# Narrative and Wisdom Heritage in Indian Knowledge Systems: A Study of the Pañcatantra

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## Abstract

Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) comprises the rich, tangible and intangible heritage developed, evolved, and practised in the Indian subcontinent. Oral traditions have served as significant pedagogical tools to transfer knowledge from one generation to another. *Pañcatantra* is one of the most celebrated and widely disseminated storytelling traditions in the world. The text is considered to be part of Nīti Śāstra. The present study intends to explore the *Pañcatantra* as a didactic text. The purpose is to unearth its potential to impart complex lessons. The engaging animal fables disseminate lessons about strategic thinking, decision-making, governance, and conflict resolution. By exploring the narrative and thematic structures, the study highlights the continuing relevance of the text in contemporary society. This paper contends that the text functions as a means of moral illustrations as well as a cognitive framework to cultivate emotional intelligence and situational judgment. The study generates an appeal to consider the incorporation of IKS-based stories in contemporary educational curricula and professional development, stating that these ancestral wisdom traditions provide an appropriate response to the increasing demand for values-based leadership and sustainability in a complex world. Through select stories and their interpretations, the paper portrays the timeless relevance of the narrative and wisdom heritage of *Pañcatantra,* offering practical solutions and ethical guidance to contemporary social, educational, and corporate contexts.

**Keywords:** Indian Knowledge Systems, Oral Traditions, Niti Shastra, Panchatantra, Heritage, SDG

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Oral traditions played a significant role in ancient Indian education and knowledge transmission. The Vedic period relied heavily on oral methods for teaching and learning, with techniques of memorization being crucial for preserving knowledge (Scharfe, 2018). This oral tradition coexisted with written forms, similar to ancient Greece, where literacy and oral communication influenced each other (Thomas, 1989). India has one of the most diverse sets of oral storytelling traditions alongside folk traditions that continue to be an engaging and enduring medium for knowledge transfer within the cultural, spiritual as well and historical framework of the country. Such traditions have served as a vehicle in the transmission of intricate conceptions or learnings of ages, history, science, ethics, and morals from one generation to another. The capacity of such knowledge transmission techniques to engage communities and Indigenous audiences underscores their relevance in the contemporary context. One noteworthy example of this oral storytelling tradition in India is the Kathakatha establishment, professional storytellers who deliver epic narratives from literature like the Ramayana and Mahabharata. This audiovisual, multimodal tradition—music, gestures, descriptions, mobilizes and activates written knowledge, and renders such knowledge increasingly accessible to audiences with varying literacy levels and understandings. These performances do not simply provide entertainment or amusement but are rather pedagogical; they reaffirm moral and ethical paradigms, which serve as the core of Indian civilized life. Likewise, there is the Pandavani tradition in Chhattisgarh, which is a folk narrative related to the stories of the Pandavas in the Mahabharata (wiki). The leading storyteller, often supported by a small group of musicians, makes extensive use of dramatic expression and props such as a tambura to create an engaging experience for listeners. This did not limit the narration to its text-based origins, but rather it introduced local

elements that helped the cultures to share a base of culture and to retain ancient practices.

Another aspect of oral knowledge transmission is represented by folk traditions, like the Baul singers of Bengal. Decked in colourful attire, the Bauls sing songs that are mystic and philosophical observations in the style of Bhakti and Sufi traditions. They contain mystic elements about the notions of God, togetherness, and a humane approach. The deliberations also include a scope for the audience to challenge the established notions in society and belief systems. Such traditions helped in the dissemination of core philosophical connotations to the common populace. Another popular storytelling tradition, namely *Patachitra,* which belongs to West Bengal, allows the storyteller to exhibit mythological stories and folklore containing socially relevant content. The model serves as an apt system to engage a diverse set of audiences.

The narratives, transmitted in Indigenous communities, also serve the purpose of archiving the knowledge related to ecology. Oral narratives in the Aboriginal Gond that majorly contain the legends and myths also include sustainable agricultural methods, plants of medicinal value, and broadly the connection between humans and nature. Such stories become important for keeping native knowledge systems alive in a rapidly globalizing world. Examples of such oral traditions highlight the opportunity to connect past narratives with present pedagogies, especially in the context of education. From the amusing folklore of the copious oral traditions to the passing on the experience of knowledge discoveries, all encapsulated into one as part of India's intangible cultural heritage.

*Pañcatantra*, *Hitopadeśa*, and *Jataka tales* are some of the remarkable works in the rich tapestry of wisdom and narrative heritage in the Indian Knowledge Systems. These works are popularly known for their stable socio-linguistic history and pedagogical relevance. Though contextually and thematically, these works are different from each other, they share a common goal, i.e. passing on the wisdom of ages and complex lessons to successors through allegory and storytelling. Using animal characters and relatable situations, they break the complex lessons into easily comprehensible parts. This has made the lessons approachable to audiences of all ages, from children to experienced adults. These stories didn't remain confined but rather crossed borders and transcended many cultures with prudence, compassion, and justice that carry forth the ethos of Indian society and its insistence on ethical living and harmonious human relations.

The *Pañcatantra*, attributed to Vishnu Sharma, is regarded as a manual of governance and practical wisdom. It is attributed to be part of Nīti Śāstra, disseminating the wisdom related to statecraft, decision-making, and other skills required for administration. The text gained popularity for its universal wisdom and narrative heritage. Originally, it was written in Sanskrit in the 3rd BCE. The intent was to impart diplomatic practices, decision-making, and governance. Incorporating a dualism of practical tactics and moral undertones, the *Pañcatantra* proves applicable not only in its era but in generations beyond its time frame and across the globe.

The fables received worldwide reach and appreciation after being translated into the Persian language by Borzūya, a Persian physician, during the reign of Khosrow I in the 6th century CE. The translated version was named Kalīla wa Dimna. This served as a connection through which Bhartiya indigenous tales entered the Islāmic world. The Pahlavi version was most likely translated into Arabic by Ibn al-Muqaffa in the 8th century, establishing the text's archetypal status and influence during the Islāmic Golden Age of literature. The text circulated throughout Europe due to later translations into Syriac, Greek, and Latin. In the early 12th century, the Latin translation by John of Capua, Directorium Humanae Vitae, introduced the text to medieval Europe, where it would leave an indelible mark on a variety of literary products, including The Fables of Bidpai. These translations highlight the text's potential to generate mass appeal across cultures and time. The *Pañcatantra* greatly influenced the Southeast Asian space, where it created its place within Javanese and Thai folklore. During the colonial era, Sir William Jones and Charles Wilkins introduced the text in Anglophone cultures, solidifying its international reputation.

One popular legend associated with the origin of the *Pañcatantra* mentions that there was a king named Amaraśakti who ruled over his kingdom, Mahilāropya. He was worried about the low intellectual capacity of his three sons. Thus, Vishnu Sharma, a renowned scholar, was called in the court, and the king requested him to train his bards. The master, through storytelling techniques, taught all the lessons that were required for a king to rule and maintain his position.

The *Pañcatantra* expression has been derived from the Sanskrit words *pañca* (five) and *tantra* (treatises or principles), meaning "the five principles or strategies." The text received a wide range of appreciation as it was translated into more than 50 languages, marking its global presence and acceptability. It carried with itself and transferred the richness of intellectual and cultural traditions that emerged in ancient India and are relevant in the contemporary world. Exploring the translations, adaptations, and historical significance of *Pañcatantra* brings to the fore its role as a vehicle of Indian knowledge and its influence over global literary traditions. This broad

historical and cultural framework prepares the ground to review and examine the thematic representations in the text. The *Pañcatantra* uses a sophisticated narrative style involving nested stories, weaving one through another to create an intricate whole. Each story is in some ways nestled within a greater moral or philosophical scene that allows readers to take in the text on multiple levels. Interspersed within the prose are Sanskrit verses that try to convey the essence of the said lessons.

लोभश्चेद्गच्छति नरं क्रोधःपापानुकूलता।
स जीवन्मृत इत्युक्तःसन्नोऽस्ति गतचिष्टटितम्॥

(Sharma, Book 3)

[A man consumed by greed and anger, inclined to sin, is considered a living corpse, devoid of meaningful purpose.]

The verse portrays the usage of poetic metaphors to communicate the fatal consequences of greed and anger. This demonstrates the potential of the text's narrative style that blends the ethical considerations and teachings with the structures of the fables. It presents an amalgamation of both prose and verse form, making it accessible and comprehensible for a wide range of audiences. Most of the characters in the fables are animals representing human conditions, thought processes, and behavioural patterns. Employing animal characters can be comprehended as a purposeful choice for making the fables culturally, religiously, and ethnically neutral. This, to a great extent, avoids the possibility of prejudices among the learners, and learning happens without biases. The animals, each with their personality traits representing commendable values such as loyalty or negative qualities, even more relatable to human experiences like deceit, reflect human likeness and behaviour, for better or worse, all in a way that is gentle yet direct enough to stay relevant across time and cultures of all kinds.

The organization of the teachings embedded in the fables is another significant aspect of the text. *Pañcatantra* is organized into five separate tantras or sections, with each section dealing with specific human behaviour and interaction. It includes *Mitra-bheda* (The Loss of Friends), Mitra-samprāpti (The Gaining of Friends), Kākolūkīyam (Of Crows and Owls), Labdhapraṇāśam (Loss of Gains) and Aparīkṣitakārakam (Rash Actions). These sections serve as thematic frameworks through which the text imparts moral, political, and social wisdom.

The first section, Mitra-bheda, deals with the cause and effect of broken friendships. It portrays the exploration of betrayal, trust, and the power of deception. The second section, Mitra-samprāpti, presents the companionship, tenets of creating alliances and earning trust. The stories in this section revolve around cooperation and a willingness to help as a tool to address problems and conflicts. Kākolūkīyam, the third section of the book,

explores the nature of conflict and diplomacy, particularly between more and less powerful. The war between crows and owls is presented as an allegory for the importance of strategic thinking and cautious negotiations. The fourth section, Labdhapraṇāśam, serves as a warning against greed and mismanagement of resources, emphasizing the importance of wisdom in protecting one's treasure. At last, Aparīkṣitakārakam cautions about the danger that is always involved in impulsive actions and decisions.

These five sections present ways of navigating the complexities of life, relationships, and governance. In addition to the allegorical construct of anthropomorphized animals, the lessons found within become universally applicable and thus culturally neutral, enabling the text to remain beyond the constrictions of the framework of regional and temporal considerations. Such categorization or sectioning not only helps in the thematic arrangement of the text but also assures its contextual relevance, making the *Pañcatantra* a relevant mine of practical wisdom for generations.

Mitra-bheda, the first section of the book, revolves around the foundations of all relationships. It is the lengthiest and most complex of all the sections. It is generally regarded as the most moralistic part of the book. At the heart of this section lies the story of King Piṅgalaka (the lion) and his companion Sañjīvika (the bull). The story serves as a frame and offers several narratives within. The destruction that deceit can cause is the prime concern that the first section communicates about, especially when it is used to create discord between friends. The friendship between the king, Piṅgalaka and Sañjīvika was targeted by two jackal brothers, Karnataka and Damanaka. They tricked the lion by spreading lies about the bull to create a rift between the two. They collated information about both the king and his friend and also hampered the communication between them, which as a result led to many unresolved misunderstandings. It outlines to spare no effort to recognize deceiving influences in relationships and avoid communication barriers in case of misunderstandings. One of the verses mentions:

न हि मित्रेण केवलं यत्नः परिहार्यतां भवेत्।
संसर्गेण हि वर्धते तत् सापथ्यातं पुरं यथा॥

(Sharma, Book 1)

The verse outlines the awareness that if a relationship is based on self-interest only, it tends to witness many lows. When influences and evils like envy and greed get in, they cause huge damage, much like a town that becomes vulnerable as it grows because it starts attracting invaders and related threats.

The story of the lion and the bull exposes the perilous effects of suspicion and jealousy. Under the influence of what Jackals told, the lion develops distrust towards

his friend, Sañjīvika. This leads to the loss of trust and friendship. The story illustrates that jealousy clouds judgment and may result in destroying things that one values. Even the best of allies can be cracked when trust is broken.

लोभायितेह विश्वं वैरिणं स्वधनं यथा।
सङ्गच्छति न कर्तव्यं यथा विघ्ना न सञ्चरन्ति॥

(Sharma, Book 1)

This verse advises that jealousy and greed create barriers in relationships, much like how obstacles hinder progress. Trust, once broken, is difficult to restore, and its consequences can be as damaging as those caused by external enemies.

One of the indices that one may draw from this section is how crucial loyalty and trust are in alliance. It also serves as a reminder that true friendship should have mutual trust, respect, and sincerity as its basis.

सहयोगे सुखं प्राप्तं यथा शक्तिसंयुजं स्वयम्।
सत्यं मित्रं सदा हि मन्यते यशः धर्मं च॥

(Sharma, Book 1)

The verse underlines the importance of honest cooperation in relationships, which is akin to the strength that unity brings. It emphasizes that a true friend will always uphold virtues such as truth, righteousness, and honour.

Manipulation and deception undermine alliances, which is one of the most important lessons of Mitra-bheda. The insights within this section are profoundly relevant in modern discourses on diplomacy, leadership, ethics, and the intricacies of relationships. Judgment of lack of trust, loyalty, and others is discussed in this section, where the outside influence of a partner is brought into question. It remains relevant today as a source of guidance and wisdom for individuals in both personal and professional contexts, encouraging them to approach decisions with integrity and fairness and to resist the impulse to act in self-interest without considering the broader implications of such actions.

The second section of the *Pañcatantra* is entitled Mitra-samprāpti (The Gaining of Friends). It navigates the readers from the dark side of the relationship to the formation of alliances and team spirit. Highlighting the importance of collaboration, the section outlines the benefits of working together against adversaries. The story centres around the friendship of a group of unexpected friends: a crow, a mouse, a tortoise, and a deer. Their collaboration showcases the power of solidarity and cooperation against the threats of even the mightiest adversaries. The following verse from the section exhibits the significance of alliance:

सन्तोषः परमो लाभः साङ्गत्यं परमा गतिः।।

Sharma, Book 2)

[Contentment is the greatest gain; alliance is the ultimate refuge.]

Another valuable lesson that is presented with the notion that true companionship is the one that one can rely upon, and it is built on respect and trust. One story features the tortoise getting captured by a hunter and the friends banding together to rescue him, illustrating the values of loyalty and teamwork. The idea is summed up in the verse:

एकस्य दुःखं दुःखाय सर्वेषां स्यात् सहिष्णुताम्।

(Sharma, Book 2)

[The pain of one becomes the sorrow of all, for true companions share in endurance.]

This insight into the emotional interconnectedness of friends remains a cornerstone of ethical conduct and human relationships. The section, Mitra-samprāpti, provides key takeaways that are as relevant today as they were thousands of years ago. Mutual support and collaboration are paramount; that loyalty is checked and earned; and that, in the end, friendship is the greatest avenue of collective strength. In modern times, these fables are invaluable bibliographies to promote cooperation, sympathy, and problem-solving. From professional partnerships to social interactions to international relations, the Mitra-samprāpti principles motivate individuals, including commoners and practitioners, to realize that trust and collaboration are ultimately more beneficial than conflict in the pursuit of mutual objectives. Thus, incorporating these values into the contemporary world generates spaces where collective prosperity is revered as opposed to individual greed.

*Kākolūkīyam*, the third section of the book, which means "the war of crows and owls", revolves around themes such as strategic resolution for conflicts, diplomacy, and the systems for steering confrontational relationships. The section brings about indices related to addressing and handling complex enmity. Through the narration, the section highlights the significance of understanding opponents and evaluating their strengths. The narration exhibits the thoughtful endeavors of Meghavarna, the chief of the crows' clan, who to protect his tribe from the attacks of the owls, consults his ministers and seniors. He, in collaboration with one of the senior members of the court, Sthirjivi, devises an elaborate plan to infiltrate the camps of the enemy. The entire plan and execution demonstrate the role of strategic & mindful planning and patience in addressing complex challenges. They eventually win the battle, demonstrating that intelligence

and strategy are often more potent than physical strength. As encapsulated in the verse:

अशक्तोऽपि शतान्येव यथाकालं विचक्षणः।
संरभ्य परसंहारं प्राप्नोति नृपुशानना॥

(Sharma, Book 3)

[Even the weak, with wisdom and the right timing, can vanquish multitudes.]

Evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of one's enemy and careful consideration of plans before initiating actions is of utmost importance, as the text states:

नाशंती व्यसनं याति दोषं चेत्कर्मणि स्थितम्।
सिद्ध्यति प्रेत्य चेश्वर्यं दुर्गतिर्वा समं भवेत्॥

(Sharma, Book 3)

[Calamity is averted when one recognizes the faults in a given course of action.]

The verse emphasizes the significance of mindful consideration before initiating any action in adverse situations. It appeals to be insightful even in an obscure situation to avoid fatal consequences. In contemporary times, when life is facing multi-dimensional challenges, the teachings from Kākolūkīyam become exceptionally relevant. Considering the need of the hour for leadership, in the avenues of international relations, and management, it is imperative to consider the utilization of such narrative structures in the training & learning. The strategic principles of careful planning, knowing one's competitors, and utilizing diplomatic ways for conflict resolution serve well in international relations and business negotiations. Kākolūkīyam addresses both intellectual and ethical dimensions of parleying, encouraging approaches that prioritize long-term stability and harmony.

*Labdhapraṇāśam* (The Loss of Gains), the fourth section of the book *Pañcatantra,* unfolds the consequences of greed, recklessness, and shortsighted decisions that lead to the loss of acquired gains. The section focuses on the significance of prudence, gratefulness, and the ability to safeguard one's achievements. A series of interconnected narratives in this section underscores the value of wise decision-making and self-control that is imperative in maintaining positions and wealth. The narration brings forth one of the most popular stories from the book, the story of a monkey and a crocodile, where the crocodile is persuaded by his wish to invite his friend, the monkey, to his home to eat his heart. Due to a good understanding of body language and speech, the monkey senses the danger and smartly escapes by feigning ignorance and claiming that he keeps his heart in the tree. A significant aspect of the story lies in the persuading skills of the monkey when he successfully strives to convince the crocodile

that monkeys can keep their hearts in the tree. The story illustrates the importance of wit, quick thinking, and convincing skills when faced with challenges. The following verse captures the essence of the section:

हस्तो हेममयं यस्य स्वर्णं चित्तं न भक्षयेत्।
स एव चौरः स च मित्रः यो भङ्गं न प्रयच्छति॥

(Sharma, Book 4)

[He who values his golden opportunity and does not destroy his treasure is neither a thief nor a false friend but one who preserves harmony.]

*Labdhapraṇāśam* provides insights related to cautions, mindful decision-making, and careful stewardship. The indices from this section of the book are significantly relevant in the contemporary world. It advises caution against impulsive decisions, critical thinking, and emotional intelligence to preserve gains and face complexities wisely. By offering timeless guidance on these principles, *Labdhapraṇāśam* continues to inspire thoughtful and ethical decision-making.

Aparīkṣitakāritam, the fifth section of the book *Pañcatantra,* expresses the consequences of rash and hasty decisions. Execution without evaluation is the key lesson that the section highlights. The fables in this section strive to establish the significance of prudence and patience in decision-making and planning before acting. One of the most popular stories of this section is the story of a Brahmin and a weasel, in which the Brahmin misjudges the intentions of the weasel and kills it, thinking it harmed his child. Later, it was revealed that the weasel instead protected the child from a snake. As the following verse mentions:

"विचारं सर्वकार्येषु कुर्वीत विधिपूर्वकम्।
शीघ्रतावा उर्वीं उशषि एवं अविचरणे च तासू मत्तेनुभिभेद सशरणम्लयं कृतम् ॥"

(Sharma, Book 5)

[Every action should follow deliberation, for actions done mindlessly will only lead to remorse.]

In another story, an impatient king kills a bird that appeared to warn him about an upcoming danger. His rash decisions cost him a loyal compatriot and ultimately his own life. This places prudence and patience as the most essential virtues in leadership.

The following verse summarizes the key lesson:

अविचरण कर्तव्यं नाशायैव हि जायते।
विचारं च करोत्येवं फलं शीघ्रं विधीयते॥

(Sharma, Book 5)

[Actions performed without reflection bring about ruin, while thoughtful actions bear swift and lasting fruit.]

The section provides multi-fold guidance, including professional, personal, and social segments of life. It

serves as a touchstone for addressing obscure situations. The stories within this section suggest being cautious about decision-making in difficult situations. Analysis and farsightedness are placed as prime instruments to avoid problems. The fall in the section's lessons rings particularly potent now, amid the dizzying pace of daily life, when sudden moves — spurred by insufficient information or heightened emotions — too often come back to haunt for the long haul. Amid such a scenario, the peculiar wisdom of Aparīkṣitakāritam encourages individuals to be more intellectually invested and take pauses while making decisions.

The *Pañcatantra* is significantly relevant owing to its delicate teachings and wise methods that individuals can adopt, and it has also proved to be one of the most relatable sets of fables following the modern education and development sector. The five indices in the text— Mitra-bheda, the loss of friends; Mitra-samprāpti, gaining friends; Kākolūkīyam, war and peace; Labdha-praṇāśam, the loss of gains; and Aparīkṣitakāritam, the rash actions—give order to addressing life skills of leadership, diplomacy and morality, negotiation, avoiding conflicts, and decision-making. These lessons can be featured for various educational levels, including early learners, enabling moral and ethical dimensions of the simple animal fables, and for the upper levels of education, the philosophical, strategic, and sociopolitical aspects of the text. The book also aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), especially quality education (SDG 4), peace and justice

(SDG 16), and responsible consumption (SDG 12). It also fosters principles of collaboration, sustainability, and responsible governance, therefore serving as an excellent resource and inspiration for tackling global issues. Storytelling-based pedagogy effectively promotes emotional intelligence, cultural literacy, and critical thinking. These profound moral lessons with fables can be integrated into various curricula across subjects, bringing in the essence of one of the oldest texts, *Pañcatantra,* in the modern world. It also provides thematic observations regarding intergenerational understanding, ethical dilemmas, and human-animal relationship dynamics that could be the basis of explorations for interdisciplinary studies. A lot of interdisciplinary studies, including thematic categorization for pedagogical adaptation, literary exploration, extraction of theories from the experiences narrated in the texts, cross-cultural adaptation and relevance, etc, can be initiated with the text.

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