

Panchatantra – an example of using narratives in teaching in ancient Indian education

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Abstract

This article presents the historical account of using narratives as a means of education in ancient India. Historians and other scholars found that in between 300–500 BC, in India, stories and animal fables were narrated for educating students with a special purpose of making them learned within a short period of six months. The collection of these stories is known as *Panchatantra*. The word *Panchatantra* can be split into two words as *Pancha* and *Tantra*. *Pancha* means *five* and *Tantra* means *technique* or *strategy*, so *Panchatantra* was narrated to teach the *five strategies of Politics, Public administration and Nitisastra (wisely code of conduct)*. In this article, I am presenting the history of migration of *Panchatantra*, its content, its educational evaluation, usefulness and adaptation of its techniques in the modern education. The main aim of this article is to present an ancient book with its specialties and its use in the modern education. It is also important to have a look at how one can adapt the technique of narrating stories not only using morals but also using the principles of different subjects. How can this kind of story form be adapted in explaining different concepts of Science or Mathematics? Some suggestions will be discussed from learning point of view.

Keywords: Panchatantra, narratives in teaching, India, education, animal fables

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Teoksessa Eero Ropo & Maiju Huttunen (toim.)

Puheenvuoroja narratiivisuudesta opetuksessa ja oppimisessa.

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Introduction

Once upon a time, in ancient India, there was a kingdom named as 'Mahilaropya' and 'Amarshakti' was the king. The king had three sons who were not interested in studies in any way. The king was always worried regarding their studies and their future as his successors. One day he asked advice from his ministers regarding this issue. The prime minister suggested him a man called Pandit Vishnusharma. Vishnusharma was a well versed Brahmin¹. Brahmin was a class of society in ancient India which used to take care of learning and teaching of the society.

Amarshakti listened to his minister's suggestion and call upon Vishnusharma. He asked whether Vishnusharma accepts his sons as his own disciples for educating them. Vishnusharma accepted the challenge and took an oath of teaching the princes and making them well learned within six months. He off course kept the promise.

This was the birth story of Panchatantra. Panchatantra is a collection of stories which were narrated for purpose explained in the above story. Before we look into the details of Panchatantra, it is vital to know the role of narratives in the process of teaching and learning.

Human beings have always told stories. It is one of the most important things which makes us who we are and distinguishes us from other creatures on this planet. Before the invention of any modern electronic equipment like television or computer, listening and telling stories was the most favorite time pass. Stories were used to pass on real events, history, family connections and also as an entertainment. They were used to teach children and to hand down values and customs from generation to generation. Long before writing, the only culture was oral, spoken culture. (Fox & Jennifer 2005, 11.) That is why it is interesting to view education from the narrative perspective.

This narrative about Panchatantra given above takes us into the deep education history of India. When we speak about narrative learning in schools for identity construction then we cannot overlook the Vedic

¹ Ancient Indian society was divided in four classes for the division of labour-Brahmins, Kshatriya, Vishya and Shudra. Out of these four classes, Brahmins were responsible for the function of education. Kshatriyas were worriers. Vaishyas were traders, farmers and Shudras were the performers (arts, crafts, sculptures).

education system² of India. In India, since the Vedic age there has been a tradition of oral education. Oral education means transferring the knowledge from one person to other through narration. Most of the ancient Indian scriptures were preserved like this, generations after generations.

It has been always a powerful tool to preserve the knowledge if we consider the attacker's history of India. Most of the ancient literature was written in *sutras*. **Sūtra** (Sanskrit: *sutra*, “a rope or thread that holds things together”) metaphorically refers to an aphorism (or line, rule, formula), or a large collection of such aphorisms in the form of a manual – is a distinct type of literary composition, based on short aphoristic statements, generally using various technical terms. The literary form of the *sutra* was designed for concision, as the texts were intended to be memorized by students in some of the formal methods of self-study (scriptural and scientific study). Since each line is highly condensed, another literary form arose in which commentaries on the *sūtras* were added, to clarify and explain them.

In Panchatantra also, the *sutra* form is used. To explain this we should look into an example. There is a *sutra* or saying in the first tantra, *Mitrabheda*, ‘*A King wishing long life should never keep foolish servants*’. There is a story following the *sutra* to explain it. As the Princes were not so enthusiastic about learning the principles and reminding them; Vishnusharma has narrated the story to make it entertaining.

² Vedic education system was an education system based on Vedas. Vedas are the oldest scripts of Hindu Dharma (Hinduism). Though the exact date when Vedas came into existence is debatable, Indologists place the Vedic age between 1300 BC and 500 BC. (Kulke & Rothermund 2004.)

Panchatantra – Its journey across the globe



Fig 1. Map of Sassanid Empire and Jundishapur³

Panchatantra has its own story of moving from places to places and from one language to other language. During the last 1500 years there are at least 200 translations of *Panchatantra* in about 60 languages of the World. Aesop fables, Arabian Nights, Sindbad and more than 30 to 50% of Western nursery rhymes and Ballads have their origin in *Panchatantra* and *Jataka* stories (Dudes 1995). Traditionally in India it is believed that *Panchatantra* was composed around 300 BC (Jacobs 1888).⁴

³ Courtesy: Dr. V.V. Bedekar (2008), *History of migration of Panchatantra and what it can teach us*. Retrieved on June 27, 2012. Reprinted by the permission of Dr. V.V. Bedekar.

⁴ Introduction, pp. xv: “The latest date at which the stories were thus connected is fixed by the fact that some of them have been sculpted round the sacred Buddhist shrines of Sachi, Amaravati, and the Bharhut, in the last case with the titles of the Jatakas inscribed above them. These have been dated by Indian archaeologist as before 200BCE, and Mr. Rhys-Davis produces evidence which would place the stories as early as 400 BCE and 200 BCE, many of our tales were put together in a frame formed of the life and experience of the Buddha.”

Modern scholars depending on references to earlier Sanskrit works in *Panchatantra* assign the period of 300 to 500 BC, for its composition in today's form (Olivelle 1997).

Panchatantra migrated to Iran in the 600 BC, to be translated for the first time in any foreign language (*Pehlavi*) with a title *Kalilah wa Dimnah* (De Blois 1990). Bud then translated it into *Old Syrian* language in 570CE (Yuka 1999). This Syrian version went into Germany and got dressed in German in 1876 CE by Bickell and then again by Schulthess in 1911CE.

The third important translation of *Panchatantra* was done after two centuries in Baghdad in 750 CE in Arabic. This *Panchatantra* translation enjoyed great popularity and is considered as masterpiece of Arabic narrative literature. Almost all pre-modern translations of *Panchatantra* in Europe have their roots in this Arabic translation. (Irwin 2006.) The journey of *Panchatantra* throughout Asia and Europe has drawn on the map in Fig. 1. With the help of which one can see how it was transferred and got a place in world literature. The popularity of *Panchatantra* lies in its simple yet elegant style and rich content.

Panchatantra – its content

Panchatantra is a collection of moral tales and animal fables with one specific teaching in each of them. The stories of *Panchatantra* are considered as stories of wise conduct of life. As Vishnusharma had only six months to teach the 'dud' sons, he wanted to make them aware of the basic principles of wise conduct as how to understand people, how to get good friends, how to choose ministers and servants, how to handle conflicts with tact and wisdom and how to live with peace and harmony.

The word Panchatantra means a group of five most useful strategies. These five strategies are called:

- *Mitra-bheda*: The Separation of Friends (The Lion and the Bull)
- *Mitra-lābha* or *Mitra-samprāpti*: The Gaining of Friends (The Dove, Crow, Mouse, Tortoise and Deer)
- *Kākolūkīyam*: Of Crows and Owls (War and Peace)
- *Labdhapranāśam*: Loss Of Gains (The Monkey and the Crocodile)
- *Aparikṣitakāramam*: Ill-Considered Action / Rash deeds (The Brahman and the Mongoose)

Panchatantra which was originally constructed or narrated by Pandit Vishnusharma, is a group of **seventy two** short stories divided in the above mentioned five chapters. Each chapter has a basic *frame story*⁵ containing other short stories within. All these short stories in a basic frame story have a purpose. That purpose can be understood with respect to the purpose of the basic frame story. We can compare it to the rings we see after dropping a stone into a still lake. They arise from a common center yet different from each other. So these stories can be told as individual different stories but still if looked into the context they have some other meaning to tell.

The stories are mostly in the form of dialogues. Two main characters in the basic frame story start talking to each other about certain incident and in the flow of the discourse they tell some principles of practical wisdom to each other. The other character asks to explain that principle in detail so the first character starts telling a story which explains the principle told earlier. At some places even the characters from the other story starts a dialogue and tell stories to explain some principle. The most noticeable thing is, that each story has a moral or a principle of practical wisdom.

As we read about the birth story of Panchatantra in the beginning of this article, to make the princes wise and well learned mainly in the field of Politics, Public administration and Nitishastra, Vishnusharma narrated these stories of Panchatantra, which were interesting as well as thought provoking. He taught them five main strategies. It will be fascinating to know them one by one with little bit of explanation and an example. The story which is given below is the frame story for fourth strategy *Labdhapraṇāśam*: Loss Of Gains.

Vishnu Sarma begins his fourth Tantra with the following stanza:

He overcomes all problems
Who does not lose his cool
Even in the face of adversity
Like the monkey in the water.

⁵ A **frame story** (also **frame tale**, **frame narrative**, etc.) is a technique used in literature that sometimes accompanies the story within story, whereby an introductory or main narrative is presented, at least in part, for the purpose of setting the stage either for a more emphasized second narrative or for a set of shorter stories. (Witzel 1987.)



Raktamukha was a monkey living on a blackberry tree near the coast. That tree was always full of fruits. One day a crocodile named Karalamukha came out of the waters and loitering on the sands came to the tree.

Seeing the croc, the monkey said, “O croc, you are my guest. I will feed you with these delicious blackberries. Enjoy the fare. The learned have said,

That man is blessed who hosts
A lover or an enemy or a fool.
Angels will desert the home
That fails to host a guest.

The monkey then gave the croc a lot of berries. After he had his fill, Karalamukha went home. Thereafter, it became a habit with the croc to daily visit Raktamukha, enjoy the fruit he offered, spend time with him discussing the world and then go home.

One day, the croc’s wife asked her husband, “Where do you get this fruit, they are so sweet. I have never tasted such mouth-watering fruit.” “I have a close friend, a monkey, who gives me the fruit every day,” said the husband.

“If the fruit are so sweet, the heart of your friend who eats them every day must be as delicious as the fruit. Please get his heart for me, if you have love left for me. I will always be young and immortal if I eat that fruit,” said the wife.

“My dear, it is improper for you to speak like that. I have accepted him as my brother. It is not possible for me to kill such a host. Please be reasonable. The elders have said,

From mother we get our first relative,
A good word brings the second relative
Who is more precious than a brother.

Angry, the wife said, “You have never defied my word. It must be a female monkey who is your friend. That’s why you are spending so much time with him every day. I have now understood you thoroughly. Your heart is full of that monkey. You are a cheat.”

Karalamukha, wanting to pacify his wife, said, ““My dear, why are you angry? I am your most obedient servant and ready to carry out your order at any time.”

“No, she is dear to you. If you really love me, why don’t you kill her and get me her heart. If you don’t get it, I will fast and die,” threatened the wife.

Worried, the croc went to the monkey. Seeing that the croc was late for his daily meeting, Raktamukha said, “You are late and do not seem to be cheerful. What’s the matter?”

“Oh my friend, how can I tell you what happened at home. My wife is very angry. She told me that I am an ungrateful friend and that every day I eat the fruit you offer but never had the courtesy of inviting you home. You have no redemption; she told me and warned me that if I did not bring you home, I would see her only in the other world. These arguments with her have delayed me. Please come with me. My wife has decorated the house fit to receive you. She has hung welcome buntings at the entrance. She is eagerly waiting for me to bring you home.”

The monkey said, “Your wife has said the proper thing. You should leave a man who loves you for your wealth like the spider attracts his prey. She might as well have quoted the elders saying,

Where there is no give and take
Where there is no exchange of secrets
And of hospitality either
There is no true friendship.

“There is a problem, however. We are all land animals. You live in water. It may not be possible for me to accept your kind invitation. I advise you to bring her here,” said the monkey.

“It’s really no problem,” said the croc. “Our house is on a sandbank. It’s a beautiful place. Sit on my back. I will carry you.”

The monkey happily sat on the back of the croc and the journey began. As the croc was entering deep waters, the monkey got scared and told the croc to go slowly.

Thinking that the monkey was his prisoner now, Karalamukha told Raktamukha, “It is now safe to tell you our plan. My wife wanted me to create trust in you first and persuade you to accept our invitation and then kill you so that we may have the good fortune of feasting on your heart.”

With great presence of mind, the monkey said, “My friend, if this is what you and your wife wanted, why didn’t you tell me in the beginning itself? My heart is safely stored in the burrow of the tree. What is the use of your taking me home without my heart? Let us go back. There is nothing happier for me than giving my heart to your wife.” Happy, the croc turned back and brought the monkey to the shore.

The monkey at once leapt to the top of the blackberry tree and thought, “We should not trust an untrustworthy person, even if we did, it should not be total. Such trust will destroy us completely. This is a rebirth for me.”



The croc was in a hurry and asked the monkey, “What is the delay? Get you heart. My wife will be very happy.”

The monkey angrily told him, “You idiot, have you seen anyone who has two hearts? You are ungrateful. Get out of my sight and never come this way again.

People who are hungry stoop

to any level like Priyadarsana.” The croc asked him to tell the story of *Priyadarsana*. Raktamukha told him the following story ...

Thus in the above example we can see how the end of the first story is the beginning of successive story. This type of structure involves the reader, in this case listener and arouses his/her curiosity of what will happen next. Moreover we should also look into the content and explanation of other strategies one by one.

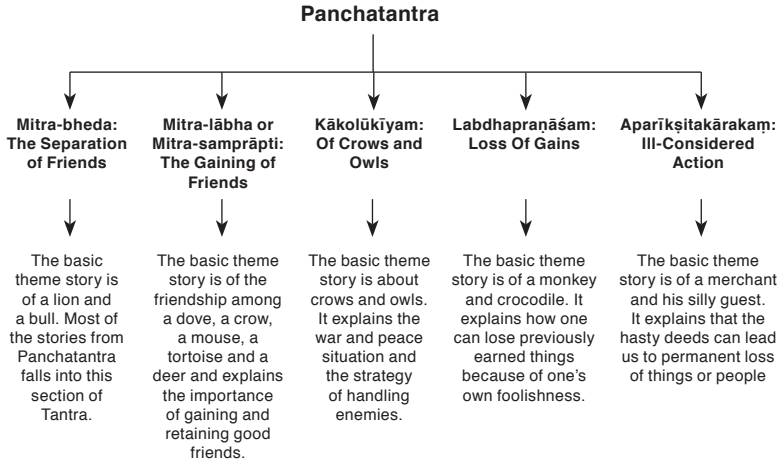


Fig. 2. Panchatantra – Its structure

First strategy is *Mitrabheda*, that is, *separation of friends*. It is a story of a lion king and a bull. It tells us how they become friends with each other and later how they are separated by a jackal. There are two jackals in this story, Damanaka and Karataka as the ministers of Lion King. The basic underlined principle in this story is how the ministers play an important role in deciding what is good for their king at a certain point of time. They can bring somebody to the king for friendship, if they find it hard to fight with that person as his strengths and weaknesses are unknown. When they understand that friendship with this person is not so useful for the King and for the kingdom, they can bow the seeds of misunderstanding between the King and his friend to separate them skillfully.

The second strategy is *Mitralabha*. This strategy is narrated to tell the *importance of gaining good friends*. It underlines the principle that one, who has good friends will never taste defeat in one's life in any kind of situation. This is a story of four friends; a crow, a rat, a deer and a turtle, and how they help each other in the time of calamity.

The third strategy is *Kokolukiya (Of crows and owls)*. The main story is about the enmity of crows and owls. It tells about *how to deal with the enemies with tact and wisdom*. It also strengthens the moral that never

believe a person who is your enemy and never believe a friend who was your enemy at some point of time.

The fourth strategy is *Labdhapranash* means *loss of gains*. It says that one can lose the things which are earned earlier because of one's foolishness. The main story starts with an incident between a monkey and a crocodile.

The fifth strategy is *Aparikshitkarakaram* means *ill-considered actions or hasty deeds*. The stories starts with a moral that one should never do anything before examining it properly, otherwise this ill-considered action will lead to permanent loss. The basic story is of a merchant and a fool guest at his house and how the hasty deeds of the guest later on leads to death of some monks.

After narrating the stories based on the above mentioned strategies, Vishnusharma brought the princes back to the King as well learned men. Since then *Panchatantra* has played a pivotal role in the life of Indian children. *Panchatantra* still has the same educational importance in childhood education and narrated as bedtime stories in many Indian families within and outside India. As per the time change, the stories are also converted into animation form and attracting viewers even outside India. What are the reasons of its immense popularity? What is so unique about *Panchatantra*? What we can learn from *Panchatantra* to improve current education and to overcome the problem of boredom in schools?

Panchatantra as a historical educating narrative method

It remains something of a mystery why narrative text is so easy to comprehend and remember. Perhaps it is because the content of narrative text has such a close correspondence with everyday experiences. Perhaps it is because the language of oral conversation has a closer similarity to narrative text than other discourse genres. Perhaps it is because there are more vivid mental images, or a more elegant composition of the conceptual structures. Narratives are more interesting, so perhaps they are more motivating to read. (Graesser et al. 2002, 240.)

This interesting element of storytelling was used in *Panchatantra* to educate the students as story telling is nothing but participation, participation by the narrator and participation by the listener. It has also been part of formal

education for many years. In the nineteenth century, student teachers were trained to tell stories (Fox & Jennifer 2005).

Storytelling is not only important for literacy but can be applicable in other curriculum areas. Storytelling is enjoyable, creative, responsive, active, inclusive and flexible. Stories being enjoyable is an important factor in imparting happiness in students. Martin Seligman (2003), a psychologist has shown through his study, that positive enjoyment improves learning. It also teaches the children to be creative by creating their own stories.

To teach his students in a short period of time, Vishnusharma creatively used the stories of different animals and human beings. As his students were not so eager to study through the routine method he found an exciting and entertaining method, that is, teaching through narration or with the help of stories. Interestingly, the characters in the fables are often animals, perhaps because children find animals interesting, and have a strange way of connecting with them. *Panchatantra* is not just a compilation of tales with morals. It is a collection of stories within a story, a manner of story-telling that engages a reader very effectively. The end result is the communication of morals and deep philosophy without preaching (Meler 2011).

With the help of the characters of the story he tried to explain simple but useful and important concepts. As people remember stories that are well told and are centered on ideas the listeners either know well or want to know well (Schank & Berman 2006).

The unique feature of *Panchatantra* is the structure of frame story. This structure keeps the reader or the listener involved in the story. Draper (2006) says that “stories use words to create imaginings in hearers. That could be a description of education”.

For learning anything new one needs concentration. Concentration is an active involvement in a task with undivided attention. As Vishnusharma also wanted them to learn, remember and use their knowledge afterwards, he explained the principles of political science and practical wisdom with the examples illustrated in the form of stories. In support of using narratives for teaching, Williams (2000) says that narrative text (fiction) is easier to comprehend and remember than expository text (factual and informational material).

In modern education, narration is already in use but to limited extent. For example Finnish education system is so much information based that there is no room for educational storytelling. We have to think outside the

limits. Narration need not be always related to morals but it can be related to a story of invention in science. There can be an example of inventing penicillin. Dr. Alexander Fleming invented penicillin drug and there is an interesting story behind this invention. Similarly, the anecdote for Archmedes' principle for buoyancy is also well known. These stories behind the inventions of theorems, principle and drugs will add an element of interest to the “boring” classes of Mathematics and Natural sciences.

Fox and Jennifer (2005) stated that children who are starting out as scientists need to be inspired and encouraged by stories of the first scientists like Archmedes and Flaming. They also suggested the use of narratives for teaching mathematics. According to them, the basic principle of teaching good mathematics is to be as creative as possible and to let the children do the same. They suggest two ways of using stories in teaching mathematics. One way is to use traditional tales which has number of characters and other way is to create a story.

While describing the importance of stories in science education, Ogborn et al. (1996) stated that at deeper level stories are knowledge carrier. Gough (1993) suggested that the significance of stories for science and environmental education is associated with both, content and form. Negrete (2003) carried out a study within the context of science education. This study explored the question of how efficient are narrative texts compared with factual ones in communicating science and by which of these two written expressions does the information obtained stay longer in the memory of the students. Total 40 undergraduate students participated in this study; they were divided in two subgroups: one reading short stories with scientific themes written by famous writers (Primo Levi and Anatoly Dnieprov), and the other group reading lists of scientific facts coming from the stories. Quantitative and qualitative data analysis showed that narrative information was retained for longer periods than factual information in long-term memory.

Conle (2003) explored various narrative practices in the classroom to highlight the effects of different forms of engagement. According to her, such narrative practices can produce five outcomes: advances in understanding; increased interpretive competence; richer practice repertoires; changes in life and visions gained.

In *Panchatantra*, the stories are in the form of dialogues making them very interesting as the characters are arguing about something. Gillon (2011) says that the natural human tendency is to listen to logical arguments. In

India, there has been an old tradition of logical arguments in the form of public debate. Though the origins in India of public debate (*parisad*), one form of rational inquiry, are not definitely known, we are aware that public debates were common in pre-classical India (Gillon 2011). With this information we understand the structure of the Panchatantra, it was one of the earlier books which generate and popularize the structure of frame story and linking them with each other with the help of arguments. The motive behind using this structure could be that Vishnusharma wanted his students to learn the logical and analytical thinking. For debate, it is necessary to develop the ability to think rationally and pose questions if you find the other person is speaking irrationally.

The names which he used for the animal characters and human beings are also interesting. Most of the times they either describe the physical appearance of the character or the other psychological attribute. For example, in the fourth strategy name of the monkey is 'Raktamukh', *rakta* literally means blood (here it means red), *mukh* means face, so the meaning becomes 'one with red face or mouth'. In India there are red-faced monkeys. We can take another example for the psychological attributes. In the first strategy, Mitrabheda, there is a story of three fishes. The names of the fishes are Anagatvidhata (one who's destiny is undecided), Pratyutpannamati (one who works using his intellect according to the situation) and third is Yadbhavishya (one who leaves everything on the destiny and do not work).

So he used appropriate names of the characters and used them in his teaching. We can understand as he was telling these 72 stories to the princes for six months, he must have explained them every single detail. Furthermore it suggests that he must have told them the meaning of every word.

As the lessons were given through stories they were entertaining and at the same time brainstorming. So it was an important strategy which is useful in the current scenario also. A story tends to have more depth than a simple example. A story tells about some event – some particular individuals, and something that happens to them. Stories engage our thinking, our emotions, and can even lead to the creation of mental imagery (Green & Brock 2000). Individuals listening to stories react to them almost automatically, participating, in a sense, in the action of the narrative (e.g., Polichak & Gerrig 2002). Bringing all of these systems to bear on the material in your course helps student learning. Students are awake, following along, wanting to find out what happens next and how the story ends.

Bruner (1986) has contrasted the paradigmatic (logical, scientific) and narrative modes of thinking, but these modes need not be mutually exclusive in the classroom. As it is a very simple method it can be generalized. It can be used all over the world without any restriction. It can be very entertaining while teaching subjects like mathematics or science. If a teacher finds that the students are not following what he is teaching then he can make a story using the same concepts. At the same time it can also be used if the students are getting bored. Another benefit of this method is it can be used without any educational aids. This does not require a video projector or an audio visual system. So it can also be efficiently used in economically developing countries. This method will enhance the creativity of the teacher and the students also as they can together construct a story related to the subject.

Other perspective is about the development of moral and social identity. 'Story' is the most important piece of narration to induce moral values in the students at an early age. Through the stories the personal and social responsibility can be imparted into the students. They can understand the society and their role in the society. So in all it can be said that this method can really prove helpful if used widely.

Conclusion

In summary, it can be said that Panchatantra has vital importance in the world literature for its contribution in the field of practical wisdom. In India, it was narrated to teach the students who were not much interested in studies. The disinterest of students about learning is a major problem of modern education where Panchatantra can come to help as a technique in bringing these students again towards schools and education.

Panchatantra has an element of entertainment, wisdom, creativity and logical thinking. Use of all these elements can be useful to the teachers, students and parents. It might help the teachers to understand how to involve students in the process of learning and how to weave the threads of knowledge with the threads of entertainment. It also reflects about psychology, philosophy and general human tendencies.

Panchatantra is a piece of ancient Indian literature which can be useful in the modern education because of its specialties (for example, frame story) and can still contribute a lot with a directed and dedicated research.

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