

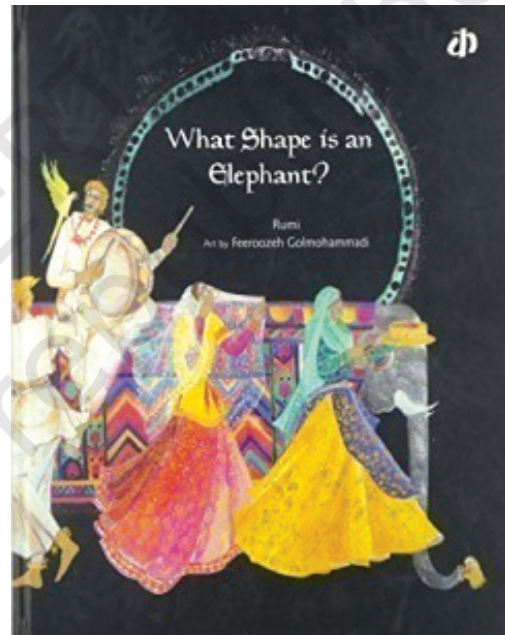
BOOK REVIEW

“What Shape is an Elephant?”

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Author	: Rumi
Illustrator	: Feroozeh Golmohammadi
Ages	: 8–11
Publishers	: Katha
Price	: ₹ 95
Pages	: 32

This is a well-known story, known to most adults and children in the Indian sub-continent and beyond. Readers would recall that the story is about six blind men. They try to learn about the elephant, through the only means they know— the sense of touch. Since the elephant is an enormous animal, each is able to touch one part. The one, who felt the leg of the elephant, compared the elephant to a pillar. The second blind man touched the tail of the animal, and declared that the elephant was like a rope. The third blind man, who was quite tall, happened to touch the ear of the elephant, which made



him announce to the world that the elephant was like a large fan. Another felt along the trunk of the elephant, and compared the animal to a snake. Yet another touched the tusk of the elephant, and stated the elephant

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is hard, smooth and like a spear. The last one moved his hand over the elephant's belly, and likened the animal to a wall.

The story has travelled across countries and has been interpreted in different ways. There are variations in the tale—in one narrative, there are seven blind men; in another, the elephant is in a dark room, etc. A lesser-known form of the story describes six persons feeling a large statue of an elephant, while being blindfolded. In a fourth version, sighted man is introduced into the story, who describes the entire elephant from various angles, giving a full description. The blind men then learn that they were all partially correct and partially wrong. The story has also been presented in a poem, titled "The Blind Men and the Elephant" by John G Saxe, it has found place in many poetry collections. The poem begins with the following lines:

- it was six men of Indostan to learning much inclined;
- who went to see the Elephant (though all of them were blind);
- that each by observation might satisfy his mind.

This particular publication, brought out by Katha introduces Rumi, the thirteenth century poet and philosopher to young readers. Rumi talks about a group of Persians who had never seen an elephant. One day, they are told that a camp from India has reached Persia, and that

an elephant was part of the camp. The persians were very excited. So impatient they were to satisfy their curiosity that they are not willing to wait till daylight. They reached the camp, and touch and felt the elephant in the dark, and depending upon where they touch it, they compared the elephant to various things. Rumi included this tale in his famous work *Masnavi*. He titles it 'The Elephant in the Dark' and interprets a verse in the Quran.

The story is evergreen in the minds of young and old alike. As with any other folktale, the theme is quite simple, yet it has a powerful impact. Young readers are led into the many layers of meaning that emerged from the story. The most obvious one is of course the suppression of the ego: each blind man is convinced that what he knows is 'right', and what is more, that only his knowledge is 'right'. The truth may be greater than what our puny minds can conceive. Rumi uses the story to explain why people end up having different ideas about life in general, and about God. Rumi seeks to develop in the minds of the reader that the truth is much more than our eyes can see and our hands can touch.

The book has beautiful illustrations by the Iranian artist Ms Feroozeh. It is to be appreciated that the book includes the author's name and the illustrator's name with equal importance to both. Indeed, the illustrations are like miniature persian paintings. She uses a wide

range of colours, with plenty of floral motifs, which adds an expressive dimension of the narrative. Here and there are touches of silver and gold, again in the miniature tradition, which illuminate the illustrations combine to create a unique book.

Rumi also subtly reminds young readers that each of the men was not 'wrong' entirely. The narrative emphasises the limits of perception and the importance of complete context. The elephant is like what it had been compared to, but it is also much more than that. Thus, there can be different perspectives of the same truth. However, each man was 'blind' to the others' perspectives. What they lacked was the will to communicate,

and an open mindset. It is also possible that perhaps there can be a deficit of information. Finally the story leads, young readers to gradually realise that even when people develop open mindsets, and begin to communicate, even then there may not be full knowledge. For, readers to ponder over 'relative truth'; what one fully believes to be true today, may be disproven tomorrow when new facts or discoveries come to light.

They then describe the elephant based on their limited experience. Naturally their descriptions are different. In some versions, they come to suspect that the other person is dishonest and start fighting with one another.