

# Assimilating Virtue of Discernment through *The Baitāl Pachchisī*

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## Abstract

Indian culture is the heritage of ethical values, traditions, customs, morals, and more. These aspects are often reflected in the stories, especially whose target audience is children. Indian parents find it necessary to educate their progenies with moral principles. The Panchatantra, The Jataka Tales, Aesop Fables are amongst works that teach children ethics. *The Baitāl Pachchisī* is one such piece of literature - written by Somadeva - originally in Sanskrit and later translated into many vernacular languages and also in English, which was written by John Platts - has all elements that showcase the Indian tradition. The work is a mixture of wisdom and entertainment along with supernatural elements. The protagonist, King Vikram is a wise, valiant, and egoistic person who is challenged by the witty, philosophical celestial spirit, Baitāl. By reading this book, the reader can develop a sense of morality and justice through the transaction between the King Vikram and Baitāl with the aid of their riddles and stories. This article aims to study how *The Baitāl Pachchisī* helps the young minds to morally judge, analyse, and resolve a situation.

**Key words:** *Indian culture, Morality, Wisdom, Ethics, Children Literature, Folktale, Supernatural elements.*

## Introduction

The necessity of having a moral ground is something that every parent would want their children to imbibe and in order to achieve this, they narrate or read stories that provides moral values. The Panchatantra, The Jataka Tales and Aesop Fables are some famous works that acts as an aid for the same. Children are attracted to these stories, and how the animals are given human like qualities. The character learns a lesson from their mistake and develops a better personality, in addition to that they showcase the difference between virtuous and depraved. The Akbar and Birbal stories provide wit and cleverness. However, the classical

folktale, *The Baitāl Pachchisī* which is internationally known as Vikram and Betāl not only teaches one to have a moral code and wit but rather helps the children to develop the analytical skills and judge a situation with a better perception of justice and conduct. The article throws light on how *The Baitāl Pachchisī* has filled the promising young minds with an imperative sense of ethics.

*The Baitāl Pachchisī* or Vetala Panchavimshati is a collection of stories within a story from India which is originally written in Sanskrit. One of the oldest recensions of the story is located within side the twelfth book of Kathasaritsagara which literally means Ocean of the Streams of Story. The work was compiled by Somadeva in the eleventh century. He was a famous author of his period and has written many fairy tales and folktales which was compiled into one work, as mentioned earlier. Little information is known about Somadeva except for the fact that he was a Shaiva Brahmin but was highly influenced by Buddhism which he often reflected in his work, Kathasaritsagara which has a total of eighteen books. Somadeva's narration is quite captivating as it is both simple and elegant. His lively way of presentation is enhanced with his humour, wit and style. The tale of Vikram and Betāl was first mentioned in the work Brihatkatha. It is believed to be first written in a long-lost language Pishachi or Picasī and then was later retold by Somadeva. *The Baitāl Pachchisī* precisely means twenty-five tales that revolves around Baitāl where there are twenty-four actual tales and the twenty fifth being the frame narrative. The stories of Vikram and Betāl are quite popular and as a result, there so many adaptations and translations in various languages. The version of *The Baitāl Pachchisī* translated by John Platts in English is in fact the translation of the Hindi text written by Dr Duncan Forbes. He is a Scottish linguist and has translated and edited a number of works in Urdu, Persian, and Arabic. His famous translation works include Mir Amman's Urdu, Bagh o Bahar, or Tales of the Four Darweshes and more. He has also written The Bengali Reader, The Hindustani Manual, and Grammar for Arabic language etc. John Thompson Platts was among the first to translate *The Baitāl Pachchisī* into English. He is a British scholar who was well-versed in Hindi and Persian grammar, A Grammar of the Hindustani Language, A Hindustani - English Dictionary is some of his notable works.

Works like these are a way to keep the young brain active and on its toes. *The Baitāl Pachchisī* make the people think about things in a different perspective and with a new outlook.

## Sagacity gained from the tales of Baitāl

Moral stories are a powerful tool for shaping children's social skills and values. These ethical stories are conventionally an important part of many cultures around the world. They teach children to distinguish right from wrong, how to be kind to others, and what they should expect from life, along with compassion, selflessness, and to treat others with respect. A person who is young has a greater capacity for empathy which means that the best way to help them become more vicarious is to tell them stories. According to psychologist and developmental expert Dr Elena Konnikova, "Young children are intuitive psychologists and they take everything we say and do as a direct window into one soul" making story telling a crucial part in one's childhood. Riddles are another alternative that would exercise the cognizance, they also provide opportunities for creativity and insightful thinking while simultaneously giving awareness into oneself. The questions play an important role in developing the minds of a human, especially of children. *The Baitāl Pachchisī* has tales which has riddles and questions which the Baitāl queries.

Indian parents narrate or read stories to their children, *The Baitāl Pachchisī* being a most common story told by them. The reason behind it is, the work is fun and engaging while also educating them on various aspects of life. The things a child could learn from the work are numerous such as social responsibility, gender sensitivity, how to scrutinize situations and more. The tales in *The Baitāl Pachchisī* are filled with wisdom and teachings to help us lead the right path of life. The work stands among the most influential books in the world which can make anyone wiser and understanding individually as well as collectively. The values it teaches are universal and timeless. Children too are excited to hear and read stories which have supernatural elements. The Baitāl is a celestial spirit, a hanging corpse or some even have translated it to be a vampire. Having a different character like Baitāl creates curiosity among the toddlers wanting to know how the story unfolds. The story of a King, is another thing that would keep the attention of theirs intact. Most of the people would be scared of going near the spirit itself but King Vikram was brave enough to capture the soul, shows the valour he has. The persistence of King Vikram is remarkable as he was ready to capture Baitāl each time he flies back to the tree he was hanging. The never give up attitude of the King motivates the young minds to have such a quality and determination. The patience level was commendable and it helps one to be grounded.

The Baitāl suggests that he would narrate a story to King Vikram during their journey and would pose a question related to that story, if King Vikram was to answer, Baitāl would glide back and if the King was not answering despite knowing the answer, then the King would lose his life. King Vikram was daring enough to accept the challenge. He was a sensible man and was filled with knowledge. Each question Baitāl asks was a piece of cake for him. He was not only able to answer but also point out the reason for the same. Along with King Vikram, the reader also develops an ability to evaluate circumstances better.

In Tale IV, Baitāl asks the question, “O king! To which of these two does the greater guilt attach?” (61). King Bir Vikramājī said it was the woman but the spirit doesn’t stop the question there and continues to question the reason for his answer, to which the King said, “However, depraved a man may be, still some sense of right and wrong remains in him; but a woman does not give a thought to right and wrong; hence great guilt attached to the woman” (61). In Tale VIII, the enquiry was that who’s was the greater virtue, King Vikram said it was of the servants. Baitāl tries to confuse the King with his clever usage of words, “Was not the merit of the king greater, who obtained so beautiful a woman, and bestowed her on his servant?” (82). For this King Bir Vikramājī said, “What superior merit is there in their conferring favors, whose office it is to do so? But he who, while having his own, interests to attend to, promotes the interests of another—he is the greater. For this reason, the servant’s merit was the greater” (82).

In order to examine such questions like who has a greater virtue or guilt is really tricky but Vikram gives astonishing explanations. Moral judgments are a key to our righteous life. They tell us what is correct and what is not from one situation to the other. To make an acumen, one needs to be aware of the consequences for both oneself and others. An ethical verdict should be made from a position of impartiality, not from one where the individual has been personally affected by the decision in any way. This folktale really is an early education material that makes the young generation more cultured and wiser.

The ending note of *The Baitāl Pachchisī* really sums up the main theme and purpose of the story, “Whether one be learned or a fool, a child or a man, he alone who is wise will win success” (181).

The quote points out that no matter what stage in life you are in, if you are wise the success will follow you. A prudent man will win succeed, no matter how his learning or foolishness manifests itself. To be able to

achieve in life, one needs to have the qualities such as perspective-taking or compassion, which benefits them to understand others better than you do yourself, humility which helps you see your own flaws, emotional intelligence which helps you control your emotions better and finally, knowledge and experience in life which supports you to make shrewder decisions.

## Conclusion

*The Baitāl Pachchisī* is a mixture of wisdom and entertainment that teaches children many practical things. With the help of this work, children are equally excited and engaged to it. The importance of imparting wisdom among children cannot be understated. Education should not be limited to academic learning but should also include teaching them moral values. Ethical development requires cognitive, social, and emotional growth, making children more socially responsible. The need of such stories for children is not just for their own sake, but also for the future they will create. Thus, *The Baitāl Pachchisī* not only coaches' the necessity of being astute and having a moral responsibility but incorporates basic requirements of human life-determination, confidence, courage, persistence, endurance being some of them.

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