



Marginalised Indian Culture: A Study Of Societal Structure, Class, Profession, And The Economic Condition Of People In The *Kathasaritsagar* Based On Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha*

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Abstract: This paper is a study of the societal structures, class, profession and condition of people in marginalised Indian culture of which Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha*, later translated into Sanskrit as *Kathasaritsagar* by Somadeva features large. Although, the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana* and the *Brihatkatha* had an equal status when it was written, and spread around the world, in later years, being accorded religious status and godly protagonists, the former two became established as main narratives of Indian culture whereas owing to 'lowly' and multifaceted, multivalent narratives, the *Brihatkatha* got sidelined from mainstream Indian literature. This paper attempts to look into the commoners and their livelihood as depicted and portrayed in the *Brihatkatha*, although the available translation is of *Kathasaritsagar*. This study enables the commoners' story of the early medieval Indian era to be told.

Keywords: *Kathasaritsagar*, *Brihatkatha*, Indian culture, marginalised, commoner, society in pre medieval era.

I. INTRODUCTION

The *Kathasaritsagar* is a collection of stories of translated from *Brihatkatha*, written by Gunadhya in 200 BCE-500 CE a lost language *Paisachi*. It is about royal families living during the early medieval times as well as courtiers and commoners. Other works translated from Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha* are Buddhaswamin's *Brihat-katha-sloka-samgraha*, written in Nepalese language (<1000 CE), and Kshemendra's *Brihatkatha Manjari*, written in Sanskrit (1037 CE). Somadeva's *Kathasaritsagar* written in Sanskrit comprising 18 *Lambakas* (books) of 124 *tarangas* (chapters) and 24,000 *slokas* (verses) in addition to prose sections is the most popular and much translated among all three works. It has about 300 stories. The time period of the stories varies throughout the text owing to different tales though the original text itself is supposed to be set during King Satavahana's rule (271-

30 BCE). Although *Kathasaritsagar* was written by a Brahman in the elitist language Sanskrit, it retains the flavour of 'common'-ism written by Gunadhya, as expounded by historians who have analysed it. Unlike the other two prominent literary works that emerged out of India, viz., the *Mahabharat* and the *Ramayan*, the *Kathasaritsagar* got sidelined during Mughal, Colonial and post-Independence era owing to many factors, primarily it being a commoner's text with multivalent narratives as *Brihatkatha* written in a 'vulgar' tongue named *Paisachi*, assumed by Linguists to be a form of Prakrit. Like most Prakrit literature which were translated to Sanskrit during the 'Golden' Gupta period, Gunadhya's *Brihatkatha* too got literary translations in Sanskrit.

II. ANALYSIS OF SOCIETAL STRUCTURE/ FRAMEWORK

The societies portrayed in the *Kathasaritsagar* (henceforth, KSS) are essentially regional kingdoms spread across territories based on land geography and/or linguistic divisions, although the linguistic division was not applicable during the conquests of these lands since people learned languages of new places as they went. Some of the prominent kingdoms and cities mentioned in the KSS are from central and eastern 'India' (not the present political unit) viz, Prathisthan, Kaushambi, Ujjain, Vidarbha, Ayodha, Kanchi, Vatsa as well as a hundred different towns and villages each of which has proper names. The local kingdoms have their local king (queen in some stories), some of whom aspire to be emperors by joining forces with other kingdoms through marriage (like King Udayana and later, Naravahandutta) or war (KSS 359).

Analysis from the KSS shows that kings and queens have a circle of well-educated courtiers comprising gurus/munis, ministers, advisors, grammarians, poets, artisans, entertainers, etc. The researcher has used Brahmin as the caste and Brahmanas as people of the caste. The researcher in this paper uses caste as an alternative term for both varna and *jati* although there are significant differences between them, which are not under the purview of this paper.

The titles of kings, as well as ministers in the KSS, are passed down hereditarily although the regions and kingdoms which do not have an heir are captured by another powerful king or some other noble warrior or an able person from the same kingdom. Alternatively, the husband of a princess too ruled over a kingdom in the absence of a male heir. Some stories feature travellers reaching distant countries where there are no rulers and therefore, either being appointed as destined rulers or caretakers or appointing themselves as rulers. Alternatively, Gana-sanghas are also an administrative unit wherein, groups of people administer the land/kingdom in the event of abdication by a Prince, especially, owing to Buddhist influence. The celestial or island countries have women too as their rulers.

Among the courtly staff, ministers, bodyguards, court jesters, and other caretakers of the king are instrumental in channelizing many stories. Therefore, the societal structures point towards the position of courtiers and how they are well received as well as endowed with splendour. The kings are mentioned to have treated them with great respect and regard. Random stories where ill-treatment is meted out are the punishment for having conducted 'moral' wrong.

Apart from the ruling class, merchants are the most prominent category mentioned in the KSS as the stories involve a lot of travelling merchants and traders. In the KSS, they are a rich community, and the instances of kings marrying Vaishya girls point to their influence as well as the fluidity of class and caste structures. The KSS proclaims that ‘the wealth of a king is temporary whereas the wealth of a merchant is forever’ (KSS 327)

Regarding the positions of servants and masters, the stories depict various characteristics and intelligence of people rather than their class or even caste. This part of the KSS reflects Aesop’s fables and Panchatantra. Penzer says in his Introduction to the KSS that ‘most of the above-mentioned moralistic stories have their origin in the KSS’ (1924). To illustrate that intelligence or character is superior to caste in the KSS, the stories narrated to King Shrutasenana (259) can be considered here, wherein a farmer chastises a sanyasi on his inappropriate quality of anger, and further narrates a story on moral goodness and how to let go of anger. Here, the character of the farmer is superior to that of the sanyasi. Further, in the story narrated by the farmer, the youngest brahmin boy of the family works as a farm helper alongside the narrator. No caste or class distinctions are visible between them as the brahmin boy’s profession/position in his household is also that of a farmer.

In one of the stories, where a barber outwits the king (255), his intelligence is applauded. There are many similar stories wherein the societal structure portrays a socio-economic difference which can be transcended by moral or spiritual superiority. The didactic stories, a few categories of which are titled ‘The Stories of Fools’ in the KSS (562), are different from the other local stories as some of these characters are neither given proper names nor given caste identities. The moral values or importance of intelligence or the crux of the story is highlighted rather than the people, akin to similar moralistic stories (537-592).

Panchatantra, the popular didactic stories have been compiled from KSS; these set of stories feature different types of animals and birds, commoners from village and town, who may be fools or intelligent, and who belong to the various professions of being farmers, merchants, cattle-herd, cotton seller, wood cutter, treasure finder, milkman, sanyasis, mantravadis (witches and wizards), servants, washermen as well as kings. In the ‘Stories of Fools’, many brahmins and vaishyas are made fun of (562).

In another story (271), about a yaksha, who are also usually considered as guardians of treasures (along with Nagas, Bhutas etc.), there is mention of a Pashupatha Brahmin whose profession is to discover and unearth treasures. Brahmanas are also thieves and bodyguards and in a certain story, a brahman serves the king of Bhils, known as lower castes nowadays (953). Therefore, we do not see the contemporary understanding of the varna system as equivalent to their profession in all these stories. Cheating and fake doctors/medicine men as well as fake sanyasis abound in KSS too. The story of King Vilasasheela and Tarunachandra Vaidya is an example of this. In his desire to become younger, the original king gets trapped in Vaidya’s plot and gets killed in a basement. Vaidya finds a younger replacement for the king and after six months when he comes out, everyone believes that the king got

younger (329). Treachery for power is an oft-repeated plotline. Considering the timeline of wars and kingdoms, it is to be expected as well. Along with that, real medicine men also exist in KSS. Most people knew how to remove snake venom considering India is a land of snakes and especially, when people used to travail through forest paths.

III. ECONOMIC STATUS

Regarding economic status, the kingdoms have been shown as prosperous with kings showering money on their subjects (273). Only one story is mentioned wherein the ethical compass of a king is skewed as he hoards wealth and grains from the impoverished subjects after a famine. This story illustrates the cruelty of a king and is narrated for the betterment of behaviour, to be a 'just' king based on Buddhist principles.

Since most stories in the KSS have travellers and travelling as an essential narrative strategy, we come across various *satram/Rajasatram* which are resting places where free food and place to rest are available (260). Here, all castes seem to have entry as presented in various stories of KSS. There are also mentions of brahmin *agraharams*, which are given by kings to brahmins for serving the king. Most brahmanas, until they receive this generosity from the king, are shown as poor since most of them have travelled from famine-ridden places. Later stories have brahmins who are settled in these *agraharams*.

Economic conditions of the various agriculturalists and professional groups like artisans-sculptors, craftsmen, engineers, goldsmiths and jewellers, diamond merchants, painters, astrologers, physicians, money lenders, etc. have been shown in various stories where most are comfortably rich. Physicians and medicine men are present in stories concerning cases of poisoning. Apart from that, the usage of medicinal herbs seems to be known to most people. Some professions mentioned in the KSS are doctors (Vaidya), dentists (Dhantakhandan 798), musicians, dance teachers, barbers, linguists, messengers, postmen (lekhaharan), tailors, painters, artists, craftsmen, sculptors and engineers (taksha). Those related to cavalry and elephants, horses etc. are already known throughout history as mahouts, charioteers and stable workers. There are doorkeepers, personal bodyguards etc. too as described in the travel and war segment. There are also maids and servants who are sometimes bound to the master and at times, not. 'Thieving' is also considered an art and a 'skill'. Gambling is quite popular among kings as well as servants. The place where servants live is described. Some of these people wore torn clothes to hide their abundance made through gambling (689).

Fisherfolk is also another category who features as protagonists in KSS, wherein a fisherman is shown to have fallen in love with a princess, and eventually gets married to her, and becomes the king of that kingdom. There is also depiction of a pious fisherman who gains moksha unlike a gluttonous-minded brahmin.

Work done according to one's forefathers and family traditions (hereditary) became easier to train generations in the absence of formal training schools. We are already aware that a king's patronage was bestowed upon the performing classes and the educationist brahmins. Many brahmins and farmers have been described as poor, reflecting the fact that both these communities have always been the most dependent upon the rulers as well as other rich classes of the land. Astrologers are also one of the professional groups supported by the kingdom.

Among other categories such as silk producers, garland makers, winemakers, and milkmen among many others, we can glean from the stories of KSS that since wine drinking is widely prevalent in the KSS, the winemakers and distillers must have thrived well during the times. Meat and milk products are also prevalent; therefore, both these along with tanneries (since leather clothing is used in the KSS) would also have flourished. Gambling dens and gamblers have also been mentioned pointing towards money in circulation. Wearing silk garments and decorating themselves with flowers are also widely popular in the KSS which points toward a thriving community of these two. Chattopadhyay mentions that 'In the days of Panini, silk termed as 'Kauseya' was manufactured in India' (Studies in the KSS 250).

Mahouts are depicted as extremely knowledgeable in decoding elephant behaviour and cries. Cart drivers, barbers, porters as well as servants are mentioned a lot but never as downtrodden. Most are happy in their profession and some are also shown to outwit their masters when the need arises ("King and the Barber's Wife", KSS 255). There are thieves and dacoits also in the KSS who rob people in the forest regions or travel paths, especially at night. However, similar crimes are not committed during the daytime in the town/city premises. Although the importance and use of omens and astrology are seen in the KSS, there are also stories of the same category that dupe people. So, thieves who fake such knowledge also feature in KSS stories.

Many princes are shown to leave their kingdoms in disguise because their *gotrajas* (kindred/clansmen) usurped. These princes either go to their uncles (mother's brother) or ask for protection and help from other neighbouring kings or powerful emperors. Such is the instance in the story of Bhimbadan, he is banished and his salary scrapped (683) which shows that young princes were given some amount of money for their needs. He then goes to his uncle at Pataliputra. The queen also has money and tries to give him (689). This points to the fact that kinsmen or the same gotras (/caste) weren't always loyal or supportive. Neither did sticking to their own caste give any loyalty to the kingdom. This probably is the origin of the reason for marrying from different clans, to consolidate one's position.

Gifts and charity abound in the KSS. Vassals and guests are given gifts. Gifts are also given to maids etc. for good news. Most kings give money or some precious jewel etc. to the poor and it's mentioned in some stories that all people except Saugatas (Buddhists) are rich (933). During marriages also, gifts are given. Therefore, many valuable materials used to transfer between kingdoms.

Cognitive archaeology, which deals with ways of thinking, beliefs, and religion, is a fast-developing area within archaeology. Although a large number of religious texts are available for ancient and early medieval India, an exclusively text-based view of religion will not tell us everything we want to know about religious practice. The material evidence of ancient religions can make a major contribution to this area. There are many problems involved in translating archaeological cultures into history. 'An archaeological culture need not necessarily correspond to a linguistic group, political unit, or social group such as a lineage, clan, or tribe. One of the most important questions is how to explain changes in material culture, especially pottery traditions' (Singh 98). It's been said that this issue has not been understood in ancient India. In KSS the many travel accounts talk about different cultures and when princesses from these distant lands get married to princes in mainland India, they are gifted many expensive gifts like clothes, pottery, jewels, cattle, horses, elephants, etc. and also come along with their maids and service people. All this would naturally bring along different types of 'archaeological' culture to exist simultaneously at a place.

IV. CONCLUSION

The analyses of stories in KSS reveal the various socio-economic classes but their religious allegiance is not shown in their day-to-day workings. The kings, shabaras or foresters, and Buddhist followers are depicted in stories of either power acquisition or moral bindings. Ram Sharan Sharma's *Sudras in Ancient India: A social history of the lower order down to circa A.D. 600* (1958), discusses at length the position of Sudras in India. Apart from the socio-politico-economic aspects discussed, the religious aspect is significant for conveying that contrary to our assumption that the varna system is religion-based, it is often socio-economic-based. Religion comes later as priestly/ Brahminical rituals cater only to the followers of the same. Sudras and other 'lower' (in contemporary usage) castes have their respective gods and goddesses, usually connected with land and nature. Therefore, the given societal structure of KSS seems to constitute the following: a society formed of the ruling classes, educationists, merchants, artisans, and people who provide the basic services to the society (like the four major varnas with distinct and different professions); people outside the town demographics like the hunters, (Nishada, Kirata etc.) fishermen (Dhivara), i.e., those who live closer to their sources of food; and the celestial beings (Vidyadharas, Siddhas, Gandharvas) who are outside the circle owing to perhaps human imagination and beliefs. These 'outsiders'/marginal or peripheral groups of people are necessary to the human society in the KSS since many traditional structures can be broken (except perhaps, ethics and values because of Buddhist influence), and they bring in the much-needed fluidity in an otherwise norm-bound society.

The uniqueness of the *Kathasaritsagar* is that contrary to the popular notions of each class being distinct and perhaps bordering even to the point of 'untouchability', the KSS testifies to the fact that intermingling and fluidity of societal structures and class categories were widely prevalent.

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