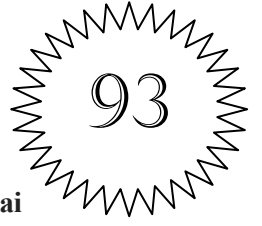


*Glimpse offolklore of south India*

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Abstract

A country as vast and as ancient as India naturally boasts a treasure-trove of oral folktales. The diversity of India's cultures ensures a wide and complex range of tales, which help to maintain traditional language and customs from different regions, religious and social groups, and tribes. Folktales exercise a powerful influence over the popular imagination, with folk heroes often being blessed in villages.

Key words: folktales, India, culture, magic, music, stories....

Introduction

Magic is one of the most delightful elements of folktales. In these pages, you will find that women transform themselves into flowering trees and magic bowls provide endless and delicious food. Magical events add an element of poetry to these stories, which feature supernatural beings such as brahmarakshasas or demons and vanadevatai or forest spirits.

In folktales, unlike mythology, the gods have bodies and perform bodily functions. In these tales, many of the supernatural figures tend to be gullible or easily outwitted or shaken. Several tales deal with the concept of fate. While in some instances, fate can be overturned, in others it proves unstoppable.

The tales of men like Birbal, Tenali Rama, and GopalBhar, depending on which region you grew up in, have long been popular for their humour. These clever, witty men frequently show their rulers the folly of their ways. These tales also provide comic relief amidst some of the darker ones.

The oldest and some of the best-known Indian folktales are the ones about animals, which go as far back in written texts as the *Jatakas* and the *Panchatantra*. Intended especially for children, they enable their young audience to feel powerful when their counterparts in the stories – small animals like the crow or Hiranmanya the parrot – defeat stronger animals like tigers. A well-known example of such a tale is *The Monkey and The Crocodile*

Mythological stories are also defined as a set of stories or beliefs about a particular person, institution, or situation, especially when exaggerated or fictitious. We need to understand that mythology is a branch of knowledge that deals with narratives about Goddesses & Gods, demi-gods, legendary personalities of

different civilizations and their cultures. Traditions, folklore and legends are similar to and sometimes part of Mythology.

### **The magical power of an old woman's story, and a baby girl who heard it**

*I'm taking a brief space from the traditional mythology of the Vedas and the Puranas and exploring folk tales instead. Folktales are usually about the common person, someone like you and me, going through something and learning a lesson as a result, no godly interference usually. But, they're tied up with myths because both were originally passed down orally, both have a larger narrative at the core, though the scope might change.*

Let's look at a **Telugu folktale** about an old woman telling stories in praise of the sun god — and the consequences of not listening to her. Ramanujan's English version is called A Story in Search of an Audience but really, it could also be called You Too Could Be an Influencer, Just Follow This Easy Step.

*I'm using AK Ramanujan's Folktales from India, which is a great resource, even if all you want is some really good stories. All right, now I've put the limitation in place, let's get down to it.*

Here's the story, Once upon a time there was an old woman who, during the month of **Magha** (about January or February) on the day of **Rathasaptami** (Surya's birthday, which also marks the day spring begins and is a nice thing to celebrate) had to go tell someone the story of Surya so she'd get double blessings, go up to heaven etc etc. But her farm was too busy to listen to her — sons had to go to court and her daughter-in-law was taking care of her baby. The old woman goes next to the riverside, where some women were washing their clothes, but they had to rush home. Everyone she meets basically turns her down, and unknown to her, she's leaving a swathe of destruction in her wake. The sons are punished, the daughter-in-law's baby almost dies, and the women at the river were abused by their mothers-in-law, and so on and so forth.

The old woman's still making her way through the city and she finds a pregnant woman who says she'll listen, but she falls asleep before the old woman can get started. But, her unborn baby pipes up then and says, “You can totally tell me the story!” And the old woman is so pleased that after she finishes her tale, she blesses the baby with lots of richness and magic. The pregnant woman wakes up then, and the old woman leaves, just saying, “Let me know when your baby is born and what gender it is,”

The woman gives birth to a daughter, which is a little weird with a set up like that, because what can a daughter do for glory in this patriarchal world into which she was born? Normally, the blessings and magic are for sons, who take them and go on to become rich and famous. Nevertheless, it is a little girl,

and the old woman makes a sari cradle for her, which you can still see people use these days if you walk through a south Indian house some evening.

Now, it so happens that the king of the country was going for a walk through the forest. He saw this cradle, and the birds around said to the king, “This baby is actually meant to be your wife, so please take her home.” Which is a creepy thing for even “the birds” to say, so nice spin there. Although that's unfair, even though he's all about the baby wife, he does wait till she's old enough — by which they mean, when she hits puberty — before he marries her. Here's an even more disturbing thing: No one actually tells the mother that her baby daughter is being taken away to be the king's bride. Nope, he just slings her into a palanquin and rides off into the sunset. As they pass through the country, barren fields are suddenly lush and old cows give milk and the queen, this dude's wife, falls pregnant, despite not being able to have a baby before.

But the old queen is not terribly delighted with the Baby Wife. She's super jealous, because Baby Wife can do no wrong, and all sorts of riches come into the kingdom — cows give milk, you know the drill by now. The Cradle Snatcher King is delighted, but, man-like, wants to test drive his wife's powers. So he goes to the old queen's quarters, takes poison and dies. The old queen is all, “Oh my god” and “We have to commit *sati* by jumping on our husband's funeral pyre.” (Which is not something I thought they did in South India, so look at that. Folk tales still educational!) Baby Wife is all for the *sati*, but before she can go, some old Brahman comes into her rooms and does a whole song and dance about hospitality until revealing himself to be the sun god himself, the one whose story she heard while still a fetus. He gives her some turmeric rice and she sprinkles it on her husband's corpse and lo and behold, he's up and about.

Finally, Cradle Snatcher asks Baby Wife how come she's so cool and magical, and she tells him about the old woman and the story and Cradle Snatcher makes his wives do all the rituals, because he wants to be cool and magical too, and that's the end of this story.....only folktales can be.

Conclusion: Moral of the Story is Always listen to old ladies, and when you can't listen to old ladies, but still forward this story to everyone you know.

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