Beast Fables in Sanskrit Literature

“Sir William Jones, in his discourse of the Hindus observes--- The universal prevalence among the Hindus of the doctrine of meta-psychosis was calculated to recommend to their belief, the notion that beasts and birds could reason and converse consequently the plan of such dialogues originated with them. Despite the questionability of the evidence in favour of the Hindus in the art of instruction by apologues, the purpose in which the Hindus directed it are particularly their own. Fable is with them practical ethics--- the science of niti or polity. Each fable is calculated to illustrate some reflection on worldly vicissitudes on some precept for human conduct.”

The above mentioned observation acknowledges the fact that the storytelling is an ancient art in India going back to the earliest literature. It formed part of the rituals surrounding the great sacrifices performed during Vedic and Epic times. We know from the Mahabharata that storytelling sessions were held in the intervals between the performance of sacrifices that often stretched over long periods of time, days, weeks, even months.

“The ancestor of the popular tale may have been such Vedic-Ākhyānas as are preserved, for instance, in the Ṛgvedic dialogue-hymn of Purūravas and Urvaśī, or in such Brāhmanic legends as that of Śunahśepa; but it is futile to seek the origin of the beast fable in the Ṛgvedic hymn of frogs (vii.103), ...or in the Upaniṣadic parable of dogs.(Ch. Up.1.12).”
According to the chronological study of history of Sanskrit literature, after the proverbial 'Vedic Age', we step into the 'Age of Epics and Purānas'. Should we search the origin of the beast fable in the very period? The eminent scholars like De and Dasgupta warn us against this unproductive attempt. They observe—"Nor is there any clear recognition of the fable in the Epics as distinct literary genre." 3

Closely allied to ‘Gadya Kāvya’ in the style of prose and to Nīti Kāvya in import are the Fables. [We exclude the Jataka-tales in the discussion, as they do not belong to the world of Sanskrit literature directly.]. Keith observes--- “The fable, indeed, is essentially connected with the two branches of science known by the Indians, as the Nitisastra and Arthasastra, which have this in common, as opposed to the Dharmasastras, that they are not codes of morals but deal with man’s action in practical politics and conduct of the ordinary affairs of everyday life and intercourse. We must not, however, exaggerate the contrast between the sastras, for in the sastras, the Arthasastra and the Nitisastra alike, there is much commonsense and that is often in accord with practical morality, at no time can we regard the didactic fable as intended merely to extol cleverness without regard to morality, there lingers around the work a distinct influence of the Dharmasastra, as was only to be expected seeing that the Panchatantra was intended for the instruction of the young ones and the instructors were Brahmins.”4

The earliest regular collection of fables is Brhatkathā of Gunādhya. But to us it is only the name that has survived. Somadeva and Kṣemendra have made translations and epitomes of Brhatkathā in Sanskrit, namely
Kathāsaritsāgara, Brhatkathāmañjarī. These Sanskrit versions represent the original Paiśācī (a low form of Prākrit) text, to a great degree though these poems read by themselves disclose an originality of poetic narration.

Somadeva, a Brahmin poet of the court of King Ananta of Kashmir, who reigned about 1029--1064 A.D., composed Kathāsaritsāgara in 18 books of 124 Tarangas and 24,000 verses. This is the earliest large collection of stories extant in the world. In about 1070 A.D. Somadeva declares that his work is a condensed Sanskrit version of Gunadhya’s Paiśāchī Brhatkathā.

In his prospectus of the Edition of Tawney’s Translation of this work, N.M. Penzer says--- “Turning to the work of itself, one is amazed by the mass of stories of every conceivable kind it contains. Animal stories dating back hundreds of years B.C., wild legends of Rig-Veda days explaining the creation of the earth, harrowing tales of blood-sucking vampires, beautiful and poetic love stories and vivid descriptions of terrible battles between gods, men or demons. All these are found in this storehouse of romance.”

Then comes Ksemendra’s Brhatkathāmañjarī. His three Mañjarīs are in reality distinct pieces of poetry and they can be called epitomes only in respect of the narrative of their originals.

Ksemendra’s poem like Somadeva’s “is divided into eighteen 'lambhakas' the name of which is the same as those of the corresponding Books in the Kathasaritsagara. Besides, we find in the Brhatkathamanjari a double system of subdivision. Most of the accessory tales and some of the
principal episodes of the hero’s history are followed by a colophon which resumes the substance of the tale—something like the marginal sub-titles found in the translation of the Kathasaritsagara by Mr. Tawney. It is a kind of index of the several incidents found in the text, and it is most convenient for ready reference. This method of subdivision, being found in all the manuscripts of the Manjari, must be rather ancient.”

Budhasvami’s Brhatkathāślokasamgraha comes from Nepal, and this led its being called a Nepalese version of the original Brhatkathā. The text is now available as a fragment of 28 sargas of about 4,539 verses. Regarding the subject matter it strikes a good difference with other two versions, the Kathāsaritsāgara and Brhatkathāmañjarī. Lacote remarks – “The spirit in which the subject is dealt with is also quite new. It is no longer a question of slight differences in the order of the books, like those one notices between the Kathasaritsagara and the Brhatkathamanjari, which, in spite of the various readings, show a common original. Here we have a poem entirely different; if it has the same ancestor as the other two, which to me seems to be certain, its relation to them is several degrees removed.”

Then comes the often-quoted Sanskrit fable, the Pañcatantra, which is the principal text of this study. In the next chapter we have dealt with the date and various recensions of Pañcatantra in detail.

Pūrnabhadra’s recension is a combination of Tantrākhyāyikā and Southern Pañcatantra. This text
Pūrnabhadra, the pupil of Jinapati Suri, revised Pañcatantra in 1199 A.D. His version is marked by the introduction of twenty-one new stories, including a famous one of the gratitude of animals and ingratitude of man.

Hitopadeśa is a far later and one of the most popular versions of Pañcatantra. Avowedly based on Pañcatantra, Hitopadeśa is a work with a plan original in itself of Narayana. It has only four books. Its third book has as its frame a story which is only a remote reflex of Pañcatantra Book III. The frame of its fourth book is wholly new. Book IV of the Pañcatantra is altogether omitted. The stories of Book V, including the frame story, are included as “emboxt” stories in Hitopadeśa Books III and IV. Several of the “emboxt” stories of Pañcatantra Book I are transferred to the Hitopadeśa’s new Book IV; those of Pañcatantra Book III are impartially divided between Hitopadeśa Books III and IV; not a few stories of the first three books of the Pañcatantra are omitted altogether, and various stories not found in the Pañcatantra are inserted in all four books of the Hitopadeśa.

In short, this is all about the beast fables in Sanskrit literature

References

3. Ibid
5. Tawney, (tr.) *Kathasaritsagar*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1968
7. Lacote, F., Essays, 10-11