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The Prequels of Detective Stories: Ancient to Medieval Lights on the Past

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Abstract

Detective stories are not a modern literary genre that was born overnight. Rather they are the product of a long historical process that has taken a rich form in the quest of mankind and its yearning for justice. In the second-third century BC, the Bible's 'Bel and the Dragon' shows Daniel's keen observation and analytical skills, which proves the main characteristics of detective stories- identifying problems, searching and solving them. Similarly, the story of Kukkuri Sarma found in the tenth mandala of the Rigveda or the images of crime, deception and the intense struggle to save life in 'Aitareya Brahmana' and 'Taittiriya Aranyaka'. In Sanskrit literature, as in the Ramayana-Mahabharata the imprint of detective stories can be seen in medieval Bengali literature as well. Hanuman's search for Sita in the Ramayana, Vidura's warning in the Mahabharata, the conflict between the thief and the protector in the Charyagana and the intrigue in the 'Manasamangala' Kavya- all are examples of the sharp intellect and analytical skills of the detective. In ancient and medieval literature, the detective character is depicted not only as a crime solver but also as a symbol of social and moral awareness. Bharatchandra's Kotal character or Mukundaram's Bharudautta proves that the main power of the detective is to uncover the truth through observation, analysis and logic. Therefore, although the modern form of the detective story was established in the 18th-19th centuries, its foundation has been formed from the streams of ancient Vedic, Biblical, Sanskrit and medieval Bengali literature.

Keywords: Detective Literature, Analytical Skills, Ancient Texts, Sanskrit and Bengali Literature, Justice and Morality

Detective stories or novels are creations of modern times, that is, the first half of the nineteenth century. Detective stories began to be written in France and England in the third decade of the nineteenth century after the establishment of the police system. But much before that, the seeds of detective stories began to germinate in our country and elsewhere. The oldest detective story in the world is found about five hundred years after the oldest story in Vedic literature. The story of Daniel, found in the Old Testament of the Bible in the second-third century BC, is considered to be the oldest detective story in the world. The name of the story is 'Bel and the Dragon'. In the story, it is seen that the priest of Babylon is a more influential person than the king of the country. The priest preaches that the god himself comes and accepts the offerings offered to the god in the temple every day. Because

the offerings offered to the god were no longer available after the temple doors were opened the next day. The formless monotheist Daniel wants to verify the truth of the information preached by the priest. Daniel sprinkles powdered lime on the floor of the temple. The next day, it is seen that although the dish is empty, two footprints are clearly visible on the floor. Daniel uses these footprints to find a secret tunnel in the temple, which leads directly to the inner chamber of the high priest. This proves that the priest himself eats the offerings in the name of the god. Daniel's keen observation, investigation and analysis reveal the real truth. Daniel follows the footprints inside the temple and identifies the culprit. Daniel proves that it is not the god, but the priest who eats all the offerings. Various written works and documents of ancient times show that theft was a social crime. And the main features of a detective story- problems, keen observation and direct solution- are directly seen in this story.

Like the Bible, the Vedas also contain traces of crime stories. The CVIII Sukta of the X Mandal of the Rigveda contains the imprint of an ancient detective story. The CVIII Sukta of the X Mandal of the Rigveda mentions the detective 'Kukkuri Sarma'. At that time, cows were the most valuable asset, and a group of foreign robbers called 'Pani' stole the cows of the gods. The gods appointed Kukkuri Sarma as a detective to search for the lost cows. Kukkuri Sarma skillfully followed the robbers 'Pani' to their secret hideout, ignored their temptations and told the gods all the information. And with the help of Sarma, the gods were able to rescue their cows. A noteworthy thing in the story is the appointment of dogs as detectives. In the present day, that is, in modern times, the practice of using dogs to identify criminals in detective work is particularly common. This is a modern practice, which comes from the hunting tradition of Britain. However, even during the Rig Vedic period, nomadic and pastoral people kept dogs, which were used to protect the herders.

Like the Rigveda, crime stories have also been found in the Vedic literature of our country. Vedic prose texts were written after the Rigveda. The first story of the oldest Vedic prose text is found in the 'Aitareya Brahmana'. The composition of the story is estimated to be around DCCC BC. The story is about King Harishchandra's breaking of a promise and an attempt to kill a child, or it can be said about the breaking of a human promise against a god and an attempt to kill a human. The sonless king Harishchandra of the Ikshvaku dynasty begets a son by the boon of the god Varun. The condition was that the prince Rohit would be surrendered for the purpose of the Varun god's sacrifice. But every time Varun wanted the sacrifice, the king kept postponing it on some pretext or the other. After the prince Rohit became eligible to wear the Kshatriya armor, King Harishchandra told Rohit about the promise. But Rohit fled to the forest in fear without fulfilling the condition. On the other hand, due to the curse of Varun, King Harishchandra was afflicted with a stomach disease. When Rohit was ready to return to the village after hearing this news, he had to wander in the forest for another six years by the trick of Indradev. After wandering in the forest for six years, Rohit returned to the village. Seeing the sage Ajigarta in a hungry state, he bought the middle son of the sage's three sons, Sunashepa, for one hundred animals. Rohit organized a yagna to save his own life by sacrificing Sunashepa. At the moment of sacrificing Sunashepa, Sunashepa's father Ajigarta tried to kill Rohit, but Rohit begged the gods for mercy. And after praising various gods, his bonds were broken and his father Harishchandra was also cured of the disease. In this story, the hero is Indra. Indra shows Rohit and his father the way to be saved from Varun's wrath. In this story, a crime was about to be committed, but

in the end, it did not happen. But within it, crime, deceit, and the intense struggle to save a life emerge. Therefore, it can be said that an exceptional crime story can be found in 'Aitareya Brahmana', written almost two and a half thousand years ago. A short but excellent crime story is found in the 'Taittiriya Aranyaka', written about four hundred years after the 'Aitareya Brahmana'. Agni's three elder brothers died while carrying sacrifices for the gods. Therefore, Agni fearing that his fate would be the same, hid in the water. When the gods hired a fish to find him, the fish informed the gods about Agni. The story of Agni and his three brothers, described in the 'Taittiriya Aranyaka', is a fine example of hiring a detective to find a lost person. According to Sukumar Sen, this story in the 'Taittiriya Aranyaka' is-

"Very short, very concise. Written entirely in a spoken style. An almost perfect detective story of a crime story."¹

In India, after Vedic literature, detective stories are found in Sanskrit literature. However, since the writers of Sanskrit literature are more interested in painting pictures of human happiness and sorrow, crime stories are almost non-existent in Sanskrit. However, traces of it can be found in some Sanskrit literature. If we look at the stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata, we can find incidents related to detective stories there too. In Ramayana, the abduction of Sita by Ravana is undoubtedly a social crime, and the investigation that Ramachandra shows in finding the destination of the criminal by finding the ornaments of Sita's body to punish Ravana is comparable to the investigation of the clue of the crime by a detective. In 'Aranyakanda', at the stage of 'relinquishing ornaments as a sign of knowledge', Sita seems to have left that clue-

"Rishyamuk parbat odhik ucchotar.
Chari patra loiya tathay ache Sugreeb banor.
Sugreeber shonge dekhe kopi charijon.
Dak diya bolen Sita korun bochon.
Janaki bolen shun panch mohajan.
Sobar thanji thuiya jai gayer abhoron.
Abhoron kariya dila Sita dibya uttori.
Abhoron felaiya dila oti binoy kori.
Shri Ramer shonge jodi hoy dorshan.
Prabhure kohiba Sita horil Raban."²

In the 'Sundar Kanda' of the Ramayana in the 'Ravaner Bhavan' section, Hanuman's role in searching for Sita was like that of a complete detective. While searching for Sita in Ravana's palace, he repeatedly changed his appearance. At one point, Hanuman saw the golden-skinned Mandodari in Ravana's inner palace and mistook her for Sita. But soon Hanuman reached the solution with his sharp logic. Hanuman thought-

"Then Hanuman calmed down and thought, in the absence of Rama, Sita could not be lying in such a state of intoxication, she must be someone else."³

There is a clear picture of Hanuman in the role of a searcher in the Ramayana- "He saw a golden-hued Shimshapa tree, beneath which there was a golden altar. Climbing the tree and concealing himself within the foliage, he began to observe everything all around."⁴

Not only in the Ramayana but also in the Mahabharata many crime story drafts are found. The intellectual conflict between the Kuru and the Pandavas centered on the Jatugriha in the Mahabharata can be considered as a competition of intelligence between the criminal and

the detective in the crime stories of the time. Duryodhana had been conspiring to kill the sons of the Pandu from the very beginning. They got that opportunity during the festival of the Shaivite community in the city of Baranavat on the banks of the Ganges. The sons of Dhritarashtra hatched a plot to kill their son Kunti at this event. Under their arrangement, a beautiful residence was built for the Pandavas to stay in Baranavat. The house was built of thatched roofs. But it looked like a brick house. When the Pandavas went to sleep in the house at night, the sons of Dhritarashtra planned to set fire to it and kill everyone. Duryodhana was busy with that conspiracy with the minister Purochana-

“Uttam dekhia sthal koriba aloy.
Agnigriho birachiba jeno byakta na hoy.
Stambha nirmi garbh tar ghrite puraibe.
Shon ar jau diya prachir rachibe.
Modhye modhye dibe bash ghrite purno kori.
Jei mate agni dile nibaite nari.”⁵

The plot of brutal murder was almost brought to the final stage by building a dwelling made entirely of straw. But the sharp-witted and prudent Kurukrta Vidura had known about the incident. Seeing that the situation was not favorable, Vidura warned Yudhishtira in advance in sign language-

“Baranabate yah panch sahodor.
Sabdhane thakiba, achhoye tahe dor.
Yahe janme tahe bhokhye shital binashe.
Ihar achhoye bhoy jai sei deshe.”⁶

Here detective is Vidura. Due to his intelligence, the five Pandavas including Kunti survived. According to Sukumar Sen, the incident of burning the Pandavas in the Lakshagriha in Baranavat in the Mahabharata is characteristic of crime stories. In this context, he says-

“There are many old stories in the Mahabharata. I found an excellent crime story in it. The subject of the story does not match any other Indian story. It is a brutal plan of murder. ... The story should have been in an Arabic novel. However, there is no doubt that this ancient story comes very close to the modern British crime story.”⁷

A realistic picture of the police system under the supervision of the king in the early first century AD is found in Kalidasa’s play ‘Abhijnana Shakuntalam’ (at the beginning of the sixth act). According to the plot of the play, King Dushmanta marries Shakuntala in the hermitage of Kanva in the Gandharva manner and gives her a ring engraved with his name and returns to the capital. But after reaching the capital, King Dushmanta forgets Shakuntala. Kalidasa shows in his play that when Shakuntala went to Dushmanta and claimed the status of his wife, Dushmanta could not recognize her. Shakuntala could not show her the ring given by the king either. Because, in a twist of fate, Shakuntala had also lost the ring that symbolized knowledge. Finally, King Dushmanta’s ring carrying knowledge was found with a fisherman. Two guards came to catch the fishermen for stealing the king’s ring. The matter becomes clear from a conversation between the fisherman and the guards-

“The guards: O thief, tell me where you got this jeweled ring with the great shining name of the king.

Fisherman: I earn my living by catching fish with a net and a spear.

One day I caught a red fish, then when I cut it into pieces, I found this brilliant jewel in its belly; then I took it and brought it to sell, but as soon as I was caught by the gentlemen,”⁸

Sukumar Sen says in describing the two guards- “I can say that the description of these two guards almost reflects the behavior of our police constables here. The names of the two guards are also quite significant. The name of one of them is Induk (meaning needle i.e. Spy or Agent). Let me know the name of another person (meaning Informer or Investigator).”⁹ According to the fisherman, they found the ring from the stomach of the fish and in the end, the fisherman’s words were proven to be true by the smell of fish found in the ring.

Like Sanskrit, the imprint of crime stories can be found in ancient and medieval Bengali literature. The image of crimes or vices committed in society is also reflected in ancient Bengali literature. Just as the ancient Charyagan, the oldest example of Bengali literature, reflects the society of that time behind the secret mantras of the Sahajiya Buddhists, similarly, the crimes of the society were not left out. In two songs of Charyagan, it is said-

“Angan Gharpan Sun Bho Biati.

Kanet Chauri Nil Adharati

Susura Nindaia Bahuri Jagao.

Kanet Chore Nil Ka Goi Magao.”¹⁰

The earrings of the housewife are being stolen at night. The father-in-law is sleeping but the daughter-in-law does not know who to ask for help. From this, it can be inferred that crimes like theft were common in ancient Bengali society as well. In 33 songs of Charyagan, Dhendhanpad writes-

“Jo So Budhi Sou Nibudhi.

Jo so chaur so dushadhi.”¹¹

This song says that the intelligent person is the one who is the fool, the thief is the one who is caught. That is, the protector is the one who is the one who eats. The one who protects the law is the one who is involved in crime. Here the word ‘dushadhi’ is used in the sense of a kotal. The word comes from the Sanskrit ‘dauhsadhik’. Which means one who does difficult work, i.e. a skilled person or a detective, according to Sukumar Sen.

Mangalkavya is an important chapter in medieval literature after the Charyapadas. Worshipping gods and goddesses was the main theme in Mangalkavya. However, it is not that good crime stories were not written in medieval literature at all. The goddesses of Mangalkavya have broken the concept of divinity. Despite possessing infinite power, they seem to have human qualities. They conspire against people. In the poem ‘Manasamangal’, Manasa not getting worship from Chandsadagar, engages in one wrong act after another. Chand sinks Chandsadagar’s seven-legged boat. She even gets involved in the murder of his friend Shankar Gabari along with Chand’s children. Such a conspiracy comes up in Manasa’s conversation with Tarapati-

“Ek kone chhidra rakhah tvarit.

Putrer karone more nana mand koy.

Aaj ratrite tahar bansh korib khoy.
Shimul tula diya achhadio mukhe.
Shotekbar chahile jeno chand nahi dekhe.
Lohar ghore chhidra rakh kahilam tomar thani.
Ami tusto hoile tomar yamer bhoy nai.”¹²

In the poem *Manasamangal*, the detailed plan of the conspiracy is revealed through the conversation between the goddess Manasa and the blacksmith Tarapati. In this poem, not only the plan, but also the strategy to implement that conspiracy with great precision is skillfully shown. In detective stories, thieves, robbers or murderers often resort to disguise for their criminal acts, due to which their identity remains hidden. In the poem ‘*Manasamangal*’, a similar hint is caught in a line –

“Chirakaler nagini karye jane bhaw.
Pother gatik bujhiya chhoto kail gao.”¹³

The first evidence of detective stories in Bengali literature is found in the story of Kalketu in the XVI century Bengali poet Mukundaram’s ‘*Chandimangal*’. During the war between Kalketu and Kalketu, Kalketu hid in a granary on the advice of Fullara. Bharudautta tried to find out the truth from Fullara by strategizing. Bharudautta’s keen observational skills are captured in paragraph CVI of the poem ‘*Chandimangal*’-

“Thoker madhur bani ekchitte Rama shuni
Dhanaghara kail bilokon
Suchatur Bharudautta bujhila karyer tattwa
Birachil Shrikabikankan.”¹⁴

While talking to Fullara, Bhandudatta took a glimpse of his granary as a ‘clue’ and found Kalketu. A glimpse of a skilled detective in Bengali detective literature can be found in Bharudautta.

In medieval literature, the detective’s vision is found in the character of Kotal in Bharatchandra’s story ‘*Vidyasundar*’. In Bharatchandra’s character of Kotal, all the perfect observations, extraordinary analysis and ingenious solutions like the characters of modern detective stories are found. Kotal’s observational power is revealed in-

“Kotal bidyar ghore surakh sandhan kore
Kon pothe ase jay chor
Ghorer bhitor giya shayya fele tan diya
Dashdikhe dekhe nirakhia.”¹⁵

The best detective character in medieval literature is undoubtedly the character of Kotal. Speaking about the character of Kotal, Sukumar Sen says-

“The character of Kotal, portrayed by Bharat Chandra, has at least two suitable moves for a detective in a modern Western detective story- one is to go to the house of a washerman and examine the dirty clothes and collect ‘clues’ of the criminal from them. The other is to identify Sundar, who is disguised as a woman, by looking at the way she walks.”¹⁶

Despite being disguised as a woman, Kotal identifies Sundar as a man by looking at the way she walks. In the lines titled ‘*Streebesh*’ by Kotalgan-

“Se bote bosonchora
Tahare dhorib mora
Peet dhora loib kadiya.
Sada fire banka hoye”¹⁷

Apart from medieval literature, some good short detective stories from the XVIII century are found in William Carey’s ‘Itihasmala’. In story number XI of ‘Itihasmala’, the judge is like a foreign ancestor of English detective stories like Monsieur Dupyar and Sherlock Holmes. The detective of the story, the judge can understand the mentality of a thief by sitting at home with his intelligence. In the story, it is seen that a Brahmin loses his money bag while bathing at the ghat and complains to the judge. The judge thinks that stupid criminals usually roam near the crime scene and they want to show that they are not criminals. In this story, the criminal himself falls into a trap while trying to trick others. In story number XCVIII of ‘Itihasmala’, a naive criminal is caught by his awakened sense of guilt. The king seizes the thief with a novel trick for stealing jackfruit from a childless woman. The system of lining up suspects with the general public to identify the criminal, as seen in the story is a special type of current police system. The story shows that this psychological technique has been used to identify criminals since ancient times. It proves that intelligence is the real power.

Apart from ‘Itihasmala’, there are two stories in Arabic novels that are similar to detective stories. The first story is about King Yunan and the doctor Duban. Duban cures King Yunan, who is suffering from leprosy, through a drugless technique. As a result, Duban gradually becomes the king’s favorite. But the king’s ministers unable to tolerate Duban, send a beautiful girl to the king. The girl keeps on breaking the king’s ear against Duban and one day, the king impressed by her words, sentences Duban to death. Before his death, Duban gives the king a poisoned book and a ladle, telling him that if he reads this book his severed head will speak. The king dies of poisoning while frequently turning the pages with his tongue to read the book. The specialty of the story is that the person whom the king sentenced to death is not guilty. He is an extraordinarily intelligent and prudent person. Therefore, he had prepared a strategy in advance to avenge his own murder twice. The second story is ‘Alibaba and the Forty Thieves’. In this story, an ordinary maid plays the role of the main detective against the bandits. When forty bandits come to take revenge on Alibaba, the maid defeats them all single-handedly through her intelligence. This story is a wonderful example of the emergence of the first female detective in detective literature.

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