

Sexography of Vatsyayana: the author of '*Kama Sutra*'

Sachi Sri Kantha

KEY WORDS

hedonism, India, Pataliputra (Patna), penis-vagina size, Sanskrit, sexuality

One of the best known of earliest extant sex manuals, second only to the *Ars Amatoria* [Art of Love] by Roman poet Ovid (43 BC – AD 17) was Indian author Vatsyayana's '*Kama Sutra*' treatise in Sanskrit¹⁾. Though the origin of this treatise has been tentatively dated between 3rd and 4th century AD, it remained largely unknown beyond the Indian territory, until a first English translation by a four member team (Richard Burton, Forster Arbuthnot, Bhagavanlal Indrajit and Shivaram Bhide)²⁾ was privately printed in 1888. This history has been studied by Doniger and Kakar, for their new translation of the treatise^{3,4)}, Grant⁵⁾ and Ali⁶⁾.

After studying the translations of Danielou⁷⁾, Haskar⁸⁾ and Narayan Reddy⁹⁾, in this essay, I establish that Vatsyayana deserves consideration as a theorist in sexology of his era. I also propose a reason why *Kama Sutra* treatise came to be composed. This was to promote the hedonism doctrine (i.e., Pleasure is the Good path for humans.), in opposition to the pessimistic Buddhist notions (then in ascendancy in the North India), that human life is filled with suffering.

Geography

This study is the fifth in my 'Sexography' series¹⁰⁻¹³⁾ published in this journal. It is rather discomfoting that hardly anything is known about the life of Vatsyayana, who authored *Kama Sutra*. He had lived in the Northern region of India, between 2nd and 4th centuries AD. Based on his reference to the city Pataliputra (currently Patna, in the Bihar state of India) in the text, scholars infer that Vatsyayana should have lived in the then Magadha kingdom. Current consensus among scholars is Vatsyayana's period was 3rd century AD prior to the establishment of Gupta dynasty in AD 320⁴⁾. Previously, Chakladar had studied the geographical locations mentioned by Vatsyayana^{14,15)}. During Vatsyayana's period, Pataliputra was a metropolis of commercial and cultural importance for Buddhism. With as many as more than 12 names, Pataliputra played an important role in expanding Buddhism, beyond Indian borders¹⁶⁾.

The language in which *Kama Sutra* was composed is Sanskrit. *Kama Sutra* treatise is composed of 7 books, with varying number of chapters in each of them. Altogether, the number of *sutras* (verses) in Danielou's translation⁷⁾ are 1,515, though *Kama Sutra* text itself mention the number of *sutras* as 1,250 verses in the first chapter of Book 1; in other modern translations in English, up to 1,683 *sutras* are presented¹⁷⁾. Such a discrepancy may be attributed to interpolations in post-Vatsyayana period, by different commentators of the treatise.

Sanskrit language and audience

Though the contents of *Kama Sutra* mainly address the sexual concerns of city living men, chapter 6 offers advices to women courtesans. Sanskrit was accepted essentially as a language of scholars in religion, politics and culture^{18,19)}; according to Filiozat¹⁹⁾, 'while middle Indic dialects and other languages were local, Sanskrit was universal throughout India, it was fully known by a few people only, but everywhere'. Nehru²⁰⁾ also had written,

'Sanskrit was the official Court language [during the Gupta period]. But even in those days Sanskrit was not the common language of the

people. The spoken language was a form of Prakrit, which was nearly allied to Sanskrit. But even though Sanskrit was not the vernacular of the time, it was living enough.'

Thus, two inferences can be made. First, *Kama Sutra* would have been read and espoused only by the learned population. This segment of learned population constituted what percentage of the total population is now obscure. Secondly, *Kama Sutra* could not have gained popularity with Indian masses in the 3rd century AD or subsequently. Thus, Katchadourian and Lunde were correct to note, 'It is perhaps helpful to realize that the average Indian has never heard of the *Kama Sutra*²¹⁾'.

By convention, in the 3rd century AD India, only the men belonging to the highest caste (Brahmins) of Vatsyayana's period learnt Sanskrit, while women were illiterate in Sanskrit. Among the seven books, two specific thoughts have been recorded about Book Seven tagged as Erotic Esoterica. According to Doniger and Kakar, it 'has a very different tone from the rest of the book⁴⁾ and Narayana Reddy considers that this could be due to interpolations in post-Vatsyayana period⁹⁾'.

None of the authors of 5 translations studied, offer relevant context to the Vatsyayana's period that generated such a treatise on sexuality. These include, (1) either the total population or the urban population of either India, or the Magadha kingdom, (2) literacy percentage of the milieu in which Vatsyayana lived, and (3) demographical parameters such as man-woman ratio. Historian Romila Thapar provided some hints, as follows:

'The daily life of a comfortably well-off citizen is described in *Kamasutra* (The book on the Art of Love) as a gentle existence devoted to the refinements of life for those who had both the leisure and the wherewithal for such living; comfortable if not luxurious surroundings were provided to harmonize with moods conducive to poetry and painting, in both of which the young city dilettante was expected to excel. Gatherings were frequently held where poetic recitations and compositions were heard. Painting and sculpture were always on view in the homes of those who executed them. Music was another necessary accomplishment, particularly the playing of the lute (*vina*). The young man had also to be trained in the art of love and for this purpose the *Kamasutra* and other works of its kind were written²²⁾'.

In 2020, the urban population was only 35% among the total population of 1.326 billion in India²³⁾. Though Shembavnekar²⁴⁾ in 1952 had estimated a total population of 120 – 130 million in India between 500 BC – to AD 100, many demographers in 1970s followed by Maddison²⁵⁾ had downgraded India's total population from AD 1 to AD 1000 to the range of 70-77 million. If the urban population of India in 2023 was only 35%, retroactively one can deduce that in the 3rd century AD of India, the urban population would have been in the range of only 10-15%. Thus, assuming a total population of India was 75 million in the 3rd century AD, the urban population can be fixed to 13 – 20 million. Those who were literate in Sanskrit language would have been only those belonging to the socially influential and literate Brahmin caste. According to the percentages of four major castes as well as aborigines and wild types of Shambavnekar²⁴⁾, the Brahmin caste constituted 4-5 million, in a total population of 130 million. By revising Shambavnekar's overestimate of total population to 75 million in AD 3rd century, the Brahmin caste would constitute only 2.3 – 2.8 million. Assuming a sex ratio balance of 50:50, that only Brahmin men were flu-

Received on May 8, 2023 and accepted on May 23, 2023

mediPhone Inc.

Higashi Nihonbashi 1-2-5 3rd Floor, Minato-ku, Tokyo 105-0021, Japan

Correspondence to: Sachi Sri Kantha

(e-mail: sachisrikantha53@gmail.com)

ORCID ID:

Sachi Sri Kantha: 0000-0001-6693-0110

ent in Sanskrit (women had to use Prakrit language only), the audience of Vatsyayana all over India would have been in the range of 1.15 -1.4 million at most, depending on the assumption, that all Brahmins could read and comprehend Sanskrit. Maddison's caveat that 'India does not have statistical records of the same sort of Western Europe, China or Japan, and there is consequently a wide range of views' should also be taken of note²⁵.

Merits and Demerits

To his credit, Vatsyayana had cited 9 of his predecessors in his treatise. They are, Shvetaketu Auddalaki, Babhravya, Dattaka, Charayana, Suvarnanabha, Ghotakamukha, Gonardiya, Gonikaputra and Kuchumara. Their works had become extinct¹⁷. Vatsyayana's signature appears in the second chapter of Book 7 as follows: 'By combining earlier texts and following their methods, Kamasutra is composed diligently in a condensed form (verse 52). Based on Babhravya's lineage, Vatsyayana studied and composed Kamasutra according to the prescribed rules (verse 56).'

If Vatsyayana has to be faulted, I'd focus on three issues. First, his indulgence in spurious typologies, and the preposterous inference of correlating sizes of penis and vagina with personality traits²¹. For example, he had arbitrarily classified men in three types on the basis of penis length: the hare-man (*shasha*, with an erect penis six finger breadths long), the bull-man (*vrisha*, nine finger-breadths) and the stallion-man (*ashva*, twelve finger breadths). Women are also classified in three types of vagina: doe (*mrigi*), mare (*vaadavaa*) and cow-elephant (*hastini*). But some scholars may attribute such a classification of genitals to poetic license²⁶ of the era and the text, and not to be taken seriously in scientific context. Secondly, though Vatsyayana had devoted one book on courtesans (who according to tradition, had commissioned this work from him), he has deftly omitted physical/mental health related inconveniences suffered by male clients. Only in one verse (Book 6, chapter 1, sutra 16), Vatsyayana advises courtesans to avoid clients who are wasting away with disease, suffering from tuberculosis, passing worms in the feces and those with halitosis (foul smelling mouth). Thirdly, Thannahill²⁷ had pointed out, that though Vatsyayana had provided a collection of 'specialized pharmacopoeia', missing items were 'any prescriptions for contraceptives or abortifacients'.

Asimov²⁸, a biochemist by training and historian of science, could identify only four ranking scientists (Diophantus, Pappus, Zosimus and Hypatia) in Europe during the period, Vatsyayana flourished. All four were Greeks: two mathematicians Diophantus and Pappus, a woman philosopher Hypatia and an alchemist Zosimus. None of the four contributed to biology or medicine. Based on Vatsyayana's contribution to human physiology, pharmacognosy and sexual medicine, he deserves to be ranked among these four contemporaries in Europe.

Hedonism in Hindu society

Though beyond the scope of this commentary, I propose a reason why *Kama Sutra* treatise came to be composed. Considering the political, historical and religious trends in the period Vatsyayana had probably lived (late 3rd cent AD and early 4th cent AD) prior to the origin of the Gupta dynasty in AD 320, Buddhist religion became prominent due to the patronage provided by the Kings of Kushan dynasty²⁹. The primary teachings of Siddharta Gautama who came to be known as the Buddha ('the awakened one'), consisted of four noble truths. These are, (1) Life is suffering, (2) Suffering involves a chain of causes, (3) Suffering can cease, (4) There is a path to such cessation³⁰. The *Kama Sutra* of Vatsyayana promoted hedonism doctrine (i.e., Pleasure is the Good path for humans.), to oppose pessimistic Buddhist notions that life is suffering. This eventually led to the renaissance of Hinduism²⁰.

In this aspect, thoughts of philosopher Radhakrishnan (1888-1975) on hedonism in the Hindu society, and how he endorses the work of Vatsyayana is pertinent. "To look upon sex as something unclean or indecent is a sign of moral perversion. Freud's emphasis on the sex basis of human life, though exaggerated, is not incorrect. The Hindu view has no sympathy with the relentlessly severe attitude adopted by Christianity...The Hindu looks upon sex life as sacred...sex is not a disease or a perversion, but a natural instinct...The author of the *Kama Sutra* gives us an account of the different sides of sexual life and attraction, presents us with those stirrings of the human heart that make so full and poignant. His whole account, with its ardent love of life and passionate spiritual serenity, has nothing in common with the abstinence solicited by the votaries of suffering..."³¹

In agreement with Gautam³² that 'given its significance, the *Kamasutra* has attracted surprisingly little scholarly attention', I had

focused on a few pertinent mysteries in Vatsyayana's life. Unless he had correspondents and collaborators to collect data, it is rather inconceivable to think that Vatsyayana was an empiricist in sexology, to describe the courtship and pair-bonding habits of men and women living in the different regions of India of his period. Details of such correspondents and collaborators are now lost to history. Nevertheless, Vatsyayana deserves consideration as a pioneer sexologist — albeit a ranking theorist in sexology.

REFERENCES

1. Francoeur RT, Perper T, Scherzer NA, Sellmer GP, Cornog M. A Descriptive Dictionary and Atlas of Sexology, Greenwood Press, Westport, CT, 1991, pp. 325, 587.
2. Burton R, Arbuthnot FF (Translators). *The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana*, with a preface by W.G. Archer, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1963.
3. Doniger W. On translating the 'Kama Sutra': a guru dakshina for Daniel H.H. Ingalls. *J Ind Philosophy*, 2001; 29(1-2): 81-94.
4. Doniger W, Kakar S. *Kamasutra — a new, complete English translation of the Sanskrit text*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2002.
5. Grant B. Translating 'The Kama Sutra'. *Third World Quart.*, 2005; 26(3): 18-37.
6. Ali D. Rethinking the history of the kama world in early India. *J Indian Philosophy*, 2011; 39: 1-13.
7. Danielou A. *The Complete Kama Sutra — the first unabridged modern translation of the classic Indian text by Vatsyayana*, Park Street Press, Rochester, Vermont, 1994.
8. Haksar AND. *Vatsyayana Kama Sutra — a guide to the art of pleasure*, Penguin Books, New York, 2011.
9. Narayana Reddy D. *Vaatyanarin Kaamasuthiram*, Vikatan Pirasuram 704, Chennai, 2012. (in Tamil).
10. Sri Kantha, S. Sexography of William Masters in Medical Journals: a survey. *Internat Med J.*, 2016; 23(6): 607-610.
11. Sri Kantha, S. Sexography of Alex Comfort in medical journals. *Internat Med J.*, 2020; 27(6): 755-756.
12. Sri Kantha, S. Sexography of Mahatma Gandhi. *Internat Med J.*, 2021; 28(4): 476-480.
13. Sri Kantha, S. Sexography of Wardell Pomeroy: an analysis. *Internat Med J.* 2021; 28(6): 667-670.
14. Chakladar HC. The geography of Vatsyayana. *Ann Bhandarkar Orient Res Inst.*, 1926; 7(1-2): 129-152.
15. Chakladar HC. The geography of Vatsyayana (contd.). *Ann Bhandarkar Orient Res Inst.*, 1926; 8(1): 43-62.
16. Prasad OM. Some aspects of literary references to Pataliputra. *Proc Ind Hist Congress*, 1957; 58: 160.
17. Desmond L. The pleasure is mine: The changing subject of erotic science. *J Ind Philosophy*, 2011; 39(1): 15-39.
18. Rapson EJ. In what degree was Sanskrit a spoken language? An essay on the development of the Sanskrit language. *J Roy Soc Great Britain & Ireland*, Jul 1904; pp. 435-456.
19. Filliozat J. Sanskrit as language of communication. *Ann Bhandarkar Oriental Res Inst.*, 1955; 36 (3-4): 179-189.
20. Nehru J. *Glimpses of World History, being further letter to his daughter, written in prison, and containing a rambling account of history for young people*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1989 centenary edition (first published in 1934-35), pp. 104-105.
21. Katchadourian HA, Lunde DT. *Fundamentals of Human Sexuality*, Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc., New York, 1972, pp. 28, 313.
22. Thapar R. *A History of India*, vol. 1, Penguin Books, London, 1990 (first published in 1966), p. 151.
23. Central Intelligence Agency: *The CIA World Fact Book 2020-2021*, Skyhorse Publishing, New York, 2020, pp. 437-443.
24. Shembavnekar KM. The population of ancient India (500 BC — to 100 AD). *Ann Bhandarkar Orient Res Inst.*, 1952; 33(1-4): 83-96.
25. Maddison A. Appendix B: Growth of World Population, GDP and GDP per capita before 1820. In: *The World Economy: Historical Statistics*, vol. 2, OECD, Paris, 2003. pp. 236-237.
26. Scott AF. *Current Literary Terms — a concise dictionary of their origin and use*, Macmillan Press Ltd, London, 1981 reprint, p. 224.
27. Tannahill R. *Sex in History*, Stein and Day publishers, New York, 1980, pp. 199-228.
28. Asimov I. *Asimov's Biographical Encyclopedia of Science and Technology*, 2nd revised edition, Doubleday & Co., New York, 1982.
29. Spear P (ed). *The Oxford History of India*, 3rd ed., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1964 reprint, pp. 143-189.
30. Honderich T (ed). *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1995, pp. 106-109.
31. Radhakrishnan S. *Religion and Society*, Harper Collins Publishers, New Delhi, 1997 (originally published 1947), pp. 139-198.
32. Gautam SK. The courtesans and the birth of 'Ars Erotica' in the 'Kamasutra': a history of erotics in the wake of Foucault. *J Hist Sexuality*, 2014; 23(1): 1-20.