



## ANCIENT INDIA'S STORYTELLING LEGACY

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### ABSTRACT

As a work of literature, philosophy, and pedagogy, the art of storytelling continues to inspire and educate, bridging the gap between ancient wisdom and contemporary relevance. Its enduring appeal lies in the art of allegorical storytelling in which animals are used as protagonists. The Panchatantra is a seminal work of Indian literature, renowned for its timeless wisdom and global reach. Written over 2,000 years ago by Vishnu Sharma, it is a collection of fables crafted to impart practical lessons on human behaviour, ethics, governance, and relationships. The text is divided into five books, each focusing on themes such as the loss and gain of friends, conflict resolution, and the consequences of impulsive actions. Employing animals as central characters, the Panchatantra weaves engaging narratives that simplify complex moral and strategic concepts, making them accessible to all. The Panchatantra's influence extends far beyond its Indian origins, establishing it as one of the most translated and widely read texts in history. It inspired the Arabic *Kalila WaDimna*, which later influenced European fables like Aesop's Fables. Its wisdom has permeated cultures across the Middle East, Asia, and Europe, underscoring the universal relevance of its teachings. This collection is not merely a set of moral tales but also a profound educational tool designed to cultivate critical thinking, foresight, and ethical decision-making. Its stories have endured through millennia, continuously inspiring diverse audiences with their wit, wisdom, and insight.

**Keywords:** Animal Fables, Moral Tales, Universal Values, Cultural Heritage, Storytelling, Global Influence, Ancient Wisdom.

### Introduction

The colonial presumption that India lacked a cohesive tradition of statecraft has been increasingly contested by scholarly engagement with ancient Indian political thought. Ancient India developed a complex political philosophy based on niti-pragmatic governance guided by ethical calculation—from early Sanskrit treatises like Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and Kamandaka's *Nitisara* to narrative-didactic texts like the *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesa*. These texts are positioned by contemporary scholarship not only as literary or moral works but also as fundamental contributions to political realism, diplomacy, and governance, all of which continue to have an impact on contemporary Indian statecraft. The *Nitisara* highlights the king's duty as a moral ruler who must strike a balance between authority and morality. Its political vision incorporates moral behaviour as essential to political stability in contrast to Western political realism, which frequently separates ethics from governance. The *Panchatantra*, on the other hand, demonstrates the shift from political manuals to narrative instructions. The book employs storytelling as a teaching technique and is a manual of political survival. Lessons on intelligence, betrayal, alliance-building, and diplomacy through animal fables are thus conveniently imparted. Academics contend that while maintaining strategic depth, this narrative mode democratises political wisdom by making it approachable.

The Panchatantra is an ancient Indian collection of interrelated animal fables in Sanskrit verse and prose, arranged within a frame story. Written over 2,000 years ago by Vishnu Sharma, this collection of fables is crafted to impart practical lessons on human behaviour, ethics, governance, and relationships. Employing animals as central characters, the Panchatantra weaves engaging narratives that simplify complex moral and strategic concepts, making them accessible to all. The Panchatantra's influence extends far beyond its Indian origins, establishing it as one of the most translated and widely read texts in history. It inspired the Arabic *Kalila waDimna*, which later influenced European fables like Aesop's Fables. Its wisdom has permeated cultures across the Middle East, Asia, and Europe, underscoring the universal relevance of its teachings.

The Panchatantra is a niti-shastra, or a textbook of niti. The word niti roughly means "the wise conduct of life." Western civilization must endure a certain shame in realizing that no precise equivalent of the term is found in English, French, Latin, or Greek. Many words are therefore necessary to explain what niti is, though the idea, once grasped, is clear, important, and satisfying. It is of immense significance to note that the word niti presupposes that one has considered and rejected the possibility of living as a saint. It can be practiced only by a social being and represents an admirable attempt to answer the insistent question of how to win the utmost

possible joy from life in the world of men. It is here that the beauty, relevance, and universal nature of the Panchatantra can be discerned.

Vishnu Sharma's Panchatantra explains *niti* as the harmonious development of the powers of man - a life in which security, prosperity, resolute action, friendship, and good learning are so combined as to produce joy. It is a noble ideal, shaming many tawdry ambitions. This noble ideal is presented in an artistic form of perfect fitness, in five books of wise and witty stories, in most of which the actors are animals. In the English translation of the Panchatantra, the translator Arthur W. Ryder notes, "Better with the learned dwell, even though it be in hell, than with vulgar spirits roam, palaces that gods call home".

The Panchatantra was conceived as a teaching tool for the sons of a king. According to legend, King Amarasakti of Mahilaropya was concerned about his three dull-witted sons who showed no interest in learning traditional knowledge. To equip them with wisdom, practical knowledge, and leadership skills, he sought the assistance of Vishnu Sharma, a renowned scholar. Vishnu Sharma promised to transform the princes into wise and capable rulers within six months. Instead of conventional teaching, he composed the Panchatantra, a collection of fables filled with moral and political lessons. The text uses animals as characters to engage readers while subtly conveying wisdom on governance, diplomacy, and human behaviour.

The *Panchatantra* also migrated into the Middle East through Iran during the Sassanid reign of Anoushiravan. Around 550 CE, his notable physician Borzuy (Burzuwaih) translated the work from Sanskrit into the Pahlavi (Middle Persian) language. According to the story told in the *Shah Nama (The Book of the Kings)*, Persia's late 10th-century national epic by Ferdowsi), Borzuy sought his king's permission to make a trip to Hindustan in search of a mountain herb he had read about that is "mingled into a compound and when sprinkled over a corpse, it is immediately restored to life." He did not find the herb but was told by a wise sage of "a different interpretation. The herb is the scientist, science is the mountain, everlastingly out of reach of the multitude. The corpse is the man without knowledge, for the uninstructed man is everywhere lifeless. Through knowledge man becomes revived." The sage pointed to the book, and the visiting physician Borzuy translated the work with the help of some Brahmins. According to Hans Bakker, Borzuy visited the Kingdom of Kannauj in north India during the 6th century in an era of intense exchange between Persian and Indian royal courts, and he secretly translated a copy of the text then sent it to the court of Anoushiravan in Persia, along with other cultural and

technical knowledge.

The Panchatantra is divided into five books. Each book focuses on a specific theme or principle of life and is interspersed with stories within stories - a narrative technique known as frame narration. The first section of the book is titled "Mitra-Bheda" This section illustrates how friendships can be broken through deceit and misunderstanding. It primarily focuses on the consequences of betrayal and mistrust. The frame story revolves around a lion named Pingalaka and a bull named Sanjivaka. Through the manipulation of two jackals, the lion's trust in the bull is eroded, leading to tragic consequences. The second section is named "Mitra-Labha." This book emphasizes the importance of making friends and forming alliances. The stories explore the value of cooperation and trust among companions. The central narrative involves a group of animals — a crow, a mouse, a turtle, and a deer — who help each other survive against predators and adversities. The third section is known as "Kakolukiyam." This part focuses on the dynamics of war and peace, exploring when it is prudent to engage in conflict and when diplomacy is the better option. The stories revolve around a war between crows and owls, with lessons on strategy, cunning, and foresight. The fourth section is called "Labdhapranasham" (Loss of Gains). This book examines how carelessness, greed, or lack of foresight can lead to the loss of previously acquired gains. The tales warn against recklessness and emphasize the importance of prudence and caution in safeguarding one's assets. The final section, "Aparikshitaka-rakam" (Rash Actions), addresses the perils of acting without forethought or understanding the consequences. It teaches the importance of deliberation, self-control and wisdom in decision-making. The stories are filled with examples of individuals who face ruin due to impulsive actions.

The stories of Panchatantra are narrated in the most interesting manner using different animals. To understand this let us read a story from the seminal text. The story titled *The Wedding of the Mice* conveys the idea that all the beings in universe have a remarkably innate desire to connect with identical beings. In no circumstances this desire is relinquished.

Once upon a time there was a sage named Yagyawalakya who resided in his cottage on the bank of river Ganges. One day while offering prayers to Goda doe fell on his palm. The doe was being flown away by a hawk. Somehow, she slipped the hawk's claws and fell straight on the sage's palm. The sage took the doe home and attended her till she recovered completely. He then transformed her into a girl. Since the sage had no child of his own, he advised his wife to treat the girl as their daughter. Time passed and the child grew up into a

beautiful young girl. The sage and his wife decided to get her married but only when the groom is approved by their daughter.

The sage asked his daughter if she would marry the Sun?

The girl denied saying, "Dear father! Sun is like a fireball and I might get injured. Please bring a better match". The sage asked the Sun if he could suggest a better groom for his daughter.

The sun replied, "Cloud is better as he has the potential to eclipse me."

The sage called the Cloud and asked his daughter, "will you marry the Cloud?"

The girl replied, "he is too dark. I can't marry him. Please bring a better match".

The sage asked the Cloud if there is someone better than him. The cloud replied, "Wind is better as it can fly in different directions."

The sage then called the Wind and asked his daughter for her consent.

She replied, "O father! he is too fickle. Bring a better groom."

The sage asked the cloud the same question. The cloud replied, "Mountain is better than me as he stays steady even in heavy typhoon."

The sage then called the Mountain and asked his daughter her decision.

The girl replied, "O father! he is very tough and serious, I can't marry him. Bring someone better."

The sage asked the Mountain to suggest a match more worthy than him.

The Mountain replied, "the Buck is more powerful than me. He can break me and create a hole for himself."

The sage then invited the Buck and asked his daughter "Dear daughter! if you are willing you can marry this Buck".

The girl looked at the Buck very carefully. She experienced a rare and beautiful sense of belongingness towards the Buck. It was a love at first sight for the girl.

So, she requested her father, "Dear father! please transform me into a doe and get me married to this dear Buck."

The sage then transformed her into a doe and married her

with the Buck.

The Sanskrit version of the Panchatantra gives names to the animal characters, but these names are creative with double meanings. These names connote the character observable in nature but also map a human personality that a reader can readily identify. For example, the deer characters are presented as a metaphor for the charming, innocent, peaceful and tranquil personality who is a target for those who seek a prey to exploit. Similarly, the crocodile is presented to symbolize dangerous intent hidden beneath a welcoming ambiance. Different types of wildlife found in Hindustan are thus named, and they constitute an array of symbolic characters in the Panchatantra.

An early Western scholar who studied The Panchatantra was Dr. Johannes Hertel. He thought the book had Machiavellian characters. Similarly, Edgerton noted that "the so-called 'morals' of the stories have no bearing on morality; they are unmoral, and often immoral. They glorify shrewdness and practical wisdom, in the affairs of life, and especially of politics of government." But the scholarly debate regarding the intent and purpose of Panchatantra – whether it supports unscrupulous Machiavellian politics or demands ethical conduct from those holding high office - underscores the rich ambiguity of the text. Establishing the Panchatantra as an entertaining textbook for the education of princes in the Machiavellian rules of Arthashastra is a most vicious attempt to contain Indian art of storytelling.

The Panchatantra as a collection of delightful stories with ageless and practical wisdom speaks to different readers at different levels. It is a profound educational tool designed to cultivate critical thinking, foresight and ethical decision-making. In the Indian tradition, the work is a Shastra genre of literature, more specifically a Nitishastra text. It is a remarkable testament to India's intellectual and cultural contributions to the world. Through its engaging storytelling and practical lessons, it bridges cultural divides, enriches literary traditions and underscores the enduring power of narrative to inspire and educate across generations.

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