



Stupidity is not a laughing matter

Warija Adiga*

वरं पर्वतदुर्गेषु भ्रान्तं वनचरैः सह। न मर्जनसम्पर्कः सुरेन्द्रभवनेष्वपि॥- भर्त्तर्हरि¹:
मूर्खजनसम्पर्कः भर्त्तर्हरि:

varam parvatadurgesu bhrāntam vanacarai: saha |
na mūrkhajanasamparka: surendrabhavaneśvapi -Bhartṛhari

Abstract :

Ancient Sanskrit literature—whether in the form of poetry, philosophy, or spiritual discourse—is vast and profound, consistently aimed at the betterment of individuals and society. Amidst this wisdom, it is intriguing to find that several texts, particularly the “nīti-śāstras” (ethical treatises), devote considerable attention to the theme of stupidity and the characteristics of foolish individuals encapsulated as subhāśitas (verses of wisdom). Are these verses mere satire or sarcasm aimed at contemporaries? Were they composed in jest, or do they conceal deeper, serious insights?

This paper examines approximately twenty subhāśitas, from four specific poets belonging to different centuries (~1500 BCE to ~1700 CE), to understand how these thinkers used wit and sarcasm to explain stupidity and its impact on society. The study also explores the relevance of these ancient words of wisdom in the modern world by a comparative study of a couple of modern philosophical essays available on “Theory of Stupidity”. Through this comparative approach, the paper aims to extract the underlying lessons on this specific human fallacy, especially relevant to the current individualistic world.

Keywords: #Stupidity #Viduraniiti #Bhartṛhari #Kṣemendra #NilakanthaDīkṣita #Cipolla #Bonhoeffer

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1 Bhartṛhari, Nītiśatakam

Introduction

Stupidity is a relative trait—it can manifest in anyone, regardless of education or social standing. It is not a lack of intelligence but rather a lack of awareness or discernment. A highly educated person may show poor judgment in one domain, just as someone with little formal education may display wisdom in another. The fact that even powerful and influential individuals are often duped by conmen is a reminder that no one is entirely immune to lapses in judgment. Whether due to temporary oversight or a persistent blind spot, stupidity can take many forms across all walks of life. Not surprisingly, several ancient Sanskrit poets—such as Bhartṛhari, Kṣemendra, and Nīlakanṭha Dīkṣita—have woven verses on foolishness into their literary works. In Mahābhārata, Vidura's counsel in Vidura-nīti includes a detailed listing of a fool's traits, intended to open the eyes of (the blind) Dhṛtarāṣṭra towards right decision making. Bhartṛhari's Nītiśatakam begins with difficulties in dealing with fools. Kṣemendra's satirical writings often depict fools and malicious individuals as part of their moral narratives. The following verse, in his own words, explains why he uses humor to render such messages -

हासेन लज्जितोऽत्यन्तं न दोषेषु प्रवर्तते ।
जनस्तदुपकाराय ममायं स्वयमूद्यमः॥²
hāsen lajjito'atyantam na doṣeṣu pravartate|
janastadupakārāya mamāyam svayamudyamah.

"I am offering this satire as an altruistic act - after all, ridicule can deter a person from making mistakes."

2 Kṣemendra, Deśopadeṣa - 1.4

Nīlakanṭha Dīkṣita has humorous takes on people and professions in his *laghukavyas* such as Kalividambanam, Sabhārañjanam etc. He also ridicules foolish poets in the introductory chapter of the *mahākavya* Śivalīlarṇava".

So it is clear that all these verses, though humorous and biting, serve a deeper purpose. They act as subtle mirrors, offering readers an opportunity for introspection. Through satire, the poets create a kind of behavioral checklist—one that uses wit to encourage self-awareness and ethical conduct. The choice of humor is deliberate: emotions, especially laughter, make lessons more memorable. After all, isn't it easier to remember a truth wrapped in a joke than one delivered as a lecture?

Ancient poets on “Stupidity”

Given the vast reservoir of Sanskrit literature, this chapter explores the concept of stupidity in a chronological progression—beginning with Vidura-nīti from Mahābhārata (pre-1500 BCE), followed by Nītiśataka of Bhartṛhari (circa 1st century CE), then satirical works of Kṣemendra (11th century CE) and sarcastic wits of Nīlakanṭha Dīkṣita (early 17th century CE). This study shows that even after thousands of years, the weaknesses in human behavior have not abated. Even words like Mūrkha, Mūḍha used in the literature and comparing fools with donkeys continues to this date.

Description of a fool from Vidura's advice to Dhṛtarāṣṭra

In the Udyoga Parva of the Mahābhārata, eight chapters are collectively known as Vidura-nīti, where Vidura, the wise minister, attempts to guide his elder brother Dhṛtarāṣṭra toward

moral clarity and sound judgment. He begins by outlining the qualities of a truly learned person (*pañdita*), then shifts to describing the traits of the foolish, and finally returns to elaborating on the virtues of the wise. This carefully structured communication—placing negative feedback between two positive or constructive messages—is remarkably similar to modern management strategies for delivering criticism effectively. By framing his advice in this way, Vidura not only softens the impact of his critique but also increases the likelihood that Dhṛtarāṣṭra will reflect on it without becoming defensive. It is a timeless example of persuasive and empathetic counsel, blending ancient wisdom with principles echoed in contemporary leadership and communication practices. Vidura's list of traits of stupid people is given below under their specific headings for clarity::

1. Not able to understand one's roles and responsibilities

स्वमर्थं यः परित्यज्य परार्थमनुतिष्ठति ।
मिथ्या चरति मित्रार्थे यश्च मूढः स उच्यते ॥ -(1)
svamartham् yah parityajya parārthamanutishthati |
mithyā carati mitrārthe yaśca mūḍhaḥ sa ucyate.³

"He who abandons his own interests and pursues those of others, and who acts falsely for the sake of a friend — he is called a fool.".

2. Misplaces emotions

अकामान्कामयति यः कामयानान्परिद्विषन् ।
बलवन्तं च यो द्वेष्टि तमाहुर्मूढचेतसम् ॥ -(2)
akāmānkāmayati yah kāmayānānparidviṣan
balavantam ca yo dveṣti tamāhurmūḍhacetasam.⁴

3 VyasaMuni, Vidurāñīti, - 1.31 (Mahābhārata)

4 Ibid - 1.32

"He who desires those who are disinterested, who hates those who desire him, and who envies the powerful — such a person is said to be of a deluded mind."

अमित्रं कुरुते मित्रं मित्रं द्वेष्टि हिनस्ति च।
कर्म चारभते दुष्टं तमाहुर्मूढचेतसम् ॥ -(3)
amitram kurute mitram mitram dveṣti hinasti ca
karma cārabhate duṣṭam tamāhurmūḍhacetasam.⁵

"He who treats an enemy as a friend, harbors hatred toward a true friend and harms them, and who engages in wicked actions — such a person is said to be of a deluded mind."

संसारयति कृत्यानि सर्वत्र विचिकित्सते।
चिरं करोति क्षिप्रार्थे स मूढो भर्तर्षभः ॥ -(4)
saṃsārayati kṛtyāni sarvatra vicikitsate
ciram karoti kṣiprārthe sa mūḍho bharatarṣabha⁶

"One who spreads work everywhere and is suspicious of everything; one who delays tasks which are urgent — such a one, O best of the Bharatas, is a fool."

3. Lack of sensibility

अनाहूतः प्रविशति अपृष्टो बहु भाषते।
विश्वसत्यप्रमत्तेषु मूढचेता नराधमः ॥ -(5)
anāhūtaḥ praviśati aprṣṭo bahu bhāṣatे
viśvasatyapramatteṣu mūḍhacetā narādhamaḥ⁷

"One who enters without invitation, talks a lot without being asked, believes those not trustworthy are the lowest form of people with a foolish mind."

4. Blaming one's own faults on others

परं क्षिपति दोषेण वर्तमानः स्वयं तथा ।
यश्च क्रुद्ध्यत्यनीशः सन्स च मूढतमो नरः ॥-(6)

5 Ibid - 1.33

6 Ibid - 1.34

7 Ibid - 1.35

param kṣipati doṣena vartamānah svayam
tathā |
yaśca krudhyatyanīśah sansa ca mūḍhatamo
narah⁸

“One who blames others for their own faults, and who becomes angry despite lacking the power to act — he is the most foolish of men.”

5. Lack of self-awareness

आत्मनो बलमज्ञाय धर्मर्थपरिवर्जितम् ।
अलभ्यमिच्छन्नैकम्यान्मूढबुद्धिरहोच्यते ॥ -(7)

ātmano balamajñāya dharmārtha parivarjitam
alabhyamicchanniśkarmyānmūḍhabuddhirih
ocaye⁹

“Without understanding his own capacity, one who desires unattainable results through means devoid of dharma (righteousness) and artha (practical effort) — such a person is called foolish-minded (mūḍha-buddhi) in this world.”

Nītiśatakam - Bharṭṛhari's take on fools

The poet Bharṭṛhari, writing around the beginning of the first millennium CE, captures human follies that appear strikingly unchanged even after two thousand years. He begins his Nītiśataka—a collection of moral and ethical aphorisms—with reflections on the nature of folly. Before describing the traits of a fool, Bharṭṛhari sets the tone with a quiet frustration: that wisdom, no matter how timeless or profound, often falls on deaf ears.

बोद्धरो मत्सरग्रस्ता: प्रभवः स्मयदूषिताः ।
अबोधोपहताश्चान्ये जीर्णमङ्गे सुभाषितम् ॥ -(8)

8 Ibid - 1.36

9 Ibid - 1.32

boddhāro matsaragrastāḥ prabhavaḥ smayadūṣitāḥ
abodhopahatāścānye jīrnamaṅge subhāṣitam¹⁰

“The learned are overpowered by envy, the masters are defiled by pride and the rest are smitten with ignorance, hence the subhāṣita withers within myself.”

While Viduranīti explains traits of a foolish person, Bhartṛhari goes further in describing the impossibility of pleasing or reasoning with such people -

अज्ञः सुखमाराध्यः सुखतरमाराध्यते विशेषज्ञः ।
ज्ञानलवदुर्विदाधं ब्रह्माऽपि तं न रञ्जयति ॥ -(9)

ajñāḥ sukhamārādhyāḥ sukhataramārādhyate
viśeṣajñāḥ
jñānalavalavadvadurvidagdham brahmā'pi tam naram
na rañjayati.¹¹

“It is easy to please an ignorant person and much easier to please an expert. However, even the almighty Brahma cannot please a person who possesses only a little knowledge but considers himself an expert.”

लभेत सिकतासुतैलमपि यत्ततः पीडयन् पिबेच्च मृगतृष्णिकासु
सलिलं पिपासार्दितः ।
कदाचिदपि पर्यट्जशविषाणमासादयेत् तु प्रतिनिविष्टमूर्ख
जनचित्तमाराधयेत् । -(10)

labheta sikatāsutailamapi yatnataḥ pīḍayan
pibeccamrgatṛṣṇikāsu salilam pipāsārdita:
kadācidapi paryātañchaśaviṣāṇamāsādaye-nna
tu pratiniViṣṭamūrkha janacittamārādhayet¹²

“One might, extract oil from sand with great effort;

10 Bharṭṛhari, Nītiśatakam - 1.2

11 Ibid- 1.3

12 Ibid- 1.5

Or drink water from a mirage when tormented by thirst ;
Or even find the horn of a hare¹³, by wandering endlessly,—
but never can one win over the mind of a person firmly rooted in foolishness.”

Even after describing the futility in teaching fools, his advice to them is- to use “silence” as a tool in the company of learned to hide their ignorance.

स्वायत्तमेकान्तगुणं विधात्रा विनिर्मितं छादनमज्जतायाः ।
विशेषतः सर्वविदां समाजे विभूषणं मौनमपण्डितानाम् ॥ -(11)
svāyattamekāntaguṇam vidhātrā vinirmitam
chādanamajñatāyāḥ
viśeṣataḥ sarvavidām samāje vibhūṣaṇam
maunamapaṇḍitānām¹⁴

"The Almighty has made "Silence" as a tool to hide ignorance. In all types of assembly of wise, silence is an ornament especially for the fools".

यदा किञ्चिज्जोऽहं गज इव मदान्धः समभवं तदा सर्वज्ञोऽस्मी
त्यभवद्वलिपां मम मनः।
यदा किञ्चिकिंचित्पूर्वजनसकाशादवगतं तदा मूर्खोऽस्मीति ज्वर
इव मदो मे व्यपगतः ॥- (12)

yadā kiṁcijjñō'ham gaja iva
madāndhaḥ samabhavam tadā
sarvajñō'smītyabhavadavaliptam mama
manah।
yadā kiṁcitkiṁcidbudhajanasaṅkāśādavaga
tam tadā mūrkhō'smīti jvara iva mado me
vyapagataḥ॥¹⁵

"When I had learned just a little, I was intoxicated with pride like an elephant in

13 Ibid - 1.33

14 Ibid - 1.12

15 Ibid - 1.14

rut, convinced I knew everything. But in the company of the truly wise, I felt like a fool—and the fever of that arrogance quickly vanished."

Finally, “Avoid being with fools” is his famous advice to all -

वरं पर्वतदुर्गेषु भ्रान्तं बनचरैः सह।
न मूर्खजनसम्पर्कः सुरेन्द्रभवनेष्वपि॥ - (१३)
varaṁ parvatadurgesu bhrāntam vanacaraiḥ
saha
na mūrkhajanasaṁparkaḥ surendrabhavaṇeṣvapi¹⁶

"It is better to wander among mountains and difficult passages with forest people than to live with fools in the golden palaces of Indra themselves."

Interestingly, nītidviṣṭikā, the poet Sundara Pāṇḍya (6th century) echoes the same ethos as follows

मूर्खा न द्रष्टव्याश्वेन्न तैस्तु सह तिष्ठेत्।
यदि तष्ठेन्न तु कथयेद् यदि कथयेन्मूर्खवत् कथयेत्॥ -(14)
mūrkhā na draṣṭavyā draṣṭavyāścenna taistu
saha tiṣṭhe।
yadi tiṣṭhenne tu kathayed yadi
kathayenmūrkhavat kathayet¹⁷

"Fools should not be seen;if they must be seen, one should not stay with them; if one must stay with them, one should not speak with them; and if one must speak, then one should speak like a fool would."

Satires of Kṣemendra and Nīlakanṭha Dīkṣita on Human Falacies

Both the poets Kṣemendra and Mahakavi

16 Sundar Paṇḍya, Nītidviṣṭikā 19

17 Kṣemendra, Deśopadeṣa- 1.11

Nīlakanṭha Dīkṣita have written several satires, which show the degradation of people during their times. Apart from describing foolish behaviors, they also describe such behaviors of a group of people, based on their professions or social strata. Their poetic works describe individuals showing stupidity to people using their professions or social standing to display unreasonable behavior, which are sometimes hilarious and sometimes poignant. For brevity, we have selected only a few verses from both of them in the following paragraphs -

Kṣemendra in Deśopadeśa

1. Inability to appreciate others

सत्साधुवादे मूर्खस्य मात्सर्यगलरोगिणः।
जिह्वा कङ्कमुखेनापि कृष्टा नैव प्रवर्तते॥-(15)
satsādhuvāde mūrkhasya mātsaryagalarogiṇah|
jihvā kaṅkamukhenāpi krṣṭā naiva pravartate¹⁸

"When it comes to offering praise, not even tongs can pry open the tongue of a fool whose throat is choked by the disease of jealousy"

2. A wicked stupid person is better than a wicked intelligent person

भग्रदन्त एव व्यालः श्रेयान्मूर्खखलो वरम्।
पक्षवानिव कृष्णाहिर्नत्वेव खलपण्डितः। - (16)
bhagnadanta eva vyālah śreyānmūrkhakhalo
varam|
pakṣavāniva krṣṇāhirnatveva khalapanḍitah||¹⁹

"Similar to how a rogue elephant without tusks is better than a wild rogue elephant, a stupid villain is better than a wicked intelligent person. A wicked intelligent person is like a

¹⁸ Ibid -1.35

¹⁹ Nīlakanṭha Dīkṣita, Kalividambana, 7

dangerous black snake with wings (enabling it to fly)."

This work of Kṣemendra contains five chapters critiquing different kinds of people of his time.

Nīlakanṭha Dīkṣita in Kalividamabanam

1. Self-praise is an attribute of a fool

स्तोतारः के भविष्यन्ति मूर्खस्य जगतीतले।
न स्तौति चेत्स्वयं च स्वं कदा तस्यास्तु निर्वृतिः॥ - (17)
stotārah ke bhaviṣyanti mūrkhasya jagatītale|
na stauti cetsvayam ca svam kadā tasyāstu
nirvṛtiḥ॥²⁰

"Who would be the admirers of a fool on this earth? If a fool does not praise himself, then when shall he get the satisfaction of being praised"

2. Stupidity does not spare even teachers

वाच्यतां समयोऽतीतः स्पष्टमग्रे भविष्यति।
इति पाठ्यतां ग्रन्थे काठिन्यं कुत्र वर्तते ॥ - (18)

vācyatām samayo'tītah spaṣṭamagre bhaviṣyati
iti pāṭhayatām granthe kāṭhinyam kutra vartate²¹

"Read (by yourself)", "time is over", "everything will be clear later", (thus), if in this manner a teacher teaches, then, where can there be any difficulty in any text ?

अगतित्वमतिश्रद्धा ज्ञानाभासेन तृस्ता।
त्रयः शिष्यगुणा ह्येते मूर्खचार्यस्य भाष्यजास् ॥ - (19)
agatitvamatiśraddhā jñānābhāsenā tṛptatā
trayah śiṣyaguṇā hyete mūrkhacāryasya
bhāgyajās²²

²⁰ Ibid - 8

²¹ Ibid - 1.36

²² Sundar Paṇḍya, Nītidviṣaṣṭikā 20

"Helplessness (for learning), blind faith in the guru and satisfaction only by the semblance of scholarship, these three qualities of a student are the cause of goodluck of a foolish teacher."

Checking modern theories on Stupidity

Dietrich Bonhoeffer's theory on stupidity (1943 CE)

Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German theologian and philosopher, wrote a profound reflection on stupidity in his essay "Letters and Papers from Prison" while imprisoned by the Nazis. "Stupidity is the unwillingness or inability to use one's reasoning and moral judgment, especially when it matters most" was what he wrote in. The core ideas he proposed are -

1. Stupidity is not a lack of intelligence, but a moral failure.
2. Stupidity is a social, not intellectual, phenomenon.
3. The stupid person is incapable of self-reflection
4. Stupidity thrives in conditions of power and manipulation.
5. Only liberation of the inner self can overcome stupidity

In conclusion, Bonhoeffer argued that stupidity is more dangerous than malice:

- Against stupidity we are defenseless.
- Evil can be exposed and fought.
- But stupidity **blocks understanding**, mocks logic, and often believes itself virtuous.

- It creates a moral vacuum, allowing evil to operate unchecked.

Carlo M. Cipolla's theory on stupidity

Similarly, in his book "The Basic Laws of Human Stupidity", the Italian economic historian Carlo M. Cipolla defined five laws on stupidity. Through statistical analysis he warns that stupidity is more dangerous than evil, and societies that ignore or enable stupid behaviour do so at their own peril. The five basic laws on stupidity that he has proposed are :

1. Always and inevitably everyone underestimates the number of stupid individuals in circulation.
2. The probability that a certain person be stupid is independent of any other characteristic of that person.
3. A stupid person is a person who causes losses to another person or to a group of persons while himself deriving no gains and even possibly incurring losses.
4. Non-stupid people always underestimate the damaging power of stupid individuals. In particular non-stupid people constantly forget that at all times and places and under any circumstances to deal and/or associate with stupid people infallibly turns out to be a costly mistake.
5. A stupid person is the most dangerous type of person.

Further, Cipolla categorized people based on their behavior (helpful, harmful, neutral) and grouped these behaviors based on how one's actions affect oneself and others:

Category	Others Benefit	Others Harmed
Intelligent	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓	Y X
Bandit	X	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ Y
Helpless	X	X
Stupid	X	✓ ✓ ✓ ✓ Y

In summary, the following chart shows a comparison between these two thinkers:

Aspect	Carlo M. Cipolla	Dietrich Bonhoeffer
Background	Economic historian, humorous-social analysis (1976)	Theologian and resistance thinker, moral-philosophical reflection (1943, in Nazi prison)
Definition of Stupidity	A person who harms others without any benefit to himself	A moral failing: a lack of independent thinking and critical judgment
Nature of Stupidity	Innate, statistical phenomenon - found in all groups	Induced and social—often a result of manipulation, power, or conformity
Danger Level	Most dangerous type of person due to unpredictability and irrational harm	More dangerous than evil, because it resists reason, argument, and self-awareness
Can it be cured?	Implied to be permanent or widespread; not easily remedied	Can be overcome through moral awakening, resistance, and inner liberation
Causes	Random distribution in population; not tied to education or class	Psychological surrender under authoritarian systems, mass movements, or ideology
Key Quote	"The stupid person is the most dangerous type of person."	"Against stupidity we are defenseless."
Tone	Witty, analytical, satirical	Sobering, moral, existential
Focus	Behavior and impact of stupid people in society	The process by which people become stupid (especially in political systems)

(This infographics is generated from chatGPT)

Conclusion

From the sample subhāṣitas we have reviewed it is clear that “Stupidity” is not a laughing matter. Based on the harm caused to themselves and others, these verses can also relate to modern categorization as enumerated by Cipolla: Intelligent →Pandita, Bandit

→ “*Khala*”, Helpless → “*Praja*” (normal citizens) and Stupid → “*Mûrkhâ*”. Pañdita’s actions benefit others, *Khala*’s actions harm others, *Praja* are at the mercy of others and *Mûrkhâ* harm themselves and others (including all the three above). The fact that poets across centuries continued to lament about Stupidity,

shows that despite human-evolution, human nature has not been able to get rid of this infliction. With the current interconnected world, this trait has become more dangerous than before - stupidity manifesting as pride, ego, righteousness and short-sightedness in powerful leaders resulting in catastrophe such as wars with mass destruction. Hence, it is imperative to understand stupidity (within one's context), to introspect so that we do not harm others by our actions and prevent ourselves from being misdirected by others as well. Such subhāśitas given in Sanskrit literature act as a checklist for us to correct ourselves and lead others to guard themselves from supidity.. For brevity, the paper has listed only twenty verses, but readers are encouraged to read Sanskrit literature for more path-finders.

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GRATITUDE IS A MARK OF NOBLE SOUL AND A REFINED CHARACTER.

We like to be around those who are grateful.
They tend to brighten all around them.

They make others feel better about themselves. They tend to be more humble, more joyful, more likable.

- Joseph B. Wirthlin