

## ENCODING ANCIENT INDIAN MATERIALISTIC PHILOSOPHY IN CHILDREN'S LITERATURE: A READING OF *THE PANCHATANTRA*

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*The Panchatantra* has been enchanting children all over the world for many decades. They aid men in knowing men, in becoming worldly-wise and in comprehending the ways of survival. These stories have been popular for more than at least 5000 years in India and they still continue to enthrall everyone. Various interpretations and adaptations of these stories can be found in various parts of the world. The original collection of *The Panchatantra* tales were in Sanskrit and numbered about 84. But over a period of time, the stories increased in number. It is difficult to accurately place its date of composition, yet it is assumed that it was composed in Kashmir, by about 200BC. The translated version by Arthur W. Ryder, which I have used for this presentation, is based on a Sanskrit edition of 1199 AD.

The word 'Panchatantra' means the 'Five books'. Each of the five books is independent consisting of a framing story with numerous inserted stories narrated by characters in the main narrative. The first three books show exceptional narrative style, while the last two seems to have been added on later. Epigrammatic verses are used to highlight specific themes and these verses are often quoted from other texts. The text uses animal characters to delineate human social situations. The text, supposedly written by Vishnusharman, had a purpose. It was to instruct three princes who were lacking in intelligence and needed to be taught wisdom. Vishnusharman took up the challenge and he gave the five books to the princes. The books are titled The Loss of Friends (*Mitra Bhedha*), The Winning of Friends (*Mitra Laabha*), Crows and Owls (*Suhrudbheda*), Loss of Gains (*Vigraha*) and Ill-considered Action (*Sandhi*). They ended up intelligent and wise rulers as their father wanted them to be.

The text offers several possibilities and reading it with the spectacles of a Culture Studies critic opens for us the doors to understanding a materialistic philosophy that existed in India. Culture Studies emphasizes on the political and ideological construction of the nation-state. This leads us further to the hegemonic class which controls representation. Exposing the control of representation is one of the chief concerns of Stuart Hall and Cultural Studies. Culture Studies began as a discipline when Richard Hoggart established the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham, England, in 1963. Stuart Hall (1980) lists such diverse sources as Marx, Weber, Mead, Howard Becker, Raymond Williams, E.P. Thompson, Roland Barthes, Georg Lukács, Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and various feminists. There are four ideas that are central to cultural studies: hegemony, signs and semiotics, representation and discourse, and meaning and struggle. Influenced by Althusser, Stuart Hall asserts the operation

of codes within any chain of discourse. Communication is structured within an equal system of signs that engages both langue and parole. The production and circulation of the message are thus fueled by the rules of the language (langue) as well as the actual discourse (parole) in an entire system of interconnected parts. Hence, encoding and decoding are fundamental processes in the communicative exchange. Reality is understood by the codes of our culture. What passes for reality is the product of that culture's codes. When 'reality' itself is already encoded, any message in its natural form must be encoded by the source and decoded by the receiver so that a symbolic exchange is produced. Thus, the idea of discourse lets us focus on the way knowledge, language, and culture is used, rather than any idea of ultimate truth or falseness. In fact, every knowledge system or discourse has its own way of deciphering (and thus creating) facts and lies. That being the case, "the very language we use to describe the so-called facts interferes in this process of finally deciding what is true and what is false" (Hall 203). Knowledge and power are always intertwined and controlling sources of knowledge ensures the centrality of the ruling elite. Hall also spoke of how meaning creation of texts is a social act, embedded in the particular moment and context. Hence texts are not inscribed with a particular meaning once and for all.

*The Panchatantra* or the five principles for right living is being used as the text to illustrate Hall's concept of coding as well as the way the text is being used through generations to help the people internalize the social norms. Hinduism arose from a unique socio-economic background. Hindu law was formulated in a tribal society based on customary practices and relationships. Social controls were in place because what was most important was the peace between tribes. So there emerged a social order with the king as the supreme head and kingship as inherited with emphasis on sons. Kingship got defined as divine during this period. Men in a state of defenselessness and social disorder appealed to gods and gods appointed a king in their own image who would protect people and maintain law and order and in return take a share of 1/6th of produce.

The king incarnates all the gods,  
 So sing the sages old;  
 Then treat him like the gods: to him  
 Let nothing false be told. (*The Panchatantra* 37)

Then again it says;

The king incarnates all the gods,  
 Yet with a difference:  
 He pays for good or ill at once;  
 The gods, a lifetime hence. (*The Panchatantra* 37)

Kingship became primogeniture and women were excluded from succession. There was a council of ministers and the king was an autocratic monarch. The duties of the kings are listed out in detail since the text was meant to be for instructing princes. The priest functioned as the advisor and was also in charge of the religious class. A rigidified caste system is not very evident in the text. In fact the text speaks of a person becoming friends with someone of a different caste. But, the Brahmin priest gets mentioned in several sections.

The social structure of the age is clearly evident in the text. The relationship between the master and the servant is defined in several verses.

No sacrificer and no saint  
 Can ever rise as high  
 As do the simple serving folk  
 Who for the master die. (*The Panchatantra* 111)

It also says: "... one earns credit for a hundred good deeds by serving his master" (*The Panchatantra* 129).

The coding of social norms has been cleverly done in this text. Assigning the role of woman in society became a necessity. So there are long verses describing the pain and doubt that pester a man when a daughter is born. A daughter brings worries into your mind since she needs to have good life, a good reputation and a good husband.

When a poem or a daughter comes out  
The author is troubled with doubt,  
With a doubt that his questions betray;  
Will she reach the right hands?  
Will she please as she stands?  
And what will the critics say? (*The Panchatantra* 77)

The role of a woman is also clearly defined in the later sections. Woman finds herself getting marginalized and the authority of the man is getting clearly established as we move ahead.

That woman should be burned entire  
Whose husband is not satisfied. (*The Panchatantra* 267)  
No woman earns the name of bride  
Whose husband is not satisfied  
If he is happy, she may know  
The gods she venerates are so. (*The Panchatantra* 267)

Widowhood is shunned and the verse says: "Authority with all the brood/ Of servants, die with widowhood (*The Panchatantra* 270)". A clearly defined patriarchal society can be seen at work here in the text. The identity of a woman is tied to that of her husband and family.

*The Panchatantra* becomes unique due to several reasons. Apart from the cultural framework, the tales are torch bearers for the materialistic philosophy that existed in ancient India. Thinkers and intellectuals like Jawaharlal Nehru and Amartya Sen have pointed out the prevalence of such a philosophy in India. The system of philosophy named after its founder, Carvaka, was set out in the Brhaspati Sutra in India probably about 600 BC. This text has not survived and much of what we know of it comes from polemics against it and remarks by its critics. This is a rationalistic and skeptical philosophy, thus undermining the widespread belief in the West that Indian philosophy is primarily religious and mystical. One of the best sources for Carvaka's atheistic argument happens to be a book, Sarvadarshansamgraha (the collection of all philosophies), written in the Fourteenth Century by Madhavacarya, a Vaishnavite (Hindu) scholar. Amartya Sen has argued, in fact, that there is a larger volume of atheistic and agnostic writings in Pali and Sanskrit than in any other classical tradition—Greek, Latin, Hebrew, or Arabic. Jawaharlal Nehru argues that probably much of these texts dealing with a materialistic philosophy may have been destroyed by priests and believers of orthodox religious sects. Apart from *The Panchatantra* another source for this philosophy known as Lokayata philosophy is Koutilya's *Arthashastra*.

The materialistic philosophy embedded in these texts is clearly understandable in *The Panchatantra*.

Since brother, son, and wife, and friend  
Desert when cash is at an end,  
Returning when the cash rolls in,  
'Tis cash that is our next of kin. (*The Panchatantra* 200)

The text clearly establishes the value of wealth and the priority given to it by society. We understand the subtle message that ancient India wishes to convey. Success is defined in terms of wealth by the society.

On virtue follows money, and  
On money follows fame;  
Then, personal authority;  
And then, the kingly name. ( *The Panchatantra* 296)

In accordance with the dictates of policy and enjoyment, a majority of people in the society consider wealth and satisfaction of desire as the only ends of man. They deny the existence of any object belonging to a future world, and follow only the doctrine of Carvaka.

Money gets you everything,  
Gets it in a flash;  
Therefore let the prudent get  
Cash cash, cash. ( *The Panchatantra* 343)

*The Panchatantra* tales which have created magic in the minds of young children has successfully implanted ideas of the hegemonic class. The communication becomes complete only when the children internalize the social norms of the times. As Stuart hall pointed out, the text is rich in coded information and the encoding by the power elite leaves no stone unturned. Using myths, parables, animal characters and verses, the tales have been imparting valuable information on successful and wise living. The text also opens the possibility of exploring it further and working on the Carvaka or Lokayata philosophy which will open up a new fresh approach to Indian philosophies.

### **Workcited**

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