

WHO TAUGHT MY MOTHER ECONOMICS?

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LITERARY INTERVENTION

One day, working in the kitchen, for the first time my mother asked me to reduce the amount of jeera (cumin) I was about to add to the tempering for dal. I could not comprehend the gentle orders. “Jeera is expensive these days”, she commented after seeing my confused look. With a more confused look I said, “What?”. “Hey Bhagwan, what a dumb daughter I have!”, I bet she must have thought. She explained, because Jeera is expensive these days we should use it less, so that those who cannot afford it, are also able to buy it. This time it was I who questioned my intelligence. Who taught her the logic of demand and supply? More importantly, who taught her to bring it in practice with a touch of compassion for other members of the society? I studied Economics for three years in my Bachelors, she never had a formal education in Economics. Yet, she was the one who applied it in her kitchen with more kindness and consideration. This incident prompted me to question whether our formal education equips us for practical application, rather than remaining theoretical knowledge that fails to integrate into our thinking and lives. Also, where does the broader public, uninitiated into institutional learning or without subject-specific expertise, cultivate its political, economic, ethical, and empathetic sensibilities? After much reflection, one reason that stands out to me is my mother’s habit of recounting the folktales she had heard from her elders, stories often accompanied by melodies that could engage both children and adults alike. These narratives carried lessons spanning multiple aspects of life, harmoniously intertwining rational thought with deep empathy.

We innately consume and produce stories every day, to comprehend reality around us and convey our ideas and thoughts. Our whole being and conscience is woven with stories. Teaching a child addition: Tom bought ten apples and ate four out of them, how many are left? ; singing folk tales to keep local histories and heroes alive and turning life into celebration; writing and performing street plays to sway masses in order to bring political upheavals; governments producing advertisements that tug emotional chords to promote new schemes; two friends gossiping

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over coffee : stories in various forms, for intentional/unintentional purposes, knowingly and unknowingly, walking on toes, entering our lives. The earliest memory I have of receiving a therapy is of my grandmother swirling her finger gently on my palm and reciting a few-lines long detective story in rhythm. She would use my name and repeat several times, “Has someone seen her? Where is she?”, then add another finger to walk them up my arm towards my arm pit and tickle me till I laughed and forgot crying. The same story and game have been passed down to generations across Punjab since time immemorial, only the name of children in it changed. I was nine years old when I was introduced to the concept of Justice. During school vacation, on hot summer nights, our uncle would gather us all children under the open sky and tell us stories. At the end of every story, he would ask a question. The questions always tested our ability to state right and wrong, and deliver justice to the characters in the stories. Sometimes we were a king in dilemma and sometimes a girl who had to choose the most suitable boy for marriage. In every story, we wore different shoes.

In the modern world, literature is often regarded as a domain of aesthetic pleasure or artistic and cultural expression. While these qualities are important, literature’s most ancient and powerful functions are often overlooked or undermined: to transmit knowledge and wisdom, its ability to integrate knowledge from various disciplines (economics, politics, ethics, to name a few) into itself in a seamless manner. Literature, whether oral or written, functions as the language of the masses, as it acts as a medium that conveys knowledge in an engaging manner. Its story-driven structure makes complex ideas more accessible, palatable, portable, and enduring. Its entertaining nature serves as the cognitive doorway, drawing audiences in with the charm of the narrative while quietly equipping them with moral, political, or philosophical insights that might have been too dry or complex to absorb. Across the world, and among diverse cultures and demographics, there is an abundance of literary traditions that have been produced and handed down through centuries, serving as vast reservoirs of wisdom of various disciplines weaved together. One of the prime examples of ancient story collections performing this function is the Panchatantra. It is believed to be written around 3rd century BCE in Sanskrit. At its essence, it is a Niti-shastra – a treatise on ethics, statecraft, and wise conduct of life. Its prelude mentions a king named Amarshakti, who was concerned about his sons’ lack of inclination towards learning. The king consulted his ministers, one of whom advised him to approach Vishnu Sharma, a learned Brahmin who was an expert in all the sciences. He was given the task to instruct the princes. Accepting the request, Vishnu Sharma composed

the Panchatantra stories to impart lessons in various disciplines, including economics, politics, religion and the sciences. While academic knowledge is divided into discrete disciplines— politics, economics, philosophy, science— literature often defies such compartmentalisation. It has the potential to bridge the gap between the broader public and academia. While scholarly knowledge is often confined to technical language, limited circulation, and niche audiences, literature has the capacity to act as a democratic channel and translate complex ideas into accessible forms without sacrificing depth. It is essential that the world once again recognises literature as a vehicle of collective learning, as the oral and written literary traditions remind us that political and historical consciousness is not forged from statistics and data alone. These narratives preserve the moral memory of communities, keeping alive an economy of care, mutual responsibility, and practical wisdom. By recognising their value, we take a step closer to building societies that are more just, empathetic, wiser, and collectively responsible.