

What The Panchatantra Tells Us Today

“Money...” – so begins the first jewel of wisdom in the Panchatantra –
 ...If you don't have it, try hard to earn it
 When you have earned it, you should guard it well
 And as you guard it, always make it grow
 When it has grown, give it to worthy men.

In an age when money is both sought after, often mindlessly, and also reviled at the same time by some, these ancient words of wisdom serve us well. The purpose of education has come to be defined as making money. Lost in that race to make money is the purpose of making money, which is to increase wealth. But the wealth of nations does not grow by trickery, as is evident from the various schemes that claim to make money grow. One problem is that with humans also in charge of printing money, which directly affects inflation, the distinction between real growth of wealth and deceptive growth of wealth is lost upon unsuspecting populations who marvel at their being stuck at a certain level of relative prosperity despite decades of hard work. Therefore, to this brilliant verse one would have to add that before you seek to make money grow, make sure you understand the phenomenon of inflation. Those who attribute inflation to simplistic explanations of supply and demand fool others seeking rewards they do not understand.

A dog is thrilled when it happens to get
 even a bone without any meat;
 Filthy with remnants of sinew and fat
 though to sate its hunger it is not enough;
 But even a jackal within his grasp
 a lion lets go, to kill an elephant;
 Every being though in dire straits
 seeks a reward that accords with its own disposition.

The meaning of the word disposition in this verse is no different from the meaning of the word *swabhavagun* in the Bhagwad Gita. The implications are colossal because modern day reward systems often abuse this insight while also failing to properly assess the beneficiary's gunas, leading to pervasive discontent. That the wisdom of Panchatantra remains relevant on this backdrop becomes even more obvious in the next few verses.

Surely not by the might of someone else,
 Is anyone judged here noble or base.
 By his work alone does a man obtain
 Greatness in the world or else its reverse.

Servants, when they get to remain close by,
 Observe what angers or pleases the king (boss);
 And little by little they surmount him.
 In spite of his attempts to shake them loose.

The tragedy that follows a wrong plan,
The triumph that results from the right plan,
To the rules of Polity both are linked;
 so the wise can point them out, as if displayed in advance.

Be ever careful in how you assess
The merits of your kingdom and your men,
On this alone will your success depend --
 discerning the relative worth of men (and women).

A farmer may sow a mixed bag of seeds;
But only by their sprouts can one judge
The quality of germinating seeds.

If a gem fit to be set
In a golden ornament
Is encased instead in tin,
It utters no complaint, it ceases not to shine
On the jeweler falls the blame.

When a master fails to make distinctions,
And treats all his servants in the same way;
Then even the assiduous lose their zest.

Be it a horse, a science, or a sword,
A lute, a voice, a woman, or a man –
Whether they become capable or not
Depends on the competence of the one
 to whom they belong.

When a king is unwise, dimwits will surround him;
When such men come to power, the wise will soon disappear;
When the wise leave the realm, policies go askew;
When his policies have come to ruin,
 the realm perishes along with the king.

When there is poison in the food,
When a tooth has become loose,
When a minister is a crook
 to wipe them all out is the only relief.
...But one should not, without probing the facts,
Abandon a man who's extremely bright,
Every bent of whose heart one has long observed.

These few verses brilliantly articulate the essence of all the literature on management, which can be summarized as the ability to systematically actualize the three constructs – knowledge, aspirations of each individual, and cooperation – in the pursuit of the stated purpose in its institutional context. When badly managed “realms” are artificially propped up instead of allowing them to fail and rejuvenate, the society at large degenerates.

From management the Panchatantra moves seamlessly into the realm philosophy, recognizing the limitations of even the yogis.

There's a silly goose searching in a pond
 for white lotus shoots at night;
 it pecks at reflected stars
 time and again and is fooled.
 Thereafter, assuming that they are stars,
 it does not peck at a white lotus
 even in daylight.
 Fearful of imposters, people expect the worst
 even from good men.

With deepest love some render him service,
 And yet he displays some hostility;
 With shrewd guile others render disservice,
 And yet he shows just cordiality.
 The minds of kings, they are mercurial,
 And they are difficult to comprehend;
 Rules of service are a deep mystery,
 Impenetrable even to yogis.
 Virtues beget virtue only for those
 who recognize virtue.
 They turn into faults when they encounter
 people without virtue.
 ...Virtues themselves often work
 against those who practice them.

Even the sides of mountains topple down,
 As gentle waters slowly wear them down;
 How much more, then, the gentle hearts of men,
 By crafty men whispering false reports.

When he is proud and blind to right and wrong
 Or when he has embarked on evil paths,
 even an elder
 it is right to rebuke.

The first of the five tantras ends with thoughts on education. At a time when “factories” of education are being created to serve short term interests, these thoughts are illuminating.

What is the use of learning –
If obtaining it does not lead one
To control his senses with all his heart;
If it would not make his mind docile;
If it does not follow the righteous path;
If getting it only serves to create
Displays of eloquence before the world;
If it leads to neither glory nor peace?

Knowledge normally destroys pride;
in fools instead it creates pride;
As light that illuminates one’s sight
creates only blindness in owls.

What is wholesome you should seek in harsh speech;
if you find it, it is nectar indeed.
What is deceptive you should seek in sweet speech;
if you find it, it is poison indeed.

By associating with good and bad folks,
Men pickup their qualities, good and bad;
As the wind, blowing over sundry spots,
Gathers to itself odours, good and bad.

Go where you find joy, though it be afar;
Ask a learned man, though he be a mere child.

The remaining four tantras explain the aforementioned pearls of wisdom in different contexts, some more relevant in the past than the present. Some of the original text and verses have even been lost. Nonetheless, the parts that have survived cast a brilliant light on ancient wisdom that seems ever more relevant today, even though various leaders choose to dwell only on the parts that serve their agenda. The Panchatanra conclude:

No person should ever do anything
he has not properly seen,
nor properly understood;
he has not properly heard,
nor properly examined.