Shruti and Smriti: Some Issues in the Re-emergence of Indian Traditional Knowledge

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Summary

Great care needs to be taken in not mixing up shruti and smriti and original sutra with commentary or bhasya. In a speech in the Munich Security conference in the first week of February 2013, India's National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon argued that contrary to the western discourse calling ancient civilisations as emerging powers is incorrect. Re-emerging is a proper term as countries such as India and other civilizations are in the process of restoring the historical norm in the international hierarchy and distribution of power. While Menon has made the point well, it behoves on academics and scholars to do their bit now. What is needed is that traditional ideas now have to be revisited with diligence and accuracy by the scholarly and policy related work of a high order in which scholars have to revisit and contextualize traditional historical knowledge with current issues in mind critically. The one big hurdle is that historical texts of ancient eras that are available may not be to the satisfaction of modern historians. But the wisdom contained in them cannot be left to hang on a methodological issue.

"By its official designation, the Gita is called Upanishad, since it derives its main inspiration from the remarkable group of scriptures, the Upanishad." – *The Bhagavadgita*.[1]

In a recent book review of Nagappa Gowda K's *The Bhagavadgita in the Nationalistic Discourse* (Oxford University Press, 2011),[2] Amiya P. Sen, Professor of Modern Indian History from the Centre for the Study of Comparative Religion and Civilisation, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi, points to one of the many extraordinary developments in British India. Namely, the text's seemingly turning self-referential – from being a *smriti* to a near Canonical (*shruti*) status.

Scholars, pundits and sankritists have taken pains to explain the difference between *shruti* and *smriti*. The French Indologist Robert Lingat writes that Tradition (*smriti*) differs from Revelation (*shruti*) inasmuch as it is not a direct "heard" perception of the divine percept, but an indirect perception founded on memory (*smriti*: to remember, Latin *memor*). A sage remembers and transmits to men the tradition which he has gathered. In its larger sense, *smriti* signifies a complete portion of the sacred literature: the six *Vedanagas*, the epics (The *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*) and the *Puranas*.[3] A. Appadorai explains that the *shrutis* are the source of *Dharma*: sacred knowledge orally transmitted by great Indian sages from generation to generation, generally taken to include the four *Vedas* and *Upanishads*.[4]

John Grimes and others point out that in general Hindu authors divide sacred literature into *shruti* and *smriti*. *Shruti* (as we have seen, literally 'that which is heard') is a class of Sanskrit texts that are regarded as revelation. *Smriti* (literally 'recollection') is a class of texts that are based on memory, therefore traditions. Its role has been to elaborate upon, explain, interpret, and clarify primary revelation.[5] Thus it is clear that the epics, *Puranas*, codes of Manu, tantric treatises and the *Arthasastra* of Kautilya are all *smritis.*

In his *The Ramayana & Mahabharata*, Romesh C. Dutt of the Indian Civil Service and a pioneer in contemporary interpretations of the epics writes:

"The real Epic ends with the war and the funeral of the deceased warriors. Much of what follows in the original Sanscrit poem is either episodical or comparatively recent

[1] *The Bhagavadgita*, with an introductory Essay, Sanskrit Text, English translation and Notes by S. Radhakrishnan, Bombay, Blackie & Sons (India) Ltd, 1977, p.13; first published by George Allen & Unwin, 1948.

[2] *The Book Review*, Vol. XXXVII, No.1, January 2013, pp. 5-6.

[3] Robert Lingat, *The Classical Law of India*, Oxford University Press, 1998, pp. 9-10.

[4] A. Appadorai, Chapter 5, "Vyasa's Mahabharata- Shanti Parva," *Indian Political Thinking Through the Ages,* New Delhi. Khaam Publishers, 1992, note 35, p. 90.

[5] John Grimes, Sushil Mittal, and Gene Thursby, "Hindu Dharma," in Sushil Mittal and Gene Thursby (Eds.), *Religion of South Asia: An Introduction*, London/New York, Routledge, 2006, pp. 35-36.

interpolation. The great and venerable warrior Bhishma, still lying on his death-bed, discourses for the instruction of the newly crowned Yudhishthir on various subjects like Duties of Kings, the Duties of the Four Castes, and the Four Stages of Life. He repeats the discourse of other saints, of Bhrigu and Bharadwaja, of Manu and Brihaspati, of Vyasa and Suka, of Yajnavalkya and Janaka, of Narada and Narayana. He explains *Sankhya* philosophy and *Yoga* philosophy, and lays down laws of Marriage, the laws of Succession, the rules of Gifts, and the rules of Funeral Rites. He preaches the cult of Krishna, and narrates endless legends, tales, traditions, and myths about sages and saints, gods and mortal kings. All this is told in two Books containing about twenty-two thousand couplets, and forming nearly one- fourth of the entire Sancrit Epic!

The reason of adding all this episodical and comparatively recent matter to the ancient Epic is not far to seek. The Epic became more popular with the nation at large than dry codes of law and philosophy, and generation of Brahmanical writers laboured therefore to insert in the Epic itself their rules of caste and moral conduct, their laws and philosophy. There is no more venerable character in the Epic than Bhishma, and these rules and laws have therefore been supposed to come from his lips on the solemn occasion of his death. As a storehouse of Hindu law and traditions and moral rules these episodes are invaluable; but they form no part of the real Epic, they are not a portion of the leading story of the Epic, and we pass them by."[6]

What is important to note in Dutt's book is that he clearly explains that some are later additions to the epic. This is clearly a very accurate and authentic scholarship which is a model to be followed.

Why this basic fact is being explained is that, as noted by Amiya Sen, there is probably a drift in this basic understanding and because of the powerful message that the Gita provides to a lay person, it appears seamless and can even be assumed unintentionally to be a *shruti*. Today, there is a keen interest in the study of indigenous Indian traditions from history and it is important that readers are clear on this unique difference. In the syllabus of post graduate level in political science and conflict resolution, students in some Indian universities are now being introduced to the idea of statecraft as in the *Shantiparva* – which is part of Bhismaparva or lectures and discussion as transmitted to Yudhistra by the dying Bhishma. Chaturvedi Badrinath's *The Mahabharata: An Inquiry in the Human Condition* (2006) is one of the prescribed books that has come to notice. It needs to be remembered that over the past centuries there have been a number of commentaries on the Gita (the eighteen chapters of the Gita form chapters XXII to XL of Bhismaparva of the Mahabharata). The most ancient

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6   Romesh C. Dutt, Book XIII, ASWA-MEDHA, (Sacrifice of the Horse), *The Ramayana & Mahabharta*, condensed into English verse by, Dent: London, Everyman's Library, First version 1910, last reprinted 1969, p. 312.

of the commentaries is that of Samkara (AD 788-820). Older commentaries are not available.[7] Inspired by the Viennese scholar, Moris Winternitz, The Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute at Pune had undertaken a project where over a hundred different versions from different parts of the country were compiled and published as a Critical Edition of *Mahabharata* under V.S. Sukhthankar's leadership.[8] Prof Amiya Sen in his book review points out that there were more commentaries on the Gita in the 19th/early 20th centuries than in the five centuries preceding it. Now with the digital age it is likely that more commentaries or *bhasyas* may be attempted both on the Gita and the *Mahabharata* – both by spiritual gurus and popular authors. In the latter category, the work of Gurcharan Das must be added where he has given contemporary interpretations of *dharma*.[9]

Accuracy and correct references to texts are hallmarks of good research. Here, it must be appreciated that the nuclear scientist J. Robert Oppenheimer who had studied Sanskrit quoted accurately from the Mahabharata (Gita) when the first nuclear explosion was conducted. Oppenheimer, while witnessing the explosion, thought of a verse from the Bhagavad Gita (XI,12): "If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst at once into the sky, that would be like the splendor of the mighty one." Later, in an interview, he would explain that another verse had also entered his head at that time: namely, the famous verse (XI,32) which he translated as "I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds."[10]

Similarly, the concept of *shruti* and *smriti* is very clear in Tibetan literature. The Tibetan versions of Indian literature, chiefly Buddhist, have been preserved in two great collections - similar to *Shruti* and *Smriti* of ancient India called *Kanjur* (*bka' 'gyur* - the commandments of Buddha) and *Tanjur* (*bstan'gyur* - doctrinal teaching given by subsequent teachers). The Indian *Nitisastras* in the Tibetan version have been preserved in the *Tanjur* collection.[11]

However, because of the absence of teaching the secular aspects of religion and not studying all knowledge emanating from religious literature, we as a society are missing out on many things of philosophy. Due to lack of a wider and serious study in our education system, basic concepts and ideas have a tendency to drift away and get transformed in the public perception. In a recent interaction that this author had on Kautilya's *Arthasastra* with senior officers from a paramilitary organisation, it appeared that there was an opinion that all that needs to be known is available in the *Mahabharata*, whereas this is not the case, especially on issues of statecraft. Here, let me give an example of foreign policy and morality.

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[7]   *The Bhagavadgita*, Note 1.

[8]   Gurcharan Das, *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma*, New Delhi, Allen Lane/ Penguin, 2009, p. xlix.

[9]   *Ibid.*

[10]   See http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._Robert_Oppenheimer.

[11]   Suniti Kumar Pathak, *The Indian Nitisastras in Tibet*, Delhi, Motilal Banarasidas, 1974.

A. Appadorai shows the connection between foreign policy and morality. He gives an example by quoting Machiavelli that ends justifies means, or the doctrine of *raison d'etat* (reason of the state or national interest). He then quotes Kautilya's *Arthasastra* where it is mentioned that what produces unfavourable results is bad policy. For Kautilya, diplomacy was an art and not concerned with ideals but with achieving practical results for the state. For instance:

> "When any one of these is on the point of rising against a weak king, the latter should avert the invasion by making a treaty of peace or by taking recourse to the battle of intrigue, *mantrayudha*, or by a treacherous fight in the battlefield. He may reduce the enemy's men either by conciliation or by giving gifts and should prevent the treacherous proceedings of his own men either by sowing the seeds of dissension among them or by punishing them" (*Arthasastra* book VII, Ch 1).

Appadorai then goes on to quote other ancient texts that provide views contrary to the ones prescribed by Kautilya. Manu's *Dharmashastra* categorically stated: "one should not do a good thing by following a bad path". And the *Kural*, the Tamil classic, states: "To seek to further the welfare of the State by enriching it through fraud and falsehood is like storing water in an unburnt mud pot and hoping to preserve it."[12]

Thus, Appadorai has not left any ambiguity in the reader's mind to note that both arguments at the individual and state levels have existed in Indian literature and traditions. No grand knowledge is being claimed by Appadorai but just simple ideas of statecraft that continue to be applicable even today.

Another habit which needs to be corrected is to attribute an opinion or a saying directly to Kautilya without going deeper into the text. During my research on the *Arthasastra*, I have noticed that some authors pick up quotes from Kautilya's *Chankayaniti* (a very condensed version differing from author to author) from online sources to sound profound and ascribe it to Kautilya. This makes it appear as if it was in the original aphorism/*sutras* (*Sutra* are half sentences or aphorisms or a concise statement of a principle, maxim or adage) of *Arthasastra*. The same casual error may occur when secular issues of statecraft are revisited from both the concepts of *shruti* and *smriti*. It is clear that most of the material will be found not in *shrutis* but in the *smritis*. Researchers need to be conscious of these nuances and proceed with care. The need of modern security studies demands more *bhasyas* or commentaries and the modern variations updated as *smritis*.

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12   A. Appadorai, *National Interest and India's Foreign Policy*, Delhi, Kalinga Publications, 1992, pp. 4-5.

Conclusion

Great care needs to be taken in not mixing up *shruti* and *smriti* and original *sutra* with commentary or *bhasya*. In a speech in the Munich Security conference in the first week of February 2013, India's National Security Adviser Shivshankar Menon argued that contrary to the western discourse calling ancient civilisations as emerging powers is incorrect. Re-emerging is a proper term as countries such as India and other civilizations are in the process of restoring the historical norm in the international hierarchy and distribution of power.[13]

While Menon has made the point well, it behoves on academics and scholars to do their bit now. What is needed is that traditional ideas now have to be revisited with diligence and accuracy by the scholarly and policy related work of a high order in which scholars have to revisit and contextualize traditional historical knowledge with current issues in mind critically. The one big hurdle is that historical texts of ancient eras that are available may not be to the satisfaction of modern historians. But the wisdom contained in them cannot be left to hang on a methodological issue. Though ancient, Indian philosophy is a late starter in the international arena. Dr. S. Radhakrishnan mentions that the first time Indian philosophy found a place in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was in 1926 when he was approached by the publishers to contribute on the subject.

Some suggestions offered for consideration are:

1. Both think tanks and universities need to attempt to study traditional knowledge (much of which lies in religious text of many traditions). Such studies must go beyond the history and philosophy departments of universities. A vocabulary needs to be created. Rich methodological traditions exist and they need wider study (see Appendix).

2. The world's religions, four of which originated in India (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism and Sikhism) and almost 100 per cent in Asia, need to be studied in the Indian university system in an apolitical manner.

3. Languages in which ancient texts exist need to be studied.

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[13] Sandeep Dikshit, "We would rather be called re-emerging powers, says NSA", *The Hindu*, February 3, 2013.

Research Methodology, Writing Skills and
Logic from Indian Traditions

Research Methodology and Communication Skills

In research methodology, communication and writing skills, there is much to extract from ancient traditions. Jaimini the founder of the *Mimamsa* school of philosophy (circa 200 BCE to 200 CE), articulated that a topic is divided into the five following parts:

1. *Visaya*: Subject of the investigation

2. *Samasya*: The doubts it raises

3. *Purva Paksha*: The hypothesis or *prima facie* view

4. *Uttara Paksha*: The reply

5. *Siddhanta/Niryaya*: The conclusion

Indologists have observed (as mentioned in Robert Lingat's seminal *The Classical Law of India*, OUP, 1998) that this method of discussion is not without relevance to the method followed by jurists in elucidating a point of law. This methodology does not appear much different from any foundational research methodology in social science research.

Now relate this with ancient writing and communication skills as explained by Kautilya. Book Two of the *Arthasastra* mentions excellences in writing or *lekhasampad*. These excellences in writing are:

1. *arthakrama* (proper order of presentation of a matter)

2. *sambandha* (maintaining a connection from beginning to end)

3. *paripurnata* (completeness), so that the meaning of the written text is clear by stating reasons and by giving examples and illustrations

4. *madhurya* (sweetness), consisting of words conveying their meaning with ease

5. *audarya* (elevatedness) or absence of vulgar expressions, and

6. *spastatva* (clearness).

The *Arthasastra* also notes that the absence of charm, incorrect (use of) word, and confusion are to be avoided in writing.

Lekhadosah or the principle defects, according to the *Arthasastra* are:

1. *vyaghata* (contradictions)

2. *punarukta* (repetitions), and

3. *apasabda* (the use of words and constructions not sanctioned by grammar).

One can relate that India always had a rich idea on methodology and communication skills. Thus research methodology can also be understood by the study, revival and application of ancient Indian indigenous knowledge.

Gautam Rishi and the Nyaya School of Indian Philosophy

The famous Gautam rishi was the founder of the *Nyaya* or Analytical system of Indian philosophy, which forms part of the six systems.[14] *Nyaya*, the science of logic, is the art of reasoning. In *Nyaya* there are four ways of right knowledge or *Pramana* and five constituents of reasoning. The four ways of knowledge (*Pramana*) are:

(a) *Pratyaksa* or perception

(b) *Anuman* or inference

(c) *Upmana* or analogy, and

(d) *Sabda* or verbal testimony

And the five constituents of reasoning are:

(a) *Pratijna* or the proposition what one proposes to prove

(b) *Hetu* or reason for establishing the conclusion

(c) *Udharana* or homogenous and heterogeneous parts

(d) *Upanya* or application, the recapitulation, and

(e) *Nigmana* or conclusion

In establishing a thesis, five steps as given are more elaborate than the usual three. We often read or hear the three constituents by the example:

Where smoke is, fire is

There is smoke in yonder hill

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[14]   These systems are the pre-Buddhist *Vaisesika Sutra* of Kanda or Uluka (owl), *Samkhya Sutra* of Kapila, *Nyaya Sutra* of Gautama, *Mimamsa Sutra* of *Badarayana* and *Yoga Sutra* of Patanjali.

There is fire in the hill.

In Aristotelian logic a similar example is:

1. All bachelors are men.

2. ABC is a bachelor.

3. Therefore, ABC is a man.

In contrast, the process expounded by Gautama gives five steps:

1. There is fire in the hill.

2. Because there is smoke in it.

3. Wherever smoke is, fire is , e.g., a kitchen.

4. So there is smoke in the hill.

5. Therefore there is fire in the hill.

This process of deductive logic is attributed to Greek philosophers. Gautama's *Nyaya* appears to be in the same mould. According to the famous Indologist A.L. Basham, the third term of the Indian syllogism corresponds to the major premise of Aristotle, the second to Aristotle's minor premise, and the first to his conclusion. A. L Basham indicates that Indian syllogism reversed the order of that of classical logic.