

CHAPTER SEVEN: SHĪT BASAṄT

Having invoked Guru Gaṇesh,
and borne “Om” in my heart,
And remembered the voice of Sarasvatī,
I will write the story in detail.
I will describe all four parts
of **Kissā Shīt BasaṄt**,
In my mind I have grown very eager
and written from start to end.¹

In **Shīt BasaṄt** we have the chance to examine newly popular qissa versions of a tale called by folklorists “The Magic Bird-Heart” (Tale Type 567). Relying on Aarne’s research, Thompson writes of this tale,

It is well known in eastern Europe, especially in Russia and around the Baltic, but it is to be found in western and southern Europe as well. It is frequently found in North Africa and is reported once from much farther south in that continent. The French have taken it to Canada, where they still tell it, and from them it has doubtless been learned by the Ojibwas of southern Ontario. Though it is found in the Persian *Tuti-Nameh* of around 1300 A.D., Aarne demonstrates clearly that its life has been primarily oral and practically uninfluenced by literary retellings.

Aarne has also attempted to reconstruct “the probable form of the original tale,” and has concluded that “the most plausible home for the story is western Asia, perhaps Persia.”² This “original tale” is not very close to Indian versions of the story, and we will not be concerned with it here. We will be looking first of all at the qissa **Shīt BasaṄt**, then at the **sāṅgīt**, or folk-opera, **Rūp BasaṄt**, and finally at other Indian versions of the story, including many folktale versions.

Shīt BasaṄt is, as we will see, a relatively new qissa, in print only since the 1930s. It appears to be a popular one. Of two recent editions published by Shrī Loknāth Pustakālay, Calcutta, one is marked “70th time, 4000 (copies),” and the other, “71st time, 7000 (copies).” While the figures may be somewhat inflated, they certainly testify to a number of reprintings; the publisher is an old and established one. I have examined six Hindi editions of the qissa **Shīt BasaṄt**. All of them are quite recent, and told entirely in prose; two are identical in content, making five versions of the story in all. Versions A, D, and E are especially close. Version A in particular is well established, and is issued independently by two publishers, one in Calcutta and one in Varanasi. The general plot shared by versions A, D, and E will therefore be summarized, with major deviations by B and C duly noted.

The virtuous Raja Maheshvar Siñh of Maṇipur and his devoted queen, Rani Prabhāvatī, are overjoyed when two fine sons are born to them; at the astrologers’ advice, they name the elder Shīt (Winter), and the younger BasaṄt (Spring). But Rani Prābhavatī is troubled

¹Version D, p. 2. The main editions to be discussed in this chapter have been assigned letters from A to N; see Appendix B for details.

²Thompson, *The Folktale*, p.75.

by the behavior of some sparrows who nest outside the palace: the female sparrow dies, leaving the male with two young ones in the nest. When the male finds another mate, the new female attacks the young ones with her beak, and pushes them out of the nest to their death. The Rani is haunted by the fear that she herself might die, the Raja might remarry, and her sons might suffer a fate like that of the baby birds. All the Raja's vows and reassurances fail to comfort her.

In time, the Rani does in fact die, and the Raja does in fact remarry--though reluctantly, at his ministers' urging, and because he feels that his sons need a mother. His remarriage is the occasion of great celebration--in both traditional and modern modes:

All around the city it's a day of happiness. And before the royal palace all kinds of shows--like **nauṭāñkī**, **Rāmlilā**, **rāslilā**, circus, theater, bioscope (cinema)--are being shown free to the people. Everyone is being fed various kinds of food. **Pān** and cigarettes are being given away free.³

The new young Rani soon completely wins her elderly husband's heart, and for a time all is well.

But there eventually ensues, in two of the five versions, perhaps the single most shocking scene in qissa literature: an incestuous instance of the famous "Potiphar's wife" motif. One day while Shīt and Basañt are playing ball, their ball accidentally bounces into the Rani's chambers. Shīt goes to retrieve it.

...fearfully, with hands joined, Shīt said, "Mother! Pardon our carelessness, and please give us our ball. We'll never do such a thing again." Having heard Shīt's words, the Rani, seized by desire, came forward, and seizing both Shīt's hands and pulling them toward her bosom, said "Please don't be so anxious! Only *one* ball! *Both* these balls are fit for your playing with! Play with them however you want." This behavior of the Rani's made Shīt feel faint. Now poor Shīt began trembling in terror and tried very hard to free his hands--but the Rani didn't release them, and restless, gripped by desire, she began to say,

"What do you know, heartless one, about anyone,
What shape anyone's in, grieving for you."

When Shīt realized there was no way he could get free, he panicked. Saying "Mother! Mother!" he used his whole strength, and struck such a blow that that wretched woman fell to the floor with a crash. Trembling, Shīt ran away.

The above scene, from version D, is described very similarly in version C--but extenuating circumstances are also emphasized.

Dear readers! It's a real disaster that a mother should wish to misbehave with her son. It should also be realized that the saying is true: a marriage in old age is not one's own--but for others, for those in the neighborhood! Our Raja Chandradev is in this situation. At this time Raja Chandradev is already about seventy, and Rani Premlatā is about eighteen. You yourselves reflect, to what extent the desire of a new queen now in the flower of her youth, can be satisfied by an old man.⁴

Apart from A and C, however, the other qissa versions omit this scene. They merely report that the ball bounced into the Rani's chambers while she was undressed--and hit her forcefully on the breast.

³Version C, p. 8. The English words are merely transliterated "**sarkas, thiyc̄tar, bāyaskop (sinema)...sigaret.**"

⁴Version D, p. 8; version C, p. 10.

In any case, the Rani complains of Shīt's evil behavior (or blames both boys). She shows the Raja the mark on her breast, and claims she will die of pain and disgrace unless she can cure her wound with Shīt's liver. The Raja eventually agrees, and both boys are handed over to the executioners (though in versions C and E they are merely banished). This course of action is not merely inhumane, but according to several versions, extraordinarily foolish as well.

God had bestowed on both brothers this special quality, that when they laughed, rubies fell, and when they cried, pearls rained down. Yes, what a pity! Having been trapped in a woman's net of illusion, the Raja paid no heed to such jewels.

Another version makes the same point with an appropriate pun.

Shīt and Basañt had this remarkable trait: when they laughed, rubies [*lal*] fell, and when they cried, pearls. Taking no heed of such precious ones [*lal*], the Raja was attached to his wife.⁵

"*Lal*," which means "ruby," is also a term of affection, especially used for beloved children. But the executioners fortunately have second thoughts about their task.

When the executioners took Shīt and Basañt into the forest, they began to consult each other: "Now this is where we should kill them." Having heard this, an old executioner said, "Hey, Katbaruā, Patbaruā, listen, and take my advice. Kings' minds never stay fixed. Today they get angry and order somebody killed, but after some time when the Raja comes to his senses, then he takes it out on us! So take my advice: release both boys, kill a jackal, and take its liver to the Raja." Having heard this, they all got together and began to say, "Brothers, Uncle Gudarī is right in what he says. Kings' minds keep changing every minute." All of them, with this thought, released Shīt and Basañt, killed a jackal, took his liver, and started back. When they had gone a ways, one executioner said, "When the Raja makes us swear that this is Shīt and Basañt's liver, what then?" Having heard this, Gudarī said, "Shīt and the jackal come under the same sign of the zodiac. There's no harm in swearing." Then a second executioner said, "And if Shīt and Basañt come, what then?" Patbaruā said, "So what? We'll say that we killed them and got rid of their bodies! If the Lord revived them, then it's hardly our fault! If the Raja says, 'Can a dead man really live again?' I'll say, 'Executioners killed Prahlād and got rid of his body--then how did he get revived?'"⁶

Accordingly, they release the boys, and abandon them in the forest.

Shīt and Basañt comfort each other, and pass the night under a tree. Shīt sleeps, but Basañt lies awake, and overhears the conversation of two mynah birds in the tree. The birds discuss the auspiciousness of the hour, which is such that whoever eats the female mynah's meat will become a king at once, while the eater of the male mynah's meat will become a king after some time. (Version C includes only the first bird; in version B the second bird's meat will bring general success and good fortune.) With his bow and arrow Basañt skillfully brings down both birds. In the morning he and Shīt roast the birds on a fire of thorns; Shīt eats the female's meat, and Basañt the male's. But then a jackal appears and reproaches the boys for their folly: rather than eating the raw meat instantly, they waited and cooked it. Furthermore, since they roasted it on a fire of thorns, they will have thorns in their fortunes, and must endure bad times before their good times begin.

⁵Version D, p. 11; version A, pp. 6-7.

⁶Version A, pp. 7-8.

After another period of wandering, the boys approach a city. Shīt plans to go and bring back food, while Basañt gathers wood for cooking. But when Shīt enters the city, he finds the **svayamvar** (marriage-choice) of the local Raja's daughter in progress. The elephant who carries the ceremonial garland insists on giving it to Shīt, and after some reluctance the Raja accepts Shīt as his daughter's destined husband. But Shīt's troubles are far from over. A frustrated rival for Princess Rūpvantī's hand is determined on revenge. He eventually sends an evil old woman who poisons Shīt, and then tries to abduct the grieving Rūpvantī on a magic flying couch (**urāṇ khaṭolā**). When Rūpvantī realizes the scheme, she hurls herself down from mid-air, lands in a river, and is carried along by the current.

Basañt, left alone in the forest, becomes the servant of an old woman. She sells him to a merchant who is looking for a victim to sacrifice, in order to make his ship move. But Basañt frees the ship merely by touching it, and the merchant releases him unharmed. Wandering by the river, Basañt finds a woman lying on the bank, and recognizes Shīt's ring on her finger. It is Rūpvantī, and she has just the strength to tell her melancholy story before dying. Distraught at the news of Shīt's death, Basañt prepares for a suicidal leap from a treetop into the river. But the Goddess, in the form of an old woman, prevents him; she leads him along the riverbank to the ashes of Shīt's pyre, and directs him to cut his little finger and let the magic revivifying nectar (**amṛit**) inside it fall on Shīt's bones; then she vanishes. Shīt is thus revived, and the brothers happily reunited. (In version B, Shīt is revived by Basañt's ritual repetition of his name; in E, by a holy man who sprinkles him with water.)

Once again, the brothers spend the night under a tree. A snake comes to devour some baby swans whose nest is in the tree. (In version B, it is no ordinary snake, but "a horrible Dānav in the guise of a deadly serpent."⁷) The boys kill the snake with their swords. In the morning the grateful parent swans reward the boys: they promise good fortune for the future, and send one of their own nestlings to see the boys safely through their remaining difficulties. Some aspect of this scene provides the cover picture for almost all editions of the qissa: the nestlings in the tree, and the boys attacking the snake with their swords; or the grateful parent swans, the boys with bloody swords, snake fragments all around.

Shīt and Basañt wander on, accompanied by the young swan. Avoiding a demon-infested forest, they reach the seashore, and the swan offers to fly them across the ocean--on one condition.

"Both of you climb on my back, and I will cross the ocean, but don't absent-mindedly light a match, or my wings will burn, and all three of us will fall in the ocean." Having heard these words of the swan, they threw away their matchbox, and mounted the swan's back.

On the far shore, the boys and the swan build a little hut, and begin to live very comfortably. They have no financial worries, because of the boys' ability to laugh rubies and cry pearls. This amazing affluence, however, attracts suspicious attention in the nearby city.

In whichever shop they bought anything, they gave rubies and pearls in exchange. Having seen this, all the shopkeepers said among themselves, "These two boys are from some rich family." Someone said, "If they were from a rich family then their dress too would be rich. It seems that these two boys are thieves, and they have stolen these costly rubies from somewhere. If it were their own wealth, they wouldn't let themselves be looted like this. So they should both be seized and

⁷Version B, p. 19.

brought before the Raja and punished.” Having heard their words, a wise shopkeeper said, “Wherever they get it, what harm does it do us? We take rubies and pearls in payment for the smallest purchases.” Everyone understood this good man’s words, and they all fell silent.⁸

The merchants thus decide to let well enough alone.

But one day when Shīt is in town to make such purchases, his eyes meet those of Princess Phūlvantī, daughter of the local Raja of Chakrapur, as she is sitting at her window. The two fall in love. They exchange messages through the swan and Phūlvantī’s parrot. Then the swan flies Shīt to her window in the night, and the lovers are blissfully united. But suspicion is aroused, because Phūlvantī has always been so delicate that she has weighed exactly one flower--whereas now, many flowers hardly suffice to balance the scale. One night Shīt stays too long and is captured. Phūlvantī saves him from execution by threatening suicide, the two are married, and Shīt takes the throne of Chakrapur. In version B, Shīt acquires a more energetic princess, whom he meets during one of her daily hunting expeditions in the forest. But the result is the same: a marriage and a throne. In versions A and D, Basañt marries the chief minister’s daughter at the same time. The boys then visit their repentant father and stepmother. All is forgiven, and Basañt takes the throne of Manipur. In version B, Basañt then wins his own bride after he wanders into her kingdom while hunting. The story ends.

Version C, however, diverges from the above plot at a point just after the boys eat the magic birds. Basañt is killed by a poisonous snake; grief-stricken, Shīt wanders off to the nearby city and is chosen its new king. Later, Basañt is revived by Shiv--at Pārvati’s insistence, as usual. Then he too wanders into a city and is chosen in a princess’ **svayamvar** as her husband. At length the brothers meet by chance while hunting, and are happily reunited.

Shīt Basañt is a classic fairy tale, absolutely simple in structure yet emotionally resonant in a way that no analysis can exhaust. Its images are archetypal: birds, trees, water, serpents, jewels; the threat and promise of sex; death and rebirth; the forest as a place of mysterious encounters. Occasionally a scene will catch some writer’s imagination and be vividly portrayed: the stepmother’s seduction attempt, the executioners’ ingenious reasoning, the greedy merchants’ discussion. But such instances of colorful style are rare, vary from version to version, and cannot be the source of the story’s appeal. Rather, its appeal is in its very simplicity, its invitation to the reader to make of it what he or she wishes. It is the skeleton of a story, with all its archetypal bones exposed. Of all the qissas we have examined, it has the oldest and most notable history as an oral tale--and the newest and least significant history in written form. Yet it too, however simple, is a permutation of the classic qissa pattern. The noble and virtuous princes, their wandering in foreign lands, their constant encounters with magic forces both friendly and hostile, the seriousness and dignity of their adventures--all are familiar. Because of their youth, the princes are at first a bit pathetic and helpless--but by the time they kill the serpent and cross the ocean, they are already adults, and true qissa heroes. After much tribulation they obtain princesses and kingdoms--exactly the traditional objects of quest--and live happily ever after.

The S.A.M.P. records for this qissa, itemized in Appendix A, show a numerically limited but quite varied publication history. A few editions in other North Indian languages have been included, to give an idea of the story’s range. The genres of the various editions differ greatly. And as can be seen, the name of the elder brother is usually “Rūp,” and only rarely

⁸Version A, p. 20; version D, pp. 31-31.

“Shīt.” Moreover, all the editions which use the name “Shīt” are from 1935 or later, and all are either identified as qissas, or not identified by genre.⁹ It appears that the name “Shīt” and the qissa genre are usually associated, and that the qissa **Shīt Basañt** began to be published only in the 1930s.

The story figures most conspicuously in the S.A.M.P. records as a work in the **sāṅgīt** genre. In **sāṅgīt** versions, the elder brother is called Rūp. **Sāṅgīt** is a traditional form of North Indian folk opera performed by itinerant troupes (**maṇḍlī, akhārā**); in some areas essentially the same kind of theatre is called **svāñg** or **nauṭañkī**.¹⁰ **Sāṅgīt** began in the nineteenth century, growing out of earlier forms of folk opera. And one of its first influential productions was **Svāñg Rūp Basañt**, performed in Agra in 1827.¹¹ **Sāṅgīt Rūp Basañt** had a number of late nineteenth-century editions.¹² In the twentieth century, the S.A.M.P. records testify to its increasing popularity in printed form.¹³ I have been able to examine three complete modern versions of **Sāṅgīt Rūp Basañt**, all of which are uncommonly long: version H of 227 pages, version I of 192 pages, and version J of 132 pages. (Version K contains only the first part of the drama, and is 24 pages long.) These versions are, like all other **sāṅgīt** texts, entirely in verse.¹⁴ As dramatic “scripts” these versions differ considerably, but their basic plots are remarkably similar.

The **sāṅgīt** versions do not begin, as do most of the qissa versions, with the boys’ birth, but with the sparrow episode, the queen’s anxiety, her illness and death, the Raja’s reluctant remarriage. All the **sāṅgīt** versions describe the “Potiphar’s wife” scene with almost indecent relish¹⁵--but all except version H name Basañt as the brother involved in it. The queen’s accusations develop into prolonged, emotional scenes involving not only her and the Raja, but also both boys, the chief minister, the executioners, and the people of the city; it is easy to visualize the effectiveness of such scenes on the stage. Finally the Raja orders the boys’ banishment, and they are abandoned in the forest.

Only in version H do they encounter and eat the two magic birds of the qissa versions. In all the **sāṅgīt** versions, however, they are attacked by a snake, whose bite kills the sleeping Basañt in the night. Rūp, grieving, wanders off to a nearby city and appears at the right time and place to be chosen king; from then on he lives in happiness.

The rest of the drama is chiefly concerned with Basañt, who is soon restored to life and consoled by a passing holy man. Traveling on, Basañt kills a ferocious tiger--but then is

⁹“Swet,” used in several earlier editions, is not a form of “Shīt” but a different name entirely; it means “white” rather than “winter.”

¹⁰For a general account of the history of **sāṅgīt**, see Hansen, **Grounds for Play**; see also Agravāl, **Sāṅgīt**.

¹¹Agravāl, **Sāṅgīt**, pp. 66-67, 85.

¹²Agravāl, **Sāṅgīt**, p. 277; Blumhardt, **Catalogues of the Hindi, Panjabi, Sindhi, and Pushtu Printed Books in the Library of the British Museum**, Hindi section, col. 90; Blumhardt, **Catalogue of the Library of the India Office, vol 2: Part II: Hindi, Panjabi, Pushtu, and Sindhi Books**, p. 69.

¹³See also Agravāl, **Sāṅgīt**, pp. 273, 277.

¹⁴Although version J offers a few rare passages of prose dialogue: part 3, pp. 21-22, 44-45.

¹⁵For a discussion of this motif in **Rūp Basañt** and other **sāṅgīts** see Ved Prakash Vatuk and Sylvia Vatuk, “The Lustful Stepmother in the Folklore of Northwestern India,” **Journal of South Asian Literature** 11 (Fall-Winter 1975):19-43.

beaten and left for dead by the local police chief, who wishes to claim credit himself for the tiger's death. Basañt is nursed back to health by a virtuous potter couple, then later imprisoned by the police chief, and eventually given to a merchant (as in the qissa versions) to be used as a human sacrifice. But the ship moves at Basañt's touch, and the delighted merchant adopts him as a son.

At the next port, the local Raja's daughter sees Basañt, falls in love, and has her parents arrange their marriage. The wedding is celebrated splendidly, and the newlyweds embark on the merchant's ship. But the merchant, infatuated with the princess, pushes Basañt overboard. Basañt drifts ashore in Rūp's kingdom, where a kindly gardener and his wife shelter him. By the time the merchant's ship arrives, Basañt and his new allies are prepared with a plan. On the pretext of garland-selling, the gardener's wife manages to see the princess and tell her what to do. The princess then promises to marry the merchant on condition that, according to her "family custom," the "story of Rūp Basañt" should be told as part of the ceremony. Needless to say, no one can be found who knows the story except the gardener's "daughter," Basañt in disguise. He tells the whole story to a large gathering at which Raja Rūp is also present. The brothers are reunited, the wicked punished, and the virtuous rewarded. Rūp and Basañt return to visit their father's kingdom, forgiveness and reconciliation are achieved, and Basañt takes the throne. All the **sāṅgit** versions examined agree on these basic facts.

It is clear from the summaries given above that two distinct plots can be identified: one which we might call the Shīt plot, in which Shīt is the dominant figure, and which is contained in the qissa versions; and the other, the Basañt plot, in which Basañt's adventures form the main content of the story, and which is contained in the **sāṅgit** versions. In the Shīt plot, Shīt is involved in the Potiphar's wife incident, Shīt acquires a princess, Shīt is poisoned by a rival and revived. Shīt then wins another princess, and a throne; Basañt is a relatively passive figure, a little brother. In the Basañt plot, it is Basañt who is involved in the Potiphar's wife incident, Basañt who is poisoned by snake-bite and revived. Shīt receives a kingdom, and drops out of the story from then on--while Basañt kills a tiger, marries a princess, survives great hardships, and skillfully engineers the reunion. In each plot, it is the brother marked by the Potiphar's wife incident who is killed and revived, and who has the leading share in later adventures--especially sexual ones.

But while this division into a Shīt plot and a Basañt plot is clearly marked for the most part, it also has rough edges. For the qissa versions are not entirely coextensive with the Shīt plot, nor the **sāṅgit** versions with the Basañt plot. The **sāṅgit** version H has some features suggestive of the Shīt plot: Rūp as the participant in the Potiphar's wife incident, the presence of the two magic birds. And the qissa version C has some features suggestive of the Basañt plot: Basañt killed by a snake and revived by Shiv and Pārvatī, Basañt's winning of a princess in a marriage-choice.

Moreover, the issue is further complicated by the existence of idiosyncratic versions like version F, **Kathā Rūp Basañt**, and version G, **Qissā Rūp Basañt**, both of which are entirely in verse. They tell stories very close to the Basañt plot, although both contain two magic birds, as in the Shīt plot; in these versions, one bird is a kingmaker, and the other causes the eater to spit out rubies. Another verse version, the mid-nineteenth-century **Maśnavī afsānah-e ḡham ya,nī qışṣah-e Rūp Basañt**, follows the Basañt plot even more closely.¹⁶

¹⁶ **Maśnavī afsānah-e ḡham ya,nī qışṣah-e Rūp Basañt**, by Munshī Harchand Rāj Harchand (Kanpur: Maṭba,-e Naval Kishor, 1854, 30 p., Urdu); its plot is summarized in Nārang, **Hindūstānī qışṣoñ se mākhūz urdū**

In addition, several mostly prose **nāṭak** (drama) versions of the story exist; these are cast in the form of dramatic scripts. Significantly, **Shīt Basañt nāṭak** (version L) follows the Shīt plot very closely. Of the two versions called **Nāṭak Rūp Basañt**, one (version M) follows the Basañt plot with the addition of the two magic birds, while the other (version N) bears no relation at all to the traditional story, but concerns the efforts of a wicked courtier to deprive the boys' father of his throne.

For the purposes of comparison, I have also examined a large number of published versions of Indian oral folktales of the Magic Bird-heart type. Not all of them named the brothers, but I found the following instances:

Tale 2:	Sit	Lakhan
Tale 3:	Sheet	Basanta
Tale 4:	Sit	Bosont
Tale 5:	Turi	Basanta
Tale 6:	Sit	Basant
Tale 7:	Swet	Basanta
Tale 8:	Rupa	Bisuntha
Tale 12:	Hemanta	Basanta
Tale 14:	Cita	Vasanta
Tale 15:	Vijaya	Vasanta
Tale 16:	Cita	Vasanta
Tale 18:	Rup	Bussant

There is almost universal agreement on the name of the younger brother. The name of the older brother is most often "Shīt"; "Hemanta" means "winter," and is thus a variant of "Shīt." "Rūp" occurs only twice. And in other respects also the oral versions recall the Shīt plot, as can be seen from the following table:

maśnaviyāñ, pp. 101-104.

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SHĪT BASANT: FOLKTALE VERSIONS

INCIDENT

T A L E N U M B E R

sparrows (young ones killed)	-- - - - 4 5 6 -- 8 -- - 11 -- - 14 -- - - 18 19
stepmother quarrels	1 2 3 4 5 -- 7 -- - - 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 --
esp. with elder boy	-- - - - - - - 8 -- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - 19
esp. with younger boy	-- - - - - - - 6 -- - 9 -- - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
Potiphar's wife motif	-- - - - - - - - - 9 -- - - - - 14 -- - - - - - - - -
ball incident	-- - - - - - - 6 -- 8 -- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - 19
magic birds:	
kingmaker	1 2 -- - - 5 -- - - 8 9 -- 11 -- 13 14 -- - 17 18 19
jewel-giver	1 2 -- - - - - - - - 10 11 -- - 14 -- - - - - - - - -
other	-- - - - - - 5 -- - 8 9 -- - - - - 14 -- - 17 18 19
older boy chosen king	1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19
death and revival:	
of younger	-- - - - - - - - - 8 -- 10 11 -- - - - 15 -- 17 18 --
of older	-- - - - - - - - - - 9 -- - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
younger kills tiger/monster	1 -- - - - - - - - 8 9 -- - - - - - - - - - - - - 17 18 19
younger frees merchant's ship	-- - - - 4 5 -- - - 8 9 -- - - - - 14 -- - 17 18 --
princess marries:	
younger	1 -- 3 4 5 -- - - - 9 -- 11 12 -- 14 -- - 17 18 --
older	-- - - - 4 -- -
younger thrown overboard	1 -- - 4 5 -- - - - 9 -- 11 -- 13 14 -- - 17 18 --
reunion through younger's story	-- - - - 4 5 -- - - 8 -- - - - - 13 14 -- - 17 18 --

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The oral versions are very hesitant--as is the Shīt plot--about the Potiphar's wife episode: they often replace it with some other quarrel, or with a general description of the stepmother's jealousy and hostility. And the oral versions generally give a prominent place to the two magic birds--as does the Shīt plot.

But similarities to the Basañt plot can also be seen. All the oral versions agree that the older brother is chosen king--usually either by the behavior of a special elephant, or by his appearing at a predicted place at an auspicious time. Sometimes he passes through some ordeal in the process of winning the kingship; but once he is settled on the throne--usually quite early in the story--the younger brother dominates the rest of the narrative. As can easily be seen, in many versions the younger brother's adventures are quite close to those of the Basañt plot. He dies, usually of snakebite, and is revived; he kills a tiger or monster; he saves himself from being sacrificed by causing a merchant's ship to move. He is chosen by a princess as her husband, and thrown overboard by jealous rivals. He survives, and achieves reunion with his brother by telling the story of their lives.

Additional points of comparison could be adduced, but it is clear that both the Shīt plot and the Basañt plot have affinities with oral tales. The Shīt plot retains the oral tales' emphasis on the magic birds, and their name "Shīt" for the older brother; but it provides a much more impressive set of adventures for the older brother, at the expense of the younger, than does any oral tale. The Basañt plot emphasizes the Potiphar's wife incident, renames the older brother "Rūp"--but narrates the younger brother's numerous adventures almost exactly as they are described in oral tales.

Oral versions of the tale thus provide possible sources from which the plots of the printed versions begin their further development. In fact it is easy to show that the influence of oral versions has caused significant perturbations and anomalies in printed versions of the tale. The motif of the magic birds offers perhaps the most striking case in point. The tale-type itself is called "The Magic Bird-heart,"¹⁷ and the above chart shows how common the magic birds are in Indian oral versions of the story. Almost invariably in these versions one of the birds is a kingmaker; the older brother eats its meat, and quickly obtains a throne. There is less consensus about the other bird. Its meat may make the eater king after some time has passed, or a king's minister. Or its meat may bring first a period of misery, then happiness, or may bestow the thirty-two marks of perfection.¹⁸

But the most common quality is to cause the eater to produce or obtain jewels. Gold pieces "fall in a shower from the smiles" of the eater; he is caused to "spit gold"; every morning he finds "in the place where he lay, seven jewels"; he finds himself "in possession of a diamond every morning." Or the magic agent is a fish: when its eater laughs, jewels fall from his lips, and when he weeps, pearls drop from his eyes.¹⁹ Now this sort of ability cannot long go unnoticed, and as soon as the younger prince has eaten the magic bird, its effects enter into the story. His new ability amazes observers, makes him wealthy, charms a princess into marrying him, initiates a reunion with his brother; it makes him wealthy and wins him a princess as bride; it procures his escape from a robbers' dungeon and wins him a bride; it causes an avaricious

¹⁷Thompson and Bals, *The Oral Tales of India*, pp. 86-87.

¹⁸King after some time: Tale 13, p. 71; a king's minister: Tale 8, p. 62, Tale 17, p. 130, Tale 18, p. 415; misery then happiness: Tale 5, p. 261, Tale 19, p. 77; thirty-two marks: Tale 9, pp. 283-284.

¹⁹Tale 1, p. 62; Tale 2, p. 239; Tale 11, p. 169; Tale 14, p. 167; Tale 7, p. 97.

merchant to make him drunk to discover his secret--and then to persecute him when the power is lost through drinking. And most dreadful of all, an avaricious merchant kidnaps him, and arranges for him to laugh and cry the maximum number of jewels: "After this poor Basanta was alternately whipped and tickled all the day and far into the night." Although sometimes the magic bird itself merely "lays rubies instead of eggs," generally it is eaten, and markedly affects the adventures of the younger prince.²⁰

In the printed versions, however, the situation is conspicuously different. In all the qissa versions, one bird is a kingmaker. The other will make the eater king after some time (versions A, D, and E) or generally fortunate and successful (version B); or there is only one bird (version C). Yet the traditional jewel-giving motif seems to force itself into the plot. We have seen how versions A and D describe jewel-giving power as a remarkable quality of the boys' physiology. Version E does not even find it remarkable, but simply reports of the boys, "When they laughed, rubies rained down, and when they wept, pearls."²¹ In all these versions the boys' ability attracts no attention--neither from the two princesses Shīt marries, nor from the cruel police chief or the exploitative merchant who holds Basaṇt captive, nor from the humble potters who befriend him. In the oral versions, all such characters are greatly impressed by the jewel-giving power, and modify their behavior accordingly. Yet in the qissa versions the boys' gift is ignored--until it is abruptly brought into play to help the boys support themselves in a strange country, as we have seen, and makes the local shopkeepers suspicious. Version E in fact entirely forgets that the boys have this power, and explains that their companion swan "began to bring pearls and rubies from the sea, and give them to Shīt and Basaṇt."²² Thus the jewel-giving power, so prominent and effectively used in the oral tales, is neither explained at all by the qissa versions, nor plausibly integrated into the plot. Yet it seems to be felt as a proper and necessary feature of the story, and is included even at the cost of narrative incoherence.

In other printed versions the incongruity is even more marked. Four versions in different genres (versions F, G, H, and M) include a bird whose eater will "spit out rubies" or "rain down swan-pearsls."²³ In each case Basaṇt eats this bird. And since these versions follow the Basaṇt plot, their accounts of Basaṇt's adventures are lengthy and detailed. Yet his jewel-giving ability is never mentioned, and plays no role in the development of the story. The printed editions thus fail to make any narrative use of the jewel-giving motif--though they do, under the influence of oral tradition, insist on including it somehow in the story.

Modern printed versions of the story, of whatever genre, are thus embedded in a matrix of oral tales. They not only share many narrative elements with these tales, but are influenced by them even to the point of self-contradiction and incongruity of plot. Yet this oral tale tradition is not sufficient in itself to explain the varying texts of the qissa versions. For the case of Raja Vikram provides an effective counter-example. We have looked at only a small sample of the enormous body of traditional narrative material, much of it oral, which deals with Vikram. Oral tales of the Vikram cycle are far more widespread and popular all over India than are tales of the Magic Bird-heart type. Yet as we have seen, **Siñhāsan battīṣī** and **Baitāl**

²⁰Tale 1, pp. 64-66; Tale 2, p. 240; Tale 11, p. 171; Tale 14, pp. 168-169; Tale 7, p. 103; Tale 10, p. 81.

²¹Version E, p. 7.

²²Version E, p. 22.

²³Rubies: version F, p. 8; version G, p. 4; version M, p. 42. Pearls: version H, p. 77.

pachchīsī, the most important Vikram tales, remain confined to single versions. Why then do the **Shīt Basāñt** qissa versions vary so freely?

A possible answer lies in the way the qissa **Shīt Basāñt** is associated with related printed versions in different genres. In particular, **Sāñgīt Rūp Basāñt** is older and better-established than the qissa form of the story; it goes back, as we have seen, to the early nineteenth century. And not only is this **sāñgīt** still popular in printed form, but it is also still being presented by itinerant performing troupes.²⁴ The continuing popularity of versions of the story in genres like **sāñgīt** would seem likely to encourage textual variation.

An obvious way to test this explanation is by looking at other qissas which have **sāñgīt** versions. If we consider the perennials, we find that eight of them, all single-source works, seem never to have directly inspired any **sāñgīt** versions: **Baitāl pachchīsī**, **Qiṣṣah-e chahār darvesh**, **Qissā Dallā**, **Qiṣṣah-e Hātim Ṭāf**, **Keshar Gulāb**, **Sāṛhe tīn yār**, **Siñhāsan battīsī**, **Qissā totā mainā**.²⁵ Qissas with only a few sporadic **sāñgīt** versions include **Gul-e bakāvalī**, **Gul o Ṣanobar**, and (as we have seen) **Sārañgā Sadāvrij**.²⁶ According to the S.A.M.P. publication records, **Chhabīlī bhaṭiyārī** had half a dozen **sāñgīt** editions between 1920 and 1933, and **Fasānah-e ,ajā fb** an equal number between about 1904 and 1918.²⁷

And, surely not coincidentally, the two perennials most closely associated with the **sāñgīt** tradition both have widely varying texts: **Triyā charitra** and **Lailā Majnūn**. The S.A.M.P. records include 26 **sāñgīt** editions of **Triyā charitra** between 1911 and 1940, while Agravāl mentions three versions. As for **Lailā Majnūn**, the S.A.M.P. records mention no **sāñgīt** editions at all--but Agravāl lists no fewer than nine different versions.²⁸ (These discrepancies in reporting probably tell us more about the limitations of available records than about actual printing history.) **Triyā charitra** and **Lailā Majnūn** also share with **Shīt Basāñt** a long history of popularity in many languages and many genres, both verse and prose, both oral and written. “**Triyā charitra**,” a common theme in Sanskrit story literature, is a common folktale in modern North India as well.²⁹ And **Lailā Majnūn**, after its long folk and literary history in Arabic and Persian, has become equally popular in both Urdu and Hindi.³⁰ **Triyā charitra** began to be printed in qissa form in 1896, and in **sāñgīt** form by 1911. **Lailā Majnūn** began to be printed in **sāñgīt** form by 1833, and in qissa form by 1846. In neither case was the interval nearly as great as for **Shīt Basāñt**, which began to be printed in **sāñgīt** form by 1874, and in qissa form by 1938. **Shīt Basāñt** is the only qissa to be associated with a **sāñgīt** tradition of significantly greater age and very much greater popularity.

²⁴Vatuk and Vatuk, “The Lustful Stepmother,” pp. 22-23.

²⁵Though the figure of Vikram has inspired several **sāñgīts**; see “Vikram” in Appendix C. See also Vatuk and Vatuk, “The Lustful Stepmother,” on the Vikram-based **Sāñgīt bhābhī kā pyār**.

²⁶See Appendix B, and Agravāl, **Sāñgīt**, pp. 113, 274 (on **Gul-e bakāvalī**), and p. 277 (on **Gul o Ṣanobar**). Nowhere does Agravāl mention any **sāñgīt** edition of **Sārañgā Sadāvrij**.

²⁷Some of these editions were probably reprints of each other, rather than different versions. See Appendix B, and Agravāl, **Sāñgīt**, p. 274 (on **Chhabīlī bhaṭiyārī**).

²⁸Agravāl, **Sāñgīt**, pp. 109, 274, 276 (on **Triyā charitra**), and pp. 113, 117, 232, 272, 274, 276-277 (on **Lailā Majnūn**).

²⁹Mohanlāl Bābulkar, **Gārhvālī lok sāhitya kā vivecanātmak adhyāyan** (Allahabad: Hindī Sāhitya Sammelan, 1964), p. 231; Agarchand Nahtā, “Tin sau kathāoñ kī ek sūchī,” **Māru Bhāratī** 14 (October 1966):52.

³⁰See Appendix B, and Farmān Fathpūrī, **Urdū kī manzūm dāstāneñ**, pp. 432-443.

We have seen that three important qissas with varying texts all have related **sāṅgīt** traditions of considerable popularity. Although it is difficult at this point to make precise statements about how qissa and **sāṅgīt** versions interact, they undoubtedly do influence each other. And it seems very probable that one effect of this mutual influence is to encourage variation in printed qissa versions.