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The problem of early modernity in the Sanskrit intellectual tradition

Anyone who aims to discuss the Sanskrit intellectual tradition of the early modern period is required to preface his exposition with two remarks. The first is the typical caution offered by those in a new field of research, though in this case the caution truly has bite. Sanskrit science and scholarship from the 16th through the 18th centuries has only just begun to attract the attention of scholars. In addition, the vast majority of texts have never been published, and some of these are housed in libraries and archives where access is either difficult or impossible. The second remark concerns a rather atypical language restriction on our problematic. In striking contrast to China or the Middle East, while somewhat comparable to Western Europe, India in the early modern period shows a multiplicity of written languages for the cultivation of science and scholarship. But two of these, Sanskrit and Persian, monopolised the field, and did so in ways that were both parallel and nonintersecting. Each constituted the principal language of science for its associated social-religious sphere, while very few scholars were proficient in both (at least aside from mathematicians and astronomers, and even these were very much in the minority). Sanskrit continued its pervasive, age-old dominance in the Hindu scholarly community, and merits consideration as a completely self-contained intellectual formation. With those two clarifications in mind we can proceed to ask what actually occurred in the world of Sanskrit knowledge during the early modern period, and how a comparative analysis may illuminate the general problem of modernity.

Sheldon Pollock

What happened in Sanskrit intellectual history in the early modern period?

Two trends have begun to manifest themselves to scholars working in the period, which are gradually hardening into facts. The first is that an extraordinary upsurge in writing across intellectual disciplines can be observed beginning in the 16th century. Second, a gradual but unmistakable decline set in beginning in the early 18th, which by the century's end had accelerated to the point where one might be justified in speaking of an evaporation of creative energy in many Sanskrit disciplines.

The explosion of writing occurred in a wide domain of scholarship. Consider hermeneutics (*mimamsa*) and political theory (*raja-dharma-sastra*). In the former, a burst of writing begins around 1550. For example, the premier compendium on the subject, composed around 1000 (the *Sastra-dipika*, 'Lamp for the Science'), which seems not to have been touched for five centuries, became the object of sustained reexamination, with a half-dozen major reassessments between 1550 and 1650. In fact, that hundred-year period is probably the most productive era in the history of hermeneutics since the seventh century. In political theory, from the time of the *Kritya-kalpataru* ('Wishing Stone of Moral Duty') at the end of the 12th century to late 16th only a single, minor work in the field was produced (the *Raja-niti-ratnakara* of Candessvara c. 1400). Beginning in 1575 or so, however, a range of often vast treatises were composed from within the heart of polities from Almor in the northern hills to Tanjavur in the peninsula.

The same kind of uptick, though following a slightly different timeline, can be found in many other domains. Significant new work in logic was sparked by the searching genius of Raghunatha Siromani (c. 1550); in astronomy, too, unprecedented contributions were made starting with Jnanaraja in 1503. In these and the other cases I've cited, we begin to find not just large amounts of new writing but writing that is substantively new.

The trend we see is no mere artifact of preservation. There is no evidence that anything substantial in hermeneutics, political theory, logic, or astronomy was lost in the preceding period. Candessvara's work in political theory, for

example, refers to only one text from the entire preceding two centuries. The upsurge we see is real.

Nor was this trend a matter of mere proliferation of texts. To an important degree we find intellectual innovation was as well. There is, for one thing, a new multidisciplinary on the part of scholars. Earlier hermeneutists never wrote juridical treatises (or scholars of jurisprudence hermeneutics), let alone aesthetics; it now became common. In addition, scholars adopted an entirely new discursive idiom, the more abstract language of the New Logic. Entirely new scholarly genres began to appear: in grammar, the *Prakriya-kaumudi* ('Moonlight of Transformations'), and its later imitation, the *Siddhanta-kaumudi*, 'Moonlight of Doctrine') radically redesigned the most hallowed of Indian intellectual monuments, the two-millennium-old grammar of Panini. At the same time (and this is no contradiction), a new concern with the textuality of the foundational texts (in logic, for example) is manifest – though this nowhere reaches the pitch of philological innovation we find in late imperial China or Humanist Italy. And with it came a return to the sources; hermeneutists, for example, begin to comment again directly on the *sutras* of Jaimini. Most dramatically, we find a new historical, perhaps even historicist, conceptual framework for understanding the development of the knowledge systems. The late-17th-century *Nyaya-kaustubha* ('Divine Jewel of Logic') organizes its exposition by referring to the 'ancients', the 'followers of the ancients', the 'moderns', the 'most up-to-date scholars', and the 'contemporaries'. Knowledge is thought to be better not just because it may be better (because of its greater coherence, economy, or explanatory power), but also in part because it is new. Consider, finally, such claims to conceptual novelty that begin to make their appearance. Raghunatha defends what he calls 'a philosophical viewpoint that emerges precisely in opposition to the tenets of all other viewpoints', while Dinakara Bhatta (Varanasi, fl. 1620) announces at the beginning of his treatise on hermeneutics that he intends to 'prove by other means, clarify, or even uproot the thought of the outmoded authorities'. A century earlier the astronomer Nilakantha Somayaji of Kerala dared to argue that 'the astronomical parameters and models inherited from the texts of the past were not in themselves permanently correct, but needed constantly to be improved and corrected based on a

systematic practice of observation and reason'. Few declarations of this sort had been heard earlier in India.

All this changed fundamentally in the course of the eighteenth century, when – or such is my present assessment – the capacity of Sanskrit thought to make history dramatically diminished in most fields. The production of texts on political theory ceased entirely; a few minor works from Maratha Tanjavur are all we can find. In hermeneutics the last contribution of significance – significant in the eyes of the tradition itself – is that of Vancesvara Diksita (Tanjavur, fl. 1800); in literary theory, that of Visvesvara (Almora, fl. 1725). What we seem to be witnessing – in very marked contrast to China or Western Europe – is the exhaustion of a once-great intellectual tradition.

We are far from satisfactorily explaining either the upsurge and the decline, though we can make a much better guess about the former than about the latter. It seems to me rather obvious that the conditions for unleashing the new intellectual energies across the whole range of social formations (from courtly Tanjavur to free-market Varanasi) were made possible by the Mughal peace, with the consolidation of the empire by Akbar (r. 1556-1605). As for the decline, it is far more difficult to explain in either intellectual-historical or social-historical terms. Internally, we can perceive how a moment of incipient modernity was neutralized by a kind of neo-traditionalism, as I'll detail momentarily. Externally, the acceleration of a European colonisation of the Indian imagination, although still superficial in the 18th century, may have played a role, though this has yet to be clearly demonstrated. Consider the stunning fact – almost too stunning to be a fact – that before 1800 we know of not a single thinker writing in Sanskrit who refers to any European form of knowledge.

Comparison: navyas, les modernes, and the problem of early modernity in India

The history of Sanskrit knowledge systems in the early modern period shows some astonishing parallels with contemporary Europe. Let me just examine one of these in some detail that in both its structure and its consequences is representative of the whole conceptual complex.

In Sanskrit literary theory a consensus about what made it possible to create poetry had long reigned undisputed,

and was given canonical authority by the 11th-century thinker Mammata: poetry can be produced only given the presence of three co-operating causes: talent, learning, and training. For the first time in a thousand years this consensus was challenged by a scholar named Srivatsalanchana (Orissa, fl. 1550). He claimed that talent alone was necessary, while launching a frontal assault on the whole conceptual edifice of Mammata, whose views he dismisses, with rare contempt, as 'completely fatuous'. In the 17th and early 18th centuries, however, the position of Srivatsalanchana and his followers was itself the target of a withering critique by a number of scholars such as Bhimasena Diksita (Kanyakubja, c. 1720), who vigorously sought to reestablish the old consensus against those they called the *navyas*, the 'new' scholars – the term signified something quite different from the merely contemporary or present-day (*adhunika*, *adyatana*) – and this was a sobriquet that Srivatsalanchana almost certainly had claimed for himself.

If this dispute over the three causes of poetic creativity seems minor, the issues it raises for cultural theory are not, something that comparison with contemporary Europe allows us to see with special clarity. The comparison also shows how differently India and Europe responded to similar conceptual challenges – and how radically, after centuries of homomorphism, their intellectual histories diverged.

In India, the stakes in the dispute were by no means as slight as they may appear to be from our present vantage point (where most literary stakes seem slight). Everyone participating in the Sanskrit conversation clearly understood that the rejection of learning and training and the complete reliance on inspiration was precisely the rejection that many *vernacular* poets had been making since at least the 12th century. And much of this vernacularity represented, not just an alternative to the Sanskrit language, but to the Sanskrit cultural and political order – indeed, the 12th-century Kannada poet Basava is a salient example.

Remarkably similar was the discourse on the three sources of poetry in Europe that began in the early 17th century. In England this discourse was a basic component of neoclassicism – a neoclassicism that became increasingly reactionary especially after 1688 – which was epitomised by Ben Jonson. For him

'naturall wit', or talent, required the discipline given by 'exercise', imitation of classical models, and 'art', knowledge of rules for effective expression. A similar and earlier cultural complex can be found in France, starting with the Pléiade in the mid-16th century. And in both cases was the neoclassical view attacked. In France this occurred famously in the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*, with Charles Perrault in 1688 celebrating inspiration (*le génie*) and one's 'own lights' (*propres lumières*) over the doxa of tradition, and, above all, talent over training based on mechanical imitation of the classics.

If the terms of the debate were nearly identical, the outcomes and consequences were fundamentally different. In Europe, the historical development is well known, leading to a transformation of the sense of tradition and the past – indeed, if Frederic Jameson is correct, it led to the very invention of the idea of historicism, with the past being neither better nor worse, just different. In India, a potentially powerful idea of inspiration outside tradition's discipline, and with it, a potentially transformative idea of freedom, died on the vine. With one exception, Srivatsalanchana had no defenders in the 17th century, and was virtually forgotten thereafter – indeed, along with the debate itself. More generally, the *navya* impulse itself was largely repudiated. An even more passionate defense of the status of Mammata, unlike anything seen in the past, was offered by Bhimasena, who asserted that the moderns' view on talent is 'mere vaporizing that fails to understand the hidden intention of the author, who was an incarnation of the Goddess of Speech'. This is more than recentering the authority of the medieval scholastics; tradition had now become the voice of God pronouncing on matters of culture. And, it suggests the presence of something internal, not external, to the Sanskrit intellectual formation, however far this something may still elude our historical reconstruction, that arrested the capacity for development by cordoning off the kind of critique that had once supplied that formation's very life force.

What we may be seeing here is the intellectual dimension of a larger political transformation. As the early modern period began and the vast changes in wealth arrived, along with the new Mughal peace, a 'new intellectual' movement was emboldened to rethink the whole past. When the Mughal order

Cairo Citadel. K.A.C. Creswell Photograph Collection of Islamic Architecture, Album 16/plate 7, Rare Books and Special Collections Library, The American University in Cairo.



The historiography of protest in late Mamluk and early Ottoman Egypt and Syria

History in its various forms – chronicles, biographies and biographical dictionaries – was a favourite genre in late medieval Egypt and Syria. One of the salient features of these histories is their breadth of perspective. Matters related to community and urban life including market prices, fires, murders, epidemics, floods and social relations were considered worthy of record. The writers were profoundly interested in the events of their times rather than in classical Islamic history. In the absence of archives, these histories remain our widest windows on medieval Egypt and Syria.

began to crack – or perhaps when the new social facts of capitalist-colonial modernity became too much for the earlier conceptual repertoire to capture let alone evaluate – a turn to a new traditionalism was found to be salutary. And traditionalist knowledge has a certain stasis built into it, which may account for the falloff in production we see across the Sanskrit world.

Let me repeat what I alluded to in my opening remarks, that it is only a certain kind of modernity that makes us bemoan what might otherwise be taken as a steady state of civilisational equipoise: the industrialisation and commodification of knowledge in western modernity, one could argue, in contrast to the reproduction of artisanal intellectual practices, are merely a result of the ‘everlasting uncertainty and agitation’ that capitalism brought in its wake, not a sine qua non of an intellectual tradition. Moreover – although I cannot go into the argument here – the modernization of intellectual life in Europe was a consequence of a widespread dissolution of the previous social, political, and spiritual orders.

A highly cultivated, and consequential research question for Indian colonial history has been well put by David Washbrook: ‘If its long-term relationship with India was, at least in part, a condition for the rise of Britain’s Modernity, how far conversely were relations with Britain a condition for India’s Traditionality?’ I am beginning to wonder whether the traditionalisation that Washbrook and others have found to be a hallmark of early colonialism may have been a practice earlier developed by and later adapted from Indian elites themselves. ◀

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Modern scholars have referred to Egyptian and Syrian schools of medieval historiography. The Egypt (Cairene) school during the Mamluk period tended to focus on politics of the state and the sultanate. Syrian historians allowed more room for the activities of the urban notables, including the ‘*ulama* (religious scholars) and merchants. An interest in popular politics is evident in both schools, but is more pronounced in the writings of Syrian historians and predates the Ottoman period. Thus Egyptian historians such as Taqiyy al-Din al-Maqrizi (d. 1442) and Muhammad Ibn Iyas (d. ca. 1524) and Syrian historians such as Shams al-Din Ibn Tulun (d. 1546) included in their writings news of a wide sector of the urban population.

The period witnessed a popularisation of history in various ways. Not only did the subject matter of history include topics of a more popular nature, but increasingly, and especially in Syria, less learned men of the urban community also took to writing history. The diary-like chronicle of the simple

Damascene ‘*alim*, Ahmad Ibn Tawq, covers many of the same events as the chronicle of the learned scholar Shams al-Din Ibn Tulun but differs in style and perspective. Later in the 18th century, Ahmad al-Budayri al-Hallq, a Damascene barber, would also write a historical chronicle. In Egypt, military officers who did not enjoy the traditional education of an ‘*alim*, such as Ahmad al-Damurdashi, also documented the events of their times. Popular histories are noted for their use of the vernacular and their more sharply defined local perspective that focused on a particular urban network rather than high politics.

The inclusion of more popular elements in the subject matter and production of history allow the modern historian to trace elements of the political participation of common people. It is more often through reports of urban protest that common people entered historical narratives. Historians used the common people differently. Sometimes the participation of commoners in urban politics provided opportunities for rhetorical devices to confirm and stress a historian’s implicit argument, granting

it legitimacy through an implicit reference to their numbers.

Naturally, the narrative contexts in which various historians placed these events differed. Historians of the Cairene school, like Maqrizi and later Ibn Iyas, tended to narrate events within a larger historical drama with a particular sultan and his reign at centre-stage. Protest by the common people was more often than not narrated as a reflection on and reaction to particular state policies. They viewed provincial history through this same imperial lens so that protest in Damascus was reported as a reflection on state authority. While Egyptian historians focused firmly on Cairo, Syrian historians aimed squarely at their own cities – provincial cities rather than imperial capitals.

The attitudes of historians towards urban protest differed. Most did not disapprove of violent outbursts by the common people in defence of religion and justice under the rubric of forbidding wrong, an Islamic duty. Syrian historians were more likely to offer detailed accounts of such acts of protest, identify the participants and

explain the political negotiation that led to its resolution. However, when such protests lacked a clear sense of resisting injustice, the rebelling common people were portrayed as ‘mobs’. Such outbursts were dismissed, their participants often not dignified by a proper mention. Despite the disapproval of the writers, such incidents made their way into the chronicles as expressions of ‘bad times’ and faulty governing.

The contextualisation of the politics of common people is connected to the didactic rationale behind medieval Arabic historiography. History was written to teach contemporary and future generations lessons about morality and justice. Historians were making political statements on their present and future by narrating their own times and the recent past. History as a didactic discourse, when applied to contemporary events, often becomes an expression of protest and hence potentially subversive. ◀

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A number of ideas in the foregoing article are discussed in greater detail in Sheldon Pollock, *The Ends of Man at the End of Premodernity* (Amsterdam: Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, 2005). The website of the international collaborative research project ‘Sanskrit Knowledge Systems on the Eve of Colonialism’ contains a great deal of information on the issues discussed in this article. See www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pollock/sks/