

# *Śīt Basant: Oral Tale, Sāṅgīt, and Kissā*

By

FRANCES W. PRITCHETT  
*Columbia University, New York*

## THE MAGIC BIRD-HEART

Once there was a magic bird whose heart, when eaten, would make the eater a king. The story of this magic bird, and of the lucky hero who by accident or design actually ate its heart, is told in many parts of Europe, North Africa, and Asia. It has been classified as Tale Type 567, "The Magic Bird-heart," and its source has been tentatively identified as western Asia, perhaps Persia (Thompson 1946: 75). In South Asia, this tale has come to have not just one hero, but two: two brothers, usually named Śīt and Basant, "Winter" and "Spring." Their story has become a special subtype of the original tale, one which Thompson and Roberts call "The Magic Bird-heart and the Separated Brothers." Thompson and Roberts identify five parts of the tale: (I) Two Brothers Wander in the Forest; (II) The Magic Object; (III) The Adventures of the Elder Brother; (IV) The Adventures of the Younger Brother; (V) Reunion (Thompson and Roberts 1960: 86-88). The pan-Indian story of the two young princes named "Winter" and "Spring"—their abandonment in the forest, the magic birds they eat, and their reunion after many vicissitudes—has the simplicity and resonance of all great folktales.

Its archetypal plot and continuing wide popularity as an oral tale probably account for the fact that *Śīt Basant* has also been adopted into the two modern Hindi folk genres of *sāṅgīt* and *kissā*. And not only adopted, but also adapted: the stories told in these two genres differ significantly both from each other, and from the oral tale. In this paper I will discuss this divergence in plot, and argue that it is by no means haphazard or accidental. Rather, each genre selects and

modifies the elements of the story in its own characteristic way. The *sāṅgīt* cultivates melodrama and pathos as consistently as the *kissā* seeks out occasions for heroic adventure. Each genre is hospitable to certain kinds of plot configurations: it looks for them wherever they can be found, even vestigially, and nurtures them into their fullest development. Comparative study of the same story as it appears in different genres can thus be doubly revealing, telling us something about the possibilities of the story itself, and much more about the kind of appeal which each genre has for its audience.

As an oral tale, *Śīt Basant* is distributed all over South Asia: I have been able to find more than two dozen versions of it in published oral tale collections ranging in area from the Panjab to Assam, from Kashmir to Sri Lanka. (A list of the versions used in preparing this paper will be found in Appendix I.) While these stories naturally differ among themselves a good deal, there are a few points on which they almost all agree. They agree that the two brothers Śīt and Basant are princes, and their mother the Rani has died. Their father the Raja has remarried, hoping to give his two little sons a second mother. But the new Rani intends to have children herself who will inherit the throne. Being young and beautiful, she completely captures the elderly Raja's heart. Soon she invents one or another pretext for complaint against her stepsons, and as a result the two boys find themselves abandoned in the forest to die.

In the forest, they spend the night under a tree. While Śīt sleeps, Basant keeps watch, and overhears two magic birds talking in the branches above. The birds are foolishly boasting to each other about the auspiciousness of the hour, and the benefits which their flesh would bring to someone who ate it. Basant strikes both birds down with his arrows; in the morning, he feeds the kingmaker bird to the unknowing Śīt. He himself eats the other bird, whose flesh will bring him some future benefit which differs from story to story. In the course of the day, Śīt wanders off in search of provisions for them both. Arriving in a nearby city, he is garlanded by the royal elephant as the new Raja, since the old one had just died. All the oral tales agree that Śīt simply remains in his kingdom, uneventfully, until he is reunited with Basant at the very end of the story.

Basant, meanwhile, has a number of adventures. In various stories, he dies of snakebite and is revived by Lord Śiva, at Pārvatī's insistence; he kills a tiger or other monster; a wicked merchant plans to offer him as a human sacrifice to make his grounded ship move, but Basant frees the ship with a touch. All the stories agree that he catches the eye of a princess, and wins her as a bride. A lecherous merchant, coveting

the princess, then has Basant thrown overboard in mid-ocean, but the princess secretly rescues him. When the merchant's vessel reaches Raja Śit's country, Basant contrives to tell the story of his adventures before the Raja, thus bringing about a happy reunion and proper rewards and punishments all around.

#### THE STORY AS SĀNGĪT

Not surprisingly, this vivid, dramatic tale has come to be staged as a folk-drama. *Sāng*, *swāṅg*, or *sāngīt* is a traditional form of North Indian folk opera, performed by itinerant troupes (*maṅḍlī*, *akhārā*).<sup>1</sup> According to Vatuk and Vatuk, "*sāng*" refers to the performance itself, and "*sāngīt*" to the printed performance-script; as they themselves acknowledge, however, such a distinction is not universally maintained (Vatuk and Vatuk 1979 a: 33). *Sāng* proper began in the early nineteenth century, growing out of older forms of folk opera. And one of its first influential productions was *Swāṅg Rūp Basant*, performed in Agra in 1827 (Agrawāl 1976: 66-67, 85). In *sāng* performances, the two brothers are almost always called Rūp and Basant. *Sāng Rūp Basant* was often performed during the nineteenth century, and in the later part of the century, as printing presses became more common, a number of the scripts of these performances were printed as well.<sup>2</sup>

In the twentieth century, its popularity continued to grow: not only was it widely known, and performed by a number of troupes, but the number of printed performance-scripts also increased (Agrawāl 1976: 273, 277; Pritchett 1981: 206). Today *Sāng Rūp Basant* continues to flourish as before, and as in the past, printed performance-scripts are numerous. These are closely tied to actual performances by particular troupes. Usually the printed script is attributed to either the current leader or the original founder of one of the troupes that performs it; often his picture adorns the cover. (The modern *sāngīt* scripts on which this paper is based are listed in Appendix II.) The most important *sāngīt* publisher in the field in fact makes a point of never printing any *sāngīt* until it has first been successfully performed by a troupe; he finds that only then is there a market for it.<sup>3</sup>

When these *sāngīt* performance-scripts are compared with the oral tales, one striking expansion of the plot can be seen. Most of the oral tales are not very interested in the reason for the stepmother's hostility to the two brothers: they either describe it very briefly in general terms, or even take it for granted. As one Panjabi version puts it, "Of course the new wife was jealous of the two young princes, and, as stepmothers usually do, she soon began to ill-use the poor boys" (Appendix I, Story 17: 129). Not so the *sāngīt* versions. They are

all very interested in the reason for her hostility, and they go into great detail about it. Her hostility is born of an episode which takes the form of either T418 ("The Lustful Stepmother") or K211 ("Potiphar's Wife"). The two boys are playing with a ball one day, and it accidentally bounces into their stepmother's apartments. Basant<sup>4</sup> goes to fetch it, and the new Rani is charmed by his beauty. She protests her love, he recoils in shock; she protests even more urgently that she is dying of love for him, he calls her "mother" and reacts with even more horror. Their melodramatic encounter is the emotional high point of the *sāṅgīt*, and it goes on and on. In the most elaborate version (*Sāṅgīt* B), it continues until they have recited or sung by turns a total of twenty-two rhymed eight-line speeches (*javāb*). Finally the Rani grabs hold of Basant, and in a panic he manages to break free, push her to the floor, and run from the room. She then accuses him before the Raja of trying to assault her, and the whole matter is debated at length in a series of dramatic scenes involving the Raja, the Rani, Rūp, Basant, the courtiers, the ministers, the people of the city, and sometimes the Cruel Executioner and the Compassionate Executioner. This episode occupies more than one-fifth of the whole length of each of the *sāṅgīt* scripts I examined.

When Vatuk and Vatuk studied the theme of the "Lustful Stepmother" in North Indian folklore (Vatuk and Vatuk 1979 b), they drew almost all their material from *sāṅg*, including *Sāṅg Rūp Basant*. In their study they used both oral performance recordings and printed performance scripts. They emphasized the domestic triangle of elderly weak husband, young childless frustrated wife, and virtuous innocent stepson, which in *sāṅg* after *sāṅg* generates the sharpest kind of sexual and social conflict. The characters in such *sāṅg* argue at length about what it means to be a husband, a wife, a mother, a son. Can an elderly, impotent man really be a "husband" to a young girl? Does a "wife" have a natural right to sexual satisfaction? Is a stepmother really a "mother" and a stepson a real "son"? All these questions are close to the heart of *Sāṅg Rūp Basant*. The following stanzas taken from the dialogue between Basant and his stepmother, Candrāvati, are typical (*Sāṅgīt* B: 12):

*Javāb Candrāvati kā*<sup>5</sup>

*Dohā*—

Don't you call me mother, I'm not your mother.

Only she who gave you birth is your mother, take my word for it.

*Caubolā*—

Take my word for it, enjoy yourself in bed with me, sweetheart.

I am fourteen years old, join yourself to me, sweetheart.  
 Drink the cup, drown in desire, remove the pain in my heart, sweetheart.  
 Speak to me, put your hand on my breast, hug me, embrace me, hold me  
 tight in your arms, sweetheart.

*Muktāl—*

A special flower-faced one, a rose, a tulip, has intoxicated my mind.  
 Come to bed, dearest, embracing me, drink the cup of love.

*Javāb Basant kā*

*Dohā—*

Mother—I'm your son, you're my mother, think what you're saying.  
 I'll never agree, your words are my ruin.

*Caubolā—*

Your words are my ruin, to play around with your dear little son.  
 Don't say such things to me, say 'Son, come and hug me.'  
 Fix the image of the Raja of Saṅgaldīp in your mind.  
 Why are you forcing bad behavior on your son, don't wrongly commit  
 such a sin.

*Muktāl—*

Listen to me, mother, your son comes for refuge.  
 Place your hand on my head, O giver of liberation.

*Javāb Candrāvati kā*

*Dohā—*

Prince—I'll never find ecstasy with your father.  
 I'm intoxicated, I'll wrestle with you in bed.

*Caubolā—*

I'll wrestle in bed, Prince, play around with me.  
 Darling beloved one, just come, press our breasts together.  
 Come to my bed, enjoy yourself, hold me close to you in love.  
 The intoxication of youth torments me, whom can I confide in?

*Muktāl—*

A special flower-faced one, a rose, a tulip, has intoxicated my mind.  
 Come to bed, dearest, embracing me, drink the cup of love.

There is no need for me to recapitulate Vatuk and Vatuk's thorough and most interesting analysis of such situations. I only wish to call attention to the melodramatic nature of the scene: an utterly illicit passion, on the very borderline of incest, described with a good deal of detail and even with relish. The *sāṅg* performance seems to be accepted as an appropriate setting for intimate familial, and even sexual, scenes of conflict. The prolonged dialogue between Basant and Can-

drāvati is dramatic, pathetic—and titillating.

At the end of the “Lustful Stepmother” episode, the boys find themselves abandoned in the forest. Only in one version (*Sāṅgīt* A) do they encounter and eat the two magic birds of the oral tales. In all the *sāṅgīt* scripts, however, they are attacked by a snake, whose bite kills the sleeping Basant in the night. Rūp, grieving, wanders off to the nearby city and appears at the right time and place to be chosen Raja; from then on he lives in happiness, and drops out of the story entirely.

The rest of the *sāṅgīt* is chiefly concerned with Basant, who is soon restored to life and consoled by a passing holy man. Traveling on, Basant kills a ferocious tiger—but then is beaten and left for dead by the local police chief, who wishes to claim credit for killing the tiger himself. Basant is nursed back to health by a virtuous potter couple, later imprisoned by the same police chief, and eventually given to a merchant (as in all the oral tales) to be used as a human sacrifice. But the grounded ship moves at Basant’s touch, and the delighted merchant adopts him as a son.

At the next port, the local Raja’s daughter sees Basant, falls in love, and has her parents arrange their marriage. The wedding is celebrated splendidly, and the newlyweds embark on the merchant’s ship. But the merchant, infatuated with the princess, pushes Basant overboard. Basant drifts ashore in Rūp’s kingdom, where a kindly gardener and his wife shelter him. By the time the merchant’s ship arrives, Basant and his new allies are prepared with a plan. On the pretext of garland-selling, the gardener’s wife manages to see the princess and tell her what to do. The princess then promises to marry the merchant on condition that, according to her “family custom,” the “story of Rūp Basant” should be told as part of the ceremony. Needless to say, no one can be found who knows the story except the gardener’s “daughter,” Basant in disguise. He tells the whole story to a large gathering at which Raja Rūp is also present. The brothers are reunited, the wicked punished, and the virtuous rewarded. Rūp and Basant return to visit their father’s kingdom, forgiveness and reconciliation are achieved, and Basant takes the throne. All the *sāṅgīt* scripts examined agree on this basic plot, and in all of them it centers almost entirely on Basant.

#### THE STORY AS *KISSĀ*

The career of Śīt and Basant does not end with their appearance on the *sāṅg* stage, for their story is also published in *kissā* form. *Kissā* (from the Arabic / Persian / Urdu *qissah*, or “story”) is nowadays a

printed genre, though its contents include many stories which are still transmitted orally as well. Most of the popular stories in this genre are romantic fairy tales—or, as Northrop Frye would put it, naive romances—which describe the marvelous adventures of a human hero on a quest which includes encounters with both friendly and hostile magical forces (Pritchett 1981). Among the most popular works in the *kissā* genre are stories about Ḥātim Ṭā'ī (*Arā'ish-e maḥfil*) and Raja Vikram (*Simhāsan battīsī*). *Śīt Basant* is a relatively new *kissā*, in print only since the 1930's. And it appears to be a popular one. Of two recent editions published by Śrī Loknāth Pustakālay, Calcutta, one is marked "70th time, 4000 (copies)," and the other, "71st time, 7000 (copies)." While the statistics may be somewhat inflated, they certainly testify to a number of reprintings, for the publisher is an old and established one. I have examined six Hindi editions of *Kissā Śīt Basant*. All of them are quite recent, and told entirely in prose; two are identical in content, making five versions of the story in all. These are listed in Appendix III. *Kissā* A, D, and E are especially close to each other; A in particular is well established, and is issued independently by two publishers, one in Calcutta and one in Varanasi. The general plot shared by *kissā* A, D, and E will therefore be used as the basis of the present discussion.

All the *kissā* versions begin with the same sequence of events as the *sāngīt*: the Rani's death (foreshadowed by the ominous sight of baby sparrows being pushed out of the nest), the Raja's remarriage, the two princes' accidentally allowing their ball to bounce into the new Rani's chambers. This time, however, Śīt is the one who goes to retrieve it. As one version (*Kissā* D: 8) describes the scene:

... fearfully, with hands joined, Śīt said, "Mother! Pardon our carelessness, and please give us our ball. We'll never do such a thing again." Hearing Śīt's words, the Rani, seized by desire, came forward, and seizing both of Śīt's hands and pulling them toward her bosom, said, "Please don't be so anxious! Only *one* ball! *Both* these balls are fit for your playing with! Play with them however you want." This behavior of the Rani's made Śīt feel faint. Now poor Śīt began trembling in terror and tried very hard to free his hands—but the Rani didn't release them, and restless, gripped by desire, she began to say,

"What do you know, heartless one, about anyone,

What shape anyone's in, grieving for you."

When Śīt realized there was no way he could get free, he panicked. Saying, "Mother! Mother!" he used his whole strength, and struck such a blow that that wretched woman fell to the floor with a crash. Trembling, Śīt ran away.

The above scene is described very similarly in one other version (*Kissā* C: 10)—but the narrator also emphasizes extenuating circumstances:

Dear readers! It is a real disaster that a mother should wish to misbehave with her son. It should also be realized that the saying is true: a marriage in old age is not one's own—but for others, for those in the neighborhood! Our Raja Candradev is in this situation. At this time Raja Candradev is already about seventy, and Rani Premlatā is about eighteen. You yourselves reflect, to what extent the desire of a new Rani now in the flower of her youth, can be satisfied by an old man.

Apart from A and C, however, the other three *kissā* versions omit this scene entirely. They merely report that the ball bounced into the Rani's chambers while she was undressed—and hit her forcefully on the breast. In none of the *kissā* versions is the Lustful Stepmother scene prolonged or emphasized, as it is in the *sāṅgīt*; and in the majority of versions it is not even present at all.

Through the Rani's machinations, the boys are abandoned in the forest. They pass the night under a tree. Śīt sleeps, but Basant lies awake, and overhears the conversation of two mynah birds in the branches above. The birds discuss the auspiciousness of the hour (*muhurt*), which is such that whoever eats the female mynah's meat will become a king at once, while the eater of the male mynah's meat will become a king after some time. Basant brings down both birds with well-aimed arrows. In the morning Śīt insists on roasting the birds before eating them; Śīt then eats the female's meat, and Basant the male's. But soon a jackal appears and reproaches the boys for their folly: rather than eating the raw meat instantly, they waited and cooked it. Furthermore, since they roasted it on a fire of thorns, they will have thorns in their fortunes, and must endure bad times before their good times begin.

After another period of wandering, the boys approach a city. Śīt plans to go and bring back food, while Basant gathers wood for cooking. But when Śīt enters the city, he finds the *swyamvar* (marriage-choice) of the local Raja's daughter in progress. The elephant who carries the ceremonial garland insists on giving it to Śīt, and after some reluctance the Raja accepts Śīt as his daughter's destined husband. But Śīt's troubles are far from over. A frustrated rival for Princess Rūpvantī's hand is determined on revenge. He eventually sends an evil old woman who poisons Śīt, and then tries to abduct the grieving Rūpvantī on a magic flying couch (*uran khaṭolā*). When Rūpvantī realizes the scheme, she hurls herself down from mid-air, lands in a river, and is carried along by the current.

Basant, left alone in the forest, becomes the servant of an old woman.

She sells him to a merchant who is looking for a victim to sacrifice, to make his grounded ship move. But Basant of course frees the ship merely by touching it, and the merchant releases him unharmed. Wandering by the river, Basant finds a woman lying on the bank, and recognizes Śīt's ring on her finger. It is Rūpvantī, and she has just the strength to tell her melancholy story before dying. Distraught at the news of Śīt's death, Basant prepares for a suicidal leap from a treetop into the river. But the Goddess, in the form of an old woman, prevents him; she leads him along the riverbank to the ashes of Śīt's pyre, and directs him to cut his little finger and let the magic revivifying nectar (*amṛt*) inside it fall on Śīt's bones; then she vanishes. Śīt is thus revived, and the brothers happily reunited. (In version B, Śīt is revived by Basant's ritual repetition of his name; in E, by a holy man who sprinkles him with water.)

Once again, the brothers spend the night under a tree. A snake comes to devour some baby swans whose nest is in the tree. In one version, it is no ordinary snake, but "a horrible demon (*dānav*) in the guise of a deadly serpent" (*Kissā* B: 19). The boys kill the snake with their swords. In the morning the grateful parent swans reward them: they promise good fortune for the future, and send one of their own nestlings to see the boys safely through their remaining dangers. Some aspect of this scene provides the cover picture for almost all editions of the *kissā*: the nestlings in the tree, and the boys attacking the snake with their swords; or the grateful parent swans, the boys with bloody swords, snake fragments all around.

Śīt and Basant wander on, accompanied by the young swan. Avoiding a demon-infested forest, they arrive at the seashore, and the swan flies them across the sea on its back. Reaching the far shore, the boys and the swan build a little hut, and begin to live contentedly. But one day when Śīt goes to a nearby city to buy provisions, his eyes meet those of Princess Phūlvantī, daughter of the local Raja, as she sits at her window. The two fall in love. They exchange messages through the swan and Phūlvantī's parrot. Then the swan flies Śīt to her window in the night, and the lovers are blissfully united. But suspicion is aroused, because Phūlvantī has always been so delicate that she has weighed exactly as much as a single flower—whereas now, many flowers hardly suffice to balance the scale. One night Śīt stays too long and is captured. Phūlvantī saves him from execution by threatening suicide; after Śīt's royal ancestry has been established, he is allowed to marry Phūlvantī, and is given the kingdom as well. In *kissā* B, Śīt acquires a more energetic princess, whom he meets during one of her daily hunting expeditions in the forest! But the result is the same: a

marriage and a throne. In *kissā* A and D, Basant marries the chief minister's daughter at the same time. The boys then visit their repentant father and stepmother. All is forgiven, and Basant takes the throne. In *kissā* B, Basant then wins his own bride after he wanders into her kingdom while hunting. The Happy Ending is complete.

#### PATHOS AND HEROICS: DIFFERENCES IN GENRE

Clearly all these *sāṅgīt* and *kissā* versions are embedded in the matrix of oral tales about "The Magic Bird-heart and the Separated Brothers." But each genre has developed the story in its own characteristic way. We have seen that the oral tales name the two brothers Śīt and Basant, pay little or no attention to the "Lustful Stepmother" motif, emphasize the two magic birds, and assign almost all the adventures to Basant. The *sāṅgīt* versions name the brothers Rūp and Basant, give extreme importance to Basant's encounter with the lustful stepmother, ignore the magic birds, and assign almost all the adventures to Basant. The *kissā* versions name the brothers Śīt and Basant, give minor importance to Śīt's encounter with the lustful stepmother, emphasize the magic birds, and provide adventures for the boys together and for Śīt in particular. It seems to me that these variations, far from being random, result from an efficient and sometimes even elegant process of evolution: they help to accommodate a traditional oral tale to the needs and preoccupations of two very different genres.

The *sāṅg* genre is a form of folk opera. Most dialogue takes place in verse stanzas of fixed length which are sung or recited in stylized modes. *Sāṅg* are performed on small stages, close to the audience, with highly ornate costumes but very few props or special effects. When a good troupe performs, whole villages turn out to see the show. Under such conditions, dramas based on domestic conflict form a natural stock in trade of the genre. Everyone can understand and identify with them; they do not require fancy scenery and technical equipment; a small intimate stage forms an ideal setting for them. Best of all, they offer the most intense and sustained displays of clashing emotions. Love and lust, virtue and vice, innocence and guilt, vulnerability and oppression are even more vividly contrasted when incarnated in various members of the same family. Such stereotyped characterizations are usually simplistic, but at times can be used with telling effect: conflicts which in our theatre would be fought out among different sides of a complex character's personality are fought out on the *sāṅg* stage among different characters. Above all, *sāṅg*, like opera, is basically a drama of face-to-face verbal encounter: poetry, rhythm, music, dance, costume, and the evocation of mood are far more crucial than the de-

picture of events in the outer world. Usually, in fact, the narrator (*kavi*, or “poet”) marks a change of scene, summarizes offstage events, or prepares for the next major encounter among the characters by merely reciting a stanza or two.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the virtuous and happy ending that everyone knows can be expected, wicked characters have full scope in the course of the plot to do their worst to virtuous ones. *Sāng* may thus offer verbally violent and even sadistic scenes,<sup>6</sup> as well as sexually titillating ones, since good always wins out in the end.<sup>7</sup> In particular, full scope is given to the emotion that seems never to lose its charm in this genre: pathos. Virtuous characters find themselves helplessly vulnerable to attack by wicked ones, and they do not fail to reduce themselves and the audience to tears at their plight. This sort of emotion may be considered compassion (*karuṇa rasa* perhaps) or mere pathetic sentimentality, but in *sāng*, it works. When such pathos is linked to the threat of doubly forbidden sex—both adulterous and quasi-incestuous—through the “Lustful Stepmother” motif, the result is a plot situation so appealing to audiences that it recurs in *sāngīt* after *sāngīt*.

*Sāngīt Rūp Basant* is certainly a case in point. The *sāngīt* is not really interested in Śīt at all. It has even taken away his name: the evocative parallelism of Śīt and Basant, Winter and Spring, has been abandoned. Now “Rūp,” which might be roughly translated as “Good Looks,” is forgettably commonplace, “Basant” the more suggestive name. Both boys are young, almost children, but the crucial “Lustful Stepmother” scene is given to Basant, the younger—and hence more pathetic—of the two. When the boys are abandoned in the forest, it is Basant’s adventures we follow. The magic birds drop out of the story—perhaps a guarantee of good fortune would reduce the pathos of the boys’ plight. Basant dies of snakebite and is revived; manages to kill a tiger, but then is beaten and left for dead; is nursed back to health but then imprisoned; is freed but then threatened with becoming a human sacrifice; marries a princess but then is thrown overboard in mid-ocean; has to masquerade as a gardener’s daughter in order to be reunited with Rūp. It is always touch and go for him. When he is in dire straits, human or divine help always appears—often quite inscrutably, as when he touches the grounded ship and it mysteriously moves. And well it should. For Basant is a virtual orphan (his mother dead, his father hostile), an innocent victim (his stepmother slanders him), a lonely little boy (he is separated from the older brother who should by rights protect him), a helpless wanderer (dangers lurk around every corner). His pathos is thus multiplied many-fold. Is it any

wonder that *Sāṅgīt Rūp Basant* sells so well, and that *Sāṅg Rūp Basant* is a mainstay of so many troupes' repertoire?

*Kissā Śīt Basant* is, in more than one respect, a different story. Nowadays *kissā* are cheaply printed and widely distributed all over North India. Those who sell them insist that it is impossible to specify any particular public for them: they are bought by both sexes, all ages, both urban and rural people. While *kissā* may be read aloud, or read by story-tellers and then used as frameworks for oral narratives, they are not traditionally associated with any particular form of oral recitation. Whatever else is done with them, they are certainly meant to be enjoyed privately by a single reader. They provide fantasies of romance and adventure, visions of heroic prowess gloriously rewarded, the stuff of day-dreams. *Kissā* heroes are, like Ḥātīm Ṭā'ī and Raja Vikram, noble princes, both brave and generous. After overcoming deadly perils and performing magnificent feats of valor, they always achieve the goal of their quest—a princess, a magic object, etc.—and live happily ever after. During their wanderings, they frequently encounter demons (*dev*, *rākṣas*, *dānav*), enchantments, and hostile magic forces; they are aided by talking animals, fairies (*parī*, *apsarā*), holy men of various sorts, and divine emissaries. But it is their own special gallantry that is admirable. They represent the best kind of attempt to live humanly in a world pervaded by both superhuman and subhuman powers.

In a genre dedicated to heroic deeds, it is not surprising that Śīt, the older brother, should be given special prominence. Śīt is closer to manhood, Basant to childhood. Although the whole domestic triangle of the "Lustful Stepmother" motif is not important to the *kissā* versions, where it does occur, it involves Śīt rather than Basant. In the forest, the magic birds appear. It is Basant who kills them, but Śīt who rashly insists on cooking them, thus weakening their magic effect and guaranteeing the boys a long series of dangerous adventures. When Śīt becomes a Raja, marrying Princess Rūpvantī at the same time, he does not fade out of the story as he does in the oral tales and the *sāṅgīt*. Instead, after he has reigned only briefly, he is poisoned by a jealous rival, and the faithful Rūpvantī leaps out of the magic flying cot that is bearing her away. Basant, meanwhile, has wandered in the forest, fallen into the hands of a merchant intent on human sacrifice, and freed the grounded vessel (magically, it seems) by a mere touch. He has had no other adventures. Then, finding the dying Rūpvantī and hearing of Śīt's death, he is on the verge of suicide, but is divinely prevented and magically enabled to revive Śīt.

From this point on, the two brothers remain together, with Śīt

the more prominent. Basant now loses most of his potential for pathos, since he is no longer alone, but is properly protected by his elder brother; he remains in a younger brother's dutiful, subordinate role for the rest of the story. Śīt was not really pathetic to begin with, but a handsome young prince, almost grown up; now, accompanied by Basant, he begins to have a proper *kissā* hero's adventures. The boys intercept a huge serpent creeping toward a swans' nest, and hack him to pieces with their swords. In gratitude, the parent swans, who of course can talk and have other powers as well, give the boys not only a blessing, but also one of their nestlings as companion. Avoiding a forest full of demons, the boys are flown across the sea on the young swan's back. In the land beyond the sea Śīt woos and wins a princess, and gets the throne as well. The boys then visit their father's kingdom, where Basant takes the throne; Basant finally acquires or is given a bride. This whole set of adventures which the two separated brothers have *after* their reunion, occurs neither in the oral tales nor in the *sāṅgīt*, but only in the *kissā* versions. Thus it is hardly surprising that they are classic *kissā* adventures: active and heroic, emphasizing prowess rather than pathos, centering on marvelous encounters in far countries rather than intense family conflicts at home. In a small way, Śīt and Basant as *kissā* heroes have joined the gallant company of Raja Vikram and Hātim Ṭā'ī.

#### CONCLUSION

In this paper I have tried to show how one traditional Indian oral tale has been transformed by its incorporation into two different modern folk genres. Such comparative study is, I think, a useful analytical method. It can help to clarify the ways in which genres are perceived and enjoyed by their users, and can suggest the sort of changes other works in these genres may have undergone in the past. In principle, this method might even provide a degree of predictive power: it could suggest the lines along which stories newly adopted into a genre were likely to develop over time.

*Sāṅg* is basically an orally and visually presented genre, though *sāṅgīts* are very popular in printed form. *Kissā* is nowadays chiefly a printed genre, though *kissā* texts are often read aloud. The comparative study of genre thus comes to involve the study of each genre's characteristic mode of presentation. In this paper I have touched on the question only impressionistically, since my basic concern was with changes in the plot of the story. Work is currently being done by several South Asian folklorists on the mode of presentation and its influence on narrative technique in particular cases (Beck 1982; Wadley

1982). This approach has the merit of taking into account the nature and attitudes of the audience—a concern which not only folklorists, but recently literary critics as well, have begun to appreciate.<sup>8</sup> Comparative study of various forms of the same story, whether the focus is on different genres or different modes of presentation, is now much more feasible than it has ever been in the past, and I hope we will see more of it. Thanks to the spread of the printing press, “the folk” are in effect doing much of the collecting (though none of the preserving). Library collections of popular literature have begun to be put together at Syracuse (Wadley 1978) and Chicago (Pritchett 1982); the latter contains more than one hundred *sāṅgīt* and two hundred *kissā*.

Among all critical approaches, the close analysis of genre categories will surely remain especially valuable to the folklorist and the student of popular literature. Folk taxonomies of genres can be found in the catalogues of popular publishers, and are often an excellent supplement to orally collected information. For each genre can best be defined not in isolation, but as a particular band on the whole spectrum of indigenous genres; similarly, its nature is determined not merely by the technical meaning of its name, but by the uses people make of it.<sup>9</sup> In recent years folklorists have been becoming much more aware of the importance of comparative and theoretical genre studies, as witness the valuable collection of articles brought together a few years ago under the title *Folklore Genres* (Ben Amos 1976). Compared to elite literary genres, folk genres are often more problematic, for they do not come equipped with a body of indigenous critical theory that can help to explicate them. Thus the folklorist’s work is all the more necessary. “Oh readers! The one who first endures trouble, *he* is the one who afterwards finds happiness. As Śīt and Basant’s good days finally returned, so may God bring back good days to everyone” (*Kissā* A: 32).

#### NOTES

An earlier version of this paper was presented at the fourth South Asian Languages Roundtable at Syracuse University in May 1982. I thank Susan Wadley and W. Michael Kelsey for valuable editorial advice.

1. For a thorough study of *sāṅg*, including its development as well as its contemporary styles of performance, see Agrawāl 1976.

2. For publication details see Agrawāl 1976: 277; Blumhardt 1893, Hindi section, column 90; Blumhardt 1902, Part II, p. 69.

3. Interview with Paṇḍit Rādhā Ballabh Gauṛ, Śyām Press, Hathras, 16 November 1977.

4. Only version A maintains that it was Rūp who went.

5. This and all subsequent translations are my own. Each character in turn recites or sings one eight-line stanza or *javāb* (literally, "answer"). Each *javāb* is made up of one two-line *dohā*, then one four-line *caubolā*, then one two-line *muktāl*. For the standard description of Hindi meter, see Kellogg 1938: 546–84. *Sāṅg* meter is discussed in Vatuk and Vatuk 1979a: 34–36, but the meters mentioned are different from those used in the *sāṅgīt* I have studied. As far as I know, no one has yet made a comprehensive study of *sāṅg* meters.

6. In *Sāṅgīt Pūran Mal*, the hero's wicked stepmother has his eyes gouged out, his hands and feet cut off, and his body thrown into a well—where he survives for twelve years before being rescued by Guru Gorakhnāth. See Vatuk and Vatuk 1975b: 197.

7. There are a few *sāṅgīt* with tragic endings, including some of those based on the *Ālhakhaṇḍ*, but they are very much in the minority.

8. A recent collection of relevant articles is that of Suleiman and Crosman (1980); it contains a detailed introduction to "audience-oriented criticism" and an annotated bibliography.

9. John M. Ellis (1974) discusses such problems of genre definition with sophistication and good sense.

## APPENDIX I

### Oral versions of Sit and Basant

This is a listing of all English versions of the story with which I am familiar; the tales have been collected from all parts of India. To my knowledge, it is the most complete such list to be published.

1. Birla, L. N. "Golden laughter." In his *Popular tales of Rajasthan*. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1967, pp. 61–67.
2. Bompas, Cecil Henry. "Sit and Lakhan." In his *Folklore of the Santal paraganas*. London: David Nutt, 1909, pp. 237–40.
3. Bradley-Birt, Francis Bradley. "Sheet and Basanta." In his *Bengal fairy tales*. London: John Lane, 1920, pp. 153–61.
4. Campbell, A. "The story of Sit and Bosont." In his *Santal folk tales*. Pokhuria: Santal Mission Press, 1891, pp. 33–39.
5. Damant, G. H. "The Two Brothers: A Manipuri story." *Indian antiquary* 4 (September 1875), pp. 260–64.
6. David, E. "The story of Sit and Basant." *North Indian notes and queries*, 2 (August 1892), pp. 81–82.
7. Day, Lal Behari. "The story of Swet-Basanta." In his *Folktales of Bengal*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1892, pp. 93–107.
8. Dracott, Alice Elizabeth. "Rupa and Bisuntha." In her *Simla village tales, or folk tales from the Himalayas*. London: John Murray, 1914.
9. Jorgensen, Hans, transl. and ed. "Story of the twenty-third statuette: The strange adventures of two princes, who by their mother were accused of violence against her." In his *Batisaputrikākathā—the Tales of the Thirty-two Statuettes* (A Newari Recension of the *Siṃhāsanaadvatrimśatikā*. Copenhagen: Ejnar Munksgaard, 1939, pp. 282–91.
10. King, L. V. "The tales of the Punjab." *Folklore* (London) 37 (1926), pp. 81–84.
11. Knowles, James Hinton. "The Two Brothers." In his *Folk-tales of Kashmir*.

- London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1893, pp. 166-73.
12. Majumdar, Geeta. "The story of Basanta and Hemanta." In her *Folktales of Bengal*. New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1971, pp. 95-112.
  13. Parker, Henry. "The Turtle Dove." In his *Village folktales of Ceylon*, Vol. 1. Dehiwala, Sri Lanka: Tisara Prakasakayo, 1971, pp. 70-79.
  14. Sen, Dinesh Chandra. "Cita Vasanta as told by Golam Kader." In his *Folk literature of Bengal*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1920, pp. 165-73.
  15. Sen, Dinesh Chandra. "Harinath Mazumdar's version." In his *Folk literature of Bengal*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, pp. 173-78.
  16. Sen, Dinesh Chandra. "Dakshina Ranjan's version." In his *Folk literature of Bengal*. Calcutta: University of Calcutta Press, 1920, pp. 182-89.
  17. Steel, Flora Annie. "The Two Brothers." In her *Tales of the Punjab*. London: Macmillan and Co., 1894, pp. 129-43.
  18. Swynnerton, Charles. "The adventures of Rup and Bussant, the two sons of Raja Bans." In his *Romantic tales from the Punjab with Indian nights' entertainment*. London: Archibald Constable and Co., 1908, pp. 410-29.
  19. Wadia, Putlibai D. H. "The Two Brothers." *Indian antiquary* 17 (March 1888), pp. 75-81.

## APPENDIX II

Versions of *Sāṅgīt Rūp Basant*

- A. *Raṅgat Yogeśvar Bālak Rām kṛt Rūp Basant, sampūrṇ aslī sāṅgīt (Bambāi ṭāip)* [The complete genuine *Sāṅgīt Rūp Basant*, as arranged by Yogeśvar Bālak Rām, in Bombay type]. Lekhak: Māṣṭar Nyādarsimḥ 'Becain' Dehlavī. Delhi: Agrawāl Buk Ḍipo, n.d. 227 p. hardbound, Rs. 10.
- B. *Aslī sāṅgīt Rūp Basant; rangat Yogeśvar Bālakrām kṛt* [The genuine *Sāṅgīt Rūp Basant*, arranged by Yogeśvar Bālakrām]. Delhi: Dehātī Pustak Bhaṅḍār, n.d. 192 pp., paperbound, Rs. 4.5.
- C. *Sāṅgīt śiromaṇi Hindustān bhūsaṅ paṅḍit Nathārām Śarmā Gauṛ racit sāṅgīt Rūp Basant, sampūrṇ tīn bhāg mēṃ* [*Sāṅgīt Rūp Basant*, by the crest-jewel of India paṅḍit Nathārām Śarmā Gauṛ, complete in three parts]. Ustād: Indarman. Hathras: Śyām Pres, 1976. 36, 48, 48 pp., hardbound, Rs. 8.
- D. *Rāganī khās ṭhes Hariyānī kī Rūp Basant* [*Rūp Basant*, in the special *rāganī* style of Hariyana]. Delhi: Agrawāl Buk Ḍipo, n.d. First part only. 24 pp., paperbound, 75 paise.

## APPENDIX III

Versions of *Kissā Śīt Basant*

- A. *Kissā Śīt Basant cārom bhāg* [*Kissā Śīt Basant* in all four parts]. Lekhak: Bābū Mahādev Prasād Siṃh 'Ghanśyām.' Calcutta: Śrī Loknāth Pustakālay, n.d., 32 pp., 71st time, 7,000 copies, Rs. 2.
- B. *Śīt Basant* [Śīt Basant]. Lekhak: Śrī Rāmkhilāvan Tripāṭṭhī. Calcutta: Rājū Publications, n.d. 32 pp., Rs. 1,50 paise.
- C. *Kissā Śīt Basant kā, āṭhom bhāg* [The *Kissā* of Śīt Basant, in all eight parts].

- Calcutta: Sarasvatī Pustak Bhaṇḍār, n.d., 40 pp.
- D. *Kissā aslī Śīt aur Basant sampūrṇ cārom bhāg* [The Genuine Kissā of Śīt and Basant, complete in four parts]. Lekhak: Māṣṭar Nyādar Siṃh 'Becain' Dehlavī. Delhi: Garg and Co., n.d., 48 pp., Rs. 1.
- E. *Kissā Śīt Basant* [*Kissā Śīt Basant*]. Racāyita: Śrī Rūprām Kavi. Hāthras: En. Es. Śarmā Gauṛ Buk Ḍipo, Śyām Pres, 1971. 28 pp., 6,000 copies, 60 paise.

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1979b The lustful stepmother in the folklore of Northwestern India. In Ved Prakash Vatuk, ed., *Studies in Indian folk traditions*. New Delhi: Manohar Book Service, pp. 190-221.

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