

Book Reviews

Vasanthi Srinivasan, *Virtue and Human Ends: Political Ideas From Indian Classics*. Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2021, 202 pages, ₹685.

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Vasanthi Srinivasan's timely book, *Virtue and Human Ends: Political Ideas From Indian Classics*, comes at a juncture when one witnesses the erosion and rupture of the moral and ethical self across societies, manifesting in innumerable crises. In this text, Srinivasan describes the foundational virtues and values that have shaped human civilization, as other scholars have argued, but in addition, she traces the countless sources of the self that have shaped the Indian perspective on righteousness. Based on the *Nitishastra* traditions, the book deals with virtues and vices but also identifies what falls between virtues and vices: 'Situated Ethics', *Apad Dharma*, which roughly means 'ethics in times of emergency' and also about certain virtues transforming into vices.

The book presents the rich and diverse traditions of thought drawing on four classics: *Panchatantra*, *Hitopadesha*, *Dasakumaracharita* and *Vetala Panchavimshati*. For centuries, these classics have been disseminated in creative ways: as inspiring stories, satirical fables, intriguing folk tales and thoughtful Kathas. This text deals with virtues and vices: for the individual; for communities; and for the rulers, as well as for ordinary men and women. Its key argument is for a 'thick interpretation' of these classics and the need to engage with the deep 'political' nature of the *Nitishastra* tradition. The book provides an alternative reading of the classics, arguing for the need to shift beyond the dominant but limited reading of *Nitishastaras*, which have been handed down as ethical stories, fables and moral education for children and young adults. Srinivasan invokes a distinct interpretation of the texts, arguing that ethical

considerations and practical wisdom are equally crucial in statecraft. She emphasizes the advisory nature of these texts for training the young and the old in statecraft and in the pursuit of *Artha* (material gains); the experience of *Kama* (pleasure); the practice of *Dharma* (righteousness) and the attainment of *Moksha* (liberation).

Presenting a set of closely connected ideals such as prudence, service, friendship, wisdom, magnanimity (and many others) as political virtues is common in the classics, and despite the distinctions of the stories, certain similar values seem to be at the core of each of them. According to Srinivasan, The *Panchatantra* invokes virtues such as friendship, sympathy, compassion and prudence. The *Hitopadesha* invokes the idea of prudence and ethical realism in war and peace. *Dasakumaracharita* is framed on the lessons of desire (*kama*) and the distinct strategies of experiencing it, bringing virtues such as love, courage and fairness. The *Vetala Panchavimshati* delves into the concept of 'Svadharmā', emphasizing the pursuit of ethical excellence and discernment in accordance with one's duty towards the self and the others. According to Srinivasan, each of these classics are helpful in moving beyond the realist readings of statecraft as presented in existing political treatises like the much-celebrated *Arthashastra*. The author argues that multiple strategies and methods of statecraft emerge from the reading of the classics. Prudence emerges as a dominant virtue as well as strategy, but so does seduction, friendship and at certain occasions *Suvarna Sandhi* (golden peace) as equally crucial in practices of statecraft.

Other scholars have argued that texts like *Arthashastra* have been significant for tracing the 'organic' and the 'indigenous' in the history of non-Western political thought, but focusing on those texts has meant the neglect of identifying vernacular texts and oral traditions. Srinivasan argues that texts within the larger *Nitishastra* traditions are equally suggestive of elements and practices of statecraft based on mutual coexistence, friendship and tolerance that shift beyond realist frameworks of 'Six-fold Strategy' (*Shadgunya Siddhant/Mandala Siddhant*), which resulted in positioning 'self-preservation' as the norm in the political discourse. This should encourage the reader to identify and rescue other indigenous texts that are embedded in political, moral, ethical and philosophical traditions.

Srinivasan indeed advocates exploring overlooked texts that may not be considered "classics" but continue to be present in folk narratives, stories and everyday experiences. Arguably, this addition of new 'classics' by expanding the canon would also encourage alternative readings of the history of political and social thought. Comparing texts would facilitate a dialogue between Western thinkers such as Machiavelli and Indian scholars such as Kautilya, Dandin, Visnu Sharma and Shivadasa. This juxtaposition offers valuable insights into common values among the two, for instance, Srinivasan's comparison of Machiavelli's *Mandragora* with Dandin's *Dasakumaracharita*.

The feminist reading of these classics, especially of Dandin's *Dasakumaracharita*, is commendable. These classics have been predominantly read and disseminated through a male lens, usually ascribing restrictive and dutiful roles to women. Srinivasan's reading questions the conventional invocation of women characters that are without any kind of agency, autonomy and selfhood. She provides women characters with active agency in statecraft – deploying love, friendship, seduction and passion.


The narratives are drawn solely from Sanskrit classics, revealing a gap that could be filled by classic texts in other languages such as Tamil, Pali, Prakrit and others. Understandably, the selection of classics was undertaken with the semblance of ideas and virtues that the classics suggested. It would have been interesting to have a chapter on *Jataka* tales, drawing from Sutta Pitaka or Jain fables. One does find some comparisons with the *Jataka* tales in the chapter on *Panchatantra*, but is there a possibility of analysing classics of the Shramanic traditions and folk narratives? This can also be seen as Srinivasan's invitation to carry forward similar engagements with non-Sanskrit classics.

The book is a useful addition to the corpus of writings on the *Nitishastra* tradition. It is a significant intervention on the nature and shaping of the 'political', informing the reader about the transfer and

migration of ideas, which in this case was from East to West. It also bears witness to rich, robust and voluminous oral traditions, which continue to shape the self, society and the nation.

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