

Source of the wise Daughter - in - law From Assam and Birbal

Jai Prakash Singh

There is an Assamese folktale entitled 'the wise daughter-in-law'. In the short paper we propose to discuss its possible source. It will however be appropriate first to give the tale in brief.

One morning some women went to fetch water from a river. At the ghat they noticed a dead body floating in the water. All the women, except one, left to collect water elsewhere. The woman that remained went to the floating body and noticed that a pot was tied to its neck. She found it to be full of gold, and came back home with it.

The women, who came earlier, circulated the news of her pulling a dead body in the village. Her Father-in-law also came to know about it. When the daughter-in-law returned she was stopped. The old man asked his son to take the woman to her mother's house as she was a witch dealing with dead bodies. His son, obedient as he was, started with his wife, as asked by his father.

As they walked on, they came across a paddy field. A lane passed through the field. It was, however, blocked by the owner of the field to prevent people walking through it and thereby damaging the field. Passersby, crossed the field by entering it on either side of the blocked space. Thus, they had done a greater damage to the field. The woman's husband commented on the foolishness of the farmer. At this his wife said in verse that one fool is the smith Kaula, the other is father-in-law, yet another is the owner of the land and still another is my husband.

The man asked his wife to explain. She said smith Kaula only saved gold and did not want to leave it behind. He asked his children to tie his pot of gold to his neck when his body was thrown in water. I collected this gold and kept it. My father-in-law, on the report of women, took me to be a witch and asked you to take me to my home. This farmer is like you all.

The husband was embarrassed and came back home with his wife.¹

Praphulladata Goswami² has indicated in a note that the story was collected from Shri Rohini Kumar Mahanta, a teacher,

in 1976. I do not know whether the source of the story was enquired from Shri Rohini Kumar Mahanta at the time when it was collected from him. This is because the story does not seem to be an Assamese tale. This story is a poor adaptation of the following story known from Jaina *katha* literature.

A rich merchant Ratnakara had a son named Ajitsena. Ajit-sena was married to Shilavati, the accomplished daughter of a wealthy merchant of Kajangala. She was not only beautiful but also trained in fine arts and quite capable. Ratnakara, however, suspected and watched her..

It so happened that one night Shilavati left the house at midnight with a large earthen pot. She came back home after several hours. Ratnakara became angry at her conduct and thought she will put both families to disgrace. Hence, he advised his son to send her to her parents for a time. His son agreed after some hesitation. Ratnakara himself accompanied Shilavati.

On the way they came to a river. The old man asked Shilavati to take off shoes and wade through the water. She waded with her shoes on. Ratnakara though annoyed kept silent.

Now they came to a ripening field of beans. Ratnakara said how nice it is. Its owner will make good use of the yield. Shilavati, said yes, if it is not eaten up first. Ratnakara thought he talked foolishly.

Next they came to a city. Ratnakara observed how beautiful it is. Shilavati retorted provided it is not destroyed. In the city they met a wounded warrior. How brave he is, said Ratnakara, provided he is not beaten commented Shilavati.

Moving further they decided to take rest. Ratnakara sat down under the shade of a banyan tree and asked Shilavati also to do the same. She, however, took her seat away from him. The old man thought she was willful, disobedient and silly.

As they continued their journey, they came to a village. Here lived Shilavati's maternal uncle. They had their meal at his place. After meal Ratnakara rested on his chariot and Shilavati outside under its shade. A crow perched on a nearby tree was all the time cawing. Shilavati listening carefully said don't you get tired cawing all the time? Adding further, for one fault I had to leave my house. If I commit another I may be separated from my husband for ever.

Ratnakara heard her and asked her to explain. She said she understands the language of birds and animals, which in my case has turned out to be a disadvantage. The other day I followed

the call of a jackal about a floating dead body in the river with valuable ornaments on. I went to the river with a jar, dragged the body, took out the ornaments, kept them in the jar and leaving the body for the animal came back home. For this fault of mine I have come to this state. The crow crwing on the tree is saying that a treasure worth ten lakhs is buried under it. Ratnakara immediately started digging, collected the treasure, was full of admiration for his daughter-in-law and returned home with her.

On their way back home her father-in-law asked her to explain her conduct about not sitting in shade of the banyan tree, the city, the warrior, the river and the field. She explained. Ratnakara was more than satisfied and full of admiration for her extraordinary wisdom.

The king of Nandanpur, where they lived, had 499 ministers. He, however, wanted a capable minister to head his council of ministers. King's men, therefore, were sent around beating drums and announcing that the person who answers the king's question suitably and to his satisfaction shall be made the Prime minister. The king's question was 'what punishment does kicking the king deserve?'. No one could satisfy the king. Ajitasena, also heard the Question and came home. Shilavati gave him the answer. He went back to the king and told him that but for his beloved no one could dare kick him. Hence, no punishment should be given to him.

The king was pleased and made Ajitasena his prime minister. Shilavati continued to advise him.⁸

There is no doubt that the story of the anonymous daughter-in-law of Assam is that of Shilavati. The Assamese version is restricted only to a part of Shilavati story. There is a little difference too. In the Assamese tale the daughter-in-law collects a pot of gold tied to the neck of a dead body, one morning, when she goes to collect water from a nearby river. In the original, the woman goes out at the dead of night. This change was necessitated because in north east people do not venture out at night for fear of wild animals. In Sanskrit literature there was a strong tradition of women-nayikas particularly - going out to meet their lovers. The tradition continues in medieval literature and art. It was, therefore, possible for the writer of the Jaina tale to think of a fearless woman who could walk along at night to a river, haul up a dead body and take its ornaments. The field of beans is changed to a paddy field, quite understandably in the Assamese version. In the original version there is no reference to the damage to the

field of beans. Unlike in the original version, it is the husband of the woman in the Assamese tale, who accompanies his wife. The husband, however, is convinced of his wife's wisdom quite early as compared to Shilavati's father-in-law. Differences apart the two stories are similar. It is beyond any doubt that the source of the wise daughter-in-law from Assam is Shilavati's story through possibly a folk version of the tale popular in Gujarat-Rajasthan region. If this assumption is correct, then, it can be held that in all probability the story was circulated in Assam by some member of a Marwari business family. The original narrator of the story did not narrate probably the whole story either because he did not know the full story himself or he just concluded it at this point arbitrarily. Hence, the latter part of Shilavati's story is absent from the Assamese version. The original version of the story, however, establishes the wisdom of Shilavati more convincingly than it is done by the Assamese version. Not only this the Assamese version ends up abruptly suggesting thereby its incomplete nature.

II

The last part of the story, particularly the one which refers to Shilavati's wisdom in answering the ticklish Question of the king of Nandanpur, is not known from any other Assamese tale. It was prevalent in some parts of the Hindi heartland, however, as an independent tale, current in the name of Akbar and Birbal. It is as follows :

One day Akbar was sitting inside the *zenana*. The queen brought his grandson and gave him to the King. He started playing with the boy. In the process the infant prince caught the king's beard and started pulling it. The king could extricate it with some difficulty.

When he came to the court he asked his courtiers to suggest the punishment they would recommend to one who dared to pull his beard. Some said that he should be killed. Others also suggested similar harsh punishments. Akbar was not satisfied with these answers. He looked towards Birbal. The latter said that the person should be offered sweets. Akbar smiled, but asked why should he be given sweets? He also added your majesty, who can pull your beard but for your grandson or grand-daughter.⁴

The kicking of the king in Shilavati's story is replaced by the pulling of the emperor's beard in the latter. Both the rulers test the wisdom of their courtiers. Since none of the 499 ministers of

Nandanpur could answer the question it was addressed to a much wider section of the people with the offer of the premier's position. That is how, Ajitasena with the help of Shilavati, answers the Question. In case of the latter story, the objective is simply to reestablish the superiority of Birbal over his fellow courtiers. There is no doubt, however, that the Birbal tale is also inspired and adapted from Shilavati's story either from its literary form or from one of its current folk versions.

The story as found in Jaina *kumarapalaprati-bodha* is perhaps a literary form or version. This literary version itself may have been based on some folk version, then current, in the society. This literary form led to the development of many folk versions as is indicated by the wise daughter-in-law from Assam and the Birbal tale. Both these folk versions, however, are based only on parts of the story.

1. P. D. Goswami, *Tales of Assam*, pp. 105-7.
2. *Ib'id*, p. 307.
3. The story is from the Jaina work *Kumarapalaprati-bodha* 12th. Century)
J. C. Jain and M. Walter, *Women in Ancient Indian Tale*, (Delhi 1937; pp. 37 - 4x, for the story and intro, p. xviii.
4. *Birbal ki gabasapa* (Ed. Omprakash Beri Hindi Pracharak Pustakalaya, varanasi, 1959), pp. 40-41