
INTERVIEW

In Conversation with Prabhat (P) and Sushil Shukl (SS)

Prachi Kalra (PK)

The Route to a Poem is Not a Highway

Prabhat writes in Hindi for both children and adults. His stories, poems and songs for children have been published by Eklavya, NBT, Ektara and Room to Read. His writing has won several awards including the 'Yuva Kavita Samay Samman' and The Big Little Book Award in 2019 from the Parag initiative of Tata Trust.

Sushil Shukl has been writing for children for more than two decades. He was the editor of Eklavya's magazine *Chakmak* for many years. Currently, he is a director at Ektara Trust where he edits and writes for their children's magazines *Pluto* and *Cycle*. He also anchors a professional course for illustrators at the Riyaz Academy of Illustrators.

PK: I am interested in your journey as a reader. When and how did you start to read?

P: I was born in a village in Rajasthan with no electricity. But it had a rich atmosphere of folk songs. I could hear them all the time: when women ground flour, when a child was born or when an old person died. There was also a tradition of singing in large groups; imagine nearly 150 people singing together. That rhythm, that sound, those words would stay with me.

There was no library even in school, so school textbooks stood in even for casual reading. They contained a comprehensive selection of stories and poems, which we would memorize and enjoy singing.

My village had a rich atmosphere of folk songs. I could hear them all the time: when women ground flour, when a child was born or when an old person died.

When I began to live with my uncle, I got introduced to *Parag*, a wonderful children's magazine. I followed that up with *Nandan* and *Suman Saurabh*. So, the interest in reading kept growing. My father would scold me for this pastime reading; like all parents, he wanted me to study, not read.

In Dausa, I started borrowing *Amar Chitra Katha* from the local *paan* shop which lent them out; the world of comics opened up for me. Soon I was reading grown-up stuff such as *Sarita* and *Mukta*, buying them by the kilo from a local grocery store.

That's when I began to write—I was writing not-so-good love poems, the kind that I had read in *Sarita*. One even got published and I got paid Rs. 25.

College was a different ballgame which put me in touch with the Rajasthan University library and sophisticated literature such as Harivansh Rai Bachchan's poetry. My friends and I would meet each Saturday to read, write and talk about poetry.

SS: I also grew up in a village which had a rich oral tradition. The bhajans were beautiful, not filmy. Even the recitation of *Ramcharitmanas* is more political now. We used to recite portions of it in school, enjoying the rhythm, the sound of it. We memorized Chaupais¹, but we were spared the teacher's commentary even though we didn't understand all the words.

At home, we had religious texts. Within the stories of Gods, there were side stories of monsters and demons, which were more fun. So my reading journey had begun without my realizing it.

I read a lot of pulp fiction as a teen, including novels by Gulshan Nanda and Omprakash's *Vijayvibrant* series. I also read comics; and writers such as Shivani, Amrita Pritam and Saratchandra.

But, I would like to point out my father was a farmer who would take me around the farm and show me minute details. Some crops have beautiful flowers. All that exploration is reflected in my poetry. So, we can never say exactly what clicks to make a reader or a writer. I also know people who began their reading journey in their 20s, and became good writers.

PK: There's a long tradition of memorizing poems in school. Since you're both poets, how do you see this tradition?

SS: I've been working with teachers on poetry; teachers from elite

schools who are interested in literature and read magazines like *Cycle* and *Pluto*. But there's so much pressure around the teaching of poetry. They immediately get into poetic devices and themes. Exploring the soundscapes, enjoying the language and a new way of looking at things, new images, which a poem presents, is all forgotten. It's all reduced to arriving at one meaning.

It seems language is a pre-determined thing which we just learn how to use, not how to make new meanings, arriving at new results.

I'm sometimes grateful that we didn't have such sincere teachers. It is so important to create new language, new possibilities. A poem has a structure and space for so many meanings. We as children were left alone to grapple with poetry, not bound by teachers explaining poems.

PK: I know very few people who read poems after school. Why is this so? What is done to poetry in school?

P: The possibilities of literature have become really narrow in school. When I was a student, we had a Bal Sabha² each Saturday in school where we got to recite folksongs, poems, riddles. It was a lot of fun. The whole school, including teachers, used to participate. Teachers are now caught up in a lot of paper work and report-writing. This bureaucratic control has placed teachers and schools under immense stress, and removed space for creativity.

Teachers are now caught up in a lot of paper work and report-writing. This bureaucratic control has placed teachers and schools under immense stress, and removed space for creativity.

When I taught in a school run by the NGO Digantar, the day began with songs and poetry, rather than prayer. Children had tremendous say in what they studied. They were immersed in play and drama. This opened up many possibilities right away in the morning. We used to work with poems in an organized manner too - putting up poetry posters, writing poems and illustrating them. Young children love to extend the pattern of repetition in a poem. When their creations are published, children are really thrilled.

So, it all boils down to creating a rich environment for literature in the classroom and not putting stress on teachers.

PK: Talking about stories, schools often demand that a story should have a moral at the end. It must have a purpose or take-away. Sometimes, schools also insist that children must be kept away from sad stories. How do you look at all this?

P: We kill stories when we link them with education. The emotions, the rise and fall of events, the thrill of it all; all is lost when you focus on the moral. Stories shed light on life as a whole. When you link a story to a single moral, you destroy it.

And, why shouldn't you tell sad stories? When I was in Class ten, we read a story *Lal Kela* (Red Banana) in which a poor family plants a banana tree and waits excitedly for the fruit. But when the tree bears fruit the zamindar's men take it away. What a touching story! The magic of stories lies in the images, the imagination, the vastness and thrill of that world. Why reduce it to a single sentence?

You can come back to a story some days after relating it in class. You can use it as context for a discussion on a theme.

The picture book *Bhediye ko dusht kyon kahte hain* (Why are wolves called evil?) leads you to a discussion on rumours and how they spread unchecked. The NBT book *Mahagiri* is about baseless violence. And we see this violence all around us. Why would you sanitize literature?

Another claim which is often made is that children won't understand these complexities. In fact, children understand deeply. Our role as an adult is to add to or extend that understanding.

SS: Unfortunately, the pedagogy of literature remains the weakest. For instance, how do you define the story as a genre? Of course, if you hear many stories—and the textbook is a very small canvas—you'll get how stories work.

Questions emerge in your mind when you read a story: that's not how it happens, or it happens like this. Those are exactly the sort of questions a story should trigger. Once a creation has become a story, there's nothing higher than that.

There isn't much discussion around the form of a story. The play on time, space and dialogue in a story, how characters are created. These internal workings of a story can be analysed obliquely. Of course, you can enjoy a story without this analysis, but this can lead to a deeper understanding.

Instead, we focus on morals and what should or should not be read.

Our cinema, incidentally, also rests mostly on stories, but there's hardly any exposure to it in school. The setting of a film provides the internal logic for how a character will behave. We suspend disbelief for a Salman Khan film based on the world it creates. In school, though, everything must be based on logic. Even in art class, a teacher challenges a child who paints the sun green. But if everything must be logical, then a bigger question is— how did the sun descend on paper?

Once a creation has become a story, there's nothing higher than that.

Schools believe that children learn everything in school, that there's no learning which happens outside. Contrary to this, we often see that things learnt beyond school remain useful till much later.

PK: Do you see children's literature and literature for adults as different or separate from each other? Can we arrive at a definition for children's literature, or should we do away with this category?

SS: There is no doubt in my mind that good literature is for everyone. Also, can we say that adults really understand everything that is written for them?

And what does it mean 'to know'? We can't really want children to achieve adult-like knowing. Their understanding of a story can be complete in itself.

How we approach literature—a story or a poem—that's important. The path to a story is not a highway, but more like the narrow bylanes that children take to arrive at their own understanding. The problem is that we see the highway as the only valid route, but consider the bylanes of understanding which children create as less credible.

And we place little value on imagination. The most profound reality is created through imagination. If something is really imaginary, neither adults nor children will have a reference for it. In this, we are together. For example, no one has seen a flying elephant. Here children have an upper hand.

Children are less likely to reject a story about a flying elephant because they are not bound by authoritative notions of what can or cannot be.

P: Who is not moved by *The Little Prince* or *Alice in Wonderland*? Gulzar's song *Lakadee kee kaathe* (Wooden Saddle) is fun for everyone. Movies such as *Makdi* (Spider) and *The Blue Umbrella* appeal across age groups. Problems arise when things are made simplistic in the name of children. That kind of phony simplification does discredit to children. But, such literature is being published in large numbers.

We can't compromise on the quality of literature. For instance, the *Mahabharat* has a huge canvas and thrills everyone. It's another matter that children will read it differently from adults. We might come back to it as adults for newer meanings. So, we can't compromise on the vastness of the literary canvas or the depth of meaning in children's literature.

SS: Premchand and Nirala—one, a great writer, the other, a great poet—both wrote poorly when they wrote for children. Premchand's most read stories in schools, *Idgah* and *Bade Bhai Sahab* (Big Brother), were written for adults. So a writer's challenge is to be able to reach both children and adults. An author for children does not need to be a tailor, merely reducing the size of the canvas.

Notes

1. Chaupai is a poem consisting of four lines, a quatrain, and a meter of four syllables. This kind of poetry was popular during the medieval Hindi poetry period.
2. Bal Sabha is a school event in which children are given opportunities to showcase their talents.

Prachi Kalra is Associate Professor in the Department of Elementary Education at Gargi College, University of Delhi. She teaches courses in literacy and children's literature and storytelling.

prachikalra@yahoo.com