

## Soapnut Leaves

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### **B.A(Prog.) IInd Year Understanding Narrative :: "Soapnut Leaves"**

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### **THE SHORT STORY**

The **short story** is a narrative that is much more concise and to the point than longer works of fiction like the novel. Short stories are usually structured around **a major episode**. Many short stories also bring in the element of **surprise** or **a sudden twist at the end**.

The origin of the short story actually lies in the tradition of oral story-telling. In traditional village communities people used to collect together after the day's work and have collective singing, performance and story-telling. Any member of the community could tell stories but there were also individuals who were specially trained to become the village songsters and story-tellers. Many stories were in verse and were sung. Then of course, all of us have heard stories from our mothers, fathers and grandparents.

All of us have read fables and parables as children.

Fables are short stories that teach a moral lesson. In these stories animals talk and behave like human beings.

Parables also teach us moral lessons but the animals and the plants do not behave and act like human beings in parables.

The popular **Panchatantra** stories – much loved by children - are a collection of animal fables. They were originally in Sanskrit and Pali. The original Sanskrit stories, now long lost, are believed to have been written in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC by Vishnu Sarma. (For more information, click: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Panchatantra>)

**Aesop's Fables** are believed to be written by Aesop (620-560 BC) a slave and a storyteller who lived in ancient Greece. (For more information click: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aesop's\\_Fables](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aesop's_Fables))

In Europe, the oral story-telling tradition began to take the form of written stories in the early 14th century especially with the publication of with Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

In the latter 19th century, the growth of print magazines and journals created a strong demand for short fiction of between 3,000 and 15,000 words. Anton Chekhov is a well known short writer of this time.

A small sample of short stories from the west are as follows:

"The Last Question" by Isaac Asimov

"The Bet" by Anton Chekhov

"The Overcoat" by Nikolai Gogol

"The Gift of the Magi" by O. Henry

The Monkey's Paw" by W.W. Jacobs

"The Necklace" by Guy de Maupassant

"The Red Room" by H.G. Wells

(Click: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short\\_story#Some\\_famous\\_short\\_stories](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short_story#Some_famous_short_stories) for a more comprehensive list of short stories)

In the dramatic tradition of ancient India it often happened that the dialogues of the main play were in Sanskrit and the stories told as stop-gap arrangement were in the language of the common people. These short interludes were called "**Apabhramsha**" and are also believed to be the forerunners of the short story.

The short story in its contemporary form reflects society and social issues quite closely

and realistically. Literary critics believe that it was in nineteenth century Bengal that the short story form was perfected by **Rabindranath Tagore** (1861-1941) though other writers had tried their hands at writing short-stories before him. **Puranchoandra**, the brother of famous Bangla novelist **Bankimchandra Chatterjee** (1838-1894) wrote a short story entitled "Madhumati" (1873) which is generally acclaimed as the first short story in Bengal. The form of the short story was influenced by the traditional story telling and the fables as well as the novel. The short story however, is different from both.

[FOR MORE INFORMATION CLICK: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short\\_story](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Short_story)]

<http://books.google.co.in/books?id=KnPoYxrRfc0C&dq=tagore+and+short+story&pg> ]

Short Story and the Printing Press in india

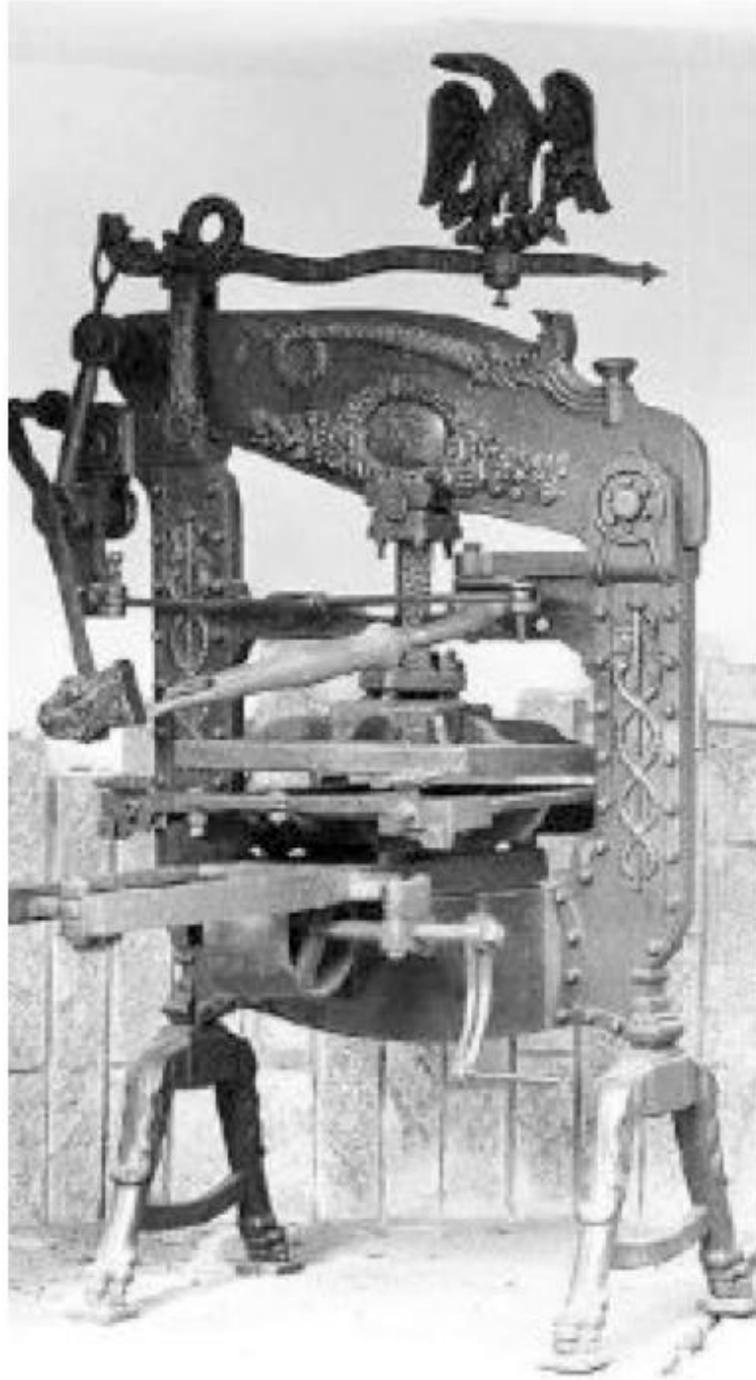
### **SHORT STORY AND THE PRINTING PRESS IN INDIA**

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The introduction of the printing press also brought about a change in literature and the reading public in India. Printing led to a wider circulation of written works. It also popularized the printing and reading of journals and short-stories.

The first literature ever printed in India was released on **November 6, 1556** by the missionaries. The rest is history. The missionaries established a number of printing presses in many parts of India, triggering a revolution in languages and literatures that led to the spreading of the written word much more widely than ever before.

#### **A sixteenth century printing press**



[FOR PHOTO AND MORE INFORMATION, CLICK  
: <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/mag/2007/04/01/stories/2007040100080400>].

**A small printing press in present times**



[PHOTO FROM: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Printing>]

**The writer**

**Chaganti Somayajulu**, popularly known as **Chaaso** (1915-1994) was a popular and prolific writer of short-stories and poems in Telugu. His first story *Chinnaji* was published in the journal "Bharathi" in 1942. Many of his short stories have been translated into other languages.

Chaaso was long time member and president of the **Progressive Writers' Association** of Andhra Pradesh. The **Indian Progressive Writers' Association** was founded in 1936 in Lucknow and the famous writer Premchand was its first President. Some of the other prominent writers and poets who have been members of the group are Faiz Ahmed Faiz, Kaifi Azmi, Ismat Chughtai, Rajinder Singh Bedi Kisan Chander, Majrooh Sultanpuri and Sahir Ludhianvi. They were mainly anti-imperialists and believed that literature should be used to bring about social change and build a more just society. Their basic aim was to inspire people through their writings and to bring in a society which is free from injustice and backwardness.

(FOR MORE INFORMATION, CLICK  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressive\\_Writers'\\_Movement](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Progressive_Writers'_Movement))

Chaaso's concern for social problems and the desire to change society gets reflected in the short-story "**Soapnut Leaves.**"

Chaaso's commitment to society continued even after he died of throat cancer on 1st January 1994 at the age of 79 in Madras. He donated his eyes and body to Sri Ramachandra Medical College and Research Institute for research purpose.



CHASSO

[FOR MORE INFORMATION ON CHASSO  
CLICK: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaganti\\_Somayajulu](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chaganti_Somayajulu)]

[FOR CHASSO'S PHOTO CLICK:  
<http://www.vundavilli.com/Telugu/Personalities/teluguPersons.htm>]

The Translator

Late Chaganti Sankar was a well known Telugu short-story writer and an eminent translator.

**The story "Soapnut Leaves" has been translated from Telugu into English but the translator is careful to keep preserve the atmosphere of the Telugu speaking village.**

**We find that the translator adopts many techniques to recreate the atmosphere of the Telugu speaking village in the story.**

- Many Telugu words have been retained in the English translation. The words from the Telugu original are written in italics. Sometimes their English translations are given in brackets e.g. *parikini* (long skirt); *Bugata garu* (Prime Landlord); *congee* (water boiled with rice); *iguru* (a curry boiled until the water has evaporated); *balusu* (canthium) bush.

- Sometimes the Telugu words are written with their meaning alongside e.g. "the most prominent *naidu* or 'big ' farmer of the village".

- At other times the Telugu words are used in such a way that one can guess their meanings. This is done especially when Gaviri exclaims either in pain or surprise e.g. 'Olammo'.

A short note on translation and languages in India

### **A SHORT NOTE ON TRANSLATION AND LANGUAGES IN INDIA**

India is a country of diverse living languages, literatures and cultures. Article 342 and the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India now identifies **22 languages as 'official'** and lists more than **1652 languages as 'mother-tongues'**

[HYPERLINK:

([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages\\_of\\_India](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_India))([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/official\\_languages\\_of\\_india](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/official_languages_of_india))

While several languages have a written script and a developed literary culture, there are many others that have for centuries existed only in their spoken form. Many of our adivasi languages for instance, fall in this category. Their orality, regional insularity and the prejudice in favour of the written word has led to a neglect of these languages and the rich literature, philosophy and culture they carry within them.

The advance in technology should now be used positively to make it possible for us to study and preserve these languages and the cultures they embody.

A multi-layered linguistic map of India shows the diversity of languages and scripts in

the country



[FOR MAP AND MORE INFORMATION CONNECT TO [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages\\_of\\_India](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Languages_of_India)]

The presence of such a large number of languages in India establishes the significance of translation as an activity that is not just desirable but inevitable. While it is true that it is impossible for any one of us to learn all the languages in India, almost all of us know more than one language without consciously trying to learn them and we quite naturally shift from one to the other, depending upon the occasion. Nonetheless, it is impossible

for any single individual to learn all the languages in India and translation becomes the vehicle for us to travel from the culture of one language into another. Translation provides not just an opportunity to read the literature of a language we may not know but also familiarizes us with its culture. Each language however, has its own cultural specific connotations and it is a challenging task to carry these to another language.

### The Telugu Language

**Telugu** is one of the official languages of India. It is a Dravidian language primarily spoken in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, where it is the official state language. If we include the non-native speakers of Telugu, then it is the most spoken Dravidian language, the third most spoken language in India after Hindi and Bangla. Telugu is one of the most used languages in Carnatic music, the classical music of South India.

### The Short Story

#### **SOAPNUT LEAVES**

Do you know what a soapnut tree is? Do you know of any nut that does the work of soap? Well, there is such a nut and it is called *ritha* in Hindi. When soaked for a couple of hours, it produces a froth that works like soap and may be used to wash clothes. Soapnut is the English translation for *ritha* and the soapnut tree is the *ritha* tree.

Ritha is a handsome deciduous tree found in India. It has large leaves. It is mainly found in upper reaches of the Indo-Gangetic plains, Shivaliks and sub-Himalayan tracts.

Have a look at the soapnut leaves in the picture.



[FOR MORE INFORMATION CLICK: <http://www.haryana-online.com/Flora/ritha.htm>]

The story "Soapnut Leaves" deals with the issue of poverty and neglect of the girl child. The two girls **Paamma** and **Gaviri** are the main characters and the story traces their experiences through a part of a day in their lives. The events of the day expose the oppression of the poor by the rich. The poor and helpless have absolutely no control over anything in the village, be it land, trees or crops. They only have their bodies, with which they labour day and night to somehow make the two ends meet. Even after labouring hard, they are totally dependent for their livelihood on those who own land.

We find out that Gaviri is eight years old and Paamma is also about the same age. Paamma's father Appala Naidu is a '**respectable**' farmer while

Gaviri's father Chinnademudu is a labourer.

We find that the word '**respectable**', which describes Paamma's father, is in **inverted commas**.

We already know that we use inverted commas mainly for two purposes:

1. For **direct speech**
2. For **quotations**

The word respectable is neither in direct speech nor is it a quotation.

So, can you think of any reason why the word 'respectable' is in inverted commas?

*Actually we use inverted commas also to indicate words when they are used not in the usual but in a special kind of way.*

*When we say that a person is respectable, we generally mean that she/he holds a position of high status in society. By putting the word respectable in inverted commas, the translator is attempting to add certain other meanings to the word that may be different from the usual meanings.*

Some hints to special meanings of the word respectable are found later in the story. We find that Paamma, the daughter of the 'respectable' farmer, is dressed in a ragged *parikini* (Telugu for a long skirt) and has only a small towel to cover her shoulders but she also wears a string of corals around her neck, gold pieces in her earlobes, and silver bracelets and anklets. Thus while Paamma's jewellery tells us that her father is not a poor man, the fact that her long skirt is "ragged" and that she still does not go to school, points at her neglect. Can we then call her father 'respectable'?

Moreover, we also find that though Paamma's father is 'respectable', his social status in the village is lower than the "Prime Landlord". He does not seem to hesitate to ask the Prime Landlord for food, fish curry and pickles and is happy to receive these from him. The pattern of different groups in the village and their social hierarchy becomes clear by this kind of information dropped in by the writer throughout the story. Thus we find that Paamma's father may be 'respectable' for some but not for others. He actually belongs to the social group in the middle. The Prime Landlord belongs to the top and Gaviri's father belongs to lowest social

strata in the village.

The low social status of Gaviri and her family becomes very clear from the kind of clothes she is seen wearing.

She is wears "cloutpiece" – a single piece of cloth with which she covers her whole body.

**Look at the picture below. It is the picture of an adivasi girl from the village of Chote-Dongar in Madhya Pradesh.**

**Gaviri too probably ties the cloutpiece around her body in the same way as the girl in the picture below.**



PHOTOGRAPH FROM - <http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/tribals/7677.htm>

In fact, Gaviri's father also probably wears a loin-cloth, or a single piece of cloth around his waist, since the story describes him as belonging to the **"loin-cloth class"**. Gaviri's nose pendant is made of copper and reflects her poverty. It is quite clear that Gaviri is from a really poor family

whose members do not even have clothes to cover their bodies fully. Neither do they have enough food and on several nights they are forced to sleep on empty stomachs.

We find that Gaviri had not eaten on the night before the story begins. She is hungry in the morning but she has a duty to perform for the household.

We are told that in the story that, "*Gaviri was eight years old. But already on her head a mountain of family responsibility had descended. With a little pot on her head, she had to go to the pond and fetch half the supply of water the family needed; basket in hand, she had to go looking along the hedges and orchards for dry leaves, twigs sticks or thorn bush for firewood. These responsibilities Gaviri had already come to carry out routinely.*"

When we look at the world around us we find that a large number of girls work to support their families.

**There are between 60-115 million working children in India. About 85 percent of these children work in the agricultural sector; the rest work in small-scale industries and the service sector, including a large but uncounted number of girls working as domestic servants. While both boys and girls work as child laborers, the girl child is often treated more dismissively than her brothers. Girls consistently earn less money than boys (as women earn significantly less than men in India), and are sometimes sexually exploited by their employers.**

**Girls are also expected to work in their own homes as well. They tend to do the other children, collect fuel, clean the house, go to market and cook. They do this even after working long hours outside the home.**

**There are twice as many girls as boys laboring in India's quarries and factories, and the majority of children working in the construction industry are girls.**

**[FOR MORE INFORMATION CLICK:  
<http://www.hrw.org/reports/1996/India3.htm>]**

Look at the photograph below. If you imagine the girl in it wearing a cloutpiece, you may be able to imagine what Gaviri may have looked like when she returned home on many evenings. Even today innumerable girls work to run the family, many of them returning after a hard day's work like the girl-child in the picture below.



[FOR PHOTOGRAPH CLICK

[http://members.tripod.com/sadashivan\\_nair/freephotos4ursocialstudy/id5.html](http://members.tripod.com/sadashivan_nair/freephotos4ursocialstudy/id5.html)]

In the story "Soapnut Leaves" Gaviri lies to Paamma when she tells her that she had eaten prawns for dinner the earlier night.

However, it looks like everybody knows about the poverty of Gaviri's family, including Paamma who is extremely rude to Gaviri.

Paamma is also after all a child and her rudeness to Gaviri may be a reflection of the general lack of sympathy that the well-off people have towards Gaviri and her poor family. Paamma probably copies the manners of her elders.

As opposed to the **human society, the natural world** is kind to the poor. There seems to be no inequality or injustice in nature. It distributes its gifts – fruits and flowers - equally among the rich and the poor. We find that the yellow coloured oleander flowers scattered all around are as easily available to Paamma as to Gaviri. The two girls pick these up and put them their hair. We find that nature is actually more generous to Gaviri than to Paamma because it is Gaviri who has much longer hair. Gaviri's bun is much bigger than Paamma's but when Gaviri does mention this, she is snubbed by Paamma whose hair is well-oiled, while Gaviri's hair is dry like the coconut fibre. We thus find that though nature may be kind to both the poor and the rich, when it comes to human society, the poor are always deprived and continuously insulted and rejected.

The writer tells us in the story that the oleander flowers were yellow. Actually, the oleander flowers are found in many colours like red, purple, yellow, white, and pink. They are grown both for their beauty and their smell. They grow easily wild or in parks, and even along roadsides.

The pictures of white and pink oleander can be seen below.



Flower bud of the white oleander.



Pink oleander

[FOR MORE INFORMATION AND PHOTOGRAPHS CLICK:  
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Oleander>]

**The writer describes many details about the natural vegetation that surrounds**

### **the two girls. This fulfills many purposes:**

The writer recreates the whole atmosphere of a village. Here people are dependent for their survival on the land. Therefore, whoever possesses land and orchards also has social power. The larger the land the more important is the person in the village hierarchy. Kaambhukta is the most important person in the village because he is the Prime Landlord. Below him are people like Paamma's father because though they are 'respectable', they have less land than the Prime Landlord. Therefore they are inferior to him in social status too. People like Gaviri's father are at the lowest rung of the social ladder because they have no land at all and need to labour on the land of other people for their survival.

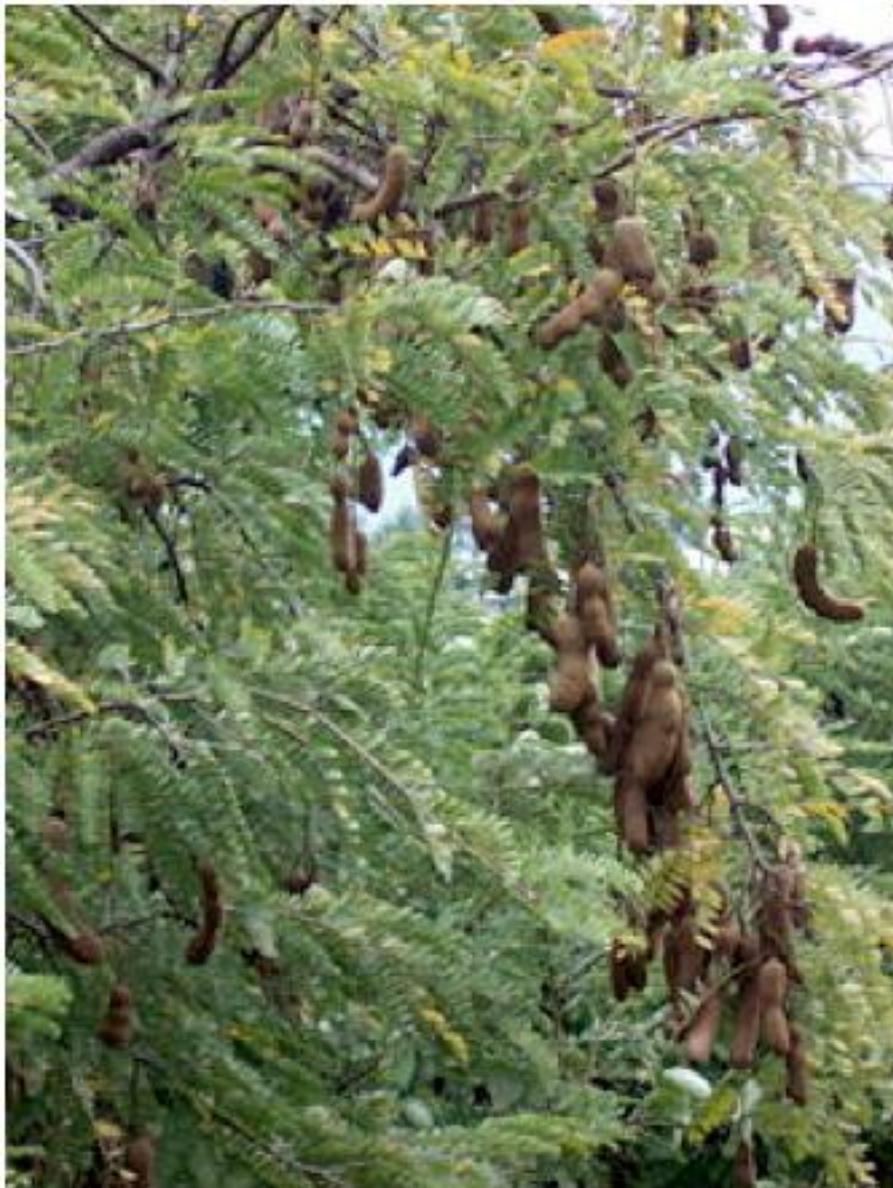
The background of nature also constantly reminds us that the inequality and injustice that we see in society is not a natural phenomenon. Nature distributes its gifts equally to everybody. However, this changes when human beings begin to possess these gifts of nature as their personal property. The possession of natural things like land, trees and water by some naturally deprives the others of their use. For example, we find that Paamma and Gaviri are free to move around the (canthium) bush and pick up the oleander flowers because they do not seem to belong to any one individual but when it comes to the tamarind tree, we find that it belongs to the Prime Landlord and Gaviri is scared to bring down the tamarind fruit. That is because the tamarind tree brings economic returns to its owner. He sells its pods to make money. Canthium may be a very beautiful bush but does not bring any profit to the owner and is therefore not possessed or guarded. *balusu*

**Have a look at the pictures of both the canthium bush and the tamarind tree and pods.**



[FOR MORE PICTURES AND INFORMATION CLICK:  
<http://www.plantzafrica.com/plantcd/canthinerm.htm>]

The canthium tree is very beautiful. Under forest conditions the tree grows quite tall. Those in more exposed conditions are shorter in height. The branches generally grow in pairs and at right angles with each other. The flowers are small and cream to green-yellow in colour



[FOR MORE PICTURES AND INFORMATION CLICK: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tamarind>]

The tamarind [tree](#) can grow up to 20 m in height. Tamarind [timber](#) consists of hard, dark

red [heartwood](#) and softer, yellowish sapwood. The leaves consist of 10–40 [leaflets](#). The [flowers](#) are produced in [racemes](#). The [fruit](#) is a brown pod-like [legume](#), which contains a soft acidic pulp and many hard-coated [seeds](#).

It is from nature that Gaviri gets what she needs. Gaviri's job for the day is to collect fuel for cooking the evening meal for her family. We find that nature helps Gaviri to achieve this. Gaviri finds that the "soapnut tree had dropped its leaves and carpeted the path." That was the best gift that Gaviri could have got. The leaves of the soapnut tree are thick and long and so even a few of them could fill Gaviri's basket. Gaviri collect these leaves freely and finds that her basket fills up fast. Her heart is delighted.

Gaviri almost forgets her hunger for sometime when she is able to fill her basket with the soapnut leaves. Both the girls turn homewards after that. On their way back, they cross the fields of the Prime Landlord and then reach the tamarind tree belonging to him. Just as they reach the tree, something falls down with a crash. Gaviri soon sees that it is a crab. She looks up to see many **paddy birds** sitting on tops of the tamarind tree looking like **white lotus** spread around.

The writer here uses a **simile** and helps us to imagine what the paddy birds sitting on the tree-top looked like.

Look at the pictures of the lotus flower and the paddy birds below. Imagine the tops of the tree covered with many such white lotus flowers. That is what the paddy birds covering the tops of the tamarind tree looked like to Gaviri.



The Lotus Flower [PICTURE FROM: <http://pdphoto.org/PictureDetail.php?pg=5237>]

A **SIMILE** is a technique that compares two or more objects and draws our attention to their similarities in order to help us to imagine more clearly the appearance of what is being described. The two things being described are usually joined by words like "like" and "as".

Some other similes in the story are:

When Gaviri's shin gets injured by the wooden sandal that the Prime Landlord throws at her, she "writhes" in "pain like a decapitated fowl". We have to imagine Gaviri twisting in pain like an injured bird.

We have here images of two kinds of birds – the paddy birds looking like blooming lotus and Gaviri in pain like an injured bird. If we imagine the two together we can immediately see that Gaviri does not have the freedom that the paddy birds have. Very different from a bird in nature, Gaviri is trapped in an unjust and unequal society and injured when she tries to challenge it.

When Gaviri suddenly saw the Prime Landlord in front of her she "bent like a bow." Once again the image of the bent bow brings to our minds the image of Gaviri bent down low in front of the Prime Landlord.

3. The tamarind pods look "like curved sickle". A sickle is a curved metal tool usually used for harvesting. If you look at the tamarind pods in the picture, you will find many of them looking like curved sickles.



A Sickle [PHOTO FROM: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:20.Falz.JPG>]

Would you now like to create some of your own similes? Try and complete the following sentences by thinking of some suitable comparisons:

1. The big bun of hair on Gaviri's head was like .....
2. The Prime Landlord's loud voice sounded like .....
3. Paamma's ragged skirt looked like .....
4. When Gaviri saw the dried twig that fell from the tamarind tree, she was as happy as .....
5. The yellow coloured oleander flowers had fallen around and looked like .....

\*\*\*\*

## **METAPHOR**

Unlike simile, a metaphor does not compare two objects. Instead, it replaces one object with another to visually create the image. For instance, if we want to praise somebody's strength, we sometimes use the image of a lion.

If we use a **simile** we may say

"He is as strong as a tiger"

If we use a **metaphor** to express the same idea we may say

"He is a tiger".

In "Soapnut Leaves" the writer make use of metaphor when he describes the anger with which the Prime Landlord looks at Gaviri:

"The Landlord's eyes kept showering hot tamarind coals on her."

Do you think it is possible to express the same idea by using a simile instead of the metaphor in the sentence above? Try and do it.

As the day passes in the story "Soapnut Trees," we find out many differences that exist between the lives of the two girls Gaviri and Paamma. We find that while in the fields, Paamma quite spontaneously pulls out a few greengram pods and starts chewing them. Gaviri, in spite of being hungry does not dare to do this. She knows that **"if the poor indulge in such petty thefts, they will be treated as major crimes."** Paamma on the other hand is confident that she would go scot-free even if she is caught. She tells Gaviri, **"Even if anyone sees, I am the daughter of Appala Naidu and what can they do to me, those silly asses?"**

It seems quite clear that there exist two sets of rules in the village – one for the well-off and the other for the poor. The same act done by the poor is punished and when done by the rich or influential, it is overlooked.

**Do you agree with Gaviri's opinion? Can you explain the reasons for your answer?**

**TRY AND ORGANISE A DEBATE ON THIS TOPIC.**

We find that when the girls reach the tamarind tree, it is Paamma who once again picks up few stones and aims at the pods to bring them down. Gaviri begs her to give a pod to her but Paamma refuses. "If you want them, you hit them," she tells Gaviri and once again goes into the field of greengram pods.

Gaviri is frightened but her empty stomach pushes her on and finally she does pick up a stone and throws it up. The stone falls back but it does not bring any tamarind pods down. Instead, a dried up branch falls down with the stone. Another child would have been unhappy to see the dry branch instead of the tamarind pod and especially if the child was as hungry as Gaviri. However, Gaviri is thrilled to see the dry branch fall. For her the dry branch was very valuable because it would have provided fuel for the family's cooking fire.

Gaviri breaks the dry branch into small pieces and puts these in her basket, on top of the soapnut leaves. Just then the Prime Landlord walks in. He sees Gaviri standing with a basket full of soapnut leaves and the dry twigs, gives a kick to the basket. "The basket and the leaves flew" and got scattered all around.

The writer tells us that the soapnut leaves and the pieces of dry twigs in the basket may have been worthless for the Prime Landlord but they were of great value to Gaviri. "For the household of Chinnademudu, the trash their daughter Gaviri collected had much economic value." Clearly, families of people like Chinnademudu live on what is thrown away as worthless by others.

By the way, this does not happen only in villages. If you have looked around, you may have often seen people – both adults and children –collecting things from the garbage. These are the ragpickers and the waste produced by others becomes a means of survival for them. Not many of us realize how useful a service they are performing for us and society on the whole?

Do you know that more than 95 per cent of Delhi has no formal system of house-to-house garbage collection? This basic service is actually provided by the 300, 000 garbage collectors of the city who are amongst the poorest of the poor in India. They are not paid regularly and live on the small amount of money that they may sometimes make from the discarded items.  
[FOR MORE INFORMATION CLICK:  
<http://www.iht.com/articles/2007/09/02/asia/rag.php>]

Look at the photograph of some children who are garbage collectors or ragpickers. If you like you may read a poem about them at the end of the lesson.



[PHOTO FROM: [http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/people/rag\\_picklers.htm](http://www.kamat.com/kalranga/people/rag_picklers.htm)]

We find that in the short-story "Soapnut Tree" Gaviri collects dried twigs and leaves for use by her family but in the process she also manages to clean the village of "trash." The Prime Landlord however, treats Gaviri and her family as very low and insults them without any valid reason. After kicking Gaviri's basket, the Prime Landlord lifts a bush close by to find a basket of **cattledung** hidden under it.

Many people in cities may regard cattledung as being dirty and useless and wonder why

somebody would hide a basket of cattledung in the bushes. However, cattledung is of great utility in the Indian village. Some of you may already know that it is used as fuel by both the rich and the poor in the village. See the picture below to get an idea about how it is done.



[PHOTO FROM: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cow\\_dung](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cow_dung)]

The Prime Landlord decides that the cattledung has been stolen and hidden by Gaviri without asking her any questions. Gaviri tries to tell him that she is not the one who has committed the theft. He however begins to fling abuses at her, calling her a "little bitch". To begin with, Gaviri is very frightened and starts weeping. The Prime Landlord lands a blow on her back with his wooden stick. Gaviri now stops crying and shows him her hands and her basket, saying sharply, "It's not me. Look at my basket and my hands." Both have no traces of cattledung but the Prime Landlord lands another blow. It is at this point that Gaviri seems to lose her patience and begins to heap a string of abuses at him, "You son-of-a-whore! It's not me," she screams. This comes as a shock to the Prime Landlord because nobody in the village had the courage to reply back to him. He takes off his wooden sandal and throws it at Gaviri. It hits Gaviri on the shin and she falls down. Satisfied, the Prime Landlord goes away. Gaviri now gets up to find that her shin is hurt and bruised. That is because the sandal is made of solid wood. Look at the picture below to see what **the wooden sandal** looks like. Imagine this wooden sandal hitting the little girl's shin and you may be able to guess the injury it causes.



[PHOTO FROM: <http://delhimagic.blogspot.com/2007/06/secret-of-wooden-slippers.html>]

Gaviri gets up. She weeps and looks at the soapnut leaves and the dry twigs scattered all around. Continuing to abuse the Prime Landlord, she picks up the soapnut leaves but decides not to pick up the dried twigs. She addresses the absent Prime Landlord and says, "You-son-of-bitch! No one needs your tamarind twigs."

***Do you think that Gaviri should have left the dry twigs behind? They are after all valuable for her family and by leaving them behind she will not be harming the Prime Landlord but her own family?***

***Do you think the writer is trying to communicate some kind of a message through Gaviri's action?***

One way of understanding the end of the story is to see it as a protest of a completely helpless girl against her exploitation and oppression. Perhaps the writer is trying to tell us that there will come a point of time when the poor and the deprived people will fight back for their rights and dignity. Even if it appears pointless for some time, it is bound to have repercussion after a while. Gaviri may be seen as having sown the seed of this protest that may later grow into a huge tree.

We find that both Gaviri and Paamma do not go to school and this is despite the fact that there is a school in the village itself.

After reading the story we get to see why it is difficult for Gaviri to go to school. Many girls like Gaviri are not able to go to school because they share the responsibility of running their household, doing jobs like collecting fuel or taking care of their younger siblings. Gaviri's father also feels that sending Gaviri to school would be a waste of time.

What we find even more difficult to understand is the reason for Paamma not attending school and this may be seen as an example of the general neglect of the girl child. Paamma does tell us that her father has decided to send her to school from the coming Tuesday. We are however not sure that it would really happen.

By showing us the lives of Gaviri and Paamma, the writer gives us a glimpse of some of the reasons for the girl child not being able to attend school.

The Census of India 2001 gives us the following information regarding the literacy among children aged 15 and above.

**Total percentage of children aged 15 and above: 61%**

**Out of this 61 %**

**Boys who are literate= 73.4%**  
**and**

**Girls who are literate= 47.8%**

[SOURCE: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/print/in.html>]

The Government of India has taken several measures to protect and promote the Girl Child. It has announced its "Education for All" campaign which is to reach 19-24 million children in the age group 6-14, of whom 60 percent are girls.

[FOR MORE INFORMATION CLICK:

[http://www.indianembassy.org/policy/Children\\_Women/rights\\_children.html](http://www.indianembassy.org/policy/Children_Women/rights_children.html)]

The school children, while singing a hymn to Saraswati say 'Saraswati' and Paara repeats it as "Saraspati"; they say 'Namstubbyam' and Paamma says 'Namattubbem'. What do you think is the writer trying to tell us through this incorrect repetition of the words by Paamma?

This shows that the spoken language of the people is different from the language taught in school. The school teaches **Sanskrit** but the people speak in **Telugu**. Thus clearly, only the people who go through formal education are the ones who get to learn Sanskrit. The knowledge of Sanskrit then, becomes the symbol of social status.

All the incidents of the story happen against the background of the school children reciting either hymns or multiplication tables. There is clearly very little physical distance between the girls and the school yet they seem to belong to two different worlds. It would be impossible for Gaviri and Paamma to enter the school unless society is able to get rid of economic and social inequality.

#### Questions

- Why do you think the word 'respectable' describing Paamma's father is in inverted commas?
- Do you think that Paamma's father will really send her to school?
- What are the various jobs that Gaviri has to do for her family?
- Gaviri reports that her father feels that a school is useless for labourers. Would you agree with a statement like the one made by Gaviri's father?
- Why do you think Paamma is so cruel to Gaviri?
- We find in the story that Paamma enters a field, pulls out the green gram pods and starts munching them. Why do you think that Gaviri does not do this in spite of being hungry?
- Why do you think Gaviri forgot about her hunger at the sight of the leaves of the soapnut tree that had fallen from the tree?
- Why did Gaviri's heart palpitate when she threw a stone at the tamarind pods? Will you see this as an act of defiance? Why was Gaviri happy when a big, broken and dead dry twig came rustling down and dropped on the ground?
- Why did Gaviri bend like a bow when the Prime Landlord came?
- What does the phrase "finished off many an intrepid stalwart" mean?
- Why do you think Gaviri leaves behind the pieces of dry twigs? Do you think she should have done that?
- The school is going on all the time in the background as the events of the story unfold. Does this add any extra dimension to the story?

**[NOTE: AUDIO INPUT REQUIRED HERE]**

**The Ragpicker Child**

**by**

**Carole Edgecox**

*What do you see when you're looking at me?  
My clothes are all tatters, my hair full of fleas.*

*My body is battered, my feet always bare,  
But I have a heart, and need someone to care.*

*A long time ago, I had a mother,  
A father, a sister, an aunt, and a brother.*

*Where are they now? The weather is cold.  
I need someone to love me, someone to hold.*

*Each morning at dawn when people start waking,  
The fires are all lit, but I huddle shaking.*

*The cold and the wet just eats at my bones,  
I need someone to love me, someone to hold.*

*If I rise very early the pickings are best,  
I dodge the night watchman and fight off the rats.*

*The other rag pickers, they are my brothers,  
My father, my sister, my aunt, and my mother.*

*We all need a family, someone of our own,  
A fire, and a mother, and love in a home.*

*Look in my eyes, I'm just a child.  
But my body is old and my head very wise.*

*Christmas to me, is like any day,  
The rubbish is picked, and the rats chased away.*

*So tell me why Christmas is special to some,  
And who is this God, and who is his Son?*

*Where is he now, can he see me,  
As I pick through the rubbish, and scratch at the fleas?*

*You tell me this story, a baby was born,  
In a manger he lay, with the beasts in a stall*

*And Mary his mother, loved him so much,  
But she knew from the start, He was given to us.*

*A Gift He was called, from our Father above,  
And sent to this earth, for each one to love.*

*Can I be this baby, just for a while,*

*And have someone to love me, and someone to smile.*

*And perhaps I'll believe, that the Lord is my helper,*

*And be not afraid, when man tries to hurt me.*

*So next time you see me, see Mary's child,*

*Not a dirty rag picker, discarded and wild.*