

The legend of Palakapya

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I often speak about the legend of Palakapya and it has been a particular source of inspiration for me. Palakapya is supposed to have lived in the 5th or 6th century BCE. in the region of Bengal. His story has been transmitted to us through a Sanskrit text called *Matanga-lila*, which is probably a thousand years old, perhaps more. This text was translated into English for the first time in 1931 by an American Professor, Franklin Edgerton. Evidently, such a very old text is a little enigmatic; that is why I have tried to interpret it in a more accessible way.

“The moonlight was shimmering on the waters of the Ganga. By her lapping waters was built an imposing palace and on the balcony, overlooking the river, was a silhouette crouched in thought: Romapada, king of Anga. He was a powerful and benign ruler, an efficient administrator regularly checking in disguise on the state of his kingdom’s affairs. Campa, his capital, was flourishing in trade and forests all around the kingdom were cleared to make land available for the gentry and peasants. Taxes were collected regularly and the kingdom’s coffers were full.

“The night was getting cooler, a light breeze filled the air, and the king looked for the shawl that had fallen from his shoulder. As he picked up the shawl and wrapped it round his shoulders, he felt a prick in his hand. He removed a sharp little grain from the shawl and examined it carefully. It was bamboo rice, which meant that the bamboos had started to flower. From the dawn of time, it was known that the gregarious* flowering of bamboos signified seven years of drought, that the rats would multiply and eat all the grain, and the elephants would go out of the forests to look for fodder in the cultivated fields.

“The news soon reached the last corner of the kingdom, to the east, near the great Lohit River, a tributary of the mighty Brahmaputra. Sages live there, next to the river and came to visit the king. His daughter Shanta went to welcome and look after the visiting sages. The king knew that the flowering of bamboos meant hardship and starvation for his people, thus he had to seek the advice of the visiting great sages.

“The next morning the official priest and the ministers of the court came to see the king with their plea: ‘Forests were burnt and cleared away in hectares and in its place was built the dazzling city of Campa, the capital of the kingdom of Anga. The city flourished on the banks of the river Ganga. The population soared and more forests were cleared to make way for agriculture and cattle. The farmers toiled day and night to protect their crops from wild animals. Then, in the forests surrounding this vast kingdom, the bamboos had started to flower in mass, announcing a drought in the kingdom of Anga. The seeds that fell from these flowering bamboos were collected by the people and eaten as rice; rats multiplied with the fallen bamboo rice and gnawed their way through everything they could find, and finally the wild elephants started raiding what was left of the crops. O Mighty king, we supplicate to you with our solemn plea.’

“The sages of the great river were graciously hosted by King Romapada in Campa and by their grace he earned a boon to catch the elephants that were threatening his people. The visiting sages advised the king of Anga how to capture them using the system of *keddah*. Soldiers were dispatched to every forest near and far in the kingdom to search for the elephants. One batch found a group of elephants near a watering hole, by a small ashram where lived an old sage, Samagayana and his son, Palakapya. The soldiers discovered that Palakapya was accustomed to spending his time with the elephants, morning, noon and night. They sent the information to King Romapada about these elephants that were at a waterhole not far from the ashram and the strange sage who lived with them. The King ordered for the elephants to be captured. The method used was the *keddah*, the far-eastern

technique of the country, trapping elephants in their territory. Chased into an enclosure built into a funnel, they were pushed into a circle made of tree trunks. To the accompaniment of continuous loud noises, the elephants, of all sizes, were driven through the opening of the gate, and it was shut by slashing the rope that had held it open. The elephants were roped by their necks and feet, and then taken out of this wooden cage. Many elephants were sacrificed: mothers tethering their young ones, old bulls or calves running amok. The others were trained to the voice of man and obeyed their orders. Then they were taken to the city of Campa, and, with the help of the great sages, the elephants were secured to strong poles.

“When Palakapya came out of his father’s ashram, he went to the water hole to check on the elephants and realised that they had disappeared. He started to track them, and after a few days, he arrived at the entrance of a great city. Its streets were busy, and people in colourful robes were moving about gracefully. He followed a crowd of people into a market place where jewels and gold were sold like fruits of the season. The people were whispering and then he heard the word ‘elephant’. He walked out into the open air, and at a distance, he saw a beautiful *peepul* tree standing alone near water. He walked towards the swaying leaves of the tree, climbed the tree, and was overwhelmed at the sight of women playing in water and the sounds of tinkling laughter. It was the queen’s bath. He started to climb down, to take a closer look.

“He was stopped by soldiers and was escorted through a garden illuminated by lamps in the approaching darkness. He heard roaring, moaning sounds, reverberating into dark forms that took the shape of elephants in wooden kraals; elephants tied to trees, elephants walking around with bells and chains. Palakapya approached the elephants. Everyone stood aside. Gently he caressed the sick ones lying on the ground. He whispered in their ears, blew a cloud of yellow powder on their wounds. They revived and stood up to live again

“Palakapya understood that King Romapada had captured the elephants thanks to the knowledge of the sages on how to trap them and train them to be obedient to man. But he believed that the elephants had to be kept free, for after all they are wild. All observed Palakapya calming the beasts and heard them playing music like trumpets in response to his care. Everyone present was lost in admiration for is it not the forte of man to make a beast sing?

“Then the great sages went to see the king and told him what they had seen. The King immediately went to pay his respects to the hermit, Palakapya. Curious, the king asked, ‘What is your name, O honoured one? Who are your ancestors?’ Palakapya remained silent. The king then bowed in low homage and Palakapya spoke: ‘I was born of a mother who had to abandon me in the forest when I was six months old, as she was a princess whose kingdom’s law did not accept a child out of wedlock into her family, even though my father is Sage Samagayana. That is why I grew up among elephants and I can speak to them and they can speak to me. That is how I learnt their story.’

He pursued: ‘Formerly elephants could go anywhere they pleased and assume any shape. They roamed as they liked in the sky and on the earth, their moving herds resembling fleeting masses of rain clouds, until one of them rested on a huge banyan tree and broke a branch that fell on the head of an irate hermit who cursed the elephants. Hence you see, the elephants were deprived of the power of moving at will, and came to be vehicles for even mortal men. The elephants of the quarters, however, were not cursed.’

“The elephants of the quarters, attended by all the elephant tribes, went to Brahma and said: ‘O God, when our kinsfolk have gone to earth by the power of fate, they may be prey to diseases, because of unsuitable and undigested food due to eating coarse things, overeating, and other causes.’ Thus addressed by them in their great distress, Brahma replied to them: ‘Not long after now there shall appear a certain sage fond of elephants, well versed in medicine, and he shall skilfully cure their diseases.’”

“Palakapya was born and he grew with the elephants, played with their young ones, wandering with them through rivers and torrents, on mountain tops and in pools of water,

and on pleasant spots of ground, living as a hermit on leaves and water, thus learning all about the elephants.’

“Know, King of Anga, that I am that hermit Palakapya, son of Samagayana! By capturing the elephants, you are calling the wrath of god and more grief for your people. If you free them and leave them under my care, I shall take them far away where they will not threaten your people. Then rain will fall and crops will come and peace shall be restored in your kingdom.’

On hearing Palakapya, who spoke wisely, the King of Anga decided to free the elephants. So Palakapya untied them and when the last rope was dropped to the ground, the rain fell. Palakapya guided the elephants he had freed from the King of Anga. They disappeared in the rain, enveloped by a misty, white, veil.”

* Note: for this phenomenon, see

<https://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/bamboo-flowering-14755>

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