



## My Name is Gulab

**Reviewer: Dhruv Desai**

*My Name is Gulab* is an important book to bring to all the students in our classrooms (and to adult readers as well). It addresses the issue of manual scavenging - an illegal activity in India that is still widely prevalent and is strongly linked to issues of caste discrimination and untouchability.

This book takes a close look at a troubling issue but does so gently and with empathy. Gulab's father is a manual scavenger, and Gulab hates that he has to do this work. She is angry for him, and she is sick of being teased for it by the bullies in her class. At some point, she decides to try and help solve this problem once and for all. To do this, she asks her father all about his work, and he replies with patience and honesty. This response from him is eye-opening and heartbreaking and is one of the best-written parts of the book.

Many people would look at this book and wonder if it is suitable for children. Often, adults assume that children do not have the capacity to understand such complex problems. As the author of this book, Sagar Kolwankar said in an interview:

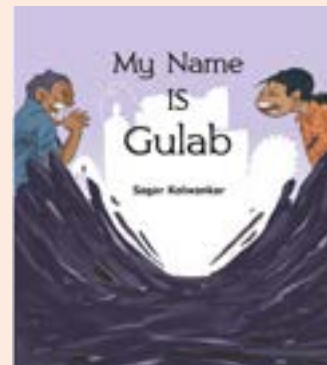
*'I have seen children questioning their parents about serious issues in society. The answers parents give will shape their minds. If parents lie, the child will believe in that lie. If they hide, the child grows up ignorant of the issue. On the other hand, if we make them aware, the knowledge will lead to empathy. And empathy is the first step to creating a sense of fairness and justice in young minds.'*<sup>1</sup>

Some people also believe that children are perfectly innocent and have no thoughts of inequality in their minds. They argue that by reading such books, we are introducing these kinds of negative ideas and attitudes to children. To them, I would respond: Children also live in the same world as we do, and as any teacher knows, they are not to be underestimated – their power of observation is sharp, and always growing. Children already see these things in the world around them; they also know and may wonder about sewers, gutters, and waste. If some privileged students have never had to think about any of this, it is all the more our responsibility to bring these conversations to them, to help them grow with empathy and compassion.

Reading books like this one with our students is a starting point for important conversations with them, which are an essential part of their education.

When I read this book with my students in classes III, IV and V, the students were very moved by both the story and the evocative illustrations. Several questions came from all of them. It led to a discussion about the waste management systems in our homes, and students went home and asked questions to their parents and older siblings. We also did an art project where the students all drew their 'solutions' to the problem of waste management. We saw some wonderful 'inventions' - a machine that would turn human waste into diamonds and another that would pump toilet waste directly into the farms (underground).

One of the students in the class was also deeply troubled by the bullying she read about in the story and created a small play in which she portrayed the lead character, Gulab, 'giving it back' to the bullies. These discussions and activities also helped me, as the teacher, understand some of the dynamics in my classroom that I was previously unaware of. Though in a different way from what was happening in the story, students shared that they also unknowingly engaged in caste-based discrimination. This helped us as a school to start to address this issue.



Author and Illustrator: Sagar Kolwankar

Reading Age: 6-16 years

Print length: 32 pages

Language: Hindi, English, Kannada

Publisher: Tulika Publishers, Chennai

In this story, while the tone is positive throughout, the author never allows us to fall for a magical 'perfect solution'. Gulab's parents quietly reflect that the problem goes beyond equipment and machinery and is much more prevalent in people's minds.

At the very end of the story, the bullies were still teasing Gulab. We are repeatedly reminded that despite our best intentions and efforts, change will take a lot of work, and there will always be people who are resistant to change and continue to further inequality. I believe this is one of the great strengths of this book, as it does not sell us a fairy tale, but rather it represents reality while being rooted in the hope of a better future.

<sup>1</sup> <https://tulikapublishers.blogspot.com/2021/08/my-name-is-gulab-interview-with-author.html>

**Dhruv Desai** is part of the teacher education team at Azim Premji University. He spends most of his time either playing and thinking about physical education or reading and thinking about children's literature.

## The Rajah's Moustache

**Review: Jai Shankar Chaubey**

*The Rajah's Moustache* is a story about a king who takes great pride in his moustache. His moustache is so unique and long that he wants everyone in the kingdom to admire it. The king's ego and strange obsession with his moustache become a problem for the entire kingdom.

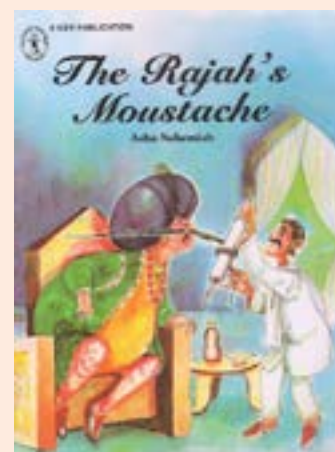
The story's delightful blending of humour and satire makes it special. Just reading the title makes one curious. When this story was read out to children of classes IV and V, they thoroughly enjoyed listening to the techniques that made the moustache round and twirly.

Discussing a story with children sparks their curiosity and invites them to think critically. Some questions need to be prepared in advance, while others organically emerge during the discussions. For example: What methods did the king use to keep his moustache round and twirly? Have you ever seen anyone show off or boast about something they have? If you were the minister, what advice would you give to the king? If you were the king, what would you want to do in your kingdom and why? Why was the king so attached to his moustache? and so on.

Apart from discussing the story, children also enjoy role-playing it. In the role-play, one child can become the self-absorbed king, and another can play the minister who suggests solutions or tries to reason with the king. In another activity, we distributed small slips of paper to all the children in the class. Then we asked them to write one sentence about something that they were proud of about themselves and exchange it with their partners. Then, they were asked to write one special quality about their partners. Additionally, creative writing topics can be given, such as: If I were a king or queen, what would I do to prove my greatness? Children enjoy reading aloud what they have written and discussed in class. Such activities make children think.

Children enjoy this story because it contains many interesting and humorous events that engage them. Towards the end of the story, a new character enters whose common sense and behaviour lead to a cheerful outcome. The story also highlights how ego, pride, and excessive self-praise can create anxiety and restlessness in oneself and others.

A lot of the credit also goes to the translator for using simple language and everyday words. The writing style is so engaging that children are keen on reading it again and again. For example, 'The barber tried continuously for three



Author: Asha Nehemiah

Illustrator: B G Verma

Translator: Mahendra Yadav

Reading Age: 3-6 years

Print length: 16 pages

Language: Hindi, English,  
Bengali, Tamil and Telugu

Publisher: Children's Book  
Trust

days and three nights. He applied special oil that shapes hair. He also applied special powder that makes hair curly...’ The colourful and fun illustrations in the book expand children’s imagination and make the process of understanding and thinking about the story even more interesting.

*The Rajah’s Moustache* is an entertaining children’s story. It not only gives children a chance to laugh but also subtly provides them important life lessons. The book draws readers’ attention to the kinds of problems caused by self-absorption and ego. Examples of such self-absorption in distorted forms are available in plenty on social media. This story seems relevant for children of all ages and adults alike and allows us to look at our present, reflect on it, and make it worthwhile.

*Translated from Hindi. Translator: Simran Sadh Vetter: Sonam Kumari*

---

**Jai Shankar Choubey** has been working as a Hindi Resource Person at the Azim Premji Foundation in Rudrapur, Udham Singh Nagar, Uttarakhand for the past 16 years. He has an interest in reading satire and children’s literature and conversing with children.

*Condolences: The writer of this review, Jai Shankar Choubey, passed away recently due to a heart attack. The Paathshala team pays tribute to the memory of our writer.*