

THE NIHONRYŌIKI: FIRST BUDDHIST SHORT STORY COLLECTION IN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

Whenever we talk about, short moral story collection, The Jātaka comes to mind for almost everyone. There are many more such collections like Aesop's Fables, Hitopadesha, Panchatantra etc., etc. The moral stories are always in simple and easy language, and the characters used in these stories are familiar to the listeners or readers. As these stories have a long background of oral transmission, one can find an easily similar type of stories in other languages, maybe with some characters changed for the audience's understanding

This paper will discuss the Nihonryōiki, the first collection of Buddhist short stories in Japan, and how this book helped spread Buddhism in Japan. It will also discuss the monk and the time frame when Nihonryōiki was compiled.

Key Words: Oral Tradition, Hinduism, Buddhism, Jātaka, Nihonryōiki

INTRODUCTION

Story is a simple medium to connect with all the classes of people in a society. There are two types of stories, the fictional story and the non-fictional story. Both are for entertainment of the readers and sometimes the readers get emotional as well. Children used to listen to bed-time stories from their grandparents or parents, but unfortunately now a days, kids use their mobile before going to bed, thereby losing their interest in listening to stories. Presently we use YouTube or other websites to listen to stories. Only very few peoples buybooks to read it.

In ancient time stories were in oral form, therefore peoples transmitted it orally to one generation to another generation, such as *Veda*, *Upanishad*, *Puranas* and *Ramayana*¹ and *Mahabharata*². These two epics (*Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*) are very large in size but still people managed to transmit it to generation after generation.

As we all know that the Sanskrit language is one of the oldest languages, therefore it is enriching and multi-layered. The whole Sanskrit *Ramayana* is very much difficult to memorize, that's why, people composed a short but full *Ramayana* in the form of one Shloka to remember the whole story.

¹The *Ramayana* is an ancient Indian epic, which was composed by Rishi *Valmiki*. It is written in Sanskrit language.

²The *Mahabharata* is an ancient Indian epic, composed by Veda *Vyāsa*. The story is based on, who will be the ruler of *Hastinapura*, two family *Pandavas* and *Kauravas* engaged in a battle of *Kurukshetra*. It is written in Sanskrit language.

Aadho Rama Thapo Vananu Gamanam, Hathwa murgam Kanchanam, Vaidehi Haranam, Jatayu Maranam, Sugreeva Sambhashanam, Bali Nigrahanam, Samudhra Tharanam, Lankapureem Dahanam, Paschad Ravana Kumbhakarnamadanam, Ethat ithi Ramayanam	Once Rama went to forest, He chased the deer, Sitha was kidnapped, Jatayu was killed, There were talks with Sugreeva, Bali was killed, The sea was crossed, Lankawas burnt, And later Ravana and Kumbha karna, were also killed. This in short is the story of Ramayana. -P. R. Ramachander
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The Oral Tradition shows us the memorization power of our ancestors. There are two Sanskrit words related to this oral tradition, first one is *Shruti* (Heard) and the second one is *Smriti* (Remembered). In Hindu culture we can find the concept of 'Guru and Shishya' or 'Master and Disciple', it is because the *Guru* knows culture, rituals and other things, so the *Guru* gives his knowledge to his *Shishya* by *Smriti* and the *Shishya* received the knowledge by *Shruti*.

On the other hand, to give the knowledge about the culture, rituals, tradition and also about kings and legends, a group of people visited from place to place and spread these tales through songs, play, storytelling etc. The storytellers always tried to convey the moral teachings, life lessons, moral responsibilities etc. through their stories. They always tried to make it interesting for the people with their expressions, and gestures. The storyteller always used very simple words and phrases, for the audience to easily understand him and enjoy the act. The Buddhist *Bhikshus* and *Bhāṅkas* spread Buddhist teachings and knowledge in the form of short moral stories. They visited villages or rural areas to teach life lessons.

In present time, Japanese Language is one of the famous languages all over the world, and youths are very much interested in Japanese language, because of *Manga* and *Anime*. But most of the people don't know that the Japanese Language was Oral Language, until the Chinese script *kanji* was introduced in sixth century in Japan. Presently Japanese Language have three scripts, *Hiragana*, *Katakana* and *Kanji*. As we know that, the *kanji* is a pictographic language, in Japan the *Kanji* have two types of pronunciations, *On-yomi* and *Kun-yomi*. *On-yomi* is Chinese pronunciation and *Kun-yomi* is Japanese pronunciation. For example, Mount Fuji is known as 'Fuji Yama' as well as 'Fuji San', in Japanese pronunciation the mountain is called 'Yama' but in Chinese Pronunciation it is 'San'. So, 'Yama' is *Kun-yomi* and 'San' is *On-yomi*.

FROM THE ORAL FORM TO WRITTEN FORM

The 'Oral Literature' is called '*Kōshō-Bungaku*' in Japanese. If we separate the word we can see, the first word '*Kō*' means 'Mouth', '*Shō*' means 'hear' and the word '*Bungaku*' means 'Literature'. Those who tell these stories professionally are known as '*Kataribe*'. They spread the historical events, stories, myths etc among their listeners.

The Chinese script is also introduced to Japan with Buddhism. After that, *Kojiki*³, *Nihonshoki*⁴, *Fūdoki*⁵ etc. were written. Later Japanese monks started using their pronunciation (Japanese pronunciation) in Chinese character, and they also took one part of *kanji*, and gave it Japanese pronunciation and in this way *Katakana* came to existence. Then they simplified the *kanji* and *Hiragana* was born for women. As *Hiragana* was for women, they named it

³The *Kojiki* is known as the oldest book of Japanese chronicle of myths, oral traditions, etc. *Kojiki* was compiled by *Ono Yasumaro* in 712.

⁴The *Nihonshoki* is the second oldest book of Japan. It is a compilation of classical Japanese history, written in Chinese language. It was compiled in 720.

⁵*Fudoki* is the compilation of culture, oral tradition, folklore and ancient geography of Japan, it may also consider as the local gazetteers. It was compiled during *Nara* period.

'*Onnate*', which means 'hand of a woman'. With the development of script, peoples wrote of their feelings, and emotions and many written documents can be found. One of the major collection of poems is *Manyōshū*. In this collection, poems of all the classes of people (from Emperor to the farmer) are compiled. This collection is the first collection of classical Japanese poem. The *Manyōshū* was written in a script called *Manyōgana*. When *Hiragana* started being used widely many beautiful texts were written by women, like *MurasakiShikibu's* (978—1014) *GenjiMonogatari*, the Tale of *Genji*.

The similarity between India and Japan is that both countries believe in the god of Nature, worship the ancestors, and also believe in rebirth and fruits of *karma*. The concept of *karma*, rebirth etc. are introduced from Buddhism, because *Shintōism* had no concept of rebirth. But *Shintōism* had the concept of heaven (*KaminoYo*). After Buddhism was introduced, they also started believing in the concept of hell, which is known as '*Jigoku*', but they also call it '*Naraku*' which is similar to the Sanskrit word '*Naraka*'.

With the spreading of Buddhism, stories, myths are also influenced by it and through these stories' Buddhism became rooted firmly in Japan. As time passed, Buddhism flourished, many sub-sects started separating from the major sects like *Tendai* sect⁶, and established their own schools and spread new teachings.

The *Nihonryōiki* is the first collection of short stories in Japanese, where the author not only draws the image of Buddha as a supreme being, but also shows the right path of life through his stories. The language easily conveyed the Buddha's teachings among the common people. Through this collection, one can easily understand the image of the society of that time.

THE NIHONRYŌIKI

The *Nihonryōiki* is known as the first major compilation of Buddhist short stories. The full title of the book is *Nihonkoku genhō zenaku ryōiki*. If we discuss the name with each word, the meaning will be, '*Nihonkoku*' means Japan, '*Genhō*' means Reward '*Zenaku*' means Good and Bad, '*Ryōi*' means miracle, and the last '*ki*' means scribe or record. The full name of *Nihonryōiki* in English is 'Record of Miraculous Events in Japan'. The book is compiled by a monk of *Yakushi-ji*, named *Shamon Kyōkai*. *Yakushi-ji* is located in Nara prefecture. This text is one of the complete collections of Japanese classical literature. The *Nihonryōiki* is divided into three volumes, and have hundred and sixteen (116) stories in it and it was compiled during late 8th century and early 9th century.

We can also say that, the time when *Nihonryōiki* was written, peoples were aware of epidemics and pandemics, because some stories show villagers and farmers dying due to unknown reasons. In this compilation, author skilfully describes the society as well as their beliefs.

This compilation, may be considered as a book of Japanese Buddhism for ordinary common people of Japan. It is also said that, maybe *Kyōkai* tried to make a way for Buddhism under the *Ritsuryō* system of that time. The aristocrats of that time built Buddhist temples because they wanted to remove their sins committed during war time. This is not the only reason to build Buddhist temples; they also promoted the new religion and culture coming from outside of their home land. In the field of Japanese Buddhism, the name of the monk *Shamon Kyōkai* is not that much well-known as that of Monk *Kūkai* and Monk *Saichō*. But still his contribution in spreading Buddhism among the Japanese people is unforgettable.

SHAMONKYŌKAI

Shamon Kyōkai was appointed as a monk of *Yakushi-ji* (Yakushi temple), which was built in 680. In the compilation, there are very little information about him such as, his birthplace and other information like family, his resident, etc. There are some stories in the *Nihonryōiki*, where we can find a place called *Nagusa*, many people said that, monk *Kyōkai* was from *Nagusa* district. We can learn more about him from the *Honchokosoden*. The *Honchokosoden* is a compilation of biographies of Eminent monks in Japan, compiled by *Shinban* in the year of 1702.

The author of the *Nihonryōiki* is very much influenced by the Chinese culture and literature. He has mentioned in his compilation about the two Chinese book of stories, which were written during Tang period of China. Therefore, we can say, Japanese people were aware of China and their culture and literature and therefore, we can find some Chinese influence in these writings.

The story with moral teachings is easily understood by the common people, therefore Monk *Kyōkai* collected these stories which were verbally spreading among the people of Japan and compiled it in the *Nihonryōiki*.

THE CONCEPT OF KARMA

⁶The founder of *Tendai* sect is monk *Saichō*, who established the first *Tendai* school in 806.

The meaning of *Karma*'s action. Every *Karma* has its own equal reaction or result either immediately or later. Good karma gives good result and on the other hand bad karma brings bad result. There are three types of *Kāma*, *Sanchita-kāma*⁷, *Prarabdha-kāma*⁸ and *Agami-kāma*⁹.

In this compilation, the concept of *Karma*, is described in a simple way, to give a clear concept of *Karma* to the people. According to *Nakamura Hajime*¹⁰ (1912-1999), he explains the concept of *Karma* as follow-

- Anything to produce is a cause and anything produced is an effect. (the cause and effect)
- Whenever there is a cause, there must be a result. Who so ever is born, must change according to the principle.
- Good deed brings good result on the other hand, bad deed brings bad result.

We can find these concepts throughout the stories in the *Nihonryōiki*. The author of the *Nihonryōiki*, tried to focus on the *Sanbō* or the three treasures, the Buddha, the Dharma and the monk. He emphasizes on good deeds, loyalty, fulfil duty, follow the right path. There are also some stories where, Buddha gives punishment to thieves who stole statues or conducted bad deeds.

In some stories, we can see people making Buddha's statue or painting Buddha whenever they are in trouble, because they believed that it will help them to overcome the problems. We also see people telling others about how they come out of the problem they faced and their experiences of making statues or paintings. Common people started believing in Buddha. There are also stories where *Kannon* statues (Bodhisatva) was made. There are many stories, where we can see that evil people stole Buddhas paintings and received punishment for the same.

In one story when a person faced problem in crossing a river, he started praying to *Kannon* to cross the river and *Kannon* helped him. Some stories show that, if someone does good deeds, *Kannon* gives happiness, money etc to them. Everyone can receive the favour of *Kannon*, by just praying to him. This was one of the major reason for people praying *Kannon* for everything.

In *Nihonryōiki*, some stories are focused on Buddhist Sutras. They narrate how people copied sutras, and let somebody else read them. In this way, people reduce their past sins. In the *Nihonryōiki*, monk *Kyōkai* describe the concept of *Karma*, in such a way where a person can change his bad deeds into good by reciting sutras.

CONCEPT OF DEATH

In the *Nihonryōiki*, there are some stories of life after death or retribution after death. This shows the theory of *Karmic* retribution. The *Ryōiki* shows people thinking about death or the concept of *Karma*. Sudden death or an unnatural death are deemed as punishment. Also, some people believed that, it was a mistake by *Enma*, so they will be sent back again in this world, on the other hand some people believed that, it was a result of past deeds, so he has to suffer in the hell and then be reborn in this world.

In the second volume, there was a lady who read *Hokekyō* very well. *Enma* had a great interest to listen to her reading, so he called upon her and she died. Again, she was sent back to this world after he heard *Hokekyō* (The Lotus Sutra). There is another funny story, about an ogre coming to a man to take him to *Enma*, but the ogre received some bribe and took another person to *Enma*. That person was taken to the hell, but as he was a wrong person, he was sent back to the world again. However, when he returned, his corpse was already burnt to ashes and his soul had nowhere to settle.

There are stories where people revived from the hell. The persons who was revived from hell were either acknowledged by *Enma* for not carrying malicious mind or forgiven by *Enma* despite of their sins. It is because of their other virtuous deeds such as copying sutras or saving the life of living creatures.

REBORN AS AN ANIMALS

There are stories where people were reborn as animals, for example, cow, cat, dog, monkey etc. These are the animals who live close to human beings. Human bully or tease these animals, and as a result and they are reborn as animal and face the same situation.

⁷ Accumulated *Karma* or in other words Arrows in the Quiver.

⁸ Present *Karma* or in other words Arrows in Flight.

⁹ Current *Karma* for next birth or in other words Arrows in Hand.

¹⁰ *Hajime Nakamura* was a Philosopher, Indologist, Academician. He had a deep knowledge in Hindu and Buddhist scriptures.

The cow is used for agricultural purposes, transportations and milk production. Cows are always close to human beings because people drink cow's milk. According to *Shoku-Nhonggi* there are were fifty cowsheds in *Yamashiro-no-kuni* during 713. Cows' fields were supervised by the government, therefore the cow breeding become popular in Japan during eighth century.

People who kill the living beings and who cheat on people become dog, and a man who is stingy is revived as a snake beside the money he left. In Japan as well as in India, even in present time money and snake are regarded as closely related.

REBORN AS A HUMAN

There is one story where a person was reborn as a human just because he had believed in the sutras. He became a happy person in his life, and this was the result of good karma in previous life. On the other hand, a woman who died without returning what she had borrowed, again she was reborn as a woman and the person who lent her the thing, was reborn as her child. These are the result of one's karma.

Kyōkai did not explain deeply about the concept of the *Rokudō* or the six paths in the *Nihonryōiki*, but he tries to preach the retributive result of *karma*.

As already mentioned, that, in the *Nihonryōiki*, death is deemed as the punishment. It is because, the *Nihonryōiki* is a story book, which preaches the religious redemption where the punishment in the hell is regarded as means for atonement for sins.

THE INDIGENOUS RELIGION OF JAPAN AND THE NIHONRYŌIKI

The concept of *Yomi no kuni*, and the hell is very much similar. *Yomi no kuni* in *Kojiki*, is adjacent to the land of this beautiful world, being divided by *Yomotsuhirasaka* from the latter. This is the same in the *Nihonryōiki*, so this can be considered as the native religious belief which also had a major part in the *Nihonryōiki*.

The *Yomotsu hegui* (a cooking pot in the netherworld) appears in the *Nihonryōiki*, there is a description of the *Yomotsu hegui* in *Kojiki*, when *Izanami* said to *Izanagi*, who came to *Yomi no kuni* to bring her back, "I am sorry, you should have come early. I have already eaten the food of *Yomi no kuni*". In *Nihonryōiki*, *Enma* warns the dead person who is revived and returns to the world saying, 'You should never eat any food in *Yomi no kuni*'.

Similar to the *Kojiki*, there are many cases of revivals of dead people in the *Nihonryōiki*. There are not so many cases of revival, of those people who was were suspended animation. The revival of a person means to return back to this world. In this case if the body of that person was burnt, his soul had no where to return after the person come back to this world.

CONCLUSION

Story and religious beliefs are very much interconnected, because religion is spread among the common people through stories, because in ancient time there was no script so, people transmitted their religious belief, tradition, culture etc. from generation to generation in verbal form.

Buddhism came to Japan during 6th century, and slowly mixed with the native religion *Shintō* and therefore we can find many things which is related to the *Shintōism* in the *Nihonryōiki*, which is the first collection of Buddhist stories in Japanese. In the *Nihonryōiki*, Buddhist concepts, like the concept of *Karma* rebirth, death etc are discussed in a very simple way.

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