

## BRIDGING THE PAST AND THE PRESENT: A PASSAGE TO THE CULTURAL ARCHIVE

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### ABSTRACT

*The paper is an attempt to look at how Balarama, a popular magazine for children in Malayalam serves as a means by which culture reflects and renews itself. The magazine has taken efforts to remain in the mainstream by including the popular taste of its target group. To survive the tough competition in the globalized world, the magazine has increased the number of non-native stories. Though there is a profusion of western classics and stories in Balarama in the recent past, a consistent effort on the part of the publisher to offer the young generation the taste of his/her land can be identified. The young reader is introduced to the myths, legends, and folklore of the land through the stories that the magazine feature.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Children's Literature, Culture, Balarama, Myths*

### INTRODUCTION

Children's literature is a cultural construct which essentially reflects the beliefs, values, and practices of the society that provides the background of its creation. Beneath the deceptively simple themes, they hide serious concerns about various issues of the society. Children's books are not isolated from the structures of knowledge and power in society. Even in something seemingly innocent like children's literature ideology is very much engrained between the letters. The paper looks at how the children's magazine *Balarama* serves as a means by which culture reflects and renews itself.

*Balarama* (literally "Joy of Kids") is a children's magazine in Malayalam published by Malayala Manorama Publications Limited from Kerala. *Balarama*, now a weekly, started as a monthly magazine in 1972 and later upgraded to a fortnightly periodical. The magazine is a complete entertainer for the young reader. The magazine offers a variety of stories ranging from illustrated and non-illustrated ones to serialized stories and in-house series. Majority of the artists in *Balarama* work under the restrictions of anonymity.

The stories for children are vehicles through which they make sense of the world. Regional literature for children performs an additional function. It is instrumental in the socializing process and in the bringing up of new generations with an awareness of the cultural heritage of the land. Especially in the post-globalized world, children are introduced to a potpourri of ideas at the very offset – before learning to count numbers in his/her mother tongue, he/she is made to ape the Arabic numerals. The twenty-first century young reader is more familiar with gadgets and technology than with the cultural heritage of his/her land and for them, *Balarama* functions as a mediator between the past and the present. Though a diverse range of stories– from western classics and fairy tales to folk tales– feature in *Balarama*, a close analysis of the

text has revealed that not a single edition has seen light without featuring stories from the cultural reservoir of India.

The myths, legends, and folklore of the land are offered to the reader on a very regular basis. The two great epics of the land *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* are a constant ingredient in the magazine, with the latter having been serialized in the early twenty-first century. The saga “Devi Mahatmyam ” was also serialized along with many other legends of Kerala like “Kayamkulam Kochunni (Kochunni of Kayamkulam),” “Kunjali Marakar,” and “Mantrikanaya Ravuthar (Magician Ravuthar).” The beliefs and customs prevalent in the place and significant archetypes find expression in the magazine. Through the magazine, the young reader is not just introduced to the myths of the land, but to its socio- political history as well. There are many stories published to acclimatize the reader to the social scenario of the land. The problem of the caste system in the country is an issue that is constantly addressed in the magazine.

For the young reader who is not familiar with the political history of the place, *Balarama* takes him on a ride to the past. Stories set against the backdrop of palaces with Kings, queens, ministers, and soldiers as characters are a constant presence in the magazine. Many of the stories that feature in *Balarama* are meant purely for entertainment. But through the entertainment, the reader is almost always made familiar with the culture and history of the land. The illustrated stories “Valiya Mampazham(Big Mango),” “Vegam Valaran (To Grow Quickly),” “Kaniyude Bhalam (The Effect of Qualtagh),” “Panditan Jayichu (The Scholar Won)” are simple and light texts exclusively aimed at entertainment. However, through these seemingly innocent stories, a part of the past is put on display for the young reader- all the stories unveil in the backdrop of a palace.

“Valiya Mampazham” is the story of a king who is a great lover of mangoes. The illustrated story takes the reader to a mango orchard in the palace where the king in his royal attire orders the chief minister to inform the cook to prepare a special mango dish for lunch. The hilarious story, with its focus on the king and his idiosyncrasy, gives the reader a hint of the ways of an erstwhile era when the king was at the helm of affairs. The importance and sovereignty of the king are underlined. The king is portrayed with all his majesty. He has at his service the chief-minister and a retinue of servants. All the orders of the king are meticulously carried out without being questioned. Even though the Minister and the Army Chief are fed up with the king, they obediently obey his commands and go for the war. The Chief Minister and the soldiers are seen to be mumbling: “Oh! This King is useless” (64)[Self-translation], “Our King is mad” (63) [Self-translation], but only in the King’s absence.

“Vegam Valaran” is another story in the same pattern. The story is about a young man who fools the king by disguising as a sanyasi. But the focus here is on the illustrations. Before the era of telecommunications, messages and announcements from the king and authorities were conveyed to the public by means of proclamations. The announcement would be made in public places where people gather in great numbers. A huge drum would be beaten to call the attention of the people. The person carrying the proclamation would then read it aloud to the public and the process would be repeated in all the main streets. This practice is however unfamiliar to the twenty-first century subject. In the story, there is an illustration of a proclamation. A child was born to the king after fifteen years of marriage and the king wishes to see the child as a young lady in a few years. The minister advised that a proclamation is made that whoever makes the child a young lady within a few days will be rewarded with a mansion and gifts. The illustration box depicts an orderly beating on a huge drum producing the “dum dum dum”(62) sound and another orderly reading out from a Palmyra/handbill: “Anybody who can turn the infant princess to a young lady in a few days will be rewarded with a mansion and attractive

gifts” (62) [Self-translation]. There are focused out images of a group listening to the announcement. The next illustration depicts Muthayya as one among the group gathered to listen to the announcement thinking aloud: “I will go to the palace disguised as a sanyasi” (62) [Self-translation]. The story then takes a very humorous turn with Muthayya taking the princess to his home and raising her with his own children and later returning the princess to the king eighteen years later as a young lady.

Here the young reader is made to forget logic and enjoy the story. The portrayal of the king as a person, who is easily fooled, supplemented with illustrations, fulfills the purpose of entertainment. In addition to this, the reader is also made aware of a practice of the past. Through the illustration of the proclamation, the young reader is introduced to a means of communication prevalent in an erstwhile era.

In the story “Panditan Jayichu,” another aspect of the royal regime is revealed. During the royal regime, events and competitions were held for the entertainment of the King. Being the supreme head of the province, pleasing the King usually fetched a fortune. The story is about a pundit who is summoned to the palace by the King to prove his wisdom. He is to tell the King the thing that would make the King happy and angry simultaneously. The pundit presents a stone to the King with the introduction: “This is a very precious stone, Your Majesty. I brought it especially for you” (51) [Self-translation]. The King, excited to be gifted with the special stone was enraged when he found out that the stone was an ordinary one. The pundit replies that his task is complete since he has made the King happy and enraged at the same time. The King, impressed with the pundit’s wit, orders his minister to give the pundit whatever he demands.

The pandit was invited by the King to prove his mettle and having proved himself wins a fortune. Such instances were not uncommon in the history of Kerala. History has records of many instances where the King is pleased and gifts offered. Gifts ranging from costly clothes to even pieces of land were usually given as gifts by the Kings to the ones who impressed the King.

The series titled “Raja Tuglan” is inspired by Muhammed bin Tughlaq who was the Sultan of Delhi from 1325 to 1351. He is marked in history for his notorious administrative reforms. The series with the subtitle “Mandanaya Raja Tuglante Maramandan Bharanaparishkarangalude Kadhakal,” is purely entertainment oriented. The main characters are the King Tuglan, the palace Guru, Chief Minister and soldiers and storyline depicts the foolish administrative reforms carried out by the king.

For the young reader, the stories set against the backdrop of the palace are a trip down the rabbit hole. Being the citizens of a democratic country, the ride takes them to an almost fantastic space with kings, palaces, queens, ministers, and soldiers. In all the stories, care has been taken to reproduce the paraphernalia of the king and his retinue. The king is always in his royal attire, complete with the crown. The guards are always portrayed with the spear in hand. The palace guru in “Raja Tuglan” is clad in saffron, with long beard and hair and always seated next to the king. One also gets to know about the power distribution through the illustrations. The king mostly seated in his royal throne has the minister and the attendants at his disposal. The prominence of the palace guru is underscored in the “Raja Tuglan” series. While the soldiers stand with their heads down in front of the king, the guru is always seated, even while the king is standing.

In addition to the fictional stories, slots like “Charitra Katha” which occur occasionally features anecdotes from history in an attempt to familiarize the reader with the political history of the land. “Kaniyude Bhalam” is one such story. The story is an anecdote featuring His Majesty Karthika Thirunal. The story introduces Karthika Thirunal as the king who ruled Thiruvithankoor. On finding a young man sleeping in the corridors of the palace, first thing in the morning, the king orders the soldiers to imprison him. It is believed that a day’s outcome depends on the *qualtagh* (Kani). By afternoon, the king bothered by the outcome of his ‘Kani’ was informed that a ship carrying sugar has anchored at their harbor. The king was elated and believed that his Kani brought fortune to the country that was facing acute sugar deficiency. The king immediately released the young man and sought an explanation. The man introduced himself as Kesavan, accountant of the merchant Pokkumoosa and apologized to the king for having dozed off in the corridor. He had accompanied Pokkumoosa to the palace but dozed off while Pokkumoosa was engaged in a discussion with the king. The king was pleased with Kesavan and appointed him as the accountant in the palace. Later he came to be known as Raja Kesavadas and became the Valiya Divanji of Travancore.

Unlike the other stories with the king and palace as the setting, this particular story is introduced with the title tag ‘Historical Story’. An anecdote is narrated to the reader who was transported to a fantasy land through the other stories. Thrust with a slice of history, the reader is made to identify with the past of his/her land. The story has a small information box titled ‘Dharmaraja’ inserted into the body of the text. The box gives information about the characters in the story: “Karthika Thirunal ruled Travancore during the eighteenth century. He was also known as ‘Dharmaraja’. Raja Kesavadas was the king’s favorite and is remembered as the chief architect of Alappuzha district” (91) [Self-translation]. Thus the young reader is taken to the past where he/she meets a real king who ruled the ancestors of his/her land.

Stories from the cultural reservoir are also unearthed and presented to the young reader. The river Ganga and its streams are an important source that nourishes the heritage of the land. Ganga is one of the most important rivers in the country and is considered sacred by believers. The river is inexplicably intertwined with the Hindu belief in Moksha. Different aspects related to the sacredness of river Ganga has been discussed through many stories in the magazine.

The didactic story “Koduthathe Kittu (You Get What You Give),” which ends on a ‘they lived happily thereafter’ note, on a primary level teaches children the importance of being good in life. On a secondary level, the story introduces the reader to a number of Indian practices and beliefs. The piece is a passage to Indian mythology- the concept of Moksha and the sacredness of Ganga. For Indians, the Ganga is not only a river but also a goddess, a tradition, a culture and much more. Personified as a goddess, Ganga is worshiped by Hindus who believe that bathing in the river causes the remission of sins and facilitates moksha, the liberation from the cycle of life and death. In the story, the father wishes to have a bath in the waters of Ganga before his death to wash away his sins. The reader gets the first hint of the sacredness of the river. Though the particular story does not elucidate the significance of the river, the young reader is bound to understand that Ganga is unlike any other river in the country.

The legend behind the sacredness of the river is not left unattended. The story “Bhagiratha Prayatnam (Bhagiratha’s Efforts),” describes the descend of Goddess Ganga to earth. Here, the reader is not only introduced to the linguistic expression ‘Bhagiratha prayatnam,’ (equivalent to the idiom ‘Herculean task’) but also to the Indian myth. The story about the concept of Moksha describes how Bhagirathan undertakes rigorous penance to bring Ganga to earth so that the souls of his ancestors could attain moksha. The holiness of the river is emphasized through the words: “Only the

waters of Ganga can liberate the wandering souls” (75) [Self-translation]. Though the primary aim of the story is to inform the reader about the idiom and the story behind it, it also serves the purpose of introducing an important aspect of the culture of the land.

A story from the Puranas, “Ruruvum Pramadwarayum”, describes how Ruru brings back Pramadwara to life. Ruru, in order to give strength to his prayers, immerses himself in Ganga, resulting in Lord Brahma, the Creator himself appearing before him and granting him his wish of bringing back Pramadwara to life. The story thus reinforces the divine aspect of the river.

Nature worship is a part of the culture of India and Tulsi plant is considered as sacred in the Indian tradition. The story “Ariyatha Mahatvam (Unrecognised Loftiness)” sheds light on the aura associated with the Tulsi plant. It is a widely held belief that Tulsi is of divine importance. According to some versions like the *Devi Bhagavata Purana*, Tulsi is the manifestation of Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth and principal consort of Vishnu; some other versions hold it as a manifestation of Goddess Tulsi. The offering of Tulsi leaves is considered mandatory in the ritualistic worship of Vishnu and his forms. While tree worship is not uncommon in Hinduism, the Tulsi plant, regarded as the threshold point between heaven and earth, is considered the holiest of all plants. A person who waters and cares for the Tulsi daily is believed to gain moksha and the divine grace of Vishnu, even if he/she does not worship it.

In the story, the significance of the plant is emphasized through the words of the grandpa tree which are offered as words of wisdom: “. . . Tulsi is used to worship God. It goes directly to the God’s abode. What is greater than that honor” (5) [Self-translation]. The story thus serves to induce the reader to an aspect of the heritage of the land.

The “Mayavi” series, which has gained wide popularity, is a direct import from the folklore of the land. The characters in “Mayavi,” like Mayavi and Luttapi are ‘kuttichathans’(imp) indigenous to Kerala. Kuttichathan is a deity worshiped by a minority group of the society. The “Mavayi” series was revamped in the early half of the twenty-first century to cater to the changing taste of the readers. The characters were given new fashionable westernized attires. The characters in the earlier stories appeared in traditional, almost rustic clothes – Mayavi was not given any particular clothing, Raju and Radha were in the normal attire of the rural folk, and Kuttusan, Dakini, and Luttapi in nomadic clothing. This, however, changed with the revamping after which the characters were given designer dresses. However, the theme or the structure of the story has remained the same. Thus, through a slightly diluted (read stylized) manner, the reader is offered the taste of the folk tradition in an appealing manner.

## CONCLUSIONS

The stories in the magazine are a deliberate attempt to bring into circulation those stories that are part of the cultural heritage of the land. Though there is a profusion of western classics and stories in *Balarama* in the recent past, a consistent effort on the part of the publisher to offer the young generation the taste of his/her land can be identified. The magazine is also instrumental in familiarizing the reader to the socio-political history and context of the land. The young reader is also introduced to the myths, legends, and folklore of the land through the stories that the magazine feature. Almost like a grandparent, the magazine acts as the younger generation’s link to the past enriching them with the history and the richness of the land. To the reader who is more familiar with the heroes, games, food and fairy tales of the western world, *Balarama* opens a new (read old) world rich in its own flavor.

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