



Relations Between Women and Men in the Kama Sutra and the Arthashastra

The ancient Indians articulated three broad areas of human concern: dharma—the realm of religious and moral behavior; artha—the acquisition of wealth and property; and kama—the pursuit of pleasure. The Kama Sutra, which means "Treatise on Pleasure," while best known in the West for its detailed descriptions of erotic activities, is actually far more than a sex manual. It addresses, in a very broad sense, the relations between women and men in ancient Indian society, providing valuable information about the character and activities of men and women, the psychology of relationships, the forms of courtship and marriage, the household responsibilities of married women, appropriate behavior, and much more. The author of this text, Vatsyayana, lived in the third century C.E.

When a girl of the same caste, and a virgin, is married in accordance with the precepts of Holy Writ, the results of such a union are the acquisition of Dharma and Artha, offspring, affinity, increase of friends, and untarnished love. For this reason a man should fix his affections upon a girl who is of good family, whose parents are alive, and who is three years or more younger than himself. She should be born of a highly respectable family, possessed of wealth, well connected, and with many relations and friends. She should also be beautiful, of a good disposition, with lucky marks on her body, and with good hair, nails, teeth, ears, eyes and breasts, neither more nor less than they ought to be, and no one of them entirely wanting, and not troubled with a sickly body. . . . But at all events, says Ghotakamukha [an earlier writer], a girl who has been already joined with others (i.e. no longer a maiden) should never be loved, for it would be reproachable to do such a thing.

Now in order to bring about a marriage with such a girl as described above, the parents and relations of the man should exert themselves, as also such friends on both sides as may be desired to assist in the matter. These friends should bring to the notice of the girl's parents the faults, both present and

future, of all the other men that may wish to marry her, and should at the same time extol even to exaggeration all the excellencies, ancestral, and paternal, of their friend, so as to endear him to them. . . . One of the friends should also disguise himself as an astrologer, and declare the future good fortune and wealth of his friend by showing the existence of all the lucky omens and signs, the good influence of planets, the auspicious entrance of the sun into a sign of the Zodiac, propitious stars and fortunate marks on his body. Others again should rouse the jealousy of the girl's mother by telling her that their friend has a chance of getting from some other quarter even a better girl than hers.

A girl should be taken as a wife, as also given in marriage, when fortune, signs, omens, and the words of others are favourable, for, says Ghotakamukha, a man should not marry at any time he likes. A girl who is asleep, crying, or gone out of the house when sought in marriage, or who is betrothed to another, should not be married. The following also should be avoided:

- One who is kept concealed
- One who has an ill-sounding name
- One who has her nose depressed
- One who has her nostril turned up
- One who is formed like a male
- One who is bent down
- One who has crooked thighs
- One who has a projecting forehead
- One who has a bald head
- One who does not like purity
- One who has been polluted by another
- One who is affected with the Gulma [glandular enlargement]
- One who is disfigured in any way
- One who has fully arrived at puberty
- One who is a friend
- One who is a younger sister
- One who is a Varshakari [prone to extreme perspiration]

But some authors say that prosperity is gained only by marrying that girl to whom one becomes attached, and that therefore no other girl but the one who is loved should be married by anyone. . . .

A virtuous woman, who has affection for her husband, should act in conformity with his wishes as if he were a divine being, and with his consent should take upon herself the

whole care of his family. She should keep the whole house well cleaned, and arrange flowers of various kinds in different parts of it, and make the floor smooth and polished so as to give the whole a neat and becoming appearance. She should surround the house with a garden, and place ready in it all the materials required for the morning, noon and evening sacrifices. Moreover she should herself revere the sanctuary of the Household Gods. . . . The wife should always avoid the company of female beggars, female Buddhist mendicants, unchaste and roguish women, female fortune tellers and witches. As regards meals, she should always consider what her husband likes and dislikes and what things are good for him, and what are injurious to him. When she hears the sounds of his footsteps coming home she should at once get up and be ready to do whatever he may command her, and either order her female servant to wash his feet, or wash them herself. When going anywhere with her husband, she should put on her ornaments, and without his consent she should not either give or accept invitations, or attend marriages and sacrifices, or sit in the company of female friends, or visit the temples of the Gods. And if she wants to engage in any kind of games or sports, she should not do it against his will. In the same way she should always sit down after him, and get up before him, and should never awaken him when he is asleep.

The core of the Arthashastra, which means "Science of Wealth," may have been composed in the later third century B.C.E. by Kautilya, an adviser to the first Mauryan ruler, Chandragupta, but the text as we have it includes later additions. While the Arthashastra is primarily concerned with how the ruler may gain and keep power, it includes prescriptions on other aspects of life, including the kinds of problems that may threaten or destroy marriages.

If a woman either brings forth no live children, or has no male issue, or is barren, her husband shall wait for eight years before marrying another. If she bears only a dead child, he has to wait for ten years. If she brings forth only females, he has to wait for twelve years. Then, if he is desirous to have sons, he may marry another. . . . If a husband either is of bad character, or is long gone abroad, or has become a traitor to his king, or is likely to endanger the life of his wife, or has fallen from his caste, or has lost virility, he may be abandoned by his wife. . . .

Women of refractive natures shall not be taught manners by using such expressions as "You, half-naked!; you, fully-naked; you, cripple; you, fatherless; you, motherless." Nor shall she be given more than three beats, either with a bamboo bark or with a rope or with the palm of the hand, on her hips. . . .

A woman who hates her husband, who has passed the period of seven turns of her menses, and who loves another, shall immediately return to her husband both the endowment and jewelry she has received from him, and allow him to lie down with another woman. A man, hating his wife, shall allow her to take shelter in the house of a beggar

woman, or of her lawful guardians or of her kinsmen. . . . A woman, hating her husband, cannot divorce her husband against his will. Nor can a man divorce his wife against her will. But from mutual enmity divorce may be obtained. . . .

If a woman engages herself in amorous sports, or drinking in the face of an order to the contrary, she shall be fined three panas. She shall pay a fine of six panas for going out at daytime to sports or to see a woman or spectacles. She shall pay a fine of twelve panas if she goes out to see another man or for sports. For the same offences committed at night the fines shall be doubled. If a woman goes out while the husband is asleep or intoxicated, or if she shuts the door of the house against her husband, she shall be fined twelve panas. If a woman keeps him out of the house at night, she shall pay double the above fine. If a man and a woman make signs to each other with a view to sensual enjoyment, or carry on secret conversation for the same purpose, the woman shall pay a fine of twenty-four panas and the man double that amount. . . . For holding conversation in suspicious places, whips may be substituted for fines. In the center of the village, an outcaste person may whip such women five times on each of the sides of their body. . . .

A Kshatriya who commits adultery with an unguarded Brahman woman shall be punished with the highest amercement; a Vaisya doing the same shall be deprived of the whole of his property; and a Shudra shall be burnt alive wound round in mats. . . . A man who commits adultery with a woman of low caste shall be banished, with prescribed marks branded on his forehead, or shall be degraded to the same caste. A Shudra or an outcaste who commits adultery with a woman of low caste shall be put to death, while the woman shall have her ears and nose cut off.

QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS

1. In what ways are women given essentially equal treatment to men in these excerpts? In what ways are they treated unequally?
2. On what bases do men and women choose spouses and lovers? How does the class status of the two individuals play a part in these choices?
3. What were the most important household responsibilities of ancient Indian women? What social, intellectual, and cultural activities did they engage in?
4. In light of the prescriptions for how a married woman should treat her husband, what do you think was the nature of the emotional relationship of husband and wife? How might this differ from marriages in our society? Why do some marriages fail in ancient India?

Source: First selection: Sir Richard Burton and F. F. Arbuthnot, *The Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana* (1883), sections III.1, III.4, III.5, IV.1, found at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/sex/kama/index.htm>. Second selection: R. Shamasastri, *Kautilya's Arthashastra*, 2nd ed. (1923), sections III.2, III.3, IV.13, from Internet Indian History Sourcebook at <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/India/kautilya2.html>.