

# Remarkable & relevant

**Vasanthi Srinivasan has attempted to study the rare classical texts of India vis-a-vis Western political thought... A review**

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Studies abound of *Arthashastra*, *Mudrarakshasa*, *Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha*; not so many of *Dasakumaracharita*, *Vetala Panchavimshati* and *Simhasana Dvatrimshika*, (second century BCE to 13th century CE). Vasanthi Srinivasan is the first to study them together vis-a-vis Western political thought. It is the first study based upon Telugu translations, which provide different versions of some tales.

*Dasakumaracharita* is unique for its unstinted praise for *niti-shastra* that is not found even in the *Arthashastra*. It is, however, undercut by a parody mocking Kautilya's tenets as too demanding and urging study of other disciplines because statecraft is uncertain, the root of all anxiety and a hindrance to pleasures like hunting, gambling, drinking and women, which bolster manhood and enlarge the circle of friends.

In *Mudrarakshasa*, the king's orders about a festival are countermanded by Chanakya. Both *Panchatantra* and *Dasakumaracharita* depict counsellors losing favour because kings suspected powerful ministers.

Srinivasan mentions how Plato failed with Dionysus of Syracuse whereas Chanakya succeeded with Chandragupta. Realpolitik, however, is often found to support tyranny and sophistry.

*Panchatantra* teaches that practical wisdom must govern power. It specially celebrates friendship, embracing allies (*mitra*), well-wishers (*suhrid*) and personal friends (*sakhya* with a *sakha*). It not only depicts political situations where deception by inferiors subverts the stronger, but also the bonding of heart to heart. Friendship is possible only between equals, with *dharma* hardly playing a role. Any wide gap militates against friendship, for example, with kings and gods.

The instance of Prince Hal abandoning Falstaff is an excellent example that Srinivasan cites. She appropriately compares with what our epics depict. Instead of the Sugriva-Rama alliance, however, she selects the Rama-Hanuman relationship, which is more of master and devoted

servant.

The Drona-Drupada relationship focuses on equality as the basis of friendship, further explored in the Duryodhana-Karna pair. Again, instead of Krishna-Arjuna, Srinivasan includes Krishna-Sudama, where classmates change into *bhakta* and *Bhagwan*.

The superiority of *Panchatantra/Hitopadesha* to Aristotle, Cicero and Francis Bacon lies in conveying teachings through highly entertaining tales instead of lecturing on morality or policy.

Poverty is seen as the root of all evils and mendicancy is as terrible as death, thus denigrating Jain and Buddhist *bhikshus*. Srinivasan asserts that charity is considered dreadful and a door to death but fails to cite any instance of this. *Hitopadesha* conversely condemns hoarding without donating.

Donation (*dana*) is extolled in the Mahabharata as a sure path to heaven. There is a fascinating debate on individual enterprise and dependence on fate, with *karma* determining what is one's due. The texts are scornful of Brahmins but extol merchants as wise, righteous and ambitious, indicating the social perspective. Caste is not a social barrier. A weaver seduces a princess and gets the kingdom.

Srinivasan expands the ethical dimension in the *Arthashastra*, which is usually neglected by academicians. War is the last resort. Instead of abstract morality, it is practical steps for survival and winning wealth that are advocated, including using spies and occult practices, not hankering after glory or honour. If, however, Kautilya were to be followed, the weaker Pandavas would not have fought the stronger Kauravas, Alexander would not have attacked Darius', and Porus' superior forces and invaders would not have fought at Panipat.

*Panchatantra* and *Hitopadesha* stress Kautilya's policy of negotiating peace while preparing for war and note how wars may arise from trifles because

of meddlers.

In the story of the owls and crows, Stirajivin's suggestion of staging a mock-quarrel and withdrawing out of sight echoes how the Achaeans deceived the Trojans. Srinivasan cites Pakistan's use of the "double policy" of having bilateral agreements while fostering armed intrusions and terrorist strikes.

*Hitopadesha* specifically warns against simplistic action based just on courage, strength and textbook maxims without practical experience. It advocates tempering strength with prudence, recommends that the good ally with one another and shows that displaying indiscriminate good will to all brings destruction. It upholds peace with honour as the goal.

In Dandin, love is exclusively sexual, rivals spiritual bliss and demands immediate consummation, spurning all obstacles. All is commendable when used by the talented. This recalls Bhishma telling Draupadi when she is being molested in the court that whatever the mighty do is *dharma*.

Conveniently, Ganesha is introduced to sanction fraud, and examples are cited of Shiva seducing *rishis'* wives, Brahma lusting after his daughter, Brihaspati violating his pregnant sister-in-law, Parashara forcing Matsyagandha, Indra's adultery with Ahalya, Vyasa impregnating his brother's wives and Atri having coitus with a doe.

Women are as complicit as men in these intrigues. The tale of Vikatavarman being deceived by a female *sanyasi* to participate in a *yajna* to acquire beauty, only to be murdered, recalls Euripides' *Medea*.

Srinivasan notes that Dandin's world is akin to Machiavelli's play *Mandragola*, both showing the fragmentation of virtue in corrupt society and advocating practical compromises, *apad-dharma* (the ethics of emergencies). The chaste wife succeeds by her wits, not by undergoing a fire-ordeal like Sita. The redeeming feature is that Dandin gets all his heroes married, like Shakespeare in his dark comedies.

Pointing out the "doubling motif" in these texts (Chanakya-Rakshasa, Damanaka-Karataka, Chakravaka-Doordarshi and Vishruta-Aryaketu), Srinivasan shows that the loyalty and humanity shown by one in each pair prevent him from ruthless acts of self-interest. Such qualities are needed in normal times for establishing legitimacy and trust.

By reconciling the characters finally, the texts show their understanding of "the chameleon-like nature of political prudence". One may do wrong to restore order, but that is preferable to being weak in *niti*-policy during emergencies. Srinivasan has overlooked Krishna doing precisely that in the Mahabharata, where he also specifies when not being truthful is justified.

The tales of Vikrama-Vetala are also erotic escapades but are distinguished by the importance accorded to morality. Vikrama is usually asked to decide who is nobler.

Srinivasan concentrates on five tales about outstanding nobility and how they relate to proper conduct in terms of caste, family tradition, duty and the stage of life. Here, too, women are regarded as more prone to commit evil, lacking instruction in morals. Vikrama's decisions about nobility are quite sexist, extolling the husband who gives up his faithful wife Madanasena to save himself or suspecting her chastity. There is no concern about building up the state.

Srinivasan surmises that the ruler needed to be educated about how to deal with forest people outside the

pale of "civilised" society. Vikrama chooses as more noble not those eminent figures who follow their "svadharma", but ordinary people who forgo self-interest to help strangers, acting without any thought of reward.

Srinivasan has an illuminating discussion of Giovanni Boccaccio's *The Decameron*, which also presents models of greatness in intelligence, generosity and patience, and reveals the limits of traditional moral standards in evaluating excellence. She finds that Vikrama's tales go further by exploring the challenges posed by having to retain power when faced with competition. The king cannot assume he is safe because he is good but must remain alert about hidden dangers.

This prudence, however, is disregarded in the 32 tales about Vikrama's throne. Here, the pattern is of a king adventuring in dangerous places to obtain occult powers, which a poor Brahman then takes away. They also stress on nurturing the *atman*.

Srinivasan feels that feminists can learn much from these texts about women as sexual agents to become more sophisticated about sexual harassment, though she does not elaborate this. They also show how politicians can behave as though they were omniscient, using others as means to their ends.

In crises, it is difficult to distinguish statecraft from tyranny and "only the most subtle experts of *niti* can gauge what is *apad-dharma* at all". Although the audience was royalty and the urbane man, the insights on friendship, war and peace, morality and political necessity are remarkable and still relevant.

This slim volume carries a striking cover and a fine bibliography. While the Indian texts are well presented, the discussions on Western scholarship are rather tedious and pedantic. The printing is excellent, with only one error -- on page 71 Jayadratha is misspelled as "Jayadrata". The price is disproportionate to the book's slender dimensions.

It is puzzling why Srinivasan left out Tiruvalluvar's *Tirukkural*, the earliest didactic treatise to deal with *aram* (*dharma*-virtue), *porul* (*artha*-wealth) and *inbam* (*kama*-love), available in K R Srinivasa Iyengar's excellent verse translation. She would have benefitted from consulting the splendid English translations of *Arthashastra* by Pratap Chandra Chunder (1995), *Hitopadesa* (1989) and the *Kathasaritsagara* (1994), with the Vetala tales by V Balasubrahmanyam in the M P Birla Foundation's "Classics of the East" series. Kanikani, Vidura-*niti*, Narada's discourse on statecraft in the Mahabharata and Bhartrihari's *Nitishatakam* (translated by Sri Aurobindo as "The Century of Life") could also have been discussed.

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**Spot Light**  
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