

## Didactic Potential of Classical Indian Riddled Narratives

Dr. Shreeja Tripathi Sharma

Assistant Professor of English

Dept. of Higher Education

Bhopal, MP, India

shreeja.sharma@gmail.com

### Abstract

The 'riddled narrative' has served as a timeless technique of storytelling, especially in India. The technique was historically used to impart moral instruction to the masses and was often intricately related to minutely interlaced philosophical teaching points that were passed on to the audience effortlessly. This paper examines the scope of integrating riddled narratives into modern educational practices for nurturing critical thinking and moral development.

**Keywords:** Riddled narratives, literary technique, Classical Indian Literature, Critical Thinking, Moral Instruction

### 1. Introduction

Storytelling has always been a powerful tool for education, offering a means to convey knowledge, values, and wisdom across generations. Among the various storytelling techniques, riddled narratives stand out for their exceptional ability to engage audience and evoke cognitive response. These narratives, classically characterised by the inclusion of riddles and puzzles, encourage readers to think critically and reflect on moral and ethical dilemmas.

The technique was a particularly popular form of oral tradition of storytelling in India and manifests as an enduring legacy in early expression of ancient and epic literature. The classical riddled narratives were gradually cast aside as a popular form of storytelling due to the changing landscape of transmission of stories. The technique offers didactic potential for

contemporary educational scenario, particularly with respect to enhancing critical thinking, moral reasoning and ethical decision making through storytelling and immersive narratives.

## **2.Hypothesis**

The integration of classical Indian riddled narratives into educational curricula can enhance critical thinking skills and moral reasoning skills in learners by stimulating them to solve complex problems and imprint patterns of expected moral conduct with a specific focus on ethical dilemmas.

## **3. Research Questions**

- a. How do riddled narratives enhance critical thinking skills among learners?
- b. What impact do riddled narratives have on moral reasoning and ethical decision-making?
- c. How can riddled narratives be effectively integrated into modern educational practices?

## **4.Review of Literature**

Riddled narratives have a rich history of serving as literary tools to convey moral lessons, philosophical ideas, and intellectual challenges. This practice was particularly prominent in India and enduring literary works of classical Indian literature such as *Vikram Vetala*, *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha* etc. can be stated as a few illustrations that employed the technique. Apart from ancient India, the technique was popular in several parallel cultures and there are instances of works such as *One Thousand and One Nights* from the Middle East, and the riddles in Norse mythology. The technique gradually declined and has been cast out as a popular tool of learning.

In the context of the increasing interest and revival of the Indian Knowledge Systems and duly commissioned emphasis in the New Education Policy, 2020, it becomes vital that

we re-evaluate and integrate the classical tools of instruction in modern teaching pedagogy. The scope of riddled narratives as a didactic tool, therefore, seems enormously pertinent. However, there is scant research material available on the technique that focuses specifically on the subject of research in this regard.

Modern theories on education generally emphasise the importance of critical thinking and moral reasoning. According to Bloom's Taxonomy, higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation are crucial for intellectual development. Research in general suggests that storytelling, when combined with challenging intellectual tasks, can significantly enhance these skills. A few notable ones include:

- (a) "Fostering Creative Thinking Skills through Digital Storytelling": This study, published in the *Journal of Pedagogical Research*, evaluated the effectiveness of a Digital Storytelling Science Creative (DSSC) module in enhancing creative thinking skills among eighth-grade students. The results showed that students who participated in the DSSC module performed significantly better in divergent thinking compared to the control group. (*Journal of Pedagogical Research*,1-8)
- (b) "Thinking Critically through Storytelling Technique: Enhancing Students' HOTS and English Speaking Skill": This research investigated the effectiveness of using storytelling techniques to enhance the learner's critical thinking (HOTS) and English speaking skills. The findings indicated that storytelling positively impacted learners critical thinking and speaking abilities. (*Journal of Educational Study*, 1-6)
- (c) "Storytelling to Improve Students' Speaking Ability" – This study was conducted at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia to explore how storytelling improved eighth-grade students' speaking abilities. The results showed

significant improvement in students' speaking skills after implementing storytelling techniques. (Tanti Hardianti, 2019)

The illustration of contemporary studies listed above indicates that integrating riddles and puzzles into educational activities can improve problem-solving abilities, cognitive flexibility, and language skill acquisition. However, the use of this technique for moral instruction has been largely undermined.

Developing morally upright individuals has been the primary focus of ancient Indian pedagogy. Consequently, the use of riddled narratives served a didactic purpose in the classical narratives. However, research focused specifically on the use of classical riddled narratives from classical Indian tradition and its scope for fostering critical thinking and moral development is severely restricted. This paper attempts to explore ways of incorporating the classical technique as an educational tool for contemporary instruction.

## **5. Critical Analysis**

### **A. Semantic dimensions of Classical Indian riddled narratives**

The genesis of classical Indian riddled narratives emanates from the rich tradition of oral storytelling in India. These narratives traditionally incorporated riddles, puzzles, and enigma in order to engage the audience for conveying metaphysical philosophy and for imparting moral instruction for routine conduct and decision making.

In classical Indian literature, the riddled narrative was known as the '*prashnavya karaṇa*', or a storytelling technique wherein the plot is driven by a series of riddles or questions.

For instance, the technique is found in the *Vikrama and Vetala* tales. In these stories, King Vikramaditya is tasked with capturing a clever ghost, Vetala. Each time the king captures Vetala, he tells him a story that ends with a riddle or a moral dilemma. The king must solve the riddle correctly to avoid a curse and continue his quest. This

narrative structure not only entertains but also imparts wisdom and moral lessons for ethical conduct and decision making to the audience/ readers.

Likewise, the narrative of the epic *Mahabharata* includes the famous “*Yaksha Prashna*,” where the Pandava prince Yudhishtira successfully answers a series of challenging riddles posed by *Yaksha*, a nature spirit, to save his brothers. Indian folk narratives such as the *Panchatantra*, *Hitopadesha* and *Jataka Tales* have several instances where the riddled narrative has been used didactically for moral instruction. In fact, the lost narrative of the *Brihadkatha* too is believed to have employed this ancient literary technique.

The popular use of riddles and questions in classical Indian literature served several purposes:

- (a) **Engagement:** Riddles and questions kept the audience engaged and actively thinking about the story. This was significant, as the stories were often transmitted orally not to readers but to ‘audience’ who either heard the story or watched it being performed. The riddles naturally sought a direct response from the audience and ensured their attention. The technique can be perceived as an ancient medium of instruction that enabled the development of cognitive skills around target learning points.
- (b) **Morality:** The classical riddled narratives often contained profound philosophical or moral teachings, that encouraged the audience to imbibe expected values and beliefs. For example, the riddles in the *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha* often conveyed lessons about honesty, wisdom, and virtue.
- (c) **Ethical Conduct, Decision Making, and Individual Choice:** The stories in the narratives encouraged the audience to inculcate appropriate conduct and decision-making skills as a matter of self-informed choice rather than an obligatory

imperative to be followed. The process is evident in the tales of king Vikramaditya.

- (d) Cultural Preservation: By embedding riddles and questions, these stories preserve cultural knowledge and traditions, passing them down through generations.
- (e) Symbolism and Allegory: These narratives connote symbolic and allegorical ideas that are expressed metaphorically in the form of intriguing riddles. This technique allowed storytellers to impart deeper meanings and philosophical insights through engaging and thought-provoking tales. The Riddles often employed symbolic language to represent abstract ideas. For instance, in *Vikrama and Vetala*, Padamavati communicates with her lover Vajramukha through symbolic gestures that he must crack in order to impress and acquire her love. The use of animals and anthropomorphic characters in these fables added layers of symbolism to the stories.
- (f) Philosophical Didactics: Riddled narratives frequently impart complex philosophical learning points. For instance, the “*Yaksha Prashna*” riddles touched upon the principles of *dharma* or duty, righteousness, and the nature of existence.

The riddled narrative thus served as a tool of conveying spiritual truths and insights through a thoroughly delightful rendition. The intriguing puzzle-stories functioned as allegories, where the surface story represented deeper spiritual or philosophical truths. By embedding symbolic and spiritual ideas within riddled narratives, storytellers created rich, multi-layered tales that engaged audiences on both intellectual and emotional levels.

## **B. Interlinkages with Parallel Cultures**

Riddled narratives were widely used in literature, folklore, and oral traditions across Europe and Asia during the Middle Ages (approximately 5th to 15th century).

The legend of *Oedipus and the Sphinx* is a classic example from Greek Mythology. The Sphinx poses a riddle to Oedipus, which he must solve to save the city of Thebes. In Norse Mythology, the *Poetic Edda* contains a “battle of wits” in the story of Odin and the giant Vafthrudnir, to the detriment of the latter. *The Exeter Book*, an anthology of Anglo-Saxon poetry compiled around the 10th century, contains numerous riddles that reflect the intellectual and cultural life of the time.

In Asia, apart from India, riddles were popular in Chinese and Japanese literature. The Chinese Tang dynasty (618-907) saw a flourishing of literature with riddles being included in poetry and used in literary games. Similarly, in Japan, riddles were part of the Edo period (1603-1868) storytelling traditions. It is also interesting to note that didacticism was not confined to “serious” or morally righteous tradition alone; the Japanese game “*Hyakumonogatari Kaidankai*” ( *A Gathering of a Hundred Ghost Stories*) offered an unconventional-albeit macabre- version of riddled narratives.

Many African oral traditions include riddles and puzzles as part of their storytelling. For example, the Yoruba people of Nigeria have folktales that feature trickster figures like the Tortoise, who often engage in riddles and cunning challenges.

The riddled narrative has thus been a traditional educational tool to impart ethical instruction that evoked cognitive learning in individuals. The medium became popular across different parts of the world due to its inherent ability to both instruct and entertain. In contrast to the instructional imperative that gave stipulations and directions to individuals, the innate quality of the narrative to intrigue and attract spontaneously created a wider share of audience and ensured maximum reach to the masses.

### **C. Decline over Generations**

The gradual decline in the popularity of riddled narratives can be attributed to several factors:

- (i) **Changing Literary Trends:** New forms of storytelling emerged over different periods of time. Contemporary narratives are more focused on post-modern complexity and ideas such as existentialism.
- (ii) **Empirical Shift:** As societies modernised and educational systems evolved, there was a greater emphasis on scientific and rational thinking, which sometimes led to a decreased interest in the abstract and symbolic nature of riddles.
- (iii) **Educational Focus:** The vocational focus towards developing skills and employability-based curriculum can be considered as a cause that contributed to the decline.
- (iv) **Decline of Oral Tradition:** Many riddled narratives were originally part of oral storytelling traditions. As written literature became more dominant, the spontaneous and interactive nature of riddled narratives may have been less suited to the written format, leading to a decline in their use.
- (v) **Entertainment Media:** The rise of new entertainment media, such as cinema, television, and digital content, offered different forms of storytelling that captured public interest. Visual and auditory media often prioritise more direct and visually engaging narratives, unlike relatively esoteric riddle-based techniques, which may have contributed to the decline of riddled narratives.
- (vi) **Complexity and Accessibility:** Riddled narratives can be intellectually challenging and may require a certain level of cultural and philosophical knowledge to fully appreciate. As literature became more accessible to a wider audience, there may have been a shift towards simpler and more easily understood storytelling techniques.
- (vii) While riddled narratives may have declined in popularity, they have not disappeared entirely. They still hold a place in certain literary traditions, genres, and educational settings, continuing to offer a unique and intellectually stimulating form of storytelling. Their potential

to still instruct can be revived by appropriate integration with contemporary pedagogy and technology.

#### **D. Didactic Potential for Contemporary Learning**

Riddled narratives present a unique opportunity to blend traditional storytelling with modern educational goals. By incorporating riddles into narratives, educators can create a learning environment that promotes active engagement and intellectual challenge. For example, a history lesson could be structured around a narrative where students must solve historical riddles to uncover key events and figures. Similarly, a literature class could use riddled narratives to explore themes and character motivations.

One of the strengths of riddled narratives is their ability to convey complex moral and ethical dilemmas in an engaging manner. By presenting these dilemmas as riddles, students are encouraged to think deeply about the implications of their choices and reflect on their own values. This process of reflection and decision-making is essential for moral development.

However, there are challenges to integrating riddled narratives into educational curricula. One potential issue is the difficulty of creating high-quality riddles that are both challenging and relevant to the subject matter. Additionally, educators may need to invest time and resources in developing materials and training to effectively use riddled narratives in the classroom.

### **6. Methods**

The interactive ability and cognitive learning potential of the riddled narratives makes it suitable for adaptation into formats of digital literature.

Digital platforms, interactive fiction, and educational applications can incorporate riddled narratives to create immersive and thought-provoking experiences. This integration can make philosophical exploration more engaging and relevant to modern audiences.

For example, a digital storytelling platform could use riddled narratives to explore philosophical themes such as the nature of reality, free will, and ethical decision-making. Users could solve riddles to unlock different parts of the story, each segment providing deeper insights into the philosophical ideas being explored.

By blending the rich tradition of riddled narratives with modern technology and media, we can create innovative ways to engage with philosophical questions and encourage intellectual growth.

However, the ‘digital methods’ do pose the ethical dilemma of transmitting sublime concepts over a ‘trivial medium’. For instance, the sacred concept of *dharma* or precepts like Justice cannot be trivialised and should not be compromised.

However, in the wake of soaring popularity of digitalisation, it is not possible for the coming generations to thrive without digitally charged educational set up. In the wake of changing nuances of education, it would not be a great argument to wean away a whole generation from the core of cultural ethos on the pretext of maintaining the sanctity of our systems. However, at the same time, it becomes extremely crucial that we innovate and blend traditional learning with utmost caution and care.

In this context, I put forward the case for blending classical Indian riddled narratives with digital mediums for didactic learning. But this must not be done without a thorough research that ensures appropriate and meticulous transmission of the learning points. Some tools that offer potential for use in this regard include the following.

- A. Interactive Fiction: Digital platforms and applications can offer interactive fiction where readers solve riddles to progress through the story. This can create an engaging and immersive experience, reminiscent of classic choose-your-own-adventure books.

- B. Video Games: Though sublime precepts cannot be imparted adequately over platforms such as the video game, letting the soaring number of learners go unmoulded by an interface that is completely ungrounded by overarching principles of learning should not be sought either. Many contemporary video games currently incorporate riddles and puzzles as core gameplay mechanics. Games like “The Legend of Zelda” series and “The Witness” have successfully integrated riddled narratives, challenging players to think critically and solve puzzles to advance. However, there is a lack of such games based on regional ethics of traditional learning.
- C. Digital Storytelling: Online platforms, such as blogs, webcomics, and multimedia projects, can use riddled narratives to engage audiences. Creators can blend text, images, and interactivity to craft compelling stories with riddles and puzzles.
- D. Augmented and Virtual Reality: AR and VR technologies can create immersive environments where users can solve riddles and navigate narrative challenges. These platforms offer new ways to experience riddled narratives in a highly engaging and interactive manner.
- E. Social Media and Collaborative Storytelling: Social media platforms can host collaborative storytelling projects where users contribute riddles and solutions. This can create a dynamic and community-driven narrative experience.
- F. Educational Tools: Riddled narratives can be used in educational applications and platforms to teach critical thinking, ethical problem solving, and decision making.
- G. These experiences often use riddled narratives to create a cohesive and intriguing storyline.

The versatility and timeless appeal of riddled narratives make them well-suited for contemporary digital literature and interactive media. They can provide a rich and engaging experience that challenges and entertains audiences in innovative ways.

They can act as tools for didactic and philosophical purposes in contemporary contexts. They can simulate situations involving critical thinking. They can serve as a starting point for discussions and debates by posing questions and challenges that invite readers to engage in dialogue and explore different perspectives. The classical riddled narratives contain timeless wisdom and life lessons that can be integrated and blended in the contemporary digital interface to impart valuable teachings and insights.

## **7. Results and Discussion**

1. The classical Indian riddled narratives were used as a traditional tool for imparting learning points such as moral code of conduct, ethical decision making etc.
2. The literary technique became popular due to its inherent ability to entertain and engage the audience.
3. The narrative technique can be regarded as amongst the earliest educational tools developed for promoting cognitive abilities and general spiritual development.
4. The narratives blended philosophy, literature, and performance to entertain an ever-widening array of audience in India as well as in other parts of the world.
5. The linguistic and semantic structure of the riddles contained embedded layers of meaning and were both metaphoric and allegorical.
6. The tradition of rendering learning points through riddled narratives gradually declines with the changing orientation of the general aim of education.
7. Empirical emphasis in learning coupled with skill-based curriculum etc. led to the eventual phasing out of the literary technique from the contemporary modes of learning.

8. In the wake of the call for reviving 'Indian Knowledge Systems', the use of Indian classical riddled narrative as a medium of learning can be re-established.
9. The riddled narratives can be blended with different digital platforms that are increasingly gaining acceptance as a regular facet of human life.
10. As the digital-scape becomes the new sphere of human interaction, it becomes necessary to seep the space with overarching principles of education.
11. The scope of blending the classical precepts with innovative formats of transmission must be done with caution. This is necessary to ensure that the right precepts get rightly transmitted in the right sense.

## **8. Conclusion**

Classical Indian Riddled narratives are a potential instructional tool for enhancing critical thinking, moral reasoning and ethical decision making in learners. By integrating these narratives into modern educational practices, educators can create engaging and intellectually stimulating learning environments and impart valuable learning points to an ever-new age of digital learners. While there are challenges to implementing riddled narratives, the accruing benefits make them a suitable area for further pedagogical research and innovation.

**Conflict of Interest:** The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

**Copyright:** © 2024 by Dr. Shreeja Tripathi Sharma Author(s) retain the copyright of their original work while granting publication rights to the journal.

**License:** This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License, allowing others to distribute, remix, adapt, and build upon it, even for commercial purposes, with proper attribution. Author(s) are also permitted to post their work in institutional repositories, social media, or other platforms.

## References

- Hwang, Wu-Yuin, et al. "Digital Storytelling for Enhancing Student Academic Achievement, Critical Thinking, and Learning Motivation: A Year-Long Experimental Study." *Computers & Education*, Vol. 59, No. 2, 2012. (pgs. 339-352)
- Wan Mohd Nasr, W. M. F., Halim, L., & Arsad, N. M. Inside the teachers' toolbox: Fostering creative thinking skills through digital storytelling. *Journal of Pedagogical Research*. Vol 8(3), 2024. 147-162. <https://doi.org/10.33902/JPR.202427318>
- Dewi, Kadek Trisna Kusuma. *Thinking Critically through Storytelling Technique: Enhancing Students' HOTS and English Speaking Skill*. *Journal of Educational Study*. Vol. 1, Issue , 2021. DOI: 10.36663/joes.v1i1.151
- Hardianti, Tanti. Storytelling To Improve Students' Speaking Ability. Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia, 2019. repository.upi.edu, perpustakaan.upi.edu.  
[https://repository.upi.edu/46307/3/S\\_ING\\_1500801\\_STORYTELLING%20TO%20IMPROVE%20STUDENTS%27%20SPEAKING%20ABILITY.pdf?form=MG0AV3](https://repository.upi.edu/46307/3/S_ING_1500801_STORYTELLING%20TO%20IMPROVE%20STUDENTS%27%20SPEAKING%20ABILITY.pdf?form=MG0AV3)