

# New Global Order, Ethics, *Niti*, and Three Indian Texts

SUDHIR KUMAR SUTHAR

In the aftermath of the pandemic when nation states were grappling with the question of ensuring human security by bringing in an efficient public health system, Russia chose to invade Ukraine with whatever diplomatic logic it may have had. This war has resulted in an unanticipated human catastrophe while the nation states appeared to be helpless and clueless. This war came at a juncture when largely the community of nation states had assumed that the era of traditional warfare was over. Apart from challenging the relevance of the liberal theory of international relations, it has brought forth the essential role of ethical questions in the domain of political thought.

The rise of populist leaders across the globe is posing a serious threat to the idea of global peace, cosmopolitanism or multiculturalism, as they tend to defy all institutional mechanisms, domestic or international, while projecting themselves as the saviours. Amid this, the book by Vasanthi Srinivasan poses pertinent questions about the role of leadership and its relationship with concepts of *dharma*, ethical code and other worldly challenges that it may encounter. This book is a must-read discussion on how the contemporary everyday questions of politics as a social activity were being understood in ancient India. How the method of storytelling was used as an effective leadership training mechanism is also a very interesting question that this book engages with.

Despite the fact that this book attempts to look at the Indian political thought in a fresh perspective by situating it in the context of statecraft and leadership challenges, a critical engagement with the concepts is missing. It is true that every text has a context and it must be read within that context. However, there is a fundamental shift in the contexts

## BOOK REVIEWS

**Virtue and Human Ends: Political Ideas from Indian Classics** by Vasanthi Srinivasan, *Orient BlackSwan*, 2021; pp 216, ₹685.

today and the context that these texts were produced in. The book does not make any such distinction and carefully navigates its way without bringing any discussion on misuse of such texts for political mobilisation by the ruling regimes across the globe. In the concluding chapter, the book discusses how populist regimes address the different policy questions and the way people relate to them, and yet it leaves such questions as passing remarks. Besides, even while dealing with various political concepts, the book ignores the contributions of other contemporary Indian thinkers. Including B R Ambedkar and Jotirao Phule on questions of discrimination, caste inequality, etc, could have been useful references in critically examining the context of these texts. In the absence of a critical discussion, the textual discussion in the book seems to further entrench the great divide of Indian philosophy, what Gopal Guru (2002) calls as “theoretical brahmins and empirical shudras.”

### Text and Context

This book is an apt text to understand this question of an interrelationship between rulers and the ethical principles which should govern the public life. In an era when the questions of ethics and morality in the political sphere have taken a back seat amid the assertion of individualism and rational-choice theories, this text brings forward the classical Indian texts’ engagement with the principles of politics and ethics. The book argues that the questions of *niti*, that is, the art of governing, are not only a major part of

Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* that is widely known but there are other significant texts available to Indian readers through children’s tales or television programmes (for example, *Vikrama-Vetala* on Doordarshan) that deal with such questions.

Methodologically, the book makes an interesting beginning by highlighting the need to study texts beyond the text but the larger context in which it should be studied. It is in this context that one needs to keep in mind the fact that the political ideas that are being discussed in this book belong to an era of monarchy. The four texts selected for this purpose in this book are: *Panchatantra*, *Dasakumaracharita*, *Hitopadesha* and *Vetala Panchavimshati*. Most of these texts are about training the prince about statecraft, fiends, supporters, etc. Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* is referred as a connecting text for all the themes.

Quite interestingly, the book starts with the context of the New Education Policy (NEP) where it focuses on liberal education and study of ancient Indian texts. With the new right-wing electoral victory and introduction of the NEP, there has been a resurgence of interest in engagement with the Indian intellectual traditions. A considerable focus now is on how various political issues were debated and discussed in intellectual traditions in ancient India.

A similar interest had existed in the discourse in political studies immediately after independence when almost all universities had started teaching Indian political thought. Apart from engaging with the thinkers largely chosen from pre-Mughal or colonial India, a critical enquiry into the ideas of these thinkers or authors did exist. The teaching of Indian political thought was not only about glorification of these texts or the “Hindu culture” that they represented, but also about critically analysing the Indian social set-up that they defended or built. However, this interest gradually weakened since the 1980s onwards, perhaps owing to increasing interest in political economy questions and also of increasing relevance of electoral analysis in political studies. In this exercise, a

more nuanced engagement with the concepts in political studies was largely absent. The methods which were popular for studying various political ideas in ancient India were through a particular text along with an author, for example, Kautilya's *Arthashastra* with its theory of diplomacy and foreign relations.

The book under review tries to fill this critical gap by bringing in three key texts in the study of Indian intellectual traditions other than the popular texts like *Arthashastra* or *Shukra Niti*, etc. This book, though discusses three important texts, knits the discussion around various conceptual categories of political philosophy. Two prominent categories that flow through the book are virtue and friendship.

What makes the book all the more relevant is the kind of pedagogy it offers for the studies of political philosophy in general and Indian political thought in particular. This book tries to connect these texts with the broader question of political action that they propose, advise or prohibit. In other words, the author tries to connect the hidden political ideas in the three texts with real-life political issues and challenges.

While dealing with practical questions that are embedded in ancient Indian texts, the book also navigates through European traditions back and forth. For example, the author brings in the Stoic notion of friendship while dealing with friendship in the three Indian texts. In Chapter 3, it quotes Cicero:

All this resonates with the stoic view that loyalty, frankness, sociability, sympathy, and goodwill were the markers of friendship. Friends are to be cherished because they are counsel, encouragement coming out and reproof. (p 73)

### Five Themes

The five diverse themes which have globally been at the centre stage of debates in political philosophy and thought form the core of this book as well. They are: friendship and enmity, war and peace, power, love, *svadharma*, etc. This book is a step forward in the direction of giving shape to various political concepts which originate from ancient Indian texts. The text selection as well as the selection of

the themes are very apt for the students of Indian political studies. Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, for instance, is not seen merely as a commentary on statecraft but how it argues for various ways in which different political concepts could be evoked.

Chapter 1 deals with the dilemma of studying politics as an activity or doing it. It refers to the debates in ancient India among intellectuals about whether the prince should be taught the ethics of politics or he should be trained in more empirical, day-to-day challenges or concerns of governance.

Chapter 2 is largely about the questions of friends and enemies in *Panchatantra*. Vasanthi claims to examine the role and contours of *niti*, or "practical wisdom" while explaining Vishnu Sharma's classic text. An interesting discussion in the chapter is on friendship between the similars, that is, *samana*. In one of the stories, the book brings in constructivism by referring to a story where by a crow discusses principles of friends and enemies. However, the chapter also makes an interesting remark claiming that the stories presented in this text are not really "obsessed with caste-identity" (p 60). Further connecting the theories of international relations with Indian political thought, this chapter also discusses the popular concept of balance of power and role of friendship in achieving such a balance. Bringing in Bhikhu Parekh's argument, Vasanthi also questions the validity of his arguments about the lack of intellectual friendship in the Indian context, which, according to him, has resulted into "poverty of Indian political theory."

Another popular text, *Hitopadesha*, and its principles of war and peace are discussed in Chapter 3. Linking the questions of war and peace with Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, this chapter also brings in the realist notions of prudence. The discussion about ethical concerns in war or the contemporary questions of "just war" are some of the questions that are highlighted in the book in the context of *Hitopadesha* stories. This chapter builds on people's perception of war and how a more balanced policy of peace with honour as a policy of diplomacy can be a more effective solution.

Chapter 4 is another interesting theme of discussion that deals with the question of love and politics in *Dasakumaracharita*. Bringing in the discussion on love and connecting it with *kama*, that is, desire in general and erotic desire in particular, this chapter highlights how the dichotomy of ethics on the one hand, defined as *dharma*, and "intricate ways of fulfilling one's desires and earning wealth by clever means" (p 106) exist as simultaneous narratives in classical Indian texts.

Chapter 5 discusses issues of *dharmic* conduct of a king in view of *Vetala Panchavimshati*. This chapter problematises how the role of women in various ancient texts has been kept out. Though the heroic status of women is emphasised, ultimately women's *svadharma* is to be a good wife, sister or daughter. It says,

Thus, all the stories considered here involve heroic women, but the two men discussing virtue (the Vetala and the King) ignore women's exemplary virtues and heroism. Is this because all these women invoke family honour and may be said to act within the bounds of their *svadharma* as wives or daughters? (p 153)

### Critical Questions

Democracy and technology are two major determinants that distinguish the lessons of these texts and political realities of our times. Vasanthi is right when she argues that people at large still think around some of the themes mentioned in these ancient texts. However, these popular narratives today feed the demagogues who try to influence public opinion to gain legitimacy for populist policies while undermining the very idea of democracy and inclusion. Monarchy being the context was a major factor when these texts were written. A one-on-one dialogue was narrated while keeping the king in mind, as Vasanthi also highlights while referring to *Hitopadesha*, *Panchatantra* or *Arthashastra*. In the name of ethical realism, a centralised, monopolised form of political system is being promoted today. In contemporary times, such ideas may be right for evoking certain ethical concerns, but how far they are useful in explaining today's challenges is a question to worth ponder over.

Interestingly, the book also refers to some of the old European as well as recent commentaries on statecraft in contemporary times such as Machiavelli or Henry Kissinger. It also refers to the emergence of concerns of ethical realism that highlight the relevance of some of the ideas discussed in the ancient Indian texts. However, perhaps it would have been interesting to expand this section further. In the current volume, the

discussion on some of these contemporary concerns emerges only in the form of a passing remark.

The book, in every chapter, refers to one kind of book quite extensively. It builds upon few texts which have already discussed these themes at length. Hence, what is the originality that the book constitutes is also a question which troubles the reader. The length of the book is an ideal size for

any reader. The printing quality is very good along with the pocket-friendly price of the book.

---

Sudhir Kumar Suthar (*sudhir131@gmail.com*) teaches at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

---

#### REFERENCE

Guru, Gopal (2002): "How Egalitarian Are the Social Sciences in India," *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol 37, No 50, pp 5003–09.