



A Tale of Two Kings: Arthur and Vikramāditya

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Abstract:

The legends of brave and chivalrous kings dominate medieval literature. However, only a few could achieve the timeless appeal and popularity of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table. Similarly, in the Indian tradition, the legendary King Vikramāditya (Vikram) is hailed as the epitome of an ideal emperor. In his introduction to the Harvard Oriental Series volume *Vikram's Adventures or Thirty-Two Tales of the Throne*, Franklin Edgerton describes Vikram as one of the most prominent semi-historical or quasi-historical heroes of medieval India. He further observes that “the stories all deal with the wonderful character and deeds of Vikrama, who is intended to serve as a kind of Hindu King Arthur, a model for real kings to follow” (Edgerton xxvi). The comparison between Vikramāditya and Arthur suggests a shared archetype of the righteous and heroic monarch across cultures. This paper explores the similarities between the Arthurian legends and the Vikram-Vetāl folktales through close analysis of texts such as *Historia regum Britanniae*, *Le Morte d'Arthur*, *Vetālapañcaviṃśati*, *Siṃhāsana Dvātriṃśikā*, and *Śukasaptati*.

Keywords: Arthurian Legends, Vikramāditya, Folklore, Medieval Literature.

Introduction

Folklore travels from one culture to another and in the process, undergoes several modifications. It is not wrong to say that one folktale, which exists in a specific region, can be found in a faraway place with a different name. The Arthurian and Vikramaditya cycles of tales come under the subgenre of legends in folklore studies. According to William Bascom, legends are “prose narratives...regarded as true by the narrator and his audience”. He further observes that legends are typically secular in nature, with human protagonists, and frequently recount migrations, wars, heroic deeds, and dynastic successions. In this respect, legends often serve as the oral equivalent of written history, while also incorporating vernacular narratives of buried treasure alongside supernatural elements such as ghosts, fairies, and saints (Bascom 9-10). Bascom’s definition is partially applicable, as both Arthur and Vikram are part of popular stories and continue to evoke historical curiosity. Nevertheless, the supernatural figures are not marginal; Merlin and Vetāl play significant roles in shaping the narrative.

Divine and Noble Birth

The earliest source that mentions Arthur’s name is the *Historia Brittonum*, attributed to the Welsh monk Nennius. The work focuses on Arthur’s military exploits and presents him as a Christian warrior cleansing the pagan Saxons. It was Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *De gestis Britonum* or *Historia regum Britanniae* that put Arthur on the centre stage. Geoffrey’s account of Merlin’s prophecies and Arthur’s mysterious birth became a source for later Arthurian works. He also recounts the exploits of Arthur’s father, Uther Pendragon, as the king of the Britons. Uther’s obsession with Igraine, the Duke of Cornwall, Gorlois’s wife, leads him to seek Merlin’s aid. Merlin gives him herbs that will help him disguise himself as Gorlois and seduce Igraine. Uther

orders his army to besiege the Duke of Cornwall, and that very night, he sleeps with Igraine, disguised as her husband. Gorlois dies during the siege of his castle, and Igraine conceives Arthur. Uther marries her, and she gives birth to a boy, Arthur, and a girl, Anna. After Uther's sudden death following a prolonged illness, Arthur is crowned King of the Britons. Geoffrey describes his noble qualities as exemplifying the ideal of kingship:

Moved by his country's plight, Dubricius and his bishops placed the crown of the kingdom on Arthur's head. He was a youth of fifteen, of great promise and generosity, whose innate goodness ensured that he was loved by almost everybody. As newly-crowned king, he displayed his customary open-handedness. Such a crowd of knights flocked to him that he ran out of gifts. Yet a man who combines an upright character with natural generosity may be out of pocket for a short time, but will never be the victim of lasting poverty. Arthur, who was both upright and generous, decided on war against the Saxons, to use their wealth to reward his household retainers. Right was on his side as he should have been the ruler of the entire island by lawful inheritance. (Reeve 192)

However, in Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Arthur pulls out the sword from the stone to become the King of England. The nobles opposed his accession to the throne because of his obscure birth and young age. Geoffrey presents Arthur as the saviour of the British people, foretelling his victory over the Anglo-Saxons and his dominance over the British Isles and the Continent. Whereas in the fifteenth century, when Malory was composing the Arthurian narratives, Merlin's prophetic role had vanished, and the episode of the sword in the stone came to signify that Arthur was divinely ordained to rule. (Allen 5)

The birth and reign of Vikram have been the subject of multiple theories of origin. Raj Bali Pandey delineates the historical and folkloric aspects of Vikram's identity. He notes that Vikram's frequent appearance in folktales and popular stories has made him a somewhat legendary figure. According to *Kathāsaritsāgar*, the Gods, led by their head, Indra, requested Śiva to save Earth from barbaric foreign invaders who were committing atrocities against the people. At the same time, the emperor of Ujjain, Mahendrāditya, who had no male heir, was performing penance for a son. Śiva summoned a Gana and ordered him to reincarnate as the son of King Mahendrāditya. Pandey argues, "This foreign invasion in the first century B.C. was none other than one of the Sakas, who swept off everything before them in Central Asia and the countries south of the Hindu Kush mountains. The historical fact of the Saka invasion of India has found literary expression tinged with supernatural elements." (Pandey 87) The circumstances of the succession of Arthur and Vikram were somewhat similar. Both were fighting foreign invaders and protecting their kingdom. Arthur was fighting the Saxons, and Vikram was fighting the Sakas.

Siṃhāsana Dvātriṃśikā, or *Vikram's Adventures, or Thirty-Two Tales of the Throne*, describes Vikrama's accession to the throne and his golden reign. He was not the immediate successor; his elder brother, Bhartrihari, initially ruled Ujjayini and later abdicated upon learning of his wife's betrayal. Agnivetāla terrorised Ujjayinī, killing each newly crowned king on the very night of his coronation. Impressed by Vikram's valour, the Agnivetāla grants him a boon, and Vikram requests his assistance in times of need. With the powerful and fierce Agnivetāla by his side, Vikram ascended the throne of Ujjayini. J. Gordon Melton writes, "The Vetala-Pachisi described the encounter of King Vikram with a betel who told him a series of tales. Vikram, like King Arthur, was an actual person who lived in the first century C.E. and became a magnet for many tales and fables" (Melton 371).

Merlin and Vetāl: The Suprahuman Advisors

In *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Malory presents Arthur as the undisputed king of England, who becomes the very embodiment of the chivalric code. William Caxton, the printer of *Le Morte d'Arthur*, in his preface to the text, writes, “the most renowned Christian king, first and chief of the three best Christian, and worthy, King Arthur, which ought most to be remembered among us Englishmen to-fore all other Christian kings” (Malory 2020). Arthur’s association with Christianity elevates him above other kings. He is not merely fighting to protect his territories but defending the cause of the Christian faith. Ironically, his advisor, Merlin, the greatest wizard of all time, was born of a virgin Christian mother and a demon, and is often referred to as the Devil’s son. Malory portrays Merlin as a guardian-like figure before Arthur. His profound wisdom helps Arthur subdue rebellions and win battles, making him one of the most powerful characters in the Arthurian legends. When he strikes a deal with King Uther, he sets a condition: “to fulfil my desire, ye shall have your desire” (Malory 4). In exchange for his assistance in seducing Igraine, Merlin demands Uther and Igraine’s firstborn child. His lack of subservience to the king underscores his strength and magical prowess. If Arthur is considered a national hero today, it would not have been possible without his association with Merlin. He took in the unchristened infant (Arthur) and placed him in the custody of an ordinary knight, Sir Ector. When Arthur turned fifteen, he accidentally pulled out the Sword in the Stone and was crowned King of England, proving his mettle rather than relying on his royal lineage.

Merlin defends Arthur’s legitimacy when other kings challenge his succession. He declares, “I prove him he is no bastard. And whoever saith nay, he shall be king and overcome all his enemies; and, or he die, he shall be long king of all England, and have under his obedience Wales, Ireland, and Scotland, and more realms than I will now rehearse.” He motivates him to

bravely confront the nobles questioning his birth and rightful claim to the English throne, “come out boldly and speak with them, and spare them not, but answer them as their king and chieftain; for ye shall overcome them all, whether they will or nill.” When Arthur faces rebellions from enemy states, he summons the council for assistance. However, he soon realises that none but Merlin could offer the apt strategy to quell the uprisings. Merlin advises Arthur and his council to establish strong diplomatic ties with allies before engaging in warfare. He gives them a reality check: “I warn you all, your enemies are passing strong for you” (Malory 13) and serves as Arthur's political and military strategist.

In *Vetālapañcaviṃśati*, Vikrama's sense of justice is tested by Vetāl, who narrates a cycle of twenty-five frame stories and asks a riddle at the conclusion of each. He warns Vikram that if he speaks, then he will return to the tree, but if he remains silent despite knowing the answer, then his heart will burst, leading to his death. A queen and his daughter seek refuge in a forest after enemies besiege their kingdom. While in hiding, they are discovered by a king and his son. In an unexpected turn of events, the king marries the princess, and his son weds the queen. Over time, each couple has a child, a son, and a daughter, who, upon reaching adulthood, are married to each other. When Vetāl questions the unusual relationship between the two, Vikram remains silent. Impressed by his integrity and courage, Vetāl unravels the sinister plan of the Yogī (Tantrik) who had sent him to the cremation ground to fetch Vetāl for his secret rites. The Yogī intends to sacrifice Vikram and acquire *siddhis* (divine powers). Acting on Vetāl's advice, Vikram kills the Tantrik and claims the *siddhis* for himself (Śivadāsa 176–178). Although Arthur and Vikram appear as heroes in their respective stories, their victories remain incomplete without the assistance of Merlin and Vetāl, who guide them toward greater achievements.

Deceitful Wives

Arthur and Vikram share a similar fate in their marriages, as their wives found love elsewhere. In *Historia regum Britanniae*, Guenivere engages in an adulterous relationship with Mordred, Arthur's nephew. Having been entrusted with the governance of Britain, Mordred treacherously usurps the throne. Upon learning of this betrayal, Arthur's trust is shattered, and he resolves to seek revenge. However, in Malory's version, the French knight Lancelot begins an affair with Guenivere. Merlin warns Arthur against marrying Guenivere, but he disregards the advice and marries her in an arranged marriage setup. Inspired by the French Romances, Malory describes the affair between Lancelot and Guinevere. They have an open affair in the court, and everyone is aware of it except Arthur:

For, as the book saith, had not Sir Lancelot been in his privy thoughts and in his mind so set inwardly to the Queen as he was in seeming outward to God, there had no knight passed him in the quest of the Sangrail, but ever his thoughts were privily on the Queen. And so they loved together more hotter than they did beforehand, and had many such privy draughts together that many in the court spoke of it.
(Malory 403)

Śukasaptati, or Seventy Tales of the Parrot, is a collection of seventy tales in Sanskrit. A parrot narrates tales to a married woman to prevent her from meeting her lover while her husband is away. In some of the tales, King Vikram appears as a loving husband who dotes on his beloved wife, Kámalilá. While having dinner, Kámalilá refuses to eat fish; she cries, "These are men! I am unable even to look at them, much less to touch them!" The fish laughed after her statement, which baffled the king. He summoned the head of the Brahmins and asked him to explain the reason

behind the laughter of the fish, or else he would be exiled. The Brahmin's wise daughter visits the court and explains the reason in verse. The king fails to decipher the clue and summons her again to explain the verse's meaning. On further insistence, the minister reveals the Queen's affair, leading to public embarrassment (Haksar 23).

Death

An underlying theme that reverberates throughout the narrative is 'death', which immortalises the deceased kings through lasting glory. *Le Morte d'Arthur* translates as "the death of Arthur," and the title itself alludes to the inevitable death of the eponymous protagonist. In keeping with the epic tradition, the adventures of Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table culminate in their deaths. Arthur kills his enemy, Mordred, but ultimately succumbs to his fatal injuries. He is then taken to the magical island of Avalon to be healed, a motif that gave rise to speculation that he never died and would return as the eternal King of England. Arthur is not considered dead, as he will reincarnate like Christ to save his people. The *Historia regum Britanniae* mentions that after being wounded, Arthur was taken to the island of Avallon for healing. Before departing, he entrusts the sovereignty of Britain to his relative Constantinus, the son of Cador, Duke of Cornwall. (Reeve 252) In *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Arthur's last words are addressed to Sir Bedivere, he says, "do as well as thou mayest, for in me is no trust for to trust in. For I will into the vale of Avilion to heal me of my grievous wound; and if thou hear never more of me, pray for my soul" (Malory 516).

Arthur's story concludes with an enduring hope of restoration, whereas *Simhasana Dvatrimshika* unfolds in the aftermath of Vikram's death. King Bhoja discovers the enchanted throne of King Vikram. The Sanskrit word "Simhasana" denotes throne, and when Bhoja tries to

ascend it, he is stopped by the thirty-two statues engraved on the throne. The statues transform into celestial women and recount the adventures of Vikram, the illustrious king of Ujjayini, and warn that only someone endowed with virtues like his deserves to sit on the throne. Vikram is immortalised in this text through his heroic deeds, and even after his demise, the stories of his bravery and justice resonate. In one of the stories of *Simhasana Dvatrimsika*, the king of the Gods in the Vedic pantheon, Indra specially invites Vikram to judge a dance competition between two of the most beautiful apsaras (heavenly nymphs), Urvaśī and Rambhā. Impressed by his sense of judgement, Indra gifts him a throne with thirty-two statuettes (Haksar 16). Although Vikram's death scene is not vividly described, his image as an ideal king is mirrored throughout the narrative, underscoring the impossibility of anyone filling his place. Unlike Arthur, there is no anticipation of a messianic return as he is regarded as an irreplaceable figure in the Indian narrative tradition.

Conclusion

Despite being born into royalty, both Arthur and Vikram ascend the throne by proving their merit. Their historicity is debated among scholars; for some, they are mythical characters, while for others, they are historical figures. Despite cultural differences, the Arthurian and Vikramāditya legends have many similarities. Arthur emerges as a model of the ideal British king, one who was much needed in the socio-political context of the times. While Vikram embodied the ideal of kingship, inspiring later Indian kings to adopt the name Vikramāditya as an honourific epithet.

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