

KATHASARITSAGARA ('the Ocean of Stories')

Overview The *Kathasaritsagara* ('The Ocean of Streams of Story' or more commonly, 'The Ocean of Stories') is a Sanskrit text composed in the 11th century CE by Somadeva. Neither purely prose nor poetry, this remarkable text represents a separate category of Sanskrit narrative poetry, which includes this work and a few others (*Vikramankadevacarita*, *Rajatarangini*). However, because it is a work of such immense scope and importance, it deserves separate treatment.

As the author himself notes, 'The Ocean of Stories' is taken from the much earlier (and now lost) collection of stories known as the *Brihatkatha*. Although our text is only a selection of material from that earlier work, 'The Ocean of Stories' still weighs in at 22,000 verses, and readers (and scholars) can rejoice that it did not borrow the entire *Brihatkatha*, which is a mere 700,000 verses. By comparison, Milton's 'Paradise Lost' is about 10,000 verses. 'The Ocean of Stories' also draws on the entire repertoire of Sanskrit story literature, including the tales in the *Pancatantra* and the *Vetalapancavimsati* ('25 Stories about a Vampire'). In addition, lengthy sections of the *Mahabharata* are imported wholesale into Somadeva's narrative poem, and other tales are borrowed from various Buddhist and Jain sources. Using these diverse materials, the *Kathasaritsagara* is a rambling compendium of tales, legends and the supernatural composed in an easy metre with prose sections interspersed. A good parallel would be the 'Thousand and One Arabian Nights.' In his prologue, Somadeva tells us that he compiled these stories for the entertainment of a queen in a royal family in Kashmir.

Contents Any attempt to summarise this enormous text would be as foolhardy as some of its hapless characters. However, as an overview, we can say that it uses a frame-story and the dialogue format, as do so many early Indian texts (for example, the *Pancatantra* and *Jataka* tales). In the opening story, it is said that the entire collection was first told by Siva to his wife Parvati, that one of her attendants overheard it and told it to his wife, who told it...and so until, after a circle of retellings, it is recounted once again to Parvati. When she hears it, Parvati is angry, thinking what Siva told her was an old story and not something new, as he had claimed. Then follows a series of curses and rebirths, ending up with a poet who composes the *Brihatkatha*, with its 700,000 verses. The poem is met with disdain, however, because it is composed in a rural dialect, and the poet burns his massive manuscript. Only a few thousand were saved from the flames, and they become the present text of 'The Ocean of Stories.' The frame-story itself, which provides the principal story line, narrates the adventures of Naravahanadatta, son of the king of Udayana, in his quest to become 'emperor of the three worlds.'

History Unlike most early Indian texts, we can date 'The Ocean of Stories', from internal evidence correlated with the history of Kashmir, almost exactly to the period between 1063 and 1081 CE. Ironically, this nicely precise date is misleading since we also know that nearly all of the story material in the text predates it. The *Pancatantra* stories, for example, had been around for perhaps a millennium before being written down in 'The Ocean of Stories.' For its part, 'The Ocean of Stories' helped to continue the transmission of those stories in later texts, such as the *Hitopadesa* (probably 13th or 14th c. CE). Following Somadeva's 11th-century text, manuscript editions of 'The Ocean of Stories' soon appeared in Tamil, Bengali and Marathi, although a complete printed edition in Sanskrit was published only at the end of the 19th century. That now-famous translation by C H Tawney was the result of several decades of scholarship, beginning in the 1820s with the work of H. H. Wilson, who lived in Calcutta and had access to several manuscripts of 'The Ocean of Stories' held in the then-capital of British India. His labours were expanded by Indian, German and other British orientalist by consulting unstudied manuscripts held in Bombay, Berlin and London. Tawney, who also lived most of his life in Calcutta, then collated this research, comparing the various editions of the text and preparing what he thought was the most accurate version. The final result was published over four years (1880-1884) by the Royal Asiatic Society in Calcutta. That publication is still the only complete translation into English, although it was edited and expanded with notes by N M Penzer in the 1920s. More recently, several new but partial translations in English have appeared. The text has inspired many other writers to imagine their own 'ocean of stories,' the most recent (and perhaps best-known) being Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990).

Cultural significance The *Kathasaritsagara* is one of those texts, like the Bible or Chaucer, which no one has read but everyone knows. It is less a book and more a library, containing the vast storehouse of Indian storytelling. Because of its structure—hundreds of stories loosely connected by a fantastical frame-story—it is virtually impossible to read it from start to finish. After a page or two, one easily forgets how this incident is connected to the previous one. And yet, the author, Somadeva, has managed to retell these tales afresh, using a simple verse form to present vivid imagery and dramatic scenes. The text is valuable in helping us to understand the development of Indian literature since it is both the continuation of earlier storytelling and the bridge to later traditions. For example, many of the stories in ‘The Ocean of Stories’ are found in Indo-Persian texts composed in the immediately subsequent period of history. A good example is the *Tutinama* (‘Story of the Parrot’), composed in north India by Nakhshabi (a Persian scholar and Sufi saint) in the 14th century. Another instance is the *masnavi* genre of poetry used by Persian poets in the Islamic courts of north India during the Delhi Sultanate (13th -16th c. CE) to tell stories based on tales found in ‘The Ocean of Stories.’ The text was so important that the Mughal Emperor Akbar (r. 1556-1605) commissioned a Persian translation in an illustrated manuscript (see the images reproduced here). Although the *Kathasaritsagara* is usually thought of as a Hindu text, in fact, it incorporates stories and values from Buddhism, Jainism, Islam and marginalised communities such as India’s tribal groups. More than this, the *Kathasaritsagara* has become an indispensable text for international scholars in their attempts to trace the migration of stories from India to the west. Following the trail of translation of this text, they have charted a journey from Sanskrit to Persian, Arabic, Hebrew and Turkic sources that, in turn, led to Greek, Latin and modern European languages. The Sanskrit text also contains international folktales, such as ‘Faithful John’, which is known in the West as one of the Grimms’ tales. Whenever we read or hear or tell such tales to our own children, we become part of a chain of retelling that stretches back to the *Kathasaritsagara*. It is indeed an ‘ocean’ of stories, connecting peoples and territories across the world.

Themes The themes contained in this voluminous text span the entire spectrum of traditional Indian storytelling—the value of loyalty and patience, the costs of greed and foolishness, and the necessity of courage and compassion. To single out a few would be misleading, and so, instead, a few illustrative stories as a whole are discussed below. However, we can comment on the contents of the *Kathasaritsagara* as a whole. The first noteworthy element is the relative absence of the gods and goddesses that dominate so many other early Sanskrit texts. When they do appear, they act more or less like humans with extra power, like Siva and Parvati whose conversation sets the ball rolling in this extended collection of stories. Deities do respond to entreaties from worshippers, often dispensing boons and issuing curses, when emergency aid is required. In addition, most of the supernaturals in these stories are not the great gods of Hinduism (Siva, Vishnu and Brahma, etc.) but rather celestials from the lower leagues. These include ghosts, demons, sprites, ascetics, sages, nymphs and various other forms of powerful and often air-borne beings in Indian cosmology. Again, and again, the plot is driven forward not by capricious acts of the gods but by the logic of karma, by past lives, rebirths and fate. Another, somewhat unusual dimension of the content is the extent to which it deviates from the normal caste rules of social interaction. There are numerous cross-caste marriages, and the whole text is peopled with individuals from outside the three highest castes of Brahmin, warrior and merchant. Finally, there are also a large number of battles, which are won by our nominal hero of the frame-story, the prince Naravahanadatta. However, the pleasure of reading, listening to or simply reading about the *Kathasaritsagara* lies less in the plot than in the spaghetti-like structure that leads from one incident to a yet more incongruous incident. It may not appeal to everyone, but it certainly has endured for a long time.

Stories and translations

1. Upakosa and her Lovers This is one of several tales about clever women who outwit their adversaries and save their honour. In this case, Upakosa is the virtuous wife of Vararuchi, who foolishly agrees to an intellectual duel with a great scholar and grammarian (only in India is ‘grammarian’ a synonym for ‘intellectual’). Having been humiliated, he entrusts all his wealth to a merchant and goes into the Himalayas. Now, his wife, Upakosa, faces unwanted advances from a series of men: a magistrate, a minister and a priest. One by one, they accost her and she ‘buys time’ by agreeing to their demand but says that she can only satisfy their desire at night. Then she meets the merchant who has all her husband’s money and puts him off by the same trick. Back home, she instructs her servants to find a large trunk and fill it with rags soaked in a mixture of lamp-black, oils and perfume. One by one, as the first three suitors arrive, she has them whisked away and deposited in the trunk. When the merchant arrives, she makes him repeat his demand loudly so that the others,

locked in the trunk, will overhear: 'Yes, yes,' the merchant promises, 'I will return your husband's money but only after you satisfy my desires.' Then Upakosa has the evil merchant stripped, smeared with lamp-black and pushed out into the street where he is attacked by dogs. Next, she marches to the king and demands punishment for the merchant. When the merchant denies her accusation, she has the trunk brought into the king's assembly. When it is opened, the trio of rogues trapped inside confirm her story, though they, soaked in oil and lamp-black, give everyone a good laugh. The merchant is then punished and gives back the money to Upakosa, whose cunning and virtue are commended.

This story is one of those that migrated from India to the west, where it is known as the 'Entrapped Suitor'. In fact, it is so widespread in world folklore that it is listed in an international index as folk-tale 1730. The same story is told, for example, in the *Thousand and One Nights* as 'The Lady and her Five Suitors,' with only minor changes: the king is also one of her suitors and there is no merchant with the husband's money. Dozens of other versions are recorded, stretching from Finland to north Africa.

The extract presented below is from the translation by Arshia Sattar in 1996. Note: Upakosa's husband is Vararuci; the minister is identified here as a 'secretary' and the merchant as 'Hiranyagupta'.

Upakosa had her maids prepare a mixture of lampblack, oil and sweet perfumes in a large vat. She dipped four rags into the mixture and made her servants make a huge trunk which could be locked from the outside. On the night of the Spring festival, the prince's secretary arrived during the first watch, dressed in his best clothes. He entered the house without being seen and Upakosa said to him, 'You cannot touch me before you have a bath. Go into that room and bathe.' The foolish man was led into a dark inner chamber by the maids. They took off his jewels and his fine clothes, even his underclothes and gave him a single rag to wear as an undergarment. They rubbed the villain from head to toe with the mixture of lampblack and oil, pretending that they were using a perfumed ointment. While they rubbed it into his every limb, the second watch of the night arrived and with it the priest.

'The maids said to the secretary, "The king's priest has arrived. Quickly, climb into this," and they pushed the confused man, naked as he was, into the trunk and fastened it securely from the outside. The priest was also led into the dark inner chamber for a bath. The maids stripped him of his clothes and ornaments and rubbed him down with the oily mixture. When he was wearing nothing but the rag, the third watch of the night arrived, bringing the magistrate with it. The maids used his arrival as a means to scare the priest and pushed him into the trunk just like the prince's secretary before him. They locked him in the trunk and brought the magistrate into the room on the pretext of giving him a bath. They rubbed him with the oily mixture as they had done the others and also gave him a small rag to cover himself. While this was happening, the merchant arrived in the last watch of the night. The maids pushed the magistrate into the trunk and locked it from the outside, scaring him with the idea that the merchant might see him. Even though they could touch each other, the three men in the trunk dared not speak and cowered there in terror as if they were preparing themselves for a life in a dark dungeon.

'Meanwhile, Upakosa brought a lamp and led the merchant into the inner room. She said, "Give me the money that my husband left with you." When the wicked merchant saw that the room was empty, he said, "I told you I would give you the money that your husband deposited with me." As soon as he said that, Upakosa addressed the men hidden in the trunk, "Dear gods, listen to the words of Hiranyagupta." Then she blew out the lamp and the merchant was covered with the lampblack by the maids on the pretext of preparing him for a bath. Then, since the night was over, the maids took him by the neck and pushed him out

of the house. Covered only by a small rag and the oily mixture, Hiranyagupta went home slowly, bitten by dogs along the way. He was so embarrassed that he was unable to look his servants in the face as they washed the oil off his body. Truly, the path of the wicked is not smooth.

'In the morning, Upakosa went to King Nanda's palace along with her maids without telling her parents. She told the king that the merchant Hiranyagupta was trying to take away her husband's money. The king had the merchant brought in so that he could investigate the matter. The merchant said, "Sir, I have nothing that belongs to this woman." Upakosa replied, "I have witnesses to prove this. When my husband left, he placed the family deities inside this trunk. This merchant admitted that the deposit was with him in front of them. Bring the trunk here and ask them yourself." The king was astonished to hear this and ordered that the box be fetched. Immediately, it was brought in earned by several men.

'Upakosa said, "Gods, tell the truth about what the merchant said and then you can return to your own homes. If you do not tell the truth, I will either bum the box or open it up here." The men inside were terrified and replied that it was true, that the merchant had admitted that he had Vararuci's money in their presence. At a loss for words, the merchant confessed to his crime. But the king was overcome with curiosity and after asking Upakosa, had the box opened by breaking the lock. The three men were dragged out looking like lumps of darkness and it was with great difficulty that the king and his ministers recognized them. Everyone started laughing and the king, still curious, said to Upakosa, that virtuous woman, "What is all this?" and she related the whole story. All the people in the assembly praised Upakosa saying, "The behaviour of women from good families is above reproach because of their inherent virtue."

'Those four men, who had coveted another man's wife, were banished from the kingdom and their wealth was confiscated. How can the wicked ever prosper? The king affectionately made Upakosa his sister and gave her lots of wealth. Then she was allowed to return home. When Varsa and Upavarsa learned what had happened, they, too, praised Upakosa and the whole city sang her praises.

2. The Fickle wife Many stories are devoted to the theme of the 'fickle wife' or the unsteadiness of women. The female's lack of constancy is usually, as in the extract below, emphasised by a contrast with the modesty and courage of her husband. However, the waywardness of the wife is typically restricted to thought rather than action, so that she can be reclaimed by the hero, as again in the story translated below. The cause of the wife's momentary wobbly mind seems to be an accident, a misfortune over which she has no control. Often, this brief instance of disloyalty on the part of a woman is attributed to an arrow shot by Kama, god of love. This selection is from the translation by C H Tawney in 1880-1884.

Formerly there dwelt in the Deccan a king, of the name of Simhabala. And his wife, named Kalyanavati, the daughter of a prince of Malava, was dear to him above all the women of his harem. And the king ruled the realm with her as consort, but once on a time he was expelled from his kingdom by his powerful relations, who banded together against him. And then the king, accompanied by the queen, with his weapons and but few attendants, set out for the house of his father-in-law in Malava.

And as he was going along through a forest, which lay in his road, a lion charged him, and the hero easily cut it in two with a stroke of his sword. And when a wild elephant

came at him trumpeting, he circled round it and cut off with his sword its trunk and feet, and stripped it of its jewel, and killed it. And alone he dispersed the hosts of bandits like lotuses, and trampled them, as the elephant, lord of the forest, tramples the beds of white water-lilies. Thus he accomplished the journey, and his wonderful courage was seen, and so he reached Malava, and then this sea of valour said to his wife: 'You must not tell in your father's house this that happened to me on the journey, it will bring shame to you, my queen; for what is there laudable in courage displayed by a man of the military caste?'

After he had given her this injunction, he entered his father-in-law's house with her, and when eagerly questioned by him, told his story. His father-in-law honoured him, and gave him elephants and horses, and then he repaired to a very powerful king named Gajanika. But being intent on conquering his enemies, he left his wife Kalyanavati there in her father's house.

Some days after he had gone, his wife, while standing at the window, saw a certain man. The moment she saw him, he captivated her heart by his good looks; and being drawn on by love, she immediately thought: 'I know no one is more handsome or more brave than my husband, but alas I my mind is attracted towards this man. So let what must be, be. I will have an interview with him.'

So she determined in her own mind, and told her desire to a female attendant, who was her confidante. And she made her bring him at night, and introduce him into the women's apartments by the window, pulling him up with a rope. When the man was introduced, he had not courage to sit boldly on the sofa on which she was, but sat apart on a chair. The queen, when she saw that, was despondent, thinking he was a mean man, and at that very moment a snake, which was roaming about, came down from the roof. When the man saw the snake, he sprang up quickly in fear, and taking his bow, he killed the snake with an arrow. And when it fell dead, he threw it out of the window, and in his delight at having escaped that danger, the coward danced for joy.

When Kalyanavati saw him dancing, she was cast down, and thought to herself over and over again: 'Alas ! Alas ! What have I to do with this mean-spirited coward?' And her friend, who was a discerning person, saw that she was disgusted, and so she went out, and quickly returned with assumed trepidation and said: 'Queen, your father has come, so let this young man quickly return to his own house by the way by which he came.' When she said this, he went out of the window by means of the rope, and being overpowered by fear, he fell, but, as luck would have it, he was not killed.

When he had gone, Kalyanavati said to her confidante : 'My friend, you have acted rightly in turning out this low fellow. You penetrated my feelings, for my heart is vexed. My husband, after slaying tigers and lions, conceals it through modesty, and this cowardly man, after killing a snake,

dances for joy. So why should I desert such a husband and fall in love with a common fellow? Curse on my unstable mind, or rather curse on women, who are like flies that leave camphor and haste to impurity.'

The queen spent the night in these self-reproaches, and afterwards remained waiting in her father's house for the return of her husband. In the meanwhile, Simhabala, having been supplied with another army by King Gajanika, slew those five wicked relations. Then he recovered his kingdom, and at the same time brought back his wife from her father's house, and after loading his father-in-law with abundance of wealth, he ruled the earth for a long time without opposition.

'So, you see, King, that the mind of even discerning women is fickle, and, though they have brave and handsome husbands, wanders hither and thither, but women of pure character are scarce.'

3. The Elephants and the Hares This story is representative of a great many others included in 'The Ocean of Stories.' It is fable, an animal story with a moral, and it involves a smaller animal outwitting a larger one, in this case a clever hare and a somewhat gullible elephant. Once this story moved west and into European languages, the clever hare became the wily fox who triumphs over lions and tigers. The English expression 'sly as a fox' in India would translate into 'sly as a hare.' The story from the *Kathasaritsagara* (given below) has the Indian element of the connection between a hare and the moon (in traditional Hindu astrology and mythology we can see the shadow of a hare on the moon). This is what convinces the clumsy but kind elephant that the humble hare is indeed an emissary of the great god of the moon. A similar link between the rabbit and the moon (often that the animal lives on the moon) is found in Chinese, Korean and Japanese folklore. And the trick of using a reflection of the moon in water to stand for the real thing is a motif found in many more literary traditions across the world. In western Europe, for example, the numskull mistakes his own reflection for the moon, tries to rescue it and falls in the water. Or, he sees the reflection and, when it disappears (because the clouds have covered the moon, assumes a cow has eaten it and tries to it consume it himself when it reappears. The translation here is by C H Tawney, 1880-1884.

There is a great lake abounding in water and on its bank there lived a king of the hares, named Silimukha. Now, once on a time, a leader of a herd of elephants, named Chaturdanta, came there to drink water, because all the other reservoirs of water were dried up in the drought that prevailed. Then many of the hares, who were the subjects of that king, were trampled to death by Chaturdanta's herd, while entering the lake. When that monarch of the herd had departed, the hare-king Silimukha, being grieved, said to a hare named Vijaya in the presence of the others : 'Now that that lord of elephants has tasted the water of this lake, he will come here again and again, and utterly destroy us all, so think of some expedient in this case. Go to him, and see if you have any artifice which will suit the purpose or not. For you know business and expedients, and are an ingenious orator. And in all cases in which you have been engaged the result has been fortunate.'

When dispatched with these words, the hare was pleased, and went slowly on his way. And following up the track of the herd, he overtook that elephant-king and saw him, and being determined somehow or other to have an interview with the mighty beast, the wise hare climbed up to the top of a rock, and said to the elephant: 'I am the ambassador of the moon, and this is what the god says to you by my mouth: "I dwell in a cool lake, where dwell hares whose king I am, and I love them well, and thence I am known to men as the cool-rayed and the hare-marked [Hindu tradition sees a hare in the moon]. Now thou hast defiled that lake and slain those hares of mine. If thou doest that again, thou shalt receive thy due recompense from me".'

When the king of the elephants heard this speech of the crafty hare's, he said in his terror: 'I will never do so again :

I must show respect to the awful moon-god.' The hare said : 'So come, my friend, I pray, and we will show him to you.' After saying this, the hare led the king of elephants to the lake, and showed him the reflection of the moon in the water. When the lord of the herd saw that, he bowed before it timidly at a distance, oppressed with awe, and never came there again. And Silimukha, the king of the hares, was present, and witnessed the whole transaction, and after honouring that hare, who went as an ambassador, he lived there in security.

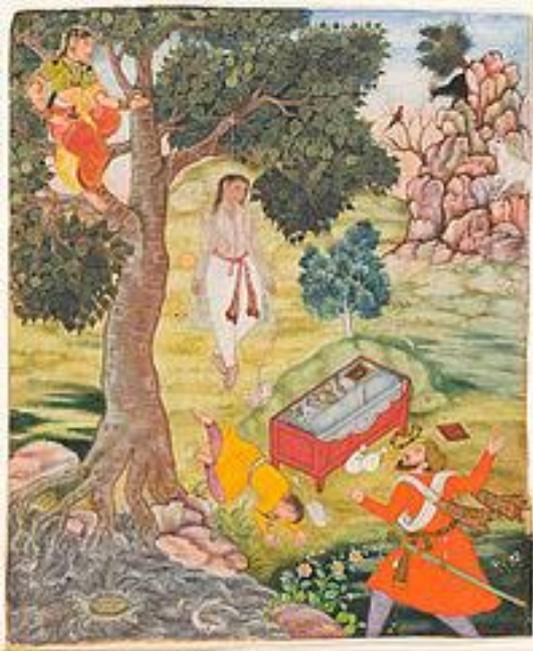
Reading

Arshia Sattar, *Tales from the Kathasaritsagara*, 1996

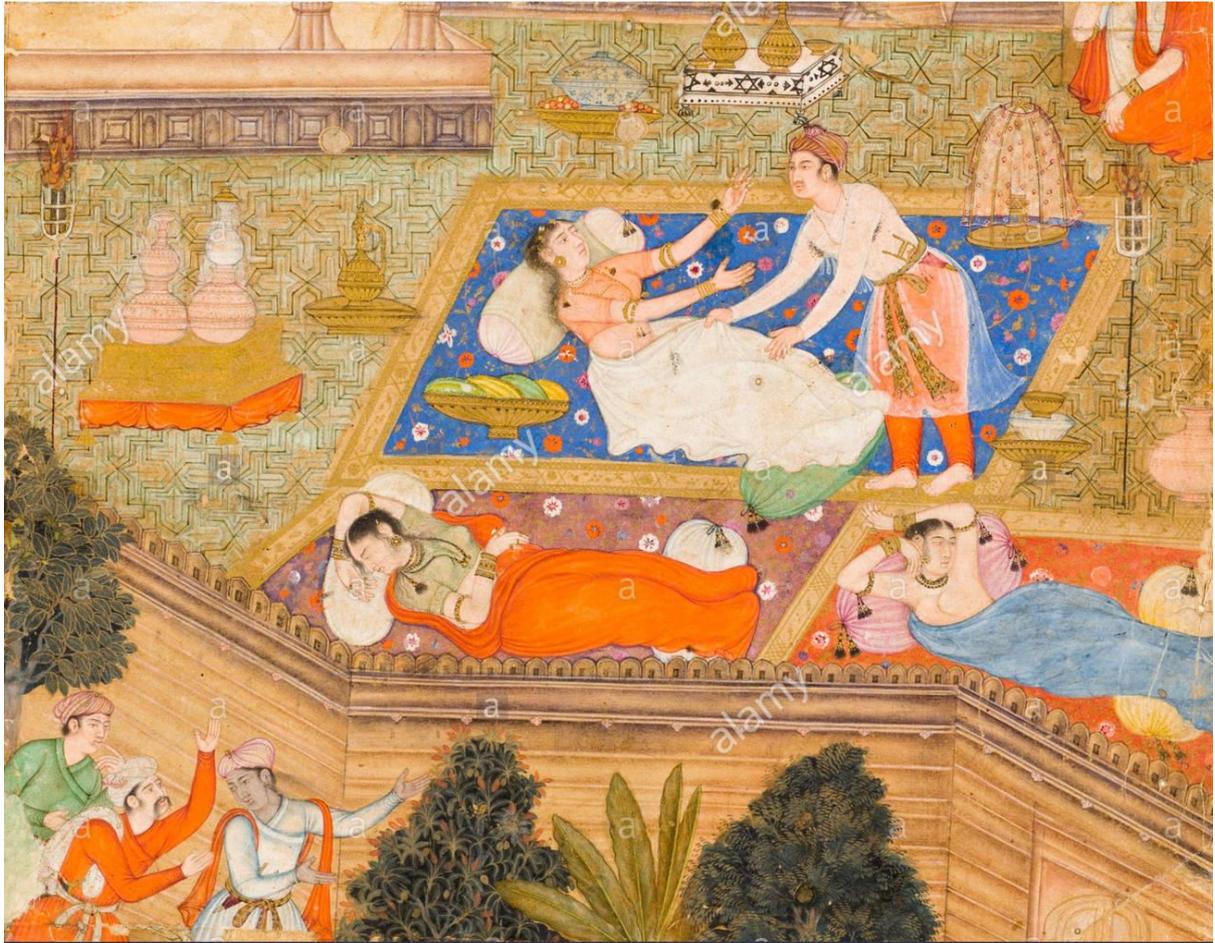
C. H. Tawney, *The Katha Sarit Sagara*, 1880-1884

N. M. Penzer, *The Ocean of Story*, 1924-1928

James Mallinson, *The Ocean of the Rivers of Story*, 2007-2009



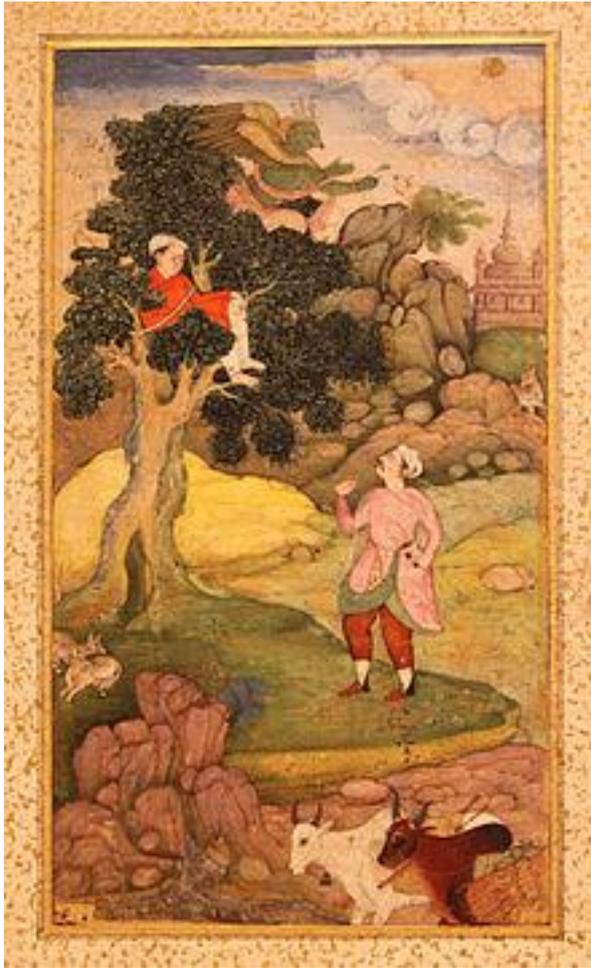
(the tale of the Cunning Siddhikari, from a manuscript of the *Kathasaritsagara*, c. 1590)



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(Story of King Putraka, from the *Kathasaritsagara*, watercolour, c. 1590)



(from an illustrated manuscript of the *Kathasaritsagara*, c. 1590)