

South Asian Texts in History

Critical Engagements with
Sheldon Pollock

Edited by

Yigal Bronner, Whitney Cox, and
Lawrence McCrea

ASIA PAST & PRESENT



Published by the Association for Asian Studies, Inc.

<http://www.asian-studies.org/publications>

Asia Past & Present: New Research from AAS, Number 7

Asia Past & Present: New Research from AAS

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Published by:
Association for Asian Studies, Inc.
825 Victors Way, Suite 310
Ann Arbor, MI 48108 USA
www.asian-studies.org

Printed in the United States of America on acid-free, archival quality paper.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

South Asian texts in history : critical engagements with Sheldon Pollock /
edited by Yigal Bronner, Whitney Cox, and Lawrence McCrea.

p. cm. — (Asia past & present: new research from AAS; no. 7)

Includes index.

ISBN 978-0-924304-63-7 (pbk. : alk. paper) 1. Sanskrit literature—
History and criticism. 2. Indic literature—History and criticism. 3.
Literature and society—India—History. 4. India—Civilization. 5. Pollock,
Sheldon I.—Influence. I. Bronner, Yigal. II. Cox, Whitney. III. McCrea,
Lawrence J. IV. Association for Asian Studies.

PK2903.S725 2011
891'.209—dc23

2011029412

Front cover photo: a hero stone commemorating the death of the Hoysala warrior Bereyadanāyaka (southern Karnataka, second half of the 13th century).

Back cover photo: a nāga stone (southern Karnataka, 12th–13th century).

Cover photos by John Lee. Courtesy of and copyright the National Museum of Denmark, Ethnographic Collections.

For Shelly, with gratitude.

*O de li altri poeti onore e lume
vagliami 'l lungo studio e 'l grande amore
che m' ha fatto cercar lo tuo volume.*

*Tu se' lo mio maestro e 'l mio autore
tu se' solo colui da cu' io tolsi
lo bello stilo che m' ha fatto honore.*

The glory and light are yours,
That poets follow—may the love that made me search
Your book in patient study avail me, Master!
You are my guide and author, whose verses teach
The graceful style whose model has done me honor.

— Dante speaking of Virgil, *Inferno* 1.83–88, translation by Robert Pinsky

*yaṃ vidma iti yadgranthān abhyāsyāmo 'khilān iti /
yasya śiṣyāḥ sma iti ca ślāghante svaṃ vipāścitaḥ //*

“I know him.”

“I read every letter in his books.”

“I was his student.”

See how scholars promote themselves.

— Nīlakaṇṭha Dīkṣita speaking of Appayya Dīkṣita, *Gaṅgāvataṛaṇa*, 1.45

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Acknowledgments

This book began in conversations the three of us had among ourselves and with a few other former Pollock students—Prithvidatta Chandrashobhi and Parimal Patil deserve special mention here—as early as 2006. This initial brainstorming eventually led to a two-day conference held at Columbia University in February of 2008. The papers delivered at that memorable gathering form the backbone of this book.

The New York conference was made possible thanks to the dedicated help and generous support of several individuals and institutions. First and foremost, we wish to convey our gratitude to Akeel Bilgrami, whose Heyman Center for the Humanities hosted and sponsored the gathering, Columbia's South Asia Institute (SAI), then headed by Vidya Dehejia, which generously supported the event, and, of course, Nicholas Dirks, Executive Vice President for the Arts and Sciences at Columbia University, whose support for this project was crucial from the start. We are also indebted to the JJC Foundation and the Clay Sanskrit Library for their endorsement of the conference. Many special thanks go to Jonah Cardillo, Arthur Dudley, Eileen Gillooly, Elisa Kirchheim, Isabelle Onians, Zainab Mahmood, Anna Seastrand, and Somadeva Vasudeva, all of whom worked hard to make the conference possible and successful. We are also grateful to Muzaffar Alam, Arjun Appadurai, Akeel Bilgrami, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Philip Lutgendorf, and Christopher Minkowski, who enriched the conversations as discussants and participants in the roundtable discussion that concluded the event. Many special thanks go to Allison Busch for all of her assistance in arranging the conference at Columbia.

The making of this book was made a pleasant task thanks to the contributors themselves, whose cooperation with our editorial requests and quick time line were simply extraordinary. While working on this volume, we received much advice and encouragement from colleagues in our different institutions, including Wendy Doniger and James Nye at the University of Chicago. Many thanks go to Martha Selby, Jonathan Wilson, and Gudrun Patton of the Association for Asian Studies' "Asia Past & Present" series for their help in realizing this book. Finally, we wish to convey our deep gratitude to the two anonymous reviewers of this volume for their highly useful suggestions.

Before concluding we would like to comment on our personal experience of Sheldon Pollock as a teacher, a colleague, and a friend. Shelly has always fostered an intense and rigorous intellectual climate, while at the same time

remaining open to, and, in fact, eager for, criticism. The contributions in this volume, in their willingness to question and criticize aspects of his work, clearly grow out of and reflect this climate. It takes a certain kind of generosity of spirit to foster such a discussion, in which any argument is legitimate so long as it is well argued and properly substantiated. Indeed, we have come to benefit from Shelly's immense generosity in this and in many other ways, and our debt to him—intellectually and personally—is beyond repayment. Without his wise instruction, personal care, and inspiring example, our lives and careers would not have had the shape that they have.

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Foreword

Nicholas Dirks

This volume is a fitting tribute to the scholarly breadth, erudition, originality, and commitment of Sheldon Pollock. A Sanskritist by training and disciplinary practice, Pollock has both given new meaning to this particular field of classical studies and made fundamental contributions to areas of study ranging far afield from Sanskrit proper. Extraordinary even among the already extraordinary tribe of Sanskritists, he has taken the study of Sanskrit to a new level, engaging historical, comparative, and theoretical issues with a range and sophistication that is unusual and in many respects unprecedented. It certainly was not something I would have anticipated while doing my own graduate work at the University of Chicago in the 1970s, when Sanskritists were seen as the repositories of a vast and foundational cultural lexicon that could provide the timeless meanings and key words for Indian civilization. The great Sanskritist W. Norman Brown played a critical role in founding South Asian studies in the United States, but his work, including his canonical book *The United States and India and Pakistan*,¹ betrayed an almost textbook case of orientalism.² Over the last several decades, Pollock has both delineated a new kind of historical understanding of and genealogy for Sanskrit and proposed the extent to which the history of Sanskrit provides the spine of a different kind of history of India, a history that features radical change, the rise of regional languages and literatures, the correlation between political power and cultural production, and finally, if arguably, the death of Sanskrit itself.

Pollock has been able to change the field of Sanskrit studies without abandoning deep philological interests and methods. While producing a constant stream of translations and critical editions, he has proposed for Sanskrit studies a new kind of critical philology deeply grounded in the study

of language and texts but imbricated in a larger field of cultural, historical, political, and social contexts and questions. His recent magnum opus, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*, shows what critical philology entails and covers an almost astonishing array of issues, questions, texts, periods, places, and archives. The book begins with the constitution of Sanskrit as a political language under the Śakas at roughly the beginning of the common era. This was the moment when the sacerdotal origins of Sanskrit—the language of ritual and sacrifice, the language of Brahman *purohīts* and pundits, the language of itinerant Aryan tribal groups who were slow to develop large-scale political institutions and aspirations—began to give way to new historical forces and uses.

Pollock demonstrates how Sanskrit emerged as a new kind of language, with a political will of its own, during the early centuries of the first millennium CE through two principal genres: *praśasti* and *kāvya*. *Praśastis* were the prefatory poems and proclamations recorded on stone and copperplate inscriptions that were used by kings to express and extend their sovereignty and political regimes. Ritual contexts gave way to political concerns, and new kinds of texts were composed on a scale never before witnessed in South Asia. Political inscriptions record this outpouring of rhetorical claims to sovereignty and power, signaling new transregional forms of and claims to kingship and divinity. Sanskrit was the lingua franca for claims about sovereignty across the subcontinent, even in the Tamil country, where, in inscriptions dating at least from the early Pallava period, the practical details of endowments were delineated in a pragmatic Tamil after the prefatory *praśasti*. As Pollock puts it, “This was the way power spoke at every royal court for a millennium or more all across the Sanskrit cosmopolis,” enhancing reality even as it transformed that reality in geopolitical terms.³ The second genre was *kāvya*, or poetry. Pollock’s first book had been on *kāvya*, and he shows us how the forms and embellishments of *kāvya* realize new generic conditions of possibility, most notably in that wonderful and extensive epic poem, the *Rāmāyaṇa* of Vālmīki. Both genres played important roles in the establishment of royal courts and political systems that were organized in relation to a set of cosmopolitan coordinates and spheres that were vitally caught up in the facts of language itself. For Pollock, the facts of language included the ways in which a language of poetry and ritual became the vehicle for civilizational discourse to emerge with greater power, force, and geographical range than had previously been imagined possible.

If the combination of *praśasti* and *kāvya* engaged much of the linguistic terrain in these ways, the work of Sanskrit was carried much further through

the other great epic, the *Mahābhārata*, which became not just, as Pollock tells us, a “veritable language for talking about the world,” but a “veritable library for the world.”⁴ Pollock writes, “Epic representations provided a template for structuring real political aspirations.”⁵ During the first millennium, the logic of the expansive cultural role for language was in part rooted in the way claims to universal sovereignty had to be made in a universal language. Sanskrit was not just in some way transgeographical, even transhistorical, but also the most significant and widely used vehicle to transcend local identities and affiliations. This is a breathtaking account of trends and trajectories across a large swath of history and the entire subcontinent, but then Pollock shows us the global dimensions of this history. After reconstructing through the career of Sanskrit the history of culture and power during the first millennium CE in India, he provides us with a comparative analysis of the Latinate world, showing how Latin achieved a similar kind of historical role across the Roman Empire, in what he calls the European Countercosmopolis.

If Sanskrit provided the epistemological, and for that matter technical, means to forge an enlarged idea of political sovereignty and community, linking a sense of the transcendental to the expansion of political aspirations in both genealogical and geographical respects, it began once again to undergo major structural change at the beginning of the second millennium CE. The universalism of the first millennium began increasingly to be mediated, and then challenged, as a result of the rise of what Pollock calls “vernacularization.” Some of the earliest indications of this came from southern India, first in the Tamil country under the Cholas, then with Kannada, under the Rashtrakutas and later the Chalukyas. Under a new vernacular regime, Kannada was no longer merely a secondary language of bureaucratic detail and compliance—counting, measuring, particularizing, and sanctioning—but rather a primary language of expressive political discourse. Once again, Pollock shows us this process with broad historical sweep and immense subtlety—never making direct causal or unidimensional arguments—showing instead the multiple interconnections between new aesthetic and cultural sensibilities and new social and political worlds. And also once again, Pollock shows parallels with the European world, which during the same half millennium begins to betray a similar process of vernacularization, a process that begins to provide the linguistic and cultural infrastructure for the emergence of different political structures, the building blocks for the rise of nation-states, at least as they existed in the early modern European world before the next phase of nationalist developments in the eighteenth century.

The question of the “early modern”—the period of history that has variably

been periodized as the late medieval or “middle period” in the Indian case—hovers over the second half of Pollock’s tome. For decades, historians of India used the category of medieval to represent the time of “Muslim” rule (from the so-called Sultanate period to the late Mughal), occasionally resorting to the notion of a middle period of history for, say, Bengal and the Deccan, where there was a multiplicity of political regimes. Using the term *early modern* assimilates Indian history into a larger, comparative, global history in which certain kinds of political transformations, cultural reconfigurations, social formations, and economic forces not only turn out to be more general but also more interconnected than we had previously thought.⁶ As the term also proposes that the kinds of changes associated with modernity were anticipated, or prefigured, by earlier changes, it implies that India (or China) was no more locked into a timeless relationship to a premodern traditional past than Europe was. This last insight implies that the progression into modernity was arrested by forces that had nothing to do with earlier histories but with some other kind of realignment of historical forces specifically tied to the emergence of modern regimes themselves (such as, say, capitalism or colonialism or some combination of the two). While historians have increasingly embraced the historical periodization of the early modern for the Indian past, Pollock has shown what that would mean for our understanding of language form, literary production, and cultural transformation more generally.

A historian critical of the forms of colonial rule that played a significant role both in stalling and in introducing (through the representation of modernity as a specifically European import) the modern, Pollock has also been concerned for years that far too many of the interesting questions had been vacuumed up by colonial history and the study of colonial modernity in India. The problem was embedded in regnant historiographical assumptions in at least two respects, the first that students of premodern India were all too often wedded to the peculiar philological conviction that all the big issues of Indian civilization had been either anticipated or resolved in early texts, the second that students of modern India had largely ignored earlier historical periods and accepted a fundamentally colonial view that India had no real history, permeated as it was by traditional values, practices, and understandings until the colonial era. Pollock’s signal influence on the field has been to contest both of these assumptions, and his success has been in part the result of his grounding in Sanskrit textual tradition and in part his brilliant demonstration—following the practices of critical philology—of the way in which Sanskrit itself not only has a history but allows unique insight into precisely the changes associated with early modernity by a broad group

of historians, whether they work on political economy or cultural and literary production. By taking onboard many of the questions, theoretical insights, and comparative frames of postcolonial historical thought, Pollock was further able to show how much more complicated, and complementary, the study of early modern, and modern, history should really be.

Pollock's book ends, unsurprisingly, with speculations about even bigger questions. What were the cultural, as well as political, effects of the expansion of Islam on India's western and eastern frontiers? How did the process of vernacularization connect to the history whereby Persian became the language of political will and transaction? What were the early modern forms of regional, linguistic, social, and cultural identity that might have predicated the emergence of an Indian nation, or something akin to that, had European colonialism not unfolded the way it did? What are the categories we can responsibly use, as historians and social critics, to address these questions? He asked all this with the underlying assumption that comparison is necessary, that there was no special deficiency, or excess, in South Asia that might fuel exceptionalist logics, whether driven by a condescending civilizationalism from the one side or a fundamentalist indigenism from the other. At the same time, he asked his questions with a relentless historicist insistence that neither ancient nor early modern historical anticipations or transformations did all the work of the modern, nor can they now be represented as somehow ahead of their time, markers of a timeless civilizational genius rather than particular signifiers that changed radically, first under conditions of expanding global capitalist exploration and exploitation and then under conditions of hegemonic colonial conquest, appropriation, and rule.

One of Pollock's most influential articles was mischievously entitled "The Death of Sanskrit."⁷⁷ Pollock succinctly makes his argument about the way the rise of vernacular languages and literary traditions began first to challenge and then increasingly to displace Sanskrit, even as Sanskrit began to be challenged by the spread and growing political significance of Persian. Tracing in this larger context the steady decline of literary innovation and vitality, he asks us to consider whether languages die long before they disappear and what kinds of circulatory and productive elements are necessary to sustain life, whether in speech or textual form. In this provocative essay, Pollock engages broad historical questions with his characteristic eloquence, erudition, and efficiency, and in raising a series of questions he makes one point very clearly. Whatever the life course of Sanskrit, the study of Sanskrit is hardly dead. Indeed, the work of Pollock's colleagues and students makes abundantly clear how vital and important the field is today. The present volume provides ample

evidence for this claim, but it also reveals that the work represented here is not just about Sanskrit, or for that matter language or literature in a narrow sense. The essays collected here take on Pollock's challenge to connect the study of language, culture, and power in larger historical contexts, with all the rigor, and care, of classical philology. Exemplary models of a new kind of cultural history, they provide a fitting tribute to the scholarship, teaching, and enduring intellectual influence of Sheldon Pollock.

Notes

- ¹ Brown 1963.
² See Dirks 2003.
³ Pollock 2006: 146.
⁴ *Ibid.*, 225.
⁵ *Ibid.*, 237.
⁶ See, for example, Subrahmanyam 2001.
⁷ Pollock 2001: 392–426.

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