

## CHAPTER FIVE: QISSĀ TOTĀ MAINĀ

First of all I praise that perfect Supreme Lord, who through his energy along has created this marvelous world, and who protects and provides for all, from man to the ant. Having remembered that all extensive Being, Intelligence, and Bliss, in order to entertain people of taste I offer a new, captivating qissa, **Totā mainā**, in the readers' service, according to my humble understanding.<sup>1</sup>

**Qissā totā mainā** (The Parrot and the Mynah), by Pañdit Rañgīlāl Sharmā, is the most remarkable of the important single-source perennial qissas. Unlike the Fort William texts, it was not produced and given its start by a powerful institution. Unlike **Fasānah-e ajāfb** and **Gul o Šanobar**, it had no standing in the Urdu literary world. Unlike all these earlier texts, it was probably written in the 1870s, and thus did not have a long period to establish itself before mass printing began. On the contrary: it started as merely one of several rather similar qissas which used parrot narrators, and which told stories of sexual guile and deceit. Even its title echoed those of several other qissas, as we will see. In order to avoid confusion, therefore, it has commonly been identified by author: prominently on the cover of most editions appears the claim of authenticity: “**pañdit Rañgīlāl krīt** (written by Pañdit Rañgīlāl). Nowadays, however, it has so overpowered all competition that such identification is often deemed unnecessary, and it seems to be falling gradually into typical qissa anonymity.

**Qissā totā mainā** thus made it to its present supremacy on its own, without any of the advantages which might have given earlier qissas their head start toward lasting popularity. And certainly it is by far the most popular single qissa text of the twentieth century. Its predominance can easily be seen from its printing history: 264,600 copies, in 94 editions, are recorded in the S.A.M.P. publication records; a list of these is provided in Appendix A. And any modern observer will notice the work's continued conspicuous popularity.

In style, **Qissā totā mainā** is fully as flat and simple as the Fort William texts we have examined. The edition selected for close study is a fairly recent, undated Hindi one, published by the Vaishya Book Depot of Delhi. It is illustrated with crude line drawings, and its cover displays a picture of the kind that has become traditional for this qissa: the parrot and the mynah talking in the branches of a tree, while two human lovers recline under the tree, listening. The frame story begins idyllically.

Near Beautiful Isle was an extremely superior and glorious garden, full of fruit and flowers, adorned with various kinds of captivating, colorful birds-- cuckoos, peacocks, chakoras, swans, herons, etc.--full of many pools and lakes, as radiant as Indra's Delightful Forest. Birds had made their dwelling places on many trees of that garden. By chance one day a parrot, a victim of storms and rain, very anxious, came and sat on a tree to pass his time of trouble. On that same tree was the dwelling place of a mynah. When the mynah saw the parrot seated on her own tree, she said with great anger, “Oh Parrot! Why have you sat on my tree? Get away from here, and go to some other tree.” Having heard these words of the mynah, the parrot said, “Oh Mynah! What harm am I doing you? Having passed the night on a

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<sup>1</sup>**Qissā totā mainā**, by Pañdit Rañgīlāl (Delhi: Vaishya Book Depot, 192 p., Hindi), p. 1.

branch, at dawn I'll go to my own place.” Having heard these words of the parrot, the Mynah said, “If you say it a thousand times, I still won't agree, because I have great hatred for the race of men. In the whole universe there is no race as pitiless as that of men.” Having heard these bitter words of the mynah, the parrot became angry, and said, “What surprising thing is this, that you call men heartless! Indeed, everybody says that the race of women is very heartless and uncompassionate, because some poet has said,

No one knows women's wiles,  
Having sworn [falsely], she becomes **sati**.

Therefore, Mynah! The heartless race is that of women. There is no other race as true to its word and honest in speech as that of men. What such defect have you seen in men, that you hate them?” Then the mynah said, “Oh Parrot! The things for which I hate men, I'll tell you in a dastan. You pay attention and listen.”<sup>2</sup>

She tells her story, and of course the parrot replies with one of his own, which goads her to tell another, and so on. The qissa is thus a continuing battle of the sexes, as parrot and mynah take the offensive by turns. They call their stories “dastans”--a clear, if inappropriate, evocation of the classical tradition. In all, the work contains fourteen such dastans, divided irregularly into eight parts (**bhāg**). The dastans themselves vary considerably in length, and the number of dastans in each **bhāg** varies accordingly. This “table of contents” is of course my own; it would be unheard-of for a qissa to provide one.

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<sup>2</sup>Qissā totā mainā, pp. 1-2.

## Part VIII

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Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl's probable source of inspiration is not far to seek. In the **Baitāl pachchīsī**, the **baitāl**'s third story features a combative dialogue between a parrot and a mynah who have been placed by a raja and his rani in the same cage. Eventually the parrot makes sexual overtures to the mynah.

Having heard this, the mynah said, "I have no wish for a man." Then he asked, "Why?" The mynah said, "Men are sinful, unrighteous, deceitful, and murderers of women." Having heard this, the parrot said, "Women too are deceitful, false, foolish, greedy, and murderous." When both began to quarrel in this way, the Raja asked, "Why are you two quarreling?" The mynah said, "Maharaj! Men are sinful, and harmful to women. For this reason I have no desire for such a man. Maharaj! I'll tell you a story, please listen, men are all such."<sup>3</sup>

The story she tells bears some resemblance to Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl's first dastan, while the parrot's rebuttal which follows has several points in common with Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl's second dastan. It seems likely that Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl recognized a clever frame story, and developed it at much greater length. Another of the perennials, **Kissā sārhe tīm yār**, uses a very similar device: adversary story-telling by two (human) lovers about the relative merits of the sexes. This work is definitely later than **Qissā totā mainā**, and may well have been influenced by it. Similar stories have also been recorded as oral tales.<sup>4</sup>

Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl's dastans themselves are a diverse group drawn from various traditional Indian narrative sources. The sixth dastan, told by the parrot, is a leisurely retelling of the **baitāl**'s first story from the **Baitāl pachchīsī**. And the tenth dastan, also told by the parrot, includes the twelfth statuette's story from the **Siñhāsan battīsī**. Six of the dastans are set in nominally "real" cities, eight in frankly imaginary ones with names like Ratnapur (Jewel City), Chandrapur (Moon City), and Vichitrapur (Strange City). Eight of the dastans include overtly magical and marvelous elements (magic objects, talking animals, Parīs, etc.), while six do not.<sup>5</sup> But it should be emphasized that the marvelous appears in every case as matter-of-fact and "natural." **Tilisms** are wholly absent, and the spirit of the stories is to take both "marvelous" and non-marvelous events in stride: all events become "assimilated to their functions in the plot." In the fourth dastan, a chief minister's son learns that his prince, with whom he is visiting a strange city, is sleeping with a dangerous prostitute whose clients all die. The minister's son keeps watch over him.

When midnight passed, a snake, having emerged from the prostitute's mouth and come beneath the bed, began to crawl along the ground. Then the minister's son, having cut it in four pieces with his sword, concealed it beneath his shield. A little

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<sup>3</sup>**Vetāl pachchīsī**, Rājā Rām Kumār, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup>William Crooke, trans. and ed., "The Parrot Prince and his Princess," **Indian Antiquary** 21 (September 1891):277-278.

<sup>5</sup>Dastans which include overtly marvelous elements: 2, 3, 4, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14; dastans which do not: 1, 5, 6, 7, 12, 13.

while after the minister's son had killed the snake, the thought grew in his heart, "My friend's life has been saved, but now I should see even more of the ways of this place."<sup>6</sup>

The rest of his adventures are improbable (a lecherous faqir bites off a woman's nose, thieves kidnap a princess for human sacrifice), but not overtly marvelous. They are all parts of "the ways of this place," and as such he is interested in discovering them.

In fact, the most startling, astonishing, and thus (in a sense) "marvelous" parts of Pañdit Rañgīlāl's dastans are generally their endings. The frame story requires that every dastan illustrate cruelty and violence by one sex toward the other. But Pañdit Rañgīlāl often chooses his stories simply for the joy of telling them; then since they have not fulfilled their illustrative role, properly brutal endings must be forcibly imposed. Often these endings are gratuitous, or even actively contrary to the whole tone of the story. The third dastan, told by the mynah, has as its hero Prince Madanpāl. Banished by his father, he wanders in the forest until he meets a yogi. The yogi, pleased with his respectful behavior, gives him four pieces of advice, the first of which is that "in a foreign country, two are better than one."

Having heard these four sayings of the yogi's, Madanpāl went on. As he went along, after many days he arrived in a desolate forest. There what does he see but a kite flying along, carrying a young turtle. By chance that young turtle, having escaped from its claws, fell, and began to writhe. Having seen the writhing young turtle, Madanpāl began to say to himself, "I should take care of this young one. By taking care of him two things will be achieved--first, his life will be saved, and second, one will become two." Having decided this, he took that young one and went on. A long time had passed in traveling, when one day he arrived in a forest when it was already afternoon. Having seen a well of pure water and an excellent place under a pipal tree, he decided, "Now I should pass the afternoon in this place." Having thought this, Madanpāl bathed and meditated, and ate whatever he had with him; he fed the young turtle also. Then Madanpāl said to that young one, "Oh young one, you stay sitting here, I'll sleep for a little while." Then the young one said, "Very good. You go to sleep, I am sitting here." Then Madanpāl went to sleep. In that tree lived a snake and a crow. They always had this custom, that when any traveller came and settled down under the tree, the snake bit him and the crow picked out his eyes. When Madanpāl, was sleeping under that tree, the snake came down from the tree, bit Madanpāl, and went up the tree again. Then the young turtle, seeing Madanpāl dead, became very anxious and began to think, "What shall I do now, how shall I go to my homeland?" Thinking this, he was sitting on Madanpāl's forehead, crying. In the meantime, the crow too, having come down from the tree, wanted to peck out Madanpāl's eyes. At that moment the young turtle pounced on the crow and seized him in his mouth. Then the crow called, "Oh friend Snake, come quickly--if you don't then I too will die today." Having heard this cry of the crow, the snake ran, and having come, saw that the turtle had grabbed hold of the crow. Then the moment the snake came he attacked the turtle very forcefully, but the turtle pulled his head inside. When the snake was helpless and could do nothing, then he began to say to the turtle, "You let go of my friend." Then the turtle said, "I won't let him go, because you have eaten my friend, so now I will eat your friend." Having heard

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<sup>6</sup>Qissā totā mainā, pp. 32-33.

these words of the turtle's, the snake said, "Oh Turtle! Let him go somehow." Then the turtle said, "If you let my friend go, then I'll let your friend go." Having heard this, the snake put his mouth to the bitten place and sucked out all the poison from Madanpāl's body. Then the turtle too let the crow go. Madanpāl sat up, and began to say to the turtle, "Today I slept a lot." Then the turtle told the whole story of the snake's biting. Having heard this, Madanpāl began to say, "Today that yogi's word proved useful. If I had been alone, then how could I have remained alive?" Having said this, he went on, and after many days Madanpāl arrived at the ocean shore. Then the turtle said, "Oh friend! My dwelling place is here. If you consent then I will go and see my mother and father. Ever since I have been separated from them, they must have been very unhappy without me." Having heard this, Madanpāl took leave of the turtle and went on.

Soon afterwards, Madanpāl is captured by a band of robbers. His resourceful use of the yogi's advice keeps him alive until the daughter of one of the robbers falls in love with him and helps him escape. She accompanies him, taking much wealth. She is absolutely devoted to him, and the two live happily and comfortably for some time, until the term of Madanpāl's banishment has expired. He then reflects,

"Now I should go to my own country. But one thing is difficult: how can I take this robber's daughter with me? When my father sees, he will banish me again." Having thought this, when the robber's daughter went to sleep, Madanpāl killed her with a sword and, shutting her up in the room, himself took all the wealth and set out for his own country.<sup>7</sup>

Madanpāl's attractive, naive adventure with the young turtle, in which he learns the value of loyal friendship, and his ingenious escapes from death at the robbers' hands, have not at all prepared us for the sudden reversal of his character in the last few lines of the dastan. The same story has been recorded as an oral tale--and omits, of course, the violent ending.<sup>8</sup>

In the story of Madanpāl and in similar dastans, Pañdit Rañgīlāl has done quite new things to the qissa. In the classic Persian and Urdu qissa, we follow one noble hero through a long series of travels and marvelous adventures which culminate in the successful achievement of some goal. Pañdit Rañgīlāl has been careful to evoke the classic qissa pattern. All his fourteen dastans begin with young men noble birth--almost always princes.<sup>9</sup> They inhabit the typical amorphous cities of the qissa world, the kind that are named in the first sentence of the story and never heard of again. These princes set out to travel, or are banished, or go hunting in the forest. And many of their adventures involve Parīs, yogis, magic powers and objects, the pursuit of princesses--exactly the traditional elements of the qissa world. The reader feels familiar ground underfoot. Yet as the heroes' adventures proceed, the pattern is frequently undercut. Madanpāl's adventure with the young turtle, for example, is really the young turtle's adventure with the snake. Its only connection with Madanpāl is that it teaches him a valuable lesson about friendship--and even that lesson he later abruptly rejects. Other princes too confront adventures which do not reveal their character at all--or reveal it as base and

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<sup>7</sup>*Qissā totā mainā*, pp. 21-22, 30.

<sup>8</sup>William Crooke, trans. and ed., "The Advice of the Sadhu," *North Indian Notes and Queries* 3 (December 1893):152-153.

<sup>9</sup>Though the hero of the seventh dastan is a Brahmin student, and the hero of the twelfth dastan is a rich merchant's son.

treacherous. Sometimes the princes lose the center of the stage entirely to other characters, especially female ones, of much greater narrative interest. To depict princes as doubtful heroes or even as villains, to permit their upstaging by characters like women and turtles, is impossible in the classic qissa tradition. The classic qissa hero may be briefly upstaged, briefly weak or fallible--but only to reassert himself with a firmness all the more effective for its momentary eclipse. He is and must be the focus, both moral and dramatic, of an otherwise unfocused narrative.

Pañḍit Rañgīlāl's originality is to have created a frame story more interesting and narratively effective than any of the individual dastans which it frames. He can take all kinds of liberties with the dastans, because they are not, individually or collectively, the center of his work. Rather, the heart of his work lies in the lively, malicious repartee between his two secondary narrator-characters, the misogynist parrot and the man-hating mynah. (The primary narrator, in typical qissa style, plays no part in the action.) The byplay of the parrot and the mynah is no mere formality, nor is it confined to the beginning and end of the narrative: it is the moral and dramatic focus of the whole work. The parrot and the mynah are almost obsessively aware of each other, and frequently interject "Oh Parrot!" or "Thus, Oh Mynah!" into their narratives. And they argue energetically, not only at the beginning and end of each dastan, but also when one or the other pauses to emphasize a particularly telling point in mid-story. Their arguments may not always be lucid, but they are always filled with zest and conviction.

The parrot said, "Oh Mynah! Ever since I heard this dastan from my elders I have too hated women, and for this reason I have never married, to this day." Then the mynah said, "Oh Parrot! You too have spoken truly, but man is more pitiless, and among a hundred women only one will prove cruel. If you think my words false then I will tell one more dastan before you. Listen--..."

The mynah began to say, "Oh Parrot, look, hearing of such pitilessness among men my heart is disturbed. He had not even the least pity for such a sweet dog--thus the race of men is pitiless and cruel." Then the parrot said, "This is not a matter of pitilessness, because if the merchant killed the dog then he did so for the sake of his word. I have already said that men are true to their word and honest in speech--for this reason the merchant killed him. A man cannot be false to his word." Then the mynah said, "Now remember the situation of Madanpāl and the robber's daughter..."

"Thus, Oh Mynah! What harm had Chandradatt ever done to her, that Rani Padmāvati schemed to take his life? Oh Mynah? Do look at me, what is there to be ashamed of? *You* decide in your heart whose is the fault in this." Then the mynah said, "Oh Parrot, there's no question of being ashamed. You finish your dastan, I too will answer it..."

The mynah said, "Oh Parrot! Now I tell you about men's unfaithfulness, don't get ashamed and fly away!" Then the parrot said, "Mynah! Why do you talk so boastfully? You probably recall ten or twenty dastans of men's unfaithfulness. But I recall so many dastans of women's wiles that if I told them all it would make a big thick book. Nevertheless, I tell dastans in which there's no idle nonsense. If I told them all, then the qissa wouldn't be finished even in a year!" Having heard this, the

mynah said, “Oh Parrot, why do you preen yourself so? Whatever you remember, why don’t you say it? What are you afraid of?...”

The parrot said, “Oh Mynah! Just give this some thought: what was that poor boy’s sin, for which that woman had him killed without feeling the least pity?” Then the mynah said, “In this case woman and man both should be called merciless, because Manisen too killed him on the word of a woman, without inquiring.” The parrot said, “Oh Mynah! I have already said that this woman is so alluring that whenever she clings to a man’s neck, says sweet things, glances coyly, ensnares him with the arrows of desire, a man becomes subject to her. No telling what evil deed he commits. Well, now listen to the rest of the dastan...”

The mynah said, “Oh Parrot! How good she had been to the Prince and how the Prince requited her! When I know such things about men, how could I have confidence in them!” Then the parrot said, “In this case it’s not man’s pitilessness, because when a woman makes a man an animal, it hardly bothers him to kill a man. To kill such a woman is the duty of kings. This dastan which you told was one which was worth *my* telling. I know that now you don’t recall any dastans favoring women. Look, I’ll tell a dastan, you listen attentively...”

The mynah said, “Oh parrot! On the one hand there was such love between the Prince and Champaklatā that they couldn’t go for a moment without seeing each other--and on the other hand he became so pitiless that he took both their lives without any sin. Oh Parrot! You yourself just judge fairly if you can: what was the Rani’s fault?” Then the parrot said, “The bitch was totally wrong. If she had told the facts about that ring, she would never have been killed. You don’t realize that if a man sees something of another man’s in his own wife’s possession, what a grief it is. There’s no fault of the Prince’s in this. Look, I answer it, listen.”<sup>10</sup>

The liveliness of such exchanges buoys up the whole qissa. The reader easily becomes partisan--and the individual dastans become arenas for the battle of the sexes.

But it should not be thought that the use Pañdit Rañgīlāl makes of the traditional qissa is a wholly weakening and distorting one, hostile to the true nature of the genre. In his best dastans, he retains the traditional focus of the qissa both on the marvelous adventures of a virtuous and noble hero, and on the progressive revelation--and even development--of the hero’s character through these adventures. We have seen that the story of Madanpāl does not “work” as a qissa, but is merely a folktale turned by an arbitrary ending into one round in the battle of the sexes. Madanpāl himself is a passive cardboard figure; he is not noble, interesting, consistent, or even intelligible as a character. We will now look at a story which retains the spirit of the qissa genre, builds on it, and creatively extends the range of the genre.

The story is the eighth dastan, told by the parrot. Its hero, Raja Añgadhvaj, hears a woman weeping at night, finds her, and inquires the reason. She tells him that she is bemoaning the death of the Raja, which is soon to occur. A snake will bite the Raja, because of events in a

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<sup>10</sup>Qissā totā mainā, pp. 19-20, 27, 73, 77, 92-93, 113-114, 168.

previous birth which include the classic “Potiphar’s wife” motif:<sup>11</sup> the Raja was the Potiphar-figure, while the snake was the unjustly accused young man. And if Añgadhvaj reveals the source of this information to anyone, he will turn to stone. Añgadhvaj decides to try to placate the vengeful snake.

Having made this firm resolution in his mind, at dawn the Raja called his chief minister and all his courtiers and said, “At ten o’clock tonight a snake will come to bite me. All of you clean the path from my bed to that snake’s hole, and spread rose petals, and sprinkle rose, pandanus, and other perfumes in abundance on them, and, having sweetened and perfumed milk, put it in vessels on both sides, from the hole to my bed.” Having heard the word of the Raja, the chief minister did as he had said, and sat near the Raja. In the meantime the time came for the snake’s arrival. He left his hole in great anger, and began to say to himself, “Today I won’t leave the Raja alive.” Thinking this in his mind, he emerged, scraped by fragments of stone, forcefully and in anger from his hole. So, oh Mynah! When that snake, having emerged from his hole, came, he grew intoxicated by the perfumes, and began to crawl on the soft, soft flowers. Wherever he turned, scented milk was there to drink. Having seen this, he was very happy, and began to say to himself, “This Raja, knowing me his enemy, has taken such care of me; therefore I will not bite such a virtuous Raja. But I should definitely go before him, because how will the Raja know that I am pleased with him and have not exacted revenge?” Having thought this, intoxicated with the perfumes, he arrived near the Raja’s bed. Having seen the snake come, the chief minister seized a sword to kill the snake. Then the Raja began to say, “Beware, don’t lift a hand to this snake.” Having said this, the Raja extended his hand before the snake and began to say, “Oh Lord Snake! Now bite me, and take your revenge.” Then the snake said, “Raja! Your mother and father are fortunate, who have given birth to a courageous, virtuous hero like you, and your courage and virtue are fortunate, that you have treated an enemy like me so hospitably. Now I am pleased with you. I will not bite you. I have already taken my revenge, now I have no claim.” Having said this, that snake went away. Having seen this, everyone was astonished. Then the Rani said, “Oh Raja! How did you know about this, tell me that.” Having heard these words of the Rani, the Raja began to say, “Oh Rani! It is not a thing to be told to anyone.” Then the Rani said, “Oh Lord of my Life! Tell me about this, only then will I eat and drink.” The Raja said, “Oh Rani! Don’t insist on this. My life will leave me in the telling. Because the person who has said this has also said, ‘If you tell this to anyone, you will turn to stone.’” The Rani said, “Oh Raja! Let anything at all happen! But tell me about this. If not, I will take poison and die.” Having heard this, the Raja grew anxious, because that Rani was so loved by the Raja that he couldn’t live a moment without seeing her. He was becoming so blind about her that when she insisted, he said nothing at all. He said only, “If it is in your mind to turn me to stone, then all right, come, I will tell you at the holy Ganges, because when I turn to stone I will stay lying in the sands of the Ganges.” Having heard this, this one hungry for the life of the Raja agreed. The Raja prepared to go to the Ganges. When the Raja’s servants and the people of the city heard, everyone

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<sup>11</sup>Motif K2111, “Woman makes vain overtures to a man and then accuses him of trying to force her.” See Thompson and Balys, **Oral Tales of India**, p. 340.



went with the Raja. The Raja too, taking his Rani with him, went to the Ganges. Then the courtiers reasoned with the Raja, and began to say, “Oh Raja! If your body remains, then thousands of Ranis will come. [Despite] being so intelligent, you are throwing away your life for nothing, at the word of a woman.” People reasoned like this with the Raja a great deal, but he was so much in the power of that Rani that people’s persuasions didn’t penetrate his mind even a bit. Having been defeated, the chief minister went to the Rani and reasoned with her a great deal: “Oh Rani! Abandon this stubbornness, so that the Raja’s life may be saved. If perhaps the Raja tells you this matter and the Raja turns to stone, where will you find [a Raja like] this Raja again, and how will this country manage without a Raja? The moment the Raja dies, whoever of your lineage sits on the throne will never show you so much respect....So, Rani! Now this Raja is at your command. Abandon your stubbornness, and take the Raja and go back. Perhaps from someone’s teaching the Raja’s mind may turn, and no telling what will become of you.” The chief minister reasoned with the Rani a great deal in this way, but the Rani remained firm in her original wish, and paid no heed. Helpless, the chief minister went away from there. He passed the night somehow or other. As soon as dawn came the Raja set off. When it was afternoon, a river appeared, by the road. The Raja camped by that river. He sat by that river to bathe, and having bathed, sat on the riverbank and began to sing hymns to the Lord. In the meantime, a herd of female goats came to the river to drink. All the goats, having drunk, went away. Only one, drinking, remained behind. At that time a very choice flower came by, floating in the river. Having seen that flower, the goat craved it, and began to say to herself, “If somehow I can manage to get this flower to eat, it will be a good thing.” Having decided this in her mind, she stretched her mouth forward very much, but that flower couldn’t be reached. She remained standing there. When the male goat saw that all the female goats had come, except for one who had not, he went up to that goat and began to say, “All the goats have gone, why are you standing here?” That goat said, “If you bring me this flower, then I’ll go with you, and if you don’t bring me this flower, then I won’t go with you.” Having heard this, the male goat said, “If I go to get this flower, and drown, how would that be?” The female goat said, “Oh Goat! No matter what, I won’t go without this flower.” Having heard her words, the male goat became very angry, and with reddened eyes he said, “Oh Goat! I am not foolish like Raja Añgadhvaj, who is going to the bank of the Ganges in the power of a woman, to throw away his life.” Having said this, the male goat beat the female goat severely with his horns. Then out of fear, the female goat went along ahead of the male goat. These words of the male goat’s lodged in the Raja’s heart like an arrow. Inwardly he realized, “Look, I am even less than this male goat, that in the love of this Rani I have left the whole kingdom and come to squander my life. I didn’t even realize that this Rani whom I love so much was hungry for my life. What some poet has said is true--

A mother causes birth, a wife causes grief,  
The Goddess causes worship, Kālī causes death.

The Raja began to say to himself, “I am very foolish. Cursed be this intelligence of mine, and cursed too be women who with their many sweet words subjugate men, and cursed too be those men who come within the charming words of guileful

women, and lose their heads and become subjugated to them.<sup>12</sup> He then punishes his stubborn queen most severely: he has her whipped, blinded, and abandoned in the forest.

This dastan is clearly based on one of the most famous stories about Raja Bhoj, as contained in **Kissā rājā Bhoj** and many folktales; this Bhoj story has been briefly summarized in the previous chapter. In **Kissā rājā Bhoj**, the snake gives Bhoj the boon of understanding the language of all animals, and forbids him to reveal anything he hears from them. Thus the rest of the story follows naturally and easily: Bhoj laughs aloud at the pretentious conversation of two ants, and his pampered queen is driven wild by the very human desire to know that he is laughing at. The Bhoj story is much funnier, and somewhat more narratively plausible than Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl's dastan, which rests merely on the queen's insistent desire to know the source of certain information. And the overhearing of the goats' conversation fits much more integrally into the Bhoj story, as a corrective to the trouble caused by the overhearing of the ants' conversation. The Bhoj story leaves fewer loose ends: it explains why Bhoj can understand animals' language in the first place. By comparison, Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl has not organized his narrative so deftly; perhaps he knew the story only in a partial version.

But Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl has made something of his own from the story too. His early qissa is much longer and more detailed than the modern **Kissā rājā Bhoj** or any of the folktale versions. And he treats the story not humorously, but with considerable seriousness, and with great respect for Raja Aṅgadhvaj. To go out in the dead of night, alone and unguarded, at the sound of an unknown woman's tears, is the classic action of a true king and hero: "hearing the sound of her weeping, great pity entered the Raja's heart."<sup>13</sup> Facing the snake, whom he knows to be a rightful avenger of a previous birth's injustice, Raja Aṅgadhvaj again behaves with true gallantry. Though he hopes to placate the snake, and thus avoid being bitten, he would rather be bitten than allow his minister to kill the snake. When the snake hails his courage and virtue, it is no more than his due: his kingly qualities have earned him the right to live. When his obstinate queen demands the secret, even at the cost of his life, he has every reason and right to repudiate her unjustified demand. But though he can command others, and command himself in relation to others, he cannot command her. She is "hungry for his life," and he is in her power; his only stipulation is that he should meet his fate on the sacred banks of the Ganges. The party sets out for the Ganges; everyone tries to dissuade the Raja, but no one succeeds. The Raja remains silent; he shows a kingly dignity and power before all others except her. The chief minister then tackles the Rani, with a sequence of nicely calculated appeals to her self-interest, but even these fail; she is unmotivatedly obstinate, beyond even selfishness. The Raja has resigned himself to his fate--when he overhears the goat's words. Those words "lodged in the Raja's heart like an arrow." He sees his folly, his queen's power over him is broken, his hatred for her is in proportion to his previous love. In his bitterness he punishes her with a slow and cruel death.

In Aṅgadhvaj's life, his queen's brand of **triyā charitra** has very much the quality of a **ṭilism**. Aṅgadhvaj is under his Rani's spell, and nothing can rescue him from it until he accidentally blunders into a counterspell. The goat's words enter his heart like an arrow--like Ḥātim's final arrow which enters the parrot's heart and breaks the enchantment. And the queen herself is a kind of magician, wielding a strange and arbitrary power, invulnerable to ordinary

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<sup>12</sup>Qissā totā mainā, pp. 93-98.

<sup>13</sup>Qissā totā mainā, p. 89. See also **Siñhāsan battīsī**, N. S. Sharmā Gauṛ, pp. 46-47, and **Vetāl pachchīsī**, Rājā Rām Kumār, pp. 18-19.

human concerns, immune even to appeals to her own self-interest--almost disinterestedly evil, like a demon. Aṅgadhvaj's adventures begin with typical qissa ones--the mysterious weeping woman, with knowledge of the past and future, the powerful serpent--which are triumphantly surmounted. But these are followed by a special kind of **tilism** against which he is helpless, and from which he is saved only by great good fortune. The peculiar bitterness of this enchantment is that it is an inward one: one part of himself has been turned against another, his love for his wife has been used to destroy him. Amīr Ḥamzah never knew such devastating, heart-destroying enchantments, nor did Ḥātim Ṭāḥ. Vikram discovered **triyā charitra** in a purely external way, and promptly executed his guilty queens. Not until Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl did the qissa recognize a more bitter, painful, and inward-looking kind of sexual experience.

The case should not, however, be overstated. Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl writes very simply at best, very clumsily at worst. And his dastans are, as we have seen, uneven in quality. If at times he was doing new things with the qissa, there is no evidence that he was conscious of it. His own conclusion to his work is a happy reconciliation of sexual conflict through common sense.

In this way the quarrel was going on between the parrot and the mynah. In the meantime a wild goose came, and reached that tree and sat on it. Seeing their quarrel, he said, "Why are you quarreling?" Then the parrot and the mynah both said to the wild goose, "Please, you judge between us! We accept your decision." Then the wild goose said, "If you will accept what I say, then I will end your quarrel." Both vowed, "We will do what you say." Then the wild goose said, "You are both equal in debating. It is suitable that you both do what I say and get married, because in this world not all men and women are alike." Having heard this word of the wild goose, both the parrot and the mynah were happy, and choosing a good day, got married....In this way the parrot and the mynah both, by coming together, attained their desire. I too pray to the Supreme Lord that as the desire of the parrot and the mynah was fulfilled, in the same way the desire of the reader of this qissa be fulfilled.<sup>14</sup>

It is the classic closing formula among printed qissas: the happy ending for the characters is extended in fantasy to the reader as well.

About Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl himself it is possible to gather a certain amount of information. He lived in or near Mathura, and composed a series of qissas, **sāṅgits**, and Vaishnava devotional works, some of which became quite popular. The owners of the Shyāmkāshī Press in Mathura, one of the largest and oldest qissa publishers, claim that Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl Sharmā was their author, and composed his works originally for their press, which was founded around 1870.<sup>15</sup> From their collection of old publications it can be verified that their firm was publishing at least in the early 1880s, and that it published a great many works by Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl Sharmā. Other firms, however, also published his more popular works. Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl apparently died around 1897.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup>**Qissā totā mainā**, pp. 191-192.

<sup>15</sup>Interview with Mr. V. P. Agarvāl, Shyāmkāshī Press, Mathura, November 8, 1977.

<sup>16</sup>**Kissā Keshar Gulāb dūsrā bhāg**, by Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl (Agra: Matba Abul Ulāi, 1896, 41 p., Hindi), identifies Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl as "**Mathurā nivāsī**," a resident of Mathura. **Champā Chamelī**, by Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl (Mathura: Shyāmkāshī Press, S. 1955 [1898-99], 15 p., Hindi), identifies Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl as "**Vaikuṅṭh nivāsī**"--a resident of Viṣṇu's heaven.

Pañḍit Rañgīlāl obviously knew what pleased his readers. Among his qissas **Qissā totā mainā** is not the only perennial: **Qissā Keshar Gulāb** is still a member of that select group. And **Champā Chameli** is a former member: it remained quite popular, according to the S.A.M.P. records, until the end of the 1930s. As for his masterpiece, **Qissā totā mainā** itself, it must have been written before 1880, for an edition of it in the Delhi University Library is dated 1297 A.H. (1879-80).<sup>17</sup> It seems likely that **Qissā totā mainā** was written during the 1870s.<sup>18</sup>

Pañḍit Rañgīlāl's **Qissā totā mainā** had to compete with a number of other parrot-narrated tales. (In fact the tradition of the parrot-narrator was so established that Pañḍit Rañgīlāl's parrot tells one dastan featuring another parrot who tells several emboxed stories.) I have found several Urdu editions of a completely different **Qiṣṣah ṭoṭā mainā**--a work well described as "a collection of stories narrated to cure a king who was suffering from a disease which could only be remedied by listening to tales."<sup>19</sup> The work is full of traditional dastan adventures; the narrative style too is very reminiscent of dastan prose, and is probably late-nineteenth-century. Although there is rivalry between the parrot and the mynah, it is centered on their relative skill at **dāstān goḥ**, and their narratives do not express direct sexual hostility. This qissa is not in print today, and so few copies can be found that it probably has not been popular for years.

There seem to have been other versions as well that competed with Pañḍit Rañgīlāl's. In its 1932 catalogue, the Shrī Veñkaṭeshvar Steam Press of Bombay advertised an eight-part **Kissā totā mainā** which is probably Pañḍit Rañgīlāl's version, and also a **Kissā totā mainā bārahoñ bhāg**, "with all twelve parts," which it described as

interesting, edifying, compiled in the new style. From other qissas of this name, there is the fear of corrupting the character; but from reading this, even a corrupted character can be corrected, because in its twelve parts only very interesting and especially enlightening stories have been admitted.<sup>20</sup>

No trace of this latter version can be found today.

And certainly Pañḍit Rañgīlāl's text had to compete with the various parrot-narrated stories of sexual duplicity which found their origin in the Sanskrit classic **Shukasaptati** (The Parrot's Seventy [Tales]). The **Shukasaptati** is a group of short anecdotal stories used on successive evenings by a clever parrot to beguile a young wife in her husband's absence, in order to divert her attention from her waiting lover. Most of the tales describe ingenious ways in which unfaithful wives elude their husbands' vigilance, some depict shrewd men who outwit women in sexual affairs, a few relate other, miscellaneous instances of extraordinary ingenuity. This Sanskrit text gave rise to two famous Persian versions: the fourteenth century **Ṭūṭī nāmāh** of Żiyā ud-Dīn Naḥshabī, which contained fifty-two tales, and Muḥammad Qādirī's later abridgment of it to thirty-five tales. Only twelve of Naḥshabī's tales were borrowed directly

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<sup>17</sup>**Qiṣṣah ṭoṭā mainā**, by Munshī Ibne Parshād (Delhi: Maṭba,-e Fauq Kāshī, 1297 A.H. [1879-80], 31 p., Urdu). This edition has been Urduized not only in script but in vocabulary as well, presumably by Munshī Ibne Parshād. The Hindi edition had probably been out long enough by that date to become popular.

<sup>18</sup>This is my judgment based on the extensive collection of Pañḍit Rañgīlāl's works, and other late nineteenth-century works, owned by the Shyāmkaṣhī Press, to which Mr. V. P. Agarvāl generously gave me access.

<sup>19</sup>**Catalogue of Books and Periodicals Registered in the Punjab under Act XXV of 1867 and Act X of 1890**, 1910, 2nd quarter, p. 26.

<sup>20</sup>Shrī Veñkaṭeshvar Steam Press, **Brihat sūchīpatra** (Bombay: Shrī Veñkaṭeshvar Steam Press, 1932, 174 p., Hindi), p. 160.

from the Sanskrit; even his frame story ended differently, since the wife was finally killed for her intended (though not consummated) unfaithfulness, rather than forgiven as in the Sanskrit. Qādirī's shorter version was translated into Urdu at Fort William College by Ḥaidar Bakhsh Ḥaidarī, the author of **Qiṣṣah-e Ḥātim Ṭāf**. Ḥaidarī's Urdu version was called **Ṭoṭā kahānī** (The Parrot's Tale); it was popular for many years in both Urdu and Hindi, but seems to have gone out of print completely in the 1930s.

The **Shukasaptati** also gave rise to a Hindi version called **Shukbahattarī** (The Parrot's Seventy-two [Tales]). This work, which has a fixed, single-source text, was certainly in print by 1874, and perhaps by 1850.<sup>21</sup> Although most of its stories are more or less modified borrowings from the Sanskrit, a number are unique to the Hindi version.<sup>22</sup> The work seems to be losing popularity today, and may eventually go out of print. Both **Ṭoṭā kahānī** and **Shukbahattarī** are qissas by adoption or accretion, parts of the "outer layer" of modern printed qissa literature: their stories are shorter and slighter than those of the classical qissa tradition, and center on the humor and moral ambiguity of sexual conflict. By treating themes of sexual conflict with seriousness, dignity, and moral concern, Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl's work serves as a bridge between the classical qissa and works like these.

Nowadays, having overpowered all competition, Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl's text has become the established center to which other stories attach themselves. While the overwhelming majority of modern **Qissā totā mainā** editions consist of Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl's text in some or all of its traditional eight parts, a few supplement the work with additional stories. The limit case, Dehātī Pustak Bhañḍār's 721-page **Kissā totā mainā sampūrṇ paiṅsaṭh bhāg**, "complete with all sixty-five parts," prominently claims Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl as its author. Of its seventy-six dastans, the first fourteen are Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl's. Dehātī Pustak Bhañḍār has at various times published **Kissā totā mainā** in four editions: 8 **bhāg** (14 dastans); 16 **bhāg** (22 dastans); 32 **bhāg** (38 dastans); and 65 **bhāg** (76 dastans). Each larger edition simply incorporated the smaller ones. All these editions begin with Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl's text, and all claim him as author.

It was almost certainly this publisher's 32-**bhāg**, 38-dastan edition which was the basis for K. P. Bahadur's recent **The Parrot and the Starling**, the only English translation of the qissa. Bahadur bought his text at random from "a pavement-seller," and condensed and slightly modified its tales in the course of translation.<sup>23</sup>

One other extended version, Shrī Loknāth Pustakālay's **Kissā totā mainā sampūrṇ chaubīsoṅ bhāg**, "complete with all twenty-four parts," includes an introductory note from the publishers.

The story **Totā mainā** is very old--it is popular among thousands of Indian readers. In Hindi literature Pt. Raṅgīlāl was the first to get it published. At first this story too was among the ranks of simple stories, but because of its growing popularity the authors examined it, and this enlarged form of it came before the readers, for which the authors are worthy of congratulations.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>**Shukbahattarī** (Lucknow: Naval Kishor Press, 1874, 87 p., Hindi); I own this version, and it is the same which is in print today. **Shukbahattarī** (Varanasi: Benares Akhbar Press, 1850, Hindi) is mentioned in Government of the North Western Provinces, "On the Native Press," p. 271; but it might possibly have been a different version.

<sup>22</sup>Unique to the Hindi version: Stories 13, 27, 37-39, 46, 58, 60-66.

<sup>23</sup>K. P. Bahadur, trans., **The Parrot and the Starling** (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1977), pp. vi-vii.

<sup>24</sup>**Qissā totā mainā sampūrṇ chaubīsoṅ bhāg** (Calcutta: Shrī Loknāth Pustakālay, 264 p., Hindi), p. 2.

It is significant that even after this explicit avowal of modification, Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl's text is left virtually intact. One brief emboxed story is inserted in the third dastan, and at one point an extra dastan for the parrot is interpolated, giving him two in a row.<sup>25</sup> Otherwise, all the new dastans are simply added on after the end of the Raṅgīlāl text. The added stories are for the most part different from those added by the Dehātī Pustak Bhaṅḍār version--further proof that the Raṅgīlāl text, and only the Raṅgīlāl text, has earned for itself a special status.

Occasionally, of course, an unrelated work tries quite unabashedly to cash in on the popularity of Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl's text. Garg and Co.'s **Kissā totā mainā** imitates even the traditional cover picture used for Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl's text. In the frame story, when the parrot lands on the mynah's tree she asks him if he doesn't even have the courage to build his own nest. He replies,

“Oh Mynah! Today it's gotten late, so I didn't manage to get to my own nest. So I'll spend the night here, tomorrow I won't come here--don't think, Mynah, that I have no courage. I won't waste even this night: I'll tell you the stories of the heroes of India.”<sup>26</sup>

The parrot and the mynah then regale each other with patriotic moral tales of Hindu heroes. Such works are isolated instances, rarely reprinted--but they testify indirectly to the popularity of the work they imitate.

Pañḍit Raṅgīlāl's **Qissā totā mainā** is thus a uniquely interesting case among single-source qissas. It started with no prestigious source and no special advantages. From the first, it was in competition with other popular parrot-narrated qissas--some of which, like **Toṭā kahānī** and **Shukbahattarī**, were much older and better known. It also had to vie for attention with other works of its own title, from which it needed to be distinguished by its author's name. Yet while its rivals have steadily lost ground, it has gone on to become the most popular single qissa text of the twentieth century, and if anything its appeal, relative to that of other qissas, seems to be increasing.

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<sup>25</sup>**Qissā totā mainā** (Shrī Loknāth), pp. 21-22, 103-107.

<sup>26</sup>**Qissā totā mainā**, by Mohar Siñh (Delhi: Garg and Co., 20 p., Hindi), pp. 1-2.