

Environmental Consciousness in Indian Fables: How and What the Pañcatantra can Teach Our Children

Nivedita Bhattacharya

Abstract Environmental crisis and destruction of environment is perhaps the single gravest danger that the earth faces today. Children are observant and learn easily. They observe events in their immediate surroundings. In order to ensure that our children preserve what is rightfully theirs, i.e. an earth which will hold them securely, their love for and consciousness of the environment should be instilled in them from a very early age. Literature can help in achieving this goal; and children's literature is where one should begin. In order to develop this awareness in children it is imperative to develop an environmentally conscious reading of literature more appropriately called green reading or eco-centric reading of texts. Eco-criticism is defined as the relationship between nature and literature and how nature is represented in a text. Fables, myths and folklore are an important part of children's literature. Some of the oldest fables in the world originate in India. The Indian fables have been in circulation for many centuries and were finally collected under the guidance of

sage Vishnushama and titled Pañcatantra meaning the five tantras or books on policies or nitis. This paper deals with the representation of the environment in the fable of the Pañcatantra. An eco-centric reading of the Pañcatantra can reveal how children can have informative reading about nature, how nature functions and the positive effect of nature on living beings.

Keywords Green reading, Eco-centric reading, Pañcatantra, fables, children's literature

INTRODUCTION

Environmental crisis is one of the greatest dangers that our children will face in the future. Air and water pollution, disappearance of forests and water bodies, global warming and acid rains can lead to extreme hardships and perhaps even extinction of our race. Thus creating environmental awareness and love for environment in our children has become important. This is what brings us to the green reading of texts, or an ecocentric reading of texts particularly of children's literature of which fables form an inherent part.

If we want to develop environmental awareness through text reading it is imperative that one understands the concept of ecocriticism. Ecocriticism is defined by Cheryl Glotfelty as follows:



Nivedita Bhattacharya

bhattacharyanivedita@gmail.com

Department of French
Syamaprasad College,
University of Calcutta, India

“...study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment...ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. Ecocritics and theorists ask questions like: How is nature represented in this sonnet? ...” (Glotfelty, Introduction xviii, 1996). Ecocriticism and green reading of texts is literature’s answer to the challenges of environmental concerns in today’s world.

We are facing a global crisis today, not because of how ecosystems function but rather because of how our ethical systems function. Getting through the crisis requires understanding our impact on nature as precisely as possible, but even more, it requires understanding those ethical systems and using that understanding to reform them. Historians, along with literary scholars, anthropologists, and philosophers, cannot do the reforming, of course, but they can help with the understanding (Donald, 27:1994).

Children are the most sensitive to their environment and observant. This makes them good learners and easiest to mould. They are curious and observant. So an environmentally interpretative reading of a literature catering to the imaginations of children can mould them to develop an eco-sensitivity that they will carry into adulthood. Fables and folklores have been an important part of children’s literature. Fables have been used all over the world as tools for

moral, social and political instruction. They have used their allegorical and anthropomorphic forms to entertain and instruct children, the method of instruction being so subtle that children internalise them without realising. Thus fables form an important part of children’s literature.

This article shows how there can be an alternative way of reading the *Pañcatantra* (the celebrated collection of Indian fables) as opposed to reading it only for reasons of teaching moral value and political and social systems-asking Glotfelty’s question of how nature is represented in the text as also how such a reading can create environmental awareness in children.

ENVIRONMENTAL CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE PAÑCATANTRA

In India the fables of the *Pañcatantra* is a collection of fables known to be one of the most ancient in the world. They have been widely translated and have travelled the world to be integrated and absorbed in other countries and cultures, whether manifestly or covertly.

Even to this day, there are at least a few stories from the *Pañcatantra* which are incorporated in literature books in the curriculum of most schools, at the junior level. Thus the fables of the *Pañcatantra* have a positive formative effect on children even though the *Pañcatantra* was probably originally conceived to serve as instruction for the art of politics. Since fables primarily use anthropomorphic forms, primarily in the form of speaking animals and trees, by their very nature fables create awareness about the environment:

animals, trees, water bodies and other natural habitats of animals.

For the purpose of this article the translation of Arthur Ryder of the *Pañcatantra* will be treated as the primary source as in this translation, Ryder not only remains completely faithful to the form of the text (translating prose to prose and verse to verse) but also avoids any analysis or critical comments in the main body of the text. The *Pañcatantra* is divided into five books or tantras (meaning *nitis*), with an introduction which gives a description of the ignorant sons of the king of Mahilaropya who had three sons who were stupid and uneducated. Desperate to make his sons worthy of being princes the king seeks the help of the Brahmin Vishnusarma who uses fables to impart education to the princes. The stories he narrates have been organised into five texts: Mitrabheda (Loss of Friends), Mitralabha (Acquisition of friends), Kakulokiya (the war of crows and owls), Labdhapranasha (loss of gains) and Aparikshitakarak (ill considered action). Talking of environmental consciousness in the *Pañcatantra* and other Indian folklores and folktales Aditya Narayan Dhairyasheel Haksar says, "... I would describe them as folklores with a strong environmental sense. They cover different aspects of nature but are not confined to that. Underlying these tales is the belief that unity encompasses human as well as non-human forms. These stories display a fairly exact knowledge and understanding of environmental phenomena, of seasons, of climatic

changes, of birds, beasts and vegetation. While describing animals and plants, the writers of these anthologies show a great sympathy towards them."('Ancient Indian literature ... phenomena' 2018)

How does the *Pañcatantra* create awareness about the environment? To begin with, the *Pañcatatra* has far more stories situated in milieus that are away from urban areas rather than in cities and towns. The very first Book or Tantra (Mitrabheda) begins with the story of a merchant from the city. Having given a description of city of Mahilaropya in details and in all its splendour the scene very quickly shifts to that of a forest which has to be traversed by the merchant Vardhamana with his two bulls, Nandaka and Sanjivaka. The first tantra gives a beautiful description of the forest with detailed information on its trees and animals. The forest was dense with trees like acacias, sals and dhaks and animals like elephants, tigers, boars, deers and wild oxens. The water was pure and plentiful and there were caves (Ryder, 21:1925). The description is so picturesque that it is very easy for a child to transport himself in his mind to these natural surroundings, far away from the populous environment of a city or a town. The child reading it gets a lot of information on the fauna and flora of an Indian forest. If this is combined with a nature trip to identify some of the trees cited, the child's awareness about the preservation or the loss of such flora or fauna is heightened.

The frame fable touches with its story of how Sanjivika is abandoned by his owner as he gets injured. No thought is spared for his survival as the merchant and his companion decide to move on with their business. However, Sanjivika soon recovers on feeding upon the fresh green grass of the forest. This is the first indication of the importance given to environmental factor. The freshness of the environment helps an animal to survive.

On the other hand the final demise of Sanjivika in the hand of Pingalaka due to the intrigue of the jackals (Karataka and Damanaka) is a demonstration of the functioning of the food chain. The bull is the natural food of the Lion and the jackals who contrive to get Sanjivika killed by the lion are scavengers feeding off the flesh of a dead animal. The child unconsciously internalises this arrangement of nature. The same frame story talks about the principal characteristics of some animals when they exist in their natural surroundings. This is done in a beautiful manner: in verse form. "The lion scorns the jackal..." (Ryder 1925) and "Dogs wag their tails and fawn and roll..." (Ryder 1925).

There are stories like the "Blue Jackal" which teaches about the pack behaviour of jackals. The jackal gets caught because he cannot resist responding to the call of other jackals. The entire third book deals with crows and owls. We come to know about the nocturnal nature of owls. We know that they are flesh eaters. On the other hand man is criticised as being greedy. This has an underlying implication: that man

can cause destruction to his surroundings. "Since cattle draw the plough/Through rough and level soil" (Ryder, 28:1925) teaches the child that cattle are used for ploughing and farming. The fable "Monkey and the Crocodile" (Ryder 1925) underlines the repercussions of the change of habitat of animals. The monkey who is a land animal loses his survival instinct when he is taken into the water by his crocodile friend. At the same time the crocodile (the amphibian) has no idea about the ways of a land animal underlined by the fact that he believes the monkey when he says that he has kept his heart on a tree.

CONCLUSION

S K Mishra (2016) rightly observes that "Indian philosophy is rich in ecological thought since Veda which paid equal importance to all organisms. India is also a land of rich biodiversity. From the Himalayas of North to Kanyakumari of South, from the Bay of Bengal off east to the Arabian Sea on the west, the country has versatile physical surroundings leaving a deep impact on human beings. Literature is not apart from that. A good number of writers deal with ecocritical texts" (Mishra, 169: 2016). Thus it is little wonder that *Pañcatantra* represents nature at its purest. It depends on the teacher or the parent to put emphasis on this aspect to create environmental awareness in the child. Makwanya and Dick (2014) in their analysis of the role of children's poem in creating environmental awareness concluded that "children's literature promotes

environmental consciousness, appreciation, knowledge, and stewardship of the children. In addition, in order to inculcate long lasting impression on environmental stewardship, it has been concluded that catching them young is the best method (Makwanyana and Dick, 15: 2014).

REFERENCES

- ‘Ancient Indian literature displays exact knowledge of environmental phenomena’ Down To Earth, 31 October 2018. Published in website-<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/interviews/environment/ancient-indian-literature-displays-exact-knowledge-of-environmental-phenomena-49232> (accessed on 10 April, 2019)
- Glotfelty C and Fromm H Eds. (1996) The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology. Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press
- Makwanyana P and Dick M (2014) An Analysis of Children's Poems in Environment and Climate Change Adaptation and Mitigation: A Participatory Approach, Catching Them Young. The International Journal Of Engineering and Sciences (IJES) 3(7, 1):10-15
- Mishra SK (2016) Ecocriticism: A Study of Environmental Issues in Literature. BRICS Journal of Educational Research 6(4):168-170
- Ryder AW, trans. (1925) The Panchatantra of Vishnu Sharma. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press
- Worster D (1994) The Wealth of Nature, Environmental History and Ecological Imagination. New York: Oxford University Press