

Humanities in South Asian Studies

by Sheldon Pollock*

Over the past fifteen to twenty years, the methods, materials, and perhaps the very sense of mission of humanistic inquiry have been undergoing radical change. A similar transformation has occurred in area studies, and perhaps nowhere more profoundly than in South Asian studies. Scholarship in the South Asian humanities, finds itself at present in a moment of doubly intense reconceptualization. As all who are making plans to reconstitute South Asia programs for the coming century, or even, less dramatically, to develop a syllabus for next year's undergraduate general education course are vividly aware, old certainties about the defining characteristics and central methods of the South Asian humanities, the central texts, or the central purposes, have largely vanished.

The changes in humanistic study broadly viewed have been provoked by ever more challenging questions emerging from the realm of cultural theory, with respect to methods and to disciplinary identities, so much so that we are no longer sure even what the domain of the "humanities" is. Shifts in boundary have been accompanied by shifts in substance. Now, for example, we read poetic texts from the perspective of social power theorists, and seek to construct a "poetics of power" through social "texts," while at the same time directing attention to altogether new areas of cultural practice (performance, film and video, "public culture"). The changes undergone by area studies have been to a large degree responses to developments in the social sciences, above all the historical and political-economic critique of the relationship between Western power over Asia and Western knowledge of Asia. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1979) was only one of the more pointed expressions of what has been a two-decade-long examination in area studies of the relationship between knowledge and human interests.

In the spring of 1988, the Joint Committee on South Asia decided to make a preliminary assessment of some of these complex developments. Five South

Asian humanists from different disciplines were invited to participate in a workshop to discuss the current situation and future developments in South Asian humanistic scholarship. They were asked in particular to consider how to reformulate the questions that can be posed about the nature of humanistic inquiry and creative activities in and about South Asia, to articulate their ideas about relevant theories and methodologies, and to help suggest projects the JCSA could consider taking up in the future. The workshop took place in the New York offices of the SSRC in September of that year, with presentations on modern literature (Vinay Dharwadkar), art history (Michael Meister), "historicity" (Sheldon Pollock), ethnomusicology (Regula Qureshi), and folklore (A.K. Ramanujan). In the discussions initiated by invited respondents and enriched by the participation of the Joint Committee's humanists and social scientists, and at the wrap-up meeting on the second day, several larger problematics in the humanities were identified as promising themes for conference development.

Over the following year and a half, the Joint Committee reviewed a number of draft proposals for what came to be referred to as the "South Asian Humanities Project." It became increasingly clear that the issues involved were too large and complex to reduce to a typical JCSA conference, and that, instead, a series of workshops over a longer period, more "bottom-up" in formulation, more inclusive in scope, and more decentralized in location was called for. Cooperation with other interested institutions would be both desirable and necessary. A basic plan to enact these ideas was shared with the directors of the nine South Asia National Resource Centers at their spring 1990 meeting, and was enthusiastically endorsed. Funds are currently being sought from the Department of Education to supplement resources identified by the JCSA for a series of workshops to be held over three years beginning in 1992.

The South Asia humanities workshops will be less forums for the presentation of polished work than arenas for articulating and vigorously debating large matters of a theoretical nature on the basis of particular cases from within the South Asian humanities. They will be organized according to significant problematics and interdisciplinary in scope. Since many of the issues confronting the South Asian humanities are common to other non-Western areas, the perspective of specialists from outside the South

* Sheldon Pollock is the George V. Bobrinskoy Professor of Sanskrit and Indian Studies at the University of Chicago.

Asian scholarly community will be a potentially valuable addition. At the same time, the very nature of the problems as formulated makes essential the inclusion of scholars working in the methods and theories of European and American culture.

It is proposed to organize the workshops under the following rubrics:

▪ *South Asian Humanities and Cultural Theory.*

These workshops will address the relevance to the South Asian humanities of Western cultural theory. How useful are the tools this provides for the analysis of South Asian literary or artistic works? To what degree is it possible, on the basis of South Asian materials, to sustain or challenge the postulates of such theory regarding cultural forms and change? Do the South Asian humanities themselves have compelling theoretical models to suggest for the analysis of other cultural formations? Workshops currently being planned will address these and related questions from within the framework of more narrowly defined problematics: "canonicity," for example, "text and history," and "identity."

▪ *South Asian Humanities and the Social Sciences.*

These sessions will address the claims of the social

sciences, especially as they are practiced in South Asian studies, on the South Asian humanities. How far can we sociologize culture in South Asia so as to interpret its production and consumption from the perspectives of rank and power? What are the implications for the humanities of the current critique of colonialism? Conversely, to what degree are the practices of the South Asian social sciences open to critique from the side of the humanities?

▪ *South Asian Humanities in North American Education.* The implications of Western theory and of social-science and post-colonial problematics for the teaching of South Asian humanities in American universities will be assessed. What curricular changes are entailed in both humanities and the social sciences? What new texts and textbooks should we be preparing, what new constellations of problems should we try to incorporate in undergraduate teaching? What are the pedagogical implications of a new generation of South-Asian-American undergraduates enrolling in South Asian language and culture courses? What are the implications for graduate training in the South Asian humanities in the coming century? ■