tulsi's harbourage and Krishna is the pallbearer who carries her to heaven. She wishes to be one with god, and quite literally die in his arms.

The woman represents the ultimate devotee, the "bhakt" who sacrifices her entire life to god and his service. She is rewarded for her devotion and her love for Krishna, for she gets

everything she asks for: her family always has enough to eat, she dies in Tulsi's harbourage and Krishna himself takes her to heaven.

The story held a very special significance in the place of its origin: the widows who resided there and dedicate their lives to Krishna, were given hope every single time they thought of the old woman who got to be akin with god.

Stories like this exist in other cultures, for they teach their listeners about the importance of dedicating oneself to god and then bearing the fruits of his reverence and love. Not only for the widows of Mathura and Vrindavan, the story also held significance for those who were true believers in god. The story originally taught people about the importance of fully dedicating themselves to god. By immersing oneself in the devotion of god, one can forget other worldly pleasures and by showing true love, dedication to his cause, one can reap the benefits of god's love.

My grandmother is a deeply spiritual woman: she believes that whatever she has is due to the belief she holds in her Krishna. While she may not completely believe that Krishna will be her pallbearer and that she will reside in heaven with him for eternity after her death, she does believe that by praying to god with all the reverence and sincerity that she has, she will be able to live a better life, for she will have her Krishna by her side. She still holds the belief in a very tangible version of 'God': she prays to it, she tries to keep him happy at all times and to show him how much she truly loves and appreciates him. To her, the story holds lesser significance than it did to her mother, and to my mother even less.

To me, the second generation that my grandmother has told this story, the story has lost quite a bit of its original meaning. The story to me is not about dedicating oneself to god and fervently praying to him and begging to be one with him. It is about putting my heart and soul in anything that I do and dedicating myself to completing the task at hand by doing my best.

The story is now no longer about the love for god and the dedication to god, but about the importance of giving oneself completely to the task at hand without fixating on the results. To me it doesn't hold the same spiritual significance that it did to my previous generations.

The journey from the concrete to the abstract is clearly visible. The story goes from something concrete: an absolute belief in and dedication to god, to something more abstract and open: dedication in everything one does.

The processes associated with this dedication have also become abstract. The dedication for god was associated with the lighting of the lamp, the chanting of the prayers, the counting of the 'rudraksh', etc. The dedication to everything that you do is associated with the mental processes that you go through in order to complete the task, the convincing of your mind to go into the 'working state of mind', the singular focus, the inner monologue telling you to get to work, etc.

In spite of all of this, the story somehow still also ends up holding significance similar to what it did back in the day. In Vrindavan, the 'city of widows', the women who still dedicate themselves to Krishna after a lifetime of suffering and endurance, hold the hope that Krishna will deliver them from the pain that they endure every single day. Their lives are threaded by the hope that they share amongst themselves and the belief that they hold within themselves: both fuelled by folk stories like the one we are discussing.

However, the story can have so many different meanings despite its pure unambiguity. Like A.K. Ramanujan discusses in his essay, "Who needs Folklore", the story can have various meanings in different parts of the country and even to two people.

To elucidate, he says, "A proverb such as "It's dark under the lamp" (dipada kelage kattale, in Kannada) has been collected in Kannada and in Kashmiri, at two ends of the Indian subcontinent. The sentence is the same in each place, but it means different things. The

reference is the same, but the sense is different. In Kannada it means that a virtuous man, like a lighted lamp, may have dark hidden vices. In Kashmiri, I'm told, "It's dark under the lamp" has a political sense— that a good-natured king may have evil counsellors. This is, of course, characteristic of cultural forms. The signifiers, of which even the so-called structures and archetypes are instances, may be the same in different periods and regions, but the signification may go on changing."

My grandmother and I, arguably, are from two different cultures. She has spent her entire life in the smaller towns of northern India while I have lived my entire life in the metropolitan cities of this country.

Although we come from the same family, she has spent her entire life in very different circumstances than mine (generation gap notwithstanding). All her life she was taught about the importance of holding god close to herself and her soul while I have spent my life understanding the importance of working as hard as I can to survive in this capitalist society and religion and god have taken a back seat in my life. This difference is very evident in our interpretations of the same story. She believes it is about the dedication to god while I think it is about the dedication to one's work.

The story can have different meanings within the same culture as well. It has three different yet interlaced meanings that I have come across. First and foremost, is the one about dedicating oneself to a task completely without worrying about the results. The results will come to you automatically.

The other is about the importance of being unselfish and altruistic. The old woman, despite not having enough to eat and having to endure comments about the same, gives up her share of the day's food to Krishna disguised as the old man. This moves Krishna to believe that she is an unselfish woman, without any worldly materials that she holds dear to herself. He

then decides to become her pallbearer and carry her to the heavens away with him. The other aspect of unselfishness that arouses in the story is when the old woman lays 'asleep' underneath the Tulsi plant and her family assuming she is sick tends to her. Krishna arrives at this moment disguised as the same old man and asks for food again. Instead of turning him away, the family offer him the food and Krishna is able to carry the old woman away.

The last interpretation is about having to prove one's worth despite having a strong witness and past to show for oneself. Despite, Goddess Tusli being a witness for the woman's dedication, altruism and love for Krishna, he only decides to fulfil her last wish after he has tested her and she has proven her dedication through the observations he makes through her routine.

Thus, a folk story as old as this one, still holds a certain significance in our lives and can be taken to mean something different from the meaning intended. The lore's significance can be altered and interpreted in different forms and metaphors. The tradition of folklore is something that holds so much importance in our lives without our knowledge, that we may as well have learnt all our values and ethics and morality from these stories. The Jataka tales, the Panchatantra and the Kathasaritsagar are all folk traditions that we have held true to ourselves for centuries although the meanings and applications have changed drastically over the centuries.

As we explore the world of folklore and ancient literature more, we learn more about our traditions, about our ancestral circumstances and even about our own selves.

To quote Ramanujan, where he talks of the folklore about the woman who searches intently for something on the street and upon asked about why she searches for her keys (that she lost in her house), out in the streets, replies that she doesn't have light in her house and can see better in the streetlight, and how we have now begun to look through our literature for

answers, “Without carrying the parable too far one may say we are now moving inward, trying to bring lamps into the dark rooms of the house to look for our keys. As often happens, we may not find the keys and may have to make new ones, but we will find all sorts of things we never knew we had lost, or ever even had.”