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Crisis in the Classics

IN OCTOBER 2004, AFTER AN ELECTORAL SWEEP IN THE SPRING parliamentary elections brought it unaccustomed influence over the ruling coalition in Delhi, the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK), the Dravidianist party of the state of Tamil Nadu, demanded that the United Progressive Alliance declare Tamil a classical language—which it did, apparently the first such declaration by a national government in recorded history. Sanskrit was soon granted classical status, without external pressure, but the floodgates were now open to other language activists to seek classical status, and they proceeded with passion to petition the central government on behalf of Kannada (2006), Telugu (2007), and Malayalam (2009).¹ This is not the classical language debate India should be having, however; there is something other than status to worry about—and to worry about deeply.

At the time of independence in 1947, India was home to scholars whose historical and philological expertise made them the peer of any in the world. They were the heirs of the longest continuous multicultural literary tradition in the world, and produced editions and literary and historical studies of texts in Apabhramsha, Assamese, Bangla, Brajhasha, Gujarati, Kannada, Malayalam, Marathi, Oriya, Persian, Prakrit, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telugu, Urdu—the list could go on because the list of Indian languages goes on—that are still used today. Two generations later their works have not been replaced not because they are

I would like to thank Robert Goldman and Pratap Bhanu Mehta for criticisms and suggestions, as well as audiences at the Indian Academy of Sciences in Bangalore, the University of Texas at Austin, the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, the University of Calicut, and St. Stephen's College in Delhi, where I presented earlier versions of this essay.

irreplaceable—it is in the nature of scholarship that later knowledge should supersede earlier—but because there is no one capable of replacing them. And this is a sign of what people should be worrying about: if Indian education and scholarship continue along their current trajectory, the number of citizens capable of reading and understanding the texts and documents of the classical era—or precolonial or premodern or pre-1800 era, all equivalent terms for my purposes here—will very soon approach a statistical zero. India is about to become the only major world culture whose literary patrimony, and indeed history, are in the custodianship of scholars outside the country: in Berkeley, Chicago, and New York; Oxford, Paris, and Vienna. This would not be healthy either for India or for the rest of the world that cares about India.

Admittedly, there are a lot of problems in the world. Very big problems, like global warming, AIDS, unequal power, and vast poverty; intermediate problems like terror, especially terror in South Asia, or the periodic financial upheavals of global capitalism; smaller-scale problems, like the political transformation of India in the postcolonial period, with the astonishing rise and acceptance of new and violent forms of communal irrationality and violence. Then there are very small problems like the potential disappearance in India of classical textual knowledge. Michel Foucault drew a distinction between universal intellectuals, masters of truth and justice who occupy themselves with the big, bigger, and biggest problems, and specific intellectuals, who work in a particular sector of society and speak to the small-scale issues constitutive of that sector. These may be distinct forms of intellectual engagement, but they are not opposed; on the contrary, there is something of a fractal relationship between the two. The very small problem I will deal with in this essay contains a very big question indeed, about what it means to be fully and richly human.

Four questions immediately present themselves by the assertions I make above. Is the hypothesis of a looming collapse of classical knowledge in India actually valid? If this knowledge is indeed threatened with extinction, and we are witnessing something more than the chronic crisis that humanists have been trumpeting since there were

humanists, how is it to be explained? The third question—perhaps the first for some—is why anyone should care. Many people are entirely unconvinced that the past should not simply be allowed to pass away. Explaining clearly why it should not is an obligation that classicists do not usually rush to discharge. Last, but alas least answerable, is what if anything can be done about the situation in India—about the fate, as I once named more generally, of a soft science in a hard world? (Pollock 2009)

IS THERE A CRISIS IN THE CLASSICS IN INDIA TODAY?

Legitimate research problems should be empirically answerable, and at present this one is only partly so. Not only is the question of the vitality of classical knowledge complex but data on higher education in India are woefully inadequate to answer it. There is no systematic database or accurate metric to enable us to move beyond the subjective and actually measure the severity of this problem, or indeed, almost any problem of knowledge production in the social sciences and the humanities. Accordingly, my account will be largely personal and anecdotal, and limited in its truth value by the limits of one person's experience—though these experiences are real and have a certain heuristic value.

The Indian case is extreme, but for comparative purposes it is worth looking at the bigger picture. I began worrying about the situation in India more than a decade ago but lecturing on it only in the past few years, and during this period the situation for the humanities in general and classical studies in particular has grown more dire almost globally. Every week it seems a new book is published on the corporatization of the university, the commodification of education, the technologization and scientization of all knowledge, and the concomitant denigration and, increasingly, discontinuation of humanities programs.

Recent statistical studies for the United States unequivocally reveal a decline in both absolute and relative support for research in humanistic scholarship that has been described, perhaps optimistically, as “dangerous.” The national budget for humanistic studies in the United States in general dropped from more than \$400 million

in 1979 to less than \$150 million in the past two years. Humanities faculty have grown far more slowly than any other area; in fact, relative to other disciplines they have not grown at all (14 percent of the professoriate has been the steady figure for the past decade), and the number of full-time positions has shrunk dramatically to just over half in the same period. The humanities currently produce the lowest number of PhDs of all fields—8 percent, a 45 percent drop since the 1970s—and these figures include the bloated discipline of history. Only a tiny fraction of that 8 percent are PhDs in classical studies, even according to the broadest definition, “global premodern language-based studies”: the total of non-English language and literature PhDs in relationship to all PhDs (and this includes modern as well as premodern) dropped by two-thirds from the mid-1970s to the present (Brinkley 2009).² In short, the population of scholars in the United States responsible for understanding and transmitting a large segment of historical human culture stands in an almost exact inverse proportion to its object.

A look at classical Indian studies in Western Europe offers a good sense of the state of affairs. In the past 30 years, Dutch Indology, the heir of a great tradition, has been decimated, losing all but 2 of 20 positions. In Germany during the same period, at least 11 professorships have been lost entirely or converted to modern South Asian social science; Indian philological studies in Berlin, whose birth (in 1821) was virtually simultaneous with the birth of the university, is expected to be closed in the near future. At Cambridge and Edinburgh, long-standing professorships have been replaced by low-level lectureships, and even these are threatened with elimination. The situation at the College de France today is indicative of the larger picture beyond Indian studies. The current Indologist will not be replaced when he retires in a few years, something that has already happened with classical Arabic, Chinese, and Semitic. Speaking of the latter, a recent position paper on philology in Europe notes that scholarship in Syriac—the language that forms the most important link between classical European and Islamic culture—has virtually died (Ahmed et al. 2010).

The endangerment of classical studies is thus clearly a global problem, and it is perhaps only because India has so much more to lose than other cultures that it seems to have lost so much more. Let me give a few examples, starting with Sanskrit, first because it had been the most widely cultivated of the traditionally identified classical languages of India, but also because it is the tradition I know best.

I was recently asked to contribute to a centenary volume on D. D. Kosambi, one of the most interesting and influential of classical studies scholars in the immediate postindependence period. Kosambi combined strong philological skills with a richly developed theoretical approach to his subject matter. But perhaps the most remarkable realization I had in thinking about his work is not why he used this method or defended that theory, but rather why since his time India has produced not a single scholar with an equivalent combination of skills (Pollock 2008). Indeed, there have been no successors to any of the pre-independence generation of Sanskrit scholars, the sort who mastered their discipline and thought conceptually about it and wrote for an international audience: S. N. Dasgupta, S. K. De, Mysore Hiriyanna, P. V. Kane, S. Radhakrishnan, Venkata Raghavan, C. Kunhan Raja, V. S. Sukthankar, are the first in a long and distinguished list from across India (I leave aside the loss of the great tradition of pandit learning, which is now virtually extinct). There have been no major Sanskrit projects in India since the completion of the critical edition of the *Ramayana* at Baroda more than 30 years ago. All the great classical series (such as Anandasrama, Trivandrum, Gaekwad, Madras) have been more or less discontinued, and as a result the manuscripts in those collections are no longer being published. Indeed, there have been few new Indian editions of complex Sanskrit texts at all from among the scores of important manuscripts that lie unpublished in archives. In the area of hermeneutics (*Mimamsa*), for example, I know of no one in India today capable of editing works like those edited just a generation ago by P. N. Pattabhirama Sastry or S. Subrahmanya Sastry. (The same holds for many other areas of classical studies; with the death of A. N. Upadhye in 1975 and H. C. Bhayani in 2000, the editing of Prakrit and

Apabhramsha works seems to have died too.) I have not encountered a single PhD dissertation on Sanskrit in India—and I have seen many—worthy of publication by a Western university press.

The situation is no different in the other classical languages, as I learned in the late 1990s when I organized a project on the histories of South Asian literary cultures (Pollock 2003). Our core group of colleagues was looking for others to join us who possessed a deep historical understanding of a regional language, conceptual skills, and the capacity to communicate their knowledge effectively. We were able to locate only four qualified scholars in India, and identified no one for a host of languages, including Assamese, Marathi, Newari, Oriya, and Panjabi.

If anything, the situation has deteriorated since. Two years ago the Indian Institute for Advanced Study, Shimla, organized a conference to explore precisely the topic of this essay. The conveners were seeking university-based professors of pre-1800 Indian literary studies who had a record of strong scholarship. They sent out dozens of letters to Indian and Western scholars seeking recommendations. Let me review a few of the profoundly disheartening responses.

An Indian colleague working in North America who knows the Indian scene intimately confirmed my own worst suspicions about Sanskrit. When it was suggested to him how difficult it seemed to find an academic Sanskritist in India who fit the bill he replied, “The remark saddens me deeply, but I have to accept its truth.” He could provide just three names in all of India, only one of whom worked on literature.

Three prominent scholars of Bengali history and culture together could offer only a single suggestion. As one wrote, “The picture is depressing, no question. I can’t think of anyone in Kolkata doing interesting work on Bharatchandra or even Ramprasad Sen [two celebrated eighteenth century authors]. The better-known stuff is all by older scholars.” A wide-ranging historian from Chennai wrote almost the same thing about Tamil literary studies: Finding that type of person is “a difficult question,” he wrote. “I can think of only two scholars, and one of these can communicate only in Tamil.” A colleague from the United States with 30 years’ experience in Maharashtra, offered

two names in reply but added, “I have to say I have not heard of or read any of these people’s work in premodern Marathi literature. The really good people, in my experience, are retired or dead, or never got a university job.” Perhaps the most knowledgeable American scholar of Malayalam wrote: “Sorry to say, I don’t really know anyone working in premodern Malayalam literature in universities in India. It’s always been a disappointingly unpopular field in Kerala. I’ve had to be self-taught, working with one very knowledgeable, very old retired linguist, and the occasional odd pandit-types.” For Panjabi the organizers heard from an eminent Indian scholar teaching in the United States who had just returned from a sabbatical year in Punjab:

Although painful to see the absence of Panjabi in *Literary Cultures in History*, I knew that it would not have been easy to find some one to do the relevant piece. The situation does not seem to have changed much in the past decade. For a complex set of reasons, the present generation of scholars in the Punjab is more interested in the post-1850 period and there is no one presently teaching there who could meet the criterion laid out in your note. I am just back from the Punjab. The three names that come to mind are all retired faculty.

I could go on with responses received about other languages, including the national language, Hindi, whose classical idiom (known as *riti*), we learned, is currently taught at neither of the great universities of Delhi (the true analogy would be no one teaching Corneille, Racine, and Molière in Paris). But let me end this jeremiad with India’s second great cosmopolitan language: Persian. A colleague contacted about the conference offered in reply a rather poignant Urdu proverb: *padhen fars, beechen tel—ye dekho qudrat ke khel* (He studied Persian but now sells oil—look at the game destiny plays). The history of the interpretation of this proverb recapitulates the crisis that I am trying to capture, for it migrated 50 years ago from describing the unjust fate

of a scholar of learning, to its current sense of lamenting the economic fate awaiting anyone foolish enough to opt for Persian as a main university subject. The names of only four active scholars in all of India could be suggested, and it was not clear what even they were doing. Just consider that *diwans* of some of the greatest Indo-Persian poets such as Fayzi and Bedil remain unpublished to this day, and when new works are brought out, it is typically from Teheran, not Delhi or Hyderabad.

Let me say again that the people whom the Indian Institute for Advanced Study, Shimla, contacted are both Indians and American academics who have worked in India for years. It may be that there are strong scholars who were overlooked—but if so, it would be an almost equally sad and instructive commentary on the lack of communication between Indian and Western classical scholars. The truth, I fear, is that there are few left to communicate with.

Consider these additional facts. There are no major centers in India for training in classical studies: all the important and serious research institutes are devoted to the social sciences (Madras Institute for Development Studies; Centre for Social Studies, Surat; Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta; Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and the Centre for Policy Research, both Delhi). An exception was the Centre for Excellence in Classical Languages at the Central Institute of Indian Languages (CIIL)—or could have been. But the center never did anything, so far as I can tell, and in 2009, as a result of the classical languages mania mentioned at the start of this essay, it transformed itself into the Central Institute of Classical Tamil. The fate of this new center offers a revealing gloss on the state's role in the crisis of the classics. An official at CIIL told me the following:

For you and me, reading scholars who could devote their lives to classical studies may be important, but for the players in national and regional politics, this fact (of recognition of Tamil as a classical language) is viewed as an achievement that must be fully utilized [read: the political goals of this decision must be achieved]. The reason for this

shift is to tell the people of Tamil Nadu that the fruits of the Union Government's decision on declaration of Tamil as a classical language—on par with Sanskrit—has finally come to Tamil Nadu with creation of a Central Institute of Classical Tamil there. Now their problem is that they need to appoint people to run it and give it a direction, and they are unable to find a truly capable linguist and a scholar. . . . [In addition] the political decision to find a person amenable to the political elite and also acceptable to Tamil scholars is not easy to resolve.

There are many other symptoms of crisis besides the institutional void. There exist no Indian scholarly journals devoted to classical studies that have an international stature. None of the once-great publications—*Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Bombay Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society, Indian Historical Review, Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Journal of the Oriental Institute, Baroda, Journal of Oriental Research, Madras*—are any longer thought of as obligatory reading or as suitable venues for international contributions. India-based classical scholars rarely publish in major Western humanities journals, and never publish, so far as I can see, in Western university presses. Indeed, it is rare to find their publications in the best presses in India (Oxford University Press Delhi, for example, or Permanent Black). Equally rare is it to find Indian postgraduates enrolling in doctoral programs in the United States who have serious training in classical studies; students with good skills in a modern Indian language can be found, to be sure, but they invariably lack access to the classical past.

Every datum I can find, then, and every measure I can use, indicates that the tradition of scholarship on precolonial texts has decayed in the last 50 years almost to the point of extinction.

IF THERE IS A CRISIS, WHAT HAS CAUSED IT?

If evidence shows that there is indeed a crisis in the classics in India, it also suggests that the crisis is largely a postindependence phenom-

enon. Why has this come about? I am decidedly no expert in modern Indian history in general, let alone educational history in particular. I have only some very general hypotheses to propose.

One could argue that the process of decay has roots that reach back far beyond independence, with the disqualification of traditional learning in the Western-style universities established in 1857 in Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras, where only those with MA degrees were permitted to teach. The kinds of classical skills that could have been institutionalized and hence preserved and reproduced were arguably precluded from the very start of Westernized university education.

And yet, some structures of education and of philological sentiment were clearly in place up to 1947 to produce the great scholars I mentioned earlier and who graced virtually every Indian literary tradition. Conditions must have since changed that fundamentally altered the rules of the game. One factor was no doubt the nationalist movement in the first half of the twentieth century, and the transition to linguistic states in the second. Both were a spur to historical-philological studies (just as was the case in nineteenth century Europe). But as both objectives were achieved the quest for origins—a concomitant of much interest in the classics, however deplorable—may have lost its *raison d'être*.

To be sure, there were larger tendencies at work, with far more discernible impact. Even nonmodernists like myself know about Nehruvian materialism, and, later, slash-and-burn globalization, where, as many have pointed out, high dams became the new temples, and the image of Lakshmi, goddess of wealth, has replaced that of Sarasvati, goddess of learning. The outcome for education of Nehruvian state initiatives has been a concentration on science and technology at the expense of virtually all other forms of knowledge. Any reasonably careful reader of the reports of the (recently disbanded) National Knowledge Commission, which was charged with recommending long-range solutions to India's higher education deficit, cannot fail to register the utter indifference with which the humanities in general and premodern studies in particular have been treated.

The problem of the domination of science and technology in India hardly differs from that in the United States, or Europe, for that matter, as the Browne Report on higher education in the UK makes clear (Browne 2010).³ But the fact is that Indian university degree programs in the humanities, let alone the classics, rarely get the best students (as we in the United States often do) except in the case of the indomitably dedicated anomaly. In large part this may be because there are so few life chances, as a result of the factors earlier mentioned. But there is a dialectical rhythm here: the low-esteem jobs for classicists ensure that only weaker students will pursue such careers, which further lowers the profession's esteem.

To some degree, non-Brahmanism and Islamophobia, two widespread (and perversely complementary) early twentieth-century ethno-chauvanist movements in the south and the north, respectively, have worked to weaken classical studies already weak from the sociological changes just noted. It is not necessary to deny that non-Brahmanism had its justification as a movement for social transformation, or that it created a new context of respect for the Dravidian past, to recognize at the same time that it seriously damaged the foundations of classical study. You cannot read classical south Indian languages (or for that matter classical north Indian languages) without strong skills in Sanskrit, but a false equation of the language and Brahmanism turned the study of Sanskrit into an object of derision, if not shame. Contradictorily, today Sanskrit as part of the "three-language formula" can be taken to fulfill a school requirement, but I have never encountered a single student who thereby developed competence in the language. Obligatory Sanskrit in middle school is a complete failure and has done nothing to improve children's education, let alone secure a future for classical studies.

The case of Persian is hardly different. Before 1947, all school students of Urdu in the United Provinces were required to take one year of Persian or Arabic. Not only was that requirement abandoned after 1947, but it became almost impossible to study Persian in secondary school. As C. M. Naim recounts:

I don't think the situation was so drastic for Persian before 1947, at least not in U.P., where I grew up. Every high school had a Persian and Arabic teacher, just as they had a Sanskrit teacher, for under the colonial rule the education syllabus required one year of a "classical" language relevant to the pupil's mother-tongue. Since mine was Urdu, I had to choose between Persian and Arabic. I chose Persian, while two of my closest friends chose Arabic. Our two teachers were Muslim, but I recall my Persian class even then had one or two Hindu students too. All that disappeared after 1947; students were given no choice—they had to study Hindi and Sanskrit. If their parents wished to have them study Urdu, the parents had to find at least 29 more parents wishing the same, then petition to the government to provide a teacher. The Persian and Arabic *maulavis* were quickly retired or forced to teach other subjects to younger children (Naim ms.).

The impact on classical studies of such nativist movements was redoubled at the end of the twentieth century by vulgar anti-Orientalism. The original Orientalist critique was salutary in its day (as was the critique of the imperialist foundations of anthropology, to take only that example from elsewhere among the disciplines), but in later times and in lesser minds this critique was guilty of grotesque excesses. Those who could not or would not try to understand the past wound up either stipulating the very enterprise to be conceptually impossible—colonialism, we were told, imposed an epistemic barrier whose untranscendability was somehow known a priori—or condemning it as inevitably reactionary. It took years before a serious history of colonialism was understood to presuppose a serious history of precolonialism, but by then the greater part of a generation of scholars was lost to the study of historical languages.

Some colleagues in India have suggested that the erosion of classical studies may be connected with the policy of reservations. It was

the case, or so they told me, that reservation quotas required of an Indian Institute of Science or Indian Institute of Technology could be passed on down the line, with the result that—to take an almost farcical example—the Maharaja’s Sanskrit College in Mysore, when I was living there in the mid-1990s, had a Vedic Sanskrit post reserved for a Scheduled Caste (formerly, untouchable) scholar. But, generally speaking, most people with adequately working brains understand that merit is randomly distributed among castes and classes, and good institutions can create good scholars, whatever their origins (see Mehta 2006 for one of the best brief statements). The problem is “good institutions.”

A counterintuitive but potentially consequential factor in the erosion of classical language skills lies in the erosion of English language skills. There is little question that, as a result of state policy as in West Bengal or Tamil Nadu, linguistic pride in many parts of the country, or postcolonial rejection everywhere else (Gandhi’s *Hind Swaraj* providing an astonishing charter; see Parel 1997: 100-101)—the capacity to communicate in English has decayed dramatically among classical, and indeed most other, scholars in India since independence.⁴ As a result, Indian classicists are almost entirely shut out of the international community of scholarship and show little substantive understanding of what is being done in classical studies outside of India, or even in India itself.

The erosion of English would not loom so large if, by way of compensation, the Indian translation industry were remotely functional. I cannot examine this topic here in any depth—or the ironic, postindependence reversal of nineteenth-century translation initiatives such as those at Benares Sanskrit College into Sanskrit (Dodson 2007), or Delhi College into Urdu (Minault 1999), or across the Bombay-Pune region into Marathi (Naregal 2002)—but consider just the case of translation into Hindi. I and the colleagues I polled must surely be mistaken but none of us could identify a single article, let alone monograph, on classical Indian studies written in English that has been translated into Hindi in postindependence India—or indeed, on any topic in South Asian studies, however broadly appealing. There is no *Provincializing*

Europe in Hindi, no *The Nation and Its Fragments*, none of the works of Bernard Cohn, not even Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?"⁵ If Indian scholars are not reading English and not reading translations of English in Indian languages, they cannot participate in the global scholarly community and thus cannot secure whatever support, intellectual or material, that community might have to offer.⁶

Add to this mix, as noted earlier, the larger forces at work globally. Some of these are old, since corporatization, commodification, and technologization have been part of university life in the United States, for example, for more than a century. (In 1891, Andrew Carnegie congratulated graduates of a business college for being "fully occupied in obtaining a knowledge of shorthand and typewriting" rather than wasting time "upon dead languages" [Donoghue 2008: 4]; just one representative quote from a litany of philistinism in Donoghue's book.)

Some are very new, however, like the rise of a postliterate society and the death of reading as a result, not of a sociological but of a physiological transformation, as the circuitry in our brains, some suggest, is being remapped by digital devices. I certainly have sometimes felt an unfamiliar sense of having to drag "my wayward brain back to the text. The deep reading that used to come naturally has become a struggle" (Carr 2010: 5-6).⁷ A reading style that prioritizes efficiency and immediacy militates against developing the habit of "slow reading," as Nietzsche called it, upon which literary, especially classical literary, studies depends.

Among this scattershot array of factors behind the crisis in classical studies in India, from the structure of the nineteenth-century university to the erosion of reading with the rise of the Internet, at least some have to be consequential to some degree. But it really does not matter what caused the crisis if no one believes it is a crisis worth caring about.

WHO CARES?

Why should we care at all about the fate of the classics in India? What is lost if that particular competence is lost? Competencies are lost all the

time—cultures are dying everywhere. Fifty years ago Erich Auerbach, the great philologist of Western literature, raised the same specter of crisis for Europe, describing the loss of philology as “an impoverishment for which there can be no possible compensation.” And yet he seemed to assume that it was those alone who already appreciated philology who could understand how grievous the loss would be (“only those who have not totally sustained this loss would be aware of privation”) (Auerbach 1969: 5). It is admittedly no easy task to preach to the unconverted. I want to try, however, proceeding by way of a brief reflection on the idea of the “classic” itself, which might lead us toward the beginning of an answer to the question why anyone should care.

I have been using “classic” in the context of India to refer to any and all literature written before c. 1800.⁸ That moment did mark a profound transformation: colonialism would not only eventually render the literary past unreadable to most Indians: it would remake the literature of India according to its own image (whatever indigenization would eventually occur). It is this rupture, for me, that defines the classical.

For virtually everyone who has written on the “classic” in the West, from C. A. Sainte-Beuve’s “Qu’est-ce qu’un classique?” (1850) to T. S. Eliot’s “What is a Classic?” (1944) through “The Example of the Classical” in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s *Truth and Method* (1996 [1960]) to Frank Kermode’s *The Classic* (1975), it has been the supposed capacity for universalization that grounds the category. The classic, as Sainte-Beuve famously put it, uncovers “a certain moral truth that is not equivocal” and recaptures “a certain eternal passion in the heart where all seemed known and discovered”; it is “effortlessly contemporaneous with all ages,” possessed as it is of a “universal morality” (1895:44-45, 52). For Kermode the classic possesses “intrinsic qualities that endure,” it is “more or less immediately relevant,” with a “perpetual contemporaneity” (1975: 45, 15-16). Gadamer, too, thinks of the classic as “a kind of timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other present” (1996: 288). Eliot demands of the classic maturity, amplitude, catholicity, nonprovinciality, comprehensiveness, and, yet again, “universal-

ity” (Eliot 1975 [1945]:116, 128).⁹ While J. M. Coetzee, in his rereading of Eliot’s essay, memorably describes him as “a man with the magical enterprise of redefining the world around *himself*,” that, I submit, is precisely what each one of our authors does in defining “classic.” It’s just that Eliot’s un-self-awareness allows a particularly bright light to shine on the specious universalism inherent in the very idea of the classic.

I follow an entirely different logic, abandoning the “normative significance” of “classical” and the subjectivism and illegitimate generalization of the present that such normativity always smuggles in.¹⁰ To me “classic” means precisely the opposite of what my predecessors understood: a work is classical by reason of its resistance to contemporaneity and supposed universality, by reason of its capacity to indicate human particularity and difference in that past epoch. The classic is not what tells me about shared humanity—or, more truthfully put, what lets me recognize myself as already present in the past, what nourishes in me the illusion that everything has been like me and has existed only to prepare the way for me. Instead, the classic is what gives access to radically different forms of human consciousness for any given generation of readers, and thereby expands for them the range of possibilities of what it means to be a human being.¹¹

Let me turn now to why classical studies, in my—no doubt to some perverse—sense of “classical,” are important. I do this by distinguishing four different human ends they serve, a sort of *chaturvarga*, if you will, the classical Four Ends of Man. Classical studies 1) promotes real pedagogy, especially and perhaps unexpectedly radical pedagogy; 2) stimulates care for memory and helps shape a usable sense of the past, preserving memory from those who would abuse it and opening the past to responsible critique; 3) enables us to acquire new “tools for living”; 4) makes possible an encounter with the enduring beauty and intellectual excitement created by the vast labor of several thousands years of human consciousness.

There is a general pedagogical importance of the classics attaching to the study of language as such. Here I can agree with

Gadamer that “Language is not just one of man’s possessions in the world; rather, on it depends the fact that man has a world at all. . . . Man’s being-in-the-world is primordially linguistic” (440). We learn to know the world and to know ourselves by learning language, and learning a non-modern language is, however counterintuitively, the most profound way to come to know one’s own.

This general aspect of pedagogy in the classics—of understanding human being as mediated by language—is complemented by, perhaps inseparable from, a particular, political aspect of such pedagogy. It can be argued—and, as I read him, Antonio Gramsci tried to argue—that in the era of the capitalist and corporatist university, the most radical education is the most radically noninstrumental. This is not simple contrariety. The discipline of learning a nonmodern language and learning it well is at once personally transformative and (in the widest sense of the term) politically oppositional: “Pupils did not learn Latin and Greek in order to speak them, to become waiters, interpreters or commercial letter writers,” Gramsci reflected; rather, they studied in order to learn not a particular vocational skill but, first, the discipline of work as such rather than this or that particular job, and second, the possibility of acting in the world in a disinterested, even anti-profit manner (Gramsci 1986: 37-40; Entwistle 1979: 170-172; Borg and Mayo 2003). Moreover, teaching students to confront the difficult and the noninstrumental, teaching them the patience to listen to unfamiliar voices and to continue to listen until they make sense—to teach slow reading in a fast world—is one way of teaching them, as Gramsci suggested, to think for themselves. And nothing is quite so radical a political act as that.

This discipline of making sense of texts, which I have been talking about here all along, is what used to be called—and what I hope will one day again be called, with pride—philology. Philology is central to all reading, whether that of a Sangam poet or a Dalit novelist, though it seems to confront us as a methodological issue in direct proportion to the distance in time and space that separates us from the text. We naively think the contemporary text transparently accessible, but

making sense of it always requires philology, which becomes more effective the more present it is to our consciousness. Learning a classical language renders philology permanently present; it enables us to read with sustained discipline, teaching us above all to distinguish and balance the three core domains of meaning: the author's, the tradition's, and, most important, our own.

The philology of texts leads, thus, to a philology of life, whose first if fragmentary theorist was Nietzsche: "Philology is, in a general sense . . . the capacity for absorbing facts without interpreting them falsely, and without losing caution, patience and subtlety in the effort to understand them . . . whether one be dealing with books, with newspaper reports, with the most fateful events or with weather statistics—not to mention the 'salvation of the soul'" (Nietzsche 1980, 6: 233). I don't claim the salvation of our souls depends on the salvation of classical philology, but some portion of our humanity might well.

The capacity to shape memory likewise has two aspects for me, one general, concerning the value of memory as such, and one particular, concerning the critique of memory.

If you question the study of the classics you inevitably question the value of history as such, since the two (as Vico was the first to understand) are inseparable—or put more pertinently to the present, the classics are significant to the same degree that history as such is significant. That significance is, to be sure, not unproblematic for many, starting again with Nietzsche. But even for Nietzsche, it is only the beast that lives unhistorically. If you argue for an "ethics of forgetting" you might as well argue for an ethics of unconsciousness; if you lose memory you lose all sense of self (or indeed, your mind, as the *Bhagavad Gita* puts it, *smritibhramshad buddhinashah*: "from loss of memory comes the destruction of the mind").

India is well on the way to losing its memory, and not just losing it—since in fact the past never passes away—but surrendering it to the abusers of memory. If classical scholars in India or elsewhere cede control of memory, it will be left to the delusions and the ravings of the antihistorians, who almost in lockstep with the loss of classical knowl-

edge over the past generation have moved ever closer, if incredibly so, to a credible place at the center of public discourse in India.

The second, more particular aspect of memory is again oppositional. When I talk about the memory cultivated by classical studies I mean to include the capacity made available for critiquing the past. We may unhesitatingly grant the premise that classical culture, Sanskrit for example, offers at one and the same time a record of civilization and a record of barbarism, of extraordinary inequality and other social poisons. Once we all agree on the toxicity of this discourse, however, there will be contestation over how to overcome it. In my view, you do not transcend inequality, to the degree it is a conceptual category taking some of its force from traditional discourse, by outlawing the authors and burning the discourses, or indeed by trying to forget them; you transcend inequality by mastering and overmastering those discourses through study and critique. You cannot simply go around a tradition to overcome it, if that is what you wish to do; you must go through it. You only transform a dominant culture by outsmarting it. That, I believe, is precisely what some of India's most disruptive thinkers, such as Dr. Ambedkar, sought to do, though they were not as successful as they might have been had they had access to all the tools of a critical philology necessary to the task.

The third end, recovering "tools for living" from the past, means recovering possibilities of other ways of being in the world that have been lost or that we have falsely come to believe are impossible, thanks to the amnesia enforced by the insistent universalizations of Western modernity. It was for me a transformative life experience to have been able to glimpse, in my study of classical Kannada and Sanskrit literature, the existence of practices now deemed unthinkable: a voluntary cosmopolitanism as opposed to the familiar compulsory one, a vernacularity of accommodation instead of the usual vernacularity of necessity, ways that globalism and localism could beneficially coexist (Pollock 2006). The possibilities for imagining a different future are sometimes made available by discovering a different past.

From all this you will understand my impatience with the ignorant and self-crippling attack on the classics by a shallow post-Orien-

talism and postcolonialism on the one hand, and the criminal attempt at its appropriation by the alphabet soup of indigenist forces (RSS, BJP, VHP . . . DMK, et cetera).¹² on the other. 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 public discourse on Sanskrit these days, politicized in the most ignorant fashion. I have already explained the role I believe critique must play. But there are vast areas of Sanskrit and other classical literatures and forms of knowledge that have enduring beauty and intellectual excitement and that cannot be simply reduced to some sort of false consciousness that must be overcome. This was precisely what Marx grasped in that all too brief remark in the *Grundrisse*: “But the difficulty lies not in understanding that the Greek arts and epic are bound up with certain forms of social development”—that is, slaveholding, Asian-hating, women-oppressing forms; “the difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure” (Marx 1973: 111). And not just pleasure: 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 elsewhere.

What I have been suggesting by my account of pedagogy, memory, tools for living, and beauty is that the study of the classics is crucial to an enriched human life, but also that that study needs to be reinvented under the sign of what we might name *critical classicism*. How did we lose the radical potential of this form of thought? How did we wind up so completely ceding the classics to an often vicious conservatism of the present? Even today the simpleminded argument continues to be made that “to love old art is to honor old arrangements” (Gropnik 2008).¹³ But Marx and Gramsci stand as evidence to the contrary, and so too does a contemporary Indian thinker like the late D. R. Nagaraj, a true

heir of Ambedkar, who went from a childhood as an indentured weaver outside of Bangalore to an adulthood as a scholar and cultural activist who strove tirelessly to master Old Kannada and Sanskrit and write at once critically and appreciatively about both (Nagaraj 2010). Critical classicism is thus a legacy to be recovered, but also an obligation to be discharged and a resource to be cherished.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

If there is a crisis, and if we have some sense of the complex of factors that caused it, and if we see good reason to address the crisis because the classics are important to our lives—if there is pain (*duhkha*), a source of pain (*duhkhasamudaya*), the need and possibility to end pain (*dukkhanirodha*)—then what is the way?

This is where I am weakest, I am sorry to say, for I am no Buddha. At the end of the day, the vortex of the market may suck us all down. Here and in so many areas both good and bad, postcolonial India, with its various crises including the classics, may constitute not an anomaly but the world's future: no longer in the waiting room of history but history's guest of honor. (And the problem may really be far larger than I can see. Indian learning as such may be on the line: the historical arc of creative Indian science, for example—the age of Meghnad Saha, S. N. Bose, and C. V. Raman—shadows classical studies.)¹⁴ Still, we cannot have come this far simply to throw up our hands.

I long thought the solution to the crisis in the classics was governmental—it used to be clear that when India is convinced of something's importance it can do something important about it—and I accordingly promoted the idea of an Indian Institute of Classical Studies, along the lines of the Indian Institutes of Science, Technology, Management, and now Information Technology. This would have to be a place where the realistic assessment of Dipesh Chakrabarty is realistically acknowledged:

It is a shame, isn't it? But why will bright people invest in learning difficult languages and literatures if it is going

to hurt their life-chances? What India needs is real elitist streaming in education, so that some people, chosen on very strict criteria, are allowed to pursue philological studies but be compensated at such a high level that their life-chances and those of their children are not compromised. We are talking of diverting brains from technological studies. This can't happen without real incentives. The incentives on the other side are much, much higher (Chakrabarty, n. d.).

I have more recently thought that the solution might be a demonstration department of philology in one of the new universities—Nalanda University (a pan-Asian affair), SAARC's South Asian University (a regional affair), or Vedanta University (a private affair)—and I actually sketched out the design of such a department at the request of the Nalanda Mentor Group Advisory Council. But the plan came to nothing, as Nalanda itself seems to have come close to nothing, SAARC is headed by an economist (enough said) and Vedanta U. may never be realized. As for the new state universities called for under the Eleventh Plan—which Pratap Bhanu Mehta characterized as “a strategy for *university buildings*, not for *building universities*” (Mehta 2008)—I fear there is little hope. Consider the new humanities initiative for the IITs, whose frivolity an Indian newspaper captured with its headline, “IITs to go artsy, to offer courses in music, architecture, performing arts” (*Indian Express* 2009). Why on earth are the IITs competing in areas that are already strong and where the skills produced are eminently marketable? Can no one understand the importance of supporting those critical yet fragile because unmarketable forms of knowledge such as the historical and textual? Nor do I see the point of the competition recently announced by the government of Tamil Nadu, the “Kalaigarnar M. Karunanidhi Classical Tamil Award,” which carries an award of 1 million rupees, an 80-gram gold medal bearing the likeness of Karunanidhi (the chief minister, for life it seems), and a five-metal statue of Thiruvalluvar (author of the *Tirukkural*). What good are awards if there is no one trained to compete for them?

It would be worth exploring in more detail than I am capable of the comparison to contemporary China, where the state is—uniquely in the world at present—investing vast resources in classical studies.¹⁵ But for India, I am no longer so sure that the central government is the solution rather than the problem. Having had considerable experience with *sarkari* institutions (the term used effectively to dismiss the “government” to which the word refers), especially in the past few years, I have grown increasingly convinced that the dead hand of the state would likely wind up perverting any such initiative. It is hard to disagree with Bruno Latour, who argued recently that “there is no more urgent task than removing from the production of knowledge the double stranglehold of the state and the market” (Latour 2008), but also hard to see how to do it. Perhaps the enlightened private sector can offer a way forward—the founding of the Murty Classical Library of India through an endowment from an Indian family is one stellar example—or cooperative arrangements between private Indian actors and the international community of classical programs, pressed though these themselves may be for essential resources.¹⁶

Solve this problem we must, however. 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.

NOTES

1. The articles from *The Hindu* newspaper cited in the references chart something of the history of this burlesque, which deserves a full study; for now see Venktachalapathy (2009).

2. See the Humanities Resource Center Online, the “Humanities Indicators” (<http://www.humanitiesindicators.org/humanitiesData.aspx>). Brinkley notes that the National Endowment for Humanities budget today is one-third less than 30 years ago, while academic humanities receive only 13 percent of that budget.
3. For Browne, the value of knowledge will henceforth be judged by students in terms of “the employment returns from their courses.” “What universities teach,” as one commentator summarizes, “will henceforth be determined by their anticipation of consumer demand.” (Collini 2010).
4. Admittedly, the capacity for, and interest in, participation in international scholarship was unevenly spread across classical studies in pre-independence India. Many Sanskrit scholars named earlier did take part; but perhaps for obvious reasons very few scholars of classical Kannada or Hindi did, world-class though they were.
5. The translation of Hindi or other Indian-language scholarship or thought (beyond belles lettres) into English, which is almost nonexistent, is an important related problem.
6. Hindi-language publishers have recently begun to bring out more scholarship in translation, but this is largely Western history or theory (Hobsbaum, Marc Bloch, Voloshinov). The Indian Languages Programme at the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies translates into Hindi English-language works of *Indian* social scientists. Incidentally, the National Knowledge Commission recognized that “the current facilities for translation are inadequate and less than socially optimal. . . . Therefore some amount of public intervention is crucial to encourage the translation industry” (see <http://www.knowledgecommission.gov.in/focus/translation.asp>).
7. For others Carr’s worries are “merely” about a particular form of cultural death. The net isn’t making us stupid, it has simply unmasked Tolstoy as the bore he is: “Too long and not so interesting” (Shirky 2008).
8. I say “written” but have no desire to insist on the question of literacy. But subaltern opponents to the classics should understand that the

history of written culture in India is in part the history of dominated communities seizing the power to write themselves into the historical record (think of Raidas, for example, or Tukaram or Eluttacchan). Moreover, a commitment to literate literature does not preclude a commitment to oral literature, with its own specific methods of study and theories of its conditions of possibility.

9. It is in keeping with Eliot's provincialism disguised as cosmopolitanism that such universality could only be expression in Latin, "the universal means of communication between peoples of all tongues and cultures" (1975: 130).
10. How else could one possibly think oneself capable of identifying the particular stage of the development of humanity that produced "the perfect form of the human"? And what can "perfect form of the human" possibly mean? See Gadamer (1996 [1960]): 285-286.
11. I reserve for another occasion explaining the Rankean foundation of my argument here, and only note that even a secularist can take seriously his argument that "Jede Epoche ist unmittelbar zu Gott" (every age is immediate to God) (Ranke 1971 [1854]: 59-60).
12. That is, Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (National Volunteer Organization); Bharatiya Janata Party (Indian Peoples Party); Vishwa Hindu Parishad (World Hindu Council).
13. "His love of poetry and music and art," the author says further of John Stuart Mill, "also led him toward conservative thought. Aesthetes always bend to the right."
14. Pratap Mehta has seen this larger dimension, and for science research in particular calls my attention to Prathap (2004).
15. According to Stephen Owen,

The state has spent and continues to spend huge sums supporting students, scholarly projects and scholars. The quality of philological work is not universally good, but where it is good, it is very good indeed. . . . Virtually every printed book . . . since the eleventh century has been at least photo-reprinted, and available in digital form—sometimes free online. This is clearly in the interest of the state,

teaching national culture. There are issues about what is done with the material, but the texts and scholarly skills are definitely preserved—not quite in the old way—but preserved (private communication).

A recent visit I made to the Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities at Fudan University in Shanghai bore all this out.

16. See <www.murtyclassicalibraryofindia.com>. Note also the “Campaign for Classics in the Twenty-first Century” (http://apaclassics.org/index.php/support_the_APA/campaign_for_classics), an unprecedented initiative of the American Philological Association, which is at once a symptom of the crisis and a model response to it.

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