

Historical Study of 'JĀTAKAS': Special Reference to Buddhist Literature

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Abstract – This study is an attempt to understand oral traditions are rooted in assumptions about human actions and the nature of society even if the holders are unaware of their own beliefs. Using Jātakas as a text of popular tradition and as a historical source in the form of Oral tradition as a research method definitely helps in documenting previously undocumented information about rituals, customs, social organizations, myths, legends, indigenous science and knowledge, migration and origin. It also attempts to focus on the representation of the norms and values of superior culture as well as the inferior culture tradition of the common people who were earlier ignored by the texts of High culture. It also provides a multiple meanings of Reaffirmation, Subversion and ambiguity simultaneously. Hence, the structure of the Jātakas makes it possible to deal with every person and class of society that was not considered important for High culture society and tradition. This supplements the information already in the records, fills the gaps in the ethnographic data and brings out new and previously unknown facts about the society at the time of the Buddha.

Keywords – Literature, History, Tradition, Culture etc.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The Jātakas are canonical, narrative and normative texts known to us in the form of stories. It is a collection of 547 or 550 stories containing four elements:

Paccupannavatthu, (the story of the present) an introductory story, *Attitavatthu*, (story of the past) a story of the previous birth of Buddha, *Gatha* or verses (part of the text as canonical), short commentary in which stanzas are explained and *Samadhana* (conclusion) that connects the characters in the present with the characters in the past.

2. DEBATE ON THE CHRONOLOGY OF THE JĀTAKAS

The elements of *Attitavatthu* and *Gāthā* can be used to chart out a chronology of the Jātakas. Since *Attitavattu* has occurred repeatedly in the *Paccupannavatthu*, it is necessary to explore the *Attitavattu* (a story of the previous births of the Buddha), where the Buddha throws light on events in which he participated himself in primary or secondary roles was just an observer. Undoubtedly, these narratives help us to form the chronology of the Jātakas.

Scholars like Winternitz, Richard Fick, T.W. Rhys Davids, Narendra Wagle, B.C Sen, Uma Chakravarti, K.R. Norman, John Garrett Jones and Naomi Appleton have mainly relied on the Jātakas in their study of the

social history of the Buddha's time. They have tried to look at the history in terms of the chronology of the Jātakas.

Concerning to the chronological problems in the Jātakas, Winternitz, focuses on the origin of Buddhist literature which is still very controversial. He attests to the fact that the Jātakas stories could have been completed in the 2nd or 3rd Century BCE. This is evident from the sculptures represented in Barhut, and the Sanchi Buddhist *stūpa* and in Amravati during third century C.E. There is evidence that verses in the old Ceylonese tradition are the real core of the Jātakas and the prose was later influenced by Singhalese. The Jātakas are divided into *Nipātas* according to the number of *gāthās*. He says that, like the other Buddhist literature, tales of Jātakas could also have been told among the common people or the followers in the form of secular literature.

Moreover, he also says that the Jātakas work has important significance, not on the grounds that they are a piece of writing or craftsmanship but since they uncover data about the Indian culture in third century CE. Despite the fact that original Jātakas collection is lost yet we think about them from a commentary composed on them by some Buddhist monk. Jātakas are in writing too in verse frame. Many scholars opine the Jātakas reflects on social, political and

economic condition running from fifth to second century BCE.

On the other hand, Rhys Davids, in "*Buddhist India*", says that the Jātakas are canonical literature in the form of verses composed in North India before the time of Ashoka. It is certain that these verses are an oral commentary with the stories in prose and have preserved the original form of Indian folklore.

He further says in determining the relative and absolute age of the text, that the sixth and the last volumes are the longest and the latest. Some of these were selected for illustration in the 3rd Century BCE. In addition, the text of the story of the earlier Jātakas belonged to pre-Buddhist folklore. They were later modified to form Buddhist principles, values, and ethics. As is evident from the 23 sculptural representations at Sanchi, Barhut and Amravati, these were not the part of newer Jātakas.

Narendra Wagle, in "Society at the time of the Buddha" scholars like Richard Fick, Rhys Davids, R.N. Mehta and A.N Bose, in their investigation of the social history of the Buddha's time, have for the most part depended on the Jātakas, however frequently they have included the confirmation of *Vinaya* and the *Nikāya*. A portion of the Jātakas stories contain extremely old legends, however for the most part, they speak to an extensive period of development from the Buddha's time down to the 2nd and 3rd century CE.

Benoy Chandra Sen, in "*Studies in the Buddhist Jātakas*", has also tried to look at the issue related to the chronology of the text. According to him, the period of the text can be ascribed to second century BCE to fifth century CE as discussed by the scholars like Winternitz and E.B. Cowell. By following them his argument based on the fact that the prose of the text could belong to second or third century BCE as some of these stories were sculpturally inscribed on Buddhist shrines of Amaravati, Sanchi, Barhut. In addition, some of the Buddhist *suttas* contain the same instances as found in the Jātakas.

John Garrett Jones also agrees with Rhys Davids' notion of the origin of the Jātakas in the pre-Buddhist stories and fables. Thus, he agrees that the Jātakas had their origin in the later years after the Buddha around Fifth-century CE.

K.R. Norman discusses the historical importance and chronology of the Jātakas as pre-Buddhist and Buddhist literature in canon. After the analysis of 500 stories of the Jātakas he concludes that many Jātakas can be regarded as being non-Buddhist or even pre-Buddhist while there are some which are certainly Buddhist. This clearly shows that the Buddhists inserted materials of their own to the Jātakas collection.

He assigns these stories to a period of great antiquity and sometime to the pre-Buddhist tradition. He also says that some of the versions of the Pāli Jātakas

stories could be found in Buddhist Sanskrit texts. In the Pāli version, the Jātaka stories consist of verses and a prose and except a few all, the verses are canonical. According to the number of verses they contain, all these stories are arranged in Nipatas.

In the Pāli version, each Jātaka is preceded by a long introduction, the *Nidāna-kathā* which provides the Buddha's previous history, both before his last birth and also during his last existence until he attains the state of the Buddha. Generally, these stories are a three-tier analysis as an introductory: *Paccuppannavatthu, Attitavattu*: the narrative of the past, *Gāthās verses* and stanzas, *Veyyakarana*: commentary to the verse, and *Samadhana*, the conclusion part.

Norman's analysis reveals that some of these stories are also found in Aesop's fables and other European literature and the problem of their inter-dependence has been much discussed. Representations of some of them are found in the relics, sculptures and inscriptions of the Bharhut, Sanchi, and Amravati *stūpas* meaning that they had already become popular by the second century BCE.

B.C. Law, argues that there are a few Jātakas scattered all through the standard Pāli writing and also the Sanskrit Buddhist writing and even outside the writing of Buddhism, a significant number of the stories of the Jātaka Book occur in the *Pañcatantra*, *Kathāsaritsāgara*, and other Indian story books. A few stories still others in Jaina writing for example, the narrative of Isisinga in *Suyakadanga*, which is the *Nalini Jātaka*. They are found in even the *Mahābhārata*, for instance *Rsisringaupakhyāna*. Additionally there are many stories in the Pāli writing, eminently in the *Milindapañha*. Numerous Jātakas occur in the *Mahāvastu* in prose and additionally in verse in mixed Sanskrit. Some of them are variations of Pāli Jātakas while others are not found in the Pāli collections.

Regardless of the extensive number of stories found in the Jātaka, plainly it in no way, shape or form all the Jātaka stories which existed in North India after the Buddhism.

Uma Chakravarti, points out that despite their popularity, many layers of narrative in the text made it difficult to arrange it chronologically to entail an absolute analysis.

Contrary to the above mentioned scholars Kumkum Roy reflecting the period of the text from third century BCE to fifth century CE.

3. NATURE OF THE JĀTAKAS

When any orator wants to say something by telling a story, his experiences of past change as a culture and tradition, and became the soul of the narrative and make them live. Likewise the same properties too resides in the Jātaka stories. These stories

reflect the society, culture and tradition of India at the time of the pre-Buddha, Buddha and post-Buddha. Therefore, the study of oral and written tradition and folkculture helps us to understand culture and its role in the life of the common people. It throws light on the attitude, behavior and numerous other aspects of social organization. It also provides a clue to understanding the interplay between personality and cultural development. All these viewpoints support and throw light on the importance and nature of the Jātaka. Having described the Jātakas as written tradition with some characteristics of oral tradition in them I would like to deal with the application of the rules of evidence to them and explain how a tradition relates to a text that stems from it.

But before tackling such sources, we are given to realize that oral traditions could be used for multiple purposes. As a source material, they help to reconstruct the social history of tribal society and caste formation at the time of the Buddha. As a source material, they help to recreate the histories in the tribal society and social difference in caste formation at the time of the Buddha.

The study of oral tradition greatly aids knowledge about the traditional behavior of the folk culture. In order to understand its role, it is important to know about the culture and behavior of the people. It includes expressions of belief, attitude, ceremonies, tradition, superstition, folktales, folk songs and myths of the people. It also reveals the values, goals, and life of the common people whose life histories were excluded from high culture tradition.

Oral tradition gives greater scope to frame the socio-economic and political life and structure of the society at the time of the Buddha from the Jātaka. *As it could be put in a class of writing with different layers and folkloric, content it would have spread "through various cycles of oral and composed transmission"*.

According to Ramanujan, in a narrative folklore, there is a cycle of different mediums of transmission from oral tradition to compile and to reconstruct. He also says that it represents a counter image of society.

The Jātaka as a source of written tradition with some elements of oral tradition having the nature and characteristics of folklore culture are restructured in such a way as to present a vivid picture of the society through its values, norms, and ideas. According to Uma Chakravarti, it is probably one of the most widely known compendiums of the Buddhist world of which many of the stories form part of oral tradition.

Blackburn and Ramanujan say that the old stories are the compelling specialists of new social developments and they mirror the particular requesting of the truth as opposed to inactively mirroring the things that are. They analyze folk tradition and describes that the idea and control of classical text is balanced by the energy and chaos of the folk text as it represents a clairvoyant

contradiction to the support of control in great conventions. That is the control and limitation of established writings is adjusted by the confusion and vitality of the society writings.

According to the above description, he says, "the oral tradition is a cultural system which carries, reflects and changes the style, event, metaphor in a more subtle way". Hence, Oral traditions become indispensable source materials to understand and appreciate tribal history and caste formation and make their culture meaningful.

Likewise, Margaret Egnor talks about the audience and communication of the oral narration and says that the communication is indirect and the audience is hidden in such narration. She also says that codes and metaphorical ordering must be filtered through the social order.

Vansina illustrates the different roles played by oral tradition in framing an oral history of any society. He discusses the singularity of oral tradition as a source and it is due to this singular character that one cannot ignore it. A sender narrates it and doubles as a performer and the receiver who perceives these messages as a source of events. As far as oral tradition as a source of history is concerned, definition specifies that the messages in the oral statement are either spoken or sung on musical instruments. Thus, oral tradition is a dynamic process that encompasses memorized speech, accounts, epics, tales, proverbs and sayings.

4. NARRATIVE STRUCTURE OF THE JĀTAKAS

The stories has the high degree of literary value. The narrative structure used in the Jātaka divided into two forms : internal and external narrative structure. The internal narrative reflects twist in the story, narration of first, second and third person, social customs, beliefs faith and practices, social groups, social hierarchy and interrelationship among the groups that depicts the social inequalities, protest or resistance, distrust and loyalty prevails in the society. And external structure deals with the content, arrangement, form and dialect which would coordinate away collection of stories in any dialect or writing. The structure of the stories may sometime seems to be artificial and simulated, however regardless it is possesses characteristics of the Pāli collection. The structure and type of such stories encourages one to comprehend that specific element marks it out from other comparative literature.

Regarding the discussion on the **importance of the feature in plotting the situation** and its impact, Rhys Davids, analyzes the structure of literary forms and establishes a relationship between folklore and literature where he suggests that there are structural borrowings. He further talks about the implication of

both and describes the context of behavior of folktale through culture and its implication. Like an instance depicted in *Talapatti Jātakain* which the order of social hierarchy was not followed to elect a king while a common man elected as a king by the council of ministers.

5. NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES OF THE STORIES IN JĀTAKAS

Concerning to the **tools** used to construct the structure and content of the Jātaka, includes the standardization and repetition of words, phrases, meaning and moral of the text, verse summary, prose teaching, similes, use of metaphor, parables, anecdotes and so. This made these stories to categorize into various groups which led to generate the new ideas and clear conclusion of the theme in relation to these stories.

Hence it shows that firstly all stories are encompassed by various situation and characters event, time and space. Secondly, all the functions are related to each other and not a single function is exclusive in the order.

Thirdly, the text is constituted with regards to the fact that the stories were told around some incident at that point event, and it is in their association with that incident that we locate their actual lesson. At the close of the story the Buddha constantly distinguished the birth with the approach that, lines of character and action emerge plainly from the past to the present, which is here and there the same, and sometime improved. Therefore, replacement of narration, stream of consciousness, Ironies, personification, magical elements, fictional characters, are the functions of the Jātaka stories encompassed by different characters and situation. One perceives, the other receives and a third deals with it.

As far as oral tradition as a source of history is concerned the Jātaka could have mnemonic feature, which originated in the Buddhist teaching style. It also has the repetition feature like the oral culture. Considering to the Jātaka, Buddhist monks belonged to different social backgrounds which helped them to relate and recall memories of the past tradition. This made the Jātaka a popular tradition in the history of the Buddhist literature. Here we find multiple collections of stories in which repetition is prevalent at the phrase, similes, meaning, words, introductory paragraph, *gāthās*, class, characters, and occupation and sometime in morals of the text.

6. LITERARY FORMS OF THE JĀTAKAS

When writing about the **forms and context** of the text, messages are surrounded by written and iconographic sources, oral history and folk tradition. A source, which passes through two or more interpretations, limits the scope of the source. But beyond this limit, it is partly due to the different means of communication as

language. Language played a vital role in performance to shape a vivid picture of the narrated events. It is also a very sound medium for interpretation, to deal with the common people and to reflect various aspects of society. Therefore, that common people may understand and hold to it and incorporate to the Buddhist teaching and tradition. Hence, Buddhist tradition could depend on the language concerned and social organization without which it could not be comprehended. This later on might have transmitted from one generation to other in this particular region.

Hence, it shows that the verses are inclusive in nature which contains different types of verse composition. Sometimes it specifies the dignity of the master, identity and role, in question answer form, in praise, comparison and so.

Concerning to the singularity of the Jātakas there are many stories in the text which reflects the numbers of analogies, metaphors and similes, which are realistic, precise and formal in presentation. As depicted from the *Valahassa Jātakas*, in which Bodhisatta identified as a flying horse and leader of merchant's group. This kind of version found in many instances in the Jātakas, in which Buddha should be identified as a protagonist or presents himself either as a hero or as a spectator.

It is a collection of fables and legends which either has a parallel or derivative in folklore and literature. Each story has a concise moral. Based on the teaching of the Buddha, the stories used his teaching by sutras, stanza and by legends to attract common people. The Tathagata knew the audience. He preached in many different ways so that they should not misinterpret his narration. Moreover, it also reflect from the text that each story is set of particular theme in which present story connected with the story of the past based on the previous life and experience of the Buddha.

As evident from the information, the genres of oral tradition in societies are very diverse. This interpretations become more culture-specific, less anachronistic and ethnocentric" as discussed by Vansina. Thereby, oral traditions are transferred through a different medium in the form of messages which is reflected from the inside (narrator) and refracted to the outside world (audience). Buddha narrated stories from his past lives to teach his monks the good conduct of life which was compiled in the form of the stories. In this manner, the Jātakas are Buddhist stories and stories of Buddha in his past lives which included incarnations as an animal, human beings and so. And the more interesting thing in this, the quality of oral narration of the Jātakas, multiplied its audience.

7. VARIOUS TYPES OF NARRATIVE LITERATURE IN THE JĀTAKAS

Concerning to the description of the stories in the Jātakas with regard to its components and the

relationship of these components to each other and to the whole, the story of the past is directly or indirectly linked to the present based on the other past experiences of the Buddha. Each story contains the several characters with their defined role and their socio, political, cultural and economic aspects like tribes, king, and various social groups, their sorrow, anger, jealous, oppressive, forest, state and so.

Hence this shows a key of social interrelationship between each character. Various mythical and real characters make it very complex and at the same time interesting. According to Brenda Beck, provide a new coding and usage of the term 'Social dyads'. It involves a pair of characters which is a primary unit of the story and might include an animal, a human beings and the interaction between the two. The Jātakas stories could also divide into various dyads. These dyads contain a pair of two characters and its relationship to one and another. These dyads operating within the stories and represent or counter represents established values, norms and ideas of the society. Thus, majority of these dyads reflects the interpersonal relationship and social inequalities as depicted in the form of various tribal identities and caste groups in the Jātakas. Moreover, it also depicted the kind of distrust, inequalities, resistance while some shows the counter culture instances happened in the society.

In *MamsaJātakas*, depicted the community of the hunter practiced hunting for trade. Likewise in *KarandiyaJātakas*, hunter and fishermen stop killing animals and adopted other occupation for food. Buddha also prohibited killing of animals in sacrifice. It also represents the social concern as per the values and norms of the society. Thus, the animal kingdom has thoroughly internalized the social value system of the humans.

This narrative literature and tradition discuss the notion of strict control and freedom on the lower class of people as depicted in many instances in the Jātakas. One could detect a refraction of reality and act of transgression permitted to them. Hence, their identity is at conflict with imposed values and norms. The text also deals with the kind of occupation, marriage, eating habits, faith and beliefs, resistance performed by these classes. They were always represented as engaged in agriculture, tending livestock, and performing drudge labour to support their families.

The Jātakas as a text imposed a certain identity upon lower class in representing a social relation. Loyalty and meekness are said to be their characteristic which is in confirmation with the Buddhist moral order. Here we detect an imposed identity, which could be reflected in their opportunity to enjoy a happy life. Moreover, we could also detect the confrontation between the norms and values of high culture and the transgression space as depicted in the narrative.

In every story of the Jātakas, the characters of lower order through the intellectual level opposed the resistance to the *Brāhmaṇical* ideology. Thus, the confrontation and resistance by lower order represent new social identity strategy made by the narrative structure.

One can also recognize the representation of the counter image of social reality as economic and social mobility and symbolic resistance against the exploitative nature of the society that follows. We could assume this symbol as the sites of re-codification and contestation of resistance. Regarding the representation of the lower order in Jātakas, she opines that "the Jātakas provide a valuable insight into the points of divergences and intersection between popular culture and the culture of high classes, and between the *Brāhmaṇical* and Buddhist tradition".

Hence, it is to be noted that we presume the past from the present stories. Wherever the present may be located, the past would be constructed as tradition. It is in this context that an attempt is made to explain the significance of oral traditions and folk culture as a methodology to adopt for the construction of the history of tribal societies of eastern U.P. and north Bihar. This would not contribute to specific aspects of tribal history and culture, but to the nature and mechanism of oral traditions in general and its relation to social reconstruction of the folk culture in particular.

8. CONCLUSION

Hence, from an analysis of the secondary literature by various scholars I conclude that there is a debate on the chronology of the Jātaka. Winternitz, assigns its authorship to the period from third century BCE. While Norman attributes its origins to the period of the early Buddhist tradition. According to him, some of the stories of the Jātaka belong to pre-Buddhist, Buddhist and non-Buddhist eras.

The above explanation clearly states that the verses were written prior to the prose. The Jātaka had started with the Buddha and most of the text was constructed before the third century BCE. It is accepted that the Jātaka that has come down to us was edited in the fifth century BCE. The authenticity of ancient Indian culture that the Jātaka depict is validated by parallel stories in other texts of the time.

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