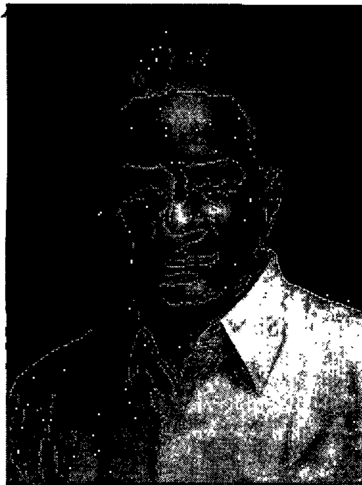
Unsettling the Past

Unknown Aspects and Scholarly Assessments of D.D. Kosambi



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Towards a Political Philology

D.D. Kosambi and Sanskrit

SHELDON POLLOCK

Two traits, as an ensemble, distinguish D.D. Kosambi in his work on Sanskrit not only from the scholars who were his contemporaries but also from almost everyone since. The first is his search for a method in the editing of Sanskrit literary texts, and the second his search for a theory in the reading of these texts. In the former case, if judged by the practices of editing Sanskrit literary texts in India at the time, Kosambi emerges as a remarkable pioneer, his concrete accomplishments hardly in danger of being superseded anytime soon. In the latter, he is exceptional in the history of Indology for his awareness that the method of philology is always inseparable from a theory of philology, itself produced by a tradition of writing and reading, and from a cultural and political criticism specific to that tradition. If Kosambi's theory has proven to be flawed, we have only come to know the flaws and sought ways to overcome them because he had the courage to enunciate the theory in the first place.

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How old fashioned, even quaint, it must seem to readers to find the word 'philology' used, and how odd to see it coupled with the qualifier 'political'. But there is nothing quaint about what philology represents, at least according to its most robust self-understanding. This is not the shrunken and withered idea it conjures in the minds of many people today because of the shrunken and withered practice it often embodies, but rather a core human concern: the fullest use of the most human attribute, language, which occurs in the making sense of texts. Such is the conception Nietzsche once sought to promulgate. He conceived of philology as an active mode of understanding that directed its powers toward every kind of text, from weather reports to the 'most fateful events', and he viewed it is as deeply political as well, in his case as a crucial antidote to the dehumanization of capitalist modernity, to the 'age of work' in which we are now imprisoned more remorselessly than Nietzsche could ever have dreamt. In one of his most luminous passages he describes philology as

> that venerable art which exacts from its followers one thing above all—to step to one side, to leave themselves spare moments, to grow silent, to become slow—the leisurely art of the goldsmith applied to language: an art which must carry out slow, fine work, and attains nothing if not *lento*. For this very reason philology is now more desirable than ever before; for this very reason it is the highest attraction and incitement in an age of 'work' . . . Philology itself, perhaps, will not 'get things done' so hurriedly: it teaches how to read well.[1]

Although it may not always be possible to draw a perfectly straight line between a philological method and a critical theory of culture and power, there is nothing odd in suggesting that philology has political projects to achieve and political lessons to teach, which Kosambi knew, without perhaps making it fully explicit, and which many have since forgotten. This lesson, in its most fundamental form, is that we can actively make the future only because we know who we are and where we have come from, and we can only know these things—know

[1] Friedrich Nietzsche, *Morgenröthe: Gedanken über die moralischen Vorurtheile.* Leipzig: Fritzsch, 1887 (second edition), trans. J.M. Kennedy, Edinburgh and London: Foulis, 1911, p. 11.

the past—because we have learned the discipline of philology, 'the great, the incomparable art of reading well.'

II

Like every other human practice, making texts and reading texts are activities that are (as Karl Popper would say) wholly theory-laden: we neither could nor would do these things unless we had some sense of how to do them and why. As with every other practice, however, most of us tend to ignore the conceptual foundations of how we make and read texts. We just seem to do it. Philologists are the people who try to bring these foundations to consciousness, and to constantly test their validity. Although the history of philology globally viewed is actually coextensive with the history of textuality, a new and critical—even skeptical and suspicious—philology came into existence in the early modern period, and did so, again, globally. Editors and critics in Europe from around 1400 to 1650, such as Lorenzo Valla, Erasmus, and (most explosively) Spinoza; the new historical philologists of late imperial China such as Yan Roju; and Indian grammarians and linguists, such as Melputtur Narayana Bhattatiri in seventeenth-century Kerala (for Sanskrit) and Siraj al-Din Ali Khan Arzu in eighteenth-century Delhi (for Persian), put philology front and centre in their intellectual practice as each in his own way redefined such core questions as textual authenticity, canonicity, and the very historicity and sociality—the humanity—of language itself.[2]

An outgrowth of this process was the positivist science of philology that reached its apogee in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century. Pune in the mid-twentieth century, when Kosambi was working on his Sanskrit philological projects, was imbued with the spirit of this science: V.S. Sukthankar, general editor of the critical edition of the Mahabharata and mentor to Kosambi, had brought it with him from Bonn, where he had been a student of Hermann

[2] This is a chapter in a still largely untold counternarrative to Foucault's temporally and spatially foreshortened account of the 'birth of philology' in Berlin, *c.* 1800. See Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, New York: Vintage Books, 1994 (*Les mots et les choses*, 1966), ch. 8, section 4.

Jacobi. The textual method was that of Karl Lachmann, which posited (on the basis of the history of Greek and Latin texts) an orderly ramified descent of manuscripts from a stable authorial archetype.[3] Assembling all the manuscripts and determining what they held in common should in principle enable one to reconstruct that archetype. This was not a method without its challengers. French scholars, in particular, who worked with medieval Romance materials—troops in a philology war contemporaneous with the Franco-Prussian political wars of the period—encountered vastly different textual phenomena from those of classical antiquity. In such a textual world, where no *chanson de geste* may have ever existed in a stable original, variation was not accidental but constitutive: there was *nothing but variation.*[4] Lachmann's crystalline sphere was already beginning to crack.

Prior to the Mahabharata work initiated by Sukthankar at the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute in Pune (this was to have been a European project, but it was scuttled after World War I), modern Sanskrit text editing was a relatively simple affair. Editors were typically traditional pandits who would print what was judged by some (usually unspoken) criterion or other to be the best manuscript; variants from other manuscripts would occasionally be recorded in footnotes but with no attempt to investigate the logic of variation. Such colonial-era practices arguably marked something of a decline from premodern times, under the constraints of print capitalism. But this is speculation; we have still no history of what might be called script mercantalism—the social-economic form of manuscript culture—let alone its relationship to and supersession by print.[5] We do know that for centuries prior to the rise of the colonial printing

[3] Sebastiano Timpanaro, *The Genesis of Lachmann's Method,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

[4] See R. Howard Bloch, 'New Philology and Old French', *Speculum* 65, 1990, pp. 38–58; David Hult, 'Reading It Right: The Ideology of Text Editing', in *The New Medievalism*, ed. Marina S. Brownlee, *et al.*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991; Bernard Cerquiglini, *In Praise of the Variant: A Critical History of Philology,* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999. (Originally *Eloge de la variante*, 1989.)

[5] Sheldon Pollock, 'Literary Culture and Manuscript Culture in Precolonial India', in *History of the Book and Literary Cultures*, ed. Simon Eliot, *et al.*, London: British Library, pp. 77–94.

industry Indian scholars produced thousands upon thousands of editions of Indian texts and published them. We may still have little sense of what 'publication' meant in the premodern era, but we are coming to better understand the principles that traditional commentator-editors used to establish their texts—and there is no question they did edit, and on the basis of philological principles (including the recording of variants, or *pathantaras*) about which they were fully self-aware, if rarely fully forthcoming.[6]

Kosambi was heir, at least in part, to all this philological ferment, and his work represents a decided advance over anything his contemporaries had achieved, Sukthankar and his fellow epic editors aside. His engagement with Sanskrit poetry concerned two bodies of materials, one vast corpus and one more stable text, which are in fact intimately related, since both comprised poetry of the genre known as *muktaka*, the 'isolate' or stand-alone verse that constitutes the bedrock of Sanskrit literary culture. The first and larger project was an edition of the poetry collection, 'The Three Centuries' (*Sataka-traya*, ST) that has come down to us under the name of Bhartrihari; the second, an edition of the 'Treasury of Literary Gems' (*Subhasita-ratna-kosa*, SRK) of Vidyakara, the oldest example of what was to prove an enduring genre of Sanskrit literature, the literary anthology.[7]

Kosambi's involvement with the Bhartrihari corpus extended over more than three decades. *The Epigrams Attributed to Bhartrihari* appeared in 1948. This critical edition of the poems was preceded and followed by a series of editions of traditional commentaries on the text, either wholly or collaboratively edited by Kosambi (one by a Jain from western India, Dhanasara Gani, the oldest, if an often sophomoric, scholiast; a second, of very high quality, by Ramacandra

[6] Preliminary studies are Gérard Colas, 'The Criticism and Transmission of Texts in Classical India', *Diogenes* 47, 1999, 2, pp. 30–43; Sheldon Pollock, 'Sanskrit Literature from the Inside Out', in *Literary Cultures in History: Reconstructions from South Asia*, ed. Sheldon Pollock, Berkeley/London: University of California Press, pp. 111–14.

[7] *The Epigrams Attributed to Bhartrihari*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1948, Singhi Jain Series 23; with V.V. Gokhale, *The Subhasitaratnakosa Compiled by Vidyakara*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957, Harvard Oriental Series, vol. 42.

Budhendra, possibly seventeenth-century Andhra (the work was previously published and re-edited by Kosambi); a third by a South Indian commentator, whose name we now know to be Arkūttyalaya Balarāmā Kavi; the last by one Ramarsi, date and place unknown). Kosambi's concern with commentaries may in the first instance have been with their textual testimony, what they could say about the historical development of the Bhartrihari corpus. But in making them available he at least intimated an understanding (as classical scholars of his day almost never did) of the importance of the history of the reception of the poetry, of changing reading practices—what I term vernacular mediations, those moments of edition-making or interpretation that constitute an essential second domain of a text's truths, beyond that of the putatively singular authorial one. What people in history have taken to be the truth (or in Sanskrit terms, *vyavaharika ṣat*) is as important as what may have once been *the* truth (*paramarthika sat*). What we want to know is the history of these truths, and the ways in which they made sense in their worlds—and we want then to *apply* (in Hans-Georg Gadamer's sense) the same analytic to ourselves, to understand what truth the text is making for us. Accessing these truths in all their variety and plurality is one of the great promises of philology.

It was, however, primarily to get at that one primordial textual truth that Kosambi studied 377 manuscripts of ST (out of a 'conservative' estimate of 3000 extant manuscripts), undoubtedly a larger number than has ever been used for any single text in the history of Indian literary criticism.[8] He believed these could be divided into two grand regional recensions and some twelve lesser versions, an analysis that was a notable accomplishment in itself.[9] What he found was not the orderly disagreement of manuscripts that classical philology had taught Sukthankar to expect. It was instead (as Sukthankar

[8] Kosambi certainly acknowledges the contribution of his collaborator, K.V. Krishnamoorthi Sharma, but the full extent of the pandit's labour is unclear to me.

[9] It was challenged in part by M.B. Emeneau, 'The Epigrams Attributed to Bhartrihari' (review), *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 70, 3, 1950, pp. 195–7.

himself and his colleagues were to find, though to varying degrees, for the Mahabharata) the textual chaos of a beloved living tradition, where thousands of manuscripts diverge in the order of poems, their number, and their content, where the conflict between the 'linguistic code' and the 'bibliographic code' becomes utterly dizzying.[10] Kosambi could find only some 200 poems on which a sufficient number of manuscripts agreed closely enough to allow for inclusion in a hypothetical archetypal source ('Ur-Bhartrihari'). While clinging to a Lachmannian image of orderly dispersal—a neatly branching European oak—Kosambi seems to have felt that a banyan's controlled anarchy of aerial shoots and roots (Bernard Cohn's wonderful analogy) offered an arboreal figure far more pertinent to the Indian textual condition.[11]

I say 'seems to have felt' since Kosambi never offered an explicit defense of his philological method—as opposed to his general, and far more innovative, interdisciplinary historical method—or an argument about Indian difference in the world of textuality, in order to trim the universalist pretensions of European philological theory. In fact, India reveals cultural processes that seem altogether inassimilable to that theory, in the same way we find it to reveal social and political processes inassimilable to European social or political science. We can observe how orality could thrive utterly unimpeded by the rise of literacy, so that in a work like the Mahabharata a wide spectrum of communicative media came to be sedimented over the centuries (some sections were transmitted entirely orally, others entirely in written form, and yet others in a mixture of the two, presumably in relation to their performativity); how regions tended to produce their own recensions of given works, with their own effective history, among which sometimes none evinces primacy; or how some genres were completely open to variation or expansion (the epics, for instance) while others remained almost completely closed (the *mahakavyas*, or great courtly poems).

[10] Jerome McGann, *The Textual Condition*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991, pp. 48–68.

[11] Bernard S. Cohn 'The Command of Language and the Language of Command', in *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985, p. 327.

All that said, the complex reception history of the Bhartrihari corpus still needs to be reconciled with a more familiar genetic history disclosed not only by a concrete core of stable verses—it is Kosambi's signal accomplishment to have demonstrated the existence of this stable core buried in the slag heap of tradition—but by an attribute more difficult to define yet no less real. There is something about those 200 poems, and more than a few of the 150 classified by Kosambi as doubtful, that marks them off from almost all other Sanskrit literature, a personal voice of the sort one hears only rarely, in Catullus, say, or Du Fu, or Heine. In the Sanskrit world no one—with the exception of a stray verse here of Bhavabhuti, or one there of Dharmakirti—wrote the sort of verses we find in the Bhartrihari corpus, such as this one:

> I never rightly fixed my thoughts
> on the foot of God, to end rebirth,
> I gained no moral strength enough
> to force open the gate of heaven,
> not even in dreams did I embrace
> the full breasts of a woman—I did
> nothing but act as an axe to lay waste
> the forest of my mother's youth.

Kosambi himself was unable to reconcile this incontestable if maddeningly elusive authorial presence—what today would be called an almost confessional voice—with the complex history of the transmission of his work and the various identities of the author mirrored in that history: the indecisive Buddhist monk, the learned king, the wise ascetic, the Vedantic mystic.[12] But if anyone in the future proves able to do so, it will be because of the materials Kosambi provided.

[12] While Kosambi felt that 'a certain type of stanza came to be attracted to the collection' he remained convinced, as do I on a good day, that 'the seeds must necessarily have been present in the original collection to permit such growth.' D.D. Kosambi, *The Epigrams Attributed to Bhartrihari*, Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, Singhi Jain Series 23, 1948, p. 81. Ingalls, by contrast, felt that 'the present collection, even the 200 "certain" poems, must contain poems by more than one poet.' Daniel H.H. Ingalls, 'The Epigrams Attributed to Bhartrihari by D.D. Kosambi' (review), *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 13, 1/2, 1950, p. 260. In the end, it is one person's feelings against another's.

The SRK presented a rather different kind of text-critical problem. There exist only three partial manuscripts of the anthology, though a large number of the poems it includes are represented both in the manuscripts of the works from which the poems were selected and in other later anthologies. (For many of the great Pala-era poets such as Yogesvara, the SRK, which was produced at a Pala-supported Buddhist monastery, is our only source—and their work is one of the anthology's great revelations.) Here the great contribution of Kosambi, along with V.V. Gokhale, his collaborator, was, first, to have adjudicated with great care among the various readings in manuscripts often very difficult to read, printing the most credible version possible while respecting Vidyakara's authority, and, second, to have provided a historical catalogue *raisonné*, so to call it, of the poets included in the work. Although Daniel Ingalls, the translator of the anthology, was later to suggest more than 200 changes to the text, Kosambi's SRK stands as one of the most valuable works in the history of Sanskrit philology. Indeed, Ingalls' observations, when he invited Kosambi to consider taking up the project, were borne out fully.[13]

III

Why should Kosambi, a mathematician by training and a Marxist by persuasion, have cared about Bhartrihari's poetry or Vidyakara's anthology? Why did he almost drive himself mad editing the first ('Baba has nearly lost his mind in the work', says Jinavijayamuni in the foreword), and spend so many of his productive years editing the second? He certainly developed a theory to explain the nature of this literature. But although as we will see this theory is in some way connected with his philological method, insofar at least as both show the same unquestioned commitment to positivist science and singular truth—there is one correct reading of a text, a society, a history[14]—

[13] 'This would mean a vast amount of work tracking down verses and authors in other anthologies. But . . . it would be a most useful contribution to Sanskrit literature and on the basis of the job you did with Bhartrihari I would say you are one of the few people capable of doing it creditably.' Letter of 17 September 1951, in the possession of Meera Kosambi.

[14] The same is strikingly true of Kosambi's European doppelganger, Sebastiano Timpanaro. His commitment to philological positivism was in itself a

it does little to explain the nature of his deep involvement with the literature. On the contrary, it is hard not to feel that the two are in serious tension, and that the theory is a mechanical and ill-fitting adjunct to an inherited passion that long antedated it.[15]

Kosambi's cultural theory is only briefly enunciated in the Bhartrihari book, though it is trumpeted in the dedication—or more justly, the provocation—whose Sanskrit expression is meant to embody the very tension: *nutana-manava-samajasya puras-caranam marx-engels-lenin-namadheyanam tejasvinam maha-manavanam punita-smaran-artham* ('To the sacred memory of the great and glorious pioneers of today's society, Marx, Engels, Lenin'):

> The dedication . . . is to the men from whose writings I first learned that society can and must be changed before we attain the stage at which human history will begin. The senseless bloodshed and increasing distress of our times are inevitable only because of the present class-structure of society; Bhartrihari's poetry of frustration provides at most an escape, but no solution.[16]

The 'literary physiognomy' of Bhartrihari with his 'poetry of frustration'—Kosambi's characterization of the powerful poem translated

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political commitment though one he seems not to have argued out anywhere. Timpanaro's last works, devoted to the history of the reception of Virgil in antiquity, thus aim to capture, not the vernacular mediations critical to our understanding of the plurality of truth in history, but rather the singular truth of the one 'real' reading.' See also James E.G. Zetzel, 'Sebastiano Timpanaro, *Virgilianisti antichi e tradizione indiretta*' (review), *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 2002.02.09; and Perry Anderson, 'On Sebastiano Timpanaro', *London Review of Books*, 10 May 2001.

[15] I am not entirely sure of this passion, though it seems self-evident from the work. On the other hand Kosambi's complaints about Sanskrit (e.g. 'The Sanskrit language is so indefinite, with so many meanings for each word in literary usage . . . that the same phrase can give a dozen different translations' (D.D. Kosambi, *Combined Methods in Indology and Other Writings*, ed. Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 794) call to mind George Bernard Shaw: 'I preferred Caesar, because his statement that Gaul is divided into three parts, though neither interesting nor true, was the only Latin sentence I could translate at sight.'

[16] Kosambi, *The Epigrams Attributed to Bhartrihari*, p. 11.