

BOOK REVIEW

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The Citrasutra of the Visnudharmottara Purana

Book reviewed by Dr. Sangmitra Basu

The *Citrasutra* of the *Visnudharmottara Purana* is published under the *Kalamulasastra* series and is considered the most significant *silpasutra* or treatise on painting. This is the latest critical edition of the text since the one edited by Priyabala Shah in 1958. Parul Dave Mukherji, the editor and translator of the *Citrasutra*, has concentrated on a section of the third khanda (Canto) of the *visnudharmottara Purana* comprising nine chapters from 35 to 43. This book consists of the two sections: the first section is in the form of an introduction and the second section has been divided into three parts-text, translation, and notes. The text puts together a critical apparatus, which incorporated fresh evidence from two new manuscripts from Nepal and Bangladesh in addition to the manuscripts used by the earlier editors. The notes here are detailed and bring in the interpretations by the earlier scholars to indicate important deviations from the official line of interpretation. This edition contains a detailed Glossary, the first of its kind, which focuses on the technical and context-specific sense of the terms.

The chapters of the text deal with various technical aspects of painting such as related measurements, combination of colours, drawing of the outlines, enlargement and reduction of figures and ingredients for the preparation of colours.

The reasons why the *Citrasutra* has attracted so much of scholarly attention are many. Its importance in Indian art history rests upon several factors. The foremost reason is historiographical. Since the time of its discovery in 1924 by the pioneering art historian, Dr. Stella Kramrisch till its translation by Shri C. Sivaramamurti in 1978, the *Citrasutra* has been at the center stage of theorization of early Indian art and aesthetics. Hence, it is even more striking that there was a gap of almost 35 years before the first critical edition compiled by Priyabala Shah was available in 1958. This fact, however, did not deter either Dr. Stella Kramrisch or Dr. A.K. Coomaraswamy from engaging in this text and deriving support from it for their theorization of traditional Indian art. In other words, the text prior to 1958 was extremely corrupt from the point of view of a textual critic. Nevertheless, it has a long history of interpretation by pioneering art historians of the 20th century, like A.K. Coomaraswamy, Stella Kramrisch and C. Sivaramamurti.

Interest in the text is triggered by a set of concerns of the art historians, which tied up with questions of Indian identity and the construction of an authentic past, which was, of paramount importance especially in the colonial period. Each of the interpreters of the *Citrasutra* was located within a specific framework within which the text made sense or made to yield sense, which makes the question of an authentic text deeply problematic. At the same time, as a textual critic, Parul Dave Mukherji is not only committed to a careful construction of the text and examination of the primary manuscripts evidence but also aware of the critical frame that enables her own interpretation of the *Citrasutra*. It is therefore not surprising that the editor keeps moving between the historiographical and the textual (i.e. the posited original text) spaces of interpretation.

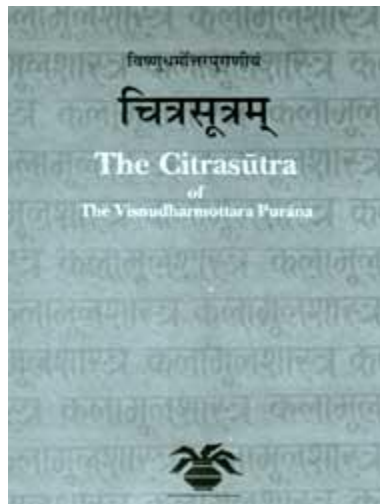
She has also attempted to follow the methodology of textual criticism as taught by Prof. Alexis Sanderson

the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Oxford University. It has entailed a careful construction of a stemma, which diagrammatically demonstrates the interrelationship between the various manuscripts that have been studied, and also sets up guidelines for selecting the correct reading. While this empiricist method aspires to ensure a construction of a reliable text as free from corrupt readings as the primary data of the impossibility of reaching back to a pure and pristine past by means of the textual evidence. In fact, it is the tension between the apparently contradictory agendas of a textual critic and an art historian that underscores the book and functions as a productive force.

The *Citrasutra* is not only about updating our knowledge of the text with the help of new manuscripts evidence but raises larger questions about the need to critically engage in the interrogation of the traditional art via the categories deployed in the *śilpasastras*. If there is one question that has not been brought up, it is that of the relationship between the text such as *Citrasutra* and the art practice. The editors perhaps are of the view that in case of traditional Indian art, it will be difficult to assume a one to one correspondence between the Sastric knowledge and the art practice. This should not however undermine the importance of the *śilpasastras* since it is they that incorporate the epitome of the traditional Indian art and aesthetics.

The author, Dr. Parul Dave Mukherji is currently Reader of Art History & Aesthetics at the Faculty of Fine Arts, M.S. University, Vadodra. She, after finishing her M.A. from the same University, enrolled herself as an M.Phil student at the Faculty of Oriental Studies, Oxford University, to work on 'The Theory of imitation in Early Indian Art'. The present work was originally prepared as a dissertation under Prof. Alexis Sanderson and was admitted for Ph.D. in the same university. The publication under review is thoroughly revised and augmented version of the dissertation.

The work of Dr. (Smt.) Parul Dave Mukherji displays her insight in the intricate text and her ability to conform to the canons of textual criticism. The volume contains an illuminating Foreword by Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan.



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