

A Cross Cultural Textual Parallelism between ‘Dharmasutras’ and Samuel Smile’s ‘Self Help’ and their Respective Role in Nation Building

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Abstract

The mind- body duality is a debate of the modern period and modernity as theorised by the West. The concept of modernity has started from the Enlightenment (which stresses on logic and reason and growth and encouragement of scientific knowledge) in the seventeenth century in Europe. But such progress or Enlightenment as envisioned by the West had already started in and around 600 BCE when scholars such as Gautama, Apastamba, Baudhayana and Vasistha had begun to orally transmit the ‘Dharmasutras’ or the law codes of ancient India. The dichotomy of mind and body is not present in the ‘Dharmasutras’ which is a perfect conduct book on the all-encompassing human existence from birth to death. The translation of ‘Dharmasutras’ in the nineteenth century is noteworthy as this is also a text which is important in attributing to the nation building character. The colonisers as representing reason and logic and the colonised as illogical and madness as forwarded by Edward Said’s ‘Orientalism’ (1978) is dismantled through the patronage of such translation work carried out by scholars. The second text with which I want to make a cross cultural textual parallelism is Samuel Smile’s ‘Self Help’ (1859) published in the nineteenth century in Victorian English. This is also a conduct book which mainly addresses the youth of the nation to develop good character and qualities of self-help, self-reliance and charity.

Key Words: Dharmasutras, Self Help, cross cultural, textual parallelism, conduct book nation building

Full Paper

‘Dharmasutras’ and Samuel Smile’s ‘Self Help’

The argumentative and logical structure of ‘Dharmasutras’

athātas-sāmayācārikān dharmān vyākhyāsyāmaḥ || 1 || (Apastamba13)

‘Dharmasutras’ are a Hindu way of life rules and regulations to carry out the day to day life of domesticity. It includes religious strictures and morals. Researchers like David Kolf (Kolf 40) often found that in practice the people had departed a lot from the ancient traditions. Neither can we support Brian Hatcher’s claim that the colonial discourse rendered a logical and argumentative structure to religious discourse. (Hatcher 53) This is due to the fact that the ‘Dharmasutras’ are written in a logical and argumentative manner.

Problem of colonial modernity

Brian Hatcher states the problem of the concept of colonial modernity which was completely prejudiced about the East. The Hindu youth wanted to do away with the ills of their religion and in many cases with the whole of their religion. (Hatcher 61-62)

Samuel Smiles's 'Self Help' book is a sort of Victorian Bible for dealing with day to day activities. It is a guide book about how to conduct a life of morality and with self-improvement. It was very popular among the Victorian people who wanted to lead a life of nobility and thrift. Both the texts are still very much relevant today and play a great role in nation building.

A cross cultural textual parallelism between 'Dharmasutras' and 'Self-Help'

A cross cultural textual parallelism can be drawn between the two texts which belong to two different historical timeline. If a text is similar to a textile or thread then these two texts can be found consisting of similar threads. The notion of a 'stable text' underwent changes in the last three decades of textual studies. My study of these two texts will be guided by these concepts. Books are an inseparable part of culture and are often a product of various cultures coming into contact with each other. This brings one to find parallelism between two texts across different cultures. Vedic civilization has been a beacon of light for many other civilizations. 'Dharmasutras' are a traditional way of leading life long before industrialization and commercialism hit the mind-set of the Victorian people in England. As a text 'Dharmasutra' has a tremendous influence across cultures which will be discussed here with particular reference to textual studies and history of the books.

'Dharmasutra' as a text was revived and translated by the Orientalist scholars supported by the British government. Edward Said in his book 'Orientalism' found that the colonisers often supported the study of selected orientalist texts in order to understand the civilization of the colonized people. Samuel Smiles's 'Self Help' is a conduct book which was published at the height of colonialism in the Victorian period when England established itself at the height of the imperial power. This cultural exchange and confluence of the people of these two cultures can be studied through these two texts.

Role of Conduct Books and their Tradition

Every religion has its own code of conduct which are written as laws or orally transmitted through the ages by great seers or philosophers. Hinduism has no dearth of conduct books and Christianity also has its own share of conduct or guide books on the well-being of the practitioner or faithful one. The Sanatana Hindu dharma has books on ethics and codes of conduct are guided by Dharmasutras and Dharmashastras. Apart from these, the Vedas, myths and Puranas contain stories which teach us dharma and adharma.

In the eighteenth century England, after the Civil War, there was a spurt in the availability of conduct books which were directed to girls, women, young boys and youth of the nation. Such tradition of imparting morality among the people was continued in the nineteenth century Victorian England. Some popular conduct books in the nineteenth century are Henry Ward Beecher's 'Lectures to Young Men' (1844), William Alcott's 'The Young Man's Guide' (1834), 'The Young Wife', 'The Young Woman's Guide to Excellence', 'The Boy's Guide to Usefulness', and 'Familiar Letters to Young Men on Various Subjects'.

A short view of Textual Studies and Book History

The understanding of a text and its continuity in a particular culture and across it is a concern connected to textual studies and book history. The impact of 'Dharmasutras' is not limited to Hindu culture only but it has its impact over other cultures as well. It is one of the first conduct books like Samuel Smile's 'Self-Help'. The field of textual studies and history of the book are based on the endless deferral of the text at every point of its conception. Whether it is the original conception of the text as a mental entity of the author, the various editorial procedures, the binding and laying of the print, the various sales procedure and distribution of the book as a material commodity in the market to the reception of the book by its readers – the notion of a 'stable text' is continuously debunked. Textual process and scholarship which aimed at reaching the least corrupted version of the text, is itself in fetters because of the multiple versions of the text. (David Finkelstein and Alistair McClerry)

In search of a Stable Text

Even print culture itself is not a virgin territory due to its invasion by other cultural formations like visual culture, film, television and World Wide Web. Even the history of human communication is not stable and has evolved from that of orality to literacy which we find in the case of 'Dharmasutras'. The form of the text itself is also not stable as we have the gradual movement from oral literature, manuscripts, printed texts and e-texts. In such an atmosphere of inevitability the question arises that if we are inevitably moving towards the death of the book then what is the necessity of a distinct discipline called 'Book History'?

Textual Meaning in a Semantic Context

Sukanta Choudhuri in his book 'The Metaphysics of Text' (2010) gives a justification of a separate discipline called textual studies. Instead of locating an individual authorial entity, a single text or a close ended reception; meaning itself should be conceived of in a semantic context. He applies the concepts of structuralism as conceived by Saussure and Derrida. Language is composed of signs divided into signifier and signified. 'Signified' or the concept of a word is arbitrary and should be differentiated from other signified(s). Every attempt at assigning a meaning to a word by looking up at dictionary for a synonym leads us away from the original word. Similarly, the word 'a stable text' is a paradox in itself and any attempt to reach an ideal text purged of editorial interventions falls short of the original goal. We can say that there is not 'text' but 'texts'. Even a personal copy owned by a private reader becomes a new text with the annotations and cross-references or comments etched at margins. The field of Sanskrit scholarship ascertains that a single text is the work of many scholars as has been the case of Dharmasutras. This has been confirmed long before the theory of book history came to the fore. Several Vedic scholars wrote down the Dharmasutras in a joint venture.

George Buhler, the German Sanskrit scholar translated the Dharmasutras of Apastamba and Gautama as the 'Sacred Laws of the Aryas' during 1868 to 1869 and 1892 to 1894. This was the second part of the 'Sacred Books of the East' edited by Max Muller. He also translated Vasistha and Baudhayana. Patrick Olivelle, the Indologist later translated it as "Dharmasutras: The Law Codes of Ancient India" in 1999. The Orientalists thus recognised this text as an important one for the purpose of nation building which had also begun on their part as they were coming to terms with a new nation. They found the potential for law making and its disbursing in this elaborate text.

Dharmasutras are an all-inclusive term for all types of law- civil, moral, domestic, religious, dietary, ritual rites, sins and their rites of remorse, crimes and punishment. It acts as a guide

to an individual's disposition in family and society from birth to death. These rites situate the Brahmin male within the hierarchical system of the society. They were expected to follow the rigorous course of the Hindu rites in order to attain heaven. These sutras were composed by the academically oriented Brahmins who belonged to the different sakhas or schools of the four Vedas – Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharva. These texts were composed and orally handed down and written in aphoristic style called sutras. Dharmasutras were written by Apastamba, Baudhayana, Gautama and Vasistha. Later additions were made by different authors and this was a vibrant argumentative structure in which a whole intellectual milieu took part. The dates of these compositions can only be guessed as follows – Gautama (600 to 400), Apastamba (450 to 350), Baudhayana (500 to 200) and Vasistha (300 to 100) BCE.

Grihayasutras falls under the larger structure of the Dharmasutras and the structure is as follows – marriage, rites of family life, pre-birth rites, birth, infancy rites, rites of passage of childhood including initiation rites, funeral and rites towards ancestors. It addresses the family man on how to deal with family life including children and elders. In general the Dharmasutras are addressed to the Brahman. While 'karma' signifies both the righteous and unrighteous works, 'dharma' signifies the righteous and ideal duties of the Brahmin subject. The writers are also conscious of the dharma relative to a particular area (desadharmā), dharma of respective social groups (jatidharma) or of respective families (kuladharmā). Dharma is not just any custom but its sanctity is based on the Vedas. Apastamba's conception is far broader about the Dharma.

Division of social classes and role of students and teachers

Catvāro varṇā brāhmaṇa kṣatriya vaiśya sūdrāḥ || 4 ||(Apastamba 13)

The Vedas make a distinction between the ancient ages and the contemporary age. The scriptures believe that in the former ages, man incurred no sin even if they transgressed in their path. There are mainly four classes – Brahmin, Ksatriya, Vaisya and Sudra.

aśūdrāṇām aduṣṭa-karmāṇām upāyanaṁ vedādhyayanam agnyādheyam

phalavanti ca karmāṇi || 6 (Apastamba 13) Except the Sudra, all the other classes may undergo initiation which is an important step for a student who wants to study the Vedas.

The teacher or the acharya is an important person who imparts the Laws into the student. While his parents gave birth to his body, his teacher gave him his second birth. Failure to be initiated calls for penance but one cannot avoid this ritual. Otherwise, they will be known as Brahmin killers and other people should not contract marital relations with them or accept food from them.

The qualities of a student are laid down. The student should never contradict the teacher, should always look after the welfare of the teacher, should not sleep during the day, wear the skins of animals according to his class. He should not go for entertainment like dancing, gambling or gossiping. He should speak minimum to women. He should have all the positive traits of character – gentleness, calmness, reserved, energetic, peaceful and selfless. A student should depend on the charity of others and in the morning beg and bring the provisions to his teacher. The student offers everything to the teacher and then eats the alms food. This is the sacrifice which the student performs every day. The student should regularly perform fire worship.

The student who has returned home also has his duties towards the teacher. He should visit his teacher whenever he can and pay homage and bring gifts.

Tasminscaiva vidyākarmā ntaṁ avipratipanne dharmebhyaḥ || 13 || (Apastamba 15)

Similarly, the role of the teacher is specifically mentioned. He should not exploit his student for his own selfish purpose. He should not withhold any knowledge from his student. The teacher should punish the student according to his merits. He should complete his course of study according to the position of the month. He should not recite the Vedas in or near a cremation ground. He also should not recite in front of the Sudras and women. There are several special cases when the Vedic recitation is suspended.

Position of women and Sudras

Even though women and Sudras were strictly not allowed to learn the Vedas but Apastamba in one place states that people should after a funeral listen and do whatever else the women tells them to do. This is indirect way of saying that the women might know much which was not included in the Vedas.

Position of women's education

With time we witness the gradual deterioration of women's rights to education. It is an irony that previously in ancient times even sacred-thread ceremony for girls was recommended for their initiation into education. According to Harita Dharma Sutra the sacred-thread ceremony has been declared necessary for brahma-vadini or girl students. They should beg also from their homes while studying Vedas and performing sacrifices.

Empowerment of women

The Rig Veda gave women the power to perform all kinds of sacrifices which was later handed over to the Brahmins – “In Rig Veda it has been stated that a woman should perform all kind of sacrifices such as Brahma Yagna, Dev Yagna etc. This is an example of performing of religious sacrifices and studentship. A woman could also perform the duties of a Kshatriya and could be taught the art of war and political science.

While Dharmasutras are based on the Vedas, Manusmriti is a Dharmasastra based on the Puranic Smriti texts.. Manu has sanctioned physical violence on women as punishments for crimes. (Manusmriti 1500 B.C. translated by G.Buhler, source: Web) But Manu has equally prescribed corporal punishment to those who murder women.

Property concerns of women

Even Manu has made provisions for a woman's property which the conservatives altogether deny and leave the widow to her relatives' mercy. (Manu in Manusmriti, source: Web) Manu mentions the concept of property for the widow. A woman can even hand down her property to her child when she dies. A childless woman's property will be handed over to her husband.

Basic points of Samuel Smile' Self-Help

Samuel Smiles' 1859 book “Self-Help with illustrations of Conduct and Perseverance” is a conduct book where the author gives particular instances and cites the names of successful persons. In the preface, Samuel Smiles addresses this book to the youth of the nation so that

they can depend on themselves and not on the help of others or patronage of someone else. He warns that this book is not a promotion of selfishness. He states the purpose of this book –

“The object of the book briefly is to re-inculcate these old-fashioned but wholesome lessons – that youth must work in order to enjoy – that nothing creditable can be accomplished without application and diligence – that the student must not be daunted by difficulties, but conquer them by patience and perseverance, - and that, above all, he must seek elevation of character, without which capacity is worthless and worldly success is naught.”

The context of this book is cited as a group of young men who relied on themselves. They hired an empty cholera hospital and did some low wage job and in the evening they gathered around to inculcate teachings among each other. They invited the author to continue lessons among them about Proverbs of Solomon, lives of famous men etcetera. These young men later on followed these advices and became very successful in their life.

Samuel Smile believes that ‘Heaven helps those who help themselves’ and that individual habit helps one rather than any rights. He is more concerned about the progress of personal, national and of civilization of all age groups. He is not in favour of leaders like Caesar or any act of parliament. He talks about famous men who have come from humble professions like that of labourers. He cites from the biographies of famous men and their humble origin. Brindley the engineer has come from the class of labourers. Similarly Cook was a navigator and Burns the poet was a peasant. Ben Jonson came from the class of bricklayers. Simson the mathematician came from weaver class, Bacon was a sculptor, Dr. Livingstone was a missionary traveller and William Carey was a missionary.

In chapter 2, Smile praises the industrious quality of the Englishmen. He gives several examples from all kinds of profession. He mentions James Watt, the inventor of the steam-engine and Mathew Boulton. He also mentions the cotton-printer Sir Robert Peele and John Heathcoat, the inventor of the bobbin-net machine. He mentions Jacquard and Vaucanson’s contribution to the manufacture of silk. Chapter 3 is dedicated to the three great potters – Pallisy, Bottgher and Wedgwood. Chapter 4 is titled ‘Application and Perseverance’. Smile praises the quality of patience and perseverance and shares the examples of Newton, Kepler, Sydney Sith, Thomas Carlyle, Sir Walter Scott, Samuel Drew and Joseph Hume. Chapter 5 is dedicated to the scientific pursuits of Newton, Galileo, Galvani, Dr. Priestly, Sir Humphry Davy, Faraday, William Smith and many others. Chapter 9 portrays men of business like Shakespeare, Chaucer, Spenser, Milton, Newton, Cowper, Wordsworth, Scott, Ricardo and J.S. Mill.

In chapter 9, Smile finds that greatest men were businessmen. He gives the example of Plato who procured his travelling expenses by selling oil on his journey. Spiniza, the great philosopher polished glasses. The great botanist Linnaeus continued his studies while making shoes. Shakespeare was foremost the manager of a theatre. Chaucer was a soldier, Spenser served as the Secretary to the Lord Deputy of Ireland and Milton who was actually a schoolmaster later was promoted to the post of Secretary to the Council of state during the rule of Oliver Cromwell. Sir Isaac Newton was a master of the Mint. John Stuart Mill who worked in the East India Company was praised for the way he conducted business in his department. Smile believes that “Better to be under the necessity of working hard and faring meanly, than to have everything done ready to our hand and a pillow of down to repose upon.” (Smile 267) He praises Napoleon who with his power of imagination and punctuality could lead a large group of soldiers.

Chapter 10 is titled ‘Money – Its Use and Abuse’. Smile imparts a special importance to the use of money. He declares that the frugal use of money can raise the working class. I quote “Though money represents a crowd of objects without any real worth or utility, it also represents many things of great value; not only food, clothing, and household satisfaction, but personal self-respect and independence.” He equates a man who is always in want to a slave. He is not a man who is master of himself but he is controlled by the benevolence of others. He teaches the important lesson that economy is necessary for achieving independence. He shares several proverbs from several nations about economy. Some of them are given here –

“Take care of the pennies and the pounds will take care of themselves.”

“Diligence is the mother of good luck.” “No pains no gains.” “No sweat no sweet.” “Work and thou shalt have.” “The world is his who has patience and industry.” “Better to go to bed supperless than rise in debt.” (Smile 187)

He makes special mention of Thomas Wright who dedicated his life in reforming the criminals and convicts of Manchester. He was known as the moral physician due to whose intervention many reformed themselves and went back to their families and acquired different profession. He also mentions the abuse of money and he gives examples how great works have been done by poor people. He reminds us that Christianity has been spread over the world by simple and poor people rather than rich people. He also stresses on self-culture and gives examples from different famous people who engaged themselves with tools and made handicrafts of different kinds.

Conclusion

Bhabha in the chapter ‘Interrogating Identity’ in *Location of Culture* (1994) relates how identity is formed always in relation to something else. The Indian Nationalist movement was always conceived as a struggle against the British imperialism. ‘Dharmasutras’ contain all the basic tenets of nation building forces. Samuel Smile also believes in a stronger nation with good ideals of character, self-help, self-reliance, perseverance and economy. Nationalism as a sentiment, emotion or passion has been located in various genre of literature. ‘Dharmasutra’ or ‘Self-Help’ defines and lay down the qualities of the citizens of the nation. These two texts contain tenets taken from practical implication of them and not of an ‘imagined community’ as proposed by Benedict Anderson and found in the building of later nation states.

‘Dharmasutra’ and ‘Self-Help’ are political texts in many ways as they contain the qualities which are essential in a citizen to build a nation. ‘Dharmasutra’ promotes an ideal individual who follows the basic conducts necessary for a citizen to stay within the nation and bring forth excellence. A textual comparison between the two texts shows that ‘Dharmasutra’ being the earlier text encompasses within itself the idea of nation.

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