

Indian Knowledge System and Psychological Insight: An Analysis of the Panchatantra and the Jataka Tales

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Abstract

This paper explores the significance of oral storytelling traditions within the Indian Knowledge System as a means of preserving cultural wisdom and promoting psychological well-being. Oral forms such as folk tales, myths, and epics have transmitted values, social norms, and collective experiences across generations, later finding expression in written texts like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. These narratives reflect moral dilemmas, human relationships, and the interplay of emotional and ethical concerns.

Focusing on the Panchatantra and the Jataka Tales, the paper highlights their psychological insights into human behaviour, emotional intelligence, and conflict resolution through symbolism and allegory. It argues that Indian storytelling traditions offer a holistic, experience-based approach to mental well-being, differing from Western clinical models. By serving as informal therapeutic tools, these narratives help individuals process emotions, navigate challenges, and develop resilience, demonstrating their continued relevance in addressing modern psychological concerns.

Keywords: *Indian Knowledge System; Indian psychology; Symbolism and Allegory; Human Behaviour; Panchatantra; Indigenous knowledge.*

1. Introduction

Indian Knowledge system reflects Indian indigenous traditions of folk lore and folk tales which have travelled across generations through oral literatures and later as textual literatures in the recent ages. Oral literatures hold great cultural wisdom and psychological insight. They have been a part of India's rich cultural heritage which travelled across generations without the mode of written language. Oral transmissions include folk songs, myths, epics, proverbs, and stories which delve into Indian customs, traditions, values, and the views of different communities. Indian knowledge through the folk forms allows mediation between the past and present age and also preserves social wisdom and history. For example, the great epics like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata existed long before in oral forms before they were written by sages and later authors. These great forms of Indian literature offer narration of a wide range of moral dilemmas and the intrusion of divine entities in the lives of commoners and history. Indian literature since ages has imparted lessons of justice, duty and complex human relationships which involve love and conflict.

The continuity in rewriting and retelling of the great epics is exemplary of the dynamism involved in cultural transmission across boundaries and borders. Indian psychology is reflected through context-based approaches and creative experimental examples portraying holistic development of the individual. Story telling has been a natural component of many countries to spread knowledge and wisdom and India is no exception to it. Stories involve facts

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relevant and relative to human mind and human behaviour. Emotional and cognitive experiences are entwined with oral literary forms and the audience who participate in the mutual exchange. Narrations address themes of love, betrayal and revenge which forms a part of the collective cultural psyche in human beings. The exploration of The Panchatantra and The Jataka Tales offer psychological insights providing a repository of experiences in life which shape the consciousness of the individual. This paper analyses how folk tales/stories impact one's life and how the modern concept of well-being is developed in the true sense walking free away from the stress, frustration, and depression involved in everyday hustle dealing with recognition of identity and emotional intelligence. Indian psychology is different in its methodology which practices counselling and teaching in different forms to develop holistic, healthy individuals. It differs from the Western concept of theorizing psychology as applicable and treatable only through medicine.

2. Material & Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative, interpretative research design grounded in textual and narrative analysis of classical Indian sources, primarily the Panchatantra and the Jataka Tales. Materials include translated and critically edited versions of these texts, supported by secondary literature on Indian Knowledge Systems, folklore studies, and Indian psychology. The method involves thematic analysis to identify recurring motifs related to emotional intelligence, moral dilemmas, and conflict resolution, alongside a comparative framework contrasting indigenous narrative-based approaches with Western psychological models. Interpretative tools such as symbolic and allegorical analysis are employed to examine how storytelling functions as an informal therapeutic mechanism, with insights further contextualized through interdisciplinary perspectives from and psychology.

3. Results & Discussion

3.1 Psychological Insights in Indian Storytelling

Story telling tradition in India follows simple symbolism to help individuals realize and recognize their emotional dilemma/conflict. This paper looks into how through informal methods of therapeutic interventions, individuals process emotions, fighting back life's obstacles/problems and negotiate conflicts. The Panchatantra and the Jataka Tales highlight the importance of intelligence as essential for overcoming conflicting interests by using intelligence over brutal strength. These stories project understanding the dynamics of human nature with psychological outlook. Life and its intricacies, social codes, conflicting interests, and challenges in human life are all brought about in these stories. These stories shape human behaviour and prescribe moral standards as required to live in society serving both knowledge and entertainment forms. Oral narratives are precious in that they offer differentiated views and bring in obliterated historical facts.

The Panchatantra and The Jataka Tales offer cultural wisdom challenging the modern Western way of psychological trauma and stress bringing in societal and mental transformation through storytelling traditions. They are highly relevant to deal with human struggle, joys, beliefs, and conflicts in a better way. The Panchatantra, provides an evaluation of human emotions through personification of animal forms and projecting their actions with profound insight and how human being act in certain circumstances. The complexities of life arise due to human emotions like greed, fear etc., which should be transformed by effective use of intelligence, strategies, and knowledge to deal with them. The collection of Indian fables which is written by Vishnu Sharma brings in several notable stories which influence and teach the right attitude towards developing life skills and intelligence in handling emotions.

The story "The Lion and the Rabbit," demonstrates the importance of intelligent thinking and emotional balance in life. When circumstances force irrational behaviour and fear, human being need to be driven by intelligence and clever thinking. In this story, a lion terrorizes the forest killing animals and each day an animal is offered to the lion and when it is the rabbit's turn he comes up with brilliant idea and saves both himself and the lives of other animals. The rabbit arrives late claiming that he was stopped by another lion who is more powerful than him which enrages the lion and he is overcome with anger and loses rational thinking. The rabbit takes him to a well and seeing his own reflection the lion jumps into the well to kill it bringing its own end. The story is an example of how individuals can regulate emotions which allows the mind to think of better solutions.

The story of “The Crow and the Fox” focusses on the worthlessness of greed, pride and flattery. A crow finds a piece of cheese and starts to enjoy it sitting on a tree. However, a fox noticing it desires the cheese and begins to flatter the crow, appreciating its singing talent. The crow moved by appreciation and pride starts singing and the cheese falls down. The fox takes it and runs away. The story talks about maintaining emotional balance both in times of praise and degradation and the right behaviour is to be unmoved by both, taking both equally. In the life of individuals too, there exist men like the fox who manipulate others through flattery which bring about the person’s downfall who get clouded by feelings of pride and ego. Rational thinking is key to deal with such people and overpowering ego should never be allowed. The Panchatantra teaches emotional self-awareness and always to keep emotional control to lead a happier life. Another story is “The Wise Crow and the Pitcher,” which revolves around strategic thinking and importance of human intellect in problem solving which is applicable to human beings navigating through different adverse situations in life.

3.2 Healing Through Stories: Toward a Holistic Model of Mental Health

Life’s challenges can be effectively dealt with prudence and wisdom rather than stressing out when faced with difficult problems. During hot summer, a thirsty crow looks for water everywhere. The crow finds a pitcher with a small amount of water at the bottom of the pitcher. The crow makes deep efforts to reach out for the water. Later, without giving up the crow drops pebbles into the pitcher and the water level slowly rise up. The crow drinks the water happily and flies away. This teaches a very resourceful lesson to human beings that despite the unavailability of immediate solutions to problems there can be small efforts and small remedies which slowly allow for the solution of a problem. The intelligence lies not in stressing out because of failures encountered in life but to demonstrate the skill to come out of the problem in an efficient manner. Critical and clear thinking allows mind to overcome obstacles.

Another widely popular story from The Panchatantra is “The Tortoise and the Hare”. It shows how slow progress is better to quick, rash action. The slow tortoise is challenged by a hare to a running race. The over confidence of the hare brought about its downfall. The hare sure of its winning takes a short nap in the middle of the race. However, the tortoise remains persistent and moves slowly but never stops in its progress towards the finish line. When the hare wakes up and races it learns that the tortoise had won the race. The story propagates the importance of persistence, hard work, and realistic efforts rather than impulsive and overconfident approach which would lead to success in one’s life. These stories encourage individuals to act carefully with wisdom and rational thinking in all aspects of life. Human beings should not become stressed or think of themselves as despicable or as failures rather apply wisdom and knowledge along with emotional intelligence to face life. The relevance of logical thinking and decision making are also exemplified by stories like “The Brahmin and the Mongoose” and “The Monkey and the Crocodile.” A Brahmin cares and keeps a mongoose as his pet. One day, the Brahmin’s wife goes to bring water and leaves the baby with the mongoose. When she returns, she finds the mongoose has blood in its mouth and in anger and fear kills the mongoose immediately. Later, she realizes her mistake only when she sees a dead snake and how the mongoose had killed the snake to protect the baby.

The Brahmin fails to act logically before killing the mongoose. Sometimes, human beings tend to arrive at conclusions in normal life which leads to quarrels, conflicts, and differences in human relationships and even crimes. Only through logical thinking and steady decision making one can arrive at better approach to life. The other story deals with a crocodile’s friendship with a monkey and how the monkey uses his reasoning and knowledge to overcome his opponent. The crocodile’s invitation to a sumptuous feast is seen by the monkey as a trap. The monkey tells the crocodile that he kept his heart in the tree and must return to get it. The monkey escapes using his courage and reasoning avoiding impending danger. This story teaches how to escape harmful and dangerous situations by courage and proper reasoning even in the most difficult situations in life.

3.3 Beyond the Clinic: Indigenous Approaches to Psychological Well-being

Psychological insights are provided by indigenous approaches to psychological well-being through the exploration of human emotions, instincts and behaviour patterns that influence their actions. The stories of “The Crane and the Crab” and “The Four Friends offer such deep grounded insights of mental processes of human beings. The Crane in the story “The Crane and the Crab” is an example of manipulative, deceitful people and hypocrites which convinces the fish and other creatures in a pond to take them to a magical pond with abundance. However, sensible and intelligent people can

avoid being manipulated just like the crab who senses something wrong and clings to the crane's legs till it's brought back to safety. The story is an example of how critical thinking and emotional intelligence and save people from tactical people in the world without getting hurt or deceived.

The story "The Four Friends" shows how teamwork and collaboration can help people to achieve their goal. In the story, four friends help each other by using their skills to overcome challenges and obstacles in life. A hunter one day sets a trap to catch the deer. All the four friends – a rabbit, a crow, a tortoise, and a deer, contribute to the plan of freeing the deer from the clutches of the hunter by mutual cooperation. It is an example of how unity and working together, contributes to living in harmony, achievement of mutual goals and face hurdles and obstacles together rather than facing them alone. The stories of The Panchatantra showcase deep psychological insights of emotional traits that shape human interactions encouraging readers and the audience to purge their own perceptions and change their perspectives in taking decisions and maintaining relationships.

Emotional intelligence is a key aspect of The Panchatantra. The stories depict the importance of emotional intelligence, the ability to recognize, understand manage one's own emotions as well as to ascertain the emotions of others towards us. The fable "The Blue Jackal" reveals how clever people try to exploit reverence for the Godly people and become leaders of power and command respect and control. The fable like "The Brahmin and the Goat" shows the use of emotional regulation, logical reasoning and patience can help to turn the situation into a positive way. The Panchatantra allows for building trust in oneself, teaches integrity and effective response in one's interactions with many individuals in a society. The use of characters, help explore different traits of human beings and generates a sense of empathy, social awareness, and relationship management. The stories deal with a variety of real-life like situations, real-time people, conflicts, bringing in skills of emotional intelligence, balance, leadership, and effective decision making and problem solving.

Webb et al. (2012) proposes that social stories have been used to improve numerous kinds of practices including prosocial conduct, social correspondence, conversational abilities, on-task conduct, out-of-seat conduct, complementary associations, diminishing socially unseemly and unwanted practices, satisfactory verbal welcome inceptions, self-guideline, and in general social attitudes among kids and young people with autism spectrum disorder. The narration of The Panchatantra stories to royal children was in fact a crucial way to deal with children and to make them socially useful and teach them knowledge and worldly wisdom. The Panchatantra, a short story collection written by Vishnu Sharma somewhere around 4 BC, is a literary form which has survived as it travelled across continents and languages and countries all over the world as far as Arabia as was pointed by Ghazoul, 1996. They have been successful for reinforcing in children the aptitude and attitude for transformation even in child psychology as story telling with moral outlook is still replicated in many schools as a tool for operant and classical conditioning and even in learning through modelling, observation, mimicking etc.,

4. Fables as Therapy

These fables offer examples of how to develop intelligent behaviour in life and improve life skills to face obstacles and struggles in life freeing oneself from stress and depression and become resourceful individuals. These stories also involve one in practical wisdom and understand the long-time influence in life of the choices made. They portray how to know what to let go and what to treasure in this world. They deal with therapeutic lessons to overcome complex situations in life by reflection into emotional and intellectual aspects of a circumstance.

The Jataka Tales is another collection of short stories from ancient India with a literary enrichment of moral and psychological insights of human beings. According to Professor Rhys Davids Jataka stories are one of the oldest fables. Jataka stories can be considered as the dynamic case studies of human mind and behavioral patterns. Dr. D V J Harischandra in his famous book Psychiatric Aspects of Jataka Stories (1998) reflects on the importance of the study of mind analysis in these fables. These fables depict the life of Buddha in his previous births and are exemplary in their portrayal of basic human virtues. Human emotions are presented in their usual scope of greed, anger etc., and how they effect human lives. These stories also give out the message of the transformation from suffering towards enlightenment and wisdom.

Human beings can learn from the characters in the tales the power of self-control over emotions and develop a sense of understanding and empathy towards both self and others. The tales bring in numerous characters which allow individuals to cultivate self-awareness, self-regulation, and emotional intelligence and get social skills. In the tale of “The Wise Hare” (Sasa Jataka), Buddha is born again as a hare. The hare although afraid to enter human circle, is ready to commit itself to the well-being of others. A deity approaches the hare in the form of a starving Brahmin, it is ready to relieve the Brahmin’s hunger by offering itself as food. The hare acts selflessly with empathy. However, this selfless act leads to the hare’s enlightenment. Similarly, in the tale of “The Golden Deer (Sinha Jataka), Buddha as a golden deer becomes a symbol of emotion, compassion, and wisdom. A hunter wanted to capture it and the deer with compassion decides to communicate with the hunter and offers him suggestions and advice to rethink how he lived his life and what kind of life he is leading. The deer shows emotional control over fear and anger and empathetically offers advice. This aspect of psychology in the tales of maintaining emotional balance and composure even when in danger or in risk would help mankind to live with peace and happiness rather than a stressful life.

When we consider the clever monkey in the tale “The Monkey and the Crocodile” (Vanara Jataka), one can learn how emotional intelligence be used as a tool to outwit the harmful and dangerous intentions of others. It is a common fact that as human beings each and every individual is unique and has some positive or negative intention for the other. Largely negative emotions prevail among humans and the same is exemplified in the story. The crocodile invites the monkey to come on a ride to his home across the river with an intention to kill him and have a full sumptuous meal. However, the monkey uses emotional intelligence and keeping himself patient, responds to the crocodile in the middle of the journey that he left his heart on the tree and hence escapes from the grip of the crocodile when it returns back. Human beings too should know how to control emotions and learn about the emotional state of others through emotional intelligence and come out successful even from complex and risky situations/circumstances.

In the story, “The Banyan Deer,” Buddha born as the leader to a group of deer in a forest allows itself to be a sacrificial object to a king who comes hunting for the deer. The spirit of calmness, selflessness and sacrificial nature serves as an icon of leadership when times comes and the maturity shown in exchange for the life of other deer should be learnt by persons in authority. These tales showcase characters who have thoughtful decision-making abilities, emotional intelligence and grow mentally and spiritually at the same time. The psychological insights provided delve deep into generating the greater good to the entire society. Buddha guides and mentors via his communication with others and the tales are a window to learning from experience and make it point clear that life being impermanent should be dealt with wisdom and reflection and not by emotionally impulsive behaviours.

5. Roots of Wisdom

The Jataka Tales envision a broader understanding and encompass the interconnectedness of all beings on earth. Learning through experience is shown in the tale “The Wise King (Maha Janaka Jataka), where the king Maha Janaka is shown as a symbol of patience, consistence, and emotional balance. The king remains calm and determined to survive although he is left stranded on an island after a shipwreck. He faces despair and depression in the beginning and regains composure quickly by his strong will and sets a goal to return to his kingdom one day. His critical thinking in challenging situations helps him to truly return to his kingdom and rule with compassion. This should be inculcated in all Indians as such pearls of wisdom are available in Indian literature written several ages ago and orally transmitted still longer amounting to some thousands of years.

In the tale, Assaka Jatakaya, a King goes in to acute depression following his Queen’s death. The tale through the story teller talks of the King’s depressive situation that is now found in medical terminology in the Diagnostic Statistical Manual. Similar is with the tale, Virochana Jataka which deals with the tale of a prince who suffers from mood dysregulation. The Prince suffers from impulsive behaviour, bursts of temper, mood swings etc. The King sends the young prince to a hermit who uses behaviour modification by talking to him, imparting knowledge, and even tasting him Kohomba plant leaves. The prince is advised that his behaviour harms everyone and that just like the bitter leaves no one likes such children as he too dislikes the leaves. The prince turns wise in a few days understanding what his mistake was and reverts from aggressive behaviour to normal one.

The Jataka Tales remind of normal everyday life situations where human beings must face with difficult choices and have to choose one among many. Sometimes they depict moral and mental dilemmas which are in toto with the present

generation's dilemmas. Indian psychology is explored so well in many of the tales where requisite factors or aspects are reminded to be inculcated through storytelling traditions rather than hours and hours of counselling and medical treatment. The Jatakas have also been considered to promote the idea of the "dependent co-arising of person and society" (Macy, 1979, p. 47) because a person exists in relation to all worldly beings and their existence "cannot be abstracted from its social context" (Macy, 1979, p. 47).

Characters in The Jataka Tales encounter difficult choices and situations but use reasoning to weigh the pros and cons of action taken and to be taken and effectively make decisions positively. The stories rely on true wisdom and moral ethics intertwined with reasoning and emotional intelligence to enable clear thinking and achievement of successful outcomes both for the individual and the entire society. In the tale of "The Tortoise and the Geese," Buddha as a wise tortoise escapes a risky situation by requesting geese to take him far away from his place. The two geese agree but warn the tortoise to remain silent throughout the journey which would result him falling from the sky. The tortoise demonstrates great ability by his effective control over his impulses. The tales also focus on the relevance of Karma and past experiences which shape current life style and impulses which can be balanced by entering the spiritual dimension. Psychological issues of normal life like crisis intervention can be observed in several Jataka tales like the Guttilla Jataka, Sandakinduru Jataka etc., where Sakka, the king shows the quality of a professional counsellor by his crisis intervention.

Ancient Indian literature like the Jataka is full of psychological interventions and behaviour therapies like modelling, operant conditioning etc., in the tale Giridatta Jataka, the royal horse develops a limp and the king is worried about the horse. The minister Bodhisatta finds out what is wrong with the horse. He observes the caretaker limping around and hence immediately changes the caretaker. The horse behaves normally after that. Upahana Jataka is a story of exemplary training given to an elephant through operant conditioning.

6. Conclusion

The Panchatantra and The Jataka Tales are ancient treasure troves of wisdom which provide valuable psychological insights and tools for moral and ethical development at the same time considering the all-round development of the individual both mentally and physically. They offer relatable stories of life encouraging critical and creative solutions and remedies through reflection on life's dilemmas. The depiction of animal characters in the stories and tales provide an elaborate understanding of the larger picture of human behaviours.

The Buddhist Jataka story book deeply touches the DSM (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders) based mental illnesses and these mental ailments could be identified in many Jataka stories. The Buddhist Jataka story book discusses deep psychological themes and analyses the human mind. The Jataka stories were a form of teaching approach which used the case method. (Jayatunge, 2013). Both these folk tales are rooted in Indian tradition and provide an exposure to the values and beliefs of Indian cultural context. Medical research in the UK have dealt with various disorders using these stories in psychotherapy which suggest that complex human emotions, depression, stress, anxiety can be healed and hence Indian Knowledge system can be promoted. Story telling traditions in India have followed simple symbolism and personification where individuals are made to realize and recognize their emotional dilemmas.

These stories/folk tales allow individuals to process their emotions to balance emotions, to regulate and fight back all sorts of obstacles and problems. They are informal therapeutic interventions which sought to bring both mental and physical well being in individuals and this kind of integrated analysis of psychological insight with therapy and counselling is efficiently provided to children and adolescents through the amalgamation of Indian knowledge systems. Indian ancient wisdom allows for cognitive restructuring and arrival of case studies as informal and soothing methods of mental health approaches.

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