King Prthu and His Genealogy

Miwako KATO

The story of king Prthu is often told to explain the origin of kingship. The following is the outline of the legend.

Once there was a king named Vena, who was so impious that the sages slew him. Since he had no son, the sages churned the left hand of the wicked king. Then from the left hand came out a short and black barbarian Nisada. They then churned his right hand and great Prthu was born. Brahma consecrated him as the first king (ādirāja), and in the midst of the ritual, two bards, Sūta and Māgadha were born to praise him. As a result of Vena’s evil rule, people had been emaciated for want of food. In order to restore prosperity to them, taking up his bow and arrow, Prthu pursued the Earth who had assumed the form of a cow. Then the Earth begged for mercy and she entreated him to provide her with a calf so that she could give milk out of affection. After adopting Svayaṃbhūva Manu as the calf, Prthu milked plants and vegetables from the Earth-cow on its own surface.

Almost all of these elements occur in every version of the Prthu myth.

Regarding his ancestor the texts differ from each other. That is, the texts of this story can be classified into three groups according to genealogical accounts of king Prthu. Some of the Purāṇas (P) such as the Harivamśa (H), Brahma-P. (B), Padma-p. Bhūmi-khaṇḍa. (PB), Vāyu-p. (Vā), Brahmāṇḍa-p. (Bd), and Skanda-p. (S) mention the sage Atri as an ancestor of Ānđga, the grandfather of Prthu (group I).

In Bd 1.2.36.126, for example:

goṛtā dharmasya rājāsaubhūva Atrisamah prabhuh
Atrivamśasamutpanno hy Amgo nāma prajāpatih

The genealogical table stands thus according to Bd:
On the other hand, the Purāṇas such as the Viṣṇu-p. (V), Bhāgavata-p. (Bhā), and Vāmana-p. (Vām) do not have genealogical accounts that Āṅga came from the family of the sage Atri (group II).

Whereas the Matsya-p. (M) has a verse which makes Āṅga a descendant of Śvāyaṃ bhuva Manu.; M 10.3a:

Vamśe Śvāyaṃbhuvasyāsid Ango nāma prajāpatih/

In this connection, Hazra pointed out that M has a good number of chapters in common with the Padma-p. Srṣṭi-kh. (PS). Still more he made a comparison between the two Purāṇas, and concluded that PS was the borrower. His concordance includes both of the Prthu legends in M 10 and PS 8. Therefore these two texts can be put together as group III.

The Viṣṇudharmottara-p. (Vdh) says that Vena came from the family of Dhrūva, a son of Uttānapāda. And this Purāṇa has a unique account that Āṅga was adopted by the sage Atri.

The genealogies of Mahābhārata (Mbh) differ from those of the Purāṇas on the genealogical accounts. Regarding the import of the story they have nothing in common.
According to the other motifs, that is, the dialogues of Vena, the immediate cause of his death, the birth of the Nisāda, the explanations of 'rājan', who the calf is, etc., the categorization results in the same conclusion as that arrived at by the genealogical accounts. The following is the conclusion drawn from a comparative study of the texts on the basis of this categorization. All the texts that narrate the story of king Prthu can be classified into three groups, that is, H, B, PB, Vāṇ, Bd and S (group I), V, Bhā, and Vāṁ (group II), and M and PS (group III). Winternitz says, 'The younger the Purāṇa—this can be considered as the rule—the more measureless are the exaggerations'. This is true of the texts of the Prthu legend. For example, in the group I, there are two lines. The first line goes from H and B to PB. And the second line goes from Bd and Vā to S. In both lines, the former is developed and expanded in the latter that has measureless exaggerations and an inflated language. The four texts, viz. H, B, Bd and Vā form one group for the reason that they often agree literally. Especially the text of Bd agrees verbatim in many respects with that of Vā. And it seems to be generally accepted that Bd was originally identical with Vā. In the group II, as regards contents, V has a great influence on Bhā. Winternitz says, Bhā 'is closely connected with V with which it often concurs verbatim and is certainly dependent on it'. The story of Vena and Prthu found 'in a concise and older form in V appears in Bhā in a much enlarged and elaborate version'. S (group I) and Vāṁ (group II) have the same episode that Prthu took his evil father to the Sthānu (Śiva) shrine to save him. This episode does not appear in other variants. The Vāṁ cannot be classified into any of the three groups because of its characteristic genealogical account as mentioned above. The relationship between these texts of the Purāṇas and three texts of Mbh. is not quite clear, but Mbh. 7.69 and 12.29 are similar to group I, and, Mbh. 12.59 is similar to group II.

References

Hazra, R. C [1940] Studies in the purānic Records on Hindu Rites and Customs, Dacca.

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(Graduate Student, Tokyo University)