

IS THERE A SANSKRIT WORD FOR PUMICE?

The word *phenaka* appears in the *Kāmasūtra* twice. Both times it appears in Book I, Lesson IV, *sūtra* 6 and 31<sup>1</sup>. This word is also noticed by the *Jayamaṅgala* commentary of Yaśodhara. Here are the relevant portions of both texts:

« *trītyakāḥ phenakāḥ* » 1.4.6.

Commentary:

« *trītye'hni jaṅghayoḥ phenako deyaḥ syāt* »

and

« ... *śarīramātro mallikāphenakakaṣāyamātraparicchadaḥ...*  
... *pīṭhamardaḥ* » 1.4.31.

Commentary:

« *pravṛttaviṣayecchatvāc ca jaṅghāgharṣaṇārthaṁ phenakakaṣāyāv  
iti* ».

The Hindī rendering with which the text is furnished runs as follows:

« *tīsre din phen lagānā* » 1.4.6.

Commentary:

« *tīsre din jāṅghon se samudraphen male* »

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1. I have at my disposal the following edition: *Śrī Vātsyāyana Mahārṣi praṇītaṁ Kāmasūtram* with the *Jayamaṅgala* commentary of Yaśodhara and with the *Puruṣārthaprabhā* Hindī translation and commentary of paṇḍit Mādhavācārya, in two volumes, Bombay, *samvat*, 1991 (*śaka*, 1856).

and

« *baiṭhak men saḥārā lene kī mallikā aur samudraphen tathā pañ-  
cakaṣāy mātra hī jiske pās upakaraṇ ho* » I.4.31.

Commentary:

« *is kāraṇ jāṅghon ko mulāyam banāne ke liye samudraphen aur  
aisā hī kaṣāy jāṅghon par masalne ke liye bāndhe phirtā hai* ».

Vācaspati Gairolā in his Hindī rendering of the *Kāmasūtra*<sup>2</sup> writes in the first instance: « *prati tīsre dīn sābun lagā kar nahānā cāhiye* ». The second occurrence of the word is altogether omitted in his translation. S. C. Upadhyaya in his English translation of the treatise<sup>3</sup> uses as the equivalent of the word *phenaka* « a foam producing and cleansing substance ». This must be applied, according to him, to the thighs every fourth day. At the second instance he uses the Sanskrit word itself and furnishes it with a foot-note saying that it is a soapy lathering substance. The same thing is repeated in the glossary where he writes that it is a foam producing and cleansing substance.

Richard Burton<sup>4</sup> in turn uses in both cases « lathering substance » and has also a foot-note saying: « This would act instead of soap, which was note introduced until the rule of the Mahomedans ».

One of the best translations of the *Kāmasūtra* is that done into German by Richard Schmidt<sup>5</sup>. The first passage there is rendered as follows:

« ... *alle drei Tage Sepia* ».

The relevant portion of the commentary runs as follows:

« ... *am dritten Tage soll an den Schenkeln Sepia angewendet werden; d.h. indem zwei Tage dazwischen liegen; sonst werden die Schenkel in der Folge rauh* »<sup>6</sup>.

In the second case where the word *phenaka* is mentioned as one of the possessions of a *pīṭhamarda* also the word *Sepia* is used. Yet more enlightening context is that of the *Jayamaṅgala* commentary:

« *Um die Schenkel abzureiben, wenn ihn die Begierde nach sinnlichen Genüssen ankommt, "Sepia" und ein "braunrotes Gewand"* »<sup>7</sup>.

Thus Schmidt differs from the others in translating the word *phenaka* as *Sepia* which denotes according to the dictionary « *braunschwar-*

2. VĀCASPATI GAIROLĀ, *Kāmasūtra pariśīlan*, Allahabad, 1967, p. 81.

3. S. C. UPADHYAYA, *Kama Sutra of Vatsyayana*, Bombay, 1961, pp. 82, 86, 267.

4. RICHARD BURTON and F. F. ARBUTHNOT, *Vatsyayana's Kamasutra*, London, 1963, p. 14.

5. RICHARD SCHMIDT, *Das Kāmasūtram des Vātsyāyana*, Berlin, 1915.

6. *Op. cit.*, p. 63.

7. *Op. cit.*, p. 74.

zes Farbstoff, der aus einem Sekret des Tintefisches gewonnen wird »<sup>8</sup>. It is then brownish-black colour obtained from secretion of cuttle fish. Finally we emerge with the following meanings of *phenaka*: « soap, lathering substance, sea-foam and sepia ». While the first three meanings are simple deductions from the basic meaning which is foam, the last one apparently owes its origin to Böthlingk and Roth Dictionary which gives the meaning *os sepiae*, i.e., a bone of cuttle fish.

In our view none of the above renderings is satisfactory. The soap variant cannot be accepted for this simple reason that soap was unknown in ancient India. This was rightly pointed out by Burton although without much consequence for his translation. The *Manusmṛiti* for instances states:

« For the cleansing of the ejectors of urine and faeces earth and water should be used as much as necessary » (V.133).

« One who desires cleanliness should apply earth — once to the urinary organ, thrice to the anus, ten times to one hand and seven times to both hands » (V.135).

« Such is the purification for householders; double of this for students, treble for hermits, and quadruple for renunciates » (V.136)<sup>9</sup>.

It is absolutely evident that if *phenaka* were soap in any sense resembling our present soap then it would have been mentioned by Manu. The fact that the *Kāmasūtra* stipulates *phenaka* to be used only once every three days and applied only to the thighs also speaks against it being treated as soap or any other cleansing substance. Especially that it is supposed to be used *pravṛttaviṣayecchatvāt*, i.e. because of a desire of involvement in the objects of senses. Equally puzzling in this context is its twin word *kaṣāya*. Whatever it may mean, above all it seems to indicate that *phenaka* as well should be treated with some suspicion. Since *kaṣāya* also is supposed to be applied *janḡhāgharṣa-ṇārthan*, therefore it is obvious that both *phenaka* and *kaṣāya* serve here some cosmetic purpose other than simple cleanliness and having certain aphrodisiac function. But if this is so, then why *kaṣāya* — an ochra robe, usually mendicant's garb has been mentioned here and in what way it rubs thighs?! The answer of course is that neither *phenaka* nor *kaṣāya* mean what is usually ascribed to them, i.e., soap and ochra-robe. As we have already mentioned they serve some cosmetic purpose. The first one is exactly what Böthlingk and Roths Dictionary says it is. The bone of cuttle-fish is a well known cosmetic used already in ancient Rome<sup>10</sup> and applied in order to soften the skin. Probably this bone might have been used in the way similar to that in which pumice of today is used and it might have been called *phenaka* because, being

8. *Wörterbuch der deutschen Gegenwartssprache*, Berlin, 1976, 5 Band.

9. *Manu-Smṛiti, The Laws of Manu with the Bhāṣya of Medhātithi*, transl. by Gangā-nātha Jhā, University of Calcutta, 1922, vol. 3, part 1, pp. 160-62.

10. See *Encyclopaedia Britannica* under « cuttle-fish ».

lighter than water, it is thrown out on the beach of the ocean by the waves and there it resembles pieces of solidified foam. So it was called « foamlet » — *phenaka*. This finds an interesting parallel in pumice which being derived from Latin *pumex* is etymologically related to Latin *spuma* meaning foam<sup>11</sup>. In this context we are inclined to think that here we might have an equivalent of the word *phenaka* although the actual object so designated differs, for pumice is a volcanic product while *phenaka* is an organic one.

As it has been already hinted above a similar misunderstanding grew around the word *kaṣāya*. Its most common meaning — ochra robe — has been so much in vogue that it overshadowed all other meanings of this word. Yet in the *Kāmasūtra* its proximity with *phenaka* indicates that the commonly accepted meaning should be at least suspicious.

Burthou translates this word as « red cloth »<sup>12</sup> while S. C. Upadhyaya omits it altogether. Gairolā writes *kaṣāya vastra*<sup>13</sup> and Schmidt *braun-rottes Gewand*<sup>14</sup>. It is only paṇḍit Madhāvācārya that offers different reading in his Hindī commentary. He uses the word *pañcakaṣāya*<sup>15</sup> which according to Monier-Williams Dictionary means « decoction from fruits of five plants ». For *kaṣāya* the same dictionary gives: ointment, smearing, anointing, perfuming or anointing a person with cosmetics and Mayrhofer's Dictionary puts « astringent » as the primary meaning of it. Now, in the *Jayamaṅgala* commentary both words, i.e., *phenaka* and *kaṣāya* appear in the *dvandva* compound which usually expresses a certain unity of meaning. Soap and mendicants garb would make a very odd pair. In addition *piṭhamarda*, an impudent parasite and a dancing master who teaches courtezans would cut indeed a very unusual figure in monkish garb. Thus it is more proper to imagine him elegantly clad and having on himself as his only possessions the tripod stool (*mallikā*) and some sort of cosmetic bag(?) with pumice made of cuttle-fish bone and a flask(?) of fragrant *kaṣāya* ointment — the second applied after the skin of thighs had been treated with the first.

Warszawa 1980.

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11. See *Lateinisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch* von A. Walde, 3 neubearb. Auflage von J. B. Hoffmann, zweiter Band M-Z, Heidelberg, 1954, and *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue latine*. Histoire des mots par A. Ernout et A. Meillet, 3<sup>ème</sup> ed. revue, corrigée et augmentée d'un index, Paris, 1951.

12. BURTON, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

13. GAIROLĀ, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

14. SCHMIDT, *op. cit.*, p. 74.

15. *Sri Vātsyāyana Mahārṣi prañītaṁ Kāmasūtram*, *op. cit.*, vol. 1. p. 156.