

The Real Kama Sutra: More Than an Ancient Sex Manual More Like “Sex and The City” Circa 300 A.D.

By Michael Castleman

Mention the Kama Sutra, and everyone knows it’s ancient India’s racy sex manual. The very title conjures up titillating visions of erotic frescos in which regal maharajas with outsized genitals cavort with naked bejeweled nymphs in positions exotic enough to slip the discs of a yoga master.

But for all the Kama Sutra’s notoriety, few Americans have ever read it—not even the “good parts,” the sexual positions that made the book famous, but which, in reality, account for only about one-quarter of its content. To the extent that Americans have dipped into the Kama Sutra at all, most have explored it via derivative products, one the best being, the erotic instructional video “Ancient Secrets of the Kama Sutra: The Classic Art of Lovemaking.” But products derived from the Kama Sutra don’t really do justice to the ancient Sanskrit book.

Meanwhile, even those few who have read the major English translation of the Kama Sutra have not fully appreciated the book because that translation misrepresented it. It dates from 1883 and was published just once in the U.S., 40 years ago in 1962. Richard Burton, the British army officer responsible for it, altered the text considerably to shoehorn it into Victorian views about sexuality, notably the then-popular notions that only men experience sexual desire and pleasure, and that women are nothing more than the passive recipients of men’s lust. The real Kama Sutra holds much different—and more contemporary—views.

Happily, some 1700 years after it was written, the English-speaking world can now read what the real Kama Sutra says, thanks to a new translation that rights Burton’s wrongs, and reveals the Kama Sutra for what it truly is, much more than a manual of sexual positions, but rather a guidebook for cultivating an eroticized life. It’s “Sex and the City” circa 300 A.D., only the focus is on men instead of Sarah Jessica Parker and her girlfriends (though some of the text is clearly intended for fourth-century Indian women).

The new translation reveals a Kama Sutra in some ways remarkably modern and progressive: Women are as sexual as men, and men should work to provide women with erotic pleasure, including orgasms. But before you embrace the Kama Sutra as your new sexual Bible, be forewarned. Some of what it says is controversial: Adultery is a fact of life and it's all right, even fun—for men only—as long as the women's husbands don't find out. And some of the Kama Sutra is callous and repugnant: If a woman persistently refuses a man's advances, he is justified in raping her. Perhaps most remarkable, the Kama Sutra's vaunted sex advice is surprisingly tame. For example, the book expresses considerable ambivalence about oral sex, a popular element in modern Western lovemaking.

The new translation (Oxford University Press, \$26) has been compiled by Wendy Doniger, 61, a professor of the history of religions at the University of Chicago, and Sudhir Kakar, 63, an Indian psychoanalyst and senior fellow at Center for Study of World Religions at Harvard. They returned to the original Sanskrit, and produced a translation at once more honest and more erotic than it's Victorian predecessor. They also include copious notes that place the text in its historical and linguistic context, rather like a well annotated edition of a Shakespeare play. The Doniger-Kakar Kama Sutra is unlikely to make the bestseller list, but if you and your honey want to read each other a different kind of pillow book, the new translation is fascinating, thought-provoking, at times, disturbing, and occasionally amusing.

Treatise on Sexual Pleasure

Kama Sutra literally means “treatise on sexual pleasure.” Unlike the Christian view that the sole purpose of sex is procreation, in the fourth-century Hindu world of the Kama Sutra, the cultivation of sexual pleasure independent of procreation was considered one of life's highest callings. The ancient Hindus believed that life had three purposes: religious piety (dharma), material success (artha), and sexual pleasure (kama). All three were equal, and the erotic was celebrated as the seat of earthly beauty. In the Hindu world the pursuit of sexual pleasure was revered as a sort of religious quest. Imagine a world where having sex was just as important as religious observance.

The Kama Sutra was written by one Vatsyayana Mallanaga, about whom nothing else is known. However, from the text, it's clear he was upper class. He takes servants for granted, and assumes his readers have the leisure to spend their time seducing virgins and other men's wives, and the money to buy the gifts he recommends giving to accomplish this. Vatsyayana also claims to have written his treatise “in chastity and highest meditation.” It's hard to know what to make of

this. Some commentators have scoffed that given his subject matter, “chastity” seems highly unlikely. But considering the reverence with which the ancient Hindus approached matters sexual, it’s also possible that Vatsyayana wrote his book with the gravity of say, a modern art critic discussing a cache of just-discovered erotic paintings by Picasso. We’ll never know.

The Kama Sutra may be the ancient world’s most famous sex book, but it was by no means the first. The Chinese had sex manuals 500 years earlier, and Ovid’s *Ars Amatoria*, a handbook for courtesans, preceded the Kama Sutra by some 200 years. The Kama Sutra is not even the first Indian sex guide. Vatsyayana mentions several sages who trod his erotic path before him. What makes the Kama Sutra unique in world literature is that it’s the first comprehensive guide to living an eroticized life. It’s an ancient Joy of Sex meets Miss Manners.

The sexual culture it describes is also surprisingly like our own. While the Kama Sutra describes girls and women as dependent on their fathers, husbands, and adult sons, in the manner of women in today’s Arab Middle East, in the India of the text, women enjoyed an independence and freedom of movement today’s Saudi or Pakistani women can only dream of. While their wealthy fathers and husbands were running businesses and the government (not to mention having affairs) young women were often free to date men and select their own husbands, and married women were free to select lovers and entertain them.

Life as a Play in Seven Erotic Acts

The Kama Sutra is organized into seven sections that track men through life. In Book One, the bachelor sets up his pad. In Book Two, he perfects his sexual techniques. This is the book that has inspired the videos, games, and everything else that flies the Kama Sutra flag. In Book Three, our young man seduces a virgin. In Book Four, he marries and sets up a household for his wife and servants. By Book Five, he has grown sexually bored with his wife, and turns to seducing other men’s wives. Eventually, as he ages, the effort necessary for such dalliances loses its charm, so in Book Six, he takes up with courtesans, who work to please him—but for a price. Finally, in old age, he fears he is losing his potency and attractiveness, so Book Seven contains recipes for herbal potions to preserve them.

Although Vatsyayana was a man writing for men, some of the Kama Sutra speaks directly to women: Book Three tells virgins how to attract husbands. Book Four instructs women how to be good wives. Book Six deals with the skills required of courtesans—including how they should provide for their own old age by stealing from their patrons.

Of the Kama Sutra's seven sections, Books Two through Five are the most interesting.

Book Two, the sex manual, recognizes women as full, lusty participants in sex, and exhorts men to learn ejaculatory control to last long enough to bring them to orgasm: "Women love the man whose sexual energy lasts a long time, but they resent a man whose energy ends quickly because he stops before they reach a climax." Apparently, Vatsyayana didn't know that most women never have orgasms solely from intercourse no matter how long it lasts. Nonetheless, the Kama Sutra is very attentive to women's pleasure, a view that arrived in our culture only a few decades ago.

Book Two also instructs men to treat women in such a way "that she achieves her sexual climax first." How can a man do this? By following Book Two's extensive discussion of the fine points of embracing, cuddling, kissing, and other types of sensual touch calculated to heighten sexual arousal. The Kama Sutra gets a little wild here. It touts slapping and spanking with accompanying shrieks and moans, and is particularly enamored of scratching and biting: "There are no keener means of increasing passion than acts inflicted by tooth and (finger)nail." It even sings the praises of scars caused by erotic scratching. It considers them advertisements of erotic prowess: "Passion and respect arise in a man who sees from a distance a young girl with the marks of nails cut into her breasts."

Book Two advocates use of sex toys, and suggests sex while bathing. It also describes how a man can best satisfy two women at the same time (fondle one while having intercourse with the other), and how two or more men should comport themselves when sexually sharing one woman (take turns having intercourse, and while one is inside her, the others should fondle her).

About the Kama Sutra's unexpected aversion to oral sex: Vatsyayana declares, "It should not be done because it is opposed to the moral code." But apparently, he understood that ancient Indian men enjoyed fellatio as much as men do today. After condemning oral sex, he provides elaborate instructions to women on how to perform what the Kama Sutra calls "sucking the mango." Then Vatsyayana reiterates his condemnation of oral sex, saying it should be enjoyed only with "loose women, servant girls, and masseuses" with whom a man "does not bother with acts of civility." Finally in an ambivalent aside, he allows that some men enjoy sucking each other's mangoes, and that some even perform cunnilingus: "Sometimes men perform this act on women, transposing the procedure for kissing a mouth."

In Book Three, the Kama Sutra insists that men who seduce virgins should do so very tenderly. It advises courting a virgin for many days before bedding her. The suitor should engage her in interesting conversation, shower her with gifts, play board games with her, and work to win her trust, all the while remaining sexually abstinent to set her at ease. As the big moment approaches, he should send her little sculptures of goats and sheep with major erections. If she takes the hint, she should signal her willingness by flashing him—“revealing the splendid parts of her body.” Finally, they make a date to meet and have sex.

But tenderness toward women goes only so far in the Kama Sutra. If a virgin is unwilling to go all the way, men are instructed to have a brother ply her with liquor, and “when the drink has made her unconscious, he takes her maidenhead,” i.e. rapes her. In the Kama Sutra’s view, rape is acceptable not only for reluctant virgins, but also for other women: “A man may take widows, women who have no man to protect them, wandering women ascetics, and women beggars...for he knows they are vulnerable.....”

In Book Three, the Kama Sutra devotes only nine pages to the care of wives, but in Book Four, almost three times the real estate, 26 pages, to the seduction of other men’s wives. It exhorts wives to be doting, dutiful, careful managers of servants, and always well-mannered, well-dressed, and faithful. But it also assumes that wives eventually bore their husbands. As a result, a man is perfectly justified in seducing other men’s wives, who are exciting, challenging, worthy of indefatigable pursuit, and great fun in bed. If a wife discovered that her husband had been unfaithful, she was over a barrel. In fourth-century India, she couldn’t leave him as a modern woman might. She was obligated to remain dutiful. But the Kama Sutra allows her to be “mildly offended” and “scold him with abusive language.” However, she was forbidden to resort to “love sorcery,” i.e. herbal potions, to win him back, presumably because that might ruin his adulterous fun.

When it comes to seducing other men’s wives, the Kama Sutra is not above a little shameless self-promotion either. It asks: Which men are the most successful at it? Those “who know the Kama Sutra.”

The Kama Sutra’s matter-of-fact acceptance of infidelity is tempered by only one caveat: Men were not to go that route if it was likely to “bring disaster,” i.e. violence or financial reverses. To prevent disaster, the Kama Sutra lists women who should be avoided, notably those who are “well guarded or with their mothers-in-law.” Once a man selected an eligible extra-marital target, the Kama Sutra instructs him to woo her with all the focus and creativity he would bring to

courting a virgin, except that in the case of another man's wife, he had to be more stealthy and deceptive, which made the chase all the more exciting and intellectually diverting.

Of course, if a man seduced another man's wife, chances were good that some other sexually itchy gent might decide to seduce his. In fourth-century India, wives were expected to be faithful, but with so many men getting action on the side, many wives must also have been cheating. The Kama Sutra concludes its discussion of extra-marital affairs by saying that it does not advocate philandering, but rather seeks to prevent it by describing all the ways libidinous lotharios might cuckold them in order to warn husbands worried about their wives' wandering eyes. Given the extraordinary detail with which the Kama Sutra describes infidelity, it's doubtful that any fourth-century reader believed this. (The Kama Sutra does not discuss how a husband should deal with a wife's infidelities, but it's unlikely that all she got was a scolding.)

An Ancient Mirror

In the end, the Kama Sutra describes a highly sexual world, one that does not condemn unbridled pleasure as our culture often does, but prefers amoral pleasure that's somewhat restrained simply because it's easier for all concerned. It's a sexual world committed to erotic tenderness, yet capable of casual cruelty, a lusty world that venerated sex for its own sake, not just for procreation.

What good is Kama Sutra today? The book deals with many of the erotic and relationship concerns we have. It's about love, lust, flirtation, courtship, seduction, rejection, marriage, and sexual power, manipulation, and deceit. It presents a vision of the lives many 21st century Americans are struggling to create, lives that are simultaneously safe, sane, and erotically rich. In reading the Kama Sutra, we enter the bedroom of an exotic society long ago and far away—and find an ancient mirror in whose reflection we see aspects of ourselves.