

THE ṚṢYAŚṚṄGA STORY—A DRAVIDIAN RAIN MYTH

HERMANN BERGER

The humorous tale of Ṛṣyaśṛṅga must have been extremely popular in ancient India, as it is found not only in the epics and in the Purāṇas, but also in the Buddhist tradition. Apart from trifling variants, the story is the same in all versions:

Ṛṣyaśṛṅga was the son of the great Ṛṣi Vibhāṇḍaka and a heavenly nymph (*apsaras*); he had a horn on his forehead, because his mother had the shape of a deer when she conceived him. He grew up in the jungle without having ever seen any human being except his father. Once the country of King *Lomapāda* (or *Romapāda*) was hit by a terrible drought, and it was learned that rain would only come again if R. would be brought to the king's residence. *Śāntā*, the lovely daughter of King *Lomapāda*, was sent to the hermitage together with a host of courtesans on a decorated raft, where she seduced and abducted *Ṛṣyaśṛṅga*, who took her for a young ascetic. His father *Vibhāṇḍaka* was very furious at first, but finally agreed to their marriage.¹

It was the German indologist L. V. Schroeder who first suggested that behind this tale an old ritual play for obtaining rain might be hidden.² But he was without doubt wrong in assuming that it was of Aryan origin. In this paper I hope to show that it is in fact based on a rain myth, but of Dravidian origin. The proof is based on the etymology of the name of the Ṛṣi *Vibhāṇḍaka* which is clearly of non-Aryan origin.

From the Dravidian Kurukh (or Oraon) in Chota Nagpur, the Rev. Hahn has recorded the following story:

There was a man called *Bīrbal*; when he laughed it rained. One time he did not laugh for a whole year and consequently there was a drought in the country, and he was driven away by the angry king. He took rest in a hostel, where other people had come and taken rest in different corners without knowing of each other. At midnight due to a series of misunderstandings

a terrible noise and confusion arose, which made Bīrbal laugh, and rain came again.³

If we put aside the second part of the story and its silly jokes, it has nothing in common with the Rśyaśrūga tale except the central motif of the rain-bestowing superman and the name Bīrbal which is vaguely reminiscent of *Vibhāṇḍaka*. But two other versions will supply further details.

The Bhāmṭās, a criminal tribe found in Berar and M.P., but according to Grierson probably coming from the Telugu country, tell about *Bīrbal*:⁴

He had a son and was the prime minister of a king, who had also a son. These two were great friends and agreed that whichever of the two was married first, should send his wife to the other's house. The king's son was married first and sent his wife to Bīrbal's house before he himself had gone to bed with her. On the way she was attacked by robbers who wanted to take away her ornaments, but she asked them to take them only on her return. When she arrived, *Bīrbal* said that he looked upon her as his sister and gave her valuable presents. On her way back she met again the robbers who had found enormous booty in the meantime and therefore did not want her ornaments any longer.

Here *Bīrbal* is no longer the rain-giver, but another trait, the sending of the king's daughter decked with ornaments to gladden him, is well-preserved instead. Furthermore it is interesting that *Bīrbal* is a prime minister in this version; obviously the main figure has been confused in both tales with the famous minister of the same name at Akbar's court, who is the hero of countless popular tales especially in Bihar,⁵ and an older form of this name has been remodelled accordingly. He is obviously confused with his son in the second part of the story, as is the king with *his* son.⁶

A story from the Santal area retains the original name.

Birbaṅṭa of the oilman's caste owned many tanks and ponds, but he did not allow *Birluri* of the Goala caste to send his cows there. When *Birluri* was prepared to fight him, he became so furious that he prevented all people and animals from drinking his water. The angry king of this country promised one of his daughters and half of his kingdom to the man who would kill *Birbaṅṭa*. *Birluri* was ready to kill him. His deceased mother in the guise of an old woman advised him not to give any water to *Birbaṅṭa* and to take his sword when he throws it away. *Birluri*

fought *Birbaṅṭa* only with a quarter-staff, producing a big cloud of dust. He defeated with his own sword *Birbaṅṭa* and won the king's daughter.⁷

In this story the motif of *Vibhāṅḍaka*, *Birbaṅṭa*, as master over rain, has undergone only a slight change, and the king's daughter is married not to *Birbaṅṭa* but to his enemy—a kind of confusion very common in folk-tales when in a state of decay. Regarding the hero's name it must be noted that *Birbāṅṭa* may stand for **Birbāṅṭa* (or **Birbāṅṭa*, **Birbaṅṭa*) as Santali does not distinguish between short and long vowels.

Another variant of the name is contained in *Pijju Bibenj*, the name of the Kui rain-god⁸ (for **piju-Bibenju*, or **Bibenju* from Kui *piju* 'rain') where the first *r* is missing as in Skt. *Vibhāṅḍaka*, but the cluster *ṅṭ* is represented by the Kui masculine ending *-nju*. We may now reconstruct, something like **ibūr-bēṅru* as an old Dravidian compound meaning 'rain-god' *bīr* may be identified with Gondi *pīr* or *pīrr* 'rain' (=Tamil *peyar* 'to discharge', *DED* 3610), its *r*-less variant (in **Bibenju*, *Vibhāṅḍaka*) with Kui *piju* 'rain' (which has been added again to **Bibenju* where the meaning of *bi-* had become obscure), Kuwi *pīyū* 'rain', Tamil *pey-* 'to rain' (etc., cf. *DED* 3610). Skt. *-bhāṅḍaka*, Sant. *-baṅṭa* (or *-*bāṅṭa*), Kui *-benju* represent a Dravidian word for 'king, god', cf. Pārji *vēdid*, *vēdid*, 'god', Gondi *vēnu* 'spirit, god' (*DED* 4550), besides Kui *pēnu* 'god', common in compounds denoting names of gods, Tamil *pēyan* 'demoniac, madman', Gondi *pēn* 'god' from **pēṅḍu* cf. the pl. *pēṅḍku* (besides *pēṅk*, *DED* 3635) with variation *v-/p-* also found elsewhere and perhaps due to sandhi. The original stem is **pēy*, preserved in Tamil *pēy* 'devil, goblin', Mal. *pē*, *pēyi* 'demon', whereas Tamil *pēyan*, etc., contains the common masculine suffix **-ṅru*. Tamil *-aṅ*, Kan. *-nu*, Tel. *-ḍu*, Kui. *-nju*, etc.

It is interesting to note that the name closest to Sanskrit is found in Kui, the language of the Khonds; for it is this Dravidian tribe which has kept the custom of human sacrifice ('meriah') in order to get rain up to our times. The *Ṛṣyaśṛṅga-Vibhāṅḍaka* tales seem to be decadent remains of a once elaborate myth connected with it. The scanty material of the modern versions does not allow one to establish anything concrete about their relation to the classical story. But one point is noteworthy. In the *Bhāmṭī* story. *Bīrbal* is confused with his son (= *Ṛṣyaśṛṅga* in the classical tales),⁹ in the *Kuruḅh* and Santali versions *Bīrbal*/*Birbanta* is the main figure, not his son. This might be an old trait of the myth. In the *Ṛṣyaśṛṅga* tale not only *Ṛṣyaśṛṅga* is seduced by a king's daughter but also his father *Vibhāṅḍaka* by a heavenly nymph, whereby his son *Ṛṣyaśṛṅga* is born. The two seductions might be variants of but one mythical fact, re-united in a single story, a development well-known in general mythology.

NOTES

¹ All known versions are thoroughly discussed by H. LÜDERS, 'Die Sage vom R̥ṣyaśṛṅga', *Philologica Indica*, Gottingen 1940, p. 1 ff.

² L. V. SCHROEDER, *Mysterium und Mimus im Rigveda*, (Leipzig, 1908, p. 292 ff.

³ FERD. HAHN, *Kurukh Folklore in the Original* (1905). German translation in *Blicke in die Geisteswelt der heidnischen Kols. Sammlung von Sagen, Märchen und Liedern der Oraon von Chota Nagpur*, Gütersloh, 1906, pp. 49 ff., No. 25.

⁴ *Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol. XI, Gipsy Languages, pp. 19-21.

⁵ Cf. V. A. SMITH, *Akbar the Great Mogul 1542-1605* (reprint 1962), p. 171.

⁶ *LSI XI*, p. 21, note 1.

⁷ C. H. BOMPAS, *Folklore of the Santal Parganas*, London, 1909, No. XCIV, p. 284 (written *Birbanta*; the more exact spelling *Birbaṅṭa* is found in Bodding's *Santal Dictionary*, Oslo 1932, Vol. I, p. 297.

⁸ Cf. VERRIER ELWIN, *Tribal Myths of Orissa*, Oxford, 1954, p. 640: "Pijju-Bibenjis the god of water, providing both rain from the sky and water from a spring".

⁹ Cf. above.

¹⁰ Cf. the author's paper "Deutung einiger alter Stammesnamen der Bhil aus der vorarischen Mythologie des Epos und der Purāṇa", *WZKSOA III*, 1959, p. 34-82, esp. p. 51.