INDIAN FICTION – Postclassical Period

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Overview

During these centuries between the advent of Islam and the foundation of the Mughal Empire, Indian writers continued to produce ever more versions of the popular tale collections (*Pancatantra*, *Jataka* and *Brhatkatha*). One key difference, however, is that now those redactions were written in regional language as well as Sanskrit and Tamil. Indeed, by the end of this period, Sanskrit ceases to generate any new, major literary works. Jain influence in the southern languages was prominent, while in the north, writers produced a series of adaptations of Indian texts using Persian genres and metres.

Sanskrit

Kathasaritsagara ('The Ocean of Streams of Story') is a 12th-century version of the earlier (and lost) text known as *Brhatkatha*. Like that earlier text, the *Kathasaritsagara* is a rambling compendium of tales, legends and the supernatural composed in an easy metre with prose sections interspersed. The author, Somadeva, put the story of a legendary prince at the centre of his narrative and built a number of other stories around it. He drew on the vast repertoire of Sanskrit story literature, including tales from the *Pancatantra*.

Vetalapancavimsati One section of the *Kathasaritsagara* that later found its way into most regional languages is the *Vetalapancavimsati* ('Twenty-Five Tales of a Vampire'). The story centres on a king who is tricked into helping an ascetic perform an esoteric ritual and is tasked with retrieving a corpse, which is hanging from a tree. Unfortunately, when the unsuspecting king carries the corpse on his back, he finds it is inhabited by a 'spirit' (the *vetala* of the title). Fortunately, for the king, the *vetala* is a good storyteller and proceeds to narrate a series of 25 stories. Unfortunately, each story contains a riddle, which if the king cannot solve will result in his death. The series ends when the king fails to solve a riddle and walks away in resigned silence, an act of bravery that inspires the *vetala* to tell him how to outwit the ascetic, who had been planning to sacrifice him.

Hitopadesa The *Hitopadesa* is another Sanskrit collection of tales. Rather than the entertaining adventures of the vampire tales, however, this text is a series of moral fables. The primary source for this text is the *Pancatantra*, borrowing not only many of its tales but also its frame-story. Like all collections that borrow from earlier texts, the dating of the *Hitopadesa* is difficult. Some scholars, relying on internal references to other texts, favour the 9th or 10th century CE, but as the earliest surviving manuscript carries a date of 1377 CE, a later date seems reasonable.

Indo-Persian

Masnavi Indo-Persian writers of the period adapted the *masnavi* genre (rhyming couplets in a religious poem), made famous in Persia by Rumi, to tell stories based on Indian folk tales. One of the earliest is the *Esq-nama* by HasanDehlavi of Delhi (13th-14th c. CE), which was inspired by an oral tale from Rajasthan.

Tuti-Nama Another famous adaptation from Sanskrit story literature is the 'Story of the Parrot' (*TutiNama*) by Nakhshabi in the 14th century CE. Nakhshabi's life is typical of many during this period. A Persian physician born in Persia, he migrated to north India and found patronage under a minor Muslim ruler. While still in Persia, he had translated a Sanskrit version of the story (*Sukasaptati*, 'Story of 70 Parrots') and adapted this to write the *TutiNama*. In his text, a single parrot tells 52 tales over as many nights in order to prevent its mistress from having a love affair while her husband is away (a delaying tactic of storytelling that is familiar to us from the *Thousand and One Nights*).

Tamil

Kalingattuparani One major Tamil text in which the art of storytelling is displayed in this period is *Kalingattuparani* written by Jayamkontar in the 12th c. CE. Although this is essentially a 'war poem' (celebrating a famous victory by a Chola king over a northern king), it is an example of what we today would call 'historical fiction.' The author describes in detail the birth and maturity of his hero, followed by his military training and the

campaigns that lead up to his 'invasion' of the north. The battle itself is fierce, leaving hundreds of men and elephants slaughtered. The victorious king has prayed to goddess Kali, and now she and her horde of hungry ghosts descend on the field to gorge themselves on the flesh. All this is narrated in brisk, two-line stanzas that propel the story forward.

Kannada

Janna   A major Kannada writer of the period is known simply as Janna (13th c. CE) because he was a Jain (as were many other writers in south India at this time). Janna was both a court poet and an architect responsible for the building of several Jain temples. His patron, the HoysalaVeeraBallala II, is important because Kannada literature achieved its 'Golden Age' during his reign.

YashodharaCharite   Janna's masterpiece is the *YashodharaCharite*, a narrative poem borrowing from episodes in Sanskrit literature. In Janna's hands, the story becomes a vehicle for dramatizing Jain values and beliefs. The cycle of life-and-birth is endured without finding release because the main characters do not live according the primary Jain value of non-violence. In one famous episode, a king plans to sacrifice two young boys to a goddess, but then relents. In another, a king kills his friend and steals his wife, who then dies of grief, prompting the king to burn himself on the widow's funeral pyre.

NemichandraA second influential Kannada writer who produced fiction in this period isNemichandra. Unsurprisingly, he was patronised by the same Hoysala king (VeeraBallala II) who supported Janna. Nemichandra is best remembered for his *Lilavati* (c. 1170 CE). Inspired by the earlier Sanskrit work *Vasavadatta* by Subhandu in the 7th century, *Lilavati* is a romance (not to be confused by a mathematics treatise of the same title about the same time), in which a prince and princess carry on a love affair through dreams, until, after suitably long delays, they meet and marry.

Telugu

Vikramarkacharitramu   Among the many story collections written in Telugu in this period, *Vikramarkacharitramu* ('Story of Vikramaditya') is representative. Tales about a legendary king Vikramaditya appear to have circulated in Sanskrit and other languages from the early centuries of the Christian era before being anthologised in the great story collection of*Kathasaritsagara.* The stories, familiar from that collection, involve a series of adventures by the eponymous king, who must escape vampires, disloyal servants, undeserved curses and treacherous women.

Questions/Discussion

1.   Fiction in Indian literature before the influence of European literature is found mainly in oral stories written down and in 'historical fiction' in which a king's life is embellished by the author's imagination. How does this differ from literary history in English, French or German? When does 'fiction' in the modern sense appear in these languages?

2.   Indo-Persian writers did more or less the same thing as their native-born Indian writers: they adapted pre-existing, mostly Sanskrit story literature. However, they often used genres borrowed from their native Persian. How does this change the fiction they wrote?

Reading

Catherine Benton, *God of Desire: Tales of Kamadeva in Sanskrit Story Literature* (SUNY, 2006)
Bruce B. Lawrence, *Notes from a Distant Flute: The Extant Literature of   pre-Mughal Indian Sufism* (Tehran, 1978)
P. Chenchiah and Bhujanga Raja Rao*, A History of Telugu Literature*   (Asian Educational Services, 1988)
Sisir Kumar Das, *A History of Indian Literature, 500-1399: From Courtly to the Popular* (SahityaAkademi, 2005)
Anthony Kennedy Warder,*Indian Kāvya Literature: The Art of Storytelling*, Vol. 6 (Barnarsidass, 1992)