

# PANCATANTRA

## Reading

*The Pancatantra*, translated by Arthur Ryder, 1925 (many reprints)

*The Pancatantra*, translated by Patrick Olivelle, 1997

## History

Although scholars suggest that the 'original' version of the *Pancatantra* was composed between about 200 BCE and 200 CE, the earliest manuscript (now lost) was a Pahlavi (Middle Persian) version, translated from Sanskrit by a Persian court physician in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. This then became the basis for two translations that have survived: the Syriac *Kalilag Damnag* (7<sup>th</sup> c. ?) and the Arabic *Kailila wa Dimna* (8<sup>th</sup> c. CE); both titles of these early texts are taken from the two jackals (Karataka and Damanaka, in Sanskrit) that appear in the first story. A Greek version (*Stephanites kai Ichneutes*) is dated to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. After that, we have a second Persian translation (*Kalileh o Demneh*) in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and a Hebrew text in the same century, followed by a Latin translation (*Directorium vitae Humanae*) and a Spanish one (*Calyla e Dymna*) in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Next come a third Persian text (Anvar-i-Suhavli, 'The Lights of Canopus') and a German text in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. The first English translation is *Morall Philosophie of Doni* in 1570 CE. A Turkish version (*Humayun-namah*) appeared in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and soon after the tales from India found their way into most major European languages, where it was often called *The Fables of Bidpai* (or Pilpai). Individual tales from the collection have spread around the globe, with versions recorded in Wales and China, and most places in between. Back home, in India, the oldest surviving version of the *Pancatantra* is a Sanskrit text by a Jain monk, dated 1199 CE and found in Kashmir. Since then, the collection of stories has been translated, revised and reinvented in all the major languages of the subcontinent.

## Cultural Significance

It is difficult to find words to sum up the importance of a collection of stories that has been around for at least two thousand years (and possibly much longer), permeating every aspect of Indian society and radiating out across the world. Stories such as these, which warn against flattery and haste, celebrate friendship and commend caution, are stories that address the universal human need to navigate through the ups and down of everyday life. Perhaps the genius of these fables is to dramatise human dramas using animals and thus to disguise the moral so that it can register with us without our knowing it. In India, these stories are told and retold, in print, by word of mouth and through pictorial art, even today.

From classical sculptures to comic books, from scholarly conferences to television programmes, the *Pancatantra* has embedded itself in the very fabric of Indian life. We assume that the stories are mostly read for entertainment, and perhaps subliminally for wisdom, but it is also true that some people use them as guides to life, for decision-making as parents, business people and politicians. No one would say that the *Pancatantra* is sophisticated literature in the same vein as great Indian novels, but they have their own charm. The forest of these fables has dark places, pitfalls and raging rivers. Lions and crocodiles threaten at every turn, and we have to learn how to survive, by keeping our wits about us, by using common sense and by becoming friends with others. Above all, we must beware:

The things that claw, and the things that gore  
Are unreliable things;  
And so is a man with a sword in his hand,  
And rivers, and women, and kings.

In a verse that bears rereading, the *Pancatantra* makes this claim about itself:

Whoever learns this work by heart,  
Or through the story-teller's art  
Becomes acquainted. His life by sad defeat – although  
The king of heaven be his foe – is never tainted.

## Overview

The *Pancatantra* ('Five Books') is a collection of Indian oral stories, much like the *Jataka* tales; indeed, some tales are found in both collections. The *Pancatantra*, again like the *Jataka* tales, belongs to the genre of *nithi katha* ('moral story'), and some stories have a 'lesson' in verse added to the prose narration. The key difference between these two famous collections of Indian tales is that while the *Jataka* tales are presented as the previous lives of the Buddha and include a commentary to explain how, the *Pancatantra* has no such commentary. Its stories are presented for general instruction and entertainment. Although the *Pancatantra* lacks a Buddhist (or any religious) framework, it does have a frame-story, which was clearly added when the stories were compiled and written down. In the frame-story, a Brahmin instructs three dim-witted princes in the principles of statecraft. Each of the nearly 100 tales is then presented as a lesson to prepare the young men for later life. The entire text is divided into five sections (hence the title), each focusing on an aspect of statecraft. The five topics are: The Separation of Friends, The Gaining of Friends, War and Peace, Loss of Gains and ill-Considered Action. Each of these sections is itself introduced by a frame-story, within which animals take turns telling a story. These stories, many of which are also found in Aesop and many later European tale collections, represent the oldest prose narratives in India and much of the Western world.



(story of The Talkative Turtle, 18<sup>th</sup> century Hindi manuscript)

## Themes

**Friendship** Looking at the nearly 100 tales collected in the *Pancatantra*, we find that the theme of friendship is found in very many of them. Indeed, one of the five chapters is called 'The Winning of Friends' and another is entitled 'The Losing of Friends.' This makes sense when we remember that the ostensible purpose of the text, as indicated in the frame-story, is to instruct young princes in the craft of statesmanship. Negotiating and forming alliances with other rulers, hostile or indifferent, is an essential skill for a king. India has always been a mosaic of states, large and small, even during the periods of empire, and it was especially fragmented just after the Gupta empire collapsed in the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE, when the *Pancatantra* was first committed to writing and the frame-story added. The importance of friendship, not just in political terms, is summed up by a famous verse inserted into a tale about some mischievous monkeys:

If loving kindness be not shown,  
to friends and souls in pain,  
to teachers, servants, and one's self,  
what use in life, what gain?

We could cite many tales to illustrate this theme, but perhaps the best-known story (found in the early Persian and Arabic translations) is that of the friendship between doves and a rat. The rat works hard to chew through a net in order to free the captive birds. Impressed by the rat's altruistic act, a crow befriends it. Then a tortoise and a gazelle join the 'brethren of purity' (as the Muslim commentators called it). This band of friends suffer misfortunes, but each time they are rescued through collective action. Here, then, is an emphasis on the pragmatic advantages of friendship, and not on the abstract ideals and concepts that dominate many classical Indian texts. This is what explains the phenomenal international popularity of the *Pancatantra*. It has focused in on a fundamental truth across languages and cultures—the value of friendship, and not just for princes and kings, but for everyone.

Wisdom The other great theme of the *Pancatantra* is the value of wisdom. Again, the emphasis is not on the cerebral discrimination and intellectual acumen required to penetrate ancient texts of Indian philosophy and theology. As one of the animals puts it, in a succinct line: 'Scholarship is less than sense; therefore seek intelligence.' What these stories celebrate is the practical side of wisdom, the ability to avoid foolishness, to be shrewd, to use your wits, be free of sentimentality and see through deception and humbug. Nostalgia is not part of this 'everyman's' wisdom, as another verse makes clear: 'For lost and dead and past, the wise have no lament; between the wise and the fools this is the difference.' Fools and foolish behavior are held up for ridicule, as we saw above in the story of the thousand-wit fish and his companions. Brahmins are also frequently depicted as foolish because they only understand the literal meaning of a text and cannot adapt it to real-life situations. In other stories, an elephant or a tiger is the fool, perhaps as a way of humbling animals who dominate the forest. Even the usually clever monkeys can be mocked for their gullibility. In one famous story, some monkeys are shivering on a winter night when they see a firefly and think it is a fire that will give them warmth. Even when a bird points out that it is just an insect and will not warm them no matter how hard they rub it, the monkeys fail to listen. Before long, the insect is dead and they are colder than before. This story ends with a pithy comment: 'What good is teaching those unfit to learn? It's like a lamp that's lit within a jar with a lid on it.'

Counselors Referring again to the frame-story of the *Pancatantra*, wisdom is enjoined not only on kings but on their counselors. The wise advisor, who avoids foolishness, is as beneficial as a skilled military commander. The benefits of such an advisor is the theme of several tales, one of them being the tale of a war between the owls and the crows. Constantly attacked by the owls, the king of the crows assembles his advisors and says: 'Gentlemen, as you are aware, our enemy is arrogant and energetic. He always comes at nightfall to wreak havoc in our ranks. How can we counter-attack? For we do not see at night, and in the daytime we cannot discover his fortress. Otherwise, we might go there and strike a blow. What course shall we adopt? There are six possibilities—peace, war, change of base, entrenchment, alliances, and duplicity.' The advisors then replied:

Good counselors should tell their king,  
Unasked, a profitable thing;  
If asked, they should advise.  
While flatterers who shun the truth  
Are foemen in disguise.



(from the Arabic *Kalila wa Dimna*, c.1210 CE, illustrating the king of the crows conferring with advisors)

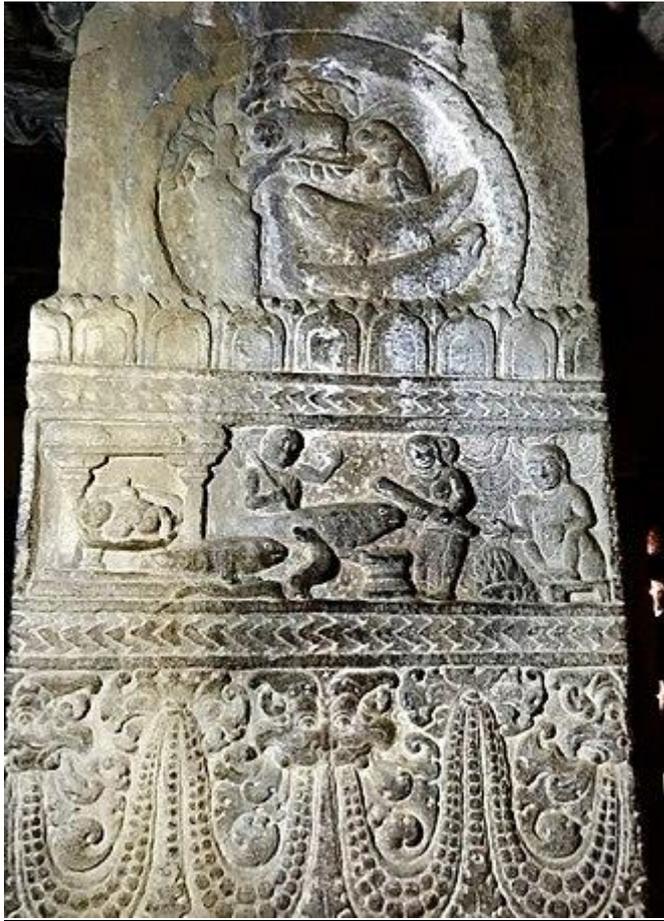
## Representative Stories

### The Brahmin and the Mongoose

This is one of the most famous and most widely-travelled of *Pancatantra* stories. It begins with a Brahmin and his wife, who have two sons, one of whom is a mongoose. She found the little animal when it was abandoned and has raised it like her own child, even feeding it breast milk. She loves both her children and thinks about them every minute of the day. One morning, she tucked her human child into a cot and told her husband that he must look after the children because she needed to fetch water from the river. 'I'll be back soon, but don't let our son out of your sight,' she said and walked away with a clay jar on her hip. The mongoose would take of itself, she thought. Then the Brahmin realized that there was no food in the house and picked up his bowl and went out to beg for alms, forgetting all about the baby in the house. When he was gone, a snake approached the cot, but the mongoose sensed the danger and fought the snake. Using its sharp teeth, it tore the snake to pieces, which it flung far and wide. Then, pleased with its heroics in killing the snake, the little mongoose sat up proudly and waited for the wife, whom he considered his mother, to return. But when she came and saw the blood on the animal's teeth, she thought that it had attacked her human child. Without thinking, in a furious rage, she raised the water jug and threw it on the mongoose, killing it instantly. Then she went inside and saw what happened: the baby was safe in the cot and a snake had been torn to pieces. Next, her husband arrived, with a meal of rice cruel in his bowl, but she screamed at him. 'Greedy! See what you have done because you went for food. You have killed your son. That is the result of your greed.'

If the wife seems a bit harsh on her husband, it is because she struggles to accept her own responsibility in killing the mongoose-son. Of course, if the husband had stayed home, nothing would have happened, but her rash action in killing the mongoose before knowing what really happened is the focus of the tale. We can feel confident about this interpretation because the story is found in the last section of the *Pancatantra* entitled 'Ill-Considered Action.' We must also remember the frame-tale for the collection, in which three princes are told these stories in order to teach them the principles of statesmanship. And surely one essential trait for a good king or official would be prudence, not to act before knowing the facts and considering the consequences. On the other hand, the wife's condemnation of greed on the part of her husband is underlined by a longer story in which this tale is embedded. That longer story contains some bizarre elements but the main plot involves a destitute merchant who kills a number of Jain monks in order to find gold. In this longer story, greed clearly is the theme. So, we have a tale that teaches caution and condemns greed.

This story of the Brahmin and the Mongoose is one the few *Pancatantra* tales that is found in almost all the translations and retellings from the early Pahlavi text to the later European texts. In fact, it is the story that has spread the farthest west from India, ending up with several versions collected orally in Wales in the nineteenth century. I think its popularity rests on three factors. It is a story of human-animal love, which is never to be underestimated as a powerful theme. It is also a family drama with complex emotional relations between husband and wife and children. And it is a crime drama, in which a killing can be blamed on two different people, or possibly on both.



(sculpture of the Brahmin and Mongoose story, central panel, Patadakal, 8<sup>th</sup> c. CE)

#### Hundred-wit, thousand-wit and single-wit

A very different but still very popular tale in the *Pancatantra* also involves animals (and fish) and humans. As the title suggests, this is one of the archetypal fables about cunning. The story begins with a frog and a number of fish in a pond. It is late afternoon, the sun is going down and the inhabitants of the watery hole are anxious. They are watching a group of fishermen going home, with their baskets full of dead fish. As they watch, they listen. One fisherman says, 'Look at this pond. Let's come here tomorrow. It's not very deep and looks full of fish.' The others agree and they continue homeward. Hearing their plans, the frog was depressed. 'Listen, friends,' he said to the fish, 'we have to make a decision soon. To run or to hide. They're coming back tomorrow morning!' But one of the fish, named hundred-wit, scoffed at the frog's fears: 'Don't worry. They might not come. And even if they do, I know a lot of tricks to escape. I can easily save myself.' Then a second fish, named thousand-wit, spoke up. 'I know even more tricks than you, so I'll also escape. I'm not giving up my home just because a few fishermen make an idle suggestion.' But the frog was not persuaded by them. 'Well, my friends, I have only one talent, to foresee danger. So, I'm leaving for another pond right now.' Early next morning, the fishermen came and caught a lot of fish, including thousand-wit and hundred-wit, who were tied together by a cord. Watching this from a place of safety, the frog laughed and said to his wife, 'Look at that, dear. Those with so much wit are dangling for their life, while I, who have only one wit, am free.' The commentator then adds, 'And that is why fate is not the sole determinant of our lives; there is also intelligence.'

This fable, with its obvious theme of the differing consequences of boastfulness and humility, is so popular that it exists in more than one version in the *Pancatantra*. Retellings of the story are also common in other Indian texts, such as the *Mahabharata*: a crow, thinking it is too clever to be caught, shows off its aerial acrobatics to a tiger, and a cautious swan has to rescue it. Outside of India, the same fable is widespread, appearing in the early Arabic, Persian and European texts. While the story is the same, the animals often change; usually the boastful animal is a fox, and the humble one is a

cat. Hunters arrive, the cat climbs a tree and the fox tries to outwit the hunters but is caught. The Persian poet Rumi, writing in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, knew the story and retold it in his *Masnavi*, commenting that the wise animal, the frog, 'possesses a torch of his own' and then adds this verse:

If you lack perfect wisdom, make yourself as dead  
Under the shadow of the wise, whose words give life.

### The Turtle and the Geese

Sometimes the stories are very brief and self-explanatory, such as the tale of the turtle and the geese. A large turtle and two beautiful geese lived in a lake, where they were close friends. The lake dried up from a drought and they had to find a new home. Because the turtle couldn't fly, his geese friends told him to hold on to a stick that they would carry between them. 'You'll be fine, but remember one thing: don't say a word.' Off they flew, but when people below began to laugh at the ridiculous sight of the turtle, he couldn't control his anger. 'What are you laughing about?' he sneered and immediately fell to his death.



(story of the Turtle and the Geese, temple sculpture, Nalanda, 7<sup>th</sup> century CE)