

Literature from Below

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Folktales of India. Edited by Brenda E.F. Beck, Peter J. Claus, Praphulladatta Goswami, and Jawaharlal Handoo. Delhi : Motilal Banarsidass, 1989, pp. xxxi + 357, Rs. 130.

A Glossary of North Indian Peasant Life.
By William Crooke. Edited by Shahid Amin.
Delhi : Oxford University Press, 1989, pp. Liv + 290, Rs. 250.

WITH the 'discovery' of Sanskrit by the West in the late eighteenth-century, and an understanding of its importance as an Indo-European language with the oldest surviving texts, the study of Sanskrit literature found a significant niche in the activities of Western scholars. The scholarly emphasis at first was on the *Vedas*, the *Upanishads*, and the other religious literature of the Hindus, but by the early nineteenth century, the *Panchatantra* and the *Hitopadesa*, two ancient Indian collections of tales, were equally well-known in the West. The advent of comparative mythology and religion, and somewhat later of anthropology, as scholarly disciplines gave further impetus to the study of folktales. By the second half of the nineteenth century it was quite widely believed that India was the motherland for European folktales, for such collections as the fables of La Fontaine or the "household" tales of the Grimm Brothers.

Recent scholarship has seen little reason to revise the previous estimates of the important, if not unique, role of Indian folktales in the transmission of tales throughout the world.

Although India remains one of the world's richest sources of folktales, Indian folklore constitutes a virtually unmapped territory of study. Not only tales, but oral literature in general—proverbs, aphorisms, anecdotes, rumours, songs, and other modes of narration—has received short shrift. In a country where the speech of even the most illiterate peasant is peppered with proverbs, this neglect of India's oral cultures is all the more surprising and incomprehensible. It is in this context that the Indian publication of *Folktales of India*, first published by the University of Chicago Press in 1987, is to be especially welcomed. Part of the Chicago series of world folktales, this volume, edited by two scholars each from the United States and India, brings together ninety-nine tales collected by eighteen folklorists from fourteen different languages. What is distinctive about *Folktales of India* is that unlike such earlier collections as Bihari Dey's *Folktales of Bengal* (1883), Flora Annie Steel's *Tales of the Punjab* (1894), or even most twentieth-century compilations, it puts together, within the confines of a single volume, tales that were *all* collected orally from many regions of India by local folklorists fully conversant with the speech dialects and equally the customs of their respective areas.

No doubt the selection of tales will not leave everyone satisfied: some areas are vastly over-represented, others under-represented or even ignored. Nearly two-thirds of the tales come from the four southern states and three states in the north-east, Assam, Nagaland, and Manipur. A.K. Ramanujan, in his succinct and yet illuminating foreword, points out that "'representation' is a chimerical ideal; in the study of a culture, one does not look for a ratio between sample and bulk but for a holograph where every part is a true representative of a whole which can never be seen whole" (p. xii). Yet Ramanujan's dismissal of this important question of 'representation' seems somewhat cavalier. We have only to consider that for a very long time

Sanskrit literature was thought to be representative of all Indian literature, or that today a handful of Indian writers working in English, and mostly settled overseas, are somehow construed in the West as representative voices of Indian literature, to realize the grave ramifications, political, linguistic, and otherwise, of the question of representation. Despite the fact that Hindi in some form or the other is *spoken* by nearly half of the country's population, the so-called 'Hindi heartland' is represented by a mere eleven tales, of which ten are from Uttar Pradesh, and tales from Rajasthan, Bihar, Himachal, Haryana, Madhya Pradesh, and elsewhere form no part of this collection. On the other hand, the tiny states of Nagaland and Manipur, which scarcely mark their presence in the consciousness of most Indians, supply one-fifth of all the tales, and in general the vast majority of the tales in this collection were collected in the coastal or frontier regions of India. Enumeration, however, is not the sum of what is objectionable about the 'representativeness' of this collection. Manipur, Nagaland, and Kashmir constitute the outer boundaries of India, and they also define the outer limits of Hindu culture. But if the outer defines and helps to interpret the inner, likewise the inner suggests the contours of the outer, and one cannot doubt that the inclusion of tales from these frontier regions of India would have greatly sharpened our understanding of 'mainland' India and traditional Indian, and especially Hindu, culture if more tales representative of that culture had found their way into this volume. Our notion of 'difference' becomes more sharply refined when there is a clearer understanding of the 'sameness' from which the 'difference' is a clearly marked departure.

The problem of representation aside, *Folktales of India* is a rich harvest of India's many oral cultures. There are tales about suitors and maidens, brides and grooms, sisters and brothers, parents and children, husbands and wives; and should this not be enough to whet the appetite, there are the usual tales about mean Brahmans, fools, tricksters, and crafty jackals. The continuities between Sanskrit literature and India's oral literatures

are evident: some tales are spinoffs from the two great epics, such as the story "Bhimnath Mahadev" about Bhima and Arjuna, while other tales like "The Prince and the Shepherd", about a king's neglect of his childhood shepherd friend, are clearly reminiscent of similar situations in either of the epics, in this instance the erstwhile friendship of Drupada and Drona in the *Mahabharata*. Many other orally-collected tales find their model in the *Panchatantra* or the *Hitopadesa*, of which one notable example is the numskull story which involves a contest between several fools to determine who is the greatest fool of them all. Moreover, many of the folktales have much in common structurally with epic literature, and this is most evident in 'the tale within the tale'.

However, it is not the continuities and similarities between folktales and the great tradition of Sanskrit literature (and other written literatures), but rather the disjunctions and discontinuities between the two, that provide folktales with their enduring interest for students of Indian literature and culture. What Sanskrit literature construes as normative is mocked in the folktales: bookish and ritualistic knowledge is denigrated, and the appeal of commonsense highlighted. The high and mighty are of little account; the weak, the impoverished, and the oppressed find their moment under the sun. Even the great gods and goddesses of the Hindus are brought down from their pedestal: Shiva, in a tale from Kerala, appears as a drunkard (pp. 175-6). The gods of Hindu mythology do not "sweat, sneeze and shit", and of this the story of Nala is amply illustrative; but in folktales they do much worse. In Ramanujan's apt words, "myths, by and large, divinize the human: folktales humanize the divine" (p. xviii).

To see how folktales invert the values and norms of Sanskrit literature, we have only to consider their treatment of women and Brahmins. The editors note that "in the folk milieu women succeed by virtue of their cleverness, their guile, and their magical powers. In more learned texts, however, they are honoured most for their religious merit and wifely devotion" (p. 138).

In a patriarchal society, "wifely devotion" is prized among the folk as much as among the educated; nonetheless, the point, on the whole, is well-taken. In the epics, only princesses are allowed the prerogative of choosing their husbands, but in folktales even an ordinary woman may so exercise her choice ("A Poor Man", pp. 22-23). Where Manu opines that a woman like a horse must be flogged for good measure every now and then, and Hindu tradition asks her to endure her suffering in emulation of Sita-Sati, in "The Tale of the Mouse" the wife upon being beaten by her husband leaves him to return to her natal home (pp. 167-9). Women in these tales also appear perfectly adept at manipulating the men in their lives in order to gain the upper hand against other contenders or co-wives. In another tale, significantly from the largely non-Hindu state of Manipur, the most dramatic reversal of the norms of orthodox Hindu society is effected when the husband, acting on the erroneous impression that his wife is dead, immolates himself at her funeral pyre (pp. 103-6).

The honour of being "milk-sop characters" surely belongs, in these tales, to Brahmins (p. xxxi). The Brahmins are easily outwitted (pp. 204-6, 208-9); they are moreover exemplary monuments to miserliness. In "The Rupee Note", a story from Assam, a Brahmin who is brought into a home from the rain and placed before the fire cries out, "Don't worry about me. There is a rupee note in my bag. Please warm the rupee, warm the rupee" (pp. 202-3). The Brahmins in "Tenali Ramalingadu", a tale from Andhra, are exposed for what they are, greed and chicanery writ large over their faces (pp. 237-8). But, above all, Brahmins are emblematic of the sacred, and this realm of the sacred is lampooned. A cat disguises itself as a holy man but is outwitted into being content with excrement (pp. 210-2); elsewhere, in a story from Kashmir, the cow's shit and urine, extolled in the Brahminical *shastras* for their expiatory value, are reduced to their true essence: "bad stench" (p. 55)!

Thus, in some respects, folktales are poles apart from the epic, *shastric*, *puranic*, and other written literature of The Great Tradition, and indeed some of the inversions they effect—the

humbling of the mighty, the mockery of priests, the indifference towards 'high' religion—have thematically a great deal in common with the poetry of the *bhakti* movement. Indian folktales also invite comparison with tales from other parts of the world, as the three most useful and detailed indices of tale types and motifs appended to *Folktales of India* amply demonstrate. Where counterparts to Indian tales are found elsewhere in the world, it becomes important to ask, in Ramanujan's words, "what the Indian tellsers do to the tales. . .to make them different", and how their telling of the tales imparts a characteristically Indian touch to what might otherwise be a universal narrative (p. xx).

The indices in this volume are not its only other assets. There are valuable "notes to the tales" which inform us about the background of the collector of each tale and the circumstances under which it was collected. The editors of this volume have also supplied an introduction to each section, and each tale in turn is then prefaced by another summary and analysis. These introductions may have been written with the relatively uninformed Western reader in mind, but occasionally they do hinder, by their sheer redundancy and length, the enjoyment of the tales. Not only is there much verbiage here, but the editors appear, despite their professed interest in regional variations and the plurality of customs and beliefs in India, to be keen to extrapolating pan-Indian truths. There is said to be a "common South Asian attitude toward fate" (p. 29), tales are described as reflecting "ideals all Indian women are asked to approximate", and we are even told with decisiveness that "Indian sons are particularly dedicated to their mothers" (p. 42). Nonetheless, despite all its limitations, *Folktales of India* is the single best volume of its kind in English and probably any other language.

At first glance William Crooke's *A Glossary of North Indian Peasant Life*, first published in 1879, and recently made available in a new edition with a fine introduction by Shahid Amin, will appear to have nothing in common with *Folktales of India*.

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Crooke was a well-known colonial historian and ethnographer in the employ of the Indian Civil Service and his glossary of North Indian peasant life, part of the systematization of colonial knowledge about the village life and peasantry of north India, was compiled to facilitate the governance by the British of their territories. The oppressed, if he is to be ruled, must also be 'known', and his language mastered. Crooke's glossary, which paved the way for similar works about other parts of India, familiarized the British colonial officer with the wide range of words used by peasants in what were then "the North-Western Provinces" and "Oudh" to describe their tools, domestic appliances, cattle and other domestic animals, agricultural products, land tenures, and such agricultural operations as ploughing, manuring, sowing, hoeing, weeding, threshing, winnowing and irrigation.

It is no accident that Crooke was also the author of such works as the *Religion and Folklore of Northern India*. To the Indian folklorist Crooke is still well-known as the editor between 1890-96 of *North Indian Notes and Queries*, "a monthly periodical, devoted to the systematic collection of authentic notes and scraps of information regarding the country and its people", and widely acknowledged as one of the best sources of the nineteenth-century for Indian folktales. Where folktales enlighten us about the customs, religious practices and beliefs, moral values, and everyday behaviour of peasants and villagers, a work such as Crooke's glossary introduces us to the material life of the village. Crooke was not the only scholar of the colonial period to have worked on both fronts. For example, Sir George Grierson, author of *Bihar Peasant Life, Being a Descriptive Catalogue of the Surroundings of the People of that Province* (1885), also compiled *Hatim's Tales, Kashmiri Stories and Songs*, to which Crooke appended "a note on the folklore of the tales". Both Crooke and Grierson were alive to how their interest in folklore and colonial ethnography was complementary and, in fact, in *A Glossary of North Indian Peasant Life*, Crooke illustrates the meanings of many words through proverbs or

popular beliefs. The entry for 'rice' begins thus : "The crop is known as *dhān*. When unhusked it is called *dhān*; when husked *chāwal*: when boiled plain *bhāt*. . . The varieties of rice grown in the provinces are very numerous and not important. In the east districts there is a proverb—*dhān aur chatrrion ku ek hi hisāb hai*, i.e. there are as many kinds of rice as Rajputs" (p. 100). Most illustrative of the kind of information which serves as a backdrop to folktales is this gem on evil spirits and disease: "In case of sickness (particularly small-pox) some rubbish is exposed on the road in a saucer. This, called *jog*, is supposed to communicate the infection to the first person who touches it" (p. 163).

There is little doubt that the study of folklore would be considerably enhanced and enriched with an awareness of the kind of perspective, at once ethnographic, socio-economic, and literary, that works like William Crooke's *Glossary of North Indian Peasant Life* bring to bear on the material side of rural life. Howevermuch the scholarship of the colonizers existed merely to serve the interests of the colonial state, and whatever may have been its totalizing features and its propensity towards essentialism, the scholars of the colonial period showed, as modern folklorists and historians have not, an awareness of the complementarity of various kinds of discourses necessary to an understanding of the culture of rural people and their literatures. The publication of a new edition of Crooke's *Glossary of North Indian Peasant Life*, to which the editor, Shahid Amin, has contributed both his expertise as a historian and his knowledge of the oral literatures and traditions of present day Uttar Pradesh, will surely go a long way to sensitizing students of folklore to the existence of much material that so far has not properly been utilized in the study of folktales and other forms of oral literature.