

Gijubhai and his Tales

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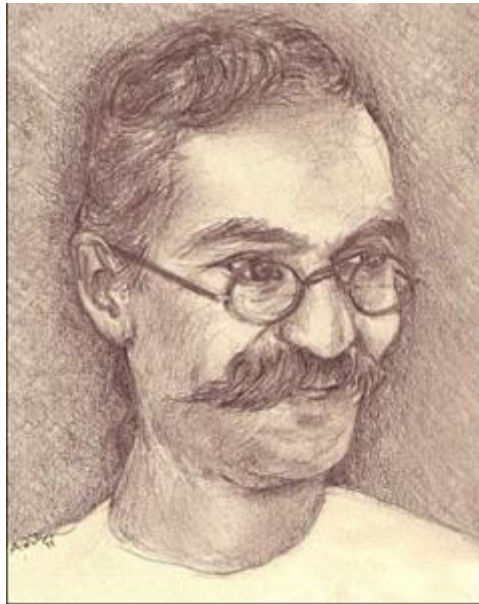


Illustration by **Adivya Pandya**

*Gijubhai Badheka, is one of Gujarat's foremost educationists and storytellers. Born in 1885, Gijubhai passed away in 1939 at the age of 54. Between 1920 and 1939 he wrote prolifically in the area of children's literature and education. He is the author of over 200 books, of which 20 were addressed to teachers and parents. His best-known work is *Diwaswapna* (daydream) first published in Gujarati in 1939. This is counted among the world's classics in pedagogy.*

In Gujarat his name is synonymous with a rich treasure of stories for children. Gijubhai Badheka has been acknowledged as the Brahma of Gujarati children's literature. Drawing upon the ageless folk traditions and the rhyme and rhythm of colloquial Saurashtra dialect, Gijubhai penned delightful tales of ordinary people, and familiar animals and birds. Generations of children have grown up with these tales, told and retold by grandparents and parents.

Surprisingly, this rich treasure of tales has not been widely translated into other Indian languages, except for Hindi. There is almost no translation of the stories in English that captures the flavour of times gone by, and yet are timeless in their spirit.

Grandfather Gijubhai: The Tales Live On

Summer holidays in the late sixties and seventies, and it was time to take the train, and then the local bus, to Bhavnagar, a town in Saurashtra, and for us, the home of stories. This was Grandfather Gijubhai's home, and the Daxinamurti Balmandir, the school on the hill that he had helped set up in 1920. Although grandfather had passed away long ago, his words rang through the hot lazy summer afternoons, and starry nights on the terrace.

We grew up with the rhythms and rhymes of the scared hare and the carefree crow (The Cheeky Crow). We would so easily refer to the clever lamb who went home to nani (Going Home to Nani), or the miserly tailors, or the quick thinking barber (The Barber and The Tiger) in our normal conversation, and our cousins would know exactly what we referred to. Over dinner of *bajra rotla* and *baingan bharta*, an uncle would refer to the tasty brinjals that

Dala Tarwadi helped himself to (Dala Tarwadi); an aunt trying to keep a hungry gang of children supplied with snacks of *ganthia* and *sev-mumra* would tell us not to be like the children in the story where each one wanted one more *vada*.

For children who grew up away from Gujarat, and studied in non-Gujarati medium schools, the colloquialisms of Kathiawad tripped comfortably off our tongues.

And yet, we probably never sat down with the story books and “read” the stories ourselves. The stories were all around us, being told by Vimumami, being dramatically enacted by Nanubhai, and also by the gang of us cousins for the captive audience of numerous uncles and aunts.

This was the magic of Gijubhai’s stories.

A contemporary of Gandhiji, Gijubhai started his professional life as a Pleader in a district court. In the early 1920s, he got deeply involved in the upbringing of his own son. Under the influence of the thinking of Madame Montessori, he started experiments in child-centred education, when he joined the recently set up Daxinamurti Balmandir. It is here that he realized the importance of stories for children as a means of learning. He started collecting stories for children and telling them.

As in most Indian languages, in Gujarati too, the child reader had remained somewhat neglected till the middle of nineteenth century. There were no magazines and hardly any specific literature for children at this point. Most of the stories were retold from classical Indian literature (*Mahabharat*, *Ramayana*, *Panchatantra*, and *Hitopadesh*), or heroic stories from Western literature, without adapting the style or language for young readers. Aesop’s Fables were translated, as were Gulliver’s Travels or Robinson Crusoe – but the language was not really suitable for children (or child-friendly as it were).

It was Gijubhai who established the child as an individual and created a special place for the child in literature, with the creation of special literature that was meant not only to provide entertainment and joy, but also directly link to education.

As he wrote in *Vaarta nu Shaastra*, “By calling a story a ‘children’s story’ does not make it one. Children’s stories are those that children get a special type of enjoyment from. Children like short and simple stories. Reflections of what happens around them, behaviour of birds and animals, small rhymes that can be easily remembered and repeated ... these are the characteristics of children’s stories.”

But where were these stories? Gijubhai opened up the treasure chest of folk literature and recreated the folk tales for children. He started by asking all the teachers and teacher trainees at Daxinamurti to start collecting folk stories that were still being told in homes and to pick those that would be suitable for children.

His contemporaries reminisce. “Monghi” he would say, “get a couple of children’s stories from somewhere, we will tell the children.” The next day Monghiben would get some stories that she had heard from her neighbours. Taraben and Nanubhai would get stories in other languages. Gijubhai would ask the Balmandir helper from Karnataka, “Rangabhai, which stories do you tell your children at home? Tell me also. We will tell our children in the Balmandir”. (From Bharat Pathak, *Balopanishad-Gijubhai ni Balvaarta*, in *Gijubhai*:

Jeevan ane Karya, Gujarat Sahitya Academy, 1986)

The trainees debated whether these should be written up just as they had been recorded, or be edited. Gijubhai, it is said, felt that the stories should be presented “as is”. The handwritten stories were compiled into a periodical called *Vaarta* (story). About 100 stories, from those collected over a decade, were first published in five volumes in 1929.

Gijubhai’s is an outstanding and prolific contribution to preserving the oral tradition of literature through exploring and compiling the rich legacy of folk literature.

As Gijubhai wrote in *Vaarta nu Shashtra* “... if you seek folk literature you will have to leave the city and go to the villages, and from the villages, move into the forests and fields. When the toothless grandmother finishes her chores and rubbing tobacco on her gums, starts to tell stories to the gaggle of children, there springs the magic of folk tales. You will find folk literature in every village *chaupal*, children will be spreading it freely from *galli* to *galli*, and grandmothers will be distributing its *prasad* in their homes.”

And so every morning Gijubhai told the children a story. In the afternoon the children would enact the stories. Soon they became so adept, they did not need to remember the words, the rhymes flowed naturally and if they forgot in between, they made up the words as they went along.

Gijubhai wrote “If we go out to collect folk literature with a pen tucked behind our ears and glasses balanced on the nose we will not get to hear a single word. If you collect a group of children and tell them a story, they will tell you ten more”.

Gijubhai’s search for folk tales crossed the boundaries of language and country. He explored and discovered unique gems in the literature of different countries, and also the great similarities. This journey of exploration he described thus in his book *Vaarta nu Shashtra*. “So many stories have travelled in foreign lands, so many stories have changed their religion and form it is an adventure to trace the journeys. If we became wandering travellers with the stories, we will discover that we find one story in Tibet and will see the same story in Africa; we will discover the same story wrapped in snow at the North Pole and yet if we wander in the Arabian Desert, there it will be, but uncovered and bare ... still we will recognize the story.”

“Some stories adapt to their land, taking on the form and language of their adopted home, while some retain their origins wherever they may settle. Some stories follow the creed of universal brotherhood, they see the world as their home and go wherever they get a chance to serve and please. Some settle firmly in different countries and come to be recognized as belonging to that place. They are then only translated to reach other countries. And we know them as stories from Japan, tales from Punjab, life stories from Malaya, or legends of Kathiawar.”

“Some stories are like *sanyasis*—they give *darshan* in many places, people in these places feel they are their own, and yet these stories retain their own identity. The Grimm’s stories are held by Germany, but the people of Morocco take them as their own. The people of Siam claims that their stories were taken away, while the Khasis believe that the stories originated in their land.”

Many of Gijubhai's stories are members of this travelling band. From the Punjab came the story of the Hen That Fell into the Dye, several stories come from the Kannada, and also from the Marathi.

Gijubhai transformed and localized these stories, so that they are steeped in the sounds and colours of Gujarat, and have today become not only Gujarati, but uniquely "Gijubhai's stories".

These are simply told tales characterized by a mixture of prose and rhyme. There is a lot of dialogue and reiteration. The repetition of rhymes makes for lively storytelling which listeners join in. Many stories follow a sequence of cause and effect, leading to a chain reaction which is reinforced in verse. Children love the repetitive rhyme and rhythm.

The refrain in the story of the scared hare who panicked when a leaf fell on her, trips easily off the tongue in Gujarati. In English it goes:

"Run for your life," she cried "run for your life".
The trrrrrumble is coming, the brrrrumble is nigh
A piece of the sky just fell from up high,
It fell on my back and broke it apart
Run for life, you'll need a head start."

(From 'The Hare Scare' by Mamata Pandya, published by Rupa 2004)

Several stories have improbable characters or plots. Children enjoy the absurd, fanciful and nonsensical. The 'story' of 'The Point of a Thorn' is an example.

Gijubhai retold delightful tales of ordinary people, and familiar animals and birds. With equal panache, he churned out stories of common folk with common trades (tailors, potter, shopkeeper, and barbers), but also featuring kings and queens and princesses. The characters reflect basic human traits—greed, envy, proving physical or mental prowess, and one-upmanship. The animals talk and act in human ways while reflecting some typical characteristics. The stories also reflect a close and symbiotic relationship between animals and people with the two often trying to outwit each other.

The story of the lamb ('Going Home to Nani') that outwitted all the animals is popular with its refrain:

"So thin am I, not much to eat
To Nani's I'm going, three miles to the east
On lots of goodies there I'll feast
When I return, I'll be a tasty treat."

Many stories follow the classic fairy tale-style opening with "once upon a time", and ending with "happily ever after". They capture the rustic flavour and pace of days when travel meant walking from one village to another and long distance meant a bullock cart ride. En route is where the encounters and adventures take place. Several generations, and ninety years later, children today may not relate as closely to the settings and the pace of the narrative, and yet, the quirks and foibles of the characters, the silly and the absurd, the funny and the fantastic still touch a chord in the child, and also the child in each one of us. Yes, Grandfather Gijubhai's tales live on!

As he started compiling, retelling and creating stories for children, Gijubhai was also thinking a great deal about the what, why, and how of stories. In 1923, just three years after he embarked on his journey of stories, he started writing up his thoughts. In just one month, he completed this significant work which was first published in 1925 as *Vaarta nu shaastra*. This remains a classic exposition on the structure and function of the narrative. This book has not been translated or published in English. The extracts in this article have been translated by Mamata Pandya.

Dala Tarawadi

Dala Tarawadi's wife loved brinjals. One day she said "Oh, Tarawadiji". Dalabhai replied, "What do you want, oh wife?"

"I feel like eating some brinjals today. Won't you get some for me?"

"All right. I will go and get some", said Tarawadi. Taking his trusted stick, Tarawadi set off. Thak, thak, thak, went his stick. There was a field on the river bank. Tarawadi reached the field. Brinjals grew there, plump and purple. But there was no one there. Whom could he ask for some brinjals? Tarawadi thought for a while. He said to himself 'the owner of this field is not to be seen. But the field is right here and so are the brinjals. Why don't I ask the field itself?'

So Dalabhai called out "Hey, field, my friend. Do you hear me?"

The field remained silent. So Tarawadi himself replied. "What do you want oh Tarawadiji?"

"Can I take two brinjals, maybe four?" asked Tarawadi.

Once again there was silence from the field. Tarawadi replied on its behalf, "Why two, why four? Take some more!"

So Dala Tarawadi helped himself to some fresh brinjals and went home to his wife. She made delicious baingan bharta for dinner. Tarawadi's wife had never tasted better brinjals. She couldn't have enough of them. Every day Tarawadi went to the field and brought back a few brinjals.

The owner of the field noticed that brinjals were disappearing. He thought "Surely there is a thief who is stealing my brinjals. He must be caught." So one evening he hid himself behind a tree in the field. Soon along came Tarawadi. As was his habit by now, he called out. "Hey, my field-friend. Do you hear me?" And Tarawadi replied to his own question, "What do you want, oh Tarawadiji?"

"Can I take two brinjals, maybe four?"

Again Tarawadi replied on behalf of the field. "Why two, why four? Take some more!"

Tarawadi filled his bag with fresh purple brinjals and was about to go, when the owner came out of hiding.

"Wait old man! He called. Who did you ask for these brinjals?"

"Who did I ask? Why I asked the field itself".

"Since when did my field start talking?" asked the angry owner.

"Well the field did not actually speak. I spoke up on its behalf," explained Tarawadi.

This made the owner even more angry. He caught Tarawadi by the arm and led him to a well. He tied a rope around Tarawadi's waist and lowered him into the well.

The owner's name was Vashram Bhuva. He called out "Hey you deep and dingy well. Do you hear me?"

And Vashrambhai himself replied, "What do you want, Oh Vashram Bhuva?"

Vashram Bhuva called, "Can I give this man a dunk or two?"

Once again he replied on behalf of the well, "A dunk or two? That's too few!"

So Vashram Bhuva gave Tarawadi a good dunking in the well, until water was coming out of his nose and ears. Dala Tarawadi sputtered for mercy. "Please let me go brother! I will never steal anything again."

Vashram Bhuva pulled him out, and Tarawadi went home, soaking wet.

But he never stole anything again and his wife suddenly lost her taste for brinjals!.

The Cheeky Crow

There was a crow. He was always full of mischief. Once he was so naughty that the King got to know about it. The king told his men, "Go and throw this crow in the muddy puddle near the village well".

The crow was thrown into the gooey muddy puddle. There he began to sing:

"I am learning to slip slide in the mud, hey ho!

I am learning to slip-slide in the mud".

The king and his men were surprised to hear this merry song. They thought that the crow would have been afraid, all covered with mud. The king was angry. "Throw him into the well", he ordered. "Let him drown in it."

The crow was thrown into the well. Suddenly from deep inside, he began to sing:

"I am learning to swim-swim in the well, hey-ho!

"I am learning to swim-swim in the well".

The king was very angry now. "This crow deserves severe punishment", he said. And the crow was thrown into a great tangle of thorns. But even the sharp thorns could not prick the crow's cheer. He sang cheekily:

"I am getting my ears pierced, hey, ho!

"I am getting my ears pierced".

"What kind of a crow is this?" wondered the king. "The more we try to punish him, the happier he seems to get. Maybe we should put him in a happy situation. Let's see if that makes him any sadder". And he ordered that the crow be thrown into a barrel of oil. The merry crow found another chance to sing:

"I am oiling my creaking joints, hey, ho!

"I am oiling my creaking joints."

The king then ordered that the crow be dumped in a large pot of ghee. From the ghee the crow chanted:

"I am eating my fill of ghee, hey ho!

I am eating my fill of ghee, you see."

The king's anger knew no bounds. "Throw the cheeky rascal into a vat of jaggery", he ordered.

This was even better for the crow. "Caw caw caw" he crowed:

"I am feasting on my favourite sweet, he-ho!

I am feasting on my favourite sweet yum, yum!"

So it was the king who tired in the end. "I admit defeat", he said. "This crow is too cheeky and cheery. He will not let anything get him down. Free him. Let him fly away with his cheeky song and free spirit".

The Point of a Thorn

On the point of a thorn
There were three towns
Two had nobody living there and one had no people, no people.

Three potters lived in the towns
Two could not mould clay and
One did not turn the wheel, the wheel

They made three pots
Two were not backed, and the one fell apart, felt apart.
Three moong seeds were cooked in the pots
Two were raw and one was uncooked, uncooked.

There came three guests,
Two were fasting and one wouldn't eat, wouldn't eat
They gave three copper coins
Two were fake and the third one was not real, was not real.

There came three goldsmiths
Two were blind and one could not see, could not see.

I told this story to three boys,
Two forgot and one could not remember it, remember it.

Going Home to Nani

Once there was a lamb, small and soft and sprightly. One day she decided to visit her Nani. As she set off on her journey, she met a jackal. Jackal said,

"Ah, what do I see, a tasty snack
I will eat you, little lamb, smack, smack."

The lamb was young, but quick thinking. She replied:

"So thin am I, not much to eat,
To Nani's I'm going, three miles to the east.
On lots of goodies there I'll feast,
When I return, I'll be a tasty treat."

"OK, said the Jackal, "I'll wait for you."

Lamb went ahead, and she met a great big python. Python said,

"Here comes an extra treat.
Hey, lamb, be prepared for me to eat."

Little lamb replied boldly:

"So thin am I, not much to eat
To Nani's I'm going, three miles to the east
On lots of goodies there I'll feast
When I return, I'll be a tasty treat."

"Well", said the python, "In that case, I'll save you for later."

Lamb continued on her way. A roaring tiger blocked her path.
"What's this, I see" he snarled.
"It's food. A mere mouthful, I agree.
But it will last me till my next meal."

Lamb was bold, and lamb was brave. Lamb stood still, and bleated with respect:

"So thin am I, not much to eat
To Nani's I'm going, three miles to the east.
On lots of goodies there I'll feast,
When I return, I'll be a tasty treat."

Tiger said, "Well, I don't mind having a bit more of you. I'll await your return, with some more fat on you".

Lamb trotted on through the forest. She met Wolf and Eagle, and many more, as she made her way, till she reached Nani's house.

Nani was very happy to see her little lamb. Lamb said, "Nani Nani, you must feed me well. I've promised so many that I will return plump and fresh from your house".

So Nani fed lamb with lots of nice things to eat, and lamb became plump and round, and healthy and strong.

When it was time for her to go home, Lamb told her Nani to make a dholak out of leather. Nani made a nice strong dholak. Inside, she put fluffy, soft cotton wool. And then Lamb got inside. Nani closed the dholak from both sides and gave it a push. The dholak started rolling along the path.

As it rolled, past where Eagle sat, the Eagle asked,
"Hey drum! Have you met a little lamb on your way?"

From inside, the lamb said in a loud voice that echoed through the air:
"What lamb do you seek; and who are you?
Roll on, oh dholak, dhumak dhumak dhu."

The dholak kept rolling along the path through the jungle. It gave the same answer to all the

animals who were waiting anxiously for the lamb to return from her Nani's house.

As it neared Lamb's house, the jackal was still lying in wait.
"Did you meet a lamb on your way", called Jackal to the dholak?

And from deep within, came the reply:
"What lamb do you seek, and who are you?
Roll on, oh dholak, dhumak, dhumak, dhu"

But Jackal suspected some trick. He thought "Let me break the dholak and see what is inside".

But by then, the dholak had rolled up to the lamb's house. Lamb quickly slipped into her house and closed the door. Jackal was left to stand and stare.

Plump little lamb lay down and slept soundly. She dreamt of all the goodies that Nani had made for her and her mouth watered in her sleep.

The Barber and the Tiger

There was a barber. He was a simple man, but a sensible one. Once he set off to go to a neighbouring village. With him he carried his barber's box.

On the way he had to go through a forest. As he was walking along he saw a tiger coming towards him. The barber thought, "Oh, no. I will have to die before my time. Why should his tiger spare me?"

Just then an idea struck him. As the tiger came near, the barber said in a loud voice. "Come here, you dog. You think you can escape my might? See, I've already captured one tiger. It's your turn now".

The tiger was enraged at being called a dog. He leapt at the barber, but the barber suddenly pulled out a mirror from his box and placed it in front of the tiger. The tiger saw his face in the mirror and suddenly stopped. He thought. "This man seems to be telling the truth. I can see that he has really caught a tiger. I had better run before he catches me too". And he fled into the forest.

The barber put the mirror back into his box and continued on his way. When it started to grow dark, he found a big banyan tree and climbed it. He settled down for the night on one of its branches. On a nearby branch he hung his box.

As the night grew darker, several tigers began to come to the tree. One... two...three... Soon there was quite a gathering of tigers under the banyan tree.

It was the night of the tigers "talk and tell" session. They were catching up on news about each other's territory. Then one tiger said, "You won't believe, brothers, what happened today".

"Tell us, tell us", urged the others.

"I met a barber in the forest today" related the tiger." As I was about to pounce on him, he said "Hey, you dog. One of your kind, I've already locked up. It's your turn now".

I did not heed him, and pounced. Suddenly he pulled out a tiger from his box. There he was, the poor thing, staring back at me. I just turned and ran for my life."

"Enough of your jokes", interrupted another tiger. "How pray, could a mere barber catch a mighty tiger?"

"I am quite serious", said the tiger. "I saw it with my own eyes".

"You always were a scaredy-puss", sneered a third tiger. "If I had been there, I would have finished off that barber".

Up on the tree, the barber started shivering with fright. He trembled so much that the branches of the tree started to shake. A monkey was asleep on one of the branches. When the tree shook, he fell off the branch. As the monkey fell, the barber kept his wits about him. "Catch that tiger, brother", he yelled. "Don't let him go. He's the one that's talking a bit too big".

"See I told you that someone is out to catch tigers", yelped the first tiger. The monkey fell with a thud. It so happened, that he landed on the disbeliever, who leaped up in fright and fled. All the other tigers followed. Soon they disappeared in the dark forest.

When it was morning, the barber calmly got down from the tree and went on his way.