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Research Article

KASHMIRI FOLKLORES AND THEIR REPRESENTATION IN LITERATURE WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE "TALES OF AKNANDUN" AND THE "BIRTH OF LAKE SHEESHNAG"

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ABSTRACT

Tales, myths, sagas and other narratives comprise perhaps the most interesting part of the literature named "Folklore", a term coined in 1846 by W.J. Thomas to designate the traditional learning of the uncultured classes of civilized nations. Folktales comprise a respectable volume of literature in all languages which is being explored with increasing interest everywhere. The earliest tales of this kind are traced to about 2800 B.C. in Egypt. By and large, however, the tales portray a large variety of men and women, both individuals and types, and project peoples' beliefs, customs, ideals, preferences and prejudices in all their rich variety as few other literary forms can do. As a matter of fact they impart meaning and substance to culture as it is crystallized in our day-to-day living. In this sense they are allied to myths. This paper will highlight the Kashmiri Folklore with historical perspective and how Kashmiri folklores have been represented in Kashmiri Literature. Moreover this paper will discuss the two most famous folklores viz a viz, "The tale of Aknandun" and "The birth of the Lake Sheeshnag" in detail.

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INTRODUCTION

Historical Background of Folktales in Kashmir

Nine hundred years ago a remarkable collection of stories called *Kathasaritsagara*, the "Ocean of Stories", was produced in the valley of Kashmir. Somadeva, its author, is said to have included in this tome many stories which he had heard from others and which, in fact, had their origin in folk-literature. The *Kathasaritsagara*, which may justly be called a treasure of folk tales, has had considerable influence on countries which were in close touch with India during the Middle Ages. The first collection of Kashmiri folk tales in English was brought out by the late Rev. John Hinton Knowles towards the end of the last century. Similarly sometime later, a renowned scholar, the late Sir Auriel Stein, published another collection of this kind entitled as *Hatim's Tales*. It is a collection of tales in verse and prose recited in Kashmiri for the scholar by Hatim who was an oilman by profession. These two works can by no means be said to exhaust the harvest of tales garnered in the fertile minds of the people. Tales, myths, sagas and other narratives comprise perhaps the most interesting part of the literature named "Folklore", a term coined in 1846 by W.J. Thoms to designate the traditional learning of the uncultured classes of civilized nations. Suffice it to say that folk tales comprise a respectable volume of literature in all languages

which is being explored with increasing interest everywhere. The earliest tales of this kind are traced to about 2800 B.C. in Egypt.

The two tales I have chosen for this research article "The Tale of Aknandun" and "The Birth of the Lake Sheeshnag" are based on incidents centering on real persons and real things. By and large, however, the tales portray a large variety of men and women, both individuals and types, and project peoples' beliefs, customs, ideals, preferences and prejudices in all their rich variety as few other literary forms can do. As a matter of fact they impart meaning and substance to culture as it is crystallized in our day-to-day living. In this sense they are allied to myths. "Myths," according to the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, "are not created out of nothing It [a myth] is always the covering, the shell, to a kernel of truth contained inside. Folk tales are the myths of the race."

Aknandun as the Famous Folktale of Kashmir

Long ago there lived a king. His principality comprised seven towns and his capital was called Rajapuri. He was a kind and conscientious ruler and dispensed justice with an even hand to high and low alike. He maintained peace and his subjects lived happy and content under him. He was a god-fearing man and his subjects held him in reverence as their father. He punished

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with a severe hand all those who dared to trouble his subjects in the least. He took measures for the welfare even of the birds and animals living in his country. Ponds were dug to store drinking water for the quadrupeds and troughs were placed on perches to enable birds to quench their thirst. In all this he was assisted by able, honest and hardworking ministers. His subjects had but one longing and that was for the birth of an heir-apparent. The king had but one queen who had borne him seven daughters. The king and the queen were highly devoted to each other but craved for the birth of a little brother to the seven sisters to gladden the hearts of the subjects and their own. The Prince would shoulder the responsibilities of the kingdom in time to come. Even his subjects begged God Almighty in their matins and vespers to grant their ruler the gift of a little son, and the royal couple did all in their power to secure such a coveted fruit. They gave lavishly in charity which included gifts of land, garments, corn, livestock and gold. Holy men from far and near came to Rajapuri to give their benedictions to the queen who also met the expenses on the weddings of many destitute girls and the maintenance of orphans and widows. Still the heir-apparent of their dreams was as far away as ever.

The king except when busy with the affairs of the State was always melancholy. He did not reveal this corner of his heart to his consort lest she feel hurt. She, however, had not given up hope and retained faith in holy men and ascetics.

One day the queen was sitting as usual in her chamber when she was startled by a call for alms. She beheld a Jogi invested in an expression of ecstasy. "Give me anything in the name of God," replied the jogi. The queen told her consort that the jogi was the very person whose aid should be enlisted in seeking fulfilment of the age-long craving. She gave him a handful of precious stones which he received in his wallet. The queen explained to him how she was pining for a son. Our seven daughters will go their own way and bless the homes of young men unknown to us. Would that they had a brother to shine in their galaxy as the sun! "she concluded with a sigh. Cutting the matter short the jogi said that he would give them a son provided they returned the child to him after twelve years. The child should be named as Akanandun. Finally Akanandun was born and his parents rejoiced in their hearts. There was also immense rejoicings in the whole country on the birth of the heir-apparent. The baby was brought up right royally. There were seven wet-nurses to feed him at the breast. Their lullabies chanted melodiously sent him to sweet slumbers. They rocked his cradle which was draped in velvet and cloth of gold, and inlaid with gems. The baby was the dearest little creature ever born. His eyes and eye-brows, his nose, his lips and chin, his forehead and complexion— each in its own way betokened an extraordinary heredity for the little infant who shone as the light of the palace. His sisters fondled him in all affection and he was the apple of the eyes of his parents who were ever grateful for his birth.

The baby grew fast into a child and then a strong, handsome and intelligent boy. His parents arranged for his education in a befitting manner. While everyone looked hopefully to the future when the boy, in the fullness of his physical strength and the maturity of his wisdom, would relieve his father of the burden of ruling the State. Twelve years are over and the jogi has returned to claim the child after twelve years as the king

and Queen had promised to him. The parents made many subtle attempts to beguile his mind, but to no purpose. These attempts only enraged him. He called the child by name and the latter was on the spot immediately. They submitted that he was the one who alone sustained their lives and that their very existence was impossible without him. The jogi was harsh and stern, "I have to kill Akanandun and you will rue it if you try to dissuade me."

Everybody who heard it burst into tears except the jogi. He divested the child of his garments and ornaments. Warm water was got for cleansing his body to which his mother had to attend. The child had a bright and radiant body and the jogi had him dressed in bright new clothing. He had the soles of his feet dyed in henna and applied collyrium to his bright almond eyes. The child looked like a fresh-bloomed flower, but the jogi had no time to waste. Proceeding forthwith to kill the child, he got a butcher's knife. Everybody there cried but the jogi was entirely remorseless. He laid Akanandun sprawling on the ground and asked his sisters to catch hold of his limbs severally. There was a tremendous intensification in the hue and cry raised. The king tore his tunic to shreds and his wife rolled herself on the dust. But the jogi was remorseless and reminding them of the promise given warned them of the inevitable consequences if they tried to shirk the fulfillment of the promise.

The jogi passed on the knife to the king and asked him to behead the child. But when the king betrayed hesitation the inexorable jogi, overawing him, pushed the knife into his hand. Finding that there was no escape the unlucky father cut the innocent throat and scarlet blood welled out. The house was turned into hell. There was beating of breasts, gnashing of teeth and pulling of hair. The blood stained the walls, coloured the floor and dyed their clothes.

The involuntary movement of the child's limbs having petered out, the jogi severed them, had them washed and began to hack the flesh assiduously like a butcher. When it was over he asked them to put the flesh into an earthenware vessel and to boil it. Akanandun's mother attended to it smothering her sobs and hiccoughs. The jogi warned her, on pain of dire punishment, not to lose even the least particle of flesh. When the faggots were burning bright, the jogi asked her to put the lid on. The flesh was thus cooked as if it were mutton, salt and spices being added according to need. The jogi asked the queen to make haste as he was getting hungry. The lady could suppress her feelings no longer and burst out upon him: "Which is the faith that permits thee to eat human flesh? O stone-hearted jogi, how have I ever offended thee? Aren't thou afraid of the curse of the innocent sufferers?" The jogi replied, "O lady, I am indifferent to all the human weal or woe. You may take me for a goblin or an ogre, but I have to fulfil my promise. So, without prolonging the matter please attend to your cooking and tell me how it tastes." In spite of her protests the unfortunate lady was forced to taste the soup. The jogi asked her to pick out the flesh and to cool it as it was his wont not to eat steaming dishes. He also asked for seven freshly baked earthenware bowls. The bowls were got and he distributed the flesh evenly among them all. The queen asked him what for he was dressing up seven bowls with flesh. He replied promptly, "Four are meant for the female folk, two will suffice us, two males, and one I am keeping for Akanandun." Meanwhile the jogi passed on the bowls to the people for whom they were meant and turning to

the queen, said, "O lady, go and call Akanandun upstairs. I shall feel really glad to see him and I can't taste a bit in his absence." When he again asked her to call Akanandun from below she could not help going downstairs. And when she called him by name she was surprised to hear, "Coming mother." Akanandun came to her as before, was held in fond embrace and carried upstairs where another pretty bewilderment was in store for her. The jogi was nowhere to be seen and the seven bowls of cooked flesh had disappeared.

The Birth of Lake Sheshnag

King Nara, who ruled over Kashmir about more than a thousand years ago, was a young, tall figure, erect as a lance. He was known in the kingdom as an Aphrodite on the prowl and he was a womanizer. He had also fallen for the daughter of a courtier whose vivacious gait and swimming large eyes, which looked larger due to the outline of kohl around them, had hooked him fast. But the maid had already sold out her heart to some recondite Buddhist priest. In one of her unguided moments the girl had confessed to the king her attachment to the priest, which was enough to turn his milk sour. King had instructed his men to kill Visakha but before they could carry out their nefarious scheme, the priest, sensing danger, had hoisted his sail at midnight and vanished without trace along with his lady love. Learning that his quarry had given him a slip a glowering devil seemed to rage within the king's heart, raising dark and savage gall. In a mad fit of frenzy he ordered his royal guards to wipe out all the Buddhist Viharas in the kingdom. He had left his home in the morning to see his maternal grand- parents who lived in an adjacent village. But now he dared not take the highway for fear of the soldiers. He turned left and took the bridle path stretching over the hillock like a ribbon in order to make a detour to avoid any encounter with them. A small pool of water nestling under the shade of a couple of mulberry trees offered a tempting invitation to the jaded nerves of Visakha. He felt hungry and thirsty.

He had his 'Sattu' (a mix of flour and jaggery) with him, which he now intended to eat. He had just cupped his hands to draw out a drink from the pool when he pricked his ears on hearing somebody talking. The desolate place was hardly a place fit for people to sit and talk. He thought that the Nagas must be living somewhere in the vicinity as their habitats were usually lakes, ponds and springs. He circled noiselessly round the bushes in order to have a close look at their faces. The maidens in their prime of youth were stunningly beautiful, their almond shaped eyes adding a strange unearthly charm to their faces. He had not seen such slanting and sparkling eyes in any woman's face before. Dressed in their finest and bedecked with gold jewellery, their appearance seemed at odds in that uninhabited place. The maidens had sensed the presence of a stranger and without looking towards him, they suddenly stopped eating and said to Vidakha that civilised men do not violate the privacy of others. Visakha felt as if he was caught with his pants down. He could neither run away because they had seen him, nor come out of his hiding, feeling terribly embarrassed. He cursed his luck. It was a day full of disasters one after the other. He stood rooted at the spot like a person caught red-handed stealing his own money. Accusations left him no other alternative but to defend and clear himself. Inwardly angry at his own foolishness, he stepped out of his hiding dropping all pretence of concealment. He approached the young girls but

stood at some respectable distance from them. "I am no vulgar sneaker. One cannot expect people sitting and talking in this desolate place and that is what made me curious to look," he stammered a reply with honest reproach in his voice that why they were eating 'kacchaguccha' pods. He have sweet 'Sattu' with him and will be happy to share it with them, if they agreed. He introduced himself as Visakha, the son of a Brahman priest living in that village. Visakha's honest countenance and the genuine anguish in his words had the desired effect. The young girls seemed to struggle for the remnants of their dignity and finally gave in. With a gracious and slightly condescending smile the one with the glittering necklace beckoned him to sit. Similarly maidens introduced themselves to Visakha as Chandralekha and Iravati, the two sisters. They were the daughters of the Naga Chief.

Visakha fell in love with the Chandralekha in first sight and vowed to himself to be as near to Chandralekha as possible. That was the ultimate he could think of about the gates of paradise which he wanted to be opened to him. Visakha was among the first pilgrims to reach the shrine on the auspicious day. Roaming about aimlessly among the thickening crowd he spotted the two maidens flanking a stout man with two long plaits of hair decorating his front. He bowed his head respectfully and wished him. Iravati recognised Visakha and introduced him to her father. The Naga chief gazed rather loftily with his meditative look and tried to size him up. There was a faint tightening of his nostrils but presently he shook his head like an old horse. The honest innocent look of Visakha clicked a favourable response in his heart.

Chandralekha's father was very impressed by the honesty of the Visakha and he narrated the whole story regarding the eating of 'kacchaguccha' pods by his daughters and by the whole clan. The chief wiped Chandralekha's tears with his finger and continued." A spell has been cast upon our standing crop by an ascetic who indulges in black magic and so we cannot reap the yellowing corn. If only he would eat a few grains from this crop, the spell would break and we could satisfy the painful rumblings of our empty stomachs. What else is there for us to eat except the lowly 'kacchaguccha' pods till then? Look, there he is sitting on the river bank chanting spells on simple folk like us," he concluded pointing towards the man.

Visakha looked at the wide reflective eyes of Chandralekha and then resolved to do something to help the family out of the impasse. The ascetic was indeed guilty almost to the point of heartless cruelty toward those who had done nothing to earn his wrath. The ascetic's inhuman torture of the Naga family and his crazy way of showing off supernatural powers, destructive in intent was disgusting. Visakha saw the ascetic sitting cross-legged on the river bank. He plucked a sheaf of the yellow corn and entered into his hut where he saw a pot of rice boiling. He put the grains of corn into the pot and hurried out as stealthily as he had entered. Hiding behind a cluster of poplars, he sat down to wait. Visakha was determined to see the end of the ascetic's wickedness. He saw him entering the hut and taking the contents of the pot on a plate, after which he sat down to eat. The spell existed no more. The Naga chief was overjoyed to hear the good news. He and his people started reaping the harvest.

Finally Viaskha asked for the hand of Chandralekha which was granted and the wedding took place at Narpora, a beautiful village nearby. One day while sitting on the terrace of her house, Chandralekha found a horse eating corn that was laid out in the sun to dry. She hurried down the terrace and slapped the horse on his croup, leaving a golden imprint of her slim tapering fingers on it. King Nara heard of the strange phenomena and as usual, the devil in him poked him. He asked his sycophants to seduce the lady. He sent his agents, emissaries to her with fabulous temptations but the virtuous lady rebuffed them, one and all. The king now threatened Visakha with death if he did not surrender his wife to him. He along with his wife rushed to the Naga chief and narrated their tale of woe. With a wave of his hand, the Naga Chief turned the day into night by hiding the sun under thick layers of clouds. A strong gale swept the Valley which turned into a hurricane and started uprooting everything. Thunderbolts leaped with deafening crash burning everything on the ground. King Nara's palace was ablaze and then a rain of big boulders coming from above crashed the fleeing people to death. The apocalyptic devastation consumed the entire place. Seeing the extent of devastation, the Naga king felt great remorse for having overreacted to the king's foolishness. He abandoned the locality and with the help of his supernatural powers he made water gush out from the bosom of the earth forming a huge lake in the depression. Pilgrims on way to Swami Amarnath cave can see this lake, named the *Sheeshnag*, its bluish waters reflecting the snowcapped mountains around it and sometimes the passing clouds as clearly as in a mirror. After the demise of the Naga chief, Visakha, having now become a Naga, ascended the throne. He got another lake made in the vicinity of the *Sheeshnag*, popularly known as the '*Zamturnag*' meaning '*the lake of the son-in-law*.'

CONCLUSION

There is an unmistakable similarity in many folk tales of countries as far apart as Kashmir and France or China and Sweden. The obvious conclusion is that they have all been influenced by a common stock of tales which appear as variants in different languages. Apart from this there is the same affinity between the folk tales of different countries as in their fables, legends, myths, apologues, etc. There is, therefore, nothing to be surprised at if some of the folk tales of Kashmir have close parallels in other countries. In Kashmir, too, the study in folklore was initiated by the European scholars for their enthusiastic quest for the universals in folklore through comparative study. It may be that by understanding Kashmiri folklore they aimed at understanding the psyche of the people and by understanding their psyche they could propagate their belief. It is interesting to note that the founder of the study was the famous missionary of the time, namely J. Hinton Knowles, the compiler of the Folktales of Kashmir. When his English translation was published from London in 1887, scholars of different disciplines evinced great interest in Kashmiri folk literature and folklore

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