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Deciding with 'Dharma': Lessons in Managerial Decision-Making and Ethical Leadership from the Panchatantra, Betaal Pachisi and Select Indian Tribal Literature (in Translation)

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Abstract

King Vikramaditya must listen before each verdict and make a decision after each story; he is not allowed to evade, remain silent or take a middle ground. Long before the case method came around in business schools, Indian minds had been honed to the art of decisiveness and sound decision-making. This paper reads three such traditions side by side- the Panchatantra, Betaal Pachisi, and some of the selected Indian tribal tales (in translation) and determines what they have to offer the modern manager in the twin disciplines of ethical leadership and decision-making. The study takes a different path from the conventional reading of the narratives as illustrations of existing management theory; it is a reading that starts with the narratives themselves, extracts the decision logics contained within them, and then traces these to current management situations. Three different logics emerge: the anticipatory logic and consequence-weighing strategy of the Panchatantra; the calculated reasoning under ambiguity necessitated by Vikramaditya in the Betaal Pachisi; the consensual, stewardship-oriented decision-making of the tribal narratives, where the decision is made by the community itself. The binding of the three is 'dharma', not a strict moral rule but rather a situational compass, refusing to separate the 'smart' decision from the 'right' one. This is distilled in the paper into a three-lens model of 'dharmic' decision-making and illustrated with familiar managerial scenarios, which suggests that the stories are not mere parables to be admired but tools for developing judgment.

Keywords: *Ethical Leadership, Decision-Making, Indian Wisdom Traditions, Dharmic Management, Managerial Judgment*

1. Introduction

In the vicinity of a ghostly cremation ground, a king exhibits the art of decision-making, long before the case method was invented at business schools. Each trip with the 'Betaal' was a process of weighing evidence, assessing alternative testimonies and making a judgment that could not be postponed. On reflection, it is astounding to find the structure of the Betaal Pachisi to be rather modern: the decision-maker is presented with a lot of information, multiple claims from those involved, sometimes incomplete information, and is asked not only to make a judgment but also to defend his decision. These tales are didactic, representing the emperor's righteousness, but remove the cremation ground and the ghoul, and there you have the architecture of the case method: the pedagogical tool that has been the foundation of contemporary management education for a century. India, as this paper contends, has been conducting this seminar for more than a millennium.

Recognising this is gaining institutional momentum at present. In addition, the National Education Policy (NEP) 2020 explicitly calls for reviving indigenous epistemologies for use in the present-day. The Ministry of Education's

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Indian Knowledge System (IKS) Division has been funding research centres, faculty development programmes and curricular experiments since its inception to recover indigenous epistemologies for their use in the contemporary education sector. The policy vision has progressed significantly from the framework to practice between 2020 and 2026, with multiple IKS centres established at higher-education institutions throughout the country; IKS courses have been integrated into academic programs and academic research into various domains of Traditional Knowledge (TK), from water management to wellbeing, has been initiated. In this movement, management education has been active mainly via two streams: Vedantic and epic, like the Bhagavad-Gita on leadership and the Arthashastra on statecraft, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata on governance. However, IKS is not exhausted by its high canonical texts; it also breathes in the katha tradition (fable, riddle-tale, frame narrative) and the oral literatures of the tribal communities of India, one of the world's largest living indigenous traditions of oral narrative. These story traditions were pedagogical; that is, they were crafted, recounted, and repeated precisely to develop listeners' judgement, whether princes or villagers.

It is within this intellectual space that the present paper positions itself. It collates three intentionally heterogeneous story collections, the courtly Sanskrit fable corpus of the Panchatantra, the riddle-frame corpus of the Betaal Pachisi (Betaal Panchavimshati) and selected Indian tribal story collections in English translation and reads them for the lessons they offer regarding two intertwined managerial concepts: decision making and ethical leadership. The configuration of constructs is anything but random. In all of these cultures, the outcome of a decision is never judged solely on smartness; in fact, each story asks: was it right? Was there a commitment fulfilled, a vulnerable population protected, and the whole sustained? This blend of pragmatic and ethical aspects is encapsulated in the Indic notion of ‘dharma’, which is not a fixed moral imperative but rather a tool for navigating situations. That's why the title: to decide with ‘dharma’ and not just to make a good decision.

At the outset, it is important to explain the concept of 'dharma', as few terms are as often misinterpreted as this one. Derived from the Sanskrit root dhṛ — "to hold, to bear, to sustain" — 'dharma' signifies, in its most essential sense, "that which upholds": the conduct that sustains the individual, the relationship, the institution and the larger order of which they are parts (Monier-Williams, 1899). No single English word captures it fully: "religion" reduces it to a creed, "law" diminishes it to a statute, and "duty" makes it merely general (Olivelle, 2009). Classical Indian thought itself did not lend its constructs to such fixity — the Mahabharata famously declares that dharma is sūkṣma, subtle, its demands shifting with context, capacity and consequence, which is precisely why the tradition taught it through stories rather than statutes (Matilal, 2002). It is in this specific and delimited sense that the present paper employs the term: not as a theological doctrine, not as a sectarian marker, and not as a fixed moral code, but as a secular-analytical construct — a principle of sustaining rightness in decision-making, which asks of every choice whether it upholds what the decision-maker is entrusted with: the truth of the information acted upon, the legitimate claims of those affected, and the continuity of the whole. Dharma, so understood, is the quality that binds the effectiveness of a decision to its ethicality, and it is exclusively in this decision-theoretic light — as the integrating principle between managerial judgment and ethical leadership — that dharma is explored throughout this paper.

An investigation of this kind takes on special importance in a time when decisions in any organizational leadership are increasingly becoming ones where leaders often have to balance multiple demands when addressing issues of sustainability, stakeholder accountability, social justice, and organisational trust. Contemporary scholarship in management has therefore acknowledged that good decision-making requires analytical skills alongside moral imagination, contextual sensitivity and practical wisdom. It is these capacities that are the object of the narrative traditions this study examines. They create problems that involve opposing values and no answer comes without a cost, encouraging readers to think through the problem instead of simply solving it mathematically, and to understand that good leadership is more about moral judgment than about tactics.

The paper thus posits a more ambitious claim than that of the recovery of cultural narratives as pedagogical resources. These texts are claimed to be repositories of managerial cognition, containing complex models of thinking — as evidenced across the Indian indigenous tradition by the strategic statecraft of Kautilya's Arthashastra (Rangarajan, 1992), the counsel literature of the Mahabharata's Vidura Niti, the anticipatory fable-logic of the Panchatantra and

Hitopadesha (Olivelle, 1997; Ryder, 1925), the dilemma-verdicts of the Betaal Pachisi (Burton, 1870), the ethically bounded reasoning of the Jataka tales, the Akbar–Birbal and Tenali Raman cycles' lateral thinking and wit under power asymmetry (Naim, 1995; Shulman, 1985), the Thirukkural's aphoristic decision heuristics on rulership, wealth and conduct (Tiruvalluvar, 1990). The Kural (P. S. Sundaram, Trans.). Penguin Books) aphoristic decision heuristics on rulership, wealth and conduct and the stewardship cognition of tribal oral literatures (Bompas, 1909; Elwin, 1949; Devy, 2002) — models that are ethically sophisticated, contextually aware, sensitive to stakeholders, and value-driven, and that remain relevant to present-day organisational life (Chakraborty, 1991; Muniapan & Dass, 2008).

This study aims to show that indigenous narrative traditions are not merely cultural artefacts to be preserved but active sources of conceptual knowledge, through the lens of Indian Knowledge Systems. In the process, it helps to advance the quest to diversify the epistemic base of management education and put a new vocabulary of leadership and decision-making into the spotlight: one that is rooted in India's history and also relevant to the present.

2. Review of Literature

The review of literature in this paper does not represent a single disciplinary tradition but a historical strand of conversation. It walks through the fields of management studies, Indian Knowledge Systems, literary studies, leadership studies, and indigenous knowledge research, and observes the various ways in which storytelling traditions have been perceived as places of managerial and ethical learning. The review is organised in reverse chronological order, starting with the contemporary institutionalisation of Indian Knowledge Systems and then going backwards to the primary narrative traditions that make up the corpus of this study. This allows the present inquiry to be situated within the immediate scholarly environment and its broader intellectual heritage. In his study of "morality and governance in the Panchatantra," Sarkar (2025) presents it as a tried-and-tested model of governance, in which wisdom, mentoring, and strategic foresight are important qualities of leadership. Panchatantra's five tantras are interpreted as pragmatic, ethical and governmental discourses. What makes this recently produced work so significant is its unusual framing as a mode of governance – instead of being considered Children's Literature, it is treated as a Leadership Curriculum.

Additionally, Gawde and Chopra (2025) report institutional mainstreaming of IKS after NEP 2020, highlighting the initiation of IKS as a subject in management institutes in India and faculty training in the IKS cell in 2023. Their case study findings suggest that there is a growing infrastructure for indigenous content in management classrooms, but a lack of a pipeline of rigorously analysed indigenous material remains. Moreover, Tripathy and Mishra (2025) also support the idea that IKS provides a repository of philosophies, pedagogies, and ethics that can make education culturally rooted and meaningful. Relevance to pedagogy is relevant here: They consider IKS not as something to be shown or exhibited, but as something to be applied. The concept of "wisdom pedagogy" is discussed in detail by Jakubik (2024) and other sources, highlighting its spiritual and indigenous aspects in knowledge management and management learning. Concurrently, Edwards and Küpers (2024) call for alternative management education vocabularies – a place for non-Western and ecological vocabularies, too. These interventions are important because they indicate that the mainstream management-learning scholarship is now open to the types of materials this paper examines.

The findings of the study by Vinay and Sowmya (2024) confirm the previous hypothesis that Panchatantra stories promote critical thinking among students, a finding established empirically. Also, the school's use of stories in the management education context has proven effective in teaching management and life skills to learners. Kristjánsson, Fowers, Darnell and Pollard (2021) resurrect phronesis (practical wisdom) as an integrative thinking process that centres on situational reasoning and ethical perception. They speak in Aristotelian terms, but their structure is most similar to the Western equivalent of what this paper terms dharmic decision-making, and it serves as a mediator between the present analysis and the mainstream literature on judgment and decision-making. Another strand of scholarship to recover management thought from Indian sources is represented by Muniapan and Dass (2008), who have argued that the concepts of corporate responsibility have a long and deep history in Indic literature, and that even the case method of teaching management is evident in the Panchatantra literature, though it remains an unstated or unworked-out analysis.

In his seminal work on organisational storytelling, Boje (1991, 1995) made it clear that organisations themselves are storytelling systems in which sense is made and decisions are legitimated through narratives. Sensemaking theory

by Weick (1995) has also demonstrated that decision makers create plausible stories before, during and after decisions are made. The stream validates narrative as a legitimate field of management research rather than a casual add-on. The trailblazer in the "management by values" school in India, Chakraborty (1991, 1995) showed that Indic ethical categories such as ‘dharma’ could be operationalised for managerial development, although such sources are mostly Vedantic in nature. His work opened the portal through which fable and folk material can now enter. The primary corpora of this study that is the three Indian narrative traditions under analysis, namely the Panchatantra, the Betaal Pachisi and select Indian tribal literature are then based on well-known scholarly translations: Olivelle's (1997) translation of the Pancatantra alongside Ryder's (1925) classic rendering of the same text; Burton's (1870) Vikram and the Vampire for the Betaal cycle, which descends from the Vetala tales embedded in Somadeva's Kathasaritsagara; and, for tribal narrative, the collections of Bompas (1909) on Santal folktales, Archer (1974) on Santal life and oral poetry, Elwin (1944, 1949) on the oral literatures of central India, and Devy's (2002) landmark anthology of tribal literature in translation, Painted Words. The cycle's vernacular career is also attested in Lallu Lal's realy Hindi Baital Pachisi, later edited by Forbes (2023/1873), and in Vidyasagar's Bengali Betal Panchabinsati (2018/1847), whose adaptations testify to the tales' continuous life as instruments of popular moral reasoning across Indian languages.

The availability of credible translations is what makes a comparative method of management analysis feasible. The materials as a whole point towards a clear history: a policy environment (2020–2026) that is actively seeking indigenous content; recent studies (2024–2025) that assert the pedagogical power of Indian tales; an established theoretical warrant (1991–2021) for narrative and wisdom-based approaches to judgment; and credible translated corpora waiting to be analysed. The trajectory has not yet yielded a study of the natural point of convergence, which is attempted here. What also follows, in connection, is not an excavation of ‘dharma’ as philosophy but an observation of ‘dharma’ at work- the sustaining principle caught in the act of deciding.

3. Research Gap, Research Questions and Objectives

Though there is ample research literature on Indian Knowledge Systems and management education, the scope and approaches remain fragmented. Studies have tended to focus on a limited number of canonised texts, employ illustrative rather than inductive methods, and examine managerial constructs separately. Thus, questions concerning the scope, structure of teaching and learning, and conceptual consistency of India’s story traditions as sources of managerial knowledge remain insufficiently addressed.

The literature indicates four key gaps: a comparative gap arising from the limited examination of multiple, structurally different narrative traditions; a corpus gap resulting from the limited attention given to the Betaal Pachisi and indigenous community-based decision traditions in tribal narratives; a methodological gap due to the predominance of deductive approaches that interpret narratives through established management theories; and an integration gap because decision-making and ethical leadership are generally treated separately, whereas the Indic concept of dharma connects effective judgment with ethical conduct.

Against these gaps, the study seeks to investigate how selected Indian narrative traditions contribute to managerial judgment and ethical leadership. The enquiry is guided by four research questions: What decision-making logics can be derived from selected tales of the Panchatantra, Betaal Pachisi, and Indian tribal literature without imposing predetermined management concepts on the narratives? How is ethical leadership represented in these narratives, and how does dharma connect decision-making with ethical conduct? How do the decision-making logics across the three corpora converge or differ, and can they be integrated into a coherent framework? Finally, how can the resulting framework be applied to contemporary managerial practice and management education?

Accordingly, the study has four objectives: to identify and describe the decision-making logics present in selected stories from the three narrative traditions; to analyse representations of ethical leadership and examine dharma as a connecting principle between prudence and morality; to comparatively examine corpus-specific and convergent decision logics and integrate them into a framework of dharmic decision-making; and to suggest applications of this framework to contemporary managerial practice and management education, particularly through the use of Indian narratives as indigenous case material.

4. Methodology

This is a qualitative, interpretive and textual study. It follows a hermeneutic-comparative design, which involves three moments: hermeneutic, which involves close reading and extraction of each tale's decision logic; comparative, which compares the logics across corpora; and applicative, which maps onto managerial contexts. The route is deliberately presented inductively (from the narrative to the construct) in response to the identified methodological gap in Section 3. Corpus and sampling. The tales were purposively sampled based on three criteria: (a) the tale should have an explicit decision point in which there are alternatives and consequences, (b) the tale should be available in a credible scholarly English translation, and (c) the collection of tales should represent the structural diversity of its parent corpus. Based on these criteria, three texts were chosen from each corpus, yielding a total of nine units of analysis.

Table 1: The Seven-Field Analytic Template, with a Worked Illustration

No.	Field	What the field captures	Worked entry: Pingalaka, Sanjivaka and Damanaka (*Panchatantra, Mitra-bheda*)
i	Decision situation	The choice-point the narrative constructs, stated as a decision problem	Whether the lion-king Pingalaka should act upon his counsellor's report that his trusted ally, the bull Sanjivaka, is plotting treason against him
ii	Decision-maker(s)	Who decides — an individual, a leader-in-role, or a collective	Pingalaka, an individual decision-maker occupying a leadership role (king), deciding alone
iii	Information conditions	Quality, source and completeness of the information available	Severely compromised: sole source is Damanaka, an intermediary with a private grievance and a direct interest in the outcome; no verification, no second source, no direct confrontation of the accused
iv	Alternatives considered	The options the narrative makes visible, whether or not the decision-maker sees them	Available: (a) verify the accusation independently; (b) confront Sanjivaka directly; (c) act on the report. The narrative makes (a) and (b) visible to the reader; Pingalaka considers only (c)
v	Decision logic employed	The reasoning pattern actually used to reach the decision	Emotion-led inference: fear and wounded pride are converted directly into conclusion; the counsellor's motive is never modelled; anticipation of consequences is absent
vi	Ethical dimension invoked	The duty, trust or obligation the narrative places at stake	The obligation of a leader to protect a loyal dependent from unverified accusation; the fiduciary duty to test counsel before acting on it
vii	Outcome and narrative verdict	What happens, and how the narrative itself judges the decision	Sanjivaka is killed; Pingalaka is consumed by remorse; the court is left in the grip of the manipulator. The narrative's verdict is unambiguous: the failure is the king's, for deciding on unverified, interested information

Source: *Authors Creation from different sources*

(Note: The remaining eight completed templates are presented in Appendix A, and the cross-case comparison worksheets are presented in Appendix B.)

Analytic technique. Analysis was done in two phases. Thematic narrative analysis was performed on each tale in Stage 1 (derivation), according to a common analytic template: (i) decision situation, (ii) decision maker(s), (iii) information conditions, (iv) alternative(s) considered, (v) decision logic employed, (vi) ethical dimension invoked, and (vii) outcome and narrative verdict. The logics presented in Sections 7.1–7.3 and the integrated framework in Section 9 are derived from the cross-case comparison of the seven-field completed templates. In the seven-field template, close reading is implemented, in which each tale is condensed into a designed decision record before any assessment is attempted, warranting that all nine tales are cross-examined with identical questions. Table 1 presents the template together with an operative illustration from the first tale analysed, the Pingalaka–Sanjivaka–Damanaka frame narrative of the Panchatantra.

For the second stage (cognitive profiling), each decision episode identified in Stage 1 was recoded using de Bono's Six Thinking Hats (1985), which served as the coding instrument in this paper. Some methodological clarification is essential here. The Six Hats scheme is used not as an interpretive theory that is imposed on the narratives, (a posture that would amount to an invalid approach) but as a content-neutral taxonomy of cognitive modes: white (information and facts), red (emotion and intuition), black (caution, risk and critical judgment), yellow (optimism and benefit-seeking), green (creativity and alternatives) and blue (the metacognitive process control). The taxonomy deals with modes of thinking rather than conclusions, so it can be used post-derivation without tainting the derivation. For each episode, the 'wearer(s) of the hat(s)' were recorded; the conspicuous absence or domination of some hats, which the narratives themselves identify as the cause of success or failure, were also noted. This results in a cognitive profile for each corpus (as reported in section 7.4) and allows further, more precise inferences: whether verdicts in the tales are systematically related to the imbalances in the composition of thinking and whether 'dharma' performs a function that the Six Hats scheme does not.

It bears emphasis that 'dharma' itself was not coded as a pre-defined category in either stage; consistent with the study's derivational posture, it was permitted to emerge — as it did, repeatedly - from the narratives' own verdicts on their decision-makers.

Table 2: Summary of the Methodology

Element	Description
Research paradigm	Interpretivist
Research design	Qualitative, hermeneutic-comparative, inductive
Nature of data	Textual (primary narrative texts in scholarly English translation)
Corpora	Panchatantra (Olivelle, 1997; Ryder, 1925); Betaal Pachisi / Betaal Panchavimshati (Burton, 1870; Somadeva tradition); Indian tribal narratives in translation (Bompas, 1909; Elwin, 1944, 1949; Devy, 2002),Archer, 1974
Sampling method	Purposive; criteria: presence of explicit decision situation, availability in credible translation, structural representativeness
Sample size	9 tales (3 per corpus)
Unit of analysis	The individual tale/decision episode
Analytic technique	Stage 1: thematic narrative analysis using a seven-field template with cross-case comparison; Stage 2: cognitive profiling of each decision episode using de Bono's (1985) Six Thinking Hats as a coding instrument
Constructs examined	Decision-making; ethical leadership; 'dharma' as integrating principle
Output	Corpus-level decision logics; integrated three-lens framework; pedagogical and managerial applications
Trustworthiness measures	Use of established translations; template-based coding for consistency; thick description; corpus triangulation

Source: *Authors Creation from different sources*

5. Analysis and Interpretation

The pedagogical purpose of the Panchatantra is announced in the frame of the *Panchatantra* itself: Vishnu Sharma takes up the task of awakening the intelligence (buddhi) of three princes who are not promising. The tales selected here

are the frame tale of *Mitra-bheda* (the lion Pingalaka, the bull Sanjivaka and the jackal Damanaka), "The Lion and the Hare," and "The Monkey and the Wedge."

As the lion-king and bull grow closer, the jackal Damanaka meddles and disrupts the happy alliance between Pingalaka and Sanjivaka with misinformation. The situation for Pingalaka is that he must decide if the involved intermediary can be trusted. His defeat is not moral evil but "epistemic negligence", that is, the lack of verification, lack of triangulation, lack of asking what the counsellor might benefit from it. The story's verdict is unforgiving: A leader who makes decisions based on unverified information ruins his own house. The managerial mapping is straightforward: information asymmetry, principal–agent hazard, and the destructive influence of politics on executive judgment.

In "The Lion and the Hare," the hare, who was about to be the tyrannical lion Bhasuraka's next meal, defeats him by creating a rival lion and tempting Bhasuraka to attack his own reflection in a well. The decision logic is anticipatory; the hare wins because it understands and models its opponent's psychology: pride, territoriality, haste, and then constructs a chosen architecture, where the opponent's instinct becomes the weapon. The story, read managerially, is a study in anticipation and strategic thinking, in the manipulation of an adversary's decision prejudices, whereas when read morally, the justification of intelligence as a weapon of the weak against unjust power.

The cautionary inverse is provided by "The Monkey and the Wedge", where the meddling monkey takes a wedge out of a half-sawn log and is destroyed by it. It is a clear act of a deed without understanding of the system one is acting on. Intervention without diagnosis that leads to failure is its managerial translation.

One pattern emerges in each of the three stories: anticipatory, consequence-weighing strategies. Significantly, the Panchatantra does not promote ingenuity without morality. Damanaka's craftiness is successful from a tactical point of view, but is showcased as the path toward destroying trust. The collection offers praise for intelligence that is used to protect the vulnerable or the entire group. The corpus asserts that if strategy is divorced from 'dharma', it ultimately leads to the destruction of the strategist.

The Betaal Pachisi: The Deliberative Lens — "Reason through ambiguity, then commit"

The frame of the *Betaal Pachisi* itself is the finding. King Vikramaditya has to carry Betaal, dwelling in a dead body, through a cremation ground. On the way, Betaal narrates a story that leads to an impasse: if the king knows the answer and does not say anything, his head will split; but if the king answers, the dead body will fly back, and the labour will start again. The structure enforces three constraints on the decision-maker that every executive will identify: he cannot depute, he cannot delay or shelve, and he must justify his decision vocally.

Three episodes were analysed. First, the 6th tale in the collection "Story of Madanasundari", or "The Transposed Heads", features two men who chop off their heads while visiting a temple. The goddess then brings them back to life, instructing the grieving woman who had accompanied them to place their heads on the bodies. In a moment of confusion and agitation, she puts the heads back on the wrong bodies. Now, whose wife is she, the man with her husband's head, or her husband's body? Vikramaditya answers that the man bearing the head is the real husband because the head is the seat of one's identity, memory, intellect and personhood. The significance of the story does not lie in accepting a particular answer but in the reasoning it demands. It requires readers to formulate a defensible principle in a situation where every alternative has limitations. Such dilemmas closely resemble complex managerial decisions, including succession disputes and the fair distribution of recognition.

Second is the story of "Madhumavati (The maiden is named Madhumavati in the Hindi *Baitāl Pachīsī* recension followed here; in Somadeva's Sanskrit recension she appears as Mandāravatī.) and the Three Suitors", alternatively also called "The Three Brahmins". The story orbits a beautiful maiden whose three ardent suitors each demonstrate astonishing qualities after her untimely death. One preserves her ashes with steadfast faithfulness, another undertakes intense atonement and learns a sacred mantra capable of reinstating life, while the third travels widely in grief carrying her bones. Using the life-restoring mantra, the maiden is brought back to life, upon which all three men claim the right to marry her. King Vikramaditya is then asked to decide who among them has rightfully earned her hand. He rules that the man who devotedly guarded her ashes is most deserving. While the others fulfilled roles more akin to those of a father (by restoring her life) and a son (through performing rites and carrying bones), one suitor's unwavering devotion

most closely reflects the lasting commitment expected of a husband. Managerially, this is the question of who did what, in a team in which everybody's contribution was essential — and the king's approach is the lesson: he does not measure quantities of contributions; he measures types of contributions.

The final riddle of the cycle, a genealogical puzzle in which a father and son marry a daughter and her mother, making the relationship between their children ambiguous and indeterminate. This seems impossible even for Vikramaditya, and his truthful silence is what ultimately releases him. The lesson ends the deliberative logic: The wise decision-maker is also aware of what is not decidable and does not pretend to be confident when there is no principled response to the question.

The corpus-level logic is therefore deliberative reasoning under ambiguity with enforced accountability. But what it has for its ethical core may be termed as the duty to judge: in *Betaal Pachisi,* evasion will itself be an ethical failure, as will fake certitude or confidence. Here ‘dharma’ reveals its deliberative face: it is not the comfort of having a rule, but the burden of having to uphold a judgment in the open.

Indian Tribal Narratives: The Communal Lens — "Decide as a steward, not an owner"

The third one changes the location of the decision. In the Santal, Gond and allied central Indian traditions of stories studied here (Bompas, Elwin, Devy), the subject of the story is not necessarily a single hero, but the community, and the horizon of decision is not the transaction but the generation.

The three clusters of narratives were analysed. The first is the story of the first-fruits and harvests of the Santals, in which the new crop may not be consumed until it has been ritually shared with the spirits and the village, then with the kin group. The embedded decision rule is that surplus is not private until the collective claim upon it has been honoured: distribution precedes accumulation. Second, the Gond earth-origin stories gathered by Elwin, in which the earth is retrieved from the waters and placed in the care of human beings, not their ownership, which means that every subsequent extraction from the earth is an act of borrowing. Third, the familiar cautionary theme of the greedy honey-gatherer (and its variants in relation to fish, game and forest produce), in which the taker who empties out the source (comb, pond, etc) is punished by his/her eternal loss of access to the source, and the taker who retains a portion is rewarded by the renewed source.

The logic that results is consensual stewardship; accord over command- choices are valid and acceptable when they involve participation and are regenerative in their outcome. The ethical yardstick in these stories is that the "whole" is not diminished, perpetuating guardianship in leadership. Distinctive managerial mapping principles emerge: participative decision-making, inclusiveness of stakeholders, sustainability and intergenerational responsibility, expressed and voiced many centuries before those words were even coined.

Stage 2: A Six Thinking Hats Profile of the Three Corpora

Recoding the nine decision episodes according to de Bono's (1985) taxonomy yields a cognitive profile for each corpus, summarised in Table 3.

The profile yields three important implications.

Inference 1: Verdicts in the tales are systematic verdicts about ‘hat’ imbalance. In each failure event in all three corpora, the event is tracked back to the absence of a named cognitive item (an item such as the White hat in Pingalaka, the monkey's Black, the honey-gatherer's Blue). In each successful event, there is the integration of multiple ‘hats’. In other words, the traditions do not moralise in the abstract: they diagnose the failures of composition, and do so with great precision, predicting the core of de Bono's thesis that poor decisions are caused not by poor intellect but by an imbalance in the use of thinking modes. In doing so, this finding elevates the paper's argument from analogy ("the tales resemble management cases") to correspondence ("the tales encode a theory of thinking that modern frameworks rediscovered independently").

Inference 2: Each corpus institutionalises a different hat (and a different bearer of the Blue hat). The centre of gravity of the Panchatantra is the White–Black pair (verify, then weigh) given to the individual strategist; the centre of gravity of the Betaal Pachisi is the Blue hat, which is forced on the individual judge and must be expressed verbally; the most distinguishing feature of the tribal corpus is to collectivise the Blue hat — process control is established by custom,

ritual and consensus, not by any single mind. Together, the three corpora provide something that no one on its own does: a full description of how one might have metacognitive control (the self, the accountable leader or the community) and when. This enriches the three-lens concept of Section 9, which is now more than just the decision logic: the lenses differ not only in their decision logic but also in the position of their 'Blue hat'.

Table 3: Six Thinking Hats (by de Bono) Profile of the Decision Episodes

Corpus / Episode	***Hats demonstrably worn***	***Hats absent or suppressed***	***Narrative verdict traced to***
Panchatantra — Pingalaka & Damanaka	Red (fear, wounded pride); Yellow (flattering optimism supplied by the counsellor)	White (no verification of facts); Blue (no control over the deliberative process, which the jackal captures)	Failure caused by absence of White and Blue hats
Panchatantra — The Lion and the Hare	White (the hare studies the tyrant's habits); Green (invention of the rival lion); Black (risk assessment of each alternative); Blue (the hare stage-manages the entire encounter)	Red kept deliberately in check	Success caused by near-complete hat integration in the weaker party; the tyrant, wearing only Red, destroys himself
Panchatantra — The Monkey and the Wedge	Green unchecked (playful experimentation); Red (impulse)	White (no understanding of the system); Black (no risk assessment)	Failure caused by Green and Red without White and Black
Betaal Pachisi — The Transposed Heads	White (facts of the case restated); Black (costs of each ruling weighed); Blue (an explicit governing principle — the head as seat of identity — is constructed and announced)	Red acknowledged in the litigants but excluded from the ruling	Success: judgment survives because its principle is articulated
Betaal Pachisi — The Three Suitors	White; Black; Blue (contributions are distinguished by *kind*, a classificatory principle)	Yellow and Red (no sentimental preference for the most heroic contribution)	Success: principled classification defeats emotive attribution
Betaal Pachisi — The Final Riddle	Blue at its limit (recognition that no principled answer exists); Black (honest assessment of undecidability)	—	Success through honest silence: metacognition includes knowing when judgment is impossible
Tribal — First-fruits narratives	Distributed White (communal knowledge of the harvest); Red honoured collectively (gratitude ritualised, not suppressed); Blue held by custom rather than by an individual	Individual Yellow (private benefit-seeking) deferred until collective claims are met	Success: process control is vested in shared norms
Tribal — Earth-as-trust narratives	Black across generations (long-horizon risk); Blue as cosmological rule (the Earth is held on loan)	Unbounded Yellow (extraction optimism)	Success: stewardship encoded as the community's permanent Black-and-Blue hat
Tribal — The Greedy Honey-Gatherer	Yellow and Red unchecked in the transgressor	White (regenerative capacity of the source ignored); Black; Blue	Failure caused by benefit-seeking without caution or restraint

Source: *Authors Creation from different sources*

Inference 3: 'Dharma' is the missing 7th hat. The Six Hats scheme is deliberately amoral because it structures the thinking process and says nothing about the "goodness" of the results; as a limitation accepted in the literature on practical wisdom (Kristjánsson et al., 2021), the scheme is not an "ethical" one. The Indic corpora afford this absent element precisely. Episodes which would pass for a purely procedural Six Hats audit are condemned in tale after tale:

Damanaka's manipulation is a tour de force of White, Green and Blue thinking, and the narrative condemns him for it. The stories provide an ethical governor, not of the contents of thinking, but of its direction – who the decision benefits, what is not being reduced. It is therefore suggested in this paper that 'dharma' is a seventh saffron hat of thinking, a meta-ethical mode that must be placed atop the other six hats, thereby transforming balanced thinking into right judgment. The most vital implication of this study is that it reframes the Indian narrative tradition not as a 'quaint precursor' to Western decision-making approaches but as an epistemic complement that completes their conceptual architecture by integrating ethical discernment, contextual wisdom, and reflective judgment.

6. Findings

Table 4: Mapping of Findings to Research Questions

Research Question	Principal Findings
RQ1: What decision-making logics are embedded within the selected tales?	Three distinct logics were derived: (i) *anticipatory strategies* in the *Panchatantra* — decisions succeed when consequences, adversary psychology and information quality are modelled in advance; (ii) *deliberative reasoning under ambiguity* in the *Betaal Pachisi* — decisions must be made under forced accountability, with transparent articulation of the governing principle, and with honest recognition of undecidable cases; (iii) *consensual stewardship* in tribal narratives — decisions are made participatively and evaluated by their regenerative effect on the community and the commons. Stage 2 profiling further showed that every narrative failure corresponds to a nameable imbalance of thinking modes (a missing White, Black or Blue hat), and every success to multi-hat integration — the tales diagnose *compositional* failures of thinking, not merely moral ones.
RQ2: How is ethical leadership conceptualised, and how does 'dharma' integrate ethics with effectiveness?	In all three corpora, no decision is narratively endorsed on the basis of effectiveness alone. The *Panchatantra* punishes cleverness that betrays trust; the *Betaal Pachisi* makes the *duty to judge* — and to justify — the leader's defining ethical act; tribal narratives define the leader as trustee of the whole. 'Dharma' operates in each as a situational compass rather than a fixed code: it is what forbids the separation of the "smart" decision from the "right" one. Ethical leadership thus appears not as a constraint upon decision-making but as a constituent of decision quality.
RQ3: Do the corpus logics converge, and can they be integrated?	The logics are distinct but complementary rather than contradictory, and they converge on 'dharma' as their common evaluative core. They integrate naturally as three sequential lenses — anticipation (strategic), articulation (deliberative), and stewardship (communal) — through which a decision may be passed. A decision endorsed by the narrative traditions is one that clears all three lenses; each corpus, tellingly, locates downfall precisely where one lens is cleared and another fails. This yields the Three-Lens Framework of Dharmic Decision-Making presented in Section 9. The Six Hats profile adds two integrative findings: the three corpora differ systematically in where they locate metacognitive (Blue-hat) control — the individual strategist, the accountable judge, or the community — and 'dharma' operates across all three as a "seventh hat," an ethical governor absent from the Six Hats scheme itself.

RQ4: How can the framework be operationalised for practice and pedagogy?	In practice, the three lenses serve as a diagnostic checklist for consequential decisions (Section 10.1). Pedagogically, the tales function as indigenous case studies: the *Betaal Pachisi* episodes, in particular, are ready-made decision-forcing cases, while the *Panchatantra* and tribal tales support modules on strategic judgment and sustainable, participative leadership, respectively (Section 10.2). This directly serves the NEP 2020 mandate to integrate IKS into professional education.

Source: *Authors Creation from different sources*

7. Discussion

The comparative analysis is the main theme of the paper. The three corpus logics presented here in a series of filters comprise a coherent model of judgment:

Lens 1 — The Strategic Lens (from the *Panchatantra*): Is the decision anticipated? Has the decision-maker checked the information and its sources, as well as the motives of the counsellor and the opposition, and followed up on second-order consequences? Pingalaka's fate is the cost of failing this lens.

Lens 2 — The Deliberative Lens (from the *Betaal Pachisi*): Do the words of the decision make sense? Can the decision maker state in public the principle that serves as the foundation on which the decision is made – and will he say it out loud and claim it? Where there is no principled answer, is that accepted and not masked? Vikramaditya's sequence is one seamless training in this lens.

Lens 3 — The Communal Lens (from tribal narratives): Is the decision stewarded? Have those impacted been heard and has the whole — people, resources and future — been left unimpaired? The image of its violation is befittingly portrayed through the voracious honey-gatherer.

In the parlance of the traditions themselves, a decision that clears all three lenses is dharmic and aligned with being judicious, responsible and sustaining. The framework is substantial because its weaknesses closely mirror common organisational setbacks, such as carefully planned strategies that are never communicated honestly.

The narrative traditions illuminate not only the fundamentals of operative decision-making but also the representative failures when any one of these lenses is considered in isolation. For example, where Lens 1 is implemented without Lens 2, it may yield tactics that are effective on paper but ethically faulty, sometimes leading to corporate deception or fraud. Similarly, using Lens 2 without Lens 3 may lead to decisions that are rationally and ethically justified yet overlook their larger consequences, reflecting the limitations of shareholder-centred thinking. Again, applying Lens 3 without Lens 1 may lead to all-encompassing, well-intentioned decisions that lack strategic viability.

The Stage 2 profiling helps to enhance the framework in two ways. Firstly, the three lenses can now be referred to in cognitive terms: Lens 1 demanding the pairing of 'White' with 'Black hat' (verify, then weigh); Lens 2 calling for an individually worn, publicly expressed 'Blue hat'; and Lens 3 repositioning the 'Blue hat' to convention and consensus. If the decision passes all three lenses, then it is, in de Bono's words, a fully composed act of thinking that holds that process control has been maintained at the appropriate level, that is, the self, the leader or the community. Secondly, the profiling demonstrates what the procedures alone cannot: Damanaka passes an audit on all the Six Hats but is condemned anyway because, in addition to a composition test, the traditions also mandate an orientation test. That is exactly why the 'seventh hat' of 'dharma' is a requisite addition that shifts the paradigm from a decision-quality orientation to a judgment-quality orientation.

The framework can also be easily adapted to mainstream scholarship. The strategic-anticipation and information-quality elements of decision research connect to Lens 1, whereas the accountability, transparency and phronesis (Kristjánsson et al., 2021) are addressed by Lens 2. Lens 3 relates to the stakeholder theory and sustainability leadership, while the Stage 2 analysis is related to the tradition of parallel thinking (de Bono, 1985), which the paper both builds on and supports. In addition, the Indic material infuses into the narrative, story by story, the emphasis that these are not separate virtues but one and the same discipline, termed 'dharma'.

Read together, the findings return continually to the title's claim: in each corpus, the decision the narrative endorses is the one that upholds "that which upholds", which precisely is ‘dharma’.

The Implications of the Study

The three lenses form a pre-decision protocol for future managerial decisions: verify and anticipate, articulate and own, consult and sustain. The protocol can be used in decision-review templates, in deliberation and post-mortem analyses in organisations. Its advantage over an imported ethical checklist is that it resonates culturally. For Indian managers, the vocabulary of 'dharma' is not a peripheral acquiescence language but an inbred moral grammar.

Implications for Management Pedagogy

The study provides a worked example of the ability to embed narrative IKS content in the management classroom without compromising rigour. These *Betaal Pachisi* episodes are decision-forcing; each episode requires students to make a judgment and defend it, as Vikramaditya must; the *Panchatantra* episodes focus on strategic judgment, information politics and negotiation; and the tribal stories provide a grounding for teaching in sustainability, participative leadership and stakeholder trusteeship. It is a feasible and indigenous pipeline of cases for management institutes under the NEP 2020 rather than a mere lip service to the past.

Limitations of the Study

Like all interpretive questions, this research is constrained by the scope of its corpus and the nature of its methodology. Nine tales have been carefully selected (through purposive sampling) from the *Panchatantra*, the *Betaal Pachisi* and Indian tribal literature in translation, chosen for their bearing on the research objectives rather than for statistical representativeness. From the *Panchatantra*, these are the frame tale of Pingalaka, Sanjivaka and Damanaka (*Mitra-bheda*), "The Lion and the Hare," and "The Monkey and the Wedge"; from the *Betaal Pachisi*, the tale of the transposed heads, the tale of the three suitors and the revived maiden, and the final unanswerable riddle of the entangled kinship; and from the tribal corpus, the Santal first-fruits and harvest narratives, the Gond earth-origin narratives in which the earth is held in trust, and the widely attested cautionary motif of the greedy honey-gatherer. A sample of nine tales, however purposively chosen, cannot exhaust corpora of this size, and reliance on translation necessarily filters nuance.

Therefore, the findings should be comprehended as interpretive rather than exhaustive. The availability of translations may also mask some of the linguistic, cultural and contextual aspects of the original texts. Additionally, the tribal corpus reflects only a small sample of the diversity and richness of oral traditions across India and places an emphasis on the central regions. There might be other conceptions of leadership, ethics and collective decision-making that are more prominent in other narrative traditions not explored here.

8. Conclusion and Future Scope

In the present study, it has been proposed that the *Panchatantra*, the *Betaal Pachisi* and Indian tribal narratives in translation can be read as far more than a 'storehouse of memory'; they can be read as complex pedagogical texts that can help build intellectual and ethical skills essential for the effective functioning of the manager. While each corpus emphasises one distinct dimension along which a decision is adjudicated like the Panchatantra for its foresight, the Betaal Pachisi for the honesty and accountability of its reasoning, and the tribal narratives for its effect upon the community and the commons, they all converge towards an integrated understanding of leadership in which strategic reasoning, moral responsibility and awareness of community are in dynamic interplay and where ‘dharma’ is the guiding principle. The study allowed the converging decision logics to be synthesized and articulated as dharmic decision making, thus bringing the conversation on Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) and enriching the epistemic underpinnings of management education. So the paper concludes as it started, with ‘dharma’ no longer a vague echo of the word but a demonstrated construct. The introduction gave ‘dharma’ as a definition: ‘dharma’ as that which upholds; and the tales have fulfilled what was proposed. Those who bear the burden of judgement, even at the cost of their lives, prosper: Pingalaka falls when he does not; Vikramaditya endures when he does; the tribal community prospers when it does. In a royal court, on a cremation ground, in a village harvest, the tradition gives a single answer to the question that has to

be asked by every leader, not "what can I get away with?" nor even "what works?" but what does my decision hold up, and what does it let fall? To make a decision with 'dharma ', this study concludes, is to agree that a manager's every consequential decision is a decision of trusteeship – trusteeship of information, of people, of the future and that the oldest stories of India were written to train that acceptance.

The investigation could be extended by incorporating other types of traditions, e.g., *Hitopadesha, Jataka Tales and Battrish Singhasan*, and/or by testing the proposed approach in a management or executive education environment, or by analysing how indigenous decision models are perceived and utilised by practising managers across different organisational and cultural contexts. This would further buttress the argument in favour of mainstreaming India's leadership heritage into the current leadership development and management curriculum.

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