



36 Theme: Maritime piracy

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NEWSLETTER

A pre-colonial language in a post-colonial world

Sheldon Pollock is a man of many interests. A Sanskritist by training, he is also concerned with history, politics and social theory, while some of his work is controversial. He spoke to Gijs Kruijtzter last December about his career, research, and the politics of writing the pre-colonial.

GK: During your career you've moved from ancient Sanskrit poetry through the Medieval to the brink of the colonial period. Can you describe some of the stages along this journey?

SP: Let me try to cut into this question by describing some of my recent projects, especially my new book, which concerns the history of Sanskrit itself. I think a lot of Sanskritists are interested in this question, since Sanskrit occupies a strange social location among the classical languages of the world, and many Sanskritists ask themselves early in their careers what exactly Sanskrit was for, who used it and how it differed from other *Kultursprachen*. In the early 1990s I became interested in precisely these questions and realized - and I think a lot of people have realized this long before I came along - that understanding the history of Sanskrit requires understanding the history of non-Sanskrit. This brought me to the study of Old Kannada.

I first began to study Kannada in Chicago, with my colleague A.K. Ramanujan, trading Kannada lessons for Sanskrit lessons, and then with scholars in Mysore, above all T. V. Venkatachala Sastry. That was a very important moment in my career, for I began to see the powerful interactions between Sanskrit and a local literary language in ways you simply cannot see if you're looking at the history of Sanskrit divorced from the history of regional languages. Some years later my editor at the University of California Press encouraged me to develop all this into a larger book project that turned into *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men*.

The new book is a history of culture and power as expressed in the medium of Sanskrit, and what happened when Sanskrit was superseded in the course of the second millennium CE, a period I have called the 'vernacular millennium'. Given my earlier training as a classicist and belief in the value of serious comparativism, I also look at the role of Latin in the Roman Empire, the very different forms empire took in India and Italy, and the displacement of Latin and Sanskrit and their imperial embodiments through vernacular poetries and vernacular polities in the medieval period. There are absolutely stunning symmetries in every sense. It is remarkable to compare the court of King Alfred at the end of the ninth century and the relationship between that developing polity and its attitude towards the Carolingian Empire with their contemporaries in southern India, the Rashtrakutas and western Calukyas, and their cultivation of a Kannada cultural-political region. Sanskrit maintained only a kind of ghostly existence in the literary domain during the latter half of this vernacular millennium. I am well aware that as a language of scholarship it has continued into the present - I studied only in Sanskrit medium with my various teachers in India, including the great P. N. Pattabhirama Sastry - but my book will show that its displacement began long ago, and that by the middle of the second millennium, Sanskrit in many places was no longer relevant in the literary and political spheres. The real creative energies were from then on located in the *desha bhashas*, the languages of Place.

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GK: Was your desire to view literature historically in *Literary Cultures in History* in any way inspired by the 'literary turn' among researchers of colonial history?

SP: No, the literary cultures book didn't come out of any methodological shift in Indian historiography, let alone from a Western literary-theoretical problematic, whether derived from Bakhtin or Derrida, both of which Indianists must find inadequate for their materials. It emerged out of a set of issues that poets and novelists and anybody who writes in South Asia has confronted for a very long time, the Indian version of the Questione della Lingua. I'll give you an example. The Kannada novelist U.R. Ananthamurthy, a friend of mine since the 1970s, did his PhD in England in the early 1960s and could have stayed to become a Salman Rushdie, *avant la lettre*, of the Anglo-Indian fiction world. Instead he decided not only to go home but to write in Kannada. This was a huge choice - a choice that in the 1960s a lot of post-colonial intellectuals were making - to sort of recapture the *deshi* literary aesthetic and to refuse English. There is an old and interesting essay on this by the poet R. Parthasarathi, another old friend, called 'Whoring after Strange Gods', written when he abandoned English poetry for Tamil. There is sometimes a certain indigenism or nativism in such gestures, which is not my political cup of tea, but Ananthamurthy has no nativism about him at all - his was a cultural-political decision.

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Twenty years later I wanted to do a project about the long history of the Ananthamurthy problem, one that in Kannada began around the time of Pampa in the tenth century: poets and writers confronting the choice of how to write, of what language to write in, of which audience to address. These were always choices. In Benedict Anderson's theory of nationalism, language diversity is a fatality. It is a sort of negative, biblical vision of language diversity as a curse. As I've argued, India has no tower of Babel myth, and in any case language diversity is a product of culture, not a product of nature. Culture does not, in any meaningful sense of the term, 'evolve'. People actively develop language diversity because it serves their aesthetic, political or spiritual purposes. When and how those choices were made is an important question behind *Literary Cultures in History*. In a place like South Asia, where you have the longest continuous multi-lingual literary history in the world, you have a very big research project. How do you begin

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to explore the problem of literary language choice over a two thousand-year period with dozens of languages? It seemed sensible to develop a collaborative project. I also like collaborative projects for political reasons; if we can't have a socialist world we can have socialist research projects. So for me there is real political value in collaborative work.

And you see, the Indian material is so much richer than the European, we are able to follow the history of literary culture



Sheldon Pollock

in a way that is impossible in Europe. Just look at the depth of the archive. In German or French, for example, you have almost nothing from the ninth or tenth or even eleventh century, whereas India is awash with texts from that era. To pursue this issue one second further: there are certain kinds of history that are very difficult for us to do in South Asia, since we simply don't have the archival materials. Why not do the history that we have the materials for? And the material that we have in abundance is literature. Making literature is one of the most important things that South Asians have done with their lives and they have lovingly preserved its written forms in harsh conditions for centuries. There you can really discover something about the history of South Asian sensibilities, standards of aesthetics, about language and modes of social or political identification, about the place of culture in the world of power.

GK: This nativism and what you've called the neo-orientalist view of ideas of history, how are they problematic?

SP: There are two ways to think about that. There are definitely multiple temporalities in pre-modern India and multiple ways of encoding these temporalities, as the work of Sanjay Subrahmanyam shows. I think his project of developing more sensitivity towards South Asian visions of time, of change and transformation is very important. The belief that everybody in South Asia before the coming of some western historical model thought in terms of cyclical history strikes me as completely erroneous. But that false assumption is the least of our problems. Much more crippling is the implicit argument that we cannot know anything about a people that they themselves did not know. Even if you grant for the sake of argument that all South Asians through all of time believed in cyclical history, does this mean that scholarship cannot achieve knowledge about a text or event or tradition that the people themselves did not have?

I agree that the only way to know anything about South Asia is to start with South Asia, with the categories and presuppositions and expectations that people in South Asia have had. But there is a convergence between a sort of neo-orientalism and a nativism that wants to somehow disallow a critical historical analysis of pre-colonial South Asia, because critique and history in their view were not indigenous conceptual schemes. First of all this is not true. And secondly, even if it were true, it is irrelevant to our critical project except insofar as it presents yet another problem to theorize. It is crucial for us to know, for example, that people in the past may have held a geocentric view of the cosmos. But this does not mean that in the past the earth did not go around the sun, or that we cannot know what they did not know or actively reflect on. We should be able to develop a critical historical account of culture which first of all describes the nature of the traditional views, but also probes what they couldn't see and asks why they couldn't see it. For me historicism remains an essential dimension of scholarship, even if pre-modern South Asians themselves were not historicists (though they sometimes were). But the old historicism needs to be complimented by a spirit of political - in the largest sense of the term - criticism. These are the two core components of what I would call a critical philology. Let me explain this a little further.

A core problem for me in all this - it occupies the third part of *The Language of the Gods* - remains capitalist theory, the social theory developed to explain culture and power in the era of capitalism. How to get beyond such theory, which is entirely inappropriate for thinking through non-capitalist culture and power, and what that might mean for a radically different *prac-*

tice of culture and power, are the real prize. Why do we care about the past, especially a past that some myopic observers might say is not our own? We care about the past because we care about the future. And we want to have a more humane world, where we have better choices than we had in the past. And one question that motivates me is: are there resources in the non-capitalist, non-modern, non-western world, theoretical resources in particular, that are available to us to remake our world?

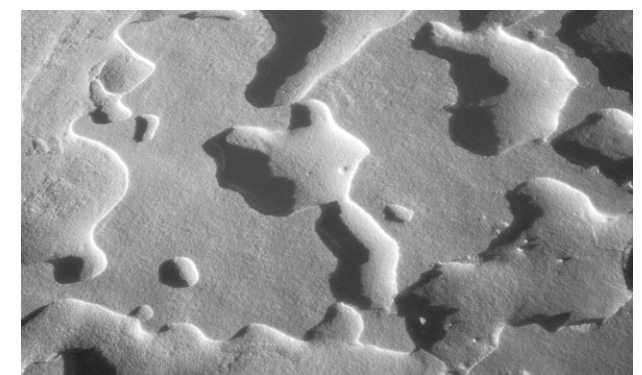
GK: There are also people who care about the past in order to stake their heritage claims, most notably Hindu nationalists, and some have associated you with them....

SP: I think you're referring to an article on the Ramayana I wrote in 1993 ('*Ramayana* and Political Imagination in India'). I feel this piece has been woefully misinterpreted by some readers. When I was traveling in India early in 1992 and arrived in Hyderabad, there were atrocities against the Muslim community and the *Ramayana* was everywhere, and I thought: I have been working on the *Ramayana* for so long, I have got to say something about the role of this text in Indian political life. And my need to understand what enabled it to function as an instrument of violence became even more desperate after the Babri Masjid was destroyed - actually twelve years ago today. So I decided to look at the long history of *Ramayana* discourse and what I saw was very upsetting. But how are you supposed to suppress that sort of information? My feeling was that it was crucial to bring that material out and to critique and defang it.

Some people were upset, especially with my criticism of a pamphlet on the uses of history brought out by Jawaharlal Nehru University scholars. When you are on the frontline of struggle I understand you have to do certain things, like denouncing the Vishwa Hindu Parishad for its 'political abuse' of his-

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tory. But my feeling was this is rather naïve, all history writing is political, there is not political history on one side and transcendently true history on the other, only better political history and worse political history. My feeling was we have to write



better political history than the bad guys, and some people didn't like that criticism. To attack me for being somehow aligned with the VHP is ridiculous. Some of the most inspiring letters I received were from Muslim colleagues, from Aligarh and as far away as Malaysia, thanking me for that article, and they didn't view it as 'oh you see Muslims have been *rakshasas* for 800 years and we should continue to kill them the way Ram-candra killed Ravana'. That is an absurd interpretation of the argument. The *Ramayana* article was meant as a contribution to the critique of *Hindutva*, to the critique of the *Ramayana* as an instrument of political manipulation and to the critique of domination. And if the historical record looks bad for some people, if the pre-British past is not entirely utopian, well, that's unfortunate. But the only way you get out of the past is by confronting it.

GK: A latent question behind your new knowledge systems project is: what if colonialism hadn't happened?

SP: The project was designed in the first instance to address the great lacuna of colonial intellectual history - our profound ignorance of late pre-colonial intellectual history. You can't know what it meant for the British to invade the epistemic space of India, as my late colleague Barney Cohn once put it,



without understanding what that space was. But one of the things the project will show, I am increasingly convinced, is that forces internal to the Sanskrit scholarly tradition and social order ensured its breakdown before colonialism in its strong form even arrived. How to show an ending (no less than how to show a beginning) is a very serious empirical and epistemological problem. There is always the possibility that there will be texts we haven't found, some brilliant treatise on aesthetic theory from 1893 turning up in some village. Also, what epistemically it means for a cultural form to end needs to be specified.

The way I look at the record now, in 2004, on the basis of materials accessible to me, is that something big in Sanskrit science and scholarship happened around the beginning of the sixteenth century and something big happened around the end of the eighteenth century. You have a 300-year period



scholarly relations with India. We were able to collect several hundred manuscripts, but at every library - Bhandarkar Institute, Adyar Library, Saraswati Mahal in Tanjavur, the Government Oriental Manuscripts Library in Madras, Ganganath Jha Research Institute, and worst of all, Saravasti Bhavan, Banaras - all kinds of obstacles were put in our way, and in some cases we were turned away altogether. (No one can even get into some really crucial collections, such as KSSU and MRI Darbhanga.) We have even been denied permission to print from microfilm duplicates held in the Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts. The reasons range from regional chauvinism to xenophobia (one librarian in Allahabad accused us of trying to steal India's cultural heritage) to what seems almost magical thinking about the loss of a manuscript's value if it is read. This project is for the greater glory of India, nobody is going to read these manuscripts if not the sort of people working on our project and the students they train. Some westerners may have been insensitive in the past, but this is 2004 and those days are gone, there has got to be some sort of open access to these materials.

GK: Why have you chosen to compare Sanskrit knowledge systems rather than say Indian Persianate knowledge systems to European systems?

SP: The project is not meant to be another exercise in Sanskrit hegemony. My longer term hope is to develop an ongoing seminar and publication series on the seventeenth century and work with scholars elsewhere, in China, for example, the Middle East, and Europe to do a kind of global intellectual history of the early modern age. But yes, it is difficult to draw in the

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Indo-Persian material because the actual number of people you can put this in the interview, I'll be delighted if I am shown to be wrong - the actual number of people working on Indo-Persian knowledge systems, such as political philosophy, historiography, or aesthetics, is almost zero. Muzaffar Alam is one of the very few, that is why he is so precious to us. You have to create a buzz, you have to show people that, while the Mughal documents are important and the Sufi and other religious texts, so are Indo-Persian moral philosophy, political thought, and literary criticism. What I hope this knowledge system project does is create a sense of possibility for work in all South Asian traditions. People will begin to see that there is a whole world of intellectual production that both Indian scholars and western scholars have simply ignored in favor of the colonial archive, and that has something crucial to tell us about the history of modernity. ◀

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forces internal to the Sanskrit scholarly tradition and social order ensured its breakdown before colonialism in its strong form even arrived

of remarkable efflorescence and then, for reasons we still have to figure out, this began to slow and then almost completely cease. It would be convenient to argue that colonialism came in and destroyed Sanskrit intellectual life but it is not clear to me that such is the case. It is demonstrably not the case in literary history. Somehow Sanskrit had become a world enclosed



on itself, which wasn't able to communicate, literarily, as effectively as the languages of Place. That may have been one of the conditions for the slow decline of Sanskrit, but I don't know how important other elements were. When Lord Minto wrote his minute on native education in 1811, he describes how 'abstract sciences' had been abandoned in India, 'political literature' neglected, and so on, and he ascribed this to the erosion of patronage systems in the recent past. It is conceivable that the breakup of certain kinds of patronage structures after the collapse of the Mughal Empire was a factor in the erosion of Sanskrit knowledge, as the coming of the Mughal peace two centuries earlier was a factor in its efflorescence. But that can't be the whole story.

GK: You said earlier that you wanted to discuss the problems the project encountered...

SP: The knowledge system project has three components. First, we want to write a book on the history of the disciplines that expressed themselves in Sanskrit in the period 1500-1800. Second, we want to make a bio-bibliographical database (I hope that we will eventually include vernacular language texts and persons and also Persian language texts and persons, to have a new and powerful research tool for the history of South Asian intellectuals). The third component was to be an online

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digital archive of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century manuscripts. For me that was a very important element because these materials are extremely difficult to get hold of, and can be very hard to read and understand. The idea was to make digital images, put them on our website and let scholars around the world have access to these materials. It would be a goldmine for future scholarship.

But we ran into problems with Indian libraries from the beginning, and this has been a source of profound disappointment to me, and also a sign of a serious problem in international

Neil Garcia was an ICOPHIL fellow and artist in residence at IIAS in 2004

When will it ever end-
the strangeness to write about?

The apartment I stay in
is next door to the Black Tulip:

an exclusive guesthouse
for clients into leather and chain.

In other words: bondage,
and all the gory theater it entails.

I've had half-a-mind to go visit
as next-door neighbors are supposed to,

but with pleasure and pain
I'm already fully acquainted,

and for the inflictions of felt language
I no longer have to pay.

At least, not in hard currency.
But I can imagine

how comparable they are-
writing and sadomasochistic sex:

they are both peak experiences
that blur body and spirit,

pushing one into the other's
transforming embrace.

This may be why desire's idiom
approaches the idiom of death:

to be breathless, to know passion,
to be utterly consumed.

Or perhaps, I'm only being analogical,
wishing to see kinship

from the sympathy of distance.
Perhaps, it's not as I think it is.

The metaphor of the suffering self
can be stretched just so far:

wheals and bruises on an exposed flank
are too literal to be abstracted

to a verbal device.
The burning of lashed leather

on a buttock or a thigh
is irreducibly what it is.

Drawn blood from a pricked nipple
isn't quite inspiration.

As I write this, into the courtyard
outside my window waft

muffled moaning and screams
counterpointed by the deliberate sound

of hard, rhythmic spanking.
I can see a fat belt slapping

against a rippled expanse of skin,
freckled and progressively shading

into deeper moods of red.
My mouth waters

at the remembered sensation
of a splintered finger, a stubbed toe,

the waves of dark heat cresting
from the body's midpoint

to the quickening head;
which reels and unhinges

and throbs into a flower-
a tulip blossoming

on the whiteness of the page.

Poems from Amsterdam: a cycle XXXIV

J. Neil C. Garcia