Between Wisdom and Normativity: Rhetorics of Disability in the *Panchatantra*

Prof. Anil K. Aneja*

*Department of English, University of Delhi, India.

Abstract
This paper explores the rhetorics of disability in the *Panchatantra*, a foundational text of ancient Indian literature that offers a surprisingly nuanced engagement with physical and cognitive difference. In contrast to the dominant discourses of its time — which often cast disability as divine retribution, moral failing, or allegorical symbol — the *Panchatantra* opens with a story about intellectual disability not to stigmatize or exclude, but to educate and empower. The three "blockheaded" princes are not banished but taught through stories, reflecting an early vision of inclusive pedagogy and affirming the value of cognitive diversity. This approach resonates with contemporary frameworks such as inclusive education and the neurodiversity movement.

Beyond cognitive disability, the text engages with a wide spectrum of bodily difference — from blind sages to physically marked animals and humans. These figures are not merely background characters but narrative agents, suggesting that disability was not invisible or irrelevant to early Indian storytelling. However, the *Panchatantra* remains embedded in its socio-historical context and cannot fully escape the ableist tropes of its era. Disability is at times equated with moral deficiency, used to signal deception, or reduced to a narrative device. This paper reads these contradictions as indicative of a broader cultural tension: between the impulse to include and the pressure to conform to normative ideals of ability.

By offering a close reading of selected stories, this study positions the *Panchatantra* as a text that is at once radical and regressive, progressive yet problematic. It is not simply a moral fable, but a rich archive of how early Indian thought contended with questions of difference, agency, and inclusion. In doing so, it invites us to recognize disability not as a modern concern but as a longstanding axis of ethical and political thought — one that continues to challenge, unsettle, and enrich our literary and cultural imagination.

Keywords: *Panchatantra*, Disability, Intellectual Disability, Indian Tradition, Normativity, Ancient India

Introduction
"One Vishnusharman, shrewdly gleaning
All worldly wisdom's inner meaning
In these five books the charm compresses
Of all such books the world possesses."
— *Panchatantra*, Introduction (13)
The *Panchatantra* holds an iconic place in Indian literary and pedagogical traditions. Revered
as a repository of worldly wisdom, it has shaped moral instruction and practical life lessons for centuries through the vehicle of allegorical storytelling. Nita Berry aptly calls it "a veritable sugarcoated pill" (Berry, 2016, p.48) — a delightful blend of narrative and instruction, capable of initiating social change. While it has often been viewed as a normative text laying down rules for ideal conduct, it is essential to acknowledge the extraordinary forwardness it displays, especially in its treatment of disability. Ancient Indian literature, until the time of *Panchatantra*, largely depicted disability in limited and often metaphorical ways — characters like Dhritarashtra, the blind king of the *Mahabharata*, or Shakuni with his limp, are emblematic of physical impairments that were often symbolically linked to moral, emotional, or political inadequacies. These figures, while iconic, rarely transcended their symbolic function. Against this backdrop, *Panchatantra* emerges as a radical text. It is arguably one of the first classical Indian texts to explicitly address intellectual disability, not merely physical difference, and to do so with a reformative lens.

The very premise of *Panchatantra* — the education of three princes labeled as intellectually unfit — is a revolutionary move for its time. Rather than attributing their limitations to divine punishment, fate, or karmic burden, the text treats disability as something that can be addressed, nurtured, and transformed through education. This is a strikingly progressive stance that aligns with many contemporary ideals about mainstreaming and inclusive education. In an era when exclusion and marginalization of the disabled were often the norm, *Panchatantra* imagines a path where those with cognitive differences are seen not as burdens but as individuals with potential, deserving of access to wisdom, power, and social integration.

Moreover, the text does not restrict itself to intellectual disability alone. Through its many fables, it presents a wide spectrum of bodily and sensory differences — the blind, the hunchbacked, the physically deformed, the visually impaired — not merely as metaphors, but as characters within the narrative. In doing so, *Panchatantra* becomes one of the earliest Indian texts to represent multiple disabilities within a single work, offering a surprisingly broad and diverse canvas of difference. Importantly, the narrative impulse in *Panchatantra* is not one of pity or fatalism, but of reform and inclusion. Vishnu Sharma's stories suggest

that education can be a tool for empowerment — a belief that resonates deeply with present-day movements advocating for the rights and mainstreaming of persons with disabilities. In this sense, *Panchatantra* can be seen as an early advocate of inclusive thought, imagining a world where those who differ from the norm can still participate meaningfully in society.

Yet, for all its radical gestures, the *Panchatantra* is not free from the cultural structures of its time. No text — however visionary — can wholly isolate itself from the dominant social realities that shape its production. Alongside its efforts to educate and include, the *Panchatantra* also inadvertently reaffirms certain ableist tropes: of linking physical difference with weakness or villainy, of defining people by their impairments, or of setting rigid ideals for what constitutes a worthy life. These tensions do not diminish the value of the text — rather, they offer insight into the complex, layered ways in which disability is represented in classical literature.

This paper, therefore, is not merely a critique, but a tribute to the Panchatantra — a recognition of its bold, reformist impulse and a thoughtful engagement with the points where it falters. By analyzing how the *Panchatantra* both challenges and upholds ableist discourses, we hope to uncover the nuanced ways in which disability is imagined, represented, and problematized in ancient Indian tradition. At a time when our own society continues to struggle with questions of inclusion, accessibility, and rights, texts like *Panchatantra* offer a mirror — revealing how long the journey has been, and how early some of its most important questions were asked.

I. THE IDEAL HUMAN AND "THE IDEOLOGY OF ABILITY"

—The brave, the learned, he who wins
To bureaucratic power-
These three alone of all mankind,
Can pluck earth's golden flower‖
-Panchatantra, The loss of Friends (31)

The philosophical debates about lives worth living have always intrigued mankind. Many great philosophers have come up with theories about what kind of a human being can be considered ideal and fit for a society. Plato in his *Republic* created an ideal society and argued that people with intellectual and physical disabilities should be killed as they are the embodiments of injustice and disorder. Plato's ideal society, as described in *The Republic*, envisions a rigid and hierarchical structure where physica and intellectual perfection is a prerequisite for inclusion. He advocates that medical care should be reserved only for those with strong constitutions, suggesting that individuals deemed physically unfit should be left to die without treatment. This utilitarian approach treats disability not as a difference to be accommodated, but as a burden to be eliminated for the sake of societal efficiency. Within the ruling guardian class, Plato emphasizes the need for eugenic control. While guardians are considered the most noble — metaphorically described as "children of gold" — he warns that not all gold retains the same purity. Offspring of lesser-quality guardians are seen as a threat to the integrity of the class and must not be allowed to remain within it, as degeneration may perpetuate through generations.

In even more disturbing terms, Plato proposes that if a child with undesirable traits is conceived, the ideal outcome would be to prevent it from ever being born. And if born, such an infant should be hidden away — removed from public sight — reinforcing a deeply exclusionary vision that equates bodily or cognitive difference with societal harm Similarly, Aristotle proposed for a law that no deformed child shall live. (*Generation of Animals, Book XVI*). The debates on ideal human were about what kind of a human is fit to live in a society. Such debates continue till date.

These debates have led to the formation of the norm which in turn also specifies what is not normal. The *Panchatantra* also tries to teach —the art of intelligent living‖. (*Panchatantra*, Introduction, p.15) It also takes part in the age long debate about the qualities an ideal human should possess. It tells —how [to] draw a line between the man-beast and the beast‖ (*Panchatatra*, The loss of Friends, p.27) reducing the —man‖ who does not learn this —art of intelligent living‖ to nothing but a —beast‖.

Charles W. Mill (2011) formalised this concept much later where he pointed out the difference between being a human and being a person. Mills notes that the term human can be understood as a factual and biological term whereas the term person is more of a philosophical term and constitutes the normative assumptions of the ideal. According to Mills the fact that someone is a human or is a member of the human species does not entitle him to the status of being a person. The —socially recognized personhood‖ which is created by the discourses on the ideal human gives rise to what Siebers calls the —ideology of ability‖ (Siebers, 2009) or what is now known as ableism.

The idea of the ideal is what makes the deviant problematic. The *Panchatantra* makes use of this deviance to build its own set of rules for a life worth living. The overarching concept underlying the *Panchatantra* is the construction of an ideal human being. In the Introduction to the translation of the *Panchatantra*, A.W Ryder writes that —The Panchatantra is a *niti-shastra* where *niti* means —the wise conduct of life.‖ (*Panchatantra*, Editor's Introduction, p.5) Ryder in his introduction claims that the *Panchatantra* can help to get the —utmost possible joy of life in the world of men‖. (*Panchatantra*, Editor's Introduction, p.5) In turn what it does is rather define what might be constituted as a sad existence. Such discourses of idealism label nonconformists as having a questionable existence.

The *Panchatantra's* ideal society works on a functionalist idea[1] where the worth of each unit of the society is judged by the function it performs. Although, *Panchatantra* is an ancient classical Indian text and the sociological theory of functionalism

---

[1] Functionalism in social sciences is a theory based on the idea that all parts of the society should perform their set role for the overall survival of the society. It gained prominence in the 19th century with sociologists like Emile Durkheim and was further explored by sociologists like Radcliffe Brown, Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton.

formalised much later, but it can be seen bearing a striking resemblance to the idea. We get many evidences in the text for the same. For example, in the first book of the *Panchatantra* Vishnu Sharma writes,
—In case of horse or book or sword,
Of woman, man or lute or word,
The use or uselessness depends
On qualities the user lends.‖

Panchatantra, The loss of Friends (37)
Functionalists use the analogy of the human body to explain the interconnectedness of the different aspects of the society. A lack of function in one area can lead to a dysfunctional society.
Dysfunction is any action or person that makes a society unstable.
Disability or rather the inability to perform the pre-set role within a cultural framework is seen as a dysfunction. The *Panchatantra's* construction of the intellectual disability of the princes is also premised on the functionalist idea of the working of the society. The princes' inability to show the qualities of the prince or in technical terms to perform their function in the society leads to dysfunction and hence the label of ‗intellectually disabled'.

II.   RETHINKING THE NORM:PANCHATANTRA AND THE ORIGINS OF ALTERNATIVE CURRICULUM FOR DISABILITY

A comparison between ancient Western and Indian philosophical traditions reveals starkly contrasting attitudes toward disability. While Western philosophers like Plato proposed exclusionary and eugenic responses to physical and intellectual difference, the Indian tradition — as represented by *Panchatantra* — offered a far more humane and inclusive approach. Plato, in *The Republic*, advocates that medical treatment should be reserved only for the physically fit, and those who are weak or infirm should be left to die. He further argues that offspring of "inferior" guardians should be removed from society and that infants born with perceived flaws should ideally never see the light of day — or be hidden away if they do. Disability, in this worldview, is not just undesirable but fundamentally incompatible with the ideal state.Against this backdrop, *Panchatantra*, written several centuries later by Vishnu Sharma, marks a profoundly progressive departure. Rather than casting disability as a threat to social order, Vishnu Sharma's very motivation for creating the text is to **educate and empower three princes considered intellectually unfit for rulership**. This is not merely a narrative device — it is a pedagogical and ideological gesture. He does not seek to isolate or eliminate the children; instead, he takes on the challenge of devising a tailored curriculum that responds to their specific cognitive needs. His choice of storytelling, animal allegory, and moral fables reveals an early understanding of differentiated instruction — what we might now refer to as an *alternative curriculum*.
Vishnu Sharma's method anticipates modern pedagogical strategies designed for children with learning difficulties. His success in teaching the princes within six months validates the central claim of inclusive education: that with the right methods, all children can learn. In this sense, the *Panchatantra* becomes not just a literary text, but an early educational experiment — one that affirms the dignity and potential of those who fall outside the conventional definitions of intelligence.
What is even more significant is that this inclusive impulse arises not from political pressure or disability rights activism, but from within the ancient Indian intellectual tradition itself. Long before the formulation of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) or the idea of inclusive classrooms, *Panchatantra* was already engaging with the idea that education must be **malleable, contextual, and responsive** to the learner. The model Vishnu Sharma offers — storytelling adapted for comprehension, wisdom without dogma, and emotional intelligence over rote memorization — remains relevant even in the 21st century.
Thus, *Panchatantra* challenges the linear narrative that educational inclusion for persons with disabilities is a modern, Western innovation. It reveals that Indian thought not only recognized cognitive difference but **responded to it creatively and affirmatively**, centuries before such approaches gained currency in contemporary educational discourse. In this light, the *Panchatantra* should be seen as a foundational text in the global history of inclusive education — offering a vision that values adaptability over uniformity and potential over limitation.

III.   "FIXING" THE "CONTSRUCTED"

The *Panchatantra* was written as early as 220 BCE by Pandit Vishnu Sharma. It brought about a revolution in the terms of how disability is perceived. Rather than stigmatizing a disability, it aimed to put forward an alternative model of education for the intellectually disabled through storytelling as discussed in the previous section. The introduction of the book explains how the King named Immortal Power had three sons who, according to the narrative, had a learning disability and Vishnu Sharma took a challenge to teach them all the things necessary to live and be in power in six months. This is how the stories in the *Panchatantra* originated.
But the concept of intellectual disability cannot be completely explored without considering the socio-political construction of the idea of intellect. The recognition of someone being intellectually disabled depends on the norms of competency and intelligence that are different for different social groups. In the *Panchatantra* the king's sons are perceived as not being competent enough because they are the king's sons and their ability is judged by their ability to rule. Their intellectual disability is a political construct. If they had been a farmer's sons for that matter, they wouldn't have been labelled as being —blockheads‖ (p.13) and neither would have this discourse come into being.
If we look at the social context portrayed in the *Panchatantra*, we can see that intellectual disability is a social construction. The ancient Indian society witnessed a caste-based division of labor which set the roles of the people even before they were born. Everyone had to occupy a set role. The kind of ability an individual should possess was pre- decided. Not conforming to that decided ability meant a disability. The intersection between disability and caste can also be seen in the *Panchatantra*. The idea of the children being—blockheads‖ becomes a bigger problem because they are the king's sons and carry the baggage of

inheritance. Their royal background makes them subject to scrutiny. The children being —fools‖ become the cause of life-long grief for the king because he doesn't want to give up the royal power. So the intellectual disability of king's sons can be seen just an inability to be a king and not actually a cognitive disorder. This idea has been beautifully expressed by Judith Butler in—Doing Justice to Someone‖ where she asks, "Who can I become in such a world where the meanings and limits of the subject are set out in advance for me?" (Butler, 2001 p.621) Power and dominance become prominent ideas in the fabrication of this disability narrative.

The inability of the king to transfer his power to his children and the fear of loss of dominance is what makes the king skeptical about the abilities of the princes. The idea of dysfunction and a disabled body go hand in hand. The cultural set up gives rise to different notions about disability. A common notion attached with a disabled body is that it cannot function on its own, cannot serve any purpose and is rather a liability.

In the Introduction to the *Panchatantra*, the king says,

—To what good purpose can a cow
That brings no calf nor milk, be bent?
Or why beget a son who proves
A dunce and disobedient?‖
--Panchatantra, Introduction (14)

Here also the functionalist idea of an ideal human body in the *Panchatantra* is apparent. Thus, these discourses rather than creating an ideal world become dehumanizing discourses that surround the people labelled as having a disability. The *Panchatantra* rather than fixing the problem of the socio-political construction of disability becomes a part of the problem. Butler calls it —normative violence‖ (Butler, 2004) that excludes someone from social, political and cultural recognition by making someone intelligible through certain norms.

Ableism in the *Panchatantra* works at different levels where it tries to "fix" the problem which is just a social, political and cultural construction. First, the disability, if there is any, is seen as a problem that needs fixing and is made fun of. Second, the so called problem in itself is a creation of the socio-cultural set-up. Vishnu Sharma in the *Panchatantra* is the only person learned enough to —make them (princes) intelligent in a twinkling‖ (*Panchatantra*, Introduction (14)) Vishnu Sharma indeed proves to be a smart person because he knows the "cure" to this "problem" is creating a discourse that would help the princes fit in the cultural framework which is the creator of their disability in the first place. The culturally verified education of the princes makes them a tool to carry the normative ideology further. This is how an ideology becomes a norm and travels from generation to generation.

Cultural frames force us to have a particular set of ideas about the ideal human. The *Panchatantra* which tries to fix the problem of intellectual disability, itself engages in the —normative violence‖. An analysis of the stories and arguments in the *Panchatantra* can help to identify how it takes the idea of idealism and deviation forward. The —normative violence‖ (Butler, 2004) does not only happen at the level of ideas but also at the level of language where certain words and phrases become problematic for a particular community.

IV. DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE *PANCHTANTRA*

—Whoever learns the work by heart,
Or through the story-teller's art
Becomes acquainted,
His life by sad defeat- although
The king of heaven be his foe-
Is never tainted.‖
Panchatantra, Introduction (16)

The *Panchatantra* uses rhetoric as the means of education and the same rhetoric serves as a medium of perpetuating the ideas of an ableist culture. Disability is portrayed as a big problem and something that needs fixing right from the beginning. The origin of the *Panchatantra* is an attempt to solve this ‗problem'. But the reality, as Lennard Davis puts it is that —the problem is not the person with disabilities; the problem is the way that normalcy is constructed to create the —problem‖ of the disabled person‖ (Davis, 1995) The problem is not with an education model or the stories in that model, the problem is how the representation of disability in those stories makes normalcy so obvious that the ableist nature of the discourse goes unnoticed. Some of the representations in the animal fables show a disabled body as being a punishment or something you could take advantage of. A text which aims to give all worldly knowledge actually becomes a conveyor of the culturally constructed idea of ‗normal'. It is a normative text masquerading as a self-help book. Yet, there are moments where disabled figures are granted space for agency and action. Unlike the romanticized innocent fool trope often seen in literature, many disabled characters in Panchatantra are shrewd, observant, and capable of moral or strategic choices. They do not merely suffer disability — they live, react, retaliate, and even scheme. This layered portrayal, though inconsistent, provides a window into a more dynamic representation of difference.

If we look at the process of textual production, hegemony of normalcy is being enforced at two levels. At the level of the origin of the text the use of language and the choice of words and phrases is what make the text ableist. A text which goes forth to educate actually criticizes unfit minds which cannot ever be educated and are actually wasted.

—Educating minds unfit
Cannot rescue sluggish wit,
Just as house-lamps wasted are,

Set within a covered jar.‖
-*Panchatantra, the Loss of Friends, (186)*
But it is not only at the level of origin that a norm is perpetuated, reception also plays an important role in making the reinforcement of the norm successful. The rhetoric of Ableism is created at both the levels. At the level of reception, the celebration and extensive translation of the text carries forward the discourse. The choice of words and the characterization makes the discourse ableist. However, even this tension between "fit" and "unfit" is not presented without ambiguity. The very structure of the Panchatantra — designed as an alternative learning model for intellectually challenged princes — offers an early glimpse into a differentiated pedagogy.

The text implies that even those labelled as 'blockheads' can master the skills of politics and survival if taught differently.

The naming of the characters in the *Panchatantra* is interesting because it celebrates the idea of a normal mind and body as being superior. The names of the King's sons are Fierce- Power, Endless-Power and Rich Power when actually the king thinks that with the kind of mind they have, they cannot be kings or exert power. This shows a futile attempt to compensate for a lack of some kind. The names have been strategically chosen to compensate for the intellectual disability of the King's sons. Power is believed to be the prerogative of just the able-bodied and this kind of naming is an attempt to move away from the idea of the children having some kind of a challenge. In fact the common notion that disability renders you powerless has been clearly emphasized by playing with names and inabilities. And yet, the irony of giving these supposedly "unfit" characters names that invoke strength and wealth also gestures toward their latent potential. It is as if the text, while mocking their current state, leaves room for transformation —which, notably, does happen through the educational intervention.

The learning disability of the King's sons is made evident by calling them —Supreme Blockheads‖, which is the only identity they have been given. According to the *Panchatantra*, one who does not bring honour to his family and clan, cannot be considered as being born. The king explains what it is to have sons who are —blockheads‖ and also how it is better to be non-existent rather than existing with a disability. This has been an idea which is being carried on from a long time and recognized globally and not just in the Indian context. Deformed children weren't considered to be worth of living a life. *Panchatantra* is Vishnu Sharma's attempt to do something that the very existence of king's sons isn't questioned because the King says,
—Of sons unborn, or dead or fools,
Unborn or dead will do:
They cause a little grief, no doubt
But fools a long life through‖
-*Panchatantra, Introduction (13,14)*
Normalcy here becomes more important than life. The superiority of the normal body is taken to another level. The idea of foolishness of fools and dim-wits as opposed to the witty recurs throughout the text. This constant opposition between ‗fools' and ‗wits' reinforces the idea of an ‗ideal mind'. In most of the representations like that of a blind owl or a dull-witted lion, disability becomes an identity marker. These representations justify Rosemarie Garland Thomson's idea of —normate's assume(ing) that a disability cancels out all qualities, reducing the person to a single attribute‖ (Garland Thomson 2009, p.69) But even as it reinforces the superiority of the 'normal,' the Panchatantra occasionally subverts this by showing that so-called 'fools' can be socially astute, and those with differences can outwit the seemingly wise. Thus, disabled figures are not always simplistic props; they carry the potential for transformation, and sometimes even resistance.

The *Panchatantra* falls into the category of Children's Literature although it is considered to be beneficial for anyone who wants to learn the basics of living a successful life. It is written as a collection of five books which are The Loss of Friends, The Winning of Friends, Crows and Owls, Loss of Gains and Ill Considered Actions. *Panchatantra* contains moral fables which are mostly allegorical and this leaves the ones at the receiving end conscious of the fact that it is merely a representation of something. Animal stories have been used to teach the —beast‖ how to be a —man-beast‖. Thus there is a potential of subversion within the structure of a moral fable but in this case the people at the receiving end are mostly children. The power of discourse and rhetoric is even more when the readers are young because it leaves a lasting impression on the children and ensures that they become the adults with the same culturally built framework of thoughts that is being carried from ages. This makes its subtle gestures towards inclusion all the more significant. The early exposure to the idea that intellectual difference can be addressed through an adapted curriculum — and that strength may lie in unexpected characters — plants an early seed of pluralistic thinking in young minds. *Panchatantra* is full of stories which teach an important lesson at the end but the construction of the stories in terms of character representation and language puts the normal body on the pedestal of superiority. Whether it is a blind owl who is either wicked or pitied or the cripple and the hunchback who are defined by their physical deformities, there are many such flawed representations that create this rhetoric of ableism. Still, even among the flawed portrayals, we find characters with disabilities who are schemers, kings, lovers, and betrayers — complex roles that go beyond the usual pity-evil binary. Unlike many didactic texts, Panchatantra does not always strip disabled characters of their agency. Ableism can often be very subtle such that it is unnoticeable. Using ableist terms or disabilities even as metaphors renders a discourse ableist. Ableism can be perpetuated and endorsed "just…by using deafness as a metaphor for obstinacy ("Marie was deaf to their pleas for bread") or blindness to convey ignorance ("George turned a blind eye to global warming"). The pervasiveness of these and similar metaphors, like the cultural ubiquity of using images of disabled bodies to inspire pity, suggest the scale of the work ahead, and the ease with which one can resort to using them warns of the need for critical evaluation of one's own rhetoric.‖ (Cherney, 2011) However, it's worth noting that the Panchatantra's very act of representing a range of disabilities — physical, cognitive, and even cosmetic — gives it a broad scope. By depicting disabled characters not only as tragic or evil but also as capable of thought and action, the text occasionally gestures toward a more layered understanding of human difference.

The stories in *Panchatantra* carry representations of visual and intellectual disability and of corporeal differences both of which deviate from the norm. The representation of visual disability is mostly in a negative light or either as metaphors which are

also negative. According to Mitchell and Snyder (2001), the function of representation of disability in a literary discourse is twofold which is either as a stock feature of characterization or as a metaphorical device. The use of disability metaphors shape the way disability is received and affect the general way of thinking. A discourse gains its power through language and the choice of words can play a major role in altering the perception of those at the receiving end. In the *Panchatantra*, blindness has been used as a metaphor broadly to convey incomprehension and lack of awareness or a vision for future. Phrases like —Blind folly always has to pay‖ (p.423) is used as an expression to promote the use of wit and good deeds. Here blindness gains a meaning other than a physical, visual disability and becomes the symbol for lack of judgment which problematizes how the visual disability is perceived. The way the metaphors are used shape whether the perception would be positive or negative.

—…..The motions of a blameless heart decide
Of right and wrong when reason leaves us blind.‖
-Panchatantra, The Loss of Friends (94)

Yet, one cannot ignore that these metaphors, while problematic, also suggest that disability is part of the everyday vocabulary — not invisible, not ignored, but present and engaged with, however imperfectly.

Disability metaphors generally have negative connotations like —blinded by greed‖ (p.434), blinded by anger or enmity or —purblind heedlessness‖ (p.81). Although such usages address the able-bodied subject but the ideas linked with the usage make disability a lack of something or something which is not right, thus promoting an ableist culture.

The other feature of disability in a work of literature, as Mitchell and Snyder point out, is that of characterization. In terms of characterization disabled characters primarily perform negative roles and exist so that the so called —normal‖ can reveal the goodness of their state.

Ato Quayson in *Aesthetic Nervousness* sees disability —as a fulcrum or pivot out of which various discursive details emerge, gain salience, and ultimately undergo transformation within the literary aesthetic field.‖(Quayson, 2007, p.34) In *Panchatantra* such characterization seems unnecessary and rather imposed. In the story, —Passion and the Owl‖ (p.129-p.134), the blind owl performs the role of an evil and cruel friend who gets his swan friend Passion killed. This story and character is created only to preach —False friends- are worse than vain‖ (p.134) which could have easily happened without the associated blindness. Blindness here just becomes a pre requisite for the portrayal of negativity. —Why does the visual spectacle of…….disabilities become a predominating trope in the non-visual textual medium of literary narratives? (Mitchell and Snyder, p.53) It is perhaps because a story with a non-disabled body does not arouse curiosity when narrated. The negative portrayal just becomes a technique on the part of the story-teller to attract its readers and serves no important purpose. Mitchell and Snyder call it —Narrative Prosthesis‖ (2001) which talks about the reliance of texts on disability to make the narrative work. Disability is used as a medium to create stereotypical characters that are either wicked or weak. Nevertheless, not all characters with disabilities in the Panchatantra are helpless or evil. Many show themselves capable of independent thinking, subversive action, and even moral ambivalence — qualities usually reserved for 'complete' characters. The blind Brahmin, for instance, is not merely a victim; he is cunning enough to test and expose deceit. Such portrayals complicate the assumption that disability in the text equates to narrative flatness.

Representing disabled characters as weak is one of the easy way outs for the storyteller in terms of characterization. In *Panchatantra*, visual disability has been shown as something that is a weakness and can be taken an advantage of. In —The Butter Blinded Brahman‖ (p.370-p.378), the Brahman's wife who loves another man prays and asks the Goddess to make her husband blind so that she can do anything she likes without him noticing. Although the Brahman fools the wife by only acting that he has gone blind and then exposing her but the idea of being rendered weak due to disability takes an important place in the story. Here blindness takes a form of a weakness which can be taken an advantage of and which can be used as a tool to get away from things. In another story —The Birds choose a King‖ (p.304- p.308), the birds choose the owl as their king only to be persuaded by the crow to abandon the owl because of its blindness. Such representations portray the disabled as being incapable of holding positions of power or to be at the same level as the so called normal in the society. This weakness makes the disabled less human in a society where the survival of the fittest is the dominant idea. Such representations either generate hate or pity for the disabled both of which stigmatize disability and construct a certain response towards people with disabilities. These responses and notions have slowly become a part of the social order and any change would mean a disruption thus further complicating the idea of breaking free from an ableist culture. But even in these depictions, it is not always the disability that determines the outcome —it is wit, adaptability, and timing. The Panchatantra is replete with examples where strength lies not in perfection, but in cleverness and learning.

Ableism can stem from any set ideas or notions that define what an ideal human body should be like. The set parameters of beauty in a culture promote ableism and any deviation is seen as being ugly and less acceptable. The idea of a disabled body and beauty also are closely linked because a disabled body is not considered to be beautiful. Another layer of reinforcement of the norm can be seen in terms of how achieving standard face and body becomes a goal. In the *Panchatantra* where the birds choose a king, the crow says, —Why anoint this ugly faced fellow who is blind in the daytime‖ (p.307), criticizing the owl. The owl is not only deserted because he is blind but also for being ‗ugly' and ‗crooked'. The representation goes like

—Big hooked nose, and eyes asquint,
Ugly face without a hint
 Of tenderness or beauty in't,
Good natured it is fierce to see:
If he were mad, what might it be?‖
-Panchatantra, The Crows and Owls (308)

A big nose and squinted eyes make the owl an object of hate and also question its capability as a ruler. This becomes an example of how a difference becomes the main concern and is seen before anything else. The qualities and abilities of a disabled body are reduced to nothing because of a deviation from the norm. Impairment or a difference becomes the defining factor for the disabled body. And yet, the Panchatantra's structure — built on stories about transformation and unpredictability — sometimes disrupts these assumptions. Characters who appear foolish or unfit may emerge as survivors or even victors, complicating the dichotomy between the beautiful/able and the ugly/disabled.

Disability often takes the role of an identity marker. —Like —powerful woman‖, the term —disabled person‖ is oxymoronic because —disabled‖ nullifies the dominant version of personhood expressed in, for example, the Emersonian self-possessed individual².‖ (Garland Thomson,1997). Many of the representations of disabled characters in the *Panchatantra* are generally flat and the only identity given to them is of their disability. The use of language in —Vidur warns the monarch blind to cease from evil deeds‖ (*Panchatantra*, p.57) makes the king nothing but a blind man. The disabled person is reduced to a single attribute of his disability. Disability takes the form of a quality and becomes an adjective for the disabled person. Pointing out the disability becomes a need in terms of how the character is presented. In the story of —The Ungrateful Wife‖ (p.405-408) where the Brahman's wife falls in love with the —cripple‖, the only identity that is given to her lover is that of being a —cripple' and nothing else. This stock characterization makes a disabled body merely a prop to carry forward the narrative. Disability becomes a mechanical tool to generate emotions of pity and hopelessness. The —cripple‖ is also shown as a liability in the story and someone who just remains an object of pity throughout. Still, the repeated return to disability across the text — not as a one-off occurrence but a recurring motif — forces the reader to confront difference again and again. In doing so, it challenges the reader to read beyond the surface, and notice the nuances in how each character operates within, or pushes back against, their social role.

There are some set stereotypical representations of disability which either generate pity or make the person with disability a villain. The connection between villainy and disability also reinforces the idea that the one who deviates from the norm is an evil and the easiest way to represent this is to choose someone with a physical deformity as a negative character. This also reinforces the old idea of sin and punishment where doing something wrong makes a person subject to punishment and disabled characters serve as prototypes for the same. Paul Longmore in *Screening Stereotypes* argues that —Giving disability to villainous characters reflects and reinforces…..three common prejudices against handicapped people: disability is a punishment for evil; disabled people are embittered by their —fate‖; disabled people resent the non- disabled‖ (Longmore, 1987) Despite this, characters like the blind man or hunchback are not shown as incapable of emotion, intention, or action. Their desires and schemes, however problematic, lend them psychological depth beyond simple moral binaries.

These representations of disability can also be pointed out in the animal fables of the *Panchatantra* where disability has been shown as evil and also as a form of punishment. Adjectives like —seedy fellow who is blind in the daytime‖ (p.307) are used for the owl, which portray disability not only as a weakness but also something that can inculcate negative traits and make someone evil. Paul Longmore talks about disability and evil and notes that —deformity of body symbolizes deformity of soul. Physical handicaps are made the emblems of evil.‖ (Longmore, p.66) But it's worth noting that the sheer visibility of disability — however flawed its framing — is itself unusual in classical literature. The Panchatantra does not shy away from difference; it foregrounds it, grapples with it, and makes it central to moral debate.

The irony is that possessing a disability is thought to be what makes a person evil and the punishment for an evil deed is also rendering a body disabled. In the story of the weaver's wife in the *Panchatantra*, the wife is punished for infidelity by cutting her nose and ears and thrashing her limb. Physical deformation was a common form of punishment in those times. Other representation of disability as a punishment can be seen in the fable called —The Elephant and the Sparrow‖ (p.153-p.157) where the Elephant destroys the sparrow's nest and the sparrow seeks the help of her friends to help take revenge from the Elephant. The revenge which is decided by Sparrow and her friends is plucking out the Elephant's eyes and rendering him blind. Disability as a punishment has also been a long known idea and also an idea not only specific to the Indian context. The Old Testament writers believed that God inflicts Disability on people as a punishment for sin. In the Indian context an ideal human body without any physical deformity was a mark of honor. The cutting of nose was a social norm and a punishment for those who have done something wrong. The punishment also shows that the ideal body was celebrated and a deviation became a marker of wrongdoings. The idea was to _other' the criminal and to separate him from the society by physically deforming him and making him less human or a —monster‖.

A corporeal difference is seen as monstrosity. In the story of —Slow the weaver‖ (449- p.453) the weaver on his wife's advice asks for an extra head and an extra pair of arms from the wish fulfilling angel but he is perceived as a monster and an evil spirit and killed by the people of the village. In the same story another layer of ableism can be seen in the terms of representation of the woman character. Gender also takes the form of a disability and leads to the discourse of gendered ableism. Yet, even in this portrayal, we see that monstrosity is not static — it is a label assigned by society, often born of fear and misunderstanding. The weaver's fate reflects society's intolerance, not his inherent evil — a tragic critique of social rigidity.

This opens up a different layer of ableism in this ableist discourse which keeps the human male at the top of the hierarchy of able-bodiedness. The gender is also represented as a weakness and something which makes a person less than normal or not ideal. This narrows down the notion of normalcy as only being represented by the human male. This promotes gendered ableism. The *Panchatantra* is full of stories like this, some examples being —The Ungrateful Wife‖ (p.405-p.408), —The Monkey and the Crocodile‖ (p.381-p.388) and the —Butter Blinded Brahmin‖ (p.370-p.378). The examples are many. It is told that —a

---

² Ralph Waldo Emerson's idea of normal is based on the Enlightenment idea of self-reliant, rational and autonomous individual. Anyone not conforming to this idea is not considered to be a person. Thomson uses this idea to explain how an abnormality in a cultural framework becomes the identity of the person.

single grab/ suffices for a fish or crab,/ for fool or woman and _tis so/ for sot, cement, or indigo‖ (*Panchatantra, The Loss of gains (384)*) A fool and a woman is reduced to being just like animals who can be easily grabbed and controlled. The representation of woman characters in the *Panchatantra* also serves merely as a prop.

—Give a woman food and dresses

….Give her gems and all things nice;

Do not ask for her advice‖

Panchatantra, Ill Considered Action(451)

Rosemarie Garland Thomson also draws the parallel between a disabled body and the body of a female. She believes that —both are excluded from full participation in public as well as economic life, both are defined in an opposition to a norm that is assumed to possess natural physical superiority.‖ (Garland Thomson, p.19) But, through its exaggeration, the text may also be critiquing the absurdity of these norms. By placing these ideas in the mouths of animals or flawed characters, the Panchatantra sometimes allows its reader to see through the prejudice.

Along with physical disabilities any kind of corporeal difference also becomes a deviation from the norm and thus becomes questionable in a culture. The *Panchatantra* carries the representations of corporeal differences in the stories of the two headed bird and the three breasted woman. The problem with such representations is that any representation which shows a deviation from the idea of _normal‘ is always negative and used as a tool to expose human follies. In the tale of the Bird with two heads (p.216-p.231) the two heads are used as a metaphor for a fragmented brain which ultimately results to be fatal for the bird. This can also be seen as the representation of conjoined twins about which Garland Thomson says, —Conjoined twins contradict our notion of the individual as discrete and autonomous, quite similarly to the way pregnancy does.‖ (Thomson, 2013) Thus, this also deviates from what is considered natural and also opens up the debate about disabled not having an identity and autonomy other than that of their disability. And yet, even the most marginalized characters like the three-breasted princess or the hunchbacked man are given storylines, motivations, and roles in the unfolding narrative. They are not entirely voiceless; they act, plot, love, and suffer. This textured representation distinguishes *Panchatantra* from many other ancient texts that erase or dehumanize the disabled altogether. In the story of —The Three Breasted Princess‖ (p. 465), this corporeal difference is seen as a taboo. The king feels the fact that the princess is three breasted must be concealed lest it should bring shame to the royal family. He orders the —girl [to] be exposed in the forest, so that not a single soul may learn the fact.‖ (p.465) This is a clear representation of the stigma attached to disability. The stigmatizing doesn‘t stop here, the Brahmans tell the King

—A daughter fitted out with limbs

Too numerous or few,

Will lose her character, and will

Destroy her husband, too.‖

-Panchatantra, Ill Considered Action (466)

Breast that serves as a symbol for femininity, with slight deviation from the norm, becomes a symbol of monstrosity. For a female body beauty and disability go hand in hand.

—The twin ideologies of normalcy and beauty posit female and disabled bodies, particularly, as not only spectacles to be looked at, but as pliable bodies to be shaped infinitely so as to conform to a set of standards called normal and beautiful‖ (Garland Thomson, 2002) The representation shows that someone born with a corporeal difference brings the trouble to everyone associated with it and is actually a curse that has befallen on the world. Any kind of deviation from the norm brings evil to the society and is a symbol for destruction and calamity.

That is why the King is advised to —shun the sight of her‖. (p. 467) The three breasted princess, the king is advised, should be married to a —blind or deaf, of meanest birth/ leprous may he be;‖ (p.468) A disabled child is considered to be born out of sins of the parent. Such a birth is mean and a symbol of a wrong-doing on the part of the birth givers. To get rid of this —sin‖ the king marries the princess to a blind man who has a hunch- backed partner to guide him.

Like all the other representations the only identity given to these three characters is that of their physical deformity. Similarly, the three breasted princess and the hunch-backed man represent negative characters that plan to make use of the blind man‘s disability and kill him. The princess‘ deformity is attributed to her being unblessed by the Gods and all the three corporeally different characters are presented as being _wayward‘ just because their bodies are not what _norm‘ wants them to be. Through this representation the story attempts to preach

—Blind man, hunchback, and unblest

Princess with an extra breast-

Waywardness is prudence, when

Fortune favors wayward men.‖

-Panchatantra, Ill Considered Action, (464)

V. CONCLUSION

The *Panchatantra* stands as a remarkable milestone in ancient Indian literature — not only for its enduring stories and philosophical insights, but for its surprisingly progressive engagement with the concept of disability. In an era where physical difference was often framed as divine punishment, moral failing, or symbolic metaphor, *Panchatantra* takes a strikingly different approach. It opens with a story about intellectual disability — the so-called "blockheaded" princes — and seeks not to banish, punish, or isolate them, but to educate and integrate them. That, in itself, is revolutionary.

The text offers a framework of inclusion through education, suggesting that disability, particularly cognitive difference, can be addressed not through pity or exclusion but through tailored teaching, through the telling of stories, and through access to

knowledge. This reflects a vision far ahead of its time, and one that resonates with contemporary discourses around inclusive education, neurodiversity, and the rights of persons with disabilities.

Moreover, the *Panchatantra* does not restrict itself to one kind of disability. It portrays multiple forms — physical, sensory, and cognitive — giving it a unique position in early world literature. From the blind brahmin to the hunchbacked guide, from the owl rejected for his crooked appearance to the three-breasted princess, the text foregrounds bodies and minds that deviate from the norm. In doing so, it brings disability into visibility — not as a passing metaphor, but as a structural presence.

Yet, despite these radical elements, the *Panchatantra* remains a product of its time. It cannot fully escape the dominant social ideologies that shaped its creation. Many of its representations still reinforce ableist ideas — associating disability with weakness, deception, or danger. Some characters are reduced to their impairments, and disability often becomes a moral flaw or a narrative device. This tension between progressive intent and social conditioning is perhaps inevitable, and it speaks to the layered complexity of the text.

This paper has attempted to approach *Panchatantra* with both admiration and critical engagement — as a tribute to its pioneering vision, and as a reflection on its contradictions. Far from dismissing the text, the goal has been to situate it in a broader conversation about how cultures imagine, represent, and respond to disability. The *Panchatantra* deserves to be recognized not only as a fable of ethics and politics, but also as one of the earliest Indian attempts to think through the challenges and potential of disability in public life.

Even today, as we continue to work toward inclusion, representation, and rights for persons with disabilities, *Panchatantra* reminds us that these concerns are not modern inventions — they have long roots, and they continue to demand both celebration and scrutiny.

Works cited

1. Berry, Nita. 2016. ―Social Change through Children's Books: - An Indian Perspective.‖ *Bookbird: A Journal of International Literature, vol.54 no. 1, 2016. P.48-54. Project MUSE,* doi:10.1353/bkb.2016.0014

2. Butler, Judith. 2001. "Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 7 (4):621-636.

3. ———. 2004. *Precarious Life*. London: Verso Books.

4. Cherney, James L. (2011*). The Rhetoric of Ableism. Disability Journals Quarterly, Vol.3* http://dsq-sds.org/article/view/1665/1606#endnoteref29

5. Davis, Lennard. *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body, Verso, 1995*

6. Garland-Thomson, Rosemarie. *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Literature and Culture. Columbia University Press*, 1997. Web. Accessed 1 Sept 2018.

7. ------- 2002.―Integrating Disability, Transforming Feminist Theory.‖ *NWSA Journal*, vol. 14, no. 3, 2002, pp. 1–32. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4316922. Accessed 20 Sept 2018.

8. ------- 2009. Disability, identity and representation: An introduction. In Rethinking Normalcy: A Disability Studies Reader. T. Titchkosky & R. Michalko (Eds.), 63- 74.Toronto, ON: Canadian Scholar's Press.

9. Mills, Charles W. April, 2011. "The Political Economy of Personhood." *On the Human* blog. http://onthehuman.org/2011/04/political-economy-of-personhood/#n2 Accessed on August 19, 2018.

10. Mitchell, David T, and Sharon L. Snyder. Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001.

11. Longmore, Paul K. "*Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People in Television and Motion Pictures," in Images of the Disabled, Disabling Images, ed. Alan Gartner and Tom Joe.* New York: Praeger, 1987 .

12. Quayson, Ato. *Aesthetic Nervousness: Disability and the Crisis of Representation*. Columbia University Press, 2007. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/10.7312/quay13902

13. Sharma, Vishnu. *The Panchatantra, trans. Arthur W. Ryder, The University of Chicago Press, 1925.*

14. Siebers, T. (2009). *Disability theory*. Michigan: The University of Michigan Press. https:// doi.org/10.3998 /mpub.309723

15. Zhang, L., & Haller, B. (2013). Consuming image: How mass media impact the identity of people with disabilities. *Communication Quarterly, 61*(3), 319-334. https://doi.org/10.1080/01463373.2013.776988