Chapter 6

Conclusion

The Kathāsaritsāgara, a treasure trove of tales, is notable for its worldly rather than the other worldly concerns. Though it deals with the world of the divine and the semi-divine along with that of the mortals, it does not have a didactic purpose. It does not put forth a moral way of life. Among the four puruṣārthas which are dharma, artha, kāma and mokṣa the characters in these stories pursue artha or worldly pleasures rather than mokṣa. Sattar remarks:

The Kathāsaritsāgara speaks of the world as a many-splendoured place, one in which humans and non-humans of various persuasions and motivations act and interact with varying degrees of success and failure. Generosity and pettiness, love and betrayal, sacrifice and selfishness are emotions displayed equally by Brāhmīns and Śūdras, by kings and courtesans, for everyone in this text is concerned with only one thing—worldly pleasure and power. (xiv-xv)

The Kathāsaritsāgara forms part of a larger collection of tales seemingly lost to the world now. Paścāci, the language in which the work was originally written is likely to have been one of the many varieties of Pārākritis that was used during the time. Pārākrit was considered to be crude and unpolished and
the story about the origin of *Bṛhatkathā* speaks of the rejection of the text by the Sātavāhana king precisely on the same ground. According to Pollock:

Choosing a language for literary and political text production implies affiliating with an existing socio-textual community or summoning such a community into being. For it is in part from acts of reading, hearing, performing, reproducing and circulating literary and political texts that social groups come to produce themselves and understand themselves as groups . . . .

(*Language* 27-28)

Choosing to write in a particular language was not a simple task for the author in medieval times. Sanskrit was undoubtedly the language of the court. So it comes as no surprise when Somadeva writes the *Kathāsaritsāgara* in Sanskrit to amuse his royal patron. But one wonders why he chose to render into Sanskrit a text written in a lowly dialect Paśāci, the language of the pāśacas. It has been recorded that it was a fashion to provide Sanskrit renderings or *chayās* to works written in Pāṇḍīka and Aparahramśa and in some cases these Sanskrit translations displaced even the original (Pollock, *Language* 104). This has been the case here.

The main characters in these stories are not only drawn from the ruling class but also from the mercantile class. Their adventures are punctuated by encounters with all types of characters. The protagonists emerge successful after facing great odds and after performing wonderful exploits. Though
religious beliefs and practices are ever present in the background there is an
air of secularism and materialism. The Kathāsaritsāgara does not always speak
highly of the brāhmaṇas. It abounds in mercenary brāhmaṇas and ascetics. It
also portrays people from all castes retiring to hermitages and leading holy
lives. There is also a prevailing Buddhist element in many stories which attests
to the strong presence of Buddhism. Though the text contains stories of
people belonging to many religious sects it does not exclusively endorse the
values of any particular religion.

The vidyādharaś whose story forms a major part of the text, figure in
the Buddhist, Jain and Hindu traditions. No other text gives them the
importance that the Kathāsaritsāgara does. They stand for a state of being
the humans can aspire to and achieve. Vidyādhaṛas are not immortal hence
the aim in achieving the status is the enjoyment of worldly pleasures. About
the the Indian narrative Ayyappa Paniker maintains that:

The mixing of reality with fantasy seems to be a common
narrative of the past and the present. There is realism in minute
details with overreaching fantasy controlling the mainsprings of
action. . . . The interpolation of fantasy seems to add a
supernatural level to human existence: the unheard and the
unseen being as important as, or more important than, the
heard and the seen. (5)
The kingdom of ancient Kashmir was a territory much smaller than the modern state of Jammu and Kashmir. Ray comments that it “denoted an irregularly oval valley, 84 miles long from north-east to south-west and 20 to 25 miles broad, between 33° to 34° 35′ N. and 74° 8′ to 75° 25′ E. It was surrounded by snow capped mountains varying at different points from 12,000 to 18,000 feet in height” (1). The mountain ranges surrounding it have largely determined the political destiny of the valley, making it impregnable and inaccessible. While powerful neighbouring kingdoms succumbed to the onslaught of the invaders, Kashmir’s natural defences saved her from impending foreign domination. Ray remarks:

In fact, it was not the valour of the Kashmirian army but the defence furnished by the mountain ramparts, which many a time turned the tide of invasion from the valley. Guarded from the outer world by chains of mountains, she was able to preserve her ancient culture for a considerable time and to develop her social and economic system in her own way. (2)

Stein in his preface to the Rājatarāṅgiṇī concludes that “the great geographical barriers which separate Kaśmir from the rest of India, coupled with the marked difference of climatic conditions have from early times assured to the alpine land a distinct character of its own which manifests itself strongly in all matters of culture, customs and social organisation” (xvi). The stories in the
Kathāsaritsāgara reflect the various aspects of the life of the people of Kashmir.

Religion is an inevitable part of the life of the majority of people in our society even today. The Kathāsaritsāgara depicts a society riddled with innumerable popular superstitious beliefs. The major religions seen are the Śaiva, Vaiṣṇava, Tantric, Śākta variations of Hinduism. Other little traditions like worship of trees, serpents as well as semi-divine beings like yakṣas are also seen. Stein remarks that “for centuries before Kalhaṇa’s time Buddhism and the orthodox creeds had existed peacefully side by side in Kashmir. As far as the laity was concerned, they had to a great extent amalgamated” (9). We find ample proof of this in the Kathāsaritsāgara, where a father is a staunch Buddhist while his son is a devout Hindu. Buddhism is practised but the holy ascetics are far outnumbered by cunning procurers in the garb of ascetics. Wicked pāśupata ascetics are also many in number. Daniel James Bisgaard in the introduction to his work Social Conscience in Sanskrit Literature comments that such attempts reveal a “social conscience” on the part of the authors which resulted in a critique of “hypocrisy and injustice within . . . society while calling attention to the lot of the exploited” (ix). He remarks that though Somadeva himself is a brāhmaṇa, that does not prevent him from “copious satirizing of false ascetics and nuns together with vainglorious and hypocritical Bṛahmaṇas” (xxv).
The idea of *karma* and rebirth found in these stories is different from the versions in the *Dharmaśāstras*. The stories uphold that action in this birth is the reason for the next birth. Even a *caṇḍala* by doing good and pious deeds can achieve the status of a king in the next birth. It is interesting to note that though the stories contain characters from various sects and religions it does not endorse the values of any one religion or sect. As Sattar remarks “the *Kathāsaritśāgara* has no single religious orientation” (xxix). Somadeva, being a Śaiva bṛāhmaṇa dedicates the text to Śiva but the main characters, the *vidyādharas* as well as the mortals celebrate worldly pleasures and *mokṣa* is not their aim. The *Kathāsaritśāgara* remains “the nexus for different religions, different ideologies and different genres” (Sattar xxx). It also contains many types of stories including myths, legends and folk-tales. It has the story of Rāma and Śītā as well as some stories in the *Mahābhārata* along with the Urvaśī-Purūravas myth. Rebirth is very important in these stories. Actions in the previous birth or *karma* has a direct bearing on the present life. Boons and curses are a plenty. They are devices which help in moving the narrative forward while offering an explanation to the events. These stories do not share rigid views regarding the notion of caste impurities and untouchability. In fact they are quite flexible.

The organisation of society on the basis of various *varṇas* is evident in the stories. The bṛāhmaṇas are the priestly class following the occupations of teaching and conducting sacrifices for others. They are entitled to receive
gifts from kings and other people. But there are other brähmanas employed
as attendants of kings. They seem to be proficient in the art of warfare also.
The warrior class of kṣatriyas is the royalty. But some are also employed in
the king’s service. The merchants feature prominently in the stories in the
Kathāsarisāgara. But it is interesting to note that they are not referred to as
vaiśyas. The merchants were very affluent and enjoyed the pleasures of
luxurious life as well as the society of the courtesan. It is evident that there
was a class called the vaiśyas. The śudras were also present. We come across
the rajas who are a separate class of warriors. They are considered to be
very brave. Though some consider them to belong to the kṣatriyas it is clear
that they form a separate group. The society consisted of many other tribes
like caṇḍala, niśada, śavara, bhilla who were tribal groups assimilated into the
four varṇa system by the story of their having been born out of a clandestine
union of a member of a higher varṇa with that of a lower varṇa. Many of
them are occupational groups performing various services. The evidence
gathered from the stories in the Kathāsarisāgara refutes Ray’s argument
that “there was no such caste as Kṣatriya, Vaiśya and Śūdra in early Kashmir”
(101).
Matters of everyday life like their food habits, clothing, coinage,
weights and measures, pastimes, etc. throw invaluable light on the life of the
people. People had food twice a day. Meat was a delicacy served in feasts
and it was eaten by members of all sections of the society including the
bṛāhmaṇas. But consuming the flesh of cows was a great crime. Buddhist records also mention eating flesh and fish either fresh or salted (Beal 89). Fondness of wine by men as well as women is also evident. Al- Masudi the Arab historian who visited India during AD 943-55 also mentions this custom (Ara 93). The clues that we can gather from the stories point to the dressing habits of men as well as women. Both were fond of ornaments and cosmetics and various unguents were used to perfume and decorate the body. Louis Renou exclaims that “even men did not disdain the use of paint and unguents” (171). Arab travellers also note the various forms of jewellery worn by the kings of India like ear-rings of precious stones mounted in gold, necklaces of great value, formed of the most precious red and green stones. They remark that “pearls, however, are held in the highest esteem, and are greatly sought after” (Ara 55). Various forms of art and music were patronised and many festivals including the spring festival were celebrated with mirth and hilarity. Pastimes of people included gambling, hunting and betel chewing. The rules pertaining to gambling can also be clearly seen.

Public sphere offers a picture of the society while the private sphere that is the home, throws light on the familial aspects of life. Marriage and domestic life is another field which provides ample scope for the understanding of interpersonal relationship of the time. Marriage is the most important saṃskāra in the life of a person and various forms of marriage can be seen. Marriage is arranged by the elders in the family and most often the
proposal comes from the groom’s side. The bride’s parents have the
authority to accept or decline the proposal. In some cases the ḍāndharva
form in which the man and women enter into a relationship on their own
accord is witnessed. But the formal marriage which follows all the rites and
rituals is preferred over it. The Kathāsaritsāgara gives a detailed picture of
the preliminary procedures which result in a marriage, the customs
associated with it, and the living arrangement of the newly married couple
after marriage. The custom of giving dowry is also seen. The ruling classes use
marriage as a means to strengthen their political power. The wife’s family
always comes to the aid of the husband whenever he is facing difficulty. The
son-in-law enjoys an advantageous position as he is at a vantage point. The
common man also aids his son-in-law in whatever ways he can. But the
daughter-in-law does not enjoy such powers in her husband’s home. Inter-
caste marriages are frequently seen. Brāhmaṇa–kṣatriya alliances are
common but it is interesting that kṣatriya-caṇḍāla, brāhmaṇa-niśada matches
also take place and are not looked down upon by the people. They are
claimed to be divinely sanctioned though.

Life of a woman revolved round her husband. It is very rarely that we
find a royal wife visiting her natal home after marriage. The women
belonging to the other classes are seen at times visiting their parental home
but it is often portrayed as affording her an opportunity to form amorous
alliances with strangers. Polygamy seems to be the order of the day. Princes
like Śūryaprabha and Naraśahanadatta marry a host of women. They have a head wife who shares the throne during coronation but she may not necessarily be the favourite wife. The royal women must forever face the challenge of being part of a large harem, potentially in the midst of rival wives. This forces many a woman to make her husband marry her friends also. Homo-social bonding of women occurs only that way. In other cases like in the interaction between the mother-in-law and the daughter-in-law there is inverse social bonding. Daughters-in-law are exploited in all possible ways.

The woman as the wife and the courtesan play an important role in society. Great importance is attached to the faithfulness of a woman to her husband but the notion of a man being faithful to his wife doesn’t exist in a polygamous society. The wife is supposed to be ever so faithful though adulterous wives who cuckold their husbands are aplenty. They are severely punished very often with loss of their ears and nose along with banishment. The idea of corporal punishment given to wayward women enjoyed some social sanction. The dominant ideology is that women are by nature fickle and that they should be guarded against this inherent fickleness.

The custom of saṁyag or widow burning seems to be widely prevalent. The wives are ever ready to burn themselves along with their dead husbands. In some cases even daughters-in-law and faithful servants, both male as well as female, follow the dead man to the next world by jumping into the funeral pyre. Though widely practised it was by no means compulsory. There are
many widows who stay alive looking after their children. Some instances of widow remarriage are also seen.

The courtesan or the gañikā played an important role in the social life of the time. She was an accomplished person in the fine arts and her society was sought after by kings and affluent merchants. The stories which caution against the wiles of the courtesan who try to fleece unsuspecting young men are plenty. But there are some faithful gañikās also. Bhattacharjee remarks in the *History of Classical Sanskrit Literature* that:

> The socio-religious milieu of Somadeva is virtually the same as that depicted in the *Rājatarāṇī*, where the social degeneration is so obvious, and where the machination of the self-seeking, the ruthlessness of the ambitious and the unscrupulousness of the avaricious are portrayed so powerfully. This abominable picture of a depraved society, however, is relieved by those who harbour genuine goodness in their hearts and those who pay a high price for their scruples and idealism. This balance is achieved because Somadeva presents the life and adventures of two generations (Udayana and Naravāhanadatta) and enlivens his work with tales of picaresque and amorous adventures of gnomes, fools, crooks, tricksters, prostitutes, and intriguing and fraudulent men and women. He can thus hold his audience’s attention and if it is not a work of art, it is still
eminently readable. Popular beliefs and superstitions of every brand -- Saiva, Vaishnava, Pāṣupata, Buddhist, Īāntric-- co-exist and are in full play. Somadeva’s world is balanced with characters both good and evil, stupid and clever, philanthropic and self-seeking, but all the tales are exciting. There lies Somadeva’s success. (253-54)

The culture of a society implies its general way of life. Culture includes knowledge, beliefs, art, law, customs and other aspects acquired by people as members of a society. The study of all these aspects as reflected in the Kathāsaritsāgara help us to gain an idea about the society of the times. Keith holds these stories to be “spicy narratives of human life” (242). The stories have universal appeal but as Doniger comments in the foreword to Sattar’s Tales from the Kathāsaritsāgara, “it paints a vivid picture of a most particular part of India at one moment in history, and yet it tells stories that are the Indian variants—often the Indian sources—of stories told around the world” (xliii).