The Narrative Tradition

India has a rich narrative tradition as can be seen from earliest times. For example, the Rg Veda has stories and in the Yogavashishtha Rama himself is taught through stories told by the sage Vashishtha. The Jataka tales tell the life of the Buddha through animal stories. Many of these tales have been taken from the oral tradition and since they do not have a fixed structure but only a broad framework, they provided plenty of room for improvisation making it possible to move with ease between the human, natural and supernatural worlds. According to Chandra Rajan, the stories of the Jataka were taken from folklore. They were fairly straightforward and popular so the life of Buddha and Buddhist thought were introduced into them. Uma Chakravarti thinks that the appropriation from folklore must have been done through the bhikkhu who then inserted their own messages in them. They were probably used to preach as they served to hold interest. Most of these tales instruct, delight and explore immediate issues and social concerns in a popular format.

Vishnu Sharma’s avowed aim in the Panchatantra tales was teach the three princes, the sons of King Amara Shakti, so as to make them fit for the duties of kingship. Their father was himself a good king being a great warrior, an expert in various branches of polity and economics, and accomplished in all the arts. However, all the teachers had failed with his sons who remained uneducated and ignorant in spite of best efforts. They were not dull but the traditional mode of learning was obviously not for them. Then came Vishnu Sharma, the eighty-year old teacher who proclaimed that if he did not succeed in making the princes gain unrivalled knowledge and understanding in six months’ time, the king could throw him out in disgrace. Vishnu Sharma proposed a novel pedagogy. He would not give formal instruction in polity and allied branches of knowledge and learning but would try to awaken their intelligence through stories that drew on life and its varied experiences. That is why the world of Panchatantra is peopled by a vast variety of characters drawn from all strata of life, high and low, from town and country. Besides them is placed the world of nature with its own hierarchies of high and low, strong and weak, predator and prey. They are used to present real life situation and problems which would, Vishnu Sharma was sure, arouse the interest of the princes, forcing them to think and use their minds. Once they began to do that they were bound to acquire knowledge.

Kathasaritsagar, too, presents a many-splendored world, in which humans and non humans of all kind interact. Its authorship is ascribed to Somadeva, a Kashmiri Shaivite brahmana in around 1070 A.D. But he is, as is true of most narrative Indian literature, a compiler rather than an author in the modern sense of the term. The stories are mainly concerned with worldly pleasure and power, kama and artha, two of the four goals of life posited in Indian thought. Then there are many other works like Dandin’s Dasakumarcharita (The Tale of Ten Princes), the naughty tales of adultery in Sukasaptati (Seventy Tales Told by a Parrot), and Narayana Pandit’s Hitopadesh inspired by the Panchatantra that instruct and entertain through stories. Stories are in fact embedded in all kinds of literature both learned and popular. India is truly the land of stories.

Chandra Rajan traces the story telling in preliterate societies to a community activity. No song or story is sung or told in the same way twice. As there is no fixed text, the storyteller is free to improvise in each telling within the parameters and broad framework of each story. He can vary the details of his narrative, expand or condense his discourse, vary the point
of view and make revisions in the text as he goes along according to the place and audience of his narration. Since it is necessary for him to establish a rapport with his listeners, he improvises as he goes along because he has instant audience response. So each telling is an act of creation. It gives it a contemporary flavor while carrying on the tradition.

The tales embody important social concerns like hierarchy, deviant behavior and exploitation. Possible actions are suggested that can be taken in times of dilemmas arising out of conflicting affections or duties. The stories also communicate abstruse philosophical concepts that are debated upon in more abstract and learned terms in the scholarly literature of the Sūtras and the learned commentaries. These are conveyed through interesting and folk. The narration is a community event that unites people together in a group activity where there are no class distinctions. In fact often there is a reversal of the established hierarchies as the king and the people in authority may be laughed at while the narrator or the story teller, much lower down in the social scale, is worshipped.

Deomocatization of Knowledge

Kapil Kapoor has pointed out that India has always been a knowledge-centered society and the dissemination of knowledge to all people was taken seriously. Knowledge in India has not been confined to learned texts nor has it ever been the repository of the few. Along with the learned and scholarly traditions, there has always been a parallel institution of the or the popular tradition of narration and exposition of texts. It has throughout mediated between the learned tradition and the ordinary masses. There have been continuous attempts to educate and transform so that values remain an integral part of day-to-day practical life and a balance is maintained between individual aspirations and the collective good. Even Adi Shankaracharya, as Kapoor points out, besides composing numerous intellectual texts was a or a popular expounder who traveled throughout the length and breadth of India addressing village congregations, explaining and sharing with them his understanding of Advaita Vedanta. In fact, there is strong reason to believe that Shankara’s learned commentaries originated in his popular discourses. Similarly, Sri Ramanujacharya expounded his Vishishtha Advaita philosophy for twelve years in Tamil, the people’s language in his village of Melkote near Mysore. This tradition goes on till today.

In fact, even the epics were written as the fifth Veda, that is, to expand the essential concepts and ideas of the Vedas in a popular format that could be easily understood and remembered by the masses. The Mahabharata for example, is said to be “Equal unto the Vedas, is holy and excellent, and is a worshipped by the Rishis. It contains much useful instructions on and (profit and pleasure). This sacred history maketh the heart desire for salvation….this history is called. It is the “high and sacred science of , and also of , it hath been said so by Vyasa himself of mind that is immeasurable.” Krishna-Dwaipayana wrote it, “guided….by the desire of doing good to the world,” and “He that hath read the may be regarded as one acquainted with the Vedas.”

The Power of Stories

Why do we tell stories and why do they survive so persistently in our collective consciousness? Because the stories we tell reflect who we are as humans and they make us aware
of our connection to humanity. They are the reflections of our experience. We use stories to teach each other lessons about life; so when we tell stories, we attempt to make a point about something that should be explored, known and understood.

But why are stories told to teach and why are they such an effective means of learning? Joseph Gold gives a psychological explanation for the power of stories. He says that fiction or poetry enables us to experience feelings, emotions, thoughts and images which help us to learn and understand our own feelings, identify the sources of our anxieties, likes and dislikes. It has a mirror effect that reveals the veiled part of our self and our life. Awareness alters our way of thinking and so helps in problem solving. It presents us with material that we recognize but also with slightly altered versions of it thereby placing different possibilities before us. It is an aid to remembering our past and making us see it differently when we need to. Hence, as Gold points out, fiction is a powerful agent for creative and healthy change. It helps us restore ourselves.

Our lives may be chaotic and the degree of control that we may be able to exercise may be limited. Also, it is tiring to deal continuously with practical life. But stories regenerate us as they take us sure-footedly through complex paths of experience and language and let us imagine an alternative life. Refreshed and renewed we can find the energy to shape our own ends having temporarily escaped the trap of our struggles and having glimpsed an ordered experience that has enlarged our world. The major charm and power of a story is to help us see things, and those related to us, differently. Thus through stories we sort out our experiences, evoke emotions and provide information. This is also a very effective mode of teaching and learning because we memorize best through the emotional responses associated with people and events.

When we read a story we supply the pictures, the sound effects, the smells, the colors, and the voices through our own experiences and store of memories. It helps us articulate feelings and thoughts. It takes us inside people and places, and gives us hidden interior information. It does not merely show us tears, laughter or anger but describes their origins, explains their contexts and their background. A story is the basis to how human minds see their world and work.

Joseph Gold points out, stories reinforce the interconnectedness of all creation pulling us out of our isolation; outside the walls we have created around ourselves. They tell us that not only are all human beings interconnected, they are also a part of the larger creation. We are not separate from the starfish and sea anemones, the coconut palms and the primroses. And if we accept that the world is so connected, then all stories must be embedded in one Mind or be shared by all minds, whether of people, or of forests or of sea anemones. Context and relevance must be the characteristic of not only all behavior as projected out into ‘action’, but also of all internal stories. All organisms are organizations. They grow into their own story which contains their history and their very nature, shape, form and function. So the evolution of a sea anemone is a story which is a part of the story of all evolution and thus a part of all our stories. Hence the process helps us to organize the past and to grow and develop our own life stories, which are linked to other life stories at all levels.
Stories produce recognition of our own bewilderments, confusions, sufferings, sympathies and empathies. They make us recognize that what we are suffering is well known and recognized by someone else. Even more important, says Gold, is that the writer or the narrator never presents, cannot present, such a story without conveying some attitude towards it. The attitude is usually one of sympathy towards the sufferer or indignation at the attitude of others towards him or her. So the story conveys a way of framing, seeing, understanding and organizing the pain into the larger picture of life. It provides a way of integrating the painful into the story of our life and so feeling more in control of it. By ‘storying’ an event we become the master of it rather than its victim.

Stories offer many of models of action, problem solving, survival and courage. They help to expand our limited experience and point of view and make us realize that there are more than one ways of seeing or coping with a situation. Then, other stories offer other simulated experiences of surviving, of being in control. In addition, since the story is managed by the author, given a shape, order, outcome, resolution, there is a sense of control and order experienced in the reading or hearing itself. Fiction can be a powerful tool for immunizing and that is why in experienced readers, new real life situations often call up something that has been read and stored in the past and that now acts benignly to help make sense of the present.

Conclusion

Hence stories enable the common people to create their own “stories” from the events of their lives. They understand better and gain more control over the events rather than remain helpless victims of circumstances. It leads to a psychological empowerment as does the space that is provided in the course of the narration to social commentary and satirical and irreverent laughter. Fun is made of those in power and their pretensions are punctured. Family interactions and disputes are mirrored in these stories so as to make people non-threateningly aware of their own motivations and actions. Aesthetic norms and values are put forward to enable people to absorb what is beautiful and valuable. The mundane, the material and the worldly is dealt with cogently while ethical values are incorporated in daily life through these wonderful stories so that we grow knowing where they come from and the long journey they have undertaken to reach us.

* This is part of my larger work, Birds, Beasts, Men, and Nature: Tales from the Mahabharata, New Delhi: TransEdit Communications, 2008.