

Towards a Political Philology: D D Kosambi and Sanskrit

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D D Kosambi's engagement with Sanskrit was marked by an intense search for both a text-critical method and a theory for interpreting culture and power. His method was positivist but sophisticated in its positivism, and if recent work in the history of textuality (Indian and other) suggests that more attention to cultural difference is needed, his text-critical work remains foundational for further scholarship. His theory was positivist, too, in keeping with his vision of scientific Marxism, and if its strong universalism here produced a skewed interpretation that is now in all its essentials dead, he introduced a new and crucial critical dimension to Sanskrit studies. Perhaps the most remarkable (and most disturbing) realisation about Kosambi's quest for a political philology is that nearly 50 years after his death he has had not a single successor in India.

Two traits, as an ensemble, distinguish D D Kosambi in his work on Sanskrit not only from the scholars who were his contemporaries, but also from almost everyone since. The first is his search for a method in the editing of Sanskrit literary texts, and the second his search for a theory in the reading of these texts. In the former case, if judged by the practices of editing Sanskrit literary texts in India at the time, Kosambi emerges as a remarkable pioneer, his concrete accomplishments hardly in danger of being superseded anytime soon. In the latter, he is exceptional in the history of Indology for his awareness that the method of philology is always inseparable from a theory of philology, itself produced by a tradition of writing and reading, and from a cultural and political criticism specific to that tradition. If Kosambi's theory has proven to be flawed, we have only come to know the flaws and sought ways to overcome them because he had the courage to enunciate the theory in the first place.

How old fashioned, even quaint, it must seem to readers of the *Economic and Political Weekly* to find the word "philology" used in its pages, and how odd to see it coupled with the qualifier "political." But there is nothing quaint about what philology represents, at least according to its most robust self-understanding. This is not the shrunken and withered idea it conjures in the minds of many people today because of the shrunken and withered practice it often embodies, but rather a core human concern: the fullest use of the most human attribute, language, which occurs in the making sense of texts. Such is the conception Nietzsche once sought to promulgate. He conceived of philology as an active mode of understanding that directed its powers towards every kind of text, from weather reports to the "most fateful events", and he viewed it as deeply political as well, in his case as a crucial antidote to the dehumanisation of capitalist modernity, to the "age of work" in which we are now imprisoned more remorselessly than Nietzsche could ever have dreamt. In one of his most luminous passages he describes philology as

that venerable art which exacts from its followers one thing above all – to step to one side, to leave themselves spare moments, to grow silent, to become slow – the leisurely art of the goldsmith applied to language: an art which must carry out slow, fine work, and attains nothing if not *lento*. For this very reason philology is now more desirable than ever before; for this very reason it is the highest attraction and incitement in an age of "work" ...Philology itself, perhaps, will not "get things done" so hurriedly: it teaches how to read well [Nietzsche 1887: 11].

Although it may not always be possible to draw a perfectly straight-line between a philological method and a critical theory of culture and power, there is nothing odd in suggesting that

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philology has political projects to achieve and political lessons to teach, which Kosambi knew, without perhaps making it fully explicit, and which many have since forgotten. This lesson, in its most fundamental form, is that we can actively make the future only because we know who we are and where we have come from, and we can only know these things – know the past – because we have learned the discipline of philology, “the great, the incomparable art of reading well.”

1

Like every other human practice, making texts and reading texts are activities that are (as Karl Popper would say) wholly theory-laden: we neither could nor would do these things unless we had some sense of how to do them and why. As with every other practice, however, most of us tend to ignore the conceptual foundations of how we make and read texts. We just seem to do it. Philologists are the people who try to bring these foundations to consciousness, and to constantly test their validity. Although the history of philology globally viewed is actually co-extensive with the history of textuality, a new and critical – even sceptical and suspicious – philology came into existence in the early modern period, and did so, again, globally. Editors and critics in Europe from around 1400 to 1650, such as Lorenzo Valla, Erasmus, and (most explosively) Spinoza; the new historical philologists of late imperial China such as Yan Roju; and Indian grammarians and linguists such as Melpathur Narayana Bhattatiri in 17th century Kerala (for Sanskrit) and Siraj al-Din Ali Khan Arzu in 18th century Delhi (for Persian), put philology front and centre in their intellectual practice as each in his own way redefined such core questions as textual authenticity, canonicity, and the very historicity and sociality – the humanity – of language itself.¹

Positivist Science of Philology

An outgrowth of this process was the positivist science of philology that reached its apogee in Germany in the second half of the 19th century. Pune in the mid-20th century, when Kosambi was working on his Sanskrit philological projects, was imbued with the spirit of this science: V S Sukthankar, general editor of the critical edition of the *Mahabharata* and mentor to Kosambi, had brought it with him from Bonn, where he had been a student of Hermann Jacobi. The textual method was that of Karl Lachmann, which posited (on the basis of the history of Greek and Latin texts) an orderly ramified descent of manuscripts from a stable authorial archetype [Timpanaro 2006]. Assembling all the manuscripts and determining what they held in common should in principle enable one to reconstruct that archetype. This was not a method without its challengers. French scholars, in particular, who worked with medieval Romance materials – troops in a philology war contemporaneous with the Franco-Prussian political wars of the period – encountered vastly different textual phenomena from those of classical antiquity. In such a textual world, where no *chanson de geste* may have ever existed in a stable original, variation was not accidental but constitutive: there was nothing but variation.² Lachmann’s crystalline sphere was already beginning to crack.

Prior to the *Mahabharata* work initiated by Sukthankar at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune (this was to have been a European project, but it was scuttled after first world war), modern Sanskrit text editing was a relatively simple affair. Editors were typically traditional pandits who would print what was judged by some (usually unspoken) criterion or other to be the best manuscript; variants from other manuscripts would occasionally be recorded in footnotes but with no attempt to investigate the logic of variation. Such colonial-era practices arguably marked something of a decline from premodern times, under the constraints of print capitalism. But this is speculation; we have still no history of what might be called script mercantalism – the social-economic form of manuscript culture – let alone its relationship to and supersession by print [Pollock 2006a]. We do know that for centuries prior to the rise of the colonial printing industry Indian scholars produced thousands upon thousands of editions of Indian texts and published them. We may still have little sense of what “publication” meant in the premodern era, but we are coming to better understand the principles that traditional commentator-editors used to establish their texts – and there is no question they did edit, and on the basis of philological principles (including the recording of variants, or ‘pathantaras’) about which they were fully self-aware, if rarely fully forthcoming.³

Kosambi as Heir

Kosambi was heir, at least in part, to all this philological ferment, and his work represents a decided advance over anything his contemporaries had achieved, Sukthankar and his fellow epic editors aside. His engagement with Sanskrit poetry concerned two bodies of materials, one vast corpus and one more stable text, which are in fact intimately related, since both comprised poetry of the genre known as *muktaka*, the “isolate” or stand-alone verse that constitutes the bedrock of Sanskrit literary culture. The first and larger project was an edition of the poetry collection, *Sataka-trayam* (ST) that has come down to us under the name of Bhartrhari; the second, an edition of the “Treasury of Literary Gems” (*Subhasita-ratna-kosa*, SRK) of Vidyakara, the oldest example of what was to prove an enduring genre of Sanskrit literature, the literary anthology.

Kosambi’s involvement with the Bhartrhari corpus extended over more than three decades. *The Epigrams Attributed to Bhartrhari* appeared in 1948. This critical edition of the poems was preceded and followed by a series of editions of traditional commentaries on the text, either wholly or collaboratively edited by Kosambi (one by a Jain from western India, Dhanasara Gani, the oldest, if an often sophomoric, scholiast; a second, of very high quality, by Ramacandra Budhendra, possibly 17th century Andhra (the work was previously published and re-edited by Kosambi); a third by a south Indian commentator, whose name we now know to be Arkuttyalaya Balarama Kavi; the last by one Ramarsi, date and place unknown). Kosambi’s concern with commentaries may in the first instance have been with their textual testimony, what they could say about the historical development of the Bhartrhari corpus. But in making them available he at least intimated an understanding (as classical

scholars of his day almost never did) of the importance of the history of the reception of the poetry, of changing reading practices – what I term vernacular mediations, those moments of edition-making or interpretation that constitute an essential second domain of a text’s truths, beyond that of the putatively singular authorial one. What people in history have taken to be the truth (or in Sanskrit terms, *vyavaharika sat*) is as important as what may have once been *the* truth (*paramartha sat*). What we want to know is the history of these truths, and the ways in which they made sense in their worlds – and we want then to *apply* (in Hans-Georg Gadamer’s sense) the same analytic to ourselves, to understand what truth the text is making for us. Accessing these truths in all their variety and plurality is one of the great promises of philology.

It was, however, primarily to get at that one primordial textual truth that Kosambi studied 377 manuscripts of *ST* (out of a “conservative” estimate of 3,000 extant manuscripts), undoubtedly a larger number than has ever been used for any single text in the history of Indian literary criticism.⁴ He believed these could be divided into two grand regional recensions and some 12 lesser versions, an analysis that was a notable accomplishment in itself.⁵ What he found was not the orderly disagreement of manuscripts that classical philology had taught Sukthankar to expect. It was instead (as Sukthankar himself and his colleagues were to find, though to varying degrees, for the *Mahabharata*) the textual chaos of a beloved living tradition, where thousands of manuscripts diverge in the order of poems, their number, and their content, where the conflict between the “linguistic code” and the “bibliographic code” becomes utterly dizzying [McGann 1991: 48-68]. Kosambi could find only some 200 poems on which a sufficient number of manuscripts agreed closely enough to allow for inclusion in a hypothetical archetypal source (“Ur-Bhartrhari”). While clinging to a Lachmannian image of orderly dispersal – a neatly branching European oak – Kosambi seems to have felt that a banyan’s controlled anarchy of aerial shoots and roots (Bernard Cohn’s wonderful analogy) offered an arboreal figure far more pertinent to the Indian textual condition [Cohn 1985: 327].

I say “seems to have felt” since Kosambi never offered an explicit defence of his philological method – as opposed to his general, and far more innovative, interdisciplinary historical method – or an argument about Indian difference in the world of textuality, in order to trim the universalist pretensions of European philological theory. In fact, India reveals cultural processes that seem altogether inassimilable to that theory, in the same way we find it to reveal social and political processes inassimilable to European social or political science. We can observe how orality could thrive utterly unimpeded by the rise of literacy, so that in a work like the *Mahabharata* a wide spectrum of communicative media came to be sedimented over the centuries (some sections were transmitted entirely orally, others entirely in written form, and yet others in a mixture of the two, presumably in relation to their performativity); how regions tended to produce their own recensions of given works, with their own effective history, among which sometimes none evinces primacy; or how some genres were completely open to variation or expansion (the epics,

for instance) while others remained almost completely closed (the *mahakavyas*, or great courtly poems).

Core Verses

All that said, the complex reception history of the Bhartrhari corpus still needs to be reconciled with a more familiar genetic history disclosed not only by a concrete core of stable verses – it is Kosambi’s signal accomplishment to have demonstrated the existence of this stable core buried in the slag heap of tradition – but by an attribute more difficult to define yet no less real. There is something about those 200 poems, and more than a few of the 150 classified by Kosambi as doubtful, that marks them off from almost all other Sanskrit literature, a personal voice of the sort one hears only rarely, in Catullus, say, or Du Fu, or Heine. In the Sanskrit world no one – with the exception of a stray verse here of Bhavabhuti, or one there of Dharmakirti – wrote the sort of verses we find in the Bhartrhari corpus, such as this one:

I never rightly fixed my thoughts
on the foot of God, to end rebirth,
I gained no moral strength enough
to force open the gate of heaven,
not even in dreams did I embrace
the full breasts of a woman – I did
nothing but act as an axe to lay waste
the forest of my mother’s youth.

Kosambi himself was unable to reconcile this incontestable if maddeningly elusive authorial presence – what today would be called an almost confessional voice – with the complex history of the transmission of his work and the various identities of the author mirrored in that history: the indecisive Buddhist monk, the learned king, the wise ascetic, the Vedantic mystic.⁶ But if anyone in the future proves able to do so, it will be because of the materials Kosambi provided.

The *SRK* presented a rather different kind of text-critical problem. There exist only three partial manuscripts of the anthology, though a large number of the poems it includes are represented both in the manuscripts of the works from which the poems were selected and in other later anthologies. (For many of the great Pala-era poets such as Yogesvara, the *SRK*, which was produced at a Pala-supported Buddhist monastery, is our only source – and their work is one of the anthology’s great revelations.) Here the great contribution of Kosambi, along with V V Gokhale (1957), his collaborator, was, first, to have adjudicated with great care among the various readings in manuscripts often very difficult to read, printing the most credible version possible while respecting Vidyakara’s authority, and, second, to have provided a historical catalogue raisonné, so to call it, of the poets included in the work. Although Daniel Ingalls, the translator of the anthology, was later to suggest more than 200 changes to the text, Kosambi’s *SRK* stands as one of the most valuable works in the history of Sanskrit philology.

2

Why should Kosambi, a mathematician by training and a Marxist by persuasion, have cared about Bhartrhari’s poetry or Vidyakara’s anthology? Why did he almost drive himself mad editing the first (“Baba has nearly lost his mind in the work”, says Jinavijayamuni

in the foreword), and spend so many of his productive years editing the second? He certainly developed a theory to explain the nature of this literature. But although as we will see this theory is in some way connected with his philological method, insofar at least as both show the same unquestioned commitment to positivist science and singular truth – there is one correct reading of a text, a society, a history⁷ – it does little to explain the nature of his deep involvement with the literature. On the contrary, it is hard not to feel that the two are in serious tension, and that the theory is a mechanical and ill-fitting adjunct to an inherited passion that long antedated it.⁸

Kosambi's cultural theory is only briefly enunciated in the Bhartrhari book, though it is trumpeted in the dedication – or more justly, the provocation – whose Sanskrit expression is meant to embody the very tension: *nutana-manava-samajasya puras-caranam marx-engels-lenin-namadheyam tejasvinam maha-manavanam punita-smaran-artham* (“To the sacred memory of the great and glorious pioneers of today's society, Marx, Engels, Lenin”):

The dedication...is to the men from whose writings I first learned that society can and must be changed before we attain the stage at which human history will begin. The senseless bloodshed and increasing distress of our times are inevitable only because of the present class-structure of society; Bhartrhari's poetry of frustration provides at most an escape, but no solution [Kosambi 1948: 11].

The “literary physiognomy” of Bhartrhari with his “poetry of frustration” – Kosambi's characterisation of the powerful poem translated above, among others – is reduced in the introduction to *ST* to that of a “miserable class”, the brahmins, who shared his frustrations. Bhartrhari's popularity is attested by centuries-long reproduction of manuscripts across the subcontinent, copied not just by and for brahmin elites but by kayasthas, Dadupanthis, Nath yogins, and a host of others across the social spectrum, including simple everyday readers, in vast numbers unknown for any other work of classical Sanskrit literature. Kosambi explains this rich complexity by a single fact, namely the growth of that class whose misery resulted from the contradiction of their status and their power, “the anomalous position of possessing knowledge of Sanskrit but no certainty of employment” [Kosambi 1948: 81].⁹

‘Brahmanical Class Parasitism’

The introduction to the *SRK* presents the story of brahmanical class parasitism in a fuller form, but – and here I confess my surprise on revisiting work that so impressed me almost 40 years ago – with argument shallower than I remembered and a disdain that is almost Olympian. The line of thought is adequately signalled in the subheadings: ‘The Basis of Feudal Sanskrit Literature’, ‘The Twilight of the Gods’, ‘The Social Functions of Literature’. Sanskrit, for Kosambi, was a language that had lost all contact with the sensuous world of “real life” in ancient India (some lives being apparently more real than others); it was purely an instrument of elite power and “legitimisation” of power. As for the actual life of Sanskrit in society, it is altogether tangential to Kosambi's analysis: Given that India lacks the records to write normal empirical scholarship since “the episodes and details are lacking”, Kosambi can make a necessity of what to him is a virtue,

“to specify the basic theory” that would explain the data if we had it. This theory requires an analysis that “must therefore derive from the class divisions of every society in which literature was cultivated”. The ruling class in India was not a rising class and hence could never view the interests of all as interests of its own; its poets, and the priests who were their confreres, could therefore never transcend the narrow sectional interests of the elites. No new classes inevitably meant no new literature, and this held true in India until the late colonial period (Bankim, Tagore, etc); preceding this were endless “centuries of dreary classical imitation, even in the vernaculars”. As for the Sanskrit poets themselves, their work “necessarily” carried the stamp of parasitism and decay. This prohibited them from ever addressing “major problems of the individual spirit” or of humanity at large, and it condemned their works and biographies to near oblivion [Kosambi 1957: xlv-lxii].

3

There is no question that Kosambi sought to revitalise what he viewed as a moribund scholarly practice, and that for many students of the era and into the 1970s the work was electrifyingly transgressive – even to formulate a theoretical approach, of whatever stamp, to the field was unprecedented. What remains vital in this theory is another question, and to try to find an answer I examine it briefly on three fronts: its understanding of the social history of Sanskrit; its historical and economic foundations; and its metatheoretical presuppositions.

“Neither [the Sanskrit] language nor [its] literature were for the vulgar herd”, Kosambi asserts; “Sanskrit meant less to [the ‘proletariat’ of medieval India] than Greek to the soldiers of Marcus Aurelius” [1957: xli-xlii].¹⁰ Fifty years after Kosambi wrote this we have still a long way to go in developing an even remotely adequate social history of Sanskrit literary culture. But it is becoming increasingly clear that brahmins were not alone in writing Sanskrit poetry; Buddhists and Jains wrote it, too, studied it, taught it, and cherished it. And the social spectrum of secular Sanskrit seems to have been far wider than that: How else are we to understand verses from a 13th-century literary anthology that praise the Sanskrit poetry of a simple potter named Ghrona (“Caste is no constraint for those rendered pure by the Goddess of Speech”) or that of a chandala named Divakara (“Ah, what power does the Goddess of Speech possess, that Divakara should have been a member of the literary circle of King Harsha, and the equal of Bana and Mayura”).¹¹ Manuscript colophons, a huge and (for social history) as yet almost untouched archive, give abundant evidence that the readership of Sanskrit far exceeded the bounds of Kosambi's “miserable class”. The most varied testimony from later periods also tells a story incompatible with Kosambi's narrative. Consider just the Jain merchant Banarsidas' autobiographical *Ardhakathanak* (1641). Here he recounts how as a child he learned Sanskrit in addition to Prakrit and various vernaculars, that he studied a wide range of Sanskrit shastric materials, and translated a Sanskrit *namamala* into Hindi (it is extant, and dated 1613) along with a Jain Sanskrit work. Brahmins no doubt typically promoted themselves as the custodians of the language, but it is to swallow their ideology whole to equate

Sanskrit and brahmanism, as Kosambi, to say nothing of other far less critical scholars, invariably does.

'Feudalism' in Medieval India

Kosambi's sense of the "feudal" structure of medieval Indian culture-power, as it emerges from his literary-historical scholarship, affiliates him with the strong universalist tendencies of much Indian Marxist thought of the time, which held not only that Marx's social theory exhausted the possible forms of social life, but that every society was destined to experience all these forms in sequence, including what is most important for our present concerns, feudalism.¹² Here is not the place to recapitulate the long feudalism debate that continues to choke the landscape of medieval Indian historiography like kudzu weed [Byres and Mukhia 1985].¹³ The contemporary literary or intellectual historian, however, would hardly hesitate before confessing that it has been singularly sterile. Its dust-dry shastric exercises over tax or rent, peasant or serf, class or caste are often completely a priori and devoid of any engagement with real empirical data and actual texts. They have little help to offer to those trying to make any sense of the real nature of polity or the character and grounds of cultural change. After half a century of discourse on feudalism, we still seem to have little idea about the political order in middle-period India. To repeat questions I ask elsewhere, "Was [it] segmentary in the African sense or feudal in the European? Did the polity consist of hierarchically parcellated authority with ritual hegemony at the centre, or did it wither

away under vast transfers of wealth to a feudal nobility? Was the state the Great Beast, the Great Fraud, or the Great Drama?" [Pollock 2006: 6]. Moreover, participants in the debate often interpreted cultural production mechanically according to an inflexible economism and an equally dismal functionalism; as Kosambi himself put it, real history is the story of the development of productive forces; "any other type of history deals only with the superstructure, not with the essentials" [2002: 794]. If the model of feudalism was the way to restore to Indian culture-power formations something of their historical dynamism in order to erase the stain of stasis imputed by colonialism, these formations risked losing their specificity along the way. Why even bother to study them if we know in advance what they should mean? Kosambi's work shows this risk was real and present.

Finding precisely what theory prompts us to look for is a ubiquitous danger, one that engulfed communist politics, too, whose often uncritical "philology" similarly led to a search everywhere for what used to be called "the correct line". But the problem, and the irony, was doubled in the colonial context. Kosambi's historical theory unquestioningly accepts that the world works in uniform, law-like ways, and these laws have been discovered by western science. Equating as he did Marx with Carl Friedrich Gauss, Michael Faraday, and Charles Darwin, he would hardly have been prepared to allow that the social science developed out of the sociality of 19th century Europe was specific to that world (though good Marxist theory – with social existence determining social consciousness – would seem to require this radical historical difference), and therefore

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not easily, and perhaps not logically, transposed across space and time. Yet scholars increasingly argue that the history of capitalism, let alone feudalism, produced no such uniformity or universalism, upon which a supposed science of history was in part to be built.¹⁴

Kosambi's general cultural theory and metatheoretical assumptions, to turn to my last rubric, are derived from the darkest and most undialectical period of Marxist intellectual history, Stalin's *Diamat* of the 1940s compounded with Plekhanov's earlier historical materialist vision of literary change. Here all cultural particularities and differences are dissolved in the universal solvent of class. Kosambi was not alone in this, of course; the "epistemic inability to see any stratificational kind other than class" is part of the history of Indian Marxism.¹⁵ It is class alone that can serve as a diagnostic for the judgment about literature: what is to be accepted and cherished as accelerating the movement of history, what is to be denounced and discarded as retarding it. Kosambi's application of this theory shows all the flaws we have already met: anachronism, false comparison, misapplication of a social-science apparatus developed out of and for 19th century capitalist Europe to a non-capitalist Indian world; a proclivity for allowing theory to shape the interpretation of texts rather than to permit the evidence of texts to reshape theory, since our concern should apparently be less with what social actors did think and write than with what, in our theoretical view, they should have thought or written. There is a special impropriety to his arguments in the case of the *SRK*, however, with its remarkable "poetry of village and field," whose complex sociality Ingalls was the first to grasp though never theorise. Here are two of Ingalls' translations:

Somehow, my wife, you must keep us and the children
alive until the summer months are over.

The rains will come then, making gourds and pumpkins grow aplenty,
and we shall fare like kings.

* * *

The children starving, looking like so many corpses,
the relative who spurns me, the water pot
patched up with lac – these do not hurt so much
as seeing the woman from next door, annoyed
and smiling scornfully when every day my wife
must beg a needle to mend her tattered dress [Ingalls 1968: 257].

This is poetry Kosambi cannot assimilate to his theory; it is dismissed as the "poverty of the intelligentsia", as if Brecht's poverty, or Villon's, or Cervantes', was not an intellectual's poverty [Ingalls 1954].¹⁶

4

Kosambi's philosophy, in contrast to his philology, was received with cold silence by cold war-era western Indologists, politically conservative as most were and constitutionally incapable of any theoretically informed response.¹⁷ Only Ingalls, his editor, paid him the courtesy of serious engagement. He too observed that Kosambi's ideas were specific to the world out of which they originally arose and faltered against the histories of China and India; that the standards of judgment he employed were entirely alien to the standards by which the poets measured themselves (Kosambi makes no reference anywhere to Sanskrit *alankara* and *rasa-sastra*, probably the most sophisticated discourses on the nature of literature in the premodern world); that culture is not always completely homomorphic with power (in his own words, "Must

we hate the intricacies of [the 10th century Sanskrit playwright] Murari because we hate the social system of his time?"). In the end, however, Ingalls was able to oppose to Kosambi's scientific pretensions only the disinterested interest of a Kantian subjectivist aestheticism: "The poetry of Bhartrhari remains beautiful and sometimes truly great," he wrote in reference to *SR*; whereas in *SRK* he could only complain how unreasonable was the man "who will not listen to beauty until he knows that it comes from a new economic class", as if to "listen to beauty" were itself an entirely unmediated act, unaffected by history [1965: 51-53; 1950: 262].¹⁸

To ask what claims Bhartrhari or Sanskrit literature (or the Indian past as such) makes upon us here and now is indeed one of the most interesting if intractable puzzles that a historicist cultural criticism is compelled to confront, especially a Marxist criticism – after all, its first clear formulation is given 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. The difficulty is that they still afford us artistic pleasure and that in a certain respect they count as a norm and as an unattainable model" [Marx 1973: 111]. Hegel posed the same problem earlier in a more lyrical vein in the *Phenomenology*:

A friendly fate presents [the works of classical antiquity] to us as a girl might offer those fruits. We have not the real life of their being – the tree that bore them, the earth and elements, the climate that constituted their substance, the seasonal changes that governed their growth. Nor does fate give us, with those works of art, their world, the spring and summer of the moral life in which they bloomed and ripened but only the veiled memory of this reality.¹⁹

How do philologists who retain a fundamental commitment to historicism and to grasping the relationship of culture and power – and who thus remain Marxists *après la lettre* and deeply sympathetic to Kosambi's project – respond to Marx's difficulty? How is it we actually want and are able to eat, and be nourished by, the fruit offered by Hegel's *phalwali*?

We cannot dis sever a text from the world in which it originated. Philology demonstrates the truth of this proposition in every line we read – which becomes unintelligible in the absence of a grounded understanding of the language of that world, even in the case of a language like Sanskrit that sought to occlude its own grounding in space and time. And "world" of course means the whole world, not just other texts but the political conditions of the text's possibility. At the same time, we cannot deny a text's capacity to speak to us in the present; it is part of the history that has made us what we are, all of us (for texts do not respect the silly boundaries drawn and defended by cultural nationalists). Kosambi understated that capacity of the text, blinkered by his concentration on its historical origins, and a very partial, often anachronistic, and Euro-derivative view of those origins (unlike Marx himself, we should note, who was open to the pull of Greek works even though the society from which they emerged had been deformed by slavery); Ingalls understated the text's historical origins, blinkered by his concentration on its very capacity to speak to us still, while ignoring the fact that the claims of our historicity are not satisfied by pure subjectivism. Since our history is made up of and emerges out of that of earlier worlds, it is precisely in coming to understand them that we attain an understanding of our own historicity. Kosambi and Ingalls need each other,

therefore – perhaps this was the unacknowledged basis of their deep friendship²⁰ – and both in addition need the long and deep history that connects the text’s and the reader’s historicity, the sum total of vernacular mediations that constitute the full range of the text’s truths.

5

Cultural Theory since Kosambi

What has happened to critical cultural theory in the 50 years since Kosambi’s version of scientific Marxism? Everything. Any remotely adequate list would have to include Antonio Gramsci’s rich studies of Italian language, literature, and history, and of course his ideas of hegemony (from the 1930s but made available only in the 1970s); Raymond Williams’ cultural materialism that exploded the idea that culture was not a material practice, along with his concept of “structure of feeling” of the “deep community” above and beyond any given class; Louis Althusser’s structural Marxism and the idea of culture as expressive product of a totality in contrast to the mechanical causal output of an economic base; Gadamer’s historicist-antihistoricist hermeneutics with its understanding of “application” – the unavoidable historicity of the reader confronting the unavoidable historicity of the text (a concept that has a deeply radical potential often ignored due to Gadamer’s cultural conservatism); Michel Foucault’s new history of discourse, discursive formations, epistemic change and ruptures, and regimes of truth; Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and field, which resolutely contest the reduction of culture to power; and perhaps above all postcolonialism, that omnibus term for all manner of resistance to western epistemic domination.²¹

Central to all this contestation is a set of ideas and urges that are not easily disentangled: a disenchantment with the claims of a science of man and a discrediting of its tall tales of directionality in historical change (emancipation, enlightenment, the various stages of historical evolution), and a scepticism towards the trans-historical validity of its conceptual categories (ideology, legitimation, the unconscious); a refusal to make the cultural simply epiphenomenal to the economic, social, or political; an awareness of the plurality of textual truths across historical eras, and of their historical truth beyond any simple correspondence with positive fact, in other words, the historical facticity of their imaginations and lies; a desire to find what is specific to local forms of life; and, increasingly, a rejection of systematicity and of the mechanical a priori application of theory, a willingness to challenge theory’s omnipotence and omniscience with the realities of the particularities and messiness of history. The development of critical political theory and practice in India during the same period would show a similar decline of universalisms like Marxism-Leninism and the ascendancy, and success, of located – or in Sudipta Kaviraj’s term, better translated – doctrines such as Ambedkarism.

Vitality of Political Engagement

Although Kosambi’s belief in a single total theory is long dead, the political engagement that gave it life has gained vitality over the years. Culture and power are two sides of the same coin, and it is the task of a critical philology to read both – not just the texts of literature but the texts of the political, too. And what have we greater need of today, when the unconstrained power of capitalism (no less than its one-time alternative, state socialism) has brought the Earth as a whole to the brink of *yuganta*? Kosambi deserves to be celebrated for his readiness – especially in view of what was on offer at that time in the west, a timid formalism inside the seminar room and a virulent anticommunism outside – to put on the table a set of critical questions and to try to find answers to them: Why do we, here and now, care about all that back then? What does it mean to us to study the past, what does it mean to our future? Kosambi believed, wrongly in my view, that we could in a sense know the answer in advance, whereby Indian data became just more raw material for the Lancashire mills of western science. Perhaps we have since learned that if the past is studied in a spirit of theoretical openness – and not as if we knew beforehand what it was going to tell us – it might teach us something we do not already know, and make once-old resources, of culture or power, newly available to us. Is there any greater inducement for the study of how the world was before capitalist globalisation has almost wiped the slate clean?

In raising the question of studying the past, however, we encounter one of the great challenges confronting the well-being of Indian scholarship today, one that would likely have astonished Kosambi himself: the cultural ecocide that has almost destroyed millennia-long traditions of language and literature. How are the pasts that produced us to be understood if no one can any longer read the languages in which they are embodied? It is not going too far to predict, I fear, that within a generation the number of people able to access the classical, medieval, or even early modern vernacular archive of India – in Bangla, Kannada, Marathi, Telugu, and so on – will have approached a statistical zero. This has already happened with Apabhramsha and the Prakrits, and real expertise in Indo-Persian is fast disappearing. As for Sanskrit, how saddened Kosambi would likely have been, despite his evaluation, to see this great tradition stultified in the bloodless teaching and bland research often practised in Indian colleges and universities, or captured and demeaned by the most retrograde and *unphilological* forces in the Indian polity, or, the worst fate of all, simply forgotten. In fact, the most pressing question to raise on the occasion of commemorating Kosambi’s contribution to Sanskrit may be, not why he used this method or defended that theory – though it is not the least of his achievements to force such questions upon us – but rather why India has not produced any scholar to succeed him, and what if anything can still be done about it.

NOTES

1 This is a chapter in a still largely untold counter-narrative to Foucault’s historically and spatially foreshortened account of the “birth of philology” in Berlin c 1800.
2 See Bloch 1990; Hult 1991; Cerquiglioni 1999.

3 Preliminary studies are Colas 1999; Pollock 2003: 111-14.
4 Kosambi certainly acknowledges the contribution of his collaborator, K V Krishnamoorthi Sharma, but the full extent of the pundit’s labour is unclear to me.

5 It was challenged in part by Emeneau (1950).
6 While Kosambi felt that “a certain type of stanza came to be attracted to the collection” he remained convinced, as do I on a good day, that “the seeds must necessarily have been present in the original collection to permit such growth” (1948: 81).

- Ingalls, by contrast, felt that “the present collection, even the 200 ‘certain’ poems, must contain poems by more than one poet” (1950: 260). In the end, it is one person’s feelings against another’s.
- 7 The same is strikingly true of Kosambi’s European doppelganger, Sebastiano Timpanaro. His commitment to philological positivism was in itself a political commitment though one he seems not to have argued out anywhere. Timpanaro’s last works, devoted to the history of the reception of Vergil in antiquity, thus aim to capture, not the vernacular mediations critical to our understanding of the plurality of truth in history, but rather the singular truth of the one “real” reading. See also Zetzl 2002.
 - 8 I am not entirely sure of this passion though it seems self-evident from the work. On the other hand Kosambi’s complaints about Sanskrit (e.g., “The Sanskrit language is so indefinite, with so many meanings for each word in literary usage . . . that the same phrase can give a dozen different translations,” 2002: 794) call to mind George Bernard Shaw (“I preferred Caesar, because his statement that Gaul is divided into three parts, though neither interesting nor true, was the only Latin sentence I could translate at sight”).
 - 9 An odd way to describe a putatively feudal formation.
 - 10 Marcus Aurelius wrote his *Meditations* in Greek while leading his Latin-speaking soldiers in combat in the Balkans.
 - 11 See *Suktimuktavali*, p 45 nos 69 and 70 (the anthology was well known to Kosambi).
 - 12 Kaviraj 2008 gives a superb overview of the place of both “feudalism” and “class” in the quest for specifying the precapitalist Indian social form.
 - 13 The debates continue with undiminished fervour, see Jha 2000, for example, and of course Sharma 2001.
 - 14 “The problem of capitalist modernity cannot any longer be seen simply as a sociological problem of historical transition (as in the famous ‘transition debates’ in European history), but as a problem of translation, as well,” [Chakrabarty 2000: 17]; see 46-71 for an analysis of the theorem of a uniform global history of capital.
 - 15 Kaviraj 2008 is especially informative on the enduring political consequences of this conceptual failure. See also Chakrabarty 2000: 242-43, which documents with Kosambi’s texts the problems his Marxism posed for his understanding of his own society in Pune in the 1950s.
 - 16 Kosambi’s sense of Sanskrit literary history was contradictory. His historical account of Sanskrit anthology poets was the best available at the time (1957: lxiii-cvi). At the same time he ignored the tradition of Sanskrit satire (1957: lx), and would reject out of hand remarkable works like the *Prthvi-rajya-vijaya*, a powerful contemporaneous account of Prithviraja III that he dismissed as “feeble” (1957: xlvi).
 - 17 “The personal political views that Kosambi expresses over the literary value of *subhasita*-poetry . . . can be left aside. To be sure he has the right to present them, but we claim the right to ignore them” [Rau 1960: 81]; “This reviewer has however some doubts about the propriety of the insertion of sections 6-8 [in the introduction to *SRK*]. It seems to him that they are out of place and unnecessary for the analysis of this anthology” [Sternbach 1958: 318].
 - 18 His interactions with Kosambi over the *SRK* introduction are detailed in Ingalls 1974.
 - 19 Cited and discussed in Gadamer 1996: 167-69.
 - 20 Recounted in Ingalls 1974.
 - 21 Let us not pretend that any of these ideas are simple. Milner and Browitt 2003 is a convenient overview that shows how risky synopsis is.

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