

LANGUAGE IN INDIA
Strength for Today and Bright Hope for Tomorrow
Volume 6 : 6 June 2006

Editor: M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.
Associate Editors: B. Mallikarjun, Ph.D.
Sam Mohanlal, Ph.D.
B. A. Sharada, Ph.D.
A. R. Fatihi, Ph.D.
Lakhan Gusain, Ph.D.

Sila Basak's Book -
Bengali Culture and Society Through Riddles
A Review by

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

BENGALI CULTURE AND SOCIETY THROUGH ITS RIDDLES

Sila Basak, 2006

Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi 110 002

A Review By

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.

Riddles are specific to socio-cultural settings. It is shared and enjoyed amidst a social gathering. This volume has Bengali riddles collected over a period of two decades from Parts of West Bengal and Bangladesh.

Presented in English, a translation from dialects of Bengali, the riddles are so chosen for non-Bengali readers to relate to.

An emotive metaphor with a question is how a riddle is defined, most often used as a form of entertainment, to exercise and challenge the intellect, instructive in nature, at the same time, confuses and contradicts, at times absurd and is brief. Its form can be blank verse, rhymes or in prose. Its subject is from nature to daily chores. The Bengali riddle covers rites and rituals.

Language used to express riddles is often redundant, ornamental, or in rhyme form. Its meaning is concealed, to be found through clues. The distinction between a rhyme and a riddle is that the aim of the former is to create music whereas the latter is to create meaning.

Literary Riddle

Just as language varies across geographic settings, so also riddles vary. Each culture defines the nature of riddles. “Bengali riddles are characterized by its people, nature, birds and animals, customs, articles of daily use, etc” (p.27). A literary riddle emerges from the popular riddle and is made elegant in terms of language, is longer and is obscure.

For example, the popular riddle is

Ek kole dui bhai
Keur sathe keur dekha nai

Two brothers on the same lap
One does not meet the other

An example of the literary riddle is

Taru nay bane ray nahi dhare phul
Dal pallav tar ati se bipul
Pabane karia bhar karay bhraman
Banete thakia kare baner dosan

Lives in forests, not a tree nor hold flowers
Branches are huge
Travels on wind
Lives in forest and destroys it too

The answer is, 'forest fire' (p. 31)

Popular Riddle

Popular riddles are part of the stream of oral culture. These cover deities and human beings, nature, domestic life, birds, animals and insects, musical instruments, stories, fables, numbers, etc.

This chapter renders, riddles in great detail, and is so interesting and resourceful. For example:

The Garlic Tree:

Matir nice thake budi
Kapad pare tin kudi
Dhopay kapad nay na
Tabuo kapad mayla hay na

Old woman underground
Wears three and twenty clothes
Washer man does not wash
Yet clothes never get dirty.

Rural Life in Riddles

Rituals observed to appease nature is what this section is all about. Seasons of the year, on which agriculture is dependent, often plays on the nerves of farmers. This section is very interesting:

Rain: The Mymensingh riddle is most picturesque:

Akas theke namlo budi katha kambal laiya
Sei budi katha kay nirabe basiya

From the sky comes old woman with belongings
That woman talks sitting silently

Fan: Sutkale deyni dekha
Grishmakale praner sakha

Does not appear in winter
Bosom pal in summer

Larger Social Life and Riddles

The famous conversation between Yudisthira and the Yaksa in the Mahabharata is interesting. The questions were:

What is the news?
What is most strange?

What is the way?
Who is happy?

The answers were:

Sun and its ways
Death is inevitable yet people crave for immortality
The way is of great men
He who cooks a little 'sag' for himself in the evening

The riddle on page 163 about the 'egg' is presented from across the world is also of interest.

Social Analysis

Riddles, an oral art form, used among the working class are one form of entertainment. It provokes the intelligence and the power of judgment of a people and is resourceful in retaining the inquisitiveness of human mind considered a treasure of ordinary folks.

Comparative Study

This section focuses on comparisons of riddles across regions in India which are similar to and different from the ones in Bengal. There are a few from across the world. The Rajbansis and Bengalis perceive the 'jackfruit' as an "Old person with boils all over" while the Santhals perceive the fruit as 'sweet rash' instead of 'boils. So also the riddle for 'eye' varies – in 24 Parganas – it is "Two brothers in the same courtyard – none can see the other". Among the Gonds it is "An old woman keeps opening and shutting the doors" and in Orissa it is "Two brothers stay separately in the same house".

Field Survey

During the fieldwork of the Author, she found women and children to be the ones who keep the tradition going.

This volume by Sila Basak is a storehouse of knowledge. Because each section is instructive in nature, the author found it inappropriate to conclude.

Language is a significant factor in group identity, and riddles is one stream of a culture that could be used as a tool in school education, given the fact that the on going debate on the pros and cons of mother tongue as school language, use of riddles in the classroom could be an effective tool to maintenance of little languages and cultures in the country.

This is a welcome volume that could be useful the researchers, teacher trainers, teachers and, of course, the common reader.

Jennifer Marie Bayer, Ph.D.
Research Group: Communication & Literacy
Central Institute of Indian Languages
Mysore 570006, India
bayer@ciil.stpmysore.net