Storytelling Traditions in Indian Knowledge Systems: A Comparative Study of *Pañcatantra* and *Hitopadesha*

Dr. Mohit Sharma

Associate Professor, University Institute of Liberal Arts & Humanities, Chandigarh University, Mohali, India

Abstract— *The rich intangible heritage of India encapsulated in its oral traditions has played a significant role in preserving the knowledge of ages. The Pañcatantra and Hitopadesha, being two of the most celebrated and widely acknowledged collections of fables, present a handful of ancient wisdom that is universal in many ways. This paper offers a comparative study between the Pañcatantra and Hitopadesha. The study considers the structural, pedagogical, thematic, and historical aspects for the comparison. The Pañcatantra was composed somewhere around the 3rd Century BCE and Hitopadesha in the 9th – 10th Century CE. The study explores the overlapping thematic areas in both texts and highlights the purpose of crafted stories. The paper presents the context specificity in the texts within the Indian cultural and pedagogical traditions, evaluating the enduring relevance of the fables in the contemporary education system. Drawing on original Sanskrit verses, the study reinforces the potential of ancient wisdom to offer solutions to problems pertaining to governance, diplomacy, ethical conduct, etc. It is further emphasized that the modern education system, in line with its vision for holistic development, must consider the incorporation of ancient wisdom. Furthermore, future research in the fields related to Indian Knowledge Systems is the need of the hour.*

Keywords— *Pañcatantra, Hitopadesha, Indian Knowledge Systems, Oral Traditions, Comparative Study*

Storytelling traditions worldwide have served as pedagogical tools to transfer knowledge between generations. The narrative and wisdom heritage encapsulated in the oral traditions bring forth the learnings of generations and inform the successors to learn from their predecessors' experiences. They are known for their capacity to carry, safeguard, and transmit knowledge informally and effectively. Apart from human values, various oral traditions communicate complex lessons pertaining to several aspects of life and state.

India has one of the most celebrated oral traditions in the world. It is deeply rooted in oral and written narrative heritage. It has been serving as a powerful tool for transferring knowledge related to human values, morality, deep philosophical explorations, cultural heritage, and statecraft. Indian storytelling traditions range from ancient epics to regional folktales. Since, the Vedic period, oral traditions have assisted in preserving ancient knowledge, language, and cultural heritage. Many of the religiously celebrated texts including *Ramayana, Mahabharata, and Puranas* serve both religious/cultural importance and historical accounts. There is a variety of Bhartiya storytelling traditions that include; oral traditions such as folktales, *Vetalapanchavimshati* popularly known as Baital Pachisi, *Jataka tales, Tnalirama tales,* and *other traditional bedtime stories.* Bardic storytelling including *Kathavachana*, *Stories of Shivaji, and other warriors.* Temple and devotional storytelling including *Harikatha, Kathakalakshepam, Bhavai* (folk theatrical form), and *Ankiya Nat* (religious storytelling from Assam).

Storytelling traditions in India have always been didactic, serving the purpose of transmitting knowledge related to leadership, ethics, statecraft, diplomacy, etc. Many of the texts such as Pañcatantra and Hitopadesha have been specially designed to educate both kings and commoners, using fables to present complex concepts. The impact arena of the Bhartiya storytelling traditions has been vast as it influenced the global landscapes. *Pañcatantra* was

translated into many European languages, Arabic, Persian, etc. Both *Pañcatantra* and *Hitopadesha* belong to the didactic storytelling tradition of India. Both include animal fables and allegorical narratives and influenced many other globally popular texts such as *Aesop's Fables, Kalila Wa Dimna* (Persian and Arabic translation), and many European tales. *Pañcatantra* is traditionally attributed to Vishnu Sharma and is estimated to have been composed between the 3rd century BC to 3rd Century AD. The original book, written in Sanskrit language and later translated into many other languages has five sections in it, namely:

1.   Mitra-bheda (Loss of friends)
2.   Mitra-lābha (Gaining friends)
3.   Kākolūkīyam (Crows & Owls)
4.   Labdhapranāśam (Loss of Gains)
5.   Aparīkṣitakārakam (Evil actions)

These five sections of the book contain mostly animal characters which have been featured to represent and exhibit the human psyche, actions, and consequences. Stories serve as guiding principles primarily for administrators and rulers.

Hitopadesha, authored by Narayana Pandit, is considered to be influenced by *Pañcatantra* in many ways. It was written somewhere between the 9th to 14th Century CE. Thematical and structural bifurcation of the tales in the text is as follows:

1.   Sāhitīka (Gaining friends)
2.   Vigraha (war strategy)
3.   Sandhi (Reconciliation)
4.   Vigraha (Consequences of rash actions)

Both the collections, *Pañcatantra* and *Hitopadesha*, are considered cornerstones of the Indian Knowledge Systems. The *Pañcatantra* contains more comprehensive and philosophical connotations whereas *Hitopadesha* is a more simplified version for a broader audience. Together, both represent the rich intangible heritage of India.

Apart from the adaptation of these stories in many other cultures, the texts have significantly captured the attention of researchers from varied fields of study. Kulkarni, Shirin (2013) in his article titled "Pañcatantra – An example of using narratives in teaching in ancient Indian education" presented the historical journey, adaptations, and educational evaluation while highlighting its usefulness in modern education. Sadhana Naithani, et.al. (2004) in their article titled "The Teacher and the Taught: Structures and Meaning in the Arabian Nights and the Pañcatantra" presented a comparative analysis of both the collections and highlighted their structural elements. Verma Ishita and Nirban Manna (2018) in their study titled "Delimiting Storytelling: A Post-Structural Approach to the Medieval Narrative of the *Pañcatantra*" explored multiplicity of

meaning in the text and emphasized double reading for literal and metaphysical meanings. Patel S. Bhaviniben and Rastogi Nidhi (2015) in their article titled "A Sociological Aspect of Pañcatantra" highlighted the socio-cultural effects of the utilization of *Pañcatantra* as an instructional text or method for learners.

Salamone Andrew (2014) published a report under U.S. India Relationship titled "From Nitisara to Hitopadesha: Ancient India's Impact on Modern India's Statecraft" which highlights the importance of understanding India's strategic culture based on the analysis of select ancient texts. The report significantly maps certain policies and decision-making approaches with the concepts rooted in the ancient Indian knowledge heritage. Gotise Piyush and Upadhyay K. Bal (2017) in their article titled "Happiness on Ancient Indian Perspective: Hitopadesa" explore the models in the texts such as *Knowledge (Vidya)* as a foremost antecedent of happiness. The study also highlights the similarities between the ideas present in the text and some of the modern well-being theories.

Historical and Cultural Context:

Though, the *Pañcatantra* is estimated to have been composed in the 3rd century BCE, its transmission as an oral narrative tradition may predate this period. The primary objective of the text has always been related to nītiśāstra – a manual on statecraft, diplomacy, and leadership. According to a legend popularly associated with its composition, a king who was disheartened due to the lack of political acumen of his three sons, summons Pandit Vishnu Sharma and requests for training them. Vishnu Sharma, through an engaging narrative, imparts the complex wisdom required for a leader to rule over a kingdom. The collection of fables included animal characters as proxies of humans creating and solving political and ethical dilemmas. The structure of the fables was divided into five parts to facilitate the learning and systematize the approaches.

On the other hand, *Hitopadesa* was composed somewhere between 9th and 10th century AD by Narayana Pandita. Having its emergence in a different historical milieu, it draws inspiration from *Pañcatantra* but serves a broader audience than just teaching administrative classes. The text incorporates ethical instructions applicable to a wider range of individuals, including courtiers, scholars, and the general populace. Historically, during this period of time, literary and philosophical traditions were flourishing in Bengal under the regime of the Pala and Sena dynasties which as a result facilitated an apt landscape for literary reinterpretations. The *Hitopadesa* reflects the simplification and interpretation or rewriting of *Pañcatantra.*

Both texts received worldwide appreciation and cross-cultural acceptance. They played a significant role in altering or shaping the political and diplomatic landscape of many cultures. The *Pañcatantra* was one of the first Indian texts to be widely recognized. It was translated into the Persian language around the 6th century CE and continued to exert an influence on European fable traditions through its Greek and Latin adaptations. The *Hitopadesa* was written after *Pañcatantra,* thus had lesser immediate impact in some sense but its prose style made it a favorite among scholars in the colonial period. It became the first Sanskrit Book to be published in the Nagri script and then published by William Carey in Serampore in 1803-4.

Despite the similarities and overlapping in both the texts, there are distinct characteristics that they carry, the *Pañcatantra* exhibits a commitment towards the requirements for the ruler classes and retains its political and administrative framework, whereas, *Hitopadesa* contains a design for universal ethical and moral understanding. The historical and cultural context of both texts exhibits a dynamic trajectory of intellectual heritage and its transmission methods. The historical and cultural view of comparison highlights the continuity and transformation of Indian stories over time.

Framework and Structural Aspect:

Thematically, both the texts—*Pañcatantra* and *Hitopadesha*—share the same landscape. However, there is a slight variation in their structure. The *Pañcatantra* employs an interwoven narrative structure, whereas the *Hitopadesha* omits philosophical obscurity and presents a simplified version of the tales. It offers a more relatable framework that is also accessible to commoners.

Structurally, the *Pañcatantra* is divided into five sections, of each which focuses on a unique theme related to statecraft. These sections—Mitra-Bheda (The loss of friends), Mitra-lābha (The gaining of friends), Kākolūkīyam (Crows and Owls), Labdhapranāśam (loss of gains), and Aparīkṣitakārakam (rash actions) present an interwoven and thematically interconnected complex framework. The narration offers stories that emerge from an existing running story. Such a narrative technique creates multiple layers of meaning which are unfolded in subsequent stories. It reinforces the themes through repetition and following a highly recursive structure that each story serves both its independent and interdependent value.

On other hand, the structure of the *Hitopadesha* is divided into four sections including; Mitra-lābha (The Gaining of Friends), Suhṛd-bheda (The Separation of Friends), Vigraha (Conflict), and Sandhi (Reconciliation). Contrary to the point of influence that it draws from *Pañcatantra,* the

Hitopadesha exhibits a more generalized focus, aiming at a wider range of audience beyond just the administrator class. It follows a linear and less recursive method and includes the moral and ethical concepts that relate well with the common people. The framing arrangement of the text also presents the collection of wisdom for personal and social conduct.

Additionally, there is a difference between the use of prose and verse, *Pañcatantra* relies on prose intermingled with didactic verses, which serve to repetition and strengthen ethical concepts that the stories echo. The *Hitopadesha* employs verse and integrates the poetic wisdom in some sections. This enhanced its consumption as an instructional text, and acceptable in medieval scholastic traditions.

Common and Unique Fables in the *Pañcatantra* and *Hitopadesha*:

Despite a variation in the historical context, both Pañcatantra and Hitopadesha share several stories as the latter is largely derived from the earlier. There are significant modifications that Narayana Pandita introduced in the narrative structures, characters' roles, objectives of the stories, and moral emphasis. Some of the stories in both texts are identical, while others see a transformation to portray varied and vast ethical and social perspectives.

The story of the Blue Jackal (Neelakantha Śṛgāla) is common in both the texts but in its Pañcatantra version, the jackal falls accidentally into blue dye and is perceived as a divine being by other creatures. Later, he meets his downfall due to his howling. In the Hitopadesha version, the story remains the same but emphasizes more on the moral obligation of deception that deception doesn't sustain for long.

Another popular story that is found in both texts is the story of the Lion and the Hare (Siṃhaśaśaka Katha). The Pañcatantra version of the story shows a weak hare who is under threat by a lion but tricks the lion and makes him jump into a well. It presents political cunningness and survival strategy. In its Hitopadesha adaptation, the emphasizes more on the significance of wisdom for the weak to overcome any threatful situation.

Similarly, the story of the Monkey and the Crocodile (Vānara-Kapīndraka Katha) which in the Pañcatantra version presents a clever monkey who escapes from a crocodile having intentions to offer the monkey's heart to his wife. In Hitopadesha, the story puts less emphasis on the trickery of the monkey and more on the idea of foresightedness and intelligence as significant faculties to survive any problematic situation.

On the other hand, the texts also highlight unique perspectives by offering unique fables like; the story of the

four friends and the hunter (Catuḥ-suhṛt-katha) is uniquely placed in Pañcatantra in which four friends—a deer, a crow, a mouse, and a turtle strive together to escape a hunter. It offers lessons of mutual cooperation and intelligence by reinforcing the themes of political alliance, strategy, and crisis management. Similarly, the story of the Brahmin and the Mongoose (Brāhmaṇa-Nakula Katha) is also one of the fables that are not found in the Hitopadesha. The story revolves around the confusion of a mother who mistakenly assumes that the loyal mongoose harmed her child. Due to this confusion, the mother kills the mongoose and regrets later. The story presents the tragic end of hasty judgments. Perhaps, the story was not adapted in the Hitopadesha for its darker moral tone.

Hitopadesha also offers some unique tales such as the fable of the Cat and the Vulture (Mārjāra-Gṛdhrakatha). It showcases the cunning cat who pretends to be an ascetic and gains the confidence of birds. As a result, the cunning cat eats all of them one by one. The fable cautions the readers or listeners to avoid blind faith. The theme aligns aptly with the overall emphasis of the text i.e. personal wisdom in social interactions. Pañcatantra doesn't include this tale for it focuses more on the needs of the commoners. In another tale of the Hitopadehs, the king and foolish minister (Rājā-Mūrkha-Mantrī Katha), highlights the disastrous consequences of misinterpretation of the king's orders. The story, categorically, brings forth the lessons pertaining to the cost that one has to pay for blind obedience. The fable is presented in a simple structure and is not included in the Pañcatantra.

Comparative Analysis:

Both sets of stories including Pañcatantra and Hitopadesha share many characteristics but serve different conceptual and instructive determinations. One strongly emphasizes the strategic and governance-related philosophy and the other simplifies the narrative and structures to make it more accessible also for the commoners. The Hitopadesha version showcases a more direct and relatable approach for a wider social context. The fables in both texts show a lot of similarities, yet there are modifications in the stories in Hitopadesha. The modifications include summarization in a concise and concluding manner, simplification, focusing more on ethical conduct, etc. This results in a shift in both the audience type and size.

Narrative Techniques and Approaches in *Pañcatantra* and *Hitopadesha*

A web-like narrative structure (Kathāmukha) has been employed in the Pañcatantra that allows the creation of a story from within a story. The technique generates the interest of the readers, allowing the dissemination of multi-layered moral, political, and philosophical wisdom. It also

unfolds wisdom gradually and connects the lessons with each other for a holistic understanding. For instance, the first section of the Pañcatantra i.e. Mitra-bheda tells a tale of a lion and the bull. The story introduces the cunning character of the jackal to manipulate the king for personal gains, the story creates many sub-stories to reinforce the major theme of deception and trust. As outlined in the verse from the first section:

"अनृतं साहसं माया मूर्खत्वमतिलुब्धता।

अष्टौ दोषा न राज्ञः स्युर्विनश्यत्याशु तान्वहन्॥" (Sharma, Book I)

[Falsehood, rashness, deceit, folly, and excessive greed—these eight faults should not exist in a king, for he perishes if he harbors them.]

In contrast, the Hitopadeha strives to reduce the multi-layered structure by following a linear pattern of storytelling. It follows a clear progression, where each story directly conveys ethical and practical wisdom. It makes the structure and storyline accessible and relatable for even non-royal audiences. The following verse from Hitopadesha mentions:

"त्यजेदेकं कुलस्यार्थे ग्रामस्यार्थे कुलं त्यजेत्।

ग्रामं जनपदस्यार्थे आत्मार्थे पृथिवीं त्यजेत्॥" (Narayan, Book I)

[One should abandon an individual for the sake of the family, a family for the sake of the village, a village for the nation, and even the entire world for the sake of the self.]

The verses from both Pañcatantra and Hitopadesha are committed to imparting wisdom in an engaging manner. The Pañcatantra employs a complex structure to impart strategic thinking and diplomacy, whereas the Hitopadesha employs a straightforward didactic approach, making moral and ethical guidance universally applicable.

Pedagogical and Contemporary Relevance:

Storytelling (Kathavachana) used to be one of the significant pedagogies in the Indian Indigenous education system. The Gurukuls, being the center for knowledge generation and dissemination actively played roles in developing and meeting the objectives of holistic education. Many of the texts including Upanishads that contain the core philosophical knowledge also follow the storytelling structures.

Both Pañcatantra and Hitopadesha are filled with proverbs (subhāṣitas) and practical learnings. The Pañcatantra imparts diplomatic acumen through a storytelling approach. It establishes the significance of acquiring knowledge and staying on the right path as outlined in the following verse:

"विद्या मित्रं प्रवासेषु माता मित्रं गृहेषु च।

व्याधितस्यौषधं मित्रं धर्मो मित्रं मृतस्य च॥" (Sharma, Book V)

[Knowledge is a friend in a foreign land, a mother is a friend at home, medicine is a friend for the sick, and dharma is a friend after death.]

The verse outlines the utility of wisdom in navigating the challenges of life. It provides a principle to motivate lifelong learning and being just. Such lessons are still relevant in the contemporary educational requirements.

The Hitopadesha borrows majorly from the Pañcatantra but experiments a lot with the structures and line of thought pertaining to audience type. The version makes it suitable for audiences beyond royal lineage. The aim of the Hitopadesha aligns with contemporary needs related to value-added education, leadership, etc. The following verse highlights the significance of decision-making:

"सन्तप्तायसि संस्थितस्य पयसो नामापि न श्रूयते।

मुक्ताकारतया तदेव नलिनीपत्रस्थितं राजते॥" (Narayan, Book II)

[A drop of water placed on hot iron evaporates instantly, but the same drop shines like a pearl on a lotus leaf.]

The verse presents an analogy that is still significant from the corporate training and leadership development point of view. It implies that the environment plays an important role and combined with adaptability, it determines success.

In contemporary times, these fables are as crucial as ever for moral instruction, taking the lead, and negotiating for peace. As we witness the unravelling of corporate governance and compromised personal integrity, the tales of these texts provide wisdom about decision-making, ethics, and human conduct.

Educational institutions around the globe are now rediscovering ancient wisdom in character-building curricula. Pañcatantra and Hitopadesha can also be considered for incorporation in the teaching & learning process at business schools and leadership programs covering diplomatic negotiation, ethical leadership, and risk assessment. Additionally, human-centric skills such as wisdom, diplomacy, and ethical reasoning have emerged as invaluable in an age dominated by artificial intelligence (AI) and automation in various industries. Originally aimed at influencing prudent leaders and thinkers, these texts are potent enough to shape thoughts and tactics for both personal and professional development. Thus, they are as important as ever in the educational curriculum and in leadership development in contemporary society.

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