

# Impregnating food. The miraculous conception motif in Indian narratives

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It is a well-known fact that, for many reasons, producing a son has always been of utmost importance for an Indian couple. For the husband, a male child meant not only the possibility to ensure the continuation of his patrilineage, but also the fulfilment of obligations to the ancestors. A woman truly entered her affinal home only with the birth of a child, and giving birth to a son made her incorporation into the husband's family worthy of celebration.

Everyday life in its all manifestations, along with all its sorrows and joys, is reflected in human literary creativity. No wonder, therefore, that the question of how to get a son has become the nucleus of many Sanskrit narratives as well as of folk tales in different vernaculars. Longing for a child stimulated their heroes to undertake different actions. All the methods used could be divided into three groups:

- I. ritualistic means (sacrifices, special rituals engendering a male issue),
- II. psycho-physical means (ascetic practices, fasts and other mortifications),
- III. animal and vegetal remedies (special food and concoctions).

It sometimes happens that the means belonging to two or all three groups are combined, whereas, at other times, another and immediate solution is undertaken, namely the adoption of a son. In any case, we shall focus on the motif of impregnating food, which occurs frequently in Indian narrative literature and poses interesting questions. Let us quote a handful of examples first.<sup>1</sup>

As collections of different stories, it seems that the adaptations of the *Bṛhatkathā* cycle are a good source of material. In the *Kathāsaritsāgara* of Somadeva (11<sup>th</sup> century CE), as well as in the *Bṛhatkathāmañjarī*<sup>2</sup> of Kṣemendra (c. 990–1070

1. Some of these examples were discussed in my article (Sudyka 1992) devoted to the miraculous conception motif in the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, published in the brochure *Seminarium Sanskrytu. Miscelanea* edited by Sławomir Cieślowski, Hubert Hładij and Lucyna Sawicka.

2. Both the *Kathāsaritsāgara* ('Ocean whose Rivers are Stories') and the *Bṛhatkathāmañjarī* ('Cluster of Blossoms of the Great Story') belong to Sanskrit paraphrases of the now lost *Bṛhatkathā* ('Great Story'), written in 11<sup>th</sup> century Kashmir. The earliest Sanskrit version of the

CE), there is a story of a childless king,<sup>3</sup> Parityagasena (*Kathāsaritsāgara* VII.8). Together with his two wives he prayed to the Goddess Durgā and begged for a son. He fasted and slept on *darbha* grass for a long time and, finally, he saw the Goddess, who gave him two fruits for his wives to eat in order to obtain sons. One of the queens deceitfully ate both fruits and gave birth to twins. The name of the fruit is not specified, it is just given as *phaladvayam*, i.e. 'a pair of fruits'. The story of King Virabhuja (*Kathāsaritsāgara* VII.5) shows a more 'scientific' treatment of childlessness. Although Virabhuja had a hundred wives, not one of them had borne him a son. He asked a physician (the text uses two terms: *vaidya* and *bhīṣaj*) for advice, and the latter then prepared a special soup (*rasaka*) from the flesh of a wild goat and gave it to ninety-nine of the queens along with some medicine. Alas, the doctor did not perceive the absence of the king's beloved wife Guṇavarā. The physician found a solution for the problem by preparing a very special elixir made from goat's horn for her. All the queens brought forth sons, but only Guṇavarā's son had very auspicious marks on him and, as the rest of the story shows, he was the only son who deserved to be an heir to the throne. In the *Bṛhatkathāślokaṣaṅgraha*, a very ugly woman named Piṅgalikā was reminded by Viṣṇu about her good deed in a former birth which could provide her with a husband and many children. This consisted in a gift of a bushel of barley to a *brāhmaṇa*.<sup>4</sup> In this case, a mother-to-be was not a recipient of food but she herself donated it.

In the folktales of Bengal recorded by Lal Behari Day, one can find a story about a king who had seven wives and not a single offspring. One day a *sādhu* told him to pick seven mango fruits from a tree growing outside his capital city. After consuming the mangoes, all the queens gave birth to their children.<sup>5</sup> Yet another story from the same collection tells about a barren queen who was given a medicine by a certain holy man, who recommended her to drink it with pomegranate juice.<sup>6</sup> Then in due time she gave birth to a son as beautiful as a pomegranate flower, which is why he was called Dalim (Pomegranate). A folk tale from the Maharashtra region describes a king who, after ascetic practises and prayers to Śiva, was given two mango fruits for each of his two wives.<sup>7</sup> His

'Great Story' is the *Bṛhatkathāślokaṣaṅgraha* ('Selection from the Great Story') of Budhasvāmin (c. 8–9<sup>th</sup> century CE). More about these works in Warder 1990 and Warder 1992.

3. The problem of childlessness is particularly painful for kings and dangerous for their kingdoms. As noticed by King Udayana, one of the main heroes of the *Bṛhatkathā* adaptations, if he dies without a son, there will be no one to guard his fortune (*Bṛhatkathāślokaṣaṅgraha* of Budhasvāmin, IV.43) and since, in such a case, his merits are few, his going to hell is a certainty (IV.53).

4. Maten 1973, 13–14.

5. Day 1912, 113.

6. *Ibid.*, 1.

7. Dikshit 1980, 33.

favourite wife did not believe in the miraculous properties of a common fruit, but the second one ate both of them and gave birth to twin boys.

What can be noticed while analysing these stories? The motif of miraculous conception after eating a certain fruit is very popular in folk tales all over the world.<sup>8</sup> However, is there any viable explanation as to why the mango fruit appears so frequently in such stories? Mary Brockington, in her article *Jarāsaṃdha and the Magic Mango: Causes and Consequences in Epic and Oral Tales*, states that the mango fruit offered by the sage Caṇḍakauśika to the barren King Bṛhadratha may be the earliest recorded instance of its use as part of a fertility-charm. She also points to the fact that it was not only the mango fruit, but also other parts of the tree that 'have had erotic associations in Indian literature since at least the time of Kālidāsa (...)'.<sup>9</sup> Mango leaves are considered auspicious in marriage rituals as they are believed to assure the birth of sons. It is said that whenever there is a birth of a son, a mango tree bears new leaves. Oral tales abound in mango-motifs.<sup>10</sup> Mary Brockington mentions 'the association with the fertility of the mango stone, seen among the Gadaba and Kond tribes as resembling human testicles (...)'.<sup>11</sup> It is worth indicating that mangoes very often grow in pairs: one fruit is bigger, the other smaller (Fig. 1). And this is perhaps the hint which unravels the mystery of involving mangoes in fertility-charms: the equivalence between macro- and microcosm, exactly as explained by Paracelsus, who believed that all earthly objects are impressed with divine powers (macrocosm), and in this way we have 'signatures', i.e. the indications as to which parts of the body (microcosm) they could serve as the best remedies and medicaments; in other words: to understand the world of the human body, knowledge of the functioning of the universe is needed. This way of reasoning is in fact very close to the Indian way of thinking, where attempts were made to correlate different macrocosmic principles with corresponding microcosmic ones.

Conception after drinking pomegranate juice can also be explained in a similar manner: the fruit consists of so many seeds. The potential to give birth to hundreds of new plants is hidden inside this quite small 'seeded apple'. The same concerns the gift of the bushel of barley – each barley ear has many seeds. Piṅgalikā had given a bushel of barley to a *brāhmaṇa* which was, indeed, a very pious act, but the fact that her gift consists of grain seeds is of greater importance. In return, the ugly woman was blessed with a husband and many children.

8. See the chapter 'Conception and Birth' in the *Motif-Index of Folk-Literature*, Thompson 1957, 302-5.

9. Brockington 2000, 86.

10. Perhaps the legend about finding the famous courtesan Ambapāli/Amrapāli in the mango grove, hence her name, is also associated with this motif.

11. Brockington 2000, 87.

The story concerning King Vīrabhuja and his wives seems to address the problem of childlessness from a more rational standpoint. The physician is asked for advice and he prepares an extract from wild goat's meat. According to ancient medical treatises, what did physicians recommend for childless couples? Of course, first of all aphrodisiacs. The libidinal effects of eating special food, spices, herbs, and minerals were important but also some remedies to cure this particular inability were recommended. In the ninth *adhyāya* of *Cikitsāsthāna* of the *Carakasamhitā*, for instance, 'auspicious clarified butter' (Skt. *kalyāṇakam ghṛtam*) is recommended for barren women (*strīṇāṃ ca vandhyānām*). It must have been a time-consuming endeavour to prepare this substance because the recipe names as many as 28 different ingredients, which should be ground together and added to the clarified butter together with *akṣa*,<sup>12</sup> and then boiled together with water until  $\frac{1}{4}$  of the liquid remains. But it was worth putting effort into preparing it, since, among other beneficial properties, it was the best remedy for obtaining a male child as Caraka indicates: 'This auspicious clarified butter is the best in respect of bringing forth male progeny' (*kalyāṇakam idaṃ sarpiḥ śreṣṭham puṃsavaneṣu ca, Carakasamhitā IX.23a*).

Among all these ingredients, pomegranate – *dāḍīma* – is mentioned. This time, however, its role is not decisive; it is just one of many substances, but the belief in its beneficial influence on generative organs and fertility possibly comes from folk tradition. Nevertheless, it should be mentioned that the nutritious values of certain remedies are also taken into consideration by the authors of medical treatises. To function properly, the human body and mind should be in good condition and for this purpose proper food is needed. This mixture known as *kalyāṇakam ghṛtam* is also described as effecting long life and vigour (*āyur-bala-pradam*).

To get back to the Vīrabhuja story, the queens received special treatment here, namely a dish made from wild goat meat. Eating big game as a good diet to maintain sexual activity is shown as one of the benefits of hunting, which is otherwise considered as one of the addictions or vices (Skt. *vyasana*) of the human race.<sup>13</sup> According to the *Śyainikaśāstra* ('A Treatise on Hunting with a Hawk') ascribed to Rājā Rudradeva of Kumaon:

By the eating of the wholesome meat of the wild boar and buffaloes bagged

12. *akṣa* – most probably *Terminalia bellerica* (see Meulenbeld 1974, 521, 601).

13. E.g. in Kauṭīliya's *Arthaśāstra*, hunting is mentioned as the last among eighteen addictions discussed in the *Puruṣavyasanasarga*. It is stated that between hunting and gambling, hunting is the worse vice, seeing that falling into the hands of robbers, enemies, and elephants, getting into wild fire, fear, the inability to distinguish between the cardinal points, hunger, thirst and loss of life are evils consequent upon hunting. But, Kauṭīliya remarks, there are also positive things which should be said about hunting: exercise, the disappearance of phlegm, bile, fat, and sweat, the acquisition of the skill of aiming at stationary and moving bodies, the ascertainment of the appearance of beasts when provoked and occasional marching (AŚ VIII.3).

in hunting, sexual desire and capacity are increased, which leads to the enjoyment of women by the increase of strength. (III.25)<sup>14</sup>

Such a diet could help men to have progeny. In the *Kathāsaritsāgara*, women were served game only once, just as medicine. And the most important of these women received a *rasaka* made from goat's horn, which according to the physician was the best remedy, and, indeed, this decoction produced the best results. The boy who was born, after the queen had eaten the cooked meat extracted from the horns (*śṛṅgamamsa*), and hence called Śṛṅgabhuja, was a paragon of handsomeness and possessed all the possible and necessary qualities of an heir to the throne. The sexual connotations of the wild goat and its horns are obvious and this must be the reason for introducing it into a fertility-charm.

One could also take into consideration the fact that all these tales about impregnating food, so popular among tribal people in different parts of the world, are based on a close observation of nature, and certain substances introduced into the diet can really stimulate procreativity and even help in programming the sex of the progeny. As confirmed by modern pharmacology, certain parts of animal organisms provide precious substances and drugs. Horns and hooves provide amino acids, the urine of pregnant cows or mares contains folliculin, and so on. Perhaps interesting hints for medical doctors are still hidden in folk tales, and according to Paracelsus's statement:

Not all things the physician must know are taught in the academies. Now and then, he must turn to old women, to Tartars who are called gypsies, to itinerant musicians, to elderly country folk and many others who are frequently held in contempt.<sup>15</sup>

And it must be said that nowadays there is an increasing awareness about the medicinal properties of plants and other ingredients known and applied by traditional medicine. Modern medicine can profit from the knowledge developed over generations within different communities. Scientists are testing various plants used by indigenous medicine centuries ago. Quite recently, researchers have tested the reproductive impact of aqueous mango leaf extract on rats. In conclusion they write:

Estradiol level was also significantly increased compared to control while other hormones such as progesterone and LH were not affected. FSH is responsible for stimulating the growth of the graffian follicles indicating that the MILE [i.e. aqueous leaf extract of *Mangifera indica* – LS] influenced the cycle via the pituitary ovarian axis hormones, as a reduction in the FSH level will also potentate a decrease in growth of the follicles which are ultimately

14. *Śyainikaśāstra*, Shāstri 1910, 10.

15. Debus 1978, 10.

released during ovulation. However, no significant alteration was recorded in the number of implants or viable fetus at day 19 of pregnancy in extract treated rats compared to control. Further work will be required to investigate the effect of the extract on ovulation and fertilization of the oocyte.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, in the future and following further research, it could turn out that *Mangifera indica* leaves or other parts of this plant could actually have an impact on human fertility, and that it was not only magical thinking which associated it with procreativity.

16. Awobajo–Olatunji-Bello–Ogbewey 2013, 62. I should like to thank Dr. Thomas Kintaert who brought this article to my attention.

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Fig. 1. Branches of mango tree with fruits (photo L. Sudyka).

