

The 'Punyakoti' Folk Tale: A Powerful Allegory

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Folk tales hold significant cultural, social and educational importance. A society's cultural history is preserved through folk tales, which pass on customs, values and beliefs from one generation to the next. The engaging narratives of these tales convey moral lessons in an easy-to-understand way. These tales have also been an excellent pedagogical tool. Folk tales play a crucial role in language acquisition and literacy development, especially among children.

Every region and language of the world has its own set of folk tales. These folk tales know no political borders. They are easy to understand, and hence reach out to the young and the old alike.

I had conducted a workshop on 'NCF-FS 2022 and Language Acquisition' for teachers of Foundational Stage. 'Significance of Folk Tales in Foundational Stage' was a part of this workshop. Here, I used the story of Punyakoti, a popular folk tale of Karnataka, to understand the different perspectives of a story. Let us read on to know more.

THE PUNYAKOTI STORY

In a serene village, nestled amidst the lush greenery of the hills of Karnataka, lived a cow-herder named Kalinga. He owned a herd of cows, whom he treated with a lot of love and affection. He treated them as his family and called them by their names. The cows echoed his love. At daybreak, Kalinga would take the cows to the nearby hills for grazing. He would sit under a mango tree, playing his flute while the cows grazed around.

Amongst the herd was a beautiful white cow called Punyakoti. She was revered by all for her pure heart and unwavering commitment to truth. She had a new born calf, whom the entire herd loved. As usual, the herd went out to graze on a bright sunny day. But that day, something unexpected happened.

A ferocious tiger named Arbhuta prowled nearby. He spotted this herd and decided to make one of them his meal. He charged on the herd, who were grazing peacefully. The herd scattered and ran in all directions.

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Punyakoti ran too, but was soon cornered as she unknowingly entered a cave. She was trapped by Arbhuta. Realising that her end was near, Punyakoti requested the tiger to let her go to her calf one last time. She promised him that she will feed her new born calf one last time and get back to him to be his meal. Arbhuta, though doubtful, let her go.

Punyakoti went back to the herd. She met her calf and told the herd about Arbhuta and her promise to him. The herd tried to convince her not to go, assuring her that Kalinga and the other villagers would certainly help her. But Punyakoti was committed to honesty. She requested the other cows of the herd to take care of her calf as their own. She fed the calf for the last time, and with tears in her eyes she bade farewell to all.

She returned to Arbhuta, who was waiting very anxiously for her return. She entered the cave and thanked him for letting her go to meet her little one. Later, she offered herself as his meal, as promised. Arbhuta could not believe what was happening. He was shocked at the honesty of this cow. He thought to himself how could he kill such a wonderful animal. He was moved by her noble gesture. He decided to let her go.

Punyakoti returned to the herd, unharmed, relieved and happy. Her little calf danced with joy. The other cows quickly gathered around her, mooing happily.

I presented this story to the Foundational Stage teachers during

the workshop. Apart from the value of honesty, which the story is known for, a lot of other perspectives to the story emerged during the brainstorming session that followed. They were thought-provoking and out-of-the-box ideas. Let me take you through each of these in the following sections.

Emotional Bonding with Parents and Group/Herd/Extended Family

Punyakoti loved the calf as much as the calf loved her. The other cows of the herd also loved the calf as their own. Punyakoti entrusts her calf to the other cows and the other cows respond to her with equal empathy. This shows us the bonding among the cows. This virtue is much desirable in our society as well.

Love and Care

This point differs slightly from the above one. Here, we talk of interspecies love and care. Kalinga, a man, took care of the cows as his family. The cows reciprocated the same love and affection. The bonding amongst the two was so wonderful that he used to call the cows by their names, and they would respond. We do see this sort of bonding in the case of few pet owners. This is also a desirable virtue.

Face the Problem

The next perspective that popped up during the discussion was 'facing a problem'. When Punyakoti was cornered by Arbhuta, the tiger, she did not panic. Instead, she faced

the problem on hand with complete presence of mind. She was able to reason out with the tiger. She believed in truth and honesty, and even in the crisis situation, she stood for the values. She faced the danger and took appropriate action.

Bravery

Not only did Punyakoti face the problem, she was also brave enough to stand in front of the most feared tiger and speak to him. This is a virtue we need to cultivate in our people, especially in children. Children must be brave enough to convey their thoughts to their elders and talk about their needs.

Commitment

Punyakoti knew her calf was dependent on her. So, she wanted to go back to the herd and feed her calf for the last time. She also wanted to entrust the responsibility of bringing up the little one to the other cows of the herd, whom she considered her sisters. Punyakoti was committed to her responsibilities—this is an attribute we should learn.

Sacrificing for a Noble Cause

Punyakoti believed in honesty and truth. She upheld them above all. She stood by that value even when it was a life and death situation. Even in dire circumstances, she did not let go of what she believed in the most. She even decided to give up her own

life for that. Not even her sweet little calf could deter her from standing up for honesty. The other cows of the herd tried to convince her against her decision, even then she stood strong.

Self-realisation

Seeing Punyakoti return to the den, Arbhuta was taken aback. He must have thought about the reasons for her return. He realised that Punyakoti kept her word and also stood by the principles she believed in. On the other hand, Arbhuta wanted to kill her to fulfil his hunger. He found his action to be very petty. She stood for a higher cause. This sparked self-realisation in the ferocious beast and that brought about a change of scene. We need to analyse the actions of others and introspect our own choices. This will certainly bring about betterment of character in us.

Interconnectedness of All Living Beings

Punyakoti, being truthful and compassionate, promises to return to the tiger after she has fed her calf. This act of honesty and compassion towards the tiger demonstrates a deep connection to nature and an understanding of the interdependence of all living beings.

Being Emotionally Strong

Punyakoti was emotionally strong. When she knew there was no escape from the tiger, she did not let fear

overtake her. She maintained her mental balance and thought logically. Later, when she was back to the herd to feed her calf for the last time, she could have stayed back. She could have gathered support of her master, and the other men and got the tiger killed. But she knew it was wrong and stood firm. When the other cows tried to convince her to stay back, she was strong and unwavering.

This is a virtue we must develop in our youngsters. They must know how to control their emotions. They must also learn to accept defeat/rejection and learn to think further. They must be able to reason out what to do next. This would help them to avoid depression later in life.

Decision-making

The folk story of Punyakoti does convey elements of good decision-making skills, particularly through its portrayal of integrity, compassion and foresight. This highlights the significance of upholding one's values despite difficult situations, which is a sign of sound decision-making. Punyakoti's choice to put the hungry tiger's needs ahead of her own security serves as a powerful example of the need of compassion in decision-making. It is this skill of decision-making that our young minds must cultivate.

Responsibility

Punyakoti was a responsible mother. She knew that her calf was dependent

on her. She did not want to die without arranging an alternative for her calf. So, she went back to the herd and requested the other cows to take care of the newborn calf. She entrusted the little one in safe hands of other cows and took care of her responsibility. She remembered her responsibilities even in dire circumstances and made sure they were met.

Curricular Observations

There is a lot of scope to include language training with the help of this story. Concepts like nouns, verbs, opposites, vocabulary (names of young ones, habitats, etc.) and so on may be taken up for explanation after understanding the story. Apart from language, there are many cross-curricular observations that may be highlighted to the children. The concepts like homes of animals, young ones of animals, the food chain, categorisation of animals into domestic animals and wild animals, count of number of animals in the herd, addition and subtraction may be discussed with the children after narration of the story.

I conclude that the folk stories (like that of Punyakoti) serve as a powerful allegory that can serve as a medium to talk about various virtues, demonstrating how these qualities can lead to positive outcomes even in challenging situations.