Introduction

The *Kama Sutra* was written in India nearly two thousand years ago. It is barely more than a hundred years since it became known outside the country of its origin. Interest in it seems ageless. In India it has been cited century after century in other works, as well as influencing literature and art. In the wider world its celebrity, or notoriety, remains unaffected by the information explosion on its principal subject in our times.

Present Perceptions

The title has 183 listings in the online catalogue of the US Library of Congress. These include several books with the original text and commentary in Sanskrit, the literary language of ancient India. Much more numerous are translations into English and other languages such as French, German, Italian and Russian, not to mention those of South Asia like Bengali, Hindi, Marathi and Telugu. There are also some scholarly studies of Indian history, literature and social life bearing on the work.

But more than half the titles in the Congressional list point to perspectives other than the academic. They range from

Complete Illustrated Kama Sutra to *Pocket Idiot's Guide to the Kama Sutra*, and from *Kitchen Kama Sutra: 50 ways to seduce each other outside the bedroom* to *Pop-up Kama Sutra: 6 paper-engineered variations*. The last entry is *Kama Sutra 52: A year's worth of best positions for passion and pleasure* published in 2009.

The work seems to have two popular reputations in the West, according to a recent commentator from the United Kingdom. One as an exotic compendium of positions for human copulation and the other 'as a repository of Oriental erotic wisdom, the Ur-text of a profoundly spiritual tradition'. Either way, he says, 'it has become a byword for sex itself.'[1] Also, one may add, a brand name for consumer marketing and advertisement, to go by the establishments and products which use its unpatented title.

This reputation also extends to modern India. Much of its vast population may yet be largely unaware of the work. But among many of its intellectual class the *Kama Sutra* 'is still held up as a proud example of that country's alternative tradition of sexual morality'.[2] A popular brand of condoms bears its name, as do many publications with colourful pictures in coffee-table and pocket-size editions. However, these are mostly bought by tourists, thinks an Indian psychoanalyst, scholar and novelist of the subject, and the locals 'don't read it any more; they only look at illustrations of the sexual positions'. What it is really about, he says, 'is the art of living – about finding a partner, maintaining power in marriage, committing adultery, living as or with a courtesan, using drugs – and also about positions in sexual intercourse. It has attained its classical status as the world's first comprehensive guide to erotic love because it is at the bottom about essential, unchangeable human attributes – lust, love, shyness,

rejection, seduction, manipulation, that are also a part of human sexuality.'[3]

An Ancient Assessment

The repute of the *Kama Sutra* and its author in ancient India, and its position in the knowledge system of the time, is perhaps put most simply in another well-known and possibly not much later work. This is the *Panchatantra*, a popular collection of animal and human fables still in wide circulation. In the prologue of its text a king, anxious to have his children well educated, is told: 'Majesty, it is heard that grammar takes twelve years. Then come Manu and other works on Dharma, Chanakya and those on Artha, and Vatsyayana and others on Kama. Thus are the sciences of Dharma, Artha and Kama learnt. Then does knowledge develop.'[4] A subsequent tale in the same text (1.5) narrows the focus somewhat. In it a friend advises a lover to go to his beloved who is alone so that 'you may enjoy her in accordance with the methods prescribed by Vatsyayana.'[5]

Four things seem clear from these references in a book which was meant for instruction as well as entertainment. First, general education at the time was seen broadly to comprise three main branches of knowledge after reading, writing and grammar. Second, each of these had come to be identified with the work of one particular authority. Third, Kama was one of the three branches and the name associated with it was that of Vatsyayana. Finally, though Kama may have had a wider connotation inclusive of other pursuits, its principal concern was with sex.

The Three Ends

It is fitting first to consider the wider context. It conceptualized a trinity of worldly pursuits or ends of human life, summed up in the words Dharma, Artha and Kama. Each has multiple meanings but, very broadly, Dharma is virtue and righteous conduct, Artha is wealth, power and material well-being and Kama is desire for and sensual pleasure of all kinds. There were areas, such as marriage, where they overlapped. But each was seen as a basic motivator and goal of normal human action as a whole, and worthy as such of study and regulation. A well-rounded education presumed some familiarity with this triad (*trivarga*) of human objectives (*purushartha*), each with its due place in life. A fourth end, which made it a quartet (*chaturvarga*), was Moksha or salvation. But that was an other-worldly pursuit.

The three ends are spelt out briefly and clearly in the *Kama Sutra*'s Book One, Chapter 2. Their mutual relationship and comparative importance are also discussed, though with some ambivalence. While the pursuit of Dharma obviously took precedence over the other two, its benefits might accrue only in a future life. Artha, on the other hand, could be more important for people like kings and courtesans because of their worldly requirements. Kama was a basic need like food. The comparison was businesslike, but it could also be cynical, as shown by a later Sanskrit poet and author of a now lost commentary on the *Kama Sutra*:

> Talk of Dharma, taste for Kama,
> mind for Moksha, come about
> only when content and comfort

dawn in bellies taut with hunger:
for, when it is the time to eat,
and no money nor the means,
who thinks of Dharma, relishes Kama,
or looks to that which leads to Moksha?

and,

The ultimate fruit of wealth, they say,
can be a religious ceremony;
and that results, without dispute,
in merit which leads to paradise;
but paradise itself is simply
women in their sixteenth year.[6]

Be that as it may, the three ends formed an overall context for learning and conduct, within which Vatsyayana concentrated on a subject which was both sexual as well as social at the time. 'Its principal element', he says, 'is a delightful, creative feeling pervaded by sensual pleasure.'

The Author and the Times

The *Kama Sutra* names Vatsyayana as its author. He is also mentioned as such in a number of subsequent works. A fifth-century CE novel, *Vasavadatta* by Subandhu, names him Mallanaga. This, says a later commentator,[7] was his given name, Vatsyayana being the family name. The little that he has mentioned about himself is confined to his epilogue: how he composed the work after careful study and consideration

of earlier material 'while observing a celibate's life in full meditation'. Nothing else is known about him. From his description of regional practices it is surmised that he may have been from the then cultural heartland of India, the Madhya Desha or central region; and may have lived in Pataliputra, its metropolis at the time, identified with a site near modern-day Patna.

The dating of the *Kama Sutra*, as with much ancient Indian chronology, is affected by the absence of conclusive data. Though there is no consensus on the subject, most scholars now place it in the third century CE.[8] This puts it after the other two works regarded as foundational texts of the then knowledge system: the *Manava Dharma Shastra* of Manu on the legal and social codes of conduct, and the *Artha Shastra* of Kautilya or Chanakya on economics and politics. With the latter it has stylistic similarities which some scholars think indicate that the *Artha Shastra* may have served as a model for Vatsyayana. He also knew other works like the *Atharva Veda* and the *Ayurveda*, which he mentioned in his text.

In historical terms this was a time between the dissolution of the Kushana and the rise of the Gupta empire in north India. Though a period of political transition, it was also marked by a continued flowering of knowledge and an expansion of trade and commerce, with consequent prosperity which provided the means and the leisure for aesthetic pursuits by the affluent. The *Kama Sutra* gives vivid accounts of these in its descriptions of the life of a gentleman and of professional courtesans who formed a class similar to the hetaeras of Greece and the geishas of Japan. This is the setting in which its examination of social and sexual behaviour is undertaken.

The Work's Genre and Contents

According to a recent study[9] the *Kama Sutra* is both descriptive and prescriptive, and comes in the category of *shastra*, the same as the works on Dharma and Artha already mentioned. 'The term has no exact parallel in English,' says Manu's latest translator. 'It may refer to a system, a tradition of expert knowledge in a particular field, that is, a science. It refers especially to the textualized form of that science i.e. an authoritative compendium of knowledge.'[10] Vatsyayana's work broadly fits this description. It is a treatise on Kama, in both the social and sexual aspects of human relationships. It quotes from earlier works, defines various dimensions of the subject and frames its descriptions and prescriptions in coldly clinical and generally dispassionate terms. A notable feature is its recurrent disclaimers. Their theme is that descriptions must not be considered as recommendations, and the latter must also take particular situations into account. This adds an intimate note to the otherwise impersonal, didactic approach.

Another seemingly personal touch comes through the verses which intersperse the text's prose. Their sources are not specified and some could well be of Vatsyayana's own composition. A refreshing counterpoint to the prose, which is framed in the *sutra* style of brief passages with compressed meaning in telegraphic language, the verses are in the more expansive *shloka* form well known through the great Indian epics. As in the *Artha Shastra*, they often provide a summation or make a point after the prose passages. A recent scholarly translation notes in its introduction that 'the prose, by and large, describes what people do; only in the verses does Vatsyayana explicitly suggest what people should do.'[11] Further, 'the voice of these verses is

one of moderation and reason.' Also, it may be noted, of an occasional tongue-in-cheek scepticism which adds to the personal touch.

Described precisely in its first chapter, the *Kama Sutra*'s contents are spread over seven books and thirty-six chapters. In contrast to the image the work later acquired, only one of the seven books, the second, deals with the act of sex in its various aspects. The first book lays out the contextual background and describes the life of a gentleman, his social, romantic and other pursuits and the work of his aides. The third and the fourth discuss courtship, marriage and the role of the wife. The fifth book is concerned with extra-marital relations, in a mainly polygamous society, and with life in the harem. The sixth deals with the life and conduct of courtesans. The final book, which is more a collection of recipes than an analytical account, provides prescriptions for increasing attractiveness, stimulating passion, enhancing virility and exerting control over a partner. None of the books, it is interesting to note, appear to be exclusively for men; they also contain advice for maidens and wives, mistresses and courtesans: women are recognized as individuals.

The *Kama Sutra* was written during a period of economic growth with greater scope for elegant living, and of increased cultural activity, in a society which recognized the legitimacy of pleasure as a basic human pursuit, along with that of virtue and wealth. It expounded on the first, but also urged a balance with the other two, as is evident from the final verse of its epilogue. Its detailed expositions on the lifestyles of cultivated gentlemen and fashionable courtesans give some idea of the audience to which it was addressed. Later literary evidence would indicate that both used it as a guide for recreational and professional purposes. But it also dwells on other matters, specially of marital import: the aesthetic education of girls; the wooing of a pro-

spective bride; the role of partners in matrimony, monogamous as well as polygamous; and also on romantic relationships outside marriage, apart from erotic techniques for the enhancement of sensual pleasure. It is thus a fairly comprehensive manual on loving and living, and deals both with contemporary issues and others which are timeless.

Influence on Later Literature

As already mentioned, Vatsyayana is cited by name in the fourth-century CE *Panchatantra*[12] and the *Kama Sutra* in the fifth-century novel by Subandhu. The language and the terminology of the work are thought to have been reflected in descriptions of the courtesan and the gentleman in Shudraka's fourth-century play *Mriccha-katika* (*The Little Clay Cart*); in amorous episodes in Kalidasa's fifth-century epic poems *Kumarasambhava* and *Raghuvamsha*; in the love lyrics of the eighth-century *Amarushatakam*; and in the ecstatic songs of Jayadeva's twelfth-century *Gitagovinda*. Though none of these famous works actually cite the *Kama Sutra* or its author, such references are found in later Sanskrit commentaries on some of them.[13] Citations also exist in other works, like the seventh-century epic poem *Shishupalavadha* of Magha and the eighth-century satire on courtesans *Kuttanimatam* of Damodaragupta.

Apart from its reflection in the subsequent poetical literature of Sanskrit, the *Kama Sutra* also inspired a series of later works in which the focus narrowed from the social to the purely sexual aspects. The still available and better known of these works are: the eleventh-century *Nagarasarvasva* of the Buddhist monk Padmashri; the twelfth-century *Ratirahasya* of Kokkoka from Kashmir; the fourteenth-century *Panchasayaka* of Jyotirisha,

perhaps from Gujarat; the fifteenth-century *Ratiratnapradipika* of Praudha Devaraja from the south Indian Vijayanagara kingdom; and the sixteenth-century *Anangaranga* of Kalyanamalla, who wrote it for the Afghan chieftain Lad Khan Lodi. All except the last of these texts cite Vatsyayana, testifying to the currency of his work and reputation over more than a millennium. All are mainly elaborations of the *Kama Sutra*'s second book on sexual union, and some of them have also been cited by later writers. They include further classifications of male and female sexual types, new techniques of making love, cosmetic methods for beautification and theories linking erogenous zones of the female body with the phases of the moon.

The *Kama Sutra* also prompted learned commentaries on it in Sanskrit. The earliest known from quotation is the *Vatsyayana Sutrasara* of Kshemendra from eleventh-century Kashmir, but its text is lost. The most reputed now is the *Jayamangala*, composed in the thirteenth century by Yashodhara. Others include the sixteenth-century *Kandarpachudamani* by Virabhadra, actually a condensation of the *Kama Sutra* in verse; the unpublished eighteenth-century *Praudhapriya* of Bhaskara Nrisimha; and another by Malladeva, known only by the name. Commentaries have also been published in India in recent times, in Bengali, Hindi, Tamil and Telugu.[14] Perhaps the best known of these is the Hindi commentary of 1964 by Devadatta Shastri; another is the Hindi *Purusharthaprabha* by Madhavacharya, reprinted in 1995.

Translations into English

The first translation of the *Kama Sutra* into English appeared in 1883. It is still well known as the work of the explorer and

linguist Sir Richard Burton, who also translated the *Arabian Nights*. Actually it was the result of a joint effort by him and another British colonial official, Foster Fitzgerald Arbuthnot, and two Indian scholars, Bhagvanlal Indraji and Shivaram Bhide, whom they had recruited for assistance in the translation. Published privately in view of the standards of censorship then prevailing, it soon acquired a reputation for pornography, leading to numerous pirated versions.[15]

Formally published in the United States and Britain only in 1962, the Burton translation still remains perhaps the most circulated of those in English. It has had several editions with learned comments by different scholars, and also been translated into other languages. Other translations into English have also appeared; some are listed in the Select Bibliography.

Recent scholarly translators have considered the Burton translation to be 'seriously flawed'.[16] A debate on this, as also on other translations, could possibly be of some academic interest, but this is not the place for it. Here it may suffice to touch briefly on translation in general and specially from Sanskrit.

An important aspect is the distinction between what may be called literal and literary translation. The first transmits information about meanings and the linguistic form in which they are presented: its main concern is fidelity to the original text, even if the readability of the rendition is thereby affected. It serves the academic purpose of better comprehending the original and its environment, and of facilitating further research. The second, on the other hand, is intended to bring the work to a more general readership through its own language. Apart from being accurate and readable, it needs to convey also a flavour and feel of the original. In the case of the *Kama Sutra*, with its compressed, aphoristic *sutra* form in Sanskrit, there is an additional need to make the language clearer through

amplification. This necessitates consulting commentaries while taking care that they do not creep into the translation itself.

The Present Translation

The present translation is for the general reader interested in the *Kama Sutra* as it is. It refrains from extraneous comment and annotation more suited for the specialist, except where it may help better understanding of the original's language. I have endeavoured to combine faithfulness to the original text with the requirements of modern English usage. While using the Yashodhara and Shastri commentaries, which are much later and reflect their own times, to follow the text better, I have also tried to confine my translation to what Vatsyayana wrote, which is generally clear enough. I have further attempted to convey something of his dispassionate tone and occasional personal touch by translating his stanzas in a free verse form.

I have also avoided looking for any esoteric meanings which some suppose the text may contain, whether in its discussion of human relations or of sexual conduct. It touches on issues of current topicality like same-sex activities and trans-sexual behaviour, and what may be considered unorthodox practices. Some, like hitting and biting while making love and oral sex, are discussed in it at length while mention of others is marginal or incidental. In translating them I have followed the text as it is without any attempt at embellishment or interpretation. Clarifications of language, where they seemed needed, have been made in the notes to the text.

The *sutras* have been grouped in paragraphs for ease of reading. Their number from the text is given at the end of each paragraph for reference. The verses have been treated similarly.

The book and the chapter headings are translations from the text, but within each chapter I have inserted sub-headings for better reading. Thirty-two of these are based on Yashodhara's commentary; they are also mentioned in the text (1.1.15–22) but without indicating their placement as Yashodhara does. These sub-headings have been marked in the text with an asterisk. The others I have devised.

The text used for this translation is that published in 1964 by the Chaukhamba Sanskrit Sansthan, Varanasi, with the Sanskrit commentary *Jayamangala* of Yashodhara and the Hindi commentary of Devadatta Shastri. I have also compared it for corrections with the Sanskrit text brought out by Pratibha Prakashan, Delhi, in 2005 with English notes and translation by Radhavallabha Tripathi.

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