

Retaliation

Tales Of The Sun Or Folklore Of Southern India

Indian

Intermediate

7 min read

There is a proverb in Tamil called Palikkuppali vângukiradu which would best be translated by the expression “tit for tat,” and the following story I heard when a boy from my step-mother, illustrating that proverb, and I have of late found the same story also in the Trichinopoly districts.

In a certain village there lived a poor Śûdra. He had made a vow to the goddess of his village, that if he came out successfully in a certain undertaking he would offer her a couple of goats. And he succeeded in his undertaking, and thought that his goddess alone had granted his request. Great was his joy and greater became his faith in her extraordinary powers. And as he promised he brought two fat goats and sacrificed them to her.

These goats thus sacrificed and the Śûdra sacrificer who meanwhile had died by a sudden fever, after a short time were all re-born in the world to undergo the results of their goodness or sin. The two goats, because they were sacrificed to the goddess, were re-born as the king and the minister of a large country. The Śûdra, as he had as much faith in his former life as in his goddess, was reborn in the priest’s (gurukkula) caste, of course neither the king and his minister nor the priest had any reason to know their former life, until the death of the latter approached, as we shall presently see. A large kingdom fell to the share of the king, and he with his minister reigned over it most peacefully. In an unfrequented wilderness was a famous temple of a powerful goddess of that country, and in that pagoda the priest regularly conducted her worship.

Thus passed several years, the king and minister happy in their own kingdom, and the priest executing his religious duties in the wilderness. The priest was leading a most calm and holy life, eating what grew in the wilderness. His life was as pure as pure can be.

But for all that fate would not forgive him for his acts in his former life.

The king and the minister had vowed to the goddess of the wilderness that if they returned successfully from the conquest of an enemy of theirs they would offer her some human sacrifice. And so they returned, and to make entire their vow to the goddess they left their kingdom like ordinary men and came to the wood. All along the way they searched for a person to sacrifice, but no one—fortunately for him—was to be found. They still thought that the vow must not be left unaccomplished, and resolved upon catching the priest of the temple and offering him up as their intended sacrifice. When such strong people like the king and his minister resolved to do so, what could the poor priest do? He was quite unable to escape when those two informed him of what they were going to do with him on his entering to worship the goddess. Said the priest:—

“Sirs! You have come here resolved upon offering me up as a sacrifice to the goddess. I cannot hereafter escape your hold. But if you would allow me to perform my pûjâ to the goddess this morning also, I shall gladly die after having done my duty.”

So said the priest, and the king and the minister watched at the entrance and let him in.

The priest went into the Garbhagriha—the holy of the holies in the temple, and performed his worship to the goddess. After that was over he gave the image a severe blow on its back and thus addressed it:—

“Most merciless goddess. What have you done for all my faith in you. In this lonely wilderness, without knowing any other duty than your worship, I had been your true servant for the past many years. And in reward for all that, I must fall now a prey to the sacrifice of the king and the minister who are sharpening their knives outside to cut off my head at this moment. Is this the result of all my pûjâ (worship) to you.”

So spake the priest, and the goddess, laughing, thus replied from the vacuum:—

“My true priest. Your acts in your former life must trouble you in this. And the charitable acts of this life, even, cannot protect you in your next birth. In your former birth you had murdered two goats. They were born as king and minister, and have dragged you here to murder you. But this—the murder you are to undergo soon,

by these hands will relieve you only of one of the two murders of your former life. And for the other murder you and they would be re-born again, and again they would kill you. So in your next third life from this one you would enjoy the fruits of all this devotion. Since now you know the story of your former life, you will forgive me, I think.”

Thus spoke the goddess, and the priest, as the knowledge of his former life dawned upon him, by the grace of the goddess, seemed resolved to die, in order to pay for his former sin. But the idea that in the next life he was to undergo the same punishment, vexed him much, and falling down at the goddess’s feet, he respectfully requested her to try her best to let him off the next life; and the goddess’s heart was also moved at the severity of fate which would make her devotee pass through one more life in misery before he enjoyed the fruits of his devotion. So she devised the following plan to exculpate him from his two crimes at the same time, and thus replied:—

“Priest! ‘Intelligence can conquer even Fate,’ is the proverb. When Kâli gave 500 years’ life to Vikramâditya in his town, Bhatti, his minister, by making the king live six months in his capital and six months in the jungle, made his master’s life to last for 1000 years. So by intelligence we conquer our fate too, sometimes. So hear my advice. Ask the king who has come to murder you to hold one end of the knife, and request his minister to hold the other end. Ask both of them to aim the blow at your neck; that will accomplish everything complete during this life. They will have no revenge to take from you in your next life.”

So saying, the voice of the goddess stopped. The priest came back with a cheerful heart to the king and the minister, and asked them to oblige him by each of them holding one end of the knife and murdering him. They agreed, and performed thus their vow. The poor priest, too, without having another miserable life, was born a king in his next life, and lived in prosperity.

Here the story ends, and the story-teller in the Hindû household, and in my case my stepmother, would at once moralise, that if we did anything to any one in this life, that one would pay us out for it in our next life.

N.B.—I am led to think that this story does not contain a purely Hindû moral.

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