

Storytelling Techniques in the *Panchatantra*: Narrative Intelligence, Ethical Pragmatism, and the Poetics of Counsel

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Abstract

The Panchatantra, attributed to Viṣṇu Śarman, stands as one of the earliest and most sophisticated experiments in didactic fiction in world literature. Far from being a simple collection of animal fables, the text constitutes a carefully designed narrative system aimed at cultivating political intelligence (*nīti*), rhetorical skill, and interpretative judgment. This paper examines the storytelling techniques of the Panchatantra through a humanities-oriented critical lens, combining close textual reading with narrative theory, political philosophy, and comparative literature. It argues that the Panchatantra employs frame narration, recursive storytelling, animal allegory, dialogic plurality, prose–verse hybridity, and psychological realism to transform storytelling into a pedagogical instrument. Rather than prescribing moral absolutes, the text dramatizes ethical ambiguity and worldly pragmatism, training the reader to think analogically and strategically. By situating the Panchatantra alongside both classical Sanskrit criticism and modern theorists such as Bakhtin, Ramanujan, and Pollock, this study demonstrates its enduring relevance as a foundational text in narrative intelligence and civilizational pedagogy.

Keywords: Panchatantra; narrative pedagogy; frame narrative; animal allegory; *nīti-śāstra*; dialogism; didactic fiction

The Panchatantra occupies a singular position in world literature as a work that fuses imaginative storytelling with political instruction. Traditionally dated between the third and fifth centuries CE and attributed to Viṣṇu Śarman, the text announces an explicitly pedagogical aim: to instruct inexperienced princes in the arts of governance and worldly wisdom (*nīti*). What distinguishes the Panchatantra from other didactic traditions, however, is not merely its subject matter but its narrative method. Political intelligence is not conveyed through abstraction or prescription but dramatized through story, dialogue, and consequence.

Modern scholarship increasingly emphasizes that the Panchatantra must be read as a theory of knowledge enacted through narrative. Its tales do not demand moral obedience; instead, they cultivate interpretative judgment, analogical reasoning, and rhetorical discernment. As A.K. Ramanujan notes, the listener is required to decide how and whether a story applies. This paper examines the storytelling techniques of the Panchatantra as a coherent system of narrative pedagogy, arguing that the text transforms storytelling itself into an instrument of political and ethical intelligence.

Early Indological studies, such as those by Maurice Winternitz and A. B. Keith, emphasized the Panchatantra as a repository of ancient Indian political wisdom disguised as fable. Winternitz famously described it as “a mirror of practical life,” while Keith highlighted its systematic treatment of statecraft beneath its narrative surface. Later scholars, including Franklin Edgerton and Patrick Olivelle, drew attention to the text’s complex transmission history and its place within the broader tradition of *nīti-śāstra*. A decisive shift occurred with the work of A.K. Ramanujan, who foregrounded the Panchatantra’s narrative structure and self-reflexivity. Ramanujan’s notion of the text as a “chain of mirrors” underscored its recursive storytelling and metafictional awareness. More recently, Sheldon Pollock has situated the Panchatantra within the cosmopolitan Sanskrit world, emphasizing its role in shaping transregional literary cultures. This paper builds upon these insights by integrating

narrative theory particularly Bakhtin's dialogism with close readings of key stories. It contends that the Panchatantra anticipates many modern theoretical concerns about voice, power, and interpretation, making it a fertile site for interdisciplinary analysis.

At the structural core of the Panchatantra lies its frame narrative: the story of King Amaraśakti and the sage Viṣṇu Śarman, who undertakes to educate the king's dull-witted sons through storytelling. This frame establishes narrative authority while simultaneously decentralizing it. Although Viṣṇu Śarman is positioned as the master storyteller, the tales he tells often undermine the very notion of stable authority by demonstrating how easily power can be manipulated through speech. The frame narrative performs several functions. Pedagogically, it legitimizes storytelling as a serious mode of instruction. Narratively, it creates a space in which stories can multiply, embed, and comment upon one another. Ideologically, it suggests that wisdom is not innate to kingship but must be learned often painfully through experience and reflection.

One of the most distinctive narrative strategies of the Panchatantra is its recursive structure: stories embedded within stories, often extending across multiple narrative levels. This architecture is not ornamental but pedagogical. Each embedded tale requires the listener to recall earlier narratives, compare situations, and infer relevance. Learning thus occurs through analogy rather than injunction. In the Mitra-bheda section, Damanaka's manipulation of King Piṅgalaka demonstrates the political potency of such storytelling. Damanaka's tales succeed not because they are factually true but because they appear situationally apt. The verse

Upadeśo hi mūrkhāṇām prakopāya na śāntaye

(Instruction given to fools leads to anger, not calm)

encapsulates the dangerous asymmetry between narrative persuasion and critical judgment. The recursive structure therefore trains the listener not only to tell stories but to evaluate them, an essential political skill.

The use of animals as protagonists allows the Panchatantra to engage in sharp political critique while maintaining narrative distance. The lion embodies sovereign power; jackals represent cunning ministers; prey animals signify vulnerable subjects. This symbolic grammar enables the text to dramatize court politics, betrayal, and governance without direct reference to human rulers. The story of the Lion and the Bull exemplifies this technique. Sanjīvaka's death results not from rebellion but from slander and miscommunication. The verse

*Rājānam bhrāmayet mantrī,
vināśaḥ tasya niścitaḥ*

crystallizes the warning: a king misled by counsel is doomed. The allegory exposes the fragility of power and the lethal consequences of rhetorical manipulation.

A defining feature of Panchatantra storytelling is its privileging of *nīti* (pragmatic wisdom) over *dharma* (ideal moral law). Characters succeed not by adhering to absolute virtue but by responding intelligently to circumstance. This ethical realism reflects the contingencies of political life. The story of the Monkey and the Crocodile exemplifies this stance. Faced with imminent death, the monkey survives through strategic deception, claiming that his heart has been left behind on a tree. The episode is framed by the maxim:

Buddhir yasya balam tasya, nirbuddhes tu kuto balam

(Intelligence is strength; for the unintelligent, where is strength?)

The narrative unsettles moral absolutism and replaces it with situational ethics. The reader is not instructed to imitate deception blindly but to recognize intelligence as a necessary condition of survival.

Dialogue drives action in the Panchatantra. Characters rise or fall through counsel, persuasion, flattery, and silence. The multiplicity of voices aligns the text with Bakhtinian dialogism: meaning emerges not from a single authoritative voice but from the interaction of competing perspectives. The Tortoise and the Geese tale illustrates speech as destiny. The tortoise's fatal loquacity, warned against by the maxim *Ati-vākyam na kartavyam*, reveals the ethical weight assigned to restraint and timing in speech. The alternation of prose narrative with gnomic verse constitutes one of the Panchatantra's most effective pedagogical devices. Prose provides narrative continuity and emotional engagement, while verse distills experience into portable wisdom. These verses function as mnemonic anchors, facilitating oral transmission and recall. Consider the frequently recurring aphorism:

Ati-sarvatra varjayet

(Excess should be avoided in all things)

Such verses interrupt narrative flow to universalize particular events. As Winternitz observes, they are "crystallizations of experience," preserving narrative insight in compact, transmissible form. Despite its animal surface, the Panchatantra displays acute psychological insight. Characters act from fear, ambition, jealousy, and insecurity. The aphorism *Svabhāvo duratikramah* affirms the text's belief in the persistence of character, lending narrative consequences a sense of inevitability. Through translations such as *Kalila wa Dimna*, the Panchatantra shaped Arabic, Persian, and European literary traditions. Its storytelling techniques reappear in Aesop, La Fontaine, and beyond, testifying to the universality of its narrative logic.

The Panchatantra endures not because it offers moral certainty but because it trains intelligence. Through frame narration, recursive storytelling, animal allegory, dialogic plurality, and the strategic use of verse, it constructs storytelling as a mode of knowledge. Its tales dramatize the consequences of judgment, misjudgment, speech, and silence, compelling

the reader to participate in ethical interpretation. For a humanities audience, the Panchatantra reveals how narrative operates as a civilizational technology shaping political perception, ethical reasoning, and cultural memory. In privileging interpretative wisdom over prescriptive morality, it anticipates modern concerns in narratology and political theory. Storytelling, in the Panchatantra, is not merely an art; it is intelligence in action.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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