

WHAT SHOULD A CLASSICAL LIBRARY OF INDIA BE?

SHELDON POLLOCK

UNLIKE the three other dual-language series treated in this volume, the Murty Classical Library of India (MCLI) has constantly been challenged, both internally and externally, to define and defend the terms of its title and hence the nature of its project. Whereas no one is troubled by the claim to the *Classical* in the Loeb Classical Library, or worried about the periodization of *Medieval* in the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library, or confused by the meaning of *Renaissance* in the I Tatti Renaissance Library, in MCLI, *Classical*, *India*, and even *Library* are all open to contestation. And whereas no one seems to be troubled by the fact that non-Greeks and non-Latins, non-Anglo-Saxons, and non-Italians are editing these other series, the fact that most of MCLI's editors and authors are non-Indians has been, to some, a source of concern. I will address and try to clarify each of these categories in what follows, as well as the issue—new and disturbing and needing attention—of who may edit, translate, publish, or even read South Asian literature. By way of prelude I offer a brief account of the origins of MCLI.

I. THE FOUNDING OF THE MURTY CLASSICAL LIBRARY OF INDIA

The study of Sanskrit was often viewed—or at least it was viewed in the past, and at least at Harvard University, where I was trained—as linked with the study of Greek and Latin. Sanskrit in fact was once quasi-compulsory for undergraduate classicists as a course relating to the major. The reasoning behind this old linkage may have been vitiated by racialism (a spurious Aryanism conjured out of almost thin air) common to nineteenth-century philology, and founded on fantasies of India as the cradle of Europe, but it reflected the importance of thinking comparatively about the shared features of ancient languages and literatures and

about complex societies with long traditions of learning. A student of Classics and Sanskrit in the late 1960s, like me, who would have known about the Loeb Classical Library as a matter of course, would readily have dreamed of someday seeing a Sanskrit version of those green and red volumes.

The same dream presented itself to John Clay in the late 1950s, when he was a student of Sanskrit, Old Iranian, and Classics at Oxford. He left academia to make his fortune, but late in life he decided to turn his youthful ambition into a reality, with the creation of the Clay Sanskrit Library. CSL, of which I was Associate Editor and then General Editor, published fifty-six volumes between 2005 and 2009, when it was abruptly closed.

Mr. Clay's philanthropy was unparalleled and his initiative, if short-lived, visionary. CSL was, as the *Bhagavadgītā* might put it, a *sāttvika dāna*, a gift of pure benevolence for which no return, whether financial or egotistical, was expected; nothing beyond the growth of knowledge and the joy of seeing the slow expansion of a row of handsome little volumes that could fit, in James Loeb's much-cited phrase that John Clay often quoted, into a "gentleman's pocket."

There were three features of CSL, however, that concerned me from the start. (I leave aside the fact that the "gentleman's pocket" trim size turned out to be altogether inappropriate for Indic texts.) One was the exclusive focus on Sanskrit works, which raises several subordinate problems of its own. For one thing, Sanskrit never existed in a realm of pure isolation—"language of the gods" though it was held to be—hermetically sealed off from other languages and their literatures; on the contrary, it lived always and everywhere in the vast sea of local languages. Indeed, it is entirely clear from the historical record that no one ever played in the streets in Sanskrit, dreamed in Sanskrit, made love in Sanskrit—playing, dreaming, and loving of course being rather significant components of literary creativity. For another, Sanskrit was often in competition with other literary traditions for cultural ascendancy: a competition that started with regional languages from the middle of the first millennium on (beginning with those of the south of India—Tamil, Kannada, Telugu—but eventually in the north too), until by the middle of the second millennium Sanskrit was displaced from primacy, in many places, by Persian, a cosmopolitan language found also in West and Central Asia,

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or by Classical Hindi, a vernacular that had recently found itself transformed into transregional courtly language.

A second troubling feature of CSL was the decision to print the original Sanskrit text in Roman transliteration, and in fact in an especially odd system of transliteration invented ad hoc and baffling at times even to the editors. Last, CSL had no commitment to making its books available in South Asia itself, as if the people of India or the other countries in the region had no interest in their ancient classics. In the last year of the series' existence, detailed plans were drawn up to correct at least the last two problems by designing an edition with the Sanskrit text printed in the Devanagari script, to be published in India at a price students would be able to afford and accompanied by a preface from a South Asian writer or scholar of note that would, it was hoped, testify to the continuing allure of the past for the present.¹ With the closing of the series those plans were aborted just at the point when they were about to bear fruit.

The excitement around CSL from its launch in the spring of 2004 until the time it closed in July 2009—along, of course, with the universal admiration for and gratitude to John Clay for his vision and generosity—was palpable to me and everyone else involved in the project. So was the consternation with which its termination was met, both from the public and of course from the translators whose contracted work was in progress but whose books were now never going to see the light of day, even if this meant that ongoing multivolume sets were to be broken. (Which occurred in the case of the *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, for example, or smaller works like the *Kathāsaritsāgara* and the *Kādambarī*.)

With all these considerations in mind—the desirability of a big-tent approach to South Asian classical literature; the advisability of using indigenous script forms; the importance of providing attractively priced editions for readers in the subcontinent, especially young people who not only would thereby have more reliable access to their past but also examples of good scholarship to help them actually learn; and finding a way to

¹ Some prefaces were published in the US edition: Mani Shankar Aiyar (*Three Satires*), U. R. Ananthamurthy (*Kumārasambhava*), Partha Chatterjee (*Mṛcchakaṭikā*), Gurcharan Das (*Mahābhārata* Book 5), Anita Desai (*Ratnāvalī*, etc.) Ranajit Guha (*Bhagavadgītā*), Girish Karnad (*Uttararāmacarita*), Sudipta Kaviraj (*Gītagovinda*), J. N. Mohanty (*Prabodhacandrodaya*), Kiran Nagarkar (*Daśakumāracarita*), Gieve Patel (*Ātmārpanastuti*, etc.) and Amartya Sen (*Vālmīki Rāmāyaṇa*). Others, like that of Romila Thapar (*Mudrārākṣasa*), had unfortunately to be canceled.

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ensure that justice would be done on behalf of the CSL translators who had been cut adrift—I sought funding in India for a new Library. For it was clear, given the financial straits in which American university presses operate (and only a university press could offer the kind of professional and scholarly direction such an enterprise would require), that a major endowment would be needed, precisely of the sort that had created and ensured the continued success of the Loeb Classical Library itself. My efforts in India, which included approaching a half dozen major industrialists, came to nothing. There was, it appeared, no Indian James Loeb to be found.

In early 2009 I presented the idea of what I was then calling the Classical Library of India to Dr. Sharmila Sen of Harvard University Press, Senior Editor in the Humanities and also responsible at that time for the three other HUP dual-language series. (And to whom I was introduced by my former student Ananya Vajpeyi.) She expressed interest, and together we began working out a detailed prospectus. One new strategy was to seek the help of foundations, both in the U.S. and in India. Our proposal was under serious consideration that summer with the Tata Trusts, when the writer Gurcharan Das (who had also been helping me establish contact with Indian donors) put me in touch with Rohan Murty, a young Indian scholar completing his doctoral degree in computer science at Harvard while also taking courses in classical Indian studies with Professor Parimal Patil. Mr. (now Dr.) Murty was intrigued by the idea of a dual-language Library and impressed by the financial plan and description of the role of HUP presented by Dr. Sen. In consultation with his family, he generously approved a proposal for an endowment in November 2009. After a massive effort of translators, editors, book designers, typographers, and HUP's editorial and production staff, the first five books were published in December 2014. As of today, the Library comprises twenty-three volumes in thirteen languages and ten scripts. Thirty-eight more are in the pipeline, which will bring the number of languages to fifteen and of scripts to twelve. New proposals are reviewed on a regular basis.

II. ELEMENTARY ASPECTS OF A CLASSICAL LIBRARY OF INDIA

Prior to the Clay Sanskrit Library and despite the long history of dual-language editions of the classics in Europe (and even older polyglot versions of the Bible), there had been no bilingual editions of South Asian literature and thought in any languages, let alone a uniform series. (Bi-*scriptal* books, in Devanagari and Nasta'liq, are found in early modern north India.) Other types of collections were long available: of text editions alone, starting with the Bibliotheca Indica (Calcutta, 1848, edited initially by Edward Röer; BI included Indo-Persian, Arabic, and vernacular works as well as Sanskrit);² of texts and translations (in separate volumes), an early example being the Harvard Oriental Series (Cambridge, Mass., 1891, edited initially by Charles Lanman; HOS comprised mostly Sanskrit, but also a few Pali and Prakrit works); of translations alone, one of the oldest and certainly the best known being the *Sacred Books of the East* (Oxford, 1879, edited by F. Max Müller; SBE included West Asian and East Asian as well as South Asian works).

Given the peculiar profile of the Clay series, a host of the conventions that were to govern MCLI had basically to be developed from scratch. Consider the question of scripts and typefaces. We had first to decide which script to use for which language, for unlike Greek or Latin or Arabic or Chinese, where scripts were in principle unsubstitutable, any Indian language could be written in several different ones. In the case of Sanskrit, historical circumstances had made Devanagari the default choice by the middle of the second millennium, so there the script question was solved. But for Pali, the language of southern Buddhism, things were not so easy. Pali has been written (and printed) in Sinhala, Thai, and Burmese scripts (surprisingly, no Pali manuscripts from mainland India are extant), but none of these had ever emerged as the transregional standard. For the past 150 years Western scholarship has used Roman to print Pali, and MCLI chose, *faute de mieux*, to continue that tradition. Panjabi presented a more painful choice. A poet like the great eighteenth-century Sufi Bulleh Shah (the edition and translation of which by Christopher Shackle constitutes Volume 1 of MCLI), had long been read in two scripts, a Brahmi-derived script often called Gurmukhi, and

² This remarkable initiative deserves far more historical study than what is available in Bagchee 1984: 29–33.

a version of Perso-Arabic script. The partition of India in 1947 left the Panjab divided into two religious groupings of unequal population: the larger comprised of Muslims in Pakistan, who these days can rarely read the former script (and who in any case confront a state policy prioritizing Urdu); the smaller comprised of Hindus in India, who rarely can read the latter (and whose literary heritage has been largely appropriated by the Sikhs). In this complex context, the translator chose to have the text printed in Gurmukhi but with the assurance that MCLI would one day develop an electronic book version allowing readers to toggle between scripts. This would not only provide access to all readers and enhance the pedagogical value of the series, but through the use of a simple radio button solve a long-term communal struggle over script-based cultural authority. The development of such e-books for the whole series remains a key MCLI objective.

Since we were designing our typefaces from scratch, we had to carefully balance the idea and character of a classical type (some features of which, for Panjabi, say, or Sindhi or Telugu, have been taken from manuscripts) against the fonts used in contemporary South Asian publishing, lest we found ourselves achieving historical authenticity at the expense of contemporary legibility. We also needed to ensure that the Indic language on the left page agreed in weight and “temperature” with the Roman typeface (Antwerp) on the right side. To maintain a certain uniformity across the books, the typeface for each of them had all to be designed afresh, and at considerable expense.³

In South Asia, colors, across the spectrum, seem to be more deeply laden with meaning than in other parts of the world. Green and red (or rather, saffron), for example, carry ineradicable associations of the Muslim and Hindu communities, respectively. Objects are similarly densely laden signifiers (e.g., crescent moons, cows, lotuses and other flowers, or for external reasons the swastika). Contrast the green of the Greek Loeb and the red of the Latin, neither of which bears any historical-cultural meaning.⁴ Moreover, the Greek key design on the former can be transferred without scruple to the latter. No modern Roman

³ To date, Murty Bangla; Murty Gurmukhi; Murty Hindi; Murty Kannada; Murty Sanskrit; Murty Sindhi; Murty Tamil, and Murty Telugu, all the work of John Hudson and Fiona Ross. For more information see <http://murtylibrary.com/design-and-typography.php>.

⁴ See Henderson in this volume.

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would see this as an act of Greek “hegemony,” however historically hegemonic Greek culture once had been for the Romans. The design adopted for the MCLI logo, which came to us as a result of an international call for proposals and competition, is a stylized elephant—something entirely neutral in terms of religion—which spells out the initials of the series, while the color chosen after much discussion is *rāṇī kā raṅg*, “the queen’s color,” a dark pink (very close—entirely coincidentally—to Pantone’s Color of the Year for 2014, “radiant orchid”), which has no associations with any particular community anywhere in India.

A range of conventions for printing and punctuation had to be established. In accordance with the manuscript practices and in contrast to modern Indian-language publishing, MCLI chose to eschew all non-Indian punctuation (periods, question marks, exclamation points, quotation marks, and the like), except for the hyphen, which is attested (if differently designed) in manuscripts, and the comma that has become conventional in marking the caesura in Hindi verse. (Additional punctuation is sometimes permitted in complex Persian prose.) Even the practices of Sanskrit orthography, though reasonably well-established today, show a host of variants that had to be sorted out. A simple case is the decision to permit use of the single *avagraha* sign and prohibit use of the double, which is often found in modern publications in India to signal the coalescence of a long vowel.⁵

More puzzling to a general audience is the need to explain the terms embedded in the series name. While *Classical* (in the Loeb Classical Library) may be taken to imply that one tradition alone possesses texts worthy of such commendation, or has experienced a *Medieval* period (in the Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library) or *Renaissance* (in the I Tatti

⁵ A proposal in 1866 by Georg Bühler and Franz Kielhorn for a new series of Sanskrit textbooks, while offering no intellectual argument in its support—presumably it was self-evident in those halcyon days—does include detailed suggestions for orthographic conventions. The *avagraha* sign, for example, was proscribed, though the usage is widely attested in manuscripts and was adopted by the best Indian presses (e.g., Nirnaya Sagar Press of Bombay, founded 1867); MCLI generally follows them. Other issues, such as the assimilation of nasals, remains unstandardized to this day. (Both *sambhava* and *ṣambhava*, for example, or *sāṅkhyā* and *sāṃkhyā*, are found in use.) Incidentally, the Bühler-Kielhorn proposal led to the creation of the *Bombay Sanskrit and Prakrit Series* (vol. 1, ed. Bühler, 1868), which indeed followed their proposed guidelines, though the *avagraha* sign was in fact added in later editions. For the proposal itself see *The Pandit* 1.2 (1866): 25–26. (I thank Dominik Wujastyk for the reference.)

Renaissance Library), few people would bother to contest those usages.⁶ Editors of dual-language book series for at least some non-Western traditions, however, do not have the luxury any longer of simply choosing the names they consider appropriate, any more than they can unreflectingly choose their logos or colors; they cannot expect consensus about the reasons for the choice or feel secure in their wide acceptance. *Classical, Library*, even *India*: none of these terms in the name Murty Classical Library of India goes without saying; all have had to be argued out. I will consider each separately.

III. WHAT IS “INDIA”?

How was it possible for someone like the celebrated anthropologist Clifford Geertz, citing a quip of the novelist E. M. Forster, to describe India as “waddling in at this late hour to take her seat among the nations”?⁷ Was there no India before 1963? That Geertz’s view was not merely his personal opinion—though it was one he, as director of the University of Chicago’s “Committee for the Comparative Studies of New Nations” project, could have argued out better than most—is not hard to show. In October 2014, a few months before the launch of MCLI, I was contacted by a Harvard University Press publicist preparing a launch event in London. She had, I was told by an HUP representative,

one last question that strikes me as a good one: Could you speak to what “India” means in the context of the MCLI? She adds, “Most of the works were written at a time when India as such didn’t exist. And in the U.K., just as in India, few people from the subcontinent self-identify as ‘Indian.’ They’re Bengali or Tamil or... And then there are Pakistan and Sri Lanka (Bangladesh speaks Bengali, that’s OK).” If you have the chance, would you be able to respond to this?

The notion that “India as such” did not exist before the British fashioned it through a long-drawn-out process of colonial consolidation, which then vanished with partition in 1947 while new entities such as Pakistan

⁶ Scholars of Greek and Latin are becoming increasingly aware of their tradition’s tacit immodesty. See for example the qualifications placed on the term “classical” in Grafton, Most, and Settis 2010: x, and cf. *ibid.* 205–6 on the term’s rediscovery in the Renaissance.

⁷ Geertz 1963: 139.

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(“The Land of the Pure”), and eventually Bangladesh (“The Place of the Bengalis”) were created—and India presumably recreated—is a very widespread view. But unless carefully hedged about with qualifications, which it rarely is, this way of thinking is a gross misconception. It betrays the blinding force of nationalism on our thinking, and radically misrepresents the character of the places, polities, and cultural processes that existed before the nation-idea began to burn its way through the brains of modern Europeans.

From a historical or even philosophical perspective, it should by now require no elaboration that nothing in our social or cultural world exists “as such,” as some pure essence, selfsame from its origins and immunized against further change. What we call “nations”—what Geertz and the publicist were thinking of—are all modern confections. From that perspective, to be sure, there was no India “as such” before 1947, just as there was no Germany or Italy “as such” before 1871.

Things become a little more complicated if we pause to ask what *Germania* meant to Tacitus, for example, or *Italia* to Dante.⁸ True enough, pre-national regions, from contemporary England to China, were all fuzzy around the edges. Their borders were not policed by Immigration and Customs Enforcement personnel; they had no national flags or flowers or songs. But *Germania* and *Italia* and *India* were not, for all that, conceptually empty terms. What the United Nations or the U.S. State Department today names India did not emerge from a historical vacuum, let alone directly from Lord Mountbatten’s endgame of colonialism. It has a deep if complex past.

A range of terms and conceptions from the precolonial past, both insider and outsider terms and conceptions, were available for describing the area of which present-day India formed part: *Bharatavarsha* (“The Clime of the Bharatas”), the name bestowed by the Sanskrit epic literature and source of today’s official Hindi name of India; *Bhārat*; *al-Hind*, the name bestowed by early Arab travelers marking the land dominated by the Indus River; and indeed *India* in various forms, from *Indikē* (*chorē*) in Herodotus to *Indu* in the seventh-century Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang. But to what do these various terms actually refer?

⁸ Tac. *Germ.* 1 *Germania omnis a Gallis Raetisque et Pannoniis Rheno et Danuvio fluminibus... separatur*; Dante, *Inf.* 1.106–7 *Di quella umile Italia fia salute / per cui morì la vergine Cammilla.*

They referred not to a space defined by political unification—what spaces in the pre-national era were “politically unified” rather than momentarily conjoined in fragile and fugitive power formations?—but by other processes, one of which was cultural unification. This consisted, in part, of a broad but specifiable set of literary languages and practices such as stories, motifs, conventions, aesthetic preferences, and so on. Both in the circulation of material literary objects—manuscripts—as well as in the narratives contained in those objects, this cultural space was mapped out. The space narrated in the Sanskrit *Mahābhārata*, for example, is largely congruent with the space within which *Mahābhārata* manuscripts circulated and were reproduced.

True enough, from some perspectives this literary-cultural area can be perceived to have extended to Central or Southeast Asia. For many Persian writers, the space of reference was a larger region called *ʿAjam*, the whole domain of Persian literary culture, which linked much of South Asia with lands as far to the north as Samarqand and as far to the west as Istanbul.⁹ As for Southeast Asia, Sanskrit poetry was studied and imitated, or adapted via vernacular literary production from Angkor in royal inscriptions to Java (where the literature called *kakawin*—the term is derived from Sanskrit *kāvya*—looks very like the regional poetry written in the subcontinent).¹⁰ But for all that, the core domain was comprised in the area stretching from what is today called Afghanistan in the west to Bangladesh in the east, from Nepal in the north to Sri Lanka in the south. That is MCLI’s *India*.¹¹ (I often refer to that space as “South Asia” here, though that term is a modern bureaucratic one and has obviously no salience for the precolonial period.)

By now readers will have inferred, if they did not already know, that there is no language called “Indian” that could have provided the kind of unity, or rather semblance of unity, that for instance Greek or Chinese (or rather, Chinese characters) provided for their parts of the world. (When Arabs and Persians spoke of a language called Hindavi, “Indian,” they were referring to what we now call Hindi, a regional language of

⁹ Sharma 2012: 49–62.

¹⁰ The best short introduction to the latter is Hunter 2014: 739–86.

¹¹ A seven-hundred-page elaboration on all this is available in Pollock 2006. Southeast Asian, Central Asian, and even Tibetan works are therefore not barred from MCLI, but they can be admitted only once the core area of Indian literary production is adequately established in publications.

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north India, that had an important transregional presence in early modern India, and that in a modified form became the national language of India.) India has always been a multilingual literary space; certain languages might have become dominant in it—Sanskrit, Persian, Hindi, English—but none completely defined, let alone filled it. Such diversity, which became something of a cliché during the first decades of Indian independence—the state motto being “Unity in Diversity”—but which in the past few years has come under pressure from an intolerant Hindu nationalism, is constitutive of this space, and without representing it fully no Library can be a Library of India.

IV. WHAT IS A “LIBRARY”?

Short of attempting to create a Borgesian library of all books ever produced in this space, choices must be made about what gets admitted into MCLI, and therefore criteria for choosing have to be established.

The easiest decision to make concerns genre. You cannot have a Library of India that excludes either expression (poetry, drama, and the like) or thought (philosophy, law, and the like). Both were part of the world of *Classical* India that I describe below, indeed even more so than in Classical Greece. In the latter, an invidious distinction was drawn, from Plato on, between *logos* and *mythos* of a sort that never found root in the former. Philosophers like the Buddhist logician Dharmakirti (seventh century) composed poetry as readily as poets like Shriharsha (twelfth century) wrote philosophy, a complementarity absent from Greece after the age of the so-called Presocratics. LCL of course had no hesitation in including the works of Plato beside those of Homer, or those of Cicero beside those of Virgil. It’s just that in India the tradition itself demands their co-presence.

But what is to be done with the works of religious expression and thought found at the threshold of Indian history, that is, those of the Vedic era? Whatever modern scholars may take to be the expressive and aesthetic aspirations discernible in those works, no one inside the tradition, not once in two thousand years, held them to be *kāvya*, “literature,” in the sense of the term used by those who produced *kāvya* over those two millennia; on the contrary, they have been seen to be radically different from any other form of discourse—existing far beyond

literature or thought. (And beyond even the human, according to orthodox doctrine.)

Nonetheless, in the case of Vedic texts too, MCLI sees no reason to be constrained by their traditional status. Despite bizarre allegations to the contrary, the Library is fully committed to including religious texts.¹² In our very first season we published a great work of Krishna devotionism, *Sur's Ocean* (*Sūrsāgar*); we are currently publishing Volume 6 of a seven-volume translation of what has sometimes been called the Hindi Bible, namely, the *Epic of Ram* (*Rāmcaritmānas*); we have plans to publish a wide range of other religious classics, including the scripture of the Sikhs (*Gurugrantsāhib*) and Mhaimbhat's Marathi classic, the *Līlācaritra*, a foundational work of the Mahanubhava religious order of Maharashtra. As for Vedic literature, much of it already exists in enduring translations—the *R̥gveda* and *Upaniṣads* most recently, and many of the *Brāhmaṇas* from an earlier period. Were new and better versions to be produced, it would perfectly possible to include them.

When we turn from questions of genre, the criteria of choice become considerably more complicated. The launch of MCLI was sometimes greeted, among some Indians at least, with the worry that its Western editors had usurped the power to determine the canon of Indian literature. This sort of thinking is a product of an unfortunate if understandable postcolonial passion. It is of a piece—though in the same way that climate denial is of a piece with the critique developed by science and technology studies—with earlier claims, deriving from the excesses of Edward Said's work, that it was the orientalists who created India's literary and religious canons. Two decades ago, in the heyday of Orientalist critique, we were repeatedly told that it was the orientalists who “canonized certain scriptures, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*.”¹³ They did nothing of the sort—in the case of the *Gītā* the work was canonized by the eighth century at the latest—nor did they create a canon of Indian literature. Sir William Jones may have christened Kalidasa “the Shakespeare of India” in 1789, but the inscriptional poet Ravikirti had already made him the touchstone of literary creativity more than a thousand years earlier, in 634 CE.

¹² E.g., Calasso 2015. The writer appears not to have opened any of the books under consideration, somehow convinced instead that he had been commissioned to review Moritz Winternitz's general index of the *Sacred Books of the East*, to which he devotes a large section of his essay. (Winternitz's book was published in 1910—and it is an index.)

¹³ E.g., van der Veer 1993: 40.

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Indian thinkers, thus, had their own processes of canonization, some of which we can recover today: lists like the “five great court epics” of Sanskrit or Tamil; the identification (however fanciful at times) of certain authors as “primal” poets of their tradition (e.g., Valmiki for Sanskrit, Pampa for Kannada, Keshavdas for Braj Bhasha); inscriptional celebrations of authors from as early as the mid-seventh century; “praises of poets past” at the start of works that begin to appear around the same date; and *cāṭu* verses, or informal appreciations of writers that circulated orally for centuries. We know precisely what works traditional Indians prized, and those materials—where they are still extant—are most desirable for inclusion in MCLI.

But canons, as we know from the canon wars of the recent past, are also always expressions of culture-power relations. It is inevitable, then, that we ask what in fact the role of MCLI should be in navigating the swirling waters of past and present forms of cultural domination. Consider the third volume in the series, *Therīgāthā*, or *Poems of the First Buddhist Women*, a text in Pali likely dating to the third or fourth century BCE. Although the *Therīgāthā* received a commentary by a sixth-century scholar who wrote on much of the Buddhist canon, the work seems to have largely fallen out of circulation even in the world of southern Buddhism (to say nothing of Hindu India, where it was completely unknown) until it was reedited and translated at the end of the nineteenth century. Only then were its historical importance and aesthetic power fully recognized. Traditions, clearly, are not always to be trusted to represent themselves in their fullness.

Indeed, they can be actively unwilling to do so. This is especially the case of the literature of oppressed castes in India, and of the peoples “without history,” who appear largely in the margins of the dominant cultures or who lived in a world of more or less pure orality. Unlike the Greek and Latin literary cultures, however, where nothing is left of the literatures (in Oscan, Umbrian, Etruscan in Italy; Punic, Phoenician, Libyan in North Africa; and other languages elsewhere) of those who were crushed politically or culturally by Athens or Rome, substantial amounts of oppositional writings are available from precolonial India. What kind of Library would it be that simply displayed the evidence of civilization and suppressed the evidence of barbarism, that ignored those who were victims of a structural inequality almost without parallel in world history but who nonetheless somehow found a way to bear

witness to that oppression through their texts? MCLI is actively seeking to commission new editions and translations of the works of low-caste and so-called untouchable poets such as Sarala Das (fifteenth century Odisha) or Ravidas (sixteenth century north India). As for oral poetry, which continues to maintain a large presence even in contemporary South Asia, it is much more difficult to include, given uncertainty about dating and the challenges of textualization. But properly edited materials that can be convincingly dated to the precolonial era will find a place in the Library.

I say “dated to the precolonial era” because dating, though not the sole criterion of the *Classical*, is certainly part of it.

V. WHAT IS “CLASSICAL”?

I suppose that if one were to stop the mythical woman in the street and ask her to name one “classical” Indian poet, it would be Rabindranath Tagore, the only Indian to have been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature (1913). Tagore won the prize not because of his Bangla poetry (of which the Nobel committee appears to have known nothing whatever) but because, in the words of the official citation, he “made his poetic thought, expressed in his own English words, a part of the literature of the West.” (This refers exclusively to Tagore’s own translation of his poetry collection *Gītāñjali*.) That in itself, however, would be no disqualification: many Indian poets produce strong work in English, and in any case Tagore’s style, according to the Nobel citation itself, is “classic.” Yet Tagore will not be admitted to MCLI, because he is a modern writer, and for MCLI, the South Asian modern cannot be the South Asian classical.

That will of course seem an arbitrary judgment, but the limits on inclusion that all series must set can seem arbitrary. James Loeb originally intended his Library to include “all that is of value and of interest in Greek and Latin literature, from the time of Homer to the fall of Constantinople.”¹⁴ Today LCL actually extends, not to 1453, but only to about the fifth century (though Bede’s eighth-century *Ecclesiastical History* was published in 1930, and there are other outliers), albeit that

¹⁴ James Loeb, his introductory preface printed in the first editions of 1912, entitled “The Loeb Classical Library: A Word About Its Purpose and Its Scope.”

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chronological revision is nowhere explained.¹⁵ The Dumbarton Oaks Medieval Library establishes its limits by the simple fact of its being bounded by a *Classical* LCL and a *Renaissance* ITRL: “DOML fills the chronological gap between two other existing series... The Loeb Classical Library... will not venture much beyond the fourth or fifth centuries... The ambit of the I Tatti Renaissance Library runs from the late thirteenth [sic] through the early seventeenth centuries; while Boccaccio [d.1375] figures in ITRL, Dante [d. 1321] will not.”¹⁶

Chronology is relevant to MCLI as well, but for quite different reasons. Whatever one may think of recent arguments about the reality of an “early modern” era in South Asian history (their persuasiveness is sometimes diminished by exaggerating genuine but small-scale and usually local innovations), the consolidation of British power around 1800 had profound consequences. It marked a true historical caesura bringing an altogether unprecedented kind of modernity. Once again, the consequences I have in mind are not those typically showcased in recent social history, where hypotheses of colonization—of religious identity, sexuality, and so on—can be disputed, but rather those more measurable, and undisputable, consequences that occurred at the level of language and literature. Just consider how thoroughly Persian was replaced by English as the language of imperial prestige.¹⁷ But with the coming of colonialism a far wider and deeper transformation began of making South Asian authors Western and modern, who thereupon dutifully produced the Romantic poetry, the national novels, the social realism, and all the other requisites of a modern literature. Equally important, it entailed an unprecedented alienation of South Asians from their old idioms and modes of expression, so much so that the linkages to the past, and to the media of accessing the past, were broken; they might be relearned but could never be recreated.

The literary world before 1800, therefore, is certainly *different* from the present, and radically so. But is it classical the way that all of Greek and Latin literature without exception (and not just “all that is of value

¹⁵ For an argument that the culture of classical Greek literature was terminated by a single political act, the closing of the Academy by Justinian in 529 CE, see Fuhrmann 1983.

¹⁶ <https://www.doaks.org/research/publications/dumbarton-oaks-medieval-library> (accessed 31 August 2017).

¹⁷ See Shackle in MCLI 1.

and of interest”) has become classical? What in fact does classical mean? What is a classic?

A classic question, that, one that at a more general level has been considered and reconsidered in the modern era from the famous opening salvo of Charles Augustin Sainte-Beuve in 1850 to (at least) J. M. Coetzee in 2001. What is striking about most of these European accounts is their uniformity—and their unreflexive provinciality. For Sainte-Beuve, for example, the classic is a work that 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.” T. S. Eliot demands of the classic maturity, amplitude, catholicity, nonprovinciality, comprehensiveness, and, yet again, “universality.” (For Eliot these requirements were met in full only by Virgil.) For Kermode, the classic possesses “intrinsic qualities that endure,” it is “more or less immediately relevant,” with a “perpetual contemporaneity.” Gadamer, too, thinks of the classic as “a kind of timeless present that is contemporaneous with every other present.” Calvino’s definition is different but problematic in precisely the same way: classics are books read in our youth that are reread in our adulthood.¹⁸

If for Calvino classics are books we already know, in a sense, how can non-Western works fit into this definition when they are as a rule absent—or at least have been absent—from the youth of Westerners—and, given the caesura described earlier, absent (with the exception of a few tales of legend and devotion) from the youth of everyone in South Asia, too? That may seem an obvious objection to Calvino’s definition, but it actually applies to all the others as well. Those descriptions pertain to works *that are only repeating to us what we already know*: they are “immediately relevant” to our situation because our situation is the same as theirs; their moral vision makes sense—to Sainte-Beuve, Eliot, Kermode et al.—because it is already belongs to them, a “universality” that is actually the generalization of their own particulars.

I want to suggest, to the contrary, that what makes the works included in the Murty Classical Library of India classics is their very resistance to contemporaneity and universality, that is, their capacity to give us a

¹⁸ Sainte-Beuve 1895: 44–45, 52; Eliot 1975 [1945]:116, 128; Kermode 1975: 45, 15–16; Calvino 1986; Gadamer 1996: 288; Coetzee 2001: 1–16. See further Pollock 2011.

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new appreciation of the vast variety of human life in the past. There will of course be many occasions for learning something about our shared humanity from these works, but they also provide access to radically different forms of human consciousness, and thereby extend the range of possibilities of what it has meant or could mean to be human. For MCLI, the classic is the non-contemporaneous, the different, the diverse, the unfamiliar, the lost, the suppressed, the alternative.

VI. A PRECOLONIAL LIBRARY IN A POSTCOLONIAL AGE

There are two further obstacles to developing a Classical Library of India, and these are perhaps more challenging than any discussed so far. One consists in internal constraints on making Indian material available in translation; some of these are shared with all other translation enterprises, some seem to be more or less specific to the world of Indian literary culture. The other consists of external constraints, which are social and political in nature, and which have no parallel in any of the series we have mentioned in this essay or others published elsewhere.¹⁹ Both can effectively be understood by the tension expressed in the subtitle of this section: there are forces at work in the postcolonial world that make a precolonial Library an uncertain endeavor.

The problems of translation apply to us all since we all inhabit a postcolonial world in one sense or another. The precolonial past is an especially foreign country, and translating the past is always translating a foreign language, whether from Greek or Anglo-Saxon or Chinese. Customs, realia, flora and fauna—all the things we laboriously learn as students of the classics, we translators need to clarify for our readers, who essentially become our students. A more specific case of this estrangement of the past pertains to such things as standards of comparison that are no longer standards for us, or idioms that do not map against our world: describing a beautiful woman in Sanskrit as *gajagāminī*, “moving like an elephant,” for example, or referring in Urdu not to the broken-hearted but to those with “their liver in pieces.” These require lexical

¹⁹ Including *The Library of Arabic Literature* (New York University Press, 2012–); *The Library of Chinese Humanities* (De Gruyter, 2015–); *The Library of Judeo-Arabic Literature* (Brigham Young/University of Chicago Press, 2017–).

or exegetical workarounds to make for a successful translation.²⁰ If such problems are exaggerated for Indian works, they are actually entirely common, being encountered by classical translators across traditions.

All of them are also tasked, aside from meeting such basic obligations toward domesticating the unfamiliar, with providing *literary* translation for general readers. Learning how to meet that sort of requirement is not a skill comprised in the usual training of classical scholars. Philologists without poetry and poets without philology is the usual state of affairs. But in addition to that lacuna, in classical Indian studies philologists themselves are few and far between. Unlike the situation in Greek or Latin or even Anglo-Saxon, the number of scholars *in the world* who can confidently read Apabhramsha or Prakrit or even classical Kannada or Telugu can be counted, literally, on one hand. (Just consider the fact—a consequence of this demographic deficit—that of the first forty volumes projected for MCLI, nearly half have never previously been translated into any language.)

If again, all translators of old texts face problems of these sorts in achieving readability—which become especially acute when the original text casts a minatory glance from the opposite page, as it does in dual-language books—they do not constitute the principal kind of obstacle I have in mind when developing a translation program of Indian literature.

In a recent essay, the classical comparatist Alexander Beecroft reflects on the place of Sanskrit literature in “world literature.” That category (he draws here on David Damrosch’s *What is World Literature*) can be defined as literature that *gains* in translation, a feature that certainly applies to a good number of Indian texts, which thereby may be admitted into the ranks of the blessed. But even an outsider like Beecroft can perceive that there is a larger number of Sanskrit works that can only lose in translation, and that is the case because they are about nothing so much as the Sanskrit language itself and its peculiar powers of expression.²¹ Consider the so-called bitextual style (*śleṣa*), where two (or more) meanings are generated simultaneously, at the level not just of the word or phrase, but sometimes of the *entire narrative*, an ability virtually inconceivable to the uninitiated.²² The deployment of a vast array of

²⁰ Unless one could assume (as alas one no longer can) familiarity with Shakespeare, e.g., *Ado* 4.1.239 “If ever love had interest in his liver”.

²¹ Beecroft 2018: 136–40.

²² See Bronner 2010.

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additional tropes, and of an equally vast toolbox of other formal devices compounds the issue, which, given the paradigmatic role of Sanskrit in non-Persianate culture, applies across the board to precolonial Indian literature. Here the very quiddity of the work lies in its original wording, and here translation can, truly, only be traducement.

A second and equally intractable problem is that much of later Indian literature is reflection on, and even rewriting of, earlier literature. Of course, many if not all traditions exemplify this phenomenon of intertextuality. From Livius Andronicus to James Joyce and Derek Walcott, reworkings of the *Odyssey* become intelligible only—or, at least, they become more intelligible—in light of a reader’s knowledge of their “prequel” in Homer. But again, given the influence of the Sanskrit tradition, far more Indian texts are reworkings and are even more dependent on this foreknowledge. To represent the greatest works of Apabhramsha, Hindi, Tamil, or Assamese, for example, MCLI must publish their Ramayanas—*Pañmacariu*, *Rāmcaritmānas*, *Kampan Rāmāyaṇa*, *Saptakāṇḍa Rāmāyaṇa*—all of which require basic understanding of the Sanskrit original, which few contemporary readers will have.

At every level of the text, then (including sheer magnitude: many Indian texts are among the largest ever produced—the *Mahābhārata*, to cite the limit case, is seven times the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* combined), the postcolonial condition raises epistemic barriers to precolonial understanding that can seem insurmountable.

It also raises serious social-political barriers, but here “postcolonial” is intended in a narrower sense than that used above, restricted to the world of South Asia, or rather of India itself. There, the effects of colonial humiliation, along with the *ressentiment*—envy and hatred—that often accompanies it, linger to this day, whether as an actual residue of historical experience or, seeing that so much of this *ressentiment* is found in the Indian diaspora, as a new component in the cultural politics of Indian nationalism that have emerged from it. As Benedict Anderson once observed, nationalism truly does grow in exile.

The sense of humiliation arises from the undeniable denigration of much of Indian culture, especially literary culture, under colonialism, and the equally undeniable racism experienced by many Indians in the postcolonial metropole. It comes to be mixed with envy and hatred when it becomes clear to Indians that they have lost, both through their own historical amnesia and through the globalization of knowledge, their

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monopoly over their own culture. Although it was hardly colonialism that generated the amnesia—classical studies thrived in nineteenth-century India, but nearly collapsed after independence in 1947—its net result is that a Library such as MCLI could not be produced in today’s India, at least not a Library that aims to embody the highest values of philological scholarship, literary-cultural diversity, and book production that MCLI strives to achieve.

The globalization of knowledge, for its part, has meant that Indian literature is once again, as it had been in the precolonial period, a cultural treasure that belongs to the world at large. Only on the most outlandish misapplication of the concept of “cultural appropriation” would anyone seek to contest this. If basmati rice and neem twigs and even yoga can be copyrighted by the Indian state and somehow restricted in their distribution, Kalidasa and Tulsidas and Muhammad Taqi Mir cannot. Anyone who cares to learn Sanskrit, Hindi, or Urdu may share in the beauty of their poetry—and now, anyone who knows English.

For the fact is that despite the extraordinary and unique challenges I have outlined in this essay, the Murty Classical Library of India has become a reality. Books are being edited, printed, and read across the world, and especially in South Asia in inexpensive and yet extraordinary attractive editions. By our tenth anniversary in 2024 we expect to have about a tenth of the five hundred volumes we promised to have, like LCL, on our centenary in 2114. Sometimes what seems impossible in theory—translation itself provides a classic example, so to speak—becomes entirely possible in practice.

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PART II
THE SACRED TRANSLATED

