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Travelling Tales: Some Stories from the Middle Himalayas

SUMMARY: This paper presents a fascinating book, which has been very recently released in India from Yatra publishing house—*Clever Wives and Happy Idiots. Folktales from the Kumaon Himalayas* (New Delhi: Yatra Books 2015). Originally written in Russian in 1875 by the ethnographer Ivan P. Minayev (1840–1890), it records the folktales, myths and legends of the Himalayan region of Kumaon, as also his impressions of the region. His account, preserved as it were in amber and never before translated into English, has both historical and archival value and the charm of rediscovering the folk narrative of Uttarakhand.

Two tales from the book, translated by Bulbul Sharma and Madhu Malik, are published as an illustration for this essay.

KEYWORDS: Indian folklore, Pahari folklore, Kumaon, Garhwal, Ivan Minayev, translation.

It is the nature of stories to travel, to be heard and misrepresented, whispered and distorted, understood and misunderstood. The literature of South Asia is bound together by its great epics, and the collective mythological imagination they inhabit. Folktales and folklore are pervasive and enduring, the oral traditions travel across dialects and regional cultures, fashioning themselves to the lay of the land and the rhythms of local languages. Both *desi* and *margi*, popular, classical and sacred forms have been retold, retranslated and revitalised across centuries and even millennia, as songs and invocations, ballads and folktales, dance and dramatic renditions. Be it the *Mahabharata*, the *Ramayana*,

the *Jataka* tales or the *Panchatantra*, these stories endure and mutate, from orality to manuscripts to technology enabled downloads.

In this essay, I shall use the periscope of a narrative transcription/translation sequence to study how one set of very local stories travelled from the central Himalayas to Russia and on to Germany, only to return via English to the original location where these tales were first told. The story of these stories is as illustrative as the stories themselves, and together they constitute a powerful portrait of the nature of the diasporic, peripatetic word, and how indeed words and ideas take wing and travel, only to return where they began...

This book has been resurrected from many incarnations and *avatars*. It is the nature of stories to change and mutate, to take on the forms and voices of their storytellers. But these Himalayan folk tales, recorded by Ivan P. Minayev in 1875, are different. They are like the fly trapped in amber, translucent, fixed forever in a forgotten moment of time.

Born in 1840, in the Tambov region, Minayev, a philologist by training, was a specialist in ‘Oriental’ languages and texts. In fact, he was one of the first Russian Indologists and buddologists, and was almost the first European orientalist to realize that the study of Pali was a must for the proper understanding of ancient Indian history and society. He studied Pali literature and prepared a catalogue of Pali manuscripts at the British Museum and the Bibliothèque Nationale (still unpublished). His Pali grammar written in Russian (1872) was soon translated into French (1874) and English (1882).

As a member of the Russian Geographical Society Minayev travelled extensively in India and Burma in 1874–75, 1880, and 1885–86. His travel journals were published in English in 1958 and 1970.

In the year 1875, Ivan Minayev travelled through Kumaon and Garhwal, in the central Himalayan ranges. In this period he recorded about fifty folk tales, and several legends and folk songs in Central Pahari languages. The Himalayas were still to an extent an uncharted territory. The Great Game was unfolding, and the Russians and the British were vying for knowledge and strategic intelligence about Tibet and the unmapped Himalayan massif. Espionage was possibly

among the motivations of those who funded Minayev's expedition to Kumaon, but his interest and understanding of folklore and keen ear for oral literatures led him to spend a considerable part of his journey in collecting and collating these stories.

These stories carry a residue of innocence and wisdom. Their spontaneous and free flowing forms, punctuated by superstition and whimsy, have endured the passage of time with charm and resilience. The influence of the *Katha-sarit-sagara*, the 'Sea of Stories', and the Arabian Nights, is imprinted in the narrative, as is that of the *Jataka* tales and Buddhist folklore traditions. The twice-told translations continue to carry the resonance of the human voice, hoarse, melodious, or sighing, in their nuance and inflections.

They are stories of survival, set in a terrain of beautiful landscapes and harsh physical challenges. My family ties are with Kumaon and Uttarakhand, and I have grown up in those mountains, listening in to stories that mirror and reflect these in so many ways. The simpleton son, the cunning old widow, the proud and foolish king, the proud maiden, these personages abide in folk and popular memory.

What Stuart H. Blackburn refers to as "geographical distribution, narrative consistency and cultural significance" throws up recurrent patterns but the stories are somehow always unique in their crafting (Blackburn 2008: 227). The indicators and conventions of folklore traditions, and the particularities of local perception, are always at play with each other. Minayev's folktales from across the Tibetan plateau carry many similar inflections to those from Nepal or Arunachal Pradesh.

In an interview, Stephen Alter, writer and Himalayan scholar, speaks of "...the way in which nature is interpreted differently from one range of mountains to the next. [...] A bird's call in Nepal will elicit a very different story from the same bird's call in Kashmir. The allegorical aspects of a certain wild herb in Garhwal will take on different meanings in Bhutan. All these narratives are drawn from nature and reflect cultural differences as well as ecological diversity".¹

¹ <http://news.mit.edu/2004/fulbright-1117>, accessed on 30.11.2015.

Folklore studies were quite the intellectual rage in Minayev's times. 19th-century German romanticism saw folklore as a 'pure' form of local cultures and literatures. In the years from 1812 to 1857, the Grimm brothers had collected and recorded more than 200 stories, and established the foundations of methodology and research practices on the subject.

A continent away, 19th-century Kumaon, under the rule of colonial British masters, was a hub of trade and travel. Despite the isolation of the high terrain, it had borders with Tibet and Nepal and was on the silk route from China. Known as the Deva-bhumi or the 'Land of Gods', it witnessed the constant wanderings of pilgrims, fakirs and holy men and saw a convergence of many peoples and religions. A joyous, pagan animism coexisted with the practice of severe tantric ritual, and Buddhism still thrived in nearby Nepal, across the Kali river.

The word 'Kumaon' derives from Kurmanchal, the land of *Kurmavatar*, the second incarnation of Vishnu in the form of a tortoise. In the *Skanda Purana*, Kumaon is known as Manas Khand and Garhwal as Kedar Khand. In the *Ramayana* it is known as Uttarakoshala. In the *Mahabharata* it was part of the kingdom of Uttarakuru. Prehistoric dwellings such as rock shelters, as well as stone-age implements, have been discovered in the Almora district.

The Chinese traveller Hiuen Tsang (Xuanzang) visited the mountains of Kurmanchal sometime in the period from 633 to 643 AD. He records his impressions of the northern tribal kingdoms (associated with Shakas, Khasas, Magars, Kinnars, and Huns) and mentions a number of geographical locations, later on linked to the valleys of Kumaon and Garhwal (see, for example, Saklani 1998: 48-52).

The Katyuri kings, who claimed descent from the Sun god, ruled here from the seventh to the 11th century. They called their state Kurmanchal, the land of Kurma. Much of the architectural heritage of Kumaon, especially in stone, came from this period. The Katyuris were followed by the Mallas, and then by the Chand Rajas, who claimed descent from the moon. In 1790, the Gurkhas from neighboring Nepal invaded Kumaon, and a brutal 'Gorkhial' rule was established, which

continued until 1814, when the treaty of Sagauli handed the region over to the British.

The Mutiny of 1857, later referred to as the First War of Independence, had echoes and repercussions in the Himalayan mountain regions as well. By 1875, when Ivan P. Minayev visited Kumaon, in search of secrets and stories, the British Empire was once again firmly in control of the vast and diverse land. In May 1876, Queen Victoria would be anointed with the additional title of ‘Empress of India’. Minayev reports:

In Garhwal and Kamaon they had heard that there is a Russian tsar in Russia, but the naive natives of Srinagar had a very vague idea about the relationship of our vast fatherland with *Kooeen* Victoria (as the natives call her British Majesty); it is true, the information that there was some kinship between the two royal houses had reached even them, and I was asked many different, fairly unintelligible questions, for instance: who pays tribute to whom—*Kooeen* Victoria to the Russian tsar or vice versa? (from the Preface by Ivan Minayev to the 1875 edition, see: Minayev 2015 lxii).

Minayev goes on to observe:

That part of ancient Kamaon and Garhwal controlled by Englishmen who live there, and where I travelled, has changed a lot in recent times: a lot of what travellers saw there at the beginning of the current century no longer exists, and the very manner of travel has not remained the same, since the country has absorbed some elements of European culture. (*Ibid.*: iv-lv)

In Kumaon, or Kamaon, as Minayev refers to it, the prevailing culture of the time had a patina of Sanskritisation, of mantras and Brahmanical ritual, imported from the successive waves of settlers from the plains. Adi-Shankaracharya and his followers remained the elite domain of the Hindu pilgrims and philosophers and priestly classes. For the rest, the intense energies and magnetic presence of the mountains themselves led to an eclectic and localized pantheon of gods, an assertion of the genius loci, as it were.

Apart of the omnipresent worship of Lord Shiva and his consort Parvati, in different forms and manifestations, each village had a *bhumi-devata*, a god of the soil. There was also an abundance of temples

dedicated to *kula-devatas*, *grama-devatas*, *naga-devatas*, and *viras* or local folk heroes who had been incorporated into divinity. Bholanath, Kailasanath, Gangnath and Haru were some of the local gods to be elevated in this fashion. An intense belief in demonology prevailed, as did a fervent fear and relish of *bhutas* and *ghouls*. Superstition abounded, and esoteric Tibetan tantric practices, and those of the *siddha* cults, were an integral part of religious and emotional life.

The goddesses of Kumaon were not the docile Sitas and compliant Satis of the Northern plains, but fiercely individualistic, often wrathful, *ugra* manifestations. *Gadha-devis* were invoked at cremation grounds on moonless *amavasya* nights. The *dayans* or local witches, with their feet pointing backwards, supposedly derived from the ancient cult of Diana, with the Himalayan sojourns of the Greeks, the Yavanas, who came to these parts after Alexander. The tutelary goddesses of Kumaon, Nanda Devi, perhaps similarly originated from the concept of Mesopotamian goddess Nana. She was introduced by the Greeks and incorporated into local divinity with the Kushan kings and the Indo Greek diaspora (Michon 2015:126-8). Vanini Devi and Shyama Devi were guardian spirits of old Almora, transformed to divinity by the power and thrust of folklore. Sitala Devi represented the propitiation of the dreaded scourge of smallpox. Kali in all her manifestations—Mahakali, Bhadrakali, Shamshankali—was present through the length and breadth of Kurmanchal. In fact, every river, mountain peak, cave and waterfall was said to bear the spiritual imprint of a special god, sage or demon.

The folk songs, the *muktaks*, similarly reflected the fabric of local life. The oral literature of the hills, the ‘told tale’, what Minayev refers to as the *danta-katha*, largely survived within the repository of musical traditions. Pastoral agricultural songs, the *hudkiya-bol*, were sung during the sowing of paddy, a delicate task involving skill, dexterity and rhythm. The major life *samskaras*, such as childbirth, marriage, thread ceremonies, all began with *shakunakhara*, invocations to the various divinities to join the festivities. The *nyoli* or *ritu* rain-songs were representative of the seasonal cycles. The vibrant *jhora*,

jhora chappeli and *chhanchhari* songs were accompanied by dances, in which the community also participated. The *jhoras* were duets, often sung by men and women together. *Chhanchhari*, also known as *khel* (game), had a lead singer surrounded by a circle that sang the chorus, and was danced to a slow and measured tread. In the month of *chaitra*, people would congregate at homes, temples and public spaces to celebrate Holi and the coming of spring. Heroic and romantic ballads such as *Rajula-Malushahi*, and *Ajua-Bafaul* continue to be popular to this day. *Jagars* were, and still are, performed in shamanistic rituals of possession and exorcism, invoking local gods and demons.

A.K. Ramanujan discusses folklore in relation to voice and agency. In his analysis, folk stories can be ‘male centred’ or ‘female centred’. In male centred tales, women have a secondary role and often aid the hero in his quest, or indeed are the object of the quest. “These stories end in marriage—for they speak of the emancipation of the hero from the parental yoke and the setting up of a new family, as he comes into his own”. In the other category, “the heroine is already married or she is married early in the tale, and then the women’s troubles begin.” She has to overcome marital harassment, and sometimes reform her husband, to achieve a happy married life (Ramanujan 1997: 218).

The theme of the clever and patient maiden is reflected in several of these tales, including the first story, ‘The Clever Wife’, where the legendary pride and guile of the Kamaoni damsel is demonstrated with charm and whimsy. In both the animal kingdom, as in ‘The Jackal and the Lion’ and ‘The Clever Wife’ the primary theme is of inverting established power structures through intelligence and guile. The forest and the animal world are present with palpable reality in these folk tales, without the detachment and artifice of court fable or urban allegory. It’s a jungle out there, and survival strategies are the essence of these narratives.

The boundaries between human, animal and psychic worlds are also fluid. Muslim influences surface in the constant wanderings of *fakirs*, and in the captivating *paris* and *houris* who inhabit the forest. The theme of metamorphosis is constant, with ravens becoming

paris and snakes transforming into Brahmin priests at will. Things are never as they seem, and the constant presence of form changing sorcerers—the demons, *bhuts*, *pishachas*, *rakshasas* and *fakirs*—all test and expand the boundaries of reality at a daily level.

‘The Sly Sepoy’ seems a contemporary interpretation of an old fable, and comes across as an allegorical tale about the machinations of the British Empire and the East India Company. The sepoy appears more than once in these stories, a trickster figure of no fixed loyalties.

The emblematic story of the collection is perhaps that of the ‘Stupid Son and the Cunning Mother’. The gullible simpleton is a staple in these tales, as is the wise and cynical old crone. It is a brutal and disconcerting tale, with nature red in tooth and claw. Here, we have human nature in its fundamentals, unadorned by ethics, characterized by cunning and expediency. Yet there is a special grace reserved for fools and simpletons. It is always ambiguous whether the mediations of the supernatural work towards justice or towards blessing the cunning with good luck, but often all manages to work out well even for those of diminished faculties.

A word about the raconteurs from whom these tales were gleaned—the reader has a sense of them from the pace at which the stories are told. There are fuzzy edges and missing links. What happened to the abandoned princess? How did the prince cut off a piece of meat from the horse’s leg? Often, they end abruptly, as though it got dark and the narrator had to walk a long distance home, in paths full of fakirs and *paris* and snakes masquerading as brahmin priests...

Folk tales are primary cultural memes, carrying in them the seeds of human geographies, histories, situations and identities. It is astounding to reflect on how stories travel and get viral, and how they may lie dormant, muted by circumstances, until they are brought alive again, as the translators Madhu Malik and Bulbul Sharma² have shown through their inspired and perceptive translations.

² Professor Madhu Malik received her degree in Slavic Folklore from the University of Virginia, Charlottesville. She worked as Professor of

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the Russian Language and Literature at Bucknell University in Pennsylvania for 25 years. Her teaching background includes courses in the Russian language and literature, folklore and ritual, race and gender studies. Now retired from active teaching, Professor Malik is working on the translation of contemporary Russian fiction. Bulbul Sharma, a graduate in Russian literature from Moscow State University, is an acclaimed author, artist, and story-teller based in Delhi. She has written collections of short stories, a full length novel *Banana Flower Dreams*. Her works have been translated into many foreign languages like Italian, French and Finnish. She also writes for children and has been conducting art and storytelling workshops for children with different abilities for the last 15 years.

Appendix

Clever Wives and Happy Idiots: a Glimpse into the Kumaoni Folklore. Two tales retold from the Pahari in Russian by Ivan P. Minayev, translated into English by Bulbul Sharma and Madhu Malik.³

THE SLY SEPOY

During his travels, a *sepo*⁴ got hungry and entered a house. There a woman was cooking lunch while her husband was in the forest collecting firewood.

‘Give me something to eat,’ said the *sepo* to the woman.

‘Where am I going to get food for you?’, she answered. ‘I do not have anything!’

The *sepo* was quiet and then said, ‘I saw a wonderful thing on the way here. They were carrying one mango⁵ on two carts. And that mango was as big as a house.’

³ The texts of two folktales from the book *Clever Wives and Happy Idiots. Folktales from the Kumaon Himalayas* has been kindly shared with us by Namita Gokhale, to whom belongs the idea to recover, translate and publish this obscure collection of rare Kumaoni fables in India. The Editorial Board of *Cracow Indological Studies* is honored to have received two selected tales from this wonderful collection for publication. The translations are published with the original commentaries by Ivan Minayev and the additional commentaries by a prominent Soviet historian of India Yevgeniy Medvedev (1932–1985), added to the second Russian edition of Minayev’s collection (Minayev 1966).

⁴ Medvedev: Sipai [from the Persian *sipahi*]—soldier. In India, mercenaries were referred to in this manner. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the word “*sipai*” acquired a specific meaning: this is how soldiers enlisted in the colonial army and trained in the European manner were called. With the help of regular units of sepoys the English won for themselves all of India.

⁵ Medvedev: mango—the fruit of the tropical tree *Mangifera indica*. The fruit of the mango is about the size of a large apple, has a soft orange

‘Where did you see this?’, the woman asked him.

The *sepoy* pointed to a place about a mile from the house.

‘Watch my house, my friend, while I run and have a look,’ said the woman.

‘Ok,’ agreed the *sepoy*. She ran off to look at the giant mango and the *sepoy* slyly began eating the bread that she had made for herself and her husband. There was still a little bit of bread left when the husband of the woman came back from the forest with firewood.

‘Who are you?’, he asked the *sepoy*.

‘A pilgrim,’ he replied. ‘And where is my wife?’

‘Well, a certain man came here a while ago; he beckoned to her, and she went with him.’

‘And in what direction did they go?’

‘She went down the road to the right.’

The poor man ran off to look for his wife. In the meantime she came home.

‘Oh,’ she said, ‘my husband has brought the firewood. But where has he gone himself?’

‘He was just here,’ said the *sepoy*; ‘some woman, standing near that tree, beckoned to him. And he went with her!’

‘Where did he go?’

‘Along that road, to the left!’, answered the sly *sepoy*.

The wife ran off to look for her husband. And the *sepoy* happily finished the bread. Then he took all the valuables from the house and left. He couldn’t get very far from the village.

Both the husband and the wife came back home and began fighting with each other.

exterior, and is sweet, with a delicate sour flavour.

‘You went off with another man,’ he said.

‘You ran off with another woman,’ screamed the wife.

The husband began to beat up his wife.

‘Why did you leave the house, woman?’ he asked.

She screamed and wailed loudly, tears pouring down her face. The *sepo*y heard the wailing and shouting.

He said to the village people, ‘*Ram, Ram ...* what bad luck. Poor chap. He had only one child and it died!’

The people of the village began to cry, ‘*Shiva, Shiva, Ram. Ram...*’,⁶ they chanted and went to the poor man’s house.

While they were raising such a hue and cry, the *sepo*y seized his chance and ran away.

‘Oh, what misfortune...’ said the people, ‘your child has died. Poor fellow.’

And the poor fellow got angry and screamed.

‘May your children die! You have come here with such inauspicious words!’

Thus they all squabbled for a long time while the sly *sepo*y escaped far, far away.

THE STUPID SON AND THE CLEVER MOTHER

A young boy decided to travel. He said to his mother, ‘Mother, bake me some bread for the journey!’ The mother baked him bread and he left for his travels.

He stopped on the way to wash his face and hands; he was about to eat when out of nowhere there appeared a dog, who came and stood near him. He gave the dog some bread and it ran away.

⁶ Medvedev: *Siva! Siva! Ram! Ram!*—an address to the gods Shiva and Rama[a reincarnation of Vishnu]. In this instance, the exclamation can be loosely translated as “O, God!” In other situations, it can assume different emotional tones, for instance, ‘*Ram-Ram!*’ is a greeting, *Har, Har Mahadev!*’ is a war cry.

At the same time one rich man's leather bags full of gold were being aired out in the sun. The dog came there, grabbed one bag and ran after the young boy. The dog caught up with the boy and put the bag of gold before him. The boy opened the bag and when he saw the gold, he was overjoyed. He gave the dog all his bread. The boy ran home happily and gave his mother the bag containing the gold. The mother looked into the bag and was overjoyed.

Now, the mother was a wise woman. She bought sweets for eight *annas*⁷ and scattered them on the roof and the *verandah*.⁸

'Dear son, just take a look at what has rained down on us. Eat as many sweets as you want,' said the mother.

The son was overjoyed. He ate up all the sweets and left nothing. And the mother stitched some good clothes for him. One day the son said to his mother,

'Mother, give me four *paisas*.⁹ I will go to the market.'

'What will you do with this money?', asks his mother.

'I will spend one *paisa* on betel leaves,¹⁰ one *paisa* on betel nuts, one *paisa* on sweets, and one *paisa* I will give to the *randi*.¹¹

The mother gave him four *paisas* and he went to the market. He first went to the shop where betel nuts were being sold and said,

'*Panwari*, O *panwari*!¹² Do you have good betel?'

⁷ Minayev: *Anna*— a small coin. Medvedev: A *rupee* was divided into 16 *annas*, an *anna* into 4 *paisas*. Currently this system has been replaced with the decimal one, where a *rupee* is divided into 100 *paisas*.

⁸ Minayev: *Verandah*—a covered balcony around the house.

⁹ See note 7.

¹⁰ Medvedev: *Paan*—plant widely grown in South Asia [Piper betel], with hot and pungent leaves used for chewing (see also *panawari*)

¹¹ Minayev: *Randi*— a depraved and wicked woman

¹² Minayev: *Panwari* seller of betel, Medvedev: *paan*, a *paan* is a mixture for chewing, very popular in India. It consists of leaves of the plant

‘I have very good betel, sir. I will send somebody to fetch them. How much would you like?’

‘I need about a hundred and fifty bundles.’

Then he went to the sweet seller and said, ‘Sweet seller, O sweet seller! Are your sweets ready?’

‘Ready, sir. How much should I weigh for you?’

‘I need one or two *mans*.’¹³

‘I will prepare that much, sir,’ said the sweet seller.

‘Get it ready. I will pick them up on my way back.’

Then he went to the *randi* and spent the night with her. In the morning as he was leaving he gave her one *paisa*. They started quarreling.

‘All night you slept with me, and now you’re giving me one *paisa*!’

The *randi* began to beat him with her shoes. She took his *dohar*¹⁴ off him. From there he went to the sweet seller.

‘Sweet seller, O sweet seller,’ he said. ‘Are the sweets ready?’

‘They are ready, sir. How much would you like me to weigh?’

‘Give me one *paisa*’s worth to try!’

The *halwai* beat him up till he was black and blue and took all his clothes. Then he went to the betel shop.

‘Sir,’ said the shopkeeper. ‘Is the betel ready?’

‘Great! Give me one *paisa*’s worth.’

betel [Piper betel], spread with lime, in which are wrapped pieces of nut of the nut palm and other spices. The little package produced in the process is called a *paan*.

¹³ Minayev/Medvedev: *Man*—Indian weight.

¹⁴ Medvedev: In Minayev’s text it is *dohara* in Roman letters.

The shopkeeper was furious. He gave him a good beating and took his *dhoti* (loin cloth),¹⁵ the last piece of clothing on him.

Just then the town crier came by, beating a drum, and announced that a rich man had lost a bag of gold. Whoever found it would be rewarded!

The son heard this and said, ‘Give me the reward. I have found the bag!’

‘So, where is it?’, they asked him.

‘With my mother.’

The people went with him to his house.

‘Ma, where is the bag I gave you?’, asked the young man to his mother.

‘When was it that you gave me a bag?’

‘Ah, on the day when sweets were raining from the sky!’

The mother looked at the people, ‘When have you ever seen sweets raining from the sky?’

The people heard these words and started laughing.

‘What a half-wit!’

Then they all left from there.

¹⁵ Medvedev: *Dhoti*— the most popular article of Indian male clothing, this is a piece of white cloth, wrapped around the hips, the end is passed between the legs and tied at the waist under the upper part of the *dhoti*. The whole effect somewhat resembles pants.