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The First Extra-Indian (i.e. Foreign) Translation of Panchatantra into Pahlavi and Its Voyage round the World

Abstract

The Panchatantra, a classical Sanskrit treatise on political-practical wisdom and wise conduct of affairs of daily life is a book of fables and stories based on non-human as well as human characters. It has travelled far and wide throughout the world in varied guises of translations, adaptations and trans-creations since its initial introduction to the outside world through the first extra-Indian (i.e. foreign) translation into the Pahlavi language in the 6th century A.D. The story of the Panchatantra's translation into the Pahlavi language is in itself intriguing and fascinating as majority of its tales and narratives. This paper narrates the accounts of the first foreign rendering of this marvelous book of narratives and its voyage round the world.

Key Words: Panchatantra, first extra-Indian (i.e. foreign), translation, Pahlavi, voyage, around the world.

Introduction

The Panchatantra is a fabulous work which has enjoyed an extraordinary and universal popularity among peoples cutting across greatest obstacles of region, religion, culture and language within and

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without India. This product of a genius, identified as Vishnu Sharma, initially set out on its remarkable progress and voyage round the world through a translation. The preamble of a version of the book itself actually foresaw its own universal acclaim (or had already attained that stature at that time) when it proclaimed, " Since then, this work on Wise Conduct (Nitisastra) has become celebrated as excellent means of awakening young minds. It has traveled far and wide over this earth." (The Panchatantra, Vishnu Sharma; translated with an introduction by Chandra Rajan, Penguin Books, P. 05.) It traveled far and wide over the world as from Java in the East to Iceland in the Northwest. It is said to be at least 200-250 versions of the Panchatantra in 50-60 languages, most of them non-Indian. 'The traces of its influence might be detected in works of literature so widely separated in time and space as the Br'er Rabbit stories current in the Southern United States.' (Ibid Intro. P. Xvi) It is a matter of immense pleasure to note, especially as a student of the Persian language and literature that this fabulous work initially proceeded on its voyage round the world through an Iranian link, a golden one and amongst the earliest examples of a long-standing close cultural ties between the two ancient nations of India and Iran.

The Panchatantra, to the best of our knowledge, was for the first time, translated or rather adapted into an extra-Indian (i.e. foreign) language, Pahlavi (Middle-Persian), during the reign of Khosro Anushirvan (AD 550-578), a Sasanian emperor of Iran, a glorified contemporary of Prophet Mohammad. This version was executed under the emperor's orders by his court physician, Burzoe. The story of the translation of this 'Book of Stories' into Pahlavi is a fascinating tale in itself and was probably set as a prologue to the lost Burzoe's redaction. It has been carried over into Arabic and Persian renderings in two versions. The first story, as recorded by Abu Mansur Saa'labi Nishapuri (350-429 A.H.) in his book on history of Persia (Tarikh-e-Ghur-e-Akbar-e-Maluk-al-Furs, Rotenburg Pub. P. 629-633), was also more or less precisely versified by none other than the great Firdowsi in his encyclopedic epic of Persia 'Shahnameh'. A few lines of the long poem are quoted below. He introduces Burzoe in these words:

به نیرو رسیده سخنگوی بود

پزشک سراینده برزوی بود

(There was a praise-worthy physician, Burzoe; he had reached strength but was still in search of knowledge.)

ز هر دانشی داشتی بهره ای به هر بهره ای در جهان شهره ای

(He possessed every knowledge and famous for each in world.)

Once, while in the audience with the emperor, he is informed about the existence of the elixir in India and its effectiveness in reviving the dead man:

من امروز در دفتر هندوان همی بنگریدم به روشن روان

(Today I was just perusing the book on the Indians)

چنین بد نبشته که بر کوه هند گیایست چینی چو رومی پرند

(It was written there that in the Himalayas, some grass (elixir) grows which is as valuable as the Roman silk)

چو بر مرده بپراگند بی گمان سخنگوی گردد هم اندر زمان

(When it is massaged on the dead, the dead, undoubtedly, starts to speak in no time)

But as it turned out:

یکی مرده زنده نگشت از گیا همانا که سست آمد آن کیمیا

(Not a single dead could be revived with that grass (elixir); and it turned out ineffective)

The same version has appeared in some European versions and forms part of Sir Thomas North's *The Fables of Bidpai: The Morall Philosophie of Doni* (1570), as 'The Argument of the Book'. (Pp. 34-71, Reprint 193) Chandra Rajan has reproduced the following brief

account of the story in the introduction to her translation of Panchatantra:(Pp. Xvii-Xviii)

“Once, Khosro Anushirvan, a king of Iran was presented a book which contained among other things the secret to raise the dead by means of an elixir (rasayana in Sanskrit). The book explained how the elixir was extracted from herbs and trees growing on the high mountains of India. The king, eager to find out the truth about this elixir sent his chief minister and treasurer, Burzoe, to India, providing him with great deal of gold and silver to defray the expenses of the long and arduous journey, and with letters to the courts of many monarchs in India, requesting their help. Burzoe, on reaching India, received all help he needed and with the wisest and most learned sages began combing the mountains for the herbs and trees mentioned in the book. But to no avail, for no extract had the power of restoring the dead to life. Burzoe and the learned Indian sages were driven to the conclusion that everything that had been written about the elixir in the book ‘was false and untrue’.

Burzoe, greatly distressed, consulted the learned sages as to what he could do to not return empty handed to his king. Then, ‘a famous philosopher’, who had also searched long and in vain for the Elixir of Life only to discover in the end that the elixir was in truth a book, showed Burzoe a copy of it. This philosopher also explained the allegory contained in the first book, the one presented to the king of Iran, which started Burzoe on his travels, as follows: the high mountains were the wise and learned men of lofty intellect; the trees and herbs their virtuous writings and the wisdom extracted from these writings the Elixir of Life that revived the dead intelligence and buried thoughts of ‘the ignorant and unlearned’.

Burzoe asked for a copy of that book, which was ‘always in the hands of those kings, for it was full of Morall Philosophy’, and for permission to translate it into his own tongue for his king. And so

‘with the help and knowledge of all those learned philosophers’, Burzoe rendered the famous book into Pahlavi and returned home with it.

King Khosro Anushirvan studied the book deeply and was so impressed by the wisdom it contained that he began to collect books with great diligence and sought out learned men to come and live in his court. Then he built a great library in his palace, in which the book he esteemed so highly-the Panchatantra- was given the place of honour, and also of justice and fear of God....”

The second version of the story of Panchatantra’s maiden transmigration overseas, which seems a more credible and realistic account in view of many investigators of the text(For example, Dr. Indu Shekhar who has rendered a latest translation of Panchatantra into modern Persian solely based on a Sanskrit Text), forms part of the famous Ibne-Muqaffa’s Arabic translation of the Pahlavi version. The following is a brief summary of a fairly long story of Burzoe’s travel to India and other details about his successful translation of the text, as retold by Abul Maa’li Nasrullah Munshi in his trend-setting rendering of the Ibne-Muqaffa’s version into a flamboyant Persian prose named ‘Kalileh-o-Dimneh’:

‘There is a divine reckoning behind commission of every act in this world and the cause of this book’s immigration from India to Persia was that once the upright Emperor was conveyed about the existence of a treasured book in the hands of Indian kings which has been compiled in the tongue of non-human characters. It is an incredible treatise on the art of statecraft and practical wisdom essential for proper governance of a kingdom and her subjects. The book is called Kalileh-o-Dimneh. The emperor’s curiosity, thus, aroused to obtain a copy of such a remarkable book, His majesty called for a suitable person to be entrusted the mission of retrieving this rare treatise from India and bring to Persia. Burzoe was enlisted for this task and he set out to accomplish it. On his arrival in India,

Burzoe had to undergo a lot of hardship and even undertake clandestine operations to get hold of a copy of the book, inaccessible like a coveted gem to a layman. He ultimately befriended a learned Hindu who provided him with a copy of the text after a lot of cajoling and pestering. Having rendered it into his mother tongue with the assistance of the said learned Hindu, Burzoe returned to his homeland and presented it to Anushirvan. The Emperor and other courtiers were mesmerized listening to the contents of this fabulous work and showered heaps of praise on Burzoe for his amazing achievements.’(The Panchatantra, Vishnu Sharma; translated with an introduction by Chandra Rajan, Penguin Books, Pp. Intro. Xviii)

However and in whatever eventual form, Panchatantra might have been carried over to Persia, there is now little room for doubt that Burzoe’s Pehlevi version was the first extra-Indian (foreign language) translation of this book. Unfortunately, his own version of the original Sanskrit text was lost to posterity but not before two translations into Arabic and the Syriac language, apparently based on his text, were produced and survived. Although the Syriac version (AD 570), nearest to the Pahlavi original, remained in oblivion until 19th century, its Arabic counterpart of Ibne-Muqaffa was destined to attain everlasting popularity. It became the parent of innumerable translations, adaptations and trans-creations into Persian, Arabic and most European versions throughout the Middle Ages. It is hardly possible to sum up in this article its comprehensive impact on all genres of Persian prose and poetry. From reproducing simple versions (Famous books in Persian literature beginning from Kalileh-o-Dimneh-e-Bahramshahi (Abul Ma’ali Nasrullah Munshi), Marzaban Nameh (Marzaban bin Washmgir), Anwar-e-Suhaili (Mulla Waa’ez Kashafi), and A’yar-e-Danish (Abul Fadl Allami) may be cited as major examples in this category) to adaptations of its chosen stories, style (The great Saadi who has deployed with such dexterity the style of prose-cum-poetry in his masterpiece Gulistan, also happens to be the distinctive feature of all preceding versions of Kalileh-o-Dimneh and their distant original source Panchatantra; a work known in Sanskrit as Champu, written in mixture of verse and prose.) and structure in their literary oeuvre by great Persian writers and poets, (The first great Persian poet Rudaki is

reported to have versified the whole of Burzoe's Pehlevi version into Mathnavi form, but except for a few scattered verses found in different anthologies as specimens, it is lost. Among other great poets, for instance, Sinaee, Attar and Maulavi have employed numerous stories of Kalileh-o-Dimneh in their ethical and mystical discourses) the influence of Panchatantra and particularly its fable style is all-pervasive throughout the history of the Persian language and literature.

Coming out of the Persian world, which has turned out to be like a second home for our beloved text Panchatantra, experts of the text have opined that, "itha d great influence on world literature as no other work of Indian literature could claim to have enjoyed. Arthur Macdonell points to its 'extraordinary influence on the narrative works of the whole Middle Ages' in Europe, and to the enrichment it brought into the literature of those languages in which versions of the work were made (India's Past. p. 122). Because of its great antiquity and its extensive migrations, traces of its influence might be detected in works of literature so widely separated in time and place as the Arabian Nights, the Gesta Romanorum, Boccaccio's Decameron and Chaucer's Canterbury Tales, The Fables of La Fontaine, some stories of Grimm, and in the most unlikely of places, the Br'er Rabbit stories current in the southern United States. However, if we were to pick the two works that display an unmistakable and notable influence of the Panchatantra, they would be the Arabian Nights and La Fontaine's Fables. La Fontaine acknowledges his debt to our text when he expressly states in his preface to the second edition of the Fables (1678), that the greater part of the new material was 'derived from the Indian sage Pilpay', whose work is regarded 'as earlier than the Aesop's.' (The Panchatantra, Vishnu Sharma; translated with an introduction by Chandra Rajan, Penguin Books, Pp. Intro. Xix-xx)

Panchatantra's stories gained popularity in the medieval Europe as 'The Fables of Bidpai'. It was committed to numerous renderings into the Greek, Latin, German, Italian, Spanish, French, Armenian and Slavonic languages. In the 11th A.D. a man called Simon Seth rendered a Greek translation of the Kalileh-o-Dimneh, considered to be the oldest translation in a European language, which was later followed by adaptations in Russian as well as other Slovanic languages in 12th -13th centuries. However, according to some experts of the text, the earliest European translation of Panchatantra is a Spanish

version executed by an unknown person in the year 1251 AD. It is perhaps pertinent to note here that Beast Fables of the Panchatantra's genre had already been current in medieval Europe since ancient times in the form of those of Aesop's leading to a controversy of primacy between the two and also, a great deal of overlapping in the contents of many European versions. Edgerton, a devout researcher of the Panchatantra's text, believes that the honour of its first replication in a European language should go to a book called 'Novus Aesops' (New Aesop) of Baldo, compiled in the early 12th century AD.

Listed below are few other important adaptations of Kalileh-o-Dimneh, and by extension that of the Panchatantra in the European languages, which were themselves subjected to numerous imitations and adaptations later on:

Language	Title	Author	Period (AD)
Latin	Liber Kelilae et Dimrae-Directorium vitae Humane	John Capua	1st 260-70
German	Das der Buch Beespiele	Anthony Von Pforr	1st 483
Italian	La Morale Philosophia	Antonio Francesco Doni	1st 552
French	Contes et fables Indiennes des Bidpai et de Lokman	Galland	1st 724
English	The Fables of Bidpai: The Morall Philosophie of Doni	Sir Thomas North	1st 570

Conclusion

The list of Panchatantra's translations, versions, adaptations and even trans-creations seems endless. Some say that its stories have been translated into nearly every language in the world that has a script. It is, though, an unpteen task to enumerate all them at one place with verifiable data. Nonetheless, Panchatantra has enjoyed tremendous popularity around the world for centuries and still continues to do so. Now the point to ponder for us is that how come this work acquired such a universal acceptability. For many extra-Indian translators,

including those of the Persian and European imitators, they were attracted to Panchatantra primarily because of the moral philosophy and practical wisdom it contained. It was also for its utility as a manual of political philosophy and guide for princes that it was committed to copying in the early age. But considering its eternal and sustained popularity up to the modern times, there has to be some thing more in it. As many specialists of the text have emphasized it, Panchatantra's longevity owes to its philosophy of life or nitisastra as much as to its style and structure. It has a dual perspective of education through entertainment—so much of relevance to derive from this novel method of instruction in our own times and overhauling of the present education system, especially, at primary levels to render learning an enjoyable experience for our young children—as Vishnu Sharma deployed this method to educate three refractory and dull-witted princes by compiling this fabulous work; a lesson of human life taught in the tongues of animals and other non-human characters.

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