
Overview Map
Charsadda
Mardan
Swabi
Abbottabad
Haripur
Sarobod
Sin Kot
Ali Khan
Khyber Agency
Peshawar
Nowshera
Kabul River
Chach Plain
Sir Kap
Taxila
Margallah
Korang River
Soan River
Islamabad
Sang Jani
Sudhnoti
Tribal Area adj Peshawar
Orakzai Agency
Tribal Area adj Kohat
Gand Garh
Attock
Abba Sindh
Khairi Murat
Hangu
Kohat
Indus River
Sil River
Rawalpindi
Mirpur
Tribal Area adj Bannu
Karak
Soan River
Bhimber
Jhelum
Chakwal
Tilla Jogian
Bannu
Gujrat
Gujrat
Chenab River
Kurram River
Mianwali
Lakki Marwat
Sialkot
Sialkot
Mandi Bahauddin
Khushab
Jhelum River
Tank
Gujranwala
Sargodha
D. I. Khan
Hafizabad
Bhakkar
Ravi River
Sahiwal
Sheikhupura
Jhang
Lahore
Faisalabad
N
W
E
S

Introduction

This collection of stories has been put together primarily for pleasure. To share with readers the carnival delights of the Punjabi folk or wondertale. Whether the act of reading these stories is one of discovery or remembrance, will depend on the geographical location and generational difference between readers; between those who come to these stories from another context and those who, while belonging to the culture that has bred them, belong to a generation that knows only the transient pleasures of satellite television and the glitz and glamour of today's consumerist entertainment. There will be others too, who heard them as children; for well into the twentieth century and many years after the British folklorist, R.C. Temple discovered that "in the Panjab the folktale (was) abundant everywhere ... (and) ... the wandering bard live(d) in every village and hamlet, in every nursery and zenana, and wherever the women and children congregate,"[1] storytelling continued to be part of the family's evening entertainment. This collection, therefore, is also an attempt to retrieve a rapidly disappearing oral tradition from the clichés and banal uniformities, the unresting images and consumerist extravaganzas that constitute so much of today's popular cinema and electronic entertainment. To enable the eye to take rest amidst the marvels and wonders of a world that, having withstood the erosions of time, is both strange and familiar in a time grown disenchanted.

While not part of some nationalist quest to create a 'Volksgeist' rooted in a time-escaped golden past, this collection is a political act to the extent that it affirms the value of a genre that lost ground not just to the authority of the written word and the book, but to the exigencies of history and the political imperatives of the British Raj. In Europe, the narrow concept of popular culture born in the pre-Romantic period, sanitised the folktale and deprived it of its component of folk laughter and the rich and varied culture of the marketplace. In the case of the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, the oral tradition was heir to a different history. The folktale was devalued by the colonial encounter, not only because it was subjected to the patronising scrutiny of a European aesthetic, but because of its association with a subject peoples and the fact that most often it was the repository of the "old wife and the bard"[2] as represented by "the bhat, the mirasi, the bharain, the jogi, the faqir and all that ilk,"[3] who were at best seen as a "sorry set of drunkards."[4] It merited attention only to the extent that it provided the colonial administration with insights into the "native" mind and "furnish(ed) much useful information as to the manners, habits, and feelings of the natives of Hindustan."[5] Ironically, this process did not end with the Raj. In the newly created Pakistan, the folktale, along with other narrative forms that comprise the oral tradition, fell foul of officialdom's post-Independence attempt to construct for the people an exclusive 'Muslim' identity rooted in Saudi Arabia rather than in its own soil. The folktale, with its roots reaching back to a time far older than Islam's official advent in the subcontinent, and affirming a syncretism at odds with an exclusivist polity, did not come within the ambit of this agenda.

But the folktale is more than the sum of the manners and habits of the peoples to which it belongs. Predating the written word and the book, these oral narratives are not so much an "autobiography of a people"[6] as an imaginative apprehension of the known and knowable world in which the boundaries of the permissible and the impermissible were charted out, even as the element of the marvellous that characterises the folk and fairytale endowed them with the potential to "open up spaces for dreaming alternatives."[7] The view that the folktale is an "omnivorous" genre,[8] cannot be gainsaid. Heterogeneous and anarchic, it depicts a varied and undifferentiated world where high romance mixes and mingles with the homespun wisdom of ordinary people; where animals speak and princes of unparalled valour and lineage keep company with carpenters, tailors, bhands, doms, mirasis, thieves, parrots, hedgehogs and horses; where saints and holy men, villains and ogres, peerless beauties and buffoons, shape-shifters and rogues rub shoulders, and the irreverent exuberance of people's laughter bubbles up to demolish alike the pomp and circumstance of kings, the austerity of saints and the grim ideologies of those who would reduce the cosmos to their own narrow, monochromatic circumference.

For the world of the folktale is full of surprises. Replete with marvels and prodigies, it is also an egalitarian genre. Not only do its roots go back to a time when, as part of the oral tradition, it was communal property and expressed the needs and wishes of ordinary people, and which were to become, with time and the authority of the written word, the repository of marginalized people such as women, mirasis, bhands and others of "that ilk," but because its form allows for the mingling of the seriousness of the high with the uninhibited humour of the low to grant them equal value. Its eclecticism along with its ability to transgress categorical boundaries and labels extends to language-use and narrative forms, for it draws upon the time-enclosed conventions of the vaar and epic as freely as it does on the open-ended impromptu topicality of jests and riddles, the formal plenitude of the kissa and dastan, the lyricism of the dhola and mahiya, the bawdy irreverence of the sithni as well as the gossip of the marketplace and the intimacies of the zenana to tell its tale,[9] even as the promiscuity of its terrain enables the pleasurable convergence of the actual and the fantastic to open up worlds of undreamt possibilities.

The aim of this collection is to restore to ourselves this rich heritage, and in so doing, perhaps to recall the lure of storytelling and a time, when the day's work done, some aunt, grandmother or father could be persuaded to unravel a story of marvels and wonders to a group of listeners of varied ages, drawn together by the magic of the tale's unfolding. For the storytelling genre does not know footlights.[10] The boundary that demarcates the space between the audience and performance in theatre and the cinema or television screen does not exist here. This is quite literally a dialogic space. The narrative thread may lie firmly in the hands of the storyteller and the trajectory of each telling depend on the mood and memory of the narrator, but the intimacy of the listening circle generates an interaction that is qualitatively different from the relationship between the book and the reader, of the viewer and

the cinema screen. Encouraging a more active participation, it makes room for the occasional interjection, nod of recognition or even a question that opens up a new dimension in the tale and listening experience. For if the tale is new for some, for others it traverses familiar ground, drawing upon a common store of cultural memory and earlier tellings. To be part of a storyteller's audience then, is very different from that of reading a work of fiction, for apart from the seduction of the tale itself, the allure of storytelling lies in its performative dimension; in the intimacy of the connection between the narrator and listeners that suspends disbelief and enables entry into an alternative domain of rich possibility.

However, the ease with which the wondertale appropriates and incorporates different narrative traditions belies an underlying order, for it depicts not so much an anarchic as an alternative world that has its own protocol and is subject to a particular formal and thematic structure.[11] *Folk and fairytales build a second life and a second world outside officialdom where accepted hierarchies of the strong and weak, the mighty and the meek, the human and animal, the feminine and masculine are often reversed or subverted to shed a new light on the relations of women and men and between those who have power and those who do not; even as at times sexual identity blurs, is shot through with ambiguity and becomes interchangeable. The ease with which female protagonists not only slip into the male persona once they have disguised themselves as men but also are accepted as such bears witness to this. In so far as their form and structure is concerned, stories often start with a prophecy, an interdiction or the advent of a stranger that acts as a trigger to subsequent action. The Punjabi folktale is no exception to these rules. Thus Salwahan may not look upon his sons Puran and Rasalu for the first twelve years of their lives if he is to ensure the safety of his throne, and the entry of the stranger or outsider, in this case the Rani Luna as stepmother and wife of an aging king, disrupts both family and kingdom as her transgressive love for Puran creates the conditions for Rasalu's future exile* [The Story of Puran Bhagat]. *Similarly the hero or heroine sets out on a quest, either to find someone – it can be a lost brother or sister, but most often is an elusive beloved – who has been magicked away or glimpsed in a passing dream or a painting; or to find an object desired by a person in a position of power, as in the case of the king who orders the princess masquerading as a man to find and bring back, on pain of death, the priceless brocade for the queen* [The Princess and the Ghouls]. *The hero or heroine who leaves home usually falls into either one of two categories as 'seeker' as in the case of the blacksmith's daughter* [Ghulam Badshah, his Son Gul and the Blacksmith's Daughter] *or as victim, as in the case of the king whose fateful and fated defeat on the battlefield marks the beginning of an exile that triggers the course of action in the tale* [The Princess and the Ghouls]. *There is also the role of what folklorists refer to as the "donor" or "provider" who enters the scene usually after the advent of the quest. Encountered accidentally either in the forest or on the road, the donor, who may be human or animal, either promises help or gives*