Nationalist Interpretations of the *Kama Sutra*
K. Rangaswami Iyengar and the Respectability of Ancient Texts

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Abstract

The text known as Kama Sutra *often brings to mind the ancient treatise on Indian sexuality brought to the attention of the West via notorious Victorian colonial wanderlust. The explorer Richard F. Burton is frequently credited with translating the book into English, although numerous and varied interpretations followed. This article examines the efforts and effects of the* Kama Sutra *by K. Rangaswami Iyengar, Pundit of the Mysore Palace, as the first Indian to translate the* Kama Sutra *into English. His rendition of the Sanskrit masterpiece is a far cry from Burton's voyeuristic edition. Iyengar uses the text to reinforce what he sees as the essential purity of Indian sexuality bound within the conventions of early nationalist ideas of the family and prescribed gender roles. Iyengar positions* Kama Sutra *as a marriage manual for keeping the Indian conjugal couple strong, and suggests that the 'unsavory' parts were meant as a warning of what to avoid when temptation strikes.*

Introduction

In 1921, K. Rangaswami Iyengar became the first Indian to publish a translation of Vatsyayana's *Kama Sutra* into English. His translation of the *Kama Sutra*, notably subtitled *The Science of Love,* was published under the name of Punjab Sanskrit Book Depot in far-off Lahore and printed by B.V. Narasimha Iyengar at the Royal Press, Mysore. Far from simply reprinting Sir Richard F. Burton's 1883 translation of *Kama Sutra* (albeit a team project of unacknowledged

Pundits Bhugwanlal Indrajit and Shivaram Parashuram Bhide) which even today remains the standard, although a highly imperfect work, Iyengar presumably translated the text himself, and as a result, his text reads much differently. By examining Iyengar's edition of the *Kama Sutra* taking into consideration his preface, his word choices, and the extent to which he incorporates earlier commentaries, particularly the 13th century work of Yashodhara, my aim is to consider the significance of the first English translation of the *Kama Sutra* done after Richard Burton.

The *Kama Sutra* is far from being a static and fixed text, either in ancient and medieval India, and particularly so after Burton's translation in 1883. While travel writer James Commachie contends in his new book that *Kama Sutra* simply went underground from Burton's time until legal publications appeared from the early 1960s onward, my research suggests otherwise. Rather, by looking at the content and context of post-Burton translations, I wish to show how each subsequent translators of *Kama Sutra* breathed a new life into the text quite different from the Victorian context of Burton. By situating Iyengar and his translation of *Kama Sutra* into the context of 1920s India, I hope to show how this work can be read as a social palimpsest reflecting the social and cultural life of the translator's times.

About the Translator

Like Vatsyayana himself, the original compiler and author of the *Kama Sutra*, almost nothing is known about K. Rangaswami Iyengar other than what he reports to us in his translation. The only bits of documentation that we do have about Iyengar are his work on two other texts. Two years after publishing his *Kama Sutra*, Iyengar published an English translation of the *Rati-ratna-Pradipika* of Sri Devaraja Maharaja, a well-known shorter and chronologically-later Kashmiri text also concerning sexuality. The other reference to Iyengar's work that I have located is an 81-page *Bala Ramayana* or children's version of the classic *Ramayana* epic mentioned in the list of records held by the Karnataka State Archives Department.

Framing *Kama Sutra*: Iyengar's Preface

Turning now to the text itself, I would like to look closely at Iyengar's preface to the work from where we can try to hear Iyengar's own voice as he writes about the Kama Sutra. In my research project which considers the history of post-Burton translations of the *Kama Sutra* into English and vernacular languages, I have found that translators' prefaces contain invaluable information about the motivations for translating the book. A common thread in most prefaces is the author's attempt to both instill a sense of timelessness into the text while at the same time to show their readers the relevance of the book to their own contemporary times. This trend of establishing timelessness was particularly relevant in the examination of ancient texts in colonial India where the struggle to interpret ancient history was in itself an act of anti-colonial nationalism against the British.

Iyengar begins his preface with both warning and frustration about the task of translating the text. He writes:

> It is with little hesitation that I allow this work of mine to be published. Firstly because a work on sexology [sic] or erotics is generally viewed with aversion, though there is every reason for a man or woman to understand the subject well. Secondly, ideas concerning matters of love as also the habits of the people which prevail in oriental countries being somewhat different from those in western countries, there is a great difficulty in finding expressions in English—a language, so foreign to the sentiments expressed and the subjects treated of in the present work—exactly corresponding with the words and phrases used in the Sanskrit text. And lastly because of the shortcomings that may be found in the work which I however leave to the generous indulgence of scholars, and the defects if kindly pointed out will thankfully be noted and remedied in a subsequent edition of this work.
>
> (Iyengar 1921)

After the usual warnings about the possible reception of the work by people other than scholars of Ethnology and the History of Morals, Iyengar makes an intriguing comment about the inherent western-bias of English as a language inappropriate for the communication of both Indian intellectual ideas and particular sexual habits. His solution to this problem, which turns out to be a wonderful aid to future historians, is to include the hard-to-translate Sanskrit terms alongside his English translation. While we cannot be sure which version of the text Iyengar used in making his translation, his incorporation of Sanskrit at places is a help to us in understanding how to chose to render the text.

So why did Iyengar feel the need to produce a copy of the *Kama Sutra* in English? While Iyengar never comes out and says directly why, one can speculate that his aim is to try to reclaim the *Kama Sutra* away from the Victorian bias of the Burton translation available widely in both Indian and western contexts. Instead of an Englishman fetishizing the text as part of the elaborate sexual discourses of Indian subjects, a South Indian Brahmin such as Iyengar can posit the text as part of the backdrop of a more glorious Indian civilization.

The Language of Science

In order to reinforce the respectability of *Kama Sutra* as an ancient Indian text, Iyengar casts it into an early Hindu science of morals, employing a language that tends to be more clinical as to distinguish it either from the pornographic or romantic terms of Burton. By stating in his title page that the book "is intended for the benefit of scholars interested in research work in Ethnology and the History of Morals", Iyengar follows the lead of other translators of erotica in providing such a warning. While other writers of the time might place what they consider to be obscene portions in Latin—such as German translator Richard Schmidt—(oddly contextualizing them in the classical language of the west), Iyengar seeks to domesticate such sections as not to detract from the intent of the treatise. By repeating words in the original Sanskrit, the classical language of scholarship in India, Iyengar

creates a textual effect not unlike that of western translators. Rather than show a lack of facility in English, Iyengar speaks to an imaginary audience of experts who would also have access to Sanskrit.

Iyengar is quick to explain and defend the value of parts of the *Kama Sutra* which contain what he describes as 'bad and immoral practices'. These parts, he argues, were included in the book in order to bring such matters to light and to put "righteous people on guard against these vile practices" (Iyengar 1921). These include certain 'depraved' sexual practices such as *Auparistaka* (oral sex), which he later defines as "sexual action in the upper cavity of the body i.e. mouth."[1] Forbidden sections also include the entire content of Book V on seducing other men's wives and all of Book VI on Courtesans. In justifying this interpretation, Iyengar refers to and echoes the conclusion of a teacher, Sri Vedante Desika, of eight centuries past who wrote in his work *Paramatabhanga* that Vatsyayana included these passages only to warn his readers about such 'evil practices.'

By utilizing the civilizing language of science as his interpretive mode, Iyengar joins other writers of his time in helping to cast India's tradition as part of scientific reason. India is no longer the 'muddle' of E.M. Forster's world, but from its very ancient past it is part of a documentable, understandable, rational world-view, completely able to fall into step with western rational thought and the scientific method which was at the very center of enlightenment thinking. For instance, Iyengar doubts whether much of Vatsyayana's theory (aka the positions) is actually doable in practice, but leaves it as 'data for scientists to investigate.'[2] References to the *Kama Sutra* as a scientific text are found in all the pages of Iyengar's translation, whereas other Victorian-inspired writers including Burton would only refer to the contents of the text as a 'subject'. Elsewhere, when the text comments briefly on the sexual lives of animals whose breeding depends only upon biology and not intelligence or culture, Iyengar uses more Darwinian terms of 'crossings', 'instinct', and 'season of menses' (Iyengar 1921:13). By choosing language which is more clinical than

poetic such as 'sexual intercourse' rather than the more poetic 'union,' Iyengar attempts to cast his interpretation as an ancient Hindu science which can become part of a modern body of scientific knowledge. Interestingly, Iyengar seems more at ease with the medical and scientific names for male body parts and fluids, using the terms 'penis' and 'semen'. For women, however, Iyengar is much less explicit, using the terms 'private parts' and 'love fluid' (Iyengar 1921:230) for female genitalia and secretions.

Iyengar's focus on science also extends to his classification of various instructions from the *Kama Sutra* in terms of hygiene. As for the description of furniture and furnishings of the bed-room, while other translators say that in addition to the elaborately dressed bed there is a couch[3], Iyengar writes that there is to be an identical second bed 'intended for sexual intercourse' (Iyengar 1921:28). Later in the same section, when describing Vatsyayana's prescription/description of the daily bath, Iyengar offers an elaboration of the scientific basis behind the need to wipe ones armpits—arising from the bad smell caused by perspiration (Iyengar 1921:29). For a final example, when describing a woman's proper response to a man's sneeze, Iyengar gives the English 'Bless You!' instead of the 'Live Long!' salutation used by other translators. This is an example of Iyengar's mastery in the art of translation or an attempt to show mastery in English idioms.

Colonial Misogyny, Indian Misogyny

In addition to using such clinical vocabulary, Iyengar's word choices and explanations reflect the prevailing attitude toward the 'Veshyas' (courtesans), denigrating them by claiming that "their very livelihood depends on money earned by prostitution" (Iyengar 1921:13). It seems here that, Iyengar glosses over the difference between 'veshya' and more-educated and sophisticated 'ganika'. In pointing out some men's warnings that women should not study the *Kama Sutra* except in one's youth or after marriage with consent of her husband, Iyengar's translation echoes Manu's maxim that women should be

banned from reading the foundational Sastras, that women are not suited for higher education and that they have in no need of receiving the training of this book (Iyengar 1921:17).

Various translations of the *Kama Sutra* include a range of interpretations as to the agency of women in social and sexual life. In Iyengar's time, Burton's translation of the *Kama Sutra* was the only known English rendering of the text and it is at the far extreme of denying women much power to act in their own interests. In their translation of the *Kama Sutra*, Wendy and Kakar (2002) point to the Victorian male bias found in Burton's work. To illustrate their example they point to the difference in translation between their own and Burton's phrasing of a particular line. Burton's text reads:

> In the event of any misconduct on the part of her husband, she should not blame him excessively, though she be a little displeased. She should not use abusive language toward him, but rebuke him with conciliatory words, whether he be in the company of friends or alone. Moreover, she should not be a scold, for, says Gonardiya, 'there is no cause of dislike on the part of a husband so great as this characteristic in a wife.
>
> (qtd. in Doniger and Kakar 2002:lvi)

Iyengar's version of the same passage, from the chapter entitled 'The Duties of a Faithful Wife' reads quite differently. He writes:

> If at any time she becomes a little displeased through some offence of her husband, she should not remonstrate with him too much about it.
>
> She may however, reproach him even in stern language when he is alone or only in the company of his friends. But she should never have recourse to the methods of a Mulakariaka (a woman administering medicinal roots to gain mastery or influences over a person)
>
> (Iyengar 1921:136)

In Iyengar's reading of the aphorism, with which Doniger and Kakar's translation also concurs, the woman is not kept silent as in the Burton phrase which only allows women the choice to 'rebuke with conciliatory words'. Iyengar's translation allows for reproachment of the man, 'even in stern language,' whether he is alone or with friends.

Sometimes, Iyengar gives more explicit detail than other translators, for instance, in his list of the 64 arts of essential knowledge, he extrapolates on the skill of 'carpentry' to include the making of wooden male organs to use as substitutes in love-making (Iyengar 1921:23).

At other places, however, Iyengar interprets the Sanskrit in ways that raise questions about Iyengar's attitude towards women and women's sexuality. In the part of the *Kama Sutra* concerning the royal harem of the King, Iyengar uses the Mughal/Persian term *Zenana* to discuss the frustrations of multiple wives who are obligated to share one husband. (Such referents to the Arabic 'harem' and Persian 'zenana', of course, postdate the *Kama Sutra* by several hundred years). In reiterating Vatsyayana's instructions for the women of the harem to please each other, Iyengar notes various substitutes for the male organ, including those for kings who 'out of pity' try to satisfy all their wives despite their own lack of inclination. He notes that kings who desire children must, however, be au naturel for their wives, but here Iyengar adds the hygienic qualifier of women "who have just bathed after their menses". Iyengar continues by glossing over the text's suggestion that such frustrated harem women can lie atop statues of male figures in order to satisfy their passion only adding this element to the ending verse which specifies that men can try similar techniques, including using artificial images, when they have no access to women (Iyengar 1921:174).

In certain places, Iyengar's text follows Burton's in his choice of words, echoing the colonial sentiments. In thinking through the complex web of relationships between colonial power and colonial translation, I find the recent work of Sanskritist Andrea Pinckley to be

helpful. Pinkley points about Burton's use of the word 'shampooing' instead of 'caressing' or 'massage' to be indicative of the power of colonial difference. She notes that the word 'shampoo' itself came into English from Hindi during the middle of the eighteenth century as an anglicized form of the informal command 'champo', meaning 'to press'. In Burton's time, a shampooer was a masseuse; and the language itself is suggestive of an imperial context where the one who gave the orders learned only enough Hindi to issue commands (Pinckley and Dane 2002:31).

Brahmin/Non-Brahmin: The Language of Caste

For my final point, I will focus on the issue of caste. Perhaps the most striking dimension of Iyengar's work is in its emphasis on the caste system where he chooses to echo later commentaries such as the 13th century scholar Yashodhara. This is most clear in Chapter IV concerning 'Nagaravrittam' or The Life of the Citizen. In discussing the four life stages, Iyengar, like Yashodhara, provides caste-specific instructions on what means each of the four varnas should use in gaining money in order to take up the life of the citizen (explains what each of the four castes should do). In the context in which he completed his translation, South India of 1920s was a hotbed of bourgeoning anti-Brahmin caste protest. Lower castes protested for social and religious rights alike, demonstrating 'self-respect' as they fought upper-castes for access to public spaces ranging from school education, employment, and temple-entries.

As a Brahmin, Iyengar would have found their demands insulting. He reiterated commentary about his own time and place while creating a version of the *Kama Sutra* both different from the original, and relevant to his setting. The likelihood that his audience would be primarily high-caste means that his readers would affirm his claims, ensuring a ready acceptance of the authoritativeness of his edition. Here we see one of the most powerful elements of translation—by embedding strongly held and widely accepted opinion to a receptive audience, the opinion is assigned a timelessness no different than Burton's own Victorian claims to British superiority in his edition.

Notes

1. Iyengar, Contents, p 5.
2. Iyengar, Preface, ii.
3. Burton pg 21, Doniger and Kakar pg 17.

References

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