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"Not of An Age but for All Times": *Panchatantra* Re-visited

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ABSTRACT

Panchatantra is a widely acclaimed icon of ancient Indian literature and culture, believed to have been composed in the 3rd Century BCE by a Kashmiri scholar par excellence, Vishnu Sharma, who produced this timeless masterpiece to make five significant treatises encapsuled in simple language and narratives, to enable the sons of his King to face Life with confidence, and be winners. Written centuries ago, though misrepresented and oftentimes branded as 'children's literature', this book has been read by countless generations across time, space and cultures. In contemporary society, the treatises of Vishnu Sharma are more relevant than ever, as is recognised by international agencies such as BBC and UNESCO's Memory of the World Asia-Pacific Regional Register. It is common now to find people flaunting life mantras and life coaching for survival in a new world that is witnessing changes more rapid than humans are able to process, whereas this ancient scholar had already encoded all the fundamental wisdom that is essential for survival in any civilization. This paper is an attempt to examine how the life mantras wrapped in the simplicity of language and narratives stand the test of time, and are still relevant, nearly 100 generations later.

Keywords: *Panchatantra, ancient wisdom, contemporary relevance, life mantras.*

Introduction

The first part of the title of this article is of course, penned about William Shakespeare by Ben Jonson, in his poem "To the Memory of My Beloved the Author, Mr. William Shakespeare" (Jonson, 1623) and since then has been used oft as an epithet to numerous other writers and artists. Ancient India and its cultural heritage have long been a beacon for modern world as it passed through various eras in the kaleidoscope of Time, despite suffering severe backlashes during the centuries of colonization. When the Western world looked back to Socrates and

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Plato and Aristotle for philosophy or linguistics or grammar, Indian scholars such as Panini and Sushruta and Aryabhatta were also there, decoding the mysteries of Life and disseminating their knowledge to the world and the posterity. In fact, as Nanditha Krishnan points out in her article, "How Science and Tech Flourished in Ancient India",

Fifty years before the Italian mathematician Fibonacci wrote about the number sequence, now known as the Fibonacci numbers, a sage named Hemchandra wrote about this sequence, but even he was not the first Indian to do so. An earlier Indian mathematician named Gopala had also studied these numbers. And several earlier Indian mathematicians also knew about them. (Krishnan 2022)

It is no surprise then, that ancient India also gave the world some of the eternally wisdom-filled classical scriptures and works in Literature too, alongside Astrology, Metallurgy, Philosophy, Medicine, Ayurveda, Yoga and Mathematics.

India has given the world such literary classics as would stand apar with any civilization at any point of time, be it spiritual scriptures such as the Vedas and the Puranas, or epics such as Ramayana and Mahabharata or romantic narratives such as Abhijnana Shakuntalam. Vishnu Sharma's *Panchatantra* has been present in the annals of recorded history for more than 3,000 years, and yet is habitually branded as 'children's literature' or "beast fables" albeit the major five treatises expounded in the collection are recognised as "niti Shastra", and "its meaning is more nuanced and expressed in multiple ways" (Bhattacherjee 1998). This paper is an attempt to examine whether *Panchatantra* is merely a collection of moral lessons, or whether it has more dimensions than is openly acknowledged, and whether the life mantras and life lessons that are encoded in them can still be held relevant and extremely essential in contemporary times.

***Panchatantra*: Genesis and Expanse**

Panchatantra is credited to be written by a famed scholar in the 3rd Century BCE, Pandit Vishnu Sharma, though the name is spelt varyingly as "Vishnusharman" (wholereader.com) or as "Vishnuçarman" and even as Vishnu "Pilpay, or Sendebar" (Bhattacherjee 1998). G. L. Chandiramani notes in the "Preface" to his 1991-Translation that some of the stories embedded in the collection could be older than the complete text itself (Chandiramani 1991), and hence, there are scholars who consider the possibility that *Panchatantra* might as well be the oldest surviving Indian fables collection.

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The accepted anecdote regarding the genesis of the work is that a King was deeply unsatisfied with his three sons whom he considered to be not good enough to be successful successors, and he was advised by one of his courtiers to leave them in the care of the famous scholar, Pandit Vishnu Sharma, who was then 80 years old. The King promised him sumptuous gifts in return for making his sons worldly wise, but Sharma declined to have the gifts though promising to fulfil the King's wish within a span of 6 months. Legend goes that Sharma did fulfil his promise and made the three princes worthy successors of the King through the use of small anecdotes with animals as characters, and a moral lesson for surviving endless complicated situations in Life was hidden in each one, and thus was born *Panchatantra*, Pancha in Sanskrit meaning "five" and Tantra in Sanskrit meaning "systems or parts" (Chandiramani 1991). *Panchatantra* is "written in champu style — a combination of prose and verse" (Hegde 2017) and structured in the form of Chinese boxes, with stories built into stories, weaved around five treatises of Niti Shastra:

i. mitra-bheda or Losing/ Conflict among Friends
ii. mitra-samprāpti or Winning of Friends
iii. kākolōkīyam or Crows and Owls
iv. labdhapranāsam or The Forfeit of Profit
v. aparīkshitakārakam or Action without due Consideration

"Interwoven together in a fables-within-fables manner, it unravels like a matryoshka, a succession of Russian dolls-within-dolls" observes Hegde, and it disentangles all the complexities found in the real world, "the good, the bad, the ugly; the joys, the deceit, what Zorba in the book Zorba the Greek calls 'the full catastrophe'" (Hegde 2017).

Regarding the spread and popularity of the work, Borzūya, a Persian physician who had come to India in 6th Century CE, searching for Mrithasanjivani, a plant believed to have resuscitating powers, to bring back the dead to life, instead found this book, which mesmerized him immediately. He took a self-written copy of the book back home to Persia, and translated it into Pahlavi, and then it seeped into Arabic, then Syriac, and then German. By 8th Century CE, it made its way into Old Castilian, thereby settling down firmly into the European cultural fabric (Roy 2018). Giovanni Boccaccio, Geoffrey Chaucer and Jean de La Fontaine are all counted among the later generation writers to have been influenced by *Panchatantra*. "It has influenced roughly 90 to 96 human generations" Roy states, "that is big magic, as deathless as any herb promising resurrection and eternal life," which is in fact, the life promised by Mrithasanjeevani.

No other work has played so important a part in the literature of the world as the *Panchatantra* … (Translated into) Greek, Latin, Spanish, Italian, German, English, Old Slavonic, Czech (and fifty other languages) … its range has extended from Java to Iceland. Indeed, the statement has been made that no book except the Bible has enjoyed such an extensive circulation in the world as a whole. (Edgerton cited in Hegde 2017)

In fact, Hegde would like to give the title "the first international block buster hit" to *Panchatantra* because by the late Victorian era, there were in existence "over seventy variants with different titles in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Spanish, German, French, Italian, English, Dutch, Danish, Swedish, Hungarian, Czech, Croat, Polish, Armenian and many other languages!" (Hegde 2017). In more recent times, the 1991 translated version by G L Chandiramani underwent the 20th reprint by 2011, in a span of two decades. That is how rapid the spread of the work has been, and probably will be in future, now that several articles and international agencies recognise the innate potential of the work to guide people towards surviving the journey of Life.

In 2024, UNESCO Memory of the World Committee for Asia and the Pacific (MOWCAP) Regional Register included *Panchatantra*, along with Ramcharitmanas and Sahṛdayāloka-Locana, thereby not only honouring and paying homage to "the creative genius of their creators but also ensure[ing] that their profound wisdom and timeless teachings continue to inspire and enlighten future generations" (PIB 2024). In 2018 the BBC published an article titled "The *Panchatantra*: The Ancient 'Viral Memes' Still with Us" by Nilanjana Roy, which draws parallels between the anecdotes and contemporary worlds. Thus, the popularity of *Panchatantra* continues unabated, even as humanity undergoes new forms of calamities and instabilities in the form of wars and pandemics, and every stable paradigm is upended, resulting in more chaos.

***Panchatantra*: A Closer Look**

Decrypting the reasons for the persistent popularity of *Panchatantra* requires a close scrutiny of the work per se. Where to begin is a pertinent question faced by any researcher – the intricate structure or the meticulous narratives or the linguistic brilliance or the selection of situations with the most apt Life lesson seamed into it, or the intuitiveness with which the Guru picks up universally relevant topics that surpass spatiotemporal, geopolitical and sociocultural confines. The stories in *Panchatantra* are in the embedded format – there is a frame story for the five major treatises, then the next story is placed into that story as an anecdote recited by a character,

and then the next story is structured into this second story as a narrative by another character in the second story, and then the fourth story is nestled into the third story as being told by a character in the third story, and thus it is for the five major sections. Hence the simile of the Russian tea dolls, matryoshka, the sets of dolls representing mothers continuing the family legacy and traditions through their children, is applied rather accurately to the work, not only for the structural intricacy, but also for carrying on the legacy of ancient Indian wisdom to future generations sans borders.

The meticulous and intricate narrative structure is but cleverly wrapped in simple and direct language, uncomplicated characters and relatable situations so that even children can enjoy the narratives and take in the robust and profound concepts and ideas pertaining to worldly wisdom, often taken from the Vedas and the Upanishads. As Hegde rightly points out, so "many *Panchatantra* characters quote amply from classics like the *Mahabharata, Ramayana*, Bhagavad Gita" (Hegde 2017), and no one can disagree with Arthur Ryder when he observes that this "is as if the animals in some English beast-fable were to justify their actions by quotations from Shakespeare and the Bible" (Ryder cited in Hegde 2017). For example, instances like a tom cat in "The Story of The Hare and The Partridge" reciting texts from the *Vedas*, or a jackal quoting *Manusmriti* in "The Story of The Monkey and The Log" proliferate throughout the work. As Vishnu Sharma had promised, the three princes were ready to face Life with better competency, within a short span of time, because it is easier to get the disciples digest the sober pills if it is presented in the guise of sugar candies.

The use of language also needs to be discussed to comprehend the everlasting value and the brilliance of presentation, especially presentation of weighty philosophical yet pragmatic wisdom for surviving in a world which is like a dense forest – inhabited with wild and mysterious beings and furrowed with invisible threats and lurking menaces. Analysing the language is not easy since the original version was composed in Sanskrit, and more than 200 translations are reportedly available around the world, and also, there will be additions and omissions of meaning, and even passages, that might happen in a work that has travelled so far and wide, across time and cultures. In fact, some of the foreign translators are reported to have been irate enough with the ever-present negative values such as greed and treachery, that they purportedly edited and even added episodes where the evil goes punished, unlike in the original where the good, the bad and the ugly are merely presented as co-existing, to be known of and to be looked out for, with no mention of the good winning over the evil or anything.

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Even then, no one can miss the simplicity of language suitable enough for easy comprehension by children and young adults who are uninitiated to the ways of the world. The manner of presentation of the issues to be mulled over by anyone who wants to deal with the complex ways of the world, and succeed, is also unique. The stories begin with the usual "Once upon a time", or "Somewhere in the world, is a city called Vardhamana" (Sharma 17), and thus place the tales into a remote past and uncertain geography, where humans and beasts live and interact with each other, perhaps a world of fantasy, perhaps with the intention that people will be able to connect more effortlessly with the story and characters. The names of characters might look difficult for a modern reader, but then the original language of composition being Sanskrit, that was bound to happen. The titles of the tales use character names only sparsely, such as "The story of Dharmabuddhi and Papabuddhi", "The Story of Nanda and Vararuchi" or "The Story of King Chandra". Otherwise, the majority of the titles are rather direct, such as "The Story of the Jackal and the Drum" or "The Story of the Hunter and the Bird whose Droppings Turned to Gold" or "The Story of The Dog in a Foreign Country".

The same candour can be found within the stories too. For instance, in "The Story of The Jackal, The Lion, The Leopard and The Tiger", which comes in the Fourth Section, "Forfeiting of Profit", the story advocates adopting different strategies with different people for one's own benefit. The jackal, named Mahachathuraka, is unable to break the thick hide of a dead elephant it found in the jungle, and so tries to use different approaches to trick bigger predators into breaking the skin so that the jackal can consume the flesh, but it does not want to share the food either. When the lion comes, it tries to be humble, but when the leopard comes, it muses to itself,

I got rid of the wicked lion by bowing humbly before him, but how shall I manage this one? He is extremely brave, so I cannot handle him except by cunning, for they say:

> When it is not possible
> To win someone over by peaceful methods,
> Or by bribery,
> Then cunning is the only solution,
> For even a man endowed with all the good qualities,
> Can be won over by cunning. (Sharma 207 – 08)

Through the encounters with a lion, a leopard, a tiger and another jackal, the story presents a step-by-step manual of how the first jackal assesses the situation, thinks of an appropriate approach and outwits all the big cats who are stronger, and resorts to fighting the other jackal who is its equal, and ends up in succeeding with his plan for getting the thick skin of the

elephant cut open by a stronger animal and enjoying the food for himself after physically vanquishing the other jackal. “Bow before the great, Pit two brave opponents against each other, Give small presents to the mean, And fight with the equally powerful” (Sharma 209) is the main life lesson here, which is spiced up with other essential but simple lessons like, “A man born of a noble family,/ Although beset with calamities,/ Never forsakes the path of righteousness” (207) and “You should only eat/ What you can digest/ And what, once digested, / Does you good” (208).

The way such profound and essential life lessons are shrouded in simplicity and ease of comprehension is truly remarkable, and this tale is actually embedded in the tales exchanged by a monkey and a crocodile in the famous frame story of the Third Treatise, wherein the monkey saves his own life by cleverly telling the crocodile that it has left its heart behind in the tree, and fools the crocodile to take it back to the shore, instead of taking it to the wife of crocodile who is waiting eagerly to eat the monkey. Riddled with abundant life lessons such as “There are six indications of friendship: / Giving and receiving, / Listening to and telling secrets, / Entertaining and being entertained” (Sharma 177) and “Never trust a man who is not to be trusted” (179), the frame story as well as the embedded tales present a beautiful bouquet of wise quips that will enlighten even a person who might be mediocre in his potential.

Selection of situations where these heavy life lessons can be impounded are also selected very sensibly by Vishnu Sharma. The situations are all practically probable and possible in real life, which may be faced by anyone at any point in time. Forming friendships, for instance, friendships between two persons destroyed by a third person, deciding whether to intervene in the affairs of others, being judicious about sharing everything with everyone, avoiding being fooled by people who pretend to be well-wishers, trusting people blindly, treating enemies intelligently, jumping into conclusions without proper verification of facts and so on. The uncanny propensity with which Vishnu Sharma could pinpoint universally valid situations furnishes testimony to the overpowering wisdom of the Pandit, and is one of the reasons for the undying acceptance of the work by human civilizations across time, irrespective of cultural and linguistic barriers.

Life Mantras in *Panchatantra*

Several research articles are available regarding the inculcation of life skills, managerial skills, life lessons, value education and moral values in *Panchatantra*, and about the increasing relevance of the teachings included in it. This is particularly relevant in the present context

where unlimited articles and websites about Life Lessons and Life Mantras are available and are much sought after by people. A quick glance through these materials enables one to identify the life lessons as what experiences teach a person, and then it is all about inspirational and motivational quotes from famous authors, authentic or not. One aspect that immediately catches the eye is that inherently all the inspirating words are fundamentally about one's self, and not much about the relationships and practical situations and choices that are available when a person traverses the jungle that is Life.

"No matter the season or situation, life lessons are invaluable and worth cherishing" says one website on Life Lessons (Success.com), and they "are a beautiful gift in the long run, but they don't always come wrapped in a shiny red bow". This can easily be said about *Panchatantra* too. Sharma himself is supposed to have described the work as "a guide to artha or worldly wisdom and niti or polity, integral desires for Hindus alongside dharma (morally proper conduct) and kama (love)" (Vijay 2024).

Lessons lurk on every page, teaching survival (artha, "worldly knowledge"), the danger of greed (kaama, "desire"), and the importance of abiding by a moral code, or dharma. Every detail is significant: characters' names (e.g. Paapabuddhi from Paap, "sin", and Dharmabuddhi from "dharma") hint at their personalities, while the setting of the forest, tumultuous and vast, is a metaphor for the human world. (UMSU 2022)

Vinay and Sowmya, in their paper highlight how the *Panchatantra* can be used as an effective tool for teaching managerial skills, because teaching the "necessary skills to tackle the difficult challenges" that may arise "in the day to day activities" and "effective utilisation of opportunities" that Life throws at a person, is very important in education, and adopting these stories for teaching the required skills and morales will make it possible "in the easiest and effective manner" (Vinay and Sowmya 2018).

One glance at all the gleams of wisdom scattered across the length and breadth of *Panchatantra*, and the contemporary life lessons found disseminated across the Internet and other materials, is enough to expose the depth of prudence and good sense bundled into a single book vis a vis the comparative superfluousness of the life lessons and life mantras paraded on the internet. The repeated focus on self-preservation, self-care and self-love is all good, and is immensely helpful for people dumbfounded by the drastic changes happening in a world that is hardly familiar to those inhabiting it, but the relevant question is whether this is all that is needed in the modern world, when no paradigm seems fixed enough to become familiar, let alone long-lasting. It is said that *Panchatantra* was used as a textbook in Ancient Persia and

British East India Company for teaching governance, administration, managing enemies, and tackling jealousy and hatred. Upinder Singh, in her Political Violence in Ancient India, probably captures it best when she remarks that *Panchatantra* offers what is necessary for surviving in a troubled and complicated world, by emphasising "the need for effort, intelligence, cunning, and – above all – solid good sense" (Singh cited in Roy 2018). One of the most valid lessons presented throughout the book is that the world is always a conundrum, more like a cauldron, where elements of virtues and vices keep intermixing, and it is all about making intelligent and sensible choices from among the innumerable choices presented by Life. As someone described it, *Panchatantra* is, indeed, a life kit (UMSU 2022).

Conclusion

From the above discussion, it becomes abundantly clear that the relevance of *Panchatantra* and the life lessons incorporated into it, is of great validity for the current generation of people, the pearls of wisdom acquiring more sheen and value than ever. To brand it as children's literature and to treat it as a means of entertainment and amusement need not be a bad approach, but simultaneously the profound life lessons and life mantras weaved into its "narrative tapestry that extols the virtues of hard work and imparts the art of maintaining composure amidst chaos", should also be appreciated, and it should be seen for what it is – a conduit "for essential moral and ethical teachings, fostering a holistic understanding of life's complexities in the impressionable minds of the youth" (Vijay 2024). The world had recognized the unpriceable intrinsic value of this priceless work centuries ago, long before the existing sorts of technological advances were even imagined. Now, when everything is available at one's fingertips, when the world has fast become a global village, the germaneness of *Panchatantra* should be more openly recognised, and it would not be an unwise decision to incorporate it into the formal educational system, like Ancient Persia or Colonial British did.

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