

FOREWORD

WHEN I WAS approached some time in early autumn of 2007 to write an introduction to an English translation of a Sanskrit text from the eighth century called “What Ten Young Men Did,” I thought it was a well-deserved but cruel joke on me and the skewered values of my student days. (Age, I have been told, makes us wiser. Let me assure you that that is a whole lot of bull. Nothing, I suspect, can prevent us from blundering head-long as we grow older.) Sanskrit was an optional language in my school-days but I was far too busy making believe that a living and lively European language would make far better sense in post-independent India. So I took French. Which too would have been a worthwhile decision had I pursued it seriously. I didn’t and so I have neither French nor Sanskrit.

There were other problems. I don’t exactly warm up to the kinds of imagery, similes and metaphors that had been handed down over the centuries through the medium of Prakrits and their later incarnations, especially in my mother tongue, Marathi. I am not quite sure, for instance, that I would like to meet a woman whose walk has the leisurely grace and allure of an elephant. I know that I am being foolish. Conventions differ from culture to culture and from era to era. There’s no way you are going to savor a Kurosawa film unless you accept the highly stylized notion of acting in Japan, or enjoy early Urdu poetry if you keep griping that it deals almost entirely—though with some notable exceptions—with love and its consequences and the

śamā-parvānā (moth-and-flame) binary. Yes, I understand the logic but that still can't make me enthusiastic about the elephant-walk.

I wrote back to the editor saying that Sanskrit was Greek and Latin to me and so I would pass up this opportunity to indulge in a favorite past-time of Indians: opine on a subject about which one knows nothing . I congratulated myself on what a clever chap I was. I had been honest and modest and at the same time avoided the headache of having to read some arcane and possibly boring book in translation. But the editor was persistent. Within a fortnight she got back saying that the absence of Sanskrit was considered an asset in this instance. What the editors were looking for was a person of modern sensibility with the kind of writerly imagination needed to infiltrate and appreciate a text from another time.

I should have known better. Never indulge in honesty. It can only get you into trouble.



When the book finally arrived in March 2008, I liked the look of it. It was handsomely produced by The Clay Sanskrit Library, the paper was a silken off-white shading into a subdued yellow and the type-face old-fashioned and easy to read. But I was reluctant to get into it. Frankly I didn't want to know "What Ten Young Men Did." For a time I felt justified about my superciliousness. The lotus-imagery in the book got completely out of control and I began to choke on it. That flower could stand for anything and everything. "Her two feet had the beauty of the autumn lo-

tuses in his personal pleasure pool...” “Now is ripe the fruit of my worship at your lotus feet.” “For I cannot be forced against my will ... to embrace this broad chest already enjoyed by lotus-throned Lakshmi’s cleavage.” “With one rod of an arm, stiff as Yama’s steel, he seized the prince and dragged him violently by his lotus hand...”

There was more, much more in this vein. But at some point the story began to take centre-stage and Kama the god of love, Rati, lotuses and other dog-eared images ceased to matter. And yet there was no denying that at times the erotic imagery did not only make surprising connections but was breath-taking in its sensuousness. But if it was effective it was also because it was closely observed and came with a healthy dose of self-knowledge.

Let me take a random example from the tenth chapter:

To my good fortune, her maidenhead looks unsullied, because her lovely tender limbs seem firm, because however deeply gorgeous, her bodily complexion is not suffused with pallor, and because there is no loud passionate red on her face, which has yet to experience the bite of tooth marks. Because her ruby lip is splendid as coral, her round cheeks like the petals of a chámpanka bud, reddish at the base and fully expanded, and because she sleeps the sweet sleep of carelessness, free from the fear of invisible love’s arrows falling. Nor has pitiless pressing squashed the breasts. And because I, who could never transgress a civilized man’s bounds of propriety, have fallen in love with her.

The young lady may or may not be as beautiful as the narrator makes her out to be. The operative words, needless to say, are “And because I . . . have fallen in love with her.” Even as the narrator, Prámati, lavishes hyperbolic praise upon the beauty of the young woman, in the end he abdicates responsibility for his judgment by implying that when you are in love you may not know the difference between fair and foul. What makes it delightfully ironic is that the disclaimers come fast and furious after this.

But if I may embrace as my love demands she will of course awake with a cry of distress. Nevertheless I cannot lie down again without embracing her. So, come what may, I shall now test my good fortune.

So much for “I who would never transgress a civilized man’s bounds of propriety . . .” from the earlier paragraph.

But the narrator once again analyzes his behavior and says in a matter-of-fact manner.

I touched her lightly, hardly touching her, and lay there pretending to be asleep, pulled between passion and terror.

Any man who has pursued a woman will be instantly able to identify with the protagonist’s dilemma.

But let’s first focus briefly on the story-line. The invincible Raja-hamsa, king of Mágadha, having defeated the proud king of Málava, Mana-sara, not only allows the conquered king to live but magnanimously returns his kingdom to him. Not a very wise move that, as Kautílya would have told him. Mana-sara cannot forget his defeat nor can

he forgive Raja-hamsa his generosity. He wins over none other than Shiva with *tapasya* or austerities and gains the great god's favor and his all-powerful mace. Raja-hamsa may be brave but he is no match for Shiva. However, he luckily escapes into the forest by the skin of his teeth. As luck will have it, or rather the author, Dandin, will, it is the same forest where his own queen is about to give birth to a son, Raja-váhana. Only at this point does the reader discover that the story is not about the deposed king, Raja-hamsa, but his heir apparent, Raja-váhana (who a sage has predicted will restore the kingdom of Mágadha to his father) and his nine friends. It would stand to reason that we expect the rest of the tale to be about how the young prince and his companions defeat Mana-sara and re-conquer Mágadha. But Dandin has one more surprise up his sleeve. The ten protagonists are not going to be the counterparts of Kurosawa's "The Seven Samurai" or Hollywood's "The Dirty Dozen" albeit from a princely background, acting in concert to restore a just order. What we are going to get is a tale of adventure from each of the ten protagonists. The fate of Mágadha will only be decided after these breathless stories are told.

I use the word "breathless" advisedly for most of the time the story accelerates at break-neck speed. The young men fall in love with incredibly beautiful women (make no mistake, they are incredible and sumptuous and devastatingly ravishing), use every conceivable and inconceivable stratagem to get inside their skirts, have children by them, are sent to prison, fight entire armies, rescue their parents and return to serve their prince, Raja-váhana.

Yes, at times the stories get a little too convoluted to make easy or instant sense but the marvelous thing is that they make a sucker of the reader. The gravitational force of the stories is so great, you are pulled along willy-nilly and the one question that every story teller since Homer waits to hear, is perpetually on the reader's lips: what happens next? You have no alternative but to doff your cap to Dandin. He is such a superb story-teller that there are times when all you can do is gasp at the audacity of his imagination. The curious thing is that even when he has pulled off something spectacular, he doesn't wait for applause, give you time take it all in. He just moves on.

Dandin's imagination is so visually oriented, it's as if you are watching a movie. Just one instance will suffice to drive the point home. Who should Raja-váhana fall in love with but Avánti-súndari, the daughter of his father's arch-enemy, Mana-sara. The Prince is lucky, it is not a one-sided love-at-first-sight. The princess is just as besotted with him as he is with her. The marriage between Raja-váhana and Avánti-súndari would seem beyond the realm of the possible. But we are underestimating the deviousness of the sly Dandin. Raja-váhana befriends the magician Vidyéshvara who devises a stratagem that should go down in the annals of sleights of hand as one of the most ingenious. Vidyéshvara entertains Chanda-varman, Mana-sara's nephew who is taking care of the kingdom in the absence of the old king's son, with many a dazzling magic trick. As a climactic show-stopper, he tells the regent that he will be able to look into the future and see the marriage of Avánti-súndari.

Eager for the spectacle, the king gave his permission. Vidyéshvara's face bloomed at the prospect of his wishes being fulfilled. He smeared both his eyes with a magic ointment to delude everyone and gazed all around.

In amazement everybody watched what they thought was a magic trick. Avánti-súndari had come as planned, her body adorned with every ornament. With the fire as a witness and his skill in wedding hocus-pocus, Vidyéshvara joined her in marriage to Raja-váhana, whose heart sprouted with love. At the close of the performance the brahmin twice-born cried loudly: "Magic creatures, may you all be gone."



Post-colonial Indian academics resent the fact that after Queen Victoria took over what became the jewel in the crown, many pre-independence Indian literary critics and historians began to down-grade or, worse, deny the dynamic nature of indigenous literature except in the case of those writers who adopted British models. Their contention is that "many modernities" were being created even then by Indian authors in regional languages. It must take a highly developed sense of self-importance and an extraordinary insensitivity to language to bandy words like modernities, imaginaries and the like. The word modern or modernity has always been a highly problematic one despite the fact that a certain era is specifically called "modern" in literary histories to differentiate it from say the Victorian or Edwardian eras on the one hand and the post-modern one on the other. After all, every generation would like to believe

that whatever is contemporary is modern. Be that as it may, whenever some feature of a literary work or a painting or a musical piece from the past strikes us as anachronistic, that is, very “today” and “happening” according to our lights, we immediately term it “modern” thereby giving it our seal of approval. Talk about the ascent of man; talk about this being the best of all worlds; talk about arrogance and hubris and a total lack of a historical sense.

Dandin’s “What Ten Young Men Did” time and again evokes this misplaced and topsy-turvy sentiment in the reader because we would all prefer to think that we invented modernism and poor Dandin is playing “catch-up” with us. And every now and again when we generously think that he almost succeeds in following our role-model, we exclaim patronisingly, “How modern.” If Dandin was still alive he would indeed find us hugely amusing. If anyone is playing “catch-up,” it’s us and not Dandin, Homer or the authors of the “Maha-bhárata.” Which is why when artists or literary theoreticians insist on being absolutely original, “never before” and “first-time-ever,” one wishes them well but there is also the sinking feeling that the man/woman is lacking a historical perspective and may well be re-inventing the wheel.

Like many a memorable character in literature, it is the rogues’ gallery, the fast-talkers, the hustlers and the con-artists, the rakes and the merchants of humbug and cant and the devils from “What Ten Young Men Did” who hold us spellbound. There is no dearth of them in Dandin but the one who walks away hands down with the prize is Apahára-varman. It is obvious that he is Dandin’s favorite

too. He gets more space and play than almost anybody else in the book and he certainly is up to more mischief. He is irrepressibly amoral and the elaborate sting operations he sets up are a riot.

The pervasive equivocal and ambivalent ethical atmosphere in Dandin is also one of the hallmarks of modern literature. As ISABELLE ONIANS, the translator of the book, says in her fine introduction, Kautīlya, the author of the *Arthaśāstra*, can be regarded as an intellectual and political mentor of Dandin even if they were born in different eras. ONIANS quotes MAX WEBER as saying that compared to the *Arthaśāstra*, Machiavelli's "The Prince" is an innocuous book. Obviously Dandin is not only a man of the world and a shrewd and keen observer of mankind despite all his hyper-romantic depictions of love and homage to Kama, but is steeped in cynicism and has a highly developed sense of irony. He cuts through the bull and sees right through to our innermost well-springs and motivations.

In the Apahāra-varman episode Dandin finds a wonderful opportunity to elaborate on the training, skills and wiles of highly accomplished courtesans a la Vatsāyana's "Kamasutra" but he goes beyond the craft of the profession and offers us Kama-mánjari, a woman of this calling with remarkable intellectual gifts. The sophistry of her argument while seducing the sage Maríchi is one of the memorable moments in the book. It compares with Richard III's astounding performance with Lady Anne whom he beguiles into marrying him immediately after murdering her husband. Kama-mánjari, read Dandin, accomplishes the ensnarement of the sage with superb finesse but also manages

to expose the chicanery and depravity of the most revered gods in the process.

One of the most egregious of the rogues in the book is the courtier, Vihāra-bhadra who makes his appearance in chapter 13. This guy is a glib and smooth talker and has such a highly developed sense of casuistry, even the venerable Kautīlya gets a drubbing at his hands and is spoofed with superb verve. His powers of persuasion are daunting and his command of language so intricate and devious, he can win any argument, prove that good ensues from evil and convince you that black is white and vice versa.

In a very real sense Dandin places his story in what Hindus believe is the most depraved of all the ages of man, the *kaliyuga*, none other than his and our contemporary times. There is not much to choose, he suggests, between heroes and villains. They both will use any and every means, however dubious, to achieve their ends. The only difference, at least on the face of it, is that the good guys claim to be fighting for noble causes.



“What Ten Young Men Did” is first and last a terrific adventure yarn. But it is also as revealing of the character of Dandin as it is of the times he lives in. There is much about the structure of society, the inter-relationships of the classes and the castes, and the true extent of the status of brahmins and the stranglehold they had on society that we presume we already know but which the novel brings home in a new and striking fashion. I thought I had a fairly realistic grasp

of the position and role of brahmins when I wrote about them in my novel, “Ravan and Eddie”:

There is only one difference between then and now. Sanskrit was the language of the gods, thirty-three million gods, and of Parmeshwar or Everlasting God (our great great grandfathers were certainly aware of the difference between small-time, easy-come, easy-go gods and the Big One) and of Brahmins. As go-betweens, middle-men, spiritual hustlers and keepers of our deities, Brahmins had exclusive and total rights to God. Since they coined the words and phrases they called themselves Brahmin or the people who know Brahman or God.

But Dandin’s novel underlined my ignorance of the real status of Brahmins. As one of his characters tells us, “The sacred thread hung over your shoulder marks you out as a brahmin, god on earth.” The phrase “god on earth” occurs so often in the first part of the book that you are put on notice: if you get on the wrong side of this god on earth, you do so at your own risk.

Everybody in India knows of Manu. He is the ancient law-giver and codifier. But we don’t really take him seriously. After all it’s a bit difficult for Indians from the sub-continent who have been educated in westernized English-medium schools and also perhaps for other educated Indians to understand how central his vision of the structure and the role of each caste and gender was to the very idea of Hindu society. Dandin doesn’t leave us in any doubt about how deep-rooted and ingrained Manu’s thought is in our culture. He is invoked in many direct and indirect ways

throughout the book. As we learn from one of the episodes in chapter 9, Manu's treatise strictly forbids the killing of a brahmin even if he has committed the worst of crimes. He is to be banished without any harm coming to his person. The god on earth is then almost above the law.

There are other minor insights I owe to Dandin. For instance, now, thanks to him, I also know how to recognize gods when they come to earth or when we visit their abode. Their clothes never get dusty nor do they ever become grey and as the editor of the book, ISABELLE ONIANS, points out in one of her many lucid and enlightening notes, like Dharmaraj from the "Maha-bhárata," their feet never touch the ground.

I might crib and complain about the recurrence and reiteration of certain motifs in Sanskrit literature but there is a poetry and resonance to Sanskrit names that is truly an exquisite aural pleasure for the Indian ear. But the names are also invaluable in another sense. They are one of the richest memory banks in the world. Vásumati: "wealthy as the earth." Pushpa-puri, the city of flowers. Pushpódbhava, "born of flowers." Skanda Karttikéya, "the paradigm prince." Megha-duta, the cloud-messenger. Suvritta, good news. Kama-mánjari, bouquet of love. One could go on and on. But add to these the names of our gods, goddesses, rivers and mountains and what you have is a cornucopia of stories, fables, parables and a treasure trove of mythology.



The traditional Indian narrative works on the amoeba principle. Like the single-cell organism it multiplies almost

endlessly by dividing itself into two. Dandin's novel is a fine exemplar of this method. One story leads to another and that to the next and then to the next and all the while the western reader fears that both the author and he have lost the thread. But of course Dandin does not lose track. Like a cat or dog, however far he may stray from his initial foray, he always returns to the starting point. Rest assured the ten young men will find their way to winning back Raja-simha's throne.

How do they do it, you may well ask? That I am afraid is one of the great mysteries in the book. One cannot but admire Dandin's audacity and gall. Indeed he will once again get away with near murder. One waits and waits to find out how Raja-simha's kingdom will be restored to him. What one discovers instead is that that it's merely the ruse for allowing Dandin to tell us the stories of these ten men since the matter of Raja-simha's throne is given such short shift that the reader is left with the impression that he has been taken for a ride.

Yes, indeed but what a ride.

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