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The Milk-drinking Hāisās of Sanskrit Poetry.—By Charles R. Lanman, Professor in Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

The Hindus say that the bird called hāisā has the faculty, out of a vessel of mingled milk and water, to separate and drink the milk and leave the water. To this wide-spread popular belief frequent allusion is made in the literature; and for it there must be some basis in the facts of natural history.

The facts which gave rise to the belief are in my opinion the following: the aquatic bird hāisā lives on lakes that abound in lotuses, and subsists in a measure upon the underground stalk of the lotus plant (such a stalk is called baisa), whose joint (granthi), when crushed (bhagna), exudes a juice designated by the word kṣīra, which is also a common name for milk. Thus the bird, as it floats on the lake, may be said to drink kṣīra or milk out of water.

For the sake of students of Sanskrit and others, it may be worth my while to assemble some of these allusions in the literature. And again it may be useful to put together the statements about the character and habits of the hāisā in order to subject them more easily to the criticism of students of natural history.

But first a word as to the general scope of these allusions. They are indeed often made directly in praise of the noble hāisā, and to show its superiority for instance to the heron; but oftener still, the point of the allusion is the marvelous discrimination, fine and clear, displayed in the separation of things so hopelessly mixed as milk and water.

Beautifully appropriate uses of our fable are made by the philosophers. Thus in the Tattva-muktāvalī we read: “Others


2 The intimacy of this mixture is praised by the poets as absolute and complete (Sprāche, 2024), and it is thus a type of the closest friendship and mutual devotion (ib. 2026).

3 Edited and translated by Cowell, 1883, JRAS. xv. pp. 149, 167, čloka 85.
see not the difference when water is mixed with milk, but the swan at once separates the milk and the water; so too when the souls are absorbed in the supreme Brahman, the Lord,—the faithful, who have received the Guru’s words, can at once draw a difference between them.” Again, the Sāṃkhya aphorism, iv. 23, says: “By him who is free from passion what is to be left [i.e. Nature] is left, and what is to be taken [i.e. Soul] is taken; as in the case of the swan and the milk.” And again, the beginning of the second vallī of the Kātha Upaniṣad says: “The better is one thing, and the more agreeable is another. The wise man weighs them both well, separates them (vi-vinakti), and chooses the better.” Çaṅkara, in his Bhāṣya, illustrates this by the fable of the haṅsa. Vi-vinakti is from the same root as vi-vecana which is used of the haṅsa’s exploit.

First then—some of the allusions. The introduction to the Pañcatantra contains the familiar stanza anantapāram etc., which, as I thought it a fit motto for a brief Sanskrit grammar that I was minded to make, I Englished2 as follows:

An endless science, as we know, is grammar.
And life is short; the hindrances are many.
Essentials keep, leaving the non-essential,
As swans drink up the milk, but leave the water.3

Here we may notice the passage in Kālidāsa’s Çakuntalā,4 where an invisible being behind the scenes is threatening the buffo’s life. Here the king promises that his arrow, which he thinks to let fly, shall slay the villain and spare the buffo—with the same uncommon discrimination that the haṅsa uses as betwixt the milk and the water.

In Böhtlingk’s Indische Spräche, 2d ed., the following numbers make express mention of the haṅsa’s gift:

243, anantapāram, from Pañcatantra, introd. 5;
245, anantapāstram, from Old Cāṇakya, xv. 10;
544, ambhojinī, from Bhartṛhari, Nitiçataka, 18;

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1 See the interesting comment hereon in J. R. Ballantyne’s Sāṅkhya Aphorisms, 3d ed., London, 1885, p. 303.
2 A dozen years ago, more or less. It has since then been put to this very use by R. Fick, Praktische Grammatik der Sanskrit-Sprache, Wien, no date, p. VII.
3 See F. Kielhorn’s note to this stanza in the Notes to his edition.
4 Near the end of act vi., especially the stanza 155 (Böhtlingk) or 182 (Pischel).
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4923, prājñās tu, from MBh. i. 74. 91=3078;
6211, vivaśoṣjhita, from Rāja-taraṅgini, vi. 275;
7358, haṇsah āveto, from Subhāśitārṇava;
7605, vedādyanekāṃstrāṇi, from the same.

About the stanzas from the Sprüche a few words may be of interest. No. 4923 is from the old Epic story of Čakuntalā, where she says: “On hearing good and evil counsel, a fool takes the evil, as a swine does filth, and a wise man takes the good, as the haṇsa the milk.” Cāṇaka’s verses, badly mutilated, are recognizable in the famous Sidharubam seu grammatica Samscvardamica . . . auctore Paulino a S. Bartholomaeo, Rome, 1790, p. 19. Bhartrhari’s stanza is thus rendered in Abraham Roger’s Offne Thür zu dem verborgenen Heydenthum, Nürnberg, 1663, p. 506-7: “Wann Bramma auf seinen Träger Ampsa’ zornig ist, kann er ihn zwar wol aus seinem Wasser-pfuhl vertreiben; aber ihm gleichwol die Macht nicht benehmen, dass er (wofern Milch und Wasser untereinander vermenget) die Milch nicht solte allein trinken, und das Wasser überlassen können.”

The Indian anthologies contain chapters, certain sections of which form a kind of Oriental bestiary. Among these are sections made up, wholly or in part, of epigrams concerning the haṇsa. Four such collections may be noticed:
The Paddhati of Čāṇgadhara [A. D. 1363], ed. by P. Peterson, Bombay, 1888. Nos. 796–814 are called haṇsānyoktayah.
The Subhāśitāvali of Vallabhadeva [A. D. 1400–1450], ed. by P. Peterson, Bombay, 1886. Nos. 689–717 are about haṇsas and sūrasas.

In all these stanzas from the Indian anthologies, the material is similar or in good part identical, and of course from very diverse sources. Among these stanzas, the following ten make reference to the kṣīra-nīra-vivecaṇa: in Čāṇgadhara, only no. 797; in Vallabhadeva, nos. 697 and 716; in Parab’s collection, nos. 6, 10, 15, and 20; in Bhāṭavaḍekar’s, nos. 2, 14, and 18.

1 Ampsa [haṇsa] sind ein Gefäß, fast wie die kleinen Endvögel [Enten]. — Roger.
these, 797, 15, and 2 simply repeat Bhartṛhari’s stanza; 6 = Sprüche 7358; and 10 and 14 are a pleasing quotation from Bhä-
miniñiläsa, i. 13, ed. L. R. Vaidya, Bombay, 1887. Thus there
are five with new allusions, namely 697, 716, 20, 18, and 10=14.

Of the many stanzas without these allusions, almost all are
interesting and instructive as to the character and habits of the
haïsa. Richest in points of description are perhaps Vallabhade-
va’s nos. 715 and 710, which read thus :

No. 715. “His beauty is enchanting; charming his mate.
For drink, he has the sweet juice of the lotus; and for a play-
ground, the waters. Among the lotuses is his dwelling; their
pollen is his ornament. He subsists on the excellent underground
stalk of the lotus.² His friends are the sweet-humming bees.—
Free from servile labor, poverty, and humiliation, happy lives
the haïsa !”

No. 710. “There are everywhere waters clear as pearl, with
lotus-roots whose knots show milk when they are crushed ;³
abundant draughts of lotus-juice ;⁴ sand-banks fit for sport and
play. What means this, then, O haïsa, that thou takest up thine
abode in this horrid, muddy, old pool, beset with impudent
shrieking herons?”

Kálidásä’s Meghadûta, stanza 11, is relevant at this point.
The Yakṣa says to the cloud that is to bear the message to his
wife, “The räja-haïsas, eager to get to lake Mänasa, will be thy
companions as far as mount Käläsä, having pieces of the shoots
of the bïsa as their provisions for the journey (patheya or viati-
cum).” H. H. Wilson⁵ says: “The Räjahansa is described as a
white gander, with red legs and bill, and together with the com-
mon goose is a favourite bird in Hindu poetry. Not to shock
European prejudice, I have in all cases substituted for these
birds, one to which we are rather more accustomed in verse, the
swan.” In rendering haïsa by ‘swan’ instead of ‘gander,’ or
‘goose,’ Wilson has been generally followed ; but Jerdon says,
under the Cygnidae, that there are no swans in India. Kálidásä
again speaks of the bïsa as the patheya or viaticum of the räja-

¹ madhu.—² bïsa : cf. Vallabhadeva, 717.—³ ‘Stalk-knots with milk
that appears (vilasant) upon breaking (bhaṅga).’—⁴ Lit. ‘tāmarasa-
extract or -liquor.’
⁵ The Mégha Dûta, translated, etc., London (reprint of Calcutta ed.),
1814, p. 88.
haṅsa, to wit, in his Urvaṣī. And again, in the same play, at the end of act i., as Urvaṣī ascends to the sky, Purūravas says that she has torn his heart out of his body, as the rāja-haṅsī tears the stringy fibre out of a lotus-stalk, the end of which she has broken off.

Professor R. G. Bhandarkar, in reply to my inquiry, kindly wrote me a letter dated Poona, July 16, 1888. From it a part of the words or of the substance may be given. "The physical facts, as distinguished from poetic fancies, that may be gathered from the allusions to the bird in Sanskrit poetical works appear to be these: 1. The birds are white, some having dark and others red bills and legs. 2. They feed on lotus-stalks (bīṣa). This lotus is of the Nelumbium order. They are also spoken of as fond of the water-lily of the kumuda species. 3. They pass their time in large lakes or ponds or on sand-banks of rivers. 4. They migrate about the setting in of the rains, i.e. about the middle or end of May, to the North, and must be supposed to come to India in the beginning of the cold season, i.e. about the end of November."

He then cites C. J. Jerdon's Birds of India, vol. iii., and especially Jerdon's notices of the family of the Anseridae. One species, Anser cinereus, corresponds, says Jerdon, to the wild goose or gray lag-goose of England, and is a common winter visitant to the North of India, extending its migrations to Central India, but rarely seen further South. It is sometimes met with in small parties of from four to twenty; occasionally in vast flocks, which feed on young corn, grass, etc., and during the heat of the day rest on some sand-bank in the large rivers or in the middle of a tank. The Anser indicus is a goose that appears to be peculiar to India and probably the adjacent countries north of the Himalayas, where it breeds. It is chiefly a winter visitant to India.—So far Jerdon.

Habits and character of the haṅsa. The mode of flight of the wild geese as they migrate northward or southward is spoken of in characteristic phrase in the Rigveda, iii. 8. 9, haṅsā iva preṇīgo yatānāḥ, 'like wild geese that move in single file (Gāṇsemarsch)'; so i. 163. 10. Their swiftness (java) is praised at

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1 Stanza paṇcāt saras, Bollensen, no. 94, Parab and Telang, iv. 31.
2 See Kathā-sarit-sāgara, lxix. 139-32, Bombay ed.
3 Although Jerdon does not speak of the Anseridae as feeding on lotuses, the point is not doubtful.
Sutta-nipāta, 221, as against the slowness of the gaudy peacock. Their breeding-place and true home is the Himalayan lake Mānasā,' whose glories are the subject of many a verse,2 and with which the every-day waters of India are set in contemptuous contrast.3 Their fondness for sandy banks is implied in the Çakuntalā,' where the king, speaking of the unfinished background of Çakuntalā, sends for his brushes, saying, “The river Mālinī must yet be painted in, with a pair of hāṅsa resting on its sandy bank, and the Himalayan foot-hills behind it.”

Their beauty or splendor (cōbhā) surpasses that of a thousand herons.6 Their angry pride is the subject of a beautiful epitaph, gṛḥgadhara, 800. Their superb dignity is told in the stanza,7 “When near him the harsh chattering jacana shrilly shrieks, the rāja-hāṅsa either goes away or keeps silent”; and still better in the stanza8 so charmingly rendered by Rückert,

Und wenn auf Erden gleich  
Bliebe kein Lotostech,  
Doch scharrte nie der Schwan  
Im Miste wie der Hahn.

The lofty devotion of Sumukha, so touchingly described in the Jātaka-mālā, xxii., may be a figment of Ārya-çūra’s piety; but it is significant that it is ascribed to a hāṅsa.

Dr. Elliott Coues of Washington, in most kindly response to my ornithological queries, propounds the following interesting solution of the milk-drinking fable: The members of the swan, goose, and duck tribe, and the flamingos also, have a series of lamellae on each edge of each mandible, which serve as a sieve for straining food from the water which they take in. A little poetical fancy would easily turn this habit into the exploit of separating “milk” (i.e. food or nourishment) from “milk-and-water” (i.e. water with food in suspension).

I think this can hardly be right: first, because the fable attributes this strange power, not to all of the Lamellirostres

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1 This is on mount Kālīṣa and is a sacred place of pilgrimage.—  
5 Parab, p. 367, no. 5.—Çārṇgadhara 798, Vallabhadeva 692, Parab, p. 367, no. 8, Sprüche 408,—many variants.—1 Ç. 811, Vall. 691, Parab, p. 367, no. 9, Sprüche, 5220.
(not, for example, to the cakravāka or Anas Casarca), but only to the haṃsa and rāja-haṃsa; and, secondly, because this particular word for milk, kṣīra, is never used for food or nourishment in general. Kṣīra is used of the milk of cows, goats, and women, and especially of the milky juice of the broken stalks of flowers. And a Sikh gentleman, Mr. Hari Singh Puri, on a visit here from India, assured me last week that the juice from the crushed or broken lotus stalks is milky in color.

It remains to inquire whether this fable can be traced back to Vedic literature. The stanzas RV. x. 131. 4, 5, and especially the occurrence of the word vy āpibas, used elsewhere of 'separating mingled liquids in drinking,' hardly prove the fable to be known to the Rigveda; but I refer the reader to the learned discussions of the passage by Bloomfield and Oldenberg.

The Yajurveda, on the other hand, does speak of a bird, a kruṅc or curlew, which can separate and drink the milk from water with which it is mingled. The passage occurs in the Māitrāyaṇi Saṃhitā, iii. 11. 6, in the Kāṭhaka, xxxviii. 1, in the Vājasaneyī, xix. 72–79, and in the Tāttiriya Brāhmaṇa, ii. 6. 21–3. I quote from the first-named text:

\[\text{adbhyāḥ kṣīrāṁ vyāpibat}\\ 
\text{krūṅnā āṅgirasā dhīyā . . .}\\ 
\text{adbhyāḥ sōmaṁ vyāpibae}\\ 
\text{chāndobhir haṃsāḥ pucīsāt, etc.}\]

Other mention of this power of the curlew I have not found save in two passages from the Pāli Buddhist literature. One is from the Udāna, viii. 7, "The wise man leaves the evil as the milk-drinking curlew the water," vidvā pañjāhāti pāpakāṁ koṅko khirapako va ninnagam. The other is from the Sumaṅgalavilāsinī, p. 305, where Buddhaghosa likens a true disciple to a curlew, because, if a bowl of spirits and water were put to his mouth, only the water would enter it and not the spirits; just as,
he continues, if a mixture of milk and water were offered to the kruṇa-birds, only the milk would be taken by them and not the water.

Sāyāṇa, in his comment on TBr. ii. 6. 2, says that the haṇsa is the soul in living beings, and that Indra, taking on its form, drank the soma, separating it from the water; and then, with some other curious remarks suggested by the passage, adds the following illustration (p. 660):

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Here the point of most interest for us seems to be that the milky part of the mixture is coagulated by contact or mingling (samparkāt) with the fluid (rasa) in the mouth (mukha-gata) of the bird when it puts its bill (mukha) into the vessel (pātra).

Now by a singular coincidence, Swāmī Abhedānanda, a Bengali gentleman, calling at my study last week on the same day as Mr. Purī and while my mind was upon the subject of this essay, told me that his teacher had explained the haṇsa-fable to him by saying that there was a secretion in the bird’s mouth which coagulated the milky part of the mixture, so that the resulting curdy portions became easily separable. Whether there is any acidulous rasa or any rennet-like rasa in the haṇsa’s mouth, I must leave to the ornithologists. At any rate, the Swāmī’s theory seems to be essentially like that of Sāyāṇa.

CAMBRIDGE, MASS., June 7, 1898.

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1 E.g. evam indro ‘py asāram parityajya ekasminn api pātre sāram eva svī-karoti, p. 661.

2 Somewhat after the fashion of rennet? But see Johnson’s Universal Cyclopaedia, 1893, vol. ii., p. 216, s.v. Cheese, on the character of the action of rennet, etc., in coagulating the curd.