

Book Review

Life's Little Tales

Patnaik, B N, Bhubaneswar: Shikshasandhan, (2022) ISBN: 978-81- 955752-0-6, Pages: 175, Price: Rs 195/-

Life's Little Tales by Prof. B N Patnaik is a collection of short notes in the manner of fireside chat on a variety of topics, from those in the Mahabharata to language, linguistics, food, institutions and situations. These notes, 21 in all, are rich in examples they cite, anecdotes they share and in the conclusions they lead to.

Let us look at the last first.

"Facing Death" (P.169-75) cites two versions of how King Parikshit reacted to his knowledge of imminent death. According to the *Mahabharata*, "he did his best to protect himself from the snake, he moved to a special mansion and ensured that all possible care was taken by his attendants for his safety... barriers of all kinds were constructed which no snake could overcome. For seven days he conducted the affairs of the state from there and for seven days he lived in great fear. On the fateful day, disguised as an insect in a fruit that was to be offered to the king, Takshaka reached him. No barrier could stop him. Those were for a snake, not for an insect". On seeing the king, Takshaka assumed his real form him and bit the king. (P.169).

There is another version of how Parikshit faced death. According to the *Srimad Bhagwat*, "the righteous king was profoundly repentant about his wrongdoing and spent the remaining days of his life listening with complete devotion to the *leela* of Bhagwan Krishna as described in the sacred text from the incomparable sage Suk. As a result, he underwent a spiritual transformation. In him was there no anxiety, or fear for death, he had conquered death. On the fateful day when Takshaka bit him he killed the body from which consciousness had already departed. Parikshit

had attained the ultimate release. This, one might think, is the appropriate ending for the one who was born dead and was restored to life" (p.170).

By citing the two versions of the same death, Patnaik suggests the following:

We all will die one day or another, but we must face death with equanimity. Many people, however, go dragging their feet, and losing their dignity. Patnaik cites examples of people even in our own times who have faced death without panicking. "Prof. Behera", Patnaik says, "was in hospital and he was aware of his impending death. He remembered that he had not sent his evaluation report of a doctoral thesis of another university. He knew that if he passed away without submitting his report, the student could suffer. Appointment of another examiner by the University and the process of evaluation would take time. What he did was, struggling in pain, as he was lying on his bed, he dictated his report to a colleague and signed it. Two days later he passed away"(P. 174).

Patnaik concludes, "These are not spectacular events, ...but the situations in which they did what they did elevated their action from the mundane level to that of spiritual... It made them look beyond their own self as they were waiting for their death. There is indeed no one path to Mukti" (P. 175). The book presents quintessential wisdom of a life begun in a village in Orissa and brought to a big city. learning and sharing all that could be during this period of ceaseless change.

We have a funny situation in this regard in India. We do not tire of telling the same stories any number of times to our friends and family, but we rarely write anything from our experience.

This book is welcome also in this sense.

This book is also a mirror of change the world has undergone in the last fifty years. For many retirees these days internet is a major blessing. They don't need to develop hobbies like reading, cooking, gardening, playing cards or badminton. They don't need to gossip with other retirees or recount their bygone days to an unsympathetic listener... But, for some, internet is nothing short of an addiction". There are retirees, Patnaik says who "check their e-mail once in two hours, I'm afraid it will not be long before I get into the same mode. I get about 80 mails a day on an average, but about 70 of them I delete right away. Five or six mails are the internet edition of newspapers and articles friends send. Only four or five mails are personal. Most of them are often two or three liners; nevertheless, they bring cheer. But let me say this 80 mails a day whatever be there content give me the comforting illusion that I am connected. I am not embarrassed about living in illusion. Who does not need an illusion to live!" (P. 167) For many living without spouse and children and grandchildren, illusion, and internet, are blessings.

Some notes have been written in a lighter vein. Those on Rasagola, Dosa, Bhuta, etc. recall a young village boy's world. Patnaik's mother told him

... that the female ones (*bhuta*) were generally more dangerous than the male ones like the Chiriguni on that tamarind tree. She said what she believed, there was no general talks in my village then. Good ghosts could help a person in difficulty, some were said to have given company and protection to those who had to sleep in the fields during nights before the harvest. They sometimes helped a week farmer at night in watering his field... (P. 97).

Patnaik identifies himself as a language teacher. He was a professor of English & Linguistics at IIT Kanpur. For a time, he was also an elected member of the Board of Governors of IIT Kanpur, besides having been on the NAAC and several other national level commissions and committees. He has contribute substantially to our knowledge of the syntax of Indian languages and of processin them through computers. Understandably, there are four or five notes on language, with headings like "Right Speech", "Bad Language", "Honeyed Language", "Dying Languages", "Thinking about Languages", etc. Given examples are relevant and interesting. Rich people, for instance, do not die, they go to heaven, or to "Baikunth", or to still higher echelons of heaven.

There is a chapter on the popular but unacknowledged craving for "extra income", in Oriya, *upuri*. People value jobs not for salaries they get, but for the chances they have for extra-income in that job. Should you speak only because you know, even when you are not asked to do so, or should you, until asked, keep silent, like Sahadeva, the youngest of the Pandava brothers in the *Mahabharata*? Life does confront one with difficult choices.

I recommend this book to all my colleagues and to those students who are a little serious minded and who some evening would like to sit next to an elderly person, such as a teacher's teacher, or next to their grandparents, and listen through their reminiscences, even if they are not thrilling like a popular television show. All of them may not be equally interesting, but they are all surely enriching.

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