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 leverage restriction on our problematic. In striking contrast to China or the Middle East, while somewhat comparable in the early modern period, in India these two spheres of science and scholarship. But of these two, 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.

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 (mīmāṃsā) and political theory (nātik-dharma-sastra). In the former, a burst of writing begins around 1510. For example, the premier compendium on the subject, composed around 1500 (the Satra-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 reasessments between 1510 and 1685. In fact, that hundred-year period is probably the most productive era in the history of hermeneutics since the seventh century. In political theory, we have the appearance of 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 Candevara c. 1400). Beginning in 1573 or so, however, a range of often vast treatises were composed from within the heart of poli- tics 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. 1723) in astrology, too. Unprecedented contributions were made starting with Jnanesara in 1503. In these and the other cases I’ve cited, we begin to find not only the beginning 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. Can devara’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 a trend a matter of mere proliferation, for an important degree we find intellectual innovation was as well. There is, for one thing, a new multidisciplinarity on the part of scholars. Earlier hermeneutists never wrote juridical texts (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 Prakriti-kausānava (‘Moonlight of Transformations’), and its later imitation, the Siddhantha-kauśānaṃ, ‘Moonlight of Doctrine’ radically modernized the entire intellectual edifice of Sanskrit intellectual monuments, the two-millennium-old grammar of Panini. At the same time (and this is no coincidence), a new language, both the textuality of the foundational texts (in logic, for example) is manifest – though this nowhere reaches the pitch of philological inno- vation we find in later imperial China or Humanist Italy. And with it came a return to the sources; hermeneutists, for example, now explicitly depend on the vastly superior text on the nātukā of Jaimini. Most dramati- cally, we find a new historical, perhaps even historicist, conceptual framework for understanding the knowledge systems. The late-17th-century Nyaya-kāśīvāmśa (‘Divine Jewel of Logic’) organizes its exposition by referring to the ‘ancients’, the ‘fol- lowers 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, the modern claim to conceptual ne- cesity that begin to make their appearance. Raghunatha defends what he calls a ‘philosophical viewpoint that emerges precisely in opposition to the reasoning at all other viewpoints’, while Dinakara Bhatta (Varanasi, fl. 1620) announces at the beginning of his treatise on hermeneutic methodology that he intends to ‘prove some astonishing parallels with contem- poraneous Europe. Let me just examine one of these in some detail that in both its structure and its content, it is the most representative of the whole conceptual complex’.

In Sanskrit literary theory a consensus about what made it possible to create poetry had long resigned undisputed, and was given canonical authority by the 17th-century thinker Mamata: poetry can be produced only given the pres- ence of three co-operatively causing tal- ent: talent, time, and place. From an early time in a thousand years this consen- sus was challenged by a scholar named Srivatsalakhantha (Orissa, fl. 1530). He claimed that talent alone was necessary, while launching a frontal assault on the whole conceptual edifice of Mamata, whose views he dismisses, with rare contempt, as ‘completely fatuous’. In the 17th and early 18th centuries, however, the position of Srivatsalakhantha and his followers was itself the target of a withering critique by a number of scholars such as Bhimasena Diksita (Kanyakubja, c. 1729), who vigorously sought to reestablish the old consensus against the moderns. And with it came a reduction in the ‘new’ scholars – the term signified something quite different from the merely contemporary or present-day (adhyaksha, adhyatma) – and this was a subrogant that Srivatsalakhantha 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 contemporaneous European events allows us to see with special clarity. The compari- son also shows how differently India and Europe responded to similar con- texts, with Sanskrit literary theory, after centuries of homonomorphism, 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 under- stood that the rejection of learning and training and the complete reliance on inspiration was precisely the reason why that many vernacular poets had been making since at least the 12th century. And much of this vernacularity repre- sents 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.

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

The history of Sanskrit knowledge sys- tems in India is exceedingly complex, and one’s ‘own lights’ (propres lumières) will lead 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 insti- tution outside tradition’s discipline, and with it, a potentially transforma- tive idea of freedom, died on the vine. With one exception: the moderns had no defenders in the 17th century, and was virtually forgotten thereafter – indeed, along with the debate itself. This is because the moderns’ position was itself largely repudiated. An even more passionate defense of the status of Mamata, unlike anything seen in the past, was offered by Bhimasara, 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 recounting 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 elucidate our historical recon- struction, that arrested the capacity for development by confounding off the kind of critical thinking that had previously supplied that formation’s very life force.

What we may be seeing here is the intel- lectual dimension of a larger political formation. 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
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 traditionalism has a certain claim 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 civilizational 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 modernisation of intellectual life in Europe was a consequence of a widespread dissolution of the previous social, political, and spiritual orders.

A highly cultivated, and consequentially 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 modernity?’ 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.

Works Cited:


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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 Colonisation’ contains a great deal of information on the issues discussed in this article. See www.columbia.edu/itlis/ma205/pollock/knowledge systems.html.


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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.

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