

NARRATIVE STRUCTURES IN INDIAN KNOWLEDGE TEXTS: FROM MYTH TO MORAL PHILOSOPHY

Dr. Pragyasa H. Upadhyaya

Assistant Professor,

Head of Department of English

Late Rajendrasingh Alias Baba Vyas Arts Commerce College,

Kondhali, Maharashtra, India

Abstract

The Indian Knowledge System (IKS) is profoundly shaped by narrative traditions that convey philosophical, ethical, and social knowledge through storytelling. Ancient Indian texts rarely present abstract ideas in isolation; instead, they encode philosophical thought within myths, fables, and frame narratives. This article examines narrative structures in classical Indian texts such as the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Panchatantra*, *Kathasaritsagara*, and *Vetala Panchavimshati*. Through textual illustrations and literary analysis, the paper argues that Indian narrative traditions transform myth into moral philosophy and serve as pedagogical tools for ethical reflection. The article also explores oral storytelling traditions that passed these narratives across generations, demonstrating how storytelling functions as a vibrant mode of cultural reminiscence and intellectual inquiry.

Keywords: Indian Knowledge System, Narrative Traditions, Philosophy, Frame narratives, Moral Reasoning

Introduction

Narrative occupies a vital position within the intellectual landscape of the Indian Knowledge System. Ancient Indian texts frequently employ storytelling as a medium for communicating philosophical insights, ethical dilemmas, and political wisdom. Unlike many philosophical traditions that privilege abstract discourse, Indian texts often embed philosophical ideas within narrative frameworks that combine myth, allegory, and moral reflection. In the Indian tradition, knowledge is frequently conveyed through '*katha*'—a story that simultaneously entertains and instructs. Narrative therefore becomes a pedagogical device through which moral and intellectual ideas are transmitted across generations. Texts such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* illustrate this approach by weaving philosophical dialogues into epic storytelling. These works are not merely mythological tales; they are narrative laboratories in which ethical questions about duty, justice, and human responsibility are explored.

Scholars of Indian literature have noted that storytelling functions as a form of "narrative wisdom," enabling complex philosophical ideas to be communicated in accessible and memorable ways. The narrative traditions of the *Panchatantra* and the *Jataka Tales* illustrate this pedagogical method particularly well. Through allegorical animal fables and moral anecdotes, these texts transmit ethical reasoning and political insight while engaging readers through vivid narrative imagery. ([ICERT][1])

This article examines the narrative structures found in Indian knowledge texts and demonstrates how storytelling transforms myth into moral philosophy. By analyzing epic narratives, frame tales, didactic

fables, and oral storytelling traditions, the paper highlights the literary richness and philosophical depth of Indian narrative traditions.

Narrative as a Mode of Knowledge in Indian Tradition

In the Indian intellectual tradition, narrative functions not merely as literary expression but as a method of knowledge transmission. The earliest layers of Indian literature—including the epics and *Puranas*—present philosophical ideas through narrative structures that invite readers to reflect on ethical questions.

The Mahabharata, attributed to the sage *Vyasa*, exemplifies this narrative mode. Often described as the longest epic in world literature, *the Mahabharata* contains numerous sub-stories that explore moral dilemmas and human conflicts. Rather than presenting a single moral doctrine, the epic dramatizes ethical complexity through its characters and events.

One of the most celebrated philosophical sections of the epic is the *Bhagavad Gita*. The dialogue between *Krishna* and *Arjuna* takes place on the battlefield of *Kurukshetra*, transforming a moment of crisis into a philosophical discourse. *Krishna's* teachings on duty, action, and detachment emerge organically from the narrative context.

Similarly, *the Ramayana*, traditionally attributed to *Valmiki*, explores the ethical concept of ‘dharma’ through the story of *Rama's* exile and return. *Rama's* unwavering commitment to duty illustrates the moral ideal of righteous conduct. Through narrative action rather than abstract theory, the *Ramayana* demonstrates how ethical principles operate within human life.

These epics illustrate how narrative can function as a philosophical framework. By situating ethical ideas within stories, Indian texts transform philosophy into lived experience.

Frame Narratives and Story Cycles

One of the most distinctive features of Indian storytelling traditions is the use of “frame narratives”, a literary structure in which multiple stories are embedded within a larger narrative context. This technique allows authors to present a diverse range of stories while maintaining a coherent narrative framework.

A classic example of this structure appears in the *Kathasaritsagara* (“Ocean of Streams of Story”), composed in the eleventh century by *Somadeva*. This vast collection of tales incorporates hundreds of stories drawn from earlier narrative traditions. Stories are nested within other stories, creating a layered narrative architecture that resembles an intricate web of narratives. The frame narrative technique also appears in the *Vetala Panchavimshati*, a collection of twenty-five tales involving King *Vikramaditya* and a supernatural spirit known as the *Vetala*. In this cycle, each story ends with a moral riddle that the king must answer. If he speaks, the *Vetala* escapes and the story cycle begins again.

This narrative structure transforms storytelling into a philosophical dialogue. Readers must engage in moral reasoning alongside the king, considering questions of justice, loyalty, and truth. The frame narrative therefore functions not merely as a literary device but as a pedagogical strategy. By embedding stories within stories, Indian authors create a dynamic narrative environment in which ethical ideas can be explored from multiple perspectives.

Animal Fables and the Pedagogy of Political Wisdom

Among the most influential narrative texts in the Indian tradition is the *Panchatantra*, traditionally attributed to the scholar *Vishnu Sharma*. Composed as a manual for educating princes, the *Panchatantra* demonstrates how storytelling can serve as a vehicle for political and ethical instruction. The text consists

of five books of animal fables, each illustrating principles of governance, diplomacy, and social behaviour. Animals act as symbolic representations of human characters, allowing complex political ideas to be communicated through simple narratives. For example, the story “*The Brahmin and the Mongoose*” warns against rash judgment. In the tale, a Brahmin kills his loyal mongoose after mistakenly believing that it harmed his child, only to discover that the animal had actually protected the child from a snake. The story illustrates the danger of impulsive action and the importance of thoughtful deliberation. ([Wikipedia][2])

The *Panchatantra* therefore functions as a form of ‘narrative political philosophy’. Through engaging stories, it teaches lessons about leadership, friendship, strategy, and moral judgment. Scholars have observed that the *Panchatantra* was designed to educate princes in practical wisdom and ethical conduct through storytelling rather than theoretical instruction. ([IJELS][3])

This narrative pedagogy reflects a broader principle within the Indian Knowledge System: wisdom is most effectively transmitted through stories that stimulate both imagination and reasoning.

Myth and Moral Philosophy in Epic Narratives

While fables teach practical wisdom, epic narratives explore moral philosophy on a grand scale. The epics of India present complex ethical dilemmas that challenge simplistic notions of good and evil.

In the Mahabharata, characters frequently confront situations where every choice carries moral consequences. The epic’s central conflict—the war between the *Pandavas* and the *Kauravas*—raises questions about justice, duty, and the ethics of warfare. One famous episode concerns the dilemma of *Arjuna*, who hesitates to fight against his own relatives and teachers. *Krishna* responds by teaching the philosophy of ‘karma yoga’, emphasizing the importance of fulfilling one’s duty without attachment to results.

This narrative moment transforms a battleground into a philosophical field. The epic demonstrates how storytelling can serve as a medium for exploring metaphysical and ethical questions. Similarly, the *Ramayana* explores the relationship between personal desire and moral duty. *Rama*’s exile, *Sita*’s trial by fire, and the loyalty of *Hanuman* illustrate the complexities of human relationships within a moral universe governed by dharma. Through these narratives, myth becomes a vehicle for philosophical reflection.

The Vikram–Vetala Stories: Narrative and Moral Inquiry

Among the most intriguing narrative traditions of classical India are the stories of the *Vetala Panchavimshati*. These tales present a unique narrative structure that combines mystery, moral reasoning, and philosophical dialogue. The central narrative involves King *Vikramaditya*, who is tasked with capturing a spirit known as the *Vetala*. Each time the king carries the spirit through the night, the *Vetala* tells a story ending with a moral question. If the king answers the question correctly, the spirit escapes and returns to the tree from which it was taken. The stories thus form a cycle of narrative puzzles. Each tale presents a complex moral situation that requires logical reasoning. For example, one story describes three men who claim the right to marry a resurrected woman. Each man contributed in a different way to restoring her life, leading to a debate about who deserves her hand in marriage. The *Vetala* asks the king to determine the most just outcome. Through such dilemmas, the *Vetala* stories encourage readers to engage in ethical reasoning. Rather than delivering straightforward moral lessons, the narratives invite interpretation and debate. This dialogic narrative structure reflects the philosophical ethos of the Indian

Knowledge System, where truth often emerges through dialogue and reflection rather than authoritative pronouncement.

Oral Storytelling Traditions in India

While many Indian narratives were eventually written down, their origins lie in oral storytelling traditions that flourished across the subcontinent. Storytellers performed epics, legends, and fables in temples, courts, and village gatherings.

One example of such oral traditions is ‘*Burra Katha*’, a storytelling performance tradition from southern India. In this form, a main storyteller narrates a story accompanied by music, dialogue, and dramatic performance. ([Wikipedia][4])

These performances illustrate how storytelling functioned as a communal cultural practice. Stories were not static texts but living performances that evolved with each retelling.

Oral storytelling also ensured the preservation of cultural memory. Through repeated performance, narratives such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* became deeply embedded in the collective imagination of Indian society. The oral tradition also encouraged creativity and adaptation. Storytellers often modified narratives to address contemporary social issues, demonstrating the dynamic nature of storytelling within the Indian Knowledge System.

Kshepak Katha in the Indian Knowledge System: Narrative Insertions with Epic Illustrations

Within the vast and layered corpus of the Indian Knowledge System (IKS), narrative traditions function not merely as entertainment but as vehicles of philosophical, ethical, and pedagogical transmission. One such distinctive narrative device is the concept of *Kshepak Katha*, or interpolated/embedded story—subsidiary narratives woven into a primary storyline to deepen meaning and expand interpretive possibilities. The presence of *Kshepak Kathas* is especially prominent in classical epics like the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. These texts evolved over centuries through oral recitation and redaction, allowing the inclusion of multiple narrative strands. As a result, they are not linear compositions but encyclopedic repositories of stories, philosophies, and cultural values.

A striking example from the *Mahabharata* is the *Nala–Damayanti* episode, narrated within the *Vana Parva*. This *Kshepak Katha* is recounted to *Yudhishthira* during his exile to console him in his suffering after losing everything in the dice game. The story of King *Nala*’s fall and eventual restoration parallels *Yudhishthira*’s own predicament, offering ethical insight into patience, dharma, and resilience. Similarly, the famous *Savitri–Satyavan* narrative, embedded within the same epic, exemplifies devotion and the triumph over death, reinforcing moral ideals while momentarily shifting the narrative focus.

Another important *Kshepak Katha* in the *Mahabharata* is the extensive philosophical discourse of the *Bhagavad Gita*. Though central to the epic today, it functions structurally as an inserted dialogue between *Krishna* and *Arjuna* on the battlefield. This embedded text transforms the narrative into a profound exploration of duty, action, and metaphysics, demonstrating how *Kshepak Kathas* can elevate a storyline into a philosophical treatise. In the *Ramayana*, *Kshepak Kathas* also play a vital role. The *Ahalya* episode, for instance, is a brief but significant interpolated tale encountered by Rama during his journey with *Vishvamisra*. This story of curse and redemption illustrates themes of sin, penance, and divine grace. Likewise, the story of *Shabari*, though relatively short, functions as an inserted devotional narrative emphasizing *bhakti* (devotion) and spiritual equality.

Another notable example is the *Agastya*-related narratives in the *Ramayana*, where sage *Agastya* recounts earlier mythic events and provides divine weapons to *Rama*. These embedded stories expand the temporal and cosmological scope of the epic, linking it with broader mythological traditions. Such interpolated narratives are not accidental insertions but deliberate pedagogical strategies. They serve multiple functions: they provide moral exempla, create narrative pauses for reflection, and connect the central plot with a wider universe of knowledge. In oral storytelling traditions, these *Kshepak Kathas* also allowed storytellers flexibility to adapt narratives to different audiences and contexts. Thus, through examples from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, it becomes evident that *Kshepak Katha* is a powerful narrative and epistemic tool. It not only enriches the literary texture of the epics but also reflects the dynamic, inclusive, and ever-evolving nature of the Indian Knowledge System.

The Bhagavad Gita : A Narrative Dialogue

The *Bhagavad Gita* stands as one of the most profound examples of dialogic narrative within the Indian Knowledge System, where philosophical inquiry is embedded within a dramatic and existential moment. Structurally, the text is not an independent treatise but an integral part of the *Mahabharata*, unfolding on the battlefield of *Kurukshetra* at the brink of war. This setting is crucial, for it transforms abstract philosophy into lived experience. The narrative takes the form of a dialogue between Krishna, the charioteer and divine guide, and *Arjuna*, the warrior prince overwhelmed by moral dilemma. *Arjuna's* crisis—his reluctance to fight against his own kin, teachers, and loved ones—serves as the narrative catalyst, making the dialogue not merely theological but deeply human and psychological.

What distinguishes the *Bhagavad Gita* as a narrative in dialogue is its method of unfolding knowledge through question (*prashna*) and answer (*uttar*), doubt and resolution. *Arjuna* does not passively receive instruction; rather, he questions, hesitates, and even challenges Krishna, thereby embodying the role of an active seeker. This dialogic form reflects a fundamental principle of Indian epistemology, where knowledge (*jnana*) is attained through dialogue (*samvada*), reflection, and inner realization. *Krishna's* responses are layered and adaptive, addressing *Arjuna's* confusion through multiple philosophical frameworks—*Karma Yoga* (the path of action), *Jnana Yoga* (the path of knowledge), and *Bhakti Yoga* (the path of devotion). The narrative thus becomes a dynamic progression rather than a static doctrine, accommodating different temperaments and modes of understanding. Moreover, the dialogic narrative allows the *Bhagavad Gita* to bridge the gap between the temporal and the eternal. While the immediate context is the impending war, the discourse transcends the specific situation to address universal concerns—duty, righteousness, detachment, and the nature of the self. Krishna gradually elevates the conversation from ethical dilemma to metaphysical insight, revealing the imperishable nature of the self (*atma*) and the transient nature of the physical world. The famous *Vishvarupa Darshana* (the cosmic vision) episode further intensifies the narrative, where Krishna reveals his universal form (*virat swaropa*) to *Arjuna*, transforming the dialogue into a moment of divine revelation that surpasses ordinary language and perception.

In literary terms, the *Bhagavad Gita* exemplifies how dialogue can serve as a powerful narrative device, creating immediacy, tension, and engagement. Unlike monologic texts, the dialogic structure invites readers into the conversation, encouraging them to identify with *Arjuna's* doubts and seek their own answers. It also reflects the teacher-disciple tradition central to Indian thought, where wisdom is transmitted through interpersonal exchange rather than unilateral instruction. Thus, the *Bhagavad Gita* as a narrative in dialogue is not merely a philosophical text but a living conversation that continues to resonate across time. Its enduring relevance lies in its ability to transform a moment of crisis into an

opportunity for self-realization, demonstrating that true knowledge emerges through questioning, reflection, and *samvada*.

Simhasana Battisi: Layered and Dialogic Narrative

An important illustration of layered and dialogic narrative within the Indian Knowledge System can also be found in the *Simhasana Battisi*, a celebrated collection of stories centered around King Vikramaditya. The text is structured as a frame narrative in which King Bhoja discovers the enchanted throne (*simhasana*) of Vikramaditya, adorned with thirty-two statues. As Bhoja attempts to ascend the throne, each statue comes to life and narrates a story about Vikramaditya's virtues—his justice, generosity, courage, and righteousness. These thirty-two narratives function as embedded or *Kshepak*-like stories, each acting as a moral test that Bhoja must pass before being deemed worthy of the throne. Structurally, the *Simhasana Battisi* exemplifies a sophisticated use of episodic and cumulative storytelling, where each story is self-contained yet contributes to the overarching evaluative framework. Much like the dialogic exchange in the *Bhagavad Gita* or the embedded narratives in the Mahabharata, these stories create a participatory mode of knowledge transmission, compelling both the protagonist and the audience to engage in ethical reflection. The repetitive yet varied narrative pattern reinforces key ideals of kingship and moral conduct, while also illustrating the fluidity of oral storytelling traditions where stories can be expanded, adapted, or reinterpreted over time. Thus, the *Simhasana Battisi* stands as a significant example of how narrative multiplicity, moral pedagogy, and structural layering converge within Indian literary and knowledge traditions.

The *Simhasana Battisi* (Singhasan Dvattrimshika) stands as a rich example of a layered and dialogic narrative in the Indian storytelling tradition, where meaning unfolds through a carefully structured interplay of frames, voices, and embedded tales. At the outermost level, the narrative begins with King Bhoja, who discovers the ornate throne of the legendary Vikramaditya. As Bhoja attempts to ascend the throne, he is repeatedly interrupted by one of the thirty-two statues (*putlikas*) that adorn it. Each statue comes alive and narrates an episode from Vikramaditya's life, thereby creating a multi-layered narrative structure in which the primary frame (Bhoja's aspiration) encloses a secondary narrative (the statue's speech), which in turn contains a tertiary embedded tale (Vikramaditya's exemplary deeds). For instance, in one such episode, a statue recounts how Vikramaditya once gave away his entire wealth and kingdom to a poor Brahmin without hesitation, illustrating the ideal of absolute generosity; this story is not merely told but is directed toward Bhoja as a moral challenge, implicitly asking whether he possesses similar virtues. This dynamic gives the text its dialogic quality, as the narrative unfolds through a continuous exchange between Bhoja and the statues, transforming storytelling into a process of ethical interrogation rather than passive reception. After each story, Bhoja is compelled to reflect upon his own worthiness, and often he must admit his inadequacy, which prevents him from ascending the throne.

In another tale, Vikramaditya is shown risking his life to protect a sage, emphasizing courage and duty, while in yet another he disguises himself to understand the suffering of his subjects, embodying empathetic kingship; each of these embedded narratives functions as a moral exemplar, and the dialogic framework ensures that these ideals are not abstract but are tested against Bhoja's lived reality. The repetition of this narrative pattern—attempt, interruption, narration, and moral judgment—creates a cyclical yet progressive structure, where each story introduces a new ethical dimension while reinforcing the central theme of *rajdharma* (righteous kingship). This technique of repetition with variation not only sustains narrative interest but also deepens the didactic impact, as the reader, like Bhoja, becomes involved in the process of evaluation and self-reflection. The narrative's reliance on dialogue aligns it with other Indian texts such as the *Vetala Panchavimshati*, where each story culminates in a question, yet

Simhasana Battisi distinguishes itself by making the dialogic exchange explicitly moral and evaluative rather than purely riddling. Ultimately, the throne itself becomes a symbolic center of the narrative—a representation of earned authority that cannot be claimed without ethical qualification. Through its intricate layering and dialogic mode, *Simhasana Battisi* transforms storytelling into a reflective exercise in moral philosophy, demonstrating how narrative in the Indian Knowledge System operates not just as entertainment but as a means of cultivating ethical awareness and ideal conduct.

Narrative, Memory, and Cultural Transmission

Storytelling in the Indian tradition operates as a form of cultural memory. Through narratives, societies preserve historical experiences, ethical values, and philosophical ideas. The enduring popularity of texts like the *Panchatantra* illustrates the power of narrative to transcend cultural boundaries. Translated into numerous languages and adapted across different cultures, these stories continue to influence global storytelling traditions.

The narrative structures of Indian texts also reflect an understanding of human cognition. Stories engage emotional imagination, making ethical lessons more memorable than abstract philosophical arguments. Thus narrative becomes a bridge between intellectual reflection and lived experience. The narrative traditions of the Indian Knowledge System reveal a sophisticated literary culture in which storytelling serves as a medium of philosophical inquiry. From the epic narratives of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* to the didactic fables of the *Panchatantra* and the riddling tales of Vikram and Vetala, Indian texts demonstrate how myth can evolve into moral philosophy. These narrative structures transform stories into intellectual exercises that stimulate ethical reasoning and philosophical reflection. Frame narratives, allegorical fables, and oral storytelling traditions all contribute to a dynamic literary ecosystem that preserves and transmits cultural knowledge. Ultimately, storytelling in the Indian tradition represents more than a literary art. It is a method of thinking, teaching, and remembering. Through narrative, Indian texts transform myth into moral philosophy, creating stories that continue to resonate across centuries.

References:

1. Doniger, Wendy. “The Hindus: An Alternative History”. Penguin, 2009.
2. Ramanujan, A. K. “Folktales from India”. Pantheon Books, 1991.
3. Somadeva. “Kathasaritsagara”. Translated by C. H. Tawney, Penguin Classics.
4. Valmiki. “The Ramayana”. Translated by R. K. Narayan, Penguin Classics.
5. Vyasa. “The Mahabharata”. Translated by Bibek Debroy, Penguin Books, 2015.
6. Sharma, Vishnu. “The Panchatantra”. Translated by Patrick Olivelle. Oxford University Press, 2006.
7. Bawa, Simmin. “Narrative Wisdom in Indian Knowledge Systems.” “Shodh Sari: International Multidisciplinary Journal”, 2026. ([ICERT][1])
8. **Vyasa**, *Mahabharata*. Translated by Bibek Debroy, Penguin, 2010–2014.
9. “The Bhagavadgita with the Commentary of Shankaracharya” Translated by Swami Gambhirananda, Advaita Ashrama, 2000
10. Brockington J.L., “*The Sanskrit Epics*” Brill, 1998.
11. Fitzgerald, James L. “The Many Voices of the Mahabharata.” *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 123, no. 4, 2003, pp. 803–818.
12. Sukthankar, V. S. *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*. Bhandarkar Oriental

Research Institute, 1957.

13. Chaudhuri, Pranab Chandra, trans. *Simhasana Dvatrimshika (The Thirty-Two Tales of the Throne)*. Sanskrit Pustak Bhandar, 1976.
14. Ryder, Arthur W., trans. *Panchatantra*. University of Chicago Press, 1925.
15. Tawney, C. H., trans. *Kathasaritsagara* by Somadeva. 2 vols., Motilal Banarsidass, 1880.



Copyright & License:

© Authors retain the copyright of this article. This work is published under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY 4.0), permitting unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.