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NURSERY RHYMES: ORIGIN, IDEOLOGY AND RELEVANCE

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It has been my belief and observation that it is the most difficult task to explain simpler things in life. The harder concepts can be simplified but it is the relatively simpler things that find us gasping for a meaning. The concepts of trigonometry and physics can be analyzed but what about the nursery rhymes and stories we narrate to our children. The more elementary or basic stories and poems that we narrate to our children and students without delving into the real meaning are of much concern. There are some which have folk stories, others describing events or still others trying to instill morals in young minds. There are others which have been passed on from one generation to the other with some changes / distortions.

There have been many poems, and specially nursery rhymes over centuries which we have made our children learn and recite. There have been many that were lost over the years, but some have survived and captured the imagination of the living. The paper attempts to understand these nursery rhymes, their interesting origins and their significance. It is not a simple endeavor to incarcerate all of them in a single paper, but it is an honest effort to understand the basic

features and an analysis of some of the popular ones. It would be unfair to not speak of the Hindi rhymes and hence a passing reference has also been made to them.

Unlike popular belief, the rhymes have multifold purpose. When children hear nursery rhymes, they hear they simultaneously are working on their reading, speaking and mathematical skills. Most of the rhymes have prominent sounds of vowels and consonants. The children learn to combine them to create words with meanings. Most of the rhymes have rhyming words which make them easier to pronounce and memorize. For example, “Jack and Jill went up the hill”. The tone, volume and pitch differ in each rhyme but they help in practicing and mastering the language. They also become the first stories of the children, creating a series of events in the poems they recite. They help in a cognitive and cohesive development of the children as the rhymes have a beginning, middle and an end. It helps in creating a sequence where there is a cause and effect relationship.

They also help in developing the mathematical concepts, like counting and also make them aware of gender and use of pronouns. The most significant is the fact that it develops a bond between the children and the parent. They learn to express their feelings and emotions and get in touch of their own.

Nursery rhymes are more memorable because they are based on rhyme and meter and hence are easier to remember. The pitch and tone are also as significant as the rhyme. A deeper observation will reveal that the language of the adults and the kids are not alike. If we observe closely, the mothers talk to the kids in a particular manner and the children also acquire the same syntax. Deborah Kemler-Nelson proved in a study conducted in the late 1980's that mothers all

over the world speak to their children differently than they speak to adults. She has used the word “motherese” to refer to this style of speaking. (Kelmer 111). When we talk to kids, the parents and adults speak in a higher pitched voice and repeat important words. There are other rhymes that slow down the speaking process and include repetition to help children learn.

It is generally the children between the age group of two and three that are in the process of sentence making and these nursery rhymes help them learn distinct units sound in a language. It is not very clear to them as to where does the sentence begins or ends these rhymes play a crucial role in helping them learn their mother tongues. A range of studies by different psychologists have reaffirmed how rhymes have in better understanding of phonemes and hence create a better understanding of reading skill. One such study by Harper done on kids ranging from two to three concludes:

This study makes it clear that early knowledge of nursery rhymes helps children to build awareness of sound patterns of language and plays an important role in a child’s linguistic and early literacy development. While hearing and reciting nursery rhymes, children are developing critical early literacy skills. One of the most important skills is phonemic awareness, or the awareness of individual sounds called phonemes that make up spoken words. Teaching and reciting nursery rhymes to young children may affect the development of phonological sensitivity; conditioning children to become more sensitive to phonemes and rhyme. At some level, a child becomes aware that different words and different syllables have a segment of sound or phoneme in common. For example, cat and bat share the common ending rhyme sound at and therefore rhyme. Children sensitive to rhyme begin to expand this common sound knowledge to other words in different

contexts which eventually contributes to their ability to read, write, and spell (Bryant et. al, 1989).

Broadly the nursery rhymes can be classified in the following categories:

- i) Introduction to an animal or its description—like, “Mice”, “Hathi Raja”, “Billi Mausi”, “Macchli jal ki rani hai”
- ii) Introducing vegetables or fruits--- like “Ladyfinger”, “Aam falon ka raja hai”.
- iii) Introducing counting or the basic mathematics— “One Two Buckle ”, “Three Little Kittens”, “One Two Three Four Five”
- iv) Based on onomatopoeia like, “pitter patter raindrops”, “Baa Baa black sheep”

The significance of nursery rhymes has been proved but what is still more interesting is the origin and meaning of some of the most famous rhymes. The paper attempts to analyse a few of them.

JACK AND JILL

Jack and Jill went up the hill

To fetch a pail of water

Jack fell down and broke his crown

And Jill came tumbling after

Unlike the literal translation of two kids climbing a mountain, this rhyme has two different lesser known origins. One is to the couple who lived in a small town of Kilmersdon in England, around 1697, who used to “sneak” up the hill, where “fetch a pail” is a euphemism for intercourse. The story goes further where the woman got pregnant and the man died of falling and woman too died in childbirth. One more common interpretation is that Jack refers to King Louis XVI and Jill to his queen Marie Antoinette.

BAABA BLACK SHEEP

Baa baa black sheep,
Have you any wool?
Yes sir, yes sir,
Three bags full.
One for the Master,
One for the Dame,
And one for the little boy
Who lives down the lane.

The reason that this nursery rhyme is so popular or even taught to children is that it imitates the sound of a sheep, i.e., onomatopoeia. The words “baa baa” add the fun element for the kids. But in reality it is not about the sheep but on taxes on wool. The wool industry was a significant part of the economy. It refers to King Edward’s gesture of imposing export tax in Britain in 1275. The words “master” refers to the the king, “dame” refers to the church and the “boy” is the poor farmer who was heavily taxed and hence in the original version “cries down the lane”.

HUMPTY DUMPTY

Humpty Dumpty sat on the wall
Humpty Dumpty had a great fall
All the King's horses and all the King's men
Couldn't put Humpty together again!

Unlike the pictures depicted in the books, Humpty Dumpty wasn't an egg-shaped thing. The legend has it that it actually was cannon. Owned by the supporters of King Charles I, Humpty Dumpty was used to gain control over the city of Colchester during the English Civil War. Once in Colchester, the cannon was placed on church tower until a barrage of cannonballs destroyed the tower and sent Humpty into the marshland below. Although retrieved, the cannon could be repaired. Another interpretation is that it refers to Charles I himself - the Humpty Dumpty of England. He was thrown by the Puritan majority in Parliament. "All the King's men", that is the army could not give his power back and Charles I was executed. Another idea says the rhyme refers to King Richard III and his defeat at the Battle of Bosworth. The rhyme was first printed in 1810 and became famous through Lewis Carroll's book, 'Alice through the Looking Glass', where Humpty Dumpty is shown as a round egg. The truth is that it is a much old rhyme.

LONDON BRIDGE IS FALLING DOWN

London Bridge is falling down
Falling down, falling down

London Bridge is falling down

My fair lady.

There are few instances in history that an event like the collapse of a structure of vital significance is such a famous rhyme. The reference of it goes back to the Norse poem “Pillage, Plunder, Prevent Foot Traffic” due to the Vikings attack. It is also related to the old concept of burying kids alive under massive structures to please the Gods and thereby ensure the stability of it. The practice of burying someone alive in a tomb is known as “Immurement” Though in present times it is too cruel to believe in such practices but it is believed the game played by kids where two of them join hands to form an arch, and the others take turns to run underneath until the end of the song, at which point the hands are lowered and the last child is captured within. That is actually an ancient ritual wherein children were buried alive.

Ring a Ring a roses

Ring a-ring o' roses,

A pocketful of posies.

A-tishoo! A-tishoo!

We all fall down!

“Ring Around the Rosie” is probably the most infamous. Though its lyrics and even its title have gone through some changes over the years, the most popular contention is that the verse refers to the 1665 Great Plague of London. “The rosie” is the rash that covered the afflicted, the smell from which they attempted to cover up with “a pocket full of posies.” The plague killed nearly

fifteen percent of the country's population, which makes the final verse—"Ashes! Ashes! We all fall down"—rather self-explanatory.

It would be unfair to not to include the hindi nursery rhymes, which we have grown up with. The basics remained the same but I found that unlike the English ones, they were not based on any historical or political subject. India had countless social and political events but they were not reflected in the rhymes. It is difficult to judge whether it is a positive or negative sign but it is definitely worth a mention. Though the following rhyme strikes as a really pessimistic but probably the most famous one:

Machli jal ki rani hai

Jeevan uska paani hai

Haath lagao gey, dar jayegi

Bahar nikaalo gey, mar jayegi

(The queen of the water is fish,

And water is her life,

If you touch her she will get frightened,

If you take her out of the water, she will die.)

Some of the latest versions also go with the last line as "so jayegi", which means it will sleep. The other major rhymes revolved around sounds and characters as train, bird, monkey, moon or "dhobhi". Another famous one is "upar chanda gol gol", whose intention is to introduce shapes to the small children. But another problematic issue in the rhymes, especially Indian is the feminist issue. The rhyme says, "mummy ki roti" and "papa ka paisa", which implies that

mothers are supposed to cook and fathers to earn. It is believed that the literature mirrors the society we live in, which holds true for the children's literature as well.

If we can inculcate a sense of equality and a spirit of freedom in them through what we teach them in the initial years of growing up, it will stay with them for long. It also might help in correcting stereotypes of masculinity. So instead of just teaching them that girls are supposed to cook, or boys not supposed to cry, we can select the literature for better understanding and correcting the ills of our society.

The following statement holds true in this light:

The most difficult subjects can be explained to the most slow-witted man if he has not formed any idea of them already; but the simplest thing cannot be made clear to the most intelligent man if he is firmly persuaded that he knows already, without a shadow of doubt, what is laid before him. (Tolstoy 1894)

Some might be of the opinion that we should not ponder too much on what our children utter in innocence and enjoy in recital as for them it is the fun and we might kill the fun by contemplating over the meaning of these rhymes. At the same time, what we teach them we need to know the origin of and hence it struck me both as a parent and researcher to study them. The subject is really wide all the rhymes cannot be analyzed, but it is a field which is yet to be explored.

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