

# Narrative Analysis of Pañcatantra

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## Abstract:

*Pañcatantra* is a widely spread and popular text in world literature. *Pañcatantra* is available in more than 200 versions in over 50 languages, more than 35 of which are non-Indian languages. *Pañcatantra* though known as a didactic fable its primary intention is to give the lessons of polity, diplomacy and worldly wisdom. This is well understood when the word *tantra* is decoded using tools of narrative analysis. ‘Box in box tale’ is a remarkable feature of Sanskrit literature. *Pañcatantra* skillfully uses this to convey the import but at the same time ‘box in box pattern’ is used in such a manner that stories are bound with each other as well as loose. Due to this, they have become popular in an independent manner as well in different languages. The employment of animal characters in the story is yet another remarkable feature of *Pañcatantra* which has helped to convey the message effectively. The frame story of Viṣṇuśarma is yet another narrative which is attached to *Pañcatantra*. It’s worth thinking about whether this story is real or fictitious like other stories of *Pañcatantra*. This paper is an attempt to analyze the narrative features of *Pañcatantra* to understand the secret of its popularity.

**Keywords:** *Pañcatantra*, Fable, Narrative features, Narratology, Narrative analysis

## Introduction:

A human being is by nature fond of narrating stories to others. The oral narration of different types of stories was prevalent in India from ancient times. *Pañcatantra* is the most widespread and popular text in world literature. The popularity of *Pañcatantra* lies in its unique characteristics. *Pañcatantra* is available in more than 200 versions in over 50 languages, more than 35 of which are non-Indian languages. There are various recensions, and scholars have attempted to trace the original *Pañcatantra*. Edgerton, Theodore, Benfey and Hertel are foremost among them.

### 1. Title *Pañcatantra* :

The meaning of the word ‘*Pañcatantra*’ is normally understood as ‘group of five books’. Monier Williams has defined the word *tantra* as an ‘essential part, main point, framework, model, characteristic feature, system’ (1899). V. S. Apte has given different meanings of the word *tantra* as state, nation, administration and governance (Apte, 1973: 420).

Scholars have pondered upon the meanings of the word *tantra*. S. N. Dasgupta says- ‘It may mean nothing more than a book or its subject matter, but since it occurs in the title *Tantrākhyāyikā* of one of the versions, it may indicate a text of polity as an art’ (1947: 88). Even Keith has expressed the same view- ‘sense of the term *Pañcatantra* is uncertain; does *tantra* merely mean a book, or does it indicate trick, specimen of sharp conduct, or didactic or authoritative treatise?’ Similarly, does *Tantrākhyāyikā* denote a Nītiśāstra in the form of tales arranged in (five) books; or an authoritative text-book (for policy) in the shape of an *ākhyāyikā*, or a text-book composed of instructive or didactic tales’ (Keith, 1996: 247).

If the word ‘*tantra*’ means a technique then it perfectly fits into the idea of ‘narrative code’ recognized by modern narratologists. Roland Barthes developed the concept of narrative code in his book *S/Z* (Dino, 2011). The word ‘*tantra*’ acts as the code of the whole narrative text and to preach various techniques of worldly and political wisdom which are narrated throughout the text.

## 2. Narrative form–

Many stories were prevalent in India from ancient times. Tales, myths, legends, fables, and parables were travelling orally through the ages. Fables are present from the Vedic period but when it developed as a literary genre, it had the definite purpose of inculcating wisdom. Similarly, *Pañcatantra* is a kind of fable directed at pedagogical purposes. The word ‘Fable’ is derived from the Latin *fabula* ‘story’, from *fari* ‘speak’ (Oxford Dictionary, 2014). *Encyclopaedia of Britannica* defines ‘Fable’ as - a narrative form, usually featuring animals that behave and speak as human beings, told to highlight human follies and weaknesses. A moral lesson for behaviour is woven into the story and often explicitly formulated at the end. In beast fables, animal characters are represented as acting with human feelings and motives.

As per *New World Encyclopaedia* A fable is a succinct fictional story, in prose or verse, that features animals, mythical creatures, plants, inanimate objects or forces of nature which are anthropomorphized (given human qualities such as verbal communication), and that illustrates or leads to an interpretation of a moral lesson, which may at the end be added explicitly in a pithy maxim.

According to Keith, the fable was far more of an independent creation in Sanskrit than the popular tale, which is free from the religious feelings of the people, their myth-making capacity, their belief in magic in all aspects, and the native ingenuity of humble narrators (Keith, 1996: 245). There is a difference between fables and parables. The word Parable is derived from the Latin sense ‘discourse, allegory’ of Latin *parabola* ‘comparison’, from the Greek *parabolē*. (Oxford English Dictionary). A parable is a succinct, didactic story, in prose or verse, which illustrates one or more instructive lessons or principles. It differs from a fable because parables have human characters. The fifth book of *Pañcatantra* i. e. *aparikṣitakāraka* consists of different stories having human characters. These stories can be called parables. Being Fable, *Pañcatantra* shows characteristics of the fictional allegorical and didactic treatise.

### a. Fiction:

As per the demand of this genre, the stories of *Pañcatantra* are fictitious and not real. These stories have arisen through the imagination of people. K. Ayyappa Panikar has recognized this as a feature of ‘fantasization’. (Panikar 2003, 8) References of Space and time are treated subordinate as to the demand of fantasization. Therefore, stories make reference to space and time in the typical style of fictional stories. E.g.

‘There lived friends named Kaulika and Rathakāra **in some place**’. (*Pañcatantra* 1.5)

‘There is a king named Citraratha **at some place**’. (*Pañcatantra* 3.6)

‘There is a city named Madharpura **on the northern way**’. (*Pañcatantra* 5.11)

‘There is Vikāṅṭaka named city **on this earth**’. (*Pañcatantra* 4.9)

Thus, time and space which are mentioned in *Pañcatantra* stories are mostly imaginary. These stories are not bound to a particular slot of space and time but they can happen at any point of time in future in any part of the world. Thus, stories have achieved ‘Universality’

**b. Allegoric representation:**

Stories are metaphorical or allegorical. Human characteristics, behavioural patterns and emotions are transferred to animals. Beasts are representations of human personae. Therefore, this text is a kind of beast fable which tries to inculcate worldly wisdom.

As noted by Arthur Ryder in the introduction to the translation of *Pañcatantra* text- ‘Majority of actors are animals, who have a fairly constant character. Thus, the lion is strong but dull of wit, the jackal crafty, the heron stupid, the cat a hypocrite. The animal actors present, far more vividly and more urbanely than men could do, the view of life here recommended- a view shrewd, undeceived, and free of all sentimentality; a view that piercing the humbug of every false ideal, reveals with incomparable with the sources of lasting joy.’ (Ryder, 1958: 12)

In fables, men in the guise of animals exhibit a distinct physiognomy. And these men are not only virtuous kings or bold warriors, or beautiful or loving princesses and venerable priests, as in the epics and mostly in dramas too, but also people from other spheres of life, viz farmers, manual workers, salesmen, artisans, and all sorts of people like jugglers, swindlers, rascals, selfish Brahmins, hypocrite monks, harlots and procuresses. (Winternitz, 2003: 302) K. Ayyappa Panikar says in this case- ‘Allegories may be a blessing or a curse to man, but it seems that he has always shown an inclination to substitute an abstraction for something concrete to achieve broader effect or relevance.’ (2003: 12)

Universality can be achieved with the employment of animal characters is the basic idea behind such beast fables. Allegorisation of these animals is successful to such a level that they can be easily replaced by humans we see around us with peculiar traits. The universality of the characters, values, and incidences have taken *Pañcatantra* to the highest level of popularity.

The purpose for the employment of animal characters is rooted in Indian philosophy. Indian philosophy does not distinguish between animal, man or God. Sense of co-existence in various beings is assumed and therefore attributing human virtues and vices to the animals was no surprise to the Indian mind. According to some scholars, the reason for this is rooted in the theory of rebirth that human beings can transmigrate to animal births.

**c. Didactic motif:**

The motif behind all these stories is making the youth trained in the subjects of *Nītiśāstra* and *Arthaśāstra*. Fruit (*Phalaśruti*) also comes at the end of the prelude (*Kathāmukha*) which is the inevitable feature of narration – ‘whosoever learns this *Nītiśāstra* cannot get defeated by Indra also’ (*Pañcatantra Kathāmukham*, 10). One’s living in this world happily with a balanced personality is the concern of this text. Therefore morals, practical values and worldly wisdom are taught with the help of stories. Stories do not have the purpose of mere entertainment though it may seem from the surface but values are interiorized in each story.

Characters of the stories profusely quote from śāstric treatises, especially moral and political principles. Situations in the stories are like the models created to guide how one can behave in a particular situation and then the guiding verse is quoted by character. E.g., ‘One should properly think though he is afraid or extremely happy and should not do anything hurriedly and get enraged’. (*Pañcatantra* 1.118) Ample material from political treatises is also produced. Therefore, it has become a practical guide to political science. E.g., the qualities of ministers (*mantrins*) are stated in the mouth of Damanaka (*Pañcatantra* 1.137). The pathetic situation of a king without a fort is stated with appropriate illustrations. (*Pañcatantra* 2.13)

### 3. Tale about a tale / Narrative about narrative:

The most significant feature of Indian Narrative Literature is the ‘tale about tale’ or ‘narrative about narrative’ which not only arouses interest in the minds of listeners but also provides appropriate context for the stories. There is a small narrative about the *Pañcatantra* narrative.

Relation between the story, the narrator and the audience, and the occasion of narration has remained an important principle in the organization of a tale. (Singh, 2011: 1s)

Such a story is given in the prelude (*kathāmukha*) of *Pañcatantra* where we learn that Viṣṇuśarman took the challenge of training three sons of King Amaraśakti. The story hints that Viṣṇuśarman is the author of the text. This tale not only provides proper context for the listeners of these stories but makes the motif of all these stories very much clear that they were employed for training three young sons of King – Bahuśakti, Ugraśakti and Anantaśakti. Therefore, the text is introduced from the beginning itself as the didactic narrative. Implicit narration of the aims and objectives of the text are mentioned in the introduction. It is said in *Pañcatantra Kathāmukha*, 9 that ‘the knowledge is infinite, time is less but obstacles are many, therefore only essence should be grasped just as milk is drawn out of the water by swans.’ The essence of Nītiśāstra and Arthaśāstra is presented through this treatise.

### 4. Narrator/ Narrators of *Pañcatantra* -

#### a. Master-Narrator of *Pañcatantra*-

*Kathāmukha* mentions Viṣṇuśarman as the narrator of the text. But was Viṣṇuśarman the author of the text? The point is worth analyzing. Stories given in *Pañcatantra* might be circulating from ancient time orally from one generation to other generations. Attempts have been made by people to compile them with some additions, modifications and alterations. According to Winternitz, ‘this type of literature is a mixture of compilation and composition. Stories which are in oral circulation are fitted in particular frames and intercalation and while doing this, there are independent additions.’ (2003: 306) Viṣṇuśarman might have compiled the stories, composed new stories wherever necessary, alerted old stories and fit them into the perfect narrative structure to engage the audience. It means he might have played a dual role of compiler and composer.

Like the other stories of *Pañcatantra*, the introductory story also may be fictitious. Name Viṣṇuśarman and the king Amaraśakti are considered fictitious by scholars. S. N. Dasgupta opines about this- ‘There is no evidence at all of authorship; for the name Viṣṇuśarman, applied in the introduction to the wise Brahmin who instructs, with these stories, the ignorant sons of king Amaraśakti of Mahilāropya in Deccan, is obviously as fictitious as the names of the king and the place’ (1947: 88). Benfey has argued that the author Viṣṇuśarman is none other than Viṣṇugupta, another name of political thinker Cāṇakya (Singh, 2011: 74). Because some stories are just to depict and exemplify political principles.

Stories included in *Pañcatantra* may be anonymous as they were in oral circulation. Attempts have been made by people to compile them with some additions, modifications and alterations. Anonymisation (Panikar, 2003: 13-14). is the feature of most Indian narratives as recognized by K. Ayyappa Panikar. Certain anonymity was maintained by storytellers even when they lived in historical times. The objective was to merge the subjective self of the narrator with the collective readership.

Sometimes the authorship is attributed to fictitious names, this may be seen as a metaphor for anonymity because the reader is free to amend, expand, or delete what he is reading. It adds to the life of the text in the long run and the works live to eternity and cross the boundaries of time and nations. The same may be

the motif of the real author of *Pañcatantra* to add a fictitious character of Viṣṇuśarman like other characters of the story.

Dhananjay Singh in his book '*Fables in the Indian Narrative Tradition*' says that-

'In *Pañcatantra*, Viṣṇuśarman is given the name of an author only to achieve the materiality of the text. There is an explicit statement that everything that he narrated, in fact, came from the discourses which were already told by many other thinkers and storytellers before him. In a characteristic Indian manner, Viṣṇuśarman in the beginning of the text, disowns his claim, so to say his copyright, over the text, and attributes the contents to many who have uttered the discourses before him.' (2011: 161)

It is made known that the text is only a rearrangement, in narrative form, of the discourses, already existing, as uttered by the various thinkers of the Indian tradition. Barthes and other postmodernists have made an effort to liberate the text from the authorial prison house. Viṣṇuśarman fits in Barthes' notion of 'scripter' which he mentions in his essay '*Death of the author*'. Roland Barthes differentiates between the concept of author and scripter. Viṣṇuśarman has possibly scripted all narratives which were in circulation.

### **Narrator –character:**

The narrator is portrayed as a character in the story. This feature is very common with *Mahābhārata* and *Purāṇas* as well. Many Indian narrative texts have internalized the narrator as a character. Viṣṇuśarman being an internal narrator also is the character of the story. So there has to be an external author who has internalized all the characters and listeners (Panikar, 2003:76) Chandra Rajan writes in this context- 'The variety of characters, diversity of opinion expressed by them and the constant interaction of narrative and discourse made the *Pañcatantra* a densely textured and layered text. Behind all this diversity, however, is the presence and voice of an ancient storyteller who sits at his loom, weaving all the richness spread before us. He provides the thread of unity' (Ibid., 76).

Various recensions and variants of this text are attributed to different narrators. *Pañcākhyānaka* or *Pañcatantra* (1199 AD) is supposed to be completed by Jain monk Pūrṇabhadra. Pūrṇabhadra himself says that he has revised the *Pañcatantra* syllable by syllable, word by word, sentence by sentence, story by story and verse by verse. He has introduced some new stories and epigrams from unknown sources. Linguistic peculiarities show that Pūrṇabhadra has used Prākṛta works or stories in popular dialects (Winternitz, 2003:324). Jain monk Meghavijaya selected stories out of the mixed recensions and presented them under the title '*Pañcākhyānoddhāra*' which contain many new stories (Ibid., 327). All these views point out that there have been additions and emendations in *Pañcatantra* texts by different storytellers. There have been compilations and revisions of the text.

### **b. Narrators / Narrative levels:**

The unknown narrator of *Pañcatantra* employs Viṣṇuśarman as the narrator of this pedagogical text, and his responsibility is to narrate the stories to make the listener well-versed in Nītiśāstra. Viṣṇuśarman becomes the principal narrator. This is the second level of narration. He narrates the frame narratives entirely. The narration of emboxed stories is not done by Viṣṇuśarman but by other narrators. This is the third level of narration. Then characters involved in the stories start narrating another story is the fourth stage of narration. Again, there is the fifth phase where characters in the stories narrated by the character in the frame stories narrated by the principal narrator narrate another story.

E.g., In *Apriksitakāraka tantra*, Viṣṇuśarman narrates the first stanza or frame stanza- "Human should not do actions when things are wrongly seen, wrongly known, wrongly heard, wrongly examined as done by a barber here." (*Pañcatantra* 5.1) Then he narrates the first story of Kṣapaṇaka to exemplify the same. Maṇibhadra, the character of the first story says-

“One should not indulge in action which is not well examined but should perform when it is well examined. Otherwise, there is scope for repenting like that of a Brahmin lady and mongoose.” (*Pañcatantra* 5.17)

Mañibhadra starts narrating *Brāhmaṇī nakula kathā*. Brāhmaṇa says at the end of the story-

“One should not do excessive greediness and also should not completely abandon the greed. When one is obsessed with excessive greed then wheel whirls around the head.” (*Pañcatantra* 5.21)

Then he narrates *Lobhāviṣṭacakradhara kathā*. Then further stories are narrated by Suvarṇasiddhi and Cakradhara to each other till the end of the *tantra*.

Another feature of *Pañcatantra* is that listeners of the narration, the three sons of the king are silent or play passive role in the narration. This factor is improvised in *Hitopadeśa* where princes add their understanding at the end of each frame story. This has added dialogue between the narrator and listener which seems to be absent in *Pañcatantra*. Listeners are limited to the frame story.

The concepts of ‘Implied author’ and ‘Implied reader’ are the key concepts in narratology. Critics like Wayne C Booth, Shommith Rimmon-Kenan and Genette have given importance to these terms.

The following narratological diagram can be given-

Real author → Implied author → Narratee → Implied Reader → Real Reader

The real author and real reader are outside the province of the entire narrative text as clarified previously. S. Rimmon Kennan says –‘the implied author can tell us nothing... ‘It’ instructs us silently, through the whole, with all voices, by all means, it has chosen to let us learn’. (Kennan 2003, 87) Some virtual image of the author gets created in our mind while reading the text and this is the idea of implied author. The real author of *Pañcatantra* may be very knowledgeable, well versed in ancient texts, have practical knowledge about the world and have the wish to train the youth in a very light-hearted manner through stories. Viṣṇuśarman is, of course, the appointed narrator employed by the real author.

Genette presents the idea of the ‘Implied reader’ as contrary to the ‘implied author’, the ‘idea’ in the real author’s head of a ‘possible reader’. (1988: 142) This is clear from the traits and characteristics presented by the audience in *Pañcatantra* at different levels of narration. At the surface level it seems that the text is meant for princes and instructions are for the sake of royal sons. When the text proceeds then we come to know that people of all strata are addressed including royal sons. Here again, three princes, all the animal characters and human characters are appointed listeners. But this text is not confined to the listeners mentioned in the text. Real readers are we all and all the future generations who will listen to these stories and the real author will be successful in his purpose of presenting worldly wisdom to them.

Thus, the narrator and audience at each level of narration are changing. Narrators speak to all types of listeners starting from those three princes, characters in the stories and further readers till today. So, it becomes a continuous dialogue between the storyteller and the audience.

## 5. Narrative Structure:

### a. Frame story:

A Frame story is a narrative feature of *Pañcatantra* whereby a main narrative framework is fixed to organize a set of stories within. The narrator of *Pañcatantra* has skillfully woven the stories in peculiar frames and emboxed them in a significant manner. Different stories are strewn into a common thread and attained unity. *Mitrabheda*, *Mitrasamprāpti*, *Kākolukiyam*, *Labdhapraṇāśa*, *Aparikṣitakāraka* are the five

frames of the stories. Within the structure of the frame, there are emboxed stories ‘stories within a story’. An emboxed story has one or more tales nesting within it, narrated by one or the other character to others in that specific tale who become the audience. E.g., The first book of the *Pañcatantra -Mitrabheda* is about the friendship between Piṅgalaka and Sañjīvaka, the lion and the bull, and the breaking up of their friendship, the fight between the two, and the killing of the bull, all because of a trick played by the fox-brothers, Karkaṭaka and Damanaka. Within this frame narrative, there are framed 23 narratives, 10 narrated by Damanaka and 8 by his brother Karkaṭaka. There are 3 more stories intercalated even further within the fables narrated by the two foxes. The three of these stories are narrated by the sparrow, Tiṭibhi, one by the jackal and the magistrate each. In this way, we have a series of a story within a story.

### b. Chain Stories:

In one *tantra*, all the stories are connected in a serial manner. They are extrinsically as well as intrinsically connected and linked with the narrators of the story. E.g: in the second *tantra - Mitrasamprāpti*, the story of a crow named Laghupatanaka and a mouse named Hiranyaka is started as the frame story. In between comes another story of *samnyāsin* Tāmracūḍa just to narrate why the Hiranyaka was feeling dejected. After the completion of this sub-narrative again narration of the main story is continued till the end. Sometimes stories are not at all internally connected but the link is maintained through the narrators. E.g., in *Aparīkṣitakāraka*- many stories are such and therefore each story is independent in itself.

In both cases, stories though separated from the previous and posterior links can suffice the same purpose for which they are written and do not create any obscurity. This feature of narrative literature is pointed out as ‘serialization’ by Ayyappa Panikar where he compared this chain narrative with the grand temple or grand palace (Panikar, 2003:7) which has many entrances and consists of many sub-temples or sub-palaces of other deities or princes. We can enter the temple or palace from any gate and though the temple of any deity or small palace is damaged or vacant do not affect the main deity or king. This is very true about *Pañcatantra*. The story of pigeons getting trapped and freed by mice is very famous. Actually, this story is part of another story and just the beginning of the frame story of *Mitrasamprāpti* where Laghupatanaka – a crow witnesses this incident and then decides to build a friendship with mouse Hiranyaka. The name of the mouse Hiranyaka and the king of pigeons named Citragrīva are lost over time. There are examples of individual fables travelling to different regions of the world. The fable of the sage and his mouse-daughter found in the *Pañcatantra* III.13, for example, is popular in Burma as *The Bridegroom for Miss Mouse*. The story of the monkey and crocodile in the *Pañcatantra* (IV) found its way to Central African folk tales, with an improvisation that the baboon is befooled by a hippo. *Brāhamaṇī nakula kathā* has travelled everywhere as a narrative about the killing of a loyal animal.

This somewhat looseness of the text has been favourable for later additions, adoptions, and deletions. This has made the text more adaptable and open. Therefore, each story is also independent and complete. These individual stories are also popular and apart from the entire translations of the whole composition, individual stories are also in circulation in different languages. The narrative is continuously in the process of mutation, adaptation by the contemporary narrators automatically provides contemporary context to the story and thus relevance of the stories is not at all lost.

### c. Gnostic stanzas:

The style of *Pañcatantra* narrative is mainly prose but verses come in between to endorse the truth, and morals or to emphasize some important points of the story. Each section called *Tantra* normally starts with a verse- which can be called a ‘title verse’ or the ‘theme verse’ which is the essence of the frame story. E.g., the third *tantra* starts with the verse saying- ‘One should not trust a person once made hostile nor an

enemy who has become a friend just as a cave that was full of owls was burnt by the fire set by crows.’ (*Pañcatantra* 3.1)

Some verses just point out the bitter truth which is normally experienced by all. E.g., ‘The power of money is narrated in the verse – ‘In this world stranger also behaves very affectionately like own relative with a rich whereas one behaves rudely with a poor though he is a relative.’ (*Pañcatantra* 1.5)

Insertion of several general gnomic stanzas in the prose narrative is a feature which is dictated by its didactic motive. E.g., ‘one should not abandon the whole for the sake of partial fruit. Wisdom lies in abandoning little for the sake of much.’ (*Pañcatantra* 1.19)

More interesting is the device of conveniently summing up the moral of the various stories in pointed memorial stanzas, which are not general maxims but special labels to distinguish the points of individual fables. E.g., in *Aparikṣitakāraka* it is said that ‘One should not have too much greed and one should not give up greed in totality, for a wheel whirls over the head of one overpowered by excessive greed.’ (*Pañcatantra* 4.22) Thus, gnomic stanzas highlight the moral of the story vividly.

## Conclusion:

*Pañcatantra* presents some unique features of its own and therefore has gone to the highest popularity. Stories are not limited by space and time due to their fictional and allegorical characteristics as well as due to their genre as fable stories. The fabric of *Pañcatantra* being very complicated and having the pattern of frame and ‘emboxed’ stories within it, arouses the interest of the listener or reader till the story ends. Characteristics, situations, principles, and advice given in *Pañcatantra* are universalized. The popularity of *Pañcatantra* lies in its narrative features. It has given ample scope for further writers, translators, and storytellers to narrate *Pañcatantra* in different manners suitable to the time and space in which they are being narrated. Though its main focus was on polity, stories of *Pañcatantra* are reproduced with different motifs even today across the globe.

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