

Is There an Indian Intellectual History? Introduction to “Theory and Method in Indian Intellectual History”

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Twenty years ago the late A. K. Ramanujan wrote a remarkable essay, at once playful and profound in a way unique to him, entitled “Is There an Indian Way of Thinking?”¹ According to the possible emphases, this sentence could express at least four different questions (“*Is*,” present/past; “*an*,” singular/plural; “*Indian*,” local/general; “*thinking*,” familiar/alien), to which Ramanujan supplies at least eight equally reasonable answers. In the end, he seems to have come down on the side that there is and indeed had long been a particular and in many ways specifically though not exclusively Indian way of doing what most rational beings would recognize as thinking (something he sought to characterize as context-sensitive rule-making). In the same spirit of openness toward the multiplicity of possible answers to a complex question, the contributors to this special number of the *Journal of Indian Philosophy* hope to inaugurate a discussion about Indian intellectual history as a challenge in respect to problems both of method and of theory. *Is* there now, or has there ever been, an intellectual history of India? If yes, is it *Indian* in any particular way, shaped by and specific to the realities of India? What does *intellectual* here mean and how is intellectual history to be differentiated from other kinds of history—of philosophy, ideas, science, literature, culture, or whatever those forms of knowledge might be named in India? And what in fact is *history*, or better put, what is the pertinence of that category to a world that Europe, self-proclaimed homeland of history, constructed as its conceptual counterpositive in order to define itself?

The very idea of intellectual history, as the contributors to this collection generally conceive of the practice, seems to be new to Indology (to be sure, one

¹ Ramanujan (1989).

could argue that it is relatively new to European studies itself, and it has been contested ever since its birth). The field of Indology has long been dominated by the old philology, which one could characterize *grosso modo* and not necessarily pejoratively as history without ideas (the history of language or textual change, for example), and the old Orientalism, which can be viewed as ideas without history (for India had no history since, as one Orientalist put it, nothing ever happened).² Understanding change in the Indian thought world, indeed, the very openness to finding change not just in doctrine but in relation to broader processes of disciplinary formations (comprised of language communities, forms of knowledge, text genres, and the like), society, polity, institutions, even media (the nature of manuscript culture, for example), represents a form of scholarship that is perhaps as yet too uncommon to have received adequate discussion. This is certainly true with respect to the methodological and theoretical challenges intellectual history presents when extended beyond the modern West, which has been its almost exclusive field of operation. Even there, however, and despite a recent resurgence of confidence after decades of conceptual self-doubt and despair in the face of defections to the new social history, the practitioners of intellectual history offer few compelling discussions of its disciplinary boundaries, theoretical aspirations, and methodological protocols.³

The international collaborative project on “Sanskrit Knowledge Systems on the Eve of Colonialism,” in connection with which the papers in this collection have been prepared,⁴ is confronted with the question of Indian intellectual history, and the theories and methods that may be specific to it, in an unavoidable, even dramatic, manner. Britain’s consolidation of political power in much of the subcontinent at the end of the eighteenth century is a historical fact, and it is also a historical fact that Britain thereupon set out to colonize Indian minds no less than Indian space, thereby producing what Sudipta Kaviraj has characterized, without much exaggeration, as “an epistemic rupture on the vastest possible scale—one of the

² To the various excesses and grotesqueries that arise from defects of the Indian mind, according to A. A. Macdonell, is to be added the non-existence of history. “The total lack of the historical sense is so characteristic, that the whole course of Sanskrit literature is darkened by the shadow of this defect ... Early India wrote no history because it never made any” (Macdonell 1900, p. 11).

³ The inaugural number of *Intellectual News* (1996) offers a set of brief, unsatisfying position papers; Whatmore and Young (2006) provides an introduction, of mixed quality; for a history of the practice see Kelley (2002). By contrast, the theoretical program of the history of concepts, which reaches far beyond the interdisciplinary tendency of intellectual history that it represents, is enunciated in very sophisticated terms, as Koselleck (2006, pp. 9–102) demonstrates. Non-Western intellectual history and its potential disruptions to the emerging disciplinary paradigm are invisible to contemporary Western reflection. A *History of Ideas* theme volume on “Intellectual History in a Global Age,” where the globe is notable for its absence, demonstrates how impenetrable is the bubble in which Europeanists live; even the new journal *Modern Intellectual History* is prepared to address only “exchanges” with the non-West, not the non-West per se. A (very brief) counterexample is Stuurman 2007.

⁴ And for which *JIP* has graciously offered itself as a venue in the past: see *Working Papers on Sanskrit Knowledge-Systems on the Eve of Colonialism I*, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 30(5), (2002); *Working Papers on Sanskrit Knowledge-Systems on the Eve of Colonialism II*, *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 33(1), (2005).

greatest known in history,” whereby Indian forms of thought of great antiquity and complexity were summarily disqualified.⁵ How we calibrate this mental colonization—one of the central objects of study on the part of historians of India for the past three decades—is largely contingent on how we calibrate Indian thinking before colonialism. If we are to gain any adequate understanding of the character of colonial-era Indian science, if we are to understand what made it colonial and therefore different from what preceded, we must try to understand the character of seventeenth-century Indian science, or, if such epochal precision proves to be unattainable, at least Indian science in the seventeenth century. And the same holds for political thought, aesthetics, cosmology, life science, and other forms of systematic knowledge. Whatever we may judge to be the status of historicity in the Indian thought world itself, history, *pace* the Orientalist, happened in India, British colonialism being only one of the more dramatic instances, and it therefore must be factored into any attempt to make sense of Indian thought. To ask whether there is an Indian intellectual *history*—that is, whether change has occurred in intellectual traditions, whether *historical forms of consciousness* have existed—is, from this externalist perspective, to raise an almost nonsensical question.

It is almost nonsensical from an internalist perspective as well. Western ideas of history are themselves too muddled, and the historicity of human existence too self-evident, to deny the plurality and the omnipresence of *forms of historical consciousness* in India. At any rate, in the past two decades scholarship has revealed styles of Indian thought that even the gatekeepers of the Western epistemic kingdom should be perfectly willing, if they ever bothered, to admit into the coveted sanctum of “history” however narrowly built—even if the prerequisite were a Hegelian “state,” which alone is “adapted to the prose of history” and indeed “involves the production of such history in the very progress of its own being.”⁶ Any more babble about “the traditional Indian mind” and its “unchanging belief in the cyclic renewal of cultural phenomena” should be punishable by a fine.

Is there, however, an Indian intellectual history that Indian intellectuals themselves constructed in the past? Yes, unquestionably. In a work such as the late-seventeenth-century *Nyāyakaustubha* of Mahādeva of Puṇyastambha (Puntambem, near Ahmadnagar, Maharashtra), an explicitly historical, though perhaps not historicist, sensibility provides the analytical framework, while a less formal organizing logic of “ancients” and “moderns” is ubiquitous in texts of the era;⁷ Jagannātha Paṇḍitarāja in *alāṅkārasāstra* is a perfect example, as the essay of Yigal Bronner and Gary Tubb shows. But even the absence of locally generated historical metrics of intellectual change makes no difference to the applicability of historical analysis to the material. We are as justifiably interested in the history of the denial of history—how for some thinkers in precolonial India “all generations” (as Tocqueville put it for the *ancien régime* generally) “become, as it were, contemporaneous”—as we are in the history of its affirmation.

⁵ Kaviraj (2005, p. 132).

⁶ On historiography see Rao et al. (2000) and Pollock (2007a). The Hegel passage is cited and discussed in White (1987, p. 12).

⁷ See Pollock (2001, 2005).

Johannes Bronkhorst's essay in this collection, on the reinterpretation of *sphoṭa* by the early seventeenth-century grammarian and philosopher of language Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita, grapples with the very subtle problems this sort of historicity can present to our interpretation of tradition and Indian intellectuals' attempts to advance or renew it, both what they actually did and what they might have thought they were doing. The anxiety of innovation⁸ Bhaṭṭoji felt in the face of a knowledge system that claimed a disciplinary omniscience and invalidated all further conceptual invention, was not, however, shared by the literary theorists. As Bronner and Tubb argue, the absence of a foundational text for *sāhityaśāstra* and the constantly changing, indeed innovating, character of its object of study, literature, meant that self-conscious innovation and individual creativity were built into the science. The problem for the contemporary scholar is to decide how to gauge what is importantly new in an always innovating discourse, and to understand what Indian thinkers, such as the historically astute Jagannātha, intended when employing the labels *navya* and *prāñc/prācīna*. That said, the reassertion or renovation of tradition, however unsettled its foundations, is a matter of no small importance for Jagannātha, too.

A more complicated adjacent claim in some of the recent scholarship on Indian historiography is that, not only is there such a thing as history in India, but it is a sign of the onset of an Indian modernity. In "modernity" we encounter a concept that has generated a vast amount of discussion in the past decade (its uncertainty marked by ever finer qualifications, such as early, multiple, colonial or contested), but that in the end has generally proved more useful in making claims than in promoting independent analysis.⁹ In fact, the concept militates precisely against such independence since it prompts us to find elsewhere what has already been consecrated as consequential in the creation or identification of Western modernity (skepticism, individuality, historicity, or whatever). There is no question the material world changed radically and globally in the period we now are inclined, by the just-named promptings, to call early modern. And one of the things an intellectual history of India should be interested in understanding is how those whose business it was to make systematic sense of the world might have made a different sense as a result of these changes—or not, and why not. But when contributors to this collection periodize an era of Indian intellectual history from c. 1500 to 1800 and call it early modern, it is not necessarily in order to make a claim about the intellectual character of that era; our interest is in articulating India into a world historical synchrony, not into a world conceptual symmetry.

Two further points of emphasis, *Indian* and *intellectual*, invite us to frame more explicitly some of the questions already implied. Is there something about the precolonial Indian world, or about its practices of systematic thought, that are, comparatively speaking, so different from others worlds and practices as to require different methods for their historical analysis and different theories to explain them? This is a large, multidimensional question that may be more appropriately addressed pragmatically than programmatically, and that in any event should be answered at

⁸ The phrase is used by Allison Busch in her account of the seventeenth-century Hindi poet Keśāvdās (Busch 2004).

⁹ Cooper (2005, pp. 113–149).

the end of the study rather than constitute its preconditions. And, self-evidently, the answer depends to a large degree on a comparative intellectual history—of the sort where all three terms, especially the last (history), are taken seriously—that can scarcely be said to exist.¹⁰ Yet several general considerations can and should be stated.

One of the most dramatic of the particularities that mark off Indian intellectual history, or rather Sanskrit intellectual history, of the early modern period from all of its contemporaries is the pitiable impoverishment of its contextual data. What has characterized, indeed virtually defined, Euro-American intellectual history over the past five decades, certainly from the rise of the Cambridge School in the 1960s,¹¹ and which the New Historicism of the 1980s and 1990s served to reinforce,¹² is the commitment to deep contextualism: for many of its practitioners in the European tradition, intellectual history is entirely a question of charting the production of and intention behind ideas in specific times and places. In India, however, a mix of peculiar cultural-political and environmental factors make this dimension of historical practice very difficult. The non-textualization of life-events (birth, marriage, death); the absence of a political absolutism whose cruel documentary invigilation over its own subjects was, in some small measure, compensated for by the archival richness left to posterity; a climate that destroyed whatever was not recopied every few generations; and, for the Sanskrit intellectual milieu, a constitutional disinclination to time-space localization and a cultural proscription of self-advertisement—these factors and others have conspired to leave the social record of Sanskrit intellectuals a virtual blank. Admittedly, we know far more about intellectuals of the seventeenth century than those of the seventh,¹³ but this knowledge emerges from their texts and has almost no independent documentary foundation. If we consider the fact that from among the thousands, perhaps tens of thousands, of scholars living in seventeenth-century Varanasi we have preserved for us today not one single personal record, we begin to get a sense of the obstacles that impede a fully realized historical contextualism. For all intents and purposes, it would seem, the intellectual history of the early modern Sanskrit knowledge systems has to be based squarely, almost exclusively, on what we have in luxurious abundance: the intellectual products themselves.¹⁴

For Jan Houben, a certain contextualism, inspired by Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of “fields” of cultural production, remains possible, and enables us to overcome the

¹⁰ For a report on a modest experiment see Pollock (2007b). Intellectual comparison entirely innocent of history, of the sort that brings Śaṅkara and Bradley, Bhartṛhari and Derrida, etc., into a single analytical framework, are not counted in this estimate.

¹¹ The leading thinkers here are John Dunn and Quentin Skinner. Dunn’s major papers on theory and method remain dispersed; Skinner’s are now available in Skinner (2002).

¹² See for example Gallagher and Greenblatt (2001).

¹³ For example, Bhaṭṭoji himself. See Bronkhorst (2005).

¹⁴ The lack of personal data is to some extent compensated for by our knowledge of the ritual routine followed by many authors—often extraordinary detailed knowledge unparalleled in European intellectual history. See Houben (2002).

shortcomings of an account of the success of Bhaṭṭoji Dīkṣita's grammar that would remain exclusively internal to the tradition and abstracted from its social and economic context. Part of what constituted this field may have been a newly expanded public for Sanskrit with a demand for pedagogically more useable works with a simplified "authority structure" of the sort that Bhaṭṭoji's remarkably successful *Siddhāntakaumudī* offered. Additional evidence for the existence of such a market is provided by the profusion of new genres of introductory texts in the period, evident in works like the *Arthasaṃgraha*, *Mīmāṃsānyāyaparakāśa*, *Siddhāntamuktāvalī*, and *Vedāntasāra* (along, of course, with the *Laghusiddhāntakaumudī*). Finding ways to reconnoiter the terrain in which this field was located—the larger world of early modern society and polity, and in general the history of intellectual cultures—remains very much a challenge, to be sure. But much can be done that has yet to be attempted. The data of script mercantism, for example, sedimented in manuscripts have something to tell us about the economy and sociology of this intellectual order; the study of manuscript dissemination something about the circuits of local and translocal intellectual conversations; historical bibliometrics something about the idea of a work's popularity.¹⁵

Jonardon Ganeri, by contrast, is concerned with precisely the misfit between a dominant Western methodology and resistant—or perhaps better, simply different—non-Western materials, and he addresses the absence of a documentary context by rethinking what "context" itself can mean. In what Ganeri calls the "intertextual" context of Indian intellectual history, the illocutionary force of a text, the things its author intended to do with his words, can often be seen to lie in the transformation of a textual state of affairs, repositioning other texts through commenting on them, recasting definitions of contested concepts, and so on. Just this rich intertextual context is the subject of Karin Preisendanz's contribution, in which she offers a carefully constructed typology of commentarial genres and objectives (including the kind of implicit "prolepsis" to which Ganeri refers), and the scholarly methods appropriate to them. This is not, of course, too distant from the "textual contexts" of the Cambridge School.¹⁶ But Ganeri goes on to argue subtly for attention to a newly emergent context required by "cultural indexicals." In this effort to use Western theory to move beyond, or at least test the limits of, Western theory under pressure from another philosophical tradition, we recognize a core objective of the study of such a tradition.

The textual products that must remain the focus of Indian intellectual history, present problems both practical and methodological. The practical problems concern Indian manuscript culture, both our knowledge of its past character and our present access to it. As for our knowledge, virtually no serious text-critical study has

¹⁵ The Sanskrit Knowledge Systems prosopographical database, in the last stages of development at King's College, London, and scheduled for general release later this year, aims to collect whatever contextual data can be extracted from colophons and other sources. Starkly different, certainly in prosopographical terms, are Indo-Persianate traditions of scholarship.

¹⁶ Brian Cowan discusses the multiple forms of context, including textual context, in Whatmore and Young (2006, pp. 171–188).

been devoted to any Sanskrit works from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, and we know from one of the few such studies how mutable these texts could be.¹⁷ As for access, it is highly constrained or even absent. Scholars everywhere confront such restrictions, of course, but for students of early modern Sanskrit—where, by a conservative estimate, more than three-quarters of the manuscripts remain unpublished—lack of access is crippling.

Consider the case of the Anup Sanskrit Library in Bikaner. The founder of the library, King Anūpa Siṃha (d. 1697) was one of the great bibliophiles of premodern India,¹⁸ but a largely untold story relates to his connections with the intellectuals of seventeenth-century Varanasi. Anūpa acquired parts of a large collection of manuscripts that once belonged to Kavīndrācārya Sarasvati, the well-known Vedic scholar and vernacular poet, client of Danishmand Khan and (probable) intimate of François Bernier; included are texts of Kavīndrācārya’s own compositions. The holdings include several significant gifts from Vaidyanātha, son of Anantadeva, an important late-seventeenth-century *dharmasāstri*. Many works of the celebrated Bhaṭṭa family were acquired, including a unique complete manuscript of what appears to be the most important treatise on mīmāṃsā of the remarkable Kamalākara Bhaṭṭa, the *Śāstratattvakamalākara* (a beautifully prepared copy of 263 folios offering a full analysis of the mīmāṃsā system in twelve chapters), as well as text editions from the hand of Dinakara, Kamalākara’s elder brother, and Dinakara’s son, Gāgā Bhaṭṭa. The library possesses, in addition, what are almost certainly autograph manuscripts of parts of the *Ṭoḍarānanda*, the *dharmā* encyclopedia produced by Nārāyaṇa Bhaṭṭa (Kamalākara’s grandfather) at the direction of Ṭoḍar Mal, Akbar’s *vakil*.¹⁹ And it contains a rare manuscript of the *Siddhāntasamhitāsārasamuccaya* of Sūryadāsa, one of the greatest of the sixteenth-century astronomers, whose *Mlecchamatānirūpaṇa* appears to be the earliest attempt in an astronomical text to write a doxography of Arabic-Persian astronomy and astrology.²⁰ Without access to these materials nothing remotely approaching an adequate account of seventeenth-century Varanasi intellectual life can be written. But both western and Indian scholars have been denied permission to reproduce the manuscripts in any way, and have thus been effectively barred from using them unless they are prepared to read them in situ—and grow old in the desert of Rajasthan.²¹

Methodological and theoretical problems raised by the specific character of systematic knowledge production in India also serve to mark it off as highly distinctive if not unique in world history. One concerns language. Radically unlike medieval or early-modern Europe, China, or the Arab world, India in the sixteenth through the eighteenth century was home to three transregional languages, Arabic,

¹⁷ See Gerschheimer’s study of Gadādhara’s *Śaktivāda* (1996, pp. 103–172), especially 158–166. There are, by contrast, instances of very stable textual transmission during this period that belie the idea that “textual drift” is an omnipresent risk in manuscript culture, see Pollock (2006a).

¹⁸ Pingree (1997) and Minkowski (2008, Forthcoming).

¹⁹ Wujastyk (2005, pp. 107–111).

²⁰ Minkowski (2002, p. 508).

²¹ Not long before his death David Pingree wrote to me with a list of desiderata, adding “I have tried for decades, without luck, to gain access to the incredible treasures of the Anup Library.”

Persian, and Sanskrit (four, if we extend our geographical reach to southern Asia and include Pali), and of a large group of ever more assertive vernaculars, all of them marking distinct traditions and communities of scholarship.²² How these interacted and if not, why they did not interact, what constituted their realms of employment and their division of labor, and what this signifies for matters of knowledge and power, are questions that Indian intellectual history cannot easily avoid.

A far greater and more direct problem is presented by the breath-taking degree of continuity in the Sanskrit knowledge systems. If early modern scholars saw themselves as temporally distanced from the ancients, as sometimes they most assuredly did, this does not mean they saw themselves as conceptually discontinuous with them; on the contrary, their conversation with the past was an unbroken one. And this circumstance places very serious demands upon the contemporary scholar. Identifying any of Dinakara's innovations in *mīmāṃsā*, for example, let alone understanding the motivation behind them, is impossible without having a grasp of a millennium and a half of writing on the subject, much of which—here note the stunning contrast with the documentary penury—is extant. Imagine the task for a student of the character and genealogy of early-modern European skepticism if the tradition from Pyrrho (third century BCE) and Sextus Empiricus (second century CE) to Descartes in 1650 and Bayle in 1700 were an uninterrupted one constituted by a continuous succession of scores of available texts.

The challenge of identifying change in traditions of such longevity and complexity is addressed by Christopher Minkowski with respect to the astral sciences, where contradictory findings present themselves. Viewed from an internalist, exact-science perspective, the science shows in general only small, and not necessarily time-bound, incremental revisions (say, in cosmology) within very long continuities; from an externalist, sociological perspective there are startling new, and highly time-bound, interactions with non-Sanskrit science traditions. In the face of these apparent paradoxes, Minkowski turns here to the work of two historians of science, Imre Lakatos and Ian Hacking, to develop a heuristics for dealing with the *śāstra*'s central problems: delimiting the object of study, identifying change, and gauging the relative importance of internal and external factors. From Lakatos, for instance, we come to understand that the very idea of the internal/external dichotomy is far more porous than we typically admit, which permits steps toward a new resolution of the historical difficulty.

To a large degree the dense continuity of *śāstra* is thematized by the Sanskrit intellectuals themselves. Indeed, a good deal of their own writing is itself a form of intellectual history—Jagannātha evinces this clearly, as Bronner and Tubb demonstrate—and their mode of understanding and analysis is, therefore, not only an object of our study but, to some degree, a methodological model. We should not do what they do but we cannot do anything without knowing how and why they do what they did. In some measure, our method should be to analyze their method.

This is in part the aim of Lawrence McCrea's contribution. The preservation of traditions of inquiry into the ancient period has served to reinforce for modern

²² Pollock (2006b). A revised version of this essay will be published in Pollock (2008, Forthcoming).

scholars a methodological predilection toward antiquity (the older the more authentic being an old Indological prejudice), disciplinary divisions, and a *philosophia perennis*. But Sanskrit intellectual history, especially of the early modern period, is as much about changes in modes of argument, new genres and styles of writing, and crossing disciplines, as it is about foundational doctrines and system boundaries. As McCrea shows, what exactly constituted “the tradition” became a central object of study—and sometimes breaking with tradition became a central goal.

One last distinctive aspect of intellectual history in India worth noting resides in the character of *śāstra* itself, for which “knowledge system” serves as a translation. Here Indologists have a disciplinary category generated from within the tradition around which to organize an intellectual history that avoids the boundary anxieties of their Western colleagues, subsuming as the history of *śāstra* does the history of philosophy and culture more generally. How far, however, should we go in cleaving to this emic paradigm? For the local category is indeed “disciplinary” (as *śās-tra*, the “instrument of discipline,” would lead us to expect) in a very Foucauldian sense, insofar it reproduces an order of domination and does so by excluding the oral, the subaltern, and (very largely) the vernacular. Here, however, the Indian case reconnects with a problem shared by all other national or civilizational traditions of intellectual history, namely the fact that by definition they study the textualized thoughts of the elite, unlike social history’s study of “mentalities,” the thought worlds of ordinary people (which are somehow more real than others). But while Walter Benjamin’s oft-quoted thesis VII on the philosophy of history may well be true, that “no document of civilization ... is not at the same time a document of barbarism,” it by no means follows that study of the documents of civilization cannot contribute, through a commitment to both understanding and critique, toward an emancipatory, or at least humanizing, humanities.

If my title question thus yields multiple answers, as it was intended to do, these all combine to suggest what an astonishingly rich domain of research we here encounter. In some ways unique in world history, in others completely comparable to China, say, or Europe; in some domains impoverished, in others superabundant; now open to historicization, now resistant, Indian intellectual history, especially of the early modern period, represents a challenging and, in global-historical terms, crucial sphere of study. The appropriate theories and methods for this study require open, clear, and sustained discussion, for what they can contribute both to Indology and to a broader conceptual refinement of the practice of intellectual history, a discussion to which the present collection hopes to make a modest contribution.

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