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Ethics, Empathy, and Strategy: Reinterpreting the Hitopadeśa for 21st Century Leadership

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Abstract

This paper reinterprets the Hitopadeśa, a classical Sanskrit compendium of fables composed between 800 and 950 CE, as a foundational text for ethical and strategic leadership in the 21st century. Through narrative analysis and comparative synthesis, the study uncovers how its allegorical tales encode enduring principles of moral reasoning, emotional intelligence, strategic foresight, and participatory governance. These paradigms are examined in relation to contemporary leadership models, including transformational, servant, and adaptive leadership frameworks, revealing striking thematic continuities and culturally distinct nuances. The inquiry positions Hitopadeśa not merely as a literary artifact, but as a repository of indigenous management wisdom with practical relevance for modern organizational contexts. By bridging ancient Indian thought with global leadership discourse, the paper contributes to the growing scholarship on culturally embedded knowledge systems and their integration into mainstream management education and practice. It advocates for a pluralistic approach to leadership development—one that values ethical depth, contextual intelligence, and intercultural fluency. In doing so, the study offers a framework for revitalizing leadership theory through the lens of tradition-informed innovation, making a case for the Hitopadeśa as a timeless guide to navigating complexity with empathy and strategic clarity.

Keywords: Hitopadeśa, Indian management, Ethical leadership, Strategic thinking, Indigenous wisdom, Organizational behaviour

Introduction

Leadership scholarship has long been shaped by Western paradigms, where traits such as vision, influence, and adaptability are upheld as universal markers of effectiveness (Bass, 1990; Goleman, 1995; Yukl, 2013). However, a growing body of research underscores the enduring relevance of classical Indian texts—such as the *Arthaśāstra*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Hitopadeśa*—in informing ethical, sustainable, and contextually grounded leadership models (Gotise & Upadhyay, 2018; Sharma, 2020). At the heart of these works lie foundational principles: *dharma* (righteousness), *nīti* (policy and statecraft), and *samarthya* (capability and competence), which align closely with contemporary discourses on responsible and values-based leadership (Sen, 2006; Tripathi, 2011).

Modern leadership theory has evolved through diverse frameworks—including transformational, servant, and adaptive leadership—each offering distinct perspectives on leader–follower dynamics (Bass, 1990; Greenleaf, 1977; Heifetz, 1994). Salient dimensions such as strategic vision, emotional intelligence, ethical integrity, and participatory decision-making continue to shape global leadership discourse (Goleman, 1995; Brown & Treviño, 2006; Yukl, 2013). This study seeks to build a dialogic bridge between these contemporary constructs and the narrative wisdom of the *Hitopadeśa*, positioning indigenous insights as vital contributors to a more pluralistic and ethically grounded leadership paradigm.

Literature Review

Indigenous Wisdom in Management

A growing body of scholarship underscores the enduring relevance of classical Indian texts—such as the *Arthaśāstra*, the *Bhagavad Gītā*, and the *Hitopadeśa*—in informing paradigms of ethical and sustainable leadership (Gotise & Upadhyay, 2018). Central to these works is the primacy accorded to *dharma* (righteousness), *nīti* (policy or statecraft), and *samarthya* (capability or competence), principles that resonate closely with contemporary discourses on responsible and values-based leadership.

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Contemporary Leadership Frameworks

Modern leadership theory has evolved through diverse models, including transformational, servant, and adaptive leadership, each foregrounding different aspects of leader–follower dynamics. Salient dimensions of these frameworks include vision and strategic orientation (Bass, 1990), emotional intelligence and relational sensitivity (Goleman, 1995), ethical integrity and accountability (Brown & Treviño, 2006), and collaborative, participatory decision-making (Yukl, 2013). The present study seeks to create a dialogic bridge between these theoretical constructs and the narrative wisdom of the *Hitopadeśa*, thereby situating indigenous insights within the discourse of contemporary management.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative narrative approach to examine a purposively selected set of fables from the *Hitopadeśa*. Each story was carefully analyzed and coded to identify key leadership dimensions—such as strategic foresight, ethical reasoning, and collaborative or team-oriented dynamics. These thematic elements were then mapped against contemporary leadership constructs to explore points of convergence and divergence. Through the use of thematic synthesis, the analysis brought together overlapping insights while also highlighting culturally specific contributions that may not be fully captured by mainstream leadership models. In doing so, the study foregrounds the interpretive richness of indigenous *nīti* traditions, positioning them as valuable lenses through which modern leadership challenges can be re-examined with greater ethical and contextual sensitivity.

Findings and Discussion

This section explores seven carefully chosen fables from the *Hitopadeśa*, each illuminating a unique facet of leadership. Far more than moral tales, these narratives offer layered insights into strategic thinking, ethical judgment, and interpersonal dynamics. Each story is examined not only for its narrative structure and embedded moral reasoning, but also for its relevance to the challenges and complexities of contemporary organizational life. By drawing connections between ancient wisdom and modern leadership contexts, the analysis reveals how these fables continue to speak to issues of authority, collaboration, and decision-making in ways that remain strikingly resonant today.

The Hare and the Lion

- **Narrative Summary**
A despotic lion demands daily sacrifices from the forest. A hare, selected as prey, delays deliberately and claims to have met another lion. Exploiting the lion's vanity, he leads him to a well, where the predator mistakes his reflection for a rival and leaps to his death.
- **Leadership Insight**
The hare's actions underscore the primacy of *buddhi* (discernment) over *bala* (brute force). Intelligence, prudence, and psychological strategy emerge as superior to coercive authority,

emphasizing that leadership effectiveness often derives from adaptability rather than dominance.

1. Contemporary Relevance

This aligns with adaptive leadership theory (Heifetz, 1994), where situational awareness, creativity, and resourcefulness enable leaders to thrive amid volatility. In contexts such as startups or digital transformation, leaders must convert structural weaknesses into strategic advantage, much like the hare.

While this fable illustrates the triumph of intellect over raw force, the following tale—the Elephant and the Jackal—demonstrates how arrogance and the rejection of counsel precipitate downfall.

2. The Elephant and the Jackal

Narrative Summary

An arrogant elephant dismisses the cautious advice of a jackal, believing in his invincibility. Ignoring the warning, he walks into a trap and perishes.

i. Leadership Insight

This story critiques *mada* (pride, hubris) and highlights the importance of humility and receptivity to advice. True leadership entails *vinaya* (modesty) and *svikāra* (acceptance of feedback), qualities absent in the elephant's character.

ii. Contemporary Relevance

The narrative resonates with ethical leadership theory (Brown & Treviño, 2006), where accountability and responsiveness to stakeholders are fundamental. Leaders who ignore dissenting voices risk reputational and operational collapse, reflecting the elephant's fate.

From arrogance leading to ruin, the next fable—the Four Friends and the Hunter—shifts focus toward *saha-kārya* (collaborative action) and the power of coordinated teamwork.

• The Four Friends and the Hunter

• Narrative Summary

A deer is ensnared in a hunter's net. His companions—a mouse, a crow, and a tortoise—collaborate to free him. Later, when the tortoise is captured, the group again unites to rescue him.

• Leadership Insight

- The tale celebrates *sahakāritva* (cooperation) and *mitratva* (loyalty). By leveraging complementary abilities—speed, intelligence, agility—the group achieves collective survival.

• Contemporary Relevance

This parallels team leadership and cross-functional collaboration (Yukl, 2013). In modern organizations, psychological safety and trust enable diverse teams to tackle complex challenges, echoing the coordinated rescue effort. Where collaboration resolves external threats, the next story—the Cunning Mediator—addresses internal disputes, foregrounding the role of negotiation and emotional intelligence.

The Cunning Mediator

Narrative Summary

Two goats fight over a narrow bridge. A fox intervenes, proposing a compromise that allows both to cross safely.

Leadership Insight

The fox embodies *madhyastha* (mediation) and *saṁvāda* (dialogue). His actions illustrate how emotional intelligence and empathy transform conflict into cooperation.

Contemporary Relevance

This aligns with conflict management and negotiation frameworks (Rahim, 2002). Leaders often mediate disputes between departments, teams, or stakeholders, requiring tact, diplomacy, and empathetic listening—skills exemplified by the fox.

Having emphasized mediation and trust-building, the next fable—the Weaver and the Bird—warns of the consequences when leaders prioritize selfish gain over relational integrity.

The Weaver and the Bird

Narrative Summary

A weaver captures a bird, ignoring its warning of consequences. Seeking personal gain, he attempts to keep it, but ultimately loses both the bird and his reputation.

Leadership Insight

The narrative critiques *svārtha* (self-interest) and short-term opportunism, advocating instead for *dirgha-darśitva* (long-term vision) and *satya-niṣṭhā* (commitment to truth).

Contemporary Relevance

This parallels responsible and sustainable leadership (Maak & Pless, 2006). Exploitative behavior undermines stakeholder trust and organizational reputation, echoing the weaver's downfall.

While selfishness corrodes leadership integrity, the Elephant and the Sparrow emphasizes the dangers of unchecked power and the necessity of empathy.

The Elephant and the Sparrow

Narrative Summary

An elephant destroys a sparrow's nest, unaware of the harm caused. The sparrow, aided by smaller animals, engineers his downfall. The elephant later repents.

Leadership Insight

This tale critiques the misuse of *śakti* (power) and underscores the importance of *karuṇā* (compassion) in leadership. Even small, marginalized actors can challenge authority when injustice prevails.

Contemporary Relevance

The fable resonates with inclusive leadership and corporate social responsibility (CSR) frameworks (Pless & Maak, 2011). Leaders must be attentive to the vulnerable stakeholders impacted by their decisions, reinforcing that sustainable authority requires empathy.

From power tempered by compassion, the final fable—the Crocodile and the Monkey—turns to relational intelligence and the necessity of discernment in navigating trust and betrayal.

The Crocodile and the Monkey

Narrative Summary

A crocodile befriends a monkey but later attempts betrayal by luring him into the water. The monkey, sensing danger, escapes through clever reasoning.

Leadership Insight

The monkey exemplifies *viveka* (discernment) and *prājñā* (wisdom). The narrative underscores the importance of emotional intelligence and boundary-setting in sustaining relationships.

Contemporary Relevance

This aligns with emotional intelligence frameworks (Goleman, 1995). Leaders in networks of partnerships, alliances, and internal teams must cultivate discernment to detect manipulation and preserve trust.

Closing the cycle of narratives, this final tale complements the earlier fables by foregrounding relational vigilance—reminding leaders that wisdom and empathy are inseparable from ethical and strategic leadership.

Cross-Case Synthesis

The preceding sections analyzed individual fables from the *Hitopadeśa*, highlighting their leadership insights and modern relevance. To consolidate these observations, Table 4.1 presents a cross-case synthesis. This comparative framework identifies recurring themes, connects them with Sanskrit principles, and maps them onto contemporary leadership theories.

Table 4.8: Cross-Case Synthesis of Fables

Fable	Core Sanskrit Principle	Leadership Insight	Modern Management / Leadership Framework
4.1 The Hare and the Lion	<i>Buddhi</i> (discernment), <i>yukti</i> (strategic wisdom)	Intelligence and adaptability outweigh brute force in leadership.	Adaptive Leadership (Heifetz, 1994)
4.2 The Elephant and the Jackal	<i>Mada</i> (pride), <i>vinaya</i> (humility), <i>svikāra</i> (acceptance of counsel)	Arrogance blinds leaders; humility and receptivity to advice are vital.	Ethical Leadership (Brown & Treviño, 2006)
4.3 The Four Friends and the Hunter	<i>Sahakāritva</i> (cooperation), <i>mītratva</i> (loyalty)	Collective action and trust enable teams to overcome adversity.	Team Leadership & Cross-functional Collaboration (Yukl, 2013)
4.4 The Cunning Mediator	<i>Madhyastha</i> (mediation), <i>saṁvāda</i> (dialogue)	Emotional intelligence and negotiation transform conflict into cooperation.	Conflict Management & Negotiation (Rahim, 2002)

Fable	Core Sanskrit Principle	Leadership Insight	Modern Management / Leadership Framework
4.5 The Weaver and the Bird	<i>Svārtha</i> (self-interest) vs. <i>dīrgha-darśitva</i> (long-term vision)	Short-term selfish gains destroy trust; sustainable vision ensures legacy.	Responsible & Sustainable Leadership (Maak & Pless, 2006)
4.6 The Elephant and the Sparrow	<i>Śakti</i> (power), <i>karuṇā</i> (compassion), <i>dayā</i> (empathy)	Power must be tempered with compassion; neglecting the weak invites resistance.	Inclusive Leadership & CSR (Pless & Maak, 2011)
4.7 The Crocodile and the Monkey	<i>Viveka</i> (discernment), <i>prājñā</i> (wisdom)	Emotional intelligence and boundary-setting prevent betrayal in relationships.	Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1995)

Implications for Practice

The leadership insights drawn from the *Hitopadeśa* offer striking relevance for today's organizational landscape. Its narrative form—rooted in allegory and moral reflection—makes complex ethical and strategic ideas accessible, encouraging *viveka* (discernment) and thoughtful decision-making among leaders. These stories do more than entertain; they invite introspection and cultivate the kind of moral reasoning and contextual sensitivity that modern leadership development often seeks to instill.

In increasingly multicultural and globally networked workplaces, integrating indigenous wisdom into leadership pedagogy can deepen cultural awareness and enhance contextual relevance. Core principles such as *dharma* (ethical responsibility), *sāmarthyā* (capability), and *nīti* (strategic policy) offer a rich vocabulary for balancing authority with accountability—an essential tension in contemporary leadership practice.

Equally compelling is the emphasis on *sahakāra* (collaboration), emotional intelligence, and ethical foresight found throughout the fables. These values resonate with current priorities around inclusivity, psychological safety, and sustainable organizational culture. When embedded intentionally, they help foster trust, resilience, and long-term impact.

In this light, the *Hitopadeśa* emerges not simply as a classical text, but as a living resource—one that can inform and inspire ethical, adaptive, and human-centered leadership in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

This study affirms that the *Hitopadeśa* is far more than a collection of ancient fables—it is a profound reservoir of leadership wisdom. Through narrative analysis, the selected tales revealed enduring themes such as humility, collaboration, empathy, adaptability, and ethical foresight—qualities that resonate strongly with contemporary leadership models. The cross-case synthesis highlights the universal relevance of these insights and illustrates how indigenous wisdom can meaningfully enrich mainstream leadership thought.

In practical terms, the *Hitopadeśa* offers a culturally grounded, story-driven approach to leadership development—one that fosters reflection, moral reasoning, and inclusive decision-making. Theoretically, it expands the boundaries of leadership discourse by introducing *dharma*-centered and narrative-based perspectives, reinforcing the

importance of pluralism and cultural nuance in understanding leadership.

At its core, this research underscores that leadership is not merely strategic—it is deeply ethical, relational, and context-sensitive. The *Hitopadeśa* stands as a timeless guide, reminding us that wisdom, compassion, and integrity are not optional virtues but essential foundations for sustainable leadership. Future research can build on this work by engaging with other indigenous texts, testing these insights in organizational settings, and exploring cross-cultural leadership traditions in greater depth.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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