

A Review of the *Folk Tales of Bengal*

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Abstract

Lal Behari Dey was a Bengali Indian. He was journalist and converted to Christianity. After his conversion he became a missionary. He wrote profoundly in English and edited several magazines. This paper discusses Lal Behari Dey's collection of Bengali folktales titled *Folk Tales of Bengal*. This research has chosen four tales to be analyzed. They are The Indigent Brahman, The Ghost Brahman, A Ghostly Wife and The Story of a Brahmadaitya. These tales are analyzed using Vladimir Propp's theory of the function of dramatic personae. The similarities between the stories will also be determined in this reading of the folktales.

Keywords: Brahman, Propp, ghost, villain, dramatic personae

1. Introduction

Folk tales are known world-wide. They are a form of literature that has been passed down from generation to generation. Folk tales are part of the oral tradition that has existed since the advent of time. There have been efforts by individuals to transfer this type of oral literature and others into print. One of these people is Lal Behari Dey (1824–1892) a Bengali Indian by birth. He was a journalist who became a missionary after his conversion to Christianity. Most of Dey's writings were in English. He edited several magazines and produced two books. The books that he wrote were *Govinda Samanta* (1874), which was later renamed *Bengal Peasant Life* and his collection of folk tales, which was titled *Folk Tales of Bengal* (1883). Duggan, Anne E. Duggan and Donald Haase (2016), inform us that the Bengali's used folktales in their independent movements against the British, they became a weapon against the colonizers, and they took up a nationalistic character (p. 118). Thus, it is important for us to understand this tool that was a means used to achieve independence in India by the natives.

There have been many readings of Dey's folktales. Among the latest is Madhumita Bose's 2018 article titled *Women in Lal Behari Dey's Folk-Tales of Bengal: An Exploration*. She argues that these folktales are biased towards a manly world. Women characters are depicted "mercifully" because this world cannot survive without women. However, the female characters are subjugated, and men lord over them. This observation must be acknowledged, and we must bear in mind the fact that the collector of the tales was a man, and they were collected before the concept of feminism came into being and became fashionable. It also must be considered that India historically and religiously is a very patriarchal society. However, this paper will not delve into these facts. It is a general overview of the folktales and a short analysis of the functions of a fairy tale that are present in them. This paper does not discuss the idea of female empowerment.

This review paper will provide a reading of the text *Folk Tales of Bengal*. The tales that have been chosen for discussion have thematic similarities. The tales that will be analyzed are *The Indigent Brahman*, *The Ghost Brahman*, *A Ghostly Wife* and *The Story of a Brahmadaitya*. This review will look at the similarities that are present between the stories in the collection presented by Dey. There are similarities present in all the stories, however only four stories have been chosen, because they have the most similarities between them.

2. Literature Review

Similar research has been conducted by Namulundah Florence (2016) in her article titled *Female Role Models in Bukusu Folktales: Education at the Mother's Hearth*. According to her the roles of folktales are descriptive and cultural. They depict cultural and social norms. The representation of Bukusu women is said to be sexist. The author discusses gender roles, the curation and creation of culture vis-à-vis folktales (p. 1). However, her research discusses the literature of Africa, while this current research concentrates on Bengal.

Nguyen Thi Kim Ngan (2020) in her article *Vietnamese Religion, Folklore, and Literature: Archetypal Journeys from Folktales to Medieval Fantasy Short Stories*, analyses folktales

based on social, cultural, and historical contexts and wars and conflicts in the 15th and 16th centuries Vietnam. The borrowing from Chinese Taoist and Buddhist cultures is also analyzed by Nguyen. The journey of Vietnamese folktales to medieval fantasy short stories is also discussed by Nguyen. The difference between this research and Nguyen's research is that it analyzes the Brahmin-Hindu cultures of Bengal with special reference to the fantastic, while Nguyen concentrates on Vietnam and Chinese cultures and religions (p. 1).

Ayub Sheik (2018) *The More Than Beautiful Woman - African Folktales of Female Agency And Emancipation*, analyzes African folklore that resist or subvert patriarchal control. He concentrates on the manipulation, the exclusion, and the oppression of women. He discusses power relations in folklore. Stereotyping and gender are the focus of this research. The author has selected folktales from Xam, Swahili, Sudanese, Senegalese, and Zulu cultures. These represent Africa. It discusses female power, resilience, and agency. These are said to be restorative and empowering female psyches of Africa. It emphasizes on the power of wisdom from folktales amongst other criteria to extract and exact social change in Africa and at the same time celebrate the women of Africa (p. 1). This research defers from Sheik's research because it only concentrates on *Folk Tales of Bengal*. It analyzes the female characters without emphasizing on female empowerment as is done by Sheik.

Enongene Mirabeau Sone (2018) in the article titled *The Folktale and Social Values in Traditional Africa*, discusses the habit of Africans that preserve their culture. One of the cultures that have been preserved is folktales. This article focuses on the folktales of Cameroon. Folktales according to the author are a method used to preserve and transmit shared values and collective experience. It is still influential in Africa although modern means of entertainment via technology is present in contemporary Africa. Folktales are also said to eliminate antisocial behaviour and promote social values and positive change. This article addresses the social influence of folktales on society. This current research however discusses Indian religion and the fantastic as well as the similarities of themes and characters in each story without putting aside social norms and behavior.

Mukul Sharma (2021) 'God of Humans': *Dina-Bhadri, Dalit Folktales and Environmental Movements*, discusses Dalit folktales which are important in Indian folklore history and corpus. Mukul Sharma discusses the Dalit movement and its importance. He emphasizes the importance of folktales to the Dalits in their mission of expressing themselves. He traces the folktales to the Indo-Gangetic Plains of India and Nepal. He researches the role of folk traditions with Dalit and South Asian societies. Folk literature is used by the Dalits as a tool of empowerment. However, Mukul Sharma concentrates on ecology and ecological symbolism in Dalit folklore. In the introduction of this current research, I have emphasized that folktales are a powerful tool and in India they were used to empower Indians to fight for Independence against the British colonizers. However, today folk literature is used as a tool to preserve nature by the Indians as is discussed by Mukul Sharma vis-a-vis his article. The importance of folk tales to the Indian and in the Indian context did not diminish with India's independence.

3. The Theory

To analyze the similarities Vladimir Propp's theory of the functions of dramatic personae will be used. Propp in his *Morphology of the Folk Tale* (1928) postulates the similarities that are present in Russian tales, and he concentrates on the fairy tale. Although Propp's theory is applied to fairy tales, it can also be used to read folktales.

According to Propp (1968; translation into English) names of the characters in a story may change, but their functions remain the same (20). He further states, "... it is possible to establish that characters of a tale however varied they may be, often perform the same actions" (Propp, p. 20). He says that functions of dramatic personas can be extracted and argues that to extract them first one must define them (Propp, p. 20). The functions that Propp lists are as such:

- 1) One of the members of the family absents himself from home,
- 2) An interdiction is addressed to the hero,
- 3) The interdiction is violated,
- 4) The villain makes an attempt at reconnaissance,
- 5) The villain receives information about his victim,
- 6) The villain attempts to deceive his victim in order to take possession of him or his belongings,
- 7) The victim submits to deception and thereby unwittingly helps his enemy,
- 8) The villain causes harm or injury to a member of a family,
- 9) One member of the family either lacks something or desires to have something,
- 10) Misfortune or lack is made known; the hero is approached with a request or command; he is allowed to go, or he is dispatched,
- 11) The seeker agrees to or decides upon counteraction,
- 12) The hero leaves home.
- 13) The hero is tested, interrogated, attacked, etc., which prepares the way for his receiving a magical agent or a helper,
- 14) The hero reacts to the actions of the future donor,
- 15) The hero acquires the use of a magical agent,
- 16) The hero is transferred, delivered, or led to the whereabouts of an object of search,
- 17) The hero and the villain join in direct combat,
- 18) The hero is branded,
- 19) The villain is defeated,

- 20) The initial misfortune or lack is liquidated,
- 21) The hero returns,
- 22) The hero is pursued,
- 23) Rescue of the hero from pursuit,
- 24) The hero, unrecognized, arrives home or in another country,
- 25) A false hero presents unfounded claims,
- 26) A difficult task is proposed to the hero,
- 27) The task is resolved,
- 28) The hero is recognized,
- 29) The false hero or villain is exposed,
- 30) The hero is given a new appearance,
- 31) The villain is punished,
- 32) The hero is married and ascends the throne (Propp, pp. 26–63).

It will be determined in the course of this paper whether the above-mentioned functions are present in the folktales. We must take into consideration that these functions are ideals that were outlined by Propp. A folktale need not necessarily have all the functions that have been mentioned above.

4. Synopsis of the Selected Folktales

The Indigent Brahman is a tale about a poor Brahman who always prays to goddess Durga. He is so poor that sometimes his children must go without clothes and food. One day he takes his sorrow to the forest some miles from his village. He weeps and prays to goddess Durga. Incidentally, the goddess and her husband god Siva are taking a walk in the very same place. She decides to help him. With the assistance of her husband, she awards the Brahmin a handi (an earthen pot). This handi is magical. When turned upside down the handi produces mudki (fried paddy boiled dry in treacle or sugar). Durga says that the Brahman and his family can consume as much mudki as they like and sell it. However, the Brahman's luck does not last him long, his mudki is stolen from him by a cunning innkeeper. The handi is switched with a normal one. The Brahman only realizes it once he reaches home. The Brahman then returns to the forests and meets the goddess Durga again. After hearing his story, she bestows upon him another handi. However, this handi does not produce sweets, but produces demons. The innkeeper tries to take this handi away from the Brahman, but upon turning it upside down demons come out and beat him up. The Brahman saves him and manages to get back his other handi. He then becomes rich by selling sweetmeat.

However, the handi is broken by his children. The Brahman feels sad by this misfortune. He again goes to the forest and offers prayers to goddess Durga. Lord Siva and goddess Durga

comes down and the goddess gives the Brahman another handi. This handi produces sandesa. This sweetmeat also becomes popular with the Brahman's customers. However, a zemindar (landlord) envies the wealth of the Brahman. The zemindar tricks the Brahman and takes away his handi. The Brahman is insulted and driven away from the zemindar's house. The Brahman goes back home and then takes the demon handi to the zemindar's. He lets out the demons and they attack the zemindar, who then repents, apologizes to the Brahman, and gives back his handi. The Brahman then lives a happy life.

The next story The Ghost Brahman is also about a poor Brahman. This Brahman finds it difficult to get married. He goes to rich people and begs them to give him money to get married. He manages to get enough money to get married. However, after he is married, he finds that he lacks money to take care of his wife and mother. So, the Brahman decides to travel to far off lands to earn some money. He tells his mother that he will be away for years. His mother gives him her blessings and he leaves the house. However, in the evening a ghost who assumes the Brahman's appearance comes into the house. He pretends to be the Brahman. The mother and wife do not suspect any foul play. They accept the ghost as the Brahman who changed his mind about traveling. One day the Brahman returns home and is surprised to find someone else in his house pretending to be him. The ghost turns him out of his own house. Surprised the Brahman goes to the king to seek justice, but to no avail. One day when he is walking through the fields from the king's castle a group of cowherds see him. The leader asks his companions to bring the Brahman to him. After listening to the man's problem, the boy decides to help the Brahman. Both the Brahman and the ghost-Brahman appear in front of the neat-herd. The neat-herd says that it will be proven who the real Brahman is if he can get into the phial that the neat-herd has brought with him. The ghost-Brahman goes into the phial and is locked in by the neat-herd. The Brahman then takes possession of his wife, mother, and house.

The next story is titled A Ghostly Wife. One day a Brahman's wife goes to the tank near her house to get some water. She accidentally brushes past a ghost. The ghost becomes angry, gets hold of the Brahmani and stuffs her into a hole in a tree. It then assumes the woman's appearance and goes back to her house. The Brahmani's mother-in-law detects some changes in the woman, for example, she does housework much faster. One day the mother-in-law sees the woman using her foot as fuel to cook. She tells her son of the strange episode, and they decide to call an exorcist. The exorcist manages to find out from the ghost that it has stuffed the real Brahmani in a tree trunk. The wife is brought back, and the ghost is beaten up and told to leave the house.

The last story is titled The Story of a Brahmadaitya. This is a story about a Brahmin and his ghostly friend, a Brahmadaitya. A Brahmadaitya is a ghost of a Brahman who dies unmarried. The Brahmin is poor, and one day he goes to a landlord to gain his favour. The landlord hears the story of a haunted tree in the vicinity. He dares his subjects to get a branch of the tree and bring it back to him at night, and he will reward that person with a certain amount of land. It is well known in the village that the ghosts that live in the tree kill human beings, and many have been their victims. Thus, no one dares to take the landlord's challenge except for the Brahmin. The Brahmin is willing to go as he thinks it does not make a difference if he dies at

the hands of the ghosts, since being poor he might die of starvation. When he reaches the tree, his courage begins to fail him. A Brahmadaitya appears at that time from a nearby tree. It listens to the Brahman's story and promises to help him. As the Brahman begins to cut a branch from the tree, the ghosts appear. The Brahmadaitya appeases the ghosts, and they help the Brahman to cut the branch. The Brahman then goes back to the landlord and after the landlord is satisfied that the branch is from the haunted tree, he awards the Brahman his promised reward. The land is filled with ripe paddy, but the Brahman does not have any means to harvest the land. He goes back to the Brahmadaitya for help and the Brahmadaitya together with the ghosts from the haunted tree help the Brahman to reap his harvest. After a few days, the Brahman decides to hold a feast for a thousand Brahmins. He asks the help of the Brahmadaitya to prepare for the feast. The ghost willingly helps the Brahman. The Brahmadaitya is rewarded by God for helping the Brahman. It is taken up to heaven, being released from his ghostly life. The Brahman lives a happy life till old age with wife, children, and grandchildren.

5. The Critical Analysis

This section presents the critical analysis of the four texts by applying Propp's theory of the functions of dramatic personae. After analyzing each text using the theory it will then be determined how similar the texts are to each other.

The first story has Propp's first element: that a member of a family absents himself from home. In the story a Brahman who is poor goes into the forest to vent his sorrow (Dey, p. 52): "One day, being very sad, he went to a forest many miles distant from the village he lived, and indulging his grief wept bitter tears". However, he does not leave home long.

The story also meets with Propp's ninth element of his theory; that is one member of the family either lacks something or desires to have something. In this story the Brahmin lacks wealth and desires to have it. It is stated in the text: "He prayed in the following manner:—O Durga! O Mother Bhagavati! Wilt thou not make an end of my misery? Were I alone in the world, I should not have been sad on account of poverty; but thou hast given me a wife and children. Give me, O Mother, the means to support them" (Dey, p. 52). The goddess Durga then answers his prayer herself.

Through the goddess Durga the Brahman acquires what Propp defines as a magical agent. Propp states in item 15: "The hero acquires the use of a magical agent" (Propp, p. 43). The goddess Durga bestows upon him a magical handi (Dey, pp. 52–53): "Durga then, calling the Brahman to her, said, "O Brahman! I have often thought of your pitiable case. Your repeated prayers have at last moved my compassion. Here is a handi for you. When you turn it upside down and shake it, it will pour down a never-ceasing shower of the finest mudki, which will not end till you restore the handi to its proper position." She then tells him that he can eat and sell the mudki.

As the story proceeds the functions of dramatic personae a villain is revealed. Propp states in the story the villain attempts to deceive his victim to take possession of him or his belongings. In this story the villain is the innkeeper. He takes away from the Brahman his magical handi

and replaces it with a normal handi. It is stated in the text (Dey, p. 54):

“Why should the Brahman care so much for an empty handi? He took up the vessel and began to examine it carefully; and when, in the course of examination, he turned the handi upside down, a quantity of the finest mudki fell from it, and continued to fall without intermission... He resolved to appropriate to himself this precious handi, and accordingly put in its place another handi of the same size and make”.

The Brahman is thus tricked by the innkeeper at whose inn he stops to freshen up on his way home to his village.

Propp's nineteenth element or item in his theory states that in a story the villain is defeated. This happens in this story where the Brahman upon realizing that the innkeeper has tricked him goes back to the forest and implores the goddess Durga again. The goddess gives him another handi, which when turned upside down produces fierce demons that beat one up. The Brahman takes the handi to the inn keeper and leaves the handi unattended while he performs his ablutions. The cunning innkeeper takes hold of the handi and turns it upside down. He is then beaten up by the demons. He begs to be saved. The Brahman then saves him and, also manages to take back his mudki producing handi (Dey, pp. 56–57). Another of Propp's elements from his theory can be applied here. That is item twenty, the initial misfortune or lack is liquidated. Here we find two misfortunes are liquidated when the Brahman gets back his handi from the innkeeper. The first is that his poverty is nullified and the other, the stolen item is given back to him.

Propp states another function is the hero returns. In this story the Brahman returns to his family with the handis that he has received from goddess Durga. He lives with his family and becomes a rich man by selling the mudki that is produced by the magical handi (Dey, pp. 57–58). However, the Brahman's good fortune is reversed one day when his children break the mudki producing magical handi. Thus, the Brahman travels again to the forest and he is once more given a magical handi by goddess Durga. This time the handi produces sandesa. He begins to sell sandesa and is remarkably successful. Another villain disrupts the Brahman's life. This time it is a Zemindar or landlord. The handi is taken away from the Brahman through trickery, however the Brahman fights back. He takes his demon producing handi to the landlord and turns it upside down. The demon's then beat the landlord and the Brahman manages to get his handi back (Dey, pp. 59–60). We find in this story that Propp's theory: Functions of the dramatic personae, can be detected. His theory is not only applicable to Russian fairy tales but also to folktales from Bengal, although not all the items that he states are present in this story.

The next story to be analyzed is titled The Ghost-Brahman. Once again Propp's theory is applied, one of the members of the family absents himself from home and the hero leaves home. Both these functions occur in this text. The Brahman leaves his house to make some fortune. He asks his mother's blessings before he leaves (Dey, p. 173).

Then we find the villain entering the scene. According to Propp the villain attempts to deceive his victim to take possession of him or of his belongings. Here the villain is a ghost

that takes the appearance of the Brahman that leaves for his travels. The ghost deceives the Brahman's mother and wife and lives with them as the Brahman (Dey, pp. 173–174).

The Brahman comes home to find an impostor in his house. The Ghost-Brahman does not want to leave the Brahman's house and family. The Brahman goes to the king for help but to no avail. However, the story does follow Propp's formula, and the villain is defeated. The Brahman manages to do this with the help of a neat-herd who asks the Brahman and the Ghost-Brahman to enter a phial. The ghost enters the phial and is locked in. The Brahman manages to get back his house, wife, and mother (Dey, pp. 176–177).

A Ghostly Wife is the next story to be analyzed. In this story it can be assumed that the 'hero' is the wife of a Brahman. One night she leaves home, (here we apply Propp's twelfth element from his theory; the hero leaves home) to get some water for the household near a tank. Here she brushes past a ghost which becomes angry. The ghost thrusts the Brahmani into a hole in the trunk of a tree (Dey, p. 188). Propp's first element from his theory is also applicable here, that is one of the members of the family absents themselves from home.

The villain who causes harm or injury to a member of a family is another of Propp's elements from his theory that can be applied to the text. The harm that the ghost causes to the Brahman's wife is that it thrust the woman into a hole in the trunk. "There the woman lay almost dead with fear" (Dey, p. 188). Though the woman is not physically injured, she is psychologically affected as she lies almost dead with fear.

The villain according to Propp is defeated in a tale. Here we find that the Brahman and an exorcist defeat the ghost. The man gets hold of the ghost and beats it up until it reveals the location of the Brahmani. The wife is discovered, and the ghost sent away (Dey, pp. 190–191). Another of Propp's elements from his theory can be applied here. Propp says the false hero or villain is exposed. This happens to the ghost. Another of Propp's elements from his theory that is applicable here is that the villain is punished. The beating that the ghost receives is punishment for it.

The Story of a Brahmadaitya is also another tale about a Brahman and his wife. This Brahman is also poor. One day he goes to visit the landlord. This act can be aligned with Propp's elements from his theory that one of the members of the family absents himself from home/The hero leaves home. Thus, the Brahman leaves home to go to the landlord in the hope to change his fortune. There he hears that the landlord wants someone to go to a haunted tree and bring back to him a branch from that tree. One of Propp's theories is that a difficult task is proposed to the hero. Here the task is not really set for the Brahman, but he volunteers for it, though many people have died: those who have dared to go near the tree at night (Dey, pp. 192–194).

In a tale, Propp argues, a task is resolved. We see that the Brahman's task is resolved in this story. However, it is not resolved without intervention from other creatures. As Propp says in the story the hero acquires a magical agent. The magical agent that the Brahman acquires is the friendship of a Brahmadaitya. It helps the Brahman to get the branch with the help of other ghosts. Then the Brahman takes the branch to the landlord. After examining the branch

and the tree to see if the branch matches the landlord gives the Brahman the land he promised (Dey, p. 195).

The Brahman acquires the help of the Brahmadaitya again, after he acquires the land. It has ripe paddy, but the Brahman has no means to reap the harvest. Here magical agents play a part again. The Brahmadaitya orders one hundred ghosts from the haunted tree to reap the paddy. The third time that the Brahman uses a magical agent is when he wants to hold a feast for one thousand Brahmans. The Brahmadaitya helps him prepare for the feast. As one good deed deserves another, the Brahmadaitya is taken up to heaven by God. He must no longer suffer as a ghost in this world.

6. The Similarities

There are similarities between the tales that have been analyzed using Propp's theory. In all the stories the main characters are Brahmans. Apart from that all the tales have a happy ending. All the heroes live happily ever after with their families.

Another similarity in all the tales is when a member of the family absents himself/herself from home. In *The Indigent Brahman*, the poor Brahman goes to the forest to vent his sorrow. While in *The Ghost Brahman* a Brahman also travels away from home. He goes on a journey to find wealth in other lands. In *A Ghostly Wife* the wife of a Brahman leaves her house, although the journey is not far, to get water for the household at a tank.

The next similarity that is present is Propp's theory of the hero acquiring a magical agent. There are two tales which have this in them. In *The Indigent Brahman*, the goddess Durga bestows upon the Brahman three magical handis, one after another. While in *The Story of a Brahmadaitya* the magical agent required by the Brahman is through his friendship with the Brahmadaitya. In this tale as has been stated above the Brahman uses his magical agent thrice.

Another similarity that two of the tales share is the hero returns. In *The Indigent Brahman*, the hero returns to his family with his magical handis. *The Ghost Brahman* is like the indigent Brahman because the Brahman returns to his home and finds an impostor there. Then he struggles to get his rightful place within his family and succeeds.

All the stories are similar because they have villains. In *The Indigent Brahman* there are two villains. The first one that the Brahman encounters is the wicked innkeeper. He manages to win against this enemy. Later in the tale towards the end another villain is introduced a landlord who takes away the Brahman's magical handi from him. In *The Ghost Brahman*, the villain is a ghost. The Brahman in this story wins against the ghost with the help of a neat herd who outsmarts the ghost. The Brahman then can take his rightful place within his family. *A Ghostly Wife* also has a ghost as a villain. The ghost causes harm to the Brahmani who encounters it near a tank. However, in the end the ghost is defeated. In *The Story of a Brahmadaitya* the villains are ghosts that live in a tree. The Brahman (again a poor man) manages to win against the ghosts with the help of a Brahmadaitya.

7. Conclusion

This paper has provided a reading of four tales from the text *Folk Tales of Bengal* compiled by Lal Behari Dey and published in 1883. It has analyzed and read the tales via Propp's theory of the functions of dramatic personae. The analysis vis-à-vis this theory has been successful, though Propp applies his theory to fairy tales. This research has proven that Propp's theory is also applicable to folk tales. The paper has also outlined the similarities that are present between the tales analyzed. We can deduce from this research that the folk tales have a preset mould, and all the stories fit that mould.

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