

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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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

*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*

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

Poems from Amsterdam: a cycle XXXIV

J. Neil C. Garcia

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:

wheels 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.