Sanskrit Story Literature – A Brief Overview

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Abstract:- The origin of story literature including the popular tales and the didactic fables can be traced to Rigveda, the Vedic akhyanas such as the dialogue hymn of Pururavas and Urvashi or the Brahmana legends such as the story of Shunashepa, are in a sense precursors of the tales. The stories of man and fish, Indra’s metamorphosis into birds, remind us of the beast stories. Though there is no distinct type as fables in the epics, yet the motifs of the clever jackal and the like, are employed for the purpose of moral instruction. The Buddhist Jatakas has the device of illustrating the virtues of Buddhism through the beast stories. Fables feature personified animals or natural objects as characters. It almost ends with moral message and this highlights the characteristic feature of the fables. They are instructive tales that teach morals about human behavior. In the fables, the thoughts and deeds of men are ascribed to animals. The fables are closely related to Neetishastra and Arthashastra. Fables and Tales are created to illustrate some reflection on worldly vicissitudes or some precept for human conduct. It is curious to note that the style of the Sanskrit tales and fables is found in Arabian Nights and Aesop’s fables.

Sanskrit fairy tales and fables are chiefly characterized ethical reflections and proverbial philosophy. A peculiar style, marked by the insertion of a number of different stories within the framework of a single narrative, made its way to Persian and Arabic literatures, exerting a major influence on works such as One thousand and One Nights. The two most important collections are Panchatantra and Hitopadesha originally intended as manuals for the instruction of kings in domestic and foreign policy, they belong to the class of literature which the scholars call niti-sastra, or “Science of Political Ethics”. The most important of the tales are Bruhatkatha of Gunadhya, Bruhatkathamanjari of Kshmendra, Kathasaritasagara of Somadeva.

Key Words:- Popular tales, didactic fables, Panchatantra, Hitopadesha

1. Introduction

Ever since the dawn of civilization, ever since man first realized the imperative need to know himself and, through that self-knowledge, win friends and influence people so to secure his own happiness and well-being no less than those of his fellowmen, the Sanskrit story literature have unfailingly offered him significant and dynamic aid. Amongst the Sanskrit story literature the Panchatantra and Hitopadesha stories have been current among the Indian populace for at least five thousand years, probably longer. Though these stories were written in children, and that too centuries ago, their utility has still not diminished. Their preaching and moral hold true for today’s jet-age grown-ups, as well. These stories are a master piece of Indian literature and also immortal work on the art of intelligent living. They have never failed to bring delight to hundreds of millions and to awaken intelligence in the young through its wise and witty hints in a diversity of themes.

Sanskrit story literature is rich in Indian culture and heritage. Story literature has certain well fixed maxims of law, certain legal, moral and ethical principles underlying the fabric of Indian society. It has solutions to problems of existence. Ancient story literature portrays a more progressive and permissible society. Sanskrit story literature also highlights upon the essential components of an economy which are literacy of the masses, occupation of the people, trade and commerce, revenue and taxation policies. Literature among masses is a measuring rod of the progress of an economy. A wealthy state creates a welfare state. An economy which flourishes in its financial status creates wellbeing among the subjects.

Sanskrit story literature is synthesis of various aspects of political laws in the widest sense of the term covered by the Indian conception of dharma. The society depicted in story literature is flexible yet restricted to the path of dharma. Ancient story literature highlights on moral and ethical values for sustaining and developing a strong sense of values, righteousness and morality.

2. Panchatantra-

A king, worried that his three sons are without the wisdom to live in a world of wile and guile, asks a learned man called Vishnu Sharman to teach them the ways of the world. Since his wards are dimwits, Vishnu Sharman decides to pass on wisdom to them in the form of stories. In these stories, he makes animals speak like human beings. Panchatantra is a collection of attractively told
stories about the five ways that help the human being succeed in life. Pancha means five and tantra means ways or strategies or principles. Addressed to the king’s children, the stories are primarily about statecraft and are popular throughout the world.

The Panchatantra is written in both prose and verse forms, a characteristic of the genre of Sanskrit literature referred to as champu. Dialogue and narrative are offered in prose, while verse is employed to articulate concepts, provide moral instruction, and describe emotional behavior and sentiment. Panchatantra has five divisions:

Part I – Mitrabedha (separation of friends)
Part II – Mitrasamprapthi (Winning of friends)
Part III – (Kakolukiya (Crows and Owls)
Part IV – Labdhapranasha (Losing what is gained)
Part V – Apareekshita Karaka (Task done without examination)

The Panchatantra is structured as a series of tales within tales, with the Preamble functioning as the highest level or frame. The five books that follow each offer another frame story, within which more stories are nested. This nesting technique appears in other Sanskrit literature, notably in the Indian epic the Mahabharata and to some extent in Vedic literature. The philosophical structure that runs through the narrative structure carries out the author’s intention to provide nitisastra. In Indian belief, the path to living wisely and well required the equal and balanced pursuit of three aims: dharma, described as duty, compliance with the law, or right conduct; artha, wealth or material possessions, since money was considered a requirement for gracious living; and kama, which includes love and sensual fulfillment. These concepts are dealt with separately in other Sanskrit texts, including the Dharmasastra, the Arthasastra, and the kama sutra, but the Panchatantra incorporates instructions on all three areas into a single context.

The consequence of a balanced approach to dharma, artha, and karma is a harmonious order within society, which the Panchatantra, in the Preamble, sets out to illuminate. Prominent signposts in various parts of the narrative constantly remind the reader that these stories are parables about human society and human virtues, vices, and frailty. A good example is “The singing Donkey” of Book V, a pretentious character who claims to know everything about music except how to sing.

In the Panchatantra, the natural world and the human world mirror each other. Two main devices achieve this effect. The narrative uses analogy to portray similarities in social and political hierarchy and organization between the two worlds. For example, the king of the human world parallels the characteristics of the animal king of the forest. The second literary device, the use of allegory, anthropomorphizes or projects human characteristics onto the animal characters in the stories. Just like the three princes in the Preamble who desire to learn moral conduct, most of the good characters in the stories strive to attain the highest level of education. Animal characters such as Lively the bull and Goldy the mole represent the perfect model citizens with their judicious blend of good learning and sound practical sense.

No other work of Indian literature, and perhaps no other work of world literature, has had such an ageless and universal appeal. Each story is laced intricately with words of wisdom spoken by the characters, in many cases, animals. This book teaches one a way of life through lessons in philosophy, economics, law, politics, psychology, and myriad other themes that are put forth through simple stories narrated elegantly, without assuming the tone of a preacher.

The Panchatantra is a rare book, for in no book will you find philosophy, psychology, politics, music, astronomy, human relationship, etc., all discussed together in such a simple and yet elegant style. This is exactly what Pandit Vishnu Sharma had in mind, to give as much knowledge to the princes as possible. And no doubt not only the princes but also millions of listeners and readers benefited from this most unique work from times immemorial. With abundant irony and satire the most various human voices are exposed, among others the hypocrisy and avarice of people the intriguing character of courtiers and the faithlessness of women. A vigorous popular spirit of reaction against pretensions here finds expression and altogether a sound and healthy view of life prevails. A purely metrical treatise dealing directly with the principles of policy is the ‘Essence of Conduct’ which is one of the sources of the maxims is introduced in these fables.

3. Hitopadesha-

Experts say that Hitopadesha is an extension of Panchatantra. Most of the stories are taken from Panchatantra. In Hitopadesha only four divisions are present. They are as follows-

Part 1: Mitralabha (the winning of friends)
Part II – Suhurudhbedha (Separation of friends)
Part III – Yuddha(War) and
Part IV – Shanthi (Peace)

The Hitopadesa is a work of high antiquity, and extended popularity. Hitopadesha tales are short stories that have the priceless treasure of morality and knowledge. The term ‘Hitopadesha’ is a joint effort of two terms, ‘Hita’ (welfare/benefit) and ‘Upadesha’ (advice/counsel). As the term suggests, the Hitopadesha is a collection of tales that counsel and advice for the welfare and benefit of everyone. Imparting morals and knowledge, Hitopadesha is one amongst the most widely read Sanskrit books in India. The author of Hitopadesha, NarayanaPandit says that the main purpose of creating the Hitopadesha is to instruct young minds in a way that they learn the philosophy of life and are able to grow into responsible and mature adults.

Hitopadesha aims at teaching the principles of polity guided by morality presenting them in the more agreeable form of stories written mostly in prose interspersed with verse. It belongs to that class of compositions which imparts instructions through fables inspired by the wisdom of its place and time.

Yet every fable in this work and every maxim drawn from it can still be applied to human character irrespective of time and place. Hitopadesha when studied gives proficiency in elegant speeches, a variety of expression in every department and knowledge of the conduct of human affairs. The object of the compendium is to train the young minds in the chief affairs of life by acquainting them with the accumulated experience of past ages.

The author sets story within story and keeps us waiting for the sequels and so leads us on through the four divisions. As one fable follows another, people and animals constantly change places and they share the same characteristics of love and hatred, compassion and wit, selfless courage and base cowardice, generosity and meanness. Each story has a moral and philosophical theme which has stood the test of time and so is true even in in modern times- an age of atomic fear and madness.

4. Conclusion:-

The study of socio-political context of a particular literature is very important and this is observed from the words of English Historian G.M. Frevelyan who reflects that “without social history economic history is barren and political history unintelligible’’. Socio-Political history focuses on the causes of the social movements themselves. The approach to the study of socio-political history is favored by scholars as it allows a full discussion on some times less studied aspects.

Socio-political history may also be found in the domain of translation studies, an area where scholars focus on translation history. The different translation of source text tries to explain different interpretations of the source text and attitudes as portrayed in their writings and shed light on their interpretation in the source text. They answer various questions as to how the translation was affected by the prevailing norms and values, target leadership and role of various levels involved.

Hence the socio-political history of a particular text becomes important to understand the differences between the sources and target languages and their contribution towards the text and the form of translation. Further the association between social relations and psychological impact focuses in relationships and national development. When we analyses the structure and content we agree that social rations merge, evolve and adopt within the socio cultural context of particular society. When we analyses the structure and content we agree that social relations which emerge, evolve and adopt within the socio cultural context of a particular society.

Certain important events in history serve as catalysts to facilitate the codifying principles and behaviors that protect the rights of the citizens. This context sets that need for the study of socio-political history of a particular text. The goal of the study is to examine how men progressed over a period of time. The study of socio-political history of a particular time period helps us to understand a code of ethics which says-

- People should always be treated as ends and never as means.
- Human life has value.
- One should always be truthful.
- All people are of equal value.

A study of Story literature through these aspects-Social impact, Progression of economy, Impact of political thoughts and philosophical impact makes us realize that always story literature remain in the main stream guiding us through its moral and leading us to the right way of living through its natural analogies.
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