

The Sanskrit Fables in World Literature and Art Forms

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The Sanskrit fables and tales, which have their origin in the Vedic literature, contain no such rigid distinction. These are specially intended to teach practical wisdom and lessons of polity. The fables and tales always attract the human mind, which have a didactic motive and a sententious note. It is interesting to note that, in the fables, all sorts of human behaviour are transferred to the animal kingdom. Thereby, the stories become allegories, which provide moral instruction through amusement. The Pañcatantra, the Hitopadeśa, the Vetālapañcaviṃśati, the Simhāsanadvātrimśikā, the Śukasaptati, etc., deserve particular mention among the Sanskrit fables. The fables have an extensive circulation, both in the country of its origin and throughout the nations as various versions of translations and adaptations are composed all over the world. This is due to the vast popularity of the fables that these texts have gained currency in different parts of the world. Equally, the fables have enriched the diverse art forms of the various nations of the world.

Sanskrit fables and tales have their origin in the Vedic literature as the *Rgveda*, the first specimen of world literature, itself contains copious materials with the characteristics of the fables. There is no such rigid distinction between the fables and the tales. Yet, Ramaranjan Mukherji, the noted Indologist, in his essay, entitled, ‘Sanskrit and Sanskritic Fables’, incorporated in the *Cultural Heritage of India*, observes, ‘While the fable becomes enriched by the folktale or spicy stories of human adventure, the tale becomes complex by assimilating the features of beast stories and also their didactic motive.’¹



Embracing into its body, the elements of the fable and of the tale, the *Pañcatantra* deserves a prominent place in the Sanskrit fable literature. The *Pañcatantra*, written in prose with an admixture of illustrative aphoristic verses, is specially intended to teach practical wisdom to princes. It is held that the *Pañcatantra* was penned by one Viṣṇuśarman, to whom the sons of King Amaraśakti of Mahilāropya, a city in the South India, were entrusted, on his promising, to beget them the lessons of polity within six months.²

The term *pañcatantra* itself suggests that it is divided into five books (*tantra*), each of which deals with an aspect of practical wisdom. The books are entitled *Mitrabheda* (which handles separation of friends), *Mitrasaṁprāpti* (which deals with the acquisition of friends), *Kākolūkīya* (which illustrates the theme of war and peace describing the enmity between crows and owls), *Labdhapraṇāśa* (which has its central theme, the loss of what was gained) and *Aparikṣītakāraka* (the theme of which is hasty or ill-considered actions). The five books also contain the valuable verses through which the fundamentals of moral, religious, philosophical and political ideas along with the general codes of conduct are unravelled. The *Pañcatantra* possesses a universal appeal owing to the lucidity with which the noblest thoughts have been expressed.

It is interesting to note that the beasts and birds, i.e. the animals, and the human beings are brought together in a most natural way to play their distinctive roles in the stories of the *Pañcatantra*. Here, all sorts of human behaviour are transferred to the animal kingdom. Thereby, the stories become allegories, which provide moral instruction through amusement. The tales and stories always attract the human mind, and thus, the *Pañcatantra*, the *Hitopadeśa* of Nārāyaṇapaṇḍita, and such fables become widely acclaimed books of stories. These stories have always a didactic motive and a sententious note. This didactic motive of the fables bring into a peculiar pattern of the fable literature, the pattern of enclosing stories within a main story. The characters usually try to support their motto by allusions to other fables, and this causes the insertion of a tale within a tale. Thus, the *Pañcatantra* contains seventy-eight subtales within its framework.

The earliest collection of fables, known to us, is Guṇāḍhya's *Brhatkathā*, composed in Paiśacīprākṛta, a very low form of Prākṛta, spoken by the degraded class. Daṇḍin calls it the *bhūtabhāṣā*.³ Scholars hold that the original *Brhatkathā* was written in prose, which is now lost. The two Kashmirian versions of the *Brhatkathā* are available



in Sanskrit, one is Somadeva's *Kathāsaritsāgara* and the other is *Bṛhatkathāmañjarī* of Kṣemendra.

Diverse works were composed in Sanskrit mostly inspired by the *Bṛhatkathā* and the *Pañcatantra*, of which the *Vetālapañcaviṃśati*, the *Simhāsanadvātriṃśikā*, the *Śukasaptati*, the *Kathārṇava*, the *Puruṣaparīkṣā* and the *Bhojaprabandha* deserve particular mention, besides the *Hitopadeśa*, which is avowedly based on the *Pañcatantra*.

The original text of the *Pañcatantra* was lost at times, and later on, the *Tantrākhyāyikā* is recognised as a true version of the primary text of the *Pañcatantra*, with insertion of more tales into it, and thus, it is an enlarged edition of the original *Pañcatantra*.

The *Pañcatantra*, along with the *Tantrākhyāyikā*, had an unequalled success in that, it was translated in various languages all over the world. In the whole field of world literature, observes V. Raghavan, the distinguished Indologist, 'There has been no work more remarkable than the Sanskrit *Pañcatantra* of which two hundred versions arose in more than fifty languages, three-fourths of which are non-Indian.'⁴

The *Pañcatantra* has an extensive circulation, both in the country of its origin and throughout the world. It was first translated into Pahlavi, also known as Pehlevi, the language of Persia, or Iran, in the Middle East. The Pahlavi was the official language of the Sassanian or Sassanid empire of Persia, the Neo-Persian Empire, known to the historians, from 3rd century B.C. to 10th century A.D. It was the Persian royal physician (*rājavidya*) Burzoe, also known as Burzoy, who translated the work into Pahlavi in 570 CE. It is said that he travelled to India in search of a book of wisdom, a book greatly sought by the then king of Persia, viz. King Khosru Anushīrvan, also called Khusroy I, who ruled from 531 CE to 579 CE in Persia. The title of the translated work is *Karirak ud Damanak*, which is derived from the name of the two jackals that figure in the first book of the *Pañcatantra*, viz. Karaṭaka and Damanaka. The book by Burzoe is also lost now, which became the basis of the Syriac translation under the title *Kalilag wa Damnag*. The translation was done by the famous Syrian priest and writer Bud in 570 CE. Syria is now officially known as Syrian Arab Republic in Western Asia. After two hundred years, around 750 CE, Abd-allah-ibn-al-Muquaffa translated the Syriac version into Arabic, with the title *Kalilah wa Dimnah*. In this version, half its contents are based on the older works like the Syriac translation and some are Muquaffa's own additions. This Arabic version led to the composition of various versions, including a second Syriac version in 10th century A.D., and an 11th century version in Greek by



Symeon, entitled *Stephanites kai Ichnelates*, from which translations were made into Latin and various Slavic languages. The Slav countries in central and Eastern Europe are, viz. Russia, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Serbia, Croatia, Bosnia, Bulgaria and others. In 12th century A.D., the Hebrew version of Rabbi Joël came out, which became the source of the most European versions of the *Pañcatantra*. The Hebrew was the spoken language of ancient Palestine in Western Asia, and now it is the official language of the state of Israel in the Middle East.

In 13th century A.D., Johannes De Capua, who was an Italian Jewish convert to Christianity, also known as John of Capua, rendered the Hebrew version into Latin, under the title *Directorium humane vitae*, which was printed about 1480 C.E. From Capua's work, was made the famous German version by Anton von Pforr, under the title *Das Buch der Beispiele der alten Weisen*, or *Book of Apologues of the Ancient Sages*, first printed in 1481 CE. A Persian version was also made in 1130 CE, which was recast later under the title, *Anvār-i-Suhailī*, or *Lights of Canopus*.

Thus, different subsequent translations and adaptations of the *Pañcatantra* are available in various languages of Europe and Asia. The tales of *Pañcatantra* are also available in English literature under the title, *Fables of Bidpai*, which is an English translation of the later Syriac version, done by J.G.N. Keith - Falconer, published from Cambridge in 1885. This work is also known as *Fables of Pilpay*. A.A. Macdonell holds that Bidpai or Pilpay is derived from Bidbah, the character of the Brāhmaṇa philosopher in the translation work, which is equivalent to Sanskrit term *vidyāpati*, i.e. 'master of sciences', 'chief scholar'.⁵ *The Moral Philosophie of Doni* is another English version of the *Pañcatantra*, and these works are mainly found as the derivative works, developed later on.

The similarities of stories, found in the *Pañcatantra*, with those in the *Aesop's Fables* attest to the fact that the stories travelled widely and orally in the ancient world. The *Aesop's Fables*, or the *Aesopica*, a collection of fables, is credited to Aesop, a slave, and a storyteller, believed to have lived in ancient Greece (620 - 564 BCE). The stories, associated with his name, have descended to modern times through a number of sources, and the new stories are still being added to Aesop's corpus. Thus, Aesop's glory as the fabulist has become worldwide. With regard to the place of origin of these fables, scholars are widely divided in their opinion. But the resemblance between the fables of the *Pañcatantra* and those of Aesop is striking, and thereby the scholars establish that the tales are indebted to their Indian origin, or it can be explained due to common world heritage.⁶



The *Pañcatantra* stories travelled to Indonesia through old Javanese written literature, and possibly through old versions. It has been translated into Turkish (spoken in Turkey, Cyprus, etc.), Danish (spoken in Denmark, Greenland, etc.), Georgian (the official language of Georgia, a country at the intersection of Europe and Asia), Icelandic (a North Germanic language, spoken in Iceland, a country in Europe), and in several other languages in the East.

Many English translations of the *Pañcatantra* are available in different parts of the world. Amongst them, Johannes Hertel, a German Indologist, did an extensive work on the translation and critical edition of the *Pañcatantra*, which is a research-based work, published in Harvard Oriental Series (Vols. XI, XII, XIII & XIV), Harvard University Press, Cambridge, USA.

Other scholars like Theoder Benfey, a German scholar of Sanskrit and Comparative Linguistics, Franklin Edgerton, an American linguistic scholar, Arthur W. Ryder, Salisbury Professor of Comparative Philology at Yale University, New Haven, Patrick Olivelle, Professor of Sanskrit and Indian religions at the University of Texas, Austin, Texas, and the like, also have contributed in a major way to the study of *Pañcatantra*, through their English translations and critical editions.

Likewise, the *Hitopadeśa* fables also gained wide currency in many languages of the East and the West. Charles Wilkins, an English Orientalist, translated the *Hitopadeśa* into English in 1787, who was also the first translator of the *Śrīmadbhagavadgītā*, into English in 1785. In Sinhalese literature also, there is a didactic poem *Subāsītaya* by Alagiyavanna Mohottala of 17th century, which is based on the *Hitopadeśa*. In Indonesia also, there is a fable, titled *Tantri Kāmandaka*, which is, principally, based on the *Pañcatantra* and the *Hitopadeśa*. It is also translated into the Newari language, which is now known as the *Nepāla-bhāṣā*.

The *Vetālapañcaviṃśatikā* or the *Vetālapañcaviṃśati* is a series of twenty-five stories, very old in its origin. One of its old recensions is found in the twelfth book of the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, by Somadeva, which was compiled in the 11th century A.D. But its old text is entirely lost, and it has come down to us in different recensions, made in later ages. The two other recensions, in Sanskrit, are those by Śivadāsa and Jambhaladatta. There is also another recension of the *Vetālapañcaviṃśati* by Veṅkaṭabhaṭṭa.

It contains twenty-four stories with the frame story itself, making up the twenty-fifth. The tales of the fable revolve around the mighty legendary king of ancient India, Vikramāditya of Ujjain, and the Vampire, *Vetāla*, a predatory undead spirit. The *Vetālas*



are the ghosts or spirits, who are believed to make their abode in the corpses and charnel grounds. It is also believed that the corpse no longer decays while it is inhabited by a *Vetāla*. King Vikrama promised a *Yogin* that he would capture a *Vetāla*, and in return, the *Yogin* promised to grant Vikrama special powers for the prosperity of his kingdom. This is where the plot of twenty-four substories begin. Each time, Vikrama tries to capture a *Vetāla*, it narrates a story that ends with a riddle, which Vikrama has to answer. The *Vetāla*, though mischievous in character, eventually proves to be a good spirit, who warns Vikrama about the nefarious motive of the *Yogin*, who is trying to plot his death, and thus, helping Vikrama vanquish his real enemy. Afterwards, the *Vetāla* is released with the promise that he would come to Vikrama's aid, whenever, he is in need.

The stories of the *Vetālapañcaviṃśati* are well-known as *Baitāl Pachīsī*, and its English version is *Vikram and the Vampire*, by Sir Richard Francis Burton, which is however, not a translation, but a very free adaptation. During the reign of Muhammad Shah III (1720-1747), the stories of the *Vetālapañcaviṃśati* were rendered into *Braja-bhāṣā*, in India, and it was retranslated into Hindi in 1805. The Hindi translation of the *Braja-bhāṣā* recension differs little from Śivadāsa's version, and many translations were made into European languages, based on the Hindi version, known as *Baitāl Pachīsī*, i.e. the Twenty-five Tales of a Spirit. John Platts made an English version of the fable, which was published from London in 1871. W.B. Barker rendered the English translation of the Hindi text of the fable, and H. Oesterly made a German translation of the work.

The twenty-five stories of *Vetāla* have been, very often, translated into popular Indian languages, and is found also in a strongly changed form in the Mongolian *Ssiddhi-kür*, written in Kalmyk language. The Kalmyks are a Mongolian subgroup in Russia and Kyrgyzstan. Here, in the word *ssiddhi-kür*, the word *kür* is Mongolian, and the term *siddhi* is Sanskrit *siddhi*, which means, 'the dead, endowed with supernatural powers'.⁷ The *Ssiddhi-kür*, however, has only thirteen stories, which have little correspondances with the Indian stories, excepting the framestory.

The Tibetan version of the *Vetālapañcaviṃśati* also is available. The spread of Indian literature in the Tibet, Mongolia and Siberia coincided with the dissemination of Buddhism in these regions. The process started in Tibet in 7th century A.D., and continued for a long time, making a great impact on its cultural life. Buddhism and its literature in Tibetan translations reached the regions, now known as Inner and Outer Mongolia, through Tibetan missionaries during the second half of the 12th century



A.D. It may be mentioned that a large number of Indian Sanskrit texts, both Buddhist and non-Buddhist were preserved in Tibet, which formed a precious collection. Rahul Sankrityayan, one of the most widely travelled scholars of India, a writer and a polyglot, found abundant texts preserved in original Sanskrit in the Shalu (Tibetan Zhwa lu) monastery in Tibet, during his visit there in 1930-31. While returning, he brought a number of them to the K.P. Jayaswal Research Institute, Patna.⁸

The fable is also translated into Newari, which was the language of the royal court of Nepal till 1768 C.E. The Malla kings of Nepal, an independent Hindu kingdom in the Himālayas, were patrons of learning, and they encouraged and patronized the production of literature in Maithili, Bengali, Sanskrit, etc., and thus, many Sanskrit texts were translated into Newari.

Its numerous adaptations for the screen in the form of TV serials are also available, and thus, it is adapted for various art forms also, such as performing art, painting, drawing, sculpture, filmmaking, crafts and architecture.

The *Simhāsadvātrimśikā* or the *Simhāsanadvātriśatikathā*, i.e. the ‘Thirty-two Throne Stories’, also called the *Vikramacarita*, i.e. ‘Life and Deeds of Vikrama’, is a popular fable as its text is available in different recensions. Apparently, the South Indian recension stands closest to the original text.

The throne of Vikramāditya was a gift from Indra, and when king Śālivāhana vanquished him and killed him in battle, the throne was buried in the earth. King Bhoja of Dhārā in Malwa region in Central India (modern Dhār) once, by chance, unearthed it, and as he was ascending the throne, images of maidens, sculptured on the throne, became animated, and related the tales in praise of Vikramāditya to Bhoja, and regained their liberty.

The stories are indeed very fantastical, and by far, are not so lively as those of the *Vetālapañcaviṃśati*. The stories are meant to describe the nobility of the king Vikramāditya. Since in all the recensions, the frame story makes reference to King Bhoja and Dhārā, the work could not be of an age, earlier than 11th century A.D., which is observed by Winternitz.⁹ Probably, it was written in honour of Bhoja, during the period of his reign. In about 1574 C.E., this work was translated into Persian under an order of Akbar, the Great. This translated work has been rendered into French by Baron D. Lescallier, which was published in 1817 from New York. The fable has been translated into many Indian languages, and in Siamese language also, spoken by the Central Thai people and vast majority of Thai Chinese. The title of the work in Siamese language is



Sib-songlieng. It has been translated into Mongolian language under the title, *Story of Ardshi Bordshi Chan*. Ardshi Bordshi is Rājā Bhoja, and Chan in Mongolian language is Lord.¹⁰ There are other English translations of the work under the title, *Throne of King Vikrama*, known as a collection of Indian folk tales.

The *Śukasaptati* or the *Śukasaptatikathā* is a collection of seventy stories of erotic nature, but of didactic import in it. It is said that the story was related to Indra, in his assembly, by Nārada, in the form of a parrot. It is narrated that one Devadāsa kept a parrot, and when the king sent him away to a distant land, with an intent to seduce his wife, the parrot, to whom the care of his whole family was entrusted by Devadāsa, began to relate, each night, one story to her, which kept her absorbed in listening to the story, till dawn. And thus, by the end of narrating seventy stories, the husband returned, and the evil intention of the king to seduce his wife failed.

The date and the author of the original *Śukasaptati* is not known. The work has been translated into Persian under the title, *Tutinameh*, which literally means ‘Tales of a Parrot’, in the 14th century A.D. A lavishly illustrated version of the *Tutinameh*, containing two hundred and fifty miniature paintings, was commissioned by Mughal Emperor Akbar in the later half of the 16th century A.D., which was made over five years after he ascended the throne in 1556 CE. It was drawn by the two Persian artists, named Mir Sayyid Ali and Abdus Samad, working in the court workshop. It is now preserved in the Cleveland Museum of Art in Cleveland, Ohio, which houses a diverse permanent collection of more than 61,000 works of art form around the world. A second version of the *Tutinameh*, made for Akbar, is now dispersed among several Museums, but with the largest part in the Chester Beatty Library in Dublin, Ireland, which is presently known as the Chester Beatty, established in 1950 CE.

The original authorship of the *Tutinameh* is credited to Nachshabi, a Persian physician and Sufi saint, a contemporary of Hafiz (also known as Hafez), the Persian lyric poet. On Nachshabi’s *Tutinameh*, Kadiri made another Persian rendering in the 18th, or in the beginning of the 19th century A.D., and one hundred years after Nachshabi, was prepared the Turkish version by George Rosen, published from Leipzig in 1858.

A.B. Keith has observed that through the *Tutinameh*, many Indian stories have gained currency in West Asia and in Europe.¹¹ P.K. Hitti, a Lebanese - American Professor and scholar at Princeton and Harvard University, who single-handedly created the discipline of Arabic studies in the United States, observes that the basis of the famous Arabian book of fables, *Thousands and One Nights*, was a Persian work,



containing several stories of Indian origin.¹²

And thus, it is derived that due to the vast popularity of the fables, the *Pañcatantra* and the other texts travelled widely to the different corners of the world, and thereby various versions of the fables exist in most of the world languages as translations and adaptations. Equally, the fables have enriched the diverse art forms of the different parts of the world.

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