

A Socio-Political Study of Kashmiri Folk Tales

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Abstract

Folk literature has always been reflective of its environmental surroundings including social, political and economic developments taking place from time to time. It has been the richness of the Kashmiri folklore which made J Hinton Knowles state that "this literature remains unsurpassed in other countries of the world." In Kashmiri folk tales, we find an impressive depiction and picturisation of Kashmir's political and social life. Even though, we have adopted many a foreign tale as our own and included them in almost every compilation of our folk literature, they too seem to have been written in a familiar diction and style to suit to the taste of local listeners of this most precious treasure of the literatures of the world. All these tales, having their origin in Persia, Arabia and even in European countries, have become part and parcel of the Kashmiri folk literature

In their *Essentials of children's literature*, Carl Tomlinson and Carol Lynch Brown say, "folk tales are stories that grow out of the lives and imaginations of the people, or folk." They further state, "they are a form of traditional literature which began as an attempt to explain and understand the natural and spiritual world. The

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origin of the folk tales lies in the oral tradition, until the twelfth century, when first literary journals began to circulate in Europe."¹

The folk tales created across the world, have been categorized in to several predominant kinds including beast stories, religious tales like Noah's Ark, romances like Beauty and the Beast, tales of magic like Aladdin and his magic lamp.

The term, folklore, was first coined by W J Thomas in 1846 AD which he described as "traditional learning compiled by the uncultured classes of civilized nations."

The earliest tales of this kind are traced to about 2,800 BC in ancient Egypt.²

The first ever collection of Kashmiri folktales was compiled by James Hinton Knowles who brought out its first edition in April 1887. He was so fascinated with the sweet diction, pleasing style and artistic treatment of these tales that he found no parallel to them wherever he could try to find it. Several other short folk tales of what he calls The Happy Valley could be found in his yet another compilation titled *Dictionary of Kashmiri Proverbs and sayings* published in Bombay in 1885 AD.

Knowles, a Christian missionary, stayed in Kashmir for four years but found that Kashmiri folk literature was not given that much importance as it found in some other Indian languages. In his own words: "and yet, while every year witnesses the publication of books on the subjects from Bengal, Bombay, Madras, Punjab and other parts; and while each successive number of *The Indian Antiquary*, *Indian Notes and Queries*, and latterly the *Christian College Magazines* presents to us articles more or less relevant, this field, ripe for the harvest has remained almost ungleaned. No doubt its isolated position and this apparent neglect."³

Sir Marc Aurel Stein, in his preface to *The Hatim's tales*, also appreciates the rich store of popular folklore when he says, "Kashmir presents in its folk tales, songs, proverbs and the like."⁴

The earliest voluminous collection of Kashmir tales is said to be Som Deva's *Katha Sarit Sagar*, which he compiled with composing lakhs of his verses to please the king of Kashmir. The king, Anant, unfortunately, did not approve of the diction of the poet and disapproved the entire treasure. Som Deva, in a fit of depression and anger, set fire to these stories but luckily part of it was saved from being destroyed. The leftover portion of the book was later published under the same title. It is said that *Katha Sarit Sagar* was based upon yet another collection of stories called *Brahat Katha* written in Pashachi dialect by one Gunnadiya. This however could not be saved and its remains vanished with the passage of time. *Katha Sarit Sagar* was first translated from Sanskrit into English by C H Tawney in 1880-84 and also by N M Penzer who brought it out in as many as ten volumes in 1927 AD and titled them as *The queen of stories*.

In *Katha Sarit Sagar* one finds stories depicting various segments of the ancient Kashmiri society comprising magic, music, social relationship, religious rituals, bravery war and battles and immense love for gods and goddesses demonstrated by human beings under all circumstances.

Being closest to folklore, *Katha Sarit Sagar* remained intact in 18 volumes and 124 chapters, which carry 22 thousand couplets besides large segments of absorbing prose. It is a treasure trove of more than 350 stories and is said to have been written around 1050 AD.

Having been transferred from mouths to ears over a long period of time, stories from *Brahat Katha Sarit*, *Katha Sarit Sagar* and other compilations must have obviously undergone tremendous variations and changes in their narration and recording of the text, turning them quite different from each other in many ways. In this context, *Hatim's Tales* can be described as the most authenticated collection of stories which was cross checked by Aurel Stein 16 years after they had been narrated to him by a local story teller,

Hatim Tilwaani (Hatim, the oilman).

For centuries Kashmir has been the centre of learning and place of dissemination of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam. The local folklore developed in the respective eras and became naturally, reflective of related customs and varied patterns of social life and political development.

On one hand we have tales of Aka Nandun and Raja Vikramaditya and on the other, stories and legends rallying around lives and loves of Mahmood Ghaznavi and Laila Majnoon, have become part and parcel of Kashmir folk literature. Aka Nandun illustrates the concept of human sacrifice for the sake of god and Laila Majnoon tells us the story of class struggle in the primitive society in ancient Arabia .

During the long period of early Hindu rule over Kashmir, detailed and embellished with legendary stories in Rajatarangini, Kalhana has talked at length about numerous instances of anarchy due to internecine wars, class conflicts and tribal incursions and misgovernance due to the court conspiracies, failure of execution of authority and fickle mindedness of the rulers. This period has provided the local literature with ample material of social exploitation of lower caste Hindus amorous activities of the rulers and opportunism of the Brahmans, which has been extensively talked about by various storytellers in their tales.

The first historian of the world, Herodotus of ancient Greece, defines the history as fiction. In this backdrop, the Kashmiri folk tales have not only dealt with social and political aspects of Kashmiri life but have also made commendable contribution in recording historical anecdotes of Kashmir particularly of its earliest times.

Folklore has been primarily composed for children all over the world. From the Arabian Nights to Hans Christian Anderson and Grim Brothers, tales in folk poetry have invariably been dedi-

cated to the children, who have all along enjoyed these imaginary stories immensely for their fantastical color, catchy depiction of supernatural and mythological characters and their unbelievable actions and performances. But folklore has always been extremely attractive and favorite species of popular literature for adults as well.

In this brief discourse, it may not be practicable to illustrate fully social and political dimensions of our folk tales, but an in depth study of this treasure of our folklore may prove the point beyond doubt that Kashmir folk tales are quite rich in their depiction of prevalent Socio-political life of ancient Kashmir.

Popular folk tales came to us by oral traditions. These stories were first told and retold and passed on to future generations. All the ancient civilizations had their folklore, but it was only in India where it took the shape of a regular art. From the Indian region, the Persians learnt this art and there from the folklore traveled to the Arabs, Constantinople and Venice and then over to England and France .

Under all circumstances, it did not, however, lose its Indian blend.

To quote only one instance, which may suffice to illustrate the point, the famous tale narrated by Hatim and titled *Yarqand anoan zeinaan* alludes to the mental agony and physical pain undergone under the enforced predicament besides being an endeavour at least, at the psychical level to resist and rebutt the coercion practiced by the Dogras when they were sent to far off northern areas of Gilgit, Baltistan, Yarqand and Kashgar and other parts of this rugged mountainous region to carry supplies for the troops. *Yarqand anoan zeinaan*, uses satire, irony and wit to speak volumes about this tyranny and exhibits an optimism that Kashmiris shall finally conquer Yarqand and get rid of the inhuman practices locally known as Begaar.

While going through some of our popular folk tales including *Heemal Naigraay*, *Aka Nadun*, *Bombur ta Loler*, *Wuzra maal sein Kissir* and many more, we come across several aspects of our social and political life which have been talked about extensively by the story tellers demonstrating the facts of their being highly conscious about Kashmir and what ever had been happening in this country politically and socially.

Aka Nadun depicts the eagerness of a human being to be nearer to God even if this craving demanded great sacrifice from the human being. True that in the first instance the human beings do not show any readiness to undergo this test voluntarily, but having a strong belief and faith in the holy men or ascetics, they finally yield to the will of God without waiting for anything in turn in this mortal world. *Aka Nadun* has all the correspondences with the great Islamic story of the sacrifice of Ismail at the hands of his own father, Ibrahim.

According to some historians, Nagas never came to Kashmir and all the tales attributed to them have been carried to his land from the region of India where Nagas were ruling or were in some kind of relation, whether hostile or symbiotic, with the future immigrants to Kashmir⁶. Without going deep into this controversy, the heart rendering tales of *Heemal Naigray* may be defined as one of the best folk tales of Kashmir having a local blend embellishing its characters at every stage.

In the end, we may once again remember Knowles who rightly and proudly said about Kashmir's folk literature that, "Kashmir, as a folklore literature is, perhaps, not surpassed by any other country in the world."

References:

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