

## BOOK REVIEWS

P. K. Gautam, Saurabh Mishra and Arvind Gupta (eds.), ***Indigenous Historical Knowledge: Kautilya and His Vocabulary (Volume III)***, (New Delhi, IDSA/Pentagon Press, 2016), Pages: ix+166, Price: ₹ 795.00.

The three edited volumes on Kautilya under review are a part of an ambitious and worthwhile undertaking by the Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses (IDSA). At the outset, it may be in order to briefly outline the project before delving into the books as such.

The broader aim of the project is to look at ‘Indigenous Historical Knowledge’. What does this imply? There is awareness today that much of the current discourse in humanities is based on a vocabulary and a conceptual framework that has been developed by European or American academics. Focusing on international relations for instance, the modern nation-state is a post Westphalian construct and the very terms and concepts that we use today almost universally- sovereignty, national security, balance of power, deterrence, and human rights are originally derived from the West. We may use these terms in different national and cultural contexts, but the vocabulary is basically Western. What about the political systems that other and older civilisations had, such as China, India, Persia or Peru? What did these polities and societies think about their systems, interests, or concerns? What from their traditional thinking, if anything, characterises them today? Hence, the search for ‘indigenous’ knowledge and possibly a different vocabulary to capture such thinking is imperative and the current volume is an attempt in that direction.

The first name that comes to mind in a search for such knowledge in Indian history is that of Kautilya and his *Arthashastra*. If we search for indigenous Indian thinking and writing on the order of the temporal and material world (that is distinct from the spiritual or metaphysical concerns), the most obvious, comprehensive and authentic source is the text *Arthashastra*, discovered by modern scholars only in 1905. It is believed to be the earliest treatise on statecraft written anywhere in the world. Kautilya covers statecraft, the components of the political order, power - its accretion and its uses, economy, diplomacy, warfare, intelligence, espionage, and other related fields.

An exploration of his themes, cataloguing of his thoughts, and conducting an enquiry about his contemporary relevance is a rich and worthwhile area of study.

The three volumes constitute such an undertaking. They are a compilation of scholarly papers presented in a number of workshops and conferences organised by the IDSA and are clustered around four broad areas: foreign policy, intelligence, internal security, and war.

A reviewer of these volumes can adopt two approaches in his task: to attempt to capture the essence of more than 25 individual essays, or to draw out some broad observations on overarching themes in the books. The first is a near impossible task in a review since the essays are wide ranging, cover a number of diverse subjects and thus it will be somewhat artificial to find a thematic unity in them. I have adopted the second approach.

The first big question is: Is there an Indian strategic culture? Borrowing from the ingenuity of the poet AK Ramanujam in another context, the query can come to mean different things to different people depending on where the interest or the emphasis lies.

Is there an Indian strategic culture? Some analysts have wondered whether classical Indian texts, so rich in metaphysical speculation have paid attention to matters concerning politics and economics. Writers in these volumes firmly believe that there is evidence of rigorous Indian thinking about statecraft and strategy. The *Shantiparva*, the *Nitisara* and other texts apart from the *Arthashastra* are cited in this regard. Pre-Kautilyan thinkers are also named. The cumulative impact of these essays is to negate doubts, if any, about the existence of strategic thought in the Indian tradition.

Is there an Indian strategic culture? Here, the curiosity is about what is essentially Indian in the thought process and an attempt to capture the core of the 'Indianness'. Former National Security Advisor, Shiv Shankar Menon, has spoken about certain aspects of India's historical experience - poly-centric multi-state systems, plurality, omni-directional diplomacy, and relativistic statecraft and how these can be contrasted, for example, with China's single-sovereign, universalist, and hierarchical statecraft and diplomacy. The resultant belief-systems and vocabulary will be different and herein lies a validation for the search for an 'Indian' *weltanschauung*. Some scholars contest the notion of 'essentialism' and believe that it is more useful to think of an Indian discourse on International Relations (IR) than to speak of an 'Indian theory of IR'. For instance, in rigorously argued essays, Jayashree Vivekanandan cautions that there are more than one Indian thought-systems and that one

should note the differing historical and regional contexts in India. She is sceptical about invoking an idealised version of 'pristine antiquity' of India and an 'essentialist' interpretation of that reality divorced from historical and cultural specificity. (The volumes have several references by scholars, which will be a good source for studies and that are different from the works of Kautilya.)

Is there an Indian strategic culture? – The stress here is laid on whether Indian texts cover what are essentially strategic issues as understood today. A number of essays in these volumes are on the detailed coverage in the *Arthashastra* of such concerns: consolidation and expansion of kingdoms, allies and foes, formations and the *Mandala theory*, war, army and intelligence, economy and ecology, etc. Michael Liebig of Heidelberg University in a detailed analysis illustrates how the *Arthashastra* is a pioneering text of intelligence studies. Another essay by Marc McClish delineates the treatment of peace pacts - both the non-aggression pacts and the strategic partnerships, in the text. A reading of these essays leaves no doubt about the intellectual sophistication in classifying, cataloguing and conceptualising the many components of statecraft in ancient India.

What is the contemporary relevance of Kautilya and some of his doctrines? There are quite a few essays that tackle this question. It is clear that the Kautilyan ways of thinking are not limited to a region, a kingdom or a set of circumstances. They are theoretical and are exercises in building models. Some of the essays apply the concepts to contemporary thinking about wars, insurgencies, treaty-making, and negotiations, with interesting insights. It is also empirically true that some of Kautilya's thoughts are embedded in our collective psyche and practices and has permeated our thoughts as evidenced by the fact that *sama, danda*....is understood in all parts of India.

Another interesting issue is the relationship between the 'realist' mode of Kautilya's *Arthashastra* and the 'idealist'/moralist universe of many other traditional texts. Is Kautilya essentially utilitarian and amoral or favours welfare of the populace –*Yogakshema* as well? It is argued in some essays that Kautilya went beyond the maximisation of power in a kingdom and his theories combine the application of power with its legitimacy. I believe an essay on the philosophical foundations of Kautilya and the relationship between his empiricism and the metaphysics in traditional Indian texts would be useful.

The volumes also contain a useful outline by PK Gautam, one of the editors on the state of research, a chronology of how it has progressed since

2012, and on some pointers for further work. As the project itself is vast and continuing, a summary of the scholarly activities hitherto is a resource for those engaged in research in this field. In general, this compendium, a result of an imaginative and painstaking initiative by the IDSA has given us materials and insights to debate on Indian strategic culture.

B. S. PRAKASH

Former Ambassador of India to Brazil and to Uganda



Kanwal Sibal, *Snowflakes of Time; Memories and Musings*, (New Delhi, Bloomsbury India, July 2016), Pages: 220, Price: ₹ 399.00

With a distinguished career of 41 years in the Indian Foreign Service, Ambassador Kanwal Sibal reached the pinnacle of success when he was elevated to the post of Foreign Secretary, where he had the most distinguished tenure. This work reflects, through the medium of poetry, the author's nature and personality, his hopes and ambitions, his unfulfilled dreams, and most poignantly, his coming to terms with the autumn years of his life. Nostalgia is a continuing theme in his work. It is constantly present as a reminder of our mortality. It is not a negative emotion. It conveys the innermost thoughts of the author in a poetic narrative of his life's journey.

One would justifiably expect this fascinating anthology to trace his life, career, shifting sands of diplomacy and international politics, many contradictions in our policy towards Pakistan, the double standards practiced by the West towards us, and the follies and foibles of our political class. The reader will not be disappointed.

Ambassador Sibal rightly acknowledges, "...writing poetry is a very personal affair". He explains his fascination with this medium of expression from an early age and his own evolution from fantasy to reality to a genuine, lyrical, poetic expression of his feelings in his own idiom. His love of rhyme, which in his view "adds music to poetry" and also "limits self indulgence" is evident in much of his poetry, though free verse is also used.

*Snowflakes of Times: Memories and Musings* is a collection of poems divided into different sections according to themes. As the writer explains in the “Preface”, these relate to the passage of time and the memories and moods that are inspired by the past coming to terms with the present, with dreams clashing with reality and by surges of extreme sensation and emotion that have to be tempered with the realities of daily life and existence. Poetic expressions are also influenced by time, as he develops his own idiom and moves from fantasy to reality.

The different themes and sections are arranged according to the author’s own preferences and are, therefore, not a chronological journey in time. The first section- “Moscow Musings” demonstrates the author’s melancholic fascination with Moscow’s long and grey winters. In the first poem entitled “Snowflakes of Time”, which also inspires the title of the book, the poet acknowledges that memories, like snowflakes, are random and cannot be grasped. They melt away leaving behind “moist sentiment”. As he says:

Across the window of his mind  
 Memories like snowflakes slowly fell,  
 .....  
 As he grasped them he saw them melt,  
 Leaving behind moist sentiment,  
 And in that muffled calm he felt  
 Pangs of nostalgic discontent.

Melancholy is the running theme in the first section, influencing the other sections and inspiring introspection and reflection.

The second section naturally flows from the first. Entitled “Memories”, it begins with “The Torch of Nostalgia”, which is both evocative and lyrical:

Nostalgia like a torch  
 Probed the still woods of the past.  
 Memories lit up like shining eyes dispersed,  
 Of creatures that blend with the night,  
 .....  
 But with the coming light  
 Of the present, the torch was switched off,  
 And nostalgia like the night faded into the day.

These memories also reflect the passing of youth, the ravages of time and the inevitability of death. This is brilliantly conveyed in another poem in the same section. “Sepia Prints” reflects these emotions, stating poignantly:

These sepia prints  
Of frozen memory,  
Faded like recollections of the past,  
Feelings no longer felt;

.....

Fires that once glowed  
Subside into greying embers,  
A twilight sets in,  
Waiting for nothingness to envelop it.

This section also hints at past temptations, which are now just faded memories. In “The Finger Tips of Memory”, the poet’s inner longings are eloquently conveyed in the last verse:

Across the distance  
That now divides,  
Only thoughts can travel,  
touching the fingertips  
of memory  
to fill the solitude  
of the present  
by the company  
of the past...

The powerful emotions that influence the poet’s moods and sensibility are evident in the section under “Catharsis”. The reader is spoilt for choice between a selection of excellent poems ranging from the evocation of passion in “Stringed Music” and “The Raga”, to the reconciliation with old age in “The Lamp-Post”, to sympathy for the poor and the marginalised in “Misery at Cross-Roads”.

To quote from “Stringed Music”, the passion is evident in these lines:

He plucked the string  
And a note escaped,  
Full of feeling,  
A sigh of pleasure,  
A moan of satisfaction  
That caused  
The chords of longing  
Within him  
To resonate.

It is more explicit in “The Raga” where the concluding verse states:

His self had subsided  
Into a calm,  
And satisfaction  
That follows the stirrings  
Of creation.

It was a raga  
Of ardour.

The melancholic reconciliation with old age and the ravages of passing time are beautifully captured in “The Lamp-Post”.

One of the best poems in this section is “Misery at Cross-Roads”. It is a stark reminder of how poverty and prosperity live side by side in this vast country without stirring the conscience of the very wealthy. The verses are poignant and touching:

Hair browned by malnutrition,  
The shrunken frame clad in a soiled saree,  
She sits on the pavement with one of her brood.

At the back of your mind  
There is this discomfoting thought  
That had fate been unkind  
You could well have been the one  
Stretching your hands  
At closed air conditioned windows  
And being dismissed with a scornful wave of hand  
Like an irritating fly being brushed off,

Meeting at traffic lights  
The condition that could have been yours  
But for the quirk of birth  
Gives you a sense of relief  
And a sense of guilt

As the reader journeys from the personal to the professional life of a seasoned diplomat, the mode and mood change dramatically. The later sections are humorous, satirical, and cynical in turns. In the section on “Humour”, there are several poems, which flow from the author’s intimate knowledge and long experience in addressing multiple challenges in defending our national interests, multilaterally, bilaterally and in India’s neighbourhood, notably with Pakistan.

Two poems on Pakistan, which reflect the absurd dilemma that India faces in dealing with this perpetually hostile neighbour have been conveyed in brilliant satire. In “Kneeling for Diplomatic Slaughter”, which is a scathing commentary on the lack of fibre in our Pakistan policy, the author states:

Accepting Pakistan is too,  
A victim of terror like you,  
Is like agreeing a rapist must  
Be seen as victim of his lust.

In “The Pet”, the dilemma of the India-Pakistan equation and of dealing with our neighbour’s incessant hostility, while being urged by the international community to respond with concessions, has been subtly conveyed:

The victim truly perplexed is  
He can’t do that, he can’t do this,  
He can’t wield stick he has in hand  
As hostile feelings will be fanned.  
The canine will breed more turmoil  
And keep the tensions on the boil.

His description of former Pakistani Foreign Minister, Hina Rabbani Khar and the contrast she presented to her Indian counterpart in the previous government in “The Birkin Bag” is a must read.

Her masters also thought to gain  
From sharpening our sense of pain  
From such a visible contrast  
Between the present and the past

.....

One perked up and articulate,  
Other well past his sell-by date  
An almost eighty who is more  
Than twice her age of thirty four,  
The Pakistanis showed us how  
They played the politics of ‘wow’.

A delightful read in this section is the devastating take on General Musharraf’s nostrum of “enlightened moderation” for the Muslim world, but tweaked as “moderate enlightenment”.

“Multi-polarity” in the same section demonstrates how a consummate diplomat views the global order. Satire and cynicism are there in equal measure when the poet concludes:

Multi-polarity then  
Would only be possible when  
The hegemons are cut to size,  
And with follies their hubris dies.

“Counting 123” gives a fascinating bird’s eye view of the double standards that mark the Indo-US civil nuclear deal, with conditions foisted on India that the nuclear weapon states reject for themselves. The “cookery” analogy used to describe the various features of the deal exposes with trenchant humour its raw nature. The corrective measures we can supposedly take should the Americans not fulfil all their commitments are dismissed as:

It is telling someone whom you choke  
That he can laugh at his own joke,  
Or tell a cripple he may don  
Track-shoes to win a marathon!

That diplomacy is a tricky game to play, sometimes resembling Russian roulette, is very well demonstrated in “Negotiation-Indian Style”. Besides giving a humorous but realistic assessment on how negotiations are actually conducted, the weakness of our negotiating style is exposed. The reader is told:

Negotiation really means  
That you count very well your beans,  
And bring them with skill into play,  
So that at the end of the day  
In your pocket you have more than  
The number with which you began.

The limited bargaining powers imposed on our negotiators, which pose a serious handicap to obtaining a satisfactory outcome are starkly revealed in the conclusion:

The ghosts of renunciation  
Haunting our negotiation  
Stand in the way of we being tough,  
The point at which we say enough  
Is far too quickly reached by us.

The others know that at the end  
Under their pressure we will bend.

It is our great diplomatic feat  
To see some success in defeat.

To turn from the realm of diplomacy to politics, the poet's wicked sense of humour is at its best in "Oh! Sonia Dear". With malice to none intended, it is deliciously funny!

"Oh! Sonia dear, what awful luck,  
Just when in seat as number one  
A Swedish snoop raked up the muck  
Around this wretched Bofors gun,  
However I explain the case  
I can't wipe the egg off my face.

The strength of satirical verse to demonstrate the danger to democratic polity by not allowing Parliament to function is poignantly evident in "Washed Out Session":

In my combative avatar  
At head of my rump forty-four  
I want to wage an all-out war  
And lay all sins at Modi's door.  
The message is clear in the concluding lines:  
The country will begin to rue  
The state of our democracy,  
With parliament is being made into  
A playground of hypocrisy.

The reader will enjoy the poems as they are replete with exceptionally evocative imagery. To give a few examples:

In "Snowflakes of Time" the poet writes:  
To denuded branches of time  
The flitting flakes were clinging fast,  
He was an actor past his prime  
A spectator of his own past!

In "Asleep in February", he visualises:  
The hand of chill  
Had gripped the air  
And cracked it into crystals

In "The Winter's Secret", the evocative imagery finds expression in the cover of the book:

He felt the sky within him fade  
And light in pensiveness retreat,  
Over the mental snow he made

A lonely trail of his own feet!  
In "The Woodpecker of Time", the imagery is poignant:  
With moments that have gone he talks  
With thoughts in quite interlude  
Like a lone woodpecker that knocks  
On the tree trunks of solitude!

In the preface, the poet has written that he hopes that the poems "will resonate with some who may choose to read them". It resonates very well in today's international scenario. This was an anthology waiting to be written, a must read not only for diplomats and politicians but also for those sensitive souls who enjoy, through poetry, a journey full of nostalgia, pensive reflection, wistful dreams and a fascinating insight into the world of diplomacy and international politics. One could ask no more from such a veteran practitioner of diplomacy. The anthology does full justice and more to our expectations.

BHASWATIMUKHERJEE

Former Permanent Representative to UNESCO, Paris;  
Former Ambassador of India to the Netherlands

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