

Moving Beyond the Human with Indian *Kathās*: A Post-Anthropocentric Understanding of the World

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Abstract

This research paper examines the nuanced intersections between posthumanist thought and the ancient Indian *kathā* tradition, foregrounding philosophical, cultural, and literary dimensions that challenge anthropocentric worldviews. Western posthumanism, as a theoretical framework, challenges conventional notions of human exceptionalism, emphasising the entanglement and coexistence of humans with nonhuman entities and technologies. In the context of the Indian *Kathā* tradition, which encompasses a diverse range of narratives and philosophical discourses, this paper seeks to elucidate the posthumanist themes and concepts, thereby situating posthumanist inquiry within an Indian epistemic context. Drawing from an interdisciplinary approach, this study synthesises perspectives from literature, philosophy, religious studies, and Indian narratology. It navigates through classical texts such as *The Pañcatantra*, *Jātaka Tales* and *Kathāsaritsagara* to analyse instances where non-human entities surpass the importance of the human entities. The research explores how these narratives depict hybrid beings, shape-shifting characters, and interactions between humans, gods, and animals, thereby challenging conventional boundaries of human subjectivity and agency. This paper also evaluates the implications of posthumanist ideals within the *Kathā* tradition on contemporary discourse. It contemplates the relevance of these narratives in addressing ethical dilemmas posed by the destructive tendencies of human beings. By illuminating the interconnectedness and fluidity inherent in the *Kathā* tradition, this research aims to contribute to the discourse on posthumanism different from the Western dominant view, enriching the understanding of human-nonhuman relationships and their implications in a globalised world with more empathy and wisdom.

Keywords: *kathā*, Indian narratology, folklore, posthumanism, anti-anthropocentrism.



Introduction

In the ancient world, stories and legends migrated, carried like silks, spices, ivory, gems and other rich commodities, from port to port and caravanserai to caravanserai by merchants and travellers, soldiers and sailors. (Rajan xvii)

Indian *kathās* belong to this long history of narrative circulation and transformation. Rooted in oral performance and later preserved in written form, these narratives encompass mythological, ethical, and philosophical reflections that have shaped cultural consciousness across South and Southeast Asia. Far from functioning solely as entertainment, these stories operate as vehicles of knowledge, offering reflections on power, morality, coexistence, and the place of human beings within a larger cosmic order.

This article asks a central question: how do Indian *kathā* traditions conceptualise the human in relation to nonhuman life, and how might these conceptualisations be read alongside contemporary posthumanist thought? Methodologically, the paper undertakes a comparative textual analysis of selected *kathās*, drawing on Indian narratology and posthumanist theory to examine narrative structures, character formations, and ethical frameworks. It argues that Indian *kathās* articulate a post-anthropocentric worldview in which human beings are neither the sole moral agents nor the ultimate centre of narrative meaning. By situating these texts within ongoing debates in posthuman studies, the article seeks to demonstrate that posthumanist thinking is not exclusively a modern or Western theoretical development but has long existed in narrative traditions that imagine multispecies worlds and distributed forms of agency.

Placing the *Kathās*: “*Kathā*laksana”

Nalini Sadhale’s work on Sanskrit poetics provides a systematic framework for understanding the diverse forms of Indian *kathās*. In her

articulation of *kathālakṣaṇa*, Sadhale situates *kathā* within the broader field of *sāhityaśāstra*, distinguishing it from *drśya* (enactable forms) and *kāvya* (descriptive poetic forms). *Kathā* belongs most closely to *ākhyeya*, a narrative mode in which thematic development takes precedence and which is primarily intended for narration. Within *ākhyeya*, further distinctions are drawn between *khyāta* (based on known stories) and *utpādaya* (invented by the poet), both of which may appear in prose, verse, or mixed forms.

While *mahākathā* refers to expansive and highly ornamented narratives, *laghukathā* occupies a more accessible narrative space. Characterised by linguistic simplicity, emotional resonance, and narrative curiosity, *laghukathā*s foreground ethical dilemmas and relational dynamics rather than stylistic excess. These narratives are classified according to the nature of their characters, ranging from divine and supernatural beings to humans and animals. Of particular relevance here is *kathānikā*, in which animals and birds are depicted with ethical intentionality, often challenging human assumptions about intelligence, morality, and social order. Texts such as the *Pañcatantra*, the *Jātakas*, and the *Kathāsaritsāgara* exemplify these narrative strategies and provide fertile ground for examining nonhuman agency.

Sources, Narration and Structure: *The Pañcatantra*, *Jātaka Tales* and *Kathāsaritsāgara*

Whoever always reads this work;

whoever listens to it told;

he will never face defeat, no,

not even from the Lord of Gods, Himself. (Rajan 6)

India's 'nitisastra' *The Pañcatantra* is one of the most translated works, only second to *The Bible*. It is a representative text of the Indian '*Kathā*' (oral)

tradition, alongside the great Indian epics *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. Traditionally attributed to Viṣṇuśarma and composed in Sanskrit, the text is structured through framed storytelling and narrative embedding. While often read as a manual of political wisdom, *The Pañcatantra* consistently destabilises human authority by granting animals complex social, ethical, and intellectual capacities. Jackals debate statecraft, lions negotiate power, and human figures frequently appear as impulsive or morally compromised. Such narrative inversions challenge assumptions of human superiority and foreground a political ecology that extends beyond the human sphere. *The Pañcatantra* has left a lasting legacy on Indian narratology and literature. Its storytelling techniques, narrative structures, and moral teachings have not only influenced subsequent Indian literary works but also inspired storytellers and writers across the globe. The enduring appeal of *The Pañcatantra* lies in its universal themes and timeless wisdom, making it adaptable to various cultures and languages. Its stories have been translated into numerous languages and have influenced storytelling traditions worldwide.

“What is *jātaka*? That which relates the austere practices and bodhisattva practices of the Blessed One in various past births: this is called *jātaka*” Mahayana author Asaṅga in his *Śrāvakaḥṭmi* (Skilling 172). The *Jātaka* tales, which recount the previous births of the Buddha, further complicate anthropocentric ethics. Across numerous narratives, the Bodhisattva appears as animals, birds, and other nonhuman forms, demonstrating virtues such as compassion, loyalty, and self-sacrifice. These tales undermine the notion that moral agency is exclusive to human life. Instead, ethical insight emerges through continuity across species and lifetimes, suggesting a relational ontology grounded in rebirth and interdependence. The narrative structure of the *Jātakas*, which links past and present lives through identification, reinforces the idea that ethical value transcends individual human existence.

May Ganesha, painting the earth with mosaic by means of the particles of red lead flying from his trunk whirled round in his madness, and so, as it were, burning up obstacles with the flames of his might, protect you. (Tawney 193)

Somadeva's *Kathāsaritsāgara*, compiled in eleventh-century Kashmir, represents one of the most expansive collections of Indian storytelling. Drawing from the lost *Brhatkathā*, the work presents a vast narrative universe populated by humans, gods, spirits, animals, and hybrid beings. The text's complex framing and episodic structure resist linear progression and human-centred closure. Notably, the origin narrative of the *Brhatkathā*, composed in the non-elite language of Paisācī and initially inaccessible to human audiences, underscores the marginal position of human agency within the story-world. The tales exist independently of human reception, reinforcing a vision of narrative continuity beyond human control.

Anthropocentrism, Indian *Kathās* and Post-Anthropocentric Thought

Western posthumanist theory has emerged largely as a response to the limitations of Enlightenment humanism, particularly its privileging of rational, autonomous human subjectivity. Thinkers associated with posthumanism have sought to unsettle this hierarchy by foregrounding nonhuman agency, material entanglements, and multispecies relationality. However, Indian *kathā* traditions demonstrate that such a decentring of the human is not merely a contemporary theoretical concern but has long been embedded within narrative cultures that imagine the world as ethically and ontologically plural.

According to Encyclopedia Britannica, “anthropocentrism” is the prominent belief that human beings are the most important entity on the planet. Also known as “humanocentrism,” “human supremacy” or “human exceptionalism,” anthropocentrists view nature as subordinate to humans, and

the non-human (animals, plants, minerals, geographical objects like lakes, rivers, oceans, etc.) are viewed as resources to make the human life more comfortable.

There are three types of anthropocentrism: perpetual, descriptive and normative. Descriptive anthropocentrism discusses the world and other species placing human as the centre, and normative anthropocentrism is based on the presumption that humans are superior because of their values, capacity, and their position in the universe (Mylius 159-194).

Professor Martha C. Beck called anthropocentrism the main cause of the problems created in the ecosphere by unchecked human actions (Beck 123-136), and *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* calls it “shallow anthropocentrism,” where the anthropocentrists argue that nature must be preserved for a better future of the humans. (Introduction: The Challenge of Environmental Ethics. *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*). Philosopher Arne Næss pointed out a major flaw in this logic, and drew attention to a systematic bias to the non-human in traditional Western attitudes due to the prominence of anthropocentrism in discourse.ⁱ He believed that “deep ecology” must be central to environmental philosophy to make this earth more inclusive, regardless of how the non-human benefit the humanⁱⁱ (95-100). Dr. Taylor proposed that deep ecology and biocentrism (prioritising all forms of life) are antithesis of anthropocentrism, and is required to combat a selfish discourse (Taylor 411-418).

Anthropocentrism stemmed from various things. The primitive anthropocentrism resulted in Heliocentrism, where people refused to believe that they were not at the centre of the universe, and everything including the Sun was not revolving around them. It also stemmed from religions and their epistemologies and meaning-making of the world and human beings' role in it.

The Indian tradition, on the other hand, talks about other creatures, natural and supernatural. It never places importance on the human beings

because it is well aware that human beings are nothing compared to the vastness of the universe, which is beyond the comprehension of even the wisest of men. Indian Narratology always focuses on trying to talk about the trivial role of human beings in the world and how the world is not bound by their actions, and the texts *The Pañcatantra*, *Jātaka Tales* and *Kathāsaritsagara* that deal with human characters constantly remind us that human beings are not that important when it comes to the past, present or future of the world. This idea acts as a check and balance to the overarching human ego.

In *Jātaka Tales*, when we see Bodhisatta or ‘the Blessed One’ born as animals like bull, monkey, deer, mallard, etc. and human characters like the hunter, negative villagers, we understand that the idea that human beings are beyond reproach and are great with their high morality, high intelligent quotient, is completely a constructed anthropocentric narrative to destroy nature and put oneself in a superposition where one will face no consequences for the exploitative behaviour. It is not to say that human beings are always wrong and criminal from their very birth, but the stories tell us how unchecked pride in being born as human beings that is used to justify the destruction of nature for personal gain hold no truth. A great example of this notion can be seen in “Suvannahamsa Jātaka.” The Bodhisatta died and was reborn as a golden mallard. He went to help his family, but his wife of the previous birth tortured and caged him. This shows the lack of gratitude in human beings. This brings out the dark side of the human mind, where it is selfish and greedy. If we talk about the “Kanha Jātaka,” we see ‘the Blessed One’ born as a bull. It takes care of his mother, the old-aged human who took care of him in his younger days. This caring nature echoes the care animals feel for their caregivers. The anthropocentric idea of compassion as a human tendency is dismantled here, and many in similar stories in the *Jātakas*.

In *The Pañcatantra* as well, we see how the human characters are not given utmost importance. If we talk about the frame story of Book V (Olivelle 155-

159) where the pet mongoose is wrongly killed by the Brahmin Devasarman, we see how the human characters torture, maim, and kill animals hastily. When we read Book I (5-70), we see how the jackals Karataka and Damanaka, discuss the art of statecraft, usually reserved for the “people with political acumen.” The animal world, too, is full of politics. There is a constant tug-of-war between various species for survival, and this story acts as a reminder to that. Indian tradition has always respected nature and tried to empathise with other beings. Human intervention is not required in the animal world. In the story “The Ascetic and the Mouse” of Book II (81-82), we see how the wandering ascetics Cudakarna and Brhatsphic destroyed mouse Hiranyaka’s life to satisfy their egos. The frame of the Book II (71-104) is a story of an unlikely friendship between four animals, mouse Hiranyaka, crow Laghupatanaka, deer Citranga, and turtle Mantharaka. The story subverts the human idea that only human beings, the “social intellectual animal,” can be “friends.” Most ironically, a human hunter tries to prey on them, but fails due to the working together of these “friends.”

Kathāsaritsagara is a work believed to be of Shiva. In Shiva’s abode, the Kailasa Parvat, it is said (as mythologist Devdutt Pattanaik observes) that animals live together. The snake around Shiva’s neck does not try to bite Mushakaraj, the *vahana* of Ganesha. Nor does Karikeya’s *vahana* peacock hurt the snake. Shiva’s *vahana*, the bull Nandi, drinks water with Durga’s *vahana*, the Lion. The bull and tiger friendship can also be seen in the friendship of the bull Samjivaka and lion Pingalaka in the frame story of *The Pañcatantra’s* Book I (5-70). The concept of predator and prey, as far as the human understanding goes, is dismantled in the works, reflecting the natural world in multiple cases. The seventh story in Book III of *The Pañcatantra*, “The Mouse that turned into a Girl” (131-137), tells the story of a mouse, who was turned into a girl by an ascetic. She refused to marry with anyone, except for a mouse in the course of the story. This story mocks the human ego, because it does not place humans on

the top of the animal-list. Rather, it shows how a creature as small as a mouse is happy and content in its life. *The Pañcatantra* shows the clever animal characters, contrasting them with the foolish human characters, be it the nested story in Book II, “The Woman who traded Sesame for Sesame” (81-82), the sixth story in Book III, “How the unfaithful wife tricked her foolish husband” (129-130), or the two stories of Book V, “Building Castles in the air” (156-157) and “The Barber who killed the monks” (158-159). This subverts the human role as superior social beings in the world.

The ancient Indian tradition is well aware of the fallacy human being’s judgement in extremes and want for certainty in life. This concept was later observed in the Western world, especially with the emergence of the Theatre of the Absurd by Critic Martin Esslin, and playwrights Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Eugène Ionesco. Victorian poet and critic Mathew Arnold’s poem “Dover Beach” also tussles with the idea of uncertainty. The movement of “Modernism” also talks about this uncertainty, and people being afraid of it. But the Indian *Kathā* tradition has always reflected on it by narratives and counter-narratives, to let the readers question. It is said that India practically invented “live and let live.” The variety of opinions and the sheer points or arguments for both sides works as a mental exercise for the readers to comprehend the unknown and to try and think beyond oneself.

Abrahamic religions that follow the concept of a single god (or monotheism) say that “God made man in their own image.” But in Indian narratives and Indian tradition, the concept of God is different. The worship of various kinds of creatures in the ancient Indian culture, be it *Nagas*, *Yakshasas*, *Rakshasas*, *Suras*, *Asuras*, *Gandharvas*, *Apsaras*, *Vahanas*, the Elephant-god Ganesha, the half-human half-animal Narasimha Deva, Varaha the bore-god, Kacchhapavatara, Matsyavatar, etc. always humbles the worshipping devotee because he sees that nature, and nature beyond the human, is more important and more divine.

If we see the *Kathāsaritsagara*, we see how the stories were never meant for human ears. It is by sheer luck that the stories came down to us. The language, Paiśācī, also moves away from the dominant human language structure. The book “*Kathāpitha*” introduces a collection of tales said to originate from Siva, who shared them privately with his wife, Parvati. However, an attendant, Pushpadanta, secretly listens and shares them with his wife, Jaya, leading Parvati to feel deceived. She curses Pushpadanta and his friend Malyavan, who tried to save his friend, condemning them to be born as mortals until they recount the tales they overheard to a *Yaksha* and each other. These demigods are reborn as Vararuchi and Gunadhya, whose mortal adventures form the basis of several stories. Gunadhya, due to a dispute, abandons known languages and learns the language of “Paiśācī,” enabling him to comprehend the tales recounted by the transformed Puspadanta. He writes these stories, stretching to seven hundred thousand stanzas, in his blood, initially rejected by King Satavahana. Later, regretful of his decision, the king obtains the remaining verses and, with the help of Gunadhya’s disciples, translates them from the goblin language for wider understanding. It shows how the human beings are trivial and not important for these stories. The stories were always there, and will always be there. Incidents were always happening in the past, happens in the present, and will happen in the future without human participation. The idea that human beings control and catalyse the world in various ways for its betterment is challenged multiple times by these narratives.

Paniker and moving beyond Humanism

K. Ayyappa Paniker’s formulation of Indian narratology offers one of the most theoretically productive entry points for articulating the post-anthropocentric dimensions of *kathā* traditions. In *Indian Narratology*, Paniker situates Indian storytelling within a philosophical worldview that resists linear temporality, singular authorship, and human-centred meaning-making. Instead, narrative is understood as cyclical, recursive, and fundamentally relational,

emerging from a collective cultural consciousness rather than individual creative agency (Paniker 9–13).

A central concept in Paniker's framework is that of *apauruṣeya*, a term traditionally used to describe texts whose origins are not attributed to a human author but are understood as impersonal, universal, or collectively generated. While the concept is most often associated with Vedic literature, Paniker extends its relevance to narrative traditions more broadly. In doing so, he challenges modern literary assumptions that equate creativity with individual human intention. The storyteller, in this model, functions as a conduit rather than an originator, transmitting narratives that pre-exist and exceed human subjectivity (13).

This displacement of human authorship has significant implications for post-anthropocentric thought. By dissolving the primacy of the individual human creator, *apauruṣeya* undermines the anthropocentric foundations of literary humanism. Narrative meaning is no longer anchored in authorial consciousness but distributed across time, community, memory, and cosmological belief systems. Such a framework aligns closely with posthumanist critiques of the autonomous human subject, particularly those that emphasize relational ontology and the decentring of human agency.

Paniker further emphasizes the cyclical conception of time (*ādi-ananta*) that structures Indian narratives. Unlike linear, progressive models of temporality that privilege historical novelty and human advancement, cyclical time situates human existence within recurring cosmic rhythms. Stories return, repeat, and transform without definitive beginnings or endings. As Paniker observes, narrative repetition does not signal redundancy but ontological continuity, reinforcing the idea that human lives and actions are momentary configurations within a much larger temporal order (11–12).

Within this narrative ecology, ethical meaning emerges not from human dominance but from participation in a shared world of beings. Humans, animals, gods, and natural forces coexist within the same narrative plane, none occupying an absolute moral or ontological centre. The absence of a privileged narrative subject destabilises hierarchical distinctions between species and forms of life. In this sense, Paniker's narratological insights provide a theoretical bridge between Indian *kathā* traditions and contemporary posthumanist discourse, demonstrating how narrative form itself can function as a mode of post-anthropocentric thought.

By foregrounding *apauruṣeya* authorship, cyclical temporality, and narrative recurrence, Paniker enables a reading of Indian *kathās* that moves decisively beyond humanism without relying on technological or speculative futures. His work underscores the capacity of narrative traditions to articulate complex ontological positions and confirms the relevance of Indian narratology to global debates on the limits of the human.

Alongside narratological approaches, a growing body of contemporary Indian scholarship has engaged questions that intersect with post-anthropocentric and more-than-human thought. Scholars such as Debashish Banerji have examined Indian cosmological and philosophical frameworks that challenge Enlightenment models of autonomous human subjectivity, while eco-critical and environmental humanities scholarship by critics such as Md. Monirul Islam has interrogated anthropocentric assumptions in literary and cultural narratives. Although these scholars work across different disciplinary locations and do not necessarily identify their interventions under a single theoretical label, their work contributes to an expanding Indian critical discourse attentive to nonhuman life, relational ontology, and ethical coexistence.

Rather than positioning these interventions as ancillary or derivative, this article recognises them as part of a broader intellectual field in which Indian narrative traditions, philosophy, and contemporary criticism converge on shared concerns regarding the limits of human-centred thought. The primary emphasis here remains on narrative form and Indian narratology as sites where post-anthropocentric thinking is most systematically articulated, while contemporary Indian scholarship is acknowledged as an important and evolving interlocutor in these debates.

Conclusion

Indian *kathā* traditions offer a rich narrative archive for rethinking the limits of human-centred epistemologies. Through animals that reason politically, divine figures that inhabit nonhuman forms, and stories that exist beyond human authorship, these narratives articulate a post-anthropocentric vision of the world. By reading *kathās* alongside contemporary posthumanist theory, this article has argued that Indian narrative cultures enact a form of narrative posthumanism grounded in relational ethics, multispecies coexistence, and cosmological continuity.

At a moment when posthuman studies increasingly seek to move beyond Western epistemic frameworks, Indian *kathās* provide a valuable non-Western perspective on the entanglement of life forms and the decentring of human exceptionalism. These narratives remind us that ethical imagination need not begin with the human, nor end with it, and that storytelling itself can function as a mode of post-anthropocentric thought. As Nietzsche said:

In some remote corner of the universe, poured out and glittering in innumerable solar systems, there once was a star on which clever animals invented knowledge. That was the highest and most mendacious minute of 'world history' — yet only a minute. After nature had drawn a few breaths the star grew cold, and the clever animals had to die. (qtd. in Herbrechter 1-2)

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Notes

ⁱ Norwegian philosopher Arne Dekke Eide Næss was one of the most important figures of late 20th century environmental movement in the west. He coined the term “deep ecology.” He argues the Western Traditional bias in his 1973 article “The shallow and the deep long-range ecology movement: a summary” in the journal *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy*

ⁱⁱ “deep ecology, environmental philosophy and social movement based in the belief that humans must radically change their relationship to nature from one that values nature solely for its usefulness to human beings to one that recognizes that nature has an inherent value”

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