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What We Knew: The Problem

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The problem

SOME years ago the eminent Sanskritist Sheldon Pollock began to formulate an argument about the study of India's premodern languages, texts and traditions that is best summed up in his now well known phrase 'Crisis in the Classics'.¹ Pollock, who has spent his scholarly career writing a comprehensive history of the literary cultures of Sanskrit and of a range of Indian and Asian vernaculars that have been impacted by Sanskrit over the past two and half thousand years, came to the realization that the wellsprings of creative writing, systematic thought, religious learning and political power – all of the vectors along which we could gauge the vitality and development of Sanskrit over the full span of its recorded history – had at long last, in our time, dried up.²

In the 21st century, Sanskrit, and together with it many other classical languages of India, including

Persian and Tamil, have ceased to show any signs of life. Not only is there no ongoing production of new knowledge in these languages, we are fast reaching a point where scholars who know how to read them, and who understand their textual histories, are no longer to be found in our traditional academy or our modern institutions. With the disappearance of trained readers, teachers, commentators and exegetes, Pollock has been arguing that our access to the languages, documents, artifacts and sensibilities of South Asian cultures before 1800 CE will effectively end. Long accused of lacking the capacity for historical thinking – for history as such – Indians will actually succeed in unmooring themselves from their past, launching out into an unforgivably oblivious, culturally impoverished and monochrome future.

The crisis in the classics has been a long time coming. Its roots lie in the epistemological crisis pre-

1. Sheldon Pollock, 'Crisis in the Classics', *Social Research* 78(1). Spring 2011, pp. 21-48. I wrote an earlier commentary on Pollock's investigation of the full dimensions of this crisis, here: Ananya Vajpeyi, 'Crisis in the Classics: Need for a Classics Survey', *India in Transition*, Centre for the Advanced Study of India, University of Pennsylvania, April 2010: <https://casi.sas.upenn.edu/iit/vajpeyi>

2. See Sheldon Pollock, *The Language of the Gods in the World of Men: Sanskrit, Culture, and Power in Premodern India*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2006. See Sheldon Pollock (ed.), *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2003.

capitulated in India's knowledge traditions as well its political traditions by the advent of colonialism in the mid-19th century. After 1947 the postcolonial Indian nation state, ironically, drove the last nails into the coffin of classical learning. After 1991 the neoliberal state, especially in those phases marked by the political ascendance of the Hindu Right (1998-2004; and 2014 onwards), seems to be in the process of finally burying the corpse of our collective history, and of all that we knew about the way we used to be – or rather, the myriad ways, the vast array of forms of life, types of belief, kinds of practice, and the innumerable expressions of human consciousness that characterized and constituted our part of the world for about three millennia before colonialism. The door is being shut on the past.

What is astonishing is that this is happening not in some country ruled by the purveyors of authoritarian, nihilistic, fundamentalist, ethno-nationalist and totalitarian ideologies, but right here in democratic India, which prides itself as much on its ancient civilization as its liberal constitution, and which wagered, at independence, that uniquely in the post-war world it

had the capacity to carry all of its diverse, incommensurable histories into a common future of enlightened pluralism. The crisis in the classics, which might appear at first to be the idiosyncratic and basically irrelevant obsession of a handful of philologists at Indian and foreign universities, turns out to be the worrying symptom of a much more profound failure in the political promise and historical imagination of modern India.

Pollock has asked whether India's crisis in the classics is actually upon us; if it is, then what factors can explain it; is it even worth caring about it, given that the past is by definition what has passed; and finally, what can be done to avert the complete and utter breakdown in India's relationship with its own classical, precolonial history, replete with texts, perhaps the largest number of texts ever produced anywhere, in any civilizational matrix, throughout the anthropocene era? What is going to be the future, if any, of philology? What is to be, Pollock demands to know, 'the fate of a soft science in a hard world?'³

Over the years, Pollock has made a thorough compilation and analysis of all the data to do with languages, texts, experts, departments, programmes, publishers,

manuscripts – the entire paraphernalia that goes with philological study – and shown that India has indeed, within the past 20-30 years, lost the intellectual resources and institutional infrastructure necessary for the preservation and continuance of Sanskrit, classical Tamil, Hale Kannada, Maithili, Braj, Farsi, to say nothing of medieval Bengali, Marathi, Punjabi, Kashmiri, etc.

He has also made extensive arguments about a range of factors that have hurt classical scholarship, including: anti-Brahmin and non-Brahmin social movements in southern India (which throw the baby of Sanskrit out with the bathwater of caste ideologies associated with Brahminical learning); Islamophobia that mischaracterizes and then stigmatizes Urdu, Persian and Arabic languages and literatures as being of ‘Muslim’ provenance and hence not welcome in ‘Hindu’ India; vernacular identity movements like Dravidianism which are often if not always based on linguistic chauvinism; regional identity conflicts like say in linguistically overlapping, i.e. bilingual and bicultural parts of Maharashtra and Karnataka, leading to phenomena like ‘language riots’; imperialist Orientalism (in the colonial period), followed by anti-Orientalist nativism (in the postcolonial period); and finally, counter-intuitively, an overall decline in the standard of English-language proficiency across the board in the Indian education system, combined with the failure of educational policy to install Hindi or any other modern Indian language in place of English as a genuine pan-Indian link language.

At this juncture, one year into the BJP-led regime with Narendra Modi as prime minister, what is most worrying is the politicization of all things classical. Cabinet ministers, elected politicians, as well as leaders belonging to various outfits of the Sangh Parivar continually make bellicose and unconstitutional assertions about the essentially Hindu character of the Indian nation.

The compulsory teaching of Sanskrit in schools; the declaration of the *Bhagavad Gita* as a ‘national book’; statements about the equivalence of ‘Indian’ and ‘Hindu’ identities, completely confusing and collapsing nation and community, politics and religion; attempts to question, undermine and scuttle public holidays that mark the festivals, rituals and other significant occasions connected with non-Hindu faiths; the struggle over the consumption of beef; the forced conversion

of Muslims and Christians to Hinduism using the specious procedure of *ghar wapsi* (‘homecoming’, the notion that converts are merely ‘returning’ to their original faith); outlandish and patently false claims about the advanced nature of science and technology in ancient India; the aggressive promotion and marketing of yoga as an indigenous brand or product that exemplifies the government policy of ‘Make in India’ – these are only some of the developments in the Modi administration since May 2014 that have taken place under the sign of the ‘Classical’.

The virulent discourse around classical languages, classical civilization, classical India, classical culture and even classical science is fast becoming the new euphemism to signal the construction of a *Hindu Rashtra*. Somehow classicism has been turned into the enemy of secularism. Pollock writes: ‘Of all the historical literary cultures of India, it is Sanskrit that has most fatefully been caught between two benighted armies, the lumpen saffron right and the anti-Brahman infantile left. It is shocking and painful to recognize how debased is the level of discourse on Sanskrit these days, politicized in the most ignorant fashion.’ (This quote is from an article published in 2011 – today, in 2015, matters have gone from bad to worse, with the saffron right leading a majority government).⁴

Most of the outcry over the official sponsorship of a *Hindutva* agenda via the *Sangh*’s takeover of national institutions concerned with the arts, humanities and social sciences, like research councils, academies, archives, universities, libraries, museums and committees appointed to set syllabi, write textbooks and formulate educational policy – most of the protest feels stale. India’s traditionally left wing and liberal intellectual establishment and academic class had put up a spirited fight throughout the 1990s, during the Ram Janambhoomi movement and the NDA’S first administration under Atal Bihari Vajpayee and L.K. Advani, unfortunately, or may be expectedly, without much success.

Veterans of the culture wars over the past 25 years are now in their seventies and eighties; a younger generation of scholars, artists and activists balks at repeating the same struggle when the electoral mandate in favour of the BJP and its allies has gone up so significantly under Modi’s leadership. Any trace of radicalism appears missing from student politics and the campuses of public universities. Citizens and voters born and raised in the era after the demolition of the

3. Sheldon Pollock, ‘Future Philology? The Fate of a Soft Science in a Hard World’, in James Chandler and Arnold Davidson (eds.) *The Fate of the Disciplines, Critical Inquiry* 35(4), 2009, pp. 931-61.

4. S. Pollock, ‘Crisis in the Classics’, op. cit., p. 40.

Babri Masjid in 1992 and the Gujarat pogrom of 2002 seem to have little conception of India's complex past, its inherent cultural diversity, and its charter commitment to a hard-fought egalitarian, plural, secular and progressive polity arrived at through the labours of the founding generations throughout the anti-colonial period between the 1880s and the 1950s. The conflicted, critical and circumspect nationalisms of Gandhi, Nehru, Tagore and Ambedkar have arguably been replaced by aggressive Hindu nationalism that combines the worst tendencies of early 20th century fascism with early 21st century populism that we see ascendant in illiberal democracies and so-called 'soft' dictatorships around the world.

What began as a crisis in the classics has become a full-blown war for the very idea of India. Non-Resident Hindus in the Indian diaspora, especially in the United States, are at the front lines in disrupting, debasing and bankrupting the disciplines concerned with the study of South Asian languages, literatures, history and culture, whether on American campuses, in Indian institutions or in the popular press, electronic media and social media. Non-academics, paid ideologues and hired help from among the NRI warriors of Hindutva continually strive to ensure that evidentiary standards, reasoned argumentation, rigorous research, genuine dialogue, principled dissent and civilized disagreement are no longer possible in any discussion of India's past. We thank our stars that unlike our counterparts in Pakistan and Bangladesh, Indian scholars, writers and intellectuals are not being shot at point-blank range or hacked to death on the streets, and can retreat to our books and ideas in the privacy of our homes and minds.

Glorified trolls, who have political patronage but no scholarly qualifications whatsoever (and no cultural commonsense either, no contact with the unmarked but highly sophisticated strategies of living with difference that are a part of everyday life in India), have brought the conversation around Indian history to a grinding halt. Since the Hindu Right has no public intellectuals to speak of among its sympathizers, it conducts its cultural warfare through poorly-written blogposts (in English, of sorts), illiterate tweets, and cringe-worthy misspelled abusive 'comments' that appear after articles on the websites of newspapers and magazines.⁵ Bigotry, propaganda and lies are rampant, and no one bothers

5. See for example some of the commentary on my op-ed, 'The Story of my Sanskrit', *The Hindu*, 14 August 2014: <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/the-story-of-my-sanskrit/article6321759.ece>

6. S. Pollock, 'Crisis in the Classics', op. cit., p. 43.

to respond to the patently senseless diatribes against Muslims, minorities or the West constantly emanating from the Sangh. Instead of an honest and difficult debate between liberals and conservatives, left and right, religious nationalists and progressive secularists, intellectual life in India these days has become a choice between noise, nonsense and silence.

In such thoroughly adverse circumstances, should we bother about the classics? Why not abandon them altogether, since no one in Modi's India seems to care for such things as facts, truth, beauty, difference or coexistence? Pollock recalls from the Bhagavad Gita, a verse that leaps to mind in the context of the Hindu Right's destructive attitude to our knowledge of the past (BG: 2: 63). The preservation, clarification and respect of memory are all necessary for preserving the integrity and sharpness, not just of the individual mind but also of the collective consciousness of an entire culture:
Krodhaat bhavati sanmohah
Sanmohaata smriti-vibhramah
Smriti-bhramshaad buddhi-naasho
Buddhi-naashaata pranashyati

From anger comes delusion
 From delusion, the confusion of memory
 From the bewilderment of memory,
 Comes the destruction of intelligence
 And thence follows
 The ruin of man.

Pollock writes: 'Let me end by stating things as plainly as I can. India is confronting a calamitous endangerment of its classic knowledge, and India today may have reached the point the rest of the world will reach tomorrow. This form of knowledge, under the sign of a critical classicism, must be recovered and strengthened not for the mere satisfaction of those outside of India who cultivate the study of its past but for the good of the people of India themselves. I may not have ready to hand an institutional solution to the crisis in the classics, but I remain hopeful that one can be found. Achieving this solution will require a collective public conversation on the problem – and the conversation must be insistent and loud.'⁶

This public conversation has yet to occur. The space for it is daily being squeezed, with the control of institutional spaces going over into the hands of officials, administrators and academics who are amenable to toeing the government's agenda on questions of Indian history. In Pakistan, students are taught a special subject called 'Pakistan Studies', which is a narrative about the historical life of Pakistan with the pre-1947 history

of undivided India written out of it, or taken apart and reconstructed in such a manner as to exclude all non-Islamic elements from a complex South Asian past. It is the triumph of ideology over history to the point of rendering Pakistan's past unrecognizable from an Indian perspective. The Indian state under a Hindutva-driven regime seems headed in the same direction – imminently wanting to construct a history of India that is a Hindu history, with Muslim, Buddhist, Jain, Sikh, Dalit, tribal, and all other sorts of heterogeneous cultural-religious-social identities marginalized, undervalued or excluded altogether. Perhaps such a history would come to be called 'Indian Studies' in the Hindu Rashtra that we can only hope never comes to pass.

Philologists are not the only community of scholars to deal with classical texts. Historians, literary theorists, philosophers, practitioners of the classical performing arts, historians of science, art historians, archeologists, curators, artists, scholars of religion, philanthropists and indeed even ordinary people who encounter the faiths and the arts in their everyday life, all come face-to-face with classical texts in some form or other, to different extents and with different degrees of interest and engagement. At a Dhrupad concert I attended recently, I knew myself to be having an aesthetic experience that can only be described as deeply philological. This style of beautiful and extremely difficult classical music blends elements of Vedic mnemonics with Saivite worship, the pursuit of pure, pre-linguistic sound with the play of language, percussion with voice, paeans to Hindu deities rendered by Muslim maestros of the form. There is no simple way to enjoy this music – the entire auditory, emotional and cognitive experience is classical in the true sense of the term.

During a trip to Hampi, the abandoned capital of the medieval Vijayanagara kingdom in southern India some months ago, I could see with my own eyes the strangeness, the unfamiliarity, the radical mystery of the past, which can be visible to us in its fragmented remains and ruins and yet eludes us in some very important dimension as a sensorium, an entire world and a way of life which is lost to us forever and cannot be recovered. During another trip to Ladakh, I visited Buddhist monasteries, some of them more than a thousand years old, where monks read, recite and debate classical Tibetan and Sanskrit texts that for them constitute their *Dharma*, the core of their practice and their belief, and for scholars like myself or my colleagues at American departments of the history and philosophy of religion

could only ever be objects of philological engagement. My past could be someone else's present: such is the very nature of life in India. But because of the crisis in the classics, we are looking at a future in which we will not know how to read texts, look at artifacts, or imaginatively enter the life-worlds of our countless ancestors.

Or take that I lost my father a few weeks ago. As his only child, even as a female, I had to perform all of the rites and rituals associated with his passing. While lighting his funeral pyre, while praying for his soul to find peace and transcendence, while propitiating his ancestors, while immersing his ashes in the holy rivers, while comforting my mother and other relatives and kinsfolk, I found myself, under the guidance of priests and pandits, reciting *mantras* and verses from the Vedas, from the Bhagavad Gita, from a variety of Vaisnava texts, some of which I knew already because my father had taught or sung them to me all my life, others because I had received a philological training as a scholar of South Asian premodernity.

My encounter with the classics in these moments of profoundest grief was nonetheless at once completely organic (in the sense of following from my upbringing as a Hindu), and highly mediated (by my education as a philologist). I could understand and take comfort from the rituals I had to perform thanks to both types of access that I had to these archaic texts – texts which are routinely brought to bear during rites of passage in the Hindu life cycle, and hence texts that are always contemporary despite their immense age. There was no way to predict this beforehand, as a scholar of Sanskrit rather than as a daughter who had lost her father, but when time came I did take comfort from the ancient wisdom that was invoked precisely to enable me to deal with great sorrow. My mourning is my own, particular to me, but I also belong to a culture which has evolved sophisticated strategies of coping with loss of a kind that is universal, human, and inevitable. In such circumstances, philology provides me with what could be called 'tools for living'.

To give the final word, then, to Sheldon Pollock – 'Studying the assembled record of 3,000 years of Indian thinking, thinking of the very highest order, is not merely a pleasure or a duty we owe the dead – though it is both those things, too – but a unique, and uniquely fulfilling, way of tracing the genealogy of our contemporary selves, whether you are Indian or not. If we lose the ability to read these texts of the past we lose something essential to us that we can find nowhere else.'⁷