

Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern South Asia: Introduction

SHELDON POLLOCK

The study of the impact of colonialism on culture and power has been the dominant arena of inquiry in the past two decades in South Asian studies. A large body of scholarship has been produced in the colonialism-and-X mode: colonialism and economy, colonialism and caste, colonialism and religious categories ... and the nation, masculinity, science, literature, art, law, historicity, empiricism, numeracy, and almost everything else. Much of this scholarship has been both substantively and theoretically exciting and provocative, and has changed the way we understand the transformative interactions between India and Europe from 1800 on.¹ Yet, as many of its practitioners would be the first to admit, colonial studies has often been skating on the thinnest ice, given how much it depends on a knowledge of the precolonial realities that colonialism encountered, and how little such knowledge we actually possess.

As I have tried to argue in various forums for some fifteen years – though it will seem breathtakingly banal to frame the issue in the only way it can be framed – we cannot know how colonialism changed South Asia if we do not know what was there to be changed.² In the domain of culture viewed broadly, and more specifically with respect to systematic forms of thought, understanding how Western knowledge and imagination won the day presupposes a comprehension more deeply grounded in social and epistemological facts than we now possess of how Indian knowledge and imagination lost – which in turn requires a better understanding of what exactly these were, how they worked, and who produced them. To date, hypotheses on the demise of Indian science and scholarship with the advent of colonialism seem largely dependent on interpretations dominant since the time of Max Weber, which take for granted the presumed uniqueness of Western rationality, technology, forms of citizenship, or capacity for capitalism, and the inevitability of their eventual conquest. These interpretations, however, were derived more from assumptions than from actual assessments of data, as Weber would likely have been the first to acknowledge,

and were based on now-discredited notions about the character and history of precolonial Indian economy and society.³ But then, as recent work shows all too clearly, our grasp of Western modernity itself shows the same kinds of epistemic and empirical gaps. Thinkers, especially sociological thinkers (for whom, as one wry observer has put it, “History tends to be the mildly annoying stuff which happens between one sociological model and another”), are far more inclined simply to imagine premodernity than to bother with the boring task of excavating it – and indeed, to imagine it purely as a counterpositive to their preconceptions about modernity. This criticism applies almost without exception to Gellner, Giddens, Habermas, Luhmann, and so on down the alphabet.

It’s not as if we don’t have the materials to make some serious sense of culture and power in early modern India (understood here as the period from about 1500 to 1800, after which British colonial power consolidated itself in the subcontinent and changed the rules of the knowledge game). In the sphere of imagination and its written expression, South Asia boasts a literary record far denser, in terms of sheer number of texts and centuries of unbroken multilingual literacy, than all of Greek and Latin and medieval European culture combined. In recognition of this richness, an international collaborative research project completed in 2003 undertook a remapping of the literary field across southern Asia especially during the late precolonial period and in relationship to larger cultural and political processes.⁴

With respect to science and scholarship, however, especially during this critical early modern period, in-depth research on most disciplines is virtually nonexistent. Again, the requisite materials exist in abundance. In fact, it can be argued that, with the coming of the Pax Mughalana from the latter half of the sixteenth century, a new and dynamic era of intellectual inquiry was inaugurated in many parts of the subcontinent. But whole libraries of the manuscripts produced over the following three centuries remain unread today. The factors contrib-

uting to this indifference would be worth weighing with care. One is certainly the diminished capacity of scholars today to actually read these materials, one of the most disturbing if little-remarked legacies of colonialism and modernization. But there are other factors. These include the old Orientalist-Romanticist credo that the importance of any Indian artifact or text or form of thought is directly proportional to its antiquity: the older it was, or such was the belief, the closer it would bring us to some Indo-Germanic *Urzeit* and the cradle of European life. Equally important is the colonial-era narrative of an Indian decline and fall before 1800, so central to the ideology of British imperialism and its civilizing-modernizing mission, which devalued the late precolonial period as an object of study. One salient example, noted by Allison Busch in the essay included in this volume, is the disdain with which the remarkable achievements of Hindi literature and literary science of the period of neoclassicism – the so-called *ritikal*, or Era of High Style, c. 1650–1850, a completely new cultural formation – were dismissed by colonized Indian intellectuals no less than by their colonial masters. As a result, many of the most important works of the period lie unedited to this day, and most of the fundamental questions, whether internal to the cultural history of India or external and comparative, remain unasked. (Why, for example, did both north India and France see the rise of powerful neoclassical movements of astonishing similarity at precisely the same period?) And this is true across the board. Our intellectual and cultural histories of the period accordingly remain grossly stunted.⁵

To gain some understanding of the style and substance of Indian thought during these centuries, a new collaborative research project, “Sanskrit Knowledge Systems on the Eve of Colonialism,” was initiated in 2001, with support from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the National Science Foundation. This project aims to examine eight disciplines in their bibliographical, prosopographical, and substantive dimensions, in order to understand better how scholars in the fields of language analysis, logic and epistemology, hermeneutics, poetics, moral-political thought, life science, astral science, and ritual understood their objects of study, what knowledge they produced, and in what specific social contexts.⁶

Restricting this research program to Sanskrit materials had at once pragmatic and historical justification. If the project was to remain historically responsible as well as manageable, it was as necessary to narrow the scope to a core language as it was to narrow it to core disciplines. But Sanskrit was not the only language of science and scholarship in early modern South Asia, and those who communicated in Sanskrit did not constitute the only community that generated systematic knowledge, though we are just beginning to understand how the division of

language-labor functioned and to clarify who used which languages for which purposes.⁷ Persian and vernacular intellectuals produced no less sophisticated work, sometimes in conversation with their Sanskrit-using colleagues – a conversation that seems to have taken place principally in the fields of astronomy and mathematics – but more often, it seems, segregated from them. (Precisely how and to what extent interaction occurred between these different communities now designated by their linguistic or religious preferences are problems in need of serious investigation.) Yet again, despite the quality and quantity and cultural-historical significance of these materials, very little scholarly attention is currently being devoted to them. While the comparative religion industry, in the United States at least, continues to claim ever-larger market share in the academy, it is almost impossible to find scholars who understand the importance of research on any aspect of precolonial science and scholarship in Persian, Arabic, or the regional languages. In Indo-Persian studies, for example, only in the last several years has any new research been undertaken on early modern aesthetics, historiography, philology, philosophy, or political thought.⁸ The same must be said of most regional-language traditions, with the notable exception of Telugu and Tamil, thanks to the remarkable collaborative efforts of Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam.⁹

In the hopes of stimulating new interest in the works of systematic thought in precolonial India, a seminar on “Forms of Knowledge in Early Modern South Asia” was organized at the University of Chicago in the academic year 2002–3. We were singularly fortunate to be able to call upon the talents of several of the leading scholars working in this area. Considerations of space prohibit a detailed review of their individual papers. It must suffice to note that most of the most important issues any account of our topic would be expected to address are present in the following collection either in elaborated form or *in nuce*: the development of new forms of language and ethnic self-identification (Guha); the scientification of vernacular cultural sensibilities (Busch); the actual practices of text editing and text circulation in the preprint era (Bangha); pedagogy and the production of bureaucrats in the Persianate sphere (Alam and Subrahmanyam); the intersection of imagination and information, what amounts to a kind of protoethnography (Sharma); and the development of science in relationship to empiricism outside of the usual European framework, where experience and religion seem to have come newly, even “modernly,” into tension with each other (Gyatso). Readers are unlikely to have heard of any of the fascinating characters who appear in the following pages: Jayarama Pindye, the multilingual poet at the Maratha court; Cintamani Tripathi, the poetician of *riti*; Nik Rai, the clerk-autobiographer; the Iranian émigré poet Nu-

ruddin Muhammad Zuhuri, ethnographer of Indian city life; or Dar-mo sMan-rams-pa, one of an inner group of physicians close to the Fifth Dalai Lama. Yet they will now enter the historical record for what they tell us about the creative reinvention of the world of South Asian thought in the late precolonial period – what I believe we will one day come to understand was an iceberg of creativity, of which the voices we hear in the following pages represent the merest tip.

The papers gathered together in this collection were either presented at the Chicago seminar itself, or solicited from colleagues who knew of and followed its progress. It is the first such collection in South Asian studies, and like all firsts, it is tentative and experimental. Plans are under way among the contributors to deepen and broaden their work on these themes for future collective publication.

I would like to thank all participants, both presenters and audience members, for their spirited engagement with the theme of the seminar, as well as the Committee on Southern Asian Studies at the University of Chicago, which generously provided the funding, and *Comparative Studies in South Asia, Africa, and the Middle East*, which graciously offered a venue for publication.

NOTES

¹For a recent review see D. A. Washbrook, “Orient and Occident: Colonial Discourse Theory and the Historiography of the British Empire,” in *The Oxford History of the British Empire*, vol. 5, *Historiography*, ed. Robin W. Winks (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

²See for example my “Deep Orientalism? Notes on Sanskrit and Power Beyond the Raj,” in *Orientalism and the Post-Colonial Predicament*, ed. Carol Breckenridge and Peter van der Veer (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1993).

³“Only in the West does science exist at a stage of development which we recognize today as valid”; “rational chemistry has been absent from all areas of culture except the West”; “all Indian political thought was lacking in a systematic method comparable to that of Aristotle,” and so on. See Max Weber, “Vorbemerkung,” in *Die protestantische Ethik und der Geist des Kapitalismus* (1904-5; repr., Tübingen: Mohr, 1934). Notable attempts at revision in economic history, to take only that dimension, include C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988); Sugata Bose, ed., *South Asia and World Capitalism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990); Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ed., *Merchants, Markets and the State in Early Modern India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990); David Washbrook, “From Comparative Sociology to Global History: Britain and India in the Pre-History of Modernity,” *Journal of Economic and Social History of the Orient* 40:4 (1997): 410–43.

⁴Sheldon Pollock, ed., *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003). For a new account specifically of political formations in early modern India, though concentrating on the eighteenth century and using much colonial archival material, see

Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Penumbra Visions: Making Politics in Early Modern South India* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

⁵Despite a growing interest in the early modern as a conceptual problematic, long-standing tendencies in Indian historiography have drastically narrowed the scope of inquiry. Edited volumes assessing the state of the field of research for the last century of our period, like Seema Alavi’s *The Eighteenth Century in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), or P. J. Marshall’s *The Eighteenth Century in Indian History: Evolution or Revolution?* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), resolutely exclude all questions of late precolonial scientific, literary, or intellectual culture. Even where the transformation of the latter is directly thematized, precolonial history is ignored; see Partha Chatterjee, ed., *Texts of Power: Emerging Disciplines in Colonial Bengal* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995); Gyan Prakash, *Another Reason: Science and the Imagination of Modern India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999); David Arnold, *Science, Technology and Medicine in Colonial India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

⁶Some preliminary results of this project are available in “Working Papers on Sanskrit Knowledge-Systems on the Eve of Colonialism I,” special issue, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 30:5 (2002); “Working Papers on Sanskrit Knowledge-Systems on the Eve of Colonialism II,” special issue, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 32:3 (2005); “Theory and Method in Indian Intellectual History,” special issue, *Journal of Indian Philosophy* (forthcoming).

⁷A first pass through this question is made in my “The Languages of Science in Early-Modern India,” in *Hallgrafs Commemoration Volume*, ed. K. Preisendanz (Vienna: Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2005).

⁸Exemplary work includes Muzaffar Alam, “The Culture and Politics of Persian in Precolonial Hindustan,” in Pollock, *Literary Cultures in History*; Muzaffar Alam, *The Languages of Political Islam: India 1200–1800* (London: Hurst and Co., 2004); Mohamad Tavakoli-Targhi, *Refashioning Iran: Orientalism, Occidentalism, and Historiography* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

⁹See for instance Velcheru Narayana Rao, David Shulman, and Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Textures of Time: Writing History in South India, 1600–1800* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), and “A New Imperial Idiom in the Sixteenth Century: Krishnadevaraya and his Political Theory of Vijayanagara,” in *South-Indian Horizons: Felicitation Volume for François Gros*, ed. Jean-Luc Chevillard (Pondicherry: Institut français de Pondichéry/Ecole française d’extrême-orient, 2004).