

# How Stories Help Children Process Social Realities

Manju Rewaria

Stories are a vital part of childhood. All of us have heard stories from our elders. Stories are often narrated for entertainment. When we tell stories to children in school, the purpose is not only to entertain, but also to develop children's imagination, help them learn about the world, understand similarities across cultures, discuss emotions, and acquire language.



Figure 1: One story can spark countless imaginations.

What we can teach children through narrating a story depends on the selection of the story and the narrator. I discussed a story with children titled '*Jald Bahut Jald*' (soon, very soon), written by Farideh Khalatbari and illustrated by Ali Namvar. I worked on this story with children from four different rural and urban schools. In this article, I present my experiences of working with children on this story.

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## Summary of the story

The story begins with a question from a little girl, asking her *Ammi*, 'How long are we going to stay at *Nani's* (grandmother's) house?'

*Ammi* replies, 'Until your *Abbu* returns.' The girl's next question is, 'And when will he return?' *Ammi* does not answer, but a shiver runs through her as she remembers an incident of a few years ago. She gets lost in those circumstances and times when she was separated from her husband. The little girl repeatedly asks when her *Abbu* will return. Whether it is an answer to the child's desire to buy a doll or while weaving a carpet, every time *Ammi* responds, 'Very soon'. When the girl returns from school, instead of studying, she whispers to herself that she already knows the answer, so why does she keep asking *Ammi* again and again?

## Discussion with children

### Presenting the scenario

Clear differences were observed in the discussions on this story with students from rural and urban schools. Clearly, the story is about the separation of a husband and wife. However, the reason for the separation is not revealed in the story. After reading it, the children were asked where the girl's *Abbu* might have gone. Their responses were as follows:

- Her father may be working somewhere far away.
- He could be in the army.
- He may be living away from home.
- Perhaps he had gone to God.
- He may have been martyred.

Neither children from rural nor urban schools came up with the response that the parents may have separated or divorced. Only one child from a rural school said, 'Oh *Didi!* They may have been divorced.'

I asked, 'Why did you feel that they might have been divorced?'

The child said, '*Didi!* My uncle had a love marriage. My aunt did not like living here in the village, so quarrels

began. Now, they are divorced, and my aunt has gone back to her home.'

I have given the children the freedom to share their views at any time. The story was also such that the children took time to think and share their thoughts. They shared a few things even without my asking them. For example, they said that the girl must be missing her *Abbu*; if her *Abbu* were there, he would have bought her a doll; he would have taken her out; he would have bought her toys just as their own fathers did; her mother must also feel like crying a lot because now she was alone, and so on. The children also mentioned some of their friends who do not have fathers. They said that children who do not have parents remain unhappy. They have to live with their maternal or paternal uncles, and no one keeps them in the same way as their parents would.

'And how do those children live who have only their mothers?' I asked them.

The children said, '*Didi!* If the mother is there, then it is still all right.'

I then asked, 'Tell me, is having a mother even more important than having a father?'

The response was, 'Yes, because the mother manages everything well.'



Figure 2: Students deeply immersed in a story session.

I asked, 'Why do you feel that the mother manages everything and not the father?'

The children said, 'Mothers can manage both household and outside work, but fathers can manage only outside work.'

### Understanding paid work

In this story, the girl's mother made carpets. I asked children in every group why they thought she made carpets. The purpose behind asking this question was to understand how aware the children were of livelihoods. Children from urban areas responded that she must be selling them. The children from rural schools did not even consider that women could also make carpets to earn a livelihood, because they had not seen women around them engaged in such work.

I then asked the next question, 'Tell me, what kind of work do mothers do?'

There was a flood of responses. The children began to list various tasks, which included household and agricultural work. Some children shared that their mothers also did stitching; this was the response I was waiting for.

I asked, 'Do they stitch only their own clothes, or do they stitch other people's clothes too and take money for it?'

The children replied, 'They take money from others.'

I then asked them, 'How do you view the work from which we earn money?'

They started looking at one another as though they did not understand. So, I changed the question and asked, 'Is the stitching work from which money is earned similar to the work that fathers do and earn money from?'

The children said, 'Yes, *Didi!* Just that mothers do it while staying at home, and fathers go outside.'

I then told them that any work which we do to earn money is called 'employment'. A job is not only one in which someone sits in an office and works. Any work from which money is earned is a job; the place does not matter.

Next, I asked, 'Now tell me some other kinds of work that your mothers or other women can do to earn money. Once again, there were many responses. The children mentioned work, such as making pickles, *papads*, and savouries; stitching; running a beauty parlour, and so on.

'Sticking *bindis* on cards and packing them, making bundles of them, packing candles, making bangles, decorating shoes and slippers, and other such work—have you ever heard of or seen such work?' I asked again.



Figure 3: Students engaging with a story through discussions.

One child said, 'These tasks must be done by machines, isn't it, *Didi!*' A discussion followed that even today, there are different kinds of work that cannot be done by machines. I asked them all to speak with their family members and find out more about such work.

### Siblings and friends

We then moved to the next part of the story. At one point in the story, the girl whispers to her doll, 'I was joking with *Ammi*. I do not have any brothers or sisters, *na*. Don't you feel the need for one?'

I asked the children, 'Why is she speaking like this to the doll?' The children replied, 'She does not have any siblings, so she is talking to her doll. Perhaps she feels sad. She wants to bring another doll for her doll, so that her doll does not feel unhappy without a sister.'

I asked, 'Are brothers and sisters so important?'

The children said, 'They are needed for tying *rakhi*, *Didi!*'

I then asked, 'What do you think about friends?'

The response was, 'Friends are the most important. Even more than brothers and sisters. Brothers and sisters complain to parents and get us into trouble, but friends always support us and even protect us. Friends are just like brothers and sisters.'

I asked, 'What do you mean by "just like"? Why are friends not actually brothers and sisters?'

All the children laughed and replied, 'Because friends are not our actual brothers and sisters. Yes, but friends are better, *Didi!*'

In both rural and urban settings, most children gave priority to friends. I asked this question because all the children were responding by placing themselves in the position of the girl in the story.

### Evaluating social biases

In all the schools that I went to, children were also asked whether divorce is good or bad, and why. All the children gave the same answer—it is bad; children feel sad and hurt; people do not consider divorce to be good; and married people should not separate.

I then presented two situations before them.

A couple live together peacefully for some time and then fights break out between them. There can be many reasons for fights. Can you tell what these might be?

The children said, '*Didi!* The husband might be drinking alcohol, he might also be beating her, he might not be earning, he might not be listening to his wife, he might be using abusive language.'

I asked, 'Is it always the man's fault?'

The children did not respond.

I then asked, 'Let us assume that he behaves in this manner. Should his wife get a divorce or continue to endure the violence?'

The girls responded quickly, 'She should get a divorce.'

In the second situation, the wife drinks alcohol, fights, and beats her husband. The children laughed at this. Then, should the husband stay with his wife?

The reply was, 'No, the man should get a divorce, *Didi!*'

'But divorce is a bad thing, isn't it? What will people say?'

But eventually, with some confidence, they agreed that 'they should divorce; people will talk anyway.'

I asked, 'Now tell me, is divorce good or bad?'

The children were of the view that divorce is neither good nor bad; it depends on the situation.

### How and why stories work

Stories not only provide opportunities to openly discuss issues related to one's surroundings but also help in building a shared understanding; they also give children an opportunity to experience the feelings of the characters in the story. For instance, in this story, through the girl's conversation with her doll and the loneliness that emerges from it, children also experience their own sense of loneliness. By listening to a story and connecting with it emotionally, one moves towards empathy. But through it, by placing oneself in the situation of a character, one also moves towards identifying with them on a deeper level. This helps in understanding social issues more deeply.

Through this story, discussions were held about employment and different kinds of work: work that is done by hand and work that is done from home. We also discussed what definition of a job exists in our minds, and what kinds of jobs we actually see around us. At the same time, there are forms of employment that we have not observed in our immediate surroundings. This is similar to how certain kinds of work are often seen as divided between men and women. While discussing the story, we were able to overturn some established ideas.

Divorce is a social issue about which very little discussion takes place. Even if it does, it is usually negative. There are several such social issues towards which we have a negative outlook, and we often hesitate to talk about them. However, through stories, we can build a sound understanding of such issues engagingly and sensitively, without hurting anyone's feelings.

*Translated from Hindi. Translator: Shabnam Sengupta Vetter: Simran Luthra*



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