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NURTURING SKILLS THROUGH NARRATIVES: EXPLORING ANONYMOUS FOLKTALES FROM INDIA FOR VOCATIONAL AND SKILL EDUCATION

Abstract

In context of vocational and skill education, folk tales offer a valuable resource that transcends boundaries and enhances learning experience. This work explores the folktales from different states of India and its applicability in vocational and skill education. It tries to elucidate on their relevance and usefulness in the context of vocational and skill education, focusing on cultural relevance, experimental learning, preservation of traditional knowledge and holistic learning. Drawing on the diverse cultural fabric of India, this work explores the rich tapestry of anonymous folk tales: folktales from Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Tamil Nadu help learners develop a stronger connection to their community; folktales from Punjab, Orissa, Kerala provide valuable insight into agricultural practices, traditional crafts and specialised trades fostering experimental learning; folktales from Meghalaya, Bihar, Himachal Pradesh help learners discover traditional herbal remedies and sustainable practices and folktales from West Bengal, Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh provide valuable lessons on teamwork, leadership and ethical conduct.

Keywords: Curriculum; Folktales; Folk story; Skill education; Vocational education;

Introduction

Folk tales have long been an integral part of India's rich cultural heritage, serving not only as a source of entertainment on slow days, but also as a means to pass down native wisdom and knowledge. Passed down through generations, the anonymous folk tales transcend time and age to encapsulate the essence of simple folks and reflect on their unique traditions, customs and values. Often, they seek to find answers to complex questions through simplistic means. Exempli gratia, this story from Orissa, *When humans had tails*, seeks a simple, albeit a little religious, explanation to why humans do not have a tail now. Undoubtedly, these simple rural folks would have been intrigued with why humans do not have a tail, while all animals as well as the bipeds have one. The story goes on to reason that humans did have tails, but as the

population increased, it only got in their way and was in general a hindrance, and the only use it served, because it was long and dragged on the ground, was to sweep the floor. The story continues that once when God Kittung, their local deity was visiting them, a man stepped on the Lord's tail, tipping him over and turning him into a laughing stock. The Lord was enraged and, in a fit, pulled off his tail and threw it away. Seeing this, the other tails fell off on their own accord and ran off to hide in the fields where they turned into blades of grass, which the people then collected, tied together and used as brooms. In this piece I try to look at how the folktales teach valuable life lessons and how these can also be a means to equip one for success in their vocational training.

One of the most notable aspects of anonymous folktales is their cultural relevance and connection. Every state in India has its unique traditions, customs and practices, and these customs and practices give a unique flavour to their stories. Stories related to farms and beasts of burden are most common in agricultural areas, whereas, those living in cold and mountainous areas have stories that talk of survival in harsh conditions and unforgiving terrains, folk tales from Rajasthan depict the significance of traditional crafts, like Jaipur's blue pottery or kagzi pottery from Alwar, while tales from Tamil Nadu highlight the ancient art of silk weaving. By incorporating these tales into vocational and skill education, learners are exposed to the cultural heritage of various regions. Take the example of the Molela potters, who have a proclivity towards making their terracotta idols during winters as they prefer the gentle warmth of the winter sun while drying their idols, the reason being harsh summer sun would dry the outer surface quickly whereas the insides remain partially wet, but the soft winter sun would take a long time to dry the outer surface thus allowing the insides to dry out properly. By engaging with these folktales and practices, students learning the art of pottery making and working with pliable materials can also develop a deeper understanding of skills needed and a appreciation of their own roots, fostering a sense of identity and connection with their vocation.

An essential aspect of anonymous folk tales is the preservation of traditional knowledge. These tales serve as repositories of age-old wisdom, indigenous practices and local knowledge systems. Dr. Lalrindiki T. Fanai highlights this in her article, *Narratives of Mizo Puan and Mizo Indigenous Patterns*. Dr. Fanai points out how the word Puanchei or Puan Laisen means 'decorated cloth' and 'cloth with a red middle' respectively and that Puan Hruith means a 'woven cloth', where Puan stand for cloth and Hruith for the weaving technique. The use of specific terms to denote specific items there is no requirement for other long drawn description to put across the type of cloth needed. A precise idea is put forward in a minimalist manner, for instance if a indigenous Mizo says he needs Puan Leisen, it is understood that the speaker requires a cloth for a specially festive occasion like marriage and the motif this cloth has is a red design running along the middle of the pattern. When these terms are incorporated into vocational textile and weaving classes, students from Mizoram can easily identify and understand the design, material and techniques of cloth making used for the material in question. Students, who are not from Mizoram, will definitely have a learning curve before they are able to identify what terms such as Puanchei or Puan Laisen means, but once they become familiar with the terms, the ideas are conveyed quickly and effectively as they are for any native speaker. Every profession has its own set of lexicon which eases communication, and it logically follows that a vocation's folk lexicon and vocabulary should be used to ease transmission of ideas. Let us look at another example, if one says, the instructor says requirement is for a cloth with black background with horizontal red lines along the edges or the requirement is for a cloth with white background with black stripes, they will be wasting valuable class time. But if the students learning about Mizoram's textiles are familiar with native mizo terms, the instructor only needs to say that the cloth in

question is a Puandum or a Puan Hruih respectively and the students readily understand the type of cloth meant. Thus, teaching vocational skills while preserving and using local terminology gives a more hands on practical approach to a student's learning experience and helps foster a sense of pride in one's identity.

Numerous instances of folk wisdom can be found in these tales which can help students. Folktales from Orissa provide insights into artisan skills like stone carving and metalwork. Tales from Punjab showcase agricultural practices, including sowing, harvesting, animal husbandry and how one reaps the rewards of hard work, as in the story of Chibi and her wheat farm. Chibi, small sparrow cultivates and harvests wheat on her land and though she asks her friend Ojas, the crow to help her, she never receives any help. The entire process is shown and self-reliant Chibi is successful, but the bag of grain is stolen by Ojas. Chibi, left only with the straw and husk is sad but later at night as a storm rages, Chibi is protected in a nest made of the straw and chaff, while Ojas, on the higher branches, where he had settled out of Chibi's reach, loses all the stolen wheat to a lightning strike. Listening to these simple narratives learners gain a deeper understanding of hard work, the nature of a person as well a lesson that one should not try to steal, adding a holistic approach to education.

Intellectual aspect; wit, critical thinking and problem solving, is another dimension of these simple tales. By engaging with these tales, learners can enhance their creative thinking skills, explore innovative approaches to vocational tasks, and develop a deeper appreciation for ingenuity and resourcefulness displayed in traditional occupations. Tales of Tenali Raman and Birbal are a common household name now. Tales, such as one where Tenali Raman after being buried up to his neck in ground as a punishment by King Krishnadevaraya tricks a hunchbacked washerman into switching places by convincing the later that being buried neck deep in the ground is a proven method to cure hunchback highlights the importance of quick thinking, thinking out of the box and problem-solving skills, each one of these a much-desired skill that students need to hone. Not only folktales but folk songs, sonnets and couplets are also replete with practical knowledge. The songs of Khanar, referred to as Kanar Bachan in Bengal is a "storehouse of sustainable agricultural wisdom" (Nuri). The farming adages found in her verses are followed in Bengal till today, and they can be a great tool in helping students of agriculture. Her verses talk of simple logical observations,

“thakte balad nak are chas

Tar dukhkha baro mas”

(one who owns oxen, but who does not plough his land, is sorry for twelve months of a year), locally sourced solutions like watering a dry land, need to fertilize the soil, the type of fertilizer to use and for the various issues faced while farming provide practical and easily available solutions and encourage productivity and sustainability. Such folk wisdom needs to be part of subject specific modules, where students after reading and learning of these tales in the classroom and being shown the scientific proofs, can experience their practical applicability. This not only helps in understanding the concepts but also in its retention long after vocation training is completed. They can then use it in the future, as well as educate their family and friends on their efficacy.

Using traditional practices in tandem with modern inventions and technologies helps in financial well-being too. An example of use of practical wisdom to enhance one productivity and sales is seen in the adaptation of the original *Matkas* and *Ghadas* (pitchers and pots) by the potters to competition. Pouring water out from bulky pitchers has always been cumbersome and the potters realised that their dwindling sales was not only due to rise in the use of refrigerators but also due to the hassle of pouring water. They came up with an

effective and cheap solution: adding plastic taps to their vessels. Though not a folktale, it shows the benefits of applying practical knowledge, out of box and innovative thinking to help one's business.

Many folktales contain traditional knowledge and techniques that are in danger of being lost. By incorporating these in vocational education there is an opportunity to preserve and transmit traditional skills. Students learning embroidery can experiment with different fabric, threads, patterns and create their own designs based on the style being taught. Art students learning a new technique can learn about the various natural dying processes used by tribal and folk artists practicing the art form. They can experiment with raw materials, patterns and objects to gain practical experience. They can learn how to handle traditional painting tools and come up with means to improve of them. They can learn to paint on the fabrics and materials used by the original practitioners through apprenticeships. Students can learn of Ayurveda and indigenous medicines and cures using natural ingredients. The current drive for herbal products offers a huge market for students.

Folktales can offer insights into ethical practices, sustainability, and responsible consumption within various vocations. Students can learn about the importance of environment preservation, fair trade and importance of all life forms. Dohas of Kabir preach ethical values;

“Log aise bavare, pahan pujan jai

Ghar ki chakiya kahe na puje jehi ka peesa khai”

(people are foolish for they worship stone out of which God's figures are carved, they should instead worship stones that grind the grains that feed them), the tales of Bishnoi community “India's original eco-warriors, willing to sacrifice themselves to protect animals and trees”, emphasise their reverence for nature and conservation, the tale of Birsa Munda highlights his efforts to protect the rights and lands of his people. Andhra Pradesh's Thimmamma Marrimanu, world's largest single canopy tree, emphasises the need to protect and preserve natural resources. Sharing these folktales, educators can encourage students to reflect on the importance of ethical and sustainable practices, inspire them to make conscious choices that emphasise ethical behaviour.

Conclusion

While incorporating the wisdom of folk tales into vocational and skill education, it is crucial to create a well-rounded curriculum. Just including these stories is not going to be beneficial. To reap the full benefit of folk wisdom the curriculum should combine theoretical knowledge with practical application including but not limited to interactive discussions, field visits, hands-on workshop, project-based learning which actively engage with the skills and strengths embedded within the tales. By integrating these tales into the curriculum, educators can create immersive and engaging learning experiences and move beyond theoretical concepts. These folk tales provide learners with a deep understanding of their cultural heritage, practical skills, traditional knowledge, and holistic development. As India continues its journey towards skill-based education and economic growth, the invaluable insights contained within these folktales pave the way for a more inclusive, culturally rooted, and meaningful vocational and skill-based education system.

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