



# Narratives Of The Common Man: Multivalent Narratives And Value Systems From The Kathasaritsagar

Dr. G. Geetha

Assistant Professor, Department of FE (Applied Sciences & Humanities)  
Lokmanya Tilak College of Engineering (Autonomous), Navi Mumbai

**Abstract:** The concepts of Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha have been deliberated upon by different philosophers over time. Originally, there were only Dharma, Artha and Kama, and after renunciatory practices originated from Shramanism, Buddhism and Jainism, Moksha became a centrefold in the religious arguments. These divergent value systems are depicted in the ancient text, Somadeva's Kathasaritsagar, a collection of stories translated from Brihatkatha, written by Gunadhya in 200 BCE-500 CE in a now lost language, Paisachi. It is about royal families, courtiers and commoners living during the early medieval times. The narratives in the Kathasaritsagar (KSS) dwell into the frameworks of ethics that encompasses Buddhist value systems before it was accepted into the Hindu philosophical thoughts and religious folds. Multinarrative also play a part in KSS since some stories could be interpreted variedly as per the speaker and listeners. Since the narrator shifts the perspective, there are stories where gambling is a vice, and stories where gamblers are praised for their intelligence in outwitting everyone, including gods. Intersecting storylines are also another characteristic of stories in the KSS which bring out various perspectives emphasising simplicity, stupidity, or intelligence as per the intention of the story. The Kathasaritsagar has not been considered an elitist text since its protagonists varies from courtly men to barbers, fishermen and asuras. Therefore, it has not been brought into any mainstream study of Indian culture or literary studies unlike the other two classics Ramayana and Mahabharata although once Kathasaritsagar was equally exalted by litterateurs of the 4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century since most of their Sanskrit plays originated from this text. This paper looks at multivalent narratives as well as stories of the common man advocating and imparting values to high profile individuals of the time like kings and sanyasis.

**Keywords/ Index Terms** - Kathasaritsagar, multinarrative, values, marginal text

## I. Introduction

This paper looks at two aspects related to the theme of Narratology and Kathasaritsagar. One is the multivalent perspective and the other, the Value systems which are present in the Kathasaritsagar. Since narratology is important to assess which value system is being prescribed, the major value systems of Artha, Kama, Dharma and Moksha are being considered and analysed as to which one of them is being considered as supreme according to the Kathasaritsagar.

The Kathasaritsagar written by Somadeva Bhatta in 1070 CE is based on another text called Brihatkatha by Gunadya (200 BCE-500 CE), supposedly written in Paishachi language and is believed to be lost. Although Kathasaritsagar was written by a Brahmin in the elitist language Sanskrit, it retains the flavour of 'common'-ism written by Gunadhya, as expounded by historians who have analysed it. The Kathasaritsagar is a collection of stories of, mostly, ordinary people but also of royal families living during the early medieval times. Other works pertaining to Gunadya's Brihatkatha are Buddhaswamin's Brihat-katha-sloka-samgraha, written in Nepalese language (271-30 BCE) and Kshemendra's Brihatkatha Manjari, Sanskrit (1037 CE). There have been a few analyses between the three main texts

of the 8th and 11th centuries, i.e., of Buddhasvamin, Kshemendra and Somadeva: the major inference is that their structure, form, and language differ from each other. A few additional stories invoking certain Gods (Shiva) seem to have been created by Somadeva, in the beginning, but nothing has been changed from the main story (Sattar 1997). Most stories of the text have travelled to Persia and Europe and other parts of the World through travellers, and later, through translations during the colonial period.

The Kathasaritsagar has not been an elitist text since it represents the common man (along with courtly stories), and therefore, it has not been brought into any mainstream study of Indian culture or literary studies unlike the other two classics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata, although once Kathasaritsagar was equally exalted by litterateurs of the 4th-6th century since their Sanskrit plays originated from this particular text. Kathasaritsagar has featured many prominent characters viz., Asura kings like Prahalada and King Bali but it doesn't revolve around 'godly' protagonists like Rama or Krishna who later through avatar stories came to be worshipped and exalted thereby, making those texts gain supremacy as religious texts.

Kathasaritsagar (henceforth, KSS) has become a marginalised text in the last few decades since it is not read or known outside the immediate circle of researchers of either Paisachi or researchers of folktales who stumble upon it. In the innumerable discussions, books and social media engagements on Indian Hindu culture, there is no mention of this particular book from any quarter of the society. Among the masses, many stories of the Kathasaritsagar are popularly afloat but without the knowledge that these stories are from the KSS, or perhaps these stories have been orally transmitted through generations from which Gunadhya and thereafter, Somadeva had compiled. Some of these works are Panchatantra stories and Vetala Panchavimshati, popularly known as Vikram Vetala.

The refreshing tales of KSS have characters ranging from Brahmin, tribal, pisach, men, single women, kings, animals to sanyasis, asuras, courtesans, and gamblers: all are treated with the same 'ironic detachment' (Sattar 1997).

## II. Narrative Structure in the KSS

In Indian historical epics, generally called 'charitas', the achievements of the royal glory by the king are developed in five stages: prambha (beginning), prayatna (the effort), praptyasa (hope of achieving), niyapti (certainty of achievement) and phatagama (the achievement)' (Upadhyaya. K, "Notions of History in Early India" 2008). Comparing and analysing folktales around the world, based on structuralist criticism by Vladimir Propp, Indian folktales follow a different structure i.e., story within a story but is much more elaborate in the Kathasaritsagar, which makes it one of the biggest and most complex texts to study. This narrative structure of the KSS is similar to most Indian Oral history traditions.

The use of chronology is in terms of the ordered sequence of action rather than in the framework of dates and years which is a characteristic of Indian thought. Also, narratology changes from person to person as per the intention of the narrator and story.

The Multivalent narrative is a term used to discuss the ways in which ancient Indian narratives use ambiguity and contradiction to enshrine new values and stories (Scott R. Shroud).

Since the narratives in KSS keep shifting, it is necessary to understand the storyteller's perspective in understanding an underlying message stated in a story. Thus, by enabling contradictory values or positions, the reader has to reconstruct the meaning from the premises and other clues extending from the historical position of the KSS.

In terms of the contents and plot, in Indian folktales, as with most folktales around the world, the protagonists defeat the antagonists whereas in the stories told in KSS, the protagonists are also cursed, manipulated or defeated.

## III. Multivalent narratives

'Ancient Indian narratives use ambiguity and contradiction to enshrine new values and stories' (Scott R. Shroud).

The structure of KSS shows use of Multinarrative, for example, stories on p.130 and p.891, almost at the beginning and end of KSS, the narratives have shifted. King Brahmadutta mentioned as an enemy of King Udayan at the beginning is the protagonist of another story regarding divine swans in the last part of KSS. There are similar stories with different names and codes of conduct, like the story of Anangamanjari. The timeline is the same but the narratives are from various regions, perspectives, as

well as the fictional imagination of the author/authors. The stories could be interpreted variedly as per speaker and listeners.

Since the stories in KSS keep shifting from narrator to narrator, there seems to be no preachiness in the original stories. Towards the last Lambakam, in some stories (unlike the stories of Suryaprabha), if a judgment based on caste and gender has crept into the narrative, it is assumed as that of Somadeva, that the author of KSS has critiqued the text as per his socio-political period of the 11th cent CE. It is necessary to understand the storyteller's perspective in understanding an underlying message stated in a story.

Thus, by enabling contradictory values or positions, the reader has to reconstruct the meaning from the premises and other clues extending from the historical position of the KSS.

#### IV. Value systems

The various categories of stories display varied value systems in the KSS. 'During a crisis, test intelligence; during the war, courage/bravery' (KSS 250). 'War is the worst', said Buddha (826). These two phrases from KSS sum up the battle between violence and non-violence that exists in the Indian sub-continent in KSS. Throughout the KSS, battles and hunting are common occurrences. So, are charity, abdication, and buddha's teachings of kindness, peace, and patience. The historical factor also suggests it as a transition period where Animistic worship, bali/sacrifices are giving way to Buddhist practices of nonviolence.

To look at the major principles leading to these human values in contemporary life, the paths of Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha have been deliberated upon by different philosophers over time. The present value system puts Dharma and Moksha above Artha and Kama. Therefore, some of the stories featuring all four are being analysed in this paper using the multivalent narrative structure to draw conclusions regarding the value system. To illustrate the emphasis on Dharma and Moksha, the story of King Vineetamati who converts to 'Saugata dharma' (Buddhism) and the values he has to uphold as a king has been depicted (KSS 651).

Regarding Artha and Kama, the presence of merchants, kings, riches of the land and gambling, merriment and lovers' meetings etc. in KSS abound to these two philosophies as being central in their life. To illustrate the importance of Artha and Kama, stories of merchants wherein Kubera is the original deity to which Brihatkatha is perhaps dedicated, is relevant. Throughout KSS, Kubera and Yakshas who guard treasures are prayed to by people who desire to acquire them. King Suryaprabha travels far and wide gathering forces, riches and queens in his quest to attain the kingdom of Vidyadharas (KSS, 356). There are innumerable stories of gamblers and rich thieves as well. The story of Gambler Tintakaralan is very vocal about his intelligence and ability to cleverly outwit kings, gods and Indra (KSS, 939). In another story, Yaksha blesses a man to be victorious in disputes, scandals, fights, debates, and gambling (597), which means materialism and everyday 'petty' issues are important to mortals and that winning in them is equally significant.

Therefore, it could be inferred that stories expounding all values are being narrated and sometimes peppered with a proverb/coda stating a moral principle if it's a Buddhist story. To understand which path is being prescribed, it is also necessary to see who has narrated the story. The narrators are well-wishers of the king/protagonist viz., their ministers, queens, wives, sanyasis/monks, travellers, friends, parents. Preachy tone in some stories could be ascribed to the speaker's perspective, personal value systems, and what is 'desired'.

Gambling is a popular form of entertainment among kings and commoners in KSS. All categories of people in the KSS (Kings, merchants, Brahmins, common people) also gamble, do dhooma-panam (hookah/smoking), and engage in material pleasures. In contrast, Kirata kings are shown as being erudite and just, and as not indulging in such pleasures. Another quote says, 'Karyam, deshama, and kalam' are important and not the person (823) which means work, place, and time is more important than a person's lineage and attributes.

One of the protagonists, King Udayan is shown as a womanizer, drunk, immoral, lusty, irresponsible, hunting-addicted (etc.) king until his ministers reels him back. Almost all kings are shown to do so. It takes Buddha's stories or fable-style narratives to bring them back to their responsibilities. Considering the nature of indulgent kings, the ministers had a duty to keep their kingdom safe. Therefore, dharmic values were imparted using these stories where lineages or varna are not as relevant as compared to these values. Therefore, the values that a king had to adhere to is different from that of a merchant. The intention of the speaker differed, sometimes, it was to move the protagonist towards taking some action or to give them motivation, at times to make them more responsible or cautious and at other times to

entertain or to show how intelligence is important than lineage. Therefore, depending on the narrator's interest, the tone and coda changes.

Since the changing narrator causes a shift in perspective, stories where gambling is a vice, as well as gamblers being praised for their intelligence outwitting even gods are presented. Intersecting storylines are characteristic of stories in the KSS which bring out various perspectives emphasizing simplicity or intelligence as per the intention of the story.

Therefore, all values are being shown in the KSS although catering to different categories of people.

## V. Conclusion

From the stories of KSS, it can be inferred that originally, there were only Artha and Kama, and after Buddhism-Jainism and its renunciatory practises originated, Dharma and Moksha became a centrefold in the religious arguments. Although Brahminism was a householder's path, the rise of monks and renunciations within the sectarian beliefs led to the merging of Animism, Brahminism, Shramanism and Buddhist beliefs into the present form of Hinduism.

The founding texts of Dharmashastra, Arthashastra, and Kamasutra were treatises of different belief systems for different categories of people whose lifestyle reflected those (e.g., merchants followed Arthashastra, ganikas followed Kamasutra, kings followed Niti and Nyaya shastra). As with most diverging beliefs and practices that got homogenised under political and religious scholars' literature, these three different philosophies got woven as paths to be followed by a single person in their lifetime which came to be categorised as brahmacharya, grushasthashram, and vanaprastha. Although there are a lot of narratives emphasising Dharma over Artha and Kama in later Sanskrit literature, contradictions are manifold. 'Initially, all three had distinct and equal statuses' (Doniger, The Hindus 278). It is, therefore, a conflicting thought even in contemporary Hindus to downplay wealth and pleasure in favour of 'righteousness'. One of the stories exposit that people do dharma and moksha only out of fear of death (211) Almost all faiths have continually borrowed ideas from each other especially, in their philosophical treatises of dharma and moksha.

This would conclude that the original Brihatkatha and thereby, Kathasaritsagar depicted stories without giving importance to any one single value or moral process. It shows different perspectives and livelihood during those times. No single moral value is above the other. It is one's livelihood and position in society that made them adhere to such systems. As with every society, whoever garners power will project their values as supreme and this leads to conflicts, both internal and external. Kathasaritsagar shows that Multiple narrators give agency to the listener/reader to have varied tones and positions of interpretation, to evaluate and imbibe the values as per their need.

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