

Demystifying the Myth of Horses and Donkeys in Indian Folklores

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Abstract

Levi-Strauss highlights the significance of mythmaking in every culture; bricolage becomes an inevitable process. A culture heavily relies on folklores, mythologies, and symbolic tokens to sustain itself. Every symbol helps in understanding the culture that employs it. Undeniably, the myths essentialize a particular culture. The mythical representation of animals is closely related to agrarian cultures; It will not be overstating to say that in such cultures, animals also form a part of human society. The animals act as agents of labour, social mobility, and economy. Indian myths and folklores are vociferously feature such animal myths. A knight's horse or a washerman's donkey seems less magical but more eloquent. The pathetic fallacy is a very important device employed in all Indian stories for children. Generally, a donkey represents domesticity, whereas a horse represents nobility and grandeur. This knowledge of two different animals representing two different classes has been constructed and consumed by the people. Undoubtedly, a narrative is the most important tool for constructing this epistemological construction.

Indian folk-tales, usually narrated by grand-mothers around fire on a chilly winter night or in bed to their grand-children in an effort to put them to sleep, are inundated with horses and donkeys. One may easily come across kings and courtiers on a hunting spree on their horses, knights rescuing their damsels from the jaws of monsters on horses, great warriors performing gallant deeds in the battlefields with their equally gallant galloping horses and traders passing through towns and villages with their goods on horses. Likewise, it is also common to encounter donkeys in these tales. For example, one may be made to ride a donkey as part of his punishment with the entire city clapping and making fun of the victim, a poor washerman carrying his load on a donkey under the blazing Sun, and a group of donkeys carrying heavy luggage under extreme servitude. In these stories, the horse is a symbol of nobility and aristocracy whereas the donkey is a symbol of dullness, penury and docility. It is very common to address somebody as a donkey in Indian culture if he or she is dunce or indolent. The aim of the proposed essay is to examine the symbols of the horse and the donkey as presented in Indian folktales, and deconstruct the obvious symbolism. The essay will argue how these two different animals are associated with two different classes. An effort has been made to unravel cultural nuances of these two animals in Indian society.

Keywords: *Mythmaking, Indian folklore, animal representation, symbolism, cultural nuance*

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Introduction

The folk narratives that constitute a major portion of children's literature play a crucial role in constructing socio-cultural attitudes within society. Kakar points out that "the dramatic treatment of interpersonal patterns in folk tales directly mirrors the modal patterns of the culture" (293). India holds a prominent position in the history of oral tradition and folklore. Upadhyaya asserts, "India occupies an important place in the history of world folklore. Especially in the field of folktales and fables, she has played the part of the mother country" (182). Indian scholars are evidently proud of the rich oral tradition in India, with Agarwal noting that Indian oral tradition is "the mother lode of Indian culture" (187).

In Hindu mythology, animals have always been significant familiars of the gods and goddesses, symbolizing cultural values and systems. The God of Death is associated with a buffalo; the Goddess Kali with a tiger; Lord Ganapathi with an elephant; and Lord Hanuman with a monkey. Each deity has a special bond with an animal. However, animals such as horses, donkeys, dogs, cats, and camels have not occupied a divine place in Hindu mythology.

Between horses and donkeys, horses claim a privileged place in literature, reflecting their higher societal status. Horses are more prominently featured in literature than donkeys. Oswald observes that "horses are the second most common animal protagonist" (141). Both horses and donkeys are known for their power: a horse symbolizes speed, while a donkey symbolizes strength. Despite this, phrases like 'horsepower' demote the donkey as an inferior breed. The donkey is often looked down upon, whereas the horse is a symbol of pride. The donkey also represents the dichotomy of dignity and humility, grace and disgrace, fame and shame.

This essay examines the portrayal of horses and donkeys in Indian folklore, arguing that these animals are associated with different social classes—primarily the upper and lower classes. This association unravels cultural nuances and socio-cultural dimensions in Indian society. Claude Lévi-Strauss' structuralism provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing myths and folktales. At its core, structuralism seeks to uncover the underlying structures of human thought as revealed through myths. Lévi-Strauss posits that myths from different cultures share common structures, often articulated through binary oppositions such as nature/culture, raw/cooked, and high/low.

Furthermore, Lévi-Strauss introduces the concept of 'bricolage' to describe the process by which myths are constructed using available cultural materials. This process is evident in Indian folktales, where familiar cultural symbols and motifs are reconfigured to convey deeper social and moral messages. The use of animals such as horses and donkeys in these narratives exemplifies bricolage, where these creatures are imbued with specific cultural meanings that reflect societal values and hierarchies.

In the context of *Folktales from India*, the tales selected for analysis demonstrate how bricolage functions within the narrative structure. For example, the figure of the horse, often associated with nobility and power, is repurposed in various tales to explore themes of authority and social status. Conversely, the donkey, typically seen as a symbol of humility and labor, is employed to highlight the virtues and struggles of the lower classes.

The analysis of binary oppositions is central to structuralism. In the context of Indian folktales, horses and donkeys are juxtaposed to symbolize contrasting social statuses and attributes. Horses, often associated with nobility, power, and valor, represent the upper echelons of society. In contrast, donkeys symbolize humility, labor, and the lower social strata. This dichotomy not only reinforces social hierarchies but also reflects the moral and ethical dimensions of the culture.

For instance, in the tale where a king rides a horse, the narrative emphasizes the regal qualities and responsibilities of leadership. In contrast, stories featuring a washerman's donkey underscore themes of service and endurance. These binary oppositions serve to reinforce the cultural values associated with each animal, illustrating how myths and folktales function to perpetuate societal norms.

Most of the tales analyzed in the present study are from A.K. Ramanujan's *Folktales from India*. This volume, however, has not garnered much critical attention so far, with only a couple of research papers written on it. Aditya Behl's article, "A.K. Ramanujan, Extraordinary Storyteller," highlights Ramanujan's concerns in the selected volume. Ramanujan brings ancient Indian culture to the forefront with his wit. Folktales, as Behl suggests, draw readers into the domestic world and its culture; Ramanujan brings this space alive. He makes his readers think differently about the fundamentals of classical civilization by using stories from heterogeneous sources. Behl further remarks, "Within this plural, interactive notion of Indian traditions,

Ramanujan is able to develop a second major set of ideas: that of folklore as a linguistic exchange, as semiosis, as the spiraling play of signifiers” (157). Discussing the place of folklore in the present world of media, Behl points out, “Ramanujan’s lifelong interest in oral communication, in folktales, proverbs, jokes, riddles, lullabies—the whole range of verbal art that is not written down—is refracted through his extraordinary ability to tell a good story” (158).

Tasnova Sarmin’s work, “Children’s Literature and Folk Culture: a Study of A.K. Ramanujan’s *Folktales from India*,” focuses on folktales as children’s literature and how culture is represented in them. Sarmin also points out his use of different languages with regional temperaments. She acknowledges Ramanujan’s point of view that one must be aware of the Indian oral tradition to understand its culture. Sarmin examines various folktales from Ramanujan and concludes that culture is a significant and intrinsic part of children’s literature, and folktale traditions are passed down from one generation to another. To quote Sarmin, “A.K. Ramanujan’s *Folktales from India* serves as a medium through which youngsters can socialize in a standard way. When one reads about other people in a different society and a different context, they get the opportunity to explore a part of that culture” (57). She further remarks, “India is considered to be a multicultural land with many myths, legends, and folktales. These tales take a pathway between one culture and another; they put a mirror in front of us” (Sarmin 57).

The aim of the present study is to analyze the selected tales from the volume, *Folktales from India*, with reference to the representation of horses and donkeys, with a view to argue what socio-cultural dimensions horses and donkeys have in the Indian context. This study addresses a significant research gap, as there is currently little to no scholarly work specifically focusing on the representation of animals in Ramanujan's folktales. By examining this aspect, the paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the socio-cultural implications of animal representation in Indian folklore.

Horses

Horses in Indian folktales are represented in various significant ways, often symbolizing nobility, power, and social hierarchy. In ancient times, horses were a primary means of transportation, accessible mainly to the wealthy. This ownership underscored a person’s aristocratic status. Numerous tales feature kings traveling across their realms on horseback,

reinforcing the association between horses and the elite. These narratives also depict scenes where royals and their nobles become lost in forests while hunting, often portrayed galloping with the king leading his entourage.

For example, in the story “How Akbar Meets Birbal,” Akbar encounters Birbal while trying to find his way out of a dense jungle. Akbar, having been hunting with his nobles, sits gracefully on his horse, while Birbal stands on the ground. This incident vividly illustrates the class hierarchy of the time, where the rich could afford the luxury of owning and riding horses, a privilege beyond the reach of the poor. Large stables filled with horses symbolized power and authority, as kings maintained extensive collections of horses, which also played crucial roles in battles. Aristocratic children, particularly boys, and soldiers were trained in the art of horse-riding, a skill essential for warfare. In the story “A Parrot Named Hiranman,” the king’s parrot is astounded by the sheer number of horses in the royal stable and selects one for a mission to retrieve a beautiful princess, emphasizing the importance and abundance of horses in royal life.

In the Rajput community, there was a tradition that the groom would ride a horse to fetch his bride, accompanied only by male family members, while the women waited at home. This custom is depicted in “Brother’s Day,” where a Rajput boy, referred to as ‘brother,’ rides a horse to bring his bride. The Rajputs, wealthy rulers of Rajasthan in North India, adhered strictly to caste, class, and gender values. Initially, the sister’s desire to accompany her brother is met with resistance because she is female, and traditionally, women were neither expected to ride horses nor participate in the wedding procession. However, the brother intervenes, allowing her to join him on horseback, “When it was time for the groom's departure from the village on horseback (grooms must go to their brides' villages for the wedding ritual), she insisted on riding the horse with him, and he said, 'Let her be. Let her sit with me’” (Ramanujan 21). This narrative illustrates how the horse serves as a symbol to unravel the intricate social fabric of gender and class in Indian society.

In the tale “One More Use for Artists,” a princess who enjoys hunting and horse-riding witnesses an incident that profoundly alters her perception of men. While hunting on horseback, she loses her way in the forest and notices smoke rising in the distance. Upon reaching the spot, she discovers a fire and is horrified to see a family of birds struggling in the blaze. Before she can intervene, the male bird flies away to save himself, while the female bird sacrifices herself,

jumping into the fire to save her offspring. This tragic event leaves a deep impression on the princess. Soon after, her attendants find her and escort her back home. Shaken by the incident, she begins to view the entire male community as unreliable and vows to remain unmarried. Such examples of women engaging in traditionally male activities like hunting and riding are rare in Indian folktales, which predominantly feature men in these roles.

In contrast, the tale “Sona and Rupa” offers a different perspective on gender norms. In this story, a prince returning from a hunting expedition discovers golden and silver hair. Notably, he is riding a mare instead of a horse, which aligns with the gender norms of the time. As a prince, he is expected to be brave and masculine, capable of mastering horse riding to lead his nation in battles. However, this prince is depicted as sulky and effeminate. He becomes infatuated with the owner of the golden and silver strands and starts behaving childishly. He hides in the royal kitchen, and when the queen searches for him, he is stubborn and petulant, “It was time for dinner, but the prince did not appear. Everyone looked for him, but he was nowhere to be found. The queen mother sent servants into every room and every corner. One of the servant women went into the storeroom to fetch some sugar. The prince was lying there, face down” (Ramanujan 13).

The mare suits the prince’s personality better than a horse, reflecting his weak and feminine nature. The prince’s behavior is akin to that of an underdeveloped child. Unlike other kings in the tales, he is not determined to solve the mystery himself. Instead, he demands that his mother find the girl with the golden and silver hair for him. When it is discovered that his two sisters, Sona and Rupa, are the owners of the strands, he insists on marrying them despite it being against customs. He fails to understand the concept of incest and its consequences, remaining adamant about his desire to marry his sisters. Fearing the worst, Sona and Rupa disappear into a tree they had planted many years earlier. In this story, the mare symbolizes the emasculated and punctured manhood of the prince, who is more suited to ride a mare than a horse, which, like a male, is tough and wild.

From a structuralist perspective, as articulated by Claude Lévi-Strauss, these narratives reveal underlying cultural beliefs and societal norms through their representations of horses and mares. The binary opposition between the horse and the mare, and the associated characteristics of strength and weakness, masculinity and femininity, reflect deeper cultural dichotomies and

social hierarchies. Examining these oppositions provides insights into how Indian folklore uses animal symbolism to convey social meanings and cultural values.

Indian folktales often feature various magical creatures, including the winged horse known as Pakshiraj. Endowed with the ability to fly at incredible speeds, Pakshiraj is capable of crossing seven seas and thirteen mountains in the blink of an eye. An illustrative example can be found in the tale “A Parrot Called Hiranman.” Here, a king, enchanted by a princess described to him by his parrot, Hiranman, seeks a way to bring her home. Advising the king, Hiranman suggests, “What you need is a Pakshiraj, a winged horse. If you can get one, you can ride on it and we'll cross the seven seas and thirteen rivers in no time” (Ramanujan 56).

This mythical horse requires six months of meticulous care before it can undertake the journey. Following Hiranman's guidance, the king and his parrot mount Pakshiraj, tapping the horse gently to initiate flight. Swiftly traversing vast distances, they reach the princess within moments, illustrating the magical abilities attributed to Pakshiraj in these tales.

The king is overjoyed to meet his dream princess. However, on their return journey, in his excitement, the king taps the horse twice, causing it to descend into a forest. There, the princess is abducted by a local king, who also seizes the winged horse, leaving the first king stranded in the woods, helpless with only Hiranman for company.

Over time, the princess manages to restore the winged horse's power and, with Hiranman's assistance, retrieves a cure for the king's blindness. Once the king regains his sight, he, the princess, and Hiranman mount the winged horse and safely return to their palace. This time, having learned his lesson, the king taps the horse only once.

The Pakshiraj in Indian folktales is as powerful and adventurous as any terrestrial horse. Riding the winged horse requires mastery and is considered an essential part of manhood training. Only men, particularly those from the upper class, are permitted to ride it. Thus, the Pakshiraj in Indian folktales highlights gender and class distinctions, showcasing that only men, specifically upper-class men, were allowed to ride such majestic creatures.

Indian folktales feature a diverse array of horses, among them the river horse, which plays a prominent role in the story “Raja Vikram and the Princess of China.” In this narrative, King Vikram is portrayed as a powerful ruler whose kingdom spans vast territories. His fame extends beyond his borders, attracting the admiration of many beautiful princesses worldwide. Known

for his justice and love for his subjects, Vikram decides one day to ride his water horse to survey his expansive domain.

As he journeys far and wide, his territories seem endless. Eventually, he reaches the bank of a mighty river, which his water horse swiftly carries him across, demonstrating the horse's capability on both land and water. Feeling fatigued, Vikram leaves his horse under a tree and falls asleep. That night, thieves break into a nearby palace, stealing gold and silver. Spotting the beautiful water horse, they adorn it with a princess's necklace. In the morning, palace guards searching for the thieves discover the water horse and the sleeping King Vikram. Mistaking him for the thief, they arrest him and bring him before the local king.

Without conducting a proper investigation, the King of China orders Vikram to be mutilated and publicly displayed as punishment. Consequently, Vikram endures humiliation and severe injury. Unlike the winged horse, which acts as a savior, the water horse in this tale becomes the cause of the king's suffering, highlighting a stark contrast in their symbolic roles.

Horses also appear as metaphors in Indian folktales, such as in "Why the Fish Laughed." Here, the son of a minister, traveling to an unknown destination, meets a farmer who invites him to join his journey. During their travels, the young man asks the farmer cryptic questions. At one point, he instructs the farmer to bring him two horses using his knife, adding that the horses should not bleed and should be properly chopped, "After a little while, the two travelers came to a big village, where the young man handed his companion a pocket knife, and said, 'Take this, friend, and get two horses with it. But please bring it back. It's very precious'" (Ramanujan 49).

The farmer is stunned and unable to resolve the mystery. Upon returning home, he informs his young daughter about the cryptic request. She interprets the riddle, explaining that the 'two horses' metaphorically represent two stout sticks, which should be cut properly to facilitate smooth walking on a rough path. Her ability to solve the riddle demonstrates her intelligence and makes her a suitable match for the young man, who later marries her.

The use of metaphor and riddles in these tales serves multiple purposes. Firstly, it maintains suspense, keeping the audience engaged. Secondly, it establishes the young man's worth, solidifying his status as the hero and making him a suitable suitor for the heroine, who is the only one capable of understanding his riddles. These elements enhance the narrative's complexity and enrich the cultural and symbolic richness of Indian folktales.

Sometimes, the horse is used as an agent of moral order in Indian folktales. When the storyteller intends to convey a particular message, the horse becomes a tool in their hands, which could easily be replaced by any other animal. For example, in “Sukhu and Dukhu,” the horse is incidental to the narrative. The primary aim is to illustrate the concepts of good and evil. The girl Dukhu is portrayed as virtuous, helping everyone she encounters and displaying kindness and love. When she meets a horse that pleads for help to remove its painful saddle and bridle, Dukhu immediately assists, and as a result, the horse rewards her with a gift of a winged horse, “Next she met a horse and it said, ‘Where are you going, Dukhu? This saddle and bridle cut into me. I can't bend down to eat the grass. Will you please take them off’” (Ramanujan 71).

Conversely, when Sukhu meets the same horse, she shouts at it instead of helping. As a consequence, she receives nothing from the horse. In this instance, the storyteller's primary goal is to impart a moral lesson, rather than focus on the aesthetics of the tale. The horse serves merely as a prop to deliver this moral message, and its presence is subservient to the cause. Here, the horse does not exist as an individual character but rather as a vehicle for the moral lesson the storyteller aims to convey.

Donkeys

In “The Donkey Learns a Lesson,” a short story for children, the narrative unfolds with the portrayal of an oppressed donkey, its mistreatment justified within the story's context. The tale begins with the introduction of a man who possesses both a hardworking donkey and a pet dog. The theme of 'animal discrimination' emerges prominently as the story progresses, “The donkey lived in the stable and was given oats and hay to eat. The dog lived in the house of their master and got meat and bones to eat. He knew many tricks which amused and delighted their master” (BPI 5).

Despite the donkey's diligent efforts—carrying loads of wood from the forest and grinding corn in the mill—it receives unequal treatment compared to the pet dog. The master lavishes affection and special treats on the dog while the donkey is relegated to its regular diet of hay and oats. This disparity leads to the donkey feeling despondent and resentful, “The poor donkey sat in the corner of the stable and cursed his fate. The donkey often compared his hard life to the dog's comfortable one” (BPI 6).

Determined to challenge this injustice, the donkey decides to assert its place in the household, like the pet dog. However, when it attempts to emulate the dog's affectionate behavior toward the master, it is met with repulsion and alarm. The master's screams for help bring servants to the scene, who are astonished by the donkey's unusual conduct. The donkey's expression of affection is met with harsh punishment as it is dragged back to the stable and brutally beaten (BPI 6).

Interestingly, the story does not stereotype the character of the donkey but rather exposes the nature of the human master. The donkey symbolizes the oppressed working class, while the human master represents the capitalists. Emotionally and physically abused, the donkey's dissent is quashed through violence, leaving it broken and submissive. The narrative concludes with the donkey acknowledging its error and resolving to continue its work obediently, thereby highlighting the perpetuation of oppression and exploitation in society.

“The Equal Share” presents a poignant narrative of donkey victimhood, where the donkey's request for an equitable share of the meal to aid a destitute friend leads to his tragic demise at the hands of the lion. The donkey's humility is evident as he carefully divides the meal into three equal parts, stating, “I want you two to select the share of your choice” (BPI 10). Through this tale, the inherent tensions within the animal hierarchy are starkly portrayed, underscoring themes of power dynamics and injustice.

Likewise, “The Brahmin and the Crooks” illuminates caste divisions among both humans and animals. The rejection of the donkey within the Brahmin community as a symbol of misfortune is highlighted when one of the crooks remarks, “Sir, Why are you carrying a donkey on your shoulders? It is going to bring you misfortune” (Achira 16), reflecting entrenched societal norms and prejudices.

“Denchu Sings Out Loud” offers a subversive portrayal of the donkey archetype, challenging conventional stereotypes. Despite being detested by his fellow animals for his singing, Denchu's resolve to pursue his talent in private is palpable when he reflects, “No one understands great artists. I’m going to keep all my precious songs to myself” (Kaul 12). Through Denchu's journey, themes of resilience and individuality amidst societal pressures are brought to the fore.

In the Punjabi folktale “Bopoluchi,” the conclusion sees the brave Bopoluchi utilizing donkeys and camels to transport loads of treasure from the robbers' safehouse to her home. This choice of transportation not only indicates the substantial amount of treasure she has acquired but also underscores the historical significance of donkeys as heavy-duty vehicles. In ancient times, donkeys were commonly employed by ordinary people for tasks requiring strength and serving as the preferred mode of transportation for common folk.

In the Tamil folktale “The Jasmin Prince,” the narrative eloquently conveys the universal truth that a donkey holds a special place as a washerman’s faithful companion, much like a dog serves as a police officer's ally, a horse becomes a knight's trusted ride, or a bullock assists a farmer. The washerman's profound distress over losing his donkey is palpable, as he tirelessly searches for it despite his heartbreak. Even in his despair, he remains steadfast, refusing to give up hope. His decision to reach out to the queen for assistance reflects his unwavering determination, as he believes that if she has witnessed all fourteen worlds, she may have seen his beloved donkey somewhere. Thus, the quote “Lady, did you see my donkey anywhere?” (Ramanujan 12) encapsulates the washerman's desperation and reliance on the queen's supposed omniscience, highlighting the deep bond between humans and donkeys in traditional societies.

The evident determination of the washerman to locate his donkey speaks volumes about his reliance on the animal, not merely out of affection but out of sheer necessity for his livelihood. Unable to manage the load of his laundry without the donkey's assistance, his search becomes a matter of survival. Additionally, the prevalence of donkeys in the households of the working class underscores their socio-economic status. Unlike horses and elephants, which are associated with the royal and noble classes, donkeys symbolize the resilience and perseverance of the common folk. Thus, the classification of the donkey as belonging to the working class of society highlights its integral role in supporting the livelihoods of those like the washerman, further emphasizing the socio-economic dynamics intertwined with human-animal relationships.

Donkeys in Indian folk literature often serve as objects of ridicule, depicted as wandering astray in jungle, however they are more commonly portrayed in domestic and working environment. In “Shall I Show You My Real Face?” a tale featuring a shape-shifting tiger intent on marrying a human, the appearance of an astray donkey adds a touch of humor and slapstick to the narrative. The youngest brother's decision to take the donkey along, initially seen as a mere

amusement, later proves fortuitous when the donkey aids in intimidating the ferocious tiger brother-in-law.

The acquisition of the donkey unfolds in a comedic manner, with the youngest brother's playful insistence on bringing it along despite his brothers' objections. However, the donkey's unexpected usefulness emerges when the brothers utilize it to deceive the tiger. Dark comedy permeates the scene as the brothers cleverly exploit its braying to intimidate the tiger. Ramanujan vividly captures this comedic moment, recounting how the youngest brother strategically places an ant in the donkey's anus, prompting it to bray loudly and terrify the tiger. This juxtaposition of humor and tension adds depth to the narrative, highlighting the multifaceted role of animals like the donkey in folklore, where they transition from objects of amusement to unexpected heroes in the face of danger.

In the short story “Crossing a River, Losing a Self,” the portrayal of donkeys as carriers of cargo perpetuates their role in Indian folklore. A disciple shares a memory of his grandfather, a salt merchant who used donkeys to transport sacks of salt even across rivers. This choice of transportation, despite the prevalence of bullock carts in agrarian Indian society, highlights the donkey's strength in carrying heavy loads. In contrast to horses, renowned for their speed, donkeys are valued for their strength in bearing heavy burdens.

The disciple reminisces, “My grandfather was a great merchant. He was once crossing this river with his two donkeys laden with sacks of salt” (Ramanujan 187). This quote underscores the significance of donkeys in transportation, emphasizing their role as reliable carriers of cargo.

The absence of references to messengers riding donkeys or princes eloping on donkeys further reinforces this perception. Donkeys are consistently depicted as beasts of burden rather than noble steeds associated with royalty or swiftness. This stark contrast underscores the societal perception of donkeys as utilitarian animals, valued primarily for their strength and endurance rather than their elegance or speed. Thus, within the narrative, the donkey's role as a carrier of cargo reflects its enduring status as a symbol of resilience and reliability in Indian folklore.

In the Bengali story “Gandharva Sen is Dead,” the narrative unfolds around the element of suspense and mistaken identity, with the titular character being a donkey named Gandharva Sen. The name itself is remarkable, as it closely resembles that of a typical Bengali gentleman,

reflecting the common practice of naming domestic animals. Brandes notes that naming patterns can offer insights into classification, emphasizing, “Naming patterns provide another clue to classification.” (209). This quote highlights the role of names in identifying and categorizing animals, shedding light on the broader themes explored in the story.

What sets Gandharva Sen apart is not just his name but also his cognomen, “Sen,” which is a popular Bengali surname. This departure from the usual practice of assigning animals singular names suggests a level of familiarity and connection typically reserved for human family or community members. Additionally, the first name “Gandharva” conveys a sense of respect and dignity, elevating the donkey beyond mere livestock.

This unique naming convention underscores the bond between Gandharva Sen and his owner, challenging conventional perceptions of animal-human relationships. The significance of Gandharva Sen's name reflects the deeper themes of respect, identity, and belonging woven throughout the story, inviting readers to contemplate the complexities of human-animal interactions within the context of Bengali society.

In this tale echoing Levi-Strauss' themes of structuralism and cultural narratives, Gandharva Sen, a washerwoman's donkey, meets its demise, triggering a wave of sorrow throughout the kingdom. The irony lies in the fact that neither the king nor his subjects mourn the donkey itself; instead, they grieve the abstract concept of death. This is evident in their mourning of Gandharva Sen without knowing its identity. The contagious nature of grief, starting with a single washerwoman's lament, rapidly spreads and envelops the kingdom.

The pivotal moment comes when the courtiers, driven by the collective mourning, seek out the washerwoman to understand her profound sorrow. They ask her who Gandharva Sen was to evoke such heartfelt lamentation. The washerwoman, overwhelmed with grief, reveals, “Oh, I'm so unlucky!” cried the washerwoman. “My heart still bleeds for him. He was my pet donkey. I loved him like my own son.” She could hardly finish her sentence and burst once again into tears. The party felt thoroughly ashamed of themselves and quickly left the place. (Ramanujan 212).

This narrative underlines a critical aspect of human culture: the projection of personal sorrow onto communal consciousness, and the symbolic importance individuals place on certain relationships and beings within their cultural framework. The collective mourning, though

initially devoid of specific understanding, highlights the shared human experience of grief and the symbolic resonance of death in societal consciousness.

The juxtaposition between the washerwoman's love for Gandharva Sen and the disregard shown by others towards a mere donkey is significant in understanding social constructs. The washerwoman cherishes her donkey and loves it like her own son. However, when the people who were mourning Gandharva's death discover its true identity, they feel ashamed for having cared about a donkey. This reaction reveals a deeper societal belief that animals, particularly donkeys, are considered insignificant, and that mourning their death is perceived as beneath their dignity. This incident highlights the disparity in value and respect assigned to different beings within the kingdom, reflecting broader themes of hierarchy and the human tendency to assign worth based on social status.

A similar psychological strain is evident in the tale "The Barber's Secret," a Tamil folktale that depicts a king mocked and laughed at because of his large ears. The king has an extraordinary ability to hear even the slightest whispers, a superhuman quality likely attributed to the size of his ears. One day, the king's barber discovers the king's large ears and, finding them reminiscent of donkey ears, bursts into laughter. He guffaws, forgetting that he is insulting his own king. When he finally explains himself, he says, "The barber recovered, gathered courage, and said, 'Your Majesty, I've seen your kind of ears on a donkey. A donkey is a bit bigger, that's all.'" (Ramanujan 280).

The use of a donkey as a medium of clowning and buffoonery is deep-seated in Indian tradition. The barber's discovery of the king's large ears, which he compares to those of a donkey, is akin to treason. He cannot divulge his discovery to anyone because the donkey is considered an animal belonging to the lower class, a symbol of embarrassment and mockery. Metaphors like 'lion heart' are appropriate for a king, but not 'donkey ears.' However, the barber is so amused that he cannot contain his excitement. Desperate to share his knowledge, he confides in a tree, saying, "The great good king who rules our land has a donkey's ears" (Ramanujan 282). Nature becomes the barber's ally and confidant. The tree, which holds the barber's secret, is later cut down and made into musical drums. When these drums are played, they resonate with the barber's secret in a loud and rhythmic manner: "Tak Tlang Taka Taka

Taka Tlang / The ears of the king are the ears of a donkey” (Ramanujan 283). This song embarrasses the king as the drums are played in his court, turning him into a buffoon.

The concept of ‘making a spectacle’ is also associated with the image of a donkey. While the donkeys are deemed suitable for carrying loads, they are traditionally not considered appropriate for transporting human beings. In the Urdu folktale “One Man’s Pleasure,” an Afghan tourist visiting India faces punishment for failing to pay a sweet vendor after purchasing sweets. Unaware of local customs, the foreigner assumes the sweets were offered as a gesture of hospitality. However, the vendor refuses to forgive the visitor and reports the incident to local authorities. As a result, the Afghan tourist is subjected to a humiliating punishment intended to reduce him to a mere jester. The objective of this bizarre punishment is to publicly shame and defame him. Ramanujan recounts, “The chief officer ordered that his head should be shaved clean and covered with tar, and that he should then be mounted on a donkey and run out of town in a procession to the sound of drums, so that everyone would know how a lawbreaker is punished in that part of the world” (Ramanujan 299). The punishment relies heavily on public scrutiny to ensure its intended effect of humiliation.

The sharp contrast between two cultures in their relationship with the donkey is evident in this tale. While in India, riding a donkey is considered utter disgrace and insult, in Afghanistan, it is viewed as mere enjoyment. Ramanujan comments, “Though this is considered brutal punishment in India, the man from Kabul thought it was fun. He even felt charmed and honored by this treatment and the attention he got in the streets” (Ramanujan 299). The Afghan tourist is not mortified to ride the donkey; instead, he is excited and enjoys the opportunity. This juxtaposition of punishment and pleasure blurs cultural boundaries, showcasing how binary opposites can merge within different societal contexts. Such binary divisions are deeply ingrained in the cultural unconscious of a society, shaping perceptions and reactions to various symbols and practices.

The association between human beings and animals is an integral part of our society. This collaboration or linkage of humans with the kind of animal they associate with often determines their social status. For example, a donkey, typically a helper to a washer person, carries both dirty and washed laundry but seldom carries any individual. In fact, riding a donkey is often seen as a form of punishment or buffoonery.

In a Tamil novel categorized as Dalit writing, titled *Beast of Burden*, the plight of an oppressed community is narrated. This community, primarily composed of washer people, is symbolically represented by the donkey. The title, 'Beast of Burden,' metaphorically refers to the entire community, which carries the heavy load of the rest of the world's burdens. This portrayal reflects the societal perception of certain communities as being burdened with labor and marginalized in the broader social structure.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Indian folktales depict horses and donkeys not merely as animals, but as carriers of profound cultural significations. Their portrayal within these narratives serves to underscore the class and gender dichotomies entrenched within the society from which they originate, perpetuated through oral tradition across generations. However, it is essential to acknowledge that these observations are not absolute, and the sample size of the data under scrutiny remains relatively small. Nevertheless, the tales selected for analysis span multiple linguistic backgrounds across India, offering a pan-Indian perspective. Researchers in this field are encouraged to further explore and test the hypotheses presented in this essay by examining additional tales from diverse regions across India. Only through comprehensive analysis can a more nuanced understanding of the cultural symbolism embedded within these timeless narratives be achieved.

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