



Indian Cultural Forum

Virtue and Human Ends: Political Ideas from Indian Classics

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In Virtue and Human Ends, Vasanthi Srinivasan revisits some of our most well-known ancient Indian texts — Panchatantra, Hitopadesha, Vetala Panchavimshati, Dasakumaracharita, Arthashastra, and Mudrarakshasa to see what they tell us about the art and nature of governance, statecraft, policy (niti), war and peace, foes and allies, but also the equally important ideas of virtue, friendship, svadharma, loyalty, prudence, justice, love, desire, good and evil, and the ability to judge rightly and act well regarding these human ends.

These timeless texts also provide a window into the popular as well as elite reception of political ideas. Unearthing some of the most colourful and enduring tales that Indians across generations have read, the author takes a closer look at these narratives to reassess the ‘morals’ of these stories, illuminate internal diversity and dissent in the teaching of politics, and their continuing relevance in twenty-first century Indian political thought.

The following is an excerpt from the Introduction to the book.

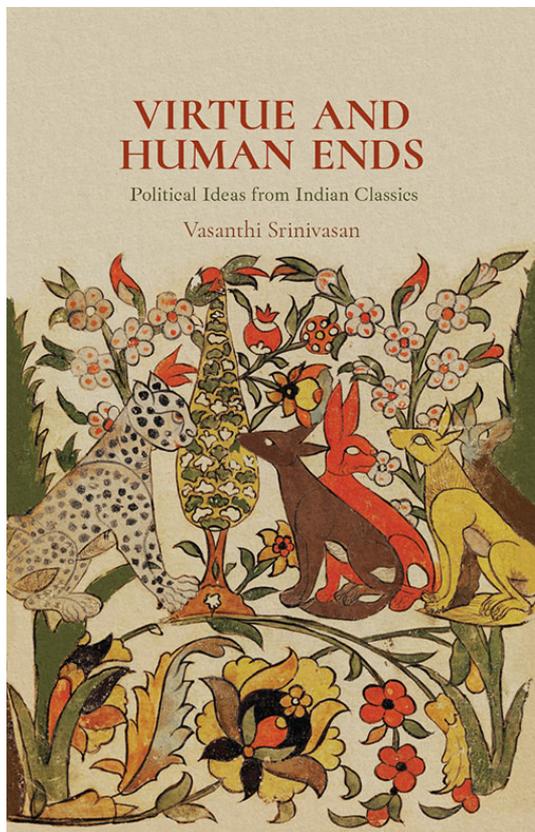


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The science of politics is but the divine eye, the operation of which is Munever obstructed in giving insight into things, past, present and future, as well as hidden or far removed from sight....

Surely, Your Majesty has got all this, viz. an exalted pedigree, unfaded youth, a lovely body and immeasurable prosperity. Don't you therefore render all these advantages vain by attention to statecraft, which is the source of all mistrust, an impediment in the way of the enjoyment of pleasures, and which is never without uncertainty on account of its having to have recourse to various kinds of tricks... (Kale 1986: 350, 354)

These contradictory views on the study of politics from the *Dasakumaracharita* a seventh century CB classic, ring as true today as they perhaps did at the time. After all, the study of politics evokes laughter and derision as a waste of time and resources. Politics, which is only about opportunism and expediency, is best left to politicians, and successful politicians do not study politics, let alone teach it. And yet, as the first quote shows, there were paeans of the 'lamp of political science' which enabled the intellect to shine and divine the meandering paths of

worldly action. So, who were these teachers and how did they study and teach politics? What strategies did they devise to entice powerful but unwilling and/or dull patrons? What kinds of sentiments and virtues did they aspire to instil in the rulers and the ruled?

Impressed initially by the debates on friendship, war and peace in the *Panchatantra*, I soon realised that many literary classics were carrying on a serious dialogue with the great Indian epics Ramayana and Mahabharata in general, and Kautilya's *Arthashastra* in particular. Further inquiry led me to the *Mudrarakshasa*, *Dasakumaracharita* and *Hitopadesha*. While fusing edification and entertainment, I found that the compilers and authors of these texts saw themselves as contributing to *nitishastra*, which broadly means expert knowledge on propriety, policy and prudence in individual conduct as well as in public affairs. They deliberated on the three human ends of acquiring *artha* (broadly worldly success in gaining land, wealth, power or fame), *kama* (pleasure in general and erotic love in particular), and *dharma* (broadly virtues, ethics, duties). In the process, they wrestled with enduring political themes, such as the need for honing practical wisdom regarding means and ends, steering the sentiments so that rulers may rightly discern their friends and enemies, uncovering unexpected sources of virtues in society, identifying vagaries of action oriented to amassing wealth and fame, assaying the conundrums of political judgment when confronted with necessity and realpolitik, and so on. I pursued these themes through a series of literary classics that fall within what has elsewhere been categorised as the 'mirror of princes' genre of advice literature, namely the *Panchatantra*, *Mudrarakshasa*, *Dasakumaracharita*, *Hitopadesha* and *Vetala Panchavimshati*.

This choice might appear strange since conventional approaches to premodern Indian political thought focus on canonical sources such as the *Vedas*,

the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics, the ethical and juridical corpus such as the *Manusmriti* and Kautilya's *Arthashastra*, as well as the manuals on practical wisdom such as *Chanakyaniti* (Guidance by Chanakya), *Shukraniti* (Guidance by Shukra), *Nitisara* (Essence of Policy) by Kamandaka, or Somadeva's *Nitivakyamritam* (Nectar of Practical Wisdom). While U. N. Ghoshal lays out these sources early on in *A History of Hindu Political Theories*, A. S. Altekar and others follow this path in *State and Government in Ancient India*, even as they include some more tracts (Ghoshal 1923: vii-viii, 5-7; Altekar 2001: 5-25). In doing so, these writers showcase the existence of a robust tradition of political thought (against the charge that India has only produced religious thought) and track the history of ideas on origins of the state, types of republics, cosmic and social order, divine kingship, law and customs, crime and punishment, war and peace, taxation and welfare, structure of administration, and so on. While providing valuable information about a glorious past, this approach tends to become antiquarian. Becoming aware of the manner in which indigenous sources broached the contractual obligations of the king or the state towards the people, long before these emerged elsewhere, may bolster nationalist pride, but may not enthuse non-specialists or students to plumb these ideas further. V. R. Mehta adopts a more thematic frame in *Foundations of Indian Political Thought*, delving into how the rules and principles of social order are derived from a cosmic and natural order in Vedic sources, how ideas of right order are simultaneously questioned and deepened in the epics, and how these are partly set aside in the realistic tract *par excellence*, the *Arthashastra* (Mehta 1996).

While these expositions are indispensable in kindling interest in Indian political thought, they also suffer from a few limitations. First, they restrict political thinking to a genre of texts by specialists. Thus, some portions of the epics and many *niti* (prudence/practical wisdom) manuals qualify, whereas popular

literary and cultural narratives are barely mentioned. And yet, as we will see, the actual transmission and discussion of practical political wisdom is adumbrated in genre defiant collections like the *Panchatantra*. Second, the epics, especially the *Ramayana*, are imbued with mythic rationale such that the notions of a divine king, and 'Ram Rajya' as an ideal kingdom, cannot be isolated from a theological analysis. Also, the epics provide normative visions of the origins and sustenance of right order in the cosmos, society, kingdom and family, which have received extensive treatment in Indological literature. *Niti* is present but overshadowed by the prescriptive and legislative enterprise in the epics, and awaits future analysis. Third, the overemphasis on Kautilya's *Arthashastra* as the epitome of 'realist' thought has occluded internal debates regarding educating and advising rulers and ensuring that power is accumulated and wielded for welfare rather than self-aggrandisement. Fourth, the authors mentioned above themselves admit that the manual corpus such as *Chanakyaniti* or *Nitisara* are overtly didactic and tend to assert rather than argue; there is also an impression that they do not add to principles propounded by the *Mahabharata* or Kautilya, and are dubbed 'colourless summaries' (Altekar 2001: 19; Mehta 1996: 84, 128). For instance, the *niti* manuals advise seeking out equals as friends, but do not address the problem of false friends and unequal friendships, which nevertheless occur in ordinary life. There is no discursive engagement with the ideals espoused by canonical texts and thinkers, be it prudence or friendship or peace, as we will see in the texts chosen here. As a result, these approaches fulfil an archival agenda through which students are apprised of the rationale underlying divine kingship, or hierarchical social order, or the balance between spiritual and temporal powers. They do not provoke us to reflect on whether Kautilya's political realism, say regarding war and peace, was criticised by traditional teachers who might otherwise agree with his worldly wisdom, and what that might teach us about different kinds of realism. They do not enlighten us on the hope and despair about reconciling virtue, especially practical wisdom (*niti*),

with human ends such as acquiring knowledge (*jnanam*), good friends, love (*kama*), wealth and kingdoms (*artha*), or doing one's duty (*dharma*), as do the narratives.

In the Greek context, Stephen G. Salkever has noted that traditional genre expectations must not inhibit political theorists from bringing narrative history, imaginative literature and self-conscious philosophising into dialogue with one another when delving into politics and human action (Salkever 2009:4-5).

Wherever there is *logoi*, or articulate speech about human nature and its relationship to nature as a whole, be it in imaginative literature or narrative history, it should be brought into dialogue with the *logoi* of our present institutions and practices to fine-tune the judgment of citizens about what constitutes 'the good life' and right political action. For political thinking must attend not only to modern concerns like securing equal liberty and a social minimum, but also to instilling practical wisdom in citizens and intellectuals on enduring political problems such as politicians who defy wise counsel, unbridled ambitions of the elite, or even erotic misadventures of the youth.

Apposite here is also Michael Freeden's advice that political thinking must move towards an 'interpretative realism' where the general nature of the political in all its intricate expressions, including vernacular forms' (Freeden 2012: 4), are explored. He counsels that the power aspect of politics, though permeating all of its forms as a core feature, does not offer a sufficient toolkit to decode the political, and that thinking politically should include, among others, 'discourses containing the ranking of collective priorities and the distribution of social significance, languages of social order and disorder and construction and critique of social visions, as well as the wielding of discursive power' (Freeden 2012:4-5).

Love and Friendship, Allan Bloom's magisterial work on a series of Western literary classics starting from Rousseau through Stendhal, to Austen, Tolstoy,

Shakespeare and Plato, provides a stunning rationale on why political thought must delve into literary classics. He argues that cultivating the imagination about the highest human ends such as love and friendship is best done not through pedantic explanations (which reduce them to power-play utility), but rather through timeless plays and novels that bring these experiences alive and unveil their ambiguities and conflicts (Bloom 1993: 30). Political theorists must care about not only justice claims but also about forging social virtues and strengthening bonds of solidarity, which require that they attend to a whole gamut of human passions such as pleasure, revenge, love of glory, and so on. In love and friendship, humans discover their incompleteness, which propels them to seek exclusive relationships, wherein they learn to exercise courage, generosity, trust and sacrifice. As experiences, love and friendship compel humans to defy law and custom and resist being tamed by authority, be it of the family or state. Through them, humans are also lifted above self-interest to seek the good of the other and to accept the inequality, and even absence, of the benefits received. This makes love and friendship unlike political justice, where there is merely an attempt to induce through rewards and punishments the kind of association that friends and lovers have without the need for either' (Bloom 1993: 548-549). Moreover, love and friendship can often come into conflict due to the imperious demands they make on individuals for loyalty and exclusivity, which is best captured in literary works rather than avowedly political tracts.

Following these leads, I have plunged into 'imaginative literature' or 'vernacular discourses' and brought self-conscious philosophising to bear on the same. In the Indian context, while the narrative history of epics is plumbed for political ideas, the imaginative literature of the past has been largely neglected. This is particularly glaring since many of the literary classics avowedly concern themselves with educating the young and ambitious about the right means to acquiring the triple ends of pleasure, wealth and kingdoms, distinguishing

between friends and enemies, circumstances conducive to the practice of virtues in war and peace, and so on.

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