

PANCATANTRA : An Exhibition of Books, Painting & Multimedia Presentation of Fables

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The tradition of *Pancatantra* has remained an inseparable part of people's lives at different levels. Integral to people's thought, behaviour and worldview in different parts of the Indian subcontinent as also the rest of the world, it gets established and re-established in multifarious eco-cultural and socio-economic contexts unifying cultures.

The exhibition, *Pancatantra* was born out of an urge for exploring the flux between continuity and identity enfolding harmony and peace. This manifests itself in different forms and genres combining within themselves the verbal, the visual, the kinetic and the aural dimensions enfolded in the diverse cross-cultural and multidimensional programmes of the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA).

Some earlier exhibitions of the IGNCA have focused on Nature and Culture on the one hand and Person/Self on the other. This exhibition amalgamated the two in providing the social context in terms of ethics, social order and polity shrouded in the many stories of the *Pancatantra* which is a rich repository primarily of animal tales that are replete with morals for human beings. This situates the *Pancatantra* in the larger framework of nature, real life and tradition. It exemplifies and upholds ethical values, customary law and yet is an important medium through which protest, dissent and reform are articulated. It was, therefore, only natural to coincide the exhibition with the World Congress on Children's Books on the theme, 'Peace through Children's Books'.

The pancatantra, as the title suggests, is a compendium of five books - *panca* meaning 'five' and *tantra* meaning doctrines of conduct enfolded in following segments : (i) estrangement of friends which expounds *niti* or social order including duties, obligations, wisdom and prudence that permeate conduct at all levels; (ii) winning of friends which begins with a stanza on resources, property and affluence; (iii) of crows and owls which is an expository of matters relating with governance and statecraft as harmony, dissension, bribery and warfare; (iv) loss of gains which opens with a note of caution on deception by pleasing words and emphasises safe guarding one's life and gains with valour; and (v) rash deeds which largely deals with greed and its consequences upholding ethics and righteousness in acquiring wealth.

The eighty years old learned Brahmana, Visnu Sarman, churned his own life experiences and wisdom in composing the stories comprising verses and prose for the dull and ignorant sons of the King Amara Sakti of Mahilaropya, now identified as part of the state of Tamil Nadu in India. He equipped the princes with the principles of polity, governance and prudence. The purpose of the entire endeavour was to teach them *how* to think rather than *what* to think.

An Overview of responses



One of the objectives of the IGNC is to acquaint children with the rich heritage of different dimensions of Indian culture which do not form a part of their curriculum. Against this backdrop, the Pancatantra exhibition encouraged the children to draw and make paintings of the stories from this text and also to fill up a questionnaire based on what they saw and understood.

The children seem to have interpreted the *Pancatantra* in their own way. Out of the 160 children who filled up the questionnaire, 20 were below 7 years of age, 92 were in the age group of 8-12 years and 48 were between 13 and 17 years. The analyses presented here are based on responses of children in second and third categories of age groups since those below 7 years seems to be largely manipulated by their escorts.

Some of the favourite stories of children seemed to be, Monkey and the Crocodile; Lion and the Hare; and Hare and the Partridge. This trend may be explained in the larger framework of children's familiarity with these stories arising out of narrations by elders and also readings from books. Evidently, these are most popular stories of the *Pancatantra*. It is with them that children identify the tradition of *Pancatantra* and in many ways they form a part of their cognitive world. All this was coupled with the three dimensional models depicting the first two stories. The models precipitated their appreciation of the stories in big way.



The story of Monkey and the Crocodile was linked with a wide array of morals as, beware of jealousy; one should not be led away by sweet words; one should not go with strangers; never cheat or you will get cheated yourself; one should not be greedy; and wise persons can come out of difficulties easily. Similarly, the story of Lion and the Hare conveyed several messages as, common sense is better than erudition; one who has wit has power; intelligence is power; one should not be cruel; and one should not be proud. The story of the Hare and the Partridge, particularly appreciated by 17% children in the age group of 8-12 years was associated with only one moral: those who choose a sly and vicious arbitrator gets killed. The responses illuminate children's understanding and interpretation of the stories.

Five morals, beware of jealousy; evil people get trapped in their own nets; kindness and compassion are always rewarded; one should not be deceived by sweet words; and one who creates problems for others lands up in trouble were provided to the children for ranking. Out of these, the one regarding kindness and compassion was ranked first by 35.5% children followed by, 'one who creates problems for others lands up in trouble' (20.2%), 'beware of jealousy' (16.6%), 'evil people get trapped in their own nets' (13.09%) and 'one should not be deceived by sweet words' (13%).

The question : In which style did you see the story of the Blue Jackal? was intended to find out the form of depiction which is most retained in the child's mind. Few children (22.14%) answered the question correctly in mentioning that the specific story was depicted in both, collage-painting and *Kalamkari* style. Most of them (37.1%) recalled having seen it in the collage painting style. This response is not for from

expectation, for, Shri Haku Shah's collage-painting were deeply inspired by children's cognition and understanding of the world around. More importantly, Shri Haku Shah had involved the children in making these paintings.

Much like the children, the 78 adults who filled up the questionnaire were most inspired by the stories of Monkey and the Crocodile (42.3%); and Lion and the Hare (28.1%). This marks a definite continuity between childhood and adulthood. The difference comes in at the level of morals and what the story means to people as they grow up. Some the morals that adults delineated as more relevant in the present day were, what cannot be achieved by force can be achieved through a strategy; one should not repose faith blindly; those with forethought and ready-wit prosper while others perish; unity is strength; and one should think of the consequences before doing something. Quite evidently, these enfold people's experience as part of growing up. These morals seem to enfold their strategies for encountering compelling situations and complex interactions. There is clear commitment to planning and negotiation rather than simple do's and don't's reflected in children's responses. This was corroborated by an adult in the following words, "In the contemporary world, most of us are cheated...". At the other level, these morals are personalised. A teacher mentioned that the moral, 'one should not lose temper' was more important in the present day while a doctor argued for the moral, 'presence of mind is one's best friend'. It is clear that the two of them were, in fact, contesting for morals with which they are able to relate their work and lives.

Among the different styles, they rate the multimedia presentation (61.5%) as the best means through which stories from the *Pancatantra* are represented followed by the literary (39.3%), *kalamkari* (23.07%), collage-painting (14.1%) and papier mache styles (07.6%). This is simple to explain in the present day wake of increasing trust on technology. Multimedia presentation is the hallmark of modernity and being advanced and progressive. There is no doubt that this technique stimulating the visual and aural sensitivity is widely appreciated. What is encouraging here is that the literary medium is not likely to be out of vogue. Books will continue to be treasured despite the emphasis on CD Roms and other audio-visual outputs.

Explicitly, the *Pancatantra* is a collection of interesting fables for children. In this apparently children's book there are couched messages for adults that get revealed to the trained and the initiated. It is versatile in its potential to kindle intelligence, sense of reciprocity, kindness, compassion and skill of managing one's affairs as also strategies for survival in difficult situations. At a deeper level, this implies the confluence of ethical, material and emotional dimensions of existence. The exhibition sought to achieve this.

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