

CHAPTER FOUR: SIÑHĀSAN BATTĪSĪ

Oh Raja! Listen attentively to the qissa I tell. You are meritorious and full of good qualities. What you have said is all true. The radiance of the fire of your glory is greater even than the sun. But don't be so proud, listen to an old story. The universe is unending. God has brought forth in it different kinds and different colors of jewels. At every step is a treasure-house, and after every few miles are fountains of the Water of Life, but you're unlucky, you never realized. What do you think in your heart? Tens of millions like you have fallen in this world--yet you've become proud and forgotten yourself. And he whose throne this is, that Raja's humblest servants were like you.¹

Siñhāsan battīsī (Thirty-two [Tales] of the Throne) and **Baitāl pachchīsī** (The **Baitāl**'s Twenty-five [Tales]) are both Fort William productions, and qissa editions of both remain today quite close to their Fort William texts. Thus they have much in common with **Qiṣṣah-e Ḥātim Ṭāf** and other works mentioned in Chapter Three. Yet they are also significantly different from those works. First, they differ in background: while the qissas discussed in Chapter Three all have Persian antecedents and Islamic cultural backgrounds, **Siñhāsan battīsī** and **Baitāl pachchīsī** come from a long, entirely indigenous Sanskritic tradition. Second, they are different in structure: both contain many short, quite independent tales that could easily be reordered or replaced without damage to the overall structure of the work within its frame story. And third, they are different in degree of diffusion: both are closely linked to major cycles of folktales about Raja Vikram that have been popular for centuries and remain widely current today. For these reasons, it might be supposed that these qissas would be more subject than the Persianized ones to textual variation and textual change over time. Yet in more than a century of widespread, unregulated publication, almost no such change has occurred. A closer examination of the nature of the texts will make it clear how remarkable this degree of textual preservation actually is. We will look primarily at **Siñhāsan battīsī**, the more varied and narratively interesting of the two works.

Siñhāsan battīsī consists of a series of brief stories recounting the glories of Raja Vikram. The frame story describes a magnificent buried throne unearthed by Raja Bhoj, a later king of Vikram's lineage. The throne is supported by thirty-two female statuettes. Each time Raja Bhoj seeks to mount the throne, one of the statuettes first prevents him, and then rebukes his presumption with a story revealing the superiority of Raja Vikram. At length, after all thirty-two statuettes have told their stories, the discouraged Raja Bhoj renounces his attempt. Knowing that his glory can never rival Vikram's, he abandons his own throne as well, and spends the rest of his life performing austerities in the forest.

This work's classic Sanskrit predecessor, the **Vikramacharita**, is a medieval text of unknown authorship. Its various recensions have been collated, briefly translated, and extensively studied by Franklin Edgerton.² The **Vikramacharita** was well known in its written

¹**Siñhāsan battīsī** (Hathras: N. S. Sharmā Gauṛ Book Depot, 1971, 120 p., Hindi), p. 7.

²Franklin Edgerton, **Vikrama's Adventures; or The Thirty-two Tales of the Throne**, Harvard Oriental Series, vol. 26 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1926).

recensions, and was also part of a much wider cycle of folktales centering on the figure of Vikram. Examples of such tales can be seen in the **Kathāsaritsāgara**, the **Shukasaptati**, the **Prabāṇdhachintāmaṇi**, and other medieval texts.³ Later, the **Vikramacharita** caught the attention of the Mughal emperors as well: it was first adapted into Persian under Akbar, and was translated anew under each of his three successors. Nārang notes a total of nine Persian versions, and six versions in Urdu verse.⁴

In modern North India, however, only the Fort William edition has been significantly popular. The authors of this edition, Kāzim Ālī ‘Javān’ and Lallūjī Lāl, are very clear about their intention for the work. They explain in the original introduction,

This story **Siṅhāsan battīsī** was in Sanskrit. At the order of Emperor Shāhjahān, Sundar Kavīshvar told it in the language of Braj. Now in the reign of Emperor Shāh Ālam, by order of the illustrious John Gilchrist, in the year 1215 A.H., 1801 A.D., the poet Kājim Ālī, whose pen name is ‘Javān,’ with the aid of the poet Lallū Jī Lāl, wrote it in the general current idiom of the people of India--so that it should be simple for the learning and understanding of the new sahibs, and they should understand everyone’s daily speech, and know the language of Hindus and Muslims, urban and rural, high and low, and not be dependent on others’ explanations.⁵

Their work was the only Fort William qissa published from the start in both Hindi and Urdu editions. It shared the fate of other Fort William qissas: first published in Calcutta, reprinted there half a dozen times during the first half of the nineteenth century, published sporadically in North India during the second half of the nineteenth century, becoming more popular as mass publishing developed. Appendix A contains the S.A.M.P. publication records for this work: 34 editions, a total of 87,900 copies--all in Hindi. Although no Urdu editions were recorded, they certainly existed. In view of the notable incompleteness of the S.A.M.P. records (discussed in Appendix A), such omission of relatively rarer forms of the text should not be too surprising. Modern Urdu editions also exist. Examples of older and newer Urdu editions will be found in the Appendix B.

The stories of the Hindi/Urdu qissa **Siṅhāsan battīsī** are quite different from those of the **Vikramacharita**. The **Siṅhāsan battīsī** text selected for close analysis is a Hindi edition published in 1971 by the N. S. Sharmā Gauṛ Book Depot, of Hathras, Uttar Pradesh. It is 120 pages long, and is not illustrated. The cover shows Raja Bhoj approaching the magnificent throne, which is flanked by two lions and thus is literally a “lion-seat” (**siṅh** + **āsan**). But the first of the tiny, graceful statuettes who support the **siṅhāsan** has stepped forward, her hand raised admonishingly, to intercept him. According to the publisher, 8,000 copies of this edition were published, at Rs. 2 each. Like all other modern qissa editions, this one is based on the Fort

³N. M. Penzer, ed., **The Ocean of Story, being C. H. Tawney’s Translation of Somadeva’s Katha Sarit Sagara**, 10 vols. (London: Charles J. Sawyer, 1924), 3:159-163, 206-217; 5:15-18; 9:2-85; B. Hale Wortham, trans. and ed., **The Enchanted Parrot: Being a Selection from the “Suka Saptati,” or, The Seventy Tales of a Parrot, Translated from the Sanskrit** (London: Luzac and Co., 1911), pp. 27-44, 106-109; C. H. Tawney, trans., **The Prabandhacintamani or Wishing-stone of Narratives** (Calcutta: The Asiatic Society, 1901), pp. 2-14; Raj Bali Pandey, **Vikramaditya of Ujjayini** (Varanasi: Shatadala Publications, 1951), pp. 107-108, 203, 252-254.

⁴Nārang, **Hindūstānī qīṣṣoṅ se māḡhūz urdū maṣnaviyān**, pp. 92-94.

⁵Quoted in Vedalankar, **The Development of Hindi Prose Literature**, p. 56. The translation is mine.

William text. The asterisks mark stories found in both Sanskrit and qissa versions. The Sanskrit version used is Edgerton's.

Frame story

- A Praise of Raja Bhoj, pp. 1-3.
*B Discovery of the throne (a variant of Skt. Frame V), pp. 3-6.
*C Bhoj's first attempt to mount the throne (Skt. Frame VIII), pp. 6-7.

The thirty-two statuettes' stories

- 1a Vikram's ancestry, his ascent to the throne by killing his brother Shañkh, pp.7-11.
1b Vikram's encounter with Lutavaraṇ, his acquisition of the throne, pp. 11-15.
1c Vikram's founding of the **sañvat** era, pp. 15-16.
*2a Raja Bhartharī and the fruit of immortality (Skt. Frame II), pp. 17-19.
2b Vikram conquers the Dev, and receives his advice, pp. 19-21.
*2c Vikram and the treacherous yogi (Skt. Frame IIIa), pp. 21-23.
*3 Vikram rescues a drowning family (Skt. 13), pp. 23-24.
*4 Vikram disenchants a haunted house (variant: Skt. 31 of Jainistic Recension), pp. 24-27.
5 Vikram settles an argument over the relative power of strength and destiny, pp. 27-32.
*6 Vikram visits the Sun's realm (Skt. 18), pp. 32-34.
7 Vikram befriends a **kañkālin**, pp. 34-37.
8 Vikram acquires a flying wooden horse, and rescues Kāmdev's daughter from a demon, pp. 37-42.
9 Vikram makes a mental obeisance, and receives a physical blessing in return, pp. 42-43.
*10 Vikram plunges into boiling oil to win a divine maiden (Skt. 15), pp. 43-46.
11 Vikram saves a woman from a demon, and rescues a **putlī** from bondage to the demon, pp. 46-50.
*12 Vikram aids another generous king (Skt. 17), pp. 50-54.
13 Vikram mediates the quarrel of a yogi and a **baitāl**, pp. 54-57.
*14 The Sea-god's gift of four magic jewels (Skt. 3), pp. 57-59.
*15a The story of the jealous king (Skt. Frame VI), pp. 59-61.
*15b The story of the ungrateful prince (Skt. Frame VII), pp. 61-64.
16 Vikram gives away his flying couch (**uṛan khaṭolā**), pp. 64-68.
17 Vikram visits Sheṣhnāg in the underworld, pp. 68-71.
18 Vikram acquires a piece of magic chalk, then gives it away, pp. 71-74.
*19 Vikram meets a sign-reader (variant: Skt. 29 of the Jainistic Recension), pp. 74-77.
20 Vikram visits the Moon's realm, pp. 77-79.
21 Vikram tests the love of a separated couple, then reunites them (Mādhavānal-Kāmkañdalā story), pp. 79-87.
22 Vikram tests the efficacy of heredity versus environment, pp. 87-90.
23 Vikram demonstrates his right to the kingship, pp. 90-96.

- 24a Vikram sees a woman kill her husband, then try to become a **sati**, pp. 96-99.
- 24b Vikram discovers and punishes his queens' infidelity with a yogi, pp. 99-101.
- 25 Vikram gives a dowry to a bard's daughter, pp. 101-103.
- 26 Vikram propitiates Shiv, obtains the boon of foreknowledge of his own death, pp. 103-106.
- 27 Vikram visits Raja Indra, pp. 107-108.
- *28 Vikram visits Raja Balī in the underworld (Skt. 19), pp. 108-111.
- 29 Vikram acquires a palace as a boon, then gives it back again as a boon, pp. 111-114.
- 30 Vikram reforms a band of thieves, pp. 114-117.
- 31 Vikram frees a golden deer from a curse, pp. 117-119.
- 32 Vikram dies; his son Jaitpāl inherits the kingdom and buries the throne, pp. 119-120.

Conclusion

Raja Bhoj renounces his kingdom for an ascetic life in the forest, p. 120.

Thus only one-third--fourteen out of forty-two--of the qissa's individual stories (as broken down into their simplest forms) are drawn from the Sanskrit text. The qissa version makes up the difference by assimilating a great deal of material derived from oral narrative traditions about Vikram and his adventures. This connection with oral narrative is so conspicuous that it is worth exploring in some detail.

As Raja Bhoj makes his first attempt to mount the throne, all the statuettes (**putliyāñ**) burst out laughing. The first statuette reproves Raja Bhoj's presumption, then tells him a story of Vikram's birth and conquest of the kingdom. The first part of the story is translated here in full, and altogether literally.

A raja of a city was named Shyāmsvayambar. He was a Brahman by caste, but he became a famous raja. On becoming a raja, his name became Dharmesen. He had queens of the four castes: Brāhmaṇī, Kshatrāṇī, Vaishyāṇī, Shudrāṇī. The Brāhmaṇī was very beautiful and delicate. She had one son; he became a great sage. He had been named Brahmajīt. Oh Raja! There was no sage in the world like him. And however many kinds of knowledge there were, he knew them all--so much so that he used to describe even the nature of death. And three sons were born to the Kshatrāṇī; they adopted the Kshatrī way of life. One's name was Shañkh, the second's name Vikram, the third's name Bhartharī. Each was more powerful than the next, their name was famous everywhere. The people of the world called them the fulfillment of all wishes. The son who was born of the Vaishyāṇī was named Chandra; he was very happy and kind-hearted. The son who was born of the Shudrāṇī was named Dhanvantari; he was a great physician among physicians. The Raja had six sons and each one was better than the next; in short, all were of the lineage of Amarsiñh. And the son of the Brāhmaṇī acted as the Raja's chief minister. When some quarrel took place with him, then the Raja took away his robe of honor. This boy left here and came to Dhārāpur. Oh Raja! All those there were your forefathers. They all esteemed him, they accepted and welcomed him. The raja

there was your father. After some time he deceitfully killed that raja. Having taken over that kingdom, he came to Ujjain and died here. Shañkh, who was the Raja's eldest son by the Kshatrāñī, became Raja and began to rule. Then it happened that one day the sages came and said to Raja Shañkh, "Your enemy has been born in the world." Having heard this, he remained stupefied. The Brahmans began to say, "We have all looked at the book of knowledge. In it we find the thing that we told you, but there is one thing that we cannot utter. The Raja said, "Well, since you've said this, say that also." Then they said, "In our opinion this is coming: having killed Shañkh, Vikram will reign." Having heard this, the Raja laughed and said, "These sages are crazy, they don't know anything, that's why they say such a thing." Ignoring their words, the Raja remained silent. The sages were ashamed in their hearts: "He took our book of knowledge as false, and decided we were crazy." Then after some days had passed, the sages, seated in their houses, began to study the stars. One among them said, "In my opinion this is coming: that Raja Vikram has arrived somewhere near." Then a second among them said, "He is in some forest around here." And another among them began to say, "In that forest is a pool too; there he has made a place for austerities, and lives." Then one Braham among them stood up, and went to the forest. Having gotten there, what does he see but Vikram performing austerities by a pool. Having made an image of Mahādev [Shiv] from earth, he worships it, and is prostrating himself. Having seen this, the sage came back. Taking all the sages, he went to the Raja. He began to tell the Raja, "You took our book of knowledge as false, and now I have just seen that Raja Vikramajīt has arrived in such and such a forest. Raja Shañkh, having heard, remained silent that day. The next morning he rose and went to the forest; having hidden, he began to watch: "What is he doing?" Where Raja Vikramajīt sat down and began to worship Mahādev in the same way--this Raja too came out and stood there. When that one finished the worship of Mahādev, this one urinated on the same Mahādev, and came home. Everyone began to say, "He has lost his mind, that he urinated on a worshiped deity." One sage among them suddenly spoke: "Maharaj, what have you done? The Raja said, "I am a Brahman by caste--shall I worship the gods, or wipe them out?" Then the Brahman said, "Now it does not look good for you, because your reason has turned into unreason. When the days of a man's death draw near, his mind is stricken. You are mad, and you make me crazy as well. What God has written will take place. No one can erase it." All the sages began to say among themselves, "This Raja has ruined himself." Then Raja Shañkh thought about killing Vikram! He drew seven magic lines with charcoal, and spread straw over them so that no one should know. And those lines had this quality, that whoever set foot on them would go mad. And having had a cucumber brought, he made magic, and took a knife and held it in his hand. The effect of this cucumber and knife was that if anyone should cut the cucumber with that knife his head would be cut off. He said to the sages, "Have him called. When he comes and steps on those lines, he will go crazy; having gone mad, when he takes this cucumber in his hand and cuts it, his head will be cut off." All the Kshatriyas who were with the Raja were troubled in their hearts. "The Raja has used deceit, this is not the Kshatriyas' way." Having called Raja Vikramajīt he said, "You and I should sit together and eat a cucumber." This Raja was a yogi and knew all sciences. Avoiding those lines, he came and

stood near the throne. He took the cucumber and knife from his hands--he took the knife in his right hand and the cucumber in his left. Raja Shañkh was negligent. Quickly he stabbed him, and finished the Raja off.⁶

The most conspicuous feature of this excerpt is certainly its internal confusion. The Brahman who became a Raja, and his sons by four wives of the four different castes, suggest some story about the nature of caste--but this suggestion is not followed through. Bhoj is told that the murdered Raja of Dhārāpur in the story was his own father, which in addition to its narrative unsuitability (since Bhoj would then certainly know the whole story already) absolutely destroys the chronology on which the story rests, since it makes Bhoj only one generation younger than Vikram--whose long-buried throne he has unearthed, and whose story he is hearing for the first time. Although we are told that Shañkh and Vikram are brothers, the story depicts Vikram as an unexpected outsider, one whose presence and ascetic powers are very much a mystery. It seems probable that we are dealing with a composite story, based on several different, poorly integrated folktale accounts of how Vikram acquired the kingdom.

After displacing his brother, Vikram began to reign. And the first statuette continues her account by telling Bhoj how Vikram obtained the famous throne (**siñhāsan**). Vikram was hunting one day when a passing crow deliberately deposited its droppings in his mouth. Furious, he had all the crows in his realm caught, and threatened them with death if they did not reveal the culprit's identity. It turned out to be Lutavaraṇ, the chief minister of a neighboring kingdom who frequently took on the form of a crow in order to travel unobserved. Vikram made friends with Lutavaraṇ, and through him, with his Raja, who promised a boon. Prompted by Lutavaraṇ, Vikram asked for the throne, and the Raja was obliged to give it. Now firmly established as a great king, Vikram inaugurated the **Vikram sañvat** era, an important traditional Hindu system of dating.

Raja Bhoj, however, is not easily discouraged. On his second attempt to mount the throne, the second statuette speaks. She tells him the famous story of Raja Bhartharī (Bhartrihari) and the fruit of immortality. It seems that when Vikram wished to perform austerities, he left his younger brother Bhartharī in charge of the kingdom. An old Brahman had received an immortality-giving fruit as a divine gift through his austerities; he offered it to Bhartharī, who rewarded him with much wealth. Bhartharī gave the fruit to his beloved queen; she gave it to her lover, the police chief; he gave it to a prostitute of whom he was enamored; she, hoping for a lavish reward, brought it to Raja Bhartharī. When Bhartharī understood the sequence of events he renounced the world in disgust, ate the fruit himself, and immediately left for the forest. This story, found in the **Vikramacharita**, is also a common oral tale, found in Hindi, Avadhī, and other languages.⁷ Its theme, **triyā charitra**, "women's wiles," is important in a great deal of qissa literature.

Another well-known story follows--told in an intriguingly cryptic manner. After Bhartharī's departure, Raja Indra realized that the throne had been left vacant, and sent a Dev to guard it. Vikram, returning to his kingdom, fought the Dev and defeated him. The Dev, pleased with Vikram's valor, gave him a valuable warning.

⁶**Siñhāsan battīsī**, N. S. Sharmā Gaur, pp. 8-11.

⁷William Crooke, trans. and ed., "The Common Legend of Bhartri Nath," **North Indian Notes and Queries** 2 (1892):129; William Crooke, trans. and ed., "The Fruit of Immortality," **Indian Antiquary** 55 (1926):55; Sarojanī Rohtagī, **Avadhī kā lok sāhitya** (Delhi: National Publishing House, 1971), pp. 78-79.

In your city are an oilman (**telī**) and a potter (**kumbhār**) who are trying to kill you. But among you three, whoever will kill both [the others] will rule. The oilman rules the underworld and the potter, having become a yogi, performs austerities in the forest. He says in his heart, “Having killed the Raja, I would put the oilman in a boiling cauldron of oil, and having given a sacrifice to the god I would rule.” And the oilman says, “Having killed the yogi, I would rule the three worlds.” And you didn’t know this; therefore I have warned you, so that you might be saved from them. Now listen to what I say! The yogi, having killed the oilman, has gotten control over him. The oilman lives in a siras tree. When that yogi comes to invite you, then by a ruse he will take you with him. Having accepted the invitation, you go there. When he says, “Prostrate yourself,” then say, “I don’t know how to prostrate myself. Since you are the teacher and I the student, tell me how to prostrate myself, I will do it in that way.” When he bows his head, then you strike with the sword so that his head is separated, and the cauldron there--the cauldron of oil which will be boiling before the goddess--put him in it, and having brought the oilman down from the tree put them both in that cauldron.⁸

This story of course is a version of the frame story of the **Baitāl pachchīsī**, and we will have more to say about it later. But it has a most obscure and puzzling cast of characters. Why should Vikram be joined with an oilman and a potter in a kind of predestined mutual fatality? If the oilman is the ruler of the underworld (**pātāl**), how can he be so easily killed? Later, the **Siñhāsan battīsī** describes both Sheṣhnāg (Story 17) and Raja Balī (Story 28) as ruling in the underworld, and both are powerful superhuman figures capable of giving boons even to Vikram. Where does the hapless oilman fit into the picture? The story’s cryptic quality suggests that it may refer to a well known folktale, or may be a poorly assimilated fragment of some other, longer folk version of the story.

Vikram took the Dev’s advice to heart, and everything happened just as the Dev had predicted. When Vikram offered the oilman and the potter, boiled in oil, to the goddess, she granted him a boon. He chose the services of her two **baitāls** (demons especially associated with corpses), Añgiyā and Koiliyā; the two served him well in his later adventures, as we will see. The twenty-third statuette’s story supplements this account: it justifies the dethroning of Shañkh by emphasizing the intense austerities performed by Vikram in a previous birth. But most of the other statuettes’ stories are simply about Vikram’s gallant or generous deeds, or about interesting episodes at his court. The use of the thirty-two statuettes as secondary narrators could permit shifts in point of view, personal asides, and other, more complex levels of narration. None of these possibilities, however, is exploited.

Rather, the appeal of the stories is very much the “musical pleasure” described by Hamori: the “neat and interesting relations among motifs and variations on motifs.” We saw that Ḥātīm’s commitment to feeding and protecting animals was repeatedly expressed, but each time in different circumstances, and with different results; it was even piquantly contradicted at times, as when Ḥātīm ate kabobs. Vikram too has characteristic actions, but they are interestingly varied in the circumstances and mode of their occurrence. Most typically, Vikram acquires a boon, gift, or prize of some sort, and promptly gives it away to a humble supplicant; this is the pattern of no fewer than thirteen stories.⁹ But sometimes his acquisition is a free boon,

⁸**Siñhāsan battīsī**, N. S. Sharmā Gaur, p. 21.

⁹Stories 4, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 13, 14, 17, 18, 20, 28, 29.

sometimes a reward for courtesy, sometimes a prize won through some ordeal, sometimes the fruit of conquest.¹⁰ And sometimes he gives away not a new acquisition, but money, or something else which he already has.¹¹ The stories are divided fairly evenly among four settings: Vikram's court itself, his own kingdom, some other land, and some other world (the underworld, the Sun's realm, Indra's domain, etc). In about half the stories Vikram is never in danger, in the other half he deliberately takes some fearful risks. In five stories Vikram actually kills himself and is revived. As a variation on the motif, in one story he kills himself twice, and in another, seven times!¹² A more conspicuous example of rhythmic repetition could hardly be desired.

When the stories of the qissa version are compared with those of the **Vikramacharita**, it becomes clear that Vikram's characteristic behavior has changed over the centuries. In particular, he now relies heavily on his two **baitāls** (sometimes referred to as "**bīr**," "brave ones," or collectively as **tāl baitāl**). Not one single story of the **Vikramacharita** involves the **baitāls** as necessary partners in Vikram's feats. Eleven stories of the qissa version do so. Interestingly, four of those eleven are stories which figure in the **Vikramacharita** without the **baitāls**, but have been modified in the qissa version to include their participation.¹³

In addition to his **baitāls**, the Vikram of the qissa has other close connections with the world of folk demonology. A case in point is the thirteenth statuette's story, in which Vikram, wandering in a strange country, is called upon to mediate a rather unappetizing quarrel.

...then when he looked, he saw a corpse come floating along in the current of the river. A **baitāl** and a yogi have grabbed that corpse. They fight with each other.

The yogi says to the **baitāl**, "You have eaten many corpses, and now I've got my chance. You let me go, I'll take it and perform my yoga." The **baitāl** said, "Brother, I'm not such a fool that you can cajole me. Why should I give you my food?"

The disputants ask Vikram to judge between them, and reward him well, in advance, for doing so. His verdict is irreproachable:

"Listen, **baitāl**, you let go of this corpse, eat my horse. Let the yogi take charge of this corpse, because you won't go hungry, and his work also will not be halted." As soon as they heard this, the **baitāl** chewed up that horse, and the yogi began to practice his mantras with the corpse. The Raja called the **vīr [baitāls]** and went to his own country.¹⁴

Vikram seems to find nothing strange or unsuitable in this incident. He moves familiarly in the world of folk magic, and willingly consorts with even its most gruesome inhabitants.

In a similar vein, the seventh statuette describes Vikram's cheerful, breezy, even comradely treatment of a **kañkālin**, a kind of horrible witch who preys on corpses. By a ruse, this creature persuades Vikram to support her on his shoulder, so that she can reach the body of a thief hanging on a gallows.

¹⁰Boon: Stories 5, 17, 27, 29; reward: Stories 13, 14, 18, 20; prize: Stories 4, 6, 7, 8, 10, 12, 26, 28; fruit: Stories 1a, 2b, 2c, 11.

¹¹Money: Stories 3, 9, 16, 25, 30; something else: Stories 16, 23.

¹²Stories 6, 10, 12, 26, 28. Twice: Story 28; seven times: Story 12.

¹³Stories 3, 6, 8, 10, 11, 13, 17, 20, 21, 27, 28 involve the **baitāls**. Stories 3, 6, 10, 28 have been modified from Sanskrit stories which do not include the **baitāls**.

¹⁴**Siñhāsan battīsī**, N. S. Sharmā Gaur, pp. 55, 57.

That **kañkālīn**, having climbed onto the Raja's shoulder, began to devour the thief who was hanging on that gallows. Blood began to drop from her mouth onto his body, and the Raja thought, "She is some other, she deceived me!" Having thought this in his mind, the Raja said, "Lovely one, is your husband eating or not?" Then the **kañkālīn** said, "He has already eaten with relish. Now his stomach is full, let me down from your shoulder." When she got down, the Raja said, "He ate with enjoyment?" The **kañkālīn** laughed and said, "You ask for whatever you want, I am very pleased with you. I am a **kañkālīn**, don't be afraid of me in your heart." He said, "What--I afraid of you! You climbed on my shoulder and ate a dead man--what will you give me?" She again said, "Don't you start thinking about what I've done. Whatever you wish, ask me for it." The Raja laughed and said, "Give me Annapūrṇā." She said, "Annapūrṇā is my younger sister. Come with me, I will give her to you." In this way both, being bound by oath, set out.¹⁵

Vikram's jocular, familiar tone marks him almost as a fellow-denizen of the **kañkālīn**'s world. To throw Vikram's camaraderie into full relief, it should be compared to the concluding part of a very similar anecdote in the **Kathāsaritsāgara**. The hero in this case, the virtuous Ashokadatta, "saw that woman cutting off slice after slice of that impaled man's flesh with a knife and eating it. Then, perceiving that she was some horrible demon, he dragged her down in a rage...in order to dash her to pieces on the earth."¹⁶ The classical Vikram of the **Vikramacharita**, like Ashokadatta, would have recoiled from the very idea of corpse-eating--while the cruder Vikram of the qissa not only fraternizes with corpse-eaters, but even assists them.

The Vikram of the qissa is not only cruder than his classical predecessor, but also more human: capable of making mistakes, of suffering for them, of seeking to atone. The twenty-first statuette's story, one of the two longest in the collection, is that of the Brahman Mādhav and the dancing-girl Kāmkañdalā, whose socially inappropriate love earns them severe persecution.¹⁷ Vikram befriends the two, and takes action to protect and reunite them. But it occurs to him to test the strength of their love by telling each of the other's death. When he does so, both instantly die. Vikram heartily repents, and recognizes himself as their murderer.

"...two murders are upon me. Now it is not proper that I should remain alive either." Having resolved this in his heart, he ordered sandalwood, had a pyre built, and prepared to burn. No matter how much his chief minister said, he didn't listen. Just as he was about to sit on that pyre and burn in the fire, the **baitāl** came and seized his hand and said, "Why do you give up your life?" Then he said, "I knowingly caused the death of a Brahman and a woman. Now it is not proper that I should remain alive in this world either. To die is much better than living in such disgrace." The **baitāl** said, "I'll just bring some nectar (**amrīt**) from the underworld, you revive both of them." Having said this, the **baitāl** quickly brought nectar from the underworld and gave it to him.¹⁸

¹⁵**Siñhāsan battīsī**, N. S. Sharmā Gaur, pp. 35-36.

¹⁶Penzer, **The Ocean of Story**, 2:202-203.

¹⁷Mādhavānāl and Kāmkañdalā are a famous pair of lovers; their story has been known in North India for centuries. For a sampling of medieval versions see Maithilīprasād Bhāradvāj, **Madhyakālīn romāñs, Hindī premākhyān aur Panjābī kissā-kāvya ke tulanātmak sañdarbh meñ** (Delhi: Research, 1972), pp. 114, 141-142, 152, 164-168, 170-173, 179-180.

¹⁸**Siñhāsan battīsī**, N. S. Sharmā Gaur, pp. 86-87.

Vikram's human fallibility is balanced by his moral seriousness, and the **baītal**'s urgent concern introduces a note of real affection. We will have more to say about this brief, but effective, passage in Chapter Eight.

One story in particular, that of the twenty-fourth statuette, is so closely linked to important folk narrative and qissa themes that it deserves special attention. One day at the riverbank, Vikram saw a moneylender's wife and a young merchant making signs to each other. Out of curiosity about women's wiles, Vikram discovered the woman's house, and contrived to rap on her window at the time of night indicated by the signs. Expecting her lover, she brought her jewel-box and prepared to elope with him. Vikram told her to kill her husband first, for safety's sake, and she did. Vikram took her to the river, had her wait while he (carrying the jewel-box) crossed first, and then abandoned her. She went home, screamed that a thief had murdered her husband, and insisted on becoming a **sati**. But when the flames reached her body she lost her nerve and leaped into the river. Vikram, watching, asked her the meaning of her behavior. She replied that he should look into the affairs of his own six queens, and he would understand; she then drowned. Watching his own queens, Vikram saw them carry trays of gold and choice foods by night to a secret place in the forest. There they met a yogi who magically took on six bodies and made love to them all. After they left, Vikram threatened the yogi, obtained the secret of shape-shifting, and killed him. He then brought his six queens to the same place, reproached them, and killed them all; later he married new wives.

The general theme of this story, women's wiles (**triyā charitra**) goes far back in Indian narrative literature: one **Kathāsaritsāgara** story, very brief, tells of a faithless wife who became a **sati**, and concludes that a woman's heart is hard to fathom.¹⁹ The theme is also, as we have seen, common to many of the "outer layer" of qissa perennials. And it is strongly associated in story tradition with bitter experiences ascribed to Vikram, Bhartharī (to whom the fruit of immortality was given), and Bhoj. We will have more to say about this theme later.

But we should also notice that the story involves "shape-shifting" (**kāyākalp**), the art of leaving one's own body and entering another (uninhabited) one--or of rapidly changing oneself from one form into another. In qissa, as in folk literature generally, these two conceptions of the process are often blurred into one. This shape-shifting art often gives rise to elaborate magic combats: a case in point is **Kissā Bhayaravānand yogī**, which directly plagiarizes most of the twenty-fourth statuette's story--and then carries it further. Though the hero is called Mahesh, his observation of women's wiles and of shape-shifting closely parallels Vikram's. But when Mahesh discovers his queens at their rendezvous, the evil yogi Bhayaravānand turns him into a sheep. His own guru then turns him into a parrot for safety's sake, and he has many adventures in that form; at length he becomes a dog, and kills Bhayaravānand who is in the form of a cat. A Newari version of the **Siñhāsan battīsī** features the combat of Vikram with an ascetic called Bhairavānand who has seduced Vikram's favorite wife; the combat relies on rapid shape-shifting in which Vikram triumphs with the aid of his guru. Vikram is turned into a dog by Bhairavānand, and restored to his true form by his guru; later he becomes a necklace of beads, and finally a cat who devours Bhairavānand while the latter is in the form of a peacock. As far back as the medieval **Prabandhachintāmañi**, a yogi called Bhairavānand was described as Vikram's guru who taught him the art of entering other bodies.²⁰

¹⁹Penzer, *The Ocean of Story*, 5:19.

Many similar stories can be cited. In a Bundelkhandi folktale, Vikram is turned into a dog by an evil yogi who has seduced his queen; later he becomes a pearl in a necklace, then a cat who devour the yogi in the form of a goose. Another such tale is told of Bhoj, who makes similar discoveries about women's wiles, is turned into a dog, and is helped by the shape-shifting powers of his guru to defeat the evil yogi. In a Rajasthani folktale, the hero is Bhoj and the cause of the combat is Bhoj's overhearing of the yogi's secret shape-shifting knowledge. Bhoj turns himself into a parrot and flies off; the yogi pursues him as a cat. Bhoj becomes a pearl necklace; the guru, as a dog, tries to eat its beads. Bhoj finally becomes a cat, and kills the dog.²¹

This motif of "transformation combat" is not only common in Indian folklore generally,²² but is also frequently and specifically associated in folk tradition with the names of Vikram and Bhoj. Such a combat occurs in a Newari version of the **Siñhāsan battīsī** itself. And it is implicit in the twenty-fourth statuette's story, in which Vikram acquires the requisite magic knowledge and confronts the evil yogi. The stage is set, nothing could be more natural at that point than a transformation combat. Yet the story stops on the verge; Vikram kills the powerful, dangerous yogi with his sword, in a facile and uninteresting way. No qissa edition of **Siñhāsan battīsī** includes any episode of transformation combat.

Another set of modern folktales about Vikram also arise from this shape-shifting motif. They center on Vikram's use of the art of shape-shifting to leave his own body and enter another, and his adventures in that other body. Usually he is "trapped" in some other body after some designing companion enters Vikram's own temporarily uninhabited body in order to pass as Vikram himself and enjoy the kingship. Often Vikram spends much time in the body of a parrot. In one folktale from Basti district, Vikram assumes the body of a parrot to demonstrate his shape-shifting power. A servant who has overheard the secret knowledge enters Vikram's body and orders all the parrots in the kingdom killed. But the parrot-Vikram manages to fall into the hands of a neighboring king, and becomes famous for his wise decisions in legal disputes. His faithful queen, realizing what has occurred, seeks out the parrot and conspires with him to trick the false Vikram into entering the body of a lamb; Vikram then returns to his own body and kills the lamb. A very similar folktale exists in the Bagheli dialect of eastern Hindi: Vikram's career as a parrot includes twice saving the other parrots from a bird-catcher, then becoming a king's counsellor famous for shrewd judgements. Vikram reclaims his body when the evil barber who has occupied it is persuaded by Vikram's queens to enter the body of a goat. Other versions of this tale exist in Braj, Bundelkhandi, and Chattisgarhi.²³ Still others exist in

²⁰Kissā Bhayaravānand yogī, by Mahādev Prasād Siñh (Varanansi: Thākurprasād and Sons, 24 p., Hindi); Hans Jørgensen, trans. and ed., **Bātīsaputrikākathā--The Tales of the Thirty-two Statuettes (A Newārī Recension of the Simhasanadvatrimśatika** (Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1939), pp. 265-268; Tawney, **Prabandhachintāmañi**, pp. 9-10.

²¹Shivsahay Chāturvedī, **Jaisī karnī vaisī bharnī; Bundelkhañḍ kī lokkathāeñ** (Delhi: Sastā Sāhitya Mañḍal Prakāshan, 1965), pp. 74-79; William Crooke, trans. and ed., "Raja Bhoj and his Rani," **Indian Antiquary** 54 (May 1925):25-26; Kañhaiyalāl Sahal, **Naṭo to kaho mat** (Jaipur: Vanar Prakāshan, 1958), pp. 41-42.

²²Stith Thompson and Jonas Balys, **The Oral Tales of India** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1958), p. 109.

²³William Crooke, trans. and ed., "The Metamorphosis of Raja Vikramaditya," **North Indian Notes and Queries** 5 (May 1895):30-32; Bhāgvatīprasād Shukla, **Bagheli bhāṣhā aur sāhitya** (Allahabad: Sāhitya Bhavan, 1971), pp. 263-265.

Rajsthani, with Raja Bhoj as the hero, and in early Dakani Urdu (ca. 1400), with Raja Kidam Rāḥ as the hero.²⁴

Vikram's adventures as a parrot are in fact so well known that they figure in other **Siñhāsan battīsī** collections. A Persian version of the tales contains a story very close to those recounted above, with the exchange of bodies, Vikram's gallantry as leader of the parrots, the treacherous yogi's final discomfiture. And a South Indian **Siñhāsan battīsī** collection also contains a long, detailed version: Vikram enters the body of a dead male parrot to cheer up its grieving mate, and an evil ironsmith appropriates Vikram's body. Vikram becomes the leader of the parrots, and when caught becomes famous for his wise judgements. In this story it is his chief minister who searches him out, and tricks the imposter into entering the body of a bull. **Kissā Bhayaravānand yogī**, which as we have seen is very close to the twenty-fourth statuette's story, also contains a number of cases which Vikram judged in his parrot form.²⁵ Yet despite the widespread popularity of this group of Vikram tales, and their inclusion in other **Siñhāsan battīsī** collections, not the slightest hints of Vikram's adventures in other bodies or his exploits as a parrot have crept into any qissa text of **Siñhāsan battīsī** that I have seen.

As for **Baitāl pachchīsī**, it offers an even more striking case of textual preservation. Although the Fort William version was based on a Braj text, it remained extremely close to the Sanskrit **Vetālapañchaviñshati**. The Sanskrit text, contained in the **Kathāsaritsāgara**, included a concise frame story and a set of twenty-five intriguing riddle-tales told by a **vetāla (baitāl)** to Vikram. As Penzer's detailed comparison reveals, the Fort William version differs from the Sanskrit only by a minor reordering of the same stories--and by a considerable enlargement of the introductory frame story.²⁶

In the Sanskrit, the frame story begins with a mysterious yogi who visits Vikram's court. In the qissa, the story of the yogi is prefaced by an account of Vikram's identity and personal history--an account quite close to that given by **Siñhāsan battīsī**.

There was a city called Dhārānagar. Its raja was Gandharvsen. He had four queens. They had six sons. Each was more learned and stronger than the next. Being in the power of death, that raja died quite soon and his oldest son, named Shañkh, became raja in his place. Then after some time his younger brother Vikram, having killed his older brother, became raja himself and began to reign without hindrance.²⁷

Some qissa editions gloss this bald account with a few words of moral justification for Vikram: "His younger brother [Vikram], having seen in his older brother some ways of unrighteousness, killed him, and having become raja himself, began to reign with great righteousness."²⁸ Raja Vikram then sets out to travel, leaving his younger brother Bhartharī in charge. Then comes Bhartharī's classic experience with the fruit of immortality; disgusted by his discovery of

²⁴Sahal, **Naṭo to kaho mat**, p. 43; Faḥr ud-Dīn Nizāmī, **Maṣnavī Kidam Rāḥ Padam Rāḥ**, ed. by Jamīl Jālibī (Karachi: Anjuman Taraqqī-e Urdū Pākistān, 1973).

²⁵Baron Lescallier, trans. and ed., **Le Trône enchanté, conte Indien traduit du Persan** (New York: J. Desnoues, 1817), pp. 130-157; K. M. Munshi and R. R. Diwakar, eds., **Stories of Vikramaditya (Simhasana Dwatrimisika)** (Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1960), pp. 186-204; **Kissā Bhayaravānand yogī**, pp. 13-19.

²⁶Penzer, **The Ocean of Story**, 6:264.

²⁷**Vetāl pachchīsī** (Lucknow: Rājā Rām Kumār Press, 77 p., Hindi), p. 1.

²⁸**Kissā baitāl pachchīsī** (Hathras: N. S. Sharmā Gauṛ Book Depot, 1975, 80 p., Hindi), p. 1.

women's wives, he leaves for the forest. Raja Indra sends a Dev to guard the kingdom until Vikram's return; Vikram challenges and defeats the Dev, who offers him good advice. All this of course agrees with the **Siñhāsan battīsī** account of Vikram's history, though some of the events are described in less detail.

But the advice which the Dev gives Vikram is considerably more elaborate than that described in the **Siñhāsan battīsī**. The Dev tells Vikram that once a raja named Chandrabhāg saw an ascetic in a forest, completely absorbed in austerities. Returning to his city, Raja Chandrabhāg promised a lavish reward to anyone who could bring the ascetic to him. A prostitute vowed that the ascetic would return to the city with her, bearing on his shoulders the son she had borne him. She seduced the ascetic, and succeeded in fulfilling her vow. Everyone present at the royal court applauded her success, and the ascetic realized that he had been exploited and humiliated.

Then he understood: "The Raja had made this attempt in order to disrupt my austerities." Having thought this in his heart, he turned back from there. Then having come out of the city, he killed that boy [his son by the prostitute]; and having gone into the forest, he began to practice yoga. Soon afterwards that raja fell prey to death, and the yogi finished his yoga.

The details of this are that you three men have been born in one city, one lunar mansion, one division of the ecliptic, and one small portion of time. You took birth in a raja's house, the second became an oilman, the third--the yogi--was born in a potter's house. You reign here, and the oilman's son was the lord of the underworld. Then that potter practiced his yoga, and having killed the oilman made him a demon (**pishāch**) in the burning ground. He has kept him hanging upside down in a sirsa tree and is planning to kill you. If you escape him, you will reign.²⁹ Vikram has had a timely warning, for soon afterwards the mysterious yogi appears, and the story proper begins.

Fort William's **Siñhāsan battīsī** was first published in 1801, its **Baitāl pachchīsī** in 1802. And it does appear that the latter has made an effort to amplify and explain that linking of Vikram, an oilman, and a potter which remains so cryptic in the former. The explanation is not very satisfactory, at best: it leaves too many obscure, illogical loose ends. Why is the yogi's son--who was killed in early childhood--part of the story of rebirth at all? If he is born a lowly oilman, and is so easily murdered in two successive births, how can he simultaneously be the powerful ruler of the underworld? Why are the three men's births and destinies so interwoven, and by what kind of predestination? But the very urge to explain, and the fact that even such a weak explanation was considered preferable to none at all, shows that the Vikram story was still being worked through, added to, developed. Later attempts might well improve on earlier ones, missing links might quite properly be supplied. Yet this progressive reworking was brought to an abrupt halt: the two Fort William texts became, so to speak, petrified--and their accounts of Vikram's life have never been altered since.

By contrast, other qissas about Vikram sometimes do manage to give clear and narratively effective accounts of his background. The modern **Kissā rājā vīr Vikramāditya** integrates various folktales and traditional stories into a quite consistent version of Vikram's history. Bhatrīharī [sic] was Vikram's older brother, and inherited the kingdom from their father in the usual way. When Bhatrīharī wished to travel, he left Vikram in charge of the kingdom.

²⁹**Vetāl pachchīsī**, Rājā Rām Kumār, p. 4.

Vikram observed **triyā charitra** in the unfaithfulness of Bhatrīharī's beautiful queen, Piṅgalā, who secretly met the chief of police by night. Piṅgalā realized that Vikram had found her out; when Bhatrīharī returned, she accused Vikram of designs on her honor, and caused the infatuated Bhatrīharī to banish him. But then Bhatrīharī was given the fruit of immortality, with predictable results; he went to the forest and became a follower of Gorakhnāth. The kingship then passed to Vikram.³⁰

Nowadays Bhoj too has qissas of his own. **Rājā Bhoj aur Kālidās** describes Bhoj's orphaned childhood, his narrow escape from death at the hands of his evil uncle Muñj--and, inevitably, his discovery of **triyā charitra** when he sees his favorite queen meet a yogi by night.³¹ Bhoj also learns to understand women's wiles in **Kissā rājā Bhoj**. From a snake whom he propitiates he gains understanding of all animals' language, with a warning that if he tells anyone of his ability, he will die. But when he laughs at the conversation of two ants, his beloved queen insists on knowing the reason of his laughter, even at the cost of his life. He prepares to tell her and die; only at the last moment does the overheard ridicule of a (male) goat make him realize that he should prefer his own life to his queen's whims. This story too is a popular folktale. One Rajasthani version associates Bhoj with "Āgiyā Vetāl" (a clear echo of Vikram's **baitāl** Añgiyā), and is almost identical in plot to **Kissā rājā Bhoj**; another version attributes the same adventures to Raja Senak.³² We will have more to say about this story in the following chapter.

In addition to **Kissā rājā vīr Vikramāditya** and the stories about Bhoj, other qissas too from time to time feature Vikram and Bhoj in major or minor roles.³³ But it should be emphasized that these less common qissas have nothing remotely like the popularity of the perennials. They come and go, evolve and change--while **Siñhāsan battīsī** and **Baitāl pachchīsī** seem to stay the same indefinitely.

³⁰**Kissā rājā vīr Vikramāditya**, by Raghunāth Siñh Akelā (Mathura: Kisān Pustak Bhañḍār, 51 p., Hindi), pp. 1-18.

³¹**Rājā Bhoj aur Kālidās**, ed. by Rāmsnehī Dīkṣhit (Delhi: Dehātī Pustak Bhañḍār, 43 p., Hindi). Kālidās and the others of the "navratan" (nine jewels) have been transferred here from Vikram's court to Bhoj's. See Rajbali Pandey, **Vikramāditya of Ujjayini** (Varanasi: Shatadala Prakashana, 1951), p. 203.

³²**Kissā rājā Bhoj**, by Mahādev Prasād Siñh Ghanshyām (Varanasi: Ṭhākurprasād and Sons, 24 p., Hindi), pp. 1-7; Kañhaiyalāl Sahal and Patram Gaur, eds., **Chaubolī; Rājasthānī sāhitya kī chār kahāniyāñ** (Jodhpur: The Students' Book Co., 1969), pp. 1-4; Sahal, **Naṭo to kaho mat**, pp. 45-46.

³³See for example **Qissā aslī chor**, by Indarman Sutaal (Agra: Murttaẓāī Press, 1935, 43 p., Hindi); **Kissā aql kā putlā** (Agra: Vainīrām Bookseller, 1937, 40 p., Hindi).