

Decentering the 'Normal' Learner: *Pagla Dashu* and the Case for Neurodiverse Pedagogies

Anusha Bhowmik

M.A. in English

Abstract:

It is estimated that around 2.2 million people are neurodivergent in India (NIMHANS). Another study highlights that nearly one in eight Indian children aged 2-9 years experience neurodevelopmental disorders (Arora et al. e1002615). But despite the statistics showing the scale of neurodiversity, discussions on neurodiversity is still at a nascent stage in India. Many people still don't understand the many benefits of thinking differently. The everyday discourse surrounding 'abnormality' is derived from diverse forms of cultural representation of the same. A lot of neurodivergent individuals face exclusion because the society expects them to fit into the neurotypically designed boxes. Reimagining popular literary texts through the lens of neurodiversity can be extremely helpful for neurodivergent students, who will be able to see themselves in the characters. Sukumar Ray's nonsense literature has been rarely read outside the contours of *hasya* or *kheyal rasa*. The paper is focused on neurodiverse reading of Sukumar Ray's *The Crazy Tales of Pagla Dashu and Co.* from an educator's lens. Furthermore, this paper aims to highlight the concept of alternative intelligence and inclusive education.

Keywords: neurodiversity, normalcy, inclusive education, multiple intelligence, pedagogy.

Introduction:

Sukumar Ray's nonsense verse *Abol Tabol* and *Ha Ja Ba Ra La* opens scope for broader search for meaning and an inquiry into the world of the colonized subject. It in his nonsense literature, Ray delves deep into the area of linguistic complicity : the disjunction between the *signifier* and the *signified*. Ray's other poems like "Hukho Mukho Hangla", "Kimbhut" and "Kumro Potash" explore the eccentricities of human behaviour. Wim Tigges in his *An Anatomy of Nonsense* defines nonsense literature as a genre of narrative literature that balances a multiplicity of meaning with a simultaneous absence of meaning (Tigges 23). According to Education Times, in a classroom, at least 10% students may have various types of neurodiverse disorders in varying degrees. The spectrum of neurodiverse disorders include autism, dysgraphia, dyslexia, Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and various other learning disabilities. But despite data showing scale of neurodiversity, there is lack of recognition of the same. Traditional classrooms fail to accommodate the diverse needs of the students. Children who are neurodivergent often feel excluded and have a difficult time relating to neurotypical characters. This paper proposes to situate *The Crazy Tales of Pagla Dashu and Co.* in the context of neurodiversity.

Objectives of the study:

The objectives of this study are as follows:

- To analyze how the character of Pagla Dashu is used as a literary tool to challenge the normative

constructs of intelligence, behaviour and learning habits in classrooms.

- To critically dissect the concept of "normal learner" in the context of dominant educational discourses.
- To examine the pedagogical possibilities of using culturally rooted texts like Pagla Dashu to foster empathy, neurodiversity and inclusive learning environments.

Methodology:

This paper is a literary analysis based on select short stories from Sukumar Ray's *Pagla Dashu*, the research methodology would be specifically critical textual analysis of primary texts. Here, the textual analysis aims to critically dissect the chosen texts through the lens of neurodiversity.

Analysis of *Pagla Dashu* :

Neurodiversity refers to the rich natural diversity of human minds, the infinite variation in neurocognitive functioning within our species (Singer 12). Through the world of *Pagla Dashu*, Sukumar Ray projects the human brain like a 'Darwinian jungle'. Sukumar Ray showcases neurodiversity through characters like Pagla Dashu, Joggidas, Ganasha and cocky Bholanath. As Gerald Edelman puts it, "*The brain is no sense like any kind of instruction machine, like a computer. Each individual's brain is more like a unique rainforest, teeming with growth, decay, competition, diversity, and selection.*" (Edelman 31).

"But when he walked quickly or spoke in a hurry, his flailing arms and legs would remind us of a lobster more than anything else" (Ray 1).

This could reflect traits commonly associated with 'naughty child syndrome' or ADHD. Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrician, Dr. Supapanvadee Phuchareon lists hyperactivity, inattention and impulsivity as three primary characteristics of ADHD. Dashu fits this definition on the surface. He shaved his head for no rhyme or reason, showered a pot of water on a teacher's head and bursted crackers in the classroom. Then, there is cocky Bholanath who acts like a "cocky know-it-all" and Shyamchand who would always project "an air of gravity and intellectual superiority".

"From the way he looked, talked and walked, it was clear that Dashu was slightly 'touched' in the head" (Ray 1). Dashu is labelled as a kind of neurological "Other". In the chapter '*Cocky Bholanath*', when master-moshai asks Bholanath a difficult question, he jumps with a stupid answer, eventually the teacher makes fun of him and his peers laugh at him. Again, in the chapter '*The Drawing*', Kalachand cries out in rage, "Go away, you needn't make fun of me", when his peers refuse to acknowledge his side of the story. Based on his actions, his peers decide that Kalachand must be bit funny in the head.

It shows the lack of empathy that the "neurotypical" have for their "neurodiverse" counterparts. What is evident in the behaviour of Bishnubahan, Shyamchand and Nandalal is that they want to feel valued and noticed. Dashu's existence in a world that constantly misreads him as 'Pagla' or madcap is a metaphor for how society often misunderstands those who don't fit as 'normal'. The society holds the perception that these students must adapt to the system not the other way round.

In *Neurodiversity: The Birth of an Idea*, Judy Singer writes, "*Just as the postmodern era sees every once too solid belief melt into air, even our most taken for granted assumptions : that we all more or less see, feel, touch, hear, smell, and sort information, in more or less the same way, (unless visibly disabled) are being dissolved*" (Singer 35). A postmodernist reading of the word 'normal' suggests that the binary between normal and abnormal is fundamentally slippery. In Ray's nonsense prose, it remains unclear whether Dashu is mad or is he feigning his madness. His 'madness' is reflection of how rigid systems fail to accommodate diverse ways of thinking.

The plurivocal ambiguity of meaning inherent in the word 'normal' subverts the hegemony of normalcy. Dashu subverts the school rules and social mores. He uses his 'madness' as a tool to challenge the toolkit of normalcy. Furthermore, Sukumar Ray challenges the rhetoric of normalcy by projecting variations in point of views. In the chapter titled '*The Drawing*', Kalachand and Nidhiram forge a rivalry between themselves over a picture titled 'The Burning of Khandaba'. Nidhiram views it as "a brace of foxes racing before a temple", whereas Kalachand reads it as "a brace of horses drawing a chariot".

A poststructuralist reading of *The Crazy Tales of Pagla Dashu and Co.* would suggest that the real definition of the word 'normal' is methodologically impossible. Dashu challenges the grand narrative of colonial rationality. The school teachers and the other neurotypical students are representatives of 'rational' discourse. Dashu resists the colonial rationality through his bizzare answers and strange logic. From a Derridean perspective, Dashu's language play exposes ambiguity of meaning : words do not signify fixed truths, but suggest that there are multiple truths, not just one.

Like for instance, in the chapter '*Chinese Crackers*', when Pandit-moshai asked Dashu, "*And were you lighting the crackers?*" Dashu pointed out at Rampada and demanded : "*Why was he not giving me mihidana?*" At this bizzare reply, Rampada said: "*It is my mihidana, I can do whatever I want with it!*" Dashu swiftly replied, "*Likewise, I can do whatever I want with my crackers*" (Ray 57)

Sukumar Ray's presentation of the idea of intelligence can also be read through a poststructuralist perspective. In his nonsense literature, Ray shows how intelligence is also not a single fixed entity, but a collection of distinct and independent intelligences. In his theory of Multiple Intelligences, Howard Gardner proposes eight distinct kinds of intelligences namely linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalistic.

Though Dashu appears a lunatic on surface, but he turns out to be creatively intelligent. Dashu's antics and his playtime tactics seem to be a manifestation of his creative genius. As Ray puts it, "*It was not as if he was dim witted. He was very clever at maths, especially in solving long divisions and multiplications. Then again, he would devise such ingenious tricks to make fools of us that we could only marvel at his brains*" (Ray 2)

Pedagogical Implications:

In his book entitled *Neurodiversity Explained*, David Aherne puts forth the cactus analogy to explain the concept of neurodiversity. He writes that a cactus flowers and blooms in a desert of Arizona, but when it is taken out of its habitat and placed in the back garden in the UK, it might not thrive or survive. The cactus won't be blamed in that case, but the climate (Aherne 17). Aherne further adds, "...we would recognize that for the cactus to fulfill its potential we may have to make adaptations to its environment" (Aherne 17). The same holds true for the human mind. There is a need to switch the narrative of ableism, so that schools can see the positive and practical benefits of embracing neurodiversity, not just for the students but for the whole school community

Conclusion:

To conclude, *The Crazy Tales of Pagla Dashu and Co.* can be used to create space for "Pagla Dashu" in our education system. Instead of stigmatizing neurodiversity, educators need to create an ecosystem where every individual can thrive and reach their potential. Through his classroom antics and playtime tactics, Dashu challenges the status quo of traditional pedagogies and teaches us the need to design inclusive pedagogies.

Works Cited

1. Aherne, David. *The Pocket Guide to Neurodiversity*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2023.
2. Arora, Narendra K., et al. "Neurodevelopmental Disorders in Children Aged 2-9 Years: Population Based Burden Estimates Across Five Regions in India." *PLOS Medicine*, vol. 15, no. 7, 2018, e1002615. *PLOS Journals*, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1002615>.
3. Edelman, Gerald M. *Bright Air, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of the Mind*. BasicBooks, 1992. Print.
4. Ray, Sukumar. *The Crazy Tales of Pagla Dashu and Co*. Translated by Indrani Majumdar, Hachette UK, 2012.
5. Singer, Judy. *Neurodiversity: The Birth of an Idea*. 2017.
6. Taneja, D., P. Vishwanathan, and S. V. Rajan. "Navigating Neurodiversity in Higher Education in India." *eLife*, vol. 13, 2024. *eLife Sciences Publications*, <https://doi.org/10.7554/elife.104071>.
7. Tigges, Wim. "An Anatomy of Nonsense." *An Anatomy of Nonsense*, Brill, 1987, pp. 23-46. Brill eBooks, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004484252-005>.