

Tales of wit and wisdom

If education means fun and learning for you, its time to travel back 2000 years in time...

INDIA is known for its epic treatises in literature. The Bhagavad Gita, the Kamasutra and Arthashastra, to name a few, are renowned works of art and philosophy. However, the country's best known work is a scarcely talked-about collection of fables for children, called the Panchatantra. Written more than two thousand years ago, the tales are still popular in India and have left their mark on world literature as well.

Legend has it that in the first century BC, an Indian ruler called King Amarashakti realised that his three children, though educated, lacked a certain 'awareness', a common sense that would help them make the most of their lives. He asked an eighty-year old scholar named Vishnusharma to teach the children values they would imbibe for life.

The scholar chose to teach the princes in a unique way. Instead of preaching morals, he told them 84 stories that starred animals – lions, jackals, snakes, pigeons, oxen, tigers, elephants, monkeys, rabbits and donkeys - as characters. Each story talked about a particular aspect of human behaviour as enacted by the animals. The morals were subtle, the choice between right and wrong was simple yet thought-provoking. It was a unique insight into true wisdom and it achieved

what formal education often neglects – an interested student is a learner for life. The princes went on to be famous, just and wise Kings and the stories became a part of India's folk-lore.

The 84 stories were told in five different parts - *Mitra Bhedha* (the loss of friends), *Mitra Laabha* (gaining friends), *Suhrudbheda* (causing dissension between friends), *Vigraha* (war and peace) and *Sandhi* (compromise). The name Panchatantra therefore literally means the 'five techniques'.

Panchatantra's stories were eventually written down in Sanskrit between 100 BC and 500 AD. In India itself, there are more than two dozen versions of the stories, depending on local nuances. Their fame eventually spread to the rest of the world with translated versions in Persian, Arabic (called *Kalilah wa-Dimnah*), Greek (the *Stepha Nites Kai Lehnelates*), Latin and various Slavic languages.

Today the Panchatantra in its different languages and versions is the most well known children's book in the world. *Aesop's Fables*, Boccaccio's *Decameron*, Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, stories of the Grimms Brothers and the *Br'er Rabbit Stories* owe a lot to these tales of ancient India.



Universally loved: Sculptures depicting the Panchatantra tales in Indonesia

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