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The Concept of Sanjivni and its References in the Persian Literature

Abstract: The references of the "sanjeevani" (the famed life-saving elixir) associated with the epic saga of the Ramayana and the King of Monkeys "Hanuman" and its narratives are abundant in the Indian mythological and other forms of literature. For instance, fables of the Panchatantra too have allusions to the story at many places.

However, references and allusions to the existence of such an elixir are not only confined to the Indian classical texts and literature but it finds mention in the literature and culture of other countries such as Iran (the greater Persia) as well.

This paper would attempt to explore and peruse such references in the Persian texts like the "Shahnameh" of Ferdawsi, an equally famous epic-cum-historical text like the Ramayana in the Persian literature.

Key Words: Sanjiveeni, Panchatantra, Persian literature, Pahlavi, Firdausi, Shahnameh.

Introduction: In Hindu mythology, sanjeevani is a magical herb which has the power to cure any malady. It was believed that medicines prepared from this herb could revive a dead person.

The herb is mentioned in the Ramayana when Ravana's son Indrajit (Meghnad) hurls a powerful weapon at Lakshmana. Lakshmana is badly wounded and is nearly killed by Indrajit. Hanuman was called upon to fetch this herb from the mount Dunagiri (Mahodaya) in the Himalayas or Valley of Flowers. Upon reaching Mount Sumeru, Hanuman was unable to identify the herb and decided to lift the entire mountain and bring it to the battlefield.

The herb, believed in Ayurvedic medicine to have medicinal properties, has been searched for unsuccessfully for centuries, up to modern times. The Himalayan state of Uttarakhand in northern India committed initial 250m rupees (£2.8m) of state money to search for sanjeevani booti starting in August 2016. The search was focused on the Dronagiri range of the Himalayas near the Chinese border, even though there is no evidence for its existence. The Ramayana mentions a mountain believed to refer to the Dronagiri range, where the magical herb is supposed to grow. Uttarakhand established a Department of Ayurveda, Yoga and Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy (Ayush) in November 2014 ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanjeevani_\(plant\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanjeevani_(plant)))

It makes for us the students of Persian and Iranian Studies to find the references of this life saving/reviving booti (elixir), albeit with not so encouraging results, an inquisitive topic of reading about its veracity and existence. However, the resultant

inference by a Persian expedition to find the booti with help and insight of some Indian sage provided the entire concept of the Sanjeevani booti with a literary tilt in the form of Panchatantra.

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 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."(Chandra Rajan, 1995: p-05). It traveled far and wide over the world as from Java in the East to Iceland in the Northwest. There are said to be at least 200-250 versions of the Panchatantra in 50-60 languages, most of them non-Indian.

As of now, it is a matter of immense pleasure to note specially as a student of Persian language and literature that this fabulous work initially proceeded on its voyage round the world through an Iranian link-a golden and amongst the earliest examples of a longstanding 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' (Shahnameh-e-Firdousi, 1314: p. 2499-2502,). A few lines of the long poem are quoted below. He introduces Burzoe in these words:

پزشکی سراینده برزوی بود

به پیری رسیده سخن جوی بود

(شاهنامه فردوسی، جلد هشتم، چاپ تهران، سال 1314، ص 2499-)

There was a praise-worthy physician Burzoe; he had reached old-age but was still in search of knowledge)

زهر دانشی داشتی بهره ای

به هر بهره ای در جهان شهره ای

(همان، ص 2499-)

(He was in search of every knowledge which had utility; every utility which was famous in world)

Once, while in the audience of 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 بروش روان

(همان، ص-2499)

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

نشته چنین بد که در کوه هند

گیاهی است رهشان چو روی پرند

(همان، ص-2499)

(It was written there that in the Himalayas some grass (elixir) grows on the high mountains)

چو بر مرده بیراگنی بی گمان

سخنگوی گردد هم اندر زمان

(همان، ص-2499)

(When it is massaged on the dead even accidentally; the dead starts to speak in no time)

But as it turned out:

یکی مرده زنده نگشت از گیاه

همانا که سست آمد آن کیمیا

(همان، ص-2502)

(Not a single dead could be revived with that grass-elixir; and that chemical 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'(Reprint 1938: P-34-71,) 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 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 that it was full of Morall Philosophy' and 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 Pehlevi 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 state craft 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.'(Chandra Rajan,; Pp. Intro. Xviii)

Conclusion: Such significant discussion, references and inferences of the Sanjeevani booti dating back to the early medieval times in Persia and recorded prominently in the Persian literature of early tenth century (Shahnameh etc.) does not only tell us about the deep-rooted and ancient Indo-Persian relations but also points to the eternal human curiosity and quest for immortality.

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