



# An Introduction to Indian Aesthetics

*History, Theory, and Theoreticians*

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## Foreword

It is a fact of stunning historical irony—or historical contumely—that some of the most advanced achievements of premodern thought in the domain of the human sciences, those of classical India, are today among the least well-known, whether in the West, East Asia or India itself. There is no doubt a range of factors that go to explain this strange state of affairs. I can think immediately of three.

One is the standard scholarly *bête noire* of miscognition about India that in this case truly was a *bête*: Orientalism, or better Macaulayism, in England—like Sinocentrism (*zhonghua minzu*) in China, Oriental studies (*toyoshi*) in Japan, and other similar early-modern and modern forms of cultural self-congratulation—sought to denigrate as nescience everyone else’s science. One’s own science always has “intrinsic superiority”; that of others is always nothing but “false texts and false philosophy.” A second, at least in the West, and in some ways, a corollary to the first, lies in the fact that it was often missionaries who engaged, first and foremost, with classical Indian culture: Indians may have known nothing true about the world, they thought, but their spiritual achievements, however misguided, were noteworthy and a point of entry for conversion. Indian religion was, thus, foregrounded to outsiders while that very attention served at the same time to persuade insiders that the spiritual was the sum total of their intellectual achievement.

A third factor for the historical disregard or dismissal of classical Indian science stems from its having done what all



sciences do, but only more so. Over the centuries, Indian science created discourses of ever greater sophistication, complexity and subtlety in expression and formulation. Forms of disciplinary knowledge—I name in the first instance language analysis (*vyākaraṇa*), hermeneutics (*mīmāṃsā*) and logic (*nyāya*), the *trivium* of classical learning, but also and especially aesthetics-and-rhetoric (*rasaśāstra*, *nāṭyaśāstra*, *alankāraśāstra*), the knowledge form where those three sciences of word, sentence and reason converged—developed in unbroken succession over two or more millennia. They accordingly embodied arguments that presupposed familiarity with the whole prior history of thought, without which that thought would remain largely unintelligible. At the same time, they developed a scholarly idiom of an increasingly refined technicality that would leave critics of the abstruseness of modern jargon—Heideggerian existentialism, Derridean deconstruction, postcolonial critique—slack-jawed were they ever to encounter it.

To be sure, there have been scholars in the modern past who learned to read across the classical Indian sciences with great proficiency, but their number has substantially decreased in the present. This is true even—especially, and sadly—in India itself. There, the great authorities of the previous century—I am thinking of traditional pandits like P. N. Pattabhirama Sastry as well as quasi-modernists, such as Ganganath Jha, who were concerned with addressing non-traditional audiences—have been succeeded by ideologues who today deliver ignorant pronouncements on the Sanskrit tradition without being able to read a word of it; who turn that tradition into a political weapon of a Hindu *rashtra* even while denouncing others for supposedly having done so. While intellectual frauds take centre stage, who, today in



India, is publishing editions of any of the hundreds of works that remain in manuscript form, unedited? Who is writing the kinds of intellectual histories that give the world some sense of the actual development of the classical sciences and their astonishing achievements? Who is producing the English translations—the portal through which Indian science becomes part of the global history of science—of any texts, even the core ones? (It is going on a century since the *Nyāyasūtras* or the *Mīmāṃsāsūtras* have been translated; *vyākaraṇa* at least has the incomplete *Mahābhāṣya* of Joshi and Roodebergen.) As for *alaṅkāraśāstra*, the reader of Western languages has nowhere to turn for any authoritative translations, of even the leading figures—Daṇḍin, say, or Udbhaṭa, or Mammaṭa, or Hemacandra, or Jagannātha (the singular exception is the outstanding work of Ingalls, Masson and Patwardhan on the *Dhvanyāloka* and *Locana*).

As a result of all this, the true measure of the achievement of the classical Indian disciplines has rarely been taken. Nowhere is this more true, as I just implied, than in the case of aesthetics-and-rhetoric. It is thus encouraging to find two scholars in India, Dr Mini Chandran and Dr Sreenath V. S., re-engaging with the intellectual history of this discipline—which we are gradually coming to see as more sophisticated than any other in the premodern world—and trying to help others do so with such introductory surveys as the one offered in the following pages. I hope other scholars will follow their example for other *śāstras*, and that a more intensive engagement with original research on these treasures will eventually be undertaken to supplement their overviews.

**Professor Sheldon Pollock**

New York, 20 May 2020