

SOCIAL CRITICISM IN SANSKRIT CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Satyanarayan Chakraborty^{1,2}

¹ Rabindra Bharati University, Kolkata, India.

² Sorbonne Nouvelle University, Paris, France.

Abstract

Children's literature in Sanskrit is characterized by abundant introduction of ethical reflections and are generally regarded as 'Indian Dharmasāstra for the children' or 'the book of ethics for the beginners'. Cf. " *tat katham idānīm ete mama putrā gunavantaḥ kriyantām ? yataḥ –āhāra-nidrā-bhaya-maithunam ca / sāmānyam etat paśubhir narāṇām . / dharmo hi teṣām adhiko viśeṣo / dharmeṇa hīnāḥ paśubhiḥ samānāḥ.// dharmārthakāmamokṣāṇām yasyaiko'pi na vidyate / ajāgalastanasyeva tasya janma nirarthakam //*" – *Hitopadeśa*, *Prastāvanā*, 25,26).

The word 'dharma' in the verses mentioned above, should be understood as 'duties' or 'lessons' or ways to 'dharma'. The most popular children's works in Sanskrit are the *Pañcatantra* by Viṣṇuśarmā and the *Hitopadeśa* by Nārāyaṇa. These two are so popular that in terms of the number of editions and translations in its original and regional languages like Bengali, Assamese, Hindi, Gujrati, Marathi, Tamil, Telegu, Kanareese, Malayalam etc – in fact all the languages the Indians now use, surpass any of the Indian work. *Pañcatantra* alone is the second highest (after the Bible) number of editions – according to some. There may be a little exaggeration, which does not matter at all. Let us at the very outset mention that the entire portions of these two works do not appear to be meant for 'children' in its true sense. There are many stories which are unsuitable and un-understandable as well to minors who have not reached the period of adolescence (e.g. superficial knowledge – '*pallava-grahi pāṇḍitya*' is compared with sexual enjoyment by regular purchase – '*krayakrītam maithunam*'). The distinction between pure children's literature and the literature for adolescents has not been taken into consideration (cf. the Indian tradition – "*āṣoḍaśād bhavet bālāḥ*"). A simple story of a tortoise and a fish and the story of a prostitute have taken place side by side and certainly both are not suitable for both. This feature may suggest that there had been a selection of lessons for different groups. Again, derogatory remarks regarding character of women in general and depiction of their gross sexual feelings clearly suggest that these were not meant for girl students. One more possibility appears to be acceptable: The very style of using such portions in books mainly meant for young students indicate a social condition where the author had no reason to hesitate in speaking out in clear terms the decadence in morality in all aspect. It was absolutely 'open secret'. One interesting feature of the fables with animal characters is that generally human character in literature reminds the readers of a particular character peculiar to an animal. But in the case of these two works process is a reverse one. Here animal characters remind readers of human characters moving around us. Acceptance of this feature of reverse comparison, which has made these works very attractive to the children who are more familiar to animal characters than humans, once again suggest cogency of the claim by the authors that these are 'for children'. Before we start discussion of the social criticism in these two works we should note that many of the verses here are taken from the older literature like the *Rāmāyaṇa*, the *Mahābhārata*, *Śukranītisāra*, *Manusmṛhitā*, *Cāṇakya-nīti-śāstra*, *Kāmandakīya*, *Nītiśāstra* and many *Purāṇa*-s. For example, one-third of the *Hitopadesa* verses, 240 of 733, have been taken from earlier works. According to Ludwig Sternbach.

However, Collection of Cāṇakya-sayings is later than *Hitopadeśa*. Anyway, that does not matter. What we want to say is that, it is a social tradition that these works follow. Here we would like to mention only a few aspects of the social – criticism that that we notice in these two works.

In the name of scriptures, people in power use to exploit the society, inflict punishment to others without any proof of offence. Some ‘*Divya – vyavasthā*’, which can never be called ‘divine’, acted as a tool for oppression. One Dharmabuddhi was charged by his friend –partner Pāpabuddhi that the former had stolen the wealth owned jointly. Dharmabuddhi denied the charge. Pāpabuddhi suggested that a ‘*Śami*’ tree be asked to act as witness which would pronounce the truth. The tree responded – Dharmabuddhi is the culprit. So, such systems were there and people with a ‘bad-intention’ rightly named Pāpabuddhi, always invented ways to cheat others. In this case Pāpabuddhi put his father in the hole of the tree to pronounce the verdict on behalf of the God. Fortunately Dharmabuddhi was actually a ‘*Vāstavabuddhi*’ and could not rely on the ‘divine’ voice and put fire to the tree and his friend’s father, may say the truth, came out with serious burn-injuries. (Pañ. Kathā 19). We do not think that such things happened on every occasion. Reality is that, the poor people suffered. But at same time it is also true that people could smell a foul in so-called ‘*vyavasthā*’-s and raised some questions about their validity.

Business means money. Other professions do not yield so much. Scope of malpractice is in other professions is generally less than business. Earning money easily and in a short span of time is possible when ethical aspects are ignored or directly violated. Mention of selling a perfume at the rate of rupees hundred when it costs rupee one only hints at this practice. Cf. “... *eken yat krītaṃ tac chatena pradīyate.*” (Pañ.1.13). In fact this tendency is eternal and all–pervading. We remember one story. D.L.Roy had been going to England by ship. At a port in Ceylon (Srilanka) a hawker sold an article to a customer at eight annas after a long bargaining which started from Rupees five. One English co-passenger remarked – “See the nature of Indian hawkers. They are never reliable.” D.L.Roy said : “Same is the nature of English hawkers as well. The only difference is that Indian hawker come down to normal price, but an English hawker sell at an exorbitant price, never budges an inch.” Foreign goods are always a craze for customers. Businessmen capitalized this sentiment to the extreme and minted money by selling goods at two or even three times more than the normal price.

There are other references of such unethical aspects as well. When a deposit is made in the house, the merchant prays to his favourite deity – “*nikṣepe patite harmye śreṣṭhī stauti svadevatām / nikṣepī mriyate tubhyaṃ pradāsāmy upayācitam//*” (Pañ.1.14) i.e., if the depositor passes away, I promise you a good gift. This is a clear indication of the tendency of cheating. People in distress only deposit valuables to the banker and the banker does not think of the consequences which the family-members of the depositor undergo due to his untimely death.

It is a grave offence that, obviously if ethics is considered, that a trader cheats a customer who has selected him only because of his prior acquaintance and hopes that he would not be cheated and surrenders to whatever the trader says. “*paricitam āgacchantam grāhakam utkañṭhayā vilokyāsau/ hr̥ṣyati taddhanalubdho yadvat putreṇa jātena //*” (Pañ. 1.16). No doubt, the peculiar practice of the business people as we face now is very old and one should learn this faithfully.

The author of the *Pañcatantra* mentions that ‘*Kirāta*’-s are habituated in cheating the customer, particularly the known persons, by selling products of less weight or quantity. One may not miss the implication of the expression ‘*kirāta*’. It is not the ‘*kirāta*’ class only, but a simile of a man with the mentality of a hunter. ‘*Akheṭaka-dharma*’ has been mentioned with regard to ministers as well (*Pañ*,1.130).

We are not sure whether the following story had any indication of a peculiar way of smuggling of valuable gems into the body, may be by swallowing or by operation and then stitching it, since it came up in another context. Five Brahmins were returning home putting some gems in their thighs (‘*jamghā-madhya*’). On the way they got into the clutches of some *Kirāta*-s, who first stripped them off but could not find anything. Then they thought of cutting and skinning the bodies (‘*carma vidārya pratyangaṃ prekṣya*’) – *Pañ. Katha* 22.

It was not that the tendency of cheating was confined to the business-persons only. When there is decadence, it comes up in all its aspects. A body grows or the otherwise with all its organs. Even a wife of a Brahmin is seen to cheat her neighbor by selling sesame which were urinated by a dog. (*Pañ, Mitraprāpti*).

In service sectors like medical profession etc. also such indications are there. Regular check-up of health is always desirable and careful persons do follow this practice if there is no suspicion of cheating or bad intention of doctors. “*yathā necchati nīrogaḥ kadācit sucikitsakam*” (*Pañca*. 1.119) is an indication of avoiding doctors as long as possible. We may take note of the expression ‘*kadācit*’ i.e. people visit doctors only when it is a compulsion. No wonder, the practice continues.

Let us start now with some aspects of attitude towards women. We begin with female new-born baby. “Better is an abortion, ... better is a child dead as soon as born, better is even to have a daughter born, better if the wife is barren...” (*Pañca*., *Prastavanā* 4). Even a king is seen to lament having a daughter— “*kanyāpitṛtvam khalu nāma kaṣṭam*” (*Pañ*. 1.205). In this connection we may say that the attitude has not changed at all. Cf. *Anandabazar Patrika*, February 2, 2005., p.4.; ‘*sabai sab jane, keu kichhu jane na --- natsi jarmaniteo, ajker bharateo*’ by Swati Bhattacharya. The author mentioned that there has been abortion of three crore twenty lakhs of female foetus in so-called ‘clinics’ (we mean sex-determination clinics), far more than number of Jews murdered in concentration camps.

Let us take up some other verses: “The women converse with one person, look, full of amour, at another, while they think of a third who is cherished in heart Who possibly is beloved by woman!---.” (“*jalpanti sārḍham anyena paśyantyanyaṃ savibhramam / hṛdgataṃ cintayantyanyaṃ priyaḥ ko nāma yoṣitām//*” *Pañ*. 1.136) The author quotes this verse with a preface— “*athavā strīṇāṃ viṣaye ko’tra sandehaḥ!*” That women leave their husband when the poor fellow is in financial crisis has been mentioned everywhere. One may test the fidelity of a friend in difficulties and faithfulness of a wife when prosperity declines Cf. “*āpatsu mitraṃ jānīyāt ...bhāryāṃ kṣīṇeṣu vitteṣu.*”(*Hitopadeśa*, *Mitralābha* 1.73) ; ”When the day is cloudy, when there is the dark fortnight, when the streets of a town are impassable by darkness and when the husband has gone abroad – great is the delight of a woman.(cf. “*durdivase ghanatimire.. patyur videśagamane paramasukhaṃ jaghanacapalāyāḥ //*” *Pañ*, 1.174). Interesting to note that such descriptions are profusely available in other branches of Sanskrit literature (i.e. other than fable literature) as well. Sanskrit poeticians also used such verses in their works like *Dhvanyāloka*, *Sāhityadarpaṇa* and others. Cf. “*attā ettha nimatthai..*”, “*kassa vā na hoi roso daṭṭhuna piyāye sabbaṇam aharm*” “. Many of them are

taken from *Gāhā Sattasāī* and in most cases expressions or suggestions are made by women, enough to prove their wit and desperateness. It is not that men were indifferent.

One more aspect is mentioned now. Royal policy (politics) has been compared with a courtesan in both the two fables (*'veśyāṅgaeva nṛpanītiḥ' – Pan.*, *'vārāṅganeva nṛpanītiḥ' – Hito.*).

Darkness was there, light as well. Certainly, there had been good men, chaste women, friends in need and kind heart great souls. A man Brahmin by caste but thief in profession (*caurabrāhmaṇa*) was accompanying some people who were Brahmins by caste but businessmen in profession (please note intermixture of caste and profession –an old practice of modern 'Chakraborty Chiken Stores' or 'Mondal Coaching Centre'). Anyway, all were rounded up *Kirāta*-s, who wanted to kill them all to see if they had been carrying valuables in their person. The *Caurabrāhmaṇa* had nothing with him, others had and that was known to him. Actually, he had been accompanying them with a view to grab those valuables. But suddenly he was a changed man. He thought that if he offers himself first and *Kirāta*-s cut him but find nothing in him then others may be freed. It clicked very well. He sacrificed his own life at the cost of which others lived. Stories like this one also are many. Such golden characters are always a few. The authors of both these two fables depicted those characters with same skill and care.