

INTRODUCTION

I

The *Sattasāi*, or The Seven Hundred, is an anthology of short poems about love and marriage in the villages of the Indian countryside. The selection is attributed to the Sātavāhana king Hāla, who reigned briefly in the first century AD in what is now the state of Maharashtra. The poems are indeed set in this part of peninsular India, whose northern boundary, the Vindhya Hills, and whose rivers, the Godāvarī and Narmadā, they frequently mention. But the first-century dating is probably much too early and the connection with Hāla most likely a literary fiction. These are points to which we will return.

All the poems are couplets and nearly all are in the musical *āryā* meter, which allows a variety of rhythm within its eight “bars.” Though their form is ultimately derived from song, they were not necessarily intended to be sung. The language of the poems is Prakrit. This is a general term for any dialect of Sanskrit, itself the language par excellence of sacred texts and official documents in ancient India. The Prakrit in question is a stylized imitation of the language spoken by country people living south of the Vindhyas, an area that for long remained beyond the pale of North Indian Sanskrit culture. Compared with Sanskrit, which is free of recognizably local elements, the language of the *Sattasāi* is intended to convey a rustic, Maharashtra flavor. Even so, it remains no less a literary language than Sanskrit.

I

Within its brief compass each separate, self-contained poem describes an emotion or presents a situation, often obliquely. Frequently it takes the form of a monologue: we hear someone, usually a woman, addressing her friend, her mother or some older female relative, her lover, her husband or simply herself. Occasionally there is dialogue, or else the speaker gives advice or warning to a young girl or boy inexperienced in the ways of the world. Practically all the poems are in one way or another about love, though the application may not always be obvious in what appear to be general maxims or straightforward descriptions of nature or the seasons.

The poems about love's joys and love's excesses are notable for their frankness but, as with all love poetry, the greater part of the *Sattasai* is about unhappy love: love thwarted, unrequited, dissembled or betrayed, as well as love in separation. While still unmarried, a young girl is kept under close watch by her parents to guard her reputation. She needs considerable daring and ingenuity to make secret assignations with her lover in the fields and forests surrounding the village, and such meetings are always at the mercy of the changing seasons: the harvest robs the fields of cover, sheltering trees lose their leaves. Married life brings a new set of problems, beginning with the many misunderstandings between the husband and his new bride, who are usually complete strangers to one another. After the wedding the young wife becomes part of the large household of her husband's family. Her mother-in-law bosses her about, her husband's younger brothers pester her, and she is in fierce competition with her husband's other wives for his favor. All too soon her husband loses interest in her and turns to other women. She can only retaliate by sulking. Even when the marriage is a happy one, the husband is often away from home on long business trips. Though he may suffer hardships, the fate of the lonely wife left behind is harsher still. She is pictured as inconsolable in her misery.

To appreciate the poems fully it is essential to understand their tone and intention. The scenes and the characters may be rustic

but the verses are anything but homespun. In the second poem of the collection the *Sattasāi* is explicitly contrasted with a wholly different literature about love:

Shame on those who cannot appreciate
This ambrosial Prakrit poetry
But pore instead
Over treatises on love.

The earliest known treatise on love is the *Kāmasūtra*, which probably dates from the third century AD. It is in Sanskrit and in prose, and its highly theoretical approach to love and sex is at the opposite extreme from that of the *Sattasāi*. Here everything is docketed and programed. For example, in a chapter dealing with nail scratching as part of love play, eight different-shaped nail marks are listed (each with its suggestive name: the Gooseflesh, the Half-Moon, the Circle, the Line, the Tiger's Claw, the Peacock's Foot, the Hare's Leap and the Lotus Leaf) as well as six places on the body where they are to be applied. This is followed by a categorization of nails into long, short and medium (medium being best as combining the qualities of both long and short). Then come detailed directions: the Gooseflesh is made by moving nails of medium length lightly over the woman's chin, breasts and lower lip without leaving any trace. The Half-Moon is a curved mark left by the nails on the neck or the upper part of the breasts. And so on. In the end, though, as if acknowledging the futility of such prescriptions, the treatise allows that the lover may also make other scratches of whatever shape he likes. Compare, on the subject of half-moons, poem 261 with its allusion to the amorous propensities of brothers-in-law:

My dear man,
Why scan the sky
If it's crescent moons you're after?
Try looking at your sister-in-law's shoulder:
You'll find a whole row of them there.

The *Kāmasūtra* is concerned essentially with classification: it gives names to things and enumerates them, claiming that to know these enables one to act in a way that will ensure the highest possible gratification. It is not a handbook on sex but a compendium of the endless variety of situations one may encounter in one's sexual life. Success is then merely a matter of avoiding the ones which are least likely to lead to gratification. But this process requires a just assessment of one's own experience and desire as well as those of one's partner. And, as shown in the *Sattasāi* time and again, this is precisely where things tend to go wrong. Take poem 158 about a newly wed couple:

He was embarrassed
But I laughed and gave him a hug
When he groped for the knot
Of my skirt and found it
Already undone.

This scene may be compared with the chapter in the *Kāmasūtra* entitled "Winning a Virgin's Trust," which explains how the husband should win over his inexperienced wife in a series of simple steps, beginning by gently taking her on his lap and ending by loosening the knot of her skirt. The objections the wife might make at each step are adduced together with the ways the husband is to counter them. It is much the same as practicing swimming on dry land. The realities of life are quite different, as in the above poem, where the husband miscalculates his partner's bashfulness.

The *Kāmasūtra* and the *Sattasāi* represent two totally different views of love and sex. In the *Kāmasūtra* everything imaginable is considered and treated as equally relevant: it is the product of an ingenious but academic mind. The *Sattasāi*, by contrast, provides an endless number of examples showing the futility of the *Kāmasūtra's* lists and enumerations. Where the *Kāmasūtra* is concerned with theory, the *Sattasāi* confronts this theory with the untidy reality of life. The opposition between the two works is so striking as to seem intentional, especially in view of the explicit

contrast made in poem 2. That contrast can be further highlighted if we compare the typically thwarted lover of the *Sattasāi* with the *beau idéal* of the *Kāmasūtra*, who can perform all the tricks in the book and is no village yokel. We are given a full description of this townsman's sumptuous mansion and of his daily round of pleasures: picnics, parties, poetry readings and prostitutes. Conspicuously absent from his timetable is work: clearly he is a man of means and belongs to the leisured class. But he is also well-educated—after years of study he has mastered the complicated grammar and large vocabulary of Sanskrit—and he is a man of parts: he can sing, make music on the rims of glasses, play the lute, arrange flowers, tell jokes and riddles, discuss architecture and improvise poems, besides being something of an athlete. In short, he is the perfectly accomplished man, at home in a salon or any social gathering. He lives, if not in the capital, at least in a city or market town. The description of this *nāgaraka*, or “townsman,” ends by recounting what happens when he attempts to live the life of a townsman in a village. Predictably he runs into difficulties when he tries to organize a reading group. He is then advised to entice the curious to his salon by describing to them the sort of extravagant party a *nāgaraka* like himself lays on. Another suggestion is that he should bribe the villagers to attend his gatherings.

Each figure, the unhappy lover from the village and the successful lover from the town, is to some extent a caricature: the idealized *nāgaraka* is even more unreal than the villager. But the image of the one seems to have been shaped by that of the other, in that the contrast between them was deliberately exaggerated. It seems very likely that the *Sattasāi* and the *Kāmasūtra* originated in the same milieu and at about the same period. The poems should therefore be read with the townsman, his lifestyle and his accomplishments in mind. It is then a question of how far one should push this contrast. In such obviously amusing scenes as the one in which the husband fails to recognize an experienced woman in his young bride it works and the resultant humor is gentle. But in a poem such as the following there is a problem of interpretation:

Though he had no more work in the fields,
The farmer would not go home,
To spare himself the pain
Of finding it empty
Now that his wife was dead [556]

At first sight this is a touching description of bereavement (and there are other poems in the anthology which treat this theme unambiguously, e.g., 557). But if we read it from the *nāgaraka's* viewpoint it is possible to detect a cruel twist. The townsman depicted in the *Kāmasūtra*, unlike the farmer in the poem, is not dependent only on his wife for female company, as he is constantly surrounded by sophisticated courtesans. He can also afford to support more than one wife. Though such a *sous entendre* may go against our own romantic or sentimental notions, the possibility of its presence should at least be borne in mind.

3

Another problem of interpretation is posed by those poems which appear to be purely descriptive or else are in the form of general maxims. Since the *Sattasāi* is essentially an anthology of love poems, should erotic connotations, however remote, be sought in these too? Take the following:

Lotuses know that winter is hot
Because it makes them wilt.
However much they try to hide their true nature
People are betrayed by their acts. [686]

Ostensibly this is a maxim, expressed in typically paradoxical fashion. But, in view of the last line, it may be possible to see in it a comment on an unfaithful lover or husband. The erotic connection is even harder to detect in this poetic fancy:

With cooing doves hidden high up in the rafters
The temple groans like a man suffering from cramp. [652]

6

The commentaries on the *Sattasai*, which date from approximately the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries, take such poems as coded messages between lovers. Here, according to one of them, a woman is telling her lover that the temple is empty and is an ideal rendezvous. They need not be anxious about being noisy while making love. People will just think it is the doves. A similarly far-fetched interpretation is offered for the following conceit:

Hear how that cloud groans with the effort,
Yet is unable to lift the earth
With ropes of raindrops
That fall in unbroken streams. [665]

Here too a commentator falls back on the stock explanation that a woman is reassuring her lover that, as it is pelting with rain, no one is going to disturb the rendezvous they have planned. Not much is gained by such strained “explanations,” and it would seem best to accept this poem as a highly fanciful description of rain. Its connection with the main topic of the anthology seems to lie in the very important role played by the rainy season in people’s love lives (see poems 486 ff.). In some cases, though, the interpretation offered by the commentators is apt. It makes sense to assume, as they do, that the following words, addressed to an “ungrateful” honey bee, were spoken by a pregnant wife within earshot of her absconding husband:

Ungrateful bee,
Once you would not think
Of enjoying yourself with other flowers
But now that the jasmine is heavy with fruit
You forsake her. [615]

In many cases a poem stands in no need of any explanation. The following, with its highly erotic image, is best left to speak for itself:

Look!
A tender shoot has sprouted from the stone of a ripe mango.
It looks like an eel hiding in a half-opened oyster shell. [658]

The commentators are not necessarily unanimous in their solutions to what they regard as the riddles posed by the poems. Poem 228 may serve as an example:

“Take it and have a look!”
With a broad smile on her face
She hands her husband the jujube fruit
With the marks on it
Of their son’s first pair of teeth.

At one level it may be read as a charming scene in the life of a young family. But in the predominantly erotic context of the *Sattasāi* one would be right to look for a subtext. One commentator explains the mother’s joy by the fact that the baby can now be weaned and she and her husband need no longer abstain from sex. The tooth marks on the fruit may be seen as an invitation—“Come, bite me!”—to her husband. Another commentator goes a step further by suggesting that it is not the infant who has implanted the tooth marks but the wife in her impatience to have sex.

4

In the third poem the compilation of the *Sattasāi* is attributed to Hāla:

Among countless elegant poems,
King Hāla, patron of poets,
Has selected seven hundred.

Hāla was a king of the South Indian Śātavāhana dynasty, whose brief reign is placed somewhere in the first century AD. This date now seems too early for the *Sattasāi*, if we link it with its complementary antitype, the *Kāmasūtra*, which dates from the second half of the third century at the earliest. It is significant that the literary tradition itself seems to contradict Hāla’s role as compiler of the anthology. In some manuscripts of the text each

poem has the name of its supposed author appended to it. Most of the poets are otherwise unknown, but among the few names that can be identified we find, beside Hāla himself, a number of kings belonging to dynasties later than the Śātavāhanas. All these names were most probably added at a relatively advanced stage of the transmission of the text, on the model of much later Sanskrit anthologies, so as to give the collection greater credence. What is striking is that all these later kings belong to dynasties, such as the Vākātakas and Rāṣṭrakūṭas, which succeeded the Śātavāhanas in South India between the second and the fifth centuries. These attributions, however fictitious, reinforce the idea of the *Sattasāi*'s origin in South India, and this same idea seems to lie behind the attribution of the work to a Śātavāhana king of the first century. This also fits perfectly the fictional setting of the poems south of the Vindhya, in peninsular India. The Vindhya Hills formed a boundary between the traditional heartland of Sanskrit culture in the north of India and the south, which was colonized only gradually. Although it was under the Śātavāhanas that North Indian culture was first introduced into South India on anything like a large scale, in their inscriptions the Śātavāhanas used Prakrit not Sanskrit. The situation is mirrored in a literary legend according to which the first Śātavāhana kings were ignoramuses, who could not speak Sanskrit. This appears to have led to misunderstandings with their wives, who were imported from the north. To northerners the people of the south, including their kings, seemed like hillbillies.

As regards the attribution of the *Sattasāi* to Hāla in particular among the thirty or so known kings of the Śātavāhana dynasty, one should note that his name evokes the word for plow, *hala*, a derivation of which, *halia* "plowman," is frequently used in the *Sattasāi* to refer to the farmer. It may have been felt appropriate that a collection of poems about village life should be attributed to a king whose name could be interpreted as meaning "Superplowman."

It nevertheless remains difficult to assign an exact date to the *Sattasāi*. All one can say is that the anthology clearly originated in a sophisticated literary milieu which also, and possibly

simultaneously, produced the *Kāmasūtra*, and that it was most probably compiled sometime between the third century and the seventh, when we find the first reference to it in Bāṇa's preface to his *Harṣacarita* (c. 640).

5

The *Sattasāi* was always very popular in literary circles. Manuscripts of it are to be found all over India. There are also numerous commentaries dating from the thirteenth century onwards, that is, several centuries after the presumed date of its composition. In a way the work has suffered from its popularity. For one thing, with each handwritten copy new scribal errors crept into the text. This was aggravated by its being in Prakrit, a language not fixed and codified in the way Sanskrit was. In addition, the situations described, or alluded to, in the poems were not always properly understood, and as a result the text was altered or whole poems simply scrapped. But every poem that was deleted had to be replaced by a new one to make up the full number of seven hundred, which had at some point become the canonical number. As a result the first critical edition of the *Sattasāi*, produced in 1881 by Albrecht Weber and based on seventeen manuscripts, contains no fewer than 964 poems, of which only 430 are common to all versions.

The order of the verses varies in the different recensions. Originally there may have been no systematic ordering by content, but some later recensions group the verses in sections according to topic, situation or poetic figure, following the practice of contemporary Sanskrit anthologies, which survive from the twelfth century onwards. As the original version of the *Sattasāi* is irretrievable, we have made a selection from the 964 poems of Weber's edition and have ordered the poems in sections according to topic, following our own judgment and interpretation and adding an introduction to each section. In our translations of the poems we have followed the text as reconstructed by Weber. The few instances where we have preferred a variant reading to that adopted by Weber are indicated in an appendix.

Many of the poems, as we have noted, are in the form of conversations or monologues, and in translating them we have been concerned to make verbal register and tone fit the intention of the speaker. She (for in most cases the speaker is a woman) may want to pass on a message meant for her lover's ears alone, she may be desperate, annoyed or in the grip of anger, she may give vent to her frustration or she may be just pathetic. These intentions and emotions have to be brought out subtly but no less clearly, as the point of a poem may hinge on the fact of the girl's being naive or jealous or pathetic.

The style of the original poems varies considerably. Side by side with utterances consisting of a quick stream of short, crisp sentences there are poems with long, slow compounds. Some poems have dense patterns of assonance and a heavily figurative language; others are made up of straightforward, unadorned statements. We have tried to convey the varying tone of the originals. But sometimes the style of the original poem is altered in translation. A case in point is poem 614, which opens with two long compounds:

*padhamaṇiṇāmahuramahu-
 lohillaṇiulavaddhajhaṅkāraṁ
 ahimaarakiraṇaṇiurum-
 vacumviam dalai kamalavaṇam*

Bees settle on it,
 Buzzing wildly,
 Lusting for its sweet nectar
 But the lotus opens
 Only after being kissed by the sun.

If the translation is relatively short and simple, this is because the poem features several convoluted circumlocutions, such as the nouns *ula* "group" in *āliula* and *ṇiurumva* "cluster" in *ahimaarakiraṇaṇiurumva* to express the plural, and the word *ahimaara* "which creates (-ara) non-coldness (*a-hima*)" for "the sun." This choice of words seems to have been largely determined

by the desire to create sound effects (*lohillāliulavaddha* and *ahimaaarakiraṇaṇiurumva*), which we have tried partially to reproduce.

The conversational flavor of the poems is underlined by the frequent use of vocatives in addressing friends and relatives as well as in expressing scorn (“You dimwit,” “You fool”). Occasionally the vocative seems to be part of a kind of literary game, as in poem 207, where the first three feet are in the form of vocatives:

Your long hair sways like a peacock’s fan,
Your thighs quiver, your eyes half close,
With long pauses you sort of play the man.
Now do you see what hard work it is
For a man?

The poems may also differ in the use of figurative language. Some poems are simply a series of similes, like the following, in which the speaker ecstatically produces one comparison after another for a girl’s hair:

The girl’s thick, fragrant hair
Is like a column of smoke rising from the fire of love,
Like a bunch of peacock’s tail-feathers
Waved by the conjuror to distract his audience,
Like the victory banner of youth. [650]

But the simile also features in elaborate puns. In the following poem a woman’s breasts are compared to a good poem, and each word describing the breasts applies simultaneously to the object of comparison, the poem:

Who is not captivated by a woman’s breasts,
That, like a good poem,
Are a pleasure to grasp,
Are weighty, compressed, and nicely ornamented? [651]

In the *Sattasāi* puns like these are rare, certainly when one compares later poetry in Sanskrit, where they were considered the

acme of poetic skill. Only a few such poems from the *Sattasāi* have been translated here, as in most cases two translations would have been required and the whole point lost. The alternative was to write lengthy explanatory notes in addition to the introductions to the individual sections. But one of our principles of selection has been to omit any poem that required annotation to make it comprehensible.

Weber, the editor of the *Sattasāi*, was the first person to translate the poems (into German), but his versions remain buried in the learned publications in which they first appeared. Mention should be made of the translation into Italian by Giuliano Boccali, Daniela Sagramoso and Cinzia Pieruccini (1990), which is as judicious as it is elegant. Translations into English have so far been less felicitous: the only one to include all seven hundred verses of the so-called vulgate (corresponding to Weber (1881) nos. 1–700) is by Radhagovinda Basak (1970). Beside often missing or obscuring the point of the poems, it is too literal and unidiomatic to give any idea of the quality of the original. Considering that the *Sattasāi* is not only the earliest anthology of lyric verse from India but also arguably the most interesting, this relative neglect is astounding.