

# INDIAN FICTION – Classical Period

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## Overview

**‘Moral story’** Short didactic tales known as *nithi katha* (‘moral story’) are generally in prose, although sometimes the ‘lesson’ itself is in verse. Nearly all these numerous stories began as oral tales before being collected and written down in manuscripts by scribes and scholars. The collections often use what is called a ‘frame-story’ to give a narrative coherence to the otherwise disparate tales. These originally oral tales were collected and redacted in manuscript form sometime in the early centuries of the Common Era. Some were composed in Pali, but most were in Sanskrit, although all were eventually written down in every Indian language.

**Oral tales** Nearly every genre of ancient and classical Indian literature, from the Vedic hymns to the great epics, is founded on oral tradition and then mediated, and usually altered, through scribes and manuscripts. In the case of the collections of classical fiction, however, we see a more transparent process in which oral tradition was more completely replicated in written manuscripts. We cannot overstate the popularity and longevity of oral storytelling in India, nor can we put a date on it. We can only assume that the oral stories found in these classical story collections draw upon tales that, even by the time they were committed to writing in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE, were already hundreds of years old.

## Pancatantra

**Contents** The *Pancatantra* (‘Five-Books’) is a collection of nearly 100 animal fables. The frame-story is that a pundit instructs three ignorant princes in the art of statecraft, using these moral stories as lessons. The work is divided into five sections, each focusing on an aspect of statecraft, although each has more general significance. The five topics are: The Separation of Friends, The Gaining of Friends, War and Peace, Loss of Gains and ill-Considered Action. Each of these sections is itself introduced by a frame-story, within which animals take turns telling a story.

The last topic (Ill-Considered Action) contains a famous story of a Brahmin’s wife who rashly kills a mongoose, believing that it had threatened her child. Later, with the rational approach of her husband, she discovers that the mongoose had in fact protected her child from a snake.

**History** Although scholars suggest that the ‘original’ version of the *Pancatantra* was composed between about 200 BCE and 200 CE, the earliest manuscript (now lost) was a Pahlavi (Middle Persian) version written in 570 CE. The oldest surviving version of the *Pancatantra* in an Indian language is a Sanskrit text by a Jain monk, dated 1199 CE and found in Kashmir. This influential version is considered the first ‘clean’ copy since the Jain scholar apparently consulted all extant manuscripts before producing his master copy.

**Popularity** The authority and popularity of the stories derives from the fact that they are believed to be the advice of a Brahmin, delivered in classical Sanskrit and addressing fundamental dilemmas of life. They function not only as admonitions on statecraft (like the 16<sup>th</sup> c. Italian text *The Prince*) and princely education, but also as entertaining tales about daily life.

**Diffusion** Stories in the *Pancatantra* diffused throughout India, where they are found in every one of its major languages, in oral and printed forms. Some tales have an international spread and have been recorded as far away as China and Wales. The chain of transmission began when the Sanskrit version was translated into Persian in the 6<sup>th</sup> c. CE, followed by translations into Syriac, Arabic, Greek, Latin, Spanish and the major languages of Europe, where it was often called *The Fables of Bidpai* (or *Pilpai*). The first known English publication was the *Morall Philosophie of Doni* in 1570 CE.

## Jataka

**Lives of the Buddha** The *Jataka* tales are similar to those in the *Pancatantra* (some tales are found in both collections) with the important difference that they were adapted to tell the story of the previous lives of the historical Buddha. In most variants of the text, each tale has a similar structure. First there is a folktale in prose,

in which the Buddha-to-be appears as one of the characters, either human or animal. This is then followed by a brief commentary in verse that links the story to an aspect of the Buddha's teaching

**Origins** Linguistic analysis suggests that the composition of the *Jataka* tales in Pali (the language of early Buddhist scriptures) began in the 2<sup>nd</sup> or 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. Several recognisable tales are sculpted in stone on Buddhist monuments dating from that period. These stories are found scattered throughout the Buddhist Pali canon (the *Tripitaka*, or 'Three Baskets'), including 35 that were collected for religious instruction and form one section of that canon.

**Jataka Katha** The most influential redaction of the tales was compiled many centuries later, in the 5<sup>th</sup> c. CE by Theravada Buddhists in Sri Lanka. This collection of about 550 tales, the *Jataka Katha*, is traditionally ascribed to a Sinhalese Buddhist monk named Buddhaghosa. Interestingly, the earliest surviving manuscript of that text is a Chinese translation, from Tibetan, also dated to the 5<sup>th</sup> c. CE.

**Jatakamala** Among other influential texts is the *Jatakamala* (c. 400 CE) ascribed to Arya Sura. Several caves at Ellora, near Bombay and datable to about 700 CE, contain scenes of the *Jataka* tales and quotations from this particular text. This Sanskrit text contains 34 tales that illustrate the 'perfections' of the Buddha, a concept developed largely in Mahayana Buddhism. Even more significant, this later text does not include the crucial 'frame-story.'

**Popular tale** One of the most popular *Jataka* tales is called 'Prince Sattva.' In this story, the Boddhisattva ('Buddha-to-be') sees a starving tigress about to eat her own cubs. In desperation, the Boddhisattva kills himself, offering his flesh to the animal, so that she and her children might live. When the Boddhisattva's disciples see what has happened, they praise his generosity and lack of selfishness.

**Diffusion** While these Buddhist morality stories did not travel as widely as the more secular *Pancatantra*, several versions of the collection exist, for example, in Tibetan, Persian, Sinhalese, Thai and Burmese. A 9<sup>th</sup>-century CE stupa at Borobudur on Java has the 34 stories of the *Jataka Mala* carved in stone.

### Legacy

Although some scholars assume that these early examples of story writing evolved into the modern short story and novel, there is actually little evidence for this pleasing idea. While some content was borrowed by modern writers, the inspiration for the modern forms came from other, more contemporary sources.

### Questions

1. The trail of the *Pancatantra* leads from India to Europe, and some early Indian stories found their way into European oral tradition. Not many, however. How do stories cross linguistic and cultural borders? Does it really, as the cliché goes, take only one bilingual person? Why do some stories migrate and other not?
2. The *Jataka* tales were used to spread Buddhism, although monks also studied philosophical and theological texts (called *sutras*). Compare the tales with those other texts, especially the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. Choose one specific tale and analyse its language and message with the more official texts.
3. The frame-story is a common literary device that gives coherence to an otherwise disparate collection of tales. Compare the frame-stories of the *Pancatantra* and the *Jataka* with the frame-stories in other famous collections, such as the *Arabian Nights*, *Canterbury Tales*, *Decameron*.

### Reading

Patrick Olivelle (trans.), *The Pancatantra: The Book of India's Folk Wisdom* (Oxford, 1997)

Peter Khoroché (trans.), *Once the Buddha Was a Monkey: Arya Sura's 'Jatakamala'* (Chicago, 1989)

Stuart Blackburn, The Brahmin and the mongoose: the narrative context of a well-travelled tale. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* LIX, 3, pp. 494-507 (1996).

Michael Witzel. On the origin of the literary device of the 'Frame Story' in old Indian literature. In Falk, H (ed.). *Hinduismus und Buddhismus, Festschrift für U. Schneider* (Freiburg, 1987), pp. 380-414

## Texts

1. The story of the loyal Mongoose, from the *Pancatantra*, translated by Ryder, 1925.

There was once a Brahman named Godly in a certain town. His wife mothered a single son and a mongoose. And as she loved little ones, she cared for the mongoose also like a son, giving him milk from her breast, and salves, and baths, and so on. But she did not trust him, for she thought: 'A mongoose is a nasty kind of creature. He might hurt my boy.' Yes, there is sense in the proverb:

A son will ever bring delight,  
Though bent on folly, passion, spite.  
Though shabby, naughty, and a fright.

One day she tucked her son in bed, took a water-jar, and said to her husband: 'Now, Professor, I am going for water. You must protect the boy from the mongoose.' But when she was gone, the Brahman went off somewhere himself to beg food, leaving the house empty.

While he was gone, a black snake issued from his hole and, as fate would have it, crawled toward the baby's cradle. But the mongoose, feeling him to be a natural enemy, and fearing for the life of his baby brother, fell upon the vicious serpent halfway, joined battle with him, tore him to bits, and tossed the pieces far and wide. Then, delighted with his own heroism, he ran, blood trickling from his mouth, to meet the mother; for he wished to show what he had done.

But when the mother saw him coming, saw his bloody mouth and his excitement, she feared that the villain must have eaten her baby boy, and without thinking twice, she angrily dropped the water-jar upon him, which killed him the moment that it struck. There she left him without a second thought, and hurried home, where she found the baby safe and sound, and near the cradle a great black snake, torn to bits. Then, overwhelmed with sorrow because she had thoughtlessly killed her benefactor, her son, she beat her head and breast.

At this moment the Brahman came home with a dish of rice gruel which he had got from someone in his begging tour, and saw his wife bitterly lamenting her son, the mongoose. 'Greedy! Greedy!' she cried. 'Because you did not do as I told you, you must now taste the bitterness of a son's death, the fruit of the tree of your own wickedness. Yes, this is what happens to those blinded by greed. For the proverb says:

Indulge in no excessive greed  
(A little helps in time of need) —  
A greedy fellow in the world  
Found on his head a wheel that whirled.'

2. From the *Jataka Tales*, translation by HT Francis and EJ Thomas, 1916

Once on a time at the foot of a certain mountain there were living together in one and the same cave two friends, a lion and a tiger. The Bodhisattva too was living at the foot of the same hill, as a hermit.

Now one day a dispute arose between the two friends about the cold. The tiger said it was cold in the dark half of the month, whilst the lion maintained that it was cold in the light half. As the two of them together could not settle the question, they put it to the Bodhisattva. He repeated this stanza:

In light or dark half, whensoever the wind  
Doth blow, 'tis cold. For cold is caused by wind.  
And, therefore, I decide you both are right.

Thus did the Bodhisattva make peace between those friends.