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Story-tellers of the World

India has produced stupendous literature of a vast variety. It includes spiritual and scientific treatises, literary works, the longest epics, fabulous fables and stories, and intimate literature on sex. By any yardstick, the contribution of Indians to the thought of the world has been remarkable. Much of it has not yet caught the attention of world scholars.

Rig Veda is by now acknowledged as the oldest book of the world replete with sublime and symbolic poetry. It was put down in writing, it is said, in 1200 BC. But the well-known German Indologist, Prof. Max Muller, warned his students in Gifford Lectures in 1890, that 1200 BC was "purely an arbitrary date based on unproven assumptions about the rate of evolution of Sanskrit." Ralph T. Griffiths in *Hymns of Rig Veda* quotes Max Muller as saying: "Whatever the date of Vedic hymns, whether 1500 BC or 15000 BC, they have their own unique place and stand by themselves in the literature of the world." (Vol 1. p. 66)

In scientific works and astronomy, 18 *Siddhantas* – some of them extinct – stand out as superb. *Brahma-sphuta-siddhanta* of Brahmagupta was taken by an Indian merchant to the Caliph of Baghdad in 771 AD. It was translated into Arabic by Mohammed ibn Ibrahim al-Fazari and called as *Sindhind*. The other book he took, *Khanda Khadyaka*, was translated by Yakub ibn Tariq and is known as *Arkand*. The Indians evolved the concept of zero and the numerals which were first taken up in West Asia from where the subject travelled to Europe. Bhaskara II dealt with Arithmetic, Algebra and Geometry in two parts – *Lilavati* and *Bijaganita* in his *Siddhantasiromani*.

In literary works, the dramas of Ashvaghosha, Kalidasa, Bhasa and Bana Bhatt are highly appreciated by those who have gone through them. About *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* of Kalidasa, suffice it to quote the well-known German poet, Goethe, who exclaims:

Wouldst thou the young years blossoms,
and the fruits of it decline,
And all by which the soul is charmed,
enraptured, feasted and fed,
Wouldst thou the earth and heaven itself
in one sole name combine
I name thee, O Shakuntala, and all is at once said.

Among epics the two most important are the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Both have inspired millions of Indians and moulded their conduct for the better. The Valmiki *Ramayana* has 96,000 lines and the *Mahabharata* 2,20,000 16-syllabled lines. C.E.M. Joad points out in *The Story of Indian Civilization*: "They are often compared with the *Iliad* and

Odyssey, but the length of the *Mahabharata* alone is nearly seven times that of the two Greek epics."

In spinning stories perhaps no other nation of the world can beat the Hindus. There are short-stories giving 'good counsels' as Arnold calls the *Hitopadesa*, containing gems of thought culled out from ancient scriptures, and even old wife's tales about male and female promiscuity. Somadeva's *Katha Sarit Sagar* is literally an ocean of adventurous stories like that of Sindbad the Sailor. The philosophical works may have a limited appeal but these stories are delighting the hearts of millions of people the world over through translations in their own language. In some cases, they do not even acknowledge their original source. It may therefore not be inappropriate to call Indians as 'The Story-tellers of the World'.

Take Esop's fables, for example. Most of the stories going round under the name of Esop are of Indian origin. Earnest Rhys in his introduction to *Fables, Esop and Others* (Everyman's) observes, "We have to admit that the beast fables did not begin with him (Esop), or in Greece at all. We have, in fact, to go East and to look to India and burrow in the 'tales within tales' of *Hitopadesa* to get an idea how old the antiquity of the fables actually is." The book was first translated into English as *Book of Good Counsels* by Edwin Arnold in 1861.

Rawlinson points out in *The Legacy of India* (Oxford) that "the migration of fables was originally from East to West, and not vice versa, is shown by the fact that the animals and birds who play the leading parts, the lion, the jackal, the elephant, and the peacock, are mostly Indian ones. In the European versions the jackal becomes the fox: the relation between

the lion and jackal is a natural one, whereas that between the lion and fox is not." With an apology for punning, the well-known Chinese writer, Lin Yutang observes, "One must say that the Hindu mind is fabulous." The genius for creating fables seems inexhaustible in Indian literature, while Esop stood almost alone in Greece.

Panchatantra

Panchatantra, says Lin Yutang, "is one of the most widely known, and widely translated books in the world." In the sixth century, it was translated into Pehlevi in Persia and into Syriac as *Kalilag and Damnag*; into Arabic as *Fables of Pilpay* whence it spread throughout in the Islamic world and reached Spain, Sicily, Provence and France. "Through Constantinople it traveled to Eastern Europe and was translated into Greek, Latin, German, Italian and English." La Fontaine, in the edition of his *Fables* published in 1678, says in the Preface, "It is not necessary that I should say whence I have taken the subjects of these new fables. I shall only say, from a sense of gratitude I owe the largest portion of them to Pilpay the Indian Sage." But Pilpay is not the name of that Sage; it is Vishnu Sharman.

Dr. Hertel believes the original *Panchatantra* was composed in Kashmir in 200 BC. But most of the stories mentioned therein were current in India since earlier centuries. As the title implies, it is a collection of five books, each independent of others, having a framing story with numerous inserted stories. The five books are:

1. *The Loss of Friends*
2. *The Winning of Friends*
3. *Crows and Owls*
4. *Loss of Gains*
5. *The Considered Action*

There are two English translations, the first was done in 1924 by Stanley Rice, and the second in the following year by Arthur D. Ryder, the American Oriental scholar. First published in America, Ryder's translation soon went out of print. In India, the Jaico Publishing House brought the first impression in 1949, which proved immensely popular, and the thirtieth impression was published in 2007.

Ryder has rendered verse by verse and prose by prose. He has gone into the spirit of the book which contains no ordinary stories but the essence of *Niti Shastras* of India, distilling most of what has been said in several Indian philosophical books on the wise conduct of life. His translation of the prose portion is faithful and the verses have been dealt with literary flair.

In fact, through his translation he has immortalised *Panchatantra* for the world readers. In his enthusiasm for carrying out literal translation he has even translated in English all proper names which have no connotation.

The book dealt with here bases the description on the original Sanskrit text and Ryder's translation but retains original proper names mentioning their English translations in brackets. For the original text of *Panchatantra* the edition published by 'Pandit Pustakalaya of Kashi' (Varanasi) in 1964

has been used which is much different in Book I from the recension followed by Ryder.

The text in the book begins by speaking about six methods of earning money and seven of conducting trade. It carries a number of sayings from ancient scriptures which are missing in the edition followed by Ryder. A few examples are given below:

- a) A warrior who does not exhibit his prowess is generally ignored like a log of wood with latent fire. But when the log is lighted everybody takes notice of it.
- b) A wealthy person is highly respected even when he does not deserve it, is treated as young when old and attracts lot of bosom friends. It is exactly the opposite with a poor man.
- c) When a clever man can subjugate a snake, an elephant and a lion, it is not impossible for him to control a king, etc.

Thus begins the story: there was once a king named Amar Shakti ('Immortal Power'), who lived in a city called Mahilaropya ('Maidens' Delight'). He had three sons, all dim-witted who showed no interest in studies. The king tried several teachers who all failed to coach the princes and the King was very worried. One of his ministers advised him to try one Vishnu Sharman who was well-versed in many subjects and was an excellent teacher. Walks in Vishnu Sharman and shunning offers of immense wealth, promised the King to educate the princes in various aspects of human relations and statecraft in just six months.

He began – and ended – telling stories to the princes about birds and beasts interspersing them with suitable quotations in verses from holy

scriptures. The princes got deeply interested in the stories and imperceptibly imbibed knowledge.

The first and second books – *The Loss of Friends* and *The Winning of Friends* – form the foundation in human relations, and are built round friendship. The fourth and fifth books look like appendices. Book III dealing with a fight between the crows and the owls is the most important part of *Panchatantra*, and shall be dealt with in detail.

Through various stories Vishnu Sharman emphasizes three things in Books I and II – resolute use of positive powers, cultivation of priceless friendship, and proper exercise of intelligence through finding out all the facts. A proverb says:

The firefly seems a fire, the sky looks flat
Yet sky and fly are neither this or that.
And again: scholarship is less than sense
Therefore seek intelligence.

Crows and Owls

Book III deals with the traditional enmity between the crows and the owls. The king of the owls, Arimardan ('Foe-Crusher'), lived in a mountain cave along with his retinue, unknown to the crows. The crow-king, Meghvaran ('Cloudy') and his followers had their home in a huge banyan tree. The owl-king killed a crow whenever he came across one during his flights. Meghvaran was seriously disturbed when he found several dead crows around the trees.

He called a meeting of his counsellors to discuss how to counter the menace. He offered six possibilities – peace, war, change of base, entrenchment, alliance, and duplicity, and wanted to know what course should he adopt to protect his followers. As the saying goes:

Good counselors should tell their king,
Unasked, a profitable thing
If asked they should advise,
While flatterers who shun the true
(Which in the end is wholesome, too)
Are foemen in disguise.

The counsellor Ujjivi ('Live Again') said, one should not wage a war with a powerful enemy, and this one knows when to strike. Therefore make peace. Another counselor Sanjivi ('Live Again') disagreed. The enemy, he pointed out, is cruel, greedy, and unprincipled. How can you have a peace agreement with such a foe. And added:

Foes indestructible by might
Are slain through some deceptive gesture
As Bhima strangled Kichaka,
Approaching him in women's venture.

The third counsellor Anujivi ('Live Along') did not agree with either, and suggested change of base.

A King, abandoning his realm
To foes of fighting worth,
Preserves his life, as Fight-Firm did,
And later rules the earth.

But Prajivi ('Live-On') disapproved all the three courses, particularly the change of place, for

A crocodile at home
Can beat an elephant;
But if he goes abroad,
A dog can make him pant.

His advice was:

Therefore provide your fort
With shaft and gun; adorn
It well with moat and wall,
And store abundant corn.

Stand ever firm within,
Resolved to do or die;
So, living, earn renown;
Or dead, the starry sky.

The crow-king then turned to Chiranjivi ('Live Long') for advice who suggested alliance with a powerful ally, to make a counterweight against the enemy.

After obtaining the views of his five counsellors in the presence of Sthirjeevi ('Live Strong'), an ancient farsighted counsellor who had preserved to the last page every textbook of social ethics, Meghvaran bowed before him and sought his opinion.

Sthirjeevi appreciated the views of the five counsellors drawn from textbooks of ethics but the present hour, he advised, demands duplicity.

He said, "Send your spies to discover the dwelling place of your enemy. They should also befriend his functionaries and find out their vulnerable points." When the crow-king wanted to know the names and numbers of functionaries, the wise crow said what Sage Devarishi Narada had told

King Yudhisthra ('King Fighting-Firm') that there are 18 functionaries in the hostile camp and 15 in one's own.

The 18 functionaries of the enemy camp include ministers, priest, the Crown prince, commander-in-chief as also the person who carries messages, the gate keeper and accountant. He advised, put three spies on each of these 18 functionaries to sow intrigues, get information, or win them over.

In one's own side the 15 functionaries include the Queen, the Queen-mother, the priest, gardener, water-carriers, teacher, physician, astrologer and geisha or prostitute. One has to keep a sharp eye on each one of them as through them the spies of the hostile camp try to ferret vital information.

The framing story of the enmity between the crows and the owls is carried forward through some 16 inserted stories. In the second story Sthirjeevi ('Live Strong') quotes his own case.

He once lived on a tree and down below lived a partridge in a hole. Over a period, firm friendship sprang between the two. One day foraging for food the partridge found a field full of ripe rice. When he did not return in the evening – and many days thereafter – his friend felt he might have been caught in a trap and killed.

Meanwhile, a rabbit named Shighra-gami ('Speedy') came that way and occupied the hole of the partridge. But one fine evening the partridge grown plump from eating rice returned and claimed his hole. The rabbit refused and a quarrel ensued.

Finally it was decided that they should go to a third party and his judgement would be final. By the bank of the sacred Ganges lived a pious

cat called Teeksh-Dant ('Curd-Ear', but a better translation would be 'Sharp-Tooth').

The Teeksh-Dant feigned as a great religious person who abhorred all acts of cruelty and said, "Even those who slay living creatures in the act of sacrifice are befuddled, and their hermeneutic theology is at fault. As I am hard of hearing, come close to me and tell me your problem sitting near my ear." That seedy rogue won their trust. As they drew near him, he seized both and ate them up.

So, said Sthirjeevi to the crow-king Meghvaran, if you take the owl-king – that fellow who is blind during day – he will meet the fate of the rabbit and partridge. He himself offered to lead the way and disclosed his plans: "Listen, my son. Forget about the famous four - conciliation, intrigue, bribery and fighting. Here is the fifth device: You feign to turn against me, rebuke me with hard words, smear me with blood, throw me at the foot of the tree, and stay away at the Rishimook mountain ('Antelope Mountain'). And there you all stay till I have completed my plan and call you."

After the discussion of this secret plan, a sham fight started for all to see. The Meghvaran's retinue started jabbering Sthirjeevi and the crow-king threatened to kill him. He pounced upon him, pecked at him and smeared him with blood. And there he lay under the banyan tree whining with pain.

The matter was reported to the owl-king Arimardan by his spy consort who was happy to see a brewing discord among the enemy ranks. When he visited Sthirjeevi he bewailed: "O King, when I advised Meghvaran

not to pick up a quarrel with you and surrender, this is what he has done to me."

The owl-king was not taken in so soon. He collected his counsellors and sought their advice one by one. Raktaksh ('Fierce-Eye') straightaway advised : "Kill him" and related several stories in support of his opinion. The second counsellor, Kruraksh ('Fierce-Eye') however disagreed by saying: "One does not kill a suppliant" and related a very pathetic story in support which deserves to be retold.

A cruel fowler's trade was to catch birds and kill them. Once he trapped a she-dove and put him in his cage. Soon a severe cyclone covered the forest and he took shelter under a tree. In the cavity of the tree lived a dove who pined for his wife who had not returned home. He was lamenting:

The house is not the home; but where
The wife is found, the home is there.
The home without the wife is less
To me than some wild wilderness.

The she-dove was deeply gratified to hear her husband's grief for her. But in spite of being behind the bars of the fowler, he advised her husband what the scriptures say:

Whoever does not give his best
To cheer the late-arriving guest
Will see his merit borne away,
And for the other's sin will pay.

Heeding his dear wife's advice, the dove arranged some fire of dry twigs and leaves to remove the chill of the fowler guest. To allay his hunger, the dove went round the fire and finally dived into it to be roasted alive.

Seeing his supreme sacrifice she-dove also jumped into the pyre. A divine chariot descended and both of them ascended to heaven. The cruel fowler was so moved that he threw away his net and knife, and since led a pious life.

The lesson from the story that imperceptibly emerges is that if an animal wife could be so virtuous and a husband so sacrificing, the human beings have to be one better.

The owl-king then turned to Deeptaksh ('Flame-Eye') to have his opinion. With the help of a story he said that even a wicked person could be of some advantage therefore he should not be killed even though coming from the enemy camp. The fifth counsellor named Vakranaas ('Hook-Nose') also endorsed the view of the last two saying, as his story showed, that it was contrary to religion to slay a suppliant.

Prakar-karna ('Wall-Ear'), the last counsellor, thought that if the king spared his life, in time to come, the two might become fond of each other. Finding four counsellors in favour of befriending Schirjeevi, the owl king Arimardan finally decided to give shelter to him. Raktaksh ('Red-Eye'), who had advised to kill him, however, was not happy. As the proverb says:

Shrewd men unmask a foe
Who seems a friend,
Whose speech is kind, whose acts
To hatred tend.

The clever crow was doubly happy – not only was he now able to find their secret cave, but also the only wise owl who advised his king to kill him, had decided to leave the cave.

To win the favour of the owl-king when asked to go to the mountain cave he pleaded, 'Sir, I have been betrayed and beaten by my own clan. Please provide me with some fire so that I immolate myself to be born again as an owl to serve you, and requite their enmity.

Raktaksh ('Red-Eye') was not at all impressed and rejoined: "My dear Sir, you are clever and plausible. Even if reborn as an owl, you would highly esteem your corvine provenience" and illustrated his point with a story.

Sthirjeevi was taken to the fortress gate and offered to stay in any of the chambers. He preferred to live near the gate so that his movements were not watched. He was pampered by his new 'friends' with varied viands and plenty of meat.

Raktaksh quietly collected his close followers and seeing the end of his friends near, left for another fortress in the mountains, as the saying goes:

Joy comes from knowing what to dread,
And sorrow smites the dunderheads;
A long life through, the woods I've walked,
But never heard the cave that talked.

And there hangs the tale of the cave that talked:

There lived a lion named Teeksha Nakh. One whole day he hardly found anything to eat and in the evening entered a cave hoping that when the owner returns he will make a meal of him. When the owner jackal returned he noticed the marks of a lion's paw going in but none coming out. To make sure he called: "O cave ahoy! Don't you remember we had

an agreement that when I return I shall call and you will answer my greeting. Since you do not talk I shall go to another cave."

Thereupon the lion roared, and as his roar echoed, all forest animals took cover and jackal ran for his life repeating the above stanza.

The plan of Sthirjeevi was so far working magnificently. During the day he collected a lot of dry leaves and twigs at the mouth of the cave. Quietly he slipped to the crow-king Meghvaran and reported to him that the cave was ready to be set on fire. "Waste no time. All your retainers should come at once holding a burning fagot in their beaks and throw them at the gate. All the owls are inside and shall be baked alive. As it is said:

Whatever deed you have in mind
(Especially when fate is kind),
Do quickly. If you wait a bit,
Then time will suck the juice of it.

The cave had no other exit and all the owls inside were baked alive. Sthirjeevi with his grit and stratagem put an end to the powerful enemy.

The main and the inserted stories are so structured that creates all sorts of situations which occur in human life, and particularly in statecraft. The stories are not always didactic and instructive nor always drawn from scriptures and epics. There is one about an old merchant and his young wife, a whore, who cheated her gullible husband, and the other about a snake and the ants. It is a sheer delight to go through them. And the royal princes would have certainly acquired apt education not only in wise human conduct but also in carrying on their kingly duties in a most effective

manner. That too in just six months. Vishnu Sharman was indeed a well-read person, a wonderful teacher and a very clever story-teller.

The technique of weaving tales within tales is entirely an Indian contribution to world literature. In the original text the stories are numbered but bear no titles. Ryder's translation provides appropriate titles but does not give numbers.

Book III Crows and Owls concludes with Sthirjeevi's advice to Meghvaran the crow-king, with sincere good wishes for "your royal umbrella, throne, and glory unshaken through the long succession of son, grandson, and beyond" and a few couplets:

A king should bring his people ease,
But he should also aim to please;
His reign is else of little note,
A neck-teat on a female goat.

And once again:

Love of virtue, scorn of vice,
Wisdom – make a kingdom's price.
Then is Glory proud as slave,
Then her plumes and pennons brave
Near the white umbrella wave.

He also warns that no man in the wide world is beyond the clutches of pending ill and quotes, in support from epics like the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* the travails of Rama and his father Dashartha who died pining for him, posing a question:

Where arm-born Prithu? Where is Manu gone,
Sun-child (yet suns still rise)?

Imperious Time awakened them at dawn,
At evening closed their eyes.

Book IV (*Loss of Gains*) and Book V (*The Considered Action*) carry 12 stories each, interconnected, making forceful points but lacking the verve and vitality of the previous three books, particularly the construction of *Crows and Owls*.

Stories about Past Lives

There is altogether a unique genre of stories in India unheard of anywhere else in the world. These are not about good counsels or wise conduct, ethics, adventures, intrigue, love, hate, war or peace. These stories are about his past lives as told by the Buddha to his followers to drive home points of Buddhist doctrine and teachings. They are not a few but hundreds of them known as *Jataka* stories.

Instances of people telling about their past life, or lives, may be found in the literature of other civilisations as well. But these are rare; in India, however, they are common. The other famous case is that of Pythagoras in the Greek civilisation. It is related by Professor E.B. Cowell in the preface of his first volume of the *Jataka Stories*. He says, "It was almost an isolated incident in Greek literary history when Pythagoras claimed to remember his past lives." He mentions some details as well of those lives.

"Heracleides Ponticus relates," he continues, "that he (Pythagoras) professed to have been once born as Ethalides the son of Hermes, andremembered the Trojan war where, as Euphorbus, he was wounded by

Menelaus, and as Pythagoras he could recognize the shield which Menelaus had hung up in the temple of Apollo at Branchida; and similarly he remembered his subsequent birth as Hermotomus, and then as Pyrrhus, a fisherman of Delos."

In India the recollection of previous lives is a common feature and we hear such incidence now and then. It is especially mentioned by Manu, the law-giver, as the effect of a self-denying and pious life.

A collection of 550 stories of the Buddha's past lives was published in Pali as *The Jataka* in the fourth century BC. These were translated by a 'guild' of translators under the editorship of Professor E.B. Cowell and W.H.D. House in six volumes and published by Cambridge at the University Press in 1895.

These stories were told to his followers by the Buddha himself and form an important part of the Buddhist lore regarded as an authentic background to the founder's historical life as Gautama. They occur even in the Canonical Pitakas.

Each story reveals some important event in the long series of his previous existences as a Bodhisattva, that is, when he was on the evolutionary path eventually to become an Enlightened Soul. At the end is given a short summary where the Buddha identifies different actors in the story in their present births at the time of his discourse.

They were widely known in the third century BC. Some *Jataka* scenes have been sculptured in Sanchi, Amaravati and Bharhut carvings on the railings. Even the titles of several *Jatakas* are clearly inscribed over some of the railings of Bharhut.

Initially, many of these stories were handed down orally but their growing popularity ensured that their basic message was committed to more permanent form. Snatches from some of the *Jatakas* were not only sculpted in stone but also painted in the famous Ajanta caves.

These caves lie in a horse-shoe shaped ravine of the Waghora river some 270 kilometres north-east of Mumbai. The early caves belong to the second century BC – about the time when *Panchatantra* was written – and the latest to the sixth century AD. The caves have been carved out of live rock and are themselves a marvel of engineering ingenuity. Some of the caves are as large as 30-50 metres (100 feet) by 12-20 metres (40 feet). The engineering feat is to have estimated that such a big hall shall bear the weight of the hillock above for centuries to come!

The *Jatakas* would have been painted by the artists in close cooperation and under the guidance of the learned Buddhist monks. The murals are the most precious remaining jewels of the ancient art of India. They also throw a flood of light on the social life of that period – the dress, ornaments, coiffures and various hairdoes of the women. These murals inspired the Bengal School of Art, especially in delineating the eyes, lips, etc and travelled to other countries like China and Japan. The principle sentiment (*rasa*) that oozes out of each figure of the murals is compassion – *Karuna* – the hallmark of Buddhism.

Benoy Behl has produced detailed photographs of these priceless murals to which Sangitika Nigam has provided notes on the *Jataka* stories. In fact, it may not be quite correct to call them 'stories', fables or parables. These are, more appropriately, 'biographical sketches' of the past lives of

the Buddha, and when related by the Enlightened one himself, these may justifiably be considered as authentic. The original Pali text also refers to them as *The Jatakas*, not stories.

Since centuries, however, as those biographical snippets have been called as 'stories' a few are included in this chapter.

Immediately before his birth when Gautama of the Sakya clan attained enlightenment sitting under a Bodhi tree, he was born as Prince Visvantara to King Sanjaya and Queen Phusati in the city of Jetuttara. The Prince was very kind and compassionate and had to suffer a lot on account of his generosity. Once the neighbouring kingdom of Kalinga suffered a severe drought. There were no rains and the earth was parched. The Prince had a precious and magical elephant whose presence alone could invite rains. The Prince donated that elephant to Kalinga. That brought rains there, the people were immensely relieved and the Prince was happy. But the public of Jetuttara were highly incensed.

They went to King Sanjaya and threatened to revolt if the Prince was not banished from the kingdom for his unbridled and reckless charity. The king had to honour the public demand – as was the custom those days – and the Prince with his wife Madri and two children left the kingdom. While leaving also he gave away in charity all he had, even the chariot which was supposed to take him away.

On the way he met an old Brahmin who begged of the Prince to give him the two children as he had none else to look after him. In fact, God had wanted to test the benevolence and sacrifice of the Bodhissattva and therefore assumed the garb of a beggar. The Prince gave away his son Jali and daughter Kanhajina to serve the feeble Brahmin.

The brahmin was very hard on the children and thrashed them now and then. When the brahmin along with the children reached the kingdom of the Prince, the public recognised the royal kids and reported the matter to the King. He was very happy to find his grandchildren and got them back from Brahmin Jujuka after paying a handsome ransom.

The public relented to hear the story of Prince Visvantara's generosity who had even given his own children to serve the old Brahmin. After a frantic search the Prince and his Queen were found out and brought to King Sanjaya for the great joy of all and amidst royal celebrations.

Here is another story. Once Bodhisattva was born as Duyyodhana, son of the King of Magadha. When the Prince came of age, the king handed over the reins of the government to him and left for forest in quest of the Ultimate Reality.

One day, the Prince visited the hermitage of his father where he met the King of Nagas who had come to hear the learned discourse of his father. The Prince was enamoured by the glory and grandeur of the Naga King and his retinue. He secretly wished to have a similar pomp and show as a snake. So it happened, and he thoroughly enjoyed his luxurious life. One day as he basked in the open some snake-charmers caught him and made him dance to their tune. A merchant saw this and got him freedom after paying a large amount.

The Naga king was much obliged and took Alara the merchant to his kingdom to enjoy all the comforts and presented him precious jewels. For about a year Alara enjoyed the wonderful company of Naga king Sankhapala when both of them were fed up of such material and

meaningless lives. The King Bodhisattva wanted to retire to the Himalayas and, like his hermit father, wanted to find the life of Eternal Bliss. Alara says in the *Jataka*:

Men fall like fruit, to perish straightaway,
All bodies, young and old alike, decay.
In holy orders only find I rest,
The true and universal is the best.

The third and last is a pathetic story of the test of Bodhisattva born as King Sibi. A hawk-pursued pigeon fell in the lap of King Sibi and he granted him protection. The hawk requested the king to release the pigeon as he was hungry and wanted his fresh meat.

The King offered his own flesh equal to the weight of the pigeon to satisfy his hunger. The pigeon was placed in one scale of the balance and on the other the severed flesh of the King. As more and more flesh was placed, heavier became the pigeon. Finally the King climbed the scale and offered himself to the hawk.

At that point the birds disclosed their real identities – the hawk was King Indra and the pigeon god Agni who had come to test the sense of justice and righteousness of King Sibi. They were immensely pleased to see the Supreme Sacrifice of the Bodhisattva on the evolutionary path to become the Buddha, the Enlightened One.

Katha Sarit Sagar

Somadeva's *Katha Sarit Sagar* is indeed an ocean of the streams of stories. Many stories popular in the world, like Sindbad the sailor in the *Arabian*

Nights are originally in Sanskrit from the pen of Somadeva. The stories have been translated into English by C.H. Tawney and published by J.W. Thomas at the Baptist Mission Press, Calcutta in 1880. Their number may be judged from the fact that Tawney's translation covers two large volumes in small print together running into 1217 pages!

Shuka-saptati

The stories in *Shuka-saptati* do not illustrate ideal examples of compassion, or offer good counsels through time-tested sayings and proverbs to instill wise conduct, or poetic quotations from epics and scriptures.

They are unabashedly about passionate sex – not between wedded wives and their husbands but illegitimate escapades of married women – and men – to their love-lorn and love-sick partners. There is no cover, concealment or cutting corners; a simple, straight forward illicit passion.

No wonder, the stories have been translated into many languages of the world, generally known as *Tutinama*. The most famous version of the book is by a Turki poet, Ziauddin Nakshabi. His *Tutinama* was copied and illustrated for the library of Akbar the Great and is now in the Cleveland Museum of Art, United States.

It is a charming collection of 70 (*saptati*) tales about the infidelity of women told by an enchanted parrot (*shuka*) to keep his mistress confined to home as her husband had gone on a business tour for 69 days.

In between, the parrot offers many comments about women and other topics. For example: Kings, women and creepers generally cling to what is

near to them. Or, cleanliness in a crow, honesty in a gambler, mildness in a serpent, women satisfied with love, vigour in a eunuch, truth in a drunkard, friendship in a king – whoever heard of these things.

And women are not to be blamed for what they are. The fault lies with Twashtri – the Divine Artificer who found that he had exhausted all his materials in making the man. After deep meditation, to create women He did as follows:

“He took the rotundity of the moon and the curves of creepers, and the clinging of tendrils and the trembling of grass, and the slenderness of the reed, and the bloom of flowers, and the lightness of leaves, and the tapering of the elephant’s trunk, and the glances of deer, and the clustering of the rows of bees, and the joyous gaiety of sunbeams, and the weeping of clouds, and the fickleness of winds, and the timidity of the hare, and the vanity of the peacock, and the softness of the parrot’s bosom, and the hardness of a diamond, and sweetness of honey, and the cruelty of tiger, and the warm glow of fire, and the coldness of snow, and the chattering of jays, and the cooing of the *Kokil*, and the hypocrisy of crane, and the fidelity of the *Chakrawak*, and compounding all these together, He made woman and gave her to man.”

The stories revolve round one Prabhavati, wife of Madan Vinod, a merchant in the city of Chandrapur ruled by King Vikram Sen. The merchant leaves the city on a business trip of nearly 70 days and leaves behind a charmed parrot for the company of his wife.

After he left, Prabhavati’s companions troop in by the evening and egg her on to look for a lover and an admirer to console her. She appreciates the concern of her friends. Dressed and bedecked she prepares to leave

when the parrot finds his voice and tries to dissuade her from her evil intentions. The mistress is annoyed and threatens to have his neck wrung.

Pipes in the parrot: "You may go if you must provided you are as clever as a person I know who got out of a tight situation through her cleverness."

"Who is that person you know of and what cleverness she showed" asks Prabhavati.

The parrot relates a story and suddenly stops at the climax asking them to tell how the story would end.

By that time the night is advanced and they give up the idea of leaving for their rendezvous that night. The same happens every evening for 69 days when the master returns.

The stories have their own share of sayings and proverbs as embellishment. They also employ the technique of introducing tales within tales. The original Sanskrit text has been consulted and also the translation of stories by Rev. B. Hale Wortham as given by Lin Yutang in his book *Wisdom of India*.

Next day the parrot tells the name of the lady as Yasodevi who lived in a town named Nandana where ruled the king of the same name. He had a son, Prince Rajasekhara, whose queen Sasiprabha was very beautiful. A rich youth called Dhanasena happened to see her and fell in love with her at first sight.

Dhanasena was so much consumed with the flame of his passion that he lost all interest in life. Watching his condition, the mother was in great

distress and fervently implored him to tell her why he was crestfallen. He finally confided in her mother and added that the princess was beyond his reach and he had to pine for her all his life. The mother consoled him and assured she would try to help and he should not be so despondent.

Yasodevi putting on her best dress went to the princess Sasiprabha along with a tame bitch. After exchanging pleasantries, she took her aside and spoke to her. She said with a fallen face, "In the previous birth, about which you do not know, we two and this bitch were real sisters. We two were accommodating to our lovers in the advances they made off and on, but this sister of ours was obstinate and always kept them at arms length. And you see her wretched condition in this life. I have come to warn you, if you ever have a lover give him gladly what he wants, or else you see the fate of our third sister."

The Princess swallowed the incredulous story of Yasodevi and, keen to avoid the fate of a bitch, asked for her help. She on the sly introduced her own son to Sasiprabha and the love-sick youth was cured of his passion. The Prince Rajasekhara was won over with plenty of precious presents, and all lived happily.

So, intoned the parrot, if you are as clever as Yasodevi, go by all means. Or else, it is past midnight better take to bed in your cosy home.

The parrot related another story of a beautiful woman named Lakshmi living in the city of Chandravati. A person called Sudham fell in love with her and engaged one go-between Purna to entice her. Purna succeeded at last and took her to Sudham's place. He was however not there at that time. But Lakshmi was aroused and she wanted Purna to bring any man.

The other man she got turned out to be her own husband. Lakshmi however turned the tables and rebuked her husband charging him of visiting another women which he had been always denying. She feigned to have purposefully laid a trap in which he was caught.

She thus safely got out of a sticky situation. If Prabhavati was as clever as Lakshmi she may certainly go out or else it is better to stay at home.

And in this way the loyal parrot detained his mistress from going out on any misadventure for as many as 69 days when his master returned.

Prabhavati received him with as ardent an affection as she could command. She said that the parrot was like a son to her and his words of wisdom were a source of great enlightenment to her. When Madan turned to parrot to find out the 'words of wisdom' she spoke fearing that he may not let the cat be out of the bag, Prabhavati blurted out what happened when he was away. She said that in his absence some of her evil companions had been giving her wrong suggestions but the stories of the parrot every night kept her home-bound but "now you shall be my chief object of love."

When Madan wanted the parrot to explain her statement he told him the seventieth story. In the city of Manohar lived a Gandharva whose wife's name was Ratnavali. Both had a very charming daughter, Madanamanjari. She was so beautiful that when Narada Rishi visited them he for once lost his heart to her. When he recovered he cursed the girl that she shall be a victim of deceit.

Hearing this her Gandharva father Madana entreated the Rishi to repeal his curse. The Rishi relented and said she would be happily married

to another Gandharva called Kanaprabha but at one time she would be deceived by somebody.

After the marriage, Kanaprabha went out on a journey. When alone, Madanamanjari was pining for her husband, another Gandharva Vidyadhara made advances of love to her which she dismissed. Then Vidyadhara assumed the form of Kanaprabha and accomplished his objective.

When her husband returned and did not find his wife happy on his return, he suspected some foul play and got burned with jealousy. Madanamanjari went to the temple of goddess Durga and prayed to her to clear the situation.

Goddess Durga spoke to Kanaprabha that his wife was as faithful as ever. Due to the curse of Narada she was deceived by somebody who took on his form and he should not blame her. Hearing this Kanaprabha took his wife home.

"So dear Madan," continued the parrot, "If you have any confidence in my words, receive your wife kindly, for there is no evil in her." Hearing this Madan was satisfied. His father held grand celebrations on the return of his son and all lived happily thereafter. A divine car descended from heaven, and having been released from his curse, the parrot in resplendent robes ascended to heaven.
