

Jai Prakash Singh.

The main purpose of this short paper is to discuss the source of a Burmese law tale and some other popular or folk versions of the same story. The Burmese law tale has been discussed by Praphulladatta Goswami. ¹ He has first given the Burmese tale and then an Assamese version of the same. The two stories are similar. Goswami, however, has not been able to trace the source of both these stories. A number of other popular or folk versions of this story are found in different parts of India. It will be appropriate to give here the relevant stories first in brief.

I. A man died of snake bite. His wife set him afloat in a river. The body was later hauled up by three daughters of a snake charmer and brought back to life by their father. All his daughters now wanted to marry him. Instead of quarrelling amongst themselves, however, the girls put a magic thread round the neck of the man, turned him into a parrot and released him. The parrot was caught by the king's men and ultimately reached the princess. She removed the thread and the bird became a man again. They now lived together and the princess became pregnant. The king also came to know of it and deputed someone to enquire about it. The man put the magic thread round his neck, turned into a parrot and flew out of the apartment. As he was flying out; the thread got entangled in the window and broke changing him into a man again.

Pursued by the king's guards he was able to take shelter in a house. When the guards reached there and enquired, the members of the house declared the young man as their son-in-law. The guards were satisfied and went back. The man was later married to the daughter of that house. The princess now longed for her lover and the king was forced to trace him out. He arranged a great entertainment and invited all his people. All came including the parrot-man and his wife, his first wife and the princess were there too. All three laid claim to the man. All the claimants, however, agreed upon and approached princess Sudharmachari to act as an arbiter. The princess decided that since the first wife performed the man's last rites by setting him afloat in a river she had no legal claim. The princess did not protect him and the man might have died while escaping from her apartment. The parents of the man's third wife protected him and hence she had the right to claim him. ²

Goswami states that India has many versions of this story. In these versions, however, a girl is claimed by different men. Versions of this story are known from 'Assam, Bengal, Rajasthan and in Bihar among the Oraons. There is also a Bhutiya version'. He has however, not given any of these versions except the Assamese.³ We also do not propose to discuss these versions here. It will be better to give the Assamese version now.

II. Father, Mother and brother of a girl invite a young man each to marry her. The boys arrived the same day and started quarrelling amongst themselves over the girl. The girl, however, could not take it all, became unconscious and died. The men then stopped quarrelling and she was cremated. One of the men was determined to revive her so he went out looking for herbs. The other one took part of her ashes for immersion into the Ganges. The third one stayed where she was cremated keeping a watch-over the remainder of the ashes. After sometime the first man returned and revived the girl from her ashes and claimed the girl. The second man also came soon after and laid claim to her stating that it was due to his efforts that the girl came to life. The third also claimed her for having kept watch over her ashes. This time, however, they left in to the revived girl to decide their conflicting claims : The girl said that the one who revived me is like my father ; the one who took my ashes to the Ganges is like my son ; but the one who watched over me in cremation ground and stayed with me watching the ashes is my true husband. ⁴

The Assamese story is a popular version of a similar story found in *Vetalanchavimsati*. This work was popular in the country for many centuries and that is how different popular versions of the story developed in different parts of the country. In *Vetalanchavimsati*, the Vetala narrates the story and then asks Vikrama to answer the problem.

The *Vetalanchavimsati* story runs as follows :

III. A Brahmana named Kesava lived in a city called Dharmasthal on the banks of Yamuna. It was ruled by King Gunadhip. The Brahmana had a daughter named Madhumavati.

One day Kesava went to a marriage where he met a handsome young man and invited him to come to his house and marry his daughter. His son went to his teacher's house. There he met another suitable young man and invited him to come to his house and

marry his sister. It so happened that a Brahmana's son came to their house by chance when Kesava and his son were both out. The girl's mother met the man and being impressed by his beauty and intelligence asked him to stay and marry her daughter after the arrival of her son and husband. After a few days both the father and son returned along with the prospective grooms they had selected. The third youth was already waiting for them. The three young men were named Trivikrama, Vaman and Madhusudan. They were all *at par* in looks, learning, age and moral excellence.

The Brahmana Kesava was placed in a difficult situation. He was not in a position to decide upon the groom for his daughter. In the meantime a snake bit the girl and she died. The father and brother of the girl as well as the three youths went and brought a number of snake charmers, conjurers and magicians to revive the girl. They all expressed their inability to revive her. Therefore, they cremated her.

Now one of the youths picked up the charred bones of the girl, fastened them and wandered from forest to forest like a mendicant. The second youth also tied part of her bones and ashes in a bundle, built a hut and started living at the very spot she was cremated. The third youth became a devotee and wandered from land to land.

The third youth one day approached a Brahmana's house for food. He was invited to take his seat in the kitchen with the Brahmana, the master of the house. His wife started serving the food. Her youngest son started crying in the meantime, caught his mother and would not let her serve the remainder meal. The woman lost her temper and threw him into the burning fire-place and the son was burnt to ashes.

Having seen this horrible act the Brahmana young man got up without eating saying he cannot take his food in a house where such a diabolical deed has been perpetrated. At this the Brahmana asked him to sit down, and himself got up, brought a book, uttered some charms from it and brought his son back to life.

The Brahmana youth when he saw this wonder immediately resolved to take the book to revive his beloved. He ate his food and stayed there for the night. After everyone had gone to sleep the Brahmana youth quietly went into his hosts room, took the book and decamped. After a few days he reached the place where Madhumavati was cremated. The two other suitors of the girl were already there.

A heap of bones and ashes was made and the Brahmana muttering prayers from the book brought the girl back to life. All the

three youths being blinded by Cupid started wrangling amongst themselves.

Vetala relating so much of the tale asked King Vikrama as to whom did the girl belong ? Whose wife she was ? King Vikramaditya said that she belonged to the one who built the hut and stayed. At this the Vetala argues in favour of the two other Brahmana youths. At this Vikramaditya clarifies that the one who preserved her bones is her son and the one who restored her to life is her father. Hence, she becomes the wife of the youth who stayed with her ashes in the hut.⁵

In the popular versions of the story, however, the riddle part is suitably changed. In both the earlier stories, the princess and the revived girl are asked to solve the problem. The Burmese tale is merely an adaptation of one of the versions of the Vikrama tale, just as the Assamese tale is a popular version of the same.

Burma and India had close contacts from very early times. The Burmese chronicles suggest that Abhiraja, a Sakya prince from Kapilavastu, came to Upper Burma and founded the city named Sankissa (Tagaung) on the Upper Irrawadi and made it his capital. His younger son followed him at Sankissaw whereas the elder one ruled over Araken. A second group of Kshatriyas is said to have come from the Ganga plains during the period of Buddha. Having ruled for about sixteen generations they lost Upper Burma and established a new kingdom in Lower Burma with Sri-Kshetra (Prome) as capital.⁶ Needless to say that much of this local Burmese tradition is unreliable and invented much later. By about sixth century A.D., Indian colonists had founded kingdoms in Burma. It is evidenced by the records of a dynasty known as Sri-Dharm-Rajanuja-Vasmsa that ruled in Arakan from about A.D. 600. The names of the kings of this dynasty have Indian names ending in Chandra.⁷ In the seventh century, Hiuen Tsang, in Bengal came to know about some Hindu kingdoms of Indo-China including Sri-Kshetra (Prome) of lower Burma and Dvaravati that was inhabited by Mons or Talaings who had already been Hinduised.⁸ The boundary of the Pyu kingdom of Burma is said to have touched India on the west.⁹

It seems, therefore, that Burma was in close contact with India from at least the sixth century A.D. This contact may have been through land as well as by sea routes. The land routes lay through Assam and Bengal (Chittagong). Many of the tribal people of North-East India came through Burma.¹⁰ The route may have been used frequently as the movements of the tribal people indi-

cates. Manipur was often invaded by the Burmese ¹¹ and Pam-heiba ¹² is known to have made extensive campaigns in Burma. Later, in the first quarter of the nineteenth century Burmese are known to have invaded Assam thrice ¹³ as a result of which the British had to intervene in Assam.

The romantic tale of the *Vetalpanchavimsati*, therefore, may have reached Burma any time after 12th Century A.D., ¹⁴ either through the North East, or Bengal or the sea route.

Burma was not the limit of the Vikrama's story. It went beyond the limits of Burma, as is indicated by the Thai Tale of the Ricebirds.

IV. One afternoon a mother ricebird sent her husband to fetch food for their ricebirdlings. The father ricebird was attracted by a lotus and in an attempt to drink its nectar was closed inside it. When he came out of it at dawn he saw the tree housing his nest destroyed in fire. He found out his mate who told him that she was taking her life and if she was reborn she would like to be born as a woman who escapes the pain of false love. The father bird also resolved to join her wishing to be born as a man so that he was able to win his wife's true love.

The mother ricebird was born as a princess. When she grew up she refused to talk to men and thus tried to keep her dying wish fulfilled. Her father was very sore. He told her that he would give her in marriage to the first man that could make her speak. Many princes came to try their luck. One gave her a necklace, the other brought a parrot that could speak, yet another gave her a troupe of dancers; but none of these could make her speak.

Then one day came the father ricebird, born earlier as a handsome prince. The king asked him what made him think that he would be able to make the princess speak. The prince told him that he would be able to make the princess speak. The prince told him that he had a strange talent whereby he could throw his voice anywhere and talk to it. He also made his crown speak to him in this way. The King escorted the prince to his daughter's chamber and leaving him at the door asked him to go away if he could not make her speak by day-break.

The prince threw his voice onto the closed door which said that the princess speaks to no man, "why do you wait at her door?" The prince told the door that the night is long and the princess needs amusement. "Door, may I tell you and the princess a story?" At this the door asked him to go ahead.

The princess had never heard a door talking like that so she came closer to the door trying to find out its secret.

The prince then asking the door 'to listen carefully' told the following story.

"Once three men went to an astrologer who predicted a most unusual event. Everything he foretold came to pass. The astrologer said the three men would soon see an enormous eagle carrying a beautiful maiden over a river. When the eagle soared above them, the first man, an archer, shot an arrow into the heart of the flying eagle, which dropped the girl into the river. The second man a swimmer, dove into the water and rescued her, but his efforts to revive her were futile. The third man, however, had magical powers, and he brought the drowned maiden back to life."

"The astrologer, the archer, the swimmer, and the magician all claimed the girl as their own. Who do you think should have her?"

After telling the story the prince peeped through the keyhole and saw the princess with her ear pressed against the opening. He now again asked the door as to who should claim her. The door said the swimmer. "Why not the archer?" asked the prince. The door said that after a careful thought I think that the magician should have her.

All of a sudden, the door opened, the prince came out and said that 'neither the archer, the swimmer, nor the magician should have her. She belongs to the astrologer who told of her coming'. "You are right" said the prince and rang the bell to inform the king.¹⁵

The story of the ricebird princess and the prince is not our concern here. We are concerned only with the story that the prince tells through the door, to amuse the princess during the long night. In this way he takes on the role of Vetala. The story introduces not three but four claimants here of which the latter three, the archer, the swimmer and the magician, together contribute to bring the girl back to life and thus are like her father. In this story, however, it is not explained as to why they cannot marry her. In other stories the person who stays at the cremation ground is implicitly taken as an ideal companion to the woman. He is not prepared to leave her even after her death. That is why this person is chosen as the husband of the girl in all tales. The Burmese version on the contrary introduces the element of protection. In Indian culture husband-wife relationship transcends time and space. They are united again and again in all their lives. Thus the ideal element of companionship was more easily followed and understood in the

Indian versions of the tale. This, however, was perhaps not so in Burma, hence it was replaced by the element of protection. The Thai story introduced a fourth claimant, the astrologer. His claim is perhaps based on the fact that it was on the basis of his prediction that the girl was saved and revived. Hence his claim is preferred against those of the others.

The story does not seem to have gone to Thailand from Burma. It is closer to the original Indian version in the manner in which it is told. Besides, it has a girl that is revived and is the bone of contention, like in the Indian version, and not a man as in the Burmese version.

Thailand also came under Hindu and Buddhist influence of India quite early in its history. It also had close contacts with China. Therefore, the story may have gone to Thailand either from India through the sea route or else from China through what is now known as North Vietnam and Laos.

Notes & References

1. The chapter, however, on p. 59 is titled 'Burmese Law Tales', Praphulladatta Goswami, *Essays on the Folklore and Culture of North Eastern India* (Henceforth EFCNEI, Gauhati, 1983), pp. 59 ff.
2. Cf. EFCNEI, pp. 59-60. The story according to Goswami is found in *The Precedents of Princess Sudhammchari*, R. F. St. Andrew, St. John, 'Indo-Burmese Folklore' in *Folklore Record*, 1973, pp. 306-313.
3. EFCNEI. p. 60.
4. For the Assamese version Cf. Arjun Chandra Das, *Asamiya Sadhu*, 1962, pp. 135-43, *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.
5. *Stories of Vikramaditya (Vetala Panchavimsati)*, BVB, Bombay, 1960), pp. 29-34.
6. *The Age of Imperial Unity* (Bombay, 1968), pp. 655-56.
7. *The Classical Age* (Bombay, 1970), p. 648.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 647.
9. *The Age of Imperial Kanauj* (Bombay, 1964), p. 432.
10. Just as the Ahoms under Sukapha came to Assam from Burma, the later migrants to the region like Aitons, Khamtis, Kamyangs, Phakes and Turungs also followed the same route.
11. The Burmese invaded Manipur in 1755, and then again in 1758 and 1765, Cf. E.A. Gait, *A History of Assam* (Calcutta, reprint 1967, Ed. by B. K. Barua and H. V. S. Murthy), pp. 322-323.

12. Pamheiba alias Garib Newaz invaded Burma many times successfully between 1725 and 1749. Cf. E. A. Gait, *A History of Assam*, pp. 322.
13. The first Burmese invasion of Assam took place during the reign of Suteupha (1268-1281), then under Sudangpha (1397-1407), and then, in 1576 in the reign of Sukhampha (1552-1603), Cf. E.A. Gait, *Ibid*, pp. 80, 84-5, and 104, reespectively. Later in the early nineteenth century they invaded Assam twice during the reigns of Chandrakant Sinha (1810-1818), and Purandar Sinha (1818-19, first reign). After the latter fled they made Jogesvara Sinha (1818-1824) King and ruled in his name till they were defeated by the British in 1826.
14. It is difficult to fix the date of the *Vetalpanchavimsati* with certainty. It may be, however, dated to the 10th-12th century. Of its many versions available, that of Sivadasa, however, may belong 'to the 12th century,' *The struggle for Empire* (Ed. R. C. Majumdar, Bombay, 1966), p. 315.
15. Marian Davies Toth, *Tales From Thailand* (Tokyo, 1971), pp. 91-96.