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The alternative classicism of classical India

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UNDERSTANDING 'classical civilization' in India (or anywhere else) means understanding processes as well as products, interactions as well as inventions. India has been in conversation with the West (Persia, Greece, Rome), and the East (Southeast Asia, China), for much of its history, and has borrowed from and lent to each, though the identification of such borrowings is often obscured by ambiguous evidence and their interpretation contested by conflicting ideologies of civilizational change. Beyond such processes and interactions, however, there are undoubtedly civilizational products and inventions in India that seem, if not unique, at least defining of its cultural formation, both for their distinctiveness and their durability. In this brief overview, I want first to revisit some of the data concerning the interactions between India and Greece, before turning to a sketch of some of the distinctive and durable values produced in India – both those that are explicitly enunciated in the tradition and those that, more elusively, are embodied in practice – that constitute a certain alternative classicity.

What makes a civilization and what makes a civilization classical are questions that, both of them, pose two serious risks: first, anachronism, or attempting to understand premodern phenomena by way of modern categories that are likely to have been unintelligible to the participants themselves; second, substantialism, or treating something that is a processual phenomenon – culturally developed over time – as if it were some given, natural object. While acknowledging those risks we can still ask about general tendencies of practices: how those in some human groups differ from those in others, however mutable or even indeterminate the 'group' admittedly is; where those practices come from, how they change over time, or persist as elements of a tradition, however intangible 'tradition' may be as well – or come to be reinvented, which is not quite the same thing (it is instead, in the idiom of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, 'traditionalism'). Among the practices scholars have found usefully diagnostic of civilizational contours are forms of expressive writing we can call 'literature', and forms of systematic thought we can call 'philosophy'.

It is especially in areas of philosophy and literature that the interactions of Greece and India have been studied over the past two centuries, in general with ever-waning intensity, it must be admitted. The balance in that interaction has been skewed – toward Greece – both for good historical reasons and for bad ideological reasons. The bad ideological reasons derive from notions of civilization as something unevenly distributed over the world, with the great civilizational orders such as Greece imagined as pre-existent cornucopias of elements that are then disseminated, spore-like, across time and space. This is often called the diffusionist model, whereby, according to the American anthropologist Alfred Kroeber, always-already powerful and complete civilizations conferred their gifts upon ‘retarded or primitive cultures.’ The good historical reasons have to do with the fact that the West did move East in the fourth century BCE, in the form of Alexander’s campaigns, when for the first time India began to take on a certain solidity for Greeks – before then it was almost entirely the stuff of dreams.

For its part, however, India never went West in military terms. We hear only of traders, the occasional ambassador, sent in the first instance by the Indian emperor Ashoka c. 250 BCE (the pre-eminent political figure of the post-Alexandrian period and yet to whom – here we have a small index of the real place of India in the Greek world – there is not a single reference in any Greek text), and Buddhist missionaries (no other Indian religion besides Buddhism proselytized), though the numbers were likely far in excess of what our scanty sources report.

Prior to Alexander there are stories of philosophical influence of India upon Greece – most famously of Indian doctrines of transmigration on Pythagoras – but likely the only historically credible aspect of these stories, and certainly their most significant, is the very image of India as a land of sacred wisdom. Even after Alexander we find little of more substance. If Pyrrho’s skeptical philosophy, for example, was influenced by the *gymnosophistoi*, or ‘naked philosophers’, he met in India while in Alexander’s entourage (as the biographer of philosophers, Diogenes Laertius, reported more than half a millennium later), this hardly constitutes more than a bubble in the civilizational brew of Hellenism. In fact, very few Greeks after Alexander are actually known to have visited India; with Apollonius of Tyana (second century BCE), for example, we are still ‘in Gullivers Königreich Laputa and nicht in der realen Welt,’ as Eduard Meyer once put it. Of Indian influence on Greek literature there is not a trace. The one Greek translation of an Ashokan inscription and the few Indic terms appearing in Greek on Indo-Hellenic coins constitute intriguing but finally, in terms of conglomerate historical effects, entirely insignificant exceptions.

When we reverse the arrow and ask about Hellenistic influence on India, the historical record is only marginally richer. Excavations in the Hellenistic colonies established in Bactria (in today's northern Afghanistan) in the wake of Alexander's expedition have produced suggestive hints. The discovery in the 1970s of Ai Khanoum, a Greek *polis* on the southern bank of the Amu Darya (today's border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan), complete with theatre and fragments of Greek drama, give new substance to speculations about potential influences of Greek drama on Sanskrit (the backdrop curtain, for example, is called the *yavanikâ* – 'from Yavana', that is, Ionia, and armed Greek female guards appear in some plays). This genre in fact seems to have been invented by Buddhists and may thus share something of the inspiration that produced the stylistically hybrid art – part Greek, part Buddhist – of Gandhara (in today's northwest Pakistan).

But Indian drama, or at least in the form in which it left a manuscript trail, is first attested three centuries after Ai Khanoum was destroyed in nomadic invasions in the century before the start of the Common Era (it was only sparsely occupied thereafter), and in India, not Afghanistan. Moreover, Indian drama has social and aesthetic objectives that as we shall see are radically different from those of Hellenistic, to say nothing of Athenian, drama.

As for Gandharan art, it did not much circulate outside northwest Pakistan where it was born, and certainly had no lasting, transregional influence after the Kushan period (the name of the ruling lineages that followed the Indo-Hellenic kings in northwest India). A few centuries later, in 150 CE, in the domains of western India ruled by the Scythians (who like the Kushans entered Indian from Central Asia in the centuries around the start of the Common Era), someone named the 'lord of the Greeks' invented Indian astrology by translating a Hellenistic horoscopy into Sanskrit. India had long borrowed from the West in this regard; much of its notions of omens and portents was borrowed from Mesopotamia. By a process about which we have much less understanding, the seven-day week, along with day names sometimes calqued on those of the Greeks (*hemera heliou*, *hemera selenes*; *bhânu* [or *ravi*]-*vâsara*, *indu* [or *soma*]-*vâsara*; Sun-day, Mon-day), was eventually adopted in much of India, complementing, or driving out, an older fourteen-day lunar reckoning. More important than all this is the possibility that the Sanskrit language itself, long sequestered in the domain of ritual and religion, came first to be used for secular literature at precisely this time and in this place, perhaps with the model of Greek (or perhaps in fact Pahlavi, Middle Persian) in mind. Beyond this speculation, and these few examples, however, there is no further

explicit evidence of the influence of Greek or Scythian or other northwest literary culture on Indic literary culture.

I say ‘explicit’ because there are of course other ways cultures interact. Nineteenth-century scholarship was rife with hypotheses like that of the German Indologist Albrecht Weber (Was the Ramayana translated from Homer?) – which followed up the largely fantastical reports of later Greek scholars such as Dio Chrysostom, who reported that ‘Homer’s poetry is sung even in India, where they have translated it into their own speech and tongue’ – or the many scholars who argued just the opposite, that Homer was influenced by Indian epic poets. These are not so much wrong as incomplete. There was no doubt very wide circulation of cultural goods across the ancient world, such that the motif of Helen’s abduction may well have emerged out of the same unlocated matrix – no doubt Near Eastern and ‘Indo-European’ at once – that produced Sita’s abduction, Odysseus’ bow as well as Rama’s, Achilles’ heel as well as Krishna’s.

Aside from these scant possibilities in the literary sphere, was there any measurable influence of Greece upon India in the domain of philosophy, thus reversing what we have seen as the image of India as the source of wisdom (which we find not just in Greece but in Persia as well)? Most scholars have rejected this, and aside from the implications of dialogue (literally) offered by the celebrated *Milindapanha*, or Questions of King Menander (supposedly the Indo-Bactrian king of the second century BCE; the work itself is usually dated one to three centuries later), there is no hard evidence. Indeed, there is no Greek influence in *Milindapanha* itself, and it breathes far more the air of the Upanishads than of Plato.

It has, however, been argued recently by the accomplished Indologist Johannes Bronkhorst that the very conditions of possibility of Indian philosophy are found in interactions with Indo-Greeks. ‘What may be considered the first indigenous philosophical system of the Indian subcontinent ... was a Buddhist system, created in Northwestern India under the influence of Greek culture.’ Indians are said to have learned ‘the art of rational discussion’ from the Greeks in public debate, where ‘people defend their opinions against others who disagree with them but are obliged to listen to arguments.’ ‘Greek culture’ does not however mean ‘Greek thought,’ for there are admittedly ‘no Greek elements in Buddhist thought, nor indeed in any other school of Indian philosophy.’ But again, empirical evidence is wanting; and indeed, it is hard not to see rational debate elsewhere than in northwest Buddhism (e.g., the

celebrated Pali work on philosophy known as the *Brahmajalasutta*, the Sutra of the Net of Brahma), and outside Buddhism altogether in the pre-Hellenistic period.

We have, then, entirely as expected, a complex picture of interactions. Greece and India may have exchanged ideas, motifs, cultural styles, and so on, or drawn them from a common pool. And it is no longer entirely clear why we should care which was the case – we are not after all being asked to adjudicate intellectual property rights – except to the degree the question of origins of such cultural goods enables us to assess the transformations introduced by people in each sphere according to their own particular needs and aspirations. These transformations produced practices whose reproduction over the long term helped create particular kinds of classicity.

Let me turn now to what this classicity looks like in the Indian case, drawing (and perhaps overdrawing) some contrasts with the Greek. I start with the Indian embodiment of two cultural practices already discussed: epic and drama, on the one hand, and philosophical argument, on the other. My generalizations must of necessity be brutally brief.

Heroic epic in India gradually but in the end fully – and inextricably – accommodated itself to transcendent concerns. (The Hellenistic worship of Homeric heroes suggests that something similar might have developed in Greece had the Homeric tradition remained alive for another millennium.) In the *Ramayana* the problem of the political, left catastrophically unsettled in the *Mahabharata*, where civil war leads to the death of most of the combatants and ‘death in life’ for the survivors, was solved by the divinization, or perhaps better sacralization, of kingship. But the *Mahabharata*’s terrible vision became a transcendent one, too. Indeed, not a single manuscript of the epic allows us to get anywhere close to a *Mahabharata* that does not ascribe the central role to the god Krishna, as many western scholars so fervently hoped before the critical edition of the work was produced (1933-1971). And for many traditional readers of this work, its negative potential offered an important complement to the *Ramayana*. As a great ninth-century critic put it, ‘The main effect of the work, in general, is the production of despair with the world... in hope of rescuing the world from the vast sea of delusion in which it is sinking.’

If the Indian epic remains Hegel’s national narrative, it is the nation *sub specie aeternitatis* – not by mere aesthetic implication (as per

Wittgenstein, ‘The work of art is the object seen *sub specie aeternitatis*’) but explicitly so, by virtue of the immediate presence of divinities. Something similar holds true for Indian drama. The whole of dramaturgy and especially the theory of aesthetic response (*rasa* is the Sanskrit term), which represents one of the defining traits of Indian classicism, pivots on the paradigmatic: what is always going to be true of human beings. Indian drama sought to explore, not the anomalous act of civic defiance of an Antigone or the quest for self-knowledge of an individual such as Oedipus, but the nature of both civic and emotional *typicality*. Drama thus became the school for the cultivation of affective and social normativity.

In addition to this ‘transcendental paradigmaticism’ (to give it a fancy name), a second set of values consists of what we might (again in a fancy way) call ‘argumentative pluralism’, something we see well illustrated in the history of Indian philosophy. The earliest philosophical discourse in India as we find it in the Upanishads does bear powerful comparison to Greek, especially pre-Socratic, thought: both sought for some principle to make sense of the beginning of things (Greeks called this the *arche*; Indians used various words for the same idea). But classical Indian philosophy, while to be sure manifestly engaged (and at a very sophisticated level) with questions of epistemology, philosophy of language and mind, and metaphysics, is arguably in the end concerned with learning to live with others.

From an early date thinkers appeared on the scene – Buddhists, Jains, materialists, radical renunciants of every stripe – who rejected the very foundations of what (in hindsight) appears to us to have been a dominant view of the world, as found in Brahmanism; thinkers who were really *other* and who attacked the scriptural heritage, the ritual practices, the social hierarchy... ultimately everything in that philosophy from its ontology to its theology.

The classicity of Indian philosophy lies precisely in the development of reasoned argument in the face of wholesale conceptual assaults – of the sort that never occurred in the Greek world since Greeks never philosophized with those, above all non-Greeks, who could have delivered such assaults. For classical India, pluralism itself became something of an ultimate value. A verse composed by the great eleventh-century philosopher king, Bhoja of Dhar, offers a perfect encapsulation: ‘Learn Buddhism, behave like a Jain, follow Vedic norms, and meditate on Shiva.’

Many of these values, I should note, were to be recreated in modern India by thinkers as diverse as B. R. Ambedkar, the leader of the

‘untouchable’ movement, and Mohandas Gandhi, who would draw on the classical tradition – the reasoned argument of Buddhism in the case of Ambedkar, for example, or the transcendental paradigmaticism of the *Bhagavad Gita* in the case of Gandhi – to forge a new kind of politics for a post-colonial state, a ‘righteous republic’, as a recent book of that name describes it.

Aside from these values that are explicitly enunciated in the tradition – reasoned argument in the service of pluralism and transcendental paradigmaticism – there are others that, as I have mentioned, are more elusive insofar as they went unmarked in theoretical reflection and were embodied only in practice. These include attitudes about the world that are typified above all in the history of the Sanskrit language itself. One is what I have called non-coercive cosmopolitanism, a form of broad cultural participation which knew nothing of the tyranny to ‘be like us’ that marks western cosmopolitanism from Romanization to modern western globalization. Wherever Sanskrit travelled – and it travelled everywhere, from today’s Afghanistan to the edge of maritime Southeast Asia – it travelled not with armies but with professional *religiosi* and scholars. Unlike Greek literary culture, in which non-Greeks could, typically, not participate, Sanskrit literary culture was open to adoption by everyone everywhere, and was eventually taken up by Buddhists on the Iranian plateau, Khmer princes in Angkor Wat, and all across the space between. This cosmopolitanism consisted of a certain vision of culture and power.

First, power was always thought of as something that was to be dispersed and shared, a decentralization that should be judged as a victory and not a defeat. (The political unification of India under colonialism is viewed as an achievement only, it would seem, by those who, bizarrely, as we now see, with Hegel, imagine the nation state as the ultimate realization of spirit, freedom, and reason.) Second, culture served to ennoble rather than merely to ‘legitimate’ power, unlike the culture-power relation we find in many cultures, achieving a kind of apotheosis in late capitalism. Last, the language that expressed both culture and power was one that, wherever it was adopted, was adopted freely and never under coercion.

Moreover, classical Sanskrit cosmopolitanism existed in a uniquely advantageous relationship with local ways of being. A small but suggestive index of Sanskrit’s relation to local styles of culture is the remarkable adaptability of the Sanskrit graphic sign itself – it was written in a vast variety of local scripts, thus displaying a

‘substitutability’ that made it (to adopt and extend the idea of Benedict Anderson) unique among the various ‘immense communities’ of pre-modernity. According to Indian classicity, you could thus be cosmopolitan while staying at home (indeed, widespread toponymic duplication – naming locales across, for example, Southeast Asia for Indian holy sites – is a perfect example of this). At the same time, the notion of staying home, of being local, in this classical world was unlike anything seen elsewhere. It was a *voluntary* vernacularity, which knew nothing of the compulsions of ethnicity.

Languages, for example, were ecological rather than ethnic phenomena. They pertained to regions and one took on a language when one entered a region: languages were typically named after such regions – such as Kannada, ‘the language of the land of black soil’ – rather than after peoples – such as French, ‘the language of the Franks.’ Language thus never *made peoples*, and was never linked with this or that particular kin group in the narratives of vernacular beginnings found from Sparta (with its ‘sown men’) to Rome (with its Trojan refugees) to medieval France (with its Brutus).

Voluntaristic vernacularism and non-coercive cosmopolitanism are values largely unnamed and untheorized in the classical tradition precisely because they were given and not produced, like the peoplehoods we know of from medieval Europe or the grand notions of compulsory cosmopolitanisms we find elsewhere (*hellenismos*, for example, or *latinitas*). And this silence points to something central about the character and existence of these two values: the one, a particularism that never expressed itself as an exclusion, and the other, a universalism that never objectified, let alone enforced, its universalism.

A longer essay would explore some of the negative virtues of Indian classicity: the absence of any absolutist state, of censorship, of a state religion, of excommunication, of inquisition or any other sort of systematic religious persecution. And, to be sure, since as Walter Benjamin famously declared, ‘no document of civilization ... is not at the same time a document of barbarism,’ Indian classicity shows positive vices: extreme hierarchy, for example, and forms – sometimes astonishingly inhuman forms – of social inequality such as untouchability.

What the study of the Indian classical past offers in the main, however, are instances of how to be human that seem all but inconceivable in the contemporary world. Voluntaristic vernacularism and non-coercive cosmopolitanism, along with transcendental paradigmaticism and argumentative pluralism, will convince some that Macaulay was right

when he declared India to be the ‘strangest of all possible anomalies.’ But anomalies to global modernity are precisely what we would expect, and perhaps precisely what we now most need.

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