Learning from Stories: A Philosophical point of view

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Children always cherish stories is in obvious generalization, have received wide attention in academia particularly in the preparation of school curricula. In this paper, I intend to study the significance of stories as a part of basic learning. By basic learning, I mean the development of concepts that helps to understand and analyze various complex things in the world. The initial exposure to various subjects could be begun with stories. Storytelling, as a mode of initiation of learning, has been conceptualized positively productive factor of knowledge development. And this has been emphasized mainly in oral traditions. One important aspect of knowledge dissemination in oral tradition focuses on learning through concentrated listening. Listening to stories at a very early stage of life helps in preparing the child to develop habit of concentrated listening. This paper begins with many such important significance of learning from storytelling discussed by Kumar, Ronney and Nelson. Their essays are referred to substantiate the point that storytelling is essential for basic learning. The second section is on a story that is picked up from a popular folktale of Odisha. Stories are philosophically rich and need to be construed in more holistic point of view of learning. In this connection, in the third and concluding section there is an attempt to show the moral and the philosophical significance of the story which transcends the end of basic learning.

Stories and the idea of Basic Learning

Stories are great source of engagement for children. Stories mostly told to the children by parents and grandparents in an informal and relaxed hour. It is construed as a means of entertainment where we treat stories as meaningful, pleasurable item which motivates the listeners to listen more and more. It is not regarded as a source of basic learning. Showing its significance Roney writes, “Reading, writing and math skills have always been considered basic to education, along with exposure to general concepts in the science and social studies. To enhance instruction in all these basics, storytelling should be used for storytelling itself is basic to humanity.” (Roney
There is a need to tell stories to children for their cognitive development that includes development of concepts used for reading, writing and counting. As ‘stories are to be told for the sake it,’ Roney emphasizes the *intrinsic* value of story and storytelling, because stories are not merely for bringing about pleasure or entertainment which signifies the *extrinsic* value of stories. And this could be also construed as motivating or inspiring factor for a child, but that is not the main concern here. The concern rather is to show certain basic learning happens through storytelling which includes the development of language/linguistic skill.

Through stories a child is initiated to learn language orally and eventually develops speaking, reading and writing skills. Though reading and writing are difficult still if the child continuously undergoes this process of learning, storytelling helps in generating ‘predictive – creative thinking’ in the mind of the listener. (Roney 1989: 522) The predicting ability is better developed through the cultivation of listening habits. ‘Patient listening’ is necessary not because it helps in skill formation but also to be emphasized from the point of view of attitude. If the child keeps listening to a story repeatedly two to three times, then he/she starts predicting the consequence. Krishna Kumar writes, “The joy of prediction coming true is precisely what story-listening offers to an experienced listener; it is not just joy: it reinforces child-listener’s confidence in his or her ability to predict.” (Kumar 2011: 75) Prediction is rule bound; inferential ability. For example, when we see cloud in the sky, we infer that it may rain. Anticipation of rain in this situation is though a possible future state of affairs, but still it gives a sense of the world. Prediction also generates a sense of confidence which is an important factor in all-round development of the child.

Another aspect of language development that happens with the pre-literate children due to listening to stories is the ‘experience of meaning.’ (Nelson 1989: 386 and Kumar 2011: 76) Language has both personal and public dimensions. The personal aspect is that ‘words are personal property’ and we use them at our convenience and ‘yet words are social wealth.’ So, in the context of personal use ‘the listener slightly stretches meaning’ (Kumar 2011: 76). The stretch of meaning is a creative act which gets manifested along with the development of language. In this situation, the child gets an opportunity to *reconstruct* the story using his/her own vocabulary. In this sense, storytelling is simulative for the listener who ‘imagines and co-creates the tale’ while listening. (Roney 1989: 523) This becomes evident if the story is told in
child’s own language. As a result the child can relate to that experience. The experiential aspect of language is more important for the assimilation of linguistic activities. As Nelson points out, “Language experience activities integrate listening, speaking, reading and writing about children’s personal experiences and ideas in their own words.” (Nelson 1998: 388) Listening, speaking, reading and writing are activities performed through language. It is through these activities thoughts are articulated. A storyteller initiates this process in dialogical engagement with the listeners. This is a ‘critical process as it facilitates the child to become literate’. (Roney 1989: 521) As Nelson summarizes, “The storytelling experience then is a vehicle for enhancing comprehension, both literal and inferential; motivating oral discussion; increasing perceptual knowledge of metaphor; explaining and promoting interesting language use; using children’s personal experiences to instill deeper meaning and exciting children about literature; storytelling, and creative interpretation of story.” (Nelson 1998: 389) Thus the child trained to be literate through the method of storytelling succeeds well in comprehending, analyzing, and expressing ideas creatively.

‘Dharamapada’s Sacrifice’

“Dharmapada’s Sacrifice” is a popular folktale in Odisha. My reading of this folktale today is to highlight the philosophical significance of the main character Dharmapada in the tale. Dharmapada is a young architect of the then Utkala. This is how the story goes:

“Once upon a time there was sculptor called Bisu Maharana in the kingdom of Utkal. Utkal is called Orissa now. Bisu Maharana was a fine sculptor and came from a renowned family of sculptors who built many famous temples. Bisu lived with his wife. The King of Utkal, Sri Narasimha Deva wanted to build a great temple at Konark. He employed twelve hundred artisans to build the temple. The temple would be designed as chariot. There would be twelve wheels and the chariot would be drawn by seven horses. The chariot like temple would be built in honour of Sun God.

The king decided to appoint Bisu Maharana as the chief architect. He sent his people to get Bisu to work for the temple. Bisu’s wife was pregnant at that time. Bisu did not know what to

\footnote{As child, I have listened to this tale many times from my mother. It is a very popular folktale in Odisha. I am happy to find this included in a book of folktale. Anand Mahanand and Lalita Goswami (2011) \textit{English through Folktales: A self-study Book.}}
do. But could he disobey the king? He couldn’t. So he left behind his wife and went to Konark to work for the temple. He met the other artisans who were employed to build the temple. They also had left behind their families. Later Bisu came to know that a son was born to his wife and he was called Dharmapada. Dharmapada grew up as a clever child. He learned from his mother many things about sculpture. She also told him about the name his ancestors gained as sculptors. Darmpada went to school. One day he was playing marbles with his friends. When his marble fell down, he asked them to pick it up. They said, ‘Whose son do you think you are?’ You are ordering us. Tell us who is your father?’ Other children also joined them and asked, ‘Yes, yes, tell us. Who is your father?’ Dharmapada could not say anything for a moment. The children said, ‘You have no father.’ Dharma was very upset. He came home in a sad mood. He didn’t speak to his mother. When she asked him about his worry he said, ‘Mother, the children in my school say that I have no father. Please tell me where my father is, I want to meet him.’ His mother was shocked to hear this. She said, ‘My child, who told you ‘you don’t have father.’ You father is a great sculptor. The king has chosen him as the chief artisan of a temple. Your father and other artisans are building that temple in Konark. He stays there with other artisans. He will come back to us as soon as the temple work is over. You need not worry.’ Dharma said, ‘I want to see my father and also see the temple they are building. Please tell me how to reach Konark. Dharma’s mother knew that he was very keen to meet his father, she told him the way. She told him, ‘Carry a bundle of berries that grow in our backyard. Your father likes them. After eating them he would know that you are his son.’ (I am also told that Dharma was accompanied by Bisu’s pet dog) Dharma took blessings from his mother and left for Konark. He went to the bank of (river) Chandrabhaga. When he reached there he saw that a number of artisans were engaged in building that magnificent temple. He went around and observed the artistic designs with keen interest. He was told that there were twelve hundred of them and they had been working there for twenty-four years. Dharma asked for his father and met him. He offered his father the berries that he got for him. Dharma’s father was very happy to see him. He explained him many things about the temple. Dharma was delighted to hear from his father.

The artisans assembled in the evening for a meeting. Dharma also went to attend it with his father. They were deliberating an important problem. They had completed the temple but had no idea how to fix the top stone of the temple. And the king had given them time till the next evening. If they did not finish they would be punished.
Dharmapada thought for a moment. He felt that he could fix the top stone of the temple. He told to the elders, ‘Listen my people, if you assign me the task, I could fix the crown by next day evening.’ The artisans were puzzled for a moment. Some said, ‘This boy must be joking.’ The rest said, ‘Let us give him a chance. He sounds like he has some knowledge.’ Finally they allowed him to go ahead with his plan. He climbed the temple the next day morning and fixed the crown stone. It gave additional beauty to the temple. The artisans were very happy to see it. But some said, ‘In any case, the king is going to know that we didn’t fix the stone but it was fixed by the young boy. He is going to punish us anyway.’ Dharma heard this and was worried. Why should so many artisans be punished because of him? He wanted to save them. In the evening he climbed the temple and fell from the top and died then and there. Dharmapada died but he is alive in people’s memory till today.” (Mahanand & Goswami 2011: 43-47)

**Dharmapada’s journey: A search for Moral Identity**

There are three important parts that we learn from the telling of the above story. Firstly, Mahanand and Goswami, the authors of this folktale have rightly used it for teaching language, especially to the natives whose mother tongue is not-English. And, this is common to the other stories as well. In their instruction to the readers, their emphasis is mainly on comprehension, language study and written communication. The notes given cited at the end of each story are special incentives to the reader. Apart from these, they ask an interesting question about the main character of the story. About this story, their question is “write the good qualities of Dharmapada.” I found this is an interesting point of research that needs some philosophical reflection. It is significant that while telling the tale a child learns the good qualities of a person like Dharmapada. This is brings the second important point of my reading of this story, that Dharma possess a high sense of obligation and commitment for his community, especially for the glory of his nation – Utkala, is traditionally known for and the best form of art, and architecture. The third important point is also one of the focal point of our reading of this folktale, that is, Dharmapada’s learning. As it is depicted in the tale, Dharma’s learning mostly happens through ‘stories’ and lessons that he listened to and learnt from his mother. The tale also represents that Dharma’s training of sculpture and architecture is basically a family enterprise that are orally imparted on him by his mother. Knowledge of sculpture and architecture requires understanding of geometry and arithmetic. Unless one possess a developed sense of
mathematical concepts measurement and calculation that requires for fixing up the crown stone would be impossible. Dharma shows an extraordinary sense of intelligence to visualize the problem of fixing up the crown stone. So far as the first and the third point are concerned, it justifies our theorizing of storytelling as a form of basic learning, which is discussed in the first section of the paper. I would like to illustrate further on the second important point that the authors bring to us. That is, Dharmapada’s articulation of obligation and commitment establishes his moral identity.

The question, ‘whose son do you think you are?’... ‘Tell us who is your father?’ when repeatedly put to Dharmapada by his fellow friends, is not merely a disturbing question to anyone, but is a profound question that seeks a legitimate answer so far as one’s identity in society is concerned. Hence, seeking an answer to these questions shows the initiation of Dharmapada’s journey to Konark is in search of his identity. In this journey Dharmapada proved that he is not an ordinary person, not an unadorned son of the great Bisu Maharana, the chief architect of Sun Temple at Konark, but a great architect and sculptor himself who sacrificed himself for the glory of his community’s well-being.

In this beginning of the journey, the authors highlight how testimony is an important source of knowledge. This is well depicted when Dharmapada’s mother gives a bunch of berries that grows in their courtyard and liked by Bisu Maharana. I am also told that Bisu’s pet dog was Dharmapada’s companion in his journey to Konark. Though, the authors have not mentioned this, I don’t think such an addition or a negation distorts the tale. Rather it could be treated as one of the virtues of being a folktale. So barriers (and the pet) could be treated as testimony that Dharmapada carried along with him while seeking recognition from his father. The meeting of father and son is well narrated. It also shown by the authors that Darmapada’s parents (mother and father) were proud of their family’s profession. It is evident in the case where Dharmapada was told by his mother ‘about the name his ancestors gained as sculptors.’ And, when he meets his father for the first time, Bisu takes him around the massive structure of the beautiful temple and narrates its significant features. And Bisu Maharana also takes his son to the evening meeting of assembled artisans.’ This point is very symbolic on the part of Bisu to acknowledge his young son Dharmapada in public. The question of identity does not come to an end at this point. Rather it takes turn when the authors draw attention to Dharmapada’s
involvement in the evening deliberation of artisans who had no clue to how to fix the crown stone of the temple.

Mahananda and Goswami open up this point with these words: “Dharmapada thought for a moment. He felt that he could fix the top stone of the temple. He told the elders, “Listen my people, if you assign me the task, I could fix the crown stone by next day morning.’” (2011, 45-47) It is a philosophically striking statement of Dharmapada who identifies himself with the community, by addressing them ‘listen my people.’ In this connection, illustrating the ‘sense of identity,’ Sen writes, “Identifying with others, in various different ways can be extremely important for living in society.” (2006, 19) It is because ‘identity’ for him gives a sense of ‘affiliation and loyalty’ which could be shown by ‘making a choice’ – rational choice with a defined sense of ‘aims, objectives and priorities.’ (Sen 2006: 20) In this episode, Dharmapada’s address to all the artisans gathered in the evening meeting expresses his affinity concerning identity. Sen argues in this essay that ‘making a choice’ is an important feature of discovering one’s identity. He writes that “A person may decide, on reflection, not only that she is a member of a particular ethnic group, but also that this is an extremely important identity for her. This decision can easily influence the person in the direction of taking greater responsibility for the well-being and freedoms of the ethnic group – it can become for her an extension of the obligation to be self-reliant (the self now being extended to cover others in group with which this person identifies).” (Sen 2006: 32) This theoretical assumption of Sen goes well in understanding Dharmapada’s address to the assembly of artisans. He stands up after having a similar reflective thinking to take up the responsibility of his community. Dharmapada starts believing that the problem of all the artisans including his father is also his problem too. Thus Dharmapada extends his identity to his fellow artisans.

When Dharmapada does the job of fixing up the crown stone of the temple, he proves his ability to clearly, how he visualized the problem clearly from a perspective which other artisans failed to notice. Sen points out that every individual is endowed with ‘this ability to be engaged in questioning, challenging and competing with others. And these are not beyond our reach.’ (Sen 2006: 37) Rather what is important is that such an engagement helps in discovering one’s own identity. When one chooses to act, one performs it from a particular perspective. “Choice does not require jumping out of nowhere into somewhere, but it can lead to a move from one
place to another.” (Sen 2006: 36-37) Dharmapada’s move takes a deep moral turn when he finds that his job is not over by completing the most challenging task and solving the problem. Rather his commitment to the community further adds to the problem. The problem does not go away as some artisan thought that ‘the king will punish the artisan anyway’ knowing that the crown stone is fixed by the young boy. In this critical phase of time, Dharmapada has to make a choice to show his commitment and obligation to his community. As Sen interestingly puts it, “We do discover many things about ourselves even when they may not be as foundational…But to recognize this is not the same as making identity just a matter of discovery. Even when the person discovers something very important about himself or herself, there are still issues of choice to be faced. … Important choices have to be made even when crucial discoveries occur. Life is not mere destiny.” (Sen 2006: 38-39) Dharmapada made a final choice to save the life of all artisans working for building the Sun temple at the cost of the loss of his own life. He chose to die for a greater cause shows his value-consciousness. The normative attitude in which Dharmapada made this choice, opens up a discourse on moral identity. It shows life is to be conceived beyond the given. The given could be part of the destiny but life is not. One brings values to life by understanding and inculcating higher values. This kind of ‘self-improvement is an urge of self-transcendence.’ (Pradhan 1999: 57)

The choice that Dharmapada finally makes shows a discovery of an identity of a person after death. This notion of identity involves not only commitment and obligation, but also exhibit high sense of integrity. The person’s death could be construed as a mode of self-transcendence; by performing this action one sets an example for the other. The fellow artisans who are skeptical about their existence, could have been perplexed with Dharmapada’s this performance. It is not an ordinary self-transcendence. Illustrating the notion of self-transcendence Pradhan writes, “…important aspect of self-transcendence lies in overcoming of our lower desires and motives for the sake of a higher life. This is reflected in the life of every civilized human being. The higher we ascend more civilized we are.” (Pradhan 1999: 57) There is no end to moral perfection. But the people who are moral exemplars do tell us something meaningful about life. They exhibit their moral identity by performing action that are meaningful for the humanity. As Cristine Korsgaard rightly puts it, “We must value our own humanity, and so that we must treat our human identity as a form of practical, normative identity… Valuing one’s humanity is called ‘moral identity.’” (Korsgaard 1996: 132)
To conclude, we have also tried to show that storytelling is a valuable incentive to attract children towards learning and could be used as part of literacy programme as it helps in developing basic learning. Apart from that storytelling also helps in building up moral character. Learning has to be value oriented. Learning from stories is no doubt inspiring. It inspires people ‘to awake by teaching them higher ends of life.’ (Das 2008) The authors of this tale have emphasized this by drawing our attention to the fact that we need to learn about the good qualities of Dharmapada. Dharmapada’s journey sets a ground for his moral identity and this moral character is disclosed in his actions that have immense significance for humanity.
References


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